No Single Reason to Move: Mobility Decision-Making among Syrians and Palestinian Families in Brazil

DOI
https://doi.org/10.11606/1678-9857.ra.227369

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, over six million people have left Syria. While numerous studies address this displacement, few specifically investigate family migration decision-making. This article contributes to this knowledge gap by focusing on the journeys of two families. Through analysing migration decision-making, I argue that there is no single reason to move; rather, mobility must be understood within the broader economic, political, and cultural dynamics. The study is based on an ethnography conducted between 2016 and 2020 in São Paulo, Brazil. The data reveals the fears, struggles, aspirations, and hopes involved in reaching a new destination and how social markers and structural contexts shape families' journeys.

KEYWORDS

Decision-making, Syrian conflict, Families, Brazil, Refugee, Mobility.

Não há uma única razão para a mobilidade: tomada de Decisão de Mobilidade entre Famílias Sírias e Palestinas no Brasili

RESUMO Desde 2011, mais de seis milhões de pessoas deixaram a Síria. Existem muitos estudos sobre esse deslocamento, mas poucos se concentram na tomada de decisões. Este artigo contribui para essa lacuna de conhecimento ao focar nas jornadas de duas famílias. Ao analisar a tomada de decisão, argumento que não existe uma única razão para a emigração e que a mobilidade deve estar ligada à dinâmica econômica, política e cultural mais ampla. O estudo baseia-se em uma etnografia realizada entre 2016 e 2020 em São Paulo, Brasil. A etnografia mostra medos, lutas, aspirações, esperanças de chegar a um novo destino e como marcadores sociais e o contexto estrutural moldam as jornadas das famílias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Conflito sírio, tomada de decisão, família, refúgio e mobilidade.

Introduction

In September 2015, photographs of a Syrian child drowned on a beach near Bodrum city, Turkey, reverberated globally. Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir took a series of photos of the boy, Alan Kurdi, who had died during an attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe with his family. The Kurdi family was comprised the father, Abdullah, the mother, Rehanna, and two sons, Alan and Ghalib, who were two and three years old, respectively. The family attempted to seek refuge in Canada, where Alan's aunt lived. Tima Kurdi, Abdullah's sister, struggled with Canadian bureaucracy and humanitarian agencies to bring her two brothers and their families to Canada. The Kurdi family's challenges in reaching Canada were huge. In 2018, Tima Kurdi published *The Boy on the Beach*, a book detailing her and her extended families' struggles. When the Canadian Department of Citizenship and Immigration rejected Alan Kurdi's uncle visa application, Abdullah and Rehannah decided to go on the maritime journey from Turkey to Greece. They were feeling overwhelmed by the wartime conditions. While Abdullah was working non-stop in Turkey, he was worried about the beginning of the school year and Ghalib's health and skin problems. In addition, Rehanna was pregnant. After carefully considering all their options, they decided they could not wait any longer to reunite with the rest of Abdullah's family and rebuild their lives in a European country where they could find refuge. They assumed that there was no future in Syria or Turkey. Tima Kurdi said that Canada's rejection of her brother's visa application, after investing so many resources and that much time, led her other brother — Abdullah, Alan's father — to lose hope about gaining entry into Canada. This spurred him to undertake the hazardous journey from Turkey to Greece. Only Abdullah survived this perilous family journey. Photographs of his son, three-year-old Alan, dressed in a red t-shirt and blue pants, and who was found deceased on the beach in Greece, went worldwide and drew attention to the conflict (Adler-Nissen *et al.*, 2019: 75).

I begin with Alan Kurdi's family history because it expresses the basis of this article. Kurdi's journey shows how things that are ordinary to a family, such as worries about the school year, health care for a child, and being pregnant, in addition to war, structural constraints to mobility, and a visa application rejection, add insult to injury in migration decision-making.

Deciding to take an unsafe route was not an easy choice. This decision was not solely driven by the unidimensional involuntary impact of the war. People leaving a war-torn area are complex individuals with aspirations, dreams, and plans for the future, as well as fears, insecurities, and personal agency. Their lives are influenced by social factors and are shaped within a structural context that should not be overlooked.

Here, I criticise the normalisation of policies that deny safe passage even to those affected by conflicts, such as the devastating war in Syria. How can we talk about a tragic journey as the Kurdi family without mentioning that the Syrian passport is the lowest-ranking acceptable passport worldwide? It is an uncritical assumption to consider that refugees take dangerous routes across multiple borders in an attempt to reach their desired destination as a mere individual risk decision. Nevertheless, it is shallow to presume that refugees cross unsafe or safe journeys unidimensionally for fear of political persecution or massive violence on the ground.

Malkki's (1995) influential work has significantly changed the approach to studying displacement within anthropological and refugee studies. Through an ethnography of displacement, based upon research conducted among Burundian Hutu refugees living in Tanzania, Malkki showed that refugees have complex identities and histories, and their displacement involves more than physical movement. It comprises intricate processes of memory, culture, and social reconstruction. By highlighting refugees' diverse experiences and agency, Malkki's work has encouraged scholars to adopt more nuanced perspectives, contributing to defying essentialisms and state binaries.

Similarly, Turton's (2003) critical examination of forced and voluntary migration concepts has further advanced the discourse in the study of migration. Turton critiques the simplistic binary categorisation, arguing that such distinctions — forced and voluntary — obscure the complexities of migrant experiences and the myriad of factors influencing their movements. Turton's work calls for a unified study of migration that recognises the fluidity and interrelatedness of various forms of displacement. By advocating for a more integrated and comprehensive approach, Turton emphasises the importance of understanding migrant's agency and diverse motivations, challenging reductive state-imposed categories.

Furthermore, Navia (2014) and Hamid (2012, 2019) have contributed significantly to the critical discussion of the dichotomy between forced and voluntary migration through ethnographic work with Colombian and Palestinian refugees in Brazil, respectively. Navia's research focuses on Colombian refugees, exploring the socio-political contexts influencing their migration decisions. Her ethnography reveals that poverty and social networks are interconnected with conflict and persecution, shaping displacement. Similarly, Hamid's work with Palestinian refugees in Brazil underscores how the aspiration for a better future, proper documents, and citizenship were pivotal for the relocation of refugees in Brazil. Therefore, by examining these diverse experiences, Navia and Hamid challenge the oversimplified binary often used to classify migrant experiences. Their work demonstrates the ongoing importance of extending the insights of scholars like Malkki and Turton, advocating for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of mobility dynamics, which

goes beyond the simplistic forced-voluntary dichotomy.

Studies have criticised such distinctions over the past two decades, and this criticism remains substantial, as evidenced by Chimni (2009) and Martins Jr. & O'Connell (2022). More recently, there has been an increased focus on the decision-making process of migration (Seven, 2022), offering a broader and more nuanced view of displacement. This article aims to contribute to that body of literature.

In this context, this paper focuses on the decision-making on migration of two families affected by the Syrian conflict. Both are Muslim Sunni from Damascus, with children and a history of secondary migration in Middle Eastern countries. The ethnography presented in this article contributes to the literature on refugees and other migrants' decision-making by analysing how refugee families have been navigating the scarce alternatives available to them in a situation where there are few safe routes to move.

This study also contributes to the broader literature on Syrian conflict (im) mobility, offering an ethnography carried out in Brazil. This ethnography shows that there were many reasons people affected by such did not initially view Brazil as a destination: the geographical distance, absence of economic support by the Brazilian government, the lack of previous relationships or networking in most cases, language barriers presented by Portuguese, Brazilian high unemployment rates and a lot of social inequalities and urban violence. However, among these constraints, the safe route and access to necessary documentation emerged as pivotal factors driving the consideration of Brazil as a destination.

Based on humanitarian reasons, the Brazilian government's decision to offer a safe route for the people affected by the Syrian War played a fundamental role in a total of 4,992 Syrian citizens seeking refuge in Brazil; 3,762 Syrians were recognised as refugees between 2011 and 2022. In 2015, Syrians stood out as the most significant refugee group in the country, according to Brazilian official data (Conare, 2020). The Brazilian decision regarding the Syrian conflict acknowledged Syrian citizens but also people of other nationalities who lived in Syria, such as Palestinians. Between 2011 and 2020, 278 Palestinians received refugee status in Brazil.

There is no single reason to move. No solitary impetus for migration. As posited by Malkki, "involuntary or forced movements of people represent merely one facet within the broader constellations of sociopolitical and cultural processes and practices" (Malkki, 1995: 496). Mobility entails more than discrete occurrences; it intertwines with overarching societal, political, and cultural dynamics. Therefore, Malkki underscores the imperative of contextualising mobility within broader frameworks, contending that an isolated understanding is inadequate. Indeed, mobility is intricately influenced and shaped by many factors, including political ideologies, economic circumstances, cultural conventions, and historical contexts.

I cannot present a sole reason for the mobility of my interlocutors. This finding is similar to what other authors (Silva, 2023; Meihy, 2019; Nathasohn, 2018) found with Syrians in Brazil. Many interconnected reasons for mobility are discussed in the literature (Seven, 2022; Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021; Adhikaru, 2015). However, none of my interlocutors could move to Brazil without a safe route and access to documentation. The most common reasons for them to move to Brazil were indeed the safe route and the regular migratory situations they encountered. By examining the migration decision-making of two families, it is clear how the options seen as less risky led them to their destinies. I aim to discuss their active decision-making process, investigate how the families came to this choice, the available information when they made the decision, the financial arrangements for their journey, the degree to which it was planned, and the extent to which they had prior contact with the country. I followed these questions suggested by Turton (2003), which represent a gap in knowledge regarding the literature on the Syrian conflict and its refugees.

With regard to the organisation of this paper, I begin with a brief discussion of categories and binary terms, such as forced-voluntary migrants or refugees-economic migrants. It can be argued that categorising people as forced migrants or refugees does not ensure humanitarian protection, although the open policy in Brazil served as one of the rare cases of exception.

Following this, I contextualise Brazil's response to the Syrian Conflict by outlining the conducted fieldwork and introducing the research question. Afterwards, the article focuses on ethnographic data, specifically exploring the journeys of two families. Throughout this ethnography, I describe different motivations and strategies for their mobility, challenging the notion of a singular and involuntary reason to flee.

Moreover, I advocate for a critical analysis that frames aspirations and hope, but also unemployment and hostilities in a secondary relocation without the fear of portraying refugees as "economic migrants". How can mobility be isolated from the broader societal, political, and cultural dynamics? Finally, by analysing migration decision-making, I explore how social marks intersect and shape individual experiences, engaging with existing literature on Syrian and Palestinian displacement (Achilli, 2015; Feldman, 2022; Barner, 2004; Dubow & Kuchiminder, 2021).

Brazilian's response to the Syrian conflict

The people affected by the Syrian conflict sought refuge in Brazil during a period when the country emerged as a global asylum hub for middle-income nations. Even though Brazil does not receive many refugee applications, the number of

people (stateless and of all nationalities) seeking refuge in the country has been increasing comparatively in the Brazilian migration pattern (Navia, 2019). In 2011, Brazil recognised 86 new refugees annually; in 2020, the number increased to 26,500. Requests for recognition of refugee status increased significantly from around 1,400 in 2011 to 28,800 in 2020 (Cavalcanti *et al*., 2021).

In the years 2011 and 2012, amidst the early stages of the Syrian conflict, Syrian communities in Brazil endeavoured to facilitate the migration of their relatives from Syria to Brazil. Notably, the Brazilian government espoused a flexible approach, opening its borders to Syrians who managed to secure tourist visas. Through Normative Resolution 17 of 2013, valid for two years and renewed in 2015 and 2017, the National Committee for Refugees (Conare) guided the issuance of visas for people affected by the Syrian conflict, considering Palestinians and citizens of other nationalities residing in Syria.

The mentioned normative resolution uses the concept of "humanitarian reason"[1]. In a state document, this concept led me to Cathrine Brun's (2016: 396) discussion about how humanitarian reason has become part of our way of making politics, nationally and internationally. Regardless, this "open policy" was a request advanced primarily by the Christian Syrian component of Brazilian society, which has a longstanding presence there. Members of the Brazilian Arab community, with backing and mediation from sectors of the Catholic Church, played a pivotal role in this governmental resolution aimed at facilitating the entry of individuals impacted by the Syrian Conflict into Brazil. The historical ties and connections between Syria and Brazil are paramount, shedding light on the relationship between the newcomers fleeing the Syrian war and the established communities in Brazil. (Souza & Manfrinato, 2020; Pinto, 2010).

1 | Understood as a gesture of compassion, fraternity, and charity, humanitarianism is strongly perceived as an altruistic act of helping others (Fassin, 2012).

From 2013 onwards, there was a notable shift in the demographic composition of migrants from Syria. Many Syrians arrived without pre-existing connections to established Arab networks and were predominantly male and Muslim. The majority of them were young men evading military conscription in Syria. Concurrently, amidst the Syrian crisis, Brazil's preparations to host the 2016 Olympic Games and the 2014 World Cup fostered an image of an economically flourishing nation with a consequent demand for labour. This perception served as a compelling factor for Syrians considering relocation to Brazil.

The "open door" policy of Brazil toward people affected by the Syrian conflict has not been accompanied by the creation of programs or public policies aimed at welcoming them. Authors have shown (Souza, 2024; Silva, 2023; Souza & Manfrinato, 2020; Meihy, 2019; Baeza, 2018) that refugees from Syria in Brazil were left to fend for themselves. They could find a safe route to Brazil, where they were able to access basic essential documentation for living in the country but not much else. As

scholars have shown (Hamid, 2012, 2019; Perin, 2014; Navia, 2019; Branco-Pereira, 2023), humanitarian aid and Brazilian administrative practices for managing refugees and migrants are uncertain and precarious.

Fieldwork and research question

My starting point was to analyse the narratives of people displaced by the Syrian conflict regarding humanitarian aid. I was interested in the relations of refugees from Syria with humanitarian organisations involved in their bureaucratic process of refugee and migration. Based on participatory observation and interviews, the fieldwork's leading actors were Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese citizens displaced by the Syrian conflict. I aimed to interpret their narratives of displacement by taking into account their encounters with humanitarian workers and other outstanding actors in refugee policies, such as advocates, psychologists, Portuguese teachers, and so forth.

In 2019, I shifted my research to family relationships in exile, discussing how social marks shape journeys, migration decision-making, and mobility family strategies. I also expanded the fieldwork into North Africa and European countries. Nevertheless, in this article, I will use specific data from my fieldwork in São Paulo, conducted between 2016 and 2020, regarding two families from Damascus. I got to know them as an Arabic language instructor and artisan food producer. They both advertised their services in social media groups. When I came across their posts, I reached out to them and introduced myself as an anthropologist researching the displacement of Syrian people in Brazil. I mentioned that I wanted to book classes and order food. Additionally, I expressed my interest in having an interview. As a client of both families, I visited them as a student and a customer of the catering service. Because of that, I was able to maintain a consistent schedule and meet with them regularly.

Both families permitted me to interview them and participate in their daily activities alongside their services. My interlocutors were rarely available for lengthy interviews. I only conducted a few uninterrupted interviews, each lasting one hour or more. Thus, the interviews were conversations during the daily activities. I had the opportunity to accompany them in various everyday endeavours. I made an effort to be as helpful as possible, assisting them with many translations and helping them navigate Brazilian bureaucracy. For example, I collaborated with them to open bank accounts and schedule medical appointments. Furthermore, I was a client who purchased their services regularly and sought to expand their customer base by recommending their services to colleagues, friends, and family. Looking back, I built a

solid relationship with them, mainly as an Arabic student and a regular food consumer.

Randa was my Arabic teacher. I had classes with her for 13 months. Moreover, I had the opportunity to interview her and her husband. I could participate in their lives doing ordinary activities, such as visiting restaurants, museums, playgrounds, and parks with our children. My identity as a mother of a small child who was often with me during fieldwork particularly helped me connect with Randa and have more in-depth discussions about family life, especially regarding the expectations about the children's future.

I was a regular consumer of Mahmood's food. I purchased it and spent hours observing him make it. I even accompanied him to the supermarket to buy supplies. I spent much time in Mahmood's kitchen, watching him prepare incredible handcrafted pastries and discussing his life. Mahmood provided takeaway food for a few customers since his kitchen served as a small restaurant. There, I met some of Mahmood's customers, friends, and son, as well as journalists and researchers like myself. In his kitchen, I could also join several online meetings he had with his wife and daughters, who lived in Europe. During the COVID-19 pandemic, classes with Randa moved online and I had to stop buying food from Mahmood. However, I held various online meetings with him, including two interviews with his wife.

To protect the privacy and safety of interlocutors, I have changed all their names and given them pseudonyms. I also had to avoid including any personal information that could identify them. Since there are only a few refugees from the Syrian conflict in Brazil, I opted to provide context by emphasising the most relevant details instead of giving comprehensive biographies of the individuals. I have come to realise that people who took part in anti-government activities and witnessed the massive violence of the Syrian regime[2] must not be exposed. It is wrong to assume that an academic publication would be outside intelligence control and spy action. Over 12 years have passed since the initial protest against the regime, yet Assad continues to hold onto power. The regime has the power to make disappear anything it deems unfit to be seen. It is essential to bear in mind that fear was a pillar of the Syrian state's coercive authority even before the uprising (Pearlman, 2016).

2 | The regime category designates the government of the current president of Syria, Bashar al-Asad, and refers to the government of his father, Hafez. Bashar al-Asad consolidated a political dynasty in power, which his opponents called the Republic of Kings (*jumlukiya*) (Pinto, 2013: 211).

Journey into the future: Randa and Khaled's family

Randa and Khaled were born in Damascus, Syria. They both studied Engineering at the University of Damascus, where they met. They were Damascenes from Sunni Muslim families but not from the same social class. Their different backgrounds were not a problem for their marriage. Khaled's mother and family did

not pose any questions when he chose to marry his classmate, a stunning, beautiful young lady from a middle-class family.

Khaled was raised in an upper-class family, and his entire life was shaped by his wealth and business endeavours. The Khaled family aligned themselves with the regime, and their affluence and entrenched social connections rendered them indifferent to the plight of the disenfranchised masses, and their protest movements. Initially, Khaled ignored the first anti-government demonstrations reported in Daraa in the South of Syria, Hasaka in the northeast, and Deir Ezzor near Iraq. However, Khaled had taken part in a street protest against the regime of Assad. Because of that, Randa and he believed there was no choice but to flee. Randa was afraid that his husband would receive another Mukhabarat invitation for questioning. A second time should lead him to incarceration. She was unsure to what extent Khaled's family money and membership in the Baath Party would protect him.

Khaled ignored the first demonstration in Syria, but at the same time, he was compulsively reading everything about the fall of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine and the massive protests that culminated in the resignation of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Although a hundred protests happened at this time in the region of Middle Eastern and Arabic countries, for him, demonstrations of popular classes from unimportant areas of Syria could not defy Assad. Not one would dare to change the power of the regime.

In 2011, Khaled watched a small crowd in the heart of Damascus marching and calling for freedom. People on the street chanted: "*God, Syria, freedom, that's all*". They dared to modify the more common "*God, Syria, Bashar, that's all*". This protest, which was no longer than 15 minutes, changed Khaled's life. He did not expect to be firmly attached to the cause. The intense desire for political freedom was a surprise for him and his wife. Randa supported Khaled's rebellion. She hoped for the fall of the regime despite being raised to accept all its atrocities. Deep within, she felt profoundly convinced that her generation was responsible for instigating change.

The fear was widespread in Syria. Khaled was afraid of everybody, including his own family. He was frightened, particularly of a few relatives, who assumed his collaboration in opposition was an outrage. How could he damage the trustworthy family name? Khaled always wondered if someone in his family could silence him or be denounced by a neighbour or anyone else. Randa was also worried. She was constantly taken by a vivid memory of her childhood when she used to visit her emaciated and injured maternal uncle in Damascus prison.

"*It's every bit as bad as it looks. There wasn't much time to think when we decided to leave the country*". The couple fled to Jordan. Randa and Khaled applied for visas at as many embassies as possible in Amman. They did not feel entirely safe there, and the fear of secret agents created barriers to socialising with other Syrians. While

attempting to leave Jordan, they hoped to stay close to Syria, awaiting the end of the war. As the situation deteriorated and the conflict escalated into civil war, Randa and Khaled began to contemplate the family's future, brainstorming ideas for what might lie ahead. They had a baby boy, and their financial resources were not limitless. Moreover, the economic situation in Jordan was dismal, with no prospect for improvement. The previous hospitality for Syrians has changed fast into hostility as newcomers from Syria looked for jobs, a place to live, and humanitarian aid. The escalating cost of living brought about a significant upheaval in daily life.

> *The first decision was to go to Jordan. In Jordan, we had already started applying to several countries; we visited an embassy every single day. After so many denied requests and problems at Amman, I just wanted to end it and start over. Khaled had terrible nightmares, and I did everything on my own. After talking to my cousin in São Paulo, we agreed to go to Brazil on the day we received one more visa refusal.*

The decision to move to Brazil was a mutual outcome reached by Randa and Khaled, but the task of researching information about the country fell primarily on Randa's shoulders. Khaled initially expressed hesitation about the idea of living in a non-Arab third-world country. He had lived in the United Kingdom, where he attended high school and earned a master's degree. The couple often travelled to European countries and the United States. Thus, relocating to a non-Western and non-Arab country was not on Khaled's radar.

Facing the denial of so many visa applications, Randa talked to her cousin in Brazil. She made calls to friends and relatives to ask questions about the country. She discovered that some of her cousins went there for a business trip; one of her cousins' wives had a Brazilian father, and her grandfather had to live in Latin America for a few years. After following up on all the various links and tips she could, Randa went to a Brazilian embassy to verify all the information she received. At the Brazilian embassy, it was explained that she would find a safe route to Brazil once she had a visa, which is easy to obtain for humanitarian reasons. Once in the country, she would receive all the essential documents to live a regular life there.

Randa mentioned her thoughts about pursuing an unsafe route to reach Europe. In spite of that, the couple never considered risking their lives by attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea or embarking on many other uncertain paths. Instead, they sought a destination accessible through a secure pathway in which their immigration status could remain regular for an extended period. Initially, they considered the Emirates countries due to Khaled's contacts, but they hesitated due to the unclear migratory situation for Syrians. Investing significant funds in a place where

they might have to depart abruptly seemed impractical to them, as well as turning back to Syria.

Randa's family moved to Brazil. They flew into the country and obtained all necessary migratory documents within a few days. While the couple experienced a certain degree of migratory stability in Brazil, they were deeply disappointed in the country. Language barriers were one of their reasons for such disappointment. Randa and Khaled already knew that the language was Portuguese. However, they assumed that Brazilian middle-class people would speak English and they could navigate into Brazilian services and bureaucracy more easily. The couple also assumed that their English, Spanish, French, and Arabic proficiency would secure them positions in the local professional job market. Randa and Khaled's assumptions proved inaccurate. Despite their knowledge of multiple languages and extensive experience in multinational companies, these highly skilled professionals struggled to secure employment upon their arrival.

Khaled's proficiency in Spanish made him quickly improve his Portuguese. Within a few months, he was speaking enough for daily survival. Within a year, he secured a job, albeit not precisely in his desired field. Khaled found contentment for a time. Meanwhile, Randa faced a different set of challenges. Her income prospects were limited to a few underpaid positions, which she declined. With the responsibility of caring for their child, she encountered difficulties securing a place for the little boy in a Brazilian day-care. Despite her earnest efforts to secure employment, the absence of childcare services posed a significant obstacle. How could she pursue a job without a suitable arrangement for the couple's child?

Maintaining her high level of English and allowing her son to learn the language was paramount for Randa. Thus, she drafted letters and diligently visited bilingual schools across São Paulo until securing a scholarship for their son to attend an expensive private bilingual institution near their home. Afterward, she started translating documents from Arabic into English for a company based in Qatar and began working as a private Arabic and English teacher in São Paulo. During the pandemic, she enrolled in open and free courses offered by prestigious American universities to expand her professional network and enhance her *curriculum vitae*. Randa once told me that, as soon as a woman marries in Syria, most husbands expect their wives to forget their diplomas and become "good little housewives" like their mothers. In contrast, Randa had ambitions beyond domestic life.

While Brazil offered them a sense of stability with its regular migratory status, it fell short of the brighter future they were after. Upon settling in Brazil, the couple confronted the challenges of adapting to a new social life. They went through an economic and occupational downgrade after their arrival. The couple embarked on a job hunt across the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States to pursue a

better life. Everything was done online and prior to obtaining Brazilian citizenship. The Syrian family citizenship was a huge barrier to the job recruitment process. Nevertheless, once they obtained Brazilian citizenship and a passport, a previously rejected employment opportunity reconsidered its stance, offering Khaled a position. First, he travelled alone to start his new job. Then, he returned to Brazil a few months later to take Randa and their son to their new home. Although the contract terms only partially matched Khaled's qualifications and expertise, it was the best strategy for relocation to a North Global country.

Journeys of separation: Mahmoud and Muna Family

Mahmoud was born in the late 1960s in Syria and raised in Damascus in a Palestinian family. His parents and most of his relatives had fled to Jordan a few months before 1948, the Nakba's year, the catastrophic event marking the Palestinian exile. Forced to abandon their home in Palestine due to the threat of violence of the British Mandate and its support for Jewish settlements, the family initially viewed their displacement as temporary. With the establishment of the state of Israel, they realised they were refugees without the right to return. After several years in Jordan, the family resettled in Syria.

When his father died, his mother and siblings decided to leave the southwestern part of Damascus. The modest middle-class family moved to Yarmouk, an unofficial refugee camp with good infrastructure connected to Damascus' urban services. In Yarmouk, Mahmoud's family owned a small building where it was possible for him, once married, to build his own family. There, he became a father. Muna and Mahmoud had three children. The couple attended the University of Damascus, where he studied Arts, and she earned a bachelor's degree in Social Work.

Mahmoud did not take part in protests against the Assad government. He felt oppressed by the regime, but the memory of his father's politically active life for Palestine's rights and subsequent death after being tortured in prison led him to express his rebellion through art. When Yamourk was directly affected by the conflict and the first bombs hit the area, he left everything behind and moved to Lebanon with his wife, Muna, son, and daughters.

Even with limited access to employment in Lebanon for refugees, Mahmoud could work in an area related to his trade. Despite that, Mahmoud and his family were unhappy in Lebanon, where the cost of living was high and social conditions were marked by precariousness. Not all children could get enrolled in school. Furthermore, as Palestinians or Syrians, they were targets of increased hostility from the local population. On a particular occasion, while Muna was shopping in the *ba-*

zaar, she was abruptly asked by a middle-aged lady: "Are you Syrian or Palestinian?". When she confirmed that she was both, the lady shouted that Syrians were usurping job opportunities at lower wages and Palestinians were ruining the country for decades. Nobody who was around said anything to help. Even the shopkeepers at the store where Muna bought sweets for her young daughter daily could not offer a word of empathy. Muna was with her daughters and felt ashamed. At the same bazaar, she started to feel that, each day, people looked at her with aloof disdain, warning her to keep her distance and not allow her girls to hurl themselves at their children because they were refugees from Syria.

The family was under temporary protection status. This status allowed them to stay in Lebanon for a limited period, renewable on an annual basis. The exact duration of stay and renewal procedures changed many times. After two years living in Lebanon, Mahmoud's family needed to leave the country. They were not allowed to be there for more than two years and were sure they would not have a future there. So where to move now? They could not move back to Syria. Mahmoud and Muna often talked to their relatives in Damascus. They were concerned about their struggles with the violence, high inflation, and fast deterioration of essential services, such as access to water, electricity, healthcare, and education. The couple had also decided not to live irregularly elsewhere and avoided an unsafe route to Europe or wherever.

As Palestinians, they did not even have passports. They used Syrian papers for travel, which were similar to passports but not officially recognized elsewhere. Before the war, it was not a big deal to use them to go to Lebanon or travel in the region, but afterward, they started to be contested across Middle Eastern borders everywhere. Their documentary status was crucial for the Mahmoud family's journey and played a decisive role in the migration project. When Mahmoud and his family left Lebanon, they pursued divergent paths. Mahmoud and his eldest son went to Brazil, while Muna and two daughters travelled to a European country. Mahmoud described this journey of separation not as a matter of choice but rather the best path available to them.

In a conversation with a friend who worked as a solicitor in Lebanon, Mahmoud gained insight into the Brazilian migration policy. After being briefed on the visa application process, the likelihood of approval, the necessary documents for a regular stay in Brazil, as well as the opportunity to earn a Brazilian passport in a few years, he moved to Brazil with his son. Before that, he worked hard to save enough money for the aeroplane ticket. The initial plan was for them to relocate first, followed by bringing the rest of the family later. The family could not afford five aeroplane tickets and all the necessary expenses for such a journey.

Meanwhile, a Christian humanitarian organisation played a crucial role in facilitating the departure of Muna and their daughters from Lebanon to Europe. Muna

contacted this organisation while living in Lebanon through her family and friends from Syria. Muna had worked in the humanitarian field in Syria. In Yarmouk, she had worked with Iraqi family Christian refugees. At that time, she did not imagine herself as an aid beneficiary. Unlike her husband, Muna was born and raised in Yarmouk from a Palestinian refugee family that left Palestine in 1948. They lived for a while in Golan and then moved to Damascus. Muna grew up aware of her Palestine identity as a refugee, but this did not make her see herself as someone who needed aid. Instead of receiving help, she was a person who offered assistance to others. Her working-class relatives were able to provide everything for their family. Following their example, she walked the same path for her own family. The offspring of the Syrian conflict changed everything for Muna. She sought aid but could not secure it for her entire family.

The humanitarian organisation that helped her to leave Lebanon focused on aiding women and children. Consequently, this organisation could not provide assistance to her husband and young son. Nevertheless, in Syria, a local branch of the organisation assisted other family members in leaving the country, primarily focusing on aiding women and children. This targeted approach reflected the organisation's allocation of resources and efforts exclusively to women and children.

For Mahmoud's family, this journey of separation marked an unfamiliar and unwelcome chapter in their lives. After spending over two years apart, they found themselves unable to make concrete plans for a reunion in the foreseeable future. Muna and her daughters were committed to remaining in Europe until their refugee status was fully processed. Asylum seekers are bound by the requirement not to leave a country for the entire duration of the asylum procedure, which may extend indefinitely.

Mahmoud did not believe that once his family received refugee status in Europe, they could bring him and his son through a family reunion. It seemed to Mahmoud that refugee family reunification in the European Union is governed by legal frameworks that do not work for impoverished families. The law imposes strict eligibility requirements for family reunification, such as proof of a stable income, adequate housing, and health insurance coverage. According to him, the practical application of family reunification is only effectively executed in some European countries if a person has a significant sum of money. He knew this based on accounts from friends and relatives whose wives, mothers, and daughters could not bring them.

Mahmoud expected that a family reunification process could bring the family together again in neither Europe nor Brazil. Family reunification takes longer in Brazil, but it is bureaucratically possible. Therefore, the idea of reunification in Brazil was initially on the family's minds. The question became "*How do we bring the family*

considering the São Paulo cost of living and the lack of humanitarian aid?". Mahmoud and his son were living in a rented small house. Before that, they had lived in an abandoned property because, for a long time, they couldn't afford to pay rent. Mahmoud expressed concern about the uncertainty of affording rent due to the high cost of living and the risk of unemployment. Mahmoud and his son worked in low-paying jobs. Thus, Mahmoud worried about their family living in poverty. They envisioned a future for the girls in Europe. Since arriving in Brazil, neither Mahmoud, nor his son, have left the country. Travelling abroad seems uncertain. The travel documents from Syria have long expired, rendering them invalid, and Brazilian-issued yellow passports would be questioned cross-borders. Even if they were still valid, their utility would be limited, given the minimal prospects for securing European visas with both the Syrian documents and the yellow passports.

The prospect of Mahmoud's son obtaining Brazilian citizenship, with its officially recognized passport, brings hopeful anticipation. It would allow him to travel beyond Brazil's borders without needing visas. He declared, "*Brazilian citizens enjoy visa-free travel and can stay in Europe for up to ninety days*." Mahmoud had been struggling with all the requirements of the Brazilian naturalisation process. For him, the Portuguese test presented a challenge. Thus, when I asked Mahmoud about his plans, he said he had to accept his fate and would not leave Brazil. "*That's okay. I am always talking to them and getting on. The girls already speak [the country's language] and are also speaking English very well*.".

The prospect of reunification remains distant due to the financial constraints associated with international airfare costs, which present a significant obstacle for the family. Such expenses far exceed their budgetary limits. Mahmoud acknowledges the possibility of affording an aeroplane ticket for their son, recognising the deep emotional need for his mother and sisters to reunite with him. The mother's longing to see her son and his reciprocal yearning to reunite with his mother and sisters stand as reminders of the enduring separation by Mahmoud's family.

There is no single reason to move

I argue in this analytical session that someone classified as a refugee would present many reasons to flee. There is no single reason to move, and rationales are never straightforward. Looking at the ethnographic work presented above, I could not point to a sole reason to justify the decision to emigrate. It is worth recalling that plenty of interconnected reasons were observed in previous studies with Syrians in Brazil, as mentioned in the introduction (Silva, 2023; Meihy, 2019; Nathasohn, 2018). These studies did not focus on migration decision-making, but they all support the

data I presented regarding the motivations for leaving and families' strategies. As indicated previously, I aim to move beyond approaches overly fixated on conflict as the sole driver of displacement. Seven's study (2022) with Syrians in Turkey further supports my goal to move forward. Seven (2022) focuses on decision-making, arguing that migration is not a pure result of actual violence. Instead, while immediate and actual violence forces individuals to abandon their homes, refugee outflows "from Syria to neighbouring countries are linked to the gradual increase in structural violence, as well as proximate conditions and intervening factors" (Seven, 2022:1030). Beyond the actual violence, individuals take into account multiple factors in the migration decision-making process. In particular, while the prospect for peace and rebuilding affects individuals' decision to stay amid conflict and violence in order not to suffer the costs of becoming a refugee, threats against people, forced conscription, and deteriorating public services function as push factors that compel individuals to migrate.

Randa and Khaled were frightened in Syria. As mentioned, fear was a pillar of the state's coercive authority (Pearlman, 2016). Khaled's collaboration in anti-government activities provided a solid reason for the couple to fear the Mukhabarat and even Khaled's family's occasional retaliation. Whether in Syria or Jordan, they felt unsafe. Furthermore, mixed with their fear, there were complaints about Jordan's social and economic conditions and the local hostility toward Syrians. The couple perceived a lack of future in Jordan based on the reality on the ground. Some authors (Achilli, 2015; Stevens, 2013) have claimed that the ongoing daily hostility in Jordan has dampened refugees' hopes but have failed to emphasise how this reality shapes migration decision-making. The research to date tends to over focus on war as the critical reason, neglecting multiple reasons along with interlocutors' narratives. Due to highlighting the involuntary nature of their displacement, these studies did not capture the nuanced reasons and contexts behind their displacement, leading to a homogenisation of diverse experiences into a single category of the "forced migrants". Undoubtedly, the conflict serves as a pivotal, transformative event for all the individuals whose narratives are scrutinised within the presented ethnography. War was the starting point for leaving Syria.

However, as argued in the introduction, a knowledge gap exists; hence, discussing the reasons for migration behind the war is highly relevant. The binary distinctions between forced and voluntary mobility may oversimplify the diverse and complex experiences of displacement. Mahmoud and Muna's decision to leave Syria was taken after a bombing in Yarmouk. They left everything behind, along with their children, to go to Lebanon. They were less than 90 kilometres from their home, waiting for the end of the war. When it was clear that the Syrian conflict continued to escalate into a massive civil war, they initiated the plan for the future. Any hope

for their future in Lebanon has dimmed in the wake of the daily hostility described in the bazaar. The ongoing hostility experienced by the family has contributed to a decline in expectations for favourable outcomes. Even within a regular situation in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees endure discriminatory treatment, relegated to second-class status with severe limitations on employment opportunities across various sectors, prohibited from property ownership, compelled to reside in dilapidated camps, and denied access to formal education (Feldman, 2022). To what extent can I assert that they left Lebanon due to daily hostility or for a brighter tomorrow for the girls in Europe? How and why is forced migration distinct from economic migration?

Examining the decision-making processes portrayed in the two family narratives and drawing from the existing literature (Silva, 2023), I argued that these decisions were shaped by a complex interplay of socioeconomic and political factors that influenced their lives. The interlocutors' quests for a liveable life took them on journeys that often took a few years, encompassing what might be seen as distinct modes of movement within the framework of the dominant conceptual paradigm for comprehending mobility. Turton (2003: 6) points out that the forced/voluntary dichotomy overlooks the fact that there are 'elements of both compulsion and choice in the decision making of most migrants'. With this in mind, this article presents data focused on the decision-making process of mobility, emphasising the agency of the interlocutors while also examining how legal frameworks, inequalities, and social divisions shape their journeys.

I organised and divided the following sessions into two parts. These show how class, gender, nationality, and documental status affected the families' mobility decision-making. This discussion shows compulsion and choice in decision-making. It emphasises decision-making, considering the agency of the interlocutors, the diverse constraints they face in this process, and the context and structures of inequality that frame their lives.

Mobility Decision-Making and its intersection with gender, class, and nationality

Their limited opportunities influenced Mahmoud's and Muna's decision to separate. They did not want to live apart but felt they had to prioritise their daughters' future. Social factors, such as class, gender, and nationality, played a significant role in their decision. Mahmoud and his son went to Brazil, while Muna and their daughters stayed in Lebanon due to a lack of resources and humanitarian assistance for the whole family to move together. The lack of resources for the entire family to settle in Brazil led to the decision for the father and son to leave without the moth-

er and daughters. The plan was for the couple to reunite in São Paulo. Mahmoud and his son would save money to bring Muna and the girls to Brazil. However, while Mahmoud and his son were struggling with the high cost of living in São Paulo, Muna received support from a Christian humanitarian organisation, which enabled her and her daughters to move to a European country. They did not hesitate to accept the humanitarian organisation's offer of assistance. Despite the family separation, they could not refuse the opportunity to move to a European country. The couple envisioned a future in Europe that they did not see for the girls in Brazil. Consequently, the couple decided to live separately for an unspecified period. Living in Brazil was not a viable option for Muna and their daughters, and Mahmoud and his son had no feasible way to go to Europe.

Mahmoud could not be assisted by the humanitarian organisation that helped his wife and daughters because of the allocation of resources and efforts exclusively targeting women and children. Even the couple's son could not receive any assistance from them. As described, this organisation played a decisive role in Muna and their daughters leaving Lebanon and seeking asylum in a European country. I tried to persuade Mahmoud to censure the organisation's approach in not assisting him and his son, questioning: "How beneficial is assistance that leads to the separation of families? How does the organisation deliberately fail to protect individuals who require assistance and solidarity?". Mahmoud could not support my critical view. He was very grateful for what the organisation did, showing his support for the humanitarian workers and reinforcing how they assisted his wife and daughters in safely leaving Lebanon and arriving in a European country. Mahmoud further argued that the humanitarian workers did their utmost given the circumstances, noting that individuals within his family and circle of friends had also experienced similar lapses in care. He emphasised that this issue was not personal. Mahmoud told me many histories of men whose families left because of the humanitarian focus and opportunities exclusively for women and children.

Researchers have demonstrated that central aspects of the refugee regime have been based on "gender-blind" assumptions that privilege the experiences of heterosexual, cisgender men (Baines, 2004; Freedman, 2010) and how, at the same time, and consistent with patriarchal assumptions, refugee "women and children" become a central object of concern for humanitarian actors (Hyndman & Giles, 2011). These authors have criticised the lack of attention from scholars to the care of men. Refugee men receive less attention compared to women and children in humanitarian discourse, which tends to focus more on groups traditionally associated with assistance. Humanitarian workers often view men as having power, agency, and independence, complicating the idea of "empowering" them. Thus, humanitarian policies frequently prioritise the empowerment of women without considering the

empowerment needs of men, reinforcing gender stereotypes and binary thinking. A similar point has also recently been made by Turner (2021), who strongly critiques the gendered assumptions and biases within humanitarian responses, advocating for a more inclusive and intersectional approach that addresses the needs and challenges faced by all refugees, regardless of gender. The binary perception of women as victims and men as powerful agents perpetuates unequal power dynamics and limits the scope of humanitarian interventions (Turner, 2021).

This article builds upon the contributions of these authors, further extending their arguments to address aspects they may have overlooked. I noted that when men are not seen as having nuanced vulnerability, it can lead to journeys of family separation. The journey of separation is an example of how families negotiate the barriers to their movement. As Dubow & Kuchminder (2021) have shown regarding refugee families from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, "by separating emerges a key adaptive strategy" (Kuchminder, 2021: 4262). Additionally, it is essential to emphasise that men are subject to mandatory military service, which drives massive journeys of separation. Syrian men of the conscription age felt very unsafe in the country. They could be called up for military service in the Syrian Army or by a range of armed groups fighting against the regime and striving with each other as well. Palestinian men who would not be required to serve in the Syrian Army were harassed into joining other military groups. Silva (2023) argues that analysed migratory trajectories demonstrate how the desire to avoid participation in the armed conflict actively led young men to emigration. This illustrates how region, gender, and generation influence experiences with war and migratory trajectories. It is no surprise that statistical data indicate that the majority of asylum seekers from the Syrian conflict in Brazil are men (73.3%), adults (78.9%), and singles (57.8%), reflecting a predominance of men of wartime age (CONARE, 2020).

Mahmoud's decision to go to Brazil with his son cannot be understood without taking into account their gender. Many humanitarian assistance programs did not include them. The primary focus of most international humanitarian efforts focuses on women and children first as the traditionally most vulnerable members of society worldwide. Moreover, as Palestinian men, Mahmoud and his son were unable to find support or access to programs for refugees from Syria due to their Palestinian nationality. Brazil's decision for refugees of the Syrian conflict considered other groups behind Syrian citizens, including Palestinians and other stateless persons. However, unlike this decision, many countries have restricted their visa policies and access to humanitarian programs for Syrian citizens. Although Syria was home to approximately 500,000 Palestinian refugees, of which 149,822 lived in one of nine official camps (Castellino & Cavanaugh, 2013: 157), Palestinians have usually been excluded from protection programs to access protection.

As I turn into the last intersection, it is important to note how social class and economic resources significantly influence the journeys of the families being discussed. Unlike Mahmoud, an artist, and his wife, a social worker, Khaled and Randa were professionals, with degrees in Engineering and a Master's in Business, respectively. They had worked in international companies and took holidays in Europe and the United States. They had an elite standard of living, which meant they had saved resources and counted on financial support from Khaled's wealthy family. Their social background also meant they could pay for aeroplane tickets for all family members to relocate to a third country and decline unpaid job proposals, allowing them time to improve their lives. Randa endured the rough time of the Covid pandemic taking online courses in prestigious American universities and supporting her husband in finding a new international job.

As I discussed elsewhere (Souza, 2024), Randa refused to look for a minimum-salary job. When Randa declined an unpaid job proposal, arguing her high qualifications, the humanitarian worker who offered her the opportunity blamed Randa's culture for her decline. This rejection sparked a confrontation with a humanitarian worker who assumed Randa refused due to her patriarchal culture. This tension reveals a discrepancy in the perception of refugees' socioeconomic backgrounds and that blaming culture is an easy path. The analysis of this tension (Souza, 2024) shows that blaming the chains of culture "deflects attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live" (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 20). The intersection of class and gender influenced the couple's decision to leave Brazil, as they faced challenges such as the lack of public childcare and limited job prospects conducive to career advancement. Their experiences challenge the assumption that displacement is solely driven by precarious lives, highlighting the importance of acknowledging individual circumstances and aspirations in understanding refugee journeys.

Conclusion

This article offers an empirical look at mobility decision-making, focusing on the journeys of two families affected by the Syrian conflict. As discussed, little is known about the reasons why Syrians flee their country for a new destination and how this choice is made. Thus, this research contributes to this knowledge gap, enriching the literature on the Syrian conflict and its refugees and exploring fears, hopes, and aspirations in choosing a new place to live. This article challenges categories of state (such as refugee versus economic migrant) through the lived experience of these two families.

The purpose was to investigate the active decision-making process by which the families arrived at their decision. To do so, this research examined the available information that the families utilised at the time they made the decision, the financial arrangements for their journey, the degree to which the decision was planned in advance, and the extent to which the families had prior contact with the country. The examined journeys also challenge homogenising categories and simplistic distinctions between forced and voluntary migrations. The results demonstrate that families' mobility is shaped by a complex interaction of constraints and possibilities and that migration decisions are multifaceted. The decision is linked with broader economic, political, and cultural dynamics.

Concerning the country of choice, this research discussed the decision-making of Syrian and Palestinians families in Brazil, which is an unexpected destination for them. Although Brazil is far from Syria, it was one of the few countries with an open policy for Syrian citizens and others affected by the War. This open policy offered a safe route and access to documentation, which was significant in a context that simultaneously marked the recognition of the tragedy of Syria and the global lack of a proper humanitarian response.

Regarding the discussion of hope and aspirations in pursuit of a better future, this paper argues that families build plans for a close future, and not only to respond in survival mode. Furthermore, this article reveals that men need to be objects of care to avoid journeys that lead to family separation. As it was illustrated, the international humanitarian focus on women and children creates a strain family unity. The binary perception of women as victims and men as powerful agents perpetuates unequal power dynamics and limits the scope of humanitarian interventions. This article also acknowledges that social marks, such as gender, nationality, documents, and class, shaped refugees' journeys differently. It illuminates the nuanced factors that drive the lived experience.

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Authorship contribution: Not applicable.

FUNDING: The preparation of this article was made possible by funding from the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (JCNE-FAPERJ processo 273063) e Grupos Consolidados (CNPq processo 422818/2021-6).

The author would like to thank Centro Integrado de Tradução e Escrita (CITE/UFF) for assistance with English language review and developmental editing.

DATA AVAILABILITY: All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

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Received on August 5th, 2024. Accepted on September 6th, 2025

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001