



Loss in times of revolution and exile

Charlotte Loris-Rodionoff
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What does loss mean for Syrians living in Southern Turkey in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution and in the midst of an ongoing war? How is this loss experienced, and how does it affect Syrians' every-day in Turkey? Those are some of the questions I looked at during my PhD fieldwork among Syrians in the city of [\(Gazi\)Antep](#).

The loss experienced by Syrians can be defined as polymorphic.



The loss of Syria takes primacy-that of the loss of one's home and homeland featuring in the myriad conversations that I had during my fieldwork. This loss was also recounted as the loss of one's past, one's former life, the loss of relatives, of kinship ties and networks. Yet, Syrians' loss is also the loss of a political project, of their revolution and the subsequent loss of one's revolutionary self.

Turkey appeared during my fieldwork as a space marked by the losses experienced in an elsewhere and in the past: being 'outside' (*barra*) - in Turkey - means having lost *the* inside (*juwa*/Syria) and *her* inside (her former life and self). The outside/Turkey was thus often apprehended through this very loss, which led to everyday practices aimed at reaching out to what has been lost - whether it is Syria, a home, the past, relatives, etc. This could be by crossing the border to continue one's revolutionary project 'inside', to meet with relatives and friends not seen for some time, or, indeed for more pragmatic reasons such as bringing back food and medicine from one's village or city. People also spend an enormous amount of time on the phone to maintain lost family connections and social networks. In the house where I lived for my fieldwork, people were constantly speaking on WhatsApp with relatives and friends inside Syria.



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The meaning of living outside Syria after having experienced a multi-layered loss ‘inside’ seems perfectly expressed by the story of Umm Khaled, a Syrian widow in her fifties, once said in front of me. “Do you remember Abu Ahmad? (she asks her friend Umm Hala) He always used to lose his way in the village. He would never know how to go back home and he would wander around the village not recognising the streets. He never knew where he was. He would turn in vain until someone took him back home. Well I am like Abu Ahmad now: I don’t know how to go home, and I don’t know where to go next!” Umm Khaled’s story illustrates how her life lost the certainty and stability it had before fleeing Syria. In Syria, her life seemed clearly mapped out, and she could live it with the same ‘ease’ she navigated her village’s streets: her present and future had a sense of certainty. But outside, she became like Abu Ahmad: she is lost in a place she doesn’t know,



and she doesn't know where to go.

For the Syrians' I met in the field their everyday is anchored in a multi-faceted loss which also translates into a loss of hope, of certainty, and of a future orientation with respect to major life decisions. "Syria is gone", Umm Yazan, a Syrian woman in her fifties told me before embarking on the perilous journey to Europe. "There is no revolution anymore" she added in an attempt to explain why she was leaving Turkey after having lived there for over two years. What had made her stay and try to settle in Turkey was the hope that she could go back to a new Syria in a near future, but after the war intensified, she lost hope that she could go back. Such feelings were echoed by Umm Khaled: "There is no hope to go back... And even if we go back now we won't have our lives back. They (the regime's army and militias) destroyed everything we had", she told me. Umm Hala added: "I feel like in a big prison in this city! I don't go out, I don't know anyone... This is not a life! We just eat and sleep, here. We used to have a life in Syria! But we can't go back to our lives..." These three mothers were planning to settle in Antep when I first met them in January 2015, yet they slowly changed their minds as what was supposed to be a temporary exile turned into a permanent one. Their decision not to stay in Antep were not only linked to the ongoing situation in Syria, it was also inflected by the fact that they felt their future was uncertain in Turkey.

Although Turkey was commonly described as the most welcoming country amongst Syria's neighbors, Syrians in Turkey are characterized as '[guests](#)' rather than refugees[1]. If being 'guests' was not perceived as an issue when Syrians thought they would be back home quickly, the absence of official refugee status became problematic with the fading possibility of a near return. The absence of clear refugee status and associated rights subsequently led to the lack of financial support and aid, and to new regulations limiting Syrians' mobility inside, to and from Turkey, thus increasing the feeling of instability and uncertainty among Syrians in Turkey.

These legal and administrative issues directly translate into Syrians' everyday



life and make them feel increasingly unwelcome and unsafe.

When I met Umm Khaled she had been living in Turkey for a year and a half with her 8 years old daughter and a son in his twenties. Her son left with his uncle to travel to Europe as the two men saw no future in Turkey. Umm Khaled was thus sharing her tiny studio flat with Umm Mohammad, her sister-in-law, and her five children, who were always around as the school did not accept children who would potentially migrate during the year. Contrary to her sister-in-law, Umm Khaled hoped to settle in Antep, despite the everyday hardships, the administrative turmoil and the constant uncertainty that it led to. She sent her daughter to a Turkish school rather than a Syrian one, she looked for a job, and she waited for her youngest son to join from Lebanon, and help them settle in Antep. But this hope soon faded away as one of the results of the EU-Turkey deal was to constrain Syrians' mobility inside and to Turkey. Syrians thus needed visas to enter Turkey,[\[2\]](#) and it was very unlikely that she would be reunited with her son, since visas are almost impossible to obtain.

The anxious feeling of being in an “open-air prison”, as Umm Khaled described it, turned into fear after Umm Mohammad's son deeply cut his forehead. The sisters-in-law were scared to go to the hospital: What if they got arrested in the hospital and sent back to Syria since he had no *kimlik*? Umm Khaled and I finally went to the hospital, but the staff refused to treat the three years old, because of the missing document. We tried another public hospital, as the family couldn't afford a private one. After the doctor fixed the stitches, and as we explained our previous misadventure to the translator, he revealed that after two days no Syrian would be treated for free without a *kimlik* even in case of emergency. Umm Khaled was strongly shaken by the news as *kimliks* were no longer issued. What would happen if she could not get a *kimlik* for herself and she was in need of medical treatment?



[Photo \(cropped\) by Christopher Jahn/IFRC \(flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

Umm Khaled's elder son tried to convince his mother to cross the Mediterranean so they could be reunited in Europe. He argued that this would offer his mother and sister the most certain future. However, despite the growing uncertainty and instability in Turkey, Umm Khaled, who had already lost her husband and a child to the revolution, could not imagine losing yet another child to the sea and strongly refused to embark to Greece on a rubber boat.

Umm Khaled, akin to many other Syrians, experienced a multi-layered loss that impacted on her every-day and her future.

She had two martyrs in her family, she had lost her house, her country and was slowly losing hope in the success of the revolution for which her husband and son sacrificed themselves. She had lost her previous life, status and the feeling of relative certainty and safety that came with it. In addition to the losses experienced in Syria, exile brought increased stresses such as- the absence of status, of certainty, and the feeling of having lost her future. It is the story of Umm Khaled and many others like her that should impress upon us the urgency of understanding the important links between loss and displacement so as to work to



better the lives of all of those caught in the bind of displacement.

[1] Syrians have kimlik which is a temporary protection status delivered by AFAD (the disaster and emergency management authority). Only European citizens can apply for refugee status in Turkey. They can also apply for a residence permit Ikamet that is not restricted to Syrians - students, workers, etc. - and is harder to get.

[2] But from Syria, yet the borders have been closed for nearly a year now.

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