

# A Perspective on the Arab Spring Diaspora: New Diasporic Identities

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## ABSTRACT

This study highlights a new tendency of the diasporic writing after Arab Spring revolutions. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions, many writers in diaspora have been motivated to portray and document a clear, authentic and integral picture of the events and how the revolutions have affected their cultures, identities, and heritage. With special attention to the Syrian case, the uprisings have deteriorated and developed into a sectarian civil war. The consequences of the fractured and unorganized peaceful demonstrations and the intrusion of foreign forces in this war have led to a totally different path that has been taken in other Arab countries. So, many Syrian writers and journalists in exile consider that Arab Spring uprisings in Syria have resulted in a massive loss of human lives and destruction of their cultural and historical heritage. The present study examines Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing* (2015) as an example of how Arab writers in diaspora have become transnational political writers who mobilize from outside and inside their countries trying to make a difference. By analyzing the selected novel, this study concludes that new forms of diasporic identities and social mobilizations have emerged among the dispersed Syrians not only outside, but also inside their country: Syria.

**KEYWORDS:** diaspora, transnational, local diaspora, Arab Spring, identity, sectarian war

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In the early 2010s, the first spark of the Arab Spring uprisings started in Tunisia, and then spread to the other Arab countries. The uprisings began in Tunisia when the young Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest against the deteriorating economic conditions, and his inability to secure a living for his family. Hence, the revolution broke out in Tunisia, and ended on 14 January 2011 when Zine El Abidine left the country. Then, the Egyptian revolution of 25 January erupted, followed by the Yemeni and Libyan revolutions. Subsequently, peaceful demonstrations began calling for an end to corruption, improving living conditions, and even sometimes overthrowing regimes in some Arab countries.

Syria is one of several Arab countries that experienced a wave of uprisings and peaceful demonstrations in March 2011. However, these nonviolent uprisings and demonstrations resulted in armed revolutions and thrust the country into conflict and civil war. Here one might consider the many factors that have contributed both directly and indirectly to the war in Syria in particular. Though its exact origins are unknown, this war, on the surface, turned into a sectarian conflict between the Sunnis in northern Syria and the Alawite regime of Al-Assad. The Syrian regime confronted the protests with fierce suppression by army and intelligence services. Later, armed militant groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) entered the conflict in the name of the Islamic religion, and foreign intervention escalated the bitterness of the crisis under the banner of efforts to resolve it. Marc Lynch et al. noted that “Syria’s conflict evolved towards a mixture of protest and civil war . . . . Syria became far more of a polarizing issue with a higher degree of sectarian rather than pan-Arab identity narratives” (1). Thus, Syria has become associated with fear and terror. The incalculable cost this war incurred has not been paid by Al-Assad’s regime nor by the armed militant groups, but rather with the lives of Syrian civilians. Estimates show that more than half a million people have been killed since the war began, while the number of wounded and injured is much higher. As another consequence of this war, a great number of people have dispersed into neighbouring as well as distant countries. More than 5 million Syrian civilians have been displaced from their home country, not including arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances (Roth). This paper will demonstrate the physical, geographical, and psychological dispersions Syrians have experienced inside their country’s borders through the lens of Samar Yazbek’s contemporary war memoir, *The Crossing*.

Recognised as a prominent writer, journalist, and novelist, Samar Yazbek plays a vital role in portraying and writing truths about Syrian calamities and destruction. Although she is from the Alawite sect, that of Al-Assad's regime, she challenges the regime and takes a stance against sectarianism and tribalist mentality. Yazbek was born in Jable, Syria, in 1970 and considered writing as a career before beginning her vocation as a columnist and content author for Syrian television dramas and film scripts. She was driven out of Syria in 2011 after the revolution broke out and exiled to France after becoming an activist against Al-Assad's regime and participating in the 2011 uprisings. Yazbek is a leading figure in human rights, especially women's rights. She established an organisation called Women Now for Development, which aims at providing socio-economic support for Syrian women. Her works have been translated into several languages, including English, French, Swedish, and Dutch, amongst others. Additionally, she has won various prizes and awards for her works. She received the Best Foreign Book Award for her novel, *The Crossing*, in 2016.

*The Crossing* is an unusual, incredible, and brave depiction of revolution in her country. In March 2011, a series of peaceful demonstrations began in northern Syria, calling for a change of government and an end to Al-Assad's regime. Samar Yazbek believed that by returning to Syria and using her voice to convey the truth about victims' suffering, she could contribute to a peaceful, and hopefully successful, revolution. She made the risky border crossing to Syria several times from Turkey until 2013, which was the last time she saw her people. She illegally crossed the borders several times to enter Syria where "the only victor . . . is death: no one talks of anything else. Everything is relative and open to doubt; the only certainty is that death will triumph" (Yazbek 15). Therefore, she called the places that she went through the gates to nothingness and nihility. These two concepts—nothingness and nihility—which represent the situation in her country, are expressed in Arabic as *Bawwābāt Ard Al-'Adam*. *Al-'Adam* means *nothingness* and *nihility*. Indeed, possible literal translations of this title in English include *Gates of Nothingness Land*, *Gates of the Land of Nothingness* or *Gateways into Non-Existence*. *The Crossing* is not a work of fiction or dramatization but rather a real story that she has lived among real characters from northern Syria. In her work, she has emphasised their pain and envisioned their hopes. The narration delves into the daily testimonies exposing the terrible details of life in Syria. The gates that she entered through were really the gates of nothingness that led to nihility or non-

existence. These gates are a representation of exposure to the predominant nihilism, the daily carnage of women and children, the despotic nihilism of the Al-Assad regime and the religious suicidal nihilism apparent in the form of extremism and mercenaries.

Samar Yazbek intended to return to her country in order to settle after her exile. She entered the liberated lands three times between 2012 and 2013. Like an intruder crossing the borders through Turkey, she disguised herself with her headscarf, black Abaya and black glasses. She intended to establish a civil organization that would empower women economically and intellectually as well as to educate children in northern Syria. During her journey, Yazbek met local people at the heart of the areas being most frequently attacked in northern Syria: Saraqib, Kafr Nabl, Maarat al-Nu`man, amongst many other such villages. She then compiled the testimonies of these people, who ranged in age from children to the elderly, as well as leaders of foreign militant groups. The voices of these people, fighting for their chance to live every day whilst under attack from multiple fronts, would not have been heard without Yazbek's attempts to collect their accounts. In her work, she portrayed the status of her nation and the consequences of the war, creating a step-by-step illustration of what has befallen her beloved people, such as *In the Crossfire: Syrian Revolution Diaries* (2012), *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria* (2015), *The Blue Pen* (Al-Macha'a, 2017), *19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria* (2018), amongst others. Her narratives have defined the scope of the catastrophes that have vitally impacted the identities of Syrians in their very homeland.

This research paper utilises a qualitative methodology to examine the Syrian writer Samar Yazbek's perspective on new Arab Spring diasporic identities. The main resources for this paper are Yazbek's narrative and the diasporic theories proposed by Steven Vertovec, Avtar Brah, Robin Cohen, and others. Both online and library research methods are used to obtain the primary data needed to analyze and explain the paper's thesis statement. Based on the main source, this paper suggests how the term "diaspora" may change to include peoples dispersed within their own homelands. The theories of Cohen, William Safran, Rogers Brubaker, and Vertovec, all of which add to or expand upon the term "diaspora," serve as the background to this research proposal. The data collected and examples from Yazbek's narrative are used to explain the researcher's argument in this paper. Close reading will be used to analyse and

extract salient information from Yazbek's *The Crossing*. Additionally, specific theoretical works of diaspora studies will be considered in order to uncover the reality of diaspora for the Syrian victims inside the country.

Diaspora has become a popular subject of discussion in recent times. It is one of the most talked-about social, political, critical, and religious concerns among critics, researchers, and thinkers touching upon an aspect of the human crisis and human identity in the modern era. The current Syrian diaspora came into being following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Syrian writers and other thinkers have portrayed, with some particular poignancy, the extent of the country's fragmentation in their writing, variously expressing the psychological tensions, anxieties, and feelings of helplessness they have suffered due to their diaspora, as well as the difficulties with harmonizing with other nations and communities in the social, linguistic and cultural senses. Therefore, finding compatibility with new cultures—and thereby forming new identities—has become one of the most vital issues for refugees. However, what distinguishes the recent Syrian diaspora from others is the fact that this nation has experienced what might be considered a twofold diaspora, that is, from both within and outside the country. Simply speaking, Syrian have faced dispersion issues locally as well, having been alienated and displaced from one place to another and forced to adapt to new social, cultural, and religious norms. This finding, as will be demonstrated, is supported through the following analysis of *The Crossing*.

Usually, the word “diaspora” is defined as the dispersal of people and communities. It originates from the Greek, for diaspeirein “disperse,” from dia “across” and speirein “scatter.” The term originated in the Septuagint (Deuteronomy 28:25) in the phrase “esē diaspora en pasais basileias tēs gēs” (thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth; “Diaspora”). So, “dispersion” means scattering of people outside the borders of their homeland (Cohen 2-3). Diaspora is a loose term that can be continuously redefined in accordance with changing events around the world. Rogers Brubaker propounds that the recurrence and “proliferation” of the term diaspora has resulted in a loss of associated meaning, leading to inappropriate analysis (1-5). However, it may also add variety to the definition of diaspora and allow researchers to identify the features and characteristics that apply to each historical diaspora, such as the Jewish diaspora, Arab diaspora, and Chinese diaspora (Safran 83-84; Cohen 1-6). Robin Cohen, William Safran, Avtar Brah,

Rogers Brubaker, Nicholas van Hear and other critics generally define diaspora as the scattering of an extended group of people outside the geographical borders of their homeland. However, each scholar applies his own distinction to his definition of diaspora. William Safran defines diaspora as a “segment of a people living outside the homeland” (83-84). He applies this definition to members of emigrant minority communities that share certain characteristics. Safran describes diaspora, or, more precisely, a “diaspora community,” as “a metaphoric designation” for numerous classes of people, including “expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court” (83). Avtar Brah, on the other hand, applies to the *Webster’s Dictionary* definition of diaspora, which “refers to a ‘dispersion from,’” originating from the Greek “*dia*, ‘through,’ and *speirein*, ‘to scatter’” (qtd. in 178). He states that this word suggests a centre or home from which dispersion originates. It resonates with “the image of a journey,” though not all journeys can be considered diasporic. He proposes that this definition contains some paradoxical implications; however, he concedes that “diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots ‘elsewhere’” due to conflict or war (Brah 178-79). Robin Cohen and Rogers Brubaker agree that the term diaspora and its associations, or “*taxa*,” have changed over time and indeed continue to evolve. Cohen notes that diaspora, in all four of its phases, appears after a traumatic event in the relevant homeland.<sup>1</sup> He adds that “scarring historical calamities . . . lend a particular colouring to these five diasporas” (1-2).<sup>2</sup> Cohen then adopts Weber’s “ideal type” “as a heuristic device in this way, a typology [that] will help to delineate, analyse and compare many diasporic phenomena” (161). Thus, Cohen develops another four types of diaspora: “trade, labour, imperial and deterritorialized diasporas” (160). For all types and phases, trauma remains the primary cause of diaspora. Nicholas van Hear also maintains his own definition of diaspora, which he defines as a “transnational community” (6) and believes that this term is more inclusive of diasporic concepts as it “embraces diaspora, [and] populations that are contiguous rather than scattered and may straddle just one border” (6). He propounds that “diaspora formation has accelerated in recent times, so too has the unmaking of

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 1 for a detailed explanation of the four phases (1-20).

<sup>2</sup> Cohen lists the five calamities: Babylon for the Jews, slavery for the Africans, massacres and forced displacement for the Armenians, famine for the Irish and the formation of the state of Israel for the Palestinians (4).

diasporas, seen in the regrouping or in-gathering of migrant communities or dispersed ethnic groups” (6). He observes that diasporas cannot be formed or thought about in a “one-way” direction (48). He argues that as diasporas can be *made*, they can also be *remade* and *unmade* in a process that he terms “de-diasporization” (48). He states that in “the formation or reinforcement of diasporas, the reverse process may occur: the *unmaking* of diasporas” (48). The term *de-diasporization* indicates that diasporic groups can make the best of their crises. Therefore, “they are not simply victims, but are active within the circumstances in which they find themselves” (van Hear 48). Accordingly, diasporic groups outside their countries may no longer necessarily be categorized as diasporic. Van Hear claims that “diaspora communities might be enhanced and reinvigorated; they might be unmade or diminished; or transnational communities might be reaffirmed” (12). Van Hear also argues that

diaspora formation can occur by accretion as a result of steady, gradual, routine migration, which may be a matter of choice or strategy on the part of households and communities . . . [or] from catastrophe, expulsion or other forcible movement induced by conflict or persecution . . . . Dispersal may well also result from a combination of compulsion and choice; diasporas may be formed as a result of a combination of cumulative processes and crises. (47)

In addition to van Hear’s definition of diaspora as a transnational community, he proposes three phases of diaspora that might be experienced by transnational communities. First, diaspora begins when political, economic, or religious factors, force or otherwise influence people to leave their own countries. Second, diaspora can be unmade when dispersed communities make their homes in new societies and become successful in their host countries. In this phase, van Hear describes diaspora as being diminished. The last phase occurs when diaspora is remade or reasserted and the already-dispersed communities experience diaspora once again. Van Hear discusses many examples of this, one of which is the case of Palestine (194-210). According to van Hear, diaspora is made when communities are dispersed from the places in which they have built their homes; one should note that the definition is not restricted to their countries of origin.

Similarly, Steven Vertovec argues that diaspora may refer to “any population that is considered ‘deterritorialized’ or ‘transnational’” (277). He describes three modalities of diaspora: as a social form, as a type of consciousness, and as a mode of cultural production. Diaspora as a type of consciousness is based on “describing a variety of experience, a state of mind, and a sense of identity,” i.e., “diaspora consciousness” (Vertovec 281). Vertovec argues that diaspora consciousness generally forms among transnational communities. Due to the very reasons for the existence of this type of diaspora, diaspora consciousness can be applied to Syrians who have experienced “discrimination and exclusion, world cultural or political forces” (Vertovec 281). Vertovec elaborates upon his point of view using Cohen’s developed version of Stuart Hall’s viewpoint on diaspora which states that “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 235). Therefore, Vertovec argues that “diaspora is comprised of ever-changing representations which provide an ‘imaginary coherence’ for a set of malleable identities” (282). Vertovec also quotes Cohen, in that “transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination” (qtd. in 282). This indicates that geographical borders are no longer a feature of diasporic identity; rather, they become a state of mind, a consciousness that is more psychological than physical. Under “diaspora consciousness,” Vertovec suggests a fourth type of diasporic mode he calls “religious diaspora consciousness” (283). Here, Vertovec wants to show that within the concept of diaspora, there is a confusion of “religiousness” and “religious-mindedness, of being held by religious convictions or holding them” (283). This type was experienced by Syrians when various ISIS-related groups occupied various regions in northern Syria, imposing restrictions that were frequently unrelated to Islam yet that were claimed to be in its name, ultimately transforming Syrian society.

If diaspora is not limited to national boundaries but is rather a product of a “shared imagination,” as Vertovec and Cohen suggest, then one could argue that it is possible for members of a fragmented nation to experience diaspora within their own homelands. According to the aforementioned definitions of diaspora, several different views of diaspora can be applied to the Syrian case.

Indeed, based on the previously mentioned theoretical outline, this research paper proposes that van Hear's view and Vertovec's second type of diaspora, diaspora consciousness, are most applicable to the Syrian case. Thus, the research reveals that Syrians have experienced internal diaspora within the geographical borders which has resulted in the shaping of new identities. As *The Crossing* shows, many Syrians have no clear identity, even collective national identity has been lost. Ethnicity and sectarianism have weakened the Syrians identity.

What has happened in Syria is nothing new. The killing of children, youth, women, and the elderly tragically is a recurrent theme throughout history, and of course are not unique to the country; similar atrocities have been documented in Palestine and Iraq as well, for instance, though there are many other examples. Additionally, events took place in Syria at the beginning of the Arab Spring that mirrored what had happened in Tunisia and Egypt, but the situation that followed in Syria was unlike anything else. The brutal killing of innocents as a result of a misguided sectarian war, as sustained by external parties, accomplished certain policies with other goals, and the peaceful revolution in Syria turned into bloody and religious sectarianism between Sunnis and Alawites. This violent fragmentation has resulted in a unique Syrian diasporic identity that is just as prevalent, if not more so, within the country as it is abroad.

The new Syrian diasporic identity is unlike the more historic diasporic identities that resulted from colonization and formed as hybrids of the home country's and colonizer's individual cultures. Historically, diasporic identities have straddled the line between retaining their former home's culture and adapting to the new, and have rather tended to combine the two to some extent. On the contrary, new diasporic identities have been stripped of their past and culture, either within or outside their homelands. Diasporic communities inside the homeland consist of bodies of flesh and blood simply trying to survive another day, hour, or even minute. Syrians inside their homeland have been estranged, alienated, and, to be blunt, annihilated, while Syrians who have been physically dispersed outside of Syria have, to some extent, been able to assimilate into their host societies. Still, diasporic communities outside the homeland struggle to survive by integrating into their host countries whilst facing complexities that affect their identities, but these difficulties are unlike the psychological suffering of Syrians inside their homeland. New diasporic identities are formed coercively without any choice or chance to maintain or

remember the past, as an enormous amount of history and historical places are destroyed without leaving any trace of their existence. The same thing applies to Syrian identities that have been systematically and comprehensively eliminated. Diasporic identities before the Arab Spring were afflicted by external forces, and many were overcome or dealt with. However, after the Arab Spring, the factors that influenced identities were internal factors that have led to a kind of annihilation.

The Syrian writer Samar Yazbek, displaced from the country herself, decided to use her writing to defend her homeland. Consequently, she illegally crossed the borders into the country on several occasions to mobilize people from the inside and to document the truth of the situation, writing down the testimonies and stories of people under bombardment as well as helping women. She stated: “My goal was to set up some small-scale women’s projects and an organization aimed at empowering women and providing children with an education” (Yazbek 10). Thus, by crossing borders, Yazbek was able to help women and children and at the same time depict their realities, explaining how an armed conflict in Syria evolved from peaceful demonstrations and describing its impact on the identities of the Syrian people. Additionally, Yazbek wanted to show how the sectarianism associated with the conflict has led to diaspora within the country as well as outside of it. Indeed, she foregrounds the war’s destruction of thousands of years of cultural inheritance and the loss of historical, cultural, and religious identity. Yazbek did not write a novel with a fictional story that dramatizes reality but rather presents real-life stories through the characters of her narrative, such as Ahmad, Abo Amjad, Maysara, and others. In this way, Yazbek demonstrates how Syrians have lost their so-called awareness of identity, a clearly defined sense that encompasses their personhood, language, culture, religion, customs, and so on. It has been distorted, not on the basis of hybridity because of an external colonizer but on the basis of internal destruction and demolition. Because of the brutal armed suppression and killing of women and children, Syrians have had to transform themselves into self-defence fighters in the attempt to survive. They follow those who can provide them with arms, food, and shelter. For diasporic Syrians displaced outside the country, the peaceful demonstrations enhanced their Syrian diasporic identity and united them in solidarity. However, within Syria, the situation has been entirely reversed by the sectarian and political tensions that have inscribed themselves on their identities inside their homeland.

Samar Yazbek monitored several testimonies about the war from inside Syria rather than from outside. Through these testimonies, she illuminates the causes of the war and how it has developed into a civil, sectarian conflict, becoming far more than the simple peaceful demonstrations demanding reform that represent its origins. Additionally, she discloses the repression and killings that took place in areas which are inhabited by the majority of Sunnis. Although all segments of Syrian society—Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, and others—participated in the demonstrations, the protests in ethnically or religiously mixed areas were united against the regime, proclaiming “Wahid, wahid, wahid, al-sha’b al-Suri wahid” (One, one, one, the Syrian people are one). The identities of all protesters were integrated as one within the Syrian nation state. However, Al-Assad’s regime used religious mobilization to direct particular violence against Sunnis, reducing that against non-Sunnis in order to gain the support of other religious groups and position themselves as saviours from Sunni radicals. Yazbek questions why many Sunni activists were released from long prison sentences while at the same time ISIS brigades were easily able to penetrate the Syrian borders, and indeed were sustained and supported with funding and weapons. This mobilization policy has two main purposes. First, it serves to manipulate people’s feelings about religious bases and encourages many moderate religious people to join the religious militant fronts, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and, most recently, ISIS. The second, most important purpose is to change the direction of the war against Sunnis—who have been represented as ISIS by Al-Assad’s regime—in order to receive advocacy from external forces. ISIS was created as a distraction from the main cause of the peaceful protests, in which Al-Assad’s regime presented itself as a saviour and protector from religious extremists. This has greatly affected the Syrian national identity, as Christopher Phillips states: “the reality was a more complex manipulation of different identities at different times. The regime tapped into these identities by raising the spectre of a sectarian civil war as soon as the uprising began, accusing the opposition of fostering sectarianism” (40).

This war has offered the opportunity to arms dealers and human traffickers to exploit people’s needs and stimulated the appearance of unorganized armed gangs who seem to be specialized in sabotage, theft, kidnapping, and murder. Thus, Samar Yazbek believed that it was not enough to convey the suffering of the Syrian people and the mass destruction that has befallen them, and instead chose to actively support them. The aftermath of this destructive war has deeply

affected the lives, culture, and history of Syrians; their identities have been fragmented, having been shattered in the conflict between the political, ethnic, religious, and national practices that influence how they perceive themselves.

Samar Yazbek has reversed the typical role of the diasporic author, through her choice to write from inside her homeland to convey the diasporic experience that her people are suffering from, both inside and outside its borders. In *The Crossing*, she writes about this suffering by documenting the testimonies of Syrian citizens' experiences during this unjust war and how they have been victimised and misled by sectarian conflict.

While the outside world sees images of bloodshed, dead bodies under rubble, the tender remains of children's bodies and their toys stained with their blood, this is not the same as living this harsh reality second by second. Watching these scenes from outside can desensitize one to such bloody scenes, as happened previously in Palestine and Iraq. Samar Yazbek attempts to live this reality in order to describe and transmit what happens under intensive bombardment and daily killing. As Yazbek states: "Everything I recount in the following narrative is real. The only fictional character is the narrator, me: an implausible figure capable of crossing the border amid all this destruction" (9). Therefore, Yazbek became an imaginary character crossing borders amidst destruction and chaos to convey the truth and write true stories with real characters and real names. In this way, Yazbek's characters (rather than Yazbek herself) are central to her narrative, as they describe their experiences of war and the great changes that have befallen their personalities and identities. She describes Syria in a very living, real image:

In my mind, I hold a portrait of Syria, but it is no ordinary image. It shows a dismembered collection of body parts, the head missing and the right arm dangling precariously. Then you notice a few drops of blood slowly dripping from the frame, disappearing as they are absorbed by the dusty soil below. This is the catastrophe that Syrians deal with every day. (Yazbek 39)

Another vivid image is described by Ayouche's daughter:

"This happened on the 5th of January 2013. We heard about the deaths of six girls and a young man and his wife after they'd been

kidnapped. On the same day another family was killed—they had gone out for the olive harvest—and they killed a woman and her two sons. And in our village, they kidnapped Abu Amer’s family and started to torture them; then they killed them all in the same way—shooting them in the head. Amer’s wife was nearly nine months pregnant. She gave birth while it was happening. When the men from our family went to look for Abu Amer’s family, they found her and the baby both dead, along with other bodies scattered among the olive trees,” said the girl with the almond-shaped eyes, staring at me sternly . . . . “It was the *shabiha* who did it, but they were driving cars with ‘Free Army’ written on them. But we know it was the government thugs, the *shabiha*. Before they left, they sabotaged the land and uprooted trees, they destroyed everything in their path, and took pictures of the corpses and all the destruction they were responsible for. Then they published the images online, saying it was the Free Army who had done it.” (51)

Here, Samar Yazbek portrays the complete distortion of mass media news and positions her real characters’ narratives as the truth. Ayouche’s daughter told Yazbek about the widespread massacres of civilians. Families were murdered by being shot in the head. The bodies of the murdered were scattered everywhere among the olive trees. Yazbek compares these images to the lives that Syrians have built for themselves in their new homes in Turkey. While crossing into Syria through the Turkish villages on the border, she noticed that many shop signs bore the names of Syrian towns and villages. The majority of buyers and sellers here were Syrian. This was, according to her, “as if a piece of Syria had been uprooted and planted here” (Yazbek 42), meaning that dispersed people had built their own homelands in border villages. To some extent, they felt safer and more at home than in their homeland, where they had left the spectre of death behind. This scene shows that diaspora does not inherently mean physical and geographic dispersion outside the borders of one’s homeland; it may otherwise encompass ethical and incorporeal matters as well. In another scene, Yazbek describes Syrians who were displaced to caves when fleeing death. Abu Waheed, an officer in the Free Army, helped Yazbek to pass through the village of Rabia “whose cavernous underground Roman

tombs had become shelters for refugees” (Yazbek 57). Many Syrians were displaced into these caves. These caves were “inhabited by some thirty families. There were six or seven caves, each one accessible through a deep, dark hole, where worn-down, dusty steps led to a cavern beneath the ground” (57). In describing the situation, Yazbek says:

There was no natural light in the cave. Day and night, they filled an empty medicine bottle with oil and dipped a wick into it, which they lit. This makeshift lamp gave off pungent fumes and didn't burn satisfactorily . . . . All the children were barefoot and poorly clothed. Their faces were pale, crusty with dirt and snot, their eyes blue or deep bluish-black, their skin dry and chapped, and their naked toes seeped blood and pus. In the bitter cold their swollen stomachs protruded like small hills . . . . It was an unparalleled vision of hell. Not merely a purgatory through which homeless wanderers passed, this was surely a cursed place created by the devil himself . . . . Directly ahead we saw some houses that had been razed to the ground. Total annihilation. It was as though a time machine had turned the clock back to the Stone Age. (58-59)

This scene portrays the dispersal of people within their homeland, stripped of their identity to an even greater extent than most Syrians in nearby countries. Of course, this does not mean that all Syrians outside their country live in better conditions than those who remain inside the country. As Yazbek noted, “the lucky ones [i.e., children] still lived with their families, but most of them were orphans who had crossed the border and survived here on the streets” (42). According to Yazbek, outside the country they survived death, but inside the country, the “[c]emeteries began to live among the people, another everyday part of life like the shops and the streets that wind between the houses. Massacre after massacre pitted the soil with craters filled with the bodies of Syrians” (76). Most Syrians who remained were dispersed inside the country without food, clothes, or shelter. They expect death at any moment, whilst in that same moment are fighting to survive. Yazbek describes a scene following the bombing of houses and people with barrels filled with explosives:

On the other side of the street, children were gathering scraps of iron from the explosion, in order to sell them later. The iron bars in the barrel bombs were usually about a foot long at most. A child of about thirteen was clambering over the immense heap of rubble, searching for more pieces . . . . The child's clothes were tattered, his eyes black and his hair full of dust. It was obvious he'd immersed himself more than once in the debris to collect as many iron rods as possible, presumably to sell them to buy bread.

(113-14)

Additionally, as Abu Waheed said: "We can't talk about one Syria now in the same way as before; everything has changed" (Yazbek 61). In terms of Nicholas van Hear's types of diaspora, diaspora is made for those who still live in their homeland, and is unmade for those who find a safe place to build new lives in Turkey. Steven Vertovec's diaspora consciousness is also demonstrated by a relative of Ayouche, who said: "It occurred to me that, between one displacement and another, there was something that weighed down on the soul yet made the body feel lighter . . . . Displacement stripped us of dignity" (Yazbek 114). Abu Waheed explained the truth about the situation to Yazbek, that external interference had played an extensive role in the evolution of the sectarian civil war. Iran was one of those external forces that interfered with and so contributed to it. As Waheed told Yazbek,

Ma'am, we want justice for our people. But we don't want other countries interfering in our affairs. We'd be better off if they left us to face Bashar alone, without interfering. Their interference only works in his favour. As you've seen, we haven't got rid of that thorn yet. (Yazbek 56)

He continued:

This is nothing compared with the arsenal the regime gets from Iran . . . . We will fight, we have no choice: we either die or we fight. The young men in the Freedom Martyrs are all villagers who have rallied together to protect their community. They are ordinary people. In other groups, you'll see things are different

because of their funding and the supply of arms they get. Our mission is to fight for our country, and our battle against Al-Assad is a battle for our country. We don't know who the other groups are or how they ended up here on our soil! (Yazbek 60)

Abu Waheed, like all civilians who participated in this war, defended his family and his country. Amjad, Hossam, Maysara, Abdul Razak, Raed, Ahmad, Abu Nasser and many others all wanted a civil state. Abu Waheed, who studied law and wanted to study at the Institute of Drama, asserts Syrians' peaceful intentions and demands. He stated:

When the regime falls we'll throw down our weapons. I don't sleep at home, ever. I'm a fighter, and I'm needed on the front line. But we want to live as human beings after this is over; we want to raise our children and give them an education. Can you believe that a government and a state could bomb its own people? I'll never understand this for as long as I live! (Yazbek 61)

Others have also discussed their forced transformations into fighters and how they joined battalions to protect their people, cities, revolution, and themselves. This transformation effectively forced the regime from the majority of the cities and villages in the Idlib countryside and the northern cities. However, its plan changed to one of terminating everything through shelling and barrel bombs, turning the lives of those who remained alive into a living hell. As Yazbek said: "And yet a sense of exhilaration tickled every cell in my body as I looked at this part of Syria, which had been mostly freed from Al- Assad's troops. Well, some of the land might be liberated, but the sky wouldn't let us celebrate yet; no, the sky was on fire" (9). Several times throughout the novel, she alludes to the fact that when Al-Assad's army failed to dominate on land, they used military aircraft to assert control from the sky. "[W]ho wants to die, but we were dead, and we want to live" (11). Later in the novel, Maysara explains the situation to Yazbek, and describes the great transformation that has occurred: "“Since you were last here, the regime has seized Idlib,” said Maysara, ‘and it’s become isolated from the surrounding countryside. The battalions are engaged in combat as we speak. There are more thieves in the revolution now than rebels. It’s one family against another. Mercenaries against mercenaries””

(Yazbek 47). Similarly, Ayouche told Yazbek about her village and how Al-Assad's army killed the people there. Then, the Shabiha arrived (49-50). For example, the Sunnis suffered during Ramadan, which represents a very important religious ritual that has its own peculiarities. The Al-Assad regime used to start their bombardments at the moment of breaking their fast, so the Sunnis would lose the joy of this moment. The mother explains to Yazbek: "It was Ramadan and they hoped to break their fast soon before anyone in the family had his or her head chopped off, or before another father was forced to pull the remains of his children out from under the wreckage brought about by a shell or a barrel bomb" (107). What could be the identity of a people who await random cycles of death? How might they think about their identity, let alone believe that today they are here, knowing tomorrow they could be martyred?

According to this paper's proposition, Syrians have experienced internal diaspora, an emerging diasporic identity that transcends geographical borders. Reflecting on Samar Yazbek's stance on the aforementioned images of Syria, Syrians have experienced new kinds of identities, transformations, and interrelationships as a result of suffering from oppression, disappointment, refraction, rupture, and anxiety about the self and others around them. They have attempted to recover themselves through introspection of the soul, where they always find themselves talking with sorrow and pain about their homeland, the pain of their diasporic experience, and their estrangement even within their own country's borders. When Yazbek started recording the first testimony of a young fighter, the first words he said were: "we wanted a civil state" (11). This young fighter was a student at university studying business in his second year. He first refused to kill people, but because of the war he was forced to fight because he wanted to live. Ahmad, one of the fighters, tells Yazbek his story: "I'm a fighter but I'm from a good family, I'm educated and I hate killing. I want to get married and have children—which is why I fight, so I can live. But I know the revolution has been infiltrated and we're surrounded by enemies" (119-20). Another testimony was given by Abu Nasser:

I've never fired a single bullet, other than to avenge a friend who was killed in front of me . . . Instead, the Syrian Army attacked us and executed some of our men by shooting them in the head. And then the battalion commander turned out to be a liar. He

abandoned us during a battle and just disappeared. I was furious—he was supposed to be our emir! How could he just run away? He even took my rifle with him, even though it'd been given to me as a gift. I found out he'd been taking drugs, smoking and committing all kinds of other sins. (Yazbek 120)

Thus, the identities of these young Syrian men—their social and socioeconomic statuses as students, workers, family members and pacifists—have been compromised due to their forced participation in the war. Another young Syrian man, Amjad Hussain, was “a battalion commander in Saraqeb . . . His presence summarized everything the Syrians have done for their revolution, their struggle for dignity and freedom, but for some mysterious reason when I first met him I had sensed he was ready to die. He was uniquely brave and pure of heart. And his fearlessness had worried me” (Yazbek 75). Not only have these men been forced to pay for this senseless war with their identities, but they have been forced to become willing to potentially pay with their lives as well.

Samar Yazbek talks about her first visit to the city of Saraqib and her reception there by a field of activists who were compelled to arm themselves. She recorded their lives and opinions. She also met revolutionaries on the ground, and many women. These people repeatedly stated their wishes to live peacefully and have a peaceful civil state. However, the cities and villages became victims of constant bombing and destruction. Most people were forced to leave their houses and villages and flee to safer areas, or otherwise seek refuge in Turkey. This continuous flight has had a considerable influence on the gradual loss of their identity. Every house has a tragedy, and every revolutionary has a story. Each woman also has a story that separates her reality from daily death, which may come in the form of bombing with barrel bombs, indiscriminate artillery shelling, machine guns distributed at barriers around cities and villages, or by ruthless sniping. In all homes, there are martyrs, absentees, detainees, the injured, and amputees.

Steven Vertovec's concept of “religious diaspora consciousness” is evident in the new diasporic identities of Syrians. Specifically, religion is one of the main reasons that revolutions have escalated into a sectarian war. Many Syrians question who among the militant groups, fronts and battalions formed in the name of religion are the most righteous and honest. Under the name of Islam, these groups manipulate people's feelings and encourage many moderate

religious people to join the religious militant fronts, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and recently ISIS. Because military support is limited and the specific weapon that will overturn the conflict and overthrow the regime is forbidden, both sides of Al-Assad's regime sought help from Iran, Hezbollah, Russia and sectarian mercenaries to support the regime's army, while Syrians from other sects sought help from strange fronts for whom the borders were open. Anyone who wishes to engage in *jihad* in Syria can easily enter through the Turkish borders and join ISIS. Samar Yazbek notes the proliferation of "opportunities for moneymaking, especially as the number of jihadist fighters wishing to be smuggled into the country was on the rise" (46). Additionally, she states: "The revolution had created an enormous, profitable black market where a number of entrepreneurs were set to reap a considerable profit. It was almost certainly in their interest to keep the war going" (100). She explains how the foreign fighters easily entered Syria:

The fighters began to disappear—there was another group waiting for them. The man accompanying us told me they were off to join the battle, that there was a French guy among them, of Tunisian origin, and that they were most likely heading for Aleppo now. My guide, who insisted on anonymity, told me they would probably go to join Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front), a new faction made up of young men with long beards. The existence of the Nusra Front hadn't become public knowledge until recently; early on, they had been an invisible underground movement, and their presence hadn't been tolerated in the villages. "You'll notice now that they've become much more powerful and more widespread," said Fida. "The next phase is going to be harder, because these groups will have more influence and will emerge in a stronger and more violent form. We're going to see videos of floggings and beheadings . . . . The city of Binnish was empty . . . it had been bombed by Al-Assad's MiG aircraft and abandoned by its residents. Only very few remained. The newly confident Nusra Front had taken over and many people in the city had joined them. (Yazbek 46)

ISIS has greatly influenced, and indeed completely changed the everyday lives of Syrians by building an Islamic state and applying Allah's law on earth by imposing on everyone their own religious interpretations—which were not originally linked to the religions and customs of the people and that were not, of course, in any way representative of Islam. For instance, they changed the style of dress. Yazbek states: “The movement now controlled state property, but it had been interfering in people's lives and had declared wearing trousers a heresy, even for men, promoting instead the ‘Afghan style’ of dress. The military infrastructure had also changed. There were now fewer roadblocks” (46). People in northern Syria were moderate and true Islamic people, but “It seemed that an entire society was undergoing a transformation, being wiped out then reconstituted once again” (102). Yazbek expressed her anger towards ISIS, as each time she entered Syria they made her a stranger in her own land: “I felt outraged at them stopping us and making us identify ourselves when they were in our country!” (100)—because they searched people and asked them to identify themselves at the multiple checkpoints they had set up.

The regime has manipulated people's religious attitudes by misleading them in order to win the war against them. This gave the civilians the impression that they were merely moving from the tyranny of the regime to the tyranny of these groups. Samar Yazbek monitors changes and facts such as how support for the Free Army youth has been drained so much that it has almost ceased to exist. Yazbek registers how Al-Nusra and ISIS have essentially monopolized the entire scene in several regions, resulting in the financial corruption of certain people, transforming some into gangs of thieves, and their evident use of kidnapping and ransom as tools of suppression. Yazbek narrates the kidnapping of a foreign journalist who was with her and states that she herself had been threatened with kidnapping and murder. The foreign fighters who came from outside Syria in the name of religion were the most dangerous, illusive battalions that appeared in Syria. These disguised battalions, known as “Islamic extremists” and later as ISIS, share a common interest with the Al-Assad regime that has immensely inflicted civilians' daily lives. One journalist who came to Saraqeb after it was freed from Al-Assad's army and taken over by ISIS battalions told Yazbek: “The biggest challenges are not financial backing and continuous bombardment; no, the most dangerous thing is the way the *takfiris*, the Islamic extremists, are edging their way in and starting to control people's lives and interfere in their business” (Yazbek 55). “This change in mentality

shows sheer ignorance of religion and Islam,' added Raed, directing his words to me. 'Ignorance is the basis of extremism'" (81). "The civilian aspect of the revolution has been neglected" (81), Manhal added.

Many scenes in *The Crossing* depict the ways in which Syrians inside their country have been dispersed and developed diasporic identities, such as the scene in the village of Jerada and all other villages associated with cultural annihilation. As Samar Yazbek said:

When we arrived at the village of Jerada, I exclaimed in surprise, "Oh, the whole village is made of stone!" There were huge Roman mausoleums thousands of years old and towering columns crowned with intricately sculpted capitals. This was just one of the many Roman sites scattered around the Jabal Zawiya region and, as I looked around, I was reminded of how most of the jihadist groups are blind to the significance of these ruins; looting is part of their ideology. For them, civilisation begins with Islam. (56-57)

In another passage, Yazbek explains how years of civilisation have been annihilated in this war. She talks about the utter devastation of every archaeological or historical period in Maarat al-Numan. Everything was decimated, including the most important mosaic museum in the Middle East, the Great Mosque, the Islamic library, and many other places and ruins that have been stolen, looted, or otherwise destroyed (Yazbek 63-70). These fundamental pillars of Syrian identity, which should have stood forever, have been obliterated in the name of a destructive war that was meant to be a liberating revolution.

Samar Yazbek has narrated the whereabouts of the revolutionaries where the liberated areas on the ground are occupied by air. Those who continue to live in any real comfort are incredibly rare; the vast majority are homeless, having left everything behind, including their innocence, in order to preserve their lives. Yazbek observed the lives of the homeless by visiting camps in Turkey and on the Syrian border. There is some safety, she noted, but the reasons to live are few to none, and the lives that can be led are almost inevitably lived close to death.

Finally, Syrians have lost their humanity in their homeland. They live with death every second. Daily killings by planes and missiles from the regime have

increased psychological alienation and an entirely justified frustration. While ISIS claims to have built something in the name of Islam, it now destroys everything it touches. It provided the regime and its allies with justification for labelling the Syrian revolution a civil war, corrupting a revolution that was meant to bring down tyranny and build a democratic state. The revolution has been stripped of its initial sense of freedom, dignity, and justice.

Samar Yazbek's direct documentation of the testimonies of people, revolutionaries, and indeed a number of some leaders, provides her narration with the strength that she possessed. It is close to being a direct testimony of the events themselves, with all of their violence, ugliness, absurdity, and barbarism. It also reveals the thoughts, feelings, and lives of Syrians today, who fear that as Syrian people, they have become nothing more than tools of death, violence, and human loss, placing stones that accumulate in the architecture of international and regional wills.

Samar Yazbek asserts that while the revolution on the ground represents a different reality than the one portrayed abroad, writing about it is also different than living it. She says that the reality of war has no place for theory, philosophy, order, or even knowing oneself at the end of each day. It requires steady nerves, the ability to manage things hour by hour, awareness of simple things, and composure in the face of torn human organs and the massive destruction of homes so that one does not lose sight for a moment of the collapse affecting those around oneself. Yazbek describes how life in death and a deep sense of non-reality engender feelings of frustration and despair in tandem with work, hope, and the unrelenting struggle between them. Yazbek says she began to write because she wanted to see things the way they were. On her several returns to Syria, she infiltrated the country in disguise, not only in order to establish development centres for women or schools for children but also to search for the underlying truth of the nature of this war's particular evil: what is the origin of this disease? She attempted to understand evil because she could not exist on the side of the border where it was manufactured, in the areas controlled by the regime. The writer discovered the ways in which identity has been stripped from the Syrian people, the fissions of the self that have occurred in the face of the daily horrors of reality and their aftermath. Syria, the country to which she belongs and yet does not belong, has been reappropriated by extremist Jihadists who have infiltrated the nation.

Although it was probably not her intention, Samar Yazbek may have committed one of the most important political acts of the twenty-first century. *The Crossing*, by its very nature, provides real stories about real people. As she says herself, it “wasn’t a novel, this was real life” (Yazbek 54). She has spoken at length about the humanitarian violations taking place in northern Syria on all sides. She has expressly talked about the circumstances that allowed ISIS and false Jihadist brigades to impose themselves upon her beloved homeland. These strange brigades as well as the different nationalities entering with them in the name of Islam, have been concerned only with the implementation of fixed beliefs on the one hand and mercenaries on the other. Furthermore, Yazbek has clearly written about the brutal practices enacted by the regime against the Syrian—its own—people and the intrusion of external forces under the pretext of embracing terrorism. In doing so, she has uncovered something essential about the new Syrian diasporic identity, one that is not merely experienced by Syrians abroad but by those who have remained within the country as well, a country that has become nearly unrecognisable due to the violence of the current sectarian conflict.

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