Testimonies of Syrian academic displacement post-2011: Time, place and the agentic self

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of protracted displacement in a group of 19 displaced Syrian academics now living in Turkey who are often referred to as the 'precariat'–that is, a group or collective of people who are living in conditions of high unpredictability, insecurity and uncertainty. As part of a small-scale collaborative professional enquiry semi-structured interviews with these academics were conducted to understand the social, affective and professional experiences, needs and concerns of the academics during and after their forced displacement.

The key concepts of 'precarity' and 'crises of selfhood', alongside memory and testimony, inform the analysis. This article seeks to provide an account of this collective experience and its complex character and concludes with observations on how one might understand the constraints on professional agency and how might one support displaced academics in such contexts. Solidarity in exile and the development of political friendships are argued for as a principle to inform all work (Arendt, 1958).

Introduction

There is a growing body of work on global human movement, particularly in relation to the human experiences of, and conditions underlying, displacement, exile and resettlement. There is also a well-established body of work on academics operating under the exigencies of conflict or dictatorships (see Bacevic, 2014; Noveilli, Higgins, Ugur, & Valiente, 2015). Only a limited number of studies, however, have examined the experiences of academics who are displaced by the exigencies of war, conflict and political instability. There is also much less work on the nature and function of memory, testimony and witnessing as they relate to professional displacement and the study of academic professional identity.

Tigau (2019) attributes this literature gap on conflict-induced displacement of skilled professionals to the difficulty of obtaining robust data on the subject, the assumed small numbers of displaced academics in comparison to the overall number of displaced groups, and a

humanitarian emphasis on younger migrants in primary and secondary schools (see Bacevic, 2014). Less attention has therefore been given to displaced academics and professional identity in Conflict Studies: that is bridging the gap between the field of memory studies to the challenges faced by displaced scholars and their experiences of professional identity, estrangement and loss. Here we are not simply defining loss in human terms, however important. Rather, we speak in particular to the injuries incurred through a loss of professional identity as a feature of displacement and how such loss can mobilise new actions. In a recent paper, Salehyan (2019:146) argues for more substantive research about the forced migration of academics. Indeed, in an environment of increasing mistrust toward, and restrictions upon, the movement of displaced populations, alongside the threatened integrity of HE in conflict (see Dillabough & Bose, 2020; Dillabough, Bose, Buckner, Robertson & Maber, 2020), research with displaced academics offers one window of understanding into the ways that professional lives are dismantled and remade in spaces of precarity and unpredictability. Such work illustrates the complexity of the displacement process, its changing character over time and highlights its human costs and consequences. Within HE and conflict spaces, it helps us understand how displacement represents what Morley, Alexiadou, Garaz, González-Monteagudo and Taba, 2018;

Table 1
Characteristics of the interviewees.

No of interviewees	Gender	Nationality	Career stage	Subject specialism
19	All male	19 Syrian	Mid and late career	Agriculture Applied Chemistry Civil Engineering Communication Systems Economics Electrical Engineering Geography History Law Math and Data Analysis Math and Informatics Medicine Religious Studies Water Management

see also Kim 2010) refer to as an 'active engagement with otherness' as a feature of academic life during war.

Morley, Alexiadou, Garaz, González-Monteagudo and Taba (2018) focus on academic mobility, migration and HE and have identified the importance of qualitative HE research in informing the debate about internationalisation, 'otherness' and academics. As one attempt to respond to this concern, we focus on the academic experiences of 'otherness' through forced mobility and conflict; a very particular kind of human movement forced upon a group often seen as possessing the capacity for 'free' mobility premised upon their symbolic capital and contingent upon regional and international geo-political constraints.

As is now well documented, the vast scale of internal displacement, external and secondary displacement, death, and brain drain resulting from the Syrian conflict post-2011 is the largest since World War II. (Abbara, Coutts, Fouad, Ismail, & Orcutt, 2016: Milton, 2019). In 2019, the UN High Commission on Human Rights estimated that at least fifty percent of Syria's population has been displaced, mainly to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

By 2015, and after four years of devastating war, Syria had lost approximately one-third of its professors (Abdo, 2015), researchers and HE students. Academics were also forcibly removed from their posts with no account of why (Al-Haj & Nelson, 2016), many teaching faculty resigned, and large numbers were detained for varied periods (Baladi, 2016). Interviews conducted by our team, alongside the work of Milton (2018), suggest that it was often the most qualified professors who left, as they had the strongest job prospects abroad, and remaining posts were usually filled by less experienced staff.

In many parts of the world, academics are seen as occupying a significant place in shaping the future of societies, carrying social and cultural capital and symbolic power. In some societies, they are also seen as reflexive agents of change and use this reflexivity to transform the existing order of things. In authoritarian contexts, however, such reflexivity is seen as a threat to the state's conception of order, particularly in relation to academic freedom, free speech and political action and make them targets in the political economies of warfare. A significant event witnessed in our testimonies was the bombing of Aleppo University on January 15, 2013 where 87 people were reported killed and the Faculty of Architecture and the dormitories were destroyed, which housed internally displaced students and staff. This is only one of many examples where HE represented a dramatic stage for conflict leading to displacement.

The testimonials in this research provide traces of the form and character of academic displacement. They also provide access to new phenomena related to the role of conflict in the making or undermining of HE knowledge and practice and the forms of governance that HE actors experience during times of conflict. By providing, at least at an exploratory level, conceptual understandings of HE displacement, we can account for both the ways in which displacement is experienced by academics, as well as its unique character in the context of Syria given its history as a state that governed to create repertoires of patrimonial affect and political alliance since the Baathist coup d'état of 1963. Temporality and conflicts of the self – both personal and professional – are crucial features of these displacement narratives.

Context of the inquiry

In 2017 we undertook a collaborative inquiry between a group of Syrian academics in exile in Turkey and a team at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education, supported by CARA (Council for At-Risk Academics). We sought to examine the state of Syrian Higher Education pre and post 2011, reported more fully in Dillabough et al. 2019, a & b. This joint project had three aims: to develop new capacities of Syrian academics to undertake research using a range of methods new to their professional experience; to assess the state of HE within Syria pre- and post-2011; to make recommendations for Syrian HE into the future; and to identify the challenges faced by those who were displaced (see also Parkinson et al., 2018). We held two workshops in Turkey in the Spring and Summer of 2017 engaging qualitative approaches to collaboratively co-constructed research, data analysis, as well as the methods of interviewing, and the use of timescape and associated visual methods (see Neale, 2012). Jointly constructed protocols were developed in order to remotely interview HE staff and students who remained in Syria at the time of the study. These protocols were drawn upon by Syrian academics to conduct the interviews remotely due to the need for safety and security measures. (see Dillabough et al., 2018 for a fuller description of our remit).

The Cambridge team also undertook a separate small-scale piece of narrative inquiry with 19 Syrian academics displaced in Turkey, which represents the main empirical component of this paper. All 19 academics had worked in three public universities in Syria (16 in University A, 2 in University B and 1 in University C [1]). Alongside working in public universities several participants experienced working in private universities, which was reported as a widespread practice in Syria at the time (Table 1).

The participants were recipients of scholarships and professional development opportunities in Russia, Yemen, Egypt, India, Sudan and Germany. In 2011 some participants were outside Syria on a scholarship or a fellowship abroad. In all these cases the payment of scholarships or fellowships had been stopped. In terms of work experience apart from Syria and, currently, Turkey, the participants also worked in Jordan, Iraq and India. Some participants are currently unemployed and the majority are not working in their field of specialisation. Great care has been taken to remove any details that might compromise participants' anonymity, including current and previous places of employment, subjects of study, and countries of scholarship or fellowship.

We draw in particular upon Shoshana Felman's concern with narratives or storied accounts as important mediums for witnessing a lived relationship to conflict and historical time (Felman, 2001). Such stories force us to recognise the contingencies of war and conflict in

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[1] Universities are not linked to interviewees' accounts for confidentiality reasons.

culturally specific contexts; in shaping how different HE actors respond during conflict (see Marginson & Yang, 2020); in striving to recognise the plight of HE actors in exile; and to make sense of this conflict to the degree that is possible by constructing a sense of our lives for ourselves with and for others (Poletta, Chen & Ching, 2017; Smith and Waite, 2018; Simon, 2005). The academics exiled in Turkey see themselves as 'representing the past, present and future of Syrian higher education' (Parkinson, 2018:133), so some of what we report may be relevant to other displaced academics as there are similarities to other such accounts in the HE in Emergencies literature (e.g. Watenpaugh, 2013). Beyond accounting for these testimonies, we sought to create forms of witnessing that also follow Sean Field's (2017) directive towards critical empathy as part of witnessing memories of Syrian HE post 2011. This form of empathy does not presume we can comprehend the scale or strength of feelings associated with the atrocity. Rather, we sought to create a frame for egalitarian research conversations which were less directly about trauma and resting more on displacement as a process; events leading to exile; security logics of the Syrian state and HE; self-censorship and HE governance; experiences of personal and professional loss and professional futures; the complexity of human movement and its hardships; and life in the 'there and then' (e.g. conceptions of home and belonging and professional life) and in the 'here and now'. As Field (2017, p660) writes, 'this use of critical empathy is neither in search of reconciliation nor equality. These political ideals are not preconditions for open dialogues'.

Theorising the experience of displacement: memory, temporality, and testimony

There are many ways of conceptualising the impact of war on those who have experienced displacement (see Al Azmeh, Dillabough, Fimyar & McLaughlin, 2020). Here, we draw in particular on the work of Brun (2015) and Felman (2001) who argue that we need to move past viewing protracted displacement as a 'time warp' or 'as static'. This move requires a critical engagement with the concept of time as it is lived, experienced and processed through displacement – a 'temporality of protracted displacement and particularly with how agency is conceptualised within that temporality (p. 20)'. It also involves a recognition of the role of memory, historicity, testimony and narrative selfhood as they are understood within the frame of forced displacement (Arendt, 1958; Field, 2017; Ricoeur, 2010). The current reality for many displaced persons points to unpredictable forms of precarity, and the repetitive experience of trauma, keeping many in a protracted crisis of the 'self' which is seemingly endless or fixed across time (see Al Azmeh et al., 2020; Felman & Laub, 1992). This temporal crisis of selfhood is what Brun (2015, p19) refers to as the experience of 'permanent impermanence' or what Al-Haj Saleh (2018) describes as 'living in the temporary' where individuals feel 'stuck in a present that they do not want to inhabit, awaiting a future that they cannot reach' (Brun, 2015, p19). Within this experience of 'protracted uncertainty', there can also be a crisis of agency where the ability to act against the forces of displacement appear, at least in part, as a 'traumatic mark' (Field, 2001) and professional and reputational status loss embodied by those who are displaced and therefore sometimes unable to realise reimagined potential into the future (Brun, 2015).

That the war in Syria represents a 'traumatic mark' on its landscape and those now living in forced exile is indisputable. Whilst we are not directly concerned in this paper with 'trauma' per se, we examine how forced displacement is remembered and reimagined through the realm of the academic professional. We do so with an eye towards the impact of the traumatic event on the displaced academic's experience of action, the loss of professional identification and the horizons they seek out in new and unfamiliar political landscapes of precarity and political and cultural conflict. We view the experiences of displacement as carrying within them the contingent concepts of culture and conflict as they emerge as part of the traumatic mark, particularly in relation

to social (not individual) suffering representing a collective displaced group. We must also address wider questions of HE and professional displacement as these too are contingent on a loss of particular forms of symbolic capital and national status. Alexander (2004) writes that 'cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness marking their memories forever and changes their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (p. 1). Whilst we are not conflating accounts of testimonial displacement as cultural trauma per se, arguably professional and personal displacement represents at least in part a collective account of both conflicted and embodied cultural experiences: this is what Sztompka (2000) refers to as the body social (Sztompka, 2000; Al Azmeh et al., 2020).

Another domain of conceptualising HE, displacement and conflict takes us into to the realms of history, memory and professional HE imaginaries, particularly when considering academic testimony about 'professional' losses. Arguably, within the realm of HE and conflict, memory is a resource for understanding ourselves as actors. Here we might argue, as Gardner (2010) does, that there are at least two pathways towards the making of history in relation to memory. The first is to act in one's own time in a way significant enough to attract the sustained attention, commentary and reflection of those from a future time, to engage in human actions in ways that are not forgotten, as most such actions routinely are. Hence the necessity for capturing rare memories of displacement. The second is to act in one's own time in pursuit of an understanding of what it was that this or that individual actor from the past was seeking to do, what they felt about the past event and what they remember and experienced as a reconstructed sense of it. This latter point – the desire to understand why we did what we did and what we felt we had to do in 'the there and then' – is important because it moves us away from judging those actors on our own terms. Rather, it forces us to better understand how it is that such things as displacement and future agency and action not only come to tell us something about the role of past political events in the meaning making processes of a storied account of professional identity during conflict (see Al-Azmeh, et al., 2019). They also tell us about the power of testimony in reimagining this past. Testimonies of displacement, through new forms of interpretation, provide one avenue for comprehending this past. Witnessing memories of displacement in the present therefore provides a dialectical space for confronting the over-flowing surplus meaning of such memories, which is always generated by the actions and utterances of historical actors. These actions and utterances, as Ricoeur (2010) reminds us, remain open to new interpretations in the present, both through the retelling of this story through the voice of the central actor and protagonist and through forms of critical empathy offered by the listener (see Field, 2017).

Finally, there must be some sense in which we seek to understand the HE precariat in times of conflict and state crises. As al-Haj Saleh (2018) states, 'to be a refugee is not to live in a strange place, but to live in the time that separates what was before from what is after – that is to live in the temporary. To live in the temporary means to struggle with this extremely precarious situation, with no guarantees of overcoming it (Al-Haj Saleh, 2018, p.9). Brun (2015), Standing (2011) and Saleh (2018) provide powerful illuminations of the experience of the group called 'the precariat' who are 'wrestling with circumstances full of uncertainty and insecurity; able to overcome the precariousness of their situation only with the greatest difficulty' (Saleh, 2018, p.8). Such forms of insecurity and unpredictability create symbolic life-worlds that are experienced as overwhelming degrees of loss in the past whilst simultaneously undermining one's ability to experience belonging, professional recognition and 'home' in the present. The desire of many displaced persons is to return home but survival is contingent on finding new meaning and purpose in the present. Brun (2019) argues that this state of being is often seen as a fixed condition of waiting which is premised on an anticipated 'not yet': one of being 'stuck in a present that they do not want to inhabit, awaiting a future they cannot reach' (p.19). Yet even in this 'permanent impermanence' Brun (2019) argues that

'everyday time flows through routinised practices and survival strategies. Protracted displacement is therefore not static but dynamic:

> 'people's capacities for waiting can be analysed through the changing dynamics of hope created in the meeting point between their everyday lives and geopolitical realities' (p.20).

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews (with the support of interpreters) that were premised on both existing literatures of HE displacement and focused upon the experience of moving into and living in exile after working in Syrian HE. Interviews were premised on eliciting responses that would provide some insight into the cultural worlds of HE before and after the conflict such as national language motifs and symbols expressed in HE about the state (see Wedeen, 1999); the working conditions associated with an authoritarian context bound up in censorship levels which eliminated dialogue on the plurality of Syrian professional identity; the realities of sectarian ties in HE as a consequence of war; HE professional surveillance and the security apparatus; journeys into displacement; and an account of life and work in the present.

Our interviews with the 19 displaced academics were undertaken in a university in Turkey and were recorded with permission on a handheld recording device and were conducted by the Cambridge team and a translator was present in interviews where there was not an Arabic speaker. Interviewees were given the choice of whether they wanted a translator present and interviews ranged from between 1 and 2 hours. They were transcribed and checked with any interviewee concerned about the need to redact any material. Conducting interviews of this kind is an inevitably ethically challenging task. This is so because of the challenges associated with remembering and reliving past atrocities, and confronting the social, economic, professional and personal losses incurred as a consequence of displacement. It was for many in the group the first time they had recounted their experiences in a sustained and reflexive way. These experiences were sometimes difficult to express and difficult to witness. Those who interviewed participants took substantive care in ensuring that interviews were conducted with sensitivity drawing upon forms of 'critical empathy', and ensuring that participants understood and were comfortable with the study's purposes and were extremely clear about confidentiality and the uses of the data. A number of Syrian academics who were identified as co-researchers also acted as critical friends to our analysis of the narrative accounts. Similar inquiry activities have been conducted by Parkinson et al. (2018), Morley, Alexiadou, Garaz, González-Monteagudo & Taba (2018), and Watenpaugh, Fricke and Siegel (2013). Tensions that have been reported concern researching a traumatic experience and the care of the person; feelings of heightened personal insecurity and issues of anonymity and confidentiality; and the challenges of re-representing narratives that have either not been heard before or diifficult to express to 'Western' researchers who tend to interpret experience through Western epistemological lenses. Consent therefore became a paramount but culturally contingent principle and we as researchers ceaselessly strove, through reflexivity, to avoid any preconceived assumptions about participant experience without critical discussions about consent with particpants before conducting interviews.

The role of interpreters was crucial in this process as they were Syrian and had also lived in exile as a consequence of the war. Their degree of familiarity with the context provided a powerful medium of both understanding and critical empathy through which to express their own experiences. In essence, those who interviewed through interpreters (where English was not the medium of expression) essentially took a 'back seat' whilst interpreters engaged in various culturally mediated and embodied translations of the wider conversation, using their own cultural and political histories as part of building new interpretive repertoires of meaning. Here the distinction between interpretation and translation is crucial. Interpreters are researchers of a sort and perform a 'double

hermeneutics' as they seek to play a role in not only recasting the meaning making processes of memory as it is expressed in the present. They also join the conversation by attending to the double meanings present at the micro-level of research questions and a situated understanding of the wider contexts expressed by both participants and the wider social science communities that researchers inhabit. This provides an important recognition that the parameters of the research can never be framed through the research questions alone or represent the sole purpose of the inquiry. Rather, meaning is also generated through the situatedness of the interpreter in relation to the researcher's questions and approaches:

> Inquiry that acknowledges the presence of the double hermeneutic can use reflexivity to better grapple with the interactions of meaning-making present between subject and object [...] By incorporating reflexivity in the research process researchers work to render explicit the effect of the double hermeneutic (Brogden, 2012).

Forced displacement and resettlement: feeling precarious in the 'Not yet'

The academics we interviewed were representative of the academy in many countries. They were from a range of academic backgrounds, worked in a range of fields, in public and private universities and were internationally trained and travelled. They had pride in their academic experiences and high aspirations for themselves, their scholarship, HE in Syria and for the young people they taught. The stories they told were of hope, longing and of protracted displacement. Experiences of precarity and unpredictability continued well past the original time of exile and heightened conflict, with sustained feelings of estrangement and displacement well into resettlement. Many are persistently unemployed or have lost their employment in Turkey as a consequence of the 2019 crackdown on academics; the majority are not working in their field of academic specialisation; and some work in various volunteer roles in HE or NGO's.

Sustained experiences of displacement, however challenging, did not lead to shared stories of normative displacement. In fact, authenticity was a driving feature of the storied accounts. These accounts of 'difference' or otherness have been documented in related work:

> We share the experience of having seen our country decimated by conflict, and having left our homes, our jobs and in some cases our families behind to seek refuge in an unfamiliar new country. But our stories are not the same: we are a disparate group of individuals [...] from different starting points, and at different times. We now live in different cities across Turkey, experience different environments and host cultures, and do not all see each other regularly [...] We were brought together by circumstance and share a responsibility to stay active as scholars [...] to safeguard our nation's intellectual heritage for subsequent generations. (Parkinson 2018, p133).

The temporality of loss and waiting

A major feature of displacement is lost time, lost people, lost identity, lost lives and the complexities surrounding this experience of loss. In the 19 interviews we conducted these temporal features of displacement loomed large (Brun, 2015). We witnessed how these experiences changed over time, the critical temporal events that seemed significant, and how complex, and at times contradictory, such displacement experiences were expressed (see also Morley, Alexiadou, Garaz, González-Monteagudo, & Taba, 2018). Displacement represents complex, dynamic processes which require demanding internal and social management of multiple losses and adaptation to rapidly changing contexts, for 'abrupt and coerced displacement is one of the harshest multiple-loss experiences imaginable' (Shultz et al., 2014, p3). Brun (2015) talks, in particular, of 'active waiting' and 'changing hopes' in the face of protracted displacement. Brun's (2015) work also points to the importance of an

'agency-in-waiting and future perspectives'. Put differently, the temporalities of displacement in the present challenge more modern notions of linear time and the idea of time as progress. Indeed, the idea of 'agency-in-waiting' points to the ways in which displaced groups must necessarily view time as a space of hope, struggle and movement – something akin to a Bergsonian duration (Bergson, 1910) – where measuring time becomes impossible because lived time is mobile and incomplete. For the individual, time can speed up or slow down and here we can witness both slow and fast time as it relates to displacement. We now move forward to provide a more in-depth analysis of these temporalities of displacement as they were experienced and expressed by Syrian academics in this study.

Moving towards exile: mounting pressures, displacement and critical conflict events

Many stories of displacement began with accounts of mounting pressures related to personal and professional safety, particularly within their own HE institutions and their capacity to fulfil their roles as scholars and thinkers. Increased centralised institutional HE politicisation and control of the academy was taking place and impacting on those who worked in it, alongside a degeneration in the conditions of work, research and study. The loss of even limited autonomy invaded all aspects of academic and social life as the authorities increased the monitoring of scholars and their progress, regulating topics of study and research, that are contrasted with a rather idealised versions of the past (Saleh, 2018). The academics testified to appointments becoming increasingly political in the university and enhanced systems of surveillance and security monitoring were reported as omnipresent and increasingly intolerable.

Hassan[1], for example, remarked that, 'I was informed [...] that I should report to an intelligence branch because of a report that says I was speaking up about injustices committed against students and academics. I took one night to think and decided to leave the city [...] immediately. The security situation was very dangerous and the circle of protests was spreading like an oil stain. We received news about the detention of a number of academics from our university [...] Two academics were assassinated. The Mukhabarat[2] would assassinate them and then place the blame on the other side claiming some unknown fictitious groups were responsible for the assassinations.'

Other participants also reported that 'injustice and oppression were present in the whole of Syria'. The 'Day of Outrage' in Daraa in March 2011 - the spark of the revolutionary movement - was identified by many as a critical event in the story of the conflict. Many too highlighted the role of violence and social disruption in shaping their symbolically charged conceptions of time and place. Such testimonials led to nostalgic reimaginings of 'normal life' in the past regardless of previous conflicts which, in turn, also led, for some, to idealised routinised memories. Indeed, experiences of safety are often rooted in our everyday practices and routines (Brun, 2015).

This memory of routine is evidenced in Salah's account of life and work before the onset of war: 'before the crisis, I usually went to work around 7:30 am, until 2 or 3 pm, sometimes at night. After that I would go home, take lunch and go for a walk with my family [...] I had a house, a car, an orchard, and we had family lunches and an office before they [security police] destroyed it'. The significance of control over work, attachments to public things and a sense of order in professional life in these accounts is very evident, as is a sense of predictability.[2,3]

These kinds of idealisations are not new to theoretical accounts of remembering. Routine practices, however mundane, do provide for many a sense of the 'normal' as a bounded human practice. Bourdieu's (2000) phenomenological conception of temporality is apt here: routinised practices and everyday habits 'involve participating in the safe routines that define our lives, such as getting up in the morning,

making breakfast [...] and going to work' (Bourdieu cited in Brun, 2015, p23). Yet when time is suspended during conflict and people have lost such routinised ways of being they are necessarily forced into writing themselves into future stories that move beyond the crisis. They sometimes do so by narrating themselves into spaces of loss and disorder whilst viewing the past as a theatre of belonging and order despite knowledge of earlier state conflicts and crises.

There were also accounts of existing inequalities and divisions between groups and locations such as those HE staff who were urban dwellers and those who worked and lived in rural areas. There was also an increasing and palpable sense within post 2011 memories of Syrian HE of dissatisfaction with HE corruption and wider political injustices in Syrian society. These memories represent Field's (2017) recognition that some memories of atrocity or injustice necessarily force the narrator to come face to face with death, not only as personal threat, but as a recognition that matters of human dignity, when compromised, can also mean a death to civic relationships:

> Injustice and oppression were experienced by everyone until things exploded. People had had enough, even if it meant death, especially when it came to matters of dignity and attacking our children, which we couldn't bear, and therefore we went out wholeheartedly. [...] The oppression was imposed on everyone. [...] (Samir).

The militarisation of the conflict became explicit in HE as did an accompanied rise in surveillance, heightened violence and the monitoring of academics and students. First, 'came the demonstrations and then weapons started to appear' (Saad). Staying alive became increasingly implausible as complex sectarian conflict began to impact on working life and academics in particular. Survivialist strategies were further compromised by threats to student and professional mobility. Student scholarships were retracted for study abroad and many were left financially and professionally destitute. Those left inside Syria were living in dire circumstances due to inflated rents whilst witnessing the universities' failure to pay salaries to survive the costs of war. Movement to work and being employed also became more difficult. Conditions worsened with a shortage of necessities – 'no laboratory, no electricity' – and an increasing sense of precarity emerged. Questions about who a scholar might be in the future became omnipresent: professional identity, belonging and future reputations, dignity and representation began to merge with the sufferings of others — making working difficult if not impossible. This precarity also made critique impossible and eroded social trust:

> I cannot belong to any one of them. I don't know which one is my friend or which one is my enemy, I cannot live in a civil way, you know that, no? So I cannot, I cannot be, you know, I cannot participate, I cannot be with the regime. Absolutely. So I couldn't find any place for me in this situation, this environment. I decided to leave. (Farid)

Many internally displaced survived by moving to another area or region of Syria: for example, some fled to regime-controlled areas whilst still working in a non-regime area or vice versa. What can be seen in the accounts of this early discomfort is both an attempt to survive alongside an increasing disquiet, an inability to accept the situation and a growing sense of being out of sync with the time of conflict (Brun, 2015). Precarity operated at multiple levels: confronting and witnessing the exigencies of war; feeling the overwhelming weight of a heightened politicisation of university spaces, including surveillance and monitoring and security police presence in universities; and the symbolic and tacit violence and associated losses inside HE such as displaced students and the ongoing criminalisation of innocent students and academics through detention.

From precarity to punishment: intensification, politicisation and academics as targets

The intensification of violence, punishment, conflict and war came together to represent another critical moment in the experience of

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[2] All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

[3] Arabic term for intelligence, as in intelligence agency.

displacement. Witnessing the everyday presence of violence, death, heightened insecurity and a recognition of growing human loss in HE was widely reported. Both universities and academics became targets:

> Lots of my colleagues have died and this has had a damaging impact on me. Also, the security situation was very difficult and we used to witness numerous security investigations [...] We were all badly affected. [...] On many occasions, the shelling got inside the university and lots of students were killed. Of course, the source of that shelling was unknown. In addition, lots of students were detained. (Qasim).

Living with such atrocities and human monitoring over time became a greater burden than seemed bearable and the traumatic mark emerged more starkly over time. Those academics working in the most precarious conditions described how such conditions became a terrifying feature of cultural life beyond HE. The now explicit and visible architecture of the authoritarian state loomed large and its policing apparatus created a dramatic theatre of fear and terror. Yusuf, for example, talked of being imprisoned and tortured by many sides of the conflict, by the Ba'ath party and ISIS:

> A group of masked members came to my house. They took me and also took my car. It was a terrifying situation. They beat me and took a rifle and shot above my head to scare me. After that they took me to an underground secret place. There I saw my younger brother and my cousins. They interrogated us and accused us of being at the service of the infidels because we were Kurds and all of this nonsense. To them everyone outside ISIS, even a Muslim from the Al-Nusra Front, is accused of being at the service of the infidels. You are either with them or with the infidels.

The intensification of violence and its role in the politicisation of those working in higher education are also witnessed in individual accounts. Many knew that speaking out had put them at risk of persecution by the security services and fear pervaded their day to day existence. Four of our participants invoked a point in time when they knew they had no choice but to leave Syria. Otherwise, death or imprisonment was inevitable. As Hassan stated,

> In 2012, I was informed that I should report to an intelligence branch because of a report that said I was speaking up about injustices committed against students and academics. I took one night to think and decided to leave the city immediately. The security situation was very dangerous and the circle of protests was spreading like an oil stain. We received news about the detention of a number of academics from our university [...] Two academics were assassinated.

Familial accounts of atrocity, kidnappings of brothers, sisters, children and colleagues and associated punishment pointed to the human costs of conflict and the logics of action necessary for retaining human integrity and hindering future human loss. These logics precipitated decisions to leave the country. The superfluous and dehumanizing character of torture rendered their condition of being human implausible in such a context (Arendt, 1958). Sahir told us that:

> My relatives told us what they faced inside the prison. It's incredible. [...] They hung them like sheep, their hands in the roof, hanging for up to eight hours, and when they released them, they fell on the floor without movement. They used electric shock and cigarettes on their skin, until now you can find the scars on his arm [...]. They prevented them from sleeping [...] Some prisoners would pass away in front of them [...] little amount of food. In the summer, you need a lot of water. They gave them about 200 ml per day.

The bombing of Aleppo University on 15 January 2013, which killed 82 people, was for many the atrocity they had witnessed that they could not bear to live with and remain in Syria. As Edkins (2003) argues, sometimes the unspeakable and unsayable must take place (particularly in authoritarian contexts) before a decision to leave is made. The unspeak-

able contradictions of Syrian citizenship therefore emerged: 'the killers are Syrians and the victims are also Syrians' (Salah).

This internal incoherence of the 'Syrian' and the 'enemy' and the inconsistency of the conflict situation meant that many participants found themselves in potentially life-threatening situations yet unable to derive strategies for survival. For many, it was unclear who represented the enemy or where the threat to order lay in the prevailing climate of uncertainty and paranoia. Indeed, in deceptive authoritarian contexts designed to threaten resistance and encourage regime alliance, such conflicts set the stage for the elimination of human plurality whereby everyone represents one's own estrangement from the social trust within a nation-state. Strangers' or enemies are a common feature of such conflicts. Social bonds and trust are eroded to the point of eradicating the human:

> They ask you 'where is your gun?' [laughs]. 'Which gun?' you tell them. 'The guns the regime gave you. I am a teacher. I'm not selling guns! [...] and you go to the other side, to the regime forces [...] they say you are from the opposition, you are against us.' (Farid).
> When I go to my family, the jihadists ask me: 'you belong to the regime and you are a spy'[...] And when we go back to the university [...] the regime army says the same thing: 'You are a spy for the jihadists'. (Sahir)

Another recounted how in 2013, after leaving the university and returning to his village, he was detained by DAESH: '[I was] accused of being at the service of the infidels.' Forty-five days later, because there was no evidence of this service, otherwise punishable by death, he was transferred and forced to attend a 'course of repentance'. Social freedom cannot exist in such a context: 'I cannot belong to any of them. I don't know who is my friend, who is my enemy' (Farid).

Such contradictions about the enemy and the 'stranger' represented a crisis of legitimacy and led to forms of collective trauma fed by rapid and sudden shocks. Sztompka (2000 p452) refers to this collective experience on the social body as 'radical, deep, comprehensive and touching the core' imposed outside of the body yet embodied by Syrian academics as 'unexpected, surprising, shocking and repulsive'. Complicity and silence were not an option. Instead the benefit of education equated with the burden of responsibility:

> If you keep silent it keeps you safe because you are not a threat to anybody, to any party. But for example, for a person like me, like, I am well educated. I am from the selected educated class [sic]. I should not keep silent. That's why I left. (Mohamed)

For many, out of a sense of incoherence came the desire to move on, demonstrating critical reflection and some capacity for agency, albeit a highly constrained form. These desires for moving did not come without a cost as many were forced to pay human traffickers using their life savings with an explicit recognition of destructive war economies and their impact on individuals and collectives: 'I entered illegally as I paid money to the corrupted officials, who are controlling the borders, from both sides – the Armed Syrian factions and Turkey. With the remaining money, I was able to settle down and rent a house and so on' (Nabil).

In these initial stages of displacement the academics were hopeful. Many too had heard positive things about life in Turkey: possibilities of work were shared and there were stories circulating that there were 'universities teaching Syrians' (Mohammad). As Saleh (2018) argues, it is this horizon of the possible and planning a future that allows for a return to a utopian notion of 'home' marking out such narrative expressions of displacement: 'to plan means to overpower the temporary, even if this overpowering itself is temporary' (Saleh, 2018, p5). The move into exile was seen by many as a clear 'ethical' decision and represented affective registers of dignity and hope.

Being 'Out of Place': life in exile – economic, social, physical and affective

For many participants, the hopes and expectations for life in Turkey quickly dashed. Turkey accepted approximately 3.6 million 'refugees'

from Syria (Smeekes, Verkuyten, Çelebi, AcartÜrk & Onkun, 2017) but they live in highly precarious circumstances without rights in terms of employment, healthcare or housing. Many testified that they have no or little income (Saleh, 2018). The promise of Turkish citizenship after 5 years did represent a sense of legitimacy after displacement for many. Yet the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey proved equally dangerous and created another 'ethics of ambiguity' over their role as knowledge makers and teachers in a novel political landscape.

The global migration 'crisis' has prompted increasingly negative perceptions towards refugees and made progress towards improving their social conditions extremely challenging. In Turkey, for example, many displaced Syrians were encouraged to apply for citizenship to access work more easily and for some of our participants access to work did improve. Yet a major barrier to gaining access to the labour market and specifically within the university was language, particularly those from Islamic Studies, which is taught in Arabic in Turkey. Academics who have gained Turkish citizenship are limited to one-year renewable contracts because they are no longer deemed to be foreign academics. As Turkish citizens they have to pass language exams required of Turkish academics to be employed. Language issues are also highly significant for expressing oneself in a meaningful way and language can represent another kind of exile 'for language too is exile' (Al Attar, 2015). Other widespread restrictions include obtaining equivalency for their degree certificates and new travel restrictions for Syrians with temporary protection cards; a status that provides them with access to benefits. Thus, many academics do not seek to change their status to permanent residency or seek Turkish citizenship, which is a double-edged sword. Political legitimacy and displacement here rest hand in hand with the experience of the exiled, experiencing othering or the 'outsider' to the Turkish national imaginary. Career mobility in such a context more often equates with formal citizenship in more authoritarian contexts rather than the idealised transnationally mobile academic.

The political position of academics in Turkey has changed considerably in recent years with many imprisoned, targeted and persecuted (Human Rights Watch, May, 2018), so those Syrian academics in Turkey who are living and working in Turkey – even with citizenship – are now further disadvantaged. Some reported that work contracts had been eliminated or were not renewed and many have lost HE jobs they did hold, even if these too were precarious and low paid. Even volunteer posts were lost. The outbreak of the COVID 19 virus has made matters even worse with increasing hostility towards refugees in Turkey (Tekin-Coru, 2020). At one new university, the hopes that working would mean being professionally recognised and legitimated so central to testimonies of professional integrity turned out 'not to be true' (Karam) and 'unfortunately, I also saw the criminals and thieves [in the new HE context]' (Jamal).

Displacement involves 'physical dislocation, social disruption, and material dispossession' (Brun, 2015, p21). It has been described as a 'simultaneously split and doubled existence - stretched across the multiple ruptures between 'here' and 'there'" (Bammer 1994, pxii). Sebald (2002) describes these ruptures of the 'here and there' as stretched across memories of home into spaces of exile where feelings of dehumanisation and estrangement are central to negotiating anew. This temporal split between the 'there-and-then' and the 'here-and-now' is also represented in experiences of estrangement and foreignness. Some reported racism as a consequence of not speaking Turkish in the border towns. Failure to obtain a post, for example, was explained as follows: 'they told me that I am Syrian and that this position is not available to Syrians. The manager was Saudi Arabian, which was very shocking for me' (Mahdi).

Failed hopes were experienced by many participants. They could not work, travel or settle down and many had not anticipated that their displacement would continue beyond a few years. Participants felt trapped in time and space: 'I left Syria to a neighbouring country at the beginning of 2013 with a hope that after one year things will calm down and then I can come back home [...]. This was a bad decision because here

I couldn't find a job' (Hussein). Unable to work, many found it hard to survive financially and had to take jobs they were overqualified for. Surviving meant that, rather than sustaining professional fulfilment which meant so much, making difficult career choices felt 'like beginning all over again'. Yet staying afloat in this new space was essential. Mohamed reported the following: 'It was not that good [of a] job, but it was the way to survive [...] Apparently it looks like a stable life. [...] but life is not that stable nor is it comfortable'. Although working provided some sense of agency, an inability to provide for family had the opposite effect. The experience of being educated, as being worthy of respect in one's profession and earning a robust salary, was also a common narrative across the cohort of participants. Loss therefore represented a lack of respect and being 'othered' and estranged in this new space.

Professional identity in exile - 'I cannot live as a refugee'

Another important dimension to the narrative accounts was the experience of being stateless. Statelessness, however, did not equate with the category 'refugee'. Many participants strongly rejected identifying themselves as refugees. To accept the label refugee would be to accept one's lack of agency and temporal stagnation, which is pervasive in the literature on forced global human movements (Saleh, 2018). This rejection was also linked to issues of belonging, alongside difficult living conditions particularly in camps and life circumstances (e.g., financial circumstances, family-visa and child-education related). Here the figure of the refugee represents a mark on one's memory of selfhood:

> I cannot live as a refugee [...] for me, you know, the worst thing for any person is not death, not to be poor, no, it is to be a refugee [...] Like a tree without roots, I feel I am without roots. I cannot respect myself [...] I feel there is something I lost every time when I go on a journey, to a picnic [...] Only in delivering my lecture do I forget. Only when I am delivering [a lecture] and I look at the face of students, I forget this [...] As soon as I go out again [slaps knee] I am a refugee. (Farid)

There is a contradiction and dilemma at the heart of this experience. The dream of return is present but the further away from departure the exiled person moves, and the more the new reality impinges, the more necessity demands novel adaptations. As Saleh (2018:8) eloquently describes, it is living in a continuous temporary state or having the split dream of wanting to adapt and succeed in a new space whilst simultaneously wanting to return to nostalgic memories of home.

Farid's remarks signify this waiting and hoping as a way towards forgetting 'the traumatic mark' and influenced by his professional history as an academic – 'only in delivering my lecture do I forget' [...]. 'In Turkey I managed to write some good articles. I published them in English. [...] I am trying to benefit from my time here'. For others taking political action and organising schools for Syrian children, academic associations or developing their academic profile also provided much needed relief from memories of the past. Past successes as a professional and any application in the present represented signs of progress, legitimacy and recognition. A strong thread in the interviews is that the professional in action is used as the marker by which to judge progress, a sense of an actor with recognition. It is when the academics experienced a sense of professionalism that they most felt a sense of agency, as witnessed in Farid's description above

Brun (2015) has written of the importance and pain of waiting and hoping and their association to action. The longer one is waiting, remembering and hoping to return 'home' despite one's inability to do so the more hopelessness emerges as a futur narrative. In such a context, protracted displacement is experienced as a story of the self which is beyond one's control, and the more likely that logics of action in exile are reimagined disparagingly. Yet Brun still argues for the concept of agency in waiting and for its possibility. Agency 'is about creating flexible and coherent accounts of the meaning of events' (Brun, 2015, p.24) [...] 'Recovery can involve becoming able to find a way to describe what is wrong and not wrong in one's lives, what is mourned, hoped for and

what is to be done about it all' (ibid p.25). Work was key in maintaining hope, adapting to new contexts and engaging positively with uncertain futures.

Saleh (2018:70) argues that many displaced persons could be seen as idealists just wanting to return to a previous status and its associated symbolic capital. However, testimonies suggest that in this case imagined forms of professional identification play a different role. Success in seeking stability, employment and reimagining a future create different structures of stability, ones which are not always about returning to the past as a way forward:

> The first month in Turkey was hard. The second month was hard [...]. Since I arrived here, I started to look for a job. After two months, I found a job with a humanitarian organisation. I worked there for four months. You know, after you have a source for income, your life starts to become somehow stable [...]. After four months, I found a new job. I have been working there for one year and six months, and started to adapt to my life, my new life, and to accept the Turkish community and society. (Saad)

Clearly it seems that some aspects of past academic stability play some part in reimagining oneself as a professional into the future and this reimagining of professional 'time' may be linked to purpose, meaning, and changing hopes.

Concluding remarks

The poignant and moving testimonies of the Syrian academics have documented their particular experiences of displacement in Turkey. We began by noting that this was a group whose experiences were under researched. Yet their influence in society in authoritarian contexts puts them at risk of censorship, detention and death. But their accounts are significant for understanding the professional ruptures and losses to an academic past. They also provide ways of understanding barriers and challenges to academic mobility into the future. The testimonies have also shown how memory and displacement shape Brun's (2015) concepts of 'active waiting' and 'changing hopes' in the face of protracted displacement: 'agency-in-waiting denotes the capacity to act in the present, in everyday time, based on the experience of displacement from the subject's history and a critical reflection of the future possibilities framed as waiting and hope' (Brun, 2015, p.24). Agency, even in waiting, therefore represents action into the future because it is linked to well-being and ways out of the experience of estrangement and the crisis of legitimacy that emerges from such displacement. It does not, however, 'indicate that people necessarily are able to control or shape their future' (Brun, 2015). Building agency in waiting may indeed be one way of dealing with the ruptures in professional trajectories and hence mental wellness (Brun, 2015: Lysaker & Leonhardt, 2013). Brun and Fabos (2015) have argued that the common portrayal of refugees or IDPs is of people living in limbo 'passive in their longing for the past and consequently devoid of agency'. Brun (2015) argues that there should be a move from 'limbo to liminality to understand protracted situations of displacement' (p.22). Liminality therefore represents not an end point but rather an active space in between past and future – 'the there and then' and the 'not yet' - representing one way to pursue new ways of energising a valued professional identity.

Our analysis suggests that professional identity, legitimacy and the temporality of displacement have been under recognised in the HE and conflict literature. Yet such testimonial accounts represent the significance they have for reimagining future selves in new worlds. Both active motivation and pain come in equal measure from the desire to perform and succeed as an academic. The constant source of comfort and the driver of hope and action is that professional sense of self reaching into the future. Focusing on providing meaning through work and some continuity of professional identity is one of many very powerful messages for those who work with displaced academics. As Shahir said 'my profes-

sion is my dream'. This is an active voice from a displaced past reaching into the future.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no competing interests financial or personal.

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