Asylum Seekers' and Refugees' Decision-Making in Transit in Indonesia

The Need for In-depth and Longitudinal Research

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Abstract

Asylum seekers and refugees currently living in Indonesia tend to see Indonesia as a transit rather than a destination country, despite the fact that their stays are increasing in length. Based on contact with Muhamad (not his real name), a young refugee from Iran currently residing in Indonesia whose adjustment and development I observed over four years, I illustrate the changing priorities in his decision-making, the constant flux of circumstances and context, and the extreme complexity of primary and secondary factors that come into play in planning for the future. Combining a macro perspective with a case study, in which I present excerpts from several life-story interviews, helps to exemplify these generic migratory challenges and distil a range of relevant parameters that influence the decision-making of asylum seekers and refugees in transit. A (self-)critical reflection on ethical and methodological challenges underpins my analysis and argument, not least because politicians and policymakers are increasingly interested in influencing migratory decision-making processes to gain political advantage. Of particular interest in my analysis is the role of Australia's deterrence policies in asylum seekers' decision-making. Despite the ethical challenges associated with studying migratory decision-making—as public knowledge of migration strategies can also suppress aspirations of mobility—I argue for more in-depth and longitudinal research. At the very least, this is because more intensive, yet considerate studies of decision-making will help us to take seriously the migratory aspirations of people with limited choices.

Keywords

mobility – clandestine journeys – asylum seekers – refugees – Indonesia – Australia – return – repatriation – maritime borders – decision-making

1 Introduction

According to the latest global report published by the United Nation's refugee agency (UNHCR 2019), the world is seeing the highest levels of displacement on record, with an unprecedented 68.5 million people around the world forced from their homes. This number translates to one person being forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution. Against the claims of right-wing politicians that countries in the Global North are overrun by refugees, about 85 per cent of all displaced people are living in the Global South (UNHCR 2019). Whereas most forced displacements take place in the Middle East and Eastern Africa at present, the Asia-Pacific region is hosting about 11 per cent of all globally displaced people. In real numbers this translates to 8.3 million people of concern to UNHCR, including 4.4 million refugees, 1.9 million internally displaced persons, and an estimated 1.4 million stateless people (UNHCR 2018a). Despite the relatively small proportion overall, the refugee population in the Asia-Pacific region increased by 21 per cent between 2016 and 2017 (UNHCR 2018b). This article highlights the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, because Indonesia is deemed to be a significant transit country and policy changes there are indicative of regional trends.

Only 20 of the 45 countries and territories in the Asia-Pacific region have acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, but long-standing traditions of hospitality towards forcibly displaced people remain strong across the region. Among the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), only Cambodia and the Philippines have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention.¹ Many refugees hope for resettlement in the Global North, including the USA, Canada, and the European Union member states. Attracted by their effective resettlement programmes and integration schemes as well as the more affluent economic opportunities, tens of thousands of asylum seekers have also tried to reach those 'promised lands' on their own in recent years, despite increasingly preventive asylum,

¹ Timor Leste, a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, is yet to become a full ASEAN member.

FIGURE 1 Population of concern to UNHCR in Indonesia
UNHCR INDONESIA (2019)

migration, and travel restrictions. On average, Australia resettles between 12,000 and 16,000 refugees each year from all around the world. For many years, however, Australia has also been a destination country for asylum seekers and refugees arriving by boats (Spinks 2013; Phillips 2017). This is often the only option for asylum seekers originating from countries whose people are barred from entering Australia on student, tourist, or short-term visas.

In order to reach Australia, asylum seekers from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and East Africa would usually transit through Thailand and/or Malaysia, and—eventually—Indonesia, not least because these countries offer generous short-term visas and have lax border control (Hugo, Tan and Napitupulu 2017). While some asylum seekers initiate their refugee-status determination process with the UNHCR in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, or Jakarta, others are deterred by the long waiting times to do so and prefer to either live under the radar or move on as fast as possible (Figure 1). Indonesia is not only relatively easy to access, but also offers relative political stability and a *laissez-faire* attitude towards ‘irregular’ migrants. Politicians in Australia view Indonesia as the ‘last stepping stone’ (Missbach 2015:7), and many asylum seekers also anticipate their departure from Indonesia as the last segment of their journey. Between 2000 and 2017, Australia resettled 3,627 refugees from Indonesia under its Refugee and Humanitarian Programme;² about 60,701 made their

2 Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection FOI Request—FA 18/09/00159. https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/refugees_resettled_from_indonesia?unfold=1 (accessed 28-09-2019).

own way by boat in the same period (Phillips 2017).³ The number of maritime asylum seekers arriving has decreased significantly since 2013 because of Australia's externalized deterrence policies under Operation Sovereign Borders, which is explained in more detail later in this article.

Based on the hypothesis that when no durable solutions are available to refugees they seek their own solutions (Long 2013), the primary research interest in this article is twofold. First, I am interested in the parameters that influence asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia in regard to their aspirations of onward migration. Taking a systematic approach, I divide these parameters into four categories: external, internal, individual, and collective. Second, I ask: to what extent do Australia's deterrence policies influence asylum seekers' decision-making? The argument put forward here is that although external parameters, such as Australia's deterrence policies, are very important for those living in transit in Indonesia, as they deter them from boarding boats at present, they are not the only parameters determining aspirations for onward migration in the long run; rather, they delay certain decisions. For the purposes of my analysis, onward migration includes both regular and irregular forms of mobility, and under certain circumstances may result in return or repatriation.

This article is informed by a long-term interest in refugee-related politics in Indonesia, which I have pursued since 2010. During the more than 20 months of fieldwork in Jakarta and other asylum seeker hubs, I had the good fortune to form lasting connections with individuals in transit over several years. One of them is Muhamad (not his real name), whom I first got to know in February 2015 in Jakarta. Since then, I have visited Muhamad each time I have been in Jakarta (either once or twice per year) and have occasionally helped him out with some cash. We keep in regular contact using WhatsApp while I am away. Legal opportunities and irregular alternatives for onward migration from Indonesia have been a major topic in our discussions.

Given that the refugee and asylum seeker population in Indonesia is very heterogeneous, Muhamad's experiences cannot be considered to represent the combined experiences of many others, yet to some extent they are indicative of the experiences of some of them. Muhamad's story will not only guide my analysis, but quotations from our conversations will also serve to epitom-

3 The rationales, organizational hazards, and roles of the facilitators of those boat journeys ('people smugglers') between Indonesia and Australia have received significant academic attention (Missbach 2015; 2016a and b).

ize the otherwise abstract rationales employed in migratory decision-making. By combining a macro-perspective with a case study, my intention is to exemplify generic migratory challenges and distil a range of relevant parameters influencing the decision-making of refugees and asylum seekers in transit in Indonesia. Some of these parameters could be deemed relevant in other geographic contexts. A (self-)critical reflection on ethical and methodological challenges in studying migratory decision-making underpins my analysis, not least because politicians and policymakers increasingly seek to influence migratory decision-making processes for political advantage. Without intending to help such politicians and policymakers in order to thwart mobility aspirations even further, I argue in favour of more intense research of migratory decision-making by conducting more in-depth and longitudinal studies, as we need to take migrants and their mobility aspirations more seriously.

2 Life on Hold

Amongst other Indonesian teenagers, Muhamad stood out when we first met. Not only was he taller than the others, but he was also rather tense. Usually unaccompanied minors who register as asylum seekers in Indonesia are accommodated in special shelters, but the increase in the number of underage asylum seekers arriving in Indonesia without family outstripped the limited capacity of the special shelters. Muhamad's arrival in Indonesia in February 2014 was a case of bad timing, as he had just missed the last boat to Australia. In late 2013, the Australian government under Tony Abbott had initiated Operation Sovereign Borders, which included turning back asylum seeker boats to Indonesia and other countries. Nonetheless, since Australia was then still accepting recognized refugees from Indonesia for resettlement, Muhamad decided to register with the UNHCR. The chances of resettlement in Australia, however, were soon to diminish. In November 2014, Australia announced it would no longer accept people in its humanitarian refugee intake if they had registered with the UNHCR in Indonesia after June 2014. Although Muhamad was lucky to have at least registered before this deadline, he was saddened, as his family was still in Iran.

Originally from Ghazni Province in Afghanistan, Muhamad's family belong to an ethnic and religious minority, the Hazara. When he was eight years old, his parents decided to move to Iran. Although they did not have the proper papers to pursue legal residence rights, they managed to muddle through, despite facing discrimination. His parents worked odd jobs and Muhamad and his siblings attended a school for Hazara children fairly regularly. On his way to visit

one of his school friends at home, he was arrested by Iranian police and deported to Herat, a city close to the Iran/Afghanistan border where he knew nobody. After a few days, Muhamad telephoned his parents for help. Afraid that he might be arrested again on his return, his parents advised him against returning to Iran and suggested that he try to reach Australia. Within a few days his parents had borrowed enough money to help him undertake the journey and had transferred it to him. A smuggler who had been recommended to Muhamad arranged for his journey to Australia for US\$6,000. He crossed through India and Malaysia, but his journey came to an unexpected end in Indonesia. At the start of his journey, Muhamad had not been aware that the boats between Indonesia and Australia had stopped and were to remain so for many years to come. Moreover, he had no idea of what it would be like to live alone in Indonesia with very little money.

According to UNHCR Indonesia (2014), there were 4,140 Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia in February 2014. Although a sizeable diaspora (in comparison to other refugee groups), the Afghan refugees had little or nothing to offer to newly arrived Afghans. Thus, Muhamad's first days, weeks, and months were enormously stressful. At first he joined some other Hazara boys he had met by chance, but they soon kicked him out of their house, as he was unable to contribute to the shared expenses. After sleeping rough in mosques and on the streets for a while, he sought help from the UNHCR, which was unable to provide accommodation. After staying for some time with an Indonesian host family that had welcomed him into their house, hoping that he could tutor their children in English, a language that Muhamad was himself still trying to pick up, he ended up in an orphanage.

Roaming the streets of Jakarta and always sticking out, Muhamad came into contact with many different people, including a group of African marathon runners. While initially rather unfit, Muhamad started running with them and soon became much better—even running well enough to run in competitions and win some prize money occasionally. Over the next few months, he met a number of Indonesian volunteers and philanthropists, some of whom taught him English and *bahasa Indonesia*, while others helped him find odd jobs. Although asylum seekers and refugees are not allowed to work in Indonesia, Muhamad found a few ways to make some money. Amongst many other jobs, he cleaned offices in a church and was given free accommodation, and he attended shops to make some cash. He was often underpaid and his fear of being detected and arrested led him to change jobs and accommodation frequently. The more skills he acquired, the better the jobs he could get; for example, he conducted surveys on refugee-related topics for an Australian NGO, which he liked a lot, but none of the jobs gave him any income security. As he followed

the political situation in Australia closely, he saw that his chances of getting on a boat became less and less likely.

By the beginning of 2016, he had finally scraped together enough money to rent a tiny place in Tanah Abang, one of the cheaper parts of Jakarta, chiefly because his family in Iran had decided to send his two sisters to Indonesia, as they deemed it too dangerous for them to stay in Tehran. They arrived late in 2016. For many weeks, Muhamad was confused as to whether or not he should register his sisters under his asylum case at the UNHCR. On the one hand, because they had arrived long after June 2014, they could never be resettled in Australia, an option that still existed for Muhamad, at least in theory. On the other hand, as two young women without family in Indonesia, they stood a better chance of resettlement somewhere else as priority cases, but this could also entail becoming separated from the rest of the family again for many more years.

Under the weight of the responsibility of making enough money not only for himself, but also to provide for his sisters, Muhamad grew thin. To make ends meet, his sisters started to contribute to the family income with sewing work. His older sister also worked at a salon, while the younger one attended a school run by refugees. After the death of his father, his younger brother and mother travelled to Indonesia late in 2017. They now live together in a small, two-bedroom apartment in a low-cost area in Jakarta. None of them have received any financial support from the UNHCR or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which usually support refugees living in community shelters. When his mother fell ill, an NGO helped them pay the hospital fees. His mother and siblings are registered under a different case number with the UNHCR, but they hope to be resettled in the same country eventually. To make things worse, at the end of 2017, the UNHCR in Indonesia began to inform refugees that their chances of resettlement were extremely low because of a global shortage of resettlement options and competing needs from other transit countries (Figure 2).⁴ Although the UNHCR has widely advertised return options, such as assisted voluntary repatriation, Muhamad and his family have no place to return to in either Iran or Afghanistan. Unlike other Hazara refugees in Indonesia who have relatives living in Australia or elsewhere, Muhamad has no extended family to turn to for help. Given that there were no longer any official resettlement options from Indonesia to Australia, Muhamad pinned his hope on private-sponsorship programmes for resettlement, operating in Canada and

4 Jewel Topsfield, 'Most refugees in Indonesia will never be resettled: UN Refugee Agency', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31-10-2017.

FIGURE 2 Solutions: resettlement from Indonesia

Australia.⁵ Not only are such programmes very expensive, but the yearly intake is also small. The option of getting on a boat was still discussed, but not seriously. When I met Muhamad in early 2019, he was busying himself with many new tasks and trying to not lose hope, as many of his friends have done. While Muhamad's family still aspires to leave Indonesia and start a new life somewhere else, during our meeting, Muhamad articulated for the first time the possibility of having to stay in Indonesia for the long term.

3 Studying Migratory Decision-Making

Migratory decision-making has been a core interest of social scientists engaged with questions of mobility, movement, and migration. Meta-theories, such as modernization theory, dependence theory, articulation theory, and, later, transnational theories, explained from a macro perspective why and how people sought to overcome unequal macroeconomic exchanges between global regions through permanent or seasonal migration, in order to improve their income and that of their families left behind (Brettell 2015:154–6). These meta-theories, however, offered little explanation of how individual migrants navigated inequality and how they decided when and where to go. There was a

5 See, for examples, Asylum Insight, 'Private sponsorship'. <https://www.asyluminsight.com/private-sponsorship#.XG1TCOZNsY>, 3-5-2018 (accessed 29-09-2019) and Labman 2016.

paradigm shift when researchers stopped viewing migrants as passive victims manipulated by the world capitalist system, and took them more seriously as active decision makers, albeit often with limited choices. An abundant body of literature on international migration decision-making reports on studies of the migratory decision-making of individuals and groups (for example, Van der Velde and Van Naerssen 2015), but most of the literature is focused on regular or voluntary migration. It was only from the 1980s onwards that the study of forced migration and the decision-making of forcibly displaced people received more scholarly attention (see, for example, Colson 2003 and Chatty 2014). The questions driving these studies were related less to why people left, and rather more to how they left and where they went.⁶ Many of these studies were influenced by earlier literature on migratory decision-making, in which it was generally assumed that the process of migration begins long before the actual departure. In fact, many studies still rely too heavily on approaches influenced by rational-choice theory (Tabor, Milfont and Ward 2015). Forcibly displaced migrants are deemed to be rational beings, who carefully weigh up push and pull factors and rely, as voluntary migrants do, on social networks and chain migration, while also making use of other enabling factors that are assumed to facilitate their mobility, such as cheap and user-friendly communication technology to access up-to-date information during their journeys. Moreover, it is—almost naively—assumed that refugees have sufficiently detailed and up-to-date knowledge of the migration policies within and between different countries to make informed choices about where to go, and that they bring with them the financial and other resources to achieve these objectives (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). However, the ability to select a particular destination may depend on whether the decision to leave is acute or anticipatory. When fleeing under distress, many people do not have the luxury of preparing for their journey, or of carefully weighing up the pros and cons of where to go, as they do not have enough reliable information to make rational choices. Once in motion, they face additional pressures, such as time pressure and financial limits. Forced migrants have choices, but from a much narrower range of options. New technologies and social media are definitely of great help for people on the move (Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017), but information located through social media becomes very quickly outdated, with negative consequences for migrants and for their ability to make informed choices about their onward migration. Interethnic solidarity amongst migrants and refugees

6 Much of the existing research seems to have focused on choice of destination and ignored decision-making processes associated with the decision to leave a country of origin (McAuliffe 2017:105).

does play a great role but tends to be overestimated by researchers who mistake shared migration aspirations for camaraderie based on shared aims, and thus ignore that refugees and migrants must prioritize their own aspirations while striking a fine balance between helping others and receiving the help of others (Bachelet 2018).

Studies undertaken in the last ten years show that migratory decision-making for forcibly displaced migrants is not a single process but rather a series of unstable processes that change over time and space (Schapendonk 2012; Düvell, Wissink and van Eerdewijk 2013; Mallett and Hagen-Zanker 2018; Tazreiter, Pickering and Powell 2017). Journeys in search of safety and protection often tend to not only be lengthy but also fragmented (Collyer 2010). Each segment of the journey brings new challenges and risks and requires the migrants to make new legal, social, and economic adjustments. Usually previous decisions have to be corrected, adapted, or put aside during the journeys to accommodate new challenges and unanticipated conditions (Schapendonk 2012). As Muhamad's account has shown, people might make it to a transit country where they no longer face immediate danger, but they still cannot live the lives they want to live and continue with their aspirations for onward migration. The unpredictability of beginnings and endings of many journeys in search of protection, as well as the interruptions within them, complicate the study of migration and migratory decision-making.⁷ While scholars have come to accept that the boundaries between emotional and rational decision-making are rarely clear-cut (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015), what is still missing in current research into migratory decision-making are longitudinal studies.

4 Methodological Shortcomings and Looming Ethical Undercurrents

An examination of how many other researchers have studied migratory decision-making reveals that most studies are conducted retrospectively. Informants (re)narrate in hindsight and retell their journeys with some distance from the actual events, errors, and confusion. Unsurprisingly, in the retell-

7 When studying migratory decision-making systematically, Benezer and Zetter (2015:314) suggested four conceptual challenges for consideration to fully understand refugee journeys: the temporal aspect; drivers and destinations; the process of the journey; and migrants' characteristics. In their study of decision-making by Afghan asylum seekers, Koser and Kuschminder (2016) advocated eliciting conceptual differences in decision-making, depending primarily on whether they were making these decisions when living in their countries of origin, transit, or destination.

ing much is omitted (Mallett and Hagen-Zanker 2018). Interviews held after the event tend to offer distorted memories or simplified accounts. Therefore, researching the migratory experiences of migrants after their arrival can be problematic, as a period of time has elapsed between the actual experience of life in transit and arrival, and recollections are tainted by more recent positive or negative events, such as immigration detention, or by embarrassment about previous failures and 'wrong' decisions, or even criminal embroilment. It is not to be forgotten that recounting high-risk decisions and traumatic events from which they have not fully recovered can re-traumatize refugees.

Moreover, there is some doubt that anything can be learned about future journeys from studying past journeys; after all, there is currently greater demand for forecasts of expected mass movements to the Global North rather than for post-migration versions of facts or constructed truths. How many will come to seek asylum in Europe or Australia? How many are likely to stay in their countries of origin or in transit countries along the route, which are increasingly serving as gatekeepers? Scholars who can offer answers to those questions are in high demand and have little difficulty finding research funding, but delivering such forecasts is complex for a number of conceptual and ethical reasons.

There are two principal ways to study migratory decision-making: either by applying quantitative methods, such as surveys, polls, and computer-based assessments, or by relying on qualitative methods, such as semi-structured or open interviews, participatory observation, and other ethnographic methods. Both approaches have shortcomings that large, well-funded studies try to overcome by using mixed-method approaches.

Quantitative studies tend to rely on large samples and are useful in discerning the key factors that influence decision-making in a specific setting, even correlating those key factors to determine their interplay (Koser and Kuschminder 2016). Therefore, they are quite effective as analytical tools for understanding complex processes, not least because they offer opportunities to integrate control questions and subsets of additional questions in direct response to previous answers. When computer-based methods are used, they are often able to limit the bias of human interviewers and can anonymize data that result, in the best of cases, in greater openness and honesty. However, surveys with fixed questions do not allow for further spontaneous questioning of aspects of respondents' experiences, such as would be the case in semi-structured interviewing. Their main limitation is that they only provide a snapshot of decision-making and cannot capture the procedural developments along the journeys. Quantitative studies can, therefore, only inform us of respondents' intentions at the very moment of interview and not about their long-term strategies or outcomes of their decision-making (Kuschminder 2018).

Qualitative studies rely on much smaller samples, often capturing data over longer periods of time. Researchers try to build rapport and trust in interpersonal relations with the informants—a process that requires time and personal presence. Despite building a certain level of closeness and trust, narrative accounts about migratory decision-making while still being in transit might still not reveal the ‘entire truth’. Because of their precarious legal status and the clandestine nature of some forms of onward migration, respondents may feel that it is impossible to speak about their true plans and arrangements. After all, they need to keep the number of people they confide in to an absolute minimum in order to protect themselves from arrest and deportation. Silence, omission, and deceit are, therefore, survival strategies used to prevent information about their real plans reaching state officials. Publishing details about refugee routes and migration strategies can result in heightened surveillance or the closure of certain passages. The presence of a researcher or a research team may draw unwanted attention to the migrants. It must not be forgotten that academic researchers increasingly face an obligation to disclose any information they might have collected about potential criminal acts to the responsible state authorities, which may include irregular border crossings and other violations of the migration laws (Olsen and Mooney-Somers 2017). While qualitative studies are useful to capture changes and adjustments in the process of decision-making, they offer fewer options for triangulation, reproducibility, and comparability with other case studies.

Before deciding on the best methods to employ when studying the decision-making of migrants who are still on their journeys, it is important to consider the ethical challenges that arise when studying people who could be classified as vulnerable. According to Shahram Khosravi (2018), migrants have a ‘fundamental right to opacity’ and therefore ‘not everything [that concerns people’s irregular journeys] should be seen, explained, understood, and documented’. While there are fundamental epistemological differences between understanding and documenting, questions about why one needs to uncover people’s behaviour in the first place and who might benefit most from revelations about that behaviour are inevitable.

In the light of Muhamad’s experience in Indonesia, it comes as no surprise to find that the first systematic studies on decision-making in transit countries were commissioned by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, when it established its Irregular Migration Research Programme in August 2012, at a time when the number of maritime asylum seekers coming to Australia was increasing (Koser and Kuschminder 2016). The Irregular Migration Research Programme was tasked with identifying and filling gaps in irregular migration research, in both the Australian and the wider global context. A num-

ber of Australian scholars accepted the generous funding and published their reports, despite having to endure the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship's tight editorial grip.⁸ Ethical challenges arise not only for those scholars who engage in commissioned or applied research and produce policy recommendations; the do-no-harm principles are also fundamental for those whose primary interest is normative/descriptive decision theories.

While I agree to a certain extent with Khosravi (2018) on migrants' right to opacity, I am also convinced that not writing about immobilized migrants, and thereby disregarding their needs and aspirations, is of no benefit to them. Benezet and Zetter (2015:297) emphasized that 'journeys are powerful life-changing events that greatly influence whoever experiences them, and therefore deserve much fuller attention by researchers than has hitherto been the case'. Rather than being silent about the existence of migrants stuck in transit with tough decisions to make, I am more interested in finding possibilities for conducting research that problematizes the stakes in which the recurrent political discussions are framed. The situation in Australia, where elections tend to be won by political parties that rely on scaremongering about potential increases in the number of asylum seekers arriving on boats, illustrates this point well.

5 Irregular Migration between Indonesia and Australia

Before air travel became the most dominant form of international travel, most people who migrated to Australia travelled there by boat. In regard to modern maritime asylum seekers, the timelines usually refer to 1976, when the first boats carrying Indo-Chinese asylum seekers began to arrive in Northern Australia and instigated mandatory detention for those arriving irregularly by boat (Phillips 2017).

Australia and Indonesia share a history of refugee protection since 1975, which led to the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) for Indo-Chinese refugees, in place from 1989 to 1997. Currently Indonesia is expected to play a significant role as gatekeeper for Australia. Cooperation between Australia and Indonesia on asylum seekers dates from the late 1990s and was formalized as the Regional Cooperation Arrangement, which took effect in 2001. Through the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transna-

8 For specific outcomes under this programme, see <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/research/irregular-migration> (accessed 28-09-2019).

FIGURE 3 Boat arrivals by calendar year (1979 to 2014) and financial year (1989–1990 to 2014–2015)
PHILLIPS (2017)

tional Crime (hereafter Bali Process), co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia, a number of measures to prevent people smuggling and, thereby, stop the arrival of asylum seekers boats, have been implemented. Thus, the arrival of maritime asylum seekers has been anticipatory rather than acute (McAuliffe 2017:106).

Because Australia is relatively remote, the number of boats arriving has never been particularly high in comparison with other parts of the world. The number of maritime asylum seekers peaked in the period 1999–2001, and again in 2009–2013, when more than 50,000 asylum seekers made their way to Australia by boat, mostly with the help of Indonesian transporters (Figure 3). This number is relatively miniscule, roughly equalling the number of maritime refugees arriving in Italy over two and a half months in the summer of 2016. Nevertheless, politicians found it easy to exploit the visible increase and the media hype that surrounded it by fuelling fears of alienation, if not panic, about an invasion of asylum seekers due to insufficiently protected borders. This hyper-politicized fear has determined the outcome of several federal elections.

A widely accepted hypothesis is that the Australia–Indonesia relationship reflects an ‘incentivised policy transfer’ (Nethery and Gordyn 2014), secured through financial and diplomatic incentives. However, very little is known about the motives behind the Indonesian responses, which have shifted from *laissez-faire* to acquiescence with Australian policies of securitization of asylum seeker issues (2001–2008) to equivocation in the face of increasingly

restrictive Australian policies (2008–2013) (Kneebone 2016). Due to the multiple tensions within the Indonesian–Australian relationship, which climaxed in 2013, when Australia commenced Operation Sovereign Borders and was caught spying on the Indonesian President, Indonesia is no longer Australia's closest ally and a compliant recipient of funds when it comes to immobilizing asylum seekers by incarcerating them in Australian-funded detention centres (Nethery, Rafferty-Brown and Taylor 2013; Missbach 2016c, 2018). Indonesian politicians have repeatedly expressed that Indonesia is only a transit country and unwilling to host refugees who are unwanted by Australia for the long term.

In order to deter unwanted asylum seekers from reaching Australia and claiming protection there, Australia has made use of extra-territorialized border protection and relied heavily on deterrence strategies. Such strategies aim not only to discourage people from leaving their home country in the first place but also to discourage asylum seekers contemplating onward migration from transit countries (Watkins 2017). Australia has further restricted access to asylum mechanisms within its own jurisdiction by outsourcing the refugee-status determination process to other places. Between 2001 and 2007, the years of Australia's Pacific Solution I, Australia detained asylum seekers on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru but involved Australian officials seconded to the islands in processing their requests for asylum (Magner 2004), eventually resettling those found to be in need of protection in Australia. In the years since the implementation of Pacific Solution II in 2012, however, asylum requests have been assessed by the administrations of Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Even if those requesting asylum are found to be needing protection, Australia refuses to accept any resettlements from these offshore centres. This measure is intended to deter any future maritime asylum seekers who might hope that detention on Manus and Nauru would only be temporary.

Offshore detention and processing is not the only ingredient of Australia's deterrence policies, dubbed Operation Sovereign Borders. Even more effective than offshore processing have been the legally highly questionable turn-backs and tow-backs (Chia, McAdam and Purcell 2014). At least 36 boats with more than 850 asylum seekers onboard have been returned to the countries of origin or transit since Operation Sovereign Borders was implemented in September 2013.⁹ What might look like a success, if judged by numbers, is only half the

9 Asylum Insight, 'Boat arrivals to Australia and turnbacks'. <https://www.asyluminsight.com/statistics#.XW0LTSOB1sY>, last updated 2-9-2019 (accessed 28-09-2019). Australia has virtually stopped boat arrivals by using its Navy to turn back boats intercepted in international waters and by sending asylum seekers who arrive by ship to processing centres on the Pacific islands, if interdicted in Australian waters.

truth. The financial cost of Operation Sovereign Borders has skyrocketed: Australia's offshore detention of asylum seekers and refugees accounted for A\$1 bn of the total cost of more than A\$4 bn for border protection and deterrence policies in 2016–2017 (McIlroy 2018).¹⁰ This takes no account of the human costs borne by those detained in the offshore camps, such as extended periods of separation from family and serious mental-health problems leading to self-harm and suicide attempts. At least 12 asylum seekers have lost their lives while in detention on Manus and Nauru between 2014 and mid 2019.¹¹

Australia's deterrence model and its three main components (mandatory detention, offshore processing, and forced returns of asylum seeker boats) still enjoy bipartisan support amongst Australian politicians, many of whom take it for granted that if any of the three main components is abolished, the arrival of asylum seekers, particularly from Indonesia, will resume. However, reports of medical emergencies and insufficient care in the offshore processing centres, including of the extreme suffering of children born in detention, have started to shift public opinion in Australia, even amongst voters otherwise disposed to accept predictions of invasion and security threats.¹²

While the Pacific Solution II appears effective, its sustainability is highly questionable and cracks in the system, caused by external factors, are already showing. In April 2016, Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court ruled that the detention of refugees and asylum seekers on Manus Island was unconstitutional. Because the people held there did not arrive in Papua New Guinea of their own volition, the court ruled that they had not broken Papua New Guinean immigration law. Keeping them in indefinite detention thus violated their constitutional rights. For that reason, the detention centres were opened and the asylum seekers held in those centres are now 'free' to roam the island, but they are prevented from leaving Papua New Guinea unless they agree to be repatriated. Since the implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders, Australia's international reputation has suffered, not least because of repeated criticism from UN special rapporteurs who have visited the offshore camps.

10 Tom McIlroy, 'Stopping the boats cost taxpayers \$4 billion in 2016–17', *Australian Financial Review*, 4-1-2018.

11 Asylum Insight, 'Boat arrivals to Australia and turnbacks'. <https://www.asyluminsight.com/statistics#XWoLTSOBisY>, last updated 2-9-2019 (accessed 28-09-2019).

12 Evidence for this change is, for example, that Kerry Phelps, a former president of the Australian Medical Association, was elected as an independent MP in late 2018. Phelps initiated amendments to the Migration Act 1958 (known as Medevac Bill) that allow for medical evacuations of asylum seekers from Manus and Nauru and their medical or psychiatric assessment and treatment in Australia.

The main questions arising from the present situation are: How long will the current deterrence measures stay in place? And will the asylum seeker boats resume if the measures are abolished?

In order to address these questions, it is not enough to consider (potential) political change at the Australian end; one must also consider changing conditions in Indonesia. Until 2018, Indonesia has played an important role in immobilizing any further movement of asylum seekers and refugees to Australia, for example by detaining asylum seekers and refugees in immigration detention centres that were financed by IOM thanks to Australian funding (Missbach 2016c). Currently there are about 14,000 asylum seekers and refugees registered with the UNHCR in Jakarta.¹³ In view of vanishing resettlement options in Australia and elsewhere, the UNHCR urges refugees in Indonesia 'to assimilate but not to settle' in Indonesia.¹⁴ Assimilation here is understood as 'learning the language, volunteering, or seeking an education in local schools',¹⁵ whereas settlement entails being granted the full range of rights. Refugees and asylum seekers are legally prohibited to engage in paid work and only enjoy limited access to health care and education (Missbach 2015). Indonesia has not acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no legal mechanism for asylum seekers to apply for protection in Indonesia. Next to temporary assimilation, the UNHCR also encourages repatriation.¹⁶

Under the latest set of changes instigated by Presidential Decree No. 125/2016 (articles 10–15, 19–21, and 24–25) on the Treatment of Foreign Refugees,¹⁷ Indonesian authorities have released almost all incarcerated asylum seekers from the detention centres (IOM 2018a). The reasons behind this decision were primarily funding cuts for immigration detention centres and detainees by

13 At the end of 2018, there were 14,014 asylum seekers and refugees registered with the UNHCR in Jakarta, of which 55 per cent were from Afghanistan, 11 per cent from Somali, and 6 per cent from Iraq and Myanmar (UNHCR Indonesia 2018).

14 Adam Bemma, 'Refugees in Indonesia told to assimilate but not settle', *Refugees Deeply*, 9-2-2018.

15 Jewel Topsfield, 'Most refugees in Indonesia will never be resettled: UN Refugee Agency', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31-10-2017.

16 Except for one year (2015), there has not been a significant uptake in voluntary repatriation schemes amongst refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia since the implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders, which puts its deterrence effect in question. According to data by IOM (2018b:48), in 2013 there were 955 assisted voluntary returns (AVR), 561 in 2014, 2,168 in 2015, 684 in 2016, 518 in 2017, and 436 in 2018.

17 The Presidential Decree states that Indonesia only tolerates the presence of asylum seekers and refugees temporarily, but it does not define a maximum length of time for their stay.

Australia to IOM¹⁸ and the unwillingness of the Indonesian government to cover those costs under their own budget. Most of the released asylum seekers and refugees are accommodated in community shelters also funded by IOM. A smaller cohort rents their own accommodation, but a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees now face homelessness, as their funds are exhausted and they are unable to earn a living. Since March 2018, IOM has stopped accepting any new people into the community shelters, as they now receive less funding from Australia than they did.¹⁹ Australia has justified the funding cut on the grounds that the number of asylum seekers arriving in Indonesia has dropped, applying logic that ignores those trapped in transit in Indonesia. The poor chance of either resettlement or local integration increases the pressure on refugees and asylum seekers to move on.

In early 2019, just months before the federal elections in Australia in May 2019, and with the accompanying media frenzy about the weakness of Australia's borders and an invasion of asylum seekers on boats in full swing, I discussed with Muhamad—who was unwilling to be repatriated, unable to properly integrate locally, and facing a dearth of resettlement options—these questions regarding whether asylum-seeker boat journeys to Australia were about to resume. In particular, I asked him to identify his priorities in the context of a number of parameters that I suggested as meaningful in his decision-making challenges.

6 Another Wave of Boats?

Given the heterogeneous composition of the refugee population in Indonesia, it seems impossible to predict what will happen in the future. Nevertheless, several key parameters might serve as a basis for prediction, even though some of those parameters might deal with perceptions rather than facts. Without intending to create a fixed hierarchy of parameters, the charts below offer a categorization of parameters: external, internal, individual, and collective. External parameters refer to Australian border and migrations policies,

18 Antje Missbach, 'Falling through the cracks: The impacts of Australia's funding cuts on refugees in Indonesia', *Policy Forum*, 8-8-2018. <https://www.policyforum.net/falling-through-the-cracks/> (accessed 28-09-2019).

19 Antje Missbach, 'Falling through the cracks: The impacts of Australia's funding cuts on refugees in Indonesia', *Policy Forum*, 8-8-2018. <https://www.policyforum.net/falling-through-the-cracks/> (accessed 28-09-2019); Khanh Hoang, 'Asylum seekers and refugees in Australia's 2018–2019 budget', 9-5-2018. <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/news/asylum-seekers-and-refugees-australia's-2018-2019-budget-0> (accessed 28-09-2019).

whereas internal parameters summarize living conditions in Indonesia. Individual parameters relate to the essentially personal perceptions of an individual decision maker and include mostly subjective and intangible factors. Communal perceptions that go beyond the distinctive characteristics of an individual and his or her circumstances are categorized as collective parameters but are still to be understood in relation to the individual respondent. That category relates to how a respondent perceives his or her peers and is, therefore, less representative of a group as such; it tells more about how the individual respondent positions him/herself vis-à-vis others.

Generally speaking, no single category of parameters on its own is deemed paramount in decision-making; it is their combination at specific points in time and the complex interplay of micro- and macro-level factors that is pivotal. While destination countries point solely to their restrictive migration policies as influencing migratory decision-making and reducing the number of arrivals, my observations support the emphasis that Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2019) place on the influence of accumulation of 'a wide range of factors, including access to protection and family reunification, the availability/accuracy of information, the overall economic environment and social networks'. To complicate migratory decision-making even more, none of the parameters is likely to remain static, with some changing rapidly and fundamentally during the migrants' journeys (McAuliffe 2017).

To illustrate the different levels of decision-making, I use the survey and conversations I had with Muhamad. While he as an individual is not representative of all other refugees and asylum seekers living currently in Indonesia, Muhamad's answers provide a starting point when trying to understand what additional parameters matter in regard to decision-making, aside from the more obvious, external deterrence factors. We defined the parameters together in order to allow Muhamad to best capture his own reasoning and his own choices as well as those of his peers at the time of this specific conversation.²⁰ Although the interplay of parameters is very important, for methodological reasons Muhamad and I discussed each parameter separately. The numbers on the vertical axis of each of the charts below are Muhamad's responses to the question how relevant each parameter was in relation to any decision he or others might make in favour of boarding a boat to Australia, with 0 indicating the least significant and 10 the most significant.

20 Admittedly, it would be most interesting to conduct the same survey with him over several years, which, so far, I have not had the chance to do.

FIGURE 4 External parameters (Australia)

FIGURE 5 Internal parameters (Indonesia)

As expected, the external parameters (Australian deterrence policies, Figure 4) clearly emerge as being of the greatest significance for Muhamad in migratory decision-making, as well as for other asylum seekers and refugees currently stuck in Indonesia. As I have already explained, it is unlikely that these measures will stay in place in the long term, at least not as currently executed. The likelihood of external parameters changing places more weight on the other three sets of parameters in terms of their influence on asylum seekers' decision-making.

The chart of internal parameters (Figure 5) captures well the situation in Indonesia in 2019. Although refugees are still quite heavily policed, the risk of being redetained in an immigration detention centre is very small, in line with the new Presidential Decree 125/2016. Although the rise of religious intolerance

FIGURE 6 Individual parameters

and growing tensions between the Sunni majority and other Muslim minorities (Shia, Ahmadi) are often diagnosed for contemporary Indonesia, Muhamad’s response to the question on lack of religious freedom suggests that it had no influence at all on migratory decision-making in his eyes, even though many Afghan refugees are Shia.

Hypothetically, although his family is struggling, Muhamad still thinks that the high cost of a boat trip to Australia (between US\$3,000–7,000) would not be the main deterrent for him (Figure 6). Also, the potential risks during the two- to three-day journey would not necessarily deter him. His reply to the question about whether decreased resettlement options would make him hesitant to board a boat was, however, surprising. Although diminished resettlement options are often assumed to be one of the highest push factors for onward movement, it became clear that Muhamad has now pinned all his hope on private sponsorship, which might be just as hard to come by. When I asked him about it, he replied that he really does ‘not want to do something that is deemed illegal, unless I am forced to’. Uncertainties about policy developments are reflected in parameter 5; if he knew what the future would bring, he might decide in favour of risking a boat trip, but without reliable information, he will not. Although his two younger siblings are currently attending a refugee school and have some options for improving their education—definitely an advantage that Muhamad did not have when he first arrived—the ‘unstable life’ they live in Indonesia is still a motivating factor in keeping his aspirations for onward migration alive.

The most surprising answers in the second set of questions, about his perceptions of decision-making by other refugees, were that perceived dangers of having to leave Indonesia either through repatriation programmes or deporta-

FIGURE 7 Collective parameters

tion slightly outweighed the deterrence mechanisms that Australia is applying to discourage potential maritime arrivals (questions 4 and 5). Muhamad considered that intensified advertising by smugglers was slightly less likely than peer pressure to ignite chain reactions amongst others, and make them also board boats (Figure 7).

7 Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on migratory decision-making strategies and considerations relevant to asylum seekers and refugees currently stranded in Indonesia, the last stepping stone before Australia. In order to better understand the complexity of migration decisions and migratory decision-making, it is important to look beyond the most frequently studied geographic regional contexts along the pathways to the European Union (Van der Velde and Van Naerssen 2011), as some of the findings from those contexts are not necessarily applicable to other regional contexts and their changing political settings.

Accumulating sufficient data from other parts of the world will then allow for a meaningful comparison of different regional contexts and stimulate

broader theory-building. Like voluntary migrants who migrate primarily for economic reasons, asylum seekers and refugees are not a homogenous group and deserve more nuanced attention.

In this article, I have exposed my scepticism towards the qualitative and quantitative research methods most commonly applied to the study of decision-making. Yet, while accepting their inherent shortcomings, there is no easy way ahead. This article not only offers a critique of methodological shortcomings but also employs two particular approaches to creating a more holistic understanding of Muhamad's decision-making challenges, which I consider, by and large, to stand as indicative of those of many others, despite his exceptional family constellation. While the first empirical part of this article retells my long-term contact with Muhamad and reflects on his ever-changing decision-making as he has faced altering conditions (family reunion, job opportunities, efforts to find sponsorship) over the last five years, the second empirical part relies on a short survey conducted with Muhamad, through which he offers a snapshot of his current points of view. In order to contrast his priorities with those of others, I also posed a number of questions, where I asked him to answer on behalf of his peers. Particularly the first account (see under 'Life on Hold') has demonstrated that Muhamad's decision-making was never a straightforward process but meandered in various directions. Certain decisions were made on the basis of insufficient information or even hearsay (for example, his decision to come to Indonesia); others were calmly calculated (for example, his decision to bring other family members to Indonesia). While at the start of his journey Muhamad only had a vague or general understanding of asylum and migration policies and of the context of Indonesia–Australia relations, he now has educated himself as well as possible. In the future this might benefit his decision-making, which, after all, is never based on a single set of parameters but on a combination of complex and multiple parameters.

I hope to have illustrated three points in this article. First, the migratory decision-making of asylum seekers and refugees in transit is uniquely complex: they must make fundamental decisions about their journeys, such as whether to stay in transit, return to their country of origin or to their previous host country, or to go on by irregular means. Second, decision-making in transit is particularly difficult, as the people concerned may lack proper legal status, may have limited financial resources, and do not enjoy basic rights, such as the right to work and earn a living—factors that not only limit their range of choices but might also make some choices appear less 'rational'. Third, despite the inherent risk of politicians and policymakers using the findings of academic studies on migratory decision-making against future potential asylum seekers, little is to

be gained from academics abstaining from this kind of research altogether. If established, informed academics abstain from such research, others with fewer qualms and fewer critical abilities will step in to fill the knowledge gap. The only way forward can be to take all the different stages of the journeys refugees undergo more seriously, and to direct the attention of politicians to the many difficult decisions that refugees have to make day after day and the complexity of the processes of making those decisions.

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