VID
Specialized
University

Dissertation no. 30

Ingrid Løland

Narrative Battles and Bridges

Religion, Identity and Conflict in Syrian Refugee Trajectories

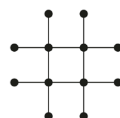
Narrative Battles and Bridges: Religion, Identity and Conflict in Syrian Refugee Trajectories

Ingrid Løland

Dissertation Submitted
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D)

VID Specialized University

2021



VID

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ISBN: 978-82-93490-83-8 e-utgave
ISSN: 2535-3071

Dissertation Series for the Degree of Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D.) at VID Specialized University, Volume no. 30

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Cover: Dinamo

Printed in Norway: Totaltrykk, Oslo, 2021.

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We Syrians have been killed in every way possible: by barrel bombs, shelling, guns, chemical weapons, torture, starvation. But I believe the hardest way to be killed is in silence, so I keep telling our stories. It is my duty, my responsibility as a woman who survived. This is the fate of those who have escaped: to endlessly retell our own stories and tell the stories of others still in Syria.

– *Waad al Kateab*

Storytelling is ‘the bridge by which we transform that which is private and individual into that which is public, and in this capacity, it is one of the key components of social life.

– *Hanna Arendt*

[Syria is] a poor animal, skinned alive, still breathing, while everyone tries to scratch their part of the carcass.

– *Samar Yazbek*

Syrians told me that it was inconceivable to them that the likes of what was happening to their home – in terms of brutality, loss, and displacement – had ever been seen before in contemporary history. They despaired as to how their country could ever again emerge, let alone prosper. They wondered how they could all live together after everything that had transpired between them.

– *Alia Malek*

Acknowledgements

If the dictionary explanation of an odyssey is a long and adventurous voyage involving a lot of different and exciting experiences, especially while searching for something, well, then it is an apt description of my PhD-journey!

Throughout this journey, I have been accompanied by a host of good people, colleagues, friends and advisers who have not only kept me on track but sometimes also steered me in unexpected directions. For this guidance, I am especially indebted to my main supervisor, Professor Tomas Sundnes Drønen, who has shown great patience over a five-year-long period. I am grateful for his scholarly insights and constructive feedback on the many unfinished drafts that have been submitted along the way. I have enjoyed from his expertise in the craft of publishing academic texts and appreciated his skilled training. I would also like to extend grateful greetings to my co-supervisor, Dr Lucien van Liere, who has given much knowledgeable advice on all the three articles. I appreciated his warm welcome to Utrecht University during my research visit there and for introducing me to his Syrian-related network. Thank you to both of my supervisors for your encouragement and generosity!

I feel privileged to have been surrounded by supportive colleagues at VID Specialized University in Stavanger during this whole period. I want to extend a special thanks to the lovely and knowledgeable ladies at the library who have provided exceptional service throughout! I would also like to thank the administrative staff and my wonderful colleagues at KURV and SIK for their many feedbacks and encouragement. A special thanks go to the director of Center for Mission and Global Studies, Professor Anna Rebecca Solevåg, for coordinating my PhD-project with compassion and determination.

I would like to add three essential networks that have functioned as tremendous sources of inspiration and learning outcomes throughout my project period. RVS research school (Religion, Values and Society), under the steady leadership of Professor Geir Afdal as well as Professor Gina Lende, has offered fantastic

opportunities for developing my academic skills through an array of high-quality courses. Thank you for providing precious memories of people and places! The same goes for the early Cracks and In-betweens research group, which is now part of MIGREL (Migration, religion and intercultural relations). I am indebted to Professor Kari Storstein Haug for her enthusiastic leadership and for bringing many migration scholars at VID together in cross-disciplinary discussions. Our special seminars at Krakow have been incredibly inspirational. In addition, the PhD-seminars provided by the Center for Mission and Global Studies have contributed to a close fellowship among doctoral students. They have inspired us to have many a 'shut-up-and-write-sessions' as well as occasional PhD-walks to clear our heads. The friendship amongst former and current PhD-students at VID in Stavanger is extraordinary, and I would like to thank each one for their unwavering support and enjoyable companionship. You have all contributed to making the PhD-journey a lot more entertaining and less lonely than I could have imagined! A special thanks go to Mariella Asikanius for sharing with me the adventure of disseminating our research at Forsker Grand Prix and for our rather intensive 'hoffice-sessions' in the final rounds before submission.

My dear family deserves a special dedication of utmost love and appreciation. Thank you to my sister for accompanying me on one of my travels to Syria. Our jeep-adventure around all the iconic heritage sites of Syria will always remain a treasured memory. Thank you to my two precious children, Ulva and Ravn Alec, for having endured your mother's long absences and for bestowing hugs and kisses when I needed it. You are simply the best! And thank you to my dear husband, Daniel, for whom no words can express how deeply grateful I am for moral and mental support. You have taken part in every step along this path, always with a great sense of humour and rock-solid reassurance. Thank you for being such a good companion and father to our children!

Last but not least, this project would not have seen the day of light without the participation of Syrian refugees. I would like to extend my most profound respect and appreciativeness to all the fantastic individuals who took the time to share so generously of their life stories. In the same token, I want to dedicate a special

thanks to my research assistant, Nidaa Raji, who skillfully and gently took part in most of the interviews during fieldwork. Thank you for your endurance and excellent work!

In the ancient Middle Eastern oral storytelling tradition, the storyteller – *hakawati* – enjoys a venerable position in the society, offering meaningful stories with universal wisdom. It has been said that if an issue arises for which no solution is found, the hakawatis would always provide mysteriously sublime answers in their tales. In this project, I regard my Syrian storytellers as true heirs of this tradition. Their stories comprise a rich and evocative archive of (hi)story, memory and meaning that ought never to be forgotten. Together they have provided narrative bridges and understanding to a wider audience, and for that, I am immensely grateful! **شكرا**

Ingrid Løland

Stavanger, September 29th, 2020

Abstract

English:

This thesis is a qualitative study based on three articles, of which two have been published. The general purpose of this study is to raise awareness of the Syrian conflict and its resulting refugee crisis through the nuanced voices and experiences of a heterogeneous Syrian refugee population. The study seeks to fill a research gap concerning the nexus between religion, identity and conflict as a lived phenomena in stories narrated by Syrian refugee. As such, the research deploys an exploratory research design and a dynamic theoretical framework in order to encounter the empirical material with scholarly vigour and ethical sensitivity. The main research questions posed in the thesis concerns how a sample of Syrian refugees residing in Norway encounter, memorise, narrate and discursively negotiate experiences of conflict, religion and identification processes in their forced displacement trajectories. In response to this questions, the thesis addresses three chronological themes, each of which represents a separate article: 1) Experiences of life in Syria prior to the war (Article 1); 2) Experiences during revolution and war in Syria (Article 2); 3) Experiences of escape from Syria and during forced displacement (Article 3). The study has applied a spatio-temporal frame of trajectories as a transformative lens through which Syrian refugee stories can be contextualised and more meaningfully analysed. By approaching trajectories as a storied landscape and a discursive field, the research has been able to show the various ways in which memories, metaphors, and life-rupturing events are subject to shared and contested meaning-making. In so doing, the three articles have seen narratives not merely as a fascinating gateway into the world of Syrian refugees, but also as essential vehicles for understanding the narrative battles and bridges of religion and identity discourses.

Norwegian:

Denne avhandlingen er en kvalitativ studie basert på tre artikler, hvorav to er publisert. Hensikten med studiet er å øke bevisstheten om den syriske konflikten og den påfølgende flyktningkrisen gjennom nyanserte stemmer og erfaringer fra en heterogen syrisk flyktninggruppe. Studien søker å fylle et gap i forskningslitteraturen når det gjelder sammenhengen mellom religion, identitet og konflikt som levd erfaring i syriske flyktning-fortellinger. Med vitenskapelige åpenhet og etisk bevissthet anvender forskningsprosjektet et dynamisk design og teoretisk rammeverk i møte med det empiriske materialet. Hovedproblemstillingen i studiet stiller spørsmål ved hvordan et utvalg av syriske flyktninger bosatt i Norge kommer i møte med, minnes, forteller og diskursivt forhandler erfaringer som omhandler konflikt, religion og identifikasjonsprosesser i sine migrasjonshistorier. I besvarelsen av dette spørsmålet er studiet delt inn i tre kronologiske temaer som hver representerer en egen artikkel: 1) Erfaringer fra livet i Syria før krigen (Artikkel 1); 2) Erfaringer fra revolusjonen og krigen i Syria (Artikkel 2); 3) Erfaringer fra flukten fra Syria og selve migrasjonsreisen (Artikkel 3). Studiet anvender et tid-rom perspektiv som et analytisk prisme for å kontekstualisere syriske migrasjonserfaringer. Ved å tilnærme seg migrasjonserfaringer som et narrativt landskap og diskursivt felt, har forskningsprosjektet søkt å vise de ulike måtene minner, metaforer og livsforandrende hendelser er gjenstand for både felles og omstridt meningsskaping. Dermed har de tre artiklene ikke bare sett på fortellinger som en fascinerende inngangsport til syriske flyktningers erfaringsverden, men også som viktige redskaper for å forstå det narrative mangfoldet som omhandler konflikt, religion og identitetsdiskurser.

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The articles of the thesis

Article 1:

Løland, I. (2019)

Negotiating Paradise Lost: Refugee Narratives of Pre-war Syria. A Discursive Approach to Memory, Metaphors and Religious Identifications. *European Journal of Cultural Studies.* Epub ahead of print August 28, 2019.

Article 2:

Løland, I. (2019)

Between Utopia and Dystopia: Sectarianization through Revolution and War in Syrian Refugee Narratives. *Religions*, *10*(3), 188.

Article 3:

Løland, I. (not published)

War, Displacement and Refugeehood: Existential Encounters of Religion in the Syrian Refugee Crisis. (Currently under peer review in *Entangled Religions*).

This study is dedicated to my beloved father, Alec Ross Løland (1931–2018), who sadly passed away during the course of this PhD project. A devoted humanist, mindful of the plight of refugees, I am confident that he would have loved to have seen this project through. I am forever grateful to him and my mother for their love and support.

Chapter 1: Introduction

If we dare to write about the remains of a homeland

That is scattered in pieces and in decay

In decadence and disarray

About a homeland that is searching for a place

And about a nation that no longer has a face

About a homeland that has nothing left of its great ancient verse

But that of wailing and eulogy

About a homeland that has nothing in its horizons

Of freedoms of different types and ideology.

(Nizar Qabbani, 1995)

Although written long before the present-day conflict in Syria, these opening lines by the praised Syrian national poet Qabbani provide an apt expression for the fall of a nation and its impact on the people.[1] Bereft of a homeland and with no promising signs of peace on the horizon, vast numbers of Syrians are currently scattered across the globe, comprising the largest forcibly displaced population in the world. Since its outbreak in 2011, the Syrian civil war has forced millions of civilians to flee their homes, either as internally displaced persons within Syria or as refugees crossing international borders. The sheer immensity of the Syrian exodus is unprecedented in contemporary history, with over 6.6 million refugees having undertaken perilous journeys across land and sea in search of safer havens. This comes in the wake of immeasurable human suffering, material losses and 'horror and bloodshed on a colossal scale' (Amnesty International, 2016). Added to this

[1] This is an extract from the poem 'We are accused of terrorism', published in 1995. As an avid nationalist and liberal, Nizar Qabbani expressed his political opinions through poetry, criticising Western interventions as much as the misrule and dictatorship in the Middle East. Many of his poems demonstrate a contempt for authoritarianism and were used as inspirational quotes during the Arab Spring's call for freedom.

turmoil are the high numbers of casualties and missing people, leading the United Nations to view the Syrian crisis as 'the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our time'.[2]

It is against this grim background of utter devastation that the following research project has taken shape. As a historian of religion and a migration researcher familiar with Syria and the Middle East, I have been puzzled by many questions related to the unfolding years of revolution and war. These have sparked a scholarly inquisitiveness as to the reasons why a country of relative peace could spiral so quickly into violent conflict. I was most interested in understanding the extent to which religion and identity discourses were entangled in the conflict and encountered in people's migratory trajectories. I realised that one way to understand the complexity of the reasons behind the Syrian refugee crisis was to go beyond the staggering statistics and seek stories on the lived experiences of Syrian refugees themselves. When the increasing influx of migration from Syria reached Europe, I saw a chance to meet people whose personal stories were yet to be heard, thereby allowing more nuanced and pluralistic first-hand accounts of refugees to gain public attention. Pressing questions such as who the Syrian refugee population comprises, what their lives have been like both prior to and during the war and what triggered their escape from Syria have mingled with other research interests regarding how conflict and displacement experiences shape discourses on religious identity in Syrian refugee narratives. Hence, one of the primary considerations of this research is to add to the existing research with a heightened analytical sensitivity while being more finely tuned to the *plurality of voices* and *lived experiences* embedded in the testimonies of Syrian refugees. As the title of the thesis suggests, there is no single dimension to these testimonies, but rather an abundance of 'narrative battles and bridges' that attest to both contestations and commonalities in Syrian refugee stories.

This introductory chapter first analyses the various motivations and rationales behind the research journey (1.1). It then provides a general outline of the qualitative research design, focusing on the research problem, the research

[2] See: https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syria-refugee-crisis-greatest-humanitarian-tragedy-our-times-un-flna2D11767838.

questions and the unit of analysis (1.2). Based on the research design, I will account for some of the inspirational foundations for the exploratory research process (1.3). The chapter continues by providing disciplinary arguments for its contribution to relevant research conversations (1.4), followed by a description of the article-based nature of the thesis (1.5). Finally, an outline of the structure of the thesis as a whole is offered (1.6).

1.1 Motivations and rationale for the study

The general purpose of this study is to raise awareness of the Syrian conflict and its resulting refugee crisis through the voices of Syrian refugees. The intention is to explore the refugees' experiences and share their stories to document more nuanced and personalised perspectives of the issues that have dominated headlines over the past decade. When I began my PhD project in the autumn of 2015, this underlying drive grew from different distinguishable gaps that existed in the research literature at the time, as well as personal and scholarly motivations for entering the research conversation with novel insights. The following section lists a few of the principal rationales for embarking on this research journey.

1.1.1 The under-researched phenomenon of the Syrian refugee crisis

Although the Syrian civil war had produced a considerable number of refugees long before the advent of the exodus to European soil, research activity on the Syrian displacement crisis was relatively scarce before 2015 (Fisher, 2014; Sweileh, 2018; Yazan et al., 2015). As most of the exiled Syrians were confined within neighbouring host countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, their increasingly protracted conditions were 'slipping off the front pages', according to Fisher (2014, p. 4). The Syrian crisis had lost international momentum, leaving mostly humanitarian and human rights organisations to deal with its severity and the lack of public outcry (Fisher, 2014). Although issues such as health, economic problems, education and infrastructure among the displaced people were documented widely by the concerned organisations, scholarly attention reflected the general neglect visible in the international community (Ostrand, 2015; Sweileh, 2018; Yazgan al., 2015). For

example, social and cultural aspects of Syrians in relation to conflict and migration were left largely untouched in the literature (Yazan et al., 2015). Thus, as the Syrian refugee crisis steadily worsened, it became clear that many dimensions remained under-researched and would require increased interdisciplinary scrutiny.

1.1.2 Inadequacy of mediatised representations of Syrian refugees

When the Syrian refugee crisis moved beyond the regional confines of the Middle East and crossed the European threshold in 2015, it soon became a burning politicised issue that directly influenced the representation of refugees in the public domain. Despite significant exceptions, most notably the 'culture of welcome' among civil society, a common denominator in media discourse was to offer binary images of the refugee.[3] Reflected also in European migrant policies, such a dichotomised discourse viewed refugees either as vulnerable victims or as potential liabilities to issues of security, border management and social stability (Wilson & Mavelli 2017). Recent research shows that a particular and possibly Eurocentric mode of understanding emerged as dominant regarding how the media covered the refugee crisis (Matar, 2017).[4] Rather than questioning what constituted the crisis, its root causes and, perhaps most significantly, to *whom* the crisis was an acute concern, a 'confused and polarised narrative' (Matar, 2017, p. 292) shifted attention toward the perceived threats that refugees posed to the European welfare system and its cultural beliefs and values. Associated narratives gave the impression of 'a linear, uninterrupted flow of people heading towards Europe' (Crawley & Jones, 2020, p. 2), without considering the many complex social, economic and political factors behind migration realities. Added to this 'myth of invasion' were the few news items which included the voices and experiences of individual migrants and

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[3] In the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis, the German concept of *Willkommenskultur* ('culture of welcome') gained new momentum, spurring many non-governmental organisations, such as Refugees Welcome and A Drop in the Ocean, to volunteer assistance for refugees on the basis of inclusiveness and solidarity. Their work was also partly a response to and a critique of restrictions within European refugee policies.

[4] See also Refugees Report (2017): https://www.refugeesreporting.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Changing_the_Narrative_Media_Representation_of_Refugees_and_Migrants_in_Europe.pdf, https://www.uib.no/node/95377/97875/refugee-crisis-figures-and-media-image, and https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/moving-stories-international-review-of-how-media-cover-migration.

refugees.[5] Corroborating this invisibility were negative portrayals of the migrant population as villains and perpetrators, accentuating an image of people on the move as threatening in nature (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020). Thus, the inadequacy of mediatised depictions regarding Syrian refugees and migrants, in general, has not merely challenged balanced portrayals in the public debate but also posed a stark reminder that academia should more consciously include the *ethical dimension* in the conducting and dissemination of migration research.

1.1.3 Lack of bottom-up perspectives on the nexus between conflict, religion and displacement in Syrian refugee research

As many scholars have pinpointed, bringing religion into the realm of migration studies is 'a long overdue enterprise' (Wong, 2014, p. 306; see also Ebaugh, 2010; Ekué, 2009; Hock, 2011; Mavelli & Wilson, 2017). Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to the interweaving of religion within contemporary flows of *forced* migration, calling for more in-depth and up-to-date studies. When I began this research endeavour, there were limited resources regarding the nexus between religion and forced migration, not least concerning the Syrian refugee crisis. Indeed, the heterogeneous field of religious experiences and identity affiliations *among* the Syrian refugee population was largely unreported and have continued to remain so (Eghdamian, 2016). It called for a need to address 'the religion-migration-identity juxtaposition' (Frederiks & Nagy, 2014) more carefully concerning the Syrian displacement crisis. In contrast, there was a growing body of literature that looked at multiple aspects of the Syrian conflict, including its sectarian dimension and religiously tinted identity struggles. However, few of the studies within this area addressed issues from a bottom-up perspective, as seen in people's everyday lived experiences; refugees' first-hand accounts were certainly not considered. Fewer still explored what was happening on the ground from sociocultural, anthropological or religious studies perspectives. Rather, the war drew attention mainly from scholars of political science and international relations, offering top-down analyses that attempted to explain broader geopolitical dynamics in Syria and the international

[5] Ibid.

community. Although contributing many valuable insights from which to understand the sheer complexity of the Syrian conflict, some critical dimensions and perspectives were missing from this literature. For example, conceptualising the religious entanglements in the Syrian armed conflict and displacement crisis demanded broader repertoires of lenses, especially from a human dimension point of view. Moreover, as far as could be detected, no study had previously attempted to explore the role of religion and narrative identity discourses in the spatio-temporal trajectories of Syrian refugees. These examples pointed to the need for more expanded and interdisciplinary responses to the nexus between conflict, religion and migration in academic research.

1.1.4 Personal and scholarly motivations for combining refugee and religious research

When VID Specialized University advertised for a PhD position that should combine the themes of religion and migration in a qualitative study, I perceived my background in these two disciplinary fields to be a fruitful vantage point from which to research the Syrian refugee population. Specialising in the religious and sociocultural landscape of the Middle East, I have been fortunate to have lived many years in the region and have made several visits to Syria. I was thus familiar with the fascinating ethno-religious tapestry of this nation and the history of conflict and coexistence that preceded the current upheaval. When the Arab Spring reached Syria, I naturally started to follow the developments in the country with a keen eye. First, I anticipated the region's long-awaited transformation in terms of political freedom and democratic change. Then, of course, I was increasingly disheartened by the reverse processes of escalation into conflict and civil war. Thus, an awakened interest in the entanglements of religion, conflict and displacement was triggered as the situation in Syria protracted and worsened. I gathered that my combined educational experiences in the history of religion, intercultural communication, migration and Middle Eastern studies (among others) were relevant for meeting these challenges academically. In addition, practical skills I had acquired from over fifteen years in refugee and migration work, could serve positively in addressing the Syrian refugee population. There were also ethical and

normative implications involved in these motivations. By conducting a qualitative study, I was inspired to promote refugees' right to speak on their own behalf, allowing their voices to be heard with respect and ensuring that they are more adequately represented in scholarly research.

1.2 Research design

With the recognition of these lacunas in academic research and the lack of nuanced media representations, in combination with my own personal and scholarly interests, the research design of this thesis rests on the conviction of bringing Syrian voices and refugee experiences to the fore in the study. The main objective is to look at how Syrian refugees discursively negotiate the intersection between conflict, religion and identity in their displacement trajectories, thus contextualising their stories across time and space. This qualitative endeavour involves numerous theoretical perspectives as well as a range of methodological considerations, firmly placing the research within a constructionist epistemology and an exploratory process of analysis. Whereas many of these features are dealt with more expansively in the methodology and theory chapters, I shall here present the basic elements of the research design. This section attempts to trace some of the dynamics inherent in my understanding of conducting qualitative research. Defining a problem, developing research questions and determining a unit of analysis thus constitute an unfolding process around which the thesis as a whole takes shape and moves forward.

1.2.1 Research problem

Initially, the idea was to structure the experiential realm of refugee narratives within three spatio-temporal units: 1) experiences during the time of war in Syria; 2) experiences *en route* in the multiple locations of forced displacement; and 3) experiences in exile and during resettlement in Norway. Each of these units would correspond to three separate articles. However, investigations during research and subsequent fieldwork prompted me to adjust the design of the research problem for different reasons. First, many of the Syrian interlocutors professed a wish to talk

about life *prior to* the war. They wanted to share memories of inter-religious coexistence as well as underlying tensions from a past that sharply contrasted with the brutalities of life besieged by war. As will be shown, this was a fourth dimension that emerged somewhat surprisingly in the data and which challenged the tripartite structure already envisioned. Second, without adding the contested aspects of revolution/uprising more clearly into the design, the dimension of war turned out to be inconclusive. It required a keener examination of how radical changes and processes of sectarianisation were negotiated from the beginning of the revolution and throughout the ensuing years of war. Third, the data relating to the dimension of exile and resettlement in Norway was more scarce and less appropriate for comprehensive analysis due to the short time that the participating Syrians had been resident in Norway. It would require additional follow-up interviews and, preferably, a longitudinal study to assess how issues of religion and identity played out in the subjects' new contexts and everyday life situations. Unfortunately, the schedule of this PhD project did not allow for such prolongation of the research, leading to the omission of this last dimension of exile from the research inquiry.

With these considerations in mind, I decided to redefine the research problem and construct an altered spatio-temporal structure that could adapt to discoveries and restrictions met along the way. Hence, the empirical material was organised to address three chronological themes that could be presented in three separate articles: 1) experiences of life in Syria prior to the war; 2) experiences during revolution and war in Syria; and 3) experiences of escape from Syria and during forced migration (Figure 1). This revised design of the research problem is testimony to the requirement for flexible manoeuvring in qualitative research. As poignantly observed by Castles (2012), '[f]lexibility implies "adaptability": the willingness of the researcher to respond to the lessons of the field and to hear what respondents are saying by changing the research strategy' (p. 16).

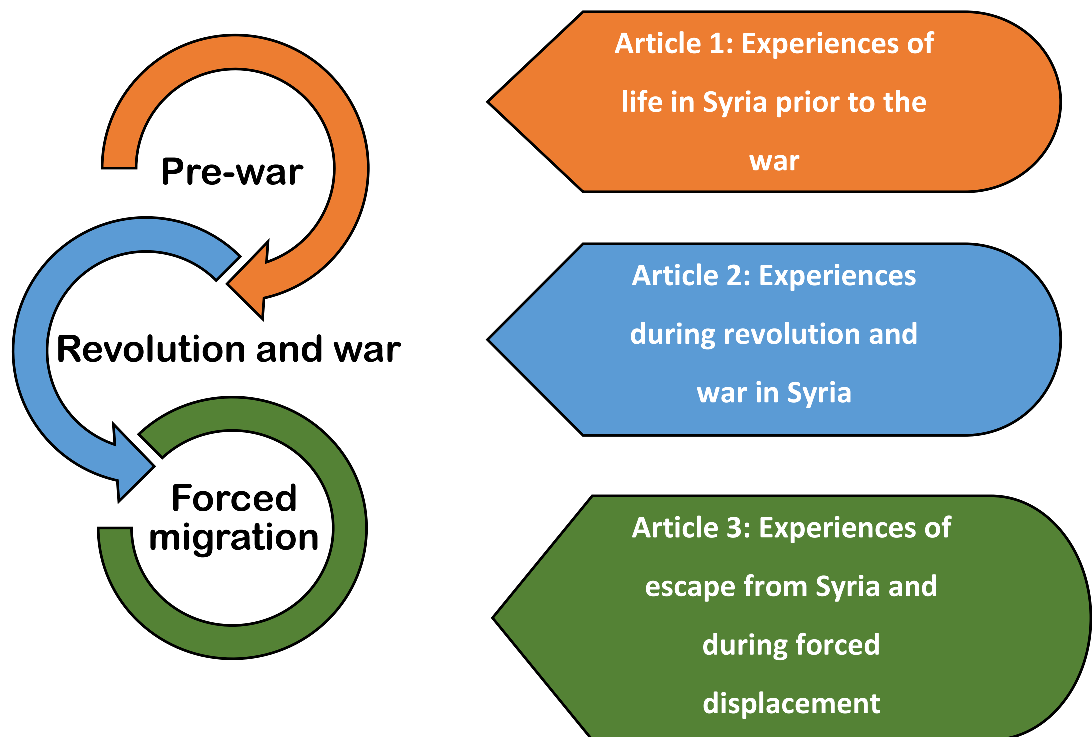

***Figure 1**: Illustration of the research problem concerning the spatio-temporal trajectories.*

1.2.2 Research questions

In conjunction with the mapping out of the research problem, I approached the formulation of research questions in a similar flexible manner. Research questions can be described as 'devices for guiding and focusing' an inquiry (Mason, 2002, p. 20), or as 'navigational tools' (Agee, 2009, p. 432) that help to map the research journey in possible but also unexpected directions. Positioning the research questions as an axis around which the reflexive analysis of the thesis evolves is suggestive of an iterative process that sparks understanding and develops meaning throughout the research inquiry. An apt description of this process is to see it as 'a loop-like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material' (Berkowitz, 1997, cited in Sriviastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 76). Thus, with insight derived from fieldwork as well as steady input from theoretical perspectives, the research questions were moulded and modified along the way. Indeed, as noted by Creswell (2007), '[o]ur questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased

understanding of the problem' (p. 43). In people-orientated qualitative research, moreover, continued questioning is 'an integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others' (Agee, 2009, p. 432). As a result, a broad and overarching leading research question was developed to cover the essential focal points of the study:

How does a sample of Syrian refugees encounter, memorise, narrate and discursively negotiate experiences of conflict, religion and identification processes in their forced displacement trajectories?

As will be shown in more detail in Chapter 2, the main research question consists of various important components that embrace the key theoretical concepts guiding the focus of this research.

The development of a set of sub-questions was primarily the result of experiences during fieldwork. Data derived from conversations with Syrian refugees generated new questions and demanded additional narrowing. The construction of these questions was thus more aligned with a grounded theory approach in which an inductive take on the data shapes the theoretical direction and analytical insight (Charmaz & Bryant, 2010; Grbich, 2013). Rather than being linear and straightforward, the process can be defined as a circular interplay between the coding of the empirical material and the application of theoretical lenses through which interpretation and understanding can progress. A fundamental concern during this dynamic interaction was to remain inquisitively open while at the same time keeping a tight focus on the main research question, the spatio-temporal design of the research problem and the tripartite structure of the thesis. The result of this process is a set of three formulated questions corresponding to three separate yet interrelated articles.

Article 1: *In which ways are social relations and ethno-religious identifications of pre-war Syria remembered and narrated by Syrian refugees in exile?*

Article 2: *How are processes of sectarianisation during the Syrian revolution and emerging civil war experienced by Syrian refugees on a micro-narrative level, and to*

what extent do these experiences correspond to socio-political frames operating on a macro level?

Article 3: *To what extent do existential encounters of religion play into life-rupturing experiences of war, forced displacement and refugeehood as reflected in the narrative trajectories of Syrian refugees?*

1.2.3 Polyvocal unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this thesis consists of narratives derived from a sample of Syrian refugees residing in Norway. Accordingly, I have chosen narrative experiences of *people* – individuals and collectives – as the primary sample. This choice is based on the firm conviction that people and their stories comprise the most meaningful sources of data through which the research problem of this particular study can be further analysed (Mason, 2002). Furthermore, it was my stated wish to study 'ordinary people' who happen to have experienced the *extraordinary* ruptures of war, migration and refugeehood in their everyday lives. Related to this bottom-up perspective is the need to combine a polyvocal approach with the narrative inquiry. Polyvocality means to incorporate many voices in order to endorse diverse listening and present multiple points of view. Narrative inquiry is a way of grasping an emic or insider's view and understanding the meanings people ascribe to life as lived. As attested by many (Bamberg, 2016; Brannen, 2013; Daiute, 2014; Eastmond, 2005, 2007; Jackson, 2002; Manojlovic, 2010; Sigona, 2014), I concede that a narrative lens serves as a particularly useful research tool with which to contest generalisations as it endeavours to encapsulate complexity and diversity in human experiences.

Therefore, the inclusion of multiple voices in this project serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows a broad sample of the heterogeneous Syrian refugee population in Norway to be voiced and heard. On the other hand, polyvocality is a powerful reminder that any one refugee story necessarily invokes the voices of others, reminiscent of what Bakhtin (1981) calls 'heteroglossia' and the 'polyphonic' nature of narratives. Socioculturally, we may see these two dimensions of polyvocality – i.e. multi-voicedness *among* different Syrian nationals and *within*

each Syrian's individual story – as valuable to encounter the experiential realm of refugees in expanded and more comprehensive ways.

1.3 Exploratory research process

Many inspirational points of view have methodologically informed the research design of this study. I will here mention a few that emphasise the dynamic aspects of conducting qualitative research. First, I share Alvesson and Kärreman's (2011) perspective on qualitative inquiry as a creative process of construction rather than passive verification. By taking a reflective and imaginative approach towards the empirical material, they suggest that researchers should embrace the *mysteries* when trying to make sense of the social world. Second, and related to the 'mystery as method' approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), is the importance of asking questions rather than providing conclusive answers. As articulated by Denizeau (2017), marvelling the human existence as an *enigma* 'implies bringing strangeness into the familiar, and uncertainty into that which is taken for granted' (p.233) – calling for movement rather than finite responses. Third, I deem the *processual* character of this study as much a personal and inward journey of exploration as well as a scholarly outreach for the dissemination of new academic insights. In line with Merriam (1998), I have thus come to appreciate that some of the legacies of conducting qualitative research lie 'in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation' (p. 19). Such an inquisitive openness implies that the subjectivity of the researcher, as well as the encounter between the researcher and her research participants, are included as part and parcel of the inquiry and becomes subject to ethical scrutiny. When combined, these dynamic aspects indicate an exploratory research design that attempts to celebrate the richness, depth and complexity of an empirical inquiry. As illustrated below, the organic nature of such a process reveals some common characteristics for the research design as a whole (Figure 2):

EXPLORATORY

RESEARCH DESIGN:

- **Flexible**
- **Ongoing analysis**
- **Imaginative openness**
- **Multi-lens perspective**
- **Theoretical and empirical dimensions**
- **Iterative process**
- **Evolving understanding**
- **Dynamic interpretation**
- **Abductive reasoning**
- **Ethical considerations throughout**
- **Researcher's subjectivity**
- **Participant relations**

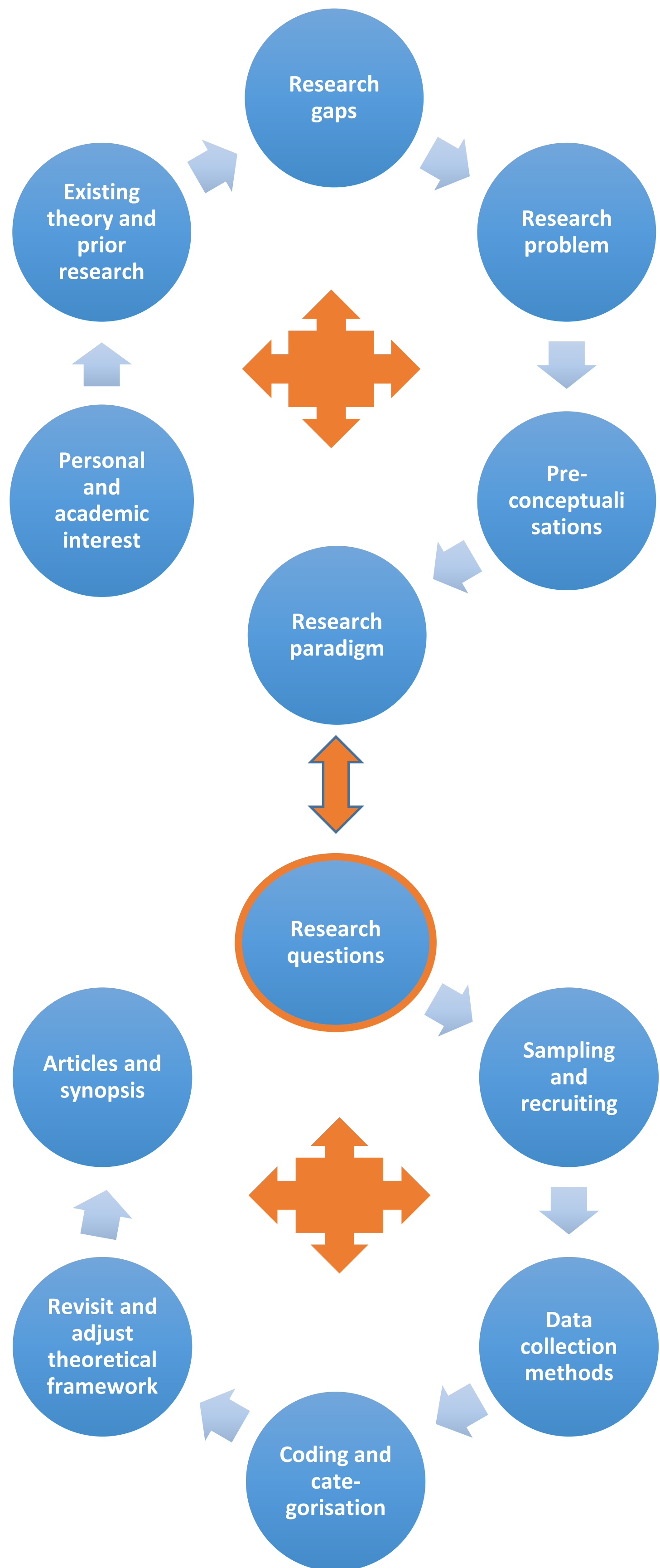

***Figure 2**: An overview of the exploratory research process and its design characteristics.*

1.4 Disciplinary conversation and research contribution

When examining the nexus between conflict, religion and migration in the Syrian refugee context, there is undoubtedly a multitude of disciplinary approaches with which to confront the issue. This thesis adopts a multidisciplinary approach while also limiting itself to a few distinguishable traits that serve to delineate the research more narrowly. The two scientific traditions that form the basis of the thesis are that of religious studies and migration research. Although vastly dissimilar, they are both broad areas of study and represent chiefly interdisciplinary types of scholarship. Both are fragmented into specialised sub-disciplines that offer a wide array of theoretical perspectives and mixed methodologies. They may be combined with academic fields such as anthropology, theology, sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, political theory, law, economics and gender studies. Thus, it is possible to explore religion and migration in different academic cultures and through diverse paradigms.

Whereas one could argue that these multidisciplinary aspects signal a state of imprecision or a lack of overall cohesion in terms of research focus, I believe that both scientific traditions show their strengths in addressing increasingly multifaceted academic debates. Gaining multiple insights into complex phenomena such as religion and migration inevitably means to converse with different theories in order to adequately and meaningfully analyse the empirical material. As universalising 'grand narratives' of the social world no longer hold 'paradigmatic hegemony' (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 163; see also Lyotard, 1984), we have seen a post-positivist move toward discussing theories *across* disciplines, blurring the hitherto strict boundaries between scientific genres. This is not to say that contending paradigms do not exist, or that scientific communities have ceased to adhere to particular disciplinary traditions. It is merely a manifestation of the need to *combine* different sources of knowledge in contemporary and increasingly complex research problems.

For example, while maintaining its position as an independent discipline, the study of religion has witnessed a shift towards a sociocultural scientific paradigm concerned with social experiences, practices, discourses, values and behaviour (Beckford, 2003; Gilhus & Mikaelsson, 2001; Lincoln, 2003). Migration research, although traditionally not a self-contained discipline, is now considered a rapidly growing research field encompassing studies on all types of international and internal migration, migrants and migration-related diversity (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015; Pisarevskaya et al., 2019). As such, the field has become fragmented into a variety of topical clusters, some of which are concerned with religious diversity, intercultural communication, identity and belonging, narratives, conflict and displacement.[6] Thus, both religious studies and migration research address contemporary fields of study and refer to a series of highly complex human phenomena that cannot always be understood within the scientific vocabulary of each. If and when appropriate, both disciplines may, therefore, benefit from being critically examined through different, and combined, disciplinary lenses.

Four dimensions may be discerned as particularly identifying features of this research. First, as a qualitative study, this thesis employs methodologies that address a multitude of meanings as opposed to the more positivist tradition of quantitative research. Empirically, it is thus concerned with viewing reality, culture, values and practices as irretrievably plural, resisting naturalised concepts and essentialist depictions of the social world. This description also resonates with the normative values to which I adhere as a researcher, in which I regard diversification and openness as important scholarly virtues. Second, the study also places itself within a pragmatic and social constructionist paradigm that seeks to understand the constructed nature of phenomena and celebrates the creative and imaginative aspects of conducting research. Constructionism also implies self-reflexivity and opens research to debate, preferring inquisitive curiosity rather than rigid affirmation. Third, the study is socioculturally inclined, meaning that, in order to

[6] According to Pisarevskaya et al. (2019), the main topical trends in migration research may be divided into the following clusters: gender and family; geographies of migration; governance and politics; health; immigrant incorporation; migration processes; migration research and statistics; and migration-related diversity.
https://academic.oup.com/migration/article/doi/10.1093/migration/mnz031/5543467

study individual stories and subjective identity constructions, social and political contexts must be taken into account. Studying human experiences and expressions, therefore, means to be open to more than one meaning or interpretation, all of which are culturally and socially embedded (Watkins-Goffman, 2006). Fourth, studying religion, migration and conflict within these parameters signals a preoccupation with the lived dimension that, for our purposes, pertains to the experiential and existential realms of refugees.

Taken together, the focus of this research can thus be said to have a sub-disciplinary leaning towards cultural theory, sociology and anthropology, which are overlapping fields preoccupied with the everyday world of experience and its inherent diversities (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999). I firmly believe that combining religious studies and migration research with such a sociocultural inclination is a way of transcending scholarly discourses and contributing new insights across institutional boundaries. A fundamental tenet in this endeavour has therefore been to embrace interdisciplinarity and open up 'for a variety of vocabularies for creating possible meanings out of the empirical material' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 39). As evidenced in the three articles, and throughout this synopsis, the research is driven by its ability to fill some of the noticeable gaps in the existing literature and address Syrian refugee debates in more nuanced and ethical ways. More specifically, the research attempts to provide in-depth and recontextualised analyses of the multifarious entanglement of religion in Syrian refugee trajectories. As a topic hitherto unsatisfactorily covered in academic research, I view my contribution as feeding both empirically and theoretically into the scholarly discussions of religion and migration, thereby contributing to their further development.

1.5 An article-based thesis

This PhD project is structured as an article-based thesis consisting of three separate yet interrelated articles in one common study. Working on a thesis based on articles offers a valuable opportunity to take part in contemporary scholarly debates and allows the research to be visible to a wider audience. However, given the somewhat rigid limitations of the article format, as well as discrepancies intrinsic to different

journals' profiles, many background issues may be unevenly or insufficiently addressed. It is therefore vital for the synopsis of the thesis to account for the research process from start to finish and summarise the various elements that are constitutive of the entire PhD project. Indeed, the term *synopsis* means to 'see together' and to offer a comprehensive view of something. For my purposes, this is a way of documenting the many steps taken in the entire construction of the thesis and account for its logical underpinnings through theoretical, methodological and analytical considerations. For an article-based thesis to make sense, the rationale of the synopsis concerns itself with a discussion of the thematic relevance of each article as well as their combined and inter-related contributions to the study as a whole. As has been indicated, the articles address different spatio-temporal trajectories in the lives of a sample of Syrian refugees. They comprise narrative experiences of life in Syria prior to the war (Article 1), throughout the revolution and civil war (Article 2) and during the escape from Syria and journeys of displacement (Article 3). Each article uses a repertoire of different theoretical lenses, providing in-depth interpretations of the various ways in which issues of religion and identity discourses cut into Syrian refugee trajectories. In order to ensure coherent transparency as to how these articles have come about and interrelate with each other on a meta-discursive level, there are crucial contextual, methodological and ethical issues that form the basis of the inquiry and provide critical background information. With this synopsis, I shall thus seize the opportunity to enlarge the space for some of these discussions and argue for their relevance in shedding light on the research results.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

The outline of the thesis is as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the research project by actualising and contextualising the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis as deserving of academic attention. It delineates research lacunas and mediatised misrepresentations and provides arguments for entering the research conversation with a defined research problem and a set of nuanced research questions. It also addresses the exploratory research design and the use of interdisciplinary approaches as pertinent to the research contribution within religious studies and

migration research. Chapter 2 offers a presentation of the theoretical approach I have chosen for the research and the close link I perceive to exist between theory and empirical data. Based on this approach, the chapter continues by presenting the key theoretical concepts that are embedded within the main research question. It provides a clarification of terms as well as an elucidation of the analytical significance they bear on my research analysis. Chapter 3 introduces historically informed background information regarding the past and present situation in Syria. It is concerned with examining the ways in which coexistence and conflict are ingrained in the historical trajectories of the country and mirrored in the ethno-religious mosaic of its population. The presentation serves to offer some significant, albeit partial, aspects behind the complexities of the current conflict and its resulting refugee crisis. Chapter 4 maps out the methodological journey of the thesis and presents the practical and analytical steps taken in order to conduct empirical research. It offers an account of the qualitative, constructionist and narrative paradigms employed as a framework for the research. It also provides an overview of the data collection methods, sampling and recruitment procedures as well as the various stages and strategies of the analytical process. Chapter 5 is devoted to ethical reflections on researching Syrian refugees and offers perspectives derived from theoretical debates as well as experiences from the fieldwork. It discusses various challenges pertaining to refugee research in general, as well as to the Syrian refugee population in particular. The chapter functions as a reminder to include ethical considerations more explicitly in research on refugees. Chapter 6 provides a presentation of the three articles and gives an overview of their inter-relationship as well their independent status. Concurrent and divergent dimensions will be discussed in relation to their contribution to one common study. Chapter 7 provides a more comprehensive and holistic presentation of the empirical findings in the three articles. It expounds on the key theoretical concepts described in Chapter 2 by showing how they have been theoretically implemented in the discussion. It addresses themes and categories that have emerged in the analytical process and compares findings across the three published articles. This chapter also offers some final reflections on future research options in studies on Syrian refugees. It shares unpublished empirical findings regarding the exile dimensions of

Syrian refugee life and indicates avenues that could be explored in order to enhance our understanding of an emerging Syrian diaspora.

Chapter 2: Theoretical approach and conceptual clarifications

This chapter will provide a more foundational overview of the theoretical underpinning pertaining to the exploratory research design already explained. It will first account for the role of theory applied in my empirical research (2.1), before delving into a conceptual clarification of key theoretical terms (2.2).

2.1 The role of theory in my empirical research

The role of theory in empirical research is a matter of disputed debate in scholarly circles. Whereas some would suggest that theory is the basis for all research, others contend that data forms the basis of all theory (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The latter is usually associated with a strict grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). My inclination toward these two opposing stands is to take the middle path and view theory and empirical data as mutually enhancing and complementary in their ability to produce new insights and understanding (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). I thus view grounded theory's stern ideal of studying an area 'without any preconceived theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 33) not only as methodologically implausible but also detrimental to human processes of cognition. In agreement with Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), I believe that no one enters a field entirely void of theories or presumptions. Hermeneutically speaking, theories will always form part of our situatedness, values and pre-judgments, conditioning a researcher's understanding toward ever-new and evolving perspectives (Gadamer, 1989). This interpretative dynamic has been reflective in this research, in which different phases have allowed for theory immersion both prior to and after conducting the actual fieldwork.[7] The

[7] This is a result of the structure of the PhD program, which lasts four years. The first two years of my PhD project were devoted to attending different courses and spending time on theoretically refining the original project description. In addition, several compulsory teaching assignments were conducted as 25 per cent of the project's workload, requiring time for preparing and conducting lectures. Prior to the commencement of the fieldwork in spring 2017, I thus had considerable time to acquaint myself with relevant theories and Syria-related reading material. After the fieldwork, the data formed a basis from which to revisit some of these perspectives as well as to introduce new theoretical encounters. In summary, this dynamic process, although time consuming, enabled the

intimate relationship between theory and empirical data is, therefore, evidenced throughout the research journey, implicating analytical approaches that can be described as abductive, comparative and multi-disciplinary.

As has already been indicated, the research problem I posit as central to this thesis cannot be understood or explained from a single theoretical perspective. When using theoretical material in the construction work on the empirical data, I follow Deetz's (1992, cited in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) apt expression of theories as 'repertoires of lenses', each offering particular understandings and perceptions. Like any language or discursive practice, theories are not objective renditions of truth but are situated and bounded by a variety of social, cultural, historical, political and subjective contexts. Theories are thus methods of envisioning or imagining phenomena through different angles and eyeglasses. As such, they can help to clarify the empirical material and make it 'more well-informed, conscious, and nuanced' (Deetz, 1992, cited in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 34). Conversely, theories can sometimes also blur and shadow the material to such a degree as to be detrimental to the research process. An exploratory research process will always entail questions regarding which theoretical avenue(s) to choose and evaluate trails that can lead the project off track. Acknowledging the interdependence of theory and data, as well as providing a critical and reflexive gaze on their interrelationship, is one way of assuring that a qualitative research inquiry remains open, yet scientifically disciplined. Another way is to allow several theories to converse with the phenomenon under study.

The way I have approached the analytical stages of this dissertation is suggestive of an iterative process that moves back and forth between the empirical material and relevant theoretical frameworks (Grbich, 2013). Epistemologically, we can understand this dynamic interplay as a cycle of inductive and deductive reasoning in which the concept of abduction plays an important role. Abduction focuses 'not on finding the correct explanation, but rather on using a variety of theories and ideas to generate insights and interpretations that provide the most meaningful way of

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research as a whole to mature and grow in accordance with a constructionist and exploratory approach.

making sense of the data' (Daly, 2007, p. 227). An abductive approach embraces existing theory in order to inspire the researcher's imagination and 'to critically open up alternative ways of framing empirical material' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1267). Aligned with Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) mystery approach, abduction implies 'constructing mysteries' and engages with creative resources that can surprise and stimulate further theory building. Consequently, the researcher must critically cultivate theory, subjectivity and imaginative capacity in order to discover new research issues and add novel insight 'to – or against – previous understandings' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1268).

2.2 Key theoretical concepts

In adherence to the theoretical approach described above, there is a range of analytical strategies to which I shall return and explain more thoroughly in the methodology chapter. First, however, it is essential to venture more deeply into some of the core concepts that have theoretically informed the focus of my empirical research. When revisiting the main research question, it is apparent that its various components embrace some of the key theoretical concepts that guide the focus of this research.

How does a sample of Syrian refugees (the unit of analysis) encounter, memorise, narrate, and discursively negotiate experiences of conflict, religion, and identification processes in their forced displacement trajectories?

As some of these terms are contested and employ multiple meanings in different contexts, it is pertinent to treat them separately while also looking at how they interrelate with each other. The following presentation will thus serve to clarify my conceptualised understanding and explain the theoretical significance each term bear on my analysis.

2.2.1 Encountering, memorising and narrating

Encountering is a broad term that implies forms of interaction that can be verbal, symbolic and concrete and that occur on various levels in society. Interaction implies that social events and situations are given meaning in relation to something

else. Encounters thus arise when they take place across a boundary (Vishanoff, 2013) and may produce effects that are both conducive and detrimental to social communication. It is therefore essential to acknowledge that any human encounter is ripe with possibilities and fraught with tensions. This double-edge perspective is especially relevant when encounters cross boundaries and become intercultural, as noted by Marques et al. (2012):

> On the one hand they [encounters] can promote mutual understanding, allow transfer for knowledge, widen people's horizons and expectations, and motivate openmindedness in the face of difference […]; on the other hand, encounters of/in difference generate cultural locations where conflicting lifestyles and mentalities can turn into battlegrounds. (p. 10)

Relevant to our non-essentialist approach to the Syrian conflict, it is pertinent to regard boundaries as imagined constructs. How Syrian refugees express encounters of conflict, religion and identification processes are bounded within certain contextual and spatio-temporal constituencies and are thus open for contested views and polyvocal diversity. Although appearing natural, unavoidable, or even immovable, boundaries are fluid and can be re-drawn or re-imagined. Different people can assign them greater or lesser significance at different times and places, thus indicating a multitude of ways in which encountering can occur and subsequently develop. Depending on the context, therefore, encounters can harbour polemics and conflict, as well as appropriation, assimilation, cross-fertilisation, cooperation and dialogue (Marques et al., 2012).

Connected to the relational aspect of encountering is the act of *memorising*, which is indicative of both individual and collective forms of reconstructing past experiences and events. Although memories are ultimately deeply subjective, they are imaginable and communicable first and foremost through interaction with other people, thus making them subject to collective contestation (DeVereaux & Griffin, 2013). In refugee and migration research, memory plays a significant role. For some, memory cuts into an existential 'struggle between the moral imperative not to forget and the extreme pain of remembering' (Eastmond, 2007, p. 259). For example, when Syrian refugees are asked to share their retrospective viewpoints of

a conflictual past, their memories are bound to reflect a multiplicity of realities and different reconstructions. This dynamic becomes particularly visible through the act of *narrating*.

Central to this thesis is the concept of narrative. Usually, it invokes the notion of a structured tale in which an event is narrated in an ordered sequence. Narration can then be understood as the articulated account of past experiences and events through the mediation of memories. As will be explained further, however, this study approaches narrative socioculturally and not merely as a linguistic device. It provides various meanings and imaginings beyond the narrating activity and the narrated event itself, pointing to the interrelationship between the subjective and the social in storytelling. Thus, as many scholars have pinpointed, narrative research not only involves narrative content as recounted on an individual basis but also seeks to understand narratives within a wider contextual framework (Andrews, 2014; Benmayor & Skotnes, 2009; Brannen, 2013; Castles, 2012; Eastmond, 2007; Grbich, 2013; Jackson, 2002; Shenshav, 2015). Given that both memories and narratives are creative (re)constructions, rendering any interpretation partial and selective (Eastmond, 2007), it is vital to approach storytelling as a mirror-image of a plurality of meaning-making and discursive practices (Bamberg, 2016; Daiute, 2017). Rather than resorting to view narratives solely as following the classical structure of a beginning, middle and end, storytelling must be understood as reflections of the often messy and contested dimensions of lived realities. For example, it is imperative to regard the *un*structured elements of ruptured life courses as part and parcel of refugee stories. Indeed, as argued in Frank's (2010) research on narratology and illness, we must acknowledge the *narrative disorder* and the indefinite nature of stories. Instead, we can see any story as 'a portal' into other stories, resonating 'multiple truths that have respective claims to expression' (Frank, 2010, p. 37). This interpretative openness is of compelling value when investigating how 'narrative battles and bridges' reflect shared and disputed encounters and memories of the Syrian war and displacement crisis.

2.2.2 Discourses and negotiation

Narrative, or storytelling, cannot be entirely distinguished from the term *discourse* as the two are interrelated concepts that can be used to describe how 'people make sense of their world and their place in it' (Boswell, 2013, p. 623). As opposed to narratives that operate on the micro level, discourse works at the macro level as 'constellations of ideas that […] order people's perspectives' (Ibid., p. 622). While this study does not apply a discourse analysis per se, it is nevertheless crucial to implement discourse when applying a sociocultural take on narrative inquiry. Often subsumed under concepts such as 'master narratives' (Bamberg, 2005) or 'meta-narratives' (Lyotard, 1984), discourses shape worldviews, beliefs and norms, as well as providing legitimacy for individual and collective behaviour. In order to understand individual refugee stories, it is vital to know how they are entangled within a broader and usually contested master-narrative landscape. It reminds us that a story is never merely individual but exists at the intersection of personal and political realms (Ammerman, 2014; Andrews, 2014; Arendt, 1958; Jackson 2002). Thus, inspired by what Geertz (1973) terms the 'microscopic' details of the social and cultural aspects of individuals' lives, I have approached the intersection between the subjective and the social in the research inquiry by interpreting the micro-narrative Syrian refugee stories within larger sociocultural frames and patterns.

I view these discursive practices as dynamic forms of *negotiation*, communicated both cognitively and interpersonally. By adopting Ting-Toomey's (1999) definition, negotiation is 'a transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images' (p. 40). For our purposes, we can see that negotiation is evident in the empirical material as an ongoing struggle to make sense of war, displacement and refugeehood. Moreover, when bringing issues of religion and identity discourses into these experiences, negotiation touches upon the existence of multiple perspectives and the ability to explore different narrative standpoints.

2.2.3 The realm of experiences

Experiences are here understood to be the lived, embodied and imagined dimensions inherent in the stories of the research participants. For the researcher, there is no direct access to people's experiences, but narrative can function as one of many gateways into the worlds of others. Applying a narrative lens can thus help to elicit the multifaceted and experiential realm of refugees' life stories and build knowledge of how people perceive the world around them. Indeed, as argued by Freeman (2015), 'the pivotal role of narrative analysis is exploring the human realm' (p. 22). Experiences point to a lived reality in which 'human lives […] unfold and are transformed in everyday situations, events, and interactions' (Jackson & Piette, 2017, p. 6). Furthermore, when dealing with the nuanced complexity of life as lived, refugee stories inevitably relay different types of experience, be they emotional, perceptual, religious/spiritual, intellectual, social or existential.

Since they are not immediate renditions of reality, life stories will always be mediated and thus subject to several layers of interpretation. Eastmond (2007) proposes four filters through which stories are sifted and edited at different stages: 1. life as lived (the flow of events in a person's life); 2. life as experienced (how the person perceives and attributes meaning to what happens; 3. life as told (how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context); and 4. life as text (the researcher's interpretation and representation of the story). As war, displacement and refugeehood bring about ruptured life courses, I argue for a fine-tuned attentiveness toward the realm of experiences through all four stages mentioned above. In particular, when researchers attempt to represent refugee experiences, it is vital to combat stereotypical accounts and examine the nexus between experiential vulnerability and agency in more sophisticated ways.

2.2.4 Conflict

Conflict displays many conceptualised understandings in different academic disciplines; however, it generally involves a situation in which two or more parties perceive that they possess incompatible goals, attitudes or behaviours (Demmers, 2017; Mitchell, 1981). Such incompatibilities may refer to different interests, values

and desired outcomes, to more cognitive struggles that display an emotional evaluation of ‘the other’ and patterns of perception or misperception. They can lead to types of action that move along a continuum of low-intensity struggles to high-intensity violent confrontations. Conflict situations, emotions and actions are therefore ‘deeply intertwined and dialectic’ (Demmers, 2017, p. 6) and can be studied from structurally conditioning approaches to individual-based approaches.[8] As a generic term, this study appropriates conflict as operating on both micro and macro levels and investigates how it plays out subjectively, culturally, socially and politically. On the one hand, it is used to describe the meta-conflictual dynamics of the internationalised Syrian civil war as a whole, with its intricate web of opposing actors, foreign involvement and multiple incompatibilities existing alongside each other (Tokmajyan, 2013). On the other hand, conflict is reflected in the dynamics of interpersonal relations, religious and cross-cultural interaction as well as identity negotiation.

The implication of religion and identity in many contemporary world affairs has led many scholars to (re)focus on their role in ethnic and political conflicts.[9] Similarly, we see this academic interest reflected in the literature that attempts to decipher the religious dimension of the Syrian civil war, particularly with regard to the role of sectarianism in the conflict.[10] What has largely been missing in many of the studies

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[8] Jolle Demmers (2017) distinguishes different approaches to the study of conflict. Some are concerned with the underlying conditions of conflicts, such as unequal distribution of resources and structural injustices. Others look at human attitudes and individual motivations as drivers of conflict. These structure- and individual-orientated approaches both feed into changing discussions regarding what might be considered just or unjust wars as well as the difficult representations of victims vs. perpetrators (Demmers, 2017, 5–6).

[9] See Brubaker (1998, 2015), Brubaker and Laitin (1998), Demmers (2017), Fox (2002), de Haar and Busuttil (2005), Hatzopoulos and Petito (2003), Juergensmeyer (2017), Manojlevic (2010), Seul (1999), Toft (2006) and van Liere (2009, 2011).

[10] See Atassi (2015), Balanche (2018), Berti and Paris (2014), Browne (2015), Dixon (2017), Farouk-Alli (2014), Gaiser (2017), Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh (2015), Haddad (2017), Hashemi and Postel (2017), Leenders (2016), Makdisi (2017) Phillips (2015), Pinto (2017), Soage (2017), Stolleis (2015), Tomass (2016), Wehrey (2017) and Wimmen (2017). There is a discrepancy in this literature regarding the correlation between religion and conflict, spanning essentialist readings of religion as a primordial source of conflict (e.g. Tomass (2016) to instrumentalist interpretations that reduce the significance of religion to other political or socioeconomic factors (e.g. Balanche (2018), Al-Haj Saleh (2017) and Dixon (2017)). Although none of these works claims an intrinsic connection between religion and violent conflict, we may argue, with Brubaker (2015, p. 12), that religion potentially provides a ‘potent assemblage of moral, ideological, and organizational resources that can, in certain contexts, inform, legitimate, or sustain violent conflict’.

is a bottom-up perspective that displays how individuals understand, subscribe to or reject various frames, or master-narrative templates, within which the Syrian conflict has been placed. There has also been a significant lack of scholarly attention addressing the fluid ways in which ordinary citizens make sense of war and conflict-induced displacement. This study seeks to fill some of these gaps by moving away from the dominant actor-centred perspective toward the realm of personal narration. While it is important to remember that 'no individual or group can adequately represent war in its entirety' (Baraban et al., 2012, p. 4), storytelling may yield valuable insights into how discursive battles and bridges are negotiated from private (and mostly non-combatant) points of view. I thus agree with Matar and Harb (2013), who suggest that narration can be a powerful tool with which to examine

> The diverse discursive spaces and forms within which conflict is mediated, communicated, experienced, imagined and lived, while not losing sight of the fact that the term narration itself implies subjectivity and agency, if not a provisional and partial reconstruction of lives and histories. (p. 4)

2.2.5 Religion and 'religious issues'

One of the most salient concepts in this thesis is that of religion. Since the term is fraught with extensive epistemologies and has diverging sets of definitions in various academic fields, the conceptualised understanding I deploy in this study demands clarification. Religion is a generic term describing a 'heterogeneous universe of phenomena' (Brubaker, 2015, p. 3) with numerous dimensions and wide-ranging implications at the level of both individual and collective identity. The now-famous model of Ninian Smart (1991) views religion as a type of worldview consisting of various dimensions (the doctrinal, the mythic, the ethical, the ritual, the experiential, the material and the social). These categories are, of course, overlapping and contain within them a multitude of elements that attest to the complexities of religious phenomena. However, rather than applying a pre-set model with which to investigate religion in the trajectories of Syrian refugees, I approach the term in a grounded and empirically nuanced way, leaving it open to investigation through the narrating practices of the participants. Hence, I

sometimes employ the indefinite term ‘religious issues’ as a catch-all for the multiple ways in which people create meaning and discursively relate to ‘processes whereby certain things are counted as religious’ (Beckford, 2003, p. 3).[11] This approach may be aligned with what Afdal (2013) has termed the ‘bits and pieces’ of discursive processes in which religion is subject to ever-changing interpretations (p. 15).

As I have chosen to explore the role of religion in the interrelationship between the individual and the sociocultural context, I adopt Baucal and Zittoun’s (2013) description of religion as a comprehensive system of cultural and symbolic resources through which human experience and meaning-making are orientated and discursively framed. As such, we may see religious elements used in identification processes for individuals and groups alike, whether it means to ‘support one’s sense of continuity, maintain one’s sense of belonging, [or] regulate one’s relationship to others’ (Baucal & Zittoun, 2013, p. 6). Additionally, the study is placed within the domain of ‘lived religion’ (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008) in that it concerns itself with ‘ordinary people’ and ‘everyday life’, as opposed to the more institutional and doctrinal aspects of religion (Ammerman, 2016, pp. 7-9). The personalised dimension of how religion is experienced or perceived is thus of compelling value when investigating empirical variations within the stories of Syrian refugees. The field of lived religion encompasses a multidimensional approach in which cognitive, emotional, spiritual, sociopolitical, existential, embodied and discursive aspects can be further explored. Religion, as a concept, is thus left open to an organic interpretation as seen through the encounters, experiences and discursive practices relayed by both the religious and secular participants of this study.

It should be mentioned, however, that, although applying an everyday take on the lived dimension of religion in Syrian testimonies, this study views these realities as situated in *extraordinary* settings rather than in the trajectories of day-to-day

[11] What follows from this constructionist approach is to dismiss a sui generis position towards religion. Instead, the emic understanding of religion as relayed by participants is analysed in etic terms, making religious issues – in line with any other sociocultural phenomena – objects for critical inquiry.

normalcy. As shown in the three articles, religion-related issues are mirrored against the backdrop of war, displacement and refugeehood, pointing to a complex and contested landscape of religious heterogeneity in times of turmoil. Stories range from inter-religious dialogue and coexistence to inter- and intra-relational tensions, violence and sectarianism. Stories may simultaneously convey religion as a profound meaning-making framework and a source of resilience and existential hope, as well as a component of intergroup conflict, civil war and forced displacement. Hence, when probed against the plurality of voices and experiences of Syrian refugees, these (dis)empowering, ambiguous and disputed aspects of religion must be included in order to gain analytical depth and understanding.

2.2.6 Identification processes

Another critical concept utilised in this study is that of *identity*. When examining the contexts and trajectories in which both individuals and groups conceive, negotiate and defend their identity or self-understanding, I adopt a constructionist position that highlights change, contextualisation and social interaction as constitutive elements of identity (Bauman, 2004, 2011; Baumann, 1999; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996). Conceptually, identity is 'a dialectical process in which individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others' (Korte & van Liere, 2017, p. 4). Contingent upon time and place, representations of identity involve 'an ongoing construing of differences and similarities between "us" and "them" according to multiple markers such as gender, politics, arts, ethnic origin, and indeed: religion' (Korte & van Liere, 2017, p. 4). Identity comes in many forms and from many sources, indicating both individual uniqueness and sameness through group membership. This results in the term seeming to be contradictory and difficult to grasp, and even questionable as an analytical category (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). However, the concept is inescapable when discussing topics of culture, religion, ethnicity, migration and conflict (Demmers, 2017, p. 20).

In sociocultural research, most scholars have moved away from an essentialised understanding of identity as something of a prefixed and stable core of the self, or as defined representations of religious, ethnic or cultural affiliations. Rather, what has become a prevailing view, and one adopted by this study, is to approach

identity as something ‘never complete, always in process’ (Hall, 1990). Hence, I use the term ‘identification processes’ to signal these dynamic and continuously shifting dimensions of identity constructions. Such a view is compatible with this study’s focus on the lived dimension and the indefinite nature of narrative identity as seen in refugee testimonies. For this purpose, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) offer an apt characterisation of identity as a phenomenon that manifests itself individually and collectively through cognitive means, discourses and social practices. They approach identity not merely as an analytical category, but also as a category of practice; in other words, as an ‘everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors’ (2000, p. 5). However, again, it is important to underline that the everyday dimension of this particular research is set against the extraordinary circumstances of war, displacement and refugeehood, thus demanding a deeper understanding of how identity feeds into conflictual processes and vice versa.

In times of conflict, concepts such as religion, ethnicity, nationhood and language – the four very ‘basic sources and forms of social, cultural and political identification’ (Brubaker, 2013, p. 3) – tend to rise more acutely to the surface. Reflected in both felt and imagined challenges at the macro and micro levels of society, such tensions may severely affect identity formation and politicise relations between the majority and the minority, as well as between various ethno-religious groups. Experiences of uncertainty and upheaval may thus motivate individuals and groups to secure their identities, demarcating boundaries in terms of in-group and out-group belonging (Demmers, 2017; de Fina & Tseng, 2017; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; Seul, 1999). Notably, in religion-related conflicts, patterns of identification and dis-identification may enhance the framing of differences, potentially legitimising violence (Brubaker, 2015; Demmers, 2017; van Liere, 2009, 2011). On the other hand, religion can just as well inform, validate and sustain moral values and peaceful coexistence, endorsing unifying identification processes (van Liere, 2009).

This study seeks to move beyond homogenised depictions of identities by looking at individual expressions of ambiguity, disparity and contradiction inherent in Syrian refugee stories. No less than people in general, refugees do not conform to one-dimensional identities that define personal or group affiliations. Rather, migratory

experiences lead refugees to engage in a plurality of identity discourses in which they 'constantly build, reinvent, synthesise, or even collage identities from multiple sources and resources, often lacing them with deep ambivalence' (Benmayor & Skotnes, 1994, p. 15). Embedded in this view lies an imperative to avoid over-essentialising the role of religious identities for all refugees at all times (Beaman et al., 2017; Eghdamian, 2016). For many Syrians, ethno-religious identities may be significant but are usually not considered an all-encompassing aspect of a person's social being. As discussed by Rabo (2012), '[c]lass background, region or place of origin, profession, clan or kin group and political affiliations are equally important in how Syrians present themselves and in how they classify others' (p. 83).

2.2.7 Forced displacement and trajectories

Migration is a cross-border social phenomenon that spans not only national and geographical but also cultural, religious and symbolic boundaries. As a liminal category, migration may be defined as 'the material and existential condition of being at the borderland, in-between, in transit' (La Barbera, 2015, p. 10). Because migration is a generic term that encompasses any type of population movement, a migrant can be anything from a voluntary worker to a displaced refugee, thus covering a multitude of causes, individual determinations as well as political designations concerning human mobility.[12] This thesis is concerned with *forced displacement*, a sub-category of migration that indicates the movement of people who have been forced to flee as a result of armed conflict, civil war and violence.[13] I contend that conflict-induced displacement represents a different type of category within the broader phenomenon of migration. This implies that religion and religious identification processes ought to be studied within a different type of conceptual framework, more sensitively tuned toward the coerced nature of

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[12] According to International Organization for Migration (IOM), migration is defined as the 'movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification'. IOM, Key Migration Terms: http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms.

[13] Displacement covers both internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as refugees who have crossed international borders. IOM, Key Migration Terms: https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#Displacement.

ruptured life courses. Such a focus notwithstanding, it is important to note that contemporary migration patterns are complex and less rigidly definable (Leurs et al., 2020; Mavelli & Wilson, 2017; McDowell, 2013, 68; Odden, 2018; Vigil & Abidi, 2018). As is the case with the Syrian refugee crisis, there can be no doubt that vicissitudes caused by war are a dominant driver for displacement. Nevertheless, migration-determining aspects on an individual level move along a dynamic spectrum between push-and-pull factors, blurring the lines between previously clear-cut understandings of forced vs voluntary migration (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018; Odden 2018). Hence, this study adheres to the term 'refugees and other migrants' to reflect the nature of 'mixed flows' and the movement of people between categories across time and space (Carling, 2015; Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

The term *trajectory* is here deployed as a description of the various stages entailed in movements of displacement. It cuts into the parameters of time and space, impacting and shaping refugee journeys. The thesis addresses the temporal trajectories in three separate, yet interrelated stages: the time of pre-war Syria; the period of the revolution and civil war; and the phase of escape and flight into refugeehood. Additionally, because migration is both 'a future-oriented and backward-looking process' (Pine, 2014, p. 595), the study approaches the past, present and future as crucial temporal scales that critically affect narrative expressions of memory and imagination. In terms of spatial trajectories, the study addresses spaces and places that impact Syrian refugee journeys, whether these are located geographically within or outside Syria or refer to metaphors that describe symbolic locations. Thus, despite the seemingly de-territorialised, fluid and boundless connotations of transnational migration, individual life stories are viewed as temporally and spatially situated, embedded in both real and imaginary worlds of reference (Dahinden, 2010; Eastmond, 2007; Hardwick, 2015; Knott & Vasquez, 2014). Hence, when tracing refugee realities through time and space, trajectories point not merely to physical movement, but also to existential and symbolic forms of mobility. As such, trajectories form a transformative lens through which various changes, adaptations, resistance and (dis)continuities can be captured and analysed.

The key concepts we have discussed and clarified in this chapter will reoccur throughout the synopsis of this dissertation. Some will be discussed in relation to methodological concerns, whereas others will cut into ethical reflections. Additionally, since all of the three articles deploy these terms in variable ways, they will be subject to further contextualisation when the research results are presented and discussed in Chapter 6 and 7.

Chapter 3: Syria – A history of coexistence and conflict

This chapter will address a few historical aspects that can serve to shed light on the tragedies of Syria's turbulent present. Although the scope of this section is inconclusive regarding the rich and epic history of Syria, it is nonetheless vital to provide some historical background to understand the dramatic turning points that occurred in 2011 and onwards. In the words of Moubayed (cited in the preface of Reilly, 2019), '[n]one of Syria's current problems were born yesterday' but are rather profoundly entrenched in history. Countering the negative image of a country in crisis, it may also be inferred that the seeds required to envision a more peaceful future have roots that stretch into the past. Hence, in Syria, manifestations of both conflict and coexistence have long precedents in the archives of history. In the following sub-section, we will first acquaint ourselves with a short introduction to Syria's ancient historical legacy (2.1), before accounting for the rich ethno-religious mosaic that has comprised the country's demography for centuries (2.2). The four remaining sub-sections will concentrate on developments in recent history, from the inauguration of the first Assad rule in 1970 to today's contemporary scene. The subjects that will be covered are life under authoritarian rule (2.3), the revolutionary call of the Arab Spring and the descent into civil war (2.4), and the resulting Syrian refugee crisis (2.5).

3.1 Syria's ancient legacy

Present-day images of Syria tend to be wholly dominated by chaos, destruction, extremism, terror, suffering and loss. Engulfed by years of civil strife and regional proxy war, it requires both imagination and memory, as well as a keen historical interest to look back and beyond the ruined remains of a devastated country. Although easily forgotten, few places in the world can boast more culturally rich and ancient history than the regional area of Syria. Indeed, the region's archaeology

spans Palaeolithic remains dating back to 800,000 BCE[14] to the many great empires, dynasties and caliphates from the third millennium BCE. This history reads like 'a greatest hits of the ancient, classical, medieval, and Islamic eras' according to Malek (2017, p. 5), and places Syria amid the 'cradle of civilisations'. Thus, the country bears the footprints of the Akkadians, Sumerians, Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Israelites, Arameans, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Muslims, Crusaders and Mongols. For the past five centuries, these ancient reigns have been followed by Ottoman rule, the European colonial powers, and national independence. Scattered throughout Syria, architectural remnants attest to this dense historical legacy, many of which are listed as unique World Heritage sites.[15] Regrettably, during the past ten years of war and political instability, all of these and numerous other places have suffered significant damage due to direct shelling, widespread looting and iconoclasm.[16]

For centuries, Syria and its people have belonged to what has been known as *Bilad al-Sham* ('the land of Sham'), which stretched over a vast geographical region comprising present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and southern Turkey (McHugo, 2014; Reilly, 2019). In Western usage, this same area is often referred to as the Levant, the Fertile Crescent or Greater Syria, heralded for its many civilisational discoveries with far-reaching consequences for human development.[17] Today, many Syrians apply the term *al-Sham* to the city of Damascus exclusively, historically known as the cultural and political centre of

[14] http://www.kochi-tech.ac.jp/akazawa/english/body.html
[15] UNESCO has added six sites in Syria to the World Heritage List: the ancient cities of Aleppo, Bosra and Damascus; the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria; the castles of Crac de Chevalier and Qal'at Salah El-Din; and the caravan city of Palmyra in the Syrian desert (https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/sy).
[16] The devastation of Syria's cultural heritage has been documented both on the ground and through satellite imaging, attesting to what UNESCO has named cultural 'war crimes' (http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1620). Extremist Islamist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have targeted the buildings and artefacts of other religious communities in particular, as well as sites dating back to pre-Islamic times (https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/special-topics-art-history/arches-at-risk-cultural-heritage-education-series/endangered-heritage-europe-west-asia/a/cultural-heritage-at-risk-syria).
[17] Examples range from innovations in agriculture (irrigation, domestication of animals and plants) to culture and communication (alphabet, writing, libraries), as well as flourishing settlements (urbanisation, administration, commerce and organised religion).

Greater Syria and also one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world (Reilly, 2019). The name of Syria itself is probably connected to Assyria, which was one of the great Mesopotamian empires of the ancient Near East.[18]

Inevitably, with a country whose timeline stretches back almost to time immemorial, and whose territory has been conquered and fought over for centuries, there is a rich history of both conflict and coexistence that still reverberates in Syria today. Situated at the crossroads of various ruling empires, commercial trade and pilgrimage routes, Syria has always been home to a great mixture of people with a variety of languages, cultures and ethno-religious identities (Chatty, 2017; Reilly, 2019; Tomass, 2016). Indeed, as noted by Chatty (2017), migrations of all kinds have been at the heart of Syria for millennia, bringing people, goods, and ideas together in close proximity, fostering an exceptional tolerance for diversity. Thus, intercultural and interreligious encounters have provided Syrians with a deep-seated knowledge of living peacefully with difference. Many of the participants taking part in this research referred to this aspect as a source of pride, longing and future aspiration. In fact, it has been suggested by historians that one of the keys to safeguarding a future peace for Syria is to transcend religious and political divisions by reconnecting with this shared cultural heritage.[19] However, Syria's history is also as a scene of great cultural schisms, religion-related violence, persecution and massacres, rendering the past an ambiguous map for navigating into the future. In his book, *Fragile Nation, Shattered Land* (2019), Syriologist James A. Reilly describes these intricacies of Syria's history as something of a paradox:

> [T]he Syrian nation is a fragile one: born recently, defined arbitrarily, contested repeatedly and vulnerable to internal schism and external

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[18] *Ancient History Encyclopedia*: https://www.ancient.eu/assyria/.

[19] Amr Al-Azm (2015). The Pillaging of Syria's Cultural Heritage, *Middle East Institute*: https://www.mei.edu/publications/pillaging-syrias-cultural-heritage. See also Løland, I. (2018). Ligger Syrias håp om forsoning og brobygging i verdensarv-ruinene? *Stavanger Aftenblad*: https://www.aftenbladet.no/meninger/debatt/i/XwLx2g/Ligger-Syrias-hap-om-forsoning-og-brobygging-i-verdensarv-ruinene.

intervention. At the same time, Syrian society is resilient, with a continuous history that spans centuries. (p. 3)

3.2 The ethno-religious mosaic

The legacy of Syria's past is much endowed to its multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious character, which has powerfully shaped the country into the complex heterogeneous society we know today (Abboud, 2016; Balanche, 2018; Tomass, 2016). To accurately represent Syria's current demography is impossible due to the ongoing civil war, high death tolls and vast numbers of refugees and internally displaced people. Also, the ethno-religious make-up of the estimated 23 million pre-war residents is itself a contested issue, with numbers varying greatly in different surveys (Balanche, 2018; Hokayem, 2013; Nome, 2016; van Dam, 2017). Ethnically speaking, the majority are Arabs, while Kurds, Armenians, Turcomans, Assyrians, Yezidi and others make up the ethnic minorities. As seen in Figure 3, recent updates from the CIA World Factbook (2020) provide an estimation of the ethno-religious mosaic in the Syrian population.[20] Muslims are in the majority, cutting into different ethnic and Islamic sects. The Sunnis account for 73 per cent, whereas different Shiite minority sects comprise groups such as the Alawites, Ismailis, Druze and Imamis (16 per cent). Christians encompass the largest non-Muslim religion (10 per cent) and are further divided into a wide array of different denominations and ethnicities. The three largest denominations are the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church, followed by smaller Eastern Catholic denominations such as the Maronites, Chaldeans and Melkites (Besenyö and Gömöri, 2014; Open Doors International, 2013; Tomass, 2016).[21] Additionally, Syria is home to small Jewish communities, Romani people and different Bedouin tribes (Figure 3).

[20] CIA World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html (last updated 16 June 2020).
[21] As a result of the Syrian conflict, the Christian population may be considerably smaller than pre-war estimates. In some regions, the current numbers are as low as 4.5 per cent of the total population. Cf. Syria: Country Dossier (2018). World Watch Research, *Open Doors International*: https://www.opendoors.no/Files/Files/NO/WWL-2019-dokumenter/Landprofiler-WWL2019-Engelsk/Syria-WWL-2019-DOSSIER-December-2018.pdf.

It has been argued that, to understand the Syrian conflict, and indeed the turmoil across the Middle East, one must take into account that religious and sectarian identities are the 'basic building block[s]' of human grouping (Tomass, 2016, p. 140; see also Lewis, 1998; Pipes, 1998). While this stance may contribute to essentialising ethno-religious identities at the expense of other identity markers (Longva & Roald, 2012; Rabo, 2012), there can be no denying that instability in the region as a whole has intensified identity conflicts along sectarian lines, enabling many inter-religious fissures from the past to resurface (McHugo, 2014; Reilly, 2019; van Dam, 2017; Wimmen, 2017). A brief presentation of the groups that participated in this study will serve to reveal some of these historical and unresolved tensions.[22]

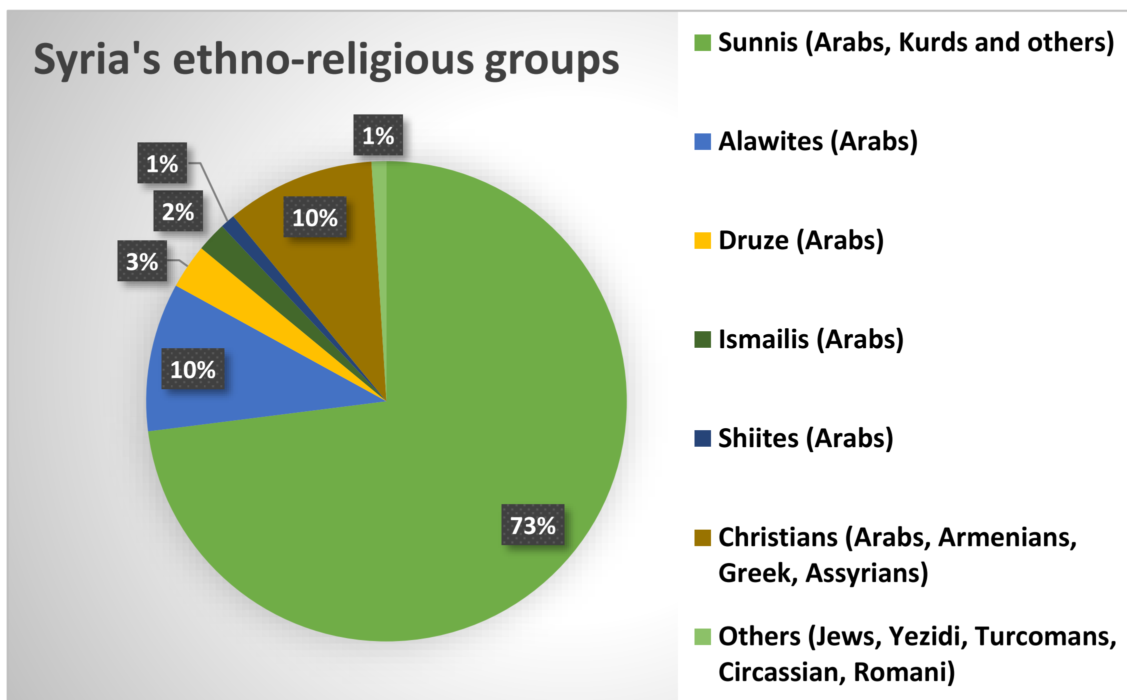

Figure 3*: An overview of the ethno-religious make-up of contemporary Syria based on mainstream estimations.*

3.2.1 Christian groups

Considered the cradle of Christianity, the region of Syria has been home to many of the oldest living Christian communities for the past two millennia. Before the

[22] Lack of space will profoundly limit this presentation, offering merely a very basic and inconclusive summary of the extremely complex history regarding the many ethno-religious groups in Syria.

advent of Islam in the 7th century, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent were Christians and remained so until the first Crusades (Tomass, 2016). Under Muslim-dominated rule, Christians have had a subjugated status as so-called *dhimmis*, with legal protection but fewer social and legal rights than Muslims.[23] Various forms of Islamisation and humiliating practices have pressured Christians throughout history, but there have been internal pressures as well. Theological differences among the different denominations have sparked rivalries and intergroup prejudice, endorsing segregation along with particular confessional identities (Tomass, 2016). At the same time, Christians have had considerable interaction among themselves, with the different churches solidifying unity in the face of external threats, fomenting bonds in minority solidarity. During the Ottoman reforms of the 19th century, new decrees relating to non-Muslim populations officially recognised legal equality for all religious subjects of the realm (Reilly, 2019). These reforms coincided with European intervention in the Middle East, with Europe allying itself with different sectarian clients and interests, fanning the flames of violent clashes and ethno-religious unrest.[24] As a result, the Christians experienced increased self-emancipation and progressed both economically and socially from this time onwards. They were, however, also the target of some of the worst acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing in modern history.[25] Christians in modern-state Syria have enjoyed a high degree of integration in society and have been instrumental in developments in the economy, politics and urban cosmopolitanism (Balanche, 2018). They have traditionally been seen to have sided

[23] In the Ottoman 'millet' system, *dhimmi* was a designated status applied to Christians, Jews and other non-Muslim religious minorities, allowing them to rule themselves in separate legal courts in return for payment of special taxes (*jizya*) (Reilly, 2019, p. 60).

[24] European interventions, although also based on the ideals of humanitarianism and principles of equality, were grounded in an Orientalist and imperialist framework, designed to 'civilise' the Ottoman Empire and side with Christian and other marginalised minorities against the Sunni majority. According to Tariq Kenney-Shawa (2016), this does not mean that the Middle East was devoid of religious conflict and sectarian violence prior to the entry of Western powers, but that European colonialism helped to reify religious identities and implement their policies along sectarian lines. These historical developments have in turn aggravated relations among different religious communities up to the present day.

[25] Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire and WWI, several attacks were directed towards Greek, Armenian, Assyrian and Maronite Christians, the worst of which occurred during the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923). Over one million Armenians were systematically massacred or forcibly deported at the hands of Ottoman Turks (Reilly 2019, p. 87).

with the Assad government during the revolution and the Syrian civil war, or else they have adopted a neutral position of non-involvement. Studies have shown, however, that political attitudes among Syrian Christians are far more complex and differentiated than assumed (Besenyö & Gömöri, 2014; Fahmi, 2018; Khoury, 2011). According to Fahmi (2018), most Christians have sided neither with the regime nor with the opposition, but have been more preoccupied with 'how to survive the risks posed by both sides' (p. 4).[26] In line with most other citizens, Christians have been severely hit by the Syrian civil war, and most vulnerably exposed to attacks perpetrated by Islamist extremist groups.[27] The jihadist ideology of ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), in particular, has increased Christians' existential fears about their future position in the country.

3.2.2 Muslim groups

After the death of the prophet Muhammad, the early history of Islam witnessed deep-rooted disputes regarding legitimate leadership and religious doctrines. Sunni and Shi'a Islam were the two main factions in these sectarian strifes, with their contested positioning resurfacing, sometimes violently, throughout history. Sunni Islam is the main confessional stance among Muslims in the Middle East, and most Islamic empires governing Syria have been based on Sunni jurisprudence.[28] Despite this longstanding dominance, the Sunnis are far from one single and unified community. Instead, there are many varieties throughout religious, ethnic, economic, political and urban/rural divisions (Balanche, 2018). According to Balanche (2018), Sunni Arab communities are 'divided between practising believers,

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[26] According to Fahmi (2018), the official stand of the Church has generally been supportive towards the ruling regime, with the notable exceptions of some religious leaders being in favour of revolution. Many younger Christians, however, have been active in peaceful demonstrations for democratic rights, and many have developed resentment towards their own Church leadership for acquiescing to the regime.

[27] According to Open Doors International, an organisation that serves persecuted Christians worldwide, virtually all Christian denominations in Syria have reported kidnappings, killings and desecration of church property during the Syrian civil war. See Vulnerability Assessment of Syria's Christians, *Open Doors International* (2013): https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/old-site-imgs-pdfs/2572679.pdf.

[28] Since the Muslim conquest of the Levant, different ethnic rulers have governed under the banner of Islam; Arabs ruled in the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, followed by the Shia-ruling Fatimids. Among the non-Arab Islamic empires are the Ayyubids (Kurdish origin), the Mamluks (Turkic and Circassian origin), the Seljuks (Turkic origin) and, finally, the Ottomans (Turkish origin) (Tomass, 2016).

atheists, secularists, followers of Sufism, quietists, and radicals who wish to impose sharia law and strict (mis)interpretations of Islam. They are further split by regional and tribal/clan loyalties' (p. 13). This heterogeneity among Sunnis is also mirrored politically in present-day Syria. Some of the economic elites have sided with the regime, have represented it, and have generally benefited from Assad's liberalisation policies (Kerrin, 2014). The more economically and politically deprived majority of working-class Sunnis, however, have seen long struggles against the government. During the internal strives of the 1970s and 1980s, political coups by the Muslim Brotherhood were brutally crushed by the regime, resulting in increased animosity along intra-sectarian lines. Sunni communities have since been closely monitored and controlled, with their voices marginalised by what many have perceived to be an oppressive and illegitimate Alawite regime (Balanche, 2018; Fildis, 2012; Lister, 2015; van Dam, 2017). Whereas Sunnis have dominated the opposition groups fighting the regime, it is essential to note that the growth of radical Islam within the rebellion has repulsed the majority of Sunni civilians. Many have continued the fight for political change on peaceful terms, either on the ground in Syria or from exile. As discussed by Nome (2016), divergent attitudes toward the uprising have also been discernible within the Sunni orthodox clergy, the *ulema*, with each side finding different sources of legitimacy in the Islamic tradition.

Shi'a Islam embraces the other central confessional stance among Muslims in Syria. Accounting for roughly 16 per cent of the population, this is a multi-factional assembly in and of itself, divided into several theologically distinct groups. The Alawis, Druzes and Ismailis are considered heterodox splinter sects from the mainstream Shiite branch known as the Imamis.[29] The largest of these groups

[29] Commonly known as the Twelvers, Imami Shiism rests on the assumption that leadership of the Muslim community has been divinely ordained from Muhammad's own family. Originating with the prophet's cousin, son-in-law and the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abu Talib, a total of 12 imams are considered to comprise the legacy of religious leadership. This branch of Shi'a Islam is the official religion of Iran, but it has had marginal followers in Syria. During the current war, however, Shi'a communities have been subject to massacres by jihadist groups, in response to the external intervention of Iran and Hezbollah that have military supported the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad (Kerrin, 2014, p. 71).

belong to the Alawite tribe and religion, consisting of a historically deprived and persecuted people who sought refuge in the mountains of northwest Syria. Shrouded in mystery, they were known for a long time as the Nusayris, who were seen to follow a syncretistic and highly secretive doctrine.[30] Mainstream Shiism and Sunni orthodoxy alike shunned them, issuing several *fatwas* that accused them of heresy (Farouk-Alli, 2014; Kramer, 1987; Talhamy, 2010; Tomass, 2016).[31] For this reason, to dispel the public verdict relating to religious deviation, the Nusayris began to call themselves the Alawis (*Alawiyyun*), i.e. supporters of Ali, thus attempting to increase their recognition within the Islamic community (Halm, 2004). Developments during and after the rule of Ottoman Empire gradually changed their official status as underdogs and heretics, paving the way for their improved stance within Shiism proper, the Arab world, and, finally, in Syrian domestic politics. These developments culminated in 1970 when, under the leadership of the Alawi president Hafez al-Assad, the Alawites received preferential treatment and have since occupied dominant positions in Syrian political and military life. Disproportionate to their size, this consolidation of power among the Alawites has provoked the Sunni majority in the country, leading to the resurfacing of old antagonisms and sectarian rhetoric (al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Kerrin, 2014; Lister, 2015; van Dam, 2017).[32] However, it is important to note that, in the current conflict, not all of the Alawite community offers unwavering support to the Syrian regime. The

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[30] Named after the alleged founder, Ibn Nusayr (d. 868), who split from the Twelver sect of Shi'a Islam and formed his own party.

[31] According to Tomass (2016), derogatory discourses on the Alawite community have been historically common among Muslim scholars and laity. 'The Alawi belief system is rejected by Shia and Sunna alike for exaggerating the place of Ali in Muslim doctrine and for believing in the reincarnation of souls' (Tomass, 2016, p. 77). For this reason, the Alawi minority sect has been persecuted and considered apostate, as well as being subjected to numerous religious fatwas (judgements) since its establishment in the 9th century. In one famous example, the medieval Sunni scholar Ibn Taymiyyah described the Nusayris as 'more disbelieving than the Jews and the Christians' (Farouk-Alli, 2014, p. 210).

[32] The most severe anti-Alawite discourses and sectarian attacks have been promulgated by the Muslim Brotherhood, until it was crushed by the regime in the wake of the Hama massacre in 1982. Many of these Sunni-resentments have resurfaced during the Syrian civil war, politicising Sunni religious identity against a perceived and delegitimised Alawite/Shiite rule (Kerrin, 2014; van Dam, 2017; al-Haj Saleh, 2017). The mixture of religious and political antagonism against the Alawis was reformulated by the influential spiritual spokesperson for the Muslim Brotherhood, Yousef al-Qaradawi, in 2013. Continuing in the medieval tradition of Ibn Taymiyya, he denounced the Alawis as 'more infidel than Christians and Jews' and called for Muslims everywhere to go to Syria and fight them (Tomass, 2016, pp. 78, 161).

pressures of showing allegiance to the government as well as socioeconomic hardships have led many Alawites to secure their livelihoods by working for the army and intelligence services, leaving them at precarious risk of revenge should the Assad regime be toppled (Khaddour, 2015). Like the Christians, the Alawites profess an existential fear of survival in case of an Islamist takeover (Balanche, 2018), as well as being subject to unfair and collectively held judgments based on their sectarian identity (Worren, 2007).

An additional group worth mentioning are the Ismailis, another offshoot of Shi'a Islam that originated around the time of the recognition of the Seventh Imam in Shiite history in the 8th century (Tomass, 2016). They have enjoyed prominent political positions throughout the history of Islam, both as rulers of the Fatimid dynasty and as the notorious Assassins who gained legendary status in medieval times (Tomass, 2016). In Syria, they have lived close to the Alawite areas, although longstanding rivalries forced many to flee to the city of Salamiya, which is currently home to most of the country's two per cent of Ismailis. During the Syrian revolutionary uprising, many Ismailis were active proponents of civil rights and political change, although the community at large was divided and supported both sides. Those participating in anti-regime protests strived for inclusion in the Sunni-dominated opposition, but many were labelled as apostates and possible regime spies.[33] Similar to other minority groups in Syria, repercussions from the regime, as well as attacks from extremist Islamist groups, have trapped the Ismailis 'between the sword of ISIS and wrath of Assad' (Meuse, 2015), forcing them to navigate a hostile climate on all sides. The official Ismaili stance in the conflict has therefore been to balance any political statements carefully and instead call for 'peace, stability and reconstruction' (al-Hallaq, 2015, p. 111)[34] in more general terms.

3.2.3 Secular and non-religious groups

A few of the participants in this PhD project have labelled themselves as secular or atheist. There is no mention of this category in the official Syrian statistics. Despite

[33] Minority Rights Group International (2018): https://minorityrights.org/minorities/ismaili-shias/
[34] Citation from a speech held by the spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims, Imam Agha Khan, in 2016: https://www.akdn.org/press-release/aga-khan-deplores-devastation-syria-calls-islands-stability

the freedom of religion stipulated in the Syrian Constitution, professing atheism or non-religious affiliation is generally not recognised in a society in which religious and sectarian affiliations are still among the prime identity markers (Malek, 2017). Nevertheless, those harbouring secular views and those rejecting religion altogether exist across the ethno-religious and political spectrum in Syria, albeit mostly in quietist forms. As recounted by one of the participants, 'we keep this to ourselves'. According to the Jesuit priest and peace activist Paolo Dall' Oglio, freedom of religion is virtually unthinkable with regard to the cultural role religion plays in everyday Syrian society. Within many of the religious traditions, he states, to abandon one's collectively held religious identity can result in 'the complete loss of one's social ties, including one's own family, friends, and acquaintances' (in Stüssi, 2012, p. 375). During the Syrian civil war, keeping non-religious beliefs private has become all the more critical as Sunni Islamist militants have violently targeted any person they perceive to be erring in their faith, including Muslim seculars and atheists.[35] Thus, with irreligiosity being considered an anomaly from different strands in Syrian society, it is not surprising that some refugees, notably in Europe, are vocalising their non-beliefs more openly than in their home country (al-Ali, 2017).

3.3 Living under authoritarian rule

In the aftermath of Syria's national independence in 1946, the country suffered a long period of political instability, including underlying tensions concerning the constitutional role of religion in state affairs. When the secular Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963, it promulgated Arab identity as the unifying source of Syrian nationality. Islamist groups, on the other hand, called for loyalty to religion and *sharia* as the source of law (Balanche, 2018). Ultimately, the disputes regarding the weight of religion in society reached a sort of compromise in the Syrian Constitution, charted by then-president Hafez al-Assad in 1973. Upholding the

[35] See: 'Syria: Situation of atheists or individuals who are perceived to be atheists; treatment by society and authorities; state protection available (2013–July 2015)'. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2015. https://www.refworld.org/docid/55debbd04.html.

secular nature of the state, in which there is no official state religion and freedom of faith is guaranteed, the Constitution also stipulates that the president must be Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation (Balanche, 2018; Bali, 2015).[36] This semi-secular nature of the Syrian regime has simultaneously been coined with political authoritarianism, vesting the president with virtually complete control over the state *and* society (Ziadeh, 2016). For over four decades, the two Assad regimes have enjoyed legitimacy on a number of issues, not least concerning the safeguarding of a sense of stability, the fight against extremists and the protection of minorities. However, according to Nome (2016), 'there can be no doubt that coercion, force, and repression have been the most important ingredients for the state's longevity' (p. 103). The political script that the Ba'athist regime imposed upon its citizens effectively suppressed other political ideas, religious differences and identity discourses (Hindy & Ghaddar, 2017; Sørvig, 2017; van Dam, 2017). For non-Arab minorities, notably the Kurds, oppressive rule under the ideological banner of Arab nationalism forbade loyalty to identities other than the national Arab identity (Allsopp, 2015; Tomass, 2016).[37] For most of the country's citizens, however, the national unity of Syria came at a cost, with the creation of a 'nation of fear' (Pearlman, 2016, p. 21) and a 'kingdom of silence' (Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami, 2016). Any dissenting voices were liable to be brutally silenced through widespread imprisonment, torture and disappearances (Abboud, 2016; Pearlman, 2016, 2017; Ziadeh, 2016). Certainly, while many people benefited from the oppressive security system, notably administrative officials who enforced its policies, privileges were few for those outside the circles of power. Indeed, in accordance with some of the participants' testimonies, a widespread culture of so-called *wasta* – an Arabic term for social networking and interpersonal connections –

[36] Based on these provisions in the Constitution, two types of judicial system exist in Syria: a secular system and a religious system. The latter is concerned only with personal status, and some of the non-Muslim groups are granted their own religious courts.
[37] According to Allsopp (2015), the autocratic Syrian state has specifically targeted the Kurds as a minority, considering them potentially threatening to the identity and security of Syria. They were subject to arabisation programmes, and many were stripped of their citizenship for decades. This led to them being 'economically, politically and socially marginalised and subject to daily discrimination and hardship' (Allsopp, 2015, p. 25).

implied that access to government services was subject to bribery and/or influences through empowered and loyal middlemen.[38]

The extensive power mechanisms exerted through the presidential authority were nowhere more visible than in the notorious intelligence services (*mukhabarat*), the eyes and ears of which were perceived to be omnipresent (Lister, 2015; McHugo, 2014; Pearlman, 2016; Wimmen, 2017).[39] Wendy Pearlman (2016) discusses how aphorisms such as 'hush, the walls have ears' (p. 21) epitomise this sense of fear among Syrians about talking politics under the pervasive surveillance of the intelligence services. Ordinary Syrians, according to McHugo (2014), knew that 'if they ever fell into their hands, they would be completely at their mercy' (p. 185). Authoritarianism in Syria was also given symbolic expressions in what Wedeen (2015) calls a 'cult of Assad' (p. 30). Spectacles of support and near worship of the president and his Ba'ath party were designed to enforce obedience, induce complicity and ensure loyalty. These measures combined have deeply penetrated the collective consciousness of Syrians, conditioning their lives and behaviour in ways that only recently have become publicly known. An emerging body of testimonial writings and literary memoirs published by Syrians in exile attest to the internalised fear of speaking up and voicing anything that could infringe upon the officially sanctioned discourse (Abouzeid, 2018; Al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Eid, 2018; Halasa et al., 2014; Khalifa, 2013; Malek, 2017; Yazbek, 2016; see also Pearlman, 2017).[40]

A common denominator in all of these writings is the domestic turbulence that culminated with the Hama massacre of 1982. Thousands of Sunni Muslims were

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[38] The social implications of *wasta* are a phenomenon throughout the Middle East, indicating all types of service provided through the means of useful connections. Consisting of both negative and positive elements (Ramady, 2016), in the Syrian context, *wasta* is generally associated with having connections with the Ba'ath Party or those in higher government positions. Seeing the term's reliance upon family or tribal ties, Alawites as well as Christian minorities have been accused by some segments of Syrian society of receiving preferential treatment due to their closer ties with the ruling regime (Tsurkov, 2019).

[39] Pearlman (2016, p. 21) discusses how aphorisms such as 'hush, the walls have ears' epitomise this sense of fear among Syrians about talking politics under the pervasive surveillance of the state.

[40] This body of literature is an invaluable surplus to academic publications in more than one way. Autobiographical and non-fictional reportages offer not merely a dynamic opportunity to explore contextualised processes of inclusion and exclusion, but often also provide more vivid insights into what it means to be displaced and exiled.

killed in the conflict between the Ba'ath Party and the Muslim Brotherhood, after which Sunni Islam and religion, in general, were kept tightly controlled (Al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Lister, 2015). According to Ziadeh (2016), 'Syrian society has not overcome this national disaster' (p. 19). Instead, for different reasons, these historical incidents have made a lasting imprint on the public memories of Sunnis and minorities alike, inflicting scars that have been reopened under the current conflict (Lefèvre, 2013; Pearlman, 2016). As discussed in my first article, the era of authoritarianism is not only negatively portrayed in Syrian refugee stories. Some refer to this period as peaceful and interculturally convivial, even paradisiacal when compared to the following years of war. However, there is no denying that deep historical tensions lurk beneath the surface in most of the testimonies shared (Løland, 2019a). According to van Dam (2017), it was inevitable that some of these tensions would 'burst out into the open' (p. 63). As it turned out, the Syrian Arab Spring was to become their point of ignition.

3.4 Revolution and civil war

When President Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafez, in 2000, there were hopes for a new era of political reform and freedom in Syria. Popularly known as the 'Damascus Spring', the immediate period of his presidency motioned a movement of democratic activists who called for significant and long-awaited changes that could benefit all Syrians.[41] These hopes were soon to be crushed, however, and many civil rights campaigners were imprisoned and tortured. Instead, this spring became the start of a long 'winter of discontent',[42] not to be reawakened until a new spring saw the dawn of light ten years later. The revolutionary winds of the Arab Spring that swept over the Middle East during late 2010 and early 2011 drew different responses among the Syrian population. Some saw promises of a

[41] The principal political objectives of this movement concerned a multiparty democracy with an emphasis on public freedoms and the lifting of the emergency law; freedom of speech, assembly and press; the release of political prisoners; the granting of economic rights to all citizens; and an end to the special status of Ba'ath as the leading party in society and the state. See also Carnegie Middle East Center (2012): https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en

[42] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 2005: Damascus spring becomes winter of discontent: https://www.smh.com.au/world/middle-east/damascus-spring-becomes-winter-of-discontent-20050302-gdku6k.html

nascent utopia and an exuberant turning point that would breathe life and activism into a nation of oppressed people. Others perceived the uprisings as a dystopic nightmare severely destabilising life as they knew it. The majority opted for a wait-and-see approach, with few daring to envision that protests could help to dethrone the authoritarian and long-standing regime in Syria. Thus, as discussed in my second article, Syrians' perceptions reveal a highly fragmented and contested mirror image of what took place in 2011 and onwards (Løland, 2019b).[43]

There is a broad scholarly consensus that the demonstrations initiating the Syrian revolution were peaceful and non-sectarian (Kahf, 2013; Pinto, 2017; van Dam, 2017; Wimmen, 2017). They were a non-violent and primarily civic uprising that cut across religion, sect and ethnicity and which propagated unity and inclusiveness in the fight for freedom.[44] A counter-narrative presented by the government, however, labelled the demonstrations as a 'foreign conspiracy', consisting of 'terrorists' and 'armed gangs' (Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami, 2016, p. 40). This was a carefully drafted master narrative that purported to present Syria as a victim of forces determined to sow sectarian strife and incite violence that would destabilise the nation. Integral to the shaping of this narrative was to strengthen the legitimacy behind the military's responses and to scare people, particularly the minorities, into siding with the regime (Balanche, 2018; Stolleis, 2015; Wimmen, 2017). Eventually, however, it was the ever-escalating violent actions by the Syrian regime and security forces that caused the revolutionary fire to spread at a pace hitherto unthinkable in a country in which public gatherings were forbidden.[45] The regime's brutal onslaught against the civilian demonstrations prompted organisations such

[43] See also Løland, I. (2019). Det syriske vårofferet, *Vårt Land*: http://www.verdidebatt.no/innlegg/11751603-det-syriske-varofferet.

[44] Human rights activist Jouejati (2015) summarised what she identifies as the main objective for the protest movement: 'the right for all Syrians to live in peace and dignity; to freely practice their religious and political beliefs; to be equal citizens before the law'. See https://newint.org/features/special/2015/09/01/what-do-syrians-want.

[45] Ever since the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963 and consolidated the Syrian Emergency Law, any public gatherings or signs of political dissent have been outlawed and coercively repressed by the two Assad-regimes (Al-Haj Saleh, 2017).

as Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2011) to qualify the atrocities as 'crimes against humanity'.

By mid-2011 and onwards, a host of new domestic and foreign political and military groups emerged to counter the attacks by the regime, gradually turning the conflict into a full-scale internationalised civil war.[46] While Islamists of different leanings attempted to exert their influence on the direction of the revolution (Kahf, 2013; Lister, 2015), non-violent political bodies struggled to navigate an increasingly militarised conflict. Whereas the regime drew powerful support from Iran, Russia, the Lebanese Hezbollah and numerous Shiite paramilitary groups, the rebel groups received political and military support from the West as well as from Sunni-led governments of the Middle East (Lister, 2015; Pinto, 2017). What became evident in this progressively complex landscape of competing forces and battles was that all parties in the conflict mobilised sectarian discourses and stimulated a repertoire of grand narratives in which the 'religious other' was constructed and framed (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016). Thus, casting the external other as an existential threat became a powerful tool to assemble around religious identities and gain legitimacy for the use of violence. As already mentioned, this religiously tinted aspect of the Syrian conflict has drawn scholars toward both primordialist and instrumentalist explanations, with some claiming that tensions arose from historical and ancient hatreds, while others claimed that opposing actors fermented sectarianism for political purposes (Mavelli & Wilson, 2017). As will be shown, mainly in Article 2, I apply a narrative identity approach that goes beyond this debate by seeking to

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[46] Syrian opposition groups consisted first of local protest-organising committees, many of which were later united in the Syrian National Council (est. 2011) or in the rival organisation of the Syrian National Coalition (est. 2012). There were also political bodies calling for non-violent and democratic changes that attempted to unite activists within and outside Syria. Among the military opposition groups, the Free Syrian Army (est. 2011) was organised by defectors from the Syrian Armed Forces to defend civilian protesters and affect government change. Considered a moderate organisation drawing Western support, poor leadership and weak organisation led many members to defect to other militant rebel forces, many of which were affiliated with Al-Qaeda or other Salafist jihadi groups. By 2015, as many as 60 per cent of the rebels could be classified as Islamic extremists (See https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/12/20/460463173/60-percent-of-syrian-rebels-share-islamic-state-ideology-think-tank-finds). The two most influential groups among the jihadists have been the Al-Nusra Front (later a leading member of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) and ISIL, the latter establishing a self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria during 2014. Controlling a third of the territories of Syria, ISIL became the most dominant opposition force until it was declared defeated in 2019.

understand the processes of contested and contesting identities as dynamic expressions of discursive practices.

The civilian toll of these and other deteriorating developments during the Syrian war has been immense. As mirrored in the stories of Syrian refugees, inflammatory and sectarian vocabulary was experienced by, as well as directed against, people in their everyday lives, whether Sunni Muslims, Shiites, Alawites or Christians. However, there is general and overwhelming evidence that it is the war crimes that have affected Syrians the most and which have caused horror and bloodshed on massive scales. For almost a decade, scenes of utter devastation, destruction and chaos have been supported by numerous reports documenting violations of human rights and international humanitarian law at the hands of all parties in the conflict. The list of violations is long, but they include severe and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, inhumane treatment, kidnappings and summary executions, torture, rape, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, the use of chemical and other unlawful weapons, destruction and pillaging of property, blockades, mass deportations and the restriction of civilians' ability to flee hostilities.[47]

Added to these violations are the staggering death tolls, the numbers of which are contested and difficult to determine due to lack of confirmed information. Figures by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights suggest that the total number of casualties from 2011–2019 may be as many as almost 600,000.[48] Recently, increased attention has also been directed against all those people who are missing as a result of the Syrian war. Since 2011, more than 100,000 Syrians have forcibly disappeared, the majority by the Syrian regime (Nome, 2020). Forcible disappearance has been used as a powerful weapon of war since 'it makes its

[47] See for example reports and documentation from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, sanctioned through the United Nations Human Rights Council: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx. See also the International Observatory of Human Rights, March 2018: https://observatoryihr.org/news_item/overwhelming-evidence-war-crimes-syria/ and Human Rights Watch *Syria World Report 2019*: www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria.
[48] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2020) places the number of documented deaths at 380,000 in addition to over 200,000 casualties who are believed to be undocumented: https://www.syriahr.com/en/152189/.

victims disappear, it makes them invisible, and it makes them unseen'.[49] It also puts the families of those who have disappeared in an emotional and informational limbo, creating a very demanding situation that also reverberates among people who have sought refuge in exile. Some participants who took part in this study, for example, are still waiting to hear news of their missing relatives and loved ones.

It is impossible to account for all the factors feeding into one of the most complex and multidimensional conflicts in modern times; nor can they be sufficiently described in this thesis. A timeline showing the different phases of the Syrian conflict will provide more detailed information, as shown in Appendix 4. However, the key purpose behind the historical presentation of this chapter has been to provide not the full but *some partial* and crucial components behind the Syrian uprising and war, the resulting refugee crisis as well as their implications for the civilian population. This will help us to understand the background of the research problem posed in this thesis and delineate some contextual features from which to analyse the entanglements of religion and identity discourses in conflict-induced displacement trajectories.

3.5 The Syrian refugee crisis

To conclude this chapter, we will briefly address some of the numbers attesting to the magnitude of the Syrian displacement crisis in contemporary migration history. It has been described as an unprecedented humanitarian disaster and 'the worst refugee crisis since World War II' (Amnesty International, 2015). As the global number of forcibly displaced people has continued to increase, Syria has topped statistics with the highest number of displaced people in the world for nine years in a row.[50] Recent estimates suggest that, by the end of 2019, nearly 6.5 million

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[49] Citation from Y. Fedda, director of the film *Ayoni*, on an online seminar hosted by The Syria Campaign on 23 July 2020: https://www.facebook.com/TheSyriaCampaign/videos/618659455434019.

[50] At the end of 2019, there were globally 79.5 million refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people, an increase of nearly 40 million people since 2012. (https://www.statista.com/chart/18423/forcibly-displaced-worldwide-timeline/). The Syrian crisis has contributed vastly to these increased numbers, ranking the highest cause of contemporary population movement: (https://www.statista.com/statistics/272999/refugees-by-source-country/).

people had been internally displaced within Syria, and over 6.6 million people were registered as refugees worldwide.[51]

The large-scale exodus of Syrians fleeing atrocities along precarious routes only received worldwide attention when an influx of refugees reached Europe in 2015. The haunting image of the three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, who had drowned in offshore Turkey with his mother and brother became a catalyst to mobilise around the merciless plight of Syrians and other migrant populations.[52] Until then, the Syrian refugee crisis had been relatively low-level news, except for the challenges it posed to European border security and refugee policies (Beaman et al., 2017).[53] Today, although refugees no longer appear in the headlines, the war in Syria continues to rage, the plight endures and the humanitarian crisis has worsened. This is especially the case for Syrians who have been internally displaced and endure dire conditions in refugee camps.[54] Since as recently as 2019, new waves of displacement caused by bombing and indiscriminate shelling have caused an additional one million people to be uprooted from their homes in the north-western region of Idlib, fleeing to confined and insecure zones with little or no access to humanitarian assistance. Additionally, the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the protection needs of Syrians. It now poses a severe threat to public health in overcrowded camps and a country already demolished by nearly ten years of war. [55]

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[51] 5.5 million Syrians live in neighbouring countries and an additional 1.1 million have moved to Europe and North America. See the following data sheets on recent Syrian displacement numbers: https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria; https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria; https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/.

[52] See Løland, I. (2015). Et hav av makt og avmakt, *Stavanger Aftenblad*: http://www.mhs.no/uploads/2015-09-10-et-hav-av-makt-og-avmakt.pdf. According to the Missing Migrant Project by IOM, nearly 20,000 individuals lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean between 2014 and 2019 (https://missingmigrants.iom.int/).

[53] In 2016, the EU brokered a deal with Turkey to curb irregular crossings of migrants and refugees into Greece in return for sharing some of Turkey's burden in meeting the needs of Syrian refugees. The deal received criticism for creating policies that left Syrians 'languishing in legal and social limbo with insufficient rights' (Rygiel et al., 2016). See also UNCHR (2020), Syria Refugee Crisis Explained: https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#When%20did%20the%20Syrian%20refugee%20crisis%20begin

[54] *Refugee fatigue?*: https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2019/6/24/refugee-fatigue.

[55] See Middle East Institute (2020), Syria is facing a COVID-19 catastrophe: https://www.mei.edu/publications/syria-facing-covid-19-catastrophe.

It can be difficult to understand the magnitude of suffering behind these numbers, let alone imagine for ourselves the ruptured life courses that refugee status entails. It is important to remember, however, that, behind the staggering statistics, ordinary people like ourselves are filled with unique life experiences and dreams for the future. They are 'mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, with the same hopes and ambitions as us – except that a twist of fate has bound their lives to a global refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale'.[56] With this human perspective in mind, it is also important to scrutinize the narrative references which the term 'refugee crisis' holds in common discourse. Rather than descriptive of a crisis for refugees, the term is often associated with its problematic infliction on European nation-states. As will be shown in this thesis, such a perception of the Syrian refugee crisis raises pivotal ethical questions and risks undermining political rights established under international law. Thus, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that refugees do not represent the crisis. Instead, it is the narratives we tell about it that may limit balanced portrayals. Indeed, narrative matters, as poignantly expressed by Ali, a Syrian refugee journalist. Whereas, in his view, media ought to present all sides of a story, 'one side is conspicuously missing from coverage of refugees: that of refugees themselves' (Ali, 2020).[57] If we turn the tables and allow refugees to tell their own stories, we can enhance our understanding and realise that, although none of us can entirely determine the course of our own lives, storytelling can at least give us a sense of defining their meaning (Jackson, 2002). This study attempts to lend an ear to some of these stories and provide space for a polyvocal narrative spectrum as testified by 28 individual Syrians who fled their homeland and found refuge in Norway.

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[56] The quote is by author K. Hosseini, featuring in the campaign 'We stand together #WithRefugees,' launched by the UNHCR in 2016: https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/57625e2e4/stars-ask-you-to-stand-withrefugees.html.

[57] From an interview with S. Ali in *Evening Standard* (2020), 'Refugees like me rarely get to tell our side: what everyone gets wrong about the "refugee crisis": https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/refugees-like-me-rarely-get-to-tell-our-side-what-everyone-gets-wrong-about-the-refugee-crisis-a4533551.html?fbclid=IwAR1d15X4JnoF9qFOtiLcalyaAF9vvEwBvNgXre01MlwT58WqYobdS8hFdBM.

Chapter 4: Methodology

A methodology comprises the whole map with which any research journey is undertaken. It not only offers a meta-perspective of 'the world' the research project sets out to explore and the lenses through which the researcher perceives and interprets that world, but it is also concerned with the routes taken to circumnavigate the map. I thus consider a methodology to be a comprehensive feature of this research project as it includes the broader epistemological framework of my understanding as well as the more minute details of the methods of data collection and analysis I employed. Mapping the research journey implies a retrospective view of the research process as a whole, attempting to provide academic reasoning for all choices, considerations and (re)directions made along the way. It includes both ethical awareness and self-reflexivity, by which I critically reflect on my role as a researcher within the research setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research, in particular, is characterised by its flexible nature and lack of fixed standards (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), making it all the more necessary to explain the course and underlying assumptions of the research process.

Any chosen methodology is intimately connected to a research topic and should be a thoughtful and tailored response to the questions to which answers are sought. When revisiting the research problem and its unfolding questions, the purpose of this thesis is to voice the experiences of a sample of Syrian refugees and enhance our understanding of how they discursively narrate and negotiate the intersection between conflict, religion and identity in their displacement trajectories. The exploratory research design outlined in the introductory chapter calls for a type of methodology that dynamically engages with these questions and provides a basis for theoretical responses to the empirical material. Thus, this chapter will begin by looking at the research framework and accounting for the qualitative, constructionist and narrative paradigms and perspectives that are central to how the research was conducted (4.1). The chapter will then outline the data collection methods (4.2) and the ethical approval obtained to conduct qualitative research (4.3). The following sub-sections will account for the collaboration with a research

assistant (4.4) and the more practical steps taken to sample and recruit the research participants (4.5). Finally, the chapter will address the analytical processes of transcribing, coding and comparing the material thematically (4.6).

4.1 Research framework

Epistemological and methodological considerations always implicitly inform each scientific community. Together, these components comprise a research paradigm, or a guiding framework, which advises on the ways in which theories and methods are applied in different research designs (Hjelm, 2014; Lincoln, 2002). There are three distinct features of this research design's framework that should be theorised at the outset. The first entails the qualitative methodology that informs the research and how it is carried out. The second feature deals with the philosophical assumptions of how knowledge is constructed. For this research, a pragmatic constructionist paradigm was chosen as the most viable epistemological framework. Third, a sociocultural rendering of narratives is considered a particularly useful way for capturing the interdependence and ambivalence of the subjective and the social in religious identity discourses. In the following, I will argue for the applicability of these features in the disciplinary fields of migration research and religious studies.

4.1.1 Qualitative methodology

When studying refugees' lived experiences, subjectivities, identities, meanings, interpretations and discourses, a qualitative methodology is an essential framework for both religious studies and migration research. As reflected in the research questions, an exploratory qualitative research design fits well with this study's focus on understanding and interpreting the experiential realm of the sample of Syrian refugees, including the variable ways in which issues of religion and identity play into their migration trajectories. This rationale extends to a deeper understanding of how spatial and temporal contexts shape, transform or otherwise influence identity constructions among individuals and groups.

Traditionally, qualitative research has been juxtaposed with quantitative research, with the latter being more concerned with hypothesis testing, the gathering of

numerical data and the quantification of information into generalisable patterns (Hammersley, 2008). Whereas quantitative research offers valuable insights through surveys and statistical analyses, qualitative research is more preoccupied with *meaning-making*, i.e. how meaning is ascribed to a social phenomenon or human condition by individuals or groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The aim is not necessarily to look for generalisations but to generate a deep cultural understanding of the social phenomena in question. In migration studies, however, there has been increased use of mixed methods, which has given both quantitative and qualitative data space to shed light on various aspects of migration processes and experiences (Bose, 2012; Carling, 2012; Castles, 2012). Without placing one methodological practice over another, the basis of this research is, as previously mentioned, firmly set within a qualitative framework. With an emphasis on discovery and interpretation, one of the critical tenets of a qualitative methodology is to 'enter the world of others' (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 80) and to 'make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). As such, a qualitative methodology can provide a more in-depth understanding by examining human behaviour, cultural contexts, structural processes and historical change (Grbich, 2013; Mason, 2002).

These initial reflections notwithstanding, it should be noted that, prior to undertaking the position of PhD researcher, I was less acquainted with qualitative research. As a historian of religion, specialising in the history and culture of the Middle East, I was schooled in the more traditional and phenomenological methods of humanities, which, in the 1990s, were more rigidly separated from qualitative practices in social scientific research. After graduating, however, I noticed that an emerging 'qualitative turn' introduced religious scholarship to a whole new range of methods and interdisciplinary approaches. In my opinion, this has served to broaden and dynamically enhance the academic study of religion. Thus, for me personally, taking on a qualitative mantle and delving into its theoretical underpinnings, as well as submitting to the formula of 'learning by doing', has been

a highly rewarding, albeit steep, learning curve in the PhD project.[58] I have, therefore, come to share Mason's (2002) regard for some of the many benefits of engaging qualitatively in empirical research:

> Qualitative researching is (…) is a highly rewarding activity because it engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter. Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate. (p. 1)

4.1.2 Constructionist epistemology

We have seen that meaning and interpretation comprise vital features of the qualitative methodology. Some would regard these terms as elusive and unreliable when confronted with the pursuit of knowledge and 'truth' in scientific research. However, what constitutes knowledge and how we establish 'facts' are questions to which there are no definite or agreed answers in the philosophy of science. In recent decades, many intellectual paradigms have questioned the 'value-neutral' and 'objective' position of positivist science, in which social reality is reduced to what can be observed and quantitively measured (Iosifides, 2012). From a qualitative point of view, when studying the sociocultural, experiential and meaning-making realm of humans, the aim of arriving at single and definite accounts of reality appears futile, if not impossible. A turn toward a constructionist epistemology has therefore been a noticeable trend within the humanities and social sciences.

One of the basic tenets of classical constructionism is to view reality as individually and socially constructed, rendering knowledge and understanding highly contextual

[58] I am indebted to Prof. Marianne Skjortnes at VID Specialized University for organising a compulsory course on qualitative methodology during the spring of 2016. As one of the requirements for the course, I wrote a paper (unpublished) related to my own research project, entitled *Qualitative Migration Research: Constructing a Viable Methodology*' (Løland, 2016).

and situated (Berger & Luckman, 1966).[59] Rather than seeing knowledge as a product, the epistemological stance of constructionism is concerned with 'knowing as a process' (Ültanir 2012, pp. 196-197). We can view this paradigm shift as a significant sign of the (postmodern) times, in which the era of globalisation, in particular, is increasingly perceived as complex, fluid and multidimensional (Scholte, 2005; Korte & van Liere, 2017; Bauman, 1998). Indeed, as noted by Grbich (2013), most 'forms of qualitative research now have an established postmodern position' (p. 8). This position is characterised by the view that reality is socially and culturally constructed and that finding and understanding the multiple layers of meaning, rather than establishing claims of 'truth', is the primary task of the researcher. Given that any gaze on reality is filtered through a variety of lenses and situated in time and place, a common claim in constructionist theory is therefore that there can be 'no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 7).

Central to constructionist thought is the concept of *discourse*, in which language is considered to be one of, if not *the* primary vehicle through which any understanding of the human world is made possible. How we think of ourselves or society at large is thus considered to be a socially constituted practice, shaped by our linguistic interactions with other people (Hjelm, 2014). This view has triggered some scholars to criticise constructionism as another form of reductionism, as it closes the window to realities beyond the context of (language) interaction between the researcher and the researched (Cruickshank, 2012; Hammersley, 2008; Isosifides 2012). I agree that such a narrowing of perspective demands some caution, especially from a narrative point of view. While I believe that the immediate context of interaction is essential, narratives are discursive practices that may transcend these boundaries, primarily as they reflect both real and imagined

[59] As a postmodern theoretical orientation, constructionism is sometimes divided into social constructionism and constructivism. Although closely related, the latter perspective is concerned more with how individuals cognitively construct and make sense of their world. Social constructionism, on the other hand, has a wider perspective as it includes how both individuals and groups socially construct knowledge through interaction and discourse as a social practice (Hjelm, 2014, pp. 6-7).

stories of the past in conjunction with stories of the present and future (Eastmond, 2007; Kirmayer, 2003; Pine, 2014; Swain et al., 2015; Wong, 2014). Because of migration processes, narratives move between different spaces and temporalities, calling for analytical lenses that can capture such dynamics. Indeed, Foucault's criticism of the 'impoverished idea of the real' (cited in Burke, 2019, p. 65) is a reminder to include the *imaginary* in people's storytelling as part and parcel of the social reality.

In qualitative migration research as well as in some fields of religious studies, constructionist theory has long inspired a methodology that involves in-depth interviews, ethnography, and narrative and discourse analysis. While the critical dimensions of the use of a constructionist framework in these disciplines have been remarked upon (notably, the extreme forms of relativism and the tendency to overlook extra-discursive aspects of the social world) (see Engler, 2004; Iosifides, 2012), there are also strong arguments in its favour (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Hjelm, 2014). For example, as previously mentioned, I have been inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman's (2011) notion of research as 'the construction and solving of a mystery' (p. 74). It represents a more moderate form of constructionism in which creative, dynamic and alternate encounters with the empirical reality are encouraged.

In this thesis, I adapt to constructionism, not as an ontological conviction in a strict sense but as a viable theoretical perspective that resonates with this particular study's exploratory nature. Knowledge development in empirical research, according to Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), consists of a series of constructions and reconstructions that perforate every step of the research process. From selecting a theory to defining research questions, choosing methods, sampling units of analysis, collecting data, analysing findings and presenting the research, the researcher is deeply embedded in 'construction work' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 34). In contrast to quantitative analysis, the researcher's voice and positionality, as well as her role and responsibility, are integral to this qualitative process of construction. Evocative of my own experiences, qualitative writing, according to Holliday (2016), 'becomes very much an unfolding story in which the writer

gradually makes sense, not only of her data but of the total experience of which it is an artefact' (p. 129).

This gradual sense-making also has implications for how empirical data is understood and conceptualised. 'Let the data speak for themselves' is an utterance we hear with some frequency. However, even data, as Lincoln (2002) points out, is a construct and is thus biased insofar as it is coloured by the ways and theories in which we collect, arrange and analyse them. According to Geertz (1973), 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions' (p. 9). Additionally, it may be inferred that it is not merely the researcher alone who performs all construction work. In the one-to-one encounter between the interviewer and the interviewee in life story research, both the narrator and the interpreter take part in a kind of co-construction of past events through the eyes and ears of the present (Brannen, 2013; Miller & Glassner, 2016). This type of double hermeneutics creates new layers of understanding, or 'second-order narratives' in the analysis of the research (Brannen, 2013, 1.0). However, it also places additional pressure on the researcher in terms of good ethical practice and to represent the narrative data in ways that do them justice. Ultimately, it is the researcher's own responsibility to disclose the (re)constructions inherent in the research contribution (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) and acknowledge the many ethical issues that underpin it (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012).

From this constructionist understanding, it follows that 'as meaning-making, meaning-ascribing creatures' (Lincoln, 2002, p. 8), we cannot as researchers assess our interpretations as scientifically value-free any more than we can expect the collected data to provide objectivity and truth in a traditional sense. These limitations notwithstanding, constructionism in its moderate form does not deny the fact that there is something 'out there' that exists 'objectively' and can be reported as 'findings' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 24). Indisputably, conflict and forced displacement are as real and complex features of our social world today as are people's experiences of (non)religion that are embedded in these processes. What constructionism teaches us is that making sense of these complexities is an unfolding dimension of people's discursive practices as well as imaginations. It

follows that meaning is subject to ongoing constructions and negotiations between individuals, and thus always situated and indefinite (Lindsay & Hubely, 2006). Hjelm (2014) offers an apt reminder of these aspects of constructionism that I have found useful in my narrative inquiry into Syrian refugee experiences:

> Our descriptions of the world are by definition incomplete: while we might be telling the truth and nothing but the truth, we can never tell the *whole* truth about the world […] Our discourse is therefore always partial – both in the sense of incomplete and biased – and constructs the world from a particular point of view. (p. 5. Emphasis in original)

4.1.3 Sociocultural narrative inquiry

Given my focus on the polyvocality inherent in Syrian refugee experiences, a narrative approach was chosen as a complementary feature to the qualitative and constructionist framework discussed thus far. A viable gateway into the world of others, narrative inquiry not only provided a dynamic and interactive platform for the conversational encounters between me and the participants, but also proved to be a valuable lens through which shared and contested meanings from a multiplicity of Syrian refugee voices can be analysed. In this thesis, therefore, I use narrative as both a methodological tool with which to elicit life-story trajectories and a theoretical prism through which to interpret the empirical material.

Narrative denotes 'the activity of narrating or telling a life story' (Brannen, 2013, 2.2). Storytelling is an essential aspect of humankind, and life stories are a powerful type of narrative that yields rich possibilities for understanding. If we agree with Andrews et al. (2007), that we are 'storied selves', it follows that 'our stories are the cornerstones of our identities' (p. 100). Accordingly, the identity aspect of storytelling functions as a meaning-making and discursive practice, 'within which we fashion, refashion, navigate, and construe a sense of who we are' (Bamberg & Demuth, 2016)[60]. Taking a sociocultural approach to a narrative inquiry is the same as acknowledging that identity discourses always involve a close link between the subjective and the social. Although this study has narrowed its gaze on personal

[60] See online publication: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4873065/.

narratives in Syrian refugee trajectories, there are relational, cultural and political aspects of reality that must be taken into account. Such an enlarged perspective is necessary, both in order to avoid ‘methodological individualism’ (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 162) and also to expand the parameters of our understanding. Castles (2012), for example, points out that ‘micro-level studies of specific migratory experiences […] should always be embedded in an understanding of the macro-level structural factors that shape human mobility in a specific historical situation’ (p. 8).

The so-called ‘narrative turn’ in the humanities and social sciences is very much aligned with sociocultural theory (Swain et al., 2015) and can be seen as a current within the rise of constructionism in the late 20th century (Burke, 2019). The three framing features of this research (qualitative, constructionist and narrative) are thus all significant 'turns' that are methodologically associated with sociocultural theory. From its inception, as discussed in the works of Vygostsky (1978), Bakthin (1981) and Bruner (1991), sociocultural theory posits the inseparability between the individual and the social, historical and cultural constituencies. The theory has been influential in education research and learning theories, but has also had an impact on other disciplines. In religious scholarship, for example, sociocultural dimensions are perhaps most visibly reflected in the sociological, anthropological and psychological sub-disciplines, heralding a focus on religion as complex, culturally diverse and integral to lived experiences (Gearon, 2014). In migration research, interdisciplinary approaches reveal the sociocultural nexus in migration causes and migratory trajectories, as well as in issues of integration and transnational relations (Brettel & Hollifield, 2015; Faist, 2000).

The strength of a sociocultural narrative approach in this study has been to expand knowledge of how narratives become culturally and politically shared or contested among Syrian refugees, and how they intersect with spatio-temporal trajectories over a certain time and in multiple places. Indeed, when conducting narrative research on refugees from the same country, understanding the sociocultural and political context of Syria is of the utmost importance. As shown in my three articles, given the country’s current history of war, violence and forced displacement, Syrians’ stories necessarily feed into an intricate web of narrative battles and

bridges in which issues of identity politics and religion are entangled. As such, stories are essential vehicles from which to capture broader discursive patterns concerning people's senses of identity, sameness and otherness.

4.2 Research methods

Having introduced the rationale behind the methodological approach, this sub-section will account for the strategic steps taken to gather the data material. From the very beginning of the research journey, I reflected on several methods that could carve out possible paths from which to explore the experiential realms and migratory trajectories of Syrian refugees. To hear and share Syrians' voices and stories, techniques that involved direct, personal and face-to-face encounters with the research participants were needed. I thus opted for two of the most common methods in qualitative research: in-depth personal interviews and focus group discussions (Chatrakul Na Aydhya et al., 2014; Denzin, 2006; Grbich, 2013). Arguably, the choice of methods could have been different or even expanded to include the more ethnographically orientated practice of participant observation.[61] Also, exciting options could have involved exploration through other means such as art, literature or various forms of digital information. After all, 'voices' need not only be extracted from talk and through discursive practices, but can also be powerfully explored in more creative ways.[62] Nevertheless, I found that focusing on *oral* encounters with the Syrian refugee population would centre-stage narrative voices more profoundly and help to elicit the 'heterogeneities in meaning' I was seeking (Dworkin, 2012).

Having thus decided on the two main research methods to apply in the fieldwork, I added informal conversations as a third and complementary method to the research design. Together, these three modes of data collection are a way of

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[61] As will be explained, the lack of known social spaces where exiled Syrians met (at least in the vicinity of my location in Norway) led me to omit this method from the research design.

[62] Recent research has paid more attention to methodologies that attempt to capture participants' voices outside the conventional frame of spoken communication, such as through artefacts, drama and artistic productions (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012, p. 86). An interesting example of this endeavour is portrayed in the illustrated anthology *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (Halasa, Omareen & Mahfoud, 2014) in which poets, painters, photographers and other cultural activists voice imagination and self-expression in times of cultural and political hardship.

triangulating empirical material from multiple sources and developing a comprehensive and multi-sided understanding of the research problem (Castles, 2012; Denzin, 2006; Salkind, 2010). Aligned with a constructionist and narrative framework, method triangulation is a way of yielding many possible renditions of social life, capturing complexity and richness in an inquiry rather than claiming any single account as 'true' or definite. The use of multiple methods in this research is therefore not so much a matter of cross-validating data in a strict or positivist sense, but rather a desire to *converse* with the research question(s) in order to gain insight from different perspectives.

4.2.1 In-depth interviews

Personal and in-depth interviews are usually seen as the very backbone of qualitative research when it comes to capturing complexities embedded in peoples' everyday experiences. In narrative migration research, interviews provide the most salient way of gaining access to migrants' life stories, as well as their perceptions and meaning-making processes. Several studies have employed narrative interviews as a gateway to understanding 'how forced migrants seek to make sense of displacement and violence, re-establish identity in ruptured life courses and communities, or bear witness to violence and repression' (Eastmond, 2007, p. 248). As such, in-depth interviewing techniques represent 'a window into the interviewees' consciousness' (Sanchez-Ayala, 2012, p. 123), their identities and the lived dimension of social issues.

As with any method, however, there will always be methodological and epistemological challenges, not least concerning the retrospective aspects of interviews. Storytelling often consists of a complex and ambivalent mixture of memories and emotions that inform representations of past events. When interviewing Syrian refugees about their past lives and changing trajectories, multiple stories inevitably compete for an authentic presentation of reality. As poignantly expressed, 'memories of conflict are also conflicts of memory' (McBride, 2001, cited in Burke, 2019, p. 70). Consequently, the distance between what is remembered in an interview and the narrative event itself may challenge the ability to obtain reliable data on what actually happened. However, I agree with Eastmond

(2007), that narratives 'are not transparent renditions of "truth" but reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story' (p. 248). Again, we are reminded of the constructed, partial and incomplete nature of our discursive practices (Hjelm, 2014). I find that to overlook these aspects in an interview context at the expense of finding coherence or imposing order on shifting expressions of reality is detrimental to the purpose of the research project.

In-depth interviews comprise a type of method that can open a portal into how people engage in plural readings of the past, carving out space in which to analyse comparatively how religion and issues of identity are encountered, conveyed and filtered through the participants' storytelling. Interviews, of course, are not merely discursive sites that address past histories through the context of the present but may as much invite discussion involving imaginings and expectations of the future. For my purposes, therefore, discourse analysis is insufficient to dynamically understand such extra-discursive realities and broader sociocultural contexts. According to discourse theory, qualitative interviews produce empirical data that can primarily be analysed as text, thus making people, groups or society irrelevant as units of analysis (Cruickshank, 2012). In contrast, a narrative inquiry of the data views personal interviews as *people orientated* and sensitive, 'allowing interviewees to construct their own accounts of their experiences by describing and explaining their lives in their own words' (Valentine, 1997, cited in Sánchez-Ayala, 2012, p. 123). According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), a mystery method approach will help to open up these gateways to the social world by entering the interviews with both cultivated discipline *and* imagination, as well as intuition and a feeling of what is interesting:

> The interview is a complex social situation where the interview is perhaps less characterized by simply reporting facts or experiences through the use of language, and more by being engaged in complicated interactions, bearing the imprints of a multitude social elements. (p. 101)

Such openness in inquiry, however, requires a keen eye for not only *what* is factually told but also *how* things are said, including the embodied, emotional and imaginary aspects of storytelling. Inevitably, any researcher should correspondingly

question *why* specific stories are told, what participants decide to include, or why things are left untold, hidden, ignored or silenced (Eastmond, 2016; Lincoln & Canella, 2007; Sánchez-Ayala, 2012). Indeed, this also applies to the researcher's positionality, as there will always be a risk of filtering information or prioritising certain points of view while silencing others. As these interactional questions were relevant in my own representation of Syrian refugee voices, I will return with further reflections when discussing the ethical concept of attentive listening in Chapter 5.

4.2.2 Focus group discussions

Unlike individual interviews, the most salient feature of the focus group is that it is a collective interview, defined by Morgan (1988) as a 'research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher' (p. 130). Wilkinson (1998) argues that the purpose of the focus group is to 'elicit people's understandings, opinions, and views, or to explore how these are advanced, elaborated and negotiated in social context' (p. 87). The idea behind this method is to 'generate talk that will extend the range of our thinking about an issue' (Macnaghten & Myers, 2007, p. 68) and provide researchers with a tool with which to investigate participants' perspectives in a broader sense than enabled by individual narratives (Lindsay & Hubely, 2006). Focus groups, therefore, go beyond the individual mediation of meaning toward meaning communicated in a joint activity or discourse. On issues of identity, the focus group methodology is particularly useful 'for exploring how discourses or themes are constructed jointly by participants in a group context, and how identity is collectively constructed' (Chatrakul Na Audhya et al., 2014, p. 160). Usually, the role of the researcher is decentralised in the focus group. According to Kamberlis and Dimitriadis (2011), a 'democratization of the research process' (p.560) is thus assured, placing participants and their dialogic interactions at centre stage. Together, the participants produce open-ended 'polyvocal texts' (Kamberlis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 560), reminiscent of what Bakhtin terms 'dialogism' and the polyphony of diverse voices.

While polyvocality is what I have strived to unveil in the research, bringing multiple perspectives to the table will always entail some critical ethical considerations.

According to Macnaghten and Myers (2007), the focus group methodology recommends a certain homogeneity or common ground among partakers, for 'differences between participants and the tensions within one participant's views to emerge' (p. 69). However, bringing people together who share forced migratory experiences demands sensitivity and careful consideration. Although controversies among participants may well emerge in focus group discussions, allowing the researcher the opportunity to explore tensions and juxtapose different positions on a particular topic, as moderator, the researcher must first and foremost attempt to create a safe space for peaceful discussion. In our context, it was essential to take into account that the sensitivities of an ongoing, unresolved and largely sectarianised Syrian conflict might negatively disrupt the flow of discourse as intended in this choice of method. As will be further explained in the sampling process, I was, therefore, vigilant about mixing groups with fiercely opposing identities to avoid sparking confrontational situations or cause undue harm.

4.2.3 Informal conversations

In addition to the two main modes of gathering empirical material described thus far, the method of informal conversations was added as a complementary data source. It was not an explicit method applied during fieldwork, nor was it used in any conscious manner in the research methodology. Rather, in hindsight, I realised that many of my informal and casual conversations with Syrians beyond the context of interviews and focus groups also contributed to the knowledge production. Conversations with Syrians I have befriended often occurred in private settings. They were not premeditated, and they were more in line with small talk or informal chats about everyday life. There was thus never a question of recording these conversations or receiving any form of informed consent to use the talks as data for the thesis. Consequently, citations from the empirical material in the three articles stem exclusively from the formal interviews conducted through the two research methods mentioned above.

This is not to say, however, that informal talk cannot function as a data collection tool in qualitative research. According to Hassen (2016), access to people's 'real life talk' can often reveal facets of human behaviour, thoughts, cultural beliefs and

social practices more authentically and less artificially than formal interviews. Hence, as a meaningful and natural human activity, talk constructs discourses through language and communicates how we reflect, understand and (re)produce reality (Hassen, 2016). In a similar vein, a recent focus on 'small stories' in narrative research has carved out a space in which to understand identity constructions in everyday interactional contexts and discursive practices (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2015). Conversational storytelling, according to Georgakopoulou (2015), may yield new perspectives that are often overlooked in the 'big stories' presented through a classical interview-based type of narrative inquiry. Related to the small-story metaphor is the significance of gaining access to the lived and mundane dimensions of existential issues, such as those found in narratives of illness (Synnes, 2015) or stories of displacement (Eastmond, 2016).

Whereas I have not consciously employed informal conversations with Syrian refugees as an instrument for data collection, they have nevertheless provided added value in understanding evolving post-migratory contexts as communicated from private points of view. In particular, the everyday experiences of 'refugeeness', of agency and constraints concerning life in exile, as well as longing and emotional ties to the homeland of Syria, are aspects that have appeared offhand in these conversations. Taken together, all of the research methods were mutually enhancing and enabled the construction of dense material concerning social and subjective identity discourses. We can say that their complementary qualities lie in the fact that, just as personalised talk and in-depth interviews reflect broader social and political issues, individual differences emerge from the collective context of focus group discussions (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2014; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011).

4.3 Ethical approval

Before embarking on any empirical project in a Norwegian context, it is necessary to obtain approval from the Norwegian Data Protection Services (NSD). In general, all research that collects, records, stores and publishes personal data manually or

electronically is subject to notification.[63] Certain types of information relating to ethnic origin, religious beliefs and political opinions are listed by the NSD as 'special categories of personal data' and thus considered particularly sensitive.[64] Also, conducting a doctoral study in Norway requires ethical training provided by the respective research institution. Such courses entail general standards pertaining to honesty, transparency and responsibility in all research activities, as well as ensuring confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary informed consent from participating research subjects. [65] In my fields of study, these principles have been set down in the 'Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology' provided by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH).[66]

The researcher's obligation to inform participants about the research project and safeguard issues of confidentiality has been of special importance in this research. Due to the relatively small numbers of Syrian refugees who have arrived since 2015, the exile community in Norway is fairly transparent and thus easily identifiable if not anonymised sufficiently in the data. The nature of the research questions, as outlined in the interview guide (Appendix 8), invited discussion around sensitive issues, many of which are subject to contestation and tension in the Syrian refugee population. Adequately informing the participants about the project, its purpose and the intended use of the results was thus of paramount importance before obtaining their voluntary, informed and written consent (van Liempt & Bilger, 2012). An information letter was distributed in Norwegian, English and Arabic in which issues of anonymity and other safeguarding measures were clearly outlined (Appendices 6 and 7). Guaranteeing anonymity, however, is not easy; it demands

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[63] https://nsd.no/personvernombud/en/notify/. See Appendix 5 for approval confirmation from the NSD.

[64] https://nsd.no/personvernombud/en/help/vocabulary.html.

[65] I am indebted to Prof. Knut Holter at VID Specialized University for organising the PhD course on research ethics during the autumn of 2015. As one of the requirements for the course, I wrote an unpublished paper related to ethical considerations in my own research project, entitled *Vulnerability and Agency: Ethical Challenges in Migration and Refugee Research* (Løland, 2016).

[66] NESH is a body within the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees that provides guidance and advice on research ethics to promote good scientific practice in the Norwegian research system. Cf. https://www.etikkom.no/en/ethical-guidelines-for-research/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences--humanities-law-and-theology/.

careful navigation between considering what to reveal and what to conceal regarding the participants' identities. One of the challenges was to balance the inclusion of identifiable features from the participants' biographies without compromising on the promise of confidentiality. As will be shown in the overview of all participants who took part in the study (Appendix 9), I attempted to solve this dilemma by anonymising all names and providing pseudonyms for the participants whose narratives have been cited in the articles. Furthermore, I used an age range instead of revealing the exact ages, and I diffused the category of geographical origin by referring to wider Syrian districts. Another measure was to omit information regarding the participants' locations in Norway.

4.4 Collaboration with research assistant

Before venturing into the field, I deemed it necessary to collaborate with a research assistant in order to perform the tasks more efficiently. There were several reasons for this decision. First, my language skills in Arabic are not sufficient to engage in long in-depth conversations, let alone to understand linguistic subtleties and advanced semantics. Second, I did not wish to be reliant upon a translation agency whose randomised choice of a translator could jeopardise the research quality and continuity. Instead, I sought an assistant who could follow the fieldwork progression from start to finish and become more intimately acquainted with the project. Also, I needed help with the transcription work, preferably from someone who would also be present at all of the interviews and focus group discussions.[67]

I was, however, not unaware of the critical issues relating to the engagement of translators and interpreters in qualitative research (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011; Chiumento et al., 2017; Sánchez-Ayala, 2012; Wechsler, 2016). Gaining access to vulnerable people's 'hidden voices' and life-worlds in narrative migration research

[67] I consider myself fortunate to have found the right person for this job, and someone who met the four ideal requirements I set: 1) she was not of Syrian nationality and had no known connection to any Syrians residing in Norway or abroad; 2) she had excellent oral and written skills in both English and Arabic; 3) she was a graduate student with mature knowledge of the principles of research and ethical conduct; 4) she had the time and energy required to undertake fieldwork for six months. I am indebted to Bård and Leni Mæland for introducing me to this person, who, by chance, happened to be a woman (there were no gender criteria for this position). I am also indebted to VID Specialized University for allowing me to pay for her services through my PhD funding.

obviously raises a number of methodological and ethical concerns. One issue is to ensure good flow in the communication exchange by allowing the participants to adequately express themselves in their native language. Although many of the participants spoke a moderate amount of English and/or Norwegian, the majority felt more comfortable communicating in Arabic. This made the use of a translator all the more necessary, while also posing risks in terms of the quality of the research. The risks could include losing ‘control’ of the investigation, missing out on the linguistic information exchange or finding that meaning had been filtered, biased or lost during the translation process. Another issue is confidentiality, whereby participants might fear that their responses could be compromised if a third party is involved (Wechsler, 2016). Related to this is an assessment of how the positionality of the translator could affect the participant narratives, especially in terms of sensitive topics (Chiumento et al., 2017).

While acknowledging that these risks could impact the data and potentially limit the research results, my approach attempted to counterbalance a relevant critique by reflecting on the equally sound benefits of employing a research assistant. According to Sánchez-Ayala (2012), using an insider companion in conjunction with the researcher’s outsider position can enhance communication with research participants:

> The insider companion or co-researcher is the link that can create the environment of familiarity and trust between the interviewer and the interviewees, and thus open the doors for a fluid conversation. (p. 119)

The insider position of the research assistant was strengthened by her ability to communicate using a common language with the research participants. In addition, she shared their experiences because she was an immigrant herself and was familiar with the religious and cultural aspects of the Middle East. However, it was important to balance our insider/outsider collaboration carefully and professionally, ensuring that appropriate distance and familiarity were maintained both between ourselves and toward the participants (Sánchez-Ayala, p. 2012; van Liempt & Bilger, 2012). I deemed it particularly crucial to avoid possible biases and political positioning that could impede the relational context when interviewing a conflict-

induced Syrian refugee population. Hence, the requirement of no previous ties to Syria or Syrians was a pre-condition for joining me in the fieldwork.

In accordance with a constructionist epistemology, the role of the research assistant is not merely that of a passive mediator of information, but rather that of a co-constructor actively contributing to the knowledge production (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011; Chiumento et al., 2017). It follows that, in the pursuit of a research assistant, I was seeking a person who could act as a key resource prior to, during and after the fieldwork, thereby recognising her role as a valuable 'interpretive guide and co-researcher' (Larkin et al., 2007, pp. 474-475). With such collaborative prospects, however, it was my responsibility as the leading researcher to inform her of my expectations, which were set down in a written contract. She also signed a letter of confidentiality, which specified the handling and storing of data, as well as an agreement not to convey information to any unauthorised persons (Appendix 10).

4.5 Sampling and recruitment procedures

Based on the unit of analysis described in the introductory chapter, there was a need to narrow the sample of individual research participants according to specific criteria: 1. they should be Syrian nationals (i.e. have a legal attachment to Syria); 2. they should be adults (i.e. above the age of 18 and thus eligible to give informed consent); 3. they should ideally represent different religious, ethnic and secular identity backgrounds (i.e. to reflect a heterogeneous and polyvocal refugee population); and 4. they should have refugee status and have resided in Norway for more than six months (i.e. have arrived as a result of the Syrian conflict, have legal residency in Norway, and experience of life in exile).[68] Based on these general criteria, we can see that the sampling technique was strategic and purposeful, targeting a selection of people who shared common characteristics (Syrian refugees). At the same time, however, individual traits and other variables such as gender, age (above 18), geographical origin, and professional and educational

[68] Experiences of life in exile were deemed necessary for my initial intention of studying the dimension of resettlement in migration trajectories.

backgrounds were left open in the sampling process. It follows from this type of non-probability sampling that selection is partial, non-random and therefore not an accurate representation of the wider Syrian refugee population.[69] It is not in the scope of this study to make general claims about Syrian refugees; its purpose is rather to gain access to their complex and differentiated life experiences. Hence, despite having pre-specified general criteria for sampling, I wanted to keep the process 'organic' (Mason, 2002) and explore diversity in an inductive rather than a deductive manner (Barglowski, 2018).

4.5.1 Recruiting participants for focus groups

When preparing the fieldwork at the beginning of 2017, I did not know any Syrian refugees personally. I needed to investigate ways to get in touch with them and in which settings to interview them. As there were no recognised organisations or social communities where Syrians met at the time, I decided to negotiate access by entering familiar terrain. Having worked for several years at an adult learning centre for refugees and asylum seekers, I knew that most of the Syrian refugees who arrived in Norway would be enrolled in the compulsory Introduction Programme run by all municipalities that host foreign nationals.[70] I made contact with two such centres at different locations in Norway, and, upon receiving formal consent for the project, relevant teachers managed to recruit two separate focus groups. The organisers at the schools were informed about the sampling criteria, but I was hesitant to request strict selection criteria based on religious/secular identity affiliations. I wanted to steer away from what has been termed the 'methodological nationalism' that essentialises categories based on ethnicity, culture and national or religious belonging (Amelina & Faist, 2012). Instead, what fundamentally mattered for my purpose was to reflect a *diversity* of experiences within the Syrian refugee

[69] Although I wanted to gain access to Syrians who represented a diverse refugee population to contrast various views and experiences, I do not consider these criteria to be a representational form of sampling. According to Mason, to sample representationally means to achieve a generalisable 'microcosm' of the population one wishes to study (2002, p. 135).

[70] The Introductory Programme is a right and an obligation for newly arrived immigrants between 18 and 55 years of age who have been granted asylum in Norway. It offers basic language and social study training for up to three years. Refugees receive economic support while participating in the programme. See The Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDI): https://www.imdi.no/en/the-introduction-programme/the-introduction-programme/.

population under study, whichever identity affiliation they had. This required an open and inclusive approach that resembled a convenience type of sampling, allowing for anyone willing and interested to participate (Given, 2008). However, I did ask the organisers to be cautious of any conflictual or sensitive issues concerning religion and politics when approaching their students, trusting them to select participants based on their more intimate knowledge of the Syrians at their schools. Additionally, and related to discussing topics that might be viewed as controversial and emotionally distressing, the preferred maximum for the number of participants was set at eight people (Frisina, 2018; Morgan, 1998). Small groups, according to Frisina (2018), are preferable to facilitate interaction among participants and foster safe spaces in which consensus and dissent may be voiced. Given that the schools provided 'neutral' premises for all participants, they were chosen as the settings for our talks. At one of these centres, the group consisted solely of women, while at the other centre, the group was of mixed gender.[71]

4.5.2 Recruiting participants for personal interviews

At the outset, I decided to recruit a different sample for the personal interviews to those selected for the focus groups. The reason for this was that I wanted to keep the focus groups as a separate unit, comparable both among themselves as well as with the unit of individual participants. Again, the purpose was to achieve empirical breadth, unveiling nuances and complexities through different methods and a variety of respondents' voices. I approached the recruitment task by contacting a Syrian refugee whose story had been profiled in the national media. Due to his network and known status in the Syrian exile community, he was an invaluable 'gatekeeper' who helped me to get in touch with potential research participants (Andoh-Arthur, 2019). After interviewing a couple of participants through his network, the ensuing snowball sampling helped me to reach other respondents who were relevant and willing to participate in the study. A snowball technique, according to Barglowski (2018), can be especially suitable for migration research because it allows the researcher to trace networks and relationships more

[71] Further information regarding composition and biographical details of the focus group respondents is provided in Appendix 9.

effectively. It enabled me, as an outsider, to locate individuals more purposefully, particularly in terms of contacting minorities such as Christians, Alawites and Ismailis, who already comprise a small sub-group among the exile community in Norway.

Word of the project spread, and some potential participants even approached me of their own accord, wanting to take part in the study. Hence, I needed to decide on an appropriate sample size that would meet both epistemological and practical concerns. In grounded theory, sample size is reliant on the concept of saturation, i.e. 'the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data' (Dworkin, 2012[72], see also Charmaz, 2006). I found it not only difficult to determine when saturation had been reached but also questionable in terms of 'whether there can be a situation in the empirical world where more data would *not* offer more information' (Barglowski, 2018, my emphasis). Indeed, the constructionist positioning I employed does not aim to cover a total amount of facts but renders knowledge partial and dependent on the situated view of the researcher. Instead, I find Malterud et al.'s (2015) 'information power' a better replacement for saturation when it comes to evaluating how depth and richness of analysis are accomplished. They suggest that the more relevant information a sample holds for the actual study, the lower the number of participants needed (Malterud, 2015). Thus, the size of the sample matters less in ensuring the quality of research; instead, it is essential 'that it covers the diversity and difference in the empirical field (Malterud, 2015, p. 7). To address the research question and gain an in-depth understanding of the 'heterogeneities in meaning' (Dworkin, 2012[73]) among Syrian refugees, I deemed it necessary to conduct at least eight to ten individual interviews, with the option to engage in further conversations or conduct follow-ups at a later stage. All respondents were allowed to decide the meeting place. Although most respondents preferred to meet in their own homes, two interviews were held on my university campus and one was conducted online via Skype. In total, ten interviews were performed during the main fieldwork period of

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[72] Dworkin, S.L. (2012): https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-012-0016-6#citeas
[73] Ibid.

2017, and two more were added during 2018. The final make-up of the sample thus consisted of 12 mixed-gender participants whose backgrounds varied in terms of age, education, geographical origin, professional life and ethno-religious/secular identity affiliations (Appendix 9).

4.6 Analytical strategies

Moving on to the post-fieldwork phase of the research, I will here discuss the analytical strategies employed in order to make sense of all the empirical data collected. Although the focus of analysis might be more accentuated during this stage, I firmly believe that analysis is something that occurs throughout the research endeavour (Daly, 2007). Indeed, what has been outlined thus far in the make-up of the thesis is a testament to how analysis is present at *all* stages of the research, from articulating a research problem to making different methodological choices and a host interpretative decisions. From an overarching point of view, the research framework sketched earlier in this section shows that I place my analysis clearly within the qualitative methodology, constructionist epistemology, and the sociocultural frame of narrative inquiry. Here, I will outline further details concerning the practical steps of *doing* and *imagining* analytic work as an iterative and constructionist process in which mystery, discovery and analysis go hand in hand. The various stages of this process concern the transcription process, the coding and categorisation work, comparative strategies as well as the thematic analysis.

4.6.1 Transcription process

As mentioned earlier, transcribing the audio recordings from the personal interviews and focus group discussions was a collaboration between myself and the research assistant. Together we agreed on a transcription template that would be consistent for all the interviews conducted. This included a system of pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants as well as a process for filing and

storing sensitive data under ethical guidelines.[74] We also agreed on a few conventional techniques when transposing the oral material into written text. As transcriptions are 'textual products' (Atkinson, 1992, cited in Daly, 2007, p. 216), they will always involve some level of selectivity and (re)construction (Macnaghten & Myers, 2007). We were thus committed to staying true to the voices and the intended meanings of the participants by using an intelligent verbatim transcription.[75] Nevertheless, constructionism is a reminder of how transcripts are interpretations of interpretations (Geertz, 1973) or 'second-order narratives' (Brannen, 2013)[76], and thereby never entirely objective or value-free reproductions of the oral records. Consequently, we approached the transcription process in the same manner as we did the interviews, viewing the collaboration between ourselves and the research participants as a type of 'co-authored conversation in context […] that is open to multiple alternative readings' (Poland, 2002, p. 635).

As most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic, the research assistant performed the bulk of the transcription work. Conversely, I transcribed those interviews that were conducted in English and/or Norwegian. Since we had both been present at all the meetings undertaken in 2017, we designed a strategy of carefully re-reading each of our transcripts, strengthening the reliability and validity of our written accounts. In this way, making each other's writing available for review was part of the analytical process of reassessing the insights we had initially gained during the interviews. It was also a way of clearing up any misunderstandings and refining our interpretative dialogues with the empirical material (Daly, 2007). All transcripts were also cross-checked against my own set of personal field notes written during and after the research interviews.

4.6.2 Coding and categorisation

After transcribing the interviews, I continued with the subsequent analysis without the involvement of the research assistant. The first step in this endeavour was to

[74] Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology: Respect for individuals. https://www.etikkom.no/en/ethical-guidelines-for-research/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences--humanities-law-and-theology/b-respect-for-individuals/.
[75] See: https://weloty.com/intelligent-verbatim-transcription/.
[76] See: https://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/2/15/15.pdf.

organise and code the empirical material using the qualitative software program NVivo. Although I did not utilise this program to its fullest and most advanced extent, I found it helpful for 'bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data' (Marshall & Rossman, 1990, p. 111). Coding can be described as 'the grouping and labelling of data in the process of making it more manageable both for display and to provide answers to the research question/s' (Grbich, 2013, p. 259). The process involves breaking down the empirical material into analytical parts and labelling different segments as meaningful chunks of data. Naming or labelling is central to any analysis as it helps to categorise vast amounts of data, identify themes and conceptualise theory (Daly, 2007). In line with the exploratory 'mystery approach' outlined previously, I approached the task of analysis in its earliest stages with an imaginative and 'open coding' (Daly, 2007, p. 230). It refers to a way of approaching the material with open-mindedness and curiosity, applying a creative gaze to what can, admittedly at first, appear to be a chaotic canvas of endless interpretative options. However, it was essential to keep the central research question in mind while familiarising myself with the complete dataset, and, at the same time, let the data speak for itself. Taking a grounded approach allowed me to inductively identify my research participants' statements, ideas and perceptions more at face value.

4.6.3 Comparative approach

Integral to the coding and categorisation process described above is the comparative approach, which enables the research analysis to continuously move back and forth between theory and data. Comparison is deeply embedded in the human cognitive enterprise of conceptualising and classifying phenomena, which ultimately underlies most research activities. All knowledge is thus inherently comparative as previous insights produce new knowledge and are probed against, valued or devalued in comparison to something else in a seemingly endless hermeneutical process (Stausberg, 2006, 2014). Although there are many factors rendering comparison both problematic and challenging, many scholars have voiced a need to conduct more comparative research as a way of addressing multiple dimensions of migration and religion (Altinordu, 2013; Brettel & Hollifield, 2015;

Castles, 2012; Faist et al., 2013; Frederiks, 2015; Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Vertovec, 2010).[77]

Rather than a strict method per se, I have approached comparison more as a strategy with which I can understand and interpret the experiences of a heterogeneous Syrian refugee population. When asking how Syrians narrate, memorise and discursively negotiate experiences of conflict, religion and issues of identity, there will inevitably be both similar as well as contested and divergent responses. I have thus applied comparison as a tool to illuminate both resemblances and differences on several levels. First, by combining emic and etic gazes to the empirical material, I have analytically compared the Syrian refugees' insider view with external perspectives from scientific theory and prior research (Daly, 2007). I have also attempted to compare polyvocally, in relation to both voices that appear internally in each refugee story and those that appear across and between different individual testimonies. Furthermore, a comparison has been attempted when looking at micro-level narratives of refugees in connection with wider sociopolitical macro narratives about the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. A comparative lens has also been instrumental to highlight contextual similarities and differences in the spatio-temporal trajectories on levels that are both concrete and symbolic. Finally, I have looked at the profound ways in which religious encountering and identification processes cut into all these levels of comparison. Despite the many pros and cons of comparative research, I agree with Meyer (2017), that, in order to understand the multi-sided experiences of refugee life and provide more profound responses to our research questions, we need to critically value the many 'insights the comparative approach can generate' (p. 510).

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[77] Criticism of comparative approaches to religious research, for example, often address reactions to 'macro-comparative studies' and tendencies towards universalising narratives (Freiberger, 2018, 8-9). Another critical aspect concerns the emphasis on similarities and the overlooking of differences in social and historical contexts (McClymond, 2018). According to Stausberg (2014, pp. 27-28), amassing categories of similarities and constructing oversimplified typologies has led to an essentialising of the issues of religion at the expense of complexity, diversity and contextual differences.

4.6.4 Thematic analysis

To analyse qualitative material thematically is a process defined by Labra et al. (2019) as 'a method that allows researchers to identify and organize relevant themes and subthemes, which can then be used as units of analysis in subsequent detailed re-readings of a data set'.[78] Hence, the meanings that emerge from participant testimonies is an exploratory process that consists of several interactive and overlapping steps that are driven by a combined inductive and deductive approach (Figure 4).

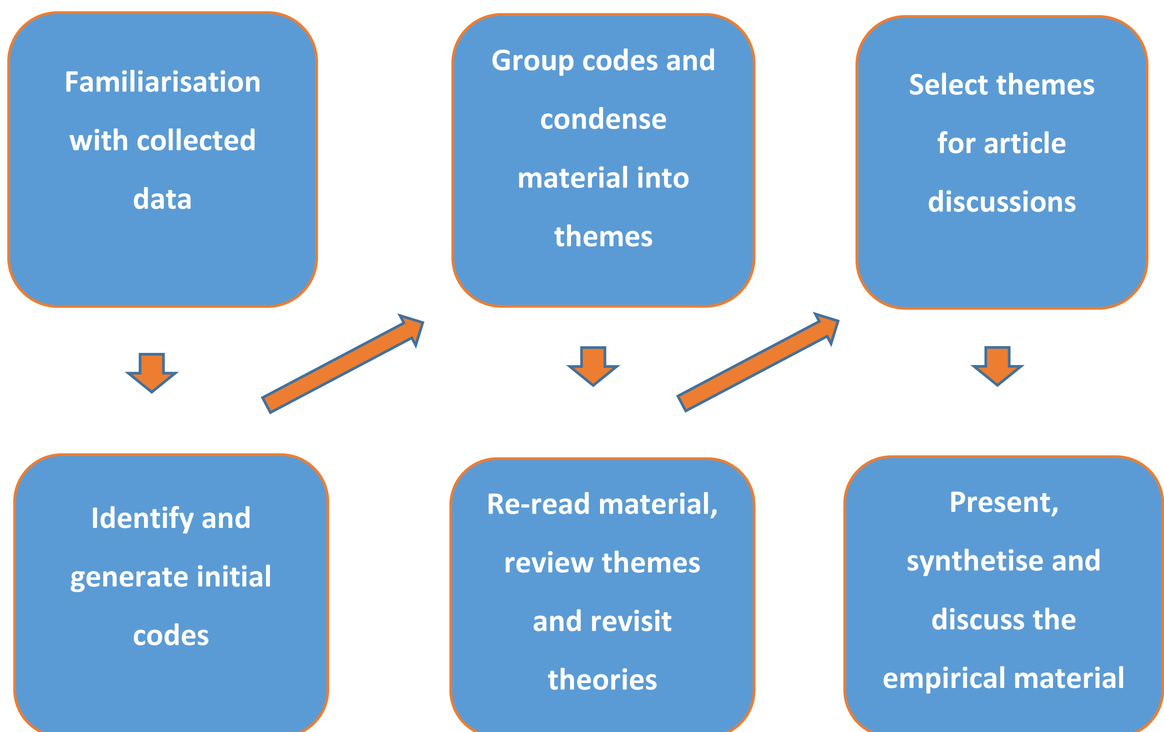

Figure 4: *An illustration of the various phases involved in thematic analysis.*

[78] Labra et al. (2019). Thematic Analysis in Social Work: A Case Study. In Bala Raju Nikku (ed.) Global Social Work – Cutting Edge Issues and Critical Reflections. DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.89464.

The process begins from an open conversation with the empirical material toward identifying and generating initial codes. Emerging codes that appear in the transcriptions can then be clustered into separate groups that signify various themes based on patterns of similarities and divergences. Additional levels of categorisation produce a more condensed overview of different themes, dynamically moving the analysis forward. Finally, re-reading and comparing the data material, reviewing themes and revisiting theories are crucial steps before a culmination of the process involves presenting and discussing a final meta-narrative synthesis of the material (Daly, 2007; Labra et al., 2019). As we shall see in Chapter 6 and 7, respectively, all these analytical steps as well as the methodological considerations discussed thus far, serve as an important framework for making sense of the research results and imbue them with more wide-ranging interpretative meanings.

Chapter 5: Researching Syrian refugees: Ethical reflections from theory and practice

As discussed in Chapter 4, conducting qualitative research is an activity that involves a wide range of ethical implications. I have touched upon some of the general issues that pertain to ethical approval and good fieldwork practice. Here, I will place my research on the Syrian refugee population within a more extensive and ethically orientated theoretical conversation. Since I believe Syrian refugee voices and experiences have been insufficiently covered in the media and academic literature, this chapter will provide a broader examination of five overlapping aspects that allow nuances, complexities and multiplicities to receive attention. The following aspects are concerned with challenging refugee stereotypes and identity labelling (5.1), researching the nexus between vulnerability and agency in refugee experiences (5.2), the need for attentive listening and imaginative capacity (5.3) and, finally, the importance of finding ways to communicate silence and sensitive topics (5.5).

5.1 Challenging refugee stereotypes and identity labelling

Studies have shown that the battle over the words used to describe the Syrian refugee crisis and migrants, in general, is a 'struggle of framing' (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993, cited in Lee & Nerghes, 2018). Whichever labels are attributed to specific groups of migrants, the risk of stereotyping is a global challenge where representations of marginal groups are concerned. The migrant population is often presented through familiar narratives of othering, whereby the 'illegitimate others' pose a threat to 'what is ours' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 1). Related to this polarised discourse of us versus them are the many myths and misconceptions that perforate anti-refugee rhetoric. Syrian refugees have been the target of xenophobia and prejudgment concerning their educational, cultural and religious backgrounds. In public imagery, in particular, religious identities have been disproportionately

essentialised (Beaman et al., 2017).[79] Experiences of exclusionary discourse, such as being perceived as illiberal Muslims, supporters of ISIL, or other taken-for-granted assumptions, were relayed by the participants in this study. In my polyvocal approach to Syrian refugee narratives, it was pertinent to move away from such uni-dimensional descriptions of identity, and instead embrace people's individual stories as hybrid and multifaceted. I thus perceive speaking of 'the migrant' (Frederiks, 2015, p. 186) or 'the refugee experience' (Lischer, 2014, p. 249) in a singular manner as detrimental to the vast diversity of human displacement stories. As researchers, we must be mindful of the fact that *how* we frame and portray migrants and refugees is not always compatible with their *own* conceptions of self and reality (Eastmond, 2005; Mavelli & Wilson, 2017). Such an awareness, as poignantly addressed by Kirmayer (2013), also implies that we should look past any individual's status as a refugee or migrant in order not to essentialise identity labels and categories:

> The category of refugees is not intrinsic to any individual's personhood or identity. Refugees are forcibly made by the actions of others: first by the violence that propels them from their homes, then by the international conventions that define the category of refugee and finally, by the immigration policies of countries that provide asylum. (p. v)

Although the unit of analysis in this study comprises Syrian *refugees*, I regard this label to be constructed and context bound. It conceptualises certain characteristics of the participants' shared history of forced displacement. At the same time, however, the refugee label is a mere container concept that says little, if anything, about the full range of the participants' experiences, including their past and present lives and identities (subjective, collective, cultural and professional). Conceptualisations and reality may, therefore, be at odds with each other, distorting 'the plenum of existence' that we as researchers try our utmost to grasp

[79] See also Yassin, N. (2019), '101 Facts and Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis', Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut (https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/70360) and Abrahams et al. (2017), 'Five Myths About Syrian Refugees', *Foreign Affairs* (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2017-03-22/five-myths-about-syrian-refugees).

(James, cited in Jackson & Piette, 2017, p. 7). Thus, when relating to the concept of the refugee, it is essential not only to challenge what it means but also to look beyond the conceptual confines to recognise 'the multiple identities and labels embraced *by* and embodied *on* refugees' (Vigil & Abidi, 2018, p. 53, my emphasis).

5.2 Vulnerability and agency in refugee research

War and migratory experiences are profound identity-shaping experiences that cut straight to the vulnerability–agency debate in refugee research. There can be no doubt that forced migration constitutes a wide range of tremendous facets of vulnerability. As Porobić (2012) notes in her treatise on Bosnian refugees, '[e]very level of human existence is affected by forced migration' (p. 6). Conflict-induced displacement is a life-changing event that radically transforms people's lives. This description resonates well with accounts shared by Syrian refugees, pointing toward the need for a careful ethical approach when researching vulnerable groups or individuals.[80] Vulnerability in a migration context has been defined as 'exposure to and susceptibility to some form of harm' deriving from a range of 'intersecting and co-existing personal, social, situational, and structural factors'.[81] Research ethics must, therefore, take into account that migrants and refugees constitute a special group who, by virtue of their particular circumstances and situation, 'may lack the means to adequately protect themselves against coercion or harm in the research process' (McDowell, 2013, p. 63).

However, as highlighted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, despite the many factors that generate vulnerability, it is imperative to remember that refugees and other migrants are neither inherently vulnerable nor lacking in resilience and agency.[82] Agency, 'or the ability to formulate strategic choices and control decisions affecting central life outcomes' (Gateley, 2014, p. 7),

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[80] A common understanding of those classified as vulnerable may include 'low status populations, minors, members of excluded groups, unemployed or impoverished persons, people in emergency situations, prisoners or detainees, homeless, minorities and refugees, traumatized, persons with mental illnesses and mentally incompetent people' (van Liempt & Bilger, 2012).
[81] IOM, Key Migration Terms: https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#Vulnerability
[82] IOM, Key Migration Terms: https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#Migrants-in-vulnerable-situations

is as much part and parcel of the lives and experiences of people on the move and must be heeded when researching vulnerable groups. However, more often than not, migrants and refugees are associated with victimhood and vulnerability based on assumptions that are rooted in what Gateley (2014) terms a 'discourse of vulnerability' (p. 7). As noted by several authors, much research on refugees has stereotyped the refugee as someone faced with no choices or opportunities due to external events, reducing them to people dependent on international relief and assistance (McDowell, 2013; Vigil & Abidi, 2018). The example of Syrian refugees using smartphones illustrates such simplifications, as it does not befit many peoples' perceived image of refugees as poor and deserving of assistance. However, one of the interesting aspects highlighted by the Syrian refugee crisis is that refugees use technology and mobile devices as strategical resources of information and communication both prior to and during the migration journey (Dekker et al., 2018). Moreover, smartphones have been used by Syrian refugees as personal pocket archives (Leurs, 2017), storing memories of the past as well as mediating links to the future (Appadurai, 2019).

The above examples serve to show that, in order to combat stereotypes and misconceptions, we need to examine the nexus between vulnerability and agency in migration research in more sophisticated ways. Hence, inspired by what Gateley (2014) terms a 'human dimension approach' (p. 11), I have attempted to examine human agency and resilience without disregarding vulnerable experiences or issues that may constrain choices and life options among vulnerable groups. Negative experiences of war, migration and refugeehood also bring to the fore the human capacity to stay alive, forcing the displaced to improvise, negotiate and navigate in new and ambiguous terrains. This is a process that has been aptly described by Hylland Eriksen (2010) as a 'task of rebuilding the ship at sea' (p. 12). In Article 3 of the thesis, this metaphor is highly descriptive when applying an existential lens on the role of religion in human displacement stories.

5.3 Attentive listening and imaginative capacity

One of the pressing questions regarding the ethical representation of migrant populations is who can speak for whom: 'are migrants the sole legitimate producers of their own experiences or can they be ethically represented by outsiders?' (Leurs et al., 2020, p. 5). This question presents a dual challenge, as one must resist representations of the faceless other and the 'figure of the mute refugee' (Stavinoha, 2019) on the one hand, while simultaneously recognising the invisibility of marginalised groups in the public sphere on the other. By combining insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives, I believe that scholarship and migrants can work jointly toward more inclusive and authentic (re)presentations of displacement realities. Finding ways of *seeing* marginalised groups necessarily also implies acts of *listening* and enabling their voices to be heard. Such listening goes beyond merely rendering an ear to what is uttered by people on the margins. Rather, it involves tuning more finely into issues that might otherwise go unnoticed or become subject to different modes of silence and silencing.

Wong (2014) calls for an interpretative procedure in which she foregrounds the method of 'attentive listening' (p.309) when trying to make sense of the complexities inherent in migrants' narratives. It is evocative of what Kirmayer (2003) calls 'sympathetic listening' (p. 178) and of Derrida's 'active listening' (2006, p. xviii) as well as Nussbaum's 'emphatic listening' (2012). In the research encounter, these modes of listening can create spaces for 'imaginative capacity' (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 3) that hermeneutically bridge the worlds between the researcher and the research participants, the outsider and the insider. Inevitably, finding ways of listening to research participants' voices also demands reflexivity on behalf of the researcher's own 'voice' as part and parcel of the unfolding research story. This includes the researcher's positionality and the largely subjective involvement in designing questions, selecting samples, interpreting data and disseminating the research results (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012).

Ultimately, it is the researcher who determines who gets to tell the story and which parts of a story to include or exclude. Whereas such power hierarchies are inherent

in any interviewer–interviewee relationship, I have tried to address these challenges in several ways. For one, and in line with the mystery approach previously mentioned (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), I have strived for imaginative openness and non-exploitative research relations in all of the narrative encounters. I have also regarded the construction of the qualitative data as a wholly shared activity based on the interview exchange as the primary site for sociocultural inquiry (Miller & Glassner, 2016). Furthermore, I have viewed these sites as dynamically polyvocal in that they include not only my own and the research participants' voices but also those belonging to the social world(s) beyond the interview context. By facilitating trust and spaces for 'joint sensemaking' (Taylor et al., 2007), I have thus strived for a co-construction of understanding across the many commonalities and differences that embed each research encounter. Finally, as issues concerning war, religion and forced displacement are fraught with contestations and can be challenging to talk about, imaginative capacity has, for my purposes, also entailed listening without judgment and embracing the in-betweens of utterance and silence.

5.4 Communicating silence and sensitive topics

As many scholars have pointed out, refugee stories of war and forced displacement often linger in the abyss of that which is both inexplicable and indescribable, thus rendering language with the inability to sufficiently articulate and address human suffering and loss (Eastmond, 2010; Eastmond & Selimovic, 2012; Jackson, 2002; Selimovic, 2018; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010). Indeed, when words fail to express experiences of terror and death adequately, we are confronted with a similar type of paralysis and emptiness in language. For refugees and survivors of trauma, silence can either consciously or unconsciously be a way of circumventing painful memories from the past. It can also be a symbolic strategy with which to disconnect from memory in order to move forward in life and gain a sense of closure (Eastmond, 2010). According to Jackson (2013), the space of war can, for many, turn into 'a place of silence' (p. 140) where 'meaning eludes our grasp' (2013, p. 156). We are reminded of what Agger (1994) describes as the 'wordless nothing' when interviewing refugees about their traumatic experiences, and how – through acknowledging the power of silence – this can turn into a meaningful 'wordless

fellowship' (p. 126). Indeed, as pointed out by Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger (2010), silence is a 'complex and rich social space that can operate as a vehicle of either memory or of forgetting and thus can be used by various groups for different ends' (p. 1104). Similarly, as Eastmond and Selimovic (2012) suggest, silence can be conceptualised as a kind of language itself, 'a form of communication that is as rich and multifaceted as speech and narration' (pp. 505-506). We can thus understand silence as a telling kind of space filled with (dis)empowering complexities and ambivalence (Selimovic, 2018).

In the context of interviewing Syrian refugees, I approached these multifaceted dimensions of silence, concerning both experiences of existential trauma and sensitivities surrounding religion and politics. Whereas issues of religion and identity politics can be difficult to talk about in general and pose ethical challenges for any empirical research undertaken (Day & Lee, 2014), these matters are particularly delicate in the Syrian refugee context. Many of the Syrian participants in this research showed a considerable reluctance to talk about religious identities or give expression to the role of religion before, during and after their migration trajectories. As shown in all three articles, such averseness must be partly attributed to the authoritarian climate of fear that has exerted unimaginably tight control over the public expression of political and religious identities (Bali, 2015; Pearlman, 2016; Sørvig, 2017; Stolleis, 2015; van Dam, 2017; Wedeen, 2015; Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami, 2016). Despite deep-seated knowledge of living peacefully with diversity, Syrians have for the past few decades increasingly lacked a script from which to articulate relational tensions inherent in Syrian society. Silencing on these topics has not only exacerbated anxiety regarding what can be spoken about, but it has also disallowed constructive ways of dealing with difference.

When talking to Syrian refugees in exile, these tensions reveal themselves in various ways. Some of the participants voiced mistrust toward fellow nationals in case of being under surveillance by Syrian intelligent services, thereby restraining talk on political matters. Others expressed defiance regarding previously forbidden subjects and gratitude at being able to address contentious issues in a country in which freedom of speech and religion are considered core values. Balancing these

concerns, many of the participants nevertheless expressed appreciation for being invited to participate in this research, and some admitted that our research encounter was the first time they had been able to tell their stories to an outside audience. I take this as a stark reminder of the need to create more sophisticated ways of listening to refugee stories, whether they are explicitly voiced or communicated more inaudibly. Frank (2008) equates the importance of listening to an 'act of witness[ing]' (p. 82). People need to find their own stories, he suggests, because stories can empower and 'make narratable their victimization' (2010, p. 76). In addition, people 'need to hear themselves tell their own stories, and this', according to Frank, 'requires a listener' – a witness (2008, p. 82).

Many of the epistemological and ethical challenges discussed in this chapter have been concerned with heeding the above call to witness. As researchers, we need to combine self-reflexivity and modes of (re)presentation of the 'the other' with tools that capture diversity and complexity within the migrant population. Therein lies a moral responsibility to listen attentively and with an imaginative capacity that embraces a dynamic understanding of vulnerability and agency. In an age in which those displaced by war and conflict are increasingly marginalised and exposed to liminal and bordered realities, scholarship should encourage inclusive research encounters and collaborative meaning-making. As expressed eloquently by Jackson (2002), the narrative encounter can function as an eye-opener in this respect, yielding wide-reaching possibilities:

Without stories, without listening to one another's stories, there can be no recovery of the social, no overcoming of our separateness, no discovery of common ground or common cause. (pp. 104-105)

Chapter 6: Presentation of the articles

This chapter will provide a brief look into the three articles that together comprise the kernel of my doctoral research project.[83] In line with the abductive 'mystery approach' already envisioned as a guiding principle for this research, we shall see that each article has originated out of something of a puzzle that emerged from a grounded reading of the data material. The puzzle leads up to the formulation of a leading sub-question, which in turn forms the basis for an explorative conversation between empirical findings and relevant theoretical discussions. In the following, we shall summarise this process in Article 1 (6.1), Article 2 (6.2) and Article 3 (6.3) respectively, before looking at their characteristic concurrent and divergent dimensions (6.4).

6.1 Article 1: Experiences of life in Syria prior to the war

In the introductory chapter, I provided some indications concerning surprises that came up in the empirical material and which altered the spatio-temporal structure of the research problem. Article 1 is the result of one of these surprises. As mentioned by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), '[u]seful analytical concepts sometimes arise "spontaneously", being used by participants themselves. And, indeed, unusual participant terms are always worth following up, since they may mark theoretically important or interesting phenomena' (Ibid., p. 458). In the interview guide, I had sketched out a few questions concerning life in Syria prior to the war, intended merely as a brief, contextualized background for the coming themes of war, displacement and exile. I was not prepared, however, for the respondents' keenness to dwell on this phase in their life stories, as my concentration initially lay elsewhere. Also, it amazed me to hear that many of the respondents referred to this part of their life in Syria as a 'paradise', or else gave descriptions in such positive terms that they could be embedded in paradisiacal

[83] The full-length version of each article is provided in Appendix 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

metaphors. Obviously, nothing could appear further from an image of paradise than a Syria devastated by years of civil warfare. However, even before the war, Syria was hardly a paradise when viewed from a political and human rights perspective. Yet, the metaphor of a 'paradise lost' was an unmistakable component of these stories. Embedded in this image, religion and religious identifications were fused into nostalgic accounts of a peaceful, prosperous and religiously diversified past. At the same time, however, and to some extent belying this metaphor, there were traces of tension-filled undercurrents that called for an attentiveness towards the ambivalent ways in which Syrian refugees go about conceptualising their past. Thus, this puzzle and the significance that many of my research participants placed on pre-war experiences pushed forward a need to make space in the thesis for a more comprehensive exploration into this phase in their life stories. In order to embrace these divergent stories, the following research question was posed for article 1: In which ways are social relations and ethno-religious identifications of pre-war Syria remembered and narrated by Syrian refugees in exile?

In my attempt to answer the question, I decided to find a theoretical framework in which memory, metaphors and nostalgia could throw light on a 'plural reading of the past' (Ricoeur, 1996, p. 7). I needed a dynamic framework that could mirror the multiple and divergent voices inherent in the empirical material and enrich analyses of pre-war Syria. On the one hand, I was interested in the different ways in which refugees construct and negotiate mnemonic bridges to a paradise lost. On the other hand, I wanted to understand the underlying tensions pertaining to the social landscape of ethno-religious relations. Thus, I took as a starting point, a socio-cultural narrative approach in which individual narratives are viewed as socially discursive practices, yielding a dynamic gateway into people's life-stories (Andrews et al., 2007; Brannen, 2013; Brubaker & Laitin, 1998; Daiute, 2014; Eastmond, 2007; Grbich, 2013; Hjelm, 2014; Shenshav, 2015). Indeed, as pinpointed by Ricoeur, there are always several stories directed towards the same past, rendering the 'identity of a group, culture, people, or nation, […] not that of an immutable substance, nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story' (Ricoeur 1996, p. 7). From this narrative vantage point, I continued to look at the concepts of memory,

nostalgia and metaphors, respectively, as repertoires of lenses into the discursive heterogeneity of Syrian refugee stories. The empirical analysis highlighted two narrative themes: (1) coexistence and diversity: narratives of intercultural and inter-religious relations, and (2) living under authoritarian rule: narratives of fear and compliance. Leading up to the revolution and subsequent civil war, these narratives displayed the ambivalent ways in which Syrian refugees discursively conceptualise the past. Thus, in order to reflect such negotiating dynamics and divergences, I chose the following title for Article 1: 'Negotiating Paradise Lost: Refugee Narratives of Pre-war Syria. A Discursive Approach to Memory, Metaphors and Religious Identifications'.

6.2 Article 2: Experiences during the Syrian revolution and civil war

The second article moves on to deal with a different phase in the life-story of Syrian refugees. It concerns the era that begins with the uprising and revolution in 2011 and the ever-escalating descent into civil war during the first two years of conflict. The study places refugee stories within a framework of two representational metaphors, that of utopia and dystopia. Together these frames illustrate a contested narrative space within which a discursive plurality of Syrian voices takes place. Utopia refers to what many people perceived as a revolutionary new and democratic beginning, filled with exuberant hopes of freedom and justice for all Syrian citizens. Dystopia is descriptive of the opposite sentiments regarding the revolutionary winds of the Arab spring, in which some people viewed the changes as destabilising and threatening. Dystopia, of course, is also evocative of the subsequent and destructive events of violence, war and forced displacement, which has affected the entire Syrian society ever since.

The puzzle that triggered the construction of this article dealt with the question of 'sectarianism', or how ethno-religious affiliations and identity contestations have gained momentum in the Syrian uprising and civil war. We saw that behind the events of 2011 and onwards, there is a long-standing history of peaceful coexistence and intercultural diversity. Although Article 1 served to highlight that

this version of the past may be disputed and more multi-layered than perceived at first sight, it pushed forward an overall and pertinent question as to how Syria could spiral so quickly into violent conflict and fuel divides along sectarian lines. Thus, I was interested in gaining a nuanced perspective of how religion and identification processes operated on the ground and became reflected in refugees' first-hand accounts. This was a perspective that was sorely missing from academic literature on Syria, most of which had offered top-down analyses of the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict. I wanted to access the meaning of this term from the point of view of people's everyday lived experiences. More specifically, I desired to know how ordinary individuals understood, subscribed to, or, alternatively, rejected the meta-discursive framing of sectarianism, and how these negotiations influenced their self-identity as well as their perceptions of the 'religious other'. Hence, the following research question was posed for Article 2: *How are processes of sectariansation during the Syrian revolution and emerging civil war experienced by Syrian refugees on a micro-narrative level, and to what extent do these experiences correspond to socio-political frames operating on a macro level?*

In order to respond to this question, I deemed it necessary first to critically examine the concept of sectarianism and converse with a range of different theoretical interpretations that had attempted to describe its currency in the Syrian conflict.[84] Also, to understand how religious and sub-national identities have been subject to politicisation and vilification under authoritarian rule, I needed to examine the sectarian narrative in the Syrian official discourse. Contextualising the master-narrative landscape of Syria was therefore essential for deciphering the micro-narrative imprints in Syrian refugee voices. These theoretical vantage points led me to move beyond essentialist and instrumentalist understandings of religious and sectarian affiliations, and instead adopt a narrative identity approach (Gaiser, 2017), more attuned with the dynamic realities evident in my empirical material. By replacing the concept of sectarianism with 'sectarianisation', I underscored the need to look at the *processual* dynamics inherent in identity constructions. These

[84] See Al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Balanche, 2018; Browne, 2015; Dixon, 2017; Gaiser, 2017; Haddad, 2017; Hashemi, 2015; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Makdisi, 2017; Phillips, 2015; Pinto, 2017; Tomass, 2016; Wimmen, 2017.

dynamics are shaped by particular historical and contextual factors, as well as by experiences and encounters that mobilise a complex discursive field of individual and public expressions. Given the extremities of revolution and war, the article distinguished four narrative clusters in which personal stories related to experiences of hope, fear, victimisation as well as hate and mistrust. The stories reflected changing and (re)emerging identity patterns, deeply contingent upon memories of the past as well as on the shifting cultural and political frameworks of a present. Thus, in order to reveal how processes of sectarianisation were culturally and socio-politically embedded within a contested narrative landscape, I chose the following title for Article 2: 'Between Utopia and Dystopia: Sectarianisation through Revolution and War in Syrian Refugee Narratives'.[85]

6.3 Article 3: Experiences of escape from Syria and during forced displacement

The third and final article is a chronological continuation of Article 2, as it endeavours to delve more deeply into the Syrian scene of war as a determinant backdrop to the Syrian refugee crisis. More specifically, it is concerned with tracing the intersection of religion in people's experiences of war, displacement and refugeehood, thus placing more substantial weight on the lived and personalised dimension in Syrian testimonies. The puzzle that drove forth the investigation of this study emerged out of an ambiguous empirical reality in which the nexus between religion and forced migration mirrored highly contradictory statements by the research participants. On the one hand, there could be no denying that for many, the traumatic experiences of war, violence and displacement contained religious entanglements that we may characterise as harmful, alienating and destructive. Religion-related issues could at the same time be a cause of, or embedded within, circumstances that led to the escape from Syria, but also function as a destabilising factor during displacement. On the other hand, there were testimonies in which religion was seen to reinforce identities positively or act as psychosocial support and orientation when navigating situations of severe

[85] Published online in March 2019, *Religions*, 10(3), 188. DOI: 10.3390/rel10030188

precarity. These contradictory and (dis)empowering aspects of religion were not merely visible across the segment of stories told by different respondents, but also within stories told by one and the same individual. Thus, seeing how religion and religious identification processes existentially affected the various ways in which Syrians understood and responded to their disruptive life courses, the following research question was posed for Article 3: *To what extent do existential encounters of religion play into life-rupturing experiences of war, forced displacement and refugeehood as reflected in the narrative trajectories of Syrian refugees?*

In order to provide responses to this question, I found it pertinent at first to reiterate the importance of a polyvocal and narrative approach when eliciting experiences of a heterogeneous Syrian refugee population. Indeed, to understand how people make sense of their world and ascribe meaning to their experiences, it was necessary to acknowledge the inherently ambiguous realm of storytelling and the lived dimension it discursively mirrors. Similarly, I needed to find a dynamic framework in which issues of religion could be meaningfully analysed and probed against the paradoxes and tensions of liminal refugee experiences. A reconceptualised understanding of religion *in existentially pivotal circumstances* was thus deemed vital for conversing with the multiplicity of lived realities detected in the empirical material.

Religion as understood in the framework of its lived dimension (Ammerman, 2016) and within existential anthropology (Denizeau, 2017; DeSantis, 2001; Jackson, 2013; Jackson and Piette, 2017) turned out to theoretically unveil the fragmented data material and articulate its divergences more thoroughly. Applying an existential lens allowed for looking at how different forces in life drive forth the simultaneous existence of contradicting ideas concerning issues of religion and identity constructions. Furthermore, it provided the analysis with a vocabulary with which the in-betweens of vulnerability and agency in displacement could be better grasped. In addition, I was intrigued by the typology of chaos, quest and restitution offered by the medical sociologist and narratologist, Frank (2008; 2010; 2013). These categories resonated with the existential feelings of despair and hope witnessed in refugees' life stories and could be used as tools for conversing with the

discontinuities of forced migration. Consequently, the article addressed two narrative clusters of Syrian displacement trajectories. The first dealt with narratives of escape from Syria and the migration-determining moments in which religious violence, identity othering and sectarianisation were seen, at least partially, to play a part. The second was devoted to narratives of refugeehood, in which religion could be seen to provide resilience, orientation and social fellowship amidst journeys of profound fear and uncertainty. Together, these narratives pointed to a realm of 'heterotopia', in which liminal experiences can give way to both trials and transformations. Hence, in order to capture how religion was interwoven in Syrian refugee experiences before and during forced migration, the following title for Article 3 was chosen: 'War, Displacement and Refugeehood: Existential Encounters of Religion in the Syrian Refugee Crisis'.[86]

6.4 Concurrent and divergent dimensions

We may see how these articles, both separately and inter-relationally, contribute to answering the overall research problem posed in this thesis, while at the same time offering independent research results in their own right. The chief commonality among them is that the results are drawn from the same empirical pool of research participants, many of whose testimonies appear in all the three articles. As a reader, one may thus follow some respondents' life-stories through a dynamic trail of narratives from the time of pre-war Syria through to the embarkment of life in exile. Other participant contributions may appear in only one or two articles however, depending on how I have deemed the collected data material as relevant to the thematic articulation of each article. Furthermore, all articles endeavour to represent a polyvocal narrative spectrum in which a broad sample of Syrian voices are explored and discussed. Another commonality pertains to the sociocultural narrative inquiry to which each article constructively adheres. They also share an exploratory and abductive take on qualitative research, viewing the relationship

[86] This article was accepted for peer review on July 20, 2020 by *Entangled Religions*: https://er.ceres.rub.de/. After a positive initial assessment by the journal's editorial board, the paper is currently under double-blind peer review.

between theory and data as mutually enhancing for gaining depth and insight into a research problem.

These concurrences notwithstanding, there are also major divergences that distinguish each article. Differing dimensions are first and foremost discernible in two primary ways. First, the articles address different spatio-temporal realms inherent in Syrian refugee stories. They are divided into three phases in the history of our participants' migratory trajectories and relate to various settings and locations both inside and outside Syria. As such, they touch upon the significance of contextualising stories in time and space. Second, they address different themes and reflect a variety of theoretical lenses that have been used to make sense of the empirical material. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, applying multidisciplinary perspectives rests on the conviction of allowing several theories to converse with the phenomenon under study. As such, each article has engaged with the key theoretical concepts outlined in Chapter 2, albeit from different angles and within different theoretical frameworks. When illustrated (figure 5), we may see how these concurrent and divergent dimensions come to the fore and illuminate both the independent status of each article as well as their interdependency and shared characteristics.

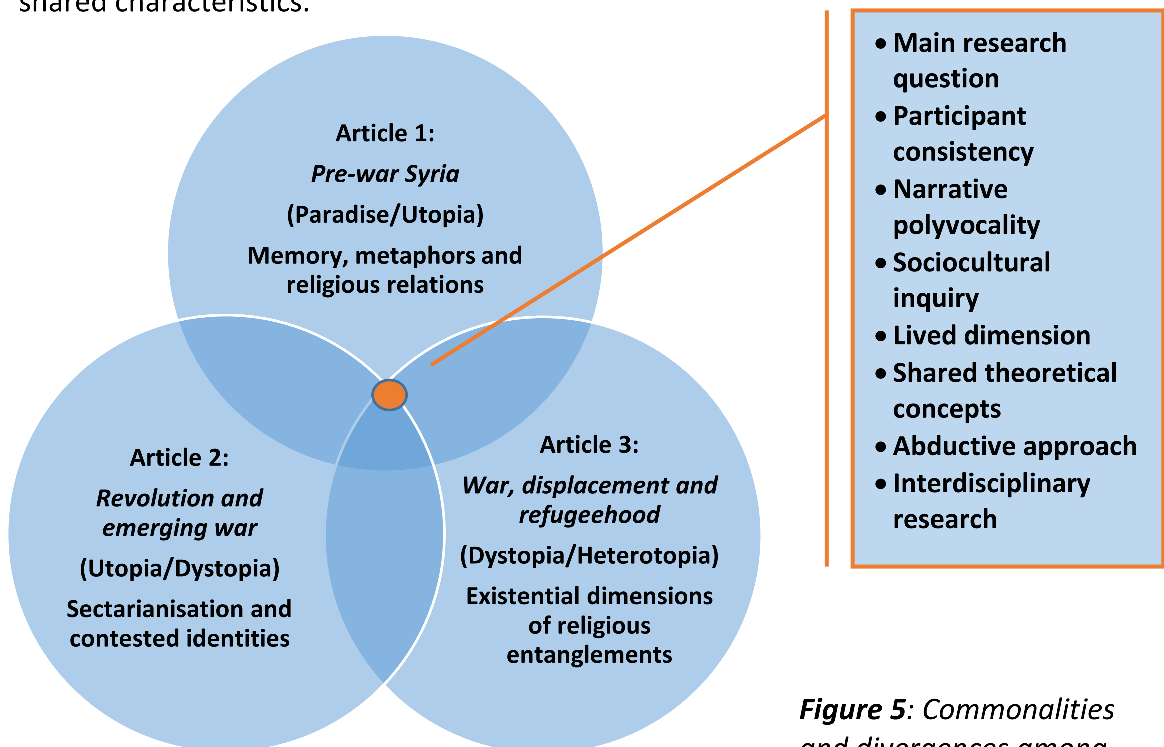

***Figure 5**: Commonalities and divergences among the three articles.*

Chapter 7: Discussion

This PhD-project has attempted to explore how a sample of Syrian refugees residing in Norway encounter, memorise, narrate and discursively negotiate experiences of conflict, religion and identification processes in their forced displacement trajectories. In so doing, I have sketched out theoretical approaches, key terminologies, historical contexts, methodological considerations as well as ethical reflections that have all informed and enlightened the ways I have gone about answering the main research question. In the following chapter, I shall provide a more holistic account of my research results, their theoretical implications as well as their contribution to relevant research debates. By providing an overall discussion of the main research results, I hope to shed a meta-discursive light on their significance for both existing research as well as future inquiries. Inevitably, such a discussion also invites new theoretical perspectives, providing additional layers upon those hitherto applied in the articles. The general thematic orientation of this thesis has been devoted to an exploration into the nexus between religion and migration in the Syrian refugee context. The chapter will therefore start by providing some insight derived from a nuanced understanding of their inter-relationship (7.1). It will then proceed to account for the parameters of time and space when mapping the memory paths and horizons embedded in Syrian refugee stories. It will do so by discussing refugee trajectories within the metaphorical categories of utopia, dystopia and heterotopia (7.2). Finally, the chapter will provide some conclusive remarks as well as sketch out some possible research avenues for studies on an emerging Syrian refugee diaspora (7.3)

7.1 Religion and migration: Exploring the nexus in a Syrian refugee context

During the past few decades, much valuable research has facilitated new perspectives on how faith, spirituality as well as religious practices are integral to globalised migration flows and transnationalism (Beckford, 2015; Drønen, 2018; Ebaugh, 2010; Ebaugh & Chafetz 2002; Frederiks, 2016; Hagan, 2012; Hock, 2008,

2011; Levitt, 2007; Levitt et al., 2011; Pine, 2014; Tweed 2006; Vasquez 2008; Wong 2014). However, there has been a lack of attention to the particularities concerning religion and *forced* migration, prompting many scholars to argue for a reconceptualisation of how religion intersects with processes of displacement (Ager & Ager, 2017; Eghdamian, 2016; Frederiks & Nagy, 2014; Goždiak & Shandy 2002; Hollenbach, 2014; Saunders et al., 2016; Wilson & Mavelli, 2017). One of the primary contributions of this thesis has been to offer a more nuanced and reconceptualised understanding of the nexus between religion and migration in the Syrian refugee context. As such, it has attempted to feed both theoretically and empirically into interdisciplinary debates in religion and (forced) migration research.

7.1.1 Understanding conflict-induced displacement

In relation to migration debates, I have addressed the need to look at the Syrian displacement crisis as a different type of migration, distinguished from a catch-all perspective on contemporary regular and irregular patterns of human mobility. I have thus argued for a more sensitively attuned approach to the life-rupturing dimensions of conflict-induced migration, viewing forced displacement as deserving of attention within the broader category of migration research. I contend, with other scholars, that contemporary migration patterns are complex and may not readily be distinguished along the axis of voluntary vs. involuntary migration determinants (Carling, 2015; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Erdal & Oeppen, 2018; Leurs et al., 2020; Mavelli & Wilson, 2017; McDowell, 2013; Odden, 2018; Vigil & Abidi, 2018). Indeed, as shown in Article 3, migration-determining factors among Syrians move along a dynamic spectrum between push and pull factors, highlighting that 'degrees of volition and constraints are constantly at play' (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). Their accounts serve to show that vulnerability and agency are not necessarily binary opposites, but work in complex ways both before, during and after a decision to migrate has been made. Nevertheless, any personal journey is embedded within larger stories of events and experiences which determine why people decide to leave their country of origin. When studying refugees and other migrants who flee as a result of armed conflict, civil war and violent uprooting, I have therefore stressed the need to look more carefully at the *coerced* nature of

such movements. This means to contextualise migratory experiences and view them in relation to a broader canvas of various cultural, historical and political processes. Not least have I deemed it important not to dismiss the factors of disruption, destruction and chaos when exploring themes of migration and religion in times of crisis.

Whilst we may see that Syrian migratory experiences *per se* are only properly addressed in the third and final article, the thesis as a whole contributes to enrich our view of migration beyond displacement determining circumstances. Indeed, the impetus of this research has been concerned with providing a fuller picture *behind* the culmination of the largest displacement crisis in modern times. As such, Article 1 and 2 are not merely descriptive of the processes leading up to the actual moment when the research participants of this study decided to leave Syria. They are also an empirical testimony to view migration more holistically and as multi-layered journeys through space and time. Thus, in order to trace different spatialities and temporalities in the life-story of migrants, I have found it pertinent to access the narrative landscape of Syrians and view their stories as representative of both backward-looking and forward-oriented processes (Pine, 2014). These trajectories include a shifting present as well as real and imagined dimensions of migratory pasts and futures. When viewed in their entirety, therefore, the three articles show how the Syrian displacement crisis can never entirely be understood in isolation from its historical and socio-political constituencies. Nor is it possible to understand conflict-induced migration without accounting for its reverberating impact on individual life-courses. Indeed, one of the primary objectives of this thesis has been to unlock the experiential and existential realm of conflict-induced displacement precisely through a combined micro-macro narrative lens. In so doing, it has attempted to fill a gap in which the plurality of voices and experiences of Syrian refugees have been missing.

7.1.2 Understanding the dynamics of religion

When considering the above-mentioned implications of conflict-induced displacement, this thesis has argued for a more complex and sophisticated understanding of how religion intersects with such processes. Deciphering the

entanglements of religion in the Syrian conflict and resulting refugee crisis has revealed a highly mixed and contentious field of research findings. In it, we may discern that the 'bits and pieces' (Afdal, 2013) of what we deem as 'religious issues' are contingent upon contrasting views as well as shifting times and spaces. Considering that Syrians display both controversial ideas about religion as well as varying degrees of affiliation to particular ethno-religious identities, it has been pertinent to avoid over-essentialising the role of religion for all Syrians and at all times (Beaman et al., 2017). Rather, in order to meet the multiplicity of lived realities, I have included in my unit of analysis the variables and in-betweens of religious and secular voices. Consequently, I have approached religion broadly, embracing not only its socio-relational, cultural, political and spiritual implications, but also its imaginative and narrative dimensions. The thesis has paid special attention to the multifaceted role of religion in identity conflicts, thus revealing aspects that are considered both negative and positive in the stories people tell. The results have shown that how particular religious identities are emphasised, acted out or contested is significantly shaped by events and experiences relating to particular times and places. In addition, there is a minority and majority debate that cuts into this discussion and which must be understood in relation to the multi-ethnic social fabric of past and present Syria.

We may see that a common denominator in this dynamic framework of interpretation has been to adopt a bottom-up view and engage with the lived complexities and challenges of religious heterogeneity. This multidimensional approach has been considered the best way to access the 'fields of discourses' (Hock, 2011, p. 57) through which meaning and interpretation is contextually established. It has helped to understand how religion simultaneously manifests itself in ways both extremely empowering and resourceful as well as disempowering and destructive in migratory trajectories. Navigating the in-betweens of these multiple dimensions has demanded a dynamic vocabulary that can only be offered by crossing and combining disciplines and approaches (Korte & Van Liere, 2017). Indeed, applying multiple lenses on religion and identity issues within the frames of forced migration has been a significant trademark in all the three articles.

7.2 Time and space: Mapping migratory paths and horizons

In order to adequately capture the complex realities of religion and migration in Syrian refugee experiences, the thesis has argued for an attentive look at the parameters of space and time. It thus feeds into a call made by various scholars to bring temporal and spatial contexts back into migration research (Dahinden, 2012; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Berg, 2018; Hardwick, 2014; Knott & Vasquez, 2014; Meeus, 2012). As noted by Hardwick, current literature has continued to 'weakly theorize space-time relationships and the impacts of space, place, and time on migrants' (2014, p. 209). The trajectory approach I have applied in this research has shown how key experiences in individual Syrian life stories are always temporally and spatially situated, embedded in both real and imaginary worlds of references. As such, the research views migratory trajectories not merely as physical and linear movements, but also as social, existential and symbolic forms of mobility. Furthermore, it acknowledges that trajectories, as migratory horizons and paths, can best be accessed through a narrative lens in which memory and metaphors play a vital role. In the three articles, I have thus alluded to how memories pertaining to the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis can be further contextualised through the spatio-temporal metaphors of utopia, dystopia and heterotopia. Together, these categories may be described as representational and overlapping frames within which the entanglements of religion and identity discourses dynamically fluctuate.

7.2.1 The roots and routes of narrative memory

When mapping the paths and horizons in Syrian refugee narratives, it has been vital to address memory as one of the primary vehicles through which they are narratively reconstructed. I have therefore approached narratives as 'path of memories' (Assmann & Conrad, 2010, p. 6) and religion as tied to 'a chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) that links vital aspects of past, present and future. Borrowing on Clifford (1997), the terms 'roots' and 'routes' are useful for our overall discussion. The roots of migrants play a vital role in distinguishing who they are, both individually and collectively. The term thus speaks to issues of ethnic,

religious and cultured identities, bound in place, socialized through time and contextualized in historical and political circumstances. Whilst roots allude to the ideals of the past, to dwelling, belonging and attachment to place, they are also linked to the present by forming the basis for negotiating new experiences and navigating alien terrains. Conversely, routes speak to the multiple and multidirectional ways in which migrants cross, travel and sojourn in processes of displacement. This may entail physical mobility as much as psycho-social strategies and existential manoeuvring along the 'broken journeys' into refugeehood (Jackson, 2013). Rather than viewing these terms as dichotomous, my research emphasises their interdependence. Hence, both roots and routes engulf human experiences, enabling memory practices to constantly cross the boundaries of 'here and there', as well as 'then and now'.

In relation to narrative memory, the thesis has argued for an imaginative capacity and attentive listening when representing contested and contesting refugee stories. Stressing the importance of polyvocal testimonies, it has been vital to conduct an open-ended conversation with the empirical findings, in order to acknowledge the disputed, manipulated, buried or silenced aspects of memories. The results have shown that what is accounted 'front-stage' and what is hidden 'back-stage' (Goffman, 1971) concerning Syrians' discourses on religion and identity, is often tied to cultural taboos and political constraints. Whilst these restrictions are still lingering on in exile, many Syrians have tried to break free and (re)articulate their identities in new ways. As such, the thesis proposes a dynamic perspective on Syrian refugees' memory practices. They may be viewed as a human 'struggle' (Eastmond, 2007, p. 259) to cross boundaries, overcome past traumas as well as combat various religious and socio-political infringements. Simultaneously, they may be important devices for re-orientation and explain how people reconstitute themselves in the face of ruptured life-courses. Also, as testified in one refugee story, going down memory lane may not be a desirable path for all, as the pain of remembering can be replaced by forgetting as a strategy for restoring order out of chaos. Borrowing on the terms of Koselleck (2004), I shall discuss how the three articles combined address these multifarious memory practices as 'spaces of experiences' that

generate various ‘horizons of expectations’ (Ibid., p. 261) among the Syrian refugee population.

7.2.2 Utopia

As already mentioned, Article 1 arose from a puzzle in which the metaphor of paradise and a longing for paradise lost appeared in many narratives concerning pre-war Syria. The metaphor was applied across the segment of research participants and held different connotations I deemed interesting for further scrutiny. Narratives describing interreligious tolerance, intercultural togetherness, and peaceful coexistence appeared to be woven into the identity fabric of most Syrians. Some referred to the long multicultural history of Syria as a uniting legacy that transcended other ethno-religious identity markers. Others described the personal friendships or the brotherly relations that existed in cosmopolitan and multireligious neighbourhoods. For the women who took part in a mixed religious/secular focus group discussion, it was a broad consensus regarding the non-issue of religious identities and differing faiths. Most appeared to agree that co-workers, co-students, neighbours, and friends were first and foremost regarded as fellow citizens and not as intrinsically different based on ethnic, religious, or tribal affiliations. Thus, part of the findings showed that the salience of religion and religious identities appeared to be either less visible or, for the most part, positively fused into nostalgic accounts of a peaceful, prosperous, and religiously diversified past.

Through a theoretical lens of memory, nostalgia, and metaphors, it was possible to analyse these results within the spatio-temporal unit of utopia. As shown by Ricouer (1976), the longing for and belonging to a place and time in which feelings of paradise are evoked, are not merely ideas projected forwards to a future time but also embody powerful symbolic representations of the past. When the participants expressed mixed feelings of pride and pain when talking about their peaceful and convivial interreligious relations, it must be understood in contrast to the destructive social divisions caused by war and displacement. The utopian imagery could serve to explain how, when something meaningful has been lost, nostalgia pushes forth a longing for a golden past and helps establish a sense of continuity in

situations of total discontinuity (Bräuchler & Menard, 2017; Miztal, 2016; Synnes, 2015; Volkan, 2006). However, as evidenced by the same empirical material, Article 1 shows that narratives of pre-war Syria were divided and not unequivocally positive regarding a paradise lost. While some stories were indicative of interreligious tensions lurking beneath the surface of harmonious coexistence, others were recounted in fear of or in compliance with, the political realities on the ground. These disparate findings prompted me to probe memory practices against the ethno-religious identity politics of modern-day Syria and interpret their negative and fear-inducing side-effects for the Syrian society (Bandak, 2014; Nome 2016; Rabo, 2012; Van Dam 2017; Wedeen, 2015; Worren, 2007). Thus, in order to locate the snake embedded within the tales of paradise, it was necessary to understand how oppressive mechanisms of the authoritarian regime had deprived the Syrian people of healthy discussions around political and religious differences.

When using the utopian metaphor, my research has shown the need to carefully scrutinise discursive expressions against the cracks and in-betweens of past tensions, whether they are perceived to be political, religious, or regarding human relations. If we, in the words of Levitas (2011), define utopia as 'a desire for a better life' (p. 191), the empirical material shows that imagery of such a life is drawn from both past and future aspirations. We may see these divergences most explicitly articulated when moving into the discussion of Article 2 of the thesis. Here, the counter-narratives to the tales of an idealised past gained relevance in relation to the Arab Spring and the awakening Syrian revolution. For those who actively took part in the uprising, talk of the good old days could be perceived as both an ignorant and deceitful sort of nostalgia. For some, it obliterated the very reasons behind the fundamental calls for change, freedom, and democracy demanded by the Syrian revolution. Portraying a glorified and flawless version of pastime Syria could thus be seen to undermine the raison d'être upon which the revolutionary ideals were laid. It could also support the regime's master narrative of being the sole provider of security, peace, and prosperity. Thus, many of the interlocutors taking part in my study placed the notion of a utopia at the moment when the revolution started. They perceived it as the beginning of a grand new era, in which a

‘tsunami of hope’ would usher a chance to ‘breathe freedom’ and be ‘born again’. Different understandings of paradise thus entered the scene, as exemplified by the many slogans and revolutionary songs celebrating radical changes and exalting a new Syria in otherworldly terms.[87] For many, the dream of a democratic Syria envisioned a new form of living together in which secular and ethno-religious identities were neither silenced nor subdued, but rather incorporated into an equally shared space of justice for all citizens. For some of the Sunni Muslim respondents, the revolution was an opportunity to demand justice for their long-held underprivileged status as well as a way for re-appropriating their religious identity with renewed fervour. Examples also show that the fear of being kidnapped and imprisoned by state intelligence prevented some from standing up to Assad’s regime.

While we may see the revolution as a space in which people could actively articulate changes and aspirations, also in relation to religion and identity discourses, my findings show that it was a deeply contested space from the beginning. Voiced perhaps most strongly by some Christian respondents, the uprising was perceived as threatening and destabilising, inaugurating feelings of repulsion and fear rather than hope and freedom. As such, their stories aligned more with the master narrative offered by the regime, in which demonstrators were characterised as terrorists and sectarian fanatics as well as foreign conspiracists, intent on destroying the multi-religious mosaic of Syria. At the same time, however, findings relayed that among people with minority status, some also sympathised with the regime critics, but felt either threatened or alienated when the revolution turned increasingly violent and sectarian. As the dreams of the revolution failed to materialise and the country plunged into civil war, it left behind another ‘lost space’. Some of the respondents saw it as an existential task to refill that space in exile, keeping the spark of the revolutionary narrative alive. Others expressed a sense of defeat, or lack of hope in the face of the dystopic nightmare that was to befall all Syrian citizens. Hence, the research has attempted to attract attention to the heteroglossia of grassroots experiences, claiming ‘history from

[87] See Abouzeid (2018, p. 157): ‘Paradise, paradise, paradise. Our homeland is paradise!’.

below' (Burke, 2019) as an important lens through which ordinary people view historically significant turning points from very different perspectives.

7.2.3 Dystopia

When entering the realms of war and displacement stories proper, as discussed in Article 2 and 3, my research shows that refugee stories are evocative of different aspects of dystopian experiences. Certainly, the mere backdrop of violence that increasingly shaped an everyday life with the sound of bombs, shootings, and artillery were enough to cause shock and disbelief among all the participants. Many of the respondents said that these dramatic and changing realities were hard to fathom, let alone accept as a new kind of normalcy when life as they knew it had been turned upside down. When internalised, one respondent described the war as 'an eternal hell' where suffering and horror reigned. Another person described it as 'an unimaginable tragedy', the mere scale of which will leave anyone 'paralysed'. Engulfed in these experiences of death and disaster, stories revealed that an existential kind of insecurity penetrated the very social fabric of intercultural and interreligious relations in Syria. It was a kind of fragmentation that appeared to emerge along ethno-religious lines, and which became visible in people's work-life, in public discourses, on the streets, as well as in conversations among friends and family members. One respondent described these divisive transformations as a form of toxic atmosphere that was gradually 'infesting all Syrians from inside'.

When discussing these changes within the framework of sectarianism, the results in Article 2 showed that whether secular or religious, participants across different ethno-religious backgrounds were exposed to mistrust, alienation, and social degradation, severely shaping how they perceived their own identity status as well as that of the (religious) others. Religion became appropriated as both a weapon and a shield for warring parties on the battlefield, dramatically affecting the felt reality for ordinary people on the ground. Indeed, research into the macro-narrative landscape in Syrian war discourses showed that all parties in the conflict appropriated derogatory sectarian language that exacerbated identity-othering and legitimised religion-related violence. As testified by many of the research participants, being caught between opposing factions and conspiracies pushed

forward coerced forms of allegiances or situations in which balancing religious identities became a matter of life and death. One respondent provided a vivid example when his Sunni Muslim identity was questioned and severely threatened by both the regime forces and Islamist opposition fighters. Another respondent said, ‘I feared them all’ when describing his multiple displacements within Syria as a perilous series of manoeuvres between areas where the regime, ISIL, and other opposition groups were fighting for control. Although some participants took a meta-perspective and viewed the war as ‘wrapped under a religious cover’, cynically used by parties to disguise other power-related agendas, there could be no denying that the disempowering vicissitudes of religious identity politics were sifting through the stories conveyed in my material. As such, the various voices among Christian minority groups as well as Muslim majority and minority groups reflected processes of sectarianisation in which fear-inducing war experiences reinforced in-group solidarity as well as exclusionary identity discourses.

Rather than viewing identity contestations as manifestations of an ancient hatred, the research as discussed in Article 2, argued for taking a narrative identity approach (Gaiser, 2017) and understanding identity dynamics as shaped by particular contexts, experiences, and encounters that mobilise discursive fields in micro and macro levels of society. It thus fed into one of the most important incentives of socio-cultural research, namely to provide insights into the historical and political climates impacting on every storyteller’s life (Andrews, 2014; Grbich, 2013; Jackson, 2013). Indeed, as asserted by Andrews (2014), discussing political narratives anthropologically always involves ‘an examination of the relationship between the stories of individuals and the stories of the communities in which they live’ (p. 355). The research also heeded the call for taking the discrepancies of historical memory more ardently into account when discussing the religio-political roots of the Syrian conflict (Balanche, 2018; Lefèvre, 2013; Pearlman, 2016; Tomass, 2016; Volkan, 2006). One major finding I have called *the haunting of Hama* is a testimony to which Syrians’ memory practices invoke events from the past and re-inscribe them into the present. It refers to the domestic turbulence between the ruling Ba’ath regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, which culminated with the Hama

massacre in 1982. Shadows of this incident, and the processes that lead up to it, resurfaced in most of my participants' stories, appearing to collectively affect entire generations across the ethno-religious divides. However, the research showed that Sunni Muslims, Christians and Alawites had deeply contested reasons for reinterpreting these events into the current conflict. When viewed as long-buried narratives of fear, it was possible to discern how memory imprints had created narratives of victimisation which gained renewed currency when the Syrian revolution and civil war broke out. For some of the Christians and Alawites, the haunting of Hama evoked fear of minority marginalisation and religious persecution at the hands of Islamist extremists. For some of the Sunni Muslims on the other hand, it replicated a sense of being under perpetual surveillance by the regime and of being targeted as prime adversaries based on their (perceived) religious identity affiliations. Hence, we may see that some of these respective narratives of victimisation could be well-founded from a particular group's perspective, while simultaneously reproducing latent tensions from the past that stimulated sectarian stereotyping of the religious other.

When moving on to Article 3 of the thesis, my research showed that the image of dystopia serves to describe spaces of experience that were highly determinant for people's decisions to flee, either internally in Syria at first or, finally, out of the country. Indeed, as recounted by one respondent, 'it was fear on all the roads leading out of Syria'. In fact, my research shows that fear – in all its modalities (e.g. Pearlman, 2016) – contributed to inform a complex backdrop to the narratives of refugeehood. Both identity battles of the past, as well as the war's chaotic scenes of havoc and horror, were ingrained within these omnipresent realities of fear. Indeed, in order to understand the existentially overwhelming circumstances of which violence, insecurity, and upheaval pushed forward the largest displacement crisis in modern history, I needed to converse with a vocabulary that could articulate modalities of chaos and fear more perceptively. Drawing on existential philosophy and anthropology (Heidegger, 1962; Jackson 2013; Jackson & Piette, 2017) as well as Frank's narrative typology of chaos, quest, and restitution (2008; 2010; 2013), it was possible to discern how religion and identity ambiguously played into the

arbitrary 'turning points and catastrophes' of my respondents' life (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 169). As such, the research has provided a hitherto overlooked dimension on the (dis)empowering aspects of religion in the Syrian refugee crisis, pointing to a heterotopic landscape of in-betweens when studying religion in liminal experiences of displacement.

7.2.4 Heterotopia

Although heterotopia is a term I have borrowed from Foucault (1986) to describe the ambiguous realm of liminality in Syrians' stories of displacement and refugeehood, it is, in fact, descriptive of all the trajectories I have investigated in my research. As a metaphor for the in-betweens of memories, encounters, and negotiating practices, it envelops the physical, emotional, and mental experiences we have discussed as pertinent for an overall and dynamic understanding of religion and (forced) migration. However, I have applied the term more analytically in Article 3, as a prism for understanding existential dimensions of Syrian displacement trajectories. When recounted by the research participants, migratory journeys were at once reflective of new and different kinds of dystopia, in which the precariousness of life was seen to engulf the trials of crossing land and sea in search of safer havens. Although removed from the actual scenes of war, participants shared memories of new fear-inducing sensations that simultaneously reflected profound aspects of transformation, choices, and redirections. As floating pieces of places (Foucault, 1986), their journeys thus represented multiple heterotopias in which the perceived dichotomies between vulnerability and agency needed further scrutinizing. By offering a critical examination of religion and identity re/deconstructions in these stories, the research was able to identify some of the different and contradicting ways in which religion intersects with forced migration.

The results showed that, for many, migration could be a 'theologizing experience' (Smith 1978, in Frederiks, 2016, p. 186), in which religious faith and fellowship provided resilience, hope, and identity reaffirmation. For some, religion could articulate a divine framing for experiences oscillating between life and death, thus helping to vocalise a powerful 'semantic of survival' (Perl, 2019, p. 19). Religion was also seen to relocate people to a sense of a secure place in the god-forsaken non-

spaces of displacement. Whether in the desert, at sea, or along border crossings, the precarity of certain places appeared to be alleviated through religious companionship, in which prayers, rituals, and togetherness provided a sense of 'communitas' (Turner, 1995) and structure in an otherwise drifting and unstructured existence. This resonates with spatial studies on religion that views religion as an inherently social phenomenon, existing and expressing itself in and through space (Knott, 2005). It also reverberates with studies that see religion function as an appropriate medium that speaks to the transitional and liminal stages of migration journeys (Hagan, 2013; Levitt, 2007). However, some stories in my material contradicted religion's role in providing meaning and comfort during displacement. Rather, the social alienation experienced during war in Syria appeared, for some, to reinforce feelings of animosity and estrangement. Indeed, as recounted by one respondent, 'Syrians have a problem with each other', and displacement in her mind only served to intensify separation and fragmentation along political and ethno-religious lines. Such discrepancies in the material invited for transcending taken-for-granted assumptions of religion and acknowledged the complex multi-vocalities inherent in diverse experiences.

We may deduce that for those who escaped Syria, the utopian impulse (Levitas, 2011) envisioning a better way of life was no longer tied to the home country, but to an undefined space of refuge elsewhere. In the words of one respondent, there was 'an urge to get out of fear and the need to get to safety'. At the point of being dislocated from Syria, respondents were painfully aware of the impossibility of return, thus pushing their quest for safety and survival in different directions. Indeed, when paraphrasing Bauman (2003), it may be said that the *topos* in their utopian yearning had ceased to exist, as the Syria they once knew was left in ruins. Nevertheless, when many of the respondents suffered from disillusionment about the future and lacked any safe reference points, thinking of Syria could invigorate nostalgic memories of an idealised past. Indeed, as noted by Jackson (2002), crisis 'creates a consciousness of that which has been lost' (p. 122); even when that loss, as shown in my research, represents a space of memory which was differentiated and in flux from the beginning.

When locating religion in these multiple geographies and directionalities of in-between places, the research has argued for reconceptualising the complex and dynamic realities of migration journeys. Heterotopia may not then merely denote non-spaces, in which religion and identities are stuck in existential perils. They are also moving spaces in which hope and new horizons of expectations are generated. Thus, stories of existential encounters of religion during war, displacement, and refugeehood as shown in Article 3, move along a continuum where both extreme forms of vulnerability and agency exist simultaneously. From a lived religion point of view, we may see that the (dis)empowering role of religion reveals types of dynamics operating on both internal subjective levels as well all on external and socio-political levels. I have regarded these micro-macro related intersections as socio-culturally relevant when studying religion and conflict-induced displacement. As noted by contemporary prominent refugee scholars (Crawley & Jones 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020), it is precisely the lived, spatial, and temporal dimensions of refugee's lives that are often conspicuously missing from academic research, narrowing our conceptual and empirical understanding of migration.

Hence, when tracing lived experiences of religion through time and space in the Syrian refugee context, my research has attempted to provide a more holistic and nuanced account. It has underscored the need to look at the nexus of religion and migration as representative of dynamic processes, enveloping a range of social and existential (mis)encounters, emotions, and contradicting imaginings. It has thus applied a spatio-temporal frame of trajectories as a transformative lens through which Syrian refugee stories can be contextualised and more meaningfully analysed. By approaching trajectories as a storied landscape and a discursive field, the research has been able to show the various ways in which memories, metaphors, and life-rupturing events are subject to shared and contested meaning-making. In so doing, the three articles have seen narratives not merely as a fascinating gateway into other people's world, but also as essential vehicles for understanding the narrative battles and bridges of religion and identity discourses. By offering perspectives from below, and from ordinary people whose voices are often neglected in public and academic discussion, the research project as a whole has

provided ethical, empirical, and theoretical arguments that I hope will feed into new understandings of the Syrian conflict and its resulting refugee crisis.

7.3 Narrative battles and bridges: Reflecting future research possibilities

As mentioned previously, at one point in the research journey, I had to make the difficult decision to omit the exile dimension of my empirical material from the inquiry. Due to the short amount of time the research participants had spent in Norway, I realised that further research would be needed to assess how issues of religion and identity play out in the new contexts of resettlement. However, several fascinating themes emerged in the material that are worth mentioning as a closing statement to this research. Having traced the Syrian refugees' journeys through different temporal phases and spaces of location, from before the war to resettlement in Norway, it would feel somehow inconclusive not to include some aspects of my findings in these final reflections. As Syrians now comprise one of the largest refugee populations in the world, it is to be expected that a new body of Syrian diaspora studies will attract scholarship for many years to come. The following themes are thus not considered exhaustive to the range of possible research options. Rather, they provide a glimpse of some continual aspects of narrative battles and bridges that my research participants have shared from their life in exile. As such, they may be deemed interesting for future academic inquires.

7.3.1 Exploring the in-betweens of life in exile

As my research results have shown, the precariousness of life has been visible in the trials of Syrian refugees through years of authoritarianism, revolution, war, and displacement. What is discernible in many of the stories gathered is that such instability does not necessarily cease after refuge is found elsewhere. New forms of chaos may be manifested during phases of resettlement as shadows of a painful past merge with expectations for a future; all the while new experiences of marginalisation, estrangement, and socio-economic challenges can add to the strains of the present. Furthermore, the very notion of exile, as reflected by Said

(2001), can be likened to an existential form of chaos in which separation from one's native country and displacement to territories of not-belonging create the void of a 'discontinuous state of being' (p. 177). Indeed, resettlement can establish new circumstances of in-betweens, as the process of displacement generates an unfinished condition of not yet belonging 'here' but no longer 'there' (La Barbera, 2015, p. 3). Whilst many of the participants in this study expressed gratitude and immense relief at having found shelter in a peaceful country, the sense of being dislocated from Syria and not yet integrated into Norwegian society summoned new liminal feelings of being betwixt and between. Added to these sentiments was the element of guilt that, for some, weighed heavily on life in exile. Such guilt could take many forms, from simply having survived when other compatriots did not, to remorse at having left loved ones behind in Syria.[88] Politically too, some expressed guilt at having given up on the revolutionary cause or else ceased to harbour any future hopes for Syria. I find that these psychosocial aspects of loss, remorse, estrangement, and guilt are deserving of more academic attention since they cut so directly into people's existential challenges for establishing meaning and purpose in exile.

7.3.2 Religious life and intercultural relations

My research also distinguished some emergent patterns of religious and intercultural life in exile and; as can be expected, they showed significant variations among a heterogeneous Syrian refugee population. Some would actively seek out spiritual fellowship in churches and mosques in the vicinity of their neighbourhoods whereas others would adhere to more private forms of religious practice. Some of the Muslim participants found that publicly displaying their religious affiliation could draw negative attention from the society, including perceived degrees of Islamophobic resentment. Those professing more conservative attitudes also expressed concern for their children's future regarding protecting traditional values against secularism and sexual promiscuity. Among the liberals and atheists who

[88] One Syrian refugee expressed this feeling as follows, 'Today, I feel how all Syrians in exile feel guilty and depressed. You just can't comprehend this nightmare unless it happens to you'. Quote taken from Pearlman & Mrie (2018).

took part in the study, many expressed a sense of liberation from living in a society in which identity labels are less associated with religious affiliation and where freedom of thought is a constitutional law. However, some had also experienced undue pressure from fellow Syrians to show greater compliance with moral and religious values. Discourses surrounding religious identity are bound to erupt as many refugees, notably in Europe, are questioning traditional religion or abandoning it outright.[89] As recounted by one participant in the study, 'I face a double fight here in Norway. As an Alawite, I am looked upon as a traitor to the Syrian revolution. But being an atheist is considered worse. I try to uphold a sense of dignity, but internal suspicion tears the Syrians apart'. Another participant stated that it is not so much religion as politics that counts, 'What matters here is whether you are pro- or anti-Assad'. These statements show that, for some, both (non)religious and political affiliations are at stake when navigating intercultural relations among Syrians in exile. My research findings corroborate a study published in 2018 on Syrian diaspora groups in other European countries. It concluded that in all the countries represented, it was clearly visible that the same political, ethnic, and religious tensions that escalated and perpetuated the conflict back in Syria, were reproduced in the European Syrian diaspora. It also showed that host countries can provide safe and neutral spaces for reflection and dialogue among Syrians in exile, highlighting the potential role of diasporas to act as agents of change and peace.[90]

Contrary to my experiences from working with other national refugee groups, who relatively quickly form organisational groups and national fellowships, the Syrian community seemed, at least at the time when the interviews took place, to have been less inclined towards such socialisation. This is not to say that Syrians do not meet and socialise privately, forming friendships across religious and political divides. Most of the participants also underscored the obligation of solidarity toward fellow nationals, particularly in providing help and assistance for newly

[89] See al-Ali (2017). On Rising Apostasy Among Syrian Youths, *Al-Jumhuriya*: https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/al-jumhuriya-fellowship/on-rising-apostasy

[90] 'Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe: Mapping Their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom' (2018). Danish Refugee Council and Maastrich University.

arrived refugees. However, as echoed by many, people were wary of talking about sensitive issues, religion and politics being considered particularly volatile in terms of experiences of mistrust and disunity. Included were some participants' fears of infiltration by agents of the regime and war criminals from different sides of the conflict hiding as refugees among their communities. I believe that many of these intercultural tensions and fears stem from the fact that the Syrian war is an ongoing and unresolved conflict, naturally asserting its continuous and disproportionate impact on Syrians abroad. However, this is not to say that considerable changes may have occurred in the Norwegian Syrian diaspora since my empirical material was gathered. As was shown in the above-mentioned study, Syrians in other European countries have displayed a great diversity for organising networks and activities that relate to integration in the host country. As we do not yet have any similar studies for the Norwegian context, it calls for a more careful mapping of intercultural, interreligious, and organisational relations among Syrians in Norway, both on local and national levels.

7.3.3 Transnational life and future aspirations

Related to mapping the social and relational networks described above, is the need to conduct more research on the transnational ties and aspirations among Syrians in exile. My precursory findings showed that Syrians did engage in transnational activities, albeit in different and uneven ways. Most of the respondents were, for example, involved in financing remittances, which helped to secure their economically deprived families back home. Also, many followed the news from Syria whilst simultaneously showing deep mistrust for the validity of information that was communicated through diverse media outlets. Some also engaged politically, continuing the revolutionary fight through social awareness campaigns and cultural activities. However, as life in Norway was rife with challenges as well as new opportunities, many expressed that most of their efforts were invested in learning the language and pursuing educational and professional ambitions. As a researcher, having followed some of these personal trajectories in resettlement, I have been deeply impressed by how quickly many of the research participants have integrated themselves in society, learning the language to an almost fluent degree

and creating new lives for themselves and their families. It has not puzzled me that these investments have been immensely time-consuming and personally demanding, leaving little space for engaging more actively in transnational relations.

We may, however, also view these investments as important and forward-looking strategies that have helped curb sensations of frustration and hopelessness regarding the situation in Syria. Given that the Syrian conflict has progressed with no end in sight, many Syrians I have talked to have felt demotivated about entering the space of peace and reconciliation. Such sentiments, I believe, must be understood against the general mistrust and fragmentation that continues to divide Syrian nationals in exile. Another factor stems from a perceived feeling that 'the fate of their country is out of the hands of Syrians themselves'.[91] Thus, envisioning new horizons and paths for the country they left folds into the difficult political conversations that many Syrians abroad either tend to avoid or feel discouraged to speak about. Certainly, these difficulties do not stem from a lack of love and caring for Syria. On the contrary, as exemplified in a conversation I had with one of the respondents, the love for Syria is an ever-present reality that deeply informs exile's aspirations:

> Whenever I look back on Syria, my heart is bleeding. We don't know what we can do but continue our life here and look forward. We need to keep going and hope that the next generations can rebuild Syria and experience peace. (…) You know, we have this expression among ourselves that we Syrians are doomed by hope.

What the respondent was referring to, was actually a well-known idiom created by the Syrian poet Saadallah Wannous, 'We are doomed by hope, and what happens today cannot be the end of history'.[92] I perceive this phrase to represent a positive anchor for Syrians in displacement. As Syrians pave the way to a future and navigate new contexts of belonging, different sets of narrative battles and bridges are bound

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[91] Ibid.

[92] The Arabic term, *mahkumun bil-amal*, has been translated to 'condemned by hope' and 'sentenced by hope'; although after 2011, the expression gained fresh currency and was translated to 'doomed by hope'. See also: https://www.space-org.no/event/the-question-of-syria-doomed-by-hope/

to be raised and negotiated. This points to the continual need for conducting narrative inquiries into people-related research and keep attentive listening an ethical virtue when studying refugees and other migrants. Indeed, as eloquently expressed by Jackson (2002), refugee stories epitomise key portals into which dense experiential realms can be better understood and existentially acknowledged:

> For refugees, their stories remain open, like wounds, for as long as it takes for dispersed families to be reunited, for lines of communication between them to be re-established, for the suffering and uncertainty in the homeland to end, and for the shock of resettlement to pass. (p. 96)
>
> [Stories also] bind people together (…). It is this sharing in the reliving of a tragedy, this sense of communing in a common loss, that gives stories their power, not to forgive or redeem the past but to unite the living in the simple affirmation that they exist, that they have survived. (p. 103)

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Appendix 1:

Article 1

Article 1

Løland, I. (2019). Negotiating paradise lost: Refugee narratives of pre-war Syria - A discursive approach to memory, metaphors and religious identifications.
European Journal of Cultural Studies, *23*(5), 749-767.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419869352

Abstract

How are social relations and ethno-religious identifications of pre-war Syria remembered and narrated by Syrian refugees in exile? Crossing the abyss of war, and negotiated through the shifting times and sites of forced displacement, this article addresses Syrian refugee narratives as discursive practices that attempt to reclaim an irretrievably lost terrain. The metaphor of a 'paradise lost' is an unmistakable component of the Syrian refugees' stories, illustrating multiple understandings of 'paradise' in which memories of the past gain a particularly idealized character. At the same time, however, and to some extent belying this metaphor, there are traces of tension-filled undercurrents that call for a plural reading of the past. Discussed within a theoretical framework of memory, metaphors and religious identifications, the empirical analysis highlights two narrative themes: (1) coexistence and diversity: narratives of intercultural and inter-religious relations and (2) living under authoritarian rule: narratives of fear and compliance. Leading up to the revolution and subsequent civil war, these narratives display the ambivalent ways in which Syrian refugees conceptualize the past.

Appendix 2:

Article 2

Article 2

Løland, I. (2019). Between Utopia and Dystopia: Sectarianization through Revolution and War in Syrian Refugee Narratives. *Religions, 10*(3), 188.
https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030188

Abstract

Whereas much recent research has tried to understand the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict, few studies address the issue from a bottom-up viewpoint as seen from people's everyday and lived experiences. This article seeks to access trajectories of sectarian identity formations through Syrian refugee narratives, articulated in stories that evolve around the revolution and the emerging civil war. It questions how the sectarian debate is experienced and reflected upon from refugees' micro-narrative perspectives and the ways in which these experiences correspond to politicized frames operating on a macro-level. By taking the concept of 'sectarianism' as a theoretical vantage point, the study argues for a dynamic identity approach when attempting to understand complex processes of contested and contesting identities. Moreover, it suggests that by replacing the concept of sectarianism with 'sectarianization', we may provide a more nuanced understanding of processes in which religious identities are discursively constructed and mobilized in conflicts such as the Syrian one. The qualitative analysis of this study is based on in-depth narrative interviews with a multi-religious Syrian refugee population residing in Norway. Divided into four narrative clusters, their stories deal with hope, fear, victimization as well as hate and distrust. Through the extremities of revolution and war, each of these clusters reveal particular memories, moments and experiences that in various ways have informed and shaped issues of identity and perceptions of the 'religious other'. Taken together, their stories expose a valuable juncture through which the complexities surrounding religion, identity and conflict can be further studied.

Appendix 3:

Article 3

Article 3

Løland, I. War, Displacement and Refugeehood: Existential Encounters of Religion in the Syrian Refugee Crisis (Submitted, revised and accepted for publication 2021).

Article under publication in *Entangled Religions* (https://er.ceres.rub.de/)

Appendix 4:

A Timeline of Syria

2011-2020

Timeline of the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis 2011-2020[1]

2011

The Arab Spring reaches Syria and starts with several small pro-democracy demonstrations. In the southern city of Daraa, Syrian police arrest several children for writing antigovernment graffiti. Antigovernment protests are held in several cities around Syria, spreading as the government begins to use heavy military weaponry against peaceful demonstrators. As the death toll continues to exceed, protesters are galvanised by the regime's brutality and call for a revolution. A group of defectors from the Syrian military announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army, an opposition militia. The uprising turn into armed confrontation when government forces and opposition forces engage in multiple battles. Syrian families begin to flee their homes and the first refugee camps open in Turkey. As fears of a civil war grow UN Human Rights Council votes to open an investigation into possible crimes against humanity. Syrian Nation Council is formed, claiming to represent the Syrian opposition.

2012

The Syrian army begins an assault on the city of Homs, an opposition stronghold. Predominantly Sunni districts are hit, causing large numbers of civilian casualties. As violence continues, Syria holds a referendum on the new draft constitution. Syrian officials announce that the constitutional referendum passed with nearly 90 percent of the vote. The opposition says that the referendum, held on short notice amid widespread violence, must be considered illegitimate. Both regime and opposition forces suffer from heavy casualties, and the civilian death toll continues to amount. An array of poorly organized opposition groups form rebel brigades, many armed by foreign patrons and with a leaning towards Islamist ideology. Multiple arrests and forcible disappearances continue at the hands of the regime and government-aligned civilian militia groups. Both government and opposition forces are held responsible for breaching the peace plan initiated by the UN. Za'atari

[1] Sources: 'Syrian Civil War', Britannica (2020): https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War; 'Syria profile-Timeline', BBC (2019): https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995; 'Syria Timeline', United States Institute of Peace (2020): https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/07/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad; 'Seven years on: Timeline of the Syrian crisis', UNHCR (2018): https://www.unhcr.org/ph/13427-seven-years-timeline-syria-crisis.html; 'A timeline of the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis', UNICEF (2020): https://www.unicef.ie/stories/timeline-syrian-war-refugee-crisis/.

Refugee Camp opens in Jordan and the number of Syrians seeking refuge in other countries reaches half a million. The UN estimates that 60,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. The International Committee of the Red Cross announces that it will classify the conflict in Syria as a civil war. The new designation means that combatants are subject to international humanitarian law and may be prosecuted for war crimes. A National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces is formed and recognised as legitimate representatives of the Syrian people by many Western nations.

2013

UN estimates that more than 100,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict. One million Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR. Reports on the use of chemical weapons attacks in the suburbs of Aleppo and Damascus spurs UN weapon investigators to inspect the incidents. The UN report confirms that rockets carrying the nerve gas sarin were used on a large scale in the attacks on August 21. It does not specify which side was responsible for the attacks, and it does not give an exact number of victims. Syrian Foreign Minister says that Syria is not engaged in a civil war, but a war on terror. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights says that a UN fact-finding team has found "massive evidence" that the highest levels of the Syrian government are responsible for war crimes. Inter-confessional strives increase, pitting Shiite and Sunni militias against each other. Lebanon-based Hezbollah join the official Syrian Armed Forces. Sunni rebel groups attack Alawite towns, reportedly killing 200 people. The number of Syrian refugee children reaches one million.

2014

The Syrian Detainee Report, also known as the Caesar Report, accuses the regime of torture and “systematic killing” of 11.000 detainees. Russia-China veto UN-resolution to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court. International peace conferences are held to negotiate an end to the conflict, with no resolutions made. Assad is re-elected, reportedly receiving 88.7% of the vote in the country's first election since civil war broke out in 2011. After making significant territorial gains in Iraq in addition to its territory in Syria, the jihadist militant group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) declares itself a caliphate. Battles occur between former allied Islamist rebel groups. The United States and allies launch airstrikes against ISIS targets in Raqqa and elsewhere. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimates that the total amount of casualties since 2011 has risen to over 200,000. Nearly half of Syria’s 22 million population is estimated to be affected by the conflict and in need of immediate humanitarian aid. More and more Syrians risk deadly sea journeys to reach safety in Europe.

2015

Russia carries out its first air strikes in Syria and enters the war scene with active support for the Syrian regime. Iran and Hezbollah deepen their role in support of the Syrian regime. The USA train Kurdish and Arab troops to fight ISIL. Kurdish forces push ISIL out of Kobane, while ISIL takes control of the ancient city and world heritage site of Palmyra, demolishing many artefacts and structures. The Islamist rebel alliance, Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), takes control of Idlib Province, putting pressure on government's coastal stronghold of Latakia. The number of Syrian refugees tops the four million mark and altogether 12 million people are displaced. The image of the dead Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi shocks the world and epitomizes the tragedies surrounding the large-scale Syrian exodus. The European Union struggles to cope with the “migrant crisis”, member states reinforcing borders and debating on policy restrictions. 1 million refugees reach Europe during 2015.

2016

Syrian troops, bolstered by Hezbollah fighters, Iranian militias and Russian air support, retake Palmyra from ISIL. After four years of battle over Aleppo, the country’s largest city, Russia and Syrian government forces begin heavy bombardment of rebel-held territory, causing massive destruction. New large-scale waves of displacement occur, and humanitarian aid groups try deliver life-saving aid to starving civilians trapped in besieged towns. The regime declares victory in Aleppo after the last rebel fighters are evacuated from the city. Syrian Democratic forces advances in the North and prompts Turkish military intervention to curb both ISIL and what they call “Kurdish terrorist groups”. SOHR estimates that over 300,000 have died in the conflict so far.

2017

The scale of material and human devastation is mounting and the number of people fleeing the war surpasses five million. One million refugees are now situated in Europe. Nearly 60 % of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon live in extreme poverty. Due to more restrictive border management by neighboring countries, few Syrians can leave the country. New chemical attacks are reported in Syria and US retaliates by striking an air base. A UN report finds that the Assad regime is responsible, although Syria denies its involvement. The Syrian Democratic Forces, a US-aligned predominantly Kurdish force, launch an attack on Raqqah, ISIL’s de facto capital in Syria and declares defeat of the group.

2018

Turkey launches assault on northern Syria to oust Kurdish rebels controlling the area, causing new waves of displacement. Claims of new chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta prompt Western allies to carry out strikes on Syrian targets. The siege and recapture of Eastern Ghouta prevents humanitarian aid and leaves people desperate to leave. The UN accuses the regime and opposition parties for war crimes, describing the siege as "barbaric and medieval". An agreement is reached to evacuate civilians and remaining fighters to Idlib and create a buffer zone there in order to de-escalate attempts by the government to capture the last rebel-held territory in Syria. The Syrian army recaptures almost all of the south of the country. Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces reduce Islamic State territory to a small enclave on the Iraqi border. A total of 5,5 million Syrian refugees are now registered by the UNHCR.

2019

Idlib comes under assault from Syrian government forces backed by Russian air strikes, but rebel forces, under the control by the Islamist coalition Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, are able to push the fighting back. The fighting cause major casualties and a new wave of 1 million residents of Idlib to flee the area to improvised and overpopulated camps in dire conditions. Many have nowhere to go and sleep in the open. On average, civilians inside the province have already suffered between five to ten internal displacements over the years. Syrian Democratic Forces declares ISIL defeated in Syria, placing ISIL fighters and their families into special camps. ISIL leader, al-Baghdadi, is killed by US forces. The US withdraws its troops from northern Syria, prompting Turkey to attack US Kurdish allies in the areas. Syria, Russia and Turkey agree on a ceasefire and creates a jointly patrolled "safe zone" between Syria and Turkey, restricting the presence of Kurdish militia, the main component of Syrian Democratic Forces. The agreement also includes to repatriate millions of Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey.

2020

The Syrian government and Russia continue to launch major attacks on rebel groups in northwestern Syria. Although the Assad-led Syrian regime appears to have emerged military victorious from nine years of conflict, the fighting is still on-going, resulting in clashes with Turkish forces and their client militias. The situation in the northeast remains volatile and hundreds of thousands of civilians are continuing to flee. UN places the total number of internally displaced people to 6,6 million but the figure is believed to be higher. However, even if the war is de-escalating, the country faces an economic collapse with an estimated 80% of Syrians living in extreme poverty. Anger about depriving living standards prompt new demonstrations across the country. The vast majority lack adequate healthcare and regular access to

clean water. In one of the most fragile countries in the world, the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic adds a new crisis upon an already shattered nation, threatening the civil population with yet another unprecedented catastrophe. SOHR stipulates that nearly 585,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the Syrian revolution. The number includes the death of approximately 200,000 people that are undocumented. In addition, the UN suggests that more than 130,000 people have been detained, abducted or gone missing during the nine years of conflict.

Appendix 5:

Confirmation letter from NSD

NSD

Ingrid Løland
VID Misjonshøgskolen Vid vitenskapelige høgskole
Postboks 184 Vinderen
0319 OSLO

Vår dato: 24.03.2017 Vår ref: 52698 / 3 / XXX Deres dato: Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 02.02.2017. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

XXXXXX	*In-between, Across and Beyond: Religion and Identity in Forced Migration. A Comparative Analysis of Syrian Christian and Muslim Narratives*
Behandlingsansvarlig	*VID vitenskapelig høgskole, ved institusjonens øverste leder*
Daglig ansvarlig	*Ingrid Løland*

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 28.02.2022, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

XXXXX

XXXXXX

Kontaktperson: XXXXX tlf: 55 58 27 97 Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Personvernombudet for forskning

Prosjektvurdering - Kommentar

Prosjektnr: 52698

FORMÅL
Formålet med prosjektet er en religions- og samfunnsvitenskapelig samt komparativ analyse av i hvilken grad og på hvilke måter konflikt og migrasjonserfaringer påvirker religiøse identitetsdiskurser i livshistoriene til syriske kristne og muslimske migranter.

UTVALG OG REKRUTTERING
Utvalget består av syriske migranter med kristen og muslimsk bakgrunn.

Utvalget rekrutteres via eget nettverk og via voksenopplæringssentre. Personvernombudet forutsetter at frivillighet, taushetsplikt og konfidensialitet blir ivaretatt under rekruttering av utvalget. Ved rekruttering via eget nettverk er det spesielt viktig at forespørsel rettes på en slik måte at frivilligheten ved deltagelse ivaretas. Vi anbefaler at de som ønsker å delta selv tar kontakt med deg etter å ha mottatt informasjonsskrivet. Dette vil styrke frivilligheten, og styrke muligheten for at kun personer som er beredt til å fortelle sine historier deltar.

DATAINNSAMLING
Datamaterialet innhentes gjennom personlig intervju, gruppeintervju, observasjon og deltakende observasjon. Per telefon 24.03.2017 har du forklart at du med observasjon mener observasjon av organiserte tilstelninger. Vi minner om at du må innhente et informert samtykke fra alle personer du vil registrere personidentifiserende opplysninger om fra observasjon.

SÅRBAR GRUPPE OG SENSITIVE OPPLYSNINGER
Det behandles sensitive personopplysninger om etnisk bakgrunn eller politisk/filosofisk/religiøs oppfatning, strafferettslige forhold og helseforhold.

Det må tas høyde for at informantene befinner seg i en svært sårbar situasjon. Når man forsker på sårbare grupper, har man et særskilt ansvar for å ivareta informantenes interesser. Belastningen informantene utsettes for må stå i et rimelig forhold til den samfunnsmessige og vitenskapelige nytten av studien.

Vi anbefaler at du har et opplegg for eventuelle oppfølgingsmuligheter for informantene, dersom det er behov for det. Videre anbefaler vi at du setter seg inn i NESH sine etiske retningslinjer om forskning på sårbare grupper: <https://www.etikkom.no/FBIB/Temaer/Forskning-pa-bestemte-grupper/Sarbare-grupper/>.

INFORMASJON OG SAMTYKKE
Utvalget informeres skriftlig og muntlig om prosjektet og samtykker til deltakelse. Du opplyser i meldeskjemaet at informasjonen skal oversettes til engelsk og arabisk.

Informasjonsskrivet er godt utformet. At du informerer om hvilken type spørsmål du vil stille er positivt, slik

informantene er forberedt på hva deltakelse innebærer.

Vær oppmerksom på at det kan være få personer, eller tette miljøer, innenfor en minoritetsgruppe som snakker ett språk, slik at informanten kan ha kjennskap til tolken, og omvendt. Vi anbefaler derfor at informanten godkjenner tolken, før tolken får kjennskap til informantens identitet.

TREDJEPERSONSOPPLYSNINGER
Vi forutsetter at du ikke innhenter sensitive opplysninger om identifiserbare tredjepersoner, som deltakelse i krigshandlinger, deltakelse i religiøse/politiske/etniske foreninger/parti/grupperinger under krigen eller helseforhold. Personvernombudets tilrådning omfatter altså ikke behandling av denne typen opplysninger.

Dersom det framkommer andre ikke-sensitive opplysninger om tredjepersoner (f.eks. familiemedlemmer) gjelder følgende: Det skal kun registreres opplysninger som er nødvendig for formålet med prosjektet. Vi gjør oppmerksom på at du i utgangspunktet har informasjonsplikt ovenfor tredjeperson. Personvernombudet legger til grunn at tredjeperson, så langt det lar seg gjøre, får informasjon om prosjektet. Informasjon kan eksempelvis gis via informant muntlig eller skriftlig. Såfremt tredjepersonsopplysningene er lite omfattende, ikke sensitive og anonymiseres i publikasjonen, kan du unntas fra informasjonsplikten overfor tredjeperson, dersom det anses uforholdsmessig vanskelig å informere.

Personvernombudet anbefaler at du ber informantene om å omtale andre personer som ikke deltar i prosjektet på en måte som ikke identifiserer enkeltpersoner.

INFORMASJONSSIKKERHET
Personvernombudet legger til grunn at du etterfølger VID vitenskapelig høgskole sine interne rutiner for datasikkerhet.

En ekstern feltarbeidsassistent er databehandler for prosjektet. VID vitenskapelig høgskole skal inngå skriftlig avtale med vedkommende om hvordan personopplysninger skal behandles, jf. personopplysningsloven § 15. For råd om hva databehandleravtalen bør inneholde, se Datatilsynets veileder: <http://www.datatilsynet.no/Sikkerhet-internkontroll/Databehandleravtale/>.

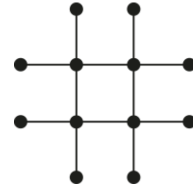
PROSJEKTSLUTT
Forventet prosjektslutt er 28.02.2022. Ifølge prosjektmeldingen skal innsamlede opplysninger da anonymiseres. Anonymisering innebærer å bearbeide datamaterialet slik at ingen enkeltpersoner kan gjenkjennes. Det gjøres ved å:
- slette direkte personopplysninger (som navn/koblingsnøkkel)
- slette/omskrive indirekte personopplysninger (identifiserende sammenstilling av bakgrunnsopplysninger som f.eks. bosted/arbeidssted, alder og kjønn)
- slette digitale lydopptak

Vi gjør oppmerksom på at også databehandler (feltarbeidersassistent) må slette personopplysninger tilknyttet prosjektet i sine systemer.

Appendix 6:

Information letter in English

Request for participation in research project - Spring 2017



Title of PhD-project:
Narrative Battles and Bridges: Religion, Identity and Conflict in Syrian Refugee Trajectories

Dear potential participant:

Would you like to share your voice by participating in a doctoral research project that focuses on migrants from Syria?

• Background and purpose

The war in Syria has lasted for six years. As a result, there are a number of people from Syria who have resettled in Norway as refugees. Our aim in this study, is to increase our understanding of Syrian refugee experiences. We wish to lend our ears to these experiences and listen to how views and life-stories are expressed and told by Syrians themselves.

The focus of this study is concerned with themes such as religion, identity, conflict and forced migration. We wish to make contact with adult informants (age 18 and above) with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds who can help us shed light on the role that religion and identity have in times of a) conflict and war, b) in times of migration and c) in times after resettlement in Norway. Participants must have legal residency in Norway and ideally have stayed in the country for at least six months.

This study is a PhD research project at VID Specialized University in Stavanger (www.vid.no) and it is part of a research group involved with religion, migration and transnational relations.

• How can you be involved?

There are two options for participation in this study. You may participate either through a personal interview or through a discussion group with a few other individuals.

❖ Personal interview:

In the personal interview, we are interested to hear the story of your life through one or more confidential conversations lasting for approximately 2 hours. I will conduct the interview, while my research assistant will help with the translation from Arabic. You may speak in Arabic, English or Norwegian – or even alternate between these languages as you

wish. You may choose the appropriate time and place for the interview. Below are some examples of question we might like to pose:

How would you describe your life in Syria before the war? How did you experience the conflict in your home country? How would you describe your religious identity? In which ways, if any, have religion and spirituality been important to you? Have you noticed any changes in your religious identity over time and in different places? Which reasons were behind your decision to emigrate from Syria? How did you experience the process during the migration journey and getting to Norway? How is your life in Norway now? What are your plans and dreams for the future? What are your thoughts concerning the future of Syria?

As many of these questions are sensitive and may raise difficult memories and feelings, we would like you to know that you have our full understanding and confidentiality regarding matters that you share with us. You may also, at any time, for no stated reason, stop the interview, and cancel your participation.

❖ **Discussion group:**

In the discussion groups, we gather 6-8 individuals with similar gender and religious backgrounds. We shall talk about themes involving your situation in exile and future hopes and perspectives, sharing different experiences and viewpoints in an open forum. My research assistant and I will lead the conversations, which will last approximately 90 minutes. The talks will take place in an adult learning center.

• What does participation in the project imply?

- ❖ All interviews and conversations will be audiotaped (sound-recorded).
- ❖ No pictures or film will be taken/videotaped.
- ❖ The audiotapes will be transcribed and kept in a secure place.
- ❖ Only myself, the research assistant and my supervisor will have access to the material.
- ❖ My supervisor will not have any access to your name.
- ❖ List of names of participants will be kept separate from audiotapes and transcription material.
- ❖ The entire data-material will be stored in a secure PC, and not online (such as dropbox).
- ❖ All personal data will be treated confidentially.
- ❖ Everyone in this study will be anonymized.
- ❖ When participating in this study, you will not be recognized in the final publication of the data material, neither in the doctoral thesis nor in a future book.
- ❖ The project is scheduled for completion by 2022. All personal information and audio recordings will be deleted after the following date: 28.02.2022.

- **Voluntary participation**

It is voluntary to participate in the project, and you can at any time choose to withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be made anonymous.

If you would like to participate or if you have any questions concerning the project, please contact:

- Ingrid Løland: PhD-researcher. E-mail: ingrid.loland@vid.no. Tel: 93085887
- Tomas Sundnes Drønen: Supervisor. E-mail: tomas.sundnes.dronen@vid.no. Tel: 51516215

The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Yours sincerely,
Ingrid Løland
PhD research fellow

Consent for participation in the study

I have received information about the project and am willing to participate.

Please indicate which option of participation you would prefer by ticking one of the boxes:

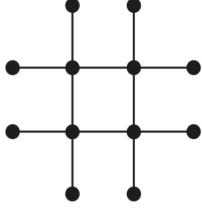
I wish to participate in one or more personal ☐ interviews

I wish to participate in a group discussion ☐

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix 7:

Information letter in Arabic



طلب للمشاركة في مشروع بحث – ربيع 2017

عنوان مشروع الدكتوراه : ***" بين، عبر وبعد: الدين والهوية في الهجرة القسرية.***

تحليل مقارن لقصص السوريين المسيح والمسلمين "

عزيزي المشارك المحتمل:

هل ترغب في مشاركة صوتك من خلال المشاركة في مشروع بحث الدكتوراه التي تركز على المهاجرين من سوريا؟

- **الخلفية والغرض**

لقد استمرت الحرب في سوريا لمدة ست سنوات. ونتيجة لذلك، هناك عدد من الاشخاص من سوريا الذين أعيد توطينهم في النرويج كلاجئين. هدفنا في هذه الدراسة هو زيادة فهمنا لتجارب اللاجئين السوريين. نريد أن نعطي آذاننا لهذه التجارب والاستماع إلى كيف يتم التعبير عن وجهات النظر وقصص الحياة وما قاله السوريين أنفسهم من قبل.

تركز هذه الدراسة على مواضيع مثل الدين والهوية والصراع والهجرة القسرية. نتمنى إجراء اتصالات مع مخبرين راشدين (سن 18 وما فوق) من ذوي الخلفيات الدينية والعرقية المختلفة التي يمكن أن تساعدنا على تسليط الضوء على الدور الذي يلعبه الدين والهوية لها في أوقات أ) الصراع والحرب، ب) في أوقات الهجرة و ج) في الوقت ما بعد إعادة توطينهم في النرويج. يجب أن يكون للمشاركين إقامة قانونية في النرويج، ومثاليا، قاطنين في البلاد لمدة ستة أشهر على الأقل.

هذه الدراسة هي مشروع بحث دكتوراه في جامعة VID المتخصصة في مدينة ستافنجر (www.vid.no) وهو جزء من مجموعة بحث معنية بالدين والهجرة والعلاقات العابرة للحدود الوطنية.

- **كيف يمكنك أن تشارك؟**

هناك خياران للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة. يمكنك المشاركة إما عن طريق المقابلة الشخصية أو من خلال مجموعة نقاش صغيرة مع أفراد آخرين.

❖ **المقابلة الشخصية:**

في المقابلة الشخصية، نهتم لسماع قصة حياتك من خلال محادثة سرية أو أكثر لحوالي ساعتين. سوف أقوم بإجراء المقابلة، في حين مساعدتي في البحث سوف تساعد في الترجمة من العربية. من الممكن التحدث باللغة العربية أو الإنجليزية أو النرويجية - أو حتى التناوب بين هذه اللغات كما يحلو لك. بإمكانك اختيار الوقت والمكان المناسبين للمقابلة. وفيما يلي بعض الأمثلة على الأسئلة التي قد نرغب بطرحها:

كيف تصف حياتك في سوريا قبل الحرب؟ كيف واجهت الصراع في بلدك؟ كيف تصف الهوية الدينية الخاصة بك؟ بأي طريقة، إن وجدت، كان الدين والقيم الروحية مهمة بالنسبة لك؟ هل لاحظت أي تغيير في هويتك الدينية على مر الزمن وفي أماكن مختلفة؟ ماهي الأسباب التي كانت وراء قرارك للهجرة من سوريا؟ كيف كانت تجربتك في المراحل خلال رحلة الهجرة حتى الوصول الى النرويج؟ كيف هي حياتك في النرويج الآن؟ ما هي خططك وأحلامك للمستقبل؟ ما هي أفكارك حول مستقبل سوريا؟

بما أن العديد من هذه الأسئلة حساسة وقد تثير ذكريات و مشاعر صعبة، نود منك أن تعرف أن لديك فهمنا الكامل والسرية فيما يتعلق بالمسائل التي تشاركها معنا. بإمكانك أيضا، في أي وقت، و دون سبب معلن، التوقف عن المقابلة، وإلغاء مشاركتك.

❖ **مجموعة مناقشة:**

في مجموعات النقاش، نجتمع 4 إلى 6 أفراد من نفس الجنس والخلفيات الدينية. سوف نتحدث عن الموضوعات التي تنطوي على أوضاعكم في المنفى و الآمال و وجهات النظر المستقبلية، و سوف تتبادل الخبرات ووجهات النظر المختلفة في منتدى مفتوح. مساعدتي في البحث وأنا، سنقوم بالمحادثات، والتي سوف تستمر ما يناهز 90 دقيقة. المحادثات ستجرى في مركز تعليم الكبار.

•ماذا تعني المشاركة في المشروع ؟

- ❖ سيتم تسجيل جميع المقابلات والمحادثات على أشرطة (مسجلة بالصوت).
- ❖ لن تؤخذ أي صور أو فيلم / شريط فيديو.
- ❖ سيتم نسخ الأشرطة الصوتية والاحتفاظ بها في مكان آمن.
- ❖ أنا، مساعدتي في البحث والمشرف على الدكتوراه فقط، يمكننا الولوج إلى المعلومات.
- ❖ المشرف على الدكتوراه لن يكون بإمكانه الحصول على اسمك.
- ❖ قائمة بأسماء المشاركين سيتم الاحتفاظ بها منفصلة عن الأشرطة الصوتية ومواد النسخ.
- ❖ سيتم تخزين كامل المواد و البيانات في جهاز كمبيوتر آمن، وليس على الانترنت (مثل المربع المنسدل Dropbox).
- ❖ سيتم التعامل مع كافة البيانات الشخصية بسرية تامة.
- ❖ الجميع في هذه الدراسة سيبقى مجهول الهوية.
- ❖ عند المشاركة في هذه الدراسة، لن تعرف في المنشور النهائي للبيانات، لا في أطروحة الدكتوراه ولا في كتاب في المستقبل.
- ❖ من المقرر أن يكتمل المشروع بحلول عام 2022. جميع المعلومات الشخصية والتسجيلات الصوتية ستحذف بعد التاريخ: 28/02/2022.

•المشاركة الطوعية

من التطوعي المشاركة في المشروع، ويمكنك أن تختار، في أي وقت، سحب موافقتك دون إبداء أي سبب. إذا قررت الإنسحاب، كل البيانات الشخصية الخاصة بك ستصبح مجهولة.

إذا كنت ترغب في المشاركة أو إذا كان لديك أي أسئلة بخصوص هذا المشروع، يرجى الاتصال ب:

- إنغريد لولاند (Ingrid Løland): باحثة الدكتوراه.
البريد الإلكتروني: ingrid.loland@vid.no . الهاتف: 93085887

- توماس سوندنس درونن (Tomas Sundnes Drønen): المشرف.
البريد الإلكتروني: tomas.sundnes.dronen@vid.no . الهاتف: 51516215

قد تم إبلاغ الدراسة إلى مسؤول حماية البيانات للبحوث، NSD - المركز النرويجي لبيانات البحث.

تفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام،

إنغريد لولاند

باحثة دكتوراه

الموافقة على المشاركة في الدراسة

لقد تلقيت معلومات عن المشروع وأنا على استعداد للمشاركة.

يرجى الإشارة إلى أي خيار في المشاركة تفضل و ذلك بوضع علامة على واحدة من خانات:

أود المشاركة في واحدة أو أكثر من المقابلات الشخصية ☐

أود المشاركة في مناقشة جماعية ☐

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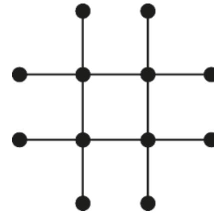
(توقيع من قبل المشارك، التاريخ)

Appendix 8:

Interview guide

Guide for interviews and group discussions



A. Sample for guide to narrative and semi-structural personal interviews

Phase 1:

Welcoming (10 min)

- Informal chat, get to know each other, introduction and trust building, give thanks for participation, coffee/tea.

Information (10 min)

- Presentation of background and purpose of research project
- Inform about the confidentiality agreement, anonymity assurance
- Inform about audio recordings and the securing of data material
- Confirm voluntary participation
- Ask if anything is unclear and if the respondent has any further questions
- Start audio recording

Phase 2:

Self-presentation by the respondent (10 min)

- Biographical details (age, family, place of birth, educational and professional background)
- Ethnic background
- Religious background

Life in Syria before the war (20 min)

- Pre-war life-experiences (personal, family)
- Perceptions of political affairs (locally and in the country as a whole)
- Perceptions of ethnic relations (locally and in the country as a whole)
- Perceptions of religious/inter-religious relations (locally and in the country as a whole)
- Participation in religious, political, ethnic parties/groups/associations?
- Self-description of attachment to national and/or ethnical identity
- Self-description of attachment to religious identity

Break

Phase 3:

Life in Syria during conflict and war (20 min)

- Changes in living conditions after 2011? (personal, family)
- Types of visible changes locally and in the country as a whole
- Experiences of the personal physical and mental impacts of war?
- Experiences of socio-economical impacts of war?
- Experiences of changes regarding ethnic and religious relations (locally and in the country as a whole)
- Self-description of personal participation in the war
- Participation in religious, political, ethnic parties/groups/associations during the war?
- Self-description of potential changes in attachment to national and/or ethnical identity – how/why?
- Self-description of potential changes in attachment to religious identity – how/why?

Phase 4:

Life during migration/the migratory process (20 min)

- Reasons behind the migration
- Who made the decision to flee; why and how?
- Experiences as internally displaced?
- Experiences in refugee camps?
- The migration out of Syria
- Choice of migration routes
- Choice of destination point(s)
- Emotions, thoughts, reflections on fear, uprooting, loss, grief and disempowerment
- Emotions, thoughts, reflections on strength, resilience, power and dreams
- Self-descriptions of personal reflections around identity (religious, national, ethnic, gendered) – changes/abruptions/continuity/reconstruction
- General life experiences during the migrational process – impact of time and space (temporal and spatial changes?)

Break

Phase 5:

Life after resettlement in Norway and visions for the future (20 min)

- Cultural orientation by IOM prior to departure? Experiences
- Experiences of arrival to Norway
- Hospitality, logistics, establishment, rights and obligations
- Experiences of new contexts; possibilities/limitations
- Culture, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality – reflections on identity as minority in the Norwegian society
- Culture, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality – reflections on identity in relation to other Syrian exiles/the Syrian diaspora
- Participation in religious, political, ethnic parties/groups/associations in Norway?
- Transnational relations and activities?
- Life-experiences now and in a future perspective
- Self-description of potential changes in religious self-identification?
- Dreams of the future (personal, family)
- Thoughts and hopes regarding the future of Syria

Phase 6:

Wrapping up and farewell (10 min)

- Wrap up interview and conversation
- Double check and confirm main points of information received
- Any questions or comments by the respondent?
- Give thanks for participation
- Remind the respondent about his/her right to view and comment on the data material, the anonymity reassurance and the treatment of confidential data material
- Ask for the permission to ask additional questions and/or conduct an additional interview at a later stage if needed

B. Sample for guide to thematic focus group discussions

Group 1: 6-8 mixed female group

Group 2: 6-8 mixed gender group

Phase 1:

Welcoming (10 min)

- Informal chat, get to know each other, introduction and trust building, give thanks for participation, coffee/tea.

Information (10 min)

- Presentation of background and purpose of research project
- Inform about the confidentiality agreement, anonymity assurance
- Inform about audio recordings and the securing of data material
- Confirm voluntary participation
- Ask if anything is unclear and if the participants have any further questions
- Start audio recording

Phase 2:

Self-presentation by the participants (10 min)

- Biographical details (age, family, place of birth, educational and professional background)
- Ethnic background
- Religious background

Phase 3:

Open forum (50 min)

Discussion and conversations around 5 themes, guided by the researcher as facilitator:

1. The conflict in Syria – individual and collective impact
2. The migration – experiences, emotions, the element of borders (personal, mental, symbolic, geographical, physical, jurisdictional etc)
3. The resettlement process – integration, inclusion/exclusion, minority/majority, religion/secularization, gender/society, network, inter-religious contact/distance
4. Self-identification before and now – national, ethnic, religious, gender, occupation, family, group)
5. Life in exile - visions for the future, power/disempowerment, opportunities/limitations, transnational relations, coping strategies, Norway vs. Syria

Phase 4:

Wrapping up and farewell (10 min)

- Wrap up discussion and conversation
- Double check and confirm main points of information received
- Any questions or comments by the participants?
- Give thanks for participation
- Remind the participants about their right to view and comment on the data material, the anonymity reassurance and the treatment of confidential data material
- Ask for the permission to ask additional questions at a later stage if needed

Appendix 9:

Overview of research participants

Overview of research participants

Focus Group 1 *Discussion with all female participants held at an adult learning center on March 6, 2017*					
	Age range	**Geographic origin in Syria**	**Ethnic origin**	**Religious/ secular affiliations**	**Profession**
Person 1	30-40	Aleppo district	Kurdish	Sunni Muslim	Tailor
Person 2	30-40	Aleppo district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Housewife
Person 3	40-50	Idlib district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Hairdresse r
Person 4	30-40	Al-Hasakah district	Kurdish	Sunni Muslim	Teacher
Person 5	20-30	Damascus district	Arab	Secular	Student
Person 6	20-30	Aleppo district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Student
Person 7	40-50	Tartus district	Arab	Secular	Teacher
Person 8	30-40	Aleppo district	Kurdish	Sunni Muslim	Housewife

Focus Group 2 *Discussion with mixed gender participants held at an adult learning center on March 17, 2017*					
	Age range	**Geographic origin in Syria**	**Ethnic origin**	**Religious/ secular affiliations**	**Profession**
Person 1 (woman)	30-40	Aleppo district	Palestinian	Sunni Muslim	Teacher
Person 2 (man)	30-40	Damascus district	Arab	Christian	Service manager
Person 3 (man)	30-40	Homs district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Electrician
Person 4 (man)	40-50	Homs district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Engineer
Person 5 (woman)	20-30	Al-Hasakah district	Arab	Secular	Student
Person 6 (woman)	20-30	Tartus district	Arab	Secular	Student
Person 7 (woman)	40-50	Damascus district	Arab	Christian	Nurse
Person 8 (man)	50-60	Hama district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Carpenter

Narrative interviews *Semi-structured interviews with mixed gender participants held during 2017-2018.*					
	Age range	**Geographic origin in Syria**	**Ethnic origin**	**Religious/ secular affiliations**	**Profession**
Person 1 (man)	50-60	Damascus district	Arab	Sunni Muslim/ liberal	Construction worker
Person 2 (man)	30-40	Damascus district	Palestinian	Sunni Muslim	Engineer
Person 3 (man)	20-30	Homs district	Arab	Christian	Student
Person 4 (man)	30-40	Damascus district	Arab	Christian	Service manager
Person 5 (man)	30-40	Hama district	Arab	Ismaili	Business manager
Person 6 (woman)	40-50	Latakia district	Arab	Alawite/ Secular	Health worker
Person 7 (woman)	40-50	Damascus district	Arab	Christian	Health worker
Person 8 (man)	30-40	Latakia district	Arab	Christian	Business manager
Person 9 (man)	30-40	Aleppo district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Religious cleric
Person 10 (man)	40-50	Damascus district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Transport
Person 11 (woman)	20-30	Damascus district	Arab	Sunni Muslim/ Secular	Student
Person 12 (man)	30-40	Damascus district	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Transport

Appendix 10:

Confidentiality agreement

with

research assistant

Confidentiality Agreement Sample

This form may be used for individuals hired to conduct specific research tasks, e.g., recording or editing image or sound data, transcribing, interpreting, translating, entering data, destroying data.

PhD project title: In-between, Across and Beyond: Religion and Identity in Forced Migration. A Comparative Analysis of Syrian Christian and Muslims Narratives.

Responsible researcher: Ingrid Løland (PhD research fellow at VID specialized university, Stavanger)

We, Ingrid Løland as researcher and Nidaa Raji as research assistant to the above research project, agree to:

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any way, form or format (e.g., orally, written, disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.

2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.

3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *Researcher* when I have completed the research tasks.

4. after consulting with the *Researcher,* erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

NIDAA RAJI 09/02/2017

(Print Name) (Signature) (Date)

Researcher

INGRID LØLAND 09.02.2017

(Print Name) (Signature) (Date)

Appendix 11:

Academic activities during PhD project- period

Academic work, scholarly dissemination and scientific contribution during PhD-project period 2015-2020[1]

Teaching assignments at VID ***Lectures, administration, evaluation, supervision***	
2016	Religion and Global Issues (MGS-304). Master Level
	Contemporary Religion and Spirituality (RKG-108). Bachelor level
	Islam (RKG-109). Bachelor level
	Political Islam (RKG-208N). Online course. Bachelor level
2017	Religion and Global Issues (MIKA-306). Master level
	Political Islam (RKG-208N). Online course. Bachelor level
	Islam (RKG-109). Bachelor level
2019	Religion and Worldviews (BATEOL/PROFTEOL 1030). Bachelor level

Compulsory PhD-courses	
2015	PhD 903: Scholarly socialization
2016	PhD 901: Research ethics Paper submitted: "Vulnerability and Agency: Ethical Challenges in Migration and Refugee Research"
	PhD 902: Philosophy of science Paper submitted: "'Rebuilding the Ship at Sea': Conceptualizing Identity in relation to Migration"
	PhD 907: Theory and method-Empirical analysis Paper submitted July 2016: "Qualitative Migration Research: Constructing a Viable Methodology"
	PhD 908: Discipline and thesis-related
	PhD 904: University pedagogics

[1] Abbreviations:
RVS: Religion, Values and Society. International PhD Research Group based in Norway. https://rvs.mf.no/
MIGREL: Migration, religion and intercultural relations. Interdisciplinary research group at VID Specialized University.
https://wo.cristin.no/as/WebObjects/cristin.woa/wa/presentasjonVis?pres=537733&type=GRUPPE&la=no
NIME: Nordic Institute for Mission Studies and Ecumenics. http://www.missionsresearch.org/

Research group activities and seminars	
2015	RVS Metochi Summer School (Empirical Analysis) August 2015: Paper submitted: “Strategies of research and analysis in my PhD”
	NIME seminar (Religion, migration, transnationalism), November 2015: Paper submitted: “A PhD Project Description in the Making”
	PhD Course Granavolden, December 2015: Paper submitted: “A PhD Project in the Making”
	RVS Sola (Religion and Globalization), December 2015: Paper submitted: “A PhD Project Description in the Making”
2016	Cracks and In-between Research seminar in Krakow, May 2016: Paper presented: “Religion and Identity in Forced Migration. The Case of Syria”
	RVS Annual Seminar, MF Oslo, November 2016: Poster presentation: “Syria – The Great Tragedy of Our Time: A Comparative Research on how War and Forced Migration Affect Religious Identities Among Muslims and Christians” (the poster won the first prize in the category of design and dissemination)
2017	RVS course Umeå (Values, religion and emotions), May 2017. Paper submitted: “Values, religion and emotions”
	Cracks and In-between Research seminar in Krakow, June 2017: Paper presented: “Veien frem mot første artikkel: De første skrittene”
	RVS Metochi summer school (The role of theory in empirical research), August 2017: Paper submitted: “The role of theory in my empirical research”
	RVS course Stavanger (Intercultural Encounters: Migration, Religion and Values), September 2017: Paper submitted: “Intercultural Perspectives in my Research: Encounters and Misencounters in a Syrian Refugee Context”
2018	Paper presentation MIGREL of Article 1, February 2018
	Paper presentation SMG of Article 2, April 2018
	RVS spring course in Tromsø (Comparison), June 2018. Paper submitted: “The pros and cons of comparison. Comparative elements in my PhD-project”
	RVS Annual Seminar, University of Bergen
	Mid-term evaluation, VID, November 2018.
2019	RVS writing-seminar at Strømstad, Sweden 27.-31.01.19.
	Participation at PhD-seminar with Olivier Roy at the University of Oslo, “For a critical use of the concepts of identity, culture and religion in contemporary research in political and social sciences”, 18.-19.03.19
	Paper presentation MIGREL of Article 3, April and November 2019
	Synopsis writing-seminar, VID, October 2019
	Participation at the Bible and Migration-seminar, VID

Guest lectures and research visits	
2016	Guest lecturer at VID Diakonhjemmet and the course “Faith and Religion in Work with Migrants”, May 2016: - Lecture: “Religion and Identity in Forced Migration. The Case of Syria”. - Panel discussion with Dr. Alexi Chehade from Gopa-Derd organization in Syria
	Forskningsdagene Stavanger, September 2016: Participation in a panel discussion on migration at KK-Kverulantkatedral, Stavanger https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGfZO4pjb54&t=3s
	Guest lecturer at Sandnes videregående skole, November 2016: Theme: «Politisk Islam – en introduksjon»
2017	Research visit to Utrecht University (Erasmus scholarship), February 2017: - Lecture for university students: “Religion and Identity in Forced Migration. The Case of Syria” - Conversation with Dr. Lucien van Liere (co-supervisor) - Visit to NGOs working in Syria and with Syrian refugees
	Guest lecturer at KIA General Assemby (Kirkens internasjonale arbeid), October 2017: Lecture: “Syriske fortellinger: Konflikt, religion og identitet”
	Guest lecturer at Karmøy voksenopplæringssenter, December 2017: Lecture: «Syriske fortellinger: Konflikt, religion og identitet. Presentasjon av et forskningsprosjekt»
2018	Guest lecturer at conference «Frykt og Fellesskap», Norwegian Church Council and VID Specialized University, Oslo, April 2018: Lecture: “Flyktningekrisen og de syriske narrativene” https://www.vid.no/arrangementer/erfaringskonferanse/
2018	Forsker Grand Prix, Stavanger, September 2018: Participation and presentation of my research at the annual and televised national Research Grand Prix. Theme: “Syria – det tapte paradis? Flyktningfortellinger om krig og fred”. TV-broadcast: https://tv.nrk.no/serie/kunnskapskanalen/2018/MDDP17002418/avspiller
2018	Reichelt-seminar (“Vi og de andre”), VID Stavanger, October 2018: - Conversation with Syrian author Mohammad Habeeb on migration, identity and religion. - Participation in panel discussion with other contributors. https://www.vid.no/arrangementer/reicheltforelesning-og-seminar-vi-de-andre/
	NIME-seminar (“Quo Vadis? Christians and Christianity in the Middle East: Conflict, Migration and Future Challenges”), VID Stavanger, November 2018: - Part of organizing committee - Lecture: “Between Utopia and Dystopia: Syrian Refugee Narratives on Coexistence” - Panel discussion with other contributors in the seminar. https://www.vid.no/arrangementer/quo-vadis-christians-and-christianity-in-the-middle-east- conflict-migration-and-future-challenges/
	VID 175 jubilee, VID Stavanger, November 2018: Presentation in public seminars. Theme: “Syria – det tapte paradis? Flyktningfortellinger om krig og fred” https://www.vid.no/arrangementer/vid-175-ars-jubileum-stavanger-10-11-november-2018/
	Research Visit Tel Aviv University, June 2019: One month research visit at the department of migration studies, School of Social and Policy Studies at the Tel Aviv University, Israel.

Conferences	
2016	University of Oxford, International Migration Institute: "The Changing Face of Global Mobility". January 2016
2017	University of Edinburgh, British Society for Middle Easter Studies: "Movements and Migration in the Middle East". July 2017. Paper presentation: "Rebuilding the Ship at Sea: Religion and Migration in a Syrian Refugee Context"
2018	University of Oxford, The Middle East Centre: "Rethinking Nationalism, Sectarianism and Ethno-religious Mobilisation in the Middle East". January 2018.
2019	University of London: "Memory of the Future", 29-30.03.2019. Paper presentation: "Between Utopia and Dystopia: Bridging a Violent Past with Future Hopes in Syrian Refugee Narratives".

Op-eds	
2015	"Et hav av makt og avmakt". On the refugee crisis, transnational migration, ethical issues. Stavanger Aftenblad, 10.09.2015 http://www.mhs.no/uploads/2015-09-10-et-hav-av-makt-og-avmakt.pdf
	"Apokalypse nå!". On Christian and Islamic apocalyptic sources and eschatology, the role of Syria). Stavanger Aftenblad, December 2015. https://www.aftenbladet.no/meninger/debatt/i/4Lggq/Apokalypse-na
2018	«Ligger Syrias håp om forsoning og brobygging i verdensarv-ruinene?» On Syria's cultural heritage and destruction, common ground for future reconciliation. Stavanger Aftenblad, June 2018. https://www.aftenbladet.no/meninger/debatt/i/XwLx2g/Ligger-Syrias-hap-om-forsoning-og- brobygging-i-verdensarv-ruinene
2019	"Det syriske vårofferet". On the Arab Spring and its significance in the Syrian refugee context. *Vårt Land*, 28.04.2019 http://www.verdidebatt.no/innlegg/11751603-det-syriske-varofferet

Academic publications	
2019	«Negotiating Paradise Lost: Refugee Narratives of Pre-War Syria: A Discursive Approach to Memory, Metaphors and Religious Identifications" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* Published August 2019. DOI: 10.1163/9789004412255_012
	"Between Utopia and Dystopia: Sectarianization through Revolution and War in Syrian Refugee Narratives" *Religions* 10(3), 188 DOI: 10.3390/rel10030188
	"African Migrant Christianities – Delocalization or Relocalization of Identities?" A book chapter written in co-authorship with Drønen and Stiansen. In Lauterbach and Vähäkangas (eds) *Faith in African Lived Christianity. Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives*. 2019. Brill. DOI: 10.1163/9789004412255_012

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