What Does It Mean to Be Young for Syrian Men Living as Refugees in Cairo?

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This article deals with Syrian young men who fled to Egypt after the uprising in 2011. Their lives were affected by the challenges stemming from displacement, such as their confrontation with new responsibilities, unknown vulnerabilities and emotions, liminality and precarity. They suffered from forced displacement in a gender- and age-specific way.

Keywords: Youth; Masculinity; Displacement; Syria; Egypt

Introduction

Young Syrian men in Cairo have held various roles since their arrival in Egypt following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011: they were refugees and sons, part of the younger generation, in one way grown-ups having increased responsibilities, but simultaneously not yet uncontested adult men in the traditional Syrian sense. This article examines how young men from Syria in Egypt made sense of the changes in their lives stemming from forced displacement, and intends to discuss the challenges and struggles they faced and went through because of their position as young men.

I argue in this article that coming of age in the context of forced displacement is not a linear process from one coherent, holistic life stage to the next. Rather, being young as a forced migrant means walking a blurry, partial, unstable and jumbled path into adulthood. Young men were challenged and struggled in a specific way because of their age and gender: they were often the main reason why their family decided to flee from Syria, they had lost trust in the older generation, and they could not find for themselves an uncontested form of masculine adulthood but instead often remained in the position of *sons* vis-à-vis their families.

Data Collection

I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork over fourteen months in Cairo in 2014/2015. Through interviews, intense participant observation and daily informal conversations with Syrian and Egyptian men and women of all ages, I aimed to examine how the experience of displacement impacts specifically on Syrian men and changes constructions of masculinity. Men and women I met in Egypt came from various cities and villages in Syria and predominantly identified themselves as having a middle-class background.

As a PhD student from the Global North who had studied the Middle East and Arabic and had lived in Egypt, Syria and Palestine for extended amounts of time, I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews, life stories and informal conversations in Arabic, but was nevertheless predominantly perceived as a stranger, outsider, guest or visitor. Thus, it took time to create relationships with participants that would eventually allow for recorded, in-depth interviews to take place. Other challenges I faced over the course of my fieldwork were witnessing and dealing with some Syrians' severe impoverishment and neediness and doing research in Egypt during a "new era of repression" (Hamzawy), which was marked by an empowering of the military, intelligence and security services and the employment of scare tactics and police brutality against citizens causing a sense of suspicion, fear and insecurity in everyday life (Hamzawy; Nassif).

I met young Syrians, the protagonists of this article who were between 18 and 30 years old, in various ways, mostly through my work as a voluntary language teacher. Furthermore, I got in touch with volunteers of a student-led association that provided support for Syrians who wanted to enroll in Egyptian universities. Conducting research among young Syrians I perceived predominantly as relaxing: it was easy to bond with them, and I sensed that they were often less suspicious than older interlocutors. Frequently, they were eager to express their political opinions and share with me their experiences during the uprising.

Syrian Refugees in Egypt

Syrians who came to Egypt after the uprising in 2011 share the Egyptian population's fate of living in a country that struggles with political and economic instabilities and witnessed the establishment of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's repressive authoritarian regime. Since Egypt does not host refugees and asylum seekers in camps, most Syrians settled in urban areas, predominantly in the governorates of Alexandria, Damietta, Mansoura, and Cairo (Ayoub and Khallaf 7). In particular, 6th of October City, a satellite town approximately thirty kilometers north of Cairo, has become known for its large Syrian community. Most Syrians I met had fled to Egypt between late 2011 and early 2013. By that time, there were no visa regulations for Syrians and then-President Muhammad Morsi repeatedly stated Egypt's support for the Syrian Revolution. He announced that Egypt would give Syrians free and full access to health and educational services (Norman 34). When Morsi was toppled in the summer of 2013, the situation for Syrians in Egypt changed drastically: they became the subject of a government-organized media campaign that labelled them as *terrorists* and allies of the newly banned Muslim Brotherhood. This led to an increase in xenophobia and discrimination against Syrians in the Egyptian population and a decrease in financial and material support (Norman 20).

Additionally, refugees, asylum seekers and generally foreigners in Egypt face challenges and legal restrictions when they try to enter the Egyptian labor market. Syrians were thus driven towards the informal labor market and frequently had to change their occupation and take up less-skilled jobs (ILO 20; Ayoub and Khallaf 27).

Why Youth?

Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to realize that young Syrian men often shared similar doubts, aspirations and problems: predominantly, they were the reason why their whole family decided to leave Syria, they had to assume new responsibilities for their families, they needed to come to terms with so-far unknown emotions, and they could not find for themselves a smooth transition into masculine adulthood. Most were aware of being at a stage where they "ought to be finding their place in society as fathers, husbands, protectors and providers; in short: as men" (Turner 1) and expressed their wish to find this place. However, they were similarly aware that becoming a man in their situation was difficult because of the various challenges they were facing during forced displacement.

Most literature dealing with youth during displacement, for example Palestinian, Sahrawi, Burundi and Afghan youth (see Chatty; Hart; Sommers), looks at the context of prolonged displacement and consequently does not speak to the case of Syrian young men, who had been displaced for no more than two or three years when I first met them. Literature dealing with young people's work migration predominantly describes their movement as a linear transition into adulthood and a

"rite of passage" (e.g. Horváth; Monsutti; Osella and Osella; Massey et al.). I argue that this perception does not fit the juggled path young Syrian men had to take to reach a form of masculine adulthood they themselves and others in their surroundings could accept. As far as recent literature dealing with masculinity and displacement is concerned, there is a recognition of the invisibility of male migrants and refugees in the study of forced migration and a call for the deconstruction of the homogenizing, generalizing and negative image of the *migrant man* (Charsley and Wray 404). Male migrants merely receive public attention as the *illegal immigrant*, who is both villain and victim, anonymous and out of place, and bereft of national belonging (Charsley and Wray 404; Andersson).

In order to conceptualize the intersection of masculinity, refugeeness and youth at which my interlocutors were positioned, I build on the following arguments: first of all, refugeeness can be described in Victor Turner's words as a liminal phase of being "betwixt and between" and of being in an "interstructural situation" (93). Simon Turner, who analyzed the situation of young Burundian men in a Tanzanian refugee camp, used this definition and extended it by declaring that "refugees are neither here nor there, neither this nor

that, they cannot be classified as boys or men" (7). I understand masculinity as a composition of resources available in a man's surrounding and as subjectively and actively constituted (see Connell; Wentzell). With the term *youth* I refer to a category that is socially and culturally constructed. Especially in the Middle East, its boundaries are considered fuzzy and stretched, since the majority of young men are unable to marry due to economic difficulties, and consequently, they belong to this category well into their thirties (Singerman; Swedenburg). Furthermore, I follow anthropologist Jennifer Johnson-Hanks, who defines life stages, such as youth, as fluid, articulate composites that are dependent on the social context and a person's agency (868-69). She argues that there are multiple paths toward adulthood, and differing aspects of adulthood might be reached at diverse times and are often reversible.

Reaching Partial, Incomplete Manhood

Several young Syrian men I met in Cairo had interrupted school or university to work, or worked and studied at the same time in order to support their family. This was the case with Fadi[1] who should have been in his first year of university. By the time I met him, he only worked occasionally, as he had to prepare for his final

school exams. One day, he took me to his workplace, a lingerie shop owned by a distant relative of his. While Fadi showed me around, a female customer interrupted our conversation in the shop asking for the best body-shaping underwear. In a professional tone and manner, he recommended one model and then referred her to his female colleague. Afterwards, while we were smoking water pipe and playing backgammon, he told me:

> It is not my dream job. I would like to become a programming engineer. I find it embarrassing to work in this job because the girls who shop there flirt with me.

He described that coping with work while also studying for his final exams in high school made him feel "older" than his peers and "impatient" and "depressed", sensing that this double burden distinguished him from others. He said, "I feel that I am not supposed to handle of all of this". Nevertheless, Fadi was also proud of his abilities to work and study at the same time:

> Men should be strong. They are stronger than women. They should support the family. I work and study at the same time. This makes us men. We stand more than we can.

Taking into consideration what traditionally defines manhood in many Middle Eastern contexts, namely, marriage, completed education, a professional career, fatherhood and knowledge about one's society (see Ghannam; Inhorn; Peteet), Fadi does not qualify as a man. He had not completed his education when he started working and was not able to save his income to move out of the parental home and get married. Nevertheless, in an environment with limited resources, he spoke of the burden of simultaneous work and study as a threshold to manhood. He transformed the heavy workload he was facing on a day-to-day basis, which distinguished him from more privileged people of his age, into a sign of masculinity and a proof that he had transcended from boyhood to manhood. Fadi took the resources that were available to him in his social context and used them to discursively define himself as a man.

I also discussed young men's responsibilities with Muhannad, a student of dentistry and founder of an NGO led by Syrian students, who was either busy studying for his exams or involved in organizing events, planning future activities and raising funds for the NGO. Muhannad spoke from a privileged perspective: unlike Fadi's family, his family was in a very good situation in Cairo, with his father being able to pay the high tuition fees of Cairo's private universities for his children. Thus, Muhannad neither needed to work nor was he forced to interrupt his studies:

> I don't work because I need money; I work because I feel that it is necessary that I work. As an adult guy, one should be able to take care of one's family. Also, I should not remain a problem for my family. There are people who are spoiled and they are against working while studying.

Muhannad, like Fadi, describes himself as a man in a specific social context, namely, when comparing himself with other young Syrian men, who did not work and study at the same time.

Remaining the Son

The incompleteness and partiality of Muhannad's and Fadi's self-ascribed transition into manhood are obvious when contrasting their accounts with Fadi's memories of his flight from Syria. He told me that the main reason for his whole family's escape was concern about his safety in Syria. Young men were perceived to be in danger of being recruited into al-Assad's army, or being arrested, kidnapped or killed, and thus Fadi's whole family decided to leave. Davis et al. declare

that men, even if they do not carry weapons, are assumed at the very least to be willing to fight and are consequently viewed either as an asset or as a threat to the regime or the opposition movement in Syria (35). Likewise, Jones argues that the most vulnerable and constantly targeted population group in situations of war is non-combatant men of *battle age*, since they are perceived as a threat to the forces at war (452).

In Fadi's case, an acquaintance of his, whose father was working with the *mukhābarāt* (secret service), had seen him in a demonstration and threatened to tell his father that Fadi was supporting the opposition. Even though Fadi tried to resist his family's subsequent decision to flee, he had to eventually accept it:

> I didn't want to leave my country but my father forced me to go with the family. I couldn't believe that I had left my country. I was so sad. [...] I should have been in Syria. I should defend my country. I shouldn't have left.

His eventual compliance with his parents' decision implies a patriarchal household structure, where family members care for each other, and in which Fadi was still primarily regarded as the *son* and was thus subject to his father's authority (see

Kandiyoti 278-79). Despite speaking of work and study as the context for his transition to manhood, he still maintained an immature status in front of his father, who forced him to leave Syria with the family. Furthermore, it is significant that Fadi bemoaned being prevented from staying in Syria to defend his country. Thus, he was unable to take over a form of masculinity that was related to military, army and war, and to the defense of his country. The only acceptable versions of masculinity he could assume in Egypt were being *student* and *son* providing support for his family. Similarly, Ghassan, a student in his last year of high school, had to accept his parents' authority and consequent absence from Syria.

> Magdalena: Who made the decision to leave Syria?
> Ghassan: My parents. The reason was their concern for their sons. We lived in an area that was not very safe. My uncle had some problems. They arrested him in this area. There were some people who brought the security service to my cousins only to arrest them as well.

In Ghassan's account, it is obvious that young men were perceived to be in acute danger in Syria due to their gender and

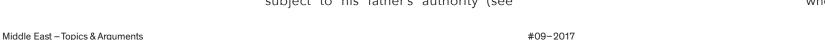age and thus they became the main reasons for their families to leave.

Consequently, I suggest that young Syrian men in Egypt faced a specific form of suffering and vulnerability, since they had to come to terms with their inability to transgress into masculine adulthood and to escape the external ascriptions based on their gender and age. They had to make an effort to discursively define themselves as men but were only partially successful.

The Guilt of the Parents' Generation

In addition to being subject to their parents' authority, young Syrian men had to come to terms with the guilt they ascribed to their parents' generation. Bashar, for instance, a student of medicine in his mid-twenties, explained his disappointment in his parents' generation in the following way: "we blame the older generation because we say: if it [the uprising] had taken place earlier it would have been better." Similarly, ʿAbd al-Rahman, who was in his late twenties and worked in an NGO in Egypt that supported the Syrian revolution, remembered the fights he had with his father after the outbreak of the uprising:

> The process of brainwashing in combination with the fears of our parents, who always told us that this is wrong,

made us continue in the wrong way. I had a dispute with my father at the beginning of the *thawrah* (revolution). I told him: 'It is your fault. Why didn't you tell me before that massacres of the Kurds in Syria took place in 2004 and that they had started a revolution?'

ʿAbd al-Rahman felt left in the dark by the older generation and left ignorant about revolutionary developments in previous decades.

Bashar and ʿAbd al-Rahman both use the pronouns *we* and *us* to differentiate between themselves and the older generation. In doing so, they create distance between their generation and the generation of their fathers. Moreover, they manage to give a reason for their own failure and ignorance – it is blamed on their parents' lack of political activism and the older generation's silent acceptance of the regime. Young men's critique and opposition of the older generation can be perceived as fundamental and radical when relating it to Annika Rabo's ethnography on traders in Aleppo, in which she contends that sons are not supposed to voice any kind of criticism of their fathers. Instead, fathers and other members of the older generation should be listened to and respected. In Egypt I sensed, however, that young men's trust and respect in

the older generation was affected by the feeling of not having been informed properly about the cruelty of the Syrian regime. Furthermore, I recognized a feeling of loss of role models and of a point of reference evoked by the uprising.

Maturity through Devastation and Hardship

In addition to their struggle with their parents' generation, several young men recognized changes in their lives after having experienced the uprising and forced displacement. While their thoughts and aspirations in Syria were focused on material items, their work and career, the uprising and the confrontation with death, danger and devastation had taught them to have a more mature, realistic and responsible approach to life. Frequently, young men stated that they felt that they had aged and had lost peace of mind, normalcy and ordinariness in their lives:

> I think that I grew up faster here. I feel that I am more mature and more responsible here. […] I grew older and understand more now. When I graduated, I started to think about what I should do. At the end of Ramadan in 2011, two of my friends died as martyrs. They were living in the same house. They died in the demonstrations. I was

here in Egypt. Now I am older and I understand more. In Syria, I never thought about all these things. My life was normal. I thought about having a job, a house, a family in Syria, but now it is different. Here, I think about my future, my situation, my family, about where I should go and what I should do.

Mazin, a dentistry student who came to Egypt with his elderly parents, defines his experience of hardship during the uprising as a transition to maturity. It is significant that in his narrative he juxtaposes his absence from the conflict in Syria and his friends' death. I suggest that his consciousness of this contrast added another layer of severity and maturity and a desire to make something meaningful out of his life. Mazin not only talked about responsibility and adulthood but also acted accordingly. In the late summer of 2015, he decided to travel via Turkey to Germany after trying, unsuccessfully, to obtain a visa at the German embassy in Egypt. Knowing that his elderly parents depended on him, he took them with him on his two-week long journey to Germany, where he currently attends language courses in order to work as a dentist to be able to provide for himself, his parents, and his new wife. Likewise, Mazin's friend Hani, who also studied at a private university in Cairo,

told me of the changes he had observed in his approach to life since the outbreak of the uprising.

> The events changed many things. It changed my mentality, my way of thinking. I learned more about life. Life taught me many things. When we were in Syria, we were thinking in an easy way about life. But really, life is difficult and it needs effort. Life has become difficult and the Syrian starts to compare death with death in order to find a country where he can live a good life. We thought about a good job, a car, a house, a nice position in the social class background in Syria. I remember that a long time ago, there was hardly anyone who went by the sea to Europe, but now there are many. […] These people risk their lives. They either die or arrive.

Hani states that the uprising taught him to see the hardship in life and to assume responsibility rather than to take life easily. He describes the severity of his condition in which everything *ordinary* that used to define his life has faded into the background. Instead, in his perception of life, since the uprising it is defined as full of dilemmas, dangers and devastation. While both Mazin's and Hani's account may remind the reader of Julie Peteet's

argument that violence directed at young male Palestinians during the first Intifada was construed as a rite of passage into manhood and thus became a creative act of resistance, I dispute this connection by stressing that young Syrian men could not rely on a dominant, widespread discourse that elevated boys into men after having experienced the uprising and displacement to prove their manhood (31). There was no overall, collective account that the experience of the uprising turned a boy into a man; it was rather the effort of every individual to accumulate material from his surroundings to demonstrate his manhood. Instead, I suggest that the narratives just presented show how young men were thrown into a hostile reality in which they could no longer rely on previously known conditions, but they simultaneously did not know how to act and respond as young men in the new context.

Dealing with Unknown Emotions

Carolyn Nordstrom asks in her groundbreaking ethnography on war and violence: "And how does violence feel?", suggesting that it feels like hopelessness, loss of future, and existential crisis (59). She argues that death and violence change in their meaning; they become sentiments rather than mere facts. In the following, I

delve briefly into a discussion of how war and violence felt to young Syrian men. Dawud, who had found work in an Egyptian agency and lived with his sister in a well-off neighborhood in Cairo, summarized the state in which young Syrian men found themselves in the following way:

> There is a sadness and difficulty like: 'I don't have an income, I cannot find a job, I cannot pay my rent, I cannot marry, I cannot send money to my family…'. The people are not anymore like they were in the past. Maybe the crisis made young men very old before they should have become old.

As already implied by Mazin and Hani, Dawud describes sadness, the severity of being unable to assume a responsible masculinity and a form of ageing, of becoming worn out and fragile, due to young men's consequent exhaustion, depression and despair. Likewise, Akram, a primary school teacher, speaks of previously unknown emotions and consequences when remembering his experiences in Syria during the uprising:

> During the last two years in Syria I was afraid of sleeping and waking up only to find someone arresting me and taking me to I don't know where. Maybe

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a bomb or a missile will fall on me and kill me. This fear put a heavy weight on our shoulders. When I arrived in Egypt and I heard any fireworks I was afraid. I thought that there were bombs and attacks. […] Even if we are young people and we have a big capacity to stand these situations we really became exhausted.

Akram felt that he was supposed to tolerate and endure fear easily because of his young age. However, he had to realize the burden of constant insecurity, distress and anxiety that he describes as a feeling of being pulled down by a weight put on his shoulders. Likewise, Rafi, who was at the beginning of his twenties, had interrupted school and worked on a construction site, described hitherto unknown experiences of emotions:

> The bad thing is that I lost feelings. Even if I hear a lot that my friends died or that my relatives died I don't have any feelings. The feelings died and this is the bad thing. In Syria, when someone died, we cried for him, but not it became normal and we don't cry anymore. We got used to it. In Syria, bombs flew over your head and there were bullets in the air, but now it's normal. We became used to it. The violence planted in

us toughness. There are no more tears and nothing else.

Rafi finds no emotions or tears in himself to mourn the multiple deaths of loves ones around him. There is nothing in him that can respond to the catastrophe he experiences.

Akram's and Rafi's descriptions of their emotional states resonate with the investigation of war and trauma by psychologist Yolanda Gampel in *Reflections on the Prevalence of the Uncanny in Social Violence*, in which she argues that the confrontation with an "unreal reality" that is incompatible with anything experienced before creates an overwhelming feeling of "uncanniness", anxiety of one's imagination and a loss of trust in one's senses (50). The pain and terror of war cause the destruction of the individual's capacity for perception, its representation, and symbolisation (Gampel 55). I suggest that the specific challenge for young men lies in the accumulation of insecurity, uncanniness and agony, which they not only experience as refugees and survivors of a war, but also as not yet uncontested adult men, who need to find a way to transition into masculine adulthood in a situation of utter despair, instability and liminality.

Conclusion

Young Syrian men who lived as refugees in Egypt faced various troubles that were distinct to their specific position. As young men, they were perceived to be in acute danger in Syria, and thus they were often the main reasons for their family's flight. Their coming of age was not a smooth process, because traditional markers of masculine adulthood could not be gathered without difficulties. Additionally, young Syrian men experienced loss of trust in the older generation and were confronted with unknown emotions that they could not easily handle. They frequently described a painful process of reaching a form of maturity or ageing and only sporadically described the challenges they faced in Egypt with pride. Consequently, I suggest avoiding the perception of being young and coming of age during forced displacement as a stringent and *simple* process. Rather, being a young man living in exile signifies a specific position that is marked by particular characteristics, such as vulnerability and uncertainty, as well as loss of grounding and context.

Notes

[1] In order to protect the anonymity of my participants, I use pseudonyms and only give a vague idea of their background.

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