Middle Eastern and Mediterranean lives: Rethinking mobility in a time of immobility

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drosos (...)

Università della Svizzera italiana

INDEX

INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

While reading the personal narratives of the 8 young people included here, I understood how essential it is to think deeply about what mobility means. During a period when the world was confined, the question of mobility suddenly entered everyone's mind and made us realize what its opposite, immobility, could generate. The glimpses of these youths' stories take us from one context to another in the Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) region. Each story captures you and forces you to jump into a new situation, a new environment. Without realizing it, we plunge ourselves in their words and slip gradually into the experiences they've been through, imagining their feelings and the actions they took when facing the circumstances that shaped their future.

As many have experienced, the quest for mobility often begins with a certain "immobility", whether dictated by social norms, political circumstances, or economic conditions. The authors of these narratives challenge the barriers in their societies, and they have found ways to "escape" and discover new horizons. With these testimonies, young activists share their multiple experiences of mobility, in the hope that they can inspire others.

This was made possible thanks to the MEM Summer Summit, which each year gathers young change-makers from the Middle East Mediterranean area to think about the future and the betterment of the region.

Fyras Mawazini
Country Director Morocco - Tunisia
**DROSOS FOUNDATION**

DROSOS FOUNDATION

The Drosos Foundation was established in late 2003 in Zurich, Switzerland. It has been operational since the beginning of 2005. It is ideologically, politically, and religiously independent. Placing the individual at the centre of its understanding of society, DROSOS FOUNDATION is convinced that life skills – as well as technical competences, professional knowledge and expertise – are key elements in personal development. Life skills are understood as the abilities permitting a person to improve his or her own living conditions, to constructively interact with others, and to actively participate in and contribute to the community. The Foundation is committed to enabling disadvantaged children, young people and young adults to live a life of dignity, take control of their lives and make a positive contribution within their community, taking into account that every individual bears the responsibility for himself, for others, and for the environment. The Foundation sets thematic and geographic priorities. In this context it favours those areas which receive no or inadequate public or private funding. It pursues a niche strategy and operates in Switzerland, Germany and the MENA region (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia), with the focus of its involvement primarily abroad.

Università della Svizzera italiana

Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) is one of Switzerland's 12 accredited public universities in Switzerland (according to The Higher Education Funding and Coordination Act). It is active in several teaching and research areas, including architecture, communication sciences, computational science, data science, economics, health studies, humanities, informatics, law, medicine and biomedicine. USI is a young and lively university, a hub of opportunity open to the world, where students are provided with quality interdisciplinary education in which they can be fully engaged and take center stage, and where researchers can count on adequate space to freely pursue their initiatives. USI is in constant evolution, always taking on new challenges while remaining true to its three guiding values: quality, openness and responsibility. These three fundamental values allowed USI to create a university flagship program: the Middle East Mediterranean MEM Summer Summit. Transversal, multidisciplinary, inter-faculty and with a strong openness towards civil society, it is an important model of dialogue and informal diplomacy between heterogeneous actors.

Middle East Mediterranean Summer Summit

Università della Svizzera italiana launched the MEM Summer Summit in 2018, in collaboration with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs that is one of the main partners. The acronym MEM stands for the extended region of the Mediterranean and the Middle East (from Morocco to Iran) and it refers to a complex and heterogenous geopolitical and cultural space that has undergone and is still undergoing profound and rapid changes. The MEM Summer Summit aims to develop new approaches, different narratives, as well as new projects that transcend physical and cultural boundaries between communities on all shores of the MEM region and beyond with the active contribution of the young participants, called young change-makers. Furthermore, the Summit aims to create a safe space for the young change-makers to meet, to exchange experiences, to collaborate and to build a common understanding. And finally, the Summit also serves as a platform to pilot initiatives and proposals at civil society level before bringing them on the formal and political tracks.
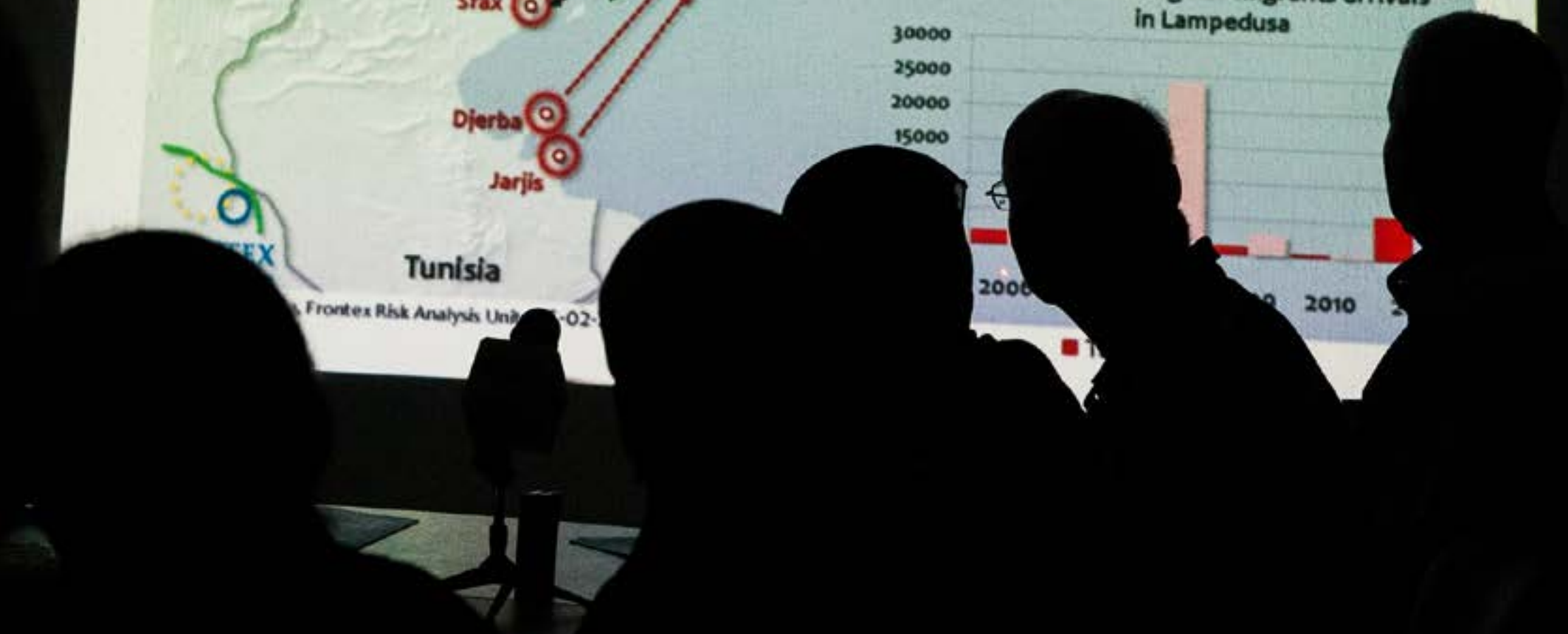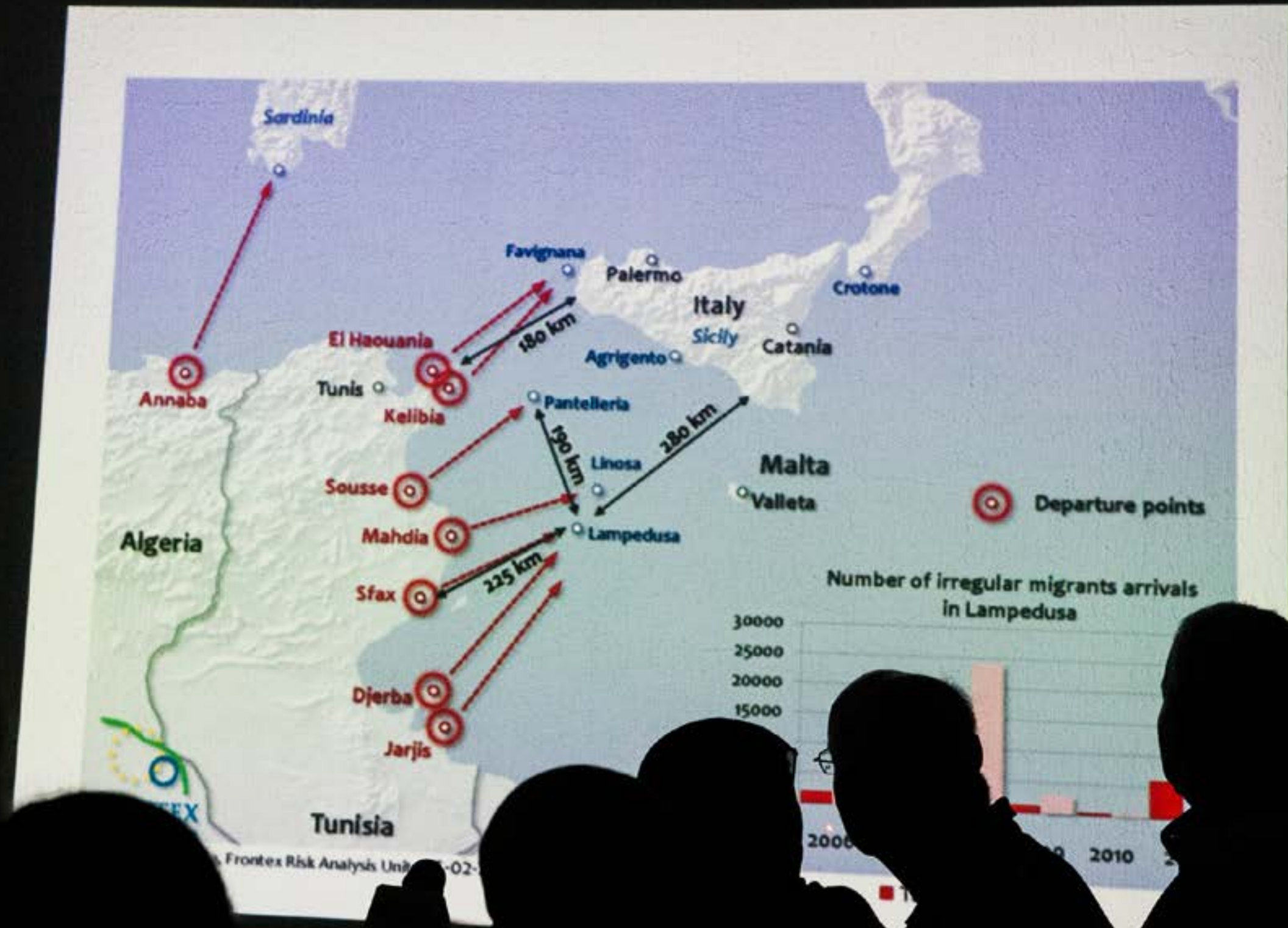
FEDERICA FREDIANI

Biography

Federica Frediani, Senior researcher and lecturer at the Università della Svizzera italiana, she is currently Educational Programme Manager of the Middle East Mediterranean Freethinking Platform. She is member of the Project Committee and Project Leader of the Middle East Mediterranean Summer Summit. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Università di Siena. Her research interests focuse mainly on representations, narratives, cultural productions and political and intercultural dynamics of the Middle East Mediterranean region. She published books and articles on the travel writing. In particular the women travel literature, and on the relationships between Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean.

PREFACE
Setting Sail

This project was conceived on late Spring 2020 when, during the first wave of Covid-19, we realized that it would not be possible to organize the Seminar of the Middle East Mediterranean Summer Summit as we planned, and as we have done now for four years. After some moments of bewilderment, stuck in an unusual and uncanny state of immobility, we decided to transform into a new venture, which had to be the Stream of the MEM Seminar dedicated to Cultural Narratives, organized with the support of the DROSOS FOUNDATION. The mobility of people, ideas, cultures, and commodities transcending barriers of space and time—hallmarks of contemporary and global world—were key themes in the 2019 MEM Summer Summit, and the 2020 edition was supposed to have the same focus. It is in acknowledging the semantic stratifications of this concept and embracing its complexity, wrote John Urry, that it is possible to state that mobility is the paradigmatic experience of modernity (M. Sheller, John Urry, The New Mobilities Paradigm, 2006).

This project is related to and generated by the MEM Summer Summit but is also a new and independent enterprise. The team—composed of eight selected MEM Alumni and two senior researchers, with different backgrounds coming from several countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Italy, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey)—met virtually on a regular basis for more than one year to discuss, exchange with, and work on mobility. Some of the workshops took place among the team members; others took place in more formal setting, with the participation of the DROSOS FOUNDATION and external guests. The process also included some one-on-one sessions for the elaboration and review of the narratives that are at the core of the project. During the project development, the team worked together to find a common language that did not erase diversities. This quest for a common language concerned not only the critical language for the analysis on mobility, but also the language to be employed for the narratives. Even though none of the team members were native speakers, English was the selected language. This choice implied the possibility to reach a broader audience, using the more "mobile" and "global" language, but it was also determined by the impossibility to find a koine among the languages of the MEM region. This is a hybrid project, not only because it has a digital format, but also because it is not an academic one. It must be seen as a laboratory of ideas and an experimental space. The Covid-19 emergency, with its far-reaching consequences, was a starting point for our discussion and common work. The crisis has exposed, and in some cases accelerated, the fragile structure of the

political, economic, and social systems in the Middle East Mediterranean region, and brought to light critical issues that have long been present and known. The cultural dimension has a prominent place within the MEM Summer Summit because culture plays a crucial role in promoting a better understanding between different countries: it pushes to look at complex phenomena in unconventional ways, to foster and to promote changes, and eventually to produce counter-narratives. Culture, as an engine for economic development and powerful tool for resilience and social cohesion, is also important for sustainable development projects.

The restrictive measures enforced in the various countries of the region in reaction to Covid-19 were and are still an ordeal for the cultural word. It is nonetheless true that culture rises to the occasion in hard times like the present one: it helps to build trust and a sense of community and solidarity by imagining new ways of facing and coping with difficulties. Mobility is a complex and stratified concept as well as a paradigm of social sciences that refers to both a material and an immaterial dimension. It explores the movement of people, ideas, goods, and images, as well as the broader social implications of these movements. This theme encompasses a broad range of issues, going from freedom and escape to social exclusion and control thus raising important questions of ethics and identities. One of the main purposes of the project was to look at the plural meanings of this concept, considering aspects such as: free movement is not everybody's prerogative; the impacts of pandemic on human mobility; and challenges and opportunities resulting from the use of technology.

The idea to think and re-think mobility in a time of immobility was the first one of many paradoxical challenges, especially because we addressed them in the Middle East Mediterranean region; one that is constituted of paradoxes and multiplicities, as Franco Cassano writes: "[The Mediterranean] is characterized by a paradoxical identity, by a multiple identity; in order to remain itself, obliged to guard the plurality of voices and languages, to fight against all of their reductio ad unum" (F. Cassano, "Repubbliche mediterranee" in F. Frediani, F. Gallo, Ethos repubblicano e pensiero meridiano, 2011). The label "Middle East Mediterranean region"—that goes from Morocco to Iran—refers to a broad geopolitical and cultural space that overcomes the physical boundaries. The Mediterranean continuously redesigns itself through the crossing borders flows and the incessant drawing up of new borders (N. Cuppini, "Paesaggio mediterraneo: il Mediterraneo come spazio urbanizzato", in D. Paci, P. Perri, F. Zantedeschi, Paesaggi Mediterranei. Storie, rappresentazioni, narrazioni, 2018).

It is a dense ensemble of communication and commercial interconnections, but also a contradictory space where the free circulation and movement is denied and foreclosed to certain subjects. Recently, the mobility paradoxes in the MEM region have been depicted in the movie The man who sold his skin by the Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania, presented at the Venice International Film Festival in 2020. The main character, a Syrian refugee, in the desperate pursuit of money and paperwork to travel to Europe, accepts to have his back tattooed as a Schengen visa by a controversial Western artist. Once he is transformed into an art object to be exhibited in the European museums, he gets the right to travel to Europe. The film director invites the audience, in an exacerbated and perhaps oversimplified way, to think about the inequal access to mobility and refugees' crisis, criticizing the contemporary international art scene.

Because of the pandemic, mobility assumed new and unexpected meanings: suddenly it started to be seen as a risk instead of as an asset and a privilege. Suddenly, physical places have returned to their traditional significance as dots within a space with clearly defined borders. This also implied the resurgence of borders and a construction of an

"us" (people who belong in/to a place) and a "them" (people who do not). This situation has put into question the assumption that there is no longer an identification between a society and the nation-state; that is, a social entity independent and self-sufficient with a physical space defined by stable territorial borders. Suddenly, borders reappeared even where they were not effective anymore. For instance, in Europe, the uncoordinated border restrictions introduced by Member States, in the initial phase of their efforts to halt the spread of the virus, all but suspended the free movement of people and greatly affected the free movement of goods and services, causing considerable disruption to the European single market. If this is true for the internal borders of the EU, it is even more so for the external ones. If it is true that the mobility restrictions were adopted almost everywhere and for once all the world citizens experienced the lack of freedom to move, it is also true that imbalance between North and South was still there. To some extent, of course, the Western citizens were more traumatized by those restrictions than citizens from the South, already used to difficulties with crossing the borders and getting visas to move freely. Abruptly, all tourists vanished, leaving the cities, the cultural and touristic attractions; the beaches empty and silent (affecting one of the most profitable industries in the region). The empty spaces were filled with a staggering and deafening silence. Nour, one of the team members, in a short video, keeps repeating, "Do you know what is like to take a city so loud and set it on mute?", referring to Cairo.

In Ali dorate. I giorni del silenzio - best short documentary at New York Movie Awards 2020 - by the Italian director Massimiliano Finnazer Flory, only the statues speak in a totally desert and silent Milan.

The image of the giant container ship stuck in the Suez Canal that for days obstructed the crucial artery for global trade in March 2021, about one year after the outbreak of the pandemic, is another paradoxical representation of mobility nowadays.

The reflections of each project team member and the outcomes of the common exchange are collected here in what we defined as "personal narratives". They possibly constitute a genre that combines autobiographic writing and storytelling. The value of these contributions does not relate to literary dimension, but rather to the dimension of testimony, enhanced by the scarce visibility of news and accounts from the Middle East Mediterranean region during the pandemic.

The authors who have ventured into writing were, for the most part, not particularly familiar with this practice. Not surprisingly, the act of writing revealed its power in disclosing and processing past and present experiences not only as an introspection process. The project gave the opportunity to these young voices of the civil society to narrate not only their everyday day life during the pandemic and their thoughts on mobility, but also their stratified identities and stories as young citizens of the MEM region. The narratives tell about exile, diaspora, confinement, conflicts, dictatorships, forced displacement, upheavals, movements, masks, explosions, etc. (see the keywords); but they also tell about success stories, creative attempts to contribute to the betterment of countries that in some case are on the verge to collapsing; they tell about efforts to maintain alive creative and cultural spaces; they reveal plural ways to be a young woman in the region; they show the concrete actions taken to survive and help during the pandemic; they speak about the importance of creativity, culture, and social entrepreneurship in a renewed political space. Their narratives display superposition of contradictory components: isolation and hyper-connectivity, opening and closure, localisation and globalisation.

The texts—heterogenous in length, style, and contents—evoke the tails of the polychromic mosaics scattered all over the MEM region. Each narrative stands on its own, but also contributes to the whole, creating a pattern. The texts draw an invisible map, with unstable borders, that recalls the maps of artists such Mona Hatoum and Moataz Nasr that erase the illusion of a measurable and stable space.

The narratives are illustrated with pictures by the photographer Amine Landoulsi, who joined the project in its conclusive phase (he selected some of his pre-existing photos), giving a reading and interpretation through the lens of photography of each narrative and of the whole. In addition to this, Amin Landoulsi also hints at his own personal journey through the Middle East Mediterranean region. The attempt of Amine to translate the words into images brings in once again the relationships among different languages and the necessity, in translating, to have "uno sguardo mobile" (a mobile gaze) on the different realities and culture. Susan Sontang declared that "essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own" (S. Sontag, On Photography, 1977, p.59), and this is the same for the translation process. On Landoulsi's pictures, some words in Arabic appear suggesting that, despite the choice of a common language, there are traces everywhere of other languages. It is not possible to write the conclusion of this trip that lasted almost two years during which we went through setbacks, diversions, and itinerary changes. We have several provisional conclusions that become visible to the reader during the journey through the narratives. We had the same experience of confinement and isolation (even if the material conditions were not the equal). In facing vulnerability and mortality, we shared our human dimension. Paradoxically, we perhaps opposed, for a moment, the crescent individualization of the experience that characterizes the liquefaction of late modernity, as theorized by Baumann (Z. Baumann, Liquid Modernity, 1999). It is probably from there that we must continue working: the picture on the cover is an invitation to "prendere il largo" (to set sail) and to imagine new horizons.

MARTINO LOVATO

Biography

Martino Lovato is lecturer in Classics and Italian at Mount Holyoke College, where he teaches Italian, French, and Arabic literature and cinema. His scholarship focuses on migration, border crossing, and social justice across the countries and societies in the Mediterranean region. His published and forthcoming essays are devoted to the medieval rebellion of the Zendj black slaves in Abbasid Iraq, to the Renaissance cosmography of Leo Africanus/ Al-Wazzan, and to contemporary writers and filmmakers such as Merzak Allouache, Abdelmalek Smari, and Francesco Rosi.

Across such Waters: A New Mediterranean Generation Facing the COVID-19 Crisis

The present volume emerges from the individual and collective effort, made by a group of MEM Summer Summit alumni, to reflect upon their life experiences with mobility and immobility in a period characterized by the worldwide closure of borders. When, in the middle of the pandemic, my friend and colleague Federica Frediani invited me to join in this project to facilitate the writing process, assisting in the progressive unfolding of these narratives until their present form, I found the group's decision to center their texts around the theme of mobility a brilliant and a momentous one. From this perspective, I would like to explain the value that I attribute to these narratives, providing some insights into how the present project contributes to the broader intellectual debate on the Mediterranean and its problems.

Mobility, Immobility, and Covid-19:

During the first weeks of this still unfinished Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed the progressive international recognition of its historical relevance as a threat shared by the whole of mankind. Unlike other traumatic episodes of the recent past, including regional conflicts, episodic epidemic outbursts such as Ebola, or structural health crises such as cholera, the Covid-19 virus could not be dismissed as a local emergency. To take preemptive measures has been a practice witnessed simultaneously in every society, as a sudden imperative transversal between countries and continents. This is just more evidence of that factual interdependence in which each individual and each society live in today's world; not only in the case of Covid-19, but for all the most relevant problems mankind faces in the 21st century: from climate change to migration from the Global South to the North, and more generally, all the aspects related to what we call globalization and international cooperation. In those initial weeks, when the World Health Organization still hesitated to give it the much-feared title of "pandemic", and it came to be understood that this was not something that could be contained within a limited space, confined within a restricted group of countries or handed down to the expertise of those few institutions deputed to handle it, the most common initial step taken by sovereign countries to prevent the contagion was to close their national borders. Reflecting a broader, ancestral logics of containment, this inaugural decision was applied not only at the international level, but also within societies and communities; between city blocks and streets, within buildings and even houses: that of putting a barrier between ourselves and the others. While communities and space

were thus split into their primal units, the internet and social media allowed each of us to share our condition of isolation with other individuals and other societies across the planet. We could be isolated, and simultaneously all together in this condition. We could not leave our houses, but we could exchange pictures and post comments on our experience of isolation. In this quite extraordinary condition, as months and even years now passed by, I find it remarkable that each country responded to the Covid-19 emergency by relying on its own resources and capabilities: those who could afford the equipment necessary to face the pandemic, such as masks, vaccines, ventilators and so on, acquired them; and those who could not obtain or afford these tools, relied instead on what they could do with the limited resources they had. But wasn't this a common threat, something that we should or could face all together? What surprised me was the lack of coordination in facing a threat that involves everyone, and in a way, that responds to the nature of the threat itself rather than replicating those vertical logics upon which our contemporary world is structured. The prerogatives of sovereignty were employed to close national borders, but no further thought was spent on what each country should do to ease this collective burden. Even now that vaccines exist, large portions of the planet still do not have access to them: it was simply not contemplated in the way we collectively reacted to this virus, that we would be all standing on the same line against it. The limits of what we call "international cooperation" are just symptomatic of a human society, ours, unprepared and just incapable to consider itself as a as a single body.

As we haven't yet returned to normality, from this sudden contraction of mobility across borders we can perhaps retain the bittersweet confirmation that, once a threat is perceived simultaneously by everyone, we are capable of collective reactions. Whether we will be able to act all together in response to those present and future problems demanding our coordinated action depends on the way in which we will be able, and willing, to recognize someone else's problems as our own. The temporary suspension of travel, one of immediate side-effects of the closure of the borders between nations, provides a good opportunity to reflect upon that myth, peculiar to globalization, by which we could all move freely around the globe: the experiences of border crossings told in this volume remind that this freedom is one among the privileges enjoyed by the citizens of Global North. For most of mankind, to cross the national borders between the Global North and South—such as trying to obtain a visa for the Schengen Area—often becomes like trying to cross an unsurmountable obstacle, resulting in long and expensive procedures whose outcome is uncertain.

These differences in mobility are inscribed in a structure of inequality documented well before the pandemic, between the peoples living on the northern and southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Superposing global and regional scales, the line traced some forty years ago by the United Nations Commission led by Willy Brandt between the Global North and South continues to this day to divide the Mediterranean region as if into a northern and southern shore, a European and a North African-Middle Eastern one, as two specimens of those greater distinctions traced worldwide by this line's sinuous trajectory between developed and developing countries (W. Brandt, North-South, a Programme for Survival, 1980). Back then, these two macro-regions were explained by the stark contrasts in life expectancy and in the availability of resources such as food and education, among others. These measurements provided a picture in which the Global North lived above the standards set by the commission, and accounted for just one-fifth of the whole human population. Today more countries rose into being considered as "developed" by similar measurements, and yet, as Louise

Fawcett and Yezid Sayigh remind, the distinction between the Global North and South continues to subsist:

> Debt, poverty, and insecurity remain endemic in parts of the Third World and have not been significantly relieved by the end of the cold war. Globalization has often exaggerated inequality, exposing sharp distinctions in the capacities of weak and strong states. It has given rise, among other things, to vertically integrated regional divisions of labour and horizontally diversified corporate strategies that limit state autonomy and undermine old notions of sovereignty. (L. Fawcett and Y. Sayigh, The Third World Beyond the Cold War, 1999, p. 4)

To feel reassured by the closing of national borders, pretending that such a unilateral decision will fix our problems, is easier than to embrace the complex task of approaching the long chain of causes and effects that make us all interdependent, and see where this path will take us. According to Thomas Hale, David Held, and Kevin Young, in today's integrated world, the international agency of private and public actors, together with the very structure and way of proceeding of international organizations, has created a "gridlock" in which "previously 'domestic' issues like the environment, health, or policing increasingly spilled across borders, acquiring the attributes of interdependence" (T. Hale, D. Held, and K.Young, Gridlock, 2013, p.17). In the face of the complex interaction between institutions, and the way in which we handle issues that are transversal between countries and continents, it is often easier for each of the actors involved in this great scene to overemphasize the necessity and relevance of its own actions, and to relegate onto other actors the responsibility for the damages that we collectively cause to ourselves. As the authors point out, our problem is not the lack of international cooperation, but that "harder global problems have emerged that reflect the deeper level of interdependence made possible by previous cooperation" (Gridlock, p.8). As distance and closeness have become confused, the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed upon us to consider the limitedness of those clear distinctions between "us" and "them" traditionally established along national borders.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall put a symbolic end to the Cold War (1989), in The Postmodern Condition (1979) François Lyotard described our age as one characterized by the fragmentation of knowledge and the proliferation of discourses distributed by public and private actors, more and more involved in the competition for the accumulation, management, and distribution of information. The post-modern condition Lyotard addressed in the title was one characterized by the fall of "grand narratives", a term which he employed to denote the major cohesive ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Symptomatic of the fall of the bipolar logic in the last decade of the Cold War, Lyotard's analysis reduced communism and liberalism, but also humanism, the foundational myths of the nation state, and even science's claim to a privileged relation to "truth", to their essential nature as narrative constructions. Their claim to universality was no longer to be credited as simply "true", but rather to be considered as a constituent element of a self-referential narrative employed by public and private institutions alike to justify and legitimize themselves (J-F. Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 1984, pp.27-41). Prophetic, in a way, of the digital age we have inherited, the crisis of the "grand narratives" provides one suggestive way to explain today's experience of reality, fragmented into a multiplicity of worldviews and perspectives simultaneously demanding recognition of their "truth". As we witness to a resurgent competition between old and new superpowers, the reemerging of nationalist

arrogance by which stronger states dictate the destiny of the weaker ones, the fact of not having reached the right answers in addressing the structural inequalities between societies, and in harmonizing our response to the great problems of the 21st century, does not imply that we should stop asking the right questions. What do we, or should we, all aim at achieving all together as a collectivity? What should we do to redress these imbalances?

On a regional scale, the contemporary Mediterranean offers a sort of laboratory of the global, a site upon which to reflect on these broader distinctions traced in the region, and elsewhere in the world where the Brandt line runs. The scholars who devoted their studies to this sea have often underscored the complexity of the Mediterranean as a subject of thought. Among others, the historian Ferdinand Braudel described it as "a complex character, cumbersome, out of the ordinary", one that "escapes our measures and our categories" (F. Braudel, La Méditerranée et le monde méditeranéen à l'époque de Philippe II, 1966, p.13). Neither a single nation or country, nor limited to a single linguistic community, culture, religion, or to a single people, the Mediterranean region provides an exemplary site from which these differences and structural inequalities between the Global North and South can be considered. Its challenges as a subject of thought reproduce in a smaller scale those of the greater world, and are revealing it its potential as a transregional interdisciplinary approach engaging across this divide.

The studies on the Mediterranean reemerged during the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and its ideological divergences, perhaps even as a response to the new challenges brought by globalization. The 1995 Conference of Barcelona inaugurated the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, whose aim was that of strengthening the cooperation between European and Mediterranean countries. Despite its inaugural vows, the partnership we have inherited from then is one that continues to privilege the economic space over the human one. As Robert Henry reminds, the Conference of Barcelona calls generously for a "Mediterranean civil society", but "how to believe in a common civility, while the free circulation of people from the south to the north has been so strongly reduced?" (J.-R. Henry, "Métamorphoses du mythe méditerranéen", in J.-R. Henry and G. Groc, Politiques méditerranéennes, 2000, p. 53). As I open in 2022 the webpage of the Euromesco network, founded soon after the Barcelona Declaration to become the main network of research centers and think tanks in the Euro-Mediterranean area, I find that cultural or humanistic exchange is mostly absent from this dialogue. Only at the bottom of the "research themes" section one will find a "culture and society" section, where only a few articles appear, mostly written by scholars in political science, security and strategic studies (https://www.euromesco.net, last accessed 15/2/2022). The network produces "evidence-based" and "policy-oriented" research on "security, political reforms, migration, regional integration" and yet, despite the great attention paid by experts to such a collaboration, something evidently escapes in the procedures developed to confront the problem of migration. In his study of the deaths of individuals attempting to cross the EU external borders across the Mediterranean in the last decades, Didier Bigo points out how none of the military, security, and data analysis agencies charged to regulate and control migration to Europe from the southern shore of the sea has as a priority that of rescuing lives. Even though these migrants and potential refugees are not considered as enemies, they die. While the decisions taken to keep them far away from the European shores are described by these agencies as "humanitarian", and justified as measures taken to "protect" individuals from the dangers of the crossing, they actually employ the language of the human to express the logics of exclusion: "one could say that the death toll is

the result not of the danger of the Mediterranean Sea but of the willingness to 'prevent' at all costs, to use technologies of surveillance in the name of 'protection' as well as surveillance and deterrence" (D. Bigo, "Death in the Mediterranean Sea The Results of the Three Fields of Action of European Union Border Controls", in Y. Jensen, R. Celikates, and J. de Bloois, The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe, 2014, p.69). The case of mobility in the Mediterranean thus constitutes an excellent case to see how the objective measurements on which the Brandt line was first traced materialize into borders that reflect the structural inequalities of our age. It also shows the conceptual and imaginative limits of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, providing a good point of departure from which to reconsider our collective hopes, and to give substance to those shared values and principles in need of a reevaluation. In the Mediterranean, and elsewhere in the world along the global North-South divide, a reassessment of the "human" and of its value is needed. Immersed in the complexity of the age of information, in the simultaneity of events and "truths" about the Mediterranean, this reassessment might allow us to consider the sea as a space of interdependence between world regions, and help to envisage better collective goals for international cooperation.

Writing the Self in the Contemporary Mediterranean:
Were the MEM alumni aware of navigating in such waters when they first embarked on this project, of facing the same questions that two of the most meaningful authors in the contemporary Mediterranean, Abdelwahab Meddeb and Pedrag Matvejevic, have addressed in some of their most significant works? In Phantasia (1986) and Mediterranean Breviary (1987) respectively, they have recounted themselves through the medium of the sea, abandoning the attempt to reduce it to a formula. They have rather raised themselves, their memories, and those of their travels and observations as measure of the sea, assuming the personal encounter with the Other as a transformative experience and as a source of knowledge:

> Exile is not a punishment, but a quest. It is an experience which does not ignore ordeals. From the pain transiting through the body, shines the truth. Stranger stirring the estrangement perturbing the group, troubles its evidence, brings doubt, repulses. Stranger wandering among you with the strength given to him by the knowledge he has of you, you who ignore so much of him. (A. Meddeb, Phantasia, 1986, p.51)

In their writings, the encounter with the Other on the other shore of the sea provides the author with enough "evidence" that more than one truth exists. Merging essayistic writing with a poetically inspired vein, they reflect an experience of the Mediterranean that is consciously personal, fragmentary, and limited. The lack, or rather loss, of certitude is the outcome of their search, and does not discourage them from the pursuit of their quest. Accepting the complexity of the intertwined histories of the Mediterranean makes the experience of crossing the sea a revelatory one, that "passage of wisdom" that constitutes, in Iain Chambers' words, the instructive lesson the Mediterranean offers to those navigating in its waters:

> The space of the Mediterranean [...] remains elusive: a perpetual interrogation. The sea is not something to possess; rather, it proposes a "passage of wisdom". Historical memories consigned to the custody of the sea are the very opposite

of those systematically catalogued in a national museum. (I. Chambers, Mediterranean Crossings, 2008, p.149)

Coming from countries as diverse as Lebanon and Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Northern Macedonia, Tunisia and Iraq, the young artists and professionals, activists and creative innovators participating in this project were probably unaware of following these authors' steps once they decided to write down their own their narratives. However, the experience of having to imagine, or rather to conceive, "who" was the audience they were addressing brought them close to their paths. The MEM encouraged the exchange of ideas among these young authors, providing the conditions for the experiences narrated in this volume to be first discussed. Asking to whom they were writing has emerged spontaneously from the immediate need of having to introduce themselves, allowing for the questions involved in the creative practice of autobiographical writing to merge, in this project, with those raised in the academic studies on the Mediterranean.

At once a common, ordinary practice familiar to everyone, and the main feature of established literary genres such as the autobiography and the memoir, the act of narrating one's own life engages the author in two different but converging efforts: one of introspection, by which the narrator identifies those elements that, among all others, are the most meaningful to recount of his or her own life; and one of expression, by which these chosen episodes are told to, or written down for the audience. To revisit one's own personal experiences is just one part of the process. There the ups and downs of life are inscribed into a narrative that is personal and private. But to assemble them for an audience requires a desire to allow for certain things to be known by others. Asking to whom they were writing their experiences with mobility inevitably affected the way in which these young authors had to view themselves, leading to the "Mediterranean passage" to take place in the very composition of their texts. From this initial question emerges the practice of self-expression elaborated in this volume, after the formative experience of looking at the self through the eyes of the Other. But who is the Other in this project? Is there such a thing as a "Mediterranean" audience?

This group of MEM alumni had already traveled across the sea, and already experienced what it means to live in another society. The problem they were now facing was that of finding the right words to convey their experiences: which aspects of their lives should they include for their story to be understood by everyone in the way they experienced it? How many aspects of life do we take for granted, when we think about the life of others, whether in our neighborhood or in another country? How many details do we miss, instead, that we did not know, or that we could not simply imagine about them? The group's decision to write in English discouraged even that assumption, possible whenever one writes in his or her own language, that the reader would be knowledgeable about the contexts and the societies they were discussing. They knew well the value of Edward Said's reflections on the representation of Middle Eastern societies produced by Western scholars, writers, and journalist during the colonial period. In his classic study Orientalism (1978), Said pointed out how the construction of them as "oriental" and as "other" by modern Europeans proceeded according to a series of tropes, ranging from despotism to fanaticism, that stood as many implicit accusations functional to the keeping of Western hegemony in the region. In doing so, he brought attention to the question of who is entitled to produce those discourses that regulate the interactions between peoples. His analysis along the nineteenth century divide between "West" and "East" superposes with the Cold War's vertical distinctions between First and Third World, and today's Global North

and South. It served as a reminder, for these authors, that their narratives would stand next to the mainstream view on their countries produced by the international media. In some cases, the opportunity to redress, at least in part, the common ideas that Western readers would have of their societies, increased their sense of responsibility as mediators between cultures and countries. However, the Western reader was not the only reader they have addressed. To write about their countries brought them back to reconsider their own belonging to the very societies in which they have grown. What would their fellow-citizens think of the way in which they were represented in these narratives? Would they write as one of "them", or would they rather talk about them as "others"? During the writing process, some of these authors realized more clearly than they previously had, that once your experience is shared with a public it is no longer just yours: it inevitably becomes part of a broader, collective experience in which your story is inscribed, decoded by the reader as part of that of a broader social group. From the practical need of introducing themselves, the question of how to establish and negotiate, in the text, the relation between the "self" and the "other" appeared immediately as one that had to be addressed transversally across the individual, the Mediterranean and of the broader global frames. They had to strike the right balance between the way they thought of themselves and the way in which they would be perceived by this multifaceted Mediterranean audience, who could be dwelling on this or that other side of the Mediterranean… or who could be, like some of them, through travels and affective relationships, living somewhere between these shores.

All of these young authors are exceptional in their own way, and to talk about their achievements and success has been, in a sense, not too demanding. But to share the pains and traumatic memories of their lives has required an additional questioning, a revisiting of those experiences that were carved in their consciences and memories, but not yet written down in a page accessible in one of the most diffused vehicular languages of the globe. Here, in my role as supporter in this writing process, I felt compelled not to insist for these memories to appear in the text; for I myself thought of Said's criticism and had no desire in increasing the sensationalist allure of their contents. I rather encouraged them to embrace of their roles as the "authors" of their texts. Even though in autobiographical writing there is an implicit agreement, between the author and the audience, by which the narrated contents are true, this does not mean that this form of writing is deprived of other aspects that we could call "literary" in the broad sense of the term. On the contrary, it includes all the elements of storytelling: from characterization and psychological introspection, to the analysis and interpretation of the events. All of them allow the author to emerge as the maker, though not the inventor, of the story that is told. If they decided to share these traumatic memories with the readers, it is because they considered these episodes of their lives as constituting elements of their narratives. I personally believe that if some of these memories were shared with this imaginative Mediterranean audience, it was primarily because the authors felt aware of their relative privileges in comparison to other individuals who suffer, in the Mediterranean, even harder experiences. This sense of responsibility has allowed for these experiences to be seen in a different way, in which they no longer had just a personal value, but could perhaps serve, have agency, impact their readers.

Through their personal perspectives on mobility, the narratives of these young authors ask the same questions we should currently ask ourselves. Reversing the angle from the vision from above provided by the measurements through which the Global North and South are divided, they do not question, nor aim to disprove the validity of these distinctions. On the contrary, they somehow explain what these measurements mean to individuals like them, from a perspective conscious of the different expectations animating the lives of peoples dwelling above and below the line dividing the Mediterranean region. They are aware of the exclusions they create, and that the causes leading to the reality of these imbalances are transversal, neither to attributed only to one side or the other. The reader should not rush to reach hasty conclusions about the authors as representatives of their countries of origin. These narratives are also narratives of an exchange: as they tell us of their societies, the reader cannot avoid noticing how their authors belong to a global generation, used to sharing models, expectations, and sense of belonging to a community that does not immediately correspond to the national one. Even as representatives of their societies, they are unique individuals, subjects unreducible to a formula or an equation. None of their narratives conforms to a clearly defined distinction between the two shores of the sea. Instead, they show how these apparently exhaustive measurements, on which we ground our collective certainties, become confused once they are taken off the map and are looked at through the measure of the individual experience. The unique trajectory that each of them traces between countries and readerships emerges from the awareness of the multiplicity of truths they acquired in their travels and allows to see in these experiences the narratives of an exchange rather than stories of a fixed identity.

The result of these individual and collective efforts is a sort of mosaic, in which each narrative contributes to the whole, and all together challenge the readers' assumptions about the region and its peoples. Collected in a single volume, they do not claim or attempt to provide a conclusive totality. On the contrary, they restitute intact to the reader the complexity of the region. Rather than providing the illusory impression a conclusive answer to intertwined problems of our age, the outcome of these narratives is quite fragmentary, a reflection of our world, in which contradictions are ordinary and what is problematic, instead, is to find the right answers to the right questions. They might help to envision, instead, beyond these divisions and this complexity, beyond the measurements we employ to trace dividing lines between countries and individuals, the evidence of other truths from which will hopefully emerge that more complete, or less limited, conception of the "human" we need to face the present and future problems shared by mankind.

CONTENTS AT A GLANCE

Sarah explains identity crisis as a result of relocations that three generations of her family has went through across several decades before finding solace by settling in her desired "home country" of Lebanon which had been marred by civil war and occupation. But also, more recent upheavals that continue to beset the country all of which she attributes to a failed post-war reconstruction that set the stage for the current situation. Yet the pandemic gave her the break she coveted but also a momentum to turn her fashion school into a production house to produce personal protective equipment or face masks and gowns as expression of cultural resistance.

Zinah recalls stories of immense hardship as result of successive conflicts plaguing Iraq that wrought collapse of state institutions the country never fully recovered from. In the face of difficult circumstances of destitution imposed by war and the ensuing sanctions, like so many others she was forced to keep reality at bay by 'normalizing' what was not normal, akin to living in an alternate reality or parallel universe. All of which seems to have made her adaptable to restrictions on physical mobility, lockdown and even the "new normal" when the pandemic ends.

Maram connects the concept of mobility, or lack of it thereof, in the Arab World to securitization policies by the various regimes that restrict personal freedoms and civil liberties on the one hand, and travel within and between countries on the other. He provides ample evidence to his convictions drawing on his memories such as the crammed prisons or checkpoints while crisscrossing between Syria and Lebanon – where he had to go for visa applications but also travel through to reach Europe.

Shivan delineates mobility through "inequality and its discontent" in the protests that gripped Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon against unemployment and corruption—which came to be referred to by many analysts as "Arab Spring 2.0", or "the new Arab Spring". He posits that while the pandemic has thrown social inequalities, such as the access to healthcare, education, work, and technology, into sharp relief, these challenges cannot be dismissed as a one off deviation in the MENA region, which is not only historically the most unequal region in the world, but also delivers less social upward mobility. It is the quest to understand these issues that has shaped his decision and informed his pursuit of mobility of thinking to understand the human sufferings and grievances that underpin social movements.

Nour while dreading the pandemic-induced restrictions at the beginning later fatefully found time for reflection in the dormant state

of life which she describes as pursuit of spiritual mobility amidst physical immobility. She metaphorically associates the lack of mobility to the patriarchal norms, social barriers and (appropriation of) religion that restricts freedom of movement from women and deprives them from their personal freedoms and a living a more fulfilling life in Egypt.

Berat urges everyone to challenge the "old normal" or what was a status quo before the pandemic ensued and seize the moment to think about transformations for the "new normal" by addressing long-neglected issues – such as inequality and extreme poverty, violence and war, and climate change – to build back better world – or B3W a buzzword for a partnership that G7 agreed on last June. It is this kind of social entrepreneurship that motivates him to find innovative solutions for the pandemic-induced social problems – perhaps he draws inspiration for the new start from his home country's new name, North Macedonia.

Asma recounts disturbing memories of civil war that confined people to their homes while explaining her experience of the lockdown that restricted mobility before Algerians were able to celebrate the first anniversary of the popular Hirak "movement" that defied an authoritarian regime in Algeria that escaped

the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. A fashion designer by training, she found a window of opportunity in the pandemic to take her work to the level of public good by mobilizing women of single-headed households to produce cloth face mask garment when the more effective surgical masks were inaccessible.

Wassim implicitly traces the contemporary artistic and cultural expressions in Tunisia to the opening made available to grassroots after the revolution in 2011 were Tunisians managed not only to reclaim public spaces but also breath a fresh air into art and culture along with civil society activism. And how along with other artists and content curators he utilized the proliferation of new media and communication over the last decade to make their work transcend physical spaces and boundaries, and in turn pandemic-induced restrictions to reach a larger audience.

narratives

exile

diaspora

health

local

borders

pandemic

masks

global

upheavals

impossibility

lockdown

stillness

explosion

travel

digital

lockdown

confinement

movements

connections

refugees

SARAH HERMEZ

Biography

Sarah Hermez is a Lebanese fashion designer, born and raised in Kuwait. She pursued dual degrees in fashion design at Parsons the New School for Design and media/cultural studies at Eugene Lang the New School for Liberal Arts in New York. She moved to Beirut in 2010 and launched Creative Space Beirut, a social enterprise that provides structures and resources for the development of progressive design practices in the Arab region. Through its tuition-free school of design, fashion label, and online retail platform, the enterprise intertwines technical and creative education with various businesses and socio-cultural initiatives.

The Road Home: A Personal Testimony of Migration, Design Education and Cultural Resistance

I've always been told that first and foremost, I am Lebanese. I have spent a portion of my life rejecting what that meant, another portion of my life searching for what that meant, and the last ten years of my life fully immersing myself in what I wanted it to mean, only to discover that being Lebanese would nearly kill me.

My first memories take place in Nicosia, Cyprus. I was four years old. My mother would often find me running around barefoot, playing with the neighborhood cats. Perhaps I was a curious cat myself, having already developed a reputation for asking way too many questions. It was borderline annoying. The question, "but why?", was pretty much printed on my forehead. Of course, what I claim to be memory is a mix of stories I have heard, pictures from photo albums engraved in my brain, and aspects of what I wish it might have been, I am sure. There is, however, one truth I can swear by: the memory of a recurring feeling¬—the desire to go home. And home was where I was born; home was Kuwait. We had left Kuwait in 1991 at the start of the Gulf War, making my earliest childhood memory that of separation and longing.

But my story began a decade before I was born, when my parents moved to Kuwait in 1976, one year after the start of the Lebanese civil war. After graduating from university, my father landed a job with a Japanese company there, providing a more stable upbringing for our family. Initially, my parents had planned to stay in Kuwait temporarily. "Perhaps two years", they'd said, "until the situation in Lebanon becomes better". 45 years later, today, they are still temporarily there.

The story of mobility, of migration, of crossing borders in search of a stable home, did not start with my parents. In fact, my family history is defined by the attempt of preserving a culture while assimilating into new ones. On my father's side, my grandfather, an Assyrian from Iraq, was born in Adana in 1917. As a child, he moved to an orphanage in Lebanon, which was then a part of greater Syria. At age 17, he once again picked up his belongings and moved to Jerusalem, Palestine to start his career. It was there that he met and married my grandmother, an Armenian raised in Jerusalem. In 1948, with the onset of the Nakba (the Israeli takeover of Palestine) and the start of the Arab/Israeli wars, my grandparents fled as refugees to Aleppo without passports, where my father would be born shortly after. They would then leave for Beirut, and in 1958, they were granted the Lebanese citizenship, as the Lebanese state was naturalizing Assyrians and Christian Palestinians fairly easily.

It is said that my mother's Armenian family migrated from Persia to Ain-Tab, Turkey and then to Aleppo, Syria in the late 1700s to early 1800s. Their connection to the actual Armenian soil is uncertain. Whether from the actual land or not, the Armenian culture has transcended generations and has been preserved in the daily lives and routines of my mother's family. As children, they sang Armenian folk songs, celebrated Armenian holidays, spoke the Armenian language, and ate Armenian food. Although they maintained an Armenian identity, my family was integrated into Syrian society, adopting the Arabic language and creating a community of Arab and Armenian friends. In the early 1900s, before the creation of nation states and the rise of nationalism, my Armenian family dispersed within the region easily, some leaving Aleppo for university to attend what was then called The Syrian Protestant College, today known as the American University of Beirut, while others left for Egypt or Iraq for better jobs and more stable lives. My grandmother lived in Baghdad until the age of 23; growing up there she felt very much Iraqi. She and my grandfather met in Aleppo; they were first cousins. They got married and gave birth to my mother there. In 1961, due to the rise of the Baath regime in Syria, most of my Armenian family migrated to Lebanon. Shortly after arriving in Lebanon, they received Lebanese citizenship.

In 1992, a year after the Gulf War ended, my family left Cyprus and moved back to Kuwait. As soon as we landed my brother, two years older than me, kissed the floor. It's a funny thought, because it wasn't long after moving back to Kuwait that it was made clear to us that Kuwait would never really be our home. First, because it is impossible to attain Kuwaiti citizenship, despite having been born there, but mostly because Kuwaitis are provided with so many benefits from the state that it would be nearly impossible for them to naturalize all the expats living there. Makes sense.

My upbringing in Kuwait was interesting to say the least. My parents did a great job creating a bubble that stood in stark contrast with the rest of my family's life in Lebanon, where the civil war officially ended in 1990 with a resolution that took the form of Syrian tutelage. By that time, several family members who had stayed in Lebanon and lived through the war had harrowing stories of surviving explosions, losing friends, torture and kidnapping, but somehow my memories of Lebanon as a child were filled with laughter and family. My mother always said we were lucky, because whenever we visited Lebanon during the war, it would by chance be during moments of less violence. Lebanon to me meant family, lots of family. I have about thirty cousins that are all in the range of being 10 years apart, give or take, so we are all pretty close. My cousins would often call my brothers and I, "the Kuwaitis", and although we weren't Kuwaiti, to them, we were definitely not Lebanese. Growing up in the early 90s, I remember that traffic lights did not exist, that buildings were covered in bullet holes, and I clearly remember the Syrian army checkpoints. I didn't really understand the meaning of all of it though, because at the time my understanding of Lebanese history or Lebanese politics was nonexistent. It's a strange phenomenon, really; how it's possible for someone to lose their culture and adopt another without realizing it. And I am not speaking about adopting the Kuwaiti culture—which I did to some extent, of course; I am referring to adopting American culture without having lived there. Although not their preference, my parents ultimately decided to enroll my brothers and I in an American school. After the gulf war, Kuwait very quickly became "Americanized". Getting an education in an American institution in the Arab world created a warped version of reality for me. Imagine this: in the American School of Kuwait, the majority of our teachers were American, and we were not allowed to speak Arabic during class. Our holidays at school included Thanksgiving, where we would have turkey and celebrate Christopher Columbus. We were taught American history, and in all my years from elementary to high school, we only had a two-month course on Kuwaiti history and were never taught the history of

our region. I guess it was assumed we would learn it on the news, or at home. But even though my parents always had the news on, cooked Lebanese food, and spoke Arabic, I found myself engulfed in American culture, American music, American movies, studying American history, going to American restaurants, and, regretfully, speaking English exclusively. I wish I understood the gravity of what it meant not to be interested in one's own culture. At the time, I also wish I understood that I was being stripped of my identity. To give you an example, when I would read American history, I would be so blinded that I would treat it as if it were the history of my own culture, as if I were American. Simply put, I was subconsciously learning to "other" myself. When those history books did mention our region, it was always brief, and mostly from a western perspective. As a result, instead of facing and understanding our actual history, it was simply ignored.

Going to an American school didn't mean my friends were American. My closest friends were mostly like me. Expats from Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Syria—kids whose parents had also moved to Kuwait in search of opportunity. We grew up in our little bubble, a mish mash of what our parents fed us at home, what our school environment taught us, and then, of course, American media, icons, music, and entertainment. With all this came the loss of my native language. It's really hard for me to explain this to anyone: how it was possible to be raised in an Arab country, in a home where my parents spoke Arabic, and to grow up feeling comfortable speaking a foreign language, not even understanding that it was foreign, that it was a language that did not belong to me. Not that there's anything wrong with learning multiple languages as a child, but there is everything wrong with a foreign language replacing one's mother tongue, because the loss of one's mother's tongue is usually one of the first symptoms of the loss of identity—one that I would have to deal with my whole life. Arabic classes at the American School of Kuwait were mandatory, but given only a few hours a week, and it was rarely taken seriously. It was the type of class that we weren't afraid to skip or to cause trouble in.

To have three identities—Lebanese, Kuwaiti, and American—simultaneously forming my identity, and to not fully belong to any, created another culture. A culture that can only be understood by people with a similar experience, deemed "third culture kids". And so, it begs the question: if home is where the heart is, and one's heart is with one's family, language and country, what happens when your family, language, and culture occupy different worlds?

In 2003, the U.S invaded Iraq, claiming to have located hidden "weapons of mass destruction". Given the history between Kuwait and Iraq, and the large presence of American army in Kuwait, the country found itself in a dangerous position and went into a state of emergency. The start of the invasion meant the closure of our schools, practicing emergency safety drills, and the continuous sound of warning sirens. For me, this meant that my parents would send me to Lebanon to continue my education for the remaining semester. At the time, I wasn't afraid; I was more annoyed and angrier that my friends in Kuwait got to miss school and hang out together while I had to leave the country. Never mind that a war was happening, because even though there had definitely been many scares here and there, we had a great way of being in denial, fixating on our regular teenage lives with only a backdrop of war. So, I moved to Lebanon for six months. I attended ACS, the American Community School, and assimilated pretty quickly, making lifelong friends. It was my first experience living in Lebanon, keeping in mind that I was a 16-year-old rebellious teenager, and my priorities at the time had nothing to do with identity. A lot of them had to do with partying, and Lebanon was definitely the place to be for a good party.

At the time, Rafik Hariri was the prime minister of Lebanon. A billionaire businessman who'd made it his goal to rebuild the country after the civil war, Hariri's strategy was to link economic recovery to private sector investment, compounded in Solidere, a private real estate company that aimed to "rebuild downtown". This marked a long, devastating process of overdevelopment and extreme gentrification. The downtown that the Lebanese people knew to be diverse and densely populated began to transform into a fortress of luxury hotels and expensive stores. Many residents were coerced into selling their property to Solidere for cheap. The development company would then go on to sell the same property for unmentionable amounts, selling company shares and property to the gulf countries. Lebanon, with its abundance of natural resources, could have easily been a self-sustainable country through local production. Sadly, it was never the case, and Hariri's new post-war strategy did not help either. Though these moves were setting the stage for the current economic catastrophe, from certain perspectives, Lebanon seemed to be blooming. Shops, clubs, and bars started to put it on the map. The country was gaining a reputation as the best place for nightlife and culture in the region. If as a child Lebanon to me represented family, as a teenager it had shifted to represent "fun". It's safe to say that there too, we'd built a bubble of like-minded people with similar values. And while many questionable major political decisions were happening outside that bubble, I was unaware of most of it.

There's one story in particular from that semester in Lebanon that I would like to share. It qualifies as one of the few "life-altering" moments I've had in my life so far. The American Community School I attended in Beirut did not have an American history class at the time. As a result, the administration created a course just for me. The instructor gave me one book to read: "A People's History of the United States" by Howard Zinn—a book that woke me up and made me question my entire education. Reading American history from a different perspective, through the eyes of the people, opened my eyes to the distorting bias of the educational system, to censorship, to alternative narratives, and made me question my upbringing and the reliability of the histories that I had been taught. It was an important moment that allowed me to step back and ask myself questions that had never occurred to me before.

I moved to New York when I was 18 to attend university. Until then, everything I knew about New York was from movies I had watched. I remember insisting on wearing headphones whenever I walked in the city so I could feel like the music was the backdrop to a movie I was the star of, until I got mugged and my headphones were stolen. New York was no movie. It was real, it was raw, it was hard, and it was a world apart from the bubble that was Kuwait. In Kuwait there was community; New York demanded independence. And independence can be lonely; it can be hard. Independence changes a person. I thought I would find my identity in New York, that my "American education" would have its place there, but as soon as I would open my mouth to speak, Americans would ask me where I was from. Where was I from? I was born and raised in Kuwait, I would say. "Oh, so you're Kuwaiti?" That awkward question. "No, I'm Lebanese".

In Kuwait, I had never really been concerned with questions of identity because I belonged to my little bubble, and that bubble was my life. In New York, I was faced with tough questions. It felt like most of the Americans I encountered were obsessed with identity, and I didn't have one. It made me insecure, and quite frankly, embarrassed. I didn't know much about the history of my region, let alone the history of my country. And although war had been the undertone of my life, I'd somehow gone through it sheltered and in denial. And when sometimes people asked me to translate words in

Arabic and I had no idea what that word was, the confusion and disappointment on their faces would leave me ashamed. New York made me face myself. I attended a few events organized by Lebanese Americans, which made me want to crawl into a ball and disappear. It seemed that Lebanese Americans tried really hard to be more Lebanese than the Lebanese living in remote villages in Lebanon. Their story was very different from mine. Growing up in America, they had held onto their Lebanese roots tightly. "Who am I?", I kept asking myself. And so it was only in New York that I began to be interested in the history of my region, that I began to read and take courses about it. It was in America, far away from anywhere I'd called home, that I started understanding my history and forming an identity.

On July 12th, 2006, Israel launched a war on Lebanon. Hezbollah, an armed political party, once acting as the country's resistance towards Israel, more powerful than the army itself, had kidnapped two Israeli soldiers at the border, demanding a prisoner exchange. Israel retaliated in an unjustified disproportion, destroying Lebanese infrastructure, bombing the airport, and targeting civilians in the villages and the southern suburbs of Beirut. I was in Lebanon at the time, as I was every summer, and that experience was my first memory of war in my adult life. What took the country ten years to rebuild, after fifteen years of civil war, was destroyed right before our eyes within a few days. I watched from my cousin's balcony as military jets flew overhead and dropped bombs, knowing the news before the news was reported. I tossed and turned in my sleep anxiously waiting for the next shuddering blast. The world had bluntly announced that the lives of two Israeli soldiers were worth more than the lives of a thousand Lebanese. I felt angry and disgusted, but most of all, I felt worthless. Within weeks, one thousand civilians had been killed and the world had not reacted. In fact, the world seemed to have given Israel the green light to act the way it did. By the time Israel ceased fire, the Lebanese people seemed to temporarily unite against a common enemy, and Hezbollah became more popular than ever. That newfound popularity would, however, end in 2008, when Hezbollah would forcefully seize control of Beiruti neighborhoods, and of course, in 2011, when the party would openly support and help the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. Nevertheless, that war in 2006 changed me, and I remember going back to New York with a newfound sense of nationalism.

My experience at university shaped many decisions I would eventually make later in life. During my first year in New York, I attended the Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts, an academic space that defies tradition. Their approach to liberal arts education was born out of The New School's vision to transcend intellectual boundaries and reimagine academic norms. At Lang, we were challenged to think critically and be accountable for our own scholarly development. We could tailor our curriculum to our interests and study a range of disciplines within the ecosystem of The New School. In addition to my studies at Lang, I could explore classes at Parsons School of Design, The College of Performing Arts, and a range of undergraduate and graduate courses at our university's other schools and colleges. After my first year at Lang, I decided to do a double major: media and culture studies at Eugene Lang, and Fashion Design at Parsons School of Design.

As a child, I was always geared towards creativity. I loved to draw, but my skills were not properly fostered, and although we did have art classes back in Kuwait and my teachers then always encouraged me to pursue the arts, majoring in arts and design was almost unheard of then. In 2003, during my brief stay in Lebanon, I started experimenting with some of my cousin's old clothes, cutting them, adding to them, and upcycling old pieces into new ones. My cousin would wear the pieces to university and come home

glowing. She was convinced that I should be a fashion designer. Fast forward to my first year at Lang, my roommates happened to be fashion design students at Parsons. I watched them go through the foundation year and then the first year of fashion design, witnessing how cutthroat the program was. Initially, I'd been torn between fine arts or fashion design, but after seeing how challenging the fashion design program was, and considering it was one of the top programs in the world, I decided to take on the challenge.

Pursuing a double major allowed me to foster my two developing passions. At Lang, the academic curriculum really pushed for dialogue and critical thinking, while at Parsons I had the chance to understand my creative potential. Cutthroat is an understatement in regard to the fashion program. Some of the teachers were brutal, justifying the harshness of the program by referring to the reality of the industry. Oftentimes, criticism felt like character assassination, and many of my peers either dropped out or failed. But I liked the challenge. Parsons was where I met my senior thesis professor, Caroline Simonelli. Caroline was in her mid-seventies at the time; she had over fifty years of experience in the fashion industry and was part of one of the first graduating classes of Parsons. She was also the type of teacher whose energy lit up the room. Caroline always directed her students towards collaboration and support, as opposed to other teachers who tended to create a negative atmosphere of competition. As soon as I learned that Caroline was originally Lebanese, I stuck to her like bubble gum, so she says. Her parents had left Lebanon for New York during the first World War, and although she'd grown up in a very Lebanese household, she had never been to Lebanon. It was having Caroline as a teacher that really made my experience worthwhile at Parsons. The creative process was a sacred space for her, and just watching her work with fabric was quite the experience. All those years in the fashion program, we had looked at fashion as a commodity. With Caroline, it was a creative journey, and for that, I am very grateful. Caroline would eventually become my life-long mentor.

At Lang, I had the chance to take part in two study-abroad programs: one in India and another in Cambodia. In the summer of 2009, a small group of five students and I went to Dharamshala, the home of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugee community. There, I was taught the true meaning of living in the present. I was shown the beauty of living humbly, simply and being fully content. At the same time, Dharamsala and the ambivalence of the Tibetan struggle, the Dalai Lama's philosophy and political stances sparked many questions and doubts in me about the place of violence in the face of injustice.

And if Dharamsala had managed to ignite my passion for social justice, it was Cambodia that solidified it. There, our professor, ten students and I lived in a guest house owned by a family of Khmer Rouge genocide survivors. We studied Cambodian politics and language while working in an orphanage sewing bedsheets and teaching English. That trip radically changed me and my views, as well as my vision of the work I wanted to spend my life doing. I wasn't interested in the type of "feel good" work that we witnessed there, because I quickly learned how futile it was. Instead, I wanted to be a part of real change. In fact, that trip reminded me a lot of my own personal struggles, having been educated by a western institution in an Arab country, and not understanding the inherent relationship between knowledge, power, and the biased construction of historical narratives and identities.

When I returned to New York to graduate, I fell into a deep hole of depression. I couldn't help but look around me and see selfishness. I couldn't help but look at everything I owned and wonder what people had suffered in order for me and those around me to live

in privilege. I didn't know how to survive it. Was I going to remove myself from society and live in a box? How could I find a way to merge my passions of creativity and social justice? To what would I dedicate my life's work? And after spending months staring at the ceiling, insomniac, feeling disgusted by everyone and everything, I decided to move to Lebanon. It was a no-brainer, really. I was Lebanese; I'd always craved to understand what that meant. There was so much work to be done in Lebanon, and the only real way for change to happen there was if more of us went back and tried to do something about it.

I moved to Lebanon in 2010 with fresh eyes, knowing that I wanted to find a way to merge my passions, but without a clue about where to start. I moved into my brother's flat in the Hamra neighborhood of Beirut, along with my best friend and cousin. I got a job at a furniture company called Bokja and worked in their textile department. It was a beautiful experience, as I got to learn about the craft of embroidery, working closely with local and regional artisans. I also got a part time job working at an NGO, teaching pre-school to Palestinian refugees. Tapping into both of my passions, I felt happy and excited to connect with Lebanon. Although, of course, before even opening my mouth, people would ask me, "Where are you from?" Apparently, I didn't dress, speak, or act Lebanese. And that frustrated me like hell, feeling like a foreigner wherever I was, once again, even in my own country.

Around October 2010, I went back to New York to finish packing up some of my things. I met up with my former Parsons professor, Caroline Simonelli. We met at Dean and Deluca on 40th street and 8th avenue. She listened to me for hours as I told her about all the things I had been up to in Lebanon, about how I loved what I was doing, but that it wasn't enough. And that I needed to find a way to merge my passions so I can focus on the real work. All of a sudden, she looked at me, and without even realizing what she was saying (it's funnier to hear her version of it), she said: "Why don't you start a school?" She hadn't even finished her question before I knew what I would spend the rest of my life doing. There was no question, there was no doubt, there was no fear; that was it. That was the "light bulb" moment I had been waiting for, the one that Oprah used to tell us about on television. I went to a café in the East Village that night and started writing a proposal for a pilot project. It didn't have a name yet, just "the Fashion Project". It would be a three-month pilot project where I would locate five individuals between the ages of 16 to 25 who dreamt of being designers but did not have the resources to do so. Caroline said that if I could make that happen, she would fly to Beirut and teach during those three months. Bessie, a close friend from Parsons who was working for Donna Karen at the time, was open to donating quality fabrics to the project. That was all I needed to get going.

I was twenty-four. I hardly had any work experience, close to none in the fashion industry, and no idea what it meant to build a school. But I was going to make it happen. People often ask me how I had the courage to start. My answer is always the same: I was naive. Because had I been aware of the type of the hardships I would eventually face, I am not sure I would have mustered the courage to move forward.

So, I returned to Lebanon with a newfound mission. I had to prepare everything in time for Caroline to come; my deadline was June 2011. I initially approached the NGO I'd been working with, but very quickly realized it would not be possible to partner with them because they wanted me to change my objectives. The traditional NGO model is based on quantity, not quality. For example, if we were to teach 100 students how to sew in the span of three weeks, with a clear start and a clear end, and a high impact beneficiary number, they would have been more than happy to help. But what happens to the students after the short program? Where is the real impact? Where is the real change? I was headstrong and declined their funding because I wasn't willing to change my objectives. I wanted to do it the way I believed it should be, or else, what was the point? I decided to focus on five students, to find the right ones and to give them comprehensive, specialized training for three months. I sent the proposal to my parents, asking them if they would fund the pilot. They were on board without flinching. Of course, I would have to figure out what would happen after the three months, but at least they would fund the pilot.

Then the search for students began. How would I find the right students when I hardly knew my way around? I began to reach out to NGOs, go to orphanages and community centers because more often than not, the talented ones would stand out in their communities. At first, it was difficult convincing the parents of potential students to trust a 24-year-old with nothing but an idea but having Caroline Simonelli from Parsons on board was impressive enough, and I guess a lot of them didn't have much to lose. In the end, I found five individuals from Palestinian, Lebanese, and Armenian communities who were willing to take a chance with me and spend their three months of summer learning about fashion design together. Caroline arrived in June 2011. We gave the students fabric, taught them to work a kind of a free-style method, and we began to witness the sort of energy that was created in the room. It felt magical. Almost instantly we knew we had tapped on to something good.

Why free education? In a country without a functioning government that provides for its citizens, people have no choice but to privatize everything. If you want something done, you have to do it yourself, without counting on any support from the government. In my life span, I've been lucky enough to have experienced a few educational spaces that have fostered my strengths and that have truly changed me, my priorities, and the way I think. I wholeheartedly believe in the importance of equal opportunity, and the untapped potential that existed within the creative sector in Lebanon. Quality education should be free and not just include technical skills and creative skills, but also soft skills—the ability to learn how to coexist, how to listen, how to collaborate, and the ability to work hard in order to achieve one's dreams. Design, in particular, is a process that shapes and structures our world. From the clothes we wear, to the buildings we live in, to the products we buy. And in order for design to be a tool for the betterment of society, it needs to be inclusive, incorporating the visions and voices of people from all backgrounds. Nevertheless, the educational system in Lebanon is divisive and elitist.

By the end of the three-month period, our students had designed thirty dresses. We hosted an exhibition and auctioned and sold all of them. We generated around 17,000 dollars, which allowed us to move into a little basement in Beirut to begin to build the foundations of this fashion project that had become the Creative Space Beirut. That was the seed that was planted in June 2011. I can't say I knew what I was doing, except following my instincts and my deep belief in the importance of free education. In fact, it would take me a good two years to understand what I was doing, the curriculum, the type of student that we were looking for, and how to develop a proper three-year program. It was a complete trial and error process at first, and I would like to say, ten years later, much of what we do today is still trial and error. Now we don't select students solely based on their talent, background, and lack of means, but we also take into consideration their character, dedication, motivation, and the ability to work hard for what they want to achieve. The fashion industry is a cutthroat industry, and our goal is not only to educate, but to also provide job opportunities and help our graduates find their place in it. Today, we are fortunate that their work and success has been bringing more and more credibility to the school.

Over the years, each student who came into the program and stayed grew into themselves. They found a safe space to learn, to foster their talent, and to do what they love. They also found a second family, a second home. Naturally, a beautiful community started to grow. A team of like-minded individuals came together; established designers started volunteering as teachers, eventually becoming paid teachers, and photographers, models, filmmakers—you name it—also got on board. Looking back, it is true that the idea was sparked that day in Dean and Deluca. However, an idea is just an idea without the individuals behind it making it their mission to bring it to life. I consider myself extremely lucky to have encountered the people that I did, who dedicated as much time and energy and passion into the vision as myself. Early on, I would join forces with my friends and partners, George Rouhana and Tracy Moussi, and together we moved from one space to another, building and growing.

Today, CSB School of Design is a tuition-free school for fashion design with an intensive three-year-program prioritizing talented individuals from vulnerable communities. The school is at the heart of Creative Space Beirut, which has turned into a social enterprise that provides structures and resources for the development of progressive fashion design practices in Lebanon. Since 2011, 45 students have been educated under 42 instructors. 320 individuals have participated in workshops, fashion shows and exhibitions.

Between 2017 and 2019, our support system and our clientele grew considerably. We held fashion shows that garnered large crowds, and our graduates started to make a name for themselves in the fashion world, embarking on respectable careers, launching internationally recognized and award-winning brands, and even teaching at various institutions and universities. Our curriculum was solidified, and our goal became to eventually expand into other programs of creative studies, creating a circular economy and a sustainable plan to support the growth of free design education.

Things took a darker turn toward the end of 2019, as four major detrimental events would hit and hijack life in Lebanon: an ongoing uprising, a catastrophic economic crisis, a global pandemic, and a historic explosion. October 17th, 2019 marked the beginning of the "October Revolution", which was sparked by decades of political and economic instability, widespread unemployment, rising poverty, rampant corruption, the state's imminent bankruptcy, and the massive, seeping repercussions of the Syrian conflict. What originally started as a series of civil protests across Lebanon against planned taxes on gasoline, tobacco, and WhatsApp phone calls would quickly expand into a country-wide condemnation of sectarian rule, unemployment, ecological and infrastructural collapse, and endemic corruption in the public and legal sector. The October Revolution shed light on and accelerated an imminent economic collapse. In a country where the economy is a state-sponsored Ponzi scheme orchestrated by the Central Bank, citizens found themselves unable to withdraw their money from banks, and the Lebanese Pound lost significant value in just a few weeks, leading to the worst currency devaluation and economic crisis in the country's history. Unemployment and poverty rate reached an all-time high. A few months later, the first wave of the Covid-19 global pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures only made matters worse, forcing thousands of businesses to close shop, sinking the country even deeper, as the middle class slid into obscurity.

As the world went into lockdown in 2020, we put the school on pause. I'd always secretly wished to have a gap year. Since the beginning of this journey, I'd always been on the run, on to the next thing, the next mission, the latest opportunity, and I'd never had time to stop, to reflect, to think. As catastrophic 2020 had been, it was also a year

of very important restructuring and re-strategizing. George, Tracy, and I spent a lot of time reconsidering our priorities, as running a school and a business was a lot for a small team. We consolidated all our inhouse brands into one name, CSB, and launched our online shop, CSB-WORLD. We adapted to the times by turning the school into a production house for personal protective gear in which we produced isolation gowns and distributed them to hospitals for free in partnership with UNICEF Lebanon. We hired our students, our alumni, and tailors from vulnerable communities. Eventually this turned into partnerships with companies in which we began to produce masks for their safety, promoting ethical production in Lebanon. The students took a few online courses as well. As the world began to change due to a global pandemic, our ability to adapt became mandatory.

On August 4th, 2020, at approximately 6:06 pm, in the middle of a photoshoot at our studio, model posing, photographer clicking, interns chatting, students working on their latest projects, in the midst of a normal moment on an average day, our world exploded. A rumbling sound that started at a distance quickly grew into a massive blast that hit with the magnitude of a 3.5 earthquake. Those 30 seconds saved our lives, allowing everyone to split, run, jump, and tumble to safety before the impact of the second and main blast, the largest non-nuclear explosion ever recorded. I was told that I screamed as I hit the ground. I remember opening my eyes to blurry vision, the air covered in heavy dust, my ears ringing loudly as sirens blared, the beeping sound of security systems that would follow us for days after. I don't remember much about what I said at that moment, but apparently, I kept whispering, "What are we going to do?", over and over again. Our space was severely damaged, the bullet proof windows and doors exploded, the walls cracked, equipment was thrown all around. My initial thought was that there had been a political assassination, that this was a targeted blast and we happened to be in its midst, and that we needed to get out of there because there was going to be another one. I began to receive calls from friends and family all over Beirut, each claiming that there had been an explosion on their street. But how can this be? Multiple explosions around the city? It wasn't until we left our workspace, until we began to walk in the streets, that we realized the level of destruction that had occurred. Our city was in pieces, completely shattered, destroyed. This was not an assassination downtown; this looked like a nuclear explosion. The city was covered in broken glass. The cracking of glass beneath our feet and the shimmering sound of people sweeping it up would become a staple for the following months. Everywhere there were people screaming, crying, bleeding, dying. Is everyone I know dead? Thank god for the pandemic, thank god for the closed airports, thank god my parents were in Kuwait because there was nothing left of their house. I didn't cry. I still have a hard time crying.

On August 4th, 2020, 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored recklessly at the Beirut port exploded, shattering the city, killing hundreds of people, injuring thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. The ammonium nitrate had been stored in the Beirut Port for seven years, and government officials were well aware of its presence. The Beirut port was 2 kilometers away from my work, along the road I drive down every day. The center of the city. Seven years. Seven years of driving by 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate every single day. Seven years of partying across the street from 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate. Seven years of inviting friends, going to cafes, and taking long walks next to 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate. Sitting there, waiting to explode at any moment. I don't know why I survived; I don't know why everyone close to me survived. We all had the same story, one second away from death. I had been planning to leave work fifteen minutes earlier to meet my cousin, and I'd only ran late

because of the photoshoot. Had I left according to plan, I would have been by the port at the moment of the explosion.

Maybe we never stood a chance.

Although I am Lebanese, although I carry the passport which is meant to provide me with certain rights and privileges, I don't feel like a citizen of the nation of Lebanon. On August 4th, 2020, the Lebanese citizen in me died. Over the last 30 years, during the reconstruction of Lebanon after the civil war ended, we were made to believe that there was hope. Hope in unity, hope in dignity, hope in life. Those of us stripped from our identity and any sort of belonging since birth, as diaspora, were made to believe that we could find a life in Lebanon, that we could be a part of the rebuilding of Lebanon, that we could start businesses and be a part of change. And although my parents left the nation during the civil war to build a life for their family, knowing that the nation was cursed with division and sectarianism, they'd carried a little bit of hope with them as well. When I'd decided that as a citizen of nowhere, I wanted to belong somewhere and that somewhere was Lebanon, they fully supported me. Don't get me wrong, I always knew our government was corrupt, irresponsible, and incompetent, that if we wanted change, we would have to do it ourselves. But, as a member of the diaspora coming in with all the hope in the world for Lebanon, with all my energy and fight for change, I could have never predicted this. I could have never predicted this level of failure, greed, hunger for power, and disregard for the people's basic needs. To lead us into such grave circumstances, to the worst economic crisis we have ever seen, to wipe out our city, and then to watch from their palaces as the people had to pick up dead bodies from the rubble. On August 4th, the Lebanese citizen in me died. This nation has not granted me any rights and privileges; this passport does not allow me to pass any ports. The basic rights of water, electricity, education, and clean air have not been granted. But most of all, on August 4th, we were told that our even more basic right to live, to be safe in our own homes, does not exist. Today, those of us who chose to stay are fighters for a new Lebanon. And as long as the current leaders of the country continue to remain in power, as long as we are stripped of all of the rights and privileges that define the word citizenship, we will continue to fight.

The ability to move from place to place, for the sake of survival in search for a better life, is part of my history. Today, due to the global pandemic, the feeling of being trapped is prevalent. Travel has become difficult, and as Lebanese, due to the economic crisis and the inability to access our bank accounts, travel has become even harder. Adaptation has become a part of survival and searching for new ways to solve basic problems has become a day-to-day task. Processing everything that has happened over the course of one year has been extremely difficult. Losing so much in so little time has been a complete shock to my system. I'd spent a decade building a life for myself in Lebanon; I got married, built a home, a family, friends, another bubble. I'd felt protected in this bubble of like-minded people, despite the unstable political situation, the same way I'd felt sheltered by the many bubbles that had been built around me throughout my life, by my parents and by myself. The hard part of it all is that on August 4th, that bubble exploded. It was our homes that exploded, our workspaces, our hangout places, the dance clubs, the bars, the coffee shops. The bubble exploded and left us all naked, unprotected, unsure about how to go on.

I've always been told that first and foremost, I am Lebanese. I have spent a portion of my life rejecting what that meant, another portion of my life searching for what that meant, and the last ten years of my life fully immersing myself in what I wanted it to mean, only to discover that it would nearly kill me. It's been 9 months since the Beirut explosion, and when I am asked whether I will be wstaying or leaving the country, my answer is unflinching: I'm staying. I did not move to Lebanon in search of stability or comfort; I moved to Lebanon to dedicate my life's work to social justice in the hopes of building new and alternative systems that have the interest of the people at heart. More than ever, this still stands. My fight continues.

ZINAH MOHAMMED

Biography

Zinah Mohammed is a human rights lawyer holding an LLM Master of Laws from the UK, a social activist and a humanitarian with experience working for many international non profit organizations providing services to Syrian refugees and Iraqi displaced persons as a result of the ISIS offensive in Iraq. Zinah is the founder of Let's Be Friends Project which twins primary schools in Iraq and Europe to build bridges of peace, coexistence, and cultural understanding using art as a way of self-expression. She also is a member of the Global Shapers Community- Erbil hub, an initiative by the World Economic Forum for youth where she volunteers with youth leaders leading initiatives and various projects to drive positive change in their communities and bringing their voices to national, regional and global platforms speaking up about their rights, challenges, and hopes for the future.

Conflicts and Mobility in Iraq: The Narrative and Perspective of a Female Millennial

An Introduction to an Iraqi Millennial

My name is Zinah Mohammed, a young female social activist and lawyer. I come from Iraq, a country that is rich in history and known as the "Cradle of Civilization" because it was home to the oldest civilization in the world, the Sumerians. Back in time, writing was invented by the Sumerians, making its way to spark the development of civilization globally. The writing helped coordinate the management of complex commercial, religious, political, and military systems, a phenomenal achievement that has served humanity since almost 3300 BC. In modern history, Iraq is known for conflicts. Iraq is situated at a strategic geographical location that borders the Persian Gulf with tremendous wealth and natural resources. Conflicts in Iraq have shaped my life and opened my eyes to tough realities from an early age, and mobility was another factor that put everything into perspective. Conflicts and mobility are correlated matters in my experience and for my generation of Iraqis.

My story and its uniqueness start from the very fact of being born an Iraqi. I was born in Baghdad during one of the biggest wars in modern history, The First Gulf War, and lived a childhood while Iraq was still under Saddam Hussein's regime and an endless number of international sanctions including the Oil-for-Food Programme (OIP). The beginning of my childhood was not a usual one. Growing up, I did not have much exposure to the rest of the world apart from Hollywood movies premiered to us once a week on national TV, and mobility was not necessarily something that my generation was familiar with up until the fall of Saddam Hussien's regime. One of the major events that not only shaped my childhood, but also the lives of all Iraqis was the OIP program. The OIP was established by the United Nations in 1995 (under U.N. Security Council Resolution 986) following the gulf war. It aimed to allow Iraq to sell oil on the world market in exchange for food, medicine, and other humanitarian needs for ordinary Iraqi citizens without allowing Iraq to boost its military capabilities. The OIP represented a problematic phase for Iraqis, and thus the economic challenges took their toll on families and their children. Simultaneously, the suspension of international flights started, making travelling extremely difficult for Iraqis, and this became a benchmark for the beginning of limited movement during my lifetime. Travelling was only an option for businessmen and merchants who could afford the payments, tariffs, or taxes related to it. The other group that had access to travelling was residents in other countries who needed to visit their family members abroad. Additionally, at a time, the Iraqi currency was collapsing and the economy was slowly falling apart. Thus,

travelling was never an easy option for regular Iraqis with limited financial resources during a challenging regime's rule, and freedom of mobility was out of the question for long years to many Iraqis. Almost three years after the OIP, travelling (by land only) was reponed to everyone, and the governments' policies included huge payments during a challenging economic phase in Iraqi modern history.

Economy and Challenges During the Oil-for-Food Programme

During the mentioned sanction, the economic challenges continued to take their toll on many citizens. I remember clearly how many of my primary schoolmates struggled to buy small snacks during breaks between classes. Yoghurt sandwiches were a thing! Looking back at these memories, it only shows how difficult it was for an average citizen to cover their basic needs, let alone the ability to move elsewhere. At the time, my primary governmental schools lacked resources, but still were strong enough to provide students with a good level of education, at least in my opinion. The curriculum was up to date, and teachers were highly trained, but on the other hand, students and teachers struggled to find the light at the end of the tunnel. A teacher's monthly salary equated to the cost of 30 eggs, which was a very low wage, and so this was the case for millions of students, graduates, and families. The country was slowly collapsing, but the regime was doing a lot of self-advocacy, rallying and encouraging the sense of identity according to its own agenda.

Looking back, I understand teachers' dedication to delivering strong educational content to us as students, but I also think they lacked options that could pay them more or grant them safety. You may wonder why Iraqis didn't move, internally or externally. Well, moving to another city technically meant a low wage in the public sector, which was then the main driver of the Iraqi economy. On the other hand, moving to another country was out of the question due to the costs, visa procedures, and the regime. Limited freedom of movement continued to be a reality for many Iraqis even after the regime's fall. The economic challenges impacted every aspect of people's lives. During those times, my school's classroom had no windows, fans, heaters, and in many cases, three to four children had to share a two-student bench. This sad reality can still be seen in many schools today. Meanwhile, despite all the difficulties around us, teachers taught us the value of loyalty, identity and sense of belonging as Mesopotamians and as Iraqis. On the other hand, schools were a platform for some regime advocacy; we were continuously told that "we are strong enough to face the enemies who will attack us soon". At that time, they were referring to America; thus, we were mentally trained to be ready for any attack or conflict.

War During Childhood, Teens, and Adulthood

During the 90s, children at schools were taught how to behave if enemies attack; mainly we were told that we should all stay in our homes and wait for our "defenders" to protect us. "Our defenders", referring to the military, and "our father", referring to Saddam, would always be there as the protector of not only our country, but also of the east gate to the Arab nation. Many hidden messages were conveyed in different ways to children through the educational systems and little was taught about what the outside world looked like, or if we had the choice to access it and move! As a child, I was unable to understand or analyze our reality. I felt that my childhood was a simple, happy, and normal childhood like anyone else's in the world, but I also think that was derived from the fact that we didn't have access to the outside world through satellite T.V. channels or the internet. We only had access to three T.V. governmental channels with censored and carefully selected content by the regime back then.

My understanding changed as I grew up. I began to understand that many things around us were not normal but were "normalized" merely because that was the only available option. I also realized that my experience didn't necessarily reflect everyone's opinions or experiences; every one of the millions of Iraqis has their own unique and painful experience. Everyone suffered, struggled, and felt pain throughout the past and current decades. The reasons may vary but the rationale remains the same, which is the fact that conflicts have no winners.

My teens were not an exception from the conflict's impact: I lived my teens during an American invasion and watched everything we learned through our schools and communities entirely change. Saddam, the so-called "nation's father figure" that schools taught us about, no longer existed; his photo at the front page of every single schoolbook had to be removed, as well as his quotes hanging on the walls of every single school classroom, and his photo on every class wall. An army with tanks and military outfits could be seen in almost every street. It was official: the regime was overthrown. Still, freedom of movement became even more limited and held a lot of risks, especially for youth and particularly for young females. Staying where you were was probably the best choice you could make. That phase witnessed a lot of bloodshed, militias, and high-security risks.

My adulthood was again not an exception to conflict and constant changes. Like all Iraqis, I witnessed the invasion of ISIS into a third of Iraq in deep shock and perhaps denial. None of us could comprehend that this was happening to our cities. That phase was one of the most crucial in Iraq's history; millions of people had to move and flee their homes. Moving was the only answer, moving anywhere far from that mess. Along with the physical movement of seeking safety, movement of identity came into necessity through the threat on civilization by ISIS.

Mesopotamian History & Identity Crisis

The heritage of Mesopotamia and history of what is described as "the cradle of civilization" was, and, I believe, will always be embedded into our minds as a source of power and strength. However, the horrendous acts of ISIS were far removed from all of this and took us backwards to thousands of years. It was unlike any conflict, war, or disturbance the country had witnessed. It created an identity crisis for young people and many were asking, "Does this mindset represent us?" In 2015, videos went viral of ISIS destroying ancient sites and artefacts. Men were shown breaking the famous Lamassu on Nineveh's old Nirgal Gate. The Lamassu is a half-human, half-animal guardian statue. The sculptor of the Lamassu, which was created in 883–859 B.C., gave these guardian figures five legs so that they would appear to be standing firmly when viewed from the front but striding forward when seen from the side. Lamassu protected and supported significant doorways in Assyrian palaces. That incident shook many Iraqis and made many of us realize that our conflicts were tearing us and our history apart. I used to have conversations with the youth of my age. Many no longer wanted to be identified as Muslims or Iraqis because they felt that ISIS's actions stigmatized their identity, which they felt ashamed to be associated with in any way. This was a general feeling for many.

The sense of identity was always deeply rooted in us as children regardless of political administrations or governments affiliation. I recall the reactions to this incident varied, but all came from one foundation, anger. I was angry to see part of my identity destroyed while others were angry that these statues were still in Iraq 'unprotected'.

Many young people said, "It should have been taken to a museum somewhere else in the world where it is safer than Iraq", something that I had to think deeply about. "To maintain our identity, should we and our identity's symbols all move away?" As ISIS destroyed these ancient artefacts, I felt that a part of my identity was being threatened too. Although ISIS claimed that their motives were political and religious, with the justification that "the artefacts were worshipped instead of Allah", I believe it was an attempt to eliminate a part of the Iraqi identity. Young Iraqis in particular were impacted. Losing a sense of identity means looking somewhere else for a new identity, perhaps in another country, which is again a challenge that many Iraqi youths face when considering leaving the country. The truth is that, for an Iraqi passport holder, the options to move elsewhere are limited, either through lengthy visa processes, asylum-seeking applications, seeking refugee status in other countries with hopes to reach Europe or the States, or through illegal smuggling of refugees and going through hazardous circumstances. Many youths of my age, born during the war, lived almost their entire lives in conflict; identity kept many hanging on to hopes and dreams for a better tomorrow to relive the rich history we once had.

Conflicts, Displacement & Activism

From 2006 to 2008, an Iraqi civil war sparked divisions within the Iraqi community. Intercommunal violence between Iraqi Sunni and Shi'a factions became prevalent and eventually turned territorial, and Christians were no exception. These divisions and conflicts included killing based on I.D.s (relating to family and tribe names), and kidnapping and threats. I too had to move and find another safe haven in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Being internally displaced was in no way an easy experience. Soon enough, and once the Syrian conflicts started and people started to seek refuge in KRI, it was easy to connect with anyone who had experienced similar circumstances and shared identical sentiments to displacement, limited freedom of movement, and the conflicts shaping our lives. The experiences I have had with war and limited freedom of movement shaped my view of life. These challenges made me always try to find other ways to use my voice as a young Iraqi female. I started a journey of activism that always found its way to be linked to my history, and I worked for years voluntarily to advocate for issues that I believed in, all of which stemmed from my experience, my identity, and of course, war. I took the path of Law: I studied for a bachelor's in Law and later got a master's degree in International Law. I created many initiatives and worked with remarkable youth groups to create positive lasting change in our communities. Law was my outlet to speak up for all the changes I wanted to see in my community with hopes of a better future, and I felt that it gave me the credibility to do so.

Connecting to the outside world through social media played an integral part in my activism. I had just graduated from law school when I saw a photo on social media of Syrian refugees suffering from the cold weather in Erbil's refugee camps inside their tents. The picture pushed me to write a post on my account asking my friends to collect blankets for a few families in the camp, and it soon grew into a voluntary youth team that collected donations and provided emergency aid to thousands of families in camps. My volunteer work extended to support Iraqi displaced persons following the ISIS offensive, which extended from Syria to Iraq in 2014. As time passed, advocacy and activism became a part of my identity, which I carried with me everywhere I went. I didn't purposely intend to follow this path, but it came to be with the development of events in my country and how they shaped who I am. I then chose to work in the

humanitarian sector to continue my efforts supporting those who suffered from conflict as I did. I noticed that walls were built higher than ever amongst people regarding displacement, refuge, ethnic groups, religions, nationalities—and the list continued to go on throughout my professional career. Prejudice was becoming a norm everywhere and for many reasons, both internationally and nationally. This was an issue that I had a lot of interest in exploring and possibly tackling myself.

Limited Mobility & Activism

I started to look for opportunities to interact with various people from different backgrounds, religions, and nationalities throughout the years. I took internships, got myself enrolled in exchange programs, and studied and worked abroad; I tried to find every opportunity to travel and explore the other side of the prejudiced narrative. I needed freedom of mobility and that was not always easy; however, I consider myself lucky to have had access to these experiences. Through each interaction, I witnessed a pattern of stereotypes around my background, nationality and gender. During my time in the U.K. for my master's degree, I had the same reactions almost every time I introduced myself to new people, such as: "You must be half Iraqi; you don't look like one of them", "How come you are a female from Iraq living alone here; do they allow you to be independent?", and "How come you speak such good English? You must have lived abroad". The truth is that I have lived all my life in Iraq, my family supported my plans for studying and working abroad when I had the chance to, and I am a full proud Iraqi! These comments inspired me to work on breaking stereotypes amongst us as humans through advocacy efforts such as my project with children, "Let's Be Friends", where I tried to create bridges of peace between Iraqi and British children in efforts to find common ground that brings them together rather than apart.

The main path to accomplish my advocacy efforts stemmed from travelling and exposure to the outside world, through T.V. and later through the Internet. Growing up, I saw travelling as an incredible experience that's only on T.V. I never saw an airplane until I was in my late teens! Once I got the chance to travel in 2003, I genuinely enjoyed every second of it. The experience was unique; meeting people worldwide, exploring other cultures, trying new food, and having a new perspective on life from other countries was fascinating. Travelling was like a dream coming true, and it shaped my character and the way I paved my path as an independent female Iraqi activist. Although it is sad to admit that my limited freedom of movement made me see travelling like a fantasy, it is the reality. Travelling led me to study abroad for my master's in Law, participate in powerful youth-oriented platforms and conferences, create meaningful friendships, and open my eyes to the possibilities available with freedom of movement. Through travelling, I learned about different cultures, gender norms in other contexts, and, most importantly, how we are viewed elsewhere, which made me more determined to break the stereotypes about us Iraqis through every interaction I had. I understood the impact of mainstream media which shows Iraqis, and particularly women, in almost one pattern.

Gender and Stereotypes

Although being a female Iraqi is not a piece of cake, and social pressure and gender norms do exist, there is another side of the story that needs to be told, seen, and heard. I went to university just like my peers, I made my own choices even though the social norms are challenging for women in a conservative society, and I chose my

career based on my interests. My experience was not an easy one, and I faced so many challenges to reach where I am today, and so do others. Iraqi women's experiences aren't easygoing, but they also aren't fairly represented in the mainstream media globally. In the mainstream media, Iraqi women are portrayed as weak, uneducated, and living in half-built homes or tents. It is a reality for a portion of the society due to the impact of conflict, but it does not represent the whole population nor even the majority. I strongly believe that a new narrative about young Iraqi women globally should be told. Social norms around women in Iraq are complex and sometimes cruel, but our generation has worked hard to change many of these norms. Many active women started movements towards women's empowerment which is slowly and gradually changing the narrative about women in the country, with the power of globalization as the primary drive supporting this movement and efforts. Therefore, the other side of Iraqi women's stories should have enough attention to shift the narrative to reality.

For anyone to learn and share experiences, freedom of mobility is crucial. I needed freedom of mobility which I did and still do not have, merely because of where I come from. In order to travel anywhere, I had to go through an exhausting visa process. In the visa process for an Iraqi passport holder, one needs to prove their suitability for accessing "X" country for legitimate reasons, such as vacation, studentships, or a job offer. Many documents, costs, and time are put into this process. In many cases, these efforts may fail for no rational reason. It almost feels like being in confinement within one border without realizing it, as if there is a stigma around who you are and where you come from. This is a system that I don't fully agree with. Mobility is defined as the ability to move freely; it includes freedom of movement within a state or the ability to move to other states following a set of procedures and processes provided by the host country. Mobility, however, differs depending on contexts, social backgrounds, and nationality.

Disconnect to Connect?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world paused as lockdowns and social distancing measures were imposed. These measures pushed millions of people to stay at home, limiting their movement both internally and externally. It was a phase of disconnecting from any normality that humanity knew. In that period, I noticed how many of my ex-pat friends and connections struggled with limited mobility; being unable to move freely was a nightmare to many. I started to reflect on my own experience, and I asked myself, "Is this a nightmare for me? Not really". Limited mobility was always a part of my life in one way or another, as it is for many Iraqis, particularly youth. "With or without COVID-19, we have challenges moving and visiting other countries because we have one of the worst passports ranking globally", a young Iraqi female I interviewed once said.

Limitations of mobility have been imposed on generations in Third World countries through to visa systems, particularly in the Middle East. I have friends who lost family members because they couldn't secure their visas to reach a better healthcare system, or who missed family occasions, and many who lost the opportunity to study or work at their dream places, which brings me to an example that I have lived. One of my life dreams was to get a master's degree in Law from abroad, which meant I had to go through lengthy visa processes and experience living on my own in another country. Through this all, my family, and particularly my father, supported me, and as a thank you gift, I wanted to have him attend my graduation ceremony abroad. His visa was denied even though his reason was to "attend his own daughter's graduation". Incidents like this make one think twice, "Am I a second-degree human?"; a question I asked myself during my graduation ceremony while watching all my European colleagues celebrate with their families. My father is a regular Iraqi man with a darker skin tone, speaks

fluent English, and has a strong travelling record. He only intended to come to see me graduate, but instead, he couldn't, and I had to continue my celebration without him by my side. Seeing other students with their parents coming from all over the world to attend this beautiful ceremony broke my heart. I started to wonder, would it be any different if my father was a white man? If I were born elsewhere or if my identity was distinct? Would it help us have freedom of movement? Instead, we had to accept that fact and move on, but why should we? It was an experience that made me question where I truly stand as a human next to others. This explains that legitimate reasons to travel are not enough when you hold an Iraqi passport, and thus your freedom is limited. I firmly believe that states should create mechanisms for securing their sovereignty that evolves with the economic and social stability of the country, including giving access to individuals who don't impose any risks. Sadly, coming from a third world country will probably mean that you are always seen as second, third, or last-degree human.

Policy Reforms

Policies and procedures need to shift to take a more inclusive approach rather than a dividing one while maintaining security and immigration policies emplaced. However, social distancing during the pandemic seems to be the unique experience that all nationalities, races, ethnic groups, minorities, first world, and third world countries have been equally exposed to. For once, the world seemed to unite, facing one threat to humanity. Usually, wars divide us, but this war brought us together at the start. However, to what extent will it unite us? Will polarized countries accelerate the winner approach? Or will they strive for greater unity? Visa policies aren't the only factors impacting the freedom of movement; other factors related to COVID-19 are also relevant. As 2020 came to an end, approved COVID-19 vaccinations started to become available. The wealthiest countries secured billions of vaccine doses through a scheme of vaccine nationalism while developing countries struggled to access such supplies. This approach doesn't only just accelerate polarization across countries but also has an evident impact on citizens' freedom of movement based on coming from both rich countries (vaccinated) or developed countries (not vaccinated). Freedom of movement and mobility might probably continue to be challenged by a new layer of health concerns, lack of vaccinations, etc. While it is essential to admit that the current Iraqi administration isn't putting as serious effort as rich countries are in terms of vaccination, one must also recognize that corruption in Iraq has a fair share explaining these shortcomings and delays. This may again impact the freedom of movement for Iraqis and may add another layer of limitation on travelling.

Flexible Movement Empowers Young Leaders

In the summer of 2019, I was accepted to the Middle East Mediterranean MEM Summer Summit in Lugano, Switzerland. In order to get a visa and attend this great opportunity, I had to travel to Jordan, apply for my visa at the Swiss embassy in Amman, the capital of Jordan, return to Iraq, ship my passport from Iraq to Jordan to the Swiss embassy for processing my application, then ship my passport back from Jordan to Iraq with no guarantee that the visa would be granted. While this lengthy process cost me money, time, and effort, I finally got the visa, attended the program, and now can write this piece, be a part of an intellectual group of young people, and share my story with a global audience. As I write this, I think of all the young talented people who cannot access such chances and all the lost opportunities due to these challenges related to movement, visas, and access for an Iraqi passport holder. Globalization is

a reality that is a part of our everyday life, and creating a balance where youth are included, heard, and given opportunities is key to a better tomorrow worldwide. Youth are the new leaders, and our current policies are in desperate need of supporting and giving that space to youth particularly through the freedom of movement and creating intellectual platforms for youth to engage in.

Throughout this piece, I share a small taste of the struggles that promising youth in Iraq face. Things that are taken for granted elsewhere are a luxury to many of us. Status, degrees, accomplishments, and achievements will always mean little when your passport is ranked one of the worst in the world. Many young talented people find that these policies limit their freedom of movement and their access to opportunities in the age of globalization. However, this should not be the case as the world needs more than ever to be more inclusive, engaging, encouraging cultural exchange, and normalizing inclusive human behavior towards each other regardless of their backgrounds. Prejudices exist everywhere, and they do not help us; they only take us backwards. As humans living in modern and open societies, we need to change our perspective beyond prejudices based on skin color, nationality, and religion, and aim to create policies and strategies that can bring us together rather than apart. Change can happen with policy reforms and serious inclusion efforts globally. As an Iraqi millennial who has access to the Internet and speaks a universal language, I think change is coming.

MARAM DAOUD

Biography

Maram Daoud works as a researcher with the Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights in Geneva. Previously, he worked with the European Institute of Peace as an Engagement and Dialogue Assistant, focussing mainly on projects in Yemen, Sudan and South Sudan. In addition, he worked as a consultant with Cultural Diversity and Sustainable Development for Peace. He has extensive experience in political and civil society work related to the Syrian conflict and participated in projects to revive local languages such as Kurdish and Assyrian.

Adel, Someone from what You Tend to Call a Third World

The renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once said: "As you return home, think of others…Do not forget the people of camps". This quote describes my first steps in the journey of life. I mean that Darwish, a renowned Arab figure, has summarized the modern Arab identity in these verses. He touched upon mobility starting from the opposite of it: siege and immobility. Through his poems borders, camps, and passports became integral part of Arabic literature, as tents became the refuge for the people who have been kicked out of their lands and houses. Across the lines of Sykes-Picot, the 1916 agreement between the United Kingdom and France that reshaped the borders in the Middle East, families and tribes were forcibly cut in two. By the naked eye, one could see their cousins and relatives on the other side of the border. This trauma of forced movement and social destruction did not end with the Sykes-Picot but continued with the Palestinian catastrophe (al-Nakba) and afterwards in the region, either due to external interventions or internal conflicts.

My name is Maram, which means Desire, Wish, Goal. My father did not know the meaning of this name when I was born. He just collected some letters and shaped my name. He told me that he meant to invent a new one, then later he discovered it already existed! He frequently traveled between Moscow and Damascus until I was born; then he decided to find stability in one place. Although he decided to stay in Syria as a final destination, we have never stayed in one neighborhood for a long time. We used to change the house, if not the city or the area, where we were living. I can simply introduce myself as an Arab, but identities are more complex, especially in a region like the Middle East, whose order is constantly changing. I am a Syrian who grew up in a Palestinian camp. It was not a regular camp, where you find homeless people standing in a line to get a loaf of bread and soup. In Syria, different camps were established to host Palestinian refugees kicked out of their homes and lands in 1948. Nothing in these camps could refer to the typical images of camps, aside for their name. Some of them turned into vital and cultural hubs for the people in their neighborhoods. Even in terms of rights and duties, one can't differentiate between Syrians and Palestinians except for voting for the president; which anyway in Syria means fake elections. They were called Syrian-Palestinians to differentiate between them and other Palestinians in the neighboring countries. We shared living in the camps with them, as we shared our concerns about the future. The camp in which I lived expanded into the largest market for clothes in Damascus, known as "The Palestinian Camp".

When I was a kid, I always thought of moving abroad, chasing an indefinite future. Back then, I knew many people who would travel abroad, most of whom succeeded to do so and left for a long time. Then they came back, and they were totally different people. I come from a frustrated society that struggles to protect its culture and heritage without any certainty of what could come tomorrow and change its path. Young people of my generation dream of finding opportunities somewhere else as they lost faith in chasing an uncertain destiny. It was easy for me to recognize the impact of time on my beloved relatives and friends who left the country. They visited Syria every few years, and everything in them had changed, their voices, characters, thoughts, and even faces. The idea of waving goodbye always triggered me. I travelled for the first time out of Syria in 2008. I was 18 years old, and I was studying economics at the University of Damascus. I joined my friends on a one-day trip to Lebanon, where we crossed the borders using a bus similar to the one I used inside Syria to move around. Yes, technically, it took two hours to arrive in Beirut without a passport. We just showed our IDs and paid some fees, and that's all. However, I was super excited to "travel abroad". It is common to hear Lebanese people say that they used to drive to Damascus just to get lunch and come back.

The trip to Lebanon added extra motivation to leave the country. I don't know the reason, but I would say it was the feeling of being free from constraints… It's like drugs; one feels addicted to the feeling of it, and then asks for more. So, I started learning French, when I came back, to prepare for my journey. I dreamt of moving to France, which was the limit of my dreams back then (since I was not good in geography). Why France? Because I had an uncle who left Syria in the same year in which I was born, 1989, and went to France to specialize in cardiology. I saw him twice in my life, and I felt that his was my path to follow as well. Why him? Because he was the uncle that I didn't know about, the one who marked, back then, my mysterious future.

I still remember the first time I was issued a passport. I was happy like a person throwing their graduation cap, or like when someone succeeds for the first time cooking rice without burning it: something that's not easy to explain as I recognize now how ridiculous it is, but in that moment it was something unusual, exceptional. In Syria, we do not hate the sun and the beautiful country with thousands of years of history, culture, and gastronomy, but as one of the Arab authors said once, "we were in a big prison called nation-state". Nevertheless, I have never used my dark-blue passport with an eagle on its cover, because it does not allow me to fly far away; it is like an eagle in a cage!

In early 2011, when the revolution started in Syria, I completely changed my mind as I felt hope for the country and for the people. I didn't want to leave the country anymore. We threatened a whole establishment of a dictatorship that was inherited from the colonial era. A mass of people took to the streets demanding "freedom and dignity"… an unexpected moment in the history of 40 years of one sole regime controlling the country. Ça vraiment m'intriguait! That is not to say that I felt as if I were one of the characters in Bernardo Bertolucci's movie The Dreamers, and that we were going to topple the system down soon to replace it with a utopian one. Although I was active and I felt as if I found my true "Maram", my wished for goal in life, I had no such illusion.

I knew that it would not be easy, and I was sure I needed to be cautious, but I felt that the walls of that big prison had started to crack. I put all my plans of leaving the country on the shelf, and I engaged politically and for the defense of human rights, in a country with a horrible record in such values. I didn't imagine the battle against the Syrian dictatorship from a knockout perspective, and that it would disappear as had happened in Egypt just a few months earlier. Quite the opposite: I was aware that this was a battle of scores, which might last for a long time. However, I believed in the collective acts of the people, and in the necessity to unify our voices. I engaged in helping the Internally Displaced People (IDP), those citizens who had to flee their houses and their towns, advocating for political and non-political detainees who were kept in underground and unlivable detention centers. My moves from one city to another in the country increased, as did the checkpoints in the cities; now placed even between one street and another. My work around Syria was against the rotten system and led me to end up in a detention center twice.

My experience in detention centers represents a unique chapter in my life, which I cannot dwell on so much here. However, I can at least share how the first of these two experiences was related to mobility. That night, from the boy who dreamt of traveling abroad and who never soared, I became just one of the 350 detainees kept in a cell designed for only 80. I was literally not able to move. My best friend shared this experience with me, and we slept on each other's shoulders. We were coming back from Beirut and succeeded in passing through all the checkpoints in a relatively smooth way, until we got caught at the last one next to my home. I say "relatively" because passing through each checkpoint was scary, as anyone could be detained for no reason. At that moment, Syria had started to suffer the shortcoming of medicines; my friend was carrying some with him from Beirut for the people who needed them and who could not find them inside Syria anymore. I had with me a report issued by Human Rights Watch regarding the detention centers in Syria, and the violations happening in these centers. We were concerned about securing lives of vulnerable people in the country when we were charged arbitrarily for disturbing the country's security. In another poem talking about two friends who believed in changing their dystopic reality, Mahmoud Darwish said: "My friend said to me, the fog being dense on the bridge: Would something be defined through its opposite?" I found both of us in this quotation: two young people who sought to build a secure space of freedom for their fellow citizens, and were found guilty of such endeavors.

The revolution in Syria turned later into a war that created, ironically, a chance for the people to find a way to go abroad. Still, with one difference: it was a forced movement of millions of Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian people. It reminded me of images of the US in Iraq in 2003. When I was a teenager, the US invasion had started to reshape everything in Syria: collective memory, economy, politics, etc. We saw Iraqi families fleeing the war and looking for tents in Damascus. At that moment, I was thinking of the danger floating around Syria, and I felt it come closer. The war in and on Syria had the same pattern as the one in Iraq. The people whose only demand was freedom had no choice but to leave the country; mostly to end up in refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. As opposed to the support showed by the International Community in early 2011, no country was eventually willing to let more refugees in, and European countries already had limited the number of visas destined to the Syrians. Ironically,

my engagement in politics and my desire to join the political arena has turned out to open a way for me to travel…and to finally use my dark-blue passport. I wanted to participate in any event regarding politics in Syria, to speak up. I joined political groups and attended political conferences and workshops, as I believed in the political inclusion of youth. My passport was now full of stamps and visas.

Every time I went abroad, I needed to take the car to Beirut, but the experience became different from the first time I went to Beirut. The Beirut-Damascus road is a passage through nature, where one enjoys the mountains and green spaces and feels internal peace. This road became loaded with checkpoints that created fear and anxiety for the people fleeing the country. There was a long queue at the borders, and the soldiers knew that people were leaving with no idea of coming back. They wanted to exploit them as much as possible, because people's destinies were in their hands, at their mercy. People were patient, as they knew that once they crossed the border no one would stop them until the Beirut International Airport. I went to Beirut many times to travel abroad: one time to apply for a visa, another time to have the visa put onto my passport, and then a third time to travel. I could not travel through the Damascus airport because of the sanctions. While the International Community was seeking to limit the regime's capacity, unintentionally—or maybe not—the world was putting more obstacles in our way. What was subject to sanctions in Damascus, however, could be done in Beirut; you just had to pay extra money and afford the blackmailing of soldiers on both sides of the border. Corruption and bribes became common after the sanctions, and soldiers on the two sides were regularly exploiting the travelers who fled the country. I suffered the exploitation and the humiliation of the borders' authorities every time I needed to travel. This anger about sanctions was the motivation behind the first master's thesis I wrote later in Geneva.

In 2015, I was detained again. Once I was released, I felt I couldn't stay any longer. I only had two options: either leave the country, or join the army, because military service in Syria is obligatory. And due to the war, once you join the army, you serve the regime and can't withdraw. It is an endless, brutal slavery, where I would have to hold a gun against my fellow citizens. I refused, and after I graduated, I chose to leave! I had the chance to take a plane to Geneva, contrary to those other Syrians who took the route of the sea to reach Europe instead. My brother took a boat and crossed the sea and the forests to arrive in Belgium. I chose Geneva as my destination, as I used to visit the city for my work as a Human Rights activist. This activism set the ground for my engagement with regular sessions of the Human Rights Council. While I was in Syria, I collaborated with an institute in Geneva to advocate for the people's rights and freedom, which provided me access to the United Nations' council. Most Syrians who succeeded in crossing the sea went to Germany to ask for asylum, but I was fascinated with moving to a city that was a hub of Human Rights activists and NGOs. I shortly started to lose this fascination when I began to face the difficulties with residency and work permits. I did not want to ask for asylum upon arriving, and like a lot of forced migrants, I was thinking of the moment of my return. After almost a year, I found a master's program to enroll in, and so I escaped the asylum procedure. Once one asks for asylum, they are not allowed to go back to their home country, and I struggled to keep this option available as much as possible. The master's program was a relief for me because I could "legalize" my situation. The Dutch said, in an event in solidarity with the sans-papiers, "Niemand is illegal"; a principle that I made my own later when I moved to Belgium.

The program lasted for less than a year, but I didn't get my residency permit until two months before the end of the program. I had hoped to start my life in Geneva and to study and work like anyone else. I didn't want to ask for asylum, as I hoped to serve as a bridge between Syrians inside and outside of Syria. I needed this freedom of movement to continue my activism against the regime in Syria. Unfortunately, I wasn't allowed to travel to France, or to any neighboring countries, before obtaining the documents. However, I always found "my way". I cannot hide the fact that Geneva represented a home to me after Damascus, in a way or another, and that I wanted to enjoy stability there for a bit. I stayed there for three years, but then I didn't manage to get the work contract required for asylum seekers, which are limited in number. The Swiss gave me two options, with no third: either I ask for asylum or leave the country. I was stubborn enough to choose to leave Switzerland, and I moved to do another master's in the Belgian city of Bruges.

I was excited to start a new life in Belgium, despite the bureaucratic chaos I had experienced when I applied for residency there—and later too. My brother has been a refugee there since 2015, and my mother asked for asylum there in 2017. I was going to move as a student to Brugge, in the municipality of Bruges, and the authorities did not know how to deal with my case. I was a Syrian but not a refugee, who came from Switzerland to study in Bruges. Normally, and regardless of your nationality, once you have a residency in a Schengen country you can move to another by registering yourself in the municipality of the city you are moving to. Simply put, you don't need a visa to travel between Schengen countries. When I arrived in the municipality, the agent made a facial expression like "fatal error"! Obviously, she couldn't "categorize" me and figure out which sort of residency system applied to my case. Her argument was that I needed a Belgian visa because Switzerland is not a part of the European Union. "Well, I know, but it's part of Schengen", I answered. I couldn't wait for too long, so I went to the "Office des étrangers" in Brussels. There, they told me, "Bah oui! Mais la Suisse ne fait pas partie de l'espace Schengen". I was surprised by such a comment in the capital of the European Union and didn't know how to respond. In Bruges, it took a month to process my case. They sent me an invitation to deliver the news regarding my case: that I should leave and sign that I had received my departure decision. As that was neither fair nor legal, I refused. They couldn't play with people's destinies irresponsibly like this. I refused even to leave the municipality without talking to the mayor. I argued that I was coming from Schengen country, with a Swiss residency permit and the admission from the College of Europe in Brugge, so that all I needed was to register in Bruges without obtaining a visa from Belgium. After an hour, they understood the case, but they told me that it was too late, and that the decision was already made. "Well, I don't care! I am right", I said. Long story short, we had a bargain, which was: I would go back to Geneva, then re-enter Belgium with a promise they would process my residency request immediately. I got the residency permit four months later. I was fed-up with all the bureaucratic barriers from Switzerland to Belgium. I paid €150 for an urgent card to get it in two days, although I had no pressing reason except that I wanted to feel free from constraints—and that was enough to me to consider it a pressing reason. Niemand is illegaal!

After finishing with my studies, I was looped again into the same problem. I needed a new residency, and no one would hire a Syrian with a Syrian passport, so I moved to Aalst. My mother had moved to Aalst after she obtained her refugee status. No escape! I should now ask for asylum—I had refused this idea for five years as I wanted to keep open the possibility of entering my country again. Tons of memories are still there, and my heart is still in Damascus. In late 2019, I started the process of asylum-seeking. Three months later, I was hired in Brussels for a position with a European NGO. I was disappointed by the Human Rights domain. When I was engaged with Human Rights NGOs and with the Human Rights Council in Geneva, I had a lot of passion to contribute to such values, but I lost my hope in this domain. So, I switched to peacebuilding and conflict resolution, in which I have less experience comparatively. My studies in International Security in Geneva, and later in International Relations and Diplomacy in Brugge, in addition to my experience of five years of war in Syria, was convincing enough to create such change.

With the onset of the pandemic, I was in the process of moving to Brussels, which marked my fourth move during the last five years. The perception of moving, for many people around me, differs from one case to another. One mostly moves to find better opportunities, or to go on adventures. We—you could call "us" however you like: Syrians, Palestinians or Arabs—move to escape something. There is a difference between moving because you have a dream or a goal and moving because you are running away from an unavoidable reality. With all the difficulties we face, we don't lose hope, but we keep struggling for a better future. All my best friends from Syria, with whom I studied and shared my memories, had already left the country for Europe. Most of them had fled Syria in 2015 to Sweden, Germany, Belgium, etc. During the first five years of life in Europe, we didn't succeed in meeting up, because of the residency-related reasons that most of us had to face. In summer 2019, however, we finally met, and it was our first reunion. It was like meeting new friends, and I was new as well. Five years in the diaspora is enough to change people's behaviors, thoughts, and faces. We had a lot to tell each other, but we talked a lot about our shared past in Syria. We avoided talking about our future there.

During the first five years of conflict in Syria, where I witnessed all sorts of grievances, explosions, clashes of heavy and medium weapons, and being detained and kidnapped, my perception of "security" was shaped based by my first-hand experience. It was not a result of what is written in books and the academic world that I became part of. Feeling constantly "insecure" and being subject to violations anytime would make one minimalist in expectations and reduce one's ego to a great extent, but not by choice. You don't choose not to have a car, for instance. You don't live in hard-to-live places because it's exotic. You become a minimalist because you might have to run at any moment. In Brussels and elsewhere in Europe, I saw the fear of potentially not finding toilet paper when COVID arrived. I witnessed the "Toilet Paper Crisis", where policymakers and heads of states presented the current situation as a war. Macron's famous sentence was, "Nous sommes en guerrre".

During the first lockdown, I had a call with a friend of mine, a Syrian refugee who lives in Berlin. He was one of my best friends in Syria, the one I mentioned above, and with whom I went to university. I still remember in one of the lectures, he was brave enough to put our detained colleague's picture on the class's projector with a sentence below demanding his freedom back. He asked for refuge in Germany after he went by sea to Europe. He was in a boat of almost 200 people, half of whom were lost

in the Mediterranean. He survived and was speechless and could not tell me about his experience until today. In that call, we came to this conclusion: we, the people of diaspora, got used to the absence of feeling "secure and free". Actually, we don't know anything different. In Brussels, in addition to being taken by surprise by the pandemic, many friends I already knew were extremely frustrated and to no small extent angry. All their plans for having vacations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were canceled. Ironically, I didn't feel the same disappointment as I am already not able to leave Belgium; I am still in the process of asylum seeking. I understand them for sure. When the lockdown was enforced, they lost their jobs, plans, goals, and their mobility on the top. We, too, lost our home countries, and we moved to countries with restrictions on our movements, with or without COVID-19.

"I am from there. I am from here. I am not there, and I am not here. I have two names, which meet and part, and I have two languages. I forget which of them I dream in", said again Mahmoud Darwish, and I feel the same. I don't know where to belong, or how to introduce myself! Syrian, Arab, refugee, migrant, etc. The lockdown gave me the luxury to reflect on the question of mobility, whereas I didn't find it when I was in Syria. I asked myself what the equivalent term in Arabic is, and I can't find one. When you translate mobility on Google, it will be tahorkiya, or tanaquliya, which renders in most contexts a meaning closer to "transport". I argue that no one would understand the topic without an introduction or a reference to the English meaning of the word. I speak French and English in addition to my Arabic mother tongue, which enriched my thoughts massively, and I believe that concept of mobility doesn't exist in Arabic, compared to its counterpart in English. Mobility in English refers to the ability to move freely with no constraints. In the Arab world, mobility is replaced, if I may say, by other concepts such as "authorization" and "visa regime". While in Europe nation-states were developing their systems to open the borders among them, moving around in the countries of the Arab world became more and more difficult, due to the wars and upheavals there. We need the authorization to leave the country or enter another. The current regimes confiscated even the right to assemble in these countries.

Since the colonial era, we have not been able to move around in our countries and visit our relatives across the borders that were drawn by colonial countries. We thought that, by defeating the Ottoman control on our lands, we would get our freedom. But thanks to the colonial powers, we entered a similar era. We succeeded to get rid of post-Ottoman powers that established the current regimes before leaving. It seems like a vicious circle. We heard from our grandpas the stories of their adventures in Baghdad, Al-Quds (Jerusalem), Haifa, etc. I met people around me here in Europe who used to spend their spare time in our home countries. They told me how beautiful our countries are. Even when we arrived in Europe, our movements were constrained by law, politics, and bureaucracy. I believe that COVID provided an opportunity to the people in the "Western world" to reflect on the complexity of security and mobility. We have been for-good-prisoners inside and outside our home country for ages! The only difference is the size of the prison.

"I like the permanent movement. There's probably some Bedouin blood in my body", said Ghassan Salame, UN Special Envoy to Libya, during an interview with Oslo Forum podcast. His words triggered in me the interest to keep reflecting on the concept of mobility in Arabic. The only relevant term I found was "Bedouinism", an ancient cultural

and institutional phenomenon that mainly refers to the people from the Arab world. Bedouins are the Arabs who live in the desert and use camels to move without being concerned about visas and borders. A myth of origins, yes; when the Arabs were Bedouins riding their camels and peasants in the villages, they were free and much freer than in this "modern" world order and its forcibly imposed system. In a region where families were separated due to borders, and moved forcibly to another place as well as in camps, it makes sense to not find a concept describing the ability to move freely.

It's not praise for COVID-19, but it's a call for all to seize this moment and reflect on where this world is going. If we would like to reflect on "mobility" today in Arabic, I would make a strong connection to the revolution of the people of the Arab world during Intifada (uprising) and the Arab spring. I would say mobility in Arabic means hurriya, the same word that the whole region was repeating, which means "freedom". This is the world we want, that we dreamed of for a century. This is our, or perhaps my own, ideal "Maram". We want to move around without any constraints. We want to chase our desire and goal in life freely, as other people on this earth do. But first and foremost, we need to feel free. With all the complexity we lived with for generations, our freedom would only be based on adel… the Arabic term for justice, that is also used as a given name for individuals. And Adel, could be any Arab migrant in the diaspora.

SHIVAN FAZIL

Biography

Shivan Fazil is a Researcher with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. His work focuses on drivers of conflict, peacebuilding, and governance in Iraq. Shivan holds an MSc in Middle Eastern Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is the recipient of the Chevening Scholarship, a prestigious award by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. He has just co-edited a book on Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan, published by Transnational Press London.

Protests in the MENA: cultural narratives and social upward mobility

In many ways, 2020 felt rather apocalyptic. Machiavellian as it was, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly brought every aspect of life to a grinding halt. We have all been ships stuck in our own personal Suez Canal, and for a moment, at least, we could all relate to the predicament of the giant shipping container. Businesses and schools swiftly shut, tourist hotspots suddenly became eerily deserted, and our movements became heavily restricted—all of which in order to contain the spread of the novel virus. It is not an overstatement to say that the pandemic has had a profound impact on human mobility. Hence, it has prompted many academics, artists, cultural anthropologists, and others to re-think mobility and what it means during and after the pandemic. Relatedly, the pandemic has brought to wider consciousness the deep-rooted inequalities within and between different communities that are felt along various lines from ethnicity to income level.

Specifically, the pandemic has thrown socio-economic inequalities into sharp relief. Access to healthcare and education, to work and technology, are among the areas of society where coronavirus has highlighted real disparities. "Unprecedented" they maybe in some countries, Covid-19 induced socio-economic challenges that cannot be dismissed as a one-off deviation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where according to the available data and recent research, it is historically the most unequal region in the world. This is due both to enormous inequality between countries (particularly between oil-rich gulf and labour-abundant countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and so on) and due to large inequality within countries often underestimated given the limited access to fiscal data. The World Inequality Database ranks the region as the most unequal region in the world. While economic inequality has decreased worldwide since the 1990s, it has remained constant in the Middle East.

Inequality and its discontents

A decade ago, a series of popular movements sprung up in the MENA region. The main demand of the peaceful and pro-democracy protestors was social justice, which suggests that income inequality might be one of the driving factors responsible for the uprising. A closer look at the inequality data between 1990 and 2019 not only validates these movements' claims but also highlights three main alarming results. First, the MENA region is the most unequal region worldwide, with the top 10% capturing 56% of the average national income in 2019, and the top 1% earning almost twice the share of the bottom 50%, 23% compared to 12%. Second, Gulf countries are the most unequal within the MENA region: 54% of national income benefits the top 10%. Finally, inequality levels have remained persistent over the last three decades. Compared to other regions in the world, the MENA region's top 10% income share exceeding 56% in 2019, is close to that of Africa (55%), and higher than that of Asia (49%), the United States (47%), and Western Europe (34%). To put it differently, the countries in the MENA region not only produce greater inequality than almost every other region/part of the world, but also deliver less social upward mobility.

Furthermore, young people experience a double inequality crisis as result of the demographic phenomenon known as the youth bulge and the deeply entrenched inequality in their countries, aggravating the already high demand for labour and employment during the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have established that countries with a burgeoning youthful population are more prone to social unrest and civil conflict. High unemployment rates, especially among the youth, have constituted a major challenge for the governments in the region.

Inequality has its discontents and fosters instability, which is especially true when it overlaps with a growing sense of injustice, endemic corruption, and declining trust in political leaders, parties, and institutions. The same extreme inequality underlies recent protests throughout the region where, a decade after the Arab Spring, the political change many across the board have hoped for has yet to be seen and where street protests continue to endure, often over the same recurring issues. In 2019, the MENA region was rocked by a new wave of protests, which was particularly intense in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, minimizing mobility and assembly, presented a challenge for these anti-government protests by limiting their ability for mobilisation. However, with their demands unmet, protests have resumed in Iraq and Lebanon since the last quarter of 2020 and are ongoing, albeit with less intensity. Many analysts have referred to this new wave of anti-government protests as the "new Arab Spring", or "Arab Spring 2.0", and argue that they are associated to that persistent and extreme levels of inequality in the region.

Arab Uprising, when the spring turns into winter

During the last decade, a series of popular and pro-democracy uprisings swept through the MENA region. The events, which more broadly began in the spring of 2011 leading to the name "Arab Spring", were a watershed moment seen by many to usher a wave of change in which the people could force a transformation in the relationship between the society, the state, and the underlying social contract. A decade later, with the exception of Tunisia, albeit with a fragile transition, that relationship as well as the conditions which sparked the popular uprisings remain much the same, if not worse. Moreover, while some of the Arab Spring protests did result in regime change, not all of them brought about the positive and desired change in the aftermath. Libya, Syria, and Yemen have all descended into civil wars. In Egypt, the counter-revolution deepened the country's malaise. Since then, there have been multiple waves of protests.

الساحة

A new wave of anti-government protests

The new wave of anti-government protests has gripped the countries that appeared immune from the popular revolutionary fervour in 2011. The new wave started in Sudan in December 2018, soon followed by Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq towards the end of 2019. Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq have witnessed some of the most enduring mass protests akin to those of Arab Spring, where the protestors showed incredible resilience in the face of a forceful response by government security forces and a global pandemic. In all three countries, the protestors have built themselves a position of influence to prevent the business-as-usual approach of ruling political elite. The largest catalyst so far has been the popular uprising in Sudan. In mid-September of 2019, the Sudanese began staging some of the biggest and most enduring demonstrations since the Arab Spring. They forced the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir, initiated a tricky transition with the military, and abolished the strict Islamic legislations associated with the previous regime. In Iraq, where I am from, a largely youth-led protest movement sprung up on October 1, 2019, against high unemployment, endemic corruption, and dire living conditions. While the pandemic dented the movement and presented a challenge for organization and mobilisation, protests have recently started to regroup.

Similar socio-economic grievances but wider political ambitions

The new wave of protest movement in the MENA is fuelled by the same socioeconomic grievances, unemployment, dismal services, and endemic corruption, to name a few, and also, by broader political demands such as accountability, transparency, and the overhaul of political systems. However, despite being sparked by the same socio-economic grievances, significant differences between the last wave of major uprisings and those of today exist. What is striking is the widening scope of the new wave of protests that has moved from socio-economic focused demands to demands for fundamental political reforms, including a complete change in the existing political systems and new election laws. These demands also include accountability, transparency, and a new political system to put an end to the quota-based power sharing as in the case of the protest movements of Lebanon and Iraq.

The protestors also have realized that governments of the region are structurally incapable of addressing their socio-economic grievances. In Iraq, protestors have been demanding an end to identity-based politics, and instead call for issue-based politics—signalling a post-sectarian shift in Iraqi society. Nearly two decades later, public anger is simmering over high youth unemployment, endemic corruption, and dismal public services. To be sure, the spread of the pandemic has worsened the underlying grievances, fuelling protests especially in the south, which floats on oil yet groans from hunger. At the start of the pandemic, 20% of Iraqis lived below the poverty line with significant regional polarization; the rate was more significant at 30% in the historically poorer southern parts of the country. In Iraq, protestors have also started to believe that change is only possible from within. A new election law, a key demand of the protest movement, is believed to provide greater opportunities for smaller parties and new entrants. As an extension to the 2019 protests, protest leaders and activists have launched new parties to push for demands made by protestors in the "October Revolution" upcoming parliamentary elections.

Moreover, if the 2011 protests sufficed with the toppling or resignation of long-term autocrats, the current protest movements' wrath is over the entire political establishment. The protestors realize that the authoritarian durability and resilience in their respective countries is connected to the wider political establishment, and thus without overhauling the political establishment, the regime is resilient and durable enough to stage a comeback. The protestors did not settle with the resignation of the president in Algeria, nor did they in Lebanon and Iraq with the resignation of the prime minister and the government respectively. Instead, the protestors in Iraq and Lebanon demanded the overhaul of the ethno-sectarian power sharing system, ostensibly to guarantee inclusive representation, in favor of an issue-based rather than identity-based politics.

Finally, the protestors across the board also took lessons from the regional dynamics that turned the Arab Spring of 2011 into a "winter", due to the regional response that turned the uprisings into sectarian strife and civil war such as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Unlike 2011, the protestors from Algeria to Iraq have rejected regional meddling into their countries' affairs and express their rejection of any efforts that could widen the underlying political rifts. In summation, despite these significant differences, it remains to be seen if the current wave of protests can force through long overdue change and transformation.

Shaped by stories of hope and despair

Beyond these similarities and differences, what these uprisings have recurringly demonstrated and have in common across the board is the feeling of despair, rage, and hope manifested in civil disobedience and in acts, forms, and contours of resistance. They are the expression of the same underlying issues of diminishing opportunities and prospects, reflecting human conditions unique to their respective contexts. Growing up in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), I have been shaped by the ebbs and flows of Iraq's contemporary and tumultuous history. Coming of age after the turn of the century following the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein's tyrannic regime has had a profound impact on my formative experience and life choices, by design or as a result of unintended consequences.

The KRI, where I originally hail from, is the story of a reversal of fortunes. It was once hailed as an oasis of stability for its peace and prosperity, and for a period it looked to be on its way to secede from a highly violent and unstable Iraq, but not anymore. The paths of KRI and Iraq started to notably converge from 2014 onward with the emergence of the so-called Islamic State and economic crisis. Both have failed to diversify their economy and hence remain susceptible to the impact of oil price shocks. From the outset of the pandemic, oil prices plummeted as a result of global economic contraction and lower demand because of COVID-19. Moreover, in recent years, protests over unemployment, unpaid salaries, and austerity measures have become a recurring theme. In line with the general trend in Iraq and the rest of the MENA region, the aspirations of a growing youthful Kurdish population are crushed, while disillusionment with the political system and ruling class has grown, and interest in politics has faded.

The quest to understanding the local dynamics and their connection and

interaction with global events made me try to understand other similar and different contexts, to look for patterns, trends, and meanings. It is also what shaped my personal viewpoints and the lenses through which I read and re-read events. My experience as a witness of events in the MENA region in general, and Iraq in particular, was also influential in the pursuit of a "mobility of thinking" to better understand to understand and contextualize the human conditions, grievances and forces underpinning these popular uprisings and social movements.

The same quest has been informing my current career goals and ambitions. In September 2020, despite travel restrictions due to the pandemic, I decided to relocate to Sweden, via Turkey, to pursue my research interests focusing on conflict, peace, and development at a prestigious think tank. After an arduous journey, which included a 24-hour bus trip and a domestic flight, I arrived in Istanbul where I stayed for a month waiting for my work permit to be processed. I relocated to Stockholm in October of 2020, where I have been living and working in the six months since. Ironically, Sweden has followed an unorthodox approach, and its shutdown-free pandemic response has prompted a global debate on the effectiveness of lockdowns and restrictions on mobility. That said, unlike in many countries, staying indoor is not a choice for many in Iraq and elsewhere in the MENA region who rely on informal work—impossible during lockdown—to survive.

NOUR NASRELDIN

Biography

Nour Nasreldin is an Egyptian writer and filmmaker with a degree in Film Studies from the American University in Cairo. She works as a writer, filmmaker, and Creative Communications Manager of Egypt's leading Arts and Culture Center Darb 1718. Nasreldin's path in the art field is already filled with a number of successful creative projects from working on award winning films, like Clash (2016) which opened the prestigious Un Certain Regard at Festival de Cannes to having her work featured in the Huffington Post US.

Spiritual Mobility in a Time of Physical Immobility

"Herodotus knows that in order to get to know Others, one must take to the road, reach them, manifest readiness to make contact; and that is why he continually travels. He wants to get to know Others since he understands that in order to get to know yourself better you must get acquainted with the Others". These are the words of the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski, whose explanation for the need for travelling is rooted in one's own ability and desire to reach beyond his or her own horizons, by exploring the world outside their doorstep. As far as I'm concerned, this has always been my personal plan as well: to never allow myself the chance to stop evolving. As a twenty-six-year-old "struggling" artist first and foremost, this means to always try to go beyond my own limitations, be it by traveling—even though this is not easily feasible—or by discovering new cultures; by participating to as many artistic endeavors as possible, such as visiting museums, galleries, etc.; by meeting new people (when the extrovert in me takes the wheel); by engaging in different forms of conversation.

As a woman born in Egypt, I have feared missing out on experiencing what life has to offer since childhood. The reason behind this is that I grew up in a country that was once the greatest on Earth, exceptionally beautiful and terrifyingly powerful. All my life, I have listened to stories about how great this country is, all the wars we fought, and all the monuments we built; all the revolutions, the resources, the richest history in the world…a time when a woman could walk alone in the street at 11:00 p.m. without hyperventilating her way through it, and how tens of other armies have marched and constantly failed at trying to take over the country. But allow me to say, I have witnessed none of that.

The country I grew up in is old, tired, and weary. It is marked by the pain our rulers caused when they let us down, time after time, and its streets still reek of the blood of those who dared to stand up against them. The country I grew up in is not the country I learned about in school, nor the one my grandmother loved, and it is not the one she imagined I would spend my life in. This land has witnessed so much injustice and wrongfulness in the last thirty-plus years, that an entire generation grew up sickened with anxiety and fear. We started a revolution, witnessed death, and stood helpless while our friends were being thrown in jail, while they were getting shot. We fought for our rights, we fought for our freedom, our land, and we overthrew entire governments. We withstood and resisted, until there was no more fighting left in us. For those reasons, I grew up with the crippling idea that if I don't do something about it, this place will

become the death of my soul, of my dreams…and I had so many; I do have so many. I couldn't let that happen. I knew I had so much to see, and much more to live for, and that's why as an adult I often dream of leaving; but until I do, I have promised myself to open as many doors in life as possible…which is why at nineteen, while studying filmmaking at university, I started working as an assistant director. From then on, my life has been an eventful trip, full of ups and downs and packed with various attempts at trying out new things. Always, because one of my biggest, secret fears is to wake up one day and realize that this place has maimed the one thing I cannot lose: myself.

When I first got the news of the lockdown, in March 2020, I was in shock…but not because of the new regulations taking place, as I ultimately saw that part as inevitable and I had already been exposed to the whole home-lockdown-routine thing before—in 2011, during the revolution. This time, however, I was startled because in the blink of an eye I had to stay at home, at such a critical time in my career. It took me some time to even attempt to process and make sense of this fact: what was to become of my plans for the future? How would I be able to just "sit around" and accept the reality that I was, indeed, immobilized? Almost everything I do in life, including work, requires going out either to shoot, organize an event, attend a meeting, or explore to find inspiration. What was to become of my daily routine, that mainly worked to help me stay sane and on-track in a city so big, so chaotic, and so damn loud? Basically, my main problem was with the sudden, almost awkward disappearance of every single thing that had kept me distracted, ultimately preventing me from sitting with myself for long periods of time. I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't ready to confront myself.

Contrary to my own belief, the world around me didn't stop turning. Yes, so many changes have taken place since that day and, to my immense surprise, a ton of those changes were for the better. It turned out that the silence I had been dreading was exactly the refuge I needed to finally have the space to pour out all the chaos I had been breathing in at work, and on the streets; the anger I have been carrying since I was a child for countless reasons, that included not having been born in a country that saw me the way I needed to be seen, the commotion caused by the hundred vocal chords I was forced to give my ear to every day, my own narcissism; a natural consequence of covertly always thinking I am not good enough, my anxiety, and my fears…I had to pour all this out from my infected soul. I had so much to get rid of, and so much inner work to do. Spiritual mobility is what I needed the most. By that, I mean that I needed to look at the world through a whole new pair of glasses, since I was so upset with how it saw me.

Not so long after the beginning of the lockdown, in an attempt to save their businesses and keep things going, every art institution and artist, including myself, began searching for new ways to infiltrate the virtual world. Cairo, the city I have lived in during my entire life, is so blaring and incredibly full of life that business owners had no other choice but to find a way to cause the same bustle elsewhere. Everyone was blowing a gasket. I remember one time I spoke to the manager of one of the biggest trap artists in Egypt, we'll call him "V", to try to get V to lead our first Covid-19 stay-at-home arts campaign at Darb 1718—a well-established arts and culture center in Egypt. He told me his guy was both scared and depressed because of the pandemic, and therefore he would not be able to take part in any arts initiatives taking place at the time. Times were hard for everyone, and some people were hit harder than others…but these are just the middle and upper classes I'm talking about. The lockdown caused major disruptions to families that couldn't even afford to become concerned about the pandemic and had to provide a meal to the people they cared for; a worldwide

catastrophe was the last thing they needed. What I'm trying to say is that a lot of times I don't feel eligible to complain, since I am so lucky to have had the privilege of working remotely in the first place. A lot of people were really, truly suffering out there.

In a matter of weeks, the switch was made, and art became accessible in countless fields, including media other than mobile phones. A quick note that is crucial to know about accessibility in this case: in Cairo, people worship their phones. I mean it. Everybody is always on their phones, 24/7. We got a 100% male dominated little profession here in Egypt called Bawab, which is basically the apartment building's security guard except he gets paid less, doesn't wear a uniform, watches women like a hawk, and lives in a room in the garage. The Bawab's wife once told me that he kept stalling buying a refrigerator for the family, because he wanted to get a new phone with two cameras first. And he did. Carrying on… Because of this transformation, new conversations emerged on all sorts of online platforms, and art became the number one healer and the sanctuary for all those affected by the pandemic—who also have internet access. From the largest film platforms like HBO, Showtime, and Sundance offering their films to watch online free of charge, to 24-hour takeovers by all sorts of artists that soon enough invaded every Instagram account. It was unclear what we were expected to do in the midst of this global "pause": were we meant to slow down or to stop running in the wheel? At first, it seemed like a dead-end; an unanticipated prison sentence that we had no control over. It dawned on me like a bolt from the blue that I wouldn't be able to function the same way I used to, and just the idea of that in my head was paralyzing.

But then, as time went by, people became more aware of their physical immobility, and a harrowing creative block prevented me from engaging in any art-related activity— meaning that I felt I related more to a dead battery that some aunt bit into, than to any of the people around me. During that same period, I was wallowing in self-doubt, self-pity and other amusing self-nouns… the path was being paved for a new, much more necessary mode of coping, and that is spiritual mobility. The reason why this form, in particular, seemed to stand out as the most promising to me at that particular time is that I was a) desperate to try out anything that could even remotely help me deal with all the emotions that were popping like soda fizz due to the whole Covid-19 situation, and b) I had absolutely nothing to lose and I always felt drawn toward the spiritual, but have never fully given it a good go. I mean, I come from a Muslim country where, unfortunately and in my personal opinion, a lot of people have found a way to exploit religion to their own benefit and patriarchal ambitions. Hence, religion has become less of one's connection to their God and more of a tool to give men even more power than they already have. Of course, even though none of us will probably ever reach spiritual perfection in this life, we humans tend to know exactly how to impede our spiritual potential. Such limitations occur through our repetitive behavioral patterns and our actions…or the lack thereof.

With the multiple impacts, physical and mental, that this worldwide crisis had on all of us individuals, it was crucial that we began to look within ourselves, after years of neglecting our minds and bodies' needs. Slowly but steadily, this time of hardship appeared to turn into a time for self-reflection, a journey to heal and find one's own inner peace and balance, as a new spiritual movement that could be felt all around was on the rise. Mind you, this spiritual awakening, this movement was only accessible to those who could afford to make time to take care of their mental wellbeing. I began to feel driven by a mysterious force (dark under-eye circles and killer migraines) that made me want to start taking proper care of myself. I was legitimately tired. Soon

enough the internet caught up with the positive shift to more mindful and spiritually conscious practices and patterns of thinking. The web began to stockpile thousands of posts, articles, affirmations, courses, and quotes, urging people to start working on their relationship with themselves in order to get better at dealing with the world around them; especially given the difficult nature of the global situation that we all were and still are facing together.

Yep, it's all yogis and gurus now. If you think I'm writing this sarcastically, then you're absolutely right. Even though I am the number one supporter of spiritual awareness and mobility—I mean, check the title of this narrative again—there is a scent of false spirituality and fraudulent practices in all this, that promise to completely transform your life if you trade in your pair of jeans for harem pants, and leave your family behind to go find yourself at forty-six. A lot of people nowadays are misled to think that positivity means being in a complete state of denial and shunning every bad feeling you get, which only serves to further disconnect humans from one another and turn us into mere bots. And so, it is necessary to remind oneself that spirituality isn't all fun, games, and sage burning. It is hard, it is gritty, and some parts of the process are absurdly, inconceivably so. Nevertheless, if there is one path in life that is worth pouring your heart, and soul, and every little ounce of energy into, it is this one; the one where you make the conscious daily decision to become a better human being. Spirituality is the only road in life that doesn't require you to become anything other than who you already are. And then, it makes you a better human.

Better late than never, isn't it? Because of this bold and much needed spiritual movement, some employers and business owners started to become more aware of the needs of their employees, and actively started tending to them by being more flexible with their working hours, for example, which led to an increase in productivity and in a decrease in stress levels; although a number of employees reported suffering from loneliness and anxiety, whose attacks are notoriously sly. Employees who are used to things like lunch and coffee-break chats were surely going to miss communicating and connecting with their colleagues. And that's merely one example of how harmful isolation can be to someone's mental health, which is precisely why one has to make their spiritual connection with who he or she truly is as a person. The most important relationship in our lives, after all, is with ourselves, because when all else fades away and the things you have, for so long, taken for granted are taken away from you and you're left only to your own devices, you want to guarantee at least that your company will be good enough for yourself.

BERAT KJAMILI

Biography

Berat Kjamili is a social entrepreneur that co-invented two migration management websites with over 15-million users. He is the co-founder of the Migport App which bridges refugees and locals. He was the Project Manager and co-organiser of the world's biggest hackathon, #EUvsVirus which had over 21,000 participants. Currently, he is Coordinator of Social Entrepreneurship Workshop at Rutgers University, USA, as well as worked as Associate Coordinator of the University of San Diego, 2017 Hansen Leadership Institute in San Diego, California. Berat was awarded as a 2018 Young Transatlantic Innovation Leaders Initiative fellow of the U.S. Department of State and German Marshall Fund.

The story of a Migrapreneur impacting 15 million lives

Where the story started!

My name, Berat, means "liberation" in the Ottoman Turkish language. I was born in a Turkish-Albanian family in Northern Macedonia, a country where we live as a minority. Growing up, my family told me stories about how the Turks and Albanians became minorities after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. For 539 years, my ancestors were landowners, whereas now I feel I am an alien in the land in which I was born. However, I am aware that this has been going on for thousands of years in my country, and in the whole Balkan region: before the Ottomans, there were the Slavs, and before them, the Romans, even the Persians, and the Greeks. This is what I feel has been my heritage, for thousands of years. In the Balkans, one can easily observe a person talking in a Slavic language and drinking Turkish coffee while dancing with Greek music. On the one hand, there is rich history; on the other hand, the memories are not always pleasant. My story started in 1993, as I was born that year in the city of Gostivar, in a new country that had just declared its independence in 1991, giving itself the name "Macedonia". I thought I was living in Macedonia but I eventually learnerd, while watching Eurovision during my teenage years, that I actually lived in the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". I still have a vivid memory of the civil war. I was sitting with my mother and sister at home when my father came back running, and told us that the civil war had started. It was 2001. I was still living in Gostivar, where most of the population is Albanian. In my imagination as a kid, the civil war seemed like adults playing with toy guns. Today, when I see kids playing on the streets in war zone countries, I think of myself back then. A traumatic event happened in that period that made me understand the seriousness of the world. While playing with my friends on the unfinished floor of our building, I fell and broke my backbone. It was a very hard lesson for me to learn: that day I became a "grownup kid". Recently, I asked my mother to tell me about the time when I fell. She told me that "the road to the hospital was so silent". They were transferring me to the capital city hospital and the highways were dangerous; they were afraid of a possible attack on the ambulance while transferring. When you ask people about their childhood, they smile, whereas I remember my injury. As I recall my memories as a kid, I suddenly realize how hard the times we went through were. The war passed, and as I grew up, my backbone recovered and the word "war" became a remote memory. Recently, upon learning from the television that Macedonia had changed again into North Macedonia to make peace with Greece, I smiled and told my friends that one

can actually move to three different countries without even leaving the house! From Yugoslavia to Macedonia, from Macedonia to FYROM, and from FYROM to North Macedonia. It is now a very peaceful country, and we do not have the same problems we had before. We now have minority rights and language, as North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic country where people speak Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Romani, and more. Today, we can study in our first languages, which are different from Macedonian. The relations between Turks and Europeans might be complicated, but to me it is all politics. Instead of looking at the political agenda of leaders, we should look more for similarities and shared history… this will lead to a better and more inclusive Europe. I am a Turk and Albanian with Macedonian citizenship, who shares and lives by European values. In Germany, Özlem Türeci and Uğur Şahin also come from Turkish roots, and they developed the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Back to origins or exile!

After high school, I decided to move to Turkey, to study in a country where I would share the same language and history. I am also of Turkish descent. When people ask about my nationality, I say that I am Turkish and Albanian as a Macedonian citizen. Long story short, I was accepted to study at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. When I moved to Turkey, I realized that I became "officially" a foreigner there, not a Turkish citizen according to the law. I had to queue for days outside a government building in Turkey to get the document that would allow me—an 18-year-old student from North Macedonia—to reside and study in the country legally. In front of the government building, there were 1,000 people and I could not get in. The following day I went at 6 a.m. instead, and still I could not get my papers. This was not something I dreamt of when moving. I literally slept on the street that night, to beat the queue. In the line I saw refugees and students like me, from many countries. Legally speaking, being a foreigner and having to renew the papers to reside, work, and study seemed even more difficult than belonging to a minority in the country in which I was born! Finally, I received my papers to register at the school. This first experience of obtaining the residence permit eventually led me to start a non-profit student club at my university, to bring together international students. Our non-profit organization led me to create a website where more than 10 million foreigners in Turkey applied for residency permits online in the following years, including myself. As a Turk without Turkish citizenship, it made me feel proud to see it was funded and now operated by the Turkish government. Now people, including myself, do not have to wait in line for days. People call me a migrant, foreigner, refugee, and sometimes ex-pat. However, I define myself as a global citizen and a social entrepreneur.

Opening my western window

When I was in Turkey, I was offered a summer school scholarship by the Hansen Leadership Institute at the University of San Diego. I loved the program so much that the year after I also worked there as associate coordinator for the program. In 2016, I thus opened my western window onto the world: a new world of which I did not know much except from what I had seen in Hollywood movies. The sunset in San Diego was as excellent as I expected, and there's no need to mention the nice weather one sees in the movies! The picture in my imagination became real. I was not only looking from my western window, but also living the American dream: learning the American way of business, politics, and life. As we walked in the streets of San Diego, my new friends and I saw many homeless people. In Macedonia and Turkey, I had never seen as

many. The scene still is vivid in my memory, where one homeless person was reading a book next to a building. However, America, the land of immigrants, welcomed me. My friends asked me, "Where are you from?" My answer was Macedonia and Turkey. They laughed when I said two countries; they asked me, "How could you be from the two countries?" In order to explain it, I needed to dig into hundreds of years of history. I kept saying Turkey and Macedonia. In San Diego, I learned about social entrepreneurship and leadership. We formed a team and started working on an idea. I saw on television the news of Syrian refugees in those days, and of a kid who got injured, so afraid while waiting far the ambulance. I saw myself in that picture. Nowadays North Macedonia is a very peaceful country, but twenty years ago, I was in their shoes in the heart of Europe. "There must be something for these kids and other refugees", I told myself. Afterwards, I started a social enterprise called Migport in San Diego, to enable technological solutions for refugees. Towards the end of summer school, we had one class at the Mexico border, a friendship wall between the US and Mexico. There were places on the wall where you can greet the people from the other side, so I greeted a Mexican and we shook hands through the wall. Maybe, that brief moment of friendship inspired me to find more solutions for migration.

Journey to migrapreneurship

The Syrian civil war was one of the great catastrophes of our times, and it strongly affected my life decisions. When I came to Turkey, there were many children from Syria, and I immediately felt that I was somehow like them while growing up. I wanted to make the refugees' voices heard, but I also knew that this alone would not solve their problems. This is how I started looking at the NGOs and governmental organizations in Turkey, to analyze what projects already esisted to help refugees. With my new team, Migport, I had to understand the problems of refugees, and we started by drinking tea with them. There are about 5 million refugees in Turkey, and it is impossible to sit and drink tea with 5 million people, but the internet facilitated our task. We started Migport to help refugees explain their problems, drinking tea online with NGOs and other organizations whose mission is to help them. At Migport, we believe that evidence-based policies can change millions of lives, and even widespread misperceptions of refugees. Migport became an online platform to listen to refugees, and to understand what they need; it now assists governmental organizations and NGOs with running more inclusive projects that are based on what the refugees themselves tell us. Again, this is not enough to address all the refugees' needs, but I do not believe that social entrepreneurs can save the world alone; yet, if everyone takes one small step, we can live in a better one. As the Turkish philosopher Ionna Kucuradi states, "when we act based ethics, human values, and human rights, the earth will not be a paradise but will be closer to the paradise", and this goal motivates me to do my part for social change. Even if Migport does something small to serve refugees, it potentially can help millions of lives. Many local entrepreneurs work for refugees. I believe that NGOs should use technology more. The private sector connects to technology, and most of their policies are super technological. Suppose we would like to live in a better world. As businesses are familiar with these technological terms, so should the civil society actors. I do not want to live in a world where many people die of poverty, whereas the rest of the world enjoys wealth. I do not want to live in a world where we have strict boundaries and forget that we are all humans, where rich countries get all the vaccines, and developing countries cannot even vaccinate a small proportion of their population. I'm very passionate about social entrepreneurship. I have known many

social entrepreneurs that go to developing countries, build their solutions there, and help them to serve their population better. I've met these people, been inspired by them, and I try to become one of them. As a migrapreneur, I have two different hats: one being an entrepreneur, and the other being a migrant. When we talk about entrepreneurs, their lives sound more exciting. However, as a migrant, one's reaction is not as good as being an entrepreneur. One opens the television, and sees people saying, "Migrants go home". Carrying a migrant hat is not that easy. I like to see myself as a traveler, who visits and lives in different parts of the world and collects memories. When I was a kid, I always dreamt of traveling the world, and other planets as well! So far, I have not been able to visit other planets but have been to many countries, met with many different people, experienced many cultures, and am grateful for each of them. All these travels, short-term residences, cities I visited, and friends I met have led me to combine all of them as an integral part of myself. These are experiences the very ones that made me become a social migrapreneur. They made me realize that we are no different, as human beings, despite the languages and countries. Yet, these postivie experiences were also accompanied by risks and uncertainties. When I was accepted to study in the United States, I was so afraid that I wouldn't get my visa to the United States. In comparative terms, Macedonia's passport is not that bad, as one can travel to Europe without visas, but I didn't hear good stories from Macedonians trying to get a U.S. visa. I was happy and relieved when my request for a U.S. visa got accepted. I recall another memory at the German borders, when I went to Germany: I showed my passport to the German police, and all the documents I had about the a event I was attending with my startup in Germany. The policemen saw that I was stressed; one of them told me: "Do not worry, you are a European; welcome to Europe". Crossing borders is an experience that creates anxieties, even if it goes well. Once I had been selected to represent Turkey in a student entrepreneurship competition in Canada, and I applied for a Canadian visa. I felt proud to represent Turkey in a competition as an international student. I provided all the documents to obtain the Canadian visa, but just three days before departure, I received an email stating that my visa to Canada had been rejected! It was a great blow for me. I was in my startup office back then, a small office in a startup incubator center, where other entrepreneurs rented their desks. I started wandering in the office, telling my friends and colleagues that my visa request had been rejected, but I did not know what to do. Then I wrote to Justin Trudeau, the president of Canada, and his office connected me with the ministry of immigration. The process took some time, and many back and forths between the embassy and the institution organizing the competition, but finally my visa was granted for Canada, just two days before the beginning of the event! This experience taught me that one should never give up! It is not always easy, but sometimes there is a way to make things possible. Posting a travel photo on Instagram does not mean that one can travel easily. For me, all the pictures I post on social media from foreign countries have a story of hardships and visa procedures, but for me, they all are worth it. Nevertheless, I still cannot imagine the challenges that people fleeing war face applying for visas and starting new lives in their host countries. We should keep in mind that we are all in the same boat. For those who are lucky enough to travel, crossing borders might turn into an instructive experience. In 2019, I visited Macau and Hong Kong, in China. When I arrived at the border, I saw no officials. The Chinese were using automatic cloud computing for their citizens. Visiting China brought me a new perspective towards the world. In 30 years, the country has reduced extreme poverty dramatically, from 400 million people in extreme poverty to 40 million people approximately. Today, they have

the same technology as the Europeans or the Americans.

So-called New Normal

While I was in the middle of my journey with my startup, I suddenly saw videos on YouTube where Chinese people experienced a lockdown. A couple of months later, in March 2020, the lockdown started in Turkey and Europe and still continues to this date, March 2021! Europeans and neighboring countries experienced a new normal. The "new normal" meant no travel, lockdown, and pandemic. The new normal changed our lives, from the way we work to the education we have. Zoom became a new hub—a hub that includes schools, conferences, dinners, and family. Many people experienced this online world for the first time in their lives. My family is in Macedonia, as well as my friends from all around the world. So, I am grateful for online life; meeting with my family via video conferencing has been my reality for years. When I moved to Turkey, my sister was ten years old; I have witnessed her growing from the video calls for nine years. I also added more memories with my friends in the United States, Australia, and Africa via video conferencing. Talking about the new normal has become a new normal. I, too, even started a podcast called "What normal?" to talk about the transformation. However, I am not concerned about the new normal as I am worried about minorities. After all, what kind of normality did we leave behind? I am not a fan of the extreme poverty that we still have globally. I am not a fan of forced migration, because of which 70 million people needed to leave their homes due to violence and war. I believe in the new normal more than the old one. I challenge the leaders to question the old normal. We all should ask how we can build up the new normal so that we have more equality, opportunities, and peace.

Hacking the pandemic: Hackathons

A new trend started during the pandemic, the Covid-19 Hackathons. The word, Hackathon, comes from hacking and marathon. People who attend the hackathons innovate and prepare a MVP (Minimum Viable Product) in a limited time, to solve the problem defined by the hackathon. A minimum viable product is a product with just enough features to satisfy early customers and provide future product development feedback. Given the social problems, economic, and lockdown effects of the coronavirus, innovators from Europe and the globe started organizing hackathons everywhere. I have participated in an organization called Coronathon Turkey. Academia, entrepreneurs, the government, civil society organizations collaborated and searched for solutions to the pandemic's social problems, and it was inspiring to see all these different actors collaborate to save the world. Besides, this movement did not only start in Turkey; other innovators organized hackathons in Estonia, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and other countries simultaneously. After each country organized its own hackathon, the European Commission brought together all the foremost Covid-19 hackathon organizers under the European Commission umbrella, which resulted in the world's biggest hackathon thus far. Initiators started to match teams to mentors, working behind the scenes to connect people from all around Europe. During the competition, neither the borders nor the visas mattered. Refugees also participated in finding innovative solutions for the pandemic, which I found motivating. Coronathon Turkey and EUvsVirus prove that social entrepreneurship and collaboration are a way to solve social problems that individuals, volunteers, and social entrepreneurs can achieve. For me, this journey meant civil collaboration, borderless efforts, and international teamwork. I was there as a Turkish/Albanian (and not to forget Macedonian), collaborating with people from Europe and around the world. As a citizen, civil participation gave me hope for the new normal. The fact that people worldwide met at the hackathon led to several social initiatives to start in Europe and is a source of hope for the future.

Latest stop or a break

After organizing the hackathons, Migport, my social enterprise, motivated me more than ever to find financial solutions to include refugees in the host countries using technology. The online shift has made the entrepreneurs' journey more volatile; however, it has also created new pathways for the startups through the new online opportunities. Hackathons, competitions, NGOs, and even life are in the transformation toward the new digital era. Hence, startups should also update themselves, adopt new digital business models, and destroy the old-fashioned businesses creatively. I have enjoyed every minute of my migrapreneurship journey, both its ups and downs, winning and losing, being strong and vulnerable. Now, I am proud of being a global citizen and a social migrapreneur. I am also proud of being a minority, Turkish & Albanian, from the country I was born in, Macedonia. I am hopeful for the future; I am optimistic for the new impact of businesses and ethical technologies. I will continue to work for a new normal better than the old one, to make it a livable world for all of us.

ASMA MOKHTARI

Biography

Asma Mokhtari is a fashion designer and founder of the fashion brand for kids' clothes. She is a member of the executive of board of Algerian Center for Social Entrepreneurship ACSE. She launched a training program in 2018 for women rural artisans, to preserve the local know-how of embroidery making and empower economically the region of Tibhirine, Medea".

Hope and Crisis in Algeria from Hirak to Pandemic

On March 23rd, 2020, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced a full lockdown for the governorate of Blida, not far south of Algiers, the capital of Algeria. That is where I was born and where I live with my family, an industrial region famous for its manufacturing and its artisanal products. The city became the first epicenter of COVID-19 in the country, and where the largest number of cases was registered during the early stages of the contagion. It took a while for the virus to reach Algeria. A few months before the beginning of the lockdown in Blida, I started seeing posts on social media about a new virus that was decimating hundreds of people in China. A friend of mine who lives in Wuhan was sharing videos of empty streets that were usually overcrowded, now looking more like a dystopic sci-fi end-of-the-world movie scene. Although the pieces of information broadcasted by the media started to become gradually more and more alarming, I wasn't really worried. After all, it was not the first virus affecting humankind, and likewise, this wouldn't affect Algeria, right?

By the president's order, we were not allowed to leave our districts for ten days and we were asked to stay indoors. This sudden change came at a particular moment in the life of most Algerians, as in 2019, before the pandemic, Algeria was going through a period of great uncertainty. When Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has been at the head of the country since 2000, decided to take part in the presidential elections for the fifth time in a row, despite being in a wheelchair and having serious health issues, millions of Algerians in and outside the country peacefully protested to show their rejection of his decision and demanded radical political change in the streets.We took to the streets every weekend, for a whole year, to demonstrate against the fifth mandate of Abdelaziz Bouteflika. This has been called the great Hirak, or the great "motion". These demonstrations were the first ones since 5th October 1988, when thousands of Algerians protested against corruption and asked for a radical political change. Like most of my neighbors, I used to participate in these peaceful demonstrations in Blida on Fridays, but also in Algiers where the demonstrations were bigger, tying the Algerian flag around my neck and holding a billboard with a slogan. At each demonstration, I was overwhelmed by a mix of intense and contradictory feelings, but the sense of belonging to something bigger than my community prevailed. For the first time in my entire life, I was witnessing the union of all Algerians: men, women, children, and seniors; from the different parts of the country, standing for the same cause and facing

the fears of an eventual arrest during the demonstrations, of sudden political charge, or of a military intervention that would drive the country to a civil war. At that time, no one could expect that we were about to go through an even more uncertain period. During the Hirak, the main streets of the big cities in Algeria were crowded during the demonstrations. Each Friday, we kept going out.

On February 22nd, 2020, we celebrated the first anniversary of the Hirak. There was a light breeze of optimism in the air, despite the uncertainty of the eventual improvement of the political situation in Algeria. As long as Algerian citizens from the whole country were demonstrating together every single week for a better future, I felt hopeful that we would be able to make a peaceful transition towards a more democratic government, towards a country where the voices of men and women would be heard. I would never have thought that, soon, these demonstrations would have to come to a halt. Or, maybe, I was terrified to imagine that this would happen and that the hopes of millions of Algerians would have to be suspended. By early March 2020, the virus was rapidly spreading across all the cities in Algeria: schools, universities, and the majority of workspaces had to close all over the country. I thought, then, that this would be a great opportunity to spend quality time at home with my family. As a fashion designer, I was very happy to be finally able to work on fashion projects that I had been delaying for months. I had just started preparing my new collection for Eid-el Fitr, a religious occasion to celebrate the end of Ramadan, a holy month of fasting and night prayers, and an important moment for us in the fashion industry. Algerian families start preparing for this special day by preparing traditional cakes, like Makrout, a fried cake made of semolina and dates. They also make sure to celebrate Eid El Fitr with new clothes. I was so excited to launch a collection of Children's wear for this special occasion, so I started by sketching the garments, preparing the patterns, and selecting the fabrics and accessories. After the announcement of the full lockdown, everything happened very quickly. First, all the supermarkets closed, and only local grocery stores and pharmacies were allowed to stay open. There was immediately an acute shortage of nearly all basic products. The store shelves soon became almost empty; my father had to wait for days before being able to buy a bag of semolina. The demand for masks also skyrocketed, and in a few days, they were no longer available in my district. Only a few lucky neighbors were able to get masks, at a cost almost ten times higher than their usual price. The hand sanitizer gel, too, became out of reach soon after the lockdown. In other words, we were only able to count on the food we had at home, and even if family members and friends living in other cities wanted to help us, they were not allowed to enter Blida. Thankfully, this situation lasted for only a week, and we were able to have access to food essentials. Being in the only city under full lockdown made me feel so lonely, but the news of the pandemic around the world made me realize how equal we are as humans (at least at the beginning of the pandemic). No matter if we come from wealthy or poor countries, we're all weak and helpless towards this invisible virus. This initial crisis was soon followed by the collapse of the health situation in the city.

Day by day, the number of contaminated citizens was dramatically increasing, and the four hospitals of my city were soon filled. A cousin of mine, who was contaminated, had to stay at home, and her daughter was the only person who could take care of her. It was so scary! Her daughter told us how much her mother suffered, how she struggled to breathe, and how the medications that her doctor prescribed for her were

not efficient. I directly thought about my parents, who are old, and I prayed every day and night that they wouldn't get sick. Although the official statistics shared on national TV channels were low compared with the rest of the world, we knew that they were far from reflecting reality. In fact, these TV channels always share censored news. Usually, people in Algeria rely on both international tv channels, such as Al Jazeera, France 24, Euronews, and social media to get a less biased perspective. The numbers shared on national tv channels reflected only the number of PCR tests done in public hospitals, which are often limited. Most citizens found themselves obliged to go to private laboratories to get a PCR test despite the high cost (approximately 63 €). This represents more than 55% of the average salary. Imagine that an average Algerian family is composed of five members, which means that one salary covers only one test. Even though, as Algerians, we live nowadays in better conditions than previous generations, and we have access to the internet wherever we are in the country, our lives have been affected by the decreasing value of the national currency in the last decade. Our consumption habits evolved but our income does not allow for extra costs (such as a PCR test) anymore. To make things worse, many people lost their jobs during the pandemic and the majority of Algerian families were not able to afford this test for everyone, which made the spread of the Covid-19 get out of control. Like me, all Algerians knew that without tests and with a weak healthcare system, we were going to face probably the most acute crisis; and that unlike the USA and European countries, which we were following closely on the media, we were not equipped to face the pandemic. A friend of mine who works as a nurse at a local hospital told me that the service where she works was full and that many patients died from lack of oxygen. By then, I was no longer hoping that COVID would not reach Algeria, but just that it would leave Blida.

My anxiety was at its utmost when two families in my building were contaminated. I was so scared of losing my parents because they both have chronic diseases, and I knew that if they got contaminated, their immunity wouldn't be able to resist the virus. So, we went two weeks without leaving the house, during which many random memories of fear, uncertainty, and helplessness I had experienced in my life hit my mind, especially from the times where I used to go to primary school with the fear that my school would be targeted by terrorists during the civil war, known as the "black decade" in the late nineties. Blida was one of the most affected cities by terrorist attacks which, most of the time, targeted schools, universities, and administrations. Back then, many children, especially in the rural part of the city, were not able to pursue their studies and were forced to stay home because of the danger going to school presented. Another memory that came to my mind was of the nights we spent outside after the violent earthquake that hit a nearby city in 2003. At that time, I was only twelve and I was preparing for my sixth-grade final exam. I remember I was scared to lose my house and my school notes, and that I would fail that exam. My memories went also to the sleepless nights following the first peaceful demonstrations in 2019.
All the fear and anxiety that I thought I had overcome came up to the surface all at once. It took me days before I started to think about what I could do to help to face the pandemic despite all the uncertainty we were going through. I put my collection for Eid el-Fitr aside and as there was an acute shortage of disposable masks in almost all the pharmacies in Blida, I started making masks with pieces of cotton fabric that I had at home. At first, I decided to make tutorials on how to make masks at home in English and Darja, the Algerian dialect, then I shared them on Facebook and Instagram,

to enable a maximum of people to make their masks. Later on, many friends and neighbors asked me to make more masks, which they would distribute for free in the neighborhood. I immediately accepted. For the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, I felt that I could contribute to the battle against the virus. I felt somehow like a hero who was going to save at least a small group of people and use my sewing skills as a superpower.

Of course, at that time, I didn't know that this type of mask wasn't very effective in protecting from Covid-19. However, being useful made me feel better, and made me realize that I could bring something to my community. In early May, after two months of full lockdown, we were finally able to move from Blida, and life resumed little by little in the city. This was when a friend of mine, who works at a national NGO, asked me to make hundreds of surgical masks that were intended for healthcare workers in Algiers because, like in Blida, there was there a significant shortage of almost all necessary medical products since the beginning of the pandemic. They had to be first sterilized and made compliant by a public pharmaceutical laboratory. I said yes right away because I finally had an opportunity to help effectively. However, I had to quickly find volunteer sewers to be able to prepare the masks in a short time. I called two tailors who lived in my district who immediately agreed to help. The first was Kenza, a fifty-year-old divorced mother and the second was Halima, a forty-six-year-old mother. I call them Tata (aunt) Kenza and Tata (aunt) Halima because they used to make clothes for me when I was a child, and they initiated me to the world of tailoring by offering me pieces of fabric to make into dresses for my dolls. A few years later, they also gave me free courses in pattern making. This experience is probably the reason why I chose to become a professional fashion designer.

Unfortunately, both lost their jobs during the pandemic. To understand why I was so excited to work with them, let me give an overview of the situation of female sewers in Algeria. First, the sector of fashion workers is mainly composed of women because in many Algerian families, sewing, among several handicraft activities such as embroidery, knitting, and crochet, is an important part of our culture and is transmitted by women to the next generations. While men were encouraged to become doctors and engineers, until the end of the colonization, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to go to school and pursue an academic degree instead of staying at home and learning from her mother how to become a good housewife. This changed right after Algeria gained independence because the Algerian government put rigorous laws to encourage the education of women, by making school obligatory and free for boys and girls, and by building schools across the country, which allowed women of my mother's generation to pursue higher education degrees and created positions for women in the workplace. During colonization, several women in big cities like Algiers were allowed to take sewing courses at home or a catholic school, and after the independence, at local training centers as well. These women had to choose later whether to work from their homes or else to break the rules of patriarchy and find a job in a fashion and textile factory. Only divorced or widowed women, who were forced to become the breadwinner for their families, were able to break these rules. In my family, all women mastered sewing and embroidery, but none of them were working in that field because they got married and had to stay at home and take care of their children. I found this deeply unfair growing up, and it encouraged me to create my business years later. Before the creation of positions for women in the job industry, the majority of female

tailors who chose to work from home were only known by a narrow circle of friends and neighbors, while the others have been significantly affected by the eventual closing of public textile factories and the flooding of the national market with Chinese products in the 1990s. Many of them had to find jobs in small companies where sewers are not usually declared to the state, are underpaid, and do not have access to workers' rights such as medical insurance or retirement. Because of their poor financial situation, they had no choice but to work at these companies despite the inhuman working conditions, and despite the social pressure on women who work in male-led environments—which still be considered to be on a social level Aib, or shameful—and their employers, usually males, took advantage of the situation to have access to cheap labor. Only a few of them, like Aunts Kenza and Halima, who are passionate about their work, kept making traditional clothes for special occasions for their most loyal customers. However, due to the pandemic, many customers preferred to buy online and drastically reduced their expenses in buying bespoke clothes. Inevitably, artisans like them were forced to close their businesses, but both of them insisted on participating in this volunteering project, even though they had no income at that time.

We had to wait until the full lockdown restrictions were relaxed and until I was able to receive the fabrics and accessories to make the masks. I started by cutting the fabric and elastics, and I divided the tasks for each of the volunteers who would then be able to work from home. After a week, we were able to make more than 300 masks, that were distributed later for free in a hospital in the capital city. Even though we knew that this number of masks would cover the needs of the hospital staff for only a few days, we were proud of using our know-how to make a positive action and support the medical staff during that critical period. A few months later, after the end of the first wave of Covid-19, the surgical masks were available again in stores in almost all the cities in Algeria. I resumed working as a fashion designer in July 2020, and I designed a new collection of dresses and school aprons for kids. This time, I wanted to include Aunt Halima and Aunt Kenza in the design process. We kept working separately, each one cutting and sewing from her place. We worked together from July to January of 2021. During this period, I was able to register my brand, called ASMA by A.M, and a few months later I created a legal status of the enterprise, which later gave me the ability to hire them.The experience was a turning point for Kenza, Halima, and me on so many levels because we were able to work together on a project despite social distancing, the lack of materials, and within extreme conditions of stress and uncertainty. In normal circumstances, we would work in the same space with the sewers: we would exchange ideas, shares thoughts about daily life, talk about the weather or share disappointment for the increased cost of fruits and vegetables, how life was better in the previous century, struggles with children, and opinions about the politicians in Algeria.
Also, we usually have access to all the raw materials locally, so communicating the instructions remotely and bringing fabrics from another city during this period of confinement was quite challenging. Yet, we were able to make it. We worked together until February 2021, and I was able to connect them with other fashion business owners to increase their income. For me, it was a glimpse of hope that I could contribute through small actions, to bring such a positive change to their local communities. I felt hopeful for a better future. I felt somehow that we were slowly going back to normal life. Despite ongoing barriers, to which we became used, we were able to resume our daily activities. This was quickly extinguished, and we returned to chaos, to fear, and to uncertainty.

The third wave of Covid-19 in July 2021 was the deadliest wave since the beginning of the pandemic in Algeria, because this time, it as deadly for youth and because there was a shortage of oxygen bottles and concentrators in all the country. Many people died in hospitals before even receiving medical care. It has been particularly stressful and depressing for me because I lost many relatives, neighbors, and friends. One of them was only 30 years old and was a father of two young girls. His death left me sleepless for many days. I still remember his posts on Facebook a few days before he died, seeking help to provide him with an oxygen concentrator. I still can't believe he is gone. At the same time, many forests in the country were destroyed by wildfires, and many friends of mine from the city of Tizi-Ouzou, in the east of Algiers, lost their homes, their lands, and their animals. I had to stop working. Because of anxiety, I was no longer able to be creative and I couldn't keep coordinating the work with aunts Halima and Kenza, because of the high risk of contamination. This time I felt that I was completely helpless towards the pandemic.

I was unable to guarantee a job for my aunts/collaborators. I lost my business, and I was constantly at risk of losing my family and loved ones and could do absolutely nothing to prevent it. As I'm writing, the Hirak, which was interrupted in March 2020, is still suspended, and the cost of almost all food supplies has doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. The borders have been partially opened but the procedures for travelling became more complicated and out of reach since the cost of flight tickets has almost tripled within only eighteen months.

The dream of a democratic country seemed so far away. All that we were claiming during the Hirak, freedom of speech and the release of the prisoners of conscience, gender equality and the right for women to be safely present in the public sphere, all these basic rights, became futile because we were deprived of almost all vital resources. How could we raise our voices anymore if we were unable to breathe? All these events took me back to July 2016, when I was freshly graduated. Unlike the majority of my university friends who left the country and moved to France, I decided to stay in Algeria and realize my dreams in my country while being able to travel despite the mobility barriers. The Algerian passport allows you to visit only 14 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America without a visa. Also, the process of requesting a Schengen Visa is complex, with expensive fees, and with no guarantee to receive a positive reply to the request. I've never thought that five years later, I would be stuck in a place where I am constantly afraid of losing my family and loved ones due to a virus that is no longer considered a threat in many countries; that I will not be able to protest without risking being imprisoned; that I would not be able to create job opportunities female sewers and tailors in my community because I could not predict if my business would survive to the economic crisis that we are going through.

I am stuck.
I want to be free,
But I don't want to be forced to leave forever.

WASSIM GHOZLANI

Biography

Wassim Ghozlani is the founder, CEO, and Art director of the Maison del'Image, an independent place dedicated to promoting and developing Visual Arts and Artists. A photographer himself, he collaborated with several renowned photographers and artists like Josef Koudelka, Patrick Zachmann, Stanley Green, Pep Bonet and Kihende Wiley. Ghozlani frequently collaborates with international organisations. He is based in Tunis, Tunisia.

Covid and Crisis: Questioning the Role of the Arts in Tunisia Today

Like many people who work in art and culture, I feel that I have always been fortunate to work in this sector and to turn my passion into my profession. Behind this chance lies a lot of work, of self-giving, of sacrifices, of ups and downs, and moments of solitude. There are also many encounters, learning, ambitions, joy, love and dreams. Today, as this boundary between dream and reality blurs, so does the one between present and future fades. We have never been so connected, and we have never been so alone. Within a few weeks, our dreams, our plans, and our daily lives have been changed. We now live at a pace dictated by the postponements of our cultural activities, official statements, and statistics on the number of infected people. This pandemic has crushed reality; it is reality. It is proof that Sidi Belhassen, Saïda Manoubia, Sidi Mahrez, and all the other saints cannot do anything against pandemics, and that our collective and individual salvation will depend on our ability to remain disciplined and help each other. In the current context, both difficult and disturbing, any cultural and artistic project—place, festival, music, book, film, etc.—must be supported, regardless of who is behind it.

We cannot afford the luxury of contributing through inaction to the demise of a cultural initiative, as small as it may be. The important thing is not to be part of the project, to be friends with the project leader, or to have a financial or personal interest behind it: far from it. What is important is rather to acknowledge that the vivacity of artistic scenes, which accompanied the Tunisian revolution, is an essential acquisition to be preserved. This vivacity, made possible by the social media networks, allowed the creation of several cultural places such as the Maison de l'Image—the outcome of an adventure in which we have been working to obtain a safe space, capable of attracting well-known artists, and training a new generation of artists (photographers, graphic designers, designers...) to become a window for artistic creation in Tunisia and in the Mediterranean. There is not a single day that passes without me finding a new Facebook cultural event, exhibition, debate, film screening, drama play, book publishing, festival... Millions of cultural associations supported by floods of sponsors finally saw the light of day. We even had the right for "Cité de la Culture", an old megalomania project that started during the Ben Ali era and was officially inaugurated a few years ago. However, these different structures, collectives, and studios, among others that appeared after the revolution, remained very fragile; a condition that only became more dramatic after

the birth of this virus. In addition to the lack of structural funds, the absence of a local cultural policy, the absence of a market, and the absence of a legal and financial framework suitable for the nature and evolution of the sector during these troubled times, we found ourselves facing the closure of our premises, the cancellation of our programs, the transition to telework mode, and the safeguarding of our jobs. As if we were not fragile and isolated enough...

You cannot imagine the effort, the work, and the sacrifices involved in working in culture. And yes, I have always said that cultural entrepreneurship was like having a miner's workload, the return on investment of an ice seller in Alaska, being taxed exactly like an oil company, requiring panhandling sponsors like a beggar in front of a mosque and, finally, fled like Covid-19 by banks. You would tell me that no one forces us to invest our time and energy in culture: I would tell you that it is true, that you are right, and ask you to consider us crazy; at least until you see by yourself how a "simple" cultural project can change the lives of many people around you. I have seen it and lived it, and I can tell you it is the best feeling you will ever have.

Everyone agrees that the economic crisis caused by Covid-19 has changed our vision of society. Since this disaster, which affected the whole world and weakened people's minds, there has been a sudden revival of interest in the values carried by solidarity movements. For our part, we did not wait for the appearance of the virus to find a movement based on solidarity. "Vision Solidaire" is an appropriate example: in 2017, the Maison de l'Image launched, with the support of the Drosos Foundation, an ambitious project which aims to train young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the visual arts.

Thanks to Vision Solidaire, these young people could understand that there was a way out of the one they knew. Today, these young people have even become "role models" for others. With Vision Solidaire, Maison de l'Image has rediscovered its vocation as an open and committed space capable of training new generations, of providing means for growth to young artists, and of creating a dynamic cultural environment that benefits both the country and the region.

Today, the question that I ask myself is: as we wait for the day when we can touch and kiss each other again, don't you think that today it is important for us to redefine, sitting around a virtual table—a very large table of 12 million people—the place of art, culture, and education in our society, and to agree on a common definition of these words: citizen, freedom, equality, dignity, health, work?

Despite the importance of social networks in my life as an artist and cultural actor, it has taken me some time, in the past, to understand that my five thousand friends and a few thousand other Facebook and Instagram followers are not "the people" and do not reflect their opinion. I also understood that in my country, once I am out of Tunis and its suburbs, if I am not a gangster, a journalist, a crooked politician, a popular singer, a football player, a buzz machine, or a billionaire, it is very rare to be recognized and known for my work, my positions, and my status on Facebook. Once out of Tunis, there are no more galleries, museums, cinemas, or even cultural centers. Despite the existence of several art schools, young and newly graduated artists are forced to settle in Tunis in order to make a living from their art. The youth centers and cultural centers that, in the

past, allowed young people to have free access to artistic and social activities, are now some haunted houses; and for a long time, they have ceased to play their social role, mainly because of the lack of material, budget, and qualified personnel.

I always think that there are three types of people in this world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder why nothing happens. Personally, I have tried to always be in the first category. This may be due to my impatience. I do not like to wait around and do nothing. I believe that we have limited time. We are all passing through here, though; in a way, we are guests on this land, offering things to learn.
For us, this pandemic was a good pretense to embark on a new artistic adventure: Art Culture Studio. This new startup capitalizes on all the experiences and experiments carried out within Maison de l'Image, while inspiring the reinvention of society through art and culture. This will be achieved through the development of a community of talents and creative skills, the creation of a panoply of collaborative solutions, physical and digital events, the training and development of the creative skills of young people, and the establishment of a hybrid regional media that informs and inspires. Why do we do it?

It is quite simple; I believe that we must infuse our lives with actions: no longer waiting passively for things to happen. Let things change in this country. Let us come together and make it happen. Let us build together our own future, our own hope, our own love. Our own path to it, we trace it at every moment, in every choice, listening to our heart. We cannot predict in advance the course it will take tomorrow. Even if we try to guide it sustainably, we must accept that everything can influence its trajectory, at every moment. We cannot impose a direction for life, even when striving to walk in the footsteps of others. It is not necessary to find a responsibility for the divergence in orientation of each one of us: the best course to follow is to accept that each piece of this shared path is a rewarding, mutual teaching that makes all of us who we are today. To observe with detachment a diverging path from ours is of great richness since it leads us to questioning, but to compel ourselves to follow it blindly is only pure loss and forgetfulness of self.

Like every year since 2011 and the "Jasmine revolution", all the faces, images, and events experienced have never stopped crossing my mind. Far from official celebrations and political speeches, I continue to believe that the Tunisian revolution marked the beginning of a new chapter in a book, whose content on all other pages has been dictated and imposed for years. Today, this pandemic gives us a second chance to rewrite the future otherwise, and to avoid making the same mistakes of the past. Having said that, despite the many wrong notes and uncertainty, I still remain hopeful that we will succeed in making a difference.

It is time to be united and try to be the change makers, away from our ego problems and our old quarrels. If we have not been able to avoid what is happening to us today, let us at least learn from it. Let us do it for the coming generations because history has shown that it retains only what we bring to our countries, and to humanity in general. That is the way it is.