5

Uncertainty

Navigating the Higher Education Dream

> When I first came, I started working, education was not in my plans since I had to work due to our bad financial status. I worked a bit, and also there were no Syrian schools at that time, I had to study in Turkish schools if I wanted to study at all.
>
> –Dawood, twenty-one years old, Adana

Dawood was twenty-one years old when we met him in Adana. Originally from Aleppo, he had promptly responded to our post soliciting research participants on a Facebook group for Çukorova University students. His eagerness to participate in the project and share his experiences as a young Syrian in Turkey became apparent in our first meeting. Indeed, we found out during the interview that this topic is very close to his heart, since he had witnessed injustices that he wanted to bring to light.

For our meeting, he chose an upscale café in the city center and led us to a quiet booth. His fingers were stained, presumably from his work in a furniture factory. He explained that he had to interrupt his high school studies in Syria due to the war and that he crossed the border to Turkey with his family in 2014. Under Temporary Protection, he worked at a furniture factory in the industrial area of Adana to support his family while studying. He felt at ease and settled in Adana. Throughout the conversation, he explained the many problems that Syrians face in accessing higher education, as well as the formal and informal activities that some young students resort to in order to secure admissions.[1]

This chapter explores the uncertainties with which young refugees grapple as they try to shape their futures through education. The previous chapter looked at permanent temporariness and the active waiting that it induces. Here, we will explore uncertainty in its dual meaning of incomplete knowledge and inability to see the future. Both epistemic uncertainty and

existential uncertainty are key elements of the refugee experience (see, e.g., Biehl 2015; Horst and Grabska 2015). In the case of the youth in this study, the intersection of these types of uncertainty comes through most clearly in their attempts to enter Turkey's universities. There, they encounter an unfamiliar system with few adequate means for obtaining information. At the same time, the question of whether or not they will access higher education creates a ripple effect of uncertainties regarding their longer-term futures. As they navigate these uncertainties and find ways to create clarity, they also begin to define new futures, often unexpected ones.

Like Dawood, many young Syrians had to interrupt their studies and engage in what they refer to as "unqualified" work to sustain their families, in some cases as the primary breadwinner. This, in turn, limits the ability of young refugees to pursue higher education, which can otherwise provide them with access to better economic opportunities in the future. Indeed, the 30 percent of young Syrians who had dreams of higher education prior to the war were faced in Turkey with new obstacles that delayed their potential path to university. However, what makes Dawood's case special is that he overcame these obstacles and played an important role in helping others, too, through his involvement in various associations.

Though refugees' access to university education is often perceived as "a luxury leading towards 'elitism'" (Pilkington 1986), higher education institutions play a vital role in the integration of migrants into the host country. For immigrants themselves, and for their new homeland, increased access to higher education can provide considerable opportunity for growth and less reliance on public services (Erisman and Looney 2007). Prior to the conflict, Syrians had been able to enter Turkish universities as international students. At time of writing, they continue to apply under the same international status and so compete with other international students under university quotas.

Early in the Syrian crisis, it is estimated that there were already about four thousand Syrian students enrolled in Turkish universities, most in Gaziantep and Istanbul (Biehl et al. 2016). That figure increased to more than twenty thousand in 2017–18,[2] and in the 2021–22 academic year had more than doubled to 48,192 in state universities.[3] Many studies have examined the barriers to higher education that Syrian young people face in Turkey (Erdoğan et al. 2017; Hohberger 2017, 2018; Watenpaugh, Fricke, and King 2014; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017). These barriers do not differ much from those identified in other migrant contexts and fall under the main headlines of financial cost, language barrier, accreditation, and registration process (Erisman and Looney 2007; Muñoz 2013; Zeus 2011). However, these have been exacerbated in the Turkish context because of the decentralized nature of the application system for foreign students, the lack of centralized guidance, and the difficulties of acquiring the paperwork necessary to demonstrate their previous qualifications.[4]

We discuss in this chapter how, in this context, an informal and often illegal "migrant-supporting industry" (Cohen 2006) has developed around higher education in Turkey. Other studies have shown how certain individuals, groups, or institutions may take on the role of mediator between migrants and their employers or other institutions, often profiting from this role (Castles and Miller 2003). Literature specifically examining mobility and higher education focuses on the agents of the higher education sector, such as international student recruitment teams and other institutions selling an education overseas, and how these shape mobility flows (Beech 2018). Here, we instead examine the informal and often illegal mechanisms underlying access to higher education among migrants and refugees. While much of the literature on the migrant "illegality industry" (Andersson 2014b) focuses on the persons and institutions who profit from migrants' attempts to cross borders, we extend that concept here to look at the informal or illegal mechanisms that Syrian youth employ to overcome the epistemic and existential uncertainties produced by the higher education system in Turkey.

We focus on how the industry around higher education for refugees has emerged in Turkey, how it functions, and how it relates to other dimensions of migration facilitation, in this case integration. Indeed, a "migration industry" has emerged around higher education in which an ensemble of "entrepreneurs, firms and services . . . chiefly motivated by financial gain, facilitate international mobility, settlement and adaptation" (Hernández-León 2013: 25). Moreover, as Ruben Hernández-León notes for the United States–Mexico border case, it is often migrants themselves who identify opportunities because of their membership in the social networks of persons migrating. "In-group membership," he remarks, "offers the chance to commodify solidarity; that is, to use migratory human capital as well as the individual migrant's distinct position in a social network for personal monetary gain" (29).

Here, too, we find that actors in the particular migration industry that has developed around Turkish higher education are also often Syrians who build on their own previous skills and contacts, in the process "commodifying solidarity" and capitalizing on their in-group membership to sell migration services. This, in turn, gives an advantage to those young people who are financially better off. These young people generally have support from their families, available time, and social networks that inform them about the best opportunities. We illustrate how privilege is (re)produced for already privileged migrants (Cranston and Lloyd 2019; Koh and Wissink 2018;).

Higher education is an aspiration, and we could have discussed it in this chapter through the prism of that futural orientation. What we discuss instead is something prior to that: developing the capacity to aspire in a context of both epistemic and existential uncertainty. In his well-known article "The Capacity to Aspire," Arjun Appadurai (2013: 188) observed that our

horizons of expectation are not simply individual but are culturally shaped. They are also socioeconomically shaped, he explains, as the aspirational capacity is something that is unevenly distributed in society. "It is a sort of meta-capacity, and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire." Appadurai calls this ability a navigational capacity, meaning that certain groups have a better-developed ability to make links between means and ends in pursuit of long-term goals.

We show here that in a context of rupture and disorientation, where one's ordinary means of orienting oneself in life are thrown into flux, this capacity is disrupted. Epistemic and existential uncertainty are great levelers. We demonstrate here, though, how those with more means learn to navigate this uncertain terrain more quickly. Regarding navigation, Appadurai (2013: 188) notes, "The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors." Access to higher education is very revealing of this, as a university diploma remains one of the main ways in which youth imagine reproducing their class position or improving it.

We rely here on data collected through interviews with administrators of higher education centers, as well as ethnographic observations in classrooms, discussions with teachers and students in these centers, and posts on social media groups. We first describe the limitations on Syrian access to higher education in Turkey before examining the informal and sometimes illegal practices, strategies, and industry that emerge to facilitate access. Such means, we show, reproduce inequalities but also have an appeal to youth, who tend to prefer them.

Confronting Existential Uncertainty

Yazan is a young woman from Aleppo who studied arts in Damascus and was starting over in her studies at the time that we met her in Izmir. Not long after arriving in Turkey, she had attempted to enter similar programs there:

> I went to universities to ask how I can complete my studies, and they told me that there was no chance for me to complete my degree. There are only three or four universities that have an arts department–I believe they're Yıldız, Marmara, and Mimar Sinan. I went twice to Mimar Sinan, and they told me that your degree is Syrian, and we do not accept it. . . . This was despite showing them my drawings–I can show them to you. I got 90 out of 100 in Damascus, but when I came here, they said no. So, I thought it would be impossible to find a university. I worked for two years. . . . Even the Turks themselves find it difficult to get a place there [in those programs].

In her case, it appeared impossible to enter university through the standard route, which involved taking the Foreign Students Exam (Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sinavı, or YÖS), for reasons relating to her particular educational trajectory. This almost made her lose hope until she decided to change her career and study journalism and media.

> I already studied for one year and a half [in Syria], I could equalize the subjects and start studying. No university helped me. I can't do the YÖS test because I studied literary baccalaureate. So, if I took a YÖS course [the exam prep courses], it is really expensive, and I cannot study YÖS and work at the same time. Whatever money I will make, it will go to the YÖS. So, I lost hope of being able to complete my studies. Later, thank God that I got a place at Ege University. . . [studying] journalism and radio and TV.

It was only, then, by changing her educational trajectory and making a different decision about her career path that she was able to gain acceptance to a program.

Yazan's story illustrates the intersection of existential and epistemic uncertainty in young Syrians' paths to higher education in Turkey. On the one hand, there was much uncertainty that developed from what Yazan did not or could not know–how the system worked, how to gain admission, and how to fund an education, for example. We will discuss barriers to knowing in the next section. For now, we wish to focus on existential uncertainty, which we use here as an umbrella concept to conceptualize the uncertainties related to planning any sort of future. These uncertainties are existential in that they concern the future shape that one's life will take. However, in the case of refugees they are also existential in that they concern what one needs to do to live. Our particular concern is with how young Syrians in Turkey attempt to overcome these uncertainties, including the way they assess them *as* uncertainties and the paths that they try to find through them.

These uncertainties primarily emerge in the trade-off between living and studying; in questions around their certificates and whether or not they will have to start their education again; and in choices that they make about language learning. In contrast to epistemic uncertainty, all of these are characterized by indeterminacy and the need to make choices and plans in the face of potential outcomes that seem random, contingent, or changeable.

First, Syrian youth are faced with the indeterminacies of supporting themselves and their families and must make trade-offs in their medium-term pursuit of education. Financial difficulties become an obstacle at the very beginning of the decision-making process. Though public universities have waived fees for Syrians, most find studying impossible without a scholarship to cover living expenses. Moreover, with two-thirds of the Syrian population being under thirty years old, they have become important actors in labor market activity (Özerim and Kalem 2016). Many are the breadwinners

in their households. Many hold family responsibilities or need to provide for themselves and cannot afford to live for four years without work. This renders the option of balancing work and studies not viable, as work hours are generally long, and the pay rate is low.

As a result, those who are able to afford university usually receive support from family, ordinarily when other family members are earning income. We see the necessity of this in at least one survey conducted with Syrian university students in 2017 (Erdoğan et al.), which found that a full 48 percent of students they surveyed relied on their families. Of the rest, 18 percent received scholarships, and 25 percent worked while studying. We similarly see that about half of the students were able to study without working (56 percent), while the rest either work part-time (32 percent) or full-time (12 percent). While working and studying may be possible in other countries or for other groups in Turkey, it is particularly difficult for Syrian youth, given the work conditions and difficulty of taking evening classes.

Though financial assistance does exist in some universities for low-income students, this may not be an economically viable option for young refugees who still require a source of income to sustain themselves. Rasha, who left Syria in middle school, continued her studies in Turkey and registered to study political science at Yıldırım Beyazit University in Ankara. She describes these difficulties:

> If there is a scholarship, it is so easy. The student will be able to study supported by the scholarship. If there is no scholarship, the student should work and study at the same time, which is impossible in Turkey. No one gives a job to students who want to work and study at the same time. For example, the government universities are free of charge for Syrians but the evening classes are not. This also plays a big role.

Rasha refers here to what in Turkish is known as "second education" (*ikinci öğretim*), a form of continuing education whose admissions requirements tend to be lower but who charge fees, unlike the daytime classes (what is known in Turkish as *örgün eğitim*, or formal education).[5]

For Syrian youth, this difference makes working during the day and studying at night not a viable option, as Zad explains:

> You know Turks do not give a part-time job. Work is the most important thing for them. If the evening courses were free of charge, the student would be able to work and study. Now, it does not make sense to work and study, as you will pay what you get by working toward the university fees. And the day classes are free of charge, but the students won't be able to work.

Because of the costs and the difficulty of both working and studying, many youths put higher education on hold to support their families. In some cases, this means long periods of waiting, while in others it means a com-

plete change of life plans. Orwa is a young professional who works as a career coach, helping other Syrians navigate professional life in Turkey. At thirty years old, he already had a PhD in economics from Aleppo University when he arrived in Istanbul, and he says that he adapted easily to life in the country. We met him at a day-long training workshop that he was organizing at a hotel in an upper-middle-class Istanbul neighborhood. He observed,

> When we talk about the Syrian person from eighteen to thirty years of age, he's bound to a family. He's either a father or a brother, if he's not married, or he's the provider for the family in a complete way. He can be either a supporter or a provider for the family. . . . The families which have four or five guys or have girls or have a decent income, you walk into the house like, okay, these people are relaxed and even have savings. I, today, talk about a minimum of 7,000 TL[6] income for a family that is saving up in an essential way. However, where is the problem? The problem is for the family that has one guy, or one provider we call him. So, whether this provider is a man or a woman, we have a problem, because one salary can't possibly be enough. And this one salary, he's forced to work.

Indeed, many of the youth we interviewed were responsible for their family members, making prospects of seeking a higher education degree unimaginable. Zad, for instance, was in a similar position to that of Dawood, having witnessed a drastic shift in life course due to his dispossession from Syria. Zad interrupted his education in ninth grade, when he had to leave Syria, and then studied tenth and eleventh grades with his sister at home, without going to school. He found time for this on weekends while working to sustain his family, first in the textile industry and then in shoe manufacturing in Adana. "I was not thinking about myself," he told us. "I was just thinking about the family. That is the main difference with my life in Syria. There, I was studying, and here I am working."

It was only when his father finally arrived from Syria that he was able to return to his studies after having worked several years. The father began working as a teacher in the Temporary Education Centers (TECs) that the Turkish government had established to help ease Syrian children into the educational system, giving the family a second income. Zad's biggest fear at the time of our interview was that his father might lose his job if the TECs closed,[7] and that then he would have to go back to work instead of studying.

Even after his father's arrival, however, Zad had delays in returning to school. He described to us how he had saved enough money to be able to take a year off to study and had even gained acceptance to university. However, a sudden change in his family's housing situation meant that his savings were needed to pay for rent one year in advance, as such advance payments are a common practice in Adana.[8] This made moving to another

city impossible at that moment, and Zad had to postpone one more year. Although by the time we spoke to him he had finally been able to start his studies, he was already anticipating the closure of the TECs. "If I had a younger brother, I might let him help us a bit," he remarked, "but the only ones working now are my father and me." When we asked if his father could not find another job if the centers close, he explained that his father had become old and frail and could not engage in manual work, which would probably be the only other sort of work that he could find.

While those who are the only or necessary breadwinners bear responsibility for their families that often forces them to delay education or even change course, other youth that we interviewed were alone and had no one to support them. Orwa reflected on the economic pressures facing Syrian youth in Turkey without first-degree family members:

> The matter, in all honesty, is linked to education in a big way, and you also have, by the way, a big percentage of people without their parents. This percentage of young Syrians who are working, their parents are either in Syria or outside of Syria in Lebanon or in other countries. . . . It is impossible to manage working and studying at the same time, as it is very difficult to find part-time employment.

These difficulties were also commonly experienced by Syrian youth in various Turkish cities.

Initiatives emerged rapidly by state and non-state actors to remove financial barriers, though requirements still exclude many young Syrians from their benefits. The Turkish government has waived university tuition fees at state universities for Syrian students. Accordingly, Syrians students registered in Turkey and those who have become Turkish citizens do not pay university fees in public universities.[9] In addition, there are a large number of state scholarships through the Türkiye Bursları (Turkey Scholarships) program to international students in general,[10] and also participating in programs are international organizations, such as DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), HOPES (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians), and DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst; German Academic Exchange Service).[11] Similarly, some private actors such as the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation offer scholarships to Arab students interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) programs to study at several Turkish universities.[12] However, there are not many of these scholarships. Official data shows that in 2017 only around four thousand Syrian students, or around 20 to 25 percent of the Syrian university population, obtained a scholarship (Erdoğan et al. 2017). By 2020–21, the number of Syrian university students had risen to 37,200, with 3,680 of those receiving full and 16,000 partial scholarships.[13] Because the partial scholarships generally do not alleviate the need to work,

this means that only 10 percent of the Syrian university population was able to focus exclusively on studies.

Because of this, many young Syrians with whom we spoke felt that these scholarships were unachievable, unrealistic. Several reported trying and not obtaining one. Zad expressed his frustration at the limited and highly competitive nature of these opportunities, saying that he applied twice for the Türkiye Bursları. When we asked him about the Dutch-funded SPARK Fellowship, he told us that he did not know about it. We will discuss the issue of knowing in the next section, but it is worth noting that in his case it was not that he had never heard of it but that he thought he would have no chance and so did not investigate it properly. He told us that he simply did not see it as a realistic option: "I felt it was like an organization, I do not know, people told me nothing came from it. I thought, if Türkiye Bursları did not accept me, I will not be accepted in SPARK for sure. There are many students applying for it as I can see on Facebook." Despite such efforts, then, many students still could not imagine ways to access them or to balance the work-study trade-off.

Apart from these financial uncertainties, however, there was also the problem of uncertainty in connecting their past education to their present and future. Nazem, for example, was in his early twenties at the time we met him and was working in a café in Gaziantep that specialized in the Turkish dessert *katmer*. Originally from the city of Manbij in northeastern Aleppo, Nazem had fled to Turkey with his brother and sisters, while his parents went to Lebanon. When we met him, he was living on his own, as his brothers and sisters had all married and established their own homes. Throughout the interview, he expressed that one of the biggest factors impeding his dreams of higher education was not wanting to burden his older siblings, who were already financially responsible for providing for their own families: "I don't have time to study and do exams anyway. I really wanted to, and even my brothers told me not to worry about money, we will help you, but I decided to work for this period of time and get some money for my expenses . . . and to decrease the load on my brothers." In addition to perceived financial constraints, however, there was also the problem of getting his diploma via the Syrian Coalition, which was not a certainty. As a result, he had not even begun studying for the university entrance exams (discussed more below), because he feared that he would waste time and money and ultimately not be admitted, as he could not produce a diploma to show his previous education.

The second existential uncertainty in relation to higher education, then, is whether or not young Syrians will be able to transfer their social and cultural capital from Syria to Turkey. For many, this is because diplomas and transcripts were missing or could not be obtained. Moneer, a young Syrian originally from Kobani whom we met in a café in Mardin, interrupted his

education in middle school prior to moving to Turkey. When asked about what documentation he possessed regarding his level of education, he expressed that he left Syria with no documents. "I do not have any," he explained. "Everything was in the house, and it was destroyed. We could not take anything from our house."

While numerous youth told us that it was impossible for them to obtain their certificates, others managed to take them or to get copies, but they then faced the difficulty of getting them accredited. In Turkey, if foreign students have a valid high school diploma, they need to acquire an equivalency certificate from the Ministry of Education or the Turkish embassy in their home country. The equivalency process invariably takes a very long time, especially the process of checking the validity of the degree (Erdoğan et al. 2017). The problem of checking the degree, and therefore the length of time of the process, are only exacerbated in the circumstances of bureaucratic confusion caused by the war in Syria. If students are not able to obtain their diplomas or cannot acquire the equivalency certificate, they will need to take yet another exam, the Foreign Students High School Proficiency and Equivalence Exam (Yabancı Öğrenciler Lise Yeterlilik ve Denklik Sınavı, or YÖLDS). We should note that this exam is given only once each year.

Although the Higher Education Council (YÖK) early on introduced the status of special students, allowing Syrians to be accepted to universities without academic records or identification documents (Watenpaugh et al. 2014; Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017), this only gives them time. Ultimately, they still need to produce the documents. Orwa explains the significant toll that this paperwork requirement has on the ability of young Syrians to pursue higher education, especially those who had already begun studying in universities in Syria: "The university students, a very high percentage, were refused the opportunity to continue their degrees, which means that you have to start all over again. So, when you're a third-year student and start again from the beginning it's honestly hard. This made many people think of not returning to education." Given the ongoing conflict in Syria, university students who wished to continue their education in Turkey found it extremely difficult to provide documentation for their previous studies. This often resulted in further putting their dreams on hold.

In such cases, young Syrians often find themselves reaching an impasse regarding their opportunities to continue education, thus having to pave alternative paths for their futures and aspirations. Yazan, for example, had to pause her initial plans for a few years and work at a real estate office before reconsidering the prospects of going back to university. When she did, she changed course, switching from art, in which she was unable to gain admission, to journalism and media.

A third uncertainty is the ability to obtain an adequate level of Turkish language, if one cannot be admitted to the relatively elite English-language

programs or to the still rare Arabic-language programs. While English-language programs exist in Turkey, especially in cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, they obviously fill their foreign student quotas sooner than the Turkish language programs. While certain universities in Turkey's south, such as Gaziantep University or Mardin Artuklu, have opened Arabic-language programs, their offerings and student numbers are limited.

We frame language learning here as an existential uncertainty, because it relates both to elements over which the student has limited control, such as language-learning ability, and also to students' perceptions of possible futures. In general, we found that those young people who made the most effort to learn the language were those who saw their medium-term or long-term futures in Turkey.[14] As we discuss more in the next chapter, youth who imagined their futures in Turkey were motivated to integrate through language learning. However, the practical possibility of being able to learn was also surrounded with uncertainties, as it was something not always in their control.

Among the youth with whom we spoke, most appear not to have reached a sufficient level to study the subjects they wished to study at university, even among those who had taken Turkish classes.[15] Those who have sufficient financial means study in TÖMER,[16] affiliated with Ankara University, and pay the required fees. This is the case with Salih, a young man from an economically and culturally privileged Aleppan family, who was living in Adana. He had attended private schools in Syria before coming to Turkey and had begun one year of an industrial engineering degree at Aleppo University. As soon as he arrived in Turkey in 2012, he began learning Turkish in TÖMER. He then took the YÖS exam and managed to get into one of the universities of his choice, Çukurova University, while working for the International Labor Organization, first as a translator and then as an adviser.

Such cases represented an exception in our sample of interviewees. Most other young people struggled to get access to such education. Ruqa, a young woman from Aleppo living with her parents in Adana, works full-time as a translator and outreach worker for international projects and is not considering going to university because of the difficulties involved. Although she was fluent in spoken Turkish, she explains that she thinks about going to a TÖMER course to improve her grammar, but this costs money. She thinks that going to the free course options, which are not of high quality, would not provide her with sufficient knowledge of Turkish to be able to get into higher education.

Some students manage to get into a Turkish language program but then find that the Turkish in the classes is different from that spoken elsewhere. The ones who face the most difficulties try to transfer to other universities in which the language of instruction is not Turkish. In such cases, English be-

comes the linguistic capital, as in the case of Sumbul, originally from an area near Aleppo, who had interrupted her studies in tenth grade but managed to continue in a Syrian high school and was admitted to the management program at Çukurova University. She says it is not hard for her to study in English because she was well prepared in Syria: "Our basics are better, and we are used to taking exams in English, even the Turkish students are aware of these advantages."

Whether finances, language, or paperwork, then, young Syrians face a host of uncertainties that throw the entire dream of acquiring a higher education into doubt and often cause them to rethink life goals. Tamim, for instance, had left school in ninth grade because of financial difficulties within his family before the war in Syria. Although he has dreamed of continuing his education, he explained to us that his chances of going to university are slim. He would have to do four years of open education to complete high school, and he knows that this will be difficult for him, because his Turkish is not good enough. Instead, he has begun working with a Syrian NGO, organizing festivals and training Turkish and Syrian students to perform.

Not all are as lucky as Tamim, however, and here we return to Dawood, who confirmed our own observations that many young people had given up on university because they could not get their certificates or could not learn the language. Even for those who stick to their plans, however, there are significant barriers, what we call here epistemic uncertainties, that all must overcome.

Epistemic Uncertainty

Fadi is a young man from Aleppo whose studies were interrupted in the eighth grade. Once he arrived in Turkey, he continued in open education while working, and he ultimately managed to gain admission to Çukurova University. His observations were particularly pertinent on this topic because he also worked part-time advising other youth on how to navigate the application process. According to him, the biggest problem for young people trying to continue their education is the complex and decentralized nature of the admission process for non-Turkish students. In addition, there are changing national and university-specific regulations, often only available in Turkish on university or government websites. The key, according to Fadi, is research:

> It is a matter of research, not more nor less. I mean, as a person researches more, the more he learns. I cannot say more than this at all. Before I left Syria, I had started researching universities in Turkey. I had a complete understanding about it before I even came here. It's research, the more a person researches, like you are now researching information, the more you research,

> the more you have a depot of information, right? It's a matter of accumulation of information, not more nor less.
>
> Knowing the rules, for instance, allowed a student who was accepted to a university in a major he did not want, to transfer his scholarship to another university the following year. There are even many students who are surprised at how I did this, because they don't know the rules.

The research Fadi refers to is necessary because of the decentralized nature of university applications for foreign students. Although Turkish students enter a central exam that places them in university programs, noncitizen applicants must apply through each university's individual route. In addition, state universities tend not to have offices set up for the purpose of recruiting eligible foreign students. This means that Syrians looking at education in public universities must research the application process on their own and apply individually (Hohberger 2018). Indeed, our analysis of the contents of several Facebook groups revealed that students were often confused by the procedures. They asked basic questions about application processes, dates, and general requirements. They also asked for more specific information, such as exam result dates, and previous experience in applying for scholarships.

The lack of a central source for information on the higher education system for international students in general, and for Syrian refugees in particular, makes it very difficult for students to gain information about or understand the opaque university application and registration process. In addition to this, the decentralized nature of the system leads to logistical difficulties. Although the entrance exam for foreign students has a single acronym, YÖS, since 2010, this exam has become decentralized, with each university choosing its own version of the YÖS and the languages in which it is offered (Watenpaugh et al. 2014). Although the YÖS exam has been waived for students by the government, universities often encourage students to take the exam to increase their chances of acceptance (Yavcan and el-Ghali 2017: 30). Each of these exams generally costs a significant amount of money.[17]

Once they figure out the exam system and which university accepts which exam, students must prepare for them. Entrance exams usually require a year of preparation, especially for those who had to interrupt high school and make up for the interruption. For this, students ordinarily take extra courses, adding to the financial strain on students who, upon failing to receive a scholarship or financial aid, need to finance their own university entrance preparation. In addition, students will need to prepare for and take a language competency exam, which may be in Turkish or English, depending on the academic program's language of instruction.

Many students, then, must prepare for each exam, particularly as entry to academic programs such as medicine and engineering can be very competi-

tive. For most, it is particularly important to try to win a scholarship that will enable them to study without working. In a private exam preparation center that we visited in Mardin, the director explained to us how competitive it had become for students to get such scholarships, especially in Mardin, where students could select programs in Arabic: "Very few got scholarships last year. I had twenty students, their points were very high, not one of them could win a scholarship. One of them was Muhammad, he had 95 points, and he did not get a scholarship."

The difficulties of acceptance, particularly with a scholarship, mean that Syrian students usually apply to more than one university to increase their chances of acceptance. Indeed, the application process becomes a type of gamble, where students try to increase their chances by applying to as many universities as they can. Janin is a young woman from Hama who was working at a private teaching center when we met her. She told us that she had prepared for university entrance exams alone while working in parallel. She considers herself lucky for having been accepted to a program after applying to twenty-eight universities. She tells us that other young people she knows applied to seventy or eighty universities without being accepted to any of them.

A final epistemic uncertainty arises precisely because of the perceived necessity of applying to as many schools as possible. Because the entrance exams take place on location, students need to travel to different universities across the country in order to take them. This requires that students navigate cities that they do not know, often with limited knowledge of the Turkish language.

Tala is another student who applied to multiple universities before finally gaining an acceptance. She had interrupted her studies in tenth grade in Aleppo when the war came to her city and later continued in a religious high school (imam hatip) in Turkey. At the time of our interview, she was a student in biology at Çukurova University. She complained that the level of difficulty of the entrance exam varied from one place to another, forcing students to take multiple exams. Not only does the cost of the exams add up, but students also have to travel to different locations, as they all apply to numerous universities to maximize their chances of being accepted. This involves not only transport between cities but also often transport to universities located outside city centers. Tala remarked, "Going to all the universities outside the city was the hard part. Like I had to go to Kütahya, Konya, and other cities, and my brother had to go to Istanbul, Ankara, and Kahraman Maraş."

In sum, then, young people are faced with considerable epistemic uncertainties that arise from the decentralized nature of university entrance for foreign students and the requirements, preparation, and costs that arise from that. Given this, it should not be surprising that enterprising actors emerged

to help young people navigate this complex situation. Many of them were young people like Fadi who had themselves found ways through the application maze and who played an instrumental role in developing an informal industry aimed at securing university spots for students.

Navigating Uncertainty

When we interviewed him, Fadi had already made his way through the university maze, graduated, and begun work helping other young people enter higher education. Some of the problems that youths experienced he attributed not to the complexities of the system but rather to the context of refugeehood, which he asserted produces a reliance on assistance, as well as a lack of professional know-how among the youth. The latter, he says, is creating a market for exploitative centers.

> The problem among the youth is their full reliance on donations or on the support that they are receiving. It has led to a lot of ignorance in our community. In my experience interacting with the young ones, a high school student does not know the word "email," or what email is, or doesn't know how to use email. What is the reason for this? Of course, it is the comfort that is being provided from assistance or financial support to these youth.
>
> The subject of registration to university is not a difficult subject at all; it is an online form about my information, nothing more. But the ignorance among our youth is what is causing these centers of exploitation that are being opened: the need of someone to come and register me. So, these are the problems that we are facing– the weakness of the youth, weakness in technology to a weird point.

Whether for the reasons Fadi suggests or others, it was certainly the case that most of the youth we interviewed used intermediaries or services of some kind at some point in their university trajectory.

These services were often informal, such as social media groups, or private, such as persons working as entrance counselors or centers for exam preparation. Some of them, however, were semi-legal or even illegal, particularly those that promised documents. While the literature usually covers informality in terms of employment or illegal border crossing through smuggling (e.g., Andersson 2014b), little is known about these types of semi-legal industries that emerge to serve a particular purpose (here providing access to higher education). These options, though often inadequate and exploitative, are also in many cases appealing to prospective students and respond to an existing need. In this case, we show that they appear very quickly in response to a need and then slowly lose importance as the moment of urgency subsides and as students, who are slowly integrated into the system, are better informed of their options.

As discussed above, most of the youth in our study had their education interrupted in some way. For some, their high school education was interrupted, while others had already begun university when violence broke out. In only a few cases in our eighteen to thirty age group, individuals had completed their university degree before fleeing for Turkey. In all such cases, including those of graduates, youth faced difficulties in obtaining diploma equivalency or transferring credits. In order to overcome these difficulties, transnational services emerged to provide diplomas and credits from Syria.

Youth mentioned individuals in Syria who either did them a favor or asked to be paid to get them their documents from their universities. Belal, whom we met in Mardin, explained the process he went through to bring his diplomas from Syria, as well as the middlemen who helped him:

> In 2017, I realized that I have to change my life and to study, so I had to bring my certificates and official papers from Syria. I knew people who do these things and take money. They are bad people and have close connections with the regime, but I was forced to pay them money and bring my papers. It cost me 800 USD. I then registered in many universities.

While Belal was successful, some youth do not have acquaintances in regime-occupied areas, or their requests to obtain their diplomas are rejected by universities because they are wanted by the Syrian regime. We met with Omar, who had graduated as an electrical engineer from the city of Homs in Syria. Although he was able to secure temporary jobs with his skills in computer companies in Turkey, he still needed to provide official certification of his qualifications. However, it was difficult for him to obtain his transcripts and diploma from Homs University, which at the time was under "Alawite and Hezbollah control," as he phrased it. Students in this situation can also get an equivalence from the authorities in "liberated" areas in Northern Syria or from the office of the interim government in Gaziantep, Turkey. However, several students described the latter as also difficult. Indeed, one student said that it is "as bad as the regime, as it charges a lot and takes time. There was never anyone in the office, and it offers poor service."

One option for students who cannot obtain documents showing their high school degrees is to sit the Libyan high school completion exam, which is accredited by the Turkish government and enables students to apply to universities. We spoke to Dunya, a twenty-one-year-old originally from Deir Ezzor studying in Çukurova University in Adana, who explained the difference between Syrian and Libyan certifications in Turkey:

> The students before us, when they came to Turkey, were taught according to the Libyan curricula here in Turkey. They were doing their exams and being awarded with Libyan certificates. Because the Libyan certificate was accredited worldwide, whereas the coalition certificate was only accredited in Turkey. So, most of the students preferred the Libyan certificate. In my year, they were

> indecisive whether to continue giving accreditation to the Libyan certificate or not, finally they decided to continue. So, the students were divided–some obtained the Syrian certificate, some the Libyan certificate. I am from the students who studied the Libyan.

While some students are able to use this option, others utilize the gray market that has emerged to help students with the hassle of formalities and certification. Ibrahim, a young man studying in Mardin, described to us how many youths resort to counterfeit certificates and diplomas due to the obstacles they face in retrieving original copies from Syria. While this may seem to be a faster route, these cases ultimately face longer periods of waiting until the authenticity of their diplomas are verified. Ibrahim explained, "Due to the war, some people started to fake their certificates and papers, so when we went to the ratification it was hard and took time. . . . The temporary government in Gaziantep must confirm the secondary certificate, and then send it to the Turkish ministry of education for equivalency."[18]

Social media pages are where those offering these otherwise illegal services advertise them and where youth learn about them. However, these online services are not limited to this type of activity, as many online platforms offer students guidance in terms of exams and registration. These platforms are mainly run by students who themselves experienced the difficulties and obstacles posed by long bureaucratic processes, demanding university acceptance criteria, and a generally competitive environment for a chance to access higher education.

> There are groups like TÖĞRENCİT–I'm not sure if you've heard of it–they're doing very good work. They're giving all the information in Arabic and all the students are required to do is to go ahead and register. . . . This is just one example of an organization that came to my mind, but there are many others that offer the same services and are doing a very nice job. (Fadi)

There were rumors that circulated of criminal activities and forging diplomas (high school and university). One young man complained that forged certificates and diplomas only created difficulties, as Turkish official offices needed to certify the authenticity of these documents, skills, and academic training. Similarly, Dawood reported a case in Gaziantep University where four diplomas were discovered to have been forged, and the students were expelled from the university. According to him, all Syrian documents can be forged and are being forged, including passports, diplomas, and identity cards. He also gave the example of an individual with a fake diploma in mechanical engineering that he used to obtain work in Turkey. According to Dawood, these forgeries are causing a lot of problems for others, who have to deal with more bureaucracy as a result.

In addition to the provision of services by third-party actors, there has been a proliferation of information groups on Facebook and other social

media through which Syrian youth share knowledge and experiences. We explored some of these groups, particularly on Facebook, where prospective students ask questions and are provided tips and answers by others who may have gone through the same process.[19]

Several non-profit non-governmental organizations also give training or counseling advice and advertise these services through social media platforms, making them accessible to students. Hemmeh, for instance, is a Syrian youth association established in 2012 that provides language programs and training sessions. In addition to Syrian organizations, international organizations including UNHCR (through TÖMER scholarships) and the EU (through a program called HOPES) offered free language courses.[20] Some Turkish NGOs also provided university preparation courses.

For instance, we met Munsef at an exam prep course offered by a Turkish NGO in Adana. He had graduated from Syria with a bachelor in mathematics and was working at the organization's community center in the old part of the city. As a math graduate, he had been recruited to work full-time at the center teaching free math classes to students prepping for the YÖS exam. Free TÖMER classes are also given to students at that particular center, which has a teaching capacity of around 150 YÖS students and 50 TÖMER students.

When asked about the performance of students attending his classes, Munsef mentioned being quite pleased by both performance and turn-out: "My students do not have to come to class, but they come to class willingly and lovingly. I try to keep the classes going, try to explain everything clearly to the students from different levels. They like our courses, I think. The number of students is high." Despite Munsef's enthusiasm, however, paid courses and services usually have a better reputation. Moreover, the lack of state supervision over the teaching at courses offered by NGOs leaves students uncertain about their level of preparation.

As a result of these practical uncertainties, certain groups that began as solidarity initiatives aimed at mutual aid progressively turned into market-oriented enterprises. Young people may start charging others for "helping" students. Fadi, for instance, had created an online social media account through which he offered services.

> Since I came to Turkey, . . . as I had a lot of information about universities in Turkey etc., I noticed that students had a lack of information or weak information. They have this, the essential subject is about searching–they didn't know how to search for information–so I was helping them and through my help, I was learning something new. So, I reached a stage where I tried to transform this help to a service that I can benefit from as partial income and at the same time I help students. So here, of course, after two years of working completely for free, I opened an office online, on Facebook with the goal of providing university services, asking for really very low amounts, for registration to universities.

He further explains that individuals who might have started as volunteers, or in solidarity, then moved on to an exam prep center, where their skills are in high demand, and get paid for providing these services. "A lot of offices offered me work with them for very high amounts, but I refused because of the abuse that is happening in registration and so on," Fadi remarked. We see here, then, how solidarity may be commodified, and individuals may capitalize on the trust of in-group membership to provide services for monetary gain (see also Hernández-León 2013).

Of course, much depends on reputation and word of mouth. Private centers compete with NGOs to offer exam preparation for the YÖS or SAT exam as well as TÖMER classes for students approaching the university level. These courses are costly and require students and their families to make a big financial investment toward their education—an investment that many students cannot afford. It should be noted that such for-profit "cram schools" have long been a part of university preparation in Turkey, where one's university place for Turkish studies is decided by a centralized exam. Such "cram schools" are expensive for Turkish students, as well, and many delay university entrance until they can afford to spend a year preparing for the exams through such schools. In the case of exam prep schools directed at Syrian students, their relatively high cost has meant that these centers or service providers employ strategies to make themselves known to the public and increase their credibility. These often imitate those of other Turkish "cram schools," such as advertising on social media the names of their former students who did well on exams and were accepted to prestigious fields in recognized universities.

The ones that have the best reputation are able to increase their prices and maintain their clientele, as explained by Zad through the case of a teaching center with which he had experience.

> There is a famous educational center in Mersin called Mersin Scientific Center. From that center alone ten students are in the medicine department . . . They started advertising and posting on Facebook. The owner of the educational center that I studied in is the brother of the owner of Mersin Scientific Center. So, the brother brought the teacher here. The teacher is now here in Mersin. That is why he raised the prices by 75 percent, which is exploitation.

Many interviewees reported that they themselves or people they knew were struggling to be able to afford these centers, as their cost seems disproportionate with the income level of young Syrians. Rasha, a young woman who works as an accountant in one of these centers in Gaziantep, also reported seeing students struggling to make ends meet, and yet trying to pay for these courses.

> We even have a student who lives in the industrial area, an area with slums and factories and very far from the city. . . . So, imagine what she is doing to study. . . . Of course, she is studying with a scholarship, but there are others

> who don't even have the money for the bus to come from her house to here. Since I am responsible for the accounting in the institution, I know their conditions, and I get into bad situations. Sometimes I try to support the people I know, even with something small, but the problem is that the numbers are huge, and the conditions are so bad. These were able to get to the center. . . . Others can't even get out of the house because they can't pay for the bus. We really don't know what we can offer them . . . and the Turkish scholarships are very few.

Most of the students in such cram centers need to work to be able to pay the fees. While those who do not work struggle to be able to afford them, this situation is exacerbated for young women, who are less likely to work and as a result often cannot afford to access these centers.

Re-Imagining Futures

We have so far traced the struggles of young Syrians in Turkey to access the higher education that for most had been part of their imagined life trajectory before displacement. While most of the youth we have met in this chapter were successful in getting to university, their experience of being uprooted at a formative age still resulted in many forging new paths to reimagine their futures. Many reoriented their educational ambitions, even in cases where they had already started university or held higher education degrees from Syria.

Jawad, for instance, is originally from Deir Ezzor, near the Turkish border, and was working in an NGO in Mardin when we met him. Jawad explained that he had other ambitions and plans when he was graduating high school in Syria. Deir Ezzor is well-known as a base for energy and oil companies, and his aim before displacement was to work in one of these companies as a translator.

> My dream, honestly, was to study languages, translation. I had that dream since Syria. When I had drawn a path for my life, I wanted English literature because at high school level I really liked English literature, so I had planned to do that, finish and then go work as a translator in a petrol company.

These plans, however, changed after his displacement to Turkey, where employment opportunities for young people with language skills centered on (I)NGOs, which offered relatively high salaries. Seeing this, Jawad changed his plans when it came time to enroll in in higher education:

> When I decided to enroll here, I chose international relations and political science. I had the points to enroll in sociology, business administration, history, and political science. I don't like history very much. I like geography a lot. I don't like math, either, so I didn't think about business administration. So, I

> considered the issue this way: either sociology or political science. I thought of sociology, how would it help me? Would it help me in my work in the NGO? . . . So, I asked them, with sociology would I focus on children? They said that the program is more general, not that specific. I didn't want to study for long years until I specialize in this field [children]. So, I chose this department [international relations and political sciences].

He further recounts how the prospect of employment in international organizations with a focus on children's issues has become his main goal, for which he continues to develop his profile and skills.

Many Syrian youth describe the humanitarian sector as highly attractive, both because it offers stable employment and because it impacts their own community. Zeyad is a young Syrian who, at the time of our interview, was completing secondary education in Izmir while working in factories and shops. He was a volunteer in NGOs, distributing aid to Syrian families during his free time. This experience motivated him to pursue higher education and obtain a degree that would qualify him for a career as a humanitarian worker.

> I have two ideas in my head: international relations and English literature. And I will continue in this field. Whatever I study, my goal is to work in the humanitarian field. I will try my best to help people. This is my concern after the things that I did with the organization.

These experiences are shared by a number of young Syrians who have found an affinity for studying political sciences. The change in interest is driven by their experience with the Syrian revolution, which many think proved the need to have more seasoned Syrian politicians to reshape the future of Syria. Hamed, whom we met in Mardin, was originally from Aleppo and was displaced at a young age to Turkey, where he completed his secondary education. He explains that the situation in Syria was his main driver to enroll in the political science undergraduate program in one of Mardin's universities:

> As a Syrian student of political studies, you see the situation in Syria is complicated politically. There is a big shortage, and everybody talks in politics. People are using one another. I want to be a man of power so I can solve these things. I hope I can fulfill this [goal] one day.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the challenge of education, and particularly on the difficulties Syrian youth face in trying to pursue higher education in a country where the language is unfamiliar, the system is complex and decen-

tralized, and where they must make critical decisions about the future in a situation of existential and epistemic uncertainty. Those who continued to pursue the university dream often used various services that have emerged to help them navigate the complex terrain of Turkish higher education. Yet we see how Syrians' position in the Turkish higher education landscape penalizes those who are the main breadwinners of their families or who migrated alone. In contrast, young students who have some type of family support usually have a better chance of acquiring scholarships, as they have the time and financial support to take advantage of counseling services and training courses.

While higher education is often considered an elite privilege, we have seen in this chapter how young people from various classes and backgrounds have aspired to it, always with the knowledge that their decisions in that moment would shape their futures. Indeed, many of the youth with whom we spoke viewed higher education as a way to contribute not only to their own futures but to those of their families and to the future of Syria. Maher, who was studying engineering in Istanbul when we met him, told us,

> The most important thing is to get back to the country that needs us, the country is always in need of educated people, and in my case, my major in civil engineering specifically is so helpful for my country now. For sure, if I have the chance to accomplish something here, I wouldn't refuse to do that, but the priority remains for my own country, because it needs us more than anything.

Quite a number of young people gave their own desire to contribute to rebuilding their country as the reason for studying subjects like political science and sociology.

For these reasons, we may view this decisive moment as another critical threshold at which youth are poised. Youth themselves saw it this way, viewing the decision to continue education or to work as life-determining. As a result, quite a few of the youths in our interviews began to reimagine their futures in new ways and to reshape their aspirations in response to the opportunities that they found or failed to find. As we will see in the next two chapters, the ability to pursue those aspirations was also directly related to where they imagined pursuing them.

Notes

1. He was also of great help to us throughout the project. He remained in constant contact with us after the interview, adding points that he thought would be important contributions. He told us that he was driven by his personal experience and that of his peers, and he felt a duty to share what he knows, hoping to improve the situation for himself and others.

2. Given that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey aged eighteen to twenty-four years old was around 443,244 for the same year (Yavcan and El-Ghali 2017), this meant that only about 3 percent were enrolled in higher education (Murray 2015). The participation of university age young adults is particularly low in comparison to 20 percent in pre-war Syria (Hohberger 2018).
3. These figures appear to concern only state universities ("Number of Syrians in Turkey November 2023." *Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association*, 30 November 2023. Retrieved 26 December from https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/).
4. As explained in this chapter, unlike the very centralized higher education national examination and settlement system for Turkish nationals, the admission of foreign students, including refugees, is administered by individual universities, based on rules that are again centrally defined by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK).
5. In Turkish state universities, evening classes are generally not part of the standard curriculum and are considered a type of continuing education. So, while it is possible to be admitted to a "formal education" program for daytime study without fees, there are relatively high fees for the evening program, also for Turkish students.
6. The interview took place in 2018, before the Turkish lira began to lose value and before the economic crisis in Turkey, ongoing at time of writing. The amount that Orwa suggests, 7,000 TL, would have been equivalent to around 1,500 USD in 2018.
7. Since the time of the interview, the government has, indeed, closed the Temporary Education Centers and expects Syrian children to enter regular government schools.
8. Demanding rents for long periods in advance is a common practice in Turkey but has reportedly become more widespread among those renting to Syrians.
9. Note that Syrians registered with open education and second education programs are not exempted from tuition fees.
10. The package includes tuition, a year of preparatory Turkish language training, housing, and other supplemental support. The Turkish government announced that it will offer five thousand scholarships for Syrian students as part of the Türkiye Scholarship program. As of publication, the stipend amount is 3,500 TL (around 115 USD) per month for undergraduate studies, 5000 TL (165 USD) for masters-level education, and 6,500 TL (215 USD) for PhD studies. The scholarship amounts have lost value with the decline of the Turkish lira, but accommodation remains important. These scholarships are funded by a combination of 15 percent national funds and 85 percent by EU funds (Erdoğan et al. 2017).
11. HOPES, funded by the EU, offers around 300 full academic scholarships and higher education short courses for more than 3,500 student refugees. The SPARK fellowship program supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides student tuition fees, other allowances such as local transportation, study materials, and monthly stipend.
12. These scholarships are very few in number, taking only twenty undergraduate and ten graduate students (of Arab country nationality) based on SAT/TOEFL or GRE. Another scholarship by IIE (Institute of International Education) offers only a 50 percent reduction on tuition fees.

13. See "How Much Is the Scholarship Given to Syrian Students?" *Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association*, 9 September 2021. Retrieved 26 December 2023 from https://multeciler.org.tr/suriyeli-ogrencilere-verilen-burs-ne-kadar/; Behlül Çetinkaya and Mehmet Şah Yılmaz, "Approximately 170 Thousand Applications Were Made from 171 Countries for Türkiye Scholarships in 2022." *AA*, 30 December 2022. Retrieved 26 December 2023 from https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/turkiye-burslarina-2022de-171-ulkeden-yaklasik-170-bin-basvuru-yapildi/2776032.
14. The opposite was not necessarily the case, however, as there were youth, especially relatively educated ones, who reported plans to stay in Turkey but also that they had difficulty learning Turkish. This was often because they worked in English, usually for international companies or (I)NGOs, and socialized with Syrians.
15. The Ministry of National Education's Department of Lifelong Learning generally oversees Turkish courses for foreigners, while some courses are offered by NGOs. In general the number of courses is limited, and the percentage of foreigners attending is usually low. Individuals decide whether they want to participate or not in these courses, in the absence of a national policy (Nimer and Oruç 2019).
16. The Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center (Türkçe ve Yabancı Dil Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi), a part of Ankara University.
17. The Turkish language competence exam (TÖMER) costs the equivalent of 200 USD (at the time of the interviews), and the YÖS exam was 50 USD.
18. Foreign diplomas must be certified through a process that ensures their equivalency (*denklik*) to a similar Turkish degree.
19. The Facebook pages (such as *tajamo' el talabeh fi terkya* or "Gathering of students in Turkey") are free and mostly open access but sometimes require permission.
20. By 2019, UNHCR had awarded 1,600 TÖMER scholarships across eleven cities. HOPES, funded by the EU, includes academic counseling to up to 42,000 young Syrians regionally and language courses to 4,000 students.