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Tracing Home: Knowledge Production in Multigenerational Palestinian Displacement

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Abstract

In our globalised world, voices of refugees and internally displaced people are often marginalised or unheard. This article examines how displaced people create knowledge and perceive the concept of home in a diaspora. Drawing on empirical data and interviews conducted with Palestinian refugees in Syria, who were displaced during the contemporary conflict in Syria (2011–2024), this article aims to comprehend the transmission, (re-)production, and promotion of displacement narratives over time. The article explores how the most recent experience of displacement and forced migration has transformed the perception of 'homeland' among Palestinian refugees in Syria. I argue that the massive scale of displacement that took place between 2011–2024 can have a far greater impact on not only Palestinian Syrians but also on the production and perception of displaced people's knowledge. This article highlights the importance of preserving memory and narratives of multigenerational displacement.

Keywords

home – Palestinian diaspora – conflict – multigenerational displacement – Palestine – Syria

Introduction[1]

The notion of feeling 'at home' can be a complex and multifaceted concept, and it can vary widely depending on individual and / or collective experiences and cultural contexts. Home can also carry cultural, familial or spiritual significance. In many cultures, the concept of home is closely linked to family and community, and it denotes a place of belonging and identity.[2] Home may be an abstract construct, where an individual or a community possesses a sense of shared cultural heritage, memories, social experiences, religious tradition, or a set of common values. The physicality of a location may make people consider a city or a country as home. The feeling of home is not related to individuals but is a universal aspect of the human experience and knowledge production. But when a group of people endures forced migration and displacement, they face the risk of losing their homes. Therefore, seeking a new home becomes an essential practice in the (post-)displacement period. The deeply profound pursuit of home can be shaped by a range of factors, such as collective and personal experiences, education, religious and family ties, cultural and social backgrounds, and most importantly the needs of the people on the move.

The concept of home is inextricably linked to several intangible (and tangible) cultural perceptions, such as belonging, identity, safety and family ties. The concepts of home and feeling at home have been examined by numerous scholars across various societies, utilising diverse perspectives, disciplines, needs, and objects of analysis, particularly by sociologists. Hazel Easthope offers a broad but clear definition: home is a unique and inclusive location where individuals may have profound emotional, psychological and social ties and connections.[3] Pierre Bourdieu considered that the sense of feeling at

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the interviewees, my siblings, who shared with me not only the journey of forced displacement, but also personal stories, experiences and profound feelings about the forced displacement we had been through. My gratitude goes also to the comments and suggestions of James Symonds as well as the participants and organisers of the Knowledge Production in Forced Migration workshop, funded by the German Historical Institute, at the University of California in Santa Barbara, California, particularly, Joshua Donovan, Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, and Vitalij Fastovskij. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Diana Bachour-Munawar, for the time we spent discussing the experiential knowledge of displaced people and mechanisms of integration and adaptation.

2 For further discussion on the relationship between home and identity, see Madan Sarup. 'Home and identity', in: Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Melinda Mash, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner (eds), *Travellers' tales. Narratives of home and displacement* (London 2005) 89–101; Kirsten Gram-Hanssen, and Claus Bech-Danielsen, 'House, home and identity from a consumption perspective', *Housing, Theory and Society* 21:1 (2004) 17–26.

3 Hazel Easthope, 'A place called home', *Housing, Theory and Society* 21:3 (2004) 128–138.

home is not inherent but rather culturally constructed. Bourdieu emphasises the importance of comprehending the reasons behind individuals perceiving certain places as natural or as 'home'.[4] Some offer examples of how to do this by drawing on theoretical frameworks, including ontological security theory, to understand people's experience of how and why they feel 'at home'. Several factors have been identified as crucial in fostering the sense of 'home'; one significant aspect is that home acts as a foundation for identity development, providing both stability and opportunities for personal enrichment.[5]

In his work on the concept of home, Peter Saunders pays particular attention to the significant role that cultural dimensions and meanings play in the formulation and perception of home.[6] Similarly, J. Macgregor Wise analysed the relationship between the concept of 'home' and cultural identity by investigating factors that contribute to the establishment of 'comfortable' place(s). His work considers the various forms of markings (e.g. daily habits, children's songs, repetitions) that he identifies as cultural processes contributing to the formation of the 'home' space. Wise argues that 'identity is grounded in habit; the repetition of action and thought establishes home.'[7] The concept of 'home' has been also explored through the lens of tangible 'homely objects', including family photographs, which Gillian Rose sees as all manifestations of familial and social relations. She argues that the utilisation of these homely items is fundamental to the making and perception of home.[8] This underscores the inherent human tendency to look for a home through a myriad of tangible objects, cultural practices and social habits.

Building on academic studies examining the concept of 'home' and the feeling of being 'at home', this article explores how a more recent experience of displacement and forced migration has transformed the perception of 'home' and 'homeland' among Palestinian refugees in Syria. By looking at the knowledge production of Palestinian Syrians who experienced forced

4 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian meditations* (Cambridge 1999), cited in Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The politics of home: belonging and nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States* (New York 2011) 26–42.

5 Ann Dupuis and David C. Thorns, 'Meanings of home for older homeowners', *Housing Studies* 11:4 (1996) 485–501; Harvey C. Perkins and David C. Thorns, 'The making of home in a global world: Aotearoa New Zealand as an exemplar', in: Ray Forrest and James Lee (eds), *Housing and social change: East-West perspectives* (London 2003) 120–139.

6 Peter Saunders and Peter Williams, 'The constitution of the home: towards a research agenda', *Housing Studies* 3:2 (1988) 81–93; Peter Saunders. 'The meaning of "home" in contemporary English culture', *Housing Studies* 4:3 (1989) 177–192.

7 J. Macgregor Wise, 'Home: territory and identity', *Cultural Studies* 14:2 (2000) 295–310.

8 Gillian Rose, 'Family photographs and domestic spacings: a case study', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 14:2 (2000) 295–310.

displacement during the past decade (2011–2024), this article investigates the role of remembering displacement narratives of ancestors in preserving and transmitting intergenerational memories of communities to future generations. Acts and practices of preserving memory and narratives of multigenerational displacement, have the capacity to enrich knowledge produced by displaced people and feed into the pursuit of belonging and the creation of a sense of home. Reminiscing about nostalgic memory as well as recalling home has the potential to become a crucial mechanism of survival and a tool to enhance a perception of cultural identity and pride among the victims of a worldwide failure to protect vulnerable people.

In our globalised world, the voices of refugees, internally displaced populations, and economic migrants tend to be forgotten or unexplored. Drawing on empirical data and interviews conducted with Palestinian refugees in Syria, who were displaced during the armed conflict in Syria, this article aims to comprehend the transmission, (re-)production, and promotion of displacement narratives over time. This study examines how displaced people create knowledge about the perception of the concept of home in the diaspora in the context of multigenerational displacement. As a former stateless refugee, I intend to underscore the significant role of refugees and displaced people in enhancing authentic knowledge production on the understanding of 'home' in forced migration discourses.

Methodology

Methodologically, this article draws upon a combination of triangular ethnography undertaken in focus group interviews, participant observation and autobiographical accounts of forced and unforced migration. The focus group interviews were conducted to assess the differences in the attitudes towards, and impacts of, the displacement experiences and forced migration narratives of a third-generation Palestinian refugee family – my family – which formerly lived in Aleppo. The members of the family included four women and four men.[9] The data and displacement stories were gathered through semi-structured interviews with displaced Palestinians who had experienced different forms of displacement (forced, economic and familial) over the preceding decade, and had previously resided in Syria, Lebanon, Türkiye,

9 The total number of siblings is nine (four women and five men, including the author). In the focus group interviews, the author's voice is excluded. However, the author used the autobiography to reflect on his own experience of displacement and forced migration.

Poland, the Netherlands, Greece, Croatia, Cameroon, Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Algeria and Djibouti. At the time of the interviews, the family members were in Gaziantep, Hatay and Istanbul (Türkiye); Kassala (Sudan); Amsterdam (the Netherlands); and Thessaloniki (Greece). The ages of the women were between 19 and 38, while the men were between 27 and 39. The family members are highly educated, and their academic qualifications range from the BSc and BA level up to the PhD level. The interviews were conducted online in Arabic using social media platforms, i.e. Facebook Messenger, and in person, between October and November of 2017.

By analysing the experiences of displaced people as 'life as told',[10] the narratives on displacement can be conceptualised, created, and retold based on the authentic voices of people who have experienced forced migration. The conversations focused on the meaning of the concepts of 'home' and 'belonging' in the contexts of multiple instances of displacement and how the understanding of 'homeland' can evolve over time. Examining the displacement of Palestinian refugees in Syria, the interviews revealed what knowledge displaced people can produce and how they did this, what mechanisms they use to preserve their cultural memories, and how belonging to a new host community can help establish coping mechanisms to overcome war and displacement trauma. During the conversations, I sought to determine what roles passive and active processes of remembering and forgetting the homeland, along with its associated stories and memories, can play as a means of enhancing a sense of cultural identity and pride among interlocutors. My role, as a researcher, was to facilitate the discussion and offer follow-up questions to focus or elaborate on certain points. However, I listened with no interruptions. Finally, both while conducting the interviews and analysing conceptions of 'home', I also drew on my own experiences with forced migration.

Memory and Narratives of Multigenerational Displacement

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930), issued the Balfour Declaration (or as described in Arabic literature 'The Balfour Promise') in November 1917, proclaiming the support of the British government for the establishment of a 'national home for

10 Edward M. Bruner, 'Experience and its expressions', in: Victor Witter Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds), *The anthropology of experience* (Chicago 1986) 3–30; Helena Lindholm, 'Arrhythmic mobilities and fragmented journeys: Palestinians seeking safety in Sweden', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34:2 (2021) 1657–1674.

the Jewish people' in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration was a prelude to what came after the close of the Second World War, specifically in 1947, when the United Nations issued the Partition Plan for Palestine, which recommended the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states on the land of historic Palestine. In May 1948, the UK announced that its mandate over Palestine had ended, and a Jewish State was founded. Approximately 700,000 Palestinians were forced to leave their homeland and flee to safer areas in 1948.[11]

The year 1948 is one of the critical moments in modern history that transformed the destiny of generations. When 15 May 1948 arrived, millions of lives and destinies altered overnight; some were granted citizenship of a state (Israel) which was established on 15 May, while others were forced to leave. 15 May 1948 is one of those days that represents a competing memory for Muslim Palestinians and Israelis. The former opted to call this day '*Al-Nakba*' 'النكبة' which means 'the catastrophe' in Arabic, while this day represents 'Independence Day' 'יוֹם הָעַצְמָאוּת' for Israelis.[12] The memory of *Al-Nakba* remains a subject of discourse among Israeli political elites, who persist in denying its occurrence and threaten people with expulsion and a recurrence of *Al-Nakba* anytime they display the Palestinian flag.[13] *Al-Nakba* exists as a scar in the memory of Palestinians, and Arabs in general, when their homeland largely became a Jewish state, the name of the region was erased from the map, hundreds of thousands of native inhabitants were forced out of their homes, and their cultural heritage suffered continuous attempts of ethnic and cultural cleansing.[14] Sadly, our grandfather was one of those forcibly displaced Palestinians from the northern city of Safad who escaped to Syria on 15 May 1948 where he and his descendants were granted the title of 'Palestinian refugees in Syria'. That is how I and my siblings were born as stateless individuals; this title will subsequently be assigned to our children.

Multigenerational collective memory can have a profound impact on conceptions of home for displaced peoples. For my family, and for many other

11 Ilan Pappé, *The ethnic cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford 2007); Rashid Khalidi, *The hundred years' war on Palestine: a history of settler colonialism and resistance, 1917–2017* (New York 2020).

12 For further discussion on the memory and narratives of *Al-Nakba*, see Ihab Abdel-Raheem Saloul, Telling memories: Al-Nakba in Palestinian exilic narratives (Amsterdam 2009) Thesis The University of Amsterdam.

13 Jonathan Cook, 'Israel calls the Nakba a lie. So why do its leaders threaten a second one?', *Middle East Eye*, 14 June 2022, https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-palestine-nakba-leaders-call-lie-threaten-second-why (12 November 2024).

14 For further discussion on cultural heritage and competing memory in Palestine, see: Nour Allah Munawar and Issam Nassar, 'Decolonizing the Sacred: the politics of heritage in Jerusalem', *Heritage Memory and Conflict Journal* 5:1 (2025) 1–22.

Palestinians, some of the most valuable stories are those of the 1948 *Al-Nakba*, recalling the forced migration of our ancestors and the routes they followed to find a new home. Our grandfather used to repeatedly relate tales and narratives of *Al-Nakba* every time we visited him. He even made me memorise our family tree and trace our origins back to our sixth great-grandfather as a means of preserving our cultural memory and to remind us of where we came from. He always opened with the prelude to *Al-Nakba* and how terrified he, his family and his friends were that they might encounter bloody events like those that occurred in the Deir Yassin massacre on 9 April 1948.[15]

My grandfather, his siblings and their children wanted to leave for Syria, temporarily, until the situation had settled. They were helped by the Red Cross, which assisted them with their arrival in Damascus by train where they had to separate into two groups. One group settled in the Syrian capital, Damascus, and the other had to continue to Northern Syria, to Aleppo, where my grandfather had to remain; he never returned to Safad, Palestine. I still remember the story he told me about his one-year-old nephew whom he carried across the border to Syria and whom he later had to leave in Damascus along with his parents. The constant reiteration and remembrance of those stories and narratives of displacement and forced migration were in truth exceptionally important to every Palestinian, at home and in the diaspora. These tales etched not only the narratives of displacement in the memories of the second and third generations of Palestinians, but additionally maintained a sense of belonging, preserved the cultural identity, and most significantly transmitted the memory, of forced migration to future generations, even in the diaspora. In the subsequent section, I explore how home is lost, once again, and how the latter impacts people for generations yet to come.

The Journey of the Displaced: from Home to Nowhere

> My name is Nour. What is different about me? You might say nothing, except that I was born a refugee, a stateless person, lived my life as a refugee, and to this day still count myself among those ranks. I am one of those people on the lips of the world, an entity no longer counted as an individual. I am one of a horde made mainstream by the media coverage

15 Deir Yassin is a village near Jerusalem where one of the first massacres carried out by Zionist paramilitary groups against indigenous Palestinian villagers took place, in April 1948. Over 100 people were murdered, including women and children.

> of a country tearing itself apart from the inside out. One life does not matter. My title defines me.[16]

The foregoing paragraph serves as the opening words written by me – a Palestinian refugee born in Aleppo and subsequently displaced from Syria – in Amsterdam for the introductory chapter of my first book. These words sound poetical or emotionally charged. Some criticised me for using a displacement narrative to describe my exile for an academic publication on heritage destruction and reconstruction in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Nevertheless, I view it differently. I consider it the use of an authentic voice to describe how displacement discourse is moulded, represented and promoted. Personally speaking, being born a stateless person is no simple matter, particularly when you reach border patrols, and border guards continuously speculate about your papers before sending you back to wherever you came from. People may think that a person becomes stateless once his or her home country disappears from the map due to some conflict, but what can be most striking is that statelessness is, in fact, an inheritable dilemma and can be passed on to future generations until such time as someone in the family line acts differently by attempting to alter reality. My statelessness story began even before I was born.

When public demonstrations erupted in Syria in 2011, and later evolved into a prolonged armed conflict, millions of Syrians were forced to escape the war and violence. The violence also threatened more than half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria. The controversial targeting of refugee camps in major cities such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs once again displaced Palestinians who, like their fellow Syrians, were forced to seek refuge all over the world. Since the advent of the Syrian Civil War, over 140,000 Palestinians have been forced to flee Syria, and over half of the remaining 440,000 are internally displaced as of 2019, according to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) figures. Included in those numbers were myself and several family members.

As of 2023, the UNRWA estimates that almost six million Palestinians reside in exile.[17] The majority of these are Palestinian refugees living in the Arab region, mainly in Syria (580,000), Lebanon (487,000) and Jordan (2.4 million), where they are deprived of multiple human rights, such as citizenship, passports, or even property ownership in some countries. The plight of Palestinians in

16 Nour A. Munawar, Lifecycles of cultural heritage in conflict: destruction, reconstruction and representation in Syria and Iraq (Amsterdam 2021) PhD Thesis The University of Amsterdam.

17 https://www.unrwa.org/ (11 November 2024).

Syria has been particularly challenging. In a study conducted while visiting Palestinian refugee camps in Aleppo (*Ein el Tal* and *al-Neirab*) and Damascus (*al-Yarmouk*), Neil Gabiam referred to the three generations of Palestinian refugees in Syria as 'informal citizens', while the Palestinians described their everyday lives in the camps in terms of 'suffering' and 'hardship'.[18] The then Commissioner-General of the UNRWA, Pierre Krähenbühl (2014–2019), visited one of the Palestinian refugee camps in Damascus, the *al-Yarmouk* camp,[19] and noted that '[Palestinian refugees in Syria] became yet another generation of Palestinians to endure the trauma of displacement and dispossession'.[20]

The second time we lost our home during the armed conflict in Syria that broke out in 2011, our grandfather's memories of *Al-Nakba* shaped how we understood displacement and home. Due to escalating violence in Aleppo in the summer of 2012, my family and I (along with many other people living in Syria) were displaced on more than one occasion. In July 2012, we had to abandon our home in an area that was on the frontline, in the path of the shooting, and having been displaced, we sought safety in a multi-ethno-religious district of Aleppo (*al-Seryan al-Jadidah*). A couple of weeks later, we were forced to flee, yet again, leaving Aleppo permanently in August 2012. We stayed in the Damascus area (approximately 365 km south of Aleppo) and spent the final few days of Ramadan in a flat in *Darayya* city in rural Damascus. On the tenth day of our second internal displacement within Syria, the fighting intensified between the warring parties in *Darayya*, which was a stronghold of the armed opposition groups. One of my sisters explains:

> Our balcony had a view over the entrance of a hospital. On the tenth day, we noticed a huge quantity of blood pooled in the entrance and a human body lying on the street with blood coming out of his smashed skull, then we heard a medical team member shouting, 'Stop bringing dead bodies, we don't have any space inside'.[21]

Following this incident, our family decided to leave Syria and head to Beirut, Lebanon, where we rented a flat and hoped things would calm down soon

18 Neil Gabiam, *The politics of suffering: Syria's Palestinian refugee camps* (Bloomington, IN 2016).

19 The al-Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus used to be inhabited by approximately 160,000 Palestinian refugees.

20 Pierre Krähenbühl, 'Palestine refugees in Syria: a tale of devastation and courage', 14 March 2019, https://www.un.org/unispal/document/palestine-refugees-in-syria-a-tale-of-devastation-and-courage-unrwa-commissioner-general-op-ed/ (10 January 2024).

21 FPS 006. Female Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in November 2017. Now living in Gaziantep, Türkiye.

so that we could return home. Ironically, this hope of returning home once the situation was back to normalcy was like what my grandfather and his family had hoped for when they left Palestine in 1948. Displacement is often accompanied by the hope of returning home.

For a Palestinian–Syrian family, entering Lebanon is not as easy nor smooth as one might expect. From a legal standpoint, Palestinian refugees in Syria wishing to enter Lebanon are not treated to the visa-on-arrival system, unlike their fellow Syrians. A Palestinian–Syrian needs to apply to the Syrian authorities for a pre-approval admission document to enter Lebanon every time she or he wishes to visit Lebanon, then a fifteen-day visa can be purchased at the Lebanese border. It is worth noting that both the female and male members of my family held Syrian travel documents for Palestinian refugees, and they were not granted Syrian nationality, even though our mother was a Syrian citizen.[22] One of my brothers, who was a humanitarian worker for the Syrian Red Crescent, explains: 'The moment we arrived in Lebanon, we felt safe! However, a few days later, I realised that I was not only a stateless refugee but a double refugee and a double internally displaced person'.[23]

My family remained in Lebanon for a few months until conceding that life in Lebanon would not be possible due to a lack, and often absence, of medical care and an increasing number of discriminatory incidents against Palestinians and Syrians living in the Lebanese capital, Beirut. In May 2013, my family decided to leave Lebanon and go to Gaziantep, Türkiye. In Türkiye, some of the family members found their way into Turkish schools and universities, while others managed to secure work opportunities, and four members decided to pursue education in Europe.

Once my family and I had reached a safe place, we started wondering where our home was now. Is it our grandfather's hometown, Safad in Palestine? Is it our parents', and our birthplace, Aleppo in Syria, or is it some new place where we will establish, yet again, a new life? Across a decade of displacement, the family of nine siblings had been dispersed throughout four continents. The continuous displacement prompted me to revive my memories, reread my diaries, and revisit the notion that I had begun pondering: the meaning of the concept 'home' and how forced displacement could succeed in developing a sense of belonging, as well as what kind of knowledge displaced people are able

22 According to The Syrian Nationality Law of 1969, which is considered paternal *jus sanguinis*, where nationality can be granted if you have a Syrian father; the transmission of Syrian nationality through the mother is not possible. https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d81e7b12.pdf (30 August 2023).

23 MPS 005. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in October 2017. Now living in Warsaw, Poland.

to produce, preserve, and transmit during and after traumatising experiences of forced displacement.

Yearning for Home: the Pursuit of Belonging

Forced displacement, as a social phenomenon, is understood as the involuntary movement of individuals or communities from their homelands to other regions and/or locations. Forced displacement is not a recent phenomenon nor an action that is exclusive to ethnic, religious, or minority groups. Nevertheless, since the dawn of the twentieth century, armed conflict, public uprisings, mass atrocities, settler colonialism, natural disasters, economic crises, and political instability have all played key roles in producing a series of humanitarian tragedies in numerous places across the planet. With the onset of the twenty-first century, migration (including that of refugees) has been the subject of major headlines in daily news reports and on social media platforms, as well as in political debates, election campaigns and academic discussions. All this stimulated a growing interest in academia aimed at studying the impact of displacement and forced migration from different perspectives, such as cultural identity,[24] collective memory,[25] archaeologies and heritage of displacement and ethics,[26] temporality and narratives of displacement,[27] knowledge production,[28] politics and management of refugee camps,[29] and integration mechanisms in host communities.[30]

24 Neil Gabiam and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'Palestinians and the Arab uprisings: political activism and narratives of home, homeland, and home-camp', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43:5 (2017) 731–748.

25 Anaheed Al Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba memories of shattered communities* (New York 2016).

26 Yannis Hamilakis, 'Archaeologies of forced and undocumented migration', *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 3:2 (2016) 121–139; Dan Hicks and Sarah Mallet, *Lande: the Calais' jungle and beyond* (Bristol 2019); Cornelius Holtorf, Andreas Pantazatos and Geoffrey Scarre (eds) *Cultural heritage, ethics and contemporary migrations* (Abingdon 2018); Randall H. McGuire, 'The materiality and heritage of contemporary forced migration', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 49 (2020) 175–191.

27 Lindholm, 'Arrhythmic mobilities'.

28 Ahmad Akkad, 'Displaced Syrian academics: unheard voices in academia', *Forced Migration Review* 70 (2022) 55–58.

29 Maria Hagan, *Disassembling the camp: the politics of policing exiles in Calais, France* (*Criminal justice, borders and Citizenship Research Paper no. 3274536*) (Cambridge 2018), available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3274536 (21 May 2025); Maria Hagan, 'The contingent camp: struggling for shelter in Calais, France,' in: T. Scott-Smith and Mark E. Breeze (eds), *Structures of protection? Rethinking refugee shelter* (New York 2020) 111–121.

30 Rainer Bauböck and Milena Tripkovic (eds), *The integration of migrants and refugees* (Florence 2017); Jenny Phillimore, 'Refugee-integration-opportunity structures: shifting

As discussed in the introduction, several scholars have studied the concept of 'home' and feeling 'at home', and others have focused in particular on the impact of migration, travel, belonging, nostalgia and identity on the perception of home by individuals.[31] Less appreciated, however, is how forced migration and displacement shapes notions of home. When a displaced person is subjected to forced migration trauma, abandonment, and being viewed as a number among hordes of individuals seeking refuge, she or he may search for a new welcoming place in which to belong. The experience of displacement destabilises not only the 'home' feeling, but also whoever belonged and whatsoever connected to that 'home'.

First, although home is often thought of as a space in which individuals experience a feeling of belonging, comfort, being protected, and safety,[32] the experiences of displaced peoples reveal that perceptions of 'home' are mutable.[33] My brother explains:

> Home is a transformable concept. If a country were to grant me things like education, welfare and citizenship in the future, I would certainly feel I belonged. As for the reason, this is due to the fact that the feeling of home, for me, is a sort of reciprocal relationship between the individual and the place: belonging, loyalty and love in exchange for privileges and rights.[34]

When a group of people endure a human-caused disaster (such as armed conflict, civil war, or political instability) or a natural disaster (such as an earthquake, tsunami, volcanic eruption or tornado), the survival instinct is the first thing that kicks in. After, and often during, forced migration, the

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the focus from refugees to context', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34:2 (2021) 1946–1966; Zeynep Sahin Mencutek and Ayat J. Nashwan, 'Perceptions about the labor market integration of refugees: evidences from Syrian refugees in Jordan', *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 22:2 (2021) 615–633.

31 See for instance, Sara Ahmed, 'Home and away: narratives of migration and estrangement', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2:3 (1999) 329–347; Ayşenur Korkmaz. 'At "home" away from "home": the ex-Ottoman Armenian refugees and the limits of belonging in Soviet Armenia', *Journal of Migration History* 6:1 (2020) 129–150; Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The politics of home: belonging and nostalgia in Europe and the United States* (Basingstoke 2011); Shelley Mallett, 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature', *The Sociological Review* 52:1 (2004) 62–89; Katherine Brickell, '"Mapping" and "doing" critical geographies of home', *Progress in Human Geography* 36:2 (2012) 225–244.

32 See also, Perkins and Thorns 'The making of home in a global world'.

33 Ahmed, 'Home and away'.

34 MPS 001. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed online in October 2017. Now living in Istanbul, Türkiye.

displaced person begins to reflect on how such unprecedented circumstances will impact their lifestyle and welfare, and how that will change the life she or he once knew, possibly forever.

Second, forced migration and displacement, as well as the perception of outsiders regarding people on the move as social phenomena, can rupture collective, pre-displacement understandings, and may pave the way for transformations in the hierarchy of social classes and socio-political views of communities, as much as it may equally reinforce these views. Specifically, the conceptions of home can be undermined by a lack of empathy and by perceptions of what displacement means to people who have not experienced displacement themselves. Personally speaking, I can still recall two incidents that altered the way I looked at life, social relationships, and dealing with people. The first one was related by some of my friends in Syria when I was forced with my family to flee our home when the clashes reached our neighbourhood in Aleppo in July 2012. They told me: 'You will not feel the difference after displacement. You were born as a refugee anyhow!' Those words were sufficiently cruel to be more hurtful than the forced migration itself and even the loss of home. Similar words were imparted to me by a university academic when I arrived in Poland to pursue my graduate studies in January 2013: 'You will not be psychologically affected by the forced migration that you went through; you are already a refugee and have been since the day you were born'. Having said that, the prevailing perception of Palestinian refugees is that these people are stateless, born as refugees, and devoid of any sense of belonging. Thus, a misconception is generated about them that forced migration is not an outside phenomenon for them and is deemed as an inherent part of their life experience.

Once every one of my family members was beginning to get settled, I initiated the idea of a focus group, and started asking them about their displacement narratives and how each one had experienced migration. One of the first questions was 'What is the meaning of home for you? Where is it, and why?' The responses I received were noticeably varied, revealing that feelings of home were tied to the presences of rights and a sense of security, while others were tied to nostalgia and affect. Experiences of displacement and forced migration made both particularly salient.

Representing the first notion of home, a brother of mine said that 'Home is the place that grants you rights and allows you to perform your duties freely'.[35] Two of my sisters echoed these sentiments, saying 'Home for me is where I feel stability, security and independence from society's constraints',[36] and 'Home

35 MPS 003. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed online in October 2017. Now living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

36 FPS 007. Female Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in November 2017. Now living in Gaziantep, Türkiye.

is the place where my dignity is maintained, where I feel valued, respected and emotionally comfortable'.[37] Such rights are innately afforded to any citizen worldwide, and people do not appreciate how valuable these rights are unless they are lost or never given to them. This is the case with displaced Palestinians. Moreover, these tangible and basic human rights are fundamentally tied to a sense of belonging and the feeling of home. Highlighting the importance of this connection, my sister responds:

> Home is the place where I feel that I have an impact on the community and where I have a space for opportunities. In addition, comfort and preserved dignity can play an important role in feeling at home and of belonging to a particular place.[38]

The loss of home can affect a displaced person's identity, belonging, and sense of self. By losing the place of memory, safety, security, and comfort, displaced individuals eventually lose the home where they can be themselves, feel at ease, and impact society.

At the same time, interviewees articulated the significance of intangible components of the feeling of home. For some, this led to thinking of multiple places as home. My brother explained:

> Home is the family. It is the place where my family are living, even if my family are residing in more than one country, city or place. For me, the feeling of home is not associated with paperwork, a passport, or the granting of privileges or rights; home can certainly be multiple places.[39]

Another brother confirms this by stating: 'As a Palestinian-Syrian, we are in a complex situation. We were born with two homes: Palestine and Syria. Thus, the concept of multiple homes is a possible phenomenon'.[40] Displacement plays a significant role in keeping a person open to the notion of having more than one home.[41] A brother of mine expands:

37 FPS 002. Female Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in November 2017. Now living in Gaziantep, Türkiye.

38 FPS 008. Female Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in November 2017. Now living in Gaziantep, Türkiye.

39 MPS 004. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in November 2017. Now living in Gaziantep, Türkiye.

40 MPS 001. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed online in October 2017. Now living in Istanbul, Türkiye.

41 For further discussion on multiple homes, see Ahmed, 'Home and away'; Doreen Massey, 'A place called home?', *New Formations* 17 (1992) 3–15; Shelley Mallett. 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature', *The Sociological Review* 52:1 (2004) 62–89.

> Home is a state of mind that your brain imposes on you once you feel psychologically comfortable due to one or more factors. This leads to the fact that it can change incautiously with the availability of more or better equipment or even with the same factors, but under better circumstances.[42]

Often, plural conceptions of home can coexist. For example, one of my brothers shared that:

> Feeling at home is the sense of belonging to a country or state that provides me with everything I need, including education, citizenship, a passport, and healthcare, and where I benefit from those services. So, for me, I would say my home is Syria, although no passport nor citizenship were granted. Simultaneously, I feel a constant nostalgia towards Palestine, even though I have never been there.[43]

A passport and citizenship certificate are two of the first birth rights granted to any new-born child and become the factors that stimulate a sense of belonging and feeling of home. On the other hand, the nostalgia for the 'lost' home that my brother had never set foot in (Palestine), is associated with the stories and narratives of displacement that our grandfather kept reminding us of. This indicates the role of multigenerational displacement narratives in evoking nostalgic memories and maintaining a connection with what should have been home. Becoming a displaced individual from a place where a person has experienced a sense of belonging, security and familiarity, may have significant emotional, psychological and practical consequences. Forced displacement can generate waves of angst and uncertainty about the future, sorrow, grief and frustration at the inequity of reality. Simultaneously, it may provoke displaced people to seek practical challenges, such as looking for a new home and adapting to a new environment, society or place.

The concept of home can be a subjective notion and may vary from one person to the next based on multiple factors, such as the individual's past or cultural background. The displacement process and experience of losing home can impact the way displaced people perceive home and the factors that determine what can be considered home. The more drawn out the displacement experience, the more profound its challenges, and the more it alters all who have been through it. Forced migration experiences, like those

42 MPS 005. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed in-person in October 2017. Now living in Warsaw, Poland.

43 MPS 001. Male Palestinian Syrian from Aleppo, Syria. Interviewed online in October 2017. Now living in Istanbul, Türkiye.

that Palestinians of the first (our grandfather), second (our father), and third (my siblings and I) generations have been through, and who survive them, they may emerge, at the end of it, unrecognisable to each other due to changes and transformations in perceiving and understanding the home concept, the levels of suffering, and the knowledge produced and accumulated during displacement. Knowledge production during and after forced migration can be incomparable to any knowledge previously produced or experiences lived. It is accompanied, and often followed, by a survival instinct that functions as an endless fuel to help perpetuate the life journey.

Conclusion

'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.' This statement by the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), offers a profound understanding of the meaning of displacement and its impact on peoples and societies. The loss of home can have significant consequences on the social, cultural, intellectual, psychological, emotional and educational aspects of individuals, and of society in general.

When I began writing this article, my family were living in six cities located in three different countries (Warsaw, Poland; Gaziantep, Hatay, and Istanbul, Türkiye; Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh; and Doha, Qatar). All of us managed to navigate a way through and establish cultural, familial and economic connections, as well as a sense of belonging in the new society, and to continue to reminisce about the recent past. Displacement and forced migration, though frequently perceived as detrimental, enabled us to produce new forms of knowledge and understandings of home that differ from one another. By viewing the glass as half full, displacement can be seen as a transformative experience or journey that creates unique opportunities and challenges for knowledge production, changes in innate concepts, and a tool with which to preserve cultural memory and narratives. Imperfection makes objects, experiences and concepts perfect.

This article has explored how displaced individuals produce knowledge about their perception of home, and how this process has evolved over time. The preservation of multigenerational displacement narratives and the memory of *Al-Nakba* has significantly contributed to the formation of knowledge regarding home. This article has demonstrated how the resilience of displaced Palestinian Syrians has effectively cultivated novel understandings of the concept of home in a way that highlights how the loss of home can transform into a sense of belonging and cultural pride.

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