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Unpacking the Syrian Academics' Experience of Exile and Their Potential Role in the Future of Syrian Higher Education

A Heuristic Inquiry

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This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted, or is being concurrently submitted, for any degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Abstract

For millions of people around the world, the condition of protracted refugee-ness and exile-ness is a daily reality. We navigate three different temporal worlds: our past socio-cultural, historical, and political roots; our present experience with conflict and displacement, loss, grief, and trauma; and our future dreams, hopes, and plans for ourselves and our homelands. While navigating these temporal worlds, we constantly remember, renegotiate, reimagine, and reconstruct home, belonging, identity, and homeland.

This thesis focuses on Syrian exiled academics residing in the UK and their experience of exile. It aims to unpack their complex belonging to their homeland and the dilemmas they encounter in exile. It also explores their potential future roles in Syrian higher education (HE), the barriers they confront in engaging with Syria, and the motivations driving them to contribute to the context with which they have a complicated relationship.

The thesis is situated at the intersection of forced migration, education in conflict contexts, diaspora engagement with homeland, and peacebuilding. It reviews the broad literature in these disciplines and the relevant contextual literature on Syria. As I have direct and personal experience of exile, I have employed a heuristic phenomenological framework that has guided all aspects of the research. Heuristic research does not exclude the researcher from the study; the self is present throughout the process, allowing for self-exploration, self-discovery, and reflexive self-dialogue to delve into the subjective experience of the exile phenomenon. Given the emphasis on relationality, intersubjectivity, and betweenness in heuristic methodology, I have conducted dialogues and interviews with 15 Syrian academics living in exile to explore the multifaceted experience of exile.

The research findings indicate that exile has a dual nature, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. The experience of exile seems to begin with a sense of alienation felt at home, which becomes formalised through forced separation from home and is continuously relived through the loss of and inability to return home. The study argues that three interconnected dimensions—practical, emotional, and compatibility—help understand the evolving dynamics of exiled academics belonging to their homeland. The research also delves into the main factors influencing exiled academics' belonging, including the impact of the war in Syria, their work on Syria, social media, prior experiences in Syria, connections with Syrians in exile, and having family in Syria. Furthermore, the study explores five dilemmas that exiled academics face. These are what help people in exile also trigger their traumas, living between two extremes of emotions when one's homeland does not feel like a home anymore, missing what no longer exists, and wanting to connect with their homeland but also disconnect.

As for exiled academics' contribution to Syrian higher education, the thesis proposed analysing their contribution on three interconnected levels: students, teachers, and academic institutions levels. The motivation driving the engagement of exiled academics in education development is rooted in four key factors: a strong sense of belonging and identity, a deep belief in the power of education, a strong sense of duty and responsibility, and a complex mix of emotions encompassing guilt, love, sadness, empathy, and hope. Finally, the thesis emphasises the importance of comprehensively analysing the barriers exiled academics face to contribute to HE development. These barriers exist across six interconnected levels: political, HE, individual, exile dynamics, local dynamics, and logistical levels.

To the millions of people in Syria who died, tortured or have been exiled for demanding freedom

To the brave students who interrupted their education to join the encampment to stop the war

To my son, whom the Syrian war has separated me from

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For millions of people around the world, the condition of protracted refugee-ness and exile-ness is a daily reality. We navigate daily three different temporal worlds: our past socio-cultural, historical, and political roots; our present experience with conflict and displacement, loss, grief, and trauma; and our future dreams, hopes, and plans for ourselves and our homelands. While navigating these temporal worlds, we constantly remember, renegotiate, reimagine, and reconstruct the concepts of home, belonging, identity, and homeland.

What does it mean to live in exile and navigate the complexity of its daily reality? What does belonging to the homeland in exile mean, and how does this belonging change in exile? What are the dilemmas experienced by people in exile? How do exiled academics envision their role in the future of their countries and education development? Will they contribute? How and why? What is their motivation to contribute, and what are the barriers to engaging?

These are personal questions I have been battling with for a long time—questions about my belonging, identity, and relationship to my home country, Syria. This thesis is a heuristic journey to answer these questions. It is an attempt to dig deep into my lived experience and my participants' lived experiences to challenge exile and heal from it.

1.1 Personal Journey into Exile and PhD

Half of the Syrians left Syria. Ten million dreams have been shattered. Ten million people have been forcibly displaced and uprooted. I am one of them. The key in the picture is my house key. I took this photo in 2015 when I left Syria. I always look at the key and wonder if I will ever use it again. The house has changed, my family has moved, and my friends and family have spread worldwide. This key became a metaphor. Will I ever return? And return to what? What will I find when if I use this key?

I was born a member of a powerful group which held power in Syria and exercised it in a way to perpetuate its privilege and maintain control over the country. This group designed an oppressive, elitist, and brutal societal order that led to the outbreak of the uprising in 2011.

When the uprising started in 2011, I witnessed those to whom I used to belong to oppress, kill, kidnap and torture innocent people. I witnessed them fabricating what happened. This made me live five brutal years of internal conflict and exile within my own country, having rejected belonging to this group. Rejecting their doctrine, their narrative, their lies, their lifestyle, and their disconnection from reality made me live in exile amongst my family, friends and in my own house. Struggling silently with the internal exile, I had to start a journey of external exile to the UK – a journey that separated me from everything dear to my heart, including my two-year-old son.

Although my exile was the most painful experience I had, it was the most liberating experience in my life. It helped me to find my true self, home, and partner, as well as to reshape my identity and belonging in an informed manner rather than an imposed one. It allowed me to rebuild a stronger and more genuine community, one that is based on compatibility rather than on ideology or privileges. Exile helped me find a profession that I enjoy working in every day. Exile gave me the most potent form of agency, allowing me to shape who I truly am.

In exile, I have gone through a journey from brainwashing to liberation. I was born into such a system, indoctrinated me from my earliest childhood through education, media and religious institutions. This system controlled how I thought and understood the world; it defined for me what was right and wrong, who the 'enemy' was and who the 'ally' was, who was 'us' and who was 'them'. This system kept me ignorant, which made me loyal to the party and the leader and gave me faith in his abilities and the immortality of his thoughts. In exile, I went through a journey to deconstruct all the ideologies that had been imposed on me, unlearn almost everything I grew up with, and reject all cultural labels that I was born with. It was a journey to find my true self.

In exile, I have gone through a journey from complacency to resistance. As someone who was brainwashed, I was complicit with an authoritarian regime that embedded violence in society. I was willing to die for that regime, believing every word given to me. However, at the age of 22, when my internal exile started in Syria, I was suffering, silently afraid to resist this regime. I felt alien in my environment, trying to go against my family, friends, neighbourhood, and old self. However, when my external exile started, I had a deep need to expose and resist this political order that brainwashed a whole society and oppressed them. My writing and research

became my way to resist the authoritarian regime in Syria as they steal history and write it the way they want.

Since 2015, when my displacement started, I started feeling uprooted. I started experiencing the loss of belonging, the search for home, the identity crisis, and survival guilt. All of my social circles were dismantled. I felt deep pain for what happened to my country and my people. All things that used to anchor me collapsed. I felt very lost. I fell into pieces. I struggled to understand what was going on with me. I wanted to understand myself. I wanted to understand my experience. I wanted to understand my emotions. I wanted to understand my past, present, and future. This PhD was my mechanism to understand, heal, come to terms with the past, enjoy the present, and be prepared for the future. It was the most crucial healing process and stage in my life. This PhD is also to say sorry. I am sorry to those who have been killed for the sake of freedom in Syria and to those who have been tortured in jails for their political views. Sorry that I could not say a word because I was afraid. I am breaking out of my fear through this PhD.

1.2 Positionality

In this thesis, I do not relinquish my lived experience under the pretext of "neutrality" and "objectivity". I centre my lived experience and use it as an interpretative framework to unpack the nuances of the topics I am researching and to reach a profound level of understanding that I would not be able to achieve without my lived experiences. I am part of the phenomenon. I live it every day. I cannot disconnect from it. As my methodology chapter shows, I use a heuristic framework that embraces my lived experience as an interpretative lens to the phenomenon I am studying: **exile**. My lived experience has shaped my research, research questions, data collection, analysis, interpretation and presentation. Nevertheless, I remained loyal to my participants' stories and voices. Whenever our stories overlap, I highlight this. Whenever they challenge each other, I also highlight this. A lot of times, my subjectivity informed theirs, and their subjectivity informed mine. Sometimes, I start presenting my findings with my personal story and then substantiate it with data from my participants; in most cases, my personal story and subjectivity have been revealed after listening to their stories. Their stories enlightened me and helped me understand myself and my lived experience.

1.3 The Syrian Context

The past 100 years are marked by multiple significant events which have shaped Syria's political, social, and economic affairs. After five centuries of rule, Syria gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1918, when the Empire collapsed. It became the capital of the first Arabic government for two years between 1918 and 1920 and then fell under the French mandate for 26 years until 1946. After the French evacuated Syria, the country experienced nine coups, formed a unity with Egypt for two years, fell under a socialist party in 1958, controlled by an authoritarian government in the 1970s, underwent a neo-liberal reform in 2000 and most recently experienced an uprising followed by a civil and proxy war in 2011. Throughout these years, Syria was slowly evolving as a refugee state. In her review of migration into Syria, Chatty (2018) presents the various waves of forced migration. This includes the Tatars, the Circassians, the Chechnyan, and other European Muslim communities expelled from the Caucasus and Balkans in the late nineteenth century. The Armenians, the Copts, the Greeks, the Orthodox, the Nestorians and other Christian minorities escaped the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. The Kurdish forced migration in the 1920s. The Palestinian forced migration in the 1930s and 1948. The Iraqi forced migration that began in 1980 into Syria reached a peak in 2003 after the USA and the West invasion of Iraq.

In 2011, a widespread social movement in Syria demanded greater freedom from an authoritarian state that controlled all aspects of life for more than 40 years. This movement has then transformed into armed uprisings as a result of the regime's violence and evolved increasingly over the years into a war involving multiple local, regional, and international actors. In his extensive analysis of the Syrian uprising, Daher (2019) tracks the causes of this uprising to various political, social and economic factors. This includes the oppression and corruption of the authoritarian political regime since the 1970s, the class-state formation that impoverished a significant part of the Syrian society while enriching a ruling elite closely tied to the government, the intervention of foreign actors in the uprising, and the sectarianism dynamics in the region that fuelled the conflict. As a result, the conflict has triggered one of the biggest forced migration waves in recent history and caused the displacement and disposition of more than half the country's population. Some reports estimated that half of the population, around 12 million, have migrated out of Syria since the start of the uprising and the war in 2011 (European Union, 2017; Internet Geography, n.d.). This led to the creation of

massive communities of Syrian diaspora all over the world, in particular, conflict-generated and exiled diaspora.

Amongst these communities of the diaspora are the Syrian academics. There is no accurate estimation of how many academics left Syria. In 2017, the Minister of Higher Education reported that 20% of academics had left the country, whereas the Dean of the Medicine Faculty reported 30% (Bek Sharif, 2017). Some old reports and studies estimated that between 1500-2000 university professors have fled the country (O'Keeffe & Pásztor, 2016), whereas others estimated that one-third of the country's Professors have left (Abdo, 2015). In addition to these numbers, a new layer of Syrian academics entered academia in exile after the conflict started. These academics, both who have left Syria or have become academics in exile, arguably have an essential role in the future of their country, particularly in the HE sector, which has a vital role in building peace in Syria. However, academics in exile are navigating a complex socio-economic and political context. They are navigating a "domicide", which includes not only the destruction of the physical home but also the suffering and the living experiences of the making and unmaking of homes (Azzouz, 2023).

Additionally, the exiled academic engagement with the HE sector is very challenging. The sector is "designed to prioritise the project of allegiance building rather than human capacity development" (Al Azmeh et al., 2020, p. 12). "Without change or challenge, the future education system in the country will reproduce the same frictions and socio-political power dynamics that led to unrest in 2011" (Al Azmeh et al., 2020, p. 14). Furthermore, a systematic review of the literature shows that the sector faces many problems, including fragmentation, corruption, academic brain drain, and low quality of education (Tozan, 2023). This limits further the exiled academic capacity to contribute to education development in Syria.

1.4 The Study Questions and Its Contribution

Literature on forced migration tends to focus on displaced people's experience in the host country (e.g. rights, integration, struggle to belong, lived experience, etc). However, displaced people's relationship with their homeland seems to have less attention in the literature. Beyond the myth of the 'return' and 'in-between' position that forced migrants inhabit, literature appears to pay less attention to the complexity of the forced migrant relationship with their original homeland. This thesis attempts to shift the focus towards displaced people's

relationship with their homeland by unpacking their belongings to, dilemmas, engagement with, and motivation towards their homeland. Furthermore, the academic literature on exile primarily reflects writing on non-Syrian contexts and spaces. Many researchers incorporated exile in their writing in the Syrian context and after 2011 (e.g. Al Azmeh & Dillabough, 2023; Azmeh, 2023; Azzouz, 2020, 2023). However, none of this research centred the exile or attempted to conceptualise it. One attempt is Elsehamy (2022), who describes Yassin al-Haj Saleh's (Syrian exiled intellectual, activist and writer) conceptualisation of exile. This thesis builds on the previous but brings exile to the centre by attempting to unpack and conceptualise it. It will do so by answering the first research question and its sub-questions. The first question is related to the **experience of exile**. I want to understand the dynamics surrounding it. Under this central question, there are two sub-questions. In particular, I want to understand what happens to people's **relationships/belonging** to their home country and how the forced separation from home shapes this relationship. I also want to understand the **dilemmas** that exiled academics navigate as a result of their exile:

Research Question 1: How do Syrian exiled academics perceive the exile experience?

Sub-question 1: How do exiled academics' belonging to their homeland change in exile?
Sub-question 2: What are the dilemmas exiled academics experience in exile?

The second main research question shifts the focus towards the role of exiled academics in the future of their countries of origin. Several researchers have highlighted the academic diaspora's important role in supporting education development in the country of origin (e.g. Amagoh and Rahman, 2016; Blachford and Zhang, 2014; Rahman, 2013; Welch and Zhen, 2008). However, as Dryden-Peterson and Reddick (2019) argued, most research seeking to understand why and how the diaspora engages in education development was not conducted in fragile and conflict settings. Although diaspora studies help us understand the potential role of academic diaspora in the future of their homeland, they do not reflect the nuances of conflict-affected settings. Understanding diaspora engagement in HE in conflict settings requires a holistic approach that considers the personal and microenvironmental factors as well as institutional, legal, and political issues (Woldegiyorgis, 2021). This thesis attempts to fill this gap by understanding the potential role of the exiled academic diaspora in their conflict-affected countries of origin. When it comes to exiled and displaced Syrian academics, studies tend to focus solely on the precariousness, marginalisation, exclusion, and deskilling of exiled academics (Akkad, 2022;

Khuder & Petrić, 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2020; O'Keeffe & Pásztor, 2016; Parkinson et al., 2018; Pherali, 2020; Vatansever, 2018). Although this line of research is crucial to amply the unheard voices of exiled and displaced academics and shed light on their various experiences, limiting research to this angle could risk reproducing and solidifying a "victim–saviour discourse perfused with the moral sentiments of pity and compassion" and "re-exile the exiled with the victim–saviour narrative" (Sertdemir Özdemir, 2021, p. 938). This thesis attempts to detour from this line of research by shedding light on the capacity of exiled academics to contribute to their homeland and their motivation to do so. It will do so by answering the second research question of this thesis, which aims to understand the **potential role** of exiled academics in the future of their homelands. There are two sub-questions under this question. I want to understand where their **motivation** to contribute to their home country stems from and what **barriers** limit them from contributing to their homeland:

Research Question 2: How do Syrian exiled academics envision their potential role in the future of Syria?

Sub-question 1: What is their motivation to contribute to their homeland?

Sub-question 2: What are the barriers that limit their envisioned role?

1.5 Note on Terminology

Throughout this thesis, I use mainly the term "exiled" academics to refer to my participants who have been deprived of going back home for political reasons. I also use the term "diaspora" or "conflict-generated diaspora" interchangeably with "exiled" when discussing the literature and my findings. As the literature review section (section 3.1) shows, there is an overlap and a distinction between diaspora, exiles, and refugees. Indeed, some of my participants perceive themselves as refugees, exiled and diaspora members. In contrast, others feel they cannot be identified as refugees because they do not hold refugee legal status. I distinguished between these terms in the thesis whenever necessary for the argument.

I use "home" to refer to the psychological feeling of being at home rather than the physical home/house. I use "homeland" or "home country" to refer to Syria as a country shaped by social and colonial forces in the 19th century rather than an imagined community or a place. I use this term mainly when I discuss people's relationships/belonging to their homelands. I also use "country of origin" sometimes to refer to the homeland, but by using this term, I intend to de-essentialise people's relationship with their homeland. I use "belonging" to refer to the

warm emotional attachment to a place (sense of belonging) rather than the struggle to belong (politics of belonging) or the nationalist understanding of belonging (citizenship). I also use the term "relationship to the homeland" to refer to people's sense of belonging that should come, in principle, with being in their homeland.

I use the "potential role" of academics to emphasise the imagination and perception of participants and the uncertainty that comes with translating this potential into an actual one. I use the "future of Syria" to refer to a time different from the current one, where things are different. This could be a change in the social-political situation in Syria, a reform, a reconciliation, or a peace agreement. This could be a change in exiled academics' perception and orientation towards the situation in Syria. Using "the future of Syria" acknowledges the complexity of the current situation and allows us to have a conversation and dream of what our role could be in the future of our country. I limit the use of the term "post-conflict" as conflict has and will always be everywhere worldwide—the conflict of ideologies, the conflict classes, and the conflict between people and themselves.

1.6 Note of Representation

Throughout this thesis and mainly in the findings section, I sometimes use the pronoun "we" to refer to my participants and myself to emphasise our shared experience in exile. However, I acknowledge that my personal experience does not fully or accurately reflect my participants' experience, nor does their experience fully or accurately reflect mine. I also recognise that our experiences do not fully or accurately reflect the experience of exile as "exile discourse thrives on detail, specificity and locality (Naficy, 1999, p. 23)". I do not intend to represent the people in exile or the exile experience; instead, by using the pronoun 'we', I intend to be closer to readers who can relate to my experience and assure them that they are not alone.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis is comprised of eight chapters, including this **introductory chapter**. The following two chapters are literature review chapters. **Chapter two** critically examines the HE sector in Syria by reviewing its evolution since its establishment, the social and political agenda it has served in Syria, and its potential role in supporting peacebuilding in the future of Syria. **Chapter three** unpacks the complexity of diaspora engagement in HE development in conflict-affected settings by examining critical debates around their impact and notion of home, belonging, and 'return'. **Chapter Four** discusses the epistemological influences on my

research, the various methodological frameworks I could use, and the choice of the methodological framework. Additionally, the chapter discusses the research participants' selection process, data collection methods, and data analysis and interpretation strategies.

The remaining chapters present the findings and results of this study. **Chapter Five** is an introductory chapter to my research findings. It presents an individual depiction of exile from participants to introduce my participants and provide insights into what exile means to them, their potential role in the future of Syria, their motivation to contribute to Syria, and the barriers they face when engaging with Syria. **Chapter Six** answers the first research question by unpacking the experience of exile, belonging in exile, and dilemmas in exile. **Chapter Seven** answers the second research question by unpacking the potential role of exiled academics in the future of Syria, the complexity of their motivation to contribute, and the barriers to their contribution**. Chapter Eight** summarises the findings, presents the limitations and recommendations for future research, and ends the thesis with a creative synthesis that combines all findings. Table 1 below shows how each chapter relates to the research questions.

Table 1

Thesis chapters and their relations to the research questions

Chapter	Title	Link to the research question
1	Introduction	Introducing research questions 1 and 2
2	The Syrian Higher Education: Between the Past and the Future	Reviewing literature relevant to research question 2
3	Exiled Academics and Diaspora Engagement with Education Development	Reviewing literature relevant to research question 1
4	Heuristic Methodology	
5	Individual Depictions	Introduction to the findings of research questions 1 and 2
6	Exile	Findings that answer research question 1
7	Exiled Academics and Higher Education Development	Findings that answer research question 2
8	Conclusion	Discussing research questions 1 and 2

Chapter 2: The Syrian Higher Education: Between the Past and the Future

As highlighted in the introduction section, over the past century, Syria has experienced significant events that have profoundly impacted its political, social, and economic landscape. Throughout these years, higher education has evolved under the influence of these events, serving different political, social and economic agendas. This chapter reviews the historical and contemporary literature on HE in Syria to track the sector's evolution. In my review, I move beyond the present time to show how the sector could evolve to serve a peacebuilding agenda in the future. This review is divided into five sub-sections, each corresponding to a critical stage in the history of Syria and higher education.

2.1 HE and Independence (1918-1958)

In September 1918, after four centuries of rule, the Ottoman Empire started withdrawing from the Middle East following its defeat in the First World War (WWI). As a result, the first Arabic government was established at that time to merge the Levant region (Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine), Iraq, and the Gulf countries under one unified Arab state. Damascus, the capital of Syria, was named the capital of that Arab state. This reflected the city's importance then and caused massive political, social and economic development (Al Samer, 2018).

As part of the nation-state building project and to strengthen the attachment of Arab people to their homeland, the historian Rafiq (1993) explains that various institutions were established in Damascus to build the Arab cultural identity and consciousness and generate a population able to achieve cultural, economic and political independence for the Arabic nation. Rafiq further explains that such organisations are the Syrian University, established in 1919 as the first European-style public university in the Arab world. The University combined two schools: the School of Medicine and the School of Law.

Before 1919, these two schools were already operating under the Ottoman Empire (the School of Medicine since 1903 and the School of Law since 1913) (Rafeq, 2004). However, these two schools were operating to serve the Ottoman empire-building project (e.g., Teaching in the Turkish language by Turkish teachers), and they were shut down during WWI (Rafeq, 2004). It was not until 1919, when the Arabic government re-opened the university and elected its first

dean, that the university gained its independent identity as a Syrian institution serving a Syrian and Arabic agenda.

In his review of this period, Rafeq (2004) presented a copy of the first mandate for the Syrian University. This mandate shows two essential attributes of the university: independence and 'apoliticality'. Section four of this mandate gave the university complete financial and managerial autonomy. The university elects a committee that governs all of its matters, and all teachers elect a dean with a wide range of responsibilities. This also allowed the university to cover all expenses by charging admission fees. Section six of the mandate forbade any politicisation of the university by forbidding students and teachers to engage in politics on the university premises. This included providing political speeches or lectures, circulating political flyers, or conducting protests (Moubayed, 2016).

Rafeq (2004) explained that the university started serving a social agenda from the first year of its opening. It translated all lectures and materials into Arabic and made the formal teaching language of Arabic. Furthermore, the Syrian University provided free treatment and medication to people who could not afford to pay while charging fees to those who could. In the subsequent years, the university extended its hospital services to offer treatment to the rural areas by appointing doctors in those areas, started offering scholarships to students who could prove to be in need, established a monthly medical journal (Journal of the Arab School of Medicine), and established the Syrian Medical Organisation. Furthermore, it opened an auditorium, established a university press, and expanded the library to include 4500 books in Arabic, French and English (Moubayed, 2016).

This period of the Arab kingdom and Syria lasted only two years (1918-1920). Then, the French mandate began over Syria and lasted for 26 years (1920-1946). During the French mandate, historians Moubayed (2016) and Rafeq (2004, 2008) show how the university witnessed a considerable shift in its governance and gradually started losing its independence and autonomy through several decrees. They explain that these decrees affiliated the university with the Ministry of Education, abolished the three-year presidency period accorded to the dean, made tenure unlimited, gave the ministry the right to dismiss the dean at any time, and gave the Minister of Education or their deputy the power to occupy the position of dean if it was vacant. The university tried to push back and restore its autonomy. Al Samer (2018) explains that in the early 1940s, the Syrian University proposed a draft for a new decree in the

parliament to regain their autonomy and win the majority of votes. Furthermore, the parliament decision was scheduled to be authenticated by the Syrian president, but WWII stopped these efforts (Al Samer, 2018).

Rafeq (2004) highlights that the Syrian population were fighting for three central causes at that time: the independence of Syria, Arabic unification, and the Palestinian cause. Although the university was an apolitical space in principle, in practice, it was one of the most important spaces for political and intellectual activism (Rafeq, 2004). The university students were among the most active people against the French mandate, organising protests inside the university premises against the French, which caused some of them to lose their university seats. In 1925, they conducted a full strike against the visit of Arthur Balfour to Syria because of the declaration that promised to support the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine. Students also actively promoted and participated in the Arabic Big Revolution between 1925 and 1927. In 1932, the students issued a petition to support the revolutionary members of the parliament who did not win the elections, stating that 'the truth above the power and the public above the government' (Rafeq, 2004). They also organised campaigns to support the local industries and boycott the French and other foreign countries' industries. They organised themselves, formed committees, and negotiated with the government in every protest or strike. They were very active in organising themselves on a national and regional level. They established the Syrian University Graduates Association in 1943 and the Arabic Universities Students Association in 1944.

In 1946, after WWII, Syria gained its independence from the French. The Syrian government needed to undo the generations of foreign rule to restore its cultural identity, and education became a priority for the government (Bashshur, 1966). The Syrian baccalaureate replaced the French baccalaureate, while French schools were suppressed and began being replaced by Syrian schools (Bashshur, 1966). The School of Science and the School of Literature were opened in 1946, and the School of Engineering was opened in Aleppo in 1948, which later became the University of Aleppo (Al Samer, 2018).

At the end of this stage in the history of Syria, political life also began to take a different direction, with military coups quite common. This signalled the end of the civil and democratic ruling of Syria. The Syrian University became a battle for political parties, and the strength of a political party in the university reflected the strength of that party in the country as a whole

(Bashshur, 1966). Moubayed (2016) documents how this stage ended. In 1953, one of the law students refused to receive the graduation certificate in the presence of General Adib al Shishakly, the President of Syria and the orchestrator of the third and fourth coups in Syria. The student spoke up, saying that he 'refuses to accept a law degree from a government that rules by the power of the army rather than by the rule of law' (Moubayed, 2016). This turned into a protest in the graduation hall, which was suppressed by the army. During this event, a military member slapped the university dean for trying to stop the army from entering the university premises. An institution that represented national pride was, at this moment, humiliated by a person with a gun.

2.2 HE and Political Domination and Indoctrination (1958-2000)

In 1958, Syria and Egypt united and formed the United Arab Republic and moved towards becoming a police state. During this period, the university witnessed huge developments. Al Samer (2018) explains that during the United Arab Republic, the government issued a new decree for universities that stripped them of another facet of their autonomy. The decree stated that the dean of the university and head of faculties were to be appointed by the president of the government rather than elected by the university teachers. Furthermore, Al Samer (2018) further showed that the Ministry started interfering by imposing a new module, the Arab Society, on all universities and faculties' curriculums. The module's content delves into the thoughts of the National Union (Al Ithad al-Qawmi), the only political organisation in the United Arab Republic. This unity between Syria and Egypt lasted only two years (1958-1960); however, its impact on the sector continued.

On the 8th of March 1963, the military division of the Ba'th Arab Socialist Party took control of Syria by orchestrating a coup. Al Malih Hilwani (2013) and Al Samer (2018) explain that this took Syria in a new political, social, and economic direction as all institutions in Syria were redesigned to operate as governmental institutions serving the new political party. Arguably, the education sectors, including HE, played a critical role in serving this agenda of their ability to build generations, shape consciousness and beliefs, and build loyalty to the party. Control over the education system and the redesigning process intensified in 1970 when Hafez Al Assad became the President of Syria (Al Samer, 2018).

Literature shows that the control over the education system happened via three main mechanisms: legal/constitutional, operational, and exclusion/fear. Legal/constitutional control was implemented by rewriting the relevant laws and decrees to give the party complete control over the HE sector, redesigning it to serve the party's political agenda. Al-Maaloli (2016, p. 2) explains that article 21 of Syria's 1973 new constitution defines the purpose of the educational system as "creating a socialist nationalist Arab generation which is scientifically minded and attached to its history and land, proud of its heritage, and filled with the spirit of struggle to achieve its nation's objectives of unity, freedom, and socialism, and to serve humanity and its progress". In 1975, the Ba'th government issued the Syria Universities Law, which gave the Ministry of Higher Education complete control over the universities in Syria and stripped universities of their independence and autonomy (Al Malih Hilwani, 2013).

Alongside this legal/constitutional mechanism, the Ba'th also worked at an operational level. It established a web of organisations and bureaus to control the sector further, push the party agenda, and form generations that believe in its doctrine. On the highest level, the Ba'th established two bureaus to control the ministries of education and inform all of their decisions. The first was the Education and Vanguard Bureau, which managed primary and secondary education and their relevant governmental bodies (e.g., the Ministry of Education). The second was the Higher Education Bureau, which managed university education and its relevant governmental bodies (e.g., the Ministry of Higher Education). Al-Maaloli (2016) explains that these bureaus managed all aspects of national education, from educational policy, curriculum design, institutional structures and appointments of the ministers of education, deans of the universities and faculties, and all other leading positions, also subject to approval from the security apparatus and the presidency.

Additionally, the party formed The Revolutionary Youth Union for Secondary Education in 1968 and the Ba'th Vanguards Organisation for Primary Education in 1974. These institutions worked on embedding '…an entire system of values and behaviours into Syria's educational institutions: 'loyalty to the party; obedience to the leader and faith in his abilities; the immortality of his thought; political and cultural isolation; repression as a means of resolving differences, conflicts and tension; dogmatism and adulation; and ingratiating one's self to the centres of power' (Al-Maaloli, 2016, p. 3). This happened through a variety of activities such as pro-presidential rallies as well as 'seminars, conferences, workshops, competitions, debates, festivals, celebrations honouring outstanding students, excursions, camping, volunteer work,

international gatherings, cultural weeks, socio-economic forums, lectures, exhibitions, science camps, the exchange of student delegations and environmental volunteer work' (Al-Maaloli, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, the Ba'th party established offices in each university and every college branch to monitor these institutions and ensure the party agenda and policies are being implemented (Al Samer, 2018; Elamine, 2021). Additionally, the Ba'th integrated military education and nationalism education as compulsory subjects for all universities and specialisations (Al Samer, 2018). These subjects were taught by military officers and party comrades, which made the university lose its civilian nature (Al Malih Hilwani, 2013).

The Ba'th also operated a mechanism to replace and exclude non-Ba'th party members from the sector (Al Samer, 2018). Elamine (2021) explain that any member of the universities, whether the Rectors, Deans, Heads of Departments, or Lecturers, can only be a member of the Ba'th party or a friend of the Ba'th Party and approved by the intelligence services. Furthermore, to be appointed, none of their family members should or could hold opposition views (Al Samer, 2018). Although some people might join the Ba'th party just to work at the university without believing in the Ba'th mindset, Elamine (2021) explains that all professors should obey, remain silent, and use the language of the party so that they could then be rewarded. Elamine (2021) further explains that this led generations of university students and professors to internalise the party's language and push the party narrative to the broader social sphere.

Al Malih Hilwani (2013) and Sankar (2000) highlight the party's achievements in the education sector during this period. They explain that, in the 1970s, the Ba'th gave everyone in society the opportunity to access education by making education, in Syria, including HE, free and public and offering university seats to any student who finished secondary education. In 1969, the number of university students was 30,000 (Al Samer, 2018), whereas it reached 225,000 in 2001[1] (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-b). Furthermore, Sanker (2000) argues that the Ba'th achieved equality by implementing the single-track admission policy that sorted students into HE institutions and specialisations based on one factor: the 12th-grade school exam (Baccalaureate). Sanker (2000) further argues that the Ba'th dramatically increased female access to HE during that stage, reaching 43% in 1998. Also, the Ba'th opened new postgraduate

[1] This number has been calculated by the researcher from the ministry database. It combines the numbers of undergraduate students, postgraduate students, higher institutes and technical institutes students.

studies, established various new specialisations, and began a lecturers' preparation programme with international universities during that stage (Sankar, 2000). Additionally, the Ba'th party expanded the number of colleges in the current two universities from 21 to 45, established two other public universities, Tishreen in 1971 and Al Ba'th in 1979, and expanded the technical institutions from 14 to 131 and established two higher institutes (Sankar, 2000). Lastly, Sankar (2000) explains that the party strategy for the HE sector was to protect and develop the Arabic Language, preserve the local culture, promote the cultural ties between Arabic countries, and build equality in the society by democratising education (giving access to the whole population).

The above achievements and strategies might be seen and read as stemming from a national social justice and decolonising agenda. However, some researchers question the intention and efficiency of these achievements. Although the expansionist policies allowed a significant proportion of society to access HE, this expansion was not happening in parallel to funding in the sector, and Syria's spending on education was among the lowest in the world During that period (Kabbani & Salloum, 2011; World Bank, 2008). Furthermore, this expansion was at the expense of the quality of education (Al Malih Hilwani, 2013; Al Samer, 2018), teaching was largely rote learning (Al Samer, 2018), and lecturers were poorly paid, overwhelmed and had no time to provide quality teaching and engagement with students (Al Malih Hilwani, 2013). Most importantly, Al Samer (2018) argues that this expansion served a political agenda as the party needed to legitimise itself after a coup. Also, the party agenda requires homogenising the society, making the population absorb the party narrative and belief system and moulding people into obedient citizens, with education the party's primary tool to achieve this (Al Samer, 2018; Al-Maaloli, 2016).

The single-track policy to access HE could be seen as levelling the playing field for everyone since admission to the HE is based on only the 12th-grade exams. However, Sankar (2000) highlighted that 47% of students perceived this policy as inefficient as it ignored students' passion, interests, career plans, and abilities. Al Malih Hilwani (2013) added that this policy also produced student grievances and took away their right to choose their specialisation and career. Worse, the party meddled with this policy to reward and enforce loyalty. For example, on top of their 12th-grade marks, the party gave 40 extra marks to students who completed military parachute training, 15 additional marks to students who attended the party camps

(Sa'ieka), and 15 extra marks to the working students in the Ba'th party (Al Samer, 2018)[2]. This meant students close to or attending the party activities were given an advantage in accessing the HE and were exempt from the single-track policy.

Although the Ba'th has started a lecturers-preparation programme, its strategy was mainly to prepare lecturers in the former Soviet bloc. Mourtada (2019) explains that these graduates did not get proper training and were ill-equipped to provide up-to-date, high-quality teaching, supervision and research. Additionally, the government seems not to have managed the intellectual diversity in the sector, including lecturers who have studied worldwide. Al Malih Hilwani (2013) explains that these academics had a different and sometimes contradictory epistemology and ontology from the ones who studied in the Soviet Union, which created new tensions and contradictions between academics on the epistemological and personal levels.

Lastly, Al Samer (2018) argues that taking independence from universities, using the appointment system based on loyalty to the party rather than the election system based on capabilities, and forbidding academic freedom turned universities into bureaucratic and corrupt governmental institutions full of nepotism and cronyism. Al Samer (2018) further argues that one outcome of this was that university teachers lost any sense of agency, felt unvalued, lived in fear, and became mere government workers in the sector.

2.3 HE and Neo-liberalism (2000-2011)

In 2000, Bashar al-Assad, a UK-educated young man, became the President of Syria after his father. He devised a new, modern vision for Syria after 30 years of isolation policies. In subsequent years, the country launched a broad sectoral reform, and Syria started transitioning from a state-led development agenda into a social market-based one. The government reformed the banking and investment laws, allowing the establishment of private banks, foreign national investments, and a stock market. It applied for membership to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 (WTO, n.d.) and signed an association agreement with the European Union in 2004 (European Union, 2016).

[2] The total marks in the 12th grade exam in Syria was out of 240, and receiving 15 grades extra just because of your affiliation with the party could have a significant impact on what university specialisation students can access.

During this period, the HE sector showed signs of moving from a state-led development agenda to operating as part of a quasi-liberal economy agenda aimed at privatising HE education and supplying the new economy with the needed human capital. The HE sector also underwent major reforms during this stage. Several major decrees were issued, namely Decree No.36 in 2001, which allowed private universities to open in Syria and the new University Regulation Law in 2006 that gave some autonomy to universities, particularly regarding staff appointments and promotions (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-a). Furthermore, the reform noticeably shifted the university teachers' preparation and profession. A new scholarship act aimed at preparing lecturers at top world universities was passed in 2004, and decree No. 298, aimed to regulate the teaching position at universities and increase lecturers' salaries, was issued in 2006 (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-a). The Syrian government also shifted its university teachers' preparation policy toward leading Western countries, including Germany, France and Great Britain (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2011; Mourtada, 2019). Mourtada (2018) estimated that 4000 students were granted government scholarships to study postgraduate degrees in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Also, the Syrian government signed an agreement in 2002 with the European Union to modernise HE in Syria through the Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies (TEMPUS). By 2008, 33 projects had been implemented, each corresponding to a different national priority and implemented with one or more Syrian universities (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2011). These projects contributed to establishing new programmes, developing curriculums, establishing a quality assurance system, updating the management information systems, and providing university tools and equipment (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2011).

In under ten years, the Syrian government established two new public universities and two higher academic institutions and allowed 18 private universities to operate (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-b). By the end of this stage, the total number of universities in Syria was now six public universities, four higher academic institutions, and 18 private universities. This expansion in the sector happened in parallel with an expansion in access. The number of students enrolled in the HE sector in Syria was around 225,000 in the academic year 2001-2002[3] (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-b). In the following ten years, the number almost tripled to 571,000 students in 2010-2011 (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-b). Furthermore,

[3] This number has been calculated by the researcher from the ministry database. It combines the numbers of undergraduate students, postgraduate students, higher institutes and technical institutes students.

the gender gap in HE enrolment and completion was closed nationally during this stage, although regional variations persist (Kabbani & Salloum, 2011). This expansion in the provision of HE was coupled with an expansion in funding for the sector, which quadrupled during this period from 7 billion Syria pounds (approx. 140 million US dollars) in 2000 to 31 billion Syria pounds (approx. 600 million US dollars) in 2009 (CBS, n.d.).

This reform and expansion in the sector have changed the long-established orthodoxy of university admission (Buckner, 2013). As argued earlier, Syria had only free public universities before this reform, whilst admission was regulated based on the 12th-grade exam marks (Baccalaureate). After the reform, students now had several routes to accessing HE. The government created two routes to access specialisations in public universities even if students do not achieve the required grades. The first route is parallel learning or Al Mwazi ($2000 per year) for those who did not meet the grades needed by a small margin, and open learning or Al Maftouh ($800 per year) for newly established degrees in which students attend university once a week only. Also, students now have the option to access any programme in private universities if they can afford to pay fees (average $5000 per year). These different paid routes into the HE sector meant redesigning the admission process and the sector's funding architecture. In her analysis, Buckner (2013) presents that students paying fees in open learning, parallel learning, virtual university, or various private universities account for 43.9% of all university students.

This reform increased enrolment rates, widened students' study options, closed the gender gap in access to the sector, established new public and private universities, and laid down better technology infrastructure for the sector (Kabbani & Salloum, 2011). However, this reform and expansion in the sector seem not to have been matched by a reform in the governance of the sector or an equivalent rise in the quality of education. Furthermore, it appears to have led to new forms of corruption, student discontent, and an ideological divide among academics. Dillabough et al. (2019b) reviewed the HE sector during this period. They found that the sector struggled with constrained decision-making powers, over-regulated and highly controlled institutional governance, and a lack of transparency coupled with favouritism. They further explain that *Wasta*, a type of corruption and a practice of favouritism, played a significant role in employment, fellowships, opportunities to study abroad and promotion practices. Furthermore, Dillabough et al. (2019b) explain that the Ba'th party and Syria National Security Services continue to control university decision-making and intervene in student admissions,

staff appointments, and fellowship and scholarship awards. Additionally, Dillabough et al. (2019b) emphasised that textbooks continued to be approved by the Syrian government to ensure that the curriculum was aligned with the ruling party's policies, which severely limited the space for innovation.

Although a Higher Committee on Quality and Accreditation was established in 2005 to set and monitor the quality assurance system for public and private universities (Waterbury, 2019), the sector's quality remained a big question. In particular, the curricula' quality and relevance to the labour market remained serious issues (Kabbani & Salloum, 2011), and teaching, curriculum and assessment in public universities were rigid, theoretical and outdated (Dillabough et al., 2019b). Classes continued to be overcrowded, Kabbani & Salloum (2011) argues. They explain that in 2006, Syria had a ratio of 27 students per teacher, which is higher than the ratios of OECD, the Middle East, North Africa, and low- and middle-income countries. They further explain that the number of students per class rose to 35 in 2007, which could be explained by the increase in enrolment rates without an adequate expansion of staff and infrastructure (Kabbani & Salloum, 2011). Additionally, the reform has not been matched by an equal improvement in research capacity at Syrian universities. Dillabough et al. (2019b, p. 8) explain that the "limited research funding, the lack of a thriving research community, employment stagnation, too much teaching, using research for promotion purposes only, the lack of collaboration with foreign universities, the absence of research freedom, and the absence of adequate forms of research training" have all contributed to limit research capacity in Syria.

Buckner (2013) also argues that the new labour market insecurity, the high level of state involvement in determining youth life, and the new inequalities in the sector led to students' discontent with the reform. She explains that before 2000, Syria had adopted a state-led development model where the government offered all university graduates a secured job. After 2001, Syria ended this policy as part of its new market economy agenda, whilst employment was regulated by market demand and supply. This left many university graduates struggling to secure jobs and a strong feeling of discontent that their degrees were not leading to promised work opportunities (Buckner, 2013). Dillabough et al. (2019b) add that the university's role in preparing students for the labour market and facilitating entry into it was perceived as negligible. Buckner explains that "given Syria's long-term commitment to a model of state-led development in the post-independence era, the failure of the Syria state to successfully link

expanded HE to secure employment in the neo-liberal era has contributed to a de-legitimisation of the Syria state as a whole in the eyes of its youth" (Buckner, 2013, p. 440). As for the high level of state involvement in determining youth life, the HE sector's admission system was designed based on the 12th-grade exam (public sector) or the ability to pay high fees (private universities and other routes into public universities). Buckner (2013) argues that this left those who did not get enough grades or did not have financial resources unable to study their programme of choice, pushing them to study a course they had no interest in. This has been highlighted in Buckner's study as the most significant source of frustration for young people.

In addition, the reform exacerbated the social inequalities in Syrian society and led to the social reproduction of elites and classes. Buckner (2013) explains that before the reform, the single-track policy to access HE was perceived as an equal playing field and a process that rewarded students' hard work. However, after the reform, admission to private universities and parallel learning in public universities was based on wealth. This, in turn, exacerbated the sense of injustice that students felt when they saw those who did not achieve similar grades pursue the same course because they had the financial means to do so (Buckner, 2013). The importance of class, gender and regional background in gaining education and employment also increased significantly after the reform, leaving a growing proportion of youth with genuine concerns about their living conditions and future opportunities (Buckner & Saba, 2010). Lastly, the lack of transparency, coupled with *Wasta* (favouritism) that gives access to HE based on affiliation with the ruling party, aggravated the concerns and grievances of students and academics (Dillabough et al., 2019b).

Although preparing teachers through fellowship in Western countries and universities could be perceived as a sign of educational development in Syria, this has contributed to an ideological divide between those previously educated in the Soviet Bloc countries, those educated locally, and those educated in the West (Dillabough et al., 2019b). This could have contributed to what Hanafi (2011) explained as the production of compartmentalised elites inside Syria who do not communicate with one another. They are 'either elite that publish globally and perish locally or elite that publish locally and perish globally' (Hanafi, 2011, p. 291).

2.4 HE and Conflict (2011-today)

The year 2011 sparked a different trajectory for Syria. In that year, a widespread social movement emerged in Syria, challenging political oppression, governance failures, inequality, and marginalisation. The government responded with promising reforms; however, it followed a security-military strategy on the ground, leading to an armed conflict that has been exacerbated by the involvement of regional and international powers (SCPR, 2020). This greatly impacted the HE sector and led it to take a new shape. The Syrian HE sector has become a site of resistance where students try to organise themselves and mobilise others to join the movements against the government (Aljasem, 2021). Although the HE sector has always been politicised by the Syrian government to support its political agenda, after 2011, literature review shows that the sector has become a tool of war by the conflicted parties and used by the Syrian government to tighten its grip over the country, suppress opposition, and eventually win the conflict. This has been done through three mechanisms: the militarisation of the sector, exclusion and suppression.

Dillabough et al. (2018) review of HE post 2011 shows that the Syrian government has intensified the security members' presence and rescaled the militarisation inside HE, leading to committing purges, patronage, detention, disappearance and violence against students and academics. They further explain that the interference of the Ba'th party, the National Security Bureau, and the security apparatus in the university governance increased after 2011, citing that in some cases, former security officials took on leadership roles within the university. In his review of the sector during the conflict, Milton (2019) argues that the Students Union, which the government ultimately controls, has been used to mistreat and harass people based on political and religious affiliation. Aljasem (2021) found similar results and highlighted that the Union suppressed the social movement against the government. Furthermore, Al Azmeh et al. (2020) found that the government has silenced, persecuted and excluded politically incompliant academics. Al Azmeh et al. (2020, 10) further explain that "as part of the regime's strategy to instil a self-serving hegemonic vision of history, impose an authoritative version of what happened in 2011, and monopolise the right to articulate it, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion ensured HE became a site for re-legitimising the regime, enforcing its narratives and erasing counter memories of trauma in Syria".

The above shows that by rescaling the militarisation inside HE, increasing the conflation of state politics with university governance, and silencing, persecuting, excluding, and harassing students and academics based on political and religious affiliations, the HE sector has been transformed after 2011 into an active site of direct suppression, marginalisation and violence. Further literature shows that the violence committed against institutions, students, and academics is not limited to government forces. Several reports have highlighted that the opposition forces intimidated students and academics, committed violence, and attacked the HE sector, leading, in some cases, to the death of students (Abdo, 2015; Crossette, 2016; Dillabough et al., 2018; Faek, 2013; GCPEA, 2020; Kadi, 2021; Milton, 2019; Sandler Clarke, 2014). For example, ISIL/ISIS allowed teachers to work only at universities that conformed to Sharia law and exerted extensive and violent intimidation on lectures to ensure these requirements were met (Dillabough et al., 2019a).

Literature also shows that increased securitisation and militarisation have been paralleled by increased corruption. Al Azmeh et al. (2020) show that selling notes, exam questions, forged certificates, swapping students' grades, obtaining university degrees through elicit means, and using Wasta (a form of favouritism) to access teaching positions, scholarships, and postgraduate opportunities have all been reported increasingly after 2011. They further explain that corruption has also been found to play a role in accessing HE, leading to access inequalities based on loyalty to the regime to privilege its supporters. This has been done in an institutionalised way both through legislative decrees that give family members of military martyrs 50% of overall academic programme capacity in public universities or, more covertly, by only admitting favoured applicants to postgraduate studies and giving seats to study abroad based on political and religious affiliation (Al Azmeh et al., 2020).

The HE sector has also begun to disintegrate. Since the government lost control over some of its territories in northern Syria, a non-regime HE sector has emerged, leading to a fragment of the sector between the regime and non-regime institutions, each having its own governing systems. In the non-regime area, the HE sector has expanded massively, opening at least 15 public, private, and non-profit universities (Abdel Nour & Shahadeh, 2019). One of the biggest challenges facing these universities in the non-regime area is the lack of recognition (Abdel Nour & Shahadeh, 2019; Dillabough et al., 2018; Nabeel, 2021). This has led tens of thousands of students to graduate with unaccredited degrees, limiting their abilities to access the labour market and pursue postgraduate degrees abroad (Masri, 2021; Mauvais, 2021). Furthermore,

Millican (2020) highlights that the HE sector in non-regime areas lacks essential functions to operate effectively, such as keeping records of curricula, course programmes, and transcripts. Dillabough et al. (2018) add that it also suffers from a small number of academics, dependency on the personal efforts of academics to operate, and lack of financial support. As a result, students graduate with significant knowledge gaps in some disciplines (Abdullah Omaish et al., 2022).

The expansion of the HE sector in Syria during the conflict is not limited to the non-regime area. The Syrian government has also expanded the HE sector, opening two public universities (Tartous and Hama) and five private universities since the start of the conflict (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-c). The number of enrolled students in the HE sector in Syria the year before the conflict started was around 571,000 students in the academic year 2010-2011 (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.-b). Although Syria experienced a massive forced and voluntary migration wave during the conflict, the number of enrolled students increased after nine years of the conflict to around 600,000 (Damascus University, 2019). Milton (2019) explains that this could be due to the youth bulge in the country, newly relaxed entrance rules to keep students in education rather than rebelling, using education by students as a mechanism to delay joining the military, and adaptation/reorganisation of the HE sector in Syria as a way to keep sector capacity to absorb students.

All of the previous has had its toll on the sector's quality, which has severely eroded since 2011. Furthermore, the sanctions against the HE sector and the reconfiguration of the political ties after 2011 have led to a cut in the links of the sector with Western universities, reinforcing collaboration with regime allies such as Russia, Iran and China (Dillabough et al., 2019a; Milton, 2019). This moved the HE sector, academics, and students further into Russia and Iran's side (Dillabough et al., 2019a; Milton, 2019).

2.5 HE and Peacebuilding (Today-onwards)

As the previous section showed, HE in Syria has served multiple political and economic agendas. However, the future agenda that the sector could serve is essential to Syria as it can either support a peaceful version of Syria or it can perpetuate a violent and oppressive social, economic and political version of Syria. Several prominent education and peacebuilding researchers have documented how education can play a negative and positive role in conflict-

affected settings (e.g. Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2010; Millican, 2018; Milton, 2018). Beyond the positive/negative dichotomy for understanding the role of HE in conflict contexts, Metro (2020, p. 295) proposed a third face, the one that is "neither the bad sort that perpetuates war nor the good sort that delivers social transformation, but the sort that may be more common in conflict or post-conflict situations: well-intentioned if theoretically muddled; passably executed; somewhat problematic; and having mixed effects on society". Pherali (2022) proposed a four-dimensional framework for understanding the potential role of education in conflict and peace that includes being a victim (education as a target for violence), perpetrator (creating or fuelling conditions of conflict), liberator (enabling freedom and justice), peacebuilder (supporting sustainable peace and preventing violent conflict). Therefore, understanding education's role in conflict and peace as multiple and contradictory demonstrates the complexity and particularity of the ways that education contributes to society (Paulson, 2008).

Starting with the negative role, Bush & Saltarelli (2000), in their seminal work on the role of education in conflict, argues that education could contribute to the conflict through the uneven distribution of education, use of education as a weapon of cultural repression, denial of education as a weapon of war, manipulating of history for political purposes, manipulating of textbooks, promoting of self-worth and hating others and segregation of education to ensure inequality, lowered esteem and stereotyping. Davies (2010) gave examples of this negative role, such as the deeply politicised role of teachers in Nepal, the destruction of research centres and prohibitions on fine arts degrees in Palestine, the hate curriculum in Rwanda, South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Israel-Palestine, the policy of segregation in Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the defence curriculum in the Balkans and South Korea. Milton (2018) provided further examples of the segregation and homogenisation of campuses along the divided line of conflict in Iraq, Lebanon, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Bosnia, Kosovo, Myanmar, and Libya. This segregation reinforced the existing social, ethnic, and political divide in the country. Bigagli (2021) provided an in-depth analysis of the case of Consociational North Macedonia. The researcher found that the peacebuilding policies introduced 'post' conflict between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians had failed to introduce mechanisms geared towards building social cohesion and contributed to reinforcing ethnocultural divisions along territorial and linguistic lines. This happened as a result of accommodating the demand of ethnic Albanians to access HE in their mother tongue. Although this policy is geared towards social justice, Bigagli (2021) argues that it created segregated

campuses, deepening stereotypes, intolerance and lack of trust between the two dominant nations. Furthermore, Davies (2010) highlighted how education could reproduce the ‘‘normality’’ of the status quo, economic inequality, gender roles and violence in ‘post’ conflict. This happens through the phenomenon of ‘‘violence by omission’’ by not learning about conflict or genocide, particularly in one’s own country (Salmi, 2006). Milton (2018) also presented a more neoliberal understanding of conflict and economy by introducing the greed and grievance thesis of conflict and how HE fits into these theories. In other words, how unemployed graduates (youth bulge|) and uneducated youth contribute to insecurity and increase the risk of conflict.

In addition to peacebuilding and conflict literature, sociologists and political scientists also shed light on how HE can contribute to conflict in society, whether this is class, cultural or political conflict. From a sociological perspective, education has long been conceptualised as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2006) that enforces cultural hegemony (Bourdieu, 1977) and manages a society’s aspirations (Freire, 1970) to accept the unequal power distribution between the different segments of society. From a political perspective, Hughes (1994) documented how nationalist and authoritarian leaders used education for legitimisation purposes using the “politics of survival” Hughes explains that authoritarian leaders need to build internal legitimacy because the way they come to power does not grant them social or political acceptance. One way to survive is through education policies, such as expanding HE to everyone and maintaining no or low fees. On the last point, the problem is not in the policy itself, as expanding HE and decreasing fees have the potential to tackle inequality in society. However, the problem is when the expansion in education opportunities is not accompanied by an expansion in economic opportunities, leaving millions of students struggling with unemployment. Additionally, comparing authoritarian regimes in Latin America, Levy (1981) found that HE policies reduce, rationalise and depoliticise social and political issues to "technical" problems, monopolise policymaking, and exert coercion to squash any resistance.

As for the positive role, the literature seems to approach this topic from three main angles: ‘post’ conflict recovery/development, peacebuilding, and social justice. ‘**Post’ Conflict recovery** literature focuses on how HE can support ‘post’ conflict reconstruction by stabilising the conflict and supporting economic recovery, knowledge economy, state building, disarmament, demobilising, reintegration of fighters, and security sector reform (Milton, 2018; Milton & Barakat, 2016). HE does so by rebuilding human capital and redressing the skill gap

(economic recovery), absorbing youth and reintegrating youth fighters into education and providing security sector training |(stabilisation), graduating lawyers and judges (rule of law), building capable politicians (legitimacy), teach national history and language (national identity), facilitate civic engagement and debates (democratisation and civic development) (Milton, 2018; Milton & Barakat, 2016). An example of such interventions is the disarmament and demobilisation interventions in Colombia, where most public universities and some private ones have special quotas for demobilised combatants and veterans of the regular forces who have been decorated or have been seriously wounded in combat (I. F. Pacheco, 2013; I. Pacheco & Johnson, 2017). In addition to 'post' conflict recovery, Milton (2021) argues that HE, through teaching, research, governance, and external leadership, has the potential to support the sustainable development goal 16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) in conflict-affected countries. In particular, through implementing education for sustainable development, capacity building, mobilising young people, research on the SDGs, public engagement, cross-sectoral dialogue and action, policy development and advocacy (Milton, 2021).

Peacebuilding literature has highlighted how HE can contribute to promoting peace in conflict-affected contexts. Milton (2018) extensively discussed how HE supports peacebuilding through its teaching, research and public service missions. Milton explains that through teaching, universities could teach peace and conflict studies that foster skills, knowledge, and behaviours that can support peacebuilding. Such competencies are intercultural, reconciliation, and dialogical competence to bridge divided communities after violent conflict (Bergan et al., 2010; Deardorff, 2017). Through research, Milton (2018) continues, universities can promote localised and contextual research on peace and conflict. Such attempts are the Peace Diploma in Sri Lanka and the Civic education programme at Ulster University in Northern Ireland (Milton, 2018). Through public service, universities can adopt a mission of peacebuilding and build a space for dialogue among all aspects of society (Milton, 2018). Examples of this are The Prince of Songkhla University in Thailand, providing space for dialogue between civil society and parties of the conflict, UNIMAK University in Sierra Leone, changing the institutional mission to peacebuilding, and Jesuit-run Central American University in El Salvador becoming a leading voice of national reconciliation (Milton, 2018).

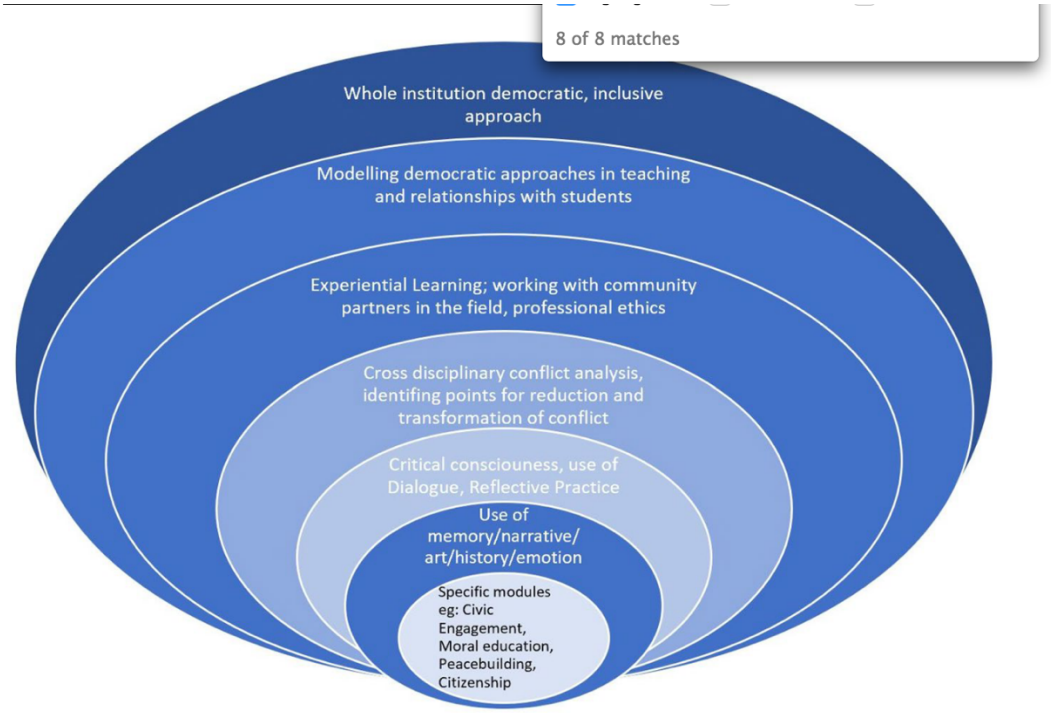
In addition to teaching about peace, researching peace and creating a space for dialogue towards peace, Milton (2018) further analysed how universities could support broader social justice and equity by tacking gender and socio-economic inequalities of access, such as the scholarship scheme to students from rural areas in Mozambique and opening new universities in deprived cities in Angola. Furthermore, Milton (2018) argues that universities could support social cohesion and transform conflict by providing a space for academics and students to socialise, collaborate, and contact the "other". Milton provides examples of this, such as the University of Balamand in Lebanon cutting through the ethnic divide by adopting a vision of peacebuilding through multi-ethnic and multi-cultural education and the Israeli-Palestinian academic cooperation, which offered some level of success in building trust, confidence, and mutual understanding between academics. Lastly, Milton (2018) found that HE can support transitional justice through fact-finding, human rights abuse documenting, curriculum rewriting and history teaching reforming. This has been found in the case of universities in Sierra Leone providing support to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in archiving and digesting of the materials, in universities of Libya through renaming university campuses, in universities in Rwanda facilitating academic collaboration to reform history education in line with transitional justice (Milton, 2018). Moreover, this has been found in attempts between Israeli and Palestinian academics collaborating on authoring bi-national textbooks for schools and in the University of Peru attempting to produce education materials that reflect the multiple perspectives on the conflict.

Millican et al. (2021) highlight that spaces for discussing inequality, difference, conflict and cohesion seem to be limited to courses on civic education, citizenship, ethics, democracy, and peacebuilding. However, these topics are not just knowledge out there waiting to be delivered. Peace is a lived and embodied experience that goes beyond the modules. Millican et al. (2021) provided an in-depth analysis of the pedagogies of peacebuilding in HE and argued that pedagogies could contribute to developing individuals who can engage in dialogue with others, agree and disagree, build relationships, have a high level of emotional intelligence, recognise complexity, and imagine a different future. One example they provide is the pedagogy of empathy implemented at The University of Rwanda and Brighton. These pedagogies require students to engage in experiential projects, service learning, and student–community engagement by working with different marginalised groups. Another example Millican et al. (2021) provided is the pedagogy of memory, retributive and restorative justice that has been implemented at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá (Colombia), where students use

reflection and self-knowledge to understand and deconstruct historical cultural and personal recollections of the past. Millican et al. (2021) further developed a more holistic cross-cultural framework for peacebuilding pedagogies that includes seven nested practice layers (Figure 1). A pedagogy that "questions rather than instructs, that looks for parallels, patterns and comparisons and tracks the process and system of conflict, rather than merely learning about it" (Millican et al., 2021, p. 15). It moves beyond just the teaching of peace to include memory and emotions, critical reflection and dialogue, and experiential learning.

Figure 1

A Cross-cultural Framework for Peacebuilding Pedagogies



Millican et al. (2021, p. 18)

Social Justice literature has a different orientation to how HE could bring sustainable peace to societies. It shifts away from the liberal peace logic that prioritises democracy and market forces as the main drivers of stability once security has been achieved and focuses on tackling the root causes of conflict. For example, Novelli et al. (2017) argue that sustainable peacebuilding requires societal transformation, and education can contribute to this societal transformation if it 1) supports equal access to education, equal distribution of resources in the education sector, equal economic opportunities for students, and redistributive policies (redistribution); 2) supports equal participation in decision-making, political control and

representation, leading to an education system that supports fundamental freedoms (Representation); 3) supports the recognition of different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, gender, age, and other groups of society (recognition); and 4) supports addressing the "legacies of conflict" and dealing with historical and present tensions, grievances, and injustices (Reconciliation). Furthermore, for education to lead to sustainable peace, it should be integrated into education reforms and peacebuilding at the level of policy formation and implementation (Maber et al., 2019), approach peacebuilding holistically (Shah et al., 2016), and enhance the socio-cultural, political and economic agency of youth as peacebuilders (Cardozo et al., 2015). Furthermore, Shuayb (2012) argues that most educational institutions are still characterised by an authoritarian, hierarchical, undemocratic, passive and apathetic culture; therefore, challenging oppression requires changing the educational institution structure and the relationships within this small community.

However, among the many factors that threaten the HE's ability to play its essential role in the future of Syria is the brain drain of academics (Al Azmeh et al., 2020; Akkad and Henderson, 2021; Milton, 2019). There is no accurate estimation of how many academics left Syria. In 2017, the Minister of Higher Education reported that 20% of academics had left the country, whereas the dean of the Medicine Faculty reported 30% (Bek Sharif, 2017). Some old reports and studies estimated that between 1500-2000 university professors have fled the country (O'Keeffe & Pásztor, 2016), whereas others estimated that one-third of the country's Professors have left (Abdo, 2015). Today, in 2024, these numbers are arguably way higher as the conflict and, mainly, the economic crisis has intensified. The professional avenues that these professors have followed post-migration/displacement vary. Some continued their academic careers in the host societies while others were sadly deskilled and pushed out of academia. Additionally, migration and displacement created opportunities for many Syrians to enter academia in their host countries and new homes. These different groups of academics now constitute a new layer in Syria's transnational intellectual communities and diaspora. These academics, both who have left Syria or have become academics in exile, arguably have an essential role in the future of their country, particularly in the HE sector. However, academics in exile/diaspora are navigating complex personal, socio-economic, and political realities in their new host countries and homelands, which shapes and influences their engagement with their homeland. The following chapter attempts to unpack these realities.

Chapter 3: The Complexity of Exiled Academics Engagement with Education Development

Numerous research studies have documented how academic diaspora contributes to the HE sector of their country of origin when they return home (permanently or temporarily) or while abroad (e.g. Amagoh and Rahman, 2016; Blachford and Zhang, 2014; Rahman, 2013; Welch and Zhen, 2008). These researchers found that their contribution takes multiple forms, such as co-authoring, conference presentations, staff/students exchange, sending research materials to academics, establishing joint research/projects, enhancing the local institution's reputation, strengthening research tradition and national innovation system back home, offering financial support, technology transfer, and teaching at local universities. However, none of this research has been conducted in conflict zones, leaving a gap in our understanding of academic diaspora engagement with their conflict-affected countries of origin. This chapter aims to review the relevant literature on diaspora engagement with their home country, especially forced migrants' engagement in their conflict-affected contexts. It aims to unpack the complexity of their evolving relationship with their homeland, including the complexity of home, belonging and return.

3.1 The Complexity of Terms

As a starting point, this chapter unpacks the complexities of the different labels that forced migrants might navigate, mainly the terms refugee, exile, and diaspora. Although the terms (and experience of) refugees, exiles and diaspora could overlap, these terms have different meanings socially, politically, and academically. As explained by Goodwin-Gill (2014), the term refuge has a significant legal definition under an international legal framework that gives rights to refugees and creates duties for nation-states. Goodwin-Gill shows that this, in turn, has created response and protection mechanisms as well as agencies, offices, and commissions to regulate these mechanisms. Refugees could be exiles and vice versa. However, a lot of people in exile are not refugees by definition. They might be on a different type of visa and have different legal statuses. Said (2001, p. 259), in his reflections on exile, explains that the word refugee has a humanitarian connotation, suggesting "large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance", whereas exile is "almost always political". Additionally, Elsehamy (2022) explored Yassin al-Haj Saleh's conceptualisation of Exile. Yassin al-Haj Saleh is a writer, political activist, ex-prisoner, and Syrian exile. Yassin

al-Haj Saleh (discussed in Elsehamy, 2022) perceived that agency and proximity are two main features that distinguish exiles from refugees. He perceives that refugeehood is the early phase of becoming an exile, and the further the distance and time far from home, the more exiled the refugee becomes (Elsehamy, 2022). He also perceives that refugees seek refuge in the nearest place from the conflict and await to return, whereas exiles choose to locate in a more stable place where they continue their political and professional journey.

Exile is conceptualised in the literature mainly as a painful experience, punishment and separation from home. Peters (1999, p. 36) describes it as a "quest for an earthly home or homeland", whereas Um (2006, p. 89) calls it an existence devoid of the "warmth of home and the history that gives meaning to every part". Said (2001) experiences it as an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (p.250) and "life led outside habitual order" (p. 266). Exile is not only about the forcible spatial and physical dislocation but also a spiritual disjuncture. Um (2006) explains that it includes the absence of community and togetherness, local food and laughter. Regardless of whether it is voluntary or involuntary, internal or external, Peters (1999) argues that exile generally implies a trauma and an imminent danger that makes the home no longer safely habitable. One of the complex realities of exile is that contrary to the common assumption, exiled people cannot be removed entirely from their homeland. Given today's world of connectivity, they are reminded every day of their exile and of the home that they cannot visit. As Said put it, "Everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalising and unfulfilled touch with the old place. The exile, therefore, exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another" (Said, 1996, p. 27).

All the previous could also be said about the experience of refugees. This is because the painful experience of forced separation from home overlaps between exiles and refugees. However, the exile phenomena could be lived without forced displacement. Pearlman (2022) has developed a framework that distinguishes between home and exile's psychosocial and locational aspects. After interviewing Syrians in exile, Pearlman identified five distinct categories of experience: "home in the homeland, exile in the homeland, exile outside the homeland, home outside the homeland, or overlaps of exile and home across borders" (Pearlman, 2022, p. 1). As Naficy argues:

> "Today, it is possible to be exiled in place, that is, to be at home and to long for other places. It is possible to be in internal exile and yet be at home. It is possible to be forced into external exile and be unable to, or with not to, return home. It is possible to return and to find that one's house is not the home that one had hoped for, that it is not the structure that memory built. It is possible to go into exile voluntarily and then return, yet still not fully arrive. It is possible to be able to return and choose not to do so but instead continue to dream of and imagine a glorious return. It is also to transit back and forth, be in and out, do here and there—to be a nomad and yet be in exile everywhere". (1999, p. 3)

Therefore, exile could become a metaphorical condition, especially for intellectuals who feel estranged inside their homeland, living at the margin and standing outside the comforts of privilege and power (Said, 1996). However, not falling into the trap of essentialising the exile experience is crucial. As Naficy (1999) argued, not all displaced people experience exile equally or uniformly; therefore, exile discourses pay close attention to detail, specificity and locality.

The classic understanding of diaspora "signifies a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile" (R. Cohen, 1997, p. ix). Therefore, the terms diaspora and exile could sometimes be used interchangeably. They both suggest displacement from a centre. However, the two phenomena have quite different meanings. The term diaspora could be used in a restricted way to refer to particular cases of migrants, such as the Jewish diaspora. However, Tölölyan (1991) explain that it could also be used in an all-encompassing way to refer to a broad case of migrants such as immigrants, expatriates, refugees, guest workers, exile communities, overseas communities, and ethnic communities. Early discussions of the term were limited to the case of the Jewish dispersion, which has influenced the theorising of the term until today. Some influential theorists in the diaspora field, such as Cohen (1997) and Safran (1991), have developed a list of criteria for what could constitute a diaspora. The Jewish dispersion has influenced both lists. However, as Clifford argued, "we should be able to recognise the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model. Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be taken as non-normative starting points for a discourse that is travelling or hybridising in new global conditions" (Clifford, 1994, p. 306). Therefore, acknowledging the need to expand the meaning

of the diaspora, the term started proliferating in the 1990s and 2000s, which led to expanding its meaning to include broader populations of migrants. In a review of the term, Brubaker (2005) identified three core elements that remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora: forced or traumatic dispersion, orientation to a real or imagined homeland that shapes values, identities and loyalties, and boundary maintenance involving the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-a`-vis a host society. However, many researchers have argued that the diaspora should be viewed differently. Rather than viewing the diaspora as a descriptive category with a set of criteria, Herbert (2012, p. 298) argued for viewing the diaspora as a "process and socio-cultural condition that shapes people's worldview and denotes ideas about belonging". Furthermore, rather than seeing diaspora as a bounded entity of ethno-demographic and ethnocultural people, Brubaker (2005, p. 12) argues for viewing it as a category of practice to "make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilise energies, to appeal to loyalties". Like exile, the yearning for home is integral to the diaspora experience, especially the classic understanding of diaspora. However, diaspora is better understood as a process of "multi-locationality across geographical cultural and psychic boundaries" (Brah, 1996, p. 191).

Although the diaspora and exile phenomena overlap, Peters (1999) differentiates diaspora and exile in several ways. Exile suggests yearning for home or homeland, whereas modern diaspora suggests compatriot networks. Exile may be a solitary phenomenon, but diaspora is always a collective phenomenon. Furthermore, the contemporary understanding of diaspora could mean any group of migrants dispersed outside their homeland for any purpose. However, exile emphasises a painful or punitive banishment from one's homeland for political reasons. Depending on the situation, Bolzman (2002) argues, exiles (and arguably refugees) either 'return' to their homeland or remain and slowly transform into diaspora members influenced by changes in the political context of the homeland, in their relationship to time and space and their hopes of returning and attitudes towards the home country.

3.2 The Complexity of Diaspora Engagement

Refugees, exiles and forced migrants gradually become diaspora and shape new layers in the country-of-origin transnational communities (Baser & Ozturk, 2022). Diaspora engagement with their homeland is a complex process that is shaped and influenced by interconnected personal, socio-economic, and political factors. To understand this process, several researchers

suggested breaking down their engagement to provide a more nuanced understanding. In their seminal paper on conflict-generated diaspora, in particular the Sri Lankan, Afghani and Somalia, Kurds, and the Russian-speaking diaspora in the former Soviet Union, Van Hear and Cohen (2017) distinguished three spheres of engagement for the diaspora with homeland: the private/personal sphere (household and extended family), the known community (people that we knew from schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, markets and shops, places of religious observance, etc), and the imagined community (the nation). They further explain that the forms of diaspora engagement differ across these spheres. Other researchers have also attempted to distinguish between several forms of engagement, mainly financial/economic (investment, entrepreneurship, remittances, philanthropy), social (norms, practices, identities), capacity development (knowledge and skills transfer), and political (advocacy & participation in peace processes) (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Ionescu, 2006; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Regardless of which sphere or form of engagement, the impact of the diaspora in general and conflict-generated diaspora in particular is hotly debated in the literature. From one end, several researchers argued that diaspora could contribute to the conflict when they are less willing to compromise, radicalise political discourse and actions, and fund armed groups, and therefore reinforce and exacerbate the protractedness of homeland conflicts (e.g. Bird, 2023; Demmers, 2002; Lyons, 2006, 2007). On the other hand, other researchers have argued that their simultaneous affiliations to and involvement in their country of origin and residence, political influence, and transnational networks, resources and skills make them potential partners in the reconciliation, reconstruction, transitional justice, development and peacebuilding of their countries (e.g. Brinkerhoff, 2011, 2004; Horst et al., 2010; Karabegović, 2018; Kleist and Vammen, 2012; Pande, 2017). Furthermore, Dryden-Peterson & Reddick (2019) and Horst et al. (2010) found that the diaspora has a strong emotional connection and a high degree of personal and moral commitment and obligation to support their relatives and imagined communities.

Although diaspora engagement with the homeland could play an essential role in the future of their conflict-affected countries, it is not without significant challenges. One of the biggest barriers to engaging the diaspora in the Syrian context is the absence of a supportive political environment. Diaspora must have a political environment and a system open to their influence (Toivanen & Baser, 2020). Furthermore, the relationship between diaspora and fragile states is complex (Hansen, 2008; Kleist & Vammen, 2012). In fragile states characterised by low

capacity levels, political leadership, violent conflict, etc., push factors for migration are strong and, in extreme situations, migration is not voluntary but forced (Mortensen, 2008). The massive displacement and conflict create conflict-generated diasporas that may have strained relationships with authorities and institutions (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Mügge, 2012; Pasura, 2012), and their fear of government surveillance or repression affects their ability to engage with their home country (Horst et al., 2010). Their position toward their home country and whether they oppose or support the existing government and political structures back home can influence their engagement (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2019; Hansen, 2008; Toivanen & Baser, 2020). Van Hear and Cohen (2017) argue that the nature of post-war society will also shape the diaspora's engagement. They explain that having a negotiated peace or settlement agreement will encourage the diaspora to engage in 'post' conflict recovery and even return to participate in the post-war administration or government. However, Van Hear and Cohen (2017) continue to explain that if there was an outright military victory and the diaspora is on the losing side, then they are less likely to engage in state re/building and resist subscribing to the victor's 'imagined community'; they are likely to maintain their vision of the imagined community. Furthermore, it is not just about how the diaspora looks at the state but also how the state perceives its diaspora. Levitt & Schiller (2004) categorised states based on how they treat long-distance members, such as transnational nation-states, strategically selective states, or disinterested states. Toivanen & Baser (2020) add that diaspora engagement can take two forms in the eyes of the home state: conflictual and complementary.

Another vital challenge is whether the Syrian diaspora has the capacity or the desire to engage and support the HE sector back home. As shown by Van Hear (2014) and Van Hear & Cohen (2017), differences in wealth, resources, and social capital influence the capacity of diasporas to engage in conflict and 'post' conflict situations. Toivanen & Baser (2020) add that the diaspora needs sufficient capacity and leverage to impact policy-making mechanisms at home and abroad. Other factors that can make the diaspora more active in their countries of origin are the group's volume, political status, integration level, existing national and international networks, legal citizenship status, and economic stability (J. H. Cohen, 2011; Mügge, 2012; Sarabia, 2011). Furthermore, not all diasporas nor their members engage in peacebuilding and/or conflict mechanisms (Kleist & Vammen, 2012; Toivanen & Baser, 2020). For some, the conflict and humanitarian emergencies in their home country inspire new or renewed interest and action on behalf of the place of origin; for others, the resulting pain can lead the diaspora to seek further integration into their host country (Brinkerhoff, 2011). However, this

does not mean that the diaspora either engages or disconnects from their home country. A more nuanced understanding is that they move between these two positions and constantly negotiate and re-practice their relationship with their home countries as a result of multiple factors such as personal, socio-economic, and political factors.

A further challenge to diaspora engagement is that they may replicate unequal international development power structures in funding and knowledge transfer from North to South and, knowingly or unknowingly, this may transfer ideas and practices associated with the very neo-colonial approaches to education development that they seek to disrupt (Dryden-Peterson and Reddick, 2019). Pellerin & Mullings (2013, p. 90) argue that "the discourse of pragmatism that has accompanied attempts to institutionalise the diaspora option has obscured the selective, market-driven orientation of most of the policies supported within this option, and the subtle way that these policies are shifting the risk and responsibility for social transformation away from the state and private corporations, and towards migrant populations". Furthermore, after reviewing cases from Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, Nyamnjoh (2018) argues that diasporas can undermine the legitimacy of peacebuilding. The researcher explains that the engagement of the Western-educated diaspora could be perceived as a way to privilege Western knowledge structures and boost the liberal peace paradigm, marginalise local knowledge in the development process, and create hierarchies of input between locals and diaspora (Nyamnjoh, 2018). Another review from Cambodia and Timor-Leste, Hughes (2011) argues that the technical orientation of the Return of Qualified Expatriates programs is misleading and hides the political significance that is noted and contested locally. This is because it is perceived locally as a re-establishment of colonial hierarchies of power and language and "represent attempts to smuggle Western hierarchies of knowledge into post-conflict reconstruction efforts under the cover of ethnic solidarity, to the detriment of local participation and empowerment" (Hughes, 2011, p. 1493).

There is also the question of the legitimacy of diaspora as partners in (post-) conflict recovery and reconstruction. Hughes (2011) argues that local or ethnic bonds do not necessarily constitute legitimacy for local people in conflict but by one's intimacy with conflict and the range of experiences of sacrifice and struggle that result from conflict. Some researchers, like Nyamnjoh (2018), go further and state that because of the potential tension diaspora creates when they return, their hidden colonial agenda, outdated information about the local context, and inefficacy in making change, the diaspora neither represent locals nor legitimise external

engagement, and their local connection is ultimately counterproductive for the legitimation of peacebuilding and 'post' conflict reconstruction.

In many conflict settings, education challenges are the product of historical and colonial legacies, long-standing social and economic structures and political regimes, and affiliations of power and privilege (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015). The fragility dimension requires acknowledgement that education may have contributed to that fragility (Davies, 2009). Therefore, McCowan and Unterhalter (2015) argue that restoring educational provision without considering cultural, political, economic and social structures is insufficient. Hence, unless diaspora engagement with local academics challenges the deeper problems of the HE system, their engagement could simply reproduce the status quo that may have contributed to the conflict (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015).

Lastly, the agendas of the diaspora are not always consistent with the agendas of the home country's population, Sward (2009) argues. The epistemic differences between academics in the diaspora and their home country make it difficult to establish collaboration (Ortiga et al., 2018). Furthermore, Brinkerhoff (2011) shows that diaspora returning to 'post' conflict countries could create new political tensions as it could lead to a new political elite. Brinkerhoff (2011) further argues that they can reintroduce and/or worsen existing ethnic tension, potentially replicating pre-conflict stratification of skills and class and consequent opportunity and resources.

3.3 The Complexity of Home

Central to the relationship between exiled academics and their home countries is the notion of home. This is because forced migration and exile are tied to the concept of home: the loss of a home, the yearning for a home, the forced separation from home, and the inability to 'return' home. Understanding this relationship between people and the place they call home sheds light on important aspects of diaspora engagement with home countries. This is because the diaspora's emotions, connection, and perception of their old and new home/homeland arguably translate into commitment, duties, and responsibilities toward these homes. The constant evolution of their understanding of and emotions towards the notion of home leads them to constantly negotiate duties and commitment towards these homes.

Home is a contested topic in social science. Brun (2001), in her seminal study, argues that there are two main theoretical approaches to understanding the relationship between people and place/space in migration studies, which are essential to understanding the concept of home: essentialist and de-territorialisation. After conducting an extensive literature review on movement, violence, and the making of home, Jansen & Löfving (2007) explain that the essentialist perspective, also called normative sedentarism, suggests that all people are naturally rooted in a place from which they derive identity, meaningfulness, and culture, which together shape people's belonging and feeling of home. In this way, space, place or home is perceived as a static, private, fixed, and confined space, such as the house where someone lives or the homeland, nation and/or city where someone grew up. Jansen & Löfving (2007) further explain that according to this theoretical approach, movement and migration are perceived as inherently violent phenomena separating people from their homes and, thus, their culture and identity. This approach perceives exiled people and refugees as out of place and uprooted (Brun, 2001) and the movement of refugees as a challenge to the "national order of things" (Malkki, 1992). Therefore, Brun (2001) explains that this approach perceives the 'return' of refugees as the natural solution to the 'problem'. This is because, as argued by Kibreab (1999), people's 'real identity' is their belonging to an (ethno-) national category territorialised in the homeland and the past.

On the other hand, transnationalism and post-modernism discourses, argues Brah (1996), Malkki (1995) and Turton (2005), have challenged this essentialist approach and attempted to de-territorialise home, identity, belonging and culture. These approaches suggest that "space is constructed from the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales" (Brun, 2001, p. 15). Therefore, home is perceived not as a fixed location but as a set of relationships to both humans and non-humans; it is the people, objects, routines, sounds and smells, parks, cafés and friends which all give someone familiarity with the place (Nowicka, 2007). Brah (1996) adds that home is a lived experience of locality. In this sense, Naficy (1999, p. 6) argues that home could be "anyplace; it is temporary, and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination". Furthermore, according to this school of thinking, the concept of home is "not static but dynamic processes, involving the acts of imagining, creating, unmaking, changing, losing and moving homes" (Al-Ali & Koser, 2001, p. 6). It is produced through a "constant process of adjustment, transformation, negotiation and redefinition" (Gedalof, 2003, p. 101). When people move, Jansen & Löfving (2007) argue, they develop strategies of cultural continuity to recreate the home and overcome alienation and social

disintegration. This could be called the practice of home, the remaking of home or emplacement that might be constructed through festivals, celebrations, visual and material cultures, objects that people use, and new social relationships that people rebuild to recreate their homes. This does not mean that forced migrants stop having a deep and emotional attachment to the lost home, Taylor (2013) argues; instead, this allows for the possibility of making a new home in the country of exile while keeping an attachment to the old home.

The above arguments show a dualism in our understanding of home/space. Home could be the place of origin where we grew up and have strong emotional attachments, a point of departure for the rest of one's life (Nowicka, 2007). However, it could also be a place we construct through tradition, culture, community and a sense of security, familiarity, possibility, freedom, status, and inclusion (Hage, 1997; Tucker, 1994; Webb & Lahiri-Roy, 2019). It is an entity that is becoming (Nowicka, 2007). That does not mean that home is either or; home could be both. Home could be place-based, such as the house and city, but also be metaphorical spaces full of shifting meanings (Staeheli & Nagel, 2006). It could be real as a home that people have experienced before or a mythic place of desire in the imagination of those who have never experienced it (Brah, 1996). Home could be linked to the past and a landscape of historical memory; however, it could be an ambiguous framework in a state of constant reinvention that does not resemble the past (Delanty et al., 2008). Taylor (2013) suggested that one possible way to understand the multi-faceted and often contradictory meaning of home is by looking at four different dimensions of home: the spatial (physical), temporal (experiences and memories), material (food, culture, etc) and relational home (community and social capital).

Although the concepts of home and homeland are sometimes used interchangeably, they could mean quite differently. As mentioned earlier, people feel, understand, practice and recreate home differently. However, homeland usually refers to the nation, an imaginative, absolute, abstract and mythical project with definitive geographical boundaries (Delanty et al., 2008; Naficy, 1999). Brah (1996) explains that it is quite possible for people to feel at home in a place, yet the social exclusions that people experience in the public sphere prohibit proclamations of the place as the homeland. Brah further argues that people might feel they are in their homeland yet struggle to feel at home; therefore, the desire for home could be quite different from the desire for a homeland (1996).

3.4 The Complexity of Belonging

Similar to the question of home, the question of belonging is also tied to the experience of forced migration and exile: the struggle to belong, the loss of belonging, belonging everywhere and nowhere, etc. Understanding the notion of belonging is also central to understanding exiled academics' relationship with their home countries. This is because the changes in diaspora's belonging to their old and new home/homeland arguably translate into commitment, duties, and responsibilities toward these homes.

Literature differentiates between two primary meanings of belonging: the positive (warmth and comfort) and the negative (exclusion and struggle). The former is usually referred to as the "sense of belonging", which is an emotional attachment to a place and a feeling of being at home (Antonsich, 2010; Nagel, 2011; Pearlman, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2011) that includes warmth, security, comfort, and pride (Brown, 2011; Nagel, 2011). This feeling is usually grounded in a felt connection to self, others, and place (Pearlman, 2022) and modes of being (Graf, 2018). The absence or the negation of connections is keenly felt and leads to estrangement (Graf, 2018). The latter understanding of belonging, the negative one, is usually referred to as the "politics of belonging", which comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing and policing the boundaries between "us" and "them" (Nagel, 2011), the social categories and groupings within these boundaries and the inclusion/exclusion mechanism (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The struggle over belonging and battle of inclusions/exclusions are underpinned by the "socio-cultural politics of difference and played out across the intersections of racialised, ethnic, socio-economic, religious, sexual, and gender identities and affiliations" (Taylor, 2009, p. 295). It is usually structured through laws, policies, and norms (Nagel, 2011). Taylor (2009) explains that the politics of belonging are usually articulated through questions about who belongs where, who decides who belongs and who does not, and on what basis belonging happens. Taylor (2009) further explains that these boundaries are dynamics; therefore, the politics of belonging involves negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups that can lead to a reformulation of these boundaries and the terms of membership.

Delanty et al. (2008) argue that the differentiation between the sense of belonging and the politics of belonging is superficial. This is because the emotional attachment to a place and feeling at home (sense of belonging) cannot be felt where everyday social practices are exclusive (politics of belonging). In other words, the sense of belonging or the absence of

belonging are outcomes of the politics of belonging that either include or exclude people. Delanty et al. (2008) understanding of belonging is a form of identity politics: “a process whereby an individual in some way feels some sense of association with a group, and as such, it represents a way to explain the relationship between a personalised identity and a collective one” (p. 44). Therefore, according to Delanty et al. (2008), belonging operates similarly to identity bias, where individuals filter out negative information about the group they belong to and aggregate positive experiences and views to build up only positive information and images. For this reason, Delanty et al. (2008) argue that we cannot understand belonging without understanding the relationship between personal and collective identity and how individuals situate themselves in relation to a collective.

Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) distinguishes between two processes of belonging: belonging to and belonging with. Belonging to is when an individual tries to access a collective that guards their boundaries (the struggle to belong), whereas belonging with means belonging together with a group of people through mechanisms of commonality, mutuality, and attachment (the way people exercise belonging). Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) explains that commonality is sharing common cultural forms, values, experiences, and memories with others. Mutuality is the ties of reciprocity that bind individuals together, as well as mutual expectations and obligations such as loyalty and commitment. Attachment is people's emotion toward the material and immaterial worlds, to people, spaces and sites, landscapes, and material possessions. Nagel (2011) differentiates between four interrelated dimensions of belonging. Firstly, the emotional dimension refers to people’s attachments to places. Secondly, the formal dimension of belonging, such as citizenship and membership in nationally defined communities. Thirdly, the normative dimension of belonging encompasses everyday informal practices and narratives that determine belonging or not belonging to specific groups. Lastly, the negotiated dimension of belonging refers to the practices of marginalised groups with the dominant ones to widen the boundaries of belonging.

The above understanding of belonging is also important to understanding diaspora engagement with their homeland. This is because the diaspora’s belonging to their old and new home/homeland arguably translates into commitment, duties, and responsibilities towards these homes. Furthermore, the constant evolution of their belonging translates into an ambivalence. Some studies have tried to unpack the ambivalences that forced migrants and people in exile exhibit, especially the ones related to homeland politics (e.g. Belloni, 2019;

McIlwaine & Bermudez, 2015; Žíla, 2022). They shed light on contradictory attitudes towards home politics through activism, voting, and exercising their political rights. Belloni (2019), in particular, showed how ambivalences can result from embodying more than one role, such as patriots, family breadwinners, refugees and citizens of their homeland and how each role can result in contradictory expectations and clashing implications. Gerharz & Land (2018) shed light on the ambiguous emotional relationship that people in exile have with their homeland, representing not only a place of origin but also discrimination and exclusion. Kivisto & Vecchia-Mikkola (2013) discussed three different ways that forced migrants to respond to their ambivalence. These are "exit" (disconnection from the home society and full incorporation in the host society), "loyalty" (a constantly renewed attachment and homesickness to the home society and subsequent isolation in the country of settlement) and "voice" (living a transnational life in between countries).

3.5 The Complexity of 'Return'

In addition to the question of home and belonging, the question of return is also central to understanding exiled and diaspora academic relationships with their home countries. Some diaspora feel the yearning for the 'absent homeland' (Brah, 1996, p. 180); however, Webb & Lahiri-Roy (2019) argue that this yearning is far higher in the case of exiled people. This yearning to 'return' to a homeland is usually felt as nostalgia and homesickness. Rubenstein (2001) differentiates between these two feelings. They argue that homesickness refers to the feeling of wanting to go back to a physical/geographical place. In contrast, nostalgia has a temporal dimension and refers to the feeling of wanting to go back to a time in the past. The former refers to a physical home, whereas the latter refers to a temporal home. Blunt (2003) explains that the social practices, rituals, traditions, and the actual work of constructing domestic and community spaces in exile could be a result of productive nostalgia. However, the feeling of nostalgia and 'return' for exiled and displaced people come with contradiction, discomfort and ambivalence, Gerharz & Land (2018) and Tucker (1994) argue. They explain that the home people feel nostalgic for is the same one where people struggled, oppressed, and expelled. It is the place that evokes the memory of death and deprivation (Um, 2006).

But is a 'return' possible? And 'return' to what? Is home a timeless entity in an unchanging context of origin? Much research has documented how many migrants never fully achieve a 'return' to home, especially forced migrants whose countries experienced conflicts and

significant change (e.g. Barnes, 2001; Braakman & Schlenkhoff, 2007; Gerharz & Land, 2018; Glazebrook, 2004; Muggeridge & Donà, 2006; A. Taylor, 2009). These researchers argue that the physical and temporal distance, the rapture created by the war, the dismantling of social circles and ties, the social and physical transformation of the place, and the post-war politics of belonging all make home never fully achieved even after 'return'. For example, Matos et al. (2022) found that those who revisited or returned home reported a constant reminder of the trauma, a realisation that the society has changed, a shattered sense of belonging, an out-of-place feeling, and a struggle to fit back in. Therefore, a 'return' can never be fully achieved for those who experienced conflicts. Um (2006) adds that the rupture created by the war and the steady march of time are irreversible. Loizos (1999) argues that this is because the temporality in forced movement often becomes a discontinuity and a loss; a loss of capital, entitlement and status; and a dramatic disconnection from persons, objects, and environments; a loss of home. Therefore, Kaminsky (1999) argues that people living in exile continue to experience the world through the lens of exile, even if the 'return' is possible. 'Return' could mean a new uprooting (Braakman & Schlenkhoff, 2007) and provoke alienation in one's homeland (Gerharz, 2010). A 'return' to the past is to realise that a full return, or repatriation, is impossible (Said, 2001); it is to realise that the memories have been stolen, "erased", and "swept away" (Kaminsky, 1999, p. 120). Boer (2015, p. 486) summarised the myth of 'return' so delicately: "Home is not only left behind in another place, but it has also been left behind in another time and is therefore experienced as a previous and irretrievable home". Therefore, the home before displacement becomes a previous home, "irrevocably lost both spatially and temporally" (Jansen & Löfving, 2007, p. 10). In other words, we can go back to the place, but we cannot go back in time to when we are home. Therefore, people's desire to 'return' could be better explained as the "myth of return" (Anwar, 1979).

Naficy (1999) argues that exile produces compensatory fantasies and longings and hopes to return, but this "frustrating elusiveness of return makes it magically potent" (p.3). Nevertheless, 'return' is still an essential feature and compass of exiled people's relationship with their homeland. Um (2006) provides a powerful explanation for this. Um argues that 'return' is an instinctual reaction to flight and displacement. It serves as an anchor for an otherwise rudderless life and could be pursued because of "the void carried into, and heightened, in exile;" (95). Um (2006) also argues that 'return' could be a way to resist, long-distance nationalism, a struggle for national self-determination, and a struggle against the peril of forgetting. Um (2006) believes nostalgia becomes a way of reclaiming history and identity amidst the

liminality of refugee and exile conditions. However, for some, the actual ‘return’ is the way to face the place and moment and renegotiate identity (Gerharz, 2010). Muggeridge & Donà (2006) argues that the first reconnection with home is a meeting between imagination and reality, marked by an awareness of the passing of time, that helps healing by providing an end to waiting and a measure of one’s progress (or lack of) in life. They further argue that on the first visit, forced migrants reexamine their refugee cycle, the myth of ‘return’ and the meaning of home.

However, not all exiled people have the same or even the desire to return. Jansen & Löfving (2007) argues that individual and collective experiences, as well as social, political, and economic contexts, can all play a role in shaping the desire to return. This extends beyond the desire to ’return’ and encompasses different elements of the relationship with homeland/place of origin. Joly (2002) differentiated between those who remain committed to a political project in the land of origin and those who do not. Kunz (1981) distinguishes between those who feel like they belong to their nation (but oppose its government), those who are ambivalent or bitter toward that nation, and those who ideologically distance themselves from their native land. Brown (2011) found considerable differences in the emotional expressions and attachment of people to their homeland between those who left before and after significant events that happened in their countries (e.g. Polish migrants who left post-war and post-accession). Furthermore, Brah's (1996) analysis shows a clearly different relationship between the first and subsequent generations, mediated by memories of and experiences of disruption and displacement.

Chapter 4: Methodology

"Last month, I learnt about heuristic research. I immediately felt inspired to apply this framework. I always explained my research to my friends and colleagues as a healing process in which I am trying to research myself and the things I am experiencing on a deep level. However, I never knew that there was a methodology that just does that. The more I read about it, the more I love this method, but the more I feel worried. I am worried about disclosing and exposing my personal experience. I am worried about opening the wounds, connecting with the trauma, and not being able to heal after this. I am worried that following this methodology goes against my efforts to move on. I am worried about returning to this dark room, the exile, and not finding my way out of it. However, have I ever been out of this dark room, or am I just denying it to convince myself that I am out of it? I have been in its darkness for eight years. I feel it almost every day; I have never exited this room. This time, I am not running away. I am not turning a blind eye. I am not ignoring my identity and feelings and who I am. I am part of the phenomenon, and I will dig deep into myself through this methodology either to find my way out of it or to familiarise myself with it to become the one in control".

Researcher Reflexivity Journal, 14 March 2022, Title: I am worried.

As highlighted in the introduction, this thesis has two main research questions. They are two personal questions that I have been struggling with for a long time. Questions about my belonging, identity, and relationship to my home country, Syria. Questions I am living every day through my research and lived experience. To unpack these questions, I employ a heuristic framework that extends beyond the methodology section to underpin my study. This chapter discusses the epistemological influences on my research, the various methodological frameworks I could use, and the choice of methodological framework. Additionally, the chapter discusses the research participants, selection process, data collection methods, and data analysis and interpretation strategies. It ends with the methodological limitations and ethics.

4.1 Epistemological Influences

Starting from the fundamental belief and paradigm that guide my thinking and actions and the worldview through which my knowledge is filtered (Guba, 1990; Kuhn, 2012), is the reality of exile a singular one, and the research of exile results in findings that are time- and context-free irrespective of variation in the social, cultural, or personal characteristics? Can exile be

understood through cause-effect investigations or research without the interference of our subjective interpretation in the research process? Can we research exile in a similar vine of the natural world that consists of laws that capture relations operating across all times and places? These questions are questions of ontology. To use Cohen, Manion, and Morrison's (2018) framing, is the social reality external to individuals imposing itself on their consciousness from without, or is it the product of individual consciousness? Is the social reality of an objective nature or the result of individual cognition? Is it a given 'out there' in the world, or does one's mind create it? Is there a social world that exists independently of the individual and that the researcher can observe, discover relationships, regularities, and causal explanations for, and which can be tested empirically and repeatedly under similar conditions?

This research departs from the positivistic and post-positivistic research paradigms, which align with modernity in thinking and understanding the social world by pursuing objective universal truth and laws. As Buch-Hansen & Nielsen (2020) argued, social sciences have failed to identify universal reality and social laws, and the reason is simple: the social world is not governed by such laws. Buch-Hansen & Nielsen (2020) further explain that the social world is not a closed system in which invariant event regularities occur but rather an open system containing patterns in the social world that vary from place to place and evolve. Nesfield-Cookson (1987) adds that understanding life in measurable terms rather than meanings and experiences excludes notions of choice, freedom, individuality and moral responsibility; therefore, positivism views the social world mechanistically and reductionist as a machine rather than a living organism. However, this is not to say that positivist research is invalid; instead, it is a paradigm that works in the natural world rather than social research.

Building on the previous understanding, this research adopts an interpretative worldview. It understands reality as multi-layered and complex, and the social world could have multiple interpretations and perspectives (L. Cohen et al., 2018). Furthermore, "unlike atoms, chemicals, and even most non-human forms of life, people actively interpret or make sense of their environment and of themselves (Hammersley, 2013, p. 26). In other words, they actively construct and reconstruct meanings through their daily interactions. They socially construct reality. Therefore, "they make and remake the social world through their patterns of interaction and interpretive processes, by which [they] assign meaning to activities, situations, events, gestures" (Leavy, 2017, p. 13). Hammersley (2013) adds that to understand the social world, we must draw upon our own social lived experience rather than seeking to achieve procedural

objectivity. We do this, Hammersley (2013) explains, when we draw upon our human capacity to understand our research participants through empathy, shared experience and culture. Therefore, this paradigm believes that social knowledge neither can nor should be entirely value-neutral (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020).

4.2 Various Methodological Possibilities

Meanings and experiences cannot be measured but understood. We can measure how many people had a particular experience, but we cannot measure the experience itself. As this research aims to understand the meaning of exile and how the relationship with home is shaped through the lens of exile, it follows a qualitative design. Qualitative methods help me unpack the meanings of the experience and build a depth of understanding of its dimensions (Leavy, 2020). It gives importance to people's subjective experiences, values the depth of their meaning-making processes (Leavy, 2017), and attends to participants' contextual conditions (Yin, 2016). Inspired by the interpretative paradigm, this qualitative research can follow several approaches to unpack the meaning of exile and its various related phenomena. Mainly, it could adopt a Narrative Inquiry (in particular autoethnography), Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, or Heuristic frameworks to unpack the exile phenomenon.

As someone who lived/is currently living in exile, I can embark on an autoethnographic journey (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) to unpack the exile phenomenon. I can conduct a self-as-subject thesis, follow a systematic method of rigorous self-reflection or reflexivity, and interpret the social phenomena (exile) and its wider cultural, social, and political dimensions by analysing my lived experience (Adams et al., 2017). By doing so, I can engage in an iterative internal exploration of the lived construct of the phenomenon and alternate between outer and inner investigation until the personal lived experience and social phenomenon become blurred (Throne, 2019). However, autoethnography centres on the researcher's experience. I want my lived experience to be an integral part of this thesis but not the centre. I want the centre to be my participants' stories and exile as a phenomenon. I can use other types of narrative enquiry, such as biographical studies, life history, or oral history, which focuses on collecting and telling stories of individuals who experience exile. However, my research is interested in understanding myself, my participants and the phenomena that I am living in rather than the stories of people and the chronological order of their lived experiences.

Another methodological framework I can adopt is the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I can engage in an inductive theory development of exile through systematically analysing participants' data and testing the theory against data. This could help me develop a deep understanding of exile grounded in participants' knowledge of the phenomena. However, the positivist paradigm's influence on grounded theory does not align with my interpretative paradigm. Grounded theory requires the participant to be detached from the phenomenon (West, 2001), which is something that not only does not reflect my personal circumstance (as someone living in exile) but also does not reflect my personal belief that being part of the phenomenon gives immense strength to interpret it. Also, this research does not intend to generate a grand theory of exile. Exile discourses thrive on detail, specificity and locality (Naficy, 1999); therefore, the claim to develop such a theory is doubtful.

Phenomenology (Husserl, 1970) is closely related to my interest and the nature of this research. Phenomenological studies provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon (exile) by exploring it with research participants who have experienced it (Creswell, 2014). It believes in the primacy of subjective consciousness to unpack social phenomena (L. Cohen et al., 2018), and profound learning results from it have the potential to cause "a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness" (Manen, 1990, p. 163). However, although not necessary, phenomenology encourages researchers "detachment" from the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). As someone living in exile since 2015, this phenomenon became ingrained in my mindset and behaviour. It is not like a lens I can put whenever I want and set aside/bracket whenever I want. My lived experience of exile operates as a framework for my interpretation; therefore, phenomenology does not fit my thesis perfectly.

The best methodological framework for my research is one that aims to unpack social phenomena, that embraces the fact the researcher has an intimate relationship with the social phenomenon, that allows me to use my personal lived experience as data and my subjectivity as an interpretative framework, and that encourages me to engage with other research participants not only to explore my blind spots but also to unpack the multiple facets of the phenomenon. More importantly, it is the one that allows me to dig deep into my inner self and heal from the traumatic experience of exile. Autoethnography, grounded theory, and mainstream phenomenology do not constitute the best framework for my research. In the subsequent section, I present the heuristic methodological framework/design, which constitutes a better framework to guide my research.

4.3 Heuristic Methodological Framework

4.3.1 Background

"If the mission of the scholar is to give the deepest meaning to human experiences, then heuristic inquiry provides a central resource to achieve this" (Bach, 2002, p. 100). Heuristic research involves exploring the subjective experience of a particular phenomenon. Sultan (2019) explained it as a personal journey to discovery that includes a systematic though flexible research framework that engages self-searching and reflexive self-dialoguing, honours the felt sense, and stresses relationality, intersubjectivity, and betweenness. Sultan (2019) further highlights that it is characterised by being exploratory, discovery-oriented, process- and content-focused, intuitive, introspective, reflexive, experiential, embodied, holistic, existential and humanistic. It requires engaging various dimensions of the "psyche such as sensing, perceiving, imagining, remembering, intuiting, feeling, thinking, and judging (Dilthey, 1977, p. 81)".

Heuristic Methodology was developed by Clark Moustakas (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; C. Moustakas, 1990; C. E. Mousakas, 1994), who applied it to his extensive Loneliness studies. Heuristic is a Greek concept that originated from the Greek word heuriskein, "meaning to discover or to find" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). According to Moustakas, heuristics as a methodological framework involve self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery to understand the nature and meaning of phenomena. Moustakas emphasised that the researcher must have had a direct and personal experience of the phenomenon being investigated. Therefore, heuristic research does not exclude the researcher from the study; instead, the self is present throughout the process. Moustakas further argued that the research questions and the methodology are inspired by the researcher's lived experience, inner awareness, and meaning. Therefore, heuristic research requires the researcher to fully inter themself and the phenomena with unwavering attention, interest, and focus and to search introspectively, meditatively, and reflectively into the phenomena' nature and meaning. Heuristic research demands the researcher's total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity to navigate this challenging and complicated journey and delve into the deepest corners of the researcher and participants' consciousness to understand the experience under investigation (Moustakas, 1990).

There are two versions of heuristic methodology developed through empirical work. Firstly, the one was developed mainly by Moustakas (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; C. Moustakas,

1990; C. E. Mousakas, 1994). This version employs a plurality of voices to unpack the many facets of the experience under investigation. Such research uses the lived experience of the researcher and research participants (also called co-researchers or research partners) as data for the research. However, the data collection starts with the researcher through a process of self-searching, which typically includes journaling. The second one is the heuristic self-search inquiry developed by Sela-Smith (2002). This method is closer to autobiography, where the researcher's lived experience is the sole data. In both versions, heuristic research engages with the accounts found in literature, art, wisdom traditions, and any manifestations of the social phenomenon under investigation (Mihalache, 2019; Sultan, 2019). In all subsequent sections, I will focus on the first form of heuristic methodology, which employs a plurality of voices and engages with research participants.

Heuristic research has its foundation in existential and humanistic philosophical foundations. Sultan (2019), Moustakas (1990), and Tudor (2022) provided an overview of the theories that inspired heuristic methodology. These include those advanced by Abraham Maslow self-actualisation research (1956, 1966, 1971), Jourard's investigations of self-disclosure (1968, 1971), Martin Buber explorations of dialogue and mutuality (1923/1970), Edmund Husserl writings on phenomenology (1900/2001), Michael Polanyi (1958, 1966, 1969) writings on tacit knowledge; Carl Rogers work on psychotherapy and humanistic psychology (1961, 1980, 1985) and Eugene Gendlin analysis of meaning of experiencing (1962). Therefore, heuristic research generally draws on existentialism, phenomenology, and humanistic and experiential psychology (Tudor, 2022). However, heuristics as a concept started way before Western sciences and philosophies. Al-Ghazali, a Sufi scholar who lived almost a thousand years ago, emphasised that epistemology is multi-layered, focusing on the need for different forms of knowledge- sensory, intellectual, mystical, and the use of various methodologies to reach them- empirical, rational, reported, divine revelation (Ghazzālī, 1999). He emphasised the importance of self-search in understanding the nature of the physical and divine world (Ghazzālī, 1999).

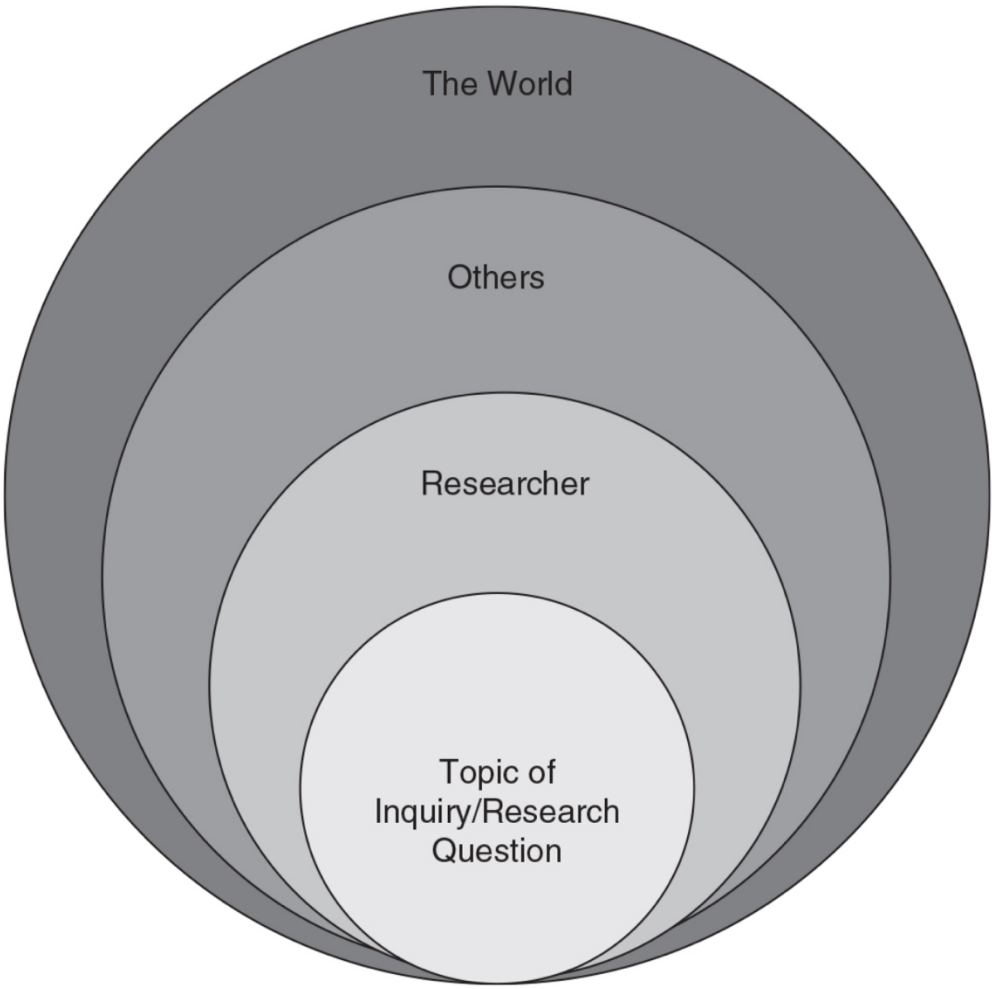
Sultan (2019) reviewed in depth the methodological philosophical foundations of Heuristic research. Ontologically**,** it aligns with the social constructivism/ interpretivism paradigm as it assumes reality as relative and is constructed based on one's contextual and subjective meaning-making of personal experience (Sultan, 2019). Epistemologically, it aims to cocreate knowledge and understanding of the essential nature of the phenomenon of inquiry through the intersubjective relationships maintained between the researcher and each research partner

(Sultan, 2019). Rhetorical speaking adopts a first-person and personalised approach to presenting the findings (Sultan, 2019).

Heuristic studies have been conducted in several disciplines, mainly in psychology. An example of such research is researching connectedness to nature (Joan Snyder, 1989; cited in Moustakas 1990), the experience of touch in blindness (Lusseyran, 1987; cited in Moustakas 1990), and the experience of being sensitive (McNally's, 1982; cited in Moustakas 1990). Further example of academic research that are accessible online is the experience of acculturation and identity reconstruction (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2014), the role of personal writing in the development of the self (Haertl, 2014), the experience of living with parental cancer (Kazlauskaite & Fife, 2021), the experience of becoming forgiving (Mihalache, 2012), the experience of having obsessive-compulsive disorder (Ozertugrul, 2017), the experience of isolation in alternative education (Pane & Salmon, 2009), the experience of having sexual abuse in childhood (Sela-Smith, 2002), the experience of autism (Wiorkowski, 2015), the experience of problematic eating (Shelburne et al., 2020), the experience intimate partner violence (Kumar & Casey, 2020), experience of grief (Alleyne, 2016), and the experience of shame (Hammond, 2016). Heuristic inquiry not only focuses on the personal experience of a phenomenon but transcends the specifics of personal experience to move toward more 'universally' shared essential meanings of the phenomenon under investigation (Sultan, 2019). Although the heuristic research focuses on a personal experience, the experience under investigation has social and perhaps universal significance (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, the topic under invitation, although very personal to the researcher, is a topic that has social and universal relevance (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The topic of inquiry/research question as a lens for being, relating, and knowing



Sultan (2019 p.11)

Because of its personal nature, using self-dialogue, self-disclosure, and self-search, heuristic research has a therapeutic value and the potential of healing and transformative (Etherington, 2004; Fox, 2018; Kumar & Casey, 2020; Ozertugrul, 2017; Swinton, 2017; Throne, 2019). Heuristic research requires connecting with the deepest levels of consciousness about the topic, which might be painful or traumatising for the researcher. However, these profound insights and heuristics experiences, no matter how uncomfortable they are, come with experiencing self-awareness, knowledge, and growth (Moustakas, 1990). The method does not permit the researcher to remain untouched; therefore, it contains the promise of growth (Bach, 2002).

4.3.2 Heuristic Concepts

C. Moustakas (1990) identified six important concepts for heuristic research: self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference. Below is an explanation of these concepts.

Self-dialogue is a communication with the self about the phenomena under investigation. C. Moustakas (1990) further explains that the researcher should dive into themselves to shape the preliminary awareness of their knowledge and experience of the phenomena. This is because, Moustakas argues, the initial steps to understanding the phenomena are one's own self-discoveries, awareness, and understanding. As the research progresses, this self-knowledge and awareness enable the researchers to develop the capacity to deepen and extend their understanding through the eyes and voices of others. It is not just a one-way reporting of feelings and thoughts, Sela-Smith (2002) emphasises. Self-dialogue is a highly reflective process of engaging and reengaging with the "perceptual, emotional, cognitive, and sensory experience of all facets of the phenomenon" (Sultan, 2019, p. 10), usually through a form of journaling or voice recording of self-dialogues that the researcher has with hr/himself about the phenomenon.

We know more than what we can tell, Polanyi (2009) argues. **Tacit knowing** represents our internal knowledge, but we cannot describe or explain it (Moustakas, 1990). Examples of this tacit knowledge are the skills of riding a bicycle, feeling our way in the dark, understanding the mood of others, painting, or playing music. Tacit knowledge is the "realm of the highly subliminally known, or the unknown known, dimensions of experience" (Sultan, 2019, p. 87). This knowledge is essential in discovering the phenomena, and curtailing this tacit knowledge in research leads to limited possibilities for knowing (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, the heuristic process seeks to elucidate this tacit knowledge (Bach, 2002).

There are a lot of phenomena that we understand deeply based on our lived experiences but are unable to describe what constitutes them consciously. Moustakas (1990) argues that **intuition** represents the bridge between implicit, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge, which is observable and describable. Moustakas (1990) further explains that tacit knowledge is mystical, and the intuitive process draws on clues and patterns to enable the research to imagine and characterise the reality, state of mind, or condition. Sultan (2019) adds that we access these

clues and patterns through our subjective and objective experience, observation, and perception. Hammond (2016) emphasises the value of intuition in heuristic research. She reflects on how she learned her whole life to override her intuition to adhere to family rules; however, her heuristic study has helped her regain her trust in intuition.

Indwelling is a process in which one intentionally looks inward to seek a deeper understanding of the human experience to comprehend it holistically (Sultan, 2019) through conscious and sustained attentiveness to one's thoughts, feelings, and wonderings (Bach, 2002). It involves tapping into the tacit, intuitive, and explicit dimensions of an experience by exploring every nuance of it (Sultan, 2019). Although deliberate, indwelling is not linear or logical, and the researcher "follows clues, dwells inside them and expands their meanings and associations until a fundamental insight is achieved" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24). This process enables the researcher "to tap into intuitive awakenings and tacit mysteries as well as the explicit dimensions which can be observed, reported, and described" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24).

Another concept that Moustakas identified is **focusing**, which has its roots in body psychotherapy (Bach, 2002; Sultan, 2019). In the research process, focusing refers to "an inner attention, a staying with, a sustained process of systematically contacting the more central meanings of an experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 25). It is like a meditative process where the researcher clears an inward space and enters a relaxed and respective state to enable them to "tap into thoughts and feelings that are essential to clarifying a question; getting a handle on the question; elucidating its constituents; making contact with core themes; and explicating the themes" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 25). Focusing differs from the previous concept, indwelling. While indwelling is a process of looking inward, focusing is a process that sustains this looking inward (indwelling) and clears inner distractions so that indwelling achieves its objectives.

Lastly, the heuristic requires the researchers to embrace their **internal frame of reference,** the medium or base for understanding the nature, meanings, and essences of the phenomena and human experience under investigation (Moustakas, 1990). This internal frame guides the heuristic research processes and concepts (Bach, 2002), catalysing discovery through "returning again and again, to seek within [myself] a deeper understanding of [my] perceptions, feelings, thoughts, decisions, and actions" (Sultan, 2019, p. 92).

4.3.3 Research Processes

C. Moustakas (1990) presented six phases that guide the unfolding investigation in heuristic research: initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis.

"Within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem or a question that represents a critical interest and area of search (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27)". In the **initial engagement** stage, the objective is to discover this intense interest in a topic that the researcher is passionate about and holds personal and social importance (Sela-Smith, 2002). Since my PhD started, I have had intense feelings about my exile. I deeply desired to unpack this topic, but I strongly resisted my intuition to study this topic, not knowing why. It became an existential need that I could not ignore anymore. No matter what I do, read, or research, I find myself returning to the topic of exile in one way or another. There was something inside of me that kept taking me towards this topic. I still remember my supervisor's advice early in my studies: that my PhD should be a healing process. Taking courage and inspiration from this advice, I started the initial engagement process with my deep interests through a self-dialogue to understand why I was running away from the topic of exile. This self-dialogue made me realise that I am avoiding studying exile for two main reasons: Firstly, I was afraid to enter the deepest corners of my subconscious and connect with the pain, and secondly, I wanted to stay ignorant about the exile conditions to maintain a false hope that I will for sure go back to my country one day. At the end of this self-dialogue, I concluded that living with a pain that I understand is better than living with a pain that I do not understand and that moving on is better than clinging to false hope. Therefore, I decided to study exile. This initial engagement stage also included indwelling to seek a deeper understanding of my personal experience and tacit knowledge of exile and its various elements through journaling my experience, feelings, and thoughts. I also used focusing and indwelling to access my tacit knowledge and shape my preliminary awareness and understanding of the topic, and I captured this understanding in my journal.

After the initial engagement and identifying the research question and topic, a process of **immersion** starts. Immersion is when the researcher "lives the [research] question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states. Everything in his or her life becomes crystallised around the question" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 25). This stage involves moving entirely into the topic to acquire the depth and breadth of knowledge about the phenomena (Bach, 2002). In my

research, immersion happened after I identified the research topic. I started exploring the literature around exile, attending cultural events, reading pottery on exile, watching documentaries, and proactively conversing with other exiles. I embraced exile and relived it constantly. Immersion also happened in the data collection, preparation, and analysis stage after I collected my data (subsequent sections will discuss the data collection and analysis process in depth). I used self-dialogue and journaling after each intense immersion to make sense of the data. These self-dialogues usually start with questions such as "What have you learnt, Oudai, from this?" or " Can you relate, Oudai, to this experience?". I engage with myself in these dialogues to relate to the data and challenge and expand my understanding. I also used focusing and indwelling, which usually happen by disconnecting completely from any source of distraction for a day (emails, social media, phones, people) to make sense of this data and capture my thoughts and feelings in my journals.

After the immersion comes the **incubation stage**. In this stage, the researcher withdraws from the intense focus on the research question. This stage allows the "seed that has been planted to undergo silent nourishment, support, and care to produce a creative awareness of some dimension of a phenomenon or a creative integration of its parts or qualities" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). Even though deliberately disengaged from the topic, the tacit dimension "is at work, and understanding and growth are taking place beneath the level of [my] conscious awareness" of the phenomenon (Sultan, 2019, p. 96). After each immersion, I took various opportunities to disconnect from my research to allow learning incubation. My immersion included spending breaks with my son, trips to Australia, and hiking in Scotland and Switzerland.

In this heuristic research, after immersion and incubation, there is a process of **illumination** that should occur naturally at a certain point when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition (Moustakas, 1990). It is like a breakthrough into the researcher's conscious awareness of the qualities and themes inherent in the research question and phenomena under investigation (Moustakas, 1990). For me, this process of illumination was most evident in the interviewing process, while listening to the recordings, and while analysing the data. I felt the illumination when I felt my knowledge of the subject was hugely enhanced, and in a lot of time, I felt deeply inspired, relived, and touched by data.

When illumination happens, and the researcher gains a solid understanding of the themes, qualities, and components of the topic under investigation, they enter a process of **explication**

to explain the various layers of meaning behind the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). The outcome of the explication phase is organising, synthesising and presenting the research findings in two parts:

1. A portrait of each participant. In this step, I constructed an individual depiction of exile that retains participants' language and includes examples drawn from their experience of the phenomenon. That adds up to 12 individual portraits presented in chapter six.
2. A composite depiction of the phenomena and experience. By merging the individual portraits, I put together the core qualities and themes of the experience of exile in one big picture. This is presented in chapters seven and eight.

Creative synthesis is the final phase of heuristic research. In this phase, the researcher enters with a thorough understanding of the major constituents, qualities, and themes of the phenomena and puts together " an original integration of the material that reflects the researcher's intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of meanings and essences of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1990, p. 50). This creative synthesis could be a poem, story, drawing, painting, etc. However, creative synthesis "goes beyond distillation of themes and patterns. It is not a summary or recapitulation. In synthesis, the searcher is challenged to generate a new reality, a new monolithic significance that embodies the essence of the heuristic truth" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 50). In my research, I put together my creative synthesis at the end of the findings in chapters seven and eight.

The above phases are not linear, and the researcher moved between them constantly until the experience under investigation was revealed. In these phases, the researcher uses the tools/concepts mentioned earlier (self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference) as necessary.

4.3.4 The Role of Subjectivity in Heuristic Research

Positivist arguments depict subjectivity as an unscientific and dangerous concept that renders research findings inaccurate, invalid, and not rigorous, and therefore, research/er should be 'objective' and value-free. I would like to engage with two crucial points about objectivity in this section: possibility and desirability.

First is objectivity, which is usually depicted on the opposite pole of subjectivity, ever possible? How can we make meaning of phenomena and experiences without counting on our own personal knowledge and subjective interpretations? How can we not rely on our senses when we make observations? How can we not rely on our judgment when we make inferences and come to a conclusion? Is it possible to not let our values, biography, and assumptions interfere in the interpretation process? Arguably, the principle of objectivity is more feasible in natural science; however, the social world is governed differently, as discussed in section 4.1 above.

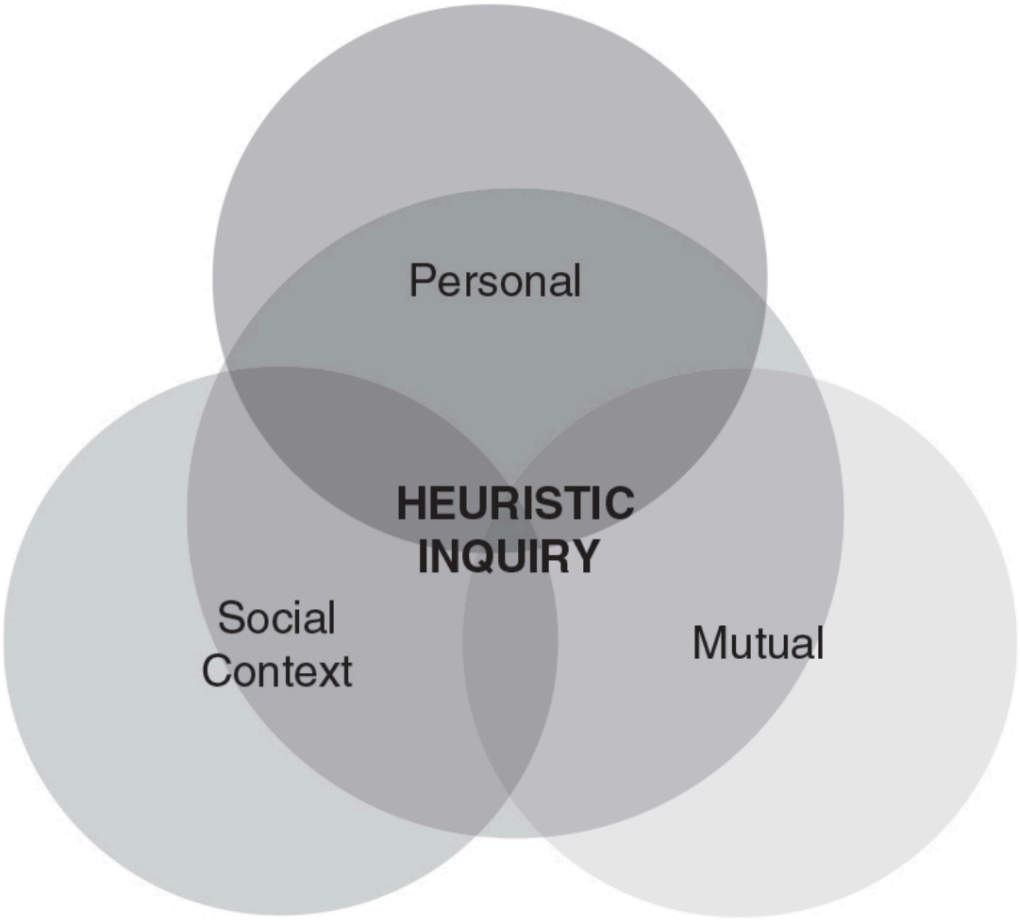
Secondly, is our subjectivity, formed by our lived experience, something undesirable? Some prominent psychologists, such as Maslow (1969), asserted that "there is no substitute for experience, none at all. All the other paraphernalia of communication and of knowledge—words, labels, concepts, symbols, theories, formulas, sciences—all are useful only because people already knew them experientially" (pp. 45–46). Moustakas, 1990 (p. 15) adds that "the deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one's senses, perceptions, beliefs, and judgments". This is because our values, beliefs, and lived experiences constitute epistemological and ontological strengths that act as normative and moral compasses and give true meaning to who we are (Sultan, 2019). Our subjectivity, argues Throne (2019), could serve as a vehicle to uncover previously unknown findings and better understand the dynamic of the self, society, culture, and world.

In heuristic methodology, subjectivity (inner self), when embedded within a systematic and empirical research method, is considered a powerful concept with an available wealth of unknowns waiting to be explored (Throne, 2019). Heuristic enquiry does not privilege the form of subjectivity overriding the social, societal and institutional social facts independent of myself and my participants (L. Cohen et al., 2018). Instead, heuristic enquiry embraces the form of critical subjectivity that does not "suppress our primary subjective experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and swept along by it; rather, we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process" (Reason, 1988, p. 12). Additionally, heuristic research is not intended to be a self-centred and self-indulgent process that denies the existence of the world around us and its impact on how we make sense of experience (Sultan, 2019). Therefore, the heuristic researcher engages with other research participants and the accounts in the literature to understand the phenomena holistically. The intersection of personal experience, mutual experience with participants, and the social world is at the heart of the heuristic enquiry (figure 3 below). However, the self/lived experience and insights have an

essential rather than marginal role in the process (Sultan, 2019), acting as a frame of reference for co-creating novel understandings of the living experience that is being explored (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, heuristic researchers bring their authentic embodied self into the research process and co-construct knowledge with research participants (Sultan, 2019). They do not bracket themselves out of the research studies but instead into the inquiry process (Sultan, 2019).

Figure 3

Heuristic inquiry lies at the intersection of the personal, mutual, and social context



Sultan (2019, p. 28)

Subjectivity can lead to errors stemming from the researcher's social or individual characteristics and their influence on the research process (Hammersley, 2010). However, as stated by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), it is unnecessary, undesirable, and naive to assume that the researcher can stand out completely from their social and individual conditions. The task, then, is to "protect the research from negative effects of subjectivity" (Hammersley, 2010, p. 101). To do so, I am checking my findings with my research participants to ensure my

subjective interpretation of the phenomenon accurately depicts it. I am also engaging in a deep heuristic process of reflection and examination of self, not to restrict my subjectivity and enclose myself but to access consciousness to gain a broader perspective on the experienced phenomenon with an intentional lens (Brisola & Cury, 2016).

4.4 Research Participants

Although heuristic research can be conducted with only one person (the researcher) in theory, including research participants and the depictions of the experiences of others "achieve richer, deeper, more profound, and more varied meaning" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47). Furthermore, this increases the rigour of the research through observation of and dialogue with self and others (Moustakas, 1990).

Heuristic research usually applies a purposive sample to include people who have experienced the phenomenon being explored (Sultan, 2019). Therefore, a purposive sample was my primary strategy, which helped find participants likely to produce the most relevant and plentiful data (Yin, 2016). This approach maximises the utility of information from small samples (Brinkmann, 2013). I also employed snowball sampling, where each participant leads to another participant via referral (Adler & Clark, 2011; Patton, 2015).

Heuristic research is a personal journey to discovery. I want to understand myself and the phenomenon I am experiencing by understanding others who have experienced some facets of the phenomenon. Therefore, my participants and I need to have things in common. I need to relate to them; they need to relate to me, and we all need to relate to the phenomena under investigation. As someone trying to understand exile and the potential role of exiled academics in the future of Syria, I have four criteria for selecting my research participants.

Firstly, they need to be or feel **Syrians**. I am defining Syrians here in broader terms to include those who lived their whole life in Syria but do not necessarily hold citizenship (e.g. Palestinian Syrians). There are also Syrians who might not have lived in Syria for some reason (e.g. first-generation migrants) but still feel deeply Syrians. Applying the border definition of Syrians fits my ethics and is relevant to my research. I am trying to understand exile in the Syrian context and unpack how exile shapes Syrians relationship with Syria. Any person with a strong homeland relationship with Syria shares with me some emotions, thoughts, experiences, values, and identities that help me understand exile.

Secondly, participants need to be or feel **exiled**, whatever that means to them. My research must help me understand exile and shed light on this phenomenon. Therefore, anyone who does not feel exile or experience it might not provide insights into this phenomenon. Thirdly, they need to be **academics** who work at HE institutions. This excludes current PhD candidates who might be unsure about their future profession. My research is interested in understanding exile (my first research question) and my potential role in the future of Syria and HE development (second research question). Exiled people come from all walks of life, and their potential role in the future of their country varies immensely based on their profession. As someone who works in academia and considers academia to be my future profession (either in Syria if I go back or anywhere else), I am interested in understanding the potential role of academics. Focusing on academics also brings an essential focus to my research. The fourth criterion is they are based in the **UK**. This also brings further focus to my research and makes their exile experience more similar to mine in that we all sought a home in the UK. Together with my participants, I will depict a picture of what exile means, the dilemmas facing us, how our belonging to our homeland is changing, and our potential role in Syria's future.

Several prominent qualitative researchers specify that researchers should interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what is needed until the point of redundancy (Brinkmann, 2013; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Galletta, 2013; Leavy, 2017; Yin, 2016). Moustakas (1990) advises interviewing between 10 and 15 people in heuristic research. In this research, I reached out to 23 academics in the UK, of whom 15 have agreed to participate in the research. After engaging in dialogues with the 15 academics, I found that only 12 met the criteria mentioned earlier. Therefore, the data of the three participants have not been included in the analysis. Table 2 below provides more details on my research participants, including gender, discipline, age, academic experience, and length of exile.

Table 2: Research Participants

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Left Syria**	**Reasons cannot go back**	**Years living in the UK by 2021**	**taught/ Syrian university**	**Experience in academia**

Sinan	Male	After the conflict	Political	9 years	No	7 years
Matar	Male	Before the conflict	Political	7 years	No	12 years
Bassam	Male	After the conflict	Political	10 years	No	10 years
Lubna	Female	Before the conflict	Political	5 Years	No	20 years
Ahmad	Male	After the conflict	Political	9 years	Yes	5 years
Ruba	Female	After the conflict	Legal	7 years	Yes	17 years
Sami	Male	After the conflict	Legal	7 years	Yes	16 years
Mirna	Female	Just before the conflict	Legal	17 years	Yes	10 years
Kamel	Male	Just before the conflict	Political	10 years	No	10 years
Qasem	Male	After the conflict	Political	10 years	Yes	12 years
Rima	Female	Just before the conflict	Political	12 years	No	7 years
Khatar	Male	After the conflict	Political	12 years	Yes	5 Years

In brief, most participants left Syria after the conflict or just before it started. The main reason why they left Syria is the conflict and its ramifications. However, the reason why they cannot go back is different. The majority cannot go back for political reasons, whereas three people cannot go back for legal purposes. This is because, as part of their scholarship agreement, these people have contracts with the government to spend a certain duration in Syria teaching at universities. By leaving Syria or not coming back when requested, these people found themselves facing legal and financial barriers. Before engaging with my participants, I collected demographic and personal data from participants through an online form to understand my participants better and prepare myself for engaging with them (Appendix A).

4.5 Data Collection Methods

Heuristic is a qualitative method that obtains qualitative depictions of the experience (Moustakas, 1990). This could be fulfilled through "examples, narrative descriptions, dialogues, stories, poems, artwork, journals and diaries, autobiographical logs, and other personal documents" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 39) from both the researcher and research partners. Interviews are the most common data collection method in heuristic research, and Patton (2002) suggested three interview approaches that fit heuristic data collection: informal conversational interview (naturally emergent dialogue about the topic), general interview guide (with a set of topics to explore), and semi-structured interview (with a clear set of questions). However, Moustakas (1990) emphasises the importance of having the interviews as dialogues, which corresponds with the informal conversational interview. Generally speaking, "we know the world through the stories that are told about it" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 641) and "to hear someone's story is to enter a world of thought, action, emotion, and circumstance through another's perspective" (Mears, 2009, p. 14). Interviews invite participants to tell stories about experiences, relate to their memories, and offer reflections and opinions (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). This method allows us to access people's stories to broaden our understanding of the topic while honouring individuals' authority over their own life experiences (Mears, 2009).

In heuristic research, data collection moves beyond just gathering information. The researchers collect data by immersing themselves in social phenomena through self-dialogue and dialogue with individuals who share their interests (Sultan, 2019). In my research, I used three sources of data: my self-dialogue/reflexivity journals, interviews/dialogues with participants, and participants' journals, diaries, blogs, podcasts, and social media posts. My self-dialogue/reflexivity journals contained six dialogues with myself related to my research questions and 23 paragraphs of reflection on various elements related to exile. As for interviews, I engaged three times with each academic, making the total number of interviews/dialogues I had with them 36. The first encounter was an interview (with a general guide) rather than a dialogue. I felt the need to listen rather than contribute to the discussion, so I focused solely on the participants' experience. I entered the interview with a set of topics rather than a clear set of questions (Appendix B) that covered the broad line of inquiry I undertook. I treated this protocol more like a mental framework than a written, structured document. This helped me to retain an open mind to capture participants' perspectives and to

attend to emerging and unexpected information while reminding me of the original topic and questions (Yin, 2016). That also helped me to maintain eye contact and human connection and keep the conversation natural rather than mechanical (Brinkmann, 2013; Yin, 2016). In the second engagement with participants, the interviews became dialogues where my participants and I unpacked specific themes and topics that had emerged from the first interview. I brought my perspective and theirs into a conversation and further unpacked the exile themes. In the third encounter with participants, I engaged with them again in a dialogue and returned to specific themes I felt I was still not fully understanding. As for the participants' dairy, participants shared three blogs, a 50-minute podcast, three social media posts, and one letter written in a diary. These documents supplemented the interview data.

Two interviews took place in person; however, the majority of the interviews took place online during COVID-19. There is growing support in the literature for online interviewing for its accessibly, affordability, convenience, and flexibility (e.g. ArcRubald et al., 2019; Irani, 2019; Janghorban et al., 2014; Leavy, 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021). However, online interviewing is not without challenges. One of the key criticisms and limitations of online interviewing is its exclusory nature for those who do not have access to the internet and laptops and those who are not confident with using technology (Janghorban et al., 2014; Leavy, 2020; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). I believe the impact of this challenge is minimal/absent in my research as I am engaging with academics who use technology and video conferencing very confidentially. Another critical challenge in online interviewing is that it affects the researchers' ability to build rapport and capture non-verbal cues, which could impact the quality and depth of the data generated, the interpretation of data, and the reflexivity of both the participants and I (Leavy, 2020; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). To mitigate the impact of this, I had phone calls with each participant before interviewing them to get to know them, build trust, understand their background, and share with them my background.

The first interview ranged between 60-90 minutes, the second dialogue between 30-60 minutes, and the third dialogue for around 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded after obtaining the participants' consent, fully transcribed, and translated to English for reporting later. However, these dialogues are "not ruled by the clock but by the inner experiential time" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 38). Therefore, these dialogues took place several times with each academic, and their length was flexible.

Several guiding points underpinned my interviews/dialogues. Moustakas (1990) emphasised that dialogues should involve cooperation and reciprocity where the participants and I will open up to each other, fully express ourselves, and explicate the phenomenon being investigated together. Sultan (2019) highlighted the importance of having a balanced sense of engagement with research participants by following an embodied relational interviewing approach where thoughts, emotions, sensations, intuition, memories, and perceptions play a part in interviewing, "laying the foundation for a holistic, relational experience that honours the experiences of all who are involved" (Sultan, 2019, p. 125). I also adopted the person-centred approaches and micro-skills (Rogers, 1972) in dialoguing by implementing active listening, genuineness, empathy, congruence, unconditional positive regard, acceptance, focus, appropriate self-disclosure, empowerment, paraphrasing, summarising, and reflection of feeling and meaning.

4.6 Data Analysis and Interpretation

As mentioned earlier in the research process section, there is a phase of explication that results in organising, synthesising and presenting the research findings as individual portraits of each participant and as a composite depiction of the phenomena and experience. This is then followed by the phase of writing a creative synthesis for the research findings that integrate my understanding of the phenomenon's significant constituents, qualities, and themes.

Analyses and interpretations occurred to reach my research findings (the individual portraits, composite depiction, and creative synthesis). To guide my analysis, I followed the steps discussed below by Moustakas (2014). However, I modified them to fit my research process. In particular, I came up with the first step as I found it helpful and merged some of the steps. I also employed the techniques (immersion, incubation, and illumination) and concepts/practices (self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference) at the core of heuristic research. These concepts and practices have guided the whole research process; however, below is an explanation of how I implemented them, particularly in the data analysis:

1. **Preparation**: I usually start with self-dialogue. For each research question I have, and before I ask my interview questions to my participants, I begin with a self-dialogue. In

other words, I ask myself the questions and engage in a dialogue about them. This helped me dive into my understanding of my knowledge and experience of the phenomena to shape my preliminary awareness of the topic. This enabled me to develop my capacity to extend my understanding of the topic through the eyes and voices of my participants later in the interview and interpretation process.

2. **Data Organisation**: after I collected data from each participant, I transcribed the data and gathered all data collected from one participant (transcripts, blogs, social media posts). I immersed myself in the material in timeless immersion. I comprehended the individual participant's experience as a whole and its details. I regularly set the data aside for a while to allow incubation and return to the data with fresh energy and perspective. A reflexivity process usually accompanies this immersion-incubation process. This "dance between immersion-incubation-reflexivity" (Sultan, 2019, p. 28) and going back and forth between my self-dialogue data and participants' data gives me access to the subjective and objective perspectives on the data.

3. **Explication**: After I had a solid understanding of the themes, qualities, and components of the topic under investigation, I entered a process of explication to explain the various layers of meaning behind the phenomenon. I examined, analysed and interpreted all knowledge obtained from myself (journals), co-researchers (interviews, diaries, social media posts), and any other sources to understand the various facets of meanings of the phenomenon. I added the different angles, textures and features to the topic under investigation and refined/corrected my previous understanding of it (Moustakas, 1990).

   What aided me in this stage was using Atlas.ti as a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software and coding the data using in vivo, descriptive, and analytical codes, each aimed to summarise or capture the essence of that segment of data (Saldaña, 2009). From coding, I moved to categorising and theming and started grouping similar or seemingly related codes to understand the more significant meaning behind a code or category (Saldaña, 2014). During this stage, I wrote analytical journals to capture the thinking, learning, ideas, impressions, and emerging understandings generated during the analysis stages. I wrote descriptions, summaries, and quotes about how codes, categories, and themes relate to each other and how theories or literature relate to codes or themes (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011).

In the explication stage, I presented my findings in two parts:

- **Individual portraits:** I reviewed the individual material again, took notes, and identified the qualities and themes manifested in the data. Based on this, I constructed an individual depiction of the experience. I returned to the individual data again to ensure the individual portrait reflected the individual experience and revised it until it accurately reflected the participant's experience. I repeated this step to the 12 participants so that an individual depiction of each participant's experience of the phenomenon had been constructed.

- **Composite depiction:** I gathered all individual depictions and immersed myself in the data, with intervals of rest (incubations), until the qualities and themes of the exile experience were thoroughly understood. At that point, I constructed a composite depiction representing the common qualities and themes inherent to the exile experience as viewed by my research participants and me.

4. **Creative synthesis:** I ended my analysis by presenting my creative synthesis of the experience of exile. In this innovative synthesis, I brought my tacit intuitive awareness, the knowledge incubating over the years of the PhD, my memories, feelings, passion, and pain. I bring them all to tell a story about those who are exiled.

During data analysis, I often felt stuck in the data, struggling to make sense of my experience and the participants' experience. Indwelling and focusing have helped me find my way out. I practised indwelling and focusing in several ways, mainly meditation and hyper-focusing. For example, I am stuck in understanding why some participants feel a certain way while others feel the opposite. I meditate to clear my mind and hyper-focused on the point I am stuck with until my intuition makes me come up with several explanations. I immersed myself in the data and literature again to understand my explanations. I later discuss my explanations with my participants in the subsequent dialogue with them. During this research process, I have experienced illumination constantly, but mainly during/after dialogues. I describe illumination when I feel that immense joy and inspiration that I have finally understood something that has

been puzzling me for years or something that I have never thought of before but is so relevant to my personal story. It is usually accompanied by me saying/feeling that "this makes perfect sense", "I finally understand why I am feeling x", or "All of these years I was experiencing x and never thought of this before". It feels like I have connected with my tacit knowledge and understood something profound about myself and the phenomenon I am researching.

Some researchers advise against using coding or software in heuristic research (e.g. Sultan 2019) as they fear this might make the heuristic process mechanic rather than intuitive, imaginative, and creative. However, I felt that analysing more than 150 pages of data (interview transcripts, self-dialogues, personal journals, participants' documents) requires a system to help me organise data into themes.

4.7 Research Rigor

Quality in social research is hotly debated (Brinkmann, 2013). Some researchers, like Mears (2009), discuss the quality of qualitative research using traditional positivism criteria (validity, reliability, replicability, objectivity, and utility). Others argue about the quality of qualitative research using different criteria. Brinkmann (2013), for example, argues that the quality in social science comes from "epistemic virtues" (quality of analysis), "ethical virtues" (the ethics followed across the research), and aesthetic virtues (how people's voices and findings are presented). Yin (2016) argues that quality in qualitative research comes from transparency (in every step of the study), methodic-ness (following rigid procedures), and adherence to evidence. Leavy (2017) outlines seven criteria for quality in the social sciences: explicitness, thoroughness, congruence, validity/credibility/trustworthiness, triangulation, craft, vividness, and transferability. However, as Miller suggests, "it is overly simplistic—indeed inaccurate—to describe global qualitative criteria" (Given, 2008, p. 910).

In my research, I deal with the above concepts individually with an open mind, aiming to achieve what aligns with heuristic research as a methodology and reject what does not. The concept of validity in heuristic research is a meaning question whether:

> "the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others presents comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience…This judgment is made

by the primary researcher, who is the only person in the investigation who has undergone the heuristic inquiry from the beginning formulation of the question through phases of incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis not only with himself or herself but with each and every co-researcher ” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32).

To solidify the validity of my findings, I asked my participants to verify the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the individual and composite depiction of the experience. I received feedback that helped me to develop my findings to reflect further on the participants' experience.

The term reliability refers to the trustworthiness of data (Mears, 2009), and the question of reliability in qualitative research rests on the question of the authority of the narrators (Seidman, 2019). In this situation, language is valued as representing reality (Yin, 2016). Therefore, the words of my participants and I, who have lived experience, are the most reliable representation of reality. As for objectivity, which refers to the lack of research bias (Mears, 2009), qualitative research, and heuristic research in particular, does not claim to be objective. This point is discussed in depth regarding the role of subjectivity in section 4.3.4.

4.8 Methodology Limitations and Challenges

Heuristic research is not without limitations and challenges. Djuraskovic and Arthur (2014), when conducting heuristic research on the experience of acculturation and identity reconstruction, experienced several challenges. They found that the procedure of heuristic enquiry is characterised by little or no control or restraints, which could lead to undeveloped research. To avoid this, I kept on track by always consulting with my supervisor and abiding by the PhD structure. Using these tools and methods helped bring more structure to my data analysis.

Another challenge Djuraskovic and Arthur (2014) found was the researcher's distraction during the interviewing process. Since the researcher is part of the dialogue, this impacts the listening ability of the researcher and their focus on the participants’ internal frame of reference. This is because the researcher is absorbed by the dialogue and distracted by their thoughts and internal frame of reference. As a result, the researcher might find it hard not to overstep the participants' boundaries and “possibly contaminate their stories with my own experience” (p 1583). I mitigated this impact by interviewing my participants first with no interruption. The second

engagement with my participant was a dialogue, and I had to discipline myself to listen genuinely to the participants and not interrupt them. Also, recording the session and listening to them repeatedly helped capture different dimensions of the experience being investigated, which I did not capture during the dialogue.

A third challenge Djuraskovic and Arthur (2014) is related to the concept of validity. As mentioned earlier, validity in heuristic research depends on the researcher's ability to depict the meanings and essences of the experience accurately. This requires numerous times validating the findings with the participants, which requires extra effort and time, as well as the ability to manage the tension that might result from the different meanings of the experience.

Fourthly, Djuraskovic and Arthur (2014) believed heuristic research potentially increases the researcher's bias as it places importance on the researcher's subjective experience of the phenomenon. This is because the researcher has a direct experience of the phenomenon, which may influence the study and interpretation of the findings. Mihalache (2019) put this as privileging the researcher's personal experience, which could become "a minimizing lens focused on self to the detriment of others" (p152). Heuristic research indeed privileges the researcher's personal experience. The researcher's experience of the phenomena could be an engine for better understating and depicting the phenomenon; however, this personal experience could also create blind spots. It might make us hear only if it resonates with us. To mitigate this, I counted on reflexivity to help me avoid reducing the data to just what matches my experience and to seek confirmation and validation from my participants on the final depiction of their individual experience and the phenomenon I am studying. In my analysis, I ensured that I included all data about the phenomenon and not just what I think about it. My participants often shared things I could not relate to; nevertheless, I included their perspectives when depicting the phenomenon.

Mihalache (2019) added another challenge to conducting heuristic research: the discomfort with personal disclosure and self-exposure. This is indeed true. At the start of the methodology chapter, I shared my reflections from my journal about how worried I was about conducting this journey. However, I sought courage in the words of my supervisor, who always wanted my PhD to be a healing journey. I sought courage in the words of Ivana Diuraskovic when she wrote in her heuristic research that "if somebody asked me if I would use the heuristic

methodology in my research again, my answer would be, Yes, in a heartbeat." (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2014, p. 1585).

4.9 Research Ethics

This research adheres to the ethical guidelines of the Faculty of Education, the University of Cambridge, and other institutions such as BIRA (2018). However, research ethics goes well beyond the ethics as institutionalised in university forms. As Cremin et al. argue, "the tidy checklists for safety and risk mitigation do not adequately address the complex affective and socio-political struggles permeating research, and the bodies of researchers, in these settings" (2021, p.1). There are a lot of other critical ethical questions not listed in the institutionalised research code of ethics. There is the question of situated ethics within the local context that is not captured in ethical universalism (Simons & Usher, 2000). There is the question of how I can frame my engagement with participants through the ethics of care and stand in solidarity with them (Cremin et al., 2021). There is the important question of reciprocity and providing something useful back to participants after interviewing them and not only serving my research interests (Seidman, 2019). There is the question of "macro ethics", specifically ethics concerning the value of interview-produced knowledge in a larger social context (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). There is the question of what data will be included/excluded in my analysis (Yin, 2016) and how I select the data. Lastly, in a heuristic research like this, where I am discussing topics that could trigger an already existing trauma, there is the question of harm and whether I am being selfish to trigger their traumas to understand myself and heal from my trauma. I paid attention to all of these issues equally and not only focused on institutional ethics.

Regarding reciprocity, I respected my participants' time by striving to provide them with a valuable outcome. In addition to making my research accessible and sharing my findings, I dedicated part of my time to supporting them. I also worked for two years on organising a project that benefited all of them. I have decided not to mention more details about the project to maintain participants' confidentiality.

For the question of harm, I felt the best I could do was be honest and sensitive. Before the interviews, I made sure to inform my participants that the conversation we would have might be triggering for some and that if they felt discomfort, they could ask to skip any question or stop the interview altogether. I also was very considerate and sensitive to what questions I was

asking, how I was asking them, and when I was asking them. I was very emotionally attuned to their feelings during the interview. If I felt the participant started feeling triggered, I would either stop digging into the question or move to a lighter question. I know I cannot prevent my participants from feeling triggered, but I have strived to respond to their emotions and feelings.

I built trust with participants and developed rapport by demonstrating an ethic of honesty, integrity, and care and using non-judgmental and non-denigrating language. While building strong relationships with participants, I attend to relational ethics. I set appropriate expectations and healthy boundaries through the informed consent form, side conversations, and frequent participant interactions. However, I paid particular attention to the local Syrian ethics. As a person from the Syrian culture, I was attuned to what is right and wrong in my culture. I was responsive to the Syrian ethics as long as they did not clash with the institutional ethics. I did not recall any incident where the local/Syrian ethics clashed with the institutional ethics.

Although my participants are not residing in an oppressive context, they come from a context where there is an authoritarian, oppressive regime that punishes, arrests and tortures those who oppose it. Furthermore, they have family in Syria. Therefore, the issue of confidentiality is crucial in my participants' context. To protect my participants, I ensured that they were fully aware of the purpose and scope of my research and that they could withdraw at any time. I shared a consent form with them and offered participants the opportunity to discuss the study and the consent form before signing to ensure free and informed consent. To protect my participant identity, I anonymised their names in my findings and replaced participants with codes in all data collected and stored. I did not mention any information that could be traced to them, such as their university, city, discipline, and disability. The only personal information revealed is their gender. I saved their data in a secure place protected with a strong password.

Chapter 5: Individual Depictions

In this chapter, I introduce my research findings by constructing an individual depiction of exile from the 12 participants. This individual depiction will introduce my participants and provide insights into what exile means to them, their potential role in the future of Syria, their motivation to contribute to Syria, and the barriers they face when engaging with Syria.

Lubna

"*Syria is a wound, tragedy, and an idea" and "My relationship with Syria is emotional and troubled".*

Lubna is "a mother, a social scientist, an A-national and identity-critical" person whose primary concern is to "bring justice and solidarity to those who are oppressed, whoever and wherever". She has lived in the UK for five years and has around 20 years of experience in academia. She spent her childhood and "one of the happiest times of her life" in Syria until she was 18 when she travelled to study for her undergraduate studies in the [Country Name]. She visited Syria constantly and frequently until 2011, when the "revolution" started, after which she has not yet been able to return. Her political orientation and writings make her live in exile.

Lubna lives in exile because she misses her home city "terribly", and she cannot go back due to "fear of persecution". She is deprived of her homeland for reasons beyond herself. Her relationship with Syria is "troubled". She had "beautiful memories" and a "happy childhood" in Syria. She "felt safe there, and Syria was her world". But now, Syria is a "wound, a tragedy, and an idea". She has a "strong emotional connection" with Syria or, more accurately, with the "idea of Syria/home". She misses Syria very much and feels "plenty of love, empathy, and responsibility" towards Syria and the "suffering" of its people but also feels "hurt by a sense of injustice and traumatised" because of exile and the tragic events taking place in the country. She does not feel that she belongs to Syria (or any other place) as a nation because she is an anti-national person who is very critical of nation-states and national identity politics.

Lubna is willing to support students in Syria through teaching and curriculum development because she "cares for them", desires to "see Syria better", and has a strong "emotional connection" to and "love" for Syria. However, she feels she cannot engage with teachers or academic institutions because she "fears" them hurting her and fears her mental health will

deteriorate. Furthermore, the “corruption” and “unprofessionalism” in the sector limit her ability to engage with education development in Syria.

For Lubna, home is “where my family, friends/community, and safety are”. However, on “some level, home will always be Syria”.

Sinan

“Syria is my first home country”, and “My relationship with Syria is becoming a memories relationship”.

Sinan is a “Syrian academic” living in the UK for ten years. He was born in Syria and lived there until 2012. He studied for his master's in the [country name] in 2007 and then returned to Syria in 2010; however, he had to leave for the UK when the war intensified in 2012. Since then, he has been settled in the UK and had his parents move to the UK to join him.

Sinan feels exiled because the reason why he is in the UK is “forced upon” him, and he cannot go back or visit Syria. For him, exile includes a “feeling of alienation”, the absence of friends and family, and a deep “longing for home, friends and family”. However, being a collective phenomenon in the Syrian context makes him feel that he “is not alone living this forced migration”. Furthermore, rebuilding his life, including having his family around him, building social circles, and progressing professionally, makes his exile feelings “less intense”.

Sinan’s relationship with Syria was a “troubled relationship” at a certain point. Syria is his “homeland” where he had all his “childhood memories”. He feels “indebted to Syria”, but Syria caused him “trauma, anxiety and depression”. He has “mixed feelings” towards Syria, both the love, sadness and anger that he cannot visit or see his old friends. However, Sinan now feels that he has come to terms with the fact that Syria is “in the past” and that he might never visit the country. As time goes by, his relationship with Syria is weakening, both emotionally and practically. His relationship with Syria today is based on his memories and research on Syria.

Sinan is willing to engage with students, teachers, and institutions in Syria in the current environment today. He can develop curricula, teach specialised topics, and mentor junior academics. His motivation stems from a “moral duty” that education “changed [his] life”, and

he feels that he should “give back to decrease suffering”. However, the fear of government, lack of time, “fear of triggering the trauma”, and his focus on moving on limit his ability to contribute to Syria. Furthermore, he believes that engaging in education development while the Syrian regime is still in control could be perceived as supporting the government.

For Sinan, home is “where I feel safe and secure emotionally, financially and physically” and “where I have strong social ties”.

Matar

“Syria is home, part of the home, part of me, one important piece of the puzzle” and “My relationship with Syria is troubled; it is memories and emotional relationship”.

Matar is an “Arabic and Syrian migrant from the Levant region”. While living his childhood in two places, Matar has always struggled with belonging and identity. He spent his childhood and part of his adulthood between Syria and [country name], then studied for a postgraduate degree in the [Country Name] and settled in the UK in 2013. Matar has 12 years of experience as an academic, and he has not visited Syria since 2010 because of the war.

Matar is exiled not because he was expelled from Syria but because “the option of going back has been taken away from*”* him. He feels he might be able to visit Syria, but “psychological and political reasons stop” him. His exile has complicated his relationship with home further. For Matar, the experience of exile includes “anxiety about the future”. Being a collective phenomenon in the Syria context, exile brings a “collective gain” by creating a “collective Syrian presence and identity”.

Matar has a “very strong emotional relationship” with Syria. His relationship with Syria is “complicated and troubled”. He loves Syria, misses it a lot, and feels he should help and contribute to its development. Syria is part of his “identity”, and he has a “strong emotional connection” with the country. That created a strong “cultural and political interest” in Syria for him. At the same time, he feels “rejected” from Syria because of the fear, because the people are treated as “worthless” there, and because the country is “stuck in this miserable situation”. What complicates Matar’s relationship with Syria is that it is “merged with trauma”. Syria is

becoming memories, “a mythical place just in my mind”. He feels a “big part of my life has ended”. Matar perceives this loss as traumatic.

Matar is willing to engage with students and teachers in Syria. He can teach students, co-write with local academics, and build partnerships with academic institutions. His motivation stems from a “feeling of guilt” and “duty” and from the fact that his engagement makes him feel “fulfilled”. However, he is unwilling to engage with academic institutions for political reasons. The lack of academic freedom, the fear of the “other”, and the HE culture in Syria limit his ability to engage in education development.

For Matar, home “is where I feel stability, where my house, community, and work are, and where I can imagine I can get older”.

Bassam

“Syria needs help” and “My relationship with Syria is a homeland relationship”.

Bassam is a “person who thinks critically and aspires to reach the highest intellectual freedom possible”. He arrived in the UK 10 years ago to do his postgraduate studies. He has lived in the UK and worked in academic institutions since then. He did his PhD in the UK to answer several personal questions that were puzzling him. He could not go back to Syria since he left for political reasons.

Bassam feels he is living in exile because he was “forced to be away” for political reasons from where he was born, and the return is “beyond my control”. However, Bassam also sees “agency” in exile because exile later becomes a “choice”. Bassam perceives instability as “becoming the norm” in exile; therefore, he stops pursuing stability. Also, for him, exile comes with a great deal of “uncertainty” about “what my future is and where I will live in the future”. Being a collective phenomenon makes Bassam feel exile as “less personal and less psychologically painful”.

For Bassam, Syria is “more than just memories and childhood”. It is his “homeland”, and his relationship with Syria stems from his “Syrian national identity”. This makes him have a strong interest in Syria and a commitment to improving things. His belonging to Syria is the strongest,

and all “other belongings are changing” except for his belonging to Syria. His Syrian identity “comes first before all other identities”. His identity is “fluid and changing, but not the Syrian one”.

Bassam wants and is willing to engage with students and teachers in Syria. He can teach online or in person in Syria, build partnerships, and develop curriculums. His motivation stems from his “national and humanitarian responsibility” to support people in Syria. However, he is not willing to engage with academic institutions in Syria as they are ”very corrupt and politicised”. Furthermore, the instability in Syria and his insecurity and instability in exile limit his engagement.

For Bassam, “home is everywhere and nowhere. It is an idea that I aspire to have. It is where there is stability and security and where I feel I belong. It is where I can build a family or be surrounded by people I care about. It is the place I don’t need to change”.

Mirna

“Syria for me is waiting to happen” and “I don’t know what my relationship with Syria is”.

Mirna is a “woman, a dreamer, a mother, a migrant, a partner, and a person who changes daily for the better”. She has lived in the UK since 2005 and has around ten years of academic experience, two years in Syria and six years in the UK. She spent her happy childhood and adulthood in Syria until she was 22 when the Syrian government sent her to do her Master's and PhD in the UK on the condition of returning and teaching at Syrian universities.

She has been living in exile since she left Syria because she decided not to go back when the war started, and that resulted in “legal” ramifications that prevented her from being able to visit. Mirna ”cannot understand her relationship with Syria anymore”. She does not know “if she belongs to Syria or not”. She belongs to, loves, and misses “certain things” in Syria but not Syria as a whole. She belongs, loves and misses her “version of Syria that is non-existent anymore”. She is longing for “a non-existent past”. She has a strong emotional connection with Syria, but also Syria caused her “trauma”, “identity crisis”, and “survival guilt”. She felt that the country had “rejected” her by not allowing her to visit Syria for legal reasons.

Mirna wants and is willing to engage with students, teachers, and academic institutions in Syria today in the current environment and with all of the complications in Syria. She is willing to develop students' skills and provide English language training and teaching. She is willing to do so because of her "love to help others" and "feeling of responsibility to give back". The legal barriers imposed on her made her unable to contribute.

Home for Mirna is "where I can be myself and reconcile with myself. It is where I am not two people wanting two contradicting things".

Ahmad

"Syria is an uncompleted home" " and "My relationship with Syria is a just humanitarian one".

Ahmad is a "Syrian, British, refugee, academic and activist". He has lived in the UK for nine years and has around five years of academic experience. He left Syria 10 years after he could not cope anymore with the "mental stress" that resulted from him being arrested twice because of his political activism. He had beautiful memories in Syria but also difficult ones, such as when he got arrested. He was connected and active with Syria and the "revolution" when he left for the UK. Still, the activism and "disappointment" he experienced in the Syrian context caused him to feel "burnt out" and "exhausted emotionally".

For Ahmad, exile is about "taking away the option to return". Part of the exile feelings includes the "absence of home". Although it is a painful experience, exile made him "resilient" and gave him "strength and determination" to succeed. The feeling of exile has "ups and downs," and healing from exile requires "moving on".

Ahmad's relationship with Syria is mainly a "humanitarian relationship". For him, Syria is the "people who are suffering". He believes that Syria is "not his homeland anymore"; however, he "belongs to the people in Syria and belong to their suffering".

Ahmad is already engaged in supporting academia in non-regime areas. Also, he is willing to engage with students, teachers, and academic institutions in regime-controlled areas today in the current political environment. He supports HE in Syria because he believes in the impact

of this sector on “bringing change” in Syria. He also does this because he feels “responsible”, has “ethical duties”, “fears of feeling guilty”, and feels “happy and relieved” when doing so. However, the bureaucracy of the sector, the absence of platforms, and the different political agendas between members of the diaspora community limit his ability to engage in education development in Syria.

Ahmad “doesn’t know what home means: I cannot describe what I don’t have!”

Qasem

“Syria is a piece of me; Syria is me. Syria is the past, present, and the future,” and “my relationship with Syria is a symbiotic one”.

Qasem is “someone with a very strong memory that does not forget”. He has lived in the UK for ten years and has around 12 years of experience in academia in the UK and Syria. Qasem did his Master's in the [country name] and then returned to Syria. When the war started, he felt the need to leave the country and went to the UK for his PhD. He has settled in the UK since then.

Qasem understands that exile is when “you cannot visit your home, your childhood and youth friends, your family, your university, and your teachers” for political reasons. For Qasem, exile comes with the absence of “community and friends”. Furthermore, Qasem feels he is living a “double exile” because of his religious identity coming from a small minority in Syria, an “exile from Syria” and an “exile from Syrians”. He feels having a community makes his exile less painful; however, he “resists building a new community” and “refuses to replace the community” he used to have.

Qasem's relationship with Syria is a “symbiotic one”. Syria is “part of me, Syria is me”. He feels that “Syria and [him] are one”. Syria is his “past, present and future”. Qasem feels a strong belonging to Syria. His belonging stems from strong “national belonging”. He feels his Syrian identity “underpins all other identities” he has. He also has a strong emotional connection with Syria built on “sadness, grieves, and anger towards what happened”. He “loves Syria as much as [he] loves [his] son”. He is “obsessed” with Syria and “daydream about rebuilding it”. He feels that he is being “culturally and socially uprooted”.

Qasem wants and is willing to engage with students, teachers, and academic institutions in Syria in the current environment today. He would love to support the organisational development of universities, develop curricula, become a peer-reviewer, teach in person and online, and collaborate with academics in Syria. His motivation stems from his "wishes that Syria gets back as it was", from his "feeling of sadness", from his "belonging and Syrian identity", and from the fact that "Syrians are being oppressed and they deserve to have education". However, the fear of the government, the bureaucracy of the sector, and the high number of students in classes make him feel unable to support. Furthermore, he fears that engaging in supporting education in Syria will be interpreted as supporting the government.

For Qasem, home is "where I sleep, where I feel comfortable, where I feel safe… it is where I lived for a long time and had my childhood in".

Kamel

"Syria is a complex home" and "My relationship with Syria is complicated".

Kamel is a person who is "trying to navigate life like everyone else". He left Syria 11 years ago for the UK to do his PhD and has been working in academia since then. He left Syria at the beginning of the Syrian revolution without a clear plan for his life; however, how things evolved in Syria made the decision more evident to him that he could not return.

Even though Kamel visited Syria recently after 11 years, he feels exiled. This is because "the 11 years of living in exile have shaped me and forced upon me a reality I did not choose". For him, exile creates "confusion in [his] feelings and behaviours towards" the idea of home. It also makes him "fear the future" and what it holds for his family back home. The collective nature of exile makes him put his "personal experience into perspective, " which makes him feel lucky to have what he has. However, the collective nature of exile also brings "pain" as he keeps "encountering cases in exile that make me feel pain and sadness".

Kamel described his relationship with Syria as a "complicated one". He has an "emotional connection" with Syria, and he feels "sad" about the country. He also misses many things in the country, such as "the food, family, friends, weather, etc". However, Syria is changing and

“none of my friends” stayed in Syria. He is missing “non-existent” things. Also, the concept of national identity has been “deconstructed” in the past ten years, and the idea of belonging became a “complicated one” that he “cannot fully understand or define”. Therefore, he cannot describe his belongings easily. However, he believes he “doesn’t belong to Syria on the national level” anymore, but he “belongs to people and to neighbourhoods and places that I lived in when I was in Syria”.

Kamel is willing to engage with students and teachers in Syria. He would love to supervise students, develop curricula, and provide consultancy to academic institutions. His motivation stems from his “desire to see the country recover”. However, he is unwilling to engage with academic institutions because academic institutions “are completely co-opted” for aggressive political agendas.

For Kamel, “home is where I feel comfortable to go back to at the end of the day and where I feel legal, social and financial security”.

Rima

“Syria is beautiful”, and “My relationship with Syria became peaceful and neutral”.

Rima is a “Syrian academic” and “caring person” who lived her whole life in Syria until 12 years ago when she decided to do her postgraduate degree in the UK. While she was doing her Master's in the UK in 2011, the “revolution” started in Syria, and she decided to stay in the UK.

Rima identified herself as exiled because she is " unable to go back home”. She is “afraid” to visit because she was politically active when the uprising started. Exile “deprived [her] of freedom”. However, because what has happened to her happened to “millions” of Syrians, she feels “less lonely in exile”.

Rima's relationship with Syria is “a peaceful and neutral relationship”; however, this peace that she is living with Syria came after stages of “hatred, disconnection, and nostalgia”. Sometimes, she feels she “belongs to Syria”, and sometimes, she feels “nothing in Syria means” to her

anymore. She feels “belonging through food, songs, and social life”. However, Syria is now “behind [her] as life is moving on here”. Yet, Syria remains “part of [her] identity”.

Rima is willing to engage with students and teachers in Syria. She aspires to mentor junior academics, teach online and in person, and co-write with junior academics. Her motivation stems from her “love of helping” and “sharing her knowledge”. However, she feels that she does not have professional connections with Syria that she can use to establish collaboration. Furthermore, she is very cautious about engaging with academic institutions in Syria. She fears that such engagement could “drain” her.

For Rima, home is “where I feel safe, where I can be a productive person and where I can achieve my ambitions”.

Khatar

“*Syria is an idea*” and “*My relationship with Syria can be summed up with this sentence: I left Syria, but Syria did not leave me”.*

Khatar is a London-based writer and academic who has been living in the UK since 2013. Before moving to the UK, he lived his whole life in a small city in Syria, where he felt very connected, supported and surrounded by friends and family.

Khatar’s inability to return “to the place where [he] grew up or even visit” makes him feel in exile. For him, exile is a “political message”. Even if he can return, he would not do this to “normalise the regime”. He sees “something beautiful” in exile and how it transformed him. Although exile is painful and comes with huge costs, Khatar believes that as a collective phenomenon, exile created a “common language” amongst Syrians in exile through arts, literature, food, research, etc. For him, “hope” makes him heal and cope with exile. Hope that “our exile will inspire future generations” to change Syria.

Khatar has a “very strong emotional connection “with Syria. He “left Syria, but Syria did not leave” him. Although he lives in the UK, part of him “still lives in Syria”. He connects with Syria every day by connecting with his family and friends who stayed there. He feels that being exiled makes his connection with Syria stronger and makes him always think about the idea of

going back. He feels “deep pain and sadness” about what happened to Syria. Rather than his situation, what troubles him the most is the “collective loss” that Syrians have experienced. His relationship is “more than memories”. He is very connected with the “day-to-day suffering of the people” in Syria.

Khatar is willing to engage with students through teaching about Syria and its history in a way that makes people proud of their heritage. His motivation stems from an “empathy” towards Syrians who experienced “huge oppression” and from his ”duty and responsibility” to support Syrians. He would also “love, in principle, to build partnerships” between local and international academic institutions. Still, he feels he cannot collaborate with either teachers or educational institutions at this stage. He cannot cooperate with people or institutions that “support an authoritarian regime”.

Home “is where I feel safe. Home is everywhere and nowhere. Home is where I can do immaterial things I care about, such as my writing and art”.

Ruba

“Syria is my country of origin” and “My relationship with Syria is a homeland relationship”.

Ruba is a “mother, wife, and a person who loves life”. She was sponsored by the Syrian government and was sent through a governmental scholarship to the UK in 2003 for her postgraduate studies. Then, she moved back to Syria in 2009 to work as a Lecturer at a public university per the scholarship terms and conditions. Life in Syria was “beautiful” for Ruba, and everything was going in the right direction until 2011, when the uprising started. In 2012, she decided to take an unpaid leave for a year and moved back to the UK to work as a lecturer. Then, the government changed the laws related to the Syrian lecturers aboard and requested them to either go back immediately to Syria or pay a considerable amount back to the government as compensation for the scholarship amount the government paid for her earlier. Since then, she has been unable to return to Syria.

Ruba's relationship with Syria is a “homeland” relationship. Syria treated her very well and never discriminated against her. She always felt appreciated and treated fairly. Syria

“recognised [her] excellence” and sponsored her to study abroad. She feels that Syria is her country and homeland, where she excelled. She belongs to Syria and has a “strong emotional connection” with the country. She “loves Syria and misses it a lot”. However, she also feels “pain and anger” that the option to go back has been taken away from her. She feels that she was “sentenced” and one of her “human rights”, the free movement, has been taken away from her. Nevertheless, her relationship with Syria is still strong.

Home ”is where I can live safely and secure financially with my kids and husband”.

Sami

“Syria is the cradle of civilisation”, and “my “relationship with Syria is a national belonging relationship”.

Sami is a “self-made person” who received a governmental scholarship to the UK in 1997 for his postgraduate studies. Then, he moved back to Syria in 2004 to work as a Lecturer per the scholarship terms and conditions. He “excelled” in Syria and worked on high-level projects to develop the HE sector. However, in 2013, he decided to take an unpaid leave for a year and moved back to the UK to work as a lecturer. Like what happened to Ruba, he could not return when the government changed the law.

Sami's relationship with Syria is a “belonging relationship”. This belonging stems from his Syrian “national identity” that “nothing will take it away from me”. Syria “is [his] homeland”, and he is “proud of being Syrian”. Also, his belongings stem from his “beautiful memories” and “good experiences” in Syria. However, Syria “is not [his] current home”, as the option to return has been taken away from him. He feels “deep sadness” that he is losing his “social connections” in Syria and that Syria is not benefiting from what he can offer. He feels “anger” about the “mistreatment and the unfairness of the laws”.

Home “is where I feel safe, and my family are safe. I mean the wider understanding of safe financially, professionally, socially and politically”.

Chapter 6: Exile

In the previous chapter, I presented the participants' individual depictions of exile, giving the reader a glance at their exile experience and their vision for their roles in the future of Syria. In this chapter, my analysis journey presents a composite depiction of exile. It aims to answer the first research question and its sub-questions:

Research Question 1: How do Syrian exiled academics perceive the exile experience?

Sub-question 1: How does exiled academics' belonging to their homeland change in exile?
Sub-question 2: What are the dilemmas exiled academics experience in exile?

This chapter is divided into four main subsections. The first three correspond to the above three questions. Section 6.1 unpacks the experience of exile, section 6.2 unpacks the changing dynamics of exiled academics belonging to their homeland, and section 6.3 unpacks five dilemmas facing exiled academics. The fourth section, 6.4, discusses the findings in light of the broader literature.

6.1 The Experience of Exile

Since I left Syria in 2015, I have felt the exile and its difficult reality every day. Yet, I am struggling to put my feelings and experience into words. These feelings seem like the tip of the iceberg, and I struggle to understand what's underneath it. I struggle to understand what it means to live as an exiled person, individually and collectively. I am struggling to understand where it started and whether it will end.
(The Researcher Reflexivity journal, 06 Jan 2022, title: What is underneath?)

In this section, I present how my participants experience exile, emphasising four themes: forced separation, dual nature, collective nature, and healing/coping in exile.

6.1.1 Forced Separation

The **forced separation** from home and deprivation from the option to visit our country seems to be at the core of exile:

"I grew up in Syria, and my grandfather was an exile in Egypt. From childhood, I have always understood exile as the deprivation of my homeland and the inability to visit. And now it is my turn; because I can't go back home, I feel I am in exile (Rima)".

"I am forced to be away from the place I was born in, my homeland, and the return is beyond my control. This is the critical point why I don't feel I am a migrant. I don't consider that I chose to be here (Bassam)".

"I left Syria before the war started. I left with an open mind on where I will end up. Therefore, I feel exiled not because I was forced to leave my country but because the option of going back has been taken away from me when the war started (Matar)".

However, for some of us, exile is not only about the inability to visit or return to our homeland but rather the inability to live there:

*"I visited Syria last year for the first time to see my parents after 12 y*ears of being unable to visit*. Even though I can visit now, the fact that I cannot live in my country makes me feel exiled. When I came here, one of my main options was returning to Syria to live and work.*

This option is not available anymore, and I feel it has been taken away from me. I feel my options have been forced upon me, and the 12 years of living in exile have shaped my options in life (Kamel)".

Even if we get citizenships, Khatar expressed that our exile feeling might continue as the option to visit is still taken away from us:

"It had been 12 years, and I couldn't visit Syria. Even when I got citizenship and felt more secure, I still felt like I lived in exile. Syria is my homeland where I grew up, and the inability to go back or visit Syria makes me feel I am in exile (Khatar)".

This forced separation from home and taking away the option to visit our country makes some of us, like Lubna, feel that our agency has been eroded:

I miss places, people, and family, of course. There's a powerful need to go home whose fulfilment is restricted by someone else. This is the experience of exile. Being deprived of your homeland for reasons beyond yourself. The agency has been taken away from you (Lubna)".

Yet, Bassam sees agency in exile:

"Although exile is about the forced separation from home or the deprivation of home, there is a voluntary element and agency in it. If exile is just a matter of forced separation from home by the political power, then I can find ways to go back by bribing, using my connections or pledging loyalty to the regime. Even if I receive guarantees right now that if I go back, I won't be arrested or oppressed, I won't go back. This is because I don't want to legitimise the Syrian regime, and I don't want to be part of this oppressive regime. Exile was forced upon me initially, but now it is my choice (Bassam)".

Bassam's comment above brought back a flood of emotions for me. It reminded me of a deeply personal struggle. As someone who had to leave my son behind due to exile, I often find myself questioning whether my departure was a choice I made or a situation forced upon me. I grapple with the idea of whether living away from my son was a decision I willingly made or an option that was imposed on me. Before leaving Syria, I was faced with the option of staying by

resorting to bribery or utilising my privileges to evade military service and silently comply with the oppressive regime. However, this internal conflict weighed heavily on me. I found it unbearable that my privileges allowed me to avoid military service while others, who were less fortunate, were being conscripted and losing their lives. Witnessing the oppression and violence while being unable to speak out due to fear left me deeply unhappy. Escaping Syria and becoming politically active against the oppressive structures seemed to be the only way to resolve this internal conflict. Despite feeling that leaving Syria was forced upon me, I also acknowledge that I made a conscious decision to embrace exile, fully aware that I might never return to my country, my son's room, or my childhood home, and that I might rarely see my family again.

Exile can be understood as a forced separation from one's home. However, for certain individuals, this separation may signify a detachment from the sense of home rather than just leaving a physical place. Consequently, the experience of exile may not commence on the day of departure from one's country; it could instead be a gradual process that initiates at home when an individual feels estranged in their home country. This internal conflict arises when one grapples with a sense of not belonging and struggles to feel at home in their own country. For instance, Ahmad experienced this alienation due to being part of an underprivileged group that faced oppression in Syria.

"When you are a student and get arrested, humiliated, beaten and tortured; when you stop feeling safe in your home country, then you feel alienated and exiled (Ahmad)".

For Sinan, his alienation in Syria was not only the result of fear but also marginalisation:

"When you live in fear in your country, and you don't have freedom, you feel alienated. Add to this the marginalisation that comes from my disability. There are so many things that I couldn't do in Syria. Even the language used was discriminatory. It was okay for me at that time because I accepted that this is how my life is. I can talk about several layers of marginalisation that alienated me in my home country (Sinan)".

Khatar shares how his sexuality made him feel alienated in Syria:

"I don't think I mentioned to you before, but I am gay, and I used to feel alienated in my home country before I left because I always felt that I wanted a society that I could belong to. You know, in Syria, people live in fear of each other. I always longed for something I couldn't have (Khatar)".

The powerful words shared by my participants have prompted me to reflect on my own sense of alienation in Syria. When the war erupted in 2011, I found myself unraveling the layers of indoctrination that had shaped my beliefs since childhood. This process brought about an intense identity crisis. Suddenly, the pillars that had defined me - my nationalism, patriotism, political convictions, and unwavering loyalty to the country's "leader" - revealed themselves as tools of control, manipulation, and brainwashing. I realised that I had unwittingly become a pawn in a political agenda that had been perpetuated through educational institutions, the media, and religious bodies to uphold an authoritarian regime. Moreover, I recognised that my birth into a privileged elite group in Syria had woven a complex web of power and control, perpetuating an oppressive and brutal social order that ultimately fueled the 2011 revolution. As the uprising unfolded, I witnessed members of my own social group oppress, harm, and manipulate innocent individuals, fabricating deceitful narratives to serve their agenda. Rejecting their doctrine, narrative, lies, lifestyle, and disconnection from reality made me feel alienated within my family, among my friends, and in the very confines of my home.

In addition to the forced separation of home and the inability to return, exile is **political** at its core:

"In my exile, the root of my exile is political. I believe what makes exile different from migration and the refuge journey is the political nature of it. Of course, there is overlap, but you might be living here not as a refugee and have stability and security, but you cannot go back home for political reasons (Bassam)".

"For me, exile means something blocking your ability to go back home, and this thing is political. Political in the wider sense, I mean. This could be because of your culture, religion, sexuality (Kamel)".

Because it is political, even if we can visit, the fear of persecution stops some of us:

"I believe I can visit Syria, but psychological and political reasons stop me (Matar)".

And because of it is political nature, a lot of us feel deeply problematic about visiting Syria while the Syrian regime is still in power:

"I know a lot of people whose parents have died in Syria, and they wished to see their parents before they die, but they refused to visit Syria because of their political stances. Exile is a political message. Even if legally I can go back, I don't believe in this regime, and I don't want to normalise it. Therefore, my presence out of Syria is political (Khatar)".

In addition to the forced separation and the political nature of exile, exile comes at a cost. Amongst the things a lot of us lose in exile is the **feeling of home**:

"Sometimes I feel [city name in the UK] is my home, and sometimes I feel alienated in the [city name]. The home feeling is fluid and shifting. Sometimes, I feel I have a home, and sometimes I don't. I came to terms with this, but exile is still a mental and psychological feeling, and part of it is the absence of home (Ahmad)".

And one element of the absence of home is the absence of community and family**:**

Initially, you feel you don't have anyone around you. No friends and no family. You are isolated. Very lonely. It is not like being saved from Syria and moving to heaven. You feel constantly alienated (Sinan)".

"Every person needs a community and friends, and this could be absent in exile. My community is broken and dismantled. It does not exist anymore, making me feel in exile (Qasem)".

And each one of us will navigate the absence of home differently:

"Some people like the idea of the old home, some like to reshape this feeling, and others empty this feeling of its meaning and don't pursue it anymore. I moved between these positions. I am trying to reshape this feeling in [city name in the UK], yet I put less

importance on it. Exile creates confusion in my emotions and behaviours towards this concept (Kamel)".

Another dimension of the exile experience is the **instability and insecurity** that comes with being separated from home:

"I believe the instability and insecurity are part of the exile, even if they are not constant. Moving away from your home country is the opposite of security and stability. This is because stability partly comes from familiarity; in exile, you are unfamiliar with the new system. (Bassam)".

Instability and insecurity might be a stage for some of us or a constant struggle for others. To cope with the latter, some of us might stop pursuing the feeling of security:

"Because I did not have stability and security for a long time, I stopped searching for them. The instability became the norm. The constant movement from one place to another and changing jobs and friends became the norm. Pursuing stability is not a goal anymore. Stability in its traditional form is difficult to find here; therefore, you need to find ways around it (Bassam)".

In addition to instability and insecurity, Bassam believes that exile comes with a considerable deal of **future uncertainty**:

"The uncertainty about the future is a big part of my exile experience. At a certain point, I went through severe anxiety related to the possibility of going back home. However, once you accept that you are exiled and that you might never go back home, a different anxiety starts. You start thinking, who am I now, what is my future, where will I live in the future, will I settle one day, or will my life constantly be like this? (Bassam)".

This fear of the future could be linked to all aspects of our lives, such as our families:

"There is a fear of the future, and this fear has to do with the people you left behind. Will you see them, and will you be there for them when they need you (Kamel)".

6.1.2 The Dual Nature of Exile

Although exile is painful, Khatar feels that exile has a **positive dimension**:

"Of course, there is pain in exile, but there is something beautiful as well. There is something beautiful about seeing things from the exile perspective. For example, my whole priorities have changed. Materialistic things don't mean anything to me anymore. Therefore, exile for me was one of the biggest transformations in my life (Khatar)".

And for some of us, like Sinan, exile allows us to flourish and be ourselves:

"There is self-growth in exile, and there is an identity change. Especially for someone who has a disability, being here made my life very positive. Sometimes there are bad experiences that leave a positive impact. Take, for example, the pandemic….. (Sinan)".

However, others like *Qasem* can only see exile through a **negative lens**:

"I am struggling to see any good side to exile. It is stressful and mentally exhausting. You might run away by working hard and achieve things professionally, which makes you feel better about your exile, but that doesn't make exile a positive experience (Qasem)".

"I cannot say exile is positive because the decision is taken from me and forced upon me. I am supposed to be a free person to make my own decision, and exile is a depravation of my freedom (Rima)".

Bassam provided a very insightful reflection on this:

"Exile might have a positive outcome but not by default. If we are going to look at exile in its very abstract form, it is a harrowing experience and not positive. For example, if someone goes to jail and experiences positive changes, does that make jail a good experience? In principle, it is a challenging and harsh experience; it is abnormal. Some people in exile succeed in transforming the exile experience into something positive, but not everyone. In principle, this experience has forced separation. All of the positive things I did here, I could have done them without exile (Bassam)".

The conversations I had with my fellow exiles about the dual nature of our experience really made me reflect on whether I would have chosen to stay in my home country or opt for exile if I could go back in time. As I mentioned before, it feels like exile was my only choice, but at the same time, I can't shake the feeling that I chose it for myself. My journey into exile has been incredibly difficult. I've faced professional and financial loss, lost my home and social connections, and grappled with a profound sense of instability and insecurity. I've also experienced a loss of belonging, faith, and even a crisis of identity, not to mention the overwhelming guilt of surviving while my family is far away. Perhaps the most unbearable part has been not being able to see my family for nearly a decade and not having my son with me. And yet, despite all the hardships, I've also found exile to be a profoundly liberating experience. It has helped me discover my true self, break free from indoctrination and societal labels, and reject imposed ideologies. I've been able to rebuild my identity and sense of belonging on my own terms, rather than having them dictated to me. I've formed a stronger, more authentic community based on genuine connections rather than superficial privileges. In a way, exile has given me a powerful sense of agency, allowing me to shape my own identity and destiny.

6.1.3 The Collective Nature of Exile

In the Syrian context, exile has occurred as a collective phenomenon or punishment. The collective nature of exile creates specific dynamics that impact our individual experience. It makes some of us feel that we are not alone, which in turn makes our exile **less painfu**l:

"The idea that exile is collective makes you meet people like yourself. We get close to each other, and this makes me feel less lonely. It makes me feel that I am not alone living this forced migration (Sinan)".

"It decreases the intensity of exile. You feel you are not alone. I do not want to sound selfish; you feel the suffering is dispersed and not limited to you (Ahmad)".

However, Kamel, although he agrees with the previous, believes that the collective nature of exile also creates **more pain**:

"The collective nature of our exile makes you put your personal experience into perspective. When you hear the stories of others suffering, you feel you are lucky and you are in a better place, which decreases your pain. However, from the other end, being a collective phenomenon could also increase your pain as you keep encountering cases that make you feel pain and sad. It is difficult to look at exile just from one side and to know if being a collective phenomenon makes my pain less or more (Kamel)".

Being a collective phenomenon makes many of us feel we are all in the same boat. We either all go back, or we all do not. And this creates **negative dynamics** towards those who visit Syria:

"Let me give you an example: My Egyptian friend told me recently that she is planning to visit Syria. Deep inside of me, I felt this was very unjust. Millions of Syrians cannot visit Syria for political reasons. I felt the exile at that point, and I feel it whenever I see Syrians visiting Syria. I empathise with them, but I also feel if we cannot all go, then no one should go. I also feel visiting Syria normalises Assad (Matar)".

Although exile is a collective phenomenon in the Syrian context, we do not feel it equally. For some people, the exile is exacerbated by social, cultural and religious factors:

"I don't know if it is real or it is just in my head, but I feel I live a double exile with Syrians. As an Alawite [a religious sect that President Assad belongs to], I feel like a minority in the Syrian social gatherings amongst Syrians. I feel I am exiled from Syria for political reasons and exiled from the Syrian community for religious reasons. Therefore, I feel it double (Qasem)".

Although exile is a painful phenomenon that comes at an individual cost, Matar and Khatar believe that being a collective phenomenon in the Syrian context brings a **collective gain**:

"Although there is a personal and collective loss in exile, there is also a collective gain. The exile created a collective Syrian presence in the West, and this is creating a new culture. A new collective identity is currently shaping, and there is an impact happening through arts, research and so on (Matar)".

"There is a whole language being taught in exile, a whole society, literature, arts, food, daily dialogues. You feel you belong to a big cause (Khatar)".

6.1.4 Healing from Exile

The feeling of exile seems to be not constant; it is a **dynamic** feeling that goes into ups and downs:

"I don't feel exiled all the time as sometimes I feel I am at home here. The feeling of exile is so complicated, and I cannot explain it because it is dynamic and constantly changing (Ahmad)".

"It depends on the days I am having. Most days, I try to push it [feeling of exile] to the back of my mind, but it is there and will always be (Mirna)".

Amongst the things that seem to help is **time**:

"I still remember at the beginning of the exile; the feeling was very intense. I used to listen to a lot of poems by Nizar Kabbani [Syrian Poet], who wrote about alienation. However, as time goes by, my emotions get less intense (Sinan)".

"No matter how painful the experience is, it won't stay at the same intensity forever. But every now and then, you feel that you are exiled and that you cannot go back home (Bassam)".

Being surrounded by a **community** of Syrians seems to alleviate some of us:

"In the Syrian context, there is a community of exiles, and this makes us develop a collective defence mechanism. In our gatherings, in social media, in our work, in our research (Bassam)".

However, for some of us, building a community is not only a tricky thing but also something we resist:

"Although you feel the need to have a community of people around you, you resist building a new community. I feel I lost someone very dear to me, and I don't want the replacement (Qasem)".

Qasem's comments above reminded me that since I left Syria, I have always felt that I have resisted building community and friendships. This is more of a defence mechanism. I lost all of my social networks once, and it was harrowing. I do not want this to happen again. I do not want to build something that I will lose if I move to a new city or country.

Having our **family** around us could also play a significant factor in our coping/healing:

"Having my family around me plays a significant role in making me feel less exiled. For example, I am heading now to [city name] to see my mom, and she is asking me what food I want her to cook for me. I feel there is a little Syria here with me. I can live it whenever I want, and I can go back to my English lifestyle whenever I want (Sinan)".

"Having my son here rooted me and made me feel some sort of belonging to the place. His relationship with the place shapes mine (Qasem)".

Exile comes with a loss. This could be professional, personal, social, etc. **Re/building our life** again seems an essential factor in our healing journey:

"Rebuilding my life was a long and painful process, but making a new social life here, marrying my wife, having my child, becoming stable in my job, all of that made me feel that I am out of the exile (Sinan)".

Re/building our life could include becoming **stable professionally and financially** and progressing in our careers:

"The feeling of exile comes and goes. It is intense at a certain time and less intense at another time. For example, when I struggle financially or professionally, I feel the exile more. When I am stable, I feel less bad about my exile (Ahmad)".

Exile always reminds us of a past we are no longer part of. This past could be our country, our families, our social ties, and our neighbourhood. Therefore, exile comes with **nostalgia**:

"I live nostalgia constantly, and it is linked to your previous relationship with Syria and how much you loved your life in Syria. My nature is that I am very attached to the past, and I cannot move on from it. I am very attached to the past, and I perceive my future as a going back to the past (Qasem)".

Therefore, there is a **moving-on** that each one of us needs to undergo in their way:

There is moving on we need to do. I cannot just live in the past; I need to live in the present and move on to the future (Ahmad)".

And this moving on requires not only coming to terms with the past but also having **hope** for a better future for us and our countries:

"I think it is very wrong to reject the past. What makes me reconcile with the exile experience is to deal with the past and make a positive outcome out of it, and I believe that the future will be different, even if it is not during my lifetime. The hope is that future generations will read what we wrote and see what worked on as a collective. I hope that there is a generation who will not forget what happened to Syria. This makes my exile feel less painful. Ignoring the past does not help me. Facing the past and trying to make something good out of it as a reaction to the brutal things that happened in Syria is what helps me (Khatar)".

The words shared by my participants have truly been a source of comfort and strength for me throughout my healing journey. Leaving Syria in 2015 left me with a lingering question - would I ever find healing and peace after such a profound exile? I often pondered what healing and recovery truly meant in the context of being displaced. Was it about 'returning' to a time when I lived happily in my country? Was it about reestablishing connections with my social circles? Was it about 'returning' to my physical home? Was it about the past? However, the insights from my participants have shown me that healing is not about 'returning' to the past but looking forward to the future.

6.2 Belonging in Exile

Over the past five years, the questions of where I belong and whether I belong to Syria became central to my life. How can I belong to a place that I cannot visit, that has changed dramatically, caused me so much suffering, and that is made of artificial borders? At the same time, how can I not belong to a place I was born in, hold citizenship, have some of the best memories of life, speak its language, share its history, and have such an intimate relationship with its people? I wish to understand what's happening to my relationship with Syria, a relationship that is becoming very difficult to understand and explain.
(The Researcher Reflexivity journal, 12 Dec 2021, title: I wish to understand)

In this section, I will present my participants' belonging and relationship to Syria. My heuristic journey with my participants enlightened me and helped me understand that three interconnected dimensions help us understand the changing dynamics of exiled people belonging to their homeland. These are the **practical, emotional, and compatibility dimensions.** Furthermore, several factors pull and push exiled academics' positions on these dimensions, such as the war in Syria, working on Syria, social media, previous experience in Syria, connecting with Syrians in exile, and having family in Syria.

6.2.1 Dimension One: The Practical Dimension

When we live in our homeland, city, and neighbourhood for a long time, we become very familiar with the details of the place, the people that inhabit it, the streets, the smells, and the cafes. We build deep social and familial connections and get embedded into the place's culture. This social, cultural, and physical embeddedness in the place creates some sort of belonging to the place. The nature of this belonging is **embodied** and experienced through everyday living in the place. However**,** our embodied and practical experiences/belonging get interrupted when we leave the place. The distance makes us lose familiarity with the place. We change over time, the country changes and our understanding of the place and the picture we have in mind of the place gradually becomes inaccurate. Some of our social networks leave the place or sadly die, and other social connections gradually get weaker because we are not in contact with them anymore. Our cultural connection with the place gets blurred unless they constantly re-practise it. We stop living the social, cultural and physical transformation of our homeland, and our belonging to the place becomes based on our past interaction with the place: **on the memories.** This dimension is what I refer to as the practical dimension (Figure 4) of people's belonging

and relationship to their homeland. From one end, this belonging could be embodied and, from the other end, could be based on memories.

Figure 4

The Practical Dimension of Belonging

Exiled academics have emphasised four factors impacting the practical dimension of their belonging to Syria. The first factor is the **exile experience** and its ramifications, which pushes the relationship towards becoming a memories relationship. In the Syrian context, exile has intensified as a result of a conflict that has torn the social fabric of the society and dismantled the social and familial connections that people built over the years:

"People know you in Syria, your second name, and your parents. Although that was annoying sometimes, these social circles made me feel connected with Syria, and they were vital to me. It takes years to shape these connections. These social connections got dismantled, and society got dismantled. I do not know where people are right now (Khatar)".

"It is not like I have been removed from my social network. The problem is that all of the social networks have been dismantled. All of my friends and family are spread all over the world (Kamel)".

Exile seems to contribute to dismantling our social connections and networks in our homeland by depriving us of the opportunity to maintain connections with those who stayed:

"I used to be closely connected within a certain milieu in [city name]. Very tight connections and very meaningful. I lost these connections gradually. When I moved abroad, I would always go back to Syria for a month or two, and that kept the relationships alive. But after 2011, when I couldn't go anymore, I became an outsider. Relationships tend to either if you do not see the people and keep the minimum communication (Lubna)".

In addition to dismantling social connections, exile could make some of us feel that our relationship with Syria lacks practical and embodied experience. This is because it forces us to live outside our places for a long time without the chance to visit the places that meant to us:

"Not visiting takes the physical element of the relationship. It deprives me of the embodied presence in this location [Syria]. Sometimes, I even use Google Maps to see our houses and streets, just to feel a spatial relationship with the place (Matar)".

Living in exile for a long time also seems to distort our understanding of Syria. It stops us from being part of Syria's social transformation and cultural change. This, in turn, could make us feel that our understanding of the place gradually becomes obsolete:

"Gradually, I started feeling that I didn't know the place. When I see people commenting on certain topics on social media, I feel that my understanding of the place becomes like a migrant relationship with her homeland. I feel I cannot talk about Syria with confidence because I feel my words represent Syria before I left in 2015 and not the current one (Ruba)".

Losing social connections in our homeland, the embodied experience of living in our homeland, and the understanding of our homeland make some of us feel that our homeland has become foreign to us. Our relationship with our homeland becomes based on past experiences and interactions with the country and past understanding of the social dynamics. It becomes based on memories. And the longer the exile period, the more our relationship seems to be moving towards becoming a memories relationship:

"I am becoming disconnected from the reality in Syria (Sinan)".
"Syria is becoming an imaginary place that exists only in my mind (Matar)".
"It [Syria] is "becoming memories just in my head" (Bassam)".

The second factor that impacts exiled academics' practical belonging and relationship with Syria is their **work on Syria**, whether their research, activism, writing, arts, etc. Conflicts and exile seem to spark new interests in some of us:

"I was working in [Country name] at that point, and I felt I could not continue my life here as if something never happened [in Syria]. What happened in Syria has made me unable to stop thinking [about Syria] and has deeply impacted me. I had pressing questions in my mind that were baffling me. Pursuing a PhD was my way to answering them (Lubna)".

This interest in our homeland, which later evolves to become our work, could be a mechanism to deal with an internal conflict we are living in and an attempt to re-belong to our home:

"My research was about the milieu that I lost, which are circles of artists, writers, and intellectuals from a particular section of Damascus. Half of my interviewees were people I already knew. Maybe this was partly an attempt to reconnect with and rebuild a lost sense of belonging, or maybe it was a way to seek closure with it, I'm not sure (Lubna)".

Regardless of what inspires our new interest in our homeland and whether this stems from sadness, guilt, or internal conflict, working on our homeland seems to keep some elements of our practical relationship with our countries by giving us knowledge of our homeland and helping us build social connections:

"I always had an interest in the Syrian context. This interest has been employed differently after 2011. I believe my work on Syria did not decrease or increase my relationship with Syria. It maintained it. It stopped me from losing my connection with Syria. It kept me informed about the political context. It also connected me with Syrians with similar interests and other Syrians interested in my work (Bassam)".

It helps some of us to connect with our roots, cities, and history:

"Being an academic and researching my city and urban development keeps my relationship with Syria alive. After 12 years of conflict, Syria became one of the forgotten wars. My city [city name], which is already a marginalised city, is more forgotten than other cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. My research aims to tell the story of my city whether through research, interviews, writing, etc. (Khatar)".

It also helps us connect with the present and future of our homeland, know the people on the ground, and understand the changing dynamics, strengthening the practical dimension of our relationship with Syria. As Ahmad stated:

"We cannot reduce the relationship to just memories. Memories are an essential part of the relationship, but not all of it, because I am currently working on Syria and the future of Syria, which is a practical element in my relationship with Syria (Ahmad)".

I can relate a lot to my participants in this matter. In 2015, I embarked on a journey of exile that transformed my life in a profound way. I experienced a significant shift in my priorities, leading me to lose interest in everything unrelated to Syria. This change compelled me to leave my career in the banking sector behind, as my sole focus became understanding and working on Syria. Looking back, I realise that my decision was driven by a deep sense of guilt and sorrow for my war-torn country and its displaced people. However, my work on Syria is a primary factor today that keeps me close to Syria and brings a practical nature to my belonging to Syria.

A third factor that impacts the practical relationship with Syria is **social media.** Without it, some of us would feel very disconnected from their countries of origin:

"I suppose social media has kept my connection with the country alive by allowing me to continue following and staying in touch with friends and family there. I can engage in conversations with them and listen to their everyday struggles. I would say social media possibly has played a significant role in preventing me from fully forgetting Syria and fully immersing myself in life here (Sinan)".

Especially for some of us whose work requires monitoring social media, these platforms have become the main tools for us to connect with our homeland:

"Social media is part of my job. I analyse social media platforms and follow what is happening in Syria. I follow certain Syrian accounts, especially those Tiktokers [users of a particular social media platform] who walk in old Damascus and take videos of the streets.

Social media made me understand Syria and shaped my professional connection to Syria (Matar)".

Social media might even have become our mechanism to compensate for the loss that we are experiencing from being away from our homeland:

"I am still connected with Syria through social media. I like to understand what's going on. This is to compensate for the loss that I am not in Syria. To be honest, I do not feel disconnected. Yes, I am not there, and the relationship from a distance differs from when you are there. Still, online technology brought us closer [to Syria], even if virtually, let us say. You feel as if you are living amongst them; understand their news, know what's going on, share with them your opinion, and help them. All of that makes my relationship [with Syria] stronger (Ruba)".

Reflecting on my own relationship with social media, as someone living in exile and deprived of the embodied experience, I found myself browsing social media daily for a couple of hours in search of different things, searching for a feeling, old friends, hope, home, and the past. Social media has become a space that connects me virtually with my homeland, the society I had to leave behind, my old friends and social networks, my culture, and the changing dynamics in my country.

The fourth factor that has been found to impact exiled academics belonging to Syria is **connecting with Syrians** in exile. We all gravitate and connect with people who can relate to us, understand us, and might have a common background with us. Our connection with each other helps some of us to learn new things about our homeland, meet the "other", and understand a new side of our country and society that we were not aware of:

"It [connection with Syrians] makes me know Syria better. I am going to say something that would surprise you. I learned about Syria and Syrians, things that I would never have known if I had stayed in Syria. I met people from certain backgrounds and geographies I have never been exposed to in Syria (Ruba)".

Connecting with people from our homeland could revive our memories and keep the cultural side of the relationship with our homeland alive:

"Connecting with Syrians makes me recall my memories and relive the common culture that I have with them because I am meeting Syrians, speaking Arabic, and talking about common things and experiences, which strengthens a side of the relationship (Kamel)".

It could help some of us to feel the community, feel home in our togetherness, in our songs, in our jokes:

"You know the songs, the food, and the jokes all make you feel part a little bit of home (Rima)".

"It [connecting with Syrians] breaks the isolation and the loneliness that I experience in [city name]. There is a part of me that is dead, but is only revived when I am with Syrians. Sometimes I feel lost but I find myself wthen I am with Syrians (Qassem)".

It also helps us to rebuild some of the connections that we lost:

"I try to build connections with the new generation. I help new Syrian academics coming to my university and mentor academics in Syria. I like helping them, and at the same time, I am strengthening my connections with the new generations that I did not know before (Ruba)".

"I help Syrians here in the UK. I have helped more than one person get jobs in academia, come study in the UK, and find jobs. This makes me feel good and that I am connecting with Syria (Sami)".

The last factor my participants shared to impact the practical relationship with home is having **family in Syria**. Having our family and the people we care about in a particular place connects us with that place in many ways and keeps the practical part of the relationship alive. As Khatar described:

"I don't think my relationship [with Syria] is a memories relationship. Of course, memories are an important part of it, but the relationship is more tangible and practical. I have all of my family and friends in Syria, so my relationship is not just a romantic one. My relationship

is daily with the current reality, with the painful reality that people are experiencing to afford their basic needs (Khatar)".

Lubna highlights a particular aspect of her family that is particularly important to her:

"If I assume that my mother has left Syria, that the people I love have all left Syria, this will weaken my relationship with the country and make disconnecting easier. Especially my mother. You know what, my mother's house means a lot to me. I have been deprived of the sense of safety and ease one gets from being in one's mother's house. For me my mother's house felt like a sanctuary; it is where I can be a child no matter my age (Lubna)".

Kamel shares with me that having family in Syria makes him want to always understand the reality on the ground to feel assured:

"Having my family strengthen the practical side because it keeps me engaged with the news of Syria. You want to know what's happening and the economic and political situations that will impact your family (Kamel)".

Qasem highlights that having a family in Syria makes him want to believe that Syria is not gone and that things will get back to normal at a certain point. This is because what happens in Syria impacts his family:

"Of course, having my family there strengthens the relationship with Syria. Family is the basis. When I see people saying that Syria has gone, they are people who don't have family there. When you have family there, you stay connected and don't accept that Syria is gone (Qasem)".

People in exile are deprived of a fundamental need: to see their families, to hug them, and to grow old with them. This seems to increase the urge to visit our homeland and keeps the pain alive:

"I believe having family strengthen my relationship because it makes me hold on to the idea of going back to Syria because my mom and dad are there, and I haven't seen them in a long time, but this also makes me feel pain to be honest because you love to go down to Syria and

see them. You feel that the urge to visit Syria stay alive and increases when your close family are there (Ruba)".

However, not everyone believes that family impacts their relationship with their homeland. Sami thinks that his relationship with Syria is strong enough to the degree it will not get weakened if his family leave Syria:

"Let us assume that all of my family has migrated to Egypt. Does that weaken my relationship with Syria? I do not think so. Syria is my place of birth; I have a lot of beautiful childhood memories of it. These memories make me attached to the place, both the happy and sad memories (Sami)".

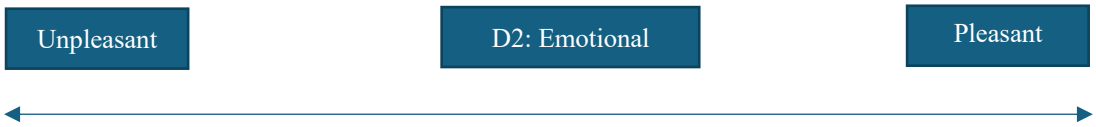
After listening to my participants share how having a family in Syria impacts their relationship with Syria, I started reflecting on my situation. It has been almost nine years without me being able to see my family—nine years of phone and video calls and virtual hugs and kisses. For me personally, the most significant factor that kept Syria alive in my head is my family; it is the hope to see them, to spend time with them like in the old days, and to give them a never-ending hug before it is too late.

6.2.2 Dimension Two: The Emotional Dimension

Belonging is usually described as an emotional feeling and attachment that comes with warmth and comfort. In the case of Syrian exiled academics, participants' answers show that their emotional attachment is based on one end on unpleasant emotions such as grief/sadness, guilt, and longing, and from the other end, is based on pleasant emotions such as empathy, love and pride. This is what I refer to as the emotional dimension, as visualised in Figure 5 below:

Figure 5

The Emotional Dimension of Belonging



The majority of the exiled academics described their relationship with Syria as an emotional relationship:

"There is a strong emotional relationship with Syria. Emotions towards people, places, and memories (Kamel)".

"I always describe my relationship with Syria with this sentence: I left Syria, but Syria never left me. Although I live in London, a big part of me is living in Syria emotionally or in my imagination (Khatar)".

However, in the case of exile and forced displacement, this emotional connection/dimension of our belonging to our homeland becomes very complicated to understand and unpack, even for the exiled people themselves:

"I feel estranged slightly; I don't know, obviously, this is just one of the feelings. I also feel sadness, a profound sadness. I also feel confused. I also feel longing; there is this sense of longing. Sometimes, I wish I could give them [Syrians] all hugs. But there are days I feel like, oh, you are driving me up the wall. Sometimes, I feel like I have mixed feelings. I have to say one day, I feel so much love, compassion, and guilt; other days, I feel much anger. It is mixed (Mirna)".

Analysing my participants' data has helped me to unpack three main factors that impact where they stand on the emotional dimension of their relationship with Syria. Firstly, their **previous experience** in Syria seems to affect their current emotions towards Syria. Our experiences in the place, the laughter, the heartbreak, the love, the time with family and friends, the social status, the achievements, and childhood all translate into certain emotions towards the place. When we leave the place, our perception of our previous experience seems to impact our current feelings towards it. For example, Ruba had good past experiences in Syria, which has reflected in having a strong positive emotional connection with Syria:

"I am originally a Palestinian, but I was born and lived in Syria, married a Syrian and got a Syrian passport. I did not feel once that Syria was not my country. Its laws treated me very fairly. Syria recognised my excellence and funded my studies, although, on paper, I am a refugee. Therefore, my relationship with Syria is solid. I consider it my homeland, I have a

strong emotional attachment to it, and I still belong to Syria as before and even more (Ruba)".

On the other end, Ahmad had a bad and challenging experience in Syria, which has reflected in having difficult emotional connections towards Syria:

"When I was in Syria, I got arrested twice because of joining the protests, and it was a painful experience mentally; things got terrible, and I couldn't cope anymore, so I wanted to leave. For me, I have difficult emotions towards Syria, and I do not consider it my homeland anymore (Ahmad)".

A second factor that seems to shape participants' emotions towards Syria understandably is **what happened to Syria** in the past 12 years. Syria, as a country and as a people, has experienced a lot. It experienced colossal pain, destruction, misery, and forced migration. Whole cities have been destroyed, and entire communities have vanished. As Syrians who grew up in Syria, love Syria, and care about Syria, participants shared that the pain they feel is strongly linked to what happened in Syria:

"My relationship with Syria happens to be through the people. I feel strong love towards Syrians but also strong pain. I feel this even for people I don't know and have never met. Every time I look at Syrians' faces and I look at videos for Syria, I feel pain. The amount of pain and injustices that Syrians experienced caused me a lot of pain. Whenever I look at their faces, I feel like I know them. I feel part of their pain even though I have not experienced what they experienced (Khatar)".

We also feel the loss. Loss is such a powerful concept that describes the experience of people who have experienced conflict and its consequences. The loss of family, social ties, marriage, financial and emotional stability and security, dreams, faith, and home. This makes some of us grief:

"My emotional connection with Syria is very strong. I do not know how to explain it to you. It is like the love of a very close person to you, your partner or your children. It is something on this level. And now I feel a constant sadness and grieve as if I lost a child (Qasem)".

Some of us also feel guilty because we have not experienced the war and have not suffered as other Syrians did:

"My situation is better than most of my generation for several factors, including luck and hard work. But there was always a feeling that I was guilty because I did not live the war details and did not need to live in camps or experience crossing the sea. Lately, I started reconciling with my guilt and getting rid of it (Bassam)".

Some of us feel guilty that we left our families and friends behind:

"Deciding between living in Syria and living here was a callous decision. I feel a lot of guilt towards my mom and dad that I cannot go and visit them. My mom has been sick for a year now, and I cannot go and check up on her. You feel everything is going against you, even your country, which sometimes makes me feel I want to disconnect (Mirna)".

Matar explains how the Syrian tragedy has benefited him professionally, and this feeds into his guilt feelings:

"We should confess that writing about Syria when there was a global interest has boosted our profession, contributing to the feeling of guilt and the complications of our relationship. We benefited from the war; we got attention, visibility, and opportunity because we are Syrians (Matar)".

The experience of the war, forced migration, loss, sadness, and guilt causes some of us to feel traumatised:

"I felt the last ten years have passed quickly because life in the UK is speedy. Sometimes, I feel I grew up 50 years. In those ten years, I convinced myself that everything was good, that I had everything and that I was strong and could tolerate everything fate would send me. But the truth is that the years of the war and forced migration have left me with a trauma like almost every Syrian abroad (Bassam)".

Khatar highlights that the collective trauma is what causes him more pain:

"What I am finding more painful or more impactful on my relationship with Syria is the collective loss or trauma that we have experienced. The people I know had a decent life, dignity, house, and esteem. They lost everything. I know I am privileged to be here, but knowing and feeling that I belong to a whole society that lost everything creates more pain than the personal pain of exile (Khatar)".

However, the amount of pain that we feel towards Syria is merged with solid empathy and love towards Syria and Syrians:

"I cannot describe my emotions towards the 25 million Syrians but I can describe my emotions towards their story. The horrendous events that they endured after 2011 generated immense empathy towards those who struggle because of war and displacement. I have a strong love towards them, and when I see someone in the street who tells me I am Syrian, my heart pounces (Lubna)".

The third and last factor that I found impacting people's emotional relationship with Syria is the **experience of exile** itself. Exile takes from us the very dear things in our hearts. It takes from us the chance to see our family and friends and relive our memories with them, to visit the places that mean to us, to live in our home and homeland, to speak our language, to eat our food, to listen to our music, and live the ordinary life that we used to have. This creates a yearning that usually manifests itself in a deep longing to relive the place and memories before it is too late before we lose the people that we want to relive these memories with:

"I miss Syria very much. I miss walking in the Jazamtia [a market in Syria]. When I lived in Damascus, I used to take my kids in Ramadan to walk in the Jazamtia before breaking our fast. I miss these things. I missed sitting on Qasyoun Mountain and looking at the city. I missed going to my parents-in-law's house and spending time with the family. I deeply missed these beautiful memories (Sami)".

"I miss Syria deeply: I miss the sensory experiences, the rituals of Damascene life, the vendors' calls from their vans. I have a strong and unrealistic attachment to the place (Lubna)".

However, for a lot of people in exile, this longing comes with a feeling of pain related to the possibility of 'return':

"What I always tell myself is that home is the family, community, friends, etc. But on a deeper level, there is a feeling that home will always be Syria, and there is a painful fear that I might not visit home again (Lubna)".

As explained previously, exile makes some of us feel that our relationship with Syria is a memories relationship, and this brings a feeling of loss and grief. A feeling that part of our life has ended, and we cannot relive it again:

"A big part of my relationship with Syria is memories. So, a big part of my life has ended. Therefore, I force myself to think that [Syria] is on one side and I am on the other (Matar)".

"The transition was very difficult. When I started losing meaningful social connections, I felt deep sorrow. I felt disoriented, as if hanging in the air. Part of one's self-understanding is lost with the loss of such relations. I was always missing them and seeking them elsewhere, but then after a while, I got used to living peacefully with that loss and soon enough, it was replaced by different, but equally meaningful, connections (Lubna)".

"There is a very intimate relationship I have with certain places in Syria. One of these spaces is my friend's kitchen. I had so many memories in this room that I wish I could relive. I miss these places a lot. I feel I lost the place and I grieve for this (Qassem)".

This feeling that our relationship with our country is becoming based on memories could act as a barrier to moving on:

"Sometimes, it is memories that make it hard for me to move on (Sinan)".

However, for other exiled academics, the fact that our relationship with Syria is becoming memories seems to help us move on and focus on our new lives in the new place. This allows us to accept the reality that Syria is becoming memories. When I asked Rima if having a memories relationship makes her feel sad, she replied:

"At a specific time, yes, but now the opposite. I think it is better [to become memories] so that I can move on and live. Syria is a memory that I like and preserve on the shelf. It is a place I love and have beautiful memories of my childhood in. I don't want to be very romantic now, but I imagine Syria as an ex-boyfriend. We broke up, but I still have some feelings for him. I keep my beautiful memories with them, but I moved on in life (Rima)".

All the above, and arguably other factors, reflect on the intensity of people's emotions. Our emotional connection with Syria is not static, and it is not one thing. It is a mix of emotions that some might go up while others might go down. For some exiled academics like Sinan and Kamel, exile duration is weakening their emotional connection with Syria:

"I feel that the emotional distance from Syria is increasing. When I left Syria, I used to always think of Syria and my friends, but now it is not that often. In the morning, while driving to work and drinking coffee, I listen to Fairouz [Famous Arabic/Lebanese singer]. This reminds me of friends and things and trips I used to do when I was in Syria, but not that much anymore. Every year, the emotions are getting less and less (Sinan)".

For others such as Lubna, Ruba, Qasem, and Bassam, their emotional connection with Syria is increasing. Khatar commented after living ten years in exile:

"The pain is not decreasing. I believe the majority of us [Syrians] have a difficult relationship with our homeland and our past. Sometimes, I try to run away from Syria and the past, but the more distance I am, the closer I feel I am from Syria. you run away from Syria and you found yourself in Syria. So running away has failed. And personally, the pain is not decreasing, the more injustice Syria face, the more pain I feel (Khatar)".

For people like Ahmad and Qasem, the emotional connection goes up and down in alignment with the level of misery in Syria:

"The emotional relationship goes ups and down. A couple of months ago, when the flood hit the camps, I got very much connected and involved with everything [Syria]. The months before it, I was very much disconnected (Ahmad)".

"Sometimes, I feel my emotions are numbed, but other times, I feel my emotions are very intense. When the earthquake in Idleb and fire in Lattakia happened, I felt very intense emotions towards Syria (Qasem)"..

For people like Matar, Qasem, and Mirna, their emotional connection is not increasing or decreasing but it is taking a different shape:

"I don't like to look at it that way [that it is decreasing over time]. I like to measure it using quality rather than quantity. I cannot tell you whether it is decreasing or increasing but I can tell you it is changing and it is becoming more mature (Mirna)".

"My emotional connection to Syria has not changed over time, but my emotions have taken different shapes based on the events and timeline of conflict (Qasem)".

6.2.3 Dimension Three: The Compatibility Dimension

In addition to the practical and emotional dimensions of their belonging, participants have emphasised how they change and how Syria changes on the political, social, and cultural levels, making their identity more compatible or incompatible with the collective. This, in turn, impacts their belonging to this collective. This is what I refer to in this section as the compatibility dimension:

Figure 6

The Compatibility Dimension of Belonging

I see a different person when I look at myself ten years ago and today. My political, cultural, religious, and philosophical grounds have changed dramatically. When we grow up in a place, we absorb its culture, habits, social cues, and right and wrong. Our parents, education, and social institutions shape who we are to a large degree, creating a certain level of homogeneity between society and culture. However, living for a long time outside our country could change who we are and how we think:

"Of course, my identity has changed. Being abroad, meeting different people and cultures, and reading different things changed my opinions and identity. Part of this is related to Syrian identity. I revisited many concepts that were perceived as common sense, or clear or easy (Kamel)".

Not only have we changed after years of exile, but our society has also changed. Societies are dynamic entities changing slowly but constantly. In Syria as a country that is experiencing war, the pace of change is even higher:

"Syria today is not Syria that I knew and grew up in. There is nothing in common between me and the current Syria. I don't even know the current Syrian society and how it became. I hear a lot that Syria has changed. People have changed. Life in Syria has changed. If I go back to Syria, I do not know how I will feel. Will I know the country or find a different culture and place? Therefore, I feel Syria is just an idea (Rima)".

The change that we have personally experienced and our country experienced could be in the opposite direction, which could create a feeling of incompatibility:

"To be honest, I don't feel there are many common things left between me and Syria. I am Syrian, and my culture is Syrian, but I think there is a gap now between me and Syria in who we are. This is not to say I am on the positive end, and Syria is on the negative end. Not at all. We just became different, and the gap is getting wider. As time passed, Syria became a humanitarian case rather than a country to which I feel I belong. The more Syria and I are becoming different, the less I feel I belong to Syria (Ahmad)".

This gap between us and Syria could have been wide even before leaving Syria:

"When I was in Syria, I always felt like an outsider. Now, I don't even know how Syrian society has changed. I could not visit Syria for 12 years, so I do not know how Syria changed, how I changed and if there is any compatibility. When I was in Syria, I felt that I could not stay there anymore. But the Syrian society is very humble and loving, so I have never had any hatred towards Syria, regardless of the many limitations that the society places on you. But I felt I did not belong. It is a difficult question, to be honest. I felt that I used to belong to Syria, but at the same time, I did not (Rima)".

This incompatibility is not necessarily cultural or social but could be mainly political:

"Being born to a religious minority [Alawite] is a main factor for feeling uprooted and disconnected from Syria, which, by the way [Alawite] doesn't reflect my beliefs but reflects where I grew up and who my family are. The sectarian attacks that I read sometimes on my sect made me feel very disconnected from Syria. What happened to Syria is the responsibility of the regime and not the Alawite sect. Having this opinion makes me always receive attacks. I hate the regime, but I don't support the other side because they are saying things that attack my family. That makes me feel that I don't belong to anyone and that I lost the place and the society (Qasem)".

"Two things that make me feel that I want to disconnect from Syria and that this country is not mine. The first one is when I hear about how and how much the country has changed, and the second is the absence of justice and the prevailing political oppression. From one end, this increases the pain, empathy, and love of Syria. On the other hand, I feel that this place is not mine anymore. Like I love it and hold it deep inside my heart, but as a physical place, it is not the same one that I loved (Lubna)".

The incompatibility could also be related to our political philosophy, mainly our perception of nationalism. In Syria, nationalism is embedded in the education system and has strongly shaped our belonging:

"My Syrian identity is the engine of all other identities. My belonging to Syria is extremely strong. It is my homeland. My relationship with Syria is organic and fundamental. I feel I am an organ of Syria, and Syria is an organ of me. I do not know why I have a strong national relationship. Is it because of the Ba'th nationalistic curriculums in schools and how they planted in us the belonging to the nation? (Qasem)".

Qasam's comment above really got me thinking about my upbringing. I spent my whole life deeply believing in and revering the nation, its borders, flag, anthem, the "us" and "them" mentality, the national leader, and our history. I can still vividly recall standing in the school hall every Sunday and Thursday, singing the national anthem and saluting the leader. I remember the nationalism book that I was expected to memorise better than my own name.

National identity used to be such a profound connection to my homeland for me, but as I embarked on the journey of exile, the meaning of nationalism started to fade. I began to see nationalism as a force that breeds conflict and suffering, creating the “other”, displacing of the “other”, and demonising of the “other”. It made me blindly follow the nation and defend its wrongdoings.

Lubna shares with me her disgust of the concept of nationalism:

“I reject the concept of the nation-state. I think they are ridiculous inventions. I hate this concept. Nationalism taken to its extreme, leads to fascism. I belong to tribes. I mean to people, to friends, to people who speak my language. I belong to people, not to nations (Lubna)”.

Sinan commented on what made him lose his nationalist fervour:

“I think the Syrian Civil War and the turbulent events that it included, such as witnessing what is supposed to be the "national army" committing massacres, followed by the rise of extremist Islamist groups like ISIS wreaking havoc across the country, have caused many Syrians, including myself, to lose their nationalist or even religious fervour (Sinan)”.

When some people in exile move towards becoming A-nationalists or anti-nationalists, this does not mean they do not belong to Syria anymore. However, this could mean that one element of their belonging to Syria has dropped and that their belonging to Syria becomes to people, places, and suffering, not to the sacred flag, borders, and anthem anymore:

“When I travelled, my relationship with Syria changed in a way that I started to question many things. In the end, all nations are artificial entities. So, do I belong to Syria from a nationalistic point of view and the flags and so on? No, I don’t (Kamel)”.

“Of course, there is still a relationship with Syrians. This is because of our common background and experience rather than national belonging. My relationship with Syria is built on history and common culture. I don’t know which year you were born; however, people similar to my age have grown up in the same temporal context. We had the same interests; we watched the same TV shows. This makes us understand and relate to things that

not everyone can relate to. We use a similar colloquial. So this is what connects me with Syrians (Kamel)".

Therefore, our relationship could also turn into a humanitarian relationship, especially when we continue to have a strong connection with the people:

"Today, on the national level, I don't consider Syria as my homeland. It is a country in which I have good and bad memories, and there are people I like in it, and there has been a humanitarian disaster. Today, my relationship with Syria is humanitarian. There is a humanitarian connection more than a national connection. (Ahmad)".

However, the majority of exiled academics are aware of the fact that Syria cannot be looked at as one entity and that they cannot describe their relationship with Syria with a dichotomy of compatible or incompatible:

"I don't think Syria is a homogenous entity, nor is any country. There are social milieus and socio-cultural spaces within Syria that are completely incompatible with my values, life choices, and personality. But there are pockets of homogeneity where I get a sense of belonging that is impossible to find elsewhere (Lubna)".

"I have reservations about looking at Syria as one entity. There are people there who share with me what I believe and those who do not. Syria is very diverse and cannot be reduced (Bassam)".

Yet, our perception of how different the place is from us seems to play a role in our relationship with the place:

"If I go back to Syria, I believe I will struggle to adapt because there are a lot of differences between who I am today and Syria. I have changed, and my personality has evolved. I believe the more I have in common with the place I am in and the surrounding culture, the more I will feel connected with the place and vice versa (Bassam)".

6.3 Dilemmas in Exile

Since my exile started in 2015, my relationship with Syria began to become very complicated to the degree that I couldn't understand it, make sense of it or explain it. Do I belong to Syria, or do I not? Do I love Syria, or do I not? Do I want to go back to Syria, or do I not? Should I work on Syria, or should I not? I don't have an accurate answer to all of this. I feel the answer is yes and no at the same time. Sometimes, I felt Syria and I were on the opposite pole. Sometimes, I felt I was very close to Syria. Sometimes, I felt I wanted to run away from Syria, and sometimes, I felt I wanted to run towards Syria. What is clear to me is that I am living in a world of ambivalence and dilemmas.

(The Researcher Reflexivity Journal, 12 Dec 2021, title: Living in a world of ambivalence)

In this section, I am presenting my participants' dilemmas in exile. My heuristic journey with my participants enlightened me to understand that exile, by its nature, leads us to have a troubled relationship with our homeland, which is characterised by being ambivalent. In particular, I will present five dilemmas facing people in exile. These are: what helps exiled people also triggers their traumas, living two extremes of emotions, when one's homeland does not feel like a home, missing what no longer exists, and wanting to connect with their homeland but also disconnect.

6.3.1 Dilemma One: What Helps Also Triggers

As described in the previous section (6.2), exile complicates our relationship with our homeland. We lose the embodied dimension of belonging to our countries, and our relationships become based on memories. Our emotions become very intense, feeling the loss, pain and grief—a loss of people, homeland, stability, community, memories, hope, and identity. Many of us deal with the complexity of our relationship with our homeland through social media, working on our homeland, connecting with people from the same country and staying in touch with family and friends back home. These factors bring a practical element to our relationship with our homeland, stop our relationship from becoming entirely based on memories, and decrease the pain that results from the memories relationship. However, participants have shared that these factors also seem to trigger painful feelings and past traumas, adding a troubled element to their relationship.

Social media serves as a virtual space that allows us to stay connected with our home country, our old friends, social networks, and our culture. It also provides a means to keep up with the changing dynamics in our homeland. However, for some individuals, social media can also evoke complex emotions by connecting them with past pain and suffering:

"You can imagine what we see on our news feeds: the Syrian misery, the longing for homeland, the tough economic situation of people. You cannot escape the negative effect of social media (Bassam)".

Also, social media could be a space where some people experience political bullying:

"Everyone attacks you on social media. Some people call you opposition, and some call you loyalists. I stopped completely because I did not want to use social media anymore. I don't want to see the news. I need to move on with my life (Mirna)".

For these reasons and others, a lot of people deactivate their accounts:

"When the war started, I was using social media a lot. But in certain stages, you feel that you need to save yourself. Syrians have traumas, and deleting social media was a way to save me from the constant trauma (Khatar)".

"When I was really struggling, I deactivated social media for years. This has made me feel relieved (Rima)".

When we discussed Social Media, my participants reminded me of the countless times I found myself unable to hold back tears while browsing through social media. They reminded me of watching the heart-wrenching images of Syrian children being rescued from the rubble after their homes were hit by rockets, the story of young Kurdish boy Allan, who washed ashore in Turkey after his family's tragic journey across the Mediterranean Sea, and the many families undertaking perilous journeys in search of safety. They also reminded me of the devastating situation in Yarmouk Camp, Syria, where families were suffering from starvation due to political reasons, waiting for a bleak fate.

In addition to social media**, working on topics related to our homeland** gives us knowledge of our country, helps us to know the people on the ground and understand the changing dynamics, and connects us with the country's present and future. This, however, seems to also connect some of us with the problematic reality which could be triggering for some:

"Syrian has given me trauma. At one point, I thought of leaving my work (on Syria); maybe this is how my mental health would get better by not doing anything related to Syria. I thought to go and work at an organisation that deals with people with special needs. I fear that engaging more with Syria or in a different capacity than the current one (research) might bring difficult memories or trigger trauma (Sinan)".

It could exhaust some of us, drain our energy and make us feel constantly vulnerable:

"At this stage of life, I feel that I do not have energy for mental exhaustion. My presence in any environment that is charged with fear and memories [Work on Syria] makes me feel very tired. I feel very vulnerable in such space (Lubna)".

And for some of us whose work is to write and do research on Syria, our work even prevents us from going back to Syria:

"In certain moments, for example, before I click on the bottom submit [to academic journals], I think to myself, this will come at a high personal cost: not being able to visit Syria anymore. I mean, I feel that I am taking a step towards the point of no return. But at the same time, [being silent and complicit] is not an option (Lubna)".

Lubna's remarks prompted me to reflect on a conflict that has been a part of my life since I began my PhD. Some of my published work reflects a deep-seated desire to shed light on the situation in Syria and to expose how political institutions are using education for indoctrination and manipulation. Writing about these political issues has been my way of coping with guilt and contributing to my country by resisting authoritarianism through research. However, delving into political topics solidifies my status as an exile and diminishes the possibility of ever returning to Syria, which is one of my greatest fears. This dilemma between following my convictions and forfeiting the chance to go back home appears to be a common experience among academics living in exile.

Connecting with people in exile from the same country reminds us of home. It helps us rebuild some of the connections that we lost and feel community and home in our togetherness, in our songs, and in our jokes. It revives our memories and keeps the cultural side of the relationship with Syria alive. It gives us hope. However, it could also trigger a certain difficult feeling. At the same time, connecting with Syrians could be a reminder of everything we lost, of the fact that we do not have a home, that life has changed, and that Syria is destroyed:

"Connecting with them brings me joy, allowing me to engage in spontaneous conversations and talk about our new lives, including the shared possibilities and challenges we face in the UK (Sinan)". However, with some Syrians, it does [bring difficult feelings]. For example, when talking to my parents, most of the discussion revolves around their previous life in Syria and their nostalgia. This makes it challenging for me to focus on my current life and avoid constantly bringing up painful memories of the war. (Sinan)".

Therefore, some of us might feel the need to distance ourselves from relationships that cause difficult feelings:

"My connection with Syria is separated from my relationship with Syrians abroad for many reasons, including the fatigue and setbacks that each of us is experiencing. Sometimes, you feel that the distance from other Syrians helps you to recover, but connecting with Syrians is also helpful in exile to keep our cause alive (Khatar)".

Having family in our homeland connects us to our homeland and keeps our relationship with Syria. It makes us want to understand the reality on the ground as it impacts our families; however, having family in Syria could cause us to feel a lot of pain:

"When I talk to my family, I put on a mask to not make them feel that I am struggling. I try to be optimistic and tell them things will improve, but it takes a toll on me. After each call, I cry or feel depressed (Mirna)".

"I feel also that they[family] are becoming more distanced from me. I mean, they are not connected with my personal life anymore. Also, there are difficult feelings resulting from

fearing the future. I mean, they are getting old, and you think of this all the time and worry about what you do in such cases (Kamel)".

Having family [in Syria] causes me anxiety. I find myself monitoring the US dollar exchange rate because this impacts my family's financial survival (Qasem)".

6.3.2 Dilemma Two: Living Between Two Extremes of Emotions

A lot of people in exile live between two extremes. From one end, there is love and empathy; from the other, there is pain, longing and grief. This makes our relationship with Syria to have a troubled element:

"My relationship with Syria is deep and troubled at the same time. Syria was my world. Now, Syria is a wound that cannot be healed. The feeling of pain and injustice is mixed with the feeling of deep love and empathy (Lubna)".

"The oppression that happened in Syria makes me feel deep emotions and empathy for Syria. You feel this country has experienced huge injustices, and what happened to Syria is very unfair and that gives strong weight to my emotions. However, my relationship with Syrians is extremely complicated. There is love and hatred. (Qasem)".

For some, this deep love for Syria is merged with trauma:

"Of course, [the relationship] is very compilated. From one end, this is my country, and I should contribute to it, even if just intellectually, to be driven by questions arising from the country. On the other end, there is trauma, disappointment, and rejection towards Syria because people are treated as if they are worthless there (Matar)".

After interviewing my participants, I asked myself about my emotions towards Syria. I love Syria. It is the country where I had my childhood and best memories. The country gave me and made me who I am, and I always feel indebted to Syria and its people. At the same time, I have complicated feelings towards Syria. It is the country that made me feel constant pain for the last 12 years since the war started. I feel profound loss, pain and grief. A loss of people, homeland, stability, community, memories, hope, and identity.

After speaking with my participants, I took a moment to reflect on my emotions toward Syria. I hold a deep love for Syria, as it is the place where I cherished my childhood and created my most precious memories. The country has played a significant role in shaping who I am today, and I will always feel grateful to Syria and its people. However, my feelings toward Syria are complex. Over the past 12 years of war, I have experienced constant pain. I carry a sense of profound loss, enduring pain, and deep sorrow. I mourn the loss of people, my homeland, stability, community, cherished memories, hope, and even my own identity.

6.3.3 Dilemma Three: It is our homeland, but it does not feel like a home

The concept of home is multi-layered, and the meaning of home differs from person to person. What emerges from my participants is that the idea of home for exiled academics is connected to notions of safety, security and stability:

"I feel safe and secure emotionally, financially and physically (Sinan)".
"I feel stability and security (Matar and Bassam)".
"I feel legal, social and financial security (Kamel)".
"Where I feel safe (Rima, Ommar, Qasem)"
"where I can live safely with my kids and husband (Ruba)".
"safe in the wider understanding of the word: financially, professionally, socially and politically (Sami)".

When home means such feelings, then how could we call Syria a home? Syria does not give us safety, security and stability anymore. Syria, in one way or another, is the place that deprived us of these important feelings.

Participants also shared that home is linked to the community, family and social ties. It is where:

" I have strong social ties (Sinan)".
" My familiy, friends, and community are (Lubna)"
"I can build a family or be surrounded by people I care about (Bassam)".

When our social connections in Syria get dismantled, our friends and families get scattered all over the world, and when our kids, partners and communities are rooted outside Syria, then how can Syria feel like our home?

Home is also a various thing. It is where:

"I can imagine I can get older (Matar)".
" I can be myself, and I can reconcile with myself. It is where I am not two people wanting two contradicting things (Mirna)".
"where I can be a productive person and where I can achieve my ambition (Rima)".
"where I can do immaterial things that I care about, such as my writings and art (Khatar)".

How can Matar feel Syria as home when Syria's unpredictability and insecurity do not allow him to imagine himself growing older in Syria? How can Mirna be herself when she already struggled before leaving Syria from a society that controlled what she could and could not do? How can Rima be productive in Syria and achieve her ambition when what is happening in the country kills the smallest ambitions? How can Khatar feel at home in Syria when his writings and arts could send him to prison indefinitely?

We struggle to feel Syria as our home for all of the above reasons. However, home is also the following and therefore, Syria is also our home. It is where

"I lived for a long time and had my childhood (Qasem)".
"We lived the majority of our lives (Kamel)".
"Our childhood home and parents' home (Lubna)".
"All the memories we have knitted with friends, neighbours and colleagues that have kept me warm over the years (Mirna)".

However, as Qasem explained, the feeling of home is on a spectrum:

"It is not a yes-no feeling. I feel a little bit of home here [in Manchester]. When I am away, I feel at home whenever I arrive at Manchester airport. But compared to my old home, the feeling is fragile. Therefore, I believe the feeling of home is multi-level. It is on a scale (Qasem)".

We all want to have a homeland and feel at home. However, when people lose this feeling, it seems like home becomes "*everywhere and nowhere* (Sinan, Khatar)". It becomes a concept that people "*don't know what it means as [I] cannot describe what [I] don't have!* (*Ahmad*)". Home and homeland become ideas for some:

"I have a feeling of love for the idea that I might one day have a homeland. When I was in Syria, I never felt this need or even thought about it. Maybe my need to feel that I have a homeland stems from losing this feeling towards Syria. We became very conscious about it, and we often have conversations about it, and we start asking ourselves: where do I belong, and where is my homeland (Ahmad)?".

Contemplating the concept of home, I never doubted that Syria was my home during my upbringing and time in Syria. It encompassed my past, present, and future. It was where I was born, and where my family, career, memories, friends, and entire world resided. Despite facing challenges in Syria, I always referred to it as home. However, after eight years in exile, the question of whether Syria is still my home has become complex. Can I consider Syria my homeland and home? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because my family, physical house, roots, childhood memories, strong emotional connection, and Syrian citizenship are all there. No, because I have been unable to visit Syria for nine years, and the country has caused me significant suffering. Syria no longer resembles the place I once knew; my friends have departed, and it no longer provides the comfort I need to feel at home. I believe Syria is now a home of the past, preserved in my memories and carried with me wherever I go.

6.3.4 Dilemma Four: Missing What No Longer Exists

I miss Syria, I miss my friends, I miss my home, I miss the community, I miss the social 'cohesion' that we used to believe in, and I missed the social and familial dynamics that I was part of. I miss my naivety in thinking Syria is the best place in the world. All of that became in the past. Yes, I miss the past. I miss the non-existed. I miss the memories, and this is the case for Kamel and Sinan:

"There is an emotional relationship, a big part of it is towards memories. Memories of things and a life that is non-existent anymore, and this complicates things. Everything I left in Syria has changed. The things I miss or remember are not there anymore. If I take the aeroplane

and go back, will I find them? No. This is because I am ultimately going back to a different place. Therefore, my emotions are towards non-existent things (Kamel)".

"If I want to go back, it will be to see my friends, many of whom have either died or been displaced. I would also like to visit my grandparents, all of whom have passed away, and see their houses, which were destroyed. Additionally, I would love to spend time in the beautiful [town name], but it was tragically burnt. Everything I desire to revisit is non-existent now! (Sinan)".

Even if we managed to visit Syria, would that revive our relationship with Syria? This is a question that maybe every person in exile wonders about. The hard truth could be that exiled people not only left their places in a specific geography but also left it at a specific time. We could go back to the place geographically, but we cannot go back in time. Kamel reflects on his first visit after 12 years of leaving Syria:

"When you visit, you realise that the memories of the place you had in mind are non-existent anymore, so you realise that you are longing for non-existent things. You realise there is no going back as the place has changed dramatically. You can find the same places you were born and grew up in, but the place has changed dramatically. The visit confirmed what everyone had told me: that Syria is not the same (Kamel)".

Mirna reflects that she misses some aspects of Syria:

"I miss Syria, I love Syria, and I am Syrian to the core, but I have huge reservations about Syria because my mindset is different—the mindset of the collective society used to annoy me. I miss the group, I miss the family, and I miss the collective environment, but with huge reservations. I miss my version of Syria (Mirna)".

When I think of Syria, two contrasting versions come to mind: the idealised dream of Syria and the harsh reality. The dream version represents the country I cherish, where I spent my formative years surrounded by friends and family. It is the country that bravely stood against dictatorship, the embodiment of the future we aspire to create, where human rights are upheld. On the other hand, the real Syria is shrouded in darkness, a stark contrast to the utopia I envisioned. In longing for the non-existent, Lubna believes that Syria turns into an idea:

"I still have a strong emotional connection with, an attachment to, and a love, interest and yearning towards Syria as a romantic idea, but not to Syria the country. My love for Syria the idea has never stopped (Lubna)".

6.3.5 Dilemma Five: Want To Connect With Homeland But Also Disconnect

As we navigate through various dilemmas (and arguably others that this thesis did not unpack), we often find ourselves torn between the desire to stay connected with Syria and the need to disconnect. Syria is my homeland, and I have always felt a strong desire to contribute to its betterment. I feel I want to support Syria, work for Syria, rebuild Syria, and study Syria. At the same time, I also feel the urge to distance myself from Syria, to move forward, to pursue my own life, and to alleviate the pain I carry. This internal conflict is something many people in exile experience. If they choose to disconnect, they may grapple with feelings of shame and guilt for abandoning their loved ones. On the other hand, staying involved means enduring constant emotional distress. This dilemma introduces a troubled aspect to our relationship with Syria. Sinan's reflections highlight how his bond with Syria brings pain, while distancing himself makes him feel inhumane:

"Syria has given me Trauma. At one point, I thought of leaving my work (on Syria); maybe this is how my mental health would get better by not doing anything related to Syria. I thought to go and work at an organisation that deals with people with special needs. I fear that engaging more Syria or on a different capacity than the current one (research) might bring difficult memories or trigger trauma (Sinan)".

Matar connected this dilemma to the trauma mechanism, and he further believes that disconnecting from Syria is not an option:

"Trauma operates in a conflicting way. It makes you want to connect with Syria, support Syria, and alleviate the suffering. When you do this, your trauma is constantly triggered, and you feel you want to disconnect. So trauma makes you want to connect and disconnect from Syria at the same time (Matar)".

"I do think I have an option not to feel emotionally and mentally excused when connecting with Syria. I cannot decide not to have trauma or anxiety. This is part of my generation. Of course, we should deal with the trauma, but disconnecting is not an option. Especially for academics, intellectuals, and artists. It is a duty to connect and try to make a change (Matar)".

This dilemma of wanting to connect with Syria but also disconnecting extends to being torn between the desire to go back but, at the same time, not wanting to go back. Several of my participants live through this dilemma:

"I don't know if I want to go back to Syria. If I am going back, then purely from an ethical ground, not a national ground or because I love Syria. I feel there is a need for my profession and a duty to help there. This is the only reason I think of returning (Ahmad)".

"I cannot settle this argument (of going back) because this depends on a lot of factors. I mean, I don't know what Syria will look like in the future. I love the region, and I love the idea of going back; I have my personal reasons to go back (family), and therefore, it is an open decision. However, I struggle to see how this could happen in light of the situation in Syria and my discipline, which requires the HE sector to be different (Kamel)".

The words of Ahmad and Kamel have really made me reconsider how I approach this dilemma. I truly believe that I should consider returning to Syria. It holds a special place in my heart, and I feel a strong sense of responsibility towards it. I believe that the future of Syria depends on individuals like myself, and so I feel an obligation to go back. Additionally, my family is in Syria, and it has been nine long years since I last saw them. However, I also feel a deep reluctance and fear about returning to Syria. It no longer feels like home to me, and I worry about my safety there. The political, social, and economic conditions do not provide an environment where I can thrive. I've built a new life here, and I've grown accustomed to it. Both I and Syria have changed over the years.

6.4 Discussion

This chapter has delved into how Syrian academics perceive the exile experience, belonging in exile, and dilemmas in exile. Starting with the exile experience, this research has highlighted

how exile is a painful forced separation from home for political reasons. This aligns with the exile literature that conceptualises it mainly as a painful experience, punishment and separation from home (e.g. Peters, 1999; Said, 2001; Um, 2006). Furthermore, several of my participants highlighted that their exile started at home when they felt marginalised and oppressed and continued even after visiting home. They used exile as a metaphorical condition (Pearlman, 2022) for their estrangement in their homeland. Additionally, one participant (Khatar) highlighted that his exile feeling continued even after he got citizenship. This implied that the exile feeling could be permeant for some. Elsehamy (2022), in their exploration of Yassin al-Haj Saleh's conceptualisation of Exile, highlighted that exile has a liminal nature that persists. Al- Haj Salaeh perceived that the exile feeling is a result of the temporal and special distance from home. In other words, as long as we are temporally distant from home, exile persists. However, one of the participants (Kamel) highlighted that he felt exiled even after he visited the home. We can infer from this that once the temporal distance takes place between exiled people and their homes, the spatial distance does not make a big difference anymore. This is because home has a temporal element, and for people in exile, it is "left behind in another time and is therefore experienced as a previous and irretrievable home" Boer (2015, p. 486).

Although exile has a liminal nature and could be constant as Said (1996) conceptualised, some of the participants (e.g. Sinan) showed that exile is not a constant state in people's lives. Its nature is dynamic, with intensity fluctuating based on various contextual factors. This thesis demonstrates that factors such as time, community and family, rebuilding life, financial and professional stability, and maintaining hope all contribute to reducing the intensity of exile. Over time, emotions become less overwhelming, allowing individuals to accept, adapt, and develop coping mechanisms for dealing with exile. The presence of a supportive community helps compensate for the loss experienced through forced displacement, providing relief and fostering a sense of collective unity in exile. Establishing and nurturing families in exile or bringing family members from Syria helps alleviate the emotional burden of exile, anchoring individuals in their new country and restoring a sense of belonging. Additionally, rebuilding lost professional and financial stability and security aids individuals in reconstructing their lives and restoring what was lost.

Exile literature seems to focus on the individual experience (e.g Naficy, 1999; Said, 1996, 2001; Um, 2006). However, when exile takes place as a collective phenomenon, the individual experience of exile is shaped partially by the collective dynamics of this phenomenon,

potentially intensifying and/or alleviating the associated hardships. The field of sociology is very helpful in understanding how the experience of forced migration varies according to factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, region, or religious identity (Stepputat & Sørensen, 2014). Focusing primarily on the Syrian context, findings show that one participant (e.g. Qasem) experienced what feels like "double exile," where members of the Alawite minority face political exile due to opposition to the authoritarian regime, as well as social exile within the Syrian exiled community due to their religious identity as a minority.

Lastly, one distinction in the literature between refugees and exiles is that refugees have less agency as they move against their will, whereas exiles have more agency as they choose their exile location (Elsehamy, 2022). Although this might be true, the research findings show that the concept of agency plays an important role in shaping the experience of exile; therefore, examining the nuances of how agency manifests itself in exile is crucial to understanding the experience of exile. This is because participants show a clearly different experience and perception of exile based on how they perceive their agency regarding topics such as leaving, returning, and resisting. For example, Sami and Ruba cannot return to Syria for legal reasons rather than political; therefore, they feel less exiled. Bassem feels he can return to Syria, but he is refusing to return and legitimise the regime, and therefore, he feels he has agency.

As for the concept of belonging, literature has tried to define and conceptualise belonging (e.g. Antonsich, 2010; Nagel, 2011; Pearlman, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2011), differentiate between the sense of belonging and the politics of belonging (e.g. Nagel, 2011; A. Taylor, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2011), and distinguish between belonging to (the struggle to belong) and belonging with (how people show their belonging) (e.g. Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013). They further attempted to understand how people re-practice their belonging in host societies after forced migration (e.g. Brown, 2011; Gerharz & Land, 2018; Madenoglu, 2022; Webb & Lahiri-Roy, 2019) and the barriers facing people to belong to the new setting (e.g. Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015; Blunt & Bonnerjee, 2013; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013; Webb & Lahiri-Roy, 2019). However, none of the literature on belonging has attempted to understand how forced migrants' belonging changes to their countries of origin. In this thesis, findings show that we need to examine three dimensions of people's relationship to their homeland to understand their evolving belonging: the practical, emotional, and compatibility dimensions.

Regarding the practical dimension of belonging, literature shows how the embeddedness in a place fosters a strong sense of belonging (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013; Taylor, 2009). Meanwhile,

Said's (2001) conceptualisation of exile and memories highlights their interconnectedness. This implies that being exiled from a place is the antithesis of being deeply rooted and embedded in it, which could serve as an initial explanation for the practical aspect of belonging. The experience of being in a place provides an embodied and practical sense of belonging. In contrast, being away from the place relegates our belonging to memories. This means the more temporal distance exiled academics have from Syria, the more their relationship is based on memories. To resist this, this study found that several factors keep the practical relationship of exiled academics alive with Syria, including working on Syria-related projects, utilising social media, staying connected with Syrians abroad, and having family in Syria. These factors serve to keep the practical nature of their relationship with their homeland alive by enabling them to stay informed about the evolving dynamics in their countries, assisting them in maintaining or reestablishing connections with friends, family, and culture, and facilitating the development of new social connections with individuals in their country of origin.

In addition to the practical dimension, literature shows how belonging is an emotional feeling of being at home (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). With this feeling usually comes an emotional attachment not only to people but also to spaces and sites, landscapes, and material possessions (Nagel, 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013). Therefore, belonging has an emotional dimension. However, this research indicates that exiled academics maintain a complex emotional connection to Syria that differs from the traditional understanding of belonging. Rather than simply feeling "at home," this group's emotional connection with Syria becomes a mix of intense emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant. The study further highlights three key factors influencing the emotional dimension of their relationship with Syria. First, their past experience in Syria significantly influences their emotions towards Syria. Research on forced migration emphasises that our perception of our past experience in a particular place significantly influences our feelings toward it (e.g. Matos et al., 2022; Pearlman, 2022). This was evident in the case of exiled academics who exhibited conflicting emotions towards Syria based on their contradictory past experiences there. Second, the current situation in Syria significantly influences exiled academics' emotions towards Syria. Literature has demonstrated how exiled individuals endure daily stress and suffering following their flight due to the ongoing conflict in their home countries (e.g. Matos et al., 2022). For exiled academics in the UK, this suffering often takes the form of feelings of loss, guilt, grief, and sadness. Thirdly, exiled academics' own experience of exile also significantly influences their emotions towards Syria. Exile itself is an incredibly challenging experience that strips

individuals of fundamental aspects of their well-being. It deprives people of the opportunity to be with loved ones, visit childhood places, reside in their home and home country, communicate in their own language, enjoy their music, and live the everyday life they once cherished. Therefore, instead of categorising exiled people's feelings about their homeland as simply belonging or not, it is more accurate to recognise the complex emotions of their sense of belonging, which leads some people (e.g. Mirna) to disconnect from Syria.

As for the third dimension, compatibility, literature shows that belonging is not only an embodied experience or an emotional attachment to a place but also about the social positioning of our personal identity within a collective (Yuval-Davis, 2006). People need to feel some sense of acceptance and association with a group based on their perception of a group's aims, constitution or values (Gilmartin, 2008). From one end, this association might be hindered by the inclusion/exclusion criteria of the dominant group. However, on the other end, the association between individuals and collectives might weaken when individuals reject belonging and fitting into a collective that does not look like them or align with their values and principles. This suggests that belonging is about the compatibility or incompatibility between individual and collective identities. In the case of exiled academics, this thesis has found that the changes in their personal identity and Syria on political, social, and cultural levels can either make their identity more compatible or incompatible with the collective, affecting their sense of belonging. People and societies are constantly changing, which is even more pronounced in times of conflict. The changes experienced by exiles and their country may create cultural, social, or political incompatibility. This does not mean that society is a homogenous entity that we either fit in or not, but rather that our perception of how different we are from our place of origin shapes our relationship with that place.

Studies on migration, especially forced migration, have highlighted the challenges experienced by individuals in exile, displacement, and migration. These studies have focused on the concepts of the "myth of return" and the "myth of home" (e.g. Barnes, 2001; Braakman & Schlenkhoff, 2007; Gerharz & Land, 2018; Glazebrook, 2004; Muggeridge & Donà, 2006; A. Taylor, 2009). Research in this area has revealed that the idea of home is not only tied to a specific place but also to a particular time. For a lot of displaced people, home has not only been left behind in another place and geography but also has been left behind in another time (Boer, 2015). Factors such as physical and temporal distance, the upheaval caused by conflict, the breakdown of social networks, the transformation of the homeland, and post-war politics

of belonging make home never fully achieved even after 'return'. This body of literature sheds light on certain myths identified in this thesis, notably missing what no longer exists, and desiring to 'return' to homeland and stay in the country of residence. However, beyond the myth of 'return' and the myth of 'home', literature seems to pay less attention to the dilemmas facing people in exile.

One dilemma this thesis unpacked is what helps exiled people also triggers their traumas. Literature has discussed how certain factors help people in exile stay connected with their homeland, balance their relationship with their countries, and alleviate the pain of disrupting social and familial ties. These factors include social media (Madenoglu, 2022; Marino, 2015; Leurs, 2014), working on topics related to their homeland, including activism (Aouragh, 2008; Michaelsen, 2018), connecting with people from the same background in exile (Gerharz & Land, 2018), and having family in the home country (Barnes, 2001). However, the studies so far have not addressed how the same factors enabling migrants to maintain ties with their home countries and cultures may also contribute to their emotional struggles. This thesis demonstrates how these factors can lead to pain and suffering for exiled individuals, triggering their traumas, depleting their energy, and leaving them constantly vulnerable. As a result, there is a paradox: the very things that offer support to exiled individuals can also exacerbate their traumas.

Another dilemma that this thesis unpacked is living two extremes of emotions. Arguably, it is normal for people to have mixed feelings about their homeland; however, Taylor (2009) argues that exile sharpens people's emotional relationship with their homeland and renders it much more complex. Literature has discussed how belonging translates into an emotional attachment to people, spaces, sites, landscapes, and material possessions (Nagel, 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013). This emotional attachment results from people's memories and perception of their previous experience in that place, which fundamentally conditions how they feel towards it (Matos et al., 2022; Pearlman, 2022). Literature also highlighted how exile comes with a yearning and deep longing for an "absent homeland" (Brah, 1996, p. 180) and a grieve that homeland becomes a previous home, irrevocably lost both spatially and temporally as a result of the discontinuity, and more precisely, loss of home and homeland (Jansen & Löfving, 2007). Exile can also trigger deep sadness and trauma resulting from destruction and displacement and the loss of people, homeland, stability, community, memories, hope, and identity (Matos et al., 2022). The unique contribution of this thesis to the literature is its exploration of the

simultaneous and deeply felt pleasant and unpleasant emotions experienced by people living in exile. Unlike much of the existing literature, which tends to overlook this aspect, this thesis showed how exiled individuals navigate a complex dilemma, simultaneously living with two extremes of emotions. The deep love, pride and empathy are merged with the grief, sadness and trauma.

This thesis unpacked a third dilemma: when one's homeland does not feel like a home anymore. Homeland' and home are contested topics in social science. Home could be a private, familial and confined space such as the house where someone lives or the city and/or 'nation' where someone grew up (Jansen & Löfving, 2007). It is also a set of relationships with both humans and non-humans (Nowicka, 2007) and a lived experience of a locality (Brah, 1996). It is also people, objects, routines, landscapes, sounds and smells, parks, cafés, lived experiences, and friends that all make someone familiar (Herbert, 2012). Home is also where there is a sense of possibility, and we can dream and imagine a better future full of opportunities, improvements, and positive changes (Hage, 1997). Furthermore, Tucker (1994) argued that home is where people can be themselves, feel at ease, and express themselves freely and fully. These diverse interpretations of the home may help explain exiled academics' struggle to perceive Syria as their homeland and not their homeland. While Syria is our country of origin, where we grew up, hold citizenship, and speak the language, the absence of security, stability, and a sense of possibility, along with the breakdown of communities and social ties, makes it challenging to envision Syria as home. This ambiguity leaves exiled academics in a conflicted position towards their homeland.

Chapter 7: Exiled Academics and Higher Education Development

In the previous chapter, while answering the thesis' first research question, I presented a composite depiction of exile, unpacking the experience of exile, belonging in exile, and dilemmas in exile. This chapter moves on to answer the second research question and its sub-questions:

Research Question 2: How do Syrian exiled academics envision their potential role in the future of Syria?

Sub-question 1: What is their motivation to contribute to their homeland?
Sub-question 2: What are the barriers that limit their envisioned role?

Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter is divided into four subsections. The first three correspond to the above three questions. Section 7.1 unpacks exiled academics' potential role, section 7.2 unpacks their motivation, and section 7.3 unpacks the barriers to engagement. The fourth section, 7.4, discusses the findings in light of the broader literature.

7.1 Exiled Academic's Potential role in the future of Syria

The question of my potential role in my country's future is becoming a central question in my life. Will I contribute or have the chance to contribute to the future of my country, or will I not? How would I do this in one of the most complicated contexts in the world, in a place with which I have a highly complex relationship? What about the higher education sector, which my future engagement with Syria probably would be through? How will I navigate the complexity of working with such a problematic sector serving an authoritarian political agenda?

(The Researcher Reflexivity Journal, 12 December 2022, title: Will I ever be able to contribute?).

In this section, I am presenting my participants' potential role in the future of Syria. To answer this research question, this section will unpack the vision of exiled academics for the future of their homeland, the HE sector, and their potential role in Syria. This heuristic journey with my participants enlightened and helped me understand that exiled Syrian academics envision Syria as a democratic and open country with freedom, social justice, and economic development while preserving its cultural heritage. As for the HE sector, exiled Syrian academics envision the sector to have academic freedom and independence, good governance, participatory pedagogies, and a research culture. Lastly, exiled academics envision their potential role in the future of Syria by supporting the HE sector on three levels: students, academics and institutions level.

7.1.1 Vision of Syria

Understanding exiled academics' vision for the future of Syria helps us understand the shape of their engagement. Based on their lived experience in Syria, participants' visions for the future of Syria include interconnected categories such as freedom, social justice, democracy, openness, economic prosperity, and cultural preservation and change.

Syria is sadly a country that has been living under an oppressive dictatorship for more than 50 years. A dictatorship that oppressed people, silenced their voices, and took their rights. Therefore, it is not a surprise that exiled academics long for **freedom, dignity, and the absence of oppression**:

"I imagine Syria as a place where people feel that they are living with dignity without the fear of oppression and without being excluded because of their identity. To feel that their country is theirs and they have a voice" (Khatar).

"I wish to Syria what any person wishes to their society….. that people have freedom and rights. People are treated with fairness and dignity. A place where people live, feel worthy, and can imagine a good future (Matar)".

"I wish for Syria to become a free country without any form of oppression and exclusion. People have the freedom to choose any faith they want to believe in and the right to be whatever they want to be. At the end of the day, we don't want to replace a political dictatorship and an oppressive system with any other form of dictatorship or oppression (Sinan)".

Bassam, coming from a rural place, wishes:

"People live together in harmony, and there is no big difference between rural and urban areas. To pay attention to rural areas so that people do not need to leave for cities so that they work and develop (Bassam)".

In addition to the absence of oppression, exiled academics emphasised in their vision that they hope for Syria to be more **open and diverse**:

"I would love Syria to become a more open country where people accept each other and their differences more (Sami)".

"I really wish that people have the freedom to say whatever they want and be themselves (Mirna)".

"I wish to see internal and external openness to a big degree in the political, cultural and religious spheres (Kamel)".

The vision my participants shared about a more open and diverse Syria prompted me to reflect on my own experiences. Growing up in Syria, I had the privilege of befriending and interacting

with people from various religions and sects. Despite the warmth of these interactions, I often felt a deep-seated tension. This tension arose from the stark contrast between the lovely interactions I had with the ‘others’ and the messages conveyed by my culture and religion, which often encouraged animosity towards the 'others'. I was surrounded by myths about the ‘others’ and that the 'others' harboured hatred towards me. However, I found it challenging to discuss these differences openly with anyone - not my parents, friends, teachers, and surely not with the ’others’ themselves. We were raised in a system that treated our differences as something to be hidden and suppressed rather than acknowledged and reconciled. Conversations about our differences were always conducted in hushed tones, fueled by the fear of potential repercussions from the government. The Syrian government's approach to managing diversity was centred around suppression rather than fostering understanding. By discouraging open discussions about sects and religions, it effectively perpetuated a sectarian agenda under the guise of maintaining order. After all, how can one confront a sectarian agenda if we are not even permitted to address the existence of different sects and religions openly?

Before the war, Syria had a relatively stable economy. However, the war in Syria has hit the economy very hard, leaving the majority of people living under the poverty line. Therefore, exiled academics shared their wishes for Syria to **recover economically**:

“I wish people's economic situation gets better. The financial difficulties of living in Syria and the absence of basic needs are a tragedy. That’s what I only want now. Once we do this, we can think of more ambitious things (Lubna)”.

“I wish Syria to be economically stable where resources are being invested rationally, and wealth is distributed fairly (Bassam)”.

“I wish people's livelihood to be secured without the fear of not affording the very basics to your family (Matar)”.

“People’s dignity comes from their ability to cover their basic needs (Qasem)”.

Having freedom, social justice, and democracy does not necessitate giving up on **the local culture**:

"I would like to see it developed like other nations but within the boundaries of our culture that we were brought up on. There is nothing that stops us from merging democracy with our culture. Nothing stops us from accepting all religions and sects of society. I believe our culture embraces these things (Sami)".

"I wish for Syria to build a prosperous economy built on a social market model in a way that does not follow the 'traditional' economic development that erases the local culture or follows the modernity. I mean the skyscrapers, towers material consumption, etc. (Kamel)".

However, that does not mean that the local culture does not need to change in some aspects. Kamel comments on this:

"I hope Syria gets rid of the nationalistic and religious tendency which has led to many problems we are witnessing today such as the totalitarian thinking (Kamel)".

Another point that one exiled academic wishes Syria to get rid of is corruption:

"I wish not to have the corruption we already have in Syria and to have people take responsibility. I wish they let people flourish rather than cut their wings. I am still in contact with many teachers in Syria who returned after finishing their degrees. They have an unlimited desire to give to Syria and are very creative and have amazing ideas, but every other day, they encounter attempts to cut their wings (Mirna)".

Reflecting on the visions of Syria shared by my participants has led me to contemplate my own dreams of Syria. It has been nine years since I left Syria, but Syria has never left me. What is evident to me is that Syria resides in my imagination and daydreams. I find solace in daydreaming about Syria; it brings me a sense of warmth and comfort. It allows me to envision a version of Syria that aligns with my aspirations – a democratic country governed by the rule of law, where equality and respect for human rights prevail, and everyone can lead a dignified life. A country to which we can return and reside in without the fear of persecution due to our political beliefs. A place where the Syrian diaspora, exiled and displaced Syrians, and those who remained in Syria can coexist peacefully, working together

to construct a Syria that nurtures us all. While these dreams may seem unattainable, they play a crucial role in shaping my involvement with Syria. I wholeheartedly embrace any opportunity to contribute to the advancement of this vision for Syria, and I am deeply hesitant to engage with Syria in any manner that undermines this vision.

7.1.2 Vision of HE in Syria

During my time in Syria, I never truly grasped the significant influence of the education sector in shaping the social, economic, and political order of the country. I never questioned how the education system perpetuated societal inequalities, sorted people into social classes, and became a tool for political manipulation and control. Similar to the preceding section, comprehending the aspirations of exiled academics for the higher education sector in Syria provides valuable insights into their potential involvement with this sector. Participants' vision for the HE sector in Syria encompasses academic freedom, autonomy, improved governance, innovative teaching and assessment techniques, and a conducive research environment, drawing from their experiences as both students and educators.

The majority of exiled academics highlighted their hopes for the sector to gain academic **freedom and independence**:

" I wish HE in Syria to have a free education where the higher education sector is an institution not under the control of any institution, whether religious or political (Sinan)".

" I wish we see the disconnection between higher education and politics. I mean, the management of the universities should not be serving the government's political agenda. It should allow the freedom of research and the freedom of speech (Matar)".

Lubna wishes for the HE in Syria to be de-securitised and de-ideologised:

"The design of higher education is a security, nationalistic and ideological apparatus. This sector is for critical thinking, free-thinking, and knowledge production. It is an engine for innovation. Today, universities are security apparatus or have a very intimate relationship with the security apparatus. So, there should be a disconnect, or we will never have a real education that embraces critical thinking. We will never have the freedom to design courses. I believe many Syrian academics have huge capabilities; however, in such an environment,

all of their capabilities will suffocate because there is no room for innovation. This is especially true in social sciences (Lubna)".

Ahmad wishes the sector to be disconnected from the Ba'th party:

"The way the hierarchy is structured in the sector is terrible. It is built on connections and partisan. If you are not a member of the Baa'th party, you cannot become a lecturer. You need to strongly ally with the government to take a position. You need to support the party. Even your family needs to be supporting the party. This makes lecturers become tools and agents for the Ba'ath party. We all know that in universities you have the head of universities and the head of the party branch at the University. The head of the party branch is even stronger than the university dean. This shows the influence of the government on the university (Ahmad)".

Kamel wishes for the sector to be an independent space for **intellectual activism**:

"The intellectual activism and innovation in the sector are almost absent. I was in the faculty of economics. You would think that there are different intellectual and economic schools of thought. This was completely absent neither among academics nor among students. The sector should become a place to host discussions and intellectual movements in politics, economy and society (Kamel)".

The interference of political and security apparatus, the political design of the sector, and the absence of academic freedom have been reflected in the **misgovernance and management of the sector**. Kamel wishes to change the purpose of the sector:

"I wish we could change the purpose of the higher education. Today, the HE in Syria is mainly educational. It is to bring people, teach them and give them certificates. This is part of what the HE should do but not everything (Kamel)".

Mirna and Rima comments on the absence of **guidelines and accountability**:

"I don't want to sound pessimistic, but from my experience in the sector, I see that there are very qualified academics who are genuinely dedicated. However, the sector's management

feels they don't have a vision of where they want to be. They don't have plans. All meetings were routine, with no agenda, plans, or prospects. There is no plan we work on from one year to another (Mirna)".

"There should be proper guidelines to govern the relationship between the academics and students and to have clear responsibilities. Academics need to accept and allow students to have different opinions than the teachers (Rima)".

Mirna commented on how **bureaucratic** the sector is:

"Bureaucracy is everywhere, but it is on a different level in Syria. Before I travel to the UK, I need to have a document from the university. I went from department to department and from one office to another. And every day they ask me to come back the next. It took ages to get this document. Unfortunately, they did not sort this for me until I told them my dad is a professor here. They replied, 'Why did you not mention this from the beginning!' (Mirna)".

Bassam and Sami wish to break the **isolation** of the sector:

"It is important to break the isolation of the sector and to be open to the world. We should learn from the experience of other universities, whether Western or Eastern (Bassam)".

"The higher education sector in its nature should be international. The sector is now open to the East because of the sanctions and other reasons, but it should not forget about the Western universities (Sami)".

Bassam commented on a cultural point that has been exacerbated by the governance of the sector, mainly how the sector weighs specialisations differently, creating a **hierarchy of specialisations**:

"I wish we break the stereotype in universities between natural science and social science. Any successful person with ambition in Syria aspires to become a medical doctor or engineer. People should specialise based on their desires, not on society's perspective, which places medical doctors first as the most important people in society. The importance of specifications should change because the country needs economists, engineers, teachers, and

doctors equally. All specialisations are important equally. Therefore, we must break their hierarchy and incentivise people to access social science. People access social science in Syria after failing to enter the other science, which needs to change (Bassam)".

Pedagogies could be eye-opening, inspiring, and liberating. However, they could also be tools of domination and indoctrination that create passive people. In Syria, pedagogies in schools and universities are designed in a way where lecturers provide information and students absorb this information with no room for challenging, questioning, researching, and discussing:

" lecturing is like spoon-feeding in Syria. We have never been taught to think, imagine, criticise and evaluate (Khatar)".

"In Syria, you go to the lectures and sit and listen. We did not have a voice. When the teacher finishes the lecture, we can ask a few questions. We need to be able to search, collect data, debate our ideas and discuss them. The students need to do most of the speaking. HE should encourage students to have different perspectives (Sinan)".

Bassam connects this with the political system:

"critical thinking is something that we never learnt. It is a way of living and thinking. There is a huge gap in our critical thinking as a society. No one encouraged us to think freely and question the knowledge around us. We don't have the space to practice critical thinking. We only had exams at the end of the year that counted on memorising. You are not part of the knowledge production. You just receive the information as it is and should accept it at face value. We have never been asked to write a reflection. These practices are absent, and we cannot separate this from the external environment in Syria (the political system), which doesn't allow room for critical thinking (Bassam)".

Khatar pictured the HE sector as a small dictatorship:

"We used to live in two dictatorships. The bigger one is the government, and the smaller one is the university. Lecturers were like gods, and students were like slaves. There is no room to think critically, criticise, question, and find the answers yourself (Khatar)".

Ahmad wishes to change the curriculums as part of the solution:

"I wish we could change the curriculums. I still remember that I used to study resources from the 50s and 60s. I understand this is important for foundational and core theories; however, that doesn't mean we should not learn new knowledge (Ahmad)".

Sinan and Qasem wish to change the assessment methods to simulate critical thinking:

"I wish Syria to have generations who can think critically. I still remember when I started my studies in the UK. The first thing I was asked was to write an essay that had an argument. The first thing that came to my mind was what argument means (Sinan)".

"A relevant point is changing the assessment methods to encourage thinking. To have open book and open resources and to provide feedback to understand their weaknesses" (Qasem)".

Lastly, exiled academics wish for the HE sector to embrace and incorporate **research** as an essential element of the education process, which, unfortunately, is severely marginalised:

"Research is so marginalised in Syria and the sector. You rarely hear that lecturers are writing or researching. Libraries are old. We had a small room. Research cannot flourish in such an environment (Kamel)".

"We don't have scientific research, and those who do research in Syria are mocked (Mirna)".

"The research culture is almost absent. Our students are strong and capable but very weak in research, so there should be an infrastructure for research. We should produce research and knowledge rather than just absorbing (Qasem)".

On the last point, absorbing research rather than producing it, Ahmad and Khatar problematise this further:

"We rarely see in the HE sector people working on producing research. You feel all research is imported. You don't feel it is localised. We should localise our research rather than importing research from outside that doesn't fit our context. This creates gaps in our critical analysis of our reality (Ahmad)".

"The most important thing I feel it was missing is the absence of learning through research. Students never discuss through research. We are learning about other contexts and cities but have never been asked to research our city. We learnt through spoon-feeding. There is no room for research. We have never been asked to research a question and find the answer ourselves (Khatar)".

7.1.3 Exiled Academic Role in the Future of Syria

What could be my potential role in the future of Syria? This question is a puzzling one for me and a lot of exiled academics. It is not just a matter of using our knowledge and skills in something beneficial. It is a question linked to the question of 'return' to our homeland. It is related to the future of our country, which we all dream of seeing as a prosperous place. It is a question of resistance to the authoritarian domination of our country. It is a question of hope that we will have a future in our homeland. It is a question of exile. Exiled academics envision their potential role in the future of Syria by contributing to education development through three interconnected levels. These are the students, academics and institution levels.

As academics, one of the main ways we envision ourselves supporting Syria and the HE sector is by supporting **students** in acquiring knowledge and skills that help them succeed in their studies, progress professionally, and become active members of society. One way to do this is by teaching in person or remotely:

"I have accumulated good political and social science knowledge during my studies and teaching for the past ten years. I would love to inspire people to question the social and political order we grew up in. I would love to visit… let us say, three months every year and teach in Syria. I am also happy if technology is available to teach online (Bassam)".

Sami would love to do this even at his own expense:

"I would love to visit Syria and teach. I am even happy to pay from my pocket and travel to Syria to provide lectures. There are great academics in Syria, and I would love to co-deliver courses with them. I don't want to be the person who is coming from the West to tell my colleagues in Syria how to teach. Not at all. I would like to collaborate and work together on teaching courses (Sami)".

Rima reflects on her desire to teach where she studied in Syria:

"I wish I could teach at [local University in Syria]. I still remember when I got the lectureship position here [in the UK], I felt delighted, but at the same time, I felt sad because I wished I could do this in Syria and benefit the Syrian students. Here, students have everything, but in Syria, students do not have access to good knowledge and expertise (Rima)".

Khatar wishes to teach about his hometown through research:

"My passion is to connect research with teaching. If I return to my city, I wish to work with students to improve our identity as a society, city, and architecture. I believe we need to understand our history through research and teaching. Therefore, I wish we could increase our understanding of our culture as students and as academics because what we have learned is that our history and our city are not important. I mean the colonial way, in which everyone else is better than us. Therefore, I would love to work with students to tell the story of our city, the story of people, and open history to understand our past, which not everyone had the chance to understand (Khatar)".

In addition to teaching, exiled academics would like to support students in various ways. Sami and Qasem comments on how they wish to supervise PhD students:

"I would like to supervise PhD students. This is something I would like to do for free. I mean as a volunteer. I can be an external examiner. The external examination helps raise the quality of research in Syria (Sami)".

"Peer review, for example, and supervising students doing research in both Arabic and English (Qasem)".

Ahmad wishes to support students with research and publishing skills as well as to advocate for research to become the way for professional promotions:

"I like to work on teaching research methods skills to Masters and PhD students and develop the research methods teaching for the universities. I also like to work with those interested in research to support them in learning how to publish. I hope to see publishing and research as a requirement for promotion in academia instead of being part of the political party or attending the party meeting (Ahmad)".

Mirna, on the other end, envisions herself supporting students with English Language and other soft skills:

"I can do English language training, conversation maybe, CV building and writing, writing for research for those writing research proposals. I do this here at [university name], and the least I can do is do the same to Syrian students".

In addition to students, exiled academics in the UK envision themselves supporting Syria and the HE sector by collaborating with **local academics** in Syria on various issues. Not everyone wants to leave their homeland in times of conflict, nor do they want to experience uprootedness. Additionally, not everyone is privileged enough to afford to do so. Those local academics who stayed in Syria are the backbone of the HE sector; without them, students would not be able to receive education. Therefore, Qasem wishes:

"to work with local academics inside Syria. I am aware that they have a strong capacity. We can collaborate on several fronts. The HE sector in the UK is one of the most advanced HE systems, and they might be interested in understanding more about how universities in the UK operate. They might want external feedback or a review of a programme. I might require a peer reviewer, and they might be looking for the same. I think we can collaborate and benefit each other (Qasem)".

Others wish to co-write with local academics. Sinan comments on the importance of this to avoid following a practice widely common and criticised in Western academia:

"I don't want to keep writing on Syria by myself. I would like to partner with local voices. I hate not practising what I preach regarding emancipating knowledge and decolonising curriculums. After I lived here for ten years, at a certain point, my connection with Syria will be questioned. I always say that Western researchers conduct research on the Middle East without ever visiting the Middle East. My case differs, but we still need local voices (Sinan)".

Sinan also wishes to conduct joint conferences with local academics to allow them to represent themselves:

"I believe the academics inside Syria, regardless of whether they are with the regime or not, should have support and be given visibility. At the end of the day, they are working in a sector that benefits students directly. I think the minimum we can do is to co-present and deliver workshops together. We need to hear their voices. This might lead us to work on a special issue together or write a book. We cannot disconnect completely. If we do so, we are depriving a big proportion of people inside Syria of representation (Sinan)".

Other exiled academics envisioned that they provide mentoring to junior and early career researchers and academics in Syria. Ahmad and Sami comments on this:

"I would love to mentor junior academics, which I am already doing. I have been working with [organisation name] for three years as a mentor to researchers. Even after they finish their research, I support them in publishing this. I would love to extend this to other regions in Syria (Ahmad)".

"At my current university, I mentor junior academics and am a line manager for 13 people. I mentor them to develop their academic and research capacity and to apply for fellowships. I would love to do the same to junior academics in Syria (Sami)".

In addition to academics and students, exiled academics envision themselves supporting the **academic institutions** in Syria to develop their capacities. Ruba and Sami envision themselves contributing to policymaking:

"I used to work with the minister in Syria, and I worked on policy-making at a national level. At the same time, I accumulated experience in the UK. I know I cannot copy past my

experience in the UK to Syria; however, Syrian academics abroad right now have a multicultural and rich experience. It's like a consortium. This consortium could work on policy development in Syria (Ruba)".

"I worked as a lecturer and researcher in Syria and worked with the ministry [of HE] on several big national projects. Having this three-dimensional experience makes me capable of contributing to policy in Syria (Sami)".

Kamel envisions working as a part of a team, together, doing research that informs policy in Syria:

"I would love to join a team of researchers and consultants to study contexts similar to Syria and, based on this, develop policies. This requires a group of people. I don't know what must be done in Syria, but I have the curiosity and the skills to understand, analyse the problem, and propose solutions (Kamel)".

Other academics envision themselves contributing to curricula development:

"Something I would like to offer is to review new courses. Here, I am part of a curriculum development and quality control committee at the university level. Therefore, I know what to consider to improve the quality of the courses. No course should be delivered without fulfilling the right requirements (Ruba)".

"I have worked on developing several curriculums from scratch, and that gave me cumulative experience. I was part of the curricula development committee and would like to apply this knowledge in Syria (Lubna)".

Qasem would like to contribute to developing assessment methods:

"In Syria, we used to give students just the final marks. No feedback. Student assessment is critical for the learning process, and providing students with feedback is critical for their development. I would love to support HE in Syria to redesign their assessment system (Qasem)".

Bassam and Lubna wish to contribute to building partnerships between local and international academic institutions and secure funding for research:

"I have built good connections and networks with Universities in the UK or other countries that I wish to see the day I am using this network to connect them with HE in Syria (Bassam)".

"I worked for a long time at [University name] and managed external relations, including partnerships. That gave me access to a wide network I could reuse (Lubna)".

Although exiled academics can support students, academics and institutions, their willingness to engage with these three levels is not the same. As Sinan shared, there is a thin line that is not easy to navigate:

"Since this topic [supporting education in Syria] is an emerging one, I am still thinking about where you would start and stop if you know what I mean. I don't have a problem supporting students and teachers and supporting Syria, but I feel there is a thin line. In Syria, there is a winner and a loser, and therefore, I feel it is very difficult to support a winner in a war. I feel I might support institutions in Syria in the long term, but in the meantime, it is very tricky (Sinan)".

When it comes to students, all participants seemed willing to support students regardless of the political context in Syria:

"I don't perceive students in Syria as neutral. They have their own political opinions, which might be extremely against mine. However, I don't need to know these things when teaching. Similar to when I teach here, I might be teaching people who are racist or right-wing. However, I treat them as students and teach them accordingly (Matar)".

"I strongly believe that we should support students regardless of their political loyalty and religious and sectarian belonging. At the end of the day, a student is just a student. And if we want to teach professionally and ethically, we should not ask students about their political and religious identity (Bassam)".

Similarly, when it comes to engaging with academics in Syria, the majority of participants are also willing to support academics regardless of their political background. However, some academics struggle to see how they can engage with academics who stand on different sides of the political spectrum. Sinan believes that supporting academics leads to supporting students, and this encourages him to put politics aside:

"I am against isolating academics inside Syria because of their political opinions. I believe those who are teaching at Syrian universities should still receive support regardless of whether they are pro-government or not. Those academics are benefiting students in Syria, and this is what we should focus on (Sinan)".

Kamel sees that academics might be different from the structure/organisation that they are working for:

"I believe there is a difference between people and structures. There is a difference between the person and the organisation. There are a lot of organisations, not only in Syria but also here in the UK, that I have huge reservations about how they operate. For example, here in the UK, academic institutions support Israeli institutions, but not all people in these institutions support this. There are differences between these two levels [individuals and institutions] (Kamel)".

Rima sees the problem as an ethical one more than a political one when it comes to academics:

"If I deal with academics, I can ignore their political orientation. For me, I put all identities aside. Although we might be from an opposite political and religious stance, our experience is similar to a certain degree. We are both feeling that our identity and existence is threatened. However, what I cannot ignore is their ethics. If I felt they are using me or my knowledge for personal or political gains, then I am out (Rima)".

Bassam sees that what determines whether he can work with academics in Syria is the content and terms of engagement:

"I don't see academics as neutral when it comes to politics, but I am still willing to engage with them. However, depending on what we are doing, this might change. Suppose I

collaborate with academics to deliver purely technical things, such as designing a workshop on writing essays or publishing in academic journals. In that case, I don't care about their political orientation here. However, suppose we are collaborating on designing a political science course that must include political philosophies and theories, freedom and democracy, political change, etc. In that case, I don't think we can collaborate. Those politically different from me in Syria might disagree with these theories. (Bassam)".

Two out of the twelve participants feel they cannot engage with academics inside Syria for two main reasons. Firstly, the fear of being hurt. Some academics in Syria firmly ally with the political system to the degree that they might report anyone who shows anti-regime political orientation. Secondly, some of us feel very uncomfortable dealing with people who politically support an authoritarian regime that has committed massive crimes. Lubna and Khatar reflect on this:

"I don't think I can engage with academics in Syria unless I know them very well and trust them. I don't want to live in the fear that this person will hurt me because of my political opinions (Lubna)".

"I cannot engage with academics who are politically pro-regime. These are not students. They are mature people who decided to stand with an oppressive regime (Khatar)".

Regarding supporting the academic institutions in Syria, exiled academics became more divided. Ahmad is willing to support the institution from a utilitarian perspective:

"At the end of the day, I don't blame the teacher or the head of the university. I am sure they can share the blame, but the biggest blame is on the oppressive political and security systems. These are the ones that co-opted the education system for political agenda. Therefore, the regime is the one to blame. You might tell me these institutions are part of the regime. This is correct; however, when I compare the benefits with the negatives, I see that the benefits outweigh the negatives because, through education, you can spread awareness and knowledge crucial to Syria (Ahmad)".

Rima prefers not to shut down the option of working with academic institutions based on a moral philosophical stance but rather to look at this engagement case by case:

"Generally, I feel there is a problem with dealing with academic institutions in Syria. However, if I can work on a project with the academic institution in a way that doesn't cross my ethical red lines, then why not? If I can benefit academics and students without my effort being exploited by the institutions politically and financially, then I will be willing to do so (Rima)".

Bassam, on the other hand, believes that he cannot work with academic institutions because they are corrupt and ideologised:

"When we talk about this level [academic institutions], it is very corrupt in Syria and very much used for political and ideological reasons. The regime completely co-opts it. Higher education in Syria is a governmental institution, and as you know, all governmental institutions are exploited for the benefit of the political elites for political reasons. Therefore, engaging directly with these institutions is problematic. This level cannot be reformed. It requires a complete transformation. Therefore, I prefer to engage on a micro level with individuals (Bassam)".

Therefore, engaging with students and academics is more foreseeable for a lot of academics, whereas academic intuitions are extremely "*politicised*" (Matar) and "*not trusted*" (Lubna and Khatar).

7.2 Exiled Academics' Motivation

Why am I committed that much to Syria? Why have I left the banking sector to work on Syria when I started my forced displacement journey? Why have all of my interests and passions changed? Is it commitment or obsession? And why should I contribute? Isn't it better to forget about Syria and focus on my personal and professional life here, where I settled? Since the war started in Syria, my relationship with Syria has become very complicated. There was always something inside of me that was driving me towards Syria. No matter how painful my engagement with Syria was, I couldn't stop it. When I tried to take a break from Syria, I felt worse. It was a significant attempt to understand the healthy balance with Syria, but not the solution. I have never rationalised why I had this commitment to Syria, but it is time to understand what's underneath.

The Researcher Reflexivity Journal, 12 March 2023, title: what's underneath our commitment).

In the previous section, I presented the potential role of the exiled academics in the future of Syria, highlighting their vision for Syria, HE and themselves. In this section, I will unpack their motivation to engage with education development in their countries of origin. This heuristic journey with my participants helped me to understand that our motivation to engage with Syria stems from four interconnected factors: belonging and identity, emotions, and belief in education. These motivations, in turn, create a fourth motivation: a sense of duty and responsibility to support Syria.

7.2.1 Belonging & Identity

When I ask myself why I am working on Syria and refusing to drop Syria from my priorities, I used to say because I am Syrian, this is my identity, and I belong to this country. However, later on, I started seeing all identities as violent projects which I did not want to be part of. I started seeing the current Syria as made of artificial borders created by France and the UK after WW1. Clearly, for me, the identity/nationalist dimension of my relationship with Syria has been dropped, and I do not believe it is a motivation anymore. However, for a lot of exiled academics, their Syrian belonging and identity are still an essential motive for them to engage with Syria:

"*There is suffering all over the world. Why am I not supporting the people in Rohingya, for example? I am an individual and have limited capacity. I think my identity is essential in channelling my capacity (Ahmad)".*

"Being an academic by itself is not enough. Without adding Syrian to it, it is worthless. I mean, why my colleagues in the department don't feel that they need to support Syria? I feel I want to support Syria because I am Syrian and an academic who belongs to this environment [Syria], not because I am just an intellectual or an academic (Bassam)".

Although I do not feel my national identity and belonging are reasons behind my commitment to Syria anymore, I am still committed and belong to the society that shared with me the joy and pain, the one that shared with me Syria as a lived experience, not necessarily as a national homeland. This common background and lived experience make a lot of academics feel that we should contribute to this society:

"You are the person you are because that country [Syria] has contributed to it. I cannot cancel the 24 years I lived in Syria. My grandmother gave me; my friends gave me; my neighbour gave me, my relatives gave me; I lived the best years of my life in Syria (Mirna)".

"I feel there is a common thing between myself and people who are still living in Syria or the Syrians in Turkey. There are many common backgrounds, which is why I feel I need to help more (Sinan)".

7.2.2 Emotional

In addition to our belonging and identity, an emotional dimension to our relationship with Syria catalyses our engagement. Amongst the many feelings, a mix of guilt, love, sadness/empathy, and hope still operates as a vital engine for our engagement with Syria. Sinan and Mirna, for example, feel **guilty** because they found a safe and decent way out of Syria:

"*One of the main reasons I help Syrians who contact me is a feeling of guilt. I always ask myself why me? Why have I managed to leave Syria and do what I am doing while others couldn't do this? My life is way easier than others. Sometimes when I eat at a restaurant with my family and pay £100, I feel like, wow!! A whole family in Syria can live a whole month with this £100. You cannot stop yourself from comparing (Sinan)".*

"I feel I am fortunate; I have a good life here, I am building a good future, and I am giving my son the life that so many Syrian kids don't have. Therefore, my motivation is linked to this feeling of guilt that I should give those who were not lucky enough to get what I got (Mirna)".

Matar, from the other end, did not live in Syria during the war, and this contributes to his guilt:

"Part of the motivation is that it feels fulfilling to feel you are contributing. This is linked to my guilt. I did not experience the war in Syria. I live a comfortable life here, and I have a good job. I feel guilty because I have a Syrian identity (Matar)".

Ahmad working on Syria helps him mentally stop him from feeling guilt:

"I love it when I support education and find results. For example, I feel thrilled when I see students in [city name] defending their thesis. When I support universities in Syria, it helps me mentally. Sometimes I feel that if I don't support Syria and I became a person who is disconnected from Syria, I would not feel happy and I would feel guilt (Ahmad)".

Hearing my participants share their stories with the guilt made me recall mine. During the first five years of moving out of Syria, my guilt feeling was a vital engine of my engagement with Syria. This guilt stems from the fact that I was born and used to belong to a class in the society that could be blamed for what happened to Syria. An elitist class that thrived on corruption and on benefiting from its intimate relationship with the regime. A class that lived so well in Syria while the rest of the society struggled to survive. When people revolted against the corrupt social and political order in 2011, I internally revolted against this order. Still, I was never able to publicly show solidarity with the brave people who lost their lives for our freedom. I could not face my family, neighbourhood, and friends; who the majority were pro a brutal regime. I was witnessing silently the killing of innocent people because they were demanding free Syria. And I could not stop myself from feeling deeply guilty about what happened to Syria. Until very recently, I came to terms with the guilt feeling and managed to reach a healthier dynamics with Syria.

Another feeling that motivates us is our **love for Syria**. It is where we grew up, went to school, had our family, and had some of our best memories. We love its people whom we can relate to, understand, know the same jokes, and have a similar lived experience and backgrounds. This love that we have for this country and its people makes us care about it, which is a motivation for a lot of us to support Syria:

"My motivation is emotional. It comes from my love of the place and my memories— the love of giving. I feel like I genuinely love to help if someone needs help. I like to care for people and things (Lubna)".

"I love Syria. It is the country that gave me a lot. My motivation is the love to give, help others, and share knowledge (Ruba)".

"My motivation is the love for Syria and the people, so if you can help, why not? (Rima)".

Sadness is another feeling that seems to make a lot of us think of supporting our country:

"The motivation is emotional in the first place. It stems from my belonging, from sadness, from the feeling that the country is destroyed, and the people have been oppressed (Qasem)".

"There is sadness about the reality of people in Syria, and there is empathy towards them. I would love to support them. If you can do so, then why not (Rima)".

The sense of sadness is one that resonates with many of us. As a Syrian who has lived in Syria and has been surrounded by Syrians for most of my life, I cannot help but feel a deep sadness about the state of my country. Syria, as a nation and a society, has endured immense pain, destruction, suffering, and forced displacement. When I moved out of Syria, I still remember how painful I used to feel about what happened to my country. To cope with this, I found that the best way to ease my own pain was to alleviate the suffering of others so that my own burden might lessen. Now, after nine years of being away from Syria and enduring 13 years of conflict, I may have become somewhat desensitised. Nevertheless, my sorrow for Syria and my compassion for its people remain fundamental motivations for my involvement with Syria.

Hope also seems to be an essential feeling that motivates many of us. I hope that Syria will be transformed into a free, democratic, and fair country, that it will emerge out of the conflict stronger, and that Syrians will have a decent life and get what they deserve. Maybe Syria might become the country we envision in a year, ten years or 100 years. I do not care if my hope is realistic or wishful thinking. It is a hope that I will keep inside and always believe in. I refuse to believe that Syria will forever be trapped in a dark destiny. This hope to see Syria better is a motivation for me and several other academics:

"I want to see Syria better and the education better, and this desire makes me want to contribute to Syria (Kamel)".

"This is my country that I love. And I love to support it. I love to see the universities developing. I love to see Syrians succeeding, and I love to see the country becoming better (Sami)".

"My motivation is to see Syria getting back as it was and even better (Qasem)".

7.2.3 Belief in Education and Sharing Knowledge

Many academics are aware of the importance of education in society and its role in shaping every country's political, social and economic order. Understanding and believing in the importance of education for the future of Syria seems to be one of the primary drives for exiled academics to support education in Syria:

"Education opens the mind and could decrease many social problems such as violence, overpopulation, poverty, sickness, etc. There is a strong connection between people's education level and their ability to have a decent life. In particular, in Syria, education could play a role in the healing and reconciliation to a big degree (Lubna)".

"Our region, unfortunately, is full of wars and political and religious extremism. I believe the best way to fight this is through education by creating an educated generation interested in research and capable of critical thinking (Ahmad)".

"Education is a critical space for the future of Syria. When you go to universities, you have direct contact with people from different environments. You leave your bubble, meet others, and hear different opinions (Bassam)".

In addition to believing in education and understanding its power, our profession as academics could say something about us: that we love to share our knowledge. This inherent element in the academic profession appeared to be a motivation for academics to engage with and support education in their homeland:

"My motivation is wanting to give back. Also, when you learn something, you would like to share it with the world to see if anyone can benefit. If you learn something and you keep it to yourself, then what's the point? It is a waste (Mirna)".

"The motivation is to give and take. There is no point in being an expert in an area without sharing what you know (Rima)".

"I believe everyone who works in academia loves to share knowledge in one way or another. (Ruba)".

7.2.4 Duty and Responsibility

Our identity and belonging, emotions towards Syria, and understanding of the importance of education all seem to translate into a sense of duty and responsibility, which appears to be a significant motive for exiled academics. Sinan reflects on his moral duty to support people who are in the same position he was in:

"Education changed my life and led me to where I am today. This is a motivation for me. I came from an unprivileged background as someone with a disability who used to live in rural areas. I have a moral duty to help people in the same position (Sinan)".

Matar connects his moral duty to his feeling of guilt:

"I feel the duty is linked to survival guilt. I live a comfortable life here, and I have a good job. I feel a duty to give back. I feel that I did not give as I should. So this duty is merged with survival guilt (Matar)".

Bassam links his moral duty to privileges:

"Let us put aside the belonging and identity; there is also an ethical and humanitarian duty. I am in a privileged position that others did not have the chance to have. It's a moral duty to help those who did not have the chance. Privileges should lead to responsibilities (Bassam)".

Khatar connects his moral duty to his close connection with people on the ground who lost a lot:

"I feel I am one of those people who stayed in Syria. I feel close to them. And I feel I am responsible for giving to those who lost everything. I took a lot from this society that I lived in two-thirds of my life. This is my first homeland, and I should give back to the society I left (Khatar)".

From the other end, Bassam, Ruba and Sami, this duty stems from their Syrian identity and national belonging:

"As long as I belong to this place and identify myself as Syrian, then there is a responsibility. Belonging comes with responsibilities. There is no belonging for free. There are rights and duties, and the duty is to give back to the society we belong to (Bassam)".

"I believe I have an ethical and national duty to help. Syria has treated me well, and this is my home country. I benefited from Syria, so the least I should do is to give back to the society (Ruba)".

"I have a duty to support Syria, and this duty stems from the fact that I was born in Syria and that I belong to Syria (Sami)".

Ruba and Qasem believe their duties stem from the fact they benefited from Syria:

"I believe I have an ethical and national duty to help. Syria has treated me well, and this is my home country. I benefited from Syria, so the least I should do is to give back to the society (Ruba)".

"We learnt in Syria for free, and this made us who we are today (Qasem)".

Khatar Linked his duty to resistance and oppression:

"The motivation is the feeling of resisting the oppression that we underwent and the oppression that people have experienced. I feel my contribution to the education system, even if it is like a drop in the sea, is a big motivation for me. To give something back to the society that I left and has undergone huge oppression (Khatar)".

7.3 Barriers to Engagement

How naïve I was? I still remember when I left Syria in 2015. I used to believe that we, the Syrian diaspora, whether exiled or not, will rebuild Syria when the war is over. I was very naive, thinking that we are capable and that all we need to do is come together to support our country. I was also very emotionally charged, believing that every Syrian wants or would like to do so.

(The Researcher Reflexivity Journal, 12 July 2021, title: How Naive I Was).

In the previous section, I attempted to unpack exiled academics' motivation to engage with education development in their countries of origin. In this section, I will unpack the barriers to their engagement. This heuristic journey with my participants helped me to understand that there are six interconnected levels of barriers that limit our engagement with their homeland. These are the political, HE, individual, exile dynamics, local dynamics, and logistical levels. Furthermore, the political level shapes and influences the other five levels to a large degree.

7.3.1 Political Level

One of the main barriers facing the majority of exiled academics to contribute to their homeland's development is clearly the political environment. In Syria, the political environment manifests itself in a political regime that operates based on fear, oppression, exclusion and retaliation. A government that co-opted all institutions for a political agenda. For academics, we are not exiled by coincidence. Our exile is on purpose. When we write against an authoritarian regime and expose its oppressive, manipulating and violent practices, this makes us a threat to the regime's agenda. Everything about us is a threat. Our knowledge, our research, our teaching, our lived experience, and our public profiles as academics are all a threat. Therefore, the political environment and regime back home will stop us from influencing any public space under its control, such as education. As Matar mentioned, there is no will engage us or even let us go back to Syria:

"We should not underestimate the fact that the [Syrian] regime doesn't want us. There is a hatred between the regime and those who left in the past ten years. It is a battle that represents how the regime treats its population generally (Matar)".

Even the ones who do not have a strong or 'hostile' stance against the political regime are punished just for leaving Syria. Sami left Syria not because of his political stance but to live in a safer place with his family. He then faced legal barriers to go back because he left his lectureship position after signing a contract stipulating he spends a number of years in Syria. He contacted universities in Syria several times and offered support but received multiple rejections. Sami commented on this:

"The University of [name] was running a conference on publishing in Q1 and Q2 journals, and as someone who has extensive experience in publishing, I contacted them and offered to support them. They replied that they would get back to me, and that's it. I felt very sad, to be honest, because they ignored me. I feel we are punished just because we left Syria (Sami)".

In Syria, people are arrested, tortured and killed because of their political stances. Therefore, our **fear of the regime** is the most significant barrier to our engagement:

"How can you work when you feel you are always watched and everything is reported? You feel you are aware of every word you are saying, and academics cannot work while feeling fear (Sinan)".

"I will always feel that someone will hurt me (Lubna)".

"What stops me [from working on Syria] is feeling of insecurity and absence of safety (Qasem)".

Furthermore, this political environment makes Syria **unstable**, which, in turn, makes us feel that any engagement with Syria is not sustainable:

"The fact that Syria is unstable and that any day something big might happen is a barrier. You feel things might deteriorate in any second. This feeling of instability makes you unable to establish stable and sustainable platforms and channels. You feel that there are a lot of changing variables that you cannot control. Things related to the laws of the country where we are residing, related to the situation inside Syria, the neighbouring countries, funders, etc (Bassam)".

7.3.2 HE Level

As exiled academics who might be willing to contribute to HE development in our countries of origin, the way the HE sector is designed and governed impacts our engagement to a large degree. Education governance and design are inherently political. In the Syrian context, the political system co-opted the education sectors for a political agenda and stripped the **independence** from HE institutions:

"There is no disconnection between the government and the academic institutions. I don't believe, for example, that Damascus University and other universities are allowed to have contact with Syrians and other institutions outside Syria without using this for political gains. You cannot disconnect the universities from the government. Anything you will give needs to serve their political and ideological agenda (Bassam)".

When co-opting all institutions for political agenda, this political system stripped the freedom from all institutions. HE, in particular, thrives on academic freedom. Therefore, not having academic freedom is a significant barrier for us. Especially in social sciences, we need some level of **academic freedom** to be able to engage with HE in Syria:

"Social science is about social, political and economic knowledge. And here you have two dominant schools, the West and East. The language of social science threatens them [the majority of academics and politicians in Syria studied in the Eastern bloc]. For them, social science is an existential risk because you are threatening their philosophy in life (Ruba)".

"As a political scientist, I cannot work and write with people from inside. There is zero academic freedom in Syria in this discipline (Sinan)".

"Sociology is a critical field, and you need to think and explain social theories without feeling that someone is monitoring every word you say. This field requires academic freedom (Lubna)".

HE, in any context, thrives on national and international connections, exchanging expertise and partnerships, and producing knowledge with other academic centres. However, in a hostile political environment, HE becomes a **closed sector**, and this is a barrier to our engagement:

"Part of the collective work to support HE in Syria is to connect the academic institutions with other international institutions. Because of economic and political reasons, this cannot happen. The whole HE environment is not helpful. The sector requires to be open internally and externally (Kamel)".

Corruption in Syria, unfortunately, is a widespread phenomenon that existed even before the war started. When the government is corrupt, operating on bribery, nepotism, and partisan, corruption finds its way even to the education system, which, in principle, should be an example of good, ethical and professional practices:

"I cannot speak on behalf of Syria, but from my personal experience at the faculty of X, it has a lot of corruption, especially in the last ten years. A lot of scandals have broken out that have concerned high-level people, and the media has highlighted some of them. We recently heard of leaking exam questions and that people are getting PhDs through connections and bribery. All appointments happen through nepotism and cronyism. It is very corrupt, and I cannot deal with such a system (Bassam)".

Lubna believes that working in the sector requires her to compromise her dignity**,** which stops her from contributing:

"Working in the sector requires you to accept that your dignity will be taken away from you. When you accept corruption, when you accept the low pay, and when you accept security interference, That makes you feel that you have no dignity (Lubna)".

In Syria, public universities are free for everyone. While having free education is something to celebrate in the Syrian context, it has a downside that has not been managed by the sector. This is the **massive number of students** in classes:

"The problem is that you cannot apply any of the pedagogies we are talking about (modern and critical) in the HE in Syria because of the massive number of students. What can you do when you are delivering a class to 500 people? (Qasem)".

An additional governance barrier that might be less linked to the political situation is the bureaucracy of the sector. Ahmad and Qasem reflect on this:

"Sometimes things get drowned with bureaucracy; I mean, I can barely volunteer to supervise a student or teach a session. I cannot be dragged into daunting bureaucracy for just that *(Ahmad)".*

"I feel Syria has a terrible bureaucratic system. Everything takes ages. This makes achieving change very difficult (Qasem)".

Matar reflects on how the **HE culture** in Syria discourages collaborations:

"The higher education culture is a bit problematic. For example, there is no citation culture where you build on the work of others. You feel that everyone wants to start from scratch. Also, they use others' ideas without giving credit. These problems are everyone, but I think it is more prevalent in our culture because the research culture is very marginalised (Matar)".

For all the previous reasons and others, the HE sector in Syria is seriously struggling to equip students with the knowledge needed to excel in their fields. Kamel reflects on how this **knowledge gap** is a challenge for his engagement:

"When I worked with [organisation name], I faced immense difficulties because, to be honest, there is a huge gap in knowledge. When I was delivering a workshop on research methods, I felt people were struggling to follow because they did not understand what I was saying. I mean basic terms, the methodologies, etc. This made me realise that workshops are not enough to support people. We need to be patient, work on the very basics, and work on a long-term level (Kamel)".

7.3.3 Individual Level

In addition to the political context and the HE governance in Syria, our contribution to HE development is very much limited by our personal circumstances. Many factors, including the political context, also influence these personal circumstances. Our homeland, as much as it is a place that we love, is a place that causes us difficult feelings. In the Syrian context, some of us feel fear, sadness, longing, grief, and uprootedness, while others feel traumatised because

of what happened to them and Syria. Therefore, engaging with our homeland could trigger us and deteriorate our **mental health**:

"The wound is big, and it is very traumatic for me. When I am in this space [engaging with people from inside Syria], I find myself always anxious thinking: who is that person, what did he mean, and is it possible that he will report me to the government, etc? I feel very vulnerable in that space. It is a space charged with fear, memories, and pictures. I don't have the energy to deal with this kind of mental exhaustion. If you ask me to work and support Syria, I will definitely say yes; however, when it comes to acting, I might run away (Lubna)".

This wound makes a lot of exiled academics consider stopping working on Syria:

"Sometimes, if you work on a country that has already given you a trauma- I mean, at a certain point in time, my trauma was strong when it comes to Syria. I was thinking of stopping working on Syria so that I feel better mentally. Sometimes I fear that if I get involved and work more on Syria, I might recall difficult memories and feel tired mentally (Sinan)".

However, Matar believes that working on and engaging with Syria is not an option anymore:

"I am sure working on Syria will make me feel tired emotionally and mentally, and you cannot escape this. And it is not a decision you can take to stop having anxiety or trauma. This is part of my generation. I am sure we need to take care of ourselves, but If I decide today to stop working on Syria, I don't think this is an option, especially for us who claim to be intellectuals. If you work in a bank or a falafel shop, it is easy to say I am not going to work on Syria, but for us academics, intellectuals, artists, and writers, you cannot (Matar)".

Additionally, it is very easy to feel paralysed and hopeless in exile. Syria, as a country, is suffering a lot. It suffers from an economic collapse, having four de-facto authorities, half of the country is destroyed and displaced, poor infrastructure, and the majority living in poverty struggling to afford the fundamental needs. This makes the scale of the problem so massive that not only we, as individuals, but also governments, feel paralysed in the face of such a disaster. Therefore, the scale of the problem makes us **feel hopeless**:

"The feeling that you cannot make an impact is what makes me struggle to support [Syria]. We might now sit and agree on doing something, but then the scale of the problem makes you feel that you cannot achieve any results. You feel hopeless and useless. The change in Syria is so difficult. We tried to change Syria [when the revolution started] and look where we are now (Qasem)".

Sometimes, the duty that we feel towards Syria clashes with the duty that we feel ourselves. The **lack of time** and the tension between dedicating our time to settling in our new society or to supporting our home country is a barrier:

"You know, all time is gone here between family and work. Even when you have time, you feel you need to dedicate it to yourself. You know that with what we have experienced as Syrians, if you don't allow time to yourself, you might collapse. You always want to give to Syria, but you feel you have other things to focus on as well (Sinan)".

Therefore, as Sinan emphasised, we need to balance our commitment to our host society, our homeland and ourselves:

"There is a balance to strike. We are part of two societies now, and we have a commitment to the society that we are currently living in. For example, last month, my kid's school asked for volunteers to help with an event. We went there, and we painted the fence. As a person who belongs to two societies, your capacity is divided. You need to balance between Syria, UK, work, family, etc., and sometimes you forget that you also need time to take care of yourself; otherwise, you collapse (Sinan)".

And when we try to establish a collaborative project to support our country, this becomes an even more time-consuming task:

"Any project to support Syria requires establishing, which requires huge resources, time, and energy. People need to live their lives here. We need to settle, and life here is not easy. To support Syria, this project needs to have solid foundations, and these foundations need a huge amount of time, money, and effort from a lot of people. Without these foundations, it is difficult to do something impactful. And building these foundations could cause burnt-out. We cannot juggle so many balls and then all break (Khatar)".

Especially for us as academics, the academic profession requires us to deliver outcomes, usually in the form of publishing consistently. This could take all of our time:

"Our time as academics in the West is extremely tight because our promotion depends on narrow terms: publishing. Students need support and a lot of administrative work. All of that consumes our time (Matar)".

However, although time is a rare currency, exiled academics perceive it as a barrier that could be overcome:

"If we take the other obstacles away, I can control this barrier [time]. I can maybe teach for Syria once a week. I can take a couple of hours from the weekend, and I am happy to do it for free because I have other motives when it comes to Syria. Yes, time is a barrier, but I believe we can find time if the situation is different (Lubna)".

"Time is a big barrier, and it limits our capacity, but the emotional motivation, the desire to see Syria better, and the desire to help my community is way bigger (Qasem)".

Another barrier we might face is that as time goes by, we are losing our professional connections in Syria. The war and the long duration of their exile have dismantled a lot of their social networks and weakened their **social and professional ties:**

"The connections that we built in Syria are slowly disappearing and losing its strength inside Syria. Some of these connections are not in a decision-making position anymore, and this makes it difficult for us to establish collaborations (Ruba)".

This disconnection is not only happening to our social relationships but also to our understanding of the reality on the ground, and this makes our engagement more difficult:

"I think we as academics might become very disconnected from Syria and the society there and become similar to Western academics. When we arrived here, we used to criticise Western academics for being disconnected from the reality of the societies that they were researching. I mean, they do not visit the country or speak its language. I believe that after a

while, we will reach a similar situation. We are not visiting Syria, and our communication with the people on the ground is decreasing, and our understanding of Syria is very much influenced by our position here [in the West] (Sinan)".

7.3.4 Diaspora Dynamics Level

No matter how strongly committed to Syria, we are always limited by our exile experience and the collective dynamics that shaped our formation as a conflict-generated diaspora. Our individual and collective experiences create dynamics and lived experiences that could become barriers to our engagement with each other and contribute to our homeland's development. In the Syrian context, these dynamics are influenced by many factors, mainly political ones. One of the barriers that face exiled academics is a feeling that they are **betraying the cause** if they engage with supporting academic institutions in Syria:

"After the revolution and the war and everything that happened, you feel that if you deal with anything that has to do with the regime, you are betraying the people who died and forcibly displaced. You know, I am not a political activist, and if I go to Syria, I feel I might not be arrested, but I don't want to do this because I feel it is unfair that I go to Syria and others cannot go (Matar)".

Matar's feelings above stem from his own belief that he is betraying the cause if he engages in supporting the regime or even visiting Syria. However, others feel they cannot engage in supporting education because of a **treason culture** that has spread amongst Syrians who are against the regime. Amongst the so many horrible things, the government has systematically displaced, oppressed, bombarded and tortured people in Syria. Therefore, understandably, a lot of Syrians have zero tolerance for any engagement with the regime:

"You feel that those who are pro-government are more pragmatic than those who are against it. You feel those who oppose the government don't accept to work with anything related to the government (Ruba)".

This zero-tolerance practice could manifest itself in verbally attacking those who engage with the regime or any institution that is co-opted by it, which limits exiled academics from engaging with HE in Syria:

"The fact that there is no clear distinction between the education sector and the regime makes it difficult for us to support the sector. You might want to support education in Syria, but someone might say hold on! By supporting education, you are supporting the regime. You know that, unfortunately, we have a treason culture. People might attack you even though you are against the regime. For example, if you invite a Syrian academic living in regime areas to speak at a conference here in the UK, some people might think you are giving a platform to pro-regime academics. Then, the conspiracy thinkers start attacking you that you are with the regime. Sadly, this is dominating the minds of Syrians very much (Sinan). "

"The political pressure is high in Syria. When you collaborate to support the academics in Syria or the academic institutions, there is a group of people who will accuse you of betraying the detainees, those who got killed, and those who revolted for our freedom. Any engagement with a governmental institution is considered a betrayal, and you will be attacked. Therefore, a lot of people would prefer to distance themselves by not putting themselves in a position where they will be attacked, and this is a big barrier (Qasem)".

Another barrier that might face exiled academics when collaborating with other Syrian academics in the diaspora to support HE in Syria is the fact that they might have **different political agendas**:

"It will be difficult to avoid politicising the project. If you managed to bring, let us say, 50 Syrian academics in the UK to support education in Syria, there might be disagreements, partisan, and groupings (Kamel)".

"Some people will politicise the project. You cannot guarantee that people will not be divided between pro-regime or against the regime or they will not have affiliations with certain groups and countries (Sinan)".

However, Ahmad perceives that the problem is not in the political orientation itself but in how active people are politically:

"The difference in agendas amongst the diaspora, both political and not political, could be a barrier for us. Personally, I cannot work with someone who tries to clean the regime image. I

mean, I am okay with working with someone who is pro-regime but not actively working on promoting the regime narrative (Ahmad)".

Rima also feels she is okay with working with members of the diaspora who are different politically as long as we keep our politics aside and focus on the academic side of our engagement:

"To be honest, it has been a long time since I met with people who are different - I mean, my community looks like me, and they have similar political orientations. However, I can work with people who are different politically if we are working on a purely academic project. I mean, this is what I do when I work with British people. We keep our political background aside (Rima)".

Lubna, from the other end, sees the problem as more ethical than political:

"I can work with people who are politically different from me, but I cannot work with someone whose core ethical values are different (Lubna)".

Another relevant barrier to the Syrian context is the **fear of the other** in the diaspora. Syrians have grown up in an environment where the fear of the regime is embedded in the very lived experience of every Syrian. This fear of the government extends to a fear of civilians who are supportive of the government. This is because, sadly, in the Syrian context, there are a group of civilians who are extremists in their political loyalty to the regime to the degree they are willing to hurt and report any disobedience to the government. This fear from others makes exiled academics avoid working together or supporting HE in Syria as they fear for themselves and their families:

"I have a trust issue, unfortunately. I went one day to a conference [outside the UK and Syria], and I presented a paper on Syria. The conference was on Syria, and I was naive to think I was in a safe environment. After the conference, one person approached me and literally threatened me and accused me. My first reaction was to flight. I am not sure why this person was there. He was a PhD student, and I believe he works with the government. However, he caused me deep fear (Lubna)".

"The first barrier is the fear of the other. You know the situation in Syria. You always think that everyone could be Mukhabarat [security agent]. Especially if we are going to make it [collaborate] on a high level, the first barrier will be the trust in this initiative. Is it really an independent project for people to join and collaborate to benefit Syria, or is it going to turn into something else? (Matar)".

Any country's political, social and economic context plays a role in shaping people's culture and behaviour. The culture of collaboration and collective work is very dangerous to authorisation regimes. In the Syrian context, institutions worked very hard to create a society that does not have the tools and learning to collaborate. Our education system is solely based on rote learning, no critical thinking, no group work, no collaboration, no debating, and no participatory pedagogies. In our political system, there is no democracy, free parliament, and political parties. As a result, we might have been shaped in a way that we did not learn how to collaborate, organise, and mobilise ourselves. This might have created a widespread **negative collective work culture**:

"I think there is a truth to the saying that in Syria, the collective work was minimal. Therefore, the last ten years showed us that if you put together more than 4-5 people, disagreement will be more than efficient work… I mean, we will disagree on who will do the work, who will be the media face, and who will get the power. This is a challenge in the Syrian context that we are not experienced enough in the collective work, and this impacts our experience when working in Syria (Khatar)".

Furthermore, the social, political and economic systems that we lived in created animosity and harmful competition between people:

"Unfortunately, some of us still carry the negative competition attitude that we learnt in Syria that there is one winner. And if someone wins, I lose, and if I lose, someone else will win (Ruba)".

Matar reflects on how harmful competition could manifest itself between academics in exile:

"Academia could be a toxic environment with animosity and negative competition. In our case, it is easy to picture us as representatives of Syria in Western academia. It is easy to

become an academic person who works in Syria and represents the Syrian population. There are examples where certain academics wanted to be the voice of Syria and did not allow any other Syrian academic to enter this space. Some people exploited the Syrian tragedy for professional gains. And this creates negative and ugly competition between Syrian academics (Matar)".

Bassam reflects on how, in the Syrian culture, there is a leader mentality that harms our collective efforts:

"In the Syria culture, we always have this leader mentally that there is a person who manages everything. This is a result of the lack of experience in the collective work. We don't have civil society or cooperative originations where people organise their affairs collectively. We are not trained in such collective work, and this will lead to problems. You always feel that there are people who monopolise the credit and fame, which will then reflect on their financial situation (Bassam)".

7.3.5 Local Dynamic Level

Wars and conflicts create a new complicated reality in the social structure and cohesion of society. Although we should not feed into the 'us' and 'them' narrative, as Syrians, we cannot deny and ignore that there are new complicated dynamics between the different parts of the society, including those who left and those who stayed. While there might be empathy, love, and solidarity for some, there is also tension and animosity for others. This is especially true when the political regime fed into the discourse and narrative of the politics of belonging that depicts those who left Syria as traitors. There are many factors that exacerbate this tension, mainly our different political stances:

"We have a political difference between those who stayed and those who left. People are refusing to talk or engage with anyone who doesn't follow the same political opinion (Khatar)".

Furthermore, the different lived experiences of the conflict, including the people suffering on the ground, exacerbate this tension:

"There is a tension that stems from people's daily suffering on the ground (Lubna)".

"This tension might continue as long as we live a privileged life and they are living a difficult life (Sinan)".

This tension could be resulting from the fear that those who study and worked outside Syria will take the positions of those who stayed:

"This tension existed even before the war. When I came back from the UK after my PhD, people rejected me. They used to feel threatened that we would steal their positions or take their opportunities from them. There are people who don't want us to go back because they perceive us as a threat (Ruba)".

In academia, this tension could be the result of our academic orientation, whether we are graduates of the Western or Eastern bloc. This, in turn, creates resistance:

"They look at us [people studied in the UK] as the graduates of the Western cultures. We are not desired there. They look at us as competitors, and that we need to take their positions. They fight you and try to cut your connections from your students. When I was teaching in Syria, they put my lectures from 8-10 AM and from 6-8 PM. These times are the least attended times. In the evening lecture, my students and I used to stay until after 8 to try to answer their questions. They started cutting the electricity in my class so that I don't stay longer (Ruba)".

"There is resistance to our engagement. Some people don't accept that you are an expert. And this happened to me even before the war started when I came back to Syria after my PhD. The way they see things is that they are the ones who live on the ground, and they know better. And this is something I accept. However, I believe it is important to look at things differently that we each have something to offer (Sami)".

Furthermore, this tension could result from the diaspora disconnection from reality:

"The problem is our engagement right now might be perceived as someone speaking none-sense or idealistic. For example, if I teach entrepreneurship, I will be perceived as someone talking from their ivory tower (Ruba)".

Additionally, the tension results from how we perceive and treat each other:

"Some of them [people inside Syria] look at us as cowards, arrogant, and opportunistic. And some of us [people outside Syria] look at them that they are backwards, less experienced, not flexible, etc. This is very negative and definitely needs to be addressed (Ruba)".

For all of the previous reasons and others, the divide between those who left and those who stayed turns into a politics of belonging:

"Some people in Syria wouldn't accept to engage with us because they might feel we will cause them harm, which is fair. But others would not talk to us because they feel we left Syria, and we don't have the right to engage with Syria anymore (Sinan)".

"They look at us that we ran away and left them to suffer; therefore, we don't have the right to talk. That when it comes to the people, but the regime looks at us worse; that we are traitors (Lubna)".

7.3.6 Logistical Level

As exiled academics living outside our countries of origin, our contribution to our homeland development, whether from aboard or by 'returning' temporarily or permanently, needs platforms to encourage, facilitate, amplify, and manage it. This could be an organisation, network, governmental body, etc. This raises several logistical concerns on how this would happen in conflict and fragility settings. **Not having a platform** to do this was one of the main barriers cited by participants:

"I think not having a mediator such as an organisation is one of the main barriers. I mean, if the infrastructure is in place, then I can contribute depending on my time (Khatar)".

"I feel I lack the knowledge of how I can support Syria. I don't know how I can contribute to my current position. If I can find a project that aligns with my capacity and political values, that would be very fulfilling for me (Matar)".

"I cannot just go by myself and try to support education in Syria. I have the energy to do this, but I need an organisation to leverage it. I want people to collaborate with, discuss ideas, and share problems. I need an opportunity (Qasem)".

Having such platforms will help us to amplify our impact:

"Without having a platform that combines our efforts, our individual contribution will have no impact. If we really want to see a change, we need to organise and combine our efforts (Ruba)".

"There is no established organisation that I can join to support education in Syria. The absence of these organisations and networks and the lack of conversation around this issue make things difficult. Without these platforms, our contribution will be very limited to individual attempts. And without feeling that you are part of a bigger thing, what is the benefit? (Bassam)".

Having platforms is particularly important in the Syrian context because of the complete absence of governmental institutions that usually facilitate such efforts:

"Compared to other diaspora, we don't have a governmental institution to channel our capacity. We don't have an embassy to work with. We don't have cultural centres that the government sponsors. This put a burden on us. You need to fill the government gap. We are just individuals, and no matter how qualified and expert we are, we cannot play this role. We cannot compensate for the fact that the government institutions are absent (Bassam)".

Establishing such platforms requires financial resources, which is another logistical barrier:

"The Syrian university budget is tiny. I already work with universities on a volunteering basis, but having funding makes my commitment different (Ahmad)".

"Any initiative requires funding. We cannot continue working on the basis that each one of us will give an hour per week. Time here is really a challenge, and Syrians had a lot of disappointments (Khatar)".

Since a lot of academics cannot go to Syria, this platform should take advantage of telecommunication technology to allow exiled academics to contribute. However, technology in Syria is another logistical challenge:

"The problem is that people do not have a laptop or internet. If you want to do such a thing [teach online], you need to provide the support needed—mainly electricity and internet. Sometimes I try to call my parents all day; I struggle to reach out to them because they don't have electricity to charge their phones (Mirna)".

7.3.7 Pragmatism in Exile

Although all the previous barriers limit exiled academics from contributing to Syria and supporting HE, this does not mean that their contribution requires eliminating all of these barriers. The majority of participants are willing to contribute without having a change in the political system. Some exiled academics, such as Ahmad and Qasem, are eager to contribute to HE in the current reality as it is. In contrast, other academics believe there is a minimum needed for them to be able to contribute.

This minimum could be to have some level of academic freedom:

"It is not about who wins the war in Syria. The question is whether the new version of Syria will have room for disagreement. Even if the regime stayed, would it allow a small margin of freedom for academics? (Matar)".

"I am ready to support Syria without any demands; however, once anyone dictates what I will teach, then I am out. After all the learning and experience I accumulated, I cannot accept anyone telling me through all of that in the rubbish and teaching me what I tell you. I am not asking for full academic freedom. I am a realist, and I know that this will not happen. I just need not to be monitored (Mirna)".

"I just need a little margin of academic freedom that allows me to teach freely. Especially in my field of political science, I need a margin of freedom to talk about my research and work and the different schools of thought (Sinan)".

Rima, on the other hand, cares about having an ethical relationship rather than academic freedom:

"My discipline is not political, so academic freedom is not something important to me; however, I need to feel that I am working with people who are ethical and exploiting me. People who are really genuine about the HE sector (Rima)".

Sinan feels that he can contribute if this has been facilitated by a civil organisation rather than the government:

I am not expecting Syria to have a significant change, and I don't need to experience this in order to support the HE as I can teach online from here [UK] without engaging with the political dynamics on the ground. However, I feel that I need to do this under a civil umbrella or organisation rather than the regime (Sinan)".

Bassam just wants his contribution not to be used for political and ideological objectives:

"The minimum I need is a minimum level of professionalism. We need to have a space to work professionally without employing our efforts for political and ideological purposes. As long as our contribution is limited to supporting education and students, I am willing to engage (Bassam)".

Kamel just wants to feel that the platform that is organising this is a professional one:

"I need to feel that the project or the platform that is facilitating our efforts is capable of making an impact and leading to a positive outcome. This happens when I feel that it is a professional and organised one (Shame)".

Lastly, only Lubna has high demands to be able to contribute to Syria:

"I think my demands are very high. Without transforming the education system in Syria, I cannot support it. And transforming the education system requires changing the political system. Like I mean, I need academic freedom and disconnecting education from the Ba'th party and from the security apparatuses. I am not optimistic (Lubna)".

7.4 Discussion

This chapter has delved into the potential role of Syrian exiled academics in higher education development in Syria. It unpacked the complexity of their motivation and the barriers they envision facing when contributing to Syria.

Numerous research has documented how academic diaspora contributes to the HE sector of their country of origin when they return home permanently or temporarily or while they are abroad (e.g. Amagoh & Rahman, 2016; Blachford & Zhang, 2014; Rahman, 2013; Wapmuk, 2021; Welch & Zhen, 2008; Zeleza, 2004). These researchers argued that their contribution takes multiple forms, such as co-authoring, conference presentations, staff/student exchange, sending research materials to academics, establishing joint research/projects, enhancing the local institution's reputation, strengthening research tradition and national innovation system back home, offering financial support, technology transfer, and teaching at local universities. The research mentioned above, while not conducted in a conflict context, aligns with the findings of this thesis. Evidently, academic skills and experiences have relevance across various contexts. What sets this thesis apart is its focus on exiled academics affected by conflict. The thesis emphasises the importance of analysing their impact on three interconnected levels: students, academics, and institutions. While exiled academics can contribute to all three, their willingness to engage varies. As highlighted by the participants, negotiating the complexities of the political landscape in conflict-affected countries poses a challenge. Despite this, all participants are committed to supporting students, regardless of political affiliations. The majority are also open to collaborating with local academics, even when they hold opposing political views. However, fewer are willing to engage with academic institutions in conflict-affected regions controlled by political regimes. By understanding and addressing these differences in engagement, we can better direct the efforts of exiled academics towards positively impacting their home countries, even amid conflict.

The potential role of the diaspora in general and conflict-generated diaspora, in particular, is hotly debated in the literature. From one end, their simultaneous affiliations to and involvement in their country of origin and residence, political influence, and transnational networks, resources and skills make them potential partners in their countries' reconciliation, reconstruction, transitional justice, development and peacebuilding (Brinkerhoff, 2011, 2004; Horst et al., 2010; Karabegović, 2018; Kleist and Vammen, 2012; Pande, 2017). On the other

hand, they could contribute to the conflict when they are less willing to compromise, radicalise political discourse and actions, and fund armed groups, reinforcing and exacerbating the protractedness of homeland conflicts (Bird, 2023; Demmers, 2002; Lyons, 2006, 2007). Although exiled academics are driven to support education in Syria, some choose not to collaborate directly with academic institutions. Instead, they focus on supporting individual students and academics. This decision could be seen as a lack of willingness to compromise. However, it also reflects their determination to resist and not contribute to oppressive structures in their homeland.

When it comes to their motivation, literature has documented how diaspora motivation to contribute to their homeland country could stem from identity and belonging, responsibility for their known and imagined community, and a sense of obligation or guilt as they seek to reconcile their preference for the adopted country with their allegiance to a suffering place of origin (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2019; Toivanen & Baser, 2020). This thesis delves into these motivations and illustrates how they are expressed in the specific context of Syria. It also adds that the academic profession serves as a significant source of motivation. Their profound realisation of the value of education and the dissemination of knowledge instils a profound sense of obligation to promote education in their home countries.

As for the barriers, literature on diaspora engagement in conflict settings has discussed the political barriers (e.g. Brinkerhoff, 2011a; Hansen, 2008; Horst et al., 2010; Kleist & Vammen, 2012; Mügge, 2012; Pande, 2017; Pasura, 2012; Toivanen & Baser, 2020; Van Hear & Cohen, 2017; Wapmuk, 2021)in depth. These studies showed how the ‘post’ conflict political reality makes the diaspora less willing and capable of engaging in ‘post’ conflict recovery. However, the diaspora's connection with their home communities differs from their relationship with the government. Research from Afghanistan, Haiti, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe illustrates how the diaspora bypassed governments when they hindered educational development using their ties with their home communities, which played a crucial role in their educational initiatives (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2019). This could be attributed to their belief in the transformative power of education, which motivated their involvement in educational development regardless of the political environment (Mule & Ngundi, 2022).

The thesis contributes to the literature by providing a detailed understanding of how the political landscape significantly impacts the five other levels in the Syrian context. While it is

acknowledged that various socio-economic factors also play a role, the influence of the political sphere is particularly pronounced in a country like Syria, which has experienced political conflict and widespread displacement. Notably, the impact of the political level on HE governance is substantial. It is well-known that education sectors are often considered ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2006) and tools of political authority and social control (Orloff & Morgan, 2017). This presents significant practical, political, and ethical challenges for exiled academics looking to contribute to the development of HE.

The findings of this thesis also contribute significantly to understanding the dynamics of Syrian exile and its impact on academic involvement. It explores how the collective experiences of conflict create barriers to engagement within the diaspora. In the Syrian context, feelings of betraying the cause, a treason culture, and fear of the 'other' hinder exiled academics from participating in educational development. These dynamics are heavily influenced by the political environment that has shaped the diaspora and their lived experiences.

The literature on forced migration extensively examines the complex relationship between diaspora populations and local communities. Local legitimacy in conflict zones is not solely determined by local or ethnic ties but also by individuals' direct experiences with conflict, including their sacrifices and struggles (C. Hughes, 2011). Some researchers go further and state that because of the potential tension diaspora create when they return, their hidden colonial agenda, outdated information about the local context, and inefficacy in making change, diaspora is ultimately counterproductive for the legitimation of peacebuilding and (post-) conflict reconstruction (Nyamnjoh, 2018). This language of diaspora/locals creates a poisoned dichotomy and feeds into an exclusionary discourse that damages conflict-affected contexts. It serves a nationalist discourse that thrives on the politics of belonging aimed at creating and policing the boundaries between those who stayed and those who left. As demonstrated in this thesis, academics forced into exile have first-hand experience of conflict, its impact, and trauma. Furthermore, peacebuilding and development necessitate shifting from the politics of belonging to critical localism. This approach challenges the traditional view of "local" as purely geographical, instead recognising it as a social construct (Mac Ginty, 2015). Acknowledging the tensions between locals and the diaspora, power imbalances, and the influence of neoliberal and colonial agendas is important. However, as my research has shown, exiled academics are actively addressing these complexities rather than paying no heed to them.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this chapter, I aim to conclude my thesis by presenting three sub-sections. Section 8.1 summarises and visualises the findings into figures. However, these figures act as visuals to help readers comprehend the findings rather than as conceptual or theoretical models to universalise the findings. Section 8.2 presents the limitations and recommendations for future research. Section 8.3 provides a creative synthesis that puts all findings together into a narrative form.

8.1 Summary of Findings

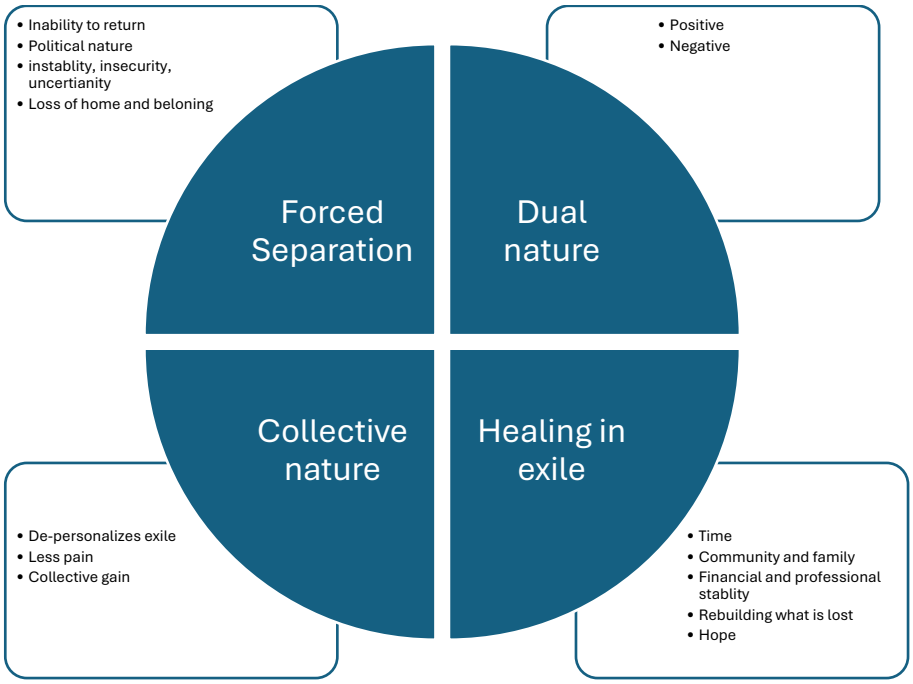
In the course of this thesis, I commenced my examination by thoroughly exploring the intricate dimensions of the experience of exile. Through comprehensive analysis, it became evident that exile is commonly construed as forced separation from home, often compounded by the inability to return. Exile is inherently political, often stemming from rejecting the political order in one's country of origin and carrying the fear of persecution with it. The experience of exile encompasses the loss of home, community, and a sense of belonging, leading to feelings of instability, insecurity, and uncertainty that are uniquely felt based on individual circumstances. This sense of dislocation and the loss of a sense of home can erode the agency of those affected. However, a noteworthy finding emerged as some individuals perceive the line between forced and voluntary separation as increasingly indistinct. Consequently, certain individuals perceive their exile as a deliberate choice—a resolute opposition to authoritarianism. This perspective reframes exile as a state of displacement and an assertion of agency. While exile entails physical separation from one's homeland, it may also be perceived as a psychological detachment from the concept of home, stemming from feelings of alienation and persecution within one's homeland. This may manifest as a loss of safety, a struggle to express one's true identity or discrimination based on sexual orientation or disability.

Exile can manifest in both positive and negative dimensions. On the positive side, it can bring about self-transformation, growth, and a shift in identity. Conversely, the negative dimension encompasses the pain and hardship associated with the experience of exile. The phenomenon of collective exile within the Syrian context can yield varying perceptions and experiences among individuals. While some may find solace in the collective nature of exile, perceiving it as a shared experience that de-personalises their ordeal, others may find it more distressing due to the exposure to multiple painful narratives. Nevertheless, the collective exile brings a collective gain that translates into arts, culture, and research. The experience of exile is

dynamic, with a constant undercurrent of nostalgia. Factors such as the passage of time, the presence of a supportive community and family, the process of rebuilding life, financial and professional stability, and the maintenance of hope have been observed to mitigate the intensity of the exile experience. Figure 7 below visualises the critical points in my understanding of the experience of exile based on my participants' answers.

Figure 7

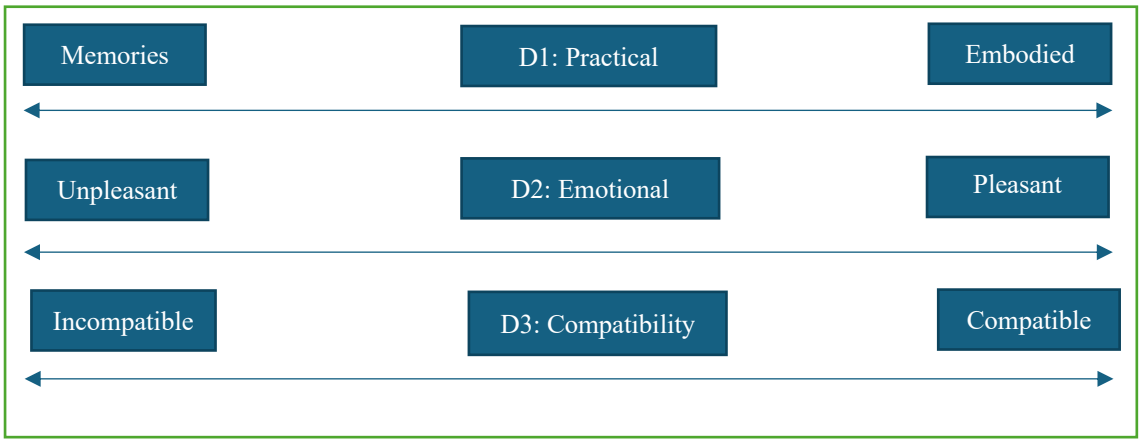
The Experience of Exile



After understanding the experience of exile, I have delved into exiled people belonging and identified three interconnected dimensions crucial in understanding the evolving dynamics of exiled individuals belonging to their homeland: the practical, emotional, and compatibility dimensions (Figure 8). Employing dimensions to comprehend exiled academics' belonging offers a more nuanced insight into the relationship between exiled academics and their homeland. Firstly, it avoids oversimplification and recognises that a single dimension cannot explain an individual's bond with their homeland. Secondly, it acknowledges the ambivalences that exiled individuals may experience in their relationship with their homeland, as they may find themselves at different points along the same dimension. Lastly, it avoids portraying the experiences of exiled academics in dichotomy and acknowledges the wide range of positions they may occupy across these dimensions.

Figure 8

The multi-dimensions of exiled academics' relationship with Syria



The practical dimension encompasses the extent to which individuals in exile maintain practical connections to their homeland. While residing in their homeland, exiled academics often experienced a strong sense of connection and belonging to Syria, which was deeply rooted in their social and familial ties as well as their daily immersion in the country's social and cultural fabric. It was an embodied experience. However, prolonged exile has disrupted these practical experiences, transforming their connection into one based more on memories. This shift is attributed to losing familiarity with Syria, disconnection from social and familial networks, and weakening cultural ties to the country. The research indicates that engagement in activities related to Syria, such as working on projects pertaining to the country, maintaining an active presence on social media, connecting with fellow Syrians in exile, and having family members still residing in Syria, serve as crucial factors in preserving the practical elements of exiled individuals' relationship with Syria. These factors prevent their connection from solely relying on memories, sustaining their interest in Syria, refreshing their knowledge and memories, enabling them to reengage with their culture, and facilitating the rebuilding of social connections with fellow Syrians.

The emotional dimension encompasses the complex array of intense emotions experienced by exiled individuals towards their homeland. These emotions play a crucial role in understanding the evolving dynamics of belonging for exiled individuals, as belonging is inherently intertwined with emotional connections and attachments to a specific place. While many exiled academics may struggle to articulate whether their emotions can be categorised as a sense of belonging, most participants expressed that their relationship with Syria is primarily emotional.

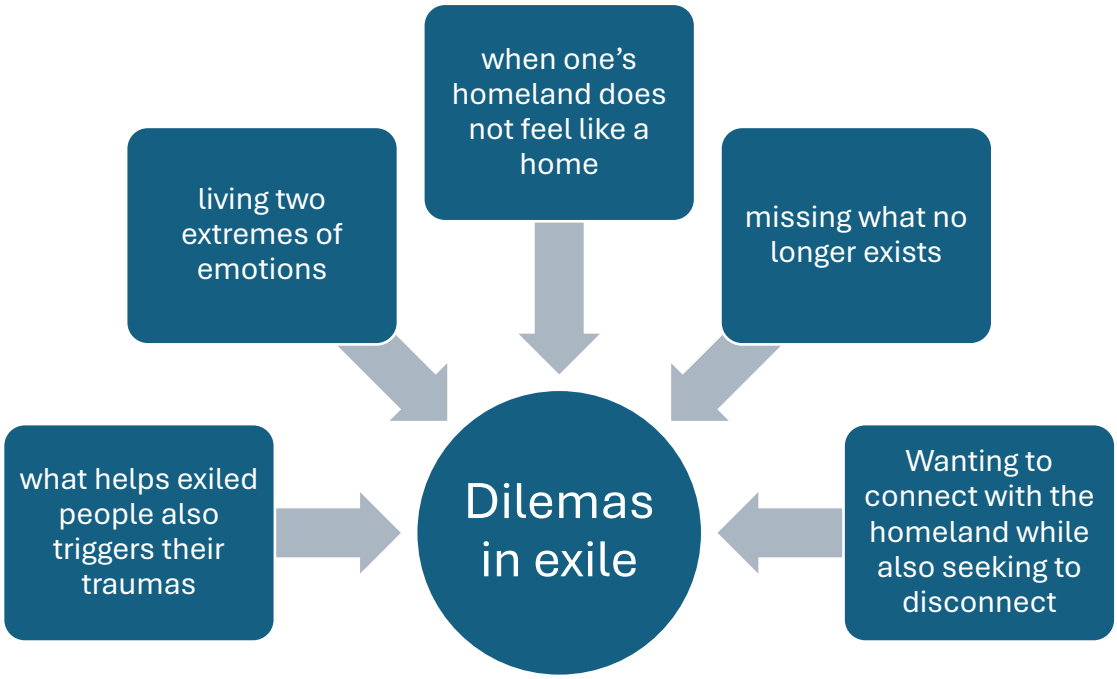
This emotional attachment spans from unpleasant emotions like grief, sadness, longing, and guilt to positive emotions such as empathy and love. This thesis also indicates that exiled individuals' prior personal experiences in Syria, the events unfolding in the country, and the experience of exile seem to shape their emotional connection, often evoking feelings of grief, guilt, pain, and longing, which are interwoven with sentiments of love and empathy.

The compatibility dimension is the third dimension that could help comprehend the evolving dynamics of exiled individuals in relation to their homeland. This dimension pertains to the way exiled individuals perceive the alignment of their personal identity with the collective Syrian identity. The research indicates that the changes experienced by exiled academics and by Syria itself at political, social, and cultural levels can make their personal identity more compatible or incompatible with the collective identity, consequently influencing their sense of belonging to the collective.

After understating the evolving dynamics of exiled individuals belonging to their homeland, this thesis found five apparent dilemmas that people in exile experience, which helps advance our understanding of the experience of exile and the complexity of forced migrants' relationship with their homeland. These are: what helps exiled people also triggers their traumas, living two extremes of emotions, when one's homeland does not feel like a home, missing what no longer exists, and feeling the pull to connect with the homeland while also seeking to disconnect (Figure 9).

Figure 9

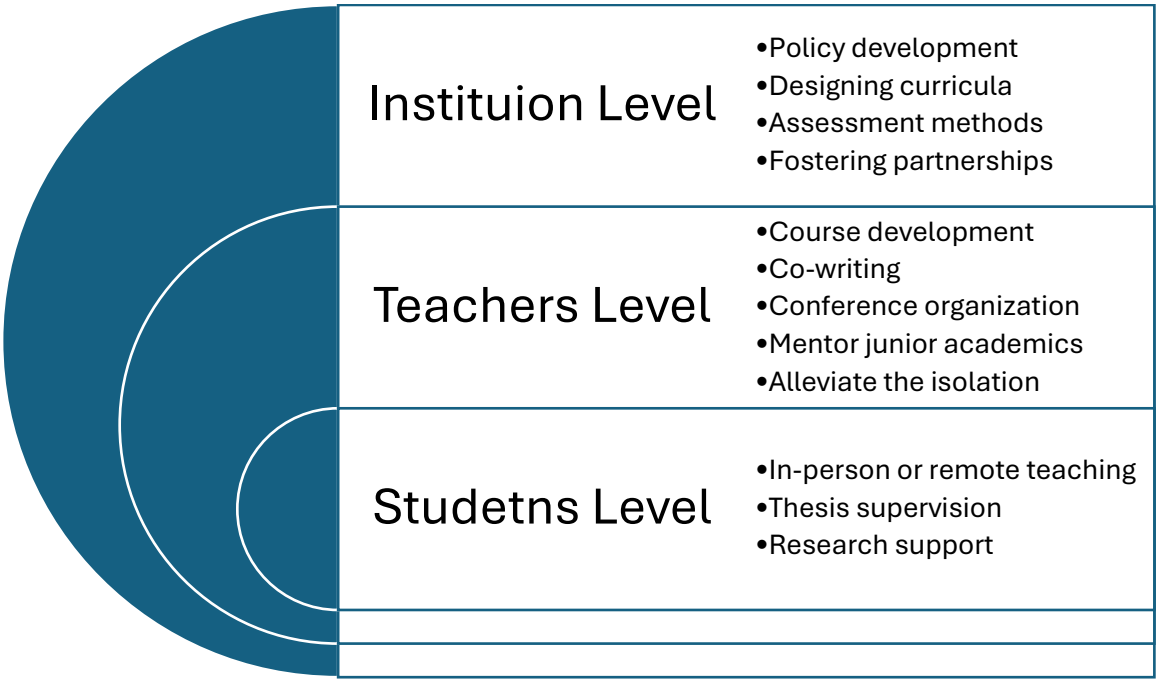
Dilemmas Facing Exiled Academics in Exile



After understanding how Syrian academics experience exile and the complexity of belonging and home, this thesis started to understand the potential role of exiled academics in future of their home countries. It proposed that understanding the potential impact of exiled academics on the future of Syria requires analysing their involvement at three interconnected levels: students, academics, and institutions (Figure 10). Exiled academics can assist students through in-person or remote teaching, thesis supervision, and research support. They can also collaborate with local academics on course development, co-writing, and conference organisation. Additionally, they can mentor junior academics and help alleviate the isolation experienced by local academics in Syria. At the institutional level, exiled academics can contribute by participating in policy development, designing curricula and assessment methods, and fostering partnerships between their UK universities and universities in Syria.

Figure 10

Exiled Academics Levels of Engagement

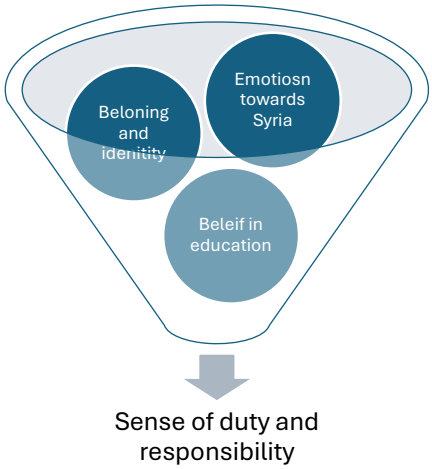


While exiled academics can contribute to all three, their willingness to engage varies. As highlighted by the participants, negotiating the complexities of the political landscape in conflict-affected countries poses a challenge. Despite this, all participants are committed to supporting students, regardless of political affiliations. The majority are also open to collaborating with local academics, even when they hold opposing political views. However, fewer are willing to engage with academic institutions in conflict-affected regions controlled by political regimes. By understanding and addressing these differences in engagement, we can better direct the efforts of exiled academics towards positively impacting their home countries, even amid conflict.

This thesis has also found that exiled academics are motivated to engage with Syria due to four interconnected factors (Figure 11). These include their sense of belonging to Syria and their identity as Syrians, their emotions towards Syria, such as guilt, love, sadness, and hope, their belief in education and knowledge sharing for the future of Syria, and the resulting sense of duty and responsibility to support Syria.

Figure 11

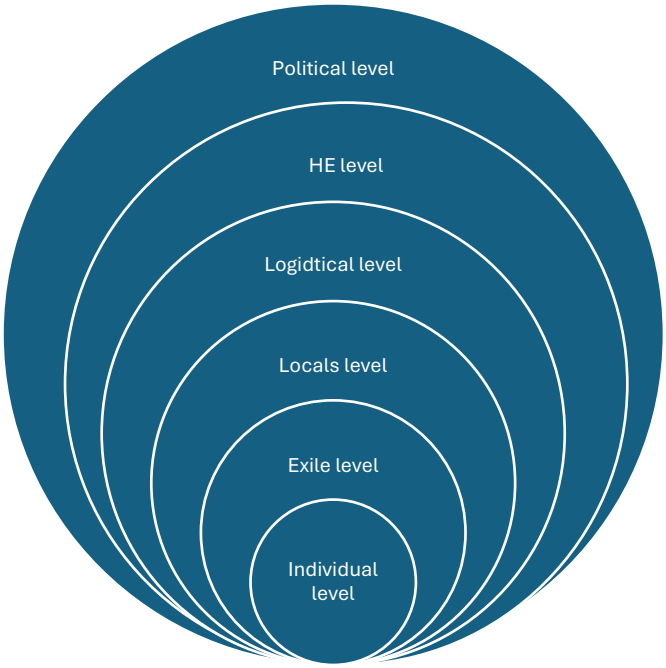
Exiled Academics Motivation



Lastly, the research identified six interconnected levels of barriers that hinder exiled academics' involvement in HE development. It delved into the complexities within each level, specifically in the context of the Syrian situation. These barriers encompass political, HE, individual, exile dynamics, local dynamics, and logistical levels (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Barriers to Exiled Academics' Involvement in HE Development



At the political level, factors such as the political environment, regime, fear of the regime, and overall instability in Syria come into play. The HE level is affected by the absence of academic freedom and independence, corruption within the sector, high student-to-teacher ratios, the

contextual HE culture, and the knowledge gap among students. On the individual level, concerns such as triggering trauma, hopelessness, time constraints, and limited professional access to Syria have an impact. The diaspora-dynamics level involves factors like the fear of betraying the cause, a culture of treason, differing political agendas, fear of the "other", negative collective work culture, and leader mentalities within the diaspora. At the local dynamics level, tensions arise between the diaspora and locals due to differing lived experiences, political stances, fear of competing for local jobs, diaspora disconnection from on-the-ground reality, varying academic orientations (West-East), and the politics of belonging. Lastly, at the logistical level, there is almost a complete absence of platforms that support exiled academics in engaging with HE in Syria.

This thesis has also found that the political level significantly influences the other five levels. While these barriers may not cover all aspects, they serve as a valuable analytical framework for understanding the challenges that diaspora academics, especially exiled academics, encounter when contributing to education development. The six levels of engagement heavily intersect with other conflict and fragile settings and, to a lesser extent, with normal settings. Any involvement of the diaspora in HE development is shaped by the political environment, governance of HE, individual circumstances, dynamics among the diaspora and locals, and the logistical infrastructure needed to support this involvement. However, the nuances within each level can vary significantly from one situation to another.

8.2 Limitations and Future Directions

The research has several limitations that should be considered for future studies. Firstly, the absence of a theoretical framework. The heuristic methodological framework used in this research focuses on the lived experience of the phenomenon. It suggests that applying a theoretical framework might hinder inductive reasoning or lead to findings not aligned with the data. While not using a theoretical framework allowed for a focus on the lived experience and the emergence of data to describe the phenomenon, it also resulted in a lack of theoretical guidance throughout the research process. Future research that uses a different methodological framework could explore the impact of employing a theoretical framework to see if it leads to different findings and insights.

Secondly, the heuristic methodological framework can offer enlightening insights and healing for researchers with lived experience of the topic. However, it also presents limitations and

challenges. One major limitation is using personal lived experience as the interpretative framework, which may result in blind spots. Future research on the topic could benefit from employing alternative methodologies to uncover findings and insights beyond the scope of my personal experience.

Thirdly, the research conducted only involved Syrian academics in the UK. By focusing on this specific group, the research gained valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of this particular demographic (Syrians, Academics, UK). However, it also means that the research's scope was limited, and other perspectives from different groups of forced migrants were not taken into account. Future research could explore the potential differences in how people interpret exile and their potential roles in their homeland across various forced migrant groups. This would help understand how "universal" or context-specific the experiences of exile, belonging, engagement with education, and barriers to education engagement for forced migrants. Arguably, the answer is both; however, future research could explain the nuances of how identity, profession, and the dynamics of a certain geographical context could impact these topics. The research findings highlighted the significant influence of identity and lived experiences, while the impact of the profession on the experience of exile was less evident. Additionally, the analysis did not address how the dynamics of the UK context influenced the findings.

Fourthly, the thesis has identified several dilemmas confronting academics living in exile. While the thesis shed light on the factors that aid individuals in mitigating the effects of exile, it did not address how people navigate the dilemmas uncovered by this research. This is an area that warrants further investigation. Additionally, future research could explore the experiences of exiled individuals from the Alawite sect in Syria. As touched upon in the thesis, this group faces a unique situation in Syrian exile, experiencing a dual form of exile due to both political and religious reasons. Lastly, the experiences of academics who received governmental scholarships to study abroad and could not return to Syria due to legal constraints present a particularly noteworthy case that challenges existing literature on exile. Although these individuals undergo an experience similar to other exiled individuals, they do not necessarily view themselves as such, as the reason for their inability to return is legal rather than political.

Fifthly, the thesis also recommends policymakers interested in diaspora engagement with their homeland consider the following: Although diaspora engagement in conflict contexts is

challenging, progress can still be made by breaking down their engagement with education into three different levels: students, academics, and institutions. Even if academic engagement with institutional development is hindered for political reasons, their engagement with local academics and students can still be facilitated. The lack of platforms for engagement is a significant barrier identified by nearly all participants. Policymakers can address this barrier easily to help bridge communities, maintain vital connections, and establish professional transnational networks, ultimately contributing to rebuilding Syria.

Finally, this thesis ends with a message to my fellow Syrian academics living in the diaspora. The experience of exile can be debilitating, the challenges daunting, and the barriers significant. We find ourselves pulled in different directions, navigating between our past, present, and future. However, our role in shaping the future of our country is crucial. The window for change may be small in Syria at the moment, but it will open and expand, hopefully within our lifetime. How great if we can be prepared for it by building bridges, trust, and platforms. How great if we can set aside our differences and direct our energy towards the future. I hope we hold onto the belief that change is possible, even when hope seems elusive. I hope we continue committing to social justice and freedom, honouring those who have sacrificed their lives to create a more just and free world. I hope we do not forget Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb, Bassel Shehadeh, Razan Zaithouneh, Samira al Khalil, Wael Hamadah, Nazem Hammadi, and the thousands who lost their lives in Syria so that we live in freedom.

8.3 Creative Synthesis

The Experience of Exile

Forcibly separated from home

Home has been taken away from us

Taken away for political reasons

Because we refused authoritarianism

We refused to be complicit in oppression and violence

We wanted to escape the war

But we have been punished

Our agency has been eroded

Even if legally we can go back home, we cannot

We are afraid of persecution

Yet, exile has agency

It was initially forced upon us, but then it became our decision

Even if legally we can go back home, some of us refuse

We don't want to betray the cause; we either all go back, or we don't

We don't want to normalise dictatorships

We lost a lot in exile

The feeling of belonging,

Identity

Homeland and home

family and community

Stability and security

Future certainty

Yet, some of us see a positive side to exile

A space to flourish and become ourselves

Resilience and strength

Different perspective,

For some, exile means liberation

Being a collective experience makes our exile less painful

We are not alone

What happened to us happened to millions

A collective gain and presence

A new collective identity through arts, research, food, and literature

But for some, the collective experience makes our exile more painful

More pain, tragedy, and suffering

We do not feel the exile equally

Those coming from minority groups feel a double exile

An exile from home and an exile from the community

Some of us are trying to heal, while others are trying to cope

These two overlaps

Time seems to help

Having our family around us seems to help

Re/building our life again and what we lost seems to help

Rebuilding our personal and professional security and stability appears to help

Having a community seems to help

But for some, we resist/struggle with building a new community

We don't want to build something that we might lose again

Moving on is important

The past is past; we cannot turn the clock back

We need to come to terms with what happened

We need to shift our focus towards the future

And the future needs hope

Hope that what is coming is better for ourselves and our countries

Our exile doesn't necessarily start the day we leave home

It could have started with alienation at home

With an internal conflict
With a struggle to belong and feel at home in our home country

Belonging in Exile

The embodied nature of our belonging has been interrupted
Our previous social and familial ties have been dismantled
Our understanding of our country has been distorted
Our cultural connection has been weakened
Our belonging to our home becomes based on past interactions
A memories relationship

The emotional nature of our belonging becomes complicated
Intense pleasant and unpleasant emotions
A pain because of what happened to our country
The destruction, the misery, the forced migration
We grieve the things we lost
The social ties, family, stability, security, dreams, faith, belonging, home, and identity.

Some of us feel guilty
We have survived and others could not
We did not experience the war similar to others
We are having a good life while others are living in camps
We have left families and friends behind
We benefited professionally from the Syrian misery

Some of us feel a deep longing
Longing to memories,
To friends and family
To home, homeland, neighbourhoods
Longing to 'return'
Longing to a past
When life was 'normal'

Some of us feel traumatised.
A trauma merged with love and solidarity for Syria and its people.

Some of us feel incompatible with the collective
We have changed
Our country has changed
This change could be in the opposite direction
We feel an incompatibility between our identity and the collective
Cultural, social or/and political incompatibility

Dilemmas in Exile

Exile and ambivalence go hand in hand

The things that help us trigger us
Social media connect us virtually with our homeland
With the society that we had to leave behind
With old friends and social network
With the changing dynamics in our country
With our culture
But,
It connects us with pain and suffering.

Working on topics related to homeland gives us knowledge of our country
It helps us to know the people on the ground
To understand the changing dynamics
To connect with past, present and future of the country
But,
It could make us experience constant pain
Exhaustion and vulnerability
It triggers past traumas

Connecting with other exiled Syrians reminds us of home
It helps us to rebuild some of the connections we lost
To feel community and home in our togetherness,
In our songs,
In our jokes
It gives us hope
But,
It could be a constant reminder of everything we lost
The fact that we do not have a home
That life has changed forever,
That Syria has been destroyed

Having family in our homeland connects us to our homeland
It keeps our relationship alive with Syria
It makes us want to understand the reality on the ground
But,
Having family in Syria causes us a lot of pain
Because they could be struggling in Syria
Because we cannot get them out

We are living between two extremes of emotions
We love Syria,
It is where our childhood memories are
Where our roots are
We feel indebted to it
But,
We feel pain, grieve, guilt, and longing
Some feel traumatised

Syria is our homeland, but it doesn't feel like a homeland anymore
It is our home
Where we were born
Where our families are
Where our grandfathers and mothers are

Where our physical house is

Where our roots and childhood memories are

But,

Home is safety, security and stability

Syria doesn't give us this

.

Home is also where we have community and social ties

Syria doesn't give us this

Home is where we can imagine ourselves getting older

Where we can be ourselves

Where we can be productive and achieve our ambitions

Syria doesn't give us this

We miss the non-existent

We miss Syria

Our friends

Our home

Our Community

Our social 'cohesion'

Our previous social and familial dynamics

But,

We miss the past

The memories

We miss the non-existent

We want to connect with our homeland but, at the same time, disconnect

We love our country

We want to support it

Rebuild it

Our connection with Syria gives us precious meanings

We want to maintain this connection

But

Our connection with Syria gives us pain

We want to move on

We want to live our life

We want to stop the pain

We want to disconnect

We have a desire to 'return'

Return to our family

To our house

To our community

But

The home is located in the past

We can go back to Syria, but we cannot go back in time

Our Role

What could be our potential role in the future of our homeland?

A puzzling question

A question of 'return'

A question of hope

A question of resistance

We wish a lot for Syria

Freedom

The absence of oppression

Social justice

Democracy

Openness

Economic prosperity

Cultural preservation and change

We wish a lot for HE in Syria

Academic freedom and independence

Creativity, innovation and intellectual activism

Good governance

No corruption

Less bureaucracy

Participatory learning

Critical thinking

Research

We envision ourselves supporting students in Syria

By teaching in person or remotely

Supervising students

Developing research and publishing skills

Helping with career and soft skills

We envision ourselves supporting academics in Syria

By collaborating with academics

Co-writing with them

Conducting joint conferences

Allowing them to represent themselves

Providing mentoring to junior and early career researchers

We envision ourselves supporting academic institutions in Syria

By contributing to policymaking

Developing curricula

Designing assessment methods

Building partnerships

However,

We struggle to navigate the political and ethical complications

There is a thin line that is not easy to navigate

We support students regardless of politics

Students are students, and we put them out of politics

The majority of us are willing to support academics regardless of politics

However,

We struggle to engage with those who stand on the different sides of the political spectrum

The ones on the different side of history

The ones who support an authoritarian regime

The ones who are complicit in massive crimes

We fear they might hurt us

We are more divided on supporting academic institutions

Corrupt, politicised and ideologised

Some of us adopt a utilitarian view

But for others, this is a redline

Motivation

Why are we committed to Syria?

What makes us want to contribute?

Wishing to contribute?

Dreaming of contributing?

Why not give up on Syria?

Why not focus on our personal and professional lives?

Our belonging and identity is a reason

Syria is our homeland

We have a common background and lived experience with people

Our emotional connection and attachment are a reason

Our emotions are a strong engine and drive

The guilt

The love

The sadness

The empathy

The hope

Our belief in the importance of education is a reason

For social justice

Decent life

Healing and reconciliation

Stopping wars and extremism

The future of Syria

Everything translates into a duty towards Syria

To decrease the suffering

To support future generations

To resist oppression

To give back to the society

To give to those people who lost everything

To help those who did not have the same chance we had

To rebuild our country

Barriers

Our engagement with our home country is complex

It is not just a decision we make

The political environment limits us

The HE environment limits us

Our individual circumstances limit us

Our exile dynamics limit us

The dynamics with locals limit us

And the logistical infrastructure limits us

All shaped by the political context

Political Level

There is no will to engage us

We are a threat to the power back home

Our knowledge is a threat

Our research is a threat

Our lived experience is a threat

Our teaching is a threat

And we fear the regime to hurt us,

We fear oppression, exclusion and retaliation

We fear being monitored and arrested

HE Level

How can we engage with such a sector?

Co-opted by a one-party

No independence

No academic freedom

Corruption

Bureaucracy

Negative HE culture

Overburdened sector

Individual Level

Our homeland could trigger our mental health

And we feel paralysed and hopeless in exile

The lack of time limits us

The loss of professional connections in Syria limits us

The loss of accurate understanding of the reality on the ground limits us

Diaspora-dynamics Level

We do not want to betray the cause

Betraying those who have been detained, tortured, killed and displaced

We fear the treason culture

There is zero tolerance by our fellows to any engagement with the regime

Our fear of the 'other' in exile limits us

Our different political agendas limit us

The negative collective work culture limits us

The harmful competition limits us

The leader mentality limits us

Locals-dynamic Level

The 'locals' and 'migrant' tension limit us

The 'us' and 'them' narratives

The different political stances

The power imbalance

The different lived experiences of the conflict

The fear of taking 'local' jobs

The Western vs Eastern education

The diaspora disconnection from reality and arrogance

Some locals perceive us as traitors, cowards, and opportunistic

Some diaspora perceive locals as backwards and less experienced

All of that translates into the politics of belonging

Logistical Level

We don't have a government to help us

We need platforms to encourage us

To facilitate, amplify, and manage our engagements

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Online Form to Collect Demographic Data

1. Name
2. Gender
3. Country of residence
4. How long have you been living in your current country of residence?
5. If you have lived in Syria previously, which years did you live there?
6. Have you previously taught at a Syrian university/academic institution?
7. Roughly speaking, how many years of experience do you have as an academic?
8. Out of these years of experience, how many years were in Syria and how many years were outside Syria?
9. Current occupation
10. Current institution

Appendix B: Interview protocol

Section	Theme	Questions/notes
Housekeeping	NA	• Thank participants for their time • Overview of research • Overview of method • Interview Length (60 min-90 mins) • Security, anonymous, withdrawal • Wellbeing (Identity, migration, political) • Recording and transcription
RQ1	Exile	• Their understanding of exile? • Their experience of exile? • When has Exile started? • What is positive and negative about exile? • How exile being a collective phenomenon impact them? • What mitigates their exile?
RQ1a	Belonging in exile	• Belonging meaning? • Home meaning? • Their experience in Syria? • Feeling towards Syria? • What does Syria mean to them? • How would they describe their relationship to Syria? • Factors that impact the relationship with Syria?
RQ1b	Dilemmas	• Do you experience any dilemmas in exile?
RQ2	Potential role in the future of Syria	• Vision for Syria • Vision for HE in Syria

		• Potential Role in HE

RQ2a	Motivation	• What makes you want to contribute?
		  ○ E.g Emotional
		  ○ E.g Identity
		  ○ E.g Duty

RQ2b	Barriers	• What stops you from contributing?
		  ○ E.g Political
		  ○ E.g Personal
		  ○ E.g Logistical
		  ○ E.g Locals
		  ○ E.g HE
		  ○ E.g diaspora

The End