Journal of Refugee Studies Vol. 36, No. 3 © The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead020 Advance Access Publication 19 May 2023

Who Owns the Future of Syrians in Lebanon? Intimate Family Explorations of Refugees' Own Search for Durable Solutions

MAYBRITT JILL ALPES

Human Rights Centre, Faculty of Law and Criminology, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

KWAMOU EVA FEUKEU

Max Planck Institute for Comparative Law and International Private Law, Hamburg, Germany
feukeu@mpipriv.de

MARIEKE VAN HOUTE

Nijmegen School of Management Geography, Planning and Environment, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

SHAHED KSEIBI

American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

BELAL SHUKAIR

Arab Open University, Beirut, Lebanon

MS received February 2022; revised MS received March 2023

For both political and ideological reasons, return is the most favoured future imagined for refugees by policy makers and protection actors. This article analyses how humanitarian migrants in a context of limited durable solutions can be supported to reclaim ownership of their futures, as well as how this can result in deeper insights for social scientists and policy makers. For the case of Syrians, this study deploys futures literacy labs as a participatory and capability-based research methodology that allows participants to become researchers of their own lives. Based on two futures literacy labs with two Syrian families in Lebanon in 2020 and 2021, the article demonstrates that a futures capability-based approach provides humanitarian migrants with the cognitive space and agency needed to go beyond foreclosed decision-making processes. The research methodology allows researchers to become witnesses to intimate reappropriation and learning processes by humanitarian migrants themselves. As a result, we are able to argue that 'returns' as a durable solution are essentially about a return to a state of well-being and possibilities, which may or not entail a spatial return.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Keywords: durable solution, return, futures literacy, participatory action research, empowerment

In the world's largest refugee crisis, millions of Syrians have escaped across borders over the last 10 years, amongst others to Lebanon, which has become the second biggest host country for refugees per inhabitant in the world (Amnesty International 2019). Over 10 years, after the start of the war, Syrians in Lebanon still find themselves in limbo, in which they feel that their future is not in their hands. Routes to any of the traditional 'durable solutions' for refugees—local integration, resettlement, or return (UNHCR 2022)—appear blocked, prolonging a profoundly unsatisfying situation for all actors involved: The Lebanese state, struggling with the logistical, economic, political, and social consequences of the high volume of Syrian refugees, is unable—or unwilling—to facilitate large scale local integration. Consequently, any support provided to Syrians in Lebanon is framed as temporary. At the same time, wealthier host states have opened few resettlement places. Instead of facilitating safe and legal access routes to asylum, the European Union places the onus of protection responsibilities on neighbouring countries (Ataç *et al.* 2017; Tsourapas 2019; Fakhoury 2020b; Arar and FitzGerald 2022). In the absence of integration and resettlement perspectives, discussions, initiatives, and programmes on 'durable solutions' for Syrians in Lebanon have focused predominantly on the option of return. However, for many Syrians in Lebanon, return has yet to become a viable option—partly because root causes of displacement persist (SACD 2020), together with acute detention risks in Syria (SNHR 2020; HRW 2021; Amnesty International 2021a,b).

Despite acute risks after return and deportation, pressures put on Syrians to leave Lebanon have mounted. Syrians in Lebanon do not have a right to protection. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not provide for access to international protection through domestic legislation. After an initial laissez-faire approach in 2011 and 2012, Lebanese authorities asked UNHCR to stop registering Syrians in 2015 (Janmyr 2018). In this sense, 'the future of Syrians in Lebanon died in 2015' (Shukair, personal observation). In 2018, an agreement between Lebanon's General Security Organisation (GSO) and the Syrian government enabled the organisation of group returns. Lebanese policies and police practices, such as for example mass scale demolishment of settlements (Human Rights Watch 2019), prevent free and informed decision-making about returns, even if Lebanese authorities present them as 'voluntary' (RPW 2020). In April 2019, the Higher Defence Council also created the legal framework for deportations to Syria (HRW 2021). In July 2020, the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs announced a 'Return Plan' (Labude *et al.* 2020), which foresees that a compulsory share of humanitarian aid for Syrians in Lebanon now needs to be channelled to return, hereby reducing funds for protection and integration. In July 2022, the Lebanese government announced a plan to repatriate 15,000 Syrians every month to Syria (Aljazeera 2022).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Prioritizing returns in migration and refugee policies is not a strategy unique to Lebanon. Migration management in Europe, for example, has also heavily turned to returns and deportations (cf. Gibney 2008; Leerkes and Van Houte 2020). In fact, the 'European' deportation turn has contributed to the Lebanese position on returns, as it has closed the options of resettlement and safe and legal access routes to asylum. Funds allocated for humanitarian relief in Syria's neighbouring countries serve to contain humanitarian migrants in these places. In the face of strong rising xenophobia, hate crimes, and racism (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018), Lebanon has used funds for humanitarian relief as bargaining tools in international relations, creating—despite promises—little to no avenues to actual integration (Fakhoury and Stel 2022).

Dominant policy frameworks that identify *return* as the best durable solution are backed by underlying ideological assumptions that refugees represent 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966; Hammond 1999), meaning they are expected (to aspire) to return after having unwillingly left 'home' (Douglas 1991). Return is the most favoured future imagined by policy makers and humanitarian actors for refugees (Içduygu and Nimer 2020). As a result of the default position of return, arguments for a right to return (Lamey 2021) become more easily audible than those on return risks (Alpes 2020, 2021, Forthcoming; Alpes *et al*. 2017). Just like the imposition of narratives and terminologies such as 'illegal migrants' or 'refugees' (Resende and Ferreira Agra 2020), we argue that the return default position colonises the futures of people on the move, limiting considerably the scope of what becomes imaginable.

This gridlock between the policy-driven pressure on Syrians to 'return' and its unfeasibility or undesirability for many Syrians creates a conundrum: Who 'owns' the power to define and shape the future of Syrians in Lebanon? This article sets aside the rationale of the politically driven 'durable solutions' as defined by the refugee ecosystem, built to support, manage, police, and enforce 'durable solutions' and instead seeks to build on knowledges and aspirations of humanitarian migrants, to explore with them, and in their own terms, what durable solutions mean to them. What is durable comes then from self-awareness, which is the first step of an experiential learning process. From an epistemological point of view, 'the concept of experience ["as a representation of learning and the process of gaining new knowledge"] also has an ideological function: faith in an individual's innate capacity to grow and learn' (Miettinen 2000: 54). This is a more inclusive and embodied approach to knowledge production that generates a much-needed counternarrative especially in contexts of structural violence and injustice, where voices of the disempowered cannot be assumed to circulate and be accessible (Spivak 2010; Müller-Funk 2021).

Mindful of dominant political and ideological frames on the policy level, and the difficulty to imagine one's future in a protracted situation of crisis on the individual level, this study shifts from *questioning* Syrians in Lebanon about their intent to *return* to *supporting* them to become actors and researchers of their own *futures*, in other words, to become *futures literate* (Miller 2015, 2018). As a team of migration researchers and Syrian futures literacy practitioners trained by Feukeu,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

we adopted a capability-based approach and implemented three *futures literacy labs* with three Syrian families in Lebanon in 2020 and 2021, of which two form the basis of this article. To create spaces where Syrians can talk about futures on their own terms, the labs consisted of games and creative activities that stimulated family members to express themselves in an open manner about their hopes, fears, and possibilities in the present and future. Contrary to futile and rhetorical optimism, hope is built on 'the ability to envision new political, social, and economic possibilities' (Dei and Lordan 2016: xv; Solnit 2016). Hope is both praxis and politics (Césaire 1952; Feukeu 2023). These new possibilities can only emerge through a collective re-appropriation of the terms on which the present is understood.

This study takes inspiration from futures specialists who, in their quest for participatory methods to study futures, have developed since the late 2000s the conceptual and methodological framework for futures literacy (Miller 2018; Feukeu *et al.* 2021; Kazemier *et al.* 2021; Miller *et al.* 2023). Challenging dominant power dynamics that leave Syrians with a feeling of not having a future or owning only a future predefined by *return*, this article illustrates that futures literacy labs are a useful tool for researchers, humanitarian migrants, and policy makers and practitioners alike. To our knowledge, our article is the first to discuss both futures literacy as a capability-based methodology for migration research in general and futures literacy labs as a participatory action research methodology carried out by and with humanitarian migrants in particular (for its application in other fields, see Miller 2018; Feukeu *et al.* 2021).

After a reflection on why the field of migration studies can benefit from insights from recent evolutions of futures studies, the article explains the underlying design principles of futures literacy labs. In the empirical section, the article exposes what Syrian family members were able to discover during the labs about the deeper meanings of being (or not) a refugee, of aspiring to return to places and/or feelings, and realistic pathways for durable solutions. Through an analysis of how lab participants articulated and negotiated desires and decisions on their own terms during and after the labs, we illustrate how Syrians in Lebanon can be supported to own their futures by investing into their capabilities. To be futures literate implies to imagine and own one's futures. We thus argue that building futures literacy as a capacity is both a means to identify durable solutions that are immediately actionable for humanitarian migrants in the present, as well as in and of itself a durable solution. By extension, we argue futures literacy is also essential for better understanding life and mobility decisions of humanitarian migrants, as well as for the emergence and articulation of more responsible protection practices and migration policies.

Applying Participatory Futures to Migration Studies

In the context of this article, we define *futures studies* as the study of anticipatory systems and processes that people mobilize to perceive, think about, make sense of, and decide on the future. Within futures studies, the methodology of *futures*

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

literacy laboratories falls under the category of *participatory futures processes*, which seeks to build the participants' and designers' capacity to use the future, or *futures literacy*.

The value of futures studies for humanitarian migrants and migration researchers lies in the fact that (migration) decisions are the direct and visible outcomes of our ability to anticipate, and reflect (unquestioned) biases. *Anticipatory assumptions* can be defined as 'fundamental descriptive and analytical building blocks' mobilized when we imagine and describe the future we fear or want (Miller 2018: 24). They are the hypotheses we do *not* pose that frame our scenarios of the future. Connecting the present to the future, our anticipatory assumptions are 'our baseline for what we believe to be acceptable in the future' (Feukeu 2023). The extent to which our thoughts on the future may go, also known as *future sightedness*, reflects our ability to see the future in the present. This ability can be leveraged to make better decisions for the short and long terms (Thorstad and Wolff 2018). As migration decisions are implemented or attempted on the basis of our understanding of what the future could or should be, different actors' increased awareness of their anticipatory assumptions is an enabling and empowering capacity.

Futurists have engaged with the topic of migration predominantly for the sake of policy makers and states. Based on scenario-planning and forecasting models, the declared objective has been the generating of quantitative data or the creation of futures scenarios to predict the future of migration policy and, to contribute to improved state-level migration management (e.g. Frontex 2016; European Asylum Support Office (EASO) 2018; Patuzzi and Benton 2019; OECD 2019). Similarly, humanitarian actors working on durable solutions have commissioned a multitude of studies that approach Syrian futures through the prism of *return* (Norwegian Refugee Council Save The Children Action Against Hunger Care International The International Rescue Committee and the Danish Refugee Council, 2018; World Bank 2019; Joint Agency NGO Report 2020). Based on interviews and surveys, these studies assume that a set of well-formulated questions, combined with a certain degree of trust can allow interviewers to access intimate aspirations.

In the Lebanese context, much research on returns is predominantly focused on political dynamics, based on policy analysis and interviews with policy makers (Mencutek 2019; Fakhoury 2021; Fakhoury and Stel 2022). Research on the aspirations of displaced Syrians themselves has identified futures by articulating a distinction between long-term return aspirations after the war that are driven by a wish to realise broader life goals, and current return movement, which is driven by legal, medical, and financial vulnerability, family obligations, and discrimination in host countries (Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022). Social scientists have sought to avoid imposing a scenario of return for Syrian futures by paying attention to holistic life aspirations (Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022), as well by being attentive to how Syrians are currently reimagining home and homeland in new transnational ways (Chatty 2021 and Zuntz 2021).

Studies based on scenario-planning, forecasting models, aspirations, and intentions have shown shortcomings in capturing or predicting complex human

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

phenomena such as migration, which are often multi-layered, situational, and at times even unconscious (Disney *et al*. 2015; EU Policy Lab 2018: 10–11; IOM 2020: 11). Migration scholarship has paid surprisingly little attention to how physical movement is tied into imaginaries of the future and connected with movement between different regimes of value (Pine 2014). The conscious use of the future is not equally accessible to all (Sardar 1992; Appadurai 2013) and intentions expressed in a survey or during an interview do not equate fulfilment in the future. Ethnographic methods such as participant observation with migrants throughout their journeys do have a potential to capture this complexity (cf. Schapendonk and Steel 2014), but are time-consuming and therefore rarely take place. Finally, research that connects people's life aspirations with return and migration decisions, does not unpack *what* Syrians hope or expect to return *to*.

Applying participatory futures to migration studies allows social scientists to work with futures, instead of merely talking or writing about them. Identifying futures for humanitarian migrants means exerting control over people's futures. Instead, questioning futures in a joint endeavour is to accept what is beyond our control and thus to offer tangible avenues for transformation.

Futures Literacy Labs as a Research Methodology

Our proposed methodology is situated in futures studies and participatory action research (cf. Gannon and Naidoo 2020). Critical insights from futures studies, and in particular futures literacy as a specific participatory futures methodology, can strengthen the epistemological foundations of the study of durable solutions, as well as help the field overcome research fatigue among humanitarian migrants, often reluctant to participate unless a financial compensation is offered.

Most commonly used methods in social sciences, such as surveys or interviews, are researcher-led, hierarchical processes, designed to extract information from informants, with limited opportunity for research participants to define the terms on which they want to express themselves or to directly benefit from the results. Even ethnographic methods such as participant observation, although less intrusive and top-down, generate no explicit benefit for the research population.

Futures Literacy Laboratory is an innovative participatory action research methodology that allows researchers working with people in disempowered positions to not only reflect on but also mitigate their own contribution to oppressive power dynamics with research participants (Jones and Jenkins 2008; Schurr and Segebart 2012; Smith 2012). The Futures Literacy methodology encourages reciprocity in the learning process between researchers and research participants.

Working with participatory research methods, such as *participatory futures*, allows migration researchers to shift to another kind of ethics, namely to move from extracting (supposedly available) information to creating conditions of possibility for learning and discovery for those most concerned. When working with participatory futures, the research process is no longer a means to an end (data collection), but becomes an end in itself (capacity building). This capacity crucially speaks to debates in the return literature about people's agency in contexts of

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

varying degrees of structural constraints (Dünnwald 2013; Newland and Salant 2018). Return aspirations are, for example, also to be understood as emotional 'coping strategies' (Anwar 1979; Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022), particularly when displacement conditions create a perpetual state of emergency. Rather than finish with the analysis of a coping strategy, this is where we started. We codesigned with family members an enabling time-space that addressed head-on that humanitarian migrants in Lebanon are in 'survival mode', thus directly intervening to create conditions of possibility for openness and (self)discovery. In oppressive normative structures, futures literacy labs offer a practical methodology to allow research participants to listen to themselves as an essential first step in a discovery journey for voice and transformation.

As a research method, futures literacy labs constitute a form of epistemic resistance (Medina 2012) and thus innovate within the fora of knowledge production in a structural manner. Compared to classical research with displaced Syrians on durable solutions (Ghosn *et al*. 2021; Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022), the futures literacy methodology allowed us to explore durable solutions in a way that is less focused on the already formulated—yet unfeasible—solutions and to open up space for previously unimaginable options, directly available and actionable for research participants in the present. Where conventional social sciences focus on the individual or the household as a static unit of analysis (Douglas and Ney 1998; van Walsum 2012), we used futures literacy labs to pay greater attention to intra-family (power) dynamics, sometimes contradictory voices within and between different family members and transformations over time. In recognition of the interdependent and organic nature of humanity (Steyn and Mpofu 2021), futures literacy as a research methodology offers a way out of individualistic and policy-driven conceptions of durable solutions. In also constitutes an alternative to social science knowledge production *about* humanitarian migrants, facilitating instead knowledge production *by* and *for* humanitarian migrants.

This small scaled, independent and self-funded pilot project emerged out of our desire as authors and Syrian families' in our personal networks, to explore Syrian futures through this methodology. The motivation was twofold: on the one hand to benefit participants' own lives, and on the other to produce more valid, cocreative knowledge on durable solutions for Syrians in Lebanon. The personal connection and mutual interest between the researchers and the research participants, without the interference of external parties and their agendas, provided a safe space to pilot this innovative methodology.

Futures literacy labs are participatory action-research processes which build on collective intelligence and stimulate participants to imagine and experiment[1] with different futures. Futures literacy labs create a safe and enabling space through the lab codesign. To shape lab activities according to the particular characteristics, needs, and desires of the different families, the authors, Shukair, Kseibi, Feukeu, and Alpes, codesigned the labs together with one family member from each family as a 'local champion'.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

A Futures Literacy Laboratory in Practice

At the start of the labs, Jill Alpes introduced the idea of futures literacy and asked participants for oral consent to use their experiences and insights from the lab for research purposes. Throughout the lab, the facilitators sought to support all voices in the family to come forward, being mindful of power dynamics between younger and older members and men and women, leaving family members free to choose whether and what to share with the family and inviting them to make the lab their own. Consequently, at several instances, the family members played the games as much as they designed its rules. The labs were naturally adjourned for shared meals and prayer time, hence encouraging a familiar atmosphere over the span of up to 3 days.

The three labs are captured in 120 pages of text, including on-the-spot transcriptions of translated dialogues, observations of lab dynamics and conventional pre-lab and post-lab interviews with local champions. Lab data also contains visual elements, including photos of collective sculptures made during the lab. Between the end of the labs and the publication of this article, 1 years later, we connected back with some family members to ask what had changed and what remained unchanged in people's lives after the labs. The authors co-analysed the transcribed text and other material together with the local champions, including invitations to other family members to provide input to particularly sensitive sections. During the co-analysis, we decided to focus the paper on the analysis of the two most co-creative family labs out of the three. The local champions of both families validated the analysis and conclusions of this article.

Futures Literacy Labs follow an experiential learning curve through the mobilisation of futures-oriented games and creative exercises. Labs consist of at least three phases, and each of the phases alternate between individual reflections, paired and group work, as well as plenary reporting (Miller 2018: chapter 4). Although we tailored labs to the specificities of each family, Table 1 provides an overview of the overall sequence with examples of some of our activities, which we further explain below.

The lab's introduction is about setting the scene for a safe and co-creative space during the lab, including an introduction to establish goals, purpose, and conditions of the lab, obtaining informed consent, teambuilding, and trust-building games and activities to practice talking about the future in the present tense.

Phase 1 of a futures literacy lab asks participants—through exercises and sharing—to express what they believe to know about the future to reveal the assumptions on which participants base their images of the future. During our labs, we invited participants to describe their surroundings, feelings, and concrete actions in what they considered both a *probable* and *preferred* 2050. These activities allowed participants to dive into their hopes and fears for the future, to connect attitudes with an embodied position in space (Hayward and Candy 2017) and to put words onto unspoken feelings.

Phase 2 creates—with the help of creative reframing techniques—conditions for participants to overcome limiting anticipatory assumptions and to expand the

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Table 1

Futures Literacy Labs Structure

Phase	Activity	Description
Introduction and teambuilding	Conversation	Introducing the team; explaining the lab; clarifying confidentiality between family members and lab facilitators; responding to open questions; asking for oral consent.
	Sharing memories of the future	Share a past memory of a moment where you imagined the future, which you have never shared with your family before.
	Warming up to the future	Every person writes two sentences in the first person and present tense about themselves and another family member in 5 years-time; we shuffle the papers and random family members read it out loud. Then family members guess who is the 'I' or who is the 'author'.
	Blindfolded treasure hunt	Each family member finds (1) an object that makes them feel home; (2) an object they see as a family marker; then discuss how they can use these objects to make themselves feel at home in the future
Phase 1: reveal	Polak game—part 1	Participants physically position themselves on two axes of a grid: bleak future vs. bright future and strong sense of agency vs weak sense of agency (see Figure 1).
	Rip Van Winkle Exercise	You wake up in 2050. You can ask 5 'yes or no' questions to make sense of this world. What are these questions?
	Memories of the future	Share a memory of a moment in the past which you thought at the time would shape your future, and which you have never shared with your family before.

(*Continued*)

://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user

Table 1 **(continued)**

Phase	Activity	Description
	Backbone	In two groups separated by gender, family members explore each other's' histories, identities, values, pathways and horizons. While one person goes through the questions pre-prepared by the lab facilitators, the person answering holds the hands of the third person with closed eyes. The lab facilitators leave the room.
	Probable and preferred futures	Family member answer in several rounds questions in writing that allow them to picture how they imagine probable and preferred futures for both themselves as individuals and for the entire family.
Phase 2: reframe	Reframing scenario	Facilitators share organizing principles of a future scenario that stimulates participants to imagine a future that reframes their anticipatory assumptions. Through improvised theatre play and adaptions of a traditional Syrian board game, family members are invited to tell new stories and play new roles.
	Modelling a future/ sculpture creation	Creation of a joint sculpture symbolising the re-imagined future of the family (see Figure 2).
	Backcasting	What needs to happen (every 10 years) to make this re-imagined future happen?
Phase 3: lessons learned	Questions and actions	Having visited the future, what did we learn? What do we want to do next? Which activities do we want to undertake in the next days, weeks, and months?
Closing activity	Polak game—part 2	Participants position themselves again on the graph/figure of two axes, observing any difference/transformation compared to phase 1.

://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user

boundaries of what participants imagine to be possible. While phase 1 had a prepared structure, Kwamou Eva Feukeu prepared on the spot for phase 2 tailor-made reframing scenarios based on anticipatory assumptions revealed by activities in phase 1. For example, in one of the labs, the local champion shared his unease in Lebanon as his father was planning onward migration dreams for his son. The reframing scenario targeted the role of parenthood and kinship in an alternative future. Supporting each other's dreams was now distributed among all family members, hence obliging everyone to both listen and find tools for expressing personal dreams.

In phase 3, participants explore new insights, surprises, transformations, and lessons learned from these different futures. After a collective exploration of windows to the (preferred) future in the present, lab participants give themselves permission to commit to joint and individual new actions. In our case, we asked all family members to describe what new questions emerged for them, and what new actions they wished to undertake individually and/or as a family. The lab closed with a repeat version of the Polak game (see Table 1), taking notice of whether participants' feelings about the future and their degree of control over it had shifted.

Syrians Talk about Futures They Own

Our futures literacy labs were designed to support family members to identify avenues to reclaim ownership of their futures. During the activities and co-analyses of the results, three questions emerged as central to the families: How do we relate to refugeeness? What do we aspire to return to? What (durable) solutions can we identify and act upon? We introduce both families before we analyse key points of emergence of the two labs.

The Karames[2] are an upper-middle-class family from Homs, Syria, comprised of a father (late 60s), mother (late 50s) and four children: Hala and Tarek (mid 30s) and Salma and Dani (mid 20s). In Syria, they owned a countryside house and the father had been a successful factory owner while the mother was supported in her domestic tasks by a household help. They left Syria for Lebanon in 2013 when their property had been seized by the regime and the father had been kidnapped and later released. They have a temporary residence permit on the basis of the house that they rent in Beirut, but no work permits. Although the eldest children had moved out of the family home in Syria, their displacement situation had put them back under one roof in Beirut. The Karames had not registered with UNHCR upon arrival in Lebanon. The futures literacy lab took place in their spacious family apartment in Beirut.

The Zeitouns' family home is located in the Druze-dominated province of Sweida in South West Syria. The family lost their middle-class status when the father, as the head of family, lost his job in 2011 due to the regime accusing him of participating in the uprising. The family consists of a father and mother (late 50s) and three sons (respectively, 30, 26, and 20 years). Two sons fled to Lebanon to escape military service and the risk of arbitrary detention in 2016 and 2018,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

respectively. The parents made payments to the regime to spare their youngest son from being drafted. In 2018, the eldest son was able to secure a place on the resettlement scheme from Lebanon to Sweden. Thus, at the time of the lab, the Zeitouns were dispersed across three countries: Syria, Lebanon, and Sweden. For security reasons, return is not an option for either the son in Lebanon, or the son in Sweden. Because of their time of entry into Lebanon, the Zeitoun sons did not have the option to register as refugees and remained without a residence permit. The Zeitoun's lab took place in Syria, where the parents and the youngest son physically interacted, with online connections from the two sons respectively in Lebanon and Sweden, as well as the facilitators from another site in Lebanon.

Are Syrians Refugees? From Class Rejection to Individuality in the Community

When Alpes, the co-facilitator, opened the lab with the Karames family with an introductory talk in Arabic, she decided to scrap the word 'refugee' from her script at the last minute, talking instead of the future of Syrians. Once welcomed as a family friend to the living room of the local champion's family, she felt it inappropriate to use the label. In the course of 8 years of displacement in Lebanon, the Karame family had not once discussed amongst themselves whether they were refugees. Historically, Syria used to function as a host country for refugees from other countries. Hence, Syrians associate the term 'refugee' with Lebanese or Iraqi nationals who fled civil war and conflict and sought refuge in Syria, while Syrians have a past of having been migrant workers in Lebanon (Mourad 2021). In the contemporary context, self-identification as a refugee implies a political position against the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad. In a country where important political parties are tightly allied with the Syrian regime, this is a sensitive position (Fakhoury 2020a). Hence, as a Syrian, you do not want to create problems for yourself or come across as needy, then you will refrain from referring to yourself both as a 'refugee' (Lajiin) or a 'displaced person' (Nazihiin), the latter being the common way Lebanese talk about Syrians in Lebanon (Belal Shukair, personal observations). According to Shukair, Syrians tend to refer to themselves as refugees only in humanitarian settings to seek support or aid.

Salma, the youngest daughter, did express a desire to give a voice to Syrian refugees but did not identify as one: she had gained employment in communications for a humanitarian NGO as a paid 'volunteer' and went to the refugee camps in the Bekaa valley every week to take photos and shoot videos as if she was an outsider. During phase 1 on day 2 of the lab, the word 'refugee' nonetheless emerged in the course of the self-facilitated game called backbone (see Table 1). Holding the hands of her older sister and mother, Salma suddenly burst into tears. In the comfort of their spacious living room with a glorious view of the Eastern Mediterranean, Salma sobbed: 'I'm a refugee. I'm like them. I'm in the photo'. During the lab, Selma could step out of the everyday survival mode that characterizes the everyday of most Syrians in Lebanon and into a moment of calm reflection. Once given the time to explore her life in a compassionate and nourishing

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

setting, Selma became aware of a shared condition of displacement, which was otherwise too painful to admit.

In the collective discussion of the game, different family members began to define what it means to be a refugee, each in turn resorting to negatively charged definitions focused on shortages and deficiencies: refugees lack education (Salma), refugees require help from governments and NGOs (father), refugees lack a home (father), refugees are unable to return (Hala). The father explained that he did not consider his family to be a refugee family. After all, he had insisted on renting a luxurious apartment in central Beirut. Savings from Syria not only paid for rent, but also funded exploratory business trips for investments in Sudan. The eldest son Tarek agreed with this position, reflecting on his future status as a labour migrant in Kuwait. Meanwhile, the youngest son Dani remained silent. He was forced to drop out of university when the old Syrian money ran dry. As the local champion Hala reflected after the lab, 'when my brother dropped out of university, he became a refugee. But when you play games online all day, you don't have to be a refugee. That's why he didn't say anything'. Losing one's social status is key to the refugee experience and every Karame had their own mechanisms to cope, resist and transform this threat. Dani, for example, had fled negative refugee connotations, first by signing up with Lebanon's most prestigious university and then by hiding in cyber space.

What legally defines refugees is their inability to return 'home' due to factors external to their will. The failure of a nation state to protect its citizens justifies the limitation of the host state's 'right to exclude non-nationals' (Achiume 2019). Such a definition introduces an unquestioned bias towards return and defines refugees in terms of victimhood with regard to the state of which they are citizens. This status is the reminder of state rejection, echoing itself in class rejection and emphasizing the refugee's supposed passivity. It is a status one does not choose and would not like to choose. However, the meaning of being a refugee is not only connected with the loss of social status, income, and educational possibilities, but can also be defined in more legal terms as a set of internationally recognized protection needs and ideally a set of corresponding rights. As the Karame's eldest daughter put it during phase 3: 'I am a refugee because I can't return to Syria. That's the difference between me and Jill (Alpes)'.

The lab's exploration of refugeeness was enabled by the fact that facilitators were from the community of lab participants themselves. Shukair, for example, had started to codesign Futures literacy labs after having been a participant in a futures literacy lab himself. Upon initially arriving to Lebanon, he had put a lot of energy into hiding his refugee identity. Being a refugee holds stigma, making it difficult to own. The lab's reframing scenario on a future without states and borders helped him to let go of the survival mode he had been in and to think of his future on new terms. After a period of denial and depression, he was at the time of the Karame lab actively pursuing university admission in Lebanon and exploring options to legalizing the relationship with his girlfriend. Based on his own transformations after his lab, the local champion shared with Dani during a smoking break: 'One can still do things if you are a refugee'.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

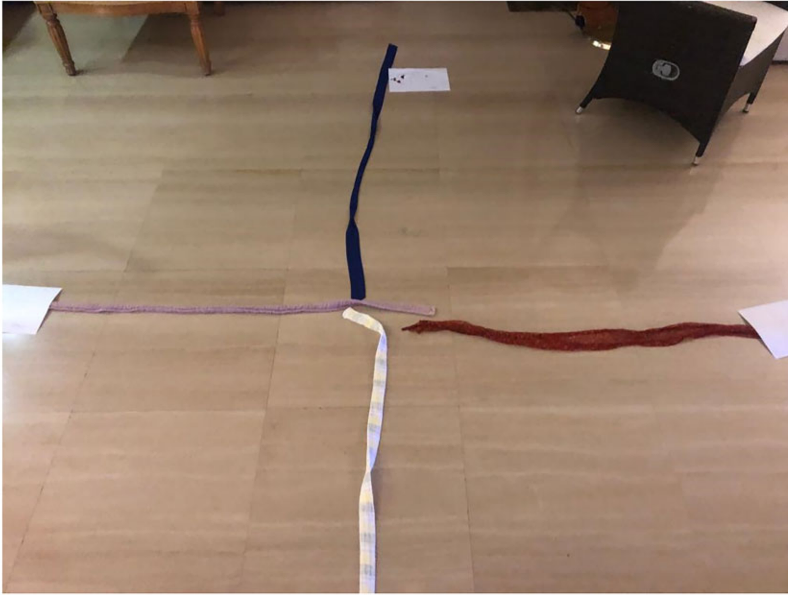

Figure 1.
Polak Game

The generational transposition of specific expectations onto the new generations' future can also be disempowering. At the start of our research intervention, the Zeitoun parents sought to exert control over their second-born son in Lebanon, judging him for being 'just a refugee' and pushing him to try and become a university student in Sweden, like his brother. From their perspective, their son in Sweden was less of a refugee than their son in Lebanon. The reframing scenario in phase 2 explored a future where nobody could fight for their own dreams, but needed to trust another family member to do it for you. In a series of activities, family member gave three criteria to describe their dreams to paired family members who needed to work out how in a series of online paintings they could enact and give form to the dreams of other family members. These activities required family members to put themselves into each other's' shoes. After this exercise, during phase 3, the Zeitoun father surprisingly stated: 'I give myself to the family to do whatever they want with me'. In the repeat-Polak game (cf. Table 1 and Figure 1), all family members—including the father—slightly shifted from their initial position to brighter futures and a stronger sense of ownership of the future.

After the lab, the local champion reflected on his father's lab-induced change about Lebanon as a refugee hosting country. The family head had come to see him and acknowledged how he and his brother were operating in contexts not familiar to him, starting to merely give advice and no longer insisting on his own ideas. When reflecting on how this change had become possible, the local champion's

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

elder brother explained to Alpes after the lab: 'It was the first time in our family to think of us as individual people and for us to accept that we all have different goals. (.) We miss talking in the family because we respect the father and the mother and they are the ones who have the power to control the conversation. When they say stop, you stop. If there is a futures literacy lab, then everyone in the family has a moment to talk'.

What Do Syrians Aspire to Return to? From Geographic Locality to Intergenerational Feelings of Connection and Honour

The labs created space for family members to confront themselves and each other with their images of the future, allowing them thus to gradually discover assumptions connected with feelings of shame, underlying needs behind aspirations for geographical relocation, as well as alternative ways of meeting these needs. An analysis of the lab dynamics illustrates how deeper insight into return and life aspirations only became explicit to family members as they went through the emotional labour of becoming conscious of their own internal journeys, guided by the participatory process of the lab, and could not have been accessed in interviews or participant observations.

Even if the Karames were at the time of the lab living under one roof in Beirut, their displacement had triggered changes in family roles that were creating fractures and acute suffering, above all for the father. At the time of the lab, the Karames lived off their savings, supported by the two daughters' income. The two sons found themselves in the kitchen, supporting their mother with cooking and cleaning in the absence of a kitchen help. In these circumstances, the father felt humiliated and frustrated. Hala explained, 'when I pay for the rent, my Dad is not happy at all. According to him, I should be doing something else. He feels disappointment and shame, but tries not to show it'.

During a preliminary interview, the Karames' local champion had explained that all family members had different attitudes towards future mobility. The lab's first phase revealed that the parents and the eldest brother associated their desire to return to Syria with a return to 'normality', wealth, honour, and greater connection of family members to each other. The sisters and youngest son did not voice a desire to return to Syria during the activities of the first phase, but instead mentioned dreams of being entirely mobile, living in Turkey and being a photo journalist in Afghanistan. In the Zeitoun family, too, the head of household had stronger feelings about return, its desirability and how things should be.

Throughout the second phase of the lab, the Karames had an opportunity to collaborate and connect with each other in new ways. The reframing scenario invited them to tell stories, play games and build a collective sculpture that embodied a future in which it was no longer possible to own property, only feelings could be owned. In this reframed future, the Karames' feelings for their former country house in Syria are still alive(see Figure 2). The family identity shifted from tensions on gender roles to connecting on the basis of shared experiences in the country house. This exercise allowed family members to physically experiment what it

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Figure 2.
Karame's Reframe (Modelling a Future/Sculpture Creation)

means to return to feelings of connection, honour, and security, which they had once experienced in this location. For their father, a torch in the sculpture represented the following: 'The light shining on us represents that we are proud of who we are and what we do. It represents that we are respectful and proud people. We are proud to recreate this—wherever we are'.

As we discussed the sculpture of the emotional home in phase 2, all children of the Karame family pointed out how aspirations to return to previous experiences of well-being did not necessarily equate with a physical return to Syria. During the family discussion, Hala spoke up, gently inquiring whether her father's desire to return was not a desire to return to the conventional family roles they had experienced in Syria in the past. She also pointed out how giving up on desires for the past could allow for new connections in the present. The youngest daughter told her father and elder brother: 'If you go back to the country house now, you will not have the same feelings. [. . .] If I return to Syria, I will not return to Homs. I would be returning to the notion of Homs, to the place where I used to think I belong'. Even the oldest son who had actually tried to set up a new life for himself and his fiancé in Damascus changed his mind on how important return to Syria was. He was scheduled to leave for Kuwait the day after the lab. Before the lab, he was feeling depressed and lost because this trip meant that he was abandoning his dream to return. During the third phase of the lab, he shared: 'We define home where the parents are. So, it doesn't matter if we return to Syria or stay here. Because I will always return to where my parents are'.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

The design of the lab allowed space for not only rational, but also emotional exchanges about the images participants had of the future. During phase 1, for example, the Karames' mother shared her fears of separation from her children in case of a return to Syria and the two younger children their desire to leave Lebanon for new destinations. While the children were aware of their mother's fear, they had never explicitly discussed the matter. Once the mother realised that her fears of the future were founded, this opened up space for new decisions in the present. She surprised her children during the third phase of the lab by formulating an idea to build a house in Syria for elderly people whose children lived abroad. In Syria, care for the elderly is traditionally carried out by younger generations and elderly care houses are rare. The mother's idea not only provided new meaning to her own life, but also reinvented traditions as a response to new realities of dispersed transnational families.

The labs created space for honest but caring conversations between generations that are otherwise not possible, particularly in more hierarchically structured Syrian family culture, as well as in a context marked by high societal pressures and fears of change. In phase 1, the heads of family tended to romanticize past experiences of the homeland while denying the discomfort with or critique of younger family members of pre-2011 Syria. When the father and head of the Zeitoun family sighed during a debrief of an activity in phase 2 that he would have wanted his son to wear a suit to work (as would be appropriate for middle-class employees in Syria), his son responded that he was happy in Sweden with more casual work wear: 'I've never liked our society—even before I left. You have to know this'. This confrontation questioned the potentially nostalgic elements of return aspirations. The Zeitoun father wanted his children to return to Syria. His children did not want to return to past customs. Realising his sons would not return to Syria, the Zeitoun father asked his two sons during phase 3 of the lab to respect the laws of their respective host countries. Both his sons were surprised with the shift in their father's position, away from dreaming about return to a shared family home in Syria, and on the contrary, prioritising feelings of honour and connection available in the present situation without relocation.

At the end of phase 3 of the Karame lab, the family reflected on how the lab had created a different kind of conversation: 'When we talk about the future, it's usually sarcastically. We make fun of each other'. New individual and collective action is possible when there is recognition and acceptance of relations and situations as they are, rather than nostalgia for how things should be. The family's mother concluded the lab by saying: 'The country house has been the place where everything started. Now the sculpture of the house will be the start'.

Small Things Matter: From Taboos to Actions

As we analysed the family members' discoveries during the labs for this article, we connected back with some of them. With political, economic, and legal constraints unchanged, we wondered about what had changed in people's lives after the labs.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Just months after the lab, the Karames' situation in Lebanon deteriorated dramatically. The parents were struggling over whether to stay in Lebanon despite growing debts, or to return to Syria despite the risk of detention. Hala explained: 'We can no longer afford to live in Lebanon. We can't pay rent. Staying here just means, we get more debts. If pushed to return without preparations, some of us risk detention in Syria'.

A year after the lab, Hala decided to stop financially supporting the debt-triggering lifestyle of her family who then finally agreed to move to a less expensive apartment in Beirut. Despite her family's resistance and discontentment, she repurposed her role as a family provider, shaking up the modus vivendi and pushing for a greater recognition of current realities. Having broken the taboo of continued upper-class membership, she moved to provide support, love, and understanding in new forms. Conscious of her family's feelings, Hala went through the notes that family members had written during the lab, took pictures, and sent different ones to her family WhatsApp group every day. 'I saw that they were lifted up by looking at the small things they had written about themselves and each other's futures. [.] We've been depressed and are not doing well—even when we meet—because of what everyone is going through individually. Futures literacy is like a cloud where we all met from a higher state of ourselves'. In the midst of turmoil, the Karames are experiencing small steps to a more sustainable lifestyle and a new openness to the present, to oneself and each other.

The Zeitoun lab, too, lifted taboos and thus created space for new solutions after the lab. While analysing our research notes, the local champions insisted that the small things that emerged from the labs should be identified as emerging pathways to 'durable solutions' for themselves and their families. In the words of the second Zeitoun son in Lebanon: 'If you can choose small things, then you can have the courage to do it on a bigger scale, too'. Two post-lab transformations with the Zeitoun family stood out in particular: the Zeitoun father lifted a family secret and moved to accept one of his sons' otherwise unacceptable choices.

The Zeitoun father had for 9 years kept a secret from his children: he was wanted by the regime. After 2011, the father had kept the circumstances of job loss vague. After the lab, the father opened up. Our lab experience taught us that discussions of aspirations for the future cannot take place meaningfully without the exposure of our vulnerability to loved ones. The lab games had touched and transformed the father, so that he was willing and able to share an important and sensitive event with his children. The father's confession to his children was triggered by the space of honest encounters that the lab had created. The lab's activities had allowed all family members to experience what it means to share dreams with intimate others, without seeking or needing their approval. Lifting taboos allows for new actions.

The Zeitoun local champion shared after the lab: 'We all realised and acknowledged that we will not be able to meet in the next ten years—maybe never. So, our parents started to accept our choices'. Prior to the lab, the parents and the elder brother had pushed the local champion to try at all costs to get to Sweden, the place of residence of his eldest brother. Regardless of the fact that his son was in a

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

stable relationship with a Syrian woman in Lebanon, the father was pushing his son to use marriage to an EU citizen as a means for mobility to Sweden. After the lab, it was easier for the local champion to differentiate his own priorities from societal expectations and the Zeitoun father accepted to engage in marriage negotiations with the parents of his son's girlfriend. For a Druze father from a traditional region of Syria, this shift is radical in at least two ways. The son's girlfriend in Lebanon is both Kurdish and Alawi. For Druze, marriages with non-Druze are forbidden on religious grounds. In addition, marriages between Arabs and non-Arabs are frowned upon in Druze-communities in Syria, particularly by elder generations. The same rationales do not hold for marriages to European citizens.

With these taboos lifted, the Zeitoun father stopped insisting that his son needed to travel to Sweden and instead started to launch 'paper work' so that he could leave Sweida without risking detention. In the course of writing, the local champion realised his dream and sent us a video of his wedding to his girlfriend in Lebanon. The lab also set into motion other transformations. The mother shifted from being a participant in a women's association to launching and leading her own initiative to train women on how to generate income with arts and crafts. At the time of article revision, the mother's initiative had grown to a full-blown workshop with an Instagram page, which the father fully supported and occasionally even participated in. The youngest son in Syria has a new business idea and found a full-time job. The eldest son opened up to his parents about doing a degree in 'sexuality studies'—a field of study that his parents could not proudly report on in their home community—and set up a WhatsApp group so that more intimate conversations could continue also after the lab. On several occasions during family WhatsApp calls, the eldest son has reminded his parents of the spirit of the lab experience: 'Let's hold onto this perspective whenever we face challenges'.

The future is one of the greatest ways to address a problematic past and re-perceive the present (Feukeu *et al.* 2021). The above transformations were directly or indirectly enabled, or at least facilitated by the lab design which had put creativity, collective intelligence, and trust-building between family members at the centre stage. A simple focus group discussion would not have enabled participants to engage in difficult and meaningful conversations about their own identity, feelings, and aspirations in the same heartfelt manner. The direct questions of a focus group skip the process of making implicit and subjective positions explicit to participants themselves, as well as creating a safe space to share them.

The future, while being a source of anxiety, was also a creative space that allowed for participants to express enthusiasm for what has yet to be, rather than simply depicting the troubles of today. During the lab's games, family members had been able to voice and share their aspirations with one another, and thus started a learning process to accept contradictions and tensions with other family members' images of the future. Our labs show that being conscious of the present is one of the hallmarks of being futures literate, which in the end is also a capacity essential to articulate humble and attainable solutions for Syrians to own their futures. These solutions do not operate within the constraints of policy frames that

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

in the absence of accessible resettlement or integration routes limit Syrian futures to return.

Conclusion

As the above analysis shows, the capacity-based participatory action research methodology informed by participatory futures can lead to knowledge production beneficial for all parties involved: humanitarian migrants without a legal status are supported to own their futures; researchers become witnesses to intimate reappropriation and learning processes; and policy makers and humanitarian practitioners are presented with an opportunity to reflect on disempowering elements in humanitarian practice and policy. Our analysis highlights three key conclusions.

First, we have illustrated that futures literacy is a capacity, which can be cultivated to support humanitarian migrants to reclaim greater ownership of their futures. The futures literacy labs we codesigned and facilitated gave Syrian families the space to speak and collectively negotiate the words they used to describe the world and themselves. These spaces for learning reflected, acknowledged and challenged existing power dynamics. The participatory and capacity-based approach helped participants define 'durable solutions' by both mentally finding ways to come to terms with changes in the present and imagining new actions to pursue for preferred futures. Durability should be found and promoted in harnessing people's capacities to identify new and evolving ways to become and remain agents of their futures—regardless of structural constraints and potentially forced relocations. It is the capacity-building nature of a futures literacy lab, which distinguishes it from other creative and participatory methodologies that could also benefit vulnerable communities. While being futures literate alone cannot radically change structural injustice or hegemonic frameworks, family members mobilised an increased capacity to identify opportunities to own and shape their futures after the labs. The capacity to frame narratives of individual and collective futures coupled with the opportunity to make use of such a capacity is a direct form of agency, as revealed by FLL participants.

Second, the engaged relationality offered by a futures literacy lab allows for insights into decision-making processes that are otherwise inaccessible, even to family members themselves, as they take place unconsciously or implicitly. The activities of the futures literacy lab allowed us to facilitate and observe processes crucial for decision-making and thus to apprehend reality as a complex set of evolving data, including taboos, contradictory desires, and evolving modes of self-identification. Our findings show that futures literacy labs can be used to lift family secrets, accept difficult migration and life choices, and explore one's individuality in both family and national settings. Access to these dynamics becomes possible through the commitment of lab designers and facilitators to enable research participants to become the researchers of their own lives, hence repositioning research as purpose, and not means. In the course of this process, we observed how research participants became aware of how to respond to what emerges, to be more honest with themselves and others, and identify new

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

pathways in the present to own their futures and shape their own durable solutions in a protracted displacement context.

Third, Syrians do not always frame futures through the (im)possibility of return or other so-called 'durable solutions'. While the concept of 'return' haunts many Syrians in Lebanon, our study shows that 'return' as a durable solution is in the eyes of our participants essentially about a return to a state of well-being and possibilities, which may or may not entail a spatial return. There is hence an important emotional dimension to return aspirations, which needs to be considered separately from geographical returns. A durable return to security and well-being can be pursued without a physical return to Syria. And a physical return to Syria can put at risk well-being, by for example disconnecting parents from their children who do not wish to return. The emotional and geographical dimensions of return do not substitute each other, nor do they have to occur in a specific sequence to one another.

Insights into life aspirations require a methodological approach that addresses the survival mode that humanitarian migrants in a protracted displacement crisis find themselves in. This is why the labs cultivated emotional connections, people's dignity, and a reconsideration of their present by talking about what is and not (only) about what should be. The lab's creative activities allowed the participants to genuinely meet, allowing us designers, facilitators, and co-authors to observe and learn with them about previously unspoken and/or unconscious desires and struggles underlying their attitudes towards return. These multi-layered meanings of return are reflected in neither conventional research methods, nor policy, which consider return only as a mobility decision. Return aspirations need to be examined in research and addressed in policy with a higher degree of sensitivity to the deeper social and (imagined) psychological implications of geographic mobility—particularly if in contexts of structural violence and limited options. For durable solutions, policy and political action need to be based on a holistic understanding of both the uniqueness and universality of people's needs and aspirations.

We here present migrants' capacity to become more futures literate as both a means to identify endogenous context-specific solutions and as a durable solution in itself. This is why it is important for migrants to be researchers who help customize the process of discovery, as well as codesigners of policies to support communities in need. The flow of emotions during the labs proves the dire need for honest and safe conversations. Migration research and policy need to cultivate trust and invite Syrians to redesign the rules of the humanitarian game, including making funding available for their specific needs emerging from futures literacy labs. In the meantime, whether the dominant paradigm allows them to or not, Syrians are creating their own futures.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Agniezska Radziwinowicz and Ibrahim Soysuren for the opportunity to present the first version of this article as a conference paper at the IMISCOE conference, Joost Beuving, Michaela Pelikan, and

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

the reading group of the Human Rights Research Network at Ghent University for generous and collegial feedback, Klara Rehm, Martins Kwazema, and Nur Duyar for their copyediting and support with references, as well as the reviewers and editors of the special issue for their professionalism and intellectual support. Jill Alpes' analysis and writing were funded by the European Research Council (ERC Advanced Grant 834044). DISSECT is a HORIZON 2020 research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC-AdG-2018-834044) and hosted by Ghent University. We would like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for having financially supported Belal Shukair and Shahed Kseibi during the analysis and writing stage of this article.

ENDNOTES

1. The designation of 'labs' pays tribute to the experimental nature of futures literacy.
2. All participant names are pseudonyms, and all details that could reveal the privacy of participants are anonymized.

Achiume, E. T. (2019) 'Migration as Decolonization'. *Stanford Law Review* 71(6): 1509–1570.

Aljazeera (2022) 'Lebanon to Begin Returning Refugees to Syria 'in Batches': Presidency Says Return of Refugees to Syria to Start Next Week, Despite Objections by Rights Groups', 12 October, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/12/lebanon-to-begin-returning-refugees-back-to-syria-in-batches (accessed 3 November 2022).

Alpes, M. J. (2020) Emergency Returns from Libya and Niger: A Protection Response or a Source of Protection Concerns?. Brot für die Welt, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344929501_Emergency_returns_by_IOM_from_Libya_and_Niger_A_protection_response_or_a_source_of_protection_concerns (accessed 2 October 2022).

Alpes, M. J. (2021) 'Pushbacks and Expulsions from Cyprus and Lebanon: The Risks of (Chain) Refoulement to Syria'. In EuroMed Rights (ed.) *Return Mania: Mapping Policies and Practices in the EuroMed Region*, pp. 1–33, https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/EN_Chapter-6-Pushbacks-and-expulsions-from-Cyprus-and-Lebanon_LAYOUT.pdf (accessed 2 October 2022)

Alpes, M. J. (Forthcoming) 'Not How, But Whether: Return and the Limits of Sustainable Lives after Interrupted Migration Cycles'. In Jacobsen, K., Majidi, N. (eds) *Elgar Handbook on Forced Migration*. London: Edward Elgar, in press.

Alpes, M. J., Tunaboylu, S., Ulusoy, O. and Hassan, S. (2017) Post-Deportation Risks under the EU-Turkey Statement: What Happens after Readmission to Turkey?. EUI Policy Brief, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/45f52a11-f4f1-11e7-be11-01aa75ed71a1/language-en (accessed 2 December 2022).

Amnesty International (2021a) 'You're Going to Our Death: Violations against Syrian Refugees Returning to Syria', MDE 24/4883/2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/4583/2021/en/ (accessed 2 December 2022).

Amnesty International (2021b) 'The World's Refugees in Number's', Report, https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/global-refugee-crisis-statistics-and-facts (accessed 21 October 2021).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Amnesty International (2019) 'The World's Refugees in Numbers', https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/global-refugee-crisis-statistics-and-facts/ (accessed 14 November 2022).

Anwar, M. (1979) *The Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain*. London: Heinemann.

Appadurai, A. (2013) *Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso.

Arar, R. and FitzGerald, D. S. (2022) *The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach*. Medford: Polity Books.

Atac, I., Heck, G., Hess, S., Kaşli, Z., Ratfisch, P., Soykan, C. and Yilmaz, B. (2017) 'Contested B/Orders. Turkey's Changing Migration Regime. An Introduction'. *Movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 3(2): 9–21. http://movements-journal.org/issues/05.turkey/01.atac,heck,hess,kasli,ratfisch,soykan,yilmaz--contested.borders.turkey.migration.regime.introduction.html (accessed 22 October 2021).

Césaire, A. (1952) *Discours sur le Colonialisme*. Paris: Seuil.

Chatty, D. (2021) 'Introduction to Special Issue: Displaced Syrians'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 1284–1290.

Dei, G. J. and Lordan, M. (eds) (2016) *Anticolonial Theory and Decolonial Praxis*. New York: Peter Lang.

Disney, G., Wiśniowski, A., Forster, J. J., Smith, P. W. F. and Bijak, J. (2015) *Evaluation of Existing Migration Forecasting Methods and Models: Report for the United Kingdom Migration Advisory Committee*. ESRC Centre for Population Change, University of Southampton, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-existing-migration-forecasting-methods-and-models (accessed 22 October 2021).

Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Douglas, M. (1991) 'The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space'. *Social Research* 58(1): 287–307.

Douglas, M. and Ney, S. (1998) *Missing Persons: A Critique of the Personhood in the Social Sciences (Published in Association with the Russell Sage Foundation)*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Dünnwald, S. (2013) 'Voluntary Return'. In Geiger, M. and Pécoud, A. (eds) *Disciplining the Transnational Mobility of People*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 228–249.

EU Policy Lab (2018) *The Future of Migration in the European Union: Future Scenarios and Tools to Stimulate Forward-Looking Discussions*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC111774 (accessed 22 October 2021).

European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (2018) 'The Future of International Protection in EU+ 2030: A Scenario Study', https://euaa.europa.eu/easo-annual-report-2018/2-international-protection-eu (accessed 2 December 2022)

Fakhoury, T. (2021) 'Refugee Return and Fragmented Governance in the Host State: displaced Syrians in the Face of Lebanon's Divided Politics'. *Third World Quarterly* 42(1): 162–180. 10.1080/01436597.2020.1762485

Fakhoury, T. (2020a) 'Refugee Return and Fragmented Governance in the Host State: Displaced Syrians in the Face of Lebanon's Divided Politics'. *Third World Quarterly* 42(1): 162–180,

Fakhoury, T. (2020b) 'Building Resilience in Strained Refugee-Hosting States? The EU in the Face of Lebanon's Cumulative Crises', *ASILE: Forum on the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in Light of the UN GCR*, https://www.asileproject.eu/building-resilience-in-strained-refugee-hosting-states-the-eu-in-the-face-of-lebanons-cumulative-crises/ (accessed 22 October 2021).

Fakhoury, T. and Stel, N. (2022) 'EU Engagement with Contested Refugee Returns in Lebanon: The Aftermath of Resilience'. *Geopolitics* 28(3): 1–26. doi:10.1080/14650045.2022.2025779.

Feukeu, K. E. (2023) 'Futures or the Reproduction of Oppression', *Futures*, in press.

Feukeu, K. E., Ajilore, B. and Bourgeois, R. (2021) *The Capacity to Decolonize: Research Paper*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, http://hdl.handle.net/10625/60080 (accessed 22 October 2021).

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2018) 'Anti-Syrian Banners and Graffiti in context: Racism, Counter-Racism and Solidarity for Refugees in Lebanon', *Refugee Hosts*, 27 April, https://refugeehosts.org/2018/04/27/

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

anti-syrian-banners-and-graffiti-in-context-racism-counter-racism-and-solidarity-for-refugees-in-lebanon/(accessed 18 March 2022).

Frontex (2016) 'Scenarios for Migration, Europe and Its External Borders' (Risk Analysis for 2016, European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union), Scenario Management International (ScMI), https://www.scmi.de/en/scenarios-frontex (accessed 21 October 2021).

Gannon, S. and Naidoo, L. (2020) 'Thinking-Feeling-Imagining Futures through Creative Arts-Based Participatory Research'. *The Australian Educational Researcher* 47(1): 113–128.

Ghosn, F., Chu, T., Simon, M., Braithwaite, A., Frith, M. and Jandali, J. (2021) 'The Journey Home: Violence, Anchoring, and Refugee Decisions to Return'. *American Political Science Review* 115(3): 982–998.

Gibney, M. (2008) 'Asylum and the Expansion of Deportation in the United Kingdom'. *Government and Opposition* 43(2): 146–167.

Hammond, L. (1999) 'Examining the Discourse of Repatriation Toward a More Pro- Active Theory of Return Migration'. In Black, R. and Koser, K. (eds) *The End of the Refugee Cycle?: Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 227–244.

Hayward, P. and Candy, S. (2017) 'The Polak Game, or: Where Do You Stand?'. *Journal of Futures Studies* 22(2): 5–14.

Human Rights Watch (2019) 'Lebanon: Syrian Refugee Shelters Demolished', *Human Rights Watch*, 5 July 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/05/lebanon-syrian-refugee-shelters-demolished (accessed 21 October 2021).

Human Rights Watch (2021) ''Our Lives Are Like Death': Syrian Refugees Returning from Lebanon and Jordan', https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan (accessed14 November 2022).

Içduygu, A. and Nimer, M. (2020) 'The Politics of Return: Exploring the Future of Syrian Refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey'. *Third World Quarterly* 41(3): 415–433,

IOM (2020) 'The Future of Migration to Europe: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Migration Scenarios and Forecasts', 20 July, https://publications.iom.int/books/future-migration-europe-systematic-review-literature-migration-scenarios-and-forecasts (accessed 21 October 2021).

Janmyr, M. (2018) 'UNHCR and the Syrian Refugee Response: Negotiating Status and Registration in Lebanon'. *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22(3): 393–419.

Joint Agency NGO Report (2020) 'Into the Unknown: Listening to Syria's Displaced in the Search for Durable Solutions', *Durable Solutions Platform*, June, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unknown-listening-syria-s-displaced-search-durable-solutions (accessed 21 October 2021).

Jones, A. and Jenkins, K. (2008) 'Rethinking Collaboration: Working the Indigene-Colonizer Hyphen'. In Denzin N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. and Smith, L. (eds) *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 471–486.

Kazemier, E. M., Damhof, L., Gulmans, J. and Cremers, P. H. (2021) 'Mastering Futures Literacy in Higher Education: An Evaluation of Learning Outcomes and Instructional Design of a Faculty Development Program'. *Futures* 132: 102814.

Labude, D., Amler, F. and Winkelsett, T. (2020) 'Fragwürdige Konferenz in Damaskus', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/266810/Fragwu%CC%88rdige+Konferenz+in+Damaskus.pdf/2cdd16ce-1493-eb47-eba3-3f430dd1ac9b?version=1.4&t=1607098150595 (accessed 2 December 2022)

Lamey, A. (2021) 'Can There Be a Right of Return?'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 1828–1839.

Leerkes, A. and Van Houte, M. (2020) 'Beyond the Deportation Regime: Differential State Interests and Capacities in Dealing with (Non-) Deportability in Europe'. *Citizenship Studies* 24(3): 319–338.

Medina, J. (2012) *The Epistemology of Resistance*. Oxford: University Press.

Mencutek, Z. S. (2019) *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East*. London: Routledge.

Miettinen, R. (2000) 'The Concept of Experiential Learning and John Dewey's Theory of Reflective Thought and Action'. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 19(1): 54–72.

Miller, R. (2015) 'Learning, the Future, and Complexity. An Essay on the Emergence of Futures Literacy'. *European Journal of Education* 50(4): 513–523.10.1111/ejed.12157

Miller, R. (ed.) (2018) *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Miller, R., Feukeu, K. E. and Raleigh, N. B. (Forthcoming) 'Futures Studies, Anticipation, and Futures Literacies: An Invitation to Co-create a Living Framework', *Futures*, in press.

Mourad, L. (2021) 'Brothers, Workers or Syrians? The Politics of Naming in Lebanese Municipalities'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 1387–1399.

Müller-Funk, L. (2021) 'Research with Refugees in Fragile Political Contexts: How Ethical Reflections Impact Methodological Choices'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 2308–2332.

Müller-Funk, L. and Fransen, S. (2022) ''I Will Return Strong'': The Role of Life Aspirations in Refugees'. *International Migration Review*.

Newland, K. and Salant, B. (2018) 'Balancing Acts: Policy Frameworks for Migrant Return and Reintegration'. In *Towards a Global Compact for Migration: A Development Perspective*, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/policy-frameworks-migrant-return-and-reintegration (accessed 2 December 2022).

Norwegian Refugee Council, Save The Children, Action Against Hunger, Care International, The International Rescue Committee and the Danish Refugee Council (2018) 'Dangerous ground—Syria's Refugees Face an Uncertain Future', *Norwegian Refugee Council*, 5 February, https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/dangerous-ground---syrias-refugees-face-an-uncertain-future/ (accessed 21 October 2021).

OECD (2019) 'Strategic Foresight Towards 2035: Making Migration and Integration Policies Future Ready', Report, https://www.oecd.org/fr/migrations/mig/migration-strategic-foresight.pdf (accessed 21 October 2021).

Patuzzi, L. and Benton, M. (2019) 'Zipline or Trap? How the Gig Economy May Affect Immigrant Integration', *Migration Data Portal*, 18 March, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/zipline-trap-gig-economy-integration (accessed 21 October 2021).

Pine, F. (2014) 'Migration as Hope: Space, Time, and Imagining the Future'. *Current Anthropology* 55(S9): S95–S104.

Refugee Protection Watch (2020) 'Trapped in between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees', *Relief Web*, 19 October, https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/trapped-between-lebanon-and-syria-absence-durable-solutions-syria-s-refugees (accessed 21 October 2021).

Resende, F. and Ferreira Agra, F. (2020) 'Refuge and Colonization of the Future: Borders Built by Words'. *Comunicação e Sociedade* 38: 161–178.

SACD (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity) (2020) 'Demographic Change: The Ultimate Goal of the Syrian Regime's Policy of Forced Displacement', *Briefing*, https://syacd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DemoChangeFinal-12V1EDITED.pdf (accessed 14 November 2022).

Sardar, Z. (1992) 'Colonizing the Future: The 'Other' Dimension of Futures Studies'. *Futures* 25(2): 179–187.

Schapendonk, J. and Steel, G. (2014) 'Following Migrant Trajectories: The Im/Mobility of Sub-Saharan Africans en Route to the European Union'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104(2): 262–270.

Schurr, C. and Segebart, D. (2012) 'Engaging with Feminist Postcolonial Concerns through Participatory Action Research and Intersectionality'. *Geographica Helvetica* 67(3): 147–154.

Smith, L. T. (2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.

SNHR (Syrian Network for Human Rights) (2020) 'The Syrian Regime Prevents Hundreds of Syrians from Returning from Lebanon to their Homeland', https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_Syrian_regime_prevents_hundreds_of_Syrian_citizens_from_returning_from_Lebanon_to_their_homeland_en.pdf (accessed 14 November 2022).

Solnit, R. (2016) *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Spivak, G. C. (2010) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?': Revised Edition, from the 'History' Chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason'. In Morris, R. C. (ed.) *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia: University Press, pp. 21–78.

Steyn, M. and Mpofu, W. (eds) (2021) *Decolonising the Human, Reflections from Africa on Difference and Oppression*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023

Thorstad, R. and Wolff, P. (2018) 'A Big Data Analysis of the Relationship between Future Thinking and Decision-Making'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115(8): E1740–E1748.

Tsourapas, G. (2019) 'The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey'. *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4(4): 464–481.

UNHCR (2022) 'Durable Solution Dashboard: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey', March, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92055 (accessed 2 December 2022).

Van Walsum, S. K. (2012) *Inaugural Speech Intimate Stranger*. VU uitgevers. https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/intimate-strangers (accessed 21 October 2021).

World Bank (2019) 'The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis', 6 February, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis (accessed 21 October 2021).

Zuntz, A. (2021) ''Refugees' Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances: Syrian Mobilities in the Middle East Before and After 2011'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 1400–1422.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/36/3/383/7174246 by Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law user on 30 November 2023