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Like a Fish Outside the Sea: An Ethnographic Exploration of Why and How Young Lebanese from El-Mina Migrate to Europe

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Like a Fish Outside the Sea: An Ethnographic Exploration of Why and How Young Lebanese from El-Mina Migrate to Europe

A Thesis Submitted by

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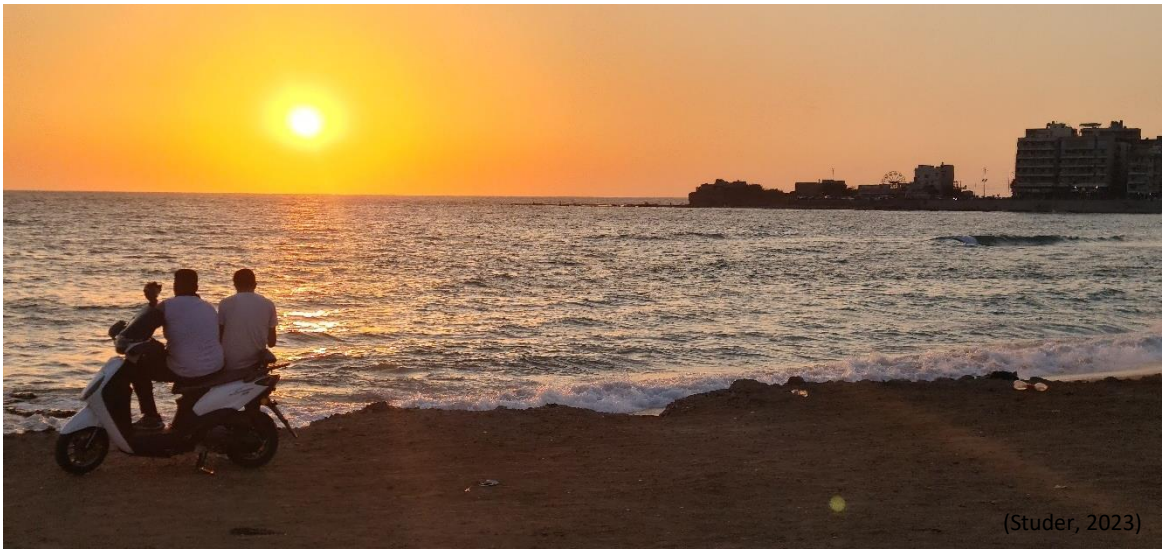
to the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS)



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Dedication

To Teta and Jeddoh,

Who were forced to leave their home more than once.

Your strength and love inspire me every day.

I admire you.

To everyone who feels compelled to leave their homes,

May you find happiness, peace, and the decent life you aspire to.

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Abstract

Following the Thawra in 2019, Lebanon's initial optimism for political change has given way to a harsh reality. The country, troubled by hyperinflation, deteriorating state services, and worsening living conditions, coupled with corruption and sectarianism, is seeing an increasing number of Lebanese seeking alternative futures abroad, including in Europe. Be it via regular or irregular pathways, young Lebanese adults have been leaving the country, their families, their friends – their homes.

This ethnographic Master's thesis, which was conducted during the Summer of 2023 in El-Mina, a port city in northern Lebanon, delves into the aspirations and capabilities that drive young Lebanese to migrate to Europe. Through fifteen semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and participant observation, the study examines the origins and the development of migration experiences in the context of El-Mina. It critically examines the resources crucial to migration decisions and the diverse actors and regulations involved in facilitating or constraining migration pathways.

By illuminating these dynamics, this thesis offers a nuanced understanding of how youth from a small port community navigate and overcome emigration challenges. The findings reveal that emigration decisions are driven by both intrinsic and instrumental aspirations and that there is never just one single motivation. Individuals with lower economic, social, and human capital were found to prioritize intrinsic aspirations, while those with greater capital focus more on instrumental goals, often having a more concrete plan for future accomplishments. Thereby, emotions and mental health proved to be central dimensions that should be given greater consideration in future research to enable a more comprehensive understanding of aspirations.

The thesis further illustrates that migration methods differ according to capital, with individuals possessing more capital typically emigrating through regular channels. In comparison, those with

less capital often employ irregular means to reach Europe. However, people without access to (financial) capital are unable to emigrate.

The interviews highlight the complexity of emigration processes shaped by the Lebanese context, capital composition, and migration governance, and portray migrants as active actors rather than passive victims. While the macro-level context influences aspirations and capabilities in general, it is the individual situation that determines the composition and importance of different aspirations and dictates individual access to capital and resources, thus shaping the mode of migration. Thereby, this study contributes to filling gaps in the literature on the emigration trends of Lebanese youth and the impact of emigration policies, in the example of El-Mina.

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1. Introduction

1.1. A Drowning Country

It was a particularly hot and humid summer when I conducted my field research in El-Mina in 2023. Although the heat was oppressive, the atmosphere was both electrifying and nostalgic. After years of uncertainty and instability, many Lebanese who had emigrated were returning for their first visit in a long time. The streets of Beirut and Batroun were filled with people, the crowded streets delayed traffic due to the many rental cars, beaches were filled with sunbathers, and as evening fell, lively parties drew in energetic dancers. It was a reminder of the time before 2019 when summers were still characterized by family gatherings and days full of plans with friends.

Foreign currency surged into the local economy, creating a deceptive sense of optimism. But behind this festive façade lurked tension and uncertainty. What would happen once the visitors returned to their (new) home countries, leaving their fellow citizens behind in a country shattered by a financial crash, a port explosion that destroyed large parts of Beirut, a global pandemic, a deadlocked government, and a failed revolution?

Lebanon, once known as the Switzerland of the Middle East, has been struggling with political instability, economic challenges, and social unrest for a long time (Al Maalouf & Al Baradhi, 2024). In the fall of 2019, Lebanon witnessed an upheaval as the streets of the country echoed with the calls of discontent. What began as a collective outcry against entrenched political grievances quickly evolved into a nationwide revolution that brought citizens, especially the youth, to the forefront of the quest for fundamental change. The Lebanese people, whose demands were grounded in the deep-rooted malaise of political corruption, economic deterioration, and imposed austerity measures, dared to envision a new beginning that was not overshadowed by the systemic injustice and impunity of the elites. Unfortunately, this optimism quickly faded. Lebanon is now grappling

with a severe financial crisis compounded by the collapse of its banking sector, resulting in soaring inflation, the loss of lifetime savings, and a decline in essential public services such as electricity, education, security, and healthcare (Fakhoury, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

With about eighty percent of people in poverty (UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Lebanon, 2023), many Lebanese feel hopeless and are trying to find a way out of this seemingly inevitable total collapse, mainly by deciding whether to remain in their home country or leave. Many have already migrated to the Gulf region, France, or Canada, with highly qualified people having an easier time migrating than those with fewer resources (Fakhoury, 2024). But what are the main motivations why people decide to leave the country and what are their aspirations? What are the pathways that people take? What resources are needed? And to what extent do the specific context in Lebanon and the existing migration governance influence emigration decisions?

My interest in researching the aspirations and different paths of migration of Lebanese leaving the country stems from various reasons. For one, having family in Lebanon myself, I have witnessed cousins making decisions to leave their homeland to seek a safer and better life in countries such as Canada, the US, France, Germany, Australia, Qatar, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia. These personal experiences were reinforced by my involvement with the non-governmental organization (NGO) Relief and Reconciliation for Syria in the northern governorate of Akkar. During my five years at the NGO, we have observed that more and more Syrian refugees are embarking on a second journey, this time via the dangerous sea routes to Cyprus and Italy, a trend also documented by a growing number of reports and scientific studies. Furthermore, the recent growth in the number of Lebanese embarking on similar, regular, or irregular journeys has added a new dimension to the problem, reflecting the people's search for stability outside of the collapsing country. The increase in the regular and irregular migration of Lebanese since 2019 was the main reason for dedicating this work to researching youth migration from Lebanon to Europe.

As someone with both Lebanese and European roots, I also brought along a personal interest in understanding choices made about different migration pathways to Europe and how these decisions unfold individually among different participants. I acknowledge that Lebanese emigration extends beyond Europe to mainly the Gulf States, the USA, Canada, and Australia. However, since I aim to analyze both regular and irregular migration from Lebanon, with irregular migration currently primarily directed towards Europe, I have chosen migration to Europe as my main focus.

It is generally known that the majority of irregular boat crossings in Lebanon take place from and around Tripoli, especially from El-Mina. This is partly due to the geographical location of the city, which is surrounded by the sea on three sides and has a well-developed port infrastructure. In addition, frequent leisure trips from the coast to the numerous small islands off the coast further predispose the region.

It is believed that around 90 percent of irregular migration comes from the north of the country, as the coast in the south of the country is more tightly controlled by UNIFIL to prevent tensions between Lebanon and Israel (Diab & Jouhari, 2023). The complex and diverse structure of historical, geopolitical, and demographic influences shaping El-Mina makes the city a particularly suitable case study. As a melting pot of religious and ethnic groups, El-Mina not only reflects the religious diversity of Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians but is also home to an ethnic diversity that includes Lebanese, Armenians, Palestinians, and Syrians. This unique population composition is in many ways reflective of Lebanese society as a whole, including the different population groups, social classes, and religions, as well as the problems, hopes, and challenges associated with them. Compared to the capital Beirut, El-Mina thus offers a more nuanced representation of the socio-economic reality of the population in Lebanon.

Furthermore, the choice of a case study enables a more in-depth analysis of the interactions between different macro and micro-level factors that influence the emigration of young people from Lebanon to Europe. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the situation and

facilitates the discussion and analysis of theoretical concepts, enabling a critical examination of the topic. In addition, already having previous contacts in El-Mina was crucial for conducting the field research proving it to be a particularly suitable research area for the case study.

Like the rest of Lebanon, El-Mina and its inhabitants have been significantly affected by the economic insecurities, limited educational opportunities, missing health care, and political instability that Lebanon has faced in recent years. Many people I spoke to told me that the current situation *"feels like being in a prison"*, which they were trying to escape. However, despite the long-standing history as a port city fostering strong networks of migration among its population and the current challenging circumstances, El-Minas inhabitants maintain a deep bond with their town and the sea, as one of the interview partners explained [1]:

> *"Mina is everything. We feel like a fish out of the water when we go out of Mina. We are a community here, we take care of each other. […]. We are like a big family, even if we fight sometimes. In the end, we love each other." (Mina 3)*

The daily struggles faced by young people in El-Mina amidst the current situation, coupled with their strong sense of belonging to the community, rendered El-Mina an ideal setting for my case study on youth emigration from Lebanon to Europe. Questions such as why people choose to leave the country, what their aspirations and preferred pathways are, and what resources are required for each path, along with how Lebanon's specific context and migration policies impact these decisions, motivated me to explore the diverse goals, capabilities, and challenges individuals face during their emigration process and how they navigate them.

[1] The participants mentioned in the Introduction and Context Chapters are introduced in more detail in Chapter 6, in which I present my research findings.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

Against this background, the thesis aims to uncover the complex factors that influence the decision to migrate to Europe of young Lebanese in El-Mina and to explore their decision-making process and experiences through ethnographic research. The overarching aim is to go beyond statistical presentation and explore the lived experiences, narratives, and contextual nuances of young adults in El-Mina to provide a comprehensive understanding of individual mobility journies to Europe. The following research question and its sub-questions will serve as orientation:

How do factors such as aspiration and capabilities, in conjunction with contextual migration policies, influence the mobility intentions and experiences of young Lebanese adults in El-Mina?

1. *What are the main contextual, social, and systemic reasons young Lebanese adults from El-Mina choose to leave the country, and what are their aspirations?*
2. *What are the most common modes of migration, and how do migrant capabilities influence their selection?*
3. *How do migration policies and regulations impact individual aspirations and capabilities on their emigration path to Europe?*

Looking at the existing literature in the field, I presume that the migration decisions of young Lebanese adults in El-Mina to Europe are shaped by a complex interplay of individual aspirations, contextual circumstances, and EU migration policies. Contextual factors such as economic insecurity, limited opportunities, and political instability drive migration, while the type of migration depends on individual capabilities. Furthermore, migration regulations are assumed to influence migration experiences by either facilitating or hindering access to legal modes of migration, thus shaping the selection of emigration routes available to the individual.

1.3. Thesis Structure

The thesis starts by presenting the contextual setting of this thesis. By giving a brief overview of the Lebanese context and Tripoli and El-Mina in particular, I aim to introduce the history of these places as well as the daily life and current struggles of the participants of this thesis. Furthermore, particular focus will be placed on the different waves of migration from Lebanon, particularly from El-Mina, to various parts of the world, especially Europe. As there have only been limited sources addressing the municipality of El-Mina, I allow myself to fill in the gaps with information received by some of the participants of this thesis.

In the next chapter, I will delve into various migration policies that influence the experiences of (potential) Lebanese migrants as they journey towards Europe. Examining these measures provides insight into the potential restraints that young adults from El-Mina may encounter when trying to leave the country.

The following literature review aims to provide a comprehensive and critical overview of existing scholarly works and research studies in the field of migration studies relevant to this thesis. While I give an overview of what has already been written about migration in Lebanon, I identify gaps and unanswered questions relevant to youth emigration from El-Mina. Building on this, I will outline the main theories and concepts that I believe best describe the situation discussed in this paper. In this context, I focus on the literature on migration network theory, the concept of migration infrastructure, agency theory, migration autonomy theory, and the aspirations and capabilities model. Demonstrating trends and patterns currently relevant in academia facilitates the introduction of the conceptual foundation for this study, highlighting the interconnectedness of various pertinent factors.

Following the presentation of the methodology used in this thesis, the chapter ‘Findings and Analysis: Like a Fish Outside the Sea’ systematically discusses the data collected during the study in

El-Mina in relation to the existing literature. Using extracts from my interviews, I will illustrate the main concerns of the research participants concerning mobility, the options available to them based on their resources, and the practical realization of these choices. Why do young adults in El-Mina decide to leave their homes? Who has the option to leave for Europe regularly? Who are the actors involved in the process? What paperwork is decisive? What about irregular migrants? Who are they in contact with? What capabilities are important to them? How does this relate to previous empirical studies and my theoretical framework? Using the conceptual framework I have developed, I will analyze these questions, highlight the key findings, and place them in the broader context of El-Mina.

2. *"Should I Stay or Should I Go?"*: Historical Background

To contextualize the present study, it is imperative to understand the current climate in Lebanon and its history. As such, this section will provide an introduction to Lebanon, Tripoli, and El-Mina, followed by an examination of historical migration patterns. By looking at these different geographical contexts, I aim to capture the multiple geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors that shape the migration experiences of the people of El-Mina. Whether driven by war or economic and political instability, migration waves created social networks between European countries and Lebanon, influencing migration patterns until today.

However, looking at migration patterns also requires us to look at the cooperation on migration governance between the EU and Lebanon to understand the different obstacles (potential) migrants to Europe encounter. Given the lack of available resources on El-Mina, the chapter will already include some insights I gained during my field research.[2]

2.1. *"There is Nothing Left for Us"*: Resonances of the Past in Today's Context

2.1.1. Lebanon: A History of Struggles and Unfulfilled Hopes

Lebanon is a relatively small country, with an area of 10,452 square kilometers, located east of the Mediterranean Sea (Apaydin et al., 2016). Its history is characterized by a variety of cultural influences that are still reflected in the country today. Settled by the Canaanites in the second millennium BC, followed by the Phoenicians, the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Byzantines, the Islamic Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire, and the French Mandate, Lebanon finally gained its

[2] All names were substituted by a name chosen by the interviewees themselves.

independence in 1943 (Apaydin et al., 2016). In the years following independence, the country experienced a period of unprecedented wealth and prosperity and was dubbed the 'Switzerland of the East' (Apaydin et al., 2016). However, the civil war from 1975 to 1990, followed by the Syrian occupation from 1991 to 2005, led to a dramatic turnaround (Apaydin et al., 2016). The following two revolutions in 2005 and 2019, the Lebanese-Israeli war in 2006, and the subsequent political and economic crisis and still ongoing tensions with its southern neighbor show that Lebanon has failed to provide stability for its citizens over the past fifty years.

Driven by decades of instability, corruption, economic mismanagement, sectarian division, and lack of public services the Lebanese people took to the streets in October 2019 to demand a radical overhaul of the existing political system. Thousands of protesters, predominantly young people from various social classes and denominations, came together in the hope of change. For weeks, they gathered on streets across the country, especially in the capital, waving Lebanese flags, chanting slogans, and imagining change. One participant in this study, who will be presented in greater detail in the findings chapter, recalls:

> *"When the revolution took place, I was living in Beirut and we were on the streets every day. I told my best friends that I never belonged to this country until that moment when the revolution happened. I never felt I belonged to this country until the moment we felt we could make a change." (Ria)*

Despite the initial expectations for positive change, the resignation of political representatives, the fight against corruption, and improvements in infrastructure and socio-economic rights did not materialize in Lebanon. Instead, the country faced a complete banking collapse and subsequent financial and political crisis while trying to cope with a global pandemic at a time when public services such as hospitals and electricity were already in short supply (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Osman, 2022). Consequently, many well-educated and professional Lebanese have emigrated,

leading to a massive loss of skilled labor and potentially hindering attempts to reform the much-needed system (Osman, 2022).

As mentioned above, one of the main reasons for the overall mismanagement in the country is the Lebanese political system, which is based on a confessional power-sharing system. Rooted in the unwritten National Pact of 1943 and the later Taif Agreement of 1989, this arrangement designates the presidency to a Maronite Christian, the prime minister to a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament to a Shiite Muslim (Lijphart, 1977, cited in Fakhoury, 2017, p. 682). Additionally, the cabinet and parliament have a proportional representation of religious groups, with equal distribution between Christian and Muslim denominations (Fakhoury, 2017).

However, this sectarian arrangement, often compounded by informal collusion and corruption among the elite, hinders policymakers' decision-making process, resulting in dysfunctional government, particularly during times of crisis (Fakhoury, 2017). This situation remained unchanged even after the revolution when a dispute between the Lebanese president and the prime minister over the composition of the new government halted the process (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Additionally, since former president Michel Aoun's term ended in October 2022, the country has been without an active president ever since (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The economic crisis, on the other hand, stems from an accumulation of public debt coupled with a Ponzi scheme[3] run by the Central Bank and political figures (World Bank Group, 2022). Finances that should have been invested in the state's basic services, such as public transportation, electricity, and

[3] A Ponzi scheme is a fraudulent investment scheme in which returns are paid to previous investors with the capital of newer investors rather than with profits from legitimate business activities. They promise high returns with little or no risk and rely on the recruitment of new investors to keep the system going. Eventually, the system collapses when it is no longer possible to recruit enough new investors to pay off the previous investors, resulting in the loss of money for many investors (Chen, 2024).

water supply, disappeared into the pockets of the elite (World Bank Group, 2022). With the value of the Lebanese Lira dropping to 98 percent of its value against the U.S. Dollar since 2019 (Kayssi, 2023), currently being at 89,000 LBP from the initial 1$ = 1500 LBP (Lira Rate, 2024), the World Bank has classified the situation in Lebanon as one of the most severe crises globally since the nineteenth century (The World Bank, 2021).

Drastic inflation combined with high commodity prices has led to more than 80 percent of the Lebanese population living below the poverty line, compared to 27 percent in 2011, resulting in a drastic deterioration in livelihoods (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Rapid devaluation, supply chain problems, and fuel shortages led to sharp food price increases of 483 percent between January 2022 and the previous year (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Furthermore, the Central Bank exhausted its foreign exchange reserves and consequently removed subsidies, causing electricity, water, and fuel prices to skyrocket by 595 percent between June 2021 and June 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

These price increases turned basic services into luxury goods. Many households struggle to make ends meet and are consequently forced to send their children to a cheaper school, limit their electricity use (as there is hardly any public power supply and the generator fuel is extremely expensive), change their consumption behavior, and ask their relatives abroad for certain medication or money. Additionally, educational institutions are struggling with teacher shortages and repeated strikes, many public schools have had to close, and the health sector has seen many doctors leaving the country.

Lebanon’s ongoing political instability and economic crisis have particularly affected young people who want to build their future. The lack of job opportunities, rising inflation, and insufficient educational opportunities deprive them of their prospects to realize their dreams and either support their family or form a new one. The insufficient prospects and the resulting dependency on the families that, after the inflation, have lost most of their savings, drive many young adults to think

about leaving the country. Hopelessness, coupled with the constantly changing, unstable context, deprives people of hope of a decent life.

Having looked at the overall situation in Lebanon, I will move a little closer to the geographical context of Tripoli in the next section. The city of Tripoli, situated in the North-Lebanon governorate (Fig. 1), gives us a better insight into what (geo)political influences are relevant to the context of my thesis.

Figure 1: Regional map of Lebanon (Country Reporter, 2020).

2.1.2. Tripoli: Between Past and Present

Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon, is located just 80 kilometers north of Beirut and about 30 kilometers from the Syrian border. The city, with a population of approximately 518,565 people, is

characterized by a rich history and is known until today for its production of Arabic sweets, soap, cotton goods, and furniture (Apaydin et al., 2016). While the upper class lives in modern neighborhoods in the west of the city, poverty characterizes Tripoli's old town and the poor neighborhoods in the northeast (Gade, 2022).

Despite its reputation as a dangerous and poor city, many residents emphasize that relations between the different communities and residents are generally peaceful and based on tolerance and friendliness. Mistrust, fear, and hostility seem to be mainly due to political tensions and are not perceived as prevalent elements in daily life (Lebanon Support, 2016). This was also the impression I got exploring the city's old souk, the soap khan, the historic mosques and hammams, or the citadel (Fig. 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Coffee shop Haraj in the Souq of Tripoli, Lebanon (Studer, 2023).

Figure 3: Khan El Saboun in the Souq of Tripoli (Studer, 2023).

The history of modern Tripoli is closely linked to the political development of Lebanon and the region. Until the end of the First World War, Tripoli was considered an important city in the eastern Mediterranean. However, this changed with the end of the war and the establishment of Greater Lebanon under French rule in 1920 (Lebanon Support, 2016). The new borders disrupted trade relations between Syria and Iraq towards Tripoli, while Beirut as the capital gained political and economic importance. Consequently, Tripoli's economic and political landscape deteriorated.

Over the years, Tripoli became known as Beirut's 'poor cousin' due to its persistent economic and social grievances (Mountain, 2015 in Lebanon Support, 2016). During the civil war, which lasted from 1975-1990, Tripoli witnessed a notable emergence of street militias with varying political ideologies engaged in street fighting (Rougier, 2015). Under the pretext of protecting the Maronite population from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had previously established itself in Lebanon, the Syrian military entered Lebanon in 1976. For Tripoli, this meant that all parties except the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) were banned, and street fighting subsided for the time being (Rougier, 2015). My gatekeeper of this thesis, Shames, recollects that period as a time when he felt safe and everything was well-regulated.

However, in the late 1970s, some of the militia leaders in Tripoli began to re-engage politically by actively supporting the PLO (Lefèvre, 2014). Influenced by the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Israeli invasion in 1982, they became increasingly Islamist, which led to the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Tripoli, which the Syrian occupation strongly opposed (Lefèvre, 2014).

The height of the conflict between the Syrian army, closely linked with the Alawite community residing in Jabal Mohsen, and the Sunni population, aligned with the PLO, residing in the adjacent area of Bab al-Tabbaneh, occurred in 1986 when around 300 residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh were murdered (Lefèvre, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2016). After the Syrian occupation had achieved victory, the two sides returned to a longer period of truce, but not without having shaped the Tripolitan population for decades to come.

Following the Taif Agreement, which marked the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1989, Tripoli experienced a prolonged period of stability and received increased economic and political attention under the leadership of Prime Minister Hariri and his 'Future Movement' party. However, after his assassination in Beirut in 2005, the political stability in Lebanon's second-largest city began to falter again (Lefèvre, 2014). The political vacuum created space for more sectarian and political discord, which was most noticeable in the neglect of infrastructure, public services, and basic needs, as well as in the resurgence of clashes between the two neighborhoods of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh (Lefèvre, 2014; Shames).

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 further exacerbated the unstable situation in Tripoli, as old political tensions were further inflamed and a large number of Syrian refugees arrived in the country (immigration was estimated at around 20 percent of the city's population) (Einav, 2015; Lebanon Support, 2016). Many refugees settled in already overcrowded, poor neighborhoods, which put an additional strain on already scarce resources (Lebanon Support, 2016; UN-Habitat, 2016).

The constant instability and neglect by state institutions and business enterprises, which seem unable or unwilling to curb communal violence, conflict, and socio-economic decline, have led to Tripoli being one of the focal points of the Lebanese Revolution in 2019 (Osman, 2022). Indeed, the city saw the largest mass demonstrations in the country, with people of different denominations and social classes taking to the streets together to demand political reform and social justice (Osman, 2022). It was then that Tripoli emerged as a symbol of resistance against corruption and grievances, eventually earning the nickname 'bride of the revolution' ('Arus al-Thawrah') (Osman, 2022).

However, the revolution also failed to make a significant impact in Tripoli. Instead of achieving positive change, the kleptocracy used its financial resources, external support, well-organized political and media structures, and deeply entrenched sectarian political culture to not only withstand the challenges of the protests but also to exploit the anti-government sentiment for its own interest and benefit (Osman, 2022).

Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon, occupies a central place in the country's historical and political history. Shaped by historical conflicts and geopolitical influences, the city is a testament to cultural diversity and human resilience. Tripoli embodies the complex dynamics of Lebanon, combining its rich historical heritage with current political and economic challenges (Einav, 2015). Despite the failure of the revolution, Tripoli continues to embody a strong desire for justice and change, while revealing the deep-rooted complexity and resilience of existing political structures.

2.1.3. El Mina: A Community Full of Diversity and Challenges

The study's main setting is the municipality of El-Mina, a historically significant municipality in the port area of Tripoli (Fig. 5). With an administrative boundary of approximately 3.82 km² and an estimated population density of around 20,459 people per square kilometer (UN-Habitat Lebanon, 2016), El-Mina is not only a place with a rich historical past, but also one with a vibrant present, characterized by community activities, social meeting places and the influence of the sea on daily life.

Figure 4: Road sign at the entrance to El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

Figure 5: El-Mina within the North Governorate (Pietrostefani et al., 2022).

The small town, surrounded on three sides by the deep blue Mediterranean, opens its streets like a history book that tells of a rich past. Once the center of Tripoli in the Middle Ages, El-Mina was completely destroyed by the Mamluks in 1289, after which the center moved to the vicinity of the impressive crusader castle Raymond de Saint-Gilles, which guards over Tripoli (Al-Harithy, 2005; Kabbara, 2021 in Pietrostefani et al., 2022). Centuries later, after serving as the port area of Tripoli for a long time, El-Mina gained its independence in 1883, becoming a municipality in its own right (Nahas, 2001). Today, El-Mina does not only share the rich history of Tripoli but is also an integral part of the city's urban area, which complicates the delineation between where Tripoli's borders end and El-Mina commences.

Figure 6: Little alley in El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

Figure 7: Little alley in El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

Walking through the streets of El-Mina, it is noticeable that the south-eastern part has modern architecture and a higher standard of living, while the north-eastern part gives the impression of immersing oneself in a bygone era. Old buildings and narrow alleys tell stories of religious, military, and political events that have shaped the community (Fig. 6 and 7). The harbor in the north is not only a striking landmark but also influences daily life through the import of goods and the associated

economic activities such as traditional boat building, fishing, and net maintenance as well as various workshops for carpentry and pottery (Fig. 8 and 9) (ARUP & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2023).

Figure 8: Carpentry in El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

Figure 9: Arairo pottery in El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

In the city itself, grocery stores dominate the commercial scene, followed by restaurants, furniture stores, beauty salons, mechanics, and metalwork. The traditional fish markets, such as the one on the Corniche and next to the Khan El Tamathili, are known far beyond the boundaries of El-Mina. Passing through the streets, the smell of freshly baked pastries from the small bakeries, the 'furns', fills the air, while numerous small fruit vendors, juice sellers, confectioners, mattress makers, and ice cream men attempt to sell their products as visitors stroll by (Fig. 10 and 11).

During my visit in the summer of 2023, El-Mina experienced an unusual heatwave. The streets were often deserted during the day, and residents complained about the unbearable heat that had gripped not only El-Mina but also much of Lebanon and beyond. This meant that at lunchtime, the only people I met on the streets were those trying to escape the heat of the city by escaping to one of El-Mina's famous islands for the day, or those sitting outside their stores waiting for customers - although these shops too closed for a few hours during midday.

Figure 10: Mattress maker store, El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

Figure 11: Juice vendor in the old city of El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

However, towards the evening, the city came back alive. Inhabitants from El-Mina and Tripoli gathered in the cafés, coffee shops, and restaurants along the promenade. Around sunset, the Corniche revealed a diverse scene of people of all classes and religious groups strolling while vendors offered nuts, potato chips, and sweet corn. Young men returned from swimming, were fishing, or fooled around with friends. Booths, renting out big electric ride-in cars for children, as well as a very old ride-on train with music, added to the vibrancy. Boats returned from the islands as families enjoyed picnics along the corniche, while young men on motorcycles performed tricks in the streets (Fig. 12 and 13).

In traditional coffee houses, predominantly men gather to play cards smoking 'argile' together. In the newer coffee shops, the genders were more mixed, with groups of friends sharing their latest stories and discussing the most recent economic and political events. A frequently observed scene was gatherings of young adults who had ostensibly not seen each other for a long time. Conversations often began with sentences like: *"Long time no see! Are you abroad now?"*, *"What do you work?"*, *"Are you happy?"* followed by exchanges and updates from other friends, discussions

about the challenges of finding work, the cost of living, and aspirations of leaving the city, whether for work in Beirut or abroad.

Figure 12: People walking at the Corniche around Sunset, El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

Figure 13: Boats returning from the islands at sunset, El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

At first glance, the people in El-Mina do not appear to be very different from the residents of Tripoli. However, upon getting to know them better, one realizes that they have their own dialect and seem to be more relaxed, possibly due to the long-lasting influence of the sea. People in El-Mina are also known to be very friendly. On my wanderings through the streets of El-Mina, I occasionally had the experience of people approaching me to see if I was lost, initiating a conversation, or inviting me for a coffee or tea. These led to delightful interactions with various individuals, such as shop owners, handymen, and coffee house proprietors, and, best of all, with my neighbors.

Staying at a nice little guest house in El-Mina, most of my neighbors were older women who happened to be either siblings or cousins. The ladies in their 60s and 70s, when not swimming in the sea or repotting plants, would sit together at a table outside the front door and talk about the latest news and gossip. Leaving and coming back to the guest house several times a day, I was often asked to sit down at the table with them where fresh fruits and sweets were never lacking, and there was always an ‘argile’ to puff on.

With interest I followed their conversation on the unbearable weather, the lack of money for the really necessary renovation of the houses, and the missing family visits from abroad. For those with family and friends visiting this summer, there was a wealth of news to share, including updates on marriages, births, job changes, and relocations.

Furthermore, the ladies mentioned a growing presence of Sunnis in their predominantly Christian neighborhoods due to the scarcity of housing in Sunni neighborhoods over time. One of them explains: "*The Muslims still have more children than us Christians and therefore need more space. We have fewer kids and more people that can travel abroad*". This comment pointed out the general assumption that Christian families in El-Mina tend to be more affluent than Muslim families which makes it easier for them to relocate to either Beirut or abroad. However, the increase in the predominantly Sunni population is likely also attributable to the increased presence of immigrants, especially Syrian and Palestinian refugees, which has risen sharply since the civil war in Syria.[4]

What was also noticeable when observing the population and walking through the city was that many people were severely affected by the country's economic crisis. About 43.2 percent of the estimated 82 thousand inhabitants in El-Mina are unemployed, with unemployment among young people aged 15 to 24 being more than twice as high as among adults (Pietrostefani et al., 2022). About 97 percent of those still working receive their salary in Lebanese pounds. With a monthly income of 1,905,921 LBP and an average exchange rate of approximately 1$ = 89,000 LBP (Lira Rate, 2024), a family of four is left with 21$ per month to survive (Pietrostefani et al., 2022).

[4] In 2017, the population of El-Mina was made up of approximately 87 percent Lebanese, 5 percent Syrians, 6 percent Palestinians, and 1 percent Palestinians who had fled Syria (ARUP & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2023, p. 20).

According to Pietrostefani et al. (2022), nearly half (45.9 percent) of the Lebanese population in El Mina experience malnutrition, with 68.5 percent of residents needing to borrow money to purchase food. To address these challenges, an increasing number of individuals rely on remittances, loans from relatives, or sending their children to work instead of school. Even households with apparent financial stability encounter difficulties, underscoring the necessity for coping mechanisms like indebtedness.

Pietrostefani et al. (2022) further note a pervasive distrust among El-Mina residents toward governmental institutions and authority figures, a sentiment I also encountered firsthand. This skepticism is particularly evident in the government's handling of economic, health, educational, and security affairs, prompting individuals to allocate their limited resources to address challenges. For instance, inadequate infrastructure not only hampers economic development but also disrupts daily life for the population (ARUP & Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2023). Persistent power shortages compel reliance on privately-run generators, requiring joint efforts by neighbors and communities to tackle the power problem thereby reshaping social and political dynamics (Verdeil & Dewailly, 2016).[5]

Amidst the aforementioned challenges, it is unsurprising that many individuals also face significant mental health struggles. According to Pietrostefani et al. (2022), a staggering 73.1 percent of respondents reported feeling stressed, with 59.7 percent experiencing it "most of the time" and 13.4 percent "often". These figures greatly surpass the 2019 national average of 30.3 percent stress reported by the Arab Barometer (2019). Additionally, 63.6 percent of the participants indicated feelings of depression, with 50.4 percent feeling it "most of the time" and 13.2 percent "often",

[5] Even though there have been power outages and thus purchases of generators before, the situation has deteriorated considerably since spring 2020.

again surpassing the national average of 30.4 percent (Arab Barometer, 2019). Other studies, such as the SEED and People in Need Slovakia (2020) report, also highlight the impact of Lebanon's crises on vulnerable populations in Tripoli, including El-Mina, with 80 percent of adults and 84 percent of children reporting increased stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, loneliness, and hopelessness.

However, despite all of these difficulties, the inhabitants of El-Mina seem to be very closely attached to their hometown. The lively social environment and people's close relationship with the sea contribute to a strong sense of belonging, which is clearly noticeable among the people of El-Mina. One participant in the group discussion I held said "3andena dahr" (we got each other's back) when discussing El-Mina's community. Another one said:

> *"Mina is everything. We are like a fish when it is out of the water; we suffocate when we leave Mina. We like the people here and the brotherhood among people. We take care of each other. If you don't appear in society for a while, people start asking about you and checking in to see if you're okay, and that's a nice thing in Mina. We're like one big family, even if we sometimes argue." (Group Discussion)*

Another one says:

> *"Mina, for me, is like the shire for the hobbit in Lord of the Rings. I belong here." (Walid)*

The challenging context that Lebanon is currently facing has severely affected all regions and small towns in the country, including El-Mina. In addition to the limited availability of jobs, lack of infrastructure, and lack of prospects due to the failed revolution, El-Mina shows an above-average proportion of people whose mental health has been negatively affected by the current circumstances. Nevertheless, residents are deeply connected to their city, its rich history, and the sea. This strong bond with their home not only influences people's daily lives but also plays a decisive role in the decision of many to either escape the *"prison"* or to stay there.

Figure 14: View of El-Mina from the boat (Studer, 2023).

2.2. Different Waves of Emigration

Due to its turbulent past, Lebanon has experienced periods of high emigration throughout its history, which have been directed towards different continents and countries.[6] This subchapter provides a brief overview of the most significant waves of migration in the Lebanese context, starting with emigration in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Lebanese moved to the USA, Mexico, and Latin American countries mainly for economic reasons (Tabar, 2009). This *first* wave of emigration was characterized by low-skilled and semi-skilled workers looking for better economic opportunities overseas.

[6] It is important to note that there are no current official statistics on emigration from Lebanon (Abi Samra, 2010; Tabar, 2010). Data on recent Lebanese migration must, therefore, be extrapolated from various sources, including individual studies and population census data in destination countries (Abi Samra, 2010).

After the Second World War, the migration pattern changed, and the range of destination countries expanded considerably (Abi Samra, 2010). In addition to the destinations already mentioned, Lebanese increasingly started emigrating to Australia, New Zealand, France, West African countries, and the Gulf States. While this *second* wave consisted mainly of low-skilled migrants, this changed from the late 1950s and after the June 1967 War, when migration to the Arab Gulf States from Lebanon increased and shifted as increasingly skilled labor was needed for the emerging economies (De Bel-Air, 2017).

The *third* wave can be identified during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), when emigration reached its peak as political uncertainty and economic turmoil significantly worsened living conditions in the country. It is assumed that around 40 percent of the population with a wide range of qualifications left the country during this period, migrating mainly to the USA, France, Germany, the Gulf States, Australia, and Canada (De Bel-Air, 2017; Tabar, 2010). In the late 1970s, Germany and the Scandinavian countries became new top destinations for Lebanese migrants, especially those without formal qualifications and rather small migration networks (De Bel-Air, 2017; Abi Samra, 2010). This trend was further influenced by humanitarian migration pathways established after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the 'war of the camps'[7] between 1985 and 1988, notably forcing Palestinians out of Lebanon to Europe (De Bel-Air, 2017).

As mentioned, from the latter half of the 20th century onwards, a significant change in Lebanese emigration has been the increase in skilled migration, which has resulted in a continuous 'brain drain' (De Bel-Air, 2017; Mendelek, 2022; Abi Samra, 2010; Tabar, 2010). To escape the country's already limited labor market, deep-rooted corruption, and clientelism that prevent the highly skilled

[7] The 'war of the camps' refers to the siege of the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and southern Lebanon by Shia Amal militias.

and politically unaffiliated from finding profitable employment opportunities without '*wasta*',[8] many young, well-educated workers left the country (Mendelek, 2022).

At the turn of the century, large-scale projects and the emergence of social networks made the Gulf States increasingly attractive for low- and highly-skilled Lebanese. Saudi Arabia in particular saw a positive net migration of Lebanese migrants from the 1990s to 2011 (De Bel-Air, 2017). In the last decade, however, these numbers have fallen sharply. Much of this decline can be attributed to the 2008 financial crisis and falling oil prices, which led to a reduction in public spending and procurement, particularly in the construction and infrastructure sectors of the Gulf states. Moreover, labor market reforms such as Saudization and the continuing political tensions between Lebanon and the Gulf States have further negatively impacted migration trends (De Bel-Air, 2017).

The following *increase* in Lebanese emigration to the USA, Canada, and Germany could, therefore, be seen as a shift in emigration flows (De Bel-Air, 2017).[9] In Germany, net migration figures from Lebanon saw a dramatic increase in 2014, rising to 3,067 migrants from just 263 in 2010 (De Bel-Air, 2017).[10] Although there is no robust data to confirm this hypothesis, De Bel-Air (2017) suggests that this trend was largely driven by migrants from South Lebanon who came to Germany by reactivating older social networks due to limited access to the labor markets in the Gulf region. While this could be a possible reason, the role of German migration policy should not be overlooked. Since 2012, Germany has introduced targeted legislative measures to facilitate access to the labor market for

[8] The word wasta describes the practice of using personal connections or influential relationships to gain advantages, favors, or shortcuts for personal benefits.

[9] According to a study by the European University Institute (2017), the vast majority of first-generation Lebanese emigrants, around 40 percent, were living in other Arab countries in 2014, out of which 37 percent settled in the Gulf States (De Bel-Air, 2017). About 25 percent were found living in North America, 21 percent in Europe, and 16 percent in other countries, mainly identified as Australia, South America, and Africa (De Bel-Air, 2017).

[10] The author does not specify whether the increase is due solely to Lebanese nationals or also to Syrians who have fled to Europe from Lebanon as a result of the war in Syria.

highly skilled non-EU migrants.[11] This policy framework has undoubtedly contributed to the increase in emigration and must be taken into account when analyzing migration flows (see Chapter Three for more information).

In 2019, the political and economic situation in Lebanon led to a revolution, after which the country plunged into deeper crises (Mendelek, 2022). The ongoing instability, the global COVID-19 pandemic, high inflation rates, and the 2020 port explosion, as well as the lethargic government, drove thousands of Lebanese to emigrate, representing the *fourth* major wave of migration (Mendelek, 2022). The emigration statistics clearly reflect this trend. In 2019, the number of emigrants doubled compared to the previous year, and by 2021, it had skyrocketed by 447 percent to reach 79,134, the highest figure since the 1990s (The Monthly, 2022).

Return migration to Lebanon was and remains limited. Many who have emigrated do not return (Tabar, 2010). This can largely be explained by the fact that the main reasons for emigration in the past century, such as the failed government system and limited economic opportunities, have remained unresolved, thus failing to encourage people to return (Mendelek, 2022). Over centuries, the Lebanese have turned Lebanon into a country of emigration and embedded their immigrant status with the painful identity of a failing state (Mendelek, 2022). Emigration has thus not only influenced the demographic landscape of Lebanon but has also created a transnational community present in different parts of the world.[12]

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[11] The so-called 'blue card' is probably the most well-known example of this policy. The EU document allows people with a university degree and a work contract above a certain salary to enter Germany with minimal effort. The main target groups are managers, doctors and pharmacists, nurses, and midwives, as well as teachers and educators (Die Bundesregierung, 2023). More details will be explained in Chapter 3.

[12] Lebanon is a major immigrant country too. In addition to the presence of migrant workers, who since the 1990s have mainly been of Asian, African, and Syrian origin, the country also accommodates the highest percentage of refugees per capita. The UNHCR (2023) estimates that around 1.5 million Armenian, Palestinian, and Syrian refugees live in

2.2.1. El-Mina: Limited Data on Emigration Trends

In the context of El-Mina, there are very few sources that deal with the emigration of Lebanese to Europe. Due to a lack of data and information in general, it is therefore extremely difficult to accurately determine the number of people who have left El-Mina in recent years, the methods of their emigration, and their final migration destinations.

Desk research on emigration from El-Mina put forth almost exclusively information on the irregular maritime migration of Syrians to Europe (Diab & Jouhari, 2023; IOM, 2023). Although Lebanese have been increasingly mentioned in various reports over the last few years, the lack of data and accessible historical accounts of past migration patterns constitutes a clear limitation of this research. However, it also represents an opportunity to contribute to the field by drawing on the knowledge and experiences of participants in this research.

Therefore, I base my background information on the history of Lebanese emigration from El-Mina mainly on an interview with a participant of this thesis, a professor who was born in and has always lived in El-Mina. Having taught at the University of Balamand for 25 years before becoming a co-founder of the Tripoli Institute for Policy Studies, he has always shown a special interest in understanding the historical and contemporary events in Lebanon, especially El-Mina. According to him, in the 1920s, many residents of El-Mina emigrated to Argentina and Brazil, while those with greater financial means moved to New York. However, in the 1980s, people from Akkar, Tripoli, and El-Mina increasingly started going to Germany. The primary reasons were the civil war in Lebanon and the existing welfare system in Germany.

Lebanon. Since my focus is on emigration from Lebanon, detailing various emigration trends would go beyond the scope of this paper.

He recalls that many left the country irregularly, usually through journeys that took them to one of the then-collapsing socialist republics, mostly Hungary or Romania, from where they traveled irregularly across the border to Germany. Despite the challenges of integration, many immigrants stayed and started businesses in their fields of expertise by resuming the work they did in their home country. For people arriving from El-Mina, this typically meant opening car repair shops, an industry in which Lebanese are still known today (Professor, 2023). Over time, many immigrants brought their families to Germany, which led to the resettlement of entire extended families in the same areas.

Current emigration patterns from El-Mina indicate that more people are leaving the municipality. Most emigrants use regular means and select their destinations based on their priorities. While many head to Europe primarily for education and to eventually acquire citizenship, those moving to the Gulf States aim to earn money quickly. The US, Canada, and Australia are attractive due to perceived higher salaries and the chance to obtain additional citizenship. However, since 2020 there has been a marked rise in the number of Lebanese engaging in irregular migration to Europe. Although the focus remains on Syrians, increasing attention is being given to the Lebanese, a trend this paper aims to explore and understand. As mentioned above, the information is based on the statements of a single individual and can not necessarily considered unbiased. However, given the professor's extensive personal and professional experience, these are the most comprehensive and accurate sources I have had access to.

3. Mobility for Some: (Selective) Migration Policies

While emigration from El-Mina is diverse, with people relocating to different countries around the world, this study focuses on the emigration from El-Mina to Europe. It is thus important to shed light on different policy structures in place to understand the diverse mobility patterns of migrants. To this end, this chapter examines policy measures and framework conditions of the EU and its member states that either facilitate or hinder mobility. It analyzes how European labor market interests can impact people's migration experience in El-Mina, e.g. by setting up specific visa regimes, therefore influencing migration dynamics. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the context in which emigration from Lebanon takes place and the obstacles that certain people have to navigate.

Traditionally a core element of state sovereignty, immigration policy[13] has evolved from a primarily national issue to a core point of global governance efforts (Castles et al., 2012; Lavenex, 2006; Lavenex & Piper, 2021). In the past thirty-five years, Western countries have tightened surveillance of their borders through a variety of innovative migration control practices (Kent et al. 2020). In the EU, this process is strongly related to the enlargement of the European Union and the associated widespread freedom of movement between new and old member states since 2007, which has led to a popular rejection of immigration from third countries. At the same time, European countries are dependent on immigration from third countries to maintain their economies due to their aging populations (Perez, 2015).

[13] Immigration policy encompasses all measures by which states control the influx of people who wish to settle on their territory. This includes regulations for access to the territory (entry and residence), permission to join the labor market (work permit), the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, the ability of immigrants to reunite with family members (family reunification), and rules for the acquisition of citizenship by immigrants and their family members (naturalization) (Perez, 2015).

The trend towards more open, but selective, labor-based migration policies is a central theme of this thesis, as it influences the categorization of migrants into 'wanted' or 'unwanted' subjects. While this chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the EU's political system or the development of its external relations policy, it shall show how migrants from Lebanon are treated differently depending on their human capital.

3.1. European (Externalized) Immigration Policies and 'Unwanted' Migrants

To understand the complex nature of EU migration policy, the following section provides an overview of its historical development and impact on specific migrant groups. Since the beginning of the 21st century, 'unwanted' migrants, perceived as a cultural or security threat, have increasingly become the focus of EU migration policy. As a result, security policy and the externalization of borders have become central elements of the EU's strategy when managing migration and refugee flows, significantly shaping EU policy and relations with neighboring countries.

Border management has, especially in Europe but also in other regions of the world, become a highly securitized topic. However, this was not always the case. After the Second World War, reconstruction and economic growth in Europe were heavily dependent on migration flows from southern and south-eastern Europe as well as countries beyond the continent. Countries such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands, facilitated guest worker programs that entailed work permits but prohibited permanent settlement or citizenship (Perez, 2015). Furthermore, decolonization was another key driver of migration to Europe during this period, with former colonial powers such as Great Britain and France granting citizenship to former colonial subjects (Perez, 2015).

While immigration policies were relatively liberal in the 1950s and 1960s, the first OPEC oil price shock led to abrupt restrictions in many advanced industrialized countries (Perez, 2015). Germany

suspended its labor recruitment programs in 1973, followed by France, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Subsequently, immigration to most European countries was largely limited to family reunification and asylum cases (Perez, 2011). Nevertheless, due to the continued demand for cheaper labor with specific skills in Europe and the continued interest of migrants from third countries, the number of undocumented immigrants in Europe increased. This group includes not only people who entered clandestinely but also those whose visas have expired and who remain in the country (Perez, 2015).

In the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain, increasing globalization, and the September 11 attacks, increased concerns about uncontrolled immigration, leading to a stronger nexus between migration and state security (Castles et al., 2012; Faist, 2004; Lavenex, 2006). This 'securitization'[14] of migration stems from seeing migrants as a social and cultural threat linked with 'security issues' such as organized crime, terrorism, and Islamic fundamentalism. Framing migration this way implies that it is an issue that requires 'exceptional measures' for effective resolution, therefore blurring the boundaries between internal and external security concerns (Bigo, 2001; Brown et al., 2018; Castles et al., 2012; Faist, 2004; Geddes, 2015; Huysmans, 2000; Lavenex, 2006; Pastore, 2001).

These developments redirected the focus of immigration policies towards the external drivers of migration. At the European Justice and Home Affairs Council summit in Tampere in 1999, the EU decided to make asylum and migration the subject of a common policy and to formally include the 'external dimension' in its asylum and immigration policy (Lavenex, 2006). The Presidency

[14] The foundation of the securitization theory is the thesis *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, published in 1990 by Buzan et al. The authors expand the definition of security and securitization by extending the traditional military security, where another state was the enemy, to issues that can be constructed as threats at the societal, environmental, political, and economic levels (Buzan et al., 1998).

Conclusions emphasized that, from then on, security concerns must be consistently integrated into the formulation and execution of all Union policies and activities, including external relations (Lavenex, 2006).

The 'externalization' of migration policy, also known as 'remote control', shifts border surveillance outside the EU territory transferring the responsibility to neighboring countries, transit countries, or countries of origin as a means of preventively keeping unwanted and irregular migrants as well as asylum seekers away from the EU borders (Gökalp Aras, 2021; Rumford, 2006; Stock et al., 2019). The main instruments in this regard are the early coordination of visa policies, carrier sanctions, deportations, enhanced control capacities at borders in home, transit, and host countries through liaison officers, maritime pushbacks, improved data collection as well as changes in legal frameworks (Markard, 2016; Menjívar, 2014).

Involving third countries in the control of migration flows to Europe has obvious advantages for the EU Member States (Lavenex, 2006). If successful, externalization creates a so-called 'buffer zone', restricting 'unwanted' migrants from reaching European shores (Guiraudon, 2000 in Gabrielli, 2016; Lavenex, 2006; Songa, 2020; Zapata-Barrero, 2013 in Gökalp Aras, 2021).

Owing to its proximity to conflict zones and historical ties, Lebanon is an important partner in EU externalization efforts, in particular since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Due to the restrictive immigration policies and current crises in Lebanon, over 84 percent of Syrian refugees live irregularly in the country, making it almost impossible for them to find decent work and secure a livelihood (UNHCR, 2022). As many Syrians are unable to obtain a visa due to a lack of documents or travel restrictions, many are considering leaving the country illegally via the Mediterranean to find refuge in a third country (Achilli, 2022a; Alrababa'h et al., 2023; National Public Radio, 2020).

According to Diab & Jouhari (2023), the number of 'potential migrants' embarking on dangerous journeys from Lebanon across the Mediterranean to Europe has risen sharply since 2020. Although

precise data on the composition of the people in terms of gender and age is still lacking, it is known that most of the passengers crossing are Syrians, followed by Lebanese and, to a lesser extent, Palestinians (AlJoud, 2022; Diab & Jouhari, 2023). Even though the sum of individuals crossing the Mediterranean by boat from Lebanon is still small compared to other routes across the sea, the number of people quadrupled since 2020 (AlJoud, 2022). While in 2019, only nine boats bound for Europe with 208 passengers aboard were detected, the number had risen to 32 boats carrying 2464 passengers by the end of 2022. The main reason for this increase can be attributed to the deteriorating situation in the country, as well as the stricter screening procedures for visa applications due to the increased number of requests[15] (Diab & Jouhari, 2023; Lawyer 2).

Cyprus, due to its proximity to Lebanon, was for a long time considered the country of destination for such crossings. During the interview with the Professor, he told me that emigration routes via smuggling channels have been used by people from El-Mina for a long time[16]:

> *"In the 1980s, people traveled to Cyprus for the purpose of obtaining fake visas to travel to Sweden and Denmark. They would take the boats to Cyprus and then the plane to their next destination. But today, thanks to biometric passports, etc., this is no longer possible." (Professor)*

My assumption is that this channel has been used due to the trade relations that certain people from Lebanon, especially El-Mina, had established with people in Cyprus. For example, an

[15] This fact was brought up by several people I spoke to during my time in Lebanon. However, it is very difficult to say whether this is actually true or just a general feeling amongst the population. What I suspect is that the numbers stayed the same, while the amount of applications increased, therefore, making it seem as if the quantity of accepted applications decreased. Knowing the Schengen system, however, I would also argue that applications are now screened more strictly to avoid 'false migration reasons' due to the situation.

[16] This information was further confirmed by other interviewees and people I spoke to during my fieldwork in El-Mina.

acquaintance told me he used to smuggle cigarettes to Cyprus as a boy. The professor further confirmed these relationships:

> *"Smuggling to Cyprus has a long history. Fishermen exported fish from Mina and brought back things like Greek olives - especially the large Kalamata sort - or types of alcohol that were not available locally, such as a secret beer called KEO. Therefore, the route to Larnaca and back has been traveled frequently, and many old fishermen will admit that they did such journeys." (Professor)*

Recent developments in the relationship between Lebanon and Cyprus include the suspension of asylum applications in Cyprus due to the drastic increase in boats arriving from Lebanon (Stamouli, 2024). Despite earlier assumptions that irregular migration to Cyprus has therefore largely shifted to Italy (AlJoud, 2022; Sewell, 2021), boat arrivals in Cyprus surged to over 2,000 in the first quarter of 2024, up from just 78 in the same period last year (Kambas, 2024).

Consequently, in early April 2024, the Lebanese Prime Minister and the Cypriot President asked the EU for financial support to help Lebanon prevent refugees from emigrating to Europe (Kambas, 2024). Shortly after, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced an aid package of one billion Euros for Lebanon. The agreement is based on the model of the recent agreements concluded with Tunisia and Egypt, in which these countries are supposed to make every effort to reduce the irregular flow of migrants to Europe in exchange for financial support and improved border management cooperation (Petillo, 2024). Most of the money is intended to help Lebanon care for its Syrian and Palestinian refugee population, while the other part provides the Lebanese army with equipment and training for border management (Global Detention Project, 2024). As a result, border management security has been tightened, making it more difficult to leave the country by boat.

Previous border management agreements between the EU and Lebanon were mainly concluded in response to the Syrian Civil War and the resulting 'Refugee Crisis'. In 2016, the two partners agreed on the 'Partnership Priorities', which aimed to address security, counter-terrorism, migration, and mobility issues. This agreement sought to reduce migration to Europe through an integrated border management approach while also offering financial support to Lebanon (Association Council, 2016; Fakhoury, 2021b).

In recent years, cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Lebanon in Integrated Border Management (IBM) has significantly progressed, focusing mainly on material and light weapons support and EU training for establishing Land Border Regiments (LBR). This includes among others the partnership 'Strengthening Capabilities for Integrated Border Management in Lebanon', which was launched in 2012 and entered its third phase in March 2021 (IBM III Factsheet, 2021). The main objective of this partnership is to promote civil-military cooperation, establish border management procedures to improve the detection and prevention of irregular migration, and support Lebanese border authorities in ensuring stability and security in border communities (IBM III Factsheet, 2021). The main beneficiaries include the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the Internal Security Forces (ISF), the General Security Service (GS), the Lebanese Customs Authority (LCA), the Lebanese Civil Defense Authority (LCD), the Ministry of Public Works and Transport (MPWT) and the Lebanese Fire Brigade (IBM III Factsheet, 2021).

Furthermore, in 2018, a center for IBM was opened at the Riyaq military base to improve cooperation in border security, trade promotion, and passenger traffic (European Union, 2018). Moreover, as part of the EU IBM Lebanon Phase 3 program, the 'Integrated Maritime Strategy of Lebanon' was signed between the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the World Maritime University (WMU) to conduct a more efficient maritime border management (ICMPD, 2021).

In addition to increased border management measures, the procedure for obtaining a visa and thus the possibility of regular migration plays a decisive role in the externalization of migration control. Obtaining a Schengen visa allowing for longer stays such as study, work, or family reunification (type D visa) is a long process that requires various documents and considerable financial resources, patience, and a functioning environment. Applicants must present a valid passport, a carefully completed application form, photographs, travel insurance, and often financial proof as well as a residential address in the country of destination. After collecting all the required documents, applicants need to schedule an appointment and visit the embassy or an intermediary organization to provide the necessary documentation and biometric information. Processing the visa application can take up to several weeks or months, as the embassies carefully check all details to prevent 'unwanted' persons from entering the EU.

Even if this process appears simple at first glance, various problems can arise, especially in a context such as Lebanon. For instance, from autumn 2022 to spring 2023, the wait time for Lebanese passport applications extended to around one year after appointment scheduling was halted completely in April 2022. Additionally, due to the economic crisis, many individuals can no longer afford the high fees for necessary documents and applications, which often must be paid in euros or dollars. Furthermore, securing a bank statement proving sufficient funds is challenging, as the Lebanese lira's devaluation means that many Lebanese lack the necessary funds to meet visa self-financing requirements.

Embassies and consulates thus play an essential role in selecting who 'deserves' to obtain a visa and travel and who doesn't. Shifting admission control to the embassies of the countries to which people wish to travel has proven to be one of the most effective instruments of external border control (Infantino, 2016). Early on in the mobility process, people are categorized into those who are 'wanted' or 'unwanted' for legal entry. Those categorized as 'unwanted' often know before the application process begins that they will be rejected and therefore choose alternative routes

(Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009). The outsourcing of entry control to the embassies of the destination countries thus appears to be a facet of the externalization of borders, which has proven to be an effective method of border control, a *"first line of defense"* (Torpey, 1998, p. 252) or the *"front line of migration control"* (Infantino, 2016, p. 5 in Laube, 2019).

In conclusion, 'unwanted' migrants tend to be hindered from leaving Lebanon by specific externalization policies by the EU, supported by the Lebanese government. Be it through visa application procedures, sanctions against transportation companies, or improved control capacities, the aim is always to create an extended barrier and surveillance for those suspected of being a 'threat' to European society. However, despite increased attempts to keep people from leaving, the number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean is rising. The increase in boats and passengers points to a growing number of Lebanese who no longer see any other way out than to leave their country by sea.

3.2. The 'Desired' Migrants: Selective Migration Policies

While Europe has become more and more securitized over the last few years, it has also become more selective. In the last twenty-four years, numerous member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have actively embraced demand-driven immigration policies to attract highly skilled (HS)[17] workers to enter their labor market (Cerna, 2009; Czaika & Parsons, 2017; Perez, 2015). This strategic approach is primarily driven by the desire to

[17] Highly skilled workers are defined differently depending on the country. However, they are commonly defined as being someone with a university degree or extensive experience in a given field that is equivalent to having a tertiary education degree in the field. Key variables are generally the university degree, the type of occupation, and the salary level (Awad, 2023).

continue to advance technological progress, increase productivity, and promote economic growth while facing the challenge of a shrinking workforce due to an aging population (Cerna, 2009; Czaika & Parsons, 2017). Therefore, policies aim to attract immigrants with high human capital to address short-term labor shortages and long-term structural employment problems, especially in areas such as health and information and communication technology, in return for permanent residency (Crema, 2019; Czaika & Parsons, 2016a).[18]

There are various ways of recruiting HS migrants. For example, university cooperation programs have been set up to promote the training and subsequent integration of graduates into the job market. Cooperation between Lebanon and Europe in the field of student exchange is promoted through various agreements, primarily based on bilateral and regional frameworks, which provide, e.g., scholarships, fee waivers, and other forms of support for students on both sides or promote academic exchange through close cooperation and the development of joint curricula. A key initiative is the EU Erasmus+ program, which enables Lebanese students and university staff to participate in exchange programs with European institutions while offering financial support in the form of scholarships. In addition, the Erasmus Mundus program allows Lebanese students to obtain a Master's degree in the EU (El Hawary, 2023; Euro-Lex, 2013).[19]

Recruiting foreign skilled workers for certain jobs through a demand-driven or supply-driven strategy is another example of selective border policy. While the demand-driven strategy requires the

[18] The largest stock of highly skilled labor is permanent residents, followed by international students and then temporary migrants (Awad, 2023).

[19] Furthermore, educational exchange programs form an important part of various general agreements that the EU has signed with Lebanon to date. The EU and Lebanon recorded their first contractual relations in 1965 when they signed the Agreement on Trade and Technical Cooperation. In 1995, Lebanon became part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), followed by the Association Agreement of 2002, which entered into force in 2006, and the accession to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2007 (Euro-Lex, 2013).

immigrant to have a job offer prior to arrival, the supply-driven strategy allows applicants without a specific job offer to apply for work visas based on age, education, work experience, and language skills (Chaloff & Lemaître, 2009; Czaika & Parsons, 2016b). In both cases, problems can arise, particularly in relation to the assessment and recognition of qualifications and the desire for family reunification and permanent residency.

In Germany, the so-called 'battle for the brains'[20] started in the year 2000, when the then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder initiated the 'Green Card' to attract IT specialists (Doomernik et al., 2009). Thus, a clear differentiation was introduced *"between those migrants whom we need, and those who need us while escaping dictatorships, war, and poverty"* (Klingst, 2003 in Doomernik et al., 2009, p. 4).[21] In 2004, the German Immigration Act further expanded the 'Green Card' and permitted residency to 'highly qualified persons' and their family members (German Interior Ministry, 2004 in Doomernik et al., 2009, p. 4).

The developments in Germany were followed by many other EU countries, resulting in a kind of domino effect on the continent (Doomernik et al., 2009). However, not only the EU member-states are competing with each other for the 'best brains'. Other strong players, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, are also in the game (Doomernik et al., 2009). To stay ahead of the global labor market, the EU initiated discussions on a new Europe-wide Blue Card in 2005. Inspired by the Green Card, but with its own approach, the Blue Card was officially introduced in 2009. It is intended to give member states control over access to their labor markets and make Europe as a whole more

[20] Rita Süssmuth from the German Independent Commission on Migration said: *"Es ist ein weltweiter, 'Wettbewerb um die besten Köpfe' entstanden [A battle for the Brains], der durch die gestiegene Mobilitätsbereitschaft dieser Personen verschärft wird"* (BMI, 2001 in Doomernik et al., 2009, p. 3).

[21] *"Zum ersten Mal wurde unterschieden zwischen jenen Migranten, die wir brauchen, und jenen, die uns brauchen, weil sie vor Diktaturen, Krieg und Armut fliehen müssen".* (Klingst, 2003).

attractive to highly qualified migrants who hold a university degree or have at least three years of professional experience (Doomernik et al., 2009). The card is usually valid for around two years, with the possibility of an extension. Its attractiveness is enhanced by the possibility of immediate family reunification, access to the labor market for spouses, and facilitating the acquisition of long-term residence status (Doomernik et al., 2009).

However, hurdles in recognizing qualifications, language barriers, and bureaucratic procedures often remain major challenges for highly qualified people when immigrating. Furthermore, the Blue Card has been poorly implemented by many European countries, as it often provided fewer benefits for the employer and employee than national immigration procedures (Newland Chase, n.d.). To address this, a new directive was proposed in 2016 and adopted in 2021, which provides more benefits for employers, employees, and their families (European Commission, 2021)[22]. The MENA region, with its comparatively young and generally well-educated population struggling to find adequate local employment opportunities, could potentially meet the EU's demand for skilled workers.[23] However, there too, only limited use of the Blue Cards has been observed.

The aim of this chapter was not to describe in detail the labor migration policies of each EU Member State, but to highlight the general trend towards the recruitment of highly skilled migrants, which has led to the further categorization of potential immigrants into ‘desired and ‘unwanted’ groups. Those with sufficient capital, especially human capital, have a good chance of preferential treatment in the Schengen visa process, while those who do not meet the requirements have little chance of settling legally in Europe in the long term.

[22] Mehr informationen über die veränderten conditions können in Newland Chase (n.d.) gefunden werden.

[23] Fargues (2008) called the MENA region an *“ideal demographic match”* for the EU labor market (Fargues, 2008, p. 3 in Fassmann & Sievers, 2014).

4. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

4.1. Literature Review

This chapter aims to present a thorough examination of the current state of research on migration in Lebanon and the theories and concepts relevant to this thesis. By analyzing previously published studies, gaps and unanswered questions on youth migration in El-Mina are identified. Based on this, the most important theories and concepts that are considered relevant for the development of the conceptual framework of this research are elaborated.

Lebanon is a key site when it comes to migration research in the Middle East. Due to the geopolitical location of the country, Lebanon is home to a diversity of migration and refugee communities. Besides the Armenian, Kurdish, Palestinian, and Syrian refugees, there are also a great number of migrant workers in Lebanon who attract the attention of scholars. While a plethora of studies have examined the complex dimensions of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (El Hayek & Ammar, 2022; Gutema, 2019; Hassan & Shukr, 2019; Jureidini, 2009; 2011; Pande, 2012) most authors tend to focus on the situation of refugees in Lebanon.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian war, the main focus has been on Syrian refugees. Most academic articles and reports from major UN agencies as well as smaller non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have focused intensively on issues such as humanitarian assistance to refugees (BouChabke & Haddad, 2021; Naufal, 2012; Schmelter, 2020) and livelihood assessments (Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, 2023).

In contrast, Fakhoury (2021b; 2017), Nassar and Stel (2019), and Darwich and Fakhoury (2016) have examined the impact of Lebanon's internal political structures and decision-making processes in managing the refugee crisis. Their research shows that there are significant limitations in refugee assistance due to the deadlock in Lebanon's sectarian political system. In addition, other authors

have examined the cooperation of the EU with Lebanon concerning refugees and migration (Fakhoury, 2020; 2022; Fakhoury & Stel, 2022; Seeberg, 2017; 2018; Tsourapas, 2019). Another important topic that receives attention in the literature is legal frameworks related to migration and their influence on the situation of refugees. Janmyr (2016) and Sanyal (2018) shed light on these legal frameworks and their impact on the living conditions of refugees.

An emerging focus in the study of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is the issue of voluntary, safe, and dignified returns, which is closely linked to the rise in forced deportations by the Lebanese Armed Forces. While scholars and experts have focused on the role of various actors (Assi, 2019; Fakhoury, 2021a; Fakhoury & Stel, 2023; Atallah & Mahdi, 2017), others, especially international human rights organizations, try to point out the risks of such returns (VDSF & OPC, 2021; Vignal, 2018).

As outlined in the chapter on emigration waves from Lebanon, Lebanon has a long history of emigration. This has led to an extensive academic engagement with topics such as brain drain (Akl et al., 2007; Dibeh et al., 2017; El-Jardali et al., 2008), drivers of migration (Dibeh et al., 2019), diaspora (Abdelhady, 2011; Bayeh & Bayeh, 2014; Hourani, 2007; Humphrey, 2004; Skulte-Ouaiss & Tabar, 2015; Tabar, 2016), social networks (Abdelhady, 2011), transnationalism (Abdelhady, 2011; Akyeampong, 2006), belonging (Hage, 2005) as well as political (Tabar, 2014), economic (Aoun, 2022; Awdeh, 2014; Meyer & Ströhle, 2023; Mercy Corps Lebanon, 2022) and cultural (Meyer & Ströhle, 2023) remittances. However, while scholars agree on the importance of the feeling of belonging, opinions differ on the political and economic impact of the diaspora on their former home country. Surprisingly, the selection of literature that specifically explores the emigration of Lebanese to Europe from an emigration perspective is small. Scholarly research addressing the topic usually includes emigration to Europe as part of an overall analysis of destinations (Abdelhady, 2011).

Furthermore, also research on student migration in the Lebanese context has predominantly concentrated on how Syrian refugees adjust to the Lebanese education system post-migration, with

several studies (Chopra, et al., 2020; Kelcey & Chatila, 2020; Kim et al., 2020) illuminating the challenges and adaptation processes involved in this transition. However, less attention has been paid to how the revolution and the economic crisis have affected Lebanese students' access to higher education and the challenges for the education sector in general (Maalouf & Baradhi, 2024).

In the last couple of years, scholars have developed an increasing interest in irregular migration of Lebanese to Europe. Although there have been some earlier publications on the irregular migration of Palestinian and Syrian refugees (Achilli, 2018; Dorai, 2003; Hutson & Long, 2011), a clear tendency towards a greater interest in the irregular migration of Lebanese to Europe is now emerging (Diab & Jouhari, 2023; Fakhoury, 2024). Building on the research of Dibeh et al. (2017), which identifies the determinants of regular migration, Dibeh et al. (2019) published one of the few studies to distinguish between the factors that influence the likelihood of regular and irregular migration of young people leaving Lebanon. What they find is that young adults from wealthier households tend to migrate via the regular route, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to consider the irregular route. Educational levels, marital status, socio-economic conditions, political affiliation, and patterns of trust further significantly influence the propensity to migrate, with university education and urbanism correlating positively, income, and being married negatively with irregular migration. Furthermore, it seems that being male significantly increases the probability of migration in general.

Furthermore, current literature suggests that livelihood studies often rely on data collection to develop policy recommendations, while governance studies typically use policy analysis or comparative case studies to make the case for particular policies. Both approaches generally overlook the particular characteristics, histories, feelings, and intentions of individuals. Although some studies on Lebanese emigration examine individual aspects, they tend to focus on the situation in the destination country. Consequently, the life experiences of young adults in Lebanon, such as those from El-Mina, and the reasons and dynamics behind their migration paths are not sufficiently explored. Therefore, this thesis does not only aim to contribute to an understudied field

of Lebanese youth emigration towards Europe but also examines migration and its structural constraints through the often neglected lens of migrants' personal experiences.

Given the scarcity of academic research, this thesis aims to best reflect the reality of young Lebanese leaving El-Mina for Europe by using the following theories: the migration network theory, the concept of migration infrastructure, the concept of agency, the autonomy of migration theory, and the aspiration-capability framework. While the migration network theory contributes by explaining the role of social networks in migration, migration infrastructure extends this social perspective from social networks to other important actors that help to move migrants from one place to another. However, to fully understand migrants as more than mere subjects who are being moved, it is essential to apply theories of migration agency and autonomy of migration, which focus on how migration involves navigating socio-economic and political landscapes with an element of self-determination. Adding a more individual approach, the aspiration and ability framework serves as a platform to combine the above theories to formulate my own, more human-centric, concept.

4.1.1. Migrant Network Theory

Given Lebanon's extensive history of migration, it is reasonable to assume that numerous transnational links have been established in the past decades between people living in Lebanon and those who have emigrated. A leading framework for understanding these webs of social ties connecting individuals from sending and receiving countries is the social network theory, which numerous migration researchers have acknowledged as an important basis for contextualizing different migration patterns (Cummings et al., 2015).

Based on the traditional theory of chain migration[24], Massey et al. (1993, p. 448) define the meso-level migrant network theory as "*sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin*." It predicts that once migrants have successfully settled in another country, this increases the likelihood of migration as the risks and costs of subsequent passages are continuously reduced (Castles et al., 2014; Massey et al., 1993).

Some scholars have focused on social networks as a component of *social capital,* through which one can acquire access to actual or potential resources for border crossings or new lives in destination countries (Castles et al., 2014; Massey et al., 1993; Sha, 2021). Social capital here needs to be understood as a resource that the migrant can draw upon to facilitate her or his decision-making process to i) leave the country, ii) which country to go to, iii) what ways and means to choose hereto, iv) how to settle and integrate into a destination country or country of transit and v) if and how to keep ties with the country of origin (Coleman, 1988). Even though this thesis does not analyze Lebanese emigrants' networks and their relations in Europe in detail, it intends to understand the importance of such social ties in facilitating the decision-making process regarding the decision to migrate, where to migrate, and how to migrate. Therefore, exploring the literature on migrant network theory and the emergent concept of migration infrastructure seems essential.

Empirical studies across different contexts, such as the migration routes between Mexico and the USA (Durand & Massey, 1992), Brazil to Portugal and the Netherlands (Van Meeteren & Pereira,

[24] Chain migration describes the process in which prospective migrants *"learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants"* (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964, p. 82).

2013), and Southern Africa to Europe (Alioua, 2005), show that relationships in social networks are constantly evolving.

Furthermore, more recent research has increasingly examined the dynamics of social networks and recognized that they are constantly changing and take on different functions at different times and in different places, rather than being static (Schapendonk, 2015). Schapendonk's research (2015) on African migrants on their way to Europe underpins this perspective, prompting the introduction of the term social networking (new ties and lost ties, changing power relations and new forms of exchange) to better capture the diverse and subjective experiences of migration.

Similarly, in their study of irregular migrants in transit in Turkey and Greece, Wissinka et al. (2020) found that social networks are a significant factor in a person's decision to migrate and that the initial composition of these networks, as well as their function, changes over time and often incorporates people who are being met en route. They emphasize the central role of social networks in providing both financial and emotional support, therefore redefining them as opportunities for migrants to make instrumental, financial, informational, and emotional connections that exist presently, prospectively, or retrospectively (Wissinka et al., 2020, p. 284).

However, while social network theory is often used to theorize and contextualize certain migration flows, some critics warn against oversimplifying the migration process by using migration networks as an explanatory model. Among these critics is Sha (2021), who points out that not enough attention is paid in academia to the diversity and accessibility of social networks. She challenges the simplistic notion that social ties per se constitute social capital and argues that this perspective overlooks the essential investments required to build and maintain relationships and mobilize resources that can eventually become social capital (Sha, 2021). Echoing these sentiments, Ryan (2011 in Sha, 2021) has criticized the frequent over-simplification of networks and social ties within networks and has called for more precise and less categorized research.

Consequently, new conceptual tendencies in inter-agency networks have emerged. The concept of *migration industries* elaborated by Cranston et al. (2019) expands upon the understanding of the factors that shape mobility patterns beyond the traditional social networks of kinship, friendship, and common origin. It emphasizes the central role of businesses and for-profit service providers in facilitating migration, forming a so-called 'migration industry', such as moneylenders, recruitment agencies, transportation companies, and smugglers who assist migrants in their journey (Cranston et al., 2018). The authors further argue that looking at migration industries allows us to understand the complex social, economic, and geographical dimensions of migration processes and offers insights into the contemporary dynamics between economies, nation-states, non-governmental organizations, and migrant movements.

However, it is important to recognize that focusing solely on the business aspects of these industries provides an incomplete picture. Therefore, recent discussions have challenged the notion that intermediaries are driven solely by monetary gain, suggesting that a more comprehensive examination of the 'migration infrastructures' is needed.

The introduction of this alternative, similarly new perspective of *migration infrastructure* was offered in 2014, primarily by anthropologists Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist. They argue that migration goes beyond the notion that it sustains itself through pioneers in social networks that provide information and assistance to new potential migrants, and instead emphasize that social networks are part of a much broader infrastructure that includes technologies, transportation, shelter, institutions, and various actors that move migrants from one place to another (Düvell & Preiss, 2022; Kleist & Bjarnesen, 2019; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

Therefore, migration infrastructure also addresses questions such as how to overcome natural obstacles like natural barriers, including long distances and features such as rivers, mountains, deserts, and seas, as well as political barriers, such as bureaucratic procedures and migration

management policies with the help of knowledge practices (Alpes, 2017; Düvell & Preiss, 2022; Findlay at al., 2012).

Unlike migration industries, the migration infrastructures theory also addresses bureaucratic matters such as gathering documents, arranging medical examinations, and coordinating pre-departure training sessions (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Research on migration infrastructures is at a relatively early stage and has so far been mainly made in the context of Asia (Lin et al., 2017; Robertson, 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014; 2018) and Africa (Kleist & Bjarnesen, 2019; 2023), with little to no research being done on migration infrastructures in the Middle East (Voivozeanu, 2021). Exploring long-term studies on labor migration in China and Indonesia, Xiang and Linquist (2014) were the first to define the concept of migration infrastructures. They differentiated between five dimensions that are relevant for the infrastructure, which should not be seen as separate areas but rather as different operating systems: i) the commercial (recruitment agents); ii) the regulatory (state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training, and other purposes); iii) the technological (communication and transportation); iv) the humanitarian (NGOs and international organizations); and v) the social (migrant networks) dimensions (Xiang & Linquist, 2014). Each dimension interacts with the other dimensions through actors, knowledge, documentary systems, and strategies specific to it, creating a system that moves people from one place to another (Düvell & Preiss, 2022; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

Recruitment agencies are probably the best-studied actors in the field of migration infrastructure. The main geographical contexts of research have been Eastern Europe (Findlay et al., 2012; Sporton, 2013), and Asia (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015; Pereira et al., 2021; Walton-Roberts, 2020), where scholars have found that the importance of recruitment agencies has increased significantly in the last decade. However, there are no scholarly works that I am aware of that have dealt with the importance of recruitment agencies from Lebanon to Europe to date. When talking about recruitment agencies in the Lebanese context, it is usually about how Lebanon receives migrants,

mainly domestic workers (Jones et al., 2023). This highlights a gap in the current literature and emphasizes the need to broaden the focus to better understand the experiences of Lebanese emigrants as well.

Among the studies that are relevant to this thesis is the research by Findlay et al. (2012) on Latvian migrant workers in the UK, which highlights the role of recruitment agents within the migration infrastructure, demonstrating that they serve a dual function. On the one hand, they offer potential migrants their knowledge of procedures and job opportunities in the destination country, and on the other hand, they inform employers in the destination country about the skills available in the country of origin (Findlay et al., 2012). Furthermore, the selection of migrants by recruitment agencies is mainly influenced by two different factors: the requirements of the employers and the perception of the employees. Recruitment agencies undertake the scouting of possible employees abroad who match the needed skills of the employer but also of people who seem *motivated* enough (Findlay et al., 2012).

This practice (re)creates a certain image of an 'ideal' candidate, which is not only based on their professional skills but also on the perceived adaptability and attitude for when they make it to the country of destination (Findlay et al., 2012). Thus, the image of the 'good, ideal' migrant that Europe tries to proclaim is imported into the state of origin. Furthermore, candidates tend to behave and present themselves according to their interpretation of what recruiters and employers seek, which in turn reinforces the prevailing understanding of the qualities that make a good employee and thus a 'good migrant' (Findlay et al., 2012).

Moreover, the migration infrastructure of student mobility, particularly in Lebanon, is crucial to this study but remains underexplored. However, one notable study is that of Beech (2018), which sheds light on the role of student agencies in the application process of foreign students to British universities. These agencies, typically private firms, establish connections with universities globally and earn commissions for successfully placing students. Simultaneously, they endeavor to reconcile

students' preferences for specific countries, their own financial incentives, and the requirements of the universities. Beech's research further demonstrates that social networks significantly influence student recruitment, with students frequently selecting their study destinations based on recommendations from their social circles.

Kleist and Bjarnesen (2019) recognize the impact of broader political structures on migration infrastructures. They introduce migration infrastructures as a part of a broader social process in which the mobility of people is dependent on their personal experiences and qualifications, constrained by political structures in which some people enjoy the privilege of mobility while others are being stigmatized and forbidden to move. In addition, they argue that migration infrastructure should not be reduced only to the *"already inscribed [existing] planning power"* that reproduces inequalities in mobility among migrants (Kleist & Bjarnesen, 2019, p. 7). Rather it must be recognized that migration infrastructures can also adapt to the needs of migrants trying to find their way despite certain structural constraints. In this way, migrants have the ability to reorganize the migration infrastructure according to their needs.

The contribution of migration infrastructure in Kleist and Bjarnesen's (2019) perspective is therefore to explore the infrastructural dimensions of mobility beyond the constraints of migration legislations, border control, and policy databases on migration and to look at how people will try to create their own opportunities within the conditions they are given. Migration infrastructures should therefore not be seen as static, but rather as systems that constantly adapt to the context and the resulting demands of migrants to get from one place to another (Sigona et al., 2021)

However, Carling and Collins (2018) warn that while the migration infrastructure perspective helps to understand the different actors involved in international migration, it also risks excluding migrants and their experiences from the analysis. Wang (2022) echoes their view, arguing that focusing on the procedural and exploitative dimensions of migration infrastructure portrays migrants as passive individuals, while instead they actively mobilize and even transform various

parts of the infrastructure. Although I agree with the authors' valid concerns, I believe it is unnecessary to prioritize one over the other. Instead, there's an opportunity to examine how migrants interact with migration infrastructures, adapting and even creating new forms, thereby emphasizing migration agency in the process.

In summary, the literature underscores the pivotal role of social networks, primarily examined through migrant network theory. Social ties, constituting social capital, influence key migration decisions. However, critiques highlight oversimplification, urging a nuanced understanding of dynamic networks. Recent conceptual shifts introduce 'migration infrastructure', emphasizing interconnected technologies, institutions, and actors shaping mobility. While migration infrastructure enriches comprehension of migration systems, concerns arise about its potential to sideline migrants' experiences. Maintaining focus on agency, it is crucial to balance analyses of infrastructures with an exploration of how migrants as individuals actively navigate and utilize these systems in their migration processes.

4.1.2. Beyond Migration Governance: Focusing on the Migrant

Since the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, where the EU committed to becoming an area of freedom, security, and justice, there has been a notable emphasis in policy measures and academic research on the unauthorized aspects of certain migration movements (Wagner et al., 2024). Consequently, efforts have primarily aimed at reducing or stopping these movements through various deterrence strategies (Bloch & Chimienti, 2011; Feng et al., 2020; Köngeter & Smith, 2015; Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2014). However, recent research emphasizes the agency and reflexivity of migrants and refugees who develop strategies to overcome barriers to mobility to achieve their personal goals (Borrelli et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2018). As a result, migrants are no longer depicted as passive victims exposed to the migration management policies of states and the international community, but as active agents who use their resources and develop strategies to

reach their destination (Anderson & Ruhs, 2010; Borrelli et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2020; Köngeter & Smith, 2015; Triandafyllidou, 2018).

According to Anderson and Ruhs, migrant agency involves more than having and acting on a mere 'choice'. Instead, it encompasses *"understanding decision-making, the room for maneuver, opportunity structures, and migration trajectories"* within the framework of contemporary nation-states and the global capitalist system (Anderson & Ruh, 2010, p. 178 in Mainwaring, 2016). Therefore, agency is understood as the ability of social actors to reflect on their position, develop strategies, and take action to achieve their desires (Bakewell, 2010).

In more detail, Hay (2002) argues that agency encompasses free will, choice, and autonomy as migrants could have decided to take different paths. Agency is therefore closely linked to concepts such as reflexivity, rationality, and motivation. Reflexivity refers to the actor's ability to reflect on the consequences of previous actions consciously. Rationality describes the actor's ability to select courses of action that are most likely to realize certain preferences. Motivation encompasses the desire and passion with which an actor attempts to realize a particular intention or preference. This broader view of agency emphasizes that individual action is embedded in a complex web of considerations and intentions and cannot simply be reduced to external constraints such as migration and border policies (Hay, 2002).

Similarly, Triandafyllidou (2018) differentiates between various forms of migrant agency while analyzing irregular migration from Afghanistan, Albania, Georgia, Pakistan, and Ukraine to Greece. Based on Katz's (2004, p. 242) preliminary work on disaggregating different forms of migrant agency, she shows that migrants navigate restrictive border regulations through recuperation (obtaining information and raising money via intermediaries), resilience (contact with networks abroad, tourist visa to find a job), and resistance (changing structures) (Triandafyllidou, 2018).

Over the past decade, migrants' agency has been mainly used in academia to describe and contextualize the migration processes of irregular migrants who try to circumvent restrictive migration structures (Mainwaring, 2016; Squire, 2017). One of the most influential research was done by Mainwaring (2016), who defines agency as a concept in which individuals or groups from different backgrounds interact according to their past experiences and future goals, basing their current actions on the judgment of these two aspects. In doing so, migrants deliberately create room for maneuver within state structures and engage in negotiations with non-state and state actors such as border guards, smugglers, and other migrants. In other words, this approach emphasizes that individuals do not just passively adapt to given conditions, but that they are involved in active engagement and creative power, mainly on the micro-level.

In the context of migration controls, in particular, agency is a political process that contests and transforms mobility and border regimes. Migrants use their scope of action to circumvent or undermine control mechanisms, which not only constitute individual actions but can also take on collective political significance if a critical mass of people is mobilized. Such situations often translate into the increased sophistication and professionalization of border crossing strategies and practices, leading not only to longer and more dangerous journeys but also to a greater degree of ingenuity and agency on the part of migrants and smugglers (de Haas, 2021). Therefore, the ongoing dialog between migration control mechanisms and border contestation shows how agency not only challenges structures but also influences their further development.

Indeed, there is a theory in the literature that recognizes migration as an independent social movement. This theory, known as Autonomy of Migration (AoM), stems mainly from Boutang's (1993) research on the political situation and subjunctivization processes of migrants as workers on the move (Castillo Ramírez, 2023). In other words, AoM claims that migration generates moments of autonomy, moments of uncontrollability and excess, in which the governing bodies of state institutions and international organizations, too busy implementing new border measures, are

unable to regulate people flowing in through different channels (Scheel, 2019). Studies on the autonomy of migration, therefore, do not seek to focus on how states attempt to control human mobility, but on how migrants contest and sidestep border controls to reach their destination (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013; Boutang, 2007).

Over the last two decades, Autonomy of Migration has been researched by various scholars, mainly from Europe and North America (Bojadžijev & Karakayali, 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013; Scheel, 2013). It challenges the 'Fortress Europe' metaphor by viewing borders as arenas of political struggle over mobility, where migrants are not merely weak subjects' to be controlled but active agents. Emphasis is given to migrants' subjective aspirations, moving beyond structural causes, asserting migration as a transformative force 'from below' (Andrijasevic, et al., 2007).

One of the first studies on Autonomy of Migration was the interdisciplinary research project Transit Migration which developed the AoM approach through an investigation of the emergent border regime in South-Eastern Europe from the perspective of mobility (Andrijasevic et al., 2007). In their book *Turbulente Ränder - Neue Perspektiven auf Migration an den Grenzen Europas*, Andrijasevic et al. (2007) argue that migration is not a simple summation of push-pull factors, but a calculated *social movement* based on networks and survival strategies that produce their own forms and practices of organization. In other words, migration is not a tap that can be turned on and off with (labor) migration policies but is based on the *subjectivity* of migrants (Andrijasevic et al., 2007).

In 'Escape Routes' (2008), Papadopoulos et al. argue that migration should be understood as an escape from post-liberal control. They criticize researchers like Mezzadra (2011) and Boutang (1993) for continuing to view migration through a capitalist lens and instead emphasize the importance of social networks in migration, which disrupt existing border structures through their social and political impact. Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) add to the discussion by noting that everyday mobility undermines systems of control through networks, emotional cooperation, and mutual

support, creating new social spaces for migrant exchange. Meanwhile, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue in 'Border as Method' that borders not only regulate migration but also create social spaces where people are classified as either part of 'society' or as 'problems'.

More critically, Scheel (2013; 2019) questions the concept of the autonomy of migration in the context of an increasingly technologically advanced border regime, asking where borders begin and end. He argues that the application of more and more biometric rebordering measures, i.e. the way biometrics are used for border control, creates an imbalance of power between migrants and border control authorities. This imbalance of power leads Scheel (2019) to question the definition of 'autonomy' as pure self-determination, redefining it as a constant zone of conflict between migratory practices and attempts to control them, intersected by multiple disputes and struggles, alliances, and negotiations.

In conclusion, AoM scholars regard borders as sites of multiple struggles, negotiations, and contestations, where migrants' tactics and practices encounter the actors, means, and methods of control, entering a *"relationship of reciprocal determination"* (Bojadžijev & Karakayali 2007, p. 204). Acknowledging the establishment of networks and the exchange of information and care between people opens up numerous possibilities of how borders can be overcome. At times when borders are becoming complex systems aimed at delimiting, differentiating, and hierarchizing migrant groups, the autonomy of migration reaffirms the importance of migration as a productive social force (Bojadzijev & Karakayali, 2007).

4.1.3. Aspiration and Capability Framework

The conceptual problem of conventional migration theories often lies in their inability to conceptualize human agency within a clearly defined structural framework. Various authors, such as Carling and Schewel (2018), believe that formulating a comprehensive theory of migration continues to be the greatest challenge in migration studies, while other researchers, including Arango (2002),

consider it to be impossible due to the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. However, de Haas (2021, p. 3) emphasizes that it would be wrong to claim that social theories aim to create all-encompassing and universal theories. He argues that social phenomena, and therefore also migration, must always be considered in the context of the specific historical and social conditions in which they occur.

The aspirations and capabilities model (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021) theorizes migration in a way that encompasses different levels of analysis (micro and macro), geographical contexts, social groups, points in time, and disciplinary perspectives. In doing so, this model does not claim to provide another competing theory with absolutist propositions but rather offers a meta-conceptual framework that facilitates the understanding of drivers and other factors shaping migration (Carling & Schewel 2018). The integrative approach makes it possible to understand migration in many of its complexities and diversities and therefore offers an excellent starting point for research into emigration processes from El-Mina to Europe.

The foundation of the aspiration-capability framework was established by Carling (2002), who studied migration behavior in Cape Verde. In his article *Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experience*, he argues that the migration process starts with a desire for mobility – a preference for migration rather than staying put— which can vary from voluntary choice to necessity depending on the current circumstances in one's home country. However, to pursue migration, one must have the necessary means to migrate. Thus, both the desire to migrate (aspiration) and the ability to do so are essential components of mobility (Carling, 2002).

For Carling, aspiration and ability are multi-layered conditions that take place on a macro- and micro-level. The author calls the macro-level dimension impacting aspiration the 'emigration environment', which entails the social, economic, and political context in which migration takes place. This context is similar for all people in a community and is highly influenced by the

understanding of migration as a socially constructed project. The micro-level of aspirations is the influence of the specific environment of a person on the desire to emigrate or not. Here, factors like gender, age, family migration history, social status, financial situation, level of education, and personality play an important role (Carling, 2002).

With regard to abilities, Carling (2002) defines the macro level as the 'immigration interface' in which there are different 'modes of migration' (legal labor migration, family reunification, political asylum, visa overstay, and illegal entry). Each of these modes requires different amounts of capital[25] and entails specific risks. In other words, a person's ability to migrate is manifested through different modes of migration and is influenced by specific contexts and external factors, such as restrictive immigration policies of destination countries and their enforcement as well as people's economic, cultural, and social capitals. Carling further illustrates that the challenges faced by potential migrants are not uniform and insurmountable, but rather resemble a *"dense jungle with various paths, each associated with specific obstacles, costs and risks"* (Carling, 2002. p. 22).

At the micro-level of Carling's capability dimension, individuals develop unique strategies to overcome barriers to migration. Similar to the micro-level of the aspiration dimension, factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, education level, occupation, family migration history, and social networks are of central importance. Carling's framework presents a model that links structural factors (macro level) with individual aspects (micro level) and emphasizes human agency as a central element of the migration framework.

[25] I consider the sets of capital here to be a combination of economic, human, and social capital. While economic capital refers to the financial resources and assets that a person or community possesses or has access to, human capital comprises the skills, knowledge, and qualifications that a person acquires through education and experience, which ultimately contribute to their productivity. Social capital, as described above, consists of social networks, relationships, and social trust in a community that can promote information sharing, collaboration, and collective action.

Another scholar who has worked extensively on the conceptualization of the aspirations-abilities framework is de Haas (2021). During his research in southern Morocco, he began to question traditional migration theories as they could not explain why people's migration aspirations were increasing instead of decreasing despite rising development standards in the country. De Haas expands Carling's (2002) framework of aspirations and capabilities and makes it more complex by placing greater emphasis on human agency and the influence of broader political and contextual structures. He argues that migration is an integral part of broader economic, political, cultural, technological, and demographic changes, making it a social process shaped on the one hand by the actions of individuals and on the other by broader structural contexts, which in turn influence people's aspirations and capabilities.

The author defines agency as the ability of people to make their own decisions based on their economic, social, and cultural capital, their ideas of a 'good life', and whether they want to stay in or leave their home country. Structure refers to a set of policies and patterns that result from state policies that either facilitate or hinder people's movement, which may vary according to class, religion, gender, ethnicity, social networks, and social class. These social hierarchies are often established and reproduced by governments and their policies as well as recruitment agencies.

Building on Carling (2002), de Haas argues that aspirations are general life preferences and subjective perceptions about opportunities of life elsewhere, which can be divided into instrumental (migration as a functional and utilitarian means-to-and-end) and intrinsic (as an empowering, well-being-enhancing factor that adds to the quality of life). Interestingly, he includes freedom of movement as an intrinsic variable of aspirations. He also broadens the understanding of ability by defining it not only as people's social, economic, and cultural resources but also as, based on Sen's (1999) concept of 'capabilities', a person's ability to live a life they value, whether at home or abroad. By adding this dimension of well-being, de Haas challenges the dichotomy of forced and

voluntary migration, arguing that individuals can feel compelled to leave the country based on their ability to strive for better (mental) well-being abroad.

Furthermore, de Haas (2021) introduces the concepts of positive and negative liberty, originally formulated by Isaiah Berlin (1969). De Haas defines negative liberty as the absence of obstacles, barriers, or restrictions, i.e. what is often colloquially referred to as freedom. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is the ability of a person to pursue his or her own goals and to exercise self-determination (agency) by having all the necessary resources (capital) at their disposal. He argues that incorporating these concepts into the aspirations-capabilities framework helps to understand how aspirations and capabilities are shaped by and interact with macro-structural processes. This allows for a contextualization of migration flows into a concrete setting.

Therefore, de Haas' concept of the aspirations-capabilities framework offers a richer, more nuanced, and more realistic analysis of the migration process. By focusing on agency, he shows that migration only improves people's well-being if they can actively choose between the option to stay or to leave. However, during this process and once the decision to leave has been made, a person is constrained by structural conditions, with the intensity of these constraints depending on people's capital.

As the aspiration-capability model was just developed in the last decade, it has only gained momentum among researchers recently. Research by Auer et al. (2020) and Cooray and Schneider (2016) have shown a positive correlation between corruption and migration aspirations. Using global survey data from over 280,000 respondents in 67 countries, Auer et al. (2020) investigated whether and to what extent corruption influences emigration intentions and found robust evidence that corruption increases emigration intentions, arguing that traditional models underestimate this effect. The study by Cooray and Schneider (2016) examines the influence of corruption on the emigration of low-, medium- and highly-skilled individuals, showing that increasing corruption increases the emigration of highly qualified people, while it only promotes the emigration of less qualified people up to a certain level of corruption.

Furthermore, Hunkler et al. (2022) explore onward migration and aspirations among Sudanese families in Europe using the aspirational capacity model. They investigate how migrants navigate institutional constraints within migration structures and welfare systems. Their study defines aspirations as future plans or goals shaped by the current social context and capabilities as individuals' ability to lead fulfilling lives and expand their opportunities. The research highlights how portraying refugees solely as passive victims, overlooking their agency and aspirations, perpetuates social dependency and undermines their life aspirations.

in a different context, Rodriguez-Pena (2023) examines the migration experiences of homosexual Latin Americans across different mobility categories, underscoring the influence of social boundaries and family dynamics on migration aspirations and capabilities. The study by Wyngaarden et al. (2023) demonstrates how rural youth in Honduras transform their aspirations for mobility into practical skills by creatively utilizing resources and engaging with supportive institutions.

As we have seen in all parts of this literature review, the interplay between agency and structure is very present in the process of migration. Therefore, in the research on the emigration of young adults from El-Mina, it is crucial to consider these relationships to understand the real-world dynamics and the interplay of the different factors. Be it migration networks, migration infrastructures, agency, or autonomy of migration, they all play into the context in which structural forces influence private decisions and capabilities, while social interactions and the maximization of capital try to circumvent them.

4.2. Conceptual Framework

The migration of young adults from El-Mina to Europe is a complex phenomenon influenced by a multitude of factors. These are assumed to include individual aspirations, available sets of capital, access to migration infrastructure, and Lebanon's broader socioeconomic and political context.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of youth migration from El-Mina, it is crucial to analyze and understand the complex interactions between these factors at the macro (emigration environment) and micro (individual environment) levels (Carling, 2002). Therefore, the conceptual framework of this thesis draws on the aspirations and capabilities[26] model as well as migration infrastructure theory to identify the reasons and realization of young people's emigration from El-Mina to Europe (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021; Kleist & Bjarnesen, 2019; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

Since the fall of 2019, Lebanon's stagnant political, economic, and social landscape suggests deteriorating living conditions for many Lebanese, prompting especially young individuals to seek emigration, e.g. due to a scarcity of opportunities for livelihood and uncertainties regarding the future. The Lebanese context thus represents the emigration environment, and therefore one part of the macro-level.

The other part of the macro-level consists of the migration governance between the EU and Lebanon, introduced in chapter three. While some of these policies enhance the capabilities of certain individuals to leave the country, increasingly restrictive measures impede the departure process for others and also affect aspirations, as people perceive the process so difficult that they do not even attempt to emigrate (impact on negative liberties; de Haas, 2021).

In addition, the immediate personal environment, for example, gender, age, family connections, social networks, employment, individual characteristics, and experiences, can influence migration intentions and capabilities. Therefore, individual migration aspirations, whether instrumental and/or

[26] I deliberately choose the term capabilities (de Haas, 2021) as, in contrast to abilities (Carling, 2002), it encompasses not only individual resources and skills but also the extended scope for action made possible by contextual external conditions, opening the scope for a deeper understanding of migration realities.

intrinsic (de Haas, 2021), are shaped by the country's context, migration policies, people's education, and experiences.

Capabilities are mainly shaped by people's personal background, which in turn is strongly influenced by the general context of the country (Carling, 2002). Depending on their economic, human, and social capital, people tend to have different access to the migration infrastructure and therefore end up in different modes of regular or irregular migration (Carling, 2002; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). It is assumed that the most important migration infrastructure in the case of El-Mina includes various travel agencies, employment and student agencies, embassies, smugglers, various bureaucratic processes, social networks, and different means of transportation.

However, a person's ability to utilize his/her economic, human, and social capital depends heavily on the impact of specific migration policies. These policies either facilitate migration for those who meet certain predetermined criteria or restrict opportunities for those who do not meet these conditions, thus restricting access to migration infrastructure. Understanding how people decide what parts of migration infrastructure to engage with and what mode of migration they ultimately pursue, gives valuable insights into migrants' ability to reflect and strategize their migration process, constantly adapting to what is happening around them.

The migrants' personal agency, i.e. the commitment to shape their migration process by themselves, is crucial to drive the implementation (realization) of migration plans. Agency is essentially shaped by personal characteristics and capabilities while being significantly influenced by the constraints on negative liberty imposed by migration governance. However, the impact of migration governance on individual negative liberty (and thus agency) varies according to the individual's ability to integrate past experiences, future aspirations, and current capabilities to navigate possible obstacles (Mainwaring, 2016).

In conclusion, the conceptual framework of this study aims to capture and understand the convergence of various factors, processes, and actors to comprehend the motivations of individuals from El-Mina opting to emigrate and the methods they employ within the constraints of their context and capabilities. Figure 15 illustrates the conceptual framework that was used as a basis for this thesis.

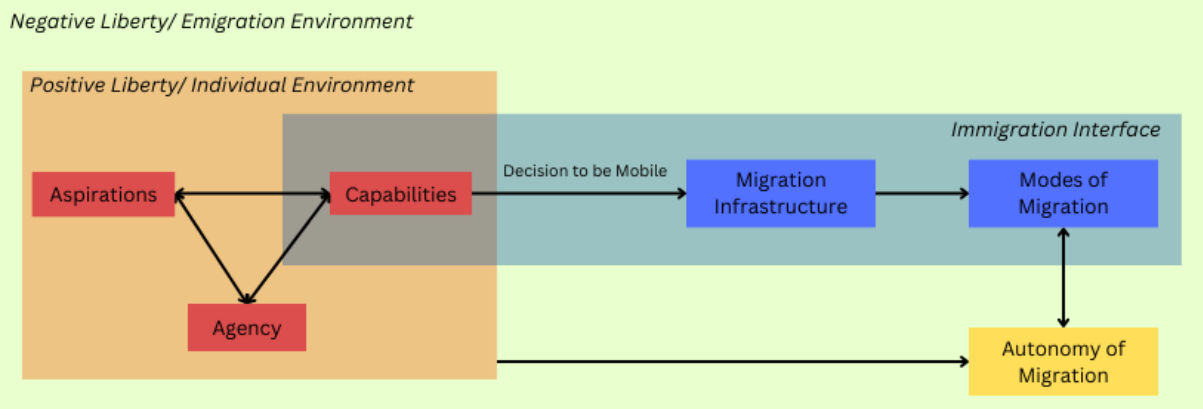

Figure 15: The conceptual framework underlying the present study on young Lebanese migrants departing from El-Mina to Europe is based on and integrates the concepts of Carling (2002) and de Haas (2021). Arrows indicate the effects/influences of one factor on another.

4.3. Importance of Research and Significance of Study

This research plays a crucial role in providing deeper insights into the mobility experiences of young Lebanese adults in El-Mina, Tripoli. As mentioned earlier, the choice of El-Mina as a case study is justified by its central role in irregular boat crossings from Lebanon as well as its geographical and infrastructural advantages, its complex and diverse socio-demographic composition reflecting Lebanese society in general, and the relevance of existing local contacts for conducting in-depth research on the macro- and micro-level factors influencing emigration to Europe.

By focusing on contextual, economic, social, and cultural influences, the study aims to understand the dynamics that influence mobility decisions comprehensively. It combines theoretical frameworks

with the lived experiences of those affected. In doing so, I aim to contribute to closing a gap in the migration research of a certain region of Lebanon and to shed light on an aspect of the migration field that is often neglected, the lived experience. While structural constraints remain relevant, the importance lies in exploring how individuals navigate their departure from the country, utilizing the available migration infrastructure based on their own abilities.

Therefore, this research extends beyond the academic realm and has concrete implications on a practical and societal level. Socially, I aim to bring people back into the migration discussion and try to divert attention from statistics and governance that tend to objectify migrants. This human-centered approach contributes to a more empathetic account of migration, promotes intercultural understanding, and can refute stereotypes or misconceptions that have been flourishing in Europe over the past two decades. Overall, the study aspires to be a valuable resource for everyone seeking a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the mobility experiences of young Lebanese adults in El-Mina, Tripoli.

5. From the Desk to the Field: Methodology and Methods

This chapter focuses on the methodology and methods used to conduct this thesis. It starts by explaining why an ethnographic methodology was chosen before it moves on to the description of the research methods used. Furthermore, this chapter aims to provide an overview of the limitations and ethical considerations to be considered in this research project.

5.1. The Preparation: Choosing an Ethnographic Approach

Given the purpose of this research to obtain an in-depth understanding of people's experiences, I decided to use a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Qualitative methodology is a research method that, other than quantitative research, is interested in a person's experience and interactions in a specific social context. The methodology, which derives from the field of sociology and ethnography, aims to deepen the understanding of social groups and communities through intensive field research. Based on existing epistemological and ontological assumptions, it draws upon participants and their surroundings as the primary knowledge source and, therefore, tends to understand the topic researched from the inside (Ritchie et al., 2013).

The operative task of the researcher is therefore to collect and interpret data in the given context (Ritchie et al., 2013). In addition, as ethnography focuses on the cultural and social environment of a specific community, researchers engage with study participants mainly through interviews and participant observations (Reeves et al., 2008; Suryani, 2008). This environment-related methodology usually examines complex social phenomena in depth and through a small number of participants (Reeves et al., 2008; Suryani, 2008). By working closely with the subjects of interest, reflexivity on the researcher's part is crucial (Reeves et al., 2008).

Ethnographic research often employs a small number of interviews and observations to capture participants' cultural and social milieu in-depth. As I am interested in investigating the everyday life

of subjects who migrated or are about to do so, as well as their experience in terms of social networks, migrant infrastructure, and emotional processes, adopting an ethnographic methodology is a valid choice. Documenting people's lives and actively observing their surroundings is crucial to understanding their socio-economic and political context, the networks of agents they interact with, as well as their emotional process. Therefore, it is crucial to be able to map the complex interrelationships between actors, services, and tools without neglecting essential elements. Given the engaging character of the methodology, sensitivity is essential as it involves working and learning directly with the persons of interest. Contextualizing their lives and their political and social surroundings is paramount. In employing ethnographic methods such as group discussions, interviews, and participant observation, this research aimed to collect the experiences of migrants to explore the aspirations, capabilities, and emotions of emigrants from El-Mina.

5.2. The Fieldwork: Exploring Mobility Experiences in El-Mina

The primary purpose of the field visit was to execute a range of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participation observation, and, if possible, some group discussions to comprehensively understand the research population and their social surroundings. However, before embarking on fieldwork, thorough desk research was necessary to establish context, alongside conducting comprehensive literature reviews to delve into relevant academic literature. Moreover, it was essential for me to stay abreast of the latest news. I usually turned to online sources like L'Orient le Jour, Naharnet, Al-Jazeera, and MegaphoneNews as my Arabic skills did not suffice for Arabic news channels. This thorough preparation aimed to track recent developments, especially those affecting the emigration trends of young adults in El-Mina.

The fieldwork itself then took place over a period of six weeks between July 1 and August 12, 2023.[27] The main difficulty encountered during this period was gaining access to individuals who were contemplating leaving the country. However, this issue was resolved through my committed Tripolitan friend and gatekeeper, Shames, who successfully implemented a referral system, snowball sampling, which allowed the identification and recruitment of potential participants. Shames was not only instrumental in providing access to possible research participants but also made himself available as my translator,[28] thus improving the research's overall quality.

Originally, the plan was to conduct eight to twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews; however, this number was ultimately expanded to fourteen interviews. To capture a comprehensive range of viewpoints and experiences, these interviews were conducted through a combination of face-to-face meetings and online calls, thus accommodating participants from various life situations and geographical locations. The inclusion of multiple interviewee groups proved to be instrumental in conducting a nuanced analysis of the emigration phenomenon from El-Mina. Specifically, I was able to interview five distinct groups:

- individuals who were already residing abroad,
- individuals who were on the verge of emigrating,
- individuals who were contemplating the possibility of leaving their home country
- individuals that had left the country and returned, and
- migration advocates such as lawyers, professors, and activists.

[27] The fieldwork period was funded by the American University in Cairo Graduate Students Support Grants.

[28] Although my Arabic is not subpar, it would not have been good enough to comprehend all the discourse presented in the interviews. In instances where the interviews were conducted in Arabic, Shames ensured my accurate comprehension and subsequently facilitated the translation of my questions to the participants.

The in-depth interviews offered a wealth of invaluable information, shedding light on participants' lives, experiences, insights, perceptions, social dynamics, and broader environments. They also allowed a deep dive into the particularities of the participants' narratives and explored the multifaceted dimensions of their emigration decisions, which served a lot in contextualizing, framing, and comprehending the complex interplay of factors that shape and influence the emigration process from El-Mina (Mack et al., 2005; Sánchez-Ayala, 2012).

To ensure comprehensive coverage of the main areas of importance within this research, I followed a set of prepared open-ended questions while also allowing for flexibility and adaptation to the dynamic and fluid nature of the interview process (Innes, 2015; Turner, 2010). By leading the conversation in a general direction, I was able to strike a balance between obtaining relevant and focused information while mitigating the risk of inundating the analysis process with excessive and potentially distracting data (Innes, 2015; Sánchez-Ayala, 2012). Consequently, the nature of these interviews fostered a natural and organic two-way conversation, allowing for a thorough and meaningful exchange between the researcher and the participants (Innes, 2015; Mack et al., 2005; Sánchez-Ayala, 2012). Each interview was concluded with a final question, inviting the participants to share their thoughts on potential areas of focus and highlight any additional aspects they deemed important. This approach not only empowered the participants by giving them a voice but also enriched the research process by incorporating their valuable input, grounded in their lived experiences.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, I had also set myself the goal of holding six group discussions. However, it became evident that spontaneous conversations in informal settings such as restaurants, cafes, and bars were prevalent. Emigration emerged as a pervasive topic openly discussed by individuals in El-Mina, rendering the planned focus group less important than initially expected. Yet, the only formal group discussion I held was with five friends, all of whom had tried to reach Europe several times via irregular maritime routes. In this case, a group discussion made sense

as the friends felt more comfortable talking as a group and could remind each other of certain incidents.

The days I conducted my interviews were characterized by oppressive heat and frequent power cuts. Yet, the participants showed unwavering interest in discussing their situation. The participants, who were young adults between the ages of 20 to 40 years old, encompassed a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, thereby ensuring a diverse representation within the study (Table 1 in Annex). Despite endeavors to achieve a balanced gender distribution, it is noteworthy that merely four out of the fourteen interviews were female individuals.[29] Furthermore, the formal group discussion that took place exclusively comprised male participants, thereby indicating a potential gender disparity within the research sample.

To complement the interviews and group discussions, I undertook daily participant observations in various settings such as cafés, bars, public places, and the corniche in El-Mina. This methodological approach of participant observation serves as a qualitative research tool that aims to gather in-depth information on the habits, behaviors, social order, interactions, and culture of the community studied (Mack et al., 2005). By immersing myself in the places significant to the community under study, I sought to capture and understand what it means to adopt an 'insider' perspective while maintaining an 'outsider' status (Mack et al., 2005).

In essence, the utilization of a diverse range of research methods, including interviews, group discussions, and participant observations, provides a comprehensive understanding of the emigration dynamics among young adults in El-Mina. Consequently, the ethnographic approach enables the researchers to establish meaningful connections between personal experiences, social

[29] I have deliberately chosen not to address gender in this paper, as this would exceed the scope of this thesis.

structures, and ongoing developments, thereby enriching the overall findings and insights garnered from the study.

5.3. Limitations of the Research Project

This research endeavor, which is based on the snowball system, is subject to several limitations that must be carefully considered for a comprehensive understanding of the validity and interpretation of the results. One major limitation lies in the risk of biased sampling. Given that the recruitment of new participants depended on referrals from existing connections, certain groups or perspectives may be disproportionately represented, while others may not be sufficiently included.

Another significant limitation is the potential homogeneity of the sample. It stands to reason that individuals are inclined to suggest contacts who share similar backgrounds or viewpoints, thereby giving rise to a limited diversity of opinions and experiences. Hence, it is plausible that certain nuances or distinctions in the migration plans of young adults may not be sufficiently captured. The voluntary participation of individuals poses an additional challenge. Those individuals who chose to participate in the study might possess specific qualities or beliefs that differentiate them from the broader population. This has the potential to introduce bias, as those who chose to participate may have harbored a specific perspective or motivation.

The potential for bias in the outcomes can further arise from the sensitivity surrounding the paths taken by emigrants. Participants may have displayed a tendency to moderate their responses or withhold specific information, particularly concerning plans for illegal migration. This highlights the necessity for a scientific approach that acknowledges this issue and incorporates a thorough examination of the gathered data. Furthermore, the element of temporality may also be influential. The snowball effect could have resulted in relatively swift data collection, which in turn could

conceivably impact the ability to adequately capture long-term developments or alterations in the participants' perspectives.

Given these limitations, I had to exercise increased caution when evaluating the results and formulating the conclusion. Open and honest communication regarding these restrictions and comprehensive analysis of the gathered information is imperative for guaranteeing the accuracy and pertinence of this investigation within the framework of its goals.

5.4. Ethical Considerations and Risks

Before commencing my research, it was necessary to acquire ethical authorization from the Institutional Review Board at the American University in Cairo (AUC) to secure the safety and anonymity of the participants. Once I had received this authorization and started my research expedition, the question of identifying and finding a suitable location for the interviews arose.

In conjunction with Shames, I decided to present the participants with the opportunity to select their meeting venue for the interviews. This undertaking aimed to create an environment that provided both comfort and security for the interviewees. If no preference was expressed, the interviews usually took place in a café that also served as a cultural center. The choice of location was based on its geographical and social convenience, as several of the interviewees already frequented this location in their free time.

Furthermore, prior to each interview, I explained the research process to the participants, as well as my role as a young female Swiss researcher. My position as a foreign student conducting research in El-Mina positioned me as an 'outsider', an external observer who was not integrated into the community, the 'other' (Voloder, 2014). The implications of this positioning can be twofold. On one hand, the 'outsider' perspective may be perceived as objective, while on the other hand, the distance may contribute to challenges in comprehending, cultivating trust within the community,

and interpreting cultural practices. However, disclosing to the participants of this thesis that I am a migrant in Egypt with Lebanese roots placed me in a position of 'insiderness' (Voloder, 2014), which made a rapid connection with the participants possible. Furthermore, it accelerated the development of a relationship of trust and recalibrated the power dynamics between me, the researcher, and the research participant.[30]

Nonetheless, as posited by Ryan (2015), I never truly felt 'inside' or 'outside' the community. It was contingent upon the nature of the discussion and the topic being discussed whether I and the interviewees perceived myself as being a part of the community or not. This interplay, or *"dance"* or *"tango"* (Ryan, 2015, p. 5; Van Mol et al., 2016), imbued this research with a particular dynamism that I found advantageous but necessitates consideration when analyzing the findings (Voloder, 2014, p. 7).

Moreover, before the interviews, I emphasized that there are no immediate benefits from participation and pointed out the following risks: i) unintended consequences for migration processes; ii) family and community impacts; iii) data leaks; iv) unauthorized access; v) misuse of sensitive information.. These risks highlight the urgent need for careful ethical consideration and robust confidentiality measures to protect the well-being and safety of participants throughout the interview process. However, I found that despite the potential risks, the research participants were very open to sharing their background information and personal experiences. They seemed confident that nothing related to this thesis would make their situation any worse, which is why many of them were comfortable with me simply using their real names without anonymizing them – which I still did.

[30] The risks and consequences of unconsidered power dynamics between researchers and research participants can lead to a lack of participation and a bias in the research findings.

After making sure that participants were aware of the risks, I additionally informed them that they could stop the interviews at any time if they felt uncomfortable and that they could still ask for their data not to be used without fear of repercussions. Following this procedure, I obtained verbal consent from them, while also asking for their consent to have their voice recorded. There were several reasons why I opted for verbal consent. Firstly, some of the participants were planning to leave the country irregularly and were therefore very wary of leaving their name and signature on a document. Secondly, requesting participants to sign a document may have emphasized the gravity of the matter and potentially discouraged individuals from getting involved.

In light of these challenges, the storage and sharing of research material was of the highest concern. Anonymity and confidentiality play a crucial role in research to ensure the privacy and identity of participants, particularly in studies on sensitive subjects like migration plans. Maintaining anonymity ensures that those affected can share their experiences freely without having to fear personal consequences or stigmatization. Confidentiality protects the data collected, promotes trust, and encourages honest and open participation, which ultimately contributes to the validity and ethical integrity of the research. Therefore, I ensured that my interview recordings were stored securely in my locked computer and were only shared with Shames, who also acted as my transcriptionist, to limit the dissemination of information. I additionally asked him to sign a confidentiality agreement stating that he was not authorized to disclose, publish, or share information from the research study with anyone other than me.

While conducting this research, it was crucial for me to critically examine my own values and motives and to be transparent with the research participants. To acknowledge the potential influence of my background on power dynamics during the interviews, I endeavored to navigate these intricacies by maintaining cultural sensitivity, acknowledging my positionality, and ensuring a respectful approach that prioritized participants' narratives and agency. This self-reflection aimed to mitigate potential biases, build trust, and uphold the ethical principles of the research process.

6. Findings and Analysis: Like a Fish Outside the Sea

6.1. Becoming a Migrant: Shaping Aspirations in a Sea of Change

The findings and analysis within this chapter explore the motivations and aspirations driving individuals from El-Mina to pursue migration opportunities to Europe. The choice to depart from their familiar surroundings and journey to Europe is influenced by various individual and contextual factors. Through a comprehensive examination of conducted interviews (Table 1 in Annex), this section includes participants' narratives, organized according to themes of aspirations. Given the limited scope of this thesis, only a selected number of participant stories and excerpts will be presented within each aspiration subchapter. Moreover, the narratives will be compared with the established conceptual framework (see Fig. 15) and placed within the existing body of literature on migration, highlighting the importance of prior scholarly insights in understanding the results of this thesis.

6.1.1. Economic Breakdown and Lack of Work Opportunities

The participants in this thesis have been significantly affected by the rapid devaluation of the Lebanese lira, which has led to decreased salaries and a lack of satisfactory job opportunities. As a result, they share aspirations to seek better, more stable, and higher-paying jobs abroad. To illustrate these impacts, I will focus on the unique experiences of Bob, Walid, and Ria. Each of them exemplifies how economic challenges have shaped their decisions and aspirations regarding emigration.

One of the first people I met after arriving in El-Mina was Bob. The 34-year-old male was raised in a middle-class family in El-Mina. After high school, Bob studied nursing at a technical college in Lebanon before gaining experience in the intensive care unit of Nini Hospital in Tripoli, where he subsequently worked as an assistant surgeon for eleven years. However, by the time I met him, he

was waiting for the final paperwork to be finished before leaving for Germany spending his free time playing football or going to local coffee shops with friends. When I asked him why he was moving abroad, he told me:

> *"The last three years were very intense. We used to get paid 1600$, now we get 300$. We used to shop, spend money, and go out a lot, but now we can't do that anymore […] I have good work experience; if I use it correctly, I will surely develop and shine" (Bob)*

The cut in his salary and the absence of higher wages in other hospitals in the country prompted Bob to look for a job abroad. Relying on the support of his social network, which included a brother and a sister already living in Germany, he gathered information about the employment landscape there. Through these connections and Germany's migration policies aimed at attracting foreign medical workers, he feels optimistic about his chances of obtaining a job and a work visa in Germany – a confidence that ultimately proved to be justified.

Another participant, Walid, whom I met at a coffee shop close to the corniche, emphasized how difficult it was for him to find a job in his field in Lebanon. The thirty-year-old young civil engineer from a middle-class family with eight siblings recounted the ups and downs of his job search after graduating from the Lebanese University in 2021. To make ends meet, Walid provided private tutoring sessions for high school and university students. However, with Lebanon's ongoing economic decline, fewer people could afford his services, and his salary in Lebanese lira plummeted drastically due to inflation. Therefore, Walid started taking on project-based assignments with humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The advantage of working with NGOs is that they were able to compensate their staff in 'fresh dollars'[31] at that time due to the influx of funds following the Beirut explosion. However, he did not see working in the humanitarian sector as a sustainable solution due to the uncertain future of projects and funding. Observing that his peers who had previously left the country to succeed in pursuing further education or careers were successful, while he faced challenges in securing adequately paid employment, prompted him to contemplate emigration himself.

> *"The country doesn't help create jobs for our futures. People that emigrate do so to secure their future. That's why I had to start taking the option of leaving the country seriously," (Walid)*

For Ria, a 27-year-old cinema director, it was mainly the responsibility she felt toward her family that led her to leave the country. Born and raised in El-Mina, she grew up in a financially constrained family. At the age of fourteen, she began assisting her parents with expenses by taking on various side jobs. Besides trying to become financially independent, she aimed to ensure financial stability for her ten-year-old younger brother. However, due to the limited job opportunities for cinema directors in Lebanon and the inadequate income from part-time jobs at restaurants and hotel receptions, Ria began exploring more effective long-term ways to support her family. She began to seek emigration to send regular remittances to her parents and thus ensure continuous support from abroad.

[31] 'Fresh Dollars' is a term coined in Lebanon following the banking crisis in March 2020 (Helou, 2022). It refers to US dollars that maintain their full value and have not been subjected to exchange on the black market or comply with bank policies requiring simultaneous withdrawal of the equivalent amount in Lebanese lira at outdated exchange rates. In essence, these dollars can be in the form of physical cash, held in foreign bank accounts, or deposited in newly established Lebanese accounts designated for 'fresh dollars' (Helou, 2022).

Although the narratives seem similar, each person has a slightly different economic motivation for aspiring to live abroad. While Bob aspired for a better-paying job, Walid sought a stable job opportunity in his field, and Ria aimed to provide financial support for her family. Their experiences and aspirations resonate with findings commonly observed in the literature, as evidenced by Etling et al. (2020), which show how unstable economies and limited opportunities force individuals to seek better economic prospects abroad to improve their living standards.

Examining nurses in Lebanon specifically, research by Alameddine et al. (2020) and Ali (2024) confirms a widespread pattern of emigration among Lebanese healthcare professionals due to declining salaries and limited career prospects. However, according to Berlinschi and Harutyunyan (2019), the desire to migrate emerges only when there is a prevailing belief that opportunities abroad surpass those available domestically—a sentiment widely shared among the participants of this study.

Another crucial consideration amidst Lebanon's economic collapse is the heightened sense of duty among individuals to support their families, exacerbated by the fallout from the crash of the Lebanese banking system (Figure 16). This observation aligns with the principles of the new economics of labor migration theory (Stark & Bloom, 1985), which proposes that individuals often migrate as part of a family strategy aimed at minimizing financial risks and maximizing overall family welfare.

Figure 16: The 'Family' tattoo of a shopkeeper in El-Mina, symbolizes the deep bond between the inhabitants of El-Mina and their families (Studer, 2023).

6.1.2. Lack of Safety and Stability

The feeling of insecurity due to the political and governmental situation in Lebanon was another factor influencing people's migration aspirations. The lack of stability, a long-standing problem that has been exacerbated by corruption, political deadlocks, recurring violence, and the constant fear of erupting wars for decades, has created a widespread climate of fear and insecurity. As a result, people yearn for a better life in safety and dignity abroad.

In addition, participants often spoke about the difficulties caused by limited access and the high cost of public services such as healthcare, education, electricity, or the availability of fuel. These challenges complicate people's everyday lives, leaving them feeling abandoned and let down by the government. Furthermore, failure to adequately meet basic needs affects people's quality of life and increases their sense of frustration, motivating many to look for better opportunities abroad, where basic needs are covered by a caring government. To delve deeper into these aspirations, I will recount the stories of Mandouch, Atiyah, and Youssef in this chapter.

Mandouch, a 33-year-old sports teacher, was born in El-Mina where she grew up in a middle-class environment. After graduating from Lebanese university, she taught physical education at a school for seven years while also working as a fitness trainer before deciding to move to Greece in 2019. During our conversation, her frustration with the persistent national violence in Lebanon, stemming from its tumultuous history and the enduring aftermath of the civil war, became evident. She argued that ongoing hostilities pose a substantial barrier to the country's advancement and development, while also significantly affecting the population's sense of safety.

Drawing a comparison with the popular game 'PUBG',[32] Mandouch compares the internal state in Lebanon to a battlefield where different factions fight for power by attacking each other. She argues that the pervasive sense of fear and insecurity due to the absence of security and stability has driven many Lebanese to feel unsafe in their homeland, intensifying their aspirations to migrate abroad.

However, violence is not confined to national or sectarian levels. Atiyah, a young humanitarian aid worker in her early thirties, originally from Akkar and now residing in El-Mina for several years, illustrates this point vividly. With a background in interior design, Atiyah has spent many years engaging in outreach work for various humanitarian organizations in Lebanon. Having lived through several traumatic experiences in her turbulent past herself, Atiyah explains how the deteriorating socio-political situation has intensified people's desperation. She explains that this, combined with a noticeable rise in drug use and the lack of accountability, further exacerbates feelings of insecurity in the daily lives of Lebanese citizens. Despite her commitment to helping others, the increasing number of violent encounters has heightened her concerns for personal safety and shaken her confidence in the future of Lebanon:

> *"It happened to me twice. The first time, a guy pointed a gun at my head because he was on pills. The second time, another guy wanted to fight with the person who owned a specific car. Unluckily for me, it was my car. […] More and more incidents are happening now. People can kill each other and no one will be held accountable for it." (Atiyah)*

The last story I would like to introduce is the one of Youssef. I met the 29-year-old man on the day of his first return to El-Mina from France where he had moved to in 2022. Youssef grew up on the

[32] PUBG is a popular online shooter game in which players land on an island, collect weapons and equipment, and fight against other players. The game is characterized by its realistic graphics, tactical gameplay, and the constantly shrinking game zone, which forces players to move constantly.

seafront of El-Mina and spent his whole life in the small city. After completing his studies in electrical engineering, he ventured into entrepreneurship and founded several companies, including one selling medical products, the installation of solar cells, and a small taxi service.

However, due to the fuel shortage in 2021 and the subsequent price increases, his businesses became unprofitable. The extreme prices and long queues at petrol stations, which lasted up to five hours, significantly affected his profit and working hours. Faced with these overwhelming challenges, he saw himself forced to close his businesses and look for alternatives abroad. Youssef's story is representative of the difficulties faced by many young entrepreneurs in Lebanon struggling against a backdrop of economic turmoil and infrastructural problems.

As already mentioned, the high cost of healthcare was cited as another factor that shows suppressed livelihoods and thus motivates people to migrate. One participant referred to the case of a friend who migrated irregularly by boat to Europe to undergo heart treatment only to return to Lebanon. As a reason for his undertaking, he pointed to the exorbitant cost of healthcare in Lebanon. This example vividly illustrates how government mismanagement of essential services and instability can reduce opportunities and lead to migration.

As we have seen, the feeling of neglect by the state in terms of basic services and provision of security causes many to question the government's ability to promote progress and meet the needs of the population in the near future. In my interviews, dissatisfaction with public services emerged as a common motive for leaving the country and aspiring to relocate to places where livelihood opportunities are more accessible (Dustmann & Okatenko, 2014). Furthermore, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) argue that beyond the enduring structural disparities in livelihood opportunities, certain events and abrupt developments can serve as predisposing factors and eventual triggers for migration. This observation emphasizes the dynamic interplay between long-standing socio-economic disparities and more immediate catalysts, such as the 2019 revolution and the 2020 port explosion.

While corruption wasn't explicitly discussed in the interviews, it is reasonable to assume that it contributes to people's desire to leave the country, given its pervasive nature, particularly evident in the governmental mismanagement and the erosion of governmental institutions mentioned earlier. Widespread corruption across various sectors in Lebanese society impedes economic development and deepens inequality, leading to the perception that Lebanon is a place where progress is at risk and opportunities are distributed unfairly. Consequently, many participants of this thesis were driven to seek environments characterized by integrity and fairness, supporting the findings of Auer et al. (2020) and Cooray and Schneider (2016) discussed in the literature review.

As Carling and Schewel (2018) highlighted, concerns about crime and personal safety significantly influence individuals' aspirations to migrate. The situation in El-Mina and Tripoli at large reflects this dynamic, in which ongoing internal conflicts and border tensions with Syria and Israel contribute to an erosion of trust and faith in the country's ability to provide security and stability. According to Chindarkar (2014), disillusionment like this can motivate migration, with individuals seeking refuge in nations providing superior welfare systems and overall stability. Moreover, events such as the revolution and the port explosion in Beirut have increased the level of insecurity by highlighting the state's mismanagement and lack of control. Mandouch's statement on the ongoing threats at the national level emphasizes the seriousness of these security concerns, which are further underlined by Atiyah's report on the increased crime rate in cities such as Tripoli.

In response to these structural factors, many young Lebanese individuals are contemplating relocation to Europe driven by a longing for a safe, peaceful, and stable environment devoid of conflict. Failure to provide for the welfare and security of its people and the inability of the Lebanese government to address fundamental issues are the root causes of the widespread frustration. Thus, the exodus of individuals and the quest for alternative citizenship represents a pursuit of tranquility and security amidst political dysfunction and social upheaval (Auer et al., 2020; Cooray and Schneider, 2016).

6.1.3. Mental Health and Self-Realization

Besides safety and stability, the pursuit of better subjective well-being and self-realization fuels the migration aspirations of young adults from El-Mina. As detailed in the previous chapters, Lebanon has experienced several devastating events, such as wars, the revolution, the port blast, and the current political and economic crises. Such events affect people's sense of security and stability materially but also impact their mental health[33] and well-being. In addition to the desire for security and stability, personal dispositions and individual circumstances reinforce the aspiration to emigrate to improve well-being and find a life filled with peace and self-realization. To illustrate this, I will elaborate on the experiences of Ria, Mandouch, and Atiyah.

As we have seen before, one of the reasons why Ria wanted to leave the country was to support her family. However, she also stressed how longing for an environment where she could feel safe, respected, and treated with dignity was a further reason to leave. Ria had lived in Beirut, juggling jobs here and there, when the devastating port explosion shattered her apartment, neighborhood, and mental health. Consequently, she had to move back to her parent's house in El-Mina, where she came to understand that Lebanon had been affecting her subjective well-being for a long time:

> *"I figured out that I've been functioning on autopilot my whole life. I never had any kind of self-awareness about myself, what I was doing, or what I'd been through. I had never taken into consideration that it might affect my mental health, and then suddenly, I found myself in Tripoli in my parents' house, owning nothing. I lost my house, my job, I lost all my*

[33] The term mental health in this thesis refers to what the interviewees described as feelings of depression, stress, anxiousness, and mental discomfort.

feelings. I had nothing. I was just soaping in depression. That's when I decided I would leave Lebanon, I'm not staying, it's not safe, there is no future, I had zero hope" (Ria)

Ria's narrative shows the profound impact of subjective well-being on migration aspirations, particularly in the context of Lebanon's socio-political landscape. Her account of the challenges she faced - uncertainty about the future, hopelessness about change, and pervasive economic and political instability – reflects a deep-rooted sense of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with her home country, leading her to consider leaving it. The catastrophic port explosion acted as a crucial catalyst, magnifying the existing feelings that prompted her to critically contemplate her quality of life.

Mandouch voiced an increasing feeling of suffocation and isolation from Lebanese society. This feeling, she explained, has grown since the unsuccessful revolution. Her feeling of disconnectedness mainly derived from the perceived stagnation and lack of progress in Lebanon, along with issues such as poor infrastructure, societal apathy, and governmental inefficiency. Additionally, she stressed the pervasive social divisions in Lebanon, where individuals face restrictions and discrimination based on factors like religion and gender, contributing to feelings of anxiety, discomfort, and humiliation, ultimately fueling her desire to relocate.

Similarly, Atiyah shared a sense of alienation and concern about the current and future course of Lebanese society, particularly concerning issues such as women's rights, sectarian influences on marriage, and the rising number of school dropouts. These concerns led to a pessimistic outlook on the country's future, exacerbated by a perceived lack of government accountability to address these issues and drive positive change. Other participants also commented on what they perceived as a *"backward"* mindset within Lebanese society, evidenced by practices like littering streets and unwavering loyalty to specific political parties and their outdated values. Their desire for a fresh start, more opportunities, perspectives, and state support reflects a broader quest for an environment that supports the maintenance of mental and personal well-being.

In contrast to traditional approaches that emphasize objective factors such as income, more recent studies by, e.g., Chindarkar (2021), Cai et al. (2014), and Lovo (2014), including this thesis, emphasize the importance of subjective well-being in migration aspirations. This shift in focus recognizes the complex relationship between structural and personal contexts that shape individuals' quality of life and their migration decisions.

Well-being, as discussed by Cai et al. (2014), integrates the influence of both structural and personal environments on individuals' quality of life and subsequent migration aspirations. Chindarkar (2014) found that in Latin America and the Caribbean, 'life satisfaction' had a greater impact on migration decisions among individuals with higher education, suggesting higher aspirations or dissatisfaction with home country opportunities. This trend corresponds to findings in the present thesis, where individuals with lower qualifications and skills were less inclined to consider emigration until presented with the opportunity.

Additionally, as per Lovo's (2014) research, individuals in this thesis expressed a preference for migrating to locations where they anticipate feeling safe, respected, and dignified, with opportunities to start afresh, obtain a second chance, and enjoy stability. This preference reflects a collective aspiration for a better life and greater well-being abroad. Therefore, migration aspirations are not solely about outside factors but also about personal factors such as the pursuit of identity, belonging, and fulfillment. The notion of having "*nothing to lose"* among some interviewees further underscores a sense of urgency and determination to chase dreams, regardless of potential risks. This finding is supported by Berriane et al. (2015) research on sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, in which they highlight that migration motivations can extend beyond economic necessity or desperation, encompassing a desire for new experiences and opportunities.

6.1.4. Culture of Migration and 'Migration Myth'

The departure of large numbers of people from El-Mina has had a profound impact on the community. This exodus has left a palpable void that affects not only the physical landscape but also the emotional fabric of society. In this context, the intertwining of migration with the community's identity is becoming increasingly evident, reflecting broader socio-economic changes.

The participant who was most outspoken about the impact of this aspiration was Walid. The departure of many friends has significantly impacted his social life, altering both his circle of acquaintances and daily routine. Walid explains that it is not only the physical absence but also the absence of companionship, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging that has created a noticeable void in both his life and the community as a whole. During our interview, he said:

> *"The reasons that push people to emigrate are not only the difficulties in making a good career but also that things are no longer the same. Everyone is leaving. So, at one point, you find that most of your close friends have left the country, […] It's like they escaped and you are still in prison." (Walid)*

The emotional strain of separation combined with economic realities drive individuals to leave Lebanon in search of better opportunities abroad. Thus, while migration has long been intertwined with El-Mina's identity, its recent intensification has left an indelible mark on both, the social fabric and the group consciousness. This observation was also taken up by de Haas (2021) in which he argues that the exodus of people not only changes the demographic structure but also profoundly impacts the community's collective psyche. The absence of familiar faces creates a sense of uprootedness that causes individuals to re-evaluate their migration perspective.

The professor I interviewed also noticed this phenomenon, observing how the decision of individuals to leave can influence others' aspirations to migrate and impact the community at large. He called it the 'migration myth'. He defined it as the widespread belief in Lebanese society that its people are

inevitably destined to leave their country due to historical influences. The 'migration myth' interprets people's desire to leave the country as a historical inevitability and widespread phenomenon rooted in a collective imagination:

> *"We had this, you know, this foundation myth of Lebanon, as I call it. It started in 1920 as a way to differentiate ourselves from Syrians and Palestinians. The idea of having this business mentality, based on our history with the Phoenicians. It kind of legitimizes the idea of migration as a way out. People assume that it has always been like this. We should never stay." (Professor, 2023).*

Shames also underscored this pervasive sense of inevitability one evening as we reflected on the interviews we already conducted:

> *"We know that at one point, we will have to leave. Everyone tells you that, at one point, going outside will be better than staying. So, we grow up hearing about leaving from our parents or teachers at school. It is normal, you know?" (Shames)*

Walid's experience, alongside Lebanon's enduring history and perception of migration, has been defined in the literature as a 'culture of migration' (Cohen, 2004; Kandel & Massey, 2002; Timmerman et al., 2014). Other than 'migration myth', 'culture of migration' refers to a society in which migration is deeply rooted as a viable and often preferred future option, stemming from a long history of emigration. This phenomenon anchors migration in the community's core values and transforms it into a collective strategy for managing and adapting to economic and political changes that its members experience on a daily basis (Cohen, 2004; Kandel & Massey, 2002).

In this context, migration develops into a habit that creates extensive social networks connecting the home country with the rest of the world. Thus, migration appears to be a widespread trend, with individuals often choosing to migrate simply because it has become a normative part of the social fabric, reinforced by the observation that everyone migrates (Timmerman et al., 2014). This

dynamic, which receives only little academic attention, underlines the intergenerational transmission of migration aspirations and the strong influence of social networks on maintaining the cycle of migration. It enriches the understanding of migration dynamics by exploring the relationship between social influences and individual aspirations.

6.1.5. Wanderlust

Some of the people interviewed in this study already had the desire to travel the world before the situation in the country deteriorated. The worsening conditions only intensified their urge to move abroad and look for a new place to live permanently. This illustrates that personal travel desires can arise independently of political or economic circumstances and often result from long-held dreams and individual interests. The three participants who expressed this aspiration most clearly were Mandouch, Marcos, and Hakim.

Mandouch always had a desire to explore the world, a dream she actively pursued, traveling extensively to destinations such as Dubai, the United States, Portugal, Spain, France, and Bulgaria. Although she has always enjoyed traveling, the idea of permanent relocation only crystallized when she was confronted with the deteriorating conditions in her home country and the possibility of not being able to return.

Similarly, Marcos, a thirty-one-year-old middle-class man who grew up in El-Mina but spent eleven years exploring different parts of the world as a seasonal captain of a cargo ship, had always enjoyed traveling and seeing the world. Greece held a special allure for him, not only because of the frequent work trips and existing connections but also because of his fond childhood memories of Greek music, his appreciation of the language and culture, and his realization of the social parallels to El-Mina. Although he longed for adventure and new encounters, the 31-year-old captain had never seriously considered moving to Greece permanently. It was only when the Lebanese revolution broke out and the situation deteriorated further that he considered changing his home base.

Another example is Hakim, a 36-year-old percussionist who left the school system at the age of eleven to work in a pastry shop while performing at various concerts to earn a living. As a member of an originally Jewish family, Hakim had repeated difficulties with the authorities regarding his papers, even though the family had officially converted to Islam two generations ago. Despite his challenges and modest income, Hakim never felt the desire to emigrate until he was confronted with the possibility of traveling to Greece irregularly:

> *"I decided to leave by accident. I've never thought about it. But one time, I was hanging out in the coffee shop, and I heard some guys talking about leaving. […]. At that time, I was stressed and tired; I needed anything to release. So, I told them that I was in." (Hakim)*

The three experiences illustrate how wanderlust, the desire for new experiences, and monotony can strongly influence the desire for mobility, whether for short-term or long-term relocation purposes. Wanderlust can be deeply influenced by childhood dreams, curiosity, and the desire for adventure. Mandouch's aspiration to explore the world before being stranded in Greece points to a desire for freedom and adventure rooted in a desire to cross borders and experience different cultures. Similarly, Marcos' fascination with Greece shows a deep attachment to a particular destination, fostered by cultural affinities or romantic notions from childhood. For Hakim, traveling to Greece meant unexpectedly seeking new horizons and finding a new lifestyle.

However, participants' dreams alone were not enough to drive migration; instead, serious aspirations emerged when confronted with additional factors such as political and economic crises. This underscores how personal dreams of exploration interact with larger socio-political pressures for migration aspirations to materialize. Thus, external challenges often catalyze aspirations, highlighting the intertwined relationship between personal desires and broader societal circumstances in shaping migration intentions.

6.1.6. Analysis of Aspirations

The migration aspirations of young Lebanese adults from El-Mina arise from a complex combination of motivations and constraints characterized by contextual, systemic, and emotional factors. For one, they are influenced by structural conditions (macro-environment), such as the economic, political, and social context in Lebanon, as well as by migration policies, which are affected by various legal frameworks that regulate and influence migration. In addition, the individual environment (micro level) plays a significant role, including factors such as gender, age, marital status, and educational background as well as individual circumstances and experiences. Hence, migration aspirations observed in El-Mina are a intricate interplay between external conditions and individual characteristics.

The emigration environment (Carling, 2002), i.e. the macro-level context in Lebanon, has significantly affected the citizens of El-Mina and increased their inclination to leave the country. As the results above show, the factors include economic challenges (Bob), diminishing opportunities for sustainable livelihoods (Walid), government corruption and mismanagement (Ria), inadequate infrastructure (Mandouch), basic rights violations (Atiyah), and insecurity (Mandouch, Atiyah, and Youssef). These macro-environment factors strongly influence the employment, income, and therefore socio-economic status and access to resources of people in El-Mina, triggering instrumental, means-to-an-end aspirations in the form of desires for better job opportunities, master's degrees, or economic conditions and security abroad (de Haas, 2021).

Moreover, the hopelessness, the inability to envision improvement, and the daily challenges that followed events such as the Thawra (revolution) and the explosion in the port of Beirut have led many people to feel pressured to seek a better life elsewhere (Ria). These factors trigger intrinsic aspirations, as people subsequently strive for a life with better well-being abroad (de Haas, 2021).

Likewise, the migration policies governing the relationship between the EU and Lebanon significantly shape the aspirations of young adults in El-Mina. Whether they ease or impede migration, these policies shape people's perceptions of opportunities abroad. For example, Hakim initially had no intention of leaving the country as he saw no prospect of obtaining a visa due to his personal background. It was only a coincidental encounter in a café, which opened up an alternative path for him, that allowed him to start aspiring to a life somewhere else.

Findings from this thesis further support Carling's (2002) argument that migration aspirations are not only influenced by objective factors such as inflation and unemployment but also by personal backgrounds and perceptions of challenges. The micro-level, or what Carling (2002) refers to as the individual environment, further influences people's migration aspirations. Despite different socio-economic backgrounds, many interviewees cited the search for personal and emotional stability, security, and a dignified life amidst the ongoing crisis in Lebanon as the main reason for their migration. A widespread feeling of having nothing left, perceiving all paths as blocked, and falling into depression was present among most participants. This emotional distress was compounded by a cycle of setbacks and perceived limitations of potential, leading to a feeling of *"being in prison"*.[34]

Events such as the explosion in the port of Beirut further exacerbated this despair same as for the macro-level. Many participants felt stuck, neglected, and forgotten, highlighting the emotional strain driving their desire to emigrate (Ria, Youssef). At the same time, the difficult migration process and its uncertain prospects of success further impacted the mental health of those affected. It can therefore be concluded that most aspirations stemming from the individual environment are intrinsic in nature, as they aim to improve people's well-being and achieve self-realization.

[34] Several interviewees, whether they left regularly or irregularly, mentioned feeling that Lebanon was a *"prison"* from which they had to escape.

In contrast to the feeling of being *"in prison",* participants in this thesis also expressed their deep attachment to El-Mina, highlighting the difficulty of accepting that they could no longer stay there. This emotional attachment (see Chapter 2.1., p.23), a sense of belonging rooted in both personal experiences and cultural connections, was often described as a sacrifice they had to make to secure a better future for themselves and their families.[35] At the same time, several interviewees, notably Walid, indicated that the social environment of the community had changed as a result of the large exodus of friends and relatives. They no longer felt as at home as before, which decreased their sense of belonging and sparked further aspirations to migrate, which can be attributed to the 'migration culture' and the 'migration myth' (Cohen, 2004; Kandel & Massey, 2002; Professor, 2023; Timmerman et al., 2014). These findings highlight the emotional complexity of migration decisions.

Overall, the present study demonstrates that emotions and mental health play a greater role in migration than previously thought. This is likely due to the fact that the existing literature predominantly focuses on a top-down policy analysis, which often overlooks migrants' well-being as a crucial component of their aspirations. By aligning the findings with de Haas's (2021) concept of aspirations as the desire to lead a life worth living, this thesis establishes a clear link between poor well-being and an increased urge to escape adverse conditions, to *"escape prison"*.

In addition, the impact of social networks on forming the aspiration to migrate should not be overlooked. All participants in this study reported maintaining contact with friends, family, and acquaintances abroad who had migrated themselves and shared their experiences and information.

[35] Carling and Schewel (2020) refer to this phenomenon as having 'aspirations to stay', which, for the participants in this study, remains unfulfilled as they feel compelled to leave their homes due to the lack of state responsibility to meet citizens' basic needs. The consequent migration is described by de Haas (2021) as 'involuntary mobility', raising the question of how 'voluntarily' young people from El-Mina actually migrate given the current circumstances and future prospects. However, a deeper analysis of this important question is regrettably beyond the scope of this paper.

This exchange led to a reduction in perceived risks and uncertainties, creating more room to imagine a better life abroad (Castles et al., 2014; Massey et al., 1993).

However, it's crucial to recognize that the desire to emigrate and the process of organizing emigration are not determined by a single motive. Rather, it is a multitude of aspirations that interact and converge and whose composition and relative importance depend on the respective individual context and are subject to change over time. For most participants in this research, the decision to emigrate was not made lightly. Instead, it was a process that often took months or even years, further influenced by unforeseen events such as the revolution or the port explosion (Eichsteller, 2021). Therefore, aspirations are not static but evolve over time, influenced by the ever-changing macro-level emigration environment and the individual environment.

From the findings, it can further be deduced, that instrumental aspirations such as emigrating to achieve a certain level of prosperity were significant for all study participants. However, the results show that the underlying aspirations were mainly aimed at improving personal well-being by escaping *"prison"* and finding a life worth living. Intrinsic goals were particularly prominent among participants with less capital, while those with more capital were more interested in instrumental goals. Although these findings may seem counterintuitive at first glance, it can be argued that people with less capital have *"nothing to lose"* and therefore often only aspire to *"living a dignified life"*. In contrast, people with greater capital tend to develop clearer plans to improve their wealth and therefore have more instrumental aspirations.

As highlighted in both the literature review and the conceptual framework, mere aspiration for migration isn't adequate for its realization (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021). Individuals must possess the necessary capabilities to facilitate migration. In the subsequent chapter, I will examine the specific capabilities possessed by the participants of this study and how these capabilities were employed in the pursuit of their migration goals. Understanding these abilities is crucial for clarifying

the factors that facilitate or hinder the realization of migration aspirations, such as the migration regime.

6.2. Navigating the Pathways: Capabilities to Leave the Water

To achieve mobility, individuals require not only aspirations but also the necessary capabilities to translate their migration desires into reality. The following chapter examines the capabilities that underpin the various emigration processes and migration modes observed among the research participants.. By listening to their experiences, I learned how various factors such as cultural background, financial situation, and social connections shape people's migration patterns. Each person's journey is distinct and influenced by their individual resources and connections. Based on the backgrounds of the research participants, this chapter shows how individuals use different migration infrastructures to facilitate their mode of migration towards Europe.

Like in the previous chapter, I will divide this chapter into different sections. This time, I will focus on the various paths of migration, sharing some stories of the research participants I interviewed. I will then compare these stories with the existing literature, analyzing whether and how the Lebanese experience might differ. This analysis provides valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of migration from El-Mina to Europe, focusing on the interplay between skills, migration infrastructure, and individual agency.

6.2.1. Student Migration

Youssef's journey from Lebanon to France to continue his studies shows a pragmatic approach characterized by financial considerations and language skills. After initially considering the United States, he ultimately chose Europe due to the significantly lower tuition fees, illustrating the crucial role of financial factors in student migration decisions. Fluent in Spanish and French, Youssef considered Spain and France as potential European study destinations. Due to logistical challenges,

such as the timing of semester applications, he was unable to apply to Spanish universities. As a result, he directed his efforts towards submitting applications to various French universities instead. However, his decision was also influenced by additional factors, including the more affordable tuition fees, the existing social networks linking Lebanon and France, and the presence of his girlfriend in the country.

Once Youssef had decided where he wanted to go, he sought advice from friends and acquaintances to determine the best course of action for his endeavor. He was advised by his friends to apply to Campus France Liban, a service of the French Embassy in Beirut dedicated to helping potential Lebanese students with university admissions, financial planning, and visa processing to France in return for a cost of 300€ (Campus France, 2024). This involved compiling a whole range of documents, including transcripts from his first two years of school, a letter confirming his enrollment for the final year, his official high school diploma, and a certificate of language proficiency in French and English, as he applied for masters in both languages.

During this process, Youssef followed the recommended steps from Alain, the owner of a Facebook group called ‘Association Universitaires Libanais en France (AULF,)’ very closely. Through videos and posts, Alain provides detailed instructions on how to properly complete the necessary documents to secure admission to French universities and navigate the Campus France application process with minimal difficulty.

Thanks to this support and his good academic performance, Youssef received several letters of admission from various universities and even a scholarship from Campus France. Finally, he decided to join the master’s program ‘Solar Energy: Engineering and Economics’ at the Université Savoie Mont Blanc, which is part of the National Institute of Solar Energy in France, a very niche program for highly skilled professionals.

Despite having everything sorted out and being admitted to a renowned university, applying for a visa proved to be challenging. Due to the economic crisis in Lebanon, Youssef's financial means were no longer sufficient to reach the required minimum balance in his bank account to apply for a student visa. Consequently, he needed to secure a guarantor for his visa application. As his parents were in no position to help him, he initially turned to his uncle living in the United States, who submitted a letter and bank statement to the French embassy in support of Youssef's request. However, these documents did not meet the requirements of the embassy, leading him to seek legal advice to ensure compliance. Despite these efforts, the French Embassy continued to find the documentation to be insufficient.

Discouraged and with only one last attempt to submit a valid bank statement, Youssef approached another uncle in Dubai and repeated the previous process. This time the application was successful, possibly due to the uncle's prominent position in a company that offered greater financial stability. Had he failed to submit valid proof of finances on this last attempt, Youssef would have had to repeat the entire costly process from the beginning. Regarding the potential financial impact of rejection, he highlights the loss of already invested funds and the necessity to save for another year to be able to reapply. The financial burden was significant, with expenses of almost €700 covering language exams, visa fees as well as administration fees for Campus France. Frustrated Youssef says:

> *"In Europe, you will go to a website, choose the plane and just go to the airport. For us, it's so difficult even to go to visit. You need the visa process. Proof of money, proof of lots of proofs" (Youssef)*

Looking back on the ordeal, Youssef admits that the agonizing wait between decisions was the most difficult aspect of the process. The uncertainty over the approval of his visa cast a shadow over his hopes and plans for a new life in France. The frustration was emphasized by the fact that the processing times of other applicants seemed only to be a few days, while Youssef had to wait a month and a half.

In hindsight, Youssef realizes the toll that the prolonged uncertainty and repeated rejections took on him. The back and forth and not knowing whether he would finally be able to leave Lebanon weighed heavily on him emotionally and impacted his daily life.

> *"You don't know the answer. You're always afraid of getting rejected. It was like a ghost following me all the time" (Youssef)*

In the end, Youssef successfully mastered the process. Reflecting on the moment he finally obtained his visa, the relief and joy he experienced are still evident on his face:

> *"I was screaming like a kid. I was so happy. It felt like I got out of prison" (Youssef)*

Emphasizing his gratitude for having the means to pursue his goals, Youssef contrasts the fortunate opportunity with the challenges some of his less fortunate friends face.

> *"The difficulty is finding a way to leave. I have friends who have zero chances to leave based on their education, their potential, and the language barrier." (Youssef)*

Youssef's story highlights not only the significant financial hurdles associated with the visa application process but also the emotional stress and uncertainty that come with attempting to pursue an education abroad. The use of family networks and repeated efforts to demonstrate financial stability reflect the complex realities and challenges faced by many wanting to leave Lebanon.

Although most studies on global student migration focus on post-departure experiences, it is important to emphasize that preparation for migration and the skills acquired prior to migration are crucial to the overall migration process. This focus on preparation illustrates that education is not only the reason for the journey but also an essential prerequisite for it (Raghuram, 2013; Spencer, 2011).

This assumption, which is confirmed by this research, suggests that student migration is subject to a certain selectivity, whereby the 'brightest and best' students gain a competitive advantage in the knowledge economy (Raghuram, 2013). Depending on the level of social, economic but first and foremost human capital available, student migration may be an easy process for some, while for others it can seem almost impossible. In other words, individuals must already possess certain forms of capital before they can be accepted by foreign universities and thus undergo a simplified visa process (Williams, 2007), allowing destination countries to ensure in advance that prospective foreign students can conform to their ideal image of a migrant and integrate socially and economically in the host country.

Youssef's experience underscores the critical role of human capital in migrating to Europe as a student, while also emphasizing the importance of social and economic capital. With the devaluation of the Lebanese Lira leaving him short on financial resources, Youssef had to actively leverage his social capital. His social networks further proved invaluable when seeking a student agency and navigating the application processes. Youssef's experience thus further supports Beech's (2018) argument that social networks play a crucial role in student migration.

Overall, the analysis illustrates that the governance of student mobility is a complex web of actors, policies, and infrastructures that influence students' choices and the direction of migration. More in-depth research in this area, particularly in the Lebanese context, is crucial to better understand the dynamics and challenges of student migration.

6.2.2. Labor Migration

Once Bob decided to relocate to Germany, he commenced his search for an agency that could assist him in securing employment and provide him with the necessary guidance for initiating the immigration process. Through acquaintances, he became aware of an agency called 'Deutsche Länder', a Lebanon-registered private recruitment agency, that specializes in offering job

opportunities to experienced Lebanese nurses and midwives seeking employment in Germany. To qualify for the nurse migration program, Bob had to have at least one year of experience, be under the age of 43, and attain proficiency in German to pass the B1 language test.

Fulfilling the two first conditions, a significant challenge arose when the designated testing center for the German language exam, the Goethe Institute in Beirut, remained closed for an extended period following the port explosion. As a result, the German language students had to travel to Turkey or Jordan to take their German exams, which required additional funds and travel documents. Even after the Goethe Institute reopening in Beirut, it remained consistently fully booked due to a backlog of individuals requiring exams, causing substantial delays for many individuals intending to depart the country but requiring a language certificate.

Apart from encountering this hurdle and facing an initial application rejection without clear reasons, Bob's interaction with the agency proceeded smoothly. Upon submitting his resume to his designated contact at 'Deutsche Länder', Bob's qualifications were reviewed by human resources (HR) representatives from various German hospitals. The HR department of a hospital in Bremen showed interest and organized a visit to Lebanon to interview Bob and other potential candidates. Impressed by Bob's credentials and appearance, they offered him a job right after the interview, initiating his visa application process. With all the required documents and an employment contract in hand, obtaining the visa proved to be straightforward, facilitating Bob's relocation to Germany just a few weeks after my field research.

Bob is a highly skilled worker with a lot of experience who fits perfectly into one of the selected job profiles that the EU, and Germany in particular, have on their list of in-demand skills, as mentioned in Chapter 3 of this thesis. His case illustrates the privileged position that certain skilled workers can occupy in the migration process. His professional qualifications and experience have opened doors for him that remain closed to many others. This dynamic illustrates how the political and economic priorities of the receiving countries can either favor or hinder the migration process. In the case of

highly skilled migration, selective migration policies can even be interpreted as a constructive option for migration.

However, it was interesting to observe how private recruitment agencies, in this case, 'Deutsche Länder', have specialized in mediating between job-seeking and employing countries in certain professional fields. In general, these agencies not only support the job search, but also help the migrants to overcome bureaucratic documentary hurdles, organize travel, and integrate into the new working and living conditions on-site in return for monetary remuneration. Although Bob was the sole labor migrant to Europe among the interviewees of this thesis, both Daya and Hakim, who migrated to a Gulf country, similarly recruitment agencies, or what Xiang and Lindquist (2014) describe as the 'commercial sectors' of migration infrastructure.

Bob's example further illustrates how crucial it is both to meet the conditions of selective labor migration for recruiters and to fit the profile of the 'good and ideal' migrant to secure employment abroad (Findlay et al., 2012). Evidence from the interview also showed that Bob was aware of this dual importance, as he remarked:

> *"I have a lot of good work experience, if I use it and my other skills correctly I will surely develop and shine."*

6.2.3. Marriage Migration

As mentioned earlier, Ria was left with nothing after the devastating port explosion and was determined to leave the turmoil in Lebanon behind. She started browsing online advertisements for master's programs abroad and considered applying for a scholarship program in the US. At the same time, with the help of a friend from Dubai who put her in touch with relevant agencies, she inquired about job opportunities in the United Arab Emirates. Feeling an urgent need to leave the country and finding the other options lengthy and complicated, Ria decided that marrying her Lebanese-

Swedish boyfriend, whom she had met a few years earlier during a summer visit to Lebanon, was the quickest and safest strategy for migration.

While registering her marriage at the Lebanese Embassy in Sweden was relatively straightforward, the process at the Swedish Embassy in Lebanon was not. Ria began her application process by consulting friends and acquaintances to gather information, as the embassy officials did not give clear instructions. However, everyone she spoke to had slightly different experiences. Although she was warned not to compare her situation to that of others, she felt frustrated by the unpredictability of what lay ahead. The lack of transparency and uncertainty about the timeline and procedures were the biggest (mental) challenges for her in retrospect, she says.

According to Ria, the marriage registration process involved numerous interviews with many different Swedish state institutions and extensive documentation requirements, particularly on her husband's side. The Swedish Embassy required confirmation that her husband could financially sustain their family until she secured employment. This included many different agents verifying that his salary was satisfactory, his apartment was furnished, and transportation was provided. The final step in the process was an interview conducted by embassy staff, which Ria recalls with frustration.

> *"You know they make a big deal out of the interview. […] They asked me weird questions. One of the questions was: what did you and your husband do after the day of the wedding? Another question was like: Does your husband have a washing machine? Which room is your favorite room in your husband's apartment? And I just saw the apartment via video calls. It's really crazy, I was so nervous. What if I said I knew that he has a washing machine and he does not, would they reject me? What the hell is this!" (Ria)*

Ria's experience shows that she mainly relied on her social network during her migration process. Before getting married, she used acquaintances and social media to find her optimal path to

emigration. In addition, she met her husband through her social circle, which underlines the importance of social capital. As the marriage migration process progressed, she again used her social capital to gather extensive information about its procedure and duration.

It is particularly noteworthy that when other migration routes became increasingly restricted, Ria opted for marriage migration. For her, this option was considered a promising way to certainly be able to leave the country, as it also offers various rights and protections, including the general right to reside in the same country as the spouse.

This analysis of options and the thought process is not unique to Ria. In recent decades, the number of binational marriages in many Western countries has risen considerably, a development which is often seen as problematic in the countries of destination (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011). In countries of destination, it is often assumed that these marriages are either marriages of convenience,[36] arranged mainly to obtain a right of residence or freedom of movement (de Hart, 2017), or that these are 'forced' marriages based on different marriage concepts and values than in the West (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011). Marriage for the sake of love is often met with great mistrust. In this regard, Europe not only sees itself as a 'moral gatekeeper' concerning transnational arranged marriages (Wray, 2006) but also uses this view to justify restrictions on migration through stricter regulations on family reunification, such as raising the minimum age for spousal visas (Jørgensen, 2012).

In light of this, evidence of a 'pure relationship' appears to be a benchmark against which cross-border marriages are measured (Eggebø, 2013). Although most applications for marriage migration

[36] The Union Citizens and Family Reunification Directives as well as related documents use the term 'marriage of convenience' to refer to marriages that are concluded with the sole aim of obtaining a residence right or right to free movement (de Hart, 2017)

are accepted and the majority of relationships are recognized as genuine, the visa process puts applicants in a frustrating situation of uncertainty and can lead to deep intrusions into their private lives (Eggebø, 2013). Ria's situation illustrates very well how embassy officials can intrude into private lives by asking very personal questions to ensure that the couple is 'real' based on the officials' standards and values.

Another important aspect is that it is not only the different nationalities that can restrict mobility in transnational couples. Marriage as a mode of migration requires social capital to find a partner and economic capital to meet the financial requirements of immigration procedures of the country of destination. Social and economic capital, which the foreign spouse in particular must possess to be able to act as a 'sponsor' in the destination country, are of crucial importance. In Europe, minimum income and housing requirements for family reunification are common, leading to socioeconomic differences in access to marriage visas in home countries (Charsley, 2012). Therefore, in addition to the emotional and social aspects of marriage, economic factors also play a crucial role. Marriage as a migration strategy thus depends on both personal and structural factors that influence the migration of young people from El-Mina to Europe.

Furthermore, research often places a strong focus on women who marry, while men are given less consideration (Hoogenraad & Dundon, 2021). Yet among the participants of this thesis, there were also several men, such as Youssef and Marcos, who were considering or had already taken steps towards emigration through a marriage visa.

In summary, marriage as a mode of migration offers young people from El-Mina a significant opportunity to migrate to Europe. However, this opportunity is characterized by numerous challenges and restrictions. The need to prove the authenticity of the marriage, the economic demands, and the prejudices against transnational marriages create a complex environment for migrants to navigate. Despite these hurdles, marriage remains a viable option to open up new opportunities and prospects in Europe.

6.2.4. Refugee

Mandouch has taken a path that differs from that of other research participants. She was in Greece on vacation with her tourist visa nearing expiration, when she got a call from her brother in Lebanon, telling her not to come back home:

> *"He's a police officer. He said: 'I beg you, stay where you are. I cannot come to the airport to pick you up'. It was the time of the revolution [October 17th, 2019]. If I remember right, it was the first or the second day. So, it was a whole mess. And he said, stay where you are." (Mandouch)*

Given the rapidly escalating scale of the revolution and its unknown immediate, dire consequences for the people, Mandouch had no choice but to confront herself with the challenge of securing legal status. One possibility was to try to obtain citizenship based on her grandfather's Greek origin. However, due to lengthy bureaucratic procedures and only a little time left, Mandouch saw no other choice than to apply for asylum with the Greek asylum authorities.

Not knowing anything about the asylum process or the laws in Greece, she turned to a couple of lawyers for help. After finding out that one of them had not worked on her case at all for about a month and the other was trying to rip her off, she contacted and worked for a humanitarian initiative with the name 'Bridges', which was founded in 2014 in response to the increasing number of boat arrivals. With their help, Mandouch was able to register as an asylum seeker and apply for and receive a residence permit, a process that took about a year and a half. Amid her journey, Mandouch found comfort in building new social relationships. These relationships not only helped her to acclimate to life in Greece but also to navigate the complicated bureaucratic procedures, prepare for job interviews, and organize documents. Mandouch confirms that these interpersonal bonds had a huge impact on her overall experience.

Having successfully navigated her path, Mandouch now takes on the role of advising others. Intrigued by Mandouch's 'success', many people have contacted her, curious to know how she made it to Europe and if she has any advice to share. Having experienced the challenges in Lebanon herself, Mandouch understands the hardships these people go through and empathizes with their curiosity. Such exchange of information illustrates how personal success stories can circulate within communities and encourage others in search of similar opportunities.

> *"Whenever they were asking me how can we leave Lebanon, how we can come to Europe, what's your advice? Tell us what you did so maybe we can do it […] I just wanted to give people some power, some faith, some hope. I just want them to believe in themselves because if I can do it [leaving the country], they can do it. I don't want them to lose hope because whenever there's hope, there's a light." (Mandouch)*

When I interviewed Mandouch, she was about to move from Greece to the UK. She had met an English man, who asked to marry her. Eager to start a new life together, the couple is now working on the necessary documents to get Mandouch to the UK on a marriage visa. This new development marks a significant shift in Mandouch's migration journey, highlighting the always-evolving dynamics of migration decisions.

Mandouch's story deviates significantly from the typical narratives often portrayed about refugees. Unlike the frequently depicted image of refugees as helpless victims or 'menace' to national security, Mandouch's experience highlights her agency, resilience, and the crucial role of social capital in navigating the complexities of securing her stay in Greece, challenging the stereotypical refugee narrative, and underscoring the scarcity of recent research on Lebanese refugees heading to Europe. Instead of passively receiving support and information, she actively engaged with her situation, used her social capital to access information, and used 'Bridges' not only as a source of support but also, through active volunteering, as a space to meet other people and receive emotional support. This

network of relationships she was able to create was vital not only in helping her navigate bureaucratic procedures but also in providing a sense of purpose, mental stability, and community.

Furthermore, Mandouch is a great example that shows that not all refugees arrive in Europe in irregular ways. However, during my stay in El-Mina, I heard of other cases where individuals circumvent the system by overstaying tourist visas, discarding documents, and applying for asylum under the pretext of being Syrian, or by falsely claiming to be homosexual to gain refugee status. These nuances illustrate that refugees, including Mandouch, possess a complex mix of motives and strategies, challenging the monolithic view of refugees as solely desperate and passive. Both Mandouch's legitimate approach and others' strategic bypassing of the system demonstrate the exercise of agency in navigating their circumstances. This observation echoes previous research on the victim-agency dichotomy by Mainwaring (2016) in her research on migrant agency in Malta and Cyprus as well as Martins and O'Connell-Davidson's (2022) research on migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe or Brazil.

Despite the increasing movement of Lebanese individuals seeking asylum in Europe, academic research on this topic remains sparse. The focus predominantly rests on Syrian refugees, overshadowing the experiences of Lebanese refugees. Although the wide majority of Lebanese enter Europe predominantly on regular visas, asylum applications from Lebanon to Europe have more than doubled between 2020 and 2022, with Germany receiving the highest number of applications (Eurostat, 2024)[37] This surge underscores a significant migration trend that warrants deeper

[37] However, it should be highlighted at this point that the number of Lebanese asylum applications in Europe is very low compared to the number of Lebanese entering with regular visas. In 2023, only 40 asylum applications were granted in the EU while a total number of 340 were rejected (Eurostat, 2024). The number of visa applications is likely to be much higher, even if this is very difficult to establish in terms of data.

investigation. However, scholarly attention has yet to catch up, leaving a gap in understanding the specific challenges and experiences of Lebanese refugees.

Mandouch's story invites a reevaluation of the conventional image of a refugee. It illustrates how individual narratives can defy stereotypes, showing that refugees possess diverse backgrounds, motivations, and capacities for agency. By focusing on her proactive engagement with social networks and humanitarian organizations, her story highlights the multifaceted nature of refugee experiences and sheds light on the humanitarian dimension of migration infrastructure. This perspective is crucial for developing a more nuanced understanding of refugees in general, and specifically youth emigration out of El-Mina, one that recognizes their potential for agency and contribution rather than merely framing them as victims in need of rescue.

6.2.5. Irregular Migration

During my stay in El-Mina, irregular maritime migration was a common topic that people would willingly talk about when addressed. I learned that people who are considering migrating irregularly either pay a smuggler or join forces with friends, family, or neighbors to buy a boat. One of the lawyers I interviewed, Lawyer 1,[38] differentiated the types of smugglers into different categories: i) those who collect the money and travel with the people to their destination; ii) those who take the money and provide the passengers with a boat (sometimes in good condition, sometimes not); iii) those who take the money and then disappear.

[38] I have deliberately chosen not to provide any further information about Lawyer 1 and Lawyer 2, as both have been very critical of the current situation and the Lebanese government. What is essential to know, however, is that both lawyers are originally from El-Mina and frequently represent individuals from the municipality who have faced challenges related to fraud by intermediaries within the migration infrastructure, whether in connection with irregular or regular migration. In addition, they handle cases of people who migrated irregularly and do now experience difficulties with the government.

Once enough passengers are gathered for a crossing, whether organized by a smuggler or as a group effort, the next step is to prepare the boat and stock it with essential supplies like water and food. When everything is ready and the optimal time is chosen—often early mornings or late evenings to evade border control authorities—the journey begins. The interviews also revealed that some migrant groups meet and gather on one of the nearby islands before setting off on their journey. Furthermore, boats have been observed departing from various other locations in the North (Tripoli) and Akkar governorates, as they are less patrolled than the coasts in the south (Diab & Jouhari, 2023).[39]

In addition, it seems as if locals from El-Mina usually pay less fees for irregular crossings to smugglers than outsiders as they are familiar with the cost of the crossing. They consider the usual payments of 5000$ to 6000$ for outsiders to be too high and would prefer to invest this money in a small company rather than risk their lives (Hakim). Nevertheless, irregular migrants from El-Mina often incur significant debt, as costs are usually paid in dollars. This financial burden is substantial and frequently overcome with the help of social networks, such as family and friends.

Through a mutual acquaintance, I met five young men aged between 20 and 25, all from El-Mina, who had tried to leave Lebanon a total of five times. They grew up together and left school early to support their families financially. From an early age, they were engaged in various tasks related to the sea, such as building and repairing boats, transporting tourists to nearby islands, and, most importantly, fishing. Despite their efforts, their income remained limited and unpredictable, resulting in a precarious daily livelihood.

[39] UNIFIL forces patrol the southern borders to prevent friction between Lebanon and Israel, which deters irregular migration there. Therefore, over 90 percent of irregular migrations start from the northern Lebanese coasts, especially between Madfoun in the Batroun district, Abedeh, the Sheikh Zanad area, and the northern Arida border crossing between Lebanon and Syria (Diab & Jouhari, 2023).

It was in 2015 that the five young men first considered leaving the country irregularly by boat after being approached by a person who offered them compensation if they used their maritime skills and knowledge to sail a boat to Cyprus. With nothing to lose and knowing that they would never get a visa to leave regularly, they considered making the crossing:

> *"We can't have the visa regularly, it's so hard. They might give you a visa if your financial situation is strong, but for our situation, if we go to the embassy, they will refuse us immediately because we have no bank account; that's why we took the irregular way because we cannot leave in a proper legal way." (Group Discussion)*

Also in the following four attempts, the five young men worked together with smugglers to attempt the crossing to Cyprus or Italy. However, despite the large financial costs that had accumulated, none of the five attempts towards Cyprus and Italy were successful. They were usually spotted by the coastguard shortly before or shortly after departure, either by boat or drone, and brought back to the mainland. However, on their fifth and so far, last attempt, they had almost reached Italy, when on the eighth day, a *"huge, ultra-modern ship with numerous cameras and people in uniforms, but without logos"* intercepted them in Greek waters.

The horrible and detailed stories about the treatment and torture that followed, presumably mainly through different border control agencies and the Turkish prison staff, from what I could gather from the conversation, would be unnecessary exposure here. However, what is noteworthy is *how* they talked about the experience. They recalled their experiences as if they were recalling escapades from their school days, characterized by laughter and camaraderie. They gave insights into the challenges posed by border regimes and recounted their encounters with modern surveillance technologies, including drones used by intelligence agencies to monitor their movements.

The group acknowledged that due to increased border surveillance in recent years and the subsequent associated higher prices for crossing the border, the perception of irregular migration

from El-Mina has changed. The two lawyers I interviewed, both of whom have clients who tried to leave irregularly and are now in some conflict with the state, further confirm these observations. During my interview with Lawyer 2, it became apparent that border enforcement measures have intensified, coinciding with a shift in public perception towards irregular migration, particularly following a series of tragic incidents in the summer of 2022. He particularly mentioned the harrowing event involving the Dandachi family, where a boat carrying over thirty individuals, predominantly members of the Dandachi family, was intercepted by the Coast Guards and subsequently capsized.[40]

However, the Dandashi family case is not the only one, and reasons for such tragedies are usually attributed to overloaded or poorly maintained boats and inexperienced captains. The often overloaded and poorly maintained boats are more prone to accidents. Inexperienced captains, who may know little about navigation and seafaring, further exacerbate the risk. In addition, smugglers who do not care about the safety and condition of the boats can further endanger the lives of migrants. However, during my fieldwork in El-Mina, I often heard that boats would only be intercepted if no preliminary bribe had been paid to the Coast Guard. It was widely believed that boats that successfully departed from Lebanese shores had undoubtedly paid some form of bribe. Lawyer 1 emphasized this aspect by saying:

> *"The smugglers somehow, under the table, make some compromises with security forces that overlook or condone the boats that leave." (Lawyer 1)*

[40] Just before Eid al-Fitr in 2022, a boat with around sixty men, women, and children on board leaving for Italy sank after colliding with a Lebanese Navy ship. Dabei kamen 22 members of the Dandashi family ums Leben zusammen mit 27 anderen Personen. While the Navy blamed the captain of the boat for not cooperating, surviving members of the Dandashi family accused the Navy of intentionally sinking the boat (Abuelgasim, 2022; Jawhar, 2022).

This fact clearly illustrates that, even with certain restrictive migration management measures in place, migrants still find ways to circumvent these restrictions. It highlights their agency and, to a limited extent, the autonomy of migration within irregular migration routes from Lebanon to Europe.

Yet it seems that fraud and bribes are not the only problems of irregular migration in Lebanon. Lawyer 2 emphasized that fraud occurs not only in irregular but also in regular migration. He explained that there are agencies that promise to take care of visa applications for an advance payment of up to $2,500 but then disappear without a trace. When I asked about security mechanisms, he waved them away: "*In this system of justice? No fucking way*." Lawyer 1 added that such fraudulent agencies, whether online or physical, deliberately take advantage of people's ignorance to exploit them.

What is particularly alarming, however, is that according to some study participants, even some NGOs were involved in such fraudulent practices. Atiyah reported that former employees of refugee organizations were said to be involved in exploiting Syrian refugees by promising them resettlement to Europe in exchange for money and personal data - a promise that was never kept. Despite being asked to participate in these scams and make a lot of money, Atiyah steadfastly refused to support them:

> *"Actually, I had an offer from one of them. They called me and they said: Do you want to earn like $100,000 in one month? And I said, What the fuck? And what is in return? And they said: All we want you to do is to sit in an office because people here trust you a lot, especially the refugees." (Atiyah)*

It is therefore important to note that misinformation and exploitation, according to the interviewees of this thesis, is not only a practice in irregular migration paths but is also practiced in the environment of regular migration.

Research on irregular maritime migration from the Global South to Europe is extensive and includes migration patterns and routes (Cummings et al., 2015; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020), the drivers of migration (Cummings et al., 2015; Dibeh et al., 2019; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022), migration policy and governance (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Schwarz, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2020), human rights (Costello & Mann, 2020), smuggling and trafficking (Achilli, 2022b; Sanchez, 2017a; 2017b; 2020), and technological advances (Frouws et al., 2016; Geddes et al., 2018; Scheel, 2019; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017). However, little attention has been paid to the specific situation of Lebanese leaving their country by irregular means. Existing research in the Lebanese context focuses predominantly on Syrian refugees, who continue to make up the majority of passengers on irregular passages.

My field research revealed some interesting aspects of the irregular sea migration of Lebanese from El-Mina. A key aspect is that people with limited social, human and financial capital have limited access to appropriate travel documents and a Schengen visa for Europe, in contrast to those with more extensive capital, as such visas require proof of employment or university enrollment, international travel insurance, and a bank statement proving sufficient financial resources. This illustrates the complex interplay between capability and aspiration, where personal capital and background directly influence migration decisions (de Haas, 2021).

As potential irregular migrants on average have a lower level of education and are more likely to work in informal, low-skilled jobs in their country of origin (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020), they can hardly fulfill the required conditions and therefore have to resort to irregular ways to leave the country. This also applies to the five young men I interviewed. Despite having worked all of their lives and acquired expertise in maritime matters, their skills are considered low-skilled and do not fit the professions for which the EU would offer simplified entry procedures. Therefore, if someone does not have the necessary human capital required, leaving the country with a Schengen visa is basically impossible.

In addition, social capital plays an important role in irregular migration. Not only can it help to obtain the necessary information and contacts for the crossings, but it can also compensate for the lack of economic capital. Although people from El-Mina pay less for passage than in other parts of Lebanon, the costs are still high and are usually paid in dollars. This indicates that individuals who leave the country by irregular means typically have some financial resources or rely on borrowing from family, friends, or acquaintances, a finding consistent with previous research (Cummings et al., 2022; Sha, 2021).

As many researchers have explored, irregular migration serves as a means to bypass established structures and discover alternative pathways to reach intended destinations (Achilli & Abu Samra, 2019; Schapendonk et al., 2020). However, as highlighted earlier, neither the contexts nor the migration policies, and consequently, the irregular routes, remain static. Before 2016, for example, the route via Turkey to Greece was a popular route, also among Lebanese migrants. Yet, with heightened security measures at the Turkish-Greek border and the EU-Turkey agreement, more individuals from El-Mina opted to directly embark on boats to reach the nearest European country, Cyprus. This route remained the predominant choice for leaving the country until 2020 when an agreement between the Cypriot and Lebanese governments allowed for the deportation of all migrants arriving in Cyprus via boats back to Lebanon (Diab & Jouhari, 2023). Consequently, migrants increasingly turned to the more perilous and expensive route from northern Lebanon to Italy,[41] a tendency that has been observed by other scholars (Czaika and Hobolth, 2014). However,

[41] Despite the increase in migration to Cyprus at the beginning of 2024, it is likely that journeys to Italy have not decreased. Instead, it can be assumed that irregular border crossings have generally increased, even if no precise data is yet available.

while tighter border security may change migration routes, it is unlikely that migration policy will affect the overall number of migrants (de Haas, 2011).

Talking with people in El-Mina, it seemed like their decisions and perceptions of the risk of passage were less heightened by increasing coastal surveillance than by the numerous incidents of capsized boats. Many said that ever since the Dandachi incident, departures from Tripoli have dropped. Interestingly, the UNHCR and the few scholars working on this subject contradict the interviewees' statements in this thesis, as their data indicates a rise in irregular departures (Diab, 2024; Diab & Jouhari, 2023). This could be because the migrants driving these rising numbers are coming from other parts of Lebanon, presumably from Akkar and other surrounding governorates, and are still mainly Syrians, but this assumption has yet to be substantiated.

To summarize, it can be observed that irregular migration from El-Mina to Europe results from the lack of alternatives in the current migration infrastructure. Despite deterrent measures such as increased naval patrols and interceptions, only a weak correlation between the tightening of border security and the decline in irregular emigration attempts was found among the participants in this study. What had more influence, however, were the negative personal experiences of friends and acquaintances. Many reported that stories of failed escape attempts or dangerous journeys were spread through social networks and the media, leading to dissuasive effects. Thus, social networks and personal experiences can play a greater role than structural limitations.

6.2.6. Analysis of Capabilities

The findings on the ability of potential migrants to leave Lebanon show that individuals with different capital, backgrounds, opportunities, and personal ambitions follow different migration paths and methods to reach Europe (see Fig. 17). However, these are rarely a straightforward process. As people plan their migration projects, they interact with different actors and resources of

the migration infrastructure while also having to navigate different contextual and structural hurdles that require constant reorganization and reallocation of available resources.

The interviews in this thesis clearly illustrate the significance of the various forms of capital for certain individuals and how they were used to gain access to the migration infrastructure and determine the subsequent migration patterns. For example, all participants mobilized social networks (social capital) to obtain information and sometimes money. This exchange mostly took place via social media, phone calls, or during the annual family reunions in the summer. It was instructive to observe how far-reaching and diverse the social network amongst Lebanese from all over the world is, which illustrates the deep-rooted migration culture in Lebanon. However, it became apparent that simply having friends or family abroad was not enough to be able to emigrate.

The findings further indicate that people with a higher level of human capital (skills, experience) find it easier to emigrate to Europe through a regular mode of migration. They tend to fit into the 'desired category' (such as Bob and Youssef) of European migration policy, while low-skilled workers encounter greater difficulties because European labor markets do not covet them. In Bob's case, it is clear that his qualification as a nurse (personal capability), the high demand for nurses in Germany, and the associated selective migration policy (structural capability) are decisive factors that have significantly shaped both his migration aspirations and opportunities. In contrast, Hakim and the five young men, being confectioners or fishermen, lack the skills that align with current migration policies. Consequently, they are not deemed 'desired' by European countries and are deprived of regular migration opportunities.

Furthermore, economic capital has been shown to be central to all participants in this work, regardless of the mode of migration chosen. Financial resources were essential for paying for documents, information, bureaucratic processes, and transportation, making it an indispensable capital without which migration would not be possible. Participants who lacked financial resources

often attempted to secure funds through family support (Youssef), scholarships (Youssef), or debt (Group Discussion). This illustrates the significant barriers that financial constraints can present and how they can severely limit the mobility of individuals despite the availability of other capabilities and aspirations.

Further findings on capabilities show how different types of capital were used to interact with different dimensions of the migration infrastructure, with engagement significantly influenced by participants' individual forms of capital. Respondents with higher human and economic capital often turned to specialized labor (Bob) and study (Youssef) agencies. In contrast, people who immigrated through marriage (Ria, Marcos) met their partner through mutual acquaintances, which underlines the central role of social networks (social capital). Other infrastructural dimensions that were accessed mainly included various offices in the spouse's country of origin and the embassy of that country in Lebanon.

Similarly, social capital was crucial for Mandouch, who entered the Schengen area as a tourist and then had to apply for asylum because she saw no other legal way to stay in Greece. With almost exhausted financial resources and without the qualifications sought by Europe, she predominantly used her social capital to make contact with lawyers, the UNHCR, and the NGO Bridges.

For participants who attempted to leave the country irregularly, financial capital proved to be the most crucial asset. While social capital is indeed significant, irregular migration typically requires substantial financial resources for either smuggling services or buying an own boat and other essential expenses, making financial capital a primary necessity.

Therefore, it was also shown how migration opportunities are strongly shaped by various existing migration infrastructure components, with various actors, bureaucratic processes, and transportation options playing a crucial role. In an attempt to categorize the different components

of migration infrastructure into the five dimensions described by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), the following distinctions can be made:

- Commercial actors (recruitment intermediaries): Migration intermediaries such as recruitment agencies (Bob: Deutsche Länder), educational institutions (Youssef: Campus France), and smugglers (Hakim, group discussion). They are profit-oriented, which doesn't mean that they cannot also have social objectives;
- Regulatory bodies and mechanisms (state apparatuses and procedures): (Selective) migration policies (Bob, Youssef, Group Discussion), embassies (Ria, Youssef), bureaucratic documentation procedures (Ria, Youssef), border regimes (group discussion, Hakim), language institutions (Bob, Youssef);
- Technological means (communication and transport): social media (Hakim, Youssef), various methods of transportation (boats, trains, on foot, airplanes) as well as places like cafes where people exchange ideas and plans (Bob, Hakim, group discussion);
- Humanitarian organizations (NGOs and international organizations): 'Bridges' and lawyers (Mandouch);
- Social networks (migrant networks): Various types of social networks involving friends, new spouses (Ria, Marcos), and family.

In line with the existing literature, migration infrastructures in this thesis have been observed to dynamically adapt to the obstacles encountered at the migration interface (for example smugglers changing their routes), thus representing an evolving social process (Kleinst & Bjarnesen, 2019). Over time, this continuous adaptation introduces new actors and objects into the infrastructure that help people reach their destination despite structural constraints, e.g. migration management policies.

Consequently, migration infrastructure forms a bridge between migration aspirations and actual migration flows by enabling migrants to comply with or circumvent structural restrictions, thus paving the way for a certain mode of migration. In doing so, migration infrastructure has the

potential to mitigate inequalities in social mobility by providing individuals who previously had limited or no access to migration opportunities with new options (Kleist & Bjarnesen, 2019).

Additionally, migrants' perceptions of the actors within the migration infrastructure are crucial, given that trust and professionalism significantly impact the migration process. This not only affects the risks taken by migrants (Hakim, Group Discussion) but also how they cope psychologically with uncertainty, as particularly demonstrated in the case of Ria and Youssef.

As described in Chapter 2.2 on Waves of Migration and earlier in this chapter, state and international structures regulate the migration of certain social groups and facilitate it for others. In this context, migration infrastructure influences both access to relevant actors and instruments and their utilization to comply with or circumvent these policies, opening pathways for either regular or irregular migration. Privileged individuals, who are considered 'desired' and 'ideal' migrants, possessed more capital and therefore had an easier path to Europe. In contrast, migrants with less capital, especially less human capital, had considerably more difficulty migrating regularly and therefore had to resort to irregular routes. In addition, the interviews, particularly with Bob, highlight how crucial the perception of migrants among members of the migration infrastructure is, specifically whether migrants are seen as well-educated, motivated, and adaptable.

The participants in this thesis demonstrated a high level of awareness of the constraints imposed by their available capital and actively integrated this consciousness into their planning and strategic decision-making processes. In this study, restrictive migration governance in line with the externalization of EU migration policies was particularly evident in the visa application processes at embassies as well as in the interception of boats attempting to leave Lebanese territory, particularly El-Mina. Restrictive visa regimes and strict screening procedures render embassies and consulates the *"first line of defense"* (Torpey, 1998, p. 252), as became particularly clear in the cases of Youssef (proof of sufficient financial means) and Ria (proof of the authenticity of her relationship). Along the coast, increased patrols by the Lebanese Coast Guard and the use of advanced surveillance

technologies, as observed by the five young men in the group discussion, form a 'safety net' - facilitated and supported by international migration agreements between the EU and the Lebanese government. This raises the question of the extent to which externalized EU border controls are internalized in Lebanon.

In conclusion, reaching Europe is extremely challenging for those who are not desired there. The numerous obstacles and difficulties encountered require not only meticulous planning and resource mobilization but also continuous adjustment and reorientation of migration strategies. Opting for a different migration path, such as through marriage instead of student or work migration, can be a practical choice for those who have that opportunity. However, for many individuals who lack substantial financial resources, regular migration routes are less accessible. Consequently, they must resort to irregular migration methods, continually adjusting their plans to adapt to evolving circumstances. These findings underscore the complexity and fluidity of the migration process, highlighting the crucial roles of capital and trust in ensuring the success of migration.

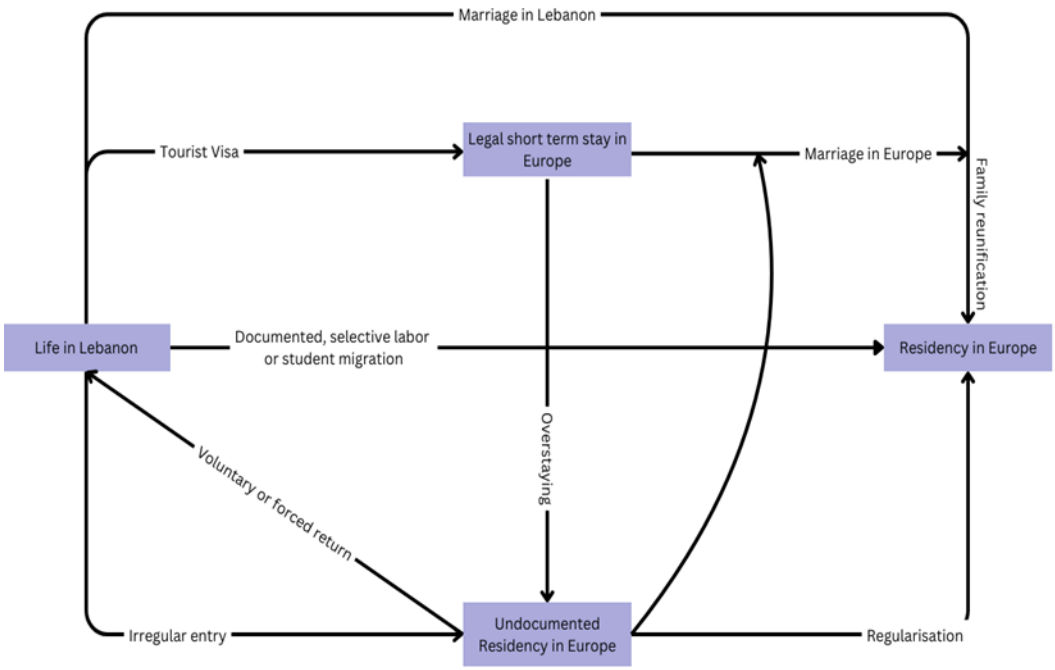

Figure 17: Migration pathways of young Lebanese emigrants from El-Mina towards Europe (based on Carling, 2002).

6.3. From Sea to Shore: Importance of Migration Policy and Agency

The interviews conducted for this study provide additional insights into emigration from El-Mina to Europe that go beyond aspirations, capabilities, migration infrastructure, and modes of migration, shedding light on further aspects discussed in the conceptual framework.

Each participant in this thesis had different resources (sets of capital) that enabled him/her to navigate the migration landscape, where migration infrastructures (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) and impacts on negative liberties (de Haas, 2021) intersect, resulting in individualized migration trajectories. Challenges at the macro- and micro-environment level can therefore vary greatly, confirming Carling's (2002, p. 22) observation that every migration project is a *"dense jungle with different paths, each associated with specific obstacles, costs and risks"*.

Migration governance not only influences the aspirations and capabilities of individuals but also determines their decisions on the use of migration infrastructure and the chosen mode of migration. In this context, the externalization of EU migration policy clearly shows its effect by selecting individuals strictly based on their sets of capital, thereby significantly restricting the mobility of certain groups. The regulations have proven particularly effective at embassies, where Schengen visas are usually only available to people with sufficient or suitable capital. In addition, externalization mechanisms such as increased border controls have also shown a deterrent effect. Events such as the Dandachi family incident have left a deep mark on the community, causing people to think twice before embarking by boat.

Despite these restrictions, existing migration policies do not completely deter people from pursuing their migration goals, as individuals often employ considerable agency to drive the realization of their migration plans. Migrants, equipped with their own aspirations and capabilities, demonstrate their personal agency by actively reflecting on their situation and developing strategies to circumvent the obstacles imposed by migration policies, creating alternative mobility paths to realize

their migration plans (Bakewell, 2010). All participants in this study developed the migration strategies that were (to their knowledge) best for them by reflecting on their situation within the Lebanese context and the prevailing migration governance. They systematically collected and assessed extensive information on past experiences, future objectives, and present opportunities, crafting strategies that align with their aspirations and capabilities. These strategies have the potential to challenge existing migration barriers and create alternative pathways for mobility (Hay, 2002; Mainwaring, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2018).

Therefore, individual micro-level maneuvers can, if sufficient numbers of similar trajectories are chosen, become a social force that influences existing governance structures 'from below' (Mezzadra, 2004; Scheel, 2019). Moreover, this then reflects back on the existing migration infrastructure, which begins to reorganize itself according to the demand for, e.g., new routes (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013).

Hence, agency and Autonomy of Migration (AoM) are closely intertwined, with agency realizing the individual aspirations of migrants that, when adopted by a critical mass, can evolve into a social movement. In the case of El-Mina, however, it is difficult to determine where individual agency ends and AoM begins. I would argue that pretending to be a Syrian refugee to obtain refugee status and the recent trend of increasing irregular migration toward Italy rather than Cyprus could be considered AoM. In contrast, the choice to pretend to be homosexual to apply for asylum can be considered more of personal agency, as the decision is made less frequently, presumably due to stigma.

An analysis of the field research findings in relation to the conceptual framework shows that Carling's (2002) two-step aspiration-capability model provides a useful overview of the initiation of migration processes. However, it fails to fully capture the realities and experiences of emigrants during the initial phases of their migration journey. Carling claims that people first develop aspirations and then assess their capacity to migrate. However, this thesis has shown that

capabilities can also influence aspirations. For example, in the cases of Mandouch and Hakim, their aspirations were often neither clearly defined nor stable enough to formulate concrete emigration plans. However, when the opportunity to move to another country arose, they seized it. Furthermore, individual agency, characterized by reflection and strategic planning due to constantly evolving contexts, migration policy, and personal well-being illustrates that migration is a cyclical and non-linear process.

In summary, the macro-environment plays a significant role in shaping general aspirations and access to capital. At the same time, individual circumstances have a significant impact on the development and meaning of specific aspirations, with emotions and mental health taking on an unexpectedly central importance. These aspirations are not static but dynamic and respond to changes in both the macroenvironment and personal circumstances. Access to capital proves to be a decisive factor in the choice between regular and irregular migration routes, with individual decisions and strategies playing a key role in translating migration motives into concrete outcomes. Due to these dynamics, the migration project is an extremely complex, cyclic, and individualized decision-making process.

Based on these considerations, it can be concluded that the conceptual framework of this thesis, which integrates the concepts of Carling (2002) and de Haas (2021), reflects the essential factors involved at the beginning of the migration process of young Lebanese towards Europe. Instead of a linear, two-stage process, however, reality has proven to be a cyclical process in which the different components continuously evolve, interact, and influence each other.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Research Questions and Main Findings

The present study has shown that by means of an ethnographic approach it was possible to reveal why young adults in El-Mina, Tripoli, intend to emigrate from Lebanon to Europe, how they prepare and organize their emigration, what capabilities enable different migration modes, and how EU-Lebanese migration policies shaping their mobility. During the six weeks of fieldwork in El-Mina, interviews were conducted with fourteen people to investigate their emigration aspirations and strategies. In the following months, I stayed in contact with some of the participants, especially those who were about to leave during my fieldwork in Lebanon, to follow up on their journey. The study aims to understand how macro-level structural issues, such as the socio-economic context in Lebanon and the constraints imposed by emigration policies, along with the individual situation of (potential) migrants (micro-level specifics), influence the decision-making processes and migration paths chosen by young adults from El-Mina to Europe.

Lebanon's financial breakdown and political deadlock have disrupted people's lives. The economic collapse, the lack of job opportunities, and the pervasive sense of insecurity have fundamentally affected the thesis participants' ability to envision a viable future in their home country. Diminishing hope for improvement within the country drives many to seek a life abroad, where stability, security, and economic opportunities are more attainable, allowing them to aspire to a life worth living again.

In addition, individual context and emotional situation, including feelings of exhaustion, depression, hopelessness, and a dwindling sense of belonging, as well as personal socio-economic backgrounds significantly influence people's desires to emigrate. Several participants stated that Lebanon was no longer the place in which they could achieve psychological well-being or authenticity, reinforcing their desire to find these conditions elsewhere. In addition, long-held childhood dreams of traveling

the world have led some to consider emigration, with the current socio-economic context placing a certain urgency on the timing to realize these aspirations.

However, this thesis demonstrated that emigration is driven by a complex interplay of aspirations, emphasizing that there is never just one single motive. The composition of these aspirations may vary depending on the context and individual environment, showing their dynamic nature, which evolves over time in response to both macro-contextual factors and individual circumstances, rather than staying static.

In terms of capabilities, the individuals interviewed for this thesis exhibited significant differences which were, e.g., reflected in their varying levels of engagement with the components of migrant infrastructure. Each person has a particular combination of social, economic, and human capital, shaped by contextual opportunities and personal backgrounds. On one hand, capabilities are shaped to a considerable extent by the macro-context, directly manifesting through migration policies and measures governed by international agreements. Indirectly, the macro-context impacts the personal situations of young adults. Although personal factors like gender, age, family status, and educational background are crucial to individual capabilities, access to resources such as capital and employment is strongly affected by the broader macro-environment.

The different composition of capital determines the young adults' access to different components of the migration infrastructure and allows them to either conform to established migration structures or pursue alternative paths. This dynamics results in different modes of migration among the participants that included pathways such as student visas, labor migration, marriage migration, seeking refugee status, and irregular migration channels. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that migration only remains limited to those with sufficient economic, social, and human capital, which given the current circumstances in Lebanon are fewer than in all the migration waves before where there was more capital stability.

While the macro-level context influences aspirations and capabilities in general, it is the individual situation that determines the composition and importance of different aspirations and dictates individual access to capital and resources, thus shaping the mode of migration. In this context, mental health and emotions, such as a sense of belonging, are crucial - an aspect that is often overlooked in migration studies, but should receive more attention in future research to better understand aspirations.

It's crucial to note that aspirations and capabilities alone are not sufficient to implement migration plans; personal agency is required for translating motivation and means into tangible migration outcomes. All participants in this study assessed their situation and strategically planned how to effectively utilize their resources, drawing on their knowledge and capabilities, thereby exercising agency in their migration processes. This proves that emigrants from El-Mina are not just passive victims of their situation, but are actively trying to reshape their lives through migration as a means to improve their lives or even as a means of survival.

Reflexivity and strategic planning can lead to the emergence of new migration routes, especially when existing routes are blocked by migration management actors. This highlights the idea that if people truly desire to leave and have the means to do so, they will find a way to depart the country despite the obstacles presented by migration policies. As significant numbers of individuals choose these alternative pathways, a social movement of autonomous migration arises (Andrijasevic et al., 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2008), underscoring that migration cannot be fully controlled by restrictive governance measures but instead reflects a dynamic social phenomenon that is constantly evolving.

The ongoing destabilization of lives in Lebanon has turned emigration from El-Mina into more than just a 'single moment' event, developing into a continuous social process with economic, political, cultural, technological, and demographic dimensions. With individuals convinced that they have nothing left to lose, to the extent that some embark multiple times on perilous boat crossings to

reclaim a meaningful life, emigration from El-Mina reveals itself as a complex social phenomenon that will continuously reshape the social fabric of the municipality.

The conceptual framework employed in this study, drawing on Carling (2002) and de Haas (2021), effectively integrates macro and micro levels of aspirations and capabilities, proving essential for analyzing the early stages of young Lebanese migration to Europe from El-Mina. Focusing exclusively on one level would have significantly limited the comprehensive understanding of migrants' experiences of their migration process. However, contrary to Carling's (2002) argument and in alignment with de Haas's (2021) position, which draws upon Berlin (1969), the findings of this thesis suggest that the aspiration-capability model should not be viewed as a linear, two-stage process but as a cyclical one where components continuously evolve, interact, and influence each other.

Figure 18: Road sign on the highway leading out of El-Mina (Studer, 2023).

7.2. Contribution and Value of the Research

This case study sheds light on the under-researched phenomenon of the post-2019 migration wave of young Lebanese to Europe, with a particular focus on the often-neglected northern region of El-Mina Tripoli. Adopting a bottom-up perspective allowed for a nuanced understanding of the ways in which migrants utilize their resources to exercise agency and strategically navigate the complex migration infrastructure.

This approach contrasts with traditional top-down analyses, which often overlook the lived experiences and multiple strategies of the individuals studied in this thesis. By highlighting these dynamics, this study contributes to the broader discourse on migration by emphasizing the importance of understanding local contexts and individual agency in shaping migration patterns and outcomes.

It further contributes to existing literature by highlighting that emigration is not a linear journey but a cyclical process. In this process, migrants navigate various phases, continuously analyzing their aspirations, resources, and resulting strategies while adapting to an ever-changing environment. Examining emigration as a process that begins long before the physical relocation, particularly through the interplay of aspirations and capabilities, provides a deeper insight into the factors that lead people to leave their homes, to which they feel so strongly attached.

The research also adds to existing literature by emphasizing how emotional and social factors influence emigration. As large numbers of people leave the country and individuals feel abandoned by their country's leadership, their sense of belonging can diminish significantly. This emotional alienation often forces them to seek a fresh start elsewhere, a dimension that has been largely overlooked in migration research. Recognizing these complex dynamics is essential to understanding why individuals decide to leave their homes and to comprehend the broader societal impact that migration can have on a community and its people.

Furthermore, this case study offers an important contribution to a deeper understanding of individual emigration processes and the complex realities behind them. It comprehensively analyzes a variety of aspects and dimensions that are central to global migration realities, while also taking into account specific situations in different communities in Lebanon. On a global level, this case study is important as it sheds light on the complex and often neglected personal stories, perceptions, and experiences that explain migration. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the multiple factors that shape personal mobility and thus provides valuable impetus for further research. Although this case study specifically describes the situation in El-Mina, Lebanon, it also addresses issues of global relevance. In particular, it highlights the importance of the emotional and psychological challenges that people experience on their migration journeys.

On a national level, it provides a better understanding of the relevant micro- and macro-environmental factors influencing migration in Lebanon. The prevailing culture of migration, intensified by recent events in Lebanon, has created a sense of compulsion among many, making emigration appear as the only viable option. This environment pressures people into feeling they have no choice but to leave the country, making their decision to emigrate coerced rather than voluntary. Moreover, the findings on migration aspirations and capabilities can be broadly extrapolated to other communities in Lebanon with comparable socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, this case study has extended the aspiration and capability framework by showing that migration governance can not only constitute a limitation to mobility but can also be seen as a capability for highly skilled migrants to draw on. However, it is important to recognize that the conclusions related to irregular migration are particularly unique to El-Mina. This distinction arises because other communities in Lebanon, especially those that are not coastal, possess different networks, expertise, and resources when it comes to irregular boat crossings.

7.3. Areas for Further Research

Looking ahead, continued study of Lebanon's economic, political, and social landscape will be essential to understand the ongoing migration trends and underlying motivations. Furthermore, exploring the chosen modes of migration that align with individuals' aspirations for personal and professional development is crucial. Therefore, future research needs to delve deeper into several key areas that have been highlighted in this thesis. These include examining the dynamics of agency and voluntarism among migrants, understanding the multiple dimensions of migration infrastructures, and analyzing patterns of irregular migration. Such studies will be essential for a better understanding of migration dynamics in the municipality of El-Mina, and Lebanon in general.

Additionally, delving into subjects like gendered migration experiences, interactions between Lebanese and Syrian migrants, and the socio-economic effects of remittances from the Lebanese diaspora abroad would offer profound insights. Moreover, investigating the circumstances of individuals who have lost essential resources and consequently lack the ability to migrate, resulting in involuntary immobility, would be a valuable focus for future research.

Despite the current challenges, the vibrancy and spirit of Lebanon's youth is cause for cautious optimism. The resilience points to the possibility of a national resurgence, where effective governance and economic stability could eventually reduce the need for emigration. However, it is uncertain how much and how long it will take and what triggers will be necessary to fundamentally change the prevailing system of government for the better. What is certain, however, is that change for the better can only take place if an environment is created in which Lebanese citizens can see a fulfilling future in their own country. Until then, it is likely that Lebanese will continue to leave their homes and loved ones in search of better living conditions abroad.

7.4. Epilogue

Beirut felt like a ghost town when I returned to Lebanon in February 2024 to visit my grandparents. The visitors were gone, the positive vibes of the summer had faded, and the tensions with the southern neighbor added to the already unstable situation. Even during my brief visit to El-Mina, the streets, cafés, and promenade were deserted. I met up with Shames, to get some updates on his life and those we had interviewed half a year ago. As we were walking around, crossing the bridge to Baqae Island, a storm was brewing on the horizon of El-Mina. Within just ten minutes, the storm reached the mainland, leaving us completely soaked at the mercy of the weather, completely soaked. Could this be a metaphor for the crises that young people in El-Mina have experienced and will continue to experience? Would this mean that the few young people who have remained in El-Mina this winter will also set off abroad in the coming years?

Figure 19: Storm incoming over El-Mina (Studer, 2024).

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9. Annex

9.1. Table 1: Overview of Research Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Socio-Economic Class[42]	(Last) Occupation & Degree	Migration Status	Preferred Destination	Migration Mode
1. Atiyah	30	F	Lower	Humanitarian work (BA Hotel Management)	Thinking of leaving	Far East	None
2. Bob	34	M	Middle	Nurse with eleven years of experience at the intensive care unite	About to board his flight	Germany	Work
3. Daya	28	F	Middle	Business Finance (BA)	Abroad	Dubai	Work
4. Dias	29	M	Middle	Electronics; illegal activities (unfinished BA)	Abroad	Belgium	Marriage
5. Youssef	29	M	Middle	Electrical engineering (MA solar energy)	Abroad (but visiting)	France	Study
6. Hakim	36	M	Lower	Various jobs (left school at eleven)	Back in El-Mina	Sweden	Irregular
7. Mandouch	33	F	Middle	Teacher in physical education	Abroad	Europe	Refugee
8. Marcos	31	M	Middle	Captain with eleven years of experience	Abroad	Greece	Marriage
9. Ria	27	F	Middle	Cinema directing (MA)	Abroad	Sweden	Marriage
10. Walid	30	M	Lower-Middle	Civil Engineer (MA)	Waiting for second visa	France or Saudi Arabia	Study or Work
11. Lawyer 1	-	M				-	-
12. Lawyer 2	-	M				-	-
13. Activist	-	M				-	.
14. Professor	-	M				-	-

[42] These are the categories into which the participants classified themselves.

Group Discussion	21-25	M	Lowe Class	Work all kinds of things related to the sea	Back in El-Mina	Europe	Irregular