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# *migration letters*

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Embracing the infidel: Stories of Muslim migrants on the journey West**

*Yaghmaian, Behzad*

(2005) *Random House, Delacorte Press, New York, 350p.* (ISBN 0 553 80393 X)

International migration is not a marginal phenomenon influencing the lives of few individuals or families but increasingly made a major political issue in recent years. Despite the fact that human history is largely dominated by wandering populations around the world, today it is probably one of the few things nobody is happy with. Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we witnessed massive migrations to Americas which was followed by post-war immigration to Western Europe. Guest workers of Germany made a history with the unique flows and composition. As the west consolidated its labour markets which coincided with economic recession and oil crisis, immigration to Europe was needed to halt. This is probably the most critical point in migration history because since then neither immigration stopped nor the wish to stop it. Hence efforts to tighten the admission have been matched with widening variety of clandestine migrations. One major reason should be increasing poverty and turbulences in sending parts of the world. Nevertheless, success in illegal ways of entry met by increasing xenophobia and demands to control it. Yaghmaian at such a critical time put together an excellent collection of stories he gathered through his journey among Muslim illegal migrants traveling to the West. He followed up stories from 2002 till March 2005, just months before the publication of the book.

Yaghmaian finds out an illegal migration corridor which should be known to many migration researchers. This corridor stretches from Pakistan, Afghanistan passing through Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy to reach France and

## BOOK REVIEW: "EMBRACING THE INFIDEL"

the UK. In my own research carried out in 1999, I have come across the same corridor extended to include more countries in transit reaching to Germany (Sirkeci 2003). It is the most likely route, which I would like to call "permeable borders of Europe".

In Yaghmaian account, there are four very important aspects. First, the human touch which has been lost recently. These people are human beings, with families, with children and most importantly they are a normal bunch with genuine needs and interests fighting for a better life. A wide variety of reasons and motivations *force* these people to move. A strong sense of forced movement is visible in every story. It is not always an escape but a move with a certain level of involuntariness. These people would have been easily accepted as guest workers forty years ago, or they could have been amongst those who "discovered" America.

Secondly, the stories about border crossings make it clear that the border countries of the EU, namely Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey need to be closely monitored. Since in migrants' narratives, these border areas are depicted as battle fields between the guards, soldiers and migrants. And these battles are unfortunately not among equal parties and often resulting in heavy beatings, injuries and even deaths of migrants.

Thirdly, Yaghmaian tells series of stories on how these people were trapped in the darkness of back streets of Istanbul, Athens, Sofia, and Paris. *The colony*, where Yaghmaian spent some time among his fellow Iranians, is a very good example of striking poverty these migrants have to stand. *Aksaray* in Istanbul and *the forest* near Calais are all places where these migrants are allowed to survive if they can.

Fourth important aspect is the remarkable size and variety of illegal service providers operating in these dark zones, often in some *bribery cooperation* with the authorities. There are agents preparing "legal" documents for illegal passages; drivers taking them to or through borders; agents finding accommodation; and all charging high fees, higher than what they would cost normally. Besides, from stories it is clear a large number of officers are involved in undocumented fee businesses (i.e. bribes). Altogether, a big indus-

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try generating possibly millions of pounds per annum is at stake.

Yaghmaian, seems, were not welcome by authorities. He, however, was able to convey us stories reflecting how many of these officers, guards, or even support agents looked down on immigrants and humiliated, intimidated them. He gave us enough material to see genuine stories of decent people who clearly did not deserve all these physical and psychological sufferings.

More of this kind of collections are needed to cover the whole migration picture through the eyes of migrants. Yaghmaian met people who have suffered brutalities, political and social discrimination, and persecution. He brought us stories about a particular state of desperation where migrants live as unwanted and undocumented and yet they are not able to return for various reasons. These are more insightful than many academic studies which usually are restricted time wise. And clearly, there are many more similar stories to be recorded in other corridors of clandestine migration such as North Africa.

*I. SIRKECI, Lecturer in Business and Management, European Business School London, UK  
Email: sirkecii@regents.ac.uk*