Syrian experiences of re/making home in the UK

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This report is based on research for the British Academy project _Lost and Found? A Digital Archive of Migration, Displacement and Resettlement_, which explores refugee experiences of re/making home. Dr Doha Samir carried out the majority of interviews on which this report is based, with one interview conducted by Dr Kalwinder Sandhu. Ten interviews were carried out with a total of eleven participants in 2020. One was conducted face-to-face in February, and the others via an online platform in November and December. All interviews were digitally recorded with the participant’s consent and transcribed in full prior to being analysed. Ten were carried out in Arabic (Syrian dialect) and then translated during transcription by the interviewer into English. One interview was carried out directly in English.

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Research participants

We interviewed six Syrian women and five Syrian men, all of whom had been resettled directly to cities across the Midlands between 2015-2019 as part of the UK Syrian Resettlement Programme (VPRS). The majority of our research participants were married, one woman was single, and one was a widow. Most had spent significant periods of time in Lebanon before being resettled to the UK, with two having spent time in Jordan and one in Iraq. Usually this had lasted for a period of five to six years, though one woman had only stayed three years in Lebanon and one man was resettled to the UK after only one year and three months. Several had experienced the traumatic loss of family members in Syria, and all research participants had resettled with children of various ages and/or with other family members. The single woman we interviewed had resettled with her mother, sister and her brother’s children.

Research findings

Leaving Syria

Syria is widely described by our research participants as a place where experiences of a good life had changed to insecurity: “Syria was a heaven on Earth, but Syrians now cannot afford the bread”. Conflict and internal displacement had left many unable to work prior to leaving, with problems in accessing services, a lack of rights, corruption and the fear of persecution all reported as reasons for leaving. Several express a continued nostalgia for Syria, though others explain how the trauma of losing loved ones means they “do not have memories, except the bitter ones”.

The majority who had fled to Lebanon emphasise how difficult the living conditions had been there, describing as limited the financial assistance provided by the UN Refugee Agency and noting various difficulties in working legally. Stories of “awful racism” are widespread. In Iraq, experiences such as a lack of rights for refugees are also highlighted as difficult. Jordan is described in more positive terms, with work opportunities, respect and the acknowledgement that “Syrians have expertise, and [are] people who really struggle for life”.

UN resettlement

Experiences of resettlement by the UN are described in variable terms, with several finding the process relatively quick and others facing significant delays. One suggests that “there are two ways to be chosen to
travel from Lebanon; the first one is corruption and nepotism, and the second is luck”. While many describe themselves as “lucky”, even those who had a relatively smooth experience share feelings of ambiguity about the opportunity. Sadness is described both in terms of leaving home and in terms of leaving loved ones behind.

The loss of home

Though most of our research participants view their resettlement to the UK as fortunate for themselves and for their families, the accompanying loss of home evokes strong emotion:

“You know when you ask me about my feelings of moving and settlement, a line of memories moves in front of my eyes. Sometimes I spent time thinking about that, and sometimes I cry when I remember. But I am thankful”.

Various forms of loss are described: social loss such as missing family and friends or missing the respect associated with a previous status; cultural loss such as missing religious affinities with those around them; and physical loss such as the destruction of homes, land, and entire cities. The loss of family is described in the most pained terms – including the loss of deceased family members: “In Syria, I left the most precious thing I have. I left my son’s body”. Some go so far as to mourn the loss of the Syrian people as a whole: “Syrians lost their usual kindness, there are now feelings of hatred and grudge”.

Arrival to the UK

For several of our research participants, the initial experience of arriving to the UK is described as difficult. For example, several express their initial fear of leaving the house, while others suggest that the level of support did not always meet their expectations. In one case, a situation is described in which a volunteer failed to provide the support requested, responding: “You, Syrians are greedy people. You are too demanding”. Another describes a tense situation at his GP: “I believe the interpreter was racist, because she let the GP get very angry with me”. Nevertheless, many report higher levels of acceptance and support in the UK overall, particularly in comparison to Lebanon.
Language and work
A key issue that all our research participants raise is the language barrier, which is seen as both an immediate and a longer-term issue on arrival to the UK: “The main challenge we faced when we arrived here was the language. Even after spending five years, I am still learning. I always feel there is a gap and I am not learning enough”. It is not language alone, however, but also cultural differences that are described as creating communication barriers: “I sometimes do not understand what they are taking about, because I do not share the same culture”.

Only five of those who we interviewed had been able to start working, and this had often involved a notable deskilling in moving from one employment sector to another. For example, one man was a sports coach and sportswear salesperson previously and has only been able to continue coaching on a voluntary basis. He has instead taken up a job packing vegetables in the UK to make money, although he plans to set up his own football academy for Syrian and Arab children. Another was a teacher in Syria yet now works as a bus driver in the UK. Several men have been unable to work on health grounds or due to language barriers, and three women are based at home as housewives.

For those who have found work, however, this is usually described in positive terms even when working in a lower skilled sector than previously: “I feel grateful for the UK, because this country helped me when I was weak. It gave me life, and a feeling of security for myself and for my children. I am currently working and I feel I am contributing to this country, not just a dependent on social benefits. I feel I am thanking them by this job”.

Rights and freedoms
Many refer to the importance of the rights and freedoms that they experience in the UK: “There are more freedoms here; there are less pressures imposed on me as a female…”. At the same time, the difficulties of accessing these rights and freedoms is also palpable: “...it is not easy to understand the laws or be familiar with the culture even if your language is excellent.

While some managed to make connections through volunteering or working, others expressed feelings of isolation and a desire for more support. The situation under various COVID lockdowns is described as
perpetuating these problems. Several point to a lack of activities such as sports clubs, although one mentions that they had attended some helpful online classes during lockdown. Others point to the ways in which the lockdowns prevented progress with their plans and raised further challenges in making new friendships. Yet also significant here is what several research participants describe as the UK’s individualistic culture: “I am also missing social bonds and solidarity here. This is almost not existing in UK. Everyone is having his own life”.

Children and education
Several highlight their children as faring better with the move than adults, and some emphasise the main benefit of resettlement as their children’s education. Overall, seven describe their children as integrating well and as making new friends in the UK, while three describe situations of bullying or isolation. Many note the lack of memories children have of Syria as an issue. Some seek to maintain these memories while others accept that children “have their own new private life that is quite different from us”.

Remaking home
Many of the activities that our research participants mention as important in helping them settle into their new life involve children. Several describe how they like to go out to parks, on bike rides, for picnics, on hiking trips, and to visit local places or the seaside to feel more at home. In addition, activities such as studying or completing courses, learning the language, learning to drive or ride bikes are all highlighted as activities that help with the process of settling into a new life in the UK.

That said, these activities are not only part of a process of remaking home in a new place; they are also described as part of a process of rekindling memories of Syria. Similarly, activities such as “reading Arabic books, watching TV series and listening to Arabic music” or “watching Syrian and Arabic drama series” are highlighted as important in maintaining feelings of home. Some emphasise how they look at pictures from the past and watch live videos of traditional celebrations that are happening in Syria or the UK.

When asked what home means to them, the most frequent responses by our research participants involve references to family, friendships and neighbourly relations. These are described not only as a process of self-preservation, but also of mutual support: “When we first
arrived here, we used to organise a gathering for Syrian families who arrived to the UK every Saturday, in order to help them in the settling process and to let them avoid some of the mistakes we had made before”.

Making new friendships is described as integral to the experience of feeling at home, though several had found it difficult to do so. For some, displacement has led to an irreducible fracturing of the experience of home: “Home is where you are raised and where you have your family and social relations, unfortunately it is now for me where the future of my kids is.”

All of our research participants envisaged staying in the UK longer term, whether out of choice or obligation. For some the future is daunting: “I don’t like think about in the future about my life. I don’t like change and move again”. For others, the future represents a decision to stay and an opportunity to remake home: “It is an open country for us, they gave us the right, to work, learn, make business, I have plans to fulfil in the future”.

Challenges
There are some more specific challenges raised by our research participants about their experience of settling in the UK, which are worth noting here. One questions the levels of support provided when people first arrive, suggesting that these can be variable over time and between locations, as well as with regard to the quality of individual volunteer support. Another goes so far as to suggest that the resettlement process “make[s] us dependent” and unable to “get things done”. Issues such as how to rent a house, how to support children at school, or how to access psychological services are all raised as challenging because of a lack of familiarity with the way things work in the UK.

Regarding access to psychological services, for example, one research participant highlights the cultural barriers that can deter Syrian refugees from seeking support: “We are all affected by the war; many of us had traumas including children. We suffered in the countries we lived in. I did not know I have the right to ask for
that...I later discovered that they think about psychological problems in a different way [here in the UK] than we do in the Arab world. They do not see us as mad people; it is okay here to have these problems”.

In addition to these challenges of getting to grips with a different culture of engaging with service provision, frustrations are voiced about the practical barriers to integration within the UK workforce. Several of our research participants emphasise the lack of recognition of existing skills and qualifications as a concern: “They can test me and see if I can do the job or not, instead of starting everything from scratch”. Others point to the ways in which linguistic barriers prevent them from updating their training in order to work in the UK.

**Summary**

Overall, our analysis suggests that experiences of remaking home by Syrian refugees who are resettled to the UK are mixed. Although having the opportunity to resettle is largely viewed as good fortune by those whom we interviewed, the process nevertheless provokes multiple emotions. Several point to displacement as leading to a loss of memories, a fracturing of the meaning of home and growing differences between generations. A sense of loss is described in social, cultural and physical terms, with several expressing sentiments about the total loss of Syria and its people. In this context, efforts to remake home are inseparable from the rekindling of memories of Syria. Activities such as bike rides, picnics and local visits help with the process of settling into the UK, yet also serve as reminders of life in Syria. Moreover, linguistic, cultural and work barriers remain significant for many and feelings of isolation and cultural alienation are also common, despite the UK being viewed as home in the longer term by the majority of our research participants. Mutual support is described as important in this context, particularly in the context of multiple COVID lockdowns, where feelings of isolation are described as further exacerbated.