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Homing

Potentiality, Hope, and (Be)Coming Home

> Home is not where you were born; home is where all attempts to escape cease.
> –attributed to Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz

Over the course of the past decade, as major Syrian cities were leveled one after the other, the scenes of distraught civilians fleeing their homeland reminded many in the region of the mass displacement of Palestinians in what is known as the Nakba, or Catastrophe. The Nakba was the scattering of Palestinians around the world, but particularly to neighboring Arab countries, in the years following the 1948 establishment of Israel. Like Palestinians, Syrians left their country with the few belongings that they were able to carry. These included the keys to their houses, which represented hope of one day returning to their homes (see also Slyomovics 1998).

In a small NGO dedicated to refugee children's education in Turkey's border province of Gaziantep, the organization's director, who was of Palestinian descent, welcomed us in his office and pointed to a set of keys hanging on the wall. The director was one of many Palestinians who had first taken refuge in Syria and had then been displaced yet again to Turkey. "Now, we hang two keys on our walls," he remarked, in reference to the keys he inherited from his family home in Jaffa and to the keys to his home in Syria's Yarmouk camp.

The keys on the wall symbolize home, which in turn stands for an imagined continuity between a past that was disrupted and a present on hold. The keys also stand for an imagined future that will restore what once was. The keys, then, represent home as something self-evident: a place that exists elsewhere, to which one has a claim, and which represents one's past and identity. Hanging the keys on the wall, moreover, becomes a rejection of rupture, a refusal to mourn, and a statement that one intends to reclaim one's home in the future. Keeping the keys in sight is a way of rejecting loss

and insisting on continuity between the past that made one and the future self that one will become.

In contrast to this act of suspending the future in the keys hanging on the wall, many youths told a rather different story. "Most young people won't go back," a young woman, Ahlam, observed. We were sitting with Ahlam and two of her friends in a café, and they all seemed reluctantly to agree. "Our parents want to go back. They'll definitely try to go back. They haven't adjusted to life here. But we've gotten used to the openness here. We've grown up here, and even if people say they'll go back, I don't believe them."

Openness is a theme that would return again and again in our conversations with youth, and we discuss it more in the next chapter. Here, we focus on the process of *homing*, or the everyday ways in which we create new homes in exile. In popular discourse, *home* is usually seen as a place, and particularly as the place from which one emerged and to which one presumably wants to return. For most young Syrians, the assumption is that their home is in Syria–an assumption that the NGO director confirms through the keys on his wall. However, much recent literature on the migrant experience describes not *home* as a noun and as something that can be found in a place, but hom*ing* as a verb that describes the action of home-*making* (Blunt and Dowling 2006) or "(be)coming home" (Hayes 2007). In using *homing* as a verb, this literature focuses on what people see as home-like and on how "people orient themselves towards what they feel, see, or claim as home, or at least as homely-enough" (Boccagni 2022: 585).

Looked at in this way, home is not only the place we have left–indeed, may not ever have been the place we left–but is the place where we imagine our futures. For some, home is "a lifelong, existential becoming towards an aspired state of things" (Boccagni 2022: 590), a "future-oriented life project" that entails "existential and resilient efforts to reach it" (591). While talk of home may appear nostalgic, this literature argues, ultimately homing may be seen as having a futural orientation. "Home might always contain elements of *having been*, but its main significance lies in our *becoming*" (Hayes 2007: 14, emphasis in original).

The home for which many migrants are striving may not be a particular place but rather "should coalesce conditions of stability, security, and predictability–much of what is perceived as an 'ordinary life'" (Boccagni 2022: 591). In the terms that we have used in the rest of the book, then, home is a space where one can expect to expect, where one does not need to anticipate. Or in the words attributed to Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, "Home is not where you were born; home is where all attempts to escape cease."

This chapter examines homing as a futural orientation, one concerned with creating conditions for ordinary lives and the expectation of expectation. In its most immediate sense, the desire to escape and its cessation to which Mah-

fouz refers is about safety, both in the home and outside of it. Whether we are trying to escape violence in the home or some natural catastrophe, the anticipation that the lack of safety produces makes homes unhomely.

However, a place becoming a home is not only about immediate safety. A desire to escape, or lack of such desire, is also about belonging and about where and how we imagine our futures unfolding. It is at this juncture that ideas of the social imaginary become important. For Charles Taylor, the social imaginary concerns how we imagine ourselves as members of society, or "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (2002: 106). As Henrik Vigh remarks, social imaginaries engage a particular type of futural orientation: "The social imaginary is the key faculty through which we anticipate the unfolding of the social environments our lives are set in–evolving positively or negatively from the *potentialities* of its current state" (Vigh 2009b: 100). Social imaginaries, in other words, shape how we orient ourselves to collective futures by giving us ways to evaluate the potentialities of the present and how they may be expected to unfold.

In this chapter, we look at how certain environments in Turkey are becoming home for young Syrians. In particular, we look at how youth evaluate potentiality and how it may unfold in the future. As we will see, planning for life in Turkey is very much related to the loss of potential for return to Syria. We saw at the end of the last chapter that some young people study subjects at university that they believe will eventually be of use to a new Syria, when the country can finally be rebuilt. Yet those same youth who dream of contributing one day to their home country plan their own lives in Turkey, in the absence of potential for return in even the medium-term future. At the same time, they recognize that their own developing sense of belonging in Turkey is generally not reciprocated, and they remain marginalized in Turkish society. We look, then, at how youth evaluate the potential for a future in Turkey that also includes them.

Return to Syria as Defeated Potentiality

Salma was a twenty-one-year-old woman from Damascus who was studying in Istanbul when we met her. She had already been in Turkey for five years at that time. She told us of how her family had first settled in the Taksim area of Istanbul, a shopping and entertainment district in the city center with a high volume of tourism. Taksim and the surrounding areas are also considered some of the most "Western" parts of the city. For Salma, the life-

style there was too different from her home and too much of a shock when they first arrived.

> Because when I first left, I didn't want to leave Syria in the first place. When I found out that we were looking at plane tickets, I started crying and started telling my mother that I don't want to leave; I want to stay in Damascus. I'm too connected to my city. When I arrived in Taksim, here my psychological state was very bad, I missed my country and my friends and my grandmother and my aunts. I was not happy at all . . . It didn't feel comfortable in Taksim at all. It was way too free, like dancing till the morning, and drinking, and it was way too hard.

Later, she and her family moved to another, more conservative part of the city, where she felt more at home, and where many Syrians ultimately began to settle. Gradually, she says, "The missing feeling faded."

Later, Salma's father left for France to work and put in a request for family reunification, which was approved. Salma, however, refused to go. "I had started university, and I was not ready to leave all the work I had done and go to France, after all this time." We asked her if she thought at all about going abroad after university. "Not at all," she replied. "If I wanted to go abroad, I would think of Damascus. I want to go there a lot."

We asked her if she meant return, to settle. She replied, "No, a visit only . . . Returning is too hard for me . . . The same situation with my family. They can't go back. We've settled down here." We asked her if she felt now that Turkey is her country, and she replied positively. "Yes, exactly," she agreed.

> What I mean is that Turkey, it's the country that I grew up in. What I mean is that when I came here, I was young. So, I have a lot of memories and events that I remember, and it's more important to me than the sixteen years I lived in Syria. I was too young then and not conscious of anything. For sure, now the years that I lived in Turkey are more important.

In the conclusion, we discuss the ways that the changes that youth experienced in Turkey were often, in their minds, part of the experience of growing up. Here, though, we wish to focus on Salma's experience of homing, or how, over five years, Salma's longing for Damascus became "normal," as she put it, so that both she and her family could miss their homeland but imagine their future homes elsewhere.

The process was a slow one, often met with denial at first. Just as Syrians in Turkey were long-term "guests," resulting in a perception that they would eventually leave, so many Syrians described how they had expected a short-term stay and found years passing. Faiz, for instance, was twenty-two years old when we met him. Of Kurdish origin from Aleppo, he was then living and working in Izmir:

> We aren't rich, but we are from the middle class. We had a three-story house. We are three men. My father was a bit old, so we didn't allow him to work. And you know that when the incidents started there was no work, and my work had stopped. Materially it was so hard. Like my father said, "We put away some money." And he was worried about us so he said, "Pack your bags, we will leave." My father said something funny, that we would come here for one month or two and then we would come back . . . And it lasted for years . . .

Surprise at being unexpectedly stuck is a feeling Faiz shared with many others. As a young man living in Gaziantep, Nazem, also originally from the Aleppo region, explained that when he first arrived in Turkey, he was expecting to return to Syria in the very near future, or "when ISIS would be cleared out of the area." He had no plans of settling in Turkey at all.

Because of this, refugees' own decisions and actions in the first years often reflected their own perception of themselves as temporary guests. For instance, initially young parents preferred to send their children to Temporary Education Centers, which had opened to cater to the needs of Syrian children by offering education taught by Syrian teachers in Arabic and following a slightly modified Syrian curriculum.[1] The curriculum in these schools contained very few hours of Turkish language courses, meaning that schoolchildren in those first years learned very little formal Turkish, despite being of an age when language learning is easier. Going to such schools has been described as "living in an aquarium" (Çelik and Içduygu 2019); students "wait" in limbo until their own schools re-open, and they can return to their regular lives.

Yet, as time passed in this liminal situation and a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict remained elusive, the certainty of returning to Syria progressively diminished. The situation in Syria became less safe and lessened the potential for return. The ongoing conflict continued to cause extensive damage to the physical infrastructure of the country, affecting basic services like water and electricity provision, or the infrastructure of education and health. In addition, there was significant economic loss, as people's homes and investments were irrevocably destroyed. With the interference of foreign powers, the rise and subsequent fall of ISIS in some areas of the country was followed by the dominance of the Assad regime, which remains in power and at time of writing controls a large part of the total territory. In 2016, Turkey's military also crossed the border and began establishing a "safe zone" in the country's northwest, intended to keep Kurdish fighters away from the border and also to encourage Syrians in Turkey to "return." Of course, this "return" would only be to a place called Syria and not to the areas many refugees had left.

Despite rising xenophobia in Turkey and the Turkish government's encouragement of Syrians to start resettling in the Turkish-controlled zone,

repatriation has been slow. For many, leaving safe and settled lives in Turkey and returning to a politically fragile area that is not their original home is not an option. While earlier surveys indicated that a majority of Syrians would like to return as soon as the situation in Syria improved, this desire has gradually faded over time. For some, perceived difficulties of return relate to everyday life concerns such as infrastructural issues. Salih, a twenty-five-year-old man from Aleppo who was studying in Adana when we met him, explained,

> I don't think [I can go back] . . . I cannot go there to live because the lifestyle there is different from here. You are now used to a standard of living; you cannot go back. There is no electricity six to seven hours per day; you don't experience this here. Or there is no internet for a couple of weeks.

Similarly, Dawood, a twenty-one-year-old young man from Aleppo, thinks it is impossible to return due to the fact that his city, and his neighborhood in particular, had been occupied and effectively destroyed.

> The area in which we lived in Aleppo has no one living in it now. The Syrian army occupied all of Aleppo. Our area was a front line, and it is badly ruined. There is nothing there, no electricity, no water. Even the electrical wire connections are all destroyed. A start from zero.

When asked if he might go back if the area was rebuilt, he answered that it is possible, but that "going back is hard." He explains, "For my parents, I think it is possible that they would go back. But for me, impossible."

Even more than the lack of infrastructure, however, most people mentioned the general security risk due to continuing fighting. The widespread availability of weapons means that their safety and that of their families are at risk if they return.

> If the war ended or a solution was found, that does not mean that the country is stable. Stability is first and foremost taking weapons away from militias. There is an abundance of guns in Syria now, and the situation is bad. It's possible for a citizen who has nothing to do with politics to get kidnapped for a ransom. It's possible that just from a small fight between my son and someone else's son. Right now, fights immediately escalate into gunfights. This is how the situation will remain. (Alma, twenty-five years old, living in Istanbul)

> We wanted to return, and we thought about it, but the situation in Idlib is especially so bad. I mean, if you step out of your door you are not sure you will come back. The situation there is so difficult. Until now, there is a war and bombing there. We escaped for our children. (Basma, twenty-eight years old, living in Izmir)

A young woman residing in Adana, Bahar, explains that her return is impossible, because she would be facing different sorts of risks.

> I would not go back [to Syria]. If I went, I would have to go to Raqqa,[2] my husband's place, but the situation is too bad. In Aleppo, the situation is better, but it is too risky for me, since it is under Assad's control. So, no, I don't think about going back.

According to the Syrian Barometer survey, too, the strongest reasons people have for not considering return are related to security. The response "because it is not a safe place" (42.9 percent) was the first reason respondents gave for not going back, followed by "because the war still continues" (31.2 percent) (Erdogan 2020).

Compulsory military service also comes up among many young men as a major inhibitor in planning for a life in Syria. Basma, quoted above, told us that she and her family would return,

> Only if the regime changes . . . To make sure that they won't take the youth, because until now they are forcing them to join the war . . . My husband–until he becomes forty-two years old, it does not matter, even if you did the military service before, you still have to go [to war].

Return is rendered especially difficult for government opposition members. Indeed, the Syrian regime claims that there are "definitely" terrorists among the refugees, referring to the opposition. In 2018, the regime introduced a law (Law No. 10 of 2018) that requires property holders in Syria to formally prove ownership of their private property within a period of thirty days (later extended to one year) or face confiscation. At the same time, Assad and his allies have promoted the idea of return to fuel the perception that the war is ending. As such, if Assad stays in power, the opposition members will not want or be able to return, even less so in the absence of property rights.

Syrian young people such as Yazan, who was mentioned in the previous chapter, cannot imagine going back to rebuild the country as long as the Syrian regime is still in power:

> I may go back if there is no Assad. Because we were so humiliated, I do not want to go back to that humiliation. My friends tell me about nationalism, "you should go back to rebuild it." How will I rebuild it if Assad is still in power? Even he does not want to rebuild it. If he really decided to rebuild it, he could have rebuilt it by now. All the rubble is still there. The city [Aleppo], its history, the castle and the surrounding buildings have gone away. He cut off water and electricity supply to make us move out, and we did. How would we come back? No, I do not think of going back.

The instability in Syria meant that many young people with whom we spoke talked about not knowing what to expect there. This is a particularly important factor among the youth who, as Dalia, a young woman from Daraa living in Adana, expresses it, are currently in the process of shaping their future. Syria, which still needs several years to get back to normal, is not

perceived to be a good place to prepare the groundwork for the future in the present:

> It is difficult to build a future once again, especially in the first years, and Syria needs at least ten years, and these are the most important years in my life. So, for me, it's better to live them here [in Turkey].

As these young people are in the process of rebuilding their lives, often having accumulated several years of delay in their education and work plans, they often prioritized their own current endeavors over making plans of return. Yazan remarked,

> Honestly, I do not see a future for myself apart from here. Currently, I am thinking here, I would like to continue a masters and Ph.D., and I do not want to take a risk to find something else. Before finishing my studies at university, it is impossible to go back.

The situation was similar for Motaz, working in Istanbul, who had progressed in his job and did not want to start again. Motaz and others fear that going back will set them back on all the progress they have made.

> The situation there is not stable, and nothing is clear. What can happen can be similar to Iraq. I even thought about it: I would either go back to Damascus with nothing or I can [stay and] work [in Turkey]. And I have the Turkish language and English and Arabic and I'm working, but if I go back, I will fall behind on everything.

While expressed as a lack of security, we also see in these accounts by youth that the future plans of many Syrians are increasingly becoming independent of the developments within Syria. Although some express this as a matter of instability, lack of security, and ruined infrastructure, at the same time they talk about not wanting to give up what they have managed to achieve—or as many expressed it, "I don't want to start from zero." In that context, they tend to weigh the long period of time that they believe it will take to rebuild the country against the period of their own youth, when they are establishing themselves. This means that, even if a solution is reached in Syria, it is likely to have limited effect on Syrian youth's tendency to return.

Hope and Homing in Turkey

Zuher is from a Turkmen region of Syria near Latakia and was displaced with his parents and siblings to Turkey as early as 2012. By the time we met him, he had already been in Turkey for seven years. When his family first arrived in the Hatay region, where they have relatives, they were put in a refugee camp. Zuher explained to us the long struggle that he had to

get from a refugee camp to study nursing at university, and from there to working as a nurse in state hospitals.

> I am a refugee, and all the property we had in Syria and the luxurious situation we were living, it all stayed in Syria. Through revolution, we did not come by choice. If we had come with our own choice, we would have sold all our properties in Syria and built a future and companies in Turkey. But unfortunately, we have this situation, starting from zero, below zero.

Although he lived in a village before displacement, he describes his family as well-off and explains the shock of starting again with only the clothes on one's back. The only capital he had upon arrival in Turkey was the language, since his mother only spoke Turkish, and he had grown up with it. They also had some relatives in Hatay, though apparently those relatives did not help them as much as the family had expected. Through much struggle, he managed to prove his knowledge of Turkish bureaucratically and gain a scholarship to university, though at the time that he applied, scholarships were limited, and he had no choice but to study nursing. He says that he would have preferred a subject like international relations, but he has grown to like his work. "It is like humanitarian work," Zuher tells us. "It is true that everyone works for money, even though it is not all about money. You serve and get something in return . . . This is the life of a human being, not a company's work. It is not like other jobs and companies."

The problem that he experienced when we met him was that he could find only precarious or contract work as a nurse in Turkey, given his legal status. He was waiting to see if his citizenship application would be approved, and if so, he looked forward to permanent work. If not, he considered learning German and going to Germany, where he had relatives, though he imagined this as only temporary, because his parents would never follow.

> They won't move from Turkey, because they love Turkey. They have adjusted to the Turkish environment and Turkish society since we are originally Turks. Syria is okay, Syria is our homeland, too, but if they live in a European country like Germany and so on, they would not adjust to life there, it is impossible.

Since Zuher imagined his own life in a more European environment, his ideal solution was to find permanent work in Izmir, where we met him, and to bring up his own family there, with his parents not too far away:

> I feel that Izmir is European, honestly, whether it's the coasts, the beaches, the touristic areas–and it is terrific when it comes to tourism. And the people act like Europeans . . . if I wanted to settle down in Izmir as a Syrian, I would have no problem. But when it comes to family, since I am the only boy, I cannot bring them to live in Izmir, honestly. For my father and mother, it would be really difficult. I cannot bring them to an area where they dress like that (*laughing*), they cannot. But for me, I would get married, settle down, and build

> my life here. I feel like Izmir is very developed after Istanbul–not right after Istanbul, that's Ankara, but then Izmir.

We have described Zuher's journey at length to show what it means to differing youth to "start from zero," and how they weigh present potentialities and the way these might unfold in the future. They do so in relation to their own desires and aspirations, as well as through the prism of certain social imaginaries, such as what it means for Izmir to be a "European" city. Zuher's story has an unusual element, which is his knowledge of the language on arrival in the country. Nevertheless, that does not guarantee that he will remain. Although it may be a preference, he also considers job stability as the most important factor to be able to settle down. At the same time, he weighs this factor in relation to his role as an only son and an expected future when his parents will age and need him near them.

His hope is to remain in Turkey, imagined as a future life in Izmir, a cosmopolitan city where he can see himself raising a family separately from the conservatism of his parents but still close to them. His dream is contingent, but at the same time it is based on a very real potentiality, and one that he is actively working to realize. For this reason, Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019: 134) call hope a form of futural momentum: "Hope is about something that doesn't presently exist but potentially could; hope is based on more than a possibility and less than a probability. In that sense, hope is a way of virtually pushing potentiality into actuality." Moreover, we may see homing and hope as linked: both are intrinsically positive ways of orienting futures. If we often view the idea of home with a rose-colored nostalgia, it is because for a home to be homely it needs also to have hope.

It is for this reason, we see, that Syrian youth today who have given up hope of return to Syria instead have begun to create homes in Turkey. One sees this in all recent surveys, which show that the majority of Syrians in Turkey today intend to remain there.[3] Indeed, all studies of Syrians in Turkey have shown that despite being in limbo, the passage of time has meant that families have settled, children have grown, and youth have made plans for the future. For example, a 2019 survey published by the UNHCR noted that 63.4 percent of respondents said that they wanted to receive Turkish citizenship, while 54 percent said that they wanted to remain in Turkey. This was in line with the findings from our own study, in which 61 percent said that they wished to apply for Turkish citizenship, while 6 percent had already done so. Of those who wished to apply, 46 percent said that it was because they planned to settle in Turkey. When asked what they would do if the situation remained the same, 72 percent said that they planned to remain in Turkey, while only 20 percent planned to move to a third country and only 8 percent would return to Syria. If the situation in Syria improved, 44 percent planned to return to the country, but 30 percent still made plans to

remain in Turkey. The same UNHCR study conducted in 2017 had shown 61 percent of refugees saying that they would return to Syria only if the war ended. Findings of the Syrian Barometer survey suggest that Syrians believe that there is a future in Turkey for themselves and for their families, a question to which over 60 percent of the respondents answering affirmatively.

We can draw several tentative conclusions from these statistics, taken in surveys several years apart (2016, 2017, and 2019). The first is that the continuing uncertainties of the Syrian situation mean that the large majority of Syrians currently in Turkey are likely to remain there. Even if conditions in Syria improve, our study conducted in 2016 showed that at least 30 percent of youth planned to remain, while a study conducted three years later showed that this rose to more than half of the general population of Syrian refugees in the country. In general, we see that as time passes, the numbers of Syrian refugees planning to remain in Turkey rises, as do their demands for citizenship.

There are many cases in which interviewees expressed that they had started to feel at home in Turkey. In general, they seemed to appreciate the political climate in the host country and the position of the Turkish state in the war (in 2018). Many progressively developed an attachment and a sense of belonging to the country, which pushed the idea of return further away. Echoing findings by Susan Rottmann and Ayhan Kaya (2020), cultural similarity and geographical proximity to Syria were emphasized as factors that encourage them to stay in Turkey. This is reflected in the interview with Janin, a strong-minded, very articulate young woman who works part time as a secretary of a private education center in Antep.

> I had opportunities to go outside of Turkey, but I feel that Syria and Turkey are one country. Turkish people stood by us during the war, and for the revolution. [In terms of] education, they offered good services, despite some kind of arbitrary matters. Honestly, I'm really comfortable here; I don't think of leaving at all. I even started feeling that I belong to Turkey, a country of freedom and justice and democracy. At least the people here choose their president. This thing is really brilliant. (Janin)

Similarly, Dunya is a young woman originally from Deir el Zor whose protective father had not allowed her to take part in the revolution in Syria or to study in Sakarya, Turkey, as it was too far from their home. Instead, she was studying at Çukurova University in Adana when we interviewed her, and she also expressed intentions to remain:

> We thought of going to another country, for example, Germany or Sweden, like those who emigrated via the sea. However, when my dad came to Turkey, he found that its culture is close to the one in Syria, at least they have some of the Islamic aspects, you hear the ezan [call to prayer], there are veiled women . . . So their traditions and habits are somehow similar to ours . . . My father didn't like living elsewhere, in any European country . . . and I kind of agree

> with him. Of course, it all depends on the rearing, but child-rearing is very hard in Europe, very hard, the traditions, habits, culture . . . and those who are there are suffering from this.

In addition, youth viewed the services provided by the Turkish state as having improved over the years and generally appreciated attempts to help them pursue higher education (see chapter 5). In turn, as we saw with Zuher, working as a nurse in Izmir, traveling to Europe was no longer a preferred option, even if it meant gaining more opportunities.

> Of course, there are European universities that are great but there are ones in Turkey, too. The way I see it is that I prefer Turkey over anything. Now for example, I do not prefer Germany or France or any European country. If I am getting one lira in Turkey, and they want to give me ten liras in Germany, as long as I have a job or job opportunities in Turkey, I would work for this one lira rather than for ten, and it is better and more honorable for me than the ten in Europe. This is my thinking.

We discussed Yazan's story at length in the previous chapter, as she struggled to find a university place in arts and design and eventually chose to study journalism and media. At the time that we met her, she had just finished her one-year language preparation in a public university and would start the following year with a scholarship. She wants to obtain the Turkish nationality, and if she continues further education abroad, in Europe, she still wants to come back to Turkey and find a good job.

As we will see even more in the following chapter, young Syrians like Yazan, who have found opportunities that encouraged their stay in Turkey, are not unusual. For instance, Ruqa is attached to her work, and she wants to complete projects she is involved in. She invested in social capital, in improving herself and her career, and she does not want to start over again.

> If the Syrians leave, I do not want to go, because I work in a public institution on projects. I do not want to go without finishing this. Also, I don't want to go back to Syria, because I haven't done anything there. I improved myself in everything here; I did a lot, I got to know a lot of people . . . If I go back to Syria, I will start all over again. It would be very difficult.

This sense of belonging and planning for a future life in Turkey also started to reflect on the education strategies of families for their children. Zina mentioned that even though her daughter wanted to be in a Syrian school, she preferred for her to start learning Turkish now for her to have better opportunities in the future. She decided to register her in a Turkish school instead.

> I just want them to study, I want them to learn Turkish, as we live here. It will be better for them, otherwise they will reach nowhere, I always tell them. Now my thirteen-year-old girl tells me to put her in a Syrian school and that

> she would do better there. She insists, but I refused. We are here now, and they might stay here in the future; I want them to reach a good level in their studies and be fine.

Indeed, the idea of return became progressively more distant among young Syrians not only because of being unable to see an end to the Syrian conflict but also because they began to feel like they belonged in their host country. This was especially the case for individuals whose situation is relatively stable. One such instance is Zahra, who came to Turkey in 2014 from Aleppo and settled in Izmir after Gaziantep. She is taking vocational courses at the local public education center, and her husband has a permanent job as a painter. She told us that she feels like the salaries are better in Turkey than other places they had considered, and that, in any case, they were building a life and could not relocate again.

Such individuals, who are in relatively favorable situations, did not want to uproot themselves again, as they felt like they were doing fine in Turkey, even without the benefits that refugees are perceived to receive in Europe. Nazem told us, "The problem with Europe is . . . my siblings went there. but I did not want to go because most people that thought of going there, they went for the money. Like I'd go there and sit all day and get a salary." Indeed, as more youth heard from their friends and family about life in Europe, the desire to leave what they had established in Turkey diminished. Even as Turkey began to feel more home-like for them, however, tensions regarding their presence in the country made them scapegoats for political problems. Opposition parties promised to "send them back," particularly during election periods.

Hazim, a young man from a Kurdish background, has a high school education and at the time of our interview was working as a translator in Izmir. He remarked,

> For example, to gain more votes in the election these people [the opposition parties] are publishing like those videos to say to other Turkish people, "Look what the Syrians are doing! Our youth are going to war and you still vote for this president, and he brought all these Syrians here!" They think that by filling up the people's minds with negatives images of Syrians, they can gain more votes.

Youths such as Hazim, then, were very much aware of their own political divisiveness, and in the context of that they assessed paths and developed strategies to make their own lives in the country more secure.

Hoping and Homing in the Context of Marginalization

"The country [Turkey] is very similar to us culturally speaking, but it's very hard for us to adjust to the people, there is a large barrier between them and

us. The barrier is their view of us as lesser humans." These were the words of a young woman, Safia, living in Adana. Another young man in her same group remarked, "It disturbs me because I always feel that I am a stranger. We always get this look that you are a stranger; you are not from us; you are not like us."

Indeed, by the time of our research, "Suriyeli," or Syrian, had become a stigma. Unlike Zuher, at the beginning of the chapter, others who were not so fluent in Turkish found themselves often ostracized. Another young man working as a welder in Izmir remarked,

> Here it is like you have no value, and no one sees you, no one cares about you. Whoever sees you keeps saying "Suriyeli," and from this concept they hate us . . . Most of the Turkish people they don't want us, maybe half of the society they don't want us, if not more.

Although many of the youth with whom we spoke reported experiencing discrimination, most of those same youth expressed a desire to remain in Turkey and to integrate into Turkish society. This desire was more strongly expressed among higher educated youth and/or those who were in relatively stable paid employment, echoing the social patterning of staying aspirations identified by Kerilyn Schewel and Sonja Fransen (2022). There were also those who expressed gratitude for the opportunities and "hospitality" that the Turkish state has offered, particularly compared to other countries in the region, even as they wished that the "guest" status would change. In our survey, when asked if Syrians living in Turkey are treated well by the government, an overwhelming 82 percent said that they either agreed or definitely agreed. In this instance, 62 percent think that Syrians who live in "Western" countries are treated well by the government, while 31 percent are not sure. Although this percentage is high, it remains considerably lower than the percentage who approved of the Turkish state's treatment.

In contrast, when we asked if Syrians in Turkey were treated well by the people, 42 percent of respondents chose not to take a position, while 16 percent responded negatively. While it is difficult to interpret the high number of respondents who did not take a position on the question, it may indicate the confusion of being "guests," as well as the ways in which the Turkish public has been divided over the Syrian refugee issue. In contrast, when we asked if Syrians who went to "Western" countries were treated well by the people there, 49 percent said that they were, and 41 percent did not have an opinion. Only 10 percent answered negatively.

The clear difference between approval of the Turkish state's position and a feeling of being excluded by Turkish society could help explain the contradiction of young Syrians feeling more at home in Turkey while still experiencing marginalization and discrimination. Moreover, parts of our research took place during general elections in spring 2018, when political

parties explicated their positions on the "Syrian issue." In particular, polls show that many supporters of the main opposition parties believe that if Syrians receive citizenship, they will vote for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). For this and other populist reasons, opposition parties have tended to promise their constituents that they will send Syrian refugees home if elected.

> During elections . . . the other candidates, besides Erdoğan and his party . . . in case they won, they said they will kick out all Syrians. They said it, they said it openly . . . "We will make them have breakfast with their families [in Syria] next Eid."[4] They said it. (Ghaith, twenty-five years old, living in Gaziantep)

Syrian youth participants in our study were aware of the ways that this rhetoric, particularly employed during election periods, increased tension and led to further hostility toward the Syrian community.

> For the purpose of gaining more votes in the elections . . . these people are publishing, like, those videos to say, "Look what the Syrians are doing! Our youth are going to war [in Syria], and you still vote for this president who brought all these Syrians here!" They [political parties] think that by filling up the people's minds with a negative attitude about Syrians, they can gain more votes. (Hazim, twenty-six years old, smuggled to Turkey in 2012 from the Aleppo region, living in Izmir)

Many youth recognized that the political instrumentalization of their plight had a longer history. A young married man from a communist family in the Aleppo region explained to us that the polarization already existed but that Syrians had just become a concrete focus for the opposition's anger:

> Of course, the government is very good compared to other governments, but still, it's not completely a democratic government. They do have some suppression of freedom, but it's better than the Arab countries in general. From the point of view of the government, there was already a lot of anger in the Turkish people from the opposition, and they now have a strong argument, which is the Syrians in the country.

The polarization and instrumentalization of the refugee issue has also made it difficult for Syrian youth to become politically active or engaged within the context of Turkey. One young man commented,

> There are always these discussions between Syrians about the consequences of supporting a specific political party, and how such support can create obstacles toward integration with the host community in Turkey. (Male, twenty-four years old, from al-Raqqa district, living in Gaziantep)

Moreover, participants shared their concerns about their sense of safety, particularly during highly contested and tense election periods, or as a re-

sult of politicized rhetoric. Several mentioned the way that personal clashes could result in communal polarization. Some reported witnessing that this had led to physical violence and property damage.

> If two people fight together . . . the whole city will start to say, "Go back to Syria," or they start in breaking the Syrian shops . . . No guarantee! I don't feel safe . . . My uncle has a car, and someone else has a mini market . . . Maybe one day their properties will be destroyed . . . I am afraid of that! At any second, someone can come and ask you to leave!

As a result of the negative representation of Syrian refugees in public discourse, which influences daily interactions with the Turkish community, young people expressed feeling stigmatized by the undesirable labels attached to the Syrian identity. When asked about their social relations and level of interaction with the Turkish community, many youths reported that the level of contact remained minimal and mainly superficial. In the university context, for instance, Syrian students expressed that they were unable to interact with their Turkish classmates beyond the classroom setting. Salma, from the beginning of the chapter, remarked,

> They [Turkish students] see you as different . . . as a stranger; they don't come near you. They are satisfied with their Turkish friends . . . It has been two years for me here at the university. I know a lot of Turks, but the relationship is superficial, not a deep one.

Some of the youth interviewed reported not having the sorts of neighborly interactions to which they were accustomed in Syria. Even when engaging in conversations with Turkish neighbors, the social contact seems to remain on a superficial level. As a result, the young people had to regulate what they have to expect from their neighbors. Salma, quoted earlier, told us,

> They treat us like foreigners . . . We don't talk to or bother anyone, and they do the same . . . If I had harmed them or bothered them in any way, they would get annoyed . . . they would just take it as "an Arab bothered me." That's why I never bother them, and they never bother me . . . I never visit my neighbors, and no one visits me, but from a distance the relationship is good.

The apparent lack of engagement reported by interviewees was also reflected in our survey, which showed that while 57 percent of participants reported having persons that they could trust in Syria, only 22 percent found such relationships in Turkey. Moreover, while 81 percent of those surveyed said that they were socially active back home, only 32 percent of participants mentioned that they are engaging in social activities in Turkey. Although many youth explain the latter difference by referencing long work hours, the social environment also clearly plays a role.

As a result, many of the youth in our study pointed out that the Syrian community mainly sticks to in-group interaction. Kamal arrived in Turkey when he was only thirteen years old. When we met him, he was nineteen and had lived in both Istanbul and Mardin, a city near the Syrian border where many people already spoke Arabic. He told us in very clear terms that he had no desire to return to Syria and wanted to stay in Turkey, but also that he recognized that he and other Syrians were living in a communal "shell":

> Honestly, about returning to Syria. I think about returning to Syria when I can get my rights, and can be effective, serve and help. I cannot return and be silent . . . Life in Damascus is good now; and they live, and they are happy. But the people I know who stayed have the ambition to live comfortably. Their ambition is not to be effective or to be . . . here I can be effective even though I am a foreigner. I am a refugee. I do not feel that I am a refugee here but as a refugee I am able to be effective and able to work. Not with the Turkish community, with the Syrian community. Here in Turkey the Syrians built their own communities, as you may have noticed . . . They integrate with Turks, but they keep the Syrian community closed. There is integration, but it is still a shell. They go out of it and return back to it.

When we asked him to explain, he expanded based on his previous experiences living in Istanbul:

> As a guy who lives in Istanbul, I buy the Syrian bread from a Syrian guy, because I cannot eat Turkish food. I go to Syrians for my food, the house stuff, and to cut my hair. When do I meet with Turks? In the market next to my house or with my neighbors. When I work, I meet with my workmates, I do when I study in a Turkish school, but I did not study in a Turkish school. I do meet with Turks, but still, the Syrian community is like a shell. They deal with Turks, but they deal with Syrians in most things.

Reasons for this "shell" include not only the failure to establish meaningful interactions with Turks and negative encounters or lack of trust, but also the language barrier. Those with the time and opportunity to learn the language described more success in social interaction:

> Some of them [Turkish people] had a bad perception of Syrians. And when they met, they started to have a certain perception, so I discovered that the Syrian is afraid to engage with a Turk and the Turk is the same. So, since I was motivated by the knowledge of the language and the desire to meet Turks, I was able to have good relationships with people who stand beside me, support me and are very close to me and they would have the courage to meet Syrians other than me. (Hisham, twenty-three years old, from Aleppo and living in Adana)

Along with the language, there was a recognition among many youths that they also needed to perform cultural "translation," and many showed

a willingness to culturally adapt. Young people reflected on the micro changes that they made in their daily behaviors, such as contact with the opposite gender, dress code, and work habits. In some cases, these changes were easy and normalized, while in others they produced reflection on what was sustainable for them.

> The community in Aleppo is conservative more than the community in Damascus or any other community in Syria. I came from a conservative environment to a liberal environment, so I lived the cultural shock during my second month in Istanbul. My interaction with people made me do things that I never used to do in Aleppo. For example, I didn't use to shake hands with women in Aleppo. I'm not going to say that this thing is religious because I understood in the end that this is a cultural thing, I mean the culture of the city was like that. It was not common that you would extend your hand to a woman to shake her hand; it was not common unless she was the one who extended her hand. So, I was feeling that weird feeling when a woman extended her hand, and I was like "oh, okay." So, this was one of the things that I adapted to here in Istanbul, one of the cultural differences that I changed to. Hugging also, hugging is not a common thing in Aleppo. It is not common that you hug a woman unless you're in a relationship and so on. It's not common, and I came to Istanbul, where it is very common and normal, so I became like Istanbul. That's why when I think about going back to Aleppo, I think how am I going to fit in the society? (Sahban, twenty-four years old)

In some cases, adapting to Turkish culture has given young Syrians, and women in particular, a space to challenge their belief system and obtain a more liberal approach in their lifestyle. Again, the headscarf was highlighted as a common example.

> Some women took off their headscarves because they weren't convinced about it when they were in Syria, so when they found this opportunity, they got comfortable. They wanted to do what they believe, especially that there no one is keeping track of them. (Asala, thirty years old)

Based on their own observations, numerous young people expressed that maintaining a balance between their own cultural practices and a respect for Turkish norms and culture can enhance the acculturation process and lead to better social acceptance. Zuher, whose story was explained at the beginning of the chapter, told us, "In Istanbul, in my home, I do the traditions and habits I want, but outside home even if it is my clothes or the way I talk or walk, I must, I am forced to, I am supposed to become like Turks."

As a result of the cultural interaction between youth groups, new forms of relationship have gradually started to emerge. While some of the young people have perceived it as a slow process, others shared an optimistic view. Subhi, for instance, quoted above, continued,

> The current generation is becoming a part of the Turks. They will become a Syrian-Turkish community. They will borrow ideas from all over the place, Syrians and Turkish people, and of course there will be a balance. They will accept ideas that Syrians wouldn't accept, or Turks wouldn't accept, there will be openness and acceptance of ideas.

Not only did many youth reflect on the need to adapt culturally, but they also were keen to create a counter-narrative where they feel actively engaged in negotiating their presence in the social world. Some did this at the individual level, through working on their Turkish acquaintances. Alma crossed the border with her family at the age of fifteen, first staying in Antakya before moving with her family to Adana. She tells us:

> I have four Turkish friends, and I love them to death. They come here, and we have sleepovers. They come from Hatay and stay with me here. Why do I do that? It's not just because I love them, but also to make them understand that we are just like them—we eat the same food and we buy the same things. I love them, and I got close to them to show them that we are not all the same. When they visit me, they tell me "Alma, in Hatay we don't see many people like you." And I agree with them on this. "The Syrians living below us are very nasty, their children write on the walls. Alma, the Syrian women are taking our men."

Alma tries, then, to use interpersonal contact as a way to break down barriers.

Other youths told us of organized activities in which they participated that aimed at creating more such contact:

> There is the Çukurova student group, and they do many events. One time we did an event in which we distributed flowers to Adana hospitals . . . The initiative was to improve relations, and we brought four hundred roses. And we wrote cards on them and distributed them to the patients in hospitals. It was an initiative by Syrian students to improve the image of Syrians. (Dalia, from Daraa, living in Adana)

Others reported on similar volunteer activities:

> It all started with a group of friends, where they met and suggested to do an activity for the orphans. Then they wrote on Facebook to try and get a number of volunteers for the activity, then they talk to the municipalities to make it official and legal. (Sumbul, from Aleppo district, living in Adana)

Their engagement in such activities seems to have a crucial role in creating a sense of autonomy and purpose despite their adversities.

> I honestly was scared because of my education. The language is hard; you need to study and memorize and interact with people, interacting with peo-

> ple is frightening to me. However, when I felt that I could be useful for the community and give something, it made me try as much as I can. (Janin, twenty-one years old, living in Gaziantep)

In all these cases, then, we see youth attempting to achieve agency in a context of marginalization. Although few of our interviewees spoke Turkish enough to fully follow news and political events, they were highly aware of the political instrumentalization of their own presence in the country, and that awareness was heightened during election periods. In response to these hardships, like many other migrant communities, Syrians have developed communal "shells," bubbles in which they support each other, and services are in their own language. However, as we saw from the previous chapter, such solidarity can also produce its own forms of exploitation. Many youth with whom we spoke recognized this problem and understood that language learning was the key to fully independent lives. Moreover, those who were able to make the effort to learn the language reported more success in social interaction with the Turkish community. Hisham, a young man living in Adana, told us,

> The solution is learning the language . . . the language . . . the language. The Turks are not going to learn Arabic. We are here in a Turkish-speaking country, and we must learn the language.

Although Hisham emphasizes that Syrians must learn the language and accommodate to their new country, he also remarks that Turks could do a bit of accommodating themselves. He repeats an impression that many Syrians have that Turkish people only work and do not know how to enjoy life:

> For example, we in Syria like to stay up, like to have fun. We do not wait for the weekend to pick up moments of happiness or joy. Here in Turkey, everything has its time. It isn't wrong, but they went too far with it. We in Syria are living our lifestyle, and we have doctors and successful people, and we have brains, although our lifestyle isn't European.

He thinks, though, that Syrians have changed the atmosphere around them:

> We very much changed Turks' habits. Three or four years ago, you would walk in Antep, and you would find only Syrians after 9:00 p.m. Now we started to see a lot of Turks, and they started to be motivated to do things in the evenings even during the week.

As scholars of integration have also noted, integrating cannot be only a one-way street and must also have an element of reciprocity. While "home" has the connotation of a welcome when one crosses the threshold, we see how hom*ing* is not necessarily about expecting a welcome but about creating one.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how youth engage in active practices of creating home in Turkey, using the tools of their own social imaginaries to evaluate the potentialities of the present and how they may be expected to unfold. While at the beginning most youth perceived the move to Turkey as temporary and expected an imminent return to their home country, progressively, youth began to abandon the possibility of return to Syria. Many described even the end of conflict as insufficient, since they could not imagine the potential to build their own lives in the conflict's ruins. Since they are at an important threshold in their lives, and many have already spent formative years in Turkey, for most this means building their lives there. Many also viewed the potentialities of Europe as limited, if what they wanted was not only education or a career but also a particular lifestyle, especially with family near them.

As we have shown, homing is not only about evaluating potentialities but also about spaces of hope. In this context, hope plays a particularly important role, as the integration of youth in Turkey is still incomplete. These hopes went through ebbs and flows with the changing political landscape in the host country. We see, though, youth using hope to propel them into the future, imagining a day when, as one young woman told us, it would no longer be Syrians and Turks but "a Syrian-Turkish community."

Notes

1. With the arrival of Syrians to Turkey starting in 2011, the Turkish government opened Temporary Education Centers (TECs) as an emergency response. As the situation in their country did not improve, the government decided to centralize Syrians' education . A circular issued by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in September 2014 provided a legal framework for the supervision and monitoring of the TECs (Aras and Yasun 2016). The 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) allowed more centralization of Syrians' education, through access to public schools. As a consequence, TECs were shut down progressively, and Syrian students were encouraged to register in public schools. This move was supported financially by EU-funded programs such as Promoting Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System (PICTES) and Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE), as well as by non-governmental organizations. As a consequence, the number of Syrian students in public schools increased systematically from 2014 to 2018 (UNHCR 2018).
2. Raqqa was still the bastion of ISIS, at the time of the interview.
3. This was as of 2022, but we recognize that the February 2023 earthquake and political polarization leading to the May 2023 election have created an increa-

singly unwelcoming atmosphere for Syrian refugees. More research is needed to determine how these events are affecting Syrians' attitudes toward remaining in the country today.

4. "I promise you from here that the Syrian refugees who are in Turkey will have their Ramadan breakfast in 2019 together with their brothers in Syria," by Head of Turkey's İYİ Party (the Good Party) Meral Akşener. "Turkey's Presidential Candidate Vows to Repatriate Syrian Refugees If Elected." *Middle East Monitor*, 7 May 2018. Retrieved 26 December 2023 from https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180507-turkeys-presidential-candidate-vows-to-repatriate-syrian-refugees-if-elected/.