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Multi-scalar and diasporic integration: Kurdish populations in Europe between state, diaspora and geopolitics

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Abstract

This article challenges both methodological nationalist and decolonial approaches to 'integration' by drawing attention to how transnational factors—including trans-state diaspora networks and geopolitical relations between European states and Kurdish 'homelands'—have direct impacts on the integration trajectories of newly arrived Kurdish displaced populations in Europe. Based on over 200 interviews with Kurdish immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers across seventeen sites in rural and urban regions in six European countries, our research suggests the need to move beyond local and national-level understandings of integration to one which is also transnational, diasporic, and multi-scalar, taking account of the enduring effects of homeland politics on integration determinants. Such a model of integration does not throw out the concept, but recognizes both the protective and empowering role that local and national policies can play in enabling refugee and diaspora populations to function autonomously in a broader transnational and global context.

Keywords: integration, diaspora, transnationalism, Kurds, Europe, multi-scalar, geopolitics

1. Introduction

In May 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suggested that Turkey would not support Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO due to them being 'guesthouses for terrorist organizations'—a clear reference to Kurdish organizations operating in Sweden (Toksabay and Lehto 2022; Aggestam *et al.* 2023). The declaration exacerbated the already-widespread sense of fear, precarity, and uncertainty within many sectors of Sweden's Kurdish refugee, immigrant, and diaspora community—a community that is frequently caught between state and local migration, asylum, and integration policies; transnational diaspora mobilization activities; and the vicissitudes of global and regional geopolitics.

The example provides an illustration of the extent to which refugee and immigrant protection and integration—which has been classically theorized as a largely domestic process (see, e.g.

Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010; Pardo 2018)—is also closely tied to, and frequently dependent on, a range of transnational and multi-scalar factors (Weinar *et al*. 2017; Erdal 2020; Zentai 2020: 205; Carmel *et al*. 2021). Indeed, it is increasingly clear that the successful crossing of national borders does not necessarily lead to the escape of populations from the influence and reach of their state of origin, which may continue to exert an influence on their everyday lives in their new state of residence via policies of diaspora engagement (Bartolomeo *et al*. 2017; Gamlen 2019), transnational repression (Moss 2016) or migration and asylum diplomacy (Thiollet 2011; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). Questions of refugee protection and integration are thus always, to some extent, multi-scalar, transcending the local and national context and subject to influences from a range of actors at multiple levels.

In this article, we challenge both methodological nationalist and decolonial approaches to integration, taking the concept seriously yet expanding it to argue for a multi-scalar and diasporic reconceptualization. Successful integration occurs when individuals have the resources and support to function and flourish in their country of reception, as well as to engage productively with broader transnational, geopolitical and diasporic contexts. As others have noted (Waldinger 2017; Erdal 2020), the concepts of integration and transnationalism are not opposites, but rather closely related. At the same time, our data collection questions recent calls to wholeheartedly abandon the notion of integration (e.g. Schinkel 2018; Favell 2022), which we argue undertheorizes how the broader geopolitical context may pose unique challenges to certain categories of displaced populations. We instead suggest the need to understand integration as multi-scalar—not in a top-down and embedded sense, but rather as a complex process that takes place on contested terrain at multiple levels. Such an approach centres the on-the-ground realities of displaced populations, including classical concerns of the integration literature, such as access to legal status, employment, housing, education, healthcare, and language acquisition, while recognizing that local contexts are always entangled with broader transnational and geopolitical forces operating at multiple levels and scales (Adamson 2023a).

Our conclusions are based on over 200 interviews with Kurdish refugees, asylum seekers, precarious migrants, and long-term established diaspora members across six European states. Importantly, in the case of Kurdish populations in Europe, the broader transnational and geopolitical context includes the potential for individuals to be exploited by a range of actors and organizations operating transnationally, many of which tied to ongoing dynamics of repression related to conflicts in various Kurdish 'homelands'. Integration processes and services were thus not primarily viewed by our respondents as pressures for assimilation but rather as protective measures that ensured individual autonomy and empowerment vis-à-vis competing actors and interests operating in the diaspora or from countries of origin.

In the rest of this article, we make our argument in the following manner. First, we discuss the literature on multi-scalar integration and transnationalism, arguing for the need to bring a stronger diasporic and geopolitical sensibility into such discussions by focusing on factors such as migration diplomacy, state-led diaspora engagement policies, homeland-oriented diaspora organizations, and transnational repression. We then present an overview of some key findings from a larger study of Kurdish populations in Europe, discussing our research methodology and providing some background and context to the case before outlining how the above transnational and geopolitical factors were reported by our respondents to impact on their everyday experiences of integration. Finally, we conclude with a summary of our findings and their implications.

2. The geopolitical dimensions of multi-scalar integration

The concept of immigrant 'integration' is heatedly debated in the literature (c.f. Laubenthal 2023). Integration has classically been understood as a domestic political process by which newly migrated individuals assimilate into the social, cultural, economic, and political structures and networks of their new society of residence (Hoesch 2018; Solano and De Coninck 2023). In this

model, integration can include features ranging from obtaining employment to mastering the language of the new context (Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010). While classic studies of migrant integration have focused on the nature and type of national identity and policies in explaining differences in integration processes and patterns (see, e.g. Ireland 2004; Alba 2005; Joppke 2007; Brubaker 2010), more recent literature has examined integration as a multi-scalar process in which a variety of actors, entities and scales beyond the state, such as cities, federal states, civil society actors and regional organizations (e.g. the European Union), all play significant roles (see, e.g. Sigona 2005; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011; Lentin and Moreo 2012; Dekker et al. 2015; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017; Pardo 2018; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Ambrosini 2021; Fry and Islar 2021; Dag 2022: 282; Dimitriadis and Ambrosini 2022).

Other scholars have gone further to question the very notion of integration itself, arguing that it is based on a form of methodological nationalism that produces a false binary between the individual migrant and the receiving society, with the concept ultimately functioning as a neocolonial category (Schinkel 2018; Hinger and Schweitzer 2020: 2–3; Favell 2022). Even multi-scalar approaches to migration, it has been argued, can be considered to reproduce entrenched hierarchies, resulting in a form of 'methodological supranationalism' (Benson et al. 2022).

A number of scholars, however, have argued for moving beyond nested understandings of multi-scalar integration to more entangled and transnational approaches that also incorporate diasporic and homeland connections (Frykman 2001; Snel et al. 2006; Mazzucato 2008; Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016; Mügge 2016; Østergaard-Nielsen 2016; Six-Hohenbalkan 2022). As Erdal (2020) has noted, there is a need to better theorize the relationship between transnationalism and integration, based on an understanding that individuals inhabit multiple social fields and retain cross-border connections and affiliations, even when they move across borders from 'here' to 'there' (Waldinger 2008, 2017). Such approaches move beyond a 'methodological nationalist' or even 'methodological supranationalist' understanding of integration (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2003; Benson et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, we argue here that such multi-scalar approaches need to be further refined to take account of different types of transnational ties, particular circumstances of migration, relation to the country of origin, and the broader geopolitical context. In effect, integration processes take place in contexts that are entangled with other scales, which are also sites of political struggles and conflicts—including transnationalized violent conflicts (Adamson and Greenhill 2021; Adamson 2024b). Integration processes thus occur in various metaphorical but also literal political 'battlegrounds,' in which migrants and refugees can face real security threats, exploitation and abuse from a range of (sometimes violent) actors (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Ambrosini 2021; Dimitriadis and Ambrosini 2022). In such contexts, integration may be less about 'assimilation' and more about providing protection and security, fostering resilience in the local context, and providing new arrivals with the means of self-empowerment.

These factors are especially salient in the case of displaced Kurdish populations in Europe, as well as other cases of forced migrants whose positionality vis-à-vis their country of origin may differ somewhat from that of voluntary migrants (such as labour migrants who have primarily moved for economic reasons). Populations escaping persecution, conflict, and violence are seeking to escape the immediate context of their state of origin, but are nevertheless still likely to retain some level of social, familial or other ties with their state of origin. Their relationship to the political context of their state of origin cannot be separated from their inhabitation of transnational fields, which in turn are embedded in larger geopolitical dynamics and state-to-state interactions and interests.

Geopolitical dynamics are frequently under-theorized in more sociological and anthropological approaches to transnationalism—unsurprisingly, as such literature emerged from attempts to move away from state-centric approaches to migration. Yet, for forced migrants, the geopolitical dimensions of migration remain key, and often do not simply remain 'over there' following the crossing of state borders. Forced migrants are likely to continue to encounter their state of origin abroad, via its official offices, institutions, representatives and other structures—and are

likely to continue to have interactions with other actors inhabiting what are often quite politically contentious transnational social fields (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Adamson 2023b).

The various scales of 'local', 'national', and 'international' are therefore in reality not just nested, but also *diasporic* as states and state bureaucracies themselves are often transnational or are able to exert power and influence in ways that have transnational effects on populations beyond their borders (Collyer and King 2014; Lacroix 2022; Adamson 2024a). States increasingly attempt to actively 'embrace' populations outside their territories via state-led diaspora engagement policies (FitzGerald 2008; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Gamlen 2019; Böcü and Baser 2022; Böcü and Panwar 2022). This is not simply a form of bureaucratic transnationalism, but can extend as well to harassing, policing, surveilling, or targeting particular populations abroad using tactics of transnational repression (Brand 2009; Ragazzi 2014; Moss 2016; Oztürk and Taş 2020; Tsourapas 2021; Craven 2022). Moreover, asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees can be subject to political instrumentalization or 'weaponization' by both their state of origin and their new state of residence, as states use the granting or denial of asylum claims as instruments in their diplomatic toolboxes, as part of the larger dynamics of 'migration diplomacy' (Greenhill 2010; Thiollet 2011; Micinski 2018; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Micinski and Lindey 2022; Dag 2023b).

These dynamics may further extend to non-state diasporic actors who are part of transnational fields that connect states of origin with states of residence, and who also play roles as agents of governance in general (Craven 2018), and of refugee and immigrant integration in particular. Diaspora organizations are inherently multi-scalar in that they operate transnationally, thus connecting new and old migrants across different local and national contexts. In addition to providing information and social capital that can be crucial to understanding settlement patterns and migration choices, they are often key actors in service provision and in promoting integration. At the same time, by operating across different scales, diaspora organizations can bring the national-level politics of homelands into new contexts. This, in turn, can affect local dynamics that impact on integration dynamics in local communities.

More broadly, a multi-scalar and diasporic lens allows one to take account of the enduring effects of homeland politics on integration processes, and suggests the importance of developing understandings of integration in which new arrivals are not expected to simply shed one identity for another, but are also embedded in multiple networks and sets of relationships—including highly contentious relationships—that operate at several scales simultaneously. Because diaspora organizations are transnational, they can in many cases help to facilitate multi-scalar forms of integration by acting as brokers for newly arriving refugees—connecting them to resources and support necessary for integration into a new context, while also translating that new context through the lens of the 'homeland'. Yet, at the same time, diaspora organizations that are politicized around 'homeland' causes may sometimes form impediments to integration, if they primarily view new arrivals as potential recruits or even mimic states by themselves attempting to instrumentalize or weaponize new arrivals or engage in non-state forms of politically-motivated transnational repression (Adamson 2020).

3. Research methods and design

The research design underpinning the analysis in this article aims to capture a 'bottom-up' understanding of the challenges facing Kurdish migrant populations across different contexts in Europe. We took a multi-sited approach based on our interest in the multi-scalar dimensions of integration for newly arrived Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers (Xiang 2013). We employed a variety of methods including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic methods, primarily, participant observation. Sites of field research were chosen in order to facilitate both cross-country and within-country comparisons. The overall research design aimed to capture variations across the different reception and integration experiences of Kurdish populations in both urban areas (i.e. metropolitan cities), but also less populated regions (i.e. border towns).

Interviews were further divided into elite (e.g. diaspora organization leaders and representatives) and non-elite (e.g. recent arrivals of various legal status, asylum seekers, recognized refugees, and naturalized immigrants). Overall, 231 interviews were conducted between March and August 2019, as well as participant observation across seventeen sites in six countries (Table 1). The range of respondents reflects the complexity and diversity of displaced Kurdish populations in Europe, allowing for a comprehensive approach to issues of integration from diverse perspectives within this complex community.

Field research was conducted collaboratively, with the questions, research design, and interpretation of results undertaken by all three authors. This ensured a balance of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives, and an approach that provides balance, allowing for both in-depth cultural knowledge and critical interrogation of findings (c.f. Zinn-Baca 2001; O'Connor 2010; Unluer 2012). Interviews and focus groups were arranged and conducted by the second author, Veysi Dag, an experienced researcher with a Kurdish background, who was able to draw on personal knowledge of the Kurdish refugee context. Interviews were conducted in Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani dialects), Turkish, German, and English. Interviews were recorded and transcribed into English by Dag. Interview subjects included both established members of the Kurdish diaspora community in Europe and recently arrived Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees. Initial contacts were identified via different diaspora community organizations, online forums, and social network sites. Subsequently, snowball sampling was utilized as the basis for arranging in-depth interviews and participant observation. In addition, the study also used a trial-and-error method to reach out to Kurdish refugees in isolated locations and populations

Table 1. Summary of interview locations, dates and methods.

Country	Total interviews	Non-elite interviews	Elite interviews	Interview sites	Interview dates	Interview methods
Germany	67	45	22	Berlin, Landshut, Munich	31 March–16 April 2019 7–14 May 2019	In-person group and semi-structured in-depth interviews
France	44	26	18	Paris Nice, Antipas and Cannes	29 May–13 June 2019 30 June–8 July 2019	In-person group and semi-structured in-depth interviews
Sweden	36	26	10	Stockholm Malmo and Lund	17–29 April 2019 30 April–3 May 2019	In-person group and semi-structured in-depth interviews
Austria	36	24	12	Vienna Salzburg	15–23 May 2019 24–29 May 2019	In-person group and semi-structured in-depth interviews
Italy	39	23	16	Rome, Grosseto Ventimiglia Bari	9–26 July 2019 27–31 July 2019	In-person group and semi-structured in-depth interviews
Denmark	9	9	–	Bornholm	4–6 May 2019	In-person group and semi-structured in-depth interviews

Source: Compiled and designed by the authors.

who were not connected to other Kurdish networks, communities, or institutions (Beauchemin and González-Ferrer 2011).

Given that governments in Europe keep no official statistics on specifically Kurdish populations in Europe, one of the key challenges was delineating what was meant by 'Kurdish' in our study. While we largely relied on self-identification to build our sample, which raises issues of selection bias, we also took steps to ensure that our sample included a variety of self-identified groups of Kurdish asylum seekers, refugees, and naturalized refugees, including many who did not identify with any particular political orientation or group.

Approximately 15–30 in-depth individual interviews and/or focus groups were conducted in each research site. Interviews were conducted with four different categories of individuals: established diaspora community leaders (elite interviews); refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas (non-elite interviews); refugees and asylum seekers in small towns and rural areas (non-elite interviews); and some focus groups that included both refugees/asylum seekers and established diaspora community leaders. For the selection of interviewees, we ensured a mix of characteristics of Kurdish refugees in relation to their legal status, age, gender identity, occupation, employment status and type, level of language skills, education level, housing situation, time of immigration, country of origin, their position within particular diaspora organizations, and their relationships with pre-established Kurdish communities in terms of political affiliation and/or kinship and transnational links with relatives or friends beyond their settlement location.[1]

We followed appropriate ethical guidelines in our study, including explaining the nature of our research to all participants, gaining their consent, and anonymizing all responses. Many individuals encountered in this research were in very precarious personal situations, as measured by their legal status, their lack of an economic support system, and their self-identification with a marginalized group. Moreover, some were engaged in political activities or organizations that may have put them at odds with majority refugee or migrant populations from their countries of origin. In all cases, the priority was for the safety, security and anonymity of our respondents. As a collaborative research team, the combined insider–outsider approach also helped us to address and work through ethical challenges and dilemmas that arose throughout the research and writing process, and included extended collective engagements around issues of positionality, interpretation, and representation of results.

4. Kurdish refugees in Europe: Between state, diaspora and geopolitics

Kurds represent a significant refugee and asylum-seeking population in Europe, especially in the 2010s at the height of the so-called refugee crisis. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF) in Germany estimated that between 2014 and 2020, more than 30 per cent of asylum applicants from Syria and 70 per cent from Iraq were people who claimed a Kurdish ethnicity. According to data provided by Eurostat, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran are ranked amongst the top ten countries in terms of numbers of asylum applicants in European countries (BAMF 2021). Yet, Kurds are often invisible as a distinct refugee and migrant population because they are not generally included in official statistics, which usually categorize populations by country of origin or citizenship (Laizer 1996: 193–194).

Due to the high level of politicization of Kurdish identity across their primary states of origin (i.e. Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran), Kurdish populations in Europe often face a specific set of integration issues based on their ethno-political identity; their relationship to state authorities and citizenship regimes in their countries of origin; the ways in which conflicts in their home countries intersect with the foreign policy interests of European states; and their membership in, or relationship to, broader diaspora networks that stretch across Europe. Our multi-sited research design allowed us to isolate factors that were context-specific vs. those factors that were transnational and geopolitical. Our interviewees reported numerous challenges that are common to

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[1] Further details of the larger project's overall research design and findings, on which this article is based, can be found in Dag *et al.* (2021a, 2021b); Adamson (2023b, 2024b); Dag (2023a, 2024).

many refugee and migrant communities in Europe, such as variation in access based on their legal status, language skills, education, housing, networks and location, but also reported challenges that related specifically to their Kurdish identity, which forms the basis of the current analysis (Dag 2024).

4.1 Background

Kurdish departures to Europe over the past decade and a half have been spurred by a number of factors, most prominently the Syrian civil war, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the collapse of the peace talks between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state between 2013 and 2015, as well as Turkish military operations and ongoing conflict in northern Syria and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq (Dag 2024). This most recent wave comes on top of earlier waves of migration (Adamson 2019): a large proportion of economic migrants from Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s were identifiably Kurdish; the civil war in Turkey between the PKK and the Turkish state spurred another wave of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers in the 1980s and 1990s, as did the use of chemical weapons in Iraq (Ammann 2000; McDowall 2005; Hiltermann 2007). In addition, there have also been waves of Kurdish migration from Iran since the 1980s. Asylum-seeking migration from the region to Europe continued into the 2000s due to state repression by the Syrian regime against the Kurdish population in Northern Syria; the on-going conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state; and unstable economic and political conditions in Iraq and Iran (Özbek 2018; Bozarslan *et al.* 2021; Schøtt 2021; Toivanen 2021).

4.2 Formation of diaspora

The history of Kurdish migration to Europe, combined with ongoing conflicts in the homeland(s), has led to the development of numerous Kurdish-oriented diaspora organizations across Europe, some of which are tied to different political actors in the region, and some of which are more focused on integration activities and politics in Europe. The larger and more established Kurdish organizations are present in metropolitan cities across Europe, with a particularly strong presence in Germany, France, Austria, and Sweden (Ammann 2000; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; McDowall 2005; Baser 2016; Schøtt 2021; Toivanen 2021). They are highly networked with strong transnational connections. In regions where there are no established Kurdish organizations, there are often informal and unaffiliated network structures, based on self-help, kinship or other factors, which are established by refugees themselves (Dag 2023a). The types of Kurdish organizations can be loosely categorized into *Moderate Broker*, *Politicized Homeland* and *Self-Organized and Unaffiliated* (Table 2)—a categorization that has been inductively arrived at by the three authors from qualitative analysis of the interview data. *Moderate Broker* organizations refer to groups, such as the transnationally connected KOMKAR organizations, that are primarily focused on fostering Kurdish cultural activities and integration within Europe and frequently work with local authorities to provide services to local Kurdish communities and new arrivals. *Politicized Homeland* organizations refer to groups focused largely on homeland politics, including ongoing armed conflicts in the countries of origin. Examples include organizations associated with the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)—a transnational umbrella organization which also counts the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and Peoples' Defense Forces (YPG) in Northern Syria as affiliates. *Self-Organized and Unaffiliated* organizations refer to spontaneously generated support organizations, or organizations based on extended kinship or regional ties.

When individual Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers arrive in Europe, they may also encounter established transnationally organized Kurdish organizations, which connect local contexts to a broader transnational and geopolitical landscape, although the type of organization and their influence will vary according to areas of settlement. *Moderate Broker Organizations* are more present in locations with established Kurdish populations and strong government refugee support policies. *Self-Organized and Unaffiliated* are found in both non-metropolitan areas with strong social services and areas with weak social services. *Politicized Homeland Organizations* are

Table 2. Types of Kurdish diaspora organizations.

Moderate broker	Work closely with local governments, agencies and officials
	Receive funds for integration programmes
	Focused on Kurdish culture w/in country of residence
	Examples: KOMKAR, YEKMAL, Kurdische Gemeinde Deutschland e. V. (KGD)
Politicized homeland	Highly politicized
	Linked to broader transnational governance structures
	Internal 'diaspora governance'
	Examples: organizations associated with the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) or Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK)
Self-organized and unaffiliated	Local and spontaneously self-organized initiatives and committees
	Provide self-help, welfare, community, some governance
	Emerge in absence of established diaspora organizations
	Examples: Bari, Bornholm, Landshut, Malmö

Source: Compiled and designed by the authors.

found largely in metropolitan areas, but their networks also stretch across to other locales. These organizations, which are encountered in different ways by self-identified Kurdish migrants and refugees who have different political positionalities and attitudes, form part of the broader landscape of individuals' settlement and integration processes across Europe.

4.3 Homeland politics and geopolitical factors

The combination of ongoing and active conflicts in the region, European geopolitical interests, and the prominence of homeland politics in many of the Kurdish diaspora organizations affects newly arriving Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees to Europe in numerous ways. Of course, the impacts of these factors vary according to the circumstances of individual refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, including their relationship to conflict dynamics in their country of origin, education level, and access to material resources and networks. Nevertheless, our interviewees highlighted significant commonalities across the diaspora, moderated by variations in the relevant national and local integration and welfare regimes, as well as the nature and type of local Kurdish organizations (Dag 2024).

First and foremost, interviewees emphasized the extent to which the geopolitical context affects the ability of individual asylum seekers to secure a legal status in Europe—a factor which affects all other aspects of integration for this population. Numerous interviewees expressed the view that geopolitical and foreign policy considerations were responsible for delays in the processing of their asylum applications, or the rejection of their applications. For example, one of our interviewees in Stockholm, stated that 'The Swedish government does not pay attention … to what I have experienced in Iran and what happens in my homeland. The government only cares about its own national interests. This … is the reason why I and other co-nationals … receive a rejection for our asylum application.' (Interview with Kamuran,[2] 18 April 2019). Another interviewee in Malmö recounted his belief that Turkish authorities were submitting false information directly to Swedish authorities. The interviewee recounted that he was a member of a legal pro-Kurdish party in Turkey,[3] but that 'fake documents and sources' were used to portray him 'as a member of the PKK,' adding that 'I believe that this is the reason why the Swedish authorities have delayed my asylum application for years and do not make a decision.' (Interview with Aref, 1 May 2019).

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[2] All names used throughout are pseudonyms.
[3] Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

On the other hand, most asylum applications from Syrian Kurds were granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.[4] Thus, despite all groups experiencing danger and persecution relating to the conflicts' cross-border and regional dynamics, including military operations by several state and non-state actors, individual chances of having one's asylum application approved vary strongly according to one's state of origin. This means that in the 2010s, asylum seekers from Turkey, Iran and Iraq often received negative decisions in their asylum processes, whereas Kurdish asylum seekers from Syria had a good prospect of having their asylum claims recognized.

Geopolitical considerations appeared to directly affect the chances of individual asylum applications being approved. For example, Turkey has been able to leverage its position as an EU candidate and NATO member, as well as a refugee-hosting and transit state, to demand concessions that impact on Kurdish populations in Europe (Dag 2023b). Our interviews indicated that individual asylum cases were also subject to geopolitical manoeuvring.[5] An already-mentioned dramatic example of this—which occurred after our field research, but which illustrates the dynamics—was the Turkish state's 2022 leveraging of its ability to block NATO membership applications of Sweden and Finland, resolved via a memorandum that included agreements to stricter vetting of Kurdish asylum seekers and further provisions for extradition (Duxbury 2022). A respondent in Salzburg noted the impacts of such geopolitical manoeuvring on his individual integration trajectory:

I always ask myself the question whether I will be granted a resident permit or not or deported. It is an uncertain life which I cannot control. It is difficult as this liminality prevents me from focusing on my integration although I want to learn German, interact with Austrian citizens and find a job. (Interview with Mirza, 26 May 2019)

Our interviewees recounted incidents in which translators were provided who were affiliated with the Turkish embassy, or in which they were harassed or labelled as 'terrorists' by German authorities with a Turkish background.[6] More broadly, Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers at times are targeted by the transnational activities of Turkish intelligence agencies, or have been subject to the larger 'global purge' that targeted members of the Fethullah Gülen religious group, but also Kurdish activists, following the 2016 coup attempt (see, e.g. Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Schenkkan 2018; Adamson 2020).

4.4 Impacts of diaspora organizations

Within this context, the various roles played by Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe is significant in multiple respects. They are vital to understanding pathways to integration of Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees, although the way in which they promote (or, at times, impede) integration varies according to local context and individual circumstances (Alessio 2008). Kurdish populations in Europe exist on a continuum from situations of extreme precarity, such as those with irregular status who are disconnected from any support networks whatsoever, to well-established elite networks, who are at the forefront of Kurdish politics and cultural production (Dag 2022).

On one end of the spectrum are irregular and recently arrived populations located in areas that lack either state service provision or well-established formal Kurdish community organizations. Such populations are living under the radar and can be considered survival migrants that are eking out a living, often via undocumented and irregular activities. They frequently rely on self-help forms of organization that provide a modicum of solidarity, internal governance and

[4] This was noted by Kurdish advisors from the Association for Parents from Kurdistan in Germany (YEKMAL e. V.), (interview on 9 April 2019 in Berlin) and the Federation of Kurdistan Laborers' Associations (KOMKAR), (interview on 8 April 2019 in Berlin), as well as interviews with Kurdish language translators in Salzburg, 24 May 2019.
[5] Kurdish translators in Salzburg and Berlin told us during interviews in April and May 2019 that the success rate of applications of Kurdish asylum seekers from Turkey, according to lawyers and advocacy groups, varies according to the relationship between the Turkish and European governments.
[6] Interview with Berxweden (pseudonym) in Berlin, 4 April 2019.

welfare (Dag 2023a). Our interviewees included numerous undocumented and irregular migrants/asylum seekers without legal status, who were subject to extreme forms of exploitation, and were often reliant on the informal services of diaspora organizations to survive.

Much of the exploitation facing undocumented individuals was intra-communal, including labour exploitation at the hands of Kurdish or Turkish individuals and companies. Their lack of documented status and legal standing meant that they had nowhere to go if they did not receive payment for work in the informal/grey economy—in some cases employers threatened to report them to police or other authorities if they pushed too hard for payment. Interviewees who had access to established diaspora organizations could turn to them to resolve such difficulties; however, individuals living in more remote areas without established diaspora organizations were often subject to ongoing and severe exploitation—this was particularly a problem for communities in France, Italy and, to some extent, Sweden. Interviewees indicated that having legal status would have allowed them to better defend themselves against exploitation on the labour market. A respondent in Paris narrated his experience:

> I work here without papers, but Kurdish and Turkish employers do not pay me my salary and run away. I have worked at the construction site for weeks but failed to receive my money. When I pressured my employer, he cursed me 150 times and threatened to report me to the French authorities. I came to the Kurdish association to complain about him … [and to seek] support from the Kurdish association to receive my money from the employer. I hope the Kurdish association will be able to obtain my payment. (Interview with Kerwan, 11 June 2019)

Asylum seekers and refugees who had been highly engaged in legal forms of Kurdish politics in Turkey, or who were active in governance structures in Northern Syria, were well-received by linked diaspora organizations in Europe due to references and networks from their home countries. In such cases, they did not need the welfare or accommodation-related services of states of reception, as they were well-served by the homeland-related diaspora organizations. As one Paris-based interviewee recounted:

> Upon my arrival, I was provided shelter at homes of Kurdish patriots, which was organized by the Kurdish association. I could obtain this support since I was already embedded in comrade networks from the homeland. I contacted friends in Brussels who asked their friends from the Kurdish association in Paris to look after me and my daughter. These friends also provided me with translation services and accompanied me to the immigration agency to apply for asylum. (Interview with Mervan 13 June 2019)

Such well-networked populations can be engaged with both *Moderate Broker* and *Politicized Homeland* organizations.

In the middle of the spectrum are the many ordinary asylum seekers who are simultaneously navigating the legal and bureaucratic landscape of Europe, the political landscape of Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe, as well as the transnational reach of the bureaucracies, diaspora engagement policies and, at times, security regimes of their states of origin. Such populations may have access to some level of support structures and services, but are often living in situations of limbo, unable to travel, work, or move forward on the path to integration, and they may be highly dependent on community and informal networks for their survival.

Diaspora organizations in such a context are therefore frequently key actors in integration processes, providing much-needed material, psychological, and social support in situations of extreme precarity. They can also act as brokers that assist new arrivals in accessing existing state services and opportunities; provide them with access to essential information; and help them to navigate the legal and bureaucratic obstacles that newcomers inevitably encounter upon arrival in European states. Diaspora organizations played important roles in processes of arrival, reception, and settlement for many respondents in our sample, as well as in the key milestones of refugee integration, including securing legal status; mitigating intra-community conflicts; acquiring access to employment, healthcare, education, housing, and other basic

necessities, such as language training; and assistance in integrating socially and culturally into the new context.[7]

In our interviews, we encountered Kurdish refugees who criticized some Kurdish organizations for their focus on politics over refugee support. A Kurdish refugee from Syria in Stockholm claimed, for example, that Kurdish organizations are biased towards refugees who support their own political agenda, choosing to variously provide services to or neglect Kurdish refugees according to their political views and ties: 'I have to admit that our association is politically oriented and not free from the ideological lines of the parties in Kurdistan which require loyalty' (Interview with Heveal, 21 April 2019). An interviewee in Berlin also raised the issue of Kurdish associations closely following the agendas of political actors in the 'homeland,' noting that they often pressured refugees to tow their political lines:

> Many associations are unfortunately loyal to particular political parties from Kurdistan … They provide Kurdish refugees with services according to their political affiliation but not according to their Kurdish background or needs of support … we need a politically neutral and civic organization that operates to solve the problems of Kurdish refugees. (Interview with Azad, 6 April 2019)

Established diaspora organizations may have incentives to secure the loyalty and membership of newly arrived refugees in order to sustain political mobilization around homeland agendas (see, e.g. Shain 2005). This pushes many refugees away from some of the established diaspora organizations, and can distract them from integration-related agendas.[8] Situations of precarity, legal limbo and dependency can also provide underlying conditions for intra-diasporic forms of exploitation, and these can in turn become tied to broader transnational conflict networks and multi-scalar geopolitical dynamics that the majority of asylum seekers are seeking to escape.

5. Conclusion: Multi-scalar and diasporic integration

Our research provides a counterpoint to both methodological nationalist and decolonial approaches to integration. It suggests that processes of integration should be thought of as taking place within a multi-scalar and diasporic context, providing individuals with the resources and support to successfully function and flourish in their country of reception, as well as to engage productively with broader transnational, geopolitical and diasporic contexts. The complexity of geopolitical relations, and the density of personal, social, political and media networks between states of reception and states of origin, means that individual refugees and asylum seekers do not simply leave one context and start a new life in another context. Rather, they will continue to be influenced by developments in their homelands; remain embedded in broader geopolitical dynamics that affect their everyday lives; and be subject to the influence of a range of transnational actors, ties, and forms of diaspora politics.

Diaspora organizations—which are inherently multi-scalar—often play important roles as 'brokers' and facilitators of processes of integration. They can connect newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers with existing resources, services and support. However, this only works when there are indeed state services and support available to new arrivals, and where there are established, service-providing diaspora organizations. In cases where state support for new arrivals is lacking, or there is a lack of established diaspora organizations that have a history of partnering with local policy actors, new arrivals can be in danger of falling into a situation of extreme precarity and/or being exploited by informal actors or diaspora organizations that take advantage of newcomers' vulnerability. There are two ways to positively intervene in such dynamics: for states and local communities to provide new arrivals with greater and more open

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[7] These services may also at times be utilized by non-Kurdish-identifying individuals who nonetheless may share political affinities with some of the diaspora organizations.

[8] Such as learning the languages of the host societies, participating in educational programs, understanding the cultural and political realities of receiving societies and interacting with citizens.

access to legal channels for reception and integration, so that services and assistance can be accessed directly and without fear; and for policy-makers to partner with and support diaspora organizations that have the capacity, expertise, experience and orientation to serve as reliable brokers for new arrivals in the process of integration.

New arrivals can be expected to remain politically engaged with and interested in their countries of origin without this being a sign of lack of integration in their country of reception. Access to legal status and forms of support can ensure, however, that vulnerable newcomers can make their own choices about levels and types of political engagement, rather than being forced by necessity into situations of intra-diasporic forms of dependency in which they may be at risk of being exploited by predatory actors in the diaspora. In the case of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers, acquiring legal status is not only crucial for accessing services in many cases, but also provides some degree of protection against exploitation by homeland-oriented diaspora groups, as well as providing some legal protection and security in the face of home state attempts to engage in transnational repression and harassment, including extradition attempts. Such a model of integration does not throw out the concept, but recognizes both the protective and empowering role that local and national policies can play in enabling refugee and diaspora populations to function autonomously in a broader transnational and global context. Our research with displaced Kurdish populations in Europe therefore calls into question proposals to fully abandon concepts of integration (Favell 2022), pointing instead to the need to understand its multi-scalar and diasporic dimensions.

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