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Uprooted/Rerouted is a partnership between the Kenan Institute for Ethics and the Office of Undergraduate Education at Duke University. The twelve students in the program immersed themselves in the study of refugees and forced migration all day every day for an entire semester.
preface

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For individuals who have been forced to flee their homes and their countries because of fear and persecution, home is a complex concept.

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56 In sharing these realities and stories, we have attempted to fill the void where information about displaced persons falls short.
“Home is where I have freedom.”
“Home is where I have purpose.”
“Home is where I belong.”
“Home is where I feel human.”

For individuals who have lived in the same house, community or country for the majority of their lives, home is a notion most likely characterized as a safe place. Home evokes feelings of fondness and even nostalgia. But for individuals who have been forced to flee their homes and their countries because of fear and persecution, home is a much more complex concept—a concept that is difficult to explain and even harder to qualify.

During the spring semester of 2014, 12 Duke University undergraduates were selected to participate in a semester-long, research-based, student-faculty collaboration centered on the issue of forced migration. In an effort to engage with the growing population of Bhutanese and Iraqi refugees resettled in the Durham, North Carolina community, a group of faculty developed DukeImmerse Uprooted/Rerouted three years ago as a way to better understand the experiences of refugees. The program strives to complement a study of global displacement in the classroom and engagement in the local refugee community with a month of field research in Jordan and Nepal—two countries that have long histories as countries of asylum.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, it was hard to deny how the inability and or unwillingness of the international community to protect vulnerable populations had enabled mass slaughter and displacement. Principles of national sovereignty and citizenship had made it too easy to say “not my people, not my problem.” The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 was an attempt to make clear that victims of persecution irrespective of national identity or origin were in fact a shared problem. And thus the convention of 1951 defined “refugee” as:

any person who[,]. . owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return.

The convention grants international protection to individuals who meet the conditions of “refugee.” Today, there are 15.4 million refugees worldwide; 15.4 million people expelled from their homes; 15.4 million people who have been forced to lose, redefine and salvage what they consider to be their home. Regardless of the changes that were made to international law in 1951, globally increasing numbers of people are finding themselves trapped in this state.

In Nepal and Jordan, the DukeImmerse team gathered life stories from Bhutanese, Syrian and Iraqi refugees with the hope of understanding in what ways displacement affects how they see themselves and the world around them. We share this research with the intent of honoring the individual experiences and of doing justice to the many stories that were shared with us. We frame our discussion here around the concept of home—a common thread across refugee stories. Home is the essence of personhood: it defines where we have freedom, where we have purpose, where we belong and where we feel human. In what follows, we share what we learned about the implications of losing one’s home and how home is then redefined in the experiences of the refugees with whom we spoke.
The Bhutanese refugee crisis began in the late 1980s when the Bhutanese government revoked the citizenship of the Lhotshampas—an ethnic minority in the south of Bhutan. The Lhotshampas are of Nepali descent and the Bhutanese government saw their distinct culture as a national security threat. Forced to flee Bhutan in the early 1990s, this people group ultimately found refuge in camps in Nepal operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. By 1996, over 100,000 of these Bhutanese refugees resided in seven camps in eastern Nepal. As Nepal is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, the government has chosen not to grant these refugees the right to work or own property in Nepal. Thus, for more than twenty years, this population has largely depended on international organizations operating inside the camps (including the UNHCR, the UN World Food Programme, Lutheran World Federation, the Asian Medical Doctors Association in Nepal, and Caritas Nepal) to provide daily necessities ranging from food rations to medical care to education.

Because they were of Nepali descent, and because the Bhutanese government has not agreed to repatriate any members of the expelled population, local integration in Nepal might have seemed like a plausible long-term solution for the Bhutanese refugees. However, a decade of civil war in Nepal, combined with that government’s unwillingness to grant citizenship to any refugee populations within its borders, has kept this durable solution from becoming available. In 2007, the UNHCR mediated an agreement with seven third-party countries who agreed to open their borders and offer pathways to citizenship to the Bhutanese refugees through resettlement. Since 2008, over 80 percent of this population has been resettled in Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with the vast majority resettling in the U.S. The effort to find stable environments for these displaced persons has been the largest and most successful response to a protracted refugee situation to date.

Because the situation has persisted over two decades, the camps have become stable and semi-permanent environments. The refugee camps in Nepal have better living conditions than almost any other refugee camp globally, yet Bhutanese refugees face ongoing struggles in their daily lives. Many believe that resettlement is their only possibility for freedom and success. As increasing numbers of people resettle, the numbers in the remaining camps—Sanischare and Beidangi—are dwindling every day. The UNHCR is now faced with the issue of smoothly closing the camps and identifying the most effective solutions for the residual refugee population, who are either unwilling to resettle or have had their resettlement processes stalled.

Refugees have become increasingly connected to the outside community—economically and socially—over the past 20 years. Some of these connections have even resulted in marriages with local Nepalis, which complicate and often stall the resettlement process. Some refugees still living in the camps anxiously await resettlement, while others have expressed the desire to be repatriated to Bhutan or to be integrated into the local community. As both Bhutan and Nepal are unwilling to offer citizenship to these people, they remain in the camps with none of the rights that accompany citizenship. Many resettled refugees offer support to these remaining family members in the form of remittances and share stories of success and security in their new countries.

As the camps shrink and the communities surrounding them dissolve, refugees lose the stability they have worked over two decades to regain. The Bhutanese refugee population has struggled to recreate a sense of home in the face of displacement, both during their time in the camps and as they enter resettlement and adjust to the camps’ closings. Their definitions of home vary based on their values and the opportunities and resources that are available to them.

Some refugees still living in the camps anxiously await resettlement, while others have expressed the desire to be repatriated to Bhutan or to be integrated into the local community.
An abandoned bus in Damak.

Spices at a market in Damak.

Beldangi II.

A view of Kathmandu from Patan.

home: definition varies
Though the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the country has become a haven for refugees. This legacy began with Palestinians, who sought refuge in 1948 following the creation of the state of Israel in 1945. An estimated 40 percent of the Jordanian population is Palestinian or of Palestinian descent. In recent decades, Jordan became a destination for Iraqi refugees, beginning with the Gulf War (1990-1991) and then with another wave beginning in 2005 due to sectarian violence following the United States-led invasion of Iraq. Most recently, Syrians—fleeing a brutal civil war under President Bashar al-Assad—have flooded across the borders into neighboring states. Jordan is one of the four primary countries to which Syrians have fled. In the past three years, over 600,000 people have crossed the border from Syria to Jordan.

Prior to the conflict in Syria, the conflicts in Iraq had resulted in the largest flow of refugees from any country in the Middle East since the Palestinian refugee crisis in 1948. In 2003, U.S.-led coalition forces including the U.S., United Kingdom, Australia and Poland invaded Iraq, thereby overthrowing the Ba’ath regime and deposing Saddam Hussein. The coalition forces set up a weak transitional government. They failed to ensure a smooth transfer of power and instead, violence and chaos erupted. Militant extremist campaigns violently raged against the current and previous regimes, the U.S., and moderate Sunnis and Shia civilians. The UNHCR estimated that in 2007, 4.7 million Iraqis were displaced in the conflict, 1.9 million of whom are displaced internally. Large numbers of Iraqi refugees now live in Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, with smaller numbers living in Iran and Turkey. Many who fled to Syria have been forced to return because of the civil war that erupted there in 2011. Many others, however, cannot return to Iraq because of continuing security issues.

By March 2013, Jordan was hosting nearly 30,000 Iraqi refugees. The Jordanian government estimates that 500,000 Iraqis have come to Jordan since 2003, yet only 65,000 have been registered with UNHCR. The primary durable solution for the remaining Iraqi refugees is considered to be resettlement. As of April 2013, 84,902 Iraqis had been resettled to the U.S. from various countries. In 2014, 1,500 Iraqis will resettle in the U.S., while 300 are expected to voluntarily repatriate to Iraq. Jordan has not proven to be the ideal permanent home for most Iraqis; therefore, many members of the population currently living in Jordan are still hoping to find a new home through resettlement.

The ongoing conflict in Syria stemmed from a similar source of sectarian violence as in Iraq. Inspired by the Arab Spring movements that began in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, peaceful protests against the political abuses of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime began in March of 2011 in the cities of Damascus and Dara’a. In Dara’a, security forces shot a number of protesters, which spurred further civil unrest. Some conciliatory efforts were made to ease political tension, but in May of 2011, President al-Assad deployed his army to squash the uprising. After months of military involvement, the protests morphed into an armed rebellion, with the Free Syrian Army leading the revolt. The conflict and division of rebel militant groups is now intensely sectarian. The Sunni majority is discontented with the political and social power that the Alawite minority possesses throughout the country. President al-Assad is a member of this Alawite minority, which represents about 10 percent of the country’s population.

In 2013, the UN recognized the conflict in Syria as the worst humanitarian crisis since the Cold War. According to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the death toll has reached 146,000 people and the UN has stopped officially releasing numbers. Tens of thousands of protesters, advocates and activists have been imprisoned and tortured. Most of the human rights abuses have been perpetrated by President al-Assad’s government, but parties on all sides of the conflict have been implicated in human rights violations. The UNHCR estimates that approximately 9 million people, about half of Syria’s population, have been displaced since the conflict began. Of these 9 million displaced Syrians, 6.5 million are internally displaced and therefore do not possess the legal status of “refugee.”

Jordanian officials estimate that the number of Syrians within Jordan’s borders is now over 600,000, and official reports say that about 600 people cross the borders daily. The Jordanian government and the UN founded Zaatari Refugee Camp in September of 2012 after formally recognizing the Syrian refugee crisis. At the outset, the camp hosted 73,000 people. As of April 29, 2014, there are
Prior to the conflict in Syria, the conflicts in Iraq had resulted in the largest flow of refugees from any country in the Middle East since the Palestinian refugee crisis in 1948.

103,301 persons of concern living in the camp. Zaatari is now considered the fourth largest city in Jordan and the second biggest refugee camp in the world, second only to Dadaab in northern Kenya. Furthermore, two-thirds of Syrian refugees in Jordan reside outside of the camps in cities, towns and informal camps—which are primarily located in Northern Jordan, near the Syrian border. The conflict is ongoing and there is no solution in sight. As such, there is not yet much talk of UNHCR durable solutions to the Syrian refugee crisis. Syrians in Jordan are still grappling with the impermanence of home and the daunting task of redefining home as the conflict persists.
For Syrian, Iraqi and Bhutanese refugees, freedom is an abiding aspiration and an integral dimension of the ideal home. In the case of Bhutanese refugees, decades of displacement have distanced those living in the refugee camps in Nepal from their perceived freedoms of home. For them, resettlement is the most clear and feasible path toward future freedom. Iraqis have similar dreams of resettlement to Western nations. In contrast, the freedom imagined by Syrian refugees is of repatriation to a peaceful Syria. In our discussion of freedoms, we first illustrate how the refugee experience is often characterized by the loss of freedoms through the process of being uprooted from home, stripped of agency and forced to depend on others for survival. With the crossing of a border, refugees lose many of the privileges of citizenship and thus the basis of many previous freedoms. They must accept that aspects of life that a citizen would take for granted are, in fact, privileges that they must seek to gain. But, displacement is not an experience that is purely defined by loss. The manifestations of religious freedom within Syrians’ expressions of home is one example of the connection between freedom and home-making. The freedoms of protection and security afforded to those with legal refugee status facilitates this connection. The following discussions of citizenship, religious practice and rights to protection will demonstrate how displaced persons lose and find freedom as they strive to redefine home.
where are you from?

For most, this question evokes instant feelings of fondness or familiarity. For some, however, it is much more complicated to name a country that recognizes them as their own and grants them the rights to pursue even the most basic elements of daily life. Your ability to cross international borders legally and travel through customs and immigration with the flash of a passport is an affirmation that you belong. The sense of security that comes from knowing that you have the freedom to seek employment is a demonstration of the autonomy you gain as a documented individual. Your right to pursue education and have access to basic healthcare services attests to the fact that you have access to all these basic human rights; rights that cannot be realized today by thousands of Bhutanese refugees who struggle with the taxing disability of statelessness.

To engage in many of the activities that constitute everyday life is very often to rely on one’s citizenship rights. We often take for granted these rights that are constantly being exercised. We take them for granted, that is, until we are faced with the threat of no longer being able to enjoy them. This threat, however, does not commonly present itself to the majority of people—with the exception of 15.4 million refugees worldwide whose rights are limited.

In our interviews with Bhutanese refugees, they lamented how their lack of citizenship hinders their livelihood in various ways. One prominent example is the inability to work legally as refugees. As non-citizens, they are denied the opportunity to legally pursue careers in the local Nepali community. The laws prohibiting work, however, are weakly enforced and many Bhutanese refugees do attempt and succeed at securing jobs. Unfortunately, without the protections guaranteed to Nepali citizens, such employment is often at the expense of full and fair payment or their honesty in regards to their refugee status.

Ashmi is a young woman who sought opportunity outside of the refugee camps as a teacher in a Kathmandu boarding school. The emotional cost of pursuing the job turned out to be high, as the principal required her to deny her refugee status and mask herself as an Indian citizen from

Three girls outside the World Food Programme ration distribution station in Sanischare.
Drying clothes in Sanischare.
Many Bhutanese refugees have lost hope in the prospect of gaining citizenship in the future as their lack of identification has stalled their resettlement processes, making their wait seem interminable and their brighter futures far away.

Lochan, a middle-aged man with graying hair, let his head fall into his hands as he explained that he was unable to pinpoint a place on a map that contained his culture, ideologies, and nationality. Having lived a good portion of his life comfortably in his home of Bhutan before being expelled, he struggled with the idea that he was recognized as a legal individual neither “back home” nor in the camps, and doubted that he would regain this privilege in future resettlement elsewhere. He felt that there was nowhere in the world where his people were welcomed, accepted, or entitled to call home.

Many Bhutanese refugees have lost hope in the prospect of gaining citizenship in the future as their lack of identification has stalled their resettlement processes, making their wait seem interminable and their brighter futures far away.
A family of Bhutanese refugees at the Damak airport, eager to board the plane that will take them to their new home in a foreign land.
“I’m just waiting for my resettlement date. I have hope, I will regain my freedom and my human rights. Maybe not in Bhutan, but I have hope for the future.”

home. “If my life were a book, its title would be Man Without Nationality,” he shared. The short snippet he would choose to summarize his entire life was grounded in the fact that he had lost his freedom to live a self-directed life. He was relocated to a place where his life was governed by camp policies and his aspirations restricted by his statelessness.

Though citizenship is portrayed as a grand ideal promising protection to everyone in its reach, most of its actual benefits are manifested in the mundane course of everyday life. In the pursuit of one's aspirations, these rights are necessary. Losing their citizenship rights stripped the Bhutanese refugees of their ability to realize their dreams and create the life they imagined for themselves as the title of saranarthi, refugee, follows and inhibits them in their daily pursuits. “I’m just waiting for my resettlement date,” Jiwan, a young middle-aged man expressed to us sincerely. “I have hope, I will regain my freedom and my human rights. Maybe not in Bhutan, but I have hope for the future.”

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Friendship transcends harsh circumstances – in the Nepal camps, community allows refugees to make a home for themselves.
Issues of religious difference are at the core of the conflict in Syria. Dictatorial President Bashar al-Assad is a member of the Alawite minority sect within Islam. His attempt at eradicating political dissenters, many not-so-coincidentally among the Sunni Muslim majority, has catalyzed terror and a mass exodus from Syria. Yet, while religion is one of the factors fueling and complicating violence, Syrian refugees continue to rely heavily on their faith to uplift their spirits. After speaking with members of this community in Jordan, it became clear that religious faith played a crucial role in finding home in the midst of displacement.

Syrian people have been driven from their homes and transplanted to new communities in a neighboring country. In life story interviews with refugees, we consistently questioned how their faith could endure when these people had experienced such violent and heart-wrenching displacement. We asked every individual who we interviewed: “Has your faith in God changed after what has happened to you and in your country?” The answer to this question was almost unfalteringly the same: No, of course, it has not.

Amidst chaos, trauma and agonizing uncertainty, the Syrian people with whom we spoke emphasized that their faith in God and in Islam remained strong. In most cases, their religion might have been the only aspect of life that remained fully intact from home. Many have suffered the losses of loved ones and prized possessions, yet their faith has endured in the wake of such devastating destruction, in an almost unfathomable way.

Eman is a 33-year-old Syrian woman currently living in Marwa, a small village outside of Irbid City in Jordan. She and her family live in a village where they know almost no one and feel like outsiders. Like other Syrians who have fled their homes and have been transplanted to Jordanian communities, she has clung to Islam. Eman said that the most important value that Islam has imparted on her and her people is freedom. Whether it was the freedom to leave a place of violence or freedom to practice Islam, members of Syrian refugee communities articulated their right to live freely in the place of their choosing. They told us of the religious freedom in Jordan, while also noting how much they had lost and their collective homesickness.

Most people with whom we spoke in Jordan presented themselves as deeply tied to their faith. We also recognized this fact in its most subtle forms when individuals frequently attached the religiously laden expressions “al hamdu lillah,” meaning praise to God, and “inshallah” meaning God willing to their sentences. The frequency of these phrases in speech showed the link between faith in God and the everyday lives of these people. Though the name of God creeps into mainstream American speech patterns at times, the way people in Jordan said these expressions seemed more connected to the idea that God was watching over them and continuously deciding the course of their lives. On a minute-to-minute basis, they must
appeal to God so as to ensure their safety. Furthermore, many Syrians with whom we spoke said that they observe their faith on a daily basis. Amir—a 35-year-old Syrian male living in Marwa—said that he considered himself “religious, but not strict,” yet he prays every day, five times a day and goes to the mosque in Marwa on a regular basis. This daily commitment to Islam seemed to be serious and intense, yet it characterized the typical religious practices of Syrians we met and interviewed.

The representations of religion became more complex and personal when we began to ask for the meaning behind the practice. Kareem—a 40-year-old Syrian male living in Marwa—presented some of the broad ideals and values that he derived from Islam. When we asked him to describe his religious

Whether it was the freedom to leave a place of violence or freedom to practice Islam, members of Syrian refugee communities articulated their right to live freely in the place of their choosing.
beliefs, he said: “There is no God but one God. We have God’s words in the Qur’an. My religion is about cooperation; we refuse killing, the bad things.” Kareem’s wife Maliha added that Islam explicitly “refuses any form of gender violence.” Both of these statements implicitly referenced the situation in Syria under President Bashar al-Assad, where over 150,000 people have died and estimates are that over 6,000 women have been raped since the war began in 2011. Kareem and Maliha view these forms of destruction as the furthest thing from their religion and have found peace and stability in Jordan, having fled Syria.

Kalila is an 85-year-old woman living in Marwa who spoke more about Quranic values—values that arose in the original text of the Qur’an. She specifically referenced the concept of *amanah*, which means fulfilling or upholding the trust of God. She explained to us, “We will not take anything back with us. Even if we have millions, we will not take anything back with us.” Kalila implicitly alluded to her experience and that of her people in this statement. Al-Assad’s army has taken their family members and their livelihoods. To Kalila, this was a violation of the values in the Qur’an.

When we asked Amir what religion meant to him, he said: “It means being safe and being protected and close to God.” In stark contrast to the religious differences exacerbated by the politics in Syria, Amir and many others explained that Islam was similar to many other faiths. Most people who alluded to these similarities noted Christianity, though a few also spoke of Judaism. Many of them said that their faith was closer to Christianity and Judaism than it was to the faith of President Bashar al-Assad. I interpreted the frequent comparison of Islam’s values to those taught by other organized faiths to demonstrate that many of these individuals linked religion with morality. Religion, then, did not seem so bound up in the Qur’an itself as it was how individuals interpreted the text and chose to act upon it. The Syrians with whom we spoke wanted us, as Americans, to understand the differences between their Islam and Islam that is used to back a heinous cause. These are the contrasting Islams that they have seen play out in their lives. They have gone through life praying and observing religious practices, while also having become victims of debilitating violence that was commanded by fellow Muslims.

Amir asked us if we knew that the current war in Syria was mentioned in the Qur’an. He said that al-Sham—which is a place very close to Damascus—was mentioned as a place where something bad would be happening in the future. Although he could not point to a passage where this fact appeared in the text of the Qur’an, he assured us that he had been learning more and more about the war in Syria through the Qur’an. He said, “Everything happening the world, it is written in the Qur’an.” This statement showed how Amir understands his life within the context of a greater narrative outlined in the Qur’an, which he uses to make meaning of devastation even while settling in Jordan.

When we asked these individuals if their faith had wavered or evolved...
after what had happened in Syria, almost every person said no. Amir said, “some people go away from God and have to come back, but I am the other way.” He said that after what has happened, he should be stricter and closer to God. Amir’s proximity to the mosque in his neighborhood and the lack of social restrictions make it possible for him to observe his faith. Kalila said she thanks God that she is alive. “We should always thank him, whatever the situation,” she said. “God gives and God takes.” Kalila, Amir and many others explained how God was always on their side, even throughout these devastating times in their lives.

In Jordan, these Syrian refugees said that they enjoy a greater level of religious freedom than they did in Syria during the war. They do not have to hide and they do not fear religious persecution. They can practice Islam in whatever way they choose. Syrians find comfort in the presence of the religious communities throughout Jordan and seem to have assimilated into them relatively seamlessly. Nevertheless, even while living in a host community that is considered to be culturally and religiously nearly identical to Syria, these people grapple with their present and ongoing inability to live and breathe on the soil they have known their entire lives. They do not want to make Jordan home, even if there are liberating elements—such as religious freedom—of their current lives in Jordan. Though they do not explicitly blame God or claim to waver in their faith, Syrian refugees are distressed and traumatized by the war. Their state of mind is inextricably linked to their faith as they work to find meaning in what they have witnessed.

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A refugee points to Syria, viewed from the Jordan border.
The UNHCR has granted about 600,000 Syrians refugee status in Jordan. While the term “refugee” has a specific legal definition, the nature of the term—along with its social connotations—is the source of disillusionment. As such, it is easy to make assumptions about what encompasses the life of a refugee. Once in Jordan and registered with the UNHCR, the UNHCR grants Syrians asylum and basic rights to security and protection. Refugee status affords these individuals protection from persecution outside of their home country, but this protection is the only thing that the status ensures them. They are not necessarily guaranteed specific freedoms or material circumstances conducive to a life many would recognize as suitable. In fact, most of the Syrian refugees we interviewed are unable to work, continue their higher education or properly make a viable home for themselves under their current conditions. Most families are struggling on a day-to-day basis to stay afloat financially, let alone manage other ongoing effects of displacement on their lives. The process of trying to imagine a new “home” has become quite daunting for Syrians in Jordan.

Regardless of the fact that Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, the country has been willing to cooperate with international organizations to accommodate the influx of refugees by implementing the necessary humanitarian-based solutions. The country has allowed many to cross its borders and seek refuge. Most refugees with whom we spoke described the crossing of the border as a moment signifying immediate safety. Because of the terror associated with Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, most crossing into Jordan are fleeing threats of kidnapping, torture and bombing. Crossing the border into Jordan ensures their and their families’ protection from those realities. We had the opportunity to speak with one older man in Irbid named Mahmoud whose decision to cross subjected him to unimaginable risks. He was a former colonel defecting from Bashar al-Assad’s army, and if caught, he would have undoubtedly been killed. He described his experience:

Coming out of explosions and shooting bombs, it is a happy moment. You know, staying alive when you come out of that. Passing Tall Shihab [city at the border] and crossing the border to Jordan was too hard. ... It was hard because you are expecting at any moment the army will shoot you, because we are crossing between the trees. We were hiding. ...

When you don’t have the safety or the security, and then you find somewhere else [Jordan], it feels like something very, very big, very great.

The same border that seemed so inconsequential before the war now often means the difference between life and death. Although unsure of the life that awaits them in Jordan, most are willing to take the risk and seek temporary refuge.

Although they are finding a sense of security in Jordan, most Syrians have become dependent on various organizations and the UNHCR for money and assistance. The aid disbursed from these organizations seems adequate for stable living conditions; however, upon closer examination there are shortcomings of the aid that is provided. Syrians express frustration with the limited funds and resources available to them. As Halimah—a Syrian mother of two—said:

I don’t get anything from organizations. I tried to call them and got no response. .... They don’t want to register us. Even for heaters, I receive from the landlord. If the situation stays until next year, we will go [back to Syria] because we do not have any money, even if the war is still bad.

The fact that working in Jordan is illegal for refugees increases the discontent felt by many Syrians in Jordan. This limitation reinforces their state of limbo and renders them idle in their homes.
Like many others with whom we spoke, Halimah’s family is having trouble making ends meet since they are not receiving much aid from organizations. Her husband works, and they receive UNHCR food coupons, but this is not enough. When we asked what needs to change for them to stay, she replied that because they can’t afford the rent, they will either have to stop needing to pay or find a way to earn enough to afford it. For Halimah, the landlord—as opposed to an organization—is the one who truly helps them meet some of their basic needs. The aid-related frustrations have caused most to feel helpless and even more vulnerable in the unfamiliar country in which they have settled. The struggle of adjusting to this hard life in Jordan has overshadowed in their minds the fact that they are safe and protected.

Not only are Syrian refugees receiving inadequate aid, but they are also forbidden to seek employment in Jordan. Some work illegally in the informal economy and are subjected to harsh working conditions, but most do not work at all. The frustration of forced unemployment was evident in the eyes of one Syrian man with whom we spoke. Sitting on the floor cushions in his house with his young daughter running around us, Abu—a man living in Kittlem—described how he is not working and only receives UNHCR coupons. He said,

The biggest difference in lifestyle between Syria and Jordan is going from working to not working. Anyone registered with the UNHCR cannot work and the Jordanian government won’t allow me to work. There are no opportunities. If I am caught working I will be deported.

Abu looked down at his hands and added, “There is nothing in my hands.” The fact that working in Jordan is illegal for refugees increases the discontent felt by many Syrians in Jordan. This limitation reinforces their state of limbo and renders them idle in their homes. Most talk of the work they left behind in Syria and their yearning to return to their former lives.
“Even the possibilities for education for the refugees is less than, is even nothing unless you have money. The community of just eating and drinking, this is not community and this is not humanity.”

All of the aforementioned factors that contribute to their new lives in Jordan have caused Syrians to become dissatisfied with their existence. Many feel as though almost everything has been taken away from them. Many children in these families have even quit school. Most of the parents with whom we spoke said school had become too costly or too difficult for their children to continue—with some children even dropping out in order to work in their parents' stead. The protection and aid from the Jordanian government and UNHCR does not seem to be able to fully replace all that the Syrians have lost. When we asked Mahmoud to describe the community of Syrians in Jordan, he said, 

We don’t have any things other than just receiving from organizations, we don’t have anything to do, or basic things to call community. ... Even the possibilities for education for the refugees is less than, is even nothing unless you have money. The community of just eating and drinking, this is not community and this is not humanity.

The unexpected consequences of displacement have altered the realities of the 600,000 Syrians living with the status. These individuals fled places of war and chaos in order to find security and protection in unknown places. With the crossing of borders, they have had to pay an unfortunate price for freedom. The struggles for money, education, and an adequate livelihood pervade their existences and cause them to mourn the lives they have lost in Syria. Jordan cannot be home for them because even though it is a land that has protected them, it is a land that is stifling their freedoms.

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CONCLUSION

From our conversations with Syrian, Iraqi and Bhutanese refugees, we gathered that their gains and losses of freedoms have deeply affected their experience of displacement. Though we as researchers had a basic understanding of the freedoms that displacement had stripped away, we were not as attuned to the potential gains it created. This measure of loss and gains inevitably varies depending on the exact circumstance, yet our research points to overarching patterns in the two field sites. We explored these patterns in our discussions of religion, security and citizenship. We conclude that while the outsider may discern the freedom of a refugee through an inventory of gains and losses, one forms their own interpretations of freedom through finding where they feel able to breathe and to live unhindered by others and institutions. These interpretations may not be as black and white as a legal definition would be. These people left homelands where they were oppressed and entered safe and secure environments while maintaining a fierce loyalty to the concept of home. We found that all three populations are still searching and still hoping for some form of home, still searching and still hoping for full freedom.
Through the experiences of displacement, it becomes difficult for refugees to take control of their lives and to feel that they have purpose. The Bhutanese, Syrian and Iraqi refugees who we interviewed were not only physically uprooted from their home countries, but also were pulled from the daily routines that gave their lives meaning. In this way, when these refugees were robbed of a home, they were also robbed of ways to exercise their purpose. The Bhutanese father who used to wake up every day at dawn to farm his land to feed his family can no longer act as a provider to his children in the same way that he did in Bhutan. The Iraqi woman who used to work as an interior designer in Baghdad is now confined to the home by her brother. The man who was a colonel in the Syrian army now feels like he has no way to meaningfully spend his days in Jordan. These examples demonstrate how the refugees with whom we spoke can no longer use their time in the fulfilling and purposeful ways they felt that they once did. Their sudden and often violent displacement ruptured their capacity to achieve purpose.

Because purposefulness is an integral component of daily life and the experience of home, refugees working to re-establish their homes in new countries need to find ways to exercise their purpose. We will describe the stages of this process in which refugees seek to exercise purpose. We explore first how displacement challenges Syrian and Iraqi refugees’ sense of self-worth. We then describe how Bhutanese refugees—having struggled with a loss of self-worth in the past—have found agency and means through which to fulfill a purpose. Lastly, we will explore how refugees look to durable solutions—namely resettlement—as possibilities for attaining a more stable, longer-term purpose. Where refugees have imagined purpose, they have also imagined finding home.
SELF-WORTH: THE CONSTRUCTION OF PURPOSE

by Christie Lawrence

"[When] I lost my closest friends... When I lost my country... When I lost my way of living, my source of income."

These are the three most significant events in the life of Amir, a 35-year-old Syrian man who has lived in Jordan since August 25, 2012. Like other Syrian and Iraqi refugees fleeing conflict in their homelands, Amir has found himself separated from his friends and family, driven out of his country, stripped of the right to work and forced to depend on aid from international organizations. In their home communities, Amir and other refugees who we interviewed fulfilled certain social roles and commanded respect from their peers. Forced displacement has disrupted those social spheres, making it difficult for many refugees to sustain personal, interpersonal and community-based conceptions of self-worth. Without a holistic sense of self-worth, refugees have struggled to feel at home in Jordan.

Although Jordan offers refuge from violence, it does not offer much else that is necessary for rebuilding a sense of home. Therefore, for many—including Amir—fulfilling the role as the family breadwinner like he did in Syria is an unattainable aspiration. Amir articulated this frustration when he said, “we live here and we lost our dignity because of the money and living expenses.” In this interview, I gathered that Amir’s sense of self-worth derives from his ability to provide for his family. But in Jordan, he refuses to get an exploitative job in the informal economy and risk deportation. Why? Living with his family is inherent to his conception of providing for his family. This consequently fuels Amir’s immediate desire to return to Syria. He explained:

I will work in Syria. I have my own home, free water, and that is enough for me. If I go back home, it is a small space, but if I grow vegetables that will be enough for me. Even if I am in a tent and had dirty water, I would be happy.

Amir equates happiness with fair employment conditions and living in Syria with his family. But in Jordan, he can only live with his family. He explained, “If I die here, I am normal; but if I die in Syria, I will be a martyr.” Being a martyr means dying with dignity, which Amir does not believe he is able to do in Jordan. For Amir, his everyday life must reinforce his worthiness of respect from others, namely his family. Failing to fulfill his role in his family due to unemployment and insufficient savings has prohibited Amir from achieving his purpose as an admirable father and husband. In Jordan, Amir’s sense of self-worth is lessened.

For others, the process of becoming a refugee has enhanced their sense of self-worth in one way, while diminishing it in others. Mahmoud, a 54-year-old man living in Irbid, came from a different situation than Amir: he was a colonel in President Bashar al-Assad’s army and lived a life of luxury. He did not worry about providing for his family and educating his children, yet he does not believe that he was deserving of the authority and respect that he received. He stated:

I was not able to express or show anything that I am against the government or the system because if they [Bashar al-Assad’s regime] felt anything against their system or rules or whatever thing, they will kill me.

Although he was member of the al-
Ba’ath party and served in al-Assad’s army for decades, Mahmoud fundamentally disagreed with the conflict. He met with members of the community to talk and organize protests, though fears of persecution prevented him from participating in public.

Eventually, his constricted speech and action threatened his sense of integrity and his safety. Mahmoud explained, “I left Syria for the freedom and to feel safe and for my dignity, my honor. … I’m O.K. to receive the donation and get money. It’s hard for me, but I will accept it.” Ultimately Mahmoud’s guilt from bolstering an oppressive regime—where equality and freedom for himself and other Sunni citizens was nonexistent—led him to leave his position. Mahmoud found his own dignity in his desertion of al-Assad’s army, while losing status and employment in moving to Jordan. He explained, “there is nothing here, I’m just human here.” Mahmoud is not in a dire economic situation compared to other Syrian families, yet he does not immediately garner a sense of dignity and respect based on his former status as a colonel. His situation therefore illustrates the competing tensions some face in Jordan. In Syria, he stated: “I used to feel unfair, so stressed and disappointed. I felt like I was conquered,” in reference to his political silence. In Jordan, Mahmoud has found the security and freedom to express himself as he pleases, leading to a growing sense of self-worth.

As compared to those who have fled Syria, many Iraqi refugees have accepted the fact that they are never returning home. Wahj—a 37-year-old Iraqi mother—constructs self-worth through imagining her future. In Iraq, Wahj was an interior designer who found purpose in her work and family; however, upon fleeing Iraq, getting divorced and being financially exploited in Jordan, Wahj became economically dependent on her brother. Her brother does not want her to leave the confines of their house. This restriction on her movements combined with her unemployment caused Wahj to say that she feels “not comfortable … not a normal person.” She said that she instead feels “like a machine” with the same mechanical, mindless housework filling her days.

Wahj’s inability to lead an “independent life” with her daughter is the crux of her dissatisfaction and low sense of self-worth. She expressed guilt that her daughter had to live without a father and was instead reliant on her uncle. For Wahj, her hopes lie in a future where she can regain control over her life and command respect from her daughter. She explained:
I want to guarantee a good future for me and my daughter. I want to get a job there [America], change my life, get income from work, and spend it anyway I like. I don’t like anyone to give me money. I want to do it myself. I am sure that won’t happen unless I settle in U.S.

In Wahj’s mind, she cannot achieve self-sufficiency in Jordan. Her sense of self-worth is inextricably tied to her ability to reimagine her future under different circumstances. America, which she believes offers her the possibility of fulfilling her purpose, has thus become Wahj’s imagined home.

Self-worth can be shattered or reconstructed depending on the circumstance. The stories of Amir, Mahmoud and Wahj demonstrate how individuals with different purposes feel varying levels of dignity and worthiness through the process of displacement. Amir finds his purpose through working to provide for his family. Mahmoud found dignity in leaving a situation that had eroded his sense of self. Wahj focuses on a future where she will have authority over her life. For all three individuals, the conflicts in their countries and their forced migration have impacted their sense of purpose. Amir is willing to return to Syria and risk death in order to achieve purpose, while leaving has allowed Mahmoud to look for self-worth in ways that he could not in Syria. Wahj envisions a future in America—where she believes she will have economic freedom and authority over decisions regarding her life and her daughter’s. For all three individuals, aspects of their lives allow them to maintain a sense of self-worth. Yet without a full sense of self-worth, none of them can truly feel at home.

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“I used to feel unfair, so stressed and disappointed. I felt like I was conquered.”

CHRISTIE LAWRENCE
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AGENCY: HOW REFUGEES CHART THEIR OWN FUTURE IN THE CAMPS

by Elizabeth Hoyler

When Bhutanese refugees first settled in the camps, all they had was a bamboo UNHCR-certified hut, some WFP food rations and a whole lot of time. After expulsion from Bhutan, these refugees did what anyone would have done after being so dramatically uprooted. They tried to get their lives back.

Everyone tries to take charge of his or her life, but refugees have a special challenge. After an unexpected upheaval from their home, refugees are robbed of the familiar routines that made up their home and their daily lives, as well as the control that they had over those routines. Without a home base, a familiar community or the means to maintain a livelihood as they once did, refugees have to be innovative. They have to search for ways to re-create a daily life in the camps. Even though they have little idea of when they will be leaving, where they will leave to or who they will leave with, refugees find ways to exercise their agency and thereby chart a future course for themselves. In this context of great uncertainty, refugees’ agency is a dimension of their purpose in life.

While in the Bhutanese refugee camps, we heard the stories of how men and women have built meaningful everyday lives for themselves over the past 20 years. The Bhutanese refugees exerted agency to find purpose through education and employment. We heard descriptions of people “feeling good” that their children attended school. We saw the pride shining through their eyes when they would describe a job or volunteer position in the camp. This satisfaction reflected a sense of purpose and what one refugee described as “an opportunity for me to live my own life.” It combated the aimlessness—or “restlessness,” as one woman said—that plagued life in the camp. Through work and education, refugees can exercise control over their daily lives and make them uniquely theirs. This agency helps them find purpose and, with that, a sense of home.

Pursuing education—both in the camps and beyond—is a way for refugees to chart a course for their future. The future is something that they can own completely, unlike their hut or any provisions given to them by international organizations. “It was one of the most significant moments for me when I started school in the camps,” 32-year-old Bikram, from Beldangi II camp, said. And though it may be easy to think of refugee camps as the place where one’s agency is reduced, for Bikram, the camps restored some agency to him in the form of free primary and secondary school education. Ramesh—a 38-year-old male refugee living in Sanischare refugee camp—was excited to see his children gain the same type of opportunities after expulsion from Bhutan. In Bhutan, Ramesh had dropped out of school at a young age to support his family, so he was grateful for the free schooling being provided to families like his in the camps. He was proud that his children did not take this education for granted and took school seriously unlike the “spoil[ed]” neighbor children who drank, fought and got arrested.

For those who have completed or choose to stop the schooling provided in the camps, finding paid employment in the outside community is an important way to fulfill daily needs and meet personal goals. Although they cannot work legally, many still seek employment. Krishna—a parent and refugee in Beldangi I—claimed that he worked for the “betterment of his health” because sitting around the house all day was not healthy. Health issues aside, Krishna’s work enabled him to provide his children with access to higher education outside the camps. Krishna said that because he was the person who...
A young man distributes were in food warehouse in Sanischare.

“Actually, the most important thing is to help others … I have to do help. I will help everybody regardless of caste or religion.”

gave birth to his children, he felt obligated to provide these opportunities. In addition to this obligation, however, Krishna felt that he had a purpose: to act as the bridge between his children and higher education. Exerting his own agency to find employment, Krishna was able to fulfill this purpose.

For Jiwan, a 27-year-old male also living in Sanischare, employment also renewed in him a sense of purpose. Jiwan told us he could finally give back to his community. In fact, one of Jiwan's most significant life moments was when he got a job at the Youth Friendly Center, a camp organization that strives to provide mentorship and activities to youths in the camp. Like Jiwan, Bikram also found it important to volunteer. “Actually, the most important thing is to help others … I have to do help. I will help everybody regardless of caste or religion,” he affirmed passionately. Bikram said that he believes that because his food and shelter are provided for him, he needs to do something to help others. Krishna, Jiwan and Bikram define their agency through work. These men are all able to embrace and contribute to their communities in a way they feel is appropriate.

One could argue that going to school and working are simply necessary ways to pass time. But education and employment are more than just
placeholders: they are means by which refugees move forward. For Krishna, Ramesh, Bikram and Jiwan, these activities helped them to define a role for themselves, whether it was as provider, community mentor or proud parent. In the camps, these men found a purpose. I couldn't help but think that they might also be a little sad to leave through resettlement. After all, they had truly built a home for themselves. A routine. Something to be proud of. Jiwan told me he wanted the “good life” in his resettlement country of Australia. He claimed that this life was not available to him in the camps. But even Jiwan couldn’t deny that he had made a life for himself in the camps.

“It was one of the most significant moments for me when I started school in the camps.”

ELIZABETH HOYLER is a sophomore majoring in Economics and Global Health. Having become so fascinated with refugee studies this past semester, she returns to Nepal this summer to work in the refugee camps.
Bhutanese refugees are currently facing difficult decisions about their futures. Their choice is between resettling to a third country or staying in the camps with the unlikely hope for future repatriation to Bhutan or local integration in Nepal. Currently, resettlement is the only available durable solution for these refugees. UNHCR has been working with the Bhutanese and Nepali governments for over a decade to explore other possible solutions—both local integration and repatriation—to no avail. Because this standstill has persisted for so long, the range of possible futures has narrowed such that resettlement has become increasingly synonymous with the future for Bhutanese refugees. Yet, some refugees still cling to the hope of other options—to go back to their past homes in Bhutan or to stay in their current homes in Nepal.

For many, the resettlement process is well underway. The vast majority of people with whom we spoke were in the middle of the process or hoping to start soon, and almost all have family or friends who have already resettled. These family members and friends tell them about life in the resettlement countries—mainly the United States and Australia—and mention job prospects and free educational opportunities. Most people we interviewed said family and friends tell them things like “get to the U.S. as soon as possible” and “life inside the States is very good, much better than life inside the camps.” The positive stories that their friends share give these refugees hope that they will have greater opportunities to live in the way that they want.

Many refugees hope that new jobs and taking care of family members in resettlement will help them find purpose. The most common dream that we heard was to find a job that satisfies their basic needs and supports their family. Lochan—a 50 year-old man in Sanischare—has a “sick leg” that is less developed, thinner and weaker than the other. It is painful for him to walk and work and he is distraught that he cannot work outside his house to support his family. He must instead rely on remittances. Because his disability keeps him out of work in Nepal, he has begun to imagine new professional opportunities that he equates with a renewed sense of purpose upon resettlement in the United States. He said that his friends have told him, “if one has good communication skills in English then it is very easy to get a job.” Lochan therefore wants to take English classes when he gets to the United States because he believes this will help him get a better job and attain his goal of becoming a provider.

Bhutanese refugees also want the opportunity to be able to spend time with and care for their children. Tika—a 22 year-old female from Sanischare—does not have much contact with friends who have resettled, yet she still maintains positive notions about resettlement. The first thing she said when we asked about resettlement was that she wants to resettle for the “betterment of her home: definition varies

“If one has good communication skills in English then it is very easy to get a job.”
son.” Her son is still a baby, but he is blind. In the camp, she works every day at the Community-Based Child Care Center, so her parents take care of her son when she is away. But she said that she has heard that for people who are resettled, “everyone got jobs, loves their new country, and can take care of their children.” For Tika, this last point is essential for her sense of purpose: not only does she want her son to have a good life in America, but she believes that resettlement will give her the opportunity to take care of him once again.

When we asked refugees what resettlement stories they have heard, they only occasionally mentioned bad ones. Yet, even if they sometimes hear resettlement countries can be dangerous and unfamiliar, the positive things they have heard lead them to embrace the resettlement process, thus further enforcing the idea that resettlement is equated with future. Jiwan—a 21 year-old male from Sanischare—said he has fears of “Bhutanese killing themselves because of frustrations,” in the United States, yet he is still hopeful for resettlement. These stories only made him more eager to resettle in

Refugee youth getting on a plane to Kathmandu en route to resettlement in the U.S.
Australia and not the U.S. He said that he hopes for “better facilities that can offer health check-ups and monthly or yearly welfare stipends” and “a clean house and an environment free of pollution, and fresh fruit and vegetables to maintain good health.” But most importantly, Jiwan said he wants to resettle to help his family better their health. He hopes his disabled brother will find appropriate aid and medical care when they move to Australia. He believes that his entire family will live longer if they move out of the camps.

However, though most Bhutanese refugees seemed to want to resettle, we met some people who actively did not want to resettle. Some think Bhutan is and always will be their home. This was where they grew up, where their family is from and where their lineage traces back. One man said that he will wait as long as it takes to be able to repatriate. Some individuals’ hopes and attachments to their old homes in Bhutan are still strong and persistent. They see their futures exclusively in these places. Others said repatriation would be their first choice, but only if their resettled family members move back, too. They realize that without family, Bhutan is no longer home, so they will resettle too.

Other Bhutanese refugees want to stay in Nepal. They have spent the last 20 years making connections, building relationships, and creating a life and home for themselves there. Some married locals or opened shops in the camp. Others, like Kalpana—a 22 year-old female from Beldangi II—are staying because their family members do not want to leave. Kalpana said, “Although all of my relatives have been resettled, we have not because my mother does not want to leave Nepal. We had started the resettlement process once before and we were going to move to Canada.” Kalpana added that her mother started crying and did not want to leave, so they decided against the process. Though Kalpana and her siblings do want to go to the United States, she said she would not do anything to split the family up. For Kalpana’s mother, resettlement in a foreign land is even more hopeless than life in the camps. These people who do not want to resettle are willing to stay in limbo until their hopes of settling in Bhutan or Nepal can come true. While these options are not guaranteed, in some of the refugees’ minds, there are other possible futures besides resettlement to a new place.

But no matter what durable solution they are waiting for, the refugees just want what they believe is best for their families, and they most certainly have divergent views on what the best will be. For those hoping for resettlement, they believe they will gain employment opportunities and that their children will gain access to healthcare and education. The opportunities that they will get in a new home will reaffirm their sense of purpose by showing that they are able to care for and support their families in an impactful and meaningful way. By achieving this sense of purpose, they believe they will really feel at home. Yet some refugees, as of now, are largely ignored because they want other options for their futures: to go back to a previous home or stay in their current home, instead of trying to forge a new one in a third country.
CONCLUSION

Through these explorations of self-worth, agency and resettlement, we have illustrated how Syrian, Iraqi and Bhutanese refugees seek purpose after displacement has robbed them of the means to do so. Clearly, achieving purpose holds a significant role in refugees’ lives. Syrian and Iraqi refugees struggle with a loss of self-worth when they cannot fulfill their purpose in the ways they once had. Bhutanese refugees work hard to exert agency in the camp, even through illegal avenues, to achieve purpose. They are currently looking to the future as a way to re-establish their sense of purpose in a new home. They are motivated to find a permanent solution—mainly through resettlement—which gives them hope that they will have a stable, reliable way of achieving purpose in the future. When people find a way to live a life that they feel is valuable, significant and important, they have found purpose. We illustrate how achieving this purpose may vary in location, but its eventual achievement is an important aspiration for all the individuals we interviewed. For where they have achieved a sense of purpose, they have achieved a sense of home.
“What can I say when you ask me where my home is? I am from Bhutan but I have no place there,”
— Prem, Beldangi II camp

The Bhutanese, Syrian and Iraqi populations have fled their homelands in fear of persecution. They were born and raised in places where they now no longer belong and are no longer welcome. Yet, everything they knew and loved was there. For most people, belonging is about a sense of familiarity, a connection to family, friends and community. But what happens when this traditional construction of belonging collapses due to the loss of the familiar? Through our research, we saw how the deconstruction of family, society and country can affect the extent to which refugees are able to redefine a sense of belonging. Some refugees look for support in the new communities, while others cling to the communities they have lost as they attempt to reestablish their sense of belonging. The following pieces discuss how family relationships dictate the choices that individuals make, how social structures in the camps in Nepal affect refugees’ sense of belonging and how the intense nationalism of the Syrian refugees makes it difficult for them to imagine new homes.
A Bhutanese family.

The Bhutanese have recreated a home for themselves inside the refugee camps in Nepal. They have found a sense of belonging that is centered on the family members with whom they interact daily. Bhutanese refugees often express the powerful role that family has played in their lives. Like so many others, they feel an immense sense of responsibility and attachment toward their family—both of which greatly impact the choices that they make for their own lives as they struggle to find belonging and create new homes in foreign lands.

Most of the Bhutanese living in Nepal’s refugee camps, if given the choice, would not choose to live there. Aakar—a 63-year-old man from Beldangi I—expressed this sentiment clearly when he said, “there is nothing here for me in Nepal.” Although, culturally they may be very similar to Nepalis, these Bhutanese feel that Nepal is a site of exclusion and exemption—a place where many feel alienated because of their refugee status. Aakar went on to say that he considers home to be wherever his wife is. His story highlights how family can provide a primary sense of belonging, even if one feels disconnected from the physical space that they occupy. The love that Aakar has for his wife allows him to create a home in a place where he feels unwanted, just like so many of the other refugees with whom we spoke.

Inside the camps, family is the basic economic and social network within which the refugees live. Many of the Bhutanese expressed that their family was their backbone. As Bikram—a 32-year-old unmarried man from Beldangi II who is waiting to join his family in the United States—explained, “I am not good looking, I am only one. … At least with my family I will [have] support.” Bikram is not interested in living in the United States; however, because his family has resettled, he will do so as well. He adds that it is more important for him to be with his family than to serve himself. This perspective was common among many of refugees that we interviewed.

Ashmi—a 27-year-old woman living in Beldangi II— informed us that after her marriage to a local Nepali ended, all she wanted to do was to go back to the camp to her family, who she regretted leaving in the first place. “My family is very good to me, they support me in whatever I do, and they help me often.” She explained that without her family, she would not be able to deal...
with the pressures of being a single mother. The community in the refugee camps is one that values family over almost anything else. For most people in the camps, family is the one constant in their lives and their only link to their previous home, a place filled with memories to which they cling and a place that they were forced to abandon.

Because family life in the camps is so central to belonging for the refugees we met, being with their family is a top priority that, at times, takes precedence over their own objectives. Although the Bhutanese we interviewed never explicitly said that they were willing to sacrifice some of their own happiness for their family, they have, in fact, ended up doing so. They were willing to put the needs of their family above their own. Inside the camps, family relationships foster reliance. Being surrounded by family constantly makes it hard to imagine a life where that is not the norm. Kalpana—a 22-year-old girl from Beldangi II who was born and raised inside the camps—told us that her biggest dream was to go to the United States and pursue a degree in psychology; however, her mother did not want to leave Nepal, so Kalpana decided to not resettle as well. “I do not want to make my mother cry, so we will do what makes her happy and stay; at least we will [all] be together,” Kalpana said. Sons and daughters are not the only community members who feel such a sense of familial obligation. Parents and siblings also make choices thinking primarily of their families. Ramesh—a 38-year-old man from Sanischare—informed us that when his family came to Nepal, he was forced to quit school twice in order to provide basic necessities, such as food and clothing, for his siblings. Ramesh’s situation is not unique; in fact, similar situations happen frequently inside of the camps.

For the Bhutanese with whom we spoke, family was only the first piece of the puzzle as they sought to find home and create a sense of belonging in their new environment. Sacrifice is a word that the Bhutanese know only too well. In Nepal, the Bhutanese refugees are willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to be with their family, to be surrounded by the people who protect them and have been around them their whole lives.

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Twenty-seven-year-old Ashmi’s family fled Bhutan when she was only five years old. “I barely remember my first home,” she told us. “We had no money and only the clothes on our back when we left.” When they arrived in the camp, Ashmi’s family was met with the harsh reality with which all refugees must grapple: they had lost their physical home. The moment a refugee leaves their home country, they leave behind their jobs, possessions, and communities. These social markers are parts of life that shape a person’s identity and where they belong.

In the camps, it was important to Ashmi’s parents that their children attend school because they believed education was the key to regaining success in the future. However, schooling is only free in the camps until tenth grade, and Caritas Nepal provides scholarships that cover half the cost for “plus two” education (grades 11 and 12) in the local communities. By the time Ashmi was old enough, her older siblings were working outside the camps and contributed money for her schooling. Since the family could not send Ashmi to college, when she was offered a teaching job in Kathmandu (where her older sister already lived and worked), she accepted.

Although it might seem like this job would give Ashmi financial security and belonging in the broader Nepali community, this did not happen. When hiring her, the principal insisted that she keep her true identity as a Bhutanese refugee secret. “Tell everyone you are from Darjeeling, India,” he said, “because it reflects well to have a teacher from that area.” Although the school was willing to hire Ashmi, ignoring the laws saying refugees cannot work in Nepal, the principal’s attitude made clear that as a refugee she did not belong. Besides having to disguise her true origins at work, Ashmi also faced daily harassment and unwanted romantic attention in public places, like the market—social pressures that afflict many young single women working in Kathmandu. Without the social protection of a community of close friends and family, and forced to keep her identity a secret, life in the big city was hard.

Although things initially looked up for Ashmi after marriage, when she was five months pregnant, her husband suddenly left, without any explanation. Even though he knew she was a refugee when they got married, Ashmi suspected “his family … did not approve of his relationship with a refugee,” and that is why he left. Like many refugees, she left the camps because she felt she did not belong in this foreign land without opportunity, only to find that she did not belong outside of the camps either.

Now that she was pregnant and had lost the social protection she hoped a husband would provide, Ashmi wanted to return to the camps since her family was there. However, her vulnerability and lack of belonging in Kathmandu was further emphasized when the principal refused to let her quit and required her to continue teaching until the term was over. Since she had no leverage and was afraid of others finding out she was a refugee, she had to stay.

When Ashmi returned to the camp, she faced new pressures from the refugee community. “Not much has changed about the camps, but my status has—I am a single mother,” she told us. In this environment, she again experienced discrimination—like she did outside the camps—but this time,
A female incarnation of the Hindu God, Brahman, serves as a source of inspiration for devotees in the camps.
it was for a different reason. Although her parents are very supportive of her and her son, some of Ashmi’s neighbors look down on her for being a single mother. “My family has never told me to get remarried, but people in the community have,” she said to us. These attitudes frustrate her, and make her feel like she doesn’t completely belong here, either, because she believes “it is wrong to discriminate against people who are different. We should all live in peace as a community.”

Like Ashmi, other refugees interviewed in the camps noted that discrimination continues to occur, even though they agreed that it is wrong. While the displacement experience of the Bhutanese refugees has had some equalizing and unifying aspects, it has not completely removed cultural expectations and norms that lead to social stratification. The fact that refugees must live and work in close proximity while overcoming the same challenges does, however, create a basic level of understanding and respect. For example, the caste system was a major source of social stratification in Bhutan, but has since become less prevalent in the camps. The stripping away of previous wealth, and the camp school system that teaches equality and tolerance to all refugee children, has facilitated interactions with members of different castes and social classes. These competing forces make the question of belonging in the camps a complex one.

“IT IS WRONG TO DISCRIMINATE AGAINST PEOPLE WHO ARE DIFFERENT. WE SHOULD ALL LIVE IN PEACE AS A COMMUNITY.”

Traditional gender roles and expectations have been more difficult to eliminate than other social differences. Even for married women, gender roles can complicate their sense of belonging. One woman expressed that Hinduism—the predominant faith in the camps—reinforces a patriarchal society. She said that she feels that Hinduism encourages female submission to men. She explained to us a traditional Hindu ritual that requires the wife to fast until she is allowed to eat by her husband’s side. Though belonging to a traditional family unit shields women from judgment and offers them financial stability, it can also diminish women’s independence.

A disabled male refugee in Beldangi II expressed that although he is unable to work and provide for his family because of his condition, he does not allow his daughter or wife to work on his behalf. In contrast, Ashmi provides for her son by operating a small snack shop outside of her hut. She said that she refuses to let her marital status dictate her success and her place in the world. She explained, “I have no husband, but I am doing the best I can. I want to raise my son well—to be strong and respectful.” Despite this inner strength, and her refusal to conform to neighbors’ expectations, Ashmi said she often worries about her prestige in the community because it is not socially acceptable to remain a single mother.

Ashmi’s story highlights the complex ways in which social norms and pressures both inside and outside the camps affect belonging within a community. Uprooted from home, work, and community, refugees must recreate belonging in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable new home. They face the struggle of maintaining a grasp on the familiar, while moving forward and letting go of their pasts. Due to life circumstances—such as death and divorce—some refugees are unable to maintain the identities and social roles they once had and they consequently lose their sense of belonging in the community. As they strive for success, they must deal with not only their refugee status, but also the ways in which gender and class dictate their place in society.

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The “Syria” in “Syrian”

by Olivia Johnson

What comes to mind when you think of nationality? For many people, ideas of freedom, democracy, flags and food come to mind. These ideas permeate across borders, as I discovered when many of the Syrians we spoke to referenced similar themes in describing their Syrian identity. They called Syria a land of cooperation where they lived as one unit. They boasted of their religious diversity and close-knit communities. Multiple families spoke of their native Syrian food and asked us to taste Syrian kubba, dumplings stuffed with meat, which they insisted were different than the Jordanian version. They were proud of their native land and thought that it was superior to Jordan in every way possible. One woman went so far as to say that even the water was better in Syria. Many others said that life was amazing in Syria before they left.

Abu—a man who we interviewed in Kitim, Jordan—described how before the war, life was perfect. He said, “I had the best life in the world.” Nadia, a woman living in Kitim, said that life was exciting; it was sufficient. To them, Syria was a paradise. Although it may seem overly nostalgic, this idealized vision of Syria makes sense given these peoples’ sudden loss of a homeland. Naturally, Syrians would lament their loss and look uncritically upon their past. The trauma of war—the insecurity, the violence—has not diminished their love of their country, the longing for their homeland. But what are the implications of cleaving so strongly to a national identity when the tangible home with which they identify has been lost? What does it mean if they are not able to return to Syria?

For many Syrians, the notion of being Syrian is not simply derived from the country’s unique qualities. After hearing about these peoples’ continual desire to return to Syria, we began to ask what differences they perceived to exist between Jordan and Syria. The almost universal response across our various interviews was that Jordan and Syria are very similar. The two countries share commonalities in culture, religion, traditions, food and history. In fact, many who live along the border are relatives and share the same accents. But, these similarities do not make up for the fact that Jordan will never be home for the Syrians simply because it is not Syria. Nizar—a Syrian man who we interviewed on the outskirts of Irbid city—said that he disliked Jordan because it is not Syria. “I don’t like that it is not my country,” he explained. Through comments like these, we gathered that the notion of being...
“Syrian” is an identity that transcends culture and location for displaced Syrians.

So many people with whom we spoke described Syria with a reverent tone. In our interviews, we gleaned that most people wanted to speak about Syria more than any other topic. Ahmed—a Syrian man living in Kitim—describes how his religion is “homesick.” He explains how there is nothing without home. He said, “Home is the most important thing in my life. My home is holy—home is Syria.” Consequently, he says that without Syria he is nothing because Syria is home. During our interviews, I began to understand that a large part of what makes Syrians who they are is their nationality. Eman—a 33-year-old female who we interviewed in Marwa—claimed that she could never feel at home in Jordan because Syria is everything in her life. Syria is the experiences in her life and her native land. Furthermore, another woman, Amira—who lives in Marwa—said, “Life is nothing, it is without any color, without any taste….this is because of the deaths of [my] sons. Even if I go back to Syria, life would be different because things have changed.” The most arresting feature of the Syrian nationality is the intense longing that the people have for a place that they have lost. The Syria that they choose to remember is not the Syria that exists today or the Syria to which they will return if they ever go back. They have lost everything because they lost the one thing that embodied who they were as a people, a group and a country. They do not believe that they belong in Jordan because they do not connect with Jordan. Home is Syria and they are Syrian.

But what are the implications of putting so much emphasis on the physical space of Syria? Although these Syrians have lost their home, the United Nations and non-governmental organizations are striving to help these refugees create new homes in displacement. But, while necessary, these efforts will likely never satisfy Syrian refugees because no place will ever fill the gaping hole of longing they have for home. The UN is currently looking into durable solutions and local integration and resettlement are certainly on the table as options. But, many of the Syrians I met do not wish to stay in Jordan or even move on to another country. They are simply waiting. Waiting to go home, to Syria. Again and again families told us that all they wanted was to return to Syria. Anas—a Syrian man who we interviewed in Farouh, Jordan—told us, “I prefer to go back to Syria, even if it is just in a tent. I could eat only onion and bread there and it would be enough. Every morning when I wake up from sleeping I cannot believe I left Syria.” Kalila—a woman living in Marwa—said, “We had a good life before and now we are nothing…there is nothing left in the world.” Kalila only wishes to be home and she, too, would return empty handed. Through these interactions, I began to understand that the intense nationalism displayed by Syrians prevents them from seeing anywhere other than Syria as home.

When we asked individuals specifically why they wanted to return, we got the same answer: Syria is my native land. Halimah explained that Jordan will never be home: “I am a stranger in a different country.” She referred to herself as “homeless.” To an outsider, this statement seems extreme, as Halimah
has a roof over her head. In fact, she is one of the lucky ones who lives in a building, with the freedom to rely on herself and to not be stuck in a camp. But many claimed that they would rather live in destitute conditions in Syria as long as Bashar al-Assad was no longer president. Nizar said, “When Bashar goes and people around him go, Syria will go back to as before, even better than before.” He added that he hopes his children’s future is better than his. He professes, “Inshallah it will be better than our future. Yes, we do not have anything but our country.” Nizar’s statement affirmed that many Syrians in Jordan are waiting to return to their lives as normal.

The idea of being Syrian came up in every conversation, in every expression of hope for the future. “Syrian” is who these individuals are as a people. This population may have physically lost their land, but they have not forgotten what it means to be Syrian. It was apparent in most of the interviews that we conducted that the Syrians in Jordan are consumed with thoughts of when they will go back. The issue is not that they identify so strongly with their home, but rather that they cannot imagine a future without Syria. They cannot emotionally separate themselves from their nationality, even after they have physically departed from the locality. This yearning to return to Syria will impact the effectiveness of the solutions for Syrian refugees provided by the international community. If they do not see themselves as members in their new communities, then will they ever really feel at home anywhere other than Syria?

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CONCLUSION

These three pieces have explored how Bhutanese and Syrian refugees attempt to cling to the places and people of their pasts with the hope of creating a future where they feel a sense of belonging. We have illustrated how families inside Bhutanese refugee camps find new ways of belonging, how social structures in the Bhutanese camps alienate some and offer a sense of inclusion to others and how Syrian refugees cling to their nationality with the desire of returning to their place of belonging. However, the concepts of family, society and nationality are each mere facets of refugees’ searches to belong. Solely possessing a sense of belonging does not cause an individual to be able to redefine or recreate feelings of home. Finding ways to belong is just a piece of the larger experience of salvaging a new home after the loss of their native land. Nevertheless, finding belonging is a crucial part of the journey: if refugees feel as though they do not belong, then they will never truly feel at home. Ultimately, the struggles to adapt to their new environments depend on how strongly they hold onto their pasts. Regardless of the aid and the circumstances, refugees will never feel at home until they construct a new sense of belonging. For many, this will come with time and through the process of resettlement, integration or eventual return. For some, however, it may never come at all.
INTRODUCTION:
where I feel human
For the 15.4 million refugees around the world, the search for home is ongoing. In the case of the Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal, this has meant nearly two decades of waiting to find out what decision has been made about their fate. Many Syrians are still fleeing Syria to countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, with the hope that if they wait out the war, one day they will be able to return. Displaced Iraqis dream of the day when they will be resettled to countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, fully aware that returning to Iraq is nearly impossible due to continually deteriorating security. They wait for the call from the International Organization for Migration to say that their paperwork has been processed. The constant waiting experienced by all refugee populations undermines feelings of humanness because it seems senseless, bureaucratic and immensely impersonal, especially because their futures are at stake.

Refugees both in Jordan and Nepal have their lives drastically reshaped once they are granted refugee status. They face limitations on school opportunities, cannot legally work and can only wait as international bodies discuss what durable solution will shape their future. These restrictions make reconstructing home incredibly difficult because they feel that their humanity has been compromised. The person becomes a statistic, a number in a category. They join the ranks of so many others who are seeking help and refuge, partially dependent on the aid of international organizations. As numbers in categories, it becomes challenging to recover a sense of humanness. And without humanity, how can you feel at home?

Home is where you feel human. It is where you have a sense of wellbeing, ownership over your own life, and a place where you can see your future play out. Humanness is where your life is no longer on pause—when you can see life regaining fulfillment. Humanness is the state of being the main voice in your own life decisions. Humanness is expressed through well-being as feeling “well” provides the strength to overcome hardship. In these pieces, we will explore how displacement affects these three aspects of life and turns home into an imagined place—a hope for the future that cannot always be realized.

A little girl celebrates her first birthday in Beldangi I camp.
IMPERMANENCE: WHEN HOPE IS NESTLED WITH TIME, THE CASE OF THE SYRIANS

by Tra Tran

In 2014, Syria’s Civil War turned three. Many Syrians have fled their homes and have been either internally or externally displaced, causing one of the largest refugee crises in current history. They live in a bubble of time—what we consider “leisure activities” are the only thing that is left in their daily lives, but these leisurely activities are not fun. Instead, they have become a monotonous way to pass the time, as they wait to return to their home. The causes of Syrian displacement have created a sense of impermanence as many believe that when President Bashar al-Assad is ousted, they will be able to return to their lives. During their time in Jordan, their life and their humanity is on pause, but as each day passes and their wait to rejoin their fellow countrymen is extended, many question the reality of returning to the place they still call home. So, what happens to conceptions of home when an impermanent living situation has no end in sight? The impermanence of life in Jordan has intensified the refugees’ sense of longing for Syria, for their home, for their country. The impermanence has also created a sense of restlessness both within the individual and throughout communities. Most importantly, everyday life is permeated by a sense of homelessness. Their rootless existence causes an understanding that the daily is paradoxically unimportant, and yet packed with worry and hope for the future. Many Syrians are refusing to abandon their home country, even if repatriation is merely a distant hope.

Almost all Syrians rely on their longing of their home country for inspiration to continue on in their daily lives. Many express hopes and dreams that 18-year-old Nadia from Kitim articulated for us. She said,

There are too many things that I am hoping for. I hope for the situation to be solved and to go back to Syria. … Ask any Syrians, they will have the same answer.

Syrians are fleeing the war and violence from their country, but their understanding of their home country is of just that: home country. This understanding of the country they left is like that of an adult remembering a fond childhood home. Longing blurs their previous reality. Eman told us that the house she lives in in Jordan was bigger than the one she lived in back in Syria, and yet despite this, she does not want to stay in Jordan. She wants to return to her home regardless of her previous circumstances.

Their hope is intertwined with a listless life in Jordan. When we asked Syrians about their daily routines, many people said that there is nothing for them to do but watch television. Fatima—a 40-year-old Syrian woman who we interviewed in Amman—explained to us:

I do nothing … All I do is sit in every corner of this room, and watch the walls. I am very bored, and do not really go out. Sometimes, I will visit some people, but not really. My other son goes out with his friends, and they leave me at home, alone.

While it might seem like Fatima is just a bored housewife, her life is saturated with more than just a pervasive sense of ennui. For Fatima, the time she is spending watching the walls is the time she spends thinking about her and her children’s futures. She spends this time worrying about the state of her life, her country and her livelihood. Like Fatima, Ahmed described to us...
A woman sitting pensively on the floor of the room in which we interviewed her.
the intersection between his life and his self. He used to be a businessman, but now he sits and waits for UNHCR to give him money and for the war to be over so that he can resume his life. For Ahmed, his job was a large part of who he was back in Syria. When he moved to Jordan and lost his business, he lost his sense of self.

With no end to the war in sight, refugee policy in Jordan is increasingly contentious. While the refugees with whom we spoke were not likely to bring up any specific issues, it become apparent when asking about their children that the communities are not integrating as much as has been espoused by the Jordanian government. In a conversation I had with Tasneem—one of our community partners—she explained to me that many schools in the northern area have gone to two shifts to accommodate the enrollment. Now, there is one shift for the Syrians and the other for the Jordanians. At the same time, Syrians do not seem to want integration just as much as Jordanians do not want Syrians to stay. When Aliya and Ahlam, two women we met in the Jordan valley—talked about their past, they talk about Syria as the life they wanted to live. Aliya said that leaving her school and home when she was 17 years old were the two hardest moments in her life. She said that it was very hard to leave, while Ahlam added that she felt very sad. Aliya enjoyed school and she would have liked to become a doctor because she wanted to help people get treatment. She explained, “What I miss most about Syria is my family. Everything is in Syria.” So, given these kinds of sentiments, how can Syrians feel like they are human in this environment? How can Jordan be their home if Syrians are unable to create a permanent place?

These questions are compounded with the sense of despair that permeates many Syrian lives. For Syrians, their sense of being is lost. Maha—a woman living in the Jordan Valley—said, “life is tasteless; there are no colors anymore. Everything is lost. All I can do is pray to God to return to Syria.” Maha’s innate senses have been dulled to the point of nothing—she sees nothing to continue living for except her hope for home and her family. Nevertheless, her hope endures; hope is what helps her—and many others in her situation—continue living. The Syrian refugee crisis is devastating, but with the hope of return to the beautiful country that is still theirs in their hearts, these people continue on. They will continue to watch the walls, to take care of their children, to watch television—to do what they can to wait out the war. For them, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad is the only thing that stops them from returning to their true home.

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In the Jhapa region of Nepal, there are villages with bamboo huts and thatched roofs in unnaturally straight rows and within close proximity to each other. Like in any village, everyone begins their day differently: some wake up before the sun to be among the first to fetch water from the pump, some start chores, go to work, see friends, some do not get out of bed at all. Like in any village, some hold leadership positions as heads of programs and sector supervisors to which they arose with a combination of skills and hard work. And like in any village, people lead their lives with joy and sorrow and disappointment and hope. But unlike most, these are all fitted around a regular schedule of collecting the services and rations that are allotted to the people so long as they remain within the confines of the barbed wire that are guarded by men with boots and knives. So long as they remain within a system that is neither of their design nor choosing yet of which they are an integral part, Bhutanese refugees are granted the basic protection of the UNHCR, IOM, WFP, and Caritas. This is life for the Bhutanese who have lived in the refugee camps for the last two decades.

Once granted refugee status, people's lives are put into neutral. Caught in a limbo between hope of return and despair of integration, Bhutanese refugees have no durable solutions but resettlement. So, they wait for resettlement dates to third countries. Many are very articulate about how they are waiting, in earnest, for their lives to begin. “We are waiting to start a family until after we resettle,” 30-year-old Isha said. “We want to give [our kids] the maximum amount of opportunities there is nothing for them here.” By the maxim of “occupational opportunity,” there is nothing for them here. By the maxim of “occupational opportunity,” there is nothing for them here.

Without legal protection from any country or working rights in Nepal, where should they go to correct the poverty that they describe to us.

The photo on the right is taken in the camps and outside of them in each situation presents an array of complications for them as refugees and water crisis.

— Rani, Beldangi II Refugee Camp

Sometimes I get anxious and wonder: “I worry about never leaving the camps.”

By Josephine Ramseyer

AUTONOMY:
TAKING OWNERSHIP
OF PROTECTION
AND PROVISION

HOME: DEFINITION VARIES
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of their refugee status. 27-year-old Ashmi said: “After [my Nepali husband left me], I wanted to return to the camps, but I was still facing pressure from my employer. So I waited until the school term was over and came back to Damak.” With the will to better their situation but neither the means nor the liberty to do so, the Bhutanese refugees have no choice but to stay in the camps.

In the camps, refugees’ lives are regulated for them by the systems they run but that were put in place without their input. They make sure to be present every Thursday at the cluster of huts and warehouses controlled by WFP to pick up the amount of rice, oil, salt and legumes that is allocated to each of them equally. Anything less than the exactly 2100 calories per person per day is suitable for complaint. Once every six months, every woman of reproductive age lines up at the Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum to pick up the two meters of sanitary napkins that will serve them until the next pick-up time. Families are assessed and placed in specific sectors by the representatives of the “Reclamation Gardening Program” based on their “level of need.”

Despite the fact that the camps were organized with good intentions, living within a heavily monitored system that is not of the refugees’ design disallows them their full autonomy. For with the international organizations’ desires to protect and provide for the refugees comes the unintended consequence of rendering them dependent on a system that, despite its best efforts, cannot fully support them. “[The organizations] are doing the best they can,” 38-year-old Ramesh said, “but what they are providing is not enough to sustain me and my family.”

Financial insecurity—particularly where the ability to buy food and clothes is concerned—is a common cause of distress within the camps. From the interviews we conducted, we learned that fear of malnutrition and the need for clothing were the two primary causes of work-related stress and school dropouts among the Bhutanese refugee population. Ramesh recalled how when his family first arrived in the camps, they had no clothes or soap. Each family member had to resort to washing his or her one outfit with just water and then putting it directly back on again. Although his situation has undoubtedly improved, Ramesh still struggles to provide for his children, one of whom has resorted to dropping out of school and eloping in order to relieve some of his finan-
cial burden. Tika, from Sanischare, had to quit school after grade nine in order to take care of her mother, father, brother and now son as the sole “responsible” member of her family. “I felt very sad to have to leave school and do work,” she said, and added that she still battles with daily financial problems. Regardless of their actions and their capacity, Ramesh and Tika alike are constrained by the realities of their community as a whole.

Trapped within these confines, most of the refugees with whom we spoke have opted to bide their time as they wait to resettle. They fill out their applications and send them in to where they are no longer within their control. Then, they wait—hoping their files will not be lost, hoping their requests will be approved, hoping their processes will begin. Yet, oftentimes, few of these wishes come to be, as 32-year-old Sumitra described:

“My files were separated from the rest of my family during the processing of medical files and my husband and I were told to resubmit new applications, which took six months to process. I don’t know why I received such treatment, my file was faultless: I was never involved in any prohibited activities, did not intermarry, yet my application was stalled and my separation from my family brings me much sorrow.

When a situation like Sumitra’s occurs, refugees have no choice but to put their futures, once again, in the hands of bureaucracy.

Yet, through all of the waiting, Bhutanese refugees living in the camps in Nepal manage to live their lives. They are stuck in the heart of dry jungles or on the outskirts of towns that have not always been welcoming to them, but refugees still play Nepali games outside of their systematically-aligned huts. They still set up shops in their own marketplace, start tailoring businesses, ride motorcycles, become mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and grandparents. They call family and friends who have already resettled and who anxiously await their loved ones’ return to a life without constraint, with full autonomy— to a home where they are the uncontested masters of their destinies.

“[The organizations] are doing the best they can, but what they are providing is not enough to sustain me and my family.”

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As he sat on the floor cushions, Mahmoud—a middle aged Syrian colonel who defected from President Assad’s army—looked at his hands. The words that followed were succinct but convey an overwhelming sense of dejection. “Life is just too hard here.”

The difficulty of life in Jordan is an aspect of the refugee narrative that both the Syrians and Iraqis with whom we spoke were keen on sharing. When we imagine what causes refugees to flee their home country, our instinct is to conjure images of bombs, bullets and intimate persecution. The assumption is that they are “doing well” once their lives are no longer in jeopardy. Walking across a border and leaving a conflict zone might mean walking into physical safety, but it does not mean it is a walk into an easy life.

Many Syrian and Iraqis described immense relief upon their initial entrance into Jordan, but it did not last long. Refugee law only ensures entrance into a country of “safe asylum.” It does not ensure entrance into a life of humanness: one of peace, dignity, purpose and perhaps most importantly, wellbeing. Wellbeing is much more than strong physical health; it is directly linked to the quality of life. Through a positive sense of wellbeing, people create a sense of home. Yet, the refugees who we interviewed wove narratives about the enormous challenges of daily life in Jordan that caused wellbeing to be elusive and constantly out of their reach. They do not imagine Jordan as the endpoint of their flight because the challenges they have faced make calling Jordan home nearly impossible.

Many Syrians end up staying at Zaatari refugee camp in Mafraq, a small governorate in a northern desert area near the Syrian border. The recent addition of small businesses to the camp has been lauded by officials and aid organizations as a big step toward making the camp more livable, yet our conversations with Syrians made it clear that these additions haven’t made the camp a humane living environment. Harsh weather, a lack of electricity and heating—as well as the prevalence of respiratory diseases due to the omnipresent dust—are all daily realities. The presence of small shops does not change the fact that Syrians are alternately at the mercy of the frigid cold or unbearable heat. It does not change the fact that every day Syrians wake up in a camp surrounded by barbed wire. Several of the Syrians who we interviewed explained that they came to Zaatari immediately after leaving Syria but could only endure it for a couple of days. Once again, they packed their belongings and headed onto the road.

Life outside Zaatari is not easy, either. Families use food coupons from the UNHCR to help pay for food, but they must still find ways to cover other expenses. Because of this burden, some families end up selling their food coupons to pay for rent. They are unable to legally work with refugee status and the money they manage to scrape together without a job is rarely enough to cover all their basic needs. A water shortage from a big drought in Jordan has made high prices for water yet another burden.

Generally, refugees describe Jordanians as welcoming people. But, it is not uncommon for both the Syrians and Iraqis to encounter discrimina-
A makeshift bathroom created in an informal refugee camp in the Jordan Valley.
mother who has been living in Amman for a year. Her son was studying economics at college in Syria, but has been unable to continue his studies in Jordan because of financial and logistical challenges. She told us he spends most of his days away from home, “wasting his time” because he can neither work nor go to school. The sheer boredom—combined with the daily challenges of paying for even the most basic of necessities—creates an incredible sense of despair for some family members; in their eyes, it is a meaningless life.

Some refugees come to Jordan with injuries and illnesses that are the direct result of war, such as bullet wounds, malnutrition, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Often, these conditions are exacerbated in Jordan. Mohammed—a 47-year-old father from Iraq—describes “nervousness” in his legs and back that first began in Iraq, around the time that the war began. He said it has only been getting worse since leaving, and so has the insomnia that has kept him awake for many nights. Fatima gives us a laundry list of illnesses, ranging from asthma to hypertension. She feels these illnesses have worsened since coming to Jordan, due to the stress of daily life in the country as a refugee.

Access to health care was a common concern among people with whom we spoke, especially for those with chronic diseases, such as hypertension or diabetes. With medical care on a regular basis, these illnesses are manageable; but without regular check-ups, they can become life-threatening. Many refugees explained they cannot afford to see a doctor on regular basis and that navigating a new and different health care system is impossible. In some cases, the UNHCR helps defray the cost of doctor visits and prescription drugs, but the system is far from perfect. Sometimes, the limitations of the system force refugees to tap into their life savings or sell food coupons to pay for medical care. Many described this as yet another burden that weighs heavily upon them.

Nadia, an 18-year-old mother from Syria, explained that although she struggles with anger and frustration with life in Jordan, the love that she has for her husband and her son anchors her courage in facing the difficulties of life in Jordan. One day, she hopes to have enough money to buy her own house in Jordan. This aspiration gives her strength to carry on. Mohammed and his wife, despite their financial struggles, are stretching
their finances in every way possible in order to pay for private education for their children. They are dreaming of resettlement to a third country, so they have a chance at future wellbeing. Mohammed explained, “I only want to leave Jordan so I can give a better life for my children. There is no target goal here. I pass the days here with nothing to do, with no dreams. It is very difficult. I want the UNHCR to take action with my case; I dream of reaching the United States.” Even if it is difficult to imagine a life of humanity in Jordan, one that is not as a faceless number as the result of an endless conflict, some refugees cling to hope through their dreams of resettlement or eventual repatriation.

Regaining a sense of one’s own humanity despite displacement often involves relying on family as emotional support and finding wellbeing by seeking hope in unlikely places. For some, this means finding the Jordanian neighbors who are willing to donate their extra blankets or clothes. For others, it has been a realization that despite the bureaucracy, many Iraqi families will get resettled at some point, or that sometimes organizations like the Jordanian Health Aid Society can pay for an expensive operation. For still others, wellbeing relies on the hope placed on that one young child who is in school. Regardless of its form, hope is very much alive among the Syrians and the Iraqis in Jordan, even if it is in the faintest of glimmers.

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ur exploration of displacement has suggested that one of the most important parts of creating home is grounding oneself in a place where it is possible to feel human. Humanness is an integral part of what home is and it is rooted in the ability to feel a sense of wellbeing, ownership and permanence. For many refugees, their sense of time and permanence are altered by things beyond their control, and only hope for the future keeps their humanity intact. Autonomy is having the ability to shape one’s own life uninhibited. Wellbeing means more than just the physical for the person’s heart and soul can also be damaged in displacement—causing the need to reshape their humanity. Based on our interviews, we found these qualities to be some of the most integral dimensions of home. Without these qualities, it is difficult to imagine a life beyond the state of being a refugee. By searching for even the smallest slivers of humanity, the people who we met stretched the limits that refugee status places on their ability to shape their lives and recreate home.

CONCLUSION
IN sharing these realities and stories, we have attempted to fill the void where information about displaced persons falls short. One reads about a refugee population—like the Bhutanese, the Syrian and the Iraqi—in the news and believes that the pain and the struggle is in the actual moments of being uprooted from home. But, we have met people who are still in the process of being re-routed and who currently live in states of uncertainty as they await the future. The experience of displacement has irrevocably altered the course of their lives. We know that their lives are still complex and tumultuous—far more complex than the most of the world may think. We challenge the notion that the life of a refugee can be reduced to the experience of leaving their homes. We frame our discussion through the lens of home because we realized through our conversations with refugees that the task of defining home is arduous, profound and continuous. The definition of home varies greatly from person to person.

Home-making is a human experience that all individuals—whether consciously or not—go through at some point or another in their lifetime. While many people can view home as a stable aspect of their past and their present, others have lost this stability. They have begun to view home as a piece of history, or a mere aspiration. Regardless of the context, home is intrinsically linked to the individual, and the individual to home. When a person is home, they can feel free and human. They can find a purpose to their life. They feel a sense of belonging. Individuals’ capacities to feel these things vary greatly across the globe, as some do not find home as readily accessible to them as others. The people with whom we spoke to in Jordan and Nepal are not resigned to a life without a home. They will continue to search and dream of home, no matter how long it takes.
This work is dedicated to all of the refugees we met throughout our fieldwork. They shared their stories, their hearts, their hopes and their homes with us, and we are deeply grateful.
where I have purpose

where I have freedom

where I feel human

where I belong

varies.