The role of information and communication networks in the decision to seek asylum and the choice of Australia

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Executive summary

1. Until recently, most research on the factors influencing the choice of destination by those seeking asylum has been undertaken in Europe. Australian-based research remains critical for understanding Australia as a migration destination. Between April and June 2014, 33 former illegal maritime arrivals (IMAs) from Afghanistan and Iran who had been granted protection visas and were residing in South Australia were interviewed. The interviewees had arrived in Australia between 18 months and 5 years prior to the interview. Specifically, the research sought to understand the factors that shape selection of asylum destinations, how these factors change across time and place, and the role of information about destinations.

2. This research is useful for understanding how factors interact in the individual decision-making of asylum seekers from Iran and Afghanistan. However, it may not apply to other ethnic groups. It may also not apply to those who have been unsuccessful in their protection applications. Further research with other ethnic groups and with unsuccessful asylum seekers would provide further insights on Australia as a destination country.

3. This research found that the choice of destination was influenced by multiple, interacting factors: protection-related factors in the country of origin and a range of potential host countries; perceptions of destination countries being welcoming of refugees and willing to offer protection; social networks in Australia and other overseas countries, in the country of origin and en route; and having a partner and children in their country of origin. Agents and non-protection-related factors (opportunities for work and education) in the destination country, despite being factors which influenced decision-making, were not primary drivers. The potential dangers and risk of possible death en route did not weaken Australia as a destination given that these were outweighed by the dangers and possibilities of death by staying in the country of origin.

4. Australia was the preferred destination for 22 of the 33 interviewees. Seven preferred Europe, the US or Canada, and four had no preferred destination.

5. The need for protection was the primary driver for destination choices. If protection needs could be met, people preferred destinations where they could work and be educated.

6. Having a family was a factor that facilitated Australia as a migration destination. This was through: choosing a destination route that was less dangerous for children; was one where asylum seekers could sponsor their family once they had arrived; and was where there was a good education system for children.

7. For those who made their decision under acute conditions, agents were key in shaping the decision about the migration pathway. In migration decisions made over the long term, additional factors could shape the choice of destination, and the decision changed over time as these came to light.

8. Social networks overseas, in the country of origin, and en route, strengthened the attraction of particular destinations and weakened others through providing suggestions about destinations, information, and connecting people with agents.

9. Danger to life and risk of death is a factor in decision-making, but it does not act as a barrier to selection of Australia as a destination. This factor is outweighed by the reasons for seeking asylum, hope and concern for one's family.

10. Information and knowledge about Australia was limited to broad perceptions of it as humanitarian, non-discriminatory and safe – similar to those perceptions associated with destination countries in the
West more generally. Iranian asylum seekers had access to more information than the majority of Afghani asylum seekers, though this depended on education and gender. The primary and most trusted sources of information were social networks. Agents were the least trusted.

11. Most people’s personal preferences were for Australia. However, it’s important to consider this micro-level finding within its social, political and economic context. Multiple factors were salient in shaping people’s preferences – both what they were and whether they could act on them. This research suggests that these included global conditions in the country of origin and in host countries, social networks in the home country and en route, and knowledge of destinations.

1. Introduction

Although there are many assumptions made about why asylum seekers choose particular destinations, there is, as yet, only a small body of research that seeks to understand this decision-making from an evidence-based perspective. In particular, there is little research within the Australian context. Existing research identifies destination outcomes as the product of multiple macro and micro factors strengthening and weakening particular migration pathways. Within the constraints of broad factors which influence the choice of destination (persecution, poverty and war in the country of origin; visa conditions and travel accessibility of host countries; agents), there are community and individual factors (social networks, access to information) that may also shape destination decisions.

This research paper adds to our current understanding of Australia as an asylum destination. It analyses the factors which shape Australia as a destination based on qualitative interviews conducted between April and June 2014 with 33 former IMAs of Iranian and Afghani descent, who have since been granted protection visas and, at the time of interview, lived in South Australia.

2. Destination decisions

No single factor is responsible for destination outcomes, but rather these outcomes are influenced by multiple, interacting macro and micro-level conditions (Richardson, 1994; Havinga and Bocker, 1999). Within the macro-level barriers and enablers of conditions in countries of origin and destination countries (including geography, colonial ties and people smuggling) an asylum seeker’s destination may also be shaped by community and individual circumstances (Barsky, 2000). As Havinga and Bocker (1999, p.57) note: “asylum seekers are dependent on certain fortuitous circumstances and these circumstances are structured by more general circumstances or opportunities which are not at all random. The motives influencing the behaviour of the individual asylum-seeker at the micro-level are related to explanatory factors at the macro-level.”

Previous research has identified four major factors that shape irregular migration pathways: the political conditions in the country of origin (i.e. the need for protection); perceptions of destination countries being welcoming of refugees and their willingness to offer protection; social networks; and agents (people smugglers). Underpinning many of these factors is information – including its accessibility, type and quality. Information is integral to shaping particular migration pathways and destination choices.

These factors are multiplicative (Richardson 1994). They also fluctuate. Brekke and Aarset (2009, p. 95) note that: “At each stage of the process the information, resources and networks may change or strengthen the individual’s direction. In other words, the decision-making process is sequential and reliant on repeated and reversible decisions.” International and Australian research on each of these factors and how they shape migration pathways is reviewed below.
2.1 Conditions in the country of origin and host countries

Irregular migration pathways are obviously strongly influenced by the particular conditions in which the asylum seeker lives (Middleton, 2005; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). Conditions that trigger flight and onward movement exist in countries of origin and also in host countries such as Pakistan and Iran for Afghans (Monsutti, 2005; Middleton, 2005; Barsky, 2000). Asylum seekers in the Netherlands ranked safety as the most important factor in their destination (Brekke & Aarset, 2009).

To understand irregular migration and the impact these political conditions have on migration decisions, Richardson conceptualises a continuum of circumstances ranging from choice to compulsion (Richardson, 1994). At one end of the spectrum are decisions made after careful consideration of all information, and at the other those made in the midst of a crisis with little preparation or plan except to escape (Richardson, 1994). For those whose flight is acute, unanticipated and uninformed, accessibility is the key factor shaping what eventually becomes their destination (Havinga & Bocker, 1999). Timing also modifies the influences of agents. Those at the ‘compelled to move’ end of the spectrum take the agent and the destinations that are available, whereas those with more time have greater control over the choice of destination because they can work with more than one source of information and/or agent (Middleton, 2005).

Koser and McAuliffe (2013) propose that most asylum journeys to Australia in recent years have been made under long-term rather than acute conditions. They suggest, therefore, that the decision to leave is thus less hurried and shaped more by factors in the destination country and less by agents.

2.2 Protection and non-protection-related considerations in destination countries

Finding protection is the key concern for asylum seekers in their destination decision (Robinson & Segrott, 2002; Barsky, 2000; Middleton, 2005). Whilst most asylum seekers assume all Western countries provide protection, at different historical times and based on different factors (e.g. a rumour circulating about protection visa acceptance rates), particular countries are perceived to be more (or less) able and willing to provide protection (Middleton, 2005).

The degree to which protection policies in destination countries shape migration pathways is not clear. Whilst relative national asylum policy facilitates choice of migration destinations, research shows it is only one factor interacting with other factors (Brekke and Aarset, 2009). Again, this may be less accurate in terms of Australia. McAuliffe (2013) found that the two most common reasons for considering Australia as a destination were that Australia was accepting refugees and that it was not returning refugees. That is, their reasons related to protection-related factors in Australia.

Non-protection-related factors – such as the prospect of being able to build a life that includes work and education – are secondary considerations (Havinga and Bocker, 1999; McAuliffe, 2013). If protection needs are met, these are less important, but when people’s status is insecure, the combined inability to gain protection and to work shapes onward migration (Middleton 2005). This is also likely to be the case in Australia. McAuliffe (2013) found that work opportunities were ranked eighth as a reason to travel to Australia.


2.3 Social networks

Social networks are made up of people and institutions that a migrant knows or connects with in some way and they can facilitate or constrain particular migration pathways (Koser & Pinkerton, 2007). Geographically, social networks are seen as a series of links between the country of origin and the destination (Kritz & Zlotnik, 1992). They comprise family and friends, as well as community organisations and associations, and may also include people like labour recruiters and travel agents (Boyd, 1989). These networks may facilitate movement to particular destinations by providing support and information (Koser & Pinkerton 2007).

Koser notes: "Social networks are indeed important throughout the migration of asylum seekers, but often in ways not normally expected among labour migrants (Koser 1997, p. 599). This difference is likely to reflect that irregular migration pathways are shaped by the circumstances under which asylum decisions are made (Koser, 1997).

Not all asylum seekers have networks in their final destination (Gilbert & Koser, 2006). In cases where they do have networks, they are not always able to contact them. Koser (1997), in a study involving 32 Iranian asylum seekers in the Netherlands, found that of the 26 asylum seekers who had friends and family in Western Europe, only 18 had sought information from their networks. Eight people did not have time to contact social networks before leaving. Similarly, McAuliffe (2013) reported from the IMA Survey that while 37% of the asylum seekers in the sample of 1,000 indicated that they had relatives, friends and friends of relatives/friends in Australia, only 7% relied on these for information prior to travelling to Australia.

However, other research suggests much stronger links between social networks and irregular migration pathways. Robinson and Segrott (2002), who interviewed 63 asylum seekers in the UK, found that social networks, specifically family and friends in the UK, was either the primary reason for choosing the UK, or one of a number of factors which tipped the balance towards the UK. For the asylum seekers, this was because they would be going somewhere where they were not completely alone. This is also supported by Havinga & Bocker’s (1999) study in the Netherlands where the most important factor influencing the country of destination for asylum was the presence of friends, relatives or fellow nationals in the country. Neumayer (2004), in a cross-country statistical comparison of asylum flows, found that a community of past asylum seekers in a host country was the strongest determinant of migration destinations.

These differences may be explained by the influence of the timing of the migration decision and the conditions under which it was made. Social networks are more salient in shaping migration decisions where people have time to access them prior to leaving (Havinga & Bocker, 1999). That is, they may exist, but whether people use them, and whether they rely on the information provided by them, is dependent on whether the trigger for their journey is acute or long-term. These differences have also been explained by another factor shaping migration pathways, the ethnicity of the asylum seeker. For example, McAuliffe (2013) found that Afghan asylum seekers were more likely than Iranians to have links to Australia that shaped their migration pathways. In Europe, Zimmerman (1996) found that migration pathways were more strongly shaped by the existence of an ethnic community in the host country for asylum seekers from Africa than for those from Europe or Asia.

2.4 Agents

Most asylum journeys involve agents (McAuliffe, 2013; van Liempt & Doomernik, 2006). Agents may act as the decision-maker, facilitator or negotiator. That is, they either determine the destination, assist the asylum seeker to reach a destination the asylum seeker chose, or offer a range of options in terms of price and visa accessibility and timing (Robinson & Segrott, 2002; van Liempt & Doomernik, 2006).
In Europe, agents significantly influence irregular migration pathways by deciding destinations (Morrison, 1998; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). The agent’s influence is modified by where people are on the spectrum of choice and compulsion. Middleton (2005), in his interviews with 12 asylum seekers in Birmingham UK, found that those at the forced end of the spectrum took what was available whereas those with more time had greater control over the destination choice.

For Australia however, agents may play a less important role in channelling asylum flows (McAuliffe 2013). The Australian survey found that whilst people smugglers had determined 15% of destinations, the majority of people who responded were involved in the destination decision themselves. This may suggest that the pathway to Australia for asylum seekers is enabled and constrained more by other factors than agents.

2.5 Information and knowledge

Asylum seekers tend to have very limited knowledge of the countries to which they are travelling (e.g. Havinga & Bocker, 1999; Gilbert & Koser, 2006). What information people have is related to safety, the likelihood of being allowed to stay, and the support offered to refugees (Robinson & Segrott, 2002). Asylum seekers have only general knowledge of asylum policies and general perceptions of Europe and the UK as places which protect human rights (Robinson & Segrott, 2002; Gilbert & Koser, 2006).

What information asylum seekers have is primarily gained through social networks and agents (Koser & Pinkerton 2002). This is also the case in Australia. For those coming here, the main sources of information were family, friends and agents (McAuliffe, 2013; Richardson, 2010).

There are multiple factors that influence the amount, type and quality of information that asylum seekers have access to. These include: government restrictions on information (Richardson, 2010); limited or no social networks (Gilbert & Koser, 2006); acute or long-term timing of their decision and whether they choose their destination (Havinga & Bocker, 1999; Gilbert & Koser, 2006); education and financial resources (Gilbert & Koser, 2006; Richardson 2010); whether they lived in a rural or urban area (Gilbert & Koser, 2006); and gender (Pickering & Barry, 2013).

3. Research questions

The above literature review highlights the multi-factorial and interactive ways in which migration pathways are shaped. Until recently, most research on these factors has been undertaken in Europe. Australian-based research remains critical for understanding Australia as a migration pathway. This qualitative research project sought to examine Australia as a destination through interviews with former IMAs who, at the time of interview, had been granted protection visas and were residing in South Australia. Specifically, the research sought to understand the factors that shape destinations. Key lines of enquiry were as follows:

1. What factors influence Australia as a destination for irregular migrants?
2. How did these factors interact and change decisions across time and place?
3. What role did these factors play in shaping this destination outcome?
4. What knowledge do people have about Australia?
5. What are the sources, type and quality of this knowledge?
6. What factors mediate access to this knowledge?
4. Method

4.1 Data collection

Qualitative interviews provided an opportunity to capture the complexity of destination outcomes including insights into how macro-factors interact with individual decision-making as it occurs in particular times and places (Robertson & Segrott, 2002).

Data were collected through 33 qualitative interviews with former IMAs who had subsequently received protection visas in South Australia. The interviewees had arrived in Australia between 18 months and 5 years prior to the interview. The interviews ran for an average time of 50 minutes, with an interpreter for all except two. A topic guide formed the basis of interviews and the lines of enquiry, but open-ended questions were used to elicit pertinent information and explore particular responses in more detail.

4.2 Participants

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection helped identify potential participants who were then contacted by the research team via mail and phone to seek their participation. 17 Afghan Hazaras and 16 Iranians volunteered to participate. Five were women and 28 men. The age range was 17 to (approximately) 55. The demographic characteristics of participants are summarised in the Appendix. Ten of the Iranian interviewees travelled with their families. Each interviewee received a $10 Woolworths voucher for participating in the study.

5. Key findings

5.1 The destination preference

For most of the interviewees (22 of 33), Australia was their preferred destination. Seven people had originally hoped to travel to another country – Canada, the US or somewhere in Europe – and had begun preparations for these journeys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination Preference</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia the preferred destination</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another destination was preferred</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not know they were coming to Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any destination</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Destination preferences and whether people reached their preferred destination were shaped by a number of combined factors. An Iranian man discussed how his decision changed as a result of volatile global factors (the global financial crisis and its effect on the UK; the unstable economy in Arabic countries), fluctuating community-level factors (the different opportunities for travel to the UK and Australia offered by agents), and personal factors (the necessity to re-establish his livelihood to support himself).

20IM: I firstly decided to travel to Arabic countries because there are a lot of Arabic countries around the southern part of Iran, like Kuwait, Oman or Qatar. I could run my business in those countries but it was not sure and I could be unsuccessful. So because I wasn’t sure I didn’t travel to those countries. Then I decided to travel to England but at that moment England had lots of different crises, like financial and other social problems. I couldn’t even
travel to England, and then I was offered to travel to Australia, so Australia was the best one and I chose it.

A further interviewee indicated that Europe was their first choice because Turkey was more accessible, but there was little available support through agents or networks and there were dangers presented by the weather. Additionally, travelling as a family meant the children’s ability to undertake the journey was a significant factor. The family did not possess extensive knowledge about Australia and had no established social networks here. The option of Australia as a destination came about from an opportunistic meeting within the individual’s work networks in their country of origin.

2IF and IM: We were looking to go out and my husband bought some ticket to Turkey because the only place we can go without visa is Turkey. [...] I started to pack our bags and everything but I was very concerned, like I was very worried because it was winter time and the weather was cold, we didn’t have someone there to help us…to go like to Germany or Sweden. [...] luckily my husband, because he was working in the company, one of his friends said “Oh, you are going out, what happened? Because one of the guys, he is going out as well. He is going to Australia.” […] My husband said its better we go this way not that way. So we changed the ticket and we bought a ticket to Djakarta.

For most participants, the preference for Australia was established prior to departure from their country of origin or a host second country. However, four participants indicated they chose Australia while in transit in Indonesia. Upon arriving in Indonesia, they sought out the UNHCR or fellow asylum seekers for information on potential destination countries.

6HM: Well actually from I think from Afghanistan I had no idea about Australia. I didn’t have very much information, but I travelled to Indonesia, staying there, I grabbed the information from different people, knowing that Australia is a peaceful country and safe and its good to live there.

And two interviewees were content with any destination:

30HM Australia was not my target country but I can say I was seeking a free country, a country without racism and especially no religious government, that is important to me.

10IM: Anywhere out of Iran. I didn’t even know we were going to another country.

Most people’s personal preferences were for Australia. However, it is important to consider this micro-level finding within its social, political and economic context. Multiple factors were salient in shaping people’s preferences – both what they were and whether they could act on them. As illustrated here these included global conditions in the country of origin and in host countries, social networks in the home country and en route, opportunity and knowledge of destinations.

5.2 Factors shaping the preference for Australia

The research evaluated six factors and how they shaped preferences for Australia:

- conditions in the country of origin and host second countries;
- protection and non-protection related factors associated with the destination;
- social networks;
- families;
- agents; and
- death and danger.
5.2.1 Conditions in country of origin and host countries

All the participants hold protection visas and cited the need for protection as their primary reason for choosing Australia. The need to find protection meant that people preferred places which they perceived could offer that protection. As one Hazara man said: “I had to go. It was not safe for me there. That is why I choose Australia”. As Robinson and Segrott (2002) also found, this is the most significant part of the story for asylum seekers – these circumstances shape everything that comes afterwards. Although the interviews specifically did not ask people about their actual experiences, all of the people interviewed began the story of their journey to Australia with the conditions that precipitated their flight.

As well as conditions in the country of origin, conditions in a second host country are another factor that promote onward movement. Those interviewees from Afghanistan who had already left their country of origin and spent time in Iran and Pakistan reported that they faced similar protection issues in these host countries. They stated that there was a constant and high risk of being found and deported, forcing people to live in hiding, unable to work or access education. Those living in Pakistan describe it as even worse than Afghanistan. One young Hazara man stated:

17HM Talibans are not living in Afghanistan, they are living in Pakistan, and they were our enemy. They were ready to kill us. It was because they – they could recognise us so easily. They could recognise our physical ambience, face, our religion, they knew we are different from them…so they could easily find us and kill us.

Political, social and economic conditions in host countries are factors that can strengthen the necessity for leaving, and also strengthen particular migration pathways. As the extract below shows, being deported was a significant factor in this Hazara man’s thinking about Australia as a destination:

26HM: I stayed in Iran for nearly four, five years. Unfortunately I had ID to live not in Iran. Unfortunately I was…then I got captured by the government, they deported me back to Afghanistan. Before when I was living in Iran I had some thoughts on travelling to Australia, but when I was deported back to Afghanistan this feeling and thinking became powerful – more powerful – then I had no more choice. I wanted to travel to Australia because life was unsafe and not good there…

5.2.2 Protection and non-protection factors associated with the destination

As previous research has identified, factors in destination countries also constrain and facilitate migration decisions. As Koser and McAuliffe (2013), amongst others, have shown, it is protection factors (asylum policies, visa decisions, safety, freedom from discrimination) that shape migration pathways most strongly. If protection needs can be met, people prefer destinations where they can work and be educated. This was also found in this research.

An individual’s ability to gain asylum in a potential destination country was the most often reported factor by participants that strengthened the preference for Australia as a destination. In making a decision, participants stated they compared their understanding of Australia’s openness to asylum seekers, visa processing times, and visa grants to what they knew of these factors in other destinations. For example this Iranian asylum seeker reported:

9IF: We choose Australia the destination for getting protect…I think because in bad time Australia was the first country who wanted to get people, and who was accepted people just come in by boat and giving the reason. … Getting the visa, it was easier. Easier country to get a visa. For example, in compare to Europe, you go there and you stay there and get the reason for coming to that country, maybe more than five or six or sometimes 12 years for
Asylum seekers also took into consideration the option of registering with the UN and waiting for resettlement, and reported that this was a much more costly option that people could not afford.

18IM: For example, if you want to go through the UN you have to travel to Turkey first and then stay for two or more, two and a half years, waiting for your turn. You have to spend your own money, no one’s helping you.

Freedom from discrimination, including gender discrimination, was also cited as a factor which strengthened preference for Australia as a destination, although this feature was seen as something common to Western countries in general.

9IF: I knew Australia is more better than my country in the right of woman. For woman, for every woman, who leave Iran, they go to Europe or US or Canada or Australia, the woman has a really problem. They believe, except Pakistan or Afghanistan or Iraq or Arabic country or, except these countries, other countries they give more right to woman. Except Lebanese or some country like it. These countries I think, womans who have really problem in Iran, they believed Australia or Europe are better than Iran.

Some asylum seekers referred to non-protection related factors such as life opportunities in terms of work and education as strengthening their perceptions of Australia as a potential destination. Education was given as a reason why people thought Australia was a good place, more often than work or job opportunities.

32IF She said that, in the very beginning she was a bit confused because she doesn’t know a lot Australia, but just a bit and had friends did a study situation Australia and he was always telling her that Australian Education Ministry is number one in the world – it is the best for us.

For others, they saw Australia in more general terms as a place to have a good life. When asked about what constituted a good life, people referred to both protection and non-protection related factors of safety, peacefulness, non-discrimination, work and education.

If their protection needs can be met, people want to work and build a life for themselves. They seek somewhere that is safe, peaceful and non-discriminatory. They hope to work and educate themselves and their children. These hopes strengthen the attraction of potential migration destinations which can also meet protection needs.
5.2.3 Social networks

Of those interviewed, 23 people knew people in Australia, but 10 people did not. Eight people also had social networks in other countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social networks in Australia</th>
<th>23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No networks in Australia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks in other countries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of those who had social networks in Australia, these comprised family (n9), friends (n11) and other community members (e.g. other Kurdish people) (n3). Social networks in other countries were in the UK (n3), Canada (n1) and Europe (n4).

No one received financial support from their social networks. But they were a primary source of information. The 23 interviewees who had existing social networks in Australia said these were a factor in shaping the migration pathway positively – in being sources of either inspiration (e.g. suggesting Australia as a destination) or as information (e.g. about their lives here). Those participants who had networks in other countries reported that these networks influenced their migration decision-making, and often other countries were the participant’s preferred destinations, but other factors meant that these could not be pursued. These were either money (e.g. the asylum seeker couldn’t afford the agent’s costs for travelling to that country) or opportunity (e.g. the route taken by agents to that country was more difficult). In some cases, the networks in other countries gave negative reports of that country, especially where people had been unable to obtain a visa.

People described how social networks provided knowledge about destinations that could be trusted. For example, one Hazara man said:

3HM Because there are more than a thousand other people before him want to come to Australia and that’s why he found out it could be a good place because people are not crazy to you, just live and go off somewhere. If there’s a bad place then eventually you hear from someone, don’t go there, it’s not a good place. That’s why we’re here; you hear a lot of good things from here.

Social networks in Australia that included people who had been in Australia for some time were seen as examples of how people lived their lives in Australia. A Kurdish man from Iran said:

18IM: After seven years from the starting idea I travelled to that area again and again I heard about these people who travelled before, like seven years before, now they have a good life, they are living in peace, they are living respectfully and it was giving me more ideas about this place.

However, although social networks were the most relied upon and trusted sources, they were not necessarily the most accurate or most detailed, particularly about the living conditions in Australia for asylum seekers. One Iranian man reported that asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia and are struggling with living conditions feel too ashamed to reveal their circumstances to family and friends back home.

8IM: Answer to your question about myself, yes it’s a big no, but I can say not even myself, the others – the people whom I know – none of them knew about it and I want to say even when someone travels from here to Tehran they wouldn’t show this financial hardship.

In the country of origin, social networks included friends and family, as well as work colleagues and other members of the same religious or ethnic community. Distant members of social networks, such as friends of friends, were influential. For example one female Iranian interviewee explained how she and her
husband first heard about Australia and connected with an agent because of her husband’s opportunistic meeting with a fellow community member on a bus:

32IF: Her husband was going to do shopping and then he catch a bus and in the bus he sit down beside someone and that one was talking to him. He is a Hawas as well, so they talk about they suffering there and resistance. And then, that person told him that "my brother escaped. He went to overseas.” And then her husband asked him how. He said “there is someone who – like agent – he do this stuff”. So her husband take his number and then he contact the agent and that’s how they know what is.

Five people connected with other asylum seekers in Indonesia, where they lived together, provided interpreting where needed, connected with agents and shared information. These networks provided considerable support for people. A young Hazara man noted:

26HM We actually stayed in Indonesia for five, six months so we got to know each other. We were about 10, 12 people. Then we decided to be together to go to a group of smugglers – we decided to travel together.

However, many people reported deliberately not connecting with other people out of fear about security and travelled the full journey alone with minimal contact with anyone.

5.2.4 Families

Previous research shows that asylum seekers may also make destination decisions in consultation with their family members, or, in some instances, the family makes the decision for them (McAuliffe, 2013). Consultations with family members were a significant factor in shaping destination preferences. However, in these interviews, no-one reported that their families made the decision for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asylum seeker made the decision alone</th>
<th>13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asylum seeker made the decision in consultation with family</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Having a family (a partner and children) was also a significant factor that encouraged selection of Australia as the destination. Ten of the Iranian interviewees had travelled with their families. For them, Australia was chosen because the route to this country was perceived to be less dangerous for family travel than routes to other destinations. This included consideration of the sea journey (although this consideration was based on inaccurate perceptions, rather than the reality of the journey – see Section 6.6). For both Iranian and Afghani asylum seekers, the desire to find a safe country for their children was important. For the Afghani fathers and husbands who travelled alone (no Afghani men had travelled with their families) being able to sponsor their family to Australia was a factor in their destination preferences.

5.2.5 Agents

All 33 interviewees used the services of an agent. In four cases the agent was responsible for selecting Australia as the destination; in the other 29 cases, the interviewees selected Australia as the destination and found an agent to assist them. The choice of Australia as a destination was determined on the basis of multiple factors: suitable timing to embark upon the journey; that, comparatively, Australia was a cheaper option; and participants’ preconceptions of Australia as being welcoming of refugees and asylum seekers.
Where a decision to leave was made under urgent circumstances and with the assistance of an agent, the ability to influence the choice of destination can be limited. One Hazara man initially had intentions of going to Europe and was able to obtain the services of an agent but was deported from Pakistan and tortured before he could commence the journey. He later fled from Afghanistan, and met a different group of smugglers offering Australia as a destination. However, he wasn’t able to afford this option, so he paid to go to Indonesia, and then once there, met other asylum seekers and other smugglers who were travelling to Australia. Similarly, another Hazara man whose agent made the decision said: “I didn’t plan to travel to Australia, I didn’t even search about Australia, I met someone by chance and that person just talked to me and offered me travelling to Australia.” Opportunistic meetings with agents who are offering particular destinations shapes decisions where these must be made under very urgent conditions.

Costs and finances were also a consideration. When people were offered a range of options, Australia was the cheapest destination because there were fewer borders to cross. As one male Hazara interviewee explained:

> 23HM: I just thought to attempt to start travelling to those European countries, but the fact is it is a long way, you need to have a good financial situation and I didn’t have that situation, I couldn’t afford the payments.

According to those interviewed, very rarely was information about Australia provided by agents. Participants reported that they had little contact with agents, except via phone, and they encountered different agents at various points of the journey.

> 13IM: I couldn’t trust them first. It took time, like a couple of days, maybe more. I started to trust. I had no more choice. No one talked to me about the journey, how it is. They just said “You see us on the day, the time. Go this way” and then that was all.

Others reported that they received misinformation from the agents, especially about the boat journey. As this Iranian man said:

> 20IM: they explained that we have always been successful, no drowning, we have a lot of facilities inside the boat. Well they don’t call it a boat, they call it a ship, but when you get inside the boat you realise that it is absolutely different, there are no facilities there.

Agents were able to shape the route, the timing of the journey, and the way people reached their destination. Once a journey had commenced, participants stated they had little control, making the journey an alienating and difficult experience. One young Afghani male explained:

> 4HM: There is a trap waiting for you. … They are running their own business very, very successfully. They tell stories. They say a lot to attract, or grab, more clients or people to interest. … When you decide to start the journey, and the smugglers talk to you, they will tell you a really nice story. They will say, “We will provide everything for you. This will be an easy journey, and its short. Nothing will happen.” And at the moment you start it, you face very difficult moments. Nothing has been provided, and everything is like a lie, and you cannot stop it. You cannot do anything about it. … If you say “No” to that person, that person would leave you. You would be left behind there. So you have to follow.

Agents also had control over other factors: the quality of the boat, the choice of the captain and determinations on how many people would be smuggled as passengers. The amount of time people spent on the boat journey depended on the competency of the crew. Most people spent three days, but others spent up to two weeks at sea. One young man was on a boat that got lost and had to return to Indonesia.
16HM: So we started the journey I think around 6am and after one day, yeah one and a half days, so the captain lost the way and the boat broke down. [...] So finally we remained on the water for five days. Everyone was about to die because we didn't have drinking water, we didn't have food, nothing. [...] The storm was very strong. The boats couldn't get close [...] They reached our boat and they tied the rope and the men, there was like a pillar, so they tied the rope around that and they used to pull us. So that's when it stopped going, it broke down, because that was very old. [...] And then they carried the women first and then children and then the old men and then the other people. Within five, ten, fifteen minutes our boat sank. [...] So that was the first journey. So they took us back to Djarkarta.

Although agents were important in shaping the travel arrangements and routes, and thus risk, they had less influence overall in shaping the perception of the destination itself either through making destination decisions or providing reliable information about destinations.

5.2.6 Danger and death

The qualitative interviews also provided insights into the degree to which the risks of death and danger en route influenced decision-making.

30 of the 33 people interviewed knew about the risks of seeking asylum. They were aware of the risks of being detained and deported, through knowing others who had died or through media coverage of boats sinking, and also of the physical dangers of the travelling itself. Several people knew about the detention centres. 30 of the interviewees said that they knew others had died, and that they could die.

This knowledge, however, did not act as a barrier to selection of Australia as a destination, even for families travelling with children, who believed that the route to Australia was safer than other routes. This is reflected that the potential risks of death and danger associated with travelling were not a strong enough deterrent when weighted against protection related issues. For example, one Hazara man who had been living in Pakistan, said:

3HM: The difficult time that I had back when I was in Pakistan, the situation was very bad, I had no even single happy day, and eventually I decided even if I die on the journey to Australia, it's okay because I decided for myself I don't care if I die.

Fear of death and danger was also weighed against hope; against what it would mean for the person and their family if they were fortunate enough to survive:

23HM: when I started to search on the internet about Australia it was the same time the event happened to that ship, the sinking of that ship and the media was announcing to the people what has happened close to Australian shores. I knew that can happen to me, as in I can die, drown. I asked myself what would happen next if I take this journey, there are two ways, one is where I drown as well and I will die, so I would not be here anymore, but if I survived, I go to Australia and I've still got my family as well.

Respondents acknowledged that the risks of death and danger were a gamble:

26HM the journey was very very dangerous – I knew it. I knew its sort of 50/50 the matter of life and death, but I decided to make the journey anyway. ... Yes, even some of them didn't reach Australia – they died – so we could hear what happens to them.

Three interviewees were not aware of the risks associated with the voyage, and three said that they knew but that the journey was much worse than they had envisaged. They found that they had been misinformed about the boat journey in particular. For example, an Iranian man reported:
8IM: I can say the thing that I heard as like the story of travelling to Australia was not the truth. I had some ideas about lots of facilities during the trip. … I knew that it’s a dangerous trip but I told myself, okay every trip can be dangerous. Even normal flights, it can happen something bad happens. So it was sort of normal trip. I had no idea how dangerous it was.

The experiences of a young woman from Iran who travelled with her husband and children reflects what Pickering and Barry (2013) also found – that women are often less informed about the journey and, particularly at the time of entering the boat, do not want to continue. Yet even at this point, other factors continue to influence decision-making, in this case, the person’s family and conditions in their country of origin.

31IF First no one told them that, like the risk to go by boat and they just say “you’ll go by boat and its easy” but then when they start, it was night time and the boat is small, many people and the sea in front of them, they scared and they were shouting even. Children were crying, women shouting. … She changed her mind and she thought her husband, for her son’s sake, she doesn’t want to go but her husband say to her “it’s okay. We have to go. We have nothing, like we can’t get back again, because we have nothing behind. We have to go.”

Danger and the risk of death are factors shaping destination outcomes, but only where these are not outweighed by the reasons for seeking asylum, and by hope and by concerns for one’s family.

5.3 Information and knowledge

5.3.1 Perceptions of Australia

Perceptions and beliefs about Australia were very positive, and centred around three things: humanitarianism, anti-discrimination, safety and peacefulness.

4HM: I believe there is no discrimination here. That you are a human being. If you are a foreigner. If you are a refugee. Whatever you are, you are equal to the others. You can use the education system. It is safe. The country is modern and rich and you can study as much as you like.

3HM: That’s why Australia – this is not the meaning of life to have a good building or have a good car, whatever, no that’s not, as long as you’re safe, that’s a good life, and humanity, anything good. That is life and I can find a good life here at the moment, but I don’t care if I have no car or house, I am in peace and I am facing lots of human here and they just treat me as human.

Although these perceptions of Australia are positive, and were amongst the reasons people gave for choosing Australia as a destination, it should be noted that asylum seekers going to Europe, the UK, Canada and the US have the same positive perceptions of those countries as well. It is not so much ‘Australia’ but positive ideas of ‘the West’ that shape migration pathways.

5.3.2 Amount of information

Most interviewees had at least some information about Australia, but this tended to be largely idealised with little detail.

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<tr>
<td>Relatively good</td>
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</table>
Interviewees’ political, social and geographical perceptions of Australia included describing it as “a good place”, “friendly” and “far away”, and it was these perceptions that were used to inform beliefs that Australia is accepting of refugees.

For example, an Iranian man stated:

22IM: I knew nothing about Australia, I only knew there is a big city named Sydney. Because the population in Australia is not so much high, we heard that the country is happy to accept more people.

Four interviewees had more extensive knowledge. These were young men, well-educated and trained, who had been living and working in urban areas. One young Hazara man said:

4HM: Yes I had the whole information about whatever happens to asylum seekers arriving to Australia by boats. I heard about many of the events that happened at sea.

That people have limited and largely un-detailed knowledge about Australia prior to the journey is consistent with European research (e.g. Gilbert & Koser, 2006; Morrison, 1998) and Australian research (Richardson, 2010).

5.3.3 Type of information

For those who had information about Australia, this was about those things most important to asylum seekers: whether they are able to obtain protection; whether their family can come; what the journey was like; and whether they could live a good, peaceful life. A ‘good life’ included safety and freedom from discrimination. For example, a Hazara man said:

5HM: I only knew that it is a peaceful country. You can start a very good new life here.

Perceptions of Australia’s political and social climate, i.e. as a good country that protected asylum seekers, was common. Most interviewees also had some information about asylum policies, i.e. whether or not Australia accepted asylum seekers, with some people also understanding about processing times. Most people also had information that the journey involved travelling in a boat, and that this was a very dangerous part of the trip. A few interviewees mentioned the geography of Australia, its distance, its spaciousness, and its warm weather, and the city of Sydney.

5.3.4 Source

As noted, social networks were the most widely relied upon and trusted sources of information. However, most people relied on information from more than source including: the internet, agents, movies and books, and previous experiences of travelling.

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<td>Agents</td>
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<td>Previous travel</td>
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5.3.5 Factors influencing information

Factors that were associated with access to and quality of information were: the initial timing of the decision; social networks and agents. Ethnicity, education and gender also influenced the amount, quality and type of information that people had and could rely upon. For most Afghan refugees, social networks and agents were the main source of information, whereas people from Iran were able to supplement this because of easier access to the internet, books and movies. People from Afghanistan had more limited information, which Richardson (2010) also found. People who were more educated and lived in urban areas had access to more sources of information and were more likely to say that they felt well informed. Two women had less information and less access to information than their husbands and felt they knew little about Australia or the journey. However three of the women were actively seeking out information from multiple sources to help their families make the best decision.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study of 33 Iranian and Afghani former IMAs has sought to shed light onto the factors that shape the selection of Australia as an asylum destination. The need for protection and finding a country that provided protection were the strongest factors in favour of Australia as an asylum destination. If protection needs could be met, then the ability to work and receive an education increased the preference for Australia. For those who made their decision under acute conditions, agents were key in shaping the decision about the migration destination. In migration decisions made over the long term, more factors could shape the choice of destination, and the decision changed over time as these came to light.

Social networks in Australia, in the country of origin and en route were important and trusted sources of destination suggestions, information about destinations and connections with agents. However, a third of the people interviewed for this study did not have networks in Australia, so the presence of networks here is not a sufficient condition in shaping destination outcomes. Danger and risk of death in Australia did not act as barriers for the respondents because these were outweighed by such risks in the country of origin. Although information and knowledge about Australia shaped destination decisions, for most people this knowledge was idealised, centred around hopes for humane treatment, the ability to build a new life, and the possibility of being accepted.

The micro-level asylum destination preferences were shaped by macro-level factors. What preferences people had, and whether they could act upon these, were shaped by the social, economic and political factors in the countries they left and the countries they sought asylum in. People actively seek out information, but what information they can access is shaped by where they live, poverty and education, and gender. The quality of this information is variable, and usually idealised.

The findings from this research assist with understanding how factors interact in the individual decision-making of asylum seekers from Iran and Afghanistan. However, they may not apply to other ethnic groups. They may also not apply to those who have not been successful in their protection applications, or those who choose not to make the asylum journey. Further research with other ethnic groups and with unsuccessful asylum seekers or those who consider seeking asylum but decide to remain in their country of origin would shed light further light on processes that lead to selection of Australia as a destination country for asylum seekers.
References


### Appendix

Participants (protection visa holders) – demographic characteristics

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