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Bilecen, Basak

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Basak Bilecen*

Human Smuggling Networks Operating Between Middle East and the European Union:

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* Bielefeld Graduate School of History and Sociology. Comments welcome to: bbilecen@gmail.com

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Bilecen, Basak

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University of Bielefeld
Faculty of Sociology
Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD)
Postfach 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
Homepage: http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/ag_comcad/

Abstract

Due to its challenging nature of traditional perspectives, human smuggling is always on the agenda of decision makers, politicians, media and academia. This article focuses on human smuggling between Middle East into the European Union, especially the Netherlands. Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan are the chosen countries from the region since there are increasing numbers of asylum seekers in Europe. The article briefly looks at different perspectives in the literature and then concentrates on the involvement of transnational organized crime in the process of human smuggling. Then it will try to analyze organized crime perspective by network analysis.

Introduction

From the earliest times of human history migrations have been part of it (Castles & Miller, 2003). It takes different forms such as labor migration, family reunification and asylum seeking. Trafficking and smuggling of people have always been prevalent since territorial boundaries have been drawn. However, the concern and research about the phenomena have only begun fairly recently due to the increase of smuggling activities which is obviously a crime from the states' point of view and raises concerns of national security. Nowadays "there are probably two [or] three million undocumented immigrants in Europe – accounting for 10 to 15 per cent of the total population of foreigners." (Stalker, 2002: 151) Even though the numeric data can vary and is only partially available due to obvious reasons, this large proportion of undocumented migrants began to attract attention of policy makers and researchers. Empirical research exists on the issue in general, but in forms of policy documents, news reports or migration bulletin rather than academic publications. The main purpose of this article is to explore the networks of human smuggling from Middle East into the European Union, the Netherlands in particular. Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan are chosen as the sending countries because the Netherlands receive large amounts of illegal migrants from these countries. "In 2000 Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq were among the top five countries of origin for asylum seekers to Europe, involving more than 99,000 people who accounted for almost 23 percent of the asylum seekers to this continent." (Icduygu, 2005: 10)

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Table 1 [or Figure 1; optional]

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Delicate stories to tell: interviewing smuggled migrants

Inside perspective of human smuggling is a key feature of this research. Although much attention is paid to human smuggling by decision makers, media and scholars, most of the time personal accounts of smuggled migrants is neglected as the main source of information. However, since the primary interest of this research is the social networks of smuggled migrants, it is unavoidable to neglect smuggled migrants' accounts. Therefore, semi-structured interview is the main method of this research combined with secondary data analysis. The interviews were conducted in three main cities of the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Nijmegen. An advantage of semi-structured interviews is that respondents have space to tell their stories in accordance with some leading questions.

In total, eleven interviews are conducted: five from Iraq, three from Iran and three from Afghanistan in 2006. Since this issue is very delicate many smuggled migrants rejected the opportunity to have an interview. However, by spending some time with individuals and showing interest in their stories enabled me to collect data. It was often very difficult to speak with the smuggled migrants particularly regarding how they found their smugglers. In the beginning they wanted to search the interview and note papers to be sure they were not related to any kind of foreign police. It is understandable when smuggled migrants, whose applications are still in process like the ones in asylum centers, reject to have an interview. However, many of the rejections also came from those who have legal status in the country even though it has been told there will be no personal indication.

Furthermore, I believe being a Turkish helped me to initiate conversation with all the respondents. For instance, the three of the interviews were conducted entirely in Turkish and one was partly in Turkish. During the remaining interviews Turkish words were used often by the respondents for me to understand better. Besides from conversation skills, being Turkish also helped me to have interviews in the first place. In other words, some of the respondents spoke with me just because the fact that I was Turkish; they told me that they felt comfortable telling their stories to a Turkish girl and help.

Different perspectives of human smuggling

"It is clear that trafficking and human smuggling have the capacity to excite attention and polarize opinion" (Salt, 2000a: 3) due to the challenging nature of the traditional views. In other words, customarily, international migration has been regarded as a relationship between an individual or a household mobilization for work or permanent settlement and a state as a gatekeeper for entry and citizenship rights. However, smuggling and trafficking confront with these traditional migration theories by distorting the boundaries between legality and illegality and between voluntary and enforced movements. Furthermore, they question the extent of migrant's decision and they influence the geographical model of migration currents. Conceptual developments on the issue are still at an early stage. Both smuggling and trafficking need a theoretical frame that includes institutionalized networks, organizations, agents and individuals (Salt, 2000b).

In the literature there are three main perspectives on the issues of human smuggling and trafficking in the way a theoretical frame is developed (Morrison, 2004). First one is the human rights perspective, arguing for both smuggled and trafficked persons are vulnerable to human rights abuses in the forms of violence, threat, and economic exploitation, physical and mental violation on their way to the destination country and also in the receiving country (Gallagher, 2002). Secondly, the migration management perspective and according to it human smuggling and trafficking are illegal forms of migration and since it is seen as a threat to national security, there has to be strong national and regional immigration control by sovereign states which are the main control mechanisms. Thirdly, the organized crime perspective advocates human smuggling and trafficking are highly structured with a rigid internal distribution of duties. Another perspective which is more recent than the others is looking at smuggling and trafficking as a business constructed by Salt and Stein. From the point of view of the business perspective smuggling is believed to be a diverse international business with an enormous budget, granting numerous jobs world-wide and controlled by a set of individuals and organizations that have interests in the expansion of the business (Salt & Stein, 1997).

This article questions the role of social networks in the operation of human smuggling between the Middle East and the European Union. Among all the perspectives given above it is

the organized crime dealing more with the operational aspects of the process. Therefore, its arguments will be the focus in analyzing the data.

Is human smuggling really an organized crime?

Both of the words 'smuggling' and 'organized crime' operate as great labels. On the one hand, “smuggling” creates an image of shadowy and dangerous tasks where passive illegal migrants are taken across borders behind closed doors such as in the back of the trucks or in deeper sections of ships. On the other hand, even with its more moving nature, 'organized crime', criminals by all accounts form a group to perform difficult prohibited tasks, hidden from the questioning eyes of the state. If it is looked at from the perspective either of national police or Europol (a European Union police organization)[i] in accordance with international organizations such as IOM or ICMPD, human smuggling is seen to be a part of the bigger organized crime scheme. Moreover, since human smuggling is considered an organized crime, whoever engaged in the process is therefore allegedly engaged in organized crime. When these two concepts are put collectively, it appears that there is something like a 'smuggling industry' (Soudijn, 2004). However, it might not be necessarily the case.

There are three levels of human smuggling in the literature. The first one is smugglers with no or little organization. They are the ones helping their family members or relatives from their country of origin to come to the receiving state they are living in. It consists of “transnational networks” or “irregular chain migration” as Staring puts it. In other words, as potential migrants, they have friends and relatives living in the Netherlands or in other Western European countries whom they have contacted. Those friends or relatives send them invitations and they arrive legally at first to the country or they sometimes use human smugglers. Even if the friends or relatives do not want to be involved at the entrance phase, they help them to stay further or take those illegal migrant friends or relatives into their homes. Those illegal migrants have good access to the informal labor market through the supportive transnational network (Staring, 2004). “Established immigrant populations function as a bridge not only for legal immigrants, but also for illegal ones, by providing assistance in finding them such things as shelter and work.” (Amersfoort & Penninx, 1998) According to his research, Staring states that approximately fifty percent of the illegal immigrants come to the Netherlands with a tourist visa which is taken by the formal invitations vouched and the money coming from the family or household in the country of origin. After the arrival the kinship networks assist them in

their settlement and employment. Nevertheless, some exceptions of this type of illegal immigration exist such as using human smugglers. For the first level of human smuggling only one respondent out of eleven used a formal tourist invitation and then overstayed. Another three respondents chose to come to the Netherlands even though they had relatives or family members in Germany and in Austria. One of them, an Iraqi migrant gives his reasons when it is asked if it would have been easier for him to come by an invitation and not by illegal channels:

> "For an invitation you need a member of your close family but my parents are still in Iraq. The relatives I had in Germany were not very close ones, so it didn't happen and also there is one important thing that to have an invitation you need to have a legal passport but Saddam didn't give us any formal documents, he didn't want us to leave the country."

Moreover, an Afghani migrant came specifically to the Netherlands because he had his brothers who already came to the country before him and advised him to come as well. However, this Afghani migrant chose to come to the Netherlands by illegal means and his brothers did not help him directly such as sending an invitation. In that case the help was indirect by advising the easier asylum policies.

The second one is small criminal smuggling groups. They are the ones who operate secretly but at a lower level. Since the attention is on the third one which is transnational organized criminal groups, the research on this group is limited and vague. It is often said in different resources that there are small groups, but there is neither enough evidence nor much explanation what is really meant. On the one hand, the evidence of this research suggests that the second level is the most common way and on the other hand, there are many small smugglers/smuggler groups involved in the whole journey. According to the interviews conducted in the Netherlands, smuggled migrants from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan did not use a very well organized smuggling network which takes them from their country of origin to the destination country. Rather they transited from different countries and the smuggled migrants themselves found the people to move on to another country. More importantly, the smuggled migrants use at least more than one smuggler or small scale smuggler groups. An interesting case is an Iraqi smuggled migrant in Rotterdam describes how he went to Italy with the help of smugglers and then he decided to carry on by himself:

> "I had a friend but I did everything because I speak English and I learned to buy tickets, so I say I can do that why should I pay someone for this easy job and I did it."

For instance, an Iraqi smuggled migrant in Amsterdam summarizes very well the concept of finding their own smugglers:

> "I went to a coffee-shop you know in Turkey you have "çaycı" [tea place where everybody gathers to chat or play cards] and find someone, you know?...Everyone who wants to make some money is in this business, it is not difficult if you want to find them, they are everywhere even here if you want to find them you can."

The third level is argued to be the transnational organized crime. They are the ones who supposedly controlling the smuggling operations and also employ the second level smaller criminal groups. Since the third group is the most threatening among the three levels, it attracts the most attention from the media, government, police and academia (Soudijn, 2004: 7-9). "Opinions are divided on the exact involvement of organized crime in human smuggling. A problem with measuring organized crime is that it is difficult to come up with completely exclusive criteria. As a result, the definition of organized crime still is a source of controversy among researchers and international organizations as there is no consensus on what criteria to use." (van Liempt, 34-35) On the one hand, according to other sources like IOM, ICMPD and SMOFA, Europol those serious illegal activities such as human trafficking and smuggling are done by transnational organized criminal groups. While organized crime exists constantly and there might be the involvement of a series of multiple criminal activities; organized criminal activity may be also extremely structured and active for extensive period of time, but if once there is a criminal activity, the organization breaks up (Salt & Hogarth, 2000).

For the third level of human smuggling the interviews revealed that only two Afghani migrants used bigger transnational organized smuggling groups. Their agreement was from their country or from their first transit country to the Netherlands. However, the rest of the respondents found smugglers in each country by themselves. Even Europol states that "the traditional perception of hierarchically structured organized criminal groups is being challenged. There is now a development suggesting that a greater percentage of powerful organized criminal groups are far more cellular in structure with loose affiliations made and broken a regular basis and less obvious chains of command." (Europol, 2003: 8)

Table 1. Concepts of network structure within each of six modes of network analysis (Burt, 1980)

	Actor aggregation in a unit of analysis		
Analytical Approaches	Actor	Multiple actors as a network subgroup	Multiple actors/subgroups as a strutured system
Relational	Personal network as extensive, dense and/or multiplex	Primary group as a clique: a set of actors connected by cohesive relations	System structure as dense and/or transitive
Positional	Occupant of a network position as central and/or prestigious	Status/role-set as a network position: a set of structurally equivalent actors	System struture as a stratification of status/roles-sets

Table 1 stands for types of models in each of the six analytical models. It is described in two axes; the horizontal one is the aggregation of actors in a unit of analysis and the vertical one is the frame of reference within which actors are examined. There are three levels of aggregation on the horizontal axis. The first one is the highest level which represents some network models that approach relations among all actors in a system as a single unit of analysis. However, like in the third one, other models examine the relations where one actor is concerned so that the individual becomes the unit of analysis. Between those two extremes, the second one represents the models which combine actors into network subgroups in order that subgroups within a system can be contrasted as units of analysis. On the vertical axis, two analytical perspectives are differentiated by network models. These perspectives are distinguished in their frame of reference within which an actor is examined. Network models within a “relational” perspective explain the strength of relation between couples of actors. The relational view promotes models where participation of an actor in one or more relations can be examined without concentrating on his/her many other relations. In a “positional” perspective, network models explain the pattern of relationship defining an actor’s position in a system of actors. The positional view promotes models where an actor is one of many in a system of interrelated actors so that all relations he/she is engaged in must

be taken into account. The models in both relational and positional views claim to define network relations; however they all have different ways to do so.

When the organized crime perspective is analyzed according to the network theory, it can be categorized within the positional view which promotes models where an actor is one of many in a system of interrelated actors so that all relations he/she engaged must be taken into account. The positional view defines network structure as intertwined, differentially prominent, status/role-sets, in terms that actors in a system are stratified. Organized crime perspective especially falls under the category of multiple units of analysis where system structure is stratified among actors' statuses and role sets where there are vertical and horizontal interdependency. Moreover, the main actor has central or prestigious role in its network position. A model of network analysis models are composed of actor, subgroup and system models of a social topology which coincides with this kind of networks and it fits to define social structure in terms of distinguished actors and subgroups.

On the other hand, what is suggested instead of this view falls under the category of relational view which focuses on the characteristics of social differentiation, the relational view creates social psychological concepts of differentiation. According to the relational view, network structure is defined in terms of typical relations of individuals and the degree to which actors are attached within cohesive primary groups where the system structure is transitive. Moreover, the main actors in that case, change from one smuggler to another that has extensive, dense or multiple personal networks. Triad census models coincide with these kinds of networks and it means that the structure of the system is impenetrable and/or is capable of transition depending on the circumstances, and the relations between smugglers and the smuggled in different transit countries.

Conclusion

This article questioned the smugglers' operations and showed how it differs from the arguments of transnational organized crime. It has been shown that use of bigger smuggling organizations is not always the case but rather there are smaller groups or individuals who are recruited through family, friendship and kinship ties. However, it is not to say there are no organized human smuggling groups at all; but rather it has been shown that it is not the only

case. There are other forms of human smuggling based on friendship, ethnic and kinship ties operating besides these bigger organizations and since they are smaller and more flexible they might dominate the market in the future. However, again, it is does not mean the organized criminal groups will not continue on their operations. Moreover, irregular migrants find their own smugglers on their way and have their own agreements. Irregular migrants especially from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in the Netherlands, make extensive use of friendship and kinship networks particularly in the beginning of their journey. Usually, the agreement is not from the country of origin directly to the country of destination. More interestingly, irregular migrants from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in the Netherlands found their own smugglers in different transit countries simply by asking around for those people through friendship, ethnic or kinship ties they had. Sometimes they became friends with those from their own nationalities or ethnic community on their way.

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i It was initially established in 1996 by the Maastricht Treaty under the Title VI as the 'European Drugs Unit". Even though it was established as a non-operational team in the Hague, Europol has been involved in actual investigations such as migrant detention in Eastern Europe which is led criticisms by the European Parliament. Also the position of Europol in the European combat against illegal migration is affirmed by Tampere Conclusions in 1999. For further information see also Morrison (2000); and the official website of Europol http://www.europol.europa.eu.

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