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**‘Roam, Sweet Home’:  
Exploring perception of homeland, home, and belonging of  
Syrian-Armenian migrants in Armenia**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
of the degree of  
Master of Arts in Middle Eastern Studies

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*In loving memory of my Syrian-Armenian grandmother  
(1921-2005)  
May this thesis capture her enduring belief*

## **Abstract**

This study seeks to explore the ways Syrian-Armenian migrants in Armenia perceive and narrate homeland, home, and belonging in their post-migration setting. Through the personal stories and experiences of the participants, this study aims to contest and deconstruct the assumptions about the fixed nature of homeland, home, and belonging. While doing so, this thesis relies upon the contemporary theoretical frameworks of diaspora/transnationalism. This study also seeks to contribute to the understanding of diasporans as ‘transnational’ people, who are both ‘rooted’ at home and ‘routed’ elsewhere by different trajectories. Moreover, this thesis also examines how the perception of homeland, home, and belonging of Syrian-Armenians of this study inform the ways they imagine their future.

*Keywords:* Homeland, Home, Belonging, Diaspora, Armenia, Syria, Syrian-Armenian Migrants, Imagining Future

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# 1. Introduction

My first encounter with Syrian-Armenian refugees living in Armenia was sometime in 2012 when I just started my university studies. It was the time, when I was doing my bachelor's degree in Middle East studies and, simultaneously, many Syrian-Armenians started to open restaurants in Yerevan, which caught my eyes immediately due to their amazingly tasty food. It is back then that the Syrian-Armenian restaurants became my absolute favorites in Yerevan. And, believe it or not, it was also back then that I made up my mind to delve into studying Syrian-Armenian migration processes in the future.

My gentle reader, as Syrian-Armenian cuisine is not the topic of this thesis, you must be wondering why I started my thesis by discussing Syrian-Armenian restaurants and food. It is because food is not merely plates of various dishes, but is something connected to our understanding of culture and migration. As genocide scholar Uğur Üngör (2019) highlights, displacement, migration, and food are phenomena that exercise a deep influence on each other, as food is not merely plates of necessary calories, but is an extremely emotional experience. In her study on Syrian refugees' migration to Norway, Nefissa Naguib (2017:645) argues that in the humanitarian encounter between Syrian refugees and local grassroots organization volunteers, food acts as a sign of compassion, sympathy, and as a way of bonding people to each other. Food, thus, is being perceived as an inert commodity that shapes and constitutes social relationships and modes of consciousness and belonging (Naguib 2017:652).

When the civil war began in Syria in 2011, many Syrian-Armenians took refuge in Armenia bringing with them new types of dishes, flavors, and tastes and spicing up the Armenian cuisine with Syrian food, especially the rich cuisine of Aleppo. Before the arrival of Syrian-Armenian refugees in Armenia, the restaurant chains and the choice of restaurants were so limited in Armenia. There was no such diversity, tastefulness, or colorfulness in the restaurants back then. Whereas now, you can feel the absolutely amazing smell of those tasty foods before even setting foot in those restaurants.

Middle Eastern cuisine, including Syrian, is not entirely new in Armenia, as the first waves have arrived with ‘repatriations’ from the Middle East to Soviet Armenia in 1946 and onwards. According to Üngör (2019), local Armenians have mocked their food as ‘*akhparakan*’ (comes from the Western Armenian word for ‘brother’) dishes, as it was a little too Arabian for the Soviet palates. As Üngör (2019) underlines, the food that those Middle East repatriates brought to Soviet Armenia was mainly Western Armenian dishes and less mixed with local cuisines in the Middle East. New waves of migrants, however, brought with them a more hybrid cuisine to Armenia, which is a blend of Western Armenian, and Middle Eastern cuisines, including the Syrian one.

Nowadays, Syrian and Middle Eastern restaurants, in general, are so many in Yerevan that I can hardly count them on my fingers. As Üngör (2019) mentions in his article, the number of Syrian restaurants has increased so much, especially in downtown Yerevan, that one is almost never more than two blocks away from a very decent plate of hummus and shawarma.

Üngör (2019) further argues that it is the Hrabarag Metro area in Yerevan that truly embodies Syrian Armenia, as it symbolizes ‘little Aleppo’, where one-room shops offer the same spice mixes, bars of Aleppo soap, and tahini bread, where the old *kamancha* (a bowed string instrument) player fiddling his melancholic tunes and the barbershop owner sitting on his plastic chair chatting away in Arabic, sometimes also Turkish with fellow Aleppines.

To bring it closer to my topic, as mentioned above, this thesis does not focus on Syrian-Armenian cuisine and restaurant businesses in Armenia. The main objective of this study is, rather, to look into the ways Syrian-Armenians understand and narrate homeland, home, and belonging in their post-migration setting in Armenia. One of the main purposes of this thesis is to contest and challenge the static and fixed perceptions of homeland, home, and belonging by adopting a migrant-centered perspective and leaning on Syrian-Armenian refugees’ lived experiences and stories. Furthermore,



through my participants' narratives, I aim to illustrate that conceptualizations of home, homeland, and belonging are constantly being changed, negotiated, and reconstructed, which, in its turn, challenge the essentialist and restrictive definition of diaspora.

Moreover, derived from the theoretical perspectives used in this thesis, I am to contribute to the understanding that Syrian-Armenians, like other migrant and diaspora people, should be studied as 'transnational' people, who embody multiple, hybrid, contingents, unfixed, and transnational identities and belonging/s and are both 'rooted' at home and 'routed' elsewhere by different orientations and connections. This study also looks into the main reasons behind Syrian-Armenians migration to Armenia and the ways they continue to develop and maintain various linkages with Syria in the post-migration environment, and go back and forth between their two homes – one in Syria and one in Armenia, and link them to each other. Another purpose of this study is to investigate how and where the Syrian-Armenian participants imagine their future by delving into the theoretical lenses of aspiration and imagination.

Based on the objectives of this study, I pose the following research question:

- How do Syrian-Armenian refugees narrate and understand homeland, home, and belonging in the post-migration setting in Armenia?

Connected to my overarching question are these sub-questions:

- To what extent and in what ways do Syrian-Armenians create and maintain relationships with both home and host countries?
- What is the main rationale behind the migration of Syrian-Armenians to Armenia?
- How and where do Syrian-Armenians imagine their future and how do perceptions of homeland, and home inform participants' vision of the future?

## **1.1 Disposition**

Within the introductory chapter, I present the history of the Armenian community in Syria and briefly discuss Syrian-Armenians' migration to Armenia because of the war in Syria. In doing so, I provide contextual background to the topic of this study and the experiences of the participants.

In chapter two, I review existing literature on different perceptions of homeland, home, and belonging, as well as, return migration and Diaspora-Armenian 'returnees'. While drawing upon earlier academic insights on these issues, I identify the limitations to the studies of homeland, home, and belonging and outline the significance of this study.

In chapter three, I discuss the theoretical frameworks of diaspora and ethnicity which helps me understand diasporas as a social process and practice and Syrian-Armenians as 'transnational' people. I further draw upon the concepts of aspiration and imagination for understanding the ways my participants imagine their future.

In chapter four, I outline my research methodology by presenting my study design and providing a reflection on the process, through which the data for the analysis were collected. In this chapter, I also discuss reflexivity and ethical considerations.

In chapter five, I present the main findings, which are organized around the themes of 'homeland', 'home', 'boundary maintenance', and 'imagining future'. In chapter six, I provide an analysis of my findings by drawing upon my theoretical frameworks. I summarize the main points of this study in the Conclusion chapter, where I also offer answers to my research questions, discuss the significance of my study and suggest future directions for research.

## **1.2 Context**

In this section, I firstly present Armenians' experiences and community formation in Syria following the Armenian Genocide. Secondly, I shortly discuss the civil war in Syria and the massive migration caused by the war.

### **1.2.1 The Armenian community in Syria**

In some historical manuscripts, Armenians' presence in Syria can be dated back to the first century BC. However, the diaspora community in Syria was mainly formed after the Armenian Genocide carried out during the Ottoman Empire in the Armenian-populated regions in 1915. By the time of the foundation of the Armenian diaspora in Syria, the Armenians were estimated to be approximately 220,000 (Bulghadaryan & Sindelar 2012).

Despite the deprivation and trauma following the genocide that many Armenian refugees had to endure, in many cases, they managed to rebuild their lives in Syria and contributed to the construction of the Syrian state in social, cultural, and economic fields. Syria was a destination country for Armenian refugees, who were engaged in building the state and Syrian identity, and even helped establish its borders (Kasbarian 2020:165). Arab nationalists first regraded newcomer Armenians as a threat to the Syrian nation, however, Armenians gradually become an important element in state-building and Syrian Arab attitudes towards the Armenians changed over time and they were upheld as a positive example of a Syrian community (ibid).

Armenians in Syria managed to improve their socio-economic situation within one generation, by working as craftsmen, technicians, merchants, traders, administrative officials, etc. (Karageozian 2015:133). In this process of rebuilding their lives, Armenians relied largely on their own intellectual, financial, and physical resources which, later on, were perceived as 'a source of pride' by the generations of Armenians

in Syria and other Arab states (ibid). As underlined in Kasbarian's (2020:165) article, in the case of Syria, Armenian refugees managed to transform from abject poverty into an urban proto-middle class.

During the 1990s, the Syrian-Armenian community reached its peak with around 150,000 members. Before the civil war in Syria, the estimated number of ethnic Armenians in Syria was about 100,000. The largest community was in Aleppo, with around 60,000 Armenians, smaller communities also existed in Damascus, Kessab, Qamishli, and Kobane. However, it is unknown how many Armenians currently live in Syria as after the civil war thousands left Syria.

### **1.2.2 Syrian-Armenians in Armenia after the civil war**

The civil war caused a mass migration from Syria to different parts of the world. Since the start of the war in Syria in 2011 around 11 million people have been internally and externally displaced, 4.8 million of which are registered as refugees (UNHCR). Among those people, there are also ethnic Armenians, estimated to be around 80,000 people. Around 20,000 Syrian-Armenians migrated to Armenia so far, making the country the third-largest host of Syrians per capita (IOM 2020).

In order to assist Syrian-Armenians that sought protection in Armenia, the Armenian government simplified the naturalization process, covered health insurance costs, allocated funds for education and subsidized housing until a person in each family finds a job (Harutyunyan 2016). Apart from the state, the local and international organizations like the UNHCR, KASA, Mission Armenia, Repat Armenia, Caritas Armenia, Save the Children International, and The Armenian Red Cross Society were also engaged in the providing various services and assistance to Syrian-Armenian refugees.

However, Syrian-Armenians faced a lot of difficulties and integration problems. Upon their arrival in Armenia, Syrian-Armenians had issues with language, cultural differences, difficulties in schooling, education, and the labor market. General concerns expressed by the Syrian Armenians included the high cost of living, the lack of decent affordable housing, the lack of opportunity, and the poor economy (Kasbarian 2020). All these factors triggered a desire to migrate from Armenia in the future. Some of the Syrian-Armenians also preferred to go back to Syria. At this moment, there are no exact reports on how many of the 20,000 Syrian-Armenian refugees that migrated to Armenia continue to reside there.

## **2. Literature review**

A main starting point for this study is to discuss and evaluate the existing literature regarding migrant experiences and conception of homeland, home, belonging, and return migration in the context of resettlement of Syrian-Armenians in Armenia after the war in Syria in 2011. There is a growing literature on the issues of homeland, home, belonging, and return migration developed through the frameworks of diaspora and transnationalism. The sociological research, however, continues to be limited in various ways.

In recent scholarship on migration processes, studying migrant experiences of building and maintaining multidimensional relations and attachment that interconnect their countries of origin to their host societies became central (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992, 1995). Little attention, however, were paid to the specific ways migrants construct their perception of homeland and home in their new settings (Abdelhady 2008:54). In this sense, very few studies were done in regard to the linkage of ‘homeland’ with diaspora and transnationalism based on the experiences of diaspora Armenians who recently moved to Armenia from different parts of the world, more specifically from Syria and Lebanon (Kasbarian 2015, Kasbarian 2020; Della Gatta 2019). Therefore, in this context, I believe it is important to review the studies on migration processes which are centred around the issue of how migrants perceive and narrate homeland, home and belonging, and how they build and maintain various relationships with their countries of origin (Kasbarian 2015; Abdelhady 2008). I further reflect on the interconnection of diaspora, transnationalism and homeland through looking into broader scholarship that contests the traditional approach of studying homeland, home, and belonging as fixed in time and place, and return as the final cycle of migration.

## 2.1 Home and Homeland

The place of origin or homeland and home are essential components in the classic definition of diaspora considering that people living in the diaspora are tragically exiled from their homeland (Safran 1991; Della Gatta 2017). Traditional literature defines diasporas as detached entities from their homelands that simply exists out there, however, other studies consider diaspora as a social construction – a process through which diasporic identity, discourse, and consciousness are being produced (Grossman 2019:1265). In *Migrants of Identity*, Rapport and Dawson argue (1998:6) that the traditional explanation of home is attached to the one’s static or fixed perception of place – “a safe place to leave and return to and a principal focus of one’s concern and control.” However, later scholarship criticizes essentialist simplifications of the concept of home by arguing that home can be in multiple places. Rapport and Dawson (1998:7) suggest using a “more mobile conception of home by proposing the concept of ‘plurilocal home’ – implying that home is neither here nor there but one that exists in more than one or several places.”

Accordingly, recent studies reconceptualized and readjusted the notion of home to the contemporary world settings, continuous globalization and movements of populations. Scholars argue that, as the results of the broader processes of neoliberal economic restructuring, globalization, social transformation and increasing human mobility, the understanding of home moved away from the ‘territorial place of belonging’ to the perceptions of a home that is in the words, opinions and gestures of people (Karamanian 2019:32). And, this is what many scholars conceptualize as the de-territorialisation of understanding of home. Ley and Kobayashi (2005:113) argue that the concept of home became extraordinarily complex due to incorporating “increasing levels of dual citizenship, labour contracts with short-term visas, family members located on opposite sides of national borders, and fast and ever-cheaper lines of contact

between nations.” Therefore, the authors suggest that “migrants never quite arrive at their destination because they never quite leave home” (Ley & Kobayashi 2005:113).

Scholars argue that the multi-locational features of the understanding of home, in its turn, altered the interpretation of homeland among the diasporic groups and communities worldwide. Kasbarian (2015:359) underlines that homeland should not be considered as a “fixed territory to which diaspora can trace its roots” but rather “a mixture of sites and cultures, located in history, memory, and present.” The importance of the homeland in diasporic identities and consciousness indicates that the “individuals are trapped for centuries between ancestral homeland and their countries of origin,” between traditional definitions of home and their own ‘plurilocal’ understanding of home – implying that home is multi-scalar, an unfixed geographical place and metaphorical space (Karamanian 2019:32).

While being in exile or living outside the country of origin, people develop and maintain imaginary connections to their previous homes or to the homes of their parents and grandparents. In this regard, Malkki (1995:24) points out that people in exile “invent homes and homelands through memories of places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit.” Very often migrants pastoralize their country of origin that remains frozen in the time they left, the present reality, however, is very different from the imaginative homeland (Silva 2009:700). Cohen (2009:117-118) argues that the diasporic people tend to idealize their original homeland through certain static and eternal images, and are committed to restoring and reconstructing their ancestral home through memories. Furthermore, Silva highlights (2009:696) that home turns into an ‘elusive commodity’ – an imaginative place of distant geography, the current geography, on the other hand, becomes “a monument to the immigrant experiences.” The mythologized home is being constructed “through the ethos and pathos of culture, ethics, religion, and moral behaviours that have very little physical manifestation,”



whereas, the host society symbolizes the detachment of the new arrival from the assimilated (Silva 2009:696).

The meanings ascribed to home and homeland are reconstructed and reshaped through memories, histories and narratives of the previous generations which play a significant role in the transformation and illumination of the understanding of the present (hooks 1991, 147). Brah (1996:179) argues that home is a multilocal and mythical place of desire in the diasporic imagination' by suggesting that diasporic communities have a 'homing desire' – a desire for 'return' that takes the diasporic subjects back "to the way they were or to an imagined past created in memory." The continuous connection and relationship of migrants with their homelands, as well as the collective memory and comradeship, building and maintaining ties within the ethnic and communal groups in host societies, forge the political, economic, social and cultural livelihoods of diasporic communities in the host countries (Safran 1991:83-84). Moreover, connection to homeland and desire of the 'return' is often perceived as the "distinguishing marker between diasporic and transnational communities" (Abdelhady 2008:54).

Contemporary scholarship on diasporas also observes the importance of the place of origin, and symbolic association of home with the homeland among children and grandchildren of immigrants (Karamanian 2019:33). Furthermore, discussion of the 'return' of the second-generation migrants to a territory from which they or their parents did not originate became increasingly common in the literature (ibid). Critical scholarship confers the problematic nature of presenting the migration of diasporas to a country or geography, where their ancestors did not originate from, as a return to homeland (Lehmann 2012; Cohen 2009).

Lehmann (2012), for instance, refers to the return issue in the context of Armenians who were said to repatriated to Soviet Armenia between 1946-1948. The author problematizes the representation of such a movement as return or repatriation since at that time Armenia was not an independent country, nor a place of origin from which

the ancestors of said repatriates were exiled (Lehmann 2012:172). Lehmann further argues that for those Armenians, whose ancestors originated from Eastern Anatolia, “‘return’ to Soviet Armenia was not a return in the literal sense of the word, as their ancestors had never lived in the territory that was Soviet Armenia” (ibid). Therefore, Soviet Armenia did not entirely replace Anatolia as the ‘imagined sacred homeland’, but ‘offered those yearning for a homeland an opportunity not to live in exile anymore’ (Lehmann, 2012:182). Kasbarian (2015:359) argues that due to lack of the direct connection to ancestral homeland in Western Armenia, both Soviet Armenia and the contemporary Republic of Armenia, act as a substitute for homeland – a ‘step-homeland’. Furthermore, as Kasbarian (ibid) pinpoints, diaspora Armenians, moving to Armenia, have to negotiate the gap between an imagined homeland lost in Western Armenia and an exciting ‘step-homeland’ in the shape of the current Armenian state.

Furthermore, in the context of American-Armenia ‘returnees’, Darieva (2011:504) underlines that in the last decades the meanings ascribed to ancestral return and homecomings have undertaken a semantic transformation in the transnational setting, which demonstrate “the diversity of the phenomenon of homecoming and return and the ways the ‘ethnic elements’ coexist with global values at one place and time.”

Moreover, scholars suggest that for many diaspora people the ‘homing desire’ is not simply a desire to return to a pre-existing home or country of origin, but a desire to feel at home in the world (Rapport and Dawson 1998; Winther 2009; Boccagni 2022). Winther (2009:66), for instance, underlines that people who are on the move are capable of establishing a sense of home, or tactics for feeling at home in any setting in the world. The ‘homing desire’ is, therefore, not determined by the return to a specific geographic location or one’s physical presence in that territory but rather the individuals’ sense of belonging (Karamanian 2019:34).

## **2.2 Belonging**

The importance of belonging and people's attachment to a place is widely studied and discussed in the contemporary scholarship on diaspora, transnationalism and return migration. As in the case of literature on homeland, and home, research on belonging is diverse and provides different definitions and dimensions for the notion of belonging.

Anthias (2006:17) discusses the issues of identity, belonging, and home through the concept of 'translocational positionality'. Anthias (2006:21, 2008:8) argues that belonging has different meanings and can encompass both formal and informal experiences. Apart from being related to membership, rights and duties, and identification with a specific group, community, or a place, belonging incorporates people's experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways in which social bonds and ties are constructed through membership, identification, practices, experiences, and emotions of inclusion. Yuval-Davis (2006:199) underlines that belonging has three central components: social locations, individuals' identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings, as well as, ethical and political value systems through which people judge their own and others' belonging/s.

Anthias further argues that belonging is also related to one's acceptance as part of a community and feeling safe in that specific group or community, "to belong is to share values, networks and practices and not just a question of identification" (Anthias 2008:8). Correspondingly, Ignatieff suggests that "where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong" (Ignatieff, 1993 cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006:197).

Some scholars highlight that due to globalization, increasing human movements and mobility, peoples' attachment and belonging to specific geographic locations has changed and become less important (Duyvendak 2011:28). Other studies, however,

suggest that the place of origin will remain salient for diaspora people even for second and later generations as places give feeling of home in a rapidly changing world (ibid).

In line with the consolidation of the understandings of homeland and home as mobile and multilocal in the contemporary world, the notion of belonging was also contested and transformed to something complex and multi-dimensional. Savage et al. (2005:80) argue that belonging is not that of an individual to a fixed community rooted in place, but rather one in which the place becomes valuable to the individual.

Moreover, globalization and continuous human mobility, prompted the formulation of a 'new kind of regional population' which is no longer defined through its connection to a specific geographic locality, but rather represented in relation to "selective and partial global ties that create distinctive kinds of imaginary belongings and in-betweenness" (Savage et al., 2005:203). For example, in the context of Afghan migrants in Germany and the UK, Braakman and Schlenkoff (2007:9) argue that many migrants experience in-betweenness in terms of understanding where they belong. Afghan migrants, living in European countries, feel as outsiders when visiting Afghanistan (Braakman & Schlenkoff 2007:20). This stems from the fact that the country of origin is mythologized in the memories of Afghan migrants which does not correspond to the reality due to undergoing changes in place of origin (ibid 11).

Furthermore, Castles (2002:1157) maintains that 'new modes of migrant belongings' are being created in the current world, which further enhances the consolidation of transnational identities and communities and several citizenships. Accordingly, Kasbarian (2020:167) also underlines that in the contemporary world, people can have a sense of multiple belongings, not simply one. In the context of Syrian-Armenians migration to Armenia, Kasbarian (2020:167) argues that many Syrian-Armenians are connected to and are caught 'in-between' two homes – their birthplace in the shape of Syria and Armenia as their 'step homeland' – a 'homeland' where they were not born, but are attached through their identification, social bonds, shared memories and

experiences. Kasbarian (2020:168) further argues that living in Armenia is not a comfortable situation for Syrian-Armenians as they are trapped between “the home of attachment and the new potential home of emplacement.”

### **2.3 Return**

Another increasingly common subject in migration and diaspora studies is return migration, which is also closely related to the notions of home, homeland, and belonging. There is well-developed and diverse literature regarding return migration over the last decades, encompassing various diasporic and migrant groups (Wessendorf 2007; Lehmann 2012; Darieva 2011a; King & Christou 2011; Kasbarian 2015, 2020; Layock 2016; Pawlowka 2017; Fittante 2017; Korkmaz 2020). Many studies use the terms return and repatriation in the context of diasporas’ migration to either their country of origin or their parents’ and grandparents’ homeland (Markowitz & Stefansson 2004). Other studies prefer to use the concept of homecoming due to fact that it is more complex and able to capture various forms of return (Laycock 2012; Darieva 2011). Moreover, in the case of second and later-generation migrants’ return, many scholars use ancestral, roots, ethnic or parental concepts (Karamanian 2019:21).

For instance, Wessendorf (2007:1084), in her study on second-generation Italians in Switzerland, argues that in their transnational childhood and adolescence the children of immigrants develop nostalgic relationships and attachment to their parents’ country of origin, which later affect their choice to move to the place where their parents originate from. The author explains such a return to the parental homeland as a form of ‘roots migration’ – implying that the children of immigrants search for ancestral roots.

However, all the terms regarding ‘return’ migration were largely criticized by scholars who argue that the idea of return is illusionary and problematic stemming from the hypothesis that those who left their country of origin can never go back literally to the same and old place which is engraved in their memories and narratives (King &

Christou 2011:460; Karamanian 2019:15). In the contemporary literature, thus, return migration were reconceptualized and situated within analytical and conceptual domains of the mobilities paradigm, the transnational approach and diaspora studies (King & Christou 2011:452). In this regard, Warner (1994: 171-172) suggests that return should be understood as a new arrival and migrants and refugees “habilitate, adapt and integrate, rather than re-habilitate, re-adapt and re-integrate.”

Furthermore, Kasbarian (2015:365) argues that the notion of ‘sojourner’ is the most accurate to label the return of diaspora people to a homeland as “sojourning can be a prelude to settlement, an experimental migration over a period of time.” Kasbarian (2015:365) uses the concept of ‘sojourner’ for explaining the transnational dimension of ethnic return migration of Diaspora-Armenians to Armenia as dynamic and variable process. According to author, sojourning help to understand the high mobility of migrants who “make an active decision to return on their own terms, free to leave when they wish and indeed, to visit home as often as they desire” (Kasbarian 2015:365).

Likewise, in the classic literature, migration is studied as a one-way journey from the country of origin to the host country and return as the final destination of migrants. However, more recent studies contest such a simplistic view by arguing that return to country of origin or ancestral homeland is not the final chapter of the migration cycle as many migrants continue the journey by moving from the place where they have returned to (Karamanian 2019:16).

Karamanian (2019:41), in addition, argues that when inhabiting the place of origin or ancestral homeland, diaspora peoples’ expectations of life in the homeland and their anticipated hope of belonging at times are not fulfilled. Instead, migrants encounter disappointment and exclusion due to rupture between what they hope for and what they find in reality in homeland. Correspondingly, as Lehmann (2012:188) argues, Armenian ‘returnees’ to Soviet Armenia acknowledged the absence of the shared experiences and memories and discovered essentially different culture and homeland

for them. Because of the differences, the diaspora Armenian ‘returnees’ felt themselves as ‘foreigners’ in Soviet Armenia and, therefore, migrated back to the diaspora when they could.

Coincidentally, Similar situations and experiences can be traced among Syrian-Armenians who moved to Armenia because of the war in Syria. In this regard, Kasbarian (2020:169) highlights that for many Syrian-Armenians moving to Armenia was traumatic and disappointing, which forced them to either move back to Syria or migrate further afield, mostly to Canada and other countries. In this context, Ley & Kobayashi (2005:111) argue that diasporic people’s experiences of returning from their homelands to their place of origin or migrating to other countries, foreground the continuous rather than complete nature of migration in a transnational era.

Moreover, for better understanding the reasons that motivate migrants to leave longed-for homeland and ‘return’ to the diaspora, it is important to take into account host societies’ and countries’ attitudes towards newly arrived diaspora people. In this respect, as Yuval-Davis maintains that it is through experiences and practices of inclusion and exclusion that people shape and maintain feelings about the new locations, and possess attachment (Yuval-Davis et al. 2006:21). In contemporary research on migration and diaspora, a significant number of studies focus on observing the stories of exclusion, racialization, resentment and discrimination confronted by diasporic people upon return to the ‘ancestral homeland’ (Karamanian 2019:41). These arguments find their reflections in Lehmann’s study (2012) on Diaspora-Armenians’ return to Soviet Armenia in the 1940s. The author underlines that due to living in exile and developing their own form of ‘Armenianness’, diaspora people experienced cultural shock when moved to Soviet Armenia (Lehmann 2012:172). Diaspora-Armenians were mocked for their different form of Armenian dialect, their adherence to religious behaviour, and their work habits that stood in contrast to those of Soviet Armenian society (Lehmann 2012:172). In this regard, Panossian (2006:362) maintains

that by the arrival of Diaspora-Armenians to Soviet Armenia between 1946-1948, a “split was created between local and newcomer, the *Hayastantsi* (Armenian from Armenia) and the *aghpar* (meaning brother but used as a derogatory term for Armenians from diaspora).” In other words, binaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ were created and repatriates were constantly reminded of their ‘foreignness’ in the Soviet Armenian society (Lehmann 2012:172).

Similarly, an estimated 20,000 Syrian-Armenians who moved to Armenia, because of the war in Syria, also encountered discrimination, exclusion, social alienation. In her study on Syrian-Armenian ‘returnees’ to Armenia, Ghahriyan (2017:37-38) investigates the socio-cultural, economic and legal challenges faced by Syrian Armenians. The author argues that such challenges cause social alienation, isolation and exclusion of Syrian-Armenians in Armenian society. Another study suggests that Syrian-Armenians had difficulties to participate in Armenian economic, cultural and everyday life because of the distinctions between their experiences of identifications and different forms of ‘Armenianness’, as well as lifestyle, language, economy, culture, cuisine, etc (Della Gatta 2017:355-356).

## **2.4 Diaspora-Armenian ‘returnees’**

A significant amount of research was done regarding the diaspora return in the Armenian context. A large body of literature focuses on the ‘repatriation’ of Diaspora-Armenians to Soviet Armenia during the 1946-1949s (Lehmann 2012; Pattie 2004, 2005; Laycock 2012, 2016; Malekian 2007; Meliksetyan 1985; Papazian 2014; Stepanyan 2010, Yousefian 2011). While some of these studies explore official, organizational, or top-down history of the Diaspora-Armenians ‘repatriation’ (Yousefian 2011; Meliksetyan 1985), other studies look into the aspects of cross-cultural interactions, collective memory, and notions of diaspora and homeland (Pattie 2004, 2005; Laycock 2009; Stepanyan 2010; Lehmann 2012).



For instance, Yousefian in his dissertation focuses on the structural conception and implementation of the Diaspora-Armenians repatriation by the Soviet state through various campaigns, networks and organizations. Yousefian uses documents and other materials from Soviet archives to investigate how the repatriation campaign was planned and implemented. Meliksetyan's (1985) work is somewhat propagandist as it supports Soviet state narratives of the 'successful' migration and portrays the Soviet Union as the 'saviour' of the Diaspora-Armenians who were exiled from their homes during the genocide. These studies, favouring top-down approach, clearly neglect Diaspora-Armenians migrants' lived experiences, creating the need of studying migratory processes from a bottom-up perspective. Contrarily, the works of Laycock (2012, 2016) Lehmann (2012) and Stepanyan (2010) advocate for a more social-cultural approach by looking into the key drives behind the repatriation campaign – mainly the motifs of 'survivor', 'diaspora', and conceptions of Armenian identity and belonging.

For instance, Laycock (2016) in her study situates the Diaspora-Armenians 'repatriation' within the global trends of migration, displacement, and diaspora versus homeland tensions. However, Laycock also does not engage with migrants themselves. Furthermore, Lehmann's (2012) and Stepanyan's (2010) studies lean on lived experiences and individual testimonies for analyzing migrants' cross-cultural interactions. These studies emphasize the differences in language, religion, food, traditions, and customs that moulded the ways Armenian 'returnees' negotiated their identity and sense of belonging in Soviet Armenia – claimed to be their 'homeland'. Notwithstanding this bulk of studies regarding Diaspora-Armenians migration to Soviet Armenia, the narratives and perception of homeland, home, belonging and conceptions of identity particularly in the aftermath of the migration were not sufficiently investigated.

Although several studies exist on Diaspora-Armenians' migration to Soviet Armenia, the post-Soviet era were not widely covered in the literature. Moreover, the existing studies mainly focus on the challenges and difficulties of diasporans integration into the fabric of society in the post-independence setting of Armenia (Harutyunyan 2011; Mkrtchyan 2009; Mkrtchyan & Tsaturyan 2006). Other studies also examine the main reasons motivating Diaspora-Armenians to move to Armenia permanently or temporarily (Darieva 2011, 2013, Karageozian 2015; Fittante 2017).

For instance, Fittante (2017) underlines that one of the important reasons of American-Armenians migration to Armenia is the desire to participate in the transforming homeland and rebuilding and rebranding Armenia. Research on American-Armenian returnees by Darieva (2011) also discusses the desire of transforming and developing the economy in the homeland as one of the central objectives of diaspora Armenians' decision to move to Armenia. Other studies also highlight the role of family and kin networks for diaspora Armenians' return to Armenia. Karageozian (2017:38) underlines that family factor affecting the return decision can differ depending on where diasporic people come from. The author further argues that Armenians from the Middle East, especially from Iran, have close or extended family members in Armenia which influence the return motivations and integration processes much more than in the case of many American-Armenians who often move to Armenia alone or with their nuclear families (Karageozian 2017:38). Karamanian's (2019) dissertation concentrates on the individual experiences, narratives, and interactions in order to understand Diaspora-Armenians' migration journey and decision behind the movement to Armenia, as well as, their adjustment and integration processes, difficulties, and challenges in the post-migration setting of Armenia.

Furthermore, so far, a small number of studies were conducted in relation to Syrian-Armenians' migration to Armenia. To a large extent, the literature on Syrian-Armenians is centred around the discussion of refugee integration policies of the

Armenian state. This scholarship mainly focuses on the arrival, reception and treatment of Syrian-Armenians by the governmental and non-governmental actors in Armenia (Călin-Ștefan 2014; Campos 2016; Ghahriyan 2017; Uzelac & Meester 2018; Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Balasanyan 2019). This literature also analyses the economic, legislative, and social problems that become an obstacle for Syrian-Armenians to integrate in Armenia and force them to further migrate from Armenia.

Kasbarian's (2015, 2020) studies are of key importance as they investigate the evolving and complex relationship between the diaspora and homeland through the lived experiences of diasporans, including Syrian-Armenians who moved to live in Armenia in different times. Kasbarian (2015) views the Diaspora-Armenians as a counter-community that re-imagines and expands the homeland while embodying the transnational. Kasbarian's (2020) study on Syrian-Armenian migrants in Armenia contests the traditional approaches of diaspora as exilic misfortune and victimhood by underlining the latent, deep-seated and enduring anxieties and complexities associated with being diasporan. Consequently, Kasbarian (2020) challenges predominant fixed conceptions of home, homeland, and contribute to narratives about multi-layered diasporan identities and belongings.

Despite the growing literature regarding Diaspora-Armenians' migration to Armenia, very few studies look into the migrants' experiences, narratives, and perceptions of homeland, home, and belonging. Nor the contemporary literature provides extensive insights into the personal experiences and understanding of home, homeland, and belonging among Syrian-Armenian migrants, currently residing in Armenia. This study, thus, aims to explore the ways Syrian-Armenians negotiate and define their perception of homeland, home, and belonging in the post-migration setting in Armenia.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, I begin with discussing the theoretical framework of diaspora that is used for understanding Syrian-Armenians' narratives of homeland, home, and belonging. I proceed with the theoretical framework of ethnicity. I further draw upon Appadurai's concepts of aspiration and imagination. By combining these theoretical insights, I develop a comprehensive analytical toolkit that allows me to scrutinize Syrian-Armenian participants' perceptions of homeland, home, and belonging, as well as, the ways they maintain boundaries with Syria and imagine their future.

#### **3.1 Diaspora**

Up until the 20th century, this classic definition of diaspora was predominant in academic analysis articulating the traumatic exile from the historical homeland to many locations of particular ethnic groups. In the classic definitions, diasporas are studied as entities that are attached to an original homeland, have an endless longing for and sense of belonging to homeland. Diasporas also possess collective knowledge of a common ethnic identity, myths, and memories about the feeling of loss, victimization and idealized homelands and desire to return to that homeland (Safran 1991; Cohen 2008; Tölölyan 2007).

This classical model of diaspora, however, does not provide a useful analytical framework for my study as it is limited by the taken-for-granted characteristics and essentialist assumptions about ethnicity, identity, homeland, etc. Inspired by the writings of Stuart Hall (1990:235-236), whose theoretical framework marks that "diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference," this study aims to move beyond studying diaspora through the traditional and essentialist conceptions of ethnicity and nationality, etc. and contribute to the understanding of the diaspora, identity, homeland, and belonging as fluid, unfixed and multilocal. This study,

therefore, relies on the contemporary frameworks of diaspora, defining it as a social condition, and a societal process (Anthias 1998:557).

Sociologist Anthias (1998:570) underlines that diaspora should be studied and understood as a socio-cultural condition, rather than simply defining it through the concepts of ethnicity and race. According to her, “identity and cultural narratives of belonging take on ‘ethnic’ forms which are themselves centrally linked to location, in terms of territory and social positioning, and therefore, ‘the bonds that tie’ are heterogeneous and multiple” (Anthias 1998:570). Another sociologist – Brah (1996:241) suggests using the concept of ‘diaspora space’, which she explains as a framework of genealogical analysis of different kinds of ‘borders’ that manifest the intersectionality of contemporary transmigrant conditions of people, culture, capital, commodities. This concept addresses the realm where economic, cultural, and political effects of crossing/transgressing different ‘borders’ create a space, where new forms of transcultural identities are constituted, and where belonging and otherness are appropriated and contested.

Furthermore, Brubaker (2005:12) argues that diaspora should not be studied in “substantial terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim.” Brubaker (2005:12) suggests that diaspora should be understood as a category of practice, as according to him, diaspora is a process, which is being claimed and practiced by people – a process of claims-staking and remaking. Correspondingly, Tölölyan (2007:649-650) emphasizes that diaspora should not be identified as a fixed concept and completed social construction but rather “as a process of collective identification and form of identity, marked by everchanging differences that chart the shifting boundaries of certain communities hierarchically embedded as enclaves with porous boundaries within other, larger communities.”

Moreover, Johnson (2012:53) underlines that aside from collective identification and belonging, there is also an individual sense of belonging that determines a self-

identification, as diaspora identity is a “hybrid identity that is not necessarily restricted to an identity based on home or host” but based on personal consciousness. Subsequently, it can be argued that the formation of the identity and diaspora is a social process, a practice and not a category of people, and in the same way, becoming a member of a diaspora community is a process of self-identification and consciousness (Johnson 2012:53).

Furthermore, Vertovec (1997:281) defines diaspora not only as a social process but also as a ‘type of consciousness’ – a ‘dual consciousness’ – referring to the self-awareness of the multilocality of the home, belonging and identification that contemporary transnational communities possess. According to Vertovec (1997:281), through the understanding of multilocality, the individual develops the need of connecting the ‘self’ with others, both ‘here’ and ‘there’, who share the same ‘roots’ and ‘route’. In this regard, Brah (1996:180) underlines that each diaspora is intertwined with multiple ‘travellings’, which may be transformed into one ‘journey’ via an intersection of diaspora peoples’ narratives “as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced, and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory.”

The contemporary literature, thus, moves away from analyzing diaspora as exiled, dispersed, and marginalized group of people, to studying diaspora from within, from a migrant-centered perspective by adopting the theoretical lenses of the global diasporic consciousness (Cohen 2008; Tölölyan 2007; Abdelhady 2011; Aly 2015). As Abdelhady and Aly (2022, forthcoming) argue, studying diaspora people through the perspective of the global diaspora consciousness, contributes to the understanding of the “dynamism and contemporaneousness of diasporans and diaspora communities” and analyzing the “connections and movements between local identities and experiences and global transformations”. This approach emphasizes the need to examine and understand homeland, home, identity, and belonging not only as multiple,

contingent, and fluid but also as local and global at the same time (Abdelhady 2011; Aly 2015).

Moreover, the contemporary scholarship also moves away from the traditional triadic approach to studying diaspora, which argues that migrants create and maintain different connections and relations with their host and home countries, as well as diaspora community (Safran 1991). According to Abdelhady and Aly (forthcoming), the triadic approach also assumes that migrants possess collective identities and belong to “places of origin, places of residence and a scattered community.” The contemporary scholarship, thus, advocates studying and thinking about diaspora beyond the static understandings of belonging, homeland, and home within the ‘transnational fields’ (Abdelhady & Aly, forthcoming; Butler 2001; Hage 2005; Tölölyan, 2007; Kasbarian 2015, 2020).

In this regard, Butler (2001:193-194) suggests shifting the defining element of diaspora studies from the diaspora group itself to a methodological and theoretical framework for studying the diaspora phenomenon. In other words, Butler (2001:194) proposes examining and understanding diaspora communities, homeland, and host societies as categories of analysis – a framework that studies diaspora from the perspective of the specific process of community formation. In this light, as Abdelhady and Aly (2022, forthcoming) argue, using diaspora as a category of analysis, enables us to understand “migrant communities not as homogenous entities that are out there, but as entities that are constantly negotiated and contested, that exclude as much as include.”

Furthermore, while underlining the understanding of diasporans as transnational people, whose identities are contingent and unfixed, some diaspora scholars also argue that the role of the place and locality for the diasporans should not be neglected (Tölölyan 2005, 2007). This perspective criticizes “both ‘sedentary’ approaches that treat place, stability, and dwelling as a natural steady-state, and ‘deterritorialized’ approaches that promote a new ‘grand narrative’ of mobility, fluidity, or liquidity as a

pervasive condition of postmodernity or globalization” (Hannam et al. 2006:5). The scholars of this theoretical approach argue that mobilities are always accompanied by and cannot be understood without taking into consideration ‘moorings’ or various kinds of “rhizomatic attachments and reterritorializations” (Hannam et al. 2006:3).

In this regard, Kasbarian’s chapter on the Armenian experience in the Middle East, is of key importance, as it discusses the limitations of the triadic model of studying diaspora (in Abdelhady & Aly, forthcoming). At the same time, Kasbarian advocates studying “Armenians spread throughout the Middle East and beyond as transnational people, who are rooted at home and routed through multiple orientations and connections and the Middle East as a site that is living and vibrant” (ibid).

To bring it closer to my topic, as illustrated throughout this section, the contemporary theoretical frameworks of diaspora prove to be useful for analyzing the meaning-making and constructions of the homeland, home, and the interplay between multiple, local and global identities, and belongings among the Diaspora-Armenian participants of this study. This thesis, therefore, addresses the perception of homeland, home, and belonging of Syrian-Armenian ‘returnees’ to Armenia within the analytical lenses of ‘diasporic space’, ‘diasporic consciousness’, ‘diaspora as socio-cultural process and condition’. By doing so, I do not aim to overlook the significance of the place and locality for the Diaspora-Armenians of this study. This research, therefore, employs a more balanced approach of combining ‘mobile’ and ‘deterritorialized’ understandings of homeland, home, and belonging.

### **3.2 Ethnicity**

The notion of ethnicity is hardly new and has been widely used in the literature since the late 1960s, including in the more recent studies on migration and diaspora issues. The concept of ethnicity is not a uniform phenomenon, but rather has a complex, unfixed, and disputable meanings.



There are several theories of ethnicity developed in the sociological and anthropological literature. One of the oldest theoretical frameworks of understanding ethnicity is primordialism. Primordialism sees ethnicity as something given by birth, something fixed and permanent (in Isajiw 1992). According to primordialist scholars, ethnicity is established by kin-clan connections and ties, and is viewed as product of long-standing cultural traditions, which individuals internalize through the process of socialization (Geertz 1963). This approach, however, has been largely criticized as it overlooks the dynamic, contingent, and fluid nature of ethnicity in different historical and social contexts.

Another common theory of ethnicity is the instrumental or situational approach. This approach underlines that ethnicity is situational and can be claimed and mobilized by individuals and specific ethnic group for achieving specific objectives (Fenton 1999; Yang 2000). This approach emphasize that people become 'ethnic' and persist to be 'ethnic' if their ethnic background corresponds to their interests and creates significant advantages for them (Yang 2000:46). Furthermore, influenced by Weber's and Barth's studies, the recent scholarship (Banton 2000; Brubaker 2004; Malešević' 2010) emphasizes that ethnicity requires successful mobilization of social action to transform mere category affiliation into conscious political association. This approach, however, also have limitations as it fails to sufficiently address the relationship between culture and ethnicity (Jones 2003:79). It also reduces the meaning of ethnicity to political and economic interests, as well as, to mobilization and politicization of culture in ethnic groups (ibid).

Other approaches to ethnicity emphasize that ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon that is also contingent and unfixed. These approaches also view ethnicity as something that draws boundaries and creates groups to which people claim and practice belonging. The roots of the constructivist understanding of ethnicity derives from Weber's and Barth's theoretical frameworks.

Weber (1968) argues that ethnic identities and groups are social constructions because they are based on a community belief of shared ethnicity, ancestry, culture, etc. Weber underlines that it is not the belief in the community that creates the group, but it is the group that creates the belief. According to Weber's approach, race, tribe, customs, culture and religion are equally important for constructing the belief of common ethnicity among the ethnic groups. Weber defines ethnicity as a way of drawing boundaries between individuals, and creating social groups.

Barth (1969) argues that ethnicity should be understood by looking into the boundaries and the process of ethnic identification, rather than focusing on the cultural features and kin-clan ties. According to Barth (1969:15), the ethnic boundaries and process of identification are those that constitute and define the ethnic group, not the cultural and kin-clan structures. In Barth's approach, ethnicity is seen as a process by which boundaries between different groups are constructed and maintained. The importance of Barth's theory of ethnicity is that it embodies a move away from static understandings of culture by defining ethnicity as a context-dependent, situational and flexible phenomenon that also fluctuates with time and place.

Later on, Weber's theory of ethnic identity and Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries established the base for the development of the constructivist school of thought. Constructivist approach to ethnicity challenges the essentialist understanding of human subjects and practices as inherent and fixed embodiments of cultural and biological features. Constructivism, rather, situates ethnicity within specific social, historical and cultural contexts, and emphasizes the fluidity and subjectivity of ethnic identity (Hall 1990; Brubaker 2004). Constructivist scholars see ethnicity as socially, culturally, and politically constructed phenomenon, which is also something in-process and is constantly reshaped by the changes in the social environment (Hall 1990; Brubaker 2004). This approach, thus, defines ethnicity as a dynamic entity, boundaries of which are fluid and unfixed (Yang 2000).

A more contemporary literature underlines that people are not simply defined by a set of binaries, but are multi-positioned and their ethnic identities interact, intersects and fuse with other social identities, such as race, gender, class (Arber 2000; Omi & Winant 2002). Arber (2000:46) argues that people are multi-positioned and their “positioning is something strategic, a coalition, a way of resistance, a precursor of agency and yet and at the same time something contingent and relational, mediated by and mediating, a crisscrossing of understandings and ways of doing.”

The understanding of ethnicity as fluid, unfixed dynamic entity, and situating it within the contested and changing social structures, also created the need to put the individual and group experiences in the center of the analysis of ethnicity.

The constructivist approach of ethnicity, thus, proves to be useful for understanding the ways the social, cultural, historical and political experiences of Syrian-Armenians inform their ethnicity and reinforce their sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. This framework is useful for my study as it also helps me to understand the ways the ethnic identity of my Syrian-Armenian participants informs their perception of homeland, home, and belonging. Furthermore, the constructivist approach to ethnicity contributes to understanding and analysis of Syrian-Armenians diasporic identities as fluid, unfixed and dynamic. This framework helps me to move away from the essentialist explanations of diaspora by critically analyzing the ways Syrian-Armenians claim and practice belonging towards a specific group.

### **3.3 Aspiration and Imagination**

To further investigate how and where the Syrian-Armenians imagine their future and to scrutinize the role of the aspiration and imagination for development of better opportunities and positions among this study participants in the post-migration setting of Armenia, I look into the theoretical approaches to aspiration and imagination.

To begin with, I believe it is useful to discuss Bourdieu's concept of culture capital, which refers to different types of knowledge, skills, symbols, ideas, tastes, preferences, and behavior that people maintain by the virtue of being a part of a specific class in a particular culture or social group, and which can be strategically used as resources in social action (Bourdieu 1997). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital comes in three forms: 'embodied' – the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, such as language and accent); 'objectified' – physical objects such as photographs, paintings, books, etc.; and 'institutionalized' – academic qualification symbolizing the cultural competence and authority (Bourdieu 1997:47).

In addition to Bourdieu's cultural capital, Appadurai (1996:12) further advocates the usage of 'cultural' – the adjective form, instead of 'culture' as, according to him, the notion of 'culture' brings the culture back to the discursive domain of race and overlooks the inequalities and distinctions in lifestyles.

Furthermore, Appadurai (2004, 2013) brings the aspect of the future to his conceptualization of 'cultural' and culture as differences by discussing the role of imagination and aspiration. Appadurai (2004) defines aspirations as practical agentic abilities that navigate one's social and cultural field to create and take advantage of present possibilities to better future possibilities and positions. The capacity to aspire is described by him as the ability to "read a map of a journey into the future" (Appadurai, 2004:76). Appadurai (2013:187) underlines that aspirations should be understood within the "wider ethical and metaphysical ideas that derive from larger cultural norms." Aspirations are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life, rather than being simply individual, therefore, they should be included as a dimension of what is cultural (Appadurai 2013:187).

The framework of the aspiration as capabilities is used by the scholars of the contemporary migration and diaspora studies, which contributing to the understanding of human mobility as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social, economic,

political, cultural, technological and demographic changes (de Haas 2021:12). de Haas (2021:17) argues that for a better understanding of structure and agency in the migration processes, this framework studies and conceptualizes migration as a process of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures. The framework of aspirations and capabilities advocates a perspective in which “moving and staying are seen as complementary manifestations of migratory agency and in which human mobility is defined as peoples’ capability to choose where to live, including the option to stay, rather than as the act of moving or migrating itself” (de Haas 2021).

Inspired by the academic works and concepts of Appadurai, in her study of young refugees, Vitus (2022:400) argues that the capacity to aspire is a crucial element for the young refugees’ well-being. She considers refugee youths’ wishes, dreams, and imaginations of the future as formed by the possibilities and constraints in the past and present (Vitus 2022:403). In her article, Vitus (2022:400) investigates the ways the young people with refugee backgrounds envision their future, by narratively linking it with their family migration (hi)story and their present life and by drawing on various social, narrative, and temporal resources that produce different senses of agency and capacities to aspire. In other words, Vitus’s article studies the future orientations of the young refugees in association with the capacities of aspiring emanated from their present contextual and family biographical resources and agency (Vitus 2022:401).

Furthermore, aside from aspirations, Appadurai (2013:286) studies and defines imagination as one of the “human preoccupations that contribute to the shaping of the future.” Appadurai (2013:286) attempts to take imagination back to the center of cultural domain by explaining it “as a social fact, a practice, and a form of work”. Inspired by Anderson’s (1983) concept of ‘imagined communities’, Appadurai (1996:31) explains imagination as a social practice and as something critical and new in global cultural processes. According to him, imagination is an important resource in all social processes and projects, and needs to be considered as a “quotidian energy,

not visible only in dreams, fantasies, and sequestered moments of euphoria and creativity” (Appadurai 2013:287). For Appadurai (1996:32), the imagination become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.

Coincidentally, Zittoun and Gillespie (2016) observe imagination as a social and cultural process facilitated by the use of resources, which include personal experiences, information, images from technology and social media, and representations of self and others. Imagination can be considered as a vital socio-cultural phenomenon that combines various types of psychological processes that allow us to call into play the past experiences and recombine them in unique ways, so as to create new alternatives and possible futures (Zittoun et al. 2020).

In this regard, the link between imagination and aspirations in the migration process is studied in different contexts (Koikkalainen et al. 2019; Schewel 2015; Czaika & Vothknecht 2012; Smith 2006). Koikkalainen and Kyle (2015) suggest using the notion of ‘cognitive migration’ to describe the process of thinking about one’s life in a future time and place before making the actual move of migrating. Cognitive migration is seen as a process by which the individuals, considering migration, imagine themselves in a future time, place and social setting (Koikkalainen & Kyle 2015).

To summarize this section, I believe that the concepts of aspiration and imagination, prove to be relevant for this study. Firstly, using these concepts enables me to understand Syrian-Armenians’ migration to Armenia as a process of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures. Secondly, it helps me understand the role of the aspirations and imaginations in the process of navigating participants in their social and cultural field, as well as in creating better possibilities and positions in the future. Furthermore, the concepts of aspiration and imagination is vital in terms of understanding of how Syrian-Armenians

envision themselves in a future time, place and social setting. The concepts of aspiration and imagination, combined with the diaspora framework, enables me to understand how Syrian-Armenians' perception of homeland and home, multilocal identities, and different modes of belonging, inform the ways participants envision their future.

## **4. Methodology**

In this chapter, I discuss the research methodology that will be used to analyze the empirical material and to answer the research questions of this study. In this section, therefore, I discuss the research design and paradigm, research method, participant selection, semi-structured interviews, data analysis, reflexivity and ethical considerations.

### **4.1 Research design**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, based predominantly on in-depth semi-structured interviews. I chose this approach due to its “characteristically exploratory, fluid, flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive nature” (Mason 2018:24). Moreover, this method develops qualitative strategic thinking, which is a dynamic, active, investigative and reflexive process (Mason 2018:31). The qualitative research design is relevant for this study, as it grants me the ability to “produce rich, in-depth, and nuanced analysis”, as well as “explore complex, conjunctural, multi-faceted dimensions of the migration dynamics” (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz 2018:2-3). Furthermore, this approach helps me gain in-depth understanding of how my participants interpret the complexity of their worlds, perceive their social realities, and perform within their social world (Burns 2000:10). This approach, thus, serves well to the objectives of this research for studying, capturing and understanding the complexities of diasporic lives and identities.

Semi-structured interviews also provide the opportunity to capture how the migrants narrate their lived experiences and make sense of what they perceive as home, homeland, and belonging. Besides, it provides me more flexibility in the research process, as I could use the findings from the in-depth interviews as a way to guide my research directions.



The design of this study preliminary relies upon the qualitative approach of narrative inquiry, which is widely used and practiced in migration and diaspora studies (O’Neill 2006, Eastmond 2007, Gemignani 2011, Baynham & De Fina 2016). Narrative analysis follows an open, flexible and unstructured approach and aims to explore peoples’ feelings, perceptions, values, beliefs and to acquire an in-depth understanding of the meanings they give to lived experiences through told stories and subjective expressions (Kumar 2014; Webster & Mertove 2007; Eastmond 2007). Moreover, narrative research implies that the self is continuously being invented and reinvented through the constructions and interpretation of the “past experience in the light of the present as well as by the way that the future is imagined” (Eastmond 2007:249).

Consequently, my choice of using this particular qualitative research approach is informed by the critical role that narratives and stories play in the complex understandings of Syrian-Armenians’ lived experiences and perception of home, homeland and belonging in transnational and migratory contexts. This approach, also provides an in-depth understanding of interviewees’ relocation journeys, specific events and processes informing migration decisions, and livelihood after migration.

Furthermore, narrative inquiry is not a uniform methodology, but rather has various forms and analytic tools and practices (Chase 2011). This unfixed nature of narrative analysis makes it the most relevant research approach for this study, as it facilitates situating the participants’ individual stories and meaning-making of home, homeland, and belonging within their personal and social experiences, as well as, cultural and historical (time and place) contexts (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

Additionally, the narratives and stories told by the participants have been largely informed by my presence, interview questions, as well as my stories and experiences – in other words by the ‘observer’s effect’ (Blommaert and Dong 2017:27). The narrative, thus, is not a stable structure that simply exists out there, but rather an entity that is being reciprocally co-constructed between the teller and listener or between

participant and researcher (Hall 2011:4, Kraus 2006:105). Therefore, the knowledge generated in this study is predominantly shaped by the participants' subjective narratives and stories told within specific social, cultural, historical contexts in interaction with the researcher.

## **4.2 Research Paradigm**

The paradigm of this study relies upon the theory of social constructivism, which manifests that what we consider to be reality and objective knowledge, are multiple meaningful constructions in the minds of individuals (Schwandt 1994; Lincoln & Guba 1985). This theoretical framework, thus, suits my aim to observe how the study participants through their stories, narratives and experiences construct and give various meanings to what they call home and homeland.

Likewise, epistemologically, this study is grounded in the social constructionists' perspective, which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are accomplished by social actors and maintained through social processes (Bryman, 2012:710). Subsequently, I believe that this perspective is useful for my study for understanding and analyzing the experiences and practices through which Syrian Armenians reciprocally construct their identities and various meanings of home, and homeland, and sustain them through social processes.

Ontologically, my research is guided by the theoretical premises of constructivist realism combining the elements of constructivism and realism (Cupchik 2001). This perspective is relevant to my study, as I do not aim to overlook the external social realities that surround and are possessed by the Syrian Armenian participants of this study, however, I acknowledge that those social realities are only acquired and understood through subjective interpretations.

With this in mind, I believe that conducting this research through the framework of constructivism allows me to better understand study participants' subjective

interpretations of the social reality generated through their narratives and stories in specific social and historical contexts.

### **4.3 Participants Selection**

This study is based on interviews with ten people identifying themselves as Syrian Armenians, who moved to Armenia between 2010-2022. Most of the participants who agreed to take part in this research were found through social media channels (mainly Facebook) and snowball sampling (Baltar & Brunet 2012), which significantly simplified finding informants. Here, I believe my identity and having a Syrian-Armenian mother often came in handy as a ‘carte blanche’, as I easily got consent from my informants that expressed willingness to participate in this study. Furthermore, being considered as an ‘insider’ by my participants helped me build rapport and gain the trust of my interviewees (O’Reilly 2009:111-114).

I conducted ten interviews with Syrian-Armenians, currently residing in Armenia, particularly in the capital – Yerevan. The length of the interviews fluctuated between 60-80 minutes. Among the ten participants, six are female and four are male. My participants are engaged with different types of works, including the IT industry, project management, marketing, translations, teaching, textile industry, etc. In order to guarantee informants’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used in the place of participants’ real names.

### **4.4 Semi-structured interviews**

This study is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with a series of open-ended questions. The choice of this method is informed by the ontological perspective of this study that characterizes people as meaningful within the social world and an epistemological position that believes that people can provide important insights into the world around us through informal interactions and conversations (Mason 2018:111). Moreover, the loose structure of this method makes it possible to have

“interconnections of the views rather than a one-way flow of information” which contributes to the reflexivity of both researcher and informants (O’Reilly 2009:126). These in-depth interviews allowed my study participants to narrate their pre-migratory, migratory, and post-migratory trajectories and experiences, as well as perceptions of home, homeland, and belonging in a variety of ways.

The interview questions were intentionally chosen to stimulate conversations around participants' migratory experiences and stories, and understanding of the of home, homeland, and belonging from their viewpoints and get an emic perspective. During the interviews, I asked more ‘palatable’ and simple questions, such as, ‘*How do you feel about living in Armenia*, ‘*Do you feel at home*’, ‘*How was life in Syria*’ ‘*Do you think of migrating from Armenia.*’ This encouraged reflexivity and time for my participants to delve into their thoughts and provide me answers on a higher scale on the ladder of abstraction and respond to my initial inquiry (Mason 2018:69).

Due to continuous restrictions against Covid-19 imposed by the Armenian Government, I decided to conduct interviews through Zoom. Some studies suggest that the lack of social and non-verbal cues in online settings makes rapport-building difficult and affects negatively the overall quality of the interview (Shapka et al., 2016:362). Recent scholarship, however, suggests that there are many benefits and advantages for both participants and researcher in doing the interviews online (ibid). Doing interviews online creates more comfortable conditions for both interviewees and researcher and is more inclusive, as it allows the participants who have time and place limitations for face-to-face interviews to participate in research (Janghorban et al., 2014:1). Mason and Ide (2014) argue that many people, especially adolescent participants, demonstrate a strong preference for electronic data collection, as it is “much more convenient in terms of fitting it in with all of their other activities.” This was the case in my research, as most of my participants expressed willingness to do the interviews in the late evening hours and on weekends due to their working hours and other activities.

Furthermore, all my participants also felt relaxed and secure during the interviews due to being in a familiar and comfortable place – in their homes. Some scholars also suggest that using a web camera replaces non-verbal and social interaction at onsite settings (Janghorban et al., 2014:1). Regardless, I am aware that there are also limitations in doing online interviews, partially, due to not being at the site and witnessing the everyday life of my informants and experiencing obstacles in observing participants' body language. Most of the interviews have been conducted in Armenian and only one in English, based on the preferences of the informants. All the interviews have been recorded after acquiring informants' oral consent.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

I started the analysis of my findings with the transcription of the interviews, which is a theoretical, interpretive, selective and never complete process and already contains some of the researcher's biases and preferences (Blommaert & Dong 2010:68; Davidson 2009:37). However, I tried to avoid corrections or involuntarily vocalization and focused on the words that were said by my informants.

I proceed with coding process by establishing the key themes that constantly appeared in the texts and are related to the research concepts, such as home, homeland, belonging, diaspora, identity, and return. I further continued the coding process by creating new categories and identifying common words and concepts in the participants' narratives. As a result, I found out several other themes, such as better life conditions in Syria, difficulties in Armenia, continuous linkages with home country – Syria, desire to further migrate afield, imagining the future.

In conducting this research, I applied abductive reasoning. Rather than adhering to inductive and deductive models, utilizing abductive approach enabled me to constantly move iteratively between theory and analysis, while analyzing the acquired data from the interviews. Rather than looking for evidence, this approach allowed me to play with

possible explanations and add new perspectives to the existing literature on migration and diaspora by collecting insights on previously unnoticed patterns (O'Reilly 2009:105-107).

## **4.6 Reflexivity**

Conducting qualitative research requires high levels of reflexivity as it is important to take into consideration the researchers' established self-knowledge, certain positionality, beliefs, experiences and biases, as well as, their role in the knowledge productions (Davies 2010:1). I am aware that my ethnic background, as well as my personal, cultural and social baggage, beliefs and sensitivities consciously or unconsciously informed all the phases of my research. Providing a non-biased and well-balanced academic work, while at the same time not endangering the trust of Syrian-Armenians, required constant critical self-scrutiny or 'active reflexivity' (Mason 2018:17-18). It was, thus, my responsibility as a researcher to develop strategies to minimize the biases, which I tried to achieve by collecting participants' background information, diverse and multi-layered experiences and stories, as well as, by presenting my research objectives and goals to the interviewees from the beginning.

I believe that my ethnic background, identity, and knowledge of Armenian language, culture and history allowed me to better understand various elements and differences in the participants' perception of home, homeland, belonging, and identity constructions. Moreover, in Bourdieusian terms, my cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) in the form of Armenian language and culture, history, as well as, socially ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions were viewed to be similar to those of my participants. This was accompanied by the perception that I and my participants shared or were believed to share somewhat similar habitus. This helped me develop rapport and trust among my informants and made the research process a lot easier and smoother. Furthermore, my self-awareness and sensitivity of being an 'insider' also allowed me

to successfully de-essentialize diaspora, and participants perception of homeland, home, and belonging (Yeoh et al., 2000:396).

Besides, qualitative interviewing is also defined by looking in a mirror and seeing not only others, but also oneself, and the researcher, therefore, being both a subject and an object (O'Reilly 2009:117). Indeed, this study also became a journey of self-observation, and soul-searching for me. While doing this research, I caught myself questioning my perceptions of home, homeland, belonging not only as a researcher but also as an individual, identifying myself as Armenian.

Moreover, while doing this research, I encountered several situations that required me to control my emotions. However, given my Armenian identity and background, managing emotions fully became quite hard, especially when speaking about the Armenian genocide and war atrocities both in Syria and in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh). Thus, I believe that reflecting on my emotions as a researcher is of key importance not only for defining my biases and preferences but also for getting insight into the world of the people who are being observed (Diphorn, 2012:203). Therefore, in this study, I continuously reflect on my own emotions as they became an indispensable part of the research process and an assisting tool for a better understanding of the lifeworlds of study subjects (Davies 2010:2).

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues were hard to avoid and were not an exception in the case of my study. From the beginning, I realized that I am intruding at some level into my participants' world and private life (Davies & Spencer 2010) as given the nature of study I had to ask people to talk about their family histories, personal experiences and reasons motivating them to migrate to Armenia. Additionally, most of my participants relocated to Armenia because of the war in Syria. I was, thus, aware that asking them to disclose their displacement and migration journeys could have caused emotions and negative

feelings. Therefore, to make my participant feel more comfortable and conversation less painful, I often shared my own experiences, as well as my Syrian-Armenian mother's family stories, to ensure that I express my empathy towards my informants' feelings. Besides, I constantly clarified to my participant that they were not forced to talk about topics that made them upset or issues they did not want to share with me.

Another ethical-related issue in this study was the conversation around participants' financial conditions before and after the migration. I found it a difficult topic to speak about, as some of my informants often consciously or unconsciously omitted it from their stories during the interviews. As a researcher, I considered it my duty, to avoid forcing participants to further elaborate on those issues, as I treated them with respect and interact with them in a human, rather than exploitative manner.

Furthermore, I must point out that the majority of my participants found my thesis topic very interesting and important, and expressed their gratitude to me for taking the initiative to study Syrian-Armenians' migration processes. My participants were also thankful that I decided to research their perceptions of homeland, home, and belonging, and, while doing so, created a room for them to speak about their experiences and stories. In many cases, Syrian-Armenians of this study enjoyed talking about their lived experiences, especially about the differences between their and local (Hayastantsi) Armenians' language, traditions, religion, and habits, and spiced up their stories with jokes and anecdotes.



## **5. Findings**

This study is based on the interviews conducted with ten Syrian-Armenians – 6 females and 4 males, ages between 22 and 44 years. Nine of my participants are from Aleppo and only one from Damascus. All participants left Syria between 2010 and 2021 and currently reside in the capital of Armenia, Yerevan. This section provides an overview of the findings I collected through the Zoom interviews.

In this chapter I present my findings based on the predominant themes that I identified in the interviews regarding my participants narratives and conceptions of home, homeland, belonging. Furthermore, I also investigate the main reasons for Syrian Armenians migration to Armenia and look at the ways my participants continue to maintain different relationships with Syria in post-migration settings. Lastly, I complete my findings by discussing the ways my participants imagine their future and rationale behind their desire to further migrate from Armenia too.

### **5.1 What is Homeland?**

Different, at the same time, parallel perceptions and constructions of the meanings of the homeland co-exist in the narratives of my study participants of Syrian-Armenian origin, who moved to Armenia within the last 10-12 years. Perception of homeland among Syrian-Armenians residing in Armenia, varies from visions centered around a particular geographical land or an ethnic group, to vision of a place where one feels attachment, and belonging, and where is safe and comfortable.

For some of the Syrian-Armenian participants of this study, the understanding of homeland (in Armenian language *Hairenik* – meaning fatherland) is closely linked to a specific geographical place or a land, or a group of people. This vision can be traced in the narratives of Anahit – a 43 years old Syrian-Armenian participant, who left Syria with her family in 2016 because of the civil war and moved to Armenia. She is a tailor by profession and runs her small clothing and textile business in Armenia while living

with her family in Yerevan. Anahit highlights that homeland is something related to land and soil and, at the same time, a place where one does not feel foreigner. In her words:

First it should be your land, it should have connection to a land, homeland is the place you are attached to.... And, of course, peace, security, own house, work, education.... It seems to me that I have counted the most important ones. .... I feel calm in Armenia, you go out, everyone speaks Armenian, it sounds Armenian and it is close to your heart [*harazat in Armenian*].

A parallel perception is noticeable in the story of another participants – 22 years old Talar, born and raised in Aleppo, Syria. Talar, who is pianist by profession, migrated from Syria in 2014 with her parents and brother, and now married to an Armenian from Armenia and lives in Yerevan. Similarly, to Anahit's understanding of homeland, Talar underlines that homeland is the place, where someone is the owner and where someone feels safe no matter what happens. To put in her words:

Homeland (*Hairenik*) is a country, where you are the owner and no matter what kind of war there is, no matter how much you are under the influence of another state, it is your land, and no one will throw you out or say get out of this land....There is the feeling of security, you are safe here [in Armenia], this is your country.

In fact, for many Syrian-Armenians in this study, the notion of homeland is associated with a place where they have a certain sense of attachment and belonging, as well as, feel safe and comfortable. As one of my participants – Arman (26 years old) emphasizes: “The homeland is where you will feel safe, you do not feel discriminated against....by all means you are free in that country and you are attached to that country in some way.” Another interviewee – 31 years old Syrian-Armenian Arpi points out: “Homeland is where you feel that you belong to.... For a person the place of birth might be any place, in any city or country, but homeland is where you also feel belonging.”

Additionally, some Syrian-Armenians define their homeland as a place where key features of their Armenian identity, such as language, ethnicity, religion, culture, traditions, etc. are preserved and are allowed to be practiced by people. As my participant Anahit mentioned, despite the fact that many things were in Arabic in Syria, including some of the subjects in the Armenian schools, Armenians were allowed to keep their language, ethnicity, culture, and religion.

Although we were born there [Syria], we grew up there [Syria], our home and place where there [Syria], but we kept our ethnicity [Armenian] and the Syrian state allowed us. That is, it was not an obstacle in any way. The state had given the opportunity to keep our identity.

It can be traced in Anahit's narratives a primordial understanding of ethnicity. Her perception represents ethnicity as something fixed and inherited by birth. Moreover, Anahit's view of ethnicity also informs the way she perceives the meaning of homeland. In her conception, homeland is also a static and immobile entity, where she feels belonging, attachment and safety.

Another interviewee – 44 years old Syrian Armenian Mane emphasized that Armenians have always been loved and respected in Syria, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. In her words: “They love Armenians very much in Syria, we have a good name and they always have given us an opportunity to keep our ‘Armenianness’, to keep our identity both as a Christian and as an Armenian.”

Mane, who specializes in linguistics and translations, left Syria in 2014 because of the war and moved to Armenia. She now lives in Yerevan with her Syrian-Armenian husband and daughter. Furthermore, in her narratives, Mane uses the metaphor of the palm of hand to explain what is homeland. According to her perception, palm of the hand that figures in all Armenians is the homeland. In her words:

The homeland is like the palm of a hand, and all Armenians are gathered in the

palm of that hand, they are in the same place, that land, those people, the heart of those people...is completely different thing. The place where Armenians gather and look for their ethnicity, they are looking for a face, that is, Armenian and Christian.

Such conceptions of homeland by Syrian-Armenians participants of this study, correspond to more traditional approaches of understanding of homeland. Participants see homeland through essentialist prism and in singular and simple terms – homeland as fixed entity in the shape of current Republic of Armenia. Moreover, as in the traditional conception of homeland, Syrian-Armenian participants see homeland as safe and static place to ‘leave’ and ‘return’, where one is also attached and feels belonging. Such perceptions, however, fail to capture the complexity and multilocality of homeland. Contrary to the participants static perceptions of homeland, the contemporary literature suggest that homeland does not carry simply one and concrete definition but can have various and multiple meanings. Subsequently, contemporary literature emphasize that homeland can be multilocal, not necessarily bounded to a specific geographical place. In the next section, therefore, I discuss my participants’ narratives regarding the issue of where is their homeland.

## **5.2 Where is Homeland?**

The majority of Syrian-Armenians, whom I interviewed, consider the current Republic of Armenia as their homeland, or as they define it explicitly or implicitly as their – *hairenik* (fatherland).

One of my participants – 34 years old Talin, who was born and raised in Aleppo, mentioned that throughout their upbringing in the family, as well as in the Armenian schools in Syria, they were always told that homeland is Armenia.

You know...not only in the family but also in the schools, we have been encouraged a lot that the homeland is somewhere else, what they have always

taught us in schools, what has always been in our minds, is that the homeland (*hairenik*) is different, that one should go to homeland [Armenia] and live there.

Talin moved to Armenia in 2021. Previously she migrated from Aleppo to Beirut in 2014, lived and studied there for almost 7 years. Talin is one of the Syrian-Armenian participants who lives in Yerevan alone, as her parents did not leave Syria even during the war and still live in Aleppo.

Another participant – 22 years old Talar underlined that even before the war in Syria, she had in her mind the idea of moving to Armenia, carrying out her activities in there and contributing to the development of Armenia.

I never considered Syria as my homeland or my motherland, and I always tried to come to Armenia, because from a young age I already had the feeling that I should come to Armenia and carry out my activities here, my homeland is the one that needs me, not the foreign land [Syria].

This feeling of non-belonging to Syria and desire to move to Armenia before the war in Syria among some of the participants, might be the consequences of the long-existing exclusion policies and minoritization experiences of Armenian community in Syria. Syria adopted the millet system from the Ottoman Empire, which continued to exist in its modern-day forms in most Middle Eastern states. According to Kasbarian (forthcoming) the millet system with its modern forms is a key factor in perpetuating the idea of ‘preserving’ distinct and static identities of minority groups and creating boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the nation-state. The existence of the millet system in Syria as in other states of the region, resulted in minoritization, subalternation and exclusion of Armenians in Syria.

In her study, Abrahamyan (2020) argues that the anti-Armenian discourse that emerged around the questions of citizenship, voting rights, inclusion and exclusion during the French mandate, played a pivotal role in consolidating the Syrian national identity.

Moreover, the Armenian political elites and religious leaders used the Syrian anti-Armenian discourse to “mobilize their compatriots against and/or around it” and to preserve the Armenian identity in Syria.

Some scholars emphasize that, gradually, Armenians became an important element in state-building of Syria, and hostile attitudes towards them largely changed over the time (in Kasbarian 2020:165). However, the minoritization and exclusion of Armenians continued persisting in Syria (Migliorino 2006). Payaslian (2007), for instance, argues that authoritarian system in Syria left the Armenian community in the condition of subaltern diasporicity. According to Payaslian (2007:114), although Armenian community developed certain successes in the economic sphere, it “lacked the degree of economic and especially cultural and political voice to overcome its subalternity.” The Syrian government provided a space for the development of ethnic institutions, however within certain boundaries of loyalty and legitimacy to the state.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Syria had one of the largest Armenian communities before the civil war. Moreover, Armenians are granted the right to have Armenian institutions, including churches, charities, cultural associations, and schools (Migliorino 2006). The education in Armenians schools is mostly Arabic, however, some subjects are in Armenian, such as language, history and religion. In the economic field, Armenians also managed to construct a world of their own, largely based on independently owned small urban trades built inside the community networks (ibid).

However, by the start of the civil war and complete destructions of social and economic fabric in Syria, many Armenians left Syria, some took refuge in Armenia and claimed membership to Armenia, as it is believed to be their homeland.

In this regard, Syrian-Armenian participant – 22 years old Grig emphasized that in the books that they read in the Armenian language classes always mentioned Armenia and Mountain Ararat, Armenian fruits, paintings, etc. This constructed an attachment to Armenia and perceptions that Armenia is their land:

We always go with the mindset that there is Armenia that waits for us and not only that, there is a land that belongs to us. Like, that was the moment of like, okay, I have a country, I have land somewhere, which I have never seen before, but it is mine. It is like your biological parent, but lives somewhere else.

As Grig previously developed strong attachment to Armenia while living in Armenian community in Aleppo, by the start of the civil war, he and his family found themselves in Armenia and claim membership to it. Grig was youngster, when they moved to Armenia. The decision to migrate from Syria to Armenia, thus, was his parents. Grig, however, underlined that he was also asking his parents to leave Syria, because of the intolerable situation caused by the war. They currently live in Yerevan, Armenia.

In line with Grig's vision of understanding where is homeland, another participant – Mane compared Armenians' birth in Syria with childbirth through a surrogacy pregnancy – implying that Syria became the 'woman who bore children (Armenians) and gave them to their parents (Armenia) after the birth.

For a moment, how can I say that...it is when someone cannot have a child and someone agrees to bear a child, give birth to that child, and then give the child to the mother. As if, in the very similar way, we were born somewhere else [Syria], which kept us, raised us, but we belong to Armenia.

Similarly, to Grig's story, Mane, who moved from Syria to Armenia amid the civil war, soon claimed her membership and belonging to Armenia. However, the migration to Armenia is not self-evident for all Syrian Armenians, as many of them continues to reside in Syria and, in fact, never left Syria. As an example, at least two participants – Talin's and Areg's families continue to live in Aleppo. In this regard, Talin highlighted that Syria also played a very important role for her and her family, as she and her parents were born and raised in Aleppo and they did not think about leaving Syria completely. In her words:

At the same time, Syria was the place where we were born, lived, and grew up. We did not think that we should leave Syria completely like this. Yes, the homeland [Armenia] has a very big place in our hearts, but Syria also co-exists in our hearts. I mean, we look at Syria and Armenia equally.

Other participants highlighted that they always felt attachment to Syria and considered themselves both Armenian and Syrian. For example, Arman underlined that he recognizes Syria as his homeland too. In his words, feeling of belonging to Syria even became stronger after moving to Armenia. In his words:

When we lived in Syria, we did not feel that Syria was ours, Syria could be our homeland, etc., but when we came, we moved to Armenia in 2012, then I felt that there is an enormous longing for Syria. I am more connected to Syria in terms of the concept of homeland, rather than to Armenia....And, in my opinion, it is more because of the childhood memories, friends, neighborhood, school, etc. in Syria.

Parallely, Grig emphasized that besides being Armenian he identifies himself as Syrian too, because, first of all, he still holds Syrian citizenship, secondly, he was born in Syria and he made memories, feelings and emotions in Syria. Additionally, Grig continued his explanation with a story that he experienced in Yerevan, Armenia:

And, another thing that I remember, when one day I was in the taxi, the driver asked me: “Do you love Syria more than Armenia”? And that kind of thing also hurts me because it’s similar to a situation when someone asks a kid: “Do you want to choose your mom or your dad”? Like, I can’t choose one. Like, I’m Armenian, but I was also born in Syria, where I’ve made my memories.

Thus, as illustrated above, apart from recognizing Armenia as their homeland or *hairenik* (fatherland), many participants consider Syria as their homeland too. One of the participants – 26 years old Arthur, underlines that many Syrian-Armenians consider



Syria as their homeland also, or as he conceptualizes it – their motherland (*mairénik*).

Syria has always been like the motherland, for me and for many. Even now, you look and feel sorry that you do not know how to help so that the situation there will become slightly better. Syria has been also yours.... There has always been the perception that Syria is also our homeland.

It is worth to mention here, that Arthur is the only participant who together with his family moved from Aleppo in 2010, just before the start of the war. Their migration reasons, therefore, is not directly the war, but the desire to get education in Armenia. However, later on, war became the reason for not going back to Syria.

Similarly, to Arthur's vision, 25 years old Areg mentioned that they always spoke about Armenia and their homeland in his family, but they also considered and still continue considering Syria as their motherland.

For me personally, I will explain it in this way: Armenia is the fatherland (*hairénik*) and Syria is the motherland (*mairénik*). With the mindset that I was born there [Syria] and you are born from your mother, I call Syria my motherland, and Armenia my fatherland because we always longed for Armenia and were attached to it.

Construction of differences between motherland and fatherland illustrated gendered and essentialist conceptions of homeland, where motherland encompasses connotations of origins – roots, birth, home, household, family life, while fatherland connotes familial duties, the bonds of fraternity and paternity.

Although my participants' narratives about homeland were mostly centered around their experiences and visions about Armenia and Syria, another type of homeland – that is to say, 'ancestral homeland' – also came up in their stories. Affinity was often made to the historical lands considered to be Western Armenia (current eastern parts of Turkey). Moreover, when speaking about the roots or lineages of their families, all

participants could draw upon their grandparents' or great-grandparents' places of origin, and the names of the villages, towns, or regions their ancestors came from, and, where they lived once, before the Armenian Genocide. This illustrates that some participants understand homeland through the traditional definition of diaspora, which sees diaspora people as attached to the original homeland, from where they were exiled.

One of my interviewees – 28 years old Shogher explained that her ancestors from her father's side escaped Marash, Turkey, and fled Aleppo, Syria during the Armenian Genocide and survived due to their fluency in Turkish, as it helped them to not disclose their Armenian ethnicity during the massacres. Shogher also can speak fluent Turkish and feel close to that language. In her words:

Everyone from my father's side fled Marash and my mother's side was from Urfa and Erzurum. I went to Turkey through the land, only passing by Marash, but we didn't stop. But I want to go to Western Armenia and see it, see where I come from, see the lands that I cannot take back.

Similar narratives are manifested in Grig's story, who also speaks Turkish fluently and has ancestors from Turkey. Grig also feels a familiarity with the Turkish language and connection to those lands whenever he goes to Turkey.

Whenever I went to Turkey, I felt like wow... it is so close to my heart. And, by the way, I can speak Turkish just like Armenian....I can say that it is not that I consider myself as Turkish, like, no, but I feel like there is a connection to those lands because when you grew up in a family that has a connection to that land – Turkey, you immediately think like, oh, this place is not foreign to me.

As illustrated throughout this section, at least three different homelands coexist in the narratives of Syrian-Armenian participants, including their current country of residency – Armenia, their country of birth – Syria, and the lands of their ancestors.

### 5.3 What and where is Home?

Some of the Syrian-Armenians associate the meaning of home with safety, comfort, and a place, where someone makes memories, feelings, emotions, and imagines their future. Such conceptions of home contribute to the understanding of home not as a fixed physical territory, but as a more imagined, multifaceted socially constructed phenomenon that is also incomplete and in progress. Such conceptions of home also correspond to what Rapport and Dawson (1998:7) define as ‘plurilocal home’ – meaning that home exists in more than one place.

For instance, Talin highlighted that there is no concrete definition for home (in Armenian language *Tun* – meaning house) and it is difficult to explain. According to Talin, home is the place where one feels safe and imagines his/her future, and feels belonging and attachment to that place no matter in what condition it is.

There must be security, and there must be a future at home. Although I feel calm here in Armenia, the future is a bit dark.... But it is true, it is my home, I feel that it is mine here. Likewise, I always felt that Syria is my home too, I was born and raised there, here [Armenia], when I just arrived, in the same way, I felt that it [Armenia] is also mine, whatever the situation, it will be good or bad.

Furthermore, in the narratives of other interviewees, it is observable the multilocal understanding of home – meaning that home is not simply one place, but can be several. In this regard, some of the Syrian-Armenian participants consider Syria as their first home – the place where they were born or raised – and Armenia as their second home – the place where they now live and always felt an attachment.

Syrian-Armenian Grig underlined that after moving to Armenia he established a feeling of home – a second home in Armenia, where he also feels belonging, while he, likewise, continues to recognize Syria as his first home, which will always be kept in his memory and heart. In his words:

I can say that I belong to Armenia, but not like you, like a local Armenian. But I can say that this [Armenia] became my second home. I never thought that I would consider Armenia as my home. We know that Armenia is the homeland but never thought that it can be home as well. But I don't know if you understand. Because my very first one was in Syria.... But Armenia also became home. So definitely, yes, this is a place where I also made memories. I have feelings and shared emotions. So definitely, yes, it is part of me.

In line with Talin's and Grig's perception of home, another participant – 31 years old Arpi, born and raised in Aleppo, indicated that she always thought that she is equally Armenian and equally Syrian and never felt that she is not a citizen of Syria. Arpi further explains:

I have never felt that Syria does not belong to me or it is not my land. No, I have not felt that way in Syria. In other words, you know what it is like... it is like a person has two homes and both of them are his/her own. He/she feels calm and comfortable in both of them.

Arpi's understanding of home is plurilocal – both Armenia and Syria. Ethnically Arpi is from a mixed family, as her father's side is Christian Arab and her mother's side – is Syrian-Armenian. Moreover, Armenia is the third country of Arpi's residency, as she left Syria because of the war in 2012 and moved to Lebanon, where she lived for about 3 years, before migrating to Armenia in 2015.

For another Syrian-Armenian interviewee – 28 years old Shogher – home is a house that is warm and belongs to her. Shogher does not feel herself at home in Armenia, because she does not have her own house, but rents an apartment in Armenia. In her words, even though their house in Syria is not an ideal one, it is at least something that belongs to them. Shogher's narratives of home corresponds to the meaning of an actual house (*tun*) in Armenian language. Home is seen as property, an actual place of dwelling. Shogher's family still keeps their house and other properties in Aleppo, Syria.

I can say that we do not have an ideal house [tun in Armenian], but it is our house and it is better than the current house, to be honest. It is so difficult that you live here in someone else's house when you have yours there [in Syria], but you cannot reach it. In fact, I miss my house, my bed, kitchen, living room, everything.... It is good that nothing happened to our house....it is well preserved, it is my paternal home, I will definitely go for a visit. I miss my house a lot, but I cannot live there anymore.

In fact, many of the Syrian-Armenian participants of this study also have houses and properties in Syria and still continue to maintain different kinds of linkages with their place of birth or the previous country of residency, be it material/physical or emotional/spiritual. Therefore, in the next part, I discuss the various ties that my participants continue to have with Syria and reasons for their migration to Armenia.

#### **5.4 Boundary maintenance with Syria**

The pattern of maintaining various ties and connections with Syria – the previous country of residency, can be observed among many participants of this study. For many Syrian-Armenian 'returnees' a long time was required for getting used to their new lives in Armenia. Upon their arrival to Armenia they also encountered many problems and difficulties due to language differences, poor economy and few job opportunities in the new environment of Armenia. As a result, many Syrian-Armenians sense of belonging to their former setting in Syria become even stronger and, in some cases, motivated to go back to Syria.

As has been illustrated above, many feel belonging and attachment to Armenia both as their homeland, and home, but at the same time they continue to stay attached to their first home – Syria not only emotionally, but also materially. Most of the participants continue to keep their houses and other properties in Syria and long for their homes in Syria, as their lives was more tolerable and prosperous before the war than their lives

in Armenia. Moreover, some of the participants still have Syrian citizenship but are not Armenian citizens.

For instance, Grig's family still has a house and many relatives in Syria, and they continue to maintain relationships with them. Grig highlighted that they had a very good life in Aleppo before the war and better living conditions than now in Armenia. According to him, his grandparents and parents managed to build a good life in Syria and never thought about leaving Syria.

Well, what I remember, my childhood in Syria was so good. Like, we never felt like we were foreigners in Syria as Armenians, we always felt like we were part of them. We were Syrians.... My dad had two shops. He was doing so well in his work. My mom was like, you know, a happy housewife. And I was going to school. So, like, everything was perfect. So, we never thought of leaving the country.

At the same time, Grig underlined that, although he will keep the memory of good Syria in his heart and mind, he does not think that even if Syria becomes a better country and Aleppo returns to its pre-war condition, he would like to go and live there again. In his words: "I feel like, in my memory, good Syria will always live in my heart and my mind, but I don't think even if Syria comes back, like a good country and more productive, I don't think I can live there anymore."

Another participant – 43 years old Anahit also has both material and emotional ties with Syria. She and her family still own a house in Aleppo and the lack of their own house makes life harder in Armenia. She also has many relatives, childhood, and school friends in Syria. As she explained:

Of course, there is still a connection to the home and place. That is... I still have relatives, acquaintances, and school. There is longing for Syria to some extent. Also, you have your own house there, it is just your own four walls, it is there,

you have your corner there. So, yes, I miss it, yes, but I don't think I can go and live there as a country again.

Accordingly, 26 years old Arman, identifying himself as Syrian-Armenian, mentioned that he still feel an attachment to Aleppo, Syria, and has many relatives and friends still living in Syria. Arman's father side is from Syria and mother's side, however, is from Armenia. Arman and his family also never thought about leaving Syria, but because of the war, they decided to migrate to Armenia in 2012. To put in his words:

If someone asked me where would you like to live in Syria or Armenia, I would say in Syria. I would have liked to return to Syria only 4-5 years ago, but at the moment, I still want to return, but because of work and other things in Armenia, I will not return with the intention of permanent residency, but will go for visiting places and streets where I once walked and for refreshing my memories.

Similarly, Shogher also described that their life was very good in Syria, they were living in good condition in the Nor Gyugh district of Aleppo and never thought about leaving Syria. Shogher and her family still have houses and other properties in Syria. She also expressed her desire to return to Aleppo but only if it goes back to its pre-war condition. But, at the same time, Shogher understands that it will not become the same and even though there are no active bombings in Aleppo anymore, there are financial and economic crises, which hold her back from returning to Syria. In her words:

If it became Aleppo of 10 years ago, I would definitely like to go, 100%, but, once, in 2018, I went there with my mother, we stayed for four months to solve the problem of houses there, and the situation was terrible, no water, electricity, internet, connection. There are no bombings now, when we were living there were many bombings. There are no bombings now, but the financial situation is bad there, there are few jobs, a lot of poverty, almost no work for women. That is why I don't want to go back.

In fact, as it appeared from the stories of many Syrian-Armenian interviewees of this study, they left Syria mainly because of the war and actually never thought about leaving Syria and moving to Armenia, as they had very prosperous and calm life in Syria.

For instance, one of the participants – 25 years old Syrian Armenian Areg, whose family currently lives in Aleppo, mentioned that before the war in Syria he had no intentions or thoughts to leave Syria, neither had his family. In his words: “In fact, I did not even think that I would go out. But as you see the bad conditions of life, war, no water, no electricity, no gas, the bombings and rockets, you want to seek better conditions. And with that in mind, I came to Armenia.”

Correspondingly, Talin – 34 years old Syrian-Armenian underlined there was a big Armenian community and culture in Aleppo, Syria and all Armenians were living in very good and comfortable conditions, therefore, there was no reason to migrate. In her words:

The significance of Syria remains the same, but the view towards Syria changed, I mean, there is no previous brightness in Aleppo anymore. In the past we lived very peacefully, we did not even think of leaving. It is true that the homeland – Armenia was different for us, but no one thought of leaving Aleppo, because it was very quiet. It was during the war that people started migrating to Armenia or going to Canada, etc.

Similar narratives are noticeable in the story of 43 years old Anahit, who emphasized that there was no reason for moving to Armenia before the war in Syria because they were used to the environment in Syria as it was their home, they were settled and had everything in Aleppo. As she explained: “There was no reason for the relocation before the war because you are settled, there is your house, your job is good, you go to school..., so there was no special reason to move.”



At the same time, for Anahit and her family, Armenia –homeland – was always important and they always remembered and missed it even when they were living in Syria. In her words:

But we have always remembered homeland [Armenia], always longed for it.... Armenia is different, when there was something from Armenia, it was a special thing. When a simple candy or chocolate was coming from Armenia, we were all accepting it as something special.

The majority of Syrian-Armenian participants do not think of going back to Syria, as they are certain that Syria will never restore its pre-war condition and return to what it was before 2011, even if the war completely ends. As some interviewees underlined, though there are no active bombings, there is economic and financial crisis in Syria, therefore, they do not have any intention to return to Syria for purpose of permanent residency. Some participants, therefore, imagine their future in their new home – Armenia, others, however, do not envision their future in Armenia too. In the next section, thus, I will discuss how and where my participants imagine their future.

## **5.5 Imagining the Future**

As discussed above, the majority of the Syrian-Armenian participants of this study consider both Armenia and Syria either their homeland or their home. Some of them who are well-integrated in Armenia have strong attachment and belonging towards Armenia and imagine their future there.

For instance, Syrian-Armenian participant – 26 years old Arthur, mentioned that there were some conversations about leaving Armenia in his family, but he personally does not think of migrating from Armenia. According to him, one can go to study and work abroad but should bring the experience back to the homeland. As he explained:

There are opportunities, there are offers all the time, but I do not accept them

myself, it will be difficult for me to accept something. Yes, you can go to study, work, something short but then you have to bring it here [Armenia]. I don't think anything would change my mind.

Similarly, 44 years old Mane does not have any thoughts of leaving Armenia, as she loves living in Armenia and feels she belongs to Armenia. She also explained that her husband wants them to migrate from Armenia for a better life, but she does not want to. In her words:

To be honest, I do not think I will leave Armenia by any means. My husband, for example, wanted our child to live better and have a better future.... I say, no, everything will pass, everything will improve, I do not think at all...I always say that I lived through difficulties and terrible days in Armenia but I still love it, I do not know, it is a completely different feeling for me and I want my child to grow up here.

Contrarily, other Syrian-Armenian interviewees do not imagine their future and their life in Armenia for a longer term, despite the fact that they also feel attachment and belonging to Armenia. These participants want to further migrate from Armenia too, which they explain through different reasons, however, their rationale for moving to another country is mainly based on the fear of the conflict and another large-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the future.

For Areg, the main reason that forces him to think of leaving Armenia is the fear of living another war, this time in Armenia. He explained that he already experienced the difficulties caused by the war in Syria and does not want to experience it again.

I would be lying if I say that I have no intention to leave Armenia.... Because we already saw war once, we know the difficulties. I am a bit afraid of the war here. There is a rude phrase saying that a donkey falls into a hole once, not twice, and, as if, now I put myself in the place of a donkey and fell into the

same hole again, once we saw a terrible war, we lived it, I lived it for five years, my family lived for more than ten years, we know about difficulties of the war.

Similarly, Anahit mentioned that she and her family do not think of leaving Armenia, despite all the difficulties and poor economy in Armenia. However, the only reason that will force her to migrate from Armenia is the war. In her words: “I do not want to leave Armenia, but God forbid, another war might happen, that can be the only reason I want to migrate. There must be a terrible situation that I decide to leave Armenia too”.

Another participant – 26 years old Arman underlined that both economic difficulties and the risk of war in Armenia might force him to migrate from Armenia as well. “We have already seen the war and we know what it means, we want to go so that we do not fall into the war for the second time, roughly speaking”. Most of the participants presume that war may erupt again as the situation at the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues to be escalated after the war in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) in 2020. Furthermore, the interview with the participants were conducted amid Russia’s offensive in Ukraine, during of which clashes also were reported at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border areas. Thus, participants fear of the war might also be triggered by the war in Ukraine.

Shogher is also concerned about the future in Armenia and fears that she and her family might experience another war, which makes her think of leaving Armenia as well. She also explained that they are afraid to buy a house in Armenia because another war might start and they might lose their property again. Moreover, in Shogher’s opinion, it is the fate of Armenians to constantly flee or migrate from one place to another one.

I do not want to leave [Armenia], I love every district, I love living here. Yerevan is my capital but I cannot see that I can live here for the rest of my life, I do not know what is the reason for that. Maybe it is from the feeling that my grandparents were also forced to flee and they also migrated and went to Syria. I did the same, I also migrated and came and live in Armenia. Maybe in a few

years, my children will move to another place. I think it is our [Armenians] fate that we will not have a homeland anywhere.

Similar narratives are observable in Talin's story, who emphasized that after the war in Syria they got fear in their hearts and minds that they should constantly move from one place to another one. According to her, the future is dark in Armenia as well and it is difficult to imagine the future in Armenia.

We got fear inside our hearts and minds after the war [in Syria], we did not have it earlier, but now, wherever we go, there is that fear, as if our destiny is running from one place to another one. Now here too, there is the fear that there might be another war in Armenia, wherever we go, that fear remains inside us, whether what the future should be.

To summarize, though my study participants have a strong attachment and belonging to Armenia as their homeland, some of them consider their residency in Armenia as something temporary and want to migrate from Armenia in the future, if they have the opportunity. This corresponds to the concept of sojourning (Kasbarian 2015:365) as some of the participants go with the mindset of being temporary residents in Armenia. At the same time, despite feeling attachment and belonging to Syria as their first home or homeland, almost none of the Syrian-Armenian participants express willingness to go back to Syria, but rather want to further migrate to other countries, mostly Europe and the Americas.

## **6. Analysis**

Based on the findings, in this chapter, I present my research analysis drawing upon the insights acquired from the theoretical frameworks and literature review. The findings, thus, are critically scrutinized based on the theoretical perspectives of diaspora, ethnicity, aspiration, and imagination with the purpose of delivering answers to my research questions.

As illustrated throughout the findings, the Syrian-Armenian participants of this study have various conceptions and perceptions of what and where is homeland and home. Syrian-Armenian participants understanding of what is homeland is somewhat static and singular. According to participants perceptions, homeland is a specific geographical place, where one feels attached to and safe. As Syrian-Armenian participants Anahit and Talar mentioned, “homeland is the land and soil where you feel belonging and safety” and “you are the owner of that land.” These explanations of homeland can be situated within the traditional framework of diaspora, which defines diasporas as entities that are attached to their original homeland, feel belonging and endless longing for that homeland (Safran 1991). Furthermore, based on existing literature it can be argued that Syrian-Armenians view homeland as a fixed territory, which does not undergo changes over the time.

According to Anahit and Mane, homeland is also the place where Armenian ethnicity and religion are preserved and practiced. In their narrative it is observable that the participants have primordial understanding of ethnicity, which in its turn, informs the ways they perceive the meaning of homeland. Such conception of homeland, also fits to the traditional framework of diaspora, which is characterized by primordial understanding of ethnicity and nationality. Though I do not deny or neglect the importance of place, ethnicity, or nationality for diaspora Armenians in this study, I do not find them adequate anymore for studying current migratory processes and increased mobilities, flexibilities of diasporas and diaspora communities.

Interestingly, when it comes to the understanding of the where is homeland, many participants of this study demonstrated through their narratives and stories that homeland is multilocal and can be in simultaneously in several places. As Talin mentioned, she always had in their mind that Armenia is the homeland, however at the same time, Syria is also important for her and both Armenia and Syria have equal place in her heart. Other participants –Areg and Arman recognize both Armenia and Syria as their homeland – Armenia as fatherland and Syria as motherland. Moreover, as illustrated in the findings, in Shogher’s and Grig’s narratives another type of homeland also occurred – that is the ‘ancestral homeland’ – the historical territories of Western Armenia.

The emergence of these at least three versions of homeland in the narratives of my participants correspond to what Susan Pattie (2005:55-56) explains as “three parallel constructions of Armenian homeland” – which include historical territories of Western Armenia, their country of birth – Syria, and the current Republic of Armenia. This conception of homeland also coincides with Panossian’s (2005: 241) argument that the Armenian diaspora is no longer attached to one concrete and ‘existing’ homeland, but rather it is connected to the one that is idealized and imagined homeland or a ‘spiritual homeland’. Diaspora Armenians, in this case, Syrian-Armenians, thus, have more than one homeland which can “alternate between, or simultaneously be, the place of birth, the host-land, the current home-land, the ancestral land, or the diaspora condition itself as homeland” (Pannossian 2005:241).

This, in its turn, contributes to the understanding of homeland not as fixed territory, to which diaspora people belong, but rather as contingent, hybrid and plurilocal entity. This, consequently, help to understand diaspora as not a static entity, but as a social condition and process, and not a category of people (Brah 1996; Anthias 1998, Brubaker 2005; Johnson 2012).

As stated above, at least three types of homeland occur in the narratives of Syrian-

Armenian participants: the home country – Syria, the host country – Armenia, and the ‘ancestral homeland’ – historical ‘Western Armenia’ (eastern parts of Turkey).

As the research findings show, some of the Syrian-Armenian participants regard the ‘ancestral lands’ of Western Armenia as their homeland. Nevertheless, this is more of an ‘imagined homeland’ as the ‘return’ to those territories in the future is viewed by most of them as utopic. For instance, Shogher mentioned that she has desire to go and see her ‘ancestral homeland’. However, at the same time, she emphasized that those lands will not be physically available as actual homelands to claim membership to. Therefore, as Kasbarian (2015:359-360) argues, the historic ‘homeland’ evoked by the genocide-created Armenian diaspora is confined to the spiritual, mythical realm and functions as a tool to build diaspora group cohesion and identity. ‘Ancestral homeland’ is an orientation that gives the heterogeneous and multilayered Armenian diaspora coherence and meaning (Kasbarian 2015:360).

Consequently, most of the participants explicitly or implicitly recognize the current Armenian and Syrian states as their homelands, as, according to them, it is the ones that are materially available. Though Syrian-Armenians have always been deeply ‘rooted’ in Syria, especially in Aleppo and Damascus before the migration, they also have been ‘routed’ in various ways and connections towards Armenia, which claimed to be their homeland or as they define it – *‘hairenik’* (fatherland). As Anahit underlined, while living in Syria, they always remembered and longed for homeland – Armenia. She also highlighted that whenever they received some gifts and candies from Armenia, they always perceived them as something special. At the same time, all participants were and still are deeply ‘rooted’ in Syria, in a way that they never thought of making the actual move of migrating to Armenia or somewhere else.

Subsequently, in the light of Tölölyan’s (2010:36) theoretical perspective arguing that the current ‘routing’ towards Armenia is no longer from an exilic position place, it can be argued that homeland in the shape of the contemporary Armenian state, is a part of

the trans-nation. Correspondingly, as Kasbarian (2020:164) underlines, Syrian-Armenians' encounter with Armenia should be studied and understood as a process of negotiation, where Armenia can 'simultaneously be a site of refuge, a historic or potential homeland, and/or a temporary transit zone'.

Moreover, as illustrated in the findings section, many of the Syrian-Armenians participants have unfixed, multiple, multilocal conceptions of home. As stated by Arpi, one can have two homes where he/she can equally feel belonging. Grig also highlighted that he regards both Armenia and Syria as his homes, where he experienced emotions, feelings and created memories. The plurilocal understanding of home contributes to the vision that Syrian-Armenians are 'transnational' people, who embody and maintain two or more versions of home. As 'transnational' people they also constantly go back and forth between those homes and connect them to each other with their self-awareness of the 'multilocality' and 'diasporic consciousness'. This corresponds to Kasbarian's (2015; forthcoming) argument that Armenian diasporans in the Middle East and beyond should be studied as transnational people 'who are rooted at home and routed through multiple orientations and connections.' By being both rooted at home and routed through different trajectories and linkages, Syrian-Armenians also embody fluid, contingent, multiple and multi-layered, both local and global diasporic identities that are constantly being contested, and negotiated over the time and under the various circumstances.

Furthermore, while for many participants Armenia also became the second home in the post-migration setting, others do not feel themselves fully at home in Armenia and long for their homes in Syria. For instance, Shogher highlighted that she does not fully feel at home in Armenia, mostly because of the lack of the actual house, whereas in Syria her family has house and other properties. This different understandings of home in Armenia, is informed by the distinctions in the migration experiences of Syrian-Armenians, based on factors such as the financial conditions, the time of the arrival, education, and professional background, class and connections, etc. Those participants,



who previously established various relationships and connections, and who were going back and forth between two homes in Syria and Armenia before the war in Syria, managed to empower themselves in the new environment in Armenia and, thus, developed much stronger attachment and sense of belonging in Armenia. For those, who did not have the pre-existing social, cultural, and economic capital, the adaptation and integration process have been accompanied by disappointments, traumas, and difficulties. This, in its turn, thus, triggered the desire to further migrate to other countries, mostly Europe and the Americas.

Moreover, as illustrated in the findings section, many of the participants of this study feel more at home in Syria due to better live conditions there. Almost all participants of this study highlighted that the living conditions and economic and financial situation of their families used to be much better and more prosperous than those in Armenia. Some of the participants' families – for example Areg's, Grig's and Shogher's families – had houses and other properties and run various businesses in Aleppo, Syria, which made their life easier in the pre-war settings. Additionally, most of the participants of this study continue to maintain and develop various linkages with Syria, both emotionally and materially. Besides, in some cases, participants' families continue to reside and work in Syria, for instance Talin's and Areg's families. These narratives also contribute to the understanding that Syrian-Armenians like other diaspora people possess transnational identities, and are both 'rooted' and 'routed' by different connections and orientations.

According to my participants, they also did not have anything to worry about as they had a very calm and peaceful life, and always were respected by the other ethnic groups and Syrian state. As Mane and Anahit mentioned, Armenians were always loved, trusted and respected in Syria. Grig also stated that he never felt foreigner in Syria. Due to these good and peaceful living conditions, the majority of the Syrian-Armenian participants were not thinking about leaving Syria and migrating before the start of the civil war in 2011. As illustrated in the findings part, the main reason behind the

migration of Syrian-Armenian became the war in Syria, and the intolerable situation caused by the war. For instance, Anahit underlined that before the civil war there was no reason to leave Syria, on the contrary they were living in very comfortable and peaceful way, so never thought about migrating. Therefore, Syrian-Armenian relocations to Armenia should be understood as migration, rather than a 'return'. This is because, just like other migrants from Syria or the Middle East in general, Armenians were increasingly forced to take refuge in Armenia during the civil war in Syria and claimed their membership to Armenia only after the total destruction of the social and economic fabric in Syria. By claiming so, I do not intend to deny Syrian-Armenian refugees' migratory agency, rather, based on the theoretical framework that conceptualizes migration as a "process of aspirations and capabilities" (de Hass 2021:17), I argue that like other migrant groups, Syrian-Armenians migrate "within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures" and are not deprived of the capability to choose where to live, including the option to stay. Furthermore, as Abdelhady and Aly (2022, forthcoming) underline, instead of defining diasporans as marginalized groups who long for a homeland, it is useful to study and understand the ways Middle East diasporans, including Syrian-Armenians, respond to major social changes and transformations.

It is first important to underline that, as the collected data shows, Syrian-Armenian participants of this study illustrate in most cases that they are entirely aware of and reflective of multilocal, fluid, both local and global diasporic identities, as well as their multilocality, in-betweenness, multiple and hybrid orientations of homeland and home. This, as Kasbarian argues (2020:170), is both a source of anxiety and a source of empowerment for Syrian-Armenian refugees in Armenia. It is a source of anxiety, as they have to constantly negotiate their self and belonging in order to situate themselves in a new setting that is neither home nor entirely foreign and self-struggle to 'choose' a homeland. This argument perfectly illustrates the self-struggle of one of the participants, who once were asked whether he loves Syria more than Armenia.

However, as Grig emphasized, he cannot choose one over the other, as he identifies himself as an Armenian, but was born and raised in Syria.

At the same time, as mentioned above, being a diaspora Armenian in Armenia is also a source of empowerment and strength for many Syrian-Armenians. This is due fact that it helps to activate their 'Armenianess' and make their claim to the Armenian state. It also creates hope for settlement despite all the difficulties and disappointments faced by Syrian-Armenian refugees upon their 'return' to Armenia. Indeed, some of the participants managed to empower themselves in the new environment and declare Armenia as their homeland, where they imagine their future. For instance, Anahit, who managed to empower her in Armenia by establishing her own small textile business, emphasized that she has no intention of leaving Armenia and migrating to somewhere else. This is, however, not a case for everyone, as not all Syrian-Armenians envision their future in Armenia. This takes me to the discussion of the ways Syrian-Armenians in Armenia imagine their future.

As it becomes apparent from the findings section, broader political and economic issues inform one's desire to further migrate from Armenia too. As illustrated in the findings part, one of the main reasons behind the Syrian-Armenian participants' desire to migrate from Armenia and not seeing their future in there, is the fear of experiencing another war, this time in Armenia. I believe their experiences of the war in Syria, refuge backgrounds, and migration journey play an important role in shaping the ways some of the Syrian-Armenians imagine their future. For instance, Talin feels that the future in Armenia is dark and cannot imagine her future there, which, according to her, is because of the fear that was developed in her mind after the war in Syria. Other participants, Areg and Arman also think about migrating from Armenia too, which they explain by the fact that they already experienced war once and know the difficulties caused by war and do not want to fall into the same trap again.

Moreover, though some of the participants expressed their desire to go back to Syria, however, the economic and financial crisis, as well as war destructions hold them back from the 'return' decision. For instance, as Shogher mentioned, she would like to go back to Syria, however she is aware of the economic difficulties in Syria, which prevents her from making the actual move. Syrian-Armenian participants cannot imagine their future in Syria either, as they are certain that Syria will never restore its pre-war condition. For some of them, particularly for Shogher, Grig and Areg the future is neither in Armenia, nor in Syria, but somewhere else. In this regard, derived from the theoretical perspective of Vitus (2022) it can be argued that the ways and orientations Syrian-Armenians imagine their future is affected by their capacity to aspire, which is based on the present contextual, individual stories, and family biographical resources and agency, and experienced constraints and difficulties in the past and present.

Furthermore, in their stories, two of the participants linked their desire of migrating from Armenia, and fear of the darkness of the future in Armenia because of the trauma, memories of genocide, ancestral exile, and Armenians "destiny of being always displaced." As illustrated in the findings part, the Syrian-Armenian refugees, thus, envision their future, by narratively linking it with their ancestors' displacement and migration (hi)story and their lived experiences of war and migration because of the war in Syria. In this regard, as Kasbarian (2020) argues, the diasporas collective memory of previous displacements, migration journeys, and misfortunes acts as a historical resource that Syrian-Armenians use to constitute and imagine their future.

## **Conclusion**

The overarching objective of this thesis was to study and understand the ways Syrian-Armenians, currently residing in Armenia, perceive and narrate home, homeland, and belonging through their diaspora and transnational spaces in the post-migration setting. For this purpose, I also look into their migration reasons and experiences, as well as, the ways they create and develop relationships with Syria in their new environment and link their home in Syria to their home in Armenia. I concluded this study by investigating how and where my participants imagine their future.

This thesis relied upon theoretical frameworks of diaspora, ethnicity, aspiration, and imagination while evaluating the life stories and narratives of the participants. The life-story narratives of the Syrian-Armenian participants, thus, became the main source of the empirical material for this study, which gives insight into the world of the participants in the pre-and post-migration settings.

The findings chapter shows that both similar and different perceptions of homeland and home co-exist in the narratives of the participants. While some of the participants' understanding of homeland and home is related to a specific geographical place, others' perceptions are more multilocal and multidimensional.

As the empirical material demonstrated, Syrian-Armenians, like other diasporas from the Middle East and beyond, should be studied as 'transnational' people, who simultaneously have two or several homes and go back and forth between those homes. Moreover, those homes, as well as homelands are not fixed but are always in the process of negotiations and contestation. By being both 'rooted' and 'routed' by different trajectories and orientations, Syrian-Armenians embody multilocal, hybrid, contingent, local, and at the same time global identities and different modes of belonging/s.

Furthermore, as appeared in the narratives of Syrian-Armenian participants, they are aware of their ‘multilocality’ and ‘hybridity’, which further informs their future orientations, as it serves both as a source of anxiety and a source of empowerment.

As illustrated throughout the findings and analysis, Syrian-Armenian participants of this study have different imaginations and directions for their future. Those, who managed to empower themselves in their new setting in Armenia, are more inclined to stay in Armenia. Whereas, other participants consider migrating further afield, as they do not envision themselves in Armenia in the future, mostly because of the fear of experiencing another war in Armenia.

The importance of this work is due to the fact that it contributes to the wider literature on diaspora by adding the essential aspect of investigating diasporas’ lived experiences and the narratives of home, homeland, and belonging in their new setting. Furthermore, while the experiences and stories of other migrant groups from Syria were sufficiently studied, little attention were paid to Syrian-Armenians’ migration journeys and experiences. This study, thus, aimed to fulfill those limitations in the existing literature.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

As I adopted a migrant-centered perspective for this study, the role of the state, local, diaspora and international actors that inform the construction and meaning-making of homeland, home, and belonging among Syrian-Armenians, were not covered in the study. Another aspect that were not sufficiently studied in this research is the ways class, education, gender, age, etc. impact the understanding of homeland, home, belonging, as well, as future imaginations and migration decisions of Syrian-Armenians. Thus, these are issues that require further research.

Moreover, due to space limitations, this study does not examine the perception of homeland, home, and belonging among Syrian-Armenians who migrated to Armenia and later on, returned to Syria. I believe that it will be useful and important to further

investigate how homeland, home, and belonging take many meanings in the process of back and forth migration and transitions.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Guide**

Tell me about yourself and your background.

Where were you born?

Were your parents and grandparent also born in Syria? Do you have ancestors from Western Armenia?

Where did you live in Syria before migrating to Armenia?

How was the life in Syria? In which schools did you study?

Did you feel foreigner in Syria? Was there discrimination against you? How was the attitude towards Armenians?

Did you speak about Armenia when living in Syria?

What are the reasons behind your migration?

How do you explain what is homeland for you? Where is homeland?

What is home for you? Where is home?

How did your understanding of homeland and home changed after migrating to Armenia?

Do you feel belonging to Armenia? Did you feel belonging to Syria? Do you still feel belonging to Syria?

What role does Syria play in your life after migration?

How was the migration journey to Armenia?

Did you experience difficulties when moved to Armenia? What kind of difficulties?

How was the local attitude towards you? Did you experience discrimination?

Did you receive assistance from the Armenian state and NGOs?

What kind of differences can you notice between Syrian-Armenians and local Armenians?

Do you still have connections with Syria, both materially and emotionally?

Would like to go back to live in Syria again?

What plans do you have for the future?

Are you planning to stay in Armenia? Or?

Where and how do you imagine your future?