

SPECIAL FOCUS

REFLECTIONS ON THE GEOPOLITICS OF REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS

Becoming a Refugee: Reflections on Self-Understandings of Displacement from the Syrian Case

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Abstract

International law, government policy, and a range of academic disciplines all demonstrate different approaches to the task of defining who is a refugee. Yet how do refugees define themselves? When, how, and why do they come to identify with this term, or not? This essay offers reflections on these questions based on interviews with hundreds of displaced Syrians in the Middle East and Europe from 2012 to 2018. Syrian experiences illustrate how individuals' self-understandings as refugees evolve over time as a contingent process not necessarily coterminous with actual physical displacement. I trace how these self-understandings are generated as shifts in three indicative relationships: displaced persons' relationships to their expectations of return to their homeland; their relationships to their pre-flight lives; and their relationships to the word "refugee" itself. This focus on the bottom-up, organic development of a new subjectivity suggests how one's self-definition as a refugee might be less a quality or state that exists synonymously with forced migration than it is an identity that comes into existence gradually over time. That is, it is the product of a process of "becoming" more than "being."

Keywords: Refugee, Syria, Displacement, Forced Migration, Subjectivity, Self-Understanding

During approximately 14 months of field research between 2012 and 2018, I have interviewed nearly 400 displaced Syrians in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, the UAE, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and the United States. I began this project with an interest in gathering individuals' narratives about their experiences in the popular uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad that began in 2011. By 2012, violence already made it dangerous to carry out this project inside Syria. I judged that if I wanted to have frank conversations with Syrians about

politics and protest, it would be safest to do so with those who had left the country. This became increasingly the case as regime repression escalated, the rebellion militarized, external actors intensified their interventions, and conflict evolved into the multi-dimensional war that now has claimed some half a million lives, destroyed much of the country, and forced more than half the population from their homes. As of summer 2018, more than 5.6 million Syrians were refugees in the Middle East and North Africa, about one million were seeking or had received asylum in Europe, and about 100,000 had been resettled elsewhere.¹ Another 6.6 million were estimated to be internally displaced.² These figures make refugees from Syria the single largest national group among the record 68 million people currently displaced around the globe.³

My interviewing project, which has resulted in a book and nearly a dozen articles or book chapters, did not begin with a focus on refugees or displacement. My driving interest was in Syrians as citizens negotiating a new relationship with their own state, not as refugees confronting a new reality outside it. Yet with each passing year that I have recorded Syrians' testimonials and observed their growing communities in exile, I have found that displacement itself has become an ever-more salient element in their lives. The organic growth of my own attention to my interlocutors' displacement alerted me to the organic development of their own identification with displacement. It encouraged me to think about how one's self-definition as a refugee might evolve gradually, and thus be the product of a process of "becoming" more than "being."

This focus on individuals' subjective and intersubjective self-definitions as refugees offers a different perspective than conventional delineations of the term. According to Article 1 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is any person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." While this

¹ See "Syria Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR Operational Portal, last modified August 29, 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>; Philip Connor, "Most displaced Syrians are in the Middle East, and about a million are in Europe," Pew Research Center, January 29, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/>.

² See "Syria Emergency," UNHCR, last modified April 19, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

³ See "The world's 5 biggest refugee crises," Mercy Corps, last modified July 5, 2018, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/worlds-5-biggest-refugee-crises>.

definition remains the legal bedrock, changing conditions periodically have propelled a rethinking of its elements. Most basically, the convention restricted refugee status to those who became displaced in Europe during World War II and before 1951. The 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees removed these geographic and time limits. Other scholars and practitioners have debated other dimensions related to defining who is a refugee.⁴ Rieko Karatani traces the historic development of the concept of “refugee” as a separate category from “migrant,” suggesting that the distinction is an artificial product of institutional struggles.⁵ Even given international law’s common definition of refugee, Rebecca Hamlin points out that processes for determining refugee status differ from one country’s bureaucracy to another.⁶ Moving from statutes to academic conversations, David Scott FitzGerald and Rawan Arar compare constructivist and realist approaches to defining refugeehood.⁷ Claudena Skran and Carla Daughtry examine how political, legal, anthropological, and sociological scholarship emphasize different aspects of the category to be taken into account.⁸ Among those aspects gaining increasing attention is climate change, leading many to make the case for greater safeguards for the plight of “environmental refugees”: those who must abandon their homeland as they can no longer secure a livelihood due to rising sea levels, flooding, drought, or other natural disasters.⁹

The task of defining who is a refugee is of the utmost importance for determining the vulnerable peoples to whom states have an obligation to offer protection. Yet this leaves us to wonder how refugees define themselves. Probing that question, this reflective essay joins a tradition of scholarship focusing on the “view from below” and the lived experience of forced migration.¹⁰ Bringing that perspective to the question of defining

⁴ See William Malley, *What is a refugee?* (London: Hurst, 2016).

⁵ Rieko Karatani, “How History Separated Refugee and Migrant Regimes: In Search of Their Institutional Origins,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 17, Issue 3 (2005): 517–41.

⁶ Rebecca Hamlin, “International Law and Administrative Insulation: A Comparison of Refugee Status Determination Regimes in the United State, Canada, and Australia,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 37, Issue 3 (March 2012): 933–68.

⁷ David Scott FitzGerald and Rawan Arar, “The Sociology of Refugee Migration,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (2018), pp. 8.13–8.14.

⁸ Claudena Skran and Carla N. Daughtry, “The Study of Refugees Before ‘Refugee Studies,’” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, Issue 3 (2007): 15–35.

⁹ See, *inter alia*, Essam El-Hinnawi, “Environmental Refugees,” UN Environment Programme, Nairobi, Kenya, 1985; Arthur H. Westing, “Environmental refugees: a growing category of displaced persons,” *Environmental Conservation* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 201–07; Norman Myers, “Environmental refugees in a globally warmed world,” *BioScience* 43, no. 11 (December 1993): 752–61.

¹⁰ For overview, see Dawn Chatty, “Anthropology and Forced Migration,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, eds. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

who is a refugee, I consider how refugees' own identification as refugees evolves over time as a contingent process not necessarily coterminous with actual physical displacement. In particular, I trace how refugees' self-understandings are generated as shifts in key relationships defining one's sense of self and being in the world. For the sake of illustration, I examine three indicative relationships: displaced persons' relationships to their expectations of return to their homeland; their relationships to their pre-flight lives; and their relationships to the word "refugee" itself. These relationships are neither determinative of refugee self-definitions nor are they exhaustive of all the subjective shifts that individuals undergo as they come to terms with displacement. Rather, I explore them as one set of starting points for an inquiry into refugee status not as a legal category or geographical fact, but as a personal identification. Using the Syrian case as a reference, I explore the three posited relationships as examples of the kinds of experiences that shape how these (and quite possibly other) refugees come to understand their own selves as such. I discuss each of these relationships in turn, using illustrations from my ongoing research on displaced people from Syria.

Relationship to the Expectation of Return

When I began interviewing Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2012, few saw themselves as refugees. Most were from Daraa, one of the first regions in Syria to launch and sustain mass demonstrations and the first in which security forces shot and killed unarmed protestors.¹¹ Correspondingly, Daraa was also one of the first areas where the military carried out reprisals of bombardment and siege, pushing civilians to flee their homes in search of safety.¹² As Daraa lay on Syria's southernmost periphery, that exodus took people across the international border to Jordan.

The Syrians I met in Jordan at that time were technically refugees, in the sense that they were outside their home country and had well-founded fears of persecution due to the regime's punishment of oppositionists and collective punishment of areas perceived to support the opposition. Nevertheless, few of these individuals viewed themselves as such. Most considered themselves to have traveled a matter of kilometers in temporary search of safety, waiting for a lull in violence that they

¹¹ See Wendy Pearlman, "Contingency and Agency in a Turning Point Protest: March 18, 2011 in Daraa, Syria," in *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters*, eds. James Jasper and Frederic Volpi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 111-34.

¹² For an early press release on refugee outflows from Daraa, see "Syria: Doubling of Refugees fleeing to Jordan," UNHCR, last modified August 28, 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/503ca1c99.html>.

expected to come at any time. Few brought any possessions. Many were women and children, with husbands remaining behind as fighters or to guard properties. In our open-ended, free-flowing conversations, people's attention focused overwhelmingly on what they had experienced inside Syria. People narrated their still-fresh and raw experiences of protest and war in great detail; they were much less interested in talking about life in Jordan, where they did not expect to remain long. Accentuating this sense of transience was the fact that these displaced persons were not far from home, either geographically or socially. Southern Syria is part of the larger "Houran" region stretching into northwest Jordan, where extended families sometimes straddle both sides of the border. Some Daraawis who fled to Jordan thus stayed with relatives. Accordingly, they did not see themselves as refugees abandoning their homes for the unknown as much as visitors under duress, relocating for a few days or weeks.

I am not saying that these individuals resisted or opposed the word refugee. Rather, it was simply not paramount in their own sense of themselves in the world. I found similar sensibilities among Syrians whom I met in Turkey in 2013. Some young people had kitchens that consisted only of a few plastic utensils left over from take-out meals; there was no sense investing in more when they were only going to be in Turkey for a short stay. Others were families in which, again, the mother and children stayed in a rented apartment on the Turkish side of the border while the father continually traveled back and forth to northern Syria. Proximity and impermanence, as well as residence within predominantly Syrian milieus growing in Turkish towns, could sometimes make people forget where they were. When I arrived for the first time at one bare apartment shared by several Syrian families and activists, a mother intuitively asked me, "For how long have you been here in Syria?" Only afterwards did she remember that we were actually in Turkey.

Over time, I noticed changes. While my interlocutors still tended to focus on events in Syria more than on their own lives in host countries, the weight of attention to the latter increased vis-à-vis that to the former. One summer in Jordan, rumors buzzed that France was opening opportunities for asylum for Syrians; I continually heard people trading fragmentary information about how one might apply. In Turkey, stories began circulating about boats smuggling people across the Mediterranean to Europe. An activist whose heart and soul was in the Syrian revolution – and who had only left Syria after being released from his second imprisonment – asked me what I thought about him trying his luck on the sea. For more than a year he had stayed close to the border as an act of political will or commitment.

When I saw him three years later, he was living in Germany. That same year, I returned to a Turkish border town and spoke with another activist who refused to leave from where Syria was in eyeshot so he could go back as soon as conditions allowed. “But my friends are leaving for Europe one by one,” he shook his head. “Soon I’ll be here all by myself, talking to the wall.”¹³

The uneven give-and-take between one’s sense of being a refugee and expectation of return are affected not only by geographic proximity, but also by legal status. A university administrator in Canada told me about a Syrian university student who fled government repression and made it to North America, where he resumed his education. It was only when his student visa was set to expire that he found himself forced with a painful decision that he had theretofore managed to avoid: whether or not to apply for asylum. Though the practical likelihood of a safe return home had been slim for years, he had not had to confront that issue as long as, legally, he was an international student taking advantage of educational opportunities abroad, as any enterprising young person might. Only with the eclipse of that legal option did he have to ask himself: am I a refugee?

In offering these anecdotes, I do not suggest that one subjectively becomes a refugee when one no longer hopes to return home. Rather, I propose that one might come to feel a refugee to the degree that one no longer *assumes* that he or she will return home. Correspondingly, it is only after people come to see themselves as refugees that they might begin to rally around “return” as a political cause, personal commitment, or collective aspiration. Before that shift in identity, the idea of return is not a project as much as an article of faith. Such is what struck me when I spoke with a Syrian asylee in Europe in 2018 who invoked an expression that in the Middle East has been almost exclusively identified with Palestinians, long the region’s major refugee diaspora. “We Syrian refugees,” he stated emphatically, “demand our right of return.”¹⁴

Relationship to One’s Pre-Flight Life

In June 2017 in Sweden, I met a displaced Syrian who told me that making a life as a refugee in Scandinavia is a long journey demanding patience. He expressed the most critical step on that journey in imperative form: “*Insa meen koont*,” or forget who you used to be. He then corrected himself. Refugees need not completely forget their past and prior experience. They should make use of it and try to benefit from it. But they cannot get hung

¹³ Interview in Gaziantep, Turkey on January 12, 2016.

¹⁴ Interview in Marburg, Germany on July 1, 2018.

up on their past status, reputation, accomplishments, or possessions. “You are starting a new page,” he told me. “You will not start where you were before you got here. The page isn’t totally blank, but it’s almost blank. What’s sure is that it’s a new page.”¹⁵

These words expressed advice for the particular challenge of forging a new path in Europe. No less, they highlighted another relationship that shifts in the course of the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of displacement: becoming a refugee, this man suggested, means forging a new relationship to one’s own prior sense of self. This idea points to the fact that forced migration does not only signify displacement from a specific physical place, but also dislocation from the aspects of one’s identity which were built in that place and can be difficult (or impossible) to recuperate elsewhere. Following this man’s lead, I consider here one dimension that has emerged as particularly prominent across my interviews with displaced Syrians: their professional or occupational identities.

The degree to which refugee displacement does or does not seem to create an unbridgeable rupture with one’s prior career or work is shaped by numerous factors. These include the nature of the career itself, conditions in the host state (such as bureaucratic regulations and the structure of the labor market), and characteristics particular to the displaced person (personality, age and stage in the life cycle, degree of trauma carried, etc.). Regardless of the causes, change in individuals’ relationship to their pre-flight work identity can be a significant element shaping whether or not they see themselves as refugees. Two examples from Syrians in Germany illustrate. Both are forty-something males, heads of households, and fathers of three children. Both are from towns that came under severe bombardment and both were forced by war to flee with their families to other countries in the Middle East. After several years of coping with constricting life conditions there, each journeyed to Europe.

The first is a school teacher. In Germany, he has struggled in language classes and discovered that, in order to work as a teacher again, he must return to university and become specialized in a second subject area (in Syria, one needed certified specialization in only one area). Gradually accepting that he would not work as a teacher again, he submitted dozens of job applications in youth-related fields, to no avail. After months, he obtained work at a shelter for unaccompanied youth migrants, but that

¹⁵ Conversation in Gothenburg, Sweden on June 11, 2017.

job came to an end when a supervisor vaguely stated that his performance “did not meet expectations.” He recalls his life in pre-war Syria as one filled with meaningful activity: work, spending time with friends and family, playing soccer, etc. Depressed, he now keeps mostly to home, and, although there is a top-notch soccer pitch just down the street, he has no motivation for exercise. His wife jokes that the only good thing about his situation is that they no longer quarrel about him going out too much with his friends.

The second man is a doctor. He spent his first months in Germany in a refugee shelter, where he devoted hours each day to studying German through YouTube videos and phone apps. He then secured a place in a language school, moved through the required levels of German, and simultaneously began volunteering at a hospital as a guest auditor. Though that work was not compensated, he improved his language skills, built relationships with others in his field, learned about the German healthcare system, and advanced his technical knowledge about a host of new medical practices. He then took a specialized medical language course and did a second round of guest auditing at another hospital, where he assumed greater responsibilities. Eventually, he was hired to work as a physician without wages for a month-long probationary period, was granted a license to practice medicine, and then received a work contract at a hospital. Having now passed successive tests to become fully accredited in the specialization in which he had worked in Syria, his career is set to continue advancing

The juxtaposition between these two examples is not intended to elicit praise or pity for any individual’s experience, but rather to hint at the range of difficulties that any forcibly displaced person might face in rebuilding a fulfilling professional life. These experiences, I suggest, can reinforce one’s subjective feeling of refugee status or alternatively help one to move past it. For the former teacher, key aspects of his pre-flight life seem irretrievable and the struggle to create a satisfying new life seems insurmountable. This not only undermines his personal sense of efficacy and practical ability to provide for his family. It also increases the prominence of “refugee” – rather than teacher – as the lens through which he is seen by the state, by his new society, and even by himself. For the doctor, by contrast, displacement has not ended the career that is a major part of his identity. The maintenance of his professional life has allowed him to continue to see himself less according to the label of refugee than according to the terms through which he has seen himself for most of his adult life: as a doctor.

Relationship to the Word “Refugee” Itself

A third relationship shaping displaced persons’ self-identification as refugees, or not, is their felt connection to the word “refugee” itself. Whether a stigma, stereotype, political lightning rod, or legal claim to rights that demand respect, the word “refugee” is loaded with layers of connotations that fluctuate with circumstances and trends in popular and media discourse. To the degree that displaced persons perceive the word “refugee” positively or negatively, they might come to see themselves in it or alternatively avert it as much as possible.

I have observed both trends in my conversations with displaced people from Syria. Perhaps the most powerful assertion of an identification with the term “refugee” that I encountered came from a Palestinian-Syrian. Refugee status was essential for his self-understanding long before he was forced to flee Damascus and, thereafter, remained a pillar of his political identity. He told me:

I was born as a refugee. My father was born as a refugee. My grandfather was kicked out of Acre. So now, I am refugee for the third time. I don’t have a problem with this word. I defend it. I am *with* this word. But I think the word “refugee” is sensitive because of how it has been used here in Germany. So, some people now prefer to use “newcomers.” But for me, I don’t like “newcomers.” It doesn’t mean anything. “Refugee” means to seek for refuge and find shelter. But “newcomers” means that you just came for no reason. “Refugee” is a legal [category] with legal benefits given to you by law. “Newcomer” takes [the politics out of it].¹⁶

Other displaced Syrians I met in Europe similarly claimed the label “refugee” in order to emphasize the non-voluntary nature of their flight. In 2015, when record numbers of people illicitly crossed the Mediterranean in search of new residences in Europe, considerable political, public, and media attention focused on the distinction between “real” refugees – that is, escaping war and persecution – and “economic migrants” searching for better livelihoods than those available in impoverished countries. Syrian asylum seekers I met in 2016 followed the heated debates on this topic and many felt pressure to assert their belonging to the former category and distance themselves from the latter. Asserting ones’ refugee status, it seemed to me, was essential not only for

¹⁶ Interview in Berlin, Germany on August 8, 2017.

obtaining legal residence but also for one's own sense of the legitimacy of doing so.

At the same time, many Syrians were highly sensitive to the conflicted and negative connotations that the word "refugee" carries, whether or not one is fleeing persecution. This encouraged some to try to distance themselves from the term. A young man from Aleppo explained:

Today, the word "refugee" is used in a horrible way. It's something either to be pitied or blamed for everything. Overpopulation? It's the refugees. Rents going up? It's the refugees. Crime? It's the refugees. If you label people refugees, they remain refugees for the rest of their lives. For that reason, the organization I work with here doesn't use this word. Instead, we say "newcomers." After a while, they are no longer newcomers – just members of society.¹⁷

This sentiment has increased as have anti-refugee attitudes in host countries. As I met Syrian asylees in Germany in 2018, nearly all brought up their dismay with what they saw as relentless, pejorative media coverage. "Who knows what the media even talked about before we got here," one man said. "Thank goodness the World Cup distracted attention for a while. But then the German squad got eliminated, and now it's all back to 'refugees, refugees.'" The media seemed to circulate a host of stereotypes, from refugees being lazy consumers of state welfare to being anti-Semites or religious fundamentalists bent on Islamizing Europe. Most disturbing was coverage of cases in which refugees were accused of committing rape or other brutal crimes, leading some Germans to speak of an "alleged epidemic" of such incidents and many asylum-seekers to feel that they were suspect, by definition.¹⁸

If this is what "refugee" was increasingly coming to mean in host societies, then there was little that encouraged forced migrants themselves to want to identify with the label. In a different way, that was also the case for the celebratory reception of "successful" refugees, such as the growing community of Syrian artists, intellectuals, filmmakers, writers, and other creatives finding new homes in cities such as Berlin and Paris. Some cultural producers with whom I spoke were exhausted with what they saw as the patronizing acclaim or tokenizing inclusion that they

¹⁷ Interview in Berlin, Germany on July 23, 2016, cited in Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* (New York: Custom House, 2017), 272.

¹⁸ See Der Spiegel Staff, "Is There Truth to Refugee Rape Reports?" *Spiegel Online*, January 17, 2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/is-there-truth-to-refugee-sex-offense-reports-a-1186734.html>.

garnered in local circles by virtue of being not artists, but “refugee artists.” To the degree that they experienced the refugee label as a set of demeaning assumptions and expectations, rather than a starting point from which they could simply be themselves, they likewise recoiled from it. In this way, even those who had experienced a process of “becoming” a refugee at one phase of their life journey might reach another phase in which they no longer saw themselves in the word.

Reflecting on the subjective

From the vantage points of nation-states and law, forced migration is a political, legal, and locational phenomenon that can be verified in terms of geographical displacement and credible fear of persecution should one be returned to his or her country of origin. From the perspectives of refugees themselves, however, it is a subjective and intersubjective experience, and one more of becoming than being. In words expressed to me by the Aleppine quoted earlier, “A refugee is not a type of person, it’s a type of situation.”¹⁹ The degree to which people come to see that situation as describing their own circumstances changes over time in discontinuous ways.

This essay has considered three evolving relationships that shape how, when, and the degree to which displaced persons come to see themselves as refugees: their relationship to their own expectations of return to the homeland they were forced to flee, their relationship to their sense of continuity with or rupture from their pre-flight lives, and their embrace of or aversion to the word “refugee” itself. These are by no means the only relationships that affect whether or how a displaced person comes to identify in this way. As examples, however, they encourage us to think about what it means to be a refugee beyond fitting its legal requirements. They thus supplement geopolitical analysis with attention to the lived experiences, self-understandings, and meaning-making of the real individuals whose lives are transformed by displacement.

¹⁹ Interview in Berlin, Germany on July 23, 2016.