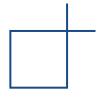# workingpapers

"Normality" and "Crisis": encounters, memories, and new beginnings between Germany and Syria

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Abstract

This paper presents the main outcomes of a joint research project conducted at ZMO Berlin between March 2018 and July 2021 with funding from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The project analyzed how Syrians remembered their "normal lives" through daily interactions with each other, in neighbourhoods, institutions, or families, as well as routine encounters with the state through the interface of infrastructural provision and bureaucratic practices. Describing three distinct modalities of connection through which incomers of Syrian origin continue to engage with their distant homeland, the paper demonstrates that 'crisis' and 'normality' are not mutually exclusive states of reality, but can be experienced as overlapping states of being that may shape a given life alternately or simultaneously. Secondly, engaging with efforts to communicate the research findings to a wider public, this paper discusses the communicative "balancing acts" that arise when presenting and discussing the project findings with members of the public in Germany. It is suggested that social and political hierarchies inherent to "integration" contexts may complicate or hinder communication. Thus, opportunities to learn about life in Syria, but also Germany, from the perspective of new citizens, may be obscured and even lost. In conclusion, this paper argues for a perspective that does not essentialize (and generically flatten) people as "refugees" despite the distinct and specific legal and political regimes that shape their condition and set them apart from other categories of migrants. Rather, their experiences must be seen in the context of longer-term trajectories that encompass Syrian and German realities as intertwined and linked in many, often unexpected, ways.

Introduction

How is "a normal state of affairs" remembered, imagined, or expected in a situation of pervasive crisis? How do refugees and forcibly displaced people, specifically, remember life at home before war, flight, and displacement; and how do such memories come alive in the new everyday life of individuals who have recently come to Germany as refugees?

These questions were at the heart of the joint research project '*Normality' and 'Crisis'. Memories of Everyday Life in Syria as a Chance for a New Start in Germany*, conducted at ZMO between March 2018 and July 2021 with funding from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung,

BMBF).[1] Comprising three sub-projects (described below), the research, under the two thematic headings "experiences of statehood" and "living together", investigated how Syrians remembered their "normal lives" through their daily interactions with each other, in neighbourhoods, institutions, or families, as well as routine encounters with the state through the interface of infrastructural provision and bureaucratic practices. This paper gives an account of the project, its main research questions and outcomes, and considers efforts to communicate (some of) the findings to a non-academic public. It argues for a perspective that does not essentialize (and generically flatten) people as "refugees" despite the very distinct and specific legal and political regimes that shape their condition and set them apart from other categories of migrants. Rather, and reflecting our roots in regional and translocal studies, we urge to consider their experiences in the context of longer-term trajectories that encompass Syrian and German realities as entangled, as linked in many, often unexpected, ways; simultaneously kept alive and denied through bureaucratic as well as social practices in Germany.

We underline that those who, in Germany, are classified as refugees, carry experiences and memories of different everyday practices and "normalities": before their flight, after it, and during the period in between. It should be noted that the term "normality" is used here not in a normative sense as an effort to "normalize" experiences that have been shaped (also) by violent or oppressive realities and structures, but as a shorthand designation of everyday life beyond the evident crisis characterized by forced displacement and flight. This crucial point is discussed more fully below. Our approach suggests a perspective that bridges between the context of origin (Syria), "transit" locations, and the current destination of Syrians' journeys (Germany). The project therefore addresses three distinct fields: first, Syrian studies; second, debates on migration and asylum in Germany; and third, the vast field of mem-

ory studies. This third aspect is not discussed at length in this paper but will be treated in more detail elsewhere.[2]

Between "refugee research" and "Syrian studies"

The questions, motivations, and considerations to which a research application responds are contingent on a specific historical setting. Just like the subject of research itself, the processes of writing a funding application, recruiting a research team, conducting research, and writing up the results, are situated in a particular moment in time and endure for a specific period. In other words, they are inherently historical phenomena and need to be historicized. Even in the relatively short time between application writing and granting of funding, circumstances and contexts may change dynamically so that research questions, objectives, collaborations, and personal circumstances of researchers may have to be adjusted and modified, supplemented by new questions, or be abandoned. This is evidently true for any research project, but the situation varies with the structures and conditions (of funding) that differ from project to project. At the time we wrote the funding application for the project presented here, many Syrians were coming to Germany or had just arrived in Germany, many did not know any German and were orientating themselves. In the intervening years, this has, of course, changed considerably: many of them have completed their education, have entered the labour market, and made new homes. Syrian intellectuals, artists, and activists are present, visible, and vocal in Germany, other European countries, also the United Kingdom, and to a lesser degree, the United States; they can and they do present their own perspectives (McManus 2021, 47). Funding for the project presented here was awarded for researching decidedly contemporary issues and offering "solutions" to societal or political "problems". The project was granted as part of a cohort of research initiatives financed by the BMBF under a funding line advertised in September 2016, entitled "Strengthening Social Cohesion in Times of Crises and Transformations" (Zusammenhalt stärken in Zeiten von Krisen und Umbrüchen). The Ministry financed three researcher positions: two part-time positions for pre-doctoral candidates,[3] and one postdoctoral position, as well as a number of student assistants. In addition, the position of a part-time project coordinator was funded for the first and third year. While the call for applications did not explicitly mention the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015/2016,[4] it responded implicitly to the sense and rhetoric of crisis that made itself felt in German public discourse at that time and mentioned – among other issues – specifically the "increase of diversity" in Germany and Europe as one of the fields where crisis could, poten-

tially, jeopardize social cohesion.[5] The European "refugee regime" is constituted through legal provisions and material structures, as much as knowledge production that encompasses, among other fields, anthropological research on "refugee experiences" (Cabot 2019, 262). In Germany, the so-called refugee crisis affected not only social and political debates but also augmented what could be called "refugee research" (Kleist 2015).[6] Acknowledging the urgency of the subject, the German Federal Government increased public funding for studies addressing the subject of refugees and migrants.[7] The vast majority of these studies was driven by a motivation to address political problems and therefore help new arrivals to "integrate" into German society. This focused on practical issues, such as, the refugees' professional and educational qualifications, their success or lack of success with formal education, and their readiness to join the workforce. Our project responded to a particular gap in the rapidly growing literature on (Syrian) refugees in Germany. Research in this field (like German public discourse more generally) concentrated on people who have come to Germany from Syria since 2012, mainly as refugees, as subjects who became relevant and interesting for "us" in the moment they crossed the borders into Europe and, especially into Germany. If their biographies and experiences before leaving home were considered at all, they were treated in a cursory manner. Academic engagement with the newly emerging Syrian diasporic community has hardly, if ever, addressed the realities in Syria and their ongoing linkages to the newcomers' lives in Germany. A similar observation can be made with regard to public discourse. As Yassin al-Hajj Salih, one of Syria's most prominent dissident intellectuals, now living in Berlin, put it in a recent interview: "As long as our stories beyond the flight are not there [in Germany], then we are not here." In the same interview, he asked why hardly anyone in Germany was interested in Syria – or in the one million Syrians (an estimated number) living in Germany. "Should the Germans not listen more closely [to them] to understand which stories are becoming part of their (hi)story?"[8] Or, as Damascus-born musician and poet Sam Zamrik observed eloquently in a contribution to German newspaper taz in June 2021:

5   Zusammenhalt stärken in Zeiten von Krisen und Umbrüchen im Rahmen des Forschungsprogramms "Geistes-, Kultur- und Sozial-wissenschaften", https://www.dlr.de/pt/desktopdefault.aspx/tab-id-11212/16307_read-46589, accessed 15 November, 2021.

6   Consider, for example, the establishment of the new journal – Z'flucht Zeitschrift für Flucht und Asyl – with its first issue in 2017, and the creation of a "network" entitled basics of refugee research – Grundlagen der Flüchtlingsforschung – at the University of Osnabrück in 2015, which was, however, prepared before the "long summer of migration".

7   See Kratzer (2021) on the role of research within the administration of asylum and refugees, who argues that government researchers provide "uncontroversial, depoliticized knowledge" while downplaying knowledge about issues such as racism and discrimination as it is "seemingly politically irrelevant".

8   „ ... er fragt sich, warum sich zehn Jahre nach dem Beginn des Krieges kaum jemand in Deutschland für Syrien interessiere – für die eine Million Syrer, die in Deutschland lebt. Vielleicht verschwinden sie nie wieder? Sollten die Deutschen nicht genauer zuhören, um zu verstehen, welche Geschichten da Teil ihrer Geschichte werden?" .... „Solange unsere Geschichten jenseits der Fluchterfahrung nicht da sind«, sagt er, »sind wir nicht da.« (Bauer 2021).

2   The team members are currently developing monographs which will (partly) include findings from this project. These will consider the issue of memory from different angles.

3   This reflects a specificity of the German academic bureaucracy, where full-time employment (equalling full pay) is conditional on the completion of a PhD, while doctoral students are usually paid 50 to 65 % of a full salary.

4   See below for a critical discussion of the term.

I am being either fetishized or problematized [...] Either way, I never become a full-fledged human being in this way – because being full-fledged is a privilege. My past, everything that is Syrian about me, should be modified and ridiculed or it should disappear, because this Syrianness in me is foreign and uncanny. The qualifications, skills or ideas I might have do not count or are devalued because they have not been issued by an authority recognized and identifiable by German offices. (Zamrik 2021, 31; my own translation from German)[9]

Syrians after 2015 were frequently represented in the German media and were also talked about in daily context by members of the public, from educators in elementary education to public servants in local administration. Here, Syrians appeared, at first, mainly as "refugees", as victims of war and violence who were to be pitied and, at least initially, sympathetically greeted and "welcomed". The well-known iconography of those early days of "welcome culture" produced images of happy, albeit exhausted people who appeared grateful to have "arrived" after a long, arduous journey, destruction, and death. Shortly after, the general discourse shifted, giving way to concern that had been voiced by opponents to the policy of open doors: Syrians came to be regarded as potentially problematic, as people whose crisis threatened to become contagious, perceived as potentially dangerous, threatening to upset "German normality" by infecting it with the crisis experienced in Syria and by Syrians (Hann 2015; Herrmann 2020; Bock and Macdonald 2019, 2–4; Dilger and Dohrn 2016, 9–10). Yet, the complex and heterogeneous experiences that people brought with them were, and still are, hardly talked about; to continue their lives in Germany, their "Syrian-ness" (to repeat Zamrik's term) is largely ignored and discarded in the German public sphere.

This contrasts with Syrian artistic and intellectual production in exile, much if not most of which engages with the problematic homeland left behind; with the political conflicts, visions, and problems that came to be so violently visible in the course and aftermath of the Syrian Revolution. Syrian intellectuals, artists, and activists have published in different formats, genres, and languages on their political-personal projects, experiences, and trajectories (For example, Halasa et al. 2014; Yazbek 2012, 2015; Hajj Salih 2017, 2020). Their works demonstrate that even amidst new beginnings, the past is not past, and Syrian realities continue to be lived and engaged with, even at a distance of several thousand kilometres. Our project underlines that this continuing engagement is not only true for intellectual and artistic production, but also matters on a more daily level.

On the other hand, in another academic field, the realm of so-called Syria studies, a rapidly growing body of ac-

ademic literature on developments in Syria after 2011 provides valuable and relevant insights into larger-scale political issues and questions (for example, the publications of St. Andrews's Syrian Studies Centre, such as Gani and Hinnebusch 2022; Hinnebusch and Saouli 2019; Dukhan 2018; Hinnebusch and Imady 2018; Díaz 2017). Scholars have engaged with political activism, political subject hood, and violence in Syrian authoritarianism (for example, Ismail 2018; also contributions in Bender 2012), with experiences of the uprising, the subsequent flight and refugee experience (for instance, Pearlman 2017). Yet – reflecting a long-standing trend in the historiography of Syria – discussions, descriptions, and analysis of more routine aspects of everyday life in Syria, particularly in more marginal or rural areas, in the years and decades before the uprising, have been few (an example is Khalaf 2020; see also Lange 2019).

Responding to a sense of urgency to research and document experiences of everyday life in that country before memories were submerged completely by the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, the war, violence, and large-scale flight and displacement in the years after 2011. In contrast, our project departs from the premise that the developments in Syria of the past decade (as much as Syrian-German lives today) must be understood in the context of daily life preceding the uprising and subsequent war. Moreover, these past experiences have not "gone away" although they may have been overlaid by other everyday experiences; they may have moved in or out of perspective and transported from the experiential everyday realm into that of memory. Anthropological and ethnographic approaches have explored memory as verbalized recollection, as visualized and manifest in objects, as ritualized enactment, as embodied and habitual. While the projects presented here focused strongly on verbalized memories and, in the case of Ferreri's research, on objects (documents and papers), the methodological repertoire they employed was less sensitive to embodied or habitual memories; not least because, once the Covid pandemic severely restricted opportunities for face-to-face contact, those would have been difficult to observe in daily life. Yet, we suggest that past everyday experiences can continue to colour lives in the present, by functioning as a source and object of nostalgia, yearning, refusal, political positioning, practical engagement, resilience, expertise, interpersonal relations, and disappointments.[10] We thus seek to document daily experiences of Syrian "normality" as they live on and continue to matter for those who now live in Germany. Arguing that the temporal entanglements between past, present, and future are not unidirectional, our approach to memories of everyday life in Syria amidst efforts to make a 'new start' in Germany goes beyond a mere excavation of the past: we show how the past is being excavated, revived, reflected on, or documented in the present. Our findings underline that these processes are not merely individual, but take place in wider societal and political structures, and are being prompted by a variety of actors – bureaucrats, activists, neighbours, or relatives.

Crisis/normal

To approach Syrians' recollections of their everyday lives before being displaced, the project employed the dual lens of "crisis and normality" as a heuristic device. These notions do not, however, reflect a translation of terms used widely by Syrians. In the current Syrian context, the literal Arabic translation of crisis, *azma*, indicates a specific political positionality, as the term has been used by the Syrian regime and its followers to refer to the uprising and the intense and pervasive violence (initially deployed by the regime forces) that followed it. Speaking of this time as "azma" thus might indicate either an active siding with the regime or, at least, a refraining from overt opposition to it and tacit acceptance of its discourse. Syrians who do not share this positionality and actively support the opposition instead highlight the revolutionary momentum by referring to the uprising and even its aftermath with the word *thaura* ("revolution"). Somewhat more neutrally, the term *harb* ("war") may be used to describe the widespread and multidirectional violence and forced displacements of the past decade.

Rather than echoing a Syrian discourse, the title of our project responded to the German and, more broadly, the European context. In German public discourse, the increased number of people seeking refuge in Europe, and many of them in Germany, since the summer of 2015 have frequently been referred to by the shorthand of "the refugee crisis". The political rhetoric of crisis in the context of migration and asylum reveals fundamental insecurities about transformations of local society, because, as Seth Holmes and Heide Castaneda observe, "[h]ow displaced people are framed reveals a great deal about anxieties … regarding diversity and change within a paradigm of limited good … informed by debt, austerity, and neoliberal disassembling of social systems" (Holmes and Castaneda 2016; see also Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017a). At the beginning, this term indicated the crisis in the countries of origin, notably war and destruction in Syria. However, this soon turned to the perception that the questions raised by the "long summer of migration" (Hess et al. 2016) could amount to a crisis of German society, dividing public opinion, raising doubts in the capacities of the German state and society to absorb a large number of refugees, and increasingly giving rise to xenophobic politics and public discourse (Bock and Macdonald 2019).

The notion of crisis, which seems so self-evident at first glance, can fruitfully be unpacked to enable a number of different possible perspectives for research. But what sort of questions does the analytic optics of the crisis enable? Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's writings on the conceptual history of the term "crisis" (1982), Mergel (2011, 13) (and others) understand crisis as a temporary state of emergency, a transitional moment in which familiar orders break down and something new may emerge. In Gramsci's (1971 [1930], 275) famous words: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born…" This new situation, these new structures about to emerge, are usually not discernible to the people who are in the crisis. This opaqueness of a world in crisis may create existential insecurity and anxieties – which, in turn, may enable and legitimate particular political orders,

measures or atmospheres. Heath Cabot has developed the notion of "crisis talk" (or "crisis thinking"), a form of political rhetoric that distracts our gaze from persistent injustices by suggesting that insecurity and injustice represent exceptional states of the human condition, rather than revealing them as an expression of persistent and structural inequalities. This pervasive "crisis talk" suggests that the course of history has got "out of control" and that the future has become unpredictable. Generating a sense of anxiety and urgency, crisis talk creates a myopic and narrowed gaze onto the present. The notion of the "crisis" assumes a particular dynamic which draws our attention to certain themes and places that used to appear as quite "normal" and that have now become imbued with an aura of danger, urgency, and pressure; conversely, it may detract our gaze from longer-term inequalities of power, hierarchies, and injustices (Cabot 2015, 2; Dilger and Dohrn 2016, 11). The notion of crisis, in other words, inevitably raises the question of its opposite: what came before the crisis, what do we envisage after it – what would be "normality"? When and where does a crisis begin and end for a given person? Critically, Henrik Vigh (2008) has emphasized that, for many people, the notion of crisis as a transitory moment out of the ordinary is not an adequate reflection of their lives. Rather, for a considerable part, and perhaps the majority of the global population, the experience of living in precarious and insecure circumstances is the normal state of affairs, their experiences could more accurately be described as living in permanent, chronic crisis; and we as researchers should ask how they do this, how the context of crisis shapes the "terrain of action and meaning" (Vigh 2008, 8) in which lives unfold. If this perspective is adequate, the two ideal types of 'crisis' and 'normality' become visible not as polar opposites, but as overlapping states of being that may shape a given life alternately or even simultaneously: 'normality' may be crisis-like, a state of crisis may be 'normal'; and thus these two concepts may appear as normative, aspirational categories rather than descriptive terms: when displaced to the future, normality may well be something that is aspired to and desired, or when located in the past, it is a state of affairs that is nostalgically remembered in hindsight; in these case it may well be imagined as a counterpoint to lived experiences and realities. Attempting to bring this critique of "crisis talk" together with lived experiences of crisis-like normality from positions of powerlessness, as referred to by Vigh, the project *Normality and Crisis* responded to the rhetoric of the refugee crisis as a crisis of Germany and of Europe by asking a fundamental question: what do refugees from Syria describe as their experienced "normality" and "crisis" when remembering the "normal" state of affairs at home before becoming displaced, refugees, and newcomers?[11] Yet similarly to the term "crisis", the notion of "normality", too, is by no means universal or commonsensical but has a distinct historical genealogy that is rooted in 19th–century Europe (Cryle and Stephens 2017). In (Syrian) Arabic, the literal translation of "normal" (*'adi*)

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11 It should be noted that those who came as refugees in 2015/2016 were not all Syrians; nor have all Syrian immigrants to Germany come as refugees. For reasons of space, however, this issue will not be explored in this paper.

would be related to the substantive for habit or custom, 'ada, while in everyday usage, "tabi'i" (literally: "natural") is more frequently used to indicate what may be understood as "the common, the ordinary, the usual, the standard, the conventional, the regular" (Cryle and Stephens 2017, 1). In the context of our research, we therefore "translated" this term into practice by asking respondents about their memories and experiences with certain themes that are situated in the everyday – such as their interactions with bureaucracy and paperwork, infrastructural provisions, and family relations.

Methods and politics

Under the general direction of the author of this paper, the research team consisted of colleagues from heterogeneous disciplinary as well as national backgrounds and levels of academic experience, as well as different durations of collaboration in the project. The post-doctoral project "Paper Trails and Dislocated Bureaucracies" (conducted by Veronica Ferreri, May 2018–July 2021) addressed experiences and encounters with bureaucratic practices and paperwork between Syria and Germany. In one of two pre-doctoral projects, Lisa Jöris (March 2018–May 2021) focused on memories of infrastructure, notably water provision and waste removal, in Aleppo, while in the second pre-doctoral project (February–July 2021) Jamshid Hussein, drawing on his earlier research at Free University Berlin (Hussein 2021a), addressed the ways in which Syrian activists critically questioned their own familial socialization in retrospect.[12] As one of the project's student assistants, Agit Kadino contributed his findings from earlier and ongoing research on perceptions and experiences of poverty among Syrian men (Kadino 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).[13] While all of these researchers employed qualitative methodologies, their repertoire of methods varied slightly according to their respective disciplinary backgrounds, as well as the needs and necessities of the researched subject: Lisa Jöris, Jamshid Hussein, and Agit Kadino relied centrally on narrative interviews, while Veronica Ferreri found that the sensitive nature of her research on paperwork and bureaucracy necessitated a stronger reliance on participant observation, effected through shared attendance in integration classes and personal networks.

The political dimensions of the research raised ethical and practical problems for the project team. It became clear that, especially when compared to earlier periods of conducting research on Syria, the political experiences of the past ten years have created a widespread scepticism and disappointment with Western scholarly perspectives or analytics. The initial urge to share stories and make people in Germany or Europe familiar with Syrian realities, which was so evident during the early months and years of the Syrian uprising, was linked to hopes and even sure

expectations that "the West" would intervene against the regime's oppression if things were only known abroad. These initial hopes have, in the meantime, given way to a widespread disappointment with Western politics in the country – politics which bely the ubiquitous European rhetoric of human rights and enlightenment. Thus, at least some interlocutors were reluctant to engage in conversation and to share their experiences, asking what would be the point of doing so as there was no hope of achieving political change. In this situation, personal relations that had often been established in the early years of the uprising, or even before, became an important means of recruiting interlocutors and sharing conversations – a practice that raised other ethical anxieties and issues (see Ferreri 2021c).

The highly political nature of our field of research also necessitated a revision of plans in the realm of archiving. By focusing on life in Syria before 2011, the intention of our research was not only to better understand what happened in the years after, but also to document experiences of everyday life in a country that has since seemed to have been engulfed in bloodshed and destruction. This, in a sense, made it an archiving project – an issue which raised unexpected challenges. Initially, we had planned to archive and publish the narrative interviews that researchers conducted during the project. This seemingly straightforward task, however, led to intense and prolonged discussions within the project team, and in the end turned out to be unfeasible. This conundrum resulted from political, ethical, and legal issues, and manifested in the tension between the need for data protection and protection of the interviewees, and the desire to make their testimony accessible to a wider public.

The members of the research team felt that the nature of the qualitative research material they generated, which differs from the "data" generated in other, more quantitative disciplines (see Kühl 2020; ZMO n.d.; de Koning et al. 2019; Dilger et al. 2019), combined with the political sensitivity of the Syrian situation, raised fundamental ethical concerns. Syrian interlocutors formulated their perspectives at a particular political moment in time; their decision to participate in the research (or not) could be based on a shared interest in the objective of the project, but also on a personal relationship of trust with the researcher that might be established through mutual social contacts and shared personal networks, as interlocutors were typically identified following a snowball principle (Jöris 2021a). Memories and perspectives were entrusted to the care of the individual researchers with whom interlocutors had formed a personal relationship based on trust (or mistrust; see Ferreri 2022) – researchers whose employment contracts, and thus presence at the research institution, were limited. The relationships of trust that were a precondition for conducting the research extended between persons, but did not include an institution such as ZMO. It seemed doubtful whether the guardianship of confidential insights and memories incorporated in the "data", produced between researcher and interlocutor, from close personal relationships between people could simply be transferred to a digital institutional infrastructure after the end of this period.

The concerns that were articulated in our internal discussions generally touched on the respondents' personal rights; but more specifically, they responded to the realization that the Syrian context of the past, which was the focus of the interviews, refused to stay in the past, but continuously seeped into the present and future. Until they are granted permanent residency (let alone German citizenship), Syrians in Germany are facing the possibility of deportation or "voluntary return" to Syria and resuming their lives there, at some point. This horizon of possibility imbues the present with different effects and calculations. Besides the courageous activities of political activists working to uncover crimes of the Syrian regime,[14] many others articulate their deep-seated concerns and fears about the regime, its secret police and persecution of oppositional thought and expression which, if it is not happening now, may well happen in the future. For some, this possibility represents a hope of "returning home" if and when the political, military and material situation allows; for others, the insecurity and volatility of the political situation and the threat of continuing political violence, oppression, and persecution by the different actors involved – notably the Syrian regime – leads to apprehension, anxiety, and fear. Political debates and measures which involve deporting people of Syrian origin against their will only deepen these concerns.

Faced with the uncertainty and potential insecurity regarding interlocutors' life trajectories in the future, as well as the lack of interlocutors' explicit consent to archive "raw material", the research team instead opted for a systematic overview of existent Syrian archiving initiatives.[15] There are a considerable number of websites devoted to archiving open-source testimonies especially of the Syrian Revolution and its violent aftermath. By providing an overview of the most important ones, accessible through ZMO's online archive, we sought to make Syrian narratives and experiences more visible for researchers interested in gaining insights into recent Syrian history.[16]

Modalities of connection

Biographical crises can overlap with macro-economic or political crises and reinforce feelings of powerlessness and despair, but they can also open up new options and opportunities. Syrians who have recently sought refuge in Germany describe individually different experiences, memories, and hopes. The "breakdown of familiar orders" has brought them into new contexts and situations, opening up new possibilities of action that fill them with anxiety, hope, or disappointment. Some have lived through a succession of different crises; among them the dangerous life in a war context and under domination of armed forces

and militias of different political sides; the precarious life as refugees in Turkey or Lebanon (Alkan 2021a, 2021b), the frightening experience of fleeing across the Mediterranean and Europe (often while carrying responsibility for small children), and now the crisis of being strangers and making new lives in Germany. Others may locate the most oppressive crisis in the political repression or in suffocating personal, social, and existential circumstances in the years *before* leaving Syria, and may consequently experience life as a refugee even, at least partly, as liberating, despite the numerous difficulties they face. From this point of view, the social, political, and, in a sense, cultural ruptures enmeshed with the uprising, as well as the flight to a different continent, do not only entail the loss of home and of intimate social ties, but also offer a chance to reframe personal life situations which were experienced as crisis, and to seek out new spaces of action. These different perceptions may also change and shift over time, as individuals move from one phase of life to another, from being hopeful newcomers to disappointed people-in-waiting, or to those who are able to move on and continue life in Germany on a more secure legal basis, as paperwork comes through and legal statuses begin to change for the better. In other words, Syrian refugees' perspectives reveal "crisis" and "normality" not as empirical opposites that occur in temporal sequence, but rather as contrary experiential states that may inhabit the same context.

This sense of the "crisis"/"normality" binary as overlapping states of reality, which are entangled with political positionalities and other social markers (such as generation and age, gender, or class), is amply demonstrated by the research conducted in our project. Showing a multiplicity of relations and connections between "Syria" and "Germany", the findings run counter to simplistic assumptions that "recollections of past normality" would provide orientation for a life beyond crisis in the present. Rather, these links display a range of different, complex temporal directionalities: considerations of past, present, and future intermingle, as do perceptions and experiences of crisis and normality.

Specifically, our research demonstrates three different modalities of cross-temporal connection: first, we describe a *modality of retrospective reconstruction*, where evocations and (re)valuations of past everyday life are affected through implicit and explicit comparison with lived realities in the present; second, there is a *modality of care*, through which relations to left-behind possessions, objects, and most of all, persons (relatives and friends) based in past connections are enacted in the present and projected into the future; third, a *modality of bureaucratic logics* obliges refugees to recur to bureaucratic practices and structures they left behind in order to forge new lives in present and future.

Retrospective reconstruction

Let us examine each of these modalities, turning first to the *modality of retrospective reconstruction*. This modality is illustrated, for example, through recollections of infrastructure in Aleppo. When researching how former residents of Aleppo experienced and recollected infrastructures of water provision and waste removal in this city, from the

14 See the activities of the Legal Center for Studies and Research (https://sl-center.org).

15 More recently, the curator of the project *Refugee Voices* at Free University Berlin, Verena Nägel, assured us that this decision was, in her opinion, the ethically correct and appropriate way to respond to the problems and imponderables associated with the status and the lives of our interlocutors.

16 Datenbanken und Onlinearchive zur syrischen (Zeit)geschichte. Available at https://www.zmo.de/bibliothek/bestaende/datenbanken-und-onlinearchive-zur-syrischen-zeitgeschichte.

vantage point of life abroad (mostly in Berlin) today, Lisa Jöris found that we do not see a unidirectional temporal movement from experiences that took place in the past to the ways in which they surface in memories articulated in the present. Rather, Jöris (2021a) argues, that experiences rooted in Syrians' everyday lives in Germany radiated back into recollections of infrastructural provisions in Syria. This happened through an implicit comparative dimension where infrastructural provisions in Aleppo were recalled, in conversation with the researcher, through explicit and implicit comparison with Germany; but also logics of social structuration – inclusive and exclusive – which associated different levels of infrastructural services with different social strata, status, and identities.

Experiences of infrastructure were diverse and strongly dependent on social status, while religious or confessional identities hardly mattered during the interviews. Jöris's mostly middle- or upper-middle class respondents associated the weak infrastructural provisions for waste disposal in poorer or informal quarters of Aleppo with the lack of "cleanliness" and awareness of their inhabitants. This, Jöris (2021c) suggests, echoes stereotypical associations in the German context, promoted, for instance, in "Integration Classes", attendance of which is obligatory for Syrian asylum seekers (Ferreri 2022). Here, the correct way of disposing of one's waste is taught as a marker of "integration" into German society, thus differentiating between insiders (long-time residents and nationals) and outsiders (newcomers). Thus, Jöris's research intriguingly suggests, even though the material components of infrastructures (such as, pumps, garbage containers) have remained in Aleppo and have often been destroyed or damaged, the discursive and social elements of these infrastructural networks, marking out social distinctions, exclusion and inclusion, prevail and continue to evolve.

Jöris points out that infrastructures as "skeletons of everyday life" (Larkin 2008, 5) remain invisible as long as they work; and only become an object of concern when they collapse, malfunction, or break down. Yet as Syrians' recollections of water and waste infrastructures demonstrate, this malfunctioning happens in gradations: water provisioning in Syria in the decade preceding the uprising was ceasing and interrupted by a rationing programme which, during the summer, and in specific quarters, led to daily cuts (*taqnin*), obliging residents to provision themselves through different measures, such as storage tanks or the adjustment of temporal rhythms for doing laundry, washing, and cleaning – tasks that now had to be completed during the small hours as water cuts were most severe in the daytime. Some of Jöris's respondents, however, evaluated these cuts as "hardly significant" when compared to the breakdown of infrastructures in the time of war and fighting after 2012. In contrast, some respondents who positioned themselves in opposition to the Assad regime evaluated the infrastructural reality before 2011 much more critically, interpreting it as a manifestation of Syria's political crisis, as yet another indication of the regime's inability and downright unwillingness to provide for the wellbeing of its citizens (Jöris 2021b). Thus, Jöris's findings show that such evaluations are not neutral recollections that soberly weigh different forms of infrastructural breakdown: *how* breakdowns are remembered is coloured by political perspective as well.

Jöris's findings underline that experiences and perceptions of "normality" and "crisis" overlap and blend into each other. Whereas some respondents emphasized the pre-uprising regular cuts of water (and electricity) as a sign of crisis, others recalled it as a state of normality when compared to the war-related almost complete collapse of provisions after 2012. Rather than describing stable states of affairs, normality and crisis thus emerge as relational and dynamic phenomena, informed by a plethora of factors such as social status, political positionality, or even the point in time at which these perceptions are articulated.

Jamshid Hussein's research of retrospective, critical evaluations of social, and especially family relations, by Syrian political activists also underlines how past everyday life in Syria is reconstructed from the vantage point of the migration context. Hussein argues that the Syrian Revolution was, and is, not limited to the larger political field but extended – and continues to do so – to the most intimate relations. His research demonstrates that the activists whom he accompanied and interviewed critically revisit gender roles and relations between sexes and generations that they evaluate to be patriarchal, undemocratic, even dictatorial, and often violent. The critical reassessment of patriarchal relationships and structures frequently leads to conflicts between the generations or between spouses in the migration context, and, ultimately, even to the conscious severance of these relationships, for instance, through divorces (Al-Ajlan 2020). This critical revision is partly fuelled by a comparative perspective arising from experiences in the migration context, where "European" or "German" society serves as a (experienced or imagined) site and example of family relations that are "otherwise". This example illustrates, once again, that 'crisis' and 'normality' are experienced differently from different vantage points, entangled with orders of gender, generation, and socio-economic power: a family order following patriarchal norms might represent a state of desired normality for some, for example, the male head of the household, but be a situation of crisis for female or junior members of the family; and the breaking of such orders might represent the chance for desired normality for a young woman (for instance), but a crisis of family and social identity for the older generation and male family members.[17] Mainly, however, Hussein interprets the critical revision of family and gender roles and relations as a societal and emotional revolution which, he suggests, may well be the lasting and most significant legacy of the uprising, even if the Assad regime continues to stay in power (Hussein 2022; see also Hussein 2021a, 2021b).

Care and connection

In terms of the temporalities they create and reflect, the examples of infrastructure and family socialization emphasize the linkage between the two settings as a comparative practice that is situated in the realm of memo-

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17 This issues are relevant beyond the specific case of Syrians in Germany, as a rich literature on the reconfiguration of gender norms, family relations, and marital ties in migration contexts attests; for example, Abdi 2014; Kim 2006; and others.

ries and revaluations in retrospect. Another modality, the *modality of care*, creates and shapes connections between Syria and Germany that are rooted in the past through relations of belonging and identity – be it in terms of communal, and especially family networks, with their close affective and social ties, or in terms of local identity, expressed through memories of being unequivocally at home in a specific landscape and place.[18] But they also point to the future, as the reduction and destruction of material belongings and sources of income, of social networks or physical infrastructures call a potential "return" to Syria fundamentally into question. This means that even after leaving Syria and when faced with the necessity of building a new life in Europe, Syrian refugees relate to their left-behind material possessions – businesses, housing, farms, or cars – not merely in the realm of nostalgic longing, as a thing of the past; rather, these relations are frequently kept alive. Even several years after leaving their homes in Syria, interlocutors kept track of what had become of their houses and apartments, of cars, tractors, and other possessions through regular phone calls or social media conversations with neighbours and relatives. Members of the older generation with roots in rural areas expressed a sense of worry and concern for trees (olives, apricots, and other fruit trees) left behind – trees for which they had spent a lifetime of care, and which are now falling prey to neglect, ignorance, and even wilful destruction (Lange 2021b). They made practical provisions for taking care of their left-behind properties until such a time as they would return, for instance by granting power of attorney to relatives or trusted persons who still live in Syria, by instructing them about agrarian measures to be taken (such as, pest control, pruning fruit trees, harvesting) or by demanding part of the produce to be sent to Germany for personal consumption. This modality of long-distance care and concern is driven not only by materialist and utilitarian considerations but incorporates strong ethical and affective dimensions; an aspect that becomes especially clear when looking at relations of care that include animate objects.

Most urgently, responsibilities and obligations of care are felt in interpersonal relationships, articulated through the ongoing concern for family members left behind in Syria. Many of the researchers' interlocutors feel a sense of obligation and responsibility towards relatives and friends who have stayed in Syria or are still stranded in front of the gates of "fortress Europe". This sense of responsibility can translate into political activism and lobbying on behalf of causes and issues related to the Syrian predicament. Much more frequently, and spread across the polarized political spectrum of the Syrian diaspora, it manifests in the transfer of material support, notably money, to destitute relatives or acquaintances in Syria or neighbouring countries by making use of informal finance networks ("Hawala") (Kadino 2021b; also al-Jssem and Obeid 2019; Jalaby 2019, 26). This underlines the new connections between Germany and Syria that are forged through relational differentials of wealth: even those who, in the German context, as refugees are considered among the poorest in society, may be comparatively well-off when seen in relation to residents of Syria where living costs have exploded over the past years (Kadino 2021a). Underlining that poverty is not an absolute category, but a relative term (Kadino 2021c), differentials of wealth and poverty feed into a modality of connection that is constituted by relations of obligation and care.

Bureaucratic logics

A third modality arises from *bureaucratic and administrative logics*. Far from neutral or apolitical, German administrative procedures forge unexpected links between Syrian and German paperwork and bureaucratic practice.

In the Syrian context, routine bureaucratic acts such as issuing an identity card, a passport, or registering a new address after moving house, were part of an entangled web of deeply political relations. The ubiquitous "security investigations" (*dirasa amniya*) by one or more of the numerous intelligence agencies, which were routinely part of even the most mundane encounter of Syrians with the state bureaucracy, suggested that every citizen was considered as potentially suspect. Syrians had to demonstrate their loyalty to the Syrian state and the Baathist leadership on a daily basis. At the least, they had to refrain from any oppositional statements or activities. In addition, state employees and students had to outwardly affirm adherence to the system through joining one of the regular "marches" (*masira*) expressing support for the regime or through membership in Baathist organizations such as the students' union, the women's or the farmers' union or the Baath party itself (Ismail 2018).

Based on her fieldwork with Syrians of diverse legal statuses in Lebanon and Germany, Veronica Ferreri argues that these practices are part of a larger pattern, insisting that citizenship in Baathist Syria was, and is, inextricably interlinked with, and even conditional on, political loyalty to the Baathist order. Wherever this loyalty was or is (allegedly) withheld, access to citizenship rights too may be curtailed by state authorities, including the right to access official documentation (Ferreri 2021a). Therefore, official documents and papers are not simply stores of seemingly innocuous information regarding nationality, identity, and social status; they also carry political categorizations and positionings and may transport affects like anxiety or concern.

These complex relations, tying Syrians to their national state and its bureaucracy, are not cut once they leave the country. The German state, Ferreri (2021b) points out, imbues these papers and the political and affective weight they carry with an uncanny, new life: authorities routinely demand official Syrian documents as part of bureaucratic processes even for the most basic administrative acts (granting residency, recognizing claims to asylum, registering an educational certificate, or even the birth or death of a family member). This demand for "valid" Syrian papers extends to most realms of civil life, making access to Syrian documents a precondition of successfully starting afresh in Germany. In order to get married or register a baby's birth, Syrian identity documents must be produced; when wishing to register previous qualifications and certificates in order to continue a course of formal educa-

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tion, one has to submit one's school or university leaving certificate, stamped and certified not only by the proper university or school board authorities, but also legitimized by the Syrian Foreign Office. However, unless these documents were already brought from Syria, it is costly and difficult – not to mention, in certain contexts, dangerous or even virtually impossible – to source these documents from Syria under the conditions of ongoing crisis and war. The impossibility of approaching the – local, regional, or national – authorities involved in issuing these documents in practice meant that producing them could entail the need to involve middlemen, or to access officials that held certain offices (or were in possession of certain stamps) in areas controlled by the Syrian opposition and thus were not recognized by the Syrian state.

Syrians in Germany, moreover, frequently complain of the need to continually renew their passports. This need is created by the German bureaucratic requirement according to which residency permits are registered onto valid passports of one's national state only; as many Syrian passports have a validity of only two years (this varies according to status, depending for instance on whether or not military service has been completed), Syrian nationals in Germany regularly have to approach the Syrian Embassy in Berlin to renew their passports (even if they have no ambition to use them for traveling) in order to maintain a valid residency status in Germany. As every passport renewal is quite costly (in the upper three-digit-numbers), this procedure is not only a burden on people's budgets, but passport renewal and issuing has turned into a considerable source of revenue for the Syrian state in recent years. Thus, German bureaucratic requirements in essence oblige Syrian refugees to financially support, in part, the state from which they have fled; an oxymoron of which are critical, particularly those Syrians who politically position themselves in opposition to the Syrian regime. There is yet another, often commented-on paradox inherent to German bureaucratic policies towards Syrians: while on the one hand, Syrians are obliged to approach the Embassy to fulfil German bureaucratic requirements, on the other hand, contacting the Embassy may also jeopardize their residency status in Germany – at least for those among them who have been recognized as political refugees (Ferreri 2022).

This brief glimpse into the contradictions and frictions inherent to practical German politics of asylum and refuge reveals the unexpected and frequently obscured ties between Syrian and German bureaucratic practices. They are clearly discerned and commented on by many Syrians who have come to Germany since 2015 but are apparently often hardly known to even those members of the German public who are engaged – either as volunteers or professionals – in helping refugees "integrate". When scrutinized in terms of the temporalities they produce, the complicated bureaucratic practices involved in Syrian refugees making a "new start" in Germany point not only to the past but also to the future. For many Syrians, German asylum bureaucracy grants only temporary residence permits that are usually extended and may be converted to permanent residency and even German citizenship (which a growing number of Syrians have been granted); but, as recent developments in Denmark and political debates in Germany have shown, there is also a distinct possibility that they may *not* be extended but potentially be cut short or revoked in favour of "returning" (deporting) refugees with temporary protection to Syria. Thus, considerations of a possible future inevitably play into interactions and practices in the present. To plan for this contingency, paperwork past and future needs again to be taken into account. This interlinks with the *modality of care* described above, in order to ensure the material basis for such a possible future life in Syria, deeds of ownership over properties left behind need to be secured, power of attorney given to relatives or acquaintances, and political classifications as "oppositional" or as belonging to an "enemy" group (the definition of which varies according to region of origin and the militia currently in power there) need to be avoided or contested, as they could lead to dispossession and expropriation.

These examples demonstrate the manifold and complex linkages and connections between everyday life experiences in Syria and Germany. Yet simultaneously, these connections are reinforced *and* denied, ignored, or obscured by the German public as well as by German state bureaucratic procedures. On the one hand, identifying refugees in terms of their past – first and foremost, in terms of nationality – is essential for granting specific residence statuses and recognizing individuals as "refugees" who are entitled to legal protection; on the other, the realities of everyday life in Syria remain largely invisible to a wider German public. It is suggested that this complicated tension between the visibilizing and invisibilizing context of migration (Germany) and context of origin (Syria) is not only characteristic of the specific case study at hand – that is, Syrian refugees in Germany – but may also be a central feature of migration policy in Europe more generally. It would be worthwhile exploring to what extent wider European policies disregard the nuanced and differentiated settings in migrants' diverse countries of origin in favour of a standardized, Europe- or Germany-centred "normality" from which the incomers supposedly (or potentially) deviate, and to which they must (be made to) conform (integration). Yet, what is this supposed German "normality" that is taught in integration classes, referred to in political speeches and in media, and from which the newcomers are seen to differ? This is an open question, as ongoing political contestations, struggles and debates in the German public show. The "crises" of the past years (Covid crisis, refugee crisis, climate crisis) have revealed the enormous internal rifts and political differences that characterize this supposedly clearcut "we" of German society; and these crises have only added to long-standing social contrasts (for example, East–West, urban–rural; for a recent – controversially discussed – perspective see Hensel and Foroutan 2020).

Beyond a mere lack of information, the ignorance about Syrian realities in the German arena reflects an unwillingness to engage, a shying away from the extremely complex, polarized, and complicated political realities in the Syrian conflict, a conclusion that is supported by anecdotal evidence from another component of the project, the dissemination and presentation of the research results in

different forums of the German public sphere. Reflections on this aspect of the project constitute the final part of this paper.

The intrusion of politics

The dissemination of research results beyond an academic audience was an integral part of the project architecture. This responded to the practice-oriented approach of the funder, who made the commitment to bridge between academic research and applied-practical perspectives – an explicit condition for being granted funding. In the case of our project, this "bridging" process was situated in the sphere of knowledge transfer; that is, in the communication of research outcomes and findings to a non-academic audience, specifically individuals, associations, and institutions that are invested in "welcoming" or "integrating" people who have come to Germany as refugees.

Given the restrictions created by the Covid 19 pandemic, this transfer of knowledge had to take place in virtual space. In cooperation with a Berlin-based graphic design agency (123comics), the project team, together with two colleagues from ZMO, Hilal Alkan and Sarah Jurkiewicz, whose research also focused on Syrian refugees, developed a short animated film as well as a "virtual exhibition" to showcase different facets and aspects of Syrians' daily lives, inflected with crisis and normality (Lange et al. 2021).[19] Both the film and the exhibition demonstrated that there are manifold connections between everyday life in Syria and in Germany, extending to the issues discussed above – for instance, engaging with infrastructure, family relations, and paperwork; and others, for example, neighbourhood, urban-rural connections, schools, and schooling. These were presented to members of the public through what we called "virtual tours"; presentations and discussions of the issues raised, that partly took place on site and partly were realized through Zoom sessions. These included different audiences, such as as professional Middle East experts of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, but also loose groups that gathered regularly in "Intercultural Cafés", or other social spaces where refugees from Syria mixed with volunteers and professional social workers of German and other national backgrounds (representing "German society"). We also discussed the research with exclusively or mainly Syrian audiences. Depending on the audience, discussions took place in German supplemented with occasional translations, or, more rarely, exclusively in Arabic and Kurdish.

"Not too negative"

In the beginning of this paper, the need to situate any research project in its particular historical context was stressed. The research project presented here forms part of an intensely political and politicized field. Syrians who have come to Germany represent a wide spectrum of political attitudes, positions, and commitments; albeit with varying degrees of activism, ranging from conscious detachment from any Syrian networks to committed political activism. Syrian refugees are therefore not mere victims of political repression, violence, and persecution, but active agents in a polarized and politicized field. Researchers

(such as ourselves), too, engage their subject with their own political positionings and sentiments, regardless of whether we are of Syrian or any other national background. Interestingly, the most critical reflections on Syrian society and social relations were formulated by those members of the team who had biographical roots in Syria, while the "outsider" researchers were careful to avoid any supposedly negative points so as not to feed into racist or right-wing discourse; suggesting differences in intended audience.

Moreover, in different situations, it became apparent that the political nature of everyday life in Syria, and the complex political realities and entwinement in them, presented a complication not only for the research process itself, but also for the dissemination of the research outcomes. Various reactions of German volunteers and social workers spoke of a certain reluctance on their part to engage with the polarizing, hurtful political dimensions of the Syrian situation, amounting to a virtual denial of politics.[20] Thus, German interlocutors on different occasions expressed an uneasiness about more overtly political issues and themes of our research, especially about the fact that not all Syrians who have come to Germany are democracy activists or apolitical civilian victims of the conflict. As the highly publicized Koblenz trial against two officials of the Syrian regime and other incidents prove, the Syrian diaspora in Germany also includes – more or less active – supporters of the Assad regime, among them perpetrators of violence and war crimes. While this issue was not at the centre of our research, we alluded to this fact in our short animated film by introducing the fictional figure of "Abu Abdo", a former member of the Syrian military who, as a desk officer at the recruitment bureau (*tajnid*), participated in corrupt practices for personal gain and who came to Germany when oppositional militias occupied his village. None of our Syrian respondents took issue with this figure; some (as far as they explicitly commented at all) reacted to this story line with chuckles or statements like "sure, this is how it was". Yet this narrative led to mixed reactions among our German audience; one social worker, for instance, expressed her uneasiness with the film because the political issues it raised "might affront or antagonize Syrians". Rather, she suggested, we should have conveyed less controversial issues and themes. On another occasion, a social worker asked me to prepare a virtual tour to a mixed group of refugees and volunteer helpers. She asked me to exclude potentially controversial (political) issues, such as bureaucracy (Ferreri 2021a, 2021b) or even schooling (Lange 2021a) from the virtual tour, and to focus on themes that would convey a more "positive" message, such as neighbourhood relations and the close

social ties they incorporated. She explained her request with her fear that the discussion might become "one-sided" (stereotypical and anti-Syrian) if more problematic aspects of life in a dictatorship were shown.

An unstable "we"

Yet the implicit wish for depoliticization was ironically subverted by the subtle hierarchies and power relations that structured the "virtual tours" and the discussions that followed. Initially conceived merely as a space of dissemination for previously generated knowledge, these encounters revealed yet another facet of the ongoing connections and links between Syria and Germany. Most frequently and obviously, these connections took the shape of explicit comparison, where "Syrians" (or the researcher, as an expert of Syria) explained Syrian realities and memories to "Germans", and where "Germans" explained and described social realities to "Syrians". Contrary to the intention of the project, the latter often occupied at least half of the session time. While Syrian participants expressed their appreciation of having a space where they could share memories and describe previous experiences of life in Syria to German interlocutors, discussions nevertheless often turned to realities in Germany. As the meetings were offered to institutions engaged in refugee integration, their audiences arrived as preconceived social groups with their own internal relations, hierarchies, and dynamics. Not surprisingly, those most fluent and most comfortable with the German language typically dominated the discussions, and therefore a format that was intended to disseminate knowledge about Syrian realities sometimes tended to give much more space to "German" perspectives. This necessitated considerable moderating efforts to contain the self-confident and "at home" speakers with regard to those whose experiences they had come to learn about. This appeared to replicate, to an extent, the discussion settings to which these groups were accustomed, where relations between volunteers, professionals, and refugees were not equal or power neutral, and where those "at home" in Germany were in a position to teach and explain things to the newcomers.

The situation was different when the audience was exclusively or even predominantly Syrian, and where discussions took place in Arabic or Kurdish. Here, other dynamics came into play: a hesitancy to engage with other Syrians whose social identities and political positionings were unknown, and hence the clear preference for closed circles of people who already knew and trusted each other. In this context, the perspective of the speaker who was in the privileged position of feeling at home in Germany was, if anything, taken by the researcher who moderated the discussion. Yet in this space, too, the discussions were not limited to experiences of "normal life" in Syria, but inevitably addressed the new normality of living in Germany. Recollections of rural-urban connections and contrasts in Syria, for instance, quickly led to perceptions about the differences between urban and rural communities in Germany, and what it meant to reside in either.

Inevitably, even in the small space of encounter provided by the "virtual tours" in the context of the exhibition, the discussions once more underlined that any facile dichotomy of "Syrians" versus "Germans" is misleading, and that both entities contain different trajectories, experiences, stories, and perceptions despite shared, structural frameworks. This heterogeneity was illustrated by a discussion of the differences regarding gender relations and childcare that developed following a presentation of the virtual exhibition and screening of the film in a "refugee advice centre" in a less than affluent district of former East Berlin. The conversation initially focused on "Syria" versus "Germany", but soon turned into a discussion between the German volunteers present, who belonged to different generations and, most importantly, hailed from different regional backgrounds in former West and East Germany, respectively. The discussion was prompted by one Syrian mother who cautiously articulated that, while she was of course aware of the differences in approaches to sexuality and bodily norms and was not judging, she preferred to hold on to more conservative norms when it came to toddlers running around scantily clad. The middle-aged social worker who had come to this East Berlin district from a West German background earnestly agreed, citing the danger of paedophilia that she suspected to be much more widespread in this particular quarter than one might think. This prompted a defensive response from another volunteer, her senior by at least twenty years, who had lived in this district for decades, she declared, and who was not aware of any such heightened danger; – rather, she suggested, this perception might be linked to West German prudish and inhibited mores that were much more prudish and inhibited when it came to nudity and clothing than East Germans had ever been. (This discussion was translated back into Arabic).[21]

On another occasion, during a discussion in an "intercultural café" (in another impoverished district, this time in former West Berlin), the social worker in charge of the café in a very animated manner shared her experiences and perceptions of neighbourliness as someone who had come from Ukraine herself, and compared her former experiences with the situation in Berlin.[22] Other social workers, too, participated in discussions from their own perspectives that sometimes reflected experiences of migration from other European countries (Greece and Spain). Conversely, the group of "refugees" present at this, and other encounters, also represented different national origins; and the discussions that were supposedly focused on Syria therefore extended to include individual experiences in Cameroon, Iran, and Iraq. Moreover, several groups showed that the roles of "volunteer", "integration worker" or "social worker" were not clearly distinguished from the roles of the "refugees" who were invited to share their experiences. Members of the Syrian community in Germany, including refugees, have played active roles as volunteers and professionals: as translators, "integration helpers" ("Integrationslotse"), and in other functions, to help compatriots navigate the jungle of paperwork, rules, and norms they have to face in order to make a new start in Germany.

21 Field notes, 22 June 2021.

22 Field notes, 7 July 2021.

Conclusion

Based on findings of a joint research project conducted at ZMO Berlin between 2018 and 2021, this paper argues for a perspective that supplements existing debates on Syrian refugees in Germany by taking seriously refugees' continuing ties – emotional, mnemonic, material as much as political – to their homeland. While these ties continue to live, they are shape-shifters and may weaken, strengthen, or change in quality over time. This paper described three distinct "modalities of connection" (others might be found) through which incomers of Syrian origin continue to engage with their distant homeland: the *modality of retrospective reconstruction*, the *modality of care and concern*, and the *modality of bureaucratic logics*. They are, in turn, entwined with a range of different temporal directionalities, pointing to the past in the case of retrospection, memory, and personal histories; but also to the future, affecting spaces and horizons of plan-making as well as engagement in the present. We detailed how Syrian immigrants remember their interactions with the Syrian state and with their neighbours through the interface of infrastructure (notably water provisions and waste disposal); how they reinterpret family relations and their own socialization into gender and generational roles in retrospect; how others (often involuntarily) continue to engage with Syrian bureaucracy through paperwork and bureaucratic practices that are enacted through the German state; and how the translocal nature of social relations – including property relations – result in practices of care that transcend geographical boundaries. The project demonstrated that "crisis" and "normality" are not mutually exclusive states of reality contained in distinct and clearly delineated periods of time, but can be experienced as overlapping states of being that may shape a given life alternately or even simultaneously.

While our project emphasized a perspective that is attuned to the specificity and diversity of Syrian experiences in Germany, rather than a generic stereotyping of incomers as "refugees", our findings nevertheless relate to wider issues that are relevant beyond the German-Syrian context; a dimension that has not been the focus of this paper, but might be worthwhile exploring in a more overtly comparative approach elsewhere. To name some examples: the fact that memories (not only) in the Middle East are shaped by political positionings and personal histories, for instance, has been increasingly discussed in recent years (for example, Haugbolle and Hastrup 2008; Nikro and Hegasy 2017; Roccu and Salem 2019; and others). Jöris's research intriguingly demonstrates that this may pertain even to such seemingly innocuous or "neutral" subjects as infrastructural provisions. Similarly, Hussein's insight that gender dynamics in Syrian family relations crucially inform perceptions of what is "normal" or a "crisis" resonates with findings from a variety of geographical and historical settings (for example, Abdi 2014; Kim 2006; while the "kafka-esque" (Campbell 2016) contradictions and complications that arise from the encounter of lived experiences with bureaucracy in the asylum/refugee process have been described for other contexts as well (aside from Campbell, see for instance, Rozakou 2017; Kalir 2017).

In a second stage, this paper turned to challenges inherent in seemingly straightforward project objectives, such as transferring or communicating research findings to the public. It became apparent that the political dimensions inherent to the situation of the respondents both in the German and Syrian context intruded on these seemingly simple goals. For some members of the research team, and some German volunteers or social workers, highlighting problematic or "negative" issues (illegal, opportunistic, corrupt, oppressive, authoritarian) of Syrian lives and realities raised fears of feeding into German right-wing and racist discourses, which have been on the rise publicly since the "long summer of migration" in 2015–2016. On the other hand, addressing such "negative" issues is clearly a political, academic, and ethical imperative if Syrian realities, experiences, and memories are to be adequately described; resulting in a communicative balancing act when presenting and discussing the project findings with members of the public. This may be understood in the light of the two contrasting perspectives arising from the intersection between "refugee research" and "Syria studies" on which this project is based. Moreover, the discussions during a number of "virtual tours" in the exhibition showed that social and political hierarchies inherent to "integration" contexts may complicate or hinder communication, as they tend to privilege the voices of "natives" (who speak for 'German' society) over those of newcomers to Syria. Thus, somewhat ironically, opportunities to learn about life in Syria and Germany from a different perspective, through the eyes of newcomers, may be lost. In conclusion, the paper therefore calls for greater openness and an acknowledgement of Syrian lives and trajectories in the German public sphere.

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