Of negotiations, strategies and ethical projects: Inheriting memories of violence among Syrian mothers in displacement

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Abstract ENG

This article centres on Syrian women's narratives and practices of intergenerational knowledge transmission on violence. Based on data collected over the course of fourteen months of ethnographic research in Istanbul and Berlin in 2022/2023, this article questions how experiences of violence are remembered vis-à-vis one's children who are raised in displacement. Syrian women's modes and practices of communicating violent experiences feature as complex negotiations and thoughtful strategies. Children play an active role in the process of intergenerational knowledge transmission. Centring on verbal and non-verbal acts of sharing of memories, this article suggests thinking of them as ambivalent balancing acts and ethical projects directed at a liveable life for one's offspring, the next generation and Syrian society within and beyond the nation's borders.

Keywords: Syrian displacement, intergenerational transmission, violence, memory, mothering practices

This article traces how Syrian mothers reflect, when in contact with their children, on previous violence they have experienced. It is centred on Syrian women who settled in Turkey and Germany and are raising their children in displacement. These mothers' modes and practices of transmitting intergenerational knowledge about violence take the form of complex negotiations and thoughtful strategies. This article therefore sheds light on Syrian mothers' reflections on and practices of (not) sharing certain memories of violence, as part of their responsibility of raising children in exile. In Syrian women's narratives and practices, one can trace various forms of silence: intergenerational and intersubjective silence, silence as a strategy, and silence as a structural condition of growing up in an authoritarian regime. Yet, narrations, speech acts and storytelling hold a similarly relevant position in Syrian women's strategies of knowledge transmission. When following wo-

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men's thoughts and ambivalences about sharing violent experiences, parenting comes across as an ethical project directed towards creating a liveable life for the next generation and ultimately for Syrian society.

The topics and arguments I discuss in this article have emerged as part of a research project on parenting practices among Syrian families residing in Germany and Turkey. Comparing experiences in two countries, both of which have become major destinations for Syrians fleeing the conflict since 2011, offers a reflection on how different migration regimes and other structural factors affect families and parenting practices. Other scholars have compared Germany and Turkey in terms of how these countries' different policies and regulations impact on Syrian migrants' socioeconomic status (Pearlman 2020) and on family constellations (Alkan 2022). It is also worth comparing and analysing migration to these two countries – one a neighbour of Syria and the other a central European destination – in light of some interlocutors' tendency to equate geographical distance from their homeland with cultural distance. 'Cultural closeness' and assumed similarities in lifestyle have proved relevant when people migrate to a country geographically close to their homeland (see for instance Pearlman 2018, Scharrer, Suerbaum 2022). Berlin and Istanbul are home to the largest Syrian populations in Germany and Turkey, respectively. The infrastructure in these cities – such as the presence of language schools, libraries with Arabic literature, supermarkets offering products from Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), restaurants, NGOs, community centres and art spaces – makes them attractive destinations, and ultimately fertile ground for an analysis of parenting practices in urban displacement.

This comparative ethnographic research project starts from the premise that Syrian parents in displacement raise children amid the continuity of the conflict in their homeland, albeit in different intensities and manifestations. The permanence of violence means that "death and dying have become a salient feature of Syrian life, both inside and outside the nation's borders" (Bandak 2015, p. 672). The conflict has transformed living arrangements, life plans, kinship structures, social and gender norms, as well as religious practices among Syrians in displacement (Al-Khalili 2022). While the protagonists of this article (and the wider research project) – Syrian parents who raise their children in Istanbul and Berlin – belong to a generation that experienced life in Syria before 2011 and witnessed the Syrian uprising and ensuing conflict, their children were either born in Syria and left at a very young age with their parents, or they were born during displacement. Making sense of the violence in their homeland vis-à-vis their children is an aspect of childrearing that the Syrian parents I met in Istanbul and Berlin have in common. Another aspect faced by many Syrian families in Istanbul and Berlin is the absence of loved ones in everyday life, which is a source of immense pain. Worries about relatives

living in Syria and other countries remain uppermost in people's minds, and manifest themselves in daily attempts to make contact. Different practices, such as communication via various social media, have been introduced to confront the multiple forms of absence in people's everyday lives (Palmberger 2022). Hence, the Syrian uprising and its violent aftermath cannot be considered closed or past chapters in the lives of these Syrian families.

Since the Syrian uprising and ensuing war, Turkey and Germany have become two of the major destinations for Syrians fleeing the conflict. At the end of 2023, Germany was hosting more than 972,400 Syrians holding all visa types (Statistisches Bundesamt 2024). In Turkey, there are 3.6 million Syrians registered under temporary protection (UNHCR 2024). Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention; however, the country limits the legal responsibility it extends to asylum seekers from Europe (Biehl 2015). Syrians were initially considered guests, but then Turkey adopted a new Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2013, and additional legislation in 2014, which changed the legal status of Syrians to "under temporary protection" (Koser Akcapar and Simsek 2018, p. 177). Syrians under temporary protection have access to healthcare and education. They are thus granted some of the social rights available to Turkish citizens (Terzioglu 2022). However, there are regulations concerning their regional settlement and access to the labour market (Düvell 2018). Between 2011 and 2016, the Turkish authorities did not grant Syrian refugees access to the formal economy, thus laying the groundwork for impoverished Syrians to be drawn into the informal economy where they had no labour-related security (Badalič 2023, p. 968). With the Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection, adopted in 2016, Syrians were allowed to apply for work permits, under which they could work legally in Turkey (Badalič 2023, p. 968). Nevertheless, most Syrians continued to work informally, since holders of temporary protection are only allowed to work in the provinces where they are registered, and cannot easily move elsewhere and pick up work wherever there is a demand for labour (Badalič 2023, p. 969). Since 2019, the Turkish authorities have refused to change the place of registration of Syrians who moved to Istanbul from other provinces, which complicates legal employment in the city (Badalič 2023, p. 973). There is a huge number of Syrians who have residence permits but no temporary protection status, and an unknown number of Syrian migrants who possess neither papers nor status (Koser Akcapar and Simsek 2018, p. 177). Over recent years, everyday life for Syrian people in Turkey has been severely impacted by an increasing number of racial attacks, Turkey's dire economic situation, inflation that has exceeded 80 percent, a consequent

decrease of monthly income for the majority, as well as police raids and (internal) deportations (Peksen 2023).

As regards Syrians' initial legal status in Germany, most newcomers have been granted either refugee status, which permits a three-year residence and the right to apply for family reunification, or subsidiary protection, which translates into a one-year residence permit that is extendable for two years. As asylum seekers and holders of refugee or subsidiary statuses, Syrians are eligible for state support. It is initially compulsory to attend so-called "integration courses", including language and orientation courses (Etzel 2022). Participation in the German labour market is possible if asylum seekers receive refugee status or subsidiary protection; however, it often hinges on the request for official documents from Syria that prove the jobseeker's qualifications (Pearlman 2017, Ferreri 2022). Previous work experience and diplomas are frequently devalued by agents at the Jobcentre, an entity responsible for providing support for various social groups: the unemployed, people who work but cannot cover their basic living costs, and recognised refugees (Etzel 2022, p. 1125). Germany has some specific naturalisation criteria, including eight years of residency, language proficiency, passing a citizenship test, and being able to prove non-reliance on welfare support (Tucker 2018, p. 8). Across Germany there is a rising number of legally registered, non-governmental, organisations that have been set up by Syrians and which step in where the state does not meet needs (Easton-Calabria, Wood 2020, p. 5).

In this article, I will delve into encounters and conversations with four Syrian women who live with their families in either Istanbul or Berlin. Their narratives and practices feature different strategies of knowledge transmission in relation to violence. Using the term 'transmission' does not imply an uncritical assumption of linearity and violence of the past ordered in a series of traumatic events (Han, Brandel 2020). Rather, I seek to give space to perceive of practices and narratives as processes of the world being pieced and puzzled together (Han, Brandel 2020). Ultimately, Syrian mothers' reflections on raising children in displacement shed light on their daily balancing act between an ethical project of remembering the crimes of a brutal regime both before and after 2011, and the hope for a peaceful future. When I refer to an ethical project, I am inspired by Hayder Al-Mohammad and Daniela Peluso (2012) who argue that "an ethics of the rough ground of the everyday" resides in "living-in-action" (p. 44) and features "how in the entanglements and relations of lives with other lives in the everyday, lines of care and concern emerge" (p. 44). Following their reasoning, I perceive of ethical projects as mundane practices and conversations that reveal mothers' care and concern for the future of their children and of Syrian society inside and outside the nation's borders.

Conducting ethnographic research with Syrian families

This article is based on data that I collected during six months of ethnographic research in Istanbul in 2022, and during a follow-up visit in the summer of 2023. In Berlin, I engaged in ethnographic research for seven months in 2023. In Istanbul, I became acquainted with Syrian families through contact with a community centre, a kitchen cooperative and a handicraft initiative. In Berlin, I frequented two women's cafés, and regularly visited a reception centre for asylum-seeking families. With the protagonists of this article, relationships developed into regular meetings beyond the women's café, the reception centre, and the handicraft initiative where they were forged. While the broader research project on which this article is based centres on parenting, this piece zooms in on mothering practices and women's strategies of knowledge transmission.

Introducing my positionality, I am inspired by Ruth Behar (1996, pp. 12-13) who pleads for "vulnerable observation" and "writing vulnerable". As part of the endeavour of writing vulnerable, Behar asks to make known "*what happens within the observer*" (1996, p. 6, emphasis in the original). While she clarifies that she is not interested in the researcher's positionality as a practice of navel-gazing, she stresses the relevance of a process of selecting "the most important filters through which one perceives of the world and more particularly the topic being studied" (Behar 1996, p. 13). From my standpoint as a white[1] woman with citizenship rights in Germany, who started to learn Arabic more than fifteen years ago, has lived in different parts of the SWANA region, and has studied migration trajectories and experiences for a decade, the most important filter for this research project has been my ongoing experience of raising two children together with my husband, who grew up in Syria. I mention my husband's background in this paragraph on positionality because our marriage has affected the research foci, questions and the relationships I developed with Syrian families. Anita Häusermann-Fábos (2000) discusses the implications of conducting research in her husband's community. Several aspects she mentions resonate with me, such as the assumption that marriage endows one with knowledge and awareness of history, traditions, and habits of the community under study. Similarly, some of the challenges of navigating propriety, stressed by Häusermann-Fábos, reverberate with my experiences. My marriage was under scrutiny and was met with curiosity, and it remained a challenge to find a balance between sharing details about my husband and our relationship, and drawing lines when I assumed that sharing such information would upset him. Apart from my marriage, raising children (who are half-Syri-

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1   Following a critical whiteness approach, the notion of whiteness indicates structural power asymmetry, and does not refer to phenotypical or 'racial' markers (Dietze 2009, 2022).

an) mattered: my engagement in mothering practices translated into Syrian parents assuming that I knew, understood, and had lived through certain experiences. Having childrearing in common with my interlocutors thus provided fertile ground for discussing educational aspirations, children's development, and how to provide support. Kelly Dombroski (2011, p. 52) describes herself as an "edgewalker" to capture her positionality vis-à-vis the Chinese women she talked to about mothering and childrearing. The women considered her parenting style familiar because of her knowledge of Chinese culture, while simultaneously seeing in her an example of Western motherhood by virtue of her nationality and ethnicity. As far as my relationships with Syrian parents were concerned, they included moments of familiarity and intimacy as well as lack of understanding of the other's parenting practices and decisions. Similarly, sharing advice or empathising with parental challenges alternated with awareness of differences in our experiences of racialisation or discrimination.[2]

Parenting away from home

In Arab societies, the family is a central social and political institution. According to Suad Joseph (2000), many states in the SWANA region have not abolished subnational affiliations of kin, religion or other collectivising entities, but rather have incorporated them into their citizenship regimes. As a result, citizens are not bounded autonomous individuals with a direct contract with the state, but rather "belong to families prior to [their] membership in the state" (Joseph 2005, p. 149). Over the course of more than thirty years of ethnographic fieldwork in Beirut, Joseph (2018, p. 1) found that "family remains the most powerful social idiom" in the region. Boundaries of selfhood are relatively fluid, so that a person feels a part of and intimately connected to significant others (Joseph 1999, p. 11; see also 1994). These relationalities are embedded in power structures and form "patriarchal connectivities" (Joseph 1999, p. 11) that are embedded in gender-based and age-based domination. Patriarchal connectivity supports "the production of selves who invited, required, and initiated involvement with others in the shaping of the self" (Joseph 1993, p. 468).

A frequent consequence of forced displacement, especially if family members settle in a European country, is the navigation of life as 'nuclear families' rather than as members of 'extended families' who reside in proximity to one another (Alkan 2022, Suerbaum, Richter-Devroe 2022). Hilal Alkan (2022, p. 749) compares Syrian refugees' engagement in care relations with kin in Germany and in Turkey, and comes to the conclusion that in Turkey

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2   This aspect is discussed in more detail in Winkel, Suerbaum (2024).

displaced people can take care of kin thanks to a migration regime that has allowed for fuller family constellations "at the same time (and also because) [Turkey] has been hesitant to give Syrians long-term legal status." Conversely, in Germany the family reunification scheme is underlain by a limited understanding of family, and only allows smaller family units to reunite (Alkan 2022, p. 748). For Syrians seeking refuge in Germany and other European countries, "this implies a legalist transition from the extended family to the nuclear family, reducing the social horizon of kinship to the individual subject" (Richter-Devroe, Buffon 2019). There is also a gendered dimension to this transition: in Germany, Syrian women find themselves in the opposite position to the one they occupy vis-à-vis the Syrian state, which views them as "appendages of husbands and fathers" (Joseph 1996, p. 7). Conversely, Syrian women encounter the German state from the standpoint of individuals undergoing the asylum process on their own (Habib 2018, p. 15).

Most Syrian parents I came to know in Istanbul and Berlin lived with their children, and had only a few nearby relatives upholding transnational ties to family members and loved ones all over the world. Most families had developed friendships and connections with other Syrians living locally, but these ties were often viewed and experienced as ambivalent.

Intergenerational transmission of knowledge about violence

I suggest conceiving of the Syrian uprising and ensuing conflict as 'critical events' in Veena Das' (1995) sense, calling forth "new modes of action". Iris Jean-Klein (2000, p. 103), in her analysis of motherhood in the first Palestinian Intifada, employs Das' notion to describe constitutive events and their critical effect on people's lives, rather than focusing on the transformation of cultural values. She analyses experiences of personal injury, deriving from the political conflict, that were experienced as traumatic by the persons concerned and their families. Inspired by Das and Jean-Klein, I trace the effects of the uprising and the ensuing violent conflict in Syria as critical events that affected people's and families' biographies.

The sharing of memories is one among many aspects that make kin (Meinert, Grøn 2020, p. 582). Yet, family experiences have the potential to be contagious, haunting, and even entwined in family life over generations (Meinert, Grøn 2020, p. 583). Existing anthropological literature suggests that intergenerational transmission of experiences involving violence and suffering can take various shapes: from misfortune that sticks to some families (Meinert 2020), to fear that attaches itself to different objects and ideas (Stevenson 2020), to small gestures in the household among close kin (Han, Brandel 2020). While the content may be vague, the experi-

enced presence of these reactions often persists (Meinert, Grøn 2020, p. 584). The sharing of memories holds a particular position in contexts of migration and displacement. Focusing on women's roles in migration processes, Irene Gedalof (2009) perceives of the work of maintaining heritage, culture and structures of belonging as an aspect of the reproductive sphere. In her research with migrant women in the UK, she found that they produce a sense of belonging for themselves and their families through their daily decisions about how to mother. Migrant women thus deal with and negotiate the "complex entanglement of past and present, continuity and change" (Gedalof 2009, p. 87). Inspired by Iris Marion Young, Gedalof argues that preservation in the context of migration and mothering should be understood as the renewing of meaning and a "knitting together of today and yesterday" (Young 1997, 153 cited in Gedalof 2009, p. 92). Using similar terms to grasp women's involvement in the work of repair after the Partition, Veena Das (2007, p. 161) argues that they "engaged in the work of stitching, quilting, and putting together relationships in everyday life." Women enact this work amid the repercussions of a violent event, which "attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary" (Das 2007, p. 1).

Violence transmitted between generations in the form of silence and the haunting presence of ghosts has been discussed on numerous occasions (e.g. Argenti, Schramm 2010, Shaw 2010, Thiranagama 2011). Nevertheless, experiences of violence can also be verbalised and consciously transmitted. According to Marita Eastmond (2007, p. 249), who analyses narratives in the context of research with forcibly displaced people, past experiences are remembered and shared in light of the present, and affected by imaginations of the future. Acts of remembering and of telling are situational and dependent on the relationship to the listener. Stories help negotiate what has happened, and also offer an avenue for seeking future perspectives (Eastmond 2007, p. 251). The springboard for storytelling, according to Michael Jackson (2002, p. 30) "is the existential tension that informs every intersubjective encounter – a tension between being for oneself and being for another". Both storytelling and violence occur "in the contested space of intersubjectivity", which significantly affects the field of interrelationships that constitute people's lifeworlds (Jackson 2002, p. 39). While recounting violent events can be healing in certain situations, violence may also evoke loss of words, language and narrative coherence (Jackson 2002, p. 95).

Inspired by these scholars and arguments, the following sections will centre on different ethnographic vignettes that offer a perspective on Syrian women's different forms of engagement in the sharing of their memories of violence with their children.

Drawing a beautiful picture of Syria?

In a Berlin suburb, in a women's café affiliated with a group of approximately forty women from various countries, I met Nabila. The number of women who attended the sessions varied, but usually a group of around twenty women came together on a weekly basis. A few were regulars and hardly missed a session, while others might not show up for weeks, even months, but eventually came back sharing stories about an internship, a trip to visit a relative, or a child's persistent illness that had prevented them from participating. Nabila was the mother of four children. Dalia, the eldest, was 23 years old and had got married a few months ago, and the second-eldest daughter, Amira, had recently got engaged. Shams, the youngest daughter, was born in Germany and was three years old. The family came to Germany in 2013. When I asked Nabila, during another meeting in the women's café, about her children's awareness of the Syrian uprising and ongoing conflict, she answered that her children, who were young when they came to Germany, asked her many questions about Syria, for example about where they stayed as a family, and which places they visited. She would respond by describing how they all used to spend their time together. Her children wondered whether the places they used to visit as a family still existed, and together they all tried to find these places online. Amira had just spent a month in Syria, visiting her future in-laws and Nabila's siblings and parents. Nabila shared that Amira was upset upon her return to Germany and wished that she had not visited Syria. Amira told her mother that if only she had not visited Syria, her memories of it would have remained intact. She agonised over the omnipresent rumours with which she felt confronted, and Nabila assured me that her children were not raised to appreciate gossip-mongering. When I asked Nabila how she presented her own memories of Syria to her children, she stressed her ambivalence:

> You want to draw (*tursumy*) neither a picture that is too rosy nor one that is too ugly (*bishʿaa*). If you tell them that everything was bad, they will hate Syria. If you tell them that we fought each other, they will hate other Arabs. Syria is their homeland after all.

The notion of drawing a certain picture alludes to a practice that requires energy, skill and creativity, and describes a subjective process, based on the drawer's positionality and choice to include or omit certain details. The use of this notion reiterates that knowledge transmission is a matter of finding the middle ground between a harsh and cruel reality and a nostalgic longing for the past.

Sawsan, a teacher in a Syrian kindergarten in Istanbul, also used the expression in a conversation with me. She sensed that conveying the beauty of Syria was not challenging. Often, Sawsan recalled, she would start cry-

ing when sharing with her children her memories of living in pre-2011 Syria. This was how her children would grasp Syria's beauty. With Sawsan's words, we can perceive the body and emotions as a "perceptual option" (Feldman 1994, p. 406, cited in Salih 2016, p. 15) holding the potential to convey memories that refuse to be translated into texts or facts, as Ruba Salih (2016, p. 15) argues in her analysis of Palestinian women's embodied memories of the Nakba.

Nabila and Sawsan's words about the act of drawing a beautiful picture of Syria allude to its palpable, affective dimension. Furthermore, their words suggest that knowledge transmission can be thought of as a balancing act, a strategy and a conscious process. The sharing of memories has a purpose and is intimately related with their children's and Syria's future.

Connecting past, present and future

In another Berlin suburb, I met Yara in a refugee shelter where she worked as a housekeeper. She was from the Druze community and hailed from a Syrian mountain village. When we met, her oldest daughter Lamia was about to turn 18, her son was 14 and her youngest daughter was eight. The family had settled in Berlin in 2014. Yara and I regularly spent her breaks in the refugee shelter together. Often, we found ourselves talking about Lamia who struggled in school, experienced mobbing, experimented with alcohol, and started many arguments with her parents. Yara struggled with the general lack of interest that Lamia presented. She was convinced that her daughter had all the necessary skills to strive and live a good life in Germany, while Yara herself struggled due to a lack of certificates that proved her skills as a tailor. She had worked as a tailor since her graduation from high school in Syria, where she was successful in this enterprise and had a huge base of satisfied customers. In Germany, however, Yara could not work as a tailor without completing vocational training. Comparing her own future in Germany – as a middle-aged woman without the certificates that proved her skills – to her daughter's youth, beauty, and intelligence, Yara could not understand why her daughter frequently skipped school, lied to her parents, and had little enthusiasm for extra-curricular activities. Frequently, Yara would lament: "my daughter is lost (*bintī ḍāyʿa*)." She believed that the reasons behind Lamia's condition were manifold: Lamia was the first child and grandchild in Yara's and her in-laws' families and was thus "spoiled (*mitdalila*)." Whenever Yara tried to police her daughter's behaviour during Lamia's early childhood in Syria, her in-laws intervened and undermined Yara's authority in front of her daughter. Upon the family's move to Germany, by then eight-year-old Lamia was suddenly confronted with the absence of extended family members, while simultaneously witnessing

the freedom enjoyed by other children her age. However, the event that had the gravest effect on Lamia's development and current behaviour was, in Yara's eyes, the witnessing of her uncle's torture and death. Lamia's uncle had been imprisoned by the Syrian regime, tortured and killed, and Lamia, then around primary school age, had seen her uncle's tortured body when it was given back to the family. Ever since Lamia witnessed her uncle's torture and death at the hands of the Syrian regime, she kept expressing that she wanted to seek revenge and kill Bashar al-Assad. According to Yara, Lamia's only constant ambition seemed to be a determination to join the armed forces and fight Bashar al-Assad.

In Yara's relationship with her eldest daughter and her perspective on Lamia's life, we glimpse the repercussions of being confronted with unimaginable violence. Michael Jackson (2003, p. 39) highlights a person's sense of powerlessness vis-a-vis violence committed against family and loved ones. Witnessing death or disaster connects the presence to one fateful moment, and even the future "cannot break free of it" (Jackson 2003, p. 92). But we also learn of a mother's perception of displacement as a sudden rupture in family constellations and relationships, and how settling in an unknown place marks another fateful event that continues to affect the life of a child, a mother, and a family.

One day, when Yara and I spent time together during her break from work, eating a few of her home-made cookies, we came to speak about the war in Syria and how she addressed it in conversations with her children. Yara remembered that in 2017 her hometown was hit particularly hard by the war. To keep abreast of the developments, she used to be online constantly. Her children asked questions: 'why are you always online? Why are you sad?'. On one occasion, Yara and her husband had decided to respond to their children's questions, even if they preferred not to talk about the violence in Syria. Her son reacted compassionately to his parents' descriptions of the dire situation in their hometown, while Lamia responded with anger and resentment (*ḥiqd*). Again, Yara connected Lamia's emotions to her confrontation with her uncle's tortured body. This exposure to the cruelty of the regime features as a master frame through which Yara seeks to fathom Lamia's actions. I asked Yara whether she shared her personal views of the regime with the children. Yara thought about my question for a moment and answered: "the children need to build their own opinions, they should not simply adopt ours." Her words shed light on the asymmetry in parent-child relationships, showing Yara's sensitivity to the potential for a monopoly of knowledge that might lie with the parents.

When the family visited Syria a few years ago, Yara inculcated in her children not to say anything to anyone they met there. In case somebody asked, she instructed her children to respond: "we don't live in Syria. We don't know anything." Yara's brief description of their visit to Syria alludes to

mechanisms of surviving in an authoritarian regime, and to the role played by parents' socialisation and everyday life (before the uprising) in processes of knowledge transmission. For Yara and the majority of Syrians, violence, repression, and intimidation have been aspects of their daily life in Syria. Salwa Ismail (2018) discusses the effects of exposure to surveillance, authoritarian rule and the use of violence as a mode of governing. She argues that citizens' sense of self and their interpretative horizon are shaped by the feeling of being subject to the regime's security gaze in their daily lives, mundane practices, and relationships. Nassima Neggaz (2013, p. 12) describes pre-revolutionary Syria as a "kingdom of silence." Politics were a taboo that could not be talked about even among family members. The continuous surveillance affected language: codes of communication were created in closed (kin) groups, and inherited from generation to generation (2015, p. 15). The fear of the *mukhābarāt* (security service) persists in present-day Syria, leading people to use coded language, particularly on the phone (2015, p. 21).

These reflections highlight the need not to exceptionalise the violence post-2011, but rather to perceive it on a continuum with various aspects of authoritarian governing. It is appropriate to think of these forms of violence as shaping and affecting mothering practices. Growing up and living in pre-war Syria can thus be understood as a crucial context, among various others, that sets the stage for raising children in displacement.

Sending the children away to play

In the park of a low-income neighbourhood in Istanbul, I regularly met Leen with her two sons. Iliyan was in primary school, while Abdallah was of kindergarten age and stayed at home with his mother. Leen's husband was a tailor, and Leen was part of a crocheting initiative through which she received orders from time to time. She hoped to leave Istanbul for another country, ideally Germany where her brother was staying, as she felt that life in Istanbul was becoming more challenging by the day. In the park close to Leen's flat, men gathered to play games, teenagers worked out and played football at the nearby sports field, while groups of women sat together on the grass with their needlework. Leen, sitting on a bench that offered a good view of the park and the playground in its centre, spoke about her life during the Syrian uprising and ensuing war. She described the fear and anger she felt when she could not leave her besieged hometown. Eight-year-old Iliyan listened carefully to his mother's words, and as soon as Leen realised that he was doing so, she halted her narration and asked Iliyan to take Abdallah to the nearby playground. Only once she saw her children leaving did she continue sharing her memories of life under siege, her sorrow,

anger, and fear. From the way Iliyan was attentive, silent, concentrating on every word his mother said, I could grasp that he knew why he was asked to distance himself from the grown-ups' conversation. Iliyan did not insist on staying; he respected his mother's wish and left with Abdallah. However, Iliyan came back after some time, sat silently next to his mother again and tried to listen to the conversation as actively as possible, until his mother noticed and asked him again to go off and play with his brother.

This ethnographic vignette reveals various dimensions. It shows a certain perception of childhood, namely, that children need to be protected for as long as possible from the harsh realities their parents have witnessed. Furthermore, it reiterates that children play an active role in processes of knowledge transmission. Han and Brandel (2020, p. 631) highlight that children piece together the fragments of social life that they find around them in order to grasp violent events that they did not directly experience. Leen and her sons perform particular roles in their interaction: she seeks to protect the boys, while Iliyan on the one hand tries to grasp the secrets the adults are about to share, and on the other allows his mother to protect him and his brother. His everyday is marked by the presence and simultaneous absence of his mother's experiences.

As mentioned already, the relevance of silence in intergenerational knowledge transmission has received wide attention in anthropology. Sharika Thiranagama, for instance, discusses "key moments", such as "unexplained photographs and observed tears" (2011, p. 98), in which children glimpse the histories of their parents and grandparents. Focusing on processes of "wordless transmission of one generation's pain to another" (2011, p. 98), Thiranagama observes the persistence of the "ghosts and secrets" of the previous generation (2011, p. 97) and pays tribute to their immanence. Leen's practice of refusing to speak about her memories in the presence of her children, and her insistence on sending the children away to play, are not an absence of communication. Instead, these actions create a key moment, an act of transmission that appears to play a decisive role in Iliyan's process of piecing together the social life around him.

Imagining a different Syria

Rasha is a mother to three children, and studies part-time while also working as the main breadwinner for her family in Istanbul. Her husband only recently joined his family in Turkey, having been imprisoned in Syria. Rasha heard about my research project through a friend, and was enthusiastic to share her experiences of parenting in displacement. She explained that her son Majd, who was in primary school, had started asking questions about the family's situation when he was three years old. Rasha recounted:

> he speaks with my family (*ahlī*) in Damascus. He speaks with his other grandparents *(bayt jiddu)* who are in Saudi Arabia. He asks: 'why, in our case, is everyone in a different place?' During meetings, he sees that his friends are accompanied by their grandparents and families and he asks: 'why are they a family (*ā'ila*) and we are not a family?' This is how children understand. Here you want to explain to him that we came to Turkey because this is what happened.

It is through the scattering of the family that Rasha's son senses his out-of-placeness in Turkey and comes to fathom his loss of 'normal'. For Majd, the palpable distance from his kin makes his family incomplete, and becomes the ultimate proof that their situation is exceptional and out of the ordinary. Majd's observation of and everyday confrontation with loss resonate with Han and Brandel's (2020, p. 644) words. They argue that "the child witness inherits familial memories of violence in the inhabitation of everyday life." Rasha has to come to terms with her son's sense of loss, and she considers it her responsibility to respond to Majd's questions with child-oriented answers that give context to the absence of their loved ones. In addition, Rasha mentions another parental responsibility:

> For example, I am Sunni Muslim and there is still a trend to distinguish (*numayyiz*) us Sunnis by saying that we have more rights than others and that we are the oppressed sect in society. It's really tragic if you raise your son that way and if you also tell him 'you are Sunni Muslim and the others are this or that'. There are many people who raise their children based on those thoughts. To where will these ideas lead us, especially in a place like Syria full of sects, full of differences (*ikhtilāfāt*)? How are you able to embrace these differences? If you cannot accept them between you and yourself, how do you want to transmit (*tinqilī*) them to your children?

Rasha expresses that the uprising and ensuing conflict laid bare the fractures within Syrian society. Pre-war Syria was defined by various ethnicities, sects, and minority groups living together. Dawn Chatty (2018, p. 11) ascribes to the arrival of forced migrants in the late Ottoman period the role of evoking "the emergence of an acceptance of the 'Other' and a local conviviality and tolerance of difference which particularly characterised the modern state of Syria." Yet, from an exilic point of view, this tolerance and ability to live together is predominantly narrated as being lost (Bandak 2015, Løland 2019, Suerbaum 2020).

Rasha highlights the societal and parental responsibility to raise an open-minded child, and thereby eventually enable the youngster to create and become a member of a tolerant society. She emphasises the need to accept differences before engaging in the process of transmitting them unreflectingly to the children. The "poisonous knowledge" (Das 2007, p. 54) of sectarian differences has the potential to severely affect the children's future.

What gives sectarian differences a toxic and lethal quality is the assumption that, once inherited, they have the potential to stabilise sectarian hate, and fuel ongoing violence. According to Rasha, it is the parents' obligation to interrupt such processes of passing on knowledge, since they could contaminate the next generation and make living together in Syria an impossibility. Rasha is in fact evoking the work of witnessing in Veena Das' (2007, p. 102) sense, that is, "holding the poisonous knowledge of violation, betrayal, and the wounded self from seeping into sociality of everyday life."

Concluding thoughts

This article has conceived of the uprising and violent conflict in Syria since 2011 as critical events that transform familial biographies, practices, and performances. Dealing with and making sense of memories of violence in displacement has been at the centre of this article. The narratives and practices of Syrian women reveal the intimate entwinement of memories of violence and mothering practices. Silence, in different shapes, has proven to be relevant. Silence was a practice to protect the children from the brutality of memories of violence and it emerged as a consequence of growing up under an authoritarian regime that spied on its people. Silence also materialised in moments in which words could not convey a particular image of Syria. But Syrian women also described their conscious use of words, language and narratives, their acts of reasoning and strategising to convey what they considered relevant knowledge about Syria, its conflict, and their personal experiences of violence. It is in the dynamic relationships between women and their children that violence is inherited (Han, Brandel 2020). We learn that the process of stitching together relationships in the everyday, on the one hand, and piecing together the social life around oneself, on the other, are not exclusive processes that take place at either the level of the mothers or the level of the children. Rather, memories of violence are transmitted in tandem as part of the process of forging, maintaining and negotiating parent-child relationships.

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