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The Kurdish *kaçakçı* on the Iran-Turkey border: corruption and survival as EU sponsored counter-smuggling effects

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Abstract

This article examines people smuggling in the Kurdish borders between Turkey and Iran, and describes how members of local Kurdish border communities use their roles as *kaçakçı* (smuggler in Turkish) to navigate externalised EU border controls amid internal displacement and poverty. It draws upon ethnographic data collection between 2020 and 2022 in the Turkey-Iran border that has not been considered in studies on the EU-supported external counter-smuggling. This article specifically narrows down on corruption, an often mentioned yet understudied element of smuggling, and discusses the payment of bribes to border officials, and the creation of riskier routes to facilitate border crossing. We show how unequal access to corruption allow some people smuggling attempts to result in relatively uneventful passages while others are permeated by risks and death. While vilified by governments, corruption is also widely known and accepted as a social equalizer: as a safety valve that allows marginalized Kurds – both *kaçakçı* and border and security guards – to navigate precarity and survive borderland enforcement regimes. Our analysis from the perspectives of Kurds working as *kaçakçı* in the context of conflict and internal displacement seeks to move away from the dominant lens used in the analysis of people smuggling, which has almost solely examined it as a form of transnational organized crime and/or as an element of externalised border governance.

Keywords People smuggling · Corruption · Survival · EU externalisation · Ethnic conflict

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Introduction

This article examines people smuggling in the Kurdish borders between Turkey and Iran, and describes how members of local Kurdish border communities use their roles as *kaçakçı* (smuggler in Turkish) to navigate externalised EU border controls amid internal displacement and poverty.

The fear of migration motivated by the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015 helped European governments legitimise controls of both migration and its facilitation along non-EU borders. Turkey’s western border with Greece (Çetin 2020; Karadağ 2019; Üstübcü 2019) and its southern border with Syria suddenly became important research loci on people smuggling research (Achilli 2018, 2019; Baird 2016). Given the visibility of the Syrian conflict however, people smuggling along Turkey’s other borders with Iran – specifically the South-Eastern Turkey – in the context of EU’s externalisation practices has been side-lined in policy and research, despite its critical nature in current migration and other geopolitical dynamics in the region. This contribution addresses this gap.

The existing research on this region has predominantly focused on the conflict between Turkey’s security forces and Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanî*, PKK in Turkish) which has killed between 30.000 and 40.000 civilians and combatants (Mandiraci 2016) and internally displaced one million Kurds (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020). The conflict is deeply linked to the social and economic strategies upon which Kurds have relied to survive. To this day many rely on the informal cross-border trade of goods like petrol, oil, cigarettes and food (Bozçalı 2020) to endure displacement and widespread precarity in the region. Historically, some Kurds have also engaged in people smuggling and help migrants from Afghanistan and other countries navigate the difficult mountainous track from Iran to Turkey in exchange for fees (İçduygu 2020). Working as *kaçakçı* – as many Kurds refer to themselves – is therefore an everyday activity derived from the region’s long history of oppression and conflict.

Turkish security forces had rarely countered people smuggling along its eastern border with Iran, as historically their main concern in the south-eastern regions of Turkey had been cross-border operations of PKK guerrillas (Genç 2015; Tezcür 2009). However, the intensification of EU pressures to reduce the number of migrants reaching Europe has led to tighter collaboration between Turkey and the EU, and to the deployment of counter-migration and counter-smuggling policies to eastern Turkey (Kaytaç 2020). The “Europeanisation of migration and border policies” (Hess and Kasperek 2017, p 2) and its embracing by governments throughout the EU’s neighbourhoods have never considered the local life and trade history specific of communities residing along contemporary borderlands (Fakhry 2021). In this article, we argue that despite enhanced border enforcement policies negotiated between the EU and Turkey to target migration and smuggling to Europe, Kurds have never stopped their cross-border trades and neither have migrants stopped their attempts to cross the border. Instead, enforcement furthers an already present demand for services sought after by migrants seeking to survive a highly surveyed and criminalized journey, which is in turn facilitated by displaced local residents in need of an income.

Whilst multiple studies have examined migrants' efforts to survive through the use of smuggling as clients (Ayalew Mengiste 2018; Maher 2018; Vogt 2016), less is known about the perspectives of people who are from communities afflicted by conflict and internal displacement and who turn to smuggling as service providers. To address this gap, this article examines how some Kurds living along the Turkish borderlands – many of whom once worked in the smuggling of goods – have increasingly turned to the provision of people smuggling as a method not just to counteract border surveillance, but to survive amidst displacement and poverty. In this article we argue that people smugglers attempt to unsettle anti-smuggling efforts through different adaptation and coping mechanisms. We specifically narrow down on corruption, an often mentioned yet understudied element of smuggling, and discuss the payment of bribes to border officials and patrols, and the creation of riskier routes to facilitate border crossing. We show how unequal access to corruption has the potential of shaping the outcome of smuggling attempts – or in other words, why some people smuggling attempts result in relatively uneventful passages while others are permeated by hardship and death (Palacios 2019).

Furthermore, by framing the work of Kurdish *kaçakçı* in the context of ethnic conflict and internal displacement, we seek to move away from the dominant lens used in the analysis of people smuggling, which has almost solely examined it as a form of transnational organized crime and/or as an element of externalised border governance. In what follows we argue that migrants and the facilitators of their movement continuously mobilise their agency to develop efforts to survive and overcome border controls (Ayalew Mengiste 2018; Bakewell and Sturridge 2021; Maher 2018; Mandić 2017; Vogt 2016, Frank-Vitale 2023). We argue that people smuggling is a survival strategy that aims to overcome marginalisation, that in the specific case of Kurdish communities is rooted in ethnic conflict and poverty. Notwithstanding the huge risks and forms of violence present in clandestine journeys, bribes and corruption effectively allow smugglers to reduce risk and increase the chances of a successful border crossing. While vilified by governments, corruption is also widely known and accepted as a social equalizer: as a safety valve that allows marginalized Kurds – both *kaçakçı* and border and security guards – to navigate precarity and survive borderland enforcement regimes.

Methodological remarks

This article draws upon ethnographic research in Turkey between October 2020 and March 2022. During this time, we conducted participant observation across diverse sites in Turkey, including Van Province near the Iran-Turkey border (see Fig. 1). We have selected this conflict-affected and externalised border as it has much to reveal about the facilitation of irregularized migration as a survival method for Kurdish communities, themselves displaced populations living along borders subjected to counter-terrorist and migration enforcement.

Alongside participant observation notes, this research involved interviews with eighty-two participants. We spoke with Kurds living in the border region who have been affected by the Turkey-PKK conflict and Turkey's hard-line counterterrorism

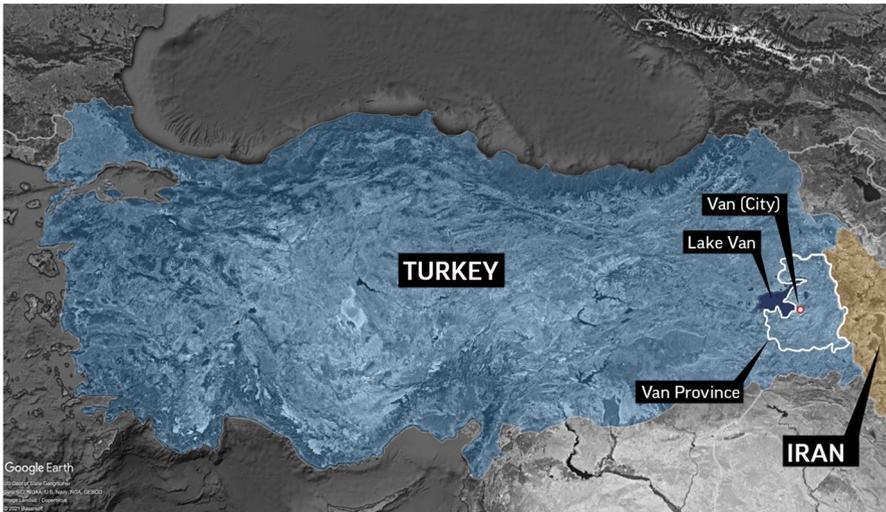


Fig. 1 A map of Van Province in the Kurdish region and the border between Turkey and Iran

strategy—characterized by violence, extrajudicial killings, repeated displacement, poverty, and unemployment among other challenges—and who have turned to the smuggling of goods and people to endure the scarcity of jobs and income generating mechanisms derived from the conflict.

While most residents who facilitated migration were Kurdish young adult men (20–40 years old), we also met people under the age of 18 and heard about women undertaking different roles in the facilitation of people’s movement. We asked our interlocutors why and how they engaged in people smuggling and how their choices were circumscribed by the context of counter-smuggling operations in Turkey’s Kurdish region and their everyday survival. Additionally, we interviewed migrants¹ from Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan whose travel between Iran and Turkey was facilitated by Kurdish residents. Finally, we spoke with lawyers investigating cases of corruption and deaths in people smuggling at the Iran-Turkey border.

The interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ preferred language. While many Kurdish residents speak a number of languages (i.e., Kurdish variations, Persian, Turkish), most preferred to be interviewed in Turkish. For this we were assisted by compensated English interpreters. Migrants who used smuggling services were often fluent in English but some preferred to speak in Pashto, Urdu and Persian with the presence of interpreters. All participants’ names have been changed to protect their identities.

¹ Throughout this article, we use the term ‘migrant’ despite diverse legal statuses and intentions that these people have (i.e., asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants). By avoiding elaborating on people’s statuses in migration, we aim to blur legal, political, economic, and social divisions between migrants and rather focus on their experiences in people smuggling.

Smuggling and survival at the Iran-Turkey border

Smuggling of basic goods and people has been an everyday practice in the Kurdish region for centuries, shaped by both the history of Kurds on the land and their experience under the Turkish government. Prior to the creation of the current political territories, Kurds lived in semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates. Unlike today, trade among these communities was not considered smuggling. It was controlled by the imposition and collection of taxes at different stops (İçduygu and Toktas 2002; McDowall 1992). The *Treaty of Sèvres* (1920) signed during the post-Ottoman period was the nearest the Kurdish people ever got to statehood (McDowall 1992). However, Kurds were not given a state of their own. Instead, they found themselves dispersed between modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran (Park 2016). Furthermore, in the context of this division, Kurds soon found out that their trade had been rendered illegal by those countries' governments without notification (İçduygu and Toktas 2002). Despite this designation, Kurds kept trading (Bozçali 2020), which over time led their commercial activity and/or interactions to be given the criminal designation of smuggling, particularly by the Turkish government.

Smuggling is a blurry concept along the Kurdish borderlands, which mark the sites of the PKK-Turkey conflict. Smuggling of all kinds, particularly basic goods ranging from food to petrol, is widespread in Van Province, a key hub for internally displaced Kurds (Keyman et al. 2017). Many residents cross mountains from Van Province to Iranian border villages and towns on foot or on horses to avoid border checkpoints. Once in Iran, they purchase items for resale, and transport them back into the Turkish side of the border concealed to avoid taxation, hoping to turn a profit this way. Other residents drive in cars across the official border checkpoints and bribe state authorities to conduct the same trade. In the city of Van, there is even a so-called "smugglers' market" where children and adults sell cigarettes, oil, petrol, and other products brought from Iran.

As stated earlier, many of these traders openly call themselves *kaçakçı* or "smuggler" in Turkish. While law enforcement characterises "smugglers" as a homogenous category of elusive criminals who seek nothing but profit (Vogt 2016), many people in Van refer to the *kaçakçı* actions simply as tasks that allow them to generate an income to survive. As argued by a number of scholars, people who provide smuggling services are usually ordinary citizens from marginalised and displaced communities with no political interests other than trying to improve their precarious living conditions (Biner 2018; Uhm and Grigore 2021). While border practices become designated as illegal or clandestine by the state, it is because they are most often part of a complex matrix of survival, conflict, oppression and poverty (Sanchez 2022). In this context, smuggling becomes a form of labour from below that commonly aims to generate profit by those on the receiving end of structural inequality (Ahmad 2021, Bliesemann de Guevara 2013).

The Turkish government has deployed extensive militarised surveillance mechanisms along its south-eastern borders allegedly in response to concerns over the presence of the PKK, and on the claims the smuggling of goods funds their cause (Tezcür 2009). Yet Kurdish residents commonly refer to the need for survival,

rather than the conflict alone, as the main factor that drives their decision to become *kaçakçı* as Amez from Van, asserted:

I stopped studying when I was seventeen because I had to look after my family. All my family members were jobless. I did the easiest thing that I could do; I became *kaçakçı* and smuggled petrol across the border on a horse. This way, I could feed and dress my family and pay rent. When the police caught me and I went to court, I explained to the judge that I was *kaçakçı* because we were poor. I went to a prison for two years.

Perceptions of Kurdish residents of smuggling as survival deviate from the state's narrative of the practice as a cross-border crime, which designates punitive measures that disproportionately impact marginalized residents of remote and conflict-affected borders. Kurds working as *kaçakçı* are often targeted by Turkey's counterterrorism unit, and even murdered on the claims that they are PKK members. At border controls, allegedly placed to counter the PKK, severe human rights violations against villagers who work as *kaçakçı* have been recorded. For example, Yezda, a Kurdish woman from Van, told us how her relatives died during the Roboski massacre (2011), when thirty-four civilians (mostly children) were killed by the Turkish Air Force while smuggling goods across the Turkey-Iraq border:

My family relatives died in the Roboski massacre. We all cried. Many people keep becoming engaged in smuggling because we continue living in poverty. It is very common to smuggle cigarettes, petrol and other things. [To this day] I worry about our friends and family who are involved in smuggling being killed [by the Turkish security forces], which keeps happening.

State-centric narratives by the Turkish government on border security risks have criminalised trade activities in Kurdish region in Turkey, labelling them as terrorism and smuggling. The designation of cross-border trade as criminal clashes with traditional practices of trade and mobility are part of efforts by the Turkish government to control and oppress Kurds (Biner 2018). This speaks to Yezda's comment that the main reason for Kurdish communities to involve in smuggling is to survive as a consequence of the prolonged conflict. In other words, Kurds we spoke with during this research became involved in smuggling to cope with marginalization, rather than as an act of political defiance or as a desire to further the conflict. As research by Bozçali (2020) suggests, despite tough border controls in the Kurdish borderlands, smuggling of drugs, oil, tobacco, sugar, tea, and other foodstuffs has continued during the conflict, generating rather than earnings for the resistance alone, important survival income for residents of border communities.

The impact of EU border externalisation on people smuggling

While the contraband of basic goods constitutes the most common form of smuggling in the Kurdish border, people smuggling has historically been a source of revenue in the region. The passage through the border from Iran to Turkey has been

important for migrants fleeing the multiple conflicts that have afflicted Central Asia over the last forty years – from the 1980s Iran-Iraq War (Çetin 2020) to the 2011 Arab Spring (İçduygu 2020), to the most recent Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan in 2021. Until recently, *kaçakçı* mainly guided these groups of migrants across mountains to avoid them getting lost in unknown terrains, or so that they could find faster transport onto Istanbul onboard of cars and minivans, and their journeys were mostly undisturbed by border enforcement.

However, as mentioned above, the so-called migration crisis led to the emergence of EU-sponsored stepped-up measures to counter the movement of migrants. Turkey and the EU signed one of the first agreements – and until then, one of the most severe – aimed to counter irregular migration on the grounds that controls would stop smuggling gangs from exploiting and abusing migrants, while imposing severe penalties on smugglers.

Granted, counter-smuggling led to the imposition of heavy penalties for people smuggling. At present in Turkey, people detained while performing the wide range of activities designated as people smuggling related tasks can be arrested without a warrant and held up in detention twice as long than before (see the Penal Code, December 2019). The EU also assisted Turkey to erect a concrete wall at its border with Iran, deploy additional surveillance technology and train border guards.

Despite the escalation of the EU-Turkey collaboration, neither migration controls nor stepped-up border surveillance have stopped people smuggling. In a tea house in Van, men who engaged in cross-border trade and refugees' transports were sitting and discussing new border controls, when one laughed and said: "There are always side roads. You can easily avoid army checkpoints". This comment resonates with a common reaction among some Kurdish residents when asked whether the EU-funded border controls were going to stop people smuggling activities in the Kurdish region in Turkey. For example, Destan, a former *kaçakçı*, asserted: "The new [EU-funded border] wall is a joke [laughing]. This will not stop anything. We will always find new ways and give money to border guards." Even push-backs did not seem to stop migration facilitation. This is also the case of Abas, a Pakistani man, who had been pushed back by Turkish security forces to Iran. He said that just after being returned to the Iranian side of the border, he immediately received a phone message from his smuggler with a new pinned map location, indicating where to try crossing again, and this time his journey was successful. As the above comments by Destan Abbas and others show, counter-smuggling has only cemented migrants' need to search for smugglers' services in order to avoid the new border surveillance, and so, provided more work opportunities for local residents. During our fieldwork we witnessed how people smuggling journeys from Iran to Turkey are mostly organised by a chain of residents working as *kaçakçı* in Iran and Turkey who are commonly connected by ethnic and family ties. *Kaçakçı* are in contact with their clients, provide them information from where to cross to Turkey, walk with them across mountains alongside donkeys transporting their luggage, drive them in minivans or cars across the border, and transport them further towards the West of Turkey.

In between legs of their journeys, migrants are often accommodated by local families in border villages. As Fareed from Pakistan said during the interview, "we were hosted by a local family and slept in their living room. Children were playing

around, and we were given nice food and treated with respect”. While we found migrants’ encounters with *kaçakçı* overly positive, some said that their smuggler took them to what they called “shock houses” and referred to squalid conditions where they were left without food or water for days. A few migrants witnessed other smuggled people being subjected to extortion when smugglers demanded higher fees than initially agreed upon. The migrants’ treatment varies according to different *kaçakçı*. Furthermore, a range of services provided is usually dictated by the price for smuggling: the price circumscribes the transport possibilities and conditions under which migrants are smuggled.

Most smuggling research has argued that enforcement increases smuggling costs, and drives smugglers to opt for more dangerous routes, exposing people to higher risks, furthering victimization, and leading to higher chances for exploitation and abuse, and even death. While the challenges to migrants’ lives have been well documented, the literature has remained mum concerning the challenges smugglers themselves must counteract in order to sustain their livelihoods, but also to stay safe, and in some cases, alive. After all, the intensification of counter-smuggling controls demands the apprehension of smugglers, which a term designating a vast range of actions, allowing for easier criminalization. In what follows, we argue that corruption constitutes one of these mechanisms, and we examine howby Kurds working as *kaçakçı* rely on the bribery of border officials, and the creation of riskier routes when paths to corruption are unavailable, inexistent, or denied to them, as an attempt to circumvent border enforcement and navigate their historical conditions of displacement and marginalization.

Bribery

One of the ways that Kurdish residents working as *kaçakçı* attempt to act against counter-smuggling policies and controls is through bribes and collaboration with state officials –namely, border and security guards– during their smuggling operations. Bribery ensures that smugglers working as guides or drivers on board of vehicles are not chased, and so, their clients are transported across the border with a level of safety. *Kaçakçı* interviewed at the Iran-Turkey border usually said that they paid bribes to patrols at the border or/and at army check-points connecting Van Province to Bitlis Province so that patrols let them pass in cars carrying smuggled people. As a man transporting people from Iran to Turkey said during our conversation, he had been regularly cooperating with state authorities working at the border:

“I take people via army roads [from Iran to Turkey]. There is only one way [of people smuggling now], and that is through this road. There is someone [from border enforcement] who works with me and my clients cross with him. There is no problem [to smuggle people]”.

Corruption of border authorities is not uncommon in people smuggling (Antonopoulos and Winterdyk 2006; Brachet 2018; Palacios 2019), and researchers have for a long time argued it runs parallel to increasing border controls (Andreas

2009). Yet examinations into how smugglers interact with authorities to make it work to their advantage are virtually null. Bribing aims to improve the ability of *kaçakçı* to smuggle people without much disruption and to avoid legal prosecution (Sanchez 2022). In line with these aims, corruption through the distribution to bribes to both low- and high-ranking border authorities is a common strategy used by *kaçakçı* at the Iranian-Turkish border, as a member of an anonymous lawyer association suggested:

Smuggling migrants turned into an industry in the region during the last years. It is not risky. If someone is caught smuggling people, they stay in detention maximum a few weeks and after, they are released. The discrepancy in juridical procedures against [people] smugglers goes hand in hand with the profit that the government and people working as border guards and in municipality generate from people smuggling.

Processes of corruption in people smuggling are further manifest in the legal record. Transcripts of wiretapped investigations reveal that border officers working at the Iran-Turkey border work directly with a number of people working as *kaçakçı*, arranging smuggling operations on specific days and sharing information about rival smuggling groups. Whenever the bribed border officers find out about any smuggling activity at the border, they call the *kaçakçı* to check whether it is an agreed operation. Border officers will only stop the vehicle for inspection if the detected operation is not being run by the *kaçakçı* who had a previous agreement with them.

Not only bribes and corruption effectively allow smugglers to reduce risk and increase the chances of a successful border crossing. While vilified by governments, corruption is also a social equalizer: a safety valve that allows marginalized Kurds – both *kaçakçı* and border and security guards – to navigate precarity and survive borderland enforcement regimes coupled with ethnic conflict. In the Kurdish region, local dynamics become intertwined with smuggling's processes and consequences. The same way it has been documented across North Africa and the Americas (see Sanchez et al. 2022), Turkish authorities recognize the economic and political value of smuggling, allowing it to take place –granted with limits, and as far its actors (often low paid border agents assigned to remote regions) also benefit from it.

Receivers of these bribes are not only Turkish enforcement officers (i.e., Gendarmerie) who are stationed in the Kurdish region for limited time. The expansion of the counter-smuggling project has translated into the creation of detention facilities and prisons throughout the south-eastern region and the establishment of surveillance in border villages where many Kurdish residents find work as security guards. As Amraz, a security officer in Van told us, while sitting next to a *kaçakçı* who happened to be his friend: “local people often work as *kaçakçı*, but also, like me, [they work] in a security due to the booming security system and prisons around Van.”

Amraz's testimony shows how migration enforcement and counter-smuggling have created on the one hand, low paying jobs that allow for the continued survival of Kurdish communities, but on the other hand, financial opportunities that negotiated among locals, ultimately maintain their own communities. Border officials and

detention facilities guards accept bribes to supplement their precarious wages and survive, as found in smuggling markets elsewhere (Brachet 2018, Sanchez et al. 2022). While working on what could appear as opposites sides of border controls, it is common for smugglers and security officers to know each other personally, or to come from the same family or a village, which allows for bribery negotiations but also to secure mutual and much needed profits conducive of survival (see Guerra 2015).

Counter-smuggling operations are troubling in the sense they led to the criminalisation of communities and their livelihoods. But it would be amiss to ignore that they simultaneously create profit and survival opportunities for a vast range of actors other than smugglers, all people who rely on bribes within the matrix of externalised controls, conflict, and poverty. Profits derived from people smuggling – with bribery at its centre – are almost immediately recycled into the local economies and communities (Brachet 2018; Sanchez 2015). As a self-fulfilling prophecy, counter-smuggling ultimately allows for the survival of those it seeks to destroy.

In the specific case of the Kurdish region, after the failed alleged coup by sections of the Turkish Army in 2016, military courts that were responsible to prosecute corruption of border officials and guards became inoperative. While corruption allegations became the responsibility of civil courts, to this day trials have not returned, as reported by lawyers interviewed in Van. As a result, most allegations of smuggling-related corruption receive none or lighter sentences. However, reports of apprehensions and attempts to “dismantle the smuggling business model” – a common line of the EU’s counter-smuggling agenda – are enough to satisfy the demands imposed by the EU. “The harsh convictions get recorded for the making of statistics delivered as successful outcomes to the European Union, but in reality, no people smuggler really goes to jail for more than two months”, said a member of a lawyer association.

The claims of our interlocutors are supported by the official data. While Turkey’s Directorate General of Migration Management (Turkish Ministry of Interior) reported that “Turkish authorities managed to intercept and hold over 27,000 people smugglers between 2015 and 2020” (in Daily Sabah 2020), so far there has been no explanation of how these apprehensions took place, or of their specific outcomes. Another claim circulated by the Turkish security forces was that they had “intercepted over 7,400 smugglers” (Turkish Ministry of Interior 2022) during the operations that preceded the EU-Turkey Agreement and the migration generated by the Arab Spring (2010–2015). However, no information concerning these arrests or their outcomes was ever provided.

Granted, in the event these numbers are true, they point towards a troubling trend – the widespread criminalisation of people apprehended for facilitating smuggling related services. People working as *kaçakçı*, as well as residents occasionally providing basic support to migrants (i.e., food) said that they face greater risks of apprehensions in border regions following the intensification of the EU-Turkey collaboration. However, the lack of outcomes – that is, of official information concerning convictions or judgements — suggests that apprehensions may be taking place simply to create the impression that the Turkish government is being tough on smugglers. As acknowledged, it may suggest troubling injustices committed against people labelled as smugglers, and widespread and unjustified apprehensions. But

the lack of official data on outcomes could also suggest that enforcement does not necessarily seek to completely eliminate the practices Kurds have relied on for their survival. By allowing smuggling to exist, the Turkish government is able to maintain a certain level of socioeconomic and political control in Kurdish territory.

The creation of riskier routes

As stated above, many smugglers work in coordination with border and security guards known to them by ties of friendship and kinship. However, this access is not equal. Competition, struggles over territory, and everyday personal conflict signify that some smugglers can benefit from the access to authorities provided by their social networks, while others may struggle or be altogether prevented from bribing officials who can ultimately allow them to facilitate clandestine journeys and make a living. Also, in an attempt to reduce the potential for corruption, border guards posted to the south-east of Turkey are often rotated from outside regions, what means smugglers may lack connections to them. Others may be simply inclined to reject bribes because, as a member of Gendarmerie said during the interview, “phones of Gendarmerie members are surveyed at the border, and so, many are scared to cooperate with smugglers”.

When bribing officers is not a viable option or is out of reach, people working as *kaçakçı* will still attempt to carry out their activities. However they most often resort to more precarious means, which as shown by Palacios (2019), reveals the differences between smuggling passages facilitated by bribes and those that are not. *Kaçakçı* have little alternative but to search for new smuggling passages *without* the cooperation of security officials and patrols with the hope to overcome border controls. These attempts involve searching for less travelled and therefore more dangerous smuggling routes and methods.

Attempts to avoid border controls have been linked to an increase in migrant injuries and deaths in Eastern Turkey over the last five years. While IOM’s Missing Migrants Project (2022) states that at least 157 deaths or disappearances involving migrant people were reported in the crossing from Iran to Turkey between 2014 and 2022, growing numbers of graves in cemeteries in Van city, where migrants and refugees are buried, suggest these numbers are likely much higher. When visiting one of such cemeteries, a local gravedigger, a local Kurdish man in his late forties, explained that most people he buried were migrants – mainly from Afghanistan, but also from Syria and Pakistan – who died while being smuggled:

The majority of migrants die during the smuggling accidents. Refugees are driven at high speed through army checkpoints. [It is common for] drivers to lose control and kill the passengers. Smugglers also put too many people in small fishing boats when trying to transport them across the Van Lake, which results in boat accidents and drownings.

The above comment speaks to the argument by Bakewell and Sturridge (2021) that people during their migration journeys have little option other than choosing

to travel across passages relying on extremely dangerous options in order to avoid detection by state authorities if their co-option is not negotiated (also, see Frank-Vitale 2023). The data further suggests that *kaçakçı* purposely opt for dangerous methods. While the reliance on risk and danger as a way to challenge border and migration controls is deliberate, such attempts take place in the context of border enforcement controls. Most troublingly, the latter are by design (Boyce and Chambers 2021), expected to lead to injuries and deaths among those being smuggled – collaterally, *kaçakçı* themselves as well.

Attempts to drive across the official checkpoints in minivans and cars without pre-negotiated agreements with border guards, exposes *kaçakçı* and people smuggled to armed response. In these cases, armed patrols do not benefit from people smuggling journeys, and thus, have no interest in letting them pass. Consequently, vehicles transporting migrants are often chased by patrols which at times also shoot at the vehicles in order to stop them. This became clear in the interview with Fadila, a woman from Afghanistan who had been smuggled from Iran to Turkey with her six children. Fadila explained how after walking down the mountain path crossing the border from Iran into Turkey, smugglers led her and other forty people to the first dirt road they could find. There, they were met by a large van and climbed in the back:

The journey [in the van] was going OK until we started to be chased by the Turkish Gendarmerie. They [Gendarmerie] started shooting at us and a bullet hit my youngest daughter on her foot. She died at a hospital and the police said it was the smugglers who shot her.”²

Despite involving high risk of injury and death, migrants continue relying on smuggling while some Kurds are dependent on its provision to navigate their own precarity at the border. They often perceive such risks as unavoidable and worth taking in order to survive – a sort of ‘occupational hazard.’ As Abdul, an Afghan refugee residing in Van, said: “I don’t blame them [Kurdish residents] who do this job [smuggling]. Look at the situation here. People are poor and they have no work. They do this not only for money but to fill their and their family’s stomach.” This assertion also became prominent during the conversation with people working as *kaçakçı* who acknowledged the dangers associated with new smuggling journeys but considered them as necessary to navigate tighter border controls and complete their jobs. The prior statements show how migrants are often deeply aware of the dangers involved in their cross-border journeys alongside with smugglers, while smugglers understand the high risk involved in their actions. In this context, and by virtue of being actors of a clandestine activity, cooperation with border guards becomes a critical component of clandestine journeys’ outcomes.

² During the interview with Fadila, it was unclear if the wound to the foot of the young girl was the main cause of her death, or whether the victim had also reported further injuries as a consequence of the car chase between the authorities and the van carrying the Afghan family.

Conclusion

Kurds working as *kaçakçı* in the Iran-Turkey border are not merely subjected to the increasingly surveyed external and armed border as part of EU efforts to contain irregular migration and fighting people smuggling. Rather, *kaçakçı* are aware of their position in smuggling and have developed efforts to unsettle border enforcement practices (Biner 2018).

The testimonies included in this article show that even under extreme enforcement conditions and violence, smuggling continues. Not only *kaçakçı* carry on with a long tradition of trade, but have turned to an increasingly dangerous form of it to ensure their everyday survival in the Kurdish region. Externalised border controls not only produce victims and offenders for the criminal justice system (Uhm and Grigore 2021). They led people who have already been subjected to conditions of marginalization and oppression to create increasingly dangerous paths to unsettle counter-smuggling and navigate survival in an externalised and conflict-affected remote border.

This article focuses on two examples of how *kaçakçı* attempt to overcome border controls – the payment of bribes and the development of riskier passages. They stand as examples of both the productive and destructive aspects of people smuggling. In relation to the bribery of border officials, we argue that beneficiaries of corruption are not merely the people who are physically present at the border in order to control it (border patrols) or pass it without authorisation (smugglers and migrants). The creation of impressive counter-smuggling statistics – involving both reports of corrupt border guards and of arrested smugglers who never get prosecuted, as shown by the number of cases overturned or not even prosecuted – ultimately satisfies the EU's demands on the Turkish government to feed the illusion of counter-smuggling as successful.

When corruption is not an option, smugglers turn to riskier routes and methods with the hope to overcome border controls and make a living, actions that often face heavily armed response. Injuries and deaths incurred during these counter-smuggling operations are then blamed by state authorities onto smugglers, in turn simplistically portrayed as careless and greedy – a key component of counter-smuggling discourse (Sanchez 2018).

It is fundamental to highlight that we do not deny smugglers' involvement in deadly accidents nor seek justify their behaviour. Yet our goal is to equally shed light on how counter-smuggling fosters unequal access and relationships between smugglers and border guards that ultimately create the conditions under which many migrants travel and die. Counter-smuggling does not simply aim to counter smugglers' roles. By being implemented in remote and marginalized areas it also allows for the reproduction of relations of inequality, exemplified in the uneven access to officials who can let smugglers and their cargo pass, but also by the reactions of those who feel entitled to chase vehicles and shoot at passengers when they cannot profit from the trade themselves. Dangerous pathways in people smuggling are more the consequence of protracted lack of legal and safe migration passages, rather than of smugglers' intentions (Achilli 2018, p 86). Corruption

therefore creates the ability to draw the line between death and survival of smuggled people in the context of international counter-smuggling and counter-migration controls, and simultaneously, it allows *kaçakçı* to overcome their own precarious living conditions in the context of internal conflict and poverty.

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Declarations

Informed consent The researchers obtained informed consent from all human participants.

Research involving human participants and/or animals This research did not involve any animals.

Conflict of interest We are hereby confirming that there is no conflict of interest in this research.

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