

TRAFIG

Transnational Figurations of Displacement

Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Germany

Empirical findings and reflections on
mobility and translocal connections of
refugees living in Germany

S. Christ, B. Etzold, G. Güzelant,
M. Puers, D. Steffens, P. Themann and
M. Thiem

SUMMARY

This *working paper* presents the findings of the empirical research on the role of connectivity and mobility for displaced people in Germany in the framework of the TRAFIG project. The findings are based on qualitative fieldwork in Germany, with 73 qualitative interviews with displaced people and experts in the field.

This *paper* uses a figurational perspective; figurations are characterised as dynamic social constellations which emerge in the context of displacement between displaced people and state and other actors at the local, translocal and transnational scale. This working paper discusses the figurations of displacement in which refugees in Germany are embedded.

Our analysis demonstrates the importance of family figurations in displacement, among them the “figuration of a transnationally separated family”, “figuration of the jointly displaced family”, or the “figuration of the transnationally extended family”. Family figurations are deeply intertwined with local and transnational bureaucratic figurations, which structure the experiences of refugees. Bureaucratic figurations evolve with respect to German authorities, those of the countries of origin and other local actors. Despite the significance of family figurations, connectivity is not restricted to it. Refugees are also connected within non-kin figurations, such as within an “ethnic network-based” or “volunteer-refugee” figuration.

The analytical category of figurations provides valuable insights into how displaced people embedded in certain social constellations can best be supported. It shows that transnational life is a reality for displaced persons and an integral part of their everyday lives. As the German case demonstrates, displaced people use mobility and connectivity as a way out of protracted displacement.

KEYWORDS

displaced families, transnational families, family separation, family reunification, humanitarian admission, volunteerism, bureaucracy of asylum

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Introduction

This *working paper* presents the findings of empirical research in Germany within the “Transnational Figurations of Displacement” (TRAFIG) project, funded by the European Commission. The project examines how transnational mobility and local, translocal and transnational connectivity can be considered as resources for displaced people and thus seen as part of the solutions to protracted displacement (Etzold et al., 2019, p. 20). TRAFIG’s central hypothesis is that the more connected and mobile refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are, the easier it is for them to move out of protracted displacement. In turn, for more disconnected and immobilised persons, we had assumed a higher risk of remaining stuck in conditions of protracted displacement. To test this hypothesis, TRAFIG conducted studies on displaced people from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and DR Congo in Jordan (Tobin et al., 2021), Ethiopia (Tufa et al., 2021), Pakistan (Mielke et al., 2021), DR Congo (Jacobs et al., 2020), Tanzania (Wilson et al., 2021), Italy and Greece (Roman et al., 2021) and Germany, among others. Accordingly, our research in Germany focuses on displaced people from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea. Germany was chosen to exemplify the situation of a country of destination in western Europe. Germany is the fifth-largest host country of internationally displaced people, after Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, and Uganda (UNHCR, 2021).

The TRAFIG project uses a figurational perspective (Elias, 1978) and adjusts it to the study of displacement. In our interpretation, “Figurations of Displacement” are “dynamic social constellations between displaced people, state actors, humanitarian actors, host communities, communities of origin and transnational diasporas, which have arisen in the wake of conflict-induced mobility” (Etzold et al., 2019, p. 12). Displaced people are embedded in different Figurations of Displacement, at the local, translocal, and transnational scale levels. They are not only shaped by structural forces but also by everyday practices and lived experiences that are part of a wider web of social relations. This *working paper* will discuss—backed by the empirical research in Germany—the Figurations of Displacement in which refugees in Germany are embedded.

‘Family’ is one of the central social figurations. As Castrén and Ketokivi (2015, p. 1) have argued, a figurational approach is particularly suitable for studying family relationships as it is “personally lived and embedded in wider webs of relationships”. By looking into **family figurations**, we account for new sociological and anthropological perspectives on ‘doing family’ that highlight how personal relationships between different generations and gender are continuously (re)produced in a family and by its members (Jurczyk et al., 2014). Other studies

stress that it is the feeling of relatedness rather than biological relations, which constitutes who belongs to a family and who does not (Aguilar & Peñalosa, 2009; Alber et al., 2010; Carsten, 2000).

This *paper* builds on such a comprehensive understanding of ‘doing family’. We argue that specific positions displaced people occupy within—often forcibly transnationalised—family networks decisively shape opportunities to flee and find protection and long-term perspectives elsewhere. We are also fully aware that many people flee without family members even knowing it. In other cases, conflicts or even violence and exploitation within families are part of the reasons why people become mobile. Nonetheless, with few exceptions, all respondents were full of appreciation and concern for ‘their family’. Our research in Germany confirms the earlier assumption (Etzold et al., 2019) that the family, which encompasses the nuclear family and extended networks of kin-relations, is the most significant social unit for refugees.

Family figurations often unfold on a transnational scale after displacement. After having settled in Germany, connections and ties are upheld, re-created or disrupted. New family figurations evolve after displacement, which are largely shaped by the governance of mobility. Even though there is now a large body of literature on transnational families in the context of labour migration (Fresnoza-Flot & Shinozaki, 2017; Merla et al., 2021; Parreñas, 2005), knowledge about how refugees are practicing their family lives at a transnational scale remains scarce (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Merla et al., 2020; Sauer et al., 2021). ‘Doing family’ on a transnational scale involves different practices to uphold familial connections. Transnational practices include mobility practices (see Section 3), transactions of resources such as money or material objects, communicative practices and care practices (Etzold et al., 2019; Sauer et al., 2018).

Apart from family figurations, refugees are embedded in figurations at the local level. Such social constellations at the neighbourhood level, which are constantly transformed due to the arrival and departure of migrants but are marked by segregation, stigmatisation and power contestations between longer-established and newer groups of residents, have been described in the literature on immigrant societies as ‘**established-outsider figurations**’ (Elias & Scotson, 1994; see Hüttermann, 2018 for several case studies from Germany).

Moreover, the experiences of refugees also largely are related to their embeddedness in **local and transnational bureaucratic figurations**. At the local level, this affects their legal trajectories in Germany. A growing body of literature on the 'legal consciousness' of migrants shows how differently (undocumented) migrants and refugees experience, interpret, adapt to, and possibly circumvent laws and regulations affecting their legal status, asylum procedures and rights as workers and (non)citizens (Hart & Besselsen, 2021; Schwenken, 2013). At a transnational scale, refugees deal with different actors such as German authorities and authorities of their country of origin or international organisations in Germany, the country of origin and third countries.

This discussion will unfold in the following sections:

Section 1 will introduce the empirical design and limitations of the study. It presents the research team followed by the research methods, sampling strategy, and the ethical considerations and fieldwork challenges, including how the COVID-19 pandemic affected field research.

Section 2 describes the governance regime of asylum in Germany. It focuses on legal pathways for displaced people, which enable their mobility through connections to someone in Germany. The two main important ways in this regard are family reunification and humanitarian admission programmes.

Sections 3 to 7 present the empirical findings of our research in Germany. **Section 3** describes the mobility patterns of displaced people to Germany. **Section 4** focuses on people's knowledge about governance regimes, how they access this knowledge, and how they navigate through the institutional landscapes unfolding at the local, national, and transnational scale. **Section 5** presents insights into the everyday life of refugees and the multiple networks they are embedded in at the local level. **Section 6** asks who displaced people in Germany are connected to translocally and transnationally. To answer this question, three different family figurations of displacement are presented to give information about network contacts, the scale of the connectivity and provision of support. **Section 7** presents cross-cutting issues which came up inductively during the research.

The five empirical chapters are followed by a **Conclusion** on the role of connectivity and mobility as resources for displaced people. Here, we also sum up the key characteristics of the different Figurations of Displacement identified by our analysis and highlight the policy implications resulting from such a relational perspective on refugees' transnational social constellations.

1. Empirical design and limitations of the study

In the following, we provide details on the research team and our positionality as researchers, the methods applied, sampling and the fieldwork challenges we encountered.

1.1 Research team and positionality

The team consisted of Simone Christ, who was responsible for the German case study and Benjamin Etzold, scientific coordinator of the TRAFIG project, who was involved in all parts of the research process. Maarit Thiem, TRAFIG's project coordinator, was also ~~conducted~~ involved in the empirical field research, as did Gizem Gül Güzelant, TRAFIG's student assistant at BICC. The students Gizem Gül Güzelant (BICC/University of Bonn), Mara Puers (University of Cologne), David Steffens (University of Trier)¹ and Philipp Themann (University of Bonn) are writing their master's thesis in cooperation with the TRAFIG project and helped with gathering the data. The whole team was trained in research methods, research ethics and trauma-sensitive interviewing.

The gender and age diversity of the TRAFIG team was helpful in building rapport with the interviewees. For example, one Eritrean woman shared her life in detail with a female TRAFIG researcher, which she may not have done in the case of a male interviewer. Our positionality as researchers—all being well-educated, middle-class Germans with no own experience of displacement—might be seen as a limitation of our strategy. The interviews were primarily conducted in German and some in English; however, no interview was held in a respondent's native language. We decided against using interpreters because it might have affected the trust relations that were carefully built. It would have also meant another person being present in times of COVID-related contact restrictions. In deciding not to use interpreters, we accepted that this excluded those who did not speak German or English well from the sample. Some of us are active as volunteers or activists working with refugees. If an interviewee knew us in this role, we made our role as researchers clear to avoid unrealistic expectations.

1.2 Methods applied

The empirical field work in Germany took place between August 2020 and March 2021. Initially, the research team had planned the field phase to start in spring 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it decided to postpone the start of the fieldwork and adapt it to the ever-changing conditions of the pandemic.

The data for this study is based on qualitative interview data with a total of 73 people. We focused on the perspective of displaced people who (might have) experienced protracted displacement. The team conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with refugees and their network contacts. To further understand an individual's experience of displacement, we conducted eight biographical interviews. Moreover, we held a small focus group discussion on 'resettlement' in which three people participated. To contextualise all information, we interviewed twelve experts on topics related to our research questions such as resettlement, humanitarian admission programmes, family reunification, or gender and trauma. The experts were staff of German ministries or authorities, international, welfare, non-government (NGO) and community organisations.

The semi-structured and expert interviews were documented in an interview protocol, while the biographical interviews were fully transcribed. Comments, remarks and observations supplemented the respective protocols, which were immensely helpful to contextualize the interviews. We then uploaded the documented interviews in our project's data management tool—the [kobo toolbox](#)—for data security and further processing. Afterwards, we analysed the interviews with MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis tool. The analysis followed a more deductive approach, as the coding followed our TRAFIG main themes. Despite this, new topics were derived inductively from the data.

Four semi-structured interviews, one expert interview and participant observation in Bosnia-Herzegovina conducted by Phillip Themann supplemented our main research on Germany, which helped us to better understand the situation of (dis)connected people on the move, who have become—temporarily—immobilised on the fringes of the European Union.

1.3 Sampling

As our research in Germany focused on refugees' networks, we did not define localities for the research. We rather tried to follow the networks of our respondents as much as possible. Therefore, sampling was largely done through snowballing, which proved useful in following our interviewees' network contacts and helped us to build trust with our respondents. Trust-building was one of the main challenges of our fieldwork due to the pandemic's social distancing rules. The COVID-19 situation even prompted us to conduct some interviews online.

¹ His MA thesis was completed at the time of this publication and focused on stereotypes and self-perception of refugees, see Steffens (2021).

Because of the pandemic, we were unable to travel through Germany to follow the network contacts as planned, nor did we have the chance to participate in and observe the everyday interactions of our respondents. We conducted individual interviews at around ten different places, mostly urban sites, among them medium-sized cities and one large city in North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland Palatinate and Saarland. We only conducted few interviews at rural or peri-urban sites. At the time of our interview, most of our respondents had already left refugee reception shelters and lived in their apartments.

1.4 Ethical considerations and fieldwork challenges

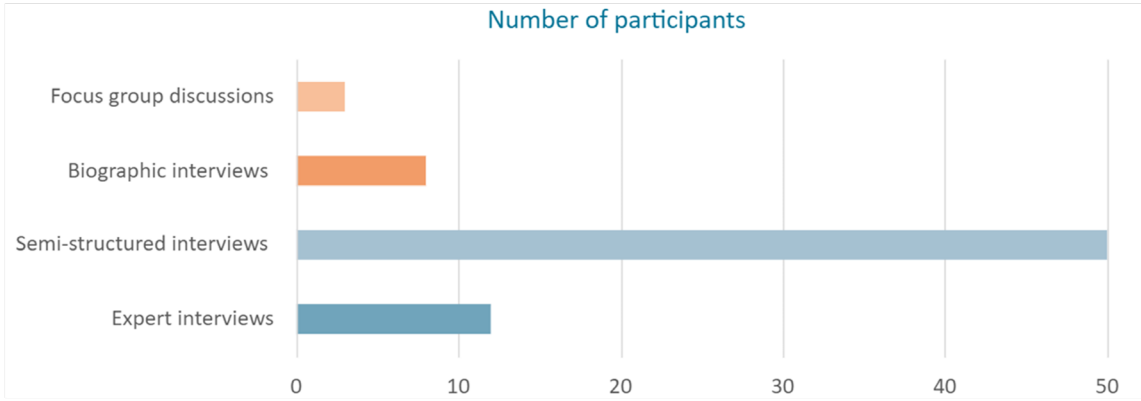
The TRAFIG ethics guidelines address the main ethical challenges that might arise during fieldwork and how we plan to address them (Christ & Thiem, 2019). However, new challenges evolved due to COVID-19 regulations. For example, accessing people became much more difficult because the usual gatherings, such as welcome cafés, did not take place in the autumn and winter of 2020, or to a lesser and more restricted extent in the months before. Moreover, approaching people in refugee shelters was not possible because access to shelters was rightly restricted. When possible, we often met our respondents outside, where it was much easier to maintain a physical distance. Only in exceptional cases and when the restrictions were lifted did we visit interviewees at home.

When the COVID-19 case rate rose again in autumn 2020, we started to conduct online interviews. Doing interviews online with people unfamiliar with video conference tools, for whom speaking German is difficult, and who are asked sensitive questions about their families and stressful situations in their life course, is ethically very challenging. To gain trust, we usually established contact before the actual interview. For example, one interviewer met outside with the potential interviewee to get to know one another before the actual interview later online. Alternatively, the interviewer had a longer phone conversation before the actual interview. We also informed the interviewees about issues of data security.

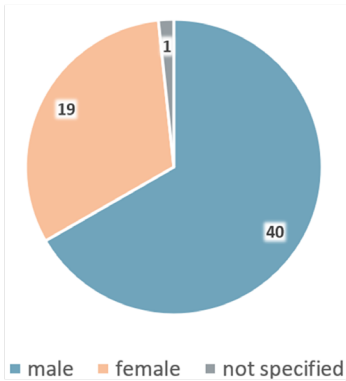
Another ethical challenge that we consider highly relevant for all our encounters with refugees is a trauma-sensitive approach to prevent harm, not only to the research participants but also to us researchers. The research team was trained on trauma-sensitive interviewing, which proved to be immensely helpful. With the trainers, we also discussed how to apply a trauma-sensitive approach under the special condition of online interviews. Regular discussions and debriefings among the research team were crucial to tackle the challenges we encountered.

Overview of TRAFIG research in Germany

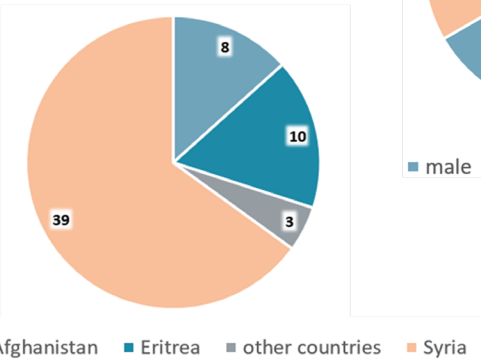
Time of empirical research: 08/2020 – 03/2021



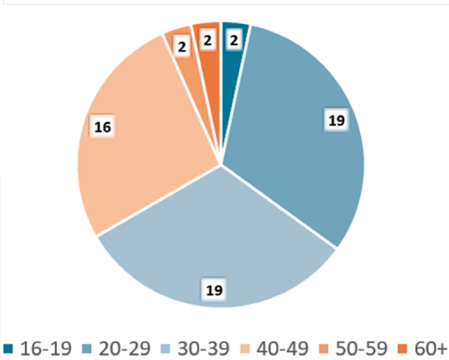
Gender of respondents



Country of origin of respondents



Age of respondents



Information in pie charts of 60 refugees or network contacts, who took part in biographic or semi-structured interviews or FGD.

Respondents' year of arrival in Germany



2. Governance regimes enabling mobility through connectivity

This section asks which governance regimes of mobility, in the context of displacement, use refugees’ connectivity as a key criterion for a legal pathway to Germany. Our research shows that family reunification and humanitarian admission programmes are the main regimes that use refugees’ connectivity, while this is much less so for resettlement and relocation programmes.

2.1 The German reception system

Germany is the largest country in the European Union (EU) in terms of its population and economy. It can also be considered the most important player in Europe for refugee protection. Over the past ten years, with more than one-third of all asylum applications, Germany has received by far the largest number of refugees among all EU member states.

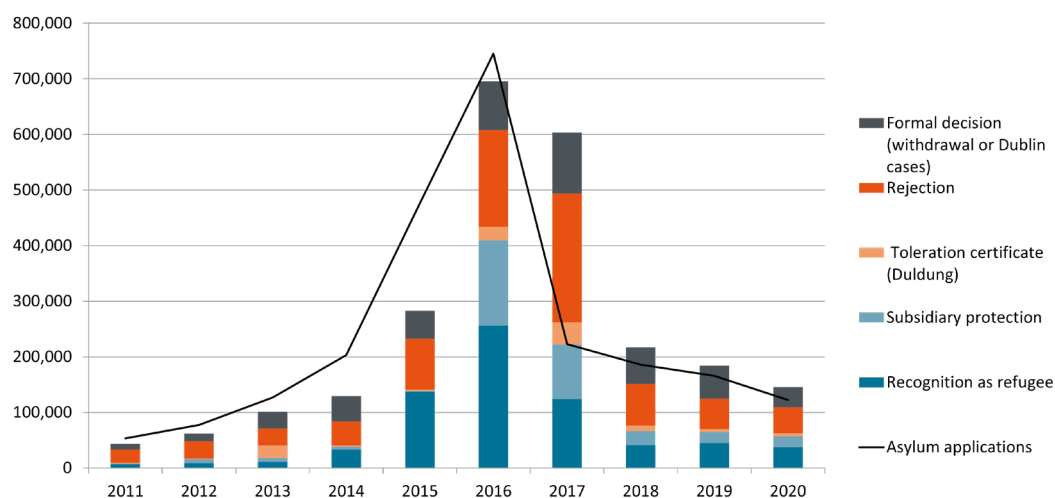
Since 2009, the number of asylum applications in Germany has increased drastically until it reached 746,000 in 2016. The numbers have since dropped to below 200,000 applications in 2020 (Figure 1). Germany’s policies on refugees’ reception, asylum, migration and integration have undergone some fundamental structural transformation in recent years, both due to the rapidly increasing numbers of refugees arriving in 2014, 2015 and 2016 and the highly politicised public and media debates (Beinhorn et al., 2019) that followed the long “*Summer of migration*” (Hess et al., 2017).

Hierarchy of protection

The asylum decision determines a person’s place in Germany’s hierarchy of protection (Beinhorn et al., 2019). The following are five possible decisions on an asylum application:

1. Entitlement to **asylum** under Article 16a of the German Basic Law for people who have been persecuted on political grounds;
2. **refugee status** according to the Geneva Refugee Convention because of fear of being persecuted by state or non-state players (incorporated in German Asylum Act, §3 AsylG);
3. **subsidiary protection** for people who are not entitled to asylum or refugee protection but who are at risk of serious harm in their country of origin (§4 AsylG);
4. if an asylum application is turned down, but the applicant faces a concrete danger to life, limb or liberty in the country of origin, in certain cases, a **ban on deportation** can be issued under certain conditions (§60 (5,7) Residence Act, AufenthG);
5. if an application is rejected and the individual does not comply with the obligation to leave the country voluntarily, the authorities can coercively deport that persons, but they might also decide to suspend the enforcement and issue a **temporary suspension of deportation** (or ‘toleration certificate’—‘*Duldung*’) (§34 AsylG).

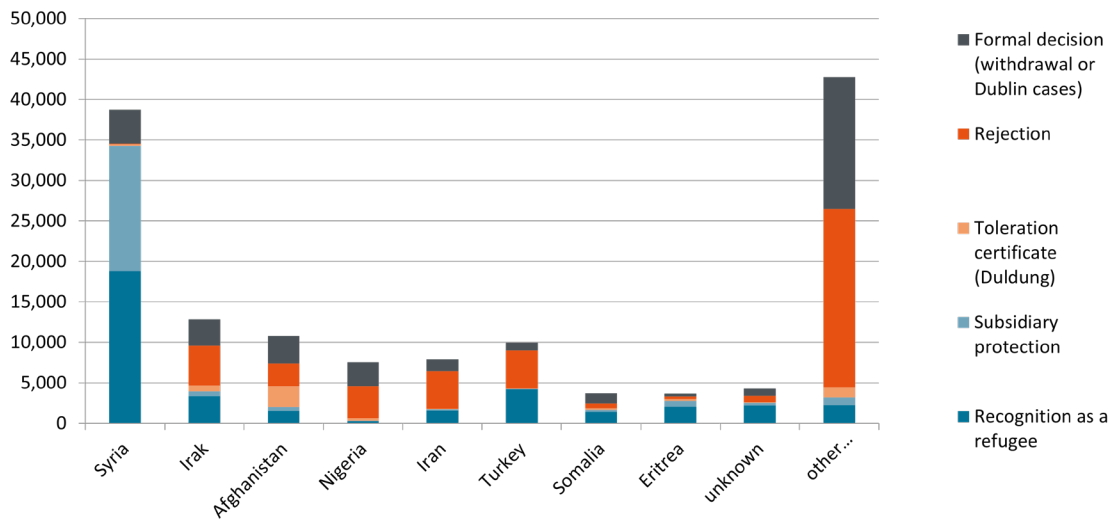
Figure 1: Total numbers of asylum decisions taken in Germany 2011–2020



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Source: Based on data from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF, 2021, p. 37). Note: Those who have been granted asylum under the German Constitution are subsumed under ‘recognition as refugee’ according to the Geneva Convention. Numbers have been rounded up, and colours represent the different proportions of asylum decisions

Figure 2: Asylum decisions in 2020 (top ten countries of origin)



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Source: Graph based on data from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF, 2021, p. 40).

The hierarchy of protection presented above relates to the hierarchical structure of access to civic rights according to different residence statuses and is thus also referred to as civic stratification (Scherschel, 2015). For example, a refugee is entitled to a three-year temporary residence status and has the right to work, whereas a person with a toleration certificate does not have residence status and is only allowed to work with the permission of the foreigners' authority.

Recent statistical developments

Over the past ten years (2011–2020), 2.38 million people applied for asylum in Germany, and the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) took 2.44 million asylum decisions. During these ten years, only 19,800 people were granted asylum in line with Article 16a of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) (0.8 per cent of all decisions), 701,500 people were granted a refugee status (29 per cent), and 336,700 people received subsidiary protection, as they had fled from violent conflicts and cannot return (14 per cent). One hundred fourteen thousand five hundred applicants were not accepted as refugees but were granted a temporary suspension of their deportation (five per cent). The applications of 802,300 people were rejected (33 per cent), while 507,800 applications were formally withdrawn or transferred to other countries as Dublin cases (21 per cent of all decisions).²

2 There can be more decisions than applications because decisions are often delayed. Deviations from 100 per cent result from rounding the numbers. Own calculations based on data from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). For overviews see BAMF and BMI (2020a, 2020b) and Deutscher Bundestag (2019). Formal decisions are cases in which asylum applications have

Two things are important to note. First, the protection quota has varied considerably over the past years. In 2016, it was at its highest with 62 per cent; in 2017, 43 per cent of all applicants received one of the three protection statuses (BAMF, 2019, p. 54). Second, the protection quota of asylum applicants from different nationalities varies greatly. This variation in protection is exemplified in Figure 2 with regard to the top ten countries in the order of the number of applicants. In 2020, 89 per cent of Syrian applicants (38,700 in total) were recognised as refugees or received subsidiary protection; only 0.1 per cent were rejected. In contrast, 14 per cent of applicants from Afghanistan were recognised as refugees, and five per cent received subsidiary protection, whereas 26 per cent were rejected. For Eritreans, 57 per cent received recognition as refugees and 18 per cent subsidiary protection, while nine per cent of the applications were rejected.

A distinct hierarchy of protection has emerged, not only between the diverse protection statuses that pave the way to residence permits and give access to or deny entitlements but also between different nationalities with better or worse 'prospects to remain'³.

3 Asylum applicants have a 'good perspective to remain' in Germany if they come from a country whose nationals have a protection quota that is higher than 50 per cent in Germany (currently, only Syria, Eritrea and Somalia). The invention in 2015 and subsequent use of the category of asylum applicants with a 'good perspective to remain' has been widely criticised as forestalling a pending asylum decision for a whole group based on nationality (while the asylum procedure is an individual process) and, even more importantly, granting or denying privileges and access to services, e.g. to language and integration courses. For those with a 'bad perspective to remain', the experience of (protracted) displacement is further prolonged (see Voigt, 2016).

2.2 Governance regimes of mobility in the context of displacement

In recent years, most refugees living in Germany arrived via land routes and applied for asylum after having crossed Germany’s border without an entry visa. So-called formal pathways to protection are limited. Without a specific vulnerability, direct and proven connections to Germany or German residents are key eligibility criteria for displaced persons' safe, regular, and documented journey to Germany.

Family reunification

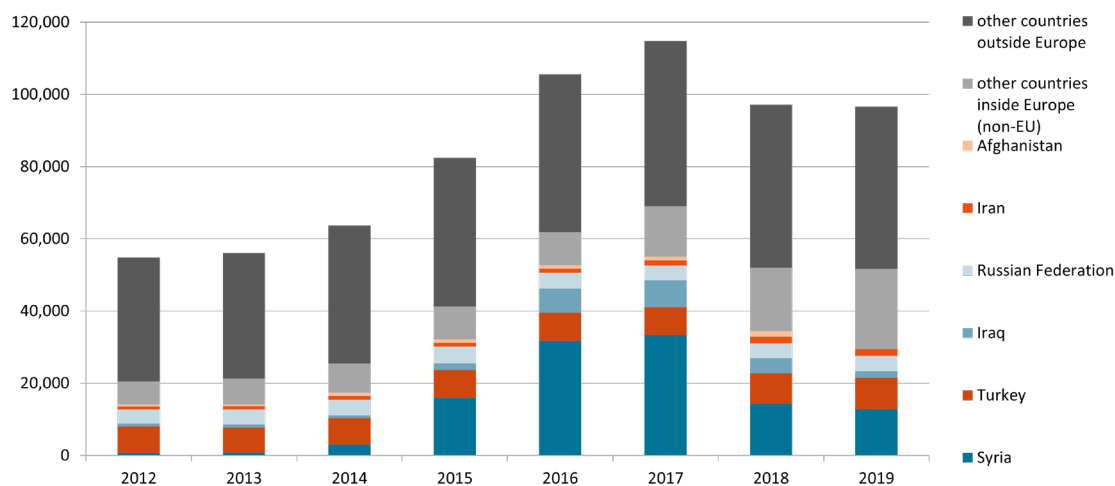
According to German Basic Law, family and marriage are under special protection of the state (Grote, 2017, p. 13). Family cohesion and the right to reunite with family members are thus also of great importance in the German asylum regime. Between 2005 and 2014, Germany granted the most visas for family reunification of Turkish citizens; in 2017, they only accounted for seven per cent of all issued visas. The more recent increase in the movement of family members to Germany is largely attributed to the displacement crises in the Middle East as Syrian and Iraqi nationals and their spouses applied for visas for family reunification in German embassies in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan (see Figure 3). In 2017, 39 per cent of all issued visas allowing for family reunification were granted to Syrians and seven per cent to Iraqis. Among the 33,400 visas that were issued for Syrians in 2017, most (59 per cent) were granted to children joining (one of) their parents, almost one-third to women joining their husbands and a smaller share of five per cent to parents joining one of their children (BAMF, 2019a, p. 9).

The Syrian case shows that for displaced people who are embedded in transnational networks, family reunification is an important "complementary pathway" (Van Selm, 2018) to protection. Since some of their family members migrated to other countries prior to a violent conflict, some of those who later became displaced were able to find ways to reunite their family once more (REACH, 2017; Sauer et al., 2018).

Only members of the nuclear family—namely spouses and minors—are eligible for family reunification. Persons entitled to asylum or refugees have the right to privileged family reunification: They do not need to provide sufficient living space, healthcare insurance and sufficient means of subsistence. They also do not need to provide proof of German language skills, which is a requirement for the general family reunification process. If they want to avail of this exception to the rule, they must apply for family reunification within three months after the final recognition of their protection status or after having been granted a residence permit (Grote, 2017). For people with subsidiary protection, family reunification was suspended from 2016 to 2018 and has been restricted since 2018. According to this regulation, people with subsidiary protection do not have a right to family reunification; rather, family reunification is only granted on humanitarian grounds and until the quota of 1,000 per month is reached.

A range of problems is associated with the application and implementation procedure which relates to the length of the procedure itself, the difficulty of bringing the required documents for identification (see Sub-section 4.2) and the narrow understanding of ‘nuclear family’, that is who is entitled to family

Figure 3: Family reunification (2012-2019) according to the top six nationalities



reunification according to the German Residence Act. The sole focus on the spouse and parent-child relationships is not necessarily in line with the reality of displaced persons' family relations: Parents and grandparents of recognised refugees (older than 18 years), siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, adult children and grandchildren are excluded from the right to family reunification (Grote, 2017, p. 18).⁴

Resettlement

Resettlement is one of the three durable solutions discussed for protracted displacement situations. It refers to a legal and safe pathway, particularly for vulnerable people to Germany or other safe third countries. This country then guarantees permanent admission and protection. Resettlement is only possible for UNHCR-recognised refugees in a country of first reception. UNHCR facilitates the selection process, but the receiving country makes the final decision of whether a person is admitted or not. UNHCR has developed eight criteria for prospective beneficiaries, at least one of which must be fulfilled: Legal and physical protection needs, survivors of violence and torture, medical needs, women-at-risk, children and adolescents, elderly refugees, lack of local integration prospects and family reunification or family members in a third country. The receiving country can add additional criteria, which Germany does: Maintenance of the family unit, the potential beneficiary's integration capability and existing connections to Germany, including the presence of relatives or previous stays (FGD-BICC-BE-001-DEU; <https://resettlement.de/>). According to some experts we spoke to, the definition of family is more inclusive in resettlement schemes than in family reunification procedures and includes grandparents, adult siblings and other 'dependent' persons. Displaced families can thus jointly benefit from resettlement (EInt-BICC-SC-018-DEU; FGD-BICC-BE-001-DEU). Even though resettlement is a safe pathway, this option is only available to very few people. Between 2012 and 2019, 5,300 people arrived in Germany via resettlement. More than half of them (52%) were Syrian refugees who were resettled from diverse countries; a smaller share of resettled refugees (between nine and thirteen per cent, respectively) originated from Sudan and South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Iraq (BAMF & BMI, 2020b, p. 103).

Relocation

Relocation is another admission programme that refers to the relocation of people in need of protection within the European Union. It is intended to relieve the burden on individual member states, especially those located at the outer borders of the European

Union. Based on decisions taken by the European Council in May and September 2015 to relocate migrants from countries at the external border, where they had first applied for asylum, Germany relocated 10,842 persons (around half each from Italy and Greece) by the end of 2019 (BAMF & BMI, 2020b, p. 102). In general, connectivity is not relevant for being admitted to a relocation programme. Applicants can, however, point out existing familial ties in another EU member state. In the end, the authorities decide which applications are accepted—and do not have to take pre-existing familial ties into account. People who arrived in Germany through relocation and who are recognised as refugees can apply for family reunification.

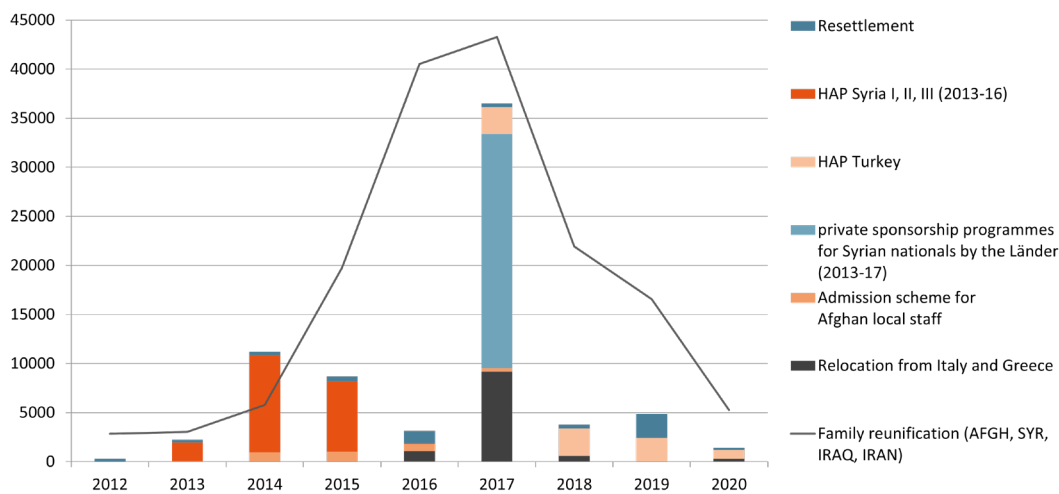
Humanitarian Admission Programmes

Humanitarian Admission Programmes (HAPs) are rapid responses of states to conflicts and crises. These programmes offer legal and safe pathways for migration for a larger number of refugees of the same nationality. Two examples of national HAPs are the reception of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and refugees from Bosnia in the 1990s. The most recent national HAPs are the admission of 20,000 Syrian nationals between 2013 and 2015. Moreover, most German federal states had also initiated HAPs, which enabled the arrival of 24,000 Syrians in Germany between 2013 and 2015. There were different phases in Germany's HAP for Syrians: In the first HAP, UNHCR was mandated with selecting the refugees: familial ties or pre-existing connections to Germany did not play a role, whereas the second and third HAP allowed Syrians in Germany to apply for admission of their relatives. Existing connections were the sole selection criterion for the HAP of the German federal states. While Syrian nationals or Germans with Syrian origin could apply for admission of their relatives, they also had to sign a 'declaration of commitment' with which they were obliged to finance the travel costs, provide accommodation and pay for all costs of living except for health insurance. According to this procedure, HAPs can be classified as private or community sponsorship programmes. In the latter case, a community, members of a parish, for example, shoulder the costs together—the responsibility for refugees' admission and for supporting their societal integration is thus shared between civil society and the state (see Tan, 2021 for a recent overview of community sponsorship as a policy trend in Europe).

While connectivity was the sole selection criterion for the HAP of the German federal states, these connections were restricted to first- and second-degree relatives (parents, children, spouses and grandparents), but not cousins or uncles. Only Syrians residing in first reception countries or Egypt were applicable

⁴ The discussion on family reunification in this and the following empirical chapters do not address the options of family reunification under the Dublin Regulation. We have neglected this aspect as it did not concern any of our interviewees.

Figure 4: Third-country nationals admitted via different humanitarian admission programmes and other schemes to Germany (2012–2020)



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 Source: Based on BAMF, 2017–2020; BAMF & BMI, 2020a, 2020b; Deutscher Bundestag, 2020, 2021; EMN, 2016.

for the HAP. Syrians who had already entered the European Union were excluded. After having received a two-year visa, the beneficiaries of the HAP could then enter Germany by plane and did not have to embark on the dangerous irregular journey. Based on the assumption that the nuclear families would travel to Germany together, people who arrived in Germany through such a HAP are not entitled to privileged family reunification (see Tometten, 2018 for a detailed discussion of the differences between the federal and the state-level HAPS, and the variations of legal rights and obligations of the beneficiaries).

is based on the legally enshrined right to live with one’s family, according to the European Council directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification. HAP, in turn, depends on the political will of a state to provide a certain group and number of people with a safe and legal pathway. Recognised refugees in Germany who were separated from their family following their displacement should thus be able to find ways to reunite with their family members—at least with those of their nuclear family, but as the following sections will show, this right is far from being exercised.

2.3 Concluding remarks

The most important legal pathways to Germany in the context of displacement are family reunification, resettlement, relocation and humanitarian admission programmes (HAPs), each having its own logic and selection criteria. While resettlement and relocation schemes centre around the notion of needs and vulnerability and do not prioritise refugees with existing ties to the country, family reunification and HAPs build upon refugees’ connectivity as a key selection criterion for legal mobility (Welfens, 2021). However, both programmes differ with regard to who are eligible family members. While in the context of family reunification, only members of the nuclear family can apply for a visa, it is members of the extended family—first- and second-degree relatives—who can benefit from the HAPs. As shown in Figure 4, the number of displaced people entering Germany through family reunification is significantly higher than the number of people under HAPs, resettlement or relocation. Another important distinction is that family reunification

Key findings

- *In the past ten years, most refugees currently living in Germany came to the country by irregular means as there are limited legal pathways available. More displaced persons benefitted from family reunification and humanitarian admission programmes than from resettlement from countries of first reception or relocation from Greece or Italy.*
- *Family reunification and humanitarian admission programmes that entail a private sponsorship element can be seen as central instruments of refugee protection that are sensitive to displaced persons’ own networks.*
- *A distinct hierarchy of protection has emerged in Germany, not only between diverse protection statuses that pave the way to residence permits and give access to or deny entitlements, including differing rights to family reunification but also between different nationalities with a better or worse ‘perspective to remain’.*

3. Networked mobility—Refugees’ journeys to Germany

Many refugees living in Germany keep in touch with relatives and friends in their countries of origin and many more countries in- and outside of Europe (Sauer et al., 2021). In TRAFIG, we were interested in learning more about the social relations that (former) refugees maintain across borders (see Section 6). But we also asked ourselves what role these transnational networks actually play in displaced peoples’ mobility and their journeys to Germany. Not all facets of refugees’ ‘networked mobility’, which we understand as mobility practices that are initiated, facilitated or supported by and through personal network relations, can be described here. We only present selected insights into the role networks played in decision-making processes before and during peoples’ initial displacement, while living under conditions of protracted displacement in a country of first reception and for journeys to Germany. A particular focus is on **family figurations in displacement**.

This chapter focuses on the role of (transnational) families in refugees’ mobility to Germany. We deduced four variations of family figurations in displacement from our empirical material.

- ‘**The figuration of the lone yet connected traveller**’ of refugees who embark on a journey on their own but are nonetheless embedded in transnational family relations.
- ‘**The figuration of the jointly displaced family**’ that fled and stayed together throughout the whole displacement trajectory.
- ‘**The figuration of the separated displaced family**’ that either fled from the country of origin at different points in time or that strategically or involuntarily (got) separated on the move.
- ‘**The transnational extended family figuration**’ that has its foothold in multiple places and countries between which family members, information and resources can circulate.

These family figurations in displacement are not meant to be exclusive in the sense that one person only belongs to the one or the other figuration. A figurational approach nonetheless helps to better understand the social constellations in which displaced people are—sometimes simultaneously—embedded and shape their mobility decisions, trajectories and lives after displacement. It also recognises the changes of these social constellations. The sketched family figurations are thus not stable over time. In contrast, they can be brittle and evolve and dissolve quite quickly.

Two-thirds of the 60 refugees we interviewed in Germany were born in Syria (39 individuals). A smaller share came from Eritrea (10) and Afghanistan (8). War, violence and persistent insecurity were mentioned as the predominant reasons for fleeing.

Political persecution from the government, intelligence services or other (non-state) armed groups such as ISIS in the case of Syria or the Taliban in the case of Afghanistan, as well as a general lack of freedom and rights were also given as reasons. Forced military service, or fear thereof, was highlighted by respondents from Syria and Eritrea. The reasons for displacement can, however, not be neatly separated. Displacing forces are often coupled with family reasons and economic factors and, in many cases, with personal ambitions regarding education and a professional career. Many of our respondents also spoke of previous mobilities, and these experiences of transnational lives often played a decisive role in their decision to flee, their mobility trajectory and their choice of destination. Some Syrian refugees had, for instance, lived and worked or studied in the Gulf countries, in western Europe or Russia before, and many had been active travellers before the Syrian war began.

How did the refugees we spoke with come to Germany?

Three-quarters of them arrived in Germany between 2015 and 2016, the *Long Summer of Migration* (Hess et al., 2017), when a record number of refugees applied for asylum in Germany (477,000 in 2015 and 746,000 in 2016) (see also Figure 3). The overview in Table 1 helps to better comprehend their pathways towards Germany. One-quarter of our respondents came to Germany by plane, arriving with visa documents on so-called formal pathways: Eight people arrived through family reunification, three on a student visa, one person with a tourist visa, two persons thanks to community sponsorship in a HAP and another two through a resettlement programme.

The majority (73% of our respondents) travelled to Germany by crossing borders by ‘irregular’ means. In doing so, most were supported by smugglers and other migrant entrepreneurs who themselves are embedded in dense webs of transnational relations (Tinti & Reitano, 2016). Most of respondents from Syria and Afghanistan who had travelled informally arrived in Europe on the so-called Eastern Mediterranean route via Turkey and Greece, and then traversed the Western Balkan countries before entering Germany via Austria (see, for instance, Map 1: Rami’s journey). With few exceptions, refugees from Eritrea crossed the Sahara to Libya, from where they embarked on a dangerous journey by boat across the Central Mediterranean Sea to Italy (note the difference between the journeys of Musea and Dawit/Genet in Map 2). Many interviewees had experienced death, violence and other traumatising incidences in their home countries and during their journeys. Nonetheless, some spoke about their experiences on the move, while others understandably did not share detailed information.

Table 1: Overview of mobility options for refugees on their way to Germany)

		Degree of formality	
		-	+
Transnational connectivity	-	<i>'Irregular' journey alone or together with the family (without external support)</i>	<i>Student, work, tourism visa; resettlement; humanitarian admission programme</i>
	+	<i>'Irregular' journey, yet with the support of relatives living in another country</i>	<i>Student, work, tourism visa with support; family reunification to a person in Germany; humanitarian admission programme with private or community sponsorship</i>

The degree of formality of a refugee’s journey (as in Table 1) can only be distinguished in theory. In practice, modes of travelling and border-crossing changed along the way in almost all accounts of our respondents’ journeys to Europe. The pathways of different family members can be closely connected with one another, as the example of the young Syrian woman Suli and her relatives’ journeys to Europe shows (see Map 3 as an example of mobility within a transnationally extended family). Due to widespread mobility restrictions and the increased securitisation of borders, many displaced people are forced to use all mobility options available to them at a particular place and a certain point in time. The realistic prospect of travelling across borders along established pathways can also change overnight. Pathways also differ between individuals, depending on their position within a family, for instance as an independent ‘pioneer’ adult or a dependent minor family member, and being able to draw upon the support of a transnational family or not.

3.1 Mobility of the lone yet connected traveller

The ‘figuration of the lone yet connected traveller’ is a transnational family constellation with certain defining features. This figuration is often opened by the journey of a ‘pioneer’, who is most often male and at times also a minor, but connected to people at other places, be it in the country of origin, transit, destination or a third country. After a pioneer has ‘successfully’ established him/herself in the country of destination (with or without access to the asylum system), he/she often tries to facilitate the mobility of others, predominantly ‘dependent’ family members. The following cases of Rami from Syria and Musea from Eritrea illustrate this social constellation of the lone yet connected traveller in displacement.

Rami is a 35-year-old Syrian who has been living in Germany since the end of 2015. He grew up and lived in Damascus before the Syrian war. In 2012, he, his mother, father and two siblings fled to a city in western Syria, where his family originally came from, because the situation in the capital had become too dangerous for them. Two years later, he decided to flee once more when his employer warned him after he had raised his voice on political issues. His family members still seemed to be comparatively safe, so he left alone. From August to October 2015, he travelled via Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia,

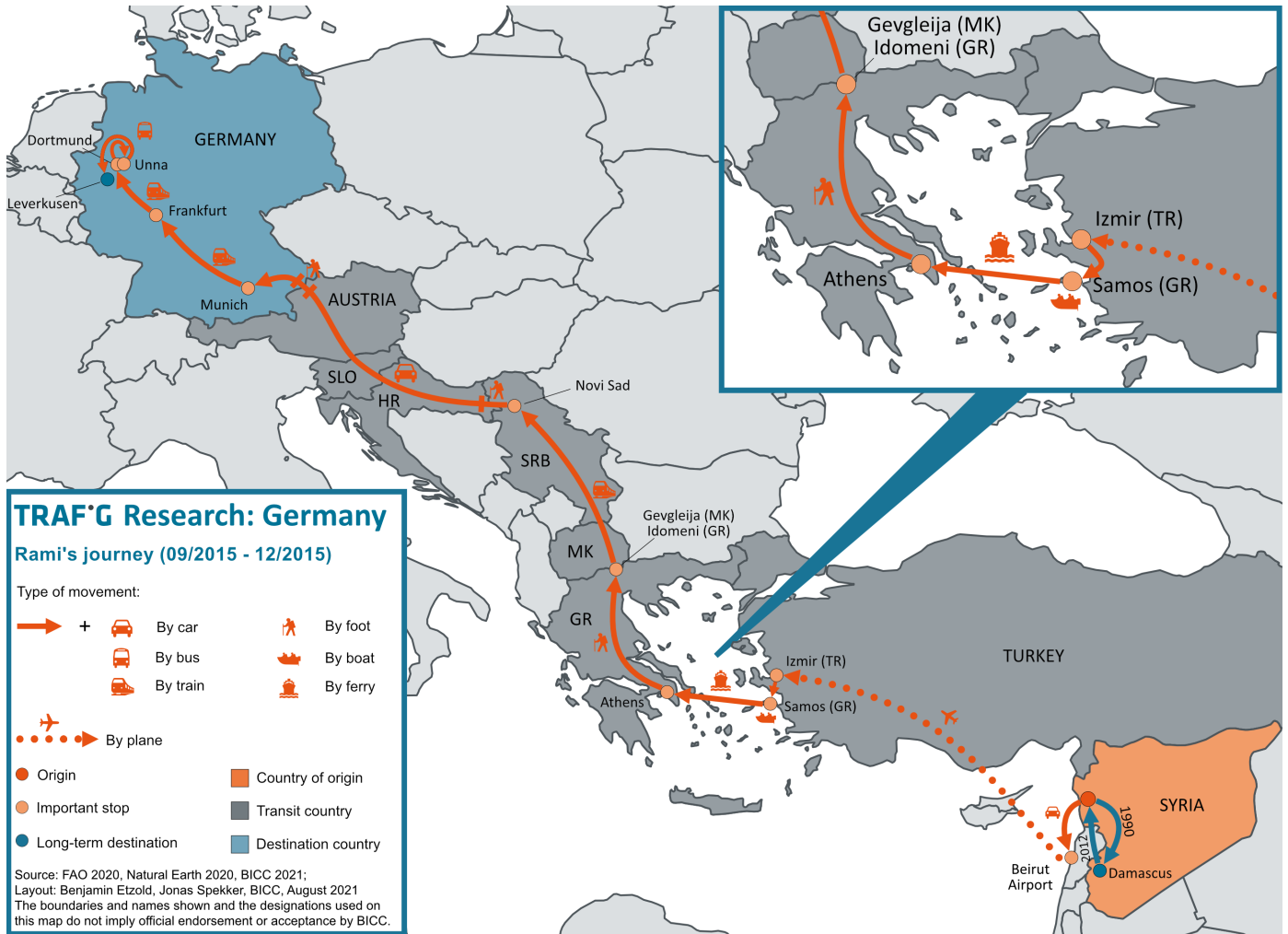
Hungary and Austria to Germany (see Map 1). The journey was perilous and traumatising. In Turkey, smugglers confined him in an overcrowded house under dismal conditions from where they took him to the shore in a refrigerator truck. They offered him the boat passage from Turkey to Greece for 1,500 euros. Having arrived at the shore, he did not dare the journey at first due to the heavy sea but then forced himself to overcome his fears, and he eventually landed on a Greek island. When Rami finally arrived in mainland Greece, he was able to call his mother for the first time and tell her that he was still alive. His mother had wanted to convince him to abandon his journey. But since military service or prison and torture due to his publicly voiced opinion would be waiting for him in Syria, he felt that his only chance was to move on.

Having arrived in Austria and found refuge in a camp after a long journey along the Western Balkan route, almost entirely on foot, he was able to contact his family again. His mother was relieved, as she had not heard from her son since his last call. Rami did not tell his mother what had happened to him during the last days and weeks. He only told her two years later. Since there was electricity in the camp, Rami had finally been able to charge his mobile phone. After what felt to him like 30 days without sleep, he fell asleep. When he woke up an hour later to get his cell phone, it had been stolen. The theft of his mobile phone, his only connection to his family, was a heavy blow. His connectivity to his previous life was disrupted once more.

Since Austria did not want to accept any more refugees, people working in the camp advised him to travel on to Germany, which he did. In the overcrowded reception camp in Bavaria, other refugees from Syria suggested that he continue his journey, as otherwise, he would probably have to wait for months for his asylum procedure. Having no family ties in Germany or other European countries, Rami then decided to continue his journey to Sweden. Shortly before his departure, he called his sister, an aspiring medical doctor:

When my sister heard that [I was going to Sweden], she said, ‘No, I’d rather not. I would, if possible, come to Germany in the future and study there.’ Then I said, ‘Okay, anyway, I don’t have a destination. Germany is the best country for me, too.’ Then I stayed there” (BInt-BICC-BE-002-DEU).

Map 1: Rami's journey to Germany



Source: Interview (BInt-BICC-BE-002-DEU).

Note: The name is a pseudonym, and some places and exact routes on the map have been changed to protect the respondent's privacy.

Rami finally decided to apply for asylum in Germany and eventually received subsidiary protection. He has been living in a city in North Rhine-Westphalia ever since and recently started an apprenticeship. Rami is in constant contact with his family in Syria. Occasionally he sends money if needed. He would like to enable the formal labour migration of his sister, who is already learning German in her free time. But so far, he has not been able to organise a secure and legal pathway for her. Being the only one of his family living in safety in a European country, he feels responsible for his parents and siblings but is frustrated and sad that he cannot help them from a distance to the extent that he wishes to.

Musea, an Eritrean man in his mid-thirties, built upon his previous migration experience before moving (on) to Europe (see Map 2). Musea first fled from Eritrea in 2008 as he was, as almost all Eritreans, forced to work in national service with little payment. At first, he had no plan where to go when he left and first lived in Sudan for a month and then in Egypt for another month. Supported by an aunt who lives in Italy, he moved

on to Israel, where he was allowed to work right away, having to renew his work permit every three months. He did several jobs, most of them unqualified labour, including working at a fast-food restaurant. In 2013, his situation worsened significantly as his residency permit and, in consequence, his work permit ran out, too. He nonetheless stayed in the country, but as there were no options to regularise his status, he lived without documents from then on. He was forced to accept exploitative labour relations and lived in constant fear of the police and looming detention. "Israel doesn't want us to stay. But they know we can't go back. Without permit to work it is very bad in Israel", Musea described his precarious situation of protractedness.⁵

5 Musea is not a unique case. The Israeli asylum policy hardly provides security or long-term perspectives for African migrants. While Israel's plan to deport 40,000 African migrants, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan, to Rwanda and Uganda in 2018, raised at least some domestic and international outcry, in the same year only five (!) of the 16,215 asylum applications were accepted. <https://www.laender-daten.info/Asien/Israel/fluechtlinge.php>; <https://www.rosalux.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Das-gelobte-Land-aber-nicht-fuer-Asylsuchende-Matar-1-1.pdf>

Faced by this constant situation of limbo without prospects, Musea decided to leave Israel in search of “a better country to live”, as he said. In 2015, he took his savings from hard labour in Israel and paid 8,000 euros to a smuggler to get to Turkey. He assessed the options to live and work there but, having acquainted other Eritreans who had already decided to move on to Europe, he eventually did the crossing with five of his fellow Eritreans to one of the Greek Aegean islands in a dinghy and was later transferred to the Greek mainland. He stated that it would have been easy to get to Germany from there as “all borders were open”. Along the Balkan route, they were even transported from border to border by authorities after filling in a paper declaring they only wanted to transit to the next country, as he recalls. Only in Germany was he asked whether he would want to launch an asylum claim. So, he did and was transferred from one reception centre to the other in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and Saarland. Eventually, he ended up in a shared house with five other Eritreans in a rural village in Rhineland-Palatinate. Another two years and several German language courses later, and with a temporary residency permit as a recognised refugee, he moved to a larger city in the same federal state to start an apprenticeship (SsInt-BICC-DS-013-DEU; see Map 2). Musea’s bride-elect joined him in 2018 via an irregular journey via Greece, as formal family reunification had not been possible as the couple had not yet been married and because she did not have valid identity documents. This way, the ‘figuration of the lone, yet connected traveller’, eventually turned into the ‘figuration of the reunited family’ (see Sub-section 6.1). Musea’s move to Germany proved to be a decisive step out of protracted displacement: His livelihood situation in Israel, where he first found refuge, had been very precarious, and there was no realistic prospect of improvement in that country.

There are several similarities, yet also differences between the two cases. Musea had migrated before he travelled towards Europe, while Rami was a first-time migrant when he fled. Rami is the ‘pioneer’ in his family, in whose wake other family members might follow. Musea was not the first to move in his family as he has an aunt in Italy, who also financed his initial move from Eritrea to Israel. But on his onward move from Italy to Germany, he was independent. Rami’s family paid for his entire journey to Germany, and he now feels deeply indebted to them.

3.2 Joint family mobility

Comparatively few refugees we spoke to were able to flee and stay united with their family all the way from their country of origin to Germany. We conceptualise this constellation as the ‘figuration of the jointly displaced family’. For larger families, being able to stay united in displacement requires enormous organisational efforts and adequate legal documents and substantial financial resources, which many lack. An exception is **Reber**, a Syrian Kurd, who had been comparatively wealthy and

highly mobile before the Syrian war. Between 2000 and 2014, he worked in Saudi Arabia and earned enough money to consider ‘early retirement’. He frequently travelled to Europe during this time but could have never imagined being there as a refugee one day. His entire family opposed Assad and was thus on a list of political adversaries to whom the Syrian regime did not hand any papers. For this reason, he could not renew his passport and had to leave Saudi Arabia. Having returned to the city where he used to live in northern Syria in 2014, two things quickly became quite clear to him: His family could not stay there as their lives were at risk, and he wanted to go to Germany because of its advanced social system, the—how he perceived it—good opportunities to find work there and the security that the country provided. Together with his wife and his three children, he travelled to Germany (he did not want to say how), where they eventually arrived in July 2015 and where they now feel “well-integrated” as he stated in an interview (SsInt-BICC-Ds-010-DEU).

Besides labour migration, which was not mentioned by any of our respondents, the only formal pathways that allow for the joint mobility of displaced families to Germany are humanitarian admission programmes (see the case of Suli’s family in Sub-section 3.4) and resettlement. **Ali and his family** were one of few examples in our study who were able to jointly travel to Europe via legal pathways. Ali, a Syrian man in his early fifties, came to Germany together with his wife and minor children in 2019 through a resettlement programme from Jordan. Ali was a lawyer in southern Syria and was politically persecuted because of his position and political opinion. In 2012, he first fled to Jordan on his own, rented a flat in a northern city, and organised the journey of his wife and children, who arrived six months later. From 2012 to 2019, they lived in Jordan, his children went to school, and he tried to establish himself as a lawyer but could only do volunteer work. According to Ali, access to resettlement is limited, and the process as such is not at all transparent:

UNHCR chooses who is allowed and who is not allowed. So, for example, in 2015, they called me and asked me if I was interested in resettlement. I said, yes, I can't go back to Syria at all. [...] I will be arrested, I was in prison there, and I will be in prison again. If I go back, my life is at risk. And then they asked me whether I was interested in travelling to America. Then I said I didn't really like the USA. If anything, I want to go to Europe, to Germany. That was bad, so they said afterwards, I refused to go to America. And then I had to wait for four or five years. That was hell for me. I didn't know what was coming tomorrow. I was just waiting, I had no hope anymore. [...] And then four or four and a half years later, I got the call from UNHCR, they wanted to have an interview with me [...]. And they asked me if I wanted to go to Germany. I said, yes, I want to go to Germany. And then [in spring 2019] the procedure started [with an interview by UNHCR, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and a security screening]. We flew to Germany

directly [in December 2019], stayed in Friedland [the central reception centre for resettled refugees] for 11 days. And after that, I was immediately allowed into a house, a private flat (FGD-BICC-BE-001-DEU).

In the interviews for resettlement, Ali could not only prove his high qualification and ~~their~~ his willingness ‘to integrate’, but he could also demonstrate his prior connections to Germany. He even did the interview in German, which he speaks fluently as he had lived in Switzerland from 1997 to 2007:

I worked there, I have relatives, I also lived in ... [a German town just across the Swiss border]. I know the whole area, friends, relatives. If I am allowed to go to Europe through this programme, I would like to go to Germany (FGD-BICC-BE-001-DEU).

In the end, he thought, it was not only his professional competence but his German skills and ‘transnational competence’ that paved the way to Germany for his family of nine. Like Musea, the onward mobility to Germany was a way for Ali and his family to leave protracted displacement, as he had not been able to establish himself professionally in Jordan.

3.3 Mobility in separated families

The previous description of the figuration of the jointly displaced family has already shown that family unity in displacement is quite rare and often difficult to organise. For strategic reasons or security concerns, it often makes sense for families to split up during their journeys and reunite later at a presumably safe place. However, whether families can travel together or remain separated is also a matter of class belonging. If legal pathways such as resettlement are closed, sufficient money is key to fleeing with others, as Reber's case has demonstrated. We also spoke with several refugees, for whom neither joint mobility nor family reunification after the migration of a ‘pioneer’ was possible, mainly due to financial constraints.

Halim, a 68-year-old Syrian man, had also been separated from his family but eventually managed to follow one of his sons. The existing transnational family relations in Germany were key for his decision to choose this country, but so were previous migration experiences. In the 1990s, Halim frequently visited European cities on business trips. He had lived in Bulgaria for several years, and each year he travelled to Germany to buy a car and resell it in Syria. In 2012, a bomb destroyed the flat he owned in a Syrian city, and he and his family temporarily moved to another part of the town. In 2015, his son left Syria with his wife and children and with Halim's wife (who had lived separated from Halim). While they travelled via Turkey and the Balkan route to Germany and settled in Cologne, Halim initially thought he could stay in Syria. Eventually, they convinced him

to join them, but as the situation had changed, it became difficult for him to travel to Turkey and even more challenging to move on to Europe due to the ‘closure’ of the Balkan route and the EU–Turkey deal in March 2016. He then embarked on a journey of several weeks from Syria to Sudan and then Egypt, and finally a boat passage from Egypt to Italy. In Italy, he could circumvent giving fingerprints and managed to quickly move on to Austria and then to Germany, where he applied for asylum. Even though he indicated straight away that he wanted to join family members in Cologne, his pleas were not heard. He had to spend weeks in a reception centre in Munich and seven months in a refugee shelter in a small rural town in Bavaria before his request to move to his relatives was finally granted. Since then, he has been living in Cologne, the first two years in a refugee shelter, and then in a single room apartment, which is just ten minutes away from the house, in which his son, his daughter-in-law, his grandchildren and his former wife live. They are reunited in the same place in Germany, even though they continue to live separately (SsInt-BICC-MP-002-DEU).

Dawit is a 28-year-old Eritrean man who came to Germany in 2013. He left Eritrea in 2010 together with his girlfriend **Genet**, and both stayed in a refugee camp in Ethiopia for three years. They then went to Sudan and travelled on to Libya, where they were forced to stay in an apartment with 30 others. In Libya, tens of thousands of migrants are imprisoned in detention centres or private houses, and smugglers demand ransom from relatives in other countries for their release and onward journey (Davy, 2017)—A perverse form of criminal exploitation of migrants and their transnational networks. Dawit and Genet were in such a situation, yet raised 6,000 euros from Dawit's parents in Eritrea and his cousin, living in the United States for the past 15 years. After the payment, the couple was released, and they embarked on the boat journey towards Europe. Upon their arrival in Italy, one could describe their family figuration in displacement as a jointly displaced (unmarried) couple. This changed in the Italian reception centre, where officials separated them without being able to contact each other. Dawit remained in Italy for two weeks, searching for his girlfriend. Both no longer possessed phones and had no other means of finding each other. As a result, they parted ways in Italy.

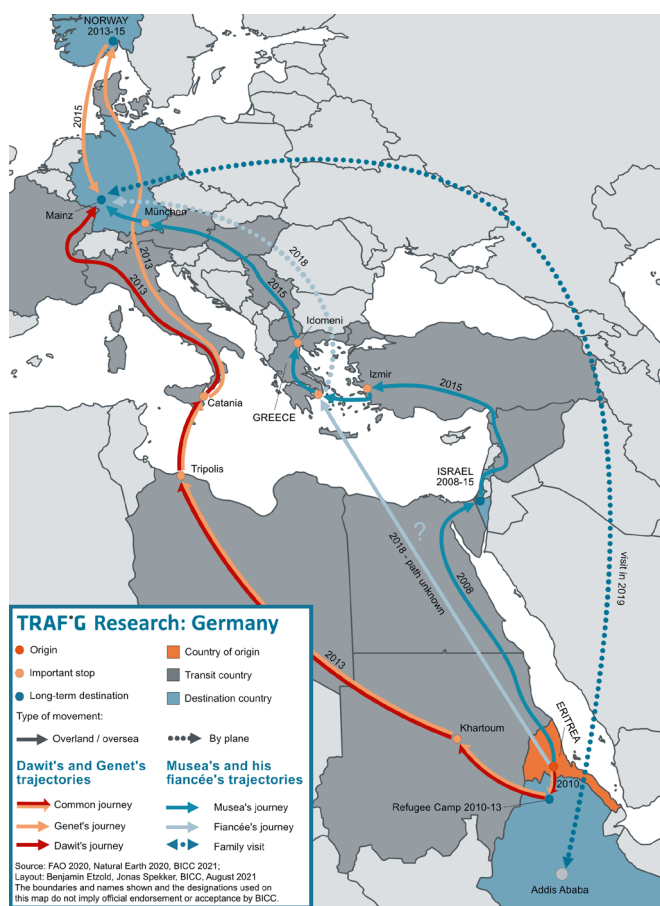
Dawit and Genet had favoured going to Norway because other people they knew had planned to go there. With this destination in mind, Dawit set out to Norway with five other men he had met on the boat, hoping to reconnect with his girlfriend. The men travelled to France and then continued to Germany. There, he they arrived in a small city in North-Rhine Westphalia, where he Dawit eventually stayed with two of his fellow travellers. He was registered in a reception centre in the city and decided to stay in Germany because he was already registered and liked the city he had arrived in. Dawid hoped to reunite with his girlfriend in Germany instead of moving on to Norway. Two months later,

they were able to find each other via Facebook. Genet was in Norway, where she lived for two years until 2015 before joining her partner in Germany. Dawit and Genet were not married when they left Eritrea; they did not have any documents, thus lacking the preconditions for a family reunification process for her to come to Germany by legal means. Genet also does not have a passport, which is needed for this. Dawit describes that when his girlfriend came to Germany, she received a temporary suspension of deportation after her arrival, which she has been renewing every six months since then. Now, the couple has two small children (SsInt-BICC-GG-008-DEU).

3.4 Mobility within a transnationally extended family

We have seen that individuals' displacement trajectories are closely tied to the (im)mobilities of immediate family members. Yet, in many cases, such an analysis cannot be limited to the nuclear family only. Wider webs of kin-based relations marked by solidarity and reciprocity, but often also by unequal power relations and dependency, can shape the lives and mobilities of dozens of people. The example of **Suli**, a young Syrian woman in her twenties who came to Germany as a student with the help of her cousin **Lya**, who in turn has been living in Germany since her father fled more than twenty years ago, shows that (forced) migration trajectories are often intrinsically linked to one another within the social figuration of the transnationally extended family.

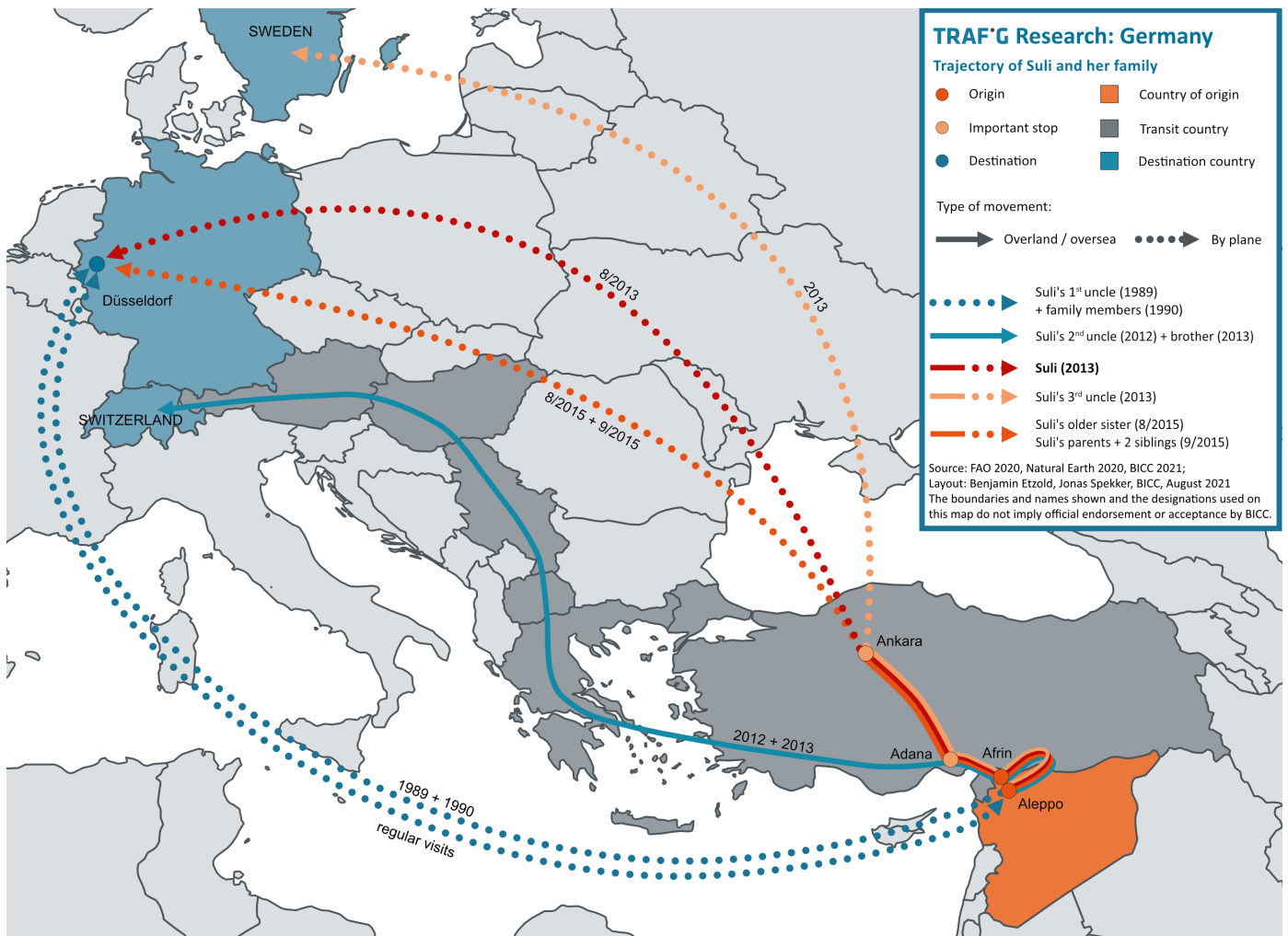
Map 2: Four Eritrean refugees' journeys to Germany



Source: Interviews (SsInt-BICC-GG-008-DEU; SsInt-BICC-DSs-013-DEU). Note: The name is a pseudonym, and some places and exact routes on the map have been changed to protect the respondent's privacy.

Suli's uncle had fled to Germany in 1989, and Suli's aunt and cousin followed through family reunification one year later. Yet, they frequently visited Syria—which included Suli and her family—over summer in the years before the war. Moreover, they spoke to one another on the phone or by skype, or followed each other on Facebook. The Syrian war changed this pattern of transnational life and the relations within the extended family. In 2012, Suli, her parents and four siblings had to flee from Aleppo to their family's village of origin in the Kurdish north of Syria. When the security situation deteriorated there, too, the family moved on to Turkey the following year. Suli's cousin, Lya, suggested that she could come to Germany to study there, as Suli had just graduated with excellent grades at a time when the war turned into a critical phase. Lya helped Suli prepare the documents, and Lya's mother served as the guarantor and signed a declaration of commitment required for the student visa, for which Suli successfully applied at the German consulate in Ankara. After arriving in Germany by plane in August 2013, Suli stayed with her cousin and later with another aunt. Being at a safe place herself, she now worried about her family in Turkey with whom she spoke regularly to convince them to come to Germany. As Suli had just turned 19, family reunification was no option, and there were no other legal pathways during that time. Her younger brother, who was 17 at the time, took the clandestine journey via Greece and the Balkan route to western Europe and finally reached Switzerland, which was his choice because another uncle had been living there since fleeing from Syria in 2011. Because her brother was still a minor, he could be assigned to live with his uncle and circumvent living in reception and asylum centres. As Suli lived in Germany on a student visa and had her passport, she could freely travel within Europe and visit him in Switzerland. Today they speak regularly but do not see each other very often.

Map 3: Interconnected mobility trajectories of a Syrian family between 1989 and 2015



Source: Interviews (SsInt-BICC-BE-001-DEU, SsInt-BICC-BE-004-DEU).

Note: The name is a pseudonym, and some places and exact routes on the map have been changed to protect the respondents' privacy.

Suli's parents did not want to risk the dangerous journey with their smaller children and thus hesitated to join her, but their situation in Turkey, where all adult family members worked in garment factories, became increasingly precarious. In 2014, Suli learned from her cousin Lya about programmes through which other Syrians were bringing family members to Germany. The German federal state and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia had both set up humanitarian admission programmes (HAP; see Sub-section 2.4). When Suli registered her parents in this programme, the 5,000 places to which the programme was limited had, however, already been filled. When a new phase of this programme with 6,000 additional places was established, Suli registered her parents and three siblings again. The problem was that the respective families had to provide a guarantee that they would cover the costs of living and legally stand in for their family members. Due to her own temporary status and lack of funds, Suli could not sign such a declaration of commitment herself. Her aunt, who had already signed this guarantee for Suli's visa, could also not sign another one as

there are limits to the number of people one can bring in based on one's income. After several unsuccessful attempts to find support, Suli finally contacted a civil society initiative around a local church, which had already helped other Syrian families reunite. At first, she was told by one of the volunteers that it would be impossible to bring the whole family to Germany but that she had to choose the person who could come—a moral dilemma that Suli remembered vividly. In spring 2015, after many meetings and talks, however, the initiative offered her support for the whole family as several private sponsors and guarantors had jointly signed the necessary declarations of commitment. The volunteers also sponsored the cost of living of the beneficiaries during the first time after arrival. Once the formal hurdle of the guarantee was taken, it did not take long until her parents and siblings received their visa at the German embassy in Ankara and could arrange their travel. Finally, her family arrived in Germany in September 2015, at the height of the *Long Summer of Migration* (Hess et al., 2017) to Europe (SsInt-BICC-BE-001-DEU, SsInt-BICC-BE-004-DEU).

The case of Suli and her family demonstrates the interconnected mobility pathways to Germany, not only within a nuclear but within a wider web of kin-based relations and across generations. First, Suli's uncle fled to Germany in 1989 and her aunt and cousin followed suit in 1990 while maintaining close ties with their relatives in Syria over all these years. These close transnational ties provided the base for Suli's migration to Germany on a student visa. Her other uncle's clandestine mobility to Switzerland and her brother's journey were also linked to one another. These dangerous pathways became necessary as the legal mobility options based on kinship support were exhausted. Suli decisively broadened the extended family figuration by establishing contacts with a local volunteer group, who did not have any prior connections to the family but nonetheless signed the necessary legal documents and even raised a considerable amount of money to finance the journey and the costs of living for an unknown period. In effect, and from the perspective of the extended family, clandestine journeys, family reunification, student migration and mobility via the special humanitarian admission programme served as complementary pathways of 12 forcibly displaced people to Europe. The transnationally extended family, some of whom had left earlier and had enabled the mobility of Suli and her family, was eventually reunited in Germany. Suli's case also highlights how the HAP was a chance to get her family members suffering from precarious working conditions in Turkey out of protracted displacement and start anew in Germany.

3.5 Concluding remarks

How does connectivity shape refugees' mobility aspirations, opportunities, strategies and trajectories? To what extent do transnational network relations facilitate mobility towards Germany and thus enable people to 'move out of protractedness'? There is no straightforward answer to these questions as the contexts of violence, personal situations and network relations vary considerably. But one thing is clear: Transnational networks, particularly close ties among family members across multiple countries, matter decisively in all phases of refugees' journeys: before, during and after displacement. Three key lessons can be drawn from the presented cases:

1. Mobility decisions in the context of violent conflict are not only based on peoples' experiences and fears of violence but also on perceived risks of staying, opportunities to move and the future perspectives for family members and other persons they feel close to. We did not always spell it out in detail, but our interviews clearly show that refugees carefully evaluated the risks of staying or moving (on) from countries of (first) reception such as Ethiopia and Sudan, or Turkey, Greece and Italy. The decision to flee to Germany must thus also be seen in the context of previous experience of protracted displacement in other countries or the calculated risk thereof (Roman et al., 2021). Furthermore, previous experiences of mobility due to work, education,

family or tourism, that is the experience of living a transnational life, play an important role in mobility decisions, the direction of refugees' journeys and individual imaginations of a better and secure future 'elsewhere'.

2. Existing transnational social relations, particularly family networks transgressing borders, play a significant role in decisions to flee and for trajectories of displacement. Our interviews have shown that mobility decisions are rarely taken in isolation but rather in consultation with and often depending on relatives or friends at various places. The information base in a large extended family that stretches across multiple places and countries is far greater than in a nuclear family that lives united in one place, and so is the potential to tap into resources from the transnational network. Without closely-knit family networks, the 'move out of protracted displacement' would have been impossible for many of our interviewees.
3. The case studies illustrate how refugees' decisions and options to travel together or separately and, eventually, reunite—or not—are intrinsically embedded in their family figurations. This does not necessarily mean that all family members end up in the same place. Often, they embark on quite different journeys, but their pathways are closely interconnected—as the example of Suli's family demonstrates. We have also shown that forced mobility often leads to a continuous separation of family members in physical space, thus transforming family figurations. Either way, (forced) mobility certainly leads to the transformation of relations and social positions within a family and between the different members of extended kin networks, a fact that is taken up again in Section 6.

Key findings

- *The decision to flee, stay or move on from countries of reception is shaped by experiences of violence and protracted displacement, previous migration experiences and existing family ties. Risk and benefits of moving or staying are carefully weighed against each other.*
- *By providing information, emotional support and financial resources, family connections—to family members residing locally and transnational ties—play a significant role in the mobility decision, specific trajectories and the conditions on the journeys.*
- *Family figurations are significantly transformed through displacement leading to new family constellations that are often shaped by a separation of family members and characterised by transnational ties.*
- *Onward mobility towards Europe can be seen as a chance of getting out of protracted displacement in a country of first reception. If legal pathways (e.g. family reunification) to move on and reunite with family members who have found protection in Europe remain blocked, irregular pathways are used as a last resort to move out of protractedness.*

4. Navigating through local and transnational bureaucratic figurations

Whereas Section 2 gave a short overview of the governance regimes of mobility in Germany, this section focuses on how displaced people navigate through the institutional landscape of refugee protection and migration and labour market regimes to find protection and assistance. Thus, this section will investigate what displaced people know about the legal frameworks that shape their lives. How do they find their way through the complex bureaucratic and legal conditions? Who provides support about governance regimes of asylum? What kind of legal hurdles do displaced people face? Are they able to overcome them and, if yes, how?

When navigating through governance regimes, refugees have to deal with the authorities of the country of refuge and with authorities in a neighbouring country or country of origin. Often, they also have to interact with many actors and organisations that serve as ‘brokers’ in between. Displaced people thus must position themselves in local bureaucratic figurations and transnational bureaucratic figurations.⁶

4.1 Local bureaucratic figurations of asylum

Our interviews have shown that everyday knowledge about the asylum system is often sketchy, making navigation through governance regimes that decisively shape all parts of refugees’ lives a risky and complicated endeavour. The legal complexity is not easy to grasp, and the asylum applicants build on the knowledge of other people, such as neighbours, volunteers, but also professional legal experts such as lawyers or social counselling services. Refugees need to find their way within the local figuration of asylum governance. The following four brief examples of Salim, Asma, Dan and Mehmet sketch how displaced people learn about the German asylum system and how they try to find their way through the legal requirements.

Salim from Syria, who arrived in Dortmund in December 2015, had no knowledge of legal procedures—of how to apply for asylum. He depended on other people’s assessment and everyday knowledge and had no one to rely on who was familiar with legal matters. Before he left Syria, an acquaintance working in Germany told him that everything would be correct in Germany and that there is a rule for everything. Nine months after arrival, Salim and his family were granted subsidiary protection. Relying on the information by his neighbour, he was

satisfied with his protection status: “My neighbour said subsidiary protection is ok.” Only after the deadline for an appeal had passed did Salim realise that he could have appealed against this decision (SsInt-BICC-DS-004-DEU).

A volunteer helped **Asma** and her family from Syria navigate through governance regimes of asylum in Germany. Asma recalls: “Initially, we were with a German woman; she did everything for us” (SsInt-BICC-SC-001-DEU). When Asma and her husband had an appointment at the BAMF, the volunteer drove them there. Finding one’s way through the asylum system also depends on needed language skills, according to Asma. There were no translators present at the BAMF, and luckily, the German woman helped Asma and her husband. When the family had another appointment three years later at BAMF, the situation had already changed, and a translator was present.

When **Dan** from Eritrea reached Germany, he was still a minor. Despite receiving the institutional support he was entitled to as a minor, he did not know which legal status he had been granted. He was allowed to stay for one year and had to mandate a lawyer to extend it. His lawyer informed him then that he had received a suspension of deportation but Dan is still in the dark about what this status means for him. He is now hoping to get this information from his lawyer soon. Dan’s difficulty in navigating and understanding the legal processes is also evident in the question he posed to our interviewer, namely whether his legal status would allow him to travel to his uncle in Ethiopia, who had raised him for seven years when he was a child (SsInt-BICC-MP-009-DEU).

Mehmet drew on his translocal community network to navigate through the asylum system. Mehmet is an academic from Turkey who fled after the coup attempt in 2016. He is very well connected to other Turkish academics who applied for asylum in different places in Germany. One of them, who himself has a refugee status, is a law professor and former colleague of Mehmet. He is an expert in migration and asylum law. After Mehmet’s asylum application was rejected, he asked his former colleague for help. The colleague referred him to a lawyer whose expertise is in asylum law. Mehmet’s translocal community network was the main source of obtaining legal advice. His case is still pending (SsInt-BICC-SC-007-DEU).

⁶ Another important dimension adding to the complexity of the bureaucratic figurations is the intra-EU transnational bureaucratic figuration, into which actors in Germany and in first-entry-EU countries are involved. According to the Dublin Regulation, only one state is responsible for the asylum application, which in general is the country of first entry into the European Union.

Access to the legal justice system in first reception centres varies a lot: While some benefited from court rulings correcting unlawful asylum rejections, others missed important deadlines as they did not have the relevant information or their statement of claim was written by someone who is not well versed in law (Steffens, 2021).

Bringing the different cases together, we can discern different actors involved in the local bureaucratic figuration:

- **Intermediaries:** Persons seeking protection often approached neighbours, volunteers, people in their co-ethnic network, and even the TRAFIG interviewer, to help them navigate within the bureaucratic figuration.
- **Professional (legal) experts:** Legal professionals such as lawyers and other professionals (e.g. social workers, Federal Office staff) are involved in different stages of asylum procedures. Before an application is submitted, all asylum seekers can participate in general asylum procedure counselling by the BAMF at the initial reception centre. Several NGOs offer legal counselling, which asylum applicants resort to once they face legal insecurities. Asylum applicants often hire lawyers for an appeal, particularly when the asylum application is rejected or only a lower form of protection has been granted.
- **State institutions:** The most powerful role within the local bureaucratic figuration is held by the state actors. The BAMF is responsible for the whole asylum application process and, most importantly, for the decision on the application. In the case of appeal, courts will review the decision of the BAMF.

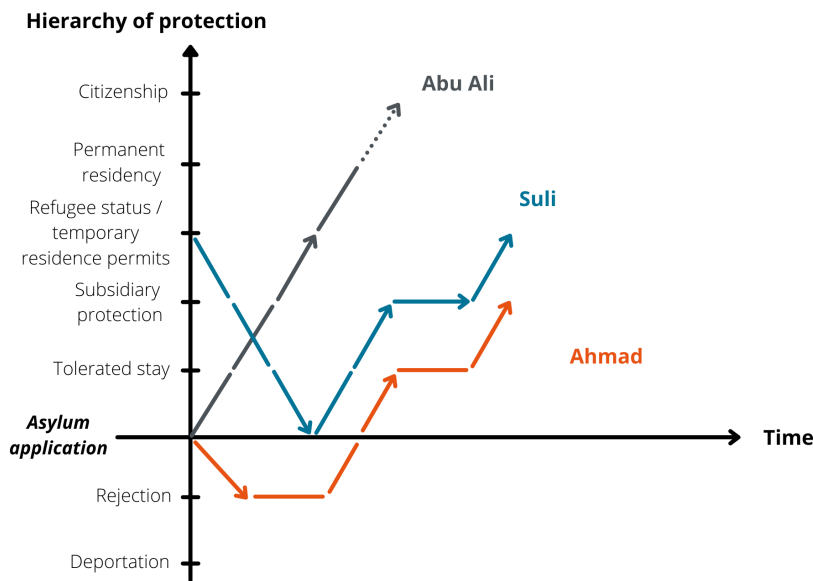
The kind of protection status an asylum applicant receives or not has substantial implications on all facets of their lives (Christ, 2019a; Etzold, 2017). The narratives of our interviews show how legal trajectories might change over time, how they perceive the protection status they have, and how they deal with legal insecurity.

Abu Ali from Syria, who is in his 30s, has been living in Germany since 2015. In the last five years, he passed through different legal statuses relatively quickly: After having applied for asylum, he received refugee protection and, recently, permanent residency. Abu Ali's asylum procedure was relatively fast compared to others and only lasted five months as he had provided a written rather than the long oral interview. Abu Ali is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree while also working part-time with refugees. He is considering applying for German citizenship, which would further change his legal trajectory, providing him with full citizen rights (SsInt-BICC-DS-001-DEU).

Suli arrived in Germany in 2013 on a student visa. In 2015, Suli was able to reunite with other family members in Germany with the help of a humanitarian admission programme (see Sub-section 3.4). A year after their arrival, the whole family applied for asylum as they wanted to be independent of their sponsors' financial support. Waiting for the asylum decision was a difficult time: "We feared to receive a rejection." (SsInt-BICC-BE-001-DEU). After six months, the family was granted subsidiary protection but handed in an appeal with the help of an advisor from a welfare organisation. Eventually, the appeal was successful, and Suli and her parents received refugee protection. However, her elder sister only was granted subsidiary protection. Suli was not the only respondent who told us that family members were granted different protection statuses and that they did not understand why (see, for example, SsInt-BICC-SC-004-DEU).

People with a temporary suspension of deportation (*Duldung*) find themselves in a status of protracted legal insecurity (Christ, 2019a). Out of the national focus group studied for TRAFIG in Germany, Afghans are more likely to live in legal limbo. From 2014 to 2017, more Afghan refugees arrived in Germany than before and after, but around half of them did not receive any form of protection. These people permanently live with the fear of being deported to Afghanistan. Apart from the threat of possible deportation, people with a tolerated stay might be impeded from integration into German society, for example, as they cannot access language courses or employment (EInt-BICC-SC-015-DEU) (see also Christ, 2019a; Etzold, 2017). Since 2020, one possible way out of this legal limbo is to do quality vocational training and obtain a temporary suspension of deportation for the whole duration of that training ("*Ausbildungsduldung*" according to Section 60c of the Residence Act). After successfully completing the vocational training, a six-month extension of the suspension is possible. **Ahmad** from Afghanistan, who reached Germany in 2015, benefits from this new regulation. With his asylum application rejected, he found a lawyer through the help of his local network. After the lawyer had filed a complaint, Ahmad was granted a temporary suspension of deportation for six months. He recalls: "We always heard stories about deportation and things like that. That was stressful" (BInt-BICC-SC-016-DEU). His relatives in Germany and his lawyer advised him to go for the temporary suspension for the purpose of training. He was interested in becoming a healthcare worker and nurse, despite having a law degree from Afghanistan and, with the help of a volunteer, applied at several hospitals to be trained as a nurse. Ahmad was accepted and is relieved to finally have legal security for the duration of his training as a healthcare worker.

Figure 5: Legal trajectory and civic stratification



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 Source: Interviews (SsInt-BICC-DS-001-DEU; SsInt-BICC-BE-001-DEU; BInt-BICC-SC-016-DEU)

Figure 5 shows Abu Ali’s, Suli’s and Ahmad’s legal trajectory and its relation to civic stratification (Scherschel, 2015) in Germany. Whereas Abu Ali could ascend the socio–legal ladder quickly and unidirectional, the situation is different for Suli and Ahmad. Suli decided to give up her student permit to apply for asylum, thus descending the ladder for some time, putting her into the situation of legal limbo, but her hope to become financially independent from her visa sponsor weighed heavier than the hoped-for temporary legal limbo. Ahmad’s asylum application was rejected. Thereby, he first descended the hierarchy as he was supposed to leave the country. However, his appeal was successful, and he could even start vocational training. Still, compared to Abu Ali and Suli, he is in a lower and more insecure position in the social hierarchy, as his deportation is only suspended temporarily due to his vocational training, which does not give him the same rights as if he were a recognised refugee.

4.2 Transnational bureaucratic figurations

The bureaucratic conditions represent a transnational bureaucratic figuration and require that displaced people navigate the governance regimes across different scales. Refugees must not only deal with the authorities in Germany—the country of refuge—but also contact the authorities of their countries of origin—the regime from which they fled. Several German authorities are involved within a transnational bureaucratic figuration: the German embassy in the country of first reception, the BAMF in Germany and the local foreigners’ registration office in Germany. But German bureaucracy also demands refugees to renew their passports or get marriage or birth certifi-

icates from the authorities of the country of origin. Therefore, they must either contact their respective embassy in Germany or ask their relatives in their countries of origin to contact the authorities there.

Apart from state actors at the local and national level, supra-national actors are often also involved. One example is the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with whom Germany cooperates in resettlement processes (EInt-BICC-SC-018-DEU; EInt-BICC-SC-012-DEU; EInt-BICC-BE-006-DEU; FGD-BICC-BE-001), or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which the German Federal Foreign Office has mandated to support the process of family reunification. Moreover, intermediaries such as counsellors, volunteers or lawyers help refugees navigate the legal procedures

These multiple actors and organisations involved in different countries in refugee protection

schemes or legal migration procedures maintain more or less close relations with one another, exchange information or jointly process ‘cases’, thus forming a ‘transnational bureaucratic figuration’ that decisively shapes conditions of protracted displacement and refugees’ and family members’ mobility pathways towards Europe.

“It is a nightmare for me”—Hurdles in proving one's identity

Proof of identity is the cornerstone of the bureaucratic processes refugees are facing and through which they are obliged to contact the authorities of their country of origin.

Our interviews reveal that contacting their national authorities is a topic fraught with fear for the people concerned, and many find it unacceptable to have to pay the countries they fled from through application fees and taxes. They find themselves caught in a dilemma as not adhering to this regulation means that certain procedures, such as family reunification, are inaccessible.

Ali came to Germany via a resettlement scheme (see Sub-section 3.2) and received a temporary residence permit for three years. In that time, his Syrian passport expired. The German foreigners’ authority is now requesting him to renew his Syrian passport so that they can extend his residence permit. He explains his concerns:

It is a nightmare for me. I have a Syrian passport. But when it expired, they gave me the grey passport for the whole family. The foreigners’ authority told me quite

clearly that after three years, I have to have a Syrian passport so that they can extend my residence permit. Without this Syrian passport, they will not extend my residence permit. The Syrian [passport] is the most expensive passport in the world: 325 dollars for a passport. So, I have to pay 300€ for each passport, and this passport is only valid for two years. We must not support the regime because he [Assad] makes money from this passport acquisition for him. He rips people off and then finances his war there. And we support this regime with this passport procurement. And Germany supports him. I still have two years [until I must renew my passport], but I am already worried, and for me, this really is like a nightmare (FGD-BICC-BE-001-DEU).

Ali's case shows that refugees who cannot prove their identity remain in a situation of legal limbo. While Ali fears that his residency will not be extended, **Musea's** plan to apply for permanent residency to prevent being deported to Eritrea will most likely not be successful, as he cannot prove his identity either. Moreover, he cannot legally marry his partner, who followed him to Germany via Greece in 2018 without identity documents (see Sub-section 3.1 and Map 2). To get married, the couple needs their birth certificates and a certificate of no impediment to marriage, for which they must approach the Eritrean embassy in Berlin. However, the couple does not do so as they fear to risk their refugee protection status when going to the Eritrean embassy. They also fear reprisals for their families in Eritrea. Above all, they refuse to financially support the Eritrean regime by paying the required diaspora tax (see below) (SsInt-BICC-DS-013-DEU).

Fears of reprisals are widespread among displaced people from Eritrea. **Feben**, for example, married an Ethiopian in Germany in 2018 in a church service. As she does not have a birth certificate, a civil wedding is not possible. She does not dare to go to the Eritrean embassy in Berlin (on risks related to getting documents from Eritrean authorities see Mekonnen & Palacios Arapiles, 2021). Her sister and her mother in Eritrea were jailed, as they are members of a Protestant free church. Feben's mother has meanwhile been released, but they do not know whether her sister is still alive. Therefore, Feben fears asking her mother to contact the Eritrean authorities (SsInt-BICC-SC-006).

However, if displaced people decide against contacting the authorities of their countries of origin, they face a multitude of constraints, such as reduced chances of acquiring a permanent residency, further hurdles for a legal marriage in Germany, and further difficulties in and prolongation of family reunification procedures (see next sub-section).

Family separation rather than family reunification?

Sure, I also still speak of family reunification all the time, however, the word is actually more of an empty shell. More so, we should speak of family separation because the whole thing is basically nothing else (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU).

With the citation above, the interviewee, an expert on family reunification of Eritreans, refers to the fact that, out of the around 50 cases he was responsible for, only two were resolved and the families reunited.

When trying to disentangle the different actors and their positions within the transnational bureaucratic figuration of family reunification⁷, we can discern the following actors involved:

- The person applying for family reunification, his/her nuclear family and other relatives;
- authorities of the German state: Foreigner registration office, the Federal Office for Migration and Asylum (BAMF), German embassies;
- authorities of the country of origin: Different authorities in the country of origin, embassy of the country of origin in Germany;
- intermediates: NGOs, counselling services, lawyers, volunteers;
- supra-national institutions: IOM, UNHCR, EU/EASO.

The following section will explain the transnational bureaucratic figuration for Eritreans applying for family reunification. People who want to follow their family to Germany must leave Eritrea by irregular means to even begin the process of reunification. Even though there is a German foreign representation in Asmara in Eritrea, it does not deal with the necessary visa regulations. Family members in Eritrea who want to initiate the family reunification process for Germany officially need to go to the German representation in Nairobi, which is responsible for this issue. However, this route is impossible for most people, which is why most applications are de facto submitted in Ethiopia and Sudan. An expert providing legal assistance to Eritrean refugees in Germany explains:

The people who want to join their families cannot simply apply from home and then somehow wait until they get an appointment to hand in the documents. Instead they have to leave the country first, they have to leave for Ethiopia or Sudan, and this always has to happen illegally (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU).

⁷ This sub-chapter does not distinguish between the cases of people with refugee protection and people with subsidiary protection. However, there is a major difference, as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection do not have the right to privileged family reunification. Moreover, there is a maximum of 1,000 people for whom a visa is issued. Therefore, the process of family reunification for people with subsidiary protection must overcome even more bureaucratic hurdles as already described here. See, for example, Krause et al., 2021.

To leave Eritrea officially, individuals need to have a passport—which only very few Eritreans, like state officials or businessmen, do. They also need an exit visa, which is almost impossible to receive. Leaving Eritrea requires intensive preparations, especially regarding the provision of documents and is highly dangerous as people must rely on smugglers and are constantly in danger of being arrested and having their documents taken away. In Ethiopia, people who want to apply for an appointment at the German embassy to start the family reunification must first provide evidence of stay for at least six months. Usually, displaced people arriving in Ethiopia are registered with the Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs (ARRA) (that works together with UNHCR) and can then register for an appointment with the officials (see Tufa et al., 2021 for details on refugees' admission and the governance of protection in Ethiopia). Receiving an appointment can take up to 18 months. Once they have an appointment and can communicate with the German embassy, they face two major bureaucratic hurdles (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU).

First, applicants for family reunification need to have a complete application, which usually entails documents such as birth or marriage certificates, which the applicants in general do not have, as there is no harmonious official documentation system in Eritrea comparable to the documentation system in European countries (Mekonnen & Palacios Arapiles, 2021; Ton, 2018).

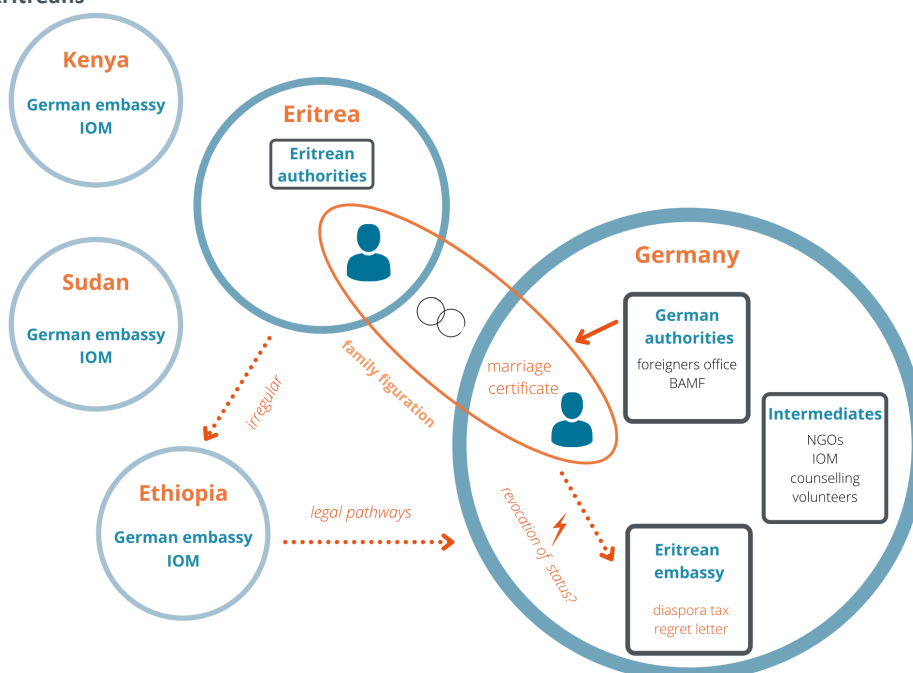
An official states:

Eritreans are basically expected to contact the authorities to issue documents that they don't have. This, of course, will open Pandora's box. It is much more problematic in Eritrea to apply for documents because you become visible to the state, which can lead to persecution because the authorities assume that there is a desire to leave. The other problem is that it is never quite certain who will actually get documents (EInt-BICC-SC-012-DEU).

The Eritrean government claims that every Eritrean abroad can always get documents, regardless of his or her status. However, the situation on the ground is very different. First, Eritreans who decide to get consular services from the Eritrean embassy must pay diaspora income tax. Eritreans residing outside the country must pay two per cent of their income to the Eritrean government. This refers to the two per cent of the assets generated in Germany, including social benefits—which can amount to a large sum depending on the time spent in Germany. People refusing to pay the tax will not get access to consular services. Moreover, there are reports of threats of violence or fraud and other illegal practices related to tax collection (Buysse et al., 2017).

Second, Eritreans seeking consular services must sign a 'regret form' through which they formally have to 'admit guilt' of having left the country and which can be used against them and their families in Eritrea (Mekonnen & Palacios Arapiles, 2021). When the German authorities tell Eritreans abroad to consult with officials, people often do not dare to do so:

Figure 6: Transnational bureaucratic figuration: The example of family reunification for Eritreans



I know almost no one who does this, because the fear is simply too great. And rightly so, because there are many informers, you never know what will happen (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU).

Moreover, displaced people from Eritrea fear that signing the regret form might negatively affect their protection status (EInt-BICC-SC-010-DEU).

Resulting from the situation described above, an incomplete application is usually sent to the embassy and is usually rejected because neither identity nor family connection can be proven. This leads to legal proceedings, and then it is established what evidence is admissible in court, for example,

whether wedding photographs or videos or private chat sessions can be presented to prove a marriage. In some cases, the embassy requires a DNA test.

The already protracted family reunification process has become even lengthier due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The embassy in Addis Ababa was closed, so that further processing was no longer possible for a few months. It can now take up to two years before an application is submitted, followed by a processing time of about one to two years until a decision is made and the lengthy process that follows afterwards (EInt-BICC-SC-010-DEU). All in all, for Eritrean refugees, family reunification is a very long and costly process with an uncertain outcome (see also the case of Dahab in Sub-section 3.2).

4.3 Concluding remarks

This section shed light on the local and transnational bureaucratic figurations refugees must navigate. The figurations are very complex, with many actors involved and structured by power imbalances. Nevertheless, refugees can exert agency by hiring a lawyer, for instance.

The first part of this section showed how asylum seekers and applicants navigate the local bureaucratic figurations of asylum and how refugees ascend or descend the hierarchy of civic stratification in Germany, struggling with their legal trajectories. Refugees are also embedded in a transnational bureaucratic figuration. They not only have to deal with Germany as the country that provides protection but are also required to contact the state authorities of their country of origin. Many refugees find this unacceptable. They fear reprisals for their family members in the country of origin or are not willing to financially contribute to the state they fled from, for example, by paying passport fees (Syria) or diaspora tax (Eritrea). Furthermore, they fear that they could lose their protection status if they contact their respective embassies. The case of the family reunification process demonstrates the numerous hurdles one must overcome to get the right to reunite with family.

Key findings

- *In Germany, a hierarchy of protection assigns different legal statuses and rights to asylum seekers, recognised refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection or temporary suspension of deportation, rejected applicants as well as resettled refugees and beneficiaries of HAPs. Despite limited knowledge about legal procedures, refugees must navigate through this hierarchy of protection and complex local bureaucratic figurations, hoping to get out of legal limbo and improve their longer-term prospects.*
- *The paradox of the transnational bureaucratic figuration requires refugees to deal with the country of protection and the country from which they fled. This contradicts the rationale for fleeing the country in the first place. If they do not approach their country of origin's representation abroad, they might face continuing legal limbo in Germany, including family separation. If they do, they might face reprisals, such as paying diaspora tax for Eritreans.*
- *Lengthy procedures of family reunification with insecure outcomes due to bureaucratic hurdles contradicts the right to protect the family and preserve family life, as stated by the German constitution and the European Council directive 2003/86/EC on the right to family reunification.*

5. Local figurations between solidarity and discrimination

Being embedded in or excluded from network relations at the local level has multiple effects on refugees' everyday lives, access to information, housing and work, among others. This section centres on networks and local practices of solidarity and support at the places where displaced people live after initial reception. There are interactions and relations among displaced people in 'their' ethnic-based figuration, certain benefits and pitfalls in the relations between refugees and volunteers and, more general, experiences of marginalisation, racism and discrimination that reflect host–refugee relations—or established–outsider figurations—in Germany.

5.1 Connectivity in the ethnic network-based figuration

The ethnic network-based figuration refers to a social figuration based on trust, solidarity and support between people of the same ethnic or national background. The degree of formality differs: Some people are members of an organisation based on a common ethnic background, whereas others do not know each other beforehand but still trust each other due to their background or common experiences. However, just because people come from the same ethnic or national background, this does not necessarily mean that they get along. Rather than being homogeneous, there can be conflicts among people from the same country (see Röing, 2019 on the case of Turkish refugees in North Rhine-Westphalia).

The example of **Said** from Syria who arrived in Germany in 2015 shows how ethnicity-based connectivity influences migration trajectories. Said is embedded in Kurdish networks, which has influenced his daily life, the trajectory of his displacement, his search for housing and the processing of various applications and official communication in general. Even though Said did not initially plan to go to Germany and had lived in other countries before, he eventually decided to go to the city of Cologne because he had friends living there already:

Because my friends were there. They were almost all here in Cologne. The best friends, I mean. I know many people in Germany who are from our Kurdish area in Syria. But my best friends were in Cologne, and I had heard about Cologne before (SsInt-BICC-PT-006-DEU).

Others have made new contacts upon arrival in Germany. **Samia** from Syria has many friends, most of whom are women who also came to Germany from Syria. She knows some of them from her short time at the initial reception centre, others she met later, for instance through her children. Before the

COVID-19 pandemic, the women and their children visited each other regularly, ate or drank tea together or engaged in activities with the children. At the time of field research, the women communicated with each other mostly virtually. Samia is also in touch with her daughter-in-law's family that has the same religious background as Samia, which gives them a common ground even though she is not Syrian and was born in Germany (SsInt-BICC-GG-006-DEU).

Mehmet from Turkey frequently links up with members of his community in different cities in Germany. This translocal ethnic network provides him with support in many regards. For example, he was referred to a lawyer when his asylum application was rejected and he needed a lawyer for the appeal. A Turkish friend who was born and raised in Germany also helped Mehmet to search for a flat. Some other friends of his community even housed him for several weeks when Mehmet was afraid to stay in the crowded refugee shelter during the pandemic (SsInt-BICC-SC-007-DEU).

Whereas housing was also provided to **Udai** from Syria, he did not know the person who housed him beforehand. When he moved to Freiburg to study, he used Facebook to find support there:

When I first arrived, I asked my Facebook friends: 'Do we know anyone in Freiburg?' A friend knew a friend who knew a friend who told me, 'Yes, we do know some Syrians there.' So, they put me in touch. I met a Syrian guy that I have never met before, and he offered me a room for a week. He had like a little house, so with an extra room. And he was also studying languages. So I told him, 'Okay, I can help you with your German as long as you give me a place for a week until I find a place of my own'. So, he did, and he introduced me to a few people. And afterwards, I moved to my own shared apartment, and we stayed in touch. And I told him to apply to the same programme that I did (BInt-BICC-MT-006-DEU).

The shared Syrian identity led the two young men to trust each other even though they did not know each other beforehand. They based this trust on the assumed commonalities of their Syrian identity. People belonging to the same ethnic or national group use social media to disseminate information among that group, such as information on the proceedings of other embassies or concerning family reunification in Germany as reported by a staff member of an international organisation. In private Facebook groups, members discuss updates on fees, documents needed, where to get what, how to get it, or where to legalise

it. When someone receives information, they do not keep it to themselves but share it with others:

So for me, the number one channel for connectivity is facebook. And then you have WhatsApp if you want to have further information or details. So it works well. The connectivity is super strong (EInt-BICC-SC-017-DEU).

Other organisations operate in integration projects. An Afghan organisation, for example, brought together former and recent refugees from Afghanistan. The refugees who reached Germany many years ago serve as examples and motivation for the newly arrived. Some members also support individual refugees, for instance, when they have appointments with the authorities or doctors (EInt-BICC-SC-015-DEU).

Displaced people from Eritrea founded a translocal movement to deal with protracted family separation. The members of this movement want to draw public attention to their situation, as they are all affected by protracted separation from members of their nuclear family (see Section 4 and Sub-section 7.2). By doing so, they hope to change politics. However, this alliance was not about their shared nationality but rather their frustration about not being able to reunite with members of their nuclear family in Germany. Moreover, the movement grew out of a, now abandoned, initiative against the suspension of family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. This example clearly cautions against homogenising an ethnic network-based figuration. A staff member of a counselling organisation explains:

The Eritrean community is very divided within itself. There is a great deal of mistrust because no one knows who might be working for the Eritrean state. Some people reject military service, for example, but are still considered close to the government. Others are considered oppositional, but no one talks about that openly. That is, this initiative is also political toward the German authorities, but they are completely apolitical toward the Eritrean ones (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU).

The various examples show that ethnic network-based figurations exhibit different degrees of formality. In some cases, people support one another due to an ‘invisible bond’ based on a sense of common belonging and shared identity. Other networks within this figuration are formalised, for example, the organisation of the Kurdish or Afghan community. However, the degree of formality does not seem to be decisive for supporting one another. In general, the connectivity between people with the same ethnic or national background is characterised by reciprocal exchange; some of the contacts described above are long-standing friends who existed before they were displaced, whereas others formed after arriving in Germany.

5.2 Local connectivity in the volunteer–refugee figuration

At the local level, a central social constellation for newly arrived refugees is the volunteer–refugee figuration, as the analysis of our interviews has shown. Volunteers often serve as intermediaries and enablers for refugees’ social and economic integration. These local contacts to volunteers open pathways that would otherwise remain blocked or take a very long time (Christ, 2019a; Karakayali, 2018). In 2015/16, many people in Germany volunteered to support newly arrived displaced people. Volunteers were engaged in providing German classes, accompanying displaced people to appointments with the authorities, but also in networking and organising other forms of support (Karakayali & Kleist, 2016).

Studies demonstrate that refugees’ integration into the German labour market depends to a large extent on the length of the asylum process and the decision (Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020), but also on language and other skills, recognition of educational and professional titles, the place of living and personal networks (Etzold, 2017). Local connectivity plays a crucial role in finding jobs; refugees who received support through informal network contacts—either through family, wider kin-networks or locals—gained faster access to the labour market and more often had full-time jobs (Eisnecker & Schacht, 2016). Locals share their knowledge about vacancies and suitable jobs, recommend someone for internships, help to write applications or serve as mediators if conflicts between the employer and the apprentice or employee arise (Bernhard & Röhrer, 2020; Christ, 2019a).

Dawit from Eritrea (see Sub-section 3.3) cleans beds in a hospital where he previously worked in the kitchen. To a significant part, this job was arranged with the help of a volunteer.

I don’t know how she did it and where she found the job, maybe on the Internet or somewhere else, but she asked me: ‘Do you want to work in the kitchen there?’ I said yes and then I went there and got the work contract (SsInt-BICC-DS-006-DEU).

Musea (see Sub-section 3.1) benefited from the help of a group of volunteers in the small village in Rhineland-Palatinate where he lived at that time. Volunteers helped him with legal procedures regarding his asylum process, drove him and other Eritreans to the next supermarket, which was 10 km away, and to the integration course in the next city, which he could hardly reach by bus. Musea was trained as a mechanical engineer, and when he saw a suitable job offer on the Internet, one of the volunteers helped him with the job application. Musea got the job, but it was in another city that he could not get to by public transport. The volunteers searched and found a flat for Musea in that city from where he can easily reach his workplace now (SsInt-BICC-DS-013-DEU).

However, many other interviewees indicated that while they tried everything to find work, they lacked social contacts and local support. One example is **Maier** from Syria, who was unemployed and lived on social security when he was interviewed. He had worked before in different companies, mainly as a temporary worker (“*Leiharbeiter*”), but a knee injury prevented him from working in his profession as an electrical engineer. He has tried to find alternative jobs in offices but has not been successful. Asked what he considers to be the reason for this, he said: “First reason: I am a foreigner”, then further explained that he considers the better language skills and a ‘similar mindset’ of Germans as barriers. He also stressed that Germans often have the better networks needed to find a job. “It’s not easy without people helping you. It’s not easy to find a job alone.” Moreover, In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Maier noted that getting a job has become even more difficult as many companies refrain from employing new staff due to economic uncertainty (SsInt-BICC-DS-008-DEU).

Social capital, the resources linked to networks in one’s country of origin, have often been cut due to displacement (Bernhard & Röhrer, 2020). We noted in our interviews that even though displaced people had expanded their networks in the wake of their displacement to Germany, once they had arrived in Germany, they could no longer benefit from the social capital they had built up before their displacement. Building up social capital anew and at the local level is thus crucial for all facets of everyday life and the job search in particular. Volunteers often have local knowledge and networks that newly arrived refugees simply cannot have. By ‘building bridges’ to authorities, employers, landlords and other actors and thus establishing connections to these networks, many volunteers provide essential support to displaced people in navigating through the difficulties of everyday life.

We could have given many more examples at this point, as most of those we spoke with have benefited from volunteer support in one way or another. Volunteers’ support is multidimensional; many help wherever they can: They teach German, help find a flat or provide housing, assist in looking for a job, provide financial and moral support. Their support is not restricted to one field, as is often the case for the support provided by the state (such as help in writing applications). The support by volunteers is crucial for our interviewees to have a good start and help to settle them in Germany.

By its very nature, the relationship between volunteers and displaced people is hierarchical. This characterisation is not to devalue the relationship between these two groups, yet it helps to understand how their connectivity is shaped. The volunteers are at the giving end, whereas the displaced people are at the receiving end; the relationship is not equal. Those who receive the support cannot reciprocate what they have received. Some relationships transcend this hierarchy and transform into friendships; unidirectional support has transformed into reciprocity.

Malek is in his 20s and originates from Afghanistan. He reached Germany in 2015. His first asylum application was denied three years ago—he appealed but has yet to receive an answer from the court. Malek loves sports and trains at a local sports studio, where he also works as a fitness instructor for children. According to him, sports helped him the most in learning German:

This is a good story, because I told you, before I didn't get a German course. I talked to the [coach], I don't have a German course (...). He told me, you can come with me and train together with children, stay next to me as a trainer and learn. (...) [When] there was no work and no school, I learned the language here every day with the [coach].

After having assisted the coach for two years, the coach suggested he obtain an instructor's license and work in the studio. His coach paid for the license, so he and some of his teammates attended a one-week seminar to receive theoretical and practical training. With the help of his colleagues on language issues, he passed the theoretical exam and then scored very well in the practical exam. The last task he had to do was to write a paper in which his colleagues and German acquaintances supported him. For this, his coach bought him a laptop since Malek did not own one. He really enjoys working with children, and his own training is also important to him. According to him, he is hardly doing anything else but working out, preparing for tournaments or instructing with them in the studio (SsInt-BICC-GG-002-DEU). His relationship with his coach is characterised by reciprocity: The coach helps him practice his German, whereas Malek supports the coach in instructing children.

Shams from Syria lives in Rhineland-Palatinate and is friends with a local woman. Both women's children were together in kindergarten, and they also met at the playground. Their relationship with each other was free of the expectations and hierarchies that sometimes characterise volunteer relationships, as they found each other as two women who simply liked each other. At the same time, they shared a psychologically stressful life experience, as their mothers had become seriously ill. Shams explains: “Stefanie has a positive role in my life. She has made me feel that I can make friends in Germany“ (SsInt-BICC-SC-011-DEU). Her relationship to Stefanie can be described as an anchor relationship, which is quite an exceptional form of local connectivity for displaced people in the first years in the country of reception, as they are usually regarded as refugees rather than as individuals.

This identification potential of normalization [through anchor relationships] should not be underestimated: For once, one can be a human being first and foremost and not a 'refugee'! (Bernhard & Röhrer, 2020, p. 52).

5.3 Discrimination and racism in established–outsider figurations

Some of our respondents also reported experiencing discrimination and racism, which are indications of unequal power relations, social and cultural conflicts and boundary-making processes between ‘the established’ and ‘the outsiders’ that appear to be quite normal in German cities (Hüttermann, 2018). Displaced people and migrants in general face discriminatory practices on the housing market, for instance. When **Hamoudi**’s family grew, and his flat became too small, he had to look for a bigger flat. He had been searching for a flat for a year when he was told about a vacant flat. However, when Hamoudi called the landlord, he immediately refused to talk with him further as soon as he heard his accent. This was not an isolated incident in his search for a flat (SsInt-BICC-SC-003).

Udai, a young Syrian student, recalls one racist incident. A border official detained him for 12 hours because of suspected illegal entry. A friend eventually helped him out of the situation:

I had one bad incident. I mean, in all my years, I wouldn't say anyone has ever caused me harm by racism, except for one. And I was travelling around. I was in England. I was coming back to Germany. I wanted to see my friends. And at the time [...] I flew back to Berlin, and a police officer insisted that my passport was fake. I was like, 'What do you mean, my passport is fake?' He was like, 'Oh yeah, you're coming to apply for asylum.' I'm like, 'No, I've been living here for years.' And the guy insisted that my passport was fake, even though it had a German visa, British visa and so on in it. [...] He kept me like in a room for twelve hours. I immediately called the lawyer from my fraternity. I was very lucky. I went to a fraternity. So everyone there was a lawyer. They called around and just said, 'Hey, this is unacceptable. You can't do that. You have to let him go now [...].' He confiscated my passport. But I was able to go to the embassy and just get a second one. And we had a big legal battle. Of course, there was nothing. It was purely fabricated. There is nothing. You know, the prosecutor just said, 'You must be kidding me. Why are you wasting our taxpayer's money on this stupid case?' (BInt-BICC-MT-006-DEU).

The different social categories of gender, religion and nationality intersect in the case of several women who reported discrimination for wearing a headscarf. Overall, **Darya** feels welcome in Germany. Originating from Afghanistan, Darya arrived in Germany with her family in 2010 when she was 12. Since then, she has become a German citizen. However, in the interview, she spoke in detail and very emotionally about incidences of discrimination in her everyday life because she is wearing a headscarf. One incident occurred when she had already been studying at university. A couple walked by at the

bus stop, and the man said: “Hey, can you show my girlfriend how you do the headscarf, so we can also get more money from the job centre?”. But the “worst two years” of her life, although having experienced a lot in Afghanistan and Greece, were when she went to school in the little town in Rhineland Palatinate, where she and her sister were hiding in the breaks and went home crying every single day, as they were bullied as the only girls wearing headscarves. At the time of the interview, she had just lost her mini-job due to the COVID-19 crisis. Now she fears not finding a new job, just like her sister, who had been rejected 15 times in her job search because of her headscarf (SsInt-BICC-DS-002-DEU; see also Steffens, 2021).

5.4 Concluding remarks

How does connectivity at the local level shape refugees’ everyday lives and their prospects of socio-economic inclusion—or marginalisation—in Germany? To address this question, we presented insights into diverse social figurations in which displaced people are or can become embedded. Local practices of solidarity and support play a decisive role in these figurations.

We found that many displaced people are embedded in ethnicity-based figurations, which often provide a lot of information and—even unconditional—support. A shared sense of origin and belonging are the central features of this figuration. In some cases, these ethnicity- and solidarity-based networks are more organised and institutionalised and maintained through personal interactions, social media and events. But not all of our respondents relied on or wanted to be closely involved in these ethnicity-based networks.

Many refugees benefitted from the support and solidarity of volunteers, most often German locals. Volunteers helped them pave the way to a new place to live (outside of a reception centre), employment and education. Local volunteers were often also decisive for refugees’ capacities to navigate through the landscapes of the local and transnational bureaucracy and thus provided support in asylum procedures, appeals against negative asylum decisions or family reunification processes.

Several respondents reported their experiences of racism and discrimination in Germany. While these are not necessarily tied to being better or more loosely embedded in local network relations, we nonetheless see such unpleasant and often intimidating experiences as an indication of wider figurational changes at the neighbourhood level and in the German society at large. Established–outsider figurations are characterised by unequal power relations, social and cultural conflicts and boundary-making processes between local residents and new arrivals, including refugees and other migrants, who are seen as ‘outsiders’ by individuals who see themselves as ‘better established’.

Key findings

- *Displaced people are embedded in ethnic-based figurations, coming from a shared sense of origin and belonging and providing support.*
- *The new social constellation between refugees and volunteers is an important source of support for refugees' integration in Germany. Contacts to volunteers open paths that would otherwise be very difficult to take.*
- *Nevertheless, some refugees, who arrive as 'outsiders' to a new place inhabited by 'the established', report discrimination and racism. In general, the established-outsider figuration is marked by highly unequal power relations.*

6. Family figurations after displacement

Section 3 has already shown how refugees uphold connectivity with their family members and others during their displacement. New family figurations evolve after displacement, which are largely shaped by the governance of mobility. We ask how people are connected across different scales and what kind of support they provide among these networks. This section will investigate the connectivity of displaced people once they have found refuge in Germany.

In the following, we will present different practices of ‘doing family’ on a transnational scale under the conditions of displacement:

- The reunited nuclear family figuration;
- the involuntarily separated family figuration;
- the transnational extended family figuration.

6.1 The reunited nuclear family figuration

The reunited nuclear family is a figuration of a family that has been separated for some months or years but finally reunited in Germany. In this figuration, mostly one parent went to Germany irregularly intending to spare the more vulnerable family members the strains of the difficult journey and bring them to Germany later to join them through family reunification.

Tahir from Syria is married—his wife now lives with him in Germany, but they did not leave Syria together. Tahir had received information from some contacts who had come to Germany before him that the family reunification process is a safe way to bring spouses or children. Tahir and his wife thus decided that he would leave on his own first and have his wife follow him through that formal process. After his arrival, Tahir supported his wife in Syria financially, and he also helped his mother with money for her onward journey. He remembers feeling very guilty after his arrival in Germany, as he was already safe while his family remained at risk in Syria. Therefore, during the family reunification process and his mother’s journey, Tahir’s strong sense of obligation to bring his family here as soon as possible and his need to be reunited with his loved ones made him feel depressed and defeated.

After receiving his refugee status, the family reunification process indeed enabled him to bring his wife to join him in Germany from Syria as he could prove that he was married by showing their family register and marriage contract, having received legal support from counselling agencies during the application process. His wife came to Germany about 2.5 years after Tahir had arrived in Germany. Tahir’s mother also came to

Germany. She could not enter legally, so she travelled irregularly from Syria to Europe—first to Turkey and then over the Aegean to Greece. His mother could not leave Greece immediately as planned and ended up living in a refugee shelter in Greece for a whole year before she could irregularly travel on to Germany. She used smuggling services and joined other travellers during her journey. She also stayed in touch with Tahir and other relatives in Europe, who attempted to accompany her through the process. She then lived in a refugee shelter in North Rhine-Westphalia for a month before moving in with Tahir and his wife. She recalls that her time in Greece was difficult because she wanted to be reunited with her children. Besides suffering from diabetes, she was also worried because she was an older woman on her own in Greece.

Tahir’s example shows the emotional burden of separation. When Tahir was alone in Germany, he felt responsible and depressed because his family was still in danger. He was supposed to take the dangerous irregular journey to provide a safe journey for his wife. However, he also wanted to bring his mother to Germany, but there was no possibility to provide her with a safe journey as well, as the family reunification process only works for members of the nuclear family. Thus, despite suffering from ill health, she had to make the dangerous journey alone. Now that his wife and his mother have joined him in Germany, he is still worried about his two sisters in Syria (SsInt-BICC-GG-001-DEU).

Rosa from Syria shares her perspective as a wife who joined her husband through family reunification. Her husband first went to Turkey intending to find work there. As he could not find work, he decided to move on to Europe and followed an irregular journey. Once he had reached Germany, he fell ill in the shelter. After his recovery, he told Rosa to move to Turkey as in Turkey, she would be able to apply for her and her children’s visa. This point in her life is very emotional for Rosa. Crying, she tells the interviewer about the situation:

That was good and not good. Good: I go to another country for my daughters, but here is my home, my parents. That was hard. The decision was like a game in the beginning, but when it happens, for real, oh I’m leaving my parents, I’m leaving my home, that was hard (SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU).

Rosa feels that her two daughters and her parents needed her help. But her mother affirmed that it was the right decision for the sake of her children.

Rosa and her two daughters had to cross the border to Turkey irregularly, which was very dangerous and difficult. After having tried ten times, they finally were able to cross the border on foot. They went to Istanbul, where they met Rosa's brother, who had reached Istanbul one month earlier. The children were happy to be together with their cousins. Rosa and her children had to wait for six months for the papers from the German embassy for family reunification to arrive. As their passports had expired, they had to be renewed. However, this was not possible in Turkey, as the Syrian embassy does not issue passports. The family in Aleppo then hired a lawyer to make sure that the passports were issued. The process was expensive, but they finally got their visa. The family now faced another difficult farewell. They had to say goodbye to Rosa's brother. Rosa cried while telling the interviewer how she experienced this farewell:

[Other] people are looking at the airport, why are these people crying all the time, it was very hard. [They do not understand that] This is not a vacation, we know we can't see each other (SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU).

Rosa's brother decided against moving to Germany because their parents were alone in Syria. He hoped that the border would be opened and that he could see their parents again. When Rosa and her two daughters finally met their husband/father after one year's separation, they had mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were very happy to be reunited, but on the other, they mourned the separation from their other family members. Rosa explained: "We lost each other. Family plays a big role for us" (SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU).

Rosa's wider family is now spread across several countries: "My sister, she now lives in Iraq, my brother in Turkey and we are here, and my parents in Afrin. We are all spread out. This is bad, this is not good" (SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU). Her parents are sick; all the people who stayed behind in Syria are old. Rosa's other brother died in the war in Aleppo. Even though she is in regular contact with her sister and brother, they find this situation difficult. There is no work in Iraq, and in Turkey, the situation for Syrian Kurds is difficult. Her children also miss their family members. Whenever there are family celebrations, the children are sad to not have them around: "My daughters are always sad, why are they alone here. Where is my aunt, where is grandmother?" (SsInt-BICC-MT-002-DEU).

As shown in Section 4, family separation due to displacement is a common pattern. The families then hope to reunite again after the family member who has taken the journey has arrived in a safe country. If this is possible, the figuration of the separated family transforms into that of a reunited nuclear family. Despite the relief of being together again, both narratives also show how the reunited family feels guilty having left other family members in precarious and dangerous situations in Syria or a neighbouring country. The decision of who can leave and hopefully build a new life in the future and who stays behind weighs

heavily. People must decide whose welfare they will put first. If they go abroad with their children, their elderly parents must be left behind alone. If they stay in Syria instead, they risk their future and that of their children.

The narratives are also crucial to understanding the contradictions between the legal framework of family reunification and the families' understanding of family. The legal understanding of 'family' in Europe as the nuclear family with two married parents and their minor children developed from the ideal of the conventional middle-class family ("*bürgerliche Familie*") during industrialisation (Hill & Kopp, 2013). As there is no legal pathway for other members of the extended family to join, the families resort to finding irregular pathways. The example of Tahir's mother is a case in point. So, with the figuration of the reunited nuclear family being structured by the legal framework for family reunification, it contradicts the social reality of most displaced people who would also include other family members in their understanding of 'family'.

6.2 The involuntarily separated family figuration

The figuration of the transnational nuclear family figuration was not very frequent among our sample. However, this figuration is characterised by an onerous psychological burden on the people concerned. Compared to the cases of the reunited nuclear family that have also endured separation, the cases discussed here are about protracted separation that leads to enforced transnational family lives. We will present two cases of protracted family separation that differ according to who took the journey and whether it is the spouse or a child who is left without the other family members. Omar is an unaccompanied minor from Syria who arrived in Germany, intending to bring the other nuclear family members to join him. Dahab, an Eritrean mother, went to Germany first, also with the intention to bring her children to join her through family reunification.

Omar fled from Syria in August 2015, as his father, a physician, was threatened for refusing to treat wounded IS combatants. Omar had to convince his father that it would be best if he went to Europe alone. When he arrived in Germany in August 2015, he was still a minor. Around one year later, he was issued refugee protection. Two months later, a few days before he turned 18, he applied for family reunification for his parents. The rejection on his application came some weeks after Omar had turned 18. According to a judgement by the ECJ in April 2018 (C-550/16), the right to apply for family reunification cannot depend upon the speed of authorities processing an asylum procedure stating that the date of application should be relevant, not the date of issue. Therefore, Omar appealed against the rejection with the support of an NGO. At the time of our interview, two years had passed, and Omar had still not received a

decision. He has been separated from his parents for five years now, which put him under severe stress:

I was a child as I entered Germany, 15 years old. Every child needs their parents. (...) I always dreamed of them being with me in Germany. (...) the same dream every day (SsInt-BICC-DS-005-DEU).

Omar had planned to meet his parents in northern Iraq in July 2020. Everything was arranged already from the flat to the visa, when the COVID-19 pandemic made the trip impossible. Omar compares his disappointment with not meeting his parents with waking up from a nightmare. In this nightmare, he dreamt that he wanted to have a glass of water but could not find it and stayed thirsty forever. Omar supports his parents financially. His support is crucial to financing the education of his three sisters at private universities in Syria. Omar talks to his parents twice a week. They assure each other that everything is fine, and they should not worry. Nevertheless, both sides are aware that this is not true. Whereas he upholds the transnational connectivity with his family in Syria, he has no contact with his extended family members living in Germany (SsInt-BICC-Ds-005-DEU).

Dahab from Eritrea has been involuntarily separated from her children for around six years already. When she decided to flee Eritrea, her husband had already died. She left her two children aged four and eight with her mother in Ethiopia as the journey to Europe was too dangerous for children. Dahab hoped to avail of family reunification when she arrived and was recognised as a refugee. On her journey, she met her current partner Solomon with whom she is now living together in Germany. The couple has three children now. After Dahab was recognised as a refugee in Germany in 2016, she applied for privileged family reunification, as she fulfilled all relevant criteria.⁸ When she did not hear from the authorities for quite some time, her lawyer inquired at the German embassy in Addis Ababa about the process. After a long wait, the embassy replied that the children could not receive a visa in Ethiopia as they are not registered as refugees. Instead, they must go to Kenya and apply for a visa there. Dahab learnt that the children should have registered as refugees at the Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs (ARRA), the Ethiopian authority cooperating with UNHCR, within the first two years of arrival in Ethiopia, which she was not aware of. As two years had passed already, the registration was no longer possible. Moreover, she feared that the children would have to live in a refugee camp for an indefinite period instead of living with her children's grandmother. As Dahab's

mother is elderly, she can no longer take care of the children and has thus asked Dahab to bring her children to Germany.

Dahab is extremely worried. During daytime, she thinks of her children and every night, she dreams of them, speaking to them in her dreams. She does not sleep well. With the help of a local volunteer, she approached a local counselling organisation that tried to help her speed up the reunification process. Even though the social worker tried hard, she did not succeed. Dahab also receives support from local volunteers, and all fail to understand why there is such a long delay. So, with the financial support of volunteers and the local church, Dahab and her then one-year-old daughter travelled to the Tigray region in Ethiopia in Spring 2018 to register her children at ARRA. It was a joyful reunion after five years of separation, and her sons were happy to get to know their little sister. However, Dahab failed to register her children with ARRA. Luckily, the following year, the children were finally registered as refugees at ARRA with the help of the newly established Family Assistance Programme by IOM.⁹ In January 2020, Dahab travelled to Ethiopia again, this time together with her now two daughters and Solomon on the occasion of a reunion of her partner's family. As the bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea improved, older people could more easily cross the border. Solomon's parents travelled from Eritrea to Addis Ababa as his father needed hospital treatment in Addis Ababa. This was the opportunity for a family reunion after many years. His brother, who lives in the United Kingdom, also joined the family reunion in Addis Ababa. Afterwards, Dahab travelled to the Tigray region to meet her children and her mother (BInt-BICC-SC-005-DEU).

During that time, Dahab was optimistic that her family reunification will happen soon, as her children had finally received the long-awaited appointment at the German embassy. To the family's disappointment, the appointment was cancelled as the pandemic had just started. While the family waited for the embassy to reopen, a violent conflict in the Tigray region began in November 2020. The whole region was cut off resulting in an interruption of connectivity, flights and land transportation. Dahab did not have any information about her two sons and her mother for around four months. She did not even know whether they were still alive or had to flee the region. This situation was emotionally challenging. Finally, in February 2021, she received the information that her children were safe and back in their hometown after being displaced for three months. A few weeks later, they finally had their interview for the visa in Addis Ababa. The trip to the capital was very difficult to arrange due to the ongoing conflict. She also did not know how the embassy would decide: like many other Eritreans, Dahab's

⁸ Criteria for privileged family reunification are: the recognition as a refugee under the Geneva Convention, an application within the first three months after recognition of protection status and children who are under 18 years of age (Grote, 2017).

⁹ The IOM's Family Assistance Programme, financed by the German Federal Foreign Office, operates in nine countries: https://germany.iom.int/sites/default/files/FAP/Family_Assistance_Programme_Info%20Sheet_eng_09-2019.pdf

children do not have the required birth certificates. Moreover, with the media reporting a threat of famine in northern Ethiopia, Dahab worried even more about her children. The indefinite time of waiting, the uncertainty of what the result of the application will be, and the worries about her two children living in a conflict-affected region put a heavy psychological burden on her.

Dahab sends money through an informal remittance system by giving money to an Ethiopian man in another city in Germany who forwards this money to Dahab's mother in Ethiopia. This financial support is urgently needed, as Dahab's mother and her stepfather are retired and do not have enough money to support the children. As displaced children do not have the right to go to government schools (EInt-BICC-SC-019-DEU), her children are attending a private school. If Dahab cannot pay the fees, her children cannot go to school at all (BInt-BICC-005-DEU).

The involuntarily separated family figuration is characterised by an enormous psychological stress on all family members (see Section 7). This separation has often been prolonged due to bureaucratic obstacles, protracted conflicts in the region of origin and the COVID-19 pandemic. Worse even, minors are forcibly separated from their parent(s) and continue to live in highly precarious and dangerous conditions whilst their parents presumably live in safety. This might have a severe impact on the relationship between the family members, as they often have not seen each other for many years. For example, the relationship between the parent in Germany and the children in a country of first reception is strained, as the children do not understand why parents cannot bring them to Germany. The psychological stress experienced in this figuration may also hinder integration processes in Germany as the sorrows deter people from concentrating on acquiring new life skills, such as learning German. In both presented cases, the family members, if possible, upheld their connections through regular contact. Moreover, the family members living in Germany often support the other family members financially. For many, this is the only source of livelihood. It was only through the remittances of Dahab that her children could attend school. Dahab is also trying to support the mobility of her children, yet so far without success.

6.3 The transnational extended family figuration

A common feature among nearly all of our interviewees is that their relatives live in different countries. Therefore, a significant part of everyday life of displaced people in Germany is the embeddedness in a transnational extended family.

Aafia arrived in Germany together with her daughter in 2016, after having left Syria in late 2014. She initially planned to travel from Syria to Sweden to join her mother, sister and brother there. She left from Syria to Turkey and went to Greece over the Aegean. Contrary to her plans, she could not travel on from Greece immediately and stayed there for 18 months. In Greece, she lived with an old friend for a while and then rented her own apartment. Even though she was supported by her family in searching for any legal or irregular ways to leave for Sweden that would guarantee her arrival there, she was unsuccessful and, therefore, hesitant because of this unpredictability. Aafia ultimately decided to go to Germany because she wanted to leave Greece as quickly as possible and had heard from many people that it was easy to reach Germany and stay there. Besides one of her close friends whom she had met in Greece and who went to Germany before her, Aafia made a few friends in the village where she now lives, mainly other women who came to Germany from Syria. The women talk regularly, but Aafia's circle in her village is rather small, and her primary contact is her old friend from Greece. Aafia keeps in touch with a counsellor in her community who has been supporting her, mostly on bureaucratic or administrative issues that she cannot handle by herself. She has also befriended some of her neighbours, most of them seniors.

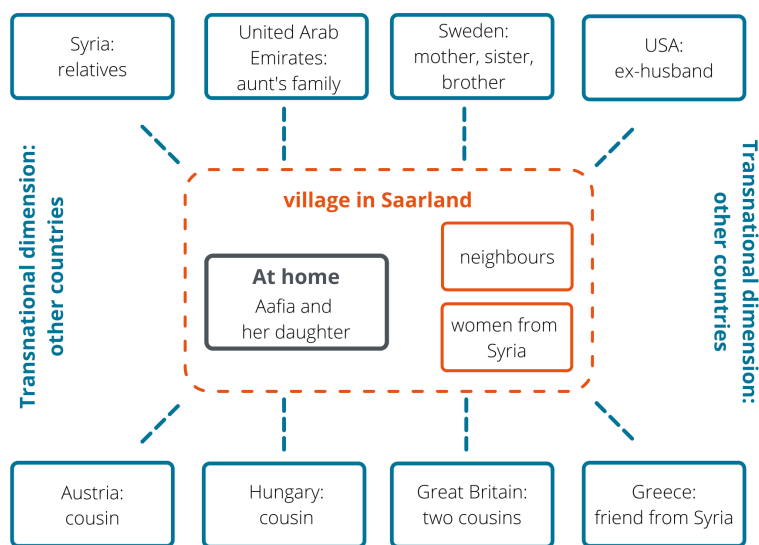
Aafia maintains close contact with her family none of whom live in her immediate vicinity. Her mother, who currently lives in Sweden with her sister, visited her once from Sweden. According to Aafia, her siblings have obtained Swedish citizenship by now. Aafia's family in Sweden has tried to support her financially and emotionally whenever possible during her time in Greece and since she has been living in Germany. Aafia also has a cousin in Vienna, one in Hungary, two in Great Britain, and her aunt's family lives in Dubai. She keeps in touch with them but on an irregular basis. They were not involved or supported her during her journey to Germany. One of her relatives still lives in Syria, because she did not dare to leave the country with her three children, and because she is taking care of her sick mother. Aafia communicates with her regularly via WhatsApp and phone. Aafia's ex-husband, the father of her daughter, lives in the United States. He had planned to visit her and her daughter but had to postpone the visit because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They stay in close contact because of her daughter (SsInt-BICC-GG-003-DEU).

Aafia's network differs across the different scales. Except for her relatives in Syria, all other relatives live in different 'countries of reception' but none in Germany. Her local contacts are all non-kin.

Hawa and her three children arrived in Germany in 2016, joining her husband through family reunification. Hawa’s familial network stretches across several countries. Her sister, parents, two brothers and a nephew live in Vienna. An uncle of hers lives in London, a friend in Paris and aunts in Dubai and Canada. Only one sister, who is ill, still lives in Syria in their town of origin with her husband and does not want to migrate but would really like to visit Hawa. Hawa talks to her family in Syria and Austria, in particular with her mother and sister, almost every day. Hawa feels at home when visiting her relatives in Austria. During the pandemic, Hawa did not visit her family in Vienna because she felt that the danger to infect her elderly parents with COVID-19 was too high. Despite having her close relatives in Austria, she does not plan to move there. She feels obliged to stay in Germany and give something back to the country (SsInt-BICC-MP-007-DEU).

Similar to Aafia, Hawa’s kin network stretches across several countries. The majority of her family members have settled in different receiving countries; only her sister’s family still lives in Syria. Likewise, both Aafia and Hawa did not mention anyone who is important for them living in other parts of Germany. Whereas Aafia is well connected locally with friends in her village, Hawa only has a few friends. Hawa’s main focus is her own family with her now four children. Both examples show that their everyday life is mainly influenced by transnational family relations.

Figure 7: Aafia’s network connectivity across different scales



6.4 Maintaining relations across the distance

‘Doing family’ on a transnational scale involves different practices to uphold familial connections. Transnational practices include mobility practices (see Section 3), transactions of resources such as money or material objects, communicative practices and care practices (Etzold et al., 2019, p. 25; Sauer et al., 2018). This section investigates different practices of ‘doing family’ on a transnational scale under conditions of displacement.

Financial and emotional support at a transnational scale

As Aafia’s and Hawa’s relatives live in a relatively stable economic environment in receiving countries, there is no need to financially support them. The situation, of course, is different when family members live in precarious situations or even protracted displacement in countries of first reception or the country of origin. **Darya**, who was born in Afghanistan and has been living in Germany since 2010 when she was 12 years old, still has family members living in protracted displacement situations. One aunt still lives in Afghanistan with eight children. They live in great poverty, as described drastically by Darya: “They have to sell [the labour of] their children to have something to eat in the evening” (SsInt-BICC-DS-002). While Darya’s family sends a little money to them, one son of her aunt who also lives in Germany does this more extensively. Darya’s family mainly supports a cousin who is living in Iran now, sending her around 100€ every two months. The Taliban murdered this cousin’s father before her and her family’s eyes.

She uses the money for existential things and to go to university. They keep in contact via social media; Darya’s mother visited her twice in Iran since living in Germany, Darya joined her once. They are trying to get her cousin to come to Germany via a student visa. Darya is already busy looking for a suitable place at a German university. For Darya, it is important to get her out of her situation in Iran, not that much because she is missing her cousin, but because she is fearing for her life, as she tells them of pogroms against the Afghan minority by Iranians. The difficult situation of her cousin in Iran is a great psychological burden to Darya (SsInt-BICC-DS-002).

Abulraheem regularly sends money to cousins or friends who still live in war-torn Syria, in Idlib or Hama. He used to send money over every month via a money transfer agent, who charged around four per cent for the transfers. He now supports relatives and

friends on an irregular basis with smaller amounts because from his experiences during his time in Turkey, he knows that every little helps. Of what he earns, “one or two days per month, I do not work for myself, but for others”, Abdullaheem explained. He remarked that the “catastrophe” in Syria is now lasting for ten years and that others, i.e. fellow Syrians who had to flee or who lived in another country before, are sending less money. He was very concerned about this trend noting that people in Syria continue to need food, medication and many other basic provisions. “A whole generation is growing up [in Syria] without any education, without a chance for a better life. A lot of people have given up hope“ (SsInt-BICC-BE-003-DEU).

Asma's emotional closeness to her mother and sisters in Syria becomes apparent in how they support Asma during her new pregnancy. After having had two stillbirths, the new pregnancy is accompanied by many fears. Even though her mother and her two sisters are geographically apart, they are the first to know about the examination at her gynaecologist and never miss whenever she has an appointment there: “[They all have in their] calendar: Asma has an appointment.” Asma, who daily chats with her mother via WhatsApp, tells the interviewer how her mother awaits her call:

And when my mother knows I have an appointment with the gynaecologist, she always waits to call me. Everything ok? She doesn't say hello. When I say everything is ok, then says: How are you? (SsInt-BICC-SC-001-DEU).

After talking to her mother, she talks to her two sisters in Syria and her husband. Especially during important life events, it is difficult for people not to be able to bridge the geographical distance. In these cases, communication that can only take place at a transnational scale is not an equivalent substitute to face-to-face contact.

Disruption of connectivity

This section has focused on the connectivity of displaced people with family members and other persons. But there are also examples of people who have voluntarily cut connections to family members. For example, many women from Syria get divorced from their husbands once they are in Germany (Wiebking, 2021). Some respondents told us about involuntary disruptions of connectivity to other people due to their displacement or the conflict situation, but only one woman shared in her interview how she deliberately avoids any contact with her family.

Dala, a Syrian woman in her forties, had experienced mobility before displacement as well as fundamental fragmentations in her family and thus phases of separation and joint mobility with family members. Dala had lived in Oman between 1997 and 2006, where her husband worked as a labourer. Since he beat her, she divorced him and left with her daughter to Syria. Her strictly religious family objected to her divorce and return. Her brother even threatened to kill her, so she hid from him and moved several times within Syria. Later, after Dala had married a second time, her parents and brother accepted her again. But in the early phase of the war, her second husband was abducted by the Syrian secret service, and she found out later—after three years of fear, waiting, and depression—that he had been killed. At that time, the political persecution of opponents and the war got much worse in Damascus. She, her daughter, mother and sister-in-law fled to Turkey via Lebanon. With the support of her elder brother, who had already moved to Germany and professional smugglers, they then crossed the Aegean Sea together to a Greek island, and later moved on towards western Europe via the Balkan route. Eventually, they arrived in Germany in late autumn of 2015. Most of her family members tried to move close to her brother's place of living in the south of Germany, but she and her, now adult, daughter decided to live in another city in the west of Germany. Dala suffers from depression, and her feelings towards her family are very ambivalent. On the one hand, she deliberately tries to avoid contact with her family, on the other hand, she still considers moving to the south of Germany to be closer to them as her mother wants the whole family to live in the same area. Dala says about her family: “I don't love my family. My heart is bleeding for my mother, but I don't love her” (SsInt-BICC-DS-014-DEU).

6.5 Concluding remarks

This section shed light on the different family figurations under conditions of displacement and the social practices that families use to uphold a transnational family life. The cases show how our respondents' connectivity and transnational relations are a crucial part of everyday life. For some, this transnational life may be voluntary and accepted, while for others, the transnational dimension of the family is involuntary and emotionally strained. Dahab, for example, would like to overcome the involuntary separation from her children, whereas being embedded into a transnational extended family is unproblematic for Solomon or Hawa.

There is no clear cut separation between the figurations presented here. The same person can, for example, be part of the reunited nuclear family while also being embedded in a transnational extended family figuration. It also becomes clear how

figurations might change over time: Families who have been separated due to displacement might have been able to reunite after some time has passed.

Connectivity between family members embedded in a transnational family figuration is being upheld through different practices. By talking to each other or using the chat on social media—as long as there is no disruption of technical connectivity such in Dahab’s case—and by providing support, they “do family” over geographical distance. Family members in Germany would want to financially support their relatives in other countries who live under precarious socio-economic conditions. Only through Dahab’s remittances can her children in Ethiopia go to school. But support can also go in the other direction: Asma receives emotional support from her mother and sisters in Syria.

Practices of “doing family” would also include personal visits. For transnational families spread over different EU countries, such as in Aafia’s case, family visits are much easier to realize. However, being able to visit relations largely depends on the asylum regime and the respective residence permit. A return to the country of origin is nearly impossible, as beneficiaries of protection could risk the revocation of their protection status. Therefore, families try to meet in third countries, such as Solomon’s extended family in Ethiopia.

The different case stories make the contradiction of what the legal framework defines as family and what refugees understand as family very clear. The figurations of the separated family evolve out of the governance of displacement: Legal pathways for the whole nuclear family to Germany are extremely rare so that a common pattern is the mobility of one family member aiming to bring other families members to join them later through family reunification.

Most interviewees neither wish to live purely within the nuclear family in Germany while other family members are still in protracted displacement nor do they want to be separated from family members for a very long time.

Key findings

- *After displacement, different family figurations (e.g. the reunited nuclear family, the involuntary separated family, the transnational extended family) evolve, which are largely shaped by the asylum governance.*
- *Despite multiple bureaucratic constraints and mobility restrictions, refugees engage in diverse communicative and transactional practices to maintain their connections, engage in transnational family lives and support one another financially and emotionally.*
- *Transnational connectivity is a part of refugee’s everyday life. As shown above, ongoing family separation and concerns over family members may hinder integration processes in Germany.*
- *The legal understanding of family as a nuclear family differs greatly from the familial practices and feelings of relatedness of refugee families.*

7. Cross-cutting issues

This section considers cross-cutting issues that arose during our research and analysis. The first part deals with trauma and psychological well-being of some of our respondents. The second part emphasizes the political agency of refugees. It investigates how refugees counter marginalising and displacing forces through political activism.

7.1 Trauma and psychological well-being

Many displaced people have experienced traumatic events; often, they were not only exposed to one specific traumatic event but an accumulation of several traumatic experiences. Traumatic events refer to one's own experience of violence and witnessing violence against others. Even after displacement, stress factors such as legal insecurity or the separation from family members may add to psychological strains (Alpak et al., 2015; Mlodoč, 2017).

Fleeing itself is an extreme psychological and physical experience that is enormously stressful and traumatic (see Section 3).

Malek from Afghanistan remembers the hardships and the terrible situations he experienced while he was fleeing:

Between Iran and Turkey and Afghanistan and Iran, I saw so many people, just dead bodies on the way. I also saw people in our group who didn't have any water, I didn't have any water with me either, they couldn't go on (...) on the way, they were already dead. They were also such strong young people (SsInt-BICC-GG-002-DEU).

Hussein left with his family from Syria in the winter of 2015/16 and arrived in Germany in February 2016 via the Balkan route. His children were still small, which made fleeing even more difficult. Above all, seeing the dangers that the children faced at such a young age was extremely worrisome. He recounts a tough time on the road to Turkey, the moment when he feared for the life of his child:

I don't forget those three days. I see my daughter, I think, you know, one hour [more] and then [she is] dead, she can't go [any further]. It was very cold (...) Really cold and snow, and we are in the street (...), no food, no nothing (SsInt-BICC-GG-004-DEU).

His children survived, but Hussein witnessed how a six-month-old baby died in the extreme cold.

For **Hisham's** four-year-old son, crossing the Syrian–Turkish border was traumatic. By chance, his son was the first of the family to cross to the Turkish side, where he had to wait for his

family for about an hour, surrounded by other refugees he did not know. This forced separation from his family was a terrifying experience for him. He dreamt of this incident for a very long time, and only now, six years later, has he started talking about it (BInt-BICC-MT-001-DEU).

In Libya, **Dawit and Genet** and some of the people they travelled with were dropped off at a small room owned by three to four smugglers. Dawit described this time as particularly difficult and very dangerous. They were stuck in Libya, living in a small space with approximately 30 people, waiting to save enough money to be able to pay for their departure to Europe. Many people shared small apartments and were not allowed to leave—which would have been dangerous for them as well. They only received food once a day in small rations and were only allowed to shower once a week: In addition to the cramped and oppressive living conditions, Dawit describes the situation he and his girlfriend found themselves in as highly dangerous, especially for women. 'Unprotected'—without male persons on their side—women were often violently and sexually abused in the apartment or taken outside to be abused and left there. While they were in this apartment, at least one woman had been killed in an attack. As Dawit describes, his girlfriend was safe due to his presence, but especially women who travelled alone faced these dangers (SsInt-BICC-GG-008-DEU).

Smith from Nigeria found work in Libya and had worked there for several years. When the conflict in Libya evolved, he and other people from Africa and Bangladesh were arrested by soldiers and brought to a farmhouse to build defence sandbag walls. After a month, the group was taken to a warehouse, which was then hit by an airstrike. Many were wounded: Smith himself was injured in his leg, and others had more serious and even fatal injuries. Smith remembers them crying with pain from their burns. Four people died as a result of the injuries sustained during that explosion.

After some days, they were forced to board a fishing boat, almost entirely without provisions. After around five days at sea, the boat loaded with more than 870 people was rescued and taken to Italy. During these days at sea, Smith was in fear for his life, and he can still not forget the scary clicking sounds of the wood, which let him think that the next wave would capsize the boat. He explains the dangerous situation in the Mediterranean Sea and his close relationship with God ever since:

I made a vow while in the Mediterranean Sea. It is quite difficult to reflect on this for me, because I understand that I lost my life there in the Mediterranean Sea. And the life I am living now is purely a gift from God because

the circumstances already took that [my old life] away from me right there in the middle of the Sea. And I made a vow to serve Him for the rest of my life. And as soon as I made this vow, I became peaceful despite the difficult situation we were at sea where there was no hope for us to be alive or to survive that situation. And I found peace. [...] with prayers, praises and thanks to God Almighty, I could subdue the trauma [...] The trauma of losing my profession, the trauma of missing my family, the trauma of harassment and intimidation in Libya, the trauma from the fear of death in the sea” (BInt-BICC-SC-014-DEU).

The last sentence describes how he experienced several traumatic events over time.

Even after arriving in a country of reception, there might be other experiences that can deepen mental wounds. Some women report that they do not feel safe in the refugee shelters, for example, when they cannot lock showers or even their rooms (Christ et al., 2019). Women having experienced sexual violence might have to recount the trauma when the interviewer at BAMF is not specialised on the topic (EInt-BICC-SC-002-DEU). Prolonged legal uncertainty or the protracted family reunification process with uncertain outcomes can also affect mental health (see Section 4).

Not everyone who has had traumatic experiences subsequently suffers from a mental health disorder such as post-traumatic stress disorder. However, even in Germany, situations like those described above as well as the legal uncertainty and sense of waiting can affect people’s psychological well-being, not to speak of spoiling any chance of mental healing. Many people seeking protection describe the phase of reception as a time of waiting as shown above. For most of our interviewees, the situation of waiting was resolved after a few months or one to two years, when their asylum application was approved and they could move to a flat of their own. For those people with an insecure protection status, the situation of living in limbo continues. **Feben** from Eritrea, for example, is still waiting for the result of her appeal after her asylum application was rejected. The young woman would love to earn her own money and no longer be dependent on the jobcentre. She went to the foreigners’ authority several times, but had not received a work permit so far. Feben explains how she feels to be condemned to doing nothing as a young woman wanting to work:

I can learn, do an apprenticeship. I can live independently. I did not want to sit like a poor woman [only at home]. I am young, I have strength, I want to work. Now I am like an old woman, sitting at home, getting only money from social services. I asked for a work permit a thousand times (SsInt-BICC-SC-006-DEU).

Feben has been waiting for three years now, and the enduring feeling of being underwhelmed and bored as she is not allowed to work, causes her stress. Since Feben is neither allowed to attend a German course nor work, her thoughts keep turning to her mother and sister in Eritrea. She is very worried about her sister, who is in prison in Eritrea because of her faith. Connectivity to her sister was cut; none of the family has any information about her sister.

The insecurity and indefinite time of waiting in the case of the families experiencing protracted involuntary separation puts a heavy psychological burden on them. The figuration of the involuntarily separated family is not an exceptional case. According to an expert working in an NGO, the situation for children and minors is especially challenging for their mental and physical well-being. Another NGO worker reports about the situation of unaccompanied minors in refugee camps:

I have a lot of cases with unaccompanied minors who are in these camps in Sudan and Ethiopia (...) and there are children who are waiting four to five years to reunite with their family and they have the feeling that their parents in Germany are not doing anything and that's why they are still there (EInt-BICC-SC-010-DEU).

In the camps, they do not have access to education and often feel that they are losing valuable time of their lives. The psychological implications can be devastating: The NGO worker supervises the case of a boy who has been staying in a camp for five years and is so desperate that he even talks about suicide. In Germany, the parents are also desperate. The fact that their children are trapped in precarious and dangerous situations worries them constantly. The emotional strains are immense, as an expert working for an NGO reports:

This means that people are separated from their families for an enormously long time. I know this from many people who get extreme psychological problems through this separation process because they can't stand it anymore. I have people who are with me every week [come to counselling], and it doesn't help when I explain to them that it's no use, (...) they are so desperate that they simply don't know what to do anymore (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU).

According to him, many of these people have experienced violence, torture, danger and imprisonment in Eritrea or while they were fleeing to Europe. Further stressful experiences, such as a protracted or failed family reunification process, can lead to increasingly complex implications for people’s mental health.

Public authorities often fail to recognise or address these effects on the mental health of those affected. According to a staff member of an authority, the uncertain situation also has an impact on integration processes:

Many had already settled in quite well [in Germany], had found jobs. But then the waiting time got longer and longer, and they realised, ok, I can no longer concentrate on this. And also for people who have just arrived, who are supposed to go to language courses and so on, or integration courses, and they say. How can I do that when I know my family is still in the crisis or conflict area? (EInt-BICC-SC-012-DEU).

Many of our respondents suffered from traumatic incidences. Living in legal limbo certainly impairs their mental well-being. Worries about relatives living in marginal and precarious conditions in other countries also make it difficult for displaced people to focus on their everyday life in Germany.

7.2 Political activism: Countering marginalising forces

Some of our respondents are politically active. By this, they hope to counter the forces marginalising them and other displaced people in Germany. **Abu Ali** from Syria is one example. He participates in many demonstrations, among them demonstrations challenging issues of migrants. For example, he participated in demonstrations against the Pacts on Migration and Asylum in Germany or restrictions in family reunification, which affect him and others. He also had conversations with various politicians, such as the mayor of the city where he lives, and even with the Minister-President and the Minister for Integration of the federal state. He considered the talks to be very positive, and he felt that the other party took his issues seriously (SsInt-BICC-DS-001-DEU).

Udai, a young Syrian who, after pursuing his bachelor's degree in Germany, is now studying in Italy, values political freedom highly:

I realised that many people think like me. We never had the democratic vote in our lives, and now we do. We can participate in a democracy. (...) Many of my friends are now running for local councils, those who are actually naturalised by now or started their naturalisation process. People are running for the local council. One of my friends is running for the Bundestag. We're mostly Greens [followers of the Green party] (BInt-BICC-MT-006-DEU).

A movement for the right to family reunification began as a protest against the German government's plans to temporarily suspend family reunification for people with subsidiary protection. Even though the initiative dissolved in June 2020, Eritrean refugees had meanwhile joined another, which became more and more politically active in its fight for their right to family reunification (see Section 5). However, the initiative and their demands have had little effect on the policy level so far. What is special about this initiative is that these protests emerged from people's own initiative, as self-empowerment, not by German alliances as it often is the case (EInt-BICC-SC-009-DEU, EInt-BICC-SC-010-DEU).

Some of the refugees are also politically active regarding their country of origin. **Maher** organised a demonstration with Syrian friends against the war in Syria, especially the attacks on Idlib to raise awareness of the German government for the situation in Syria (SsInt-BICC-DS-008-DEU). In these cases, political activism is not directed against the German asylum regime, but the German government is considered a potential and powerful ally (Steffens, 2021). **Ali** had been politically active already in Jordan and was even engaged in the Syrian peace processes. Five times, he was a representative of Syrian civil society at high-level peace negotiations in Geneva and also represented them in Brussels at a meeting of foreign ministers (FGD-BICC-BE-001-DEU).

The examples show that refugees can engage in political activism in Germany. The respondents value taking part in demonstrations without any fear, contrary to their countries of origin. Political activism countering marginalising forces in Germany and countering displacing forces in their countries of origin shows refugees' agency. It shows the diverse strategies displaced people use to cope with the situation and change it. However, refugees are excluded from full political participation in the sense of having the right to vote and be elected, which only naturalised people can.

Conclusions

Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Germany

A figurational approach understands everyday practices as being embedded in a wider web of social relations. Figurations of Displacement are shaped by the governance regimes of asylum as a dominant structural force (Ferreira et al., 2020). At the same time, displaced people exert agency and can build on resources such as mobility and connectivity to navigate through the social constellations they live in. By definition, Figurations of Displacement are shaped by unequal power relations, yet these power relations are subject to change over time; they change due to broader structural transformations and/or due to changed social practices of actors. The social relations within a figuration are characterised by the respective actors' positions, dependency relations and transactions (Etzold et al., 2019).

The analytical category of figurations is not a purely academic exercise but instead can provide valuable insights into how displaced people embedded in certain social constellations can best be supported. The characterisation of the figurations shows that policies should not only support individual refugees but acknowledge their embeddedness in different social constellations. Different social figurations need different support mechanisms. The following list summarises the different figurations identified by our analysis¹⁰ and highlights the policy implications resulting from it.

Family figurations in and after displacement

At first, the analysis demonstrates the importance of family figurations under the conditions of displacement.

Figuration of the jointly displaced family



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Characteristic: This social constellation encompasses a family who was to flee, left at the same time, and stayed together from the place of origin to the final destination.

¹⁰ This list of social figurations in displacement presented here does not claim to be exhaustive. Rather, some people may also be embedded in entirely different figurations that have not been described here. For example, Christ (2019a) describes how two female refugees, one from Syria, the other from a successor state of the Soviet Union, became friends and supported each other in everyday life. In this case, the figuration unfolding is neither based on kinship nor on common ethnic identity. We only described those social constellations that were the most relevant in our sample. It should also be noted that people are embedded in several figurations at the same time and that an essential feature of each figuration is its changing nature.

In Germany, jointly displaced families normally enter the asylum system together. Their case is legally considered as one, and they continue to live together—first inside and later outside the reception system.

Policy implications: Families must be supported to preserve the unity of the family. Families should not be obliged to choose to leave children behind or send them on the journey alone. Rather than this, legal and safe pathways for the whole family must be available. Families with children should not be accommodated in reception centres but get the opportunity to move on to private accommodation as quick as possible. All family members should receive the same, and at best the highest possible, protection status and subsequently the same residency status with the same duration.

In most of the cases we encountered, neither the extended nor the nuclear family was able to move together. Most families were forced to or felt the need to separate so that at least one family member could reach Germany or other safe places first. The separation was most often intended to be temporary because other family members were supposed to follow through legal pathways. The family figurations presented below have in common that the family is, or has been, separated across different places and countries.

Figuration of the lone yet connected traveller



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Characteristic: A person embarks on an—often irregular—journey alone but is nevertheless connected to relatives in the country of origin, at the destination or in a third country who in some cases support the journey financially, logistically and emotionally.

Policy implications: In general, states should provide legal pathways to protection. Upon arrival in Europe, familial ties within the European Union should be immediately assessed as part of the registration and asylum application. Ideally, and if the person wishes so, asylum procedures should be carried out in the country where close relatives live. If contact persons already live in Germany, the lone travellers should be distributed to that persons' place of residence.

Figuration of the transnationally separated family



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Characteristic: A family figuration where nuclear family members live in different countries—on the journey or for an indefinite time after arrival. Those living in Germany often try to bring family members who remained in the country of

origin or in another country to join them in Germany. If the separation is prolonged and efforts to reunite the family through legal pathways fail, and if an irregular journey is too costly or evaluated to be too dangerous, the separation can become protracted. The uncertainty of family reunion leads many displaced families to involuntarily organise their family lives across the distance. If a reunion is not possible, the family member in Germany tries to support the separated family members financially and emotionally.

Policy implications: Receiving states need to inform refugees early about available options for a family reunion and allow access to legal support in the procedures. Family reunification procedures must become quicker, more transparent and consider hurdles that the applicants find challenging to overcome. For example, if formal documents such as marriage or birth certificates are impossible to obtain, alternative credible means to prove one's identity should be possible at an earlier stage of the process. For family members who cannot benefit from family reunification, alternative safe pathways should be initiated, for example, through humanitarian admission with a private sponsorship element. In general, transnational connectivity should be supported, for example by securing access to information and communication technologies and sim-cards in contexts of reception and providing cheap, reliable and legal ways for sending remittances. Recognised refugees require a secure status that allows them to visit the country of origin or a nearby country in the region, to meet family members in person.

Figuration of the reunited nuclear family



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Characteristic: Separated families may transform into reunited families if formal family reunification processes, humanitarian admission with private sponsorship or other 'complementary pathways' were successful. However, there is usually only one case where separation can be over-

come. And this is the nuclear family, as family reunification procedures do not apply to extended family members. What follows from this lack of alternatives and long-term perspectives in the country of origin or the country of (first) reception, family members often test and use irregular channels to bring separated families together again in one place, for instance in Germany, if family reunification is not possible.

Policy implications: The family member(s) who already live(s) in Germany often shoulder(s) most of the costs and a lot of responsibility for the journey of other nuclear family members and might need personal counselling and mentorship themselves. Those who followed later are highly dependent on the relative(s) who arrived earlier and need to be equipped to navigate the new environment themselves. After being reunited in

Germany, all family members need personal support to start a new life together during the arrival phase. Particular challenges might evolve when family members have no or quite different protection and legal statuses, and their residency permits expire at different times, leaving the entire family in legal limbo. In certain cases, family members who arrived later via irregular pathways and are not granted protection might even be at risk of deportation.

Figuration of the transnationally extended family



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Characteristic: Many, if not nearly all refugees in Germany form part of a transnationally extended family figuration, as family members have been dispersed in the wake of displacement, and the kin network is now spread across several places, including the home country, countries of first reception, several European countries or other third countries. In transnational families, members maintain contact and often provide financial, emotional and mobility support across the distance, particularly in times of need. Depending on visa regulations and legal status, some can visit each other.

Policy implications: First and foremost, transnationally extended families are not an exceptional, but rather a common figuration. Whereas some parts of the family would like to reunite at the same place, not all family members wish to do so. In the latter case, these families could be supported by simplified means of remittances and a more liberal way of making family visits possible. It should be possible for beneficiaries of protection to travel back to their country of origin in certain situations—for example in case of severe illness or death of a close relative—without fearing the revocation of their protection status.

Non-kin figurations in displacement

Apart from family figurations, our research revealed other social figurations that unfold under conditions of displacement.

Ethnic networked-based figuration



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Characteristic: An ethnic network-based figuration evolves under conditions of mutual trust and solidarity among persons of the same ethnic or national background. Common ethnic identity, shared experiences and empathy often lead to mutual support and reciprocal exchange. There is a varying degree of formalisation, from

ethnically or politically defined diaspora organisations to individual friendships, and these figurations can unfold locally, across a multitude of places or transnationally across borders.

Policy implications: Diaspora groups and cultural organisations could be strengthened to support and mentor newly arrived refugees. Important lessons can be drawn from the experiences of people who have settled in Germany at an earlier stage and who have the same ethnic or religious background. Interactions between different generations and groups of migrants, also across diverse ethnical, religious and cultural backgrounds, should be fostered.

Volunteer–refugee figuration



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Characteristic: At the local scale, networks between volunteers and refugees play a significant role. Refugees might benefit from the local knowledge and multi-dimensional support of local volunteers, e.g., support for the job search, search for a flat and explaining everyday life in Germany.

The volunteers can thus serve as door-openers and facilitators of the integration process in many regards, whilst refugees can bring in their skills and capacities in mutually beneficial relations.

Policy implications: Instead of cutting down resources for volunteer work, networks of support must not only be continued but expanded. Church groups, social initiatives and migrant-led organisations must be supported in their efforts to create safe spaces of welcome and interaction. Mentoring programmes for refugees entering schools, universities and the labour market have proved to be vital networks for integration and need more funding, too. Programs like NeST (Neustart im Team), which are based on community sponsorship and volunteers' engagement for resettled refugees, should be scaled up massively. However, activities and support mechanisms, such as toddler groups or other joint activities, should not be exclusively made available for refugees but rather consider the needs of all local residents irrespective of their background (Christ, 2019b). Joint activities and multiple opportunities for people to meet can foster integration and prevent discrimination. Whereas the benefits of support by volunteers need to be further enhanced, volunteers and supporting organisations need to consider and more pro-actively involve displaced persons who face difficulties in easily engaging with others, for example, people without sufficient language skills.

Local and transnational bureaucratic figurations

Refugees must find their way through bureaucratic figurations both at the local and the transnational level. These play a crucial role in their asylum procedures, their access to residence titles and citizenship, family reunification procedures and other forms of support that they can extend to family members locally and in other countries.

Local bureaucratic figuration of asylum



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Characteristic: The local bureaucratic figuration of asylum consists of all actors and institutions who shape the reception conditions for displaced people, who are involved in asylum decisions, and who assign particular rights and benefits to refugees depending on their respective status, i.e. their 'legal capital', and thus

also put refugees' in certain—more or less privileged or disadvantaged—socio-economic positions. This socio-legal constellation is marked by large power imbalances between actors, assigning central roles to state actors and marginal roles to displaced persons (Etzold, 2017).

Policy implications: Bureaucratic procedures need to be simplified, easier to understand for laypersons, sped up, and more transparent. Displaced people need to be provided with information on how bureaucratic processes such as asylum procedures work, which actors are involved, what implications the different steps taken entail, and how they can avail of legal aid. Bureaucratic actors should not hinder but rather support displaced people in claiming their rights. Local and national administration and social and legal counselling services must be adequately staffed.

Transnational bureaucratic figuration



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Characteristic: The transnational bureaucratic figuration is characterised by different bureaucratic actors who cooperate across territorial borders. In Germany, staff working in the local foreigners' authority, in the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and German embassies in third countries, for instance,

exchange information on resettlement or family reunification procedures. In many cases, staff working at a foreign embassy or for other authorities in the country of origin is involved in bureaucratic procedures and, for instance, when refugees try to obtain identity documents. International organisations such as the IOM or UNHCR take part in the transnational governance of refugee reception, asylum, resettlement and family reunification, too, and so do counselling organisations, NGOs and law firms. Refugees try to navigate such complex and multi-layered bureaucratic figurations, knowing that they are unevenly balanced in the interests of states and that decision-making power is in the hands of some key agents, brokers and bureaucrats.

Policy implications: The same policy implications apply as in the case of the local bureaucratic figuration. Moreover, the paradoxical situation that beneficiaries of protection must contact the authorities of their country of origin and the legal insecurity they people are facing through these procedures needs to be resolved. One possibility is to account for alternative means of personal identification at an earlier stage of the process.

Mobility and connectivity as solutions to protracted displacement? Lessons from Germany

The figurations portrayed above display different varieties of connectivity in displacement. The German case study's reply to TRAFIG's central hypothesis is, indeed, that the more connected and mobile refugees are, the less likely it is that they end up in conditions of protracted displacement. Five key arguments can be derived from our analysis:

Argument 1: Transnational life is a reality and an integral part of displaced persons' everyday lives. Rather than only focusing on integration mechanisms at a particular place, policies need to acknowledge and address their transnational orientation (see policy implications above). Conventional 'solutionist thinking' considers one appropriate solution at one place (local integration, voluntary return or resettlement). The framework of transnational Figurations of Displacement thus opens up the space for interconnected strategies at and across multiple places.

Argument 2: Mobility to Germany has enabled displaced people to move out of protracted displacement in their country of origin or a country of (first) reception. Many of our interviewees benefited directly from being connected to relatives or friends in Germany or other third countries who supported their journey financially, logistically and emotionally. Transnational connectivity thus opens complementary pathways to protection and broader future perspectives. But those who lack these networks and due to the general lack of legal pathways, a majority had to resort to dangerous irregular pathways to find safety in Germany. Quicker and less bureaucratic family reunification and the expansion of humanitarian admission programmes that entail a private or community sponsorship element could enable far more people to move out of protracted displacement.

Argument 3: Even though physical mobility is a way out of protracted displacement, not all family members would want to leave and join their relatives in Germany. As shown, many displaced families are spread across several countries. If they can, family members in Germany actively support relatives and friends in precarious and protracted conditions—either in the country of origin or in countries of first reception—financially and emotionally. The potential of this transnational support through personal networks must be acknowledged, institutionally leveraged and expanded as it is the most direct and needs-oriented support to people caught in (protracted) displacement.

Argument 4: Local and transnational bureaucratic figurations fundamentally shape the social constellations of refugees and their family relations. For example, delays in processing individual cases by the administration or difficulties in proving

one's identity by the applicants prolong and hinder family reunification. (Nuclear) Families who want to reunite then remain separated and are forced to organise family life transnationally for an indefinite time. Bureaucratic figurations are crucial for developing more adequate solutions to protracted displacement. The capacities of diplomatic missions abroad and supporting organisations must thus be strengthened, and modes of transnational cooperation simplified to speed up procedures and scale up refugees' mobility along legal pathways.

Argument 5: The focus on family relations as well as transnational and local connectivity should not distract from the fact that many displaced persons do not have such beneficial connections. Those who do not have the necessary financial resources and no personal connections to others such as (extended) family relations often find it much more difficult to escape violent conflict and conditions of protracted displacement. Social inequality is evident in the case of forced migration (see Mielke et al., 2021 for the case of Afghans and Tufa et al., 2021 for the case of Eritreans' displacement). For this reason, too, alternative options that do not focus on personal connectivity as selection criterion must be further developed. In recent years, only a limited number of resettlement places have been made available in Germany, and relocation from southern Europe was far below the initial promises of the German government, too. Instead of yearly pledges on the maximum number of persons benefitting from such programmes, generous quotas for resettlement and relocation should be introduced.

Even though some of our respondents experience the hardships of living in legal limbo, the comparatively well-functioning reception and asylum system in Germany helps them move out of protracted displacement and is thus not directly comparable to those conditions of uncertainty, legal insecurity and precarity experienced in southern Europe (see Roman et al., 2021 on protracted displacement in Greece and Italy). However, many of the refugees we spoke to have experienced protracted displacement before (in and outside of Europe, see Section 3), and through being mobile, they managed to escape this situation. Thus, our study with refugees in Germany clearly shows that mobility and connectivity can—and should—be part of the solutions to protracted displacement. Rather than considering refugees' transnationalism as an exception, policies need to consider transnational lives as an integral and important part of displaced people's everyday lives. Displaced people already make use of mobility and connectivity as a way out of protracted displacement; it is now time for policymakers to recognise and further support this potential.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ARRA	Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs, Ethiopia
AsylG	German Asylum Act
AufenthG	German Residence Act
BAMF	German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees
BICC	Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies
BMI	German Federal Ministry of the Interior
COVID-19	COVID-19 coronavirus disease of 2019
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EU	European Union
HAP	Humanitarian Admission Programme
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
MaxQDA	Qualitative data analysis tool
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
TRAFIG	Transnational Figurations of Displacement
UNHCR	United Nations Commissioner for Refugees

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Simone Christ is a senior researcher at BICC. She is a social anthropologist with a focus on forced migration and labour migration. She holds a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies from the University of Bonn. She is the principal investigator for the German case study. She coordinated the TRAFIG research in Germany, held the training for the researchers, conducted field research and was responsible for the conceptual design, data analysis and writing of this *working paper*.

Benjamin Etzold is a senior researcher at BICC. As social geographer—holding a PhD in Geography from the University of Bonn—he specialises in migration and refugee studies as well as livelihood and vulnerability studies. He is the scientific coordinator of the TRAFIG project. He conducted several interviews for the Germany case study and contributed to the conceptual design, data analysis and writing of this *working paper*.

Gizem Güzelant is studying Political Sciences (MA) at the University of Bonn. For her Master's Thesis, she has conducted several interviews in Germany in cooperation with TRAFIG. She has been supporting TRAFIG as a student assistant since 2019.

Mara Puers is doing her postgraduate studies in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Cologne. She is currently writing her Master's thesis for which she has conducted several interviews in Germany in cooperation with TRAFIG.

David Steffens holds a Master of Arts in Political Sciences from the University of Trier. He wrote his final thesis in cooperation with TRAFIG and conducted several interviews for the German case study. He specialises in the legal framework of asylum law in Germany and worked in a student association providing free legal aid to migrants during his studies.

Philipp Themann is studying at the Department of Geography of the University of Bonn. As part of his Master's thesis, he is conducting research in cooperation with TRAFIG. He joined TRAFIG as an intern in 2021.

Maarit Thiem is the project coordinator for TRAFIG at BICC. She has supported research in Germany by conducting several interviews. She holds a Master's in Social Anthropology from the University of Cologne. Before joining BICC, Maarit Thiem managed the Global Nexus Secretariat at GIZ, worked in Namibia for the GIZ Land Reform Programme and the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change at the United Nations University.

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TRAFIG provides academic evidence on refugee movements and protracted displacement; analyses which conditions could help to improve displaced people's everyday lives and informs policymakers on how to develop solutions to protracted displacement.

Partners

BICC (Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies), Germany

(Coordinator)

Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

CMI (Chr. Michelsen Institute), Norway

Danube University Krems, Austria

Dignity Kwanza – Community Solutions, Tanzania

FIERI (Forum of International and European Research on Immigration), Italy

ICMPD (International Centre for Migration Policy Development), Austria

SHARP (Society for Human Rights & Prisoners' Aid), Pakistan

Leiden University, The Netherlands

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

Yarmouk University, Jordan

Contact

Dr Benjamin Etzold (BICC)

Pfarrer-Byns-Str. 1, 53121 Bonn; +49 (0)228 911 96-24

contact@trafig.eu | www.trafig.eu | Twitter @TRAFIG_EU

Authors

Simone Christ, Benjamin Etzold, Gizem Gül Güzelant, Mara Puers, David Steffens, Philipp Themann and Maarit Thiem

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