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“I Turned to Things That Mean More to Me”: Unpacking the Activist Trajectories of Syrians in Oslo

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how Syrians' activist trajectories have evolved in exile contexts of small Syrian communities and limited mobilization structures. Based on in-depth interviews with Syrians in Oslo, I argue that the specific features of integration narratives, lack of community structures, and presence of solidarity infrastructures have produced locally embedded forms of activism. The participants reorganized their experiences of the uprising and antiregime activism into identity-based activism and acts of supporting community members. The article contributes to the emerging literature on Syrian activism in exile, concluding with conceptual pointers on the study of activist trajectories.

KEYWORDS

Biographical consequences of activism; opportunity structures; Syria; uprising; exile; integration

Introduction

The Syrian uprising of 2011 inspired the people in Syria and abroad to become involved in politics and activism to create social change. Yet as the initial peaceful movement evolved into a prolonged war, mobilization became largely diasporic, with the displacement of millions of people and thousands of Syrian activists to neighboring countries and Europe. Like many other countries around the globe, Norway has experienced a sharp increase in the number of Syrian refugees since 2015 (Tønnessen et al., 2020). In total, around 3000 Syrians are reported to be living in Oslo (Dzamarija, 2018). Inhabiting spaces that are invisible in the geographies of Syrian diaspora communities, the Syrians in Oslo provide an interesting case for examining what has become of individuals' participation in the uprising and antiregime activism and how people took their participation experiences to the small contexts of exile. I define exile contexts in terms of community size and organizational structure. Thus, the context of Oslo is considered a small exile context because it includes a small Syrian community that has limited organizational ties to Syria and within the receiving context. I also define antiregime activism as any kind of action taken with the purpose of opposing the regime and supporting the uprising inside or outside of Syria.

Analyses of Syrians' participation trajectories and diaspora activism highlight different paths. For example, in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, several studies have observed a shift from antiregime collective action to professionalized humanitarian assistance (Abiyaghi & Younes, 2018; Elvira, 2018; Fourn, 2018; Khoury, 2017). The central argument of these studies is that the dire living conditions of Syrian refugees in these countries, combined with their proximity to Syria, donor policies, and securitized environments, have made humanitarian work the predominant mode of action. In the West, different yet similar paths have been observed in the activism of Syrians. In addition to humanitarian work, there is work being done on

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political advocacy (Moss, 2016; Ragab, 2020; Stokke, 2016), transitional justice (Stokke & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2019), and community-building and integration (Ragab, 2017, 2020). These studies indicate that different kinds of activism have flourished thanks to the large community presence and preexisting organization. Here, I wish to examine the paths in contexts of exile that lack these characteristics to understand how both the sociopolitical context and past experiences of activism can shape action.

Following this, the current article asks how activism has evolved among Syrians in contexts of exile where the community is small and the organizational infrastructure is very limited. How have their trajectories of activism developed in such contexts, and in what ways are these trajectories influenced by the past and the context in which the participants live? To answer these questions, the present study utilizes in-depth interviews with 14 Syrians in Oslo who have varying levels of previous involvement in the uprising. Using an analytic frame that bridges the concept of identity-based repositioning with the literature of the biographical consequences of activism and an opportunity structure approach, I analyze how Syrians living in Oslo developed their current engagements through their experiences of the uprising and interactions within the context of exile. I show that the participants reorganized their involvements around identity-based activism and translated their experiences of the uprising into practices aiming to help and support community members. I argue that their past experiences were adjusted and transformed into locally embedded forms of activism because of the conditions found in the context of Oslo. The participants linked their engagements to a lack of networks, integration narratives, the state of the Syrian community, and the presence of solidarity infrastructures in connection to other causes.

The current article begins with an overview of the literature discussing Syrian diaspora activism, which is followed by an analytic frame to analyze activist trajectories in relation to opportunity structure. I then provide a background on the Oslo context and a description of the data and methods. After that, I foreground two main trajectories of activism: identity-based activism and helping community members in a variety of ways. I end by stating my contribution to the literature on Syrian activism in exile, highlighting the benefits of the concept of identity-based repositioning while binding the macro and micro aspects in the study of activist trajectories.

Syrian activists, political environment, and changing activism

As stated, there has been an emerging trend in research documenting Syrians' activism in various contexts of exile. Moss (2016, 2020) highlights how Syrian activists in the UK and US focused on political advocacy and lobbying when the rebels were advancing in Syria. Along with this form of activism, they acted as brokers, connecting people at home to potential donors and policymakers, appearing in Western media to speak against regime practices and improving the journalistic skills of people in Syria. These efforts were facilitated by the political support they found in the host countries and the preexisting Syrian institutions through which they could communicate their demands.

Studies focusing on activism in neighboring countries map the paths taken with the displacement of activists to these countries. As previously mentioned, these studies have found that activists have focused on humanitarian action because it ensures a number of benefits (Abiyaghi & Younes, 2018; Elvira, 2018; Fourn, 2018). Specifically, humanitarian action has offered activists the chance to stay engaged by enforcing their vision for social change through service provision. In addition, it has helped them fight precarity by having a source of income and realizing the goals of the revolution without being threatened by local forces loyal to the Assad regime.

Further north, Ragab (2020) draws a more diversified geography of the activism taking place in Germany. Like elsewhere, the space for action in Germany is humanitarianized because of better opportunities for funding and growing humanitarian needs generated by conflict developments. Yet there is also a huge mobilization around advocacy issues because the clustering of activists conversant in grassroots activism coupled with an atmosphere receptive to diaspora

mobilization has enabled the continuation of action on behalf of Syria. A distinct shift toward integration is also observed among activists to facilitate the settlement of newcomers into their new environments.

In contrast, Pantti and Boklage (2014) argue that the inhospitable conditions found in Russia have not allowed for mobilization to emerge and develop as in other Western contexts. The close relations between the Syrian regime and the Russian government exposed activists to danger, and the limited freedom of expression ensured an uneven access to established media institutions. As a result, activists have retreated from visible action to being more engaged in online commentaries.

Trajectories of activism and opportunity structures in exile

Generally, trajectories of activism are understood to be about the progression of individuals' engagement, from recruitment and persistence to disengagement and post-activist lives and how these phases are influenced by organizational forces, individual motivations, and biographical changes (Corrigall-Brown, 2011). In this article, the aim is to explore post-revolutionary/activist lives, bringing together the literature on the biographical consequences of activism, the concept of identity-based repositioning, and the opportunity structure literature into one framework. Through this analytical frame, I analyze trajectories of activism by looking at how the participation experiences in the uprising and antiregime activism inform and inspire individuals' current engagements and how the sociopolitical context of exile plays a role in shaping these engagements through the experiences and interactions of individuals within that context.

Starting with the biographical consequences of activism,¹ previous research has discussed the enduring effects that movement participation leaves on individuals, from their professional careers to private lives. Compared with nonactivists, movement participants have been found to be more likely to engage in altruistic activities, artistic expression, or social and academic sectors because these fields make room for social change and the alignment of one's ideological orientation with career options (Fendrich, 1974; Giugni & Grasso, 2016; McAdam, 1989; Nassi & Abramowitz, 1979; Neveu, 2019; Pagis, 2011; Sherkat & Blocker, 1997). Activists have also been found to experience changes in their family relations, friendship circles, gendered perceptions, and parenting style thanks to the principles they learned from movement participation (El Chazli, 2020; Lambin, 2016; Maynard, 2018; Schwarz, 2021; Whittier, 2016). For example, child rearing can be an arena for putting one's adopted worldviews into practice by raising children to have agency (Maynard, 2018) and choice (El Chazli, 2020).

Previous participation in movements may also open up new spaces for engagement and creativity. The notion of conversion² describes this process and how individuals may shift their engagement from one area to another by investing the organizational skills, ideals, and knowledge they acquired into new activities and causes (Corrigall-Brown, 2011; Juhem, 2001; Leclercq, 2012; Tissot, 2005; Willemez, 2004). For example, after the decline of communism, former communists turned to cultural, urban, humanitarian, and antiracist work because it could accommodate their struggle for equality and social justice (Juhem, 2001; Tissot, 2005; Willemez, 2004). Similarly, militant activists have moved to social and community activism as a way to maintain continuity with their past while disengaging from violence and reintegrating into civilian life through serving their communities (Bosi, 2019; Gayer, 2019). Instead of drawing distinctions between these different forms of activism, the aim of this stream of the literature is to delineate how commitment to social change is continued in different ways throughout the life course. Thus, continuity is emphasized as a mechanism through which past activism is connected to present endeavors, revealing how previous movement participation comes to impact individuals' choices for engagement.

Drawing on this literature, I attempt to crystalize how individuals' previous experiences in the uprising and their antiregime activism can influence their engagement in exile. Specifically, I look at how their engagement in helping and supporting community members is linked to

the ideas and values they acquired from participating in the uprising. I build on the idea of continuity as a link between their current practices and their past involvement in antiregime activism. In addition, I examine how this continuity is reconfigured and established in their interactions with the specificities of the exile context in Oslo.

Drawing on ideas of conversion (Juhem, 2001; Leclercq, 2012; Tissot, 2005; Willemez, 2004), I develop the concept of identity-based repositioning to analyze the trajectories of individuals engaged in activism that is associated with their identities. As mentioned earlier, conversion suggests that people may switch between causes in response to different circumstances. Here, I introduce the concept of identity-based repositioning to help articulate the break-up of two overlapping activisms. I define identity-based activism as advocating and promoting the rights associated with a particular identity, while antiregime activism is defined as engaging in behaviors against the ruling regime. Thus, I coin the term identity-based repositioning to unpack the disentanglement between antiregime activism and identity-based activism and how a full-repositioning toward the latter can be achieved in response to the conditions found and brought about by the context of Oslo. This process resonates with moving from collectivist collective action to individualized collective action (Micheletti, 2002), that is, moving away from collective work against the regime, channeled through movement collectivities, to individualized action grounded in the preferences of individuals.

Although it is important to emphasize the agency of individuals and how they utilize their previous experiences in developing new areas of engagement, it is equally important to look at the context in which people conduct their engagement and how this might influence their trajectories (Bosi, 2019). Thus, adding a contextual perspective to studying the trajectories of activism is essential for understanding engagement in exile. Following this, I build on the concept of opportunity structures. Traditionally, an opportunity structure has been defined in reference to the conditions that facilitate or constrain homeland mobilization in the receiving context (Tarrow, 2011). These conditions relate to the environment in which the migrant community is rooted, including reception and integration policies (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2002) state relations (Koinova, 2016), and local solidarity infrastructures (Quinsaat, 2016). Factors internal to the migrant community are also crucial for mobilization to emerge and become sustained, including size, resources, organizational capacity and structure, and networks, which—when combined—refer to community embeddedness (Müller-Funk, 2016; Quinsaat, 2016) and how the community is anchored within a specific context (Koinova, 2012).

Thus, the context of Oslo, with its lack of such community embeddedness, constitutes a case of a small exile context because the Syrian community is small, new, and lacks an organizational representation and structure in connection to Syria and Oslo. As Vogel (2007) argues, individuals' motivation to become engaged is influenced by the opportunity structures they meet in the society of reception. The resources of individuals, meaning their past experiences and skills, together with opportunity structures, shape motivations for participation. In line with this, I analyze the impact of the exile context on individuals' forms and practices of engagement through their interactions within the context of Oslo. By interactions, I mean how individuals position their action in relation to the state of the Syrian community, integration narratives, the absence/presence of supportive networks, and solidarity infrastructures regarding other causes, as a way to better understand how these factors shape their engagement.

Context

The Syrian community in Norway is fairly sizable, constituting around 30,000 (Tønnessen et al., 2020). Before 2011, the community had no significant weight or presence in Norway, but it grew substantially after 2015. This situation heightened existing rhetoric around how refugees need to be activated to work, volunteer, and contribute to society (Djuve, 2011).

In the beginning of my research, I conducted a small mapping of Syrian initiatives and organizations operating in Norway to determine the landscape of Syrian activism in Oslo. Using

Facebook and the official registry of businesses and organizations in Norway, I was able to identify a very small number of organizations, of which many seemed to be registered but not operating. Some others seemed to have an online presence on Facebook with no on-the-ground activities, structure, or premises. As such, the structure of activism concerning Syria was very limited.

Prior to 2011, the informants spoke of attempts at organizing social events and gatherings to revive a sense of community, which, however, failed because of fear of potential surveillance and a lack of trust among Syrians. With the start of the protests in 2011, political rallies were organized in support of the uprising back home. Those with a supportive attitude toward the uprising in Syria started to get in contact with each other and discuss the possibilities for collaboration. This support was also reflected online in the creation of Facebook pages that were sympathetic to the uprising, as well as offline in attempts at lobbying. More established Syrians also engaged in cross-border humanitarian efforts, which culminated in the wake of the refugee situation in 2015, by providing assistance to newcomers. The arrival of Syrians in large numbers constituted a window of opportunity in creating a more collectivized enterprise. A community front was established to support the needs of the Syrian community in Oslo and the ongoing uprising in Syria by organizing local events and social gatherings and functioning as a front that could be consulted on matters related to the situation in Syria. The front operated for a year but soon went into hiatus for multiple reasons regarding the inability to reach consensus, the community's format, and the busy schedule of the members. The collectivity eventually disintegrated, and its members and founders parted ways.

There are, however, activities that are organized in collaboration with Norwegian and international organizations. These include cultural and social events that serve as political spaces in the absence of a more politically organized environment, such as public seminars, film screenings, art exhibitions, and even events involving food and dance. This selection of events is restricted to a core of interested artists, intellectuals, and students. Recently, student events have begun to be organized to serve the growing community of Syrian university students. In the past, the official opposition³ used to have a running office in Oslo and facilitated meetings between established community members and opposition figures. Many Syrians also joined the LGBT movement, which is very active and organized in the Norwegian context and known for its support of queer asylum seekers (see Akin, 2017).

The Kurdish community is also highly mobilized in Norway (see Weiss, 2020). Because this community is bounded by a collective identity based on trauma and a collective struggle for statehood, it is more organized and vibrant, being anchored through a string of cultural and political organizations. Rallies connected to escalations in the northern part of Syria and other Kurdish parts are often met by large demonstrations in Oslo. Thus, the emerging activist scene among Syrians in Oslo is diffused across different causes and interests.

Methods

The current article is embedded in a larger project entitled *Imagining and Experiencing the Refugee Crisis* (IMEX). The analysis presented here is based on data collected as part of a study looking at the activist trajectories of Syrians in Berlin⁴ and Oslo. The current article focuses on the Oslo case and utilizes a sample of 14 interviews. The pattern of activism in the empirical material collected from the context of Oslo prompted a separate analysis because of its embeddedness in the local context.

The interviewees were recruited through Facebook browsing, community events, and snowball sampling. Some of them were more identifiable because they frequent relevant events and spaces, and some others I had to reach via trusted contacts because they were isolated from these spaces. In the beginning, I relied on a neatly prepared interview guide based on selection criteria that initially favored individuals who were involved in Syria-related initiatives and their roles within those initiatives. As I recruited more informants who were not part of such collectivities

but were engaged in a more informal and broadened form of activities (e.g., minority rights activism, community organizing, etc.), I adopted a biographical approach (Brannen & Nilsen, 2011) to capture the participants' activist trajectories and how their activism has shifted in time and space. Thus, my choice of methodology constituted a mix of biographical interviewing and semi-structured interviews considered the most suitable for interviews with activists (Blee, 2013). This approach allowed for a varied data set, with some interviews focusing on collectivities and others on activist biographies. Furthermore, this shift in focus enabled greater insights into the ways activism has been altered and grounded in the local contexts of exile.

The Syrian uprising was diverse from its onset, and it united (and divided) people at home and abroad in mobilizing for the revolution. Hence, the sample includes participants who were living in Oslo before 2011 and others who came following the mass refugee exodus to Europe in 2015–2016. The extent of previous activism has varied accordingly: from people who were active in war zones, media, and humanitarian activism to those who engaged with critical events in Syria from afar through protest organizing, online campaigning, and lobbying. Currently, their roles also differ: there are community organizers, humanitarian volunteers, minority rights advocates, and so forth. Table 1 provides a general description of the participants' basic characteristics. With these varied histories, the study is well positioned to examine how people draw on their past experiences in configuring their current engagement. Although a sample of 14 interviews is small because of the small number of people in Oslo with a history of activism, it generates context-specific insights into how activist trajectories have evolved in a context of small Syrian community with limited internal organization, by foregrounding the contextual elements that matter to the adjustment and translation of past experiences.

I used Atlas.ti to code various forms of activism following a grounded theory approach for analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Following coding, I categorized the codes by patterns. I divided the data into two groups according to the pattern displayed. Codes for which identity figured explicitly in the practiced activism were grouped together. The second group was formed based on practices that connect more generally to helping, volunteering, organizing activities, and so forth. Below, I present two biographies selected for discussing this pattern related to identity, showing how repositioning occurs. These biographies reflect different identities, histories of activism, migration history, and examples of how repositioning toward identity-based activism was achieved and mixed with antiregime activism in the past. For the second pattern, I present examples drawn from the larger data.

Unpacking Syrians' activist trajectories in Oslo

Identity-based activism

In this section, I reconstruct the trajectories of two informants currently involved in different movements close to their ethnonational and sexual identities, respectively. For these informants, this kind of activism is not new but was practiced along with antiregime activism during the uprising and was uncoupled from it in exile. I call this process repositioning, whereby activism is repositioned in alignment with identity and further away from antiregime activism or other previous entanglements. I draw on the concept of identity-based repositioning to unpack this process through two different examples in which antiregime activism and identity-based activism were mixed and uncoupled at different stages. While the first story reflects the trajectory of an informant who came to Oslo before 2011 and is affiliated with the Kurdish movement, the informant in the second story sought asylum in Norway after 2011 and is involved in LGBT activism.

A long time before the uprising started in 2011, Faten left Syria to escape the difficulties and repression she encountered as a result of her involvement in Kurdish activism. In her exile in Oslo, she continued her opposition against the regime through her support for and involvement

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Interviewees.

Category	Number of interviewees
<i>Gender</i>	
Women	5
Men	9
<i>Age</i>	
20s	4
30s	4
40s	2
50s	4
<i>Migration time</i>	
Before 2011	7
After 2011	7

in the Kurdish movement in Oslo. Describing how she was part of the movement in Oslo before 2011, Faten explains:

We were larger in numbers than our Arab Syrian fellows. We had our own associations and activities since we were calling for the rights of Kurds in Syria. We were active politically as well as culturally. As Syrian Kurds, we were the only opposition to the regime in Oslo, objecting to the regime's arbitrary policies against Kurds. We organized more than one demonstration in Oslo, and we had meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the parliament under the name of the Kurdish Syrian community. We were organized into many associations and organizations.

Faten elaborates on how she opposed the regime from Oslo through her advocacy for the rights of Kurds in Syria and how this activism and opposition to the regime were mutually reinforcing. She serves as an example of how identity-based activism was deeply intertwined with opposition to the regime from pre-uprising times and during her time in exile. As such, when the uprising began in 2011, Faten became highly active in the uprising from her new location in Oslo, taking part in rallies, talking to policymakers about the situation in Syria, and coming together with the Syrian diaspora elsewhere in the establishment of representative entities. These efforts were coordinated within loose networks that were enabled by the momentum of the uprising. At that point, her opposition to the regime was primarily manifested and channeled through support for the revolution, while Kurdish activism was continued in parallel,⁵ combining the two forms of activism together.

The turning point for the repositioning of identity-based activism in lieu of antiregime activism was when Syrians arrived in large numbers in Norway in 2015. At first, Faten saw this as an opportunity that could be seized upon for the expansion and reactivation of Syrian mobilization in Norway: "By 2015, we had a good mass of Syrians, so we were still excited that the revolution can produce something." Accordingly, Faten participated in community efforts to aid the revolution in Syria by creating an organization that could represent these interests. However, the organization did not persist or lead anywhere:

I did not see any enthusiasm from them [members]; there were no capacities nor was there a plan, and so I couldn't just work alone.

Disappointed by the outcome that she blamed on the inability to organize and "having her faith in the Syrian revolution shaken" by the expansion of Islamist extremist groups in Syria, Faten grew more convinced that it was more worthwhile to redirect her attention to Kurdish activism:

It is their revolution.⁶ We, the Kurds, have our own platforms to ensure our rights in the future [...] Right now, I am more inclined to serve my nationalism, not all Syrians in general here in Norway. As Kurds, we have our own associations and some good activities, and we are trying as much as we can to preserve this.

Faten's trajectory exemplifies what I conceptualize as identity-based repositioning in terms of disentangling antiregime activism from her Kurdish activism and having the latter repositioned at the heart of her ongoing engagement because the two could not be continued in parallel.

This identity-based repositioning was facilitated by her established position in the movement and presence of platforms through which she could continue to channel her activism. This can be seen through her repeated emphasis on how organized and established the Kurdish community is in Oslo.

I move now to the story of Reema, who came as an asylum seeker to Norway a few years after the uprising began. Like the first story, Reema was politically active prior to the start of the movement, taking an interest in human rights and party politics within the parameters of what was permissible at the time in Syria. Thus, when the protest movement began in 2011, she became immediately involved in the uprising as a media activist and in the coordination committees⁷ of her hometown. She coordinated protests and covered, documented, and edited the news of the movement in her local surroundings. Along with these tasks, Reema wrote in defense of LGBT rights:

One of the things I became active for in Syria and talked about was LGBT rights. I used to write for a magazine about Syrian LGBT persons, under a pseudonym of course. I was also in contact with a couple of LGBT activists. I used to write, not articles, but more like thoughts about the situation of LGBT persons in Syria.

Here, Reema's involvement in antiregime activism paved the way for an equivalent kind of involvement in LGBT activism, almost as if the moment of political awakening encouraged her to draw attention to the unjust situation of LGBT persons because "the regime contributed to the demeaning view of LGBT persons in Syria" (Interview 8). Her example shows that the two activisms were joined in complementary ways to each other.

When Reema was forced to flee Syria, she moved to one of the neighboring countries where she briefly engaged in humanitarian work to make a living but was forced to stay away from LGBT activism to stay safe and not contravene the principle of neutrality enforced by international NGOs. When she came to Norway, she could not pursue activism linked to Syria because she could not find the encouragement needed in her circles to act as an established point of access to antiregime activism⁸: "I don't have the same circle to encourage me to work and be creative again"; this quote summarizes the role played by the absence of activist networks over her trajectory. Later, Reema decided to get involved in LGBT advocacy in Oslo as a continuation of the LGBT component, here activated by her participation in the uprising. In her view, it is important to defend the rights of sexual minorities, which tends not to be on the agenda of Syrian activists:

I disagree with Syrian activists who say women and LGBT rights are not a priority because people are still dying. But the right to life is the first right of human rights. What is the purpose of living if I cannot be the way I am? I cannot live in a prison. One should be free, no? Freedom is very important, [and you should] be able to express your gender or sexual identity.

Here, identity-based repositioning is encapsulated in the act of disembodying identity-based activism from antiregime activism. The marginalization of LGBT voices from the discussion on Syria led Reema to reposition her engagement in connection to her identity as a queer person. Thus, even though her activism is no longer about being active against the regime, there is an element of continuity between fighting for human rights in the past by exposing the violations of the regime and narrowing down her focus to the rights of LGBT persons. Because Reema is currently a member of an organization that cares for LGBT persons in Norway, her membership testifies to how she capitalized on the established LGBT movement structures in Oslo as an incubator of an activism more embedded in her past (Quinsaas, 2016).

Helping and supporting community members

The second trajectory prevalent in the data manifests in the translation of previous experiences gained from participation in the uprising into various practices of supporting and helping

community members. Translating such experiences takes place in response to the specific conditions found in Oslo. This can be observed in the account of Lubna. She participated in protests in Syria and was later involved in development programs for refugees. Now, she is working to provide Syrians with the necessary tools to be part of the public space in Oslo:

The goal that is really underpinning our work is to preserve those principles and values launched in 2011 [with the uprising] [...] To understand more from Norwegians, to invite them to come and tell us what the entry points are into influencing the public space, not just the parliament. I mean you can take part in what is going on in this society on so many levels [...] And also to have a component of this training on how to write opinion articles and how to make an influence. Like introduce a catch up about how one can take part in the society because, unfortunately, in this introduction program, the whole focus is on how to write a CV, how to apply for a job just to make money and pay taxes. I feel like this definition of integration is too narrow. Just because you started paying taxes does not mean you are integrated into society. For me, being an active person in this society is much more than working and paying taxes because you can work and pay taxes and still live in your own bubble.

Lubna's statement reveals a continuity between what she calls the principles of the uprising and helping Syrians access the public space in Norway. Her work can be read as an attempt to invest in the principles learned from participation in the uprising into work that can challenge integration narratives and help young Syrians be active participants in Norwegian society. Embarking on this particular practice was mediated not only by ideas of empowerment and social transformation linked to the uprising, but also by the refugee introduction program in Norway, which is too focused on work-life contributions in her view.

Similarly, Rahim is a community organizer who used to organize protests in solidarity with the uprising and communicate with local politicians about the uprising in Syria. As the community started growing larger, he describes how he switched to meeting the needs of community members:

There is now a community here and a lot of people; it is important to see what their pain, concerns, and issues are. Here, too, the goal has changed along the way, especially when things became more complicated in Syria. We have to focus on our efforts on people coming here; they need work, accommodation, Arabic lessons for their kids, social networks, and so on. So things have changed although the main political goal remains in the background [...] That's why I helped a number of young men and women to be part of voluntary organizations here. This kind of experience and education also makes one aware of their role in society because we also have a role toward this society. I think this kind of experience is very good to learn.

For Rahim, supporting community members find their way in the Norwegian system and society and helping young people volunteer speaks to "the political goal in the background," in terms of responding to the situation and being helpful, be it through showing solidarity in the past or accommodating the social needs of the community at the present moment. Meanwhile, switching to this practice also conforms to integration policies in Norway, which place a large emphasis on volunteerism and that measure the degree of integration by participation in associational activities (see Djuve, 2011).

Some other informants reincorporated the ideas connected to their past activism into forms of artistic expression and the cultural field in Oslo. Samer, for example, expressed his participation in the uprising by taking writing as a means of opposing the regime and advocating for the mass protests and values of freedom and democracy through organizing participatory forums for dialogue. After coming to Norway, Samer became interested in issues of intercultural dialogue and how this can improve the lives of newcomers:

I encourage dialogue ... I am interested in art and culture through which we can spread the culture of dialogue. I use poetry, film, and theater to build cultural bridges between cultures and use dialogue to solve problems [...] So I am interested in changing [people's] way of thinking, how to think differently, and how to lead a better life. I organize seminars on these matters, coaching on how to live your life in a better way.

Samer sees building “cultural bridges” as a space for widening the horizons of newcomers, helping them think differently about what they can make out of their lives in exile. His experience made him appreciate the importance of dialogue as a launching pad for facilitating integration in Norway. As such, engaging in intercultural dialogue derives not only from his experiences in the uprising, but is also translated to match and appeal to the discourse of integration governing the presence of Syrians.

Likewise, after an engagement in protests from Oslo and with a lot of experience in cultural advocacy, Karam envisions cultural activities as a space that can accommodate the aspirations of political mobilization:

I specifically work in the cultural field because it can be a vessel for channeling my political vision and ideas. The cultural vessel can be an aspect and vision of changing the climate through offering answers and questions in terms of creating a minimum of cooperation and intellectual harmony among the population of Syrians in Oslo, specifically for the purpose of building the tools and structures that we hope can be built and developed. Here comes my role as someone with a vision, ideas, and notions for how to build these structures and tools through which I can tell my vision [...] I focus on the cultural aspect that has to do with organizing seminars and lectures.

For Karam, cultural organizing can help the community organically emerge and develop, potentially mobilizing around a more political agenda in the future. His assessment of the state of the Syrian community as yet unestablished made him mobilize on his interest in cultural advocacy as a space that can provide an opportunity for achieving consensus.

On the other hand, some other informants reenact their legacy of participating in the uprising through situations encountered in everyday life. They are interested in spreading awareness among their immediate circles through conversations and political socialization. For example, Ali, a humanitarian activist back in Syria, proudly shares his political history with his children:

I feel like there is something I can tell my kids, and I already tell them a lot [...] that I participated in that stage that the country went through and wasn't just neutral [...] we are in pain when we left our country. As you see here, there is snow and how we are far away from everything that we question what kind of life is that. We have a comfortable life here, but this isn't what we wanted.

Raising children is often highlighted as a basis for embedding revolutionary ideals in everyday life (El Chazli, 2020; Gayer, 2019; Maynard, 2018). Thus, the act of Ali shows how he is engaging in intergenerational transmission that is essential to the formation of the political subjectivities of younger generations (Schwarz, 2021) and how in light of the felt distance from Norway and expressed lack of support to hinge on for activism, socialization becomes a means for him to inculcate a narrative that can potentially contribute to the collective identity of the community in exile.

Likewise, Mariam believes in the power of small conversations as a site of renegotiating her past activism into ideas that relate to the everyday life of Syrians in Norway:

I turned to things that mean more to me. If I sit with someone [with a different orientation] and I am able to give them hope by sharing my experience with them, I believe I can win over any politician; it is more important than entering politics itself. When I support someone to get back on their feet and live and achieve their role as a human being in this society, I believe I can beat any politician sitting behind a desk and driving a Mercedes accompanied by bodyguards. Because of all what happened with me and all the accumulative experiences I had until that moment, I believe that psychosocial support regarding the issues that pained us for so long matters more to me. If I make people understand that you are not wrong if you are [different], if I am able to create this awareness one way or another, me as a person, I believe I am able to triumph over any politician speaking in public. That is my vision [...] I believe that if I help someone with learning the [Norwegian] language, support them one way or another, study with them, or do anything, I am showing Norwegians and Europeans that I deserve to be alive, I deserve a second chance, and in that way, I am supporting my political cause with that very small act.

Mariam seeks to make a change through her interactions with community members by helping them learn about their rights, overcome their vulnerabilities, and advance their education. Her

act of care can be linked to her experience within the uprising, which revolved around fund-raising and service provision for the displaced communities. This experience made her believe in the value of psychosocial support that can be achieved through rehabilitating and mutual support in the context of Oslo. Being a newcomer herself, in the process of rebuilding her life in exile, made something like helping people learn the language the act of care most aligned with her past and the most meaningful to her.

Conclusion

I began the current article by asking how Syrians' activist trajectories evolved in exile contexts with a small and new Syrian community and with undeveloped organizational ties to Syria and the receiving context. Drawing on interviews with Syrians in Oslo with a background in activism during the uprising, I argued that the participants' activist trajectories evolved in a locally embedded manner. The participants have integrated the context in reinventing their engagement by challenging and conforming to integration narratives, recognizing the lack of resources to support the action related to Syria, capitalizing on infrastructures related to other causes of their interest, and evaluating the state of the Syrian community as in need of structural support. They establish continuity with their past activism by *repositioning* their engagement in alignment with their identity and incorporating the values and ideals of empowerment, dialogue, and solidarity acquired from the past in various formal and informal practices of helping community members. Therefore, the present study demonstrates that activist trajectories are embedded in both past experiences and the specific sociopolitical context of Oslo.

In this manner, I contribute to the growing literature on Syrian activism in exile (Abiyaghi & Younes, 2018; De Elvira, 2018; Fourn, 2018; Moss, 2016, 2020; Ragab, 2020) by adding insights into how activist trajectories may develop in exile. Shifting the focus from contexts with visible populations and structures to those that lack these advantages has illuminated the wider aspects of engagement rooted in identity and community support. Although Ragab (2020) already highlights an extensive diaspora mobilization among Syrians in the area of integration and community-building in Germany, she does not take individual experiences into account. In my study, I show that one's past experiences of participation in the uprising and antiregime activism cannot be delinked from current engagements. Thus, it is important to account for both contextual factors and past experiences to better understand how engagement is shaped in exile.

This point relates to my second contribution. The literature on the biographical consequences of activism focuses on past experiences without accommodating the mediating effect of sociopolitical contexts in shaping individuals' engagement in the present (for an exception, see Bosi, 2019). By bridging this scholarship with an opportunity structure approach, I systematize the relationship between past experiences and the context of exile. Although the literature on Syrians' activist trajectories articulates the impact of exile contexts such as Lebanon and Turkey on leading activists to engage in humanitarian activism (Abiyaghi & Younes, 2018; De Elvira, 2018; Fourn, 2018), it does not do so systematically. I argue that an opportunity structure approach can add an important layer to studying activist trajectories because it allows for the specification of the opportunities and constraints existing in the context of engagement, thus contributing to a better understanding of how they can interact with past activism in influencing trajectories. For example, an opportunity structure approach has been useful in highlighting the impact of integration regimes and, therefore, in showing how they might influence individuals' engagement.

Finally, I also extend the literature on conversion (Leclercq, 2012; Tissot, 2005; Willemez, 2004) by introducing the concept of *identity-based repositioning*. I coined this term to label the overlap between antiregime and identity-based activism in the past and how these two became disentangled over time as identity was repositioned as the locus of engagement. Drawing on the trajectories of two informants, the concept highlights individuals' experiences with a lack of community structures in Oslo and how it contributed to their decision to disengage from

antiregime activism. The favorable conditions in Oslo in connection to Kurdish and LGBT rights activism further enabled the enactment of repositioning around identity. In this sense, this concept can be utilized to scrutinize how activist trajectories evolve over time and in exile, taking into account both individuals' involvement in the past and the opportunity structures in the context of exile. Although I alluded to the circumstances in Syria as important to the act of repositioning, I did not expand on it in my analysis. Future research can establish a better relationship between the factors at the sending and receiving contexts and how the interplay of both can shift and shape the process of repositioning and activist trajectories at large.

Notes

1. Defined by Giugni (2008) as the “effects on the life-course of individuals who have participated in movement activities” (p. 1589).
2. Known as reconversion in the French literature, but I choose to translate it here as conversion.
3. Known as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC).
4. I address the activism of the informants in Berlin in another article.
5. Such as organizing protests in solidarity with the Kurdish-inhabited areas in Syria and being a member in several Kurdish organizations.
6. Speaking of Arab Syrians.
7. Local groups mobilizing for the uprising that sprang up later as the protest wave spread across the country.
8. In an unpublished article, I elaborate more on that point in terms of how the lack of emotional spaces (mainly protests and networks) in Oslo contributed to the disengagement of activists from organized action on behalf of Syria.

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