

# THE SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF YOUNG AFGHAN MIGRANTS IN KARASU

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## **Introduction**

The present paper aims at showing the case of young Afghan migrants in Turkey, and above all in the neighbourhood of Karasu, by analysing the survival strategies that these actors implement in order to live in an area characterized by many difficulties. Firstly, I am going to present some data and a geographical and historical view in order to give a general knowledge of the phenomenon. Then, the focus will shift to the subject in question and its fragilities and finally, the strategies adopted to survive.

## **Trends and laws**

Turkey is a transit country that hosts the largest number of migrants with 3,7 million people, of whom around 1,8 million are children coming above all from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Differently from other migration movements that occurred suddenly and intensively, the one from Afghanistan developed in waves since the Soviet Union invasion and, above all, in the period after the US intervention and, more recently, the 2021 Taliban takeover. Indeed, since 2018 Afghans represent the largest group of irregular arrivals with a yearly percentage of 40-45%. The confirmation of this phenomenon can be seen in the latest trends. In 2022 the Turkish Coast Guard (TCG) intercepted 3,161 Afghan migrants between May and August. That represents a 105% increase compared to the previous quarter and a 122% increase compared to the same period in 2021. Over the first seven months of 2022, TCG intercepted 5,593 Afghan migrants, which made Afghanistan the most common country of origin accounting for 23% of interceptions during this time period.

Regarding the juridical perspective, the most relevant document signed by Turkey is the EU-Turkey Statement, whose aim is to block the arrival of migrants in Europe by providing money to the Turkish government. Nevertheless, the interesting aspect is the absence of any reference to the unaccompanied children. This lack is partially covered by Turkish State laws which try to include minor migrants into society, at least until they turn 18.

## **A geographical and historical context**

Karasu is a migrant neighbourhood located in the north of Turkey on the Black Sea coast that has become a known and shared migration destination. Indeed, if migrants from a certain place settle in an area in the country of destination, this aspect establishes social relations and consequently the direction of the migration flow. The composition of the neighbourhood reflects the contemporary migration history of the country. In the 1950s rural people from Kastamonu, a Turkish city, had started to come to the neighbourhood as its first wave of migration. Afterwards, with the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, people from Romania had come as the first international inhabitants in the late 1980s, forming the second wave of migration to the neighbourhood. Subsequently, the Kurdish forced migrants from the rural areas moved into the neighbourhood in the 1990s, escaping the conflict in Eastern Anatolia. The final group is composed of young male Afghan migrants, who came as undocumented and unaccompanied minors in the late 2000s to escape war and destruction in Afghanistan. Obviously, each new group of migrants arriving in Karasu ranks lower than their predecessors and so the Afghan boys represent the last category of people into the neighbourhood.

## **Afghan migrant boys**

The case of young male Afghan migrants in Karasu is concerned with three aspects of migration. First, forced migration, since it involves the movement of people from a country in constant conflict and war, Afghanistan, to another country, Turkey, in order to accomplish the status of breadwinner in their family. Second, undocumented migration and so young and undocumented minors who left their families as unaccompanied children. Third, male migration since it involves boys.

In the case of a childhood forced into adulthood at an early age, there is a usual framework which refers the journey of these young migrants. Firstly, from an early age, they learn about migration by listening to stories told by elderly people. Then, around the age of 8 to 10, they decide to migrate from Afghanistan and discuss it with their surviving male parents and relatives. After that, together with other caravans of boys from the same region, they set off

for Iran, a transit country full of painful memories, where they work as unregistered child labourers under precarious conditions. Finally, they decide to go to Turkey, a place known for its better conditions, and set off again. This process emphasizes the fact that unaccompanied migrant children are not passive victims, but active and decision-making subjects who are trying to improve their living conditions and escape from war. In fact, from earlier childhood to the current state in Karasu, these young Afghan migrant boys experience serious challenges that appear in three stages of their lives. Firstly, in their homeland Afghanistan, from which they travelled with remnants of early childhood trauma from conflicts that triggered their decision to migrate abroad. Secondly, in the threats in the process of migration given by human traffickers and Turkish and Iranian officers. Lastly, in the challenges experienced upon arrival in Turkey, where they found themselves in totally insecure conditions.

### **The survival strategies**

In the precarious state that characterizes their life, young Afghan migrant boys have to survive among squatter households, the street and the labour market.

Households represent the first step towards adaptation to the destination country. Indeed, the oldest boys help the others in many ways: they teach how and where to find work, how to go to Istanbul, the dangers of the city, the manners of the public sphere and, most importantly, they teach Turkish to the newcomers. The relations inside the Afghan migrant households reflect patriarchal hierarchies, because the boy who has the best knowledge of the Turkish language and the widest and most efficient social network (for finding a job or solving problems with locals) outside the households, acts as the leader of the household community.

While the household provides isolation, protection, a relatively conflict-free environment and spatial differentiation, the street is the space of encounters. For the Afghan boys, the street is a battleground of possible conflicts because they feel the constant control and threat of the locals. In order to show themselves stronger to the local inhabitants, they usually go out and walk in the streets of the neighbourhood in groups.

Finally, in the labour market, unaccompanied Afghan migrant children are employed in precarious, temporary and unskilled jobs across Istanbul doing the heaviest work, at the cheapest price and for long hours. Karasu has an actual job market, located in front of the Mosque, where men seeking jobs await employers looking for cheap labour. This labour market is ethnically stratified: from the highest to lowest strata are the Turkish, the Kurdish, and the Afghan migrant workers. Indeed, Afghan migrant boys, who need to earn money the most, and who supply the cheapest labour to the market, rank at the bottom of this hierarchy. Although the Afghans had begun to dominate the labour market due to low wages and poor working conditions, they developed their alternative ways of finding employment. Accordingly, they established a phone-based job market as a virtual way of finding a job through cell phone networks between employers and workers. Based on pre-established connections among the Afghan migrants' social networks, the phone-based job market enables the finding of migrant workers, connecting them to employers. It is grounded on two-sided acquaintances: on one hand, Afghans have information on employers whom they have previously worked for; on the other hand, the Afghans find jobs through a reference system. Afghan boys who have connections with employers enable other ones, with whom they have connections, to find proper jobs. In this network, having a better knowledge of Turkish becomes an advantage. As a result, novices and those who do not speak Turkish well cannot participate in the phone-based job market, and unwillingly they have to accept jobs in the actual labour market in front of the local Mosque. Yet, ultimately, through the orientation of the household, novices also begin to participate in the phone-based job market.

## **Conclusion**

The young Afghan migrant boys are a fragile category of people that, due to their traumatic childhood, have to search for a better life outside their home country. From there, they move at first to Iran and then to Turkey, where they manage to develop strategies to survive in all the places they live in: the household, the street and the labour market. Indeed, they form a social community among themselves and help each other not only with the Turkish language but also in finding an adequate job. These relations are not limited to the Karasu neighbourhood but extend from Afghanistan to Europe.

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