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*Published in:*  
International Migration

*DOI:*  
[10.1111/imig.12647](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12647)

E-pub ahead of print: 04.10.2019

*Document Version*  
Version created as part of publication process; publisher's layout; not normally made publicly available

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Koikkalainen, S., Kyle, D., & Nykänen, T. (2019). Imagination, Hope and the Migrant Journey: Iraqi Asylum Seekers Looking for a Future in Europe. *International Migration*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12647>

**TO CITE THIS PAPER, USE THE PUBLISHED VERSION:**

Koikkalainen, Saara, Kyle, David & Nykänen, Tapio. 2019: Imagination, Hope and the Migrant Journey: Iraqi Asylum Seekers Looking for a Future in Europe. *International Migration*. DOI: [10.1111/imig.12647](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12647)

**Imagination, hope and the migrant journey:****Iraqi asylum seekers looking for a future in Europe**

Saara Koikkalainen, David Kyle & Tapio Nykänen

**Abstract**

Europe received an unprecedented number of asylum seekers in 2015. This article examines Iraqi asylum seekers who journeyed through Europe in search of an *idealized version of Finland*, which they had imagined based on word-of-mouth and social media information. Through cognitive migration, the act of pre-experiencing futures in different locations, Finland was seen to offer both *subjective hope* of personal growth and advancement and *objective hope* of safety and physical security. This hope motivated them to embark on a journey of 6.000 kilometers to the European North. Based on interview data and relevant studies, the article concludes that hope of a better, imagined future abroad acts as a powerful magnet for persons with poor prospects in their countries of origin. Hope is a kind of critical emotion strongly shaped by beliefs and real-time opportunities; and as such, beliefs are notoriously difficult to change. Imagination should, therefore, not be overlooked when planning and implementing migration policies.

**Introduction**

For most Europeans, the years 2015 and 2016 will be remembered as the peak of the “European refugee crisis,” when more than two million asylum seekers arrived in Europe, many of them traveling via the then-popular Eastern Mediterranean route (Eurostat 2017; Crawley et al. 2016a, see also Triandafyllidou 2017). A majority of the individuals on the move were fleeing war or unstable, war-like circumstances. They originated predominantly from refugee-sending countries where persecution, as it is described in the Geneva Refugee Convention (UNHCR 2011; Goodwin-Gill 2014, 37–39), was evident. Around one-third of all first-time asylum seekers who

arrived in Europe during 2015 were from Syria, 14 percent from Afghanistan, and 10 percent from Iraq (Eurostat 2016). Yet the situation is best described as a *mixed flow*, in that alongside those fleeing persecution there were also migrants looking for work or study opportunities, or those who were simply driven by the hope of a brighter future (IOM 2016a; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Crawley et al. 2016b; Fargues 2015).

Stephen Castles (2003) sees forced migration as an integral part of North-South relationships and current processes of global social transformation. The case presented in this article discusses a migration phenomenon where we need to "look both more broadly and more closely at migration dynamics" as the political context and different socio-economic structural constraints but also significant migrant agency play an important role (Martiniello and Rea 2014, 1082). Thus the situation of 2015 is a compelling example of how emergencies and armed conflicts fueling transnational mobility are not the only determinants of a rise in the numbers of asylum seekers; there are also social networks, historical ties and other structural factors that influence who moves, when, and how. Forced migration is often closely linked with economically-motivated migration, which in turn is linked to the imbalance in the global economy and the belief that a move to a foreign country is a strategy for upward social mobility, or simply a way of moving forward in one's life. Following (Carling and Talleraas 2016, 6), we note that there are many drivers of international migration that stem from "conditions of states, communities, and individuals that underlie a desire for change, which, in turn, produces migration aspirations." In this article, we do not classify these individuals to any strict categories based on the forced – voluntary migration axis, but rather focus on the social nature of hope as a belief in motivating people originating from very different circumstances.

A total of 32,477 individuals applied for asylum in Finland in 2015 (Migri 2019). While this only signifies 2.6 percent of all first-time asylum applications filed in the European Union (EU)

member states in 2015, in comparison to what Finns were accustomed to, the rise in numbers was highly significant. *In fact, the rise of +822 percent in Finland from 2014 was the highest experienced by any EU member state* (Eurostat 2016). As a result of the situation, the populist, right-wing Finns Party, which held five ministerial posts in the government since the 2015 parliamentary elections, put pressure on the other parties, the agrarian Centre Party and the conservative National Coalition Party, to introduce new immigration restrictions, such as abolishing residence permits given on the basis of humanitarian protection and tightening the family reunification criteria (Wahlbeck 2018). The exceptional rise in numbers of asylum seekers was largely due to the arrival of 20,485 Iraqis, who represented 63 percent of all applicants in Finland that year. Finland was, therefore, clearly a particularly interesting country of destination for the Iraqis (Juntunen 2016). Hence, the puzzle of why thousands of Iraqis chose to travel through Europe to the North at a particular time presents an interesting case for academic research on the migration decision-making process, and it may also offer valuable insights for migration policy.

This article examines mobility from Iraq to Europe during 2015–2016 and seeks to understand this migration mystery through the sensitizing lens of the concept of cognitive migration (Koikkalainen and Kyle 2015). Why did thousands of Iraqis choose to embark on an uncertain journey towards Finland, a northern European country situated more than 6,000 kilometers away? What kind of life did they leave behind, and what kinds of futures did they imagine for themselves in the country of destination? And why did they develop the kind of hopeful beliefs that continued to play into this process even when contrary information and experiences proved to be less sanguine?

## Data and methods

The article is primarily based on data gathered via participant observation and semi-structured interviews of 25 Iraqi asylum seekers who lived in reception centers in Northern Finland in 2016. 24 interviewees were male and only one was female, thus the views expressed in the data are predominantly those of men. While a more balanced set of interviewees would have been good, this gender imbalance does reflect the fact that more than 80 per cent of asylum seekers arriving in 2015 were male (Migri 2019) and most of the Iraqis were young males, who travelled alone. The youngest interviewee was 18 and the oldest 45 years old, with a median age of all interviewees at 28.5 years. All interviewees were Iraqi Arabs, mostly from the greater Baghdad area. Six interviewees were Shi'a and 11 Sunni Muslim. Five stated that they were either not very religious, or due to their family background, found themselves to be "in the middle" of the two major religious sects, while one said he was an atheist and one a converted Christian. The interviewees had different educational and professional backgrounds: there were, for example, chauffeurs, small business owners, computer engineers as well as a nurse, an accountant, an employee of an oil company, a medical doctor and a music teacher. The interviews were conducted in English.

Eastmond (2007, 249) concludes that it is important to hear the narratives of refugees and asylum seekers because such data can reveal how they, as "experiencing subjects", make sense of the chaotic and violent life situations they are fleeing from. The interview structure loosely followed that of the migration journey: starting from life back home in Iraq and continuing through Europe until the time one had arrived in Finland and settled into life at the reception center. In their analysis of the importance of understanding the multifaceted nature of refugee journeys BenEzer and Zetter (2014, 314) conclude that "(..) an exploration of, and detailed

insights into, the lived experience of the journey, reveal and highlight the formative, ‘life-changing’ experiences that wayfarers undergo.” The impact of what happens during the often traumatic, clandestine journey towards the destination country should, therefore, be taken into account when trying to understand how the individuals talk about why and how she or he decided to embark on that journey.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed into text (~280 pages in total). Interviewee names have been changed, and the timing and location of the interviews are not disclosed to protect the participants’ anonymity. During the time of the interview, 24 interviewees still awaited for the decision on their claim for asylum while one had received a negative decision and was submitting an appeal. The data were analyzed with narrative content analysis (Spencer et al. 2006, 200–204) to find commonalities in the narratives of the interviewees. It is important to note the limitations of such interview data. The fact that English was used in the interviews limited the selection of potential interviewees to those fluent in the language and, in some cases, influenced the depth in which the participants were able to talk about their experiences. To supplement the qualitative interview data, we also used studies and survey research reports by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This data is produced within the framework of the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)<sup>i</sup>, which is a system to track and monitor the displacement and population mobility in global key regions. This statistical and survey-based data supports the findings of our qualitative interviews in our effort to gain an understanding of what events and topics before and during the journey were most salient to Iraqis as they contemplated their futures in Europe.

## **Imagination as a factor in migration**

Migration decision-making has received considerable attention over the last couple of years. Carling's (2002) model is based on *aspiration* and *ability* and states that for migration to occur the aspiration to migrate needs to be followed by the necessary talents and resources. The model by Van der Velde and van Naerssen (2011; 2015, 267–8) notes three thresholds that have to be crossed for migration to occur: the mental (interest to migrate), the locational (where to migrate) and the route threshold (how to reach that destination). Kunz (1973) divided refugees into two groups based on when the decision to leave was made: some anticipate the flight and have time to prepare, but others wait until the last minute before leaving. Robinson and Segrott (2002) conclude that whether one is an “anticipatory” or “acute” asylum seeker also influences one's choice of destinations countries. While the anticipatory group can wait for the best possible option, the acute ones may have to settle for any option and route that is available. The Iraqis in our study included both types of asylum seekers: while some had planned their move for years, others left on as little as a day's notice. Approximately half of the interviewees had to leave suddenly due to a death threat, a kidnapping, or because of the ISIS invasion of Mosul, for example, while the rest were anticipating future troubles and left when it became possible via Turkey.

The imagination, or imaginative cognitive faculties, which we define as the ability to hold something in mind that is not present or never will be, is a universal capacity of a healthy human brain. It makes it possible to envision different futures, make choices based on these futures, and make plans to reach desired outcomes. Carling and Collins (2017) underline that the desire to aspire for change is a key component also in migration. The link between imagination and aspirations in the migration process has been studied in different contexts (e.g. Smith 2006;

Czaika and Vothknecht 2012; Schewel 2015). The concept of *geographical imagination* has been used to describe how the “landscapes and climates, perceptions of cultural qualities and understandings of economic, social and political characteristics of places” (Thompson 2017, 79) play a role when potential migrants think about where they would like to move to. Koikkalainen and Kyle (2015) have labelled the process of thinking about one’s life in a future time and place before making the actual move, *cognitive migration*. We can imagine ourselves to be in a different time and place to pre-experience new situations and regularly engage in our everyday life in acts of “future-coordination” (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013).

Cognitive migration is thus a process by which the individual considering migration imagines prospectively oneself in a future time, place and social setting (Kyle and Koikkalainen 2011; Koikkalainen and Kyle 2015). The process also involves *affective forecasting*, i.e. trying to predict what the future me would feel in a given setting (Loewenstein and Lerner 2009; Dunn et al. 2009). As there is information on possible migration routes and destination countries available via migrant networks, different online sources and word-of-mouth, the imagination of an individual contemplating his or her future begins to play within preexisting pathways. In this sense, the notion of leaving may come after a possible escape route is presented. The nature of the imagination is implicated in the migration decision-making process in ways that are less conscious and narrative, where one generates alternative “future images” of life in the desired destination. The nature of the desire, its origin and availability to consciousness, is at the heart of the question.

The concept of cognitive migration may, therefore, help explain why and how the maximization of hope is not the same as the minimization of hazards, but rather parallel process with different forms of thought and emotional energy. According to Snyder (2000, 8) “Hope is the sum of perceived capabilities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to

use those routes.” *Hope theory* has four categories: 1) *goals* providing direction for hopeful thinking, 2) *pathway thoughts* that refer to the routes taken to achieve the goals and one’s ability to produce these routes, 3) *agency thoughts* that signify the motivation to undertake the routes towards our goals and 4) *barriers* that may block the attainment of our goals and force us to create new routes. (Snyder 2000.) In this article, we use the terms *subjective* and *objective hope* to highlight the importance of having both individual agency and the necessary pathways to achieve the desired goal of fleeing to a place where starting a new life is possible. Thus, subjective hope is part of one’s identity and social personality, whereas objective hopes pertain to the external world with its ever-shifting limitations and opportunities. Given the many contingencies involved in the ability to make the journey, one should not assume that one is more important than the other in predicting a migratory pattern.

Triandafyllidou (2019, 6) highlights how irregular migrants and asylum seekers "develop forms of recuperation, resilience and resistance" when they navigate the restrictive policies along the migration journey while interacting with smuggling, kinship and other ethnic networks.

Information that is available on different destinations may remain rather generic and incomplete, but yet those looking for a way out of a desperate situation are likely to use it to anchor their plans and dreams towards a future abroad (Triandafyllidou 2019; see also Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). Some refugees have strong preexisting imaginations of themselves in a particular destination, while for some refugees and many migrants, it might be the case that hopelessness continues or is reinforced abroad. This may especially be the case for the “acute” asylum seekers (Robinson et al. 2002), for whom the agentic experience of cognitive migration, a period of mental escapism, was not possible before a route presented itself, typically by a third party, as a *fait accompli*. Yet, as we will see, many Iraqis, who were seemingly abruptly forced to uproot their lives, had been pondering migration abroad for years or even decades, one part escapist fantasy, one part planning through the mental experimentations of the mind. Others in similar

situations, of course, may have never considered leaving their homes. In the next sections, we will follow the journeys of the interviewees as they travel from the extreme heat of Iraq to the cold and dark winter of Northern Finland.

### **Life in Iraq: dreaming of Europe**

Iraq is a country rich in oil. The wealth brought by oil, as well as the battles over controlling the revenue from oil production, have had a significant impact on the country's history and politics across the twentieth century (Hiro 2003, 155–171; Fattah and Caso 2009; Colgan 2013). In the past decades, wars, post-war crises, ethnic tensions, sectarian violence and power struggles between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, as well as the interference of foreign powers to Iraqi politics, have been a part of the everyday life in the country (e.g. Sirkeci 2005; Haddad 2011). The war, which started in 2003 and ended with the military coalition led by the United States invading the country and crushing the Saddam Hussein administration, was followed by a power vacuum that has led to more violence and the rise of different ruthless militia groups. Political instability and widespread human suffering have, in turn, led in a rise in the numbers of internally displaced people and created pressure for outgoing migration (FMR 2007; Juntunen 2016; Abdel-Razek and Puttick 2016; Ali 2011).

Sirkeci (2005, 200) describes life in Iraq with the concept of an *environment of insecurity*, consisting of material factors, such as poverty, deprivation and armed conflict, and non-material factors such as fear of persecution, discrimination and problems in the everyday life. Hassan (29) talks of Iraq as follows: “Actually, in general, the situation after 2003 was very bad, and every day the people wished that the country could be better, but we have seen how the situation is just going to be worse and worse (...). And the people lost *the hope* that the country, that everything

would improve for the better.” Traumatic events, such as the experience of war, may deprive a person of the capacity of having hopeful thoughts and engaging in active goal pursuit (Snyder 2002, 264). Trauma victims may try to cope by restricting their goals to those involving psychological and physical survival. Such strategies provide little reward and lead to feelings of loss of agency and the difficulty of seeing a path forward (Simpson 2000, 15). Iraqi Kurds have a long history of discrimination in the country, and of migration and life in diaspora as a response to the difficult situation (e.g. Wahlbeck 2002; Baser and Toivanen 2018). Yet as the country’s situation deteriorated and the lack of trust in the government faded, also many Arabs, who had led comfortable and wealthy lives, had to flee the country.

During the 2015 refugee crisis, ISIS controlled the northern parts of Iraq (Abdel-Razek and Puttick 2016; Juntunen 2016). The violent, extremist group which developed based on Iraqi al-Qaida has benefited from the instability of the region and it has been responsible for brutal acts of violence targeting the civilian population in Iraq and Syria (Gulmohamad 2014). Even though there was no active war in the Baghdad region or in southern Iraq, life in these areas also included many elements that Kaldor (2012) has called the special features of new types of war. Attempts to achieve political control of the population through fear and terror, the threat of random violence targeting the civilian population, brutal murders of opponents and kidnapping wealthy individuals for extortion of money, are examples of such features. Juntunen (2016) calls the situation of Iraq as “decades lived in a state of exception.” Several of our interviewees had been threatened, assaulted or blackmailed by members of either the Sunni or Shi’a militias or the local authorities. In some cases, members of their families were also threatened. This was the case for Abu Bakr (37), who rescued his ten-year-old son from the hands of a Shi’a militia. The son was released when he promised to leave the country permanently.

An IOM study (2016b) on Iraqi asylum seekers in Europe (n=473) noted that the “sense of uncertainty and the precariousness of the situation in Iraq” was reflected in the fact that 80 percent of the respondents selected “no hope in the future” as their primary reason for leaving. When hope in one’s own country is lost, the future image of life in a new destination becomes a powerful magnet consisting of a stew of fact, fiction, and dreams. For our interviewees, the sense of hopelessness was fueled by violence, unemployment and lack of opportunities even for educated professionals. Abdullah (28), a university graduate, explains that no-one wanted to hire him because he is a Sunni: “I never worked in Iraq because now we have the two kinds of people (...) If you... if you joined the people like Shi’a maybe you will get something. But if you are still single and don’t, never.” The frustration with the job situation and the danger experienced in everyday life were important factors in his desire to leave the country. He explains, “(...) we walk at the farm of bombs. That’s why. Sometimes we go out of the home but we don’t know if we will ever be back or not.”

Two common interconnected themes emerged in the interviewee’s stories of leaving Iraq: (1) the danger of everyday life, and (2) the lack of prospects for their personal futures in the country. The circumstances the interviewees described were filled with growing uncertainty and mistrust. This reminds one of Hannah Arendt’s classic description of a pre-totalitarian state, in which the fundamental details of everyday life become distorted and insecure. Life may still seem normal, but ontological uncertainty looms under the surface. Some people or groups are usually openly isolated from political life, but also many others start to become alienated from “normal” ways of life. Finally, this leads to fundamental loneliness, which refers to the complete alienation from the human condition with relatively predictable life and stable relations with other people (Arendt 2013, 546-552). In such circumstances, criminals are often in a better position than other citizens. Their actions are evaluated and condemned by explicit standards, while others under these conditions cannot predict why or when the police may come for them. While Iraq in 2015

was not a totalitarian or perhaps even a pre-totalitarian state in Arendt's sense, the narratives of our interviewees resonate with Arendt's description. In short, life in Iraq was uncertain and existentially unsafe in a way that created collective and fundamental mistrust in society and the political establishment.

In contrast, in the imagination of our interviewees, Finland was a peaceful country with a high standard of living, democracy, and a good education system. In a study by Brekke and Aarset (2009, 69-70) concerning why Iraqi asylum seekers chose Norway, the participants expressed similar ideas about that Nordic destination: it is a country of human rights, peace and welfare, even though some of their interviewees had only a vague understanding of what this meant in practice. Responses along the same lines were also found in a Home Office study in the United Kingdom: asylum seekers from different countries assumed that all Western countries are democratic, modern and affluent and can thus offer the possibility of living in peace and finding work or education opportunities (Robinson and Segrott 2002, 62). Many of our interviewees had also heard that the processing times of residence permits in Finland would be rather short and that the family reunification process was going to be easy and straightforward. In the IOM survey, 14 per cent of the Iraqis stated that Finland was their intended destination at the time of departure, while for 47 per cent it was Germany and for 10 per cent Sweden. The main reason for this choice was the understanding that it is easier to get asylum there. (IOM 2016b, 9).

The hope of a brighter future provided by the migration merchants (Kyle 2000) profiting from the trade of getting people to Europe, as well as those who were already there, was a powerful pull factor to the those for whom Iraq was mainly offering insecurity, violence and death. When asked about what he had imagined Europe to be like Abu Bakr (37) comments: "Like heaven! [*laughs*] Yeah, but it is not like heaven. But you know we try to bring the family here, we try to live, to trust the Finnish people, we try this." When asked whether he was considering other

destinations, Jafar (26), another interviewee, explains: “No, in my country I thought I can go to Finland because Finland is the new country and on the internet I’m reading and many many are writing about Finland and the people of Finland (...) very wonderful these people.” He stresses that as a baby he could not choose where he would be born, but now as a grown man, he can make a choice about what his country will be. For Jafar, making that choice led him along with countless others, on the road towards the North of Europe.

### **On the journey: getting to Europe**

The Internet and especially social media were the most important sources of information that the asylum seekers used before and during their journey to Europe. Juntunen (2016) calls the Iraqis who left for Europe in 2015 *Facebook migrants*. He concludes that during the peak of the mobility from Iraq a wave of asylum migration was formed where online content filmed by mobile phones and shared in social media played a very significant role (Juntunen 2016, 57). Also, our interviewees had seen photos and videos posted by other Iraqis who had travelled the same route before. This was, in a sense, the primary fuel for the mental images nourishing the cognitive migration process. In addition, social media contacts provided concrete assistance on how to cross the sea from Turkey to Greece, avoid being caught by the authorities and cross the borders that were most heavily guarded.

Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2016) stress that for a person considering migration, the *source* of that information is as or even more important than the *content* of the information. A rumor heard from a source that the individual thinks is reliable and knowledgeable will, therefore, be more effective than information provided by the country’s authorities (see also Mallett and Hagen-Zanker 2018). For our interviewees, these sources included social media, friends and relatives,

fellow Iraqis already living in Europe, as well as human smugglers and other migration merchants that appeared professional in their knowledge of how people are transported from one place to another along their migration route.

Also in the IOM survey (2016b, 10–11) the role of word-of-mouth and the Internet are found to be the most important sources of information used by Iraqi asylum seekers. According to the survey, the most common things the respondents looked for information about were: *the price of the journey* (93 % chose this) and possible *travel routes* (78 %). A smaller number had also searched for information on *how to apply for asylum* and *what life in the destination would be like*. Embarking on the journey was seen more important than getting accurate information about a specific destination. In the case of Finland, for example, it would have been vital to know that the country's immigration policies have historically been rather strict in European comparison and that the populist and nationalist The Finns -party had just joined the government for the first time. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, it had received 17.7 percent share of the votes and this success would be later visible in the country's immigration policies (Nykänen 2016; see also Wahlbeck 2018; Saarikkomäki et al. 2018).

Crawley and colleagues (2018) conclude that asylum seekers make a series of separate migration decisions *en route* towards their destination and can thus change their course several times once already on the move. What the ultimate destination turns out to be, depends on the information available and the circumstances they find themselves in – as well as the kinds of futures they imagine living in each possible location. Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017) highlight the importance of chance encounters that may have significant effects on migrants' lives. They conclude that migrants respond differently to such encounters and thus new information received during the journey may cause some migrants to change their course, while others are less willing to adjust their plans. The destination may change during the journey, if a trusted source reveals

that Iraqis will get asylum in Finland easier than in other countries or when the Al-Jazeera announces that as a sign of solidarity to the plight of the refugees, the Prime Minister of Finland offers to host asylum seekers in his private house which he does not use while in office (Al-Jazeera 2015).

For many of our interviewees, the place where the final decision on the destination country was made was Turkey, which in 2014 had become the country hosting the world's largest refugee population, estimated at 2.5 million people (UNHCR 2016). Even though the country had opened its borders to those fleeing especially from Syria, but also from Iraq, the prospects of permanent settlement in the country were not good, as the stay of the refugees was considered temporary (Sirkeci and Pusch 2016; Genç and Öner 2016). Turkey was thus a *precarious transit zone* (Hess 2010) along the route, where those on the move could consider applying for refugee status at a camp, gather information and engage in cognitive migration while planning their futures in different European destinations.

The case of Abu Bakr is illustrative of how hope theory (Snyder 2000) is useful in understanding the migration decision. By relying on what he has heard from other Iraqis and read online, he explains: "But when I go from Turkey, my mind is just about Finland. Because they told me many many more things about Finland. I told you about democracy and safety and like this yeah. And they say the people in Finland are very kind. In my mind: just Finland." For him and many other Iraqis, the image of a safe future in Finland thus became the *goal* of hopeful thinking and the services offered by the migration merchants in Turkey provided the necessary *pathway* and *agency thoughts* necessary for him to strive towards that goal.

During 2015, the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece became the most popular route to Europe (Fargues 2015; Frontex 2016). It has been referred to as *The Death Way* by Iraqi

asylum seekers (Äijälä and Nyman 2017, 55–56). Fatima (26), a widow traveling with her parents and small child, talks about the horror of the sea voyage: “[It was] an unsafe journey, informal journey, and in fact, we buy the death. I was thinking to myself. I buy the death. I pay money to death, not to life at that time.” Yazid, who reached Greece only at the fifth try, was planning the trip with his family. Once his wife saw the sea and the inflatable boats, she simply refused the idea and decided to rather return to Iraq to wait for family reunification. Her fear was well-founded, as according to the official estimates, ~800 people either died or disappeared in the Eastern Mediterranean route in 2015 alone. (Crawley 2016a, 5; UNHCR 2017, 2). The statistics from the Central Mediterranean route, which includes a longer sea voyage from Libya to Malta and Italy, are even grimmer where 4,500 deaths were recorded in 2015 (UNHCR 2017, 7).

The route from Greece via the Balkan countries had operated for some time as an unofficial route to the EU territory, but the high numbers of asylum seekers traveling this way made it into a *formalised corridor*, through which the authorities of the respective countries hoped that those on the journey would continue as soon as possible. Another stop along the route was Hungary, which has shocked the other EU member states by its harsh immigration policies and rhetoric where asylum seekers and other migrants are represented as dangerous “others” who are a threat to the security of Europe (EC 2015; Nagy 2016). Many interviewees stressed that passing through Hungary was an important threshold to Europe. Adel, a 29-year-old engineer shows his travel route from the map: “And the difficult part was Hungary, because I don’t know Hungary why they are not helping people and even the treatment was really bad with the asylum seekers but after crossing Hungary and you when reach to Vienna or Austria you can go where ever.”

Once past the two main obstacles along this route: the deadly Mediterranean and inhumane Hungary, the Iraqis were free to continue their journey to different European countries. Many

chose to stay in Austria or Germany or continued onwards to other Central European countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, or France. Yet the enduring image of Finland as the one and only destination encouraged more than 20,000 Iraqis to continue towards the North.

### **Not a paradise: In Europe**

The interviewees had arrived in Finland during the autumn months of 2015 and at the time of the interviews, had already been there for more than six months. Yet the vast majority still had no information on how their claim of asylum was going to be treated. They were still stuck in *limbo* (Van der Velde and van Naerssen 2015; Brun and Fábos 2015; Yijälä and Nyman 2017), where one is no longer traveling towards a destination, but is not “there” yet either, as the right to stay and settle permanently is far from guaranteed. In fact, it is rather typical of a refugee journey that the physical arrival at the destination does not really signify the end of the journey (BenEzer and Zetter 2014, 306-7), as one cannot know whether the destination really is a final destination and how long it takes until a legal, permanent decision is made (Twigt 2018).

The role of imagination in transnational migration does not end once the asylum seeker or migrant has reached his or her planned destination. Friends and family left behind in Iraq were vividly, though virtually, present in daily life in the reception center through mobile phones and computers. As Twigt (2018) argues, the same transnational media networks between family members that can be an asset in arranging the journey can later make life bearable also for those who were not able to travel in Europe but were stuck in countries of transit or origin. Abu Bakr (37) tells us that he uses nearly a third of his small monthly reception allowance to pay for his phone because it is his link back to Iraq: “Every month I charge the mobile phone with about 20 euro and I call her. . . . I call this [points at his phone], this is my wife [laughs]. Because every

time I open this, we see each other's face." During this daily contact, both parties continue to imagine a version of the future that includes a positive asylum decision and a new life in Europe.

Stories told of the refugee journey are not only narratives of what transpired during the journey, but they are also creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present (Eastmond 2007, 250). Thus, the fact that the interviewees were still *living in transit* while waiting to find out whether they were allowed to stay in Finland, had an impact on *how they talked about* the journey, their ideas about Finland and the futures they had imagined in Europe. The narratives that emerged from the interviews implied that all of the interviewees still hoped that their journey would end with a positive outcome. The hope of realizing the dream life in Europe was still present, even though some doubts had begun to cloud the blue skies of that version of the future.

The stories of the Iraqis we interviewed included three common ideas that were a part of how they imagined Finland and on which they based their subjective hope: (1) it is a safe European country where human rights are respected, (2) the numbers of Iraqis living there are relatively low, and (3) the asylum process is quick. At the time of the interviews, it had already become obvious that the notion of Finland as a country with fast processing times of asylum claims was not correct and life at the reception centers did not match the idea of Finland, as heaven or paradise. Many were shocked by how many other Iraqis had reached the same conclusion, fearing the high number of Iraqis applying for asylum at the same time would be detrimental for their own case. In her analyses of the experienced temporalities involved in the asylum-seeking process Griffiths (2014, 1994-6) refers to the time of waiting for a decision as "sticky time". During this period, cognitive migration takes on a different tone, as successfully reaching the destination did not settle the question of their futures nor did it entirely erase the older cognitive journeys and the hopes on which they were based. In the context of the reception center and the

months of waiting, they also had to begin imagining futures where return to Iraq may become the only option.

Considering the rather strict line adopted by the Finnish immigration authorities in the aftermath of the "European refugee crisis" (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018) it is likely that ultimately only a few of the interviewees received a positive decision; that is, were either granted asylum or refugee status, given subsidiary protection or a residence permit on other grounds. In the years 2016 and 2017, MIGRI, the Finnish Immigration Service, processed 20,645 claims for asylum submitted by persons of Iraqi origin. Out of this number, only 21 percent (4,407) were positive, 56 percent (11,659) were negative and the remaining 23 percent (4,579) were either dismissed or had expired before a decision was reached.

## **Conclusion**

The complex history of the Middle East and the current ethnic and political unrest made each of our interviewees story unique in their own way. However, the most common push factor for the interviewees was simply the experience that Iraq was a country in turmoil, without any clear path to a safer and hopeful future on the horizon. Many said explicitly that they left because they had "no hope" of Iraq ever offering them safety, work or even "any future". Hope is a motivational state that draws from one's sense of agency (having goal-directed energy) and pathways (planning to meet desired goals). For the interviewees, the experience of despair was created by several overlapping factors such as war, local and global power struggles, aggressive competition over natural resources, ethnic violence, the long-standing conflict between the Sunni and the Shi'a, as well as unemployment and economic insecurity, and thus their agency was directed towards finding a way to leave.

During their time in Iraq, and along the journey towards the north, many of our interviewees imagined themselves in a safe and promising future time and place in Europe. In that context hope was a motivational emotion that urged them to seize the opportunity and escape from the harsh reality of a chaotic country. The journey they made to Finland was, in a sense, a case of *hope maximization* reinforced through cognitive migration. It was subject to confirmation bias; they discovered the information they were looking for in conversations, media, and the internet, especially social media. Migration merchants marketed their services via Facebook directly to those contemplating leaving their home countries; painting a rosy picture of affordable access to Europe, where it is easy to be successful and prosper. Moreover, digital information from friends and family already in Europe provided evidence of dignified life elsewhere. In this context, all the elements of hope theory fell into place: the desired goal, the necessary motivation and the capabilities and routes to reach that goal, where Finland was seen as a place that represented both *subjective hope* of personal growth and advancement and *objective hope* of safety and physical security.

Rather than trying to learn as much as possible about the immigration policies of the country or assessing the political situation at the destination, they searched for and found an *idealized version of Finland*. Because the destination was a small country at the Northern edge of Europe, outside the beaten track leading to Germany or Sweden, for example, our interviewees could think that they possessed special knowledge that was not widely known. By choosing this relatively unknown destination, they were making a wise and informed choice. For many, it was a real shock that not only was the information they relied upon largely false, but many others had also been privy to the online marketing and word-of-mouth information that promoted this destination. At the time of the interviews, our study participants were still hopeful of the future and talked about their lives from that vantage point. A discussion taking place some years later

would perhaps reveal a story of a totally different nature; one where the trip from Baghdad to the European North was merely a diversion, rather than the start of a new life.

Before leaving for Europe, many had engaged in cognitive migration, pre-experienced a future studying or working in Finland, starting a family or seeing their children grow up in a peaceful Nordic democracy. Interviewees who recall having such thoughts are found from both the “acute” and the “anticipatory” groups, even though the time they had for planning the journey and imagining a future abroad differed considerably. Information received via social media reinforced the image that Iraqis would be welcomed to Finland. The imagined futures were filled with optimism and hope, on the one hand, the absence of fear, uncertainty and injustice on the other. However, as such a high percentage of Iraqi asylum seekers have received negative decisions in 2016 and 2017, this new beginning in a safe country with plentiful work and educational opportunities was not to be realized for a majority of those who arrived in 2015.

Most of the Iraqis who had journeyed to Finland were, thus, to be disappointed because their claim for asylum was rejected. They would have to redirect their hopes and dreams towards futures in other destinations or return to Iraq, the place they thought to have left for good. With significant implications for migration policy-making, this case is a prime example of the power of long-standing beliefs, rumors and clever social media marketing that placed Finland on the map for Iraqis looking for a way out of their deteriorating circumstances. The imagined beliefs about destinations countries, the level of cognitive migration, and the role of subjective hope as an emotion should, therefore, be considered when planning and implementing migration policies as they may lack solidity but not salience.

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<sup>i</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.globaldtm.info/global/>