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Diana Ibañez-Tirado & Rabia Latif Khan

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'Birds without legs': legal integration as potentiality for women of a Afghan-Turkmen family in Istanbul

Diana Ibañez-Tirado ^a and Rabia Latif Khan ^b

^aDepartment of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, UK; ^bDepartment of Development Studies, SOAS University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines how three generations of women in an Afghan–Turkmen family residing in Istanbul, Turkey, have experienced historical migration and legal integration. We deploy the concept of *potentiality* to convey these women's experiences of legal integration as a particular *form of existence* that is, at times, expressed by them and other families of Afghan background with the Dari metaphor of being 'birds without legs'. The metaphor conveys their constant mobility. Combining original ethnographic data with the analysis of historical works, we argue that families of Turkic ethnolinguistic backgrounds from Afghanistan residing in Turkey have been unable, and at times unwilling, to realize refuge, citizenship and settlement as the endpoint of their mobile trajectories.

KEYWORDS

Afghan women; migration; gender; Turkmen; Uzbek; Turkey

Introduction

Grandmother Akgul, a woman in her 80s living in Istanbul in 2017, was born in Aqcha, in northern Afghanistan, in the 1930s. Six years before Grandmother Akgul was born, her parents and relatives had entered northern Afghanistan seeking shelter from the turmoil of the then newly established Soviet Turkmenistan. As Turkmen emigrants, they were granted protection by Afghanistan, and, ultimately, they and their descendants lived as Afghan citizens from approximately the 1930s onwards.

Hülya and Meryem, Grandmother Akgul's granddaughters, were born in the 1990s in Turkmenistan, but had grown up with their mother, Gulbadam Khanum, in Mazar-e Sharif, Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) and Dubai (United Arab Emirates – UAE) before settling in Istanbul. Gulbadam Khanum explained to Diana that Grandmother Akgul found it painful (*gham*) to having been born as an 'emigrant' (*muhājir*) in Afghanistan, and anticipating to be dying soon as an emigrant in Turkey. In a light-hearted tone, Gulbadam Khanum concluded that in her family, 'We are all *muhājirān* [emigrants], from everywhere.'

By focusing on the narratives of three generations of women in this highly mobile Afghan–Turkmen family residing in Istanbul, this article examines how they have experienced historical forms of migration and legal integration. We suggest that for these

CONTACT Diana Ibañez-Tirado  di40@sussex.ac.uk

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women legal integration is *potentiality*, or a particular *form of existence*, that entails unpredicted diversions rather than linear trajectories of mobility with citizenship and settlement in a final geographical destination as the endpoint (cf. Leech 2017). This form of existence is intensified because, informed by their previous experiences, these women speculate about how nation-states change their borders, immigration laws or disintegrate altogether. Potentiality was expressed by these women, and is also conveyed by other families of Afghan background who migrate, with the metaphor of being ‘birds without legs’ (Dari: *parandahā bedun-e pā*) (e.g., Saidi 2018). Potentiality, we suggest, is the prospect of, and the ability to come into existence as, ‘bird without legs’ for families who historically have needed to migrate, legally integrate and migrate again. Cutting across potentiality, Turkic ethnolinguistic identities and historical depth are significant to analyse our case study because these two aspects are reminisced through these women’s narratives of protracted migration since the 1920s. Our work aims to inform existing and future research on the wider forms of migration and mobility of Afghans, and people of Afghan background to understand the extent to which their trajectories of migration and mobility have been shaped by, and continue to reinforce, significant registers of their Turkic ethnolinguistic identities.¹

Given the complexity of national and ethnolinguistic backgrounds in this household alone, we decided to refer to this family in the title as ‘Afghan-Turkmen’ rather than Afghan of Turkmen and Uzbek background and/or ethnicity, or Turkmen–Uzbek–Afghan. We do so as a matter of practicality, and because our Uzbek interlocutor, Gulbadam Khanum, referred to herself, at times, as Turkmen. Throughout the article, however, we will examine some of the nuances concerning people of Turkic background in Afghanistan – especially of Turkmen and Uzbek ethnolinguistic heritage.

Our combined methodology includes the gathering of ethnographic data in Istanbul by Diana, followed by the analysis of historical data from secondary sources by both authors. We analyse the experiences of mobility and legal integration of one family rather than a larger sample of Turkmen Afghan families or individuals residing in Istanbul. Through the detailed examination of one case study, however, we aim to illuminate the broader processes of mobility and legal integration that Afghans of Turkic background, especially Turkmen and Uzbek, have followed throughout the past decades to resettle in Turkey. Diana collected the narratives of these Afghan-Turkmen women in their apartment in Istanbul in the summer of 2017, when accompanying them to family gatherings in restaurants, and while doing their shopping in local markets. The language of communication for the interactions between Diana and her Afghan interlocutors for this article was Dari (Afghan Persian), and to a lesser extent Russian and English – as chosen by the interviewees. These women’s first language, however, is not Dari but Turkic languages (Turkmen and Uzbek), and similarly to other Afghan–Turkmen who previously lived in Turkmenistan, they are able to speak Russian to different degrees of proficiency. The scarcity of literature about Turkmen and Uzbek Afghans in English, as well as our inability to speak Turkic languages, is a limitation in this study.² We have tried to solve such limitations by consulting some of the prolific literature about Turkmen history published in the Russian language.

In what follows, we discuss the concept of potentiality in relation to our interlocutors’ experiences of migration. Then, we locate our work in the current debates about Afghan migration before proceeding to analyse the narratives of these Afghan-Turkmen women

organized generationally: we start with Grandmother Akgul and finish with her granddaughters.

Legal integration and potentiality

The issue of integration in migration studies has focused on the multilayered processes of creating workable adaptations between immigrants and host communities concerning rights and obligations established as sociocultural norms or policies of assimilation (e.g., Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018; Hack-Polay 2008), and the shifting legal frameworks that make assimilation possible within nation-states (e.g., Goodman 2010). Legal integration, as an aspect of such overarching processes, involves the progressing steps that states, communities and individuals take towards the regularization of entry, residence and citizenship of migrants. Legal integration as forms of *adaptation* usually assume that migrants will eventually become adjusted to and established in the host country in more or less a permanent basis, in which sedentary articulations of life are expected: after all, a great number of migrants in the world today are fleeing from violence and marginalization, and aim to reach a destination where they can live safely and put an end to the discomforts, dangers and expenditures of being, often illegally, on the move. As Simsek (2019) argues, however, integration is a multidimensional phenomenon in which transnational aspects of mobility continue to interplay with migrants' integration in a host state (see also Erdal and Oeppen 2013). Highlighting such remaining forms of mobility, 'secondary migration' is an important aspect of migrants' trajectories of integration: once migrants have achieved full, or some forms of, legal integration and recognition in a host country, they continue to move in search of better opportunities of integration or reunion with family members elsewhere (e.g., Urquia, Frank, and Glazier 2010; Ambrosini 2018; Andersson 2014). Such forms of migrant trajectories among Afghans are often prompted by a 'moral economy of migration' in which migrants' pressure to succeed, peer competition and obligations towards their families back home are of great importance (Scalettaris, Monsutti, and Donini 2021, 521). These studies have stressed the agentic nature that migrants, refugees and citizens have within the structural boundaries that national and international immigration regimes posit to their movements including, for example, the politics of borders, the bureaucratic procedures imposed for obtaining documents, registrations, and state protection and benefits. Naturalization or achieving a legal form of permanent settlement in a preferred country of 'destination' are often considered the 'endpoint', or at least, a more enduring respite to often excruciating trajectories of migration. In other words, citizenship, with its 'instrumental and identity value' (Bauböck 2019, 15; see also Harpaz 2019) is regarded as the terminus of migrants.

Millions of migrants all over the world, however, continue their trajectories independently of different forms of border controls, or the rights and obligations that legality, 'partial citizenship' or full citizenship may grant them (e.g., Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Salazar Parreñas 2001). Citizenship or naturalization in a host country can be another juncture, or a necessary step for further trajectories of mobility. For instance, a trader of Afghan background living in London explained that accumulating passports through naturalization in different countries is a strategy for achieving further mobility, and the possibilities of new migration and business ventures (Marsden 2016). Besides,

the mobile trajectories people continue to follow and embrace after reaching legal integration in a host state are an important historical dimension in the shaping of translocal and cosmopolitan identities among trading, diasporic and scattered communities (e.g., Balci 2007; Marsden 2016; Falzon 2005; Green 2015). Our argument builds upon these works, but emphasizes that for our female Afghan interlocutors in Istanbul legal integration is *potentiality* or an ontology that highlights constantly *being on the move*, in addition to settling and adapting to a host state. *Potentiality* is a concept that has been used in anthropological works to theorize feelings of certainty and uncertainty in relationship to biomedicine (e.g., Taussig, Hoeyer, and Helmrich 2013). We find potentiality useful to study the life-worlds, and the quality of being 'on the move' that it is difficult to grasp by people who are deep-rooted in a country, or those who have not migrated. For our Afghan interlocutors, who expressed such potentiality as being 'birds without legs', the emphasis is on the *ambiguity* of their legal integration, adaptation and resettlement in host states, as well as their feelings of *certainty* of the worries that their future trajectories of migration will bring about. In other words, these women are convinced that once resettled legally in Turkey, they will continue to move – one day. Potentiality as a way of being, or coming into existence (Witt 2003) *in endless migration* is underpinned by a future that, in detail, is unknown (when, where and why to move). At the same time, such future is anticipated because of this family's past experiences: three generations combining forced and voluntary migration.

To understand how the sensibility of being 'birds without legs' comes to be an existential attribute to our interlocutors in Istanbul, we stress the narratives of their Turkic ancestry and their mobility. These are imperative to theorize not only this particular family, but, more broadly, can shed light into the most recent patterns and experiences of migration and legal integration of other Afghan–Turkic families in Turkey, including those of Turkmen and Uzbek background. Turkmen from Afghanistan identify themselves with broader ideas of their Turkmen heritage which, in turn, are associated with both ancient and more contemporary forms of mobility including pastoralism and/or semi-nomadism, as well as exile. Images of ancient mobility are contrasted in these people's narratives to imaginaries of sedentary 'others' (e.g., Tajiks), and connected to the history of formerly nomadic and semi-nomadic groups based mainly on kinship and political affinity, or what came to be known to scholars and administrators as Turkmen 'tribes' – even if a common Turkmen language and 'ethnicity' as a modern type of identity was systematized only in the twentieth century (Elgar 2007).

Currently, Afghan–Turkic families and individuals (e.g., Turkmen, Uzbek and Kyrgyz) can obtain Turkish citizenship in more straightforward ways and relatively faster than those Afghans without such Turkic ancestry, for example, Tajiks and Pashtuns. Historically, Central Asian travellers (more particularly, Turkic-speaking pilgrims to Mecca) engaged in imperial politics since the nineteenth century to enhance their opportunities to stay, work and frequently integrate themselves as Ottoman or Turkish citizens in cities such as Istanbul. Such Turkic-speaking Central Asian 'spiritual subjects' have negotiated travel dangers and restrictions, geopolitics, as well as the protection from different institutions including *sufi* lodges, and Ottoman, Russian and European authorities to enable their journeys, or achieve their integration to local society (Can 2020). On the contrary, the work of Hakimi (2020) about the more contemporary marital strategies of Turkmen men from Afghanistan working in Istanbul highlights the importance of the moral and financial

obligations that shape these men's masculinities, and, in turn, their decisions to migrate to Turkey and often reside there illegally – regardless of their Turkic background. Hence, we also consider that the Afghan–Turkmen family we examine here is of a wealthy economic background, and that Diana's interactions in Istanbul were mainly with the female members of this household rather than the male members. In other words, we offer a more modest and contemporary outlook of the pathways of mobility analysed by Can (2020), from a contrasting perspective of migration and legal integration than that of Hakimi's (2020) – centred on men from marginalized economic and educational background from Afghanistan's Turkmen communities.

Finally, in contrast to a great number of Afghan citizens currently living in Istanbul, this family was not using Turkey as a crossing point to Europe, but as a safe haven where they could thrive in safer conditions to those unstable, and at times violent, circumstances they have passed through in northern Afghanistan and beyond. Although settled in Istanbul at the time of the interviews and without specific plans of, or willingness to, migrate in the future, a Turkish passport, they recognized, would facilitate them travelling abroad with more ease than they would do with an Afghan passport. Citizenship thus would provide them with better chances to obtain visas, visit relatives, study or resettle, for instance, in Europe, the United States and elsewhere.

Our key findings show that obtaining legal integration or citizenship does not fix this type of mobile populations to a permanent residence or final destination. Thus, rather than focusing on the intricate pathways to legality that migrants regularly face, or to the agentive or forceful nature of migration and exile, we aim to make an ethnographic contribution to these themes by highlighting how these female emigres' notions of being-in-the-world have been shaped by historical mobility of particular Turkic ethnolinguistic heritage, one that traverses, at least, three generations (cf. Balci 2007; Thum and Kashgary 2021). Potentiality, as the ability to come into existence as 'birds without legs' indicates that legal integration for our interlocutors does not represent a permanent status or the completion of their migratory trajectories because they inhabit the world by both settling down and anticipating further migration.

The diversity of the 'Afghan migrant'

With the exception of nuanced studies that have focused on Afghanistan's Hazara migrants and communities (Momenian 2014; Monsutti 2005; Saidi 2018), the heterogeneity of Afghan migration to Europe and/or through Turkey has been regularly overlooked (van Houte 2016). Policy reports and some academic works tend to discuss the figure of 'Afghan migrants' without taking into account their diversity, intersectionality and the distinctiveness of the several waves of Afghan migration (e.g., Schuster 2011; Sajjad 2018). Although, a term such as 'Afghan migrant' may be helpful in monitoring numbers of people fleeing Afghanistan, such a category falls short in showing the important distinctions embedded in registers of gender and socio-economic background of migrant Afghan families, as well as the politics of ethnicity in Afghanistan that continue to affect people of Afghan background overseas (cf. Hakimi 2020).

The paucity of works that focus on the particularities of such diversity in terms of gender may be the result of the overwhelming majority and visibility of male, young, undocumented Afghan migrants, rather than family units that include women.

Concerning ethnolinguistic backgrounds, such paucity may respond to the slowly evolving legal frameworks dealing with Afghanistan's ethnic and religious groups. The 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan explicitly names 14 ethnic groups native to the country, in Article 4, including Uzbeks and Turkmens.³ Uzbeks are recorded as constituting 9% of the country's population and Turkmens 3% (Ibrahimi 2017, 3). As there has not been a census in the country, with the exception of the partial census of 1979, which was not completed due to the start of the Soviet occupation (Miller 2014), it is extremely hard to decipher accurate population sizes of Afghanistan's various ethnic communities. The provinces of Afghanistan with sizeable Turkmen and Uzbek populations are mainly in the north and include Kunduz, Balkh, Takhar, Badakhshan, Faryab, Sar-e Pol and Jowzjan.

Gathering more data on the ethnolinguistic diversity (as well as socio-economic, religious and gender perspectives) when conducting studies of migration of people from Afghan background is extremely relevant to understanding both their communal and diverging experiences of mobility and integration, and it is in this aspect that our work aims to make a further contribution. Hence, in the following sections we combine ethnographic data with historical sources to explore the trajectories of historical mobility of Turkmen and Uzbek groups with reference to the ancestry of our interlocutors, Grandmother Akgul, Gulbadam Khanum and her daughters, Hülya and Meryem.

From Russia's 'Protectorates' to carpet weaving: paving the path to Turkey

Grandmother Akgul's parents emigrated from the Lebap region of modern-day Turkmenistan to northern Afghanistan in the 1920s. She was born in Afghanistan's Aqcha district, in Jowzjan province, but as an emigrant (*muhājir*) she remembered having moved houses several times within the region. Through marriage, she finally established her main residence in the city of Mazar-e Sharif. Whilst aiming at legal integration in Istanbul in 2017, Grandmother Akgul explained to Diana how contradictory she found the fact that Afghanistan had been a safe location of refuge for her parents, but that eventually became a place that pushed people out 'to live and die as emigrants' – as 'birds without legs'. Legal integration in Turkey as potentiality meant for this elderly woman uncertainty about whether or not she would obtain Turkish citizenship, as well as the doubts expressed that such a status would put an end to her mobility. On the one hand, she wished she could return to Mazar-e Sharif one day, and, on the other, she feared she would be forced to do so via deportation if her application for a longer visa was unsuccessful. The legacy of her ancestors' past migration in the 1920s, combined with the potentiality of her future mobility, is similar for other Turkic families because of their background, as we now explore based on secondary literature.

Turkmen and Uzbek communities have been historically living in northern Afghanistan, while Aqcha was part of the Emirate of Bukhara until 1855 (Babaeva 1985). A considerable number of Turkmen groups, however, began arriving in Afghanistan from Central Asia after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 (Šír and Horák 2016). Many also migrated in the 1920s and 1930s after the failed Basmachi revolt against the Soviet Union, which began during the rule of Imperial Russia in the late 1910s, due to the removal of the exemption of the region's Muslims from military service (Fraser 1987). By 1932,

approximately 30,000 households, consisting primarily of Turkmens and Uzbeks, left for Afghanistan (Crews 2015).

Previously, Imperial Russian forces had taken partial control of the Central Asian khanates of Kokand and Khiva, as well as the Emirate of Bukhara, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. These states came to be regarded as Russia's protectorates (Becker 2004). The Turkmen groups to the north-west remained autonomous from such control until Russian campaigns in the strategic oasis of Gökdepe (1880–81) paved the way for the Russian conquest of the region (Horák 2015). Decades later with the Red Revolution and the advancement of Bolshevik troops in Central Asia, these states and territories were incorporated into the emerging Soviet Union. In 1920, the Emir of Bukhara fled to Afghanistan from where, allegedly, he guided the Bukhara wing of the Basmachi uprising – a revolt that involved Central Asian Muslims, including Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik militias. With the partial defeat of the Basmachi fighters and victory for the Soviet Union, however, the precarity of the region's Turkic Muslims was further heightened, which in turn provoked the outward migration of entire communities and their families. In the case of many of the region's Turkmens, including Grandmother Akgul's ancestors, the country of settlement became their southern neighbour: Afghanistan.

Babaeva (1985) argues that the equally intense civil war in Afghanistan (1928–29), in which both local and recently émigré Turkmen participated, caused internal disputes among such heterogeneous groups. The Afghan authorities provided refuge and assistance to the Basmachi Turkmen who fled from the USSR, at the same time that they tolerated the intensified anti-Soviet activity of this Turkmen emigres. When finally the Afghan government feared more severe complications in their relations with the USSR, the government resettled a number of Turkmen emigrant groups from the north to the south of the country, and worked to break down and reassign a significant number of Turkmen 'tribes' to different regions.⁴

Joseph Stalin's collectivization of agriculture forced an additional number of Turkmens to 'flee to Afghanistan and Iran' (Šir and Horák 2016, 109). Although the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan border was officially closed in 1932, migration to Afghanistan still occurred several years later. Including Grandmother Akgul and her relatives, these Turkmen groups of Afghanistan have now been settled in the country for nearly a century, and are citizens of the state. Most Afghan Turkmens switched to a sedentary and semi-sedentary life in Afghanistan, but the narratives of their ancestral 'tribal' associations and divisions prevail. Hence, the main Turkmen tribes in Afghanistan are the Ersari, Salyr, Teke, Yomud, Mauri, Muschzh and Khatab (Babaeva 1992).⁵

Whilst Grandmother Akgul referred to herself as Turkmen, Gulbadam Khanum (Grandmother Akgul's daughter-in-law) described herself as Uzbek, and explained that her paternal family's ancestors had also arrived in northern Afghanistan from the disintegrating Emirate of Bukhara. Gulbadam Khanum continued to speak to her mother and paternal relatives living in Afghanistan in Uzbek language over the phone. In terms of everyday language, Gulbadam Khanum and her daughters interchangeably used Turkmen and Uzbek (more recently Turkish) in daily conversations – in addition to Dari with Afghan families of Tajik or Pashtun background with whom they socialized in Istanbul. At the same time, Gulbadam Khanum considered herself to have 'become' Turkmen (to a certain degree) by having gotten married in the 1970s to a Turkmen man – Grandmother Akgul's son. As she moved to live with her husband and in-laws in the city of

Mazar-e Sharif, she had to learn and use Turkmen as the language of day-to-day sociality, and she reported to Diana that although Uzbek and Turkmen were similar, the narratives of ancestral lands and heritage differed. Gulbadam Khanum's ancestors, she said, have lived in Bukhara rather than in 'tents' that Turkmen people used to 'shepherd and make carpets'.

Gulbadam Khanum's remarks highlight one of the popular conventions in Central Asia which asserts that Turkmen remained nomadic and semi-nomadic, as well as following tribal affiliations and political autonomy, whilst Uzbeks (and also Tajiks) turned to agriculture and became sedentarized beforehand.⁶ Such dichotomous ethno-national representations that cut across apparently opposing registers of sedentarization and nomadism are far from straightforward, as not even Turkmen groups can be fully positioned in the latter category (Irons 1974; see also Elgar 2006). Nevertheless, in everyday conversations they continue to be important sites for the production of difference among, and communal memories within, the Turkic groups in the region. In terms of migration, for example, analysis of Turkmen music shows that nomadism, mobility and travel are valued aspects of Turkmen identity. For example, *yol* (path, road) is a genre of popular and traditional song and performances that highlight mobility: not only is the destination of the road important, but also the direction and the voyage (Zeranska-Kominek 1998). Such valued registers of mobility based on Turkmen cultural understandings of nomadism and journeying are significant aspects underpinning experiences of legal integration as potentiality, or inhabiting the inevitability of further migration.

Whether or not Gulbadam Khanum's depiction of her Turkmen in-laws' mobile ancestors living in tents and weaving carpets was accurate, Grandmother Akgul indeed expected her Uzbek daughter-in-law to weave carpets when she moved to her house in Mazar-e Sharif. Even if carpet weaving is also considered a traditional skill among Uzbek communities (Poullada 2008), Gulbadam Khanum learnt carpet weaving from these Turkmen women including her mother-in-law. This apparently inconsequential activity indeed underscores not only registers of Uzbek and Turkmen identity among the emigres to Afghanistan arriving from the nascent Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, but also the migratory paths and legal integration this and other families pursued in Turkey from the 1980s onwards.

Turkmens in northern Afghanistan, who after the 1930s became overwhelmingly sedentary farmers, have also been known for engaging in seasonal distant-pasture and semi-nomadic cattle breeding, especially of karakul sheep (Babaeva 1985). Poullada (2008) considers that the close relation that Turkmen groups in the Lebap region had with the Emirate of Bukhara in the nineteenth century impinged processes of sedentarization of such Turkmen groups in relation to their more itinerant neighbours to the north. As the emirate required carpets of high quality, the Lebap Turkmen (from *Lab-e Āb* or riverside – of the Amu Darya), including the Ersari group to which Grandmother Akgul's family trace their ancestry, became economically dependent on, and traditionally associated with, carpet weaving. Thus, Turkmen women are famous for their local production of woollen handicrafts, textiles and embroidery, as well as carpet weaving. Some of these products are made for the international market, including exports to Turkey.

In the 1980s especially such types of trade from Central Asia to the markets of Istanbul facilitated the resettlement and legal integration of Uzbek and Turkmen emigres from both the Soviet republics and Afghanistan to Turkey, who mostly resettled in Istanbul

(Marsden 2018; Mentges and Shamukhitdinova 2017). To date, it is still common to find handcraft and antiques shops run by Turkmen and Uzbek people who arrived from Afghanistan and Central Asia from the 1980s in the most touristic zones of Istanbul, including the Grand Bazaar and Sultanahmet. As Marsden (2016) has documented, the trading routes of previous decades (e.g., the 1980s) paved the way to future trading networks of Afghan merchants in which, we want to highlight, women have also played an important role in. Whilst the more public commercial activities of people of Afghan background have predominantly been run by men, the less visible production of carpet weaving and other handcrafts have been conducted by women – often in domestic compounds. In the particular case of Grandmother Akgul’s family, they did not rely on the trade of textiles, carpets and antiques for their arrival to Istanbul as other merchants and Afghan–Turkic families did from the 1980s onwards, or on carpet weaving to make a living. Gulbadam Khanum’s husband secured his and his family’s entrance to Turkey by pursuing a trading business. As we will explain in a later section, immigrants of Turkic background were provided with an easier process of legal integration to Turkey than those not of Turkic ancestry.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and migration to post-Soviet Turkmenistan

Gulbadam Khanum did not offer further details about the place of origin or profession of her ancestors in the Emirate of Bukhara, but explained that, in contrast to Grandmother Akgul’s parents, her father and grandparents were born in Afghanistan and referred to themselves as Uzbek. Gulbadam Khanum’s father worked as a driver for local-level authorities from the 1960s. He only had vague knowledge of their ancestral lands and relatives in Central Asia, and had not talked to her in detail about this. Certainly, details about such families and their past is, at times, difficult to track, and Gulbadam Khanum, being one generation younger than Grandmother Akgul, did not have memories of her ancestors’ trajectories of mobility in, and to, Afghanistan. Hence, we briefly refer to the situation of the Uzbek population in northern Afghanistan from secondary sources.

Rasuly-Paleczek (2011) notes that until the late 1800s the autonomous northern Afghanistan was a distinct administrative unit ruled by Qataghan Uzbeks, who were the main political force in north-eastern Afghanistan’s lowland areas (see also Dupree 2002, Shalinsky 1990).⁷ Mir Murad Beg, an ethnic Uzbek, controlled vast swathes of north-east Afghanistan from the 1820s onwards, from the provinces of Bamiyan, Balkh and Badakhshan (Hopkins 2008). In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the Pashtun Emir Abdur Rahman Khan sought to consolidate his power, and the political system of the Qataghan Uzbeks was abolished. The north-eastern region of Afghanistan was incorporated into the Afghan state, which in turn resulted in the large settlement of Pashtun and other ethnic groups to the region. This demographic shift and loss of power resulted in fewer job opportunities being available to Uzbeks, for example, in the army and administration, with many choosing to subsequently work in agriculture or cotton mills, whilst others became artisans and traders, thus remaining ‘a marginal group in terms of education, socio-economic standing and political position’ (Rasuly-Paleczek 2011, 81). This situation continued for several decades for both Uzbeks and Turkmens in the twentieth century. During the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan, the government proclaimed new

policies concerning the country's diverse nationalities and tribes to safeguard their newly achieved legal rights including teaching in languages such as Turkmen and Uzbek, as well as newspaper publications and radio broadcasts in these languages (Babaeva 1985).

The withdrawal of the Soviet troops, the collapse of Najibullah's government and the arrival of the Taliban contributed to shifting the visibility of Afghanistan's diverse ethnic communities during the country's bloody civil war, where ethnic factionalism played a leading role. It is in the context of this violence in the 1990s that a considerable number of Turkmen and Uzbek Afghans from the north fled to Turkmenistan. Gulbadam Khanum gave birth to her first son in Mazar-e Sharif in the mid-1980s, amidst the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the early 1990s, she, her husband and eldest son also sought refuge in newly independent Turkmenistan. Grandmother Akgul remained in Mazar-e Sharif during those years, and pointed out to Diana that, regrettably, she had not been able to go with her son to their ancestral homeland (*watan*) where her parents were born.

Gulbadam Khanum told Diana that the life for her family was penurious in such *watan*: they experienced hard times during their arrival to Turkmenistan because the economic situation was precarious, even for Turkmenistan's local population, soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition, Soviet Turkmen and Uzbek people were completely different to those who recently arrived from Afghanistan. People in Turkmenistan, she said, preferred to communicate in Russian or in a mixture of Turkmen and Russian that was very difficult to grasp. Russian was also the language needed to achieve legal integration: obtaining documents for their resettlement, finding housing and schools for her son, and access to healthcare and jobs required proficiency in Russian. Gulbadam Khanum explained: 'I lived eight years in Turkmenistan, so in addition to Turkmen I also learned Russian. My daughters were born there, and later on started school in Ashgabat. My husband worked in trading.'

Trading activities meant that Gulbadam Khanum's husband, as with numerous Afghans in the post-Soviet ecumene, travelled widely in the region (e.g., Marsden 2016). In turn, she had to spend a considerable amount of time alone with her son, and was alone in Ashgabat when her first daughter was born. As she suffered from loneliness, and her parents and in-laws were in Mazar-e Sharif, Gulbadam Khanum did not seriously envision settling permanently in Turkmenistan – even if she hoped to obtain Turkmen citizenship. At the same time, she often complained to her husband and constantly requested that they return to Mazar-e Sharif. Similarly to Grandmother Akgul who experienced both mobility and legal integration as potentiality, Gulbadam Khanum was certain of her impeding migration from Turkmenistan, like a 'bird without legs'.

Gulbadam Khanum's stories resonate with the hundreds of Afghan families who also sought refuge and reintegration in neighbouring Turkmenistan with the support of Turkmenistan's government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (e.g., IRIN News 2003). As Grandmother Akgul's mobile trajectory shows, Turkmen and Uzbek communities initially migrated to Afghanistan in the early 1900s. Almost a century afterwards, during the 1990s new forms of relocation affected Turkmen and Uzbeks from Afghanistan. Legal integration and final resettlement in newly independent Turkmenistan would have been a logical choice at the time given the shared cultural, linguistic and ancestral ties Afghan Turkmen share with Turkmen in Turkmenistan. As Gulbadam Khanum noted, however, the latter have passed through seven decades of Soviet rule and Russification. Decisions to flee to Turkmenistan were taken by Turkic

families and individuals in Afghanistan out of the violence they experienced during the country's civil war and subsequent Taliban rule, as well as the apparent openness that Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov showed to welcome 'back' ancestral Turkmen populations. Numerous Turkmen and Uzbek Afghans settled in Lebap province, including in the city of Charjew. As the economic situation in Turkmenistan was inadequate, Gulbadam Khanum revealed that numerous Afghan families sought resettlement in Canada and the United States, and succeeded in their attempt to relocate. Indeed, sources show that this was especially the case for Afghan emigres who had prior association with the Najibullah government of the late 1980s, whose political party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, had strong ties with the Soviet Union during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (Malynovska 2006).

Numerous others, including Gulbadam Khanum and her children, stayed in Charjew and then Ashgabat. It is usually assumed that migrant families and individuals see North America or Europe as their ideal destination for legal integration, but Gulbadam Khanum's family and numerous others did not want to resettle in North America: being in Turkmenistan allowed them to keep close contact with their family members and control their properties in Afghanistan. Some other Afghan emigres married Turkmen citizens, or sought to start business enterprises in the newly opened, growing and then comparatively profitable, economies of post-Soviet Central Asia (Marsden 2016). Gulbadam Khanum remained in Turkmenistan for eight years because she and her husband thought that they would return back home to Afghanistan once the conflict had ended. As many others believed, she said, perhaps they could obtain Turkmen citizenship and own two passports by claiming their ancestry in a time when new constitutions and laws were being drawn for these newly independent countries. This would have been a good choice for them, she said, in terms of assuring proximity to Afghanistan rather than venturing into a completely new and uncertain life in the United States or Canada – regardless of how attractive such destinations could be. For some years, Gulbadam Khanum said Turkmenistan was a worthy place after all. Indeed, in 2003, Ruven Mendikdiwela, the UNHCR chief of mission in Turkmenistan, stated that, 'The government [of Turkmenistan] has been extremely good and have largely fulfilled their international humanitarian obligations to refugees here. Refugees have access to jobs, education and health care' (The New Humanitarian 2003). Rather than improving, however, the situation in Turkmenistan for those Afghan emigres who did not relocate to North America worsened.

During the Taliban's first rule of Afghanistan in the 1990s, Turkmenistan's official position regarding the conflict was one of neutrality (Šír and Horák 2016). However, in spite of the official political position taken by the Turkmen regime towards the conflict, there were reliable reports of refugees being sent back to Afghanistan to the Taliban regime unwillingly, even though they had initially fled the country to evade the Taliban (Šír and Horák 2016). Although Turkmenistan has provisions for the naturalization of foreigners who apply for it and fulfil the legal requirements of residence, work and language, Afghans who previously lived in Turkmenistan reported to have suffered increasingly tighter controls to their everyday lives. This included new laws that imposed taxation to those marrying Turkmen citizens, higher taxes to their businesses and properties, and irregular extortion and harassment. Years after the initial openness and welcome of refugees by Turkmenistan's president at the time, Saparmurat Niyazov, Afghan emigres either

returned voluntarily (like Gulbadam Khanum's family), or were forcibly sent back to Afghanistan.

When safety in northern Afghanistan improved in the 2000s, Gulbadam Khanum and her family returned to Mazar-e Sharif. Their economic situation had also improved thanks to the trading activities conducted by male members of the family. They bought new land and property in northern Afghanistan and renovated their houses, and lived in a state of relative tranquillity for four years. Nevertheless, Afghanistan was dangerous for them for many reasons including, she said, the family's increasing wealth in relation to the poverty of their neighbours, and the sporadic, yet increasing, violence that ended up spreading to northern Afghanistan, with different armed groups including the Taliban entering in the region. Hence, the family decided to flee to Dubai where they lived for three years.

Gulbadam Khanum's son, already in his 20s, began working in the family business with his father. She and her daughters said they would have liked to settle permanently in Dubai, but this proved impossible in terms of the financial costs of paying rent, residence permits and school fees – as well as the complexities of achieving legal integration there. As it is reported for wealthy Afghan traders and merchants of other nationalities in the Gulf, Gulbadam Khanum's family and their business were affected by the unfeasibility of obtaining citizenship or permanent residency in the UAE (cf. Louër 2018; Vora 2013). Affected by previous forms of forced migration, and further migration as potentiality, Gulbadam Khanum and her daughters moved to Istanbul. Her son stayed in Dubai managing the family business, and her husband moved between Afghanistan, Dubai and Istanbul – localities where members of the family had scattered throughout recent years. Although there are no accurate figures for Turkmen and Uzbek migration from Afghanistan overseas currently available, it can be reasonably assumed that they constitute a sizeable demographic within the high numbers of Afghans who are fleeing the country and are also displaced internally. Many of these Afghan citizens chose Turkey to resettle, as we will examine in the following section.

The third generation on the move: 'We are Turkish in Turkey'

With approximately 4 million immigrants arriving mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iran, Turkey has the largest refugee population in the world (Akar and Erdoğan 2018). Political instability, widespread poverty, the lack of job opportunities and social mobility, alongside the desire to pursue education are important factors for moving from Afghanistan to Turkey, or through the country to Europe. Those who choose to migrate and settle in Turkey are usually young males. Turkey is regularly viewed by these men as a destination of choice especially for those with 'Turkic affinity' and 'articulations of a shared historic and ethno-linguistic past' (Alimia 2014, 171). Life as a migrant in Turkey is precarious for those who are undocumented, with regards to healthcare and education (Alemi, et al. 2018). However, it is also a place where there are opportunities available to earn a living, alongside sending remittances to Afghanistan (Dimitriadi 2018).

Not all migrants in Turkey describe themselves as refugees, or are considered as such by Turkish law. Numerous foreign nationals arrive and stay in Turkey without claiming asylum, but seek legal ways of obtaining work, residence permits and citizenship. The legal status of Grandmother Akgul, Gulbadam Khanum and her daughters show the complex forms of legal integration of this and numerous other families of Afghan

background in Istanbul: some have entered Turkey claiming asylum, whilst others have done so through education, work, tourist or visiting visas. Once established, mainly in Istanbul, they have sought to regularize their residence status or achieve citizenship. As Grandmother Akgul's family shows, some family members may obtain Turkish citizenship faster than others depending on the particular circumstances of their admission to Turkey, their age, and previous migration trajectories.

Grandmother Akgul entered with a visiting visa to see her sons already living in Istanbul and then applied to extend her stay. Meryem and Hülya have already obtained Turkish citizenship, while their parents were still waiting to do so through an investment programme. At the time of fieldwork in Istanbul, citizenship was available to foreign nationals who invested at least US\$500,000 in Turkey and/or purchased real estate with a minimum cost of US\$250,000, amongst other conditions applicants had to fulfil.⁸ More details about the process of legal integration were not revealed to Diana by this family, as paperwork related to their cases was still in progress. Gulbadam Khanum's husband held an Afghan passport, but as a prosperous trader who ran businesses in different cities in Afghanistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the UAE, he spent most of his time travelling throughout these countries. Immigrants to Turkey who claim and prove Turkic ancestry achieve legal integration in a shorter period of time than those who do not. This is why we claim that the situation of this particular family is salient to bring light the processes of legal integration of other Afghan families and individuals of Turkic ancestry (cf. Hakimi 2020).

Turkey has been a historical migration destination for Turkic populations from Central Asia, including Turkmen, Kazakh, Uzbek, Azeri, Uyghur and Kyrgyz (e.g., Can 2020; Shah-rani 2014). According to Turkey's Settlement Law of 1934, such groups are perceived as *natural citizens* rather than foreigners (1934 Settlement Law), and thus they have easier access to legal residence and citizenship on the basis of their Turkic ancestry than other immigrants (Parla 2011; Ustubici 2018). In addition to the trading routes related to carpets, handcrafts and antiquities mentioned previously, the years of 1982 and 1983 in particular were of great importance concerning Afghan migration to Turkey. At the time, Turkey's President Kenan Evren 'initiated the assisted-movements of displaced Afghans with "Turkish origin and culture"' (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018, 490). There have been waves of diverse Turkic migrations to Turkey since then: more recently and as a result of the shrinking humanitarian spaces in Pakistan and Iran, Turkey has also become one of the preferred countries for Afghan refugees to cross to Europe or to seek legal integration (Kaytaz 2016; Okyay 2017).⁹

Our Afghan–Turkmen interlocutors did not refer to themselves as refugees, but as foreigners and, at times, as emigres (*muhājir*). At the same time, Gulbadam Khanum's daughters, Hülya and Meryem, in their early 20s and late teens, respectively, were already Turkish citizens. Speaking to Diana in English (as they said they could barely communicate in Dari), they explained:

Hülya: We are Turkmen, yes, but our mother is Uzbek. When we are with her, we speak Uzbek rather than Turkmen. But really, now we all speak most of the times in Turkish even at home. Actually, we now mix it all up. But if we go to the streets everybody understands that I am Afghan. Maybe it is the way I wear my veil and clothes.

Meryem interjected:

In comparison, everybody thinks that I am just another Turkish girl – I don't wear a veil and I chose my clothes to look Turkish.

When Diana asked them if they identify themselves with Afghanistan, Hülya said:

When we see our relatives here in Istanbul we do, I guess. But when we go to neighbourhoods in Istanbul full with Afghans, we see them, I mean, poor people who come directly from Afghanistan, and we think: No! We are not like them!

Gulbadam Khanum then explained to Diana that this is because, on the one hand, they chose to live in a superior (*bartar*) neighbourhood in Istanbul in contrast to neighbourhoods such as Zeytinburnu, the area known for hosting the largest number of Afghan migrants in the city. On the other, Hülya and Meryem have lived most of their lives outside Afghanistan, and thus important registers of what it means to be a Turkmen and/or Uzbek woman from Afghanistan, according to Gulbadam Khanum and Grandmother Akgul, have been affected. For example, they mentioned that Hülya and Meryem did not know how to weave carpets or could not talk without a slight foreign, or at times stronger Turkish accent. They also acknowledged that male Afghan migrants trying to cross Turkey towards Europe are a considerable population in terms of numbers in Istanbul, as are Afghan-Turkmen families who live in impoverished conditions. Some of these unprivileged families work sewing clothes for the famous Turkish garment industry. Their living conditions in Istanbul were undoubtedly in contrast to those of Gulbadam Khanum's family, and this, rather than being Afghan-Turkmen, was an intersectional point of difference that these women recognized.

It is common that Afghans in Istanbul who can afford it, rent or buy property in buildings inhabited by other Afghans of a similar socio-economic background or who among those they previously knew back in Afghanistan. In these neighbourhoods, everyday sociality among female Afghan emigres is fostered in markets, beauty salons, healthcare facilities and schools. Gulbadam Khanum explained to Diana that regardless of their vanishing registers of life in Afghanistan, Hülya and Meryem were encouraged to cultivate relations with their relatives in Afghanistan, for example, by keeping online regular contact with those still living in Mazar-e Sharif. In Turkey, they also fostered such relations by attending wedding celebrations in Istanbul including in Zeytinburnu where they have relatives who recently arrived from Afghanistan. Although being permissive about the choices of Turkish fashion, accent and gestures Hülya and Meryem embraced on a day-to-day basis, Gulbadam Khanum and her husband discouraged them from becoming 'Turkish' or having expectations of one day being allowed to marry a Turkish man, especially in a context of regular Afghan sociality in Istanbul.

Thus, Hülya's and Meryem's notions of difference in relation to other 'Afghans' in the city were related to gender, ethnolinguistic and socio-economic status, as well as previous migration trajectories and disparate forms of legal integration in Turkey. After all, these young women pointed out that with over four decades of war a great number of Afghan youth like themselves were born, or lived most of their lives outside Afghanistan, and did not envision returning there for good. 'Where are we going next?' was a question that they often mentioned during conversations. Such comments highlight that rather than assuming permanent settlement because they achieved Turkish citizenship, they continue to experience legal integration as potentiality in terms of their impending voluntary or, yet again, another episode of forced migration. This form of inhabiting legal

integration as potentiality are at the core of this family's historical trajectories throughout, for at least, three generations, and continue to surface in their everyday lives.

Gulbadam Khanum explained that they did not know whether Turkey could one day turn out to be as dangerous as Afghanistan, or that it could disappear as the Soviet Union did. She also worried that a new government or immigration policy could make their stay unbearable as Turkmenistan and Dubai had once. Legal integration seen from the perspective of potentiality involves the past as internalized historical and compulsory exile, together with present settlement and citizenship that, for this family, wealth and Turkic ancestry has facilitated. At the same time, it has equipped the third generation with the ability to envision further migration including moving to a different country to study, or to get married. In this sense, mobility for Hülya and Meryem was impending.

When Diana asked Gulbadam Khanum and Grandmother Akgul if they would like to return to the ancestral homeland in Turkmenistan, Gulbadam Khanum joked in Russian: '*Tovarishch!* [Comrade] we were Turkmen in Turkmenistan,' but concluded that she would rather live and die in dangerous Afghanistan than in Grandmother Akgul's ancestral homeland, Turkmenistan, because her life in Ashgabat, raising her children, had been arduous. Besides, they did not get a Turkmen passport, as they initially had expected. 'We were international in Dubai' and 'We are Turkish in Turkey' – Hülya and Meryem continued their mother's joke, respectively. Gulbadam Khanum stressed in a light-hearted tone that an equally significant aspect of their lives was not only to adapt to new host countries, but *when* (not if) they would move to the next destination. 'Birds without legs', she said, continue to fly.

Conclusions

In one century alone, Turkmen and Uzbek communities from Afghanistan have lived and moved in the intricate spaces previously conquered by Imperial Russia. They experienced the emergence and then collapse of the Soviet Union, and were once welcomed in progressive safe havens such as Afghanistan from the 1930s until the late 1970s, and Turkmenistan from the 1990s to the 2000s – places of both refuge and exile that, ultimately, turned into sites of further expulsion and displacement. In recalling their memories of such migratory patterns and search for legal integration, our interlocutors highlighted their origins in the ancestral Turkic people that moved across Central Asia. These populations established either urban lives in places such as Bukhara (in the case of Uzbek narratives), or semi-nomadic patterns in West and Central Asia until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (in the case of Turkmen 'tribal' ancestry). Hence, our work revealed new insights into the lives of migrants from Afghanistan of Turkic background who settle in Turkey. Deviating from the usual attention to the contemporary figure of the male Afghan migrant who, more often than not, moves in marginalized conditions, our work underlined the experiences of women of three generations in a family that, at the time of fieldwork, were recognized by themselves and others as wealthy. With such a focus, we hope to stimulate more attention to the importance of gender, heterogeneity, intersectionality, as well as the significance of deeper historical aspects of present-day Afghan migration.

The origins, places of reference and registers of identity of Grandmother Akgul, Gulbadam Khanum and her daughters, do not simply respond to the geographical space where

they are supposed to officially 'come from' (Afghanistan). Rather, where they come from (Lebap or the 'ancestral homeland'; Aqcha; Ashgabat; Mazar-e Sharif; Dubai; Istanbul) intertwines an arrangement of perspectives of where they have lived, and who they have 'become' in different times and paths of their highly mobile family trajectories. In other words, our case study shows that not only have our interlocutors been on the move for generations, but also states themselves are mobile (Gill, Caletrío, and Mason 2011) by being created and then dismantled, or by shifting borders, governments, and immigration policies. The volatility of the emerging and more established nation-states where these women have lived impinges in their experiences of legal integration as potentiality, or their inhabiting the world as 'birds without legs'.

We have suggested legal integration as potentiality because this concept emphasizes our interlocutors' ability to come into existence as birds who keep flying: for them, being on the move either voluntarily or forcibly is an existential state. Acquiring citizenship offers these women a refuge that allows them to continue embracing mobile trajectories, and these become articulated in narratives of past exile, current states of being emigres, or expectations of further mobility. Their capacity to come into existence as 'birds without legs' also concern, for example, the processes of integration to Turkish society through language, education, daily sociality, labour and, finally, the procurement of a Turkish passport – as well as the uncertainty about failing to obtain one. This also implies the possibilities of migrating to another country through marriage, education, voluntary return or being deported to Afghanistan, or, in their thoughts, the possibility of nation-states and the current world order radically being transformed.

We have used the phrase 'birds without legs' to discuss experiences of migration and legal integration with our interlocutors as this phrase expresses how these types of mobile families and individuals are unable, and at times unwilling to land (settle down permanently). Potentiality, in this case, does not refer to experiences of migration as a temporary state from which 'the migrant' aims to finally escape. Instead, potentiality is this family's disposition, which is historically and geopolitically imprinted in their Turkic mobile ancestry, of being able and talented to relocate because they either had been forced to migrate, had themselves desired to, or are envisioning doing so in the future. Legal integration as potentiality refers to the times when our interlocutors oscillate between economic prosperity and destitution; hope to return 'home' or to resettle elsewhere. This oscillation underscores potentiality as a powerful and encompassing way of dwelling in migration, exile and attempts to legal integration, and as a mode of being that may differ according to the socio-economic, gender and ethnolinguistic backgrounds and histories of those who are embedded in protracted forms of migration. When Grandmother Akgul refers to herself, or her family more broadly, as being 'emigres' from 'everywhere', indeed she is conveying an ontology that encompasses the past, present and future as being on the move, as being birds without legs.

Notes

1. In a similar vein, Thum and Kashgary (2021) reveal the importance of historical migration, more particularly, the *haji* to the formation of the 'Turkistani' identity in Saudi Arabia among Turkic speakers from Soviet Central Asia and the Tarim Basin in Saudi Arabia (see also Balci 2007).
2. Throughout this paper, the most common transliteration of place names found in English are used, for example, Ashgabat, Badakhshan, Charjew and Mazar-e Sharif. The same goes for words in Dari, such as *watan*.

3. What today is called ethnic or ethnolinguistic identities in Afghanistan have been constructed in relation to one another, and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan played a pivotal role with regards to ethnic consciousness in Afghanistan (Adelkhah 2017).
4. The process of registering such emigres, and how they achieved Afghan citizenship, remains obscure, and there is interesting potential in this area for scholars to conduct archival research.
5. For a nineteenth-century historical account of Turkmen groups, see Vámbéry (2006).
6. For more nuanced approaches to this complex processes, see Ilkhamov (2006), Elgar (2006) and Naby (1984).
7. Qataghan denotes a historical region of Afghanistan which has now been subsumed within the provincial boundaries of Kunduz, Baghlan and Takhar.
8. For more details on the category of 'refugee' under Turkish domestic law (depending on whether they receive government assistance or can sustain themselves), see Baran (2020) and Ustubici (2018).
9. For more details on the EU–Turkey deal of 2016 that signalled the fulfilment of a border externalization policy aimed at preventing refugees from entering the EU, and how this has greatly impacted Afghan refugees, see Kuschminder (2018).

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ORCID

Diana Ibañez-Tirado  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8003-6158>

Rabia Latif Khan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0238-340X>

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