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Violence, life aspirations and displacement trajectories in civil war

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Abstract

Drawing on qualitative data from the civil wars in Syria and Libya since 2011, this paper seeks to build a better understanding of immobility and of displacement trajectories within conflict countries and towards neighbouring countries. The paper shows that different types of violent experiences—personal threats, generalized violence, an increasing hopelessness relating to the absence of violence in the future—trigger different exit movements across internal and external borders. Second, the analysis demonstrates that migration decisions in civil war contexts are complex processes with people balancing between strategies of how to avoid violence with strategies of how to realize broader life aspirations related to family, love, work and political change. Life aspirations often play a more important role once people move out of a situation of immediate danger and in later phases of trajectories and influence (im)mobility patterns in three different directions: stay, move (on) or return. Life aspirations, especially related to political change, outweigh perceptions of violence in some cases. Financial vulnerability can force people to stay in or return to violent contexts.

INTRODUCTION

What about conflict drives some people to move, while others stay behind? And which displacement trajectories are undertaken out of and back into conflict-affected areas? While it is widely acknowledged that conflict is one

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of the main determinants of forced migration, it remains rather unclear how subjective experiences of violence influence displacement patterns across internal and external borders and how these experiences interact with other factors over time.

Research from conflict studies has provided important insights into why people flee war (Adhikari, 2013; Davenport et al., 2003; Moore & Shellman, 2004, 2006; Schmeidl, 1997) and on the logics behind combatants forcing people to flee, for instance to gain control of a territory, or to learn more about displaced populations (Greenhill, 2010; Hägerdal, 2019; Lichtenheld, 2020; Steele, 2018; Zhukov, 2015). The conflict studies literature on why people flee war has—perhaps unsurprisingly—concluded that violent political conflicts are the primary determinant of forced migration, often measuring and distinguishing between different types of violence. Schmeidl (1997), for example argues that institutional human rights violations have weaker predictive power than generalized violence in producing refugee migrations. Davenport et al. (2003) show that threats to personal integrity are of primary importance in leading people to leave their home, threats to personal integrity, dissident threats to personal integrity and joint state–dissident threats each have statistically significant effects. Studying a global sample of forced migration, Moore and Shellman (2004) argue that violent behaviour has a substantially larger impact on forced migration than variables such as the type of political institution or the average size of the economy. According to this study, civil war is the strongest predictor of refugee migration. In another study, analysing global internally displaced people (IDP) and refugee stock data, Moore and Shellman (2006) argue that refugee flows outweigh IDP flows in most cases and that refugee production relative to IDPs is a positive function of a state targeting of civilians.

However, many of these studies fail to explain why not all people exposed to violence flee. On the one hand, violence might be experienced differently by different people. On the other hand, experiences of violence are interlinked with other factors. It is rarely a single decision that guides refugees' trajectories which are often fragmented over time (Arar & FitzGerald, 2022; Collyer, 2010). Displacement is not a linear process but is almost always multiple. While the aforementioned global or large-*n* studies have had mixed results regarding the relationship between economic factors and displacement, with some of them not showing a significant relationship at all (cf. Davenport et al., 2003; Schmeidl, 1997), detailed case studies typically find that levels of violence interact with economic and other considerations (Adhikari, 2013; Arar & FitzGerald, 2022; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007). Existing research also shows that migration decisions in violent contexts are often taken on the household level. Arar and FitzGerald (2022) show, for example in a longitudinal study of a Syrian family living across several countries, that households often function as economic and decision-making entities. In a similar vein, Dubow and Kuschminder (2021) show that refugee families often negotiate the physical and financial barriers to their movement by employing separation as a key adaptive strategy.

Refugees' migration trajectories are structured by financial resources and social networks (van Hear, 2004). People contemplating flight or who have been displaced make decisions within sharp structural constraints, influenced by policies and practices of governmental authorities and rebel groups in origin and host states (Arar & FitzGerald, 2022; Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023). As Lubkemann (2008) has pointed out, in conflict settings, people might have stronger aspirations to leave than in other contexts, but fewer people actually manage to do so, resulting in involuntary immobility for many. He argues that such involuntary immobilization is a much stronger driver of disruption and disempowerment than wartime movement. Those who manage to cross an (or multiple) international border(s) are often more privileged than those who stay behind. Once refugees have left their home country, host state policies shape their aspirations and judgements about staying or migrating onward (Arar & FitzGerald, 2022: 75; Müller-Funk, 2019).

Building on this literature, this paper takes on a micro-level perspective analysing immobility and displacement trajectories within conflict countries and towards neighbouring countries and aspirations for onward movement, by studying how experiences of violence intersect with broader life aspirations. While migration and stay decisions in displacement contexts are embedded in larger social and family networks and are often household strategies, a perspective on the individual level can shed light on how individuals position themselves to such larger social frames over time and, in particular, how they respond to family expectations and gender norms. In doing so, I draw from the

literature on stay and migration aspirations (Carling, 2002, 2014; de Haas, 2021; Schewel, 2020), looking into who a person is, but also who he/she aspires to be and how he/she wants to live. The concept of stay and migration aspirations emphasizes the importance of migrants' agency, as it assumes that migrants exert agency over their migration decisions. In fact, the "act" of aspiring itself can be seen as an expression of agency (Borselli & van Meijl, 2021). Theoretical literature on migration aspirations argues that broader life aspirations play an important role in migration aspirations (Carling, 2014). de Haas (2014: 23), for example, defined migration aspirations as a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived spatial opportunity structures (cf. Carling & Collins, 2018). The migration aspiration literature has been used to study a wide variety of migration types, as almost all migrants, including those who are displaced, are considered to have some form of agency. Yet, displacement has often been omitted in theoretical discussions around migration aspirations (Aslany et al., 2021; Müller-Funk et al., 2023). Following de Haas (2021, 15), I define life aspirations as "people's perceptions of the 'good life'". Life aspirations are highly influenced by individual perceptions of local and remote socio-economic opportunities (Carling & Collins, 2017, 2018; de Haas, 2021). Individuals with different socio-economic status are thus likely to develop different life aspirations, as they have different perceptions of opportunities at home and elsewhere. Imaginations about opportunities to realize life aspirations at home or elsewhere are also often stratified (cf. also Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2022). Life aspirations are highly subject to change over people's migration trajectory (Czaika & Vothknecht, 2014).

Drawing on 91 interviews with people having experienced a civil war—in Syria and Libya since 2011—this paper therefore seeks to build a better understanding of (im)mobilities in such settings. Focusing on two contexts in the Global South is a conscious choice as most displacement happens in conflict countries and towards neighbouring countries in the Global South. According to UNHCR statistics, developing countries host 85 per cent of the world's refugees (UNHCR, 2022). These numbers might be even higher given that in many countries in the Global South, large numbers of displaced people are not registered with UNHCR. The paper makes four contributions to the existing literature. First, the analysis reveals that the distinctions between immobility and displacement and the displaced and non-displaced are blurry. Respondents' trajectories were fragmented over time into phases of staying, internal displacement within and across conflict lines, displacement across international borders and return movements. Throughout their trajectories, respondents often also hosted displaced family members. Second, the paper shows that violence and life aspirations play different roles at different points of time and in different phases of trajectories: The analysis demonstrates that migration decisions in civil war contexts are complex processes with people balancing strategies of how to avoid violence with strategies of how to realize broader life aspirations related to family and romantic partners, work, and political change. Life aspirations often play a more important role once people move out of a situation of immediate danger and in later phases of flight trajectories, highlighting the importance of time in contexts of protracted displacement. Third, the analysis shows the crucial role of family and loved ones in structuring trajectories in violent contexts. Lastly, the results underline that political aspirations and (perceived) political affiliation are crucial factors influencing immobility and displacement—not only across external borders, but also within origin countries.

The article starts with a discussion of my research design and methodology, paying particular attention to my case selection strategy and data collection. In the article's main body, I first map different subjective experiences of violence across the two case studies. The subsequent part then discusses how three forms of life aspirations—love, work/career and political change—interact with experiences of violence and create specific patterns of displacement. The conclusion summarizes my findings in relation to the existing literature and reflects on future research avenues.

CASE SELECTION, DATA AND ANALYSIS

In this article, the term displacement denotes the movement of people who have been displaced internally or across borders due to violent conflict, war, and persecution, natural or man-made disasters, or the effects of

development projects (Martin, 2012). I focus in this paper on immobility and displacement trajectories in the context of two civil wars, defined as intrastate armed conflicts which involve violence by and against a state, and at least one rebel group (Butler & Gates, 2009), given the prevalence of large-scale violence and internal displacement and across borders. The Libyan and Syrian civil wars since 2011 are emblematic cases to systematically explore immobility and displacement trajectories given the politically organized, large-scale, sustained violent conflicts that have occurred within their territories over the past 10 years after a popular mass upheaval against long-time authoritarian rule in 2011. They are characterized by an uneven state presence and international interventions, with the Syrian regime continuing to govern after having re-conquered large, but not all parts of the country, and Libya consisting of two separate parts with competing governments after the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. The intensity of fighting and extent of political instability fluctuated over the years, yet, in both cases, the conflict is still ongoing more than one decade later. Both civil wars are internationalized civil wars, which, according to Schmeidl (1997), are the violent contexts which produce the largest refugee populations.

Both conflicts have triggered massive internal and external displacement, especially to neighbouring countries with whom Libya and Syria share long histories of labour migration and strong cultural and family ties. Many Syrians and Libyans have also remained in Syria and Libya. The Syrian civil war has displaced more than 13 million Syrians within the country and across its borders; this is more than half of the country's pre-war population. Most externally displaced Syrians reside in neighbouring states (especially Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon). While there have been some external return movements (UNHCR, 2011), most displaced Syrians remain in protracted, often multiple, displacement situations. Reliable statistics of externally displaced Libyans are difficult to obtain as Libyans are not recognized or registered as refugees in main host countries (Tunisia and Egypt) and Libyans displaced across the border regularly cross back again for short periods (el Taraboulsi-McCarthy & Al-Bayati, 2019). According to estimations by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), around 1.4 million Libyans of the pre-war Libyan population of 6.2 million have been internally displaced since 2011 (IDMC, 2021). The number of externally displaced Libyans are highly disputed, with estimations in Tunisia ranging from 5,00,000 to 1.5 million (Natter, 2021), and between 163,000 (UNHCR, 2011) to one million in Egypt (IOM, 2022). According to some estimations, over 70 per cent of Libyans, who were displaced in 2011, later returned to Libya (el Taraboulsi-McCarthy & Al-Bayati, 2019, 11).

Syrians and Libyans leaving Syria and Libya have highly diverging possibilities to cross borders to neighbouring countries. Since 2014, it has become increasingly difficult for Syrians to enter neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Lebanon, for example changed from a mutual mobility agreement which was still respected at the beginning of the Syrian conflict towards a restrictive one characterized by border closure and political actors advocating for a return of Syrian refugees. The Libyan-Tunisian and Libyan-Egyptian borders, on the other hand, have mostly remained open for Libyans. Tunisia, for example adopted a *laissez-faire* approach towards Libyans tolerating their entry and presence without providing refugee status (Müller-Funk & Natter, 2023).

For the analysis, I rely on 91 qualitative interviews conducted with Syrians and Libyans living in different urban parts of Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Tunisia between 2018 and 2021. These interviews were conducted together with eight research assistants based in Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Tunisia, most of whom experienced displacement themselves, while two lived inside Syria and Libya. In neighbouring countries, we collected data in the capital city and a second large city closer to the border to better understand dynamics at the border (Lebanon: Beirut and Tripoli, Tunisia: Tunis and Sfax). In Syria and Libya, we aimed to cover cities in main regions under different political control (Syria: Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib; Libya: Benghazi and Tripoli). The sampling strategy for the qualitative interviews aimed for diversity with regard to different forms of displacement, return and immobility, current city of residence, time of displacement, gender and educational background (see Tables A1 and A2 in the annex for more details about the sample), by drawing on the team's personal contacts and snowballing through multiple entry points. Interview topics covered the respondents' life history including experiences during the war, follow-up questions inquiring into their perceptions of life in their current place of living, and future plans. While we did not specifically ask about life aspirations, all respondents referred to life aspirations (as hopes or their future) when

they talked about how their life evolved over time. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Syrian and Libyan Arabic and subsequently translated by the assistants or the author. Due to the sensitivity of some topics, all interviews were anonymised and are quoted with pseudonyms and codes.¹

The interview data has clear limitations. Given the volatile character of civil war and the sampling strategy, the analysis only provides geographical and temporal snapshots. The data reflects the sampling strategy focusing on urban areas and the limited access to different localities and respondents due to security concerns and COVID-19 regulations. Inside conflict countries, some regions remained inaccessible to us, such as the south of Libya and Northeast Syria, even if some interviewees in Lebanon and Tunisia originated from these regions. The interviews also reflect the social networks of the various research assistants, even if we tried to multiply entry points as much as possible by working with several research assistants with different social ties in different parts of the four countries. Inside conflict countries, it was therefore more difficult to reach respondents from lower socio-economic status. We tried to mitigate these biases by drawing on the research assistants' extended social networks which originated in their involvement in local NGOs supporting migrants and refugees. With all its limitations and sketchiness, qualitative data in violent contexts still provides important empirical insights into the origins of displacement trajectories, especially in contexts where large-scale and representative quantitative data collection is impossible due to the risks involved.

The analysis focused, first, on identifying dominant categories of immobility, displacement and return movements across internal and international borders which emerged inductively from the respondents' narratives. The second analysis classified dominant motives for displacement and (im)mobility across interviewees' narratives and then associated factors to different phases of immobility and displacement trajectories. The following two sections provide further insights into these performed analyses. Section three explains how different experiences of violence structured respondents' displacement trajectories, while section four explains how they intersect with their broader life aspirations.

DISPLACEMENT TRAJECTORIES AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE: PERSONAL THREATS TO LIFE, FEARS OF GENERALIZED VIOLENCE AND HOPELESSNESS

The analysis revealed that respondents had experienced different forms of displacement over time, which were often related to different motives of moving or staying. In the analysis, I distinguish first between two types of internal displacement and internal return: In-line displacement and in-line return refer to displacement and return movements within conflict lines, which involves moving to a different area under the same political control, usually across small distances, often to a different neighbourhood within the same city, with people being hosted by relatives in most cases. When talking about these experiences, respondents talked about "living with family" or "renting another apartment in a different location," rather than about being displaced. Cross-line displacement and cross-line return, on the other hand, refer to displacement and return to areas under different political control across conflict lines but within state borders. Moving to another area under different political control was either related to the attempt of trying to reach (relatively) safety within the country but was also related to state authorities and rebel groups enforcing cross-line displacement (cf. Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023). These two types of internal displacement constitute ideal types—sometimes it was impossible to distinguish between the two categories due to ambiguities and inconsistencies in the interviews, but also changing political control.

Second, cross-border displacement and cross-border return refer to displacement and return across international borders. Cross-border displacement was often an extension of internal displacement and mirrored internal displacement patterns in terms of accommodation and location: Many respondents moved in with family and relatives living across the border. While Libyan respondents faced much fewer controls by Libyan state authorities than Syrian respondents, militias and rebel groups were in both cases involved in external border control. A

subcategory of cross-border return were short-term return visits without an intention to stay—mostly for family visits and work reasons or to access health care, which were extremely common in both cases before the closures of borders and/or the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from long phases of staying, internal displacement, especially in-line displacement, was clearly the most common experience among respondents in both countries, followed by cross-border displacement (see [Table 1](#)). In-line displacement was often the first of multiple displacements and the result of immediate personal threats of violence and generalized violence. In-line returns happened in many cases immediately after a threat of violence was over. Cross-line displacement was much less widespread; cross-line return even less so. Aspirations for secondary migration from Lebanon and Tunisia were very high, with almost all Syrian respondents and around two-thirds of Libyan respondents aspiring to leave. Many respondents in exile returned for short visits to Syria and Libya, with almost half of our respondents having returned at least once. Short return trips were either undertaken by respondents with business or work relations back home or by financially vulnerable respondents in Lebanon who returned to access public health services in Syria. Both groups of respondents who returned for short visits mostly fled from generalized forms of violence and had not faced personal threats.

Different types of subjective experiences of violence committed by regime forces, oppositional groups or militias were a core motive for respondents' displacement trajectories, especially at their beginnings. Violence was in all cases a driver for exit—within conflict lines and across conflict lines within a country, and across international borders. Respondents linked their displacement to existential threats to and fears for their life and their survival. Their experiences of violence can be roughly divided into three categories: first, personal threats to their life through potential exposure to violence; second, fears of generalized forms of violence; and third, a growing feeling of hopelessness that generalized forms of violence will continue to prevail in the future. Over time, respondents experienced violence multiple times across these three categories. Yet, the categories were linked to different displacement patterns and temporalities—in terms of where to flee, but also in terms of how quickly or slowly respondents took the decision to flee and how short- and/or long-term they imagined their displacement to be.

TABLE 1 Experiences with different types of displacement and return movements.

	Libya	Syria	Total
Country of origin	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Current country of residence			
In exile (Tunisia/Lebanon)	25	27	52
In origin country (Libya/Syria)	19	20	39
Internal displacement (including multiple)	50	42	92
Of which in-line displacement	33	32	65
Of which cross-line displacement	17	10	27
Internal return (including multiple)	24	11	35
Of which in-line return	20	5	25
Of which cross-line return	4	6	10
External displacement (including multiple)	36	39	75
External return (including multiple)	12	12	24
Short-term external return visits (from host country)	12	11	23
Aspirations for secondary migration (from host country)	15	23	38
Total respondents	44	47	91

Note: Frequencies are approximations due to missing data, ambiguities and inconsistencies in some interviews.

Respondents referred to the first category of violence broadly as “the threat.” Personal threats to one’s life through potential exposure to violence included forms of personal persecution based on respondents’ political opinion or perceived political positioning in the conflict, threats and obligations to have to participate in armed fight and exposure to violence through imprisonment and torture. Libyan respondents, for example mentioned that they faced personal persecution by militias because of their (perceived) pro-Gaddafi or their atheist attitudes but also their sexual identity; others reported that their stance against the current governments in Libya’s East and West led to their persecution and threats of violence by different militias and regime actors. Other respondents faced personal persecution based on their ethnic and tribal group identity or their geographical origin. This was reported by respondents belonging to Libyan tribes or ethnic minorities perceived to be pro-Gaddafi because they were politically favoured during Gaddafi’s regime (such as the Werfalli, the Tarhouna or the Tawergha tribe), but also tribes perceived to be supporting the regime change in 2011: *“All they think of is their tribe and the people who they oppose and so there were crimes of killing [...] and the whole atmosphere was electric”* (LIBTUN1 – female, 26 years, Tunis). Respondents from specific geographical areas with a connotation for opposition to the current regime (Syria) or for support to the former regime (Libya) also faced personalized forms of persecution. For example, respondents from the Jobar neighbourhood in Damascus, Darayya, a suburb of Damascus, or Idlib Governorate feared persecution from the Syrian regime due to originating from a location that was controlled by the opposition at some point of the conflict, regardless of their political opinion. Second, participants felt threatened by the obligations to commit and be subjected to violence in an armed fight, either through compulsory army service or pressures to fight for a militia or a rebel group. Many Syrian young men fled, for instance, when they received a conscription order to join the Syrian army, while Libyan respondents often mentioned pressures to join a militia. A third type of threats to life were personal experiences of imprisonment and torture.

Respondents who experienced personal threats to their life almost always fled fast and initially thought that their displacement was temporary. Their (perceived) political affiliation often structured their displacement trajectories with a lot of internal displacement. Some respondents returned within the country, after the immediate personal threat was over, for example, when the control over a territory shifted. Internal return across conflict lines (cross-line) was less prevalent: *“The difficulties were when you were cut off from the rest of the country. That is, you are locked up from the outside. And as I told you my grandfather’s house was in Aleppo. We cannot reach it”* (SYRSYR20 – female, 25 years, Damascus). Some respondents also fled across international borders, especially after experiences of imprisonment and torture, if they had the necessary resources and family ties abroad. Some of them moved to neighbouring countries which were considered neutral or political allies of the fraction they supported in the conflict. Respondents who had faced personal persecution rarely returned from abroad due to fears of imprisonment and torture upon return—except for if the regime or political control in their region changed.

The second category, fears of generalized forms of violence, was most widespread among the respondents, which mirrors Schmeidl’s (1997) findings. These were related to fears of bombings, approaching battle lines, kidnappings as a source of income, and sexual violence towards women. In these cases, respondents talked about staying as long as possible in the country—until reaching a tipping point when violence became an immediate threat to their life: *“Then the crisis came”* (SYRLEB17 – female, 27 years, Beirut) was a prevalent narrative. Another respondent explained: *“Three days before we left, we heard the bombing getting close, saying they reached Musallata, [...], I knew they were close to Tarhouna and would take it, so I told my husband it would be best if we move to the East, but he refused, everyone there decided they’re leaving, packing their stuff Thursday night and planning on leaving Friday morning, we were so scared”* (LIBLIB5 – female, 42 years, Benghazi). Like the first category, respondents almost always perceived their displacement as temporary. Much displacement linked to fears of generalized forms of violence happened in-line across short distance and some was short-term: Many internally displaced respondents returned to their original homes when battle lines receded, or bombings ended if respondents’ houses were still intact. Some respondents also fled short distances across an international border as a first or second step in their trajectory if they had financial resources and/or family networks across. In contrast to respondents who faced personal threats, internal (especially in-line return) and external return was more prevalent: *“The war was over, and*

life was almost normal, so we said, we have to go back to Benghazi [...]. When we were back in Benghazi, life was normal and not normal at the same time. It was like there was something missing. The spirit of the city, all people were afraid, not like in 2011" (LIBLIB3 – female, 30 years, Benghazi). Many respondents who fled to a neighbouring country because of generalized forms of violence also undertook short-term return trips.

A third experience related to violence was a growing feeling of hopelessness that an atmosphere of violence will continue to prevail in the future—without an immediate threat to life. These respondents had mostly stayed for a long time in their place of living because, despite the conflict going on, they still had the perception that continuing life was possible under the current conditions, and they upheld the hope that violence will end in the long-term. Their hope was often linked to the fluctuating security situation and the fact that violence was not present everywhere. For instance, some Libyan respondents did not perceive the situation in Libya in 2011 as mainly dominated by violence, but rather by hope for a possible political change: *"To be honest, the revolution refined our personality, our ideas and our point of view changed and our voice got louder"* (LIBLIB3 – female, 30 years, Benghazi). They then described how their hope gradually disappeared over time, leading to a slower decision to flee and a perception that displacement was more long-term. Respondents of this category often had a trend for cross-border displacement and fewer return movements, while short-term return trips from abroad were also common.

While violent experiences were a clear factor in driving respondents to leave, the analysis also revealed that physical violence cannot be neatly separated from other immediate forms of threats to life, such as insufficient access to food due to decreasing economic conditions or sieges or insufficient access to health care. In Libya, for example, many interviewees left Libya to Tunisia (and Turkey) for medical treatment given the weak health infrastructure which existed already prior to the conflict and was exacerbated through the conflict. In Syria, respondents reported existential threats to life due to the lack of hospitals because of extensive bombing, which motivated some of them to leave the country (SYRLEB6). The following section delves into how experiences of violence intersected with aspirations related to love, career and politics in shaping displacement trajectories.

"MY FUTURE DISAPPEARED": LIFE ASPIRATIONS BETWEEN LOVE, CAREER AND POLITICS

While violence dominated respondents' narratives, accounts about the "good life" before the war and interrupted life goals were extremely present. Respondents talked extensively about their "disappearing future," the future of their children, or that of their whole generation. One Syrian respondent explained: *"Approximately my future, not only my future, but also the future of my siblings, half of them, disappeared"* (SYRLEB10 – female, 20 years, Tripoli). Another Libyan participant stated: *"Unfortunately, we are still young, so if I continued life there, it would be a waste of my life. I can't build myself there or develop my abilities in the current status of Libya"* (LIBTUN23 – male, 31 years, Tunis). In many interviews, life aspirations became more important in later phases of respondents' displacement trajectories and/or for those who gradually lost hope that violence might vanish. Participants often talked about a tipping point when "life became miserable" or "life got stuck." Realizing life aspirations was an element of slower migration decision-making and was a driver to stay, leave, return and for having onward aspirations. In neighbouring countries, respondents linked their aspirations for onward migration to unrealisable core life plans there. This was often closely linked to host state policies, especially regarding legal stay, work, and educational opportunities: *"It is impossible to stay in Lebanon, because you can't build a future in Lebanon. [...] For the future, I have many dreams, but I can't make them true in this country, there are a lot of obstacles, [...] dreams are impossible in this country"* (SYLREB28 – male, 28 years, Beirut). Life aspirations thus interacted with experiences of violence, creating different displacement patterns, dependent on respondents' outlooks on life.

Through the analysis, three categories of life aspirations emerged: first, love and family, second, work-related aspirations between survival and career ambitions, and third, aspirations for social and political change. Most important of these three categories were love and family aspirations, pointing to the core role of family in

civil war contexts as emotional and financial anchors and support, as also shown in previous research (Arar & FitzGerald, 2022; Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021; Kok, 2010). These aspirations often centred around the idea to start or stay together as a family or with a partner or to support each other by staying or by separating and sending money to family members located elsewhere. For some respondents, especially single female young adults, this aspiration was linked to the idea of getting married or starting a family and linked to the transition to adulthood. In the Syrian context, there is a general understanding that marriage and parenthood is how women and men become adults (Rabo, 2008). For example, women reported to have left to be able to marry and start a family as many young men had fled the country due to conscription orders, with some even calling Syria a “spinster state.” Other women left the country to join their husband abroad. Many respondents also reported to have stayed in Syria or Libya to support their elderly parents, emotionally and financially. Other respondents also left or aspired to leave to another country to be able to have more freedom from local social norms and live in a different type of relationship than their families had foreseen for them. This was especially true for queer refugees or women who wanted to get a divorce. Some respondents in fact referred to family considerations—especially related to care responsibilities—as obligations and not aspirations.

The second type of life aspirations were motives centred around education and work. Educational aspirations were a key motive for younger respondents and parents, given the interruption of education in Syria and Libya, with schools and universities stopping to operate and/or being destroyed. Educational aspirations were mostly a driver for leaving Syria and Libya and for aspirations for onward migration from Lebanon. Some respondents also decided to stay in Syria or Libya to finish university before leaving or to prolong their university studies to avoid military service. Others reported to have moved within the country to study in a different area. Aspirations related to work similarly influenced decisions to stay, move (on) and return. While some respondents reported to have stayed in Syria and Libya because they could continue working in their job, the vast majority explained that their work stopped or became unsustainable. Other participants had the aspiration to expand their business in exile, get additional work experience abroad, work in a different sector which they often had gotten to know in exile, such as civil society, or find work in one's (highly skilled) profession in another country: *“The Lebanese labour law only allows Syrians to work in construction and farming, and if we work in any other field, we are considered in violation of the law!”* (SYRLEB20 – male, 27 years, Beirut). Some few interviewees also returned to Syria and Libya if a job opportunity corresponded to their professional aspirations: *“I decided to return when I saw that all of my family had returned to Syria. And everyone began to return. And our work was very good. And there was the ability to develop my work in Syria. In other words, the pressures that were being exercised against us had disappeared and were not the same as before”* (SYRSYR19 – female, 28 years, Damascus). Work aspirations were clearly located on a continuum between aspirations and survival depending on their socio-economic situation: While some participants reported to have left Syria to find work elsewhere because they did not have enough resources to buy food, less vulnerable respondents made strategic decisions regarding their educational and professional aspirations.

A third type of aspirations was related to social and political change. These aspirations centred around ideas to promote democratic change, to foster social change through civil society activism in the light of authoritarianism and failing institutions or shape the political order in a contested area through militant mobilization. These respondents showed a trend for staying, in-line displacement and in-line return after a short time in areas controlled by rebel groups or the opposition—often taking high risks to do so. Respondents reported for instance to have stayed (or returned) to participate in demonstrations, to work as first-aid workers or volunteers in hospitals, to work for NGOs providing assistance to the civil population inside the conflict country and in exile, or to teach children in light of the breakdown of school education: *“I don't want to get out of it at all because it is our duty not to leave our house and land and go and run away. I went back to defend my land and my country and my village and the people here. It was one of the things that affected me the most”* (SYRSYR11 – male, 44 years, Idlib Governorate).

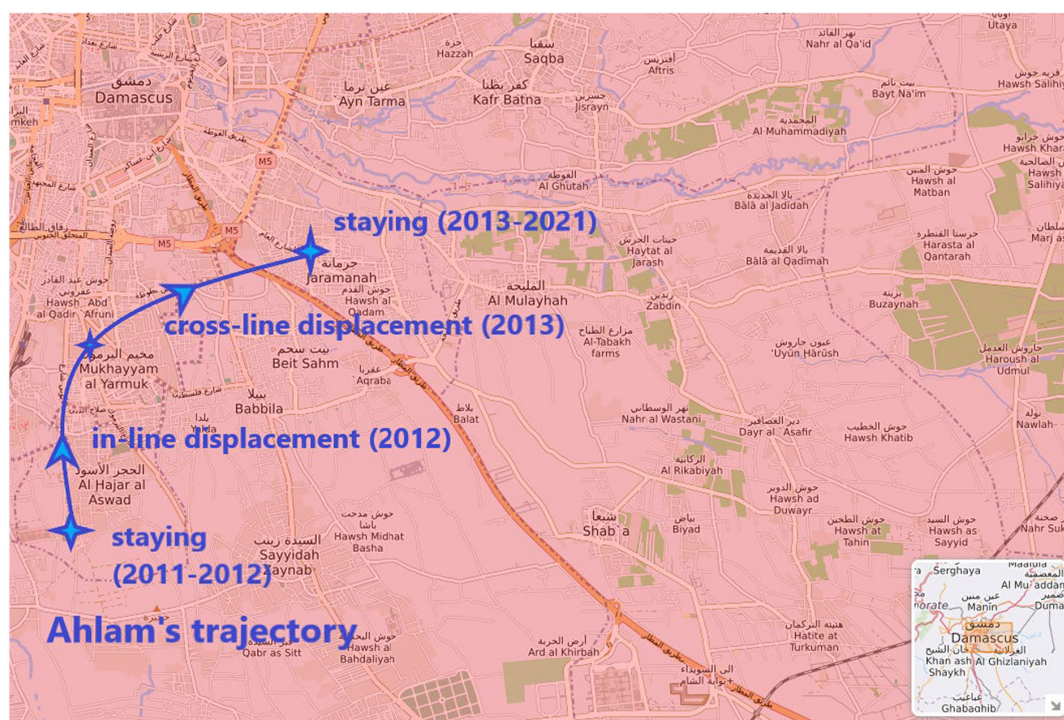
Life aspirations across the three categories had clear class and gender dimensions. On the one hand, the narratives of less educated respondents who lived in situations of extreme poverty often focused on their daily fight for survival and were sometimes characterized by the clear absence of aspirations. This was especially the case among

Syrian respondents in Lebanon, where the economic situation was dire for many. One Syrian woman in Lebanon stated for example: *"I don't imagine anything [about the future], every day that comes is worse than the one before, we are afraid about the days to come"* (SYRLEB5 – female, 20 years, Tripoli). Some of these Syrian respondents—if not personally threatened—even returned to Syria under unsafe conditions to guarantee their or their family's survival or returned for medical treatment which they could not afford in Lebanon (cf. Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2022). In contrast, many Libyan respondents arrived in Tunisia with initially better material conditions, even if they experienced dispossession and impoverishment over the years. On the other hand, higher (interrupted) educational attainment was often related to unfulfilled educational and work aspirations, which motivated some respondents to leave Syria and Libya or influenced their aspirations for onward migration from neighbouring host states.

Life aspirations were also strongly gendered. Love and family aspirations were based on and negotiated around gendered notions of family roles and responsibilities. For example, while many well-educated female respondents had clear professional aspirations which were connected to aspirations to leave, some women reported that they were not able to leave on their own, as either their family or themselves considered moving and leaving as too risky. On the other hand, mothers who were housewives (especially those with lower educational attainment) often did not mention their own educational or work aspirations but rather the aspirations they had for their children. One mother explained in this regard: *"The future of my children. I was denied an education and I want my children to accomplish it"* (SYRLEB3 – female, 39 years, Tripoli).

The following three examples aim to exemplify how different types of life aspirations play into each other and how they interact with subjective experiences of violence in creating immobility and displacement trajectories over time. The trajectory of our Syrian respondent Ahlam's (SYRSYR20) was mainly driven by experiences of generalized forms of violence, personal threats, and family aspirations and obligations and career aspirations. Amira was 28 years old at the time of our interview. She experienced internal displacement within and across conflict lines and long phases of staying. Ahlam was born in al-Hajar al-Aswad, a city located 4 km south of Damascus. In 2012, the city's control was contested between the Syrian regime and the Free Syrian Army, with shelling by government forces and clashes happening between rebels and the army, spreading into the adjacent Yarmouk Palestinian camp. In 2014, the area became a hotspot for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, before being recaptured by regime forces in 2018. Ahlam studied pharmacy when the uprising and the conflict broke out in 2011 and did not take part in any political activities. One part of Ahlam's family had roots in Idlib in northwest Syria, one of the strongholds of the opposition, and her father was a military officer in the Syrian army, which made her family suspicious to state authorities and rebel groups alike. An acquaintance of the family, who had also worked for the Syrian Army, got killed by rebel forces, which left the family in fear of their possible fate. When al-Hajar al-Aswad was bombed by the regime in 2012, the family briefly moved in with relatives in the adjacent Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk. But when also Yarmouk got shelled in 2013 and the Free Syrian Army took over control, Ahlam's family decided to move and rent an apartment in Jaramana, a neighbourhood, which was considered more neutral and had affordable rents. Since then, Ahlam has continued to live in Jaramana until the day of the interview. After Ahlam's father died in 2013 because of a kidney failure, she took over the financial responsibility for the family and started to work in a factory where she became head of department—a responsibility that gave her new self-confidence. A combination of factors made Ahlam stay in Syria: a strong commitment to her family not wanting to leave her mother behind, her long-term aspiration to finish her studies and open her own pharmacy, and the gender norms, risks and costs involved when leaving Syria as a single woman. She also rejected the idea to get married abroad to be able to leave. Ahlam's family was never able to return to their house in al-Hajar al-Aswad as the neighbourhood is part of a governmental reconstruction plan and the Syrian regime restricted the access of previous owners to it, without paying compensation (Map 1).

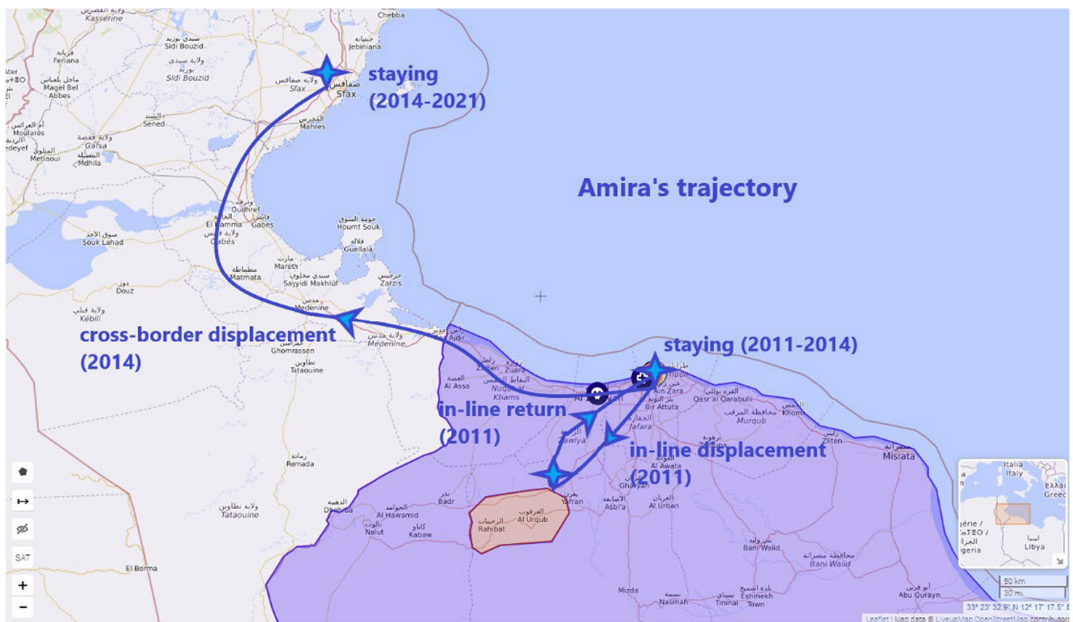
The displacement trajectory of another respondent, Amira (LIBTUN7), a 37-year-old Libyan mother and housewife born in Tripoli in 1983 living in Sfax at the time of our interview, was first driven by generalized forms of violence, and later by a decreasing hope for the absence of violence in the future, her changing romantic relationship and educational aspirations for her daughter. She experienced internal displacement and internal return within



MAP 1 Ahlam's trajectory 2011-2021 (based on Syria Live Map, 2023). Red: Pro-Assad forces, Syrian army, NDF, Russia, IRGC from Iran, Hezbollah, Shia groups from Iraq, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon (Syria Live Map, 2023).

conflict lines, followed by cross-border displacement 4 years later, and long phases of staying. Prior to the conflict, after her studies in economy in Misrata, Amira got married, moved to her husband's family in Tripoli and had a daughter and never started to work. In 2011, during the Battle of Tripoli between loyalists of Muammar Gaddafi and the National Transitional Council, which attempted to overthrow Gaddafi and eventually took control of the capital, Amira described to live in a situation of constant fear and insecurity. The family then decided to take refuge in a farm her husband's family owned outside the capital, where they remained until the battle was over, after which they returned to their previous home. In 2014, when the Tripoli airport strike happened, Amira got convinced that security was no longer possible in Libya and started to think about leaving to another country. At the same time, Amira was going through a divorce due to different ideas between her and her husband about how their daughter's upbringing. Amira left Libya because of her perception that violence will not disappear in Libya in the foreseeable future, but also because she wanted her daughter to grow up with more educational possibilities. She left to Tunis in 2018 after her divorce and after her brother moved there with his family, whom she joined with her daughter. (Map 2)

The third example of 36-year-old Karim (SYRSYR6) highlights the importance of personalized threats, increasing political aspirations and emerging educational aspirations for his trajectory since 2011. Karim was born in Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib in Syria's Northwest in the mid-1980s. The region has remained one of the strongholds of the Syrian opposition since 2011. It was shelled and raided by the Syrian Army in 2012, experienced a siege in 2015 and was still being bombed at the time of our fieldwork. Karim experienced long phases of staying and internal displacement in moments when the competing political actor attacked, followed by rapid return after the end of violence and cross-border displacement to Turkey and cross-border return to his original place of residence. Karim had strong political aspirations and later educational aspirations linked to his desire to change society and politics. He felt the strong need to support the civil population in his area where state structures started to fail



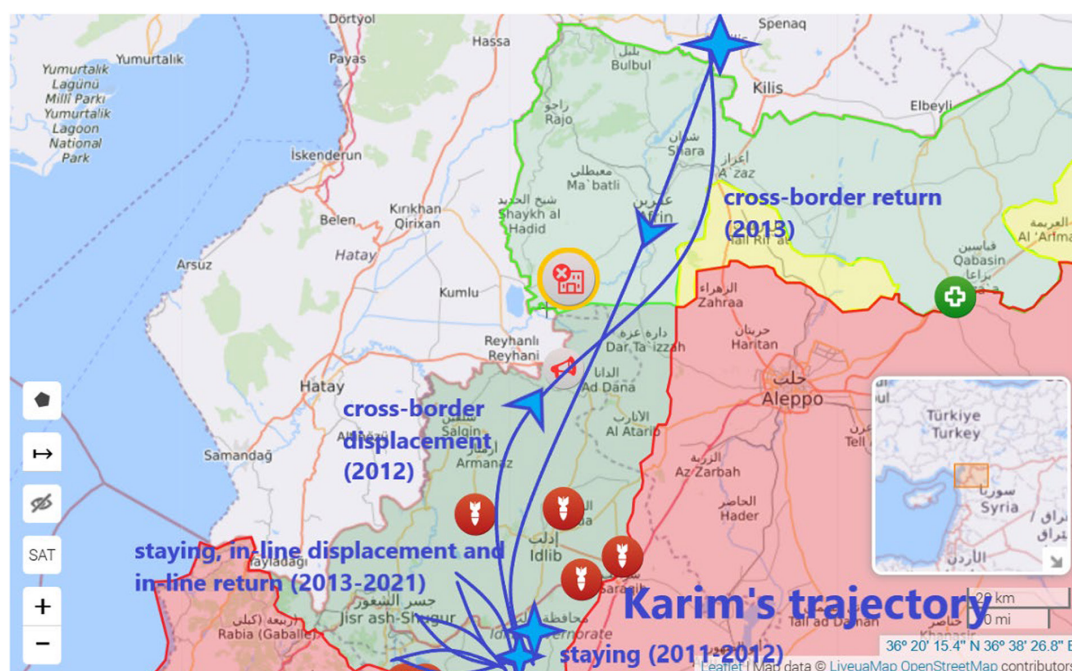
MAP 2 Amira's trajectory 2011–2021 (based on Libya Live Map, 2023). Red: Pro-Assad forces, Syrian army, NDF, Russia, IRGC from Iran, Hezbollah, Shia groups from Iraq, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon (Syria Live Map, 2023). Blue: Government of National Accord or GNA or UN-backed government or Tripoli government or Waqef government headed by Fayez Sarraj, Tripoli protection forces, Misrata forces, other pro-Tripoli militias, Turkey, Qatar, Pakistan; red: Libyan army or LNA or Eastern Libya forces or Pro-Haftar forces or Tobruk government, Arab coalition: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain (Libya Live Map, 2023).

and international organizations were absent, safeguard his property, and ultimately considered staying as an act of resistance. Karim was working in a ministry when the demonstrations began in 2011. His family was known to support the opposition, so he had a “security issue” attached to his name since the very beginning of the conflict. In 2012, during the government shelling, Karim left Jabal al-Zawiya to Turkey to join other activists and to work with an international NGO providing aid to Syrian civilians. His wife and two children stayed behind. But he returned to Syria after just 1 year, crossing directly into rebel-held territory. In 2016, he enrolled in a university to obtain a degree in international law. Since then, Karim has stayed in his village working for NGOs assisting civilians and IDPs from other parts of Syria, who fled to his region. In-between, during moments of intensive shelling, he and his family were displaced ten times but ultimately returned to their village (Map 3).

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to build a better understanding of immobility and displacement trajectories in protected displacement in civil war contexts and the factors driving them. It undertook a holistic micro-level analysis of different phases of displacement trajectories in two civil war countries and studied how subjective experiences of violence and broader life aspirations influence migration decision-making in civil war contexts over time. The results highlight that migration decisions in civil war contexts are complex processes, with respondents balancing strategies of how to avoid different types of violence with strategies of how to realize core life aspirations.

Different subjective experiences with violence structured displacement especially at the beginning of respondents' trajectories. Participants reacted to the (potential) exposure to violence with exit movements from their place of residence—within the country or across international borders. The analysis also highlighted the role of



MAP 3 Karim's trajectory 2011–2021 (based on Syria Live Map, 2023). Red: Pro-Assad forces, Syrian army, NDF, Russia, IRGC from Iran, Hezbollah, Shia groups from Iraq, Iran, Lebanon; green: Rebels forces: Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, other moderate groups; yellow: Kurds: People's Defence Units (YPG), Women's Protection Units (YPJ), Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Syria Live Map, 2023).

emotions: it is not only the physical exposure to violence as such that influences immobility and displacement, but how people react to violence either by avoiding violence due to fears or by opposing violence with hope.

Life aspirations related to love and career, on the other hand, often played a more important role in later stages of displacement trajectories and influenced patterns in three different directions: stay, move (on) or return. While political aspirations were in many cases deciding factors for staying and/or remaining close to home, educational and career aspirations often drove respondents further away. The location of family and loved ones and strategies to financially and emotionally support them influenced immobility and displacement. These results point to the core role of family in civil war contexts. Migration decisions are always embedded in and taken within the larger social and family network of respondents as also previous research found (Arar & FitzGerald, 2022; Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021; Kok, 2010). The analysis also showed that economic considerations are clearly part of decision-making about where to live, especially in later stages of refugees' trajectories, confirming previous research on economic considerations in displacement (Adhikari, 2013; Arar & FitzGerald, 2022; Engel & Ibáñez, 2007). Finally, the paper also highlighted the role of political agency in violent contexts, which has been so far ignored in much of the existing literature: Some people take an active stance in conflicts and take high risks to live according to their political convictions, which is often a factor for staying (close). Others choose to stay neutral or become so over time.

Return movements were related to perceptions about the absence of violence and realizing core life aspirations, but also to survival strategies. In fact, considerations around work were located on a continuum between aspirations and survival depending on respondents' socio-economic situation. Some respondents returned from neighbouring countries back to Syria to guarantee their family's livelihood or access medical treatment if they were convinced that surviving in the host country and onward movement was impossible for them. In neighbouring countries, aspirations to stay or move onward were closely related to how respondents imagined the

realization of their life aspirations there. As such, both external return and aspirations for onward migration were closely linked to host state policies, especially regarding legal stay and the possibility to reunite with family and loved ones, work and educational opportunities.

The analysis ultimately showed that staying is not only the result of the absence of violence, disempowerment or dispossession, but also occurs when respondents see opportunities to realize life aspirations back home. At the same time, almost none of the respondents stayed in one place over time, but either migrated to other regions within the country to join family, work or study or was displaced at some point of the conflict. Immobility was therefore always relative. For others, their immobility was clearly the result of not having the freedom and the necessary financial resources to cross borders with a smuggler—especially in Syria where external borders are closed off—or to live in exile. (Im)mobility happened therefore on a continuum between forced and voluntary, dependent on respondents' perceptions about the amount of agency they had in their decisions and on their ability to cross borders. For instance, some movements were perceived as voluntary—to migrate internally to study and or to return for a short trip to visit family, especially in a context where the legal framework allowed back and forth movements due to the absence of regulation, such as Libya. Similarly, staying was perceived as a choice by some, especially those with political aspirations, while other respondents saw their immobility as involuntary and as a consequence of not being able to leave, in particular those who lacked financial resources and social networks to leave. While the research in this paper shows that restrictive border regimes ultimately do not manage to restrict the movement of displaced people entirely, they do have a strongly stratifying and filtering effect.

The paper allows to draw some tentative conclusions about those who have migrated onwards from neighbouring countries towards countries further away, including Europe. Based on the findings of this study, these might be those who experienced personal threats which did not disappear over the course of the ongoing conflict, as well as those who lost hope that generalized forms of violence will disappear in the future, paired with the imagination that realizing core life aspirations will be better possible elsewhere. They are also those who had the necessary financial resources and social networks to cross several—at least, for Syrians, closed—international borders. Future research could look more specifically into onward migration and staying in neighbouring countries and the role of host states' policies in this regard. Another avenue for future research could be the changing nature of life aspirations over time, which this paper could only touch upon.

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PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTE

¹ SYRSYR=interviews with Syrians inside Syria; SYRLEB=interviews with Syrians who left to Lebanon; LIBLIB=interviews with Libyans inside Libya; LIBTUN=interviews with Libyans who left to Tunisia.

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ANNEX

TABLE A1 Overview of Libyan respondents.

Background characteristics	
Current city of residence (region (LIB)/city (TUN))	
Tripoli (West Libya)	7
Benghazi (East Libya)	12
Tunis (Tunisia)	16
Sfax (Tunisia)	9
Time of displacement (multiple responses possible, approximations)	
2011–2013	24
2014–2018	31
2019–2020	15
Experiences of immobility and displacement (multiple responses possible, approximations)	
Only immobility	2
In-line displacement	33
Cross-line displacement/migration	17
In-line return	20
Cross-line return	4
External displacement/migration	36
External return	12
Original region of residence in Libya	
West Libya	20
East Libya	20
South Libya	4
Year of birth	
1955–1959	1
1960–1964	3
1965–1969	1
1970–1974	3
1975–1979	6
1980–1984	8
1985–1989	4
1990–1994	11
1995–1999	4
2000–2004	3
Sex	
Male	22
Female	22
Educational enrolment	
Primary school	1
Middle school (grade 7–9)	2
Secondary school (grade 10–12)	6
University or equivalent	35
Total	44

Note: Frequencies about time and type of displacement are approximations due to missing data, ambiguities and inconsistencies in some interviews.

TABLE A2 Overview of Syrian respondents.

Background characteristics	
Current place of residence (governorate (SYR)/city (LEB))	
Damascus (Syria)	9
Aleppo (Syria)	7
Idlib (Syria)	4
Beirut (Lebanon)	18
Tripoli (Lebanon)	9
Time of displacement (multiple responses possible, approximations)	
2011–2013	47
2014–2018	37
2019–2020	0
Experiences of immobility and displacement (multiple responses possible, approximations)	
Only immobility	2
In-line displacement	32
Cross-line displacement/migration	10
In-line return	6
Cross-line return	5
External displacement/migration	39
External return	12
Original region of residence in Syria	
Damascus/Rif Dimashq	18
Aleppo	10
Idlib	5
Hama	3
Homs	9
Sweida	1
Hasake	1
Year of birth	
1955–1959	1
1960–1964	0
1965–1969	1
1970–1974	1
1975–1979	4
1980–1984	8
1985–1989	9
1990–1994	14
1995–1999	8
2000–2004	1
Sex	
Male	21
Female	26

TABLE A2 (Continued)

Background characteristics	
Educational enrolment	
Primary school	4
Middle school (grade 7-9)	6
Secondary school (grade 10-12)	7
University or equivalent	30
Total	47

Note: Frequencies about time and type of displacement are approximations due to missing data, ambiguities and inconsistencies in some interviews.