



Why Irregular? Factors Influencing Syrian Asylum Seekers in Migrating Irregularly to Sweden



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1. Abstract

This research explores the causes and incentivizing factors behind the irregular migration of Syrian asylum seekers to Sweden. The study highlights the opinions from 9 Syrian asylum seekers with previous irregular migration experiences to Sweden. The results show that Syria's conscription law (the compulsory military service), Sweden's liberalized asylum policies, and lacking social networks in the state of destination were the main determinant contributing factors for irregular migration. For participants obtaining a passport required completing the military service period however the participants rejected the military service, as a result, they lacked passports, consequently, their regular routes were limited. The liberalized asylum regime in Sweden in terms of its lenient procedures towards irregular migration attracted the participants to migrate irregularly. Likewise, lacking social networks at the destination state decreased the employment chances for the participants and as a result, the work permits and regular pathways through the labor market were limited.

Key Words: Decision-making, Irregular Migration, Syrian asylum seekers, Syria, Sweden

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2. Introduction

Irregular migration is a recent phenomenon; it emerged in the twentieth century as a result of increasing restrictive control in terms of frontiers, passports and migration laws in general (Castles, et al., 2012:118-119). In Europe, the migration policies focused on combating irregular migration externally focusing on bolstering the common European borders (Triandafyllidou, 2016:23-24). In 1995, the establishment of the Schengen free movement zone internally in Europe became the prelude to the establishment of common EU external borders and common migration policies (Triandafyllidou, 2016:12,25). Additionally, during the 1990s, Europe turned towards restricting migration laws and policies and began using the term 'illegal migration' in referring to unregulated migration (Triandafyllidou, 2016:9-11). Lately, in the last decades, the term 'illegal migration' has been recently swapped with 'irregular migration' (Triandafyllidou, 2016:2). In the context of migration, the term irregular indicates that irregular migration violates the state's laws by being 'unlawful' or 'unregulated' in relation to rules and regulations (Triandafyllidou, 2016:2,3). However, in terms of irregular migration of Syrian asylum seekers to Sweden, the research remains limited, especially as it comes to micro-level motives of irregular migration. In this context, this research seeks to explore the contributing factors for the irregular migration of Syrian asylum seekers to Sweden from a micro-level perspective. This thesis selected a qualitative method based on unstructured and semi-structured interviews to explore the phenomenon. The interviews highlight the factors behind the causes of irregular migration from 9 participants focusing on in-depth interviewing. The research targeted Syrian participants with previous irregular migration experiences aged between 18-65 in Sweden. The study focused primarily on spontaneous public interviewing of Syrians in Malmo and Malmo's Rosengard area. Moreover, the interviews focused on the major and minor causes of irregular migration. Specifically, the incentivizing factors on why asylum seekers decide to undergo an irregular route to Sweden.

2.1 Background

Irregular Migration and State's Reactions to Irregular Crossings

Irregular migration to Europe increased exponentially during the Syrian civil war and the states often referred to irregular migration as a threat to security and sovereignty (Castles, et al., 2012:118-119; Niemann & Zaun, 2018:3-5). Moreover, asylum seekers entering state's frontiers undocumented are labeled as "illegal" or "irregular" migrants and their entries are restricted under state's jurisdictions, despite the fact that the states are signatory members to the UN 1951 Geneva's Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Castles, et al., 2012:119; Triandafyllidou, 2016:2-5). Likewise, asylum seekers are facing burdensome restrictive asylum policies that can be linked to irregular migration routes that appear as the lone possible pathway to escape the restrictive policies in order to access asylum (Massey, et al., 1993: 451-452). Moreover, the migration methods to Sweden are numerous, for instance, the prominent migration

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methods are accessed by employment, investment, tourism, and educational visas or by the asylum, family reunion or the resettlement program offered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Castles, et al., 2012:117; Migrationsverket, 2020a; UNHCR, 2019). However, asylum subsequent to irregular entry forms the predominant route of migration in the context of Syrian's migration to Sweden (European Parliament, 2015; Migrationsverket, 2020a). For instance, in terms of irregular entries, Syrians nationals had been ranked as the highest nationality with irregular entries in Europe (European Parliament, 2015). In fact, 84 thousand Syrians nationals were found to be illegally present in Europe in the year of 2014 (Ibid).

States worldwide often justified restrictive migration policies by associating irregular migration with threats in terms of sovereignty and security (Castles, et al., 2012:118-119). In the same context (Castles, et al., 2012:118) stated: "Open borders would be the simplest way of eliminating irregular migration – but political considerations hinder governments from adopting this remedy. Irregularity can, therefore, be seen as a consequence of laws and regulations, which label certain forms of mobility as legal and desirable, and others as illegal and unwanted". Therefore, from a national level, laws and regulations play a key role in terms of labeling or/and punishing asylum seekers for their irregular entries (Castles, et al., 2012:118-120).

Syrian Asylum Seekers and the Destination State

After the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 the safety, security, political instability, and other factors pushed Syrians for displacement and forced migration internally inside Syria and externally worldwide (UNHCR, 2020). The UNHCR constantly pushed for assistance internally and externally by providing support in terms of food, healthcare, shelter, and resettlement for refugees (UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2020). Despite that, the amount of homelessness, displacement, forced migration caused by the civil war exacerbated and the assistance in 2020 reached out to only 9% of the IDP (Internally displaced person) and refugees (UNHCR, 2020). According to the UNHCR, the assistance is insufficient to cover the widespread destruction caused by the civil war (Ibid). Moreover, the factions involved in the civil war and their supporters persistently contested in Syria, their contestation remained ongoing for years (UNHCR, 2017). As a result, and to escape the civil war, the Syrians sought refuge internally and externally and migrated; crossing frontiers internationally to enjoy sanctuary away from the civil war (UNHCR, 2017:2-3,6-13).

Additionally, Sweden is one of the most favorable destinations for Syrian asylum seekers, according to UNHCR it is the sixth-highest destination for Syrian refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2017:14). Sweden is known for its liberalized migration policies towards asylum seekers in terms of naturalization, family reunion, and other rights, however, the temporary Aliens Act in 2015 restricted the migration policy in terms family reunion, permit resident's duration and border control, yet the migration regime in Sweden remained considerably liberalized in comparison to many other European states (Emilsson, 2018:2-18; Parusel, 2016:2-26).

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2.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the micro-level factors associated with Syrian refugees' irregular migration to Sweden. The research question of this thesis is the following:

What were the causes and incentives for Syrian refugees to migrate to Sweden irregularly?

3. Earlier Research

Earlier research on irregular migration lists numerous different causes for the phenomenon; some authors associated irregular migration with various contributing factors politically, socio-economically, and legally (Castles, et al., 2012:119-141,144-145; Massey, 1993;450). For instance, irregular migration has been attributed to the burdensome conditions and laws for regular migration, such as requiring costly investments or high skill labor and various other restrictive migration policies (Castles et al., 2012:119-141, 144-145). The research in the field of the causes and incentives for migration is diverse in terms of their methodological backgrounds (Aarset & Brekke, 2009; EASO, 2018; Haug, 2008; Havinga & Böcker, 1999; Tucker, 2018). However, the previous qualitative research associated with the causes of irregular migration on a qualitative micro-level scale relating to the causes of Syrian asylum seeker's irregular migration to Sweden is particularly scarce. Nevertheless, some studies can be more relevant for this study than others in terms of irregular migration and decision making. For example, Tucker's (2018) research investigated why asylum seekers choose Sweden as a destination for asylum. Using exploratory qualitative semi-structured interviews, Tucker (2018) analyzed why Palestinian-Syrians asylum seekers choose Sweden as a destination country. However, the research is based on Palestinian-Syrians, a community that is impacted by statelessness (lacking citizenship) and Tucker showed that this fact influenced the decision-making process by prioritizing Sweden as a destination state for its liberalized citizenship regime to escape statelessness (Tucker, 2018:1-3).

Similarly to Sweden, there has been another research that investigates the pull factors to Norway, specifically focusing on why Norway is prioritized as a favorable destination for asylum seekers (Aarset & Brekke, 2009). The findings show that reputation, asylum policy, networks, future, and security are the contributing pull factors behind the decision for asylum seekers to migrate to Norway (Aarset & Brekke, 2009:84-87). Social networks functioned as a pull factor by providing information to the country of origin, the hierarchical reputation of Norway, on the other hand, played a role in positively portraying Norway and consequently favorizing it as a country of destination (Aarset & Brekke, 2009:84-86,90-94). Nevertheless, the positive admission rates of asylum cases in the eyes of the participants incentivized asylum seekers to choose Norway (Aarset & Brekke, 2009:87-92). However, the research is limited to Norway and does not cover Sweden's pull factors for Syrian irregular migration, yet the former research in Norway is relatively relevant in terms of asylum seeker's migration and their decision-making process (Aarset & Brekke, 2009).

Also, in the context of migration decision-making, Haug (2008) study investigated Bulgarian's decision to migrate to Western Europe. And the decision behind Italians' return

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migration from Germany (Ibid). The finding showed that social ties at the place of destination (abroad) incentivized Bulgarian's decision at the place of origin to migrate externally to Western Europe by providing supportive information and facilitation to the home country (Haug, 2008). Whereas for Italians return migration from Germany to Italy, the findings showed lower decisions for return migration for larger households and higher return migration decisions for smaller households (Haug, 2008: 596-599). The research focused on the socio-economic causes of migration. The research combined two qualitative case studies focusing on the influence of social networks on migration decisions (Haug, 2008:589).

Additionally, Havinga & Böcker (1999) study explained the incentivizing factors behind the decision to migrate focusing on the UK, Netherlands, and Belgium. According to the study, the decision making had been affected firstly, by the ties between the destination and the country of origin mainly language and social ties, participants from former colonies experienced higher migration towards their colonies (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:43-44). Secondly, characteristics of the state of destination, for example, migration policies and laws in terms of labor market employment and asylum policies (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:43,52-55). Thirdly, events facing refugees and asylum seekers during the transition and migration process (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:43). The most influential factor had been the events during transiting (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:44). The factor is the most determinant factor because the asylum seekers and refugees were less likely to make calculations due to time limitations at the country of origin (Ibid). In that context, asylum seekers' desires in picking to the destination state did not play a big factor in their decision making because according to the study the asylum seekers do not hold so much control over their choices in picking the destination (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:49-50). The study claimed that many participants wanted to migrate to English speaking countries to invest their language skills however they did not achieve that since they lacked the control over their decisions to pick the country of destination (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:49-50). For participants interviewed in the Netherlands "60 per cent of the asylum-seekers would prefer asking for asylum in another country [than the Netherlands]. They would prefer to go Canada for example [...]" (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:50). From the study's theoretical point of view. The acute travels meant less preparations for migration and therefore less control over the decision making to pick the destination countries (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:58). On the contrary, the less urgent travels meant more planning, more economic potential, and greater power in migration decision making processes (Ibid). However, in general, the asylum seekers were heavily driven by the availability and accessibility of routes and had less power in deciding their destinations (Ibid). Likewise, according to the study, the positive image of the destination country pulls asylum seekers to apply for asylum there, for instance whenever the state is generally more democratic or generous towards asylum seekers' treatments the odds of migrating there increases (Havinga & Böcker, 1999:52-53). Additionally, Havinga & Böcker (1999:52) mentioned briefly, that on rare occasions the individuals with political opposition backgrounds at the country of origin played an incentivizing role for participants to migrate towards certain destinations. However, the factor was shortly discussed and had been located and identified as a limited factor that

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applies to political opposition activists and does only affect a small proportion of asylum seekers (ibid).

In this research, the answer with respect to the research question can be used to utilize the determinant factors behind irregular migration to suggest safer alternatives and to avoid or/and decrease the negative consequences and risks of irregular migration on asylum seeker's lives. Moreover, the phenomenon remains partly unexplored due to the difficulties to collect data regarding irregular migration on the micro-level from the asylum seeker's perspective, as a result, further research can be essential. Furthermore, contemporary studies are needed to identify factors that can be associated with life threats and psychological impacts, and burdensome costs of migration on asylum seekers most notably the economic expenses that can be unbearable for asylum seekers in war zones or under the poverty line (Niemann & Zaun, 2018:4-8; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Reuters, 2019).

4. Methodology

The method applied in this study is based on qualitative research (Creswell, 2009:233). The research seeks to identify factors in relation to migration using qualitative data by conducting qualitative interviews with participants with previous irregular migration experiences (Creswell, 2009:232). Therefore, the research was conducted through qualitative interviews by selecting Syrian asylum seekers aged between 18-65 in Sweden. The qualitative interviews were carried out as open-end interviews to understand the decisive and indecisive factors behind the decision and motive to migrate irregularly (Creswell, 2009:232-233; May, 2011:136). According to Creswell (2009:232); "the qualitative interviews means that the researchers conduct face-to-face interviews with participants [...] these interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants". Therefore, the interviews take longer periods and focus on in-depth understanding rather than quantity and generalization. Moreover, the qualitative materials will apply the theoretical framework and analysis for the open-ended interviews in order to explore the contributing factors behind the motive to migrate irregularly.

Methodologically the research seeks to understand the motives of 9 individuals with previous irregular asylum-seeking experiences in Sweden. Consequently, the research is interpreting factors based on participant's opinions using a theoretical framework (Castles, et al., 2013:28-29,39-41; Zanker, 2008:9). And the data acquired by the open-ended interviews through participants is employed and analyzed theoretically to understand the motives for irregular migration. Nevertheless, as a researcher, it is important to present one's identity transparently and to clarify how the information is stored and the privacy is upheld to gain and maintain the trust of the participants (Silverman, 2006: 117). I have carried out all the interviews in Arabic, as all the participants preferred to use their native language. The data collection notes acquired during the interviews were stored offline temporarily to later be translated into English. In terms

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of irregular migration maintaining trust can be essential for the consistency and the confidence of the conversation results (Ibid). Moreover, in terms of acquiring information, during the data collection, it had been important to listen, interact and to avoid emphasizing with the participant's point of view and to maintain neutrality and ensure the continuity of open-ended interviews (Silverman, 2006: 117-119). However, the qualitative interviews require consistent active listening and a slight passivity to provide the appropriate amount of space for the participants to elaborate on the issue (Silverman, 2006: 117-119). During the interviews, it is important to save notes and audio recordings while paying attention to the ethical consideration of the research integrity and the code of conduct (Allea, 2017: Silverman, 2006:120-122). Furthermore, the analysis is adopted to serve the aim in order to analyze opinions based on individual's perspectives to provide meaning and real-life experiences about the phenomena (irregular migration of Syrian asylum seekers) through constructivism lens (Silverman, 2006:215; May, 2011:150-159). Moreover, from a constructivist point of view, the analysis can be potentially biased as a result of the inclinations and biased mindsets of the various participants (Silverman, 2006:216). Further, the qualitative analysis aims to understand rather than generalize the answers by engaging in conversations with the participants (ibid). Therefore, In the context of irregular migration, the analysis will aim to understand the potential dependencies in relation to irregular migration such time, costs, accessibility for example, and their operational role in the context of regular and irregular migration (May, 2011:150-159). Moreover, it is important for the analysis to prevent ethical violations by abstaining from acquiring meanings in prejudicial manners contradictory to the participants' statements in the interviews (May, 2011:151-152). Nonetheless, after the interviews, the research qualitative data was collected separately, organized, and divided in relation to relevant themes identified during the analysis to enable the coding of the material (Creswell, 2009: 227; May, 2011: 152-154). Moreover, Silverman (1985: 165 as cited in May, 2011: 157) stated; "interview data report not on an external reality displayed in the respondent's utterances but on the internal reality constructed as both parties contrive to produce the appearances of a recognizable interview". In the same context, during the initial 4 interviews, the research first adopted unstructured interviews to acquire knowledge about the phenomena. The knowledge gained through these initial interviews were then utilized to formulate the guidelines of the following 5 semi-structured interviews, therefore the research sought to employ unstructured interviews at the beginning to accumulate knowledge followed with semi-structured interviews in the aim of increasing the knowledge to boost the relevancy and accuracy of the semi-structured questions (May, 2011:134-137).

To conclude, the research is capturing findings through the participant reflective conversations during the unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews in order to present understanding in relation to the causes of irregular migration in the context of Syrian asylum seekers migration to Sweden (May, 2011:153,157).

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4.1 Sampling and Ethical Considerations

The research selected participants in the study spontaneously; firstly to accelerate the data collection and secondly to overcome the permissions restrictions on interviewing imposed by different departments to avoid the hindering delays during the data collection process (McCormack, et al., 2013:232-238). For example, the Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket) rejected providing locations of refugee camps and refused to allow interviewing for participants in its premises. Consequently, the research did not interview Syrians at the refugee's camps in Sweden. The research experienced difficulties specifically due to the low participation rate during the data collection phase due to the sensitivity of the phenomena (irregular migration). Therefore, the participants in the study were identified and located publicly in Malmo's Rosengard area; the central square, additional to other public areas including streets and parks. Malmo and Rosengard area is known for multiculturalism and for its diversity in its demographic background, therefore the probabilities of locating Syrians can be higher in such areas (Peter, 2006). Moreover, street spontaneous interviewing is one of the most successful approaches to accelerate data collection (McCormack, et al., 2013:232-238). Street interviewing can play a very positive role in terms of accessing participants in a shorter sampling period; this sampling method can reflect positively on the quality of data collected (Davies, 2011:289-290; McCormack, et al., 2013:232-238).

Finally, pseudonyms replaced the original participants' names to protect the privacy of the individuals involved in the study (Creswell, 2009:91). According to Creswell (2009:91); [...] in qualitative research, inquirers use aliases or pseudonyms for individuals [...] to protect their identities". Therefore, it is important to uphold the ethical code of researchers by using pseudonyms alternatively to the original names while conducting the research (Ibid).

4.2 Strengths and Weaknesses

The accessibility of qualitative data by open-ended interviewing of previously irregular Syrian asylum seekers can be difficult and more time consuming due to the sensitivity of the issue and cautiousness of the potential participants, sensitive topics are hardly accessible (Silverman, 2006:116-117). Furthermore, potential bias by the participants can affect the neutrality and the data developing analysis (Silverman 2006:216). On the contrary, the qualitative method can be a useful strength point to understand personal motives and sensitive issues such as irregular migration from the individualistic perspective (Silverman, 2006:215,345).

4.3 Validity and Reliability

Qualitative research focuses on depths rather than quantity, however, the consistent depth experiences of the participants in the themes increase the validity of the qualitative research (Creswell, 2009:191-192). According to Creswell (2009:191); "If the themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study". In this research, the main themes attribute

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shared opinions and recurrent experiences of the participants towards similar factors and that enhance the validity of the study.

In terms of the researcher position, and as a former Syrian asylum seeker, my position can pose simultaneous advantages and disadvantages. As an interviewer, the disadvantage is located in the potential bias. To solve this issue, as a researcher, I avoided expressing my opinion and perception about the phenomenon during the data collection process while conducting the open-ended interviews. Likewise, in the analysis, I reflected upon the participants' opinions and their shared experiences as the themes contained the main shared experiences and opinions about the causes of irregular migration from the participants themselves. Similarly, in the analysis, theories were adopted to interpret the factors. Therefore, the results of the qualitative research were driven by the participants' opinions and the theoretical framework standpoints with the aim of being unaffected by bias.

As an interviewer and a native Arabic speaker, I experienced comfortability during the interviewing, the participants were cooperative and expressed no concerns regarding the communication during interviews. Therefore, the data collected during the interviews had been collected smoothly. Moreover, in terms of personal bias Creswell (2009:191-192) stated: "I recommend the use of multiple strategies [...] to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy [...] clarify the *bias* the researcher brings to the study. This self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers. Reflectivity has been mentioned as a core characteristic of qualitative research. Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background [...]". Accordingly, maintaining neutrality has been one of my main focuses while completing the qualitative research to enhance the validity.

4.4 Ontology and Epistemology in Relation to the Method of Choice

Scientifically the selection of the appropriate suitable design choice to explain the phenomena is essential to the quality function of the study (Okasha, 2002:55-57). The constructivist perspective does not deny the existence of the world physically however it ontologically claims that the social world is a product of our perceptions and hence it is dependent on our perception (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:169, 177, 198). Consequently, humans identify and categorize reality relatively to their perspectives, and the world ontologically does not exist independently of our senses (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:169-173, 199). However, Immanuel Kant claims that humans construct visions about the real world yet humans cannot discover and perceive everything about the real world, and therefore their vision about the real world is bound to their constructed vision (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:177). Consequently, the constructivist approach is mainly linked to the perception of reality (Ibid).

The research is based on qualitative open-ended interviews that carry a constructivist point of view by relying on the participant's perceptions with respect to the social world and in what

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way they construct their view around the real world (Creswell, 2009:232; Moses & Knutsen, 2012:177-179). Furthermore, epistemologically constructivism claims that knowledge is generated by interactions, and an individual's knowledge constructs and forms another individual's knowledge (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:184). As result, in terms of the research, the qualitative open-ended interviews knowledge is driven by the participants' beliefs about the truth, analyzed and understood through research and the theoretical framework in order to seek to identify the justified the beliefs on the causes and motives of Syrian asylum seekers irregular migration to Sweden (Moses & Knutsen, 2012: 184, 199-200). Additionally, the constructivist perspective points out that addressing an individual's perception of the real world can be crucial in terms of providing greater knowledge (Moses & Knutsen, 2012: 177,198-199). Finally, the constructivist perspective does not deny the existence of patterns and regularities in the real world however it argues that they are socially constructed (Moses & Knutsen, 2012; 10-11,201).

5. Concepts

5.1 Theories:

Lees' Push and Pull Micro-Level Theory and Migration Network Meso-Level Theory

In this paper, the research applies Lee's Push and Pull: Micro Theory and Migration Network Meso-Level Theory to identify the causes behind irregular migration (Castles, et al., 2013:28-29; Zanker, 2008:9; Massey, 1993:448-450). Lee's Push and Pull Theory is a migratory micro-level theory (Zanker, 2008:6-9). Microstructures theories are concerned with small units such as families, individuals, and their personal perceptions and motivations, for instance, their motivation to migrate (Castles, et al., 2013:26,28-29). According to Lee's push and pull theory, migration is initiated due to pushing and pulling factors that cause or contribute to migration trends on a micro-level, (Castles, et al., 2013:28-29; Zanker, 2008:9). The theory identifies the push and pulls factors comprehensively from environmental, economical, political, legal, personal, and demographic aspects (Castles, et al., 2013:28). The personal factors can be motivated by policies in the home and the destination country (Ibid). And factors such as laws in the home and the destination states can affect the asylum seekers decision making (Castles, et al., 2013:28). For instance, security, equality, and political and economical environments affect the decision-making process (Ibid). Also, conflicts, political oppression, lack of opportunities or equality can push individuals to migrate even irregularly to escape such threats and disadvantages in the home country (Castles, et al., 2013:28). On the contrary, peace, safety, economic boom, equality, liberalized migration policies, and other advantages which attract individuals in the destination countries are perceived as pull factors according to Lee's Push and Pull Theory (Ibid). Hence, the theory scope is seen as a comprehensive frame on a micro-level because it captures all the decision-making affecting factors for the individuals to migrate (Castles, et al., 2013:28). Lee's (1966 as cited in Castles, et al., 2013:28) argued that: "[...] migration decisions are determined by 'plus' and 'minus' factors in areas of origin and

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destination; intervening obstacles (such as distance, physical barriers, immigration laws, and so on); and personal factors”.

On the other hand, the theory is criticized as some factors can act as contradictory simultaneously for example, according to the theory the poverty can be a push factor to migrate yet poverty can also hinder individuals' migration; as being incapable financially, makes individuals incapable to afford the migration costs, therefore, some factors do not necessarily constantly function as a push or pull factors as they potentially differ in different contexts (Castles, et al., 2013:29). Additionally, the theory's disadvantage is appearing as merely factors that can affect migration trends, therefore it is criticized for lacking the framework that combined such factors in an explanatory manner (Castles, et al., 2013:28).

On the other hand, Migration Network Theory is a meso-level theory (Zanker, 2008:5). Meso-level structure includes social ties, migrants or asylum seekers communities, and migrant business, and groups (Castles, et al., 2013:26). Whereas micro-level focuses on the smaller units; for instance, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and their household decisions as a unit as mentioned earlier (Castles, et al., 2013:26). On meso-level, according to Migration Network Theory which focuses on the role of social capital; the social ties established between migrants, asylum seekers in the home and destination states, function as social networks to decrease the costs, risks of migration by providing supportive knowledge through those networks from destination to the home country (Zanker, 2008:17). According to Massey (1990:8 as cited in Castles, et al., 2013:40); “[...] expanding networks cause the costs of movement to fall and the probability of migration to rise”. Further, the migrants in the destination states who provide information, support to assist the individuals in the home countries are referred to as ‘Bridgeheads’ (Böcker, 1994 as cited in Castles, et al., 2013:40). The ‘Bridgehead’ assistance, for example, can include information on employment offers in the destination country, migratory routes, and other preferred and suitable knowledge regarding the environment in the destination countries these supportive functions can accelerate and facilitate the migratory process (Castles, et al., 2013:40-41). The theory can be crucial in understanding the causes for irregular migration of Syrian asylum seekers since it explains how social networks operate to decrease the costs of migration or to provides knowledge from the destination state to the home state to incentivizes and facilitate a subsequent migration (Castles, et al., 2013:49-41). According to Haug’s (2008:589) study, the communities’ social networks can affect individuals’ decision-making process in five different mechanisms explained in:

Firstly, ‘affinity hypothesis’ (Ritchey, 1976: 389; Uhlenberg, 1973: 309 as cited in Haug, 2008:589). According to the hypothesis, maintaining close social networks in the country of origin decreases the chances for migration. Socio-economic factors such as close social ties, businesses at the country of origin decrease the decision making to migrate to externally (Haug, 2008:589).

Secondly, ‘Information hypothesis’ (Ritchey, 1976: 389 as cited in Haug, 2008:589), for information hypothesis, the social ties externally to the country of origin increases the tendency to migrate abroad through information. The information flow between the destination state and

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the countries of origin pulls migration influx towards the destination state through information (Haug,2008:589).

Thirdly, 'facilitating hypothesis' (Haug, 2008:589). According to the hypothesis, the social ties promotes and incentivize the migration towards their locations by pulling social ties towards the destination country through their establishments at the new locations (Choldin 1973; Ritchey 1976: 389; Tilly and Brown 1967 as cited in Haug, 2008:589). Their establishment and adaptation at new resettled locations provide attractive pulling environments towards them by providing attractive, employment opportunities and suitable environments that pull migration towards them at destination state (Choldin, 1973; Ritchey 1976: 389; Tilly and Brown 1967 as cited in Haug, 2008:589).

Fourthly, 'Conflict Hypothesis' (Haug, 2008:589). According to (Hugo 1981: 196 as cited in Haug 2008:589), the hypothesis predicts that "Intra-familial conflicts within the community also cause migration Social networks at the place of residence can therefore serve as a push factor".

Finally, 'Encouraging Hypothesis' (Haug, 2008:589). With regards to encouraging hypotheses, social ties at the country of origin promote and support individuals to migrate abroad for economic gains, therefore, social networks according to "encouraging hypothesis", are push factors at the country of origin (Hugo, 1981: 196; Stark, 1991 as cited in Haug, 2008:589). The previous hypothesis factors are influential Meso-level push and pull factors that cause and incentivize the decision-making of individuals on Micro-level to migrate or remain (Haug, 2008:589).

It is worth reaffirming that the 'affinity hypothesis' assumes that social networks and economic ties at the country of origin attach individuals to remain (Ibid). Conversely, according to the 'encouraging hypothesis' the social networks at the country of origin encourage individuals to migrate for economic gains. Therefore, social networks at the country of origin can serve as a push or pull factors depending on the operational context. Furthermore, in the context of 'padroni' migration (pioneer's migration), the migration conditions are always harder due to the lack of social network support at the country of destination (Haug, 2008:590). Lacking or having ineffective social networks decreases the probabilities of migration and therefore the decision making in many cases is formulated based on the social network environment at the destination state, for instance, the support in terms of reduced costs, risks of migration routes and the supportive information inclines the individual's decision at the country of origin to migrate externally (Haug, 2008:589-591).

However, the theory scope only covers the role of social capital and social ties in relation to migration, as a result, the scope can be limited and incapable to uncover other factors that can potentially influence the migratory trends (Van Meeteren & Pereira, 2018:925-929).

5.2 Notable Definitions

International law and intergovernmental organizations definitions and positions towards irregular migration and asylum:

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The definition of irregular migration differs between states and Intergovernmental organizations; universally there has been no worldwide accepted definition (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; International Organization for Migration, 2020). However, the International Organization for Migration (2020) related to the United Nations, defines irregular migration as the “[...] movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination”.

And regular migration is defined as the “[...] Migration that occurs in compliance with the laws of the country of origin, transit and destination” (International Organization for Migration, 2020).

Furthermore, irregular migration in relation to asylum and refugees is protected in international law and the right to seek asylum is included in the UDHR (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) Article 14, additionally article 26 and 31 in the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees exempts refugees from punishments due to their irregular entries and allows the freedom of movement (UNHCR, 2020; United Nations, 2020). According to article 31 paragraph 1 and 2 in the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees; “The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees [...] The Contracting States shall allow such refugees a reasonable period and all the necessary facilities to obtain admission into another country” (UNHCR, 2020). Therefore, international law protects refugees’ right to seek asylum and to enjoy freedom of movement (UNHCR, 2020).

6. Analysis:

Factors Influencing Syrian Asylum Seekers in Migrating Irregularly to Sweden

6.1 Conscription (Obligatory Military Service)

Military Conscription is the state’s mandatory recruitment for its citizens to its armed forces (Flynn, 2002:24). Military service can be obligatory for every citizen in certain states depending on the state’s laws (Flynn, 2002:24-39). One of the main causes of irregular migration according to the majority of the participants in this study is lacking passports due to restrictions caused by conscription in Syria. Nevertheless, conscription was avoided by all the participants during the civil war. The participants stated that applying for a passport requires the Syrian army recruitment department permission. And the latter only approves individuals’ applications to obtain a passport after completing the military service duty for the state (Ministry of Interior, n.d: translated by the author). Accordingly, acquiring passports by fulfilling conscription duty appears as a difficult condition for them. For all the participants who deserted the military service claimed that; firstly, serving the state’s army during the war puts individuals at extremely high risk of death; and secondly, the majority of the deserters (participants who avoided the military service) do not believe in the involvements in wars or armed conflicts for the interest of acquiring a passport. Consequently, all participants refused the call for military service. For that

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reason, the participants were pushed towards irregular migration as a result of limited opportunities for regular pathways associated with lacking passports. Their decisions preferred Irregular routes on fulfilling the military service condition to migrate regularly with a passport.

With regards to passports Ahmad stated: *“I had no passport due to conscription. And obtaining a passport was very difficult for me because my studies were interrupted and therefore, I could not proceed with my studies and in Syria, if you want to avoid the conscription requirement to obtain a passport you must have a pretext such as currently studying or having some health issues.”*

The Syrian ministry of defense allows postponing student's military service duty for current students with uninterrupted educational history; postponing authorize permission for passport application (Ministry of Defense in the Syrian Arab Republic, n.d: translated by the author)

Moreover, Ahmad stated: *“[...] I can't, and I don't want to serve in the army. And following the orders blindly to kill is against my beliefs, I don't believe in killing or wars as a viable solution to solve problems.”*

The participants are reluctant to join the army for security and for other ethical considerations hence asylum seekers such as Ahmad prioritized irregular routes and avoided other regular routes requiring a passport.

In the same context, Ibrahim stated: *“[...] for me I had an expired passport and I could not renew it because renewing your passport requires you to obtain permission from the military department of recruitment, they only renew it on the condition of completing the military service period. Therefore, my options for regular routes were limited because of my expired passport”.*

According to participants the conscription condition to obtain or even renew a passport is very difficult to achieve and avoiding conscription deprived asylum seekers of obtaining valid passports and that caused the majority of the participants to migrate irregularly.

Likewise, Qasem added; *“Firstly, my passport did not expire, I was in Turkey searching for legal ways to migrate by; employment visa or educational visa. But the search took me too long and with the time my passport expired I couldn't renew it due to conscription”.*

Conscription placed timed limitations even on students such as Qasem to migrate by routes other than irregular routes. Since the searching for regular routes such as employment seemed time-consuming consequently the passport expired. And due to his educational inactivity, conscription did not allow his passport renewal therefore renewing passport was hindered. As a result, he lacked the passport, and his options for regular routes were narrowed.

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Additionally, Zain's decision-making had been affected by conscription in Syria. Zain argued; *"In my area in Deir Ezzor the situation was very dangerous and completing the military service period to obtain a passport meant not returning. Conscription during this war meant losing your life. Therefore, obtaining permission from the conscription department for the sake of gaining a passport was unachievable for me"*.

Zain saw irregular migration as a remedy for his passport absence. According to Zain, lacking the passport due to conscription is the determinant decisive factor behind his decision-making process to migrate irregularly.

On the other hand, Anas highlighted the reserve conscription issue: *"They are taking everyone for conscription even if you have completed the conscription period, they wouldn't give you permission to have a passport. They are taking people who had finished their conscription for emergency reserve during the war. It is an illusion to think that you'll have a passport by completing the conscription, it lasts for years and it is endless"*.

Finally, according to the participants discussed above, conscription is one the main 'pushing factor' behind their decision to migrate irregularly. For them, the Syrian conscription recruitment department placed difficult conditions to obtain passports therefore obtaining the passport seemed difficult for them or even unachievable, according to Anas. Hence, they lacked passports. As a result their options for migration inclined towards irregular routes instead of other regular routes. Options such as educational visa or employment visa were inaccessible according to Qasem, his passport renewal had been denied due to conscription restriction and his options to routes that required passport significantly limited. Theoretically, that can be explained by Lee's Push and Pull Micro-Level Theory, according to the theory the migration decisions are determined by 'plus' and 'minus' factors between the home and destination, the factors includes laws and personal factors (Castles, et al., 2013: 28). In this context, for the participants lacking passports due to conscription law, they had been denied the accessibility of routes that were normally accessible for passport holders. Therefore, according to Lee's Push and Pull Theory, the decision making process to migrate was mainly influenced by hindering obstacle (conscription law 'the push factor') which functioned against the Syrian asylum seekers and refugees and narrowed their options toward regular routes and consequently, contributed to 'pushing' them toward irregular routes (Castles, et al., 2013: 28).

6.2 Social Networks

Social networks according to the participants were utilized in terms of transferring information about irregular routes by their social ties from the destination state (Sweden). The information included details regarding the time, costs, accessibility of smugglers and irregular routes from Syria to Sweden. According to Migration Network Theory, the social network can play a role by

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transferring information and facilitating migration between the home and destination country (Castles, et al., 2013:40-41). Such information provides a supportive role to assist individuals in migration in the home country by decreasing the financial costs of migration or providing information (Castles, et al., 2013:40-41). Moreover, many participants claimed that lacking social ties in Sweden also decreased their chances of having employment offers therefore lacking social ties also incentivized them to migrate irregularly. According to Anas, Ibrahim, Mustafa and Ahmad, their regular migration routes accessed by employment were scarce due to lacking or having ineffective or short social networks.

In the same context, Anas stated: *“So you want to know more incentives on why I migrated irregularly? Well, I had a passport, but due to conscription, I couldn't renew it. But even if I did have a valid passport. I literally know nobody in Sweden. How am I supposed to secure employment offers or receive an employment visa unsupported from anyone there?”*.

From Anas' perspective, inadequate social ties meant scarce employment chances and consequently scarce regular migration chances. Anas asserted that lacking social ties was not a major factor for him to migrate irregularly instead, lacking social ties contributed as a minor incentivizing factor for his decision making to migrate irregularly.

Likewise, Faisal claimed: *“After the Syrian civil war I went to Libya and I continued to work as a chef, I have worked in restaurants for 15 years. I have a lot of experience in that field especially in Arabic food. In Libya, the situation is unstable similarly to Syria, therefore I tried to go to Sweden. I contacted my friends in Sweden to help me in finding employment there, but I was incapable of finding a job.”*

The interviewer; *“Why were you incapable of finding a job?”*

Faisal: *“I tried to contact my friends in Sweden. At the beginning they promised to help me to find a job. But later, when I contacted them, they constantly told me that they could not rely on anyone in providing an employment contract for me, even knowing that I have a lot of working experience”*.

According to Faisal, his social ties in Sweden were unable to support him to find employment to obtain a work permit. Faisal constantly communicated with his friends in Sweden to secure a job, yet his social ties were unable to guarantee any employment offers. Faisal believes that social ties play a major role in accessing the labor market. In his perception lacking efficient social networks severely undermined his labor market accessibility and discarded his previous labor experiences.

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Likewise, Ibrahim claimed; *“before I decided to migrate, I spent months on the internet searching for regular routes or employment offers but it was difficult. I think having contacts or support from Sweden would have made regular routes more accessible with less efforts”*.

Like Anas, Ibrahim agrees on the importance of social networks' role in terms of securing employment offers abroad.

Similarly, Ahmad, concurred; *“Why did I migrate irregularly? I did not have relatives or social ties in Sweden. A lot of people migrated by family reunions and employment permits with the support of others. I was unfortunate I had none of these options”*.

For Mustafa social networks are crucially decisive factors that can radically alter the migration route from irregular to regular migration.

On the other hand, Mustafa asserts on the role of social networks in bypassing language barriers associated with employment; *“[...] If I had contacts in Sweden they would have saved me the risks and the costs of the irregular routes by supporting me for safer alternatives.”*

Interviewer: *“Safer alternatives? Do you mean regular routes?”*

Mustafa: *“Yes. A lot of people of Arabic descent in Sweden employ other Arabs abroad for example. And by the way, you do not need a fluent Swedish, just search for low skill jobs, jobs with less communication, or Arabic employers.”*

Interviewer: *“have you searched for jobs?”*

Mustafa: *“I tried online and by social media platforms. Searching for a job was difficult. Because people prioritize jobs for their family, relatives, or friends. Eventually, after weeks of searching I gave up on pursuing work permits and I decided to migrate irregularly”*.

The previous five participants along with Sawsan share opinions on the role of social networks towards increasing their employment opportunities. In their point of view, the accessibility for employment permits to Sweden were or could have been hampered by the lack of social networks there. In their beliefs, lacking social ties at the country of destination contributes to a lack of probabilities to secure employment and limits their options for regular routes. To summarize, from the opinion of the participants, the absence of social networks in Sweden is a contributing factor for irregular migration.

Moreover, in a comparison between all the participants, all the participants excluding Zain claimed that social networks or social ties reduced the costs and increased their information in terms of irregular migratory routes. It is worth mentioning that Zain emigrated by himself

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unsupported or affected by social networks in the country of destination. However, unlike employment, the reduced costs or knowledge gained relating to irregular routes did not affect the participants' decision to migrate irregularly, yet, it facilitated their migration.

According to the Migration Network Theory 'bridgeheads' in the destination countries assist the individuals to migrate (Castles, et al., 2013:40). However, nearly all the participants lacked 'bridgeheads' assistance, their social networks were incapable of supporting them in terms of employment and therefore their decision leaned towards irregular routes. That can be understood theoretically, from the Migration Network Theory, according to the theory the volume and the recurrence of migration is affected by social networks and social capital since communities on meso-level provide knowledge and support to the individuals on the micro-level, this assistance includes support in terms of employment and decreasing the costs of migration (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 as cited in Zanker, 2008:16-17; Castles, et al., 2013:39-41). Such assistance according to the theory increase the recurrence volume of migration and attract individuals on micro-level by creating a suitable environment for them to migrate; the suitable environment can be abundant employment offers or decreased costs of migration (Castles, et al., 2013:39-41). In the context of irregular migration, the participants' social networks were less capable of providing support to afford employment to individuals to the country of origin, therefore, the participants' decisions dropped out the ideas of regular routes in relation to work permits and preferred irregular ones instead.

6.3 Liberalized Asylum Policies:

Lenient Identification and Immunity for Irregular Entries

The majority of the participants assured that Sweden's lenient document identification control regarding asylum seekers were 'pull factors' that attracted them towards irregular migration for the aim of applying for asylum there. For the Syrian asylum seekers lacking passports, Sweden appeared as a favorable destination due to the fact that Sweden does not impose restrictive policy to pressure asylum seekers to prove their identity solely on passport or identity cards when applying for asylum (Migrationsverket, 2020b). In cases when asylum seekers are lacking identification documents; ID-cards or passports, alternative ways can be available to prove one's identity (Ibid). For instance, using birth certification, family or military registration documents or marriage certificate, these documents can be accepted as a proof for identity while applying for asylum in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2020b).

From Libya to Sweden. Faisal's previous irregular migration experience began in Libya. And without a valid passport, Faisal's capabilities for regular routes were limited. However, Faisal acknowledged from online sources that Sweden does not penalize or hinder asylum seekers under its jurisdiction for missing identification documents or migrating irregularly. At that moment, Faisal decided to migrate to Sweden irregularly.

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Faisal stated: *“In Sweden, the authorities accept my asylum application even if I don't have identification documents. Also, Sweden does not punish asylum seekers for irregular entries”*.

Similarly, Anas assured; *“[...] The states know that we are arriving illegally, yet they allow us to apply for asylum. I have also heard that the identification documents are not obligatory requirement to apply for asylum but preferable and that also contributed to my decision to migrate irregularly because I had no documents”*.

The participants entering illegally to Sweden were exempted from punishments. Their asylum applications had been treated ordinarily and admitted without any hindrance in regard to their irregular presence.

Therefore, according to the participants, Sweden's lenient policy towards asylum incentivized them to migrate irregularly.

Accordingly, Loubna justified her decision for migrating irregularly; *“Why did I migrate irregularly? Well, Sweden does not problematize or hinder your asylum application if you migrate irregularly. They don't punish or deport any Syrian asylum seeker for migrating irregularly”*.

Similarly, in another quest, the interviewer: *“Did anything in Sweden affect your decision to migrate irregularly?”*

Ahmad replied: *“Of course, Sweden respects human rights and the right for asylum. For them, there is no problem if you enter regularly or irregularly. The most important thing is that you did not commit crimes prior to your asylum or if you have a fingerprint in another European state. If you do, you'll be sent back to that state”*.

Moreover, Ibrahim quickly replied to the same question; *“Sweden respects the law and imposes no restriction against asylum seekers [...] in Sweden there is no punishment or even detention for irregular entries as it is the case in Australia”*.

Additionally, in another interview with Sawsan. The Interviewer: *“Why did you decide to migrate using irregular routes?”*

“In my case, my passport expired, and I couldn't renew it because I am politically persecuted in Syria. In 2014 I tried regular routes by applying for asylum to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Arabic countries to use my degree. I am a doctor. For me, no country allowed me to apply for asylum at their embassy. And Saudi Arabia imposes very restrictive policies.

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They have not signed the Geneva Convention relating to refugees. You can't even apply for asylum there, they will deport you if you seek asylum there" (Sawsan).

The Interviewer: *"Is there anything in Sweden that affected your decision to migrate irregularly?"*

"Well, they simply respect your right for asylum and to seek a new life. I heard that Sweden is a humanitarian country that respects human rights and I expected that they would allow me to apply for asylum without a valid passport and therefore I decided to come" (Sawsan).

The benevolent lenient asylum policy experienced by the participants in terms of document identification and immunity toward punishments related to irregular entries operated as a *'pull factor'* for participant's decision to migrate irregularly to Sweden. According to the participants, Sweden was identified as an attractive location for asylum and that marks it as a *'pull factor'* according to Lee's Push and Pull Micro-Level Theory (Castles, et al., 2013: 28). According to the theory, a suitable environment at the destination state can function as a *'pulling factor'* for migration (Ibid). And that is what the participant experienced. The participants did not mention any incidents including; restrictions related to lacking documentation, neither detention or penalties for their irregular entries or presence at the destination state. Sweden's migration policy is considerably liberalized compared to many other states (Emilsson, 2018: 8-9). For example, in comparison to Australia's migration regime, Australia labels asylum seekers entering without a visa or proper documentation as *'unlawful'* and their treatment includes external transportation from Australia to islands abroad and long detention periods that can lead asylum seekers in many cases to commit suicide (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Phillips, 2015). The participants' decision making towards migrating irregularly was influenced by Sweden's migration policies. All the participants included in the study described Sweden's asylum policy as humanitarian or/and lenient towards their irregular presence and asylum.

6.4 Other Notable Factors

The open-ended interviews provided an unlimited scope for the participants to elaborate on the phenomenon. And thereby the research identified other diverse factors behind the causes of irregular migration that are not mentioned above. However, the opinions of the participants in relation to those factors split towards the costs, safety, speed and accessibility of irregular routes. For instance, Anas who paid smugglers to guide him for irregular routes argued; that irregular migration is costly, risky. On the contrary, Ibrahim who traveled by himself disagreed, claiming that it is considerably cheap, and the risks are very exaggerated due to the media.

It is worth mentioning that Ibrahim, Anas, and Sawsan had a common view on factors that contributed to their decision to migrate irregularly, most notably the accessibility and speed of irregular routes.

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Ibrahim claimed; “[...] *for me the irregular migration was cheap, it was almost free, and it had no requirements, and you can initiate the journey whenever you want to and that makes it much quicker than the other regular traditional pathways.*”

Likewise, Anas shared the same view; “*Why irregular routes? The illegal route is quick. And the people saw that there is no way but the illegal because almost all the arrivals are arriving by illegal routes*”.

Sawsan; “*The irregular migration is unconditionally and instantly accessible. You can even choose the destination country if you did not get fingerprinted, fingerprinting you; forces you to apply for asylum in that country according to Dublin’s regulation*”

Similarly, Ibrahim emphasized; “[...] *By going irregularly you don’t stay or get stuck in the transit countries. I can simply cross and pick the states by migrating illegally and that helps a lot to invest myself in any suitable country for my competence*”.

Hence, additional to the accessibility and haste of irregular routes. Sawsan and Ibrahim claimed that Syrians prefer irregular migration because it provides a variety of opportunities by allowing individuals to freely determine their destination state of asylum. Nevertheless, the participants were aware of Dublin regulation and its role in preventing the so-called “*asylum shopping*”. (Parusel & Schneider, 2017:67). Dublin regulation prevents asylum shopping by restricting asylum for asylum seekers in the first country of arrival, therefore, their asylum is bound in some cases to the first state they arrive at (Parusel & Schneider, 2017:31,67).

According to Lee’s Push and Pull Micro-level theory, the immigration laws, and obstacles while migrating play a role in decreasing or increasing migration influx (Castles, et al., 2013: 28). Therefore, theoretically, the attractive accessibility and quickness incentivized participants to irregular routes and facilitated movement during the irregular travel to the country of destination and consequently, according to the theory the accessibility and quickness of irregular routes formed an attractive ‘*pull factor*’ for the participants by facilitating and accelerating their movement (Castles, et al., 2013: 28-29).

Irregular Migration and an element of Desperation

Moreover, Faisal argued that irregular migration was the best of the worst available options. For him, irregular migration is more of an inevitable route rather than optional.

“I had no other choice but to migrate irregularly, it was the best of the worst available options. The international community does not encourage regular migration, they placed nearly impossible conditions for regular migration and the other solution seemed unavailable or inaccessible for me” (Faisal).

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Moreover, two participants; Anas and Sawsan were desperate due to the prolonged war. Therefore, their decisions to migrate irregularly had been more acceptable due to desperation influenced by the deteriorated situation in the home country.

Anas: *“The world is watching people getting killed every day in Syria. And the people would not have left their homes if they solved the war. The people are forced to leave. People were forced to be exploited by the smugglers and risked their lives by the sea, land, and other routes”*.

Likewise, Sawsan stated: *“The international community witnessed the killing in Syria and did not do anything considerably positive to solve the war and that contributed to illegal migration because the situation constantly exacerbated, as a result staying inside the warzone became equally risky as migrating irregularly by the sea”*.

Theoretically, according to Lee’s Push and Pull Micro-level Theory, the factors act as ‘plus’ ‘minus’ in decision making for migration (Castles, et al., 2013: 28). In terms of refugees and asylum seekers, the Syrian civil war formed a desperation ‘*push factor*’ that overcame the fear of the risky irregular routes in the opinion of few participants. The desperation caused by the civil war made some participants endure or accept the consequences of irregular routes. Therefore, desperation is identified as a robust ‘*push factor*’ towards irregular migration for some participants (Ibid). However, the desperation factor has a limited coverage since it has been expressed by two participants only.

Undoubtedly, the notable factors above affected the participant’s decision-making towards migrating irregularly. However, the participant opinions conflicted on such factors; for example, there had been no unanimous agreement between the participants towards the role of accessibility, speed, or safety in causing or incentivizing irregular migration. The open-ended interviews were important to provide space for the participants to elaborate on the potential contributing factors for irregular migration (Creswell, 2009:232). Additionally, the open-ended interviews provided unlimited space for the participants to express their perception of the causes, as a result, some factors were a lone contributing factor and had been experienced by single participants. For example, as mentioned before, Ibrahim claimed that the irregular routes are relatively safe from his point of view. However, other participants did not mention the role of safety in relation to their decision to migrate regularly and one of the participants claimed that the irregular routes are extremely risky especially when it comes to the sea routes.

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7. Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the decision-making process for the participants leaned towards irregular routes mainly due to Syria's conscription law, Sweden's liberalized asylum policies, and lacking social networks at the country of destination.

The conscription law placed a difficult condition in obtaining passports. And fulfilling such a condition (completing the military service) had been described as difficult and extremely risky for nearly all the participants. The conscription period during the Syrian civil war seen as exposure to life-threatening situations if not to an inevitable death according to some participants. Hence, all the participants with military service duty objected joining the army and completing the military service period. Moreover, in Syria, in order to obtain a passport, the citizen must complete the Syrian military service period, and as a result of this, the participants were incapable of applying or renewing their passports abroad (Ministry of Interior, n.d: translated by the author). Consequently, their options for regular routes that require passports decreased, and instead they were pushed towards irregular alternatives due to their refusal to complete the military service. In this study, the participants sought irregular routes to overcome lacking passports due to conscription. Similarly, to what Tucker (2018:6-9) shows in his study, the participants sought to migrate to Sweden due to its liberalized naturalization laws in terms of naturalization to overcome their statelessness situation (not having any citizenship for any state). In both Tucker's and this study, the participants were pushed by factors in the country of origin (conscription, statelessness).

However, in Tucker (2018:1-17), the research question was based on why the participants decide to migrate to Sweden focusing on the aspect of statelessness of Palestinian-Syrians (Syrian born group with Palestinian origin). While this study focused on why the Syrians decide to migrate irregularly focusing on Syrian citizens. Therefore, the finding had been strongly influenced by the research questions and the participant's backgrounds, as the Palestinian-Syrians in Tucker's study had been mainly concerned with their statelessness (Tucker, 2018), whereas the Syrians in this study were mainly concerned with the issue of conscription. Additionally, both studies included exploratory semi-structured questions in their method, therefore, both included predetermined questions (Tucker, 2018:5). However distinctively this study initially began using unstructured interviews to build up knowledge and use the knowledge to formulate semi-structured exploratory questions.

Sweden's liberalized asylum policies pulled the participants towards irregular routes as a result of its lenient procedures towards asylum seekers. Sweden does not impose restrictions or scrutinize identification procedures, for instance, the identification procedures during asylum are not entirely dependent on passports or identity cards when asylum seekers prove their identity while applying for asylum (Migrationsverket, 2020b). The Migrationsverket (the Swedish Migration Agency) allows asylum seekers to prove their identity throughout alternative documents for instance, by family, or military registration documents, birth certificates or

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marriage certificates, such documents are accepted as a proof to support asylum seeker's identities while applying for asylum in Sweden and that incentivized the participants to migrate irregularly (Migrationsverket, 2020b). Therefore, the participants were entitled to use alternative documents to support their identity claims. The exemption of using alternative documents was seen as a remedy for their situation of lacking passports due to the Syrian conscription law. Additionally, in terms of Sweden's asylum policy the asylum seekers are granted immunity towards irregular entries and present when applying for asylum. Their asylum applications were admitted without restrictions or penalties due to their irregular entries to the destination state (Sweden). The participants acknowledged asylum seeker's immunity towards irregular migration punishments consequently that factor pulled them towards Sweden and contributed to decision-making by incentivizing them to carry on using irregular routes unpenalized.

Hence, in short, the participant decision making towards migrating irregularly was influenced by Sweden's liberalized migration policies. All the participants included in the studies described Sweden's asylum policy as humanitarian or/and lenient towards their irregular presence and asylum.

Similarly, Brekke and Aarset (2009) research showed relevant pull factors to Norway. In their research, the study on micro-level investigated why asylum seekers pick Norway as a country of destination (Ibid). The result showed various factors labeled under the 'reputation' category, such factor was recognized as the main pull factor behind their decision to migrate to Norway (Brekke & Aarset, 2009:84,90-94). The asylum seeker's perception of Norway and its reputation among asylum seekers affected their decision to migrate there (Ibid). Similarly, in this paper, the pull factor labeled under the liberalized asylum policies in Sweden affected the asylum seekers' perception of Sweden and played a major role in reshaping their decisions in favorizing irregular migration towards it.

The social ties in the destination country (Sweden) functioned by transferring information to the country of origin (Syria). According to nearly all the participants the information included details in terms of time, costs, and accessibility of smugglers and irregular pathways to Sweden. Social networks according to the participants were utilized in terms of transferring information. However, such information did not affect the decision making for nearly all the participants. All the participants excluding Anas did not mention the role of costs and information in relation to their decision making to migrate irregularly. However, the majority of participants shared opinions; that lacking social networks in the country of destination reduced their chances of receiving employment offers or accessing contracts and that limited their opportunities at the Swedish labor market. In the same context, their opportunities to obtain work permits or employment visas were relatively low as a result of lacking or having ineffective social networks. Therefore, their chances to migrate regularly by work permits and visas were relatively low to the country of destination.

In Tucker's (2018: 9-10) study, the social network's role affected the individual's decision-making towards choosing Sweden in two ways. Firstly, some participants wanted to unite with their relatives in Sweden. And secondly, the social networks provided supportive

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knowledge to the country of origin on how to migrate to Sweden and what sort of documents are needed when applying for asylum (Tucker, 2018:9-10). However, the main decisive factor for them in choosing Sweden had been securing citizenship (Tucker, 2018:10). On the other hand, in this study, in the context of the causes of irregular migration, the social networks functioned towards incentivizing the participants for irregular routes. The social networks for nearly all the participants were ineffective and unreliable to afford employment or work permits at the state of destination hence their low social capital bond deterred them from accessing regular routes.

Likewise, Haug's (2008: 585-600) research concerning why Bulgarians migrate to Western Europe showed influential support by their social networks in the country of destination. And Therefore, the migration networks in Haug's (2008) study had a stronger impact in terms of supporting the individuals at the country of origin to migrate and affecting their decision to migrate.

Other factors also contributed to irregular migration, most notably the desperation and costs, safety, speed, and accessibility of irregular routes. Yet, the opinions regarding such factors did not correspond with the majority of the participants and some participants even disagreed on some factors. For example, some participants describe the irregular routes as dangerous and opposingly some described them as relatively safe. For 3 participants, irregular routes appeared as a favorable option due to their lack of requirements, their flexible accessibility (the routes were available for them at all times), and their quickness, the irregular routes were described as a quicker way of migration.

In terms of desperation, the Syrian civil war instability and the exacerbation of the situation caused mental desperation. For some participants, such desperation acted as a push factor by making the participant's decision to migrate irregularly more acceptable and safer compared to staying in the warzone with no brighter alternatives. Such findings are relatively close to Havinga & Böcker's (1999) study, which focused on why asylum seekers and refugees decide to migrate to the UK, Belgium, and Netherlands. The finding showed that acute migration reduced the preparation time and planning for migration and decreased their economic capabilities and therefore the participants had less control over the decision making and they were more driven by the circumstances rather than their own intentions in picking the country of destination (Havinga & Böcker 1999:44-50).

Nonetheless, according to the participants' opinions, the other factors that are linked to irregular migration decision-making processes are mainly, the accessibility and speed of irregular routes and desperation. The previous three factors had not been agreed on for all the participants however there had been no opposition opinions towards the role of accessibility and speed of irregular routes and desperation in incentivizing the decision-making towards irregular migration. According to the participants, the restrictive requirements for regular migration such as investment, tourism, and other regular routes inclined the decision-making process towards irregular routes that appeared as a solution to bypass the burdensome demands for regular routes. For some of them, the unconditional quick accessibility of the route pulled them towards irregular migration

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Finally, the qualitative unstructured and semi-structured interviews were useful to identify the causes and incentives behind irregular migration on the micro-level. The space for innovation and creativity had been limited in structuring the questions due to the sensitivity of the phenomenon and the difficulties in finding participants who are willing to take part in the study. In terms of exploratory studies, the previous research had been proven useful in exploring a sensitive phenomenon and to provide knowledge for the next research to be established on. Therefore, the research knowledge can be invested as a platform in formulating structured and semi-structured interviews on a larger scale for subsequent studies to furthermore understand the causes and incentives of irregular migration in the future.

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9. Appendix

Endnotes:

The research was ethically reviewed and approved by the Ethics Council at Malmö University.

Authors' contributions

The author is the sole writer of this research.

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Abbreviations

UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.