

Pursuit of the Unknown:  
Understanding Refugee Decision-Making

By

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M.A., University of Victoria, 2016

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

The 2015 refugee 'crisis' resulted in one of the largest refugee movements since the Second World War. The construction of refugee movements as a 'crisis' contributed to state centric responses primarily dehumanizing refugees and promoting restrictive protection policies. The 2015 refugee 'crisis' was a reminder that there is a gap in understanding how refugees make their decisions along their journeys as refugee movements of the mid-2010s defied the conventional expectations, in both legal and theoretical realms, for refugee behavior. To fill these gaps, this study explores refugee decision-making by investigating refugees' own stories. The primary question driving this study is how do refugees make their decisions? And why do different refugees make different decisions within seemingly similar situations? Building on legal, historical, and theoretical accounts of refugee behavior, this study proposes a new theoretical framework, called Interactive Decision-making Model. This model is composed of three main components: spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and decision-making environment. Through interactions with these components, refugees make their decisions along their journeys. Utilizing a qualitative narrative analysis approach, this study develops and explores the viability of this model. Through interviews with forty-four refugees from Iran and Syria, it demonstrates how coercion, time, and decision-making environment inform refugees' decisions throughout their journeys. The findings of these interviews highlight the diversity of refugees' experiences and behaviors. They also call for more inclusive protection policies that are reflective of refugees' experiences and decision-making processes.

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Tables .....	ix
List of Figures.....	x
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Dedication .....	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Problem statement.....	2
Literature review .....	6
Research question .....	11
Main question .....	11
Sub-questions.....	11
Purpose of Study .....	11
Research Design .....	12
Methodology.....	12
Methods.....	14

Case selection.....	15
The two cases.....	17
Sample .....	23
Chapters .....	25
Chapter 2: The Conventional Understanding of Refugeehood.....	29
Introduction .....	29
The history .....	31
Post Second World War.....	35
Refugees' interactions with the Convention .....	46
Unpacking agency .....	50
Take away .....	56
Chapter 3: Theorizing Refugee Decision-making.....	58
Structural approaches.....	60
Rational choice approaches .....	66
Psychological approaches .....	78
Network Theory.....	81
The refugee system theory .....	83
Take away .....	86

Chapter 4: Interactive Decision-Making Model.....	87
Interactions .....	88
Spectrum of coercion.....	91
Spectrum of time .....	100
Decision-making environment.....	105
Structural factors .....	108
Policies and opinions .....	110
Resources .....	112
Mobility.....	114
Networks .....	115
Cultural context .....	116
Psychological factors.....	118
Take away .....	119
Chapter 5: ‘Beyond the Seas’ .....	121
Research participants.....	122
Findings .....	123
Perception of a threat: the first moment.....	124
Flight: what may come after a threat is perceived .....	132

Reaching safety: a remedy for the initial source of coercion.....	141
Life in transit: a struggle that goes on.....	148
Take away .....	163
Chapter 6: Lost in a 'Crisis' .....	164
Research participants.....	164
Findings .....	166
Perception of a threat: the first moment.....	166
Flight: what may come after a threat is perceived .....	176
Reaching safety: a remedy for the initial source of coercion.....	186
Life in transit: a struggle that goes on.....	195
Take away .....	215
Chapter 7: The Epilogue .....	218
Notes on methodology.....	218
Summary of arguments.....	222
Reflections on the findings.....	226
Contributions and implications.....	227
Limitations .....	230
Future recommendations .....	232

In closing.....	232
References .....	233
Appendices.....	256
Appendix A: Interview questions .....	256
Appendix B: About the research participants .....	257

## List of Tables

Table 1 Research participants' nationality and location .....	23
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## List of Figures

Figure 1 Refugees under UNHCR mandate 1951-2021 .....	3
Figure 2 Refugee trend by population type 2008-2018 .....	4
Figure 3 Refugees originated from Iran 1980-2022 .....	17
Figure 4 Syrian Refugees 2000-2023 .....	21
Figure 5 Research participants' sex .....	24
Figure 6 Age distribution of participants by nationality .....	24
Figure 7 The (Im)mobility Chessboard .....	84
Figure 8 Interactive Decision-making Model .....	90
Figure 9 Spectrum of Coercion .....	93
Figure 10 Spectrum of Time .....	101
Figure 11 Decision-making Environment .....	106
Figure 12 Spectrum of Coercion (reminder) .....	170

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## Dedication

To the 44 refugees I interviewed for this study.

To Behrouz Boochani and every other refugee being dehumanized in detention centers.

To Alan Kurdi and every other refugee who drowned in the sea.

To Omran Daqneesh and every other child who is caught in the middle of war and terror.

To Mahsa Amini and every other individual who lost their lives before getting a chance to seek asylum.

To Palestinian refugees living in Yarmouk Camp and every other refugee living in exile, dreaming, only dreaming, of home.

To Shervin Hajipour and Toomaj Salehi and every other artist or activist who is deprived of their basic human rights but choose to stay.

To our 'baba Olga' and every other grandma forced to leave home and roots behind.

To all refugees.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.”

- Jean Luc Godard

Cold, confused, and worried, that is how I felt the day I was waiting to be interviewed outside of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Ankara. It was a sunny winter afternoon, but as the sun was losing its heat, I could feel the dry and cold breeze of the snow on the ground in Dikmen Vadisi neighbourhood. I was not the only one waiting there. There were a few dozen more refugees waiting around, just like myself. Some from Somalia, some from Afghanistan, others from Iraq, and the rest were from Iran. As a group of Catholic missionaries were giving away free wrapped doner sandwiches to the crowd, for the first time it hit me that ‘I am now a refugee.’ I thought about my own story, one that did not appear to be particularly relevant in the mind of others; as if my refugeehood surpassed every other aspect of my life, including my background, my journey, and my dreams. I looked around and thought about those around me. Their stories seemed to be irrelevant too. They were refugees, like me, whose refugeehood was their main defining element in that moment. I desperately wanted to tell myself and everyone around me that ‘I am not *just* a refugee,’ and that I am more than the vulnerable body present in this moment. Perhaps I was not the only one that day feeling this way; every other refugee waiting with me had their stories, ones that seemed lost or deemed irrelevant.

Looking back, I can trace the source of inspiration for this research project in that very moment, one that created a strong desire in me to tell stories of those whose stories are often untold,

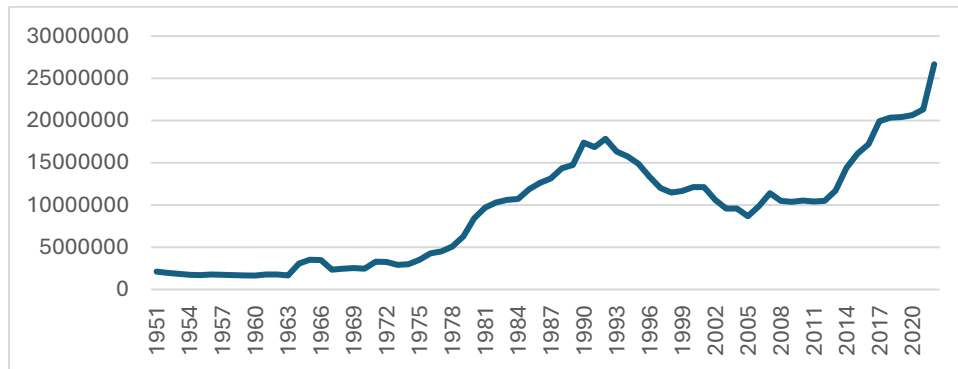
stories of how they navigate their journeys and make decisions when faced with defining questions throughout their journeys.

### **Problem statement**

The sheer scale of displacement as a result of humanitarian issues in various parts of the world demands attention. According to UNHCR, by the end of 2021, 89.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide “as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order” (2022). UNHCR estimates that this number has increased to 103 million individuals at mid-2022 (Ibid.). The total number of forcibly displaced individuals is currently twice the level of displacement in the mid-1990s, which was another period witnessing high numbers of refugees because of the conflicts taking place in Eastern Europe, particularly in former Yugoslavia.

An overwhelming majority of these individuals are internally displaced; 53.2 million individuals are internally displaced, while 27.1 million are refugees under UNHCR’s mandate (Ibid.). The overall number of forcibly displaced persons increased over the past few decades (see Figure 1). According to the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, these numbers indicate that the total number of displaced individuals are now officially higher than the 60 million individuals displaced after World War II.

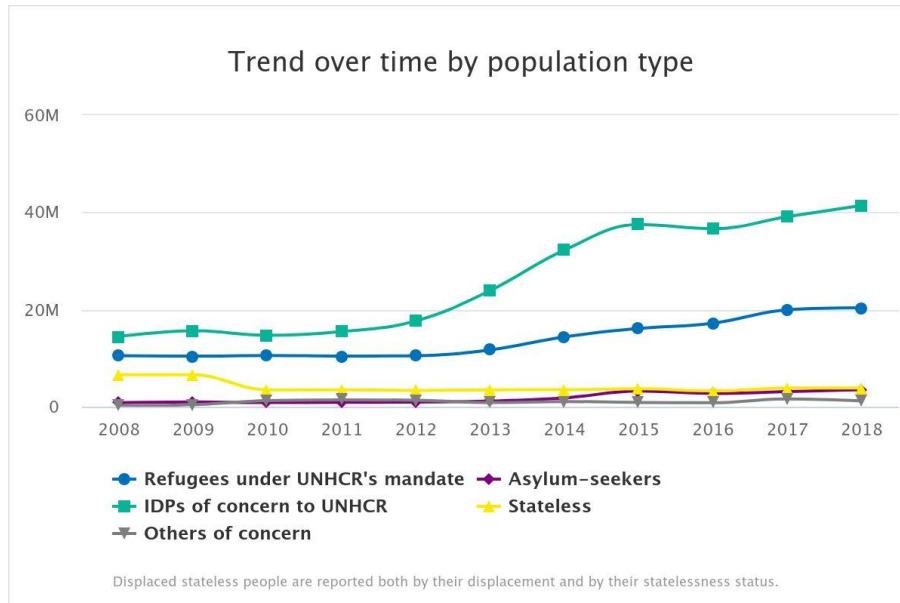
Figure 1 Refugees under UNHCR mandate 1951-2021



Source: Refugee Data Finder

Perhaps on that basis, the refugee movements of mid-2010s were commonly constructed as a 'crisis.' In 2015, Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission President, and Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, initiated the Brussels summit to discuss the refugee 'crisis' in October 2015. This summit was followed by an international summit at the United Nations (General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants) in September 2016 to serve a similar purpose on a global level (Betts, 2017). The timing of the construction of the 'crisis' in 2015 is interesting because there was a major increase in total number of refugees under UNHCR mandate from over 10 million in 2012 to over 14 million in 2014 (see Figure 2). Meanwhile the total number of internally displaced persons increased from over 17 million in 2012 to over 32 million in 2014 (see Figure 2). The impacts of the civil war in Syria were already felt by the neighbouring states and most importantly Syrian people, well before 2015. What changed in 2015, however, was that about a million individuals arrived in Europe (Conner, 2016). This is to say that the discourse around refugee 'crisis' in Europe starting in 2015 was a 'crisis' for European states.

Figure 2 Refugee trend by population type 2008-2018



Source: Refugee Data Finder

Construction of refugee movements as ‘crises’ implies that there is a discontinuity or a “breaking point in a patterned process of linearity” (Boin, 2004, p. 167). It also implies that the discontinuity is a dramatic and distinguishable event that goes beyond not only the normality, but also the ongoing or incremental change (Lindley, 2014, p. 2). ‘Crisis’ refers to a prompt need for decisive state intervention (Heir and Greenberg, 2002, p. 491). In other words, the breaking of the normal calls for immediate state responses. With the focus on ‘crisis,’ then, the state has been at the core of the discussions around refugees. Alcalde (2016) asserts that refugee ‘crisis’ is not just about number of refugees, but also the state’s unpreparedness to offer humanitarian intervention. Della Porta argues that the current refugee ‘crisis,’ then, “was triggered by the perception that the institutional structures and policies in place, at all territorial levels, were unfit to address what was presented as an emergency” (2018, p. 6).

The centrality of the state in discussions about refugees in terms of a ‘crisis’ removed the personalized nature of individual refugee journeys. In other words, it dehumanized them by reducing them to a set of numbers and a problem to be solved or prevented. Hassun, one of my Syrian participants does an excellent job of describing this problem.<sup>1</sup> He says, “It breaks my heart when countries say these refugees should go to that country, those refugees should go to this country as if we are like some goods that can be bought or sold.” Focusing on the state and state responses to refugee movements and portraying them as a ‘crisis,’ dehumanizes refugees. When individuals or groups are stripped of their humanity and reduced to mere statistics or labels, it becomes easier for societies to turn their backs to their suffering. Painting refugees with one brush and focusing on labels as opposed to individuals results in ignoring the complexities of refugees’ lived experiences. When refugees are dehumanized, it becomes easier to justify restrictive immigration policies, harsh border controls, or the denial of their basic human rights.<sup>2</sup> There are many examples for such policies, from the Australian government’s refusal to give entry to refugees, to the United Kingdom government’s plans to send refugees to Rwanda during their application review process (BBC, 2023).

The unfolding of the refugee ‘crisis’ in 2015 also served as a reminder that there is a gap in the conventional understanding of refugees’ behaviors and decision-making.<sup>3</sup> While the 1951

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<sup>1</sup> As I will discuss later in this chapter, I use pseudonyms for referring to my research participants throughout this study.

<sup>2</sup> The Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural) of the United Nations General Assembly, discussed this issue on October 31, 2018. Discrimination, racism, and xenophobia were flagged as key consequences of dehumanizing refugees.

<sup>3</sup> I will fully unpack these expectations in the next chapter.

Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees expects refugees to seek asylum in a territorially neighboring country, a noticeable number of them chose to defy that expectation and continue their search for protection far from their home country, at the European borders. For instance, in 2023, 292,985 refugees arrived at Europe (International Organization for Migration, n/a). This begs attention to why do refugees behave in ways that do not fit neatly into the expectations created by the conventional international refugee regime. And more broadly, it calls attention to how refugees make their decisions throughout their journeys.

### **Literature review**

A review of the literature on refugee studies points to a wider gap in understandings of refugee journeys and how refugees make their decisions. A common part of the literature focuses on a historical tracing of the concept of refugee, based on similar behaviours (fleeing persecution) across time. The likes of Kleist (2017), Skran (1995), and Jaeger (2001) engage with the history of refugeehood from 17<sup>th</sup> century France to the inter-war period and the 1951 Convention. These early studies established the primary behavior definitive of refugees, that they flee persecution, often to neighbouring states, primarily within Europe. This historical scrutiny is also expanded to studies that are primarily concerned with the refugee as a category. For instance, Zetter (2007), Cole (2018), Hamlin (2021), and Vigil and Abidi (2018) examine various labels such as refugee, asylum seeker, economic migrant, and more, and discuss the potential impacts of each label on refugee regimes and refugee experiences. For instance, Zetter argues that government bureaucracies, in countries of the global north, have actively contributed to the proliferation of labels; this process could result in discriminating and detaching refugees “from the core attribute of being a refugee—international protection” (2007, p. 176).

Another body of literature that often overlaps with discussions around labels and categories is one that focuses on refugee protection. Shacknove (1985), for instance, breaks down the concept of refugee and discusses the legal implications of each component of the 1951 Convention construction of refugee. Shacknove's interrogation of the construction of refugeehood provides an interpretation that challenges the conventional expectations of refugeehood, particularly in terms of border crossing: "I shall argue that refugees are, in essence, persons whose basic needs are unprotected by their country of origin, who have no remaining recourse other than to seek international restitution of their needs, and who are so situated that international assistance is possible" (Shacknove, 1985, p. 277). Hathaway (2005) investigates refugee entitlements, not only in the context of the 1951 Convention but also through the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1954) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1954). He sheds light on the shortcomings of states' exclusive focus on the Convention when creating and implementing refugee policies. In other words, he argues in favor of entitlements for refugees that go beyond the limited interpretations of the Convention. In another piece, Hathaway and Foster (2014) provide a legal discussion of refugee status and shed light on the contested nature of the meaning of refugee. They raise multiple questions that highlight challenges with the issue of eligibility for refugee status, and by extension highlight the complexities involved in refugee decision-making:

[I]s a person in an international transit zone "outside" her country? How much evidence of risk does there need to be for a fear to be "well-founded"? When is a harm serious enough to be a risk of "being persecuted"? Does an at-risk person lose her entitlement to refugee status if she can turn to militias or other non-state entities for help inside her own country? Are those at risk because of their gender or sexual orientation refugees? Can a refugee go home to "test the waters," or will doing so forfeit her protected status? And how do we deal with at-risk persons

who are serious criminals, or who are thought to pose a risk to the security of an asylum country?

One can perhaps trace this legal and historical conversation about the modern phenomenon of those who are forced to flee their home state back to Hanna Arendt's book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), where she writes of the advent of a new historical paradigm, marked by the condition of modern statelessness. For her, the twentieth-century refugees were "welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere" (Arendt, 1951, p. 267). In another seminal work, Haddad (2008) examines the historical development of refugee policy. She concludes that refugees are "an inevitable if unintended consequence of the international state system" (Haddad, 2008, p. 1). She argues that refugee is "a political construction posited outside the state-citizen-territory trinity" (Haddad, 2008, p. 43). As such, she effectively highlights the state-centric nature of the conventional understanding of refugeehood, which I intend to address in this project. Merging refugee protection with international refugee regimes, Aleinikoff and Zamore (2019) shed light on challenges faced by the international refugee regime and propose reforms to create a more effective and responsive system for protecting refugees by refocusing on responsibility-sharing, perceiving the humanitarian-development divide in a new light, and prioritizing refugee rights. They are alarmed by refugees' long-term encampment in the global south and as a result argue in favor of refugee-centered regimes that provide refugees with more mobility in pursuit of a dignified life. Their argument opens the possibility to expand the conception of refugee and protection. Along similar lines, Betts and Collier (2017) take a sharper focus on refugee protection policies. They offer a critical analysis of current refugee policies and propose innovative approaches to address the challenges of forced displacement, focusing on solutions that benefit both refugees and host countries. They propose a humanitarian approach

combined with a new economic agenda that starts with jobs, restores autonomy, and rebuilds people's ability to help themselves and their families or communities. Betts and Collier recognize and promote refugee agency and challenge the conventional understanding of refugee behaviour as passive.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to understanding refugee decision-making and behavior, the literature is significantly limited. As demonstrated above, most of this literature engages with refugeehood from a highly legal or theoretical standpoint that fails to capture nuances of refugee behavior. Hence, it may be helpful to also consider broader migration theories that are concerned with migratory behavior. Even then, as Arar and Fitzgerald (2022) argue, the literature is best described as siloed, meaning theoretical endeavors are focused on a single aspect of decision-making.<sup>5</sup> I group the first body of literature on migratory behavior as structural approaches. In this group, Adelman (2018) focuses on impacts of colonialism, Zolberg (1989) emphasizes the role of states, and Sassen (2013) offers a World System Theory -inspired approach to refugee behavior, while Ranis and Fei (1961) present a theoretical approach that is based on macro neoclassical economics. There is a second set of works that I group as rational choice approaches. These began with Ravenstein's "Laws of Migration" in 1885 and include Stouffer's (1940) and Lee's (1966) push-pull inspired models, Kunz' (1973) well-known kinetic model, as well as micro-neoclassical economics by Harris and Todaro (1970). The third group is composed of theoretical efforts that

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss conventional understandings of refugee agency in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> My list is by no means comprehensive and exclusive. There are other aspects of refugeehood that are often explored as well. For instance, a relatively large body of literature is concerned with refugee wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Srivastava et al. (2019), Björkenstam et al. (2020), Bryant et al (2022)).

have a psychological focus on refugee behavior and decision-making. Great examples of this work can be found in Keller's work in 1975 as well as Tartakovsky and Schwartz's (2001) deficiency model. The next prominent body of literature is on network theory. Epstein (2008) and Haug (2008), for instance, discuss the impact of personal networks and herd behavior in migratory decision-making. Lastly, the likes of Mabogunje (1970), Fawcett (1989), Bakewell (2014), and Massey (2020) aim at understanding refugee behavior using a system theory approach. Most recently, however, Arar and Fitzgerald (2022) contributed to this literature by introducing their systemic approach, which results in their (Im)mobility Chessboard, creating categories of (im)mobility through interactions between coercion and movement.

While all these approaches, to varying degrees, shed light on refugee experiences and behaviors, there is still a gap in the literature on how refugees make decisions in defining moments of their journey, from the time they perceive a threat, to their flight, reaching safety, and life in transit. Theoretical approaches are largely influenced by structural or rational choice theories that provide a limited space for understanding refugee agency. Additionally, refugee voices are for the most part absent from the inquiry. This contributes to the development of policies that set top-down and homogenous expectations for refugee behaviors that are at odds with the realities of refugees' journeys and experiences. The outcome of such policies deprives some refugees of much needed protection and support. This is where my research project will contribute to the literature on refugee studies.

## **Research question**

### ***Main question***

The main question this project is aiming to answer is how do refugees make their decisions throughout their journeys?

### ***Sub-questions***

- What factors are involved in refugees' decision-making processes?
- Why do different refugees make different decisions in seemingly similar situations?

## **Purpose of Study**

Refugees have either been neglected or perceived as a homogenized category, presenting them in a dehumanizing manner. This is a problem that became more evident since 2015, with constructions of the notion of refugee 'crisis.' As I discussed earlier, with the 2015 refugee 'crisis,' discourses on refugees have been focused on the implications of refugee movements on state and intergovernmental actors (Berry and Hou 2016, Triandafyllidou 2018, Lindley 2014, Heir and Greenberg 2002, and Alcalde 2016). This has resulted in the dehumanization of refugees and a rise in border control and movement restrictive policies in various countries. In addition to this statist approach, a scan of the literature in refugee studies suggests that there is a noticeable gap in the literature on refugee decision-making and behavior. The purpose of this study is to bring the refugee to the forefront of the conversation on refugee behavior and shed light on their decision-making throughout their journeys. I will give voice to refugees who are often neglected or absent from public discourses. Highlighting refugee stories will provide a first-hand account of refugee behaviors in defining moments during their journeys that are often less known. In other words, my work will provide insight into refugee behavior and inform protection policy

discussions. Throughout this study, I will argue that a better understanding of refugee decision-making and behavior will support more inclusive and wider-reaching refugee protection policies.

## **Research Design**

### ***Methodology***

From a methodological standpoint, the goal of this study is to (1) give voice to (a group of) refugees who are often absent from academic inquiries, (2) contribute to the richness of literature on a particular aspect of refugee studies within the specific context of the selected cases, and (3) develop more general theoretical propositions that can be tested through other cases and/or other methods. To achieve those goals, this project will utilize a qualitative narrative analysis approach. This qualitative approach is a suitable framework because this study is concerned with individual experiences and behaviors, which cannot be appropriately understood through quantitative approaches relying on numerical variables. As Ghorashi (2008) suggests, studying refugee experiences requires a space for individuals to be heard; it is important to give silence a chance. While the media often reduces refugees to numbers, focusing on individual stories serves as a more appropriate approach for having a clearer understanding of refugee experiences and behaviors (Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016).

Qualitative narrative analysis provides an avenue for understanding how a specific group of tellers perceive and explain their own experiences. It is a research method that is used for understanding human experiences, perceptions, and behaviors through the analysis of narratives or stories shared by individuals (Creswell, 2007). As Chafe (1990) argues, narratives can be understood “as overt manifestations of the mind in action: as windows to both the content of the mind and its

ongoing operations” (p. 79). Narratives could be found in interviews, field-work, or other similar settings, and they could include meaningful speech units or stories about a specific event or aspect of life, pertaining relationships, traumas, or conflicts (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012).<sup>6</sup> Narrative analysis is influenced by liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s that were concerned with giving voice to marginalized groups (Chase, 2005). Since this project is centered around and aimed at giving voice to refugees, as an underrepresented and marginalized group, qualitative narrative analysis is an appropriate approach facilitating that goal.

As De Fina and Georgakopoulou rightly argue, narrative analysis should revolve around interactions at the local level with proper contextualization of narratives (2015, p. 3). To do that, I focus my narrative analysis on interviews with two groups of refugees and contextualize their stories within their socio-political contexts. I organize my empirical analysis in two parts: Iranian and Syrian refugees. While using state citizenship for my grouping of research participants and stories, I am not interested in making comparisons between the two groups on the basis of their citizenship. Instead, I use this grouping in order to contextualize my participants’ stories in a more effective manner. The two populations provide a rich and wide range of experiences that include different aspects of war as well as persecution for a variety of reasons, but my proposed model of refugee decision-making supersedes nationalities. I engage with my participants’ stories on an individual level and highlight how they behave in contrast to the expectations set for them based on the conventional understanding of refugeehood in both legal and theoretical realms.

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<sup>6</sup> Narratives could also be understood across long passages of time or through large social forms, such as accounts of political events and social change. See Chase (2005) and Andrews (2007).

## **Methods**

For this study, I rely on semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews provide an appropriate avenue for my respondents to invite me into their world and to share their stories with me.<sup>7</sup> I interviewed 44 refugees, 21 of whom are from Syria and 23 from Iran.<sup>8</sup> I initially started recruiting participants for in-person interviews in British Columbia, Canada. However, with restrictions put in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 2020, my initial plan seemed to be impractical and undoable. Hence, I transitioned my work to virtual interviews and modified the scope of my study and expanded the geographical reach of my recruitment efforts beyond Canada. I continued my efforts in Canada as well as five other countries for recruiting research participants. These countries include the United States of America (US), England, Germany, Türkiye and Lebanon. I selected Canada, US, England, and Germany because they are popular destinations for refugee communities (Dyvik, 2023). Türkiye and Lebanon, on the other hand, are ideally located on major refugee routes in the region, serving as popular transit countries for refugees.<sup>9</sup> For Iranian refugees, Türkiye has been one of the most critical borders since the 1979 Revolution (Aljazeera, 2021). Many Iranian refugees cross the Turkish border and stay there for various lengths of time. For Syrian refugees, on the other hand, Lebanon and Türkiye (along with Jordan) are neighboring countries, where refugees have tried to find safety since the civil war

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B to learn more about each of the interviewees participating in this study.

<sup>8</sup> In the next section, I will discuss my case selection.

<sup>9</sup> I acknowledge that Jordan is also a major transit country particularly for Syrian refugees. I did not include them in this study only because I did not have the means and networks to recruit research participants in Jordan.

erupted in 2011 (Norman, 2023). This geographical distribution creates a relatively rich sample that reflects diverse experiences and journeys.

In terms of scope, I restricted my study to Iranian and Syrian refugees who fled their home country between 2009 and 2020. For Iranian participants, 2009 marks the Green Movement, when the country faced one of its most significant political instabilities since the 1979 Revolution. After the disputed June 12 presidential election, massive protests were provoked, and the government demonstrated a widespread crackdown that was unprecedented in a decade. According to Human Rights Watch, security forces (the Revolutionary Guard, the Basij militia, and the Ministry of Intelligence) were responsible for killing at least 30 people (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Additionally, about 4,000 people were arrested for participating in largely peaceful protests (Ibid.). For Syrian participants, on the other hand, I used the 2011 Civil War, which ultimately resulted in one of the largest refugee movements since the Second World War. Given the significant impact of the event on a large population, it seems appropriate to select the beginning of the 2011 Civil War as the starting point for my Syrian participants. 2009 and 2011, respectively, for Iranian and Syrian refugees provides meaningful depth for capturing diverse experiences of refugees within and outside of a major conflict.

### ***Case selection***

This study focuses on Syrian and Iranian refugees. While acknowledging that grouping refugees based on national identity may reinforce a sense of hegemonic understanding of an extremely diverse group, I choose this grouping for two main reasons. First, the two movements are drastically different in terms of the type of coercion employed, the time people had to plan their journeys, as well as cultural factors that shape mobility decisions. On the one hand, Syrian

refugees' journeys are almost exclusively originated by a major event, namely the Syrian Civil War and its consequences, which has resulted in a sudden and large displacement and refugee movement beginning in 2011. On the other hand, Iranian refugees have been fleeing the country in a steadier pattern without being necessarily driven by a major event, such as open armed conflict. Additionally, Iranian refugees have been fleeing the country in response to an oppressive and authoritarian regime that has been violating fundamental rights and freedoms of various identity groups as well as opposition political activists for over four decades.<sup>10</sup> Looking at the two cases together provides a window into a rich set of individual experiences and journeys.

Second, the case selection on the basis of citizenship is a methodological decision for defining the scope of the study. In other words, despite the grouping, I am interested in learning about individual experiences of my interviewees. I intend to compare my research participants' responses against the conventional expectations for refugee behavior and analyze them using the three components of my proposed theoretical model, which I will introduce in Chapter 4. This grouping is also helpful in that it will provide a meaningful setting for understanding why refugees in relatively similar circumstances actually have different experiences and behaviors. In other words, it will highlight the unique and individual experiences and behaviors of refugees even when they may be expected to behave in a similar manner given the similarities found in their political, social, or economic contexts at the national level. Focusing on two national communities provided an opportunity to explore a wider range of experiences and socio-political contexts that influence refugee decision making, while maintaining a manageable dissertation project. I suggest

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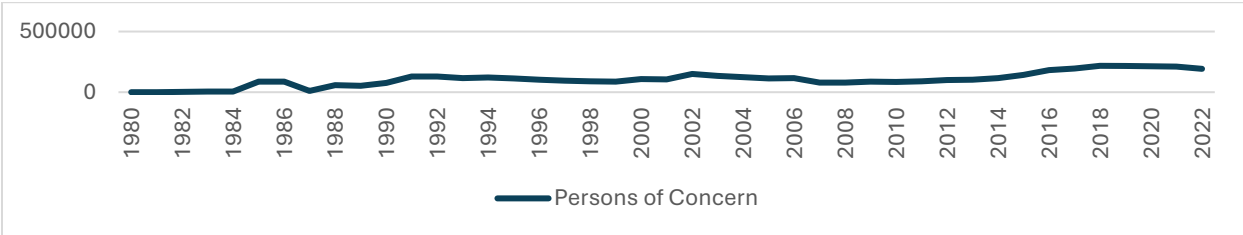
<sup>10</sup> Syria had a similar flow of refugees prior to 2011.

that the findings of this research are generalizable beyond these two national contexts, although, as I show in subsequent chapters, the exact dynamics at play can differ quite dramatically in different national contexts. I will unpack this later in my empirical chapters.

**The two cases**

Given the centrality of Syrian and Iranian refugees in this study, in this section I will highlight a few key details about each of the two populations. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran, the number of refugees has been steadily increasing. According to official data, there were only 48 refugees from Iran under UNHCR's mandate in 1980, but this number increased to 122,224 in 2022.<sup>11</sup> During the first half of the 1980s, the revolutionary government's record can be characterized as one of the most repressive periods in the country's history (Ghorashi and Boersma, 2009). The government's violations of human rights in Iran reached new levels in 1988, when authorities, "acting on the orders of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, summarily and extrajudicially executed... between 2,800 and 5,000 prisoners in at least 32 cities in the country" (Human Rights Watch 2022).

*Figure 3 Refugees originated from Iran 1980-2022*



Source: UNHCR Data Finder

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR data indicates that there are additional 69,237 asylum seekers from Iran in 2022 (UNHCR n.a.).

The unprecedented human rights violations coupled with the war with Iraq (1980-1988) created an environment where many Iranians made the coerced choice to leave their homeland and seek asylum elsewhere. The number of refugees from Iran significantly increased from tens to tens of thousands in only a few years (see Figure 3). Since then, the total number of persons of concern from Iran has been increasing, for the most part, reaching its all-time high of 217,395 in 2018 (UNHCR n.a.). Over the past few decades, there have been a few major events potentially contributing to this trend: 1999 student protests, 2009 Green Movement, and the most recent Woman, Life, Freedom Movement in 2022. These events, however, did not result in spikes in numbers in levels witnessed in cases such as Syria, where millions of people left their homes within a short period of time. While these notable events hint at state persecution for political reasons as the main driver for refugee movements from Iran, experiences of Iranian refugees are far more diverse and complex. This diversity and complexity, as I will demonstrate later in Chapter 5, relates to how refugees interact with coercion and time as well as their decision-making environment throughout their journeys.

Besides the political dissidents, there are multiple groups that are subject to the Iranian state's violence. The state law deprives Baha'is of their basic rights and actively discriminates against them. Members of the Baha'i faith are routinely harassed or prosecuted on national security charges and their access to higher education is significantly limited (Human Rights Watch 2011a). Momen (2005) compares Baha'is' situation in Iran with "religious cleansing parallel to the ethnic cleansing that occurred in the Balkans" (p. 225). Additionally, the Shia Muslim ruling political system in Iran actively discriminates against other religious and ethnic minorities such as Sunni Muslims (Kurds and Baluchs in particular), and mistreats those who convert to other religions,

particularly evangelical Christianity (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In the case of ethnic (national) minorities, the Iranian government has systemically oppressed minorities and deprived them of public education in their own language (Bazafkan, 2003). Another major group, who often find themselves with few choices but to flee from Iran are the members of the country's sexual minorities. The country's discriminatory laws and policies and patriarchal cultural values against sexual minorities put them at risk of violence by both state and private actors who enjoy the government's support (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The diversity among Iranian refugees, who have been fleeing from an oppressive state for various reasons, provides a rich set of experiences. These individuals do not flee as a result of a major event that leads to a large migratory movement, such as the Syrian civil war. Instead, they do so over a stretch of time and for a number of reasons, which makes their journeys more diverse in terms of the type of coercion they face, and, in some cases, the amount of time they have to coordinate their departure.

The flow of Syrian refugees was in fact fairly similar to Iranian refugees until 2011. After three military coups in the country, Hafez al-Asad came to power in Syria as the leader for the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in 1971. During his and his successor's rule, human rights violations have been a constant feature of the Syrian government. Arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and "Disappearances" have been a common theme in the past few decades in Syria (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Haddad (2009) characterized the state of human rights in Syria as a "quasi-permanent" and "never-ending emergency," years before the civil war began (p. 545). Members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and unauthorized political groups, such as the Communist Party were routinely arrested and charged with "spreading false or exaggerated information,"

“weakening national sentiment,” “inciting sectarian conflict,” or “insulting the president and public administrations” (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Over the years, the Kurdish minority, in particular, continued to be the subject of systemic discrimination and repression; Security authorities have been preventing political and cultural gatherings, and frequently detaining and trying Kurdish activists who demand increased political rights and recognition of Kurdish culture (Human Rights Watch, 2011b).<sup>12</sup>

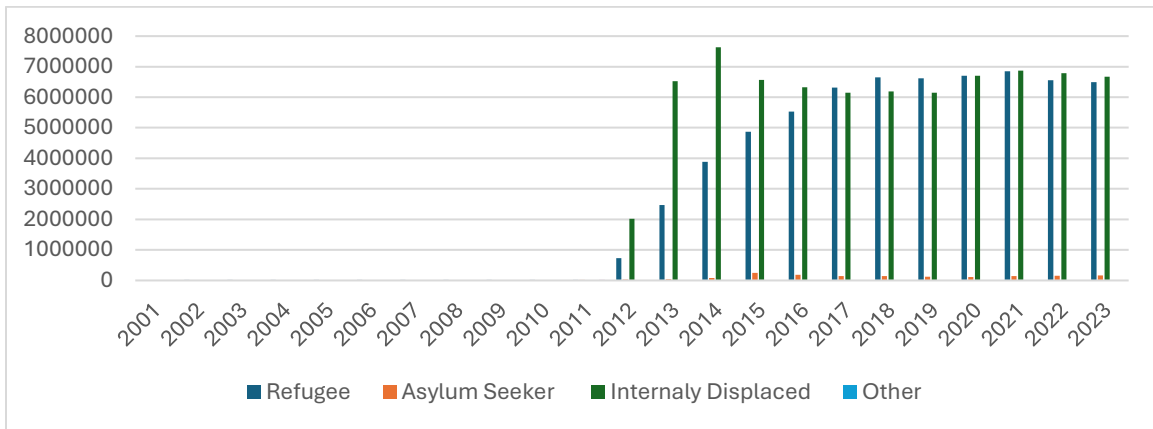
Within that political climate, the flow of refugees from Syria remained fairly steady until 2011 when the Civil War began. For instance, from 1970s to 1980s, the number of refugees from Syria remained under 1000 total (UNHCR, n.a.).<sup>13</sup> These numbers steadily increased during the 1990s, with 2,145 refugees in 1990 and over 8,000 refugees and asylum seekers in 2001 (Ibid.). Perhaps influenced by the transition of power from Hafez al-Asad to his son, Bashar al-Asad, in 2000, the number of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers experienced another expansion. In 2002, UNHCR reported 23,172 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers (Ibid.). In 2010, the year before the Civil War, this number increased to 28,190 (Ibid.).

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<sup>12</sup> Yildiz (2005) provides a detailed and historical account of the Kurds in Syria in his book *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*. Yildiz documents decades of human rights abuses against Kurds in Syria. In another piece, Gunter (2014) examines how “assimilationist and denialist Arab colonialism has exploited the Kurds in Syria” (p. 410). Gunter compares the Arab colonialism with Ottoman and French colonialism and suggests that the Arab colonialism has caused more harm to the Kurds in Syria.

<sup>13</sup> The only exception was 1985, when 2599 refugees fled Syria.

Figure 4 Syrian Refugees 2000-2023



Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder<sup>14</sup>

The conflict in Syria emerged from the Arab Spring that began in December 2010. What sparked the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor whose action was an outcry against corruption. This prompted protests in Tunisia, and soon after that protests spread across the Middle East and North Africa, and a few longtime rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen were forced to step down. Inspired by these events, a group of 15 students in the city of Deraa, Syria, spray-painted “The people want the fall of the regime” on a school wall (Laub, 2023).<sup>15</sup> After the students were arrested and tortured, demonstrations began in Deraa, Damascus and Aleppo. Demonstrators who rallied behind them clashed with police, and protests spread. The Syrian government responded to the demonstrations with a violent crackdown. With the formation of the Free Syrian Army by defectors from the military in July 2011, the revolt

<sup>14</sup> Please note that for 2000-2011, the numbers of refugees are so small relative to the following years that they are not visible in this figure.

<sup>15</sup> See Lesch’s “Anatomy of an Uprising” in *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings* edited by Mark Haas (2019) for a detailed discussion on the initiation of the uprising in Syria in 2011.

turned into a civil war and additional rebel groups emerged across the country in 2012 and 2013. (Aljazeera, 2023). By the end of 2013, various extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), emerged in northern and eastern Syria, and the Syrian government started losing control of its territories in certain regions. For over a decade, various regional and international actors have been involved in Syria; the civil war has deeply impacted Syrian people.

With the beginning of the unrest in 2011, the total number of refugees, asylum seekers and other persons of concern reached 48,482, and it further increased to 761,927 in 2012, before it reached 2,518,742 people in 2013 (Ibid.). This number increased to 3,969,131 in 2014, and respectively 5,127,340 and 5,717,364 in 2015 and 2016 (Ibid.). According to UNHCR, from 2016 to 2023 this number has remained between six and seven million. In the meantime, there has been a significant number of internally displaced persons in Syria as well: over two million in 2012 and more than six million people from 2013 to 2023 (Ibid.).<sup>16</sup> These individuals try to escape violence and war and find safety within the Syrian borders, in the neighboring countries, and even outside of the immediate region (in Europe, for instance). As opposed to the Iranian refugees, the post-2011 Syrian refugees are mostly driven by a major event that resulted in a significant migratory movement. While all these refugees flee from a conflict, each of them is unique in their journeys. More closely engaging with this group's stories will shed light on the unique and individualistic aspects of their journeys within the shared and communal experience of a nation impacted by a civil war.

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<sup>16</sup> The number of internally displaced persons reached its highest in 2014: 7,632,500.

## Sample

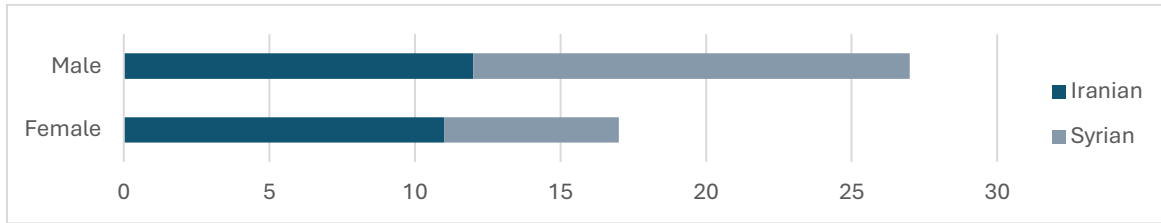
Recruitment of participants for my research was a major challenge that took over six months. Among the challenges were the sensitive nature of my research topic for and vulnerability of my participants, lack of outreach platforms, and cultural as well as religious barriers. Despite the challenges, I interviewed 23 Iranian and 21 Syrian refugees in six countries as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1 Research participants' nationality and location*

Country of origin	Canada	England	Germany	Lebanon	Türkiye	USA	Total
<b>Iranian</b>	7	4	1	0	9	2	23
<b>Syrian</b>	4	1	2	10	3	1	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>44</b>

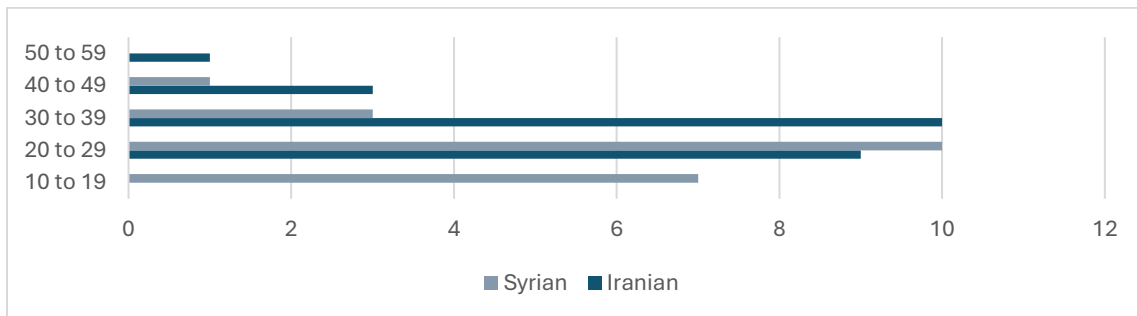
I have a reasonably diverse representation; I have 11 female and 12 male participants from Iran and 6 female and 15 male participants from Syria. Out of the 44, three of them (all from Iran) self-identified as gay. The distribution for the Iranian population is 52% male and 48% female and that ratio for the Syrian population is 29% female and 71% male. While the representation of female Syrian participants is not as balanced as the Iranian case, given the cultural and religious barriers on interactions between a male interviewer and a female interviewee, this is a relatively successful outcome. As I will show in Chapter 6, I have a sufficient number of female participants from Syria to demonstrate how certain factors, such as familial norms and values, impact the decisions of men and women from Syria.

Figure 5 Research participants' sex



In terms of age distribution, the majority (20) of my participants are between 20 and 29 years old. The next highest (13) age group belongs to those between 30 and 39 years old. I also have seven participants under the age of 19, three between 40 and 49, and one between 50 and 59 years old.

Figure 6 Age distribution of participants by nationality



I also have diversity in my participants' journey types. While 36 of them lived in a transit country, namely Türkiye or Lebanon, for a period of time to seek asylum through UNHCR, six of them directly flew to their destination country (either with valid preexisting visas or by fake documentations and smugglers' help), where they applied for refugee status through state immigration agencies. Additionally, four of my participants chose to reach their destination country in Europe whether immediately after leaving their home country or after living in a transit country for a period of time.

In my interviews, I used 13 questions to guide my conversations with my participants (see Appendix A). For Iranian participants, I conducted the interviews in Farsi (Persian), and then translated the transcripts to English. For Syrian participants, however, for the most part (18 out of 21) I used an interpreter who translated the conversation between Arabic and English during the interviews. I conducted the interviews via Zoom and WhatsApp platforms, and they varied in length between 40 minutes and two hours. To maintain privacy and anonymity of my participants, I utilize pseudonyms, as opposed to their real names. I also avoid using identity or otherwise markers that could potentially reveal my interviewees' identity.<sup>17</sup>

## **Chapters**

This study is divided into five main chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. In the next chapter, "The Refugee," I engage with historical and legal discussions on refugee as a category. In this chapter, I primarily answer two questions: Who is a refugee? What are some behavioral expectations that are associated with the conventional understanding of refugeehood? To answer these questions, I center my scrutiny around the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (and the 1967 Protocol). I demonstrate that the conventional legal framework for refugee protection understands the refugee as passive, reactive, and lacking agency. It portrays the refugee as an individual who merely reacts to a set of circumstances that

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<sup>17</sup> One challenge with this sample group is that it has an inherent bias. This bias is rooted in the fact that all the participants are refugees who managed to leave their home country. This means that their decision-making has been effective, at least in relation to their response to the initial source of threat in their home country. This focus on the those who managed to flee, leaves behind those who never had a chance to flee. To use Arar and Fitzgerald's (Im)mobility Chessboard, those who got killed at home are not included in this study. Therefore, studying the decision-making behaviour of those who never flee (hence not having the refugee title), will make an interesting research project.

impose a ‘well-founded fear of persecution.’ The refugee is expected to flee immediately upon perceiving a fear of persecution to a neighboring country in search of protection. They are also expected to wait for international or state authorities to conclude their protection application process before planning next steps in their journey toward a durable solution to their displacement, whether it is resettlement, repatriation, or local integration (Moretti 2015, 72). I argue that refugees’ experiences are far more diverse and complex than this, as they respond to seemingly similar threats and experiences in different ways. The discrepancy between expectations and refugee behavior stems from a lack of refugee voices in informing the body of work that has set behavioural expectations. One of my primary contributions is to center the voices of refugees themselves, and their understandings of their decisions, and the factors that shaped those decisions. This will demonstrate how refugees exercise their agency in various, non-conventional, forms.

In the third chapter, “Theorizing Refugee Decision-making,” I investigate the literature on (forced) migration. I explore theoretical models contributing to the literature on refugee decision-making. I argue that existing accounts of refugee decision-making are largely influenced by the rational choice approach, that stresses cost and benefit calculations in migratory decision-making (for example, Ravenstein 1885, Lee 1966, and Kunz 1973). Such approaches understand migratory movement as biproducts of supply and demand fluctuations, labor market changes, and economic disparities between the sending and receiving locations. In addition to rational choice approaches, I identify a few accounts that focus on factors such as personal networks (Boyd 1989; De Jong 2000; Tilly 1999), psychological factors (e.g., Berry et al. 1987; Eisenstadt, 1954; Winter-Ebmer, 1994), the role of states (e.g., Adelman 2018 and Kibreab 1985), and systems theory (for

instance, Arar and FitzGerald 2022). While acknowledging that these theoretical efforts have varying degrees of explanatory power for understanding refugee decision-making, I argue that they do not adequately recognize the complexities involved in agency exercised by refugees. In particular, they fail to account for time, coercion, and refugees' decision-making context in a dynamic manner.

In Chapter 4, "Interactive Decision-Making Model," I introduce my model for understanding refugee decision making. Building on my legal and theoretical discussions in Chapters 2 and 3, I lay out my proposed theoretical model. This model, the Interactive Decision-making Model (IDM), highlights the complexities involved in refugee decision-making by adopting a systemic approach. IDM has three main components, spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and the decision-making environment. I argue that in the process of making their decisions, refugees *interact* with spectrums of coercion and time *within* their unique decision-making environment. These interactions, however, take place and influence refugees' decisions throughout their journeys. IDM recognizes that refugees do not behave in a gap; instead, they make their decisions within a multi-layered and complex system. The uniqueness of IDM rests in its utilization of a complex system approach, breaching siloed approaches to the topic, taking a fresh look at the notion of coercion as a spectrum (as opposed to a binary), and including the element of time as a key component for understanding refugee decision-making.

In Chapter 5, "Beyond the Seas," and Chapter 6, "Lost in a 'Crisis'" I apply IDM to my research participants' stories. I follow their journeys from the moment they perceived a threat, to their flight, to reaching safety, and to their life in transit. I utilize IDM to demonstrate that contrary to the conventional understanding of refugees as a homogenous category, refugees have vastly

diverse experiences. This diversity of experiences is also evident in how they make their decisions in defining moments of their journeys. They interact with coercion, time and their decision-making environment as they make their decisions.

In the final chapter, "Epilogue," I briefly reflect on this project as a whole. I discuss how I stepped into this project and how my learnings and findings shaped the project along the way. I also discuss the potential implications of this project and how it informs protection policy discussions and highlight future research opportunities.

## Chapter 2: The Conventional Understanding of Refugeehood

“...Staying was no longer an option, not for a single day.  
The next step in my city was my last step in the country.  
And the most horrid step then on this rusty boat.  
That at first would leave and sway, at first would carry us.  
And then would sink, dispersing us in the sea...”  
(Ghassim and Elyas, 2017)<sup>18</sup>

### Introduction

Who is a refugee? What are some behavioral expectations that are associated with the conventional understanding of refugeehood? Answering these questions can serve as a starting point for a deeper discussion on refugee decision-making because the conventional understanding of the refugee not only shapes the parameters of states’ protection of refugees, but also influences refugees’ experiences and behaviors particularly for those applying for asylum through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In this chapter, I will engage with these questions primarily through the 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (and the 1967 Protocol). The Convention framework forms the backbone for any assessment of refugeehood – both UNHCR and most national frameworks. Consequently, the behavioral expectations set out for refugees in this framework have profound implications for refugees, and

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<sup>18</sup> In a TEDxEastEnd performance in 2017, Babak Ghassim and Usama Elyas share a heart-wrenching poem that beautifully depicts the difficult journey refugees must take in search for an unknown place, where they can find refuge.

thus, for the decisions that they will make in their search for protection. The Convention framework plays a key role in the fate of over 31 million refugees under UNHCR mandate in 2023. That is why I primarily focus on UNHCR refugee status determination and resettlement practices as opposed to specific state practices. Individual countries have incorporated the Convention differently, leading to variation in how refugee status is determined. While certain, often western liberal democratic, states (such as Canada) may have more forward-looking or progressive refugee status determination approaches, in the recent years there has been a surge in anti-refugee discourses and policies (for instance in England or the US). This is to say that the Convention, despite changes particularly within state jurisdictions, remains a relevant and influential framework for refugee status determination primarily through UNHCR. I will complement the conceptual discussion on the conventional understating of refugee in this chapter with a scrutiny of theoretical explanations for refugee behavior in the next chapter. I will, then, introduce my model of refugee decision-making in Chapter 4.

My argument in this chapter is two-fold. First, I argue that the conventional framework oversimplifies refugeehood by understanding the involuntary nature of refugeehood largely as a binary condition almost exclusively focused on the circumstances leading to a refugee's flight. The Convention not only constructs refugees as passive, but it also actually requires them to be more passive or present themselves as such - simply reacting to a sense of coercion imposed on them. Consequently, I argue that the scope of the conventional definition of the refugee needs to be expanded to provide protection to individuals with a wider array of experiences that currently do not meet the refugee qualifications. I will further unpack this position by engaging with existing literature throughout this chapter.

## The history

The conventional international refugee framework is rooted in a longer history of protection, and forced migration is by no means a modern or new phenomenon. In fact, forced migration has been a common behavior often caused by conflict, among other reasons throughout history (Kleist, 2017, p. 161). The term ‘refugee,’ however, is of French origin (*réfugié*) from the late 17th century (Fontanari, 2018, p. 18). The first *modern* refugees and their protection could arguably be found in the case of Huguenots fleeing France in 1680s, about 270 years before the 1951 Convention was established (Hintermaier, 2000, p. 429).<sup>19</sup> The key change, however, that took place in the twentieth century was states’ desire to regulate migration and to define eligibility criteria for granting refugee status to individuals and communities (van Selm and Newman, 2003). This was an effort to reconcile the state’s responsibility to protect vulnerable populations on the one hand and its sovereignty, on the other. While acknowledging the long history of forced movement, I begin my examination with events leading up to the formation of the 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the 1967 Protocol. I do so because the Convention is commonly understood and accepted as the cornerstone of the current international refugee protection (Malkki, 1995, p. 497). The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, with 149 state parties to either or both, define the term ‘refugee’ and outline refugees’ rights and states’ legal obligations to protect them. Additionally, the Convention is the framework

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<sup>19</sup> Kleist argues that the origins of refugee protection *could* be traced even further back to the 1648 peace of Westphalia when European rulers recognized sovereign territorial protection rights (2017, p. 162).

informing UNHCR practices. These qualities appropriately place the Convention at the heart of the discussion on the understanding of refugeehood.

The current predominance of the Convention means that the present refugee regime is a post-Second World War reality; however, the League of Nations was precursor to the Convention and European refugee movements during the interwar era (Skran, 1995). Tartakower and Grossman even go on to label the interwar period as 'the era of refugees' (1944, p. 1). With the League of Nations, member states officially acknowledged values that paved the way for creation of international refugee protection agreements and agencies. The League of Nations agreed to "secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women, and children, both in their own countries and in all countries to which their commercial and industrial relations extend" (The Covenant of the League of Nations, p. Article 23 (a)). Members of the League also agreed to "secure just treatment for native inhabitants of territories under their control" (The Covenant of the League of Nations, p. Article 23 (b)). After the League was established by the Treaty of Versailles, it became more involved with the legal and political matters related to refugees; it established the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees in 1921. The reason for the focus on Russian refugees was that the Russian refugee movement was the most notable refugee movement (over one million refugees) immediately after the First World War, which was the biproduct of the breakup of the Russian Empire (Skran, 1995, pp. 33-34). Refugee movements of this historical moment can be understood as a consequence of the shift from empires to nation-states. The downfall of multinational empires and the subsequent adoption of the nation-state model to govern ethnically diverse populations led to the displacement of people who left their homes in search

of communities of their own nationality and the protection of their governments (Haddad, 2008, p. 100).

In 1923, as a result of rising concerns about Greek and Armenian refugees, the term 'Russian' was eliminated from the title of the organization (Jaeger, 2001, p. 729). By 1925, two new refugee populations, namely Turkish and Assyrian refugees, were added to the discussion around refugees (Jaeger, 2001, p. 729). By 1931, the High Commissioner for Refugees Office was organized as the Nansen International Office for Refugees to offer refugees various supports including material, legal, and political assistance.<sup>20</sup> The Nansen International Office and its various iterations, serve as the foundation for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Offering supports to refugees meant that the League of Nations needed to define eligibility criteria for those accessing the supports. Hence the League defined a Russian or Armenian refugee in the Arrangement Relating to the Issue of Identity Certificates to Russian and Armenian Refugees that took place on May 12, 1926. The Agreement (Article 2) provided two separate definitions, one for Russian refugees and one for Armenian refugees. The Russian refugee was characterized as "any person of Russian origin who does not enjoy or who no longer enjoys the protection of the Government of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics and who has not acquired another nationality." And the Armenian refugee was defined as "any person of Armenian origin

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<sup>20</sup> In June 1921, the Council of the League, created by the International Red Cross, instituted its High Commission for Refugees, and asked Fridtjof Nansen to administer it. Nansen was a Norwegian diplomat (among other things), who invented the "Nansen Passport" for the stateless refugees under his care. Nansen Passport was a document of identification that was eventually recognized by fifty-two states. During his office, Nansen assisted hundreds of thousands of Russian, Turkish, Armenian, Assyrian, and Assyro-Chaldean refugees. Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the repatriation of prisoners of war, international relief work and as the League of Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (The Nobel Prize, n.d.).

formerly a subject of the Ottoman Empire who does not enjoy or who no longer enjoys the protection of the Government of the Turkish Republic and who has not acquired another nationality.”<sup>21</sup> The foundation of these definitions was threefold: the origin of the individual, their lack of protection, and denied nationality. These elements remained in the definition that the 1951 Convention outlined for the refugee; however, the specification of the origin of the refugee was later removed in the 1967 Protocol. All three components heavily define the refugee in terms of their relationship with their state, which served as the foundation of understanding of the refugee in the 1951 Convention. Another key feature of the understanding of the refugee at the time was the assumption that the refugee was a ‘temporary problem’ that could be resolved once its political conditions were addressed (Haddad, 2008, p. 31). This is partly the reason why certain refugee movements at different points took the center stage of refugee discourses (the Russian refugee problem, the Armenian refugee problem, the Palestinian refugee problem, etc.). The outcome of this approach in terms of response was that the refugee agencies in this era (e.g., the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees of 1921 or the International Refugee Organization of 1946) all were established as temporary institutions that were meant to get retired as soon as they served their purpose; a tradition that is continued to the UNHCR, with a temporary mandate that needs to be renewed every five years (Haddad, 2008, p. 31). Therefore, the 1951 definition of the refugee can be perceived as the continuation of the existing tradition at the time. In terms of refugee agency and behavioral expectations, critiques directed towards

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<sup>21</sup> The Armenians are the most frequently mentioned refugee populations originating from the Ottoman Empire, but Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans (Uniate Nestorians) and Jacobite Syrians, some Turks, Kurds and other Muslim groups suffered atrocities as well (Jaeger, 2001, p. 728).

the 1951 Convention are also applicable to the ones in the inter-war period. I will unpack these critiques in the following pages.

## **Post Second World War**

In 1951, the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* was established and would eventually become the centerpiece of international refugee protection today.<sup>22</sup> This convention was grounded in Article 14 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. The Article recognizes persons' right to seek asylum from persecution in countries other than their country of citizenship. As opposed to the 1950 Statue, the 1951 Convention placed explicit geographical limitations on the definition of refugee, which was not a new practice. As mentioned earlier, geographical location (country of origin) was a key element in definitions of the refugee in the earlier years too. In the context of the post-Second World War, the Convention was initially limited to persons fleeing events occurring *within Europe* before 1 January 1951. According to Article 1.A of the 1951 Convention, a refugee is an individual who

1. Has been considered as a refugee under the Arrangements of 12 May 1926 and 30 June 1928 or under the Conventions of 28 October 1933 and 10 February 1938, the Protocol of 14 September 1939, or the Constitution of the International Refugee Organization. Decisions of non-eligibility taken by the International Refugee Organization during the period of its activities shall not prevent the status of refugee being accorded to persons who fulfill the conditions of paragraph 2 of this section;

2. As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to the well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is

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<sup>22</sup> The Convention was enforced on 22 April 1954.

unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term “the country of his nationality” shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national.

In the 1960s, the geographical and temporal inefficiencies of the European focused 1951 Convention came to light. The number of refugees increased largely due to the heat of Cold War competitions, acceleration of often violent decolonization, and security and humanitarian challenges of post-independence in the global south (Steiner et al., 2003, pp. 7-9). Within that international political context, the United Nations recognized that changes to the definition in the Convention were necessary. These changes were manifested in the 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, which was submitted to the General Assembly under Resolution 2198(XXI) in December 1966. The Protocol acknowledges in its considerations the 1951 Convention’s limits:

Considering that the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees done at Geneva on 28 July 1951 (hereinafter referred to as the Convention) covers only those persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951,

Considering that new refugee situations have arisen since the Convention was adopted and that the refugees concerned may therefore not fall within the scope of the Convention,

Considering that it is desirable that equal status should be enjoyed by all refugees covered by the definition in the Convention irrespective of the dateline 1 January 1951.

The Protocol confirms that the definition of ‘refugee’ in the Convention needed to be expanded to be applicable to individuals in need of protection after 1 January 1951. Additionally, Article 1 states that the definition needed to be expanded to include individuals outside of Europe. While the 1951 Convention was already loosely interpreted to include those who did not meet its

temporal and spatial requirements, in 1967 the official legal pathway for assisting those in need of international protection outside of Europe after 1951 was opened.<sup>23</sup> This legal development, however, while a step forward, did not address the other challenges with the definition of the refugee in the 1951 Convention.

Perhaps the first challenge with this definition is about its intent in categorization. As Haddad rightly asserts, categorization is the ‘first and foremost’ problem in any discussion around refugeehood, including its definition (2008, p. 23). The reason for this is that this category is intended to capture diverse experiences under one label as, largely, defined by the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. As Lammers argues, often the category of refugee constructs and reduces individuals into ‘a one-dimensional, homogeneous’ group, while in reality they are an extremely heterogeneous population with a common experience, which is having felt compelled to migrate (1999, p. 22). Similarly, Malkki argues that forced movements have extremely diverse historical and political drivers and “involve people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments” (1995, p. 496). Having a homogenous category also means that certain behaviors are expected of those identified with it. As I will highlight in my empirical discussion, refugees deal with extremely diverse circumstances and considerations. When trying to fit such diverse experiences under one category with certain behavioral expectations, those not fitting within this definition are often either denied having refugee status (left in precarious conditions) or encouraged to portray their stories in a certain manner to meet the expectations. Those with a rejected refugee application are often left with

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<sup>23</sup> The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol are used by some international organizations, such as the European Union Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004.

an extra lengthy, costly, and psychologically demanding journey.<sup>24</sup> This is largely because while refugee claimants have the option to appeal the decision, the process for doing that could add multiple years to the journey.

The next issue to highlight is the fact that the 1951 definition was developed in a specific context. As Aberman (2014) and Cameron (2014) argue, this definition was founded in the specific temporal context of the post-Second World War, addressing a specific humanitarian concern. This definition was initially a part of a temporary arrangement created in the onset of the Cold War to assist those fleeing from communist regimes (van Selm and Newman, 2003, p. 5). In other words, the ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism set the tone for the international response to refugees, where Western states were welcoming and encouraging of refugees from the East (Loescher, 1993, p. 59). As Westin notes, each refugee running away from the East was a propaganda and token of triumph for Western states (1999). The outcome, as Hathaway argues, was that the Convention definition had a strategic conceptualization of the refugee and a Eurocentric focus in its application (1991, p. 6). This approach in defining the refugee was similar to the one in the inter-war era, treating refugees as a temporary ‘problem’ that was going to be resolved as soon as the root cause of the problem (often conflict) is dealt with.<sup>25</sup> The immediate impact on refugees at the time was a greater focus on and more favorable and accommodating policies towards refugees from communist countries and neglecting those in the rest of the world. While the 1967 Protocol removed the geographical restrictions stated in the 1951 Convention, in

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<sup>24</sup> Later in this chapter I will highlight the steps involved in a UNHCR refugee status determination process (including the appeal process).

<sup>25</sup> I discussed this in depth in the previous section.

practice, non-European refugees were kept outside of the refugee regime during the Cold War. In Africa in particular there were large refugee populations from Rwanda, Zaire, Sudan, then Rhodesia, summing up to 'several millions' by the end of 1970s (Loescher, 1993, p. 78). These refugee movements were often seen by Western states as 'national problems' for the hosting states (outside of Europe) that were outside of the scope of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol (Haddad, 2008, p. 149). As Mayall argues, after the end of the Cold War, Western states have been actively promoting human rights as a foundational topic supporting refugee protection; however, "their willingness to intervene in the domestic affairs of states whose governments transgressed these norms [has] remained highly selective, particularly where their own interests were not directly involved" (2000, p. 125). One of the main implications of this selective approach is the growing number of internally displaced individuals in the recent years – from 6.6 million in 2005 to 53.2 million by the end of 2021 (UNHCR, 2022). This points to the definition's close association of refugees and refugeehood with territorial boundaries of sovereign states.

Regarding territorial boundaries, one of the key elements in the definition is the requirement for the spatial location of refugees. According to Article 1A.1, a refugee must be "outside the country of his nationality." This clause sets the expectation that individuals in need of international protection do leave their home country. As I will demonstrate in my empirical discussions in the coming chapters, the decision to leave one's home country is a complex one that is influenced by an array of factors. Not crossing an international border does not necessarily mean they enjoy the protection of the state of their nationality. In other words, as Haddad rightly argues, "the relationship between the state and the citizen may have broken down without a border crossing

having taken place, hence the false dichotomy between ‘refugee’ and ‘internally displaced person’” (2008, p. 43). Also, crossing an international border is not always an option available to all refugees; neighboring states may close borders (for varying periods of time) to stop flow of refugees (2008, p. 197). For example, in 1991 Türkiye closed its borders to 400,000 Iraqi Kurds, and the international community’s response was to designate Northern Iraq (mostly populated by Kurds) as a ‘safety area.’ This contrast between the Convention’s behavioral expectation and practice is ironic because those who are commonly referred to as internally displaced are arguably at a greater risk and higher need of protection because they are geographically closer to violence (in a civil war, for example). These individuals are often byproducts of what Kaldor (2013) refers to as weak or failed states, where they often do not enjoy their own government’s protection (a criterion for refugeehood according to Article 1A.2 of the Convention). As such they are at risk of violence by organized crime organizations, warlords and other actors filling the vacuum of sovereignty. Loescher argues that the Convention’s focus on border crossing is problematic for today’s refugee movements, and he therefore provides an alternative definition of ‘refugee’ that focuses on being ‘uprooted’ as opposed to having crossed an international border (1992, pp. 6-8). Shacknove argues that the refugee status should be reserved for those “who are so situated that international assistance is possible” (1985, p. 284). In line with the Convention definition, he puts the onus on the individual to make themselves available to receive international protection. However, as Arar and Fitzgerald’s (2022) model suggests, the refugee journey begins before they cross an international border to escape a threat in their home country. For some the journey begins in their home country and while some may be outside of their home country already at the time they need protections, other may not ever be able to cross a border for varying reasons

including being killed. Hence focusing on border crossing excludes large populations, particularly those internally displaced, from the discussions on refugee protection.

Another issue pertaining to international borders is refugees' ongoing movement. Article 31 of the 1951 Convention sets an additional behavioral expectation for refugees by stating that refugees must "come directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened." In other words, refugees need to seek asylum in a neighboring country and remain there until their application is processed. As Watson argues, a strict reading of the Convention could mean that movement beyond a neighboring country, which is considered the safest close state, and travel across further international borders could be used to undermine the legitimacy of a refugee's claim to protection (Watson, 2009, p. 41). Travelling from a safe state to other countries could be interpreted as a motivation that is more reflective of other forms of migrants as opposed to refugees. In reality, however, refugees may be compelled to cross multiple international borders and territories for a variety of reasons. One key consideration is that according to UNHCR, 76% of refugees are hosted in low and middle-income countries, and 20% of refugees are hosted in the least developed countries (UN, 2023). This means that large refugee populations reside in countries that face significant economic or otherwise challenges, resulting in direct or indirect pressures intensifying the precarity that they experience in their daily lives. For instance, all my research participants in Lebanon indicated in their interviews that given the hardships and uncertainties they faced in their host country, at some point during their stay they had *considered* moving to a third country. They are in a safe state in the sense that the initial source of threat is absent, but other forms of coercion are still impacting them.

Perhaps the most debated aspect of the Convention definition is its characterization of the reason for flight. According to Article 1A.2 refugee is a person who flees “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted.” Persecution is not defined in the Convention; instead, it is tied to a set of particular reasons: persecution “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (Article 1A.2). The stated reasons are limited and by no means inclusive. For instance, while several countries have included gender and sexual identities in their refugee policies, the 1951 Convention neglects to incorporate such reasons. In fact, it is not until 1993 that the UNHCR Executive Committee recognized the *sensitivity* of dealing with cases of persecution through sexual violence and supported “the recognition as refugees of persons whose claim to refugee status is based upon a well-founded fear of persecution, through sexual violence...” (No. 73 (XLIV)). Persecution is generally understood as a threat to an individual’s life or freedom (UNHCR, 1979, Para. 51). As Grahl-Madsen argues, in order to meet this threshold, a deprivation of one’s liberty must take place for a considerable period of time (1966, p. 195). This deprivation, however, needs to be both more than harassment and caused by a government (Helton, 1990, pp. 121-122). Zolberg et al. argue that the persecution criterion assumes that the causal factors driving refugee movements are exclusively internal to states, which ignores that “persecution is related to broad historical processes in which complex internal and external forces interact” (1989, p. 25). They argue that the common feature of refugee movements is the presence of a fear of violence, direct or indirect, which groups refugees as ‘a category of unfortunates’ in need of protection from a state other than that of their nationality (ibid. 33). In terms of violence, those experiencing violence from an agent other than the state could fail to meet the criteria for refugee status.

The persecution clause in the definition is based on certain biases and assumptions. As Ibhawoh (in Steiner et al.) suggests, the Convention does not adequately consider socio-economic drivers such as starvation, war, and environmental disasters as a basis for refugee status (2003). According to her, this narrowness points to the Eurocentric liberal rights foundation of this definition, which focuses on the infringement of liberal individual rights as opposed to those of social and economic rights. Shacknove (1985) approaches the persecution clause in terms of a severed bond between a citizen and the state. The severing of the bond is caused by the failure of the state to provide protection for the basic needs of the citizen by its actions or inactions (Shacknove, 1985, pp. 274-277). The focus on the citizen or the individual is a western conception of rights that does not necessarily align with some non-western conceptions. While the western conceptions emphasize individualism and the autonomous individual, non-western conceptions often lay a greater emphasis on the community, hence giving primacy to economic and social rights (Ibhawoh, 2003). Given the fact that a majority of refugees come from the global south, the individual, as opposed to community, basis for understanding the drivers of refugeehood, overlooks their normative circumstances. By extension, this bias expects refugees' behaviors to stem from an individualist behavior throughout their journeys. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the cultural and historical context shaping a refugee's environment to varying degrees influences refugees' behaviors throughout their journeys.

The UNHCR Executive Committee ties the notion of persecution to the non-refoulement principle (No. 6 (XXVIII) – 1977). Nonrefoulement “prohibits States from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution,

torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights violations” (UNHCR, n.d.). Non-refoulement prohibits states from rejecting refugees at the border or shore (Helton, 1990, p. 123).<sup>26</sup> While helpful in qualifying the notion of well-founded fear of persecution, even this specification serves as a rigid understanding that does not reflect some of the circumstances that refugees may face. This rigid binary in understanding of coercion, heavily impacts refugees’ choices and decisions. This rigidity *may* encourage individuals to tailor their stories when they are presenting their claims for refugee status to decision-making authorities for the sake of fitting in the criteria and avoiding likely rejection of their refugee application. In other words, refugees must choose what narrative and evidence to present to meet the coercion standard.

In sum, the definition is quite narrow, and in many instances, it is difficult for individuals to persuade authorities that they are qualified to be recognized as refugees, even if they are in *extremely difficult conditions* or at the risk of potentially facing life threats or persecution. The main reason for this challenge is that this definition perceives refugeehood in an oversimplified and zero-sum manner. It understands refugeehood in light of a binary of voluntary and involuntary. The reality of a refugee’s circumstances, however, is messier and not as clear-cut. Refugees are not always behaving in a passive way as Jaszi suggests, being “only passive victims of the huge historical processes, like sufferers from a flood or an earthquake which annihilated

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<sup>26</sup> In practice, however, there have been incidents that states violated the non-refoulement principle or have found ways to by-pass the obligation. For the former, one example would be the pushbacks of Vietnamese refugees trying to get to Thailand and Malaysia by boat in 1980s. An example of for the latter could be found in 1991 when Türkiye closed its borders to 400,000 Iraqi Kurds, and the international community’s response was to designate Northern Iraq (mostly populated by Kurds) as a ‘safety area.’ The latest example is the UK Parliament’s adoption of the Safety of Rwanda Bill in 2024, enabling the removal of persons who arrive in the UK under the Immigration Acts and sending them to Rwanda. This has raised concerns around the UK’s violation of the non-refoulment principle.

their means of existence” (1939, p. 83). Nor are they solely forced to leave with *no power* “to decide whether or not to leave” (Petersen, 1985, p. 261). Refugees are not merely reactive in behavior as Richmond claims either; for him “UN Convention refugees, stateless persons, slaves and forced labourers are clear examples of reactive migrants” (Richmond, 1988, p. 14). I argue that refugees’ experiences and behaviors are significantly diverse, and that they exercise some form of agency (however limited) even under most extreme circumstances. As Arar and Fitzgerald rightly suggest, all migrations take place on a continuum of coercion (2022, pp. 36-37). Refugees are often faced with extreme situations, but they do interact with their environment and behave in different ways under seemingly similar circumstances. As I will demonstrate in the next two chapters, the coercion element of the definition needs to be understood in terms of a spectrum, as opposed to a binary. This spectrum approach will be more effective in capturing the diverse experiences of refugees and the decisions they make. Refugees interact with coercion not only as the factor driving them out of their home country, but as an element remaining a part of their decision-making throughout their journeys.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> I must note that in addition to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol there are other international organizations defining the term refugee. Regional actors have been adopting definitions that differ from the 1951 Convention. For instance, the 1969 *Convention on the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa* states that the term refugee shall “also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality” (Article I.2). The OAU definition mirrored the historical context in Africa, much like how the 1951 Convention was influenced by European experiences. It was a direct response to the instability and violence that were leading to large-scale refugee movements in Africa at the time. African states believed that these factors were not adequately addressed by the 1951 Convention, hence the need for a definition that specifically addressed the causes behind refugee movements in their region (Haddad, 2008, p. 153). The definition provided by the OAU recognizes that if a person or a group of people are afraid of the unintentional yet dangerous consequences of armed conflict, this is considered valid for granting refugee status. This provision essentially allows individuals to determine for themselves when they believe fleeing their country and seeking international protection is the only way to ensure their safety.

Finally, the Convention overlooks refugees' agency in their country of asylum. Based on the non-refoulement principle, refugees are expected to directly travel from their home country to their country of asylum. The expectation then is that refugees will live in their country of asylum until their application is processed by UNHCR or local authorities. In fact, nowhere in the convention there is a discussion about an asylum seeker's journey with multiple stops. Under Article 28, the Convention acknowledges refugees' right to a travel document; however, this privilege does not apply to asylum seekers. This means that they are expected to remain in their country of asylum until they are granted a refugee status. For many asylum seekers, however, this assumption is inaccurate. Depending on their circumstances, they may consider moving to different countries or try to access alternative channels of migration prior to receiving their refugee status. As Van der Velde and van Naerssen (2015) argue, refugees' choices about their stay or movement are informed by a combination of rational choice as well as cognitive and emotional processes. For instance, many of my participants in Lebanon reported that they are actively trying to move to a European Union member country or get university admission from a Canadian university.

### **Refugees' interactions with the Convention**

With the conceptual and historical discussion out of the way, in what follows I will highlight how a refugee *may* interact with the expectations set out in the Convention. As I have mentioned earlier, my focus in this study is on the UNHCR as the primary organization that has been applying the guidelines in the Convention for processing refugee claims. Some states have their own refugee status determination process; some of them have more forward-looking

interpretations of the 1951 Convention, while others have more restrictive and exclusive interpretations and practices. This means that those applying for asylum through specific state processes will likely have diverse experiences. Meanwhile, in a majority of countries in Asia as well as other regions in the world, UNHCR conducts refugee status determination instead of the state (Alexander, 1999). That is why it is crucial to have an understanding of what is involved for a refugee to make a claim through UNHCR. While I do not intend to look at specific state approaches, it would be likely that states may have their own iterations of this process.

Whether an individual in need of protection decides to follow UNHCR's legal process (if this is their primary avenue for claiming refugee status), is a matter of choice itself (if and when they are aware of it as an option). In some cases, individuals may be hesitant to engage in the process for various reasons. This appeared in my interviews as well. For example, Tina stated that after fleeing from Iran, she lived in Türkiye on a visitor visa for about three years before she went to US and applied for refugee status.

UNHCR conducts refugee status determination as part of its core international protection mandate, even though it is not an explicit duty under its Statute.<sup>28</sup> Refugee status determination is considered an operational activity by UNHCR. According to the 2000 UNHCR Note on International Protection, UNHCR undertakes refugee status determination when the host state is

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<sup>28</sup> See: Resolution on Statute of the High Commissioner for Refugees, GA Res 428(V) UN GAOR, 5th sess, 325th plen mtg, UN Doc A/RES/428(v) (1950) (UNHCR Statute) annex (Statute of the Office of the United National High Commissioner for Refugees).

not a signatory to the Refugee Convention or has not established relevant procedures or is unable to conduct refugee status determination (due to lack of resources, capacity etc.).<sup>29</sup>

While the practice of refugee status determination by UNHCR may be different from one location to another, there are certain elements that remain largely unchanged. The following is Alexander's (1999) account of the process based on his observations in a few Asian countries. The first step is completion of a written application, utilizing UNHCR's Basic Data/Registration Form.<sup>30</sup> Refugees commonly refer to the information provided on the form (specifically the reason for flight) as their 'case.'<sup>31</sup> After the form is completed, personal interviews are scheduled with the asylum seeker.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the process, asylum seekers have access to free interpreters.<sup>33</sup> However, legal aid in most places is not available and legal representatives are not permitted during the interview. Asylum seekers are not allowed to access their files, and their interview summaries or transcripts are not shared with them. Throughout this process, asylum seekers need to demonstrate that they meet the criteria for a refugee status based on the definition of

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<sup>29</sup> 2000 UNHCR Note on International Protection UN Doc A/AC.96/930, 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> I still remember the form I completed for my own refugee status determination application. There were two main questions on the form (besides the basic personal information): why are you here (in the country of asylum)? And what may happen to you if you return (to your home country)?

<sup>31</sup> There are references to the 'case' in Chapters 5 and 6, where my research participants discuss their story and why they embarked on a refugee journey.

<sup>32</sup> I recall having two interviews. The first one was on the day that I filled the form. I remember that as the first 'interview,' but all it involved was me repeating the same information I put on the form for an officer who was just typing that information. I heard from my participants that in some cases they had to wait for several months to have their first interview. At the end of the first interview, I was given an appointment for my 'main' interview, which was scheduled for 3-4 months after the first interview. I have information through my research participants and personal contacts in Türkiye that at times they had to wait for 2-3 years to have their main interview.

<sup>33</sup> Here I distinguish between asylum seekers and refugees to highlight the legal steps and labels pertaining refugee status determination.

refugee in the UNHCR Statute, which is adopted from the Convention (Kinchin, 2017, p. 60). The field office (in consultation with headquarters if field office deems needed) determines whether to grant refugee status to an asylum seeker. The rejection decision often does not accompany a written or verbal reasoning for the decision.<sup>34</sup> There is no independent appeal mechanism available to asylum seekers whose application is rejected and there is no ‘appeal hearing’ per se;<sup>35</sup> asylum seekers’ requests for appeal are considered based on written materials submitted by them, often without further interview and legal representation.<sup>36</sup>

Those who receive refugee status need to wait for resettlement. This process often begins with a brief interview to determine if the refugee has any family ties in a refugee-accepting country at the time. UNHCR’s aim is to reunite families if and when possible. In other words, refugees may request to be resettled in a country where they have family or a community. At this stage, refugees may provide letters of support or other forms of documentation from their family or community to support their request. For example, a Christian convert may provide a letter of support signed by a pastor and members of a church in a potential country of resettlement. This, however, is not guaranteed. There are instances where a refugee is resettled in a country other than their preferred destination. The speed of the resettlement process at this point varies. My

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<sup>34</sup> There have been concerns regarding UNHCR refugee status determination practices in the recent decades to a point that in 2005 a coalition of non-governmental organizations called for an independent assessment of UNHCR practices (See Kagan 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Lack of access to official independent appeal process is a major area of concern for UNHCR refugee status determination practices. In most state-led refugee status determination, asylum seekers are able to request a review of the decision in appropriate independent legal channels (see Kagan 2006 and Smrkolj 2008)

<sup>36</sup> I have personally observed situations where asylum seekers whose applications were rejected had to wait multiple years hear a response from UNHCR regarding their appeal request.

Iranian participants' stories indicate that those who went through this process successfully in Türkiye before 2015 could resettle in a relatively short period of time – one to three years. In contrast, none of those who went to Türkiye after 2015 and obtained refugee status were resettled by 2020. This is to say that having UNHCR refugee status does not necessarily mean an immediate resettlement. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, my research participants continued to navigate difficult and precarious living conditions even after they received their refugee status in a transit country.

One last note about this process is that those going through it may not have a full understanding of it. Networks and peers share their knowledge and experiences with each other prior or during the process, but as I mentioned earlier, asylum seekers do not have access to free legal advice, guiding them through the process. The information available to them through their networks are based on individual experiences, assumptions, and perceptions and at times inaccurate. This is to say that asylum seekers begin their interactions with UNHCR refugee status determination with varying degrees of knowledge and information regarding the nature of the process, requirements, and the likely length of the process. Lack of legal advice and prior knowledge about the process can reduce asylum seekers' likelihood of success in the refugee status determination process.

### **Unpacking agency**

So far in this chapter, I have scrutinized the Convention definition of refugee and its behavioral expectations as well as what that means to refugees in terms of refugee status determination through UNHCR. In what follows, I further unpack refugees' agency in order to set the foundation for a more extensive discussion of their decision-making and behaviors in the next three chapters.

Traditionally, and in line with the legal framework, the key element separating refugees from other migrants has been the assumption that refugee movements are involuntary and that refugees lack agency compared with other migrants (Richmond, 1988).<sup>37</sup> The binary between voluntary and involuntary movement is flawed because it overlooks different forms of agency that refugees often exercise. As Arar and FitzGerald argue, all forms of migration happen on a continuum of coercion (2022, p. 35). There are indeed those who are left with very limited choices pertaining to life-or-death situations on the one extreme of the spectrum. Even in those circumstances, there have been prior choices that have led to the state the individual is in. de Haas argues that the decision pertaining to whether one should flee or stay is itself a manifestation of agency for refugees (2021, p. 16). For instance, one's choice could be to stay and face consequences of coercion brought upon them. As Erdal and Oeppen argue, "most migrants' experiences of the degree of volition in their migration decisions means they fall somewhere in the blurry middle of the forced–voluntary spectrum" (2018, p. 981).<sup>38</sup> Even in the extreme example of an Iranian Christian convert facing immediate life danger, their choice to flee is not completely free of agency; they still have options to choose from and fleeing is only one of them. Of course, conventionally they become a refugee when they flee their country, but they could delay fleeing in the hopes that things improve; they could choose to move to another, potentially safer part of the country; they could hide or conceal their identity; or they could stay and face the

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<sup>37</sup> I base my discussion of agency on the distinction between refugees and migrants because, as Watson (2009) argues, refugee identity and behavioral expectations are often constructed in relation to other categories of migrants as opposed to ordinary citizens.

<sup>38</sup> While this discussion is almost exclusively focused on push factors, driving refugees out of their home countries, in the next chapter I will discuss rational choice theories and their arguments on pull factors as well.

consequences. Making a clear binary distinction between forced and voluntary migration is problematic because it fails to capture the diverse manifestations of agency that refugees exercise. As De Haas argues, “while virtually all migrants face some level of constraint, ‘forced migrants’ also have some level of agency” (2021, p.16).<sup>39</sup>

While the line between the two categories of migrants and refugees is blurred, the emphasis on the similarities between the two categories could be problematic as well. Upholding the refugee as a legal category is foundational to maintaining the right to refugee status and the protections coming with it under the 1951 Convention (Kumin, 2014 and Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa, 2009). That being said, from an analytical perspective, understanding coercion in terms of a spectrum, as opposed to a binary, is helpful because it can be understood as the first point of entry into the question of agency for refugees. As such, I critique the conventional understanding and expectations of refugeehood that are imbedded in UNHCR practices. In other words, I argue for the expansion of the scope of the conventional understanding of refugeehood.

Another distinction between refugees and migrants is the reason for their movement. It is traditionally understood that migrants move, primarily, for economic reasons.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, according to the 1951 Convention, refugees leave their home countries often for political reasons. Therefore, in addition to the voluntary or involuntary dichotomy, there is a dichotomy of economic versus political motivations. The political/economic dichotomy conceals the variety of

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<sup>39</sup> Of course, in extreme cases such as slavery, deportation, or death, agency becomes extremely limited or fully absent (See Arar and Fitzgerald 2022 and De Haas 2021).

<sup>40</sup> For economic-based theories of migration see Lee (1966), Stouffer (1940), and Simpson (1939). I will further discuss this in the next chapter.

motivations that influence movements. As Arar and FitzGerald argue, “states can use economic tools to punish opponents and despised minorities by cutting off their access to employment, markets, education, and land” (2022, p. 36). A prime example for this is the Iranian government’s mistreatment of Baha’i minorities: Iranian authorities routinely use economic persecution and confiscation of property as means to further impoverish and alienate Baha’is across the country (Moinpour, 2018). Additionally, the economic and political spheres are not mutually exclusive. In fact, economic upsets can drive political unrest and wars can result in collapsing economies. While acknowledging the need to keep the distinction between the migrant and the refugee as two distinct categories, for preserving rights and protections for refugees, this artificial separation tends to overlook the array of motivations that drive refugees outside of their countries and restricts some individuals’ access to the right to refugee protection. For instance, according to UNHCR, at the end of 2021, there were 4.4 million Venezuelans displaced abroad who were not categorized as either refugees or asylum seekers. Such categorization would make Venezuela the second highest “refugee” generating country after Syria (6.8 million) and far before Afghanistan (2.7 million) (UNHCR, 2022). Venezuelans leave their home country as a result of political turmoil, socio-economic instability, and the ongoing humanitarian concerns. Hence 4.4 million out of 4.6 Venezuelans abroad are not categorized as refugees and are in a separate category in UNHCR annual reports. This leads to the normative question of whether the Venezuelan population in question should be categorized as refugees. The takeaway is that while it may be necessary from a legal or policy standpoint to have criteria for defining the refugee and distinguishing it from other categories, going behind binary-based approaches is helpful in capturing the wide array of

refugee experiences that are marginalized as a result of such binaries; hence, calling for expansion of international refugee protection.

Having established that refugees are not mere victims with no agency, a further examination of the concept of agency is now in order. Borrowing from Van Eerdewijk et al., I define agency as “the capacity for purposive action, the ability to pursue goals, express voice and influence and make decisions” (2017, p. 2). This is an appropriate definition because it is based on a large body of feminist theorization that approaches agency from the perspective of those in underprivileged positions. This definition goes beyond traditional ideas about agency that are heavily centered on having power, privilege and emancipatory potential (Mohanty, 1988). Ignoring the underprivileged position refugees are in, and opting for a traditional take on agency will inevitably result in setting standards of agency unreasonably high, leading to neglecting certain manifestations of agency that are perhaps more subtle. For Van Eerdewijk et al. (2017), decision-making is a manifestation of agency through the ‘determined use of resources in and through decisions’ as well as ‘being able to act on them’ (26). The other two forms of agency for them are ‘voicing interests and concerns’ and ‘becoming visible in resistance, bargaining, negotiation, and reflection’ (Ibid.). While the latter two are more publicly recognizable, the former two may be more prevalent in refugee decision-making.

Judith Butler argues that individuals’ sense of self and ability to act in the world are shaped by discursive practices, cultural norms, and power relations that operate at both the individual and collective levels (Butler, 1990). Drawing on this work, Saba Mahmood argues that the notion of agency must be expanded beyond emancipatory ideals to include less measurable manifestations of agency: “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressive

point of view, may very well be a form of agency... that aim[s] toward continuity, stasis, and stability” (2001, p. 212). This manifestation of agency is what Sarah Bracke calls ‘subaltern resilience,’ which even includes “getting up in the morning and making it through the day in conditions of often unbearable symbolic and material violence” (2016, p. 60). Decision-making is, then, a performance of agency through the use of resources that includes ‘voicing interests and concerns’ and ‘becomes visible in resistance, bargaining, negotiation, and reflection’ (Van Eerdewijk, et al., 2017). I will share manifestations of this subaltern resilience later in Chapters 6 and 7, where I share research participants’ stories, but here are a few examples.

To unpack refugee agency, it is helpful to engage with understanding refugees as victims. It is needless to say that refugees have extremely diverse stories and complicated experiences. However, when seeking refugee status, they need to simplify their stories to fit in restrictive definitions (as discussed earlier in this chapter) that expect them to have little control over their lives (Galli, 2020). While this is not a portrayal that all refugees are comfortable with (Saunders, 2017), being defined as victims of persecution, to use the Convention language, seems to be inevitable. The element of victimhood is in fact essential for viability of the concept of refugee as well as rights and protections that come with it (Haddad, 2008). That being said, as Arar and FitzGerald argue, the problem is not the portrayal of refugees as victims; it is defining them as *merely* victims (2022, pp. 43-45). In other words, any proposition that refugees are helpless, or passive is problematic because as I will show in the next three chapters, in fact they often exercise their agency in resourceful ways, that may not be immediately measurable. That being said, they have different levels of agency. What determines a migrants’ level of agency is a “function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity

structures” (de Haas, 2021, p. 2). I argue that a similar logic is also relevant for refugees: their level of agency is the point where their aspirations meet their capabilities within the structural factors or otherwise constraints that are imposed on them. Therefore, the question is not whether refugees have agency or not; instead, it is how they exercise their agency in the face of limitations, tragedy and sorrow. Given their decision-making environment, refugees have different levels and manifestations of agency. This is to say that agency is far from a unified or static feature for all refugees. Being a woman in a patriarchal culture or an older/younger dependant result in different levels and manifestations of agency than being a single male adult. The Interactive Decision-making Model, I propose in Chapter 4, is able to shed light on these experiences.

### **Take away**

While academic circles largely understand refugees as active agents, exercising different forms and degrees of agency, the conventional legal framework for refugee protection understands the refugee as passive, reactive, and lacking agency. The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol portray the refugee as an individual who reacts to a set of circumstance that impose a ‘well-founded fear of persecution.’ The refugee is expected to flee to a neighboring country to seek protection and wait for UNHCR or state authorities to conclude their protection application process. While this is a depiction that many refugees could relate to, refugees’ experiences are far more diverse than this; they respond to seemingly similar threats in different ways. This is largely because refugees exercise agency in various forms. Traditional understandings of agency may look for manifestations of agency that are more public and thus more easily recognizable. However, as I discussed earlier, refugee agency can be understood in more subtle ways.

Manifestations of agency can be found in how refugees maneuver their day-to-day in dealing with different degrees of (un)availability of resources. In the next chapter, I will engage with the literature on refugee decision-making to unpack how refugees make those decisions. The conceptual discussion in this chapter coupled with the theoretical review in the next chapter will set the stage for introduction of my refugee decision-making model in Chapter 4.

### Chapter 3: Theorizing Refugee Decision-making

“...no one leaves home  
until home is a sweaty voice in your ear saying leave,  
run away from me now,  
I don't know what I've become,  
but I know that anywhere,  
is safer than here.”

("Home" by Warsan Shire, 2020)

As Warsan Shire, a Somali-British writer and poet, exquisitely writes in her poem in 2015, being a refugee generally means that one's home country is not safe anymore. This powerful depiction highlights the moments one struggles with the decision to flee. This, however, is only one component of a refugee journey's decision-making. Refugeehood is a complex journey. Throughout this journey, there are many decisions that refugees must make: the struggle to choose to flee, timing of flight, deciding who in the family should leave first, choosing the country of asylum, choosing a route and means of transportation, and choosing a destination for resettlement. Although some aspects of a refugee's journey may be influenced by the coercion they experience, refugees are active agents who make decisions at various points.<sup>41</sup> To learn more

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<sup>41</sup> See the previous chapter for a detailed discussion on refugee agency.

about how such decisions are made, in this chapter I will investigate the existing literature on (forced) migration.

I argue that existing accounts of refugee decision-making are largely influenced by the rational choice approach that stresses cost and benefit calculations in migratory decision-making. To use van der Velde and van Naerssen's terms, these approaches reduce refugees to 'anonymous atomized entries' that are understood as byproducts of supply and demand fluctuations, the labor market changes, and economic disparities between the sending and receiving locations (2015, 219). Some of the examples of this classic approach are Ravenstein (1885), Lee (1966), and Kunz (1973). There are a few accounts that focus on factors such as personal networks (Boyd 1989; De Jong 2000; Tilly 1999), psychological factors (e.g., Berry et al. 1987; Eisenstadt, 1954; Winter-Ebmer, 1994), and the role of states (e.g., Adelman 2018 and Kibreab 1985). One of the latest efforts to theorize refugee decision-making is Arar and FitzGerald's (2022) Refugee System Theory, which provides a more holistic account that is centered on refugee experiences. In what follows, I will scrutinize these theoretical efforts and identify their contributions and shortcomings, making the case for a new theoretical model to explain refugee decision-making.

In my analysis, I engage with both general theories of migration and theoretical efforts to specifically explain refugee movements. It is traditionally the binary of voluntary versus involuntary movement that separates refugees from migrants; however, as Arar and FitzGerald argue, "all migration takes place on a continuum of coercion" (2022, p. 35). In fact, "most migrants' experiences of the degree of volition in their migration decisions means they fall somewhere in the blurry middle of the forced–voluntary spectrum" (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018, p.

981). Refugee movements happen to be situated closer to the more extreme end of coercion, but learnings from broader migration studies are helpful in shedding light on refugee movements. Theories of migration often engage with drivers of migratory movements, whether at macro or micro levels of inquiry. As such, they offer hypotheses that are worthwhile to apply to and test in refugee movements as well. Therefore, in this chapter I will critically engage with both refugee-specific decision-making models and broader migration theories.

### **Structural approaches**

There are a few theoretical approaches that seek to understand refugee movements through the role of structures. One of such approaches emphasizes on role of states in the generation of refugee movements. In an effort to explain large numbers of refugees, particularly from Africa, authors such as Adelman (2018) search for the answer in the continent's colonial past. The core argument of this structural theory is that contemporary refugee movements from Africa are often a result of imposed colonial boundaries and failed nationalist projects that undermine the will of African people and ignore the ethnic and tribal identities on the ground (Kibreab, 1985). Such structural theories often incorporate macro-level factors that are not considered in agential theories that operate based on micro-level variables.

Along the same line is the argument that links refugee movements with the creation of new states. From this perspective, which is rooted in Arendt's *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (1973), the creation of new states has had a twofold impact on refugee movements (Zolberg, 1983). Firstly, state creation commonly involves revolution, annexation, or independence, all three of which involve a degree of violence (Koehn, 2019). Secondly, this process often relies on varying degrees

of exclusion that is key in the formation of a sense of national identity. The combination of the violence and the exclusion often provides the environment for generation of refugee movements. Finally, as Orchard (2014) argues, refugees can be perceived as “relief valves” for the state system. On the one hand, states can eliminate the problems caused by the troublesome populations when they seek refuge in other countries.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, refugee hosting countries can denounce the originating state without violating their sovereignty. In other words, accepting refugees from a country that its state violates human rights is a subtle indication of the refugee accepting state’s condemnation of the violations without openly criticizing the state committing such acts. While shedding light on historical and structural drivers of refugee movements, this approach’s capacity to explain refugee decision-making is significantly limited as it focuses on the structural conditions that give rise to forced displacement rather than the context-specific factors that influence individual refugees’ decisions.

The focus on the role of states in generation of refugee movements could be closely linked to what Mary Kaldor (2007) calls ‘new wars theory.’ According to Kaldor, warfare in the post-Cold War era can be characterized by networks of state and non-state actors, prominence of identity politics, use of extreme force to achieve political goals, and new forms of financial war activities (ibid.). Such conflicts usually lead to weak or failed states, who often struggle to provide their citizens with their basic needs, or to use Shacknove’s terms a break in ‘the bond between the

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<sup>42</sup> As an example, al-Asad, the Syrian President, proudly celebrates demographic changes in Syria as a transformation that makes Syria a “healthier and more homogenous society” (Heydemann, 2018, p. 3)

state and the citizen' (1985, p. 275). The result of such circumstances can translate to refugee movements escaping violence (Goodwin-Gill, 1983 and Zolberg et al., 1986).

Such macro theories enjoy a capacity for including structural variables that are often absent in micro level theories. The inevitable trade-off is that focusing on structural variables, such as the role of state-making processes, colonial history, and changing modes of warfare, leaves less room for incorporating the agency of refugees and their unique circumstances in the inquiry. These theories search for causal relations between macro level variables and refugee movements; however, I argue that such macro level elements can contribute to the *environment* in which refugees make their decisions.<sup>43</sup>

World system theory is another structural theory that is heavily economic based. This approach, while primarily concerned with the question of development, offers an insight to migration as well. World system theory, which is inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), understands international migration in the context of the capitalist international market. The core premise of this theoretical lens is that international migration is heavily influenced by the world capitalist market, which operate within the core and periphery dynamics. In *The Global City* Sassen argues the coupling of 'spatial dispersal' and 'global integration' has resulted in a new form of cities, the global cities (2013, p. 3). Cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo have historically served as centers for international trade, but four new functions have transformed these cities' role in the current capitalist globalized economy. First, such cities currently function as command centers for

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<sup>43</sup> I will expand on this in the next chapter as I introduce my theoretical model for refugee decision-making.

the world economy. Second, they serve as chief finance and service locations, replacing manufacturing as the key economic sector. Third, they function as centers for production and innovation in key industries. Finally, they are markets for the said productions and innovations (Sassen, 2013, pp. 3-5). Parallel to the concentration of resources in such global cities is the spread of capitalist economy to the periphery. The capitalist economy encourages firms to expand to peripheral countries so that they can have access to new markets as well as cheaper labor, land, and materials (Massey et al., 1998, pp. 444-445).<sup>44</sup>

This perspective's core argument is that it is the capitalist economy that drives migration in various ways. First, the economic linkage between core and periphery leads to expansion of transportation and communication infrastructures to facilitate the movement of raw materials, products, and of course labor.<sup>45</sup> Second, globalization processes create ideological and cultural linkages between the core and the periphery. Facilitated by advanced transportation and communication channels, core country languages and cultures are promoted in peripheral countries, and individuals from the latter are drawn to the former countries. This trend is more visible in the relations between past colonial powers and their colonies. For instance, past colonial connections between England and India or Pakistan has resulted in the migration of many from Pakistan or India to England. Third, the concentration of financial operations in global cities leads

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<sup>44</sup> There are similarities between Sassen's argument and neo-classical economics of migration as well as Ravenstein's (1885 and 1889) that I will discuss later in this chapter.

<sup>45</sup> Communication infrastructure, such as mobile phones and internet not only help refugees throughout their journeys but also contribute to the smuggler economy in terms of marketing, recruitment, and communication. For instance, nearly all my interviewees reported that they had access to their cellphones and internet throughout their journeys.

to increased demand for unskilled workers in service sectors and draws migrants from peripheral countries to global cities in the core (Massey et al., 1993, pp. 445-448).<sup>46</sup>

World System Theory contributes to refugee studies in two ways. First, the argument about the role of communication infrastructures can be applied to refugee movements. All my interviewees reported to have access to media and a majority indicated that they had access to internet throughout their journeys. I argue that increased communication and transportation infrastructure can influence refugee options and decision making. Second, the linkages between the core and the periphery are also relevant in the case of refugees. This is particularly the case in terms of forming personal and communal networks across borders. For instance, an overwhelming theme in my interviews is that refugees are often drawn to and influenced by their networks that are often drawn between refugee producing areas (often in the periphery) and the refugee receiving countries (often in the core). This function aligns with the core premise of chain migration theory, which is defined as a “social process by which potential migrants, within a family or in a community, are influenced by previously migrated family members or friends and eventually follow them to a new place of residence” (Eurenius, 2020, p. 103).<sup>47</sup> A refugee would likely prefer to resettle in a country where not only a larger familiar network/community exists,

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<sup>46</sup> While Massey (1993) almost exclusively focuses on the need for unskilled workers in global cities, I must note that the flow of migrants from the periphery to the core is not limited to unskilled workers. In fact, there are many highly educated and skilled migrants from peripheral countries that migrate to the core. According to data collected by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 30 to 35 percent of migrants in OECD are considered to be highly educated (McCarthy 2020).

<sup>47</sup> I will expand on this discussion when I introduce network theories later in this chapter.

but greater opportunities are available.<sup>48</sup> Refugees often follow networks and routes established by migrants pursuing opportunities in the major cities of the industrialized core.

Like theories of migration based on world systems theory, macro-neoclassical economics was originally developed to largely explain labor migration.<sup>49</sup> The macro neoclassical economics' key premise is that differences in labor markets in different countries can explain international migration (Ranis and Fei, 1961). This model, which is primarily focused on the notion of economic development, suggests that workers tend to move from low wage to high wage countries. This flow of workers leads to changes on the labor markets on sending and receiving countries. In the sending (low wage) country, the availability of workers decreases, and wages increase, while in the receiving (high wage) countries the increase in the supply of workers leads to decrease in wages (Ibid.). On the other hand, low wages, and lack of capital in low wage countries provides an opportunity for flow of investment and high-level skilled professionals from low wage countries. This approach, similar to world system theory, provides an understanding of migratory behavior based on fluctuation of labor market variables such as wages. This argument can be applied to refugee studies particularly in terms of push-pull calculations, which I will discuss in the next section.

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<sup>48</sup> This is a function that overlaps with the core premise of chain migration theory. MacDonald and MacDonald (1964) define chain migration as a movement "in which migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with tr have initial accommodation and employment arran primary social relationships with previous migrants" (p. 82).

<sup>49</sup> This theory approaches migration from two distinct levels: a macro level and a micro level. While I discuss the macro level here under structural theories, I will engage with the micro-level in the coming pages under rational choice and economic theories.

Structural theories explaining (forced) migration are helpful in shedding light on the impacts of structural conditions contributing to migratory movements. However, their effort to create generalizable hypotheses leads to overlooking individual (or familial) experiences and behaviors of migrants and refugees. I argue that structures contribute to the environment in which an individual refugee (or family) makes their decisions, but they are not sufficient for explaining refugee behaviors. For instance, a sole focus on structures will not provide a meaningful answer to why refugees in seemingly similar situations make different decisions.

### **Rational choice approaches**

As opposed to structural theories, which place structures at the core of inquiry, rational choice approaches direct their attention towards the individual. A theoretical effort that is commonly regarded as the starting point of migration theory is Ravenstein's (1885) "Laws of Migration" (Lee, 1966, p. 47). Ravenstein's laws made assertions regarding distance, rural versus urban, gender, migration flows, and economic factors (Ravenstein, 1885). His laws include the following:

"[T]he great body of our migrants only proceed a short distance. ... Migrants proceeding long distances generally go by preference to one of the great centers of commerce and industry. ... [T]here takes place consequently a universal shifting or displacement of the population, which produces 'currents of migration,' setting in the direction of the great centers of commerce and industry which absorb the migrants. ... The inhabitants of the country immediately surrounding a town of rapid growth flock into it; the gaps thus left in the rural population are filled up by migrants from more remote districts.... Each main current of migration produces a compensating counter current. The natives of towns are less migratory than those of the rural parts of the country" (Ravenstein, 1885, pp. 198-199).

Reflecting back on his assertions in 1885, Ravenstein made a few additions to these laws during his presentation in 1889:

“Females appear to predominate among short-journey migrants. ... [A]n increase in the means of locomotion and a development of manufactures and commerce [lead] to an increase of migration. ...Bad or oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation), all have produced and are still producing currents of migration, but none of these currents can compare in volume with that which arises from the desire inherent in most men to 'better' themselves in material respects” (Ravenstein, 1889, pp. 286-288)

Ravenstein’s focus on the role of calculations for accessing a ‘better’ life as the key motivation for migration served as a cornerstone for future efforts in theorizing migration from a rational choice perspective. Such calculations can to some degree shed light on refugee decision-making as well. Refugees, like other migrants, calculate their decisions to ensure best outcomes. The difference, however, is that refugees often face stronger restrictions and limitations throughout their journeys.

Perhaps one of the legacies of Ravenstein’s model could be traced in the push-pull factors model. The core premise of this model is that migrants are pushed by low incomes in their home countries and pulled by hopes for a better life in wealthier countries (Lee, 1966 and Harris and Todaro, 1970). In other words, these factors are conditions that encourage individuals to leave their home in order to move to a new location for temporary or permanent residence. While both pull and push factors can be helpful in explaining voluntary migration, the push-pull factor thesis needs to be approached with more caution in the case of forced migration. For instance, economic migration could be understood in terms of push and pull economic factors: low wages and high unemployment rates in the home country compared to the destination country. When looking at the case of forced migration, the push factor is largely understood in the violence or

persecution driving the individual outside of their home country.<sup>50</sup> The absence of violence or persecution, on the other hand, is the first pull factor motivating a refugee to go to a neighboring country to seek asylum. Push and pull factors, however, continue to be a part of a refugee's decision-making process throughout their journeys. A refugee may not face immediate persecution in a neighboring country, so there is a pull to that area; however, a country further afield may offer active protection and economic prospects, thus also pulling to that area. In various parts of a refugee's journey push-pull factors may have a degree of influence. For instance, such factors may be helpful in explaining why and how refugees choose their routes and country of asylum or destination. This is a theme that emerged throughout my interviews with my research participants: while all emphasized that they had no choice but to leave their home country, a majority of them referenced push-pull calculations at some point during their journeys. An enhancement to the push-pull model is Lee's (1966) theorization of migration that resulted in a model of migration that identifies a set of factors impacting migratory decision-making. For Lee these factors are associated with 1) the area of origin, 2) the area of destination, 3) intervening obstacles, and 4) personal matters (1966, p. 50). In other words, individuals' decisions are not exclusively informed by the factors at the origin and destination. Instead, a set of obstacles, with varying levels of influence, can impact migratory decisions. Lee cites distance, immigration laws, and the Berlin Wall as examples of such obstacles (1966, p. 51). Distance perhaps is the most

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<sup>50</sup> I presented an extensive discussion on persecution in the previous chapter.

notable obstacle that has been investigated by the likes of Stouffer (1940). Regarding the personal factors, Lee highlights the role of personal skills and personalities in migratory decision-making.

“Personal sensitivities, intelligence, and awareness of conditions elsewhere enter into the evaluation of the situation at origin, and knowledge of the situation at destination depends upon personal contacts or upon sources of information which are not universally available. In addition, there are personalities which are resistant to change -change of residence as well as other changes-and there are personalities which welcome change for the sake of change. For some individuals, there must be compelling reasons for migration, while for others little provocation or promise suffices” (Lee, 1966, p. 51).

Based on these assertions, Lee proposes a set of hypotheses related to volume, flow, and characteristics of migration. Regarding volume of migration, he argues that a high level of diversity across geographical regions or in populations results in higher volumes of migration (Lee, 1966, p. 52). Additionally, he notes that while intervening variables have an impact, with time the volume of migration increases. Economic fluctuation and development or progress have a direct impact on the volume of migration as well (Lee, 1966, pp. 52-54). The next set of Lee’s hypotheses relate to the flow of migration: 1) migrants move to specific destinations along established routes, 2) every key migration stream goes along a counter-stream, 3) the ratio of streams to counter-streams is higher when negative factors in the origin are stronger (slavery or famine for instance), 4) when origin and destination are similar, stream and counter-stream cancel each other out, 5) greater intervening obstacles result in more stable migration streams compared with counter-streams, and 6) the efficiency of migration streams depend on economic prosperity in destination (Lee, 1966, pp. 54-56).

Lee's framework makes several migratory decision-making contributions that can be applied to the study of refugee behaviors as well. A key contribution of Lee's framework is that it recognizes the complexities around individual decision-making and inevitable diversity in factors influencing migration at the individual level. Additionally, he rightly suggests that not all those involved in a migratory journey have a similar decision-making capacity. For instance, children and women may not have as much agency as their father or husband, at least in certain cultures (Lee, 1966, p. 51).<sup>51</sup> This complex and untidy depiction of migratory behavior can be applied to the case of forced migration, where asylum seekers and refugees navigate under complex personal, emotional, and cultural circumstances. For instance, familial or societal values can impact refugees' decision-making capacity. While helpful in explaining why individuals may go from their origin to their destination, Lee's framework is not able to explain the numerous decisions that they must take throughout their journeys. Intervening obstacles open a window into refugees' journeys, but they do not explain how refugees make their decisions throughout their journeys.

Another notable contribution to the push-pull model is Stouffer's model. In 1940, Stouffer claimed to develop a "modest formulation of a new sociological law" (p. 846). The heart of Stouffer's project is the notion of distance and how it intervenes in the classic push and pull explanation for migration. He proposes the *intervening opportunities model*, which asserts that "the number of persons going a given distance is directly proportional to the percentage increase

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<sup>51</sup> According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 41% of refugees were under 18-years (2022).

in opportunities at that distance” and intervening opportunities between the origin and the destination (Ibid.).

This theory, while a plausible effort, fails to provide an understanding of migratory behaviors in the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reason for this is twofold. First, Stouffer’s theoretical endeavor takes place 80 years ago, when modes of commute and communication were drastically different from those of today. With the advances in telecommunications and air travel, migrants often have a wider array of choices for their country of destination, compared with refugees. In the case of refugees, coercion is an undeniable element of their journeys. This sense of coercion adds restrictions on the options available to them along their journeys. Second, his theory is heavily focused on pull factors, which are traditionally associated with the case of voluntary movements. The core of the modern definition of refugee is the idea of immediate danger to one’s life, which could be understood as the ultimate push factor. While pull factors can be partly helpful in explaining some aspects of refugee behaviors, they fail to provide a satisfactory account for refugees’ decisions throughout their journeys. Of course, Stouffer’s writings belong to a time that the current international refugee regimes based on the 1951 Refugee Convention did not exist and critiquing his work on this basis is both unfair and problematic. That being said, his attention to the intervening variables between the country of origin and destination is one that I find helpful in understanding refugee behaviors. I argue that a refugee movement must be understood in terms of a journey, often with multiple key points, as opposed to a single step from home country to destination.

Another prominent theory influenced by push-pull approach is Kunz's kinetic model (1969 and 1973). Kunz argues that "[refugees'] progress more often than not resembles the movement of the billiard ball: devoid of inner direction their path is governed by the kinetic factors of inertia, friction and the vectors of outside forces applied on them" (Kunz, 1973, p. 131). This model introduces a push-pressure-pull construct. The outcome of this model is the categorization of refugees to 'anticipatory' and 'acute' refugees (Ibid. p. 132). The anticipatory refugees are the ones who leave their home countries before the deterioration of the situation to a point that their ordinary departure is at risk. They often arrive at their country of asylum/settlement with, among other things, some knowledge of the destination country's language and some money to support themselves financially. If the chain of events in the home country does not develop in the ways that the anticipatory refugees had anticipated, they will then fall under economic migrant as opposed to the refugee category (Ibid. 131-132).

Acute refugee movements, on the other hand, refer to circumstances in which the political or military situation has deteriorated to a point that individuals are forced to leave their home country without any preparation. The push is overwhelming and staying becomes an intolerable option (Ibid.). Since the decision-making process for acute refugees happen within a short time span, not only they do not plan for their migration, but they do not get a chance to thoroughly think about the consequences of their flight. In essence, refugees in this category are understood as having no choice but to flee; however, I argue that while acute refugees' choices are more restricted, they exercise their agency, to varying extents and with different levels of success. Therefore, acute refugees in similar situations may make different decisions and ultimately have

different journeys. This is of course the case for those who survive and get the chance to embark on a refugee journey. To use Arar and Fitzgerald's terms, those who get 'killed at home' or 'killed in transit' experience the highest degree of coercion and have the lowest level of agency – nonetheless, their experiences are a part of the broader refugee experience (2022, p. 42).

The line between the anticipatory and acute movements is not always as clear as Kunz's model assumes. There are 'intermediate' movements that exemplify certain characteristics of the two movements. This pattern can be found in the case of the Jewish refugees of the Second World War, for instance, when anticipatory movements turned into acute movements: Jewish refugees who fled to neighboring countries, before the deterioration of the situation in Germany, found themselves under eminent threat when their countries of asylum were under military or political pressure of Germany (Ibid. 132). Erdal and Oeppen (2018) argue that the portrayal of forced and voluntary migration as a dichotomy is a problematic conception. They suggest that the forced and voluntary migration are better understood if portrayed as a continuum of experience, instead. While the dichotomy is helpful for states and individuals when refugee status determination and migration management are at stake, the dichotomy does not seem to be able to capture the experiences of all individual refugees (Ibid. 981). Anthony Richmond (1988), too, contests the dichotomy. He argues that choices available to an individual in any given situation are limited by certain constraints.

“Although refugee movements are usually represented as ‘forced,’ they are only an extreme case of the constraints that are placed upon the choices available to an individual in particular circumstances. ... Choices facing an ethnic or political minority may be to join dissident army, face political imprisonment, torture, or

death. In [this] case the limited options available involve excruciating choices. Flight is one of these options” (Richmond, 1988, p. 14).

What seems to be missing in Kunz’s model is refugees’ different responses to similar threats or dangers. Why do some individuals decide to leave their home countries before the deterioration of the situation, while others wait until the situation becomes intolerable? This is a question that has been largely neglected in this and other theoretical approaches I have so far reviewed. Stein suggests that often the “better educated, more active age groups” tend to escape (1981, p. 323).<sup>52</sup> However, as I will discuss in the following chapters, education and age are insufficient to provide a meaningful answer to the question. There are other factors such as access to resources, values, and gender that may have an impact.

Finally, the anticipatory refugee category is problematic for two main reasons. First, those in this category do not qualify as refugees according to international refugee regimes. Second, this categorization makes the assumption that to-be refugees have the financial and legal capacity to move to a different country for asylum. Therefore, what may be a more appropriate topic for inquiry is why there are variations in choices for acute refugees, when the political or military situation has already deteriorated. Kunz’ theory critiques the voluntary versus involuntary dichotomy in migration by adding the anticipatory refugee movement. However, the distinction between acute and anticipatory refugee movement does not sufficiently capture the wide range of refugee experiences.

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<sup>52</sup> This claim however is not supported by the findings of my interviews. I will discuss this in more detail in the following two chapters.

The last rational choice theory that I am reviewing in this section is micro-neoclassical economics. As opposed to macro-neoclassical economics, which I discussed earlier under structural approaches, micro-neoclassical economics perspective approaches the question of migration from an individual level (see Ranis and Fei, 1961; Harris and Todaro, 1970; Todaro, 1976). The core premise of this theory is that human beings are rational actors, and as such their decision to migrate is informed by their cost-benefit calculations. In other words, migration is understood as an economic decision, in which one needs to calculate whether the outcome will justify the inevitable cost. In this context, cost refers to both the material and psychological costs of traveling to and adapting to a new country (Todaro and Maruszko, 1987, p. 102). From this perspective, migrants calculate costs and benefits of moving to various destinations and choose the one with the greatest benefit (or lowest cost with respect to benefits). Therefore, every aspect of international migration must be understood in terms of migrants' cost and benefit calculations of economic opportunities in the sending country and various potential destination. The policy implication of this theoretical perspective is that states attempt to control immigration by, for example, lowering the probability of employment or increasing the possibility of underemployment in the destination (Massey et al., 1993, pp. 435-436).

Neoclassical economics perspective is largely concerned with legal and conventional migration. While it does not offer a comprehensive explanation for forced migration, there are efforts within this theoretical camp to explain irregular migration. For instance, Todaro and Maruszko (1987) make an effort to provide a conceptual framework for the case of irregular migration to the United States. They borrow the key premises of neoclassical economics and apply a set of factors to shed

light on irregular migration. For them, too, individuals make their migratory decision mainly based on a calculation of their income in their home country compared to their destination country (1987, p. 102). Their main contribution is that, in the case of irregular migrants, the probability of arrest and deportation as well as 'illegality tax' must be added to the equation (1987, pp. 102-103). Concerning the case of refugees, neoclassical economics, and Todaro and Maruszko specifically, assume that economic calculations are the ultimate considerations for migratory decision-making; however, this explanation contradicts both legal refugee frameworks and on the ground experiences of refugees who are usually faced with a high degree of coercion to migrate due to consequences of war or other *well-founded* forms of threats. This perspective on migration is helpful because cost-benefit calculations do play a part in decisions that refugees make along their journeys, but the nature of these calculations is not, or even primarily, economical. The rationalist assumptions at the core of neoclassical understanding of the refugee behaviors, in fact, can be perceived as the dominant perspectives leading to restrictive refugee policies designed to have a deterring effect. This is especially the case when refugees are presented as 'bogus' refugees whose primary calculation was economic. This is why it is important in this study to show that refugees' calculations are made within the context of restrictions and pressures that they are facing.

Rational choice theories have several shortcomings when it comes to shedding light on refugee behaviors. First, rational choice models, such is Ravenstein's theory, assume that individuals have access to perfect knowledge, but this is always not the case for all refugees at any times / points during their journeys. Many of my interviewees reported that their decisions were based on

partial information that they received from their personal networks or found on social media, which both are far from ideal sources. Second, there are many unknowns to refugees at any point during their journeys, and my analysis shows that subsequent decisions along a refugee's route often arise in response to an unanticipated development from a previous decision. For example, the severity of threat, border crossing conditions, general political climate in destination countries and many other factors are not always readily available to refugees or are different from what their sources of information implied. Therefore, cost-benefit calculations, while among refugees' considerations, fall short in explaining their behaviors. Third, the push-pull approach, in particular, assumes a single-step connecting the home and the destination points with a single line (Kunz, 1973, p. 126). In other words, solely focusing on push-pull factors tends to ignore the complexity of the migrant decision-making. Depending on refugees' available choices, they often consider push-pull factors at various points during their journeys. This is a shortcoming that Stouffer (1940) and Lee (1969) aimed to overcome in their works. Another shortcoming of push-pull models is that they focus on a list of variables 'which lack a framework to bring them together in an explanatory system' (Skeldon, 1990, p. 125). Consequently, this fixed conceptualization of migratory decision-making oversimplifies migratory journey; it fails to consider changes in migrants' circumstance, motivations, and decisions (de Hass, 2011). My interviews suggest that refugees' journeys are significantly more complex than this static image, requiring multiple (if not on-going) decisions, therefore indicating the presence of push-pull calculations in various ways throughout refugee journeys.

## Psychological approaches

So far, I have reviewed two sets of theoretical approaches, structural theories, and rational choice perspectives. While the former emphasizes on the role of structures such as states or the world economy, the latter perceives rational (economically motivated) calculations as the most important element involved in a (forced) migrant's decision-making process. Psychological approaches complement both theories by focusing on the role of psychological factors unique to each individual (e.g., Berry et al. 1987; Eisenstadt, 1954; Winter-Ebmer, 1994). These are theoretical endeavors that contribute to understanding migrants' motivations and decisions beyond the realm of economic calculations. One of the prominent theories, addressing questions of motivation, is the deficiency model. The core argument of this model is that individuals with fewer personal or social resources are more likely to emigrate compared to those with access to more resources (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989). According to proponents of this model, emigrants are often 'maladjusted' and experience some form of failure or adversity. In other words, migratory movements are motivated by migrants' feelings of insecurity and inadequacy in their home country (Eisenstadt, 1954, pp. 1-2). While access to or lack of resources are still relevant, individuals' decisions are more strongly motivated by how their conditions make them *feel*.

To add an additional layer of complexity to the deficiency model, Tartakovsky and Schwartz (2001), borrowing from Schwartz's theory of values (1992), assert that individuals' migratory motives are best understood if they are seen as "basic and general" human motivations (p. 4). On this basis, they introduce three motivations to emigrate: "preservation (physical, social, and

psychological security), self-development (personal growth in abilities, knowledge, and skills), and materialism (financial well-being, wealth)” (Tartarovsky and Schwartz, 2001, p. 1). In a similar manner, De Jong and Fawcett (1981) identify seven motivations for migration: improving material life, improving social status, having greater comfort, stimulation, access to greater autonomy, and matters related to affiliation and morality. A key point here is that these motivations are informed by social expectations, norms, and gender, among other factors (De Jong, 2000). Such social psychological theories, such as the deficiency model, are helpful in basic understanding of refugee movements. I argue that extreme feelings of insecurity and inadequacy can be helpful in understanding refugee decisions throughout their journeys.

Another psychological approach to migratory behavior is found in Keller’s work in 1975. In his work, Keller argues that the trauma of flight leaves long lasting residual psychological effects on refugees. Since leaving during the height of a military or political unrest, the acute refugees are more likely to endure greater hardship and loss; hence, they are more likely to experience the following residual features: 1) guilt for the loss of loved ones who could have been saved if their departure took place before the deterioration of the situation; 2) a sense of invulnerability, which is due to the fact that the refugee has gone through the worst already; 3) a sense of aggressiveness, which is the outcome of the first two characteristics (Ibid.). Keller identifies nine stages in a refugee’s journey “perception of a threat; deciding to flee; the period of extreme danger and flight; reaching safety; camp behavior (life in country of asylum); repatriation, settlement, or resettlement; stages of resettlement; adjustment and acculturation; and, finally, residual states and changes behavior caused by the experience” (Stein, 1981).

Keller's work, while heavily focused on the psychological aspect of refugee experiences, makes two main contributions to refugee studies. First, it tries to illuminate individual refugee experiences. Using psychological tests and extensive interviews with Punjabi refugees, Keller sheds light on some often less clear aspect of a refugee's experience: how they feel throughout their journey. In other words, both in terms of his research method and his model, Keller places the refugee at the heart of his inquiry. He explores refugee agency through psychology and impact of a refugee's feelings on their behavior. Second, Keller provides a nine-stage framework that highlights certain climaxes in a refugee's journey. These nine stages, while arguably not comprehensive, offer a starting point for understanding key moments in a refugee's journey. Notably, his framework perceives a refugee's journey to begin before they even leave their home country and to continue even after they repatriate/settle/resettle. The nine stages are helpful in centering agency as they recognize multiple steps throughout refugees' journeys. Throughout these stages, refugees exercise agency by making decisions related to their immediate circumstance. Keller recognizes that internal characteristics of refugees, particularly their psychological responses are impactful in shaping their experiences and behaviors. Despite that recognition, there is still a need for understanding how refugees make decisions in interaction with their political structures, cultural settings, and more physical individualistic characteristics, such as age, gender, and physical (dis)ability, to just name few. In sum, psychological approaches balance the rational choice perspective; if rational choice theories focus on rational cost or benefit analysis, psychological approaches show that individuals measure costs and benefits in ways that are not solely motivated by economic considerations.

## Network Theory

Network theory is another key approach to studying migration. As opposed to more economy-based or rational choice approaches to migration, network theory aims at understanding migratory behaviors by focusing on migrants' personal connections through family or friends (Boyd 1989; De Jong 2000; Tilly 1999). In "Herd and Network Effects in Migration Decision-making," Epstein (2008) explores two models of herd behavior and network externalities and argues that the two complement each other in explaining migratory behavior. Network externalities, as defined by Epstein, could be understood as "I will go where my people are, since they will help me" (2008, p. 568). This understanding can explain why there is a high concentration of migrants from the same country of origin in a particular location. For instance, high numbers of Ukrainians in Canada or Iranians in California, in the United States. Network externalities benefit migrants through various forms of support that they usually receive from their networks in their destination: finding a job, housing, and ethnic goods, to name a few. Herd behavior, on the other hand, refers to "I will go where I have observed others go, because those who went before me cannot be wrong, even though I would have chosen to go elsewhere" (2008, p. 568). From this perspective, migrants, who often have imperfect information about various destinations, choose to follow previous migrants because they have access to firsthand information that to-be migrants do not. That being said, after migration, some may realize that their decision has been a mistake.

Epstein argues that only a *combination* of network externalities and herd behavior can provide a sufficiently helpful explanation of migratory decisions, particularly regarding the question of

destination choice. When a particular immigrant population (diaspora) in a location grows to a certain size, the feelings of responsibility for new members of the population usually drop.<sup>53</sup> This means that large immigrant populations with long presence in a certain location are likely to develop a more individualistic culture. It is in this context that while network externalities may not be helpful in migratory decision-making, herd behavior will still be an important factor because migratory decisions of past migrants can still have an impact on those of to-be migrants (Epstein, 2008, pp. 580-581).

In a similar fashion, Haug (2008), in “Migration Network and Migrant Decision-making,” lists five ways that networks impact migration. First, affinities have an impact on migratory decisions. This impact could increase or decrease the likelihood of an individual’s decision to migrate; having family or friends in one’s home country or the potential destination may play a key role in one’s decision to migrate. Second, networks can serve as sources of information for migrants. Such information may impact one’s decision to migrate and/or their choice of destination. Third, networks of friends and family (relatives) often facilitate migration to where they reside. For instance, an Iranian individual having a close friend or a cousin in Germany is more likely to migrate to Germany than any other place. Fourth, while networks often work as a pull factor in migration, at times they may function as a push factor in one’s decision to migrate. In this scenario, having familial conflict in one’s home community may push an individual to migrate. Finally, sometimes families push some of their members to migrate so that they can contribute

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<sup>53</sup> For more on the concept of diaspora and its evolution in the past few decades see Robin Cohen (2008) and Safran (1991).

to financial security and income diversity of the family. In such cases, often younger male adults migrate to other places so that they can earn more money and support their family (Haug, 2008).

Networks can also be understood in the context of transnationalism. Vertovec defines transnationalism as a “sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states – parallels the growth of social scientific interest in globalization over the same period” (2009, p. 2). Improved transportation and advancements in telecommunications have contributed to the role that transnational networks play in migratory movements.<sup>54</sup>

These are contributions that are for the most part transferable to refugee studies. However, I argue that there are additional factors impacting refugees’ decisions and behaviors, such as cultural and normative context, available resources, and state policies just to list a few.

### **The refugee system theory**

One of the most recent contributions to understanding refugee behaviors is Arar and FitzGerald’s (2022) refugee system model. Their model is informed by earlier works, particularly in migration systems theory, of Akin Mabogunje (1970), James Fawcett (1989), Mary Kritz et al (1992), Oliver Bakewell (2014), and Douglas Massey et al. (2020). According to Arar and FitzGerald, the refugee system is “an interactive set of processes within, among, and transcending states that produce immobility and movement related to violence and persecution. Ideological, military, economic, and political power shape the system” (2022, p. 5). It includes feedback mechanisms that link the

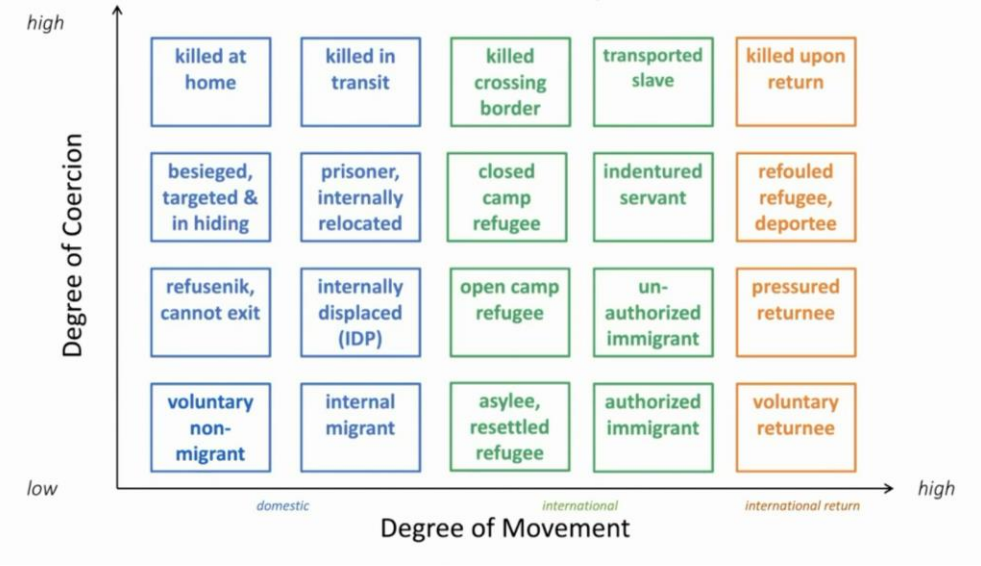
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<sup>54</sup> For more on transnationalism see Portes (2001) and Smith and Guarnizo (1998).

elements shaping the system across time and place. For them, a systems approach is a necessity to fill the gaps that siloed approaches to refugee studies leave behind: “The experience of displacement does not begin the moment a person crosses an international border. Neither does refugeehood end the day legal status is secured. Refugees often have family members dispersed over long distances and across borders. Their obligations and opportunities are not confined to one particular state” (Arar and FitzGerald, 2022, p. 9).

One of the main contributions of the systems approach is that it moves away from a legal definition of refugees to capture refugees’ less noticeable experiences of immobility. The outcome of this approach is what Arar and FitzGerald call the “(im)mobility chessboard,” which redefines refugees in a range of contexts, situating them onto a continuum of displacement and coercion (2022, p. 42).

Figure 7 The (Im)mobility Chessboard



The Chessboard explains how individuals can move between various categories that are formed in interactions between degrees of coercion and degrees of movement. It is helpful in showing that refugeehood is not a static or linear experience, but one that is dynamic and potentially subject to change. My critique of this model is twofold. First, the categories with higher degree of coercion tend to downplay the agency of refugees associated with them. For example, those who get killed in their home country before they get a chance to leave, *often* exercise a degree of agency. Often refugees *choose* to stay (for varying reasons) even though they know their safety could potentially be compromised. That is partly the reason not all Christian converts or members of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning, and Two Spirit (LGBTQ2S+) community from Iran have already left Iran. Second, this model understands coercion almost exclusively in terms of mobility or immobility. However, I argue that coercion needs to be understood in a broader term. It may be reasonable to portray (im)mobility as the overarching theme for a refugee journey but focusing on mobility could oversimplify refugees' journeys and their decisions. I argue that there is a need for a model that aims to shed light on *options* available to refugees throughout their journeys, as opposed to a binary of mobility versus immobility. For instance, finding a job, getting married, and seeking education are some of the areas that require some form of decision-making.

The other contribution of Arar and FitzGerald (2022) is a decision-making model that they call new economics of displacement. The starting point of this model is to shift the level of analysis from individual to household, which is a departure from the Convention understanding of refugeehood that uses individual circumstances as the basis for refugee status determination.

They bring attention back to household economics in relations to refugeehood, which is novel because refugeehood has traditionally been understood as movement motivated by coercion as opposed to economic gain (Arar and FitzGerald, 2022, p. 76). They rightly argue that the efforts to alleviate economic and physical risks not always result in safety; in fact, this may lead to new perils. According to their model, families “manage the risks of violence at the same time as they manage economic risks, such as losing their assets if they all flee at once” (Ibid. p. 77). They include gender and age in their model as factors impacting decision-making (Ibid. pp. 77-79). I argue that that, while this model is plausible in using household as a unit of analysis, the number of variables impacting decision-making are more than the ones proposed by Arar and FitzGerald. This is an area that my work complements their model.

### **Take away**

Building on the historical and legal discussion that I presented in the previous chapter, in this chapter I engaged with existing literature on migratory and refugee movements. I discussed structural approaches, rational choice theories, psychological models, network theories, as well as the refugee system theory. As highlighted throughout the chapter, I argue that while these theoretical efforts have varying degrees of explanatory power for understanding refugee decision-making, they do not adequately unpack the complexities involved in agency exercised by refugees. To do just that, in the next chapter, I will introduce a new decision-making model that is aimed at overcoming the shortcomings of the models I discussed throughout this chapter.

## Chapter 4: Interactive Decision-Making Model

“Have you tried to ever be a refugee  
than to watch another be on the road with despair?  
Have you ever tried to be human  
than to observe the helplessness of others?”

(Gelato, 2015)

Like Gelato (2015) says in his poem, there is an unquestionable value in stepping into refugees’ shoes, particularly for better understanding their stories and their behaviors. Building on what I established in the previous chapters, in this chapter I propose a refugee decision-making model that places refugees and their complex experiences at the heart of the inquiry. This model, which I call the Interactive Decision-making Model (IDM), unpacks refugees’ agency, while recognizing complexities and constraints involved in their decision-making processes. IDM has three main components: spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and the decision-making environment. I argue that in the process of making their decisions, refugees *interact* with spectrums of coercion and time *within* their unique decision-making environment. As I discussed in the first chapter (introduction) the aim of my model is to go beyond what Arar and Fitzgerald (2022) refer to as siloed approaches to refugee decision-making, ones that focus on a single aspect, such as structural, rational choice, or psychological elements. IDM recognizes that refugees do not operate in a vacuum; instead, they make their decisions within a multi-layered environment, which can influence refugees’ decisions by increasing or decreasing the level of coercion they face

and the amount of time they have when making their decisions.<sup>55</sup> The novelty of IDM stems from its application of a complex system approach, breaking siloed approaches to the topic, taking a fresh look at the notion of coercion, and inclusion of the element of time as a key component for understanding refugee decision-making. I will further unpack these as I present IDM throughout this chapter.

## **Interactions**

A key feature of IDM is the emphasis on interactions. This is a break away from the heavy emphasis in the forced or involuntary nature of refugeehood that assumes refugees' decisions are mere reactions to their circumstances, portraying them as passive victims (Jaszi, 1939), which is in line with how Peterson (1985) describes refugees as those coerced to leave with no other options. Richmond (1988) even goes as far as broadly categorizing refugees alongside slaves. In all such depictions there is little room for recognizing refugees' agency because refugees' decisions are mere reactions to their circumstances – reactions that are expected to be predictable for the most part: once faced with (fear of) persecution, they leave their home, seek refuge in a neighboring country, live there on good behavior until their application is processed by UNHCR or state authorities. As opposed to this passive depiction, I argue that refugees constantly and continuously interact with their circumstances and information available to them at any given moment in order to make decisions. They interact with the degree of coercion that

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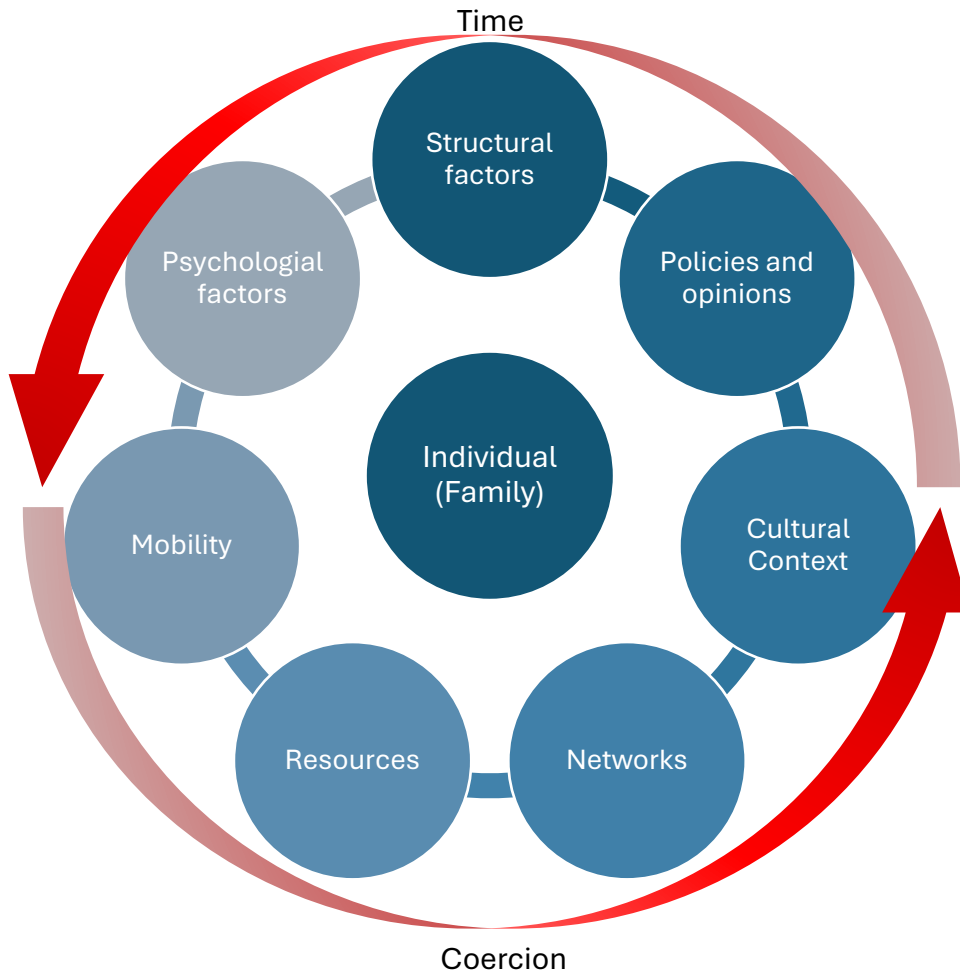
<sup>55</sup> In the first chapter of this study (Introduction), I discuss the reason there is a need for a new refugee decision-making model. In that chapter, I discuss the gaps my model is intended to fill and its main contributions to the literature on refugee decision-making model.

they face and with the risks that are associated with it *throughout* their journey; they interact with time and timing *throughout* their journeys and with opportunities or restrictions it brings for them; and they interact with elements of their decision-making environment in every step of the way. Interaction implies that the relation between refugees, their circumstances, and their decisions is fluid and more agential than a mere one-way relationship in which refugees' decisions are determined or even *shaped* by their circumstances, in a passive or merely reactive manner. In other words, refugees are not only influenced by their circumstance, but are capable of influencing their circumstances throughout their journeys (within the context of the challenges they face). This interaction also implies that, as Crawford and Jones argue, experiences refugees gain throughout their journeys alter their original ideas (2021). For example, while registering with UNHCR may not be a refugee's decision after they flee, with passage of time that decision may change. Or as an example, a refugee who does not consider returning to their home country may change their mind at a future time, based on new information or ideas.<sup>56</sup> Hence, refugees' decisions must be understood in terms of interactions that take place between them and their environment throughout their journeys.

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<sup>56</sup> Return for a resettled refugee could be permanent, semi-permanent, or temporary.

Figure 8 Interactive Decision-making Model



The interactive nature of IDM is not limited to the relations between a refugee (or refugee family) and their circumstances; instead, the three pillars of the model interact with each other as well. In other words, spectrums of coercion and time as well as the decision-making environment are often deeply intertwined. Additionally, the components forming a refugee’s decision-making environment interact with each other as well. I will unpack this more as I introduce the three core elements of my model in what follows.

## **Spectrum of coercion**

The first pillar of IDM is the spectrum of coercion. As Erdal and Oeppen (2018) rightly argue, the dichotomy of forced and voluntary forms of migration is flawed and problematic. As opposed to the legal assumptions regarding refugeehood, I argue that the element of coercion must be understood in terms of a spectrum. As I established in Chapter 2, ‘fear of persecution’ as the core of the definition of refugeehood in the 1951 Convention fails to account for refugees’ diverse experiences, particularly after they leave their home country. The legal framework is concerned with the motivation behind one’s flight, but I argue that coercion remains a component of refugees’ decision-making process afterwards. I propose a spectrum of coercion that refugees interact with as they make their decisions throughout their journeys. This is similar to Arar and FitzGerald’s (2022) continuum of coercion; however, while their model is largely concerned with unpacking the relationship between coercion and movement, resulting in their proposed 20 distinct categories of (im)mobility, spectrum of coercion in IDM is aimed at understanding how coercion plays a role in refugees’ decisions throughout their journeys. I argue that coercion’s impact goes beyond refugees’ movement. Coercion, in interaction with the other components of IDM, impacts refugees’ decisions and behaviors.

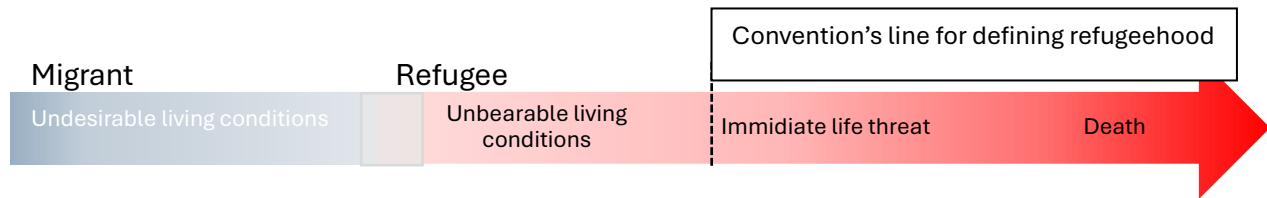
I argue that coercion should be understood in terms of a spectrum with three loosely defined categories: unbearable living conditions, immediate life threats, and death. The reason the spectrum of coercion begins with unbearable living conditions is because that is the point where I draw the line between migration and refugeehood. That line is, as Richmond (1988) suggests, often drawn by categorizing refugee movements as non-voluntary. I, however, argue that while

migrants' decisions are informed by desirability of their living conditions, refugees are faced with questions about the bearability of their circumstances.<sup>57</sup> Migrants often look for higher standards of living, but for refugees the driving factor is the intolerability of their living conditions because of the experience or prospect of physical violence or no economic prospects based on their membership in a specific group. In other words, refugees are not simply in pursuit of a better life; instead, they are in search of basic protections, rights, and freedoms that are deliberately taken away from them directly or indirectly by the state; to use Shacknove's word, they are in search of replacement for their broken 'bond' with their state (1985). Unbearable conditions refer to circumstances that disrupt one's day-to-day life or restrict their ability to live their way of life. There may not be an imminent threat to their lives, but their circumstances are not bearable or tolerable over time. For example, as Arar and FitzGerald argue, "states can use economic tools to punish opponents and despised minorities by cutting off their access to employment, markets, education, and land" (2022, p. 36). This example can be found in the Iranian government's mistreatment of Baha'i minorities; Iranian authorities routinely use economic persecution and confiscation of property as means to further impoverish and alienate Baha'is across the country (Moinpour, 2018). Syrians dealing with consequences of war, LGBTQ2S+ community members, or Christian converts in Iran who are not yet being persecuted by the state demonstrate unbearable living conditions.

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<sup>57</sup> I have discussed this in depth in Chapter 2.

Figure 9 Spectrum of Coercion



In Figure 9, I demonstrate the spectrum of coercion and the distinction between migrant and refugee. I recognize that the reference to migrant versus refugee reinforces the dichotomy my project is set to challenge. However, I find this reference to be a necessary one from an analytical standpoint because as I discussed in the previous chapter, I understand migration to be the continuation of refugeehood. The category of ‘migrant’ includes a wider range of actors, including those who are very refugee-like.<sup>58</sup> Some categories of migrant, especially those close to the line you draw as distinguishing between migrant and refugee, are virtually indistinguishable from refugee, and ought to have expanded protections and rights as well.<sup>59</sup> That is the reason I avoid drawing a solid line between migrants and refugees on my spectrum of coercion, and instead mark a gray area between the two.

Immediate life threat, on the other hand, can be defined as conditions under which an individual will likely lose their life or be subject to unjust treatment with severe consequences. It might be

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<sup>58</sup>According to World Migration Report 2022, there were 281 million migrants globally. The total estimated 281 million people living in a country other than their countries of birth in 2020 was 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970 (International Organization for Migration 2022).

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion on refugee as a label and how it relates to similar categories.

useful here to note that for most, harm is interpreted as bodily harm or restriction, rather than mental or psychological.<sup>60</sup> This is how UNHCR interprets the persecution clause in the 1951 Convention: a threat to an individual's life or freedom (UNHCR, 1979, p. Para. 51). These are the benchmark conditions for the definition of refugee, and those in such circumstance can be labeled as acute refugees, to use Kunz's (1973) categorization. For instance, those in Syria escaping a city under attack by the state army or any of the militia groups or members of LGBTQ2S+ community in Iran who are being immediately persecuted by the government are experiencing such conditions.

While the Convention definition of refugeehood draws the line between refugees and migrants closer to the right end of the spectrum, with the presence of an immediate life threat (fear of persecution), I argue that the 'line' needs to be drawn closer to the left end of the spectrum. The 'line' I propose is somewhere between undesirable and unbearable living conditions - that is the gray area indicated on the graph above. I avoid using a narrow line because refugee experiences are diverse and far from linear. In fact, as opposed to the Convention's effort to determine an objective ground for refugeehood, I recognize that there is an inevitable degree of subjectivity involved for each individual's understanding of undesirability and unbearability. There are conditions that impact one's understanding of their circumstances.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Rana, one of my research participants told me that she accepted years of mistreatment and violence as a

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<sup>60</sup> Visit Chapter 2 for my in-depth discussion of the criteria for refugeehood.

<sup>61</sup> I will discuss this more in-depth in the next two chapters as I share my findings in relation to refugees' perception of threat.

Baha'i person in Iran, but when she gave birth to her daughter, she decided that it was time to flee.<sup>62</sup> For Rana, birth of her daughter changed her perception of her circumstances from undesirable to unbearable. As Arar and Fitzgerald (2022) rightly argue too, Rana's story emphasizes here, the importance of family as a factor in decision making, rather than the overly individualized aspect of other theories and the refugee convention. Depending on the normative and value system in which a refugee operates, family can play a key role in how refugees make their decisions throughout their journeys.<sup>63</sup>

The challenge is that in the absence of a more generous global migration system, policy makers and decision makers still need some degree of objectivity for drawing the 'line' between undesirability and unbearable – between the migrant who has no right to protection, and the refugee who does. I argue that it is possible to add rigor and objectivity to the definition as it needs to provide meaningful criteria for status determination from a policy perspective. One key marker is the presence of legislations and policies that sanction harm to the individual or the absence of adequate legal measurements or lack of willingness to protect the individual against harm. For instance, the Iranian government's patriarchal and misogynist laws pave the way for psychological and physical harm against women, which resulted in at least 8,000 honor killings between 2010 and 2014, with only a few of them being reported (Iran International, 2022). According to certain interpretations of the Sharia law, only the "blood owners" (the immediate

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<sup>62</sup> As I indicated in the first chapter, I use pseudonyms for referring to my research participants.

<sup>63</sup> I will further unpack this in the following two chapters as I discuss the findings of my interviews with my research participants.

family members) are allowed to demand justice for the murder of their loved one, therefore most honor killings go unpunished or with little punishment since the family will not demand a death sentence for another family member (Iran International, 2020). Another appropriate example would be the experiences of the Iranian LGBTQ2S+ community. According to a 2020 report, *"Hidden Wounds: A Study on Violence Against Sexual and Gender Minorities in Iran,"* 62 percent of people in sexual and gender minority groups have been abused at least once by their first-degree relatives (Gholamhosseinpour, 2020). A total of 42 percent of the respondents reported that they had been sexually harassed or raped in a public space. Perhaps more shockingly, 68 percent indicated that they were unwilling to seek support from the judiciary system in dealing with such attacks. In fact, 19 percent of the respondents said they had been subject to violence by the Iranian police or judiciary authorities (Ibid.). In this context, whether an immediate life threat exists or not is irrelevant because there is documented evidence of systemic violence by the state or lack of protection for members of the LGBTQ2S+ in Iran. For them, leaving Iran is not solely based on a desire for a better life; instead, it is rooted in the unbearability of their living conditions with the constant possibility of harm, abuse, or even death from both state and non-state actors, including family. Therefore, while the subjectivity of the 'line' seems to be inevitable, there is room for identifying markers, not free of shortcomings, for a more objective assessment.

On the extreme end of a refugee's spectrum of coercion is death. In certain circumstances, refugees interact with the possibility of death as a potential risk for their decisions. For instance, when deciding whether to stay, wait a little longer, or flee in the face of an immediate threat, possibility of death is a part of an individual's calculation. As opposed to the conventional

understanding of refugeehood, expecting individuals to immediately flee and seek refuge in a neighboring country, there are individuals who *decide* to accept that risk. Since Article 1A.1 of the 1951 Convention requires a refugee to be outside their home country, those being killed before they cross a border are not considered as refugees. They appear to be mere victims, with highly limited agency. By expanding the inquiry to individuals prior to a border crossing, there is room to include and learn more about those who never get to leave their home country.

The focus on border crossing in the conventional understanding of refugeehood assumes that coercion ends at the border. I argue that this assumption is false and that refugees continue their interaction with the spectrum of coercion even after they leave their home country, where they faced threat of physical harm. In other words, coercion is not only central to their decisions concerning their original flight; at any given point, refugees interact with the spectrum of coercion. This is largely a shift in understanding of the coercive nature of refugeehood, as embedded in the 1951 Convention, which assumes that the element of coercion is relevant only in one's home country. From this perspective, as I discussed in Chapter 2, once a refugee crosses an international border to seek for asylum, they are safe. I argue that that albeit different in nature, coercion remains as a vital component of a refugee's decision-making process. For example, when deciding whether to stay in the country of asylum or seeking protection in another country, risk calculations for each available option are foundational to a refugee's decisions.

On the one hand, the threat of death *may* be eliminated in the transit country, and the living conditions are most often less than desirable. However, the gray 'line' between desirability and unbearable is what drives refugees' decisions particularly surrounding onward movement. For

instance, Christian converts or sexual minorities in Türkiye often have difficult experiences particularly in more conservative communities. Depending on the intensity of the coercion, from random harassments to life threats, circumstances can be defined respectively as undesirable or unbearable. This is a key element that can be helpful in understanding why some refugees continue their movement even after they reach safety. Most of my participants in Lebanon and Türkiye, the two main transit countries for Iranian and Syrian refugees, reported that they faced struggles within their host community. For instance, Hamza, a Syrian refugee who lived in Lebanon before moving to Germany, told me that his “first six months were like a honeymoon. I felt like that it is different than other Arab countries and I will have freedom there, no checkpoints, no arresting like Syria. I thought I was going to be respected by others.” Hamza began to have a different experience after the first few months. He said, “after these six months I started to see discrimination.... I’m talking about discrimination in terms of ideology, religiously, politically...” Perhaps what changed the circumstances from undesirable to unbearable was witnessing a frightening firsthand experience of violence: “Once I witnessed a fight between five Syrians who were staying in a home and 200 Lebanese people who were beating them up. One of the Syrian refugees had a conflict with a Lebanese guy, and he brought 200 Lebanese just to beat these five Syrians. I was living in fear, and I decided that enough is enough and I couldn’t handle it anymore.” In this and similar circumstances, experiences of coercion outside of one’s home country contribute to their decisions, particularly regarding onward movement.

That being said, refugees’ interactions with the spectrum of coercion manifest in risk calculations. These calculations, I argue, are relative, meaning that refugees *often* choose the least risky option.

For instance, if staying in Türkiye and waiting for UNHCR to process their claim imposes a higher risk than travelling to Europe illegally through the Mediterranean Sea, the refugee in question may choose the latter. However, these calculations, I argue, do not take place in a vacuum or strictly based on cost-benefit rational considerations. As I discussed in-depth in the previous chapter, cost-benefit calculations assume a universal generalizability that overlooks the diversity of refugee experiences. I argue that those calculations are informed by refugees' decision-making environment. This partly explains why individuals in a seemingly similar situation make different decisions. For instance, while some choose to take the Mediterranean route, others do not.

A higher degree of coercion or risk can often be translated to restrictions on refugees' agency and choices available to them, but this depiction cannot provide a fulsome account of refugees' decision-making. Going back to Van Eerdewijk et al.'s definition of agency as "the capacity for purposive action, the ability to pursue goals, express voice and influence and make decisions" (2017, p. 2), refugees often do exercise agency even when faced with extreme restrictions. For example, many of my research participants reported that when they felt hopeless about the prospect of resettlement through UNHCR, they started exploring other avenues for finding less precarious living conditions; while some took on the Mediterranean Sea to reach a European country, others explored university administration and private refugee sponsorship as their

alternative options.<sup>64</sup> These alternative options, however, are also influenced by refugees' decision-making environment.

In sum, refugees interact with various degrees of coercion throughout their journeys. They calculate the risks associated with their choices and make their decisions on the basis of those calculations. That being said, these calculations take place in interactions with refugee's spectrum of time and within their decision-making environment.

### **Spectrum of time**

The next pillar of IDM is what I call spectrum of time. I argue that time and timing are essential, and often overlooked, in a refugee's journey. Theories focused on state as generators of refugees to some extent engage with timing. For instance, Zolberg (1983) argues that revolutions or annexations can lead to refugee movements. This perspective can plausibly explain the displacements caused by the conflicts in the Eastern Europe in early 1990s or the case of Syrian refugees in the mid-2010s. This macro-level approach considers the question of timing for large refugee movements, but neglects time and timing in individual refugee journeys. Another related theoretical effort engaging with the element of time and timing is Kunz's (1973) model, where he distinguishes between anticipatory and acute refugee categories. His categorization of refugees and engagement with the issue of time and timing is plausible, but he uses a binary approach that tends to reduce refugees into boxes that do not fully capture their experiences and

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<sup>64</sup> I recognize that my research participants are only representative of a small group of those who manage to flee and that more importantly the alternative options listed here may not be available to all refugees.

behaviors. I argue that time and timing play a more profound role in refugees' decisions throughout their journeys.

A constant feature of the spectrum of time is the presence of a sense of urgency. As Watson suggests, refugees are traditionally understood to be outside of the realm of the 'normal' relationship between states and their citizens (2009, p. 33). As such, they are in a state that can be categorized as outside of the ordinary. This state is commonly referred to as a problem that is of a temporary nature (Haddad, 2008, p. 31). Regardless of the issues with this construction (which I discussed in Chapter 2), refugeehood does constitute an outside of the ordinary problem for refugees that requires an urgent resolution. Perhaps the first and foremost manifestation of this urgency is the threat to one's life and basic freedoms. Those faced with such threats often have a short window of time to flee from (or respond to) danger if they want to mitigate the consequences. Therefore, refugeehood is a condition that imposes a sense of urgency on the individual.

*Figure 10 Spectrum of Time*



Within this state of urgency, I argue that time must be understood in terms of a spectrum. Time impacts refugees' planning and actions. The most basic function of time is that having more time to respond to a situation often means having a wider array of options available to a refugee. Specifically in the initial state of the journey, having more time to respond can translate to more

effective planning and recruitment of resources, elements that can impact a refugee's entire journey. What makes time and timing more complex is the fact that there is often a very limited window for fleeing. An individual needs to leave early enough to escape the threat they are facing and at the same time they should not leave too early because it could negatively affect their success in achieving protection. In other words, if one flees too early, they may have a harder time to provide evidence of well-founded fear of persecution to a UNHCR officer determining their eligibility for refugee status.<sup>65</sup>

Time is intertwined with coercion in refugee decision-making. One of their key connections is that having less time to respond to a situation often translates to a higher degree of coercion or risk, and facing a higher degree of coercion often means having less time to respond. In this capacity, time and coercion are inseparable. For example, learning that a militia group is about to attack one's village within a few hours means that there is a high degree of coercion and a significantly small amount of time to respond. Under such circumstances, the array of options available to refugees is more limited. As I will discuss later in this chapter, even under such extreme conditions, the decision-making environment influences those decisions. In other words, there are other elements that influence the impact of time and coercion.

There are instances where needing *more* time works against refugees, contributing to additional restrictions and lost opportunities experienced by them. For instance, one may have to wait to receive their passport, visa, or other documents before they can flee or make their next move.

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<sup>65</sup> I acknowledge that different states may have different approaches to refugee status determination.

The longer refugees must wait, may lead to increase in the severity of the coercion they experience. This could happen, for instance, because borders close or military attacks reach the refugee's immediate community by the time, they have their travel documents. In this example, the degree of coercion they face could change, and as a result their options and decisions could change.

The other related factor to the spectrum of time is planning and coordination. Fleeing often requires some form of planning and coordination. For instance, one may need to find a smuggler to help them cross a border. Having more time could mean a higher chance to recruit resources for or find a reliable smuggler. Less time, on the other hand, could mean loss of opportunity to cross a border or opting in for riskier options. In this example, a refugee's decisions are influenced by how much time they have and the degree of coercion they are faced with. For instance, while a Christian convert in Iran whose religious affiliation is not yet exposed to the state has more time to gather information or find resources to choose the best course of action out of their circumstances, another Christian convert whose affiliation is already exposed to the state has significantly less time to react. In other words, while those living under unbearable conditions relatively have more time to react to their circumstances, those experiencing an immediate threat to their life have less time to react. But as I mentioned earlier, time is not simply a function of coercion; it can be understood as a resource that people possess – some have more while others have less. Coercion can take some of that time, but other factors also influence time.

Time, however, is not an exclusively objective matter. Instead, it includes both objectivity and subjectivity for each individual. Regarding the objective component, waiting time for a travel

document or closure of a border are great examples. When it comes to the subjectivity, on the other hand, things become more complex. This subjective component involves an individual's perception and assessment of their circumstances, and it could result in different assessments and responses in seemingly similar circumstances.<sup>66</sup> For instance, while a refugee may not find return to their home country to be a reasonable decision, their perception of their return may change with passage of time.

Similar to the spectrum of coercion, the spectrum of time is influenced by a refugee's decision-making environment. There are circumstances in which an individual's decision-making environment impacts their spectrum of time. For instance, someone with a well-established international network and more fungible assets may not need the same amount of time to prepare to flee or make their next move as someone who lacks those. That being said, there is one caveat to consider in the relation between the spectrum of time and coercion on the one hand and the decision-making environment on the other. When faced with extremely low amount of time to respond to a situation, the decision-making environment's influence is often significantly limited. For example, when an individual learns that their camp is going to be attacked within hours, the influence of their decision-making environment reduces because they will not be able to adequately interact with its elements. Their response becomes more impacted

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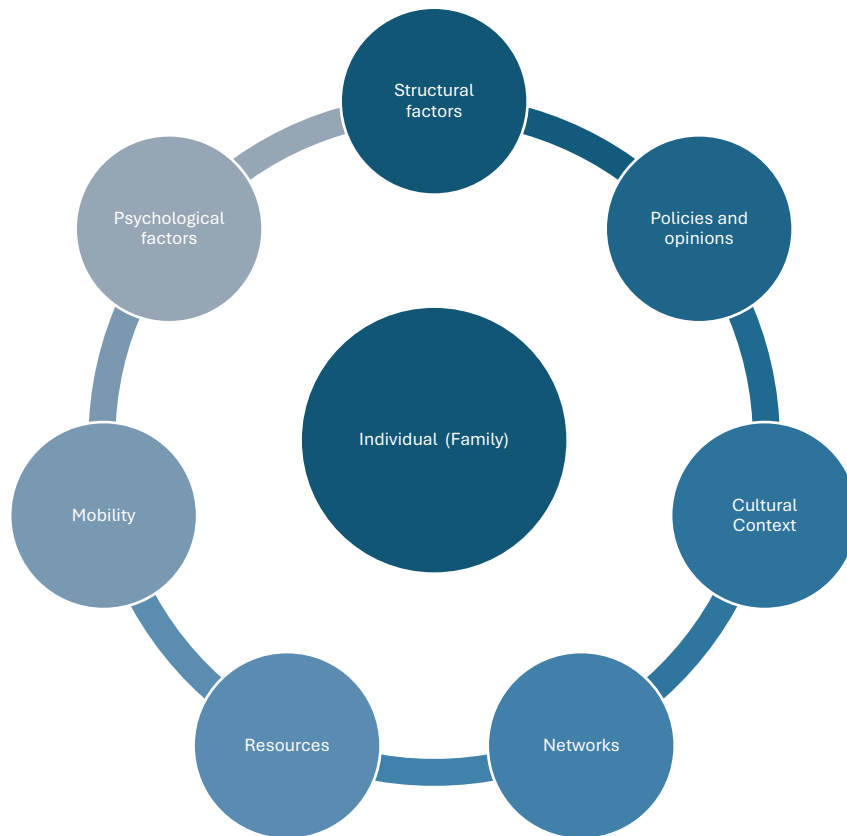
<sup>66</sup> I will show in Chapters 5 and 6 that there are instances that the subjective aspect of time in decision-making become prevalent.

by their instinct. Now that I have established both spectrums of coercion and time, in the following pages I will discuss decision-making environment in depth.

### **Decision-making environment**

The decision-making environment component of IDM refers to a set of factors that impact a refugee's experiences and behaviors throughout the journey. The decision-making environment is composed of seven components: structural factors, living conditions, policies and opinions, resources, mobility, networks, and cultural context. It is within this environment that a refugee interacts with the spectrums of coercion and time and makes their decisions. The nature of these interactions is based on a complex systems approach, similar to Arar and Fitzgerald's model (2022), where there are various feedback loops and mutual or overlapping impacts. In other words, these factors do not operate on their own, isolated from each other. Furthermore, a refugee's decision-making environment is dynamic, meaning that it changes in different spatial and temporal contexts. For example, certain values that are highly important for an individual or family in their home country could lose their degree of influence over time as they are replaced by new values in a refugee's host country. Additionally, each refugee's environment is unique to their own circumstances. This feature of IDM has the capability to shed light on why refugees in seemingly similar situations make different decisions.

*Figure 11 Decision-making Environment*



As shown in Figure 11, the refugee is at the core of the decision-making environment. I place the individual or family at the center. There are a few points in order regarding that choice. I include individual because agency is first and foremost exercised by individuals.<sup>67</sup> One, however, cannot overlook manifestations of agency at the collective, namely family, level. As Butler (1990)

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<sup>67</sup> See my fuller discussion on agency in Chapter 2.

suggests, manifestations of agency can be found on both individual and collective levels. Certain decisions are made at the family level in certain scenarios and in certain cultures. In those scenarios, members of the family *often* opt in for family level decisions. IDM's decision-making environment determines the level of influence that the family, as a unit, may have. Interactions with cultural context, among other factors, identify collective decision-making norms. Within a collective decision-making setting, such as a household, decision-making can include negotiations, bargaining, and resistance among the members (Arar and FitzGerald, 2022, p. 77). Depending on the rigidity of the family norms, the individuals within a family, at least at the conceptual level, may have the capacity to opt out of the collective decision-making authority. This is to say that cultural factors (among others) play a key role in setting boundaries for levels of authority to individuals within a family (when a family is on the journey). I include family at the center of the model with one caveat, which is the fact that in certain scenarios family becomes the source of threat to an individual.<sup>68</sup>

Ultimately, whether fleeing as an individual or family will have impacts on refugees' decision-making. Having dependants, for instance could result in additional financial pressures and restricted mobility. That being said, one's company can change during their journey. For example, members of a family may choose to continue their journey as individuals or a single individual

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<sup>68</sup> I will discuss this more in depth and share examples in Chapter 5.

may start their family.<sup>69</sup> In the following pages, I will discuss each of these factors and explain how they relate with each other and with the two other elements of IDM.

### ***Structural factors***

Structural conditions are an undeniable aspect of the refugee decision-making. These conditions include geographical location, historical processes such as colonialism (and manifestations of racism)<sup>70</sup> and role of states in generating refugees, as well as globalization and global political economy. These are factors that impact the underlying conditions for a refugee's decision-making, most notably during their flight. Rather than having an immediate impact, often they operate in the background, setting the stage for a refugee movement. There are various ways in which these factors influence a refugee's decision-making environment. For example, while Syrian refugees have a dangerous and long journey to reach a safe European country, Ukrainian refugees' journeys look drastically different because they are already located on the European continent. Another example is related to colonialism and role of the states as refugee generators. As Adelman (2018) and Kibreab (1985) argue, contemporary refugee movements from Africa are often a result of imposed colonial boundaries and failed nationalist projects that undermine the

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<sup>69</sup> I came across both scenarios in my interviews. See Chapters 5 and 6 for examples.

<sup>70</sup> Those historical processes sometimes manifest themselves in public discourses around refugees in ways that impact refugees' experiences. A prime example of this is found in comments that were shared live on air by Charlie D'Ágate, CBS News senior foreign correspondent, about the conflict in Ukraine: " [Ukraine] isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, one where you wouldn't expect that, or hope that it's going to happen" (Bayoumi, 2022).

will of African people and ignore their ethnic and tribal identities on the ground. This can be applied to the case of Syrian refugees as well.

In terms of global political economy, a macro-level neoclassical economics approach can be of relevance. As Ranis and Fei (1961) argue, differences in labor markets in different countries can partially explain international migration.<sup>71</sup> I argue that variables such as labor markets do have a role in refugees' decision-making processes. For instance, availability of jobs and existing flow of seasonal labor migration in the region can play a role in a Syrian refugee's choice between Türkiye and Lebanon as two potential options for seeking asylum. As for the role of globalization, Castles (2003) argues that as a result of globalization a system of geographical inclusion and exclusion has been formed. This system has resulted in an exacerbation of global inequalities among those in the global south and global north. Forced migration originated in various parts of the world, then, must not be understood as isolated events; instead, forced migration needs to be seen as an integral and inherent part of north-south relationships in the context of globalization (Castles, 2003, pp. 16-17). This factor could be particularly helpful in understanding refugee movements from countries with collapsed economies, such as Venezuela.

Structural factors, I argue, are an undeniable part of refugees' decision-making environment, from the time they flee to considerations for resettlement or return. However, over emphasizing their explanatory power could result in undermining refugees' agential decision-making capacity.

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<sup>71</sup> Other variables such as language, access to education, ethnicity, and religion, among other factors are helpful in explaining international migration as well.

Therefore, in IDM I appreciate their contributions while acknowledging that they are a part of a refugee's decision-making environment as opposed to its entirety. In other words, they interact with other components of the environment.

### ***Policies and opinions***

Public policies and opinions can play a role in refugees' decisions throughout their journeys. They contribute to a climate that could be understood in terms of a fluid dichotomy between friendly and hostile receptions. In terms of opinions, refugees often receive solidarity or opposition from the public. Rea et al. (2019) characterize public opinions as a refugee reception 'crisis.' This 'crisis' refers to the presence of competing opinions in support of and against refugees in public discourses and policies. The 'crisis' makes timing crucial for refugees because friendliness or hostility are states that often change in response to different events. For instance, while the image of Alan Kurdi on Turkish shores created waves of sympathy towards refugees in the Middle East and globally, the 2015 Christmas eve harassments linked with refugees in Germany had an opposite impact (Bozdog and Smets 2017). This is an example of the interactions between the three components of IDM. Such events create opportunities or limitations for refugees for varying degrees of time, and those with the resources and capabilities to materialize those opportunities have an advantage over those who do not. To the degree that such discourses are available to refugees, through media or personal networks, certain routes or destinations may become more or less desirable. The result is that refugees' coercion and time spectrums may be impacted by this factor. For example, if the general attitudes become hostile toward LGBTQ2S+ refugees from Iran in Türkiye, they may find themselves in unbearable living conditions in Türkiye and be

compelled to explore alternative transit countries or migratory routes. In the same example, the refugees may find that their application process is longer, and their resources are being drained. This factor, too, works in conjunction with other factors. For instance, some refugees may choose to go to less hospitable environments because they have other motivations such as stronger networks, possibility of having employment, or a common language, to name a few.

State or international policies or restrictions have a similar effect. Visa requirements or short- or long-term border closures are examples of such policies. For instance, such issues impact where a Syrian refugee would go to seek for asylum. If the Turkish border is temporarily closed and a high level of force and a short amount of time are given, a Syrian may be left with the more appealing option of fleeing to Lebanon even if friends or family members already live in Türkiye. Another great example for this is the distinct stances that Canada under Prime Minister Trudeau and US under former President Trump took towards refugees, while the former welcomed Syrian refugees, the latter restricted refugee resettlement.<sup>72</sup> Such policies may make certain destinations more or less desirable for refugees. The impact, however, is not certain because there are other factors that refugees interact with as they make their decisions. For instance, having stronger familial networks in US could motivate a refugee to go there (even with a smuggler's help) even if the state policies are not welcoming.

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<sup>72</sup> In 2020, the Trump administration drastically reduced the number of refugees permitted to resettle in the United States, setting the limit at 15,000, which was the lowest in the history of the country's modern refugee program (Reuters, 2020). In contrast, the United States accepted over 84,000 refugees during the last year of President Obama's administration (Korhonen, 2024).

State or international policies or restrictions could also impact spectrum of time. For example, having tough refugee policies in a hosting country may result in rejection of refugee applications and stretching of their time and draining of their resources as a result. The bottom line is that refugees are often aware of those policy changes and public opinions and utilize their agency to interact with them in varying degrees throughout their journeys. The caveat here, similar to other factors, is that exclusively looking at state or international policies will not adequately unpack refugee decisions. Hence, this factor needs to be considered alongside the other factors as a part of the environment in which refugees make their decisions.

### ***Resources***

Access to resources is another fundamental factor informing refugee behaviors in various ways. Firstly, in line with the deficiency model (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989), extreme feelings of insecurity and inadequacy in their home country motivates individuals to seek asylum in other countries. This argument can be expanded to shed light on refugees' decisions throughout their journeys. For instance, feelings of insecurity and inadequacy could motivate refugees to move from one country to another as they are searching for international protection. Having access to food and clean water, employment, and education can influence a refugee's decisions especially regarding their decision to flee, choice of country of asylum, desired destination or return to their home country, and finally their risk-taking capabilities. For example, a young Syrian asylum seeker in Lebanon working under difficult conditions with inadequate wages and deprived of access to higher education may be more prone to take the Mediterranean Sea to arrive in Europe compared with another Syrian asylum seeker in Türkiye who has a well-paid job and is in the process of

receiving Turkish citizenship. Actual or potential living conditions can impact both coercion and time spectrums. Poor living conditions can contribute to a stronger sense of coercion and limitations on their timing. Living conditions can also overlap with other factors within the environment such as a refugee's access to resources and impact their timing as a result (as discussed under resources earlier).

Additionally, resources, often in the form of financial materials, have a key role in one's spectrums of time and coercion influencing options available to them. For instance, hiring a smuggler to help an individual to directly travel to their destination for seeking asylum or fleeing using the most affordable transportation mode to the most affordable asylum country are often decisions dictated by the degree to which refugees have access to financial resources. This factor partly explains why some Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not able to travel to Europe, while others are.<sup>73</sup> Having more resources can widen the array of options available to refugees; hence, having a direct impact on both spectrums of coercion and time. As mentioned before, resources available to refugees could vary depending on the norms governing their networks and their networks' financial capabilities. The absence of resources may cause a refugee to miss certain opportunities that would put them in disadvantage. For instance, borders may close, or they may miss an open-door policy in a destination country. While lack of resources can be a highly restrictive factor,

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<sup>73</sup> According to Amnesty international, 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live under the poverty line (2024). This is a clear indication that lack of financial resources is a factor that impacts a significant majority of Syrian refugees and options available to them in Lebanon. At least 83% of Syrian refugees do not have access to residency status, meaning they are being at risk of arrest and deportation.

refugees tend to exercise their agency in creative ways to recruit resources. For instance, they can reach out to their existing networks and establish new ones; they may look for employment.

### ***Mobility***

I categorize the next set of factors as mobility. Factors such as age, (dis)abilities, physical well-being or illness, and having younger or older dependents, which are almost entirely absent in the literature on refugee decision-making,<sup>74</sup> are among the factors that impact an individual's (or a family's) decisions throughout their journey. For instance, travelling to Europe by boat on the dangerous Mediterranean Sea may not be an option for an elderly person or someone with health conditions. Such calculations may influence who in the family should flee first or who should take more risky paths. While shedding light on parts of refugee behaviors in above examples, mobility cannot account for the complexity of refugee journeys on its own. Mobility, though, does not eliminate the option so much as change the risk calculations associated with the spectrum of coercion. For instance, in the case of the Alan Kurdi, a two-year old Syrian boy whose body was found on Turkish shorelines, his father Abdullah gathered money from his sister in Canada and paid \$5,000 to smugglers to take him and his family to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. Having a young dependent did not stop Abdullah, and unfortunately the outcome was a nightmare; Alan, his older brother, and mother drowned at the sea (Kurdi, 2018). Refugees

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<sup>74</sup> This is perhaps the case because a large proportion of the literature on migrant or refugee decision-making has been heavily influenced by rational choice theories, focused on the individual as their unit of analysis.

exercise agency throughout their journeys and their decisions are not informed by a single factor; instead, they interact with an array of factors as they make their decisions.

### ***Networks***

Networks of friends, family members (and relatives), or community members play a role in shaping a refugee's decisions. In line with the core premise of the network theory (Epstein, 2008), networks can play a key role in various stages of a refugee's journey. For instance, a Syrian refugee may choose to seek asylum in Lebanon or Türkiye if they have a father or brother who already lives and works in either country. In terms of the decision to flee to or choosing a destination, for instance, networks can function in either pushing or pulling directions. A key point to be made, though, is that networks often operate within the context of norms, traditions, and values. In other words, the potential influence of one's familial network is closely related to the norms, traditions, and values that the individual and their network adheres to. For instance, grand parents or parents may be able to convince an individual to stay or move when the norms, traditions, and values governing the family give such authority and legitimacy to them. Additionally, the severity of coercion and the availability of time may impact or be impacted by such factors. For instance, if an individual is fleeing their village in Northern Syria because they were attacked by a militia group, it will be less likely for networks to have the influence to convince them to stay. Also, coercion in the form of isolation and lack of access to communications tools could deeply undermine networks' influence.

### ***Cultural context***

The cultural context, in which refugees operate, plays an important role in their decision-making. While there are often certain dominant cultural norms, religious values, and traditions in any given geographical regions, smaller institutions such as families may have their own interpretations or variations of such norms, traditions, and values. Therefore, such factors impact refugee behaviors on both communal and familial levels. As Stark and Bloom (1985) argue, individual actors' decisions are partly informed by the context of their group attachments. These group attachments, however, do not function in the same way for all refugees. For instance, a woman from the tribal areas of the southern parts of Iran, situated within both communal and familial patriarchal cultures, operates within a drastically different context than a cisgender man from an upper middle-class family from Tehran. The former will more likely be restricted to decisions by her father or husband, while the latter has more room to maneuver. Such factors tend to be stronger in the initial stages of a refugee's journey because the connections to such norms, traditions, and values tend to be stronger. As refugees get closer to their destination, the impact of such factors may become more limited. That being said, the cultural context in the temporal space that they operate becomes more relevant and influential. This is to say that at any given point during their journeys, refugees interact with the cultural context of their hosting community or country. For example, the cultural context and values in one's country of asylum or camp influences refugees' decisions; who should find a job or travel are some questions that are influenced by such cultural contexts.

Another way that cultural context influences refugees' decisions is through cultural connections. This is often more relevant when it comes to choosing country of asylum or country of resettlement. For instance, Azeri speaking Iranian refugees may find it to be a more organic fit to seek asylum in Türkiye, than in Armenia, because of the similarities shared between Azeri and Turkish languages. For Syrian refugees, while the religious connection could be shared with both Lebanon and Türkiye, the shared Arabic language could be a factor making Lebanon a more desirable choice for seeking asylum.<sup>75</sup> That being said, this shared culture is only one factor among the other factors impacting refugee decisions.

The cultural context often influences both spectrums of coercion and time. In terms of coercion, cultural context could result in varying degrees of risk and risk calculations for different individuals at different points in their journeys. For instance, two Iranian Christian converts in Iran may experience different degrees of coercion based on their cultural and normative context, one living in a more secular family in Tehran while the other living in a more conservative religious setting. The latter may be more likely to face threats not only by the state but also by their family because of their faith. In terms of time and timing, cultural context could be impactful as well. For instance, the intra-family bargaining related to decisions could be lengthier. As Nobles and McKelvey (2015) argue, both age and gender play a role in how intra-family decision-making takes place. For instance, family obligations associated with age and gender, among others, influences who leaves

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<sup>75</sup> As I have argued throughout this chapter, each of the factors shaping a refugee's decision-making environment, operates in conjunction with the rest of the factors. This is to say that shared cultural background, religion or language cannot solely explain Syrian refugees' decision to seek asylum. For instance, one needs to consider that the border between Syria and Lebanon has long been porous, with an existing flow of seasonal workers crossing the border. This factor was mentioned by several Syrian participants, and I will discuss them later in Chapter 6.

or stays at varying points. Refugees often interact with their cultural context (of their home and hosting countries) in varying ways.

### ***Psychological factors***

The final element of the decision-making environment is what I refer to as psychological factors. In the previous chapter, I discussed various theoretical endeavors that aim at approaching refugee decision-making by focusing on psychology. For instance, the deficiency model suggests that individuals with fewer personal or social resources are more likely to emigrate compared to those with access to more resources; they often feel maladjusted and faced with feelings of failure and adversity (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989). To use Eisenstadt's words, feelings of insecurity and inadequacy serve as drivers for one's decision to leave their home country (Eisenstadt, 1954, pp. 1-2). De Jong and Fawcett (1981) expand on the role of psychological factors and identify seven motivations for migration: improving material life, improving social status, having greater comfort, stimulation, access to greater autonomy, matters related to affiliation and morality. I argue that psychological factors contribute to a refugee's decision-making environment. They, however, do not work in isolation. Instead, they interact with the other factors shaping the decision-making environment. For example, as De Jong (2000) argues, psychological factors are informed by social expectations, norms, and gender, among other factors.

Regarding the decision to return, psychological factors play a key role. For instance, Balcilar and Nugent (2019) argue that a refugee spending a longer time outside of their home country will result in a lower likelihood that they will want to return to their home country (p. 95). Muller-Funk and Fransen go so far to argue that return aspirations often function as a psychological

“coping strategy to keep hope in the future” (2023). As Perez Murcia rightly suggests, refugees experience a sense of emotional and existential homelessness that leads them to an ongoing search for “a sense, rather than a place, called home” (2019, p. 1515). This is to say that psychological factors play a key role in refugees’ encounter with the idea of and decision to return.

A key function of the psychological factors is that they create balance the heavy weight given to rational choice calculations. In other words, they demonstrate that individuals calculate costs and benefits in manners that are not exclusively driven by economic considerations. In other words, feelings and perceptions play a key role in how individuals make their decisions.

### **Take away**

To address the shortcomings of the theoretical approaches that I reviewed in the previous chapter, I propose a new framework, which I refer to as IDM. Refugee decisions are made in interactions between the three elements of this model. Each element has the capacity to impact and be impacted by the other elements. As I have stated in the first chapter, IDM’s contribution to the literature on refugee decision-making is three-fold. First, as opposed to single-factor theories, IDM understands refugee behavior in terms of a complex system model that is based on three elements: spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and the decision-making environment. Second, IDM proposes a fresh look at the concept of coercion and, as opposed to the dominant theoretical and legal perspectives, understands coercion as a spectrum that maintains its relevance throughout a refugee’s journey, even after they flee. Third, IDM introduces the notion of time and timing and highlights its role as a key element impacting refugee decision-making throughout their journey. This is an element largely overlooked in the literature on refugee

behaviour. The outcome of these contributions is that IDM provides a more accurate understanding of refugee decision-making for policy makers and adjudicators. In the following two chapters, I will apply this theoretical model to the findings of my interviews with Syrian and Iranian refugees.

## Chapter 5: 'Beyond the Seas'<sup>76</sup>

I shall build a boat  
I shall cast it in the water  
I shall sail away from this strange land  
Where no one awakens the heroes in the woods of love...

Beyond the seas there is a town  
Where the sun is as wide as the eyes of early birds  
Poets inherit water, wisdom, and light  
Beyond the seas there is a town!

I shall build a boat...

(Sepehri, 1976)

To center the refugee at the heart of my study, I conducted in-depth interviews with refugees originated from Iran and Syria. In this and the next chapter, I will share the findings of my interviews respectively with my Iranian and Syrian research participants. I will demonstrate that contrary to the conventional construction of refugees as a unified and homogenous category, refugees have extremely diverse experiences. This diversity of experiences is also evident in how they make their decisions in defining moments of their journeys. I will utilize Interactive Decision-making Model (IDM) as my lens to understand how refugees make their decisions throughout

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<sup>76</sup> "Beyond the Seas" is the title of a poem about migration by Sohrab Sepehri. Sepehri was a contemporary Iranian poet who lived in suburbs of Kashan, Iran, where my paternal grandparents come from. I cherish this personal connection and admire Sepehri's free spirit living through his poems.

their journeys.<sup>77</sup> I will discuss how the three elements of IDM, namely spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and the decision-making environment, inform refugees' behaviors.

### **Research participants**

Before presenting the findings, I provide a brief demographic overview of my Iranian interviewees. As I discussed in the first chapter, the Iranian government's wide range of violence and mistreatment against various groups since the 1979 Islamic Revolution has made the Iranian refugee diaspora extremely diverse. While there have been certain events resulting in occasional spikes in number of Iranian refugees, it is more appropriate to characterize the flow of refugees from Iran as a constant and on-going phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> This flow is in contrast with the case of Syrian refugees, where millions of them left their homes in a very short period of time and became either internally displaced or looked for safety in other countries. To capture the diversity of Iranian refugee diaspora in my study, I conducted 23 interviews with refugees who fled the country between 2010 and 2019. I recruited my research participants in two stages in summer and fall of 2020. In the first stage, I reached out to immigration and refugee agencies as well as Iranian communities across Canada. In the second stage, I relied on snowball sampling, in which I asked my participants to pass on my study information to other potential participants in their networks. Using this approach, I successfully recruited my Iranian research participants in five different countries, namely, Türkiye (nine), Canada (seven), England (four), The United States

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<sup>77</sup> I discussed IDM in-depth in Chapter 4.

<sup>78</sup> See the first chapter (introduction) for my extensive discussion on Iranian and Syrian refugee communities.

(two), and Germany (one). My participants reported different reasons for their flight: 15 reported religious persecution, three reported political persecution, three reported persecution due to their sexual identity, one reported familial/cultural pressure, and one reported avoiding fighting in war (in Syria) as the primary reason for their flight. In terms of gender, I had a fairly even distribution with 11 female and 12 male participants. In terms of age, I had a diverse sample as well; I interviewed 10 individuals who were between 30 and 39, nine individuals between 20 and 29, two individuals between 40 and 49, and one individual over 50 years of age. In terms of their routes, 17 individuals reported that they stayed in a transit country (Türkiye) before reaching their final destination (if they did). The rest directly traveled to their non-neighbouring destination using valid pre-existing visas or with smugglers' help.<sup>79</sup>

## **Findings**

In what follows, I discuss findings of my interviews with my Iranian research participants. In doing so, I will build on the theoretical discussions I presented in Chapters 2 and 3 while using IDM as the framework for presenting the findings. As I established in the previous chapter, this model has three main components: spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and the environment in which refugees behave. Here, I will demonstrate how my participants' decisions can be understood through those three components. I present my findings in four stages, each of which presenting a defining moment in a refugee's journey. These stages are perception of threat, flight, safety, and life in transit. I place safety right after flight because that is the stage in which the

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<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion on my methodology for this research project.

*initial* source of threat is eliminated. This is not to say that the other forms of coercion are absent as well. In fact, as I have argued in previous chapters, coercion remains a part of a refugee's decision-making calculations during their life in transit. I organize my findings in this manner because it provides an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the three components of my model in each defining moment of refugees' journey.<sup>80</sup> It is essential to my model that the three elements interact with each other to provide insight into refugee decision-making. As I discussed in the previous chapter, my argument is that refugee decisions are informed by interactions between these elements.

### ***Perception of a threat: the first moment***

Threat is a fundamental component of the Convention definition of refugee and what drives a refugee to embark on a precarious journey. Therefore, the moment a refugee comes across a threat is the starting point of their journey.<sup>81</sup> This is why Keller (1975) and Kunz (1973) choose the perception of threat as the starting point of a refugee's journey in their theoretical endeavors. For Keller, perception of a threat is the first of nine stages in which he aims to understand psychological aspects of a refugee journey. And for Kunz, it is refugees' reactions to this crucial moment that defines them as either anticipatory or acute refugees. I understand this moment in two layers. The first layer is the objective reality of events taking place to shape an individual's

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<sup>80</sup> I recognize that a refugee's journey is complex, and it may in fact not be linear. For instance, a refugee may move across a border multiple times.

<sup>81</sup> I have discussed the Convention definition of refugee and the central role of threat in the definition earlier in the second chapter of this dissertation.

environment, and the second layer is the individual's *perception* of that threat. Raymond Cohen, writing about state responses to international challenges, argues that "threat perception is the decisive intervening variable between action and reaction.... When threat is not perceived, even in the face of objective evidence, there can be no mobilization..." (1978, p. 93). Individuals' response to threat is not different than states – individuals respond to threats (flee, for example) only when they *perceive* the threat to justify such action. Therefore, individuals in seemingly similar situations make different decisions.<sup>82</sup>

In my interviews, the first question I asked of my participants was about factors contributing to their decision to leave Iran (or Syria). Responses to this question were varied, but all respondents were convinced that they were facing a threat that justified their flight. However, as opposed to the Convention criteria that almost exclusively associates threat with the state, my participants reported that smaller institutions, such as family, could become the source of threat for an individual. In other words, it is not only the state that can impose a threat on a refugee. For instance, Sogol, a female refugee in Türkiye,<sup>83</sup> shared with me that she was threatened by her father: "I had problems with my family. My father wanted me to do something that I wasn't willing to do. ... My father wanted me to marry someone his age in exchange for money (that he would

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<sup>82</sup> In my study I focus on refugees, but for learning more about the topic of threat perception in particular, it is also equally important to interview those who never left their country in the face of threats. It is only then that a fulsome understanding of individuals' perception of threat can be achieved. Since that is beyond the scope of this project, a separate study involving refugees, those internally displaced, and those who choose to stay would be a fruitful scholarly endeavor.

<sup>83</sup> As mentioned in the first chapter, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

receive). I tried so hard to change his mind but I couldn't." In another example, Mehrdad told me about the threat he was faced with:

I had problems with the government and my family, 50% the government and 50% my family. I didn't plan to leave Iran, but my family is super religious. One of my brothers is a martyr and my other brothers had gone to Syria and fought in the war and had come back and they are all in the military. My entire family is in the military, and they insisted that I join the military too, but I didn't want to.

What Mehrdad's and Sogol's stories highlights is that one may not be persecuted by the state only but be threatened by members of one's own family. In such cases, it is the unwillingness or inability of the state to offer protection that constitutes the condition of refugeehood. In both examples, the refugees are convinced that their family is capable and willing to harm them, in different ways. I argue that individuals do not embark on a refugee journey unless they perceive the coercion, whether by the state or a non-state actor (even one's own family), to make their living conditions unbearable. For Roya, life became unbearable when she faced systemic exclusionary practices from the government:

As Baha'is, we weren't allowed to study in Iran. Some people could continue until getting a high school diploma but ... no Bahá'í ever graduated from any university in Iran. As for me, I did so good at the university entrance exam, my rank was 3 digits (out of 1.2 million students), and I got admission from the Isfahan University of Technology (which is a highly regarded university). But after two months I got expelled without any reason and I couldn't even get my expulsion paper so I would know why I got expelled!... Therefore, I left the country to continue my education.

Regardless of its source, the threat refugees perceive in the beginning of their journey, has a temporal aspect as well. The temporal aspect is what I identify as spectrum of time. Depending on how they perceive a threat, in terms of severity or urgency, time will function against or in favor of refugees. That being said, spectrums of coercion and time do not operate in a vacuum.

Various factors in one's decision-making environment influence refugees' coercion and time variables. This, however, will become more evident as they prepare for their flight. Therefore, in the next section, I will fully unpack time and timing in relation to refugees' flight.

The decision-making environment plays a key role in how each individual perceives the threat. For instance, state policies and public opinions and narratives are key in influencing refugees' perception of threat. In Iran, non-democratic and vague policies and laws often result in ambiguous charges such as "enmity against God," "insulting Islamic sanctities," "spreading propaganda," and "insulting the Prophet or Islam" against ethnic or religious minority groups, political activists, and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Those belonging to any of these groups are often aware of the threats they could potentially face. My research participants, too, were all aware of the consequences awaiting them if they did not leave Iran. For example, Payam, a Christian convert shared with me that "I was under pressure, and I thought my life could be in danger. I thought [the government authorities] were monitoring us." In another example, Maryam highlights the complexity of her family's decision to leave and their awareness of consequences they could face:

There wasn't any immediate rush or push whatsoever to leave during that specific time but all those financial problems, [familial] conflicts, [social] pressures, the decision to leave Islam ... as well as, learning from our friend who had converted to Christianity about the things that had happened to them in their home church brought us some kind of fear because we were in the same situation.

Public opinions, often heavily informed by the state discourses, contribute to threats individuals face. For instance, sexual minorities in Iran are among the groups that suffer the most from such discourses. As Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, says "members

of sexual minorities in Iran are hounded on all sides. The laws are stacked against them; the state openly discriminates against them; and they are vulnerable to harassment, abuse, and violence because their perpetrators feel they can target them with impunity" (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Mohammad's story depicts a powerful picture of sexual minorities' lives in Iran:

[We] have to deal with this anguish and the pain of being away from our hometown and the people we love. But it is so hard to live in Iran for someone like me, we have to hide from many people and don't say a word [about who we are]. We can't have so many things in Iran and this forced us to leave behind many important things and people we love, with hopes of finding a better place to live. A place in which we can live however we want even if it's for one day only. For example, I am also entitled to get married or have a child of my own. I am also a human like everybody else. But unfortunately, in Iran and many other countries, it is not something common yet and people don't accept us as normal human beings. We are deprived of all the basic rights that any human is entitled to.

What Mohammad shares also highlights the significance of the cultural context. Certain dominant cultural norms, religious values, and traditions can influence one's perception of threat. These norms could appear in various ways, including support or lack of support from personal networks, tolerance or hostility from family members, among others. For example, Zahra shares with me that her in-laws' "tribal prejudice," in the form of stronger conservative values and stricter interpretations of sharia law, deteriorated her and her husband's circumstances as converted Christians. Similarly, Mehrdad indicated that his family's religious and ideological views, expecting him to join the military to fight in Syria, resulted in his feelings of unsafety and insecurity.

Resources are another factor that appeared prominently in my interviews. As Littlewood and Lipsedge (1989) argue, extreme feelings of insecurity and inadequacy in their home country motivates individuals to seek asylum in other countries. Feelings of insecurity and economic

pressures presented themselves in six of my interviews. Morteza, for example, a Christian convert in England says, “economic and religious pressure, all the limitations and restrictions, and having a hard time making ends meet” contributed to his decision to flee. Morteza’s statement indicates that refugees’ decision-making processes and calculations are complex and multi-layered. While the primary reason for his flight is religious persecution, he speaks of additional socio-economic factors that contributed to his decision to flee. Similarly, Davood shared with me that while his conversion to Christianity and fear of persecution played a major role in his flight, socio-economic factors were fairly impactful in his decision-making process as well:

I am a Christian convert. I felt I couldn’t make decisions for my life, and I didn’t have a good living condition there. I didn’t have a good job either. We weren’t in a good condition in terms of economy, morality, or anything that a human being could possibly have. We didn’t have it in our country. That’s why I decided to flee.

Davood’s example clearly highlights that refugees’ decisions are complex because their experiences are diverse and complex.

The next factor is mobility, which includes variables such as age, (dis)abilities, physical well-being or illness, and having younger or older dependents. This factor, in particular, presented itself in one of my interviews. Rana, a Baha’i woman, told me that she endured years of mistreatment and violence in Iran, but when she gave birth to her daughter, she decided that it was time to flee:

As soon as I gave birth to my daughter, we decided to leave Iran... I was five years old when the revolution took place and I had so much fear. When I went to school, they knew that my family was Baha’i, and they used to insult and threaten me a lot... my classmates wouldn’t touch anything that I had touched saying that it is “Najes” (unclean) because I wasn’t a Muslim. They put so much pressure on me

and my family... I got expelled from high school many times, they wouldn't allow me to study just because I was Baha'i. I got my high school diploma anyway, but they didn't let me go to university.... The fear that my kids might go through the same thing, being insulted, and humiliated like me, and dreaming about my daughter studying in a decent university made me leave.

Having dependents and a desire to protect them can impact one's perception of a threat. In Rana's example, the threat remains the same, but having dependents changes the calculations resulting in a different perception of threat. As a mother, Rana develops a lower risk-taking capacity compared to when she did not have a child. In other words, while she was willing to accept and endure the risks of persecution for herself, she was not willing to do the same for her child.

The next variable impacting perception of threat is one's networks. According to Epstein (2008), networks often play a prominent role in migrants' choice of destination. In other words, destinations with pre-existing networks, and larger diaspora community, become more attractive for migrants (Epstein, 2008, p. 268). While this functioning is less relevant in the early stage of perception of threat, I argue that *internal* networks can play a role in refugee's perception of threat. Those having stronger, and more supportive, networks often have a different perception of threat compared to those with weaker, less supportive, networks. In more extreme cases, one's closest network becomes the source of threat itself. Seven out of my 23 respondents reported that the pressures they experienced from their family contributed to their flight. For example, in Sara's example, her family played a key role in *pushing* her out of Iran. She says:

Part of it was because of the social pressure and also, I was under a lot of pressure from my family. Because my family was in the government and my husband, and I had converted to Christianity. When we did, we somehow got banished from the family and we were treated differently, and also, we didn't have a place in the society anymore.

Additionally, networks can provide refugees with information that could potentially impact their perception of threat (Haug 2008). Having access to additional information from networks within and outside of the country can influence one's perception of threat. This function emerged in at least two of my interviews – Marjan and Sara both reported that they realized they needed to leave the country after they learned that their fellow church members were arrested. Marjan says: “my friends with whom I used to read Bible in our home church got arrested.... I was scared that sooner or later they will come for me and arrest me as well.” Sara shares a similar story and says “one day in [our] church, the government somehow confiscated many identification cards. Luckily, we weren't there that day, but when this incident happened, it somehow obligated us to go.” In both examples, learning information about threats to others in similar circumstances was a key factor impacting the refugees' perception of threat. Similarly, learning that others in the network have decided to flee can contribute to an individual's perception of threat, elevating their perception of threat.

Lastly, psychological factors have an impact on a refugee's perception of threat. In this stage, feelings and emotions, in response to a given situation, influence how the situation is perceived. In almost all interviews, *fear* of persecution or violence showed up. The common theme was that they fear their life was in danger based on an event that directly or indirectly was related to them. For Marjan, for instance, this fear was indirect. She describes her feelings by saying when her fellow church members were arrested “... I was scared that sooner or later they will come for me and arrest me as well. So, in less than two months, I arranged and sorted out everything, got a ticket and left for Canada.” For Mehrdad this fear was the result of a much more direct experience.

He shared with me that he escaped a prison to flee. In his case, the threat was significantly more tangible. The psychological aspect of the interaction with fear is present in both stories and influences how each individual perceives threat.

During the first stage of the journey, namely perception of threat, refugees interact with the coercion and time they have. While at this stage time seems to be less prominent, it becomes evidently more impactful as soon as the threat is perceived, and flight is the decision. These interactions, however, do not take place in a vacuum. Instead, they happen within the context of each refugee's decision-making environment.

***Flight: what may come after a threat is perceived***

The second stage of a refugee's journey pertains to decisions related to their flight. Keller (1975) breaks this stage down to three separate phases: decision to flee, the period of extreme danger and flight (Stein, 1981, p. 321). I argue that these phases are so deeply intertwined that it is more helpful to approach them together for effectively understanding refugee decision-making. I utilize flight as a distinct stage of a refugee's journey at the risk of reinforcing the problematic conventional expectation that crossing an international border is essential for accessing refugee status and protection (see Shacknove 1985). I recognize that for many refugees border crossing is messy and far from a singular event. This is well demonstrated particularly in the stories that I share in the next chapter. That said, given the conventional emphasis on flight and the significance of flight as a major milestone for many refugees, I use flight as a distinct stage of a refugee's journey for the purposes of (however imperfect) organizing my findings. I will reflect on the challenges with the conventional understanding of flight as I present my findings. Flight is a stage

where refugees are faced with certain questions to answer: When exactly should I leave the country? And who in the family should go first?

As I have demonstrated in Chapter 2, the expectation for refugees is that, once they perceive the threat to be eminent, they flee to a neighboring country.<sup>84</sup> However, this connection is not always linear; refugees may flee to safer parts of the country several times before they cross an international border. This is where the contemporary international legal framework creates two distinct categories of refugees (those who cross an international border) and internally displaced (those who do not cross an international border).<sup>85</sup> From perception of threat to flight, there may be a period of internal displacement. In many cases, in particular those facing consequences of war, individuals choose to relocate to safer areas within their home country without crossing the borders. This is largely due to the fact that conflict is often a spatial phenomenon with geographical boundaries. The outcome is that those running away from a conflict in one part of a country, may be able to find *some* safety in another part. In the case of persecution, the scope of threat aligns with the international borders of the country where the reach of the state ends. In other words, finding a sense of safety from persecution is less likely to be achievable because the entire country is theoretically controlled by the central state, the actor that is the ultimate

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<sup>84</sup> See Peterson 1985 for example.

<sup>85</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 for my in-depth discussion on this topic.

source of the threat. Perhaps it is for this reason that none of my Iranian participants were internally displaced prior to leaving the country.<sup>86</sup>

The linear understanding of flight also assumes that refugees flee as soon as they face a threat. However, this is a flawed assumption that dismisses refugees' interactions with the spectrum of time. In relation to this assumption, two groups emerged in my findings. The first group are those whose stories conform with this assumption; these are the minority. They reported that they immediately left the country within days or even hours after they perceived a threat. This is where spectrums of coercion and time demonstrate a direct correlation in this stage of the journey; a high degree of coercion means a high degree of urgency that requires refugees to flee immediately. For instance, Mehrdad, reported that he left the country as soon as he had the chance to escape prison in the middle of the night. Similarly, Sahra told me how fast her flight unfolded:

It was during the election in 2009... after the election, the electoral fraud, coming to streets to protest... Every day we had a plan to protest in a different part of Tehran. One day that I went to Baharestan [square], we were supposed to light candles for the victims including "Neda [Agha-Soltan]" in front of the parliament.<sup>87</sup> [The state militia forces] broke my car's windows and, on my way, back home I realized that they had taken away my license plate as well. I told my [then] husband what had happened, and he said he will buy me a ticket for the next morning to Türkiye.

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<sup>86</sup> I will investigate internal displacement in the next chapter when I share stories of my Syrian participants.

<sup>87</sup> Neda Agha-Soltan was an Iranian student of philosophy, who was participating in the 2009 presidential election protests. She was fatally shot in the upper chest, and instantly became the symbol of the antigovernment movement.

What Mehrdad and Sahra experienced is not shared with the majority of my Iranian participants. For many of them, even when they feel a higher degree of coercion, flight is not a readily available option. For various reasons, captured in the decision-making environment of IDM, there is a lag between the time they are certain that they should flee and the time they do so. Many of them experienced a sense of coercion that impacted their flight. Mohammad, for example, shared with me that he knew his life was in danger, but he needed to wait for about a year to get his passport so he could leave the country:

... I was under a lot of pressure from my family to get married, then I realized that I am homosexual, and I was in danger ... [that is why I] decide to look for a more peaceful life with more freedom. I didn't want to hide the true me anymore. ... it took me one year to get the medical exemption [from compulsory military service] and I had to stay in Iran until then. Otherwise, I had to leave Iran illegally and I've never wanted to do that.<sup>88</sup>

While Mohammad referenced bureaucratic and legal factors restraining his ability to flee, he acknowledges that, however restrained, it was his decision to delay his flight. He says, if he wanted to flee immediately, he “had to leave Iran illegally and [he] never wanted to do that,” a stance that is likely rooted in his normative background or psychological characteristics. Bahram, another interviewee in a fairly similar situation, explains how it took him about a month and a half to flee after he had reason to believe that his life was in danger due to his sexual identity:

I had 12 stores in different cities in Iran.... I'd rented all the stores, so none of them was mine. The only thing I could do was to put everything on sale and return the stores [to their owners] sooner than what we had agreed on in the [lease] contracts. A few of the owners didn't give me my deposit but some were good

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<sup>88</sup> Completion of 18 to 24 months of military service is a requirement for obtaining a passport for men reaching 18 years of age.

people and gave me the deposits.<sup>89</sup> It took me one month and a half to sort out everything and leave.

While in Sahra's story, availability of resources, among other factors, resulted in her overnight flight, in Bahram's case, his flight did not happen so quickly. The reason for the delay in his flight is mostly linked to availability of resources. He needed time to cash all his assets and get ready for his flight. In this case, Bahram exercises agency by taking a calculated risk in order to secure more resources for his precarious journey. This is to say that from perception of threat to actual flight there may be a lag that could be explained by legal or policy requirements, psychological characteristics, normative values, and/or having access to or lack of resources. In both Mohammad and Bahram's cases, the restrictions they faced had a direct impact on their time, one that also increased the risk they faced. They both confirm that they would have left Iran much sooner, similar to Sahra, if they had the means to do so.<sup>90</sup>

The timing of flight is also critical because it could impact an individual's eligibility to claim refugee status. Kunz sheds light on this dilemma by defining two categories of 'anticipatory' and 'acute' refugees (1973, p. 132). If an individual flees in preparation for a threat, they may be at risk of getting labeled as economic migrants, as opposed to refugees. As I have shown here so far, some

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<sup>89</sup> Damage deposits for lease agreements in Iran are significant amounts of money, sometimes equal to the monthly rent for 12 months or more.

<sup>90</sup> An interesting question that remains unanswered is whether they had left Iran if their places on the spectrum of coercion were closer to the more extreme end of the spectrum. Would Mohammad have left Iran illegally, like Mehrdad, despite his normative or psychological reservations to do so? Would Bahram have left Iran sooner, knowing that he would not have had enough resources for his journey? I do not have the answers to these questions because I do not have participants with identical situations and different outcomes.

form of preparation is commonplace for most of my interviewees. For many of them, anticipation of a threat is a major driver of their decision to flee. For example, Sara shares how she chose the timing of her flight:

Part of it was because of the social pressures and also, I was under a lot of pressure from my family [who worked for the government]. My husband and I had converted to Christianity. When we did, we somehow got banished from the family and we were treated differently. We didn't have a place in the society anymore. ...Before we leave Iran, one day in our church, the government [agents] confiscated many identity cards to capture a list of the church members. Luckily, we weren't there that day, but it somehow convinced us to flee [because we felt we were in danger].

Sara and her husband were not directly threatened by the government, but they could conclude that their lives were in danger if they did not flee. Marjan's story is very similar to Sara's.

...the thing that made me make up my mind quickly and leave Iran in less than two months was that... [when] I was on a trip to Japan for my job ..., my friends with whom I used to read the Bible in our home church got arrested. I mean they got arrested in one of my friends' house. When I went back, I realized that this had happened to my friends, and I was scared that sooner or later they will come for me and arrest me as well. So, in less than two months, I arranged and sorted out everything, got a ticket and left....

Once the time for flight is decided, a major question is who should leave first. Given the nature of the threat for my Iranian participants, which is directed towards specific individuals, all of them reported that the person in danger is the first one to flee.<sup>91</sup> For them, the question is not who should leave first; instead, it is who should accompany them. Out of the 23 interviewees, 10 of them fled on their own, while others did that with their immediate family (partners, parents,

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<sup>91</sup> As I will discuss in the next chapter, my Syrian participants, almost exclusively fleeing war, have more diverse experiences.

children, or siblings). Among those who fled alone, six identified as single adults with no dependents. In two of the cases, where the individuals were experiencing a higher degree of coercion and a more limited timeline, they fled on their own and left their family behind because it is ultimately more difficult to arrange for the entire family's flight. For example, to explain why he did not flee with his family, Babak says, "I knew nothing would happen to them in Iran and they are not in danger like me. The [financial] circumstances didn't allow us to plan to leave Iran together." In another example, Sahra talks about how this decision was made:

I was with my family.... my [then] husband told me that you go first, and I will sell our stuff and then the kids and I will join you. He said there is no point for kids to go now because it was in the middle of summer, and they had taken summer classes. He said once you settled there, we will come... I left and went through the process....

In this case, Sahra's interactions with spectrums of coercion and time as well as the decision-making environment are evident. Sahra and her partner reached the conclusion that she must flee for three reasons. First, they determined that the threat was to Sahra and not her husband or children. Second, they did not have all their resources available to them at the time of Sahra's flight, meaning that they needed to have more time for consolidating their assets and resources. And lastly, they considered the best outcome for their children (dependents), which was not to uproot them unless/until it was absolutely necessary. Their decision was the outcome of their interactions with the amount and nature of coercion they were faced, the time they had to react, and certain elements of their decision-making environment. One element of the environment that is less-readily noticeable in this case is the cultural context. According to the Iranian law (Passport Law Article 18.3), a married woman needs to obtain her husband's written permission

as a part of her application for an Iranian passport. In this context, the fact that Sahra could leave the country with her husband's support indicates that she operates within a cultural and normative context that is supportive of her, one that may not necessarily be available to other women in similar circumstance. In other words, if Sahra belonged to a more traditional or conservative cultural context, she would not have been able to leave the country, at least legally. Alternatively, being forced to leave the country illegally would have added additional barriers and risks on her journey because she would have needed to find and hire a smuggler to facilitate her flight. This would require additional financial resources and perhaps more time while imposing the inevitable risks associated with trusting a smuggler.

On the other hand, in the stories of those who fled Iran with their family, there are a few highlights that are relevant to this discussion. In none of the cases the entire family was the subject of the violence or threat of violence by the state. This is interesting because it demonstrates that individuals in seemingly similar situations (no immediate threat to the entire family) make different decisions (fleeing with or without family). Those who left with their partner and children had the financial means and mobility capability to do so. In other words, they could manage to flee as a family even though only the applicant was in immediate danger.

Lastly, I came across two stories that highlighted the impacts of mobility as well as psychological factors on decisions made at this stage of the journey. In the first story, Sogol, who is using a wheelchair, shared with me that because of her medical conditions she needed to depend on her mother for her flight. In her case, she did have a valid passport, but she needed her mother to

accompany her primarily due to her physical condition. The other story belongs to Amir, who is a Christian convert fleeing due to religious persecution:

I left Iran with my brother but now it is only me who is a refugee. As for the reason I must say that I was under a lot of pressure and was super stressed. I wasn't in a condition that I could make any decision whatsoever and my family were so worried about me considering that I was the last born.... [T]hey were so protective of me and given the circumstances they were so worried about me. Therefore, they couldn't let me leave the country alone and I couldn't do it at all. That's why my brother accompanied me, but I declared for asylum, not my brother.

In Amir's story, the psychological impacts of his circumstances played a key role in his decision-making. He openly shares that at the moment he felt 'incapable' of decision-making and in need of support. This highlights the extent to which the circumstances of one's flight can psychologically impact their decision-making capacity. In addition to psychological characteristics, two additional factors seem to stand out. First, the normative and cultural context for him at the family level were progressive (in his favor), which clearly is not a shared experience for all my interviewees, many of whom find themselves threatened by their families. Second, given the costs associated with travel and accommodation, it appears that Amir's family had access to adequate resources to accommodate this, which again may not be a reality for many others in similar circumstances. It is such interactions between elements of IDM that shed light on what may be involved in one's decisions surrounding their flight.

In sum, during the flight stage of the journey, my Iranian interviewees' stories highlight a few themes. When it comes to the timing of the flight, their interactions with spectrums of time and coercion are quite impactful. When facing with higher degrees of coercion, in terms of threat, they often have a shorter window of time to leave the country. However, in most cases there is a

notable lag between the time they perceive a threat and the time they flee. This gap can be explained by the decision-making environment in which they make their decisions. The cultural context, the legal restrictions, access to resources, mobility, and psychological factors, in various ways, play their role in influencing a refugee's decisions.

***Reaching safety: a remedy for the initial source of coercion***

The next stage of a refugee's journey is reaching safety. This is where a refugee goes to find their safety and security – to eliminate the source of threat that drove them out of their home in the first place. I treat this as a distinct stage of the journey because it often holds a significant weight on refugees' journey. In this stage, only the initial source of coercion is being removed, but other forms of coercion continue to be present along the journey until a refugee finds a durable solution. The main decision that is usually made at this stage is regarding the selection of the country of asylum. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter and in the second chapter, there is an assumption in the conventional international refugee regime that refugees leave their home country and seek asylum in a neighboring country.<sup>92</sup> I have engaged with different implications of this assumption, and why it is problematic before; what I discuss here, however, is that depending on various factors, explained by IDM, refugees may choose to seek asylum in a country that does not share borders with their home country. What I am going to address, through IDM, in this section is how do refugees make that decision.

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<sup>92</sup> Please refer to Chapter 2 where I discuss this topic in depth.

My Iranian participants present a relatively wide array of decisions. A majority of them, 17 out of 23, chose to seek asylum in Türkiye, which shares borders with Iran, while the other seven had their unique circumstances. During my interviews, I asked my participants why they chose the country they did. The top two reasons that my respondents referenced (each eight times) in their stories are ease of travel and having support networks in Türkiye. For example, Forough said:

...I didn't have any information about Türkiye, we weren't following the news, and I wasn't aware of anything. All I could think about was how to leave the country.... We didn't need a visa and it was the closest country to Iran. Plus, I was living in Azerbaijan province (bordering Türkiye), so it was easier for me to enter Türkiye. Also, my pastor was there, and he told me that there are many people in the church [in Türkiye] who can help me.

Forough references ease of travel to Türkiye, which touches on policies and opinions element as well as geographical location as a structural element of IDM. There are not many countries that Iranians can visit without obtaining a visa, and Türkiye is one of them; therefore, it makes it an attractive choice for seeking asylum. Additionally, Forough's story highlights the role of geographical proximity, as a structural factor that plays in her story. Living very close to the Turkish border makes Türkiye even more appealing for a refugee who needs to flee in a short period of time. The other strong theme in her decision-making process is the presence of her support network in Türkiye; knowing that there is a group who are going to provide support for a refugee during one of the most precarious experiences of one's life holds a significant amount of weight. The combination of these factors worked in her favor in terms of time: having support networks ready to accept her in a country that is within hours away from her without needing to obtain a visa. Changes to any of these factors could have impacted her time and timing. In this stage, the

main source of coercion for her, as indicated in her story, is the fear of persecution, meaning financial or other pressures did not play a part.

The remaining seven participants paint a different picture. Four of them flew directly to a non-neighbouring destination, one with a valid visa, and the other three with fake travel documents and smugglers' support. Before getting to the details of these cases, a few notes are in order. In all four cases, recipients seem to have access to adequate resources required for flying directly to a European or North American country. A key point to remember is that while the upfront fees for hiring a smuggler and flying to a North American or European country are higher than traveling to a neighbouring country, the overall cost for those seeking asylum in Türkiye is arguably significantly higher because of their multi-year length of stay in a transit country. The deterioration of the civil war in Syria resulted in a significant increase in the number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye as a result of the country's open-door policy. From about 38,000 in June 2012 number of registered Syrian refugees increased to more than 1.6 million in December 2014, 2.5 million in December 2015, and over 3 million in December 2017 (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 24). Türkiye hosts 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees along with close to 320,000 persons of concern from other nationalities at the end of 2023 (UNHCR, n.a.). This sharp increase resulted in longer processing times for refugee claims. For instance, the nine refugees that I interviewed in Türkiye reported that they had arrived there between 2012 and 2016. At the time of the interviews in 2020, my interviewees were in Türkiye on average for more than five years (and still counting), with two of them being there since 2012 and 2013. To shed light on what this average means, it is sufficient to state that the average stay in Türkiye for my interviewees who arrived in

Türkiye prior to 2012 is significantly shorter. I interviewed seven Iranian refugees who went to Türkiye between 2009 and 2011, and they all were already resettled by 2013, after being in Türkiye for about two years on average.

Additionally, while asylum seekers in Western European and North American countries generally have more access to social and financial supports, such supports are significantly more restricted, if available at all, in Türkiye (as the main transit country for Iranian refugees). Therefore, seeking asylum in Türkiye, for instance, will not necessarily be the cheaper option for an Iranian refugee. It will be the significantly cheaper option in the short term, but it will be a more expensive one in the longer term. Therefore, other factors, such as having access to adequate upfront funds, information about alternative destination options, the psychological readiness to accept the risks of trusting a smuggler, normative values around resorting to illegal means, or having support networks in European or North American destinations become relevant in explaining why some do and others (a majority) do not take this path. These are elements that potentially interplay with coercion and time in each refugee's story. This is a discussion that will be also relevant in refugees' movement after they reach safety – I will discuss this in the next section. Finally, flying directly to a European or North American country is not an indication of the severity of the danger refugees face because these four participants reported various degrees of danger and were located on different places on the spectrum of coercion at the time they perceived the threat they were faced with. On this basis, I argue that this factor should not negatively impact individuals' access to refugee status, during the determination process.

Having looked at the common themes for all the four cases, I am now going to dive deeper in their stories. Marjan is the only participant who happened to have a valid visa to a European or North American country:

...because of my job I traveled to many places in the world... I worked in the tourism industry. During the time that I wasn't in Iran, my friends, whom I used to read the Bible with in our [underground] home church, got arrested.... When I went back, ...I was scared that sooner or later they will come for me and arrest me as well. ...I had two options back then, I had two visas on my passport, a valid Canadian visa, and a valid Schengen visa. But considering the ongoing issues regarding the refugees in Europe that I was aware of, I preferred to choose Canada.

Marjan could easily travel to Canada and seek asylum in a non-neighbouring country because she had an existing visa for her job. This factor contributed to her decision and as a resource made her travel significantly easier. This was a resource that was not available to any other of my participants. This means that the other three refugees flew without permission to their destination. Morteza, for example, shared with me that his decision to fly to England was an informed and calculated one:

I had to go someplace where I could work quickly and earn money. It didn't seem a logical thing to do for me, going somewhere and waiting for one month, two months, one or two years to reach my destination which was the UK.... I didn't take any risk of going to other countries, so I chose to go straight there.... I left Tehran for Türkiye. I stayed one night in Istanbul and then went to Uzbekistan and was there for four days. Then I left for London. It took me five days to go from Tehran to London (with multiple flights between several countries).

For Morteza, it appears that reaching safety was not his only objective. While he was in search of safety, he was also concerned about the rest of his journey. This highlights his psychological capacity to do such calculations under extreme conditions. He noted elsewhere during the interview that he had time to plan for his flight for a few months, which is a factor that often is

not available to refugees. He also mentions that he could rely on the information that he received from his personal network in England; they provided him with information about opportunities and helped him find a smuggler who could safely take him to his destination. Babak, my other participant who fled to England, shares his story, in which role of networks and resources are quite significant again:

I went to Türkiye ... and then I went to Europe and our contract with that smuggler ended. I lived in the attic of a pizzeria for a while, I was so scared all the time, I was even scared of my own shadow. It was a big shock and couldn't believe I'm here. Back then my cousin was in touch with that smuggler who was handling my things in Iran and my wife was insisting that they help me to go to the UK. I wasn't involved in this, but my wife and my cousin paid that smuggler... some money and planned for me to fly to the UK with a fake passport. I flew to the UK, and they told me to declare asylum at the airport.

The last three participants crossed multiple international borders beyond their neighboring countries for seeking asylum. All three were outside of harm's way caused by the state persecution they faced in Iran, but they chose to continue their movement while they could seek asylum in Türkiye. I asked Mehrdad, who traveled to England, why he did not seek asylum in Türkiye, and he said, "I didn't know any better, I thought it's better to go forward." He continues,

I didn't know about it at all. When I got to Mytilene [in Greece], I realized what does "case" means. Nobody believes it but I really didn't have any idea. When I went to the UNHCR, I found out what kind of an organization it is, what the home office is. I knew about refugees, but I didn't know what exactly it is. When I got to Türkiye or Mytilene [in Greece], I didn't have the information I have now, everything happened so fast.

Mehrdad indicates that lack of time and information were the key reasons for him to choose the path he chose. I asked a similar question of Farzam, another refugee who applied for asylum in England, and his response indicated a more informed decision:

When I left Iran, from the very first beginning I wanted to go to England because I could speak English a little bit like everyone else. On the other hand, I'd heard Germany was overwhelmed with this huge number of refugees. There are other European countries too but they're not as quick as England in terms of the application process. This was important to me because I wanted my wife to join me as soon as possible. I did so much research and found out that England is the best option, they give you the result sooner than Germany even if it's negative. You can even appeal the result and go to court. I left Iran and went to seven countries on foot, not all the way of course. I trekked half of the way with trucks, boats, and at some point, they threw us in a car. I didn't declare asylum in any of these countries until I arrived in England.

As opposed to Mehrdad, Farzam did research about his preferred asylum destination and was determined to do that throughout his journey. For him, language, and application process time were the main factors contributing to his decision. A key difference between the two cases is that Mehrdad had significantly more limited amount of time and was facing with a significantly higher level of coercion, compared to Farzam, when he was making his decision to flee. Mehrdad left the country within hours, while Farzam left a few weeks after learning that he must leave. What makes the two of them stand out from the rest of my Iranian participants, though, is that they demonstrate the psychological capacity to take the risk of going on such dangerous path.

My last participant is Tina. She was sentenced by a court to live in exile, in a small town, in Iran for four years, and she was banned from traveling abroad. As soon as the ban was removed, she "left the Iranian soil legally and *immigrated* to Türkiye." As I will discuss in more depth in the next section, Tina did not seek asylum in Türkiye because she did not feel the need to do that. When I asked her why she did not seek asylum in Türkiye, she responded that "I entered Türkiye legally, first ... I got my work permit there and started working in their cinema industry. If I stayed there, after seven years, I could have used the residence law... to get Turkish citizenship. That was my

plan.” She mentioned that she found it psychologically difficult to come to terms with the idea of being a refugee and that she tried to avoid it as much as possible. Eventually, she declared asylum in the US and then in Canada, but the motives for that appeared while she was in Türkiye. I will further unpack this in the next section as it is more closely aligned with ongoing movement after reaching safety.

In sum, there are a few themes that emerge concerning refugees’ decisions surrounding reaching safety. Coercion and time play key roles in their decision-making process. Having more time to respond often results in a more calculated, informed, and planned flight. At this stage, time often has a correlation with coercion, meaning higher degree of coercion results in a more limited amount of time to flee. Those with more time were able to gather their tangible and intangible resources and assets and consider their options, while those with a more restricted timeline could not draw on their intangible properties and assets. My participants’ decision regarding their country of asylum was mostly informed by the presence or absence of their personal networks and ease of travel (both in terms of policies and structural factors such as geographical proximity). Additionally, psychological factors, personal resources, normative and cultural values, and policies as well as opinions played a role in their decisions.

### ***Life in transit: a struggle that goes on***

Once refugees reach safety, they enter the next stage of their journey. At this stage, the initial source of threat is absent; there is no fear of persecution. Therefore, conventionally, refugees are expected to remain in their country of asylum until their application process is complete. If the source of initial threat is fully eliminated, for example with a regime change in Iran, then refugees

are expected by the Convention to return to their home country (as one of the durable solutions for refugees). Alternatively, they are expected to wait until they are granted with a settlement (in the asylum country) or a resettlement offer (in a third country).<sup>93</sup> I argue that this expectation does not apply to many refugees. The reason for that is that while the initial source of coercion is absent, refugees still interact with the three components of IDM, namely spectrums of coercion and time as well as the decision-making environment. In this section, I will explore my participants' stories to learn more about their decision-making behavior while they are in transit. The main question to answer here is whether they consider repatriation, ongoing movement or alternative migration pathways and why.

After reaching a country where they can seek asylum, refugees often face challenges that can potentially shift their location on the spectrum of coercion. In other words, contrary to the conventional understanding of refugeehood, a refugee may face harm in a way that their living conditions are intolerable.<sup>94</sup> For those living in Türkiye at the time of the interviews, two main events seemed to be the most impactful. The first one was the transition in refugee claim processing authority from UNHCR to the Turkish authorities. As of September 10, 2018, UNHCR stopped registering foreigners wishing to apply for international protection in Türkiye; since then the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), as the national authority established by the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, has been responsible for registering and

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<sup>93</sup> See chapter for two for an in-depth discussion of behavioral expectations for refugees.

<sup>94</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion in spectrum of coercion.

processing temporary and international protection applications in Türkiye (UNHCR, n.a.). A few of my interviewees referred to this development as something that added considerable pressures on Iranian refugee community in Türkiye. For instance, Forough, who already had UNHCR approval for her refugee claim, shared with me that after the Turkish authorities took over, she was forced to follow a separate process that ignored the UNHCR process:

When I call [the Turkish authorities], they say “don’t rely on the UN approval.” They said, “we cannot do anything for you just because you have the UN approval, because there’s no UN anymore!” or “the UN has lost its credibility” ... We said, “ok what should we do now?!” they told us “now you need to get DGMM approval in your city”. They kept telling us this, and that made us go to the immigration office that used to be the police department, but they’ve changed the name to the immigration office (DGMM) now, it was where we used to go to sign every week... we asked around and luckily, I was able to book an interview with the police for the third time. They said you have to do this interview otherwise we cannot change your status to a provisional refugee. I did the interview and on the same day they gave me the acceptance letter....

Zahra spoke of a similar experience when I asked her about the change leading to the Turkish government taking the lead in processing refugee claims:

At first, we thought that the immigration office was going to take care of the cases exactly like the UNHCR. We thought they were going to follow the same procedures. But after a while, we realized it is not like that and they’re not going to do anything for us, especially Iranians. Anyone who went for an interview recently got deported by the immigration office and had to leave Türkiye. It’s not like how the UNHCR used to do things. When they were in charge, if they rejected you in the interview, they wouldn’t ask you to leave the country and you could stay in Türkiye to see if you can reactivate your case again after a few years (like my husband). But the immigration office rejects and deport people at the same time! The entire system has changed, unfortunately...

Watching UNHCR hand over the authority to the Turkish government was difficult for refugees who were already losing their faith in a system that was meant to provide them with the supports

they needed. Sogol who is suffering from a disease that has progressively restricted her mobility, shares her experience:

Considering my condition, I always thought that my case will progress in no time, but it didn't happen. It's been 4 years that we've been stuck here. I've heard that it's all because of this transition and the fact that the Türkiye police now are in charge of all these cases. I am so worried about this because my condition is deteriorating, and I am so sick and tired of waiting. Whenever I call them to follow up, they always tell me to wait but I don't know how much longer I should wait until I get an answer. I told them "you guys are waiting for me or my mum to die?! What should I do if something happens to my mum?! Who's going to take care of me here?!" ... but they keep telling me that I must be patient and my case is under evaluation.

Shayan seemed to be frustrated with this transition too. He believes that

The UN could have managed the pressure and solve the problem, but I think they chickened out. They just announced that the Syrian refugees have the priority because they have escaped war and they can go to a third country through Türkiye, the Syrians can work here and apply for citizenship. But it isn't the case for Iranians. The UN could have handled the situation somehow, but they didn't.

Bahram shares a similar story:

What sucked about the UN closure was losing our only source of getting updates, but I must say that they were useless. They never gave us any answers or helped us. The UN itself and all its organizations and staff were pretty much useless. They didn't do anything for us, they would show up only when someone would die. There was a 12-year-old girl who was suffering from cancer, and they were here for 4 years. The UN couldn't do anything for them until they applied for Canada's private sponsorship program, but she died on the plane! The poor girl couldn't make it, but I think she was meant to take her family there...

The transition of authority, from UNHCR to the Turkish government, added psychological pressures and financial burdens on refugees that led to additional uncertainty and precarity on their already precarious journeys.

The 2016 coup d'état was the second event that impacted refugees in Türkiye. Amir, for example, shared how he felt that the coup d'état brought the Iranian and Turkish government closer together, making him feel unsafe: "Another crisis for us is the Iranian government and the fact that they are influencing the Turkish Police here. This happened recently after this coup d'état that took place here in Türkiye. It seems that the Iranian government has the power to assign people here to threaten or do anything." Amir highlights the psychological impacts of the event, feelings of insecurity and threat caused by the Iranian government beyond its legal jurisdiction, feelings that became more concerning after the coup d'état. In another interview, Mehran, talks about another dimension of the event, one that highlights the overall impact of the event on Türkiye, as the host country, and refugees by extension:

The city we were before was so close to Ankara that we could clearly hear the sounds. We were so scared that we turned off the lights. Before we hear anything, we saw the breaking news on BBC that "a coup d'état has happened". We were shocked and we didn't know exactly what's going on. we were 45-minute away from Ankara, but we could hear everything, the choppers and the jets that were passing by. The power went off and it was pitch black and we didn't know what we should do. We felt that it might have a negative impact on our case and some unforeseen incidents might happen. That coup d'état happened, and it was over pretty soon but the events, limitations, and the countless arrests that happened after it made things harder for us. This incident gave the Türkiye government even more power to do whatever they want, not necessarily to us refugees but to everyone. We could feel that it might result in a violation of civil rights.

Whether Mehran and other refugees were directly impacted by the event, they were psychologically impacted by what was unfolding in the host county. Feelings of insecurity and precarity were heightened for him and perhaps many others. Shayan shared with me how the coup d'état impacted him: "When the coup d'état happened, we got scared so much and we were thinking about the future that what we are going to do if a civil war happens." Zahra, another

152

refugee who was living in Ankara at the time of the coup d'état, shares her first-hand experience of coping with the event:

I was there in Ankara when it happened, and it was one of the worst things that I experienced in Türkiye. This coup d'état was way harder and more saddening than being a refugee. It made life harder for everyone for a couple of months. It was even more nerve-racking for us refugees because we thought that things will get so bad that we might even get deported, or they might send us someplace else or won't let us stay in Türkiye anymore. I'd never seen a fighter jet before but during that time I saw them, and it was horrifying. Those days I felt like that a war has started, everybody was talking about it, people, news... we couldn't go to work, and we couldn't leave home. It was literally like a battlefield, there were tanks on the streets, the police weren't allowed to be outside, but streets were full of soldiers, and they would even arrest the police officers let alone regular people. It was a very bad, upsetting, and terrifying situation..., they used to ask people for their identification cards downtown or at subway stations' entrances for almost 2 years after that coup.

The coup d'état and the take over of the refugee claim processing by the Turkish government are two major events that impacted refugees in various ways. While the coup d'état imposed a psychological burden in a relatively brief moment, the policy change seemed to highlight a more profound impact on refugees' journeys. As mentioned by my interviewees earlier, the policy change for many of them was the symbol of 'failure' for UNHCR, the organization that was meant to protect and support them. Besides the psychological impact, this 'failure' resulted in longer and more stressful claim processing experiences that added financial burdens on their already precarious lives. Bahram, for instance, shares his daily life as a refugee in Türkiye:

We are waiting here and don't know what will happen in the future. We can't study. We can't move to another city... it is terrifying... it feels like we are in house arrest or something... if a police officer walks past us on the street or when we are working, we become paralyzed because we are so scared of getting caught or getting deported. We are somehow imprisoned....

What Bahram is highlighting here is that refugees in Türkiye are assigned to specific municipalities, where they need to have weekly visits to the local police station and report their whereabouts. Those who fail to make their visits to the police will be in violation of their residence responsibility and subject to arrest and deportation if caught. Many refugees choose to do so because they are often assigned to smaller towns where finding job and housing is a greater challenge; they move to bigger city centers like Ankara and Istanbul where there are more job opportunities and housing options in addition to more community and otherwise supports. The consequence, however, is that they violate their residence permits and live in constant fear of arrest or deportation by the police. The day-to-day struggles of a refugee life coupled with major events such as the coup d'état and the transition of authority from UNHCR to the Turkish government create an environment, where coercion remains a part of refugees' calculations in their decision-making, particularly in terms of movement and mobility. A majority of my Iranian participants, 16 out of 23, lived or still live in Türkiye, where they initially applied for asylum. Seven of them are already resettled in Canada or the US, and nine of them were still residing in Türkiye at the time of their interview with me. None of these individuals chose to reach a European country 'illegally.' Depending on their circumstance, some perhaps did not feel the need to do so because their refugee status application was processed reasonably fast. For those already resettled, their residence in their country of asylum, from the time they entered until the time they moved to their resettlement country was two years and four months on average, with the longest being three years. To put this number in perspective, it is sufficient to look at the same numbers for those who were still residing in Türkiye at the time of their interview. For them, the

average number was over five years, with the longest time being eight years to the time of the interview. Therefore, consideration of alternative pathways was a more common theme for the latter group because they dealt with the frustration of a dealing with a lengthy application process.

I explicitly asked my participants if they have been considering alternative pathways, including moving to a European country or seeking alternative migratory options. They all indicated that never seriously considered (for example, consulting a smuggler) to go to a European country to seek asylum. They cited four reasons for their decision: they did not want to risk their own life (3 times), they did not want to put their dependents' lives in danger (three times), they were concerned with travelling 'illegally' and 'breaking laws' (three times) and having mobility challenges (one time). For example, Zahra, who was facing deportation from Türkiye, told me that she has never considered travelling 'illegally' to Europe. She said, "Not at all. I get scared even hearing about it." For her, the main reason was the psychological factor of facing the inevitable risks of such decision. This is a stance that Bahram shared too. He said, "I've never thought about it. I prefer to live in this torment than going somewhere like this, without any respect, and end up getting beaten, naked, and then returned in the worst possible way. I can't take it... I truly hate it." For Bahram, it is not only fear that drives his decision; instead, he is concerned with losing his dignity and respect as a human being, something that is perhaps rooted in his normative environment. He holds this stance while acknowledging that he has been having a difficult time making ends meet: "I brought some money from Iran, and I spent it all. I've been working here illegally; I've been the delivery guy for bakeries and restaurants. I had many bad days here that I

hit rock bottom, but I stood up again. I have a friend here who is forced into prostitution due to financial pressures.” In another example, Fatemeh, a refugee in Türkiye, highlights the role of mobility in relation to having dependants. She said, “because of my children, no. They are still so young, and I can’t take them with me like this.” Having dependants, as I have argued in the previous chapter, has a significant impact on refugees’ decisions, particularly in terms of ongoing movement. Restricted mobility is indeed one of the main impacts of having dependants, which is evident in Fatemeh’s story.

In my interviews, I came across one participant who shared a different story. Tina lived in Türkiye without seeking asylum (with a work permit visa) after fleeing Iran. She, then, went to the US, and the Canada to seek Asylum:

I resided [in Türkiye] for three years and came to the US and declared asylum... and they were saying that the wait for the hearing could be between 10 to 16 years.... Around the time that Trump became President, Trudeau announced Canada’s ‘welcoming refugees’ approach. My immediate family (my parents) were living in Canada back then. [So], I came to Canada through the Pacific Border, and I declared asylum once again in Canada.

Tina’s story is fairly unique because she could seek asylum in Türkiye but chose to do it in the US and then later in Canada.

But my sister sent me an invitation and I came to the US to visit my family and honestly, I didn’t intend to declare asylum at all. One hour after my plane left the Ataturk airport [in Istanbul], that bomb attack happened in the airport by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). I was on the flight and wasn’t aware of anything and when I arrived in the US, found out that a couple of my friends who were there who got injured. Because of this incident, my family didn’t allow me to go back to Türkiye and considering my situation, I could easily seek asylum there, but I did anyways.

Her story is a great example of how the spectrum of coercion continues outside of one's country of origin. For Tina, the original source of threat, namely persecution by the Iranian government, was absent in Türkiye and since she had a work visa, was able to find work. However, a new source of threat and coercion compelled her to seek asylum in the US. Later on, with changes to the policies and political climate in the US, she experienced another shift in her spectrum of coercion, facing the unbearable reality of a lengthy and potentially unsuccessful application process that could deeply impact her livelihood. This was a source of coercion that would ultimately make time run in her disadvantage, a lengthy and uncertain process. That is the reason why she chose to continue her movement to Canada, where the element of coercion would be reduced, and time would be in her favor since her claim would be processed faster.

A few of my participants also reported that they explored alternative pathways for accessing a safe and stable life. For them, the alternative was outside of the UNHCR. Shayan, a refugee living in Türkiye, indicated that he was pursuing Canadian citizenship through the private sponsorship program. Shayan says:

... I have applied for a private sponsor. Canada has had this option for a long time, even when we went for the interview and got our approval 6 months ago. I think Canada is the only country that allows you to apply for a private sponsor. We didn't know anything about it back then. But even if we knew, we didn't have anyone who we could put as our sponsor. We had family and friends, but I couldn't tell my relatives in Canada that I'm gay and am looking for someone to be my sponsor. I couldn't bring myself to do it.... Until recently that we got tired of waiting and realized because of Trump and the fact that everything got banned because of him, we won't get an answer anytime soon. There is an organization [in Canada], they recently got permission from the government to sponsor refugees .... We are waiting to go for the embassy interview and biometrics after this pandemic hopefully.

In this story, the changes in policy and political climate in the US, as the country to which Shayan was assigned, lead him to actively look for alternative solutions. Shayan knew that his resettlement process in the US would be a lengthy process that would keep him in his current precarious living conditions which would deteriorate with time running in his disadvantages. Therefore, he decided to actively pursue an alternative solution that was still in line with his normative values, by seeking resettlement in a country that demonstrates more welcoming opinions and policies for refugees.

One of the key questions each refugee is faced with is regarding their long term or permanent stay in their country of asylum – for those seeking asylum in a transit country. I asked my participants if they were interested in staying in their transit country, in this case Türkiye (16 participants). Nine of my participants, who applied for asylum in Türkiye, shared with me that they believed that the Turkish government does not offer resettlement to refugees. In other words, they thought staying in Türkiye was not an option. For example, Payam said, “we didn’t have the option. As you know, since we were refugees, we couldn’t become permanent residents and we had to go to a third country. So, we couldn’t stay there.” Sara, too, shared a similar response; she said, “when we left Iran, the first thing we did was trying to stay in Türkiye.... We asked around about it and how it gets done but we realized that it is not an easy process to get the citizenship there. So, staying there wasn’t quite possible.” Three of my participants mentioned that they were not sure whether this was a possibility, while the rest thought that even if obtaining permanent settlement were a feasible option, they were not interested in it. A majority

of them cited Turkish government's policies and the broader society's unwelcoming response to gender minorities and Christian converts, in particular. For instance, Bahram said,

Türkiye is like Iran with just a better name. For someone like me who is a homosexual, the living conditions here are somewhat like Iran. Here in Türkiye, I am also deprived of the basic rights that any human is entitled to, like getting married and having kids. One of my biggest needs is to have a kid but no matter how, with surrogacy or adopting a child, someone like me can't do it in this place. This is one of my biggest dreams but I'm sure it's unreachable here whereas it's doable in Canada or the US or some European countries.

For Bahram, the original source of coercion is temporarily absent or restricted in Türkiye, but his living conditions suggest that the coercion is not eliminated. That, perhaps, explains why he was keen to find a way to move to Canada. Forough, too, had similar concerns; she said, "Türkiye is known to be a secular/ laic country, but this is not true! Türkiye is a Muslim country, and they don't treat Christian [converts] nicely here!" In Forough's story, coercion is prevalent in the country of transit, and it is more rooted in the cultural and normative setting of the host society.

After discussing the option to stay in the transit county, I asked my participants about their ideal destination. All participants indicated that they perceive some countries to be more desirable destinations for their permanent resettlement. The US was the most desirable destination (13 times), followed by Canada (11 times) in second place. Australia, the UK, and Sweden shared the third popular destination (three times), while Germany (two times), Switzerland, Finland, Norway, and the Netherlands (each one time) completed the rest of the list. I directly asked them to explain what factors contributed to their choice. The most common factor was the host country's welcoming opinions towards refugees (10 times). For example, Mehran says,

Canada is my first priority because you can get so much support from the government and the country welcomes immigrants, I am sure that this is the place where we can have a better future and grow our family. Compared to other countries, Canada has a lower rate of racism.

The second place for the most common factor was shared between liberal policies and networks (each nine times). Shayan, for instance, says, "I'd read about Canada that it is a good place for homosexuals. They say that Canada is like heaven on earth for gays... this is what we've heard." Here, Shayan is referring to his perception of Canada's liberal policies as well as progressive and welcoming society. In another example, Payam talks about the key impact of his personal network in his pursuit of the US as his country of resettlement:

We chose there because our friends ... had gone to the US and we practically followed them. The people we knew from the church in Iran, they are all in the US with us now. So, we went to a country where we can have freedom and be with our friends.... If this group were in Denmark, we would definitely go there. We could go to Australia, Canada, or European countries but we wanted to be surrounded by our community. We became a refugee to keep our community going and we wanted to reach our goal which we did.

Payam shared with me that he obtained a support letter from his church members in the US and shared it with UNHCR so that he could resettle in the US with his community. The next common theme was standards of living (eight times), including education, job opportunities, and healthcare. For instance, Roya told me that the healthcare system was the reason she preferred Canada over the US:

I had a very important reason to choose Canada. Physically speaking, I'm not that healthy and when I heard about the medical system in Canada which is somewhat free, I realized that Canada is the best option for me. I know that the US has more advantages but in terms of health insurance and considering my physical condition, Canada is the best place for me. I started Googling and reading about

the living conditions and the newcomers' conditions in Canada [and that is the reason I chose Canada].

The next common theme found in the responses was social and economic supports for refugees (7 times). Fatemeh, for example, said "I would choose Europe because of the socialism and social welfare supports [that exist] there, and considering that I'm a single mother, Europe would be a better option for me." Sahra, too, had a similar concern but different destination: "I'd rather go to Canada so I would have support for one year and there were more welfare supports there as well." Resettlement process time, weather and climate conditions, and official language (English preferred) were other factors that were cited by my participants, though with significantly lower frequency (one-three times).

In all these cases, it appears that refugees have certain preferences for their final destination. Once they reach safety, they explore their options and make up their minds about their preferred destination. While for many of them (15) this remains a mere preference, others (9) exercise their agency in various forms to try to turn that preference into their future reality. For instance, three of them tried to find a private sponsor to facilitate their resettlement in Canada, while another three took on a more precarious path of crossing multiple countries to reach their ideal destination and four of them (using existing visas or with smugglers' help) reached their ideal destination to apply for asylum.<sup>95</sup> In the stories that I heard, this is evident in the form of pursuing private sponsorship as an alternative pathway or obtaining letters of support from their

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<sup>95</sup> I recognize that these cases overrepresented in my sample and such options are not available for a large majority of refugees around the world.

community members in their ideal destination. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, this pursuit could also manifest itself during their flight, when refugees try to seek asylum in their ideal destination, as opposed to the country that is most accessible or geographically closer.

The last question at this stage of the journey is regarding repatriation. In my interviews, I asked my interviewees about their return to Iran. Not surprisingly, they all responded that the source of threat to their lives, namely the Iranian government, is still in place and that they do not envision a return to the country for as long as there is no major political change in Iran. Alrababah et al. make a similar argument: even when refugees face coercion in the form of hostility or difficult living conditions in their transit or host country, return to their home country is dependent on the conditions in their home country (2023, p. 1100). A common theme was that they did not wish to leave Iran in the first place and a future return, should a regime change take place in Iran, would be their ideal (however improbable) scenario. This is to say that refugees experience a sense of emotional and existential homelessness that leads them to an ongoing search for “a sense, rather than a place, called home” (Perez Murcia, 2019, p. 1515).

In sum, my interviews highlight a few themes regarding decision-making after reaching safety. Coercion remains a central element after refugees cross an international border to reach safety. This coercion is often the result of events taking place during their stay in the country of asylum, including lengthy application process time, political or policy changes, or (mis)treatment of refugees. Refugees interact with coercion in different ways. While some consider alternative pathways for migration, others choose to stay and endure the coercion if it is not at the extreme end of spectrum. Their decisions are often informed by the decision-making environment, usually

psychological factors, mobility, and normative and cultural values that either facilitate movement or restrict it. When it comes to choosing a final destination, refugees often appear to be far from indifferent (lacking agency); instead, they often develop strong preferences and within their capacity try to influence their journey through various means.

### **Take away**

Throughout this chapter, I engaged with the stories that my Iranian interviewees shared with me. I followed them in their journeys, from the time they perceived threat, to their flight, to reaching safety, and to their world in transit. I demonstrated that, in each stage of their journeys, refugees interact with spectrums of coercion and time as well as various elements of the refugee decision-making environment. In the next chapter, I will present a similar discussion where I follow my Syrian participants' journeys.

## Chapter 6: Lost in a ‘Crisis’

Oh Syria, my love  
I hear your moaning  
in the cries of the doves.  
I hear your screaming cry.  
I left your land and merciful soil  
And your fragrance of jasmine  
My wing is broken like your wing...

Can anyone teach me  
how to make a homeland?  
Heartfelt thanks if you can,  
heartiest thanks,  
from the house-sparrows,  
the apple-trees of Syria,  
and yours very sincerely

(Abou Kerech, 2021).

This chapter, ‘Lost in a Crisis,’ is where I tell stories of refugees from Syria. I follow my Syrian research participants’ stories along their journeys. Similar to the previous chapter, ‘beyond the seas,’ I will share my findings and discuss how my proposed model, Interactive Decision-making Model (IDM), sheds light on my participants’ decisions in critical moments of their journeys. I will highlight how interactions with coercion, time, and their environment inform refugees’ decisions. In doing so, I will argue that IDM provides the appropriate lens for capturing the complexity and diversity of refugee experiences in relation to decision-making.

### **Research participants**

To set the stage, in this section I highlight a few details about my research participants, before discussing my findings. Currently, Syrian refugees are generally associated with the mid-2010s

refugee 'crisis.'<sup>96</sup> After 13 years since the beginning of the Civil War in 2011, the Syrian refugee movement remains the largest displacement 'crisis' in the world, with over 12 million forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2024). Contrary to the tendency towards hegemonic portrayal of Syrian refugees, the war has impacted refugees in many different ways and therefore, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, Syrian refugees have experienced refugeehood in diverse ways. To capture this diversity, I recruited my research participants in two main stages in 2020. In the first phase, I focused my recruitment efforts on immigration and refugee agencies in Canada. In the next phase, I relied on snowball sampling, in which I encouraged my participants to pass on my study information to other potential participants within their networks. I interviewed 21 Syrian refugees who left their home country between 2011 and 2018. I successfully recruited these individuals in Canada (four), the United States (one), England (one), Germany (two), Lebanon (10), and Türkiye (three). In terms of the motivation for their flight, 20 of them cited the civil war while one of them indicated political persecution, linked to the context of the war. Given the timing of their flight, post- 2011, it is reasonable that nearly all of them report the war as the main reason driving them out of Syria. In terms of gender, I faced struggles in recruiting female participants, perhaps due to religious and cultural restrictions on interactions between men and women. That being said, I still managed to find six female participants so that I could include their voices and stories in this project. Regarding their age, I interviewed five individuals who were 18

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<sup>96</sup> As I mentioned in the first chapter, Syrian refugees did not appear only as a result of the civil war. In fact, there was a steady, but relatively smaller (compared to the post war) flow of refugees since 1970s. That being said, despite the commonality of the main driver for the current refugee movement, which is the war and its consequences, Syrian refugees have undoubtedly diverse experiences and journeys.

or 19, 12 who were between 20 and 29 years, three that were between 30 and 39, and one that was between 40 and 49 years of age at the time of the interview. In terms of their routes, 20 were residing or resided at some point in a transit country, namely Lebanon or Türkiye, while one directly traveled to Germany to seek asylum. Of those who went to a transit country, two decided to continue to move onward to Europe, three resettled in Canada through World University Service of Canada (WUSC), and five resettled through UNHCR while the rest were still in their country of asylum at the time of the interview.

## **Findings**

In the remainder of this chapter, I will present findings of my interviews with my Syrian participants. I do this while utilizing IDM as my theoretical lens for understanding my participants' decisions. I engage with the spectrums of coercion and time as well as the decision-making environment, which are the three pillars of IDM. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I will present my findings as I follow different stages of my interviewees' journeys: perception of a threat, flight, reaching safety, and life in transit. This organization will allow me to highlight the intertwined nature of the three pillars of IDM. I will argue that refugee decisions are informed by interactions between the three elements.

### ***Perception of a threat: the first moment***

The first stage of a refugee's journey is the moment they interact with a threat. This is a crucial component of the 1951 Convention definition of refugeehood, tied to the notion of a well-founded fear of persecution (Article 1.A). In the previous chapter, I examined Iranian refugees' interactions with this initial source of threat that informs their decision to flight in the first place.

Given the diversity of threats that the Iranian participants were faced with, my discussion on their perception of threat was complex and multi-dimensional as they interacted with different forms of state persecution on different grounds: from political activities or sexual orientation to religion. For my Syrian interviewees, one may assume that this discussion may be more controlled as the objective threat they face is almost exclusively related to a violent civil war. However, as I will demonstrate, within this shared experience there are diverse responses or courses of action that are related to their perception of threat. The key question, in this part of their journey, is why some of them fled Syria in the early days of the war but others waited longer.

I began my interviews by asking my participants to tell me about the factors that contributed to their decision to leave Syria. As I mentioned earlier, 20 of them stated that they fled their country because of the war, and only one pointed specifically to political persecution. In the previous chapter, I discussed how for my Iranian participants state and smaller institutions such as family were the source of threat. Syrian refugees, on the other hand, have suffered violence by state and non-state actors such as ISIS. For instance, the Syrian army's chemical attacks in eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus in August 2013 resulted in 1,100 deaths (Haj Suleiman, 2023). ISIS's massacre of at least 154 Kurdish people in Kobani in 2015 is a prime example of how non-state actors undermined safety and security of civilians residing in Syria (Shaheen, 2015). In both cases, Iran and Syria, refugees flee because of state's actions or inactions (or inability to action) resulting harm to individuals (by state or non-state actors). In the case of my Syrian participants, in particular, the source of the threat is unclear or even irrelevant. In

nearly all of the interviews, my participants focus on impacts of the war on their livelihood as opposed to the source of violence or threat. For instance, Jamal said:

Before we left Syria, we had already lost our school, lost our education, lost our work, lost everything even our dreams... We left Syria in December 2012..., we decided that time because a rocket hit our house..., so we just felt that it's time to leave, and we left Syria after 2 days of that incident.<sup>97</sup>

As Jamal mentions, for him and his family the direct rocket attack to their home was the event that motivated them to flee, even though they had earlier perceived a threat based on the destruction of the school and the loss of work.

One question is why refugees in seemingly similar situations flee at different times. I interviewed an individual who left Syria in early 2011 (early days of the conflict) and nine individuals who fled in 2012, while I had four individuals leaving in 2013, four leaving in 2014, and one fleeing in 2018. In their responses, my interviewees referenced various reasons for their flight. For a few of them, flight was the absolute last resort, in that they chose to flee once they personally got wounded or their house was hit by a rocket. Marwan, for example, explains how he was wounded as he was fleeing Syria:

I left because of the war... I was wounded two times; the first one I was going to work with my coworkers, and we were attacked by snipers who shot us. I survived magically from this attack. The next time happened when I was in my own house. Our house was hit by a rocket. With these two injuries, I felt like it's time to just leave because I couldn't survive this anymore. We packed and left Syria in a week.

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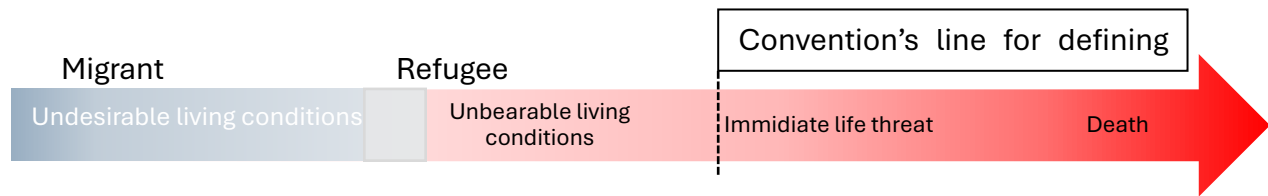
<sup>97</sup> As indicated in the first chapter, I exclusively use pseudonyms for referring to my research participants.

Marwan was shot at by snipers, but still did not leave until his house was hit by a rocket, suggesting that even suffering a physical attack from a sniper was not the single or adequate event that tipped the decision to leave, but the bombing of the house was. Perhaps Marwan's story can be placed on the extreme side of the spectrum of coercion, where he was finally convinced that there was an immediate threat to his and his family's lives if they stayed. He was still wounded as he crossed the Lebanese border in 2013. Bushra explains that she did not leave until their house was hit by a rocket. Bushra shares her story of her interaction with threat, violence, and coercion, as a woman:

What happened was that our neighborhood was known to have many members of opposition parties. At some point, the regime... started airstrikes on the neighborhood and it became very intense [as I was closer to my due date] ... I couldn't even go to the hospital to give birth to [my son]; I had to do it in a very difficult situation inside the house. The regime used to launch airstrikes at night, and they started hitting the civilians' houses. After two missiles hit our house, we felt like we had to leave because it became too real.

For Bushra, the hitting of her house, not once but twice, is what constituted an adequate reason for her to decide that it was time to flee. In all these examples, individuals do not flee until they personally survive an attack that could have very well taken their lives. These, perhaps, are among the most extreme experiences of coercion, as a spectrum. In these cases, the extreme severity of the situation leads to a need for an immediate/urgent reaction, which means individuals do not have a significant amount of time to prepare for their journey. In such circumstances, the decision-making environment's impact becomes significantly limited as the number of options available to individuals becomes limited. As individuals move towards the less extreme end of the spectrum of coercion, there is more room for the decision-making environment's influence.

Figure 12 Spectrum of Coercion (reminder)<sup>98</sup>



In other stories, my interviewees shared with me that they fled Syria because their family members or relatives got wounded or killed. Saba and Saad explain how the impact of war on their close relatives' lives changed their and their families' perceptions of threat. Saba describes how her family grappled with the spectrum of coercion:

My cousin was living in another city, but he came just to visit us. When he was leaving, a tank shot him, and he was killed. Because my uncle's family was with him and they all had severe injuries, every one of our (extended) family had to leave the city. There was no running hospital in my city. Hospitals were the most dangerous places for patients or for anybody who existed. Because they were the target by every side of the war. So, we had to leave either to go and have medication or else we couldn't survive anymore.

In Saba's story, spectrums of time and coercion function similar to how they did for Marwan, Jamal, and Bushra. The difference, however, is that the role of family structure and values becomes more evident. The closeness of the extended family serves as a major factor in the family decision-making process, this is an element that Arar and Fitzgerald rightly highlight as a core element of refugee decision-making in their book (2022). Saba and her family decided that it was time to leave as soon as there was harm to a member of the extended family. In other words, the urgency of the situation for her uncle's family translated to immediate urgency for Saba and her

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<sup>98</sup> Please refer to Chapter 4, where I have extensively discussed the spectrum of coercion.

family as well. A testimony for this family impact is that Saba's family were living in their region as they were witnessing bombings and attacks on a daily basis. They found the situation to be tolerable up until that moment: "before [my cousin was killed] there was a siege around my city, and we used to say maybe tomorrow it's going to get better... so we shouldn't leave... it's not necessary... we are still surviving."

In another example, Saad shares how his cousins' fate impacted his assessment of the situation:

In the beginning of the revolution in 2011, the revolution didn't start in Aleppo until the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013. At that time the regime started bombing this area. Two of my cousins refused to join any of those groups like the Free Syrian Army or the Syrian [state] army, so they killed them because they refused to join them. I didn't want to be the third one who will be killed for not just joining any of the sides. I was afraid to stay there because I knew it was going to be my destiny if I choose to stay there.

For Saad, witnessing his cousins lose their lives was a clear indication of his own circumstances and the threats he could face himself. Violence was so close and tangible for him to a degree that he felt that he could be in grave danger if he did not flee. In terms of the spectrum of time, his conditions were more leaning towards probabilistic or anticipatory as opposed to urgent when compared to the earlier examples.<sup>99</sup> For Saad, and Saba, the psychological aspects of encountering with threat against family members resulted in an assessment of their situation that justified flight for them.

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<sup>99</sup> Kunz (1973) categorizes refugees in such circumstances as anticipatory. According to him, the anticipatory refugees are the ones who leave their home countries before the deterioration of the situation to a point that their ordinary departure is at risk (p. 132).

In other interviews, I heard several stories that highlighted the deterioration of the situation and expansion of violence to the interviewees' immediate region. In these stories, interviewees share that their understanding of threat and coercion was changed as violence came closer to their geographical region. For instance, Ahmed and Roshan shared that they decided it was time to flee when the bombings in their regions intensified. Hassun, too, depicts a similar picture regarding his interactions with threat and coercion: "It wasn't bad until 2012, I'm talking in my region, Idlib, so it wasn't that bad until 2012 October when [the army] started sending fighter jets (to attack us). They started to use like big rockets against my city as well. So, we had to leave...." The deterioration of the situation in his immediate area convinced Hassun that the threat was eminent. In all these cases, individuals resisted to flee because they felt that things were going to get better, and they chose to flee when they did not. What seems to differentiate this group from those who decided it was time to flee in response to physical harm or close encounters with violence of war is the psychological factors embedded in IDM's decision-making environment. This is to say that individuals respond to different events in psychologically different manners. What constitutes threat at the individual level is a psychological matter that differs from one individual to another; for some, it may be the spread of conflict to their immediate region, but for others it may be the hitting of their house or neighbourhood with a rocket. As Cohen (1978) argues, what constitutes a threat, requiring a response, is partly based on an individual's perception of the developments around it.

The remaining stories move towards the left side of the spectrum of coercion, which I categorize as unbearable living conditions. In these examples, the reason for flight is not a close encounter

with violence per se. For instance, individuals do not flee because they are physically harmed or are afraid of the intensification of the conflict in their community. Instead, they are concerned with the consequences of the conflict on their livelihood. In these examples, the decision-making environment becomes more impactful. In other words, the perception of threat becomes the result of individuals' interactions with various elements of the decision-making environment.

Afan shares his story of how for him and his family their living conditions became unbearable:

There was no money; we couldn't find a job there anymore.... Schools were closed, and lack of education and job opportunities bring poverty. The majority of people left the country because of the poverty that the war brought.... The health system became worse and worse and because of the [constant] attacks on hospitals. That's why people started to think about leaving Syria.

Afan highlights the socio-economic side effects of war as a main factor in his family's decision to leave. Ferran had a similar experience as well:

Everything was ok and even at the beginning of the revolution; it was safe in my city, but after a while they started bombarding... I don't know whether it was the regime or someone else. We had to move to another city that was safer for us. when we moved, we had some financial problems; we didn't have enough money. I felt that I had to leave for Lebanon by myself [so that I could provide for my family].

Ferran's story, too, highlights how the consequences of a civil war, namely socio-economic factors made life unbearable for him and his family, to a degree that they decided to flee. To use IDM as the reference, it is the availability or absence of resources that leads to the decision to flee. Socio-economic challenges, however, are not the only consequences of the war that my interviewees reported as the reason for their flight. Absence of hope for a better, or a merely ordinary, future is one of the themes that showed up in my interviews as one of the consequences of war. This

was manifested in restrictions on or absence of educational opportunities. For instance, Salim talks about how the prospect of continuing his education impacted his circumstances:

I had to seek for a safe place to continue my education because my education was a priority for me, and I wanted to find a place that I can continue my education. So, education was the first reason and there were a couple of other reasons. 17 is the age of the last year of high school, which is the year that if you pass (the university entrance exam) you get the permission to postpone your military service and you would do it a couple of years later. But I wasn't sure I will fail or succeed at that time, so I decided to not to limit my choices and to give myself more choices in case I fail that year. Because it wouldn't be an option for me if I fail and I'll be definitely forced to join the army.

For Salim, being able to pursue his education was key in how he interacted with and assessed his circumstances. He found the possibility of his circumstances to be unbearable. His cultural context, valuing education and the absence of proper educational structures lead him to decide that his circumstances are unbearable.

Salim's concerns about being forced to get in combat is a concern that was shared with other interviewees as well. For instance, some mentioned that they decided to leave because they were in fear of being drafted to the military by the Syrian government or to be forced to join any of the opposition armed groups. Hamza, for instance, shares his fears:

... the revolution started in 2011 ..., after two weeks I just finished my military service. I was pretty much afraid that I will have to go back for another service. I am one of those people who don't like to hold any weapon or to kill anyone.... I was afraid that I will be forced to go back to the military or that other side, the Free Syrian Army would force me to serve with them. So, I didn't want to do any of these and because it was in my region, I would be killing people from my own region.

Hamza's fear of being forced to fight and kill others in a civil war was shared by others as well. For instance, Rashid paints a very similar picture with his story:

Before 2015 I was quite younger (under 18 years of age) and that meant that there was no chance to be drafted to the Syrian army. However, in 2015, I was at the age that I would be drafted... and I didn't want to do this. I did not want to fight one way or the other (Syrian army or any of the rebel groups). I had to choose one of them to fight for, but I didn't want to get involved in this.

In Hamza and Rashid's stories, the governmental policies combined with their cultural contexts inform their assessment of their circumstances. In terms of policies, the compulsory military service within the context of the civil war serves as a key push factor, to use Lee's model (1966), leading Hamza and Rashid to make the decision to flee. This decision, however, takes place within the cultural context in which they have been making their decisions. In other words, it is their normative setting and values that make joining the Syrian army or any of the rebel groups unbearable.

Across all these stories, war is the common element, but it informs refugees' experiences in extremely diverse manners. In other words, their lived experiences with the conflict are diverse and best understood in terms of a spectrum. Being physically injured, having their homes hit by rockets, witnessing their neighborhoods being bombarded, being deprived of most fundamental infrastructures and public services, facing extreme poverty and heightened socio-economic pressures, losing home in the future, and fearing to be forced to pick up guns and take part in a bloody conflict, are some of the ways that my interviewees experienced the war. These experiences inform their perception of threat. They created those definitive moments leading to the refugees' decision to flee. The stories I shared here demonstrate extremely diverse encounters within the common experience of war. Consequently, they perceive and interact with threat in different manners, resulting in diverse decisions that shape their journeys. My Syrian

interviewees' experiences, with how they perceive threat, are in essence similar to my Iranian interviewees' stories, where those in seemingly similar situations have their unique experiences, resulting in different perceptions and consequently different decisions in this early stage of the journey.

During this stage of the journey, perception of threat, refugees interact with the IDM. Those on the more extreme end of the spectrum of coercion have less time to respond and are more limited to the psychological factors in their decision-making environment. As individuals move towards the left side of the spectrum of coercion, unbearable living conditions, they tend to have more time to respond to their circumstances. In such settings, IDM's decision-making environment becomes more impactful in refugees' decision-making.

***Flight: what may come after a threat is perceived***

The second stage of a refugee's journey includes decisions involving their flight. In this stage, individuals have already assessed their circumstances and determined that they must flee (Stein, 1981, p. 321). Naturally, what comes next is the planning of the flight itself. As I acknowledged in the previous chapter, I cautiously use flight as distinct stage of a refugee's journey only a way to organize my findings. I am aware that flight may not be a linear experience for many refugees. In fact, as I will demonstrate in this section, border crossing is a fluid experience for some of my research participants. There are two main questions that refugees are faced with: When exactly should I leave the country? And who in the family should go first? In this section, I explore my Syrian interviewees' responses to these questions while utilizing IDM as my primary theoretical framework.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the connection between perception of threat and flight, as the two early stages of a refugee journey, is not linear.<sup>100</sup> While the conventional expectation for refugees is for them to immediately flee to a neighboring country for seeking asylum (see Peterson (1985), as an example), refugees do not necessarily behave in that manner. In Chapter 5, I discussed how my Iranian research participants challenge this expectation. There, I mentioned that while the connection between the two points in a refugee journey are not linear, Iranian stories were not ideal for demonstrating the complexities of this component of a refugee's journey. The reason for that is that Iranian refugees often flee from an authoritarian regime that has a strong control over the entire country, and as long as individuals are within the Iranian borders they are in danger. This, however, is not the case for refugees running from a war. In the case of Syrian refugees, conflict is often regional, meaning certain areas are more severely impacted by the conflict at any given time. Consequently, Syrian refugees may not feel the pressure to exit the country immediately as is the case for those fleeing from a strong authoritarian state. For instance, one third of the Syrian participants reported that they were displaced within the country for varying periods of time. This calls for a closer look at what takes place between the time an individual perceives a threat and the time they flee.

In my interviews, I came across a wide range of experiences and behaviors in this stage of the journey. A majority of my Syrian research participants indicated that they fled to a neighbouring country directly after they perceived the threat to justify their flight. For instance, Jamal explains

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<sup>100</sup> Also, see Chapter 2 for my in-depth discussion on conventional expectations for refugee behavior.

the circumstances of his flight with his family: “We left Syria in December 2012. We decided that exact time because a rocket hit our house.” Marwan had a similar experience to Jamal. He took his family and fled to Lebanon one week after his home was hit with a missile:

First my little daughter was hit by a car during a car chase. It happened when there was shooting on the street and a man was trying to run away with a car. My daughter who was two years old (at the time), and she was standing in the street, so [the driver] hit her with a car while he was trying to run away. A couple of days after that, a missile that hit our house and it injured me. So, after one week, I decided that we must leave. We could not stay. We left after one week, as I was still suffering from my injury.

Marwan and his family went to Lebanon as soon as they could leave Syria, which was one week after their house was hit by a missile.<sup>101</sup> Bushra, too, shared that she left Syria in a few days after her house was attacked by a missile. For them, as interacting with the more extreme end of the spectrum of coercion, the direct physical and psychological impacts of the war create a strong push to flee, one that took only days to materialize. Owais, for instance, shares how the experience of being arrested (or kidnapped as he describes it) motivated him to flee in a short period of time, in summer of 2018:

In my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of my studies in the university, I didn't feel safe, but I was thinking that if I leave my studies, I won't have any opportunity to continue the same journey with my studies outside of Syria. So, I was planning to finish my studies and after that thinking about leaving Syria. I was also eligible to postpone my military service until the time I was graduated and that was one of the contributing factors to delay my decision. So, when I got graduated, I went to the police station to get travel permission to go to Lebanon, but they arrested me. Because people who took me didn't officially arrest me, I consider it kidnapping because they weren't official officers; they were regular people who had weapons

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<sup>101</sup> Marwan did not share why he waited a week after his house was hit with a rocket before he fled with his family. I can speculate that he needed that time to recover from his injury (to some degree) and prepare for his family's departure (gathering resources etc.)

and they took me for 3 months. My family was searching for my name in the government, but they didn't find me. So, I left for Lebanon immediately after I got released.

The psychological impacts of such traumatizing experiences create a sense of urgency for flight. In most cases, however, the timing of flight is messier and more complex, especially within the context of a civil war. As I discussed in the previous chapter, those fleeing from an authoritarian regime, like Iranian refugees, often cannot find any sense of security within the borders of their country because the state's threat reaches the country in its entirety. Contrary, within the context of a civil war, demonstrating key elements of a weak or failed state, with variations in the regional impacts of the conflict, individuals may try to find a form of safety within their country before seeking asylum outside of their country. For instance, residents of a city under attack may try to find refuge in a neighbouring city that is not impacted by the war as significantly as their own city. Therefore, timelines are messier. Some still do follow the expected pattern of behavior to immediately seek asylum in a neighbouring country, but they do not represent the majority. For instance, Tariq shares the story of how his family fled Syria only days after the initial uprisings in late January 2011:

I didn't leave Syria as a refugee, we went to Lebanon for 10 days, it was more like a visit and then we [thought we would] go back.... we thought things would calm down after a couple of days and we could go back to Syria... My father had been already working in Lebanon, and the main reason [for our flight was] that all people got involved in the military and we didn't like to be involved in that. My father came back from Lebanon to Syria to visit us and he saw the situation and didn't like the idea of us staying there anymore. So, he said let's go to Lebanon for a couple of days and see how things will be ... 10 days has become 10 years now!

While Marwan, Bushra, Owais, and Tariq left Syria in a relatively short period of time, there were others who moved to other 'safer' regions within Syria before they fled the country. In these

stories, leaving Syria and seeking asylum in another country appears to be a last course of action.

This is what Afan nicely explains as well:

Everyone wanted things to get better, so they did not have to leave. We were hoping that the war would finish, and we could go back. At that time everyone was thinking that the situation could get better, but it got worse and worse and that's why people moved to other countries. They were forced to move actually because no Syrians liked to leave their country. It's not just Syrians, I think everyone likes to live in their own country where they grew up and continue to live there...

With the hope of things getting better or going back to normal, a third of my interviewees (7/21) reported that they moved around within Syria before they finally decided to flee. Aisha, for example, shares the story of how she and her family decided that it was finally time to flee Syria: "I didn't want to give up too early, that's why we wanted to go from one region to another to seek a safer region, but eventually, we had to leave." Aisha and her family lived in different parts of Syria for about three years before they moved to Lebanon. Diala, and her family too, had a similar experience:

When the whole conflict began, we were living in the countryside outside [of Damascus]. We didn't live in the city itself..., but we lived nearby. It starts from there where I lived and then we moved... we displaced first from where I lived from Qusayr to Al Yarmouk camp to my grandfather house and then Al Yarmouk camp started to fall down and started to be not safe anymore. At that time, the whole city of Damascus wasn't safe, but there were places that Syrian authorities where living, which were safe. So, we decided to move to another house, which was in the downtown of Damascus.... We lived there with [our extended family]. We all lived together. Then, we decided to move to Lebanon, not moved, escaped from Syria to Lebanon because the whole area started to be bombarded. In 2013, the whole city was burning, ... we were immediately affected by the bombings, [and] it was very risky for my family to stay there.

What Diala shares is a fairly common experience. Ferran, for instance, shares a story that is very similar to Diala's:

Everything was ok and even at the beginning of the revolution, it was safe in my city but after a while they started bombarding, I don't know whether it was the regime or someone else. We had to move to another city which was safer for us. So we went from my city, which is called "Al Hajar Al Aswad," ... to Al Yarmouk camp, which was for the Palestinian refugees in Syria. It's in the countryside of Damascus. My family had to stay there for a while, and I stayed with them (for about two years) before I went to Lebanon.

In a similar story, Hakim shares how it took him two years from the time he left his home in Homs to the time he crossed the Turkish border to seek asylum:

It was 2 years between when I left my house until I got to Türkiye. I had a very long journey inside Syria. My home was originally in Homs, I moved from Homs to Darayya and then from there to Daraa and then from there to Quneitra and then to Eastern Ghutah and when I was in that city, my destination was Idlib, but it was a very long journey until we got to Idlib.... Then we went to Deir ez-Zor, Al-Hasakah, then we got arrested by ISIS in the Syrian desert. ISIS kept us for 10 hours until they made sure that I am not one of Free Syrian Army members. I went to the countryside of Aleppo and after that I went to Türkiye. Before Türkiye we got to Idlib which was our destination, we slept overnight in Idlib and then we went to Türkiye. In normal conditions, it takes 4 hours only, but it took us 40 days to reach Idlib.

In another interview, Hassun shares how he and his family were displaced in Syria before they eventually decided to flee:

When the war started in Idlib, we went with my uncle, like my mum, my sister, and I have also two brothers. We went all with my uncle and his family to the countryside of our city, and we stayed there, and we stayed actually in a mosque... Yeah there was an old mosque that people don't pray in, and we stayed there, all of us, like his family stayed like in one area of the mosque and we stayed in the other. So, we lived there I think around two months... the main factor that made us wait for about two months was that we were kind of hoping that everything was going to settle down... and [we thought] it was going to be ok... in a couple (of) day(s), or in a couple (of) weeks... yeah but after that... even when we went to Lebanon, I remember that my mum and my dad used to say 'oh it is just a couple of months and we are going to go back to Syria.'

What drove Hassun and his family to search for safety within Syria before fleeing the country is a common theme for all those internally displaced before seeking asylum in another country: hope for the betterment of their circumstances and optimism for the prospect of life going back to its ordinary state. As Affan stated earlier, they did not want to leave their home country unless they had no other choice. In these stories, individuals respond to the original threat through interactions with the spectrum of coercion. Instead of permanently eliminating the original threat by seeking asylum in a neighboring country, they try to relocate themselves on the spectrum of coercion from immediate life threat to the edges of the unbearable living conditions. In all these cases, the relocation on the spectrum of coercion is only a temporary measure that cannot be sustainable in the long term. Based on what they share in their stories, my participants' decisions to initially move within Syria primarily stems from the psychological and the cultural context of their decision-making environment. In other words, their unique psychological characteristics coupled with their cultural context makes flight a less desirable, last resort, option.

After the timing of flight, a crucial question to answer is about who should flee first. In my interviews, I asked that question and a majority of my interviewees (15/21) reported that they fled with their family (including partner and children, parents and siblings, and in some cases the extended family). Only a small group of them reported that they fled individually. This is an indication of the role of the cultural and normative context in which the decision is made. In these cases, maintaining the structure of the family is a value and flight is a family-oriented decision and action. In Ferran's story, which demonstrates the role of family in this part of the journey, he explains how his family encouraged him to flee first so that he could provide for the family:

The main reason that encouraged me to leave wasn't actually the safety; it was because of the family. My family really encouraged me to leave Syria because at that time I had to get married to my cousin. As my family saw that I became responsible for the new members, they found out that my father had gotten stuck in a Syrian [refugee] camp, so that made me the only provider for the family. So, they encouraged me to flee to be able to go abroad and take my wife after that and start my new life and send the money to them because I was the only supporter for them. My family was the main reason for me. I was able to bring my wife later and I've got a kid now, but my family is still in Syria.

For Ferran, flight was largely an obligation to provide for the family in the absence of his father.

For a majority of my interviewees, family seems to play a central role in decision-making, and, in this stage of the journey, decisions are made in the best interest of family. Saad, for instance, shares how he fled first in order to prepare for his family's arrival:

I left Syria... in 2012 and I made sure that everything there was alright, and that I could work. I rented a house for my family then I went back to Syria and brought them.... I didn't want my family to be hurt especially. I went to Lebanon at the end of 2012 to make sure everything was ready for my family and in the first of July 2013 I went back not to Aleppo because it was too bad there. I ask somebody to bring my family from Aleppo to Baniyas, which is a closer area to Lebanon than Aleppo in Syria. I crossed the Lebanese border and went to Baniyas, and I met my family there and I brought them to Beirut.

Saad's decision to flee first was perhaps a practical choice rooted in economic considerations involved in the journey. In a similar story, Afan shares how his father and older brother fled first in order to prepare the conditions for Afan and the rest of the family to join them: "I left with my mother, sister, and brother but first my father and my brother fled so that they could check the conditions and to rent a house and find a job to help us live over there and after a few days my brother returned to Syria and he helped us flee as well. It was me, my sister and our mother."

In some cases, there are several factors involved in the making of this decision. Nabil, for instance, depicts a picture that demonstrates how multiple factors impacted who flees first in the family:

My brother went to Türkiye then my oldest brother went to Türkiye as well, after 2 weeks we joined him. We were 5 without my brothers who had already gone to Türkiye, and we left one brother in Hama, and he joined us after 6 months. He was late because he was in the army, the Syrian army so he had to escape to catch up with

In his case, two of his brothers fled first so that they could prepare for the arrival of the rest of the family. This could perhaps be understood in the context of values governing the institution of family in Nabil's case. The brothers were responsible to move first, find jobs, rent a place, and then bring the rest of the family with them. In other words, family responsibilities coupled with economic factors motivated the family to send the two older sons first. Another factor that is hinted in this story is that one of Nabil's brothers joins the family with a delay. This delay is caused by his legal obligations (being in the military service) that restricted his movement.

In another example, Saba's experience reflects the complexity of flight. In her case, it was her father who fled first, but he continued to visit the family in Syria:

I left with my immediate family.... My father was in Lebanon a few months before we went there, and he was always asking us to go to and live with him in Lebanon. He was just going back and forth to visit us because we didn't want to leave our home and then suddenly, we told him that we are coming.

While not explicitly mentioned, Saba's father lived in Lebanon because he could work there and provide for his family. In addition to this economic factor, the rest of the family's decision to flee seems to be driven more heavily by psychological factors, such as the emotional readiness to leave their home behind and embark on a journey as refugees.

In sum, during the flight stage of the journey, my Syrian interviewees' stories highlight a few themes. When it comes to the timing of the flight, their interactions with spectrums of time and

coercion are quite impactful. Specifically, when facing with higher degrees of coercion, a more urgent response within a shorter window of time to leave the country is required. Perhaps driven by psychological impacts of interactions with extreme violence and harm, individuals find themselves more inclined to flee. As individuals move away from the extreme end of the spectrum of coercion, time and timing of flight become more complicated. Particularly within the context of a civil war, the timing of flight is messy. Individuals try to find some sense of 'safety' within their country as a short-term solution with the hope that life would go back to its normal state.

In other cases, individuals may cross the borders back and forth as they try to mitigate the economic pressures of the conflict; in these cases, individuals often work in a neighbouring country because the local economy is simply collapsed. When it comes to the decision of who should flee first, cultural and economic factors seem to play the most prominent role. In several cases, I learned that younger male adults are responsible to flee first to prepare the economic conditions and logistics for the rest of the family to join. To a lesser degree, legal restrictions showed impact. This, for the most part, was evident in young male individuals' military service obligations. Lastly, an underlying element of the decision-making environment that seemed to be influential in this stage is psychology. In many of my interviews, the decision to flight was heavily impacted by psychological factors, chiefly in the form of a sense of resistance towards flight. In these cases, individuals were reluctant to flee often until some form of catalyst event (deterioration of the conflict, losing a loved one etc.) convinced that that they needed to leave.

This further highlights the fact that for a majority (if not all) of my interviewee's flight was the absolute last option.

***Reaching safety: a remedy for the initial source of coercion***

The next stage of a refugee's journey is reaching safety. This is where a refugee goes trying to find a longer term, if not permanent, solution for the original source of threat that initiated their refugee journey. In other words, reaching safety is to eliminate the source of threat that drove them out of their home in the first place. This, however, does not mean that refugees are not faced with any form of coercion. In fact, as I have argued throughout this work, coercion remains a part of refugees' decision-making considerations/experiences until a more durable solution is available to them. Hathaway (2005) calls this stage "the right to enter and remain" or otherwise known as non-refoulement principle (p. 279). The most important decision that is made at this point is about the selection of the country of asylum. As such, what I am going to discuss in this section, through IDM, is how refugees make that decision: Where do they go and why? As I mentioned earlier, the assumption in the conventional international refugee regime is that refugees flee their country and seek asylum in a neighboring country.<sup>102</sup> In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that many of my Iranian research participants' stories contradict this expectation, as their experiences and decisions are far more diverse. Following that same discussion, I will explore the same themes in what follows in this section.

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<sup>102</sup> Please refer to Chapter 2 where I discuss this topic in depth.

Perhaps due to limitations imposed by the war, Syrian refugees were left with limited options. Economic hardships, difficulties for obtaining a valid visa, and reduction or absence of international flights are among the factors that often impact the mobility of those in a war-torn country.<sup>103</sup> With that context in mind, 16 of my Syrian interviewees reported that they fled to Lebanon and four stated that they went to Türkiye to seek asylum. When I asked them to explain why they chose that particular country, a few themes emerged from their responses: having familial ties or networks (14 times), ease of travel (10 times), and geographical proximity (nine times) were the most common reasons for their decisions. Other factors such as economic considerations (affordability, living conditions, and prospect of employment), cultural similarities, policies and opinions, legal restrictions, and strategic geographical location (proximity to Europe) were among other reasons that were shared during my interviews.

Personal networks, as one of the elements of IDM's decision-making environment, is the most impactful factor for attracting refugees to their country of asylum. In the previous chapter, I found that support networks and ease of travel were (equally) the top reasons impacting Iranian refugees' decision. A similar theme emerged in my interviews with my Syrian participants. Mira, for instance, shares how having her brother and sister in Lebanon impacted her decision to flee to that country:

The reason I chose [Lebanon was] because I had a brother and sister there and my sister had stayed in Lebanon before and then my brother got arrested by the government for 17 days. Even though they found out that he was innocent, they

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<sup>103</sup> According to American Journal of Transportation, Syria has been a no-fly zone for most airlines since 2011, when the war began (Hong et al. 2023)

still put pressure on him, and he left Syria and went to my sister in Lebanon. After a while, he also called for his wife to go to Lebanon and eventually I went there as well.

Bushra, too, went to Lebanon with her family. This is how she describes the rationale behind her decision:

We decided to go to Lebanon because my husband has a brother and a sister who fled to Lebanon first, so he has family there. And when we left we didn't have anything... when you are a refugee you just take your things and go out so we needed to make sure that there is someone who can accept us and take us in which was [my husband's] sister so we lived with his sister for one month because we needed to just settle down and understand where to go and what to do afterward and that was the main reason why we chose Lebanon not any other place.

For Bushra and her family, fleeing was extremely difficult, so it is understandable that having someone to stay with during these difficult times was crucial. To paint a clearer picture, it is helpful to have a closer look at how Bushra and her family fled from Syria. This is how Bushra recalls the circumstances of her flight:

We paid money to some people so that they could facilitate our arrival to journey because from my city to the border there were barriers or checkpoints. In order to avoid being investigated or attacked, we had to pay money to certain people to ease the situation somehow for us to go, especially that my husband was injured, and we had 3 kids at that time. My youngest son was one month old. We... had to leave together.

While having a support network is the top indicated reason for my participants' decision for their country of asylum, it is not easy to single out a single factor as the sole driver for an individual's decision. In fact, it is often a combination of factors within their decision-making environment that influence refugee's choice of country of asylum. Hassun, for instance, shares the reasoning behind his decision to flee to Lebanon: "it was because (of) my dad. And because it's Arabic [that is spoken in Lebanon, similar to Syria], and because he was working there, because [we thought]

it was temporary.” For Hassun, it was a combination of having a support network (his father) and the cultural similarities of the two countries that drove him to choose Lebanon.

Ahmed fled to Lebanon for similar reasons:

The main reason was because of my brother and sisters who were [in Lebanon] already.... We considered going to Türkiye, but ... we didn't choose Türkiye because of the language. If we would go there, we had to start from zero if we wanted to learn a new language. We didn't do any research, or we didn't compare these 2 countries because we felt so privileged that the roads (to Lebanon) were open, suddenly they got opened so we felt like that we have to take the advantage of the situation and we felt privileged, and we had to travel right away before it was closed again.

Ahmed's story highlights the complexities of decision-making and the impact of the decision-making component of IDM. In his story, while having a support network (siblings) is crucial and a shared language (Arabic) is a consideration, his interactions with the spectrum of time are impactful as well. He describes a limited window of time in which he had the option to flee to Lebanon, and he did not want to miss it. In this context, the presence or absence of an opportunity available only for limited time creates a conjuncture that convinces Ahmed to leave.

Diala shares the story of how she fled to Lebanon:

It all started in Qusayr ... at the end of 2011 and then it got worse... so it took around two and a half year until we made a decision to flee. We didn't expect to leave our house for long. We just said 'oh we're gonna come back...' but we didn't go back. In the beginning, when we went left Syria with my mother and my father and my two brothers but before our departure, in the last 6 months, my grandfather and the extended family on my mother side, fled because the Al Yarmouk camp in Damascus started to burn. The war started there to be worse and worse. So, they went there before us, and we joined them.... We chose Lebanon because we had a relative there and because it was the nearest place for us, and it wasn't expensive because at that time we didn't have a lot of money.

Similar to Ahmed, for Diala it was a combination of factors that contributed to her decision to flee to Lebanon. Having a support network was indeed a key factor, but it worked in conjunction with the structural element of geographical proximity and economic considerations.

Roshan had a similar experience to Diala:

We didn't have money as well to pay for the plane or anything like that, so we thought that Lebanon is the closest shelter for us.... We did know somebody, however, these people who we knew were refugees just like us. They weren't able to help us, and we just stayed with them... Because of the lack of money, we didn't think about any other country. Lebanon was the closest and the cheapest [option]. ...If we had some money we would have gone to Egypt or Türkiye or wherever we wanted [but we didn't]. We just wanted to leave for someplace that is safe enough for us to continue our life.

For Roshan, as well, the decision was made based on having a support network as a consideration along with geographical proximity and economic affordability. In a similar story, Aahil shares his decision:

The plan was to go to Türkiye, but because the roads were closed at that time and because my brother was already in Lebanon before even the revolution started... we knew my brother was there [so] it was an option for us to go there as well. When my brother heard that we cannot go to Türkiye because of the roads, he made sure that we have everything like a house in Lebanon and he said OK come on here.

Aahil's story demonstrates once again that refugees interact with various factors within their decision-making environment in order to make their decisions.<sup>104</sup> Faced with a degree of coercion and a restriction through the spectrum of time, Aahil's family decided that they needed to

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<sup>104</sup> As I have argued earlier, objective facts and perceptions both play a part in how refugees understand their circumstances and interact with them. In other words, their perceptions could be as impactful and effective as the objective facts available to them when they make their decision.

reevaluate their plans and flee to Lebanon, instead of Türkiye, which they had initially planned. This demonstrates the fluidity involved in decisions that refugees make, exercising their agency in navigating the challenges they face.

Ease of travel and geographical proximity were additional key factors that are worth closer investigation. For Marwan, for example, ease of travel and geographical proximity were the sole factors driving him to choose Lebanon: “Lebanon was the most reasonable choice because it’s the closest to ‘Homs’ which is the city I was living in with my family. But also, the streets and the roads to Lebanon were blocked with many things and it was like a miracle for me that we made it... that we were even able to reach Lebanon.” In another interview, Jamal portrayed a powerful image regarding how he chose his country of asylum:

There are a number of reasons, and the first one is the distance; our city was close to Türkiye and the traditions, and the habits are pretty much the same and the main reason was a guy who we knew at that time, and he arranged everything for us like the house and basics of the household. He arranged everything for us and then we went. Another reason was that we didn’t feel like we were welcomed in any other country except Türkiye.... When we left for Türkiye and when that rocket hit our house, all the roads to Lebanon were closed. It was the only option and we actually left at 3 am.

In this story, Jamal and his family interacted with a high degree of coercion that required a quick response within a short period of time. In that situation, Jamal and his family fled to Türkiye because it was the closest and fastest option, demonstrating ease of travel and geographical proximity, respectively understood in terms of policies and structural factors in IDP’s decision-making environment. Nabil, another Syrian refugee who fled to Türkiye, describes how he made his decision about his country of asylum:

[My family and I] chose [Türkiye] because it was the easiest way for Syrian refugees and back then my uncle came back from Lebanon, and he told us how miserable the Syrian people were there. So, we weren't encouraged to go to Lebanon. Türkiye was easier than any other country. ... even though it was illegal when we left Syria to Türkiye, we went through the mountains and crossed the borders illegally. It was easier because it was also cheaper than in Lebanon.

Nabil's story is a reminder that when speaking of ease of travel, 'easiness' must be understood in the context of the difficulties refugees often face; for him, Türkiye was the easier option compared to Lebanon. Another point that Nabil's story demonstrates is that even in extreme circumstances, refugees use the information available to them as the basis of their decisions. In this case, learning about Syrian refugees' poor living conditions in Lebanon made Nabil keener to flee to Türkiye, instead of Lebanon.

In another interview, Aisha defines geographical proximity in a new light: "[My family and I] thought [Lebanon] is the most available country for us and there will be potential for us to travel outside of Lebanon to Europe." For her, Lebanon's geographical location would provide an opportunity for onward movement in the future. Similar to Aisha, Afan lists the geographical advantages of Türkiye for onward movement as a factor impacting his choice of country of asylum:

I had been to Lebanon for a few months before we [went] to Türkiye. Lebanon is more difficult than Türkiye, the job opportunity is less and of course if you want to [flee] to Türkiye or Lebanon, at that time there wasn't any support from the government or from the UNHCR. And in Lebanon it is much more difficult than Türkiye ... so [in Lebanon] if you go and live in an area that is for Shiaa or Hezbollah or Harket Amal, they will not let you go safely or by your own. They will restrict you and, they are so racist, and they will not leave you alone, so that's why I didn't want to go to Lebanon because I had [bad] experience and Lebanon is not as safe as Türkiye. What I mean by that is that you might get arrested in Lebanon for no reason by Hezbollah if you let them know that you are against Assad. But in Türkiye I know some people who are with Assad and live in Türkiye and the government doesn't do anything to them. So, in Türkiye there is more freedom and people are

much friendlier than in Lebanon, so that's why we chose Türkiye. Another reason that we chose Türkiye was the plan we had ever since we left Syria, to go to Europe [and Türkiye provided that opportunity].<sup>105</sup>

For Afan, economic factors, living conditions, policies and opinions, and structural factors created the conjuncture that resulted in his decision to flee to Türkiye. Ferran, in another interview, sheds light on how such conjunctures function. He provides a thorough account of what was involved in his decision-making process:

First, [Lebanon is] the closest country to Damascus; it was closer than Türkiye. The second reason is the language, Lebanese people speak Arabic, but Turkish people speak Turkish. I am a professional confectioner, and I can make Arabic sweets so I thought there will be [more job] potential [for me] to go to Lebanon.... another reason was that I knew that I could register with the UNHCR and that will help me to get out of that area. Another reason was that going to Lebanon wasn't that expensive compared to going to Türkiye. It was less expensive. Another reason was that I thought if I wanted to bring my family to Lebanon, it's also gonna be closer to them than Türkiye.

Ferran's response demonstrates the complexity of calculations that may be involved in a refugee's decision-making process. For him, geographical proximity (structural) and ease of travel and access to UNHCR (policies) were considerations that impacted his decision alongside shared language and family considerations (cultural context) and affordability (resources) – all elements of IDM's decision-making environment.

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<sup>105</sup> Afan later found his way to England. I will share more on this later in this chapter.

So far, I have discussed why my Syrian participants chose Lebanon or Türkiye as their countries of asylum, but there is one more case left.<sup>106</sup> This is about Rashid's story of how he traveled to Germany to seek asylum. I have other Syrian participants who moved to other countries after initially fleeing to Türkiye or Lebanon, but Rashid is the only one who traveled to Germany without residing in a transit country. Rashid left Syria in October 2015:

I left Syria in 2015. I wasn't thinking about it, and I was studying my last year in high school, and I saw some people were traveling to Europe and saw that there is no more future in Syria. I told myself that I am gonna take the advantage of this opportunity and go... and leave Syria. ... I asked some of my relatives in Germany and they told me if I have the opportunity to travel "Don't hesitate! Just come!" My destination was Germany because I knew some people there who were happy. I left Syria just like other people through Türkiye and after that with tubing, ship, something like that. It took me one week to arrive from Greece to Germany. It wasn't hard, it wasn't that bad that it took me one week, I feel lucky actually.

Rashid decided that he wanted to go to Germany largely because he could pursue a better future. He went through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria before getting to Germany. I asked him if he did not fear the potential dangers of his journey, and this is how he responded: "Of course! I left Syria to go to an unknown situation. I didn't know if I'm gonna arrive alive or not." Rashid was psychologically prepared to take on the risks involved in his journey. He was also physically capable and mobile enough to embark on this demanding journey.

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<sup>106</sup> I recognize that according to UNHCR's Operational Data Portal, a large number of Syrian refugees (628,135 as of June 2024) reside in Jordan. The reason my questions were focused on my Syrian participants' choice of transit country between Lebanon and Türkiye is because 1) those are the two options that my participants discussed in the interviews, and 2) my participants resided in Türkiye or Lebanon. This focus is not to suggest that experiences of Syrian refugees in Jordan are less worthy of learning and sharing. In fact, engaging with stories of Syrian refugees in Jordan would make a great future research project.

In sum, a few themes emerge concerning refugees' decisions surrounding reaching safety. In the last chapter, I argued that coercion and time play central roles in refugees' decision-making process at this stage of the journey. Having more time to respond often results in a more calculated, informed, and planned flight. This chapter supports that finding as well. However, since Syrian refugees operate within the context of a civil war, they are more restricted in the options available to them. Therefore, geographical proximity and ease of travel, coupled with having support networks, are most noted reason for choice of country of asylum. Especially considering restrictions on obtaining valid travel visa and Syria's no-fly status for a large number of airlines, it is expected that Syrian refugees' choices are more restricted. In other words, they experience a high degree of coercion in terms of choosing their path. Even within this context, though, refugees interact with their decision-making environment and make decisions based on their unique circumstance. At this stage, time often has a correlation with coercion, meaning higher degree of coercion results in a more limited amount of time to flee. In addition to the presence or absence of personal networks and ease of travel (both in terms of policies and structural factors such as geographical proximity), my participants interacted with psychological factors, personal resources, normative and cultural values, and policies as well as opinions as they made their decisions regarding their choice of country of asylum.

### ***Life in transit: a struggle that goes on***

After reaching safety, refugees begin the next stage of their journey. At this point, they are outside of their home country and the initial source of threat is absent. As I discussed in the previous chapter, conventionally, the expectation for refugees is to remain in the first safe country of

asylum until their refugee application process is complete (Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law*, 2005). This is true for some refugees. For instance, Roshan explains that within four and a half years after fleeing from Syria and living in Lebanon, she was resettled to the United States through UNHCR: “It was the UNHCR who called us and asked us would you like to go to the US? and we said yeah, we would. They started to do the interviews with us, and they started the process, and we left Lebanon by the resettlement program.”

Despite examples like Roshan, this is an expectation that is rooted in understanding refugeehood as binary: being faced with a well-founded fear of persecution or not (Richmond A. H., 1988). This is also an expectation based on the understanding that coercion is a consideration for refugee decision-making prior to the time they flee. In other words, coercion is understood as a condition initiating the journey. As I have stated in the previous chapters, IDM challenges this expectation and argues that coercion remains a key decision-making factor throughout a refugee journey. Arar and Fitzgerald (2022) make a similar argument as they construct their (im)mobility chessboard, which traces coercion well beyond the initial stage of a refugee’s journey. Conventionally, then, if the source of initial threat is fully eliminated, then refugees are assumed to return to their home country. If the source of threat is not eliminated, refugees are then expected to wait until they are granted with a settlement (in the asylum country) or a resettlement offer (in a third country).<sup>107</sup> IDM challenges this assumption too. I argue that this expectation does not apply to all refugees because while the initial source of coercion is absent, refugees still interact with the

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<sup>107</sup> See chapter for two for an in-depth discussion of behavioral expectations for refugees.

three components of IDM, namely spectrums of coercion and time as well as the decision-making environment at the intermediate stage of the journey. In this section, I will share my participants' stories to shed light on their decision-making behavior in transit. The question I will answer in this section is whether my participants consider permanent residence in their country of asylum, repatriation, ongoing movement or alternative migration pathways and why.

When I asked them about the possibility of pursuing permanent residence in their country of asylum (Türkiye and Lebanon), an overwhelming majority of them (17) responded 'no.' Some of them thought they did not legally have the option to obtain citizenship in their country of asylum, while other stated that they were not interested in doing that even if they were legally eligible. Three of my respondents mentioned that this was an option for them, but only two of them were interested in doing that (both in Türkiye). Hakim, for instance, shares that he already obtained Turkish citizenship: "I have citizenship because I was a good resident in Türkiye. Based on my education I got the citizenship, so I have it right now. I also welcomed another child last month and the child also got citizenship right away, after one week of his birth. All my family now are Turkish, we all got citizenship." Jamal, shares his desire to receive Turkish citizenship as well:

It's available, some Syrian people got the nationality after they applied, and I am working on it. I am making friends, I am networking, even now I have some people that make me forget about my country. I feel welcomed and I don't feel like I'm a refugee because the government doesn't treat us as refugees. Not just the government, even the people here are so sympathetic and supportive with Syrians. At the beginning we didn't understand the language and it was difficult for us to communicate, but Turkish people were understanding. After a while, my Turkish got good because I made friends with many Turkish people here.

Nabil shares his reflections on the possibility of obtaining Turkish citizenship: “I don’t have any intention to stay in Türkiye. I am eligible to apply for citizenship, but I don’t want to. I have a friend in Canada who went there and is continuing his studies, so I am encouraged to go there.” When I asked him to explain the rationale, he shared that he does not “feel welcomed” in Türkiye. He also shared that he does not feel receives protection or support from the government: “The government doesn’t do anything if somebody doesn’t pay [my wages] because of my status as a refugee and (and that) I come here illegally.” Nabil’s response is another reminder that refugees experience different forms of coercion along their journeys, and they exercise their agency and explore their options even when faced with coercion.

While the Syrian participants in Türkiye generally had a better experience about their residence, those in Lebanon had a significantly more negative experience. They all mentioned that they do not find permanent residence in Lebanon to be a desirable option. For instance, I asked Ahil if he had the option or desire to stay in Lebanon, and he responded: “No, never. If I have a chance to leave tomorrow or even today, I would do it right away.” This is how he responded when I asked him to tell me about his life in Lebanon:

It is terrible. In terms of regulations and the law, I am not allowed to work in any institution because I am a refugee, I am Syrian. I am not allowed to go to some places because I am Syrian. I am not allowed to do many things because of my nationality. I am being humiliated and disrespected by other people and I am also being taken advantage of. When they find out that I am Syrian they increase the prices, they discriminate against me because of my religion or my beard!

At the time of the interview, Ahil was working, and this is how he describes his working conditions:

I am working with a guy who has been in Lebanon even before the war started in Syria. I've been working with him in a store since I got married. I used to get \$533 but now because of ... the economic crisis... my boss has decreased the money in Lebanese currency, so now I am getting paid exactly \$75 per month... (working) 12 hours (a day) ... 7 days (a week), (with) no off days.

What Ahil describes is a prime example of how coercion continues with refugees even after they leave their home country, eliminating the initial source of threat. For him, working long hours with an unfair wage and being treated poorly creates an unbearable living condition that motivates him to explore alternative solutions. Lack of resources, restricting policies, and poor public opinions and treatment in the host country, as elements of his decision-making environment result in circumstances that he finds residence in Lebanon to be unbearable. Ahil's experience creates a clear contrast against Jamal and Hakim's desire to pursue permanent residence in Türkiye because they find their living conditions to be more tolerable and even desirable. Ahil says: "...I regret every moment that I [have] spent in Lebanon."<sup>108</sup>

Ahil's experience is shared by others too. Saad for example, shares how he finds life in Lebanon:

I have refugee status in Lebanon, but I am not being treated as a refugee and I am not being treated as a human either. For example, yesterday I wasn't feeling well, and [my neighbors] had to take me to a doctor and when I got there, the doctor didn't ask me what's wrong with me, he just gave me medicine. I have been sick for 10 days and not even one hospital has agreed to admit me, I was unconscious, but no hospital took me in.

I asked Saad to tell me about his medical coverage and this is his response:

There is no coverage, people will say that the UNHCR will cover everything but technically the hospital doesn't even admit you. I saw many women who gave birth

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<sup>108</sup> Maja Janmyr (2016) and Verme (2016) shed provide details of Syrian refugees' precarious conditions and poor treatment in Lebanon.

to their children at the door of hospitals. I have so many problems with my health, ... I have some kind of problem with my eye that costs lots of money and when I went to do a surgery, they told me that it is ... considered cosmetic and they said they don't do cosmetic surgeries. If somebody loses his vision or if someone wants to give birth, they say it's cosmetic surgery and they don't do it. Even if somebody dies, they say it is cosmetic surgery! Just not to have surgeries or admit people to their hospitals. Even the public parks, they now charge people just to let us enter. If I take my children to the park, I need to pay \$10 just to enter. I am lucky because this park allows Syrians in, other parks in another region in Beirut don't allow Syrians to get it.

Despite his medical conditions, Saad works long hours, but like Ahil, his wage is extremely low for someone who is responsible for a large family with six children:

I work every day from 5:30 AM until 10 PM. I feel privileged because I do handcraft and I can get money way more than people who are getting money now. I work so much, and I earn decent money, but I haven't worked since Corona started, it's been almost a year. ...We started working a few weeks ago but I haven't been able to work because of my illness. I have one day off on Sundays, and I am getting \$200 per month. I work in an environment that ... my boss is taking advantage of all his workers by selling these items with the scale of 8 but he is paying us in a scale of 1.5 or 2 sometimes.

Saad's story, too, is an example of how refugees interact with different forms of coercion after they leave their home country. For Saad, this coercion is in terms of his living conditions, access to resources, and how he is being treated in the host country. These circumstances inform his perception of life in Lebanon. When I asked him about his desire to stay in Lebanon, this is how he responded:

I say no to this question in English, Turkish, and in Arabic. NO! It is impossible. My will to my children in case if I die in Lebanon is to not to bury my body in Lebanon because I saw some Syrians who were buried here, and when the Lebanese discover that this grave belongs to a Syrian, they throw the corps in the garbage.

This is a powerful statement that illustrates the degree to which Saad finds life and even death in Lebanon unbearable. What contributes to refugees' circumstances in Lebanon is time. The reality

200

of living in such difficult conditions for a long period of time, nine years for Saad and Ahil by the time of the interview, contributes significantly to refugees' sense of threat and subsequent decision-making. Such difficult circumstances may be more bearable for shorter periods of times but facing such challenges for a long period of time, with no end in sight, will make life more difficult for those in precarious situations, like Ahil and Saad.

A logical question, following the fact that individuals find themselves in unbearable situations, is how do they respond to their circumstances? I asked this question in my interviews with my research participants, and they all responded in ways that highlighted their agency.<sup>109</sup> While their plans or actions differed, they all demonstrated an active approach for finding solutions for their difficult circumstances. Seven of my interviewees managed to find their ways out of their country of asylum and resettled in a European or North American country and others shared their plans to take control of their journey to whatever extent possible. Bushra, for instance, was persistent to find resettlement through UNHCR:

The whole process took two years. [My family and I] conducted two interviews with the UNHCR, and I was supposed to go to Germany when suddenly they stopped [communicating] with me, so I followed up. They told me that because of ... the refugees that go illegally to Europe... everything (has) stopped, like the country had to stop the whole process of asylum and when I told them about my situation because as a woman going to work, I was being harassed and caused many problems. While I was working for a year and half with the UNHCR, I continued pushing my file, like telling them I really need to leave Lebanon and eventually when Canada opened up, they put my file (forward), and it took four months before coming to Canada since the day they started the process.

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<sup>109</sup> I understand agency for refugees in light of the context in which they operate. That is in line with what Sarah Bracke calls "subaltern resilience" (2001, p. 212). See my detailed discussion on agency in Chapter 2.

Bushra did not simply wait for resettlement in Germany through UNHCR; when she faced a setback in her application process, she exercised her agency by trying to influence her circumstances through the means available to her. What Bushra did was similar to what Ferran had in his mind as his course of action:

I am planning to go to the UNHCR and ask them for the refugee status and I will look for someone who is in charge there and pay him something illegal so he could juggle things around and move my profile and expedite the process of resettlement. I want to say that I want to go out of Lebanon urgently because I need to find a good school for my son.

For Ferran, who arrived in Lebanon in 2014, six years was enough to consider influencing his application process through ‘illegal’ means. Having concerns about his son and his future was a key factor driving him to consider this course of action; the unbearability of the circumstances, pertaining his son’s future, drove Ferran to make this decision. In both Ferran and Bushra’s stories, their reaction to the coercion they faced was to try to influence their UNHCR application.

This, however, is not the only way my interviewees responded to the coercion they experienced in their country of asylum. Some of them pursued education in order to take control of their circumstances. For example, Hassun and Saba came to Canada through WUSC.<sup>110</sup> This is how Hassun describes his decisions and actions:

I applied to [so] many scholarships and ... WUSC was one of them and it was a scholarship for one year and sponsorship to resettle. ... I got accepted and I came here.... I applied to the Turkish, that government Turkish scholarship. I applied to Hungarian, Hungarian scholarship. There were scholarships inside Lebanon that I

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<sup>110</sup> WUSC is a Canadian non-profit organization working to create a better world for all young people. As an official Sponsorship Agreement Holder with the Government of Canada, WUSC mobilizes individuals, schools, and businesses to resettle refugees through education and employment pathways so they can build a brighter future.

applied, (for example,) American University of Beirut.... I wanted to continue my education, I wanted to have a better future and all of that was in Canada.

Hassun resided in Lebanon for seven years before he arrived in Canada in 2019. Saba, too, left Lebanon after seven years, and arrived in Canada in 2019 through WUSC. Saba explains how, despite all setbacks, she remained focused on her dreams:

My dream was to study medicine at Homs University, to be with my friends and all that. When I went to Lebanon it was totally impossible to go back and study in the university there.... So, I applied for (universities in) the United Kingdom (and) the United States.... I didn't know at that time about WUSC. I got accepted with a scholarship to the US, at that time I didn't have a mobile number in Lebanon so the number that I was putting (for my applications) was my dad's number. He doesn't speak English so [the American university] called him and he understood that they are talking about me for a scholarship. They said my name so he just told them to give me a minute and I will be back at home and then call me. We arrived home and they didn't call. I tried to call them, but they were shifting me between offices, (so) I couldn't reach out to them. So, my dad decided to buy me a phone number, ... and then I started applying for every scholarship I found online... to Canada, to every place (I found) and I got accepted in the (WUSC) scholarship of Canada.

In another interview, Diala, who describes herself as a “double refugee” tells her story, one that ultimately motivated her to leave Lebanon:

My case is complicated because I was born as a refugee because I am Palestinian Syrian. My parents were born also as refugees. My grandma was born in Palestine and then because of what happened in 1948 when Israel came and stole our land... so my grandparents are Palestinians so when I born in Syria, they gave us the UNHCR number from... The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees and the UNHCR is responsible for Syrians. So, when we went to Lebanon, we didn't have to go through the refugee process because we were already born like that, but we are recognized as stateless.

Diala faced numerous pressures as a Palestinian-Syrian refugee, and ultimately decided to leave Lebanon. This is how she describes her persistence:

I learned about WUSC 5 years ago when I was in high school. Our teacher had the application on his desk, and he asked us if anyone wants to travel to Canada here is the application. But it was a joke for most of the girls, he was just joking, he wasn't serious about that. He just did it because it was his job to give the applications to the students. I took the application, and I kept it. I was 16 at that time. I applied a couple of times and every time they told me you are young, wait until you finish your high school and then come back. When I was 18 years old, I did an interview with the manager of WUSC, and they accepted me right away. I waited for one year in Lebanon and I traveled.

Hassun, Saba, and Diala decided that waiting in Lebanon for resettlement through UNHCR meant that they were jeopardizing their future. Staying in Lebanon for several years with no clear solution, whether a return to Syria or a Lebanese citizenship, in sight, motivated them to pursue an alternative option. Baliclar and Nugent (2019) make a similar observation in their article, "The Migration of Fear: An Analysis of Migration Choices of Syrian Refugees." They argue that "the longer the time the refugee has spent in [a country of asylum], the higher is the probability of permanent settlement in another European (or other Northern refugee accepting) country" (2019, p. 95). Of course, their cultural context and resources allowed them to pursue this option. When I asked them why you chose Canada, Hassun indicated that he had no strong preference and simply wanted to leave Lebanon. Saba, however, appeared to be more intentional:

People [in Canada] are more friendly, [compared] to the US maybe I will face some challenges as a girl alone there. It's not as safe as Canada. We hear a lot of (negative) stories about the US. Also, when it comes to Islamophobia, for example, you will find that Canada is more welcoming than the US. Canada was welcoming to Syrians since the war started, we can say that. But the US closed the borders, and they were not accepting Syrian whether they are refugees or not and as long as you are Syrian you are not allowed to enter the US.

For Saba, the public opinions and state policies seem to have the highest impact on her decision to choose Canada as an ideal destination.

Concerning onward movement, my interviewees were divided in two groups: those who did that, those who did not pursue it. Belloni (2016) compares the first group with gamblers who are aware of the high risks for the journey, but nonetheless are willing to take the risk for the potential “jackpot” awaiting them (p. 105). In the first group, I had two interviewees, Afan and Hamza. This is how Afan explains the circumstances of his onward movement to Europe:

I went to Lebanon for 6 months in 2012 and then went back to Syria, stayed over there for a couple of months and then [fled] to Türkiye with my family, (and) stayed over there for a year and 7 months, and then my brother and I went away to the Netherlands, I stayed over there for 2 years and joined my family in the UK since the end of 2017, in December. ...We [went] from Türkiye to Greece and then we walked illegally from Greece to Macedonia, Serbia, and then Hungary, and then Austria and then Germany and then the Netherlands. ...We did hire someone to help us to go from Türkiye to Greece and then we hired another one from Hungary to Germany.... But from Germany to the Netherlands, we took a train..., so no one helped us from Germany to the Netherlands.

Looking through the lens of IDM, Afan and his brother had the resources to hire smugglers who could facilitate their movements and had the physical mobility to be able to take on a dangerous and demanding journey that took four months. They also had the psychological readiness to accept the risks associated with this journey. For Afan, state policies were clear considerations as well: “I searched a lot on the internet and I do have a cousin who lives in the Netherlands, so I did ask him, and we took this decision, and we went to the Netherlands. I prefer[ed] Germany, but the Netherlands is much faster in terms of family reunion, and I wanted to get my family as soon as I can, so that’s why I chose the Netherlands.”

Even after receiving refugee status in the Netherlands, Afan and his brother moved to England to join the rest of the family, which is a clear indication that family values (cultural context) and

personal networks can play a key role in how refugees choose their destinations. In another interview, Hamza shares the story of why and how he went to Germany from Lebanon: “Syrians receive a very low wage because that’s how Lebanese people take advantage of Syrians. We are like easy targets for Lebanese to force us to work and for the government we are a reason to get money from other organizations and other countries. So, both people and the government were taking advantage of Syrians.” This experience made life so unbearable for him that he decided to leave Lebanon after about three years:

In the middle of 2015, I started to arrange and research and plan to get out of Lebanon. I was planning to go to Saudi Arabia, but something happened to the King there, he passed away. My siblings had gone to Vienna in Austria, and they were telling me that living there is not like living in Lebanon. Nobody would threaten you to send you back to your country. Nobody would discriminate against you; it's quite fair to live there and the living conditions are so good. People are so welcoming. After a couple of months, they got a temporary [residence permit] in Austria. You can't compare this to living conditions in Beirut. People like us have no rights there. I compared myself to my siblings who are living in Europe. They got so many rights, way more than I got during these past few years that I lived in Lebanon... the main reason was my relatives there in the UK, France, Germany. My relatives had been living in these countries for a long time, seven years. I called them and asked them how things are there. They all recommended me to get out of Lebanon.

The desire to find better living conditions and reuniting with his family, motivated Hamza to leave Lebanon:

I went from Lebanon to Türkiye, Greece, Macedonia, Croatia, Austria, Germany... ...I had a friend who left just before me. He left for Türkiye and when I got there, he gave me the number of [smugglers] who [could] help me to go from Türkiye to Greece and other countries. In Greece, the [international civil society group] had a really great impact on refugees and on the journey.... They were doing their job perfectly by leading the refugees to go to their destinations. They were truly taking care of us, they had lots of interpreters, and they were talking to us and telling us what to do and what not to do, go with these people for example, don't go into

the forest, it's not safe to go with this group, you should go with that group. So, they were providing us with this useful information helping us to reach our destination.

Hamza had the resources, support networks, and the psychological readiness for undertaking this dangerous endeavor.

The second group are those who considered onward movement but chose not to pursue it. The reasons they shared varied. In an emotional response, Mira shared with me that she never considered going to Europe because she never really came to terms with leaving Syria in the first place:

I was married in 2015, 2016 and I wasn't thinking of leaving Lebanon and I thought Lebanon would be the country I will settle down in. So, I didn't really think about going to Europe at that time. I felt that I don't belong to any country, I have no country, and this is the most difficult feeling not to have a country to belong to. ...I am hoping for a day that we can go back to Syria and all the world will live in peace.

For Mira, this decision is primarily informed by psychological factors pertaining the reality of life in exile. In another interview, Nabil shared with me that he was considering traveling to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea: "I was thinking about it, and I did everything that I could have done but the money was the biggest challenge for me, and I couldn't do anything." So, I followed up and asked if he had the money, would have he gone? He replied "yes, without thinking about it." Nabil felt this way because he felt that he was trapped in Türkiye with no future.

When I asked Tariq if he has been or is considering onward movement to Europe, for example, this is how he responded: "a lot." I asked him to explain what has stopped him from doing that, and his response was "It just came at the wrong time." This is a great example of how spectrum of time works. Given the restrictions refugees face, their options are, for varying reasons, more

bound by time, meaning that certain options may be available to them at certain times only. Jamal, too, mentioned that at some point he considered taking on the Mediterranean Sea route, but did not pursue it. This is how he describes his rationale: “it’s not just the fear of getting drowned, it was also the fear of losing your family and your family loses you. The chances of arriving there alive were only 1% and it wasn’t worth the risk.” The psychological fear associated with the journey deter him from doing that. In another interview, Ahmed shares a very similar thought process: “I have thought about it, but it’s difficult and expensive. It costs up to 5,000 – 6,000. (The) other thing [is] that it’s dangerous. So, I prefer to live with my family in Lebanon, it’s better than wasting money or [taking] that risk. I am working [in Lebanon] and I have a family here....” For Ahmed, a combination of resources, concern for family, and the psychological factors involved in taking on a highly dangerous route are the factors deterring him from making that decision.

In a similar story, Owais explains his rationale for not traveling to Europe:

Yes, I was aware of it, it was the climax of refugees going to Europe. I was studying at that time, and I think I made a mistake that I didn’t leave Syria at that time. I didn’t have the intention to go with them. What I wanted to do was to continue my studies because I didn’t want to make my 14 years of studying for nothing. I didn’t want to let it go. I had only two years left, and I didn’t want to lose all my years of studying because I just wanted to go out of Syria or give up too soon. It came to my mind for sure and I considered it, but I was thinking about it logically and didn’t want to sacrifice my years of studying. Plus, I wasn’t able to provide the money for the trip.

Not having enough resources to afford the trip and not being psychologically ready to make the necessary compromises were factors that stopped Owais from going to Europe. Saad shares a similar response as well: “I saw that many refugees were able to travel outside and have a better

life but unfortunately, I wasn't able to do it because I have a big family. I have 6 children and my wife, so it was so difficult for me because I didn't have the money."

Ahil shares a similar thought process: "I didn't consider going just like them because it was expensive, and I didn't have money at that time, and I didn't feel safe, and I wanted to go there legally." For Ahil, though, not only the psychological readiness for taking on such dangerous path was a deterring factor, but so was the normative consideration of abiding by laws. Lastly, Aisha, shares that fear was the primary reason she did not consider going to Europe through the Sea: "I didn't want to leave from one place to another place because it was dangerous."

Additionally, I asked my participants about their ideal destination. Responses to this question varied, but a large proportion of them indicated that they did not have any preference. Those already resettled through UNHCR or WUSC shared that they simply accepted the offer that was given to them. Bushra, for instance, shares that her only concern was to receive the care and support her family needed, and that the destination did not matter to her:

In Lebanon we didn't receive any decent life and any good services, so my concern was two things. My healthy kids to be taken care of and receive good services and to settle down in a good place and for my husband and daughter to get the medical care that they needed .... So, I was like take me to any country that will take care of this, and I didn't care if it's Germany, Canada, or anywhere the place is as long as I get out of Lebanon and receive like the medical and life care that we needed.

I asked Saba, who came to Canada through WUSC, whether she had a preference for her country of destination. She responded: "No, I was totally fine with any country just a country that knows what it means to have human rights." Hassun, too, shares that he accepted the first offer he received and moved to Canada through WUSC:

I applied to too many scholarships and the Canadian (organization) or WUSC was one of them and it was a scholarship for one year and sponsorship to resettle. I applied to [so] many scholarships and ... WUSC was one of them and it was a scholarship for one year and sponsorship to resettle. ... I got accepted and I came here.... I applied to the Turkish, that government Turkish scholarship. I applied to Hungarian, Hungarian scholarship. There were scholarships inside Lebanon that I applied, (for example,) American University of Beirut.... And yeah, I was just accepted in the Canadian one.

For Bushra, Saba, and Hassun the primary goal was to leave Lebanon. As mentioned earlier, they actively tried to facilitate their departure from Lebanon, but the destination itself did not seem to be a significant concern. This narrative is common among those who are still in transit as well.

For instance, Nabil, who was in Türkiye at the time of the interview, says: “My biggest dream is to just continue my education and I don’t have any specific country in my mind. I don’t have this outstanding dream; my biggest dream is to continue my education and I just wanna have the basic human rights.” In another interview, Saad shares his response to my question: “Any country is better than Lebanon.” These powerful responses demonstrate a desire for finding a more permanent solution that offers a remedy for my respondents’ most immediate needs - a more bearable solution.

The rest of my respondents shared that they had preferences in mind and provided rationale for their choice as well. Canada (five times) and Germany (four times) were the most common ideal destinations, but anywhere in Europe (three times), Sweden (two times), the US (one time), the UK (one time), Austria (one time), Australia (one time), and Ireland (one time) were mentioned too. Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye were listed each once as well. In terms of rationale, living standards (six times), welcoming opinions (five times), personal

networks (five times), cultural reasons (three times) and resettlement process (two times) were the factors that my respondents shared with me.

Choices and rationales shared with me, however, are not clear cut and singular; they are often highlighting multiple locations or factors. Salim, for instance, shares why he prefers Germany as his ideal destination: “I would have traveled to Germany (because) my brother is there and everything is affordable, education and pretty much the life.” Mira shares a similar rationale:

... My niece got married to a Canadian guy and is in Canada. They are using the [benefits] for refugees from the days they arrived in Canada.... She told me that ‘living there is awesome, and you can treat yourself and you can visit your sister in the US, and you can treat your illness there.’ She says you can use [the medical system] there and I can find a good treatment for my neck pain.

For both Salim and Mira, a combination of living conditions and networks contribute to their understanding of their desired destination. In another interview, Hamza shares his response, one that provides a different rationale than Salim’s or Mira’s:

The living conditions weren’t that important to me. I got two sisters in Austria and one sister in Germany.... When I was in the military service [one of my sisters] got married and I didn’t have a chance to see her. So, we decided to see each other and live close to each other again in Austria. It was all because of the family not anything else.

For Hamza, value of family and network supersedes living conditions or other factors. In another interview, Aahil explains how a combination of living conditions as well as state policies and public opinions lead him to prefer Ireland or Germany as his ideal destination:

I will be thrilled if [UNHCR] call me, and I will choose Ireland or Germany because of what my friend tells me. [My friends] are telling me that I (will) have legal status there, I will have a good job, and nobody will discriminate against me, and I will be

able to fulfill my needs perfectly and I don't need to work for all these hours (12 hours a day, seven days a week).

Rashid, who fled directly to Germany, shares why he preferred the UK or Sweden as an ideal destination: "Just because Germany got so much pressure from the refugees, I actually would have loved it if I could go to the UK or Sweden, but it was so so hard for me to make it there. Because the UK wasn't receiving or accepting refugees." For Rashid, Germany was a pragmatic choice because the UK or Sweden were not available options at the time he was on the move, which indicates the impact of the spectrum of time and how refugees' options are limited at different points in time. In another interview, Owais shares his desired destination and the rationale for it:

I would ask for a country that I can have some justice and equity and where I could live a normal life with safety as well. I prefer to live in western countries not in the middle east or places like that... Canada, Germany, and Australia. ... They have stability, and you can have a stable life there. Because when you go to these countries you don't feel that you are a stranger, because these countries have received lots of refugees.

Owais refers to public opinions and state policies that he perceives to be just and welcoming and reasonable living conditions as the primary reasons for his choices. In two other interviews, however, my respondents used similar justifications for their ideal destinations in the middle east.

Hakim, for instance, says:

I would love to get Turkish citizenship because I think Türkiye has a suitable and comfortable atmosphere for me and I won't find any country like Türkiye that will suit me as much as Türkiye does. Mosques here do all the prayers, and they have awesome mosques in Türkiye, and I am enjoying it, and I am so grateful for how much they pay attention to religion. My goal is for my child to memorize the Quran. This is my dream to see my son memorize the Quran and I want to everybody in my family to know the Quran as well.

For him, the primary reason he finds Türkiye to be an ideal destination is cultural and religious similarities that allow him to continue his way of life. In a similar response, Afan, who was resettled in England, shares his ideal destinations and rationale:

I would choose to live in Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Qatar because we got the same religion. This is not (only) about religion, at the end we are all Arabs, so they were supposed to support each other but unfortunately, they didn't do that. Jordan did it, Lebanon did it because they are neighbors. Iraq did it too. ...I wanna immigrate to those countries because we have the same traditions, have the same culture, the same language, (and) have the same religion. I would love to immigrate to Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, or Morocco but unfortunately, none of them opened their borders to Syrians which is a shame because we are all Arabs. I don't mind living in any of these countries because I would feel like that it's my home, but they didn't let me do that.

For Afan, similar to Hakim, shared cultural elements are key factors informing his choice of ideal destination. This wide range of responses demonstrates how refugees interact with their decision-making environment and make different choices in seemingly similar situations.

Finally, I asked my participants if they can or consider returning to Syria. All 21 interviewees said that they cannot return to Syria. The overwhelming theme in their responses was that Syria is not safe for their return. For instance, when I asked if he ever had the option to go back to Syria, Hassun responded that "we always had the option to go back to our country, but it was like the impossible option...." Owais shared a similar response that question too: "No, never. It is impossible unless the regime [is] removed, and the situation changes to what it used to be." Salim, too, shared a similar answer: "No, not at all... I am thinking about returning to Syria, it's in my mind but for now, there is no chance I can go back." Aahil, said he does not think he can return because "it is getting worse." This was an assessment that Saad agreed with as well. When I asked

him if he feels that the situation in Syria is improving, he responded “It’s the opposite, it is worse than ever.” Lack of safety is the main reason for this assessment, but other factors are impactful as well. For instance, this how Ferran explains his rationale:

In terms of safety, it is safe right now. I’m not worried about that. But in terms of living conditions, it’s really really hard. If I want to go back to Syria, I don’t have a home as I used to do. My family home is destroyed and if I went there, I would have to work so much to afford the costs of living, my son’s school, and my parents’ living costs as well, and I can’t do that in Syria because there is no chance I can take all these responsibilities in Syria.

For him, the unbearability of the circumstance in Syria is rooted in his familial commitment and the economic conditions of Syria, as a war-torn country. In other words, the cultural context in which he operates coupled with lack of resources makes return to Syria an impossible option. This highlights what Alrababah et al. argue: return is not a mere push-pull calculation between the host country and the country of origin; instead, “only once safety in the country of origin passes a certain threshold do refugees begin to consider other factors” (2021. P. 1110). That threshold is met when safety is coupled with prospect of landownership, work opportunities, availability of public services and other factors.

Nabil, in another interview, unpacks how return to Syria is a psychologically difficult decision:

I haven’t thought about going back to Syria [because] it’s not just safe enough... even if the war [stopped] there now, I’m not gonna think about going back anymore because where would I go and live?! I have many memories there with my dad that are now black (sad) memories... how can I go back there because I’m going to recall all the memories with my father... walking through the parks and streets is gonna be all black memories for me...

Nabil’s story demonstrates the depth of psychological impact that losing one’s home and loved ones can have on a refugee. For him, returning to Syria is not merely a question about safety, it is

also about facing the psychological trauma and scars left by the war. The tragic reality of refugeehood is that while returning could be a difficult decision, not returning is a difficult one too. Roshan's response sheds light on this struggle: "I was hoping to go back [to Syria] and I cried every day, hoping to go back again. However, when I see the news on the TV, or when I hear all this bad news about Syria, I am so afraid to go back." What all my respondents agree on is that returning to Syria is not an option that they entertain. While lack of safety is the overwhelming theme in their reasoning, economic considerations (lack of resources) and psychological factors are contributing factors as well. These concerns are also documented in the literature on refugee repatriation. For instance, Black and Koser (1999) or Harlid et al. (2015) discuss the economic and political challenges of repatriation for both refugees and communities receiving them. Warner (1994) touches on the psychological and emotional aspects of repatriation for refugees and how they face the idea of their return to home. Return is an ideal outcome that is extremely difficult to materialize because, as Alrababah et al. (2021) argue, it is not just about the war coming to an end; it is also about having a certain threshold of safety alongside the return of life back to a sense of normal (pre-war) at home. It is definitely a dream and a strong desire, but one that did not seem probable for my participants at the time of the interviews.

### **Take away**

In this chapter, I followed my Syrian interviewees' narratives. I followed them from the time they perceived threat, to their flight, to reaching safety, and to their world in transit. Similar to the previous chapter, here I demonstrated that refugees interact with spectrums of coercion and time as well as various elements of the refugee decision-making environment in each stage of their

journeys. I also demonstrated that despite being in seemingly similar situations, refugees' interactions with their decision-making environment are unique to each of them. That is why they behave in different manners.

I established that despite the common experience of war, Syrian refugees respond to war in extremely diverse ways. They interact with coercion, time, and their decision-making environment as they navigate the pressures or limitations they face because of the war. In the initial stage of the journey, individuals who experience higher levels of coercion have less time to react and are more influenced by psychological factors in their decision-making environment. Conversely, those facing less extreme levels of coercion, falling under what I refer to as unbearable living conditions, generally have more time to respond to their situation. In these cases, the decision-making environment plays a more prominent role in the decisions made by refugees. During the flight stage of their journey, my Syrian interviewees' narratives emphasize that the timing of their flight is significantly influenced by the levels of coercion they face; higher levels of coercion necessitate a more urgent departure within a shorter timeframe. The psychological impact of extreme violence and harm often drives individuals to flee. As the level of coercion decreases, the timing of flight becomes more complex, particularly within the context of a civil war, where individuals attempt to find temporary safety within their country, hoping for a return to normalcy. Border crossing becomes quite complex in the setting as well. Some individuals cross borders repeatedly to cope with the economic pressures of the conflict, often working in neighboring countries to cope with the collapse of the local economy. In this stage, cultural and economic factors predominantly determine who should flee first. Typically, younger

male adults are responsible for fleeing first to establish economic stability and logistics for their families to join them later. Legal restrictions, such as military service obligations, also impact the decision, albeit to a lesser extent. Psychological factors significantly influence the decision-making process. Many interviewees were reluctant to flee until a catalyst event, such as worsening conflict or the loss of a loved one, compelled them to leave. This underscores that, for most interviewees, flight was considered a last resort. Lastly, while in a transit country, my participants continued to interact with the three components of IDM, time, coercion, and their decision-making environment. My takeaway from their stories in this stage is that refugees are far from passive in this stage of their journeys. They demonstrated different manifestations of agency as they tried to influence their circumstance. While some waited for UNHCR to ideally resettle them, others explored various options for influencing their journey, whether through WUSC or onward movement. In the next chapter, I will reflect on these findings and discuss how they challenge my initial assumptions and their impact on my own learning journey.

## Chapter 7: The Epilogue

“A refugee is someone who survived and who can create a future.”

- Amela Koluder

In this brief chapter, I will reflect on my learnings and my contributions. I stepped into this study with a vision and set of expectations, but as I made progress, I learned more and made adjustments as needed. My interviews, in particular, were impactful on my learning journey; they made me realize that some of my initial assumptions were problematic and that I needed to revisit my research design along the way. In what follows, I reflect on these learnings and how they impacted this study.

### **Notes on methodology**

I used qualitative narrative analysis, as my methodological approach for this project. However, this was a change of direction in response to my findings as opposed to a decision made from the outset. Initially, I designed my project based on a comparative case study approach. I had this method in mind because I was interested in understanding the impacts of the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’ on refugee decision-making. Hence, I expected that comparing Iranian refugees, as a group not dominantly associated with the international perception of a refugee ‘crisis,’ and Syrian refugees, as a group discursively depicted as constituting an international ‘crisis,’ would provide meaningful

findings regarding refugee behavior.<sup>111</sup> This line of thinking is evident in my interview questionnaire as well; I asked several questions about the refugee ‘crisis.’

Throughout my interviews, and in response to the stories I heard from these refugees, I decided to adjust my theoretical and methodological approach. I realized that the refugee ‘crisis,’ as a construction, is a state-centric concept that has been present in the public discourses and that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to try to identify any causal or correlational relationships between refugees’ tangible decisions on the one hand and an abstract construct on the other. The state-centricity of the ‘crisis’ narrative not only constrained the research scope of the project, but also diminished the narratives of refugees themselves; forcing their stories through the state-centric ‘crisis’ lens. Therefore, I shifted my focus from refugee ‘crisis’ to refugee behavior in more general terms. I recognized that centering my project around the notion of refugee ‘crisis’ would contradict my goal to center refugees’ voices and stories. It would impose a framework that was not necessarily reflective of my research participants’ experiences.

I initially chose a comparative case study, but as I moved away from a comparison based on the construction of refugee ‘crisis,’ I began questioning the suitability of my method as well. As I was conducting my interviews, I realized two parallel findings: On the one hand, I noticed important similarities in behavior across the two refugee populations. These are similarities in how refugees, regardless of their nationality or source of coercion, interact with different components of Interactive Decision-making Model (IDM). On the other hand, I recognized that there is vast

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<sup>111</sup> For a fuller discussion on the notion of ‘crisis’ please see Chapter 1.

diversity in how refugees within each population, whether Syrian or Iranian, behave. In this respect, national origin was less impactful than I had originally theorized. While the national context (political, economic, and social environment) is still important in many respects in influencing the choices refugees make, it was clear that it was one of many factors and thus would not work as the overarching framework of the project. In response to these learnings, I revisited my method, and decided to utilize qualitative narrative analysis instead of comparative case study. Utilizing qualitative narrative analysis oriented my study towards the goal I had in mind when I began this project: placing the refugee at the center of my inquiry.

Regarding case selection, my initial focus on refugee 'crisis' through a comparative case study resulted in selection of two refugee populations based on nationality and association with the refugee 'crisis.' Throughout the interviews, I continuously reflected on whether my case selection was appropriate for the goal I had in mind (centering the refugee at the heart of the inquiry) and my revised method (qualitative narrative analysis). Upon reflections, I decided to maintain my cases and use them to organize my findings. My two cases, Iranian and Syrian refugees, provided a rich and diverse set of experiences in various regards, particularly source of threat. While an overwhelming majority of my Syrian interviewees indicated that they fled their country directly or indirectly because of the civil war, my Iranian interviewees shared a variety of reasons including political persecution, religious persecution (both Baha'is and Christian converts), persecution based on sexual orientation, familial/cultural pressures, and avoiding fighting war (in Syria). Therefore, while shifting away from making overarching comparisons based on nationality, my interviewees' stories provided a window into refugees' decision-making. That being said, I

recognize that my cases are not as representative of refugees' experiences globally. For instance, more than half (23 out of 44) of my participants were resettled in a final destination, which is not exactly representative of refugees globally. According to UNHCR Annual Results Report on Lebanon (2023), there are 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon as of 2023 and just over 1% of them accessed resettlement to a third country or returned to Syria. This is to say that I am cautious the findings of my research need to be further examined in more diverse cases in future research projects.

In terms of organization, I presented my findings based on nationality, in two empirical chapters, one for each group. At the risk of reinforcing broad hegemonic grouping of refugees based on their nationality, I maintained the organization of my findings by nationality because there was still some value in these groupings. The experience of most refugees from Syria differed in many important respects from those from Iran. That being said, throughout each empirical chapter, I addressed this tension by clarifying that I do not reduce my interviewees to their nationality. I also ensured that my finds are presented on an individual (or family) level without generalizations based on nationality. Furthermore, this organization was helpful because it facilitated my presentation of the local context for my participants. In other words, while each of my participants has a unique story, the national context helped me set the stage for better contextualizing their stories.

Regarding my proposed model, IDM, I took a similar approach to how I developed it. As opposed to imposing a fully developed model on my participants, I developed my model throughout the interviews with my research participants. I designed my questions to loosely reflect on different

stages of a refugee's journey, from the moment they perceive a threat, to flight, reaching safety (elimination of the initial threat), and life in transit. Then, I followed my participants' stories to understand how their decisions responded to conventional expectations for refugee behavior. The outcome was a decision-making model that is helpful, particularly for policy and decision makers, in understanding refugee behavior.

### **Summary of arguments**

I set out this study to investigate refugee decision-making. My primary question was how refugees make their decisions throughout their journeys and why do refugees in seemingly similar circumstances make different decisions. In Chapter 1, I interrogated the historical and legal literature on refugeehood and established that, while academic literatures largely and rightly understand refugees as actors with agency, the conventional refugee protection legal framework understands the refugee as passive, reactive, and even lacking agency (Malkki 1995, Jaszi 1939, and Rajaram 2002). According to the 1951 Convention, and the 1967 Protocol, the refugee is an individual who responds to conditions that impose a 'well-founded fear of persecution' on them. The expectation is that refugees flee to a neighboring country to seek protection and wait for a resolution to their asylum application by UNHCR or state authorities (Haddad 2008). In particular, they are expected to remain in their country of asylum (Watson 2009). This is an understanding that some refugees could relate to, but it is not one that all refugees adhere to. I argued that refugees' experiences are far more diverse, and that they exercise their agency in diverse, and often subtle, forms.

In the third chapter, I investigated literatures on refugee and migrant decision-making behavior. Building on the historical and legal discussion that I presented in the previous chapter, I discussed various theoretical approaches, such as structural approaches (for example, Adleman and Sorenson 2018, Kibreab 1985, Koehn 2019, Goodwin-Gill 1983, Zolberg et al. 1986 and Orchard 2014), rational choice theories (for example, Ravenstein 1885 and 1889, Lee 1966, Harris and Todaro, Stouffer 1940, and Kunz 1969 and 1073 psychological models (for example, Berry et al. 1987, Eisenstadt 1954, Winter-Ebmer 1994, Littlewood and Lipsedge 1989, and Keller 1975), network theories (for example, Boyd 1989, De Jong 2000, Tilly 2007, Epstein 2008, and Haug 2008), as well as the refugee system theory (for example, Mabogunje 1970, Fawcett 1989, Bakewell 2014, and Massey et al. 2020). I argued that while these approaches shed light on different aspects of refugee and broader migratory decision-making, they are not appropriately designed to demonstrate complexities of refugee agency. One of the most recent pieces of work that aims to capture these complexities is Arar and Fitzgerald's (2022) model, which is based on system theory. In their book, Arar and Fitzgerald introduce the "(im)mobility chessboard," providing a fresh perspective on categorization of refugees based on an understanding of coercion that is a continuum, as opposed to a binary (2022, 42). They highlight the interplays between coercion and mobility and unpack the familial or community-based aspects of refugee behavior, which is where their contribution to refugee decision-making ends.

Building on the legal and theoretical discussions that I presented in chapters two and three, in Chapter 4 I positioned my proposed refugee decision-making model. My model, which I refer to as IDM, has three main components: spectrum of coercion, spectrum of time, and the decision-

making environment, which is composed of seven elements, namely structural factors, policies and opinions, cultural context, networks, resources, mobility, and psychological factors. With the spectrum of coercion, I argued that that refugees interact with coercion as a spectrum as opposed to a binary. In other words, coercion is not a definitive and static condition that is either present or absent. Instead, I conceptualized coercion as a spectrum that goes from the presence of an immediate life threat on the extreme side to unbearable living conditions on the opposite end of the spectrum. As I demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, coercion, contrary to the conventional understanding of refugeehood, is not solely an objective state. In fact, in many instances refugees' perceptions add a layer of subjectivity to coercion. Elsewhere in this project I have shared many instances, in which individuals' assessments of their own situations are highly subjective.<sup>112</sup> For instance, Marwan, a Syrian refugee who fled from the civil war in 2011, shared with me that getting shot at by a sniper did not convince him that his situation was serious enough to justify him fleeing the country. Later, however, when his house was hit by a rocket, he was convinced that it was time to flee. In this extreme example, one could argue that the shooting incident was enough for him to flee, but that was not Marwan's perception and understanding of his situation.<sup>113</sup> I also argued that contrary to the conventional understanding of refugeehood, coercion does not disappear after a refugee leaves their home country to seek asylum elsewhere.

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<sup>112</sup> Please see Chapters 5 and 6 for in-depth discussions.

<sup>113</sup> In Chapter 4, I discussed the subjective vs. objective aspect of coercion in detail.

Instead, coercion often remains an ongoing factor that refugees interact with throughout their journeys.

The second component of IDM is what I refer to as the spectrum of time. As I demonstrated throughout this study, time is largely absent from the literature on refugee decision-making. Through IDM, I conceptualize the spectrum of time as a continuum with one extreme being the state in which an individual has more time to prepare for and respond to their circumstances (usually a threat) and having less time to prepare and respond, on the on the other end. The core function of the spectrum of time is that it demonstrates how time plays a key role in setting refugees' decision-making environment. When having more time to respond to their circumstances, refugees are often able to gather information, generate resources, and better plan for their next steps. Conversely, when faced with a higher degree of urgency, refugees are more limited in resources, options, and their actions. This spectrum, too, remains a core element of refugees' decision-making even after they flee their home country. Throughout their journeys, refugees are constrained by limitations that the spectrum of time, along with the spectrum of coercion, set for them. That said, within those limitations, they try to manoeuvre and create opportunities.

The last component of IDM is the decision-making environment. While spectrums of coercion and time shed light on two specific aspects of a refugee's journey, the decision-making environment provides the context in which refugees make their decisions. In other words, refugees make their decisions in their interactions with the three components of IDM. The decision-making environment is a web of seven elements that includes structural factors, policies and opinions,

cultural context, networks, resources, mobility, and psychological factors. At every stage of the journey, refugees interact with various, not necessarily all, factors. Each of these factors are dynamic and changeable in different settings. For instance, for a refugee from Iran who has lived as an asylum seeker in Türkiye for multiple years, their cultural context in the early days of their journey could go through changes as they live in their country of asylum. The cultural context remains relevant, but the refugees' perception and normative assessments may change along the way.

### **Reflections on the findings**

I interviewed forty-four refugees from Iran and Syria. These interviews were emotional and humbling for me as someone with the lived experience of being a refugee. I followed my participants' stories throughout their journeys. These stories made a few points clear. First, flight was far from a desirable option and that it was the absolute last course of action for my interviewees. It stood out to me that my interviewees tried to stay for as long as they could. In some cases, for instance having their house hit by a rocket or getting injured, one could even argue that they even waited too long before they fled their country. In many cases, particularly among my Syrian participants, they tried to find a sense of safety and security within the country before crossing an international border. This, of course, was not an option for my Iranian interviewees because they were running from state persecution and there is no safe place from that as long as they were within the Iranian government's territory and jurisdiction.

Building on the first point, I learned that my participants' timing of flight is messy and far from linear. Contrary to the conventional expectations for refugee behavior, presence of a threat did

not equal with an immediate flight. In other words, their interactions with a combination of coercion, time, and their decision-making environment provided insight into why they chose a specific time for their flight. A higher degree of coercion and shorter window of time to respond, however, seemed to limit the impact of the decision-making environment. Overall, the interplay of IDM's coercion, time, and decision-making environment provided me with insight into my interviewees' behavior throughout their journeys.

### **Contributions and implications**

This study makes a few notable contributions to the literature on refugee decision-making. Given the fact that refugee voices are often absent from the literature (perhaps due to difficulties in recruitment, language barriers, sensitive and emotional nature of their stories, etc.), designing a study that is centered around refugees and their narratives is my first contribution to the field. While refugees are often reduced to sets of numbers or labels, centering the discussion around their stories and experiences is an effort against dehumanizing them. Giving voice to refugees and allowing them to be the narrators of their stories was a goal for me since the moment I began this study. As a result, the framework I established in this study is based on firsthand experiences of a group of refugees. My framework, IDM, fully recognizes refugees' agency, even when they are faced with high degrees of coercion. I demonstrated throughout this study that refugees exercise agency in their own unique and often subtle ways even when faced with difficult situations limiting their options. IDM highlights this sense of agency by considering the uniqueness of each refugee's circumstances, particularly in their decision-making environment. In other words, while the core elements of IDM are consistent, each element's weight could be

different from one individual to another. The outcome is that IDM does not lock refugees in a box or limit them to labels; it recognizes the diversity in refugees' experiences and behaviors.

I demonstrated throughout this study that refugees' experiences and behaviors often challenge the conventional expectations imposed on them. Throughout this study I demonstrated that refugees have diverse experiences and behaviors and therefore their decisions may defy conventional behavioral expectations. These include expectations around the timing of flight, country of asylum and onward movement. Throughout this study I argued that refugees may not leave immediately after they face a threat, or not seek asylum in a territorially neighbouring country, or decide to continue with their movement beyond their first country of asylum; however, none of these should take away from their eligibility to receive protection. Second, as opposed to the conventional understanding of refugeehood, which perceives coercion as a binary relevant only in the initial stage of the journey, coercion must be understood as a spectrum that remains present throughout a refugee's journey. My interviewees' stories clearly demonstrate that refugeehood implies a range of experiences of coercion that expand from immediate life threat to unbearable living conditions. Therefore, I argued throughout this study that protection policies need to be reflective and inclusive of individuals' diverse experiences of coercion at different stages of their journeys.

My work offers specific recommendations to three groups, namely UNHCR, state decision-makers, and non-profit organizations working with refugees. Regarding UNHCR's approach to refugee protection and status determination, my research participants demonstrate a lack of faith in the effectiveness of its processes. Many of my interviewees were frustrated with how slow the

status determination and resettlement processes were (often taking multiple years). While acknowledging the lack of resources available to UNHCR and challenges involved in resettling refugees, making status determination more readily available to those in need of protection, reducing the wait times for status determination and resettlement, establishing a more transparent and effective appeal mechanism, and better communications and information sharing with refugees will reduce the pressures on refugees, who are often already in extremely precarious conditions. Making such improvements will lead to more bearable experiences for refugees. Restoring faith in the effectiveness of UNHCR processes will reduce the sense of precarity that is involved in a refugee journey, and likely deter them from exploring alternative, often more dangerous, pathways.

My work also offers take aways for state decision-makers. When it comes to working with UNHCR on refugee resettlement, providing resources to UNHCR will assist the organization in improving the effectiveness of its processes. Empowering UNHCR will result in better experiences for refugees and reduce the likelihood of refugees trying to choose riskier alternatives that put them in danger. This will also result in the reduction of resources required for status determination within a state's legal system. Regarding states' refugee status determination and protection approach, I encourage policymakers to adopt more inclusive approaches that are based on more forward-looking interpretations of the Convention.

Finally, my study has recommendations for non-profit organizations working with refugees. Refugees have vastly diverse experiences and understanding that diversity will better equip organizations providing services to refugees with a perspective that helps them provide more

meaningful services to refugees. Tailoring communications and interactions for refugees based on their cultural and normative context allows them to feel safer and more accepted. It is also key to understand that refugees face different forms of coercion even after they leave their home country. That being said, refugees exercise agency in their own subtle ways and acknowledging their agency will help their state of mental wellbeing. Contrary, treating them as passive victims with no sense of agency will psychologically harm them. Therefore, supports, services, and communications with refugees must be understanding of their sense of agency and culturally sensitive and reflective of the diverse experiences they have.

## **Limitations**

Throughout this study, I faced several limitations and challenges. Initially, I was planning to recruit my research participants in British Columbia, Canada, so I could conduct in-person interviews in early 2020. However, once the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in public health orders restricting in-person interactions, I was forced to change my approach and opt in for virtual interviews. Meanwhile, since my interviews were taking place virtually, I decided to expand the geographical scope of my research and recruit outside of Canada as well. I recruited my research participants in Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, Türkiye, and Lebanon.<sup>114</sup> I largely used snowball sampling.

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<sup>114</sup> While only two of these countries are *countries of transit*, an overwhelming majority of my interviewees (36/44) at least at some point lived in these two countries: 21 were residing in Türkiye or Lebanon at the time of the interview, and 15 lived in one of the two countries for varying lengths of time before they resettled in their final destination.

Once conducting the interviews, I faced a few challenges. With my Iranian interviewees, I shared a common language, Farsi, and the experience of refugeehood. These connections perhaps helped establishing trust and comfort for my interviewees; however, I noticed that my Iranian interviewees were significantly less open to share the details of their stories. In many instances, responses to my questions and follow-ups were short. In contrast, my Syrian interviewees were significantly more open to share their personal stories. Regardless of the reason, for which I can only speculate, this difference in responses is reflected in the difference in length of my two empirical chapters; the chapter where I discuss the interviews with my Syrian participants is 25% larger than the one where I share the findings of my interviews with my Iranian participants. Regarding my interviews with my Syrian participants, communications was a challenge. My comprehension of Arabic language is not adequate for conducting interviews, so I relied on two interpreters who voluntarily helped me with communications. Without them I would not have been able to conduct the interviews.

For this study, my primary goal was to understand how individuals in seemingly similar situations make different decisions. In essence, I draw comparisons on the individual level, between those in similar situations. My sample provides me with an excellent set of experiences that help me achieve that comparison - for the most part. In every stage of the refugee journey, I have that wide range of experiences, except for the flight itself. For the initial stage of the journey, I can compare those who choose to flee against each other, but I am unable to make that comparison against those who choose to stay. For instance, many Syrians have left their homes, but a large

majority of them chose to stay. That being said, recruiting individuals within Syria or Iran would have been a great challenge and outside of the scope of this study.

### **Future recommendations**

I recognize that my study is based on the experiences of a small sample group. Therefore, conducting a similar study in different settings and with larger samples would be my first recommendation. My findings have supported the functionality of IDM but utilizing it as the main theoretical framework for understanding refugee decision-making in other contexts will further evaluate the viability of this framework.

### **In closing**

Overall, the findings from this study shed light on refugees' agency through their decision-making process. Refugees exercise their agency in subtle and less conventional manners, often manifested through navigation of difficult situations with restricted options. Using IDM, I followed my research participants journeys and highlighted how they make their decisions in their interactions with coercion, time, and their decision-making environment. By demonstrating the diversity of my interviewees' experiences, I demonstrated the shortcomings of the conventional understandings of refugee behavior that have resulted in restrictive protection policies. Therefore, throughout this study, I called for expansion of protection policies that are more reflective of refugees' vastly diverse experiences.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview questions

1. What factors contributed to your decision to leave your home country?
2. When exactly did you leave your home country? What factors contributed to the timing of your decision to leave?
3. If you left your home country with your family or friends, who left first and why?
4. Where did you go to seek for asylum? Why did you choose that country?
5. Did you have the option to return to your home country? why did you choose not to if you had the option?
6. Did you have the option to stay in the country where you applied for asylum (if other than Canada)? Why did you decide to not stay there?
7. When did you come to Canada? How long did it take from the day you entered your country of asylum to the time that you arrived at Canada?
8. Why did you decide to resettle in Canada? Did you have the option to resettle in other countries too?
9. Did you have access to the media throughout your journey (from the time you were considering leaving your home country to the time you arrived at Canada)?
10. Did you follow the domestic, regional, or international news in that period?
11. If you had access to the media and followed the news, did anything in particular impact the decisions you made throughout your journey?
12. Did you ever hear the phrase “refugee crisis” either in the media or in your personal or social networks? Did it have any impact on the decisions you made throughout your journey? How do you think it impacted your journey?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add to any of your answers?

## Appendix B: About the research participants

1. **Aahil** – Aahil is a male, Syrian individual just under 20, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. He left Syria with her siblings: “lack of security and because lots of innocent people were getting arrested or killed and the lack of food and other necessary items for a living.” He initially wanted to flee to Türkiye because his brother was already there, but since the borders were closed, he traveled to Lebanon, instead, where he applied for asylum. While in Lebanon, Aahil got married. When I asked him about life in Lebanon, this is how he responded: “It is terrible.... I am not allowed to work in any institution because I am a refugee, I am Syrian. I am not allowed to go to some places because I am Syrian....” He continued by stating that: “I am being humiliated and disrespected by other people and I am also being taken advantage of. When they find out that I am Syrian they increase the prices, they discriminate against me because of my religion or my beard!” Despite that, Aahil shared with me that he works in a shop where he gets paid only \$75 per month for working 12-hour shifts, seven days per week. After about eight years in Lebanon, he was still there at the time of interview in 2020, with no clear prospect of resettlement.
2. **Afan** - Afan is a male Syrian individual in his early 20s, who fled Syria in 2013 because of the civil war: “the war, especially where I used to live Idlib. There is no money; we couldn’t find a job and work there anymore.” He left Syria with his family, following his brother and father. They traveled to Türkiye to seek asylum, but after a few months he traveled with his brother across Europe on foot to get to The Netherlands, where he applied for asylum.

Their journey to The Netherlands took about four months. After his family were resettled in England, Afan and his brother moved from The Netherlands to England to join them, as well. He had his permanent residence status in England at the time of interview in 2020.

3. **Ahmed** - Ahmed is a male, Syrian individual in his 20s, who fled Syria in 2014 because of the civil war. He left Syria alone based on his parents' decision. This decision was the result of heavy bombings in Ahmed's village. He traveled to Lebanon and joined his siblings, in search of safety. Ahmed reported that he worked in Lebanon, legally, but found the working conditions quite difficult for Syrian refugees. After about six years he was still there at the time of interview in 2020.
4. **Aisha** - Aisha is a female, Syrian individual in her 20s, who fled Syria in 2014 because of the civil war. She left Syria with her parents and siblings. Before fleeing the country, Aisha and her family were internally displaced for about three years. When I asked her about the reason for the delay for the flee, she said that she "didn't want to give up too early. We wanted to go from one region to another to seek a safer region, but eventually, we had to leave." They eventually traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. Aisha works in a retail shop where she gets paid between \$75 and \$100 per month. When I asked her about her work conditions, she replied "what happens always is that they give you less than you deserve or supposed to get." After about seven years, Aisha and her family were still in Lebanon at the time of interview in 2020.
5. **Ali** - Ali is a male, Iranian individual in his 20s, who fled Iran in 2014 due to religious persecution. He is a Christian convert who left Iran alone. He left Iran alone and directly

flew to Germany where he joined his wife who had already successfully obtained refugee status. Ali lived in a refugee camp in Germany for about six months. He was residing in Germany with his wife, waiting for their German citizenship at the time of the interview in 2020.

6. **Amir** - Amir is a male, Iranian individual in his 30s, who fled Iran in 2015 due to religious persecution. He is a Christian convert who left Iran with his brother. Amir's brother accompanied him because Amir needed his support: ". I hadn't gone outside of Iran not even once and I had no idea of the outside world or a place like Türkiye. That's why my brother was kind of forced to come with me." They traveled to Türkiye where Amir successfully obtained refugee status. However, he does not feel safe and welcomed in Türkiye: "when I see a police officer on the street I try to avoid them by taking a different route. Because they can easily pick on you and make things even harder for you. Ever since they became in charge of the refugee cases the situation has gotten way worse." After about five years, Amir was still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020.
7. **Babak** - Babak is a male, Iranian individual in his 30s, who fled Iran in 2019 due to religious persecution. Babak belongs to the ethnic Arab minority group in Iran, who are often subject to different forms of state sponsored discrimination. He is a Christian convert who left Iran alone. Before fleeing the country, Babak lived in hiding for about a month. Babak flew to England with the help of a smuggler. He was waiting for refugee status claim to be processed in England at the time of interview in 2020.

8. **Bahram** - Bahram is a gay, Iranian individual in his 30s, who fled Iran in 2016 due to persecution based on his sexual orientation. He belongs to the Kurdish minority in Western Iran. He left Iran alone. He traveled to Türkiye where they successfully obtained refugee status. After about five years, Bahram was still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020. Bahram shared with me that his living conditions in Türkiye were far from ideal: “living in Türkiye is so difficult. Türkiye is like Iran with just a better name. For someone like me who is a homosexual, the living conditions here are somewhat like Iran. Here in Türkiye, I am also deprived of the basic rights that any human is entitled to, like getting married and having kids.” He was actively exploring other permanent solutions such as private sponsorship to Canada. At the time of interview, he was waiting to hear from the Canadian embassy in Ankara on his private sponsorship application. He shared with me that the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to put a pause on his application process.
9. **Bushra** – Bushra is a female Syrian individual in her 20s, who fled Syria in 2013 because of the civil war. At the time, she was pregnant, but given the intensification of the conflict in her region, she had to deliver her baby at home. Bushra decided that it was time to leave after his house was hit by a missile. She left Syria with her husband and children. They traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. She characterized life in Lebanon as difficult and described the environment as “hostile” towards refugees. After about three years, Bushra and her family were resettled to Canada through UNHCR in 2016. Bushra had her Canadian citizenship at the time of interview in 2020.

10. **Davood** – Davood is a male Iranian individual in his 40s, who fled Iran in 2011 because of religious persecution. As a Christian convert, he left Iran with his son. They traveled to Türkiye to seek asylum, and after about three years they were resettled to U.S. through UNHCR in 2014. Davood had his American Green Card at the time of interview in 2020.
11. **Diala** – Diala is a female Palestinian-Syrian individual in her 20s, who fled Syria in 2013 because of the civil war. Diala is a Palestinian-Syrian who was born in Syria in a refugee camp. That is why she called herself a “double refugee.” She shared how this identity, created a unique experience for her, feeling of not being accepted by Palestinians, Lebanese, or Syrians. Diala left Syria with her parents and siblings, but before fleeing the country, Diala and her family were internally displaced for about two years. They eventually traveled to Lebanon in search of safety. She shared with me how bravely she defied religious and cultural traditions and expectations by removing her headscarf in a refugee camp in Lebanon. After about six years she moved to Canada through WUSC in 2019. Diala had her permanent residence status at the time of interview in 2020.
12. **Farzam** - Farzam is a male, Iranian individual in his 30s, who fled Iran in 2017 due to political persecution. He left Iran alone and traveled to England by crossing multiple countries in Europe on foot. He shared how he crossed seven countries (Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, France, Germany, etc.) in about three months before he reached England. He was waiting for his refugee status claim to be reviewed in England at the time of the interview in 2020.

13. **Fatemeh** – Fatemeh is a female, Iranian individual in her 30s, who fled Iran in 2015 due to religious persecution. She is a Christian convert who left Iran with her immediate family and in-laws. They traveled to Türkiye where she successfully obtained refugee status. Fatemeh did not have a positive assessment of her living conditions in Türkiye: “People are prejudiced here, I don’t know the language that good, and I don’t want my kids to grow up here. I am forced to live here, and I don’t have a good living situation here.” She continued: “we are miserable here in Türkiye.” After about five years, Fatemeh was still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020.
14. **Ferran** - Ferran is a male, Syrian individual in his 20s, who fled Syria in 2014 because of the civil war. He left Syria with his parents and siblings. Before fleeing the country, Ferran and his family were internally displaced for about two years. He traveled to Lebanon alone to seek asylum, and after a while managed to bring the rest of the family to Lebanon as well. When I asked him for his closing remarks, Ferran said, “I just want to get out of Lebanon to make a better life for myself, my wife, and my family.” After about six years he was still in Lebanon at the time of interview in 2020.
15. **Forough** – Forough is a female, Iranian individual in her 40s, who fled Iran in 2013 due to religious persecution. She is a Christian convert who left Iran with her daughter. They traveled to Türkiye where she successfully obtained refugee status. Despite that, Forough and her daughter live in conditions that are far from ideal: “I’ve been waiting for a decision for years, my daughter hasn’t gone to school for 8 years now. She was always a good

student, one of those straight-A ones.” After about eight years, Forough was still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020.

16. **Hakim** – Hakim is a male, Syrian individual in his 30s, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. He was internally displaced with his family within Syria for about two years: “I used to move from a block to another, from a city to another, from a province to another inside Syria.” Eventually, he left Syria with his immediate family and in-laws. They traveled to Türkiye to seek asylum, and successfully obtained Turkish citizenship. Hakim had a positive view of life in Türkiye: “Everything here is great, and I am so grateful for that. They have offered us hospitals, education, we can even work here legally, nobody asks you any weird questions. For the first year I didn’t even work, I was receiving some help from others. A year after that I started my own business, I opened a small shop....” Hakim was in Türkiye with his family at the time of interview in 2020.

17. **Hamza** - Hamza is a male Syrian individual in his early 20s, who fled Syria in 2014 because of the civil war. He left Syria alone. He traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. He worked during his residence in Lebanon and looked after himself. However, in about a year, he traveled across Europe on foot to get to Germany, where he successfully obtained his refugee status. He travelled through Lebanon, Türkiye, Greece, Croatia, and Austria, and Macedonia before arriving in Germany. Hamza lived in Germany at the time of interview in 2020.

18. **Hassun** – Hassun is a male, Syrian individual in his 20s, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. He left Syria with his siblings and mother to join his father in Lebanon, where

they applied for refugee status. Before fleeing the country, Hassun and his family were internally displaced for about two months. After staying in Lebanon for about seven years, Hassun applied for student visa through World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and arrived in Canada in 2019. Hassun was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

19. **Jamal** - Jamal is a male Syrian individual just under 20, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. He says: “we decided that time because a rocket hit our house specifically, so we just felt that it’s the time to leave, and we left Syria after two days of that incident.” He left Syria with his siblings and parents. They traveled to Türkiye to seek asylum, and after about eight years he was still there at the time of interview in 2020. He works in Türkiye, and shares that he has been treated fairly for his work: “I’ve been always paid for my work. There wasn’t any discrimination against refugees in terms of money.” Jamal was waiting to receive his Turkish citizenship status.
20. **Marjan** – Marjan is a female, Iranian individual in her 20s, who fled Iran in 2019 due to religious persecution. She is a Christian convert who left Iran alone and traveled directly to Canada. Because of her job, Marjan had an existing visa for Canada, which facilitated her flee. Marjan’s application was accepted shortly after her arrival, and she successfully obtained refugee status. She was waiting for her permanent residence status in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.
21. **Marwan** – Marwan is a male Syrian individual in her 30, who fled Syria in 2013 because of the civil war. He left Syria with his wife and children. He was once shot at by a sniper as he was going to work in his hometown. In a separate incident, his house was hit by a

rocket, which convinced him that he needed to flee from Syria. A few days after the rocket attack, Marwan traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. After about three years Marwan and his family were resettled to Canada through UNHCR in 2016. He had his Canadian citizenship at the time of interview in 2020.

22. **Maryam** – Maryam is a female, Iranian individual in her 30s, who fled Iran in 2011 due to religious persecution. She is a Christian convert who left Iran with her siblings and parents. She traveled to Türkiye where she successfully obtained refugee status. After about two years, Maryam and her family were resettled in Canada in 2013. She was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

23. **Mehran** - Mehran is a male, Iranian individual in his 20s, who fled Iran in 2015 due to religious persecution. He is a Christian convert who left Iran with his parents and siblings. They traveled to Türkiye where they successfully obtained refugee status. Mehran and his family successfully obtain refugee status through UNHCR; however, after about five years, they were still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020. Mehran indicated that he was open to the idea of permanently settling in Türkiye because resettling to a third country would present new challenges, such as learning a new language, finding job, and so much more.

24. **Mehrdad** - Mehrdad is a male, Iranian individual in his 20s, who fled Iran in 2018 because he was being forced to deploy to Syria and fight in the civil war. He was pressured by his highly conservative and powerful family to follow the footsteps of his brother, who was a ‘martyr.’ He was imprisoned for a few months, before he could escape and flee the country.

Mehran left Iran alone and traveled to England by crossing multiple countries in Europe on foot. It took him more than two years to arrive in England. He stayed in a camp in Greece for several months, where the extremely poor living conditions coupled with rejection of his application led him to commit suicide. Mehrdad was waiting for his refugee status claim to be reviewed in England at the time of interview in 2020.

25. **Mira** - Mira is a female, Syrian individual in her 30s, who fled Syria in 2015 because of political persecution during the civil war. She left Syria alone and traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. She lived as a single parent with her young child. Mira shared how this has caused problems for her: “People here look at divorced women as targets for relationships and they are not respectful. It’s way harder than when I used to live by myself in Syria. Here I feel inferior and disrespected because of the society. Everybody is treating me as an easy target. I am hoping to get out of here because outside of Lebanon I can gain more human rights and I can be respected as a divorced woman, and I can gain a better education for my [child].” After about five years Mira and her child were still in Lebanon at the time of interview in 2020.

26. **Mohammad** - Mohammad is a gay, Iranian individual in his 30s, who fled Iran in 2016 due to persecution based on his sexual orientation. He left Iran with his partner. They traveled to Türkiye where they successfully obtained refugee status. After about five years, Mohammad and his partner were still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020. They were actively exploring other permanent solutions, such as private sponsorship to Canada.

27. **Morteza** - Morteza is a male, Iranian individual in his 40s, who fled Iran in 2019 due to religious persecution. He is a Christian convert who left Iran alone. Morteza flew to England and successfully obtained refugee status. He was in England at the time of interview in 2020.
28. **Nabil** - Nabil is a male Syrian individual just in his late 20s, who fled Syria in 2014 because of the civil war. After he lost his father, Nabil left Syria with his brothers to prepare for his family's arrival: "I lost my father in Syria, and we lost our home and there was no more reason for us to stay in Syria anymore." They traveled to Türkiye to seek asylum. Nabil's biggest dream was to continue his education. After about six years he was still there with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020.
29. **Owais** - Owais is a male, Syrian individual in his 20s, who fled Syria in 2018 because of the civil war. He was kidnapped for three months, before he decided that he must flee. He left Syria alone. He traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. Owais shared some of his struggles as Syrian refugee in Lebanon: "Sometimes I didn't have the money to buy bread or even any food for my day." He continued: "I was working in this restaurant, and everything was going great until Corona happened. The restaurant shut down and I was behind for paying my rent for 4 months, I didn't pay my rent and the landlord kicked me out." After about two years he was still in Lebanon at the time of interview in 2020.
30. **Payam** – Payam is a male Iranian individual in his 50s, who fled Iran in 2010 because of religious persecution. He left Iran with his wife and children. They traveled to Türkiye to

seek asylum, and after about two years they were resettled to US through UNHCR in 2012.

Payam and his family had their American citizenship at the time of interview in 2020.

31. **Rana** – Rana is a female, Iranian individual in her 30s, who fled Iran in 2011 due to religious persecution. She is a member of Baha'i faith community. Rana was not allowed, as a Baha'i person, to pursue her education in a public university and her family experienced continuous harassment because of their religion: "When I went to (middle or high) school they knew that my family was Baha'i and they used to insult and threaten me a lot... my classmates wouldn't touch anything that I'd touched, saying that it is *najes* (unclean) because I wasn't a Muslim." Rana left Iran with her partner and two children. They traveled to Türkiye where they successfully obtained refugee status. After about two years, Rana and her family were resettled in Canada in 2013. She was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

32. **Rashid** - Rashid is a male Syrian individual in his early 20s, who fled Syria in 2015 because of the civil war. He left Syria with his cousins. They traveled across Europe on foot to get to Germany, where they applied for asylum. On his way to Germany, he crossed several countries, including Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria. He considered himself lucky, because his entire journey took only seven days, from the time he left his home in Syria to the time he arrived in Germany. Rashid successfully obtained his refugee status and lived in Germany at the time of interview in 2020.

33. **Roshan** – Roshan is a female Syrian individual in her 30s, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. She left Syria with her parents and siblings. They traveled to Lebanon to

seek asylum, and after about four years they were resettled to US through UNHCR in 2016. Roshan had her American Green Card at the time of interview in 2020.

34. **Roya** – Roya is a female, Iranian individual in her 30s, who fled Iran in 2010 due to religious persecution. She is a member of Baha’i faith community. She left Iran alone. Roya traveled to Türkiye where she successfully obtained refugee status through UNHCR. After about three years, Roya was resettled in Canada in 2013. She was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

35. **Saad** - Saad is a male, Syrian Kurdish individual in his 40s, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. He left Syria alone to prepare for the arrival of his wife and six children. He traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. He found his living conditions in Lebanon to be difficult: “... I am not being treated as a refugee and I am not being treated as a human either. For example, I have been sick for 10 days and not even one hospital has agreed to admit me, I was unconscious, but no hospital took me in.” he continued by saying that “even the public parks, they now charge people just to let us enter. If I take my children to the park, I need to pay \$10 just to enter. I am lucky because this park allows Syrians in, other parks in another region in Beirut don’t allow Syrians to get it.” Saad shared that he worked every day from 5:30 AM until 10:00 PM everyday and received \$200 per month. After about eight years he was still there at the time of interview in 2020.

36. **Saba** – Saba is a female, Syrian individual who was just under 20, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war: “Before that time there was siege around my city and we used to say maybe tomorrow it’s gonna get better so we shouldn’t leave, it’s not mandatory, we

were still surviving... like these words you know... and suddenly the siege was very very strong and we couldn't do anything." She left Syria with her siblings to join his father in Lebanon, where they applied for refugee status. After staying in Lebanon for about seven years, Saba applied for student visa through World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and arrived in Canada in 2019. Saba was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

37. **Sahra** – Sahra is a female, Iranian individual in her 30s, who fled Iran in 2009 due to political persecution. She left Iran during the Green Movement, following the controversial 2009 presidential elections: "Every day we had a plan to protest in a different part of Tehran.... They broke my car windows and, on my way, back home I realized that they had taken away my back license plate as well." When she realized that identity is exposed to the government, Sahra left her partner and two children behind and traveled to Türkiye, where she successfully obtained refugee status. After about two years, Rana resettled in Canada in 2011 through UNHCR. She was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

38. **Salim** – Salim is a male, Kurdish Syrian individual who was just under 20, who fled Syria in 2012 because of the civil war. He left Syria with his brother. He traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum, and after about eight years he was still there at the time of Interview in 2020.

39. **Sara** – Sara is a female, Iranian individual in her 20s, who fled Iran in 2013 due to religious persecution. She is a Christian convert who left Iran with her partner. She traveled to Türkiye where she successfully obtained refugee status. After about one year, Sara and

her partner were resettled through UNHCR in Canada in 2013. She was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

40. **Shayan** - Shayan is a gay, Iranian individual in his 20s, who fled Iran in 2016 due to persecution based on his sexual orientation: “For someone like me who is a homosexual, it got to a point that I couldn’t hide from society anymore. The problems I had were increasing non-stop and it became unbearable for me.” He continues by saying, “sometimes life gets so tough that it gives you the will and motivation to do something about it and in my case [that something was to] leave Iran and everything in that country behind.” He left Iran alone. He traveled to Türkiye where he successfully obtained refugee status. When I asked him about life in Türkiye, this is how Shayan responded: “I have some dreams and desires in my life and I’m trying to reach them. some of these desires got fulfilled in Türkiye but as for the rest, I cannot reach them here in Türkiye, it’s not gonna happen here. Like getting married to the person I love, raising a family, and having kids. You can’t do it here because it’s illegal like in Iran.” After about five years, Shayan was still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020. He was actively exploring other permanent solutions such as private sponsorship to Canada.

41. **Sogol** - Sogol is an Iranian individual in her 20s, who fled Iran in 2016 because his father was forcing her to marry a man who was significantly older than her in exchange for money. She left Iran with her mother, primarily because she needed her support as Sogol is fighting a disease that has increasingly limited her physical mobility. They traveled to Türkiye where they successfully obtained refugee status. However, after about four years,

Sogol and her mother were still in Türkiye with no clear prospect of resettlement at the time of interview in 2020.

42. **Tariq** – Tariq is a male, Syrian individual in his 20s, who fled Syria in 2011 because of the civil war. He left Syria with her siblings and parents. He traveled to Lebanon to seek asylum. He shared with me that he worked in a restaurant once for a month, but the owner refused to pay him. After about nine years he was still there at the time of interview in 2020.

43. **Tina** – Tina is a female, Iranian individual in her 20s, who fled Iran in 2013 due to political persecution. Before leaving Iran, Tina was sentenced to live in exile in a remote area in Iran. She lived in exile for four years before she could manage to flee Iran. She left Iran alone, and lived in Türkiye on a visitor visa (that she extended for three years). Tina then obtained an American visitor visa, where she applied for asylum. With Donald Trump's presidency, Tina was convinced that refugees' situation in the U.S. was going to deteriorate. Therefore, she traveled to Canada, and successfully obtained refugee status. She was in Canada at the time of interview in 2020.

44. **Zahra** – Zahra is a female, Iranian individual in her 30s, who fled Iran in 2012 due to religious persecution. She is a Christian convert who left Iran with her partner. They traveled to Türkiye where they applied for refugee status through UNHCR. However, their application was rejected and after about eight years, Zahra was handed a removal order at the time of interview in 2020.