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Without choice? Understanding war-affected Syrian families' decisions to leave home

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

There is a solid body of research that focuses on refugee families' experiences of displacement. Yet, there is little research exploring the journey (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015) and even less research that explores the factors influencing their decision-making processes before flight. Discussions about refugee flows centre on forced migration with refugees seemingly having no choice when faced with making decisions based on limited alternatives. Popular media images extend this depiction of refugees as vulnerable and at the mercy of oppressive systems rather than having any decision-making power over their fate (Akesson and Denov, 2017; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2017).

This paper addresses the factors that influenced displaced Syrian families' decision to leave the Syrian Arab Republic for Lebanon and how this impacted the time it took to decide to leave. The research is grounded in the experiences of displaced Syrian families who have left the Syrian Arab Republic and fled to Lebanon in the past eight years since the start of the conflict in 2011.

Prior to the war, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic had a history of open borders to encourage commerce and livelihoods as well as hosting each others' displaced populations (Chatty, 2018). As the number of displaced Syrians has reached approximately 1 million people (UNHCR, 2017), the Government of Lebanon's policies have become one of restriction and containment rather than hospitality and protection (Akesson and Coupland, 2018). With Lebanon enacting further restrictions on Syrian refugee movement, families are faced with decisions about whether to stay in Lebanon or move to a third country. This paper introduces the push and pull factors that ultimately led to each of the interviewed families' decision to leave the Syrian Arab Republic. Reflecting on the families' situations in Lebanon, the following pages examine the complexity of decision-making in times of conflict to illustrate the agency of families faced with limited alternatives.

Literature Review

Migration studies have typically focused on the political and economic drivers that provoke the movement of people, highlighting a dichotomy between those who make a decision to migrate and those who leave their home country as a result of conflict or persecution. Massey proposes a power geometry that emphasizes the different relationships that those who are migrating have with "flows and interconnections", suggesting that while some people are more in charge of their mobility than others, some are essentially "imprisoned" by it (Massey, 1993:62). This power geometry is obvious in the differences in the international community's differing definitions of refugees and migrants. While migrants are seen as voluntary actors who choose to move in order to pursue opportunities, refugees are regarded as people fleeing persecution from their home countries (Betts, 2010; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018; UN General Assembly, 1951; Zetter, 1991). These definitions suggest that one type of individual makes a choice to leave his/her country, while the others are forced to leave to pursue safety, providing a basis for protecting one population and not the other (Betts, 2013; Bariagaber, 1997; Kunz, 1973).

Rather than categorizing a person on the move as either a migrant or a refugee, the decision to migrate can be understood along a continuum of experience (Betts, 2010; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018; Fussell, 2012). How people make decisions relates to their position along the continuum which is affected by different drivers of migration. People's experiences, perceptions and knowledge of the situation may result in anticipatory or acute refugee migration (Adhikari, 2013; Kunz, 1973), or what Richmond (1993) refers to as proactive or reactive migration, and what is commonly regarded as "the voluntary migrant" or "the escaping refugee". As a means of merging the voluntary and involuntary theories of migration, Betts (2010) introduces the survival migrants who decide to remain outside of their countries because their basic rights, of security, liberty and subsistence are threatened and cannot be remedied domestically. The culmination of a number of elements will result in the decision to leave one's home, making definitions of refugees related to one event inadequate (Adkhikari, 2013; Fussell, 2012; Richmond, 1993). The decision to stay in one's home country may reflect the hope that things will get better, the limits of financial restrictions or the choice to protect oneself and one's family from the hardships of being a refugee (Bariagaber, 1997; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018; Zimmermann, 2011). At the beginning of a conflict, the availability of acceptable alternatives to migration may allow families to remain in their home countries (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). As these alternatives deteriorate, security is threatened, or resources diminish, families may find their position on the continuum shifting, influencing their decisions to remain in their home countries or to leave. While not all survival migrants are refugees, they are motivated to leave their country to maintain "the fundamental conditions of human dignity" (Betts, 2013:5).

The decisions of families to leave their home countries are often related to what are described as push and pull factors. Violence, persecution, poverty, food insecurity, and limited educational and health services might push people away from their home countries, while factors such as geographic proximity, economic security, education opportunities, safety and networks may pull families towards another country (Akesson, 2017; Betts, 2013; Castelli, 2018; Davenport, Moore and Poe, 2003; Fussell, 2012; Zimmermann, 2011). In addition, previous experiences of moving or connections to people who have made similar journeys may be reflected in the decision-making process (Adhikari, 2013; Fussell, 2012). These push and pull factors are dynamic and interrelated, with multiple factors having characteristics of both push and pull.

How these factors influence one's decision to move relates to perceptions of and ability to manage risks. The influence of these factors may progress over time as the situation changes, reaching thresholds that limit livelihoods and affect future goals (Fussell, 2012; Zimmerman, 2011). Families determine the risks that meeting these thresholds may pose to their well-being and make decisions about whether or not to leave.

Methodology

This paper reports findings from a 2016 research study aimed at understanding the experiences of Syrian refugee families living in Lebanon. Collaborative family interviews were conducted with participants from 46 families who had fled the Syrian Arab Republic in the last five years and had resettled in three regions of Lebanon, namely, northern Lebanon, Beirut and Bekaa Valley. Providing family-level analysis highlights the variance across individual decision-making not captured in national-level data (Adhikari, 2013). Initial selection of participants took place in partnership with various community and international organizations working in northern Lebanon. Aligned with cultural norms, participating families were subsequently recruited through word of mouth. As shown in Table 1, the interviews included 312 immediate family members, known as *a'ila* (e.g. mother, father and children), and 39 extended family members, known as *hamula* (e.g. aunts, grandmothers, cousins, etc.).

Table 1: Family Demographics (Age and Gender)

	Immediate Family (*A'ila*)		Extended Family (*Hamula*)		Total
Adults (18+)	Male (father)	36	Male	7	43
	Female (mother)	44	Female	13	57
		80		**20**	**100**
Children (<18)	Male	117	Male	9	126
	Female	115	Female	10	125
		232		**19**	**251**
Total		**312**		**39**	**351**

Discussions during the collaborative family interviews followed a chronological life course format: (1) life in the Syrian Arab Republic before the war, (2) life in the Syrian Arab Republic during the war, (3) making the decision to leave the Syrian Arab Republic, (4) the journey from the Syrian Arab Republic to Lebanon, (5) life in Lebanon and (6) dreams for the future. Interviews used place-based methods that sought to understand the research participants' connection with their social and physical environments. Children participated in the interviews through drawing, mapmaking and narrative methods.

At the end of the collaborative family interview, we invited the children to take us on a walk of their neighbourhood communities (with parental consent and child assent). During the walk, the children were asked to carry an activity logger, a small device that collects geographic information systems (GIS) data regarding physical movement. The children guided the walk to places they were allowed to visit, places where their daily activities occur and places where people they know are located.

After completion of the neighbourhood walk, the research team asked three family members (one parent, one older child and one younger child) to carry the activity logger for a period of one week. Like the use of the activity logger during the neighbourhood walk the GIS technology registered the family members' movements over the course of a typical week, thereby serving as an ethnographic mechanism by which to better understand their experiences. To aid in the recall, family members were asked to keep a simple diary of their daily activities while carrying the activity logger. In addition to observing the family members in environments of displacement, the GIS technology yielded quantitative data on elements such as time outside the home and distance travelled, among others. At the end of the one week period, the research team revisited the family for a follow-up interview. During this final interview, the family members were asked to reflect upon their experiences over the past week.

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With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded, translated and transcribed prior to data analysis. Data analysis was facilitated through Dedoose, an online research and evaluation data application. Data were analysed through careful reading and collation of transcripts to ascertain meaning and significance that participants attributed to their experiences. In addition to the rich quantitative data gleaned from using the GIS technology, qualitative transcripts were coded, and concepts were generated and categorized into themes. All participants names were changed to pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

Making the Decision to Leave

Some families in the study left immediately, while others chose to remain in the Syrian Arab Republic with the hope that conditions would improve. At the outset of the conflict, and years into the war, most of the interviewed families had been hopeful that things would go back to normal within a few months. While families were escaping persecution and violence, they made conscious decisions of when to move and where to go based on their experiences and understanding of the situation. As is common with refugee populations, there was a strong desire for families to stay at home in the Syrian Arab Republic. Thirty-five-year-old Umm-Abbas, mother of seven, spoke about the conversation between her sisters and husband, "We told him no, as long as the place we are in is safe, we're not moving out of the Syrian Arab Republic. Then the shelling started to hit us. The bombs were exploding all around us. Shrapnel was found on the balcony. The children started to be scared."

This increase in violence became a catalyst for Umm-Abbas and her family to leave the Syrian Arab Republic. As the situation in the country continued to deteriorate, families met thresholds that influenced their decisions to leave. For example, 29-year-old Umm-Yousef, mother of five, and her family spent a year in the Syrian Arab Republic after a marked increase in violence. She explained her family's decision to leave, "It all happened on the spot. Just at night I was discussing this with my husband. And right then he called the driver, who said he was available the next day, and we left early the very next morning."

Upon deciding to leave their homes, a number of the families had become internally displaced before moving to Lebanon. For example, after remaining in the Syrian Arab Republic for a number of years, the Abu-Amir family decided to immediately leave their home after it was bombed and move to another location in the country. Subsequently, they repeatedly abandoned these temporary homes when they became afraid of an uptick in violence, often escaping right before sudden attacks. Eventually, they decided to leave the Syrian Arab Republic and migrate to Lebanon. This was a common story among the participating families. In another example, 38-year-old father of five, Abu-Ammar, explained, "We didn't think about it beforehand. We left on the spot. Imagine if you were in a jungle and suddenly lions attacked you, you run away without even thinking about anything."

Though many families had spent years managing risks during wartime in the Syrian Arab Republic, the decision to leave the country was sudden, with most families not preparing to leave and some staying only as long as necessary to get the families' papers in order. While staying in the Syrian Arab Republic may have been the preferred option over migrating to Lebanon, the rapidly changing context of war and the ebbs and flows of violence influenced these families' decision-making process.

Considering Push Factors from the Syrian Arab Republic to Lebanon

While there are a number of common factors that influenced families' decisions to stay in the Syrian Arab Republic or leave for Lebanon, the families exhibited agency based on their specific circumstances. As the risks increased and accumulated, the families were increasingly pushed to leave their homes. Limited food combined with increasing prices required families to rely on international aid donations, which eventually stopped arriving due to increases of violence. The threat of food insecurity led to the decision of the Abu-Ali family to leave as described by 37-year-old mother of nine, Umm-Ali:

> We did not leave because we wanted to. When the war started, everything changed, bread cost more, and my family needed around three bags of bread. I had to pay 2,200 Syrian liras [approximately USD 4.50] per day! Even if I had millions of dollars, I would have spent them in month [for food]. Even the cow's cost changed from 20,000 Syrian liras [approximately USD 40] to just being exchanged in return to five bags of bread. I just left everything I own behind and left with my kids.

Though parents did not explicitly describe children as part of the decision-making process, many of the families shared the fears of their children and the importance of securing a safe future for them as their reason for deciding to leave Syria. When asked what made their family decide to leave Syria, 29-year-old mother of two, Umm-Iman, said, "It was the children. They were in fear. Bombings were everywhere, so I told my husband we had to leave, for the sake of our children."

The families weighed their choices using their experiences and their perception of the risk involved. For some families, a male family member (oftentimes the father) travelled to Lebanon prior to the family joining due to the perceived risk of being targeted by the military. In many cases, it was direct experience with an event that led to the decision to leave. Twenty-eight-year-old mother of four, Umm-Haytham, explained what prompted her family's decision to leave, "We saw kids slaughtered in front of our eyes. On our way out we saw scattered body pieces. Our street was a battlefield." In some cases, the decision to leave was a response to push factors such as a violent event or a lack of adequate resources.

Considering Pull Factors from the Syrian Arab Republic to Lebanon

Deciding to leave one's home is rarely an easy choice to make, particularly when considering multiple factors such as livelihoods, family unification, the well-being of children and one's connection to the place. In times of conflict, media reports often show families suddenly fleeing at the outset of violence. However, the data suggest that this is a much more thoughtful and challenging process for families. Most families in this study stayed in the Syrian Arab Republic as long as possible despite experiencing high levels of violence. However, families who had connections to Lebanon through the father's previous employment there are an exception to this. As one example, while working in Lebanon during the family's annual seasonal migration, the home of 43-year-old Abu-Nabil was destroyed and he, his wife and four children found themselves unable to return to the Syrian Arab Republic.

In addition to the safety of their children, parents hoped to find stability in their children's education by moving to Lebanon. The focus on the future of the children was captured by 38-year-old mother of four, Umm-Ghaith who explained: "All I care about is the future of the kids, if their future is lost, there's nothing else to care about and ask about other than their future." This sentiment was shared among many of the families, with some parents emphasizing their hope for their children to continue their studies at home, in Syria.

For many refugee families in this study, Lebanon's proximity to the Syrian Arab Republic was a major pull factor, with some families living less than 20 kilometres from the border. Most families believed that the Syrian conflict would be brief and decided to seek safety across the border and as close as possible to their homes. For example, Abu-Ammar explained: "If I was next to Turkey, I would have moved to Turkey. If I was in an area near to Jordan, I would have moved to Jordan."

Some families reflected on the familiarity in traditions, language and religion as a factor pulling them towards migrating to Lebanon. Abu-Nabil, described the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon as being "one people" and "a family", saying, "Lebanon is our land…it is true, we're Syrians, but Lebanon is our land. What pulls us to Lebanon is just like what pulls us to our nation [of] Syria. This is our nation and that is our nation." Similarly, 36-year-old father of six, Abu-Nour, explained that when many Lebanese people had fled to the Syrian Arab Republic during the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War in Lebanon, Syrians had recognized the similarities between the countries and "encouraged [them] to come here." The interconnected histories of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic led some families to believe that Lebanon had a responsibility to offer the same hospitality to Syrians.

Deciding to Resettle in a Third Country

Families consistently weighed their options including the actual risks posed by remaining in the Syrian Arab Republic versus the perceived risk of resettling in another country where they would not have the same citizenship rights. Thirty-two-year-old Hishan described this feeling as, "going from one unknown into another unknown." In these scenarios, families were forced to make decisions based on unsatisfactory options. Once settled in Lebanon, families faced limited options to pursue employment, education or medical care, coupled with the rising cost of living (Akesson and Badawi, forthcoming). Families therefore had to make decisions about whether to travel even further away from the Syrian Arab Republic and resettled in a third country.

When given the opportunity to resettle in a third country, some families decided to stay in Lebanon in order to remain close to the Syrian Arab Republic. They were hopeful that the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic would change, and they would have the opportunity to return home. By remaining in Lebanon, they would quickly and easily be able to return to their homes in Syria. Furthermore, families feared that if they travelled too far away, they would not have the resources to return to the Syrian Arab Republic when the war ends. Umm-Nour explained, "We had two chances to leave to Europe, but we did not. I am still waiting to go back to my country. I feel I will return soon to my home."

The Umm-Zayn family had been accepted for resettlement in New Zealand at the time of the interviews. While the children talked about their future in New Zealand, the parents were saddened by the thought of being located further away from home. The grandparents also lived in Lebanon, but would not be moving, which introduced the factor of family separation as a consideration in the decision-making process.

For most of the families in this study, it was the desire to ensure a good education for their children that was driving their decision to migrate to a third country. Having limited access to schools as result of not having proper papers, prohibitive costs for transportation or schools not having enough space threatened the future of the children. Realizing the limited opportunities for education in Lebanon and the challenges posed by returning to Syria, Abu-Ammar explained, "My life doesn't matter to me anymore. But I'm thinking about the children. If I wanted to immigrate, the only reason behind it would be providing my children with a better environment [and] ensuring that they'd have better lives."

Conclusion

The findings indicate that there is much diversity in the decision-making processes that families engage in and underscore the importance of family agency in making decisions. Although many Syrians came to Lebanon to escape risk and find safety, they continue to manage the risks in challenging conditions (Akesson and Coupland, 2018; Garin et al., 2016). The findings counter common popular depictions of refugees as helpless and without agency (Akesson and Denov, 2017; Fussell, 2012). In fact, they are making difficult decisions and balancing equally difficult decisions to ensure their family's survival.

For many families, the decision to stay in the Syrian Arab Republic resulted in even more limited financial resources and rising costs of living, forcing families to take loans or sell assets by the time the decision was made to leave. They had remained at home in the hope that the situation would get better, but as conditions deteriorated and their situation along the continuum shifted, they re-evaluated their decision. The preliminary proactive decision of families to stay in their country where rights should have been protected has been overshadowed by the decision to leave as a reaction to events or loss of life necessities. It should be recognized that families decided to leave the Syrian Arab Republic reluctantly when they found themselves in danger.

The research highlights the multiple push and pull factors that can influence families' decision-making in times of conflict and suggests that the decision to leave is not always simply a reactive measure to violence; it is, in fact, a much more dynamic process. Data from this research suggest that it is the build-up of years of everyday losses compounded by violent acts that informs families' decision-making processes. When considering how to respond to such findings, the need for protection of these everyday dignities and access to services that protect the future of families is paramount. As conditions become more challenging for Syrian refugee families in Lebanon, it is necessary that the rights and livelihoods of all people living within its borders be protected regardless of their motivations for leaving. The research underscores the importance of recognizing that all people deserve protection of basic rights and access to services regardless of what has informed their decision to leave their countries. Continuing a discourse that simplifies the decision to migrate as a dichotomy disregards the complexities of decision-making processes and the continuum of experiences of people on the move.

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