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Refugees' transnational livelihoods and remittances: Syrian mobilities in the Middle East before and after 2011

Abstract:

Pursuing an ethnographic approach, this article explores how Syrians' pre-war kinship-based networks have oriented livelihoods strategies for refugees in Jordan after 2011. Drawing on long-term fieldwork (2015-2017) in northern Jordan, I argue that seasonal migration was a livelihoods strategy for Syria's rural poor long before 2011, serving as their old-age provision and contributing to rural development. Since 2011, conflict-induced displacement and border closures have reshaped Syrians' transnational kinship-based networks: geographically, but also with regard to the diversification of sources of income and gendered responsibilities. In Jordan, Syrian refugees mobilize pre-war transnational ties to access jobs in agriculture and the humanitarian sector, and distribute their income through kinship-based cross-border networks. These ethnographic findings challenge a localized understanding of refugee livelihoods, demonstrating that the household economies of refugees, migrants, and those left behind, in Syria, Jordan, the Gulf countries, and now Europe, are intertwined. In closing, I provide recommendations about how a networked understanding of refugee livelihoods can inform the COVID-19 emergency response, and help create decent jobs for displaced people in the Global South.

Keywords:

Mobilities, transnational livelihoods, Syrians, Jordan, rural, labour migrations, displacement

Introduction

In July 2017, a teenage adventure caught up with Adnan, a Syrian refugee originally from Jabal al-Hoss, a cluster of villages in rural Aleppo. By this time, Adnan had lived in northern Jordan for the last three years. He was suddenly arrested in the streets of Mafraq, a provincial town ten miles away from the Syrian border. An old file with his name had resurfaced, marked with "Prohibited from re-entry" – a late repercussion of a summer job as a tiler more than fifteen years ago, for which he had travelled to Jordan with other men from his family. Jordanian police officers threatened Adnan with deportation to Syria. Fortunately, the UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) Protection Unit was able to assist him, so he could return to his anxious wife and children, and stay in Jordan. Around the same time, Baher, another refugee that I had befriended through an NGO in Mafraq, complained to me

that he was “not really here – only my body is here”. Before the war, Baher had spent most of his life in Mheen, a village southeast of Homs. In Jordanian exile, Baher had obtained some, but not all the required refugee documents. According to the Jordanian immigration authorities and Mafraq’s municipality, Baher resided in Mafraq. For the UNHCR, he lived in nearby Zaatari camp. Adding to that was the fact that Baher’s family was now stretched out over the entire region. Baher and his wife received support from his father-in-law in Kuwait, while passing on a share of their meagre income from volunteering to Baher’s mother in Syria and other relatives in Jordanian camps. Baher found himself at the heart of a complex web of WhatsApp messages and money transfers, which connected him to other places in the Middle East which had long become out of reach.

Pursuing an ethnographic approach, this article explores how the pre-war kinship-based networks of Syrians like Adnan and Baher have oriented livelihoods strategies for refugees in Jordan after 2011. For displaced Syrian families, movement is not an anomaly – the transnational ties that sustain them in the present are embedded into more longstanding circular mobilities of people, but also money and information. Since the early 1990s, the concept of transnationalism has changed the ways in which we think about migration (for an overview, see Faist, Fauser & Reisenauer 2013). It has turned the spotlight on the cross-border ties that bind origin and host communities together and on the “transnational practices” (Faist 2010: 20) which mobile people and those left behind engage in. My research situates itself in the continuity of historical and social science studies on the transnational Middle East which highlight old and new processes of globalization and the movement of people, resources and ideas in the Arab-speaking world (Vignat 2017). The diversity and strength of ethnic, religious and regional networks in pre-war Syria are well documented (for an overview, see Stevens 2016). In particular, this article draws inspiration from Joseph’s (1994, 2004) account of the seminal role of kinship ties in social institutions in the Middle East. Following Joseph, I explore the social fabric of debts and obligations through which Syrian refugees are bound to their relatives in sites of origin, refuge and labour migration. I also borrow from Joseph the insight that we should not look at families in isolation, but rather ask how people mobilize family relations to access resources and services. Hence, I explore how Syrian refugees capitalize on kinship ties to obtain jobs and assistance in Jordan. The ethnographic snapshots at the beginning of this article illustrate that experiences of mobility continue to reverberate in refugees’ present lives; they may create new forms of uncertainty, throwing refugees in legal limbo, but are also be relied upon for support. While borders are closed and refugees stuck in Jordan, money and information still travel. Of course, not all families are the same, and kinship ties intersect with structures of inequality, including class, ethnicity and gender. This research zooms in on a low-resource context, the lives of poor agricultural

workers in Syria who have now been displaced to Jordan, but have long lived at the margins of the Syrian and other Arab states. Nor are families static. As Joseph (2004) argues, the malleable nature of families create “spaces for social experimentation” (277). In this article, I am concerned with how transnational families are transformed by, and adapt to, displacement.

Livelihoods frameworks have been applied in Forced Migration Studies to capture the interplay of economic, political and social factors that shape displacement. Looking at Syrian refugee households through a livelihoods lens allows us to disentangle their various forms of assets, capabilities and survival strategies before 2011 and after the onset of the Syrian conflict (cf. Chambers and Conways 1992). Studies with refugees highlight the importance of remittances in complementing precarious work in the informal sector and humanitarian assistance, but also refugees’ economic agency in assisting loved ones in sites of origin and refuge in the Global South (e.g. Horst 2006; Jacobsen, Ayoub and Johnson 2014; Lindley 2010; Omata 2017). Hence, we cannot merely look at Syrian families in Mafraq at the local level – the study of refugee livelihoods requires a multiscalar approach that remains sensible to country-specific refugee reception policies that shape Syrians’ lives in Jordan, but also to Syrians’ transnational, mobility-based practices (cf. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019). While most refugee livelihoods research focuses on North-South transfers, in this article, I look at support networks *within* the Global South. My interlocutors’ various income-generating activities transcend a purely economic rationale, and are embedded instead in a dense web of social obligations, affection and shared responsibilities (cf. Lindley 2010). Thus, a livelihoods lens is particularly suited to this research because it uncovers the role of refugees’ *non-monetary* resources. Acknowledging the role of cross-border kinship ties, through which dispersed families circulate resources in times of peace and war, is not meant to present refugees’ social capital as a panacea for precarious lives but rather highlight how transnational connections have helped poor Syrians cope with structural marginalization and the lack of stable income in pre-war Syria, and later in Jordan.

The first section of this article argues that migration has long been a livelihoods strategy for the rural poor in Syria, with remittances serving as old age provision and contributing to rural development. Following Ramsay (2020), I maintain that we should broaden our understanding of the ways in which refugees are displaced – not always by sheer force, but also by economic and ecological crises. Hence, this research goes beyond a narrow focus on conflict-induced displacement by drawing attention to wider processes of joint “migrantization” and “precarization” that “concern the

economic and social condition of some people and that make it more difficult for them to stay in a certain place or to move” (Garelli and Tazziolo 2017: 72).

The later parts of the article look at how Syrian refugees in Jordan mobilize pre-war transnational ties to access jobs in agriculture and the humanitarian sector (section 2), and redistribute their income through kinship-based cross-border networks (section 3). Since 2011, the role of Syrians’ transnational networks in facilitating the Syrian revolution has come under scrutiny (e.g. Leenders & Heydemann 2020). Scholars have also examined the impact of displacement on refugees’ social relations in Jordan. While the financial pressures and social isolation in exile may have damaged family ties (Stevens 2016), Lokot (2018) cautions against simplistic assumptions about the shattering of Syrian families, the emasculation of Syrian men and higher workload for women. Following Lokot (2018), I argue that conflict-induced displacement and border closures do not simply disrupt, but rather *reshape* transnational kinship-based networks and coping strategies: geographically, but also with regard to the diversification of sources of income and gendered responsibilities.

This article draws on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian refugees in Mafraq between 2015 and 2017 which I conducted as part of my doctoral thesis at the University of Edinburgh. The research received ethics approval from the University of Edinburgh’s School of Social and Political Science; all names of my Syrian interlocutors have been changed. In 2018, UNHCR statistics counted circa 84,000 refugees in Mafraq (UNHCR 2018b), although the town’s mayor estimated their number at closer to 100,000 at the time of my fieldwork (personal communication, 2016). It was thus symptomatic of the urban nature of displacement in Jordan, where more than 80% of refugees live outside camps (UNHCR 2018a). Like most of Syria’s neighbouring countries, Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees (UNHCR 2018). Since 2011, its open border policies have gradually given way to stricter encampment policies and the closing of remaining border crossings (Achilli 2015). Through volunteering as an interpreter with an NGO-led informal education project, I was able to accompany a dozen Syrian teachers for a year. On average, I saw them once or twice a week as part of training sessions that NGO members held in their living rooms. As I lived in Mafraq for all of 2016, I also visited the teachers privately. All were aware of my PhD research, and male teachers like Adnan and Baher gave me historical “mini-lectures” to help with my thesis, often over a cup of tea or lunch. The relationship of trust that I managed to build with the teachers’ families allowed me to overcome a major obstacle to my research: like most refugees, my interlocutors were reluctant to reveal sources of income, for fear of losing humanitarian assistance (Abu Hamad et al. 2017). At least on the Syrians’ side in Mafraq which I

could observe more directly, refugees are struggling to survive and pool resources through a combination of informal work, aid money and support from family members and neighbours, none of which comes on a permanent and foreseeable basis. My friends sometimes confided in me about their money-sending plans because they were hoping that I might lobby NGOs on their behalf. I was also present for the rare visits of male remittance-senders, my friends' fathers, grandfathers and brothers, from the Gulf. This article retraces the movements, employment-seeking and family-making strategies of two of the Syrian teachers, Adnan and Baher, and their kin.

Before 2011: Labour migrations as old-age provision and rural development

The first section of this article looks at the role of migration as a livelihoods strategy of Syria's rural poor before 2011. I argue that remittances from seasonal migration helped rural households cope with economic shocks and uncertainty, and allowed rural families to make long-term plans.

Adnan and Baher, both in their early thirties, only met in Mafraq in 2016. Until then, however, both men had led surprisingly similar lives. They grew up in villages in climatically transitional areas in northern and central Syria where frequent droughts made farming difficult (FAO and WFP 2016). Coming of age in the early 2000s, they were part of a young generation of Syrians who had benefited from infrastructural, agricultural and educational reforms but were still outside the regime's clientelist networks that would have granted them access to white-collar jobs (Imady 2014). Adnan and Baher nurtured dreams of higher education but spent at least part of the 2000s as low-skilled labour migrants in Syria's neighbouring countries. Before 2011, Syria was a main source for migrant workers in the Middle East, as natural and man-made factors plunged poor and, increasingly, middle-class Syrians into precarity. While the Syrian state expanded infrastructure and public services to the countryside and co-opted rural populations through career opportunities in state bureaucracies and the military, the poorest segment of the rural population failed to benefit from these measures (Batatu 1999; Hinnebusch et al. 2013). As Rabo (2017) describes in the context of Raqqa province, the shift to irrigated and mechanized agriculture, first by urban agricultural entrepreneurs, and since the 1960s by the Syrian state, had upended rural hierarchies of class and property, creating new aspirations about employment in the public sector which were only partly fulfilled. Since the 1970s, the inclusion of villagers into cash economies also fuelled migrations. In the 1990s, Syria transitioned from socialist experiments to crony capitalism and witnessed the emergence of an excess workforce: the rural (and urban) poor. Rapid population growth played a major role in this: between 1970 and 2000, the number of rural inhabitants more than doubled,

from 3.5 million to 7.9 million (Azmeah 2014). In 2002, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated youth unemployment at over 70% (Schmidt 2006).

On his phone, Adnan showed me pictures of the earthen beehive houses that his native region is famous for. He and his family came from Jabal al-Hoss, a rural area in the northern Aleppo governorate, a day trip away from the Jordanian border. When Adnan was a child in the 1980s, there was only one elementary school. His father, a well-respected man and well off to local standards, allowed him to continue his education in a neighbouring village and paid for the transportation costs – a solution out of reach for female students whose freedom of movement was more restricted, and who did not have access to schooling until the 2000s. Life was rough in remote places. As Adnan put it: “We have always been poor”. Khadija, a cousin of his, laconically remarked: “Picking up vegetables from the ground was hard.” In her village, nobody had the necessary qualifications to work better jobs. A 2003 UNDP report described Jabal al-Hoss as hardly fit for farming: “Jabal al-Hoss with its 157 villages is one of the poorest areas in Syria. The villages are known for the beauty of their houses in the shape of mud domes; but life is harsh, given the rocky surface of the land and the dry climate” (Seibel and Imady 2003: 4). In the mid-2000s, villagers were mostly young, poorly educated and had a high birth rate. Their annual income was less than one sixth of the national average. Daily wages in the informal rural economy amounted to ca. 2 USD for women and 4 USD for men (Seibel and Imady 2003). Against the backdrop of increasing precarity, poor Syrians’ circular migrations kept lives in the countryside afloat. In a study in Jabal al-Hoss, Abdelali-Martini and Hamza (2014) found that poorer and larger families were more likely to send out migrants. By way of illustration, Adnan’s father owned approx. 100 dirham in land (approx. ten hectares) - but he also had many children. Seasonal migrants like Adnan, often younger sons, usually retained small parcels of land that they built new houses on, in which they invested the returns of their migrations abroad, and where they planned to settle down in old age. For families with migrants, remittances represented a significant source of cash – on average fifty per cent of the annual income (Abdelali-Martini and Hamza 2014). But remittances were more than just an old-age provision. Rural households with no access to formal banking services also used them to pay for derocking land and farming inputs. Hence, migrant households often achieved higher yields, and remittances thus contributed to rural development (Abdelali-Martini and Hamza 2014).

For male Syrians born in the 1980s who had access to better education, menial and other income-generating activities were increasingly intertwined. Baher, a man from Mheen in Homs governorate, had benefitted from being the youngest son, largely free from caring responsibilities for his kin, and

Mheen's strategic location along the Homs railway. Both allowed him to attend university in Homs city and acquire a master's degree. His unusually high qualification in his remote village enabled him to work as a teacher upon his return, when he installed himself permanently with his elderly mother and young wife. However, as a teenager, Baher had not shied away from manual labour. During a semester break, he and his male friends from the village had travelled to Beirut to work on construction sites – his only memory of the metropolis is walking on its famous Corniche at night. Baher was an on-and-off migrant in the 2000s, but his parents' generation had already been mobile in the region at least as early as the 1980s. Baher's father, as well as his wife's father, used to work in Kuwait, and others moved to Saudi Arabia. Other men of the village travelled to Mafraq and the Beqaa Valley for shorter stints. Figure 1 illustrates how migration patterns of these two generations of villagers connected Mheen to places in various countries in the Middle East.

Poor Syrians' migrations as a livelihood strategy have to be understood at the household level. As Adnan and Baher's stories demonstrate, mobilities were highly gendered and conditioned by age and marital status. Different types of migrations and returns occupied distinct roles in the household life cycle – they were linked to preparing for marriage, raising children, caring for the elderly and preparing for one's own old age. Young single men from rural areas sought work in agriculture in the Jordanian and Lebanese borderlands, often for as short as a week, and during breaks from school and university studies. Many also found short-term employment on construction sites and in restaurants in Beirut, a spell of freedom from conservative village norms fondly remembered by several of my Syrian acquaintances. But the ultimate goal of working abroad was to maximize savings to expand the family home in one's community of origin – often by simply adding another room to it – and to get married. After founding a family of one's own, my interlocutors' migration strategies changed. Some of them took their wives and children to work on farms in neighbouring countries or in more prosperous areas in Syria. As a child, Adnan had accompanied his parents and older siblings to the fields in northern Syria and later brought his own family. For him, picking olives alongside his relatives in the Afrin area, a region northwest of Aleppo famous for its olive oil, was one of his fondest childhood memories. Sharing food in the open brought several generations together and created a strong bond between family members. Many years later, when he and his wife found jobs in the olive harvest close to Mafraq as refugees, they kept up the tradition of late-morning picnics. Older male heads of households also engaged in more permanent forms of migration; they found work as drivers, gardeners and in factories in the Gulf. Baher's father-in-law, a man in his fifties, has spent the last decade working menial jobs in Kuwait. While constantly sending remittances, he only visited his family a couple of times every year before 2011, usually at the

occasion of Islamic holidays. As some Syrians went abroad for longer, they incurred a greater “social debt” (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999: 286) to family members back home. Migration to the Gulf was more expensive and required the help of middlemen from their kinship networks who were already successfully established in destination countries and could procure work visas. As workers stayed away for longer, they also had to entrust their wives and children to the care of relatives. In return, this created stronger obligations towards an extended circle of relatives, the repercussions of which are still felt in displaced Syrian families in present-day Mafraq.

Syrians from Mheen and Jabal al-Hoss, although from different governorates, thus engaged in similar patterns of movement. Indeed, my findings seem to reflect wider mobility strategies of poor rural populations in pre-war Syria. Ethnographic evidence of seasonal migration of peasants inside Syria and to Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf also comes from studies on Raqqa province (Rabo 2017), rural Aleppo (Wessel 2008), and research with Syrian migrants in Abu Dhabi (Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999). According to estimates of the World Bank (WB), there were almost one million Syrian emigrants in 2010 (quoted in Seeberg 2013). In 2013, the top three countries of Syrian settlement were Saudi Arabia - home to one quarter of long-term Syrian migrants -, Lebanon, and Jordan (MPC 2013). However, there are no recent statistics for Syrians on the Arabian Peninsula (Fargues and Fandrich 2012; MPC 2013), nor do available data include seasonal migrant workers in Lebanon, estimated at 300,000-500,000 in 2010 (Mehchy and Doko 2011). In pre-2011 Jordan, legal Syrian migrant workers made up a tiny percentage of the 230,000 registered work permit holders from other Arab countries – they mostly worked in manufacturing, construction and trade (De Bel-Air 2013). Given the informal nature of employment in agriculture, these figures probably understate the (intermittent) pre-war presence of Syrians on Jordanian fields.

While my interlocutors migrated frequently, it was usually for short stints. They had a clear sense of where home lay – in the village – and hardly considered themselves nomads. Chalcraft (2009) argues that spatial proximity, open borders and the availability of social security back home in Syria created a condition of “prolonged unsettlement” for migrant workers in Lebanon. While Syrian workers were attracted by higher wages abroad, they found it cheaper to leave families behind and access public services in their home country. Increasingly hostile immigration policies also prevented Syrians’ integration into host societies in Jordan (De Bel Air 2008; Van Aken 2005), Lebanon (Chalcraft 2007) and the Gulf (Thiollet 2017). Rabo (2017) describes the delicate balance between villagers’ mobility aspirations, and feelings of rootedness. In Raqqa, as in Jabal al-Hoss and Mheen, migrants’ sense of belonging translated into frequent return travels and investments into houses and businesses. As

Rabo (2017) poignantly remarks: “Labour migration was generally seen as temporary, even when it stretched over decades” (65). But home was also a place of refuge where Syrian workers could retreat to during crises in their destination countries. In 2005, hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers briefly returned from Lebanon when the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, presumably orchestrated by the Assad regime, triggered anti-Syrian protests (Chalcraft 2005).

To complicate the picture, some of my Syrian interlocutors in Mafraq were displaced before coming to Jordan as *refugees*. Some people’s pre-war mobility patterns combined labour migration and economic displacement after the eventual break-down of rural livelihoods in the late 2000s, a situation that is best described by Ramsay’s (2020) concept of “ordinary displacement[s]” (21). Figure 2 retraces Adnan’s travels between 2000 and 2014 – it gives us a sense of how he used mobility to deal with the loss of livelihoods even before the onset of the Syrian conflict. (In figure 2, green arrows indicate labour migrations; black arrows refer to trajectories of internal and cross-border displacement. While dashed arrows represent internal migrations, continuous arrows stand for cross-border movements.) A brief glance at the map reveals a complex and circular pattern of movements where “voluntary” and “forced” migrations were intertwined, and often led Adnan to the same destinations. We already know that Adnan first came to Mafraq as a teenager in 2000 to work as a tiler for a couple of weeks. Back then, he entered Jordan without a proper work visa. Other Syrians in Mafraq confirmed that before 2011, Syrian workers frequently took advantage of lenient visa regulations which allowed them to stay in the country for up to three weeks. However, Adnan soon returned to Jabal al-Hoss where he married a neighbour’s daughter, ten years younger than himself. In the 2000s, Adnan worked for several years as an agricultural labourer in the Deir ez-Zor region, an intensive farming area in Northeastern Syria. In 2008, the cumulative effects of liberalization policies, the privatization of state farms and worsening water scarcity put many farmers out of work, causing a mass exodus from the region - the number of internally displaced people was in the hundreds of thousands (De Châtel 2014; Selby et al. 2017). “From Daraa to As-Suwayda, it was all tents”, Adnan remembered, although his family was lucky enough to rent a cheap house in Daraa. For three years, Adnan and his family commuted between Daraa, where they regularly found work on the fields, and their village of origin in northern Syria, until the peaceful demonstrations in Daraa in spring 2011 heralded the beginning of the Syrian uprising. To stay out of trouble, Adnan took his family back north to Jabal al-Hoss. In November 2014, the bombing in rural Aleppo intensified and they fled to Mafraq.

After 2011, evidence from Jordan (Lagarde and Dorai 2017), Lebanon (Vignal 2018) and Iraqi Kurdistan (De Gonzague and Dessi 2014) suggests that communities from rural Syria managed to capitalize on older connections with foreign employers and relatives abroad to seek refuge and jobs in neighbouring countries. While previously (mostly young) men had migrated, the demographics of mobile people changed. Now, entire families went abroad, even though many of the elderly chose to stay behind. Although many Syrians had migrated widely in the Levant before 2011, for some of them, the connection to Mafraq proved to be a preferential link. There is anecdotal evidence that some Jordanian employers proactively reached out to former Syrian farm workers, inviting them back on their lands. Positive personal working experience and knowledge of transport routes also affected Syrians' decision to seek refuge in northern Jordan. Many interlocutors also highlighted the importance of a shared language and a conservative form of Sunni Islam. Although many have relatives in the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf States have kept their borders closed to refugees and restrictive visa regulations prohibit family reunification. The course of the front lines at the time of their flight also prevented some Syrians from travelling to nearby Lebanon. After 2011, their prior knowledge of employment opportunities, as well as personal contacts with family members in Mafraq motivated Adnan and Baher to take their families to safety in northern Jordan. However, retracing Adnan's pre-war mobilities illustrates the fact that for many Syrians of rural backgrounds, recent cross-border flight was only the last episode in a much longer history of economic disenfranchisement and movements under the radar of negligent or openly hostile Middle Eastern states.

After 2011: Recruitment of refugee labour along kinship lines

Before the Syrian conflict, the mobility of various household members kept families together and allowed them to accumulate resources, as long as they remained firmly centred in rural areas of origin like Mheen and Jabal al-Hoss. After 2011, the gradual hardening of the Syrian-Jordanian border disrupted longstanding mobility circuits, but displacement also derooted my interlocutors more permanently. For the first time, Syrians in Mafraq were prevented from returning home as they pleased, converting a lifelong situation of "prolonged unsettlement" (Chalcraft 2009) into "forced settlement". That refugees remain embedded into cross-border kinship networks explains how populations with few material assets survive in Mafraq: through their ability to pool and circulate available resources. I now turn to two types of employment that Syrians access through their family networks: volunteering with NGOs and informal labour in agriculture. Before 2011, migrant workers were frequently recruited along kinship lines, and men (and sometimes women)

from the same extended families travelled together. In this section, I contend that Syrians' forced stuckness in Jordan has exacerbated power inequalities amongst kin. Displacement has also shifted gender dynamics, opening up new jobs for women, and strengthening the position of female labour contractors.

How displaced Syrians mobilize kinship networks to make a living has to be understood against the backdrop of the dire job situation for refugees in Jordan. Although Baher and Adnan had worked almost constantly since their arrival, they had never held an official work permit. In 2016, the Jordan Compact granted Syrians in Jordan 200,000 work permits in exchange for advantageous loans and preferential access to EU markets (Barbelet, Hagen-Zanker and Mansour-Ille 2018). However, Jordan has fallen short of its target: since 2016, only 122,000 work permits have been issued to Syrian workers (3RP 2019). In fact, Syrian refugees have re-entered highly segmented labour markets in Jordan (El Miri and Mercier 2018). According to an op-ed in the English-speaking Jordan Times, only 3-4% of workers in agriculture are Jordanians (Anani 2017). The massive influx of refugees has led to a surplus of foreign labour, heightening the competition among Syrians and other migrants – in Mafraq, mostly Egyptians – and decreasing Syrians' bargaining power. In 2015, the average monthly income of Syrian workers was below Jordanian minimum wage (Yahya, Kassir and El-Hariri 2018). In autumn 2016, Adnan, his wife and 12-year old son picked olives in the Mafraq region. However, they gave up after a couple of days; the poor pay was not worth it. Egyptian workers were paid 7.5 JD (approx. USD 11) for every *shawl*, the equivalent of roughly 50 kg, i.e. two huge plastic bags full of olives. Some miles away, Adnan's family only earned a third of this. While Jordanian employers have little incentive to regularize Syrian labourers (Bellamy et al. 2017), hundreds of Syrian refugees caught working in the informal economy have been deported to Syria (Human Rights Watch 2017) and the camps (Achilli 2015).

Former Syrian labour migrants sometimes serve as labour brokers in the agricultural sector. Often those who relocated to Jordan earlier and on a more permanent basis, they assume the role of mediators between newly arrived Syrians and Jordanian employers, with considerable power in their hands. A look at the networks that Mahmood, one of these agents, managed to build, gives us an impression of his dense web of relations with local economies and migrant workers, and how business interests might trump family obligations. I met Mahmood through his half-sister Khadija, Adnan's cousin. Mahmood's case accentuates the ambivalent nature of refugees' kinship networks: in a hierarchical informal economy, Syrians participate in exploiting their compatriots. His life as a young man resembles the ethnographic narratives I have presented so far, with hard, menial labour

and frequent migration experiences. From the same extended family as Adnan in Jabal al-Hoss, Mahmood worked in Lebanon as a young man, before coming to Jordan ten years ago, alternating between jobs in agriculture in the Mafraq area and working as a driver in East Amman. After 2011, he moved from Amman to Mafraq. When his Syrian village of origin came under fire, he invited his elderly parents, siblings and their families to seek refuge in northern Jordan, a story that Khadija confirmed to me: “We came to Mafraq because I already had a brother there.” In summer 2017, Mahmood greeted me at the entrance of the shabby ground-floor apartment that he and his wife shared with one of his sisters and her family. I was surprised to find that the flat’s formal living room, set apart for receiving guests, had recently been refurbished with new plush furniture and carpets. I was accompanied by a young American entrepreneur hoping to start an agricultural project and create employment for Syrian refugees in the area. Introduced to the scheme, Mahmood was enthusiastic. He assured us that he was the perfect cooperation partner as his papers were “in order” and because of his extended networks: “Andi haraka bil souq”, he said, literally: “I have movement in the market.” In this context, it meant that he was involved in many business activities. Besides having the necessary humanitarian documentation, Mahmood was one of the lucky few refugees in Mafraq in possession of a proper work permit, provided by his employer. He went on to impress us with his detailed knowledge of working processes in Jordan: “How many workers should I bring you? Do you want men, women or children? Should they live on site?” And he quickly calculated salaries and living expenses for different types of labourers in his head, before turning to potential buyers, wholesale markets in Amman, container and pallet sizes and different types of vegetable and fruits. What about export, we asked tentatively, having destinations in the Gulf in mind. Mahmood suggested various arrangements with Syrian and Jordanian export companies, including obscure trade routes for exporting to Iraq via Saudi Arabia, or even to Israel. While my head was spinning with the unexpected wealth of information, one of Mahmood’s principles stuck with me: his insistence on employing only Syrians. In his eyes, Jordanian workers were lazy and stubborn, insisting on regular working hours and holidays, while Egyptians were all thieves.

Mahmood’s hiring preferences allow us to draw conclusions about the nature of the networks he has managed to build, and about the ramifications for Syrian refugee workers. The Jordanian employers and potential customers he suggested were heads of companies he had worked for in the past. Those tilling the fields would be recruited from within the Syrian community, most likely from his large extended family. Like Jordanian employers, Mahmood did not hesitate to play out different migrant and refugee populations against each other and thrive on refugees’ legal insecurity. Without Jordanian work permits, most Syrians had no labour rights to begin with. Studying the role of Syrian

middlemen like Mahmood provides insights into how some refugees were more apt to capitalize on pre-war networks with Jordanian employers than others, and how, as a consequence, existing power hierarchies were cemented within the refugee community and kinship groups. To Mahmood, fellow Syrians were a mobile resource, people whose longstanding survival strategies he could exploit. No wonder a power broker like Mahmood could afford new furniture for his living room – but he also had to decorate in a manner befitting his social status, to set the stage for the reception of supplicants asking for jobs.

As Stevens (2016) points out, Syrian refugees in Jordan also use their social networks to find volunteering opportunities with NGOs. While humanitarian aid is a new source of income for Syrian families, this has also created new jobs and responsibilities for Syrian *women*. Before 2011, rural women sometimes travelled abroad with their husbands and children, and undertook low-skilled tasks in agriculture. There is limited evidence of female labour contractors and all-female wage labour groups in Syria in the 2000s (Abdelali-Martini & Dey De Pryck 2015), but in present-day Jordan, Syrian women usually went to the fields with male relatives, earned lower wages, and their salaries were often handed over to their fathers. A new experience for many Syrians, though, is that NGOs have a preference for assisting and working with females (Turner 2019). In Mafraq, a newly emerged humanitarian hub, Baher tried to use kinship ties with Layan, a distant relative, to find a job in an NGO-run kindergarten. Layan's story illustrates how Syrian women gain access to humanitarian money and other resources, and how their distribution is negotiated with husbands and the wider family. Layan, an extroverted woman from Mheen and mother of two, was the main provider for her children and husband. She had left school at the age of fourteen to get married, a life trajectory not uncommon in her village of origin. In Mafraq, she had successfully established herself as a focal point for various grassroots NGOs, thanks to her excellent networking skills, but also the availability of a spare room in her apartment that she readily opened up for gatherings for free. Layan was involved in running several kindergartens for Syrian children dispersed all over the city. In 2016, she was one of the few Syrians in Mafraq I knew who had an official work permit, obtained for her by her employer, an international Evangelical organization with abundant funds. Over time, I became aware of the pressure that fellow refugees from her extended family exerted on Layan. Not only did Syrians keep strong connections with their relatives back home. As entire villages had relocated to Mafraq and Jordan together, Layan's obligations also extended to dozens of family members in the town itself. After keeping Baher waiting for weeks, Layan (falsely) informed him that the NGO he was currently teaching for prohibited him from taking on an additional job in the kindergarten. When Baher passed the phone to me so I could verify her claims, she played ignorant. Only later did it

occur to me that her delaying tactics fulfilled a specific purpose: ending her social responsibilities towards her next of kin without losing face or confronting them in the open. The pressure of social networks came to a head when Layan's husband broke her hand over a fight about passing on NGO resources to his relatives. The next day, Layan handed in her notice to her employer, but she soon returned to her job. Although Layan brought financial aid and employment opportunities to her extended family, her husband retained the upper hand when it came to their distribution. While new opportunities might reshuffle kinship ties and gender relations, and create new dependencies, they highlight the persistent importance of family networks for accessing jobs and money. In the final section, I discuss how income from refugee labour in Mafraq in turn benefits kinship networks in and beyond Jordan.

After 2011: Reconfiguring Syrians' positions in transnational remittance-sending networks

In the final part of this article, I turn to how Syrians in Mafraq fulfil their social and economic obligations towards absent family members. As *refugees*, they pursue different remittance-sending strategies than as economic migrants (cf. Vargas-Silva 2017). As I laid out in the first section, pre-war remittances served as migrants' old-age provision, protected rural households from economic shocks, and contributed to rural development. These days, they serve as an emergency lifeline, and are often spent on food and medical treatment. A Syrian money-broker in the North of England who transfers financial support from Syrian diasporas in Europe back to their country of origin, confirmed to me: "These are not huge sums. These days, nobody builds a house in Syria anymore." In Mafraq, refugees who received remittances also used them to pay the rent, and to sponsor wedding celebrations. With Syrian women having newly found access to humanitarian assistance, this has also led to the feminisation of remittance-sending (cf. Lindley 2010).

Baher's case illustrates that Syrians in Mafraq often find themselves at the intersection of overlapping family connections. When I asked him whom he would turn to in case of an emergency, he could not think of anybody at first, but then remembered his father-in-law. Baher's father-in-law, a man in his fifties, has worked as a driver in Kuwait for the last seven years. He has twenty children from three wives, two of whom are currently in Azraq camp in Jordan, among them the 45-year old mother of Rania, Baher's wife. One of Rania's stepmothers is waiting in Rukban camp in a no man's land between the Syrian and the Jordanian border. Two of Rania's brothers and a sister also sought refuge in Aleppo governorate. Rania's father supports all of them, and remittances are received in Syria, Mafraq and Jordanian camps. For example, her father sent money when Rania's youngest

daughter was sick with bloody diarrhoea, and the family had to take her to the hospital for treatment on a daily basis. In return, Baher also transfers money to his own relatives inside Syria, usually in small quantities and on an ad hoc basis. "You know, some people cannot leave Syria... Their situation is very bad... When we have some leftover money, 20, 30 JD (approx. USD 28-42) I send it to them... We only buy the necessary, but we survive. When I have 50 JD (approx. USD 71), I send it to my family in Syria." The money makes its way inside Syria with the help of informal brokers who take a huge commission, up to 10% of the entire sum. A look at Baher's monetary connections to various places in Syria, Jordan and the Gulf highlights that refugees have replicated pre-war remittance patterns, albeit at a much smaller scale. Many of my interlocutors felt a moral obligation to support family members left behind, but also that this was what was expected of them. "When we go home, they will ask: What did you bring?", one of my Syrian friends explained. Before 2011, many Syrian migrants did not intend to stay abroad, and thus tried to maximize their savings, planning to spend their salaries in their villages of origin. Having returned to Mafraq as *refugees*, this is what they still do, but today's funds are mostly raised from intermittent humanitarian assistance, in addition to waged labour. Syrians' monetary practices indicate that, although the volume of remittances might be too small to be of any macroeconomic importance, they could represent a lifeline for the rural poor left behind in Syria and refugees stuck in neighbouring countries (REACH 2017; Wilson and Krystalli 2017). Available statistics bear out these ethnographic observations about the complex nature of remittance-sending patterns within individual families. In a small-scale survey, Chegade, Navarro and Sobol (2017) find that 13% of Syrian refugees in Jordan send or receive international remittances. Half of those who get remittances do so from the Gulf countries. But Syrians also obtain money from Lebanon and Turkey, and even from inside Syria. Conversely, 90% of Syrians who engage in remittance-sending transfer money to Syria. In 2019, remittances sent to Syria through formal channels alone amounted to 1.6 billion USD (KNOMAD 2020). Most come from Saudi Arabia (29%), Lebanon (17%), Jordan (15%) and Turkey (14%). But the share of remittances from Syria's neighbouring countries is probably even higher because money also physically travels with cross-border smugglers (Christou 2020).

I asked Khadija how she sent money to her husband's elderly parents back home in Jabal al-Hoss. "It's someone from the village", she replied – the money-broker in question was a distant relative of hers. Syrian refugees in Mafraq make use of the *hawala* system, an established system of money transfer in the Middle East and Asia in parallel or outside the formal banking sector. Usually, neither the money nor the sender's contact person physically move. Rather, the money-broker contacts his local representative in the destination area who then hands out the money to the payee, minus a

transfer fee usually paid for by the sender. As in Khadija's case, senders, recipients, brokers and various middle-men often come from the same extended family (Dean 2015). Their remittance-sending practices have to be understood in the continuity of more longstanding monetary habits. Even before 2011, poor rural populations like those from Jabal al-Hoss had frequently relied on informal and expensive money brokers because they had been excluded from the formal banking system (Imady 2014). In Jordanian exile, the informal services that Khadija and her family used proved astonishingly reliable. A study with Syrian refugees in Irbid, a neighbouring city of Mafraq, found that 36% used individual businessmen and 21% relied on family connections to transfer money into Syria. Most deposits were made in cash and usually reached their destination within three days. While registered money-transfer services were mostly confined to urban centres, informal agents also delivered money to more remote rural areas (Dean 2015).

However, Syrian refugees in Mafraq do not only send remittances, they are also at the receiving end from supportive families (figure 3; red arrows represent remittance-sending, while green arrows stand for remittances received from elsewhere). On the one hand, new remittance routes reflect the emergence of Syrian diasporas elsewhere, e.g. in Germany, where many refugees in Mafraq have relatives. On the other hand, existing support networks are partly reoriented towards new destinations. Instead of assisting their families in Mheen, older Syrian men in the Gulf like Baher's father-in-law now wire money to Mafraq, usually via established financial services companies, as evidenced by the long daily queues in front of the Mafraq office of Western Union. As it is deducted from Syrian workers' salaries in the Gulf, it arrives on a more regular basis. I heard about a woman who received JOD 400 (ca. USD 564) every month from her husband, a migrant worker in Kuwait. For some Syrians in Mafraq, remittances from relatives in Saudi Arabia pay the monthly rent. A study with Syrians in urban Jordan and Zaatari camp also confirms that refugees mainly receive financial support from relatives working in the Gulf (REACH 2017). These connections are upheld in person, as Syrians residing on the Arabian Peninsula are not subject to the same travel restrictions as those registered as "refugees" in Jordan. Visitors from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – often a father, uncle, brother or husband - were a common occurrence in Mafraq during my stay. Finally, another example of emerging remittance corridors concerns the exchange of urban and camp-based refugees in Jordan. Like Baher, many Syrians in Mafraq send money to their relatives in Azraq and Zaatari camp. This echoes Van Hear's (2009) point that displaced people may remit in different directions.

In sum, what emerges is a complex picture of surprisingly robust transnational kinship networks, in which Syrian refugees are both givers and receivers. While people's movements were disrupted by

hardened state borders, they continue to send and receive money. Remittances, then, represent a critical lifeline for some Syrian refugees in Mafraq, a finding that resonates with evidence on money-sending in other humanitarian contexts (e.g. Horst 2006). However, obligations towards relatives back home might also be an important factor in preventing Syrians from making savings in exile. When they come into the possession of smaller sums, they often pass them on (cf. Hammond 2010; Lindley 2010). Unable to build a financial safety net, refugees thus remain exposed to the adversities of life, a situation compounded by the irregular nature of seasonal employment and humanitarian assistance. Let us revisit Joseph's (1994, 2004) claim that despite the predominance of kinship-based relations, families are not static, and mutual obligations are frequently contested. As Layan's example in the previous section illustrates, refugees' transnational kinship networks contain considerable conflict potential, especially when conflicts over the redistribution of scarce resources lead to marital strife and falling out with kinfolk abroad.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented ethnographic findings that challenge an atomistic and localized understanding of refugee livelihoods. My fieldwork in northern Jordan demonstrates that displaced Syrians can be contributors and receivers in vast kinship-based networks, and that the household economies of refugees, migrants, and those left behind, in Syria, Jordan, the Gulf, and now Europe, are intertwined. I showed that long before 2011, men's (and sometimes women's) seasonal migrations had been a livelihoods strategy for Syrians' rural poor, providing their families with cash for houses to retire in, and for upscaling agricultural production. After 2011, jobs and money circulated through transnational kinship networks again make an important contribution to Syrian livelihoods, this time not for long-term plans, but mostly for the sake of short-term survival. Syrian displacement has followed a complex logic: far from being a one-way street, it is often embedded into more longstanding and circular forms of movement, including voluntary and forced migrations within Syria and beyond its confines. Saving one's lives might become entangled with making (and sending) money (cf. Monsutti 2008). Easton-Calabria and Herson (2019) have suggested revaluing the web of relationships that refugees find themselves in. However, this article does not seek to romanticize my interlocutors' practices of transnational family-making. While cross-border kinship networks have been expanded, these days extending from villages in Syria to sites of refuge in camps and urban areas in neighbouring countries and far-away Europe, conflict has also created new dependencies and entrenched old ones. Transnational families may thus prove an ambivalent lifeline.

The lack of a coordinated aid response at the regional level has turned Middle Eastern countries into a laboratory for humanitarian programmes that foster urban refugees' economic self-reliance. There is now a substantial body of literature on humanitarian livelihoods programming in displacement that calls into question to which extent refugees' "economic" empowerment can help address wider protection issues. Most programmes fail because they do not provide enabling conditions for refugee labour, overlooking weak host economies and, importantly, displaced populations' lack of rights (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018). Instead of enhancing refugees' self-sufficiency, they might create more complicated relationships of economic dependency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011) and benefit poor locals more than refugees (Carpi 2017). What is more, displaced people's perspectives and aspirations are so far largely absent from the design of livelihoods programmes (Barbelet and Wake 2017). My argument about Syrians' long-standing mobility-based livelihoods strategies can inspire a wider critique of humanitarian attempts at making refugees "productive", because it helps us connect the dots between the multiple economic, ecological and conflict-induced displacements that people like Adnan have experienced in their lifetime. Hence, I suggest we shift our focus from the exceptional plight of refugees, and to the wider political economy that makes possible the exploitation of refugees. Recently, Besteman (2019) and others have drawn attention to how global capitalism affects people from the Global South who are also subject to restrictive migration governance (cf. Bhagat 2020; Lewis et al. 2015; Rajaram 2018). They put the spotlight on how controlling the movements – often justified in the lingo of "refugee crises" - and exploiting the labour of people from the Global South go hand in hand. Looking at Syrian displacement(s) through a political economy lens allows us to reconsider the forces that shape refugees' legal limbo and lack of steady income in Jordan. The latter are the result of the host country's and European countries' restrictive refugee-reception policies and dwindling international funds. But refugees' predicament is also part of a global story of how capitalist economies shape mobility regimes, pushing marginalized people – refugees, migrants and citizens – to accept informal and exploitative labour. This is particularly true for people like Adnan, who has worked informally in agriculture for all his life. For decades, migrant labour has played a central role in agriculture in the Mediterranean, because the inclusion of regional economies into transnational supply chains has increased pressure on farmers (Corrado, De Castro & Perrotta 2017; Gertel & Sippel 2014). The latter pass down the burden by subcontracting cheap, flexible and exploitable workforces, often irregular migrants. In times of crises, these seasonal workers bear the brunt of economic shocks. As I showed in this article, informal recruitment and seasonal labour are nothing new to many Syrians, who used to

migrate extensively in the Levant before 2011. Yet, as *refugees*, they have been reinserted at the very bottom of segmented agricultural labour markets.

Instead of producing more (bad) jobs for refugees in the Global South, how could humanitarian action create decent jobs? Against the backdrop of Syrians' longstanding presence in Lebanon, El Miri and Mercier (2018) advocate for a policy alternative to refugee repatriation and resettlement – for a *right to circulation*. Sadly, at a time of closed borders and ongoing conflict in some parts of Syria, this seems like a distant dream. In the more immediate future, making Syrian workers less vulnerable to exploitative labour may potentially benefit extended families, but interventions need to remain sensitive to mobility-based livelihoods strategies, for example through mobile forms of shelter, legal literacy trainings, and institutionalising the role of labour contractors. Vocational trainings more in sync with employers' needs will reduce the need for middlemen and facilitate more long-term employment. There is also an urgent need to strengthen Middle Eastern countries' capacity to inspect Syrians' workplaces and uphold labour standards (Kelberer 2017). My findings can inspire advocacy with policymakers in the Middle East for the acknowledgement of Syrians' contribution to host countries' economies, and for extending their protection as refugees and as *labourers*.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a networked understanding of refugee livelihoods also has implications for emergency aid. The loss of jobs and low oil prices in the GCC countries will severely affect Syrians' ability to remit. Border closures also affect the material movements of money from Syria's neighbouring countries, and local lockdowns prevent Syrians from accessing informal hawala agents (Christou 2020). In Jordan, less than half of 49,000 newly identified vulnerable refugee families have received emergency cash assistance (UNHCR 2020). It is important that the international community comprehends the economic domino effects of COVID-19 measures on displaced people's livelihoods all over the region. Given Syrian refugees' lack of access to formal banking services in Jordan (Chehade, Navarro & Sobol 2017), aid providers might want to start by expanding formal channels and reduce transaction costs for refugee remittances, so that money (and love) can still travel.

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