This article is available open access under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license as part of Berghahn Open Anthro, a subscribe-to-open model for APC-free open access made possible by the journal's subscribers.

Family Matters in Conflict

Displacement and the Formulation of Politics among Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey

Birgitte Stampe Holst

ABSTRACT: Through an ethnographic account of quotidian family activities like cooking or watching the news, this article investigates how authoritarian history and ongoing conflict in Syria play out in the everyday life of Syrians displaced to Lebanon and Turkey. It traces the day-to-day activities through which the value of the anti-authoritarian actions of some family members is recalibrated in friction with the social and material price the family has paid for such actions, the futures various family members imagine for themselves and the particular family history of adaptation to authoritarian rule. The article argues that unfolding these recalibrations among the displaced allows us to see how Syrians formulate the conflict (also) as a family matter. Investigating this family layer of the conflict in turn alerts us to the ways in which political contestation and collaboration in authoritarian contexts is navigated (also) through ethical propositions related to the family.

KEYWORDS: authoritarianism, conflict, displacement, family, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey

Saif and Amani,[1] a middle-aged couple, who were well positioned socially in Syria, left Damascus in late 2011 after Saif took part in the peaceful pushes for the Syrian regime to effect change in the country. As the Arab Spring gripped the political imaginations of many Syrians and protests against the authoritarian Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad erupted across Syria, Saif felt morally impelled to support these efforts. Afterwards, he became afraid that his actions would eventually land him in prison followed by torture and possible death, and he arranged for the family to relocate to Beirut, where Amani had family relations. In Beirut, the couple shared their apartment with their three children and Amani's mother, Zahra.[2]

When I visited the family in their apartment on the outskirts of Beirut, Saif usually met me on a corner close to the family home, and we walked together to the apartment. On one of these occasions, we arrived at the front door and were greeted by the sound of the television, which could be heard from the outside. When I entered the living room, Zahra, Saif's mother-in-law, was watching TV. She looked up at me, smiled and then picked up the remote control and turned down the sound of the television. After greeting me, Zahra returned her attention to the TV screen even though the sound was now off. The TV was tuned to Al Mayadeen, a channel largely understood to be supportive of the Syrian regime but not as (clearly) propagandist as SANA (the Syrian Arab News Agency, which is the official and state-sponsored channel in

Syria) (see Crone 2020). Saif put down a few things on the floor next to the mattresses for sitting and went to the balcony to smoke.

A few moments later, Amani entered the room with a large tray full of *mlukhia* (green leaves on small twigs used in a traditional Syrian dish of the same name). Amani, Zahra and I gathered around the tray and started the work of separating leaves from twigs. A few minutes later, Saif reentered the room and sat down. He picked up the remote, changed the channel to Al Jazeera (a Qatari news outlet, which mainly angled its news on Syria in support of the uprising) and turned up the sound. Zahra shot a glance at the TV with an expressionless face and then returned her attention to the *mlukhia* leaves. Later, as Saif left to pick up the children from school, Zahra changed the channel back to Al Mayadeen.

In the midst of this scene of familial entanglement, the silent war over the remote control succinctly encapsulates the everyday dynamic in the small family. While Zahra and Saif never directly verbalized their disagreement over who to support in the conflict in Syria, with their actions they clearly demonstrated that they disagreed. Getting to know them, I came to understand that their political disagreements were present but rarely spoken in various exchanges between them—as they changed TV channels, talked about life in Lebanon or debated the best future for the family as a whole. In this way, the ongoing conflict in Syria found a particularly subtle form through which to dwell in and inflect the everyday life of the family.

The Formulation of (Authoritarian) Politics as Ethical Propositions

In this article, I trace various ways in which the conflict in Syria plays out in the family life of Syrians displaced to Lebanon and Turkey.[3] I argue that as the conflict inhabits family life, it is itself (re)formulated (see Lifton 1991) as a family matter. That is, the stakes in the conflict are translated from questions of how Syria should be ruled to questions of what kind of husband, wife, father, mother, brother or sister one can and should be and what kind of family life one can and should lead. In one way this shifts the emphasis from the political to the ethical, in another way it ties these domains together as politics emerge as ethical propositions. Such a tie to ethics is arguably part of all kinds of politics (e.g., Aristotle 2020; Kant 1932). However, in contexts of authoritarianism or violent conflict the personal costs of dissent are often exceedingly high (Amarasuriya et al. 2020). I argue that these costs of political contestation in turn pushes questions of ethics to the fore so as to render the ethical stakes of family life a key language in which to think and talk about the political.

This is not to say that my interlocutors did not also engage with the conflict as a matter of what sociologist Cihan Tuğal calls "politics proper" (2009: 428). Syrians did deliberate on the issues of who should run the country and in which way, as well as the question of what means (peaceful protests and dialogue versus violence) were legitimate in the struggle for power. However, in the context of conflict and displacement as well as the (sometimes) radical transformations of everyday life caused by the loss of not only one's country and local community but also one's economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) stakes in the conflict also revolved around the effects it had on people's lives.

At the same time, the process of formulating politics as family matters was not always explicit. As in-laws, spouses, siblings, parents and children and even aunts and nephews among my Syrian interlocutors took different views on the question of whether the regime or (various parts of) the opposition were to blame for ongoing violence and destruction, an unfamiliar situation of debating politics crept into the daily conversations of many families. These families had until 2011 lived their lives in Syria where the autocratic regime repressed most forms of

political debate to the extent that such debate was even stifled in many family homes (Ismail 2018). In displacement in Lebanon and Turkey, political disagreement brought politics and the conflict into the center of family life in unprecedented ways. In this situation, disagreement was often veiled and expressed only indirectly in arguments over what would constitute a "good life" (Wedeen 2019: 20) for the family and in extension of this how one should act toward both one's family and power holders to realize such a life.

What we gain from investigating these processes of formulation are insights into the ways in which authoritarian rule is both reproduced and contested within the family. First, the pursuit of 'a good family life' is pushed to center stage as families are displaced from the ongoing battle and dispossessed in the process. This allows us to see clearly how the conflict is formulated as a family matter. Second, the way in which the pursuit of 'a good family life' is undertaken is linked directly to how a family related to the authoritarian regime before the uprising. The formulation of politics as family matters therefore shows us how family works as a crucial layer of authoritarian rule in Syria.

Connecting politics to family life, I draw on feminist scholarship that demonstrates how modern Arab states have enrolled the family in their state-building projects and in the process impacted family structures and gender roles (Abu Lughod 1998; Najmabadi 1998). To some degree, the Baathist Syrian state has related to its subjects in terms of what Suad Joseph (1999, 2005) calls the "kin contract." Relegating family law to religious communities, the state has to an extent allowed patrilineal descent to determine individual rights and obligations and thus status in relation to the state (Maktabi 2010). Simultaneously, however, the socialist Syrian regime has attempted to undercut traditional power structures by liberating women from their role as housewives and peasants from the exploitation of tribal sheikhs and large landowners (Amiralay 1974; Gallagher 2012; Hinnebusch 2001; Rabo 1996). As such, the ways in which the Syrian state has intersected the family and enrolled it in its state-building project are far from unequivocal.

From the family side of the state-subject relationship, scholars argue that people invoke their gendered family positions when they act in relation to the state (Singerman 1995; Suerbaum and Richter-Devroe 2022) just as people's relations with the state are partly shaped by their visions of a normal family life (Ginsburg 1998; Natanel 2013). I draw on these insights to zoom in on the ways in which Syrians navigate their positions in the family and in extension of this their relations to the authoritarian regime. I argue that among my Syrian interlocutors such navigations are as multi-faceted as are the ways in which the state has intersected and attempted to coopt Syrian families. On the one hand, a patrilineal patriarchal family structure clearly shapes gendered expectations of family members. On the other hand, the authority of the patriarch is constantly at risk and must be actively upheld—also through ways of engaging with power holders.

Investigating contestation of and collaboration with authoritarian rule as family matters thus allows me to show how relations to the regime are navigated also in terms of the life one can lead and the person one can be through these relations. Within the scholarship on authoritarianism, it is often argued that authoritarian states attempt to secure their power through strategies of co-optation, legitimation, and repression (Gerschewski 2013; Heydemann and Leenders 2013). Syrians for their part are said to simultaneously appreciate the protection and opportunities provided by the regime (Gallagher 2012; Wedeen 2019) and deplore the violence through which dissent is repressed and the corruption on which the system runs (Al-Haj Saleh 2017; Anderson 2013; George 2003; Ismail 2018). Adding to that literature, this article highlights how interactions with the authoritarian regime are also family matters. I argue that the pursuit of specific kinds of gendered personhood shape individual encounters with regime strategies and practices. Especially the patriarchal family model that is both promoted and undercut by the

regime serves as a conduit for negotiations over personhood that in turn mediate the meaning ascribed to various forms of regime provision, propaganda and repression. Contestation of and collaboration with the regime in part spring from such negotiations and ascriptions of meaning.

Structure of the Argument

Upon situating my research within the landscape of conflict and rupture that form a necessary starting point for any investigation of the aftermath of the Syrian uprising, the article will unfold as an exploration of subtle negotiations over politics as these take place in two differently situated families. Each family serves as a pointed example of a particular kind of family dynamic that is simultaneously shaped by and shapes the recalibration of the meaning of political action. Although they certainly do not exhaust the possibilities in terms of the shapes these recalibrations take, they represent key trends in my material. Saif, Amani and Zahra exemplify the many families who engaged successfully with authoritarian government and lost almost everything as Saif took action against the Syrian regime. Alaa and Tareq exemplify the families who were disadvantaged during autocratic Baath rule in Syria and hoped that the uprising might level the playing field in terms of opportunities. The article thus deals exclusively with families in which one member engaged in anti-authoritarian activity even though family, I would argue, played an equally significant role for Syrians who did not take action.

Rupture and its Aftermath

In exploring the ways in which politics inhabit family life in displacement and is itself formulated as a family matter, I examine a specific period of time for Syrians in which a most unusual political event (the uprising, or revolution, or terrorist plot to upend the stability of Syria, depending on your viewpoint) was not only still unfolding but had also started to have dire repercussions for most Syrians.

In 2014–2015, when I did the main part of my fieldwork among Syrians displaced to Turkey and Lebanon, the Syrian conflict (which began in early 2011) was still raging and its conclusion in terms of victors and the future of the country unsettled. It was a time of profound rupture in which an ongoing unfolding of various perspectives on both the past, present and future in Syria and for Syrians was played out on the streets, in the media and in people's homes (Haugbolle and Bandak 2017; Ismail 2011; Rabo 2014). Simultaneously, millions of Syrians had been displaced and were struggling to survive under harsh conditions either inside Syria or abroad. Displacement to neighboring countries entailed divergent forms of social and political discrimination but also the opportunity to wrestle oneself free (at least to some extent) from the watchful gaze and harmful hand of the Syrian secret police (*almukhabarat*). My interlocutors were therefore trying to come to terms with their new existence in displacement in a context of new opportunities with respect to Syrian politics. It was a time of widespread fear and despair among Syrians of all political convictions but there were also still considerable amounts of hope, at least among my interlocutors in Turkey and Lebanon.

In this atmosphere of new opportunities amidst loss and destruction what was at stake were opinions on the choice between the Syrian regime and the various factions of the opposition—including opinions on what means were acceptable in the fight for power. Even though the regime was by far the most brutal party in the conflict, the militarized parts of the opposition did not hold back either and reports of kidnappings, bestial killings and sectarian massacres

emerged ever so often (Bandak 2014). Moreover, among most of my interlocutors there was disquiet at the emergence of ever more Islamist factions on the battlefields of Syria. As the conflict escalated, violence both pushed many Syrians to seek safety across international borders and in certain ways spilled over into neighboring countries. These spillovers took the form of summary killings of outspoken critics of this or that faction, alarm and despair among Syrians at the state of their country and direct or indirect involvement of the host state in the conflict (Holst 2020).

As such the uprising, subsequent war and (for some) displacement amounted to a rupture of the political and social status quo so profound that it was almost impossible not to reflect on the novel ideas and imaginaries it set in motion (see Al-Khalili and Holst's introduction to this special section; Wedeen 2019). Among the mostly middle-aged Sunnis of varying degrees of religiosity and social conservatism or progressiveness that made up the core group of my interlocutors, the uprising was simultaneously understood as an urgent call to take action (either to defend the status quo or oppose it) and as an uncontrollable force to fear. Some of my interlocutors summed up this state of affairs saying that there were no good choices, and they were therefore left to decide which was their least bad option. Others attempted determinedly not to choose sides, instead invoking the phrase "we are in the middle" (*nahna bil nus*) almost as an incantation or opting to stay silent while shrugging their shoulders.

For the people who did take a stand, what is significant for my purpose here is that this choice was continuously renegotiated as violent events took hold of Syria in constantly evolving forms and as displacement dispossessed them in various ways. Choices were calibrated against these developments that affected both everyday lives and the country more broadly. There was thus ample and frequent cause to pause and reflect on one's decision, as Samuli Schielke (2017) shows was the case also in Egypt. Novel ideas were developed and old patterns were analyzed in many different settings such as newspapers (Hanafi 2012), political organizations (Al-Khalili 2021), work places (Proudfoot 2019) and among groups of friends (Brønd 2017). In this way, the specific time and the condition of displacement provides a unique window into Syrian deliberations on authoritarianism and violent conflict. In what follows, I use this window to show how family relationships are one of the crucial layers of the struggle over power in Syria as the political is also measured on the scale of family life.

Recalibrating Political Action on the Scale of Family Life

Returning first to the story of Saif, Amani and Zahra, I will show how the political disagreement in the extended family remains unspoken and therefore the main scale on which to measure political action becomes family life. While individual family members might hold opinions on how political contestation or collaboration is good or bad in terms of issues related to politics proper, the shared language of the family deals with actions mainly in terms of how they allow individuals to live up to their gendered family responsibilities. While I highlight the ways in which displacement and its causes inflected family discussions, I also show that conversations were to a large degree shaped by family patterns as they unfolded before the uprising. What the look at this particular family allows me to show is thus how relations with power holders during but also before the uprising were shaped and ascribed meaning in terms of the gendered roles in the family each person pursued. To lay out this argument, I will briefly describe how Saif and Zahra explained their politics in situations where the other was not present and then turn to the discussions that took place between the two and in the family as a whole.

In private conversations with me, Saif explained that he was willing to "play by the rules" (literally "there are rules you have to watch for," *fi qawaa'd lazem tentebehela*) before the uprising,

but that the regime had gone too far in its attacks on "the people demonstrating for freedom." He insisted that taking action had been "the right thing to do" (*hada alsah*). In front of his wife, Amani, his mother-in-law Zahra and other members of his wife's family, however, Saif never expressed these sentiments. I never even heard him say that he thought supporting the uprising was "the right thing to do" in principle, if not in practice. Similarly, when Saif was out of the house, Zahra would state quite clearly that the opposition were mere terrorists and that they were to blame for the unfolding destruction and chaos in Syria. When the two in-laws engaged in conversation with each other, however, such clear statements were never uttered even in conversations with obvious political implications.

On one such occasion, Zahra and Saif were discussing the latest news from Lebanon as they sat on the balcony, smoking and drinking coffee. At one point, Zahra said, "It is impossible for Syrians to live here [in Lebanon], you should not have left Syria." Saif ignored the last part of the comment and said, while looking at me, "This is why I want us to leave for Europe, there is no life here." Zahra looked at Saif and said, "What do you want to do [singular form, *shu bedak tsaui*] in Europe? You don't know the language or the society. It would have been better if you had stayed [plural form, *lau dolaitu*] in Syria." Saif again looked at me and said, "I have many good friends in France. They can help me get settled there." Zahra shook her head expressing disagreement, put out her cigarette and went inside. Saif watched as she left and then changed the subject.

While this was a conversation about the best course of action for the family, there are also clear political implications of what Zahra said. To be able to stay in Syria, Saif would have had to keep on the good side of the Syrian regime. While I do not know whether Zahra intended to indirectly criticize Saif's political actions or was simply pressing the point that Saif had responsibilities to his wife and children (Zahra's daughter and grandchildren), the significant point for my argument here is that what Zahra chose to express was her disappointment and dissatisfaction with the ways in which Saif was handling himself as patriarch. For Zahra, what was mainly at stake in the situation thus appeared to be the immediate and long-term well-being of her family.

For his part, Saif could have responded with the same kinds of arguments he gave me when justifying his actions. Rather than leave uncontested the claim that he should have kept his family in Syria, he could have argued that this was a politically or morally indefensible move. However, rather than respond overtly politically to Zahra's attack, which would require Saif to refer to the ongoing destruction of Syria at the hands of the Syrian regime and thus to attack Zahra's political position, Saif opted to ignore her statements about the past and instead address me regarding his intentions to bring the family to Europe. I was addressed, I believe, because I helped the family translate papers and phrase applications for asylum, thus aiding them in their efforts to go to Europe. Moreover, Saif, as male head of the household, might have felt uncomfortable having to defend his actions to a senior female member of his wife's family and criticize her in the process (see Chatty 2018; Mahmood 2005). He might also simply have felt that such a political discussion was futile.

Saif's response, I argue, revealed that he understood clearly that while what he did might have been 'the right thing to do' in terms of politics, it was not necessarily the right thing to do in terms of his role as husband and father. Amani, as it were, was paying a price for Saif's political activity and the relocation to Lebanon that it resulted in. She often spoke about problems at the office where she worked. She explained that the head of her section was deliberately "making trouble" for her. Amani believed that she only had problems at work because she was an unconnected outsider in Lebanon (meaning she had no *wasta*[4]), and she asserted that this would never have been a problem in Syria because Saif was so well connected there that "no one

would dare make trouble for me." While Amani never directly blamed Saif for her predicament, she complained about it almost daily and tied it in with the way the relocation to Lebanon resulted in Saif's loss of connections and standing. The implications of this reasoning was that Saif's political actions had resulted in his inability to be as successful a husband as he had been in Syria where he provided protection through social standing. Although Saif never overtly acknowledged that he had failed as husband, it was clear that he was burdened by the weight of not being able to provide for and protect his family.

Saif's recognition of his failings became apparent, for instance, when I visited the family a few days after I witnessed the discussion between Zahra and Saif on the balcony. Saif met me on a corner and while we were walking to the apartment, he said to me, "I have to get us out of here, there is no life here." He said this without any prompting from me, right out of the blue. Back in the house, I asked him whether he was sad that the family had to leave Syria. As a way of answering, he told me with a grin on his face, "In Syria I was like a fish in water [at this point he gestured with his hand and imitated a fish swimming in waves], I knew exactly how and where to swim, we had a good life, I had good connections and I was good at getting what I wanted, I could do as I wanted." After a pause, he continued in a regretful tone, "Here I can do nothing. . . . We have to leave." While Saif never acknowledged any wrongdoing on his part, he clearly demonstrated that he felt that the choices he made had put him in a situation that he regretted being in. Saif phrased this regret in terms of what he could do, but he also positioned himself as responsible for his family, and thus what he could do was directly related to what he could do for his family, what sort of man he could be.

In their thought-provoking article on ethics and everyday life in post-invasion Iraq, Hayder Al-Mohammad and Daniella Peluso (2012) argue that individual Iraqi life trajectories are entangled with the lives of others both in the sense that people open or block the way for others and in the sense that people's "lives are caught in the hopes, ambitions, and thoughts of others." Joy, therefore, does not "merely reside within our own skin, but [is] caught in the experiences of others," who are close to us (ibid.: 51; see also Anderson 2018; Bloch 2013). In a similar vein, Saif was caught in the price his wife and children paid for his political actions. The principle, however, also extended further and was stretched to include the masses of Syrians who went to the streets at risk to their own lives. What Saif did was, to his mind, the right thing to do in the sense that it helped open up roads for these Syrians, but it was perhaps also the wrong thing to do in the sense that it closed down roads for his family.

Saif's predicament, then, was his sense that he had conflicting responsibilities to others. It was also a keen awareness that his ability to be a good husband and father depended on his ability to "do as he wanted" in public life, which again depended on his standing with the political system. Saif's position is difficult to understand if we follow established knowledge on what it entailed to live under autocratic rule in Syria. In her seminal book on Hafez Al-Assad's Syria, Lisa Wedeen argues that "acting as if" (Wedeen 1999: 67) one believed in and supported the regime in contexts of public spectacle and events was a way of securing a viable life situation for oneself. This, however, placed Syrians in a situation fraught with ambivalence, because they were effectively oppressing themselves by acting against their actual beliefs. In her recent book, Wedeen (2019) argues that under Bashar Al-Assad some elite Syrians came to support the regime because it offered them access to certain visions of a consumerist good life. Understanding Saif, however, necessarily takes us beyond both these arguments. Saif was neither acting as if he believed the regime rhetoric nor lured by neoliberal notions of consumption and high life.

We should recall that Saif did not think of his life and actions before the uprising as morally dubious. Rather, the momentum of the uprising shifted the significations of undertaking certain acts and pushed Saif to take a stand against a regime he previously worked for and in sup-

port of. Saif does not present himself as a man who, against his own moral judgment, engaged with a regime he found reprehensible, as Paul Anderson (2013) argues in his perceptive examination of the ways in which moral apprehension at engaging with the regime was lived and ameliorated by Aleppians before the uprising. Rather, Saif appears to be a man who took the regime to be the only available reality (Pedersen and Højer 2008; Yurchak 2006). Within the system, he worked to position himself well so that he could do as he wanted and thus be the kind of man that he wanted to be. What many arguments on life in authoritarian Syria thus understate is that Syrians did not necessarily engage with the Syrian polity only because it was unavoidable (Anderson 2013: 467; Bandak 2015). Rather they engaged with it because this allowed them to be(come) the kinds of persons they wanted to be. Positioning oneself well within the system was also a way of crafting oneself as a "responsible" person in terms of family relationships (Gallagher 2012: 282) and wider social standing and not just a necessity for social and economic advancement.

For Saif, and others like him, "playing by the rules" in Syria tied in with conceptions of successful personhood that inextricably linked the political and the everyday and rendered opposition a complicated matter also in more mundane ways than those related to the fear of violence (cf. Ismail 2018; Pearlman 2016). Therefore Saif, who felt compelled by moral obligation to take a stand on behalf of his fellow man at the beginning of the uprising, was later compelled to pause and hesitate (Schielke 2017) as the meanings of political developments were recalibrated in terms of his role as husband and father. This is at least partly a result of the fact that Saif was so successful in navigating the system in Syria that displacement has been exceedingly costly for him in terms of social and political capital.

This perspective on Saif and Zahra shows us that seemingly non-political discussions which draw on (and institute) certain ideals for family life, fatherhood, the good husband and the good provider work to recalibrate the meaning of political contestation or collaboration as they measure such actions on the scale of family life. In what follows, the example of Tareq and Alaa will allow me to unfold how anti-authoritarian politics can also be attempts to forge desired family dynamics and thus at the outset be formulated as family matters.

Formulating Politics as a Family Matter

One of the many noteworthy aspects about Saif's predicament is that Amani consistently and astutely avoided getting caught in the middle of the conflict between her husband and her mother. While Amani's complaints about her situation at work did contribute to Saif's misery, she carefully avoided criticizing him and always supported him when the discussion fell on the issue of the future for the family. In this way, Amani was "holding up" Saif, effectively allowing him to maintain his status as head of a united family and thus providing him with a platform from which he could contest or at least refuse to acknowledge directly that Zahra was right to blame him for failing as a husband. Thus, while Zahra and Saif at first glance seem to argue their cases from fixed positions in the family, Amani's way of handling the situation points first to the ways in which those positions are themselves up for negotiation and second to the ways in which the result of such negotiations is to carve out specific roles from which each spouse is able to negotiate the meaning of political action.

In this section, I use the example of another couple, Alaa and Tareq, to explore the ways in which family roles are simultaneously caught up in and a vehicle for renegotiating notions of the good life, the good spouse (or parent) and the right strategies to bring the family toward the future. Whereas the example of Saif shows us how political contestation is recalibrated on

the scale of family life, Tareq exemplifies a man for whom political contestation is motivated by family concerns. Through Tareq, the ways in which politics are formulated as family matters become especially clear.

Tareq and Alaa married young and settled together in a house in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Aleppo. Soon, however, they came to live apart and continued to do so for most of their married life. Tareq worked in the Gulf for 16 years and only saw his wife and children (who were young adults in 2014) on the few occasions when he was able to return home for short visits. The marriage between Tareq and Alaa was thus shaped around separation, and they were accustomed to managing daily life without the other being present. On one of my first visits to the family apartment in Gaziantep, Turkey, Tareq explained that the Syrian regime was to blame for this state of affairs and that he joined the fight against Bashar Al-Assad partly to rectify such injustices.

Sitting on two soft chairs in a section of the living room where the TV was also placed (another section of sofa, chairs and table was used for doing homework and preparing food) Tareq unfolded his convictions to me while occasionally glancing at the TV. The channel was tuned to Al Arabiya (a Saudi-sponsored news outlet that angled its news on Syria in support of the uprising), and the sound was turned low enough so as not to disturb us but loud enough to alert Tareq to any significant news to which he wanted to pay attention. Over three hours, as Alaa and the children came and went, did homework, peeled and cut potatoes for French fries, listened in and talked among themselves, Tareq explained to me the personal, religious and political stakes in the ongoing conflict.

One of his key points, to which he returned repeatedly, revolved around the issue of the kind of life people could live in Syria: "It was impossible to make a decent living under the Baath regime. For people like us, poor Sunni without connections [*wasta*] there was no . . . way to support our families. I got lucky to have a chance in [the Gulf] but I was separated from my family. What kind of life is this? They prevented us from living decent lives, from having families, from having a country." Tareq went on to say that he came back to fight the regime to change this. To fight for a decent life for all Syrians.

As Tareq formulates his political perspective in terms of the life he (as a poor Sunni) was able to lead during Baath rule, he is participating in a specific way of talking about politics that was widespread among my interlocutors of all political persuasions. Politics was often discussed in terms of the life one could lead under varying political conditions. Among pro-regime and "middle ground" interlocutors the phrase "we were living" (*kinna aisheen*) was continuously invoked in reference to the difference between the situation in Syria before the uprising and the situation for Syrians both in and outside Syria during the war. Among the opposition, counterarguments ran along the lines that life in authoritarian Syria was devoid of dignity (*karame*) (a key term used also in demonstrations) (Harkin 2018).

Tareq's personal story of migration added to these general ideas a specificity in the sense that the life he had been deprived of was not only dignity as a citizen and religious freedom as a conservative Sunni but also a chance to live a decent family life. While he had been able to provide for his family, he had not been able to take part in quotidian family life as male head of the household (see Schielke 2020). Certainly, Tareq's religious agenda (to bring Syria back on the pious path) and his desire for democracy (to give Syrians a voice) were equally significant to his ideological stand and explained his choice to fight with one of the moderate Islamist factions in the opposition. However, the issue of a decent life and his lost opportunity to inhabit the role of family patriarch in the full struck a more personal cord and was connected with more anguish, I believe. While he deliberated on the wrath of God that had brought on the current misery in Syria as well as on the issue of how to build a functioning democracy in his usual calm and

friendly tone, he became insistent and spoke with intensity and agitation when speaking of his fate as a husband and father.

These considerations about the kind of life political structures allow one to live point to two issues at the heart of the ways in which my interlocutors related to politics. One is the way that political developments were understood as directly intersecting everyday life. The other is the specific way in which Baath authoritarian rule was understood as promoting certain visions of "the good life" (Wedeen 2019: 20). As to the first, my interlocutors in Lebanon and Turkey as well as the families I knew in Syria when I lived there before the war all followed politics to figure out how events would affect them. How would a new agreement between the United States and Israel influence their lives? How would their host government's response to developments on the battlefield in Syria change policies and attitudes toward Syrian refugees?

As to the second, Sally Gallagher (2012) convincingly shows that Baath policies of promoting women's education and employment crept into damascene families where it was negotiated in terms of traditional and generational hierarchies and often led to more personal freedom for young women. In turn, these young women were able to imagine new kinds of life for themselves, setting new goals related to working outside the home and in some cases even traveling abroad. Such a tendency was clear also in my interviews with women from many parts of Syria who talked about the "good life" (*hayat mniha*) they had in Syria or triumphantly ended renditions of the many opportunities they had in Syria saying, "I could do as I wanted." Dreams differed in content, but the emphasis was on secure family life, while the possibility of pursuing education, work and travel was also highlighted especially by women.

Wedeen (2019) connects notions of the good life directly with authoritarianism arguing that elites in Damascus, Homs and Latakia were drawn to the regime through its ideology of consumerist neo-liberalism. Among my less elite group of interlocutors to do as they wanted was less about consumption and more about a sense of security and opportunity that still heeded traditional and religious prescription. Significantly, many "middle ground" interlocutors offered the perspective that the opportunities they had in Syria were secured for them by the regime. A similar tendency of seeing politics as directly intersecting everyday life was clear among Syrians who opposed the regime with many of them claiming, like Tareq, that the regime had prevented them from doing "as they wanted." This could be understood as a variation on the theme of independence and self-reliance that Annika Rabo (2005) has shown to be highly valued and sought-after conditions among traders in Aleppo. In this light, Tareq's political agenda was a rebellion against a system that would only allow him self-reliant manhood if he also gave up the manhood entailed in functioning as the head of a household in daily life.

While Tareq was thus fighting the regime to change a system that had intersected his everyday life with detrimental effects on his perception of self, he also endeavored to have his efforts recognized and validated as significant by his family. These attempts for their part seemed to be failing. Tareq would try to draw his wife and children into conversations about politics at which they would shrug and leave the room. He would also ask them with curiosity about their studies and work and take an interest in their friends. They answered these questions but without much enthusiasm. Worse still, they showed no faith in the prospect of him winning the battle for power in Syria (which Tareq himself still considered likely). While they never said as much, it was clear from the way they never mentioned Syria as an option.

One especially straightforward example of this unfolded only a week after I had first met Tareq. Alaa and I were seated at the living room table used for preparing food and were busy hollowing out small squash for stuffing when Tareq came home from a meeting. He sat down to watch television on the sofa-set next to the one we were in, and our conversation continued

without him. Alaa was telling me about her 21-year-old son, who lived with Tareq's brother in France. Alaa was currently discussing with her brother-in-law what kind of future her son should aim for. At some point, she started talking about her other children and she said that she wanted to take them to Europe as well. At this, Tareq turned around in his chair and looked at her. Alaa took no notice of her husband. She continued hollowing out squash and told me that she did not know exactly how to go. She found the sea too dangerous, and she would prefer to buy false papers and take an airplane. She was currently trying to find someone who could help her with that.

What is significant in this episode is that Alaa, who was accustomed to an inordinate level of independence for a woman of her socio-economic and religious background precisely because of the specific history of Tareq's migration, manifests her role as head of decision-making in the family and simultaneously, albeit indirectly, dismisses Tareq's efforts on the battlefield in terms of the roads they might open in Syria (Al-Mohammad and Peluso 2012). As one of Alaa's daughters came home and joined our preparations of food, it became clear that Syria was in fact the one option that was never discussed by the female members of the household. I asked the daughter what she was thinking about the future and she said that she wanted to stay in Gaziantep. Pursuing a Turkish university degree and holding a job with a Syrian NGO she saw many opportunities here, she said. I looked at Alaa and, understanding the implicit question, she said that her children could do as they wanted but she would make sure they could also choose Europe if they decided on this. I then looked toward Tareq, who was again following the conversation from his seat in the other sofa-set, but he was looking at his wife and daughter and took no notice of me. As food was served and we sat eating, I pointed out that lunches in Syria were always lavish but that the spread they had laid out here was quite magnificent even by those standards. At this comment, Alaa smiled and Tareq said to me, "I am fighting to make sure that my family and all Syrians can one day return to Syria to eat lunch."

In this conversation, a plethora of political, social and personal circumstances seem to intersect to lend meaning to political actions. The specific context of Gaziantep, which hosts the Syrian Interim (opposition) Government as well as several political parties and civil society organizations, provides specific opportunities for Syrians to position themselves politically and socially. This is clear from the statements of both Tareq's daughter and Alaa. Simultaneously, the shifting luck on the battlefields of Syria and the knowledge that Europe provides more ready opportunities influence at least the thinking of Alaa who wants to relocate. For Tareq there seems to be little choice other than the battlefield. However, the lack of support for his efforts contained in the way that Alaa and her daughter do not consider Syria an option cause him to first pause what he is doing and listen and later to reassert the significance of his undertakings precisely in terms of the roads they might clear for his family in Syria.

Tareq's response, when interpreted in concert with his ongoing efforts to engage his family in political discussion and to learn about their lives, appears to be an attempt to signify his activity on the battlefield as part of his role as family father, husband and provider. In the context of quotidian family life in displacement, Tareq is thus engaged in an ongoing negotiation over the significance of his activities in Syria. Depending on his audience, he alternates between proclaiming his politics in terms of principles related to the injustices done to him and attempting to declare them as integral parts of his role as male head of the household. He thus fluctuates between declaring his politics as related to general conditions of life and as directly affecting everyday life (albeit in the future tense). In these negotiations, both the meaning of political action and Tareq's role in the family were at stake. While the negotiations never appeared to be finalized, politics and social role mutually inflected one another in shifting balances.

Conclusion

Debates over politics that took the form of arguments regarding the effect of political conditions on everyday life were widespread during the war in Syria and unfolded in various arenas. In this article, I focused particularly on the family setting as a key site for both envisioning and enacting specific versions of "a good life" that are simultaneously inflected by political developments and themselves formulate politics as family matters.

The look at Alaa and Tareq, Amani, Zahra and Saif, reveals how roles and obligations in the family are simultaneously vital motivators for engaging with the political in specific ways and form a key part of the web of meaning through which such engagements can be interpreted (Geertz 1973). Although Tareq and Saif think about politics also in broader terms of what kind of society they want or what the right thing to do in terms of one's fellow Syrian is, as political actors their choices are directly inflected by the kinds of husbands and fathers they are or want to be. It is not simply that one's (friends and) family impact one's attitudes with their arguments but that the pursuit of certain social roles and relationships inflect experience in a way that in turn molds one's political perspective. As politics inhabit everyday family life it is also formulated in terms of family relationships, adding new layers to authoritarian rule and shaping contestation and collaboration.

These interconnections between family life and politics appear to me highly significant especially in contexts of authoritarianism, conflict and/or displacement. In situations where political debate is either prohibited by an autocratic regime or inhibited by the absence of a state in which one has a place as citizen, dreams and hopes for 'a good life' that a specific political order should or could make possible become one vehicle through which to think politically. The family is one site through which to develop such ideas about a better existence, and it is a site that became all the more important as Syrians were displaced from their wider social environment of local community, workplace and country.

▪ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the reviewers for their careful readings of the article and their apt and helpful comments and critiques. I also want to thank Charlotte Al-Khalili for pertinent critical input and Marianne Hedegaard, Christine Crone, Anja Kublitz and all participants in the research seminar where an early version of the argument was discussed. Parts of the argument and empirical material I have also discussed with Lisa Wedeen, Paul Anderson, Simon Turner and Lars Højer to whom I am grateful for productive comments and questions.

▪ **BIRGITTE STAMPE HOLST** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. She focuses on political anthropology and has worked with issues pertaining to political and social change in and around Syria since 2009. Holst's PhD examined the migration and reproduction of authoritarianism as both political and social logics among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. Her postdoctoral research investigates how Syrian youth in Jordan imagine, plan for and forge viable futures for themselves. Email: stampe@hum.ku.dk

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4340-717X

NOTES

1. All names of interlocutors are pseudonyms and professions are altered or obscured. Other identifying characteristics are similarly adapted to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.
2. Except in cases where husband and wife are from the same patrilineage, it is somewhat unusual for Syrian couples to settle nearer to the kin of the wife (Al-Khalili forthcoming). For Saif and Amani, the situation resulted from the circumstance that Saif did not himself have living relatives outside Syria, just as Zahra, Amani's mother, could not live with her sons who were still in Syria.
3. The article draws on 11 months of fieldwork conducted among Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey in 2014–2015. An additional three months of fieldwork conducted in the winter of 2017–2018 as well as two years living in Syria in 2009–2010 serve as points of comparison.
4. *Wasta* signifies social capital or connections. More specifically it entails having a network of people who can act as mediators between oneself and relevant authorities (Sharabi 1988).

REFERENCES

Abu Lughod, Lila. 1998. "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu Lughod, 243–269. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Al-Haj Saleh, Yassin. 2017. *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. London: C. Hurst and Company.

Al-Khalili, Charlotte. 2021. "Halaqas, Relational Subjects and Revolutionary Committees in Syria." *Focaal* 91: 50–66. https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2021.910104.

Al-Khalili, Charlotte. Forthcoming. "Women in Revolution: Women's Revolution?" In *La société syrienne face à la guerre: reconfigurations sociales, économiques et politiques*, ed. M. Ababsa and Napolitano. Diacritique/IFPO.

Al-Khalili, Charlotte and Birgitte Holst. 2023. "Displaced Conflict: Layers of Spatial Rupture among Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Syria." *Conflict and Society* 9 (1). This issue.

Al-Mohammad, Hayder and Daniella Peluso. 2012. "Ethics and the 'Rough Ground' of the Everyday: The Overlappings of Life in Postinvasion Iraq." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 42–58. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.2.004.

Amarasuriya, Harini, Tobias Kelly, Sidharthan Maunaguru, Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Jonathan Spencer, eds. 2020. *The Intimate Life of Dissent: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: UCL Press.

Amiralay, Omar. 1974. *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village*. General Organization for Cinema (Syria).

Anderson, Paul. 2013. "The Politics of Scorn in Syria and the Agency of Narrated Involvement." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (3): 463–481. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12045.

Anderson, Paul. 2018. "'An Abundance of Meaning': Ramadan as an Enchantment of Society and the Economy in Syria." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (3): 610–624. https://doi.org/10.1086/701026.

Aristotle. 2020. *Politics*. Ktoczyta pl.

Bandak, Andreas. 2014. "Reckoning with the Inevitable: Death and Dying among Syrian Christians during the Uprising." *Ethnos* 80 (5): 671–691. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.941896.

Bandak, Andreas. 2015. "Performing the Nation: Syrian Christians on the National Stage." In *Syria: From Reform to Revolt*, vol. 2, ed. Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg, 110–129. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Bloch, Maurice. 2013. *In and Out of Each Other's Bodies: Theory of Mind, Evolution, Truth, and the Nature of the Social*. London: Paradigm Publishers.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson, 241–258. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Brønd, Thomas. 2017. "The Most Beautiful Friendship: Revolution, War and Ends of Social Gravity in Syria." *Middle East Critique* 26 (3): 283–296. https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2017.1331517.

Chatty, Dawn. 2018. "Syria." In *Arab Family Studies*, ed. Suad Joseph, 233–246. New York: Syracuse University Press.
Crone, Christine. 2020. *Pan-Arab News TV Station Al-Mayadeen—the New Regressive Leftist Media*. New York: Peter Lang.
Gallagher, Sally. 2012. *Making Do in Damascus: Navigating a Generation of Change in Family and Work*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
George, Alan. 2003. *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. London: Zed Books.
Gerschewski, Johannes. 2013. "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes." *Democratization* 20 (1): 13–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860.
Ginsburg, Faye. 1998. *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Hanafi, Sari. 2012. "The Arab Revolutions: The Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5 (2): 198–213. https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2012.668303.
Harkin, Juliette. 2018. "Demands for Dignity and the Syrian Uprising." In *The Syrian Uprising*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, 173–187. Oxford: Taylor and Francis.
Haugbolle, Sune, and Andreas Bandak. 2017. "The Ends of Revolution: Rethinking Ideology and Time in the Arab Uprisings." *Middle East Critique* 26 (3): 191–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2017.1334304.
Heydemann, Steven, and Reinoud Leenders, eds. 2013. *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Hinnebusch, Raymond. 2001. *Syria: Revolution from Above*. London: Routledge.
Holst, Birgitte. 2020. *Migrating Authoritarianism: An Ethnography of Differentiated Political Change among Syrians Living in Refuge in Lebanon and Turkey*. PhD dissertation, University of Copenhagen.
Ismail, Salwa. 2011. "The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (3): 538–549. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01136.x.
Ismail, Salwa. 2018. *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Joseph, Suad. 1999. "Descent of the Nation: Kinship and Citizenship in Lebanon." *Citizenship Studies* 3 (3): 295–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621029908420717.
Joseph, Suad. 2005. "The Kin Contract and Citizenship in the Middle East." In *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman, 149–169. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kant, Immanuel. 1932. *Perpetual Peace*. Los Angeles: U.S. Library Association.
Lifton, Robert J. 1991 [1968]. *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Maktabi, Rania. 2010. "Gender, Family Law, and Citizenship in Syria." *Citizenship Studies* 14 (5): 557–572. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2010.506714.
Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 1998. "Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu Lughod, 91–125. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Natanel, Katherine. 2013. "Living in the Garden of Perhaps: Ordinary Life as an Obstacle for Political Change in Israel." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14 (4): 19–33.
Pearlman, Wendy. 2016. "Narratives of Fear in Syria." *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (1): 21–37. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592715003205.
Pedersen, Morten Axel, and Lars Højer. 2008. "Lost in Transition: Fuzzy Property and Leaky Selves in Ulaanbaatar." *Ethnos* 73 (1): 73–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840801930891.
Proudfoot, Philip. 2019. "Lebanon Can't Give Him a Future: Revolutionary Subjectivity and Syrian Rebel-Workers in Beirut." In *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War*, ed. L. Matar and A. Kadri, 133–158. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rabo, Annika. 1996. "Gender, State, and Civil Society in Jordan and Syria." In *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, ed. Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn, 153–174. London: Routledge.
Rabo, Annika. 2005. *A Shop of One's Own*. London: I.B. Tauris.
Rabo, Annika. 2014. "It Has All Been Planned: Talking about *Us* and Powerful Others in Contemporary Syria." In *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Michael Butter, Maurus Reinkowski and Peter Auer, 212–228. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Schielke, Samuli. 2017. "There Will Be Blood: Expectations and Ethics of Violence during Egypt's Stormy Season." *Middle East Critique* 26 (3): 205–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2017.1336023.
Schielke, Samuli. 2020. *Migrant Dreams*. Cairo: AUC Press
Sharabi, Hisham. 1988. *Neo-Patriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Singerman, Diane. 1995. *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Suerbaum, Magdalena, and Sophie Richter-Devroe. 2022. "Migrations through Law, Bureaucracy, and Kin: Navigating Citizenship in Relations." *Citizenship Studies* 26 (6): 727–745. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2103967.
Tuğal, Cihan. 2009. "Transforming Everyday Life: Islamism and social Movement Theory." *Theory and Society: Renewal and Critique in Social Theory* 38 (5): 423–458. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-009-9091-7.
Wedeen, Lisa. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Wedeen, Lisa. 2019. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment and Mourning in Syria*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. *Everything was Forever, Until It was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.