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Right to mobility, right to belong: Bottom-up citizenship practices of Syrian refugees in Europe

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Abstract

Through a small-scale interview study with Syrians with Swedish citizenship who have either relocated to, or are regularly visiting, the UK, this article sheds light on the nexus between mobility and bottom-up citizenship practices of refugees in Europe. We mobilize the twin concepts of 'affective' and 'instrumental' citizenship to highlight how refugees' quest for belonging and safety challenges usual assumptions about displacement: first, our data defy push-pull models of migration, showing that quick access to naturalization and generous welfare policies attracted some Syrians to Sweden, but were not enough to make them stay. The fact that for those leaving Sweden, the UK was only one possible destination—with other Syrians moving to the Global South—calls into question a hierarchy of desirable destinations with Western and Northern Europe at the top. Second, seen through the lens of affect, refugees' and host states' interactions are not merely legalistic or bureaucratic: while our interlocutors perceived Swedish welfare interventions and political discourse as top-down affective control, they also engaged in grassroots practices of affective citizenship, devising alternative forms of belonging through mobility. Ultimately, affective citizenship can inform ambitions to stay, or move on, regardless of how affluent host countries are. Third, while our protagonists' back-and-forth movements point to the non-linearity of refugee journeys, their use of the UK's EU Settlement Scheme as a deferred 'insurance policy' highlights the complexity of temporalities of displacement. Legal security may not be sufficient to ending refugees' lingering feelings of insecurity, and thus not preclude further mobility-based strategies.

Keywords: Syrian; affective citizenship; mobility regimes; unusual; right to belong

1. Introduction

In January 2023, we met with Dr Haytham Alhamwi, the manager of Rethink Rebuild, a Syrian-led support organization in Manchester, the second-biggest city in the UK. We were hoping to understand how the non-governmental organization (NGO) had transitioned from providing orientation to newly arrived Syrian refugees, to offering activities to a more established community. Our interviewee told us that most of their beneficiaries had come to Manchester between 2012 and 2015. With around 13,000 people, the area had turned into the biggest hub for the Syrian diaspora in the UK after London. As refugees had acquired permanent residency and later British citizenship had found jobs and houses and enrolled their children in schools and universities, their needs had changed, and so had the

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mandate of their support organization. Whereas before NGO staff and volunteers had been busy signing up their charges with doctors, schools, and social welfare, they now organized cultural activities for the second generation of Syrians, children and teenagers who barely remembered their parents' homeland. And yet, we were surprised to learn that since 2020, another one thousand Syrians had arrived in Manchester—not from war-torn Syria itself this time, but from Sweden. They had left the Scandinavian country, home to almost 200,000 Syrians (Statistics Sweden 2020), and the state with the highest number of Syrian refugees per capita in Europe, to relocate to the UK, which had accepted only 20,000 of their compatriots through its resettlement scheme between 2014 and 2021 (UNHCR 2021), and whose total number of Syrians stands at around 38,000 people (ONS 2021). Once again, the NGO in Manchester had to organize sessions about life in the UK for newcomers. However, whereas earlier refugees had come to the UK as asylum-seekers, often after lengthy and dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean and Europe, these new arrivals had entered the country as 'Europeans'. Before the UK left the European Union (EU), they had used their recently acquired Swedish passports to register for 'pre-settled status' for EU citizens under the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), which later allowed them to obtain a five-year residency permit in the UK.[1] In this article, we explore not only the logistics of these Syrians' journey, but also why they chose to forego life in Sweden, considered one of the most generous refugee-hosting countries in the world, to relocate to Manchester, a place some of them now describe as 'almost Syria'.

Through a small-scale interview study with Syrians with Swedish citizenship who have either permanently relocated to, or are regularly visiting, the UK, this article sheds light on the nexus between mobility and bottom-up citizenship practices of refugees in Europe. How Syrians assert their right to mobility goes hand in hand with their right to belong: beyond narrow and place-based state-led integration agendas, refugees have used EU citizenship to fulfil their need for belonging through exploring new mobility options. Their experience complicates a simple question: when does displacement *end*? The goal of this article is not to make normative claims about whether Syrian refugees' mobilities are right or wrong, but rather to describe an empirical phenomenon that highlights the evolving nature of displacement in the interstices of policy categories. Under the previous British conservative government, the public imagination was fuelled by sensationalist portrayals of asylum-seekers crossing the English Channel in small boats, as well as the government's (ultimately unsuccessful) plans to deport them to Rwanda (Walsh 2024). The Syrian protagonists of this article, however, arrived safely on planes, equipped with EU passports. In line with the introduction to this special issue (Fakhoury 2024), recourse to refugees' citizenship practices can unsettle assumptions about a hierarchy of destinations, and what counts as a 'transit' or 'final' country. To be clear, the phenomenon of refugees using EU citizenship to relocate to the UK is not new. Over the last two decades, displaced people originally from Iran, Somalia, and other countries have all left for the UK, after having acquired citizenship in Sweden (e.g., Kelly 2013; Haandrikman and Hassanen 2014; Ahrens, Kelly and Van Liempt 2016), the Netherlands, and other Scandinavian countries (e.g., Lindley and van Hear 2007; Van Liempt 2011; Ahrens, Kelly and Van Liempt 2016; Moret 2017). Similarly, Bangladeshi migrants with Italian citizenship (Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017; Della Puppa and King 2019) and Latin American migrants who have acquired Spanish passports (Mas Giralt 2017) have used their new freedom of movement in Europe to relocate to the UK. The Syrians that we interviewed have moved for a similar mix of motivations: the quest for better employment and business opportunities, family networks, English-language education for children, and the multicultural society in big British cities, together with fear of growing right-wing sentiment in their initial host countries. And our protagonists realized their move through similar means: with the help of transnational networks, exploratory visits to the UK, and broader established diasporas.

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The unusualness of our case study comes to light when we pay attention to *how* Syrian refugees' agency unfolded, in particular, through their subversive use of the EUSS to create an 'insurance policy'. Some Syrians residing in Sweden seized a time-sensitive opportunity immediately before the UK left the EU to secure legal residency abroad. By September 2023, 5.7 million EU citizens had applied to the EUSS that allowed EU citizens to retain the right to live, work, and access public services in the UK. However, this number was higher than the estimated 4 million EU citizens living in the UK at the time. This discrepancy has been explained by inaccurate estimates and the subsequent departure of EU citizens after their registration with the EUSS (Migration Observatory 2024). Our data suggest an alternative explanation: that some EU citizens from abroad, including Syrian refugees in Sweden, used the EUSS as a deferred opportunity for settlement in the UK that they activated several years later. Swedish citizenship alone had not been enough to convince our interviewees that they could make a 'forever' home in Sweden, but it gave them the time to accumulate assets while considering their options. Our protagonists' journey involved waiting times, tentative back and forth visits, and finally, for some, a relocation synchronized with major life events in their families' lives. Besides challenging assumptions about the linearity of refugees' journeys (cf Schapendonk 2021), we thus demonstrate the need to think of the temporalities of displacement as highly complex. To make sense of Syrians' lingering subjective displacement experience, despite their newfound legal security in Sweden, we approach their mobility strategies with a critical understanding of citizenship as different from a top-down legal and administrative instrument of states, and the static mapping of a territory, people, and nation. We discuss our findings in the context of two recent debates in Citizenship Studies that have emerged in the context of increasingly heterogeneous societies: 'instrumental' (or 'strategic') and 'affective' citizenship. Both debates draw attention to dynamic and hybrid forms of belonging, where citizens have multiple and, at times, conflicting identities and affiliations. We show that affect and mobility regimes—used by states to control mobile populations—can turn into means of emancipation in the hands of refugees, but also defy narrow ideas of displaced people as purely rational, self-interested actors.

Since the 1990s, states in Europe and the Americas have reacted to more abundant and diverse migrations with new citizenship policies, notably the introduction of dual citizenship. Some migrants and refugees who have obtained powerful passports from the Global North use these to prepare future migration projects, subverting states' expectations about permanent settlement. Citizenship, and the legal security and access to services that it entails, may thus be converted into 'mobility capital' (Moret 2017: 235) that enables refugees to move on. Researchers have investigated such 'instrumental' or 'strategic' use of citizenship (for an overview, see Finotelli, La Barbera and Echeverría 2018; Harpaz and Mateos 2019), or, what Della Puppa and Sredanovic (2017) flippantly call 'citizen[ship] to go' (366). However, rather than migrants' abuse of citizenship rights, these debates highlight 'the key role of global inequality in shaping the meaning and value of citizenship' (Harpaz and Mateos 2019: 844). A focus on Syrians' 'instrumental' use of EU citizenship points to broader struggles about mobility rights. As Schapendonk (2021) and others (e.g., Van Liempt 2011) have argued, framing the movements of refugees-turned-citizens inside Europe as 'onward' or 'secondary' migrations reflects EU policy frameworks, rather than empirical realities, in a bifurcated Europe in which some people's movements are considered desirable, while those of others are blocked. Liberal democracies are built not on open borders, but on the regulation of mobility: on free movement for some, and curtailing the movements of those constructed as 'others', including, more recently, refugees and migrants (Kotef 2015). The EU is a prime example: since the late 1980s, greater freedom of movement, settlement, and employment for European citizens within the Schengen Space has gone hand in hand with the reinforcement and, increasingly, externalization of its outer borders (for a recent overview, see Heller, Pezzani and Stierl 2019). During the Syrian

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conflict, the EU's third-country deals with countries like Turkey have sought to immobilize refugees in the Middle East (Crawley and Skleparis 2017; Crisp 2021). On European territory, EU citizens' 'mobilities' are framed as a right, while non-Europeans' 'migrations' are considered a source of concern and potential threats (Schapendonk et al. 2020; Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden 2021). Our case study of Syrians who first cross borders irregularly as 'asylum-seekers', and later legally as 'European citizens', reveals that movement restrictions and unlimited movement are not competing logics of governance, but two sides of the same (European) coin: our protagonists have capitalized on the same inequalities of movement that confine so many of their compatriots to precarious places in the Global South. To make sense of Syrians' split movements, we adopt an understanding of (im)mobility that does not relegate it to a mere absence or passivity, but rather inquires about the 'intersecting regimes of mobility that normalize the mobility of some travellers while criminalizing and entrapping the ventures of others' (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013: 189; cf Franquesa 2011). Such a relational approach to mobility allows us to highlight our protagonists' aspirations, and the barriers they face, to rootedness *and* to transnational lifestyles. Neither cosmopolitan travellers nor parochial, they claim not only a 'right to protection', but also the right to choose *where*, *and on what terms*, to receive it (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013; Garelli and Tazzioli 2017a).

As we study some Syrian refugees' 'instrumental' use of EU citizenship, we aim to avoid falling in the trap of assuming a clear-cut South-North directionality to their movements (for similar critiques, see Jeffery and Murison 2011; Fabos, Kahn and Sarkis 2021; Schapendonk 2021). Echoing insights from Fischer's (2024) article in this collection, we are critical of depictions of displacement as a linear movement from conflict-ridden places of origin to sites of refuge (Collyer 2010; Crawley et al. 2017; McMahon and Sigona 2018). Rather than assuming that our protagonists had a long-term migration strategy when leaving Syria, moving towards a hierarchy of ever more 'desirable' destinations in Europe, our findings show the impact of contingencies and changing life plans. We showcase that Syrians' relocation to the UK coincided with other mobility projects, including short-term and circular family visits and holidays (cf De Hoon, Vink and Schmeets 2020). To broaden our understanding of what makes a destination (un)attractive for refugees, we also draw on insights from the 'affective citizenship' literature. The affective turn in Citizenship Studies has highlighted the emotional, non-rational, and embodied elements of citizenship (e.g., Mookherjee 2005; Fortier 2010; Hung 2010; Zembylas 2013; Di Gregorio and Merolli 2016; Ayata 2019). This includes states' expectations for 'good citizens' to exhibit patriotism, fear and anger against migrants stoked by right-wing politicians, positive nation-building through big sports events like the Olympics, but also alternative caring practices through which mobile populations assert their belonging. States' new focus on their subjects' feelings has turned citizenship into a privilege: citizens with a migration background have to 'earn' their status by foregoing signs of difference such as wearing the veil (Johnson 2010), and by demonstrating a shared sense of belonging to their local and national communities, rather than to transnational networks (Fortier 2010; De Wilde and Duyvendak 2016). Affect is thus mobilized for creating inclusive communities, but also for excluding minorities such as Muslim migrants in the EU and the US, producing new hierarchies between 'true' and 'suspicious' citizens (Ayata 2019). However, migrants, refugees, and activists have also reclaimed affective citizenship as 'the ability to act and feel differently' (Di Gregorio and Merolli 2016: 936) and 'a site of radical modes of belonging' (Fortier 2016: 1039). The subversive, grassroots dimension of affective citizenship becomes clear when new citizens refuse to integrate according to state-led agendas, instead prioritizing other forms of belonging, such as mothering (Miri, Emmery and Longman 2021), artistic transformation of public spaces (Vrasti and Dayal 2016), translation and brokerage (Ozer 2024), and acts of solidarity between locals and migrants (Lampredi 2024). Getting attuned to mobile populations' affective and embodied practices

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and entanglements allows us to consider a much wider range of acts of citizenship and political agency (Lampredi 2024), as well as a more complex appraisal of people's affiliations in a pluralistic society (Mookherjee 2005; Hung 2010; Zembylas 2013). Looking at our Syrian interviewees' citizenship practices through the lens of affect helps us make sense of how they have experienced Swedish welfare interventions as affective control. We also show how they have responded through enacting acts of affective citizenship in local and transnational communities, both digitally and offline, and, ultimately, through asserting their 'right to belong' by moving elsewhere. That affect and mobility become entangled in Syrians' bottom-up citizenship practices brings into view the wider opportunity structures that refugees seek out, beyond access to welfare and jobs. Push-pull models of migration, reducing refugees to rational, narrowly self-interested economic actors, fall short of capturing their complex motivations to move or stay put. When leaving Sweden for the UK, our protagonists did not merely weigh up costs and benefits of potential targets—their imaginations of 'dream destinations', and the quest for a holistic sense of home and belonging, equally mattered.

After an overview of the methodology that underpins this study, the remainder of this article is organized around two analytical axes: Syrians' mundane engagements with affective control at the hands of Swedish state institutions, and how they salvaged economic and affective aspects of their 'right to belong' through using their newfound mobility as EU citizens. The third and fourth sections contrast two very different movements, a decade apart: Syrians' irregular and dangerous flight to Sweden across the Mediterranean (Section 3), and their comparatively privileged departure from Sweden to the UK by legal means (Section 4). In the third section, we discuss how the Swedish state offered refugees citizenship, but also kept them on hold as the perennial cultural 'other', making them a target of welfare interventions. Meanwhile, our interviewees reclaimed belonging through affective engagements with fellow refugees in Sweden and transnational diasporas. The fourth section looks at how some Syrians later mobilized the 'mobility capital' that they had accumulated in Sweden for their relocation to Manchester, where they asserted their belonging to a UK considered a 'home' (for now) almost as much as Syria. In the conclusion, we discuss policy implications of our findings: the invisibilization of refugees' vulnerabilities once they change legal status, and the inadequacy of states' and the international humanitarian system's place-based solutions to displacement.

2. Methodology

Eight recorded interviews for this article were conducted in winter/spring 2023 and in spring 2024. In 2023, we met twice with Abu Omar, a middle-aged Syrian man, at a well-known Syrian restaurant in central Manchester. The first time, we sat down with him for an extended biographical interview; the second time, he arranged a Ramadan dinner with three of his friends, as well as his teenage son, who had all recently relocated from various locations in Scandinavia. In 2024, Dr Columbu conducted follow-up interviews with three younger Syrian men still residing in Sweden—all in their late twenties and early thirties—while they were paying a visit to a mutual Syrian friend in London. Comparing the testimonies of Syrian men with Swedish citizenship in the UK, some of whom had moved there more permanently, while others were regularly visiting UK-based family members and friends, gave us a deeper understanding of reasons to stay, or leave, Sweden. In addition to the interviews, we also draw on several years of ethnographic background research with the Syrian community in Manchester. Between 2016 and 2019, Dr Columbu taught Arabic at the University of Manchester. During this time, he lived in shared accommodation with Syrian flatmates and volunteered with the Syrian-led support organization mentioned in the introductory vignette, while Dr Zuntz regularly visited. Now based in Edinburgh and London, we recommenced ethnographic research with various Syrian-led organizations

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and individuals in early 2023, and now reconnect with our Syrian contacts several times a year during week-long stints. Neither of us is Syrian or a native Arabic speaker, although Dr Columbu has near-native level command of Arabic. Over the years, our uneasy positioning as 'outsiders'—albeit as researchers with a professional interest in Syria and as long-term collaborators of Syrian-led organizations in Manchester and elsewhere—has raised eyebrows, and sometimes suspicion, but we have also been able to form lasting friendships.

With such a limited number of formal interviews, we cannot hope to make broader generalizations about Syrians' movements after a first period of settlement in Europe. Still, through a limited case study, we hope to shed light on the ongoing complexity of Syrian displacement. Due to our longstanding relationships of trust with Syrians in Manchester, we were able to discuss our research findings with Syrian acquaintances, whose offices and living rooms turned into an echo chamber where they reflected on newcomers' motives to move from Sweden to the UK—a widely known phenomenon among Syrians in Manchester—as well as their own reasons to stay in the UK. Importantly, we did not conduct research in Sweden itself. Rather, our goal is to describe and analyse a new phase of arrivals of Syrian refugees in Manchester from the perspective of the receiving community, and discuss how social media rumours about Syrians' treatment in Sweden, circulated throughout transnational online forums, have had offline effects on the Syrian diaspora in the UK. What matters for the purpose of this article is less the truth-value of what our interlocutors told us about their experiences with the Swedish asylum system and society, but rather how, once arrived in Manchester, they retrospectively made sense of their relocation, to themselves, and in conversation with other Syrians and transnational (digital) networks. We captured discussions between men of various ages, but women's voices remain absent. Another necessary caveat is that all men interviewed for this article live in heteronormative families, usually as fathers and heads of households. This position of power has influenced the migration choices they have made for themselves and their loved ones. This does not make them representative of *all* displaced Syrians. All contributors received participant information sheets in Arabic via WhatsApp prior to the meetings, informing them about the purpose of the research and their rights with regard to it. On the condition of anonymity, all agreed to be interviewed, and for the conversations to be audio-recorded. The names of all interlocutors have been changed, and some personal details have been left out to protect their privacy.

3. Negotiating belonging in Sweden

In this section, we document top-down and bottom-up acts of 'affective citizenship' that Syrian refugees were exposed to, and engaged in, in Sweden. Securing highly coveted citizenship in the Global North does not exclude other processes of social, economic, political, and, indeed, affective marginalization: while Syrians began to live and travel as Swedish, they were also constructed by the Swedish state—as well as in their own perception—as culturally 'non-Swedish' and subjects of social welfare. One way through which our Syrian interviewees managed this ongoing sense of unsettledness *after* settlement was to assert their belonging in local communities of fellow refugees, as well as transnational diasporas, while 'refusing to belong' in Sweden through social media posts, wearing Islamic fashion, and certain forms of child-rearing.

We begin by retracing Abu Omar's journey to Sweden, and his reasons for doing so. Abu Omar, a man in his mid-forties, had fled his hometown Homs in 2014. After leaving his wife and five children in Turkey, he crossed the Mediterranean and made his way to Sweden, where he applied for asylum. Without knowing much about Sweden at the time, he considered the country 'a dream destination'; what made it most appealing was the prospect of faster access to citizenship, compared to other European countries like

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Germany. In fact, Sweden was the first European country to immediately grant Syrian refugees permanent residency, at least between 2013 and late 2015 (for an overview of Sweden's changing migration frameworks, see Rabo et al. 2021; Enos 2023). Other interview studies with Syrians in Sweden also find that quick access to permanent residence and citizenship, rather than existing family ties, motivated many Syrians to flee to Sweden (Lundgren Jörum 2015). Our interviewees confirmed that their arrival in Sweden went smoothly: from being welcomed by government employees at the train station in Malmö where all men arrived, to having their fingerprints taken by immigration officials, to being swiftly enrolled in housing and language programmes: 'All I had to do was sign up'.

At first, this allowed new residents to be quickly reunited with loved ones through family reunification. Joined by his family, Abu Omar was assigned to a city on the Baltic Sea, in southeast Sweden, and like many of his Syrian friends and acquaintances, he worked hard to integrate quickly: he learned Swedish and found work as a caretaker in a local school. In the meantime, his children started school, and his oldest son went to university. Having successfully navigated the Swedish welfare system and labour market, Abu Omar was keen to help other refugees, teaching Swedish to newly arrived Syrian children. Similarly, one of the younger men soon secured a position as a mechanic with an international car company, while Abu Omar's friend, Abu Rayan, became a foreman in a huge meat-processing factory and later managed to hire forty-five other Syrian workers—to Abu Rayan, an indicator of his fellow Syrians' economic success. Like Abu Omar, he also engaged in humanitarian activities, establishing an informal support group to assist other Arabic-speakers. Only Abu Faisal, a slightly older man with a lower educational level, struggled to find a job in his field, construction, during his seven years in Sweden. This said, there was a perception among interviewees that due to strict regulations and the small number of big companies, it was more difficult to start a business in Sweden than in the UK. The feeling that there was a limit to their professional ambitions, and that their lives in Sweden had not been a complete 'success', fuelled the men's hopes of opportunities elsewhere.

While most men thus integrated 'economically' in Sweden, at least to a certain extent, the same was not true for developing a sense of belonging. Our interviewees mentioned two decisive factors: discrimination and changing asylum policies in Sweden. On the one hand, all men either encountered first-hand or heard of everyday and institutional forms of discrimination, and rarely made friends with Swedish locals (cf Wessels 2023). Direct verbal incidents of racism were rare, but they did occur. Abu Rayan recalled: 'We were the first people with black hair in our city. [Some people] had never seen a Muslim in their lives […], they asked me whether I rode camels back in Syria. They asked me whether we had electricity in Syria'. More importantly, experiences of discrimination revolved around two issues: child welfare and freedom of religion. Regardless of the truth value of their perceptions, many Syrians believed that they risked having their children taken away by Swedish social services, pronounced as 'sossiàl' (السوسيال) by Arabic-speakers. Our interviewees gave multiple examples of parental behaviours that children could allegedly report to social services, which might trigger an intervention. These included physical punishment and insults directed at children, but also more benign forms of parenting, including Syrian parents' unwillingness to allow sleepovers, unrestricted mobile phone use, discussions on LGBTQ+ issues at school, and drinking alcohol. To conservative Muslims, Swedish policies and discourse on LGBTQ+ were perceived as particularly controversial: one of our participants perceived them as a 'deification' (تأليه) of homosexuality. To refugees, such manifestations of child-rearing in Sweden reflected a wider form of parental neglect. As Abu Omar explained: 'What [Swedish people] do is they give their children this device [ie, smartphones and iPads] to play with, they set off to work, they don't care about their children, they don't care about their upbringing. They don't care about their children learning about many things, including religious values, they give them food, and that's it'. Abu Rayan chipped in: '[In Sweden], they plant this idea in children's mind that the individual comes

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first. In our religion, taking care of parents is a duty'. In a similar vein, focus group studies with Syrians in Sweden have found that refugees are afraid of 'becoming too Swedish' (Abdel-Fatah et al. 2021:145). Such concerns about culture point to refugees' perception of cultural adaptation as a one-way street, where the onus was on new arrivals to shed their original value systems. As Rabo et al. (2021) argue, both Swedish state agencies and Syrian refugees in Sweden engage in mutual stereotyping: authorities describe all arrivals from the Middle East and Africa as coming from patriarchal and collectivist cultures, e.g., through the material taught in 'integration classes'. Syrian refugees like our interviewees, on the other hand, frame the Swedish welfare system as over-reactive, too liberal, and hostile to families.

Syrians' negative experiences with Swedish social services have been widely shared through Arabic-speaking social media platforms, and, increasingly, also English-speaking news websites, stoking outsized fears among refugees (e.g., Muhammad 2019). Only one interviewee in our study, a young man still living in Sweden who had worked at a primary school for over two years, had first-hand experience and quickly debunked the rumours: he had indeed observed social services taking children away, but only in cases of gross neglect and child abuse. And yet, despite our interviewees' lack of personal contact with social services, rumours about losing their children felt real and scary to them. While numerous studies have investigated Syrian refugees' use of social media during risky journeys to Europe (e.g., Zijlstra and Van Liempt 2017; Alencar et al. 2018; Gillespie et al. 2018), a growing body of research looks at their 'digital resilience tactics' after more permanent settlement in the Netherlands (Udwan et al. 2020: 1; cf Dekker et al. 2018), Austria (Kaufmann 2018), and Canada (Mohamed and Bastug 2020). Social media usage can facilitate integration, e.g., when refugees use Google maps to familiarize themselves with their new environments and learn a new language through translation apps. In a Dutch town, digital activism brought together refugees, locals, and civil society actors, allowing Syrian newcomers to assert their right to stay in that particular locality (Miellet 2021). But digital consumption can also reinforce feelings of otherness, as many refugee continue to rely on Arabic-speaking news on their social media. A small interview study with male Syrian refugees in Sweden found that they did not trust Swedish mainstream media to provide accurate and timely information on Syria. Regardless of time spent abroad, social media allowed participants to maintain strong ties to their families and ethnic identity. Facebook, in particular, was considered the most trustworthy source on events in Syria and involving the Syrian diaspora (Timmermans 2018). With rumours rife on social media, many refugees consider information from personal contacts and experiences most trustworthy; but in the absence of personal ties, they also interpret a larger number of social media posts on a certain topic as confirmation (Dekker et al. 2018). In the case of our interviewees, they were more inclined to believe rumours about Swedish social services because these had been reported widely, and authenticated by well-known Syrian influencers who gave them a personal 'face'. 'Children under diaspora in Sweden', for example, is an Arabic-language Facebook group with over 1600 members, dedicated to the discussion of Swedish anti-immigration laws, the dangers of Western-style education, a fundraising project to build a mosque in the city of Norkkoping, gender roles inside the family, divorce, and 'sossiàl'. Members post invitations to and videos of Syrian families demonstrating against Swedish child protection policies, and recordings of social services physically removing Syrian children. One female participant asked the following question to the online group:

> *Good evening. I want to ask you a question. I travelled to another country and I have a case open with the social services. I had an interview with them, which I did not attend. I left Sweden and a month later, they sent me a letter informing me that they had closed the case. Should I be afraid to go back, can you advise me please? Just to let you know, I*

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travelled with my younger son and left my eldest daughter with her father, I only went for a visit. [Translation from Arabic by the authors]

Syrian influencers such as the barber-turned-youtuber George Touma, an icon in the eyes of our interviewees for his online commitment and presence, further amplify such gossip. Having moved to Sweden in 2013, Touma relocated to Australia a decade later. In a YouTube video viewed almost 200,000 times, with more than 2,000 comments, he denounces the 'kidnapping' of Syrian children by Swedish social services (Touma 2023). One reason why these videos appeal to such large audiences is Touma's use of highly emotive language, calling 'every mother and every father'. The digital dimension of these reports has made them known to a wider, and increasingly transnational, Syrian diaspora. Later, this increased our interviewees' credibility when they mobilized their social networks to move to Manchester. In other interviews that we conducted around the same time, Syrians in the UK who had never lived in Sweden spoke compassionately of their compatriots' plight in the Scandinavian country.

A second factor that motivated many Syrians' move to the UK was the changing political environment in Sweden: all men were conscious of more restrictive asylum policies and the rise of the political right since the mid-2010s. In 2015, 162,000 Syrian asylum-seekers reached Sweden, twice as many as in previous years. By 2017, Syrians had become the largest group of immigrants in the country (Aradhya and Mussino 2020). This prompted unprecedented media attention and support from civil society, but also a change in policy (Rabo et al. 2021). Since 2016, newly arrived refugees have only qualified for three-year permits or a 13-month stay, depending on whether they are considered 'real' refugees in the eyes of the Swedish state, as well as restrictions on family reunification. Within Syrian families, this change in policy has led to the emergence of different degrees of legal security. 'Some migrants have permanent residency, others have Swedish citizenship, while other family members can still be on a three-year temporary residency permit' (Wessels et al. 2021). In a similar vein, Borselli and van Meijl (2021) find that post-2016 restrictions on family reunification negatively affect Syrian refugees' aspirations to settle in Sweden. The arrival of refugees boosted electoral support for the far-right party Sweden Democrats, which came third and second respectively in the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections (Ciesnik 2023; Enos 2023). In this context, our interviewees perceived interventions by Swedish social services as a bordering tool: 'Swedish people say it applies to all, but we never saw this applied to Swedish people. Maybe if they're drug addicts. […] They [ie the Swedish state] decided to play the children's card […] to push people out of Sweden'. To our interlocutors, 'sossiàl' was perceived as a political weapon in an increasingly hostile climate that the Swedish government used to intimidate them and scare them into leaving the country. Abu Omar and his friends also complained about the lack of mosques and hostile stares for women, but also men, following Islamic dress code. Abu Rayan, who attended the iftar dinner wearing a traditional male dress, took himself as an example: 'I wear a jellabyia [a loose-fitting, long garment for men] here, but if I wore it in Sweden, people would stare at me. They would take pictures of me and post them on Facebook, saying that Sweden is being islamicized. They look at you as if you were an alien'. This echoes findings that some Muslim migrants in Sweden have felt compelled to change their names to Swedish or European-sounding names to avoid being stereotyped as 'terrorists' or 'patriarchal oppressors' (for men) or passive victims (for women) (Khosravi 2012).

That Syrian refugees in Sweden appreciate good access to public services and employment, but feel held back by temporary residence permits, discrimination, and the difficulty to make Swedish friends, is backed up by larger-scale studies (Abdel Fatah et al. 2021; Irastorza and Korol 2021). Quite tellingly, Sweden-born Swedish and Syria-born Swedish people define 'integration' differently in focus group discussions: while members of the receiving community think of integration in terms of access to jobs, housing, and language

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skills, Syrians conceive of it more broadly in terms of 'safety, security, comfort, feeling relaxed, having space for personal development, and maintaining friendships' (Abdel-Fatah et al. 2021: 157). In the interviews we conducted, Syrians' sense of helplessness in their confrontation with Swedish culture and Swedish institutions, which they perceived as hypocritical and untrustworthy, perpetuated their sense of lack of belonging. However, older heads of households' decision to leave Sweden was also linked to their phase of life: the younger, unmarried men we interviewed during their visit to the UK all emphasized that they currently had no plans to leave Sweden. Without children of their own, younger interlocutors were not afraid of social services. More importantly, having done their entire university education in Sweden, they were better positioned to find highly paid jobs, and their command of Swedish was often better than that of slightly older refugees. To younger interviewees, struggling to belong had been an affective investment: 'As someone who has worked so hard to learn the language to integrate into Swedish society, I don't want to go through that again in another country'. Affective citizenship from below, it appears, encompasses a mix of sentiments and aspirations that can hardly be disentangled, including the quest for safety, homeliness, freedom of religion, family life, economic success, and the feeling of finally having arrived and being able to relax. Depending on refugees' life stage, family status, educational and professional careers, feelings of belonging may be within or out of reach, and, in the latter case, may motivate refugees to seek belonging elsewhere and move on.

4. Finding belonging in Manchester

During Ramadan 2023, we met with Abu Omar and his friends. Over an Iftar dinner at a Syrian restaurant on the Curry Mile, Manchester's famous multi-ethnic restaurant district, we discussed the reasons behind and the practicalities of their move. One of several Syrian restaurants and supermarkets that had recently sprung up in the area, it was lovingly decorated with fairy lights made up of moons and stars, and typical Syrian food and sweets were on display. After sunset, the restaurant soon filled up with Arabic-speaking families. Fittingly called 'Stories of Damascus', this stylized microcosm of Syrian life and culture was the perfect setting to hear the story of men who, having escaped a war, had become adamant to find a place that could feel as much as home as Syria. Perhaps surprisingly, after their experience in Sweden, they had now found it in Manchester. In this section, we attend to how cross-border travel and everyday practices, such as phone calls and exploratory visits, allowed our protagonists to explore mobility options, prepare for their next move, and find belonging in Manchester. This time, they moved not precariously as asylum-seekers, but as Swedish and EU citizens, which put them into a comparatively privileged situation. They had obtained enough 'mobility capital' (Moret 2017: 235), including diplomas, financial savings, and passports, accumulated through years of life and work in Sweden, to plan their departure: they first used their Swedish passports to register as EU citizens in the UK, several years before their actual relocation, and later came for exploratory visits to the UK, before they moved their families. They also drew on the shared knowledge and experiences, as well as mutual care, of the growing Syrian diaspora in Europe (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013).

Rather than a straightforward move, our findings highlight Syrians' tentative back and forth and temporary immobility, first in Sweden, where they spent time growing their 'mobility capital', and more recently in Manchester, where they resort to informal labour while struggling to access business and educational opportunities. Abu Omar estimated that since 2022, the majority of his Syrian acquaintances had left Sweden, mostly to the UK. Many took advantage of the summer holidays when their children were off school and they could take them out of the country under the radar of the feared 'sossiàl'. That subsequent moves match major life cycles is not unique: similarly, Bangladesh migrants in Italy

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timed their departure from Italy to the UK to coincide with the end of their children's school year (Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017). Moving to the UK was not done on the spur of the moment: it was a deliberate exit strategy that our interviewees had prepared for several years, and it was only open to those who had arrived in Sweden in the early 2010s, who had already obtained Swedish citizenship, and had had the foresight to travel to the UK in time to register for the EUSS. Abu Rayan laid out to us that years before he had finally left Sweden, he had already taken concrete steps to allow his family to go abroad: 'We've come here with pre-settled status, with our Swedish passports. We knew that on the 31st of December 2020, Britain would leave the European Union, therefore we came and took advantage of that window that the UK opened for EU citizens. We all [Syrians with Swedish citizenship] visited Britain at one point before the UK left the European Union. Since 2020, I had been looking for an alternative because I wanted to leave Sweden'.

Swedish child welfare, Islamophobia, and an increasingly hostile political climate motivated Syrians to leave Sweden—but their reasons for coming to Manchester were less straightforward. All the men interviewed argued that English as a global language would be more useful to their children than Swedish, and that life in Manchester would be cheaper than in London. However, their assessment of living conditions in the UK defies accusations of 'asylum-shopping'—that is, the quest for a better standard of living—that are frequently brought forward by British politicians such as former UK home secretary Priti Patel (Plummer 2022) and former Minister of State for Immigration, Robert Jenrick (Gibbons 2022). As Abu Omar pointed out: 'Sweden is top of all EU countries from all points of view, hygiene, technology, education […] Benefits are better in Sweden than in the UK […] but our children are our number one priority and religion is our number two priority'. All our interlocutors readily conceded that compared to the standard of life that they had grown accustomed to in Sweden, public services in the UK were rather dysfunctional: they found the housing substandard, and streets untidy. Yet, contrary to the predictions of push-pull models of migration, our interviewees did not simply weigh up the economic costs and benefits of onward movement. Rather, a combination of Manchester's reputation for having a vibrant Arabic-speaking and Muslim community, their existing social networks, and random experiences brought Abu Omar and his friends to northern England. All the men had friends and family in Manchester who helped them find jobs and accommodation. They also relied on the well-known local Syrian NGO for help with enrolling children in schools and signing up for healthcare. Such 'social infrastructures' (Wessendorf and Gembus 2024: 2822) allowed them to quickly access resources. While Abu Omar had followed in the footsteps of a Syrian friend from Sweden to Manchester, Abu Rayan and Abu Faisal were brought to the city by sheer coincidence: having originally planned to join relatives in Germany, Abu Rayan changed his mind when he and his wife enjoyed a short visit to Manchester. As for Abu Faisal, he missed his return flight after a trip to London. Having to wait for the next available connection, he travelled to Manchester as a tourist and fell in love with it. This does not mean that settling in has always gone smoothly. So far, Abu Omar has been unable to find a school willing to accept his 16-year-old daughter. He relies on benefits while working informally at a car dealership. In the future, he would like to return to his original profession in printing, or open a restaurant, but is still looking for an investor. He also does not know the details of how to convert his family's pre-settled status into more permanent residency, vaguely explaining that he would 'hire a lawyer when the time comes'. As evidenced by Abu Omar's current struggle to find his footing in Manchester, far from being a panacea, their move has created new forms of precarity for his family (cf Mas Giralt 2017; Della Puppa and King 2019).

Syrians' journeys from Sweden to Manchester raise questions about when, and how, displacement ends: not merely through the acquisition of foreign citizenship and economic integration, but rather through renewed feelings of belonging and stability. Rather surprisingly, all interviewees underlined that: 'This place [Manchester] is close to Syria, in

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the way that things work'. They were referring to a certain degree of informality, the active social life of Arabic-speaking communities, easy access to mosques, and even the weather, which reminded Abu Omar of his hometown, Homs. In a similar vein, Bangladeshi migrants who have used Italian citizenship to move to London have described the city as 'almost Bangladesh' (Della Puppa and King 2019: 1943), highlighting the important affective and symbolic, rather than purely economic, facets of dream destinations. Our protagonists' testimonies reveal a nuanced understanding of 'integration', and what refugees hope to integrate into. In small towns in Sweden, Syrians had been confronted with a homogeneously white society, limiting their ability to blend in as a visible ethnic minority. For this reason, Abu Rayan ruled out a return to Scandinavia: 'I feel it's impossible to integrate in Swedish society even though I changed my name. You can change any name you want, I can never fully integrate because local Swedish people will always know when someone is not originally from their own country'. The multicultural make-up of Manchester, on the other hand, facilitated Syrians' integration, not into mainstream British society, but into one of its many existing ethnic groups. In summer 2024, we discussed our research with other Syrians in Manchester. While these men—roughly the age of our older interviewees—had never visited Sweden, they had befriended several Syrians with Swedish citizenship. From their conversations, they had gathered that Sweden was a good country for elderly Syrians ('they [Swedish authorities] pay for their transport to the doctor and to centres where they organize activities for them!'), but that there was no social life. Discussing some newcomers' complaints that in Sweden, their neighbours had called the police because they made too much noise, our Syrian acquaintances laughed: 'Imagine, when we meet at my house [here in Manchester], we are fifteen people, and we talk, talk, talk. You can hear my brother's voice through the roof!' Such experiences of joyful everyday sociability are one of the reasons why Abu Omar, finally feeling at ease surrounded by people like himself, sees an end to displacement: 'I don't feel like a refugee [in Manchester], I've integrated in society in the UK. There are a lot of foreigners, I don't feel myself estranged here. No-one else tells me what to do. I feel at home, let's say'.

Yet, we should not mistake Abu Omar's current contentment for what it is *not*: the ultimate step of a linear migration journey to the 'best' possible destination. While he chose to move from Sweden to the UK, our interviewees told us about other Syrians who had left Sweden to return to Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Egypt, motivated by the prospects of living again amidst fellow Arabic-speakers (in Egypt and Lebanon) and in Islamic societies. As several of our interlocutors emphasized, they still thought of their future in terms of mobile exit strategies: 'We went to Sweden as refugees and it didn't work out for us, therefore we're trying here. As long as the situation is stable [in Manchester], we are happy here. If things get very bad here with demonstrations and problems, we'll go somewhere else, maybe to Canada or Australia'. It is important to study refugees' movements not as fundamentally different from the other, often open-ended, journeys that EU citizens freely undertake. One young man, today living in Sweden, summed up the mundane reasons that might motivate him to relocate in the future: 'Personally, I might leave, […] just like anyone else I might leave at some point if I find a better job elsewhere or if I can move to a country where there's better weather. The weather can make you depressed in Sweden'. Amer, another of our Syrian acquaintances, who had come to the UK straight from Syria and since obtained British citizenship, explained the value of obtaining British citizenship: it could not be taken away from him as easily as a residency permit. While he was currently waiting for his wife's naturalization, he was already planning to take his family on vacation in Europe, and, possibly, to relocate to a warmer country such as Morocco. During naturalization ceremonies, newly minted British citizens of Syrian origin are told by government officials to step up and assume their role in British society, e.g., as councillors and MPs. But this seems very different from how Abu Omar and Amer think of the opportunities conferred by European passports. Just like

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Abu Omar who had used his Swedish passport to sign up with the UK's EUSS as a back-up option, Amer thought of his British passport as an insurance policy: not to take root permanently, but to travel more freely and explore other settlement options.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we discussed findings from a small interview-based case study with Syrian refugees who moved first as asylum-seekers to Sweden, and later as EU citizens to the UK. We mobilized the twin concepts of 'affective' and 'instrumental' citizenship to highlight how refugees' quest for belonging and safety challenges usual assumptions about displacement: first, our data defy push-pull models of migration, showing that quick access to naturalization and generous welfare policies may have attracted Syrians to Sweden, but were not enough to make some of them stay. The fact that for those leaving Sweden, the UK was only one destination among several—with other Syrians moving on to countries in the Global South—calls into question a hierarchy of desirable destinations, with countries in Western and Northern Europe at the top.

Seen through the lens of affect, refugees' and host states' interactions are not merely legalistic or bureaucratic: while our interlocutors perceived Swedish welfare interventions and political discourse as top-down affective control, they also engaged in grassroots practices of affective citizenship themselves, devising alternative forms of belonging. For example, they started their own support groups in Sweden for fellow refugees and socialized with their compatriots. Transnationally, they interacted with other diasporas via online platforms and through visits abroad. Finally, they left Sweden to find belonging elsewhere. That affective citizenship practices can inform ambitions to stay, or move on, regardless of how affluent host countries are, resonates with other articles in this special issue: while Syrians in Japan struggle to find their bearings in a linguistically and culturally homogeneous society and thus plan to go abroad, once they have acquired Japanese passports (Liu-Farrer, Pearlman and Al-Masri 2024), Syrians in Sudan were given Sudanese passports under Omar al-Bashir's regime to motivate them to leave, but instead developed strong feelings of attachment and decided to stay (Tobin and Kanhoush 2024).

Second, while our protagonists' tentative back-and-forth movements point to the non-linearity of refugee journeys, their use of the EUSS as an 'insurance policy' that could be activated years later highlights the complexity of *temporalities* of displacement. Syrian refugees—even those turned citizens—may consider it prudent to anticipate and prepare for uncertain futures. That newly minted citizens' privilege is fragile is also demonstrated by Tobin and Kanhoush's (2024) study in this special issue on Syrians who received, and later were stripped off, Sudanese citizenship, as well as the reflections of Swedish anthropologist Shahram Khosravi (2007), himself a former refugee from Iran, when he was racially profiled at the UK border: 'My legal status as an EU citizen is situational, conditional and unconfirmed. I am a quasi-citizen whose rights can be suspended in the state of emergency' (332). Legal security, it appears, may not be sufficient to ending refugees' lingering feelings of insecurity and precarity, and thus not preclude further mobility-based strategies.

From a policy point of view, such 'unusual' forms of seeking refuge have various implications. First, by shedding light on the tensions between states' place-based and refugees' mobility-based strategies, our case study challenges static solutions to displacement. While policymakers tend to associate 'deserving' refugees with non-choice and immobility (Hyndman and Giles 2011), there is a historical precedent for factoring ongoing movement into asylum policies. In the 1920s and 30s, the so-called 'Nansen passport', named after the League of Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees Fridtjof Nansen, allowed stateless refugees to cross borders in search of employment. Recognized by 52 states, it was issued to 450,000 people (Long 2013). Since the 1980s and 1990s, renewed critiques of sedentary approaches to displacement have gained traction, with Van Hear (2004) suggesting already

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that encouraging refugees' transnational existences, rather than settlement, might be a more sustainable durable solution. Most recently, the Syrian refugee crisis has sparked renewed talk of alternative pathways to asylum, for example, through private sponsorship programmes, and new opportunities for labour mobility and family reunification, but these have only been realized on a small scale. The international community has made new commitments to making displacement and migration safer, for example, through the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees and a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Yet migration from the Global South has become increasingly criminalized, more dangerous, and costlier (Crisp 2021).

Second, the 'unusualness' of displaced people who arrive in host countries as 'migrants'—in this case, as relatively privileged EU citizens in the UK—might mean that their specific vulnerabilities get overlooked and they do not receive access to specialist services. As suggested by our small interview sample, some Syrian arrivals from Sweden struggle with substandard housing, informal labour, and access to schooling in Manchester, but may only receive dedicated support from diaspora-led organizations such as Rethink Rebuild. As they continue to remain vulnerable in certain ways, their experience blurs the boundaries between 'migrants' and 'refugees' (Dahinden 2016; Garelli and Tazzioli 2017b; Anderson 2019). As Sandro Mezzadra points out (in Garelli, Sciurba and Tazzioli 2018), this realization creates a double bind for migration scholars. On the one hand, there is enough evidence that the distinction between migrants and refugees cannot be upheld conceptually. On the other hand, we are faced with displaced people's claims, and very real needs, for more protection. Mezzadra concludes that 'we need to rethink the legacy and normative instruments of asylum' (677). The multi-layered Syrian diaspora that has emerged around the globe, with its never-ending mobilities and different forms of legal status and freedom of movement, allows us to rethink how protection issues become intertwined with people's proactive quest to belong.

On a final note, the absence of female voices in our small interview sample highlights the need for future research that includes gendered perspectives, and can provide a better understanding of refugee women's movements. While we know that our male interviewees were accompanied by their wives and daughters, we need to understand better women's involvement in migration decision-making processes, and whether they also travel more independently, and for other reasons, after a first period of settlement in the Global North. In a similar vein, LGBT+ Syrians may have different support networks outside their families and communities of origin, and thus choose to move or stay for different reasons (e.g., Reda and Proudfoot 2021). Furthermore, a fuller understanding of how refugees enact 'affective citizenship' in specific localities requires a long-term perspective. Through follow-up research with Syrians in Manchester, we are currently exploring what places and communities become meaningful to refugees as they develop a sense of being settled more permanently (again), and whether their transnational mobilities, for example, in the form of family visits and tourism, continue.

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None declared.

Note

1. The deadline for most EU citizens, including those with Swedish nationality, to apply for "pre-settled" or "settled status" in the UK through the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), was 30 June 2021. For "pre-settled status", applicants only had to prove that they had lived in the UK for at least one day before the end of free movement on 31 December 2020. "Pre-settled status" allows EU citizens to live and work in the UK for five years, after which time they can apply for "settled status", ie, indefinite leave to remain. By September 2023, Swedish citizens made up 0.8% of EU applicants to the EUSS who had been awarded pre-settled status, and 0.8% of those with permanent settled status. In the light of concerns over the legal insecurity of pre-settled status holders, in 2023, the Home Office started automatically extending pre-settled status by two years, and announced plans to upgrade eligible persons to settled status starting in 2024 (Migration Observatory 2024).

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