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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS)

**On becoming citizens of the 'non-existent': violence, document-production
and Syrian war-time migration in Abkhazia**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Egyptology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Sociology-Anthropology

By Jihad Abaza

Under the supervision of Dr. Hakem Al-Rustom
May 2016



“As long as man is affected by the image of thing, he will regard the thing as present even though it may not exist.” – Baruch Spinoza



(Source: Wikipedia)



(Screenshot from my phone)

Acknowledgments

The coincidental coming together of the ethnographic process that resulted from this MA, was for me, a blessing that I could not have imagined unfolding in any better way. There are so many people I have to thank, for it because of the encounters, conversations, and support from them that this work ultimately came together.

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It only makes sense in our current context that one's mind would turn towards questions of violence and how to make sense of it. For this, and for many more reasons, I am thankful to have come across Professor Munira Khayyat. Your class, the readings it introduced me to, and your poetic ways of teaching have inspired both this thesis, and many other thoughts that would be the seeds of more work to come. Thank you for your encouragement, and thank you for the knowledge and the questions you have passed along.

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Mariam, my sisters, your mere existence is enough to be forever grateful for; it brightens my life even if I am unable to express it because I am stuck in my room writing this thesis.

I want to thank the Syrian people that I have met and befriended in 6th of October city, Egypt. It was they who had first noticed my last name and told me about Abkhazia in my undergrad years when I was thinking of writing about the Egyptian state's post- 2013 repression of Syrians. Abu Mahmoud wondered why I don't do a study on Circassians. There are so many Circassians here in this neighborhood, Abu Mahmoud and Madame Nari always told me. I never understood. I never took the prospect of a country called Abkhazia, where my last name "Abaza" would grant me access to a citizenship, seriously. It was only recently that I began to understand the references that Abu Mahmoud and Madame Nari had made and I am ever more grateful for them.

In Abkhazia, it didn't take long for people to open their welcoming doors and hearts to me. I want to thank everyone that has befriended, supported, or took care of me there. Both those whose languages I understood and those whose languages I did not. I am forever thankful for the countless cups of coffee that people had invited me, by the sea, in cafes by the promenade, in people's houses, by the mountains during picnics. I am forever thankful for all the conversations that took place over those cups of coffee. While I wish it was possible to name each person in Abkhazia that has added to this ethnography, I am held back by the necessity to keep them anonymous.

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Abstract:

In this thesis, I look at the ways in which statehood comes to be defined, practiced, and performed through Syrian war-time migrants' "repatriation" in Abkhazia, a small breakaway self-proclaimed state squeezed between Russia and Georgia.¹ I argue that while separatist states' desires and aspirations towards statehood grant legitimacy to the modern nation-state system, they at once expose the fragility of its very order. An unrecognized state like Abkhazia still maneuvers within the system that it is locked out of, but the way that Abkhazia, like other unrecognized states, is shunned from the 'family of nations' could reveal how constructed and hallucinatory the modern state-order is. In another sense, looking at Abkhazian state performativity, or the fictitious aura that arises from the notion of an Abkhazian nationality, can tell us about the taken-for-granted fictitious characters of other states. While I use the word "fictitious" here, it is important to acknowledge, as Trouillot reminds us, that the "fictitious" has very real, felt consequences in the everyday lives of people.² The point is not to make an anomaly out of Abkhazia because it is an unrecognized state because, ultimately, most administrative practices in that space are not different from other states and their own practices of make-believeness, a term coined by Yael Navaro-Yashin.³ In other words, what can the theatrical and ritualistic practices of Abkhazian statehood around the Syrian war-time migrants tell us about similar practices in other, both unrecognized and recognized, states? From here on, one can conjure questions on what it means for a state to be sovereign within a certain territory, as well as questions that delve deeper into how it is that subjects of states imagine (or feel) the entity and/or notion of the state to begin with. How does this state project manifest itself in the movement of people across (un)recognized borders, in document production, and in the rhetoric of war? My argument therefore also entails the problematization of a variety of taken-for-granted categories, including ethno-national categories, the classification of "the refugee," the state, the nation, as well as that of war. The idea is that these categories, often considered "problem categories," stem from and float around the concept of the "state." Yet, this thesis posits the prospect that the state *is* the problem category.⁴ My thesis also branches from conceptualizing the corporeal practices of the state to include war-making and document production as nation-building practices. Both such practices also contribute to the generation of "state-less peoples," or "refugees." This thesis is split into six parts, each of which I detail with its own abstract immediately below.

¹ I use the word "self-proclaimed" whilst still maintaining the belief that all "states" are "self-proclaimed," in a sense, only that some have more recognition than others. The politics of recognition are themselves entrenched in a web of social, political, and economic power relations as this thesis touches upon.

² Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Haiti, State Against Nation: the Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York : Monthly Review Press, 1990.) pg. 24

³ Navaro-Yashin, Yael. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Post War Polity* (North Carolina : Duke University Press, 2012.)

⁴ This idea was inspired by comments made by Professor Hanan Sabea.

Notes on Transliteration, Translation, and Style

I used the International Journal for Middle East Studies (IJMES) system for Arabic transliteration and the Library of Congress system for the few Russian words used. All translations are my own. Please also note that I use the word *sharkas* interchangeably with Circassian and the words *Abazāt* (in Syrian dialect) and *Abazā* (in Egyptian dialect) interchangeably with “Abazas,” a term which will be defined in the introduction of this thesis. Names of all my interlocutors have been changed. Indented paragraphs represent chunks of my field notes.

Preface

Displaced, Emplaced, and Replaced: Problematizing “Refugee-ness”



A pin on Layla’s backpack that has a Circassian flag reads “Adyghe.” The Adyghe are one of the peoples of the North West Caucasus region. (Figure 1)



A Circassian flag, and the identification card of a Circassian fighter is one of many documents on display at the Abkhazian National Museum in the capital, Sukhum. (Figure 2)

“Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés. Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment... Refugees on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance...”⁵ – Edward Said

“My grandfather was uprooted and I was uprooted” – Amany, a single mother of four in Abkhazia.

“All of the Syrians have left except for Bashar. He has hasn’t left” –Yanal, an ex- *shabiha*, Syrian armed supporter of the regime, living in Abkhazia.⁶

“... At the nearest cemetery...dead Circassians were buried so quickly and carelessly that the last rain uncovered the graves and hungry dogs ate off the hands and feet of the dead,”⁷

Deena’s grandfather and great uncles cried when they saw videos of the mountainous Caucasus. For her generation, these images triggered some feelings but younger generations just don’t care as much. She has been here for two years, and now works at the Turkish café. Her son worked as a night guard before he left for Europe. She and her daughter are now waiting for him to do *lam el shaml* (paperwork) for them. “They called us Syrians,” she said after citing how, having thought she was Turkish at first, people treated her better. When they knew she was Syrian, the treatment changed. Now she feels the same way about Syria that her grandfather felt about the Caucasus.

⁵Said, Edward, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000): pg 135.

⁶ For more information about the *Shabiha* see this article by Yasin al-Haj Saleh: <https://fb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/syrian-shabiha-and-their-state-statehood-participation>

⁷ The Russian consul in the Turkish province of Trabzon is reported to have described the initial violence against, and the forced deportations of Circassians in December 1843. Cited in: Richmond, Walter, *The Circassian genocide*. (New Brunswick, N.J;London;: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

***Yaūm al ḥūzn*: Remembering the Circassian genocide and forced deportation**

She held the camera up to her eye, pointed it towards the clock on one of the old buildings lined up on the street heading to the port, and she clicked for a photograph. “There’s no future in Abkhazia,” the 15-year-old Lily said, adding “there’s nothing to do.” She likes photography and might want to study it later, but she doesn’t know yet, the prospects feel don’t feel encouraging. For now, school in Abkhazia annoys her. People here, they expect you to be fluent in Russian, she says. “When you don’t understand what they are saying they’ll just raise their voice or keep repeating the word! I can hear you but I just don’t know what you’re saying,” she exclaimed. We walked past the Philharmonia, which hosts all sorts of musical arts shows right in the middle of Sukhum, Abkhazia’s capital, and she told me about how some of the Syrians did a *sharkasi* dance here earlier. Last year, Abkhazia had a commemoration of *yaūm al ḥūzn* (day of mourning), to remember the Russian Empire’s forced dispossession of the Circassians in 1864.⁸ It had been the 150th anniversary of what some activists have now called out as the Russian Empire’s genocide against the Circassians.⁹ I invoke the following historicization of the Circassian genocide and/or ethnic cleansing, as well as other historical moments that I found pertinent in peoples’ narratives, because “it is the present that determines the past, making the past a mere simulacrum of the present.”¹⁰ To reflect on Lily’s own insight and guesses regarding the future, we can also consider Valentine’s statement, “the future, thanks to the capriciousness of the present, is uncertain and bleak.”¹¹

⁸ I use the work *sharkas* throughout the thesis to refer to Circassians.

⁹ Catic, Maja. “Circassians and the politics of genocide recognition.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67 (10): 1685.(2015)

¹⁰ Daniel, E. Valentine, *Charred lullabies: Chapters in an anthropography of violence*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press: 1996; 2001). Pgs. 107, 108

Please note that I use both the description of genocide and ethnic cleansing because, as the following pages demonstrate, descriptions of this historic event are contested.

¹¹ Ibid. Please

The Syrian-Circassians who left Syria for Abkhazia in the last few years of war did so because they can claim links to Circassian ancestors that the Russian empire had forcibly dispossessed in the late 19th century. With the background of the 2014 Sochi Olympic in Russia (and the Circassian mobilization around it) in mind, as well as the idea of the Circassian genocide and Circassian ‘return’ as one of the bases on which Syrians were able to migrate to Abkhazia, we can summon Trouillot’s *Silencing of the Past*. History reveals itself “through the production of specific narratives,” and the processes and conditions of the production of such narratives, which are ongoing, are what matter most.¹² For this reason, for the sake of what the Circassian genocide has come to symbolize in the collective imaginations of many, and whilst considering how or when memories are invoked in the present, a brief contextualization of Abkhazia’s 19th century history is necessary.¹³ The territory of the modern-day self-proclaimed republic of Abkhazia was, at different historical moments in the past, part of ancient Rome, Byzantium, and Persia. Later, Arabs, Genoese, Turks, and Russians had also ruled, or attempted to rule, the area.¹⁴ One can easily concur that the history of this small area is far more complicated than a nationalist narrative that concentrates on, and takes pride in, alleged characters of “purity” makes it out to be.

By 1810, Abkhazia was absorbed by the Russian Empire, and according to Alexei Zverev, before then, Abkhazian rulers had been “in nominal or effective vassalage or union with various (although often separate) Georgian kingdoms.”¹⁵ Both those who argue that Abkhazia had historically been united with Georgia and those who argue that it was autonomous, do so on the basis of historical grounds. As is often the case when reading history through the lens of the present, the narrative thus becomes ambiguous. This is

¹²Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) pg. 25

¹³Nora, Pierre. “Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire.” *Representations*(26): 7-24 (1989)

¹⁴Zverev, Alexei, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994” in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Ed. Bruno Coppieters, Vubpress. (1996)

¹⁵ Ibid.

important to bear in mind whilst thinking of the Abkhazian separatist war with Georgia in the early 90s.¹⁶

Historicizing the Genocide:

According to the historian Walter Richmond, Russian imperial expansion drove the Circassians out of their homes in the North West Caucasus in the late 1800s. The peaks of mass migration into various parts of the Ottoman Empire, including of course the area of modern-day Syria, took place in the years 1876, 1880, 1885, and 1901.¹⁷ The Ottoman Empire, in negotiations with its Russian counterpart, accepted the Circassian mass deportations and hoped that the new population would contribute in labor, and increase the empire's total agricultural output. Furthermore, in accordance with contemporary rhetoric, Richmond argues that the Circassians had a reputation for "military efficiency," that memories of the Circassian-Mamluk were alive in the Ottoman Empire, and that Muslim settlements would act as a counter weight to the Christian populations "clamoring for independence."¹⁸ The negotiations began as early as 1859. Initially, the Russian empire promised that the deportation process would be gradual, and that no more than fifty thousand people would be sent off to the Ottoman lands. The two empires finalized the treaty in 1860. The wealthier Karbadian aristocrats were the first arrivals in 1860 and 1861, but by 1863, the heightening forced deportations began to "overwhelm" the Ottomans.¹⁹ Despite objections from the Ottomans' side, the mass deportations continued and "more people were being forced to the shore and loaded onto boats."²⁰

¹⁶ I briefly elaborate on this war later in chapter two.

¹⁷Shami, Seteney. "Historical Processes of Identity Formation: Displacement, Settlement, and Self-Representations of the Circassians in Jordan." *Iran & the Caucasus*, 13(1), 141–159.(2009)

¹⁸Richmond, Walter, *The Circassian genocide*. (New Brunswick, N.J; London;: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

An estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million set out from the Caucasus to Turkey but only about 800,000 to 1.1 million people eventually arrived and settled in the Ottoman land.²¹Expectedly, large numbers of people died, and drowned en route. People were thrown off the boats for various reasons, especially if they were suspected to have been carrying contagious diseases.²²Such problems did not end upon arrival as Turkish bureaucracy was unable to “handle” all the settlements and the documents; many Circassians thus also died due to lack of shelter and food in the aftermath of their trips across the Black Sea to the Ottoman Empire.

In 1877 Russia declared war with the Ottomans. Richmond writes, adding that Russian fighters often incited villages with mixed populations by disarming Muslims and arming their counterparts, provoking them to “slaughter their neighbors.”²³ Many Circassian cavalry squadrons took part in that war, and in 1877, approximately one thousand Circassians made their way to Gudauta, Abkhazia and provided the local population with arms. Later, the Ottoman loss of the Balkans forced fifty thousand Circassians to head off once again, this time to what is now modern-day Syria. In the Syrian province, Circassians were settled in the Golan Heights.

Many had also moved to the Balqa region in Jordan and the Tiberas region in Palestine. Settlement processes were unorganized as the only branch of the Ottoman Empire’s Immigration Bureau was in Aleppo, and had been as described as “overwhelmed” by the amount of migrants. Seteny Shami writes that, at best, this bureau provided people with transportation, located and settled them on state lands, and left them afterwards to fend for themselves. She tells readers: “While the long process of displacement and resettlement

²¹Shami, Seteny. “Historical Processes of Identity Formation: Displacement, Settlement, and Self-Representations of the Circassians in Jordan.” *Iran & the Caucasus*, 13(1), 141–159.(2009)

²² Ibid

²³Ibid

scattered families, kin-groups and co-villagers, it also firmed the definition of the identity of the Circassians as the ‘immigrant migrant people.’²⁴

Controversy stirred and heightened in the moment of the 2014 Sochi Olympics in Russia, which, as brought up by Lily, also marked 150 years since the Russian ethnic cleansing of the Circassians.²⁵ The Sochi Olympics was an instant to bring up the massacres and the myth-making behind the Russian state. It was a chance to bring up the mass killings and forced deportations of the Russian Empire against the Circassians which, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Circassians and activists in the Russian republics and in the diaspora began to describe as a *genocide*. The counter-memories of historically suppressed groups manifested themselves against official Soviet history, and spoke out in grievances of Tsarist imperialism as well as of brutal Stalinist polices during the Soviet-era.²⁶ Theoretically inspired by Pierre Nora, the scholar Lars Funch Hansen argues that the Circassian diaspora, in Russia and abroad, mobilized and memorialized around the 2014 Winter Olympic in Sochi. In Chapter two of this thesis, I discuss the details of how Syrians in Abkhazia, who with an Abkhazian passport should be able to freely move between the Abkhazia-Sochi borders, were not allowed into Sochi during the Winter Olympics.²⁷

Images of displaced resettlement:

In her studies of Circassians in Jordan, Shami argues that the key images of being displaced, settlers, and Muslims enabled the Circassians to both maintain a sense of difference, and to integrate within the broader Jordanian society. The key images that Circassians used to describe themselves evoked and drew upon this history of displacement,

²⁴Shami, Seteney. “Historical Processes of Identity Formation: Displacement, Settlement, and Self-Representations of the Circassians in Jordan.” *Iran & the Caucasus*, 13(1), 141–159.(2009)

²⁵Persson, Emil, Bo Petersson. “Political mythmaking and the 2014 winter olympics in Sochi: Olympism and the Russian great power myth.” *East European Politics* 30 (2): 192 (2014)

²⁶Catic, Maja. “Circassians and the politics of genocide recognition.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67 (10): 1685. (2015)

²⁷ Lars Funch Hansen, “Sochi as a site of long distance Circassian memorialisation,” in *The Sochi Predicament: Contexts, Characteristics and Challenges of the Olympic Winter Games in 2014* ed. Bo Petersson and Karina Vamling Cambridge Scholars Publishing.2013Pg. 13

settlement, and resettlement.²⁸ As for the Circassians in Syria, these images of dispossession are heightened since, because had been concentrated in villages in the Golan Heights, they had even further experience being forced out of the villages after Israeli occupations in 1967, and later in 1973. El- Qeneitra, a province in the Golan, came up constantly whenever conversations would float back to memories of Syria. All such instances and stories, topped with the most recent ones, made *shaa'b muhajar* which roughly translates into “an immigrant people” or a “displaced people.”²⁹

According to the older Syrian men who watch the Black Sea with their coffee in hand almost every morning, there were approximately fifteen *sharkas* villages in the Golan. These villages made it easier for the *sharkas* to stick together so that up until one hundred years ago, they spoke each other’s languages; they married from each other, rarely marrying Arabs, and they maintained traditions, the Syrian men in Abkhazia told me. After leaving for Damascus, the [only parts left of] Golan became a place just for the summers, and gradually traditions became more difficult to keep together, the men said.³⁰

Circassians, like any other group of people meshed together under a label, are not homogenous. Therefore the situation for Circassians in Jordan is very different than that of the Circassians in Syria, as I am sure it is different for Circassians elsewhere in the world. Nonetheless, Shami’s argument does serve as important contextual information, not because of the idea of “identity” per se, but because a lot of contemporary narratives on war and war-time migration related back to these stories about the Circassians’ mass deportations. For this project, ideas of displacement that imply a “natural” placement in the world are made more complicated by the idea that the Syrian-Circassians journeying to Abkhazia and being

²⁸Shami, Seteney. “Historical Processes of Identity Formation: Displacement, Settlement, and Self-Representations of the Circassians in Jordan.” *Iran & the Caucasus*, 13(1), 141–159. (2009)

²⁹ For an account of forced migration out of the Golan: “Syria: Forty years on, people displaced from the Golan remain in waiting,” *Norwegian Refugee Council*: (Oct. 2007)<http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Middle-East/Syria/pdf/Syria-October-2007.pdf>

³⁰<http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Middle-East/Syria/pdf/Syria-October-2007.pdf>

emplaced “back” to where they are originally from. Another layer of complication is added when one considers the fact that approximately 200,000 ethnic Georgians had to leave their own homes in Abkhazia after the 1992 war.³¹

The figure of the “Syrian Refugee”:

The Danish Refugee Council began working with the Syrians sometime after they first arrived “even though we are not refugees we are repatriates,” Hanan who now works with the DRC told me. She described the case is unique. At a conference in Turkey, people were confused when the DRC described how different the case is for Syrians in Abkhazia, Hanan continued to explain The DRC mostly works with the Mingrelians and Georgian IDPs (internally displaced peoples) on the borders with Georgia, but since Syrians have come the DRC has been helping them out a bit too.

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May said remembers that she could still see her father’s old car on the other side of a fence, now it is on the Israeli occupied side of the Golan, when the family would visit in the summers. Her father used to have land in the Golan and he used to narrate and tell them his memories there whenever they vacationed in the non-occupied parts of the mountains region. Now they are all broken up and apart, May said. And now, if you see a nice view or sight it will have no taste and if you eat something nice, you will not enjoy it because you will find yourself constantly carrying burden, she said describing her condition.

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Syrians have “nazahu, safaru, hajaru, harabu (fled, travelled, migrated, escaped)... all of these descriptions [apply],” Nart said. I was walking with Nart and Marah, both of whom I had just met. Even though Marah had been in Abkhazia for three years and Nart had been there for six month, the two had also just met that day. We walked on the promenade by the Black Sea, past the Turkish cafes, the restaurants that sell Abkhazian food, and past the Philharmonia. We sat on a bench in front of the sea, which was not so clearly in sight since it was nighttime. As though the sound of the waves had reminded him, Nart began to speak of how Syrians are dying in the waters of the Mediterranean now. It is so similar to what happened to the sharkas at the end of the 18th century, he said.

Marah told us about what her (soon-to-be) fiancé saw on the boat when he was making his way to Italy; the smugglers, the hunger, the crowdedness, and even the jokes.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas De Waal. "Abkhaz, Circassians, Georgians and Historical Justice," *Carnegie Endowment*. (2011) <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/18/abkhaz-circassians-georgians-and-historical-justice>

“In any country in Europe we would be considered refugees, but here that is not [the case].”

– Liza Abaza, a Circassian-Syrian woman.

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Huda said she thinks that some of the apartments that have been rented for Syrians used to belong to Georgians before the war. She had seen Georgian letters and phrases embedded into the desk at a friend’s house, she said.

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“Waves” of refugees are causing what the media often calls *Europe’s* worst refugee problem since the World War; never mind the fact that war-time migration is constantly put into a Eurocentric –Western-centric– framing.<sup>32</sup> In the Arab world, borders are increasingly closing up, no visas, no residency, and no welcomes. Hungary proceeds to build longer and higher fences and walls, as though caging the nation from an “invasion” of refugees.

<sup>33</sup>“Nation-states, rich and poor, exhibit a passion for wall building,” and these walls, sometimes walls within walls, are not so much about defense as they target the “non-state” actors and subjects, and are theatrically, ritualistically spoken of and acted around.<sup>34</sup> As walling continues, sovereignty wanes and states persist as non-state actors, Wendy Brown argues.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly enough, these walls codify the challenges that they allege to be responding to, and state officials forget that the subjects they lock out are actually produced within these walls.<sup>36</sup>

In order to better comprehend the scope of the so-called “refugee problem,” one also needs to genealogically trace back the context in which this category emerged and ask under what circumstances and for what purposes this category became useful. In other words, it is worth investigating some of the “myriad events through which- thanks to which, against

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<sup>32</sup> Or the fact that Canada is praised for hand-picking a few hundred refugees or that Germany’s Merkel is made to be an angel for comments on refugees whilst also being complicit in other abuses taking place in the region.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Pg. 96

<sup>34</sup>Brown, Wendy, *Walled states, waning sovereignty*. (New York;Cambridge, Mass;: Zone Books, 2010)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, Pgs. 41 & 42

which,” this category came to be.<sup>37</sup> Malkki argues that while people who have had to flee war, natural disaster, famine, and other phenomena have existed before this period, it was after the Second World War in Europe that the key techniques through which states could manage the mass displacements of people emerged. Classifying “refugees” was a foundation for such techniques.<sup>38</sup> Later, such techniques would become globalized and standardized.<sup>39</sup>

A historical review of when the term came into use reveals that during World War II, civilians and displaced people caught in-between fighting had been considered a military “combat” problem rather than a humanitarian one. In 1944, it was the allied military that improvised policy plans on how to deal with the “refugee problem.”<sup>40</sup> It was in this militarized context that the institutionalized domain of refugee resettlement, refugee camp administration, and a legal domain of refugee law emerged. After signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1948, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established in 1951. Refugee rights were thus incorporated into the upcoming human rights discourse, and the refugee “problem” shifted publically from a military issue to a humanitarian one. Refugee law thus also came to be seen as inseparable from human rights.

According to the UNHCR, the legal definition of a refugee is said to correspond to “a social reality” and was thus identified as:

A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear or being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Foucault, Michel, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in Paul Rainbow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, London: Penguin.(1991): Pg.81.

<sup>38</sup> The word displacement is in and of itself also a very loaded word as it assumes that all human beings are born into their proper “placement,” a placement which is understood as the “nation” and also fits into a narrative that sees modern nation states as givens. See: Malkki, Liisa, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 7 (1): 1992

<sup>39</sup>Malkki, Liisa, “Refugees and Exile: from ‘Refugee Studies’ to the National Order of Things,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1): (1995) Pp. 485.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>*Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UNHCR Article 1, pg. 14:  
<http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>

There are however two main conditions, "(1) refugee status is determined exclusively by events arising out of the relations between a state and persons or categories of persons who are either nationals of that state or resident in its territory;(2) Such persons or categories of persons must be outside the territory of the state in question."<sup>42</sup> It should thus be noted that internally displaced peoples do not fit into the UNHCR definition of what constitutes a refugee. Also, at this point in time, the legal refugee regime emerged in a Eurocentric; framing, Maliki notes, UN organizations have played a decisive role and instrumental role in consolidating "the international refugee system."<sup>43</sup> It was along with the rise of the "refugee camp" that refugees more easily became an object of knowledge and study; this includes primarily quantitative study. As the UNHCR, and other international aid agencies produce maps, statistics, and assessments that scholars such as Jennifer Hyndman criticize in that the productions occur without reference to the historical configurations of power that precede them.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, refugee camps, cartography, counting and recording become enactments of the controversial power relations that exist between refugees and humanitarian aid agencies. In other words, thousands of refugees become dependents on such humanitarian agencies as the agencies are put to work and sustained (as institutions) through the increasing numbers of refugees.<sup>45</sup> Within such processes of knowledge production, the "refugee" also became a quantifiable figure; which agencies and states constantly updating their figures for the latest statistics on the exact number of refugees.<sup>46</sup>

One of the processes that facilitated "the refugee" eventually becoming a knowable, nameable, social scientific category of knowledge and expertise emerged along with and

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<sup>42</sup>*The Refugee in the Post-war World*. (Geneva: United Nations, 1951) pg.6

<sup>43</sup>Malkki, Liisa, "Refugees and Exile: from 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1): (1995)

<sup>44</sup>Hyndman, Jennifer. *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000. Print.

<sup>45</sup> Ironically the number of refugees only keeps increasing as they continue to be quantified. See:

<sup>46</sup>Malkki, L. H. "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24.1 (1995): 493-523. Web. Pg. 499

around the "refugee camp." This included camp administrators, doctors, NGO and international agency workers, journalists, photographers, state bureaucrats, and refugees themselves. Since refugees had initially been a military responsibility, refugee camps were made to resemble military camps. Germany, which had a large number of refugees after World War two, modeled its refugee camps after work and concentration camps and officially named them "Assembly Centres."<sup>47</sup> By the end of World War two, the refugee camp became the standardized unit and technology of power in the management and control of the mass displacement of people, as Malkki puts it. The camp controlled movement, spatial concentration, the ordering of the people withheld within its premises. It also facilitated the bureaucratic and administrative processes that provided for easier surveillance and legal control of people. It was thought that, if they had not been handled, refugees would enter the black-market and become looters and thieves. The refugee camp thus ensured law enforcement and public discipline. It also became part and parcel of the UN model of the "three durable solutions: Repatriation, Integration, and Resettlement," of refugees while there has been a general lack of critical questioning of the refugee camp as an apparatus for the control of space and movement.<sup>48</sup>

For many scholars, and particularly for UN officials, the most frequently asked questions regarding "refugees" have been concerned with scope, definition, and causality while others addressed the nature of the "refugee problem" and possible solutions.<sup>49</sup> Most early scholarship on refugees concerns the burden they pose for host states, on the economy, on national identity and security.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pg.506

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Skran, [Claudena](#) and [Carla N. Daughtry](#) "The Study of Refugees before 'Refugee Studies'" *Refugee Survey Quarterly* (2007)26 (3): 15-35.

## Forced Migration and the “Refugee” in the Middle East:

It was alongside the wave of decolonization taking place in the 1960s that the refugee became a "third world problem," as this decade witnessed peaks in the numbers of refugees. International organizations represented the so-called “third world”, including the Middle East, as a "refugee producer" or as having been an immense source of refugees.<sup>50</sup> These representations made absent the point that while the overwhelming majority of refugees were produced in the “third world,” the causes of their displacement and plight were kept alive and preserved by the world's superpowers. In the Middle East, Palestinian and Iraqi refugees are examples of such a phenomenon.<sup>51</sup>

The Palestinian refugee problem especially has been compartmentalized by the UN when UNRWA was created and once again when the “special agency” for Palestinians, the UNCCP was created. Even the levels of development aid and refugee policies are usually defined by the domestic interests of “host states,” and, ironically, international agencies are largely funded by the very same superpowers that are purported to have non-political goals. I mention here Palestinian refugees, because in more than one sense I see that their experiences- or the fact that they were somehow left to their fleeing- somehow paved the way in which this forced fleeing would take place concurrently in the region.<sup>52</sup>

Early UN representations of Middle East refugees were also often orientalist; much as many refugee media representations, and official political discourses, today are also quite

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<sup>50</sup>Malkki, L. H. "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24.1 (1995): Pg.500

<sup>51</sup>While forced migration in the Middle East is most often associated by the Palestinian people's dispossession, Kurdish people, Yazidis, Armenians, and Assyrians, are all people who were forced into movements early on after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>52</sup>For example, Amal (not her real name) a woman I got to know in Egypt is a Palestinian-Syrian. This means that, while she was born in Syria and before leaving the country had seen nothing but Syria, she is treated as a Palestinian refugee in Egypt. Like other Palestinians in Egypt, she is not allowed access to the UN's “yellow card.” While official travel for all Syrians at the moment is controlled, restricted, and monitored, it is even more difficult for Amal to travel (if she wants to be reunited with her husband and family in a country other than Egypt, for example). She also said that once aid organizations find out that her family is Palestinian-Syrian they immediately stop their “aid.” A UNHCR media spokesperson also specifically told me in an interview that the Egyptian state had made it a point that the UN not register or provide aid to the Palestinians coming from Syria.



racist and orientalist. In a book entitled “The Refugee Problem in the Middle East,” longtime UN reporter wrote shortly after the 1948 *Nakba* wrote of the social and economic problems “posed by Palestinian refugees,” and described the menace they would cause to the Israeli economy if they were to return. They are “unskilled, illiterate” people, he says adding that “the Arabs want to return to their homes,” because they have an immense hatred towards Israel.<sup>53</sup>In this book, he also claims that the Arabs are just “not cooperating” with international charity citing specifically the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine.<sup>54</sup>

We have also seen instances of purely racist responses to what has been termed the “refugee crisis,” more often irritatingly coined the “European refugee crisis.” Didier Fassin, writing in the early 2000s, analyzed France’s moral economy of compassion and repression towards refugees- a term which in this case indexed their residential situation rather than a legal status that the state was not eager to grant them. The state’s treatment of refugees oscillated between “sentiments of sympathy” on the one hand, and concern for order on the other.<sup>55</sup> It maneuvered between “a politics of pity and policies of control.”<sup>56</sup>European states thus manage to make it so that “in societies justly famed for their hospitality and warmth, we encounter the pettiest form of bureaucratic indifference to human needs and suffering.”<sup>57</sup>

Refugees also become racialized. Paul Gilroy’s articulation of the function of the notions of race and nationality in modern nation-state formations would aid an analysis of generally racialized policies towards refugees. Gilroy argues that modernity, which refers to the confluence of capitalism, the emergence of modern governments, and the appearance of the nation- state, saw a rise in the development of concepts such as territorial sovereignty,

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<sup>53</sup>Mezerik, A. G. *The Refugee Problem in the Middle East*. New York: International Review Service, 1957. Print. Pg. 12

<sup>54</sup> Ibid,

<sup>55</sup>Fassin, Didier, “Compassion and repression: The moral economy of immigration policies in France.” *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (3): 362-87 (2005)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

cultural, and communicative apparatuses, and a new sense of the relationship between place and community that we now call “identity.”<sup>58</sup> National and racial formations have resulted in “embattled camps” based on hierarchal and regimented qualities and privileges. In many ways we can see the continuum of this orientalist rhetoric in, as one example, the German state’s “guides for refugees,” aimed at teaching refugees not to abuse children, not to practice sexual harassment, and to respect homosexuality among other things.<sup>59</sup> The guide is based on assumptions that see “refugees” (a product of the “third-world”) as stupid, backward, intolerant people that need to be enlightened by the moralities of the German state.<sup>60</sup>

### **Refusing the category:**

Huda said she doesn’t want to go to Germany, to save up four thousand dollars just to give the money to some smuggler in the end. Then they would have to start over, learn a new language, and do everything again from the start. “Why?” she asks, “we’ve already been through that.”

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Nour wishes she could go to Germany. She hates Abkhazia, she says. She’s not even Abkhazian, she’s Circassian, she tells me jokingly. Omar, her husband, is always cursing Bashar for being the reason behind all of this. She jokes and tells me how Omar goes out to the balcony and prays: “God curse you Bashar...may you come to Abkhazia and not have a ticket back out.” Over breakfast, everyone was talking about who’s going to Germany. Merkel has opened the door for refugees and Germany wants people and laboring hands. There’s news that Merkel will be sending large ships to Turkey. Nour joked that all of Syria will be waiting for those ships, how are people going to fit? She continued joking about how she’s going to Turkey to wait for those ships on Turkey’s shores.

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Whilst thinking of the construction of the category of the refugee, it is necessary to also consider the now emerging category of “the Syrian refugee.” In many instances, it is almost as if the two are always one and the same; one cannot be Syrian without being a refugee. A sort of synonymy has been created between the two labels. Here, I argue that the “refugee” label should not automatically be plastered upon anyone who carries Syrian

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<sup>58</sup>Gilroy, Paul, “Race and culture in postmodernity.” *Economy and Society* 28 (2): 183-97 (1999)

<sup>59</sup><http://www.refugeeguide.de/en/>

<sup>60</sup> See also: Ong, Ahiwa, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States,” *Current Anthropology* Vol. 37, No. 5 (December, 1996).

nationality, as has been the tendency more recently. This is for various reasons; primarily because people themselves often reject the institutionalized category, because of the baggage it carries in terms of negative representations of helplessness, pity, and non-agency, and because often people do not need the link to the United Nations that comes along with carrying the label of a “refugee.” Finally, I hope this project pays tribute to the dynamism of this “Syrian refugee crisis” in the sense that it can highlight how Syrians are themselves a dynamic people. There are Syrian-Armenians who went to Armenia, there are Syrian Kurds that went to Iraqi Kurdistan, and as this project shows, Syrian-Circassians that went to Abkhazia. It is not all about Europe, especially when considering how expensive the trip is for most people, as Heba mentioned in the ethnographic piece I added above.

We can take Maryam’s reaction to the idea of traveling to Germany as an example. One afternoon, I asked Maryam about her sister-in-law Dina, who had not been showing up for the Russian classes. Dina had been trying to go to Turkey, so that she can then travel- by sea- to Europe with her son, Maryam said. I could hear the disapproving tone in her voice. “What’s wrong? Do you think you might go to Germany too?” I asked her. She responded with a clear-cut “no.” *Luju’ la’* (asylum, no) she said adding that she was not ready to give up the prospect of ever seeing Syria again. Applying for *luju’* - asylum or refugee status-often means sacrificing any chance of going back to (regime-controlled) Syria until the fall of the regime. Thus Dina and Maryam have different views on moving to Germany, and Sara and Heba also have different views and if anything all of these thoughts about moving to Germany or not, just go further in showing how this category is negotiated and thought through (socially, economically, and politically), and is not a given.

Furthermore, humanitarian organizations themselves can deny the institutionalized refugee status to people, in other words, not recognize them as refugees. For example “internally displaced peoples,” even if they are extremely close to the borders of another

state, are not granted refugee status. Palestinian-Syrians, as mentioned above, are not granted refugee status. With application to those Iraqis displaced after the 2003 U.S. occupation of Iraq, Julie Peteet tackles what she calls, “the continued decay of twentieth-century concepts of who is a refugee.”<sup>61</sup> She argues that the non-recognition of many of the Iraqis in 2003 as refugees had extreme implications for the displaced populations. This non-recognition, she says, diminished their rights to asylum, protection, and assistance.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, the “refugee” label, while not problematic per se, has implications and myriad forces behind how the category is constructed that deserve some scrutiny.

While there has been a great deal of literature written on the fact that refugees have agency and while this should now be taken as a given, the point does not seem to have become a hegemonic one, yet. The category of “refugee” seems to eat people up as they are recast in “singularly reductionist molds.”<sup>63</sup> Lubkemann, like Malkki and many others, points out that the word “refugee” is used to identify people in a way that misses that they are also simultaneously “brothers, workers, neighbors, and elders...” In much the same way, “combatants” are seen as a categorical sum whose only role is to perpetuate violence and “victims” are those whose only role is to suffer violence. I also really appreciate his use of the term wartime migrant, because it is a descriptive term that does not carry the same baggage of the term “refugee.” While, the term “refugee” is not always a bad one per se, and while it is the most popularly used term to describe millions of people at the moment, it is also a term that many of those that I have worked with did not identify. In fact, many even thought it offensive.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Peteet, Julie. “Unsettling the Categories of Displacement,” *Middle East Report* (2007), pp. 2-9.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Lubkemann, Stephen C, *Culture in chaos: An Anthropology of the social condition in war*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008;2010;2013)

<sup>64</sup>Madame Nariman, in Egypt, said before, as she was describing how bad the situation has become for Syrians living in Egypt, that when they had first come, a sign in the place where they made their residency paperwork would say “welcome to our Syrian brothers...etc.” and that now they say, “*alwafdeen, al-laje’een*” (the arrivals, the refugees). Then she said, *wallah benz’al* (it makes us sad). Here the assumption is that “refugees” are not welcomed, in fact one will often hear that hospitable people “did not treat us like refugees,” for example.

In another similar incident, Liza Abaza, one of the Syrian women in Abkhazia who is quoted above, said that living in Abkhazia was not so tremendously bad since, “in any country in Europe would be considered refugees, but here no.” Again, there is an assumption here about “refugee treatment.” Of course this sentence was followed up by a long list of the obstacles, difficulties, and discrimination that the Syrians living in Abkhazia have faced, but it is still very telling. In much the same way that Liisa Malkki had written that we all now have some ideas, or pictures in our head of what a refugee is supposed to look like (usually images of women and children next to tents may come to mind), we now also have an idea of what “refugee treatment,” is.<sup>65</sup>

As Lubkemann reminds us, the wartime migrant, or the “refugee” is often cast as a “paradigmatic non-agent produced by violence.”<sup>66</sup> The “refugee” is stripped of concern for “higher-order needs” and is also stripped of a past. An obsession with violence (by “viewers”) renders that person’s past meaningless, and this person’s present and future are thereby also rendered ineffective. Refugees are rendered as “universally undifferentiated actors whose culturally differentiated identities of interests no longer inform their action” and this type of rhetoric and representation compliments well the hegemonic international humanitarian discourse. People’s’ behavior is thought to be over-determined by external larger forces *alone*.<sup>67</sup>

As much as this a category that people negotiate, this is also a category that is imposed on people, putting aside the fact that it may be utilized and negotiated. Emma Haddad follows up from Malkki’s arguing by adding that “the refugee” is an inevitable byproduct and consequence of the modern nation-state system. There is a “fundamental and mutually constitutive link” between the concept of “the refugee” and contemporary

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<sup>65</sup> I elaborate on the visual representations in the next chapter. Also see: Malkki, Liisa. “Speechless Emissaries: refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* (1996) 11(3): 377-404.

<sup>66</sup>Lubkemann, Stephen C, *Culture in chaos: An anthropology of the social condition in war*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008;2010;2013)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

international society.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the tendency of fields like refugee studies to see the existence of refugee as a sign of something having gone wrong with the international system is problematic. The refugee is often portrayed as having been produced or created by a system of illiberal governance in contrast to the “normal” “rooted citizen of liberal governance. As Haddad argues it, it is the existence of modern political borders that ensures the re-creation of refugees. The construct of the refugee remains as long as the construct of the modern nation-state remains.

### **On “refugee” stories:**

In his book, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, Jackson dedicates a chapter to refugee stories and refugee lives. As Jackson narrates it, “the refugee embodies the intransitive.” As a “transient... he or she belongs to nowhere – constituting at once a problem for administrative order and for the discourse of social science, grounded as it is in the discursive habits of a sedentary culture that favors substantive, intransitive, bounded notions of identity and meaning.”<sup>69</sup> The “refugee experience” is “often characterized by fleetingness, uncertainty, and flux.”<sup>70</sup> Flight seems to be an experience of “moving through a totally destabilized and devastated world.” Thomas Nail may be echoing a corresponding idea when he says that while not all migrants are “alike in their movement,” all migrants, on the migratory spectrum of the two poles of “inconvenience” and “incapacitation,” in the *process* of migration itself share “an insecurity of some kind and duration.”<sup>71</sup> I agree, although still stress that scholars and other observers need to be more reflective and cautious about the extent to which they can blob and mush people together with certain traits (refugees are *this*, refugees are *that*).

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<sup>68</sup>Latif, Nadia, “Making Refugees.” *The New Centennial Review* 8 (2):253-72, (2008)

<sup>69</sup> 87

<sup>70</sup> 88

<sup>71</sup>Nail, Thomas, *The Figure of the Migrant*. (Stanford University Press, Stanford California: 2015) pp.2

In a section on flight and narrativity, Jackson cites that many writers have noted the most attesting thing about “refugee stories” and more generally the stories of people in crisis “is that life all but ceases to be narratable.” He writes:

“Not only is there a loss of the social context in which stories are told; the very unities of space, time and character on which narrative coherence depends are broken. For refugees, life is no longer a journey or narrative the meaning of which is consummated in return, or even, in time.”<sup>72</sup>

As the narrator – the refugee- tells the story, there is a sense that he or she is “out of time” or nowhere, or in other words “refugee stories typically juxtapose nightmarish collections of flight and nostalgic images of Paradise Lost.”<sup>73</sup> They are not like the stories we ordinarily tell,” Jackson writes; they do not carry us to a consoling denouement, they do not require that one listens and responds, and they do not carry the prospect of closure.<sup>74</sup> I appreciated, learned from, and agreed with most of what Jackson has written on the politics of storytelling. Yet, although he quotes the most prominent anthropologists in his section on “refugee stories,” I cannot help but be skeptical. The chapter, whilst theoretically useful, seems to be painting the “refugees” and “their” storytelling as somehow particularly unique, particularly fragmented, “out of time,” and not like the stories “we” would ordinarily narrate. Jackson seems to be perpetuating the idea that the “refugee experience” is a homogenous one. Jackson quotes Malkkii, but fails to really allow his own descriptions of “refugee stories” to digest Malkkii’s critiques.<sup>75</sup> By giving “refugee stories” specific traits it seems that Jackson also universalizes the “refugee” into a “special kind” of human being that has traumatized into telling fragmented stories.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Jackson, Michael, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Museum Tusulanum Press: University of Copenhagen, 2002) pg. 91.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid, pg. 92.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid, pg. 95.

<sup>76</sup> Although fragmented stories are themselves common and not unique to the “refugee.” Jackson, however, does well to expand what he means by “refugee” to a wider array of people who have experienced extreme suffering.

Nonetheless, one certainly ought to give Jackson credit for the fact that he does broaden what he means by “displacement” by explaining that it is not just about migration, that often displacement is actually about increasing immobilization, or deteriorating conditions. Maybe “displacement” is not about being re-located from one’s supposed “natural” place, maybe instead, it is about transforming lifescapes and structural violence. In this thesis for example, one can look at the Syrian-Circassians as multiply displaced peoples (and many of whom describe themselves this way) or one can see them as a people who had been displaced, but have now gone back to their “natural” placement, and more often than not these two narratives complement each other rather than oppose one another.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Please note that when I put words like “repatriate” and “return” in between quotation marks I am by no means delegitimizing peoples’ migrations to Abkhazia. Instead, I am questioning what we see as peoples’ natural placements within the confines of nation-state territorial boundaries.



## Introduction

### *'Neyalek Serty Abkhazeyeh'*: Placement and Reflections<sup>78</sup>



This is a photo of a booklet entitled “Abaza” in Russian letters, two Abkhazians gave my father and I this booklet during a discussion we were having about the “Abazas.” A Syrian man was with us and helped with translation. (Figure 3)

“In Abkhazia, the easy is impossible and the impossible is easy,” –An Abkhazian government official to my father.

“Is this a real place? I asked?  
No more, no less, than any other. She smiled.”<sup>79</sup>

Yesterday after the Russian class the group stood outside the school for a few minutes before each one of us parted ways with the rest. May talked about how she would have never imagined ever coming to Abkhazia... then she said something very cute about how maybe God put us in this situation so that we can meet and get to know each other.

<sup>78</sup> Translation: “Lucky you! You have become Abkhazian.” This is phrase that Mariyam jokingly told me in Abkhazia before I went to what I call the “Abkhazian Mogama” to get a passport.

<sup>79</sup>Taussig, Michael T. *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997) pg. 9

Abkhazia, Abkhazia, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan: these are some of the places where my friends and family thought I was over the summer. All were used to reference and to ask about, Abkhazia, a small self-proclaimed state (aren't they all anyway?) squeezed between Russia and Georgia. In the eyes of the United Nations and the European Union, it is still considered to be a part to the Republic of Georgia, which it had a secessionist war with in 1992. Shortly before my arrival to the field site, I too had hardly ever heard of Abkhazia, or of its surrounding geographies, let alone imagined that I would end up doing research there. I delve into and elaborate on the historicity, and into my ethnographic observations of this mountainous area overlooking the Black Sea throughout the rest of this thesis. Yet, I must first explain my connection to the place, which is itself a very peculiar one since it has added another layer to the ethnography and to the larger argument. I also believe this connection has made the first steps of my fieldwork a bit easier, and was one of the reasons many of the participants in this project trusted and befriended me quickly.

The connection I have to the field begins with my last name. For me, my last name has never meant anything more than the fact that I was usually the first on the attendance sheets in class. Even in Egypt, I was never very engaged or had much connection to my larger, or extended family. Once in the field, I was confronted with the fact that my last name was also the name of a language, an ethnic group of people, and a television channel called "Abaza TV" in Abkhazia. During such seemingly unusual moments of encountering my last name as a nationality, I questioned whether I may have been tripping on acid, or high on shrooms. In about three weeks, I received an Abkhazian citizenship on the basis of my last name. Over the past three years, Abkhazia also granted a few hundred Syrian nationals descendants of Circassians who fled from the North Caucasus approximately, and whose

plight I historicized in the preface. According to official rhetoric they are called “repatriates” or “returnees.”<sup>80</sup>

Seeing what was to me only a last name used in practice and in conversation as a “nationality,” in the same ways any other taken-for-granted national category, like “Egyptian” or “Syrian” would be used, brought to life Benedict Anderson’s conceptions of “imagined communities.”<sup>81</sup> Looking at how “Abaza” became a category shed light on how other seemingly more “real” categories, and the nationalisms that often accompany them, are not timeless nor are they “natural.” Each category has a traceable genealogy, and strong, lived social, political, and economic implications in determining peoples’ life chances. By looking at the case of the war-time migrants that have journeyed from Syria to Abkhazia, an unrecognized state where the struggle for separatism from Georgia is still felt, this thesis tackles the idea that statehood is imagined and performed through war-making and nation-building practices.<sup>82</sup> Unrecognized states like Abkhazia strive towards state-hood and recognition, navigating through the dominant modern state-system but also rendering the world order of states as a “collective illusion,” to borrow the phrase of Begoña Aretxaga.<sup>83</sup>

### ***Naroda Abaza: The Abaza People:***

Sitting by the window on a sunny afternoon, in Rahma’s apartment, we drank coffee, which everyone tells me is incomparable to the coffee *bel sham* (in Syria), which better on so many levels, “but we’ve gotten used to [the bad tasting coffee].” Dina and I start talking about the *sharkas* and the *Abazāt*; as was usually the case, she asked me about Egypt and I did not know. The “Abazas” in Egypt ended up there during Mamluk era, she tells me, they

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<sup>80</sup> عائدین in Arabic.

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Rev. ed. (New York: London;: Verso, 2006)

<sup>82</sup> Tilly, Charles. *War-making and State-making as Organized Crime*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Research on Social Organization, 1982) Print

<sup>83</sup> Aretxaga, Begoña, “Maddening States,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (1): 393-410 (2003).

were taken from their homes in the mountains to become Mamluks, (ruling slaves) and join Ottoman janissaries because they were “mountain men.”<sup>84</sup> They made good “warriors” and “soldiers.” Baybars is one example, she tells me and I am reminded of Arabic high school texts.<sup>85</sup> This conversation occurred repeatedly, with all types of people. Abu Mahmoud, a Syrian man I met in Egypt and one of the first people to tell me about a link between my last name, *Abaza* and a country called Abkhazia, also narrated to me the richness of a Circassian history over a viber phone call when he was finally in Sweden and I was in Abkhazia.

“The man who built the Alexandria library...?” an elderly Jordanian man who had come over the summer asked me as I sat with him and his family in the newly opened Syrian café. “Is a *sharkasi*...?” I guessed in a half-question, half-statement. “Of course,” he would say before continuing to ask me about more *sharkas* and *Abazas* whom I did not know, in large part also because of my ignorance on Egyptian historical figures. “I’ll get upset,” he joked whenever my face went blank with obvious lack of knowledge; I would smile and he would continue. The *Abazāt* in Egypt were different because they ended up there way before those who forcibly migrated to Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Palestine after the Russian Empire’s ethnic cleansing of Circassians in the Caucasus. They have forgotten their origins unlike other Circassians who have maintained their traditions, people reasoned. In Jordan and in Syria, as those were the two countries whose Circassians I became most familiar with, had Circassian associations, gatherings, and festivities as well as language classes. Madame Nariman told me when she was in Egypt (way back when my thesis proposal had nothing to do with Abkhazia) that she missed Thursday nights in *el sham*, when she would take her children to the local Circassian association. Even Abu Mahmoud would always ask me why

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<sup>84</sup> For a thorough definition of the “Mamluk” see the Britannica encyclopedia: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mamluk>

<sup>85</sup> Aretxaga, Begoña, “Maddening States,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (1): 393-410 (2003).

there's no association connecting the "Abazas" and I *never* understood why he would ask or what he had meant, until so much later.<sup>86</sup>

A short article in a 1998 issue of Al-Hayat newspaper about the "Abaza" family in Egypt reads a bit like a conversation with a proud nationalist. Reading it reminded me of how much nationalist rhetoric begins to sound increasingly repetitive, almost as though all nations can become synonyms, and it does not matter which will be filled into the blanks of a nationalist speech. In this article, the writer briefly goes over the "important" Abaza figures, the "national" role they played in Egyptian history. In this case, his review was of a list of men involved in political parties and other state activities.<sup>87</sup> However, the author also provides us with a brief overview of the narratives, myths, and stories of the "origins" of the "Abaza family," which I list to provide context and background on how this surname is itself imagined.<sup>88</sup>

There are those who say that the family is of "Arab origins" and that they are "the first Arabs to reside in Egypt," and that they came with Amru Ibn Al-'As, the author writes. He quotes Ibrahim Desouky Abaza, a member of the Wafd party saying that the family remained closely-knit, because "it is marked by races and traditions closer to a tribal hereditary system." One book cites Fikri Abaza, a writer, as having said that "the Abazas were

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<sup>86</sup>It is funny and nice how things managed to work out in the end.

<sup>87</sup> Mazhar, Atef, "'Arab am sharkas am khaleet menhuma" *Al Hayat Newspaper*, 1998

”عرب أم شركس أم خليط منهما؟ عائلات الأباضية في مصر تتكيف نموذجياً مع المتغيرات الاجتماعية والتقلبات السياسية”  
[http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue\\_archive/Hayat%20INT/1998/9/28/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%85-%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B7-%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%94%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%94%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B0%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9.html](http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20INT/1998/9/28/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%94%D9%85-%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B7-%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%94%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%94%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B0%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9.html)

<sup>88</sup>Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Rev. ed. (New York: London:: Verso, 2006)

more like a tribe.”<sup>89</sup> Another myth narrates that family tradition attributes the name “Abaza” originated from the marriage of the eighth in their genealogical line to a woman from the family of Abaza during the reign of the Circassian Mamluks...<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, there are also those who say that the “Abaza family” is of “Circassian origins,” that go back to “Angazia” (“Anjazia”), now located in the Republic of Georgia. (It is interesting to note here, that he also misspelled “Abkhazia”) The article goes on with a brief sentence of the Russian Empire’s mass deportations of Circassians into the Ottoman Empire and of the perceived “shared traits” of Arabs and Circassians (generosity, bravery, etc.).

*Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, a book on Mamluk history informs readers that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “the elites who posed the greatest threat to Ottoman authority” were Abaza Mehmed Pasha, governor of Erzurum, and Abaza Hasan Pasha, governor of Aleppo.<sup>91</sup> Both were “Abkhazian” and had “exploited legends of the Mamluk sultans as well as tales of other heroes, both historical and fictional,” the author argues.<sup>92</sup> Egypt’s regiments and grandee households in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were made up of young men that included Mamluks, mercenaries, soldiery, and other members of the palace that tended to be from a “disparate array of locales,” that included Abkhazia among other places such as Bosnia, Bulgaria, Circassia, Hungary, and more.<sup>93</sup> These young men had to be socialized (or had to socialize themselves) into their new placements after they were taken away from these locales.

“The elite of tribal society” during Mohamed Ali’s rule administrators married into the “sheikhs” of certain provinces, and this was the method through which the Abaza family

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Pg. 52

<sup>91</sup> Winter, M., and A. Levanoni, *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian politics and society*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004). See pgs: 104, 114, 115, 139.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid

“gained entrance to national Egyptian politics,” another scholar argues.<sup>94</sup> In 1812, Mohamed Ali appointed “one of the most prominent leaders of the Abaza,” as *shekh al-mashaikh* of half of the Sharqiyya province.<sup>95</sup> The Abaza family’s grip on Sharqiyya continued as Suleman Abaza Pasha, became another administrator who descended from the “the family of the *shekh al-balad* of al-Sharqiyya province.”<sup>96</sup> Most of the information I have found about them, in the margins of Egyptian history books, tend to primarily identify them as the “rural notables of the Sharqiyya province.”<sup>97</sup> The “Abaza family” had a “monopoly of power in Sharqiyya,” another modern history book that recounts the 1920s in Egypt went on to discuss the Wafd party, the “Abaza family,” and electoral practices at the time.<sup>98</sup> Since then, the *Abazīa* have been keen to maintain parliamentary presence, often running in parliamentary elections through Sharqiyya circles.<sup>99</sup> Even this year’s post-Sisi parliament, which consists mostly of people who maintain they will “back the state” and support it (as opposed to theoretically overseeing state officials), contains “Abaza” family members who ran in Sharqiyya electoral circles. Many of the “Abazas” or *Abazīa* in Egypt thus have an interesting and intimate relationship with the state that remains outside the scope of this paper, yet is significant to note as it came up in conversations with Syrians about the *Abazāt* in Syria who were also described to close to Bashar, a point which I will briefly bring up in chapter one.

What I seek to do the above invocations of history books and ethnographic narratives is to display how it is that even *family names* – with all that they hold of ambiguity - have a political, social, and economic life in Egypt, in Syria as well as in Eastern Europe.<sup>100</sup> The information and stories above came up time and again whenever the conversation turned to

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<sup>94</sup>Aharoni, R. *The Pasha's Bedouin: Tribes and State in the Egypt of Mehemet Ali, 1805-1848*. New York;London: Routledge.,(2007) Pp. 51

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Ryzova, L. *The age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in national-colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014) Pp. 187

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Whidden, James. *Monarchy and modernity in Egypt: politics, Islam and neo-colonialism between the wars*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>100</sup> Maybe they hold the same importance elsewhere as well.

me, and it broke barriers that may have existed if I had not had “Abaza” as a last name when speaking to interlocutors and meeting people.

### **Methodology and Methods:**

We take for granted the conception that the field is something that you can go see, hear, and feel, and then come back to the desk and put on paper. This ethnographic project is a “kaleidoscope” of impressions, events, textures, stories and processes.<sup>101</sup> Simply put, this project primarily relied on extensive participant observation, and on a few semi-structured interviews. While I often tried to “structure” interviews, I felt that these types of interviews were less genuine than casual, but deep, conversations with people. While I had a difficult time deciding what to keep out and what to keep in, the many things and ideas I experienced, heard, and saw, they pay testimony to connected seemingly unrelated things truly are. It sheds light on how ultimately, social phenomena and relations are more complex than they seem, more complex than we can understand, and more complex than the following thesis can ever do justice to. By “complex” here, I also mean intertwined and related in layered ways. In turn, this points to how nothing ever takes place neatly, or can be maintained inside the clear-cut, distinct “categories.” This is why, this ethnography, by extension, does not (cannot) claim whole-ness.<sup>102</sup> The multi-vocality and partiality of the Abaza history that exists in fragments, embedded in the margins of history texts is an example of this.

Social science actually makes a mess when it attempts to organize things that are “complex, diffuse, and messy.”<sup>103</sup> When it does this, social science fails to recognize the world’s heterogeneity and its variation; it fails to recognize how the world can be an “unformed but generative flux of forces and relations that work to produce certain

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<sup>101</sup> To borrow the description of John Law: Law, John. *After method: Mess in social science research*. (New York; London;: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>102</sup> Borrowed from Audra Simpson’s description of her ethnography: Simpson, Audra, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2014)

<sup>103</sup> Law, John. *After method: Mess in social science research*. (New York; London;: Routledge, 2004).



realities.”<sup>104</sup> For realities are neither fixed, nor are they definite and a failure to recognize how certain realities are constructed, highlighted, and identified at the expense of others is tragic for social science.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, when giving us the “reality” social science methods, rules, and practices do not just describe what that they seek to understand, but they also produce and mold it in the process. They are part and parcel of the specific historical processes and contexts through which everything (and all ideas and interpretations) are constructed. Thus it is not that reality imposes such rules and methods on us, but it is the other way around and this is why, we need to think of method in ways that are looser, broader, and more generous.<sup>106</sup>

The categories that I embody, which are also quite ambiguous, have shaped the dynamics of my fieldwork and its outcomes. For example, my gender meant that while I did speak to many men, most of my closest interlocutors were women, whom I had befriended quickly. I had access to women’s apartments and they had access to mine when I was staying alone. Many of my afternoons were spent eating and drinking coffee at these women’s houses before their husbands came back home from work.<sup>107</sup> Some Abkhazian men and women had

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

<sup>107</sup>In a chapter entitled “Studying your own: the complexities of a shared culture,” summarizing her experiences in the field, Seteney Shami recounts her experience with Circassians in Jordan, and with studying her “own.”<sup>107</sup> She tells readers about her parents’ ethnic pride and her own “vague doubts about whether there were really a people called Circassians, or if they were something my parents had made up to complicate my life.”<sup>107</sup> Her initial interviews “turned in sketchy accounts of the history, customs, and ‘general’ superior qualities of Circassians, as fondly imagined by the informant.”<sup>107</sup> I found this aspect of her fieldwork very familiar and relatable. Her first interviews with Circassians in Jordan yielded answers that are very similar to the answers my own initial interviews yielded. When she asked about “interethnic conflict” she heard “the same stories about a few clashes at the turn of the century, and rosy pictures of the present.”<sup>107</sup> Interestingly enough, I had also heard, from Jordanian Circassians, the same stories about a few clashes over water. After attempting to make formal interviews, I decided to give up on the idea of traditional interviews and just spend a lot of time with people. I could ask questions midst this time, in parties, picnics, and walks on the beach. If I was unsure of whether I could share something, I would ask whether or not I could write it down in my research. Yet this brought up another problematic dimension to the field work as sometimes it was only up to my own common sense and ethical compass to decide whether times were appropriate to ask if a certain conversation could go into my research, and into my writing. Shami also states that spending time in Circassian homes allowed her more fruitful fieldwork than formal interviews with community leaders in Jordan, many of whom had been high level politicians and civil servants. It was when she was invited to spend regular afternoons with regular families that her fieldwork really began to take form, and again, I find this very relatable. I am also sure that if I had spent my time differently, the outcome of my research would have had different focus points.

also been very disapproving of the fact that I would be a girl staying alone. Later, I would frequently get the surprised question of *Ty Odna?* (You're alone?), even from people I had met for the first time. As disapproving as they had been, people were also kind and often insisted that I stay with them in their homes instead of in an apartment alone. Syrian friends also often asked me if I was afraid of staying alone, but would follow up on their own question by saying that my father knows that I am there and that they will take care of me so the environment is trusted.

My father was my main gatekeeper in the field; he was the one who introduced me to the country, to various important sites within it, and to many of the people whom I worked with, or have helped me. Lots of people already knew me as, or would introduce me to others as, "Mohamed Abaza's daughter" (or in Russian *dotshka*). There were also many people, primarily men, which I had easier access to when my father was there and could speak to more easily once he was gone because he had been there and they knew him.

I justified to myself the fact that my parents would not let make my way to the country alone by telling myself that Lila Abu Lughod's father had also introduced her to the her field site, and to the Awlad Ali Bedouins, with whom she had done her fieldwork. In the edited book *Arab Women in the Field*, Lila Abu Lughod writes about her experience, stating: "I suspect few, if any, fathers of anthropologists accompany them to the field to make their initial contacts."<sup>108</sup>(She should have met my parents) She writes that after living with the Bedouins for some time, she began to understand her father's insistence that that be the case. "As an Arab, although by no means a Bedouin, he knew his own culture and society well enough to know that a young unmarried woman traveling alone on uncertain business was an anomaly."<sup>109</sup> She goes on: "By accompanying me, my father had shown those with whom I would be living and those on whose good opinion and generosity my life and work would

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<sup>108</sup>Altorki, S., & El-Solh, C. F. *Arab women in the field: Studying your own society*. Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, (1989). Pp.141.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid

depend that I was a daughter of a good family...”<sup>110</sup> While this is clearly not the case most of the time, and while this implicitly may have imposed a standard on other Arab women anthropologists, my father’s presence was initially useful in the sense that it gave me a quick introduction to the field.

Often, upon hearing my Egyptian-accented colloquial Arabic, Syrian and Jordanian nationals would ask me about *koshary*, and other Egyptian dishes as well as actors like Hussien Fahmy, Roshdy Abaza and Egyptian cinema. People often asked about Egyptian politics, and many were happy to take the opportunity to practice their Egyptian accents with me (as I sometimes also did with the Syrian accent). Besides this, many of our conversations, when they were not about the *Abazāt* in Syria, were about the *Abazāt* in Egypt.<sup>111</sup>

On the other hand, most people who were not Syrian thought I was Syrian. “*Syrii?* (Syria?), I would get asked in Russian, “*Egipet*” I would respond. In different instances I would get asked about where I was from, and the second question would be *Ÿoĭna tam, da?* (there is war there, no?). Usually at the end of the day, whilst writing field notes, I would turn on the television to listen, in an attempt to get used to the sounds of the Russian language. “The refugee crisis,” was a big deal on Russian news as well. There were many debates aired on TV where people who argued that the Syrian refugees would bring ISIS into Europe. In Russia, a woman on the bus asked me, in English if I was going to “live in Russia forever,” following up with “there is war in your country,” I told her I was going home the same night. She also thought I was Syrian. Upon hearing I was Egyptian, Russian tourists would mention having gone to Sharm El-Sheikh, others would remark that this is “interesting,” and

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> One night on the promenade by the sea, a woman named Amany, one of the women I had later gotten to know closely, approached me after she heard me and recognized my Egyptian-colloquial Arabic. She told me that she likes colloquial Egyptian and got excited hearing it in Abkhazia. Later on, Amany would become one of the most supportive people of my research project because she too, was a researcher on Levant archeology. In this case, my colloquial Egyptian Arabic was the conversation starter.

I loved it when people continued to talking even though they knew that I did not understand the language.<sup>112</sup>

### **Narratives and Stories:**

This thesis depends on the narratives of many people that I have met and sat with, but it is in and of itself, ultimately my own narrative, my own understanding and retelling of some of the stories I have seen and heard. Abkhazia is small, and the amount of Syrians who have moved there are small compared to other spaces in the world. If we are to heed to the often dehumanizing way that their movement is recorded, analyzed, and spoken of (as ‘numbers’), then what makes Syrian war-time migration to Abkhazia important? Well, these people’s stories, alongside those of the other residents of Abkhazia, are important and fascinating, and are triggers for reflection on the world we inhabit. In a very similar sense to that which Jackson notes when he says that the landscape in aboriginal Australia is “storied” the mountainous landscapes of the Caucasus are also filled with stories, and stories of stories. At one point, “it was said that more than seventy different languages could be heard in the market at Dioscurias, the Greek colony on the site of Sukhum in modern Abkhazia.<sup>113</sup> People carry along with them different backgrounds; coming from Greece, Georgia, Circassian cities, Russia, Jordan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Turkey Syria, Armenia, and more. I know that there are an endless amount of stories behind the drops that I hope to bring through in this thesis, as Michael Jackson rightly reminds us, “for every story that sees the light of day, untold others remain in the shadows, censored of suppressed.”<sup>114</sup>

Stories breach, cross, and blur the boundaries that impose themselves on the political and ethical spaces of our daily lives and they extend themselves to political domains because

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<sup>112</sup> The first sentences I had to learn were, I do not speak Russian and I do not understand.

<sup>113</sup> Ascherson, Neal, *Black Sea*: (Hill and Wang: 1996).

<sup>114</sup> Jackson, Michael, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Museum Tusulanum Press: University of Copenhagen, 2002)

they mix and smear public and private realms.<sup>115</sup>To create, organize, and narrate a story out of a collage of events, is to actively rework them, “both in dialogue with others and within one’s own imagination.”<sup>116</sup> Narrative is expressive but also (re)productive in the sense storytelling is never just an act of creating personal and social meanings; it is a strategy for sustaining a sense of agency, often in the face of disempowering circumstances.<sup>117</sup>As readers will see, throughout this thesis I interrupt the reader frequently with the ethnographic material added in short bits and pieces in between the rest of the text.<sup>118</sup> Sometimes I provide my analyses but sometimes I want to the readers to interpret as they see fit, and as they may understand, so that in the spirit of Benjamin’s advice, the narrative can achieve “an amplitude that information lacks.”<sup>119</sup>

In addition, this project integrates a visual component; both as a field method and as a constituent of the final written thesis. My visual method is focused on still-photography, or documentary-style photography rather than film. In his book, *Visual Methods in Social Research*, Marcus Banks argues that visual methods are an “actively collaborative project” between image maker and image subjects.<sup>120</sup> The social researcher, he writes, should make sure people understand what he/she is doing and why. Banks references Victor Caldora, a photographer who accompanied his anthropologist wife on her research. Caldora set up three main premises for his images: first, that the photographic images are “event-specific representations,” meaning that images are not for use in generalizing claims, second, meaning in images is dependent on context, and third, that the production of the photographic image is

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid Pgs 253, 11

<sup>116</sup>Ibid Pg. 15

<sup>117</sup> Jackson, Michael, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Museum Tusulanum Press: University of Copenhagen, 2002) pg. 15

<sup>118</sup> Although with less typos, I hope.

<sup>119</sup> Benjamin, Walter, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations*. (Schocken Books: 1968)

<sup>120</sup> Banks, Marcus, *Visual methods in social research*(London: SAGE, 2001) Pg. 166.

a social event which should involve communication and mutual understanding between the subject and the maker of the image.<sup>121</sup>

In her own research on refugees, Malkki briefly goes through the photographic visual representations of refugees and argues that the tendency to “universalize” the refugee as a “special kind” of person is as apparent in visual representations as it is in textual representations. The next chapter elaborates on this idea that, because photographic representations of refugees are abundant, most people have certain senses of what a refugee “is supposed to look like.” As Malkki puts it, refugees thus tend to be “captured by the journalist’s camera as a singularly expressive emissary of horror and powerlessness.”<sup>122</sup> In addition, refugees are often portrayed as predominantly women and children. Malkki criticizes these representations claiming that they play into the discursive constitutions “of the refugee as bare life.” These universalizing/standardizing representations thus ignore the agency that refugees hold by complementing international aid agencies that represent refugees as helpless, vulnerable, and weak.

### **A Multi-Sited Field of Multiple Realities:**

My ethnography and fieldwork focus on Abkhazia, but I still consider my field a multi-sited one. This is for a variety of reasons, including first the fact that the field, and the specific historical moment in which I now live (Egypt) has affected my readings of various events. Certain interpretations may have been different had the circumstances been different. For example, the fact that I was unable to travel to the site I had initially intended to go to became, in the end, part and parcel of the fieldwork for this project.<sup>123</sup> The way events, spaces, and temporalities mesh into each other constantly in everyday narrative and action,

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, Pg. 117

<sup>122</sup> Malkki, Liisa H. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995) Print. Pg.10

<sup>123</sup> Although I must state that the change of field sites, in the end, worked in my favor and introduced me to a part of the world I would have never otherwise paid attention to.

means that anthropological senses open to multiple sites of observation and participation makes one better equipped to “cross-cut dichotomies such as the ‘local’ and the ‘global,’ the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system.’”<sup>124</sup>

The second reason pertains to the group of people that I am working with; scholars argue that diasporas are by definition multi-sited in their stories and experiences. Ordinarily, this would make the research design based on a transnational methodology, which is generally useful when conducting fieldwork with diasporic or migrant communities. For example, Shami’s research on Jordanian and Turkish Circassians, who went “back” to the “homeland, depended on a transnational theoretical framework, and literature on “identity” while mine does not. A transnational framework can help in the process of rethinking how peoples’ lives often “cut across national boundaries,” especially with diasporic groups “whose networks, activities, and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies.”<sup>125</sup> I prefer here to think of my research as “trans-statal” instead of transnational, to borrow from Katherine Verdery’s ideas.<sup>126</sup> The trans-statal cuts across *state* boundaries. Furthermore, while the ethnographic stories I repeat to the reader here cut across these personal, social, political, and imagined boundaries, so too do the sites of power that cooperate across the very boundaries that they force people to abide by.

In its most general description, this project directly and indirectly touches upon (and is effected by) a capitalist neoliberal world and the problematics of a modern nation-state system with its borders, surveillance, control, disciplining, and the structural violence that it continues to perpetuate. It is about years of war-making in regions one may not automatically think to link to each other, about the uprisings in both Egypt and Syria; it is about the link between various sites of power (Russia, Georgia, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, etc.). Finally, just as

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<sup>124</sup> Marcus, G.E. “Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24.1 (1995): 95- 117. Web. Pg. 95

<sup>125</sup>Hannerz, Ulf. “TransnationalResearch” in: Bernard, Russell *Handbook of Methods*. (Walnut Creek, Calif: AltaMira Press 1998)Pp. 235

<sup>126</sup> I elaborate on this point in the upcoming chapter.

much as I want it to be about the stories that have been recounted to me by all of the people I have had the privilege to meet during fieldwork it is also a product of what my senses and my memory filtered as important. In the following pages, I try to balance between including myself and between not taking too much of the writing space that I initially allocated to the people I have met as well as the notions and concepts that I intended to write about.

Nonetheless, for as much as our work seeks to describe, analyze, document, and criticize what we see as the manifesting realities out-there, it is also about the depictions of those realities within us; it is about those realities “in-here.”<sup>127</sup>

### **Challenging projects of homogeneity:**

I found myself stuck for words when, in a visit to Liza Abaza’s house, she asked me what exactly my thesis was about. It was still so much during the early stages of fieldwork that I had still been quite confused about what I was doing. Sawsan helped me out and stated that the research was sort of about “about how we are coming to this place, our homeland, but it is not our country”. I liked the phrase, but not for the exact reasons Sawsan stated. I liked it because it invites to ask what is really “our country”? It invites us to put forth questions about the depth and implications of what is now known as a Syrian civil war and refugee crisis.

Initially I did not understand why Circassian Syrians differentiated themselves from Arabs. They would describe themselves as Syrian; Syria is also their *watān*, or nation. Yet, “we are not like the Arabs.” Later on, I also learned there was another word that people used to describe “Arabs”: *bzamo*.<sup>128</sup> People often also spent time explaining to me the differences in terms of habits and traditions between the *sharkas* and the *bzamo*; which was interesting seeing as they often also spent a lot of time explaining to me other sets of differences between the Syrians and the Abkhaz. Yet, after thinking and re-thinking this point, it became

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<sup>127</sup>Law, John. *After method: Mess in social science research*. (New York; London;: Routledge, 2004) pg. 122.

<sup>128</sup> بزمو



clearer how the categories that people attribute to themselves (or that are attributed to them) are negotiated differently in different moments. A Syrian-Circassian in Egypt may be keener to claim a connection to the label of “Arab” than a Syrian-Circassian in the Caucasus. The category, like other categories, is negotiated.<sup>129</sup>

People who share common label do not project a shared attitude on most matters. Circassian groups in Jordan are different from the ones in Turkey, the Circassians in Palestine, Syria, and in the North West Caucasus. In fact, in Abkhazia nationality was one of the key markers of social and economic status. Whereas most of the Syrian Circassians in Abkhazia at the moment went there *muttareen*, as forced migrants Jordanians and Turkish nationals have different reasons for visiting. During fieldwork conversations, Syrians would refer to Jordanian nationals and Circassians as *zanageel* (or rich people) and would say that unlike them the Syrians do not have *masary* (capital, or money) to start business projects in the country. Many of the Jordanians that visit Abkhazia do so in summer vacations to get their paperwork done and leave back to Jordan afterwards, although I have met a few Jordanians who have been living in the region for years.<sup>130</sup>

If anything, this fieldwork project has also taught me that “Circassians,” along with any other group of people that may share a common label are not homogenous. One of the messages I want to express through this project pays tribute not only to dismantling the understandings of refuge as monolithic beings that lack agency, but also to the heterogeneity of Circassians and Syrians. Hopefully it will even allows one to second guess that are categories spoon fed to most of us and that we continue to reproduce in speech and practice.

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<sup>129</sup> The category of the “refugee” is itself negotiation. Syrians who had been living and working as domestic workers in Lebanon long before 2011 can now go to Europe for refugee status, for example. (People negotiate their ways out of Lebanon instead of directly out of Syria). (Example based on discussion in the Anthropology of Violence class in Fall 2015)

<sup>130</sup> In many senses I was a lot like the Jordanian Circassians, I too was there only for the summer, and I too got citizenship paperwork done and left. Turkish nationals also seem to have developed an image among Syrians as the exploitative business owners as many Syrians now have to work in Turkish factories. Several Syrian men with Turkish bosses have often complained about having to work for long hours while getting paid minimum salaries, and often also having to put up with delayed salaries because there are no other work options in the country.

Most of all I want to it to open for readers the windows of imagining other realities, to dismantle the givens of the nation-state and all the symbolism of nationalism. To rethink all that such givens destroy, produce, and raise within us.

### **Ethical Considerations and (In)-Sensitivity:**

“... I have become a *resala*, (thesis)” one of the women I had planned to interview in Egypt said as she recalled her encounter with an American researcher. When I told her that this research was for my Master’s thesis, Um Waleed said she had already spoken to an American girl who was doing research with Syrians in Egypt. Initially, Um Waleed thought this girl would be able to help her with migration paperwork and was disappointed to find out the girl was only there for research purposes. The fact that there is no direct benefit for the participants of a research project frequently poses an ethical dilemma, almost as though we profit from observing the suffering of others, without doing anything to alleviate it.

Any type of research, including fieldwork, could be insensitive, or even exploitative. In an article entitled “Palestinian refugees are not at your service,” on *Electronic Intifada*, journalist Moe Ali Nayel provides one example of this exploitative fieldwork. He recounts his experience translating for a Harvard student keen on collecting data from a Palestinian refugee who fled Yarmook camp from Syria into Lebanon. The student, Nayel recounts, was rude, insensitive to the story of the woman she was interviewing, and was only keen on gathering her data. Nayel quotes a Palestinian man: “Are you enjoying filming our misery? Film. Its fine, you are like the others. You show up in the camp, film, leave, and we are still here.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ali Nael Moe, “Palestinian Refugees are not at your Service,” May 2013, *Electronic Intifada*: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/palestinian-refugees-are-not-your-service/12464>

I have encountered people making similar comments in Egypt's slums and other poverty-stricken areas. The idea is that people visit, taken pictures, and leave never to be seen again. The "interlocutors" have had to watch writers, journalists, academics, and filmmakers from across the world stroll through their camps; get their stories, pictures, research, and films only to leave and never come back. What makes well-done ethnographic fieldwork different, however, is the fact that its long-term nature forces the research to build a stronger relationship with his/her research participants (a relationship that is up to the anthropologist to maintain.) Anthropologists working on violence and issues of vulnerability, have even more difficult questions that confronting them. Schepher-Hughes and Bourgois ask: "what does the anthropologist then want from his/her audience? What of the people whose suffering is made a public spectacle for the sake of theoretical argument?"<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Philippe I. Bourgois, *Violence in war and peace: An anthology*. Vol. 5 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004)



(Figure 4)

### **Visualizing Snippets of Life in Abkhazia**

“For if indeed foundational thoughts are seen as collapsing, if indeed utopias are arguments about order and foundational thoughts, and if indeed the savage exists primarily within an implicit correspondence with utopia, the specialist in savagery is in dire straits. He does not know what to aim at, His favorite model has disappeared or, when found, refuses to pose as expected. The fieldworker examines his tools and finds his camera inadequate. Most importantly, his very field of vision now seems blurred. Yet he needs to come back home with a picture. It’s pouring rain out there, and the mosquitoes are starting to bite. In desperation, the baffled anthropologist burns his notes to create a moment of light, moves his face against the flame, closes his eyes, and, hands grasping his camera, takes a picture of himself.”<sup>133</sup>

“To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs

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<sup>133</sup>Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Global transformations: Anthropology and the modern world*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) pg. 34/35

certainly becomes more real that it would have been if one had never seen the photographs—think of the Vietnam War. (For a counter example, think of the Gulag Archipelago, of which we have no photographs.) But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real.”<sup>134</sup>  
—Susan Sontag

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Rahma kindly invited me to a get-together the women were having at her house. The kids played while the older women had their coffee, cigarettes, and (really good) Syrian snacks. Dina showed us family photographs from Syria. One of the photos was of her husband, who passed away when Ayman (her son) was a baby. At the time the photograph was taken, Dina’s husband has still been a conscript in the Syrian army. In the small black and white photograph he sits, wearing his military uniform, on what looks one of the small army beds with thin mattresses. A portrait of Hafez Al-Asad above him hung above his head. There were other photographs, of Ayman, Heba, and Rhama when they were young and of Dina’s wedding. Later, Rahma would tell me that they were able to bring their family photographs with them because they had time to plan for their travel. Other Syrians did not get the same chance, she would add.

There are two cafés that are on the sea ends of two parallel wooden ports, always surrounded by fishermen. One of them is more of a fancy restaurant that sells sushi and has hookah. The other is called “Amra,” and is run by two older women who sell Turkish coffee and baked goods. Farah and I sat in Amra, and drank coffee. We spoke about Syria, Egypt, her fiancée, Nalchik, the city where she goes attends university and studies tourism, and of course we spoke about what I study as well. I was thinking about of writing my research about how dependent on documents we are made to be, I tell her and we talk about it. I’m thinking of doing something visual for the project too, I add. I want to make photographs. “But why?” she asked me, “We’re not refugees.” Her question put me on the spot. “Yes... I don’t want to portray people in a bad way, of course,” I said hoping not to sound defensive. “If you have to take pictures maybe you can just take them without people noticing,” But I don’t want to do that it’s not necessary, I tell her, and the conversation moves onto how Abkhazian television filmed her and her friends at school when they were first here, because they were Syrian. She hadn’t had her hair done or make up on, she said lightly.

¹³⁴Sontag, Susan, *On photography*(New York: Anchor Books, 1990) pg.20

“To photograph is to appropriate the thing being photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power,”¹³⁵ Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*. The relationship between the photographer and the photographed, the represented and the one who represents is already one of authority, although the clear cut dichotomy ultimately does not exist. Who really makes the photograph—constructed as it may be—what it is? And who really makes the ethnography—also constructed as it may be—what it is? Some of the stories I have collected here are my own, but most are not.

“Pictures of refugees are now a key vehicle in the elaboration of a transnational social imagination of refugeeness,” Liisa Malkki wrote in 1996. We now have an image, an idea, in our minds of a “refugee” is “supposed to look like, often these are images of women and children next to tents, or more recently, photos of children like Aylan Kurdi dead and washed up on the shore. The most dramatic images enter the market of photojournalism.

¹³⁶“Commodified imagery threatens photographers’ primary role as storytellers. Amplified technique threatens to dominate the image, and it will lead to picturesque gluttony,” as one photojournalist describes it, the “image product has been reduced to the glib one-off drama,” it.¹³⁷Most importantly, for me at least, is the person in the photograph cannot talk back. One cannot help but wonder how the subject of the photograph, feels after seeing their vulnerable moments reified and made into images for the public.

Images, in their conscription to the world of journalism, are expected to shock, arrest attention, startle, and surprise.¹³⁸Photographs can be commodities in a capitalist media market that feeds off of the most dramatic of images. The suffering displayed thus becomes

¹³⁵Ibid pg. 4

¹³⁶See: Weber, Donald. “The Rules of Photojournalism are Keeping us from the Truth” March 2015, <https://medium.com/vantage/the-rules-of-photojournalism-are-keeping-us-from-the-truth-52c093bb0436#.8ldriycdx> (Problematic headline, but nonetheless some good points).

¹³⁷Ibid

¹³⁸Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) pg.

commercialized and “taken up into processes of global marketing and business competition.”¹³⁹ They can be absorbed into what is the rational, bureaucratic, mode of running society; most documents now have to be accompanied by a photograph of the citizen’s face, usually in alienating ways (when you are not allowed to smile for passport pictures).¹⁴⁰ Photographs can be an object of “evidence,” of “truth,” and they can also be a tool of modern nation-state surveillance, enrolled to service to institutions of control. Foucault’s conception of the panopticism immediately comes to mind, “the gaze is alert everywhere.”¹⁴¹

The most problematic aspect of the practice of photography to reflect on is the idea that it is “more than passive observing.”¹⁴² This provokes both questions of whether a photograph sheds light on a story, or how much of a role it plays in “the status quo remaining unchanged (at least of as long as it takes to get a ‘good’ picture.)” The idea that photos can muster feelings of moral outrage is bogged down depending on the degree of familiarity with these types of images.¹⁴³ Instead, it seems increasingly more likely that to photograph misery is to “be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, with photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune.”¹⁴⁴ In other words, “to take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability.”¹⁴⁵

The photographs in this chapter do not follow a particularly apparent storyline or narrative, although that is ultimately up to the reader/viewer to decide and interpret. They are,

¹³⁹Kleinman, Arthur and Joan, *The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times*. In: *Social suffering* / ed. by Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1997.) Pgs. 1, 19

¹⁴⁰Sontag, Susan, *On photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990) pgs. 21-22 (The point about alienation was inspired by a conversation with Omar Omar).

¹⁴¹Foucault, Michel, "Panopticism" from "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison". *Race/ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2 (1): 1–12, (2008).

¹⁴²Sontag, Susan, *On photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990)

¹⁴³Ibid. pg. 19

¹⁴⁴Ibid. pg. 12

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

as I saw the field, unordered, ambiguous, and seemingly arbitrary. I have added photos from the school, the classes, what I have seen as “symbols of the state” reaffirmed in flags, photos, and billboards. There are photos of homes, as well as of the United Nations peacekeeping site, now part of a “hotel” where the Syrians were made to stay upon their arrival to Abkhazia. My favorites are the photographs of the food, both Abkhazian (Russian?) and of course, Syrian. With the above critiques in mind, and with a never fully answered question of *why?* I found the camera useful with regards to building a sort of connection with people by taking portraits of them, with them, or maybe not of them but of their children, and then printing the photographs and giving them back. While there is always the grappling and gripping with not turning people into a spectacle, maybe there is something flattering about someone seeing something beautiful in you (and not in the sense of exoticism). Also, there is something slightly different in the visual representation and the textual one, in the sense that (at least nowadays, and at least in the initial stages), a photographic representation is instant. At once, after the photograph has been taken, you can show it to whomever you had photographed. Anyway, in order to not let the textual override the visual *too much*, I will just present the photographs below. To respect the anonymity of my interlocutors whose narratives and quotes I have injected into this thesis, they do not appear in any of the photographs unless they are giving their backs to the camera.

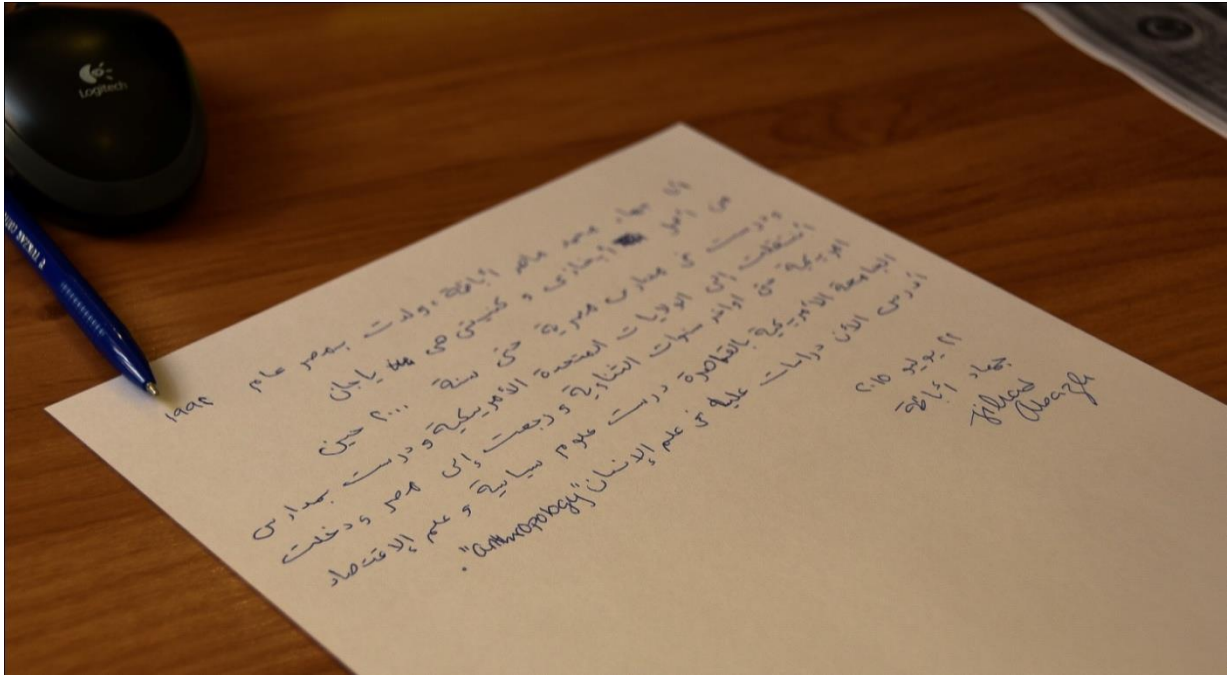
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“In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders (“framing”) seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, Pg. 22





This is a document I had to write before going through with passport procedures in Abkhazia. It includes my name, a very short life history, and the fact that I study anthropology. (Figure 5)



This is the “repatriation” building, where people go to get their paperwork done. (Figure 6)



An Armenian man shows me his passport at the Russia-Abkhazia borders upon my entrance to Abkhazia. (Figure 7)



Syrian television plays in the background at home in Abkhazia.(Figures 8, 9)





The Abkhazian military parades in celebration of the 'independence day,' marking their separatism from Georgia. (Figures 10, 11)





Children celebrate national flag day, in August 2015. (Figure 12)



A billboard sign of Abkhazia's current president stands in Sukhum's streets. ( Figure 13)



Former UN peacekeeping site – now turned hotel – where the Syrians were made to stay upon arrival. (Figures 14, 15)





The Abkhazian parliamentary building that was burned down during the war in 1992. It was a site of heavy fighting between the Abkhaz and the Georgian troops. Lily, the girl in the photograph below showed me around the building. (Figures 16, 17)





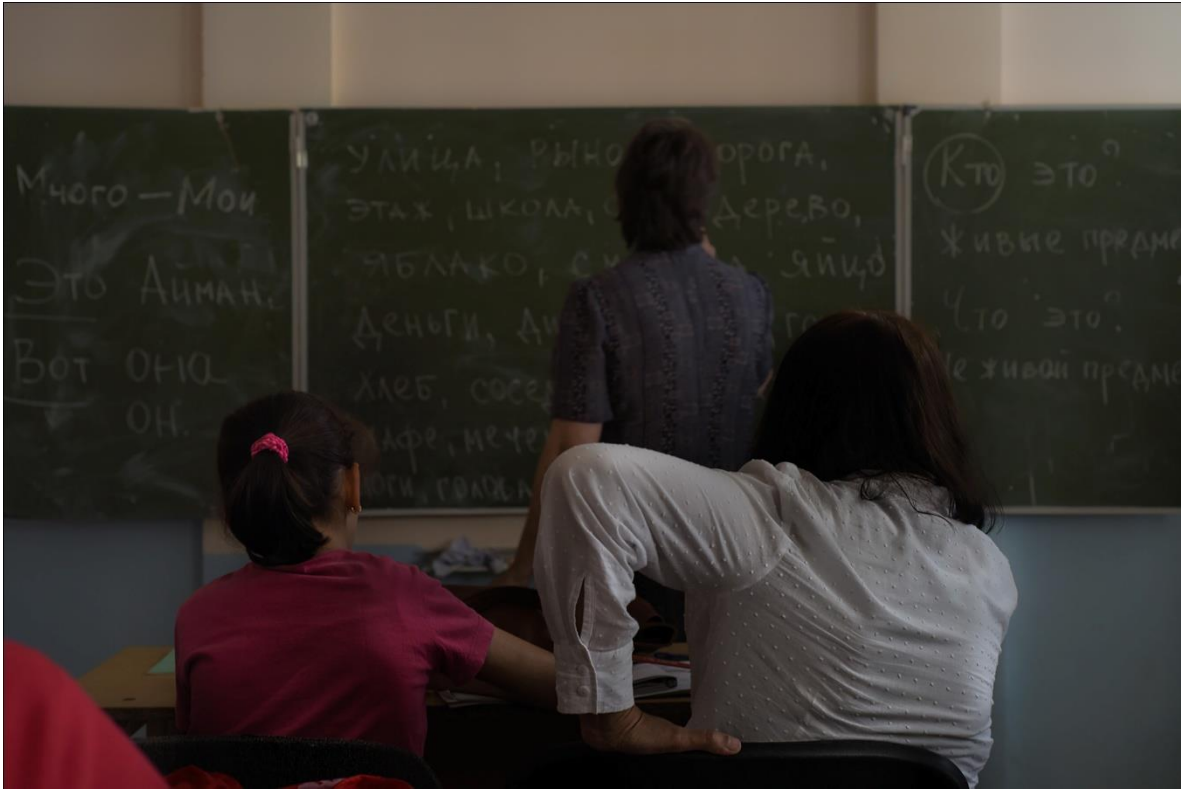
These are photographs and memorials made for the people that were killed in the 1992 war with Georgia. Yes, we called them *shuhadaa* ' (martyrs) in Arabic and I do not particularly know why. (Figures 18, 19)







This is a photograph of poster a man dressed in Circassian costume. Behind the poster, one can see the mountainous landscape that fills Abkhazia. (Figure 20)



Russian classes, inside the Tenth school, were a significant site for my fieldwork. (Figures 21, 22)





There two photos were taken from inside the Tenth school. (Figures 24, 25)





“It is a beautiful country, but there is no work,” one Syrian woman told me about Abkhazia, elaborating that, you can sit and watch the nature forever, but where will you get your meals? (Figures 26, 27)





Lake Ritza (Figure 26)



The Black Sea at sunset (Figure 27)

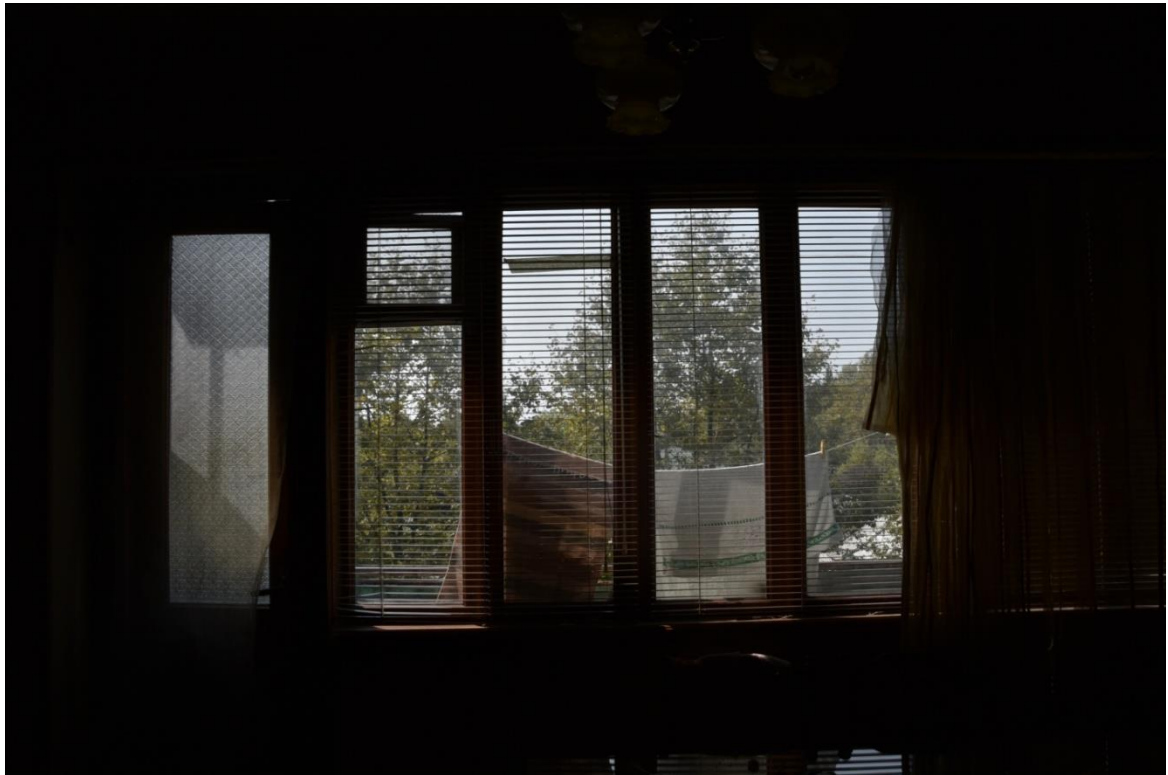


Looking at the mountains ( Figures 28, 29)





Windows (Figures 30, 31)





Syrian meals are served during gatherings that the Syrian women set up for themselves. (Figures 32, 33)







Hookah and tea (Figures 34, 35, 36)





Interlocutors prepare snacks and meals for me in their homes. (Figures 37, 38)





The Market (Figure 39)



An Abkhazian woman prepares for the winter by storing peppers. (Figure 40)



Abkhazian food stands (Figures 41, 42)





Narmez hangs up the photos that I took of him and his family. (Figure 43)



A Syrian mother and her son walk home after a long day working at the Arabic café, owned by a Jordanian-Circassian man. (Figure 44)

## Make-Believe Statehood

“And what could be more powerful than the modern state? For the world of magic is changing, has changed... wasn't it Lenin himself who wrote in 1919 that now nearly all political disputes and differences of opinion turn on the concept of the state, ... more particularly on the question: what is the state?”<sup>147</sup>

“In world history, we are concerned only with those people's that have formed states [because] all the value that human beings possess, all of their spiritual reality, they have through the state alone.” Hegel<sup>148</sup>

“When people today describe the status of Abkhazia, they use phrases such as: ‘between heaven and earth,’ ‘between East and West,’ ‘between the hammer and the anvil,’ ‘between...’—this borderline situation correctly describes our position.”<sup>149</sup>

“The newest Black Sea state of all, however, is not imaginary; I reached the end of the road in tiny Abkhazia, which broke away from Georgia only in 1992, and I tried there to measure the reality or unreality of Abkhazian independence against all that I had learned on the journey until then.”<sup>150</sup>



45) Crowds gather in front of a stage during ‘national flag day’ celebrations in August. (Figure

<sup>147</sup>Taussig, Michael T. *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997) pg. 5

<sup>148</sup>Quoted from: Nail, Tohmas, *The Figure of the Migrant*. (Stanford University Press, Stanford California: 2015)

<sup>149</sup>Lakoba, Stanislav, “Abkhazia is Abkhazia” *Central Asian Survey* 14(1), 97-105 (1995) pg. 97

<sup>150</sup>Ascherson, Neal, *Black Sea*: (Hill and Wang: 1996).

Making sense of the field was ambiguous from the first hours of first day, as I looked around, trying to understand where I was while the car moved between the green mountainous curves that took us from the Sochi border to Sukhum, the capital of Abkhazia. By the end of a two-month fieldwork period, the scenes that were part of my daily-scape were almost etched in my mind. In a short walk on the port of Sukhum one could see: the old men playing *shakhmat* (chess in Russian) by the Armenian coffeeshop - *ahwet el awageez* or *ahwet el khatayra* as we called it<sup>151</sup> - tourists lying on the peppered rocky shores of the Black Sea, the Turkish cafes lined up one after the other, occasionally interrupted by a souvenir shop, and the ice cream booths where we got our *marojanaye* (in Russian) or *booza* (in Syrian dialect). On any given morning on the pier of Sukhum, one can see how the forested mountains hug the Black sea from left and right, and can imagine how straight ahead the sea will wind up on the Turkish coast.<sup>152</sup>

Syrians friends say that all of Sukhum wouldn't be an alley in Syria, and upon hearing the population size, Egyptian friends would tell me that it would not even make up a street in Shubra. Friends (interlocutors?) in Abkhazia and I joked that there were only two main streets in Sukhum, the street for hanging out in the morning, and the street for hanging out at night. The two streets are parallel to each other. As long as there was still daylight, the shops, which included mostly expensive (but not very trendy) clothing stores, on the "morning street" would remain open. There were two popular daily destinations on this street are: the *renek-souq* in Arabic- or, the marketplace in English, where fruit and vegetable vendors - including the "Turkish place" that sold *halal* meat are all located. On the other end was the tenth school (*el madrasa el 'ashera*), where the DRC's Russian lessons were held. Bus stops were also scattered on this street, and were important for those who did not live in Sukhumi.

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<sup>151</sup>We here refers to my friends/interlocutors and I (obviously I called it that with the interlocutors I became closest to).

<sup>152</sup>It seemed like a habit, in the hand movements that accompanied conversations people would point to the mountains when speaking about *Gruzya* (Georgia) and would point towards the sea when talking about Turkey.

The “night-time” street is the pier, where at one point, Syrian men who visited Abkhazia in the late 80s and early 90s told me, hundreds of people could be seen all throughout the shore. “You wouldn’t find space to walk,” one man said. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, hundreds of Georgians occupied the same spaces that are now quickly emptied out by the end of the summer when Russian tourists go back home. Abkhazia - once known as the Soviet Union’s “Red Riviera” - is now a country dependent almost solely on its tourism industry.

Western states warn their citizens from travelling to the “Russian occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia,” while online travel guides warn travelers that they will not have access to consular help in case of any emergencies in Georgia’s breakaway regions.<sup>153</sup> A great deal of Western historical scholarship on Eastern Europe, and more specifically the Northern Caucasus have been painted the region as especially “violent.” Scholarship and media representations often imagine these as spaces where the “primordial” or “barbaric” ethno-nationalisms violently erupted after having been boxed in and held under a tight lid of “socialism” by the former Soviet Union.<sup>154</sup> With conflicts that range from the Yugoslav succession, to Chechnya, to Nagorno-Karabakh, to Abkhazia and South Ossetia it becomes easy to see the region as one where “ethno-nationalisms” and created separatist wars. Implicit in such representations is the assumption that there are “primordial” nationalisms that are opposed to more “civil” and “liberal” forms of nationalisms.

As stated previously, Abkhazia (along with South Ossetia) is most popularly termed a “separatist state,” a “rebel republic,” an “artificial state,” or “Georgia’s breakaway region.”

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<sup>153</sup> See:

<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/georgia>

<http://moscow.usembassy.gov/warning-south-ossetia-abkhazia.html>

<http://dfwatch.net/georgia-calls-russian-travel-warning-a-made-up-danger-50632-7679>

<sup>154</sup> Verdery, Katherine, “Nationalism and national sentiment in post-socialist Romania” *Slavic Review* 52 (2): 179-203 (1996).

Also, for a relatively Orientalist account of secessionist wars after the break-up of the Soviet Union one can read: Gammer, “Moshe Separatism in the Northern Caucasus,” *Caucasus Survey*, 1:2, 37-47, (2014)

The title of this book alone is a case in point: Smith, Sebastian, *Allah's mountains: Politics and war in the Russian Caucasus*. (New York; London; I.B. Tauris, 1998)



For many, it is the “homeland.” Yet in the eyes of the international world order, and the taken-for-granted recognized states, its lack of international recognition and its “illegality,” according to international law, it is not *really* a state..The following chapter (hopefully) does two things. First invites readers, and myself to question what a “real” state is. What can the supposed “unreal,” unrecognized “non-state state” tell us about the states that are deemed “real” and that are worthy of “recognition”? Second, this chapter sets the stage for a thesis project that describes statehood in terms of performative, or ritualistic, sets of practices that include war-making and nation-building processes, as well as border-creation and citizenship production.

I argue that the desire for statehood grants legitimacy to the modern nation-state system but at once exposes its fragility. A ‘state’ like Abkhazia, paradoxically called a ‘non-state’ state, still maneuvers within the very system that it is locked out of, but the way such unrecognized states are shunned from the ‘family of nations’ can reveal a how constructed and hallucinatory the state-system is. In another sense, looking at Abkhazia’s state performativity, or the fictitious aura that arises from the notion of an Abkhazian nationality, can tell us about the taken-for-granted fictitious characters of other states.<sup>155</sup> Ultimately, most of the practices of administration in Abkhazia are not so much different from other states and their own practices of make-believeness.<sup>156</sup> It catalogues its citizens, like other states, by producing documents to categorize them and it has its own myths built on ideas of the nation, war, and purity, much like other states and their nationalisms.

The notions of the “state,” *dawla*, “nation,” *watan*, and “nationalism,” *qawmeya* are very intimate and conflated in many interesting yet problematic ways. This ethnography, as

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<sup>155</sup>Again, I use the word “fictitious” here but fully acknowledging, as Trouillot says, that the fictitious has very real, felt consequences in the everyday lives of people. See: Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1990. *Haiti, State against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. New York: Monthly Review Press. Pg. 24

<sup>156</sup>Ibid. pp.6,

The same point is also made in: Navaro-Yashin, Yael *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).

with a large portion of anthropological work, deals with large, widely-used and hard to define concepts. So what does it mean to “be” a state? What does it signify to act and to function like a state? Why is the “state” often opposed to “chaos”? What does it mean to “fail” at being a state... to fail to maintain an accepted, recognized place in a world of nation-states? Can a condition of “liminality” exist between being a state and not being one, or for existing as a “non-state” between two states? Is there “full” state-ness and “partial” state-ness? How are statehood performed?<sup>157</sup> Is nationalism one of the props for the performance? What does adding the extra “ethno” in the word “ethno-nationalism” signify?<sup>158</sup> Do people only have space in the territories of states if they can conform to their nationalisms? This chapter does not necessarily provide answers to all of these questions, but it reflects on the impact such notions of ethnicity, the state, and the nation, have as well as on the implications of their (de)construction.

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There are only big families and mafias, and the strongest of the families gets its way. There is no law. What is the point of attending a university that is not recognized, not even by Russia? Even if you get your diploma from the “Abkhazia State University,” ... you cannot actually get a job abroad with it. No one knows it.

These are just bits and pieces of the comments and concerns that I have heard Syrian mothers, students, and men express about living in Abkhazia, where life can get boring because there is “nothing.” That is why many of the young men have left; they cannot live the rest of their lives as night guards in hotels that work for just three months of the year, Farah, for example, explained as she spoke about her 20-year-old brother who is now getting bored waiting for lam el shaml in Europe.<sup>159</sup>

At least the “state,” or the *commitet* – the authority responsible for repatriate affairs–pays for the apartments, at least, I have often heard after long complicated stories about what everyday life in Abkhazia entails... but officials from the *commitet* gathered many of the Syrians around in early

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<sup>157</sup>When people call for the fall of the regime, the *nizam*– a word which interestingly also means order in Arabic – are people simultaneously calling for the fall of the state, or asking to switch around the group of performers?

<sup>158</sup>Verdery, Katherine. “Nationalism, Postsocialism, and Space in Eastern Europe,” *Social Research*, 63(1), 77-95, (1995)

For me, it seems to add nothing.

<sup>159</sup>*Lam el Shaml* is family reunification by way of completing required asylum paperwork for all family members. Often a father or brother will go to Europe via sea before the rest of his family with the intention of going through with the lam el shaml process to bring over the rest of the family.

February and told them that “the state” can longer pay for their apartments. It has helped them get a head start on life in Abkhazia, but they will have to continue the rest on their own. The *commitet* will pay for only those families that are most in need.

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The Permanent Limbo and the Make-Believe:

It is easy to look at Abkhazia and deem it an anomaly, or even as part of a “wide array of existing sovereign anomalies.”¹⁶⁰ These are entities that “look like states and act like states but lack legal international recognition and so exist outside the ‘community of nations.’”¹⁶¹ De-facto states like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Kharabakh, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and more, are considered “liminal enclaves.” Often this is due to the fact that they have to withstand economic embargo and political isolation that “resemble the conditions of a siege.”¹⁶² It seems to be the case that people, academics included, cannot seem to determine the adjectives they wish to use when describing such entities and often use oxymoronic descriptions. For example, Nina Caspersen says that unrecognized states desire to demonstrate unity and consensus but can have multi-party democracies. They show tendencies of being both “open and closed, pluralistic and homogenous.”¹⁶³

If one revisits Victor Turner, and his idea of rites of passages (*Rites de Passage*) that come in phases, liminality seems at the outset to be an interesting way to analyze Abkhazia, as “liminal”. There are three phases to a transition: separation, margin (limen- or “threshold” in Latin), and aggregation.¹⁶⁴ The first phase is that of separation, which can consist of any- symbolic- behavior signifying the detachment of an individual or a group from an earlier

¹⁶⁰Bryant, Rebecca, “Living with liminality: De facto states on the threshold of the global” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20 (2): 125 (2014). Pg. 125

¹⁶¹Ibid, pg. 126.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³Caspersen, Nina *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2012), Pg. 6

¹⁶⁴Turner, Victor W. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co. 1969) Pg. 95

social structure, or condition. The second phase, the one that interests us in this chapter most, is the “liminal” period. This period is characterized by ambiguity, a limbo of “status-lessness,” a condition of eluding and slipping through common networks of classifications. Liminal entities are “neither here nor there,” betwixt between the positions arrayed by law, custom and convention.¹⁶⁵ The third phase is that of reincorporation, when the subject becomes relatively more stable, begins to have rights and obligations, and fits into a clearly defined structure once again.

Yet, there are problematics of this theory of liminality do not end with the fact that it falsely assumes clearly set phases of structures, or that it presumes a final clearly defined structure. The problem also lies in the assumption that the liminal is infused with glitches. Instead of thinking of Abkhazia as a space of permanent liminality, I prefer to borrow Navaro-Yashin’s conception of the “make-believe space.”¹⁶⁶ Again, this is not to pick on Abkhazia and deem it an irregularity, just as Navaro-Yashin points that the notion of the “make-believe” space was not intended to pick on the unrecognized state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The make-believe is a social form that refers not only to spatiality and territoriality, but also to modes of governance, administration and material practice. The category, as she makes use of it, dismantles conceptualizations that view the “phantasmic” or illusory and the tangible effects of the state as one. “The material crafting is the making. The phantasmic is the believing.”¹⁶⁷ While Navaro-Yashin transliterates the Turkish words that the Turkish-Cypriots used to describe the territory as literally meaning “made-up,” the Syrian interlocutors I worked with often spoke about Abkhazia as a place where there is no state, *ma fi dāwla*. Like Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia is a space crafted in the aftermath of a war. Also like Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia has been crafted into two

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶By extension, Syrians in Abkhazia as liminal beings (a conceptual framework that is sometimes used to describe the status of refugees)

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

senses, a material one through actual practices on the territory as well as in the political imaginations of many of the people who now inhabit this territory and take part in the spectacles from which states are imagined and created. The make-believe-ness of these states is not unique to them, but is testimonial to the make-believe qualities of other, more recognized states. It also serves to remind us that states do not form themselves in vacuum.

“This book is about a make-believe space,” Navaro-Yashin says about her ethnography, and I am tempted to say the same about this thesis.¹⁶⁸ I must admit that I too had put Abkhazia in a box of peculiarity and found myself constantly thinking during fieldwork about how “this place is so weird.” This “weirdness” that I attributed to the place and to the “nationalisms” within it can only ring true if we are to ignore the wider political, economic, social, and historical context from which the processes that made modern day Abkhazia emerged. Just as state-making and capital penetration have been important in understanding wider global phenomena, they are also important for understanding Eastern European nationalisms.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, one must keep in mind arguments such as those of Kathernie Verdery when she likens the “post-socialism” of Eastern European states to the “post-colonialism” of other states in the world.¹⁷⁰ The creation of post-colonial states has been accompanied by processes similar to those taking place in the world of the former Soviet Union, she argues.

East European state-making after the break-up of the Soviet Union began to take place during a world context of capitalist re-organization.¹⁷¹ Verdery further points out that such “state-building” activities, which often also entail that power relations are re-organized,

¹⁶⁸Navaro-Yashin, Yael *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, (2012). Pp. 5

¹⁶⁹Much like the category of the “Middle East,” it should not be taken for granted that the category of Eastern Europe is a homogenous one.

¹⁷⁰Verdery, Katherine. “Nationalism, Postsocialism, and Space in Eastern Europe,” *Social Research*, 63(1), 77-95(1995)

¹⁷¹ She cites David Harvey. There are certain conditions for the context of post-socialist states that do not necessarily apply in the same manner to post-colonial states, such as, for example, more jarring conditions for the entry of outside capital.

carried with them the possibility of inducing conflicts between different ethno-national groups. This is, in part, because of the “post-socialist” character of the states after the decomposition of “Party rule,” which had already played on nationalistic manifestations rather than anything else. Party rule had functioned by reifying and institutionalizing the ethno-national principle.¹⁷² Later, it would be at the expense of other forms of organization that the nationality principal was employed. This principle was present during the state-building processes that included “writing new constitutions, establishing criteria for political citizenship, recasting at least some state institutions, filling those institutions with new personnel, setting new terms for the relationship to ‘foreign capital’ and to homogenize local populations.”¹⁷³ Again, these practices do not sound far too different from the practices of other internationally recognized states.

States and Nations – Imagining and Institutionalizing Ethnicity:

You have to write a different surname, the Syrian man at the *commitet* told me. His name is Rassem, now in his late 40s, he’s been here in Abkhazia since his early 20s. He works at the *commitet* and helps to translate for Arabic-speakers and tells us what steps we have to take to get the passport. Abaza *qawmeya* he said, “Abaza is a nationality... not a family.” I think this might have been one of the strangest sentences I have ever heard in my life.

We took the first left after the *commitet* to get to the only Kodak photography shop in Sukhum (and probably in all of Sukhum). I saw an elderly Syrian couple in front of the photo studio and I said hi; it was still my second day and I was excited to meet people. The woman, whose daughter I had later met, asked me if I was from Egypt after she heard me speak, “it shows,” she said. She and her husband are from Damascus. She asked me what I thought of Abkhazia so far, is it better than Egypt. I replied half jokingly that everything and anything is better than Egypt. She Responded “No, it’s your country. Nothing is better than your country; if they ask you to choose between heaven and your country... [you should choose] your country” she said adding that that is how she felt about Syria. Her husband, Faisal Abaza, said “well, this is her country,” about me and Abkhazia.

¹⁷²Ibid, Pg. 81

¹⁷³Verdery, Katherine. “Nationalism, Postsocialism, and Space in Eastern Europe,” *Social Research*, 63(1), 77-95 (1995) pg. 79 (Bearing in mind, she says, the fact that homogenizing projects took place in Eastern Europe, whereas in Western European nation-building projects the processes of homogenization took a longer time.)

We went back to the *commitet* and gave them the passport photos. Rassem told me to write that I am from *usūl* Yagan (Yagan origins).¹⁷⁴

Since my arrival to the country, I heard on several occasions Abkhazians (the few who spoke English) and Syrians say that Abkhazia needs citizens. On my first night in the country, I went with my father to visit an Abkhazian friend of his named Dima. Another Turkish-Abkhazian man, with broken English, sat with us and helped in translation. I remember one of the things he said, which had made a quick impression on me, was that there were “too many” Armenians in Abkhazia and not enough Abkhaz. There was no mention of Syrians and the distribution of passports, however. Later on in the trip, in picnics (that I was so kindly invited to), after Russian class, on the beach, over coffee at home, almost all of the Syrians I spoke to made sense of the fact that they got a funded trip to the country, by telling me that Abkhazia needs people- citizens- (*hūmmā bedhūm nās*) in order to gain international recognition. This brings forth the question of how certain informal “communities” become institutionalized categories of “nationalities” through demographic state practices.¹⁷⁵

Shami’s studies the ‘encounters’ that people from the diaspora (Jordan and Turkey) have experienced their “return” to the homeland after the break-up of the Soviet Union. She argues that upon encountering the homeland, “ethnicity is suddenly experienced not as a fact but as a contradiction.”¹⁷⁶ Popular definitions of ethnicity have pointed to the conception of the ethnic community as an extension of the self. A common ethnicity is thus expected to constitute a ‘sameness’ or a familiarity, but the more salient experience that accompanies men and women’s journeys to the Caucasus is generally one of shock, of non-recognition,

¹⁷⁴My last name on the Abkhazian identity card is Yagan, on the Abkhazian passport it is still Abaza. There are more than a dozen lineages (kind of like tribes) in Abkhazia, Yagan is one of them.

¹⁷⁵ I elaborate on this point further in chapter three.

¹⁷⁶Ibid, pg. 627

Shami clarifies, that she does not mean to imply that a homogenous unified conception of Circassian identity existed anyway, but that there were still suddenness and disconcerting effects to these encounters.

and of experiencing “the self as other.”¹⁷⁷ The self in this sense is understood in abstract terms of cultural characteristics, symbols of identity, and of particular physical characteristics. Yet, when the ‘encounters’ are finally made, people feel estranged on multiple levels. ‘They’ (Circassians in the Caucasus) do not look like ‘us’ (Circassians in the Middle East) Shami quotes. Even the dances, which are a fundamental feature of Circassian associations in Jordan and Syria, are different.

This alienation, she writes, translates into mistrust. It is not a mistrust of certain individuals alone but of North Caucasian society as a whole, which people then begin describe as “immoral.”¹⁷⁸ Obviously, as Shami herself notes, these perceptions differ, often according to the country from which the person comes, among other factors. For those families who had migrated back permanently, socializing tended to take place amongst those who come from the same country, Shami notes. People also tended to refer to each other as ‘the Turks,’ ‘the Syrians,’ ‘the Jordanians,’ to the Circassians of the Caucasus as ‘the Russians, and in my case, ‘the Abkhaz.’” Many of the stories I have heard from Syrians and Jordanians in Abkhazia roughly echo similar ideas, and many of these practices Shami lists I had also noted and participated in. To take the reader back to the elderly Syrian men’s get-together for coffee by the sea in the morning example, one of these mornings as I sat with them listening, wondering if they thought it was strange I was so interested in sitting with them. The conversation soon turned to business. This meant that the conversation began to discuss “the Turks,” who seem to be running some of the most successful businesses in a country that barely has a mall. “We call them *Attrāk*, ‘Turks’ but they’re Abkhaz,” one of them turned to me and said mid-conversation as I sat silently and listened. I nodded.

The hegemonic use of the word “nation” refers to a construct that entails a relationship between an actual or potential state to its subjects – the nation – “and

¹⁷⁷Ibid, pg.628

¹⁷⁸Ibid.

distinguishes them from the subjects of other states.”¹⁷⁹ The idea of a nation posits “sameness,” or “oneness” and nationalism is the political (and emotional) use of the symbols of the nation.¹⁸⁰ Mann’s definition seems to imply a synonymy between “ethnicities” and “nations” as he says that a “nation” or the Greek term *ethos*, or an ethnic group, is a “a people that shares a common culture and sense of heritage, distinct from other peoples.”¹⁸¹ Mann warns that nationalism becomes dangerous when it is “politicized,” or when it “represents the perversion of modern aspirations to democracy in the nation-state,” but that point brings one to the question: Is nationalism ever separate from a political project?

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In Syria, everyone was just *sharkas*, Rahma tells me. There are differences now, differences that weren’t there before. Now there are *Abazāt* and other *sharkas*. Some people here made different lineages so that they can get apartments and the nationality more easily.

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We greeted each other outside the *commitet*, they were walking out and I was on the street walking to the apartment but it was the first time I had ever seen them. “We heard you were doing a Master’s or *shī heik* (something like that)?” one of the three elderly Syrian men asked me. “Yes,” I responded, wondering how he had heard. “I want to do research here about the repatriates.” “About the repatriates or the refugees...?” I remember I wasn’t sure how to answer. “Hmm about anyone ... I don’t know...,” I self-consciously uttered. “Well, because here they would treat the Abaza like repatriates but not the rest... they treat an Abaza like a chicken falling into a pot of soup,” one of the men, who had a friendly spirit and a cheerful face joked.

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Layla, a 15 years old girl from Damascus, attends both the adult and children’s Russian classes. This means she goes to class six days a week, and although she’s been here just four months and I had been there for much less I could sense her quick improvements. I always notice her huge sunglasses, her camel colored boots, and her Circassian-flagged pin on her backpack. We agree that the Russian language is hard, and she tells me that Russians and Abkhazians would have a difficult time learning Arabic if they were to go to Egypt or Syria.

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<sup>179</sup>Verdery, Katherine, “Beyond the nation in Eastern Europe,” *Social Text*(38): 1-19 (1995).

<sup>180</sup>Verdery, Katherine, “Nationalism, postsocialism, and space in Eastern Europe.” *Social Research*, 63(1), 77-95 (1996).

<sup>181</sup>Mann, Michael. 2005. *The dark side of democracy: Explaining ethnic cleansing*. Cambridge;New York: Cambridge University Press.

One afternoon after class, I walked with her halfway to her new home up the hill tops, as she told me that she likes everything in Abkhazia, except the Abkhaz, although admittedly some of them are *ḥabābīn* (lovable.)“But I am not Abaza,” Doaa explained to me although her mother is. Layla, on the other hand, is Kabardey, like her father. He is in Finland, and they are waiting in Abkhazia until he does *lam el shaml* (family reunion and paperwork) for them. Because she is Kabardey and not Abaza, Doaa’s passport will take longer to be made than her mother’s. Rassem told them the same thing at the *commitet* that he told me when her mother wrote her last name as “Abaza” in the paperwork. Abaza is a nationality and she has to write down an origin.

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Eric Hobsbawm similarly argues that the word “nation” has historically subsumed different forms of relationships. The two most dominant modern forms of being a nation are the relation known as ‘citizenship’ and the relation known as ‘ethnicity.’¹⁸² Yet because no state’s borders contain a population that is ethnically uniform, the two meanings of “nation” are seen to be at odds with one another and each is defined in ways that almost always necessarily depend on exclusions. A citizenship-based definition of nation can exclude people based on gender, race and (lack of) ownership of property (clearly people without recognized paperwork are excluded as well).¹⁸³

Any ethnic definition of the nation will, by its definition, exclude potential citizens. Ethnicity is not an objective fact, and ethnic conflicts are neither biological nor primordial. Both ethnicity and ethnic conflicts are based on social relations and are socially created.¹⁸⁴ Michael Mann, along with many other scholars, has pointed out that while ethnic groups are defined by their shared common culture, and their shared common descent, culture is vague and common descent is “usually fictitious.”¹⁸⁵ When considering Abkhazia, and the Syrians, Jordanians, Turks, and Egyptians who have been given passports, both the citizenship-based and ethnic-based definitions of “nation” become very mushy. The ethnographic material I

¹⁸² See: Hobsbawm, E. J., and T. O. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto ed. (Cambridge, New York;: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

¹⁸³ In such cases, paperwork and citizenship are a sort of vicious circle.

¹⁸⁴ Mann, Michael, *The dark side of democracy: Explaining ethnic cleansing*. (Cambridge;New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁸⁵ *ibid*

narrated above is telling of how these definitions of nationality- both citizenship and ethnic-based are arbitrary and become codified into categories in chancy ways.

With this in mind, one can begin to review what becomes obscured when the words “state” and “nation are used synonymously. To add to this point, or even when it is taken-for-granted and presumed that a nation can exist “only when a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed.”¹⁸⁶ Both Verdery and Trouillot problematize these perceptions and argue that they are representative of the dominant, “western-imposed” definitions and uses of these terms that are not necessarily applicable everywhere. Such usages, Verdery argues, can further “the process whereby the idea of ‘nation-state’ becomes hegemonic in world politics.”¹⁸⁷ She points to how the word “nation” in modern times has had more than one meaning: it can be the name of a cultural relationship that links state and subject or it can be a putative imagined community with which state-subjects - “who acknowledge an existing or hoped for”- state administration are encouraged to identify. In Eastern Europe a “nation” has (at best) a tenuous relation to the territorial limits of polities and is often more about ethno-cultural homogeneity.¹⁸⁸ Trouillot also says that “nation-building can operate within the state, against the state, or in the name of the state.”¹⁸⁹ In Eastern Europe (as with other places) “nations” spill across state lines and borders and it is far more common that states administer territories that contain more than only one ethno-nation, which is frequently the case the Caucasus.¹⁹⁰ I bring up ethnicity and the conditions of its construction, as well as where it stands in terms of war-making and state-building practices because of how this construct (of sects, ethnicities, and other categories) is

¹⁸⁶ Wallerstein (1987:22-23) quoted by Trouillot, Michel- Rolph, *Haiti, State Against Nation: the Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*(New York : Monthly Review Press, 1990.) pg. 24

¹⁸⁷Verdery, Katherine. “Nationalism, Postsocialism, and Space in Eastern Europe,” *Social Research*, 63(1), 77-95 (1995)

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Trouillot, Michel- Rolph, *Haiti, State Against Nation: the Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*(New York : Monthly Review Press, 1990.) pg. 25

¹⁹⁰Verdery, Katherine, “Whither "nation" and "nationalism"? *Daedalus* 122 (3): 37-46 (1993).

used in narratives and explanations of war. In an essay entitled “On the Syrian Question,” the author recaps that analysts and policy makers from across the political spectrum commit to an understanding of the situation in Syria as one “in which the distinction between an ‘Alawi regime allied with Shi’a Iran and a Sunni majority population supported by Sunni Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries is an epistemological starting point for analysis and policy decisions.” Yet this is an “infelicitous” choice, the author argues. Sectarian tensions are not the causes of the current conflict; they are, instead “deliberate regime strategy.”¹⁹¹ Sectarianism should not be read as “a continuation of traditional, pre-political forms of solidarity that were repressed by the modern post-colonial state only to surface in violent forms when the state enters into a period of fragility.”¹⁹² Instead, it should be viewed as is a mode of governance, and an instrument of control, constitutive of the modern state and its colonial pedigree.¹⁹³

The state in and of our minds:

“Look at the Kurds, they don’t have a state, but they are working to get one. They have a television channel and the world knows about them, and they have a state within a state,” Danny said whilst talking about how Abkhaz are not working hard enough towards forming a ‘state.’

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Sherief Abaza is a man whose name I’ve heard countless times during fieldwork. Sometimes he came up positively, have you heard of Sharaf? You have to talk to him for your research; he’s responsible for the repatriates, he was a member of parliament in Syria. “He’s a very prestigious man!” Other times his name came up negatively for the exact same reasons: he’s responsible for the affairs of repatriates, and he decides who to help or not based on his own friendships and family relations... it’s all about *masārī* (money) people say before they retell stories of who bribed whom at the *commitet*. And he was a member of parliament back in Syria, what more corruption do you want?

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¹⁹¹“On the Syrian Question”

¹⁹² Ibid

¹⁹³ Ibid

Ethnicity and racialization (just as the axis of gender is) are also frequently a part of the politics of structural violence (which I bring up in the upcoming chapter) because of the social currency that they build up. Such classifications, as Paul Farmer argues, “have an important place in considerations of human suffering—regardless of the degree.” See: Farmer, Paul, “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A view from Below,” *Daedalus*, 125:1 (Winter, 1996), pp. 251-283.

Amany told me, just one or two days before I had to leave back to Egypt, that some people may have thought I was *mūkhabārāt*, intelligence, at first. That did not surprise me. I carried that fear along with me before even starting fieldwork; and now I believe that fear comes with doing anthropology and research. I told Amany that I didn't blame people if they thought that of course, and that sometimes I have this fear too. Sometimes, in whiffs of paranoia, I wonder in the back of my head about whether certain people may not be the best to speak to for this reason. Of course, she agreed... like Sharaf. She told me it is better that I did not speak to him. He's here to work for the Syrian *mūkhabārāt* and the Russian *mūkhabārāt*, she said. His brother, Mamduh Abaza (think of pseudonym) is the one who destroyed Hama in 1982... He is responsible for killing all of these people and no one dare say a word about it all those years. His military officer brother came to Abkhazia and just took the family name Marshan, her family name *heik 'afeya*, by force.

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A small Abkhazian flag flutters next to the driver in a nearly empty bus in Abkhazia. A small Russian flag stands next to the rear view mirror in the bus in Sochi, Russia. Maryam wears her Syrian rubber band flag, with two stars, everyday... she loves it, she says and she is happy when I give her a photograph I took of the bracelet on her hand. Her daughter, Sina, possibly the cutest little girl ever, sings the chant, "Allah, w *Sūrya*, w Bashar." Vladislav Ardzinba's photos are everywhere, some of them have the number 70 next to them, I wondered why. Someone told me it is because he would have been 70 by now, if he had been alive, and then I wonder how they will keep writing the numbers of all the ages he would have been in the coming years. An obituary-article on him casually says, "he was not exactly tolerant of contrary opinions." In Egypt, once I am back, I am welcomed in the airport by a large poster showing president Sisi, posing on his side, with his head held high. In the background is the "new Suez Canal," and I am thankful that I was not present when during the few days of the motto- "Egypt is celebrating." Although I did overhear some men in Abkhazia talking about the Egyptian president over coffee in the morning—and I could not help myself from telling them, in very broken Russian, that I thought everything in Egypt was *plokha*, and Sisi is *kak Stalin* ("bad" in Russian, and Sisi is like Satlin). Are these moments and instances of thinking, wondering, and seeing the state? Or are they instances of reifying and fetishizing the notion?

In the book, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*, Navaro-Yashin analyzes and breaks down the binary between state and society. In other words, she argues that it through the everyday conversations and habits of "society" that the state is constructed.<sup>194</sup> It is also in our – the state's supposed subjects- thoughts. By proposing the breakdown of this binary, Navaro-Yashin leans back on Philip Abram's 1988 essay, "Notes on the difficulty of studying the state," in which he suggests that the notion of the existence

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<sup>194</sup>Navaro-Yashin, Yael, *Faces of the state: Secularism and public life in Turkey*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002)

of the state is the greatest myth of modern times.<sup>195</sup> Anthropologies of the state are now, for the most part, distant from an entrenched image of the state as a “rationalized, administrative form of political organization.”<sup>196</sup> It is increasingly the cases that in emerging literature which attempts to study the “state” as fetishistic (as Taussig theorized it), or as a notion by focusing on the everyday discourse that makes it up.<sup>197</sup>

Not only is the state imagined as rational but it is also imagined as “an always incomplete project,” constantly spoken of “through an invocation of the wilderness, lawlessness and savagery that not only lies outside its jurisdiction but also threatens it from within,” (*mā fi dawla, mā fi qanūn*).<sup>198</sup> Tourist- guidance websites warn that Abkhazia may be dangerous, while I remember in conversations people told me that sometimes they fear mafia politics without the existence of a “state.” “They can do whatever they want and the president cannot even do anything about it,” a Jordanian man told me during fieldwork. Others would refer to a lack of services – no electricity, no running water in the country of over 300 lakes and rivers- and attribute that to the lack of a “state.” As readers will take notice, I often use the word performance when describing state practices. I use it to convey the idea that the political (often violent) practices that we attribute to the state are in many sense ritualistic, whether they be presidential inaugurations, government sessions, police and military showcases of power, and even those moments when one feels the state’s gaze (checkpoints, borders, police stations, and Mogama’s).<sup>199</sup>

I recall the italicized stores above they remind me of what we (myself and many other state subjects) see as the “state” - sometimes embodied in the figures of the policeman, the

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ed. Das, Veena and Deborah Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, (School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, 2004)

<sup>197</sup> This is a good example: Gupta, Akhil, “blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state,” *American Ethnologist* 22(2): 375-402 (1995)

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Abeles, Marc, “Modern political ritual: Ethnography of an inauguration and a pilgrimage by President Mitterrand,” *Current Anthropology* 29 (3): 391-404 (1988).

parliamentary official, or even the *mūkhber* (informant) who isn't always clear about his/her secret state status. They remind me of the little moments when the state is in our minds, even when it isn't explicitly in our minds... when we are careful of what we say in front of whom. It reminds of social relations that are always mixed, part and parcel of relations that are at one and the same time also political and economic. It also reminds me of how part of the state's violence – in whichever form or embodiment imagined– is in how it spreads fear, suspicion or worry, of the anxiety and doubt over what this “state” can do and when.<sup>200</sup>

Anyone can be an informant or an agent, and on the other hand, anyone can be a traitor or a threat. This is part of how states often function in carceral manners. In fact, these carceral manners, embodied specifically in the ways that army and police institutions (and the officers that form them) work to uphold a god-like notion of the necessity of the existence of the state.<sup>201</sup> The state forms within and outside of us the belief that its existence is “sacred.” Therefore while the “refugees” and the “undesirables” are managed inside camps on the margins of the state, other state subjects are also maintained and managed within the state (as though contained, especially considering the embargos that people in unrecognized states have to deal with). In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the presence of Russian troops on the borders, and the “fragile” ties with Georgia make it so that neighboring, stronger states can practice carceral state power on the two separatist regions. I mention above the notion that states form sacredness around their existence because the idea is very telling when considering why it is that so many groups of people around the world aspire for states, and aspire to exist within states.

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<sup>200</sup>Ed. Das, Veena and Deborah Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, (School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, 2004)

<sup>201</sup>Levi Strauss, David and Michael Taussig, “The Magic of the State: An Interview with Michael Taussig,” (2005) *The Cabinet*. Interview link: <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/18/strauss.php>

## Sovereignty and the Make-Believe:

Narmez left Syria six months ago when he was wanted for conscription into the (Syrian) regime army, and he paid one thousand dollars to get his name out of border patrol records and travel *nīzāmy*-“officially”. He doesn’t want to be the reason behind a mother’s tears.

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If we are to delve deeper and add Wendy Brown’s theoretical analysis on sovereignty, states, borders and walls- ever so timely notions- we can make use of her argument that the concept of sovereignty- is becoming “openly and aggressively rather than passively theological.”²⁰² Borders and walls, physical or not, are symbolic of “the imaginary intact of nationhood” and sovereignty itself can be seen as “a peculiar border concept”.²⁰³ Therefore, whereas Hardt and Negri point to how sovereignty emerges in the service of the economic, Brown argues that politically, sovereignty is actually “never without” theological structures and overtones, and in that sense when “capital takes shape as an emerging global sovereign” it becomes God-like.²⁰⁴ Thus, while sovereignty becomes a secularized notion “for political bearing”, it does not lose its theological structure, Brown argues as she references Hobbes and other theorists who attribute to the sovereign a God-like aura.

Brown’s points are important in light of how we can reflect on *practices* of sovereignty and the extent to which such practices are linked to *statehood*, which is by extension also based on theological structures. In that sense how are we to locate the sovereignty (or lack thereof) of unrecognized states, and how does that also point to the waning sovereignty of the global state-system? We speak of sovereignty today as if we know what it means, Brown tells us, yet sovereignty is “an unusually amorphous, elusive, and

²⁰²Brown, Wendy, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. (New York; Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 2010), pgs. 58/59

I engage with Wendy Brown more so that other theorists of sovereignty, like Giorgio Agamben who builds on Carl Schmitt’s ideas of sovereignty that grant agency mostly to the “will of the sovereign” and who build on the notion of the political as a ruler’s decisions on “states of exception.” While Brown herself heavily engages with Schmitt, I found it more useful for this project to engage with Brown’s arguments directly.

²⁰³Ibid, Pg. 52

²⁰⁴Ibid, Pgs. 64, 65

polysemic term of political life.”²⁰⁵ The political here also denotes the processes of friend/enemy distinctions, and the reinforcement of ideas that “beyond the line” – the border that separates ‘us’ from ‘them’- “force is used ruthlessly and indifferently, with indifference to the law.”²⁰⁶ If we are to pose the question of why late modern subjects desires statehood, we can also ask, as Brown does, why “do late modern subjects desire nation-state walls?”²⁰⁷ In part, this question can be located within Anderson’s ideas that the “imagined” nations are imagined as sovereign and bounded. It can also be located, in line with arguments of other scholars like Das and Navaro-Yashin, within national fantasies of containment, impermeability, “purity, innocence and goodness.”²⁰⁸ I mention Narmez’s story above, in to highlight that borders do not just operate in keeping people out, they also operate to keep them in, a point which I delve further into in chapter three. However, Narmez’s endeavor to cross the borders through bribery can also be reflected on in light of the discourse that sees the state as, in part all about *masārī* and *masālīh* (money and interests), and borders as a space that is “all law and no law.”²⁰⁹ Myths of sovereign containment gratify fantasies of sovereign purity and innocence. Yet, sovereignty is practiced in various forms that contest each other.²¹⁰

Concluding Remarks:

²⁰⁵Ibid, Pg. 48

²⁰⁶Ibid, Pg. 45, The idea is that borders are protecting the law, and creating the barrier away from the land of the barbarians, where there is no law.

²⁰⁷Ibid, Pg. 107

²⁰⁸Ibid, Pgs, 115, 116, & 117

²⁰⁹Ibid, pg. 52

²¹⁰Simpson, Audra, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2014) pg. 129

Audra Simpson, for example, interprets the Mohawk Nation’s practices of refusing U.S. passports and regulated border crossings relate to their sovereignty as a nation. I would like to add here that I found the fact that Simpson refers to the Mohawks as a “border nation” as pertaining to the idea that they can have sovereignty within the sovereignty imposed by the borders of the settler colonial states really speaks to this deconstruction of a synonymous-ness between “state” and “nation.” In a way her ethnography speaks to this idea that sovereignty does not have to be understood as a practice monopolized only by recognized modern nation-states.

Separatist entities are feared. Recognized states and unrecognized states “do not play together.”²¹¹ Proclamations of the non-existence of unrecognized states are usually accompanied by widespread anxiety and unrest.²¹² Diplomatic fears are announced, especially fears that this entity may strengthen ties and gain creeping legitimacy. The academic articles I have found proposing “solutions” and “conflict resolutions” for these unrecognized states are many. Yet other academics argue that such frameworks for “resolving” conflicts do not account for the changing ways that sovereignty is contested, perceived and practiced. The question I want to pose from here on is why separatism is feared by states that are already wholly recognized? What exactly is threatening about these spaces that seem to be both on the grid and off it at the same time?

To bring the analysis back to the “illegal” states, and the lives that are made precarious within them (with the Syrian war-time migrants being made doubly precarious), it is necessary to bring reflection back to “legality.” As Navaro-Yashin points out, the illegal state is interesting because “it magnifies the international law’s support of it by default.” What appears peculiar about this state is precisely that which “magnifies the strangeness in ‘legal’ states and in the international system itself.”²¹³ I think Amany put nicely when once as we talking through the issues of Abkhazia and recognition, she said that she thinks it is okay if Abkhazia stays as is, unrecognized (without too many people knowing about it), because that is what makes it special.

²¹¹Bryant, Rebecca, “Living with liminality: De facto states on the threshold of the global” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20 (2): 125 (2014).

²¹²Ibid.

²¹³Navaro-Yashin, Yael. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Post War Polity*(North Carolina : Duke University Press, 2012.) pg. 110

Wars, Broom Closets, and Structural Violence



All throughout the public spaces, Abkhazian young men who died during the Georgian-Abkhazian war in the early 90s are commemorated. (Figure 46)

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“Although few of the refugees speak Russian or Abkhaz, Chirikba said they are needed as Abkhazia slowly rebuilds from its own war.”

“Many of them have very useful professions - electricians - we have a need of them,” he said. “So many of them already start[ed] working, which is very good.”<sup>214</sup>

“We are trying to increase the quantity of ethnic Abkhaz living in Abkhazia,” she said, in her office located across Freedom Square from a burned out high-rise that was the final headquarters for Georgian soldiers here 20 years ago. “For us it's really important to understand exactly what kind of people are moving here, what kind of relationship they have with Abkhazia.”<sup>215</sup>

“There were arm bands and belts woven of the national colors too. All for protection.

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<sup>214</sup> Brooke, James. 15 April 2013, “Syrian Refugees ‘Go Home’ to Former Russian Riviera,”: [http://www.voanews.com/content/syrian\\_refugees\\_go-home\\_to\\_former\\_russian\\_riviera/1642027.html](http://www.voanews.com/content/syrian_refugees_go-home_to_former_russian_riviera/1642027.html)

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

But why did we need so much protection and what was it we were being protected from?”<sup>216</sup>

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One of the women, Maysaa, said she lives a bit far from Sukhum because her husband is a war veteran, which meant that the committee gave them a house instead of renting an apartment for them. Maysaa spoke a little about their house back in Syria. They lived in the suburbs of Damascus (near Dimishiq) and the terrorists raided their neighborhood after the regime’s army “allowed them to,” or in other words, turned a blind eye, she explained. The house that Maysaa lives in now, is too far away, and so it takes very long to get to Sukhum, it is very boring, and it is hard to find a job and to make ends meet in Abkhazia.

Danny Abaza is another man that my father had introduced me to. They knew each other from those “Abaza” groups online. The first time we met him on the street by the Black Sea, he said his mother had named him Danny because she really liked a character named Danny in the show “Little House on the Prairie.” Danny came to Abkhazia before, when it was still part of the Soviet Union. In fact, he even fought in Abkhazia’s separatist war with Georgia in 1992. Abkhazia was completely different. He described “When the Georgians were here... this port was completely full,” as we spoke about how small the country is. Danny was also here for the war, but he went back to Syria immediately afterwards. He was not present for the period of strict economic sanctions. Since then their manners have changed; they have become more “materialistic,” he said. Later in the conversation, I learned from him that I had actually already met his wife, Maysaa.

I would see Danny and his wife more often. I would learn from Maysaa more details about their lives in Syria and how they had to leave their home. She said she remembers the day really well; a few months before leaving she got some money from her mother, who used to live in Homs. On her way back with the money, Maysaa remembers having to hide it in her clothes because she was afraid that the soldiers standing on the checkpoints back to Damascus might steal the money. The strategy worked. She said she remembered that her husband told her to save the money, in case they may need it later, but she wanted to renovate one of the rooms in her house. And so she renovated the room. One day, she was fasting; she took a nap in the room to pass the time until the call to prayer, when she could break her fast. Her short name was abruptly interrupted as her husband woke her up, and told her that they had to take the kids and leave. They headed for Turkey. She did not get to enjoy the room, she said one night in the Arabic café in Abkhazia, where both she and her husband now work. Nonetheless, she added that *alhamdulillah* (Thank God) she and her family were safe.

One time, in the few minutes they see each other when Maysaa is leaving the café and Danny is just arriving for his night shift as a guard, I asked him if he could talk to me about the war and he joked, “Your name is jihad and you want to talk to be about war.” Then he said that during the war, he and Mahmoud (who I do not know) had written *lā ilāha illā allāhu* on bands and put them on their heads and arms. “The Abkhaz would ask us what that was, we are *Musleman* (Russian for Muslim) we told them, it gives us power... and then one Abkhaz Christian man took one too, and then more people began to wear them”

²¹⁶Taussig, Michael T. *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997) pg. 26

Danny said, adding disappointingly, “Now Daaesh and Jabhet Al-Nusra and all of them have started wearing these things.”

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In this chapter, I borrow from Povinelli’s ideas on the Aboriginal community in Australia and I use the short piece, “The ones who walk away from Omelas” to argue that Abkhazia is a “child in the broom closet” for Russia and Georgia. I push the argument further to say that Syrian war-time migrants in Abkhazia, through structural violence, are thus doubly made into a “children in the broom closet.” Agamben’s conceptualizations of “the logic of the camp” is useful in this analysis because it allows one to think through how certain processes of surveillance and monitoring imposed on Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) stabilized the logic of the camp in that area.<sup>217</sup> I argue that Abkhazia as an unrecognized state, existing in “a state of non-existence,” also puts the neat categories of the nation-state system to question.<sup>218</sup> As the camp holds a status as a “space of exception,” so do unrecognized areas, such as Abkhazia and other post-Soviet unrecognized “states.”<sup>219</sup> In other words, one can think of the camp as one maintained and controlled form of the “the broom closet.”

In her short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” Ursula Le Guin tells us about a place called Omelas, where everyone is happy and everything is wonderful. For the good life of the people of Omelas to continue, the misery and humiliation of a small child confined in a broom closet must be maintained.<sup>220</sup> The inhabitants of Omelas are aware that their happiness is dependent on this, and it is this ethical wager that is at the center of Le Guin’s short story. Some of the Omelas inhabitants have visited the child’s broom closet, while others have heard stories of it when they were children. Some inhabitants reason that

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<sup>217</sup>Artman, Vincent, “Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 682-704 (2013)

<sup>218</sup>This is alongside the categories of “refugee,” “refugee crisis,” and “civil war.”

<sup>219</sup>Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer*. Paris: Seuil, 1997 Print. Pp.166.

Furthermore just as the category of the “refugee” represents “all that is disquieting with the nation-state system,” so does the “logic of the camp.”

<sup>220</sup>LeGuin, Ursula, “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas,” (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996) 163-166

the child has become too destitute to be set free, and has become used to her condition anyway. Others conclude that there is nothing to be done: “their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it.”<sup>221</sup> A few Omelas, one by one, to a “place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness.”<sup>222</sup>

Povinelli invites us to ask: “How do we focus attention on the broom closets of late liberalism in the context of the spectacular machine of the killing state?”<sup>223</sup> According to her, the tighter we are all tied to the neoliberal market, the more gripping ethical paradoxes such as the one Le Guin puts forth are. <sup>224</sup>Yes, those representative of the “Omelas,” who in Povinelli’s case of ethnographic study are the middle-class Australians, are not really living the utopian life. Likewise, we can add that those living on the margins, and in the broom closets of the state, are not lacking in agency in the same way that the child stuck in the closet is.

Therefore, I want to be careful with this argument, because I don’t mean in it in the sense that the Syrians in Abkhazia (or anywhere in the world for that matter) are sitting around in a closet waiting for grease, or that they are stripped of their agency the way “the child in the broom closet” is stripped of any agency in the short story. My point of departure is therefore one that seeks to critically interrogate and/or dismantle several notions: including the refugee, war and violence (and the modern nation-state). Notions, such as that of “war” and “violence” are also necessary to critically examine given that one cannot look at “refugees” in vacuum without considering the very context from which they moved. War is also interesting to think of from another angle, when considering how notions of “the state”

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<sup>221</sup>Ibid

<sup>222</sup>Ibid.

<sup>223</sup>Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2008. “The Child in the Broom Closet: States of Killing and Letting Die,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 3, pp. 527

<sup>224</sup> Ibid

feed off of the idea of “war,” both notions become part and parcel of a rhetoric that is constant creation and reproduction of “us/s” and “them/s.”

Povinelli points to how one can use the short story to think about our world, to look at the conditions of clear, outright “state killing,” as well as the “more amorphous condition” of “letting die.”<sup>225</sup> The “letting die” usually involves the ignored or made invisible, structural suffering of others. Most residents of Abkhazia – Syrians, Abkhazians, Armenians, and Mingrelians suffer from the structural violence of our neoliberal modern-nation state system. To understand state forms of killing and letting die, Povinelli says one must move into the “nitty gritty” of the everyday, before she proceeds to give us examples of how ideas of lethality, responsibility, and individuality exist in the social imaginations of the aboriginal community she worked with; such ideas exist differently within the framework of states and businesses.<sup>226</sup> Povinelli argues that the Australian security state (biopolitical regime), alongside the neoliberal market together make-up certain late liberal attitudes towards the various forms of living and dying. It is precisely this combination of the modern-nation state system and the world neoliberal market that also mark the ways “divisible forms of life, qualities, vitalities, and borders,” are produced and distributed.<sup>227</sup> In fact, if there is one thing that is staunchly clear about this process that the media has termed the “refugee” crisis (sometimes more irritatingly called *Europe’s* migrant crisis) it is this state of “letting die,” of indifference to Syrians and other war-time migrants drowning at sea. To think of all that have drowned at sea, is to think all whose lives are not quite “recognized as lives.” Here it is useful to come back to Judith Butler’s questions on frames of recognition (which are always politically saturated), and how recognizability is to be understood.<sup>228</sup> A policy of closing

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<sup>225</sup>Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2008. “The Child in the Broom Closet: States of Killing and Letting Die,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 3, pp. 512

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

borders in the face of war time migration, is also a policy of “letting die,” and therefore, also a policy of killing.

A lot of Povinelli’s focus within the idea of “letting die” centers around the disease, poverty, and other forms of structural violence present in the spaces in which aboriginal people are concentrated. This focus resonated greatly with a piece I read on Abkhazia, written in a UK medical journal. The journalist quotes Abkhazian president Seregi Bagapsh: “How do we get drugs to treat our people?” he asks. “If you want the honest answer: we bring them in as contraband or on ships from Turkey. There’s no other way.”<sup>229</sup> For approximately a decade after its war with Georgia, Abkhazia struggled from an economic embargo, imposed by the European Union.<sup>230</sup> The fact that until 2008 it was unrecognized by any country in the world did not help. The rest of Parfitt’s short report concentrates on the condition of the Abkhazian healthcare system after a decade-long embargo, when it had previously been part of a centralized Soviet health care system to begin with. In my fieldwork conversations I had heard complaints from the Syrians on the healthcare system inside Abkhazia; this system (or lack thereof) was different from what they had been used to in Syria.<sup>231</sup> I have heard stories (maybe rumors) of how Abkhazian people would go to the doctors with leg pains, and doctors amputate the leg, when there could have been other solutions. Later on in the fieldwork when sitting with Syrian women, I would also often hear comments about how if one of children breaks an arm, or if anything were to happen, it would be best to go to a hospital in Sochi, Russia rather than in Abkhazia. This is only one example of the “letting die” is enforced on such places in the world, and the 10-year-embargo, and later more sanctions, took its toll on the people of territory in other ways.

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<sup>229</sup>Parfitt, Tom. "Years of “frozen Conflict” Leave Abkhazia Isolated and Poor." *The Lancet* 367.9516 (2006): 1043-045. Pp. 1043

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> This is besides the fact that often Syrians would have a difficult time in healthcare centers due to the language barrier. One woman told me that she put off taking her son to the doctor because she knows how much of a hassle it would be to speak to a doctor there.



For the rest of the chapter I attempt to weave together the theoretical background and skeleton which holds up why the aforementioned notions should be problematized and how we can look at them more critically, as well as why I found it useful in my analysis to do so. Furthermore, there is brief historical background on Abkhazia and the Northern Caucasus, as well as brief snippets of the ethnographic material which I collected from my fieldwork and which I aim to look and think through on the basis of a theoretical bulk of knowledge. As mentioned in the introduction, I depend on people's accounts and narratives greatly as primary sources. Narratives can invoke the violence of state rituals and their transcendence into the *everyday*. Peoples' recollections, regardless of "accuracy," as Veena Das reminds us "ascribe to the half hidden state apparatus as an authorial center, a visible place from which its aggressive authority emanates."<sup>232</sup>

### **Camps, Spaces of Exception and Broom Closets:**

Using the lens of Le Guin and Povinelli, we can think of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's other break-away region as "broom closets." There are similar "spatializations of exception," and they include Guantanamo Bay, the U.S. Mexico border, and post- 2003 war Iraq, for example.<sup>233</sup> This is in addition to the similar cases of post-Soviet spaces that have declared their alleged independence without any recognition, including Trans-Dniester in Moldova and Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan/Armenia.

In Agamben's notes on "the logic of the camp," he writes that the camp "is the space that is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule."<sup>234</sup> The camp thus holds its status as a "space of exception," and the place in which "the absolute *conditio inhumana* that

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<sup>232</sup> Das Veena, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphela AND Pamela Reynolds. *Violence and Subjectivity* Los Angeles: University of California Press, , (2000) Print. Pg. 48

<sup>233</sup> Artman, Vincent "Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 2013) pg. 704

<sup>234</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer*. Paris: Seuil, 1997. Print. Pp. 170

has ever existed on earth was ever realized.”<sup>235</sup> The camp is presented, to refugees especially, as an “emergency measure,” as something “temporary,” while at one and the same time it still strikingly takes hold of the everyday, and becomes routine. Yet, the refugee camp, in its specific logic as a device of control, operates in intimate relation to what Liisa Malkki calls the “national order of things.”<sup>236</sup> The very premise that refugees are “problems of organization,” and the very notion of displacement as implying emplacement, or a proper place for people to belong, are conjugations of a robustly national logic.<sup>237</sup>

In “Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” Vincent Artman compares Abkhazia, and South Ossetia to “the camp,” as Agamben theorized it. “Abkhazia and South Ossetia today exist in a state of non-existence,” Artman writes.<sup>238</sup> Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are unrecognized by all of the world’s international organizations and nation-states, except for a handful. Georgia, with the backing of the European Union and the United Nations, maintains that these are areas that it has only “temporarily” lost control over. Only Russia, and shortly after, Nicaragua and Venezuela, have until now, officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This is also while Russian troops are present on (all of) Abkhazia’s borders, and while it maintains the economic and political upper-hand in the area. Many likened Russia’s grip and carceral powers over Abkhazia to French imperialism and colonialism over Syria- *iste’mar iqtesady w seyasey* (political and economic colonialism).

Artman’s argument lies in Russia’s mass distribution of Russian passports to the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which he argues stabilized the logic of exceptional

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<sup>235</sup>Ibid

<sup>236</sup>Malkki, Liisa H. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago, (1995) Print. Pg,10

<sup>237</sup> Latif, Nadia. “Making Refugees.” *The New Centennial Review* 8 (2):253-72, (2008).

Scholars like Latif also uphold the argument that it is the link that nationalism creates between territory and identity that has led to the construction of refugees as “aberrations of the nation-state in need of therapeutic intervention.”

<sup>238</sup> Vincent M. Artman, “Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” *Geopolitics*, 18:3, (2013) pgs. 682-704

spaces and the logic of the camp. Mainstream interpretations of Russia's move stopped at the point that the mass transformation of these two populations into Russian citizens symbolized an almost annexation of these two pieces of land from Georgia. However, Artman argues that the process symbolized, in fact, more than just that. It symbolized a generalized logic of the camp within these two areas, and I argue that, by extension the later processes of mass production and distribution of Abkhazian (and South Ossetian) passports also stabilized the logic of the camp.

Upon their arrivals to Abkhazia, the first to groups of Syrians were made to stay in two "hotels" temporarily, until they could be given apartments. Usually, the idea the word "hotels" rings with us positively, and gives the impression that they were given exceptionally good treatment. However, during interviews they clarified that yes this place was called a hotel, but was *kteer saye* (really bad), and *wesekh* (dirty). The food was gross, and the juice had ants in it, the food situation was so bad that the Syrian women wanted to take over the cooking [for the hotel]. In addition, the hotel/former living space of UN "peace" troops that were charged with overlooking the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict. Amany took me there because she thought that it would be important for my fieldwork. As we walked to the "hotel", after a long bus ride, she spoke about how difficult it was for them to be there at the beginning of their stay in Abkhazia. Because it was so far away, it was very difficult for people to get to the marketplace for food; bathrooms were shared, and the spaces and rooms were very small. The ex-UN peace keeping mission site turned hotelis behind (and linked) to an actual hotel called Atyara. This information is relevant because, while the Syrians in Abkhazia never had to stay in camps per se, and while this is one of the primary reasons many of them chose to continue living there, they were still sent to the outskirts of the city and still concentrated in specific spots. And according to official rhetoric, they had stayed in "hotels." The Syrians in Abkhazia are no longer staying in these hotels, but they are

constantly put into a place of uncertainty regarding what will happen with their apartments. Apartment owners always want their apartments back for the summer seasons, because tourists will always pay more than the *commitet* can. At different points in time, the *commitet* tells people that they must start depending on themselves for apartment payments. In addition, while there are, admittedly many Syrians who are in Sukhum, there are also many that were made to reside in much farther away, more rural-like places such as Gagra, and Dranda.

Michel Agier reminds us that camps are created on the margins of nation-states to keep out “the undesirables.” Whether or not there is a camp involved, refugees are more often than not bounded under what Agier calls “police and military mentalities of separation and confinement.”<sup>239</sup> We can thus think of the camp and a sort of “spatialization of violence.”<sup>240</sup> The “undesirables” are not only just that, they are also the “precarious lives,” the children in the broom closet, they are lives that are not worthy of living and can be let die. They are not exceptional aspect of the nation-state system, but rather they exist *because* of that very system and the many forms of violence that it perpetuates. In another sense, such unrecognized states, deemed artificial, pseudo-states, or ‘non-state’ states, are at the essence of this very system.<sup>241</sup>

### **Relevant Historical Background:**

The analysis I hope to present in this thesis, necessitates a problematization and deconstruction of the category of “war.” Das writes that her research led her to begin thinking of the social “in terms of unfinished stories.”<sup>242</sup> In a similar sense, we can also begin to think

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<sup>239</sup>Agier, Michel, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011. Print.

<sup>240</sup>Phrase borrowed from Veena Das: Das, Veena, *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2007).

<sup>241</sup> This idea that unrecognized states are the essence of a globalized modern nation-state system was inspired by a conversation with Habiba Awady.

<sup>242</sup>Ibid, pg. 108

of war in terms of unfinished stories. While, in history books, many wars are associated with start and end dates; war as a social project cannot easily have boundaries drawn around it and thinking only in terms of “events” that end and begin may not always be useful.<sup>243</sup>

Furthermore, the selection of memories from past events plays a role in the creation of the future. In this project, a mixture of historical and contemporary “violent events” is relevant; the Circassian genocide, the Abkhazian-Georgian war, and the contemporary Syrian war.<sup>244</sup>

Looking at how narratives surrounding these three “events” mesh and work together further invites us to think of war in a “continuum” (rather than simply thinking of war and peace dichotomies).<sup>245</sup>

To think of war differently, or more critically, entails moving away from popular, or more mainstream, ideas of war as an inherent “bad” that confronts “peace,” the ideal “good.” However, as Richards argues, analyses of war as simply “bad” and disorderly (as opposed to an inherently “good” and orderly peace) often take war out of its social context. War is then thought of and imagined as a “thing in itself” instead of analyzed as “one social project against many competing social projects.”<sup>246</sup> He argues that instead of quarantining war as a “disease,” one should “try instead to grasp its character as but one among many different phases or aspects of social reality.”<sup>247</sup> With this in mind, war can also be a state of mind shared by many participants while “peace” is often more violent than war.<sup>248</sup>

Throughout my fieldwork period, and especially earlier when my father was still with me, my father and I would sit at a Turkish food cart that sold halal meat and alcohol by the sea. We would sit with a Turkish man who spoke Arabic because he worked in Saudi Arabia

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<sup>243</sup>Maček, Ivana, “Sarajevan Soldier Story: Perceptions of War and Morality in Bosnia,” Richards, Paul, ed. *No Peace, no War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts* Oxford; Athens: Ohio University Press, (2005).

<sup>244</sup> One must also bear in mind how important the politics of naming is in such events.

<sup>245</sup>Richards, Paul, ed. *No peace, no war: An anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts*. Oxford; Athens;: Ohio University Press, (2005). Pp.3

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. Pg. 5

for seven years of his life, and with an Abkhazian man who, before the war, had lived in (actually) Georgian territory. During the war, this man came back to the Abkhazian territories to fight. According to the narrative that he had provided, an ethnically- “Georgian” Stalin “gave Abkhazia to Georgia.” The fact that such a narrative exists is very telling, and the story he recited was a popular one because I heard it several times later throughout my fieldwork and often from Syrians. Meanwhile, one must bear in mind that Stalinist policy of repression hit Abkhazia just as it hit the rest of the Soviet Union.

Zverev writes that in March 1921, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed and lasted until December 1921 when a treaty of Union bound the SSR of Abkhazia to a Georgian SSR. This lasted until 1931, when the Abkhazian Republic was “incorporated into Georgia,” but still with relative autonomy.<sup>249</sup> From the late 1930s to the 1950s, a policy of Georgianization was underway, including a plan of Georgian resettlement into the territory.<sup>250</sup> According to interlocutor accounts, this policy also meant that the Abkhaz were not allowed to speak their language.

An Abkhaz assembly in the village of Lykhny first proposed that Abkhazia secede from Georgia on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1989; the participants of the assembly included 30,000 people, five thousand of whom were not Abkhaz (Armenians, Greek, Russians, etc.).<sup>251</sup> Meanwhile Georgia, “informal movements” expressed outrage at the Abkhazian demands, and while the Georgian outrage was first expressed in the form of anti-Abkhaz slogans, it later acquired a general pro-independence [from the Soviet Union] character. After weeks of demonstrations [including hunger strikes] against Abkhazian separatism, and later for Georgian independence, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989, Russian Soviet troops made their way into Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi where a group of people were protesting in front of the Georgian

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<sup>249</sup>Zverev, Alexei, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994” in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Ed. Bruno Coppieters, Vubpress, (1996).

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

government building.<sup>252</sup> The troops killed at least 20 of the protesters, most of whom were young women, with sharpened digging tools and toxic gas.<sup>253</sup> One year later, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Georgia wrote its declaration of independence.<sup>254</sup> This, the break-up of the Soviet Union, South Ossetia's war with Georgia, and the autonomist movement in the rest of the North Caucasus further complicated the situation. According to a book called *Ayaayra*, meaning "victory" in Abkhaz language, the "first airstrikes" took place on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1992.<sup>255</sup> According to Zverev, the most immediate support that Abkhazia had came from the North Caucasus where meetings under the slogan "Hands off Abkhazia!" took place. The meetings were held in North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Circassia, and in Chechnya.<sup>256</sup> Men such as Shamil Basaev, a Chechen militant, helped lead military guerillas in Abkhazia, and more broadly fought against Russian domination in the region. By 1994, the Abkhaz parliament had declared itself an independent state, while turmoil continued close-by, primarily in Chechnya.

Interestingly enough, people from various other states, who have a real and imagined link to a "diaspora" of Abkhaz, or Circassians, or North Caucasus residency, also have a place in this story of war. This includes holders of Turkish, Jordanian, and Syrian nationalities but that claim Abkhazian "origins."<sup>257</sup> Soner Gogua, for example, is a Turkish man who went to fight in Abkhazia when the war began. He was one of the fighters under the lead of Shamil Basaev. Kaldun Abaza is a Jordanian man who also went to fight in Abkhazia, married an Abkhazian woman, and continued his life in the country. Danny Abaza

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<sup>252</sup> Eke, Steven. "Georgia recalls Soviet Crackdown," 8 April 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7986282.stm>

<sup>253</sup> Zverev, Alexei. "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994" in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Ed. Bruno Coppieters, Vubpress, (1996).

<sup>254</sup> "April 9 1989, Soviet Crackdown in Tbilisi," 7 April 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/media/photogallery/georgia-soviet-demonstrations/25324233.html>

<sup>255</sup> *Ayaayra*, The Government of the Republic of Abkhazia (2013).

<sup>256</sup> Zverev, Alexei. "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994" in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*. Ed. Bruno Coppieters, Vubpress (1996).

<sup>257</sup> There may be more, but these are the nationalities that I heard of that fought in the war.

also fought in Abkhazia when he was in his 20s, but went back to Syria after the war was over. Twenty years later, a war in Syria led him back to Abkhazia.

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I met Lara by the giant white statue and we walked to the beach and sat on its pebbled shore. I cannot remember the order of the conversation, but we spoke about many things: Abkhazia, Germany, Syria, and the *sharkas*. Her husband has been asking her: do you want to go to Germany. She's been telling him: "No I don't want to ... you'll still learn a new language?" And then there is the same hassle of having to look for a job, she said. If all the Syrians are now going to Germany, this means that the job market is going to be even more competitive; it will be even harder to find a job. If she's going to move anywhere, she might as well be going back to el sham, she added. The only problem with Damascus is that everything there is very expensive now... here they can buy more things with the money that they have. In Syria diapers had been some hundred liras and now they are in the thousands... milk had cost around 20 liras and now it costs over hundred, she listed the insanely high prices.

Larisa's mother, brother and sister were here before she was, They were the ones that encouraged her to come, but then her sister wanted to get married and her groom had been waiting for her, so they went back. Her brother went back too, and now he has to go into the regime's army after he had somehow fled from it when he was here (in Abkhazia), but now he has no other option and must go into the army. I asked Larisa why her brother doesn't just try to do illegally migrate and escape, and she told me, because that means he will never be able to go back to Syria and who knows what God has written, maybe he will want to go back to Syria. Anyway, she explained that in all cases they were going to get in touch with someone they know in the army so that they can place him somewhere where there is not much happening, so that he can also stay close to their neighborhood. The military man they know is Waleed Abaza, if you have heard of him, she told me. There's also a man named Mamdooh Abaza, who was killed.

They were both involved with the killing of the terrorists in the Hama events; the terrorists from the Muslim Brotherhood, she said when I asked. Both his (Waleed's) sons have died; one of them is a very scary *shabīḥa* who does not know mercy. She said he killed himself while playing the game of death.

What's the game of death? It's when there is a rifle with seven or six spaces for bullets, but only one bullet. It's like a dare that you will not be brave enough to shoot. The chances that you will shoot the bullet are less, but with his luck, he shot the bullet. He went into a comma for three days and died.

Lara recalled another story. "One time the Alawis attacked our alley at 5 am," she said. The Circassian alley was between an Alwai alley and an area that had been under the control of the FSA. So what had happened was that the FSA occupied place threw a grenade at the Alawi alley and then the Alawis thought it was the *sharkas* that had thrown it. They came into the alley with their *rūsseyāt* and their guns. At the time, Lara's kids had been sleeping they had to wake them up and their father passed them on to their uncles over the roof. The scare did not last long, thankfully, Lara said. There was a man in their alley who told them that those were *sharkas* and that the *sharakas* have nothing to do with anything.

“We’re not with anyone, we’re with the *khūbz*, bread, and neither one of these parties is going to give me a house and a car,” Lara explained. “They are both only after *sūltā*, authority ... it is a struggle over *sūltā*.”

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I walked with Maryam and her daughter Sinamis, by far one of the cutest little girls I have ever seen, down the promenade to the bus stop where they planned to ride back to their home in Novi Rayon, which is a bit further off from Sukhum. Sina ran after a dog and shouted something back at her mother. I did not understand and when I looked back at her mother for an explanation, she told me that Sina’s dog hung himself at the time fighting entered their neighborhood. How, I asked. He was on the roof, on a leach, and during the fighting they could not go get him; he jumped off the building. They had a house not an apartment, she explained. Moments before, Sina was telling her mother and I that Abkhazia sucks. We laughed and she got embarrassed and told us to stop.

### **War and el *khūbz* (‘the bread’):**

As with the aforementioned categories of the “refugee” and the “camp,” we have preconceived images and ideas of what “war” looks like. Many academic studies and most journalistic coverage of wartime experiences focus only the acute moments of dramatic violence. They focus on the moments that involve guns, barrel bombs, explosions, beatings, rape, and the list can go on. Such moments come with very felt, real consequences and While, focusing on such moments or analyzing them is important and may not be problematic in and of itself per se, focusing *only* on staunching physical violence misses other important aspects of wartime, and renders them unimportant. These other aspects may have even greater implications for wartime inhabitants but they are not sensational enough for coverage. There are other forms of more mundane, repetitive and routine types of structural violence. These everyday experiences on the economic and social landscapes of wartime reconfigurations are viewed as unremarkable because they are part and parcel of everyday life, but they are “ultimately far more deadly,” for the very same reason.<sup>258</sup> They are also the wartime issues that may affect people the most, and the conventional “overemphasis on acute

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<sup>258</sup>Lubkemann, Stephen, *Culture in chaos: An Anthropology of the social condition in war*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (2008). Pp.36

violence,” comes at the expense of this structural violence. And structural violence is important to the understanding of these moments of severe physical violence precisely because these moments are when the preexisting social conflict is amplified and made more visible. Structural violence constitutes the social conditions of war. Thus wars are not just military endeavors, they are ultimately social phenomena.<sup>259</sup>

Lubkemann’s proposition to study war as a “social condition” is also useful for this project, since I am looking at two separate “wars.” Therefore, it is important to study how certain social relations are realized and transformed in times of war. How is war thus “a transformative social condition?”<sup>260</sup> And how does reducing to only a violent condition obscure other aspects of life during war? As Lubkemann would put it, how are “culturally scripted life projects” enacted? Lara, for instance, narrated multiple violent instances some of which are not even written above. She herself had been put in near-death situations. For example, she told me that she was talking to her mother on the phone one evening when a bullet ripped through the wall of one side of the room into the other side. Yet, after and within this stream of stories, she is most of all concerned with *el khubz*, or with food and livelihood.

It is primarily for this reason that I appreciate Lubkemann’s proposal that anthropologists most on to different, less pervasive ways of studying war and displacement and of looking at wartime migration as part of war as “a social condition.” By analyzing war as a social condition, as more than just acute moments of physical violence, and of wartime migration as part and parcel of this, one can begin to ask deeper questions on the “complex multidimensional agenda of social struggles.”<sup>261</sup> It is not refugees alone that begin to be seen and represented as *bare life* but in fact, all warscape inhabitants become seen as “stripped down humanity.”

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid. pp. 42

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. pp. 34

<sup>261</sup> Ibid. pp. 37

The next point of Lara's stories that I would like to reflect on is her casual, arbitrary, and ambiguous use of ethnic, sectarian, and other categories. They also reveal the point that these categories are mushy. Again, I am keen to deconstruct ethnicity, as I have done in the earlier chapter, not just because of the stereotypes imposed and practiced on Eastern Europe (where my interlocutors have gone) but also because of the Middle East (where my interlocutors have left) that is also stereotyped as a region of endemic primordial, ethnic, and religious violence. This point will come up again in the next chapter, because it pertains to *wars* and the simplistic reasons provided for them. As Ussama Makdisi argues, the sectarianism that is now such a main feature in studies of the region is an outcome of national politics and the creation of states rather than an ever-present problem preceding the creation of states in the Middle East.<sup>262</sup> Sectarianism is also quite largely an effect of the state and nation building processes. Communal violence is a modern phenomenon and, through this type of violence, bodies of individuals become "metamorphosed" into the (ethnic, sectarian, or other) categories for which they are supposed to stand. Ethnic and religious determinacy is thus inscribed into initially less stable and less clear cut social fields and categories.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

Earlier, I stated the argument that Syrians in Abkhazia are doubly "children in the broom closet." One of the biggest evidences to this, as well as one of the biggest silences in Abkhazia and throughout fieldwork was that of access to Sochi, Russia. I heard about this early on during fieldwork from a Swiss anthropologist, and later in a conversation with Rahma at her apartment. Rahma and I had been talking about the *commitet*, where passports are made. We were talking about Syria, the Syrian regime, money, Egypt, and Sherief Abaza." The point of the conversation was not that Syrians were not allowed into Sochi, the

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<sup>262</sup>Makdisi, Ussama Samir, and Paul A. Silverstein. *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. Print, pg.10.

point of the conversation was money. Rahma told me of a Syrian woman, who came to Abkhazia and had some money. After her arrival, she realized, much like many others, that she hated it. She wanted to leave. But at that time, it was 2014 during the Sochi Olympics. “And you know how Syrians weren’t allowed across the borders during the Olympics?” she said amidst the anecdote. She went on, the Syrian woman went to the *commitet*, and told Sherief she wants to leave. He said no, it is impossible for a Syrian to cross the border now. “She was wearing a diamond necklace that costs a million liras; she took it off and put it on his desk. The next morning she was out,” Rahma said.

After reading and reflecting on “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” this story that Rahma had told me came to mind. The story had been on my mind before, and it was one of the stories that had made an impact on me, especially when considering my own experiences crossing the Russian borders into Abkhazia also as an Arab. Yet, I reflected on it differently after having read the short story. Is Russia “hiding” the children in the broom closet? Was this outright racist policy related to Russia’s already problematic relationship with the Circassians (the ones living in Russia)? Is it because the Syrians in Abkhazia are also Circassians? And when I asked Rahma why this policy had even been there during that time, she didn’t know? Why no one seemed to dwell on it was also a question that came to mind. According to various media reports, ethnic Circassians had been protesting the Olympics, because these Olympics were being held in Sochi, a city where Russian expansion took place through genocide of the Circassians.<sup>263</sup> We have learned that nation-states are more often than not created on massacres and genocides; Russia was created on the ashes of a Circassian genocide.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup>Tharoor, Ishaan “Sochi Olympics Stirs Nationalism of an Exiled People,” 6 Feb 2014: <http://time.com/4864/sochi-olympics-russia-circassians/>

<sup>264</sup> For an account that speaks of the ethnic cleansing of Circassians as a project of Russian colonial expansion, see: Shenfield, S. D. ‘The Circassians: A Forgotten Genocide’, in Levene, M. & Roberts, P. (eds) *The Massacre in History* (Oxford & New York, NY, Berghahn Books, 1999).

The “national order of things,” as we live through it today makes clear to us that violence is on a continuum and that a neoliberal capitalist nation-state system makes sure this violence is reproduced.<sup>265</sup> The “violence order of things” makes clear to us that “wars” do not begin and end when officials say they begin and end, wars are not confined to borders, and inhabiting a war (or several wars) is not limited to the moments of clear physical violence.<sup>266</sup> There is violence embedded in our classifications and our categories. There is violence in places that we have never heard of, and there is violence in the places and spaces we inhabit everyday; spaces and places that the *othered* are kept from inhabiting and moving through. We – readers and myself, inhabitants of worlds other than closets – are left to ponder our complicity, to wonder and ponder on what is beyond the Omelas and the broom closets, where the ones who walk away go, “I cannot describe it all.” Le Guin writes, “It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Phrase from LiisaMalkki

<sup>266</sup> Phrase from Lubkemann.

<sup>267</sup>LeGuin, Ursula, “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas,” (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996) 163-166

## Making passports, creating citizens: on document-production in Abkhazia



An Abkhazian government employee tells us about passport procedures. (Figure 46)

“Border policing is a ritualistic performance. When the failures of the deterrence effort led to a performance crisis, the performers save by promising a bigger and better show... And in the case of immigration control, the crackdown on illegal crossings along the most visible stretches of the border has erased politically embarrassing images of chaos and replaced them with comforting images of orders.”<sup>268</sup>

“The Costaguanians would buy forged immigration papers although, truth to tell, it was not easy to see any difference between doing that and the even more common procedure of ‘buying’ non-forged papers from State officials bribed with the ‘*tarifa extraoficial*’ or *peaje*.”

Like the official and the “extra- official,” the true and the forged were flip-sides of stately being; neither could exist without the other and this strategic confusion, together with the mystery therein, was dramatically magnified at the border dividing the two republics. What do we mean by dramatically magnified? We mean a ritual, but more precisely a literalization, as if staged, of the mystique of sovereignty.”<sup>269</sup>

<sup>268</sup>Andreas, Peter, *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000) pg. 146

<sup>269</sup>Taussig, Michael T. *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997) pg. 18

Amany's brother Owis was stopped at the Moscow airport for hours before airport security finally allowed him to board the plane. "This is what happens when you have a Syrian passport now", his sister Amany explained. Owis, an orthopedic doctor, was having a difficult time moving on with his career in Abkhazia, where the healthcare system is already crippled by over a decade of embargo and a lack of funds. The plan was that he would go to Turkey, and from there take a boat across the sea to Greece, where he would begin moving up to Holland. There, career prospects would be brighter, Amany explained.

But now, Amany, separated from her husband three years ago, has to attend to all of her four children's needs without the help of her brother. Amany is "Circassian" but her former husband is "Arab," which means that her children are "Arab" and cannot get their Abkhazian citizenship and passports in a matter of months like everyone else. This also means that other aspects of their lives, like enrollment in schools and daycare centers, and eventually also travel, will be more of a hassle to attend to.

Amany's sister, who is married to an Englishman never has trouble and airports, a fact that she knows and both she and her sister bring up. She had trouble with entry to Abkhazia and within renewing her Russian visa. It's strange, she says, because it's a British passport, she says, but it is probably because Russia does not want Abkhazia to have access to too many people from outside.

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We walked for two minutes until we reached the Abkhazian border, "the nicest border you will ever pass through," my father said poking fun at how difficult it is to travel while Arab these days. A middle-aged Abkhazian soldier was sitting on the Abkhazian side; he looked at my Egyptian passport and my online Abkhazian visa, and reminded me that I should go get my paperwork done when I get to Sukhum. Unrecognized as an "international border" by Georgia, the Georgian-Abkhazian border is much more militarized than the Russian-Abkhazian border.²⁷⁰ The Syrians who journeyed to Abkhazia have also crossed in through Russia rather than Georgia.

On our way "outside" of Russia and into Abkhazia, Russian border patrol interrogated my father and I about our reasons for visiting Abkhazia. Where did we intend to stay? How long? And what about our lives back in Egypt? The Russian border guards now even know that I study Anthropology at the American University in Cairo. Most of the others passing through were Russian tourists, fewer were Armenians and Abkhaz, but who were probably residents rather than tourists. I think my father and I looked like tourists, although not the kind they are used to. Some Abkhaz women tried to rent out their apartments to us as soon as they saw us. They even waited for us until we were done getting interrogated.

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<sup>270</sup> This I learned from the foreigners I met in Abkhazia who got into Abkhazia through Georgia.

Enrollment in schools, access to the official labor force, access to healthcare, access to money [banks], movement, as well as various other matters now considered life rituals depend on and are dictated by documents and identification paperwork that, whether available or not, often strip people of their livelihoods. People stand in lines to get documents that “prove” their health, or their clear criminal record (*fīsh w tashbīh* in Egypt), or to codify their “skills” before they can formally enter the workforce. When we are born, our (parental) guardians have to prove our existence with a birth certificate that we must then carry around for the rest of our lives. Depending on which state you happen to be born in, your birth certificate may include information such as your parents’ names, your place of birth, religion, and gender; categories that, years later, may also determine your life chances and often your mobility and access to certain spaces. Later you will be numbered with identification cards that also carry with them a set of categories that you are said to embody. Finally, all of the above maintains that you are under the eye of the state. Bureaucracy exists not primarily to facilitate subjects’ transactions with the state, but it exists to also cripple individuals’ daily prospect, someone in Egypt once told me, meaning these things hold back peoples’ interests. If at any point in your lifetime these papers do not exist, then you may be considered “stateless”... or “illegal” and illegible to the state.

This chapter invites readers to think of the passport and other identification documents as contentious (and repressive) because they dictate citizenships which in part dictate access to places and to mobility (among other things). Documents are tools of control that play a central role in producing various particular textures of relationships between people and states, as Tobias Kelly puts it.<sup>271</sup> This chapter also explores what passports and other identification documents represent in people’s everyday lives as paperwork (and the

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<sup>271</sup>Kelly, Tobias “Documented lives: Fear and the uncertainties of law during the second Palestinian Intifada,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12(1), 89 (2006).



lack thereof) remains central to people's life chances.<sup>272</sup> The color of a passport is also one of the determining factors of lives that matter and lives that do not. In other words it identifies the "undesirables"; it identifies those that are grieve-able, and those who can be left to die.<sup>273</sup> In the following pages I (again) uphold the argument that paradoxically, passport production in Abkhazia reasserts the globalized (dominant) system of, modern nation-state but also highlights how problematic, fragile, and performative that system is.

Navaro-Yashin, for example, also speaks about the affective lives of unrecognized documents in Northern Cyprus coining the term "make-believe documents."<sup>274</sup> By inviting Derrida's thought into her work, she argues that both the copy and the original are fake and deconstructs the notion of the document altogether.<sup>275</sup> In all cases, passports are a cornerstone of surveillance and control, and are central to governance, but the fact that there are those of contend and knowingly produce internationally unrecognized passports can tell us something significant about a system that creates both "stateless" peoples and an aura of the necessity of documents.<sup>276</sup>

In *Seeing Like a State* James Scott demonstrates how states attempt to make societies "legible," which is one of the purposes documents serve.<sup>277</sup> Passports and identity documentations form another dimension of a simplification process that seeks to arrange the

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<sup>272</sup>Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> This is also exemplified by international and local media choice of those who deserve more news coverage than others. (Often determining news-worthiness based on victims' nationalities; this brings forth questions of why our politics of sympathy is constructed the way it is.) Egyptian prisons are exemplary of this idea of identifying who matters and who does not based on passports. While everyone in Egypt's prisons is likely to be subjected to horrendous treatment, (most) of those with dual nationality have (at least) the option to renounce their Egyptian nationalities in exchange for release.

<sup>274</sup>Navaro-Yashin, Yael. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Post War Polity*(North Carolina : Duke University Press, 2012.) pg 114.

<sup>275</sup>Brinkley makes a similar argument in his study of hand-copyists in Yemen when he says that "the copy may take on the original." See: Messick, Brinkley Morris. *The calligraphic state: Textual domination and history in a Muslim society* ( Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

<sup>276</sup>As I explained earlier, as different sites of power and states throughout the world cooperate it becomes difficult to speak of one place in vacuum, without speaking of others. Thus, I will be making references to Egypt, Syria, Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia, throughout the following analysis.

<sup>277</sup>Scott, James. C. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.* (London;New Haven;: Yale University Press, 1998;1999;). .

population in ways that facilitate classical state functions. It is a process of state-craft that seeks an “administratively more convenient format.”<sup>278</sup> Historically, this process included the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of language and a legal discourse, and the establishment of cadastral surveys and population registers.<sup>279</sup>

With this starting point in mind, this chapter also investigates how the manufacturing of documents and passports becomes a “state activity,” or an essential trait that marks the “state-ness” of states.<sup>280</sup> Navaro-Yashin puts it perfectly when she says: “Documents are among the primary paraphernalia of modern states and legal systems: They are its material culture. A ‘wannabe’ state has to produce documents to look and act like other states.”<sup>281</sup> In the following chapter, the question of how passports, documents, and paperwork are navigated by both people and states is a central one. I begin by recounting my own experiences with accessing the field. Then, I proceed to bring in examples of what paperwork had meant for the people living in Abkhazia at large, and for the Syrian community there more specifically. How do these documents make their ways into the very personal everyday practices of people? What kind of social and political status do such documents lead? In other words, I ponder these themes of documentation, passportization, borders, and control of movement by looking at my own experiences obtaining documents and crossing borders, at the production of largely unrecognized Abkhazian passports, and finally (and most importantly) the specific stories regarding paperwork and documents that I have heard whilst conducting fieldwork with Circassian-Syrians in Abkhazia.

### **Theorizing Bureaucracy:**

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid

<sup>279</sup> Ibid

<sup>280</sup> Torpey, John, *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, citizenship, and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2000).

<sup>281</sup> Navaro-Yashin, Yael. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Post War Polity* (North Carolina : Duke University Press, 2012.) pg 114.

Scholars who theorize the state, have tended also to theorize bureaucracy, as one often visualizes images of large bureaucratic centers as one of the many embodiments of “the state.”<sup>282</sup> Gramsci, for example, considers bureaucracy, which usually constitutes a compact body, is the most dangerous conservative force. Weber, on the other hand, sees large-scale bureaucracy as alleviating exploitation; it is the state’s “rational” and legal authority. Bureaucrats’ access to information can lead to corruption, Weber admits, but a strong parliament can put a check on the amount of power bureaucrats hold.<sup>283</sup> Marx calls bureaucracy the “formal state spirit,” and the actual spiritless-ness of the state. For Marx, bureaucracy takes itself “to be the ultimate purpose of the state.”<sup>284</sup> He writes that through bureaucracy: “state objectives are transformed into objectives of the department and department objectives into objectives of the state.”<sup>285</sup> This bureaucracy is “a circle from which no one can escape.”<sup>286</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the state and his essay on how one can re-think the state’s bureaucratic field, among other state entities and manifestations, is a useful one for this project.<sup>287</sup> The endeavor of thinking the state is often accompanied with the risk of applying the very categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state to our social world. Hence one risks misrecognizing both these categories and “the state.” Taken-for-granted categories, which include “sex,” “age,” “skills” are reproduced through bureaucracy.<sup>288</sup> These notions, which make their way into the realm of obviousness, are part and parcel of symbolic production, which he says is where “one feels the grip of the state most powerfully.”<sup>289</sup> Bureaucracy portrays itself as a ‘universal group’ working with a

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<sup>282</sup> Though bureaucracies have existed even before modern nation-states

<sup>283</sup> Held, David. *Political Theory and the Modern State*, California: Stanford University Press.

<sup>284</sup> Tucker, Robert C. (editor): *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1978. Pp. 24

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. Pp.25

<sup>287</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, “Rethinking the state: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic field,” *Sociological Theory* Vol. 12 No. 1, 1994. Pg.1

<sup>288</sup> As well as, of course, other institutions such as schools, etc.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid

universal awareness in mind or that it is a “rational instrument” charged with realizing the general interest.<sup>290</sup>

Yet Bourdieu tells us that state bureaucracies and their representatives “are great producers of ‘social problems’ and of the symbolic order. They reproduce the state’s own system of classifications, constraints, corporeal and mental discipline, which is imposed “uniformly on all agents.” As part of the perform-ative discourse of the state, bureaucracy and its agents make decisive contributions “to the production and reproduction of instruments of construction of social reality.” This is important, because as he reminds us, “the most brutal relations of force are always simultaneously symbolic relations.”<sup>291</sup> State agents, Bourdieu tells us, give “a universal form of expression” to their vested interests “an in elaborating a theory of public service and public order.”<sup>292</sup> For the sake of this project, it is important to add national categories to the list of categories and classifications that states invent and impose.

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Abkhazia does not grant the Abkhazian nationality to the Mingrelians living in the South, and some of the still use their Soviet passports. It can only be utilized for movement around the region only though. A week into my fieldwork I know that a silence exists around the 200,000 Georgians living in Abkhazia that were forced to leave, and there is no granting Armenians nationality.

Shereen says that the Abkhaz have a nice opportunity for agreement with Russia. The government wants more and more cooperation with Russia... but the people do not. They don’t like to take risks, Shereen says... they think this means Russia will occupy them. Well, everyone knows that Russia is the one that’s really in control anyway, and besides, if they wanted to could do so in twenty minutes. This could actually be good for the economy, Shereen adds. It would also be so much better for us because we would have the Russian passport and then we can go anywhere in the world that we want. The Abkhaz don’t care, they already use the Russian passport anyway, she continues and I agree with her.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> ibid

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

## **Research, Mogama' and access to other states:**

Abkhazia was not planned. Initially, the plan had been to study two field sites, Turkey and Egypt; two states that are not on good terms at the moment. I chose to study the narratives of memories of Syria in Egypt and Turkey in order to answer the question: how might narratives differ according to locality? The fact that after July 2013 many of the Syrians in Egypt had stated that it would be better for them to go to Syria Turkey?than remain in Egypt, where they are also subjected to various forms of violence, had inspired this question. An increasing number of Syrians began leaving Egypt, and while many were heading to Europe, many Syrians preferred to go to Turkey over Egypt. States hold within their provinces the ability to increase restrictions on departure as well as arrivals, and this fieldwork has demonstrated that restrictions on departure are increasingly the case in states such as Egypt and Syria. It is on the interests of such states to undermine departure for various reasons, usually pertaining to military interests and strengthening the military labor force, or to prevent people (or members of the opposition) to propagandize against the state's regime abroad.<sup>293</sup>

Due the unpleasantness of an Egyptian passport, Turkey was an inaccessible field site. After at least four or five trips back and forth from Egypt's bureaucratic center, Mogama' my field of destination changed to Abkhazia. The prospect of fieldwork in Turkey dwindled with each trip back from downtown, where both the Turkish embassy and Mogama' are located. On my first trip to Mogama' I asked about the regulations that I would have to go through in order to obtain a security approval that was previously a requirement for young men only. The police officer wouldn't answer me until I had a visa on my passport first. I went to the Turkish embassy, applied for a tourist visa because I had no institutional backing in Turkey

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., Pp.124

that would allow me to apply for a different type of visa, and approximately a week later, I went back to Mogama', to room number fifteen on the second floor, to ask once again about the security approval. That time, there were more people standing in line. I overheard one man asking about a security approval to go to Jerusalem, and another woman complaining about how she missed her flight at the airport because she doesn't have a security approval. "But I have a residency permit and I am living in Libya," I heard her say. By the time I got to the window, with a visa in my passport as they had asked the first time, the disinterested woman at the window looked at my passport, then looked back at me and asked: "are you traveling alone or with your father?" I was planning on travelling alone, but because I was unsure if that was the correct answer, I told her I didn't know. "A girl alone with a tourist visa doesn't get to travel," she said. Why, I asked... *awamer* "Orders," she answered. She would only hand me an application I was travelling with my father. This rule is only for Turkey. Why I asked her again, "orders" she responded again.

The last time I went to Mogama' was with my father, a fact which only increased the stressful-ness of the experience. In this tiny room number fifteen, there are six windows. Two for people who are waiting and getting called upon to receive their papers of travel approval, two for refugee affairs, and two windows for those who, like myself, were waiting to fill out applications requesting travel security approvals and clearances. Egyptian citizens and refugees, from all over Egypt were all expected to go to room 15 on the second floor of Mogama'. The room was so crowded it was hard to breathe. People yelled, argued, and joked.

The most disturbing moment of the entire experience was when police officers told the government workers to stop working until we "organized" ourselves. The police officers stood at the other side of the glass window, staring back as people toppled over each other. The government workers stopped working. The officers told them not to work until people

organize themselves. “Why are you doing that?” people asked. “*eḥna benmūt*” (we are dying) I remember hearing someone say. Obviously none of the police officers bothered answering. People managed to laugh and make fun of the dramatic coldness of the officers amidst the mob-like crowdedness of the room. Standing in line, one could hear all kinds of stories revolving around these security approvals. For example, you instantly get your approval if you have a European Schengen visa or a U.S. visa on your passport. “Because if you’ve been to Europe or to the U.S. then there’s no need to worry about you,” one guy standing in line said poking fun at the whole process.

By the time I miraculously got to the window, I could feel the marble of that little piece of table in front of the window piercing into my stomach, because that is how crowded it was. I got my application and made my way out of what was probably the most crowded room I had ever seen in my life in order to fill it out. After filling the out the application and getting back in line, the police officer standing at the window scribbled all over it. “Go write a profession and come back” he said as he stared at some other papers on his desk. I didn’t go back. Yet the consequences of having a Turkish visa on my passports.

The most disappointing thing about the new travel approval regulations was that they singled out the countries that had previously been the easiest for Egyptians to go to. So that now, you not only had to worry about convincing the country of destination that you don’t intend on making a permanent migration of that country for travel, but now also had one has to convince the authorities of one’s own country. The security clearance regulations are justified under the idea that they keep “terrorist elements” from escaping.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>294</sup><http://www.youm7.com/story/2015/8/25/%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B6%D9%85-16-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7/2319294#.VkhwbXYrLIU>

John Torpey's book, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State*, provides us with important background from which we can begin to understand how, as he argues, the institutionalization of the nation-state system gives states "a monopoly of the legitimate means of movement."<sup>295</sup> The nation-state project, which sought to create "a homogenous ethno cultural unit," necessarily entailed that people's movement be regulated.<sup>296</sup> Through the invention of bureaucracies nation-states have thus deemed themselves, not on only the sole users of the legitimate means of violence, but they are the sole authorizers of the legitimate means of movement. This means that passports and identification documents are always part and parcel of projects of inclusion and exclusion. These documents determine the admission and refusal of entry of certain people to certain territories, but they are also method of surveillance. Creating bureaucracies to hold up the creation of identity documents and passports and hence monitoring movement is another "state-building" activity just as "war-making" is. It demands that national communities not just be "imagined" in the sense Benedict Anderson explained, but that they are also codified in documents and law. State surveillance is carried out through these documents, and certain categories of identities gain social significance through these documents, or again the lack thereof.<sup>297</sup>

For example, people have often referred to the Egyptian airport a "fishing net" *māṣeyāda*. At the airport, in embassies, or in large bureaucratic buildings people directly encounter embodiments of "states" that report and regulate their every movement; and if this movement is authorized, it is only for a limited amount of time. Thus one must remember

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<sup>295</sup>Torpey, John, *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, citizenship, and the state*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup>Foucault's conceptions of the nightmarish panopticon surveillance is clearly relevant here, yet as other scholars have pointed out, this conception does not take into account the many ways in which people can also navigate through this system of control. States may have monopolized the means of movement, but this does not mean they are effective. See: Höjdestrand, Tova *Needed by nobody: Homelessness and humanness in post-socialist Russia*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) pg. 21



that all those who take to the sea in order to reach places where they feel life will be easier, only do so after their visas are rejected and their desire to move is deemed unauthorized. Smugglers and boats, after all, cost much more money than visas and plane tickets. In fact, despite what the media says about the “crisis” of people supposedly “flooding” Europe, most of those in need of it cannot afford the trip. People have to save up somewhere between two thousand and three thousand dollars before they can begin to think of journeying to Europe.

Documents proved to be extremely important in this entire fieldwork experience, primarily because I have not met a single Syrian person who does not have some kind of document related problem. I did not have to ask questions relating to it, because the issue of documents would always come up; documents are necessary for almost all of the everyday practices we participate in. They are necessary for hospitals, schools, and almost all other public services. After I was unable to go through with the security approval paper, I applied for a Russian visa and emailed the Abkhazian foreign ministry and received my visa for Abkhazia via e-mail.

### **Historicizing the passport and Soviet power in Abkhazia:**

A brief historical overview of passports demonstrates that the document has not always existed, nor has it held the same taken-for standard status that they may now. Passport controls in Europe had initially been a temporary method, that accompanied states’ generalized anxieties about borders shortly before the start of the First World War, and the anxiety had not ended when the war was over. Therefore passport measures that were that were “temporary” persisted into the permanent.<sup>298</sup> For example, in 1919 Germany, it was already a permanent requirement for anyone passing into the Reich to possess a passport with a visa. The United Kingdom also stabilized the Aliens Order of 1920, which stated that anyone entering or leaving the country was required to possess “either a valid passport

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<sup>298</sup>Torpey, John, *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, citizenship, and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2000). Pp. 116

furnished with a photograph of himself or some other document satisfactorily establishing his national status and identity” Similarly, the United States also say the end of what had been termed “laissez faire migration.”<sup>299</sup>

In the period before and up to the First World War, the number of states that defined and understood themselves in nationalist terms was in increasing while the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian, and the Ottoman empires were all collapsing. The growing importance of national belonging, Torpey writes, “resulted in a profusion of bureaucratic techniques for administering the boundaries of the nation, in both territorial and membership terms...” These nations were the “crustacean types of nations,” the types that “crabbily distinguish between us and them.”<sup>300</sup> Border controls intensified as the technological possibilities for movement also improved, and this can give us an idea of how the passport as a document served economic police and military interests and is not a timeless one. It has instead, been reified over time due to certain sets of enforced political and social power relations. Furthermore, it is interesting to reflect on this history whilst considering one of the biggest contradictions of the capitalist world order. The contradictory tension of modern states, between relying on immigrant cheap labor and not allowing the same labor in under the idea that there is a lack of resources, or a lack of jobs, and that the ‘migrants will take our jobs.’<sup>301</sup>

Bearing the more general European historical context in mind, one must look at the Soviet context and how it pertains to a post-Soviet self-proclaimed state such as Abkhazia. Two state security organizations existed and managed peoples’ lives in the Soviet Union, the more popular KGB, (the committee for state security), and the less known MVD (“the ministry of internal affairs of the U.S.S.R”). The MVD was the police organization responsible for managing the soviet’s internal passport system, and peoples’ movements

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid, Pp. 117

<sup>300</sup> Ibid, Pp. 122-123

<sup>301</sup> To echo some of peoples’ concerns over migration.

within the union. Within the MVD, there were two departments, one responsible solely for those with people convicted with crimes, felons, and those with legal sentences more generally and the second department was responsible for monitoring “regular” peoples’ affairs. The second department, also known as the “Soviet militia,” had a much of “omnipresent” aura about it. One of this department’s functions was to administer and enforce the internal passport system, by which it had also worked to acquire control of all Soviet citizens.

After 1931, Soviet citizens could not find food nor housing unless they were properly registered, and by extension also properly domiciled in the labour force. Employment, access to housing, and basic needs and services were thus interlinked in a system of which the backbone had been necessary documents. This is something that I argue we still see today and is not unique to the Soviet Union era; even if it had taken a different form then. One cannot be properly employed if one does not have the required identity documents, and often residency and access to services depends on that.<sup>302</sup> The internal passport regulated domestic migration flows.

Movement inside the Soviet Union required a *propiska*, which is the equivalent of an internal visa or residency permit and represent the “legal right” to live in a particular administrative district within the union.<sup>303</sup> In order to move to and live in a different district, one had to apply for a *propiska* which in turn meant one had to prove employment and residency in that district, which was not always the easiest thing for young people looking for employment (as that meant they already had know someone willing to hire them before they even moved to that district, and they had to provide “proof of housing” for being able to

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<sup>302</sup>Shelley, Louise, *Policing Soviet Society*, (London: Routledge, 1996) pg. 130.

<sup>303</sup>Pipko, Simonal and Albert Pucciarelli, “The soviet internal passport system,” *The International Lawyer*, 19(3), 915-919 (1985).

actually go look for the housing. In fact, this brings us to the ways in which is that bureaucracy produces and reproduces homelessness.<sup>304</sup>

Before the dismantlement of the Soviet Union and since approximately 1934, a section for ethnicity was an integral part, and a key feature, of the Soviet passport.<sup>305</sup> It “preserved” ethnic differentiation in the soviet space. As is usually the case, some ethnic categories benefitted from this passport feature, while for others, such as the Jews (who were also categorized in passports) this policy was a clear disadvantage. By the time the union had collapsed, the newly formed Russian had been made up of 21 ethnic republics, many of which had later made claims to independence. State policy changed from one in which there existed a mode of governing ethnic diversity to one in which individual ethnicity was to be, for official purposes, irrelevant, and invisible. The policy followed from the (liberal) idea that assimilation is “possible, desirable, and encouraged.”<sup>306</sup>

Timothy Blauvelt uses the Abkhaz case to argue that the early Soviet nationalities policy was one way through which Soviet power was consolidated in the peripheries. He argues that local Abkhaz “titular” elites were able to manipulate nationality policies, and the structures of the local institutions “to gain control of patronage resources that in turn gave them substantial local autonomy and authority” and to influence the decisions on Abkhazia’s ethno-territorial status. Blauvelt also makes an important... During the time of the Russian revolution, ethnic categories in this region “were in reality probably somewhat flexible, as peasants could sometimes adapt surnames to make themselves either Mingrelian/Georgian or Abkhaz.” This depended on which category happened to be perceived as more

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<sup>304</sup>Höjdestrand, Tova, *Needed by nobody: Homelessness and humanness in post-socialist Russia*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>305</sup>Akturk, Sener. “Passport identification and nation-building in post-soviet Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26(4), 314-341(2010)

<sup>306</sup>Blauvelt, Timothy, “The establishment of soviet power in Abkhazia: Ethnicity, contestation and clientelism in the revolutionary periphery.” *Revolutionary Russia*, 27(1), 22-46 (2014).

advantageous.”<sup>307</sup> Since the early 2000s, the vast majority of Abkhaz living near the Sochi border, in Sukhum, and other cities have received Russian passports while the majority of the Gali residents (the area bordering Georgia) carry Georgian passports.<sup>308</sup> Russian policies towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia made it so that the vast majority of residents (although certainly now all) in those two areas were given Russian passports.

In a 2008 speech, marking the beginning of a Russian confrontation with Georgia, Russian President Dimitri Medvedev stated in an address to the South Ossetians: “I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are. We will not allow their deaths to go unpunished.”<sup>309</sup> The scholar, Florian Mühlfried points out the peculiarity of Medvedev’s statement, which addressed “citizens” that were neither residents of the Russian Federation, nor were they ethnically Russian.<sup>310</sup> At the same time, the Russian state encouraged attempts by the Abkhazian leadership to issue 'national' Abkhazian passports were encouraged by the Russian government.

Years after Abkhazia had declared its independence from Georgia, in October 2005, the Abkhazian parliament passed the, “Law of the Republic of Abkhazia on Citizenship of the Republic of Abkhazia,” which was to define who is or is not eligible for citizenship.<sup>311</sup> It also set out the guidelines along how citizenship can be obtained. The ethnic Abkhaz that live in Turkey, and the Circassians that are descendants of those who fled to the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century are entitled to Abkhazian citizenship and are also allowed to maintain dual nationality (or in other words, they do not have to relinquish their first

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<sup>307</sup>Ibid.

<sup>308</sup>[Although I have heard, and it is interesting to note that there are many people that still carry and use Soviet passports.]

<sup>309</sup>Mühlfried, Florian. “Citizenship at war: Passports and nationality in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict.” *Anthropology Today*, 26(2), 8-13(2010)

<sup>310</sup> Ibid,

<sup>311</sup> Ibid

nationalities.<sup>312</sup>The law becomes significant particularly with the (ethnic) Georgian population, the Mingrelians, who hold Georgian citizenship.<sup>313</sup>

In order to acquire an Abkhazian passport, one must forfeit the Georgian passport, an act that has various complex consequences for the approximately 40,000 Georgians who are registered as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Georgia. The status of IDPs depends primarily on this Georgian citizenship, and forfeiting this citizenship for an Abkhazian one means also giving up the monthly allowances and other forms of support that they otherwise would not have access to. According to media reports, these payouts are the only sources of income for many people in this area. In these media reports, Abkhazian officials are quoted saying that: "For the time being, it is impossible to allow Georgians dual citizenship purely for the fact that we're still at a state of war with Georgia."<sup>314</sup> The Georgian interior ministry spokesperson is also cited in media reports saying that anyone who takes on an Abkhazian citizenship automatically loses their right to be a Georgian citizen. Another factor is that of the un-recognizability of the Abkhazian passport. Giving up an internationally recognized passport such as the Georgian one, for the sake of an unrecognized (almost paralyzing if it's the one you hold) nationality such as the Abkhazian one. This media report quotes another Gali resident saying he would probably take an Abkhazian passport since he cannot visit Moscow with his Georgian one. "They won't take away my Georgian passport and I won't swear to anything. There are ways to get around such things," the man is reported to have said.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup>Others, like ethnic Armenians, can only have the Russian nationality as their second citizenship, and in any case the most of the Armenians living in Abkhazia have Russian citizenship anyway.

<sup>313</sup>I was lucky enough to find the Arabic translation of this law in a Russian language book given to me in Abkhazia.

<sup>314</sup>"Abkhazia: Ethnic Georgian Region Faces Citizenship Quandary," Oct. 2008  
<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav100808f.shtml>

<sup>315</sup>Muhlfried, Florian Citizenship at war: Passports and nationality in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict." *Anthropology Today*, 26(2), 8-13(2010)

By the first morning I was there, I had made a visit to the building, located in the center of Sukhum, Abkhazia's capital. This building was an important one in this project, partially also because it was a good place to first meet Syrians. I also met two Syrian women, an aunt and her niece, who invited me to a picnic where I met many more Syrian women and told them about the purpose of my visit, which is this research project. Small talk with people often involved asking me whether I was getting my paperwork done. The *commitet* building, like many other buildings in the country was covered in photos of people; the photographs were of "Abazas," "Abkhaz," or "Circassians" in the *diaspora* and were displayed in a manner that seemed to wish to show-off the status of these people abroad. There were photographs of the Circassian associations in Jordan and some of those in Syria. There was even one photograph of Maher Abaza, an Egyptian minister of electricity, with a group of men from the Circassians in Jordan. Inside the small offices, where one could see (Mubarak-like) photographs of other men whom I had known at the time, there was a Syrian man, Rassem, who had been in Abkhazia for 20 years and spoke Russian fluently. He was responsible for translating and for helping Arabic speakers get their paperwork done.

An Abkhazian woman was responsible for taking my paperwork which included, for example, copies of my Egyptian passport, and she asked me repeatedly "*Mama Arabka?*" (Is your mother Arab?). This constituted another one of the very strange moments of the trip, because it was a question that assumed that while my mother was Arab, my father was not. These moments exposed how strange and constructed categorical and "national" references are at their very core.

### **Family Names, Codifying distinctions, borders and access to passports:**

As I recounted in chapter one, it was a really strange moment when Rassem told me to write down my first name and my "family" name, and then told me that "Abaza" was not a

family name but a “nationality.” It is my surname, Abaza that made me (and many other Syrians and Jordanians) legible for an Abkhazian passport. As Florian Mühlfried points out surnames play a political and social role on borders in the region as they increasingly become markers of ethnic identity.<sup>316</sup> Family names, and the ways in which they are linked to nationality, have come to play considerable roles along the Georgian, Ossetian, and Abkhazian border regimes “even in relatively stable political situations.”<sup>317</sup> The idea that nationality is encoded in family name is thus seen as a signifier of belonging, and having the “wrong” family name can even be risky.<sup>318</sup> Mühlfried writes a small story he had heard in his fieldwork in Georgia, although told to him as a joke, the anecdote is very telling of the political and social dynamics surrounding documents, names and movement across the Georgian and South Ossetian border. The anecdote belongs to a South Ossetia domestic worker who lives in Tbilisi and decided to visit her family near the borders of South Ossetia. Georgian soldiers stopped her and interrogated her, despite her Georgian passport, likely because of her last name. It was not until the soldiers saw the business card of one of her employers, a Swiss woman who works at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that they let the Ossetian woman go.<sup>319</sup> The anecdote exposes how family names taken to reveal “Ossetian-ness” or in other cases Abkhazian-ness, or other nationalities on the borders.<sup>320</sup> With regards to border regimes, ethnicity, and family names, it is essential to note that one of the initial conditions for the first plane-full of Syrians to Abkhazia was that they be “Abazas.” This means for the first plane at least one of the spouses for the nuclear families had to carry the last name “Abaza.” For the second plane, this condition was made more flexible and people who were Circassian but had “Abaza” links were allowed to make the

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<sup>316</sup>Mühlfried, Florian. “Citizenship at war: Passports and nationality in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict,” (a response to this article at <http://www.therai.org.uk/at/debate>). *Anthropology Today* 26 (2): 8-13, 2010.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid

<sup>318</sup>Ibid. Dual citizenship is also provided to Georgians living outside of Georgia on condition that their family names are also “proven,” the case is the same in Abkhazia.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid

<sup>320</sup> This is comparatively similar to having an Arab name at an Israeli, or American, or other airports.



trip. For example Lara and her husband, who are both “Adghe” could not go onboard with the first group setting off for Abkhazia, but with the second plane, Larisa was able to make her case and go off to Abkhazia by saying that her mother is actually Abaza, although she and her husband are not. In this case, your “ethnicity” is determined by your father, just as is the case with me. In fact, getting your Abkhazian nationality is lengthier and more difficult process if the link is through the mother rather than the father. By the time the third plane was getting organized, one only had to be a Circassian to board it, as I have understood from interlocutors.

There are various important points with regards to state bureaucracy and citizenship paperwork. The most important ones include the politics (and violence) of waiting [for paperwork, for benefits, etc.], the “gray zones” of state institutions (and their official, semi-official, and unofficial practices), and the links between citizenship, nationality, benefits, and “belonging.” The process of the codification of citizenship laws, was “directly motivated by the need to establish who did and who did not have a right to the benefits of membership” to various European states and saw its golden age in the nineteenth century.<sup>321</sup> Nonetheless, we live through the tangible and non-tangible effects of such processes of codifying belonging, of codifying access to benefits and places, and of codifying identity and categories.

### **The politics of arbitrary preferences:**

Maya sees the red bag on the store’s window display and gets giddy with excitement. “It’s red!” she says, “I love red!” and we walk into the store to have a look. She and May have to get school bags for the kids anyway, it’s early September and schools are about to start again. For Maya’s kids, it will be their first year of school in Abkhazia and I wonder how they will cope. The red bag is really expensive, almost 5,000 rubles. There are other bags, and everything is expensive. “Why don’t you go to Sochi and buy your things from there?”, I ask her, “I can’t. There is no passport.”

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<sup>321</sup>Torpey, John. *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, citizenship, and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.(2000). p.71

“Why?” I ask. She is not Abaza, it will take at least a year. May, who was also looking for bags for her daughter, confirmed. Her husband and their passports in a month while she had to wait for at least eight months, she said.

In Syria, “everyone was just *sharkas*.” I mentioned in chapter one that Rahma told me this, and after she said it, I began to notice it further. When people introduce themselves and find the need to add or state the “but I am *Adghe*” not Abaza, or my father is Kabarday Now there are differences between the Abazas, the Adyghe, the Kabarday. Even the Russian language teacher, Victoria, said that this is something that bothered her once, when I told her about my research project. She pointed to this phenomenon as something that she saw as divisive.<sup>322</sup> She said that her children-students say things like “papa Adyghe, and mama Abaza.” These alleged differences begin to matter not just when it comes to the amount of time spent waiting for documents, but they matter when it comes to the amount of time one spends waiting for an apartment. Syrians whose last names are “Abaza” get their Abkhazian ID cards and their Abkhazian passports and nationalities in almost a month while others, who are Circassian, have to wait for a few months to a year. Although this Abkhazian passport is close to useless, it becomes an extremely useful document to have because it grants one access to Sochi, Russia where it is much cheaper than Abkhazia to buy all kinds of necessary goods. This politics of waiting (longer or less based on a surname) pertains to how the struggle for movement, and “legal existence” (in this case in an entity deemed “illegal”) constitute “temporal processes in and through which political subordination is reproduced.”<sup>323</sup> This politics of waiting is clearly not limited to Abkhazia, and this can be shown in a question of how many families in Abkhazia are waiting for spouses and brothers to arrange their paperwork so that the entire family can reunited in Europe (quite a few). For them, their lives in Abkhazia are another form of waiting. It is through such processes and in

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<sup>322</sup>Based on what I understood with my limited Russian, her hand gestures, and the help of classmates who were present during the conversation.

<sup>323</sup>Auyero, Javier.. *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*. (Duke University Press: 2012) Pg. 15

the moment in which the question “where is your residency, *iqama*” or your passport or ID card that domination is asserted.

### “Make-Believe Documents”:<sup>324</sup>

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Maysaa said she had to leave the Golan in 2013 when the terrorists came to her neighborhood. I asked if she meant Daash and she said Jabhet Al-Nusra. “They are supposed to give people a two hour warning before bombarding the neighborhood, but they did not do that,” I wasn’t sure who she meant by that. I asked her and she responded that the regime’s military “let the terrorists raid our neighborhood... they left it.” She postulated that there may have been a conspiracy between the terrorists and the security personnel that were supposed to be protecting the neighborhood. “How could they just pass the military men and their tanks so easily”, she asked both condemningly and rhetorically.

“So I just took the most important paperwork... people always say that the first thing you should take with you is your paperwork,” Maysaa explained.

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While, I have addressed literature on “the state” in earlier chapters, Veena Das’s theorizations of the illegibility of the state are important when considering the document production aspect of state-making. Das argues, in her ethnography on the Sultanpuri low-income neighborhoods of India, that if one sees “how the authority of the state is literalized and embodied in the contexts of violence,” then the state comes to be seen as “neither as a purely rational-bureaucratic organization nor simply a fetish, but as a form of regulation that oscillates between a rational mode and a magical mode of being.”<sup>325</sup> Das explains that the state acquires a presence in the everyday lives of the communities she worked with through practices that she calls “magical,” rather than as “fictitious.” She uses this wording for various reasons, first, because this magic has very real consequences. Its forces are not transparent and are often closely aligned to forces of danger, and “to engage in magic is to

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<sup>324</sup>Phrase borrowed from Navaro-Yashin.

<sup>325</sup> Das, Veena, *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (2007) Pp. 162

place oneself in a position of vulnerability.”<sup>326</sup> Das therefore points to how certain documentary practices of the state (she lists documents created by the Indian state), and the utterances that embody such documents acquire a place in people’s everyday life practices. While the state is both magical and rational, it is most of all marked by the ambiguity between the two. In addition, Das, along with other scholars such as Navaro-Yashin, points to how the clear cut distinction between the “state” and the “community” or “society” is a problematic one given that it is in the sphere of the personal, the domestic, and the intimate that the state and its forms of sociality are re-created and re-produced.<sup>327</sup>

In his article, “Documented lives: fear and the uncertainties of law during the second Palestinian intifada” Tobias Kelly looks at how identity documents penetrate into the lives of their holders while looking at the context of Palestinians in the West Bank during the second intifada. Identity documents penetrate lives, “not as reifying abstractions but as an unpredictable and unstable technique of governance producing fear and uncertainty for those subject to their use.”<sup>328</sup> He also adds that the production of identity documents creates “a separation between the legal and the physical person,” and that people “come to embody the indeterminacies of the passports they hold.” There are thus two aspects of personhood that are recombined as the anxieties of documentation are personified in people’s daily lives. His statements, although written about a different context, hold true in a variety of different situations. Documents are held and made for uses of convenience rather than actual “identifications.”<sup>329</sup> It is also important to bear in mind that documents are not abstracted entities, but they should be understood as in their wider institutional and political contexts.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>326</sup>Ibid . Pp. 163

<sup>327</sup>Ibid. Pp. 183

<sup>328</sup> Kelly, Tobias, “Documented lives: Fear and the uncertainties of law during the second Palestinian intifada,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12(1), 89-107 (2007).

<sup>329</sup> Ibid

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

One should ask, what are the conditions of their production as well as their reception? How are they verified, or not, and how do they take effect?

Passports exist to limit, track, and control movement and people. There are people in Damascus, Syria that cannot leave the country because the state does not want to issue passports. There are too many people leaving already, and the rest should not have the option of leaving as well, this is how the policies regarding documentation in Syria are thought out, Madame Nari explained as she recounted that her sister a government worker who is very tired, cannot leave because she is unable to obtain a passport. Again, this is an example of documents are also there to maintain people in certain territories. The sadder aspect of the fact that Madame Nari's sister is stuck in Syria is that, even if she were able to obtain a Syrian passport, she still will not be able to do much with it, due to the fact that even with passports Syrians do not have access to even some of the countries closest to them. Egypt is one example. Torpey's claim that documents and passports also "make relevant differences knowable and enforceable," is this important when dealing with the fact that life in the world today means that your passport determines where one's existence will matter, and where it will not even be allowed, or deemed "legal."<sup>331</sup>

In order to better understand the situation and the daily lives of those Syrians living in Abkhazia specifically, one has to put Abkhazia itself into historical, social, political, and economic context. In this thesis, I follow from the argument that Abkhazia itself presents us with a "space of exception." Vincent Artman agrees this in his article, "Documenting Territory: Passportization, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." In later chapters I deal with the question of how and why Abkhazia can be analytically viewed as a "space of exception." In this chapter the act and notion of mass passportization is what

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

provides us with some context as to what the manufacturing of passports and documents in Abkhazia might mean.

As briefly mentioned above, the 2008 a mass-scale “passportisation” processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia altered Russia’s relationship with Georgia, which it had gone to war with that very year and it altered Russia’s role in what are called the “frozen conflicts” of that region. Russia distributed Russian passports to most of the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, thus turning thousands into Russian citizens who can travel using their Russian passports. In an article entitled “Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia’s Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia,” Scott Littlefield looks at the possible role that Russian passports and citizenship had in facilitating an Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatism from Russia.<sup>332</sup> For example, Russia’s president at the time, Dimitri Medvedev was able to legitimize Russia’s highly militarized response Georgian military aggression in Abkhazia by making use of Article 51 of the UN charter, invoking the “inherent right of individual” and “collective self-defense.”<sup>333</sup> Medvedev was thus “protecting” Russian citizens.

Artman writes that it is not enough to argue that Russia made this move only in order to justify its war with Georgia, despite the crucial role that move had played in the war. Instead Artman argues that this wholesale conversion of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians into Russian citizens “manufactured a casus belli and produced exceptional spaces within the territory of the Republic of Georgia where the norms of international law and the modern state system were effectively suspended.”<sup>334</sup> Whereas Artman only discusses the Russian passportization, I take his argument further to include the Abkhazian issuance of passports as

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<sup>332</sup>Littlefield, Scott. “Citizenship, identity and foreign policy: The contradictions and consequences of russia’s passport distribution in the separatist regions of Georgia”: 1.*Europe - Asia Studies* 61 (8): 1461 2009.

<sup>333</sup> UN Charter, available at: <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>, accessed 17 June 2009.

<sup>334</sup>Artman, Vincent, “Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 682-704 (2013).

also exploiting a still-potent discourse of the modern nation-state. Also, as Mühlfried's points out, "oddly enough, Abkhazian and South Ossetian citizenship are downplayed and ultimately invalidated not only by Georgian, but also by Russian politics."<sup>335</sup>

The phenomenon of passportization had discursive, territorial, and biopolitical consequences. Western media reports have often mislabeled the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who do not consider themselves ethnically Russian, by calling them Russian. Mühlfried writes that this confusion of categories "ethnicizes the notion of citizenship in the public discourse to such an extent that Russian passport-holders in South Ossetia become quasi-natural subjects of the Russian state."<sup>336</sup> These passports therefore function as discursive and territorial symbols, reifying a symbolic linkage between a person and an abstract polity, "whose normative value it simultaneously called into question."<sup>337</sup> Both the production of Russian passports for Abkhazians and the production of Abkhazian passports for the people of Abkhazia and others were processes that illustrated the contradictions inherent in the norms and assumptions of the modern nation-state system. More specifically, these processes disrupted traditional understanding of sovereignty, as Artman points out. These processes, especially the Abkhazian state's issuance of largely unrecognized passports, are paradigmatic of the epistemic disruptions of neat categories and ideals of sovereignty in our modern nation-state system.<sup>338</sup>

Torpey argues that it is useful to think of states as "embracing" their citizens so that people could be "in the reach of the state" or that they become in positions where they are easy to locate.<sup>339</sup> By embrace, Torpey means "to identify and gain enduring access to."

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<sup>335</sup>Mühlfried, Florian, "Citizenship at war: Passports and nationality in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict." *Anthropology Today*, 26(2), 8-13. (2008)

<sup>336</sup> *ibid*

<sup>337</sup> *ibid*

<sup>338</sup>Artman, Vincent, "Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 682-704 (2013).

<sup>339</sup>Torpey, John, *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, citizenship, and the state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000).

Regardless of whether one would rather view states as “embracing” citizens, or as Michael Mann had written, as “caging” social activity within them, there are people -- usually “unregistered” – that remain undesirable within that grasp. Or, in other words, states (and others) codify “identities” in law, institutionalize them, and thereby render them socially significant.<sup>340</sup> The creation of these documents and nationalities not only enunciates, or I would say constructs, differences but it implements them and that this how states successfully assert their authority to determine who is included and who is excluded, or who “belongs” and who does not. Relevant differences are made known and enforceable.<sup>341</sup>

The fact that Abkhazia and the categories upon which its institutions based their paperwork were so unfamiliar to me made the process by which nation-states at large produce (or render “legible”) nationalities and identification paperwork seem that much random and fabricated. It made it that much easier to deconstruct the system by which categories are institutionalized, and how surveillance is carried out through written documents. To elaborate, the Abkhazian passports are registered in Russian records. The passports are actually created based on other passports. In other words, to create an Abkhazian passport if you are a Syrian citizen, you will need your Syrian passport. (If you are Egyptian, the Abkhazian passport will be based on the information written in your Egyptian passport, and so on and so forth). In the end, the passport goes through Russian intelligence, where all the data is stored and put under heavy surveillance. The passport also reveals if the passport holder is of Turkish, Jordanian, Syrian, Egyptian, or any other nationality. This has implications on the ground that become visible when Russia, for example, decides that Syrians will not pass the Russian-Abkhazian borders into Sochi, as it had done during the World Olympics in 2014. Its implications are also present during border interrogations. Whilst crossing the borders my father and I were asked, in broken English, if

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid. Pg. 11

<sup>341</sup> Ibid



we were “Islam” (Muslim?) and then if we were “radical.” As if there was a possibility the “radical” would have answered “yes!” From what I have observed, it does not seem that Syrians cross the border into Russia often, and the “Arabs” that cross easily are likely to be the ones who have Russian passports, otherwise these interrogations are the norm. I was once telling Maha about how we (my father) got interrogated at the Egyptian airport, and she told me they do that with all of the Arabs. One time, they went to Nalchik, and one their way back soldiers/border security kept questioning them, and told them they were terrorists and so Maha cried. She joked that the security let them pass because she cried. In her essay, “Maddening States,” Aretxaga argues that the fetish or fantasy of state power plays itself out in “expanding field of terrorism.” She adds that official documents “reproduce plots and narrative forms from novels or films about terrorism.”<sup>342</sup> From another angle, one could see this as a state dependence on narratives of terrorist plots so as to be able to reproduce its fetishistic qualities and practices, of which official documents and borders are a part of.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

While we were waiting for the bus, we saw a gypsy woman carrying a mattress and some pillows. Then Dina asked whether we have gypsies in Egypt, there are many in Syria, she said. These people do not have passports and they just travel all around wherever they want, she told her son.

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Rahma’s mother said that some people who are “Arab” got their Abkhaz passports and “they are not even *Abazāt* or *Sharkas*.” She believes that Sherief Abaza, the Syrian former Member of Parliament and Baath party member who worked at the *commitet*, gave them the nationality, “because they are friends, maybe there is money involved,” she does not know. The rest of the conversation was about Arabs and some of the things that differentiate Arabs and Circassians.

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There are a few Syrians who are not of Circassian origins, and although they are not many their reasons for having gone to Abkhazia are varied. However, many such reasons relate to the fact that because of their Syrian-ness they had no access to visas, or to other

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<sup>342</sup> Aretxaga, Begoña, “Maddening States,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (1): 393-410 (2003). pg. 401.

states, except by sea and this was not yet an option they had been willing to make. For example Owais, a Syrian that is not Circassian went to Abkhazia, where he knew his uncle was now living, after he tried to go to Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Algeria but all had by then already closed their doors to Syrians. The reason he hadn't tried to get out of the country earlier was because he had not yet needed it to do so. It was only when he was called for military service that leaving the country became ever so urgent. He is not happy in Abkhazia where he works as a blacksmith despite his engineering degree.

The main point of this chapter it is to, again, point towards how this nation-state system demands control over movement and how these practices of management have structural violence embedded within them. The Syrian-Circassians in Abkhazia should not be spoken of in vacuum; their presence in Abkhazia is part and parcel of the larger Syrian diaspora's current collective suffering, agency, and narratives. In this chapter I have argued that bureaucracy, paperwork, documents, and passports are means by which states impose authority; and they are products of social, political, and economic power relations. The misrecognized violence they perpetuate also dwells in the intimate details of people's everyday lives. Maysaa, for example, a Homs woman who married a Circassian man, stated that the most important things that they had to take with them upon leaving their house [heading to Turkey before Abkhazia became part of the plan] was their passports and papers. Maysaa was living in the Damascus (neef Dimishq) after she got married, but her mother who was in Homs and had experienced having to leave her home before Maysaa did, warned her daughter about the paperwork and the passports. Since her mother's warning, Maysaa made sure to put all the family's papers, and her wedding photographs, in her purse... which later proved to have been a good idea because she did end up having to leave her house in a hurry, barely carrying anything but her purse and children with her. The stories revolving around paperwork are many; in Abkhazia there were many families also waiting for their fathers,

husbands, brothers, etc. to do their *lam el shaml* -family reunion, including refugee status)-paperwork for them so they could follow them over to Europe.

Buthaina Abaza (mentioned in the anecdote above) pointed out to me that she appreciated that the Abkhazian state gave them the nationality and the passport. Yet, further into the conversation, she expressed her belief that if Abkhazia were to accept more treaties with Russia it would become stronger. However, the Abkhazian people believe this would hinder their independence and give Russia more control over them, she added. Well, she continued, Russia already controls them anyway... and it would be better for the Syrians because then they would be able to get Russian passports that would allow them to go “anywhere in the world.” The question of why sites of power do not allow people to go “anywhere in the world” may seem simple, utopian, idealistic, or illogical for some. Yet, to bring it forth persistently, is to again, to put under the spotlight the taken-for-granted, still widely accepted fact that the ‘undesirables’ are kept from going “anywhere in the world” while others are not because of the repressive politics of passport colors.<sup>343</sup> Sometimes, preferences of nationalities come to be based almost solely on their practical use when it comes to navigating movement.

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<sup>343</sup> I must note here first, that I have met Abkhaz that cannot travel anywhere but to Russia, and say they would have to live in Russia for three to five years before being able to get a Russian passport.

## Conclusion

I was sitting with Rahma and Heba, laughing at their jokes (as you can tell, the people I met in Abkhazia were very witty, clever, funny and fun to be around), when Heba looked at me and asked me when I was going to start doing my research. “You’re going to fail!” she joked. “Let’s start now, I’ll interview you,” I said taking out my notebook and opening up the page where I had written up some questions “I’ll tell you everything you need to know about Abkhazia,” Rahma said smiling, “but Jihad, you know despite everything, if it weren’t for the war in Syria 99% of the Syrians that are here wouldn’t be here,” Heba interrupted, reminding me that Syrian presence or return or migration to Abkhazia did not happen in vacuum, out of nowhere and out of context. It is not strange, and is very much aligned with what is happening to the larger Syrian-national Diaspora and people. On several separate occasions, after long pauses between dialogues, without any seeming prerequisite people (Amany’s mother and Suzanne’s mother) would say in a melancholic tone, “we were happy in Syria, we were living the best life.” And I couldn’t respond. Any response seems futile. What could I possibly say? Thinking of a way to conclude also seems futile. I am trying to squeeze what is left of my brain cells, hoping for little drops of consoling ideas to write down but there is really no “conclusion.”<sup>344</sup>

I have tried here to dismantle, or at least provide a different perspective on, the notions of the refugee, the state/ modern nation-state, war, and the document, which are all very interlinked notions. I argued that the state is “imagined” and that states that are perceived as unreal in the international arena (by the UN, and other nation-states) can tell us about the “real,” or about what is beyond the imaginary. Ethnicity, nation, and nationalism – again notions with intimate relations to the processes of statehood—are more arbitrary than

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<sup>344</sup>Also, as Farah reminded me of a really good point in Anthropology once, people may say one thing and do another, people might say really good things about the Abkhaz one day, and the next day *yel’anuhum* (curse them).

people are usually programmed to believe. These notions are then linked to wars- social conditions- in different parts of the world and in different moments in time (sometimes same war in a different moment), and these wars have structural consequences. Explaining these wars through simplistic ethnic categories is problematic. For this point we can invoke Navaro-Yashin, who says that the conflict in Northern Cyprus is perceived as a conflict between “ethnic” Greeks and “ethnic” Turks—there are always “sides” in a war, as imagined in international discourse.<sup>345</sup> Yet such discourse obscures talk of the *political*, the *economic* and the *social* by focusing on the “ethnic” or the “sectarian.” Finally, earlier chapters involved the notion of the “fictitious,” but maintained that this “fictitious,” has very real, felt consequences- which the discussion of structural violence, state killing and letting die, was a part of. The state’s monopoly over the legitimate means of movement and border/wall-building practices are another example of these consequences. The fate of one’s “legitimate” or “legal” access to places depends on the will of the “state” or state officials and their practices.<sup>346</sup> Abkhazia, with its contested sovereignty and the contested sovereignty of the children of the broom closet inside the broom closet both legitimizes and dismantles this globalized system of control through passports and the politics of documents by knowingly producing unrecognized passports.

This thesis, as a process that led to me to these questions, unfolded interestingly and left me with more questions than answers. To recap, I ended up in Abkhazia, a place I had only heard of a few years earlier and even then had not paid any particular attention to, through a strange twist, which one can call the coincidence of fieldwork. Through my

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<sup>345</sup> The idea of imagining “sides” is also the case for the conflicts in Syria and Abkhazia.

Anyway, See: Navaro-Yashin, Yael, “De-Ethnicizing the Ethnography of Cyprus: Political and Social Conflict between Turkish-Cypriots and Settlers from Turkey,” in ed. Papadakis, Yiannis, N. Peristianis, Gisela Welz *Divided cyprus: Modernity, history, and an island in conflict*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006)

<sup>346</sup> Bearing in mind, of course, that people find ways to navigate this monopoly, these borders, and these walls. See: Pelkmans, Mathijs, *Defending the border: Identity, religion, and modernity in the republic of Georgia*. (Ithaca [N.Y.]: Cornell University Press, 2006).

surname, Abaza, I found a thread of connection between me and Abkhazia, and the many Syrians now living there, many of whom share the same surname. The surname was a gateway that allowed me to get an Abkhazian passport, a process that I have detailed throughout the pages above. Relying heavily on participant observation, narratives and informal interviews as well as on the conceptual works of anthropologists/theorists such as Yael Navaro-Yashin, Elizabeth Povinelli, Veena Das, Liisa Malkki, Wendy Brown, Giorgio Agamben, as well as other theorists of the state, I was able to rethink many of my own preconceptions of the state.

Earlier in the thesis, I put forth questions related to my very specific case of fieldwork: Why and how did this group of Syrians end up in the North Caucasus? I provide the historical narratives that had been concurrently invoked in my fieldwork experience to make sense of how Syrians of Circassian background or descent are now going through processes of “repatriation” in Abkhazia.

I move readers and myself back into critically questioning what has been lately termed “the refugee crisis,” and to contextualize perceptions surrounding the construction of the “refugee” and more recently, “the Syrian refugee,” which is becoming a category in its own right. What does the displacing, emplacing, and replacing of populations tell us about the corporeal functions of state power, including border policing practices and national imaginings of exclusion? Syrian repatriation in Abkhazia is taking place while ethnic Georgians and Mingrelians, forcibly evicted from their homes in 1992, remain on the outskirts of the Abkhazian/Georgian border.

What sort of implications do our acts of naming hold? Would it make a difference if we were to trade the term “refugee crisis” with “refugee issue,” or maybe rethink the term “refugee”? What about policies and states and people? How are these three huge notions,

constantly spoken of within the framework of the “refugee crisis,” linked, imagined, and thought of?

As Wendy Brown may ask, what do the phenomena of walling, barricading, and policing borders from refugees tell us about waning state sovereignty? Who then is entitled to the sovereignty to produce citizens, to control borders and territory? The questions to put forth for future study and reflection are many. Another question, inspired by Professor Hanan Sabea, and Agamben’s conception of “the logic of the camp” is how can we deepen the link between how we think of the notions of “the state” and “refugee”? What can we make of considering the ways in which Abkhazia becomes a besieged and somehow “refugee-d” space? By linking nations and spaces to war, we can pose the question: how we are to make sense of the structural violence that is often obscured through a fetishized focus of only the moments of extreme physical violence?

As argued above, all of these questions and their implications have affects on the everyday lives of people. The imposed authority of documents and control over movement, even in the act of making people wait for paperwork, is another means of manifesting power over them. In fact, the point should be made clearer, that if it was easier for Syrians to get visas, they would not have to go through the complications of figuring out other ways to navigate their movements. The privileges or detriments that accompany the color of one’s passport are very much a part of the politics of imagined nations, the lives that matter, and lives that do not.

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