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Factors affecting secular migration from Turkey to the UK

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This research project proposes that amongst the new group of migrants from Turkey to the UK, there are those who have migrated due to the efforts of successive Turkish governments to deepen and extend the reach of, what I call, the islamonormative social and cultural order of Turkey. To explore this, I conducted semi-structured online interviews with migrants who self-identify as secular or laic. In this process, I adopted a social constructivist approach and did not define preemptively what being 'secular' or 'laic' means, but specifically solicited migrants who believe either of these terms describe them in some manner. Push and pull factors are the most commonly used basic framework for understanding international migration in the literature. Push factors refer to those reasons that incite or force a person to leave a country of origin, whereas pull factors refer to the reasons that draw a person to a particular destination country. I have theorised the push factors under two interrelated main headings: (1) increasing democratic deficit and (2) islamonormative pressures; both create what I refer to as a precarious life in Turkey.

A precarious life

Overall, what defines this group of migrants is the increasing precariousness of life in Turkey, which in turn creates an existential insecurity. For many of these secular professionals, life in Turkey consisted of living in a bubble consisting of certain safe spaces – the workplace, the home and socialisation centres – that were located in particular neighbourhoods of their home cities. The metaphor of a 'bubble' is significant, as it implies that certain boundaries are maintained, which can, in turn, be transgressed by others. For many of these secular Turkish citizens, day by day this bubble was becoming more and more permissive and its borders harder to maintain.

At this point, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's differentiation of 'bare' life (*zoē*) and the form and manner in which life is lived (*bios*) can be helpful to make better sense of the predicament of these secular Turkish citizens. Agamben argues that the ancient Greeks had two words for what in contemporary European languages is referred to simply as 'life': *bios* (the form or manner in which life is lived) and *zoē* (the biological fact of life). 'Bare' life refers then to a conception of life in which the sheer biological fact of life is given priority over the way a life is lived, by which Agamben means its possibilities and potentialities. Many of these secular migrants, who had an awareness of this differentiation, were concerned that their life in Turkey was becoming more and more about preserving their biological existence (*zoē*), rather than about prospering through the opportunities that their social, cultural and economic capital provided (*bios*). This vulnerable and fragile existence creates a dilemma for many secular citizens of Turkey. The stark choice is either to resist actively and challenge the normative order or to seek resilience and adapt to the new normative order and its expectations. Many of the informants reported participating in political demonstrations against the government, including the Gezi Park protests. However, the hope and potential for change that they initially felt was gradually replaced with acceptance and despair.

For those who chose to conform and transform, the formation of new alliances with those in power frequently necessitated mimicking their practices to fit into their expectations. Some of the interviewees noted that in their workplace in Turkey they had come across people who had not been practising religiously, but this had changed with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). For those who do not find it easy to adapt to the new power relations, there are also moral questions. These professionals must either accept becoming instruments in, to them, morally questionable activities, and thereby preserve their livelihood but in the process reject their ethical beliefs and identity, or resist and risk losing their jobs and being ostracised. Because the Turkish economy is very centralised, it is almost impossible for these secular, highly skilled professionals to avoid or distance themselves from nepotism and crony capitalism.

Overall, increasing nepotism and islamonormative pressures have invalidated the hard-earned social and cultural capital of these secular middle-class professionals. The vision of a life in which merit, qualifications and cultural capital trump economic and social capital is replaced by the supremacy of social capital; for these individuals, whose secular way of life excludes them from the social networks of power, this meritocratic imaginary is shattered. In addition, changes made to the educational system have added to their fears regarding the reproduction of their secular way of life. Hence, the perceived threat to their way of life is not merely related to the here and now, but also extends into the future.

Pull factors

So, what are the pull factors? What aspects of the UK prompt these secular migrants to want to migrate there? Because these migrants are highly educated, their migration destination options are very wide and not limited to the UK; there are, however, several factors that made the UK more attractive than other options.

Language. The first and the most frequently mentioned pull factor is language. English being the most extensively taught foreign language in Turkey means that these migrants

can use this cultural capital to good effect in their adaptation to a new society. Also, a perception that English is the predominant world language has given some migrants an added motivation to choose the UK.

The Ankara Agreement. This agreement with the UK offers as a less cumbersome route to migration.

High-skilled job opportunities. The UK being the home of many international companies or hosting their offices offers highly skilled professionals the opportunity to find high-paying jobs and to preserve their social status and symbolic capital. For couples who migrated as a family, the ability to find jobs that improved the careers of both adults was an important factor.

Tolerance. The perceived tolerance towards Turks within the UK compared with some other European countries is another significant factor. Some of the informants who had been to other European countries such as Germany, either as students or for other purposes, reported that the image of Turks in these countries is considerably worse.

Geography. The relative geographical proximity of the UK to Turkey is also important. For those migrants who also considered Canada or the USA as a destination or had the opportunity to emigrate to one of these countries, the proximity of Turkey to the UK was another factor that contributed to their decision to prioritise it.

None of the informants cited state support or benefits as a factor in their decision to emigrate to the UK.

A less precarious life?

The precarious state of life is seen by the respondents as much improved in the UK, especially with regard to preserving their bare life. Informants also reported a greater sense of existential security, due to a confidence in the rule of law and equal rights. For women, these differences are much more pronounced. Many women informants reported that they felt more secure and comfortable in the UK. Moreover, the autocontrol and restrictions that they had exerted over themselves in terms of adhering to more conservative codes of dressing, for example, were diminished.

However, life in the UK for those who migrated via the Ankara Agreement can be significantly more difficult and precarious, especially during the first year, compared to those migrants who moved with a sponsored high-skilled job visa. Whereas these Tier 2 visa migrants have a certain level of job and income security and can benefit from support networks provided by the companies that hire them, Ankara Agreement migrants have to generate their own income and deal with bureaucracy largely on their own. These difficulties are most acute during the initial stages of settling in the UK, when they have to set up a business and, at the end of the year, make an application to extend their visas by demonstrating that they are able to run a successful business. At this point, social capital and solidarity amongst immigrants in the UK can be key to their future.

Many of the informants reported that when they first arrived in the UK they shared accommodation with friends who had migrated before them until they could take care of the bureaucratic paperwork. Some had a hard time finding accommodation, even though they had the funds, because they were asked to provide a credit score. Thus this collaboration between migrants is essential for many in the initial stages, not only in finding a place to live, but also in generating income. As a result, migrants can end up working in jobs that they are overqualified for, merely to support themselves financially and preserve their Ankara Agreement status.

Another aspect that adds to the precarious status of the Ankara Agreement migrants is the regulation surrounding the agreement itself. One of the informants described his experience of dealing with the Home Office as 'going through a tunnel as it is collapsing': a metaphor that vividly captures the fragile and precarious life of these migrants. While most of the informants did not report being or feeling discriminated against, some did report instances of discrimination or negative treatment. However they generally did not associate these with them being Turkish but rather with them being immigrants. Some of these instances stemmed from institutional arrangements, whereas others took place during everyday interactions in the form of micro-aggressions.

In addition to these aggressive interactions, there are other instances when Turks have been subjected to the stereotyping of Middle Eastern people. For these secular migrants, Islamophobic attitudes and their nonconformity to stereotypes about Muslims can work in their favour. However, the migrants who identify as Muslim or feel a responsibility towards Muslim identity felt they needed to challenge certain expectations and images of Muslims in the UK. Their secular identity, in this respect, can become a distinguishing factor that separates them from the imaginary monolithic Muslim community, which they feel they need to emphasise. Their concern is the homogenous representation of being Muslim and the lack of recognition of the heterogeneity of the Muslim community. For these secular Turkish citizens, most of whom have grown up in Muslim households that were either non-practising or had liberal interpretations of religious rules, the expectation, either well intentioned or not, that a Muslim ought to live according to the letter of the religion is a misrepresentation and a misrecognition, and, incidentally, something that they also witnessed in Turkey from conservative Muslims.

Such expectations of how a 'good Muslim' ought to live are reported to come also from other Muslims in the UK. The relations of these secular migrants with the British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi communities, two of the largest Muslim groups in the UK, can be complicated. The Turkish migrants can be subjected to assumptions about their Muslim identity and a sense of camaraderie that they do not immediately identify with.