ABSTRACT
In this article, we examine the status of Iranian graduate students as stepwise global skilled migrants who enrol at Turkish universities, but with the intention of moving to their final destination country in the West. Based on survey data we analyse their migration strategies and career plans at mezzo-level, and conclude that more than 72 per cent of respondents can indeed be classified as stepwise migrants. First, Turkey is a preferred intermediate country particularly for migration of Iranian graduate students of Turkish-Azeri ethnolinguistic origins. Second, they use social media to communicate with a global social network of friends to facilitate their move to the final destination country. Third, equipped with accumulated ‘migrant capital’ in Turkey they select a final target country.

KEYWORDS
shared ethnicity
ethnolinguistic affinity
stepwise migration
educated and skilled migrants
Iranian graduate students
Turkey
based on its employment prospects, extent of democratic freedoms and the quality of higher education. Finally, while in Turkey, as job seekers they also monitor fluctuations in global demands for skilled workers in their respective disciplines.

Introduction

Ever since the 1979 revolution Iran has witnessed several waves of out-migration, and the number of educated and skilled Iranians who have either applied for asylum or admission to universities in western countries has also increased drastically in the new millennium (Chaichian 2012; Hakimzadeh 2006; PAAIA 2014). One internal factor that exacerbated this out-migration in the past decade has been the Iranian government’s violent suppression of protesters in the aftermath of disputed presidential election result, and subsequent failure of the so-called Green Movement in 2009 that represented frustrations, longings for democracy and a desire for peaceful social and political change expressed by a large segment of Iranian voters (Stecklow and Fassihi 2009). In his examination of Iran’s exodus of young, educated and skilled Iranians in the new millennium, Mohammad Chaichian cites the Iranian government’s impingement on their individual freedoms and democratic rights, Iran’s rigorous university entrance exams that admit only a fraction of applicants, lack of adequate jobs for university graduates, and their exposure to western culture via satellite television and social media as main reasons for this out-migration (2012: 24–25).

Among Iran’s neighbours, Turkey has attracted both asylum seekers and Iranian students in recent years due to its geographic location and proximity to Iran, which connects the latter to the European continent; cultural similarities, particularly with the Turkish–Azeri Iranians; quality of higher education; low costs of living; and (until recently) the social and political freedoms it offered. Turkey’s relaxed visa regime also allows Iranian passport holders to visit the country and stay there up to 90 days without visa requirements (Icduygu 2003; Zijlstra 2014; Koser Akcapar 2004, 2006).1 According to Michael Gameil Dziwornu et al. (2016), during the 2010–11 academic year there were 26,000 international students enrolled at Turkish universities, of which 1305 were from Iran. By 2016 the number of international students in Turkey had quadrupled to 103,727 (Anadolu Agency 2017). Iran ranked fourth after Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Syria, with 5661 students (both undergraduate and graduate) enrolled in Turkish universities (Dânış 2006; Kaya 2012). Based on one estimate, by early 2018 Turkey was hosting around 120,000 university students from more than 150 countries (Alam and Abdu 2018).

In this article, we examine the plausibility of classifying some Iranian graduate and postgraduate students in Turkey as stepwise skilled migrants who use Turkey as a stepping stone for their plans to migrate to another country. As stepwise migrants, Iranian graduate students have an edge over those who stay in Iran and apply directly to western universities. Through a two-stage migration, the former group acquire an education and at times additional related skills (migrant capital) on their first leg of migration that is of a higher quality than what is available to them in Iran (Icduygu and Kirisci 2009; Icduygu 2005; Irandoost et al. 2010). In addition, we intend to examine the importance of a shared culture and ethnolinguistic affinity between Turkey and some provinces and regions in Iran for graduate students, when choosing Turkey.
The role of shared ethnicity in facilitating stepwise migration …

as their intermediate destination country. Furthermore, anecdotal, field-based observations by one of the article’s co-authors and her own personal experience lend support to this proposition, as in 2009 all enrolled Iranian graduate students in the Sociology programme at Hacettepe University in Ankara were of Turkish–Azeri ethnolinguistic origin.

Another added value is academic collaboration of elite Turkish universities with top-ranked counterparts in the European Union. For example, in her assessment of Turkish universities’ appeal to Iranian graduate students, Homa Sadri points out that

2. In general, global universities tend to: (1) have a substantial number of international students and staff; (2) engage in collaborative research with other universities outside the home country; and (3) address global issues in their teaching, curricula and scholarship (Özöglu et al. 2012). Erasmus is the acronym for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students.

the key point for them is the higher quality and reputation of the so-called ‘global’ universities in Ankara and other major Turkish cities that are members of Erasmus – an initiative established in 1994 by the European Union (EU) that provides opportunities for students to study or gain work experience in various European countries while completing a degree.

(2018: 15)

Thus, enrolling in graduate academic degree programmes in Turkey offers Iranian graduate students a great opportunity to visit distinguished academic programs in the European countries and even North America, join networks of peers, and connect with distinguished academics and researchers – a privilege that is denied to, and out of the reach of graduate students who stay in Iran.

(Sadri 2018: 15)

To our knowledge, there are no systematic studies of Iranian graduate students in Turkey classified as stepwise migrants. But some preliminary studies (see, e.g., Zijlstra 2014b) and field observations by one of the authors, who studied Sociology as a Ph.D. student in Turkey from 2009 to 2014, lend support to this possibility. Except for some who manage to study and later stay longer in Turkey or return to Iran, others go there with the intention of seeking the opportunity to migrate mostly to western countries. In this article, we report the results of the first systematic, though only exploratory, study of Iranian graduate students who at the time of our survey were either enrolled in or had recently graduated from major teaching and research universities in Ankara and several other Turkish cities.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: in Theoretical framework section we provide a conceptual and theoretical explanation for stepwise migration; Data and methodology section describes in detail the empirical research design; Research findings and discussion section presents results; and Conclusion section concludes with policy implications of our findings and analysis. Despite its limitations and shortcomings, and in the absence of in-depth studies related to stepwise migration of graduate students, we consider this project as a pioneering work that we hope will fill the theoretical and methodological gap on this important topic.

Theoretical framework

In general, the existing literature on transnational migration mostly deals with migration trajectories related to settler migrants, namely, those emigrating from
their home country and getting settled in the host country as immigrants.³

Our focus in this article, however, is on stepwise immigrants — those who live in an intermediate country for an extended period while at the same time planning and strategizing to move onto their country of final destination. By definition, stepwise migrants, both high- and low-skilled, are different from other types of migrants such as sojourners, who according to Anju Mary Paul are ‘emotionally oriented’ towards their home country and plan to ‘return there in the future’. Rather, they are looking ‘forward’ towards a preferred destination country. Stepwise migrants are also distinctly different from onward migrants (those who emigrate and become refugees in one country and eventually migrate to another country)⁴; or serial migrants (individuals who immigrate once and settle in a country, and later move to settle in a second).⁵

Furthermore, despite some similarities in their migration trajectories, stepwise migrants are also characteristically different from transit migrants, a term invented in the 1990s by agencies and institutions that dealt with migratory waves mostly from African and West Asian countries to western Europe (Düvel 2008: 4).⁶ For example, the basic definition used for transit migration, namely, ‘migration to one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination’ is very similar to that of stepwise migration. But the former is often associated with human trafficking, irregular migration, asylum seekers and refugees, whose migratory movements are facilitated ‘by means that are partially, if not fully, illegal’ (Icduygü 2005: 8; see also Papadopoulou 2005).⁷

Theorizing stepwise migration of graduate students

As a concept, stepwise migration is not new, and we can trace its origins back to Ernst Georg Ravenstein’s observations of a short-distance, ‘intended’ spatial displacement of migrants from their rural home place to an urban destination within given national boundaries (Ravenstein 1885, 1889). Subsequent empirical research and theoretical arguments continued to focus more on upward movements of population in the rural–urban hierarchy (see, e.g., Hagerstrand 1975; Harvey and Riddell 1975; Withers and Watson 1991). However, in his review of stepwise migration theories, Dennis Conway (1980: 3) concludes that these do not yield a clear-cut explanation for the diversity of stepwise migratory paths.

More recent studies of stepwise migration at the global level mostly focus on the multistage, international movements of low-skilled and less-educated individuals, such as domestic workers and maids (see Barkan 1992; Lutz 2002; Parrenás 2015; Paul 2011, 2017). For example, in her ethnographic study of 95 Filipino domestic workers in the Philippines, Hong Kong and Singapore, Paul analyses the ways ‘low-capital’ migrants ‘intentionally follow a stepwise international migration trajectory, working their way up a hierarchy of destination countries and accumulating sufficient migrant capital in the process so that they can eventually gain legal entry into their preferred destinations, often in the West’ (2011: 1877, original emphasis). Paul defines migrant capital as the ‘resources needed to facilitate a migrant’s entry into his or her desired destination country’, with three distinct forms:

1. Migrant human capital, which refers to ‘both information about the process of emigration to a desired destination (possible visa categories to apply under, the paperwork required, the cost of securing a...
The role of shared ethnicity in facilitating stepwise migration …


Solimano does not use the concept of ‘stepwise migration’ but rather considers students as one category of transit migrants. He also points out that ‘the main recipient country of foreign students is the United States, followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia and Canada. Reportedly, since the 1990s universities in rich developed nations have stepped up their efforts in hiring foreign graduates in order to join their faculties’.

Headquartered in the United States, the World Education Services (WES) has a unique insight on US–Canadian immigration trends, as it receives and processes (for a fee) ‘applications for credential evaluations from potential immigrants and students headed both north and south of the border’ (Lu and Roy 2017: n.pag.).

Although unlikely under current social and political climate, this, however, may change soon. Speaking at the 11th International Students Gathering in Istanbul in May 2018, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan hinted that ‘soon all foreign students and graduates will receive working permission in Turkey’, without giving a specific date for enforcement (Daily Sabah 2018).

visa) and the job experience, language skills, educational qualifications, family status, and even age, that can facilitate securing a visa to the desired country.’

2. Migrant financial capital, which basically comprises ‘the funds needed to pay the necessary agency fees, visa application fees, (at times) living expenses while staying in the intermediate country, and other ancillary costs to travel to a desired destination.’

3. Migrant social capital, which refers to ‘the information or assistance received through network connections (particularly from prior migrants) to reduce the costs and risks of migration’. (2011: 1860–62)

In his book International Migration in the Age of Crisis and Globalization, Andrés Solimano (2010) hints at the possibility of conceptualizing students as stepwise migrants and observes that ‘studying abroad is a way to acquire higher education in another country, and also a way to create opportunities for a more permanent migration plan in order to reach the destination country’. But there is limited scholarship and data about educated and high-skilled stepwise migrants, particularly graduate students. One such study is a recent report by the World Education Services (WES) about the migratory paths of highly skilled workers to Canada, wherein the authors provide an insight into the migration paths of educated and skilled workers as stepwise migrants, or ‘those who come to Canada via a “second country”’ (Lu and Roy 2017: n.pag.).

First, 30% of more than 7000 respondents in their survey ‘made an interim stop at a second country before applying to immigrate to Canada’, which classifies them as stepwise migrants. Of those, 43% had ‘second-country educational experiences only’, and China, Nigeria, Iran, Bangladesh and Pakistan were the top countries of origin ‘with the highest percentages of survey respondents who had second country educational experiences but no work experience’ (Lu and Roy 2017). Related to our focus, 20% of Iranians who responded to the WES survey were stepwise migrants with ‘second-country educational experiences’ only, indicating that the educated stepwise Iranian immigrants comprised a sizable portion of Iranian immigrants who intended to move to Canada. As for the reason(s) why some students become stepwise migrants, the WES report cites the increasing difficulties in obtaining work permits in the second country, particularly for those individuals in the United Kingdom or the United States:

Work-related immigration restrictions in both countries may also contribute to the outflow of graduates to alternate work destinations. Even prior to Theresa May’s premiership, U.K. policies discouraged non-EU international students from remaining in the country to work. In the U.S., meanwhile, a cap on H1B work visas has long limited work opportunities for international students who graduate from U.S. institutions hoping to join the workforce long-term, forcing many U.S. educated graduates to seek work in other countries.

(Lu and Roy 2017: n.pag.)

This is also the case for Iranian graduate students who study at Turkish universities, as up to this date (mid-2018) the Turkish government has not permitted international students to work while studying there. Franck Düvel notes that stepwise and transit migrations mostly to European countries are facilitated
by certain ‘transit zones’, notably in Saharan Africa, the Middle East and some newly independent countries in eastern Europe (2008: 2). In his study of transit migrants, Slobodan Djajić also observes that Turkey, Moldova and Ukraine ‘have become key transit countries for migrants from Asia and the Middle East, on their way to the European Union’ (2017: 1017).  

Based on the preceding discussion, we propose a working definition for graduate students as stepwise migrants: they can be characterized as individuals who move to an intermediate country via legal channels (in this case Turkey) with the intention of advancing their (mostly) graduate studies, but with motivations and long-term plans to weigh their options in migrating to their final country of destination. Like low-skilled domestic workers, Paul’s three distinct categories of migrant capital (2011) related to low-skilled stepwise migrants are also applicable to graduate students as skilled stepwise migrants. The only advantage of the latter group over the former is that they have a more permanent, regular and legal status by the time they have been admitted to a university in the intermediate country. However, we do not consider the three categories of migrant capital as mechanical determinants of stepwise migration, but rather use them here for their intrinsic analytical values. For example, related to migration research within Europe and the importance of human capital, Douglas Massey et al. conclude that a positive correlation between wage differentials in sending and receiving countries and emigration is not always a strong predictor of migration flows (1998: 132). Paul also points out that it is not enough to simply record the multistage trajectories of migrants; we also need to understand migrants’ motivations, as these have a direct impact on where migrants decide to go and how long they choose to stay in each destination. (2011: 1876, emphasis added)

As Aspasia Papadopoulou (2005) points out, similar to transit migration, stepwise migration is also considered as a phase and not a specific category of international migration. Related to our focus, all studies of stepwise migration in both intra- and international contexts indicate the ‘intentionality’ of migrants as they choose their migration trajectories (see Ravenstein 1885; Withers and Watson 1991; Paul 2011, 2017). Thus, stepwise migrants as actors not only have to navigate through a complex web of local, regional and global rules and regulations but also make their plans in response to demands of a constantly changing global labour market both at home and abroad. In his book Globalization and Its Discontents Joseph Stiglitz has noted that ‘[g]lobalization itself is neither good nor bad’, and that ‘it has the power to do enormous good’ (2003: 20). But he is critical of the global imbalances created by the economic policies of ‘first world’ (core) nations and international finance institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, and the pressures these imbalances place on developing countries (periphery). Globalization has effectively transformed the transnational migration processes – as depending on specific global labour market demands the journey could be short- or long-term, temporary or permanent. Because of these transformations, migrants may go through several migratory stages. For example, ‘they may obtain education in one country, work and raise children
The role of shared ethnicity in facilitating stepwise migration …

Considering the intentionality of individual migrants in the context of a dynamic global capitalist economy, Chaichian has observed that individuals’ decisions to migrate (in our case graduate students as stepwise migrants) are in most part ‘rational’ and influenced by both constantly changing socio-economic and political conditions back home (Iran) as well as in their final destinations, meaning individuals’ decisions are aimed at furthering their chances for success in light of a given country’s socio-economic and political environment or placement in a global economy (2012: 20–21). In addition, due to their legal status stepwise migrants also have the option of changing course at various stages of their migratory paths, depending on social/political conditions and opportunities at both ends. As Oliver Bakewell et al. (2012) have argued, there is much to be learned about the interplay between individual migrants as actors and a constantly changing global political economy. Based on the preceding discussion, our objective in this study is to find a preliminary answer to the following two questions pertaining to Iranian graduate students in Turkey:

1. Can we classify part (or all) of Iranian graduate students residing in Turkey as stepwise migrants, namely, individuals who have moved to Turkey as an intermediate (second) country via legal channels to advance their graduate studies, but with the intention and long-term career plans to eventually move to their final (third) country of destination?
2. Do cultural and ethnolinguistic affinities between Turkey and some provinces and regions in western Iran make the former an intermediate country of choice for Iranian graduate students who originate from the latter?

Data and methodology

Using the exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method, we identified Iranian graduate students enrolled in Turkish universities as participants in our survey (our unit of analysis). Since one of the article’s co-authors was a graduate Ph.D. student at Hacettepe University in Ankara with a field-based knowledge of the capital city’s higher education institutions, she contacted nine former graduate and postgraduate students and classmates with established networks and connections within the Iranian student community mainly in Ankara to help us with the sampling procedure. In addition to completing the survey themselves, they also forwarded the pre-survey message, which included a secure web link to allow the completion of a bilingual questionnaire (in English and Farsi), and two follow-up reminders for survey completion to other qualified graduate students in their networks. Furthermore, to get more participants, we also posted the survey instrument link on an independent, non-government affiliated Facebook web page in Farsi (Iranian Students Residing in Ankara, Turkey: https://www.facebook.com/kavecivilmen) with about 500 members at the time, catering to the Iranian student community in Ankara.

Survey instrument: Structure and content

To provide respondents with easy access to our survey instrument, we used Survey Monkey, an online cloud-based software. To protect the respondents’ identities, we assured their anonymity, but they had the option to identify...
themselves, so that we could share the aggregate results with them. The survey was accessible from mid-May through mid-August 2017. This article’s findings are based on primary data from 50 completed surveys (both quantitative and qualitative), as well as secondary analysis of available data and literature on this subject. The survey instrument comprised of 22 close-ended questions: six biographical questions; six questions pertaining to their socio-economic status and educational profiles; and ten questions designed to serve as determinants of respondents’ status as stepwise migrants based on the following variables/criteria:

- Their plans to emigrate from Iran, their reasons to choose Turkey as an intermediate (second) country including its ethnolinguistic and cultural affinity with certain regions and populations in Iran, as well as their intended final (third) destination country, if any (four questions)
- Their access to social media and social networks and their influence/effect on respondents’ migration plans both at mezzo- and macro-levels (‘social capital’, four questions)
- Their overall knowledge about their final (third) country of destination, and the most imperative factors that have made it an attractive choice (‘human capital’, two questions)

The survey instrument design was based on three provisions. First, we included response categories for each close-ended question to serve as indicators of each determinant in assessing graduate students’ status as stepwise migrants. Second, respondents were also asked to provide additional comments/narratives for each question. Third, to determine whether respondents’ long-term plans to get to their choice destinations are ‘rational’ and based on ‘intentional’ decisions, we tried to analyse the collected data in the context of changing global labour market demands for skilled migrants. Fourth, our data analysis and interpretations are only based on tabulated numbers and valid percentages for each response category due to the non-random nature of our sample.16 The presented findings in Section 4 are based on both aggregate quantitative data (survey questions) and qualitative narratives (comments made by respondents on the survey instrument related to each question). Finally, in our analysis we considered the country of origin (Iran) as the first country, while Turkey (the intermediate country) and the final destination (host) countries are considered as second and third, respectively.

Research findings and discussion

Respondents’ biographical and socio-economic profile

Of a total of 50 graduate students or recent graduates who volunteered and later completed our survey, 42% were female and 58% male.17 Related to age, only 4% were 18–24 years old (N=2), while the majority of respondents (82%) were in the 25–36 age bracket (N=38), with another 14% checking the ‘37+’ category (N=7). Moreover, regarding marital status, most respondents were single (76%, N=38), two individuals (4%) identified themselves as ‘separated’ (married but living away from spouses), with the rest (20%, N=10) married at the time the survey was conducted. Respondents were also highly educated, with 90% (N=45) either being enrolled in post-baccalaureate degree programmes, or already holding graduate degrees, 31 from five ‘global’

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16 ‘Valid percentages’ are calculated by excluding non-responses and missing data.
17 Sexual orientation/identity categories were heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and all checked the heterosexual box.
universities in Ankara and another fourteen from ten universities from across Turkey – eight in Istanbul, five in Konya and one in Samsun. Most of the latter institutions are also ranked as global universities (see Table 3 for a complete list of universities and enrolment data). 18

In terms of respondents’ socio-economic status, our focus was more on that of their parents, as students’ zero earning power in Turkey made them economically dependent on personal funds, most likely provided by their parents. Since Turkey does not offer international students the right to seek employment under their student visas, this can diminish its appeal for graduate and postgraduate Iranian students who come from lower-income and working-class families with limited personal or parental support (Özoğlu et al. 2015). Therefore, we hypothesized that most respondents should have come from families with adequate financial resources (‘financial capital’). Our sample data strongly support this proposition, as 87% (N=41) came from middle- or upper-class families, based on three broad definitions of social class we had provided for this question (see Table 1).

**Ethnolinguistic and cultural factors influencing respondents’ decisions in choosing Turkey as their intermediate (second) host country**

In their study of Kurdish and Arab women in Turkey, Jeroen Smits and Ayşe Gündüz-Hoşgör (2003) consider the ability to speak Turkish as a ‘socio-economic resource’, which they view as ‘cultural–linguistic capital’ (2003: 831). Our survey results also identify cultural and ethnolinguistic affinity as a significant indicator of respondents’ preference for Turkey as their interim destination. In fact, a majority (N/%=32/71) came from provinces that are either very close to or border Turkey (namely, West and East Azerbaijan and Ardebil provinces). For example, when asked ‘why did you choose Turkey as your destination to pursue graduate studies?’, a large majority of respondents in this study (N/%=39/87) indicated Turkey’s proximity not only to Iran but also to their ‘hometown’. Furthermore, Turkish–Azeri is the main spoken language for 55% of respondents, an important factor for the Azeri-speaking Iranian immigrants for considering Turkey as an appealing choice. Finally, 36% of respondents (N=18) comment that their choice of Turkey as a destination is because of that nation’s ‘ethnolinguistic affinity’ with their province and hometown (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1977), ‘linguistic capital is a form of cultural capital defined at the level of the human individual […] thus, dialects or sociolects can represent a form of capital to the extent that they yield a benefit to the speakers endowed with them’ (Bourdieu cited in Meyer-Schwarzenberger 2013: 1; see also Bourdieu 1986). This certainly is the case for Iranians of Azeri ethnolinguistic origin. For example, in his comparison of modern Azeri and Turkish languages, Kurtulush Öztopçu (1993) considers Azeris and Turks as part of the Oghuz tribal confederation with a shared ‘ethnic background’ (Öztopçu 1993:1). 19 An earlier study by Daniş (2006) and field work by Zijlstra (2014b) about the settled Iranian community in Turkey also lend support to the significance of linguistic capital, as they both report that most Iranians were of Azerbaijani–Turkish background (Zijlstra 2014b: 189). Our findings also indicate that Turkey is a preferred choice for most respondents as an intermediate country due to a shared culture and language, as 70 per cent of graduate students (N=33) are of Turkish–Azeri ethnolinguistic origins. 20

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18. The five global universities in Ankara are Ankara University, Bilkent University, Hacettepe University, Gazi University and Middle East Technical University (US News & World Report 2017).


In his analysis of international migration patterns, Solimano has observed that students may choose certain countries to ‘acquire higher education’, while at the same time exploring opportunities for a more permanent migration that will take them to their final country of destination (2010: 74, see also International Organization for Migration 2010). To test this possibility, we also included several questions about students’ plans (or lack thereof) to emigrate from Iran, including the country or countries they considered as their final destination; the extent of their knowledge about them; what they considered as determining factors in choosing their final destination; and, finally, whether or not staying in Turkey had any influence on their long-term migration plans.

Our findings clearly support the proposition that we can indeed classify Iranian graduate students in Turkey as stepwise skilled migrants, primarily for two interrelated reasons. First, to determine respondents’ status as immigrants or prospective stepwise migrants, our initial question was ‘are you planning to emigrate from Iran?’ Of those who responded (N=47), 36 answered ‘yes’ and eleven answered ‘no’, with two indicating that they have already settled permanently in Turkey. Thus, while we can classify 23 per cent of respondents as sojourners (N=11), more than 72 per cent (N=34) were not only studying in Turkey but also planning to emigrate to another country of their choice. Furthermore, the latter group’s declaration of intent classifies them as stepwise migrants with the following profile, based on our survey findings: a majority of them were of Turkish–Azeri ethnic backgrounds, predominantly from north-western Azeri-speaking provinces bordering Turkey; Ph.D.-level or postdoctoral students; men and women 30 years or older and single and from middle- and upper-class families (see Table 3).

Second, when asked to ‘identify your “main” country or region of final destination’, the EU region was the top choice for 28% of respondents, followed by the United States (22%), Canada (20%) and Australia (5%), with the remaining 25% checking Turkey as their destination. Added together, 75% of survey respondents who answered this question indicated that their stay in Turkey was temporary, with the intent to eventually move to the more economically developed western democracies. Furthermore, a majority of respondents (75%) either commented that their ‘Turkey experience’ has solidified their plans to move on, or had set their eyes on other countries as their final destination from day one. One important contributing factor is the Turkish government’s rigid immigration policies that make it very difficult for students to obtain legal residency permits and stay in Turkey after graduation.
The role of shared ethnicity in facilitating stepwise migration …

For example, in response to the question ‘has your stay in Turkey changed your mind/decision to immigrate to your final country of choice?’, one respondent commented ‘yes, because I can’t work as a foreign veterinarian in Turkey – I must become a citizen, and it takes about 5 years after graduation’. In addition to lack of opportunities to work or gain work-related experience in their disciplines, respondents also noted a few other factors, including a ‘blatant discrimination’ towards international students when considering Turkey as a temporary intermediate (second) country, as reflected in the following two comments:

Because here in Turkey there is an obvious discrimination between Turkish students and others [international students]. Academic facilities are rarely available for us, and where and when they are, the [provided] general services are not enough or adequate at all.

(A married female middle-class Ph.D. student of Fars ethnic origin in her mid-30s from Tehran, studying Sociology at Middle East Technical University.)

Unfortunately, contrary to my initial understanding one cannot find employment in Turkey by simply getting a graduate degree – having good connections are more important than your education in securing a job. That’s why I intend to migrate to another country if possible.

A total of 36 respondents answered this question. The United Kingdom was a separate category due to its impending withdrawal from the European Union, but none checked it as the final destination.

Comment by a male graduate student of Fars ethnic origin, single and in his late-20s, studying Veterinary Medicine.
## Respondents’ profile

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<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parsi/Farsi</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-declared social class</strong>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Degree level</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postdoctoral/Graduated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Continued)*
The role of shared ethnicity in facilitating stepwise migration …

Finally, one student also cited Turkey’s changing social and political climate in recent years as a deciding factor in her decision ‘to move to a more stable and democratic country’.23

By and large, we can unequivocally classify most respondents as pre-determined stepwise skilled migrants, as evidenced by some of their comments:

That was the plan from the beginning, to use Turkey as a transition. It never changed during my stay here.

(A married female middle-class Ph.D. student of Turkish–Azeri ethnic origin in her late-30s from Mian-Doab in West Azerbaijan, studying Children with Special Needs Psychology at Istanbul University.)

I’m looking for higher education and research positions, and I never saw Turkey as a possible destination for PhD. Also, since there is recent political turmoil in Turkey, I’ve set my mind on not staying here longer than necessary.

Comment by a married female middle-class Ph.D. student of Turkish–Azeri ethnic origin in her mid-30s from Ardebil in Ardebil Province, studying Sociology at Hacettepe University.

In the aftermath of the failed July 2016 military coup in Turkey, and the ensuing crackdown on critics including journalists, writers, academics and intellectuals by Erdoğan’s AKP (Justice and Development Party), the continued desirability of perceived social freedoms by Iranian immigrants in Turkey is yet to be seen.
24 In her study of low-skilled Filipino domestic workers as stepwise migrants, Paul also concludes that ‘migrants have sufficient agency and future-thinking capacity to aspire to undertake such a multistage journey up their personal destination hierarchy’ (2011: 1880).

Turkey is another Muslim country like Iran. I just chose it so that I could get out of Asia. Also, my objective in choosing Turkey was to find an English-instructed university [such as the one I am enrolled in now] so that I can use it as a launching pad to get to the United States after graduation.

(A male middle-class postdoctoral student of Turkish–Azeri ethnic origin in his mid-30s from Tabriz in East Azerbaijan, studying Electrical and Electronic Engineering at Middle East Technical University.)

Another indicator of graduate students’ intention to leave Turkey for their country of choice as stepwise migrants is the extent of their knowledge about their final country of destination. For example, of those who responded to the question ‘what is your overall knowledge about your final country of destination?’, a considerable majority (66 per cent) indicated that they are either ‘informed’ or ‘very well informed’, indicating their purposeful and goal-oriented agenda in making their next move (an average rating of 2.9 on a 1.0–4.0 scale, see Table 4). On this issue, several respondents also commented that during their stay in Turkey they have managed to gather more reliable information about their destination countries, something that was not easy for them to do back home due to a more restricted access to the Internet.24

Social media

Forces of globalization in the past several decades have accelerated the development of communication and information networks. This in turn has strengthened the connection between migrants and their social networks, both at home and abroad, and increased their mobility. Scholarship on this topic is extensive and growing, and often concludes that social media effectively transform the nature of social networks and facilitate migration (Dekker and Engbersen 2013; Hiller and Franz 2004; Kuzlowska 2015; Komito 2011; Specia 2015). For example, Dekker and Engbersen (2013) argue that in addition to helping migrants in maintaining strong ties with family and friends, social media provide a ‘ready to use’ platform when they decide to use them, a virtual infrastructure with hidden, latent ties and serve as an informal source of insider knowledge on migration (Dekker and Engbersen 2013: 405).

Iranians are savvy users of social media, and based on a recent survey 75 per cent of those with higher education levels and university graduates in Iran are active users of social media (Financial Tribune 2016).25 However, scholarship about the role of social media and social networks in facilitating
regional and international migration for Iranians is much desired. Thus, one of the objectives in this study was to gather information on this issue. To that end, we included two questions in our survey to collect information about respondents’ use of social media and satellite television. First, of the 33 individuals who responded to the question ‘which of the social media facilitate your connection to your family and friends?’, Facebook was the first choice for 67% (N=22), followed by e-mail (61%, N=20), Telegram (45%, N=15) and telephone (39%, N=13). One respondent commented that ‘Facebook and email are the safest and most secure social media’. Of note is Telegram, respondents’ third choice, which has become the most popular social medium in Iran. However, in the aftermath of nationwide anti-government protests over economic grievances in January 2018, when protesters used Telegram to organize rallies, Iran’s judiciary banned the popular instant messaging app to reportedly ‘protect national security’ (Hafezi 2018: n.pag.).

Second, for decades Iranian opposition groups in exile and some western governments have also sought to challenge and counter Iran’s heavily censored government-controlled domestic media by beaming their own broadcasts via satellite channels, often with an anti-regime agenda. As a result, satellite dishes in Iran are officially illegal, but based on the government’s own admission, 70 per cent of Iranians allegedly violate the law (Rouhani 2016). Our findings also support this, as in response to the question ‘did you have access to satellite TV channels while in Iran?’, 87 per cent of respondents answered yes (an even higher rate than the government’s official assessment). Satellite dishes also allow Iranians to tune into foreign-funded broadcasts for entertainment and the news, and based on some studies, satellite TV programmes also help raise prospective migrants’ global awareness about countries with the most opportunities for jobs and education. However, our survey findings do not support this proposition, as in response to the question ‘did your exposure to satellite TV programs influence your decision to choose the country of your final destination?’, only 24 per cent (N=9) responded in the affirmative.

**Social networks**

Informed by Migration Network Theory, E. S. Lee (cited in Hein de Haas 2008: 31) has observed that existing social networks in the host country and recommendations by family and friends should be considered as an important factor.
This finding is in line with one of Migration Systems Theory’s propositions – social networks’ significant role in facilitating migration across borders at the macro-level (see, e.g., Arango 2000; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Massey 1999). In facilitating migration, and according to Maritsa Poros (2011) ‘most potential immigrants seek to minimize their risks when they move and consider places where they know other individuals or organizations that can help them to make the trip and settle most easily’. But as Koser Akcapar (2010) has observed, most studies of international migration have focused on ‘the importance of social networks and social capital in the countries of origin and destination’ (see, e.g., Arango 2000; Bakewell et al. 2012; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Kurekova 2010; Massey 1999; Massey et al. 1998; Skeldon 1997), and there are scant studies of their importance in transit (intermediate) countries. Related to Iranians in Turkey, Koser Aksapar’s (2010) own ethnographic study of Iranians as transit migrants provides insight on the role played by social networks and social capital. However, she concludes that social networks in Turkey ‘do not always generate positive social capital’, as they are ‘scarce resources’ and are affected by ‘macro-variables’ such as globalization and ‘Turkey’s immigration and asylum policies, as well as ‘micro-variables’ related to individual migrants’ ethnicity, gender and religious beliefs (Koser Aksapar 2010). By and large, related to our study and based on 31 subjects who answered the item ‘check any of the following networks that facilitate your move to the final country of destination’, our findings indicate that regardless of the respondents’ sex, the presence of close friends in Turkey is the main determining factor (81 per cent, N=27), while family members play a much less significant role (29 per cent, N=10). Similarly, and although at a much lower level, when asked the same question about their move to Turkey, for both sexes the presence of close friends was also more important than their family members (see Table 5).29

In general, scholarship on the role of social networks and social capital is inconclusive and has produced mixed results. For example, in his study of immigration and emigration decisions among British expatriates in Vancouver, Canada, William Harvey (cited in Katerina Nicolopoulou et al.) concludes that ‘although social networks were key in influencing migration decisions, transnational social ties were of limited importance and this problematizes the argument that these networks are prevalent amongst highly skilled migrants’ (2011: 54). Advocates of Migration Systems Theory also emphasize social networks’ significant role in facilitating migration across borders at the macro-level (see, e.g., Arango 2000; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Massey 1999). However, in an earlier study of undocumented migrants at the borders between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in 2005, Michael Collyer discusses the ways in which even ‘highly marginalized migrants’, whom he calls ‘strategic actors’, could develop ‘transnational social organizations and networks’ (2012: 505).

**Conceptualizing stepwise migrants’ intentionality in response to fluctuations in global labour market demands**

In his book *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, David Harvey explains how the cyclical inflow of educated or skilled immigrants helps companies and employers in advanced capitalist countries to break the monopoly of skilled labour in certain fields to lower labour costs, which in turn will lower production costs (2015: 119–20). In order to assess the possible effects global labour market demands might have on respondents’ plans for the next move, we asked two questions about respondents’ last field of study in Iran before moving to Turkey, as well as their ‘current field of graduate study in the host country’ as an indication of changes in their study fields...
The role of shared ethnicity in facilitating stepwise migration...

30. See Charles Kurzman (2009) for an historical context of events leading to the Green Movement and government crackdown of academic disciplines in the social sciences and humanities (labelled in Iran as the ‘human sciences’).

31. This is purely speculative, and the authors plan to conduct a follow-up survey and interview with respondents who have indicated their interest in participating in the second phase of our research.

32. Reportedly, ‘the Association of American Medical Colleges found that the demand for doctors will continue to outpace supply, leading to a projected shortfall of between 46,100 and 90,400 doctors by 2025, many in primary care’ (American Immigration Council 2018).

While in Turkey. Although these conclusions are tentative, based on our data we can make three broad observations related to three main ‘past-/present-’ response categories.

First, the number of Iranian students studying social sciences and the humanities in Turkey shows a considerable growth (N-past/ N-present = 10/15), with all five new students in the social sciences and humanities category enrolled in graduate Sociology programmes. This does not mean that there is an increasing global demand for graduates in the social sciences, but rather is an indication of the Iranian government’s continued crackdown on graduate studies in these disciplines, particularly Sociology, which intensified in the aftermath of the failed Green Movement in 2009.30

Second, respondents’ previous and current fields of study in business management, engineering and computer science had remained virtually unchanged, with only a slight increase (N-past/ N-present = 17/18). This can be interpreted as their knowledge of a strong global labour market demand in these fields, supported by the findings of another recent survey by Lu and Roy (2017) in their study of highly skilled and educated stepwise migrants (including Iranians) who were planning to go to Canada as their final (third) destination country. For example, they observed that the most common fields of study are business and engineering (30 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively), while ‘math and computer science come in third, at 10 percent’ (Lu and Roy 2017: n.pag.).

Third, there was a dramatic increase in the number of students enrolled in the medical sciences field in our sample (N-past/ N-present = 2/11). The medical field’s appeal and a change in respondents’ initial field of study could be indicators of their adjustment to more suitable future career opportunities and job prospects after graduation, based on global labour market demands at the time.31 For example, in a January 2018 document, the American Immigration Council (AIC) reported that more than one-quarter of doctors with medical degrees practicing in the United States were from foreign countries (American Immigration Council 2018; see also McCabe 2012 for an earlier report). AIC’s report predicts that, with an increased demand for accessible and affordable health care in the United States, there will be an increasing demand for foreign-born and trained physicians.32

Finally, in a follow-up question, we asked respondents to identify ‘the most important factors they have sought to gather information about their final country of destination’. In brief, respondents’ top priority was ‘job prospects after graduation’ (66%), followed by the ‘presence of democratic and socio-political freedom’ in their selected and desired destination country (55%). The ‘quality of higher education’ and ‘availability of graduate programs in their field of study’ both ranked third (44.7%). However, they were less concerned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social network:</th>
<th>Turkey, mezzo-level (N=45)</th>
<th>Final destination, macro-level (varied, N=31)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close friends</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>80.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>8.89%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Importance of Social networks for respondents’ choices of destination countries at mezzo- and macro-levels (social capital).
For my future, I decided to select a country with employment opportunities, stable economic conditions with a responsible government in charge, as well as a stable social-cultural environment. Yes, when you have lived outside Iran for a long period of time you reflect on all these issues and get used to both social freedoms and living in exile at the same time; and the thought of returning to my dear homeland [Iran] becomes increasingly troubling.

(*A male middle-class respondent of Fars ethnic origin in his late-20s from Tehran, studying Dentistry at Selçuk University.*)

In closing, while we can classify nearly three-fourths of respondents in our sample as prospective stepwise migrants (N=36), we cannot overlook Turkey’s own appeal to Iranian students, particularly from Azeri-speaking regions bordering Turkey. For example, three students (all of Azeri ethnolinguistic backgrounds) commented that either they have achieved all their goals or they consider they are headed in the right direction while studying in Turkey, leading to their decision to stay. One respondent’s comment represents the overall sentiment expressed by Iranian students who have chosen Turkey as their target destination country:

My stay in Turkey for more than 5 years has influenced my decision to get settled here. The first reason is its proximity to Iran, which has eased the possibility of traveling back and meeting my family. The second reason, which is again an emotional one, is the circle of friends I have made and the fact that I feel at home here, while the thought of moving to another country triggers my fear of loneliness and the difficulty of starting over.
Finally, in addition to a shortage of desirable employment opportunities for young, educated Iranians at home, the mandatory, draft-based military service in Iran is another push factor in their moving to a neighbouring country. For all practical purposes, Turkey provides an easy escape route for students who try to dodge the draft, as evidenced in one respondent’s comment:

There is the issue of mandatory military service for Iranian males which can be daunting. Also, the application process for many universities in Iran can take as long as a year, and given the looming military service status one might not have a year but getting accepted in Turkey is faster and easier.

(A male middle-class master’s-level student of Fars ethnic origin in his late-20s from Tabriz in East Azerbaijan, studying Medical Informatics at Middle East Technical University.)

Conclusion

Based on this article’s findings, we classify a majority of Iranian graduate students in our sample as stepwise migrants who intend to pursue part or all of their postgraduate education in Turkey as the intermediate (second) country to facilitate their move to their final (third) country of destination. Turkey has a strategic geographic location for Iranian graduate students, particularly those of Turkish–Azeri ethnolinguistic and cultural origins from bordering northwestern Iranian provinces, since it functions as a preferred transit/intermediate country between Iran and the more economically advanced regions and countries, including western Europe, North America and Australia. Furthermore, a predominant majority of respondents in our sample come from middle- and upper-class families, reflecting a financial prerequisite, as the Turkish government does not allow foreign students to work in any capacity while studying in Turkey. Under the current situation, it is a fair assessment to conclude that stepwise migrants in Turkey need to have access to sufficient funds in order to survive while in the intermediate (second) country. As stepwise migrants, they also demonstrate a considerable level of informed advanced planning for their move to the final (third) destination country. More specifically, as global job seekers they identify their final destination countries based on employment prospects, presence of democratic freedoms and the quality of higher education related to their disciplines, regardless of inhibitive factors such as a host nation’s tough immigration laws.

There are no accurate available data on the total number of Iranian graduate students enrolled in universities in Ankara and other cities (our sampling frame). However, we expected to get a higher number of responses, and despite extending the survey’s availability online we consider the response level less than satisfactory. This may be attributed to one main factor: lack of trust. The nine initial contacts were well-connected and trusted in their own circles, and we clearly stated project objectives and provided our credentials and contact information for participants. However, except for respondents from Hacettepe University, who were acquainted with one of the co-authors, others may have perceived us as outsiders and hence ‘untrustworthy’. This is a recurring problem...
and continuously reported by other researchers who have used surveys and interviews to collect data about Iranian immigrants; under the current political climate in Iran they are often suspicious of anyone who attempts to collect information about them (see, e.g., Kamalkhani 1988: 112; Gilanshah 1990: 12; Chaichian 1997: 614). Although not a direct contributing factor, the ongoing suppression of political opponents of the post-coup government in Turkey may have also discouraged some Iranian graduate students from responding to our survey in order to protect their residency status in Turkey.

This study’s non-random sample also prevented us from making any definitive conclusions, and much research and scholarship are needed in this area, using a larger and preferably random sample that can represent Iranian students from all global universities across Turkey. In addition, we are cognizant that survey research is not the best method to collect data on respondents’ opinions and decision-making processes as prospective stepwise migrants. Our reliance on close-ended response categories in the survey instrument and respondents’ voluntary choices to provide comments also limited our ability to provide a more in-depth analysis. Thus, we are planning to invite respondents who were interested in receiving the survey’s aggregate results (N=27) for a follow-up virtual interview. In our second phase of research we also intend to conduct an ethnographic study of Iranian graduate students who, as stepwise migrants from various intermediate (second) countries, have succeeded in making it to the United States as their destination country.

As a final note, regardless of Iranian graduate students’ plans and intentions to complete their final leg of migratory journeys as stepwise migrants, governments in second and third countries control the in-migration bottlenecks based on their immigration laws that often reflect fluctuations of labour market demands, and diverse positions taken by political parties in power on immigrants and immigration. Future research should also take a closer look at destination countries’ immigration laws and regulations, demands for the educated and skilled workers and other social–cultural factors that may either encourage or inhibit Iranian graduate students the completion of the final leg of their journey. Despite its shortcomings, we hope that, as one of the first systematic studies of stepwise migration of educated and skilled individuals, this article will serve as a resource for other scholars who are interested in conducting research on this subject, both comparative and case-based, as well as for host (first), intermediate (second) and final destination (third) countries in their efforts to formulate informed and sensible policies related to this cohort of international migrants.

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