UNTANGLING IMMOBILITY IN TRANSIT:
SUB-SAHARAN MIGRANTS IN ISTANBUL

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INTRODUCTION

Istanbul, the 15-million metropolis, is the biggest city of Turkey—a country situated “on the fringes of Europe” (Düvell 2006) between major political and economic regions, i.e., the European Union, Central Asia, Western Asia and Africa. Especially for people from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Western Asia, Istanbul is perceived as a door to the European Union. The city is a major crossing point in the region for maritime and air traffic, and represents the largest and most important location of trade in the region (Pérouse 2004). As a vital location for several empires throughout history, Istanbul exhibits numerous multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan features. Next to the roughly 3,000 mosques, the city has 40 registered churches and 16 synagogues (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2009), as well as a countless number of official money transfer facilities. The metropolis also provides room for a high density of social interaction; all kinds of networks—“based around ideology, politics, family, religion, nationality, trade, mafia-like practices, ethnicity, etc.”—can be found in the city (Pérouse 2004). These factors contributed largely to making Istanbul the main Turkish city from which to organise further (illegal) travel westwards, which offers interesting insights into the notion of transit migration research.

The majority of the sub-Saharan migrants I have met and talked to in the transit space of Istanbul stated that they would prefer to be somewhere else.\footnote{The chapter is based on fieldwork among sub-Saharan Africans in Istanbul that has been collected for my dissertation. For the final dissertation see Suter 2012b.} A few of them indicated that they were tired of travelling, tired of being in the situation where the lack of proper documents weighs heavy, and that they wanted to go home. Most of them, however, embraced in a cocoon of hope, dreamed of life in European countries, with Greece as its entry point. The wish to leave Turkey for Greece varies in intensity, depending on the conditions at the moment and the subjective assessment...
of it. The term *Greece* pops up every now and then in conversations. It is not only a term, a word; it has concept-like dimensions. It is an uncertain concept, but entails imaginations of success, a better life, Europe, a dream come true, of respect and safety. To reach it, to realize the concept, requires money. It is also connected to danger, to a life-threatening action, which is why courage, recklessness, the will to challenge one’s fate or in the worst case, a bottom-less desperation, is required. *Greece, Greece . . .!* It is a (bird) call that wears people down.

**The Notion of Transit in Migration Research**

In migration research, the concept of transit has been ascribed many definitions. Similarly to Thomas Faist (2000:18) who defined the term migrant as a person who crosses a border *with the intention* of settlement in the new country, many scholars regard the initial intention of movement of the migrant as one key ingredient for a definition of transit migration (see DüvELL 2006:5). Over the course of my fieldwork, however, it has become obvious that the intention aspect neglects the role of opportunities; and one might add sheer luck, and a number of factors in the course of the migration process. The second factor that is commonly seen as crucial is the time aspect. Given that migrants “get stuck” for periods of times that vary enormously in length, it has been difficult to distinguish transit migrants from temporary or long-term migrants. Moreover, understanding migration as an open-ended process, rather than a targeted, rational move from a country of origin to a country of destination, the notion of transit seems difficult to justify.3

The phenomenon of transit migration is rather recent on the agenda of migration research.4 Roughly, it has caught migration scholars’ and practioners’ attention since 1993, when the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) published a number of reports on countries bordering

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2 Italics added by the author.
3 Nevertheless, one could argue, there are some countries and regions that clearly do not figure on the list of possible destinations, and thus, have to be seen as transit countries—at least in the initial phase of stay. For sub-Saharan Africans, Turkey, for instance, has only seldom been an aspired destination country. Turkey is rather seen as a necessary evil; an obstacle for some, a stepping stone for others on the way to the planned destination area.
4 Of course, the actual phenomenon is much older. See for example Koser Akcapar (2006) who states that Turkey has been a transit country for more than twenty years.