

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Syrian Migrants' Experiences of "Irregular" Migration to Austria Interlaced by Virtual Networks: A Qualitative Study<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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The beginning of the war in Syria in 2011 led to a massive migration wave from Syria to Europe; however, this move made European migration policies more rigid in securing borders. The growing crisis has compelled Syrians to explore various ways to move. On September 14–15, 2015, thousands of people organized through Facebook gathered in Edirne and demanded to be allowed to enter Europe by crossing the Balkans on foot. This incident underlined the significant impact of social media on the process of irregular migration. This study aims to understand the role of virtual networks in the migration experiences of Syrians during multi-stage migration process, covering pre-migration, the journey itself, and the post-migration period. In this context, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 Syrian migrants<sup>2</sup> who arrived at or were captured in and currently reside in Linz, Austria. Syrian migrants meticulously planned nearly every step through virtual networks and smartphone tools, creating a holographic impression in their minds before embarking. These networks significantly enhanced the familiarity and safety of the irregular migration route and allowed them to proceed with "the migration network ladders" one by one. The Syrian migration experience highlights the pivotal role of virtual networks in motivating, guiding, and connecting individuals throughout the process.

**Keywords:** Syrian Migrants, Irregular Migration Route, Austria, Social Media, Virtual Networks

## Öz

Suriye'de 2011 yılında savaşın başlaması, Suriye'den Avrupa'ya büyük bir göç dalgası oluşturdu, ancak bu hareketlilik, Avrupa'nın sınırlarını korumak adına göç politikalarını daha katı hale getirmesine neden oldu. Büyüyen krizle birlikte, Suriyeliler göç etmeleri için çok çeşitli yollar aradılar. 14-15 Eylül 2015 tarihlerinde Facebook üzerinden örgütlenen binlerce kişi Edirne'de toplanmış ve Balkanları yürüyerek geçip, Avrupa'ya girmelerine izin verilmesini talep etmişlerdir. Bu olay, sosyal medyanın düzensiz göç süreci üzerindeki önemli etkisini göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, Suriyelilerin göç öncesi, göç esnasında ve göç sonrasındaki göç deneyimlerinde sanal ağların rolünü anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Avusturya'nın Linz kentine gelen veya burada yakalanan ve hali hazırda bu kentte ikamet eden 26 Suriyeli göçmenle yüz yüze derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Suriyeli göçmenler, yola çıkmadan önce zihinlerinde holografik bir izlenim yaratarak sanal ağlar ve akıllı telefonların sunduğu araçlarla neredeyse her adımı titizlikle planlamışlardır. Bu ağlar, göçmenlerin düzensiz göç rotasına aşina olmalarını sağlamış, rotanın güvenliğini önemli ölçüde artırmış ve "göç ağı merdivenlerini" birer birer geçmelerini sağlamıştır. Suriye göç deneyimi, sanal ağların göç süreci boyunca bireyleri motive etme, yönlendirme ve göç eyleminde bulunan bireyleri birbirine bağlamadaki önemli rolünü vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriyeli Göçmenler, Düzensiz Göç Rotası, Avusturya, Sosyal Media, Sanal Ağlar

<sup>1</sup> The data used in this article were retrieved from the first author's master's thesis (thesis number: 514529), completed under the supervision of Yelda Özen at the Sociology Department of Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University in 2018 (available at <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/>).

<sup>2</sup> Instead of the use of "refugee" or "asylum seeker", we prefer to use the term "migrant" in a broad sense for referring to people who leave their homes and migrate to another place either for fleeing from conflict or war, displacement, or reaching better life conditions etc.

## Introduction

*"We don't want food, we don't want water, we don't want humanitarian help, we want to cross the border by land. We will cross or die here". For 5 days in Edirne, Turkey, around three thousand migrants (mostly Syrians but also Afghans, Iraqis, and others) gathered, following a call started on a Facebook page ('Crossing no more'), to ask for the Turkish-Greek border to be opened for them. They refuse to risk their lives in the Aegean Sea anymore to reach a European country where they'll finally be safe, get basic human rights and have a chance to make a life for themselves (Kasperek, 2015).*

The phrase "We will cross or die here" encapsulates the Syrian migration "crisis" from 2011 onward. On September 15th, 2015, thousands, primarily of Syrian origin, gathered in Edirne, Türkiye, aiming to cross into Europe. Organized through Facebook, this collective action underscored the profound impact of social media on initiating large-scale movements. More precisely, the rapid flow of information exchange and the organization of virtual networks appear to bring about a significant shift in the nature of migration, unlike the historical organization of community networks for migration because today's technology allows a migrant to know that "it is possible to find a store where they can get a telephone line across the X city they have never visited and the Y mosque they have not yet passed or which migrant smuggler is more reliable in Greece without ever visiting Greece" as a participant (Maher, 29 M) notes.

The Syrian conflict began in 2011, but the aspects, effects, and consequences of migration, as well as the attitudes of the various parties to irregular migration, have been consistently consulted and have continued to remain on the global agenda due to the continuation of internal disorder and human mobility, and the impacts of this process on societies. Dozens of topics, such as the economic aspect of the crisis, integration policies, political attitudes where borders are built by fences, the industrialized/commercialized face of migrant smuggling, and temporary solutions, can be listed as issues discussed. Still, one should

not be overlooked: the struggle for the survival of millions of people.

This study aims to understand how Syrian migrants experienced the migration process by weaving the migration routes using virtual/mobile instruments such as sharing networks, social media, and tools. It is based on the question of the role of virtual networks in the process that thousands of Syrians experienced when moving to Europe, specifically to Austria, due to the humanitarian crisis of the Syrian War. Considering the notion that virtual networks, through digital communication, transform the migrant experience apart from the community network and create available migration routes to Europe, the study focuses on how these networks shape the migration of Syrian people. Adopting a qualitative approach to comprehend participants' experiences and the overall process, the study conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 26 Syrian migrants residing in and around Linz, Austria. Participants migrated to Austria across the Mediterranean Sea, either from Türkiye or one of the nearby Middle Eastern countries. How and under what conditions the Syrian participants decided to migrate, and how they used social media with its networks, messaging apps, and tools during the migration decision, on the route, and after migration to Austria were explored in the study by applying the semi-structured interview form to capture the diverse narratives and perspectives of the participants.

## Background and the Literature

The "Arab Spring", originating in Tunisia in 2010, had widespread repercussions in the MENA region, igniting a crisis in Syria in 2011 (Castles et al., 2014, pp.14-15). This aligns with predictions that political or ethnic conflicts could trigger large-scale refugee movements (Castles et al., 2014, p.7). "The Syrian refugee drama" has roots beyond the 2010s-2020s, encompassing regional factors that produced the regional instability that set Syrian mass migration such as the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in 2003, the collapse of Libya in 2011, and the Yemeni civil war starting in 2014 (Mandic, 2023). Because of "heavy repression from

the Bashar al-Assad's regime", the region's persistent economic instability/crises, denial of human rights, sectarianism, and ethnic marginalization, the process appears to have devolved into a catastrophe (Berzins, 2013; Akhtar & Nagen, 2019). Furthermore, the lack of social cohesion in Syria made it susceptible to foreign interventions. The crisis has resulted in mass migration, not accidentally (Mandic, 2023), making it a global issue, as UNHCR High Commissioner Grandi deems "the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time and a continuing cause for suffering" (UNHCR, 2023a). For Syrians, the crisis is framed not merely as a political conflict but as a dire choice between leaving or facing death. Many sought asylums in neighboring countries under temporary protection policies (UNHCR, 2016). Fleeing became "the most daunting humanitarian crisis in our time" (Ferris & Kirişçi, 2016, p. 1), particularly evident in the tragic events of the summer of 2015 when the death toll on Turkish and Greek shores reached alarming levels (Yazgan et al., 2015, p. 182). The Mediterranean Sea witnessed a staggering number of deaths: 3771 in 2015, 5096 in 2016, 3139 in 2017, and 2,275 in 2018. Notably, 2018 figures reveal that every 51 arrivals to Europe corresponded to one death at sea (UNHCR, 2018, pp. 6, 13).

Since 2011, millions of Syrians have been compelled to leave their homeland, seeking security by land and/or sea. Pre-pandemic official data reveals 5,642,322 Syrian migrants residing in various countries: 3,666,059 in Türkiye, 924,161 in Lebanon, 657,945 in Jordan, 228,573 in Iraq, 130,371 in Egypt, and 35,713 in North Africa (UNHCR, 2019). Presently, most Syrian migrants still reside in Türkiye, with fewer in neighboring countries and very few in European nations (UNHCR, 2023b). Considering the Austrian case, the period between 2014 and 2016 witnessed a significant refugee influx, marking one of Austria's largest since 1945 (Baumgartner et al., 2021). Migration numbers rose steadily, starting with approximately 5,000 Syrian-born residents in early 2014, escalating to 12,332 by year-end 2014, reaching 33,569 in 2016, and peaking at 46,963 in 2018 (Buber-Ennser et al., 2020, p. 140). By 2022, the

Syrian population in Austria surged to 73,923 (Statista, 2023).

UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards outlined seven principal factors driving the movement of Syrian refugees to Europe: loss of hope, high living costs and deepening poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, aid shortfalls, obstacles to renewing legal residency, scarce education opportunities, and feeling unsafe in Iraq (UNHCR, 2015a). The decline in hope for a resolution to the Syrian crisis, apprehensions about an uncertain future, challenging economic conditions, the struggle to meet basic needs, the compulsion to work in illegal and precarious conditions, concerns about a lost generation due to restricted and irregular education, feelings of insecurity, and the inadequacy of state policies and aid all play crucial roles in motivating Syrians to migrate to Europe. Additionally, the temporary status of Syrians in neighboring countries has spurred them to explore any available means to move to Europe.

The European Union's failure to reach a consensus on migration has driven Syrians to intensively utilize irregular migration routes. Despite facing unwelcoming responses from destination countries, Syrians persistently navigate these challenging routes. Irregular migration has evolved into a systematically functioning industry involving legal and illegal actors. It encompasses travel agents, labor recruiters, brokers, interpreters, lawyers, housing agents, smugglers, traffickers, and other illegal operators (Castles, 2003, p. 15; Castles et al., 2014, p. 235) facilitating border crossing, securing employment, and housing, and engaging in activities such as smuggling and falsifying documents in clandestine migration (Düvell, 2008, p. 486). The primary migration routes for potential migrants, traffickers, and smugglers from Syria to Europe typically involve first reaching Türkiye and then proceeding to the Greek islands from the Aegean coasts by sea, or reaching Bulgaria, then Serbia (Mandic, 2017), or reaching Greece from the northwest of Türkiye by road. Another route involves reaching Italy from a Middle Eastern country with a coast on the Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2015b), as participants also indicated. The complexity of these routes highlighted the

challenges Syrians face in seeking refuge in Europe and the intricate networks involved in facilitating their journey.

Comparing migration influenced by migrant community networks, which involve "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, non-migrants and former migrants in webs of kinship, friendship and shared origin" facilitating movement as stated in migration network theory (King, 2012, p. 21; Massey et al. 1998), the distinctive feature in Syrian migration is the pivotal role of new communication technology. As Bauman (1998, pp. 12-19) states, the emergence of digital advancements and communication makes geographical distances insignificant, enables the spread of information much faster than the movement of its bodily carriers, and makes information instantly available worldwide. As a result, these developments enable individuals to move with greater awareness to a place they have not been physically present before. By allowing people to see better living conditions, the internet fosters people's motivation to migrate to the "European dream". Social media serves as a technological compass, enabling people to navigate and choose viable routes they have researched. Thousands of Syrians have moved "without drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean" or "without suffocating in a pickup truck" as participants expressed. This journey is not only physical but a "digital passage to Europe" facilitated by smartphone infrastructure and affordance, as noted by Gillespie et al. (2018).

Social media networks have provided access to a wide range of information about the Syrian War, the migration wave to Europe, the integration of migrants, and recommendations for newcomers. These networks, which form the "network society" defined by Castells (2004, p. 3) as "a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies", eliminate the importance of distance. It enables people to connect more closely, experience the immediacy of the moment, and perceive the vastness of space. Platforms like Facebook, frequently used by participants, offer unprecedented content and

cultural diversity, transcending physical borders and reshaping perceptions of space. Sharing enables communicating ideas to become crucial, especially for networking, solidarity, and movement as in the case of the Syrian War and migration. Social media and messaging applications, notably Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, where people help each other, make solidarity, and constitute networks, have a very significant influence on the movements. By openly asserting its significance in these movements, social media exerts a transformative influence which is evident in the spread of the "Arab Spring" to the streets of Syria, the seeking asylum of millions of Syrian people, fleeing conflicts that turned into a war, in neighboring countries, seeking ways to adapt and integrate with the country, and attempting to reach European countries from Syria's neighboring nations. Social media acts as a medium connecting the ends of networks, providing alternative means for people to share information, coordinate movements, and make impactful decisions.

In the emerging literature on irregular migration's relationship with social media and digital tools, a notable study by Dekker and Engbersen (2014) emphasized social media's impact on communication, migration network formation, and the enhancement of ties among migrants. The study reveals that social media contributes to maintaining strong connections with family and friends, addresses weak organizational relations during migration, establishes new implicit relationships, and serves as a valuable source of informal migration information. Hacsek and Visnansky's research (2017) focuses on migrant smugglers' use of social media and smartphones, emphasizing the role of these technologies in enhancing migrants' safety. Another study by Gillespie et al. (2018) highlights the dialectical tension between the risks and benefits of smartphone use during migration for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The study by Dekker et al. (2018), involving 54 Syrian participants in the Netherlands, indicates widespread social media and smartphone use before and during migration. The study emphasizes that limited access to technology and fear of government surveillance

restrict refugees' smartphone use but they develop strategies to maintain access to social media, avoid government surveillance, and validate information. Another study by Gough and Gough (2019), based on in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees in Denmark, underlines the vital role of smartphones in their journey. The study also highlights the role smartphones play as part of migration infrastructure, both in facilitating access to the migration industry and shaping migrants' journeys.

### Study Methods

The study aims to explore the impact of new information technologies including virtual networks, messaging services, and other smartphone tools on the migration process (including pre-migration, during migration, and after arrival), and the formation of migration routes from Syria to Austria from migrants' perspective. It employs the qualitative method, focusing on capturing participants' perspectives to understand the social processes and contexts surrounding them (Neuman, 2014, p. 17). This approach is assumed appropriate for investigating the influence of social media on migration drawing insights from the experiences of Syrian migrants who completed this route despite significant challenges.

The fieldwork was conducted in Linz, Austria with Syrian interviewees. During the preliminary observations in the search for the sample, it was understood that Syrian migrants formed a mobile group due to ongoing migration. This mobility made reaching the sampling frame with official figures challenging, so participants were reached through snowball sampling. The researcher joined the Syrian group, conducted interviews, and made observations. In the sample, it should be mentioned that many Syrian participants say that they are still people with trauma. It is ethically important, and particular attention was paid during the fieldwork to ensure that the research carried out did not increase or stimulate their trauma. When the participant was observed to be anxious during the interview, the interview was interrupted, and the subject was changed and

chatted. When the continuity of the negative situation was observed, the interview was finalized. The researcher was aware that the sample profile consisted of a group that had gone through a difficult process, and maintained her sensitivity on this issue throughout the study. During the interviews, the researcher not only observed participants and their social environment but also acted with the awareness that the participants observed the researcher and formed a circle of trust based on cultural commonalities. The trust circle between the researcher and the participants did not occur immediately. The field researcher was initially mistaken for a police officer or another public official by interviewees, so the researcher could enter and gain access to the field through the references of 'gatekeepers', as Neuman (2014) puts it.

Between April 26 and August 25, 2017, twenty-six Syrian migrants (20 men, and 6 women) were interviewed in Linz and nearby towns. Twenty entered Austria by passing through irregular migration routes, while six, including one male, four female spouses, and one daughter, arrived after obtaining visas due to their relative status. Twenty-three participants reached Austria between 2014 and 2015, and three arrived between 2016 and 2017. Participants initiated their migration routes alone, with friends or family, often joining crowded migration groups during the journey. While boats and walking were common transportation means, buses, trains, cars, trucks, lorries, vans, and occasionally airplanes were also utilized. The average age of participants is thirty-three, with concentrations in their twenties and thirties. Twenty acquired professional expertise in Syria, four left university due to war, one female participant left high school, and one housewife female is a high school graduate. The majority held white-collar jobs while in Syria. The detailed profile of the participants is shown in Table 1.

In the research, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview forms. The questionnaire, available in three languages (German, English, and Turkish), accommodated participants' preferences in language choice.

**Table 1. Detailed information about participants**

Name	Sex	Age	Educational Status	Occupation (In Syria)	Employment Status in Austria	Marital Status, Number of Children	Hometown	Year of Arrival in Austria	Duration of Stay in Türkiye	Journey Duration	Modes of Transport	Group Size During Journey (including oneself)	Interview Location, Date, and Duration
Ammar	M	31	University graduate	Teacher	Employed	Married, two children	Damascus	2014	Nine months	Three months	By boat, on foot, by car	Two people (with his friend)	Linz, April 26, 2017, 1 h. 25 min.
Khalil	M	29	University graduate	Architecture	Employed	Single	Damascus	2014	Eight months	Three months	By boat, on foot, by car	Two people (with his friend)	Linz, May 6, 2017, 2 hours
Abdulla	M	28	University graduate	Architecture	Unemployed	Single	Aleppo	2015	Two years and four months	19 days	By boat, on foot, by car, by bus	13 people (with friends' group)	Linz, May 12, 2017, 1 hour
Ruba	F	60	University graduate	Retired	Retired	Married, three children	Damascus	2015	One month	Six days	By truck	Five people (with another family)	Linz, May 12, 2017, 50 min.
Taha	M	29	University graduate	Teacher	Employed	Married, two children	Damascus	2015	One month	Two months 20 days	By boat, on foot, by taxi, by bus	Five people (with another family)	Gallneukirchen, May 16, 2017, 1 h. 15 min.
Jalal	M	28	University graduate	Accountant	Employed	Single	Damascus	2014	One year and six months	Two months	By boat, by plane	Alone	Gallneukirchen, May 29, 2017, 1 h. 20 min.
Nour	M	40	High school graduate	Photographer	Unemployed	Married, three children	Damascus	2015	Two months	Two months 15 days	By boat, on foot, by car	Alone	Linz, June 7, 2017, 1 hour
Loay	M	42	High school graduate	Cook	Employed	Married, seven children	Damascus	2015	Two months	Three months 10 days	By plane, by boat, on foot, by car	Alone	Linz, June 7, 2017, 1 h. 5 min.
Omar	M	28	University dropout	University student	Unemployed	Single	Qamishli	2015	Eight months	20 days	By boat, on foot, by truck	Four people (with his sister and his two nephews)	Gallneukirchen, June 8, 2017, 1 h. 10 min.
Adnan	M	25	University graduate	Economist	Unemployed	Single	Damascus	2015	One day	10 days	By plane, by boat, on foot, by taxi, by bus	With a group of friends	Linz, June 13, 2017, 45 min.
Mustafa	M	22	University dropout	University student	Employed	Single	Damascus	2014	Two days	Two months 15 days	By boat, by car, by taxi, by bus, on foot	Alone (but later he joined a group on the route)	Gallneukirchen, July 7, 2017 and 2 h. 15 min.
Ghith	M	26	University graduate	Lawyer	Employed	Single	Damascus	2015	Six months	One month	By boat, by taxi, by bus, on foot	Two people (with his friend)	Linz, July 17, 2017, 1 h. 40 min.
Ramy	M	33	High school graduate	Merchant	Unemployed	Married, four children	Damascus	2015	Two years and six months	One week	By boat, on foot, by car	Alone (but later he joined a group on the route)	Gallneukirchen, July 19, 2017, 55 min.
Doha	F	29	University graduate	Teacher	Unemployed	Married, four children	Damascus	2017	Four years and six months	One day	By plane	Five people (with her children)	Gallneukirchen, July 19, 2017, 45 min.
Maher	M	28	University dropout	University student	Employed	Single, no child	Damascus	2015	Four days	14 days	By plane, by boat, on foot, by taxi, by car	Two people (with his friend)	Gallneukirchen, August 5, 2017, 2 h. 40 min.
Ali	M	51	University graduate	Manager	Employed	Single, five children	Homs	2014	None	One day	By plane	Six people (with his children)	Linz, August 5, 2017 and 1 h 10 min
Rawan	F	19	Student in High School	Student	Unemployed	Single, no child	Homs	2014	None	One day	By plane	Six people (with her father and siblings)	Linz, August 5, 2017, 1 hour

Morad	M	49	University graduate	Lawyer	Unemployed	Married, three children	Damascus	2015	Three years	10 days	By boat, by bus, on foot, by car	With a group of friends	Mittertreffling, August 7, 2017, 1 h. 40 min.
Hadi	M	28	Vocational high school graduate	IT Technician	Employed	Married, two children	Homs	2014	None	One week	By ship	14 people (with his wife and relatives)	Freistadt, August 9, 2017, 1 h. 30 min.
Firas	M	44	High school graduate	Shoemaker	Unemployed	Married, three children	Damascus	2015	Seven months	Two months	By boat, by taxi, on foot	Two people (with his friend)	Linz, August 17, 2017, 50 min.
Yasmeen	F	34	University graduate	Teacher	Unemployed	Married, three children	Damascus	2017	Two years and four months	One day	By plane	Four people (with her children)	Linz, August 17, 2017, 50 min.
Ahamd	M	31	Vocational high school graduate	Machine Technician	Unemployed	Single	Damascus	2015	One week	One month	By boat, by car, on foot, by bus	10 people (with a group of friends)	Mittertreffling, August 21, 2017, 1 h. 15 min.
Yassin	M	23	University dropout	University student	Unemployed	Single	Aleppo	2015	One month	Two weeks	By boat, on foot, by car, by bus	Three people (with a sibling and cousin)	Freistadt, August 22, 2017, 1 hour
Afra	F	23	High school graduate	Housewife	Unemployed	Married, two children	Damascus	2016	Eleven months	One day	By plane	Three people (with her children)	Linz, August 23, 2017 and 30 min.
Eslem	F	34	University graduate	Teacher	Unemployed	Married, two children	Latakia	2017	Four years	One day	By plane	Three people (with her children)	Freistadt, August 25, 2017, 1 hour
Yossef	M	46	High school graduate	Manager	Unemployed	Married, three children	Latakia	2014	One year	Two months	By boat, by taxi, on foot, by bus	Three people (three friends later joined with a group of 15 people on the route)	Freistadt, August 25, 2017, 1 h. 15 min.

Notes: F: female. M: male.

An Arabic translator was initially engaged, but concerns arose due to the translator's subjective comments and participant discomfort. Consequently, a translator was discontinued, and interviews proceeded in languages preferred by participants.

The study adhered to the ethical procedures necessary for conducting social research, such as obtaining informed consent and providing information about the purpose and methods of the study, anticipated length of the interview, right of withdrawal, anonymity, and confidentiality. It was established that there was no damaging material in the interview questions. The field interviews were conducted in an informal setting. The researcher emphasized that the research was conducted for scientific purposes and provided sincere and honest answers to all questions during the interviews. Interviews were recorded with the consent of participants and simultaneously noted.

However, after the first few interviews, making notes created unease among participants, leading to interviews continuing only with a recording device. Details that could expose participants' identities were omitted, and names were changed for anonymity.

Thematic analysis, widely used for qualitative data, was applied to interview transcripts obtained from face-to-face interviews with Syrian participants. The analysis was done manually by reading numerous times to become familiar with the data, gain a deep understanding, and identify patterns. The data analysis commenced, transferring raw data to Word, and categorizing through open coding. Axial coding was applied by making connections, followed by selective coding determining data to support core concepts, refined with analytical reminder notes.

The study tries to reveal multifaceted stories and experiences of migration in the process; however, understanding Syrian women's migration experience is not at the desired level for various reasons. The most important limitation of the study was not being able to reach enough female participants, and it has not yielded significant findings about women's experiences because the act of migration seems to be male-dominated. Based on the findings and

observations, the migration route is considered more dangerous for women; women are expected to be passive in the entire migration process; and women are supposed to stay with the children in families. Even though the gatekeeper was the intermediary, being able to meet and reach women depended on the permission of the men, sometimes their father, sometimes their husband or brother. In addition to access problems, interviewing women in a qualified, independent manner was not done at the intended level. The women arrived later than their family members in the role of husband or father, and their integration was seen as quite limited. During the interview, they were not alone; their husbands or fathers were with them, and they were observed to be much more anxious, timid, and emotional. Therefore, women's experience in the migration process is not sufficiently explored within the scope of this study.

## Findings

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011, escalated into a crisis that profoundly affected millions of lives, both Syrian and non-Syrian. The initial movement seeking asylum in neighboring countries evolved into a broader impact as individuals sought ways to reach European countries through various routes. The legal process struggled to keep pace with the intensity of the war and migration crisis, pushing people towards "illegal" migration routes.

While irregular migration through these routes is not a new phenomenon (Sardelić, 2017), the sudden surge in the number of individuals attempting to cross into Europe and the associated accidents brought global attention to the issue. What sets this apart is the role of social media in shaping migration routes, alongside traditional migrant community networks and the guidelines of migrant smugglers.

This study explores the extensive and multi-stage migration process, covering pre-migration, the journey itself, and the post-migration period, with a specific focus on the influence of virtual networks on migration routes. The findings shed light on the motivations for migration, the experiences of migrants during the journey, and



the sense of being migrants upon arrival in Austria. In the findings section, the migration process is conceptualized as “migration network ladders”. The first step involves seeking asylum in neighboring countries, starting from the decision. The subsequent step is to migrate from the asylum country to a European country.

**Reasons for migration: “I was not part of this war.”**

In the Syrian civil war, the main reason for leaving the country is expressed as the right to life. Ammar (31, M), a participant with two primary school-aged daughters, explained his concern as follows: “If I had stayed in Syria, I would have been killed. I didn’t want to die because I have a family, two daughters”. At the crossroads between leaving and staying, the expressions of participants were similar, as Yassin (23, M) stated, “In the war, it was equally dangerous to stay there or to try this path. I attempted”. The other participant, Taha (29, M), who first came to Türkiye as a transit country and then to Austria, reported that his wife and two young sons also arrived in Austria a year later. He expressed the feeling that risk could be taken with his words: “In case of war, they would die anyway, so they tried. We had no choice!”. Married participants often mention leaving for the survival of their children and families, while single participants express a desire to avoid involvement in the war. Jalal (28, M) clarifies this sentiment:

*In Syria, I was forced to join the military. It only means that in a war, you will either kill or be killed! You don’t have the right to choose. I was young. My financial situation was good. I owned my home and car. I was going to university while working at a bank. Then the war began. I was not a part of the war! One night while I was sleeping, they attacked me, and I was shot in the leg. What could I do? I had no choice! It doesn’t matter which side you support. They just think they have the right to kill people. Both sides were killing civilians. We had a good life there. Everything is ruined right now. It hurts me.*

In addition to indefinite conscription, the fear of sudden disappearance and detention for posting

on social media platforms or for other reasons was also reported as a cause for fleeing the country. Among participants, Maher (28, M) expresses this rationale in detail, with emphasis on the prison:

*My friend was imprisoned in Damascus for 2.5 months. They made a village-sized prison on the 15th floor underground. He recounts that they kept 400 half-naked men standing close to each other in a tiny room.... Each person receives one olive, a slice of bread, and water daily. They could drink water as much as they wanted, but they could only use the toilet twice a day, in the morning and evening. Bathing was not allowed. It was a big problem if they were caught bathing. That’s precisely why I fled Syria. My friends stated they were begging to die under these conditions. Only God knows when the one who goes in will come out!... There is no record, no name. Who remains and who leaves is determined by money and relationships. There is no food coming in too! Even if the man survives, he is no longer the same... They do not prefer to kill directly but rather consume them slowly and enjoy it. Therefore, instead of starving to death, individuals prefer to die in this way. I cannot judge them. My friend living in Innsbruck lost his eye with this choice ... People would rather die in the sea than be tortured. We wanted to save our family and myself.*

Maher’s uneasy attitude and sadness were observed while describing this situation. Based on Maher’s and other interviews, it can be concluded that spreading discourse about the conditions of detention serves to preserve and reproduce the power of existing authority.

Another reason for migration is that Palestinian-originated Syrian participants believe that there is no difference between staying in Syria and leaving because Syrian policies do not let them take citizenship. Mustafa (22, M), for example, stated that despite being born in Syria, he and his father were unable to get citizenship since his grandparents were Palestinian migrants.

Some participants also stated that because some of their family members perished or relocated to other countries, there was no reason to retain them in Syria. Many participants stated that most older parents and married sisters were left behind in

Syria. Married sisters stayed since their spouses did not allow them due to the patriarchal culture. This reason seemed normal and sufficient for the participants.

Revealing the factors that drive people to move is crucial for understanding how the migration process starts and continues. Findings show that the loss of social trust due to war, the lack of human value under war conditions, and the pressures exposed caused Syrians to flee their country with cultural trauma. Furthermore, it was seen that male participants decided to migrate, and the rest of the family members obeyed. It was found that married participants decided to migrate for their children, and singles migrated to avoid joining the army. Although the migration motives were expressed in different words, they shared a similar expression. Syrian migrants, based on the war losses in their families, wanted to migrate to maintain their right to life in general.

### **From Neighbors to Europe: "European Dream" discourse**

Almost all the participants migrated to Europe through neighboring countries like Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan, residing there for varying durations. Their decisions on which neighboring country to go to were influenced by the possibility of staying in the transit country if migrating to Europe proved challenging. While factors like the political and cultural atmosphere, attitudes towards migrants, working conditions, and low wages played a role, the primary motivation was the "European dream" discourse created by migrants living in Europe through online channels.

The first reason expressed by many participants was the belief that the living conditions in the neighboring countries were poor and the opportunities were inadequate, therefore, their quality of life would improve if they could reach Europe. For instance, Ammar (31, M), who spent 9 months in Türkiye, justified his decision with this perspective:

*I love Türkiye very much, and I admire Istanbul. My wife, two daughters, and I attempted to live there. I worked 14-15 hours daily. Despite being in the same house, I couldn't see them. We lived*

*in a flat on the 3rd underground floor that never got sunlight, and my children and wife became ill due to dampness. I was working hard but earning less. I couldn't afford it. Finally, I decided that we couldn't live in these conditions. Although I hadn't considered going to Europe previously, we felt we had no choice.*

Due to harsh living and working conditions with meager wages, participants aspired to enhance their quality of life upon reaching Europe. The pervasive influence of the "European dream" discourse, widely disseminated and promoted through social media, played a crucial role in shaping this belief and expectation. Maher (28, M), who first went to Lebanon and lived for 2.5 years there and passed to Europe through Türkiye, expresses the significance of social media as follows:

*A man in Germany posted on Facebook and shared videos on YouTube about how beautiful life was there. Another person shared, "They gave me a house, they paid 1000 Euros monthly, I don't need to work". He added that next month they can give him a car, so he doesn't have to walk. The uneducated person, who has never owned a phone, and started using Facebook soon after acquiring it, has no idea what social media is, naturally believes these posts. That's exactly the problem! Not only Syrians, but also Afghans and Somalis see these posts, believe them, and begin looking for ways to go to Europe.*

The other reason is the inconsistent policies and negative attitudes towards Syrian migrants in neighboring countries. It has caused many Syrians, such as Hadi (28, M), to see migration to Europe as a unique solution. After living in Libya, he reached Italy by ship and, subsequently, Austria. Hadi's words can help us understand the situation:

*We had a good life in Syria before the war. I first heard the word "migrant" in Libya. The problems occurred after the first year. The government started to request visas, but nobody knew where we could get them. Security problems on the street began to increase seriously too. We could not go out, and we were unable to work. After being robbed in the street with a knife threat, I decided to go.*

In the interviews with female participants, it is understood that they didn't participate in the migration decision but acted in line with the decisions of their husbands/fathers for family reunification. However, some of the participants stated that thanks to internet tools such as social media, maps, messaging applications, etc., they were able to conduct pre-migration research, so they were less worried when their husbands set out illegally. Men migrated first, followed by women and children. In this process, most of the female participants stayed in Türkiye. In Türkiye, they both experienced financial difficulties and were sometimes victimized by anti-migrant sentiments. Eslem (34, F) describes her experiences as follows:

*We lived alone in Kayseri and Istanbul for 4 years with our children. My husband came before us. When he first said he was going on this journey, I was very worried, the road was very dangerous. I was not very willing to go because of the bad news. If there was no social media, I wouldn't have let my husband go. When we were in Türkiye, we researched Austria. I worked as a teacher for very intensive long hours, more than 12 hours, and it was very difficult for me. I left the children alone at home, I was very worried. Other children threw stones at one of my children.*

While she was about to describe the bullying against her child in detail, her spouse intervened by saying "But there are also very good people who helped us a lot". In general, women followed the person in the role of husband or father during the migration process and determined their own steps in line with the steps that person would take in this process. In this research, which is conceptualized as the migration network ladder, it is understood that women are not the first to take a step but follow the steps of the man. The difficulties they experienced in the neighboring country are also noteworthy in terms of the experience of being left behind.

Primarily, the pursuit of improved living conditions appears to be the main driving factor. A minority mentioned aspirations for higher education in Europe as a motivation for migration. Participants highlighted that choosing Türkiye as

the initial destination was influenced by its comparatively better conditions among Middle Eastern countries and its strategic role as a transit point to Europe. Social media plays a significant role in transforming neighboring countries into transit spaces. Initially, migration occurred as forced asylum in neighboring countries due to the war. In the subsequent stage, challenging living conditions and the portrayal of European life on social media prompted Syrians to explore irregular migration routes. Whether participants truly believe in this portrayal is a subject of debate. Some acknowledged a distinction between fiction and reality. For instance, Morad (49, M), expressed disappointment upon realizing that the European life portrayed on Facebook and YouTube did not match reality. Smartphone-accessible content on social media platforms plays a stimulating role in influencing migration to Europe.

### **Social media use on the way**

Participants in the study undertook diverse and perilous migration routes to reach Austria, with journeys ranging from a six-day pickup truck ride without stops to flying from Greece to Prague with forged passports. Some engaged in a hazardous cruise from Libya to Italy in a week, while others walked for 3 months and 10 days, utilizing nearly all means of transportation. Only three participants had Austria as their predetermined destination; the rest aimed to reach Europe for a fresh start. Notably, the majority who reached Austria illegally traversed from Türkiye to Greece primarily by inflatable boat. Participants emphasized the crucial role of social media, sharing networks, and various applications, including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Google Maps, in facilitating and supporting their challenging journeys. One participant highlighted the courage needed for the road, while another emphasized the immediacy of information on platforms like Facebook, underlining the indispensable role of social media in enabling such dangerous migrations.

The use of Internet technologies not only facilitated migration to Europe but also enhanced safety and familiarity for migrants. Before moving,

they extensively researched road conditions and European countries, often reaching out to acquaintances through social media for information. Many spent time in effective preliminary preparation, utilizing their mother tongue, Arabic. Yassin (23, M) mentioned obtaining crucial information through WhatsApp, Facebook, and Google Maps, including details on crossing from Türkiye to Greece, safe hotels, potential risks, recommended migrant smugglers, and reliable means of transportation. The other participant, Nour (40, M), lacking acquaintances in Austria, relied on Facebook pages/groups to gather information on obtaining a residence permit, rights, and necessary actions upon reaching the destination country. According to participants, preliminary preparation encompasses migration bureaucracy, safe migration routes, key contacts, and living conditions in the chosen European country. Omar, (28, M), highlighted the importance of this process in navigating the complexities before setting off:

*I did not know anyone in Austria. Before I left, I did some research on Facebook: what should I do on the road, how much to pay the mafia, how to behave when I meet the police, which direction is better for me... A famous Italian woman, Noval, is on Facebook and helps people on the road. Whenever a Syrian arrived in any European country and decided to stay there but somehow couldn't reach the police, Noval would help, contact the police, and tell them to pick them up from where they stayed.*

In addition to preliminary preparation, a solidarity network was formed among migrants, fostering a continuous flow of updated information along the process. As Omar mentioned sometimes European local helpers like Noval were involved in enhancing the migrant experience. Utilizing tools like maps, texting, and video sharing, Syrian migrants actively guided each other through the complex migration route, sharing insights on encountered problems and potential solutions.

Most participants followed the Greece-Macedonia-Serbia-Hungary-Austria route through Türkiye and the Aegean Sea, predominantly traversing on foot, starting with

boats, occasionally by rail, and rarely by taxi. Khalil (29, M), who embarked on the journey with friends, described the experience as follows:

*On the way, we used both offline and online maps. We looked for free Wi-Fi at train stations. Facebook shares always helped us. For example, we needed a cheap rail ticket during the Christmas season in Hungary. We found a Facebook group looking for train tickets on the same route as us. We agreed because the rail ticket was cheaper for group purchases. All this happened in an hour in a foreign city. Social media made it possible.*

In addition to networked solidarity through the virtual world for making the route secure and available, findings point to the existence of a networked migratory economy on the road as well. Participants, forming a solidarity network despite being strangers, employ strategies to mitigate challenges and reduce costs, such as acquiring affordable transportation, accommodations, negotiating for forged passports, or giving money to migrant smugglers. Notably, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to remain in countries of refuge or Syria, while middle-class and upper-income groups can reach Europe. All participants belong to the middle-income occupational group and initiated the journey with a predetermined budget.

Like many participants, Ahamd (31, M), emphasized the pivotal role of WhatsApp, online/offline maps, Google, Facebook, and various apps in migration routes and collective action development. He shared how he and his friends utilized social media networks to plan and execute the migration process because he hadn't found a job in Jordan:

*First, I got information from my friend in Germany via Messenger. Then, together with a friend from Jordan, three from Syria, and five in Istanbul, we planned the route via Messenger. We also formed a WhatsApp group. We met in Istanbul and went to Greece via İzmir. I could find Wi-Fi in a hotel while in Greece, so I called my family on WhatsApp. My friends were using Google Maps on their phones, and we had an extra battery. We encountered Syrians, Afghans, Iranians, and Iraqis on the route and exchanged*

*information. Crowding on the migration route also protected us from dangers such as the mafia.*

Participants consistently highlighted the significant role of social media networks in the migration process making the way navigable and providing crucial support. Many emphasized that sharing on social networks and utilizing internet tools encouraged the decision and made migration possible. Adnan (25, M, economist) stated that these networks not only encouraged migration but also alleviated fears by making the unknown aspects of the process known through social media. Excerpts from participants suggest that new communication technologies play a dual role, both triggering and encouraging migration initiation and facilitating the journey itself. Maher (29, M) further illustrates the impact of virtual networks on the irregular migration route:

*Without social media, reaching Europe would have taken much longer and been difficult... Without it, I would go to Türkiye, and look for a migrant smuggler, but I wouldn't know where I was, where I should go, where I was going, or where the police station was... Facebook is a basic communication tool with pages, maps, and locations. Without them, many more people would die on the way... Friends on Facebook wrote, "My brother is over there, his location is this and he couldn't reach the police, please help!" and others saw the post and helped... These networks, of course, might sometimes be alarming. Anyone can catch you where you are. This possibility and negative comments on Facebook did not reduce my motivation but rather strengthened me. Before I left, I read stories and experiences on Facebook, so I set out with a lot of information. For example, there is a station in Hungary where you can drink water, everyone needs water, so they know it before they set off. That's what social media does! ... For instance, the absence of a treaty prevented Egyptians from coming here, but they heard that Germany welcomes everyone, so they attempted to go there... I could come via social media, especially Facebook. I didn't need to download things to my phone or ask my friends. I just needed to open Facebook and take screenshots of the information and coordinates...I also knew*

*alternative ways. Many people had already traveled the same road. I didn't wait for someone to kill us.*

Participants concurred that new communication technologies shape the migration route. In the Syrian case, migration evolves from community networks rooted in face-to-face relations to virtual communities and social media networks. Initially, participants connect through social media with friends or relatives in European countries, seeking information about living standards and practical migration experiences rather than expecting immediate support upon arrival. Unlike labor or chain migration, where community networks are influential, Syrian migration hinges on the reasons, type, means, and legal situation, often leading migrants to end up where they are apprehended rather than their intended destination. The process reveals that individuals, despite being strangers, collaborate with a common goal, planning and completing migration with solidarity. Those risking migration might also embrace a life separate from their ethnic community post-migration, maintaining connections via social networks. Community formation during the process occurs through social media networks, irrespective of social identities or kinship ties. Interestingly, the formed community during migration doesn't seem to be an essential need in real life post-migration. Additionally, post-migration attitudes are influenced by integration policies in the destination country.

### **Reaching Austria**

While Austria was the target country for a few participants, for others, it became the country where they were caught and subsequently lived. The term "Europe" was commonly used in interviews rather than specifying a particular country. While some secured residence permits and others awaited application results, family members were scattered across Syria, asylum countries like Türkiye, and various European nations. Upon reaching Austria, they attempted to complete formalities and continued using virtual networks for diverse purposes.

It is understood that participants faced numerous challenges and official procedures upon arrival. Participants noted that they were caught by the security forces in Austria and had to stay by providing fingerprints. Similar incidents occurred in countries along the route, such as Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. Participants, reluctant to give fingerprints, were sometimes granted permits and instructed to leave the country after a specific period, indicating the reluctance of these nations to host migrants. In Austria, the post-arrival process involved entering the country through official channels, waiting in detention rooms, and residing in refugee camps until the acquisition of a residence permit. In this process, financial support for health services, German courses, and vocational training was provided, either before or after obtaining the residence permit. While they seem to be passive/docile migrants subjected to biopolitical regulations such as fingerprints and mandatory detention upon arrival, they gradually became more active in organizing their lives through social networks.

Syrian migrants residing in Linz continue to effectively utilize virtual networks, employing them in three main ways post-migration. Firstly, they establish connections with those remaining in Syria and friends and family across different countries. Secondly, they utilize virtual networks to adapt to their new life in Linz, fostering solidarity with newcomers by sharing information on daily life and official matters. Lastly, they facilitate the migration route by exchanging insights with those intending to migrate, those who have already begun, and those on the route.

While social media is often used by migrants in Austria for integration purposes, it remains a crucial tool for staying connected with family in Syria, the country of asylum, and friends dispersed across European nations. Various virtual platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Imo, and Viber are actively employed. Participants engage in these networks to stay informed about Syria, maintain bonds with those left behind, exchange information, and alleviate the sense of isolation in their new life in Linz. Khalil (29, M) illustrates his communication with family in Syria:

*When there is electricity, I usually call my mom on WhatsApp every three days. We also chat with my sisters and friends on Facebook. When bomb news comes from Syria, I immediately call my friends via Messenger or WhatsApp because phone calls are quite expensive. I also use Imo for video calls.*

Similarly, Morad (49, M) maintains daily contact with his wife and children in Canada, from which he had to be separated for bureaucratic reasons, through WhatsApp, Messenger, or Imo, and his parents and siblings in Syria weekly due to electricity shortage. Ahamd (31, M) frequently engages in group video calls with family and friends in Damascus and Jordan, relying on Messenger and WhatsApp.

Despite spatial separation due to migration, virtual networks help unite individuals from the same Syrian community. While they endeavor to maintain their own culture, habits, and relationships, they are aware that they need to adapt to their new life. Their social networks converge in the virtual world, but with the social adaptation to the new country, they can begin to separate from their network over time. Spatial distances converge with new communication technologies, but they express occasionally their need to avoid the war chaos to adapt to their new lives and get rid of trauma. While some participants who see social media networks as useful ways to follow agendas, and news in Syria, expressed that new communication technologies relieved their concerns to some extent, other participants stated that their psychological state was not available to follow the news.

The interviews reveal that social media networks significantly assist migrants in socio-cultural adaptation to Austrian society after their arrival. Their information-seeking for integration covers a broad spectrum, including basic needs, official procedures, residence permits, rental houses, job and education opportunities, driver's license requirements, migration rights, and aspects of Austrian culture such as history, lifestyle, and language learning. The availability of much of this information in Arabic on virtual platforms is a crucial facilitator for adaptation. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook, particularly valuable for learning German, are actively utilized, with participants also downloading mobile apps for

language acquisition. Ghith (26, M) expresses his viewpoint:

*I've used Facebook daily for communication and entertainment since arriving here. I follow the Facebook profile of a man who wishes to bring his family from Syria here. People share what they have learned. I also watch YouTube to learn about Austrian history, rights, and the language. I removed the groups on the migration route. I am still in contact with my friends in other countries.*

Ghith quit the groups, both because he didn't want to remember the negativities they experienced during the journey and because of an incident he experienced before migration regarding the use of social media. He was imprisoned for 2 months and his father for 3 months in Syria because of Facebook posts. They paid \$4,000 in bail. At the time of the interview, her brother was also in prison, but they did not know where he was, and Ghith was worried because he could not get any information. It was observed that he was cautious about social media and used it more functionally, as this experience increased her concern that her relatives in Syria might be harmed.

Facilitating the migration process, participants share experiences and support each other, turning the unknown route into a known and safer path by reducing dangers and risks. Their roles evolve from receiving support to helping, making migration an ongoing process facilitated by internet tools rather than a completed journey. The participants' engagement with migrants on the route varies. Some actively share knowledge and experiences, while others passively observe. Some, like Ghith, opt to disconnect from groups to move past the challenging process.

A female participant, Ruba (60, F), a retired woman, first stayed in Mersin and then illegally traveled to Austria by truck for 6 days. On the one hand, she stated that she used Facebook, Imo, and WhatsApp to get news from her relatives; on the other hand, she expressed that she did not want to follow the news in Syria in general, by saying "I don't want to hear anything, Damascus was so beautiful, now horrible, they destroyed it and ruined it". She also stated that she maintained her

relations with a person who helped her in Mersin before migration and that they established a mother-son relationship after arrival. Although relationships may seem temporary during the migration process, sometimes, as in Ruba's case, they can continue.

Participants who want to communicate with those who want to migrate and share their experiences through virtual networks noted that they warn about the reliability and changeability of information. Taha (29, M) explains this situation as follows:

*Many people asked how I arrived here through the internet. I assisted my cousin, but I emphasized, "Don't completely trust the information I give you, research it". Because the borders are very long, everyone's method and experiences are different when crossing. Money has a major role. I gave tips on hazardous spots.*

Participants indicated that new dangers and risks may emerge on the migration route. The information about the migration route is dynamic, and the sharing of migrant experiences may occasionally lose significance and become functional.

## Conclusion

During the "Arab Spring", when the protests turned into a civil war in Syria, social media began to be influential in shaping the social movement and human mobility. Virtual networks emerged as powerful tools for organizing solidarity, guiding individuals through migration routes, and facilitating post-migration integration. These networks served as the eyes and ears of people as a compass for them when they had to flee their country and were on the way to Austria. As Gough and Gough study (2019) indicates, social media serves as a facilitator of migration. This technology, which connects people, has established a migration route that may appear "illegal" from the outside but is considered "safe" for them.

In the context of Syrian migrants, social media posts encourage individuals who want to migrate, enabling them to visualize a bird's-eye view of the migration route with every step. Based on the

findings, it can be said that most of these posts in this process constitute and reproduce a "European dream discourse". The shares containing videos, photos, and messages about the European destination trigger migration, and other mobile tools with the shares make the migration route safer while passing through European countries. Afterward, they use them for official procedures in the country where they were captured, to adapt to their new life, and to communicate with those left behind, while guiding new migrants in the formation of the migration route.

Based on the findings, Syrian migration differs from many mass migrations in history in terms of the role of virtual networks in creating the routes and the rate it has reached. The Syrian migration could be inferred to include the "migration network ladder" with a navigation system. To progress on this ladder, the individual must be motivated, because when taking a step, an individual only takes the stairs if there is a better option in front of her/ him. Rather than the dominant role of traditional community-based networks, where blood ties, ethnic ties, or friendships are influential in the process, virtual networks, driven by social media, played a comprehensive role in the entire migration process, influencing individuals from the decision to migrate. In the Syrian case, social media minimized the perceived distance, making potential migrants aware of obstacles, risks, and costs involved in the migration route. As communication technologies have advanced, migration strategies and methods have evolved. Rather than being mutually exclusive, virtual and community networks have become more integrated because virtual networks have made the process in the physical world more predictable, safer, and manageable.

Before departure, migrants extensively researched Europe and the migration route through social media. Post-arrival, they shared their experiences online, contributing to the formation of a "hologram of the migration route" in the minds of those planning to migrate. Virtual searches covered diverse aspects, from the dangers posed by the mafia to the locations of police stations, emphasizing the importance of maps and

SIM cards. Participants stressed that these tools were essential for learning about risks and alternative routes before and during the journey.

Online migration, facilitated by social media, eliminated the dependence of strong ties to community networks in the destination country. Trust spaces were predominantly created among individuals with similar experiences in the virtual world, rather than relying on governments or formal community networks. Certainly, community networks are still influential in the process. Some participants stated that they contacted their relatives who migrated to European countries to get information about life conditions in Europe. However, the aim is not to demand that basic living conditions be prepared for them before arriving but to get an idea about the country's conditions and make preliminary preparations for the migration route. Migrants act in solidarity by joining a group and forming communities along the route; however, it is understood that they are not planned but emerge depending on the road conditions, therefore the communities along the migration route are mostly temporary and interest-based, eventually disbanding.

The main motive for this migration was the chaotic situation in Syria. However, not everyone desiring to migrate to Europe could realize this goal; advantages such as economic and cultural capital, education, being in the middle or upper class, being white-collar, knowing at least one European language, and being male were crucial. The study revealed a predominantly middle-class narrative, with participants possessing education, technological literacy, and a budget for migration expenses. According to our findings, except for a small number of male participants who migrated with their families or relatives, most of them came to Austria either alone or with groups of friends or by joining different groups along the way, leaving their close family members either in Syria or mostly in neighboring countries such as Türkiye, as statistics supports (Buber-Ennser et. al., 2020). Part of their spouses and/or children were able to come later; however, older relatives such as parents, female relatives such as single sisters, and/or those who could not afford the migration



budget were left behind, as many participants stated. Women and children, older people, socio-economically disadvantaged and unable to afford migration expenses, and uneducated individuals either stayed in Syria or established their lives in the countries they sought refuge in, such as Türkiye. More precisely, they could not take the next step on the migration network ladder.

Although the migrants focused on establishing their own life after reaching their European destination in Austria, it is understood that most participants could not completely break away from both the migration route and Syria. It would not be correct to say that family ties disappear with the completion of migration, that is, with spatial separation. Dekker and Engbersen's study (2014), while discussing the impact of social media on the migration process, also states that it strengthens family ties. Similarly, in our research, we found that although the participants were spatially dispersed with close family members or relatives (e.g. some in Syria, some in neighboring countries, and some in other countries around the world), internet tools, whether voice or video calls or social media, preserved these relationships in a sense. On the one hand, it is seen that they encourage them by making plans for those staying in Syria, and on the other hand, they stay in contact with those on the migration route and are in solidarity. Just as the participants were on their way to migration, they received help from people they did not know. There is a situation in which the roles change and the person who reaches the target transfers his/her role to the new one. The migrant, who actively uses virtual networks on the migration route to achieve migration, transfers this migrant role to the newcomer after reaching the target, and this time he/she helps those on the way. The fact that those who have completed the migration help and support the newcomers indicates that they are not completely detached from this process. Social media as Dekker and Engbersen (2014) state, serves as a valuable source of informal migration information.

Gillespie et al. (2018) highlight both the risks and benefits of smartphone use during migration for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Similarly, in our study, although sharing on the road with

smartphone tools facilitates migration, as many participants stated, it also causes people to become targets or mislead people with inconsistent information. As Castles et. al (2014) and Mandic (2017) point out, it is important to remember that there are not only migrants on the migration route and within the migration industry but also many legal and illegal actors such as traffickers, smugglers, etc. Because of too much information and, the variability and inconsistency of the migration route information, as noted by the participants, the migrant needs to decide on the information that is up-to-date and reliable in order not to be in a difficult situation.

Based on the findings of this research, new studies can be proposed to emphasize certain issues. For example, a separate study of women's experience in the migration process will be able to show us how gender differentiates the migration experience. In addition, the criminal elements experienced on the road during the migration process should be studied in terms of criminology. Later, this research can continue to better understand the process by focusing on how Syrian migrants can integrate into the Austrian society during the post-migration process, how family-relative relations change, and whether there is spatial segregation or clustering over time.

In conclusion, the Syrian migration narrative, shaped by social media, highlights the pivotal role of virtual networks in motivating, guiding, and connecting individuals throughout the migration process. These networks have reshaped traditional migration dynamics, providing a unique perspective on the impact of technology on human movement.

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