Kurdish Guests or Syrian Refugees?
– Negotiating Displacement, Identity and Belonging in the Kurdistan Region

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ABSTRACT

With the conflict ongoing in Syria since 2011, many Syrian Kurds have been forced to leave their homes to seek safety and security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Their displacement to KRI is a distinctive experience of migration as it has happened within an intra-ethnic setting of Syrian Kurds, as refugees, encountering Iraqi Kurds, as hosts. Sharing ethnic identification and imagination of a historical homeland but holding different nationalities, has turned identity and belonging into sites of contestation between the refugees and the hosts. Within this intra-ethnic setting of displacement, the study has investigated the construction of home and politics of identity and belonging among the refugees in relation to protection regimes and forms of inclusion and exclusion. This has been done through a content analysis of relevant policy and regulations for refugees in KRI and Iraq and a thematic analysis of individual narrative interviews with the refugees themselves. Research results from the policy analysis have indicated the lack of a comprehensive protection regime in Iraq and KRI, and the deployment of the ‘guests’ rhetoric towards the refugees as a responsibility evasion mechanism. Results from the interviews have revealed that home for the participants is plural, and it connects to Syria and Kurdistan to varying degrees. Their identity as Kurds is contested when their Syrianness is evoked with boundaries limiting their recognition to be both Syrian and Kurdish. Similarly, their belonging is challenged with their social position as refugees and their legal belonging to Syria. With this, they get involved into a continuum of politics of identity and belonging ranging between the situational demonstration of their Syrian identity and the role of ‘the successful Syrian refugee’, and the accentuation of their attachment to Kurdishness through belonging to Rojava. These politics have been discussed as reflecting a process of reconstructing Syrian Kurdish identity in the light of the experience of displacement and the intra-ethnic encounter. Contextualizing the research results in a wider perspective, it is argued that they carry further implications related to the Kurdish struggle with identity and belonging, not only in KRI, but in all the other parts of Kurdistan.

Key words: identity, belonging, intra-ethnic relations, displacement, Syrian Kurdish refugees, Syria, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
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ACRONYMS

DRC  The Danish Refugee Council
EU  The European Union
GBV  Gender-based Violence
IDPs  Internally Displaced People/Poersons
IS  The Islamic State
KRG  The Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI  The Kurdistan Region of Iraq
RL  Refugee Law, Draft by the Federal Government of Iraq
S7-2017  Statement 7 of 2017, by the Kurdistan Regional Government
UN  The United Nations
UNHCR  The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VoIP  Voice over Internet Protocol

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context: Syrian Crisis and the Displacement of Syrian Kurds to KRI

Millions of Syrians have fled their homes seeking safety in the region and beyond since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. According to the UNHCR, 5.6 million Syrians have become refugees in the neighboring countries until February 2018 (UNHCR, 2018a). In Iraq, more than 247,000 Syrians have been registered as refugees with the vast majority being Syrian Kurds who live in and out of camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the north (UNHCR, 2018b, see Map No.1 below). Most of the refugees have arrived in KRI through a semi-official border crossing known as Semalka/Pheshkhabour, or via irregular crossing points between the two countries during the periods when Semalka/Pheshkhabour was closed. Few others have managed to get entry visa and arrived through air travel. Syrian refugees who arrived through the border crossings, mostly in the summer of 2013, were received by the UNHCR and the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) and sent to emergency camps. Later, more established camps were prepared where refugees were transferred. Since then, some refugees have managed to live outside camps after they could get jobs and afford renting in the urban areas of the three governorates of KRI: Duhok, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

Map 1 Syrian refugees’ location in Iraq by January 31th, 2018 (UNHCR, 2018c)
Other areas of Iraq have not been stable either in the last few years, so KRI has also been a safe haven for thousands of Iraqi Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Many fled Nineve to KRI during the capture of the city of Mosul and other areas of the governorate by the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, and later during the liberation campaign. According to KRG’s reports, over 1.3 million IDPs have been registered in various areas of KRI besides the city of Kirkuk (KRG, 2017a). The influx of refugees and IDPs, as KRG repeatedly reported, has placed a tremendous strain on basic and public services. In fact, the question of refugees and IDPs has been frequently a hot topic among the list of unsolved issues between Baghdad and Erbil.

The Kurds falling a victim to the geopolitics of the Middle East have experienced multiple displacements. Unresolved conflicts with the four states that control Kurdistan have led to the displacement of Kurds within and across the borders of these states. In Syria, for more than half a century after the declaration of independence from France in 1947, Kurdish populations endured discriminatory state policies that denied their Kurdish identity and culture. They were the target of state’s persecution, denationalization regime, socio-economic and political marginalization, and various forms of co-option (Yildiz, 2005: 1). Their recent displacement to KRI is a part of the series of forced migration that has not only started with the Syrian Crisis in 2011. Arabization policies of settling Arabs in Kurdish lands, and the state’s attempts of changing demographics in areas where Kurds formed a majority led to massive internal migration of the Kurds to the big cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

While the Syrian Crisis has been the main cause of their displacement to KRI, Syrian Kurdish refugees’ choice of their destination has been impacted by various reasons. Firstly, the geographical proximity of KRI to Kurdish populated areas in northeast Syria has made it logistically more possible for people to cross the borders into KRI. Secondly, community relations on both sides of the borders have facilitated the movements as marked by the ethnic relation of Syrian Kurds to the population of KRI fostered by, among others, the factors of common language and culture and families’ interconnections. Thirdly, the disapproval of some Syrian Kurds of the policies of Kurdish authorities in north and northeast Syria has made many activists seek protection and space for their political aspirations on the other side of the border. Finally, the safety and security in KRI compared to other Iraqi locations and the availability of work opportunities have been important pulling factors for those who have been basically looking for a better future. This is a generalization of the most obvious assumptions behind the displacement of Syrian Kurds to KRI. However, on an individual level, the reasons for the displacement can be different as well as the drives behind it.
1.2 Choice of the Case

I have chosen to focus on the case of Syrian refugees in KRI as it presents a unique setting of displacement which questions national and ethnic identifications and challenges assumptions about ethnic solidarity and belonging. Syrian refugees in KRI are ethnically identified as Kurds, the same as are their hosts. Given this aspect of shared ethnic affiliation, the encounter between Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds, as one might rightly assume, should be less problematic compared to conventional cases of displacement. More specifically, refugees’ belonging and identity, as constructed through the interaction with Kurds on the other side of the border as their host community, can be presumed to be minor issues. The constellation of the factors that made Syrian Kurds choose KRI as a destination partially support such suppositions. However, the reality of the everyday life is full of incidents which challenge the above assumptions and put into question the very shared ethnic affiliation between Syrian Kurds as refugees and Iraqi Kurds as hosts. Contrary to expectations, ethnic identity and belonging are sites of a struggle that is very significant and present in almost every social interaction. The ways which the refugees identify themselves, or which they are identified, not only indicate their personal belonging and social identity but also impact inclusion, access to rights and exclusion on a collective level.

One event that sparked my interest to pursue this study was a conversation I had with a friend living as a refugee in KRI, when he told me: ‘There in Syria, I was always labelled as Kurd, and here in Kurdistan I am referred to as Syrian. I feel that I always have to fight to be recognized as who I am and where I belong’. For me his words reflected a situation of displacement that calls into questions all the previously mentioned assumptions. It is a setting where boundaries of exclusion are constructed regardless of ethnic connections, and the borders of inclusion are guarded above and beyond the borders of the nation states. Moreover, it reveals the complex relationship between the territories of the nation state and the assigned membership stipulated in the form of citizenship or nationality. It tells us that identity is not fixed, and belonging is not simply how we orient ourselves to a place. It is more about how we are perceived by others, and what we do in the process. Syrian Kurdish refugees are not necessarily perceived, by default, as fellow Kurds by the population of KRI as they are Syrians by citizenship. In Syria they were not perceived as fully Syrians either, as they are ethnically Kurds. The event above informed me how the displacement of Syrian Kurds to KRI presents a specific case where identity and belonging are held in contestation. It
made me further question the role of ethnic identification and displacement in constructing home and homeland and all emerging politics of identity and belonging in between.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

The intra-ethnic encounter as briefly discussed earlier presents a unique case of displacement where identity formation processes and belonging politics challenge assumptions about inclusion that is based on ethnicity. The setting also highlights the need for a critical exploration to understand the structural conditions that impact the formation of these processes and emerging intra-ethnic relationships. The importance of this study therefore lies in its potential not only to uncover the specificities that makes the case a unique setting, but also the importance of unpacking the developing intra-ethnic relationships which could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the spectrum of displacement in forced migration research.

Theories of forced migration usually follow the general framework under which migration is studied, as I will discuss in detail in section 3.3. Within these theories, inter-group relations based on established differences between the refugees and host community form the basis for examining politics of identity and belonging. My study represents a case that is under researched in the literature on forced migration in the sense that the basis for examining identity and belonging is rather similarities between the refugees and host community than differences. The notion of inter-group relations, therefore, becomes quite insufficient to understand migration relationships in this setting where similarities can be established but boundaries of differences are more complex and diversified.

The aim of this study is to examine how refugees in an intra-ethnic setting of displacement establish the notion of home and how they orient themselves, frame their belonging and negotiate their identification. On an analytical level, the study attempts to show how structural inequalities and power relations connected to status and legal rights within this setting impact the formation of politics of identity and belonging among the refugees. Through this case, the study also seeks to better inform theoretical considerations on forced migration to accommodate for the study of identity and belonging within an intra-ethnic setting of displacement.

To fulfil the aim of the study and to overcome the theoretical concerns highlighted above, the following main question will guide the research:
How can displacement evoke different politics of belonging and identity in a unique situation of becoming refugees (Syria’s Kurds) within a community of the same ethnicity (Iraq’s Kurds)? And more generally what does that tell us about emerging intra-ethnic relationships in communities divided by borders of ‘nation’ states, then converging through displacement? To explore this overarching question, I will answer the following sub questions in my analysis:

1- What state/government regulations are there that affect Syrian Kurdish refugees’ (legal) status in KRI, and how far do policies impact their access to rights and support protection and inclusion?

2- How do Syrian Kurdish refugees express their connection to Kurdistan and Syria? And what tensions can be identified?

3- How does interaction with the host community shape the refugees’ politics of identity and belonging?

The first question will be answered through policy analysis which includes current law and regulations governing the refugee situation in Iraq and KRI. Questions two and three will be answered through the analysis of narrative interviews with Syrian Kurdish refugees currently living in KRI. The methodology of my research will be further explained in chapter two.

1.4 Previous Research

In the specific context and focus of my study, there can hardly be any empirical academic studies identified. The presence of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI is quite recent which explains the lack of research on this specific group. Studies identified for their relevancy to my research have been reviewed for either: 1) their contribution in explaining the context within which the study is situated or 2) their similar empirical choice of the notions of home, identity and belonging in researches about Kurdish immigrants elsewhere, mostly in the diaspora. The studies as reviewed below are general surveys of the refugee situation in KRI and Iraq, reports by humanitarian organizations and diaspora studies with focus on immigrants with Kurdish background.

Apart from media reports focusing on the updates of the Syrian Crisis and the refugee situation, previous studies have approached the situation of Syrian refugees in Iraq from a humanitarian response perspective highlighting the refugee needs, challenges and opportunities. In an assessment of the situation of Syrian refugees in KRI, Salman (2012)
presents an overview of the basic needs that the refugees have in KRI highlighting the limited experience of KRG in dealing with this huge influx of refugees. He argues that integration of the refugees, especially in Duhok, is fostered by shared ethnic affiliation with the host community and close social and economic ties. Similarly, Saaid (2016) highlights the pressure under which the host community in KRI has been dealing with the refugee situation. He links the possibility for better integration with the availability of more resources and also forecasts that insufficient response will initiate bigger waves of emigration from KRI, mostly to the European Union (EU) countries.

Other studies, mostly reports by international organizations, have taken certain themes related to refugee needs under investigation such as the quality of life, livelihoods, education, and gender-based violence (GBV). Aziz et al (2014) explore the quality of life as perceived by Syrian refugees in KRI within four domains: physical, psychological, social relationships and environment. The researchers’ findings show that Syrian refugees report more satisfaction with their social network than the general population, and they also express more satisfaction with the living conditions in KRI than refugees surveyed in camps elsewhere in the region. An assessment by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC, 2015) on livelihoods among Syrian refugees reveals that opportunities for economic activities support social cohesion between the refugees and the host community. The organization points out to the advantages that Syrian refugees have over IDPs in accessing labour supported by a ‘common culture and language’ in addition to KRG’s facilitations for Syrians in terms of documentation and regulations.

Focusing on the impact of the conflict and displacement on Syrian refugees’ education in Iraq, El-Ghali et al, (2017) present a different picture about access in the labour market. In this regard, the study identifies challenges related to citizenship, restrictive country policy and the lack of academic guidance. Contrary to the assumption that a common language could facilitate entry into the educational system, the study shows that the access to education is highly affected by the variation of dialects that are spoken by the host community and used in education in different areas of KRI.

The question of ‘common culture’ between Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds gets more complex in perspectives on gender and cultural norms. A study by UN Women (2014) on GBV amongst Syrian refugees in KRI shows that the fact of being a refugee and a woman, whether in or off the camp, increases the risk for many forms of GBV. The element of ‘common culture’ is more critically examined in the last finding of the study where it is
highlighted how arranged and forced marriages of Syrian women as second wives to Iraqi men can be a source of increasing hostilities between the host community and the refugees.

My study shares the empirical choice of taking up the notions of home, belonging and identity with a number of studies on Kurdish diaspora. In several of his works, Eliassi (2010; 2012, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2016) has been studying identity formation and politics of belonging among immigrants of Kurdish backgrounds. His focus on the processes of identity formation and belonging is centered on the experiences of the youth (ibid, 2010), the relation between nationalism, statelessness and identity formation (ibid, 2015a, 2016), diasporic terrains of belonging, memory and identity (ibid, 2012) and the making of a Kurdish or Kurdistani identity in the diaspora (ibid, 2013, 2015b).

In a similar vein, Alinia and Eliassi (2014) take up the study of identity and home(land) through an understanding of the temporal and generational impact on Kurdish migrants. Alinia et all (2014) provide yet another discussion on the politics of belonging among Kurdish diaspora by focusing on activism and transnational ties. Khayati and Dahlstedt (2014) also link the formation of Kurdish diaspora to transnational citizenship and the role that politics of belonging play in this.

While I have not discussed the findings of these studies in detail due to the limits of my study’s focus and space, they provide a very coherent body of knowledge on Kurdish intra-ethnic conflicts, historical injustices against Kurds, identity and belonging as impacted by experiences of flight and social integration; all of which significantly inform my theoretical understanding and analysis.

Navigating through the available relevant literature as I attempted above confirms my argument that the situation of Syrian Kurdish refugees presents a unique case of intra-ethnic displacement that has not as yet been sufficiently explored. Hence, there is a need for an empirically grounded discussion to better understand questions about the forms of community relationships, belonging, and identity politics in relation to this form of displacement that is inter-state and intra-ethnic.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into five chapters. This chapter has introduced the research context, problem, aim, and questions with a review of relevant research. Chapter two clarifies the methodological approach of the study by discussing the approaches to data collection and analysis, providing notes on sampling and participants and reflecting on the limitations and
ethical considerations that have guided the research. Chapter three gives an overview of the theoretical framework of the study by defining the concepts and the ways of understanding the notions that the study engages with or develops. Chapter four presents a discussion of the research findings from the policy analysis and the themes emerging from the analysis of narrative interviews. Finally, chapter five reviews the findings and draws conclusions based on the research questions pointing out the delimitations and areas that require further research as well as referring to the theoretical contribution of my study. A list of references is provided in the bibliography section at the end of the thesis.
2 METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a crucial part of any study that aims at generating informative and trustworthy findings. In this chapter, I present the methodology of my research and the rational for my choices of the methods for both data collection and analysis. I also reflect on the ethical considerations and challenges I faced to access data and participants while at the same time highlighting the limitations of my research.

2.1 Research Design

My enquiry into the reality of life as Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI has its focus on how different politics of identity and belonging have developed with the intra-ethnic encounter of Syria’s Kurds with Iraq’s Kurds. As I have aimed at capturing the reality through experiences and zooming out to see the structural conditions, the choice of qualitative data rendered itself best to my quest. My methodological choice in this regard has followed the understanding of the elements of qualitative research highlighted by Snape and Spencer (2003: 3) which aim at ‘providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories’.

In my view, the structural conditions under which Syrian Kurdish refugees are protected and their status as refugees is regulated construct and impact their social and material circumstances. Being able to see how these structural conditions are put and interpret their societal power help understand the different circumstances that Syrian Kurdish refugees go through in KRI. By extension, understanding these circumstances explain their social world as refugees and how politics of identity and belonging play out in this world. To this end, my research engages with an analysis of the policy that regulates the refugee situation in both Iraq and KRI, and in particular the situation of Syrian refugees.

Besides the social and material circumstances, experiences, perspectives and histories are the other side of the coin that my study focuses on. As areas of understanding of the participants’ social world, these are the individuals’ narratives of their lives. According to Riessman (2002: 219), narratives are not difficult to locate as they are present in everyday life. When individuals become the autobiographical narrators of their lives, we access ‘a community of life stories’ and stories produced reflect the ‘deep structures’ in that community (ibid: 218). Capturing some of the life stories of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI
through my study participants’ narratives, the aim is to provide an understanding of the deep structures that govern their refugee conditions and influence their inclusion and access. The everyday life as the main site of their stories helps contextualize the conditions and open the door to the community’s stories about home, belonging and identity, in addition to their experiences of displacement. In-depth semi-structured interviews have been chosen as a research tool to unpack these stories while giving the space for the participants’ narratives to be told.

The plan for my research to collect data from both policy materials and interviews is to be able to provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of life situations in the context under study. I am aware that I am taking this understanding partially from personal stories which in my view best reflect the structural problems. Seen in what Flick (2015: 122) describes as ‘the politics of qualitative research’, my engagement with this context is to be able to make a contribution in addressing societal problems that face vulnerable groups including refugees, and the least to do so is by making their stories heard.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Law and policy materials

Knowing the challenges in tracing laws and regulations that deal with migration and asylum in Iraq and KRI, I endeavored to carry out this task by focusing on the materials that can be both available and are currently in force. In fact, my search did not come up with a big pool of options as both the federal government and KRG have not developed a comprehensive legal framework for migration and asylum yet. For the purpose of analysis, two legal documents have been selected both from the federal government and KRG as described below:

Refugee Law 2016
Recently, there have been efforts by the federal government to draft a refugee law. As the process is still ongoing and pending approvals, no official publication of the draft is made yet. My interest into knowing how this law could potentially have an impact on the situation for Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI led me to investigate more on this draft. Eventually, I managed to get hold of a leaked scanned copy. The document is titled ‘Refugee Law 2016’ (coded as RL). Considering the importance and timing of such a law, and its potential when
eventually approved on the life situation of refugees in Iraq, the document has been selected for analysis as one of the main policy materials.

Statement 7 of 2017
On a local policy level in KRI, the refugee situation is regulated in close collaboration with the UNHCR. In the absence of any law which can oblige KRG to grant refugee status to Syrians, refugees are given a specific identification card that is renewed annually. Statement 7 of 2017 (coded as S7-2017) by KRG’s Ministry of Interior has been identified as the current legal instrument through which identification cards are given. Although it is originally meant to be used for granting electronic visas and residence in KRI, the articles of S7-2017 are being applied as a legal framework when granting or renewing identification cards for Syrian refugees. Taken this operative aspect of S7-2017, it has been considered for analysis as well.

The regulations from both the federal government and KRG mentioned here are analyzed against a background of international law on refuges and protection. Both have been selected based on their (potential) impact in the context of the research besides their role in providing an informative and contextual background to the narratives of the research participants.

2.2.2 Interviews and research participants
In addition to policy materials, my research data is collected from individual semi-structured interviews with participants who fulfil the criteria of the case. Talking to people as an approach to the acquisition of data is an established practice among field researchers. In qualitative social science, interviews are usually perceived as ‘conversations with a purpose’ as Burgess (1984/2006: 84) notes. Not being restricted to asking and answering in this case, interviewing in the form of a conversation allows more space for narratives to develop which in turn provides rich and detailed data. Although the style is conversational and can sometimes be ‘flexible and fluid’, the active engagement between the interviewer and the interviewee in the conversation achieve the purpose, especially when this engagement is around interesting topics, issues, or experiences for both parties (Mason, 2002: 225). For these reasons, I have chosen to have my interviews semi-structured and I designed an interview guide for this purpose. During the interviews, I maintained the lead of the
conversation only partially as my interviewees travelled flexibly with their narratives in the itinerary of their preference.

As I designed my lead questions, I had to be careful how directly I could get involved in the participants’ narratives. I was aware that asking direct questions about identity and belonging would not be very useful. Anthias (2002: 492) notes in this regard that ‘asking someone a question about their ‘identity’ often produces a blank stare, a puzzled silence or a glib and formulaic response’. It is not easy to answer such a question, nor can it be answered in simple ways. To be able to tease out answers about identity and belonging, a researcher should allow the participants to ‘talk about themselves, their lives and experiences, and their ‘identity’ will emerge through this narration’ (ibid). Therefore, I focused on allowing the space for their narratives and redirected the conversations only sometimes to keep the track of the stories.

In the duration of the research, I managed to conduct ten interviews. As I could not be physically present in the field myself, I resorted to internet-based interviewing using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies. Through this I could hold real-time conversations with audio and video functions. VoIP-based interviews are becoming a common tool for researchers, and they do have the advantages of reaching to participants in different places at the same time, especially to locations that are otherwise inaccessible. They can also be convenient for participants who can choose the time and place for having the online conversation without the hassle of going to a place to meet the researcher (Lo Iacono et al, 2016). VoIP-based interviewing, despite being a pragmatic choice in my case, became particularly useful in reaching participants in different areas in KRI at the same time which enhanced my sampling and accommodated a diversity of voices. All the interviews were held in Kurdish except for one in Arabic upon preference from the participant. The interviews were recorded and duly transcribed, and all quotes included in the thesis were translated into English.

My research participants were all found through snowballing and personal network. I did not have strict sampling criteria as I was interested in the experiences of people from different walks of life. My sampling criteria were only that a person should come from Syria, speak Kurdish and live in KRI. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of Syrian refugees in KRI are Kurds; therefore, finding participants with these conditions was not very difficult. The question of self-identification whether as a refugee, Kurdish or Syrian was left to the participants to decide in their stories as this was actually one of the main areas of investigation in the study.
Beside the basic sampling criteria, I aimed for diversity in my study by keeping the gender balance as well as having participants from different regions in Syria and/or living in different areas of KRI. In total, five women and five men were interviewed. Although my sample is not statistically representative, which is not my aim anyway, the interviewees represent diverse experiences of people in different situations. The participants live in areas of the three governorates of KRI: Duhok, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. There are those who live in camps, some are students, workers or are looking for a job, and some have arrived via visas as visitors and others have arrived via land crossings as asylum seekers.

Being from the community myself and speaking both Kurdish and Arabic helped me as a researcher to reach participants in the most effective ways. No translators or mediators were needed. Moreover, sharing the cultural background as Syrian Kurd and the experience of displacement with my interviewees established a sense of trust and confidence between us in spite of the fact that we were not physically meeting. However, this did not exclude the existence of some challenges that I will reflect upon in the limitations section.

2.3 Analysis Methods

Analyzing qualitative data can be a lengthy process that requires several levels of work, especially when working with more than one type of materials. Each of the two analysis methods I am presenting here consists of two layers: the practical level of working with the material to organize it as meaningful representation of the social reality and the epistemological level of interpretation of that organized material.

2.3.1 Content analysis, policies and context

Starting with the policy materials, my approach focused on scrutinizing specific Articles of both RL and S7-2017 and reviewing the texts as a whole against a background of international refugee and protection law. This way I used both a ‘directed’ and ‘latent’ content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Directed in the sense that I looked in how specific parts of the policy materials contrast or agree with international law, and latent through focusing on ‘discovering underlying meanings of the words or the content’ (ibid: 1284). Underlying meanings could be discovered through directly relating the materials to the context in which they were produced. In fact, to be able to interpret the materials through content analysis, context is key. Drisko and Maschi (2015: 59) note that one of the main distinguishing features between basic content analysis and interpretive content analysis is the
extent to which context is involved in the process of meaning-making. They draw upon Krippendorff’s (2004: 24-25) argument that meaning is not simply contained in the texts as ‘every content analysis requires a context within which the available texts are examined’. Explaining the context makes interpretations more possible, and the analysis then can move beyond the descriptive questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to provide inferences about ‘why’, ‘for whom’ and ‘to what effect’ (Krippendorff, 2004: 27; Drisko and Maschi, 2015: 58-59). Moreover, explaining the context of the analysis is considered as an essential aspect in considering certain inferences as both valid and reliable (Krippendorff, 2004: 24). From this perspective, my analysis of the content of the policy materials provide interpretations that go beyond describing the content of the materials selected for analysis to provide inferences about the impact of policies in general. The inferences I make are drawn primarily from my understanding and studying of the context in Iraq and KRI as presented in the findings chapter.

2.3.2 Thematic analysis and narratives

My data from the interviews required an approach through which I could sort out ideas and organize them into themes that cut across the narratives of all participants. On the first level of analysis I followed techniques of identifying themes and sub-themes as outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003). This involved ‘pawing through’ the transcribed interviews, marking ideas, passages and thoughts with different color code and underlying key phrases. By applying Ryan and Bernard’s techniques, the process of identifying themes depended on finding:

- repetitions: and how often certain topics reoccurred in the narratives.
- indigenous categories: by looking for local terms that were referenced by the interviewees.
- metaphors and analogies: by searching for how certain metaphors were commonly used by the interviewees to indicate a public rhetoric.
- transitions: when a shift naturally occurred in the narratives which indicated a shift in the topic as well.
- similarities and differences: on the level of ideas among the narratives.
- linguistic connectors: by looking at specific words which indicated casual relations. For example, ‘because’, ‘since’, ‘as a result’.
- missing data: to find out what was commonly not mentioned by the interviewees.
• theory-related material: by looking at how certain themes as discussed in theory had their evidence in the narratives.

When themes and sub-themes were identified, the data was furthered processed through coding, sorting and combining bits and pieces. This was done in order to have the data organized and arranged for interpretation as well as to maximize the clarity of the procedure by identifying themes that can be both valid and reliable (ibid: 103-104).

The exercise of thematic analysis was followed by the second level of analysis concerned with the interpretation of the themes by contextualizing them in the social world of the interviewees. Although the interviewees’ narratives can sometimes be quite ‘fragmentary and partial’, still they tell us a lot about persons and their social world (Lawler, 2002: 243). Narratives in this way are regarded as representation of the social world. However, to be able to transform this representation into knowledge, interpretation as Riessman (2002: 218) points out is inevitable. In fact, ‘research which explores the narratives people produce will necessarily be interpretivist in nature’ (Lawler, 2002: 234). My interpretation as drawn from the narratives started with working with the basic premise of how participants represented their social world and locations. This is when themes emerged in the analysis. In other words, this is when the questions of ‘what happened?’ could be answered. Interpreting their representation within the social and political context of the research meant to move beyond the question of ‘what happened?’ to be able to explain ‘what is the significance of a certain event?’ (ibid). While carrying out this task, it was crucial to understand the solid relationship between the narratives and the context while at the same time staying very true to how the interviewees represented their world. Although I had the analytical concepts of home, identity and belonging in the study context as basic premises, they did not confine the interpretation. The meaning generated from the analysis kept developing throughout the processes. In this regard I followed Riessman (2002: 253) who notes that ‘analytic induction, by definition, causes questions to change and new ones to emerge’. This became particularly true as I made meaning from the interviewees’ representation aiming to answer the research questions, new questions opened up and demanded answers too.

The role of narratives in providing representation is further important when we think of human life as a process of ‘narrative engagement’ (Hammack, 2011: 213). In this sense, narratives not only can work as ‘an integrative prism through which to interpret lives in their social and political complexity’ (ibid), they also become ‘performed identities’ (Anthias, 2002: 499). Stories that individuals narrate about themselves are a construction of themselves in the reality and their performance at different points in time and space. Narratives about the
self can be self-constructed, produced and reproduced by the surrounding structure. Therefore, Anthias underlines that ‘narratives are never innocent of social structure and social place’ (ibid: 500). Taking narratives as ‘performed identity’ in my analysis meant not only focusing on the present moment as a sight of interpretation. As identities are constructed as a process from past to present, and by self and others, the analytical interpretation had to ensure an investigation that takes this aspect into particular consideration. Riesmann (2002: 218) further highlights the importance of this saying that ‘individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives’. Similarly, Lawler (2002) emphasizes the significance of narratives in linking past and present, and the individual with the collective.

Taken from the individual level to the collective level, the analysis of narratives in my study interprets the collective while at the same time acknowledging the performance and agency of the individual both in the past and present. In sum, my interpretation as based on the interviewees representations, takes the context, performance, history of individuals and link it to the present structure and local situations to provide a collective understanding of their social world and illustrate the contestation of identities and belongings in that world.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out in full adherence to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2006: 8) and the principles of ‘honesty, openness, orderliness, consideration and impartiality’.

All research participants received information about myself, the research, the method and aim, and they granted their verbal consent to be interviewed voluntarily. I explained their role in the interview and informed them of their rights to leave out questions or terminate the interview at any point. All participants agreed to have their names changed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. They also gave the permission to have them recorded during the interviews. All data gathered is safely stored and will be retained for the duration of time required by Linköping University.

Before conducting the interviewees, I ensured that participants had selected the time of interview as it suited their schedules and upon their own convenience. Since the interviews were done through VoIP, the interviewees were advised to choose a location where they would feel most comfortable and secure. This was essentially important to take into consideration as some interviewees lived in shared spaces in refugee camps. Hence,
potentially sensitive situations created by the presence of other family members, including children, were avoided. All interviews were conducted after making sure that the participants were comfortable with the time and place as well as the mode of interviewing.

Being sensitive to the context as a researcher meant to be aware of the concern that participants were sharing their stories, experiences and opinions in an environment where the freedom of expression is not fully guaranteed, especially in their current situation as refugees. Therefore, to increase the participants’ anonymity and protection besides changing their names, references to personal information in quotations and analysis were meticulously reviewed to eliminate any risk of identifying the participants. Pseudonyms given were all selected from common Kurdish names in Syria which were as neutral as possible of any political or religious connotations.

Understanding the vulnerability in the situation of refugees and the ethical principle of doing no harm was the utmost concern from me throughout the study. The vulnerability of refugees according to Mackenzie et al (2007: 302) makes refugee research ‘ethnically fraught’. As a researcher I had to be very sensitive to the different ‘physical, psychological and emotional trauma’ that my participants could have endured trying to mitigate the impact of that during the interviews. It is of paramount importance to recognize that serious traumatic events often happen with the experience of displacement. As Mackenzie et al (2007: 302) explain, refugees ‘may have been subject to political or ethnic persecution or violence; they may have been tortured, raped or beaten or witnessed such acts inflicted on others; they may have lost children, parents, spouses or other family members through conflict; and they may have lost their homes, livelihoods and possessions’. Being aware of these situations and the vulnerability of the refugees, I had to make sure that my questions would not trigger any unsolicited memories or intervene in events the participants did not want to share much about.

I have mentioned previously that my background as a Syrian Kurd facilitated the process of accessing the community, finding participants and building trust and confidence. However, I should not deny the ethical dilemma that comes with being a member of the researched community and its impact on impartiality. My effort in this regard was to critically reflect, to my best knowledge, on any unintentional biases during all stages of working on this thesis. My reflections were in accordance with my plan that I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter which was to address societal problems that face vulnerable groups including refugees through making a contribution. Therefore, and without risking impartiality, I consider my work to have followed a human rights framework for research
with vulnerable groups as suggested by Pittaway et al (2010: 243) which takes ‘justice, recognition, self-determination, voice and agency in addressing all forms of oppression’ to be at the core of social research.

2.5 Limitations

As it is the case with any qualitative work, my study has some limitations that could have influenced the results. These limitations mostly concern challenges with retrieving policy documents, the interviewing mode, and translation.

The context in which the study is located is not a very open environment where laws and regulations are always available to the public or on the Internet for example. This makes it difficult to know what laws or regulations exist or which are actually in force. The two main documents used in the analysis were selected via help from contacts and lawyers. However, other equally influential local regulations could exist which the research has not covered.

As I could not travel to KRI or collect the data while being physically in the field, VoIP became the best option for conducting interviews that could be similar to face-to-face field interviews. The tool proved to be very reliable, and I was actually told by some participants that this mode of interviewing was more convenient and making it easier for them to talk, yet for me not being present there in the field with the interviewees might have obscured some very critical information from my inquiry.

Considering that the data collected for analysis has not all been in English, I did the translation of the quotes myself. I am trained as a translator and interpreter and have worked in this profession for several years. When translating the materials, I did my best to convey the original meanings, messages and attitudes. However, I cannot deny that translation can sometimes create misunderstandings or lead to interpretations that might be different from the original intended messages.
3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To study the experience of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI and establish it as a unique case of *intra-ethnic displacement* with distinct politics of belonging and identity, the case must be situated within an understanding of the historical background of colonialism and the borders that have divided the Kurds among four post-colonial nation states. It also requires a contextual presentation of the key concepts of ethnic identity and its inclusionary and exclusionary powers, belonging and politics of belonging as well as the notions of home and homeland. This is by no means an attempt to present a typology of these concepts, rather the focus will be on highlighting aspects that inform the discussion of the research findings and explain my theoretical points of departure in using these concepts. This chapter provides the theoretical framework of the study in three sections. Section one presents an overview of the geopolitical concept of Kurdistan within a historical background of (post)colonialism and the formation of nation states and borders in the Middle East. Section two discusses the notions of identity and ethnicity and their boundaries, belonging in relation to politics of belonging and home as a multidimensional concept. Finally, section three develops the concept of *intra-ethnic displacement* in relation to theories of migration and inter-group relations.

3.1 (Post)colonialism and Kurdistan

3.1.1 Nation states, borders and boundaries

The World Wars, perhaps the most significant trajectories in the modern history of mass conflict, were not only expressions of conflict among nations spanning across the globe, but also a manifestation of the problem of nation states. The legacy of both wars until today is present in the arbitrary borders of crafted nation states, particularly in the Middle East. Albeit novel to its history, the Middle East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was integrated as a regional subsystem of nation states into the international system. The transition to an ‘externally imposed nation state’ system did not come without major repercussions and shifting patterns of national identity and loyalty coupled with conflicts within and across borders (Tibi, 1991: 137). Nevertheless, the borders there have remarkably endured, and the crafted nations have become sites for postcolonial research consideration as one of the post-war philosophies.
Postcolonialism as a conceptual undertaking has been mainly associated with Third World countries that gained independence after World War II (Shohat, 1992). Without delving much into the problematic use of *postcolonial* as a term in different schools and contexts, the basic understanding is that the prefix *post* indicates ‘the demise of colonialism’ (ibid: 102). In spite of the fact that Western colonization, from a postcolonial perspective, has literally ended in the Middle East, the imposed nation states project continues to be the basis for bloody conflicts in the region. In this unsettled context, national borders are contested by ethnic and sectarian loyalties, often fueled by external forms of neocolonial powers. As Shohat (1992) explains in an interrogation of the term *postcolonial*, the ongoing tension between ‘the official end of direct colonial rule’ and the hegemony channelled through various forms reflects the ambiguity of continued/discontinued colonization. This is manifested through new modes and forms of ‘neo-colonial’ and ‘post-independence’.

The Kurds, self-identifying as one big ethnic group, were left out of the project of nation states, and the area they call Kurdistan (the land of the Kurds) was divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria (McDowall, 2004). While the context of Kurdistan is theoretically studied as a postcolonial site, the fact that Kurds believe they have not been freed of colonization, and their nation state could not be equally established as postcolonial Syria and Iraq for example, renders the postcolonial understanding quite insufficient. In other words, ‘neo-colonial’ rule continues as long as the Kurdistan is not independent. I have used the prefix *post* between brackets in the section heading to indicate the continuity/discontinuity of colonization and the need to approach the context from this perspective. While the context of the research is approached from a postcolonial understanding of the legacy of the Ottoman Colonization, Kurdistan is still today under colonization, at least form the Kurdish nationalist perspective. Therefore, it is essential to take both a colonial and postcolonial understanding of the context into consideration.

Historically, the boundaries, which forms the official borders of the four modelled nation states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, have witnessed a fierce conflict over the right to a distinct ethnic Kurdish identity and a historical claim to land. The non-ending conflict in the four states has consequently resulted in multiple waves of displacement among the Kurds. In fact, displacement has been one of the harshest recurring experiences in the lives of Kurds in the region. It follows that borders that cut through Kurdistan have not only divided communities but have also served as a reminder of the violence of that division.
In the Middle East and the world at large, the experience of displacement has always been signified by the experience of crossing violent borders. Jones (2016) describes the aspect of violence of borders through five forms: the over violence manifested by border guards and security infrastructure, the use of force or power - threatened or actual, the threat of violence necessary to limit access, the structural violence related to economic reasons, and the direct harm borders do to the environment and the accompanying ideologies of resource extraction. In migration literature, the violence of borders indicates a conflict ‘between the desire for freedom and the desire for control, between people who move around and people who want them to stay in place’ (ibid: 10). More often, the violence of borders is ascribed to policies of protecting national borders and imagined identity boundaries when states seek to protect themselves against the threat from other states and non-state actors (Adamson, 2006). Moreover, it indicates an increasing discursive conflict over identity in the international system as a whole.

Borders, as violent structures, are equally affective as discursive statements that are ‘crucial to the organization of power in and through space’ (Brown, 2010: 74). Walling the nation state as Brown calls it, is arguably a manifestation of the power that is sovereign and visible and that intercepts violence to the nation through overt force and policing, but above all shields against ‘imagined dilution of national identity through transformed, ethicized or racial demographics’ (ibid: 82). Thus, bordering communities is not only a policy to limit immigration, it is a political tool for organizing the space within the communities themselves. The organization of that space does not necessarily happen geographically; it can occur arbitrarily through the creation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the mind as Said (1987) argues in what he termed as ‘imaginative geography’. This way identities are produced through borders that ‘it is enough for ‘us’ to set up these boundaries in our own minds; ‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours.’” (ibid: 54). The Kurds, not always fitting the imagined demographics of the four states, have been the target of assimilation policies and denationalization schemes. In fact, the realization of a nation state cannot be separated from the violence of borders surrounding it, and borders are likewise a realization of the bounded and imagined national identity. As the nation state of Kurdistan has not been a realization yet, mobilizing Kurdish ethnic identity against the national boundaries of the four states serves the project of an independent Kurdistan. Defying the borders, both physically through migration and discursively through politics of identity, means resisting the division, the violence and assimilation but above all it means regaining a distinct Kurdish identity as potential for an independent nation state.
3.1.2 Kurdistan in the geopolitics of the Middle East

In the absence of an independent state or an officially defined map, Kurdistan as geography usually refers to the areas where Kurds constitute an ethnic majority. It includes the mountainous region of northwestern Zagros and eastern Taurus. As Izady (1992: 1) illustrates, ‘it resembles an inverted letter V, with the joint pointing in the direction of the Caucasus and the arms towards the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf’ (see Map 2 below).

![Map 2 Areas where Kurds constitute an ethnic majority (The Decolonial Atlas, 2017)](image)

Located in this part of the world, Kurdistan is in the heart of a region that is both ethnically and geographically complex (O’Shea, 2004: 9). The Kurds, namely those deeply involved in national identity mobilization, usually place Kurdistan in a central location with regards to the politics of the region. The geopolitical centrality of Kurdistan is expressed along the lines of saying ‘Kurdistan constitutes the backbone of the Middle East’ (Andrews, 1982: 8). This statement sounds like an exaggerative way of highlighting the importance of a single geography in the Middle East. O’Shea (2004: 15) notes that it is ‘an inherent

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1 With these words, a young Kurdish officer in the Iraqi Army started his memorandum to the American Legation in Baghdad in 1945, Memorandum on the Kurdish Question, Enclosure No. 2. To Despatch No. 674 of March 22, 1945, from American Legation, Baghdad. The book by F. Davis Andrews (1982) documents the struggle of Kurds in the Middle East for statehood through formal correspondences and documents in the last century.
contradiction’ when the important function of Kurdistan in the region actually developed more as a result of its very peripheral location rather than centrality. However, going deeper in the politics of the region and the sequence of events and troubles in the post-colonization period proves the logic and validity of the statement.

Irrespective of the center versus periphery discourse, the geography that constitutes Kurdistan has historically been of a paramount importance. It has been a site for rivalry among world powers along a history of control and dominance. From history until present, it can be noticed that world powers have not been in favor of an independent sovereign Kurdistan. McDowall (2004: 8) explains that ‘we know that Kurdistan was a troublesome zone on the edge of ancient polities’. This was through its various historical roles as a buffer zone between regional powers, or as the center of a coherent empire itself as well as through the multiple expeditions against it. The creation of an independent or even an autonomous region of Kurdistan has historically been turned down in order not to jeopardize the sovereignty of the states controlling it (Olsson, 1992: 479). This partially explains the geopolitical dimension that has hindered the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. The political position taken by world powers which have not supported Kurdish statehood has rested so far on the frequent rhetoric of not increasing regional instability. This has been embedded not only in their stance taken during critical conjunctures – the recent referendum on independence in KRI as an example, but also in their cartographic representation of Kurdistan. As Culcasi (2006) has critically analyzed in a longitudinal study of American journalistic cartography of Kurdistan, the variation and omission of Kurdistan in maps reflect and recreate dominant geopolitical discourses that ambiguously determine the location and even the existence of Kurdistan.

Economic relations and natural resources are the other significant geopolitical factor that has rendered the Kurdish Question to become one of the most protracted questions of the Middle East (Ünver, 2016). The growing demand for energy and the race for controlling water resources indicates the economic repercussions that an independent Kurdistan could bring forward. ‘No government will willingly surrender control of its oilfields in the Kurdish region, Rumaylan (Syria), Batman and Silvan (Turkey), or Kirkuk and Khaniqin (Iraq)’ as McDowall (2004: 7) explains.

With the current status quo in the Middle East and the shifting of power alliances and borders, especially in Iraq and Syria, the interesting question of why Kurdistan cannot become independent remains. O’Shea (2004: 2) argues that ‘Kurdistan’s importance lies not in its existence as a geographical region, nor even as a geopolitical zone, but rather its
potential’. In this regard, the possibility of declaring a Kurdish state in the region can be seen as a trigger for large-scale action of redrawing maps in the Middle East. The potentials of Kurdistan in constructing this as a new political reality in the region makes it more complicated for the Kurds to realize their dream of a nation state.

Regardless of the importance, recognition or non-recognition of Kurdistan, for many Kurds, and nationalists in particular, Kurdistan transcends the political reality of not being a declared state as long as it exists in the national imagination as a united homeland for all the Kurds. This is particularly noticed by the increasing emphasis among many Kurds on the use of the terms of Bakur (North), Başûr (South), Rojhilat (East) and Rojava (West) to refer to the four parts of Kurdistan under the control of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria respectively. As O’Shea (2004: 2) further points out ‘Kurdistan survive the reality as a powerful amalgam of myths, fact, and ambitions. Kurdistan exists on many levels of discourse amongst its inhabitants, supporters and those who would deny it’. This understanding of Kurdistan is crucial to the research as it is within these levels of discourse that conflicts of ethnic identity, politics of belonging and attachment to home can be further explored.

3.2 Conceptual Consideration of Identity, Belonging and Home

3.2.1 Identity within ethnic and national boundaries

As a social construct identity incorporates many roles and categories that cannot be pinned down to a single concept. The multiplicity of identity can be a composition of categories and social roles such as familial, territorial, class, religious, ethnic and gender (Smith, 1991: 4). One of the most important reasons why scholar invest much effort into the study of identity is perhaps because many ‘protracted ‘inter-national’ conflicts’ are believed to be developing from claims and conception of identities, mainly the national identity as Smith (1991: viii) points out. To get a better understanding of this, we need to look at how ethnicity and nationality are conceptualized, and how they construct identity. These two notions can’t be easily disconnected as they intersect in many aspects.

My conceptual consideration of ethnicity is mainly based on Barth’s (1969) theorization of ethnic groups and boundaries. According to this perspective, ethnicity is deployed in a framework of social organization of cultural difference when ethnic groups are ‘culture-bearing units’ (ibid: 11) and ‘they are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves’ (ibid: 10). In a similar vein, Fenton (2010: 3) suggests thinking of
ethnicity as ‘refereeing to social identities – typically about ‘descent’ and ‘cultural difference’ – which are deployed under certain conditions’. More analytically, Smith (1991: 21) lists detailed attributes that make up an ethnic community which he considers to be ‘a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific ‘homeland’ and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population’. He also points out that some of these elements can be firmly held or intense in certain periods than others. Here I will argue that while some of these cultural elements that Smith mentions are usually what we consider as components of ethnicity, not all can be necessarily present for a community of people to form an ethnic group.

According to Barth, studying ethnicity should not focus on the cultural difference or the ‘cultural stuff’ as he calls it as much as it should be on the social processes that govern and organize boundaries and differences because culture is dynamic and changing. Likewise, Jenkins (1997: 13) argues that ethnicity is no more fixed than the culture that composes or produces it. Therefore, identities as socially constructed are better understood through the developing relationships of cultural difference rather than the differences themselves. Jenkins further explains that ‘ethnicity as a social identity is a collective and individual, externalized in social interaction and internalized in personal self-identification.’ (ibid: 14). For ethnic identity to become performative in the way described by Jenkins, interaction is a must. Ethnic identity is not simply the possession of culture and shared ancestry; it is as Fenton (2010: 3) describes how people elaborate this possession into a community, imagined or invented, that is founded on these elements. This elaboration is evidently contingent on favorable conditions to develop and articulate into distinctive ethnic identity. In other words, different circumstances provide for the realization of different performance as there are circumstances where ‘identity can be moderately successfully realized, and limits which such success is precluded’ (Barth. 1969: 25).

In comparison to ethnicity, Smith (1991: 11) states that the conceptualization of the national identity involves a sort of legal-political community besides historical territory and common civic culture and ideology. It is clear that Smith takes this understanding of national identity from a Western conceptualization of the nation state that centers on the claim to a historical territory. To understand national identity more broadly without restricting it to the element of historical territory that Smith mentions, national identity as conceptualized in this study has its focus more on legal-political engagement through civic culture. In other words, national identity is constructed more through forms of legal citizenship and nationality rights.
National identity can, under certain conditions, incorporate ethnicity when emphasis is put on a community of birth and native culture rather than civic elements. Ethnic conception of the nation, which can also develop to ethno-nationalism (Smith, 1991: 13), is structurally based on the association of ethnic value system to the political organization of the public sphere. This is what we call the boundaries that a value system creates around an identity. This is also when boundaries of inclusion or exclusion based on identity can develop. What is important to understand is here how and why certain ethnic groups incorporate their identity in the political system, and how group identities, particularly of the minorities, play out in an ‘identity politics’ or increasingly become involved in ‘politics of recognition’ (Miller, 2000: 62). By extension, it is also important to see how certain groups incorporate their ethnicity in migration relationships as the majority identity and dictate the value system of the community. My study focuses more on the *intra*-ethnic encounter through displacement between Kurds as one ethnic group than on the *inter*-ethnic encounter between Kurds and other ethnicities within the nation states they are citizens of. Therefore, boundaries of ethnic identity rather than national identity are more elaborated on here.

To understand how ethnic identity is bounded, it is important to review the components that compose a certain ethnic identity. An ethnic community based on common cultural traits such as ‘language, ritual, economic way of life, lifestyle more generally, and the division of labour’ creates an ethnic closure in a certain way’ (Jenkins, 1997: 10). This way the cultural content is seen as a self-bordering. Reflecting more on the process of how ethnic identity is bordered, Barth (1969: 14) classifies the cultural content into two orders: firstly, overt signs that people look for and show as identity features like those mentioned above by Jenkins. Secondly, the basic value standards by which performance is judged. The claim to belong to a certain ethnicity implies the kind of a person one is, and that basic identity also implies the claim to judge and to be judged against those standard relevant to that identity. Barth clarifies that the standards vary according to socio-economic systems meaning that cultural components can be ‘of great relevance to behavior, but they need not be; they may pervade all social life, or they may be relevant only in limited sectors of activity’ (ibid). In a similar vein, Fenton (2010: 6) clarifies that the boundaries that cultural identities produce are sometimes taken very seriously, under certain circumstances, and they can play a major role in the social order, but sometimes they can be very unimportant and trivial. Therefore, the critical investigation should be turned to those situations when social interactions and relations create identity boundaries rather than the content of the ‘cultural stuff’. Barth (1969: 15) provides three forms that explain why this is more important, and
how ethnic boundaries are created through interaction. First, when identifying another person as a fellow member of ethnic group, this entails sharing of criteria of evaluation and judgment, in a way both are ‘playing the same game’. Second, when dichotomizing others as strangers, this indicates a recognition of the limited shared understanding and difference in criteria and value. Third, in situations when persons of different cultures come in contact, ethnic boundaries of identity only persist if a marked difference in behavior occur. The focus on behavior in the last form indicates the emphasis placed on social interactions in comparison to cultural traits in generating and maintaining boundaries.

Expanding more on the significance of the social situation than the cultural components in governing the process of boundaries-making, Radhakrishnan (1993: 752) explains that boundaries of identity suggest that the concept of identity is itself ‘a normative measure’ related to ideology, time and space. He notes that an ideology ‘within its own legitimate time and history’ securitize identity against division by creating the ‘imagined community’. Consequently, the securitization of identity boundaries means that inclusionary and exclusionary practices under the normative ideology prevail, and they can materialize through different forms of chauvinism, nationalism or patriotism. Barth (1969: 18) also refers to this through the concept of ‘sanctions’ which produce adherence to group values (or ideology), and accordingly organize social identities and maintain boundaries. It is important to note here that these values are not cultural neutral. In fact, they are very much loaded with the cultural values of dominant social categories (Miller, 2000: 63). This is best reflected in the consequences of majority-minority conflicts and the demands for recognition by those who are excluded by the normative boundaries. It is also manifested in relationships in the context of migration when values are being deployed to limit the immigrants’ access to the hosts’ majority identity.

Besides utilizing cultural values, the politics of maintaining identity boundaries depend quite a lot on economic criteria for evaluation. Barth (1969: 27) considers this to be related to creating stratifications based on control of valuable assets and means of production. However, he argues that this should not imply that an economically stratified community becomes the reason for the existence of certain ethnic identities. It should be more thought of as a class characteristic although I think class and ethnicity interact with each other more than that, and the boundaries they generate around identity strongly intersect.

Identity boundaries not only affect how social relationships are organized and cultures are valued, they also delimit belonging and inclusion. Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that these boundaries become more evident and more powerful in relationships
that develop in displacement or migration contexts. The analysis of these relationships is indeed not comprehensive without grasping how identity boundaries operate and considering the contexts in which individuals, through different politics of identity, defy or normalize these boundaries.

3.2.2 Belonging and politics of belonging

Belonging is very much connected to identity and membership. If we consider identity an imagined bond, belonging can be the confirmation of that bond whether it comes from within as self-confirmation or from without through interaction and politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006: 199) states that ‘belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way’. This implies that identification and membership reflect belonging and citizenship, and that rights and duties constitute belonging. However, Yuval-Davis challenges this assumption and argues that in spite of their intricate connections, belonging cannot be reduced to identities or citizenship and rights; for her belonging is a deep emotional need before anything else (Yuval-Davis, 2004: 215).

It is neither easy to pin belonging to one single definition, nor can it be encapsulated through the notions of citizenship or identity. To clarify this better, it can be said that ‘belonging is where the sociology of emotions interfaces with the sociology of power, where identification and participation collude, or at least aspire to or yearn for’ (ibid: 216). Conceptualizing belonging in these terms reveals the two important layers of analyzing belonging. First, thinking of belonging as an emotional and personal attachment. Second, looking at belonging ‘as discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)’ (Antonsich, 2010: 645). The move from belonging to politics of belonging occurs when belonging is threatened by the articulation and politicization of belonging on discursive terms serving specific political projects. Moreover, this move highlights the need for an analytical framework of belonging and politics of belonging to better understand critical discourses related to nationalism, exclusion and other politics of differentiation (Yuval, Davis, 2006: 197).

According to Yuval-Davis (2006) belonging is constructed on three major analytical levels. First is the level when belonging is constructed through the social and economic locations exemplified by saying people belong to a particular group such as gender, race, class or nation. These groups represent category locations which have a certain positionality along one or multiple axes of power. Such a positionality can be different in different
contexts, and this makes it important to recognize the social power axes more than the social identity constructed by these locations. Second is the level of identifications and emotional attachments which basically means how identities as narratives construct belonging and membership. These can be stories about belonging to particular groups or collectivities or emotional attachment, as a component of identity, that people construct towards certain objects. The third level concerns the ways in which both the social locations and identities are valued and judged. It is about the ideological boundaries that politicize belonging and constitute politics of belonging.

Judging and setting boundaries for memberships are the basic elements of politics of belonging. As Yuval-Davis (2006) outlines, the boundaries that divides populations into ‘us’ and ‘them’ are those that the politics of belonging work with. Most of the times, these boundaries rest on the construction of imagined collectivity, communities or nations. To understand how this construction work in relation to other analytical levels of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006: 204) explains that ‘the different situated imaginations that construct these national imagined communities with different boundaries depend on people’s social locations, people’s experiences and definitions of self, but probably even more importantly on their values’. The value system that the politics of belonging incorporate is not only for setting external boundaries around a community, it is also about the internal determination of the roles that specific social locations and narratives of identity should play. Thus, politics of belonging has both an inclusionary and exclusionary function.

In the previous section, I mentioned that identity boundaries are quite influential in structuring community relationships in the contexts of migration and displacement. Much of the research into ethnicity and displacement focuses on the question of what happens to identity through migration and resettlements (Anthias, 2002). However, displacement not only dictates new identities and their constructions, it also displaces belonging. The impact of displacement on belonging might be more evident in the sense that refugees can be consciously caught between the need to belong and the desire to belong. Refugees’ belonging become especially more central in displacement contexts where boundaries of collectivities both in the home and the host country are highly politicized and discursively bounded. More generally, the politics of belonging as Yuval-Davis (2006: 213) concludes ‘has come to occupy the heart of the political agenda almost everywhere on the globe’. 
3.2.3 Home between physical location(s) and imaginary homeland

Central to the study of identity and belonging and their interaction in the context of displacement is the relation of refugees to homeland and their conceptualization of their home. The notion of home evokes the feeling of belonging within a dwelling, and it also forms the basis for bordering identity when refereeing to a specific geographical location or place of origin as homeland.

Mallet (2004) presents a detailed explanation of what home means and how it could be understood. She points out that ‘the term home functions as a repository for complex, inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people’s relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces, and things (ibid: 84). Within this understanding, home can mean the dwelling, or ‘a lived space of interaction’, but it can also be an ideological construct. The complex relation with home can be explained through the contradictory attachment to it as Mallet explains, home ‘can be associated with feelings of comfort, ease intimacy, relaxation and security and/or oppression, tyranny and persecution’ (ibid). This also clarifies that constructing home as an ideology is connected to existing social conditions which can be stable or changing. Conceptualizing home in this sense is vital for understanding emerging social relations on a wider scale developed by displacement above and beyond a limited view of home as physical or fixed place.

Home, thus, is not mainly the physical place or the geographical location that one originates from. It is common that the word homeland is used to refer to this. However, the fact that no geographical ‘homeland’ exists outside the political sphere that constructs it means that homeland is imaginary to a greater extent. Homeland may not possess much value without the feeling of being at home. In other words, without the social bond of a shared identity or sense of belonging, the relation to a physical space does not necessarily produce a homeland. According to Brickell (2012: 575), home potentially shows ‘a range of spatial scales’ from the micro function of signifying one’s physical or imaginary space to broader conceptualization of homeland and narratives of national identity. This is why home is more inclusive as a category of analysis than focusing only on homeland. The use of the term home in this study encapsulates homeland and refers to all dimensions of the concept of home as presented above.

Home and homeland as analytical concepts have been essential for the study of migration, and they have developed substantially in researches focusing on diaspora and transnationalism. Brubaker (2005) shows that most early theorization of diaspora was firmly
established on the concept of homeland, and he considers homeland orientation as one of the main constituents of a diaspora. Migrants, when thought of as diasporic communities, are perceived to have an orientation towards a real or imaginative homeland that is loaded with value, identity, and loyalty. In this respect, Brubaker builds his criteria on Safran’s (1991: 83-84) conceptualization of diaspora. In an outline of the characteristics of diaspora formation, Safran extends the utilization of home(land) through six criteria. These include dispersion, collective memory, vision, or myth about the original homeland, belief of not being fully accepted in host society, view of ancestral homeland as true and ideal home, belief of commitment to restoration of original homeland to its safety, and finally personal or vicarious relation to homeland which delineate identity and solidarity (ibid). From this, it can be concluded that the concept of home is approached in diaspora studies with more focus on relations to homeland than to the hosting place.

The concept of home as I argued earlier is not only about homeland. In the context of migration and especially with first generation migrants, the host place is central to the development of different relationships. The interaction that migrants develop with their new home and the different politics that they get involve in to construct the feeling of being at home are important sites for investigation. ‘The politics of being in place’ as Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle (2010: 1) call it, is about everyday life and common rituals of home-making. Moreover, it is about place attachment and contested belonging when migrants settle in a place and create homes. The importance of examining migration with the politics of place comes from its potential to allow us ‘investigate the tensions between permanence and impermanence, movement and settlement (ibid). In this regard, the host place matters as site where migrants’ lives are woven into the social conditions through ‘emplaced belonging’ using Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle’s term, that dictate their settlement or movement. This means that migration research dealing with the notion of home should not be confined exclusively to movement, transnational lifestyle and identities, rather it should be comprehensive enough to focus on the host place as migrant’s new home as well (ibid).

Bringing together the diasporic notion of home and the understanding of the hosting place as potential home, Brah (1996: 192) clarifies that ‘on the one hand ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells,… as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations’. Similarly, Ahmed (1999: 341) maintains that home is not only about ‘fantasies of belonging’ related to place or origin, but
more ‘it is sentimentalized as a space of belonging (‘home is where the heart is’). This distinction, although not easy to demarcate, is essentially vital for a broader understanding of the lived experiences of refugees who have been forced to leave their place of origin and then are faced with the reality of finding belonging in their potential new home.

For this reason, understanding home both in the place of origin and in the hosting place entails bringing together all aspects of attachment to a place. As explained previously, home as ‘a lived space of interaction’ (Mallet, 2004: 84) whether this space is ‘one’s physical or imaginary space’ (Brickell, 2012: 575) means that it is not necessarily fixed to one place. The plurality of home especially in the diasporic understanding means that home is a space of politics (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle, 2010: 1) emerging strongly with experiences of dislocation and displacement as will be further explored in the research findings chapter.

3.3 Migration in an Intra-ethnic Setting

One of the objective of the study is to engage with the theoretical consideration of forced migration and its relation to emerging intra-ethnic relationships and politics in contexts of displacement. To understand this question, we need to reflect on how forced migration is approached in mainstream migration theories, and how these theories cater for understanding intra-ethnic settings of displacement.

3.3.1 Approaches to studying forced migration

As migration in general has increased and diversified, forced migration in particular has undergone a transformation and diversification that reflect the changing nature of conflicts which trigger movements. Forced migration is growing and increasing in diversity, and this poses theoretical and methodological challenges for general theories of migration as Watters (2013: 99) indicates. Outlining the mainstream theories of migration by the scholars Castles and Miller (2003), Watters (2013: 100) shows the advantages and limitations of the classical push-pull theory, historical structural theory, and migration systems theory to comprehensively capture the experience of forced migration in its diversity.

Migration viewed in push-pull factors terms implies that individuals have the time to reflect and calculate decisions before their movement. Forced migrants may take sudden decisions to move ‘based on immediate threat’ (ibid) without contemplating much about their destination. The element of pushing is evidently there while the pulling factor is not always available although in some cases migrants may make informed decisions based on their
aspirations. This reflects the need to explain forced migration within a mixture of these factors and not only focusing on one dimension.

Historical structural theory explains migration as a result of global economic inequalities that lead to large scale migration especially in contexts impacted by the legacy of colonialism and uneven development. This theory tells us much about forms of labour migration, for example, and increasing disparities between regions, but it does not provide much understanding on the individuals’ decisions to migrate.

Therefore, Watters (2013) agrees with Castles and Miller’s (2003) that the migration systems theory can be a better alternative to the previous two theories and highlights the promising potentials of its multi-level approach for the study of forced migration. The migration systems theory, as Watters explains, allows analysis of ‘the macro-level of international politics and economies’, the ‘micro level concerned with the examination of forced migrants’ individual and collective aspirations’ and the ‘meso-level that could include the role of intermediate actors such as border guards, immigration officials, and smugglers’ (Watters, 2013: 101-102). Such an approach will be necessary for understating both the role of the agency of the migrants as well as the role of structural institutions. It further helps explaining migration as a process and movement and potentially cater for the diversity of forced migration settings.

3.3.2 Intra-ethnic displacement

The main theories presented above and research on forced migration in general take inter-group relations as one the of the basic categories for analyzing emerging community relationships as a result of migration. This can be found in Castles’ (2003: 14) broad theorization of forced migration and social transformation where he suggests the notion of inter-group relations for the study of themes related to community and identity in forced migration research. According to this theorization, the setting of migration is perceived as an inter-ethnic encounter with established differences between the host group and the migrant group or differences between the place of origin and the destination. What lacks here is the tools for studying forced migration beyond the premise of inter-group relations in situations when both the host and migrant community belong to the same ethnic group, and where the place of origin and destination are contested in themselves. These are situations that can theoretically be described as settings of intra-ethnic displacement where intra- in addition to inter-groups relations need to be explored.
A setting of an intra-ethnic displacement as I will use the term in this study refers to a form of forced migration that happens when both the refugees and the host community are affiliated with the same ethnicity and share the image of the same historical homeland but are citizens of different states. This is to be distinguished from internal displacement that usually happens within the borders of the same state. The understanding of emerging intra-ethnic relationships in communities divided by borders of ‘nation’ states, then converging through displacement is what my study engages with through this theoretical development of the term.

In addition to the case of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI studied in this thesis, other similar historical and recent examples of migration could be more or less classified as intra-ethnic displacement cases. The intra-ethnic encounter between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews in the early phases of migration to Israel and the establishment of the state is a comparable example of this setting. The displacement within former Yugoslavia after the fall of the state provides another encounter of intra-ethnic displacement although this case of migration has been studied more within a framework of internal displacement. More recently, there is the example of the displacement of the Rohingya community from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The Rohingya are received in Bangladesh as refugees from Myanmar while their ethnic designation is contested by Myanmar, claiming they are Bengali (Leider, 2014), and they are returning to their place of origin among their ethnic Bengali community.

In conclusion, the above cases and the case that the study explores entail a perspective that takes into consideration the aspect of the intra-ethnic encounter with the displacement. The notion of inter-group relations as proposed by migration scholars should be appropriated to cater for cases of intra-ethnic displacement when group differences cannot be ethnically established as the boundaries of differences in these cases are more complex and diversified. Therefore, all the three levels of analysis as explained in the migration systems theory are required, and they will be accordingly used to navigate through the themes of identity, belonging and home that the thesis will engage with in the analysis part.

3 See for example Helton (1999) Forced Migration in the Former Yugoslavia.
4 See for example Ahsan Ullah (2011) Rohingya Refugees to Bangladesh: Historical Exclusions and Contemporary Marginalization; Parmini (2013) The Crisis of the Rohingya as a Muslim Minority in Myanmar and Bilateral Relations with Bangladesh.
4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the main findings from the research divided into two sections. Section one looks at policies, laws and regulations which collectively impact the protection of refugees in both KRI and Iraq in general, and Syrian Kurdish refugees in particular. The policies are further analyzed for their influence on the construction of different community relationships and emerging politics of identity and belonging in the experience of displacement among Syrian Kurdish refugees. Section two presents the main themes that cut across the data from the interviews. The themes are developed from the narratives of life stories of refugees in KRI and in connection to the research questions. They mainly reflect individual and collective home orientation, politics of identity and belonging, ways of dealing with discrimination and exclusion, and processes of reconstruction of Syrian Kurdish identity.

4.1 Impact of Policies

In Iraq, there is not as yet a comprehensive refugee law, and the country is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The Iraqi government has two legislative instruments related to refugees. First, Law 21-2010 which establishes the Ministry of Migration and Displacement and sets out the terms for providing assistance to refugees and displaced persons. Second, the Political Refugee Law of 1971 which concerns political refugees only and does not apply to other refugees seeking safety for other reasons (Sadek, 2013). These two legislations are not activated enough to be able to address the current refugee situation in the country. Additionally, they are outdated, and like many other state laws, they have been highly instrumentalized for political gains in the unsettled country.

As I mentioned in the methodology chapter, I managed to get access to a leaked document called ‘Refugee Law (RL) 2016’. This is a draft that the Iraqi federal government has prepared and developed, but it has been rejected by KRG, and as I learned the UNHCR has held certain reservations on endorsing it also. Although it is a draft law and not enforced yet, RL discloses a lot about the state policy in dealing with the refugees and provides indications of how Iraq as a receiving country has been doing in this regard.

The content analysis of RL reveals that it basically cancels the Political Refuge Law of 1971 and comes with very concise descriptions and definitions of the asylum seeker and
refugee. RL defines a refugee as ‘a foreigner who seeks refuge in the Republic of Iraq for humanitarian, political or military reasons and gets his application approved’ and an asylum seeker is ‘a foreigner who submits an asylum application to the Republic of Iraq’. Such a narrow and undetailed explanation of who can be a refugee or have the right to asylum does not in any way meet the international terms recognized in the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. This might explain why UNHCR has not agreed with the draft in the first place, especially with the growing criticism on the inclusiveness of these terms and the demands for expanding them to better reflect refugee situations in our present time in different parts of the world.

Although RL stipulates that the refugee enjoys the same rights as Iraqi citizens in basic areas, it does come with the assertion that ‘a refugee is banned from performing any hostile activity towards his country or any other country’. The security aspect behind drafting the law itself is very visible when RL states in Article 2 that a ‘Refugee Affairs Committee’ is to be formed headed by a military officer and consisting of members from security and intelligence authorities among others. The stress on security concerns surrounding asylum is very evident throughout the document. RL is claimed to regulate all cases of asylum in Iraq ‘in accordance with the constitution and purposes of the United Nations (UN)’, yet it does not give enough clarification on that. The document does not specify any mechanisms for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees. Some parts of RL indeed reflect a vague understanding of asylum and rights when it articulates terms such as ‘good intentions are a condition for applying for asylum’. Applications according to RL are set to be submitted to the Minister of Interior for approval in a very centralized process besides coordinating and cooperating with UNHCR and humanitarian organizations working in Iraq. In sum, while the intentions appear to be a regulation for the refugee situation in Iraq, and potentially provide a standard for protection, RL, in fact, does very little in order to fulfil this aim, and falls short in advancing any aspect of protection.

The position of KRG in opposing RL indicates the extent to which KRG has been in favor or against a regulation of the refugee situation developed by the federal government. Taking into consideration that the vast majority of refugees now in KRI are Kurdish by ethnicity and the implication of that on the burning issues of demographics and control of disputed areas with Baghdad, it can also be understood why refugee protection and the regulation of their status is hard to conclude between KRG and the central government.

5 Original text is in Arabic. The translation provided here and in the rest of the section is my own.
KRI with its state-like status, as an autonomous region of the federal Republic of Iraq, enjoys a large authority on many aspects of administration that are considered to be KRI’s internal affairs. Consequently, there is often less adherence to the laws of the federal government when KRI has developed its own regulations – although this has dramatically changed after the Kurdistan Independence Referendum in September 2017.

Moreover, KRI does not as yet have a constitution of its own in spite of several attempts of drafting or reaching a consensus among the political poles. This indicates, in fact, that the power of law in KRI, similarly to the rest of Iraq, is quite ambivalent and contingent on many factors. Partisan, local and even tribal influences greatly shape the policies and dictate the way laws and regulations are enforced. The regulations that govern entry to the territories of KRI and residency are no exception, and with them are the protection forms for refugees.

The refugee situation in KRI is one of the administrative areas that is managed by KRG. Syrian refugees in KRI are mostly handled through the UNHCR’s processing and the local regulations developed by KRG. When refugees first enter the region, they are registered by the UNHCR and then given an Asylum Seeker Certificate. The certificate, as I have seen some examples, does not replace a residency or work permit. It basically states that the applicant’s claim for refugee status is being examined by the UNHCR. However, as there is not a clearly declared legal framework for the protection of refugees in Iraq or KRI, Syrian refugees officially remain in the category of asylum seekers. Along with the UNHCR’s certificate, KRG grants an identification card (equal to a residency permit in practice) that needs to be renewed on a yearly basis. Such a process heavily depends on the regulations of the Foreign Residency Directorate rather than procedures specified for refugees or asylum seekers.

In this context, KRG has indeed developed some regulations for entry and residency for foreigners that are specific to KRI. It should be stressed here again that the power of these regulations remains subjected to the discretion of local authorities in each of the three governorates of KRI. In addition, this area has witnessed a recurrent and continuous change of regulations. The most recent regulation is Statement 7 of 2017 (referred to as S7-2017 hereafter) relating to granting of electronic visas and residence in KRI by the Ministry of Interior of KRG (2017b). Many Syrians who arrived in KRI with valid work visas had their applications processed under previous regulations not very different from what S7-2017 states.
The importance of S7-2017 lies in the fact that although it is the current legal reference that regulates the residency for foreigners, in the absence of any refugee protection framework it functions as a guideline for granting identification cards to refugees. S7-2017 does not have any reference to refugees, yet the terms and conditions for issuing residency permits are to a certain extent similarly applied to identification cards given to refugees. In fact, it is the same residency directorate that issues both types of documents.

The content analysis of S7-2017 shows an assertion on the aspect of guarantorship and a strong attachment of residency to employment contract especially for those holding work visas. The common aspects that relate to identification cards for refugees are evident in S7-2017 in the similar complex process of transferring a file from one governorate to another, risk for deportation and high fees for renewal. In fact, some of the study participants mentioned that they tended to change their legal status from holders of work visas to asylum seekers with the identification cards to avoid the very expensive and complex process. In short, the purpose of S7-2017 is primarily to regulate entry visa and residency for foreigners, yet the fact that Syrian Kurdish refugees are considered as guests by KRG makes it applicable to their case which further suspends the development of a comprehensive refugee protection regime.

‘Guests of Kurdistan’ is the common rhetoric that surrounds the presence of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI. Taken positively, this indicates a sense of inclusion for the refugees in their host community, although it is strictly based on ethnic grounds. However, the everyday reality suggests a different and a less positive outlook when we know that KRG does not have a comprehensive and sufficient legal framework for the protection of Syrian Kurdish refugees. In other words, being a guest but nothing else does not seem enough for the refugees to form an inclusive society with their hosts. Looking at this more critically in the context of the Middle East, the guests rhetoric indicates a policy that is deployed to obscure the legal protection responsibility that KRG has towards the refugees. Comparatively, in Turkey, reception policies officially welcomed Syrians as guests rather than refugees during the first period of their arrival under the assumption that the crisis would end soon, and that refugees would be able to return to their country. As the displacement seems increasingly protracted, the notion of ‘temporary guests’ in Turkish policies is being replaced by a focus

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6 Similar examples of this rhetoric can be found in the recent history of displacement in the Middle East region. Iraqi refugees in 2003 and Lebanese refugees in 2008 were received in Syria under the same rhetoric as guests from ‘Arab sister countries’. More recently with the onset of the Syrian Crisis in 2011, many Syrians sought refuge in the neighboring countries where they were welcomed as guests, though only in the beginnings.
on problems of integration (İçduygu, 2015). In KRI, the *guests* rhetoric is similarly fading with the time and more forms of exclusionary practices emerge, especially in the policies around labour market and the right to work.

These policies as reviewed above, in their everyday life applications, profoundly affect how Syrian Kurdish refugees identify themselves with the status given, how they plan their future in their new home, and how they frame their belonging towards KRI or their country left behind. The impact of living under such policy will be explored in detail through the narratives of the participants in the subsequent sections as they narrate stories of their arrival, reception, and subsequent interaction with the host community. As I will capture some of these as scenes in their own words, it becomes clear that KRG’s protection responsibility cannot be substituted by rhetoric. Also, sharing ethnic affiliation in the case of Syrian Kurdish refugees and their hosts appears to be contested as it does not provide a very strong basis for building an inclusive society where refugees belong and rebuild their homes.

### 4.2 Home, Identity and Belonging Through Narratives of Displacement

As I have detailed in the theoretical framework, my points of departure rest on the idea that ethnic identity is not fixed, and it is more realized and bounded through interaction rather than its cultural content. Similarly, belonging is seen as a multilayered attachment or designation that can be self-recognition but also a designation by others. In the context of forced migration, home orientation and feeling at home is not restricted to homeland, but rather realized through interaction. Seen in a totality, intra-ethnic relationships as impacted by displacement require a multi-level analysis to understand both the role of the agency of the migrants as well as the role of structural institutions. The findings in this section reflect these theoretical points of departure exemplified in everyday life instances, narratives and experiences of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI. It is worth mentioning that I have tried to keep my interventions quite brief in these subsections to allow more for the research participants’ narratives to be heard and give them a voice over my interpretations.

#### 4.2.1 Destination Kurdistan: expectation and reality

Although the space to make informed decisions as to where one should flee is extremely limited in the context of forced migration as has been indicated in section 3.3.1, the assumption that Syrian Kurdish refugees could choose Kurdistan made me investigate how such a space of choice processed. I am using Kurdistan rather than KRI here as my
interviewees referred to it this way. Findings in this section indicate that: 1) Kurdistan as a destination is seen as welcoming with open opportunities, and 2) challenges in the labour market and lack of refugee protection, difficulties of residency procedure and parallel systems of corruption all lead to disappointment and failed expectations about Kurdistan in the view of my participants.

One of the first questions in my mind related to the assumptions highlighted in the introduction was to ask my participants why they chose Kurdistan as a destination, assuming that they could possibly have had other options. In short statements, answers intersect through the factors of geographical proximity, ethnic relation to the host population, and feelings of attachment to a historical homeland:

**Narin (F: 23)** My father is very connected to his land. He said: ‘Erbil is close to us, I can go back to Afrin whenever I want. Kurds live there, and it is our homeland’.  

**Zana (M: 35)** Kurdistan embraced us more than other places. Its doors were open for us. We were more accepted here than anywhere else.

**Helin (F: 21)** We have relatives in Turkey, but my father stressed that Kurdistan was better. Kurdistan would support us. Kurdistan belongs to the Kurds.

**Roni (M: 28)** In Turkey, girls are sold, the same in Jordan and Lebanon. Syrians are beaten and treated badly there. Compared to the neighboring countries, Kurdistan is much better regardless of anything negative. We should not forget the positive things.

The experience of dislocation and crossing borders, as hard as it is in the case of crossing into the territories of Kurdistan, is coupled with feelings of being re-included into the nation and home coming than displacement. Roni, a doubly-displaced person from Girkê Legê to Damascus and from there to KRI, says that those who could not afford leaving to countries abroad, would come to Kurdistan. Coming from a place like Syria, where Kurds had no political or cultural rights, to a place that is called Kurdistan was a major event that was loaded with feelings of comfort for him. Likewise, Narin, who first left Aleppo to Afrin and then arrived in Erbil through a visa, mentions contradictory feelings of comfort during the flight:

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7 A city in north Syria with a majority of Kurdish population.  
8 All quotes are my translations from Kurdish and Arabic to English.  
9 A small town in north east Syria
Narin (F: 23) When we first landed in Erbil, my father and mother and all of us did not expect Kurdistan to have reached this stage of development. We thought we would find normal houses like those you find in any village. We were so much surprised. Then when we saw the flag of Kurdistan, we all had tears in our eyes. In Syria we could never dream of holding the flag like that. Now it was waving over our heads, it was the best feeling.

The space of freedom in Kurdistan for some participants as to be able to be Kurds creates the feeling of comfort that somehow eases the difficulties of being a refugee or the reality of ongoing displacement. Roni explains this through recurrent comparisons between the space in Kurdistan to be a Kurd, and the space in Lebanon, an Arab country, as Syrian – even before the crisis:

Roni (M: 28) We cannot forget we are refugees of course, but here is better than other places. In Lebanon, some friends told me, even before the current displacement, that when you would go on a public minibus and if people around knew you were Syrian or if you spoke in your accent, they would be ready to rebuke you and tell you that your voice was disturbing them. I myself was there in 2008, and I was cheated on and exploited, and I could not do anything.

The situation between Lebanon and Syria is indeed a special one taking into consideration the history of Syrian military and political intervention in Lebanon. Discrimination against Syrians in Lebanon has its roots in this history. In comparison, such encounters have not been witnessed between Kurds in Iraq and Kurds in Syria. Historical records show rather Kurdish solidarity in both countries in spite of the international boundaries and political division among Kurds on each side of the border (Gourlay, 2018). Therefore, the political space given to Syrian Kurds in KRI can be interpreted as an extension of this historical solidarity, especially in the light of the current crisis of war and displacement.

In addition to the initial political space allowed that some participants reiterated, Kurdistan for many has been the place where opportunities have been open. My participants speak about the available possibilities of pursuing further education or training, starting small and medium scale businesses beside livelihoods improvements. Hevi, for example, has found her way into entrepreneurship, and she firmly believes that moving to Kurdistan has brought her to lots of opportunities:

Hevi (F: 33) Kurdistan has been a good place for us, Syrian Kurds, I have found many opportunities here, especially in the beginning of the crisis when nobody was willing to receive Syrians. We were not wanted. We found Kurdistan as a
good place where its people, government, organizations gave us many opportunities. Those who complain much are inactive themselves. When they could not find opportunities, they focused on negative aspects. They complain about things that even people in Erbil are aware of and can see.

It is understandable that Erbil as the capital of KRI, and where Hevi currently lives, has developed as an economic hub of work opportunities which have pulled many displaced persons and refugees (UNHCR, 2016: 13). However, what Hevi focuses on in terms of opportunities is the fact of being integrated in the social life and welcomed in KRI, something she probably would not have received if she were a refugee in other neighboring countries. This is also backed by research which indicates that Syrian Kurdish refugees have contributed to the economic boom in the KRI by filling gaps in the labour market while taking advantage of the social capital and integration they have with the host community (Sood and Seferis, 2014: 14).

However, with opportunities also come limitations. This is specifically true about opportunities in the labour market. Although my interviewees praise the availability of work and chances to pursue one’s ambitions in Kurdistan, they express their worry about the sustainability of any enterprise they endeavor, and they relate this to the lack of protection of their rights in the market as well as their legal status in the region. Hevi as we have seen above, later in her narrative proudly talks about her achievements at work, and she reemphasizes that Kurdistan is the place of open possibilities. Yet, she does not deny her worry about the manipulated rule of law and the continuously changing regulations in Kurdistan:

**Hevi (F: 33)** There is something that is not very good in it. I see it [Kurdistan] as a good place to start your business, but there are sometimes things that go out of control. What worries me is that if I started my business here, suddenly a state, a region or a party law could stop it. At that moment, I would wish to have started my project, which I worked hard on, somewhere else. At the same time, it is hard to go back to my country or city to start all over. This makes the future quite worrisome; as it was vague in Syria, here it is worrying. Will there be anyone to protect you, when a law comes against you? You put a lot of effort in something, then suddenly you find yourself back to square one. An idea that you have worked hard on for years could suddenly be stolen, or a high-ranking official may oblige you to be your partner or close down your business. This is very worrying. You are
not in a place where you feel comfortable one hundred percent. Here in the Middle East in general, persons have more power than the state or the law.

Almost all participants share this worry. The lack of protection for them as refugees seems to be the reason for many injustices and hardships that they have gone through. They mention how exclusion happens when one tries to get a job. They find it particularly hard as Kurds themselves when priority is always given to Iraqi Kurdish citizens in the labour market. Lawin, who recently arrived in Kurdistan, reflects on this, but he does not find the priority as happening on the ground of a legal status of citizen versus a refugee unusual. For him, the reality becomes more striking when, as a Kurd himself, he needs a guarantor to be able to rent an accommodation in Kurdistan for example:

**Lawin (M: 29)** When it comes to jobs, yes there is a lot you can do, but then you get to work at the lowest wages. When you need to rent a place to live in as we do here, a hotel for example, the owner of the hotel must by law require you to have a guarantor. Then you have to ask different people and beg their favors until you find a guarantor. If you were at your home, your country, no one would ask you for a guarantor!

Lawin’s account reveals just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to lengthy and sometimes complex legal processes. Other interviewees have repeatedly criticized the legal system under which their claim for a refugee status is processed. While for some the distinction between the asylum seeker status given to them and the refugee status they want to have is clear as that could be a basis for rights as refugees, others express the concern that even if they are given a refugee status, the reality will not change much for them. The extent of abiding by any regulations that could provide more protection is put into question. For those who arrived to KRI via a visa, the situation does not look better. Being stuck with a Syrian nationality as Ferhad says is enough for a refugee to be always reminded of his or her status regardless of the legal status one has. In his view, it does not matter much whether one holds a residency permit, or an identification card given to Syrian refugees as asylum seekers:

**Ferhad (M: 27)** In all paper work, you are reminded that you are Syrian. The identification given to a refugee is different from the normal residency permit card. They look at it and they know that it is not a residency permit card. You are regarded as a foreigner, but they do not consider you as a refugee, either/…/ Some Syrians who arrived via visa changed their status to that of the refugee because they do not want to pay the high fees applied to foreigners. It costs more to have a normal residency permit card.
The confusion that comes with the procedure of getting residency, the status and how to navigate in the system is very frequent in the accounts of the interviewees. Narin is one of those persons who arrived via a visa, but now she wishes she had arrived via irregular ways. She had to pay high fees to get a residency permit and keep her Syrian passport when she arrived. However, now it is getting more complicated for persons like her as they cannot renew their passports in Erbil any longer. They have to go Baghdad which carries various safety risks. The procedure to many is a measure that puts them in a situation of staying without any valid legal documents. This example is one of many for people struggling with their status while living outside camps. For those staying in camps, the procedures are even more complicated. One of the participants, Jiyan, who has lived in a camp with her family since she arrived in 2013, explains how the limited choice, if allowed at all, to live outside the camp is the most difficult. Besides pending the approval from the concerned authorities who might not always give the permission, persons who move out of the camp need to relocate their files to their new residency in addition to losing all their material support in the form of food rations or vouchers. Such a life fluctuating scenario has happened to several interviewees who had to make choices between staying in camps or providing for their living outside. Roni is currently shifting between his workplace in Sulaymaniyah and his residency in a camp in Duhok, and he gives a glimpse of living in-between and navigating the system within KRI with the identification card of an asylum seeker:

**Roni (M: 28)** My residency\(^{10}\) says I live in Duhok, but I work in Sulaymaniyah. Sometimes while we were sleeping, the Asayish\(^{11}\) would raid the place. We would be questioned: ‘Your residency is Duhok, what are you doing here?’ You are not allowed to work or rent in a place outside your residency location. You can do that secretly without the Asayish knowing about it. You have to change your residency location to be able to work. /.../ Also, as a single man in Sulaymaniyah you have no option but to rent a room in a hotel as renting options for young men are scarce. The region is very tribal, and they do not rent out to single young men. So basically, you have to live in hotels for two months at least to be able to get a residence certificate that will allow you later to change your residency location on the card.

In KRI, paperwork is one of those things that refugees struggle most with. The process as Roni continues explaining does not flow naturally, rather one needs to know how

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\(^{10}\) The participants refer to the identification card as their residency card.

\(^{11}\) Kurdish forces in KRI that function as police and security services.
parallel systems work. In a similar expression, Ferhad, from his personal experiences, describes the reality that, as a Syrian, a person is not able to live in Kurdistan if he or she does not have support from powerful acquaintances. It is not necessarily about paying bribes, but more about knowing an officer in the army or security services or a powerful figure in a party, for example. For him, this is how he could keep himself within this context up till now. Ferhad’s conclusions reflect how corruption forms part of the system as a whole. KRG is often considered among the promising and progressive administrations in the region – at least from the perspective of KRG (Khatchikian and Alasor, 2011), but the reality does not support this proposition all the time. It is quite remarkable that some participants even view corruption in Kurdistan as more prevalent in many aspects of life than back in Syria. Jiyan, who currently studies at university, expresses how education in KRI is regarded as useless among her peers from the host community. The corruption she describes makes the whole process of getting a degree or searching for a job after graduation contingent on nepotism. This makes her share a very sincere thought that she regrets coming to KRI in the first place, echoing several other interviewees.

The disappointment and failed expectations that the interviewees have experienced with the reception and processes of the system in KRI raise questions about the previously-mentioned space for expression and opportunities that I discussed in the beginning of this section. Zana expressed in the beginning how Kurdistan embraced Syrian Kurds more than any other place, yet he recognizes the limits set on their freedom and voluntary integration within the community:

**Zana (M: 35)** It is true that I have lived here for a while now, but I am not really practicing my life or my thoughts. A person is here because of a need; he or she is devoted to fulfilling that need whether in terms of work, home or livelihoods. We can neither propose an idea nor are we allowed to do so. Whenever I suggest something during a discussion or explain that we used to do something this or that way, I am told that I am here, and I have to stop connecting to there. I have to look like here, for example, when we cook at work, they tell me to forget how we were used to cook it back home, I have to do it according to ways here. You can take this and apply it on a lot of other situations. Your ideas and your personality are not needed here/.../ It is a total assimilatory integration. Basically, you have to assimilate in what is here and you should not bring anything new with you.

Zana’s account of several situations where he felt that he is being immersed passively in the community not only affirms the fact of the very limited space that is allowed to Syrian
refugees, but also shows a disappointment with the reality and Kurdistan that several interviewees have expressed. Many Syrian Kurdish refugees came with expectations of Kurdistan as a home-like place that would open up to them in the same way it does to their fellow Kurds from the host community.  

As I have tried to highlight in this section, the reality has not always been that bright for the refugees. The ethnic connection with the host community in KRI does not seem to contribute much as a supposed basis for more political space, opportunities, equality or rights. At the same time, it cannot be denied that KRI has indeed been a preferred home-like location when it came to the decision of a destination taking into consideration the limited or non-existent choices for many Syrian refugees.

4.2.2 ‘I’m at home, I don’t feel like a refugee’

In chapter two, I explained in theoretical terms that the host place matters as a location where lives are attached through ‘emplaced belonging’. In other words, it is when migrants ‘emplace’ their ownership and entitlement to the host society in a framework of belonging (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle, 2010). This section shows how participants express their belonging and attachment to the place and the host community as a given fact since they are Kurds and the hosts are also Kurds.

For some participants, moving or being displaced to KRI was similar to an experience of internal displacement rather than forced migration as both Hevi and Lawin narrate below:

Hevi (F: 33) As a Kurdish region, we feel it [KRI] is a part of our region. We did not face much difficulty to realize our aspirations at all. In Kurdistan, I have not felt I was a foreigner. Many would be surprised, but I feel that I have just moved from a city to another, not from a country to another.

Lawin (M: 29) I don’t feel I am in a foreign land. I feel I am in Dêrik or Qamişlo12. Yes, I am in Hewlêr13, they speak Sorani here while they don’t in Qamişlo, but still I am at home, I do not feel like a refugee. /…/ In Kurdistan, I have not experienced life as a refugee, and I will not. If I have stayed in Turkey or Europe, I might have had those feelings when I would for example resort to social services for my living. In that situation I would probably have those bad feelings, but while I am here, and such a thing does not exist, I don’t.

12 Cities in northeast Syria with a majority of Kurdish population.
13 Hewlêr is the Kurdish name for Erbil.
Lawin links his concept of feeling at home to the shared ethnic affiliation with the host community in KRI, the geographical proximity which also includes shared ethnic markers, and the way he is treated in KRI that is distinct from what he knows about refugees elsewhere. Feeling at home and not like a refugee in a foreign place is very much connected to the degree that a Syrian refugee finds the above three factors satisfying. Thus, Kurdistan becomes home when it is not only a region of Iraq or any destination. It is home when a Syrian Kurdish refugee thinks of it as part of the greater Kurdistan – the historical homeland, where people speak the same language, and where no distinction or exclusion occurs because of a specific legal status as a refugee or an asylum seeker. At the same time, it is important to highlight that not all Syrian refugees in KRI experience their destination as home like Lawin and Hevi. Experiences of dislocation vary and the conditions that create the feeling of being at home do not always exist in the accounts of other participants.

4.2.3 Across the borders, home on both sides

I have argued in the theoretical framework that the relation to a location does not necessarily produce home unless it is loaded with values of shared identity and belonging. This attachment of value is what creates both home and homeland, whether it is in the birthplace or the temporary host location. Through a series of reflections, this section looks at home orientation in the participants’ narratives which indicates that: 1) Kurdistan does not always uphold its image as a historical homeland with the challenges of displacement and borders, 2) home as the participants perceive is associated in a complex connection to both comfort and persecution in Syria, and 3) for some, the displacement leads to a state of having no ultimate home while for others it creates a plural home found both in Syria and Kurdistan.

On both sides of the border, for Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the concept of belonging and feeling at home can’t be detached from the idea of one Kurdish homeland. Most interviewees cherish this thought when reflecting back on their experience of dislocation. Nevertheless, the idea of the imagined homeland does not become a concrete reality much when the element of crossing borders between the two countries exists. My interviewees reflect on their experiences of leaving home and how thoughts of becoming detached from one’s place are painful. In such a situation, Kurdistan as one homeland does not boost enough feeling of home as the hardship associated with dislocation speaks louder. Helin, who was first displaced from Kobani to Aleppo, then to Kobani again and finally to KRI, captures this moment of dislocation on both sides of the border:
Helin (F: 21) When we crossed the border I had the worst feeling. I was leaving my country, yes, they would also be like us there, but I was leaving my home country. I was leaving my birthplace. The first period when we arrived in Kurdistan was the most difficult. First, we left all of our relatives behind, then we were here by ourselves. We had no one by us during all the difficulties we went through while on the move. We arrived here, it was a foreign place; it was a very bad feeling. /…/ When I entered into the tent, it seemed tiny to me. I was shocked. There was nothing on the floor. We sat on the ground. It did not matter how many people came to support us, still it was difficult. We could not sleep during the nights; when it was raining, it felt like it was pouring all on us. We were scared when the wind was blowing. /…/ Yet, at those moments, I did not want to be back to Kobani, because similar things happened with me there, too. We became displaced, then refugees; one hardship after another, I have no energy left!

Earlier in section 3.1.2, I referred to the impact of the borders dividing historical Kurdistan on the construction of a homeland among the Kurds. For Kurds, this homeland exists on multiple levels, both in discourse and reality, in spite of the presence of the borders. At the same time, these borders cannot be totally ignored. They insist to be real and they do challenge the Kurdish thinking of a home that does not recognize them. As much as they want to show their connection to Kurdistan as their homeland, my participants do acknowledge the power of borders in creating their motherland (Syria) with all attending nostalgia:

Ferhad (M: 27) Leaving Syria was like leaving my mother. It was like something sharp penetrating my chest when I was on the move, the hard road, the tiredness and the bitterness, I cannot describe how difficult it was. It was the first time for me to leave home to somewhere away. I had never been away from family. I missed everyone; I remembered them, and mostly my friends whom I had spent more time with. I knew I would no longer be with them. The place through which I was walking was dark. It was still Syria, my home, but it was dark among those fields. I felt my way was leading to somewhere unknown. /…/ Then when I crossed into Kurdistan, I was one hundred percent certain that it was not my place. I was too suspicious and yet certain that here would not be my home and I would not be able to adapt.

On the conjuncture of the borders, Ferhad like many others associated home with comfort, friends, family in contrast to vulnerability and loneliness. Feelings of being out of home, vulnerability and new conditions of being in need all seem much stronger than feelings
of disappointment with imagined ethnic ties and homeland. When one does not feel as a refugee as discussed earlier, it can be assumed that the experience of dislocation has not taken an active role in life as it has happened within the boundaries of an imagined homeland; hence, it is not a major issue. However, home as we have understood it, is about everyday life and common rituals. Accordingly, it does not matter under what conditions or within which boundaries dislocation occur. More important is that when it occurs, it may create a very distressing circle of thoughts, sometime quite severe:

**Roni (M: 28)** Now, when I work every day and my days are full, I do not think much about my situation. I have been working like this for six years from morning to evening. I do not have much free time to think of Syria and how my life has changed. Before I was with my parents and siblings. Now they are scattered in different countries. The struggle is really when I stay by myself and do not work for a couple of days. Then I start thinking of returning to Syria. Sometimes I get to think that death would have been better than this situation of being out of my home.

What Roni is struggling with is a state of being out of home or having no ultimate home more than not feeling at home. Home as a notion does not always happen to be in the zone of comfort as it can equally be associated to oppression and to the state of being out of home (Mallet, 2004). My interviewees articulate their attachment to home within this contradiction of referring to home as the place of comfort but at the same time as a place where oppression and persecution stripped them of their home and made them seek safety elsewhere. In this loop they continue drawing comparisons between here and there, their past homes on the other side of the border and their new home in KRI. On the one hand, Roni speaks about the daily routines, development and openness back home in contrast to closeness and tribal power structure in his new home. Similarly, Jiyan recalls images of the beautiful streets, the smells, and the food in her hometown vis-à-vis what she sees in the camp. On the other hand, Hevi compares images of destruction, war and kidnapping back home to safety and security she found in her new home. In this complex connection to home, all participants are trying to search for and articulate their lost comfort and their home whether through cherishing past memories or through uplifting the present situation to a state of being at home. What matters in the end is that, as it seems, home cannot be substituted as one of the interviewees remarks. Home in this case becomes plural both here and there depending on the situation. Lawin indicates that he does feel at home in KRI, yet home for him is only there in the original birthplace:
Lawin (M: 29) There is no place like home although we criticize a lot of things there. It is true that I lost my dignity when I was there, but my home was dignity in itself. When one leaves home, no dignity is left.

Home in its plurality as the place of dignity, comfort, war and persecution is the true home that all interviews relate to. As seen through capturing how home is experienced on both sides of the borders in Syria and KRI in the narratives of my participants, home is entangled with the imagination of a Kurdish homeland, borders, comfort, friends, family in contrast to a state of being out of home or in a constant search for the true home. For some, the experience of crossing borders between the two countries did not seem to be very significant. It is not necessarily the borders themselves or the changing geographical location, it is more the change in life pattern which does not substitute the home they left behind in Syria. This change not only has an impact on how they relate to the new place but also on their social encounters and relationships with the host community and the politics that emerge in between. Recognizing the role of home in this way becomes a gateway to understanding closely associated politics of identity and belonging and forms of inclusion or discrimination.

4.2.4 Identity distinction: Who is more Kurdish?

Association with a specific homeland or descent are key elements for groups to identify as ethnicity or a nation. In the previous sections, the association to Kurdistan as a homeland was emphasized very often in the narratives of my participants. As a Kurdish person crossing the border into Kurdistan, despite being a Syrian citizen, contains an element of re-inclusion for many refugees, that is to reorient their position more within the normative boundaries of a collective Kurdish ethnicity. Identity distinction, as the heading of this section implies, is about: 1) how the normative boundaries of Kurdishness are perceived by the participants, and 2) how different understanding of Kurdishness between them and the host community leads to the emergence of discriminatory politics of us and them.

I have discussed earlier in the theory section that a collective identity is very contingent on available conditions which means that identification does not work on its own without interaction and solidarity among members. Solidarity in its turn depends on an agreement on the criteria of evaluation and shared understanding, as explained by Barth (1969) in section 3.2.1. Syrian Kurdish refugees in their interaction with their Iraqi Kurdish hosts have discovered how as Kurds on both sides of the border, they have a different
understanding of Kurdish identity. The study participants show how boundaries of ‘Kurdishness’ are quite different on each side:

Zana (M: 35) Our generation have understood Kurdishness in a certain way that is different from how people here have understood it. Here they think of Kurdishness within the frame of the three governorates: Sulaymaniyah, Duhok and Erbil. They tie Kurdishness to this frame that they have made while we take Kurdishness from a more comprehensive perspective. We think of it within Kurdistan, I mean the Greater Kurdistan. They do not think this way. Kurdishness according to them should be within their boundaries, their culture, their language and everything within this frame.

The distinction in Kurdish identity that Zana sees is something that other participants not only disfavor as unnecessary, but also consider as quite threatening to any Kurdish national project. It is regarded as self-constructed boundary that can be destructive within the Kurdish ethnicity itself when it marks the behavior of a group of people as more or less Kurdish than others. Some participants mentioned that they would use some strategies to build more bridges of connection and emphasis on the Kurdish unity through a certain politics of identity. For example, Roni said that whenever he was asked on checkpoints about his identity, he would always intend to say he was from Rojava14 rather than Syria. However, for Roni and others like Narin, that practice has not always been very successful. They both think that their host community sticks to a different understanding of Kurdistan and the historical homeland. Even during very critical conjunctures in the recent politics of Kurdistan, they think that the distinction in Kurdish identity persists:

Narin (F: 23) We, the Syrians, were standing in front of the voting centers during the referendum on independence15 while looking at them and feeling how lucky they were to vote. We wish if we could also vote with them. From all of our hearts we want this state to be declared someday, and we get recognized as people. But unfortunately, people here, not all of course, up till now have not got the idea that we are Kurds, too. We also scarified our blood for them. We also celebrated our national occasions and learned how to read and write in our language in Syria, all in secret and through struggle. But they do not have this idea about us at all.

14 Rojava (West) or Rojavyê Kurdistanê (West Kurdistan) is a common designation nowadays for the Kurdish areas in North and North East Syria.
15 KRG held a non-binding referendum on independence on September 25th, 2017.
Narin’s account calls for bridging the gaps in mobilizing a shared ethnic identity by referring to a judgment of the performance beyond the overt signs of the shared cultural content. According to Barth (1969) ethnic identity is bounded through overt signs of cultural features of identity, but more importantly through sharing the value criteria and judging behavior and performance related to identity in social interactions. In highlighting the performance of Syrian Kurds, Narin’s attempt seems to extend the boundaries of Kurdish identity to include the performance of Syrian Kurds and judge that performance as equally related to Kurdistan. While this is Narin’s intuitive solution for Syrian Kurds’ performance to be included within the boundaries of Kurdistan, this position is supported by facts about Syrian Kurds who have maintained their Kurdistan despite the repeated attempts of the Syrian authorities to assimilate them into the Syrian Arab identity (Yildiz, 2005). Although Narin states that there is a failure by Iraqi Kurds to acknowledge the performance of Syrian Kurds as equal Kurds, she does not rule out solidarity as yet another dimension of performative ethnicity that could work. However, this remains more of a wishful national thinking than a real practice on the ground. When the initial solidarity shown with the onset of the crisis has faded away in KRI, different politics of us and them have emerged which in turn have limited refugee’s acceptance and given more space to discrimination.

4.2.5 ‘Suriyakan’ (The Syrians): Dealing with discrimination

Whenever my interviewees discussed their relationship with the host community, the term ‘Suriyakan’ was flagged as the most inappropriate and discriminatory label that they have been enduring. Participants’ narratives under this theme demonstrate that: 1) identity is impacted by discriminatory and normalized labelling of Syrian Kurdish refugees, and 2) politics of identity manifest in deconstruction of the label, connection to Rojava and attachment through economic value.

‘Suriyakan’ in Sorani Kurdish or just ‘Suri’ in Badini Kurdish literally means the Syrians. Although it might appear as a common way to designate one’s place of origin in a factual manner or as an indication of national and legal identity, the term as seen by the interviewees is used more as discriminatory marker against them:

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16 Some of these practices included: displacement of Kurds from their lands and settling Arabs in their areas, denial of education and employment to them, denationalization and denying them the Syrian citizenship. See Yildiz (2005: 34-35)
17 Kurdish language has a number of dialects. In KRI, Sorani and Badini are the most common. Badini which is spoken in areas of Duhok is very close to Kurmanji that is spoken by Syrian Kurds while Sorani, less commonly intelligible with Kurmanji, is spoken in areas of Sulaymaniya and Erbil.
**Zoya (F: 30)** Here they use the word ‘Suriyakan’ [the Syrians] to refer to us – the refugees. I have not personally been called this much, but when this term is said, it hurts me. It is said with an intonation that tells you don’t belong here, in a very negative and uncomfortable way – especially in the beginning. When they refer to me as Syrian, I say yes, I am Syrian, and I am successful! I am Syrian, come and see what I am doing! For some others, however, this labelling can be very destructive.

In the above position, Zoya expresses her disappointment of how her ethnic identity as a Kurd is foregrounded by her legal citizenship as Syrian. Although she does not see any tension in being a Syrian, she does not want this to pin her identity in the discriminatory manner it is used in discourse. *Us and them* – the Kurds of Kurdistan and the Syrians (Syrian Kurds in this case) – is probably the kind of discourse that neither the refugees nor the host community want to develop. The study participants have repeatedly emphasized the fact that not all the people of the host community are consciously part of this discourse. At the same time, the concern over how the label has been normalized is particularly expressed:

**Helin (F: 21)** Until now, they do not call me by my name at the institute, they rather refer to me as ‘the Syrian girl’. Then I would question myself: Ok, fine I am Syrian, but what do I lack so that they refer to me as Syrian? I am Kurdish, and they are Kurdish, we are on the same level. Maybe my dialect or religion is different from theirs? We do have the same religion indeed, only the dialect is different, and we have different legal citizenships, Syrian and Iraqi. As they continue marking differences, I have decided to show them how Syrians can be leaders and successful. /.../ Now, I speak my own dialect – I care no more if they understand me or not. When they ask me, the first thing I say: I am Syrian. I am used to it. It won’t matter whatever else I say, that look in their eyes won’t change. I haven’t done anything shameful as Syrian, so I go proudly as Syrian and I care no more.

Helin’s strong opinion indicates how Syrian Kurdish refugees are caught in a conflict of rejecting the label of ‘Syrian’ while at the same time taking pride in their Syrian identity. It also indicates a gendered aspect of the problem as reference is made to a marked difference in gender roles between Kurdish women in Iraq and Syria. It is commonly known that Kurdish women in Syria have realized better gender equality and have more liberty to pursue their careers than their peers on the other side of the border. Helin’s strong position can therefore be interpreted as a rejection of the role of the Kurdish girl as prescribed by the Kurdish
community in Kurdistan by embracing her identity as Syrian Kurdish girl instead and taking up the role of the ‘successful Syrian refugee’.

My participants particularly highlight that they cannot and/or do not want to be disconnected from their ‘Syrianness’ in the same degree as their ‘Kurdishness’. They articulate an ethnic belonging that should not be replaced with a national one or vice versa. They do not want to be seen only as Syrian as that potentially strip them of their Kurdish identity. Some see the conflict when they themselves self-identify as Syrians versus when they are labelled as Syrians, and then they realize how difference gains more discriminatory power in the second instance. Others have stronger attitudes against the label as it not only ranks them second to other Kurds in the host community but also operates as stigma against them. ‘Not being equally human’, ‘from another planet’, ‘the uncivilized Syrian nomads’ these are examples of how the interviewees think the label has stigmatized them.

An initial response to deal with the stigmatization as noticed from the narratives of my interviewees is the deconstruction of the discriminatory discourse itself. By stressing their ‘Syrianness’ and defying the labelling as Helin mentioned above, Syrian Kurdish refugees are attempting to reorganize the inclusion boundaries. In other words, to restructure the social relationships within the collective Kurdish ethnic identity to be more inclusive to diverse citizenships. Earlier, I discussed how some research participants, Hevi for example, preferred to be considered as internally displaced within her homeland (Kurdistan) rather than a refugee from another country. Also, some others resorted to an identification related to Rojava as a Kurdish kinship beyond their Syrian citizenship. However, these politics of claiming and emphasizing ethnic affiliation falls short of eradicating all exclusionary powers of identity boundaries.

In the theoretical section I argued that the politics of maintaining identity boundaries may often rely on economic criteria for evaluation that is conditioning inclusion to the economic value and the ethnic descent of an individual. Such a conditional inclusion perhaps is what some Syrian Kurdish refugees have been aware of. Narin, for example, mentions that she feels she is part of the Kurdish community in Kurdistan, yet she does not think it is a mutual feeling between her and homeland. Alternatively, she decides to add an economic value to her ethnic background when she purposefully identify as Syrian Kurdish from Aleppo:

Narin (F: 23) In the beginning I was not comfortable to tell people here that I was from Rojava or Afrin. I knew they had their perceptions about Kurds there as a
lower class. Whenever I said I came from Aleppo, was born or lived in Aleppo, they would be delighted and start telling me that they had been to Aleppo and Damascus. So, for a long time I would say I was from Aleppo. Even to my friend who was also from Syria, I said I was from Aleppo with origins in Afrin. Eventually this is how I identify myself in order to get some respect from people or to have more self-esteem myself.

The quest for recognition in the case of Narin underlines a strategy to both distinguish herself from the common attributes of other Syrian Kurdish refugees and detach herself from the stereotypical ‘Syrian’ created by discriminatory discourses in KRI.

As seen, Syrian Kurdish refugees have articulated different identity politics in their effort to defy the labelling and regain an equal recognition as Kurds. This has been marked by emphasizing their ethnic kinship through utilizing their belonging to Rojava as a main part of the Greater Kurdistan and using that to establish an equal Kurdish identity, re-directing the discourse by insisting on their ‘Syrianness’ that is not less important than their ‘Kurdishness’, and dealing with discrimination through individual distinction by class or economic worth. These politics show how a displacement encounter between Kurds on the two sides of the border make intra-ethnic relations more problematic. It also indicates that Syrian Kurdish refugees in the process are reconstructing their identity in line with the surrounding conditions while dealing with discrimination.

**4.2.6 Reconstruction of Syrian Kurdish identity and prospects of Rojava**

The accounts of several of my interviewees demonstrate a clash between ethnic loyalty and national belonging. Being caught in a conflict of national and ethnic identity in addition to facing discrimination on the basis of status as refugee makes the situation quite problematic for Syrian Kurdish refugees. This section demonstrates the participants’ expression of: 1) the dilemma of identification, and 2) the reconstruction of an identity that does not carry elements of discrimination.

Following Barth’s (1969) argument of focusing more on the social processes that govern and organize boundaries and differences than the cultural content, I turn to the dilemma of identification within the social situation of displacement. The war and subsequent large-scale migration from Syria have not only led to humanitarian crisis in my view, but also to a crisis of identity where Syrians have to reconstruct their identity and/or recognize different politics of identity along with their experiences of dislocation. Jiyan, who has lived
in a camp in KRI for five years now, expresses the dilemma of recognizing how her identity is disconnected from both the past and present:

**Jiyan (F: 26)** Only with the beginning of the crisis I started to realize that there was discrimination in Syria. I realized I was living in an Arab state. Then the problem was that I became a refugee in a region where they were also Kurds. Even if I did not say it, they should have stated that we were also Kurds, we were one. They should not have considered me a refugee. When I arrived here, I started hearing – as if for the first time – that I was living in the Arab state of Syria. They would tell me that I was using too many Arabic words when I talked. That made me question myself: ‘Was I really in an Arab state without realizing it?’ By the time I realized that differences were drawn between Syria’s Kurds and Kurds here, I was so disappointed that I wished I were not a Kurd.

Trying to escape the dilemma, it seems that Jiyan wants to disorient herself from both identities. Such a position was expressed by other interviewees in a more constructive way in an effort to bridge the difference or highlight that being Syrian should not exclude being Kurdish or vice versa. Previously, I have discussed that some have taken this even as a challenge to combat discrimination. Nevertheless, to deal with the dilemma from a refugee position does not seem an easy task, especially when both identities hold their weights of discrimination:

**Zana (M: 35)** My interactions with the community here make me more nostalgic to my past, to my ‘Syrianness’. Though we were not comfortably living in Syria and we were persecuted, the way we are treated here always makes me nostalgic to the suffering there. In a simple conversation with a colleague here that I have known for four years now, I was reminded that I was a refugee. He literally said: ‘don’t forget you are a refugee!’. Such incidents make me feel that the misery in Syria was not as painful as here. At least there I was in my homeland! I know that the word refugee impacts me emotionally, but I am aware that I am a refugee. However, I am more concerned about my kids. I know that this word will destroy them one day. My kids have not seen anything in Syria. They have lived all of their lives here.

At the end of this quote Zana raises concern about the future consequences of the dilemma of the impossibility to reconcile belonging to both Syria and Kurdistan. Additionally, this highlights the importance of the present action in the process of building a hopeful prospect of the future. As discussed earlier, the present conditions of any encounter
have a major role on developing certain identity politics. When a reconciliation does not seem possible, some interviewees talk about how they clearly emphasis their belonging to Rojava as seen in previous sections. Some interviewees, Azad and Zoya for example, describe how they have learnt when to identify as being from Rojava, and when to stress they are Syrians depending on the encounter and how the person they are addressing is clinging to ethnic criteria for acceptance. In other words, how he or she frames the Kurdish identity. With Zana, although he has learned such an identity politics, it does not as yet seem to be a prospective way out of the dilemma:

**Zana (M: 35)** When Rojava became a prevalent form of attachment among Syrian Kurds, I was very hopeful that this would change the bad perceptions about Syria and Syrian refugees. Being from Rojava reflects my preferred identification here that is more connected to ‘Kurdishness’. I would be very pleased if they referred to me as Zana from Rojava. Unfortunately, everyone here knows me as Zana the Syrian, they do not think of me as Zana the Kurdish from Rojava.

The futility to reconstruct an identity that does not carry elements targeted by discrimination has previously been expressed by Jiyan who wish she was not a Kurd while in this position of being a refugee within a Kurdish host community. The same is true for other interviewees who would sometimes wish that Kurdistan, as a homeland, had remained a dream that they cherished instead of coming there and being caught in the identity dilemma. The political symbolism of Kurdistan in this case seems to clash with the daily experiences of power differentiation between Syrian Kurds as refugees and Iraqi Kurds as hosts.

As seen from their experiences, the present conditions for Syrian Kurds as refugees in KRI not only have put so many obstacles for their inclusion; the refugee conditions have rendered identification to be a political instrument, and further have limited their ethnic belonging and put it in question while it was taken for granted before.

### 4.2.7 Belonging under a tent

My point of departure for explaining belonging, has been that it is a deep emotional feeling before anything else. Following Yuval-Davis’ (2004) analytical levels, belonging starts with the socio-economic position where individuals are valued and judged. This theme illustrates how the position of being a refugee makes belonging highly politicized and contested.

My interviewees repeatedly emphasized their self-identification as belonging to the same Kurdish ethnicity as their hosts. This belonging, despite being deeply emotional, is
highly contested due to their present socio-economic position as refugees. When they are confined within a camp, especially in the beginning of their arrival, surrounded by barbed wire, their ethnic belonging can be said to be totally shattered. Capturing the paradox of belonging while being cast away in a camp in the middle of nowhere, Jiyan says:

**Jiyan (F: 26)** We were thrown into a camp in the height of a boiling summer. We were stranded. We were placed in an empty tent. We would cry and could not eat. Many got sick and had rashes on their bodies. Everything changed. We said we would go back, but we were not allowed to get out of the camp. It was like being left in a desert and not understanding anything. We did not understand the people. We thought it would be temporary. We did not know that it would be forbidden to leave the camp. We were told: ‘you are refugees, you cannot go out of the camp’.

The refugee’s socio-economic position right from the beginning has set the condition that made belonging a field of contestation. On more than one occasion, my study participants connected their belonging to how they have been received, and to what extent they have sensed a confirmation from their hosts on the shared belonging to ethnic markers of Kurdistan, the language, the traditions, and above all the shared struggle. Some interviewees took certain incidents as very crucial in confirming that their belonging has been denied. This holds particularly true for those who experienced life in camps:

**Zana (M: 35)** How much I tell you about it, I still cannot describe that feeling. First, we were taken to an area, bare like a desert, and we were told that we would be staying there. When we protested, we were driven to the town center where we and other families slept in a public park for three days. /…/ Later when we could afford renting a house, we went as a family, my wife and children. Through some contacts, we decided to go and see the landlord, an elderly lady in her 70s. The only thing she told us was that she had already consulted with her children abroad who asked her not to rent the house to us. Her children had told her: ‘they are not people of this country – they need residency, and they bring problems with them’. Imagine you want to rent a house, and you are told you are not from here, how can I understand that?

The socio-economic position of a refugee does not, in and of its own, deny belonging. It is the social power that dictates who can belong and who should remain outside. Denying belonging based on status does not in itself negate belonging but contesting it from a powerful position of a citizen who decides who belongs to Kurdistan and who does not is the critical point for Syrian Kurdish refugees. For Zana, the treatment he received could be
comprehended because he lacked equal legal citizenship rights, but it is not understandable for him when his deep emotional need for belonging to Kurdistan is put under question or denied altogether. Such is the moment when the social power that set boundaries to their belonging are recognized by Syrian Kurdish refugees. Consequently, they get engaged in politics of belonging where they claim socio-political inclusion and resist exclusion.

4.2.8 Syrian citizenship in the realm of belonging politics

When belonging is politicized on legal grounds, the question of citizenship becomes very relevant. This theme deals with politics of belonging by illustrating: 1) how legal belonging through Syrian citizenship limits inclusion and recognition and leads to exploitation, and 2) how participants get engaged in negotiating equal recognition of their Syrian citizenship in connection to their ethnic identity as Kurds.

On a very basic level, having the citizenship of a specific state or carrying its passport, as Yuval-Davis (2011: 75) explains, is a way of identifying that people ‘belong’ to that state when they are outside. What makes this problematic is the privileges or consequences that this legal form of belonging may inflict upon individuals in different situations. The refugee situation in the experience of Zana, for example, shows the consequences of being Syrian on his inclusion when he tells me later that his Syrian citizenship has been the source of all his problems in life. The holders of Syrian passport nowadays can easily end in troubles outside just because of their citizenship. Probably, this is not specific to the Syrian Crisis as it has to do more with the international system of stratification of citizenships (ibid). In relation to Zana’s opinion, some interviewees confirm that in a stratified system of citizenships, their belonging to Syria has profoundly impacted their acceptance and recognition among their host community:

Zoya (F: 30) If you are here as a Turkish citizen or even as Syrian who came through a regular visa and have residency, still you remain a second, if not sometimes third, degree person. But as a Turk, for example, you have a priority here for reasons related to economy and trade. We as refugees, feel we are second grade. Some living under difficult circumstances will feel they are graded even lower.

The legal belonging through citizenship plays out in a politics where not only Syrian refugees are positioned lower by default, but also their citizenship becomes a realm where exploitation, discrimination and labelling intersect. Some of my study participants mention
that their access to work is severely reduced once their citizenship status is known to the employers. This is very critical taken into consideration that some interviewees link their stay and recognition in KRI with the ability to maintain a job along the terms of ‘you have an income, you can stay, you exist’. Eventually, to ensure a living, a refugee is enforced to endure exploitation and all the discriminatory treatment that comes with being a Syrian:

**Roni (M: 28)** There is a lot of exploitation here. Turkish Kurds\(^{18}\) or Turks also come and work here. The only difference is that they are Bakur’s Kurds and we are Rojava’s Kurds\(^{19}\). We work in the same company, and sometimes I could be working better than them, but because they have a passport and live here through a visa, they are more valued. If they notice a shortage in food or accommodation, they can talk, and they can express. Whereas if a Syrian asks for something similar he or she will be told: ‘if you do not like it here, you can leave’. We are forced to accept the exploitation and low wages.

In Roni’s view, belonging to Syria and being a refugee at the same time have placed him in the intersection of various powers of difference while he himself lacks any power to resist. In cases like this, politics of belonging determine the position as well as the potential direction for individuals. Some interviewees, including Roni, believe that they could reposition themselves in the stratified system by stressing their belonging to Syria in a bid to possibly shift the hierarchal order. Some other have already engaged in this through the assertion on the role of ‘the successful Syrian refugee’ discussed earlier. While the formal role of Syria as a safeguard of its citizens through its embassies and the power of Syrian passport remain limited, the politics of belonging taken by Syrian Kurdish refugees move between negotiating equal recognition of their citizenship as Syrians and endorsing shared ethnic links with their hosts.

### 4.2.9 The Power of difference in an intra-ethnic encounter

Navigating through a complex relationship with their host community, both ethnically and socio-economically, Syrian Kurdish refugees deal with a unique situation of inter-group relations. Within this situation, the section demonstrates 1) how difference is experienced as a powerless, and sometimes not even existing, by some participants during the encounter, and

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\(^{18}\) Kurds who are citizens of Turkey.

\(^{19}\) Bakur (North) and Rojava (West) referring to parts of Kurdistan. See section 3.1.2.
2) how difference, when powerfully marked through different traditions and customs, potentially questions collective ethnic markers of *Kurdishness*.

The intra-ethnic encounter of Syrian Kurds with Iraqi Kurds through displacement has produced many layers of old and emergent differences. The significance of these differences lay in their impact on the everyday interactions when Syrian Kurdish refugees are caught between the desire and the need to belong in accordance with or against the value system that determine their roles in the group both internally and externally. Some interviewees confirm their belonging through the value system of the hosts. They describe Kurdistan as the space where they sense freedom in contrast to persecution back home. According to this opinion, the differences between them and the hosts are powerless as they feel totally at home in Kurdistan. Several others contest the hosts’ value system and declare it as outdated. Their opinion show that differences are both discrimination-loaded and challenging the very core of Kurdish ethnic identity.

Speaking from the perspective of the first opinion, Lawin describes the inexistence of any difference between ‘Kurds’ and ‘Kurds’, and the space for freedom in KRI that supports inclusion in the community:

**Lawin (M: 29)** Nobody can persecute us here. We are Kurds, they are Kurds. In Syria, everywhere you could be a target for persecution, at universities, home, everywhere. Syrian Kurds here are involved in so many political activities. It does not matter if you oppose or support local policies. Here there is a space for freedom, for opportunities and opinion.

From the same perspective, Narin also explains that differences, most notably in environments such as at the university, do not appear. It is interesting here that Narin’s experience of the university setting is very different from how another interviewee, Helin, (presented in section 4.2.5) described:

**Narin (F: 23)** I am very comfortable when I am at university. It is the best place here where I feel like that. Students have this awareness – they know what it means to be Syrian. When you tell them about your life, they respect you even more. For them, it does not matter if you are Syrian, Lebanese or whatever, at the end we are all humans. Life at university made me indeed have a peace of mind.

Both Lawin and Narin as quoted above show a perspective that hails Kurdish unity and/or human solidary, something that some other interviewees more generally also referred to. In connection to this, these interviewees particularly refer to the time aspect saying that
differences materialized more with the time rather than they were already established. Therefore, the intra-ethnic encounter through migration in this case becomes the starting point for understanding how differences have developed.

I have discussed in previous sections that the encounter has led to a process of reconstruction of identity. This discussion can be expanded further to say that a reorganization of ethnic boundaries based on emerging differences has taken place. Becoming more alert to these differences, the core of ethnic identity is put under question. To refer back to Barth’s (1969) ‘cultural stuff’, the accounts of many interviewees question issues of shared culture and language between them and Iraqi Kurds both through overt signs and the value system related to social lifestyle and gender roles for example:

Ferhad (M: 27) In my first days I would sometimes go to buy some stuff, then I would not be able to communicate although I could understand their dialect quite well. I always felt I was odd while they all looked alike. I was not prepared for this. I never expected that I will end up in this situation. The difficulty with language was the last thing I could think of. /…/ My second shock was when I noticed that women have zero liberty in Kurdistan. Women are tied here.

Ferhad’s encounter exemplifies the shock which triggers the question of shared ‘culture stuff’. Not only the displacement encounter has restricted his belonging, but the very overt sign, the language, of his imagined ethnic identity has been contested. When he expresses his views on equality, he further turns to flag a marked behavior deviance that challenges the coherence of an ethnic culture that he is part of. Taking this as sign of a tension in the shared culture, Hevi expands the argument when she draws comparisons and refers to the values that are attached to women in the host culture:

Hevi (F: 33) If I can talk about culture here, I can only describe it as backward compared to ours. They have a very patriarchal society in Kurdistan. Take the example of women going out by themselves here. When I was in Syria I would go out, take public transportation, and change several minibuses to get to my job, all by myself. No one would harass me or anything. Here they think of us as ‘too liberal’! When Syrian girls work in shopping malls or restaurants, they are considered cheap girls.

The value system that decides on the content of the culture itself seems an area of contestation in Hevi’s comment. On an everyday level, this is what the interviewees regard as different traditions and customs – some even called it mentalities – which are not compatible
between their Kurdish community back in Syria and the Kurdish community in Kurdistan. Consequently, this contestation leads to the build-up of difference and in due course boundaries of belonging and/or non-belonging are increasingly drawn.

In a context of dislocation where the common imagined culture does not hold itself as cohesive as it is assumed, and where the system of values becomes contested in itself, differences will gain more exclusionary powers. A deviance from what has been normalized as a Kurdish culture and values in KRI is undeniably a risk for many Syrian Kurdish refugees. This brings us back to the question of ‘who is more Kurdish?’ which then becomes ‘who can belong to the Kurdish ethnicity in the first place?’, and what does that bring with it? The struggle for inclusion and belonging on equal terms has not been an easy endeavor as the accounts of my interviewees indicate. The encounter has made some interviewees wish that the image of Kurdistan that they had in mind remained intact or that they never needed to experience the reality themselves. Others express the loss of any sense of belonging to anything or anywhere in the processes.

In conclusion, for Syrian Kurdish refugees the need for a feeling of stability and belonging is not only a question of emotional attachment. The power of difference realized with the intra-ethnic encounter with other Kurds in KRI is not limited to the present situation. The incompatibility, difference and contestation of what Kurdish culture was and is profoundly affect identity in the present, more critically they demarcate the boundaries for inclusion that are also carried into the future.

4.2.10 ‘If only – is what we always say’: the question of future and return

In all of the previous sections, the experience of displacement has been studied using the lens of the intra-ethnic encounter, and how this encounter has impacted and further problematized community relations. This has been done by focusing on the present life pattern of Syrian Kurdish refugees and their interaction with their Kurdish hosts. Perspectives of what and where home is, how identity is politicized, and how belonging is bordered have all been approached through the change in life patterns and emerging politics among the refugees. Moving from here, it was important to find out how the study participants sum their experience and what outlooks they hold for their future.

The idea that nothing can substitute the home left behind in Syria was presented as a key finding. This indeed has been one the of the most stated arguments cutting across the narratives of all interviewees whenever future was discussed. Some interviewees describe the
future as a space where things are incomplete, and stability is provisional. Others have a
darker outlook where future is seen as already destroyed through their experience of
displacement:

**Narin (F: 23)** I lost the joy, dreams and hopes, I lost a lot - not only me, but all
Syrians here. We always keep saying if only this or that had not happened. ‘If
only’ – is what we always say. We wish that things could go back to normal in
Syria. We try to forget and exhaust ourselves with work in order not to remember.

If only the present could be changed, perhaps the future would be perceived in less
pessimistic terms. Although Narin’s revelation shows a position that has surrendered to
despair, the involvement of the interviewees as seen in different politics of identity and
belonging and the resistance of discriminatory boundaries under present conditions indicate
that their agency is not all exhausted.

The question of the future for Syrian Kurdish refugees cannot be detached from the
prospects of a location where acceptance, belonging, and identity are no more contested. This
means looking at the future through the possibility of return to a new Syria, and how that
could possibly hold hopes for ending the condition of the displacement as well as the identity
and belonging dilemma evolved through this condition. For several research participants
return to Syria indeed seems to be the only evident escape from discrimination as Ferhad
explains:

**Ferhad (M: 27)** For me I see return back home as inevitable. I know I am not
accepted here. I can feel that I am unwanted whenever I do some paperwork, for
example. Everything here is done with difficulty. As a Syrian if you could afford
buying a house or a car, none of these can be registered under your name. It does
not matter how much one can adapt here, still you are alienated, you are the
Syrian, not the Kurd.

Ferhad has evoked the discrimination he experiences and identity distinction of
considering him more Syrian than Kurd as the reasons why he cannot think of Kurdistan as
home, compared to Syria, both in present and future. He is not prevented from claiming
Kurdistan as his homeland but at the same time he feels unwanted. Taking his position more
generally, it can be concluded that Kurdistan, for Syrian Kurdish refugees, is a homeland in
an emotional sense, but in practice the place has failed to become home. As Syria is still
going through an unsettled conflict, the answer to the question of what future awaits Syrian
refugees, not only in KRI but in all places where they are scattered, remains unclear.
5 CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I reflect on the results of my study by restating the main findings in relation to the research aim and questions. The findings are further discussed in relation to problems of displacement and questions of identity and belonging more broadly among the Kurds. I also state the delimitations of my approach and refer to open inquiries which could not fit the scope of my study and require further exploration. The chapter ends by highlighting the theoretical contribution of the study to research on forced migration and to the broader field of ethnic and migration studies.

The central inquiry of this research was to explore politics of identity and belonging among Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI. The aim was to understand and illustrate what policies impact their status, rights, and inclusion, how in an intra-ethnic setting of displacement they establish the notion of home, how their interactions with the host community shape their identity and belonging, and how differences emerging due to displacement play out in intra-ethnic community relations.

Findings from the policy analysis indicate that very little has been done in terms of developing a comprehensive refugee protection framework in Iraq and KRI. The situation of Syrian Kurdish refugees in KRI has therefore turned into a protracted case of asylum seeking. Enduring this situation, Syrian Kurdish refugees’ access to legal rights as refugees has been limited. Moreover, policy for regulating the situation of refugees in KRI and Iraq suffers from ambivalent laws that can be very much influenced by various types of interests. In KRI, granting Syrian Kurdish refugees’ rights, access and protection is prone to interference from partisan, local and tribal powers. Although the rhetoric of ‘guests’ has been deployed under claims of solidarity and brotherhood in KRI, this has been argued to be more an act of responsibility evasion. Complex legal process of acquiring an identification card (known as residency card) and conditions of reception in camps have been discussed to be contradictory to claims of solidarity and supporting belonging, even as guests.

Individuals’ narratives have revealed that while home can be plural, Syria rather than KRI has remained the true home for them. Kurdistan as an imaginary homeland still holds the potential of being their home in their view, but it does not substitute the home that they left behind, and the one they wish to return to. Kurdistan was described as the place of open possibilities and political expression in contrast to Syria where persecution and war forced them to flee. Syria was regarded as the place of past oppression but also the space of
memories and comfort while Kurdistan became the secure home that they greatly needed. Kurdistan, according to my participants, would become home if distinctions disappeared between Syrian Kurds as refugees and Iraqi Kurds as hosts and when shared markers of Kurdish ethnicity would be embraced strongly and mutually. Nevertheless, finding home in Kurdistan does not stop their attachment to Syria. The tension between the attachment to both places and then the possibility of losing belonging to both has been significantly articulated in the narratives of the participants. To sum it up, the dilemma of home for Syrian Kurdish refugees in Kurdistan, as revealed in the interviewees’ narratives, is to be caught in a contradiction of ‘emplacing’ their belonging to Kurdistan as their Kurdish motherland while being nostalgic to Syria as their true home in spite of the persecution there. Finding a way out of this dilemma does not seem easy either as home intertwines with the identity struggle of being Kurdish versus being Syrian.

The condition of being a refugee in Kurdistan, in the experiences of my interviewees, has turned identity into a field of political struggle. The politics of identity, which have emerged as a result of their encounter with Kurds on the other side of the border, have manifested through the participants’ demarcation of boundaries and contents of Kurdish ethnicity and their quest for recognition as both Syrian and Kurdish. Kurdishness as they perceive seems different to what their host have framed which then leads to identity distinction and discriminatory politics of us and them. ‘Suriyakan’ (The Syrians) as a discriminatory label against Syrian Kurdish refugees has been seen as denying them their Kurdish identity when their Syrian citizenship is foregrounded. Caught in the conflict of defying the label while taking pride in their Syrianness, my participants have shown their involvement in identity politics of emphasizing their Kurdish belonging through attachment to Rojava and sharing value criteria by comparing their struggle as Kurds in Syria to Kurds in Iraq and referring to ethnic solidarity between both. The participants’ politics of identity have also manifested in the sometimes-deliberate emphasis on their Syrianness as a way to deconstruct the discriminatory discourse, especially when such emphasis is connected to more economic value. Seen in an overall perspective, a reconstruction of identity has taken place when participants articulate their ethnic belonging to Kurdistan that can complement and not replace their national belonging to Syria, or the other way around. It is this construction when their ethnic identity and national citizenship are not mutually exclusive that could eventually eliminate discrimination.

As in the dilemma of identity, contested belonging has appeared to be very much connected to the refugees’ current socio-economic position. The social power that has
marked differences between them and their hosts, has also gradually contested their emotional attachment to Kurdistan on equal terms. The judgment of their social location as refugees and the contestation of their identity as Kurds have rendered belonging, in the experiences of participants, to be very political. Their experiences have further shown that politicized belonging on legal grounds of their Syrian citizenship has profoundly limited their acceptance and recognition in their host community. Defying this, the participants’ politics of belonging have articulated in highlighting their belonging to Syria through the role of ‘the successful Syrian refugee’ while at the same time bridging shared ethnic connections with their hosts. The differences marked between them and their hosts have been seen by some participants as powerless as their belonging to Kurdistan seemed stronger. The experiences of other participants, however, have revealed that differences could be very strong that they potentially put into question belonging through the same ethnic markers of Kurdishness such as language and community values. Differences building up between the refugees and their hosts have been perceived as very critical for their power of adding more boundaries to belonging which can also lead to serious consequences in the future.

Looking at the research results more broadly, they reflect the Kurdish struggle with identity and belonging in all parts of Kurdistan, to varying degrees in each place. As far as I can gather, contested identity and belonging of Syrian Kurdish refugees in their displacement mirrors what all Kurds on a general level have been enduring. The reality about Kurds, in the four countries that control Kurdistan, reveals a constant quest for recognition of their Kurdish identity that does not conflict with their citizenships. Their belonging is torn between their formal recognition in the four countries as Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian or Syrian citizens and their ethnic identity as Kurdish. The distinction in this study and its results however come from the fact that I focused on identity and belonging as contested among the Kurds themselves. The results not only revealed the conflict between Syrian citizenship and Kurdish identity but also illustrated how belonging and identity could sometimes be problematic within the boundaries of the Kurdish ethnicity itself.

In spite of the wider implications of my findings, there are some delimitations in my approach and interpretations that should be taken into consideration. These delimitations are mostly related to choices made due to the limited scope of my study. Starting from the population and context of the research, I chose to focus on Syrian Kurdish refugees’ politics of identity and belonging within their current experience of displacement to KRI. However, 20

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for a more comprehensive investigation of community relations between Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds, the experiences of Iraqi Kurds as hosts should comparably be studied. Also, to further understand how Syrian Kurdish identity is contested, not only among refugees in KRI, research engaging in historical exploration of Kurdish identity in Syria can be very useful. In fact, this has already attracted interest in some recent and ongoing studies\textsuperscript{21}. Moreover, in the argumentation of Syria as the true home, my study did not engage in a deeper interpretation of what kind of Syria that could be. Problematizing what Syria means for Syrian Kurds and what Syria they aspire for, weather it means Rojava as part of Syria or Syrian Kurdistan are all open question that require an additional study focus.

A further delimitation concerns the study participants as they are quite young with ages ranging between twenty-one and thirty-five. Age was not considered as a variable in my study, but the possibility of more diverse findings from the perspective of age and identity can be an interesting area of investigation. Older Syrian Kurds could possibility relate to different forms of identification and belonging. Likewise, focusing on the intersection of age, gender and class and their relation to the construction of identity in displacement could illustrate more individual politics within the collective politics of identity and belonging.

A final delimitation concerns the space for freedom of expression in the research context. I should mention that participants may not have always wanted to disclose certain information or express their opinions freely in that context for various reasons. Hence, understanding that findings are based on their representations of life in that context, the way they are, is essential.

Finally, taken into consideration the delimitations of my study, it is equally important to acknowledge some theoretical contributions of my research. As I have tried to demonstrate in this thesis, intra-group relations are strongly impacted by the displacement encounter. Problematizing home, identity and belonging in the context of this encounter, the displacement of Syrian Kurds to KRI was studied as a unique case of what I referred to as \textit{intra-ethnic displacement}. My purpose through this was to accommodate for a new perspective of looking at the politics of identity and belonging among refugees. It is true that questions of home, identity and belonging are not new topics, and they have been explored in a lot of studies of forced migration. However, the unique perspective in my research is that it has problematized these questions within the same ethnic community in contrast to

conventional studies that look at politics of identity and belonging through differences between the refugees and their host community. Differences, in my approach, were still taken as a starting point for the analysis of these politics, but they were investigated within an *intra-* rather than *inter-* group relations framework. Kurdish ethnicity as claimed by both the refugees and hosts became the framework in which relations were analyzed. Theorizing my approach through the concept of *intra-ethnic displacement* was a methodological need, but I regard it also as a contribution that can inform the study of similar cases of displacement.

The field of ethnic and migration studies is constantly expanding with new and innovative perspectives that can cater for diverse experiences of migration and questions of ethnicity. My hope from this work is that it has contributed to these perspectives and provided a profound insight into societal problems that affect vulnerable groups in their identity and belonging.
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