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'Blood Doesn't Become Water'? Syrian Social Relations during Displacement

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Humanitarian discourses emphasize that displacement results in disruptions to family structures. This article challenges simplistic descriptions of change during displacement, highlighting the powerful role of the family in Middle Eastern societies through an anthropological exploration of social relations among Syrian refugees in Jordan. It contributes to academic analysis on social relations among refugees by presenting a more mixed picture of social dynamics within and outside the family—both before conflict and during displacement. It explores how the hold of the family among Syrians may limit social interactions with 'outsiders' during displacement, as well as how displacement may offer opportunities for tighter social regulations to be unravelled. These findings highlight that social relations among refugees must be analysed more carefully, and with consideration of intersectional power dynamics.

Keywords: Social connection, family, refugee, displacement, gender, Syria

Introduction

Scholars have documented the prevailing power of the family in the Middle East context (Joseph 1999; Hopkins 2003; Dahlgren 2008; Hudson 2008; Rabo 2008), highlighting that, within this region, the family forms 'the bedrock of an individual's identity' (El Guindi 1999: 164). Family is seen as representing 'sacred space' (Joseph 2000: 19), yet importantly academics have stressed that the family is not a static entity that everlastingly reflects 'a sense of changelessness' (Meriwether 1999: 6). Beshara Doumani, for example, critiques historical depictions of Middle Eastern families as if they conform to a particular 'type' (2017: 18), urging historical, contextualized analysis into family life (17–18).

Within the context of Syria, the family has been emphasized as varying across space and time, depending on class, ethnicity, religion and rural–urban location (Rabo 2008: 131), as well as evolving through both 'state feminism' (Rabo 1996: 162–163) and the increasing role of Islam (Sparre 2008: 10). Lisa Wedeen argues that the role of the family is so pervasive that family

metaphors were used to signify obedience of Syrians to their (then) leader, Hafez al Assad, who acted as 'national father' (1999: 51). The potency of the family in Syrian society is reflected in Syrian proverbs and idioms such as 'Blood doesn't become water' (which means relations of blood cannot be abandoned) and 'Me and my brother against our cousin, and my cousin and I against a stranger' (which illustrates the varied strength of ties both within the family and towards outsiders).

Academics have critiqued the sometimes generalizing, essentializing analysis of policy-makers who analyse the lives of refugees (Grabska 2014: 193). In the context of the Syria Crisis, the way the family is positioned within Syrian society has been increasingly referenced by humanitarian policy-makers. Such UN agency and international humanitarian agency narratives position displacement as having a 'direct effect on the structure of Syrian communities in exile' (UNHCR 2014: 1), emphasizing the apparently unusual rise of 'female-headed households' (UNHCR 2014; CARE 2016). The 'social' is perpetually presented as broken due to war: 'Their societies fell apart' (UNHCR 2014: 1). In humanitarian narratives, families are cast as 'traditional' (CARE Jordan 2013: 40; Oxfam and ABAAD 2013: 4–6; Women's Refugee Commission 2014: 14), albeit without explanation of what 'traditional' actually means beyond the apparently typical division of roles for women and men: 'Before the eruption of the crisis, men were the sole providers for the families and women's role was confined to the private sphere' (Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration 2015: 13). In these narratives, it is assumed that men alone provided for their families in Syria, that war has resulted in women having more responsibilities and that this has negatively impacted men's self-esteem (Oxfam and ABAAD 2013: 14; Women's Refugee Commission 2014: 1; Buecher and Aniyamuzaala 2016: 4)—without recognition that this narrative does not apply to all Syrians and needs to be contextualized based on class, education status and even location. The analysis conducted by humanitarian agencies focuses on how displacement results in changes for this typical family, with particular emphasis on 'shifts' or even 'reversals' (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala 2016: 4) in gender roles, alongside increased family violence (CARE Jordan 2013: 31; Buecher and Aniyamuzaala 2016: 14). Analysis of 'relationships' within the family tend to solely be focused on marital relationships—not unusual in development and humanitarian analysis of gender norms (Cornwall 2014: 128).

Within academic literature, analysis of the social relations of refugees tends to focus on the relational ties formed by refugees during resettlement. This includes emphasis on the connectivities between home and resettlement sites, especially within transnational migration literature (Glick Schiller *et al*. 1995; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014), relationships formed during resettlement (Wells 2011) and the extent of 'integration' during resettlement (Ager and Strang 2008). Analysis has also drawn attention to social dynamics when refugees return home (McSpadden and Moussa 1996;

Hammond 2004; Grabska 2014) while the 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1964) space of displacement remains less theorized. The literature that does exist, however, points to displacement providing new opportunities for social relationships. For example, Rosemary Sayigh suggests that 'ties of locality' can become more important than 'blood' ties, during war (1993: 165). Displacement may provide new chances for people to connect (Baines and Rosenoff Gauvin 2014: 289), such that 'a group of people, finding themselves thrown together by their circumstances but sharing no other common personal history' can develop close relationships (Hammond 2004: 11). Relationships between refugees and their host communities have also been theorized, often presenting this dynamic as fraught with tension (Ohta 2005; Rodgers 2008). In camp settings, relational and identity-formation processes are seen as occurring in very specific ways (Malkki 1995; Boateng 2010; Gladden 2013), although the relational contexts of 'self-settled' refugees—refugees outside of camps—have been less explored.

Analysis of social relationships in the context of the Syrian Crisis has drawn attention to the shared familial, cultural and linguistic ties between Syrians and Jordanians (Achilli 2016: 8) and the support provided by Palestinian to Syrian refugees (Sharif 2018). However, similarly to humanitarian narratives, recent literature has asserted a 'collapse' of social networks among Syrians (Stevens 2016). My research challenges such arguments, probing more deeply into questions like: how do Syrians form and sustain relationships with others during displacement and in what ways might displacement offer opportunities for shifts in social relations?

This article explores how Syrian women and men in Jordan challenge and uphold familial ties. It suggests that the power of the family in shaping social relations and the diversity of experiences among Syrians needs to be better understood by academic scholars as well as humanitarian agencies and governments. The article begins by detailing fieldwork methods in Jordan and presenting the context of the 'Syria Crisis'. It then explores familial relationships during displacement, suggesting that these dynamics are entrenched and highly complex. The next section delves into what it means for Syrians to befriend strangers, drawing attention to the intersectional dynamics of friendships with non-familial others. The article ends with an exploration of family versus blood ties.

Fieldwork

Anthropological fieldwork was carried out in Jordan from September 2016 to May 2017 as part of doctoral research within the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies. As an Australian of Sri Lankan descent who previously managed a gender-based violence programme for a humanitarian agency in Jordan, I sought to conduct feminist research out of an understanding of the '[t]riple subjectivity' of relationships between participants, research assistants and myself (Temple and Edwards 2002: 11). My research methods were

designed to disrupt more traditional academic and humanitarian agency methods of interacting with refugees; instead, I prioritized spending time with refugees, sharing information about myself and listening to what research participants felt was important without pushing for information (Minh-ha 1989: 1; Malkki 1995: 51). The notion of reciprocity—'giving something back' to participants—was also important (Liamputtong 2007: 60), shaping how I initially connected with refuges, how I responded to their hospitality, how I listened and how I helped them to engage with humanitarian agencies to obtain assistance.

This research sought to understand mobility, social relations and gender roles among Syrian women and men. Self-settled Syrian refugees living in the areas of Zarqa, Irbid, Jerash and Amman participated in the research. These refugees lived in apartments or shared government housing in Jordan. They were aged 18–60 and were largely from Dar'a, Damascus and Homs in Syria. The research began with participatory photography workshops incorporating focus-group discussions over a five/six-week period. During the workshops, participants discussed how they spend their time in Jordan (compared to Syria), taking photographs to capture their day-to-day experiences. During workshops, relationships were built with Syrian women and men, who were then invited to participate in individual interviews. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews and 10 life-story interviews with Syrian men and women. Participant observation was also carried out at people's homes, within local humanitarian agencies, in cafés and markets. I also conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with international and local humanitarian workers. The research was conducted with support from two research assistants, who assisted with translation during workshops and interviews, as well as with transcription of the exact words of participants into English.

Context

Since the beginning of the 'Syria Crisis' in 2011, close to 5.5 million Syrian refugees have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt. Over 655,000 registered Syrian refugees are now living in Jordan (UNHCR 2018) alongside potentially a further 600,000 unregistered Syrian refugees (Carrion 2015). In Jordan, over 85 per cent of Syrian refugees live outside camps, while the remainder live in Zaatari camp or Azraq camp.

The situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan must be analysed within the broader context of Jordan's history in accepting refugees, particularly Palestinian refugees. As a country of 6 million people, consisting of 2 million Palestinians and close to 500,000 Iraqis, Jordan represents a unique context. Not having signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, Jordan's refugee policies have varied significantly depending on the nationality of refugees and the time at which they entered Jordan (Brand 2010). The Jordanian government's inclusion and exclusion of refugees has varied depending on politics (Chatty and Mansour 2011).

The Jordanian government has used a range of terms to refer to its displaced populations (El-Abed 2015: 354), calling them 'refugees', 'asylum seekers' or even 'guests'—which in Arabic has implications around Arab hospitality (Mason 2011), suggesting a point where the 'guest' should know when to leave (Peteet 2011: 18). According to Geraldine Chatelard, Iraqis in Jordan are perceived as exhausting Jordan's limited resources and also being a risk to the religious and national identity of Jordan (2009: 11), which is not dissimilar to current rhetoric about Syrian refugees in Jordan. Jordan's response to Syrian refugees stands in stark contrast to how the state of Syria itself historically accepted refugees, beginning from the collapse of the Ottoman empire (Chatty 2018: 37).

Self-settled Syrian refugees are geographically dispersed across Jordan and may not necessarily live in close proximity to other Syrians. For many, participating in activities conducted by humanitarian agencies may be the only opportunity to meet other Syrians. Unlike in camps, where refugees are separated from host communities, self-settled refugees are embedded in areas where host communities live. Some humanitarian agencies have documented reports of harassment of Syrian refugees and violence between Jordanians and Syrians (Mercy Corps 2012; UN Women 2013).

Familial Relations during Displacement

Humanitarian narratives about Syrian families during displacement suggest disruption of family configurations (UNHCR 2014: 61), 'breakdown' of traditional structures (UNICEF 2013: 4) and the social isolation of households (Women's Refugee Commission 2014: 12). These narratives are often explicitly gendered: tensions are high between the husband and wife due to the pressures of displacement, and the emasculated husband who is unable to find work takes out his frustrations on his disempowered wife (International Rescue Committee 2012: 3; Oxfam and ABAAD 2013: 4; UNICEF 2013: 4). These discourses however, seem to assume family collapse due to displacement, often failing to recognize the prevailing power of the family within the Middle Eastern context.

Suad Joseph uses the concept of 'relationality' to describe the importance of ties between family members in Middle Eastern societies. She defines relationality as 'a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding, and sociability' (1999: 9). Within relational societies, decisions are made collectively rather than individually (Rugh 1984: 33; Deeb 2006: 30; Abadeer 2015: 87). According to Joseph, rights emerged out of relationships of 'mutual obligation' (1994b: 273–274), which Leila Hudson similarly affirms in her explanation of how the Arabic word for the nuclear family (*usra*) means being captured or held captive (2008: 72). Joseph suggests that, by relationships being linked to 'mutual obligation', families in the Middle East context are 'connective' (1994a: 55); their lives are intricately

entwined. In such a context, it is possible that, instead of disruption and collapse, family ties may hold. As Davis so aptly put it:

> It is probably the case that the first reaction to suffering is to preserve the social relations which are disrupted and threatened: partly so that… there should be some people you could rely on; and partly because it is important to maintain those characteristic forms of life which define what it is to be human (Davis 1992: 157).

To what extent do refugees maintain family ties during displacement? How strong are these bonds? My research suggests that a closer, more nuanced analysis of family life during displacement reveals both narratives of refugees finding strength and solace in family structures, as well as negative or mixed experiences of family ties.

Improved/Expanded Familial Dynamics during Displacement

In some cases, refugees living in Jordan shared living spaces with other family members in Jordan—similarly to how they lived in the same building as their families in Syria. For others, it was easier and more financially beneficial to live with parents or in-laws—sharing communal spaces in order to save on costs. For one woman, who now lives with her parents along with her husband and small children in Amman, the relationship with her parents seems closer than before. Although she has not explicitly talked about the financial problems they face, her parents seem to know that this is a challenge and have provided clothes for her children, for example, without saying anything. Addressing their financial challenges in this way may be a way they help her and her husband to save face.

For another woman from Homs, members of the immediate family are much closer in Jordan because they spend so much time together at home compared to in Syria, when her husband would always have regular work. She said: 'We are together more now. And so now, we love each other more.'

Negative Familial Dynamics during Displacement

The above two examples resonate with findings from other contexts, where relationships may become closer during displacement (Joseph 2004). There are, however, examples that tell a different story. One woman, who now lives in Zarqa, recounted the relationship with her sister in negative terms, speaking of her 'cruelty' and selfishness since they had moved to Jordan. For this woman, the change in this relationship is due to her difficult financial circumstances. She and her family initially shared an apartment with her sister and her family, splitting the expenses equally, although her sister's family was in a much better financial situation because her husband works in the Gulf. She felt her sister looked down on her because of her limited finances in Jordan. Later, they moved to separate houses and, when she was sick, her sister only came to visit her once, while, in contrast, her neighbours checked

on her every day. For her, these changes in familial relationships were linked to their changed social status. Ties that had been strong in Syria were affected by the economic stress of displacement.

Mixed, More Complex Family Dynamics during Displacement

Not all participants shared examples of family relationships that could be classified as being 'closer' or farther apart during displacement; some relationships were more complex. One young woman from Dar'a, for example, said that she is very close to her mother in Jordan, yet disclosed that she hides information about her financial problems from her mother. Due to the fact that she did not marry her cousin as planned, but married someone else, for some time in Jordan, she also hid information from her mother about the problems in her marriage, feeling she would be reprimanded for choosing the wrong partner. Refusing to marry the person chosen for her has impacted the level of disclosure to her mother, such that her mother is unaware of her difficult financial situation.

Another example illustrates the tension between closeness to the family and hiding information. For a young woman from Damascus, who moved to another Governorate to marry her husband, being in Jordan has provided a way to reconnect with her parents, who now live next door to her in Jordan. In some ways, it is as if she was 'back living with them', although she fears their criticism about how she manages the house and her children. She feels they are more tolerant of her because they believe that her stay in Jordan is temporary and that she and her children will join her husband in Europe shortly. She fears telling them that her application for family reunification was unsuccessful.

In other cases, however, ongoing tension in the family, especially with a spouse, may lead to information being hidden from the spouse. One woman in her mid-30s in Irbid, whose husband finds it difficult to work due to illness, finds it difficult to meet the material needs of her family. Her relationship with her husband is very difficult, but she keeps it to herself usually, preferring not to tell her siblings (who also live in Jordan) about these problems because, in the past, her brothers have intervened in arguments with her husband and physical fights occurred, even in Syria. In the building where she lives, people sometimes hang unused bread on the staircase, for anyone to take. She explained that, when it gets dark, she creeps to the staircase to collect bread. Her husband knows she is obtaining bread from somewhere, but does not ask questions about it and she never mentions it either: it is unspoken.

The changes described in this section highlight that familial relations are complex and it is not necessarily helpful to limit analysis to whether displacement results in closer or more disrupted families. Instead, changes during displacement should be situated and contextualized. Notions of

'connectiveness' that existed in Syria may continue to bond people to each other, or may shape how Syrians interact with those who are outside the family.

Befriending 'Outsiders'

Connectiveness within families, although serving an important social function, may have consequences, creating obstacles to people's ability to form relationships to non-connective 'others'. Hamed El-Said and Jane Harrigan put it like this: 'However, the same networks that bind also exclude. They create inward-looking groups and loyalties which narrows down the circle of trust and mutual reciprocity' (2009: 1237). Boundaries are thus formed, separating those who are 'outside' from those 'inside' (Deeb and Harb 2013: 181).

Andrea Rugh argues that 'categories of difference' were mobilized in Syria to determine whether someone was included or excluded based on religion, economic status and nationality, among others (1997: 40). This has taken varied forms in Syria. For example, among the elite in Damascus, fear of the future and fear of the regime expanded into a fear of 'strangers' (Salamandra 2004: 13). Among the Druze, marriage with those who shared religious beliefs was a means of consolidating the boundaries of this sect, transcending ethnic ties but reifying divisions with other Syrians who did not share this religion (Kastrinou 2016: 94, 127). The role of the Syrian state in perpetuating boundaries between groups is also critical. Similarly to how the French emphasized particularly religious differences in Syria, using 'divide and rule' strategies to maintain power (White 2011: 47), the modern Syrian state altered population demographics in parts of Syria even before the conflict began. This included shifting the power dynamics in Governorates like Raqqa by moving Alawites into these areas (Rabo 2010: 49–61) and instituting modernization policies that resulted in non-Alawite populations being forced to move (The Syria Institute 2017: 24–32) and Alawite populations benefiting from redistribution of agricultural land (Balanche 2015: 86–88). In the conflict today, both the Syrian regime and the rebels have mobilized sectarian rhetoric to gain support (Ismail 2011: 540–543; Pinto 2017: 129). Academic literature has critiqued the way sectarianism has been blamed for the conflict, instead of recognizing the role of history in predicating the conflict (Ismail 2011; Hashemi and Postel 2017; Pinto 2017). This was echoed by research participants; one woman felt that the language of sectarianism varied depending on Governorate (appearing less in Raqqa but more when she moved to Homs) and another from Dar'a explained that sectarian differences took on specific meaning after the conflict began, changing her long-held relationship with an Alawite friend.

Within this historical context to how 'difference' was appropriated and how outsiders were viewed, there is a specific nuance. Dawn Chatty argues

that the historical influxes of refugees into Syria from 1850 onwards were 'integral to the emergence of an acceptance of the "Other" and a local conviviality and tolerance of difference which particularly characterized the modern state of Syria' (2018: 11). This tolerance, however, is put into context by the notion of generosity: *karam*. Importantly, *karam* towards outsiders may transgress the boundaries of who is 'outside' and 'inside'. In his analysis of hospitality among the Bedouin in Jordan, Shryock explains that hospitality itself is complex because the 'guest' is dependent on the host. This is not a one-sided relationship where the guest is solely 'prisoner' however; underlying this interaction is a threat to reputation, as the host fears how the guest will speak of them in the future and therefore treats the guest carefully (2012: s23). Within *karam*, therefore, is the idea of reciprocity: relationships with 'outsiders' are governed by this principle (Rugh 1997: 217) and both benefit—the guest by receiving hospitality and the host by having their reputation strengthened (Chatty 2013: 84).

Geographical Ties and 'Knowing' Someone

Hospitality, however, is different to friendship. During fieldwork, it was striking to hear how people referred to others who were different to themselves, as they talked about marriage, friendships or differences between Jordan and Syria. This sentiment emerged in focus-group discussions and interviews, where Syrians went further than solely connecting being an outsider or insider to shared nationality. Importantly, these discussions occurred largely in Amman and Zarqa; Irbid was a different situation, as discussed below. One young woman who lived in Damascus explained the importance of marrying someone from the same Governorate through an idiom: '[I]f one takes someone different from his culture, that will cause him to die.' Syrians were nuanced in how they described cultural practices and marriage, emphasizing differences between Syrians who live in the countryside compared to those from cities, and drawing distinctions between what was permissible behaviour for Syrians from Damascus, compared to Dar'a, compared to Homs.

This emphasis on diversity across Syrians highlights that analysis of Syrian culture, daily life or social relations is more complex than policy-makers and even perhaps academics may realize. Humanitarian reports, in the drive to explain the key issues faced by refugees, often fail to capture diversity across groups, for example, referring to Syrian women and girls as a general collective even when analysing complex issues like 'family honor' (International Rescue Committee 2014: 7) or when explaining their apparently automatic vulnerability to 'predators' (UN Women Iraq 2014: 6). Such analysis collapses the experiences of a subset of Syrian women into a unified whole without reference to class, education or other relevant factors, using otherizing language to reinforce notions of a vulnerable refugee in need of assistance (Fassin 2012: 21).

One young woman from Homs explained that it is not just about someone being Syrian, but she needs to know who someone is: 'Even if I meet a Syrian, but I don't know them, I won't go to her house until I know what or who she is.' These checks not only apply to women or girls. One woman in her 30s from Homs explained that, even for a boy, these rules apply: '[I]f he wants to have a friend, this person needs to be known—whose son he is.' In a focus-group discussion in Zarqa, one woman said that her brothers had many friends in Syria but now it is a 'narrow circle' and they have only two or three friends. She added that 'if it is wider, we get scared'. Another woman said: '[M]y husband does not have friends at all.' A woman sitting nearby responded to her: 'How is his *nafs*? [psychological status].' The first woman said: '[H]e won't dare to adventure to befriend any person he does not know.' Several Syrians expressed the view that they had no reason to leave the house because they did not know anyone. One young woman living in Zarqa, however, explained how she addressed the issue of friends who were not 'known' while in Syria. When she and her siblings made new friends, they actively brought their family to the new friend's home: 'We started to introduce the fathers and the mothers together so we can be friends with that girl.' In this case, among a family who had moved Governorates and perhaps was more willing to meet outsiders, being 'known' did not have to be pre-established.

If friendships were previously based on knowledge about a person's family, then, in a context like Jordan where people are faced with Syrians and Jordanians they do not know and whose families they are not familiar with, this makes forming new friendships difficult. Importantly, however, the requirement for further credentials beyond being Syrian to qualify for friendship is not universal; some felt that simply being Syrian was enough to create connections. One older woman from Zarqa explained how, when she lived in Saudi Arabia, she asked people 'Are you Syrian?' and found friends through this method. Another woman, also in Zarqa, where it should be noted large numbers of Palestinians live, said that nationality does not matter:

> In the morning when we sit, there is a Jordanian, a Palestinian, a Syrian, we sit together. We complain, we talk. We love each other. We like to meet up and like: 'I am here, come to me'. 'No, you come to me'.

This aligns with Rabo's research in Syria, which showed that, although family ties dictated who people spent time with, Syrian women's relationships with their non-familial neighbours were also important (2008: 135).

The extent to which meeting 'outsiders' may be easier in certain areas of Jordan compared to others emerged during fieldwork. For example, the overwhelming sentiment from Syrian refugees (male and female) living in Amman was that it was difficult to get to know Jordanians and even other Syrians. This was felt perhaps most strongly by Syrian refugees who had lived in the countryside in Syria and found Amman a difficult city to adjust to. A few

refugees in Amman said that the only people they knew outside their family were myself and my research assistant. These limited social ties may be due to the reduced presence of humanitarian agencies in Amman compared to Northern Jordan, based on the assumption that refugees in Amman have better financial security and therefore need less assistance. Financial security, however, is different to social relationships.

In Irbid, however, there were differences in how refugees connected—not just to other Syrians, but also to other Jordanians. In a small group discussion with a few older men (all of whom lived in Dar'a in Syria and moved to Irbid in Jordan with their families), the positive connections they have to Irbid emerged strongly. One older man was offered resettlement, but decided to remain in Irbid because he feels comfortable there:

> It's enough that when I walk the streets and I find someone I can say, '*As-salamu 'alaykum*' [peace be with you] to, and they say, '*Salam*' [peace] back. I speak with him, sit with him, have a cup of coffee with him, a cup of tea.

He had visited Jordan multiple times before the war because his relatives married Jordanians before the conflict and lived in Jordan for years. He and the other men felt that the culture and traditions in Dar'a were similar to Irbid: 'We have the same nature.' Importantly, however, these strongly positive associations with Irbid are gendered. Men have more options for gathering compared to women (Rabo 2005: 23). In a focus-group discussion, while discussing mobility in Jordan, one woman said: 'We haven't seen anything. We leave from our house, come here and from here to our house. There's nothing else, nothing at all.' It may be therefore that Syrian men benefit more than women from these pre-existing ties to Jordan, even in contexts like Irbid.

Competitiveness and Helping Others

As well as the cost of transportation in Jordan, not knowing who to meet or where to go were also factors affecting the ability to form relationships—challenges that also emerged among Syrians in Cairo (Ayoub 2017: 88). Men in particular discussed how movement outside the home occurs carefully because of the fear of deportation due to working without permits. Fear of the actions of the state could therefore cause Syrians to be careful about friendships with non-familial others. Others have suggested that Syrians may feel uncomfortable forming friendships with other Syrian families because the others may be spies for the Assad government (Stevens 2016: 60). In other cases, relationships between Syrians may be limited by competition between refugees for services or assistance. One man who lives in Zarqa said that he feels that Syrians do not want to help each other in Jordan because they are all competing for the same limited resources. He shared how his neighbour failed to inform him about the distribution of goods by a nearby association. He attributed this to the fact that Syrians are struggling for survival and can no longer afford to help each other. Another female participant from Zarqa

also described the competitiveness in Jordan: 'Here you feel like each person is only out for themselves .... No, in Syria we cared more ... [T]he heart died, it's just not like it was before.'

This was not a dominant narrative however; during fieldwork, I came across many examples of Syrians who had decided to help other Syrians, including by using more informal networks as well as through humanitarian agencies. Two men were involved in establishing processes to fundraise for refugees and meet their needs; one of these participants spent most of his time visiting refugees as part of his volunteering, whereas the other used his networks with Syrians living across the globe to raise money for Syrians needing medical assistance. Other participants spent their time volunteering with small associations and humanitarian agencies, delivering supplies and helping to organize activities for other Syrians. One older refugee explained that her Syrian, Jordanian and Palestinian friends collected money among themselves to pay for her rent. These examples contrast with the idea of Syrians being singularly vulnerable and unable to look after themselves. This affirms research in Irbid by Khalifah Alfadhli and John Drury (2018: 150), although contrasts with Matthew Stevens's findings in Irbid, where people said they could not help others because they themselves needed help (2016: 56). It suggests that, contrary to refugees being solely seen as 'vulnerable' or 'beneficiaries' of humanitarian assistance, they may themselves be active in helping each other.

Gender, Age and Strategic Friendships

The literature on the gendered dynamics to relationships within the Middle East context also provides considerable insights. This includes analysis on how women experience more freedom when men are not present (Abu-Lughod 1985: 644). Women associated with other women through the '*istiqbal*' (afternoon reception), where women would invite friends to their homes to serve food and drinks, in a display of their wealth and status (Salamandra 2004: 58). In Cairo, men built relationships with men outside their families in cafés (Kreil 2016: 167). The literature focused on Syria suggests that segregation between males and females is not fixed but may alter at specific historical moments including a post-war period (Thompson 2000: 183) or within specific locations; for example, rules about interaction between males and females may be less strict in rural areas (Rabo 2008: 134). In Damascus, elite women displayed their bodies in semi-public spaces like gyms as a strategy to manoeuvre around limited opportunities for interaction with men; physical contact was possible as long as it occurred discretely (Salamandra 2006: 154–155). This literature contrasts with humanitarian agency narratives around segregation, mobility and social interaction. For example, one UN Women report asserts that 'the biggest challenge' faced by Syrian women and girls is accessing services 'due to their limited ability to leave the home without a male family member' (2013: 3). This seems to assume by default strict rules around mobility and being accompanied by

males, which were the opposite of what Syrian women recounted across Irbid, Amman and Zarqa.

There are, however, other kinds of limits and boundaries to relationships that are not solely about gender. In some situations, relationships with others may depend on age. During childhood and even the early teenage years, research participants across locations explained relationships with neighbours and other children at school were more permissible, although, for girls in particular, the opportunities for friendship with non-familial others narrowed as they became older. For one research participant, relationships with other children at school in Syria were complicated by her skin colour, which was criticized by other children as being 'black'. She, however, was able to navigate school life through strategically gaining the support of powerful friends. This included not only regularly complaining about racism to the headmaster and obtaining support from her brothers who would speak to (and provide financial incentives for) headmasters to ensure she was not treated badly, but also extended to the types of children she befriended: children of high-level (government) employees, children of teachers and children of the headmaster. She said: 'I don't make friends with, like how to say that, the regular ones, honestly.' In this case, friendship was strategic; the ties with other children during her childhood and teenage years served a purpose.

For another older woman, who described herself as extremely social and active in Syria, it may be strategic to avoid friendships with others. She acknowledged that, in Jordan, she avoids forming strong relationships with people because she does not want to get too attached to them—this is because it will be too difficult to say goodbye when she returns to Syria. This is similar to what Strang and Ager found among refugees in Europe—that efforts to 'integrate' may not be successful if refugees have no intention of remaining (2010: 600). This is a self-protective mechanism—avoiding social connections now to avoid the pain of disconnection later. Making ties takes time and may be viewed as too difficult for Syrians who see their time in Jordan as temporary.

Blood versus Water

For some Syrians, friendships with non-familial 'others' were indeed unusual. One man, for example, explained how, in Syria, his only friends were his relatives. Even the boy he grew up with and lived next door to, until he was an adult, was kept at a distance: 'Although his door is close to mine, but there were no home visits. Our wives visited each other .... But him and me we didn't go out together.' Instead, he 'stayed on formal terms' with this friend, choosing to instead spend time with his uncles (including his wife's father) after marriage, playing cards at night. Some of his uncles were 20 years older than him, but he said his relationship with them was 'like friends'. He added: 'We treat each other as friends. They are not my uncles.' He said that, in Syria, only women would go from house to house to visit other

women, but it was not appropriate for men to visit each other—presumably because, for married men, this would mean the wife is home as well, which would make it awkward. This participant interestingly made the decision to come to Jordan with his family because this boy he grew up next to (his only friend outside of the family) worked in Jordan. He explained that this was the only reason he chose Jordan: 'How can I come here if I don't know anyone?' While his brothers and importantly his mother (whom he had a close relationship with) remained in Syria, he moved to where this friend lived in Jordan. This friend helped him to find a job.

This example of the limited extent of social relations challenges accounts in academic literature about men visiting men and women visiting women—and how women would leave to other parts of the house when a man was visiting her husband (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2001). The experiences of this participant also contrasts with Kreil's (2016) analysis of the intimacy between men in coffee shops in Egypt, where relationships between non-related men were formed. This different narrative to social relationships between men may, however, be connected to his more conservative upbringing and the closer links he has to his family compared to others. His narratives about social life in Syria were notably different, tending to focus on his role in caring for his parents and the way the experience of serving in the army (prior to the conflict) challenged his perspectives about the world and represented his only experience being away from home. The fact, however, that he invoked his relationship with his childhood friend neighbour when he needed assistance highlights that, in certain situations, what is considered a normative social relation may expand.

Whether as a result of displacement or some other circumstance, sometimes family ties are tenuous, weak or abandoned entirely in favour of ties with strangers. In these cases, people make new connections and find ways of obtaining support from outside the family. One woman recounted similar restrictions in Syria but, unlike the male participant above, being in Jordan has provided the opportunity for relationships with non-related others. She has made close friends through living with other families from Syria, Yemen, Palestine and Jordan in a government building. She and her husband socialize with people more now than in Syria. Unlike when they lived in Syria, they together visit other families living in their building. She added that in Syria she only socialized with family members:

> The problem there is that I am married and living in my father-in-law's house. You, you can say that anything you say is going to come out! My father-in-law might hear about it, my other uncle's house, my brother, my father .... That's a problem! ... I think most of the times I was just quiet. Not like here. Here I can do more.

In Jordan, this woman now has friends who are not relatives. She confides in the other women in her building in Jordan—even going to them to cry about her problems. She was happy as she talked about her new friends, saying: 'I confide in them more than I would in my sisters!' For her,

ironically, living farther from her family but closer to non-familial others has expanded her social circle, providing more opportunities for social interaction.

An older woman now living in Irbid shared about the close relationship she had with her neighbour in Syria:

> Whatever happens to me, if I feel I'm annoyed or ... I would tell her. I'm the kind of person who doesn't tell relatives. I don't. I tell my friend because I know what she is made of.

This relationship has endured during displacement, though now the women speak on the phone instead of in-person since her neighbour remains in Syria. She went on to explain the rationale for trusting a friend over a relative:

> I don't like relatives …. The relatives, you feel that no matter how much you love them but they are like scorpions …. The proverb says, '*Aktar il ara-yeb aa'r-eb*' ['Most relatives are scorpions'].

This proverb includes a play on words, because the pronunciations of 'scorpion' (*'aaqarab*) and 'relatives' (*'aqareb*) in Arabic are quite similar. The idea here is that a relative will sting you if you get close. She explained:

> Because no matter how much good you do for relatives, but afterwards, I don't know how, but there is no love for them. *Yaʿni* [it means] … they talk behind your back …. So, and because of that I feel that my neighbour is my sister, she is my sister. *Yaʿni*, whatever I wanted, if I got bored or angry, I went and see her and then I felt relieved, like my psyche relaxed. When you tell relatives, you feel as if they are glad for your misery.

Her own experience of being stung by relatives related to the marriage of her son to her niece. Reflecting back, she felt it would have been better to marry her son to someone outside the family instead of the marriage resulting in fights between her and her sister:

> There is no one like a stranger; you can get along with a stranger! If you did a mistake with him or he did a mistake with you, you can talk through the problems but not the relative, you can't do that with the relatives.

The idea of non-familial relationships being better than familial relationships also came out from men, challenging the idea that blood ties are always more powerful than non-familial ties. One man in Irbid was explaining that he only sees his father and brother—who live in Ramtha (about a 30-minute drive from Irbid)—once a month because of his work. He then said 'A good neighbour is better than a brother', adding that this was a proverb. He explained that this is because a neighbour checks up on you, when family members do not. He said: 'All my friends are Jordanians.' Importantly, he lived in Dar'a—which is very close to Irbid—before the war and consequently is very familiar with Jordanians from Irbid, whom he describes as similar to

Syrians in Dar'a, making his reference to his friend as a 'brother' less unusual.

These examples emphasize that, despite the idiom, there may be moments where blood and water shift in importance. In some cases, an outsider may be safer than a relative. At times, locational ties to non-familial others may hold stronger.

Conclusion

This article contributes to existing literature on the importance of familial relationships in the Middle East context, particularly the work of Joseph (1999, 2000) on 'relationality' and the power of family ties. It also builds on literature regarding Syrian social relations, contributing to the work of Rabo on the variations within families in Syria (2008: 131–135), suggesting that the expectations for relationships may shift in certain situations, providing opportunities for non-familial bonds to be formed. The findings point to the need for academic research on social relationships among Syrian refugees to be situated within the family. This research also suggests that making an argument about the 'collapse' of social networks (Stevens 2016) may be problematic because relational ties among Syrians are not static, but may both expand and shrink based on gender, age, reasons for friendship, attitudes towards outsiders and even geography of origin and host communities. As such, this article emphasizes the importance of intersectional analysis both before and during displacement, to understand the lives of refugees beyond conclusions about their 'uniform condition' (Eastmond 2007: 253). Rather than a singular narrative about how relationships are during displacement, this article proposes that, both before and during displacement, relational ties are complex and not predictable, so conclusions about how relationships change during displacement need to be made carefully.

These conceptual contributions also have implications for humanitarian agencies and governments implementing programmes for Syrian refugees in host contexts. Extending the conceptual argument about intersectionality to policy, there is a need to address the way 'Syrians' are collectively grouped by humanitarian agencies, without recognition of the diverse cultures and belief systems that shape their lives based on location, class and other factors. Assumptions about 'Syrian culture' or 'tradition' must be tempered with an understanding of *which* Syrian 'culture' is being invoked; the progressive culture of a city in one geographical region could contrast greatly with attitudes among Syrians in small villages in the countryside.

My findings suggest that just 'being Syrian' is not always an automatic connection between people; but it matters where you are from and who you are. This has implications for how humanitarian agencies design and implement programmes. For example, as agencies are increasingly focused on addressing the psycho-social needs of Syrian refugees, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, considering the way Syrians

form relationships may lead to better programmes. Activities such as group counselling, interactive activities like sewing or art and sport may be better able to create openness and group discussion on sensitive topics if people are grouped based on geographical location in Syria, instead of people being added to groups randomly. This is one step prior to simply allocating people into groups with family members (which many agencies avoid due to people's fear of family members knowing about their personal problems), but still incorporates an increased level of closeness by invoking geography. Agencies could similarly take greater care in assigning volunteer roles within humanitarian agencies to people from diverse locations in Syria, to ensure that a wider range of groups feel comfortable in the 'safe spaces' and community centres where activities are held for Syrian refugees. These simple considerations may prove useful in creating spaces where Syrian women and men feel more comfortable.

Lastly, the social lives of refugees need to be analysed in more nuanced ways that capture the complexity in their displacement experiences. It is not so simple as families being torn apart or female-headed households suddenly emerging; rather, family life is complex. Policy-makers need to ensure their analysis about social relations and family life are grounded in understandings of family as an entity that powerfully shapes people's lives in Middle Eastern contexts. Relationships with non-familial Syrians and Jordanians also require deeper analysis, so that humanitarian narratives can move beyond simplistically blaming 'gender norms' or 'tradition' for the limited interactions between Syrians, and recognize other factors including the feelings Syrians have about 'outsiders', age or the factor of cost in restricting the ability of Syrians to maintain friendships. Importantly, this article also emphasizes the importance of engaging not just with the material needs, but also the social needs of refugees. This article sheds light on how displacement may perhaps be more isolating an experience for Syrians who may not be used to making connections with unknown 'others'—for those who hold to blood ties rather than the weaker ties of water. What opportunities exist for such Syrians to find connection and solidarity? How might the hold of 'family' loosen over time? These are questions warranting deeper exploration as the displacement of Syrians becomes more prolonged.

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