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A Call from Raqqa

Reconfiguring Future Imaginaries in Forced Displacement

Lana Askari

ABSTRACT: This article discusses how the ongoing conflict in Syria and the Rojava Revolution gave way to newly imagined futures and political possibilities for displaced Kurdish Syrians. It examines the Syrian war and the broader Middle Eastern context as a system of unpredictable escalations (Højer et al. 2018) and the liberation of Kobanî as a "critical" and "generative" moment (Das 1995; Kapferer 2015) in the Kurdish imaginary. Using ethnographic (audiovisual) material, I point to how people in forced displacement must constantly navigate uncertainty and reconfigure and consolidate their unknown future paths. I argue that my interlocutor Mihemed stabilized these uncertainties through his capacity to hold multiple future possibilities open simultaneously in order to keep every outcome viable.

KEYWORDS: Kurdistan region, migration, Rojava, social navigation, Syria, uncertainty

"Do you have any idea what this means? I'm calling you from Raqqa, we are finally liberated. You can come and film me now in Rojava!"[1] It was early February 2019 and I was looking out toward a gloomy London sky as I received a call from Mihemed through Facebook Messenger. I had last seen him the year before while revisiting my field site in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI).[2] DAESH[3] had just been defeated after years of fighting in Syria and Iraq. After years of "waiting" for the war to be over, a glimpse of what could be a new future—one in which Syrian refugees could return to their homes and rebuild their lives—existed. After this major event, Mihemed had rushed back to Syria to visit his hometown of Kobanî in Rojava and the former DAESH stronghold in Raqqa. Mihemed and I had many talks about his plans to start reporting and teaching journalism in Kobanî and how soon his family could join him there.

In this article, as part of this special section on displaced conflict, I discuss how the ongoing war in Syria and the Rojava Revolution gave way to newly imagined futures and political possibilities for Kurdish Syrians in forced displacement. Viewing the Syrian war—and the broader Middle Eastern context—as a system of unpredictable escalations (Højer et al. 2018), I point to how people in forced displacement constantly have to reconfigure their (political) selves and consolidate their lives in displacement by navigating uncertainty. One way of navigating these uncertainties is to assert control over the unknown by holding multiple potential future possibilities open at once. Through my fieldwork and the process of filming with Mihemed, a Kurdish Syrian journalist living in the KRI, over the past years, I show how the use of filmic ethnography can illuminate this form of navigating ever-changing future possibilities.[4] As other authors have pointed out, much of our understanding of the Syrian conflict has been obtained through the

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lens and experiences of Syrians displaced by violence (Baban et al. 2017; Maadad and Rodwell 2016; Monroe 2020; Naguib 2017; Pearlman 2017). I focus on displaced Syrian Kurds and an often-overlooked analysis of a revolution within a revolution, namely the Rojava Revolution within the larger Syrian conflict.

The aftermath of rupturing events, such as critical political or revolutionary events, crises or natural disasters, can enable accelerations, hope and future possibilities for new power and political structures and symbolic meanings, as well as create closure or stasis, infrastructural destruction, and economic or political instability (Das 1995; Knight and Stewart 2016; Nielsen 2014; Simpson 2013). Following the declaration of self-rule by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the growing autonomy of Rojava, different perspectives emerged regarding what a future for the Kurdish nationalist struggle could look like and the types of actions required to achieve it.

I invite us to think about uncertainty in trying to reconfigure or make sense of life when possible futures are always subject to change. Sudden new events may happen, or the change that one initially thought was going to happen transforms into something entirely different. How does everyday life in forced displacement provide new opportunities for people to position themselves differently toward (non-) state actors and institutions (Ismail 2018; Wedeen 2019) in the context of the end of revolutions (Haugbolle and Bandak 2017) and regarding Kurdish revolutionary events in particular? How does this change the future paths that people imagine for themselves and can act upon?

In the following paragraphs, I will argue that one way to stabilize these uncertainties is through the capacity to hold multiple future possibilities open simultaneously in order to keep every outcome viable. I use ethnographic material from the film project I engaged in with Mihemed, a Syrian Kurdish journalist in forced displacement, to show how this played out in his decision making and planning processes. I will first discuss the fieldwork context of Kurdistan, followed by the historical context and methodology of this research. Then I will look at how filming with my interlocutor enabled an understanding of how his different future plans changed continuously and how multiple future plans existed alongside each other.

Researching Uncertain Futures in Kurdistan

Mihemed shared the following with me during one of our earlier interviews: “Sometimes I wake up and think it was all a dream. I wish it was. You cannot make a plan because new things keep happening. I have to wait, maybe go to Europe or Australia. No one, even DAESH, America and those forces here, know what will happen.”

“You cannot make a plan because new things keep happening or everything is so uncertain” was a phrase that I kept hearing throughout my fieldwork. My ethnographic fieldwork explored how contingent futures impact on people’s understanding of the present and how this pushes them to adopt different imaginative and planning strategies for the future. From September 2015 to September 2016 I conducted fieldwork in the city of Silêmanî, located in the eastern part of the KRI. Silêmanî is the KRI’s second largest city and at the time was home to tens of thousands of refugees from Syria and internally displaced people (IDPs) from other parts of Iraq, who were housed at the outskirts of the city. Unlike other parts of the country—which have become unstable as terrorism and clashes between different groups continue to divide the country—the Kurdish region in the north has been relatively secure since the fall of the Ba’ath regime in 2003. Considered an economically prosperous “safe haven,” it also attracted other ethnic groups in Iraq to migrate to work there.

In 2014, as the presence of DAESH in Iraq became imminent, Kurdish army forces entered into battle against the group with the support of Western powers. This war and the simultaneous drop in oil prices led to a wider economic crisis and a halt in the payment of public sector salaries, which trickled down into the wider economy. It was against this backdrop that my fieldwork in the KRI began.

The autumn of 2015 was also a period in which the large Syrian migration surge to Europe and other Middle Eastern countries preoccupied most of the media. I was conducting fieldwork with people working for a French NGO and wanted to know how different people were dealing with the economic crisis. There, I met Mihemed, a Kurdish Syrian refugee from the city of Kobanî, who was working at the NGO as a project team member. Mihemed, his wife and his children had fled Syria in 2013 by crossing the border into Iraq. They had been living in Damascus when the revolution started. During the war, they had first moved to Aleppo and then to their Kurdish-majority hometown of Kobanî in the north of Syria to seek safety. When the fighting against DAESH intensified in Syria, Mihemed lost several family members from his mother's side when the *jihadists* attacked Kobanî. This prompted him to cross the border into the KRI and soon other family members followed.[5]

In the KRI, Mihemed first worked as a journalist in Silêmanî for several local media outlets.[6] However, when the economic crisis of 2015 hit the KRI, Mihemed could no longer sustain his family through journalistic work and thus began working for an NGO. After filming an interview with him in the NGO office, he told me that too much had happened to him to explain in one afternoon. We decided to expand the interview and agreed to film a short documentary about his life.[7] This resulted in the documentary film *Bridge to Kobanî* (2019).

Fragmented Nationalism

Dispersed across four countries, it is believed that Kurds are the largest ethnic nation (with an estimated population of 35–40 million) without a state. Kurds live in parts of the Kurdish region currently referred to as Kurdistani Bashur (Southern/Iraqi Kurdistan), Bakur (Northern/Turkish Kurdistan), Rojhelat (Eastern/Iranian Kurdistan) and Rojava (Western/Syrian Kurdistan).

Kurdish nationalist movements and their struggle for a nation state have a long history in these four countries (Gunes 2012; Jwaideh 2006; McDowall [1996] 2007; van Bruinessen 1992). The Arab Spring, starting in 2010, changed these dynamics again, newly empowering Middle Eastern minorities and non-state actors, including Kurds (Bozarslan 2014). While different Kurdish actors and organizations are involved in the construction of a trans-border Kurdish political space, at the present time only the KRG in Iraq has developed into a proto-state following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In 2016, Rojava declared autonomy as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), though it lacks any official recognition.[8]

Compared to the other Kurdish regions where Kurdish resistance had been prominent, the Syrian Kurdish emancipation remained almost invisible (although existent nonetheless; see Tejel 2008 and Cemgil and Hoffman 2016) until the Syrian revolution began in 2011. Decades of discrimination and a lack of solidarity with Kurdish emancipation within the Syrian revolution perhaps played a role in spurring the separatist movement, even though Kurdish participation within the Syrian revolution itself also existed.[9] As protests throughout Syria grew in 2011, demonstrations in the Kurdish inhabited areas started only when Syrian troops attacked Kurdish representatives in 2012. When Syrian government staff and troops withdrew from these areas, Kurds saw their chance and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Kurdish National Council reached an agreement to control the predominantly Kurdish inhabited areas of Northern Syria.

More pragmatically, the Kurdish controlled areas in the north seemed relatively stable at the time compared to other parts of Syria, as the Syrian army left the area in 2012. This is why Mihemed and many others moved to these areas early on in the conflict. In the following years, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the PYD, and the YPJ, the female guerrilla force of the PYD, proved to be key players against DAESH and other (extremist) rebel forces within Syria. The military success of the YPG/YPJ led to the territorial expansion of the PYD in Northern Syria. This expansion also made for new political and military alliances with other ethnic and religious groups and thus to increasing diversity within the administration of these areas (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019: 19). Ideologically, the PYD has pushed what they have called the "Rojava experiment" in direct democracy based on "democratic confederalism," a system that incorporates inter-ethnic solidarity, the emancipation of women and participatory democracy based on local authority.[10]

Filmic Method

In the observational style of filmmaking, semi-structured interviews are placed within the process of filming daily activities and rituals. This is an embodied practice, as a handheld camera allows for different engagements between the ethnographer and the informant (Henley 2006; MacDougall 2005). Informed by the observational method, I set out to film Mihemed in his daily routines. Mihemed and I decided on the places we thought necessary to include. His initial idea was for me to follow him in his daily life: his work at the camps, home-making activities with his family—such as wetting the newly-set cement in his house—and later on visiting his mother's grave. Over the course of a year, we continued to capture moments of Mihemed's life in these spaces and how they influenced his present plans for the future.

As anonymization in academia is a prominent way of ensuring data and informants' security, considering the ethics of portraying someone in film is problematic because of the visual exposure it entails. However, it was important to Mihemed himself that his story was being told so that others would know about his situation. This included giving real names, and showing places and parts of his private life, including portraying his religious contemplations in a region close to territories where such reflections might lead to serious consequences. As Mihemed risked part of his privacy in the film, this meant I also had to reciprocate by honoring his need to remove sensitive material from the film about his parents. His wife also chose not to have a significant role in the film.

Mihemed's position as a refugee also brought about certain ethical considerations. We were unable to travel into Syria so as to not risk his refugee status. In order to film and visit the refugee camp, I had to apply for certain papers and approval from the NGO Mihemed worked for and the local municipality where the camp was situated. In addition, I made sure to collaborate with him during the editing process and informed him of screenings of the film at festivals.[11]

The strengths and limitations of the focus on an individual person, their actions, and the situated ethnographic encounter between ethnographer and interlocutor to understand wider systems and societies is part of anthropological practice (Crapanzano 2013). However, as Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak (2015) put forward, the use of exemplification as a distinct anthropological way of theorizing holds a tension between theory and ethnography, reality and analysis, suggestion and description, the particular and the general. Examples can either stabilize or destabilize (our understanding of) a larger whole. As an epistemic practice in anthropological research, filmmaking can generate different ethnographic elicitations and knowledge about the field. In the case of filming, the focus on one—often charismatic—protagonist allows us to tap into these embodied practices and the specificity of the relationship between ethnographer and

interlocutor at a certain time. The focus on an individual person thus offers a specific type of situated knowledge.

Theorizing Uncertain Futures

In recent years, anthropological understandings of crisis, uncertainty and instability have highlighted how such circumstances can be fertile ground for researching how people find resilience in precarious times and deal with unforeseen and challenging events (Guyer 2017; Pedersen and Højer 2008; Narodsky and Besnier 2014; Roitman 2013; Vigh 2008; Whyte 2008). Situations where crisis becomes the norm can illuminate prospective dimensions of life, as people show ingenious ways of adapting to new possible futures and different forms of risk and agency are at play (Vigh 2008). Authors within this field have argued for the need to explore ethnographically how actors simultaneously balance the particularities of instability while maintaining hope for the future in precarious times (Jackson 2002; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Vigh 2008; Whyte 2008).

Temporality, the state of existing within time, has been discussed in the anthropological discipline with a particular relation to the future (Appadurai 2013; Augé 2015; Bryant and Knight 2019; Guyer 2007; Malkki 2001; Pels 2015). Time includes temporal relations that have collective representations and are expressed and produced over time. Both history and the future are imaginative constructions, generated from people's different perceptions of reality (Malkki 2001). Every present moment, then, includes its own representation of past and future (Zeitlyn 2015). Following Heidegger's phenomenological perspective of lived experience, David Zeitlyn (2015: 391) discusses a need for "temporal proximity" to make sense of time and space in the present, which involves an understanding of the past and the fact that actions taken in the present affect the future. This can also include past (imagined) futures that did not take place (Carr 1991; Zeitlyn 2015). Here Zeitlyn also stresses the importance of how present actions are future-oriented; we are in constant anticipation of short- and long-term futures. Thus, not only our history but also thinking of the future impacts our present life constantly.

Living in uncertainty raises questions about how "normal lives," in terms of daily routines or access to certain goods or services, are disrupted or challenged in society (Jansen 2016; Kelly 2006). In uncertain settings, awareness of social routines becomes apparent and the consolidating of imaginations of future horizons must be constantly renegotiated (Crapanzano 2004). Following Wittgenstein and Butler, Veena Das and Clara Han (2015: 443) understand uncertainty not only as an embodied existence embedded in the social but also as a condition that is predicated on the fragility of how people come to agreements, how life is endured together and how the political and ethical emerge from this. Especially in a context of "chronic crisis," what is deemed normal is not clear-cut. Within the context of crisis and uncertainty, the pathological or abnormal exists within the normal, in a situation where people have to negotiate different modes of creating the social and ethical (Lambek 2010). We also see this in the literature on Palestinians trying to maintain an ordinary life despite the daily violence that erases all normalcy (Allen 2008; Kelly 2006).

Over the past decade, a growing body of literature has focused on the concept of hope and how, as an attitude or existential stance, it is a necessary part of social life (Crapanzano 2004; Zigon 2009; Miyazaki and Swedberg 2016). Hope as a method is about how people understand a knowledge regime as it orients them toward the future (Miyazaki 2006). In his study of Japanese traders, Hirokazu Miyazaki views the changes in their approach to work and the future as a reorientation of knowledge. Hope, as a situated stance or method, can thus take many forms

and is situational. Vincent Crapanzano makes a case for considering how people make sense of their temporal experiences and how they understand future possibilities and limitations. He argues that to hope beyond reality and the present allows possibilities to open and provides an escape from feelings of entrapment, thus adding a temporal dimension to understandings of negotiating horizons and the concept of hope within its realization.

Within shifting moral horizons and precarious contexts, a perseverance of hope is needed both to maintain everyday routines as well as in moments of breakdown (Zigon 2006, 2009). Moving away from hope as a passive stance, Jarrett Zigon understands how hope, in the context of post-Soviet Russia, can also work as an active temporal orientation that stabilizes the present through intentional ethical action, rather than being aimed at a future good. People struggle to make sense of their current predicament and utilize different varieties of hope—active and passive—to enforce, like agency, continuity in their life. Hope and imagining in this context both then have particular temporal aspects, as they open up future horizons and possibilities.

At the same time, when nothing is done to prepare for the fulfillment of hope, people can become caught in the structure of waiting (Crapanzano 1980). Non-movement in hope creates different responses: migration, frustration or disappointment (Hage 2009). Crapanzano's (1980) ideas resonate with Ghassan Hage's (2009) understanding of waiting. Hage argues that in waiting for something to be realized, agency can lie in the mere process of waiting. Rather than simply enduring a condition of "stuckedness," by dwelling in the process of waiting and by playing the underdog and asserting some "agency of no agency," the anticipation of the actual realization of an objective becomes more fulfilling.

This growing body of literature thus points to the interest in how people deal with the uncertainty of the future and the impact that this uncertainty has on daily life in the present.

After Kobanî

As the Syrian civil war continued, the Syrian Kurdish enclaves in Northern Syria consolidated control over their territories and garnered increasing international attention. Western journalists, activists and others started traveling into Rojava to report, provide humanitarian aid, and some even fought alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)[12] to help their revolution, which put forward an alternative to neoliberal practices and the nation state model. International attention rose when the city of Kobanî was overrun by DAESH, forcing almost all of its inhabitants to leave. With US backing of the SDF and coalition airstrikes, the YPG/YPJ mobilized against DAESH. The siege on the city of Kobanî lasted from September 2014 to January 2015. The city was finally taken back after months of fighting, and later in the summer of 2015 the whole canton around Kobanî was liberated from DAESH. Rallies and demonstrations were held in multiple European cities to raise awareness about the ongoing war in Syria as well as support for the SDF. There was also notable Western attention for the YPJ.

I started seeing the name Kobanî popping up everywhere during my fieldwork in Silêmanî. It appeared in murals, restaurants and hair salons, and even newborn babies were being named after it. The liberation of Kobanî was not only seen as a symbolic defeat of DAESH, but the city was soon elevated to a new symbol of hope and Kurdish resistance. When in 2016 the different parties ruling Northern Syria united under the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS; later AANES) and declared themselves an autonomous region, this news was greeted with solidarity across Kurdistan, throughout the Kurdish diaspora and in the wider leftist international community.[13] As Mihemed reflects in the beginning of the film: "It proved that if you have a will, you can do anything."

While historical events are placed in a common narrative by societies or state actors, events themselves are processual and their interpretations multiple; they change over time. When does an event then become so critical or generative that it impacts everyday life in forced displacement? Following both Veena Das' (1995) interpretation of "critical events" and Bruce Kapferer's (2015) notion of "generative events," I have argued elsewhere that the siege and liberation of Kobanî can be seen as a critical event within the Rojava Revolution and the imaginary of Kurdish youth (Askari 2021). Das (1995: 5–6) puts forward how critical events reveal the contingent nature of the world and make people rethink their own position and how they can assert power over that uncertainty. Kapferer's (2015: 10, 18) notion of the "generative moment" leads us to think about events as constructions to which people attach different meanings or significance.

As an event, the battle over Kobanî, as a conflict between extremism and freedom, redefined the role of Kurdish forces in the war against DAESH. Of course, there were other battles that were fought, but the symbolism of this defeat was unprecedented in how it posited good against evil. In addition, it was generative, as the city of Kobanî became habitable again and a stronghold of Kurdish forces and the democratic confederalist system. This also enabled the wider Kurdish population to have new imaginaries of what different and progressive social and political systems could look like, alongside Kurdish emancipation. Or as David Graeber (2008) has pointed out, personal futures shaped into collective hopes for the world in a resurgence of revolutionary practice.

Moving beyond single events, escalation as a theoretical concept can help us to understand sudden accelerating processes characterized by exponential growth and scale, which correspond to new social dynamics (Højer et al. 2018). Through this lens of "change of change," we see how the Arab Spring inspired a revolution in Syria, which inspired a revolution in Rojava, which accelerated, among other things, anti-revolutionary responses by DEASH but also new forms of Kurdish liberation and national imaginaries. These accelerations thus gave way to things and futures that may have seemed unrealistic at first, but then were no longer deemed so impossible, as well as to new imaginations of past, present and future (ibid.: 45–46).

The liberation of Kobanî and the development of the Rojava Revolution generated different anticipations and hopes for the future as these events were placed into individual and collective narratives. Authors have pointed to how the Rojava Revolution strengthened Kurdish transnationalism and activism in the Middle East and in Europe (Černy 2017; Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017; Natali 2004; Tekdemir 2018). In the past decades, Syrian Kurds did not have much connection with Iraqi Kurds; most Syrian Kurds speak a different dialect of Kurdish (Kurmanji, or Northern Kurdish) and travel between these areas was limited (Tejel 2008). However, as a result of the Syrian civil war and the ensuing influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey and Iraq, as well as the fight against DAESH, new Kurdish cross-border relations have been created. Transnational ties with the diaspora and democratic ties with the European Union and international NGOs have also increased, which have led to a newly-developed Kurdish imagined community (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017). Kurds have developed connections with the European left and other cultural and political movements in Latin America; such connections overlap with their multinational approach that aims to displace nation state structures such as secular military dictatorships and authoritarian Islamist theocracies in the Middle East (Tekdemir 2017).[14] Political divisions among Kurds as a whole, a group that has often been described as politically and ideologically fragmented, nevertheless continue and are further entrenched through such transnational and diasporic ties.

Mihemed never spoke much about the Syrian revolution with me, though he would emphasize the war and violence when he put on the news if I was visiting. Still active in his journalistic network, he continued to report on the situation in Rojava and to attend conferences and meet-

ings with fellow journalists. Mihemed remained skeptical about the actual practical implications of the political system of the PYD. He was not political, in the sense that he and his immediate family did not partake in activism, political rallies or fighting. Furthermore, he did not want to return to Syria because there were no jobs there and military conscription was often enforced.

However, as the situation in Rojava shifted and there was more space for self-rule for Kurds, and when his hometown of Kobanî was liberated, he prided himself on being from Kobanî and on being related to the party's co-chair Saleh Muslim through his maternal family. Another element of his understanding of the political landscape was his support for the plurality of Kurdish politics and Kurdish emancipation. As we were filming one day at the refugee camp, he pointed to the flagpoles above the houses: "On the same pole, you see Apo [Abdullah Öcalan], Masoud Barzani[15] and the Kurdish flag. What nobody was able to achieve, we [in the camp] brought together." For him, the establishment of the AANES was part of a larger development of Kurdish interconnectedness that changed his view on his displacement and opened up potential new futures. It made him reflect on his Kurdish identity and brought new possibilities for the existence of a plural Kurdistan region together.

In the film, I intercut between macro-events and the slow unfolding of the micro-events and personal life of Mihemed. They are combined in the film to create an interplay between the present time and future horizons through the use of montage. However, I understand the macro and micro not as separated but rather as intertwined. As Birgitte Stampe Holst discusses in her article as part of this special section, mundane family activities also become sites where ongoing conflict is negotiated in everyday life. Family and personal events, along with the "bigger" developments of war, are both brought into the ongoing process of creating narrative forms and reflecting on one's decisions.

In the summer of 2016, Mihemed's mother, who was also at the camp with him, passed away from a sudden illness. We spent some time visiting her grave, where Mihemed reinforced his understanding of Kurdistan as a transnational space where the different regions had become connected in new ways. As his kids poured water over the new grave, Mihemed expressed the importance of staying close to his mother's burial site. "Kurdistan became her graveyard," Mihemed says in this scene of the film. "We could have taken her back to Kobanî, but she wanted to stay close to us." Even though she was buried in displacement far away from her hometown, Mihemed emphasized the importance of her nevertheless remaining on Kurdish soil.

Navigating Uncertain Futures

Seeing possible future paths through current events can be disorienting. Events that are left unexplained can be existentially disruptive or cause ruptures from what one knows and expects (Irving 2017). To help consolidate uncertainty or future insecurity, people may use different strategies. Through storytelling, we can construct individual narratives around the precariousness of crisis to understand a new situation and thus enable forms of personal agency (Jackson 2008). We may conflate different disastrous events with political decisions or turns (Schäfers 2016) in what can be called collective "affective temporal orientations" (Bryant and Knight 2019: 30–32). Or we may create public discourses of anticipating uncertainty (Hermez 2012; 2017) to create certainty about the uncertain future yet to come. As Sami Hermez has described for people living in post-conflict Lebanon, both anticipating violence and war, as well as nourishing the hope that it might not come to pass, were useful strategies in creating some sense of control over the future in daily life.

Within the Middle Eastern context, authors have looked at how youth understand their futures as "wasted" or "on hold" in their narratives (Khosravi 2017; Schielke 2015). As I got

to know more about Mihemed and his colleagues, I was able to see how people with different backgrounds under the age of 40 were dealing with and enduring the precarious economic and political situation in the KRI, either by waiting or contemplating other plans. The nongovernmental sector and its projects, operated mainly by US and European NGOs, had attracted refugees, returnees and recent graduates who, in the economic crunch, were having a hard time finding employment elsewhere.

One of the NGO workers was Serdar,[16] a Kurdish returnee from London, who was becoming frustrated in the KRI. Sharing his life story with Mihemed about how he had left Kurdistan in the 1990s, only to return now, he held the hair on his head and said, "Look at my hair, it has gone completely white. Here [KRI] you age five years in the time of one year in Europe." Earlier that month, Serdar and Mihemed had gone to the Australian consulate together to acquire information about applying for a work visa. Mihemed's request had been denied, but Serdar, who held British citizenship, was still waiting to hear back. He did not want to return to Europe, he said, but he also did not want to stay in Kurdistan under the current conditions and was looking for a new adventure, somewhere completely away from all the problems of the region. "I want to go somewhere where it is impossible for me to travel back to Kurdistan too often. When you live in Europe, you are still too close to the problems here."

Naz,[17] another employee in her early twenties, had a bachelor's degree in engineering, but with no job prospects in either the public or the private sector, she had resorted to NGO work. She liked helping people in the camps and practicing her English and Arabic but felt that she had to be harsh to the people in the camps. "I want to work for another international company, perhaps after several years of experience they will relocate me abroad." Thus the NGO office environment was continuously filled with talk of prospective work and migratory plans, as employees compared and shared different possibilities and countries, emphasizing the different attributes such as age, refugee status, nationality and language skills necessary to move abroad.

Mihemed also engaged in these conversations. Through filming with him, I understood what, among other things, drove him not to leave for Europe that summer. We were sitting in Mihemed's living room where he was cutting up fruit for his children. Many people in the refugee camp had left for Europe that year and more and more houses and tents in the camp became empty during this time. The fight against DAESH was intensifying, so he had advised his brother to leave their hometown of Kobanî. As we were eating bits of apple, orange and bananas, he was sending audio messages to his brother explaining how to cross the border into the KRI. Getting to the KRI was not the end goal, however. Mihemed expressed his hopes to leave as well, but he did not want to become like those Syrians who got stuck in Turkey or Greece on their way to Europe. He would either stay or try the visa route. In the meantime, living in the KRI was a safe option.

Social Navigation

Henrik Vigh (2008) has outlined the concept of social navigation to refer to how people make sense of their situation, predict their movements and act in uncertain circumstances that shift and change over time. In navigating the unpredictabilities of life, we attune ourselves to social flows and shifts, and how this influences our current position and where we are going in the future. Thus, social navigation refers to how people do "not just act in but interact with their social environment and adjust their lives to the constant influence of social mores and change" (ibid.: 433). Vigh's concept points to how "people invest a great deal of time in making sense of and predicting the movement of their social environment, in clarifying how they are able to adapt to and move in relation to oncoming change" (ibid.: 420).

Navigation can also be focused on the short term. Lars Højer and Morten Pedersen (2019) have argued that in the crisis context of a transitional economic and political system, their Mongolian interlocutors' unwillingness to plan created a "hunter-gatherer" style of life, whereby they were forced to anticipate the accidental happenings in daily life (hustling), without making the efforts of planning for the short- or long-term future. In order to create certainty about the future, therefore, they chose to focus on a "presentism" and react to or make the most of sudden decisions, rather than making concrete future plans.

As mentioned earlier, Mihemed understood his situation as one in which he could not make plans, as things kept changing. While the concept of presentism allows us to engage with a type of temporality that does not revolve around future eventualities, Mihemed's social navigation of uncertainty and his engagement with the future was different because he did speak of long-term goals (for example, applying for an Australian visa, working on his languages or visiting Syria). As Hage (2009) discusses, in contrast to the idea of "stuckedness," people may engage in existential mobility—the sense that one is going somewhere, whether this is practically realized or not—as a form of creating a meaningful life. Mihemed did this by staying in Silêmanî; he remained in close proximity to Syria to allow a possible return, he kept his refugee status in order to be able to leave for another country one day, and he continued to build up a life in the KRI. In this way, he could create some sense of control over the uncertain future by keeping multiple future paths on the table.

Such an approach can be seen as stabilizing because it controls uncertainty by placing multiple future possibilities on hold; though it never fully discards any of these possibilities in case they can be used again to create new openings or opportunities. The ability to hold multiple long-term future plans open can thus be seen as a form of social navigation. To navigate in this way, uncertainties can be stabilized enough to allow daily life to continue and to plan toward (multiple possible) long-term futures. This form of navigation is different from waiting or enduring since it engages with long-term future planning in order to continue life. However, as with all situations, time passes and future horizons also shift. I discuss in the next section how things changed for Mihemed during my fieldwork.

The Opening and Closing of Paths

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I was expecting Mihemed to possibly make the journey to Turkey or Europe, where I would film him again. When this did not happen, we talked about changing the topic and filming Mihemed traveling back to Kobanî for a visit and prepared plans for this. However, we were unable to physically go to Rojava because of security issues at the time, thus we settled on exploring how Mihemed was dealing with these changing plans by walking around the enclosed camp and by filming his daily routines and family life.

Filmmaking is a processual endeavor that enables the performative articulation of creative and imaginative possibilities, and can elicit different forms of knowledge through the presence of the camera (Henley 2006; MacDougall 1998, 2005. Filming acts as a catalyst that brings out things that are part of our daily life, but are not usually brought to the surface in the public domain. It is here, then, that transformative moments such as imaginative futures (Crapanzano 2004) can be explored through film. Due to its fragmentary and transitory nature, film can mimic how different realities, shaped through different senses and experiences, can destabilize and juxtapose conflicting realities (Irving 2013).

The method of filming Mihemed during a walking tour through the refugee camp, for instance, made him reflect on his imaginative futures when we saw the word Kobanî in front of the primary school written in graffiti. In this scene of the film he says:

> If I was like that bird, I could go anywhere. I wouldn't leave one bit of the world unexplored. I would go everywhere. See what other people live like, if I had wings. I would go to Kobanî. That border between Western and Southern Kurdistan would not exist. If I could leave right now, I would arrive in Kobanî by evening. I would look around and look at what is destroyed. I would look at the places where I used to play as a child. I would look at how those places are now. I would spend a couple of hours there and return. Or I would go straight to Europe, or America, or Australia. . . .We often think like children.

By cutting between certain places over time and Mihemed's changing perspectives toward the future in the film, I tried to show the continuous opening and closing of his multiple future paths. Looking back at them now, the different scenes show the continuous and conflicting process of how certain events affected Mihemed's understanding of his future plans and choices. They can also reveal "past futures" (Zeitlyn 2015) that Mihemed had in mind which did not take place, such as his plan to go to Australia.

I continued to visit Mihemed and his family after my fieldwork period whenever I visited Silêmanî. They continued to live in the house they had built in the refugee camp. As the Rojava Revolution gained maturity, Mihemed's ideas about returning to Kobanî became stronger. Whatever his ideas about leaving were, he also spoke about his intention to return to Syria and how he could help rebuild his hometown. Other events in 2018 also reinforced his plans to return to Kobanî; his job at the NGO had come to an end because of the descaling of humanitarian aid to refugees and IDPs in Iraq. The need for a new job thus became another factor in his decision to go to Kobanî and explore the possibility of a full return with his family.

Mihemed made his way to Syria in 2019. After our conversation in Raqqa, he went to Kobanî to visit the ruins of his former house and to see whether he could take up a job there, perhaps as a journalist. For the final shot in the documentary film, we decided to include a scene shot by Mihemed himself while he was in Kobanî. Standing in Kobanî's main square in front of the statue of Arin Mirkan, a female guerrilla fighter who died in the fight against DAESH, he says: "This statue was made in Silêmanî and brought to Kobanî as a gift. . . . It represents how all parts of Kurdistan stand together. . . . I have become a mixed Kurd speaking *Soranji* [a mix of the Sorani and Kirmanji Kurdish dialects]. I hope that this border between our two parts of Kurdistan [will] open and I can travel easily between them." Here Mihemed demonstrates that his situation was not just characterized by existential mobility; he also acted on his future plans and tried them out.

New things kept happening, however, that made these avenues impossible or undesirable once again. Mihemed's plans to return to Kobanî were crushed at the end of 2019. With the withdrawal of US troops, Turkish forces entered Rojava, leading to new conflicts and new waves of Syrian refugees crossing the border into Iraq. Mihemed thus returned to his family in the refugee camp in the KRI. The momentum through which Mihemed was able to reconfigure his future in Rojava had passed. Different events in the region sped up one after another, changing the scale of the war—including through the involvement of more foreign players—to a point of where Mihemed's hopes of any possibility of a future in Syria had become void. We had a phone call at this time, and his tone had shifted completely as he had uttered: "I should have left for Europe back when I could."

Mihemed's way of navigating the uncertainty of the future within forced displacement thus focused on holding multiple future possibilities open simultaneously and not discarding paths that seemed impossible at certain points in time. This speaks to the capacity within social navigation to hold multiple possible future paths in our future imaginary. Furthermore, by not only holding future possibilities open, but also by acting upon them, even if they do not end up being successful, I argue that Mihemed stabilized uncertainty in order to keep going in the present. Stabilizing uncertain futures can thus be a useful anticipatory response in a context of displace-

ment, where change itself is the only constant and further escalations of conflict may close off future possibilities or create new ones not yet imagined.

Conclusion

Possible future paths are a continuously negotiated aspect of human life. Knowledge about how people make sense of and act on instability and uncertain futures is relevant as it reveals what is not seen or articulated in daily life, namely the shifting nature of possible future paths. Set within a precarious context and an economically and politically unstable region, Mihemed's story shows how in the aftermath of escalations in Syria, he had to continually reconfigure his future imaginations and plans in order to navigate and stabilize uncertainty. In the KRI, events and escalating processes continuously reshaped the everyday narratives and future imaginaries of the displaced people living there. These changes could lead to the reimagining of different political and social landscapes, and new imagined future paths. Furthermore, the displacement of Syrian Kurds to neighboring countries points to how the continuously shifting nature of (revolutionary) events can force people who did not necessarily take a political stand before to reconsider how these political developments may both close off but also open up new possible futures.

Vigh's (2008) concept of social navigation is a useful tool to understand how people navigate and make sense of uncertain futures. I argue that one form of navigation involves stabilizing the uncertainty of the future by holding multiple future possibilities alive at once. The use of audiovisual methods—in my case, making a documentary film—can illicit knowledge on how people navigate uncertainty by bringing their imaginaries of shifting possible future paths to the surface of the conversation. Whether they are acted upon or not, this form of navigation points to the human capacity to hold multiple future imaginaries at once. As with my phone call with Mihemed in 2019, in November 2022 I received another call from him wherein he pointed to perhaps newer plans. "I have made it to Germany," he said. "Let's make another film here."

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NOTES

1. North-Eastern Syria (NES).
2. I use the term Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) in this article to indicate the autonomous region in northern Iraq, which borders Iran, Turkey and Syria, and which encompasses most of Iraqi Kurdistan.
3. The so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) / *al Dawlah al-Islameyah fi Iraq wal-Sham* (DAESH).
4. This article focuses primarily on the ethnography and less on the theoretical discussion of audiovisual techniques in the making of the film *Bridge to Kobanî* (2019).

5. The journey from Kobanî to Silêmanî covers about eight hundred kilometers. For a map of the Kurdistan region, see https://www.vox.com/a/maps-explain-the-middle-east#map-36.
6. An estimated 250,000 Syrian refugees lived in the KRI at the time of my fieldwork in 2015–2016, which itself had a population of 5.7 million. Most of these refugees were Kurds from Syria. See also http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5.
7. The story of Mihemed (until 2018) also appears in my PhD thesis, the documentary film *Bridge to Kobanî* (Askari 2019), and an online essay (Askari 2017). It has been partially rewritten for the purpose of this article. See also https://allegralaboratory.net/filming-future-imaginaries-in-kurdistan/.
8. Rojava (Western Kurdistan) is the common name for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), previously the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), a de facto autonomous region in Northern Syria. It became a self-declared autonomous region in March 2016, though this was immediately denounced by the Syrian government and other Syrian revolutionary and opposition forces. Rojava is based on a constitution that promises gender equality and freedom of religion and is focused on direct democracy where local communities govern through councils. It is regionally ruled under the coalition of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), comprised of different parties, including the leading Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) established the People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) in 2012 as a military force to defend the Kurdish inhabited areas in Northern Syria. The YPG/YPJ is aided by the United States to fight DAESH in Syria. In recent years, Rojava has also come to defend and govern other ethnic groups living in North-Eastern Syria, turning it into a poly-ethnic federation in Syria.
9. Other Kurdish forces outside of Rojava are known as the "Kurdish brigade." While they were part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) until 2013, they now remain stationed in Aleppo (Schmidinger 2018: 101).
10. Critical of capitalism, ethnic differentiation and patriarchy, the PYD draws inspiration from postnational and feminist discourses that are informed by the writings of Abdullah Öcalan as well as the political thinker Murray Bookchin. The ideological basis of this anarchic democratic autonomy and its practical implementation have been the focus of recent literature (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2017; Leezenberg 2016). Leezenberg points to a break from Bookchin on the topic of militarized struggles for self-defense, as well as to the hierarchical Leninist/Stalinist cult tradition around Öcalan himself, as being problematic. Other criticisms include the romanticized Western media representation of women's liberation in the KRI (Shavisi 2018; Şimşek and Jongerden 2018).
11. This work and Mihemed's participation in it were not part of his work for the NGO, but part of this separate research.
12. The SDF is a multi-ethnic force under YPG leadership.
13. Among others, the authoritarian character of the AANES administration, its conscription policy and its strategic collaboration with the Syrian government have faced strong criticism from Syrians and Syrian Kurds (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019: 70, 108, 130). When US troops withdrew from the Turkish border at the end of 2019, the SDF sought help from the Syrian army and Russian troops to safeguard the borders against Turkish troops and prevent further assaults on the cities of Manbij and Kobanî, prompting further strong criticism (ibid.). While the AANES holds civil authority over these areas, these former military troops are still present.
14. See also David Graeber, *Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?*, The Guardian, 8 October 2014.
15. Then president of the KRI from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).
16. Fictive name.
17. Fictive name.

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