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**Lives Stalled: The Costs of Waiting for Refugee Resettlement**

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## **Lives Stalled: The Costs of Waiting for Refugee Resettlement**

### **Abstract**

During their migration, refugees often pass through transit countries, especially before resettlement elsewhere. These stays in cities or camps may last several months or years as they await the next step of their journey. This paper examines the context of waiting for Iranian religious minorities who must first travel to Vienna, Austria in order to apply for resettlement to the U.S. Drawing on theories of waiting, I demonstrate how uncertainty and the passage of time shape refugees' experience in transit contexts. While in Vienna, they endure months of compulsory idle waiting, free from persecution yet unable to begin the long-term process of settling in a new country. I argue that the duration of stay and conditions of life in transit contexts can have meaningful consequences for refugees. My findings demonstrate that even when waiting is temporary and remedied with eventual resettlement, time spent in transit carries material, emotional, and physical costs. Based on 43 interviews and participant observation with Iranian refugees in Vienna, this paper examines the precarity that is born from the uncertainty of waiting. Because resettlement ultimately provides stability, we tend to overlook the insecurities associated with this "pre-resettlement" phase.

Keywords: forced migration; refugee resettlement; transit; waiting; uncertainty

## **Introduction**

Refugees rarely travel directly from the home country to their final destination. Particularly for refugees awaiting resettlement, they have likely spent months or years waiting in refugee camps or cities in neighboring countries before arriving in their community of resettlement. Building on sociological theories of waiting, this paper examines an interim phase of the forced migration trajectory as refugees suspend their lives in a transit country in search of protection. Prior studies of migrant waiting have examined asylum seekers (Griffiths 2014; Khosravi 2014; Rotter 2016), refugees in protracted situations (Hyndman and Giles 2011), migrants with temporary status (Menjívar 2006), or migrants in detention (Griffiths 2014; Turnbull 2015). In a departure, this paper analyzes the effects of waiting for those who have nearly achieved resettlement, adding to the literature on refugee transit (Akcapar 2009; Chan and Loveridge 1987; Palmgren 2017). In contrast to migrants and asylum seekers who may have options for circular, onward, or return migration (Jefrey and Murison 2011), I examine the transit stay of Iranian refugees in Vienna, Austria whose resettlement trajectory is exclusively linear, leaving them to wait for months without any control or alternative.

By examining the stalled lives of Iranian refugees in transit, this paper demonstrates how waiting for resettlement comes with material, emotional, and physical costs. The humanitarian program through which these refugees are resettled offers security and protection, yet refugees must bear the price of their own resettlement, which becomes more costly as time progresses. This program requires a significant investment of time and resources for a resettlement that is not guaranteed, exposing refugees to new forms of precarity in Vienna. As they withstand months of idleness and uncertainty, I argue that the duration of stay and conditions of life in transit contexts have meaningful consequences for refugees. Uncertainty is not an inevitability for refugees on the move (Schiltz et al. 2019), rather this paper demonstrates how it is a byproduct of the structural conditions that refugees must endure in order to gain safety. The very program that provides a pathway to protection simultaneously creates new costs along the way.

Based on 43 interviews and participant observation with Iranian refugees in Vienna, I examine the overseas resettlement processing of religious minorities bound for the United States through the Lautenberg Program. While preparing for resettlement, these refugees are coping with an unpredictable application timeline in a wholly different national context without access to the meaningful forms of engagement that facilitate integration. Studies of refugee resettlement that focus only on the destination leave a lacuna in our understanding of the forced migration experience. I demonstrate how even programs of humanitarian relief create new forms of precarity in the lives of refugees, imposing additional suffering. This paper sheds light on the pre-resettlement stage (Fee 2017) during which refugees' lives stall between the hope and uncertainty of resettlement.

I begin with a review of the literature on waiting, particularly for marginalized groups, followed by an overview of the Lautenberg Program, which makes resettlement contingent upon a transit stay in Vienna. My findings demonstrate show how uncertainty creates new forms of precarity for these refugees in Vienna. They must endure material, emotional, and physical costs as they wait for resettlement.

### **Powerlessness and Waiting**

Scholars have previously theorized the relationship between time and power (Auyero 2011; Bourdieu 2000; Griffiths 2014; Hage 2009; Khosravi 2014; Schwartz 1974, 1975). Put simply, those with power can make others wait, especially if they are the gatekeepers of a necessary or scarce resource. As Bourdieu (2000) notes, "the art of making people wait,...of

delaying without destroying hope, of adjourning without totally disappointing...is an integral part of the exercise of power” (228). This power imbalance is particularly uneven when waiting is accompanied by uncertainty and unpredictability, making those who wait acutely aware of the passage of time (Bourdieu 2000) and reinforcing their subordinate status in relation to decisionmakers (Grace, Bais, and Roth 2018). However, the disenfranchised continue to wait as long as there remains the possibility of a favorable outcome (Khosravi 2014), underscoring the inequity between dominant states and acquiescent subjects (Griffiths 2014). As time is insufficiently theorized in migration studies (Griffiths 2014), this paper examines “waiting as an event, experience or object worthy of analysis in its own right” (Rotter 2016, 81), drawing attention to the various costs imposed upon refugees seeking protection.

Waiting disproportionately burdens marginalized populations. Not only must they wait within a system that lacks reliability, they are expected to do so while remaining “compliant clients” (Auyero 2011, 6). Refugees in search of safety, security, and rights often endure long periods of uncertain, idle waiting in hopes of gaining protection for themselves and their families. Waiting is an endurance test (Hage 2009) that becomes a proxy for refugees’ deservingness and reinforces the notion that their time is less valuable. The expectation that refugees will wait for safety no matter what they lose in the process or what new forms of precarity they might face is implicit in the international humanitarian regime. In exchange for protection, refugees are compelled to renounce ownership of their time. Hyndman and Giles (2011) argue that refugees must withstand long periods of waiting in the Global South before they are seen as legitimating protection and resettlement in the Global North. They critique the tacit assumption that real refugees wait passively while those who move and cross borders on their own are deemed threatening migrants. In order for forced migrants to avail themselves of protection and gain legitimacy, they must remain “without access to livelihoods, mobility and the protection of citizenship” (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 366), as waiting in limbo becomes part and parcel of attaining security.

The need to wait in neighboring countries results from the urgency of refugees’ migration as well as a lack of options when circumstances in the home country remain unchanged. Of the three durable solutions – voluntary return, local integration, and resettlement – resettlement is the least likely of outcomes, as less than one percent of refugees are ever resettled (Fee & Arar 2019). Thus the demand for resettlement far exceeds the supply, necessitating long queues. However, resettlement does not have to be so scarce. It is merely constructed and maintained as such by governments in the Global North. Moreover, resettlement is the only durable solution that is discretionary, as states have no legal obligation to take in refugees this way (Hashimoto 2018).

Schwartz (1974, 1975) suggests that waiting becomes punitive when there is no end in sight. For refugees, indeterminate stretches of waiting create new forms of precarity. Even those in the comparably advantageous position of applying for resettlement are not immune to the harms of waiting, and short periods of waiting under the purview of humanitarian protection still carry detrimental effects for forced migrants. Precarity and relative privilege are not mutually exclusive (Parla 2019). While those applying for U.S. resettlement through the Lautenberg Program may not experience the physical vulnerabilities endured by other refugees fleeing war and violence, they nonetheless experience precarity while waiting in Vienna. When refugees seek the benefits of resettlement, they must endure whatever the process entails, even if it subjects them to further insecurity. Periods of imposed waiting create harmful conditions, the

effects of which may linger even after displacement has been remedied and hinder future integration (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016).

The case of Iranian religious minorities applying for resettlement to the U.S. through the Lautenberg Program appears to provide ideal conditions. These refugees are spared physical endangerment and typically spend less than one year in Vienna. Nevertheless, the specificities of this program also bring challenges, including extreme financial burden and the ambiguity that accompanies two prolonged stages of waiting, first in Iran and then in Vienna. While in limbo, these refugees are subjected to greater precarity, which is engendered in the relationship between the powerless and the powerful (Fassin 2012). Parla (2019) explains how precarity, which she defines as “uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity” (104), is “structurally contingent” (29) and a product of time, place, and circumstance. As relatively privileged refugees, much of the precarity they experience is created by the requirements and structure of the Lautenberg Program rather than their condition as forced migrants.

The refugees’ transit stay in Vienna is mandatory yet does not guarantee approval, necessitating a form of stepwise migration (Paul 2011). For the labor migrants in Paul’s study, stepwise migration was a planful strategy reflective of their agency. However, for these Iranian refugees, their intermediate stay in Vienna is compulsory, depleting, and symptomatic of their powerlessness. These refugees would never have traveled to Vienna if not for the Lautenberg Program. Humanitarian protection is conditioned on their transit migration and the idleness that follows, creating impositions of mobility and immobility. Chan and Loveridge (1987) differentiate between two types of refugee transit: one characterized by movement, the other by stagnation. The time spent in Vienna falls into the latter category as they simply wait for something to happen.

### **The Lautenberg Program**

Iranian religious minorities benefit from inclusion in a special policy that provides a direct pathway to U.S. resettlement. In 2004, the U.S. Congress added the Specter Amendment to the Lautenberg Amendment of 1989 which opened a resettlement pathway for religious minorities in Iran, including Armenian Christian, Baha’i, Jewish, Mandaean, and Zoroastrian minorities who benefit from the “reduced evidentiary standard for establishing a well-founded fear of persecution” specific to this program (The President of the United States 2016, 10). Rather than requiring proof of individual persecution, applicants must instead prove membership to a religious minority group. Additionally, Lautenberg applicants must have preexisting ties in the U.S., typically a family member or friend who assumes certain responsibilities once the refugee is resettled. Accordingly, a refugee’s resettlement destination is determined by the location of their “U.S. tie.” More than 20,000 refugees from Iran have been resettled to the U.S. this way (HIAS Vienna n.d.).

Because there is no U.S. embassy in Iran, the U.S. Government relies on the cooperation of the Austrian Government to provide initial visas and host the humanitarian organization HIAS which manages a Resettlement Support Center in Vienna. Typically when refugees apply for resettlement, they have already crossed an international border and been granted refugee status by the UNHCR or the host country. However, the Lautenberg Program operates differently through a process that requires significant time and financial resources from the refugee applicant. Though this program provides direct access to U.S. resettlement, it also carries risks. In bypassing the UNHCR, these religious minorities are not yet recognized as legal refugees. Should something go wrong with their resettlement application, they are left without the protections that come with refugee status. For more than a decade, Vienna has been the

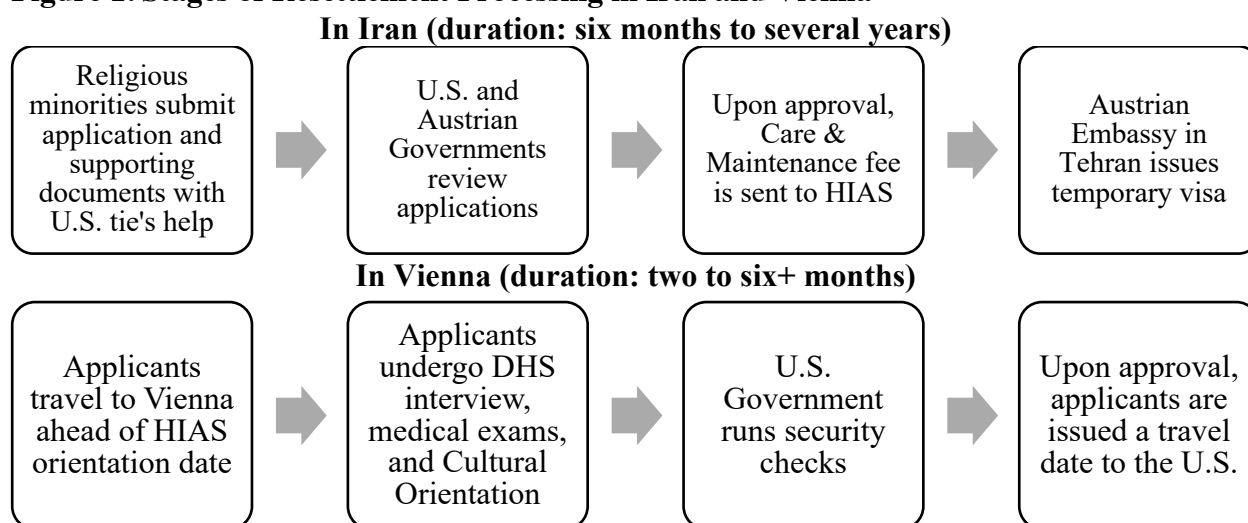
temporary home to thousands of Iranian religious minorities applying for resettlement through the Lautenberg Program. At any given moment there have been between 500 to 900 Lautenberg applicants at various stages of processing in Vienna. Over the course of a year, approximately 2,000 Iranian religious minorities pass through Vienna on their way to the U.S.

Religious minorities first submit a preliminary application and supporting documents from Iran for review by the U.S. Government. This initial stage may take years. Among study respondents, the wait associated with this first review ranged from six months to twelve years, with most waiting between one and two years. Delays may result from missing documents, requests for additional information, or simply drawn out reviews. If an applicant's preliminary file has been reviewed favorably, she must then go to the Austrian Embassy in Tehran to obtain a temporary six-month visa. As applicants come from all over Iran, visa collection may require a trip to Tehran.

Before traveling to Vienna, applicants provide a monetary deposit to HIAS. This money proves to the Austrian Government that these temporary visa holders will not become a public charge, as it is mostly distributed back to applicants to cover their living and medical expenses during the duration of their stay in Vienna. For a single refugee applicant, this Care and Maintenance fee is approximately \$3,000. For cases of two or more, the Care and Maintenance fee is \$2,600 per person (Wright 2015). Following years of waiting in Iran for news of their case, applicants are typically given two to four weeks' notice to leave Iran after learning that they have moved on to the next stage in Vienna. In this short time, applicants must inform employers of their departure, sell any belongings and property, and say goodbye to family and friends. This drawn out wait in Iran followed by little warning of their departure for Vienna is symptomatic of the ways in which speed and time are manipulated for migrants (Griffiths 2014).

Applicants are responsible for getting themselves to Vienna by their HIAS orientation date and covering the cost of air travel. Once in Vienna, they undergo intake, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) interview, background checks, medical examinations, and U.S. Cultural Orientation classes. This drawn out, multi-stage application process (see Figure 1) is only possible because these refugees are not fleeing acute violence in Iran. While the prolonged wait in Iran can be difficult and stressful, for the most part these applicants avoid the physical dangers typically experienced by other refugees on the move.

**Figure 1. Stages of Resettlement Processing in Iran and Vienna**



## Methods

This paper relies on two months of fieldwork in Vienna, Austria in the summer of 2016. I conducted interviews with 43 Iranian religious minorities who had applied for resettlement through the Lautenberg Program. Research access was granted by HIAS prior to my arrival and cleared with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Initial interview recruitment took place in U.S. Cultural Orientation classes at the HIAS office and continued with snowball sampling through refugees' networks in Vienna. My positionality as an American affiliated with a university in Los Angeles made me of interest to many of the refugees, particularly those destined for Southern California and those interested in pursuing higher education in the U.S. The refugees' length of stay in Vienna at the time of the interview ranged from two days to six months. Table 1 outlines respondent characteristics. Interview questions were organized around three topics: their past in Iran, their experience in Vienna, and their expectations for life in the U.S. The majority of interviews were conducted directly in English. In a few instances, when the respondent was not comfortable with or proficient in English, a family member or friend served as interpreter. A Farsi translator subsequently transcribed these audio recordings to ensure that responses were accurately conveyed. I coded interview transcripts and fieldnotes using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti.

**Table 1: Interview Respondent Demographics**

Demographics	N (n=43)	Percentage of Sample
Gender		
Female	24	56%
Male	19	44%
Age		
20 – 39 years old	23	53%
40 – 59 years old	12	28%
60 – 79 years old	8	19%
Religion		
Armenian	20	47%
Baha'i	15	35%
Mandaean	5	12%
Zoroastrian	3	7%
U.S. Resettlement Destination		
Los Angeles	20	47%
Other California	3	7%
Other U.S.	20	47%

I supplemented interviews with participant observation, both in the formal context of the HIAS office and informally around Vienna. I was invited to attend six days of Cultural Orientation classes at the HIAS office as well as an English conversation group. I also had several meetings and conversations with HIAS staff. Additionally, I engaged in participant observation with refugee families at their homes and in the city as they went about their daily lives in Vienna, including shared meals, social activities, and religious meetings. These opportunities for additional observation outside of the HIAS office and interview setting provided a more complete understanding of how they spent their time and coped with their circumstances in Vienna.

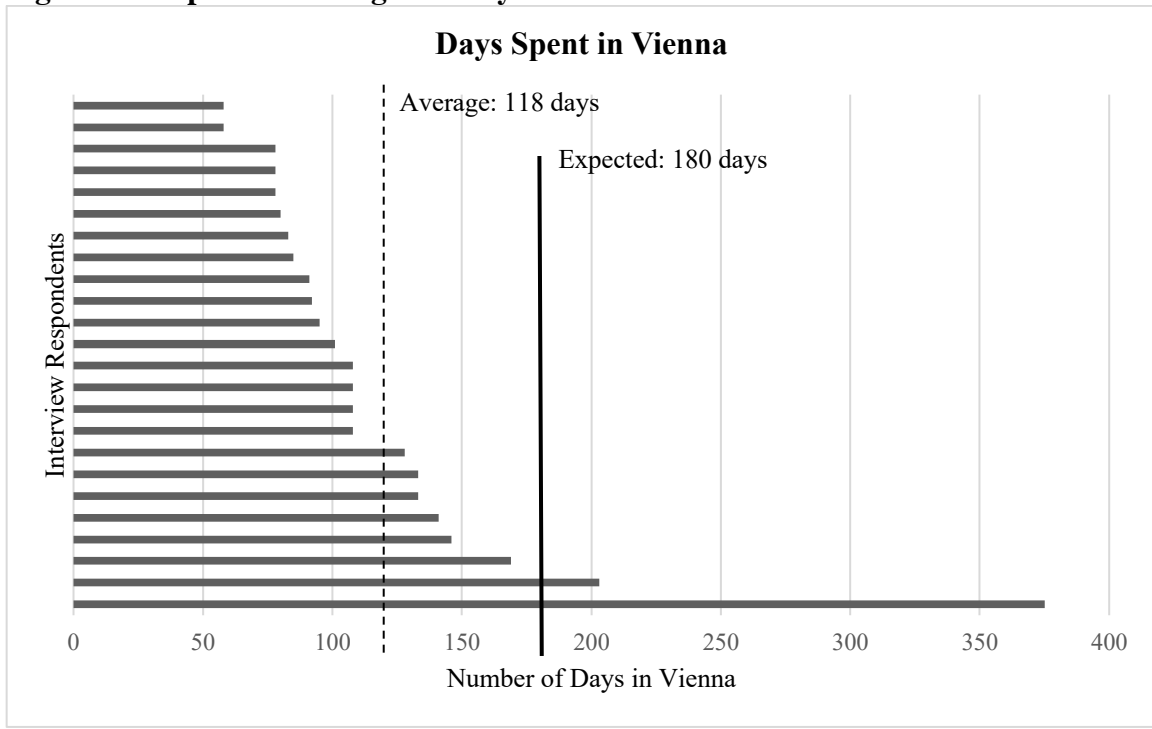


### Uncertainty and Resettlement Processing in Vienna

Once they depart Iran for Vienna, these religious minorities put their future in the hands of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. These applicants have no control if and when their case will be approved and are at the whim of the U.S. Government’s timeline. Their time in Vienna constitutes a “wait with no guarantee of being served” (Schwartz 1974, 843), as they effectively become stuck in Vienna with no recourse should their application for resettlement be denied. Returning to Iran would make them even more vulnerable to the scrutiny and harassment of Iranian authorities, and the conditions of their visa prohibit them from seeking asylum in Austria or elsewhere in Europe. They must wait, biding their time for months without being able to settle or move forward.

HIAS informs applicants to expect to spend up to six months in Vienna while their case is processed, though HIAS noted that the average length of stay at the time of my fieldwork was shorter, at slightly over three and a half months. According to a HIAS staff member, the Vienna stage of the resettlement process is a “sit and wait scenario.” I tracked the departure date for twenty-four respondents. Figure 2 shows their time spent waiting in Vienna, which averaged just under four months. However, some experienced much longer wait times, including one refugee who spent over one year in Vienna before his family’s case was approved. Despite the reality that processing is on average quicker than expected, much of their precarity stems from not knowing when their wait will come to an end or if their case will be approved. A lack of knowledge about the future creates migrant uncertainty (Williams and Baláz 2012). When an applicant arrives in Vienna, her case may be processed in three months, or she may end up one of the exceptional cases that drags out for seven months or longer. This unknowing fuels stress, which becomes an all-consuming state of being while in Vienna. Everyone hopes to be among those approved quickly while simultaneously fearing that they will be the rare case who must wait a year or, even worse, gets rejected.

**Figure 2. Respondents’ length of stay in Vienna**



I interviewed Roya, a young Baha'i woman, just over a month after her family came to Vienna. She shared how her life had stalled since her arrival. She explained, "still I have the same feeling. I don't like it. No, I don't like it...because you know that you are in a dilemma. Just waiting." Respondents like Roya expressed how they felt trapped during their time in Vienna. Even though they were free from religious discrimination in Iran, their daily lives were now fraught with new challenges and anxieties. Omid, an older Mandaean man, told me, "In Iran we have difficulties. Here we have difficulties. It's like the same thing." Leaving Iran for Vienna did not automatically remedy these refugees' hardships. The former insecurities in Omid's life in Iran were simply replaced by new uncertainties in Vienna.

Despite the lengthy paperwork review from Iran, several stages of the resettlement application process must take place in Vienna. These refugees are expected to be "mobile clients [who] must expend resources to come to obtain the service" (Schwartz 1974, 845). The first few weeks after arriving in Vienna are the busiest. HIAS collects their story of religious discrimination and prepares documents for their DHS interview. Applicants also have a medical exam to screen for certain excludable conditions. A few weeks after arrival, applicants undergo an interview with a DHS officer, after which they wait several months for a decision. As these various stages are taking place, a U.S. Government background check is carried out, which is lengthy and lacks transparency. As a HIAS staff member acknowledged, the security check "can take a long time, [it's] one thing we're waiting for...it's very frustrating for the refugees." DHS will not approve a case with a pending security check. In response to inquiries, HIAS simply responds vaguely that a case is still "in check."

Refugees are frequently made to wait due to security concerns (Loescher and Milner 2005). The security check is at the root of the varied and uncertain duration of time that applicants spend in Vienna. Despite the opacity of their security checks, applicants searched for justification and logic in the process, resulting in frustration and confusion. Some applicants were confounded why a seventy-year-old widow's security check took six months, theorizing that she should have been the least threatening of applicants. Parviz, a Zoroastrian university student, could not understand why his security check was still ongoing given his uneventful life. He said, "when I ask them why I'm here for four months, okay, they say to me we are here for security check. Security check for what? I don't go to the military, I do not [do] anything. In Iran I just study and work. A normal life. What is a security check? But that's it." Similarly, Basir, an older Mandaean man who had been in Vienna for five months recounted that when he asked HIAS for an update on his family's case, he was simply told, "You're in check, be patient and wait." Not knowing how long the wait will be or what is required for a favorable outcome creates instability in migrants' lives (Khosravi 2014). The security check process was extremely consequential, yet it was the least predictable and explicable stage of their resettlement processing.

During this transit period, these refugees are living within a vacuum of information tormented by not knowing how long their wait will be, creating an ambiguity that feels manipulative (Bourdieu 2000). Several respondents cited the uncertainty surrounding their stay as the most challenging aspect of their time in Vienna. Zareen, a young Baha'i woman in Vienna alone, explained, "I think for challenge, we don't know how long we must stay in Vienna. One month? Two? Three? Or eight month[s]?" Ultimately, she was in Vienna for just over four months. Zareen knew how fickle the program could be. She had initially applied for resettlement from Iran with her family. Zareen was approved to come to Vienna before the rest of her family,

and so she went alone as they awaited news of their visas. At the time of our interview, Zareen had been in Vienna for two and a half months and her family was still waiting in Iran.

Not only does the lack of information throughout their transit stay create insecurity, applying through the Lautenberg Program also carries significant risks, as resettlement applications can still be rejected. Though rare once in Vienna, the consequences of a rejection are devastating, and the mere possibility is enough to incite fear. By departing on this particular Austrian visa, the applicant has effectively signaled to the Iranian Government her intentions to flee, making her more vulnerable to Iranian authorities upon return. Much of the refugees' uncertainty stems from their non-status in Vienna, which leaves them in limbo as they await news of their case. Not only is their wait arduous and expensive, it is also wrapped up in the fear of a denial after which they would have no safe alternatives. While in Vienna, they are guests to the Austrian Government and prospective refugees to the U.S. Government. A denial would strand the applicant in Austria financially depleted and without the proper visa to seek asylum there or in Europe. This non-status in Vienna is at the core of their precarity as they are not yet legally refugees according to anyone. Not only do the applicants have nothing left in Iran, return would prompt increased government scrutiny and harassment. Denial is unlikely, yet exceptional cases stalled in Vienna served as proof that resettlement was not guaranteed. Though respondents did not mention knowing applicants who had been rejected, they knew that it remained a possibility. HIAS exacerbates this fear by cautioning applicants that missteps in Vienna could preclude resettlement. The HIAS staff are positioned to facilitate this humanitarian program, yet they also contribute to the refugees' anxieties. Though the precarity they experience in transit is likely temporary, these refugees worry that it may nonetheless become permanent. Schwartz (1975) notes that "delay is not only suffered; it is also interpreted" (7). Considering the consequences of a denial, as time progresses in Vienna with no news of approval, fear sets in that something has gone wrong. Waiting is more difficult the more the outcome matters (Rotter 2016; Turnbull 2015). While in Vienna, these refugees are waiting for a decision about their fate.

### ***An All-Consuming Wait***

Naveed had already been in Vienna for six months, and his anger and frustration were pervasive throughout our interview. In contrast to his life before, he told me, "I'm [usually] active, but I'm idle here. I'm very depressed." He explained how he typically concluded everything he had to do for the day by 9 AM, leaving him with nothing to occupy his time but sitting and eating. When I inquired about how his two young children were doing, he replied, "I am depressed. I can't care about my children. It's too long. I don't work here. I don't have money. I don't know what's going on." To make matters worse, his neighbors had started to complain about the noise his children made in their small apartment. The longer refugees wait, the more demoralizing it becomes (Kunz 1973). Because of the growing length of his stay, the effects of the passage of time on Naveed's emotional and psychological wellbeing were amplified. His family had surpassed the six-month expiration date of their Austrian visa and crossed a new temporal threshold. Though HIAS reassured applicants that the date on their visa was merely a formality, it nonetheless added to Naveed's growing stress, making him feel like he had become "illegal" in Vienna.

While we sat in a park popular with the Iranian applicants, Naveed pointed to those around us and told me about the status of their applications. It seemed as though he knew how long each refugee had been in Vienna, continually measuring the growing length of his family's case against the progress of others, fueling his despair. As he introduced me to passersby both during and after our interview, he began each introduction with how long that person had been in

Vienna as if it had become their defining characteristic. Waiting is relational (Auyero 2014), and applicants constantly measured the duration of their stay against those around them. With little to do but wait, Naveed was “in the solitary confinement of the refugee's own obsessions” (Chan and Loveridge 1987, 750). I encountered Naveed the week after our interview as I walked into the HIAS office. Speaking to the receptionist, he was upset and despondent. He concluded that HIAS “hates us” and asked if I could “fight with them” on his behalf. Then he admitted, “I’m nervous.” Now that he had exceeded six months in Vienna, fear had taken hold that something might be wrong with his case, pushing him into a new state of indeterminacy (Turnbull 2015) void of “temporal specificity” (Rotter 2016, 89).

In describing their lives in Vienna, several respondents spoke about the idleness that had come to define their days, unable to make progress as they awaited news of their case. Because their Austrian visa prevented adults from working and children from attending school, their time was empty and unstructured. Between the initial appointments at HIAS and their eventual departure, there was little else for them to attend to. These refugees in Vienna were in a holding pattern in a foreign country whose only purpose was to get them to the U.S. Not only were they deliberately excluded from Austrian social institutions, local engagement felt futile as remaining in Vienna was never the objective. As opposed to asylum seekers who gain social and economic inclusion as they await legal inclusion (Rotter 2016), these refugees existed within a social and legal island. Vienna was merely an interlude between their past in Iran and their future in the U.S. Their time in Vienna was deliberately constructed as liminal. One young woman who had worked full-time in Iran told me how much she enjoyed the week of Cultural Orientation because it at least gave her something to do. When I told Fairuza, a Zoroastrian mother, that I did not want to take too much of her time during a long interview, she reassured me, “we have many empty time here. We don’t have any work to do.”

On a tight budget, many applicants made a habit of passing their days in local parks, particularly during the warmer months. Basir explained, “Nothing to do. Morning to afternoon we’re playing cards, go home for lunch, come back. It gets dark so we go home, drink, then go to bed. Next day, same thing! All the time we come for the park and spend our time here. It’s very expensive [in Vienna]...Nothing to do really. No job. Nothing. When we go home or it’s raining, we are arguing with our wife. It’s very difficult. Nothing to do.” I was introduced to Basir in a park popular with the Iranian applicants due to its proximity to where many of them lived. He socialized regularly with a group of other Mandaean men while their children played on the playground. Basir was not the only one to cite how idleness and stress bred family conflict. Negine, a young Baha’i woman, explained how her family of four had a difficult transition from the pace of their lives in Iran to the unfamiliar inactivity and close quarters in Vienna. She said, “Since we are here [in Vienna], because both my father and my mother worked in Iran, they don’t have anything to do here. And imagine that our house was very, very big [in Iran]...And here, a very small house and all the time we are in front of each other. Lots of arguments that I hadn’t had experienced through my life, and it’s really hard here. It’s really, really hard.” Though free from religious discrimination, many of these refugees experienced an overall deterioration of living conditions in Vienna. Stress, boredom, and small apartments led to family discord. Others noted how challenging the winter months were when the park offered no reprieve in a climate to which they were unaccustomed.

Despite the frustration and anxiety that accompanied the uncertain wait in Vienna, HIAS reminded applicants of their privilege. In an attempt to mollify a group of applicants, a HIAS staff member explained that the wait in Vienna used to be twice as long. During Cultural

Orientation, one of the instructors reinforced this point, telling the class, “be thankful. You are some of the luckiest refugees,” suggesting that their relative privilege negated their hardship. While such statements do put into perspective the difficulties faced by other refugees, it also reinforces the expectation that real refugees are patient and subordinate, justifying the violence of their imposed precarity. As if suffering is a foregone conclusion in forced migration, these refugees were told to be grateful for their circumstances.

### **The Costs of Resettlement**

In this section, I delineate the ways in which waiting for resettlement is materially, emotionally, and physically costly for these refugees as they endure the uncertainty of their stay in a transit context. In order to avail themselves of the protection of the U.S. Resettlement Program, these refugees must renounce ownership and control of their futures. Uncertainty is itself a type of violence that affects migrants’ mental and physical wellbeing (Grace, Bias, and Roth 2018). Javed, a young Mandaean man, told me about how the wait in Vienna was at the root of his and other applicants’ struggles. He said, “They treat us well, but they should work faster because there are many problems here, financial, and mental problems... Also, uncertainty about the future here. We have left our country, and family. However, there are still many problems here, too [many] financial, mental problems. Whoever I met here has the same problems like me.” Javed traveled to Vienna alone because his family could only afford the cost of one application. He left his mother and grandfather behind in Iran, hoping to earn enough money once he settled in Texas to pay for their applications. Refugees like Javed incur costs while waiting, which are the price they must pay for resettlement to the U.S. In seeking humanitarian protection, they confront new precarities in transit.

#### ***Material***

These refugees are expected to self-fund this indeterminate stay in an expensive European city. Not only is the cost of living higher in Vienna than in their home cities in Iran, respondents lamented the poor exchange rate of the Iranian rial to the euro. Being able to finance their time in Vienna is one of the prerequisites for the Lautenberg Program. The most immediate cost of resettlement is material, as they spend down their savings with each passing month. Basir explained, “Whatever we got from Iran, we come and spent it here.” With his family of four, he estimated that he had already spent 15,000 euros during his first five months in Vienna, still without news of his case’s approval. Each additional month in Vienna translated to that much less savings to start his life in the U.S.

After purchasing their flight from Iran to Vienna, these applicants’ principal expense is housing. Because they may only have a few weeks’ notice of their departure from Iran and do not know how long they will be in Vienna, it is difficult to find an apartment through the Viennese rental market. HIAS does not provide any assistance locating or securing housing. Consequently, ethnic entrepreneurs have capitalized on this need, and a migration industry (Hernández-León 2013) of Iranian housing “dealers,” as they are called by the applicants, has sprung up in Vienna. These dealers are Iranian men in Vienna who have made a business out of renting furnished apartments to Lautenberg applicants. One dealer has so many units in a building near HIAS that it was colloquially referred to as his hotel. Prior to departure for Vienna, applicants receive a dealer’s contact information from their network of ties who have already passed through Vienna. The dealer offers the price and size of his available apartments, and the applicant chooses sight unseen. These dealers offer their services as a package, including transportation from the airport and other assistance to help new arrivals get set up in Vienna.

However, the convenience offered by these dealers comes at a price. Both applicants and HIAS were aware that these dealers inflated rental prices. According to a HIAS staff member, these dealers “gouge” and “defraud” the applicants with high prices and a mandatory commission fee equal to one month’s rent. Despite HIAS viewing these dealers so unfavorably, they were deliberately uninvolved in housing matters. Since these refugees are merely applicants and not yet approved for resettlement, the U.S. Government, and HIAS by extension, are not responsible for them. The lack of guidance with housing is symptomatic of the limbo in which these applicants find themselves. While in transit, these refugees are suspended in a liminal time, place, and non-status (Griffiths 2014; Menjivar 2006). One applicant told me that after he complained to HIAS about the cost of his apartment, HIAS simply responded, “we can’t do anything about this.”

Nevertheless, applicants were resigned to pay a premium for housing because they had few alternatives and these dealers offered several conveniences: apartments were secured with short notice, all business was conducted in Farsi, many of the apartments were in proximity to HIAS, dealers typically had multiple units per building ensuring that some neighbors would also be Iranian, and applicants did not have to worry about breaking a lease once they received their flight date. At least one of the dealers also relied on some of his tenants as informal employees, compensating them through rent reduction. I only met a few applicants who were not housed by a dealer.

Applicants relied on their Care and Maintenance fee distributed back to them in Vienna as well as any other accumulated savings. They paid their monthly expenses within a vacuum, not knowing how much longer they would need to make it stretch. They watched their funds diminish without news of their case’s progress, deepening anxiety. Negine was concerned about her family’s financial situation. Her parents had taken out a loan to help cover their family of four’s stay in Vienna. Negine was worried about how long they could make this money last. She said, “We are waiting for something unknown, you know? We have money here, and we don’t know how many months we have to wait here because we have to pay the bills of the apartment... Like my friend he has been here for eight months and we are here for two months and a half. And [we don’t know] if our money is going to finish. It’s lots of difficulties, you know?” Negine’s friend had received his approval after eight months, representing a scenario that could nonetheless happen to her family. Not only would Negine’s family expend their savings in Vienna, each additional month they waited pushed them further into debt.

As time progressed in Vienna, the material costs of resettlement accumulated. Vardan, an Armenian musician, explained, “the first month, second month is good. The third month, my money starts to go down, and now I want to go. Five months here! And I don’t work! We need the money!” For Vardan, the balance tipped during his third month in Vienna as he continued to deplete his savings. The hefty price tag of this resettlement program intensified the refugees’ precarity. As time passed, funds diminished without a concrete end in sight.

### ***Emotional***

Beyond the material cost of waiting, several respondents spoke of the emotion toll their time in Vienna took, describing their feelings of sadness and anxiety as depression. Hage (2009) refers to this sentiment as “stuckedness.” Khosravi (2014) elaborates that “the ambiguity about the duration of waiting generates a sense of uncertainty, shame, depression and anxiety” (74). With little to occupy their time but wait for news of their case, each day that passed carried more disappointment that fueled stress. While scholars have long recognized the initial trauma of forced migration, less attention has been paid to effects of transit, which has been discounted as

empty time and omitted from conceptions of forced migration experiences (Chan and Loveridge 1987). Particularly for those eager to pursue dreams of higher education and employment, idleness became challenging as precious time seemed to slip away (Turnbull 2015). Basir explained how his son was struggling five months into his family's time in Vienna. He said, "My son is 19 years old. He's really depressed now. He spends 24 hours a day sitting by the computer playing games and on the internet." While his father socialized with older men in the park, his son had retreated to the confines of their small apartment, isolating himself and filling his endless days on the computer.

Roya carried the emotional burden of her family's resettlement. Because of her religion, Roya was denied access to higher education in Iran and faced a lifetime of job discrimination. Her parents knew that resettlement was the only way to give their only child a meaningful future. When I first met Roya, she told me that she had spent the previous night crying and woke up that morning feeling dejected, thinking to herself, "what am I still doing here?" She had been in Vienna for nearly six weeks when we sat in a park for our interview. She was particularly aware of her emotional state in relation to those around her. As children laughed on a nearby playground, she asked, "why are they happy? There is no reason to be happy." Later in our conversation she inquired if the other Iranians I had interviewed were happy in Vienna, as she clearly was not. She explained that "ninety percent" of why she was sad and angry was because she felt like she carried the weight of her parents' migration. Her mother was ailing with a debilitating hip condition that left her mostly bedridden in Vienna, while her father occupied himself with long solitary walks around the city. Roya assumed responsibility for her parents' "stuckedness" (Hage 2009), knowing that their migration was for her benefit. So as not to add to her parents' stress, she feigned happiness around them yet struggled to understand why she still felt so sad. This burden had already taken an emotional toll. She described herself as a coiled spring. She felt as though everything around her was pushing down, compacting the spring. She did not know at what point this spring would burst, how far it would fly, or if anyone would be able to find it. The emotional cost of waiting for Roya was tripled, as she internalized the weight of the hardship it caused her parents.

Applicants followed their case's progress through an online portal that tracked each stage, providing milestones that punctuated their time in Vienna and triggered emotional highs and lows. This online system exemplified the extent to which these applicants' futures were at the whim of the decisions of others, structured around bureaucratic markers of progress (Turnbull 2015). Applicants made a habit of logging in to their portal daily to monitor their application with the hope of seeing the coveted words "flight day" flash in neon across the screen, notifying them that the wait in Vienna was finally over. Niloo, a young Baha'i woman, explained, "every day in the morning and in the afternoon, I check my site if...my [flight] date was defined. It's very stressful." She also received regular reminders from her sister to check for updates. Fairuza told me that everyone knew to check their HIAS portal "three or four times a day." Their anxieties got channeled into this online system, eager for any indication that their case had progressed.

When Fairuza's husband logged in and first saw "flight day" flash across the screen, his heart started pounding. After more than four months, the words they were waiting for had finally appeared. His family was leaving Vienna in six days. That same day, a young Baha'i family received their flight notification at a community event I was attending. The casual conversation over tea was interrupted by shouts of joy from one corner of the room, which were soon followed by celebratory hugs and well wishes. They, too, had six days to prepare for their departure.

However, the wait for both families did not come to an end as planned, underscoring the uncertainty and powerlessness that shaped their lives in Vienna. Soon after these families had received their flight date, they got a subsequent notification informing them that their departure would be delayed by more than a week. According to HIAS, flight dates can change because of follow up medical appointments or reissued security checks. Despite their inquiries, these families received no explanation as to why their flights had been delayed. As Bourdieu (2000) notes, “absolute power has no rules, or rather its rule is to have no rules – or, worse, to change the rules after each move, or whenever it pleases, according to its interests” (229). These refugees learned that nothing about the resettlement process is guaranteed, as even a flight date can be taken away. By seeing how quickly their departure changed, these applicants were knocked from the high of celebration to the low of powerlessness, reminding them that they were not in control of their futures. Not only did these families go through the emotional rollercoaster of having their departure delayed, both sets of parents were concerned that their children would now miss the beginning of the school year in a new country.

### *Physical*

Some applicants also suffered physical consequences. One young woman shared how her anxiety had manifested itself somatically. She had menstruated four times in the two and half months she spent in Vienna. The isolation of an elderly applicant’s stay in Vienna proved dangerous when she sustained a back injury alone in her apartment, making the remainder of her stay and subsequent travel to the U.S. more difficult.

Waiting also took a toll on refugees with chronic illnesses like hypertension and diabetes, which were particularly prevalent among many older applicants. For those who needed continued care and access to medication, added stress exacerbated existing conditions. Roya worried about the health of her mother, bedridden with a hip condition, as well as her father. She said, “It’s really hard for him to stay at home. Just go out, walk, come back, cook... Most of the time he sleeps. That is really bad. Because he has [high] blood pressure. I’m afraid... ‘Daddy, don’t think about anything. Everything is gonna to be alright.’ He think[s], making him have higher blood pressure.” The stress surrounding their stay in Vienna coupled with the idleness of their days made it more difficult for Roya’s father to manage his blood pressure. Her mother’s hip condition developed shortly before their departure for Vienna, not allowing enough time to get the surgery she needed. As a result, her time in Vienna was plagued by pain and delayed treatment. She remained housebound, biding her time until she could access medical care in the U.S. With ailing parents, Roya assumed management of her family’s case, hoping to shield them from additional stresses that she feared would worsen their health.

As part of their processing in Vienna, each refugee undergoes a medical examination, which screens for certain excludible conditions, such as active tuberculosis and leprosy. Rather than a comprehensive exam, this appointment simply checks for inadmissible conditions and attends to other medical care as needed. The prevailing fear among these refugees that their case will be rejected leads them to at times withhold medical information that they believe might preclude them from resettlement. One woman withheld her cancer diagnosis, afraid that it would jeopardize her case. Her time in Vienna was spent without the treatment she needed, and she passed away while awaiting approval. This tragic example illustrates how these refugees’ decisions are conditioned by the fear that accompanies waiting for resettlement, which may prove fatal.



### Conclusion

These refugees sought the protection and security afforded by resettlement, yet the conditions of their transit stay in Vienna created new forms of precarity. By not knowing how long their money must last or when they would receive medical treatment, these refugees were stripped of control and agency, watching months pass by without the ability to remedy their situation, all while fearing that their application may be denied. Respondents expressed an overall sense of stalled progress, fraught with uncertainty and unable to move forward with the plans they had envisioned for themselves once they left Iran. In exchange for religious freedom, they confronted new uncertainties. Resettlement is an important form of protection for refugees fleeing persecution and violence, yet humanitarian programs can add to already existing precarities for refugees, particularly when they must assume the costs of their own protection. As a group of relatively privileged refugees, much of their precarity stemmed from the structure of the very program intended to protect them. Accessing resettlement was contingent on compliance with requirements that inflicted hardships and made their lives insecure in new ways.

Upon resettlement, it is important to consider not just the circumstances of a refugee's forced migration, but also the lingering effects of a transit stay. At the theoretical and programmatic level, there is a lack of continuity between transit and resettlement (Chan and Loveridge 1987; Fee 2017). Each stage of a refugee's migration comprises pieces of the same journey, yet the U.S. approach to refugee assistance artificially compartmentalizes these steps as discrete. By the time they arrive in the U.S., these Iranian religious minorities have already borne the material, emotional, and physical costs of a prolonged and idle stay in Vienna.

Most refugees awaiting protection are not afforded the strong odds and humane conditions of those in Vienna. Other refugees and migrants are enduring extreme conditions of waiting in detention centers and through prolonged asylum processing, which blur the line between asylum and imprisonment and use indefinitely imposed waiting as a deterrent for future asylum seekers (FitzGerald 2019). For some refugees, the costs of waiting have become incalculable. Consumed by hopelessness, children have developed resignation syndrome, causing their bodies to shut down in response to the violence of indeterminate waiting (Doherty 2018). These refugees have been legally and physically confined to conditions where they can do nothing more than exist. The Trump Administration's Remain in Mexico policy, or Migrant Protection Protocols, has forced Central American and other asylum seekers to await their asylum hearings from Mexico, creating a dangerous ad hoc transit context for vulnerable refugees (Pitzer 2019).

The resettlement of Iranian religious minorities became a casualty of the Trump Administration, and the worst-case scenario came true when the applications of about 100 Iranians were rejected in 2017, stranding them in Vienna for well over two years without a viable alternative or clear path to protection (Fee 2018), laying bare the extent of their precarity. As U.S. resettlement capacity was reduced and the admission of refugees from Muslim-majority countries all but ceased, the Iranian refugees already in Vienna were subjected to an unprecedented en masse denial (Fee 2018) and endured new and unforeseen precarity in Vienna. After about a dozen of these Iranians were eventually resettled to the U.S. in Winter 2019 (Parvini 2019), many of the remaining refugees were finally granted asylum in an exceptional decision by the Austrian Government in Summer 2019 (Asyl für rund 100 2019). The mere bad timing of having traveled to Vienna shortly before President Trump took office cost them dearly. The capacity of the U.S. Resettlement Program has been devastated by the Trump Administration, and refugees around the world are waiting longer for fewer slots. As security

checks and medical examinations expire, refugees must start the arduous process all over again (Fee & Arar 2019). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated conditions of immobility for refugees awaiting resettlement.

Given the circumstances of their migration, refugees cannot afford to lose whatever remaining resources they have. Once refugees arrive, the U.S. Resettlement Program is demanding of them. Periods of idle waiting deplete refugees of their finances as well as their mental and physical wellbeing soon before they arrive in the U.S., which is counterproductive to the U.S. Resettlement Program's emphasis on self-sufficiency. As a result, refugees may be less prepared for the expectations of resettlement. During extensive periods of waiting, refugees are stripped of any semblance of control and are at the whim of government officials and bureaucrats. Even when the wait is remedied with resettlement, refugees have endured material, emotional, and physical costs along the way. So much is already lost in forced migration. We need to turn our attention to how much more refugees lose while seeking protection.

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