Syrian young people in Jordan and the question of return

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war lasted nearly fourteen years, resulting in one of the largest displacement crises in modern times, with most refugees seeking refuge in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Many children who left Syria during the conflict have now spent a majority of their lives living 'elsewhere' and have grown up with ambiguous feelings of belonging and attachment, trying to make sense of how they might build futures in restrictive and obstructive local and global settings. With the overthrow of Bashar Al Assad, and with it the opportunity to return and rebuild, Syrian refugee young people are adjusting to the possibility of new futures in a nation that many have few memories of.

This viewpoint provides an insight into the initial reactions and perspectives of Syrian young people displaced by the civil war who self-settled in urban Jordan with their families between 2012 – 2015 and have continued to live in the Kingdom. Reflecting on workshops held in January 2025 and engaging with earlier work with Syrian communities in 2022, it highlights how these young people are re-conceptualising and strategising their future trajectories amidst an uncertain political landscape as they face a new chapter of 'waithood'.

Key Words: Syria, Return, Jordan, Youth, Memory, Futures

Introduction[i]

"The most common question we're asked, and I ask myself, is: 'When are you going back to Syria?'" Amal[ii] sighs as she indicates the various concerns that she is now weighing up as a Syrian background young person who has lived in Jordan for over half her life. "Employment, education, marriage, safety, alienation, Syria, Jordan…" she has written these terms out on a piece of paper in Arabic and English, laying them out as different concerns before a sketch of herself confused and overwhelmed, illustrating the multitude of issues that weigh on her as she contemplates her next life decisions. Like millions of other Syrians, the unexpected overthrow of Bashar Al Assad took Amal by surprise. Throughout her youth in Jordan, a future back in Syria had only been imagined. But now, it is rapidly appearing to be her only possible future.

Beginning in 2011 and continuing until late 2024, the Syrian civil war led to horrendous causalities and one of the largest displacement crises in the world affecting approximately 14 million Syrians - 7 million displaced internally and another 6.5 million as refugees. Most of the latter sought refuge in the neighbouring countries of Turkey (2.9 million), Lebanon (1.5 million) and Jordan (650,000) (UNHCR, 2025). More than half of those refugees are children and young people, who have now spent most of their lives in host countries. This piece draws on creative workshops with Syrian young people living in the city of Zarqa, Jordan which were held in January 2025. Simultaneously, it also engages with previous work conducted with Syrian young people in urban Jordan in 2022, and published in this journal (REDACTED), to foreground young people's personal perspectives on the change in regime and its impact on their lives, as they enter a fresh period of ambiguity and change during this key socio-political moment in the Levant. As found in our previous work, despite structural restrictions on education and employment opportunities, Syrian young people in Jordan have been actively navigating a period of 'waithood' (Singerman, 2020; Wagner, 2017), aspiring, and making plans. As political transformations suddenly widen spatial imaginaries, young people are expressing both an excitement and a fatigue about the 'right decision' for their future geographies as they weigh their aspirations and capabilities (de Hass, 2021). These decisions circulate relentlessly around 'where' questions: where might it be possible to build lives, where might it be possible to work or study, where are their family and friends, where do they belong, where are they safe - and each of these is being carefully weighed amidst complex memories, place attachments, identities and legal frameworks which permit their right to be present, or not, and to access economic and educational opportunities.

Intervention

This viewpoint emerges from ongoing workshops with young people in Jordan as part of a British Academy funded project *Surfacing Zarqa* (2024-2026). The project focuses on historical and contemporary socio-spatial research activities with diverse background young people in Zarqa, the industrial capital of Jordan and capital of Zarqa Governorate. Zarqa is considered an under researched

and ‘overlooked’ city (Price 2020). It is socio-economically deprived and is most often associated with pollution, religious conservatism and militarism. The city has a heterogenous community and was founded by Chechen forced migrants in the early twentieth century. It has a significant Palestinian population, being the location of first Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan. Syrian and Iraqi refugees displaced from civil conflicts over the past few decades have also made the city home, as have thousands of migrant workers from Egypt and South Asia who work in Zarqa’s industries. The city is also home to several indigenous Bedouin communities, notably the Bani Hassan.

In January 2025, our research team conducted two workshops with 10 Syrian young people, who were between the ages of 20 – 24 years old. All had left Syria between the ages of approximately 7 years old – 11 years old. Most of them had arrived in Jordan between 2012 – 2015 and had been displaced from various regions of Syria including Damascus, Hama, Raqqah and Dara’a. The workshops held a mix of genders and began with introductions, ethics[iii] and consent, and an ice breaker centred around an activity which asked young people to use one word to describe Zarqa, Jordan and Syria. These one-word descriptions acted as an anchor, which then were returned to during the workshop discussion phase, where they fleshed out their responses in more detail. Providing drawing and tracing paper and coloured pens, we then invited young people to draw a picture of how they saw their future in the given socio-political moment. The research team emphasised that young people did not need to draw or share anything they felt uncomfortable exploring with the wider group. This statement was reiterated several times during the workshops to remind young people that even though we were posing questions, it was their prerogative if they wanted to answer or engage in the topic. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, translated and analysed manually along with the drawn images from the participants. A summary of these findings is currently being prepared in Arabic and the research team has asked to follow up with the young people intermittently over the next eighteen months, during the project’s life stage, to follow young people’s decision making and experiences.

Capacity to build futures

Jordan’s legislative approach to Syrian refugees within the Kingdom has had direct outcomes on their social, economic and political capacities and their sense of identity and belonging. The Jordan Compact, which was introduced in 2016, was hailed as a revolutionary approach to enabling Syrian refugees to work legally within certain sectors of the Jordanian economy. However, this system has rapidly changed over 2024 and has effectively ended. Permit costs have increased from 10 Jordanian dinar per year to over 500 Jordanian dinar, with increases in social security contributions and refugees expected to pay punishing back-payments when they renew their permits from when the policy was implemented in early 2024 (Lenner & Turner, 2024). This has made a future in Jordan feel untenable, particularly for young people with few resources trying to establish themselves as adults. These restrictions were seen

as the main reason in limiting young people's capacities to continue to live in Jordan and many viewed this as coercion to return to Syria:

> 'We are forced to go back (to Syria) after liberation because here, they pressure you as if they're saying, "Go, don't stay here." (Ibrahim)

Some felt that the change in the permit system meant that they are now 'boxed in' to rely on aid infrastructures. However, since the regime change there has also been discussion about how the aid in the region will be modified, with funds being directed into Syria directly to help the country's reconstruction. The extent to which these aid regimes continue to function will be further in question with the ongoing Trump administration (Rahman & Kamel, 2025). Jordan relies heavily on aid, and with this significantly compromised, return to Syria may increasingly emerge as a viable option. This is relevant for young people, as NGO programmes which provide 'cash for work' payments are a common occupation for young people who cannot access work opportunities, and tide over many whilst they strategise their futures (see also: Lenner and Turner, 2024).

Young people felt that the Kingdom is focused on prioritising jobs for Jordanian youth in a stagnant economy with soaring youth unemployment, despite Syrians predominantly being engaged in informal, low-waged work. The challenges facing the Jordanian economy and population were clear to young people, who noted that:

> "The hardships of living here aren't just for Syrians…even Jordanians from tribal backgrounds are struggling…(Palestinians face them too)… we'd never be able to achieve anything (in Jordan)' (Saaed)

This permit scheme, alongside other legislative controls including restrictions on Syrian's ability to buy a house, own a car and work in most sectors meant that life in Jordan was described as 'lacking dignity'. As observed in our research in 2022, life for young people continues to feature relentless strategising as they navigate 'waithood'. Waithood, widely conceptualised in refugee and youth literature, is a period of life between adolescence and adulthood where young people wait to secure economic security, marriage and, in the case of refugee communities, legal security (Singerman, 2020). For Syrian young people, waithood is typically 'frantic' (Wagnar, 2017), with many 'strategising' by suspending studies until they have enough funds to pay for a term of education, accepting underpaid or exploitative work and staying home to avoid police and security services. One young woman even mused that she had tactically considered an engagement to a Jordanian, so she could access citizenship which would enable her to be able to work in her future skilled sector.

These policies significantly limit young people's capacities and contributions, to 'fully thrive and achieve' and this frustration mean that Syria was seen as a place where there might be 'stability' from legislative changes such as permit prices, and a 'freedom to do what you want'. For young people who

had struggled through waithood these opportunities were welcome, despite the challenges ahead. As Carpi (2024) has noted in her article on the fall of the regime, Syrian's are not naïve to the challenges that face them, but they are jubilant and driven by the new possibilities of reimagining their own political futures. As one young person commented:

> 'The only thing that eases the feeling (of leaving) is that whatever you build in Syria will be yours' (Amal)

Young people were cautious about the emergence of a new regime, wanting time and space to weigh its actions and activities before making judgement. They shared news and social media updates from friends and family in Syria and were intently following political and social developments to understand how the new political regime would develop. The efforts of different rebel groups during the civil war were appreciated, however there was a desire to see democratic processes put in place. The war-time activities and actions of new political leaders, such as Ahmed al-Sharaa, were not of specific interest or concern, with many observing that the transitional government had a new, public position and the 'world was watching'. What mattered to young people was what the new regime could do for the future of Syria, including what legislations might be implemented (for example, the removal of national service) and how opportunities for young people might be facilitated.

The fundamentalist Islamic underpinnings of the new regime were also of little concern, with one young man wryly observing that the previous 'secular' government had been brutal and dictatorial, defined by 'thuggery', where police and security services had unfettered power. Rather, it was the task of regaining control over a politically and socially fragmented nation that emerged as the greatest worry to young people, as was the presence of other forces, such as ISIS, and regional powers, such as Israel, which might destabilise Syria and steer it towards collapse. This would mean the loss of hope and a possible re-entry into conflict.

Lifestage and Agency

Whilst the imagination of return to a 'homeland' is critical in the consciousness of displaced communities, despite ambivalent feelings or attachments to it (Long & Oxfield, 2004), as Muller-Funk and Franson (2020) have noted, the *aspiration* to return is different to the *reality* of return. For Syrian young people repatriation itself was not a dominant concern, but rather what would follow. The impact of the war on the nation's infrastructure and economy was central to young people's preoccupations on return. Initial reports have detailed the significant challenges awaiting the rebuild of the nation and the horror as it comes to terms with the legacy of the conflict and Al Assad's regime (Slemrod, 2024). Some young people knew that their family's homes had been destroyed and many felt that a return to Syria would be 'building from scratch', highlighting the challenges and difficulties that this would bring. For some young people, there was a sense that their current life stage meant that they were uniquely positioned to contribute to post-conflict rebuilding of Syria (see Schwartz, 2010) and they expressed

enthusiasm for return and the ability to build their own lives. For others, the sheer challenge of the task ahead and the reality that much of this would have to be built from the ground up, left them feeling both overwhelmed and passive.

There was a sense that throwing efforts behind a singular activity (e.g. trying to start your own business or enterprise, within a broken economy in Syria potentially without a home or a network of connections) could be all-consuming and become life-defining. One young man was quick to emphasise that returning now could trap young people into a geographical location or set of responsibilities that would then dictate the outcomes of their lives. He emphasised how he was 'young' and that part of the hesitance to return was linked to an unwillingness to make life choices that would determine his entire future, at such an age. Return was also perceived as 'one-directional', with an assumption that the Kingdom would not allow for easy and open transnational movement, or a return to Jordan, which also fed into young people's concerns about being spatially and socially 'trapped' in Syria.

Aspiration, change and mobility is typical of this life stage, regardless of young people's refugee status or the obstructions ahead of them (deHaas, 2021). Many young people had been actively strategising about their futures and working towards broader life goals just before the regime change. Some had been planning marriages or seeking opportunities to build a future in Europe, learning languages or taking courses. Aspirational plans were now on hold and for some, return did not align with their planned life goals, which had been crafted when 'return' was only an imaginary (Muller Funk & Fransen, 2022). Young people were now entering a new and unexpected chapter of 'waithood' as they sought to understand what might come next and how best to navigate the decisions around this (Singerman, 2020). As Western nations suspend Syrian asylum programmes or engaged in a rhetoric of return (Mantoo, 2024) there is a sense that previous routes or opportunities are rapidly closing, and that returning to Syria is emerging as the only future. This continued to exasperate some young people as they reflected on wider regional concerns around opportunities for youth and the restrictions on their aspirations commenting:

> 'There's a kind of frustration we, as Arab youth, experience. You look for opportunities to achieve something in an Arab country, but you can only find them in foreign countries. Even if your country is stable, it's not possible (to achieve your potential).' (Amjad)

For young women, there is also less capacity to make individual or independent decisions about where to go. One CBO noted how the social norm of young women being expected to live with their families until marriage meant that for many the choice of staying or going was not necessarily up to them but would be dictated by the decisions of their immediate family. The educational gains, social networks and serious personal relationships that Syrian young women had made were not necessarily dismissed outright by their families. For example, in our workshop young women that were studying explained they were encouraged to continue and complete this in Jordan by their families, as there is a consensus

that further education structures were likely to be compromised in Syria. However, there was still a definitive expectation that upon completion of their studies they would 'join their family in Syria.'

Memories, relationships and place attachment

"Honestly, I don't know much about Syria. Even if I return, I know there will be more challenges…" (Layan)

Place attachments and belongings were relational and scalar, expressed at local and transnational levels across Jordan and Syria (Tomaney, 2015). In contrast to our previous workshops in 2022, where memories and descriptions of Syria were scarce, young people that engaged in workshops in 2025 did hold their own memories of Syria, and some described with pride what they could recall of their childhood. Young people's accounts stemmed from interactions between place-attachments and interpersonal relationships sharing memories of their home, relatives' houses or neighbourhoods with fondness and joy (Scannell et al., 2016). For some it had been important to keep these memories alive and to distil them to younger siblings, some of whom had been born in Jordan and had no exposure to life in Syria. One young man talked about how he continually tested his childhood memory of Syria, asking family members about whether he was remembering things correctly, to keep recollection of place sharp and active. Despite more descriptive memories of places and people that constituted their Syrian childhood, most of the young people explained that they had scarce recollection of what Syria 'was' and admitted that they knew little about the country itself and what societal life there might be like.

The handful of positive memories of growing up in Syria digressed quickly into descriptions and experiences of the civil conflict, and how these dominated young people's recollections of childhood in Syria. For one young woman whose family left Isis controlled Deir ez Zor in 2015, her memories were traumatic and featured brutal accounts of hangings, crucifixions, shootings and eventual large-scale clashes between Isis and the Free Syrian Army. Another added:

> 'I remember so many things—there were constant raids…I saw so many dead bodies, and I remember it all despite being just six years old' (Ibrahim)

As childhood memories of Syria were predominantly attached to the conflict and coupled with a knowledge of family relations scattered and homes destroyed, the thought of what young people were leaving behind in Jordan was palpable. Some confessed that their painful memories of Syria meant they had no interest in returning. The potential loss of Jordanian security and the social community they had built was also bearing down on young people, contributing to an ambiguity of feeling which was underpinned by a fear of loss of relational belonging and a sense of a new identity as an 'outsider' (Oxfeld & Long, 2017) within a homeland they held opaque memories of:

> ‘You think about the social environment you’ve built in Jordan and how you’ll have to rebuild it in Syria. You don’t really have anyone there…But in Jordan, you’ve built a broader social network, so moving would affect you a lot, even psychologically’ (Qais)

> ‘If I leave Jordan, I’ll miss it a lot because I have memories here. For me, Syria feels like a bit of “exile” now…it will feel like going to a very strange and distant country. In Syria, I had memories that hurt more than happy ones.’ (Amal)

As they reflected on the possible loss of social networks, connection and memory making, young people appeared to reframe their sense of place attachment to Jordan, as the threat of leaving and losing that attachment became more pronounced (Oxfeld and Long, 2017). In contrast to our previous research, there did appear to be some softening in attitudes towards the Kingdom. The creation of new possibilities outside of the Kingdom provided a sense of existential mobility (Hage, 2009), removing the dominating structural oppression that had characterised their quotidian life before. Some reflected that they could see how Jordan had provided safety and security for their communities and how this hospitality had been lifesaving and lifechanging. Self-settled refugees in urban areas tend to have deeper attachments and integrations into the local community through both social and economic networks and can express less inclination when opportunities to return emerge (Oxfeld & Long, 2017). Several young people described Jordan as ‘home’ and themselves as *ibn Zarqa* (son of Zarqa), explaining that despite the ‘chaos’ and poverty of the city, it was ‘their city’. This indicated an affinity with the city, where it was expressed as part of an individual sense of identity (Clarke et al, 2018), a notable contrast to how previous participants in 2022 had conceptualised or described it. However, young people still struggled with memories of racism and hostility when they first arrived in the Kingdom and emphasised that legislative restrictions towards Syrians ensured that they would only ever be ‘guests’. This fragmented their sense of belonging, complicating their social positioning within Jordan and enabled a romanticisation of Syria as ‘the mother’, ‘the soul’ or ‘the heart’. Syria was described as a place that would have hardships, but where they would be citizens. This capacity, to be a recognised citizen with rights, would mean that they could determine the building and creation of their futures.

Conclusion

This viewpoint provides insight into the perspectives of a small group of Syrian refugee young people in Jordan as they traverse one of the most significant socio-political moments of their lives to date. As regime change occurs in their homeland and civil war appears to end, their already ambiguous position in a country, which some have identified as ‘safety’ or ‘home’, is rapidly shifting beneath them, pushing identities, attachments and futures into flux. With such significant geopolitical changes taking place, not only in the Middle East but globally, it is difficult for anyone to dictate or predict what waits ahead. However, with the changes to the Jordan Compact and the national rhetoric about Syrian returnees leave

many young people feeling that Syria may be their only option, and whilst this may be intimidating, the possibilities of political autonomy, citizenship and personal independence dampen wider concerns.

UNHCR has emphasised the need to provide space and time for Syrian refugees to make informed and voluntary decisions regarding return (Manatoo, 2024). Those advising and supporting refugee returns, should be mindful of specific challenges for children and young people in these settings who will be grappling with ambiguous feelings and attachments including fears and traumas which young people may feel unable to surface and discuss. Fears such as the loss of the only home they have ever known, the loss of social networks, community and identity and being an insider/outsider in their 'homeland'. Fears such as returning to a country when their primary memories are dominated by trauma, brutality and conflict. Because of their lifestage and the primacy of family ties, gender norms and social hierarchies, some of the autonomy and decision making for young people will also be compromised. Governmental policies, such as suspending the Jordan compact, will oblige young people to make coerced and hasty returns into a volatile and unknown environment. These are life altering decisions, and vulnerable young people require a kindness toward, and a consideration of, their lived experience.

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[i] The authors would like to thank the young people who took the time to reflect and share their experiences with us during a time of personal upheaval. Many thanks for the workshop support provided by Mohammad Emad AL-Heraki and for editorial support from Hala Ghanem. We would also like to thank anonymous reviewers for their comments.

[ii] All participants have been given pseudonyms.

[iii] This research has been reviewed by MMU Arts & Humanities Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee EthOS Reference Number: 67563