

Michelle Obeid

# MIGRATION AS ANCHORAGE

Ethnography of a Palestinian Family in London





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To all those who seek to anchor  
To my mother and my sisters  
To Widad

We have on this earth what makes life worth living.

—Mahmoud Darwish



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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION OF ARABIC TERMS

There are different approaches to transliterating Arabic terms and expressions, especially colloquial and regional dialects and accents. In this book I follow a simple version of the standards established by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. For example, I am dropping the *h* at the end of words such as *umma* or *ghurba*, which usually stands for the ‘*tā’ marbūta*’ ة.

In some Levantine pronunciations, words ending with the sound ‘*ā*’ (such as Ghazza for Gaza) are pronounced as ‘*eh*’ (Ghazzeh). In this and other cases, I have chosen to transliterate the version of a word that is closest to its iteration in *fusha*, modern standard Arabic. With proper names and some Arabic terms that are commonly used in English, for example *halloumi*, *kunafa* or *iftar*, I have opted not to use diacritical marks.

I have provided a glossary of Arabic terms, which I hope will be helpful for the reader.

*Introduction*

## **‘Now, We Are Here’**

Anchoring in the Meantime



Um Bashir<sup>1</sup> had been fussing all morning. She moved the tables back and forth to make space for the two builders carrying their tools and a long ladder through the café to the upstairs flat. Two patrons were deep in conversation. They sipped their sweet mint tea, oblivious to the commotion around them. For the past three weeks Um Bashir had been overseeing the refurbishment of her flat. The work on an extension of one of the bedrooms and an additional bathroom was almost done. She was hoping that the project would finish by that evening in time for the two sofa beds that were arriving the next day. She had particularly chosen designs that were big enough to accommodate her grandchildren and other family members who needed to stay with her. ‘Listen’, her daughter Manal told me in her usual mischievous tone as we sat with her parents and her brother to have a quick lunch. ‘Other women seek hobbies like knitting ... drawing, maybe ... or arranging flowers ... you know, lovely things like that. My mother? Never! *Subhān Allah!*’ Giggling through her sentence, she continued, ‘her hobby is construction sites!’

This was not the first time Um Bashir had embarked on renovating the flat in the two years since her arrival in London with her husband Abu Bashir. ‘If you ever lose my mother’, Manal teased, ‘you are sure to find her in IKEA or a second-hand antique shop. Apparently, these places help improve her

English!’ Taking her daughter’s teasing in her stride, Um Bashir nodded with a beaming smile, perhaps recognizing some truth in the picture her daughter was painting. After all, she did have plans to redecorate the café, which was attached to their flat. Al-Zaytuna was the business that Um and Abu Bashir had started for their family in London and were hoping to upgrade and expand now that it was up and running. ‘Well, how else would all the children fit?’ Um Bashir asked. She was referring to her children and grandchildren, who in that year, and in different combinations, stayed in that same flat as they sought, in their turn, to settle in London: two unmarried sons, an unmarried daughter, a son with a wife and three children, and a married daughter with her three children. ‘Now, this is our family home [*dār al-‘ā’ila*],’ she added. The project of making home was sure to justify the financial, physical and emotional investments at stake in such a mission. As if absorbing the gravity of his wife’s words, Abu Bashir responded with what sounded like a poetic proclamation, ‘London!’ After a pause he added rhetorically, ‘Who would have thought the Gazzawis<sup>2</sup> would make a home in London!’

‘No one knows where we will be tomorrow’, Um Bashir sighed in response to her husband, confirming the uncertainty that haunted their migration. ‘But now ... we are here. This is where we have anchored [*arsayna*].’<sup>3</sup>

What does it take to ‘anchor’ in a place in which one had not intended to settle? This book documents the processes of ‘anchorage’ of the Gazzawi family, whose migration to London was accidental. Um and Abu Bashir were no strangers to the UK, a country they had been visiting to check on three of their children, who had been living in different cities: one of their daughters had been living in Glasgow, Scotland since 2001, with her husband and three children, and two of their sons were doing postgraduate studies in London and had stayed on when they found good jobs after graduating. As conditions of life worsened in Gaza, particularly with the 2007 Israeli blockade, their youngest son sought asylum in the UK. Um and Abu Bashir were hoping that, by joining his brothers, their son would make a life away from the violence and risks young men faced under occupation. On one of their usual visits to see their children in 2007, the couple was unexpectedly stranded in London due to a siege that the Israeli military enforced on Gaza, which involved the closure of all border crossings, prohibiting the passage of goods and people. The intended short visit was extended numerous times. Giving in to their sons’ pleas, and without much choice, the couple applied to stay in the UK and they were granted a five-year residence permit based on a humanitarian protection scheme.

Um and Abu Bashir envisaged their stay in London to be a liminal and temporary phase that would soon end with the reopening of the borders. But a few months into their stay, Israel launched its 2008 war on Gaza, thus complicating the idea of return. Frustrated at first and troubled by the fate of their house and business back home, the couple accepted that they may have

to stay longer than they had intended. In the year and a half that followed, and as life became untenable in Gaza, their unmarried daughter sought asylum in the UK, followed by her married sister, who wanted a safer life for herself and her family. As the months went by, Um and Abu Bashir immersed themselves in the lives of their children and in their new city. While they still hoped to return to Gaza one day soon, London was to be their home – at least for the time being. The refurbishments were a means to make this new place homely for a family that was now displaced.

What makes home, and how is it refigured in the temporary? In documenting the labours of (re)creating home in conditions of uncertainty, this book tells a universal story of migration, by drawing out the everyday practices and projects that embed migrants in their new social worlds, the rhythms and sociabilities they pursue to forge a sense of security and stability, the challenges they face in learning how to navigate new social rules and bureaucracies, and the affects and sensibilities that govern these experiences. But the book is also a particular story. It is an account of Palestinians who find themselves displaced and dispossessed from home, having to make new lives in what Arabs refer to as *shatāt* (forced dispersal), the particular predicament of Palestinian removal from their land, the scattering of their families and communities around the world and the denial of their legal and moral right to return. Israel's war on Gaza in 2008, not unlike the series of wars that followed over the period of fifteen years, had devastating effects on Palestinian communities. As I write this Introduction, Israel, with unwavering support from the United States, the UK and other European countries, has waged yet another war on Gaza in 2023, carpet bombing major parts of the city and razing entire neighbourhoods to the ground. The death toll has surpassed 40,000 civilians,<sup>4</sup> nearly half of whom are children. The violence, loss and injustices that led to the displacement of home in 2008 no doubt hovered over the Gazzawis' concerted efforts to settle in London. But this is by no means a story of victimhood. Nor is it an account of the exilic experience that has a rich documentation in the literature on diasporic Palestinians (Said 1988; Suleiman 2016; Loddo 2017). Rather, the book focuses on the ways these migrants embraced the sense of possibility in the UK and found ways to thrive by actively shaping their new social worlds and by 'bringing a bit of Palestine to London' through everyday acts and practices of emplacement.

### **Privileging Palestinian Experience**

This book shifts perspectives away from the representations of Palestinian migrants in mainstream British discourses as problematic figures who are unable to integrate and who struggle to belong. Palestinians living in the UK

have endured tired orientalist tropes. The image of the threatening terrorist is regularly reproduced by mainstream media that often conflates Palestinians, Hamas, Hizbollah and ISIS, reducing the subjectivity of Palestinians to violence.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Edward Said's contention that Western prejudice against Palestinians has rendered them 'a synonym for trouble ... mindless, gratuitous trouble' (1992: 7) still rings true. Hostile migration policies, counter-terrorism programmes (Kundnani 2014) and, more recently, the silencing and criminalisation<sup>6</sup> of protestors speaking out against Israel's genocide on Gaza in 2023/2024<sup>7</sup> have all played a role in reinforcing these tropes as well as Palestinians' awareness of always being suspect (Allen 2009). On the other end of the spectrum is what Scarlet Harris calls 'the falafel identity' (2017: 939), which emerges out of trivializing Palestinian culture and representing it as 'absen[t] of great cultural achievement' (Said 2003: 289). My intention in this book is not to directly engage with these discussions with a mission to 'correct' such diminishing, flawed and dehumanizing representations. Rather, I employ ethnography to trace the ways in which the Gazzawi family members made their lives in London viable through the thick and thin of an uncertain migration.

This book therefore privileges my interlocutors' own experiences and perspectives in their story of migration. The focus on the emic has for long been one of the hallmarks of ethnography. Yet, there is a particular urgency for a focus on experience in the current climate surrounding movement in the Western World. In the British and European contexts, discourses of 'crisis' in migration since 2015 have but exaggerated the 'global apartheid regime' (Hage 2016; Besteman 2019), in which countries in the Global North have increasingly undertaken measures that are military, technological and epistemic to deter the mobility of people from the Global South. By 'nurtur[ing] xenophobic ideologies and racialized worldviews' (Besteman 2019: S26), this regime has entrenched hierarchies of deservingness and brought to the fore the inequalities underlying the ability to move (or to stay put, for that matter) for people in different parts of the world (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). Current discourses of migration tend to omit the contexts, histories and regimes of power that lead to migration in the first instance. They reduce migrants to 'metaphorical figures that have little to do with their actual lives' (Tošić and Lems 2019: 3).<sup>8</sup> With the best of intentions, the way we write about migration as scholars 'risk(s) replicating all-too-familiar logics of apartheid and marginalization' in what Heath Cabot calls the 'business' of academia (2019: 262).<sup>9</sup> In this sense, privileging emic idioms and concepts and a 'return to experience' (Tošić and Lems 2019: 6) become not just ethical and political imperatives but also intellectual ones that open up new avenues for theorization.

As the following chapters will show, the pursuit of a viable life tends to be messy, contradictory and fluctuating in ways that are not always amenable to

theoretical organization. Some of the established academic concepts available to us do not adequately cover the complexities of the worlds we are writing about.<sup>10</sup> Critical scholars of migration have shown that a phenomenological focus on experience, in its attention to hopes, affects, dreams, desires and disappointments, points to the existential nature of migration (Hage 2009, 2021; Jackson 2013; Schielke 2015; Lems 2018). Detailed ethnographic portraits can lay bare the processes and intersubjective ways in which people make sense of what is happening in their lives, particularly how they navigate ambiguity and uncertainty. Emic expressions, concepts and metaphors can be generative in this regard. As Lakoff and Johnson (2008: 3) argue in *Metaphors We Live By*, ‘our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people’. In this vein, and moving away from conceiving migration as routes (Clifford 1997), or from considering settling in a new place as an event, I take Um Bashir’s expression of ‘*arsayna*’ as a starting point to develop the concept of anchorage as a novel lens to understand migration, home and place in ways that account for fluidity, temporariness and serendipity.

Capturing the depth of these experience requires not only an openness to new theorization but also a particular style of writing. I follow a scholarship that has been committed to forms of radical empiricism that ‘zoom in’ (Tošić and Lems 2019: 2) on the vagaries of human experiences and that analyse and comment on them without a ‘radical split’ from them (Desjarlais 1992: 35). The value of ethnography, as Michael Jackson has long argued, is not in its guarantee to reveal some hidden knowledge of others but in the ‘intersubjective process of sharing experience, comparing notes, exchanging ideas, and finding common ground’ for understanding (1996: 8). My aim in this book is to develop an anthropology of anchorage that documents and understands the everyday practices that create a sense of holding fast in otherwise fluid times and places. A focus on the ways migration trajectories unfold in time and place brings to the fore the motivations, aspirations and agencies that drive migrants in new places, where they seek to create home. As this book documents the experience of Palestinian migrants, radical empiricism is all the more needed. At a time when Palestinians are facing annihilation, writing about Palestinian life, whether at home or in the diaspora, becomes an ethic of presence and a subversion of colonial erasure.

### A Palestinian Diaspora?

‘The Palestinian is a refugee!’ (*al-Filistīnī lāji*),<sup>11</sup> Um Bashir told me once. Her anxious married daughter Widad had just left the room. She had returned upset from an unsettling meeting with the immigration lawyer handling her

asylum case, and her mother had been trying to console her. A potential rejection of Widad's application would be devastating for her family. Um Bashir was hopeful that her daughter would be granted refugee status. This would certainly alleviate her immediate worries. Yet, the feeling of being a refugee remains a recognizable existential condition among Palestinians worldwide. Regardless of legal status or location within or outside the territories of historical Palestine, Um Bashir was pointing to the universal predicament of Palestinians: as long as they were away from their land, they would remain refugees. Um Bashir's statement condenses a drawn-out history of forced displacement. At the heart of this history were the devastating events of the Nakba, which saw the flight and exodus of some 700,000 Palestinians from their homes, lands and villages in the 1948 war that led to the creation of the state of Israel. The catastrophe – the English translation of Nakba – was the destruction of Palestinian society. With hundreds of villages obliterated and with the forceful dispersal and fragmentation<sup>12</sup> (*shatāt*) of the Palestinian population, the lives of Palestinian individuals, their families, communities and the Palestinian nation were all irreversibly transformed (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Masalha 2012).

Scholars of Palestine have argued that the Nakba is not a mere political event with a distinct ending. Unlike disasters explored in what Rosemary Sayigh calls 'the trauma genre' (2013: 56),<sup>13</sup> the Nakba is ongoing. It is not just a traumatic memory; 'the suffering caused by the Nakba has to be understood in terms of a *continuing* state of rightlessness [original italics], with all the varieties of abuse and violence that rightlessness exposes people to' (2013: 56). Sayigh argues that the Nakba repeatedly generates new disasters that deprive Palestinians of a sense of security, not only in the present but also in the future.<sup>14</sup> It is this continuity that is expressed in Um Bashir's and other Palestinians' notions of an 'ongoing Nakba' and the predicament of living in perpetual refugeehood.

Although the Nakba marks the fragmentation of Palestinian communities, many agree that it was also a key moment for the birth of a collective Palestinian consciousness and the consolidation of a national identity defined by a history of suffering and the struggle for recognition (Doumani 1992; Khalidi 1997; Lindholm Shulz and Hammer 2003; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). As Ilana Feldman writes, 'the political value of simply being (being Palestinian, claiming Palestinianness)' has been a vital part of the now seventy-six-year-old struggle (2012: 158). It goes without saying that to claim that all Palestinians in the world have a homogenous identity or political subjectivity would be inaccurate. Being Palestinian in the West Bank is not the same as being Palestinian in a Lebanese refugee camp (Allan 2013), in Denmark (Schiocchet 2022), in Chile (Bawalsa 2023) or indeed in the UK (Loddo 2017). What it means to be Palestinian, or what forms

Palestinianness take in different social and political contexts, can be topics of dispute and contention, as I show in [Chapter 5](#). However, Palestinians in all these places, in spite of diversity of expression, *do* feel united in their profound sense of social belonging to a broad and global Palestinian community and cause.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the different expressions of this communitarian space, scholars of Palestine and Palestinians themselves are cautious in their use of the category ‘diaspora’ to represent the Palestinian experience. Diaspora has come to have many meanings in the literature (Clifford 1994; Brah 1996; Gilroy 1999; Brubaker 2005; Quayson and Daswani 2013). With the shifts in emphasis in its conceptual development, it is often unclear how exile and different forms of displacement sit in the frameworks of diaspora studies (Lindholm Shulz and Hammer 2003). As Julie Peteet argues, the ‘uncritical invocations of diaspora risk minimizing the range of traumatic conditions that fuel displacement and the way these shape sociocultural formations and subjectivity’ (2007: 629). In this sense, diaspora may negate both the internationally recognized legal category *and* the identity of ‘Palestinian refugee’, deflecting attention from the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. In the same vein, Abbas Shiblak warns that the use of diaspora might indicate an acceptance of Palestinian dispersal and risks the assumption that they are ‘no longer refugees uprooted from their country by force’ (2005: 8). Moreover, scholars have indicated that the permanence implied in understandings of diaspora as ‘essentially about settling down [and] putting roots “elsewhere”’ (Brah 1996: 182), does not chime with the exilic experience of ‘liminality’, the ‘state of constant alert’ or the existential refugeehood described by Palestinians living abroad (Lindholm Shulz and Hammer 2003; Suleiman 2016: 4; Schiocchet 2022). This critique and problematization have not necessarily led to the abandonment of the use of diaspora as a category.<sup>16</sup> However, it does call for a ‘critical politics of mobility’ that ‘examines and ethnographically grounds its use of diaspora’ (Peteet 2007: 630). This issue, of course, does not apply to Palestinians alone. Treating people as ‘representatives’ of ‘types’ of displacement (such as forced versus voluntary) tends to create problematic moral judgements (such as deserving and undeserving), not to mention that the boundaries between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration are often themselves questionable (Jansen and Löfving 2009: 8; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013; Holmes and Castañeda 2016).

The Gazzawis provide a very good example of the futility of these labels. A Palestinian family of ten, five of the children, as well as the parents, moved to London at different times over the course of ten years, after one sister had already settled in Scotland. Among the eight who were in the UK, they combined an assortment of legal statuses: student residencies, asylum claims, refugee statuses and British citizenship. Their arrival stories range from the

ordeal of crossing various borders for one brother to travelling on a business class ticket for another. For all of them, however, the premise of their displacement, despite its logistical execution, relates to the living conditions they were subjected to in their city, Gaza, as a result of the structural and actual violence inflicted on the Palestinians by the Israeli state. A main repercussion of the blockade on Gaza, for example, was the closure of a thriving business that the Gazzawis owned. Other drivers were life-threatening events during the Israeli war on Gaza in 2008 and the overwhelming sense of entrapment inflicted on the general population of residents.<sup>17</sup> If we take on board that displacement can result from staying put as well as moving across space (Hage 2009; Kelly 2009; Cabot and Ramsay 2021; Obeid 2023), then the displacement of the Gazzawi family may have started long before their move to London.

My aim from this discussion is to bring to the fore some of the problems and the loss of complexity that arise when we use certain mobility labels, particularly in the case of Palestinians. What might be more generative is to think of diaspora as a 'a way of being in the world and a way in which the world comes to be' (Hage 2021: 2). The starting point of this book is that the Gazzawis are agentic actors, embedded in the social, political and historical contexts that make up their worlds. Through an ethnographic approach, the book sets out to detail the ways in which different members of this family strove to make their worlds, as individuals, as a family and as a community, viable in London. This viability is made possible with the (re)creation of home, for it is in home that 'the intimate and the global, the material and the symbolic' (Long 2013: 334) tend to converge.

### **A Palestinian Home in London**

Um Bashir often spoke to me about her family home in Gaza. Um and Abu Bashir had built their home through blood, sweat and tears. It was luxurious and spacious, with two large living rooms (*salonayn!*). Um Bashir longed for the bustle of relatives, neighbours and friends coming in and out of their house and she missed *istiqbāl* (offering hospitality). The three-bedroom flat in London was small in comparison and lacked the comforts of the Gaza house. When her children and grandchildren stayed with her, they crammed into shared rooms and sofa spaces. 'It was but a temporary arrangement', she consoled herself. She and her husband would sooner or later return to Gaza. And yet, Um Bashir continuously invested in that small flat. She did so materially, through decorating and embellishing the flat with ornaments, handmade cushions and curtains, chairs she herself upholstered and, socially and affectively, by turning the flat into the node that connected the different

households in this extended family. I often teased Um Bashir about her busy social life. It did not feel like her life in London was all that different from the one she described in Palestine, I would say. Her life seemed just as busy, judging by the flow of people who dropped by for a *ziyāra* (visit): classmates from her English and swimming classes; neighbours she had met while shopping at the local grocery shop; Palestinian friends from London; not to mention the big feasts she prepared for her family and friends on weekends and on occasions such as *Īd. Al-dār*, home, Um Bashir would say, is something you must ‘create’ (*biddik tikhlaqīb*). While aware of what was left behind in Gaza – a house, a rich social life, routines, attachment to place, etc. – Um Bashir believed that one could, through certain processes, and in time, (re) create some of the things that would lead to feelings of comfort and security (*rāha wa amān*), in other words a sense of homeliness. To put it simply, we can think of homemaking as a set of agentive practices through which people work on making a new place familiar (Rapport and Williksen 2010).

Home, in this sense, is much more than a material dwelling, even when it needs to be ‘materially anchored’ (Boccagni 2017: 51). It is an ‘affective space, shaped by emotions and feelings of belonging’ (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 22; Lenhard and Samanani 2019; Boccagni, Mercia and Belloni 2020). We often articulate this as the ‘*feeling* of being at home’, which we experience when we feel a sense of security, familiarity and autonomy; when we gain spatial knowledge of the places we live in and when we feel able to communicate with others, to build relationships and to belong (Hage 1997; Boccagni 2017). Ghassan Hage highlights an important existential aspect of homemaking, that it involves a set of forward-looking practices that rely on the feeling of ‘a sense of possibility’, where one can discern opportunities for a better life (1997: 102–3). Rather than defining what home is, then, the literature has approached home as a dynamic set of everyday processes<sup>18</sup> that have diverse meanings and articulations. Particularly for people who are displaced and who long for homes they lost, home can be a representation, an ‘imaginative space’ (Lenhard and Samanani 2019: 13), in which the past and its memories are woven into the present, the future and idealized versions of home – a home one aspires to. Home therefore stretches across different temporalities (Mallet 2004; Jansen and Löfving 2009; Brun and Fabos 2015). Here I extend these arguments to explore the entanglements of home with homeland. As a metaphor of belonging, home traverses different spatial, temporal and relational scales interlocking individuals with families, neighbourhoods, communities and nations.

For the Gazzawis, the project of home was anchored in the everyday, in routine chores, activities and economic projects that aimed to reproduce a *Palestinian* home in London, even when the nature of these activities were themselves transformed or renegotiated in the diaspora. It is not my intention

here to present an essentialist argument about identity. The ‘fetishization’ of the homeland and the preoccupation with the idea of ‘origin’ have received well-articulated critiques (Clifford 1994; Axel 2002). Such critiques, however, ought not dissuade us from paying attention to people’s attachments to notions of the homeland, the times and places in which such attachments intensify and the ways that the nation percolates into the nooks and crannies of everyday life. For Palestinians, as for others, the national extends far beyond national territory. What it means to be Palestinian, and perhaps Palestine itself, are ‘dynamic processes of becoming, rather than [perceived] through fixed static identity politics’ (Johnson and Shehadeh 2013; Richter-Devroe and Salih 2018: 16). It is in the context of daily life that national subjects are constructed. In the recreation, negotiation and even invention of familiarity and sociality in London, there was a strong sense that aesthetic, sensorial and social practices that promoted homeliness were guided by a Palestinian habitus – my interlocutors would stress Arab or Gazan sensibilities at times, depending on the social context, and eventually a ‘London’ sensibility as they settled. Once reunited, family members began to undertake practices and activities that made life feel ‘normal’: cooking food together, cleaning the house, calling each other several times a day, shopping together, taking their mother to a doctor’s appointment, looking after grandchildren while their parents were at work, taking a trip to Scotland to see their sister, discovering London’s attractions and so on. These activities ‘temporalised everyday practices’ (Bocagni 2017: 69), but they did so precisely because they were approached in similar ways to how they were done back home, *‘al-tariqa al-Filistinia* (the Palestinian way), as my interlocutors would say. Mundane activities, in the ways that they (re)created everyday sociality and familiarity for the different family members, imbued their new place with meaning and enhanced their processes of emplacement.<sup>19</sup>

The interlacing of home, family and nation was especially prominent in the establishment of a family business, a Palestinian café that offered ‘home-made’ food. As a savvy businesswoman, Um Bashir saw a niche in the Arabic foodscapes of London. While there was an abundance of Lebanese, Moroccan and other Arab eateries, there were very few Arab and Palestinian restaurants across London – particularly in the area of South London in which her sons lived. ‘What better way to introduce London to Palestinian [culture] than food?’ And not just restaurant food, but ‘real home-made food in London’. It is no surprise that food played a crucial role in producing familiarity. Food is one of the most powerful markers of identity. It facilitates a sense of continuity with the past, but it also enables the creation of new relations, particularly in a city like London where food in its diversity has come to be an important measure of multiculturalism. As a site that would facilitate *lamm al-‘ā’ila*, the uniting of the family, as Um Bashir referred to

her project, the café anchored the Gazzawis financially, affectively and, as the business became stable, politically. By re-creating a Palestinian national cuisine in London, and by turning the café into a site in which Palestine and its culture were represented, the Gazzawi family aspired to contribute to a politics of presence that aimed to sway political opinions in the metropolis. The chapters of this book (1, 2 and 6) detail the ways in which this project of a Palestinian café was realized and how it deepened the links between home, kinship and nation for this dispersed family. That the café and the new Gazzawi accommodation were part of the same property only amplified these entanglements.

Outside of the café itself, the Gazzawis created a network of social relationships. Some of these were with other Palestinians dispersed around London.<sup>20</sup> But on an everyday level, most of these relationships were emplaced in their very mixed neighbourhood and were built around the café. The shops in the vicinity were owned by a diversity of people: a Moroccan owned a butchery, an English man a fishery, an Indian a fruit and vegetable shop, a French family a bakery and a Lebanese the next-door Italian restaurant. Apart from some special Arabic ingredients that they ordered from Arab shops or imported from Palestine, the Gazzawis bought most of the café supplies from these neighbours, thus embedding the café in the neighbourhood economy and strengthening neighbourly ties. These shop owners and their families would often be seen at the café during the day and were also invited to some Gazzawi family festivities. This ‘social field’ facilitated a sense of familiarity outside of the house/café and exemplifies the ‘modes of incorporation’ that Nina Glick-Schiller and Ayse Çağlar (2006: 614) referred to when they argued for an approach that looks beyond migrants’ interactions with their own ‘community’, ethnic or national group. The sense of feeling at home for the Gazzawis was fostered by the familiarity created in the home, through their work in the café and through the economic and social relationships they forged on their immediate street. As the chapters that follow will show, while home in its various scales is a site of familiarity, affective belonging and social reproduction, it is also a ‘site of contestation and creativity’ (Lenhard and Samanani 2019: 12) in which personhood, family and nation are all negotiated and recast.

### **At Home with the Gazzawis**

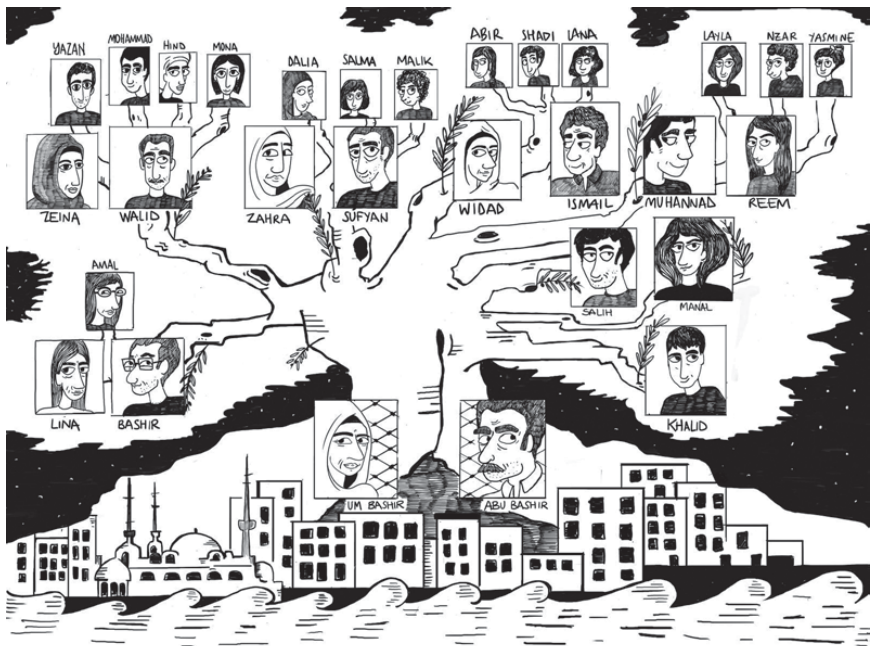
Um Bashir and I sat down in the afternoon around a plate of her home-made *basbūsa* (a Palestinian coconut cake) and a pot of mint tea. Abu Bashir was sat at his usual table by the window, sipping his tea and quietly observing the street. Their youngest daughter Manal had just returned famished and

was having a late lunch that she assembled from the café fridge. This was around late afternoon on a weekday when the café did not expect customers. Yet, it was anything but quiet. I had promised Um Bashir to help her with her English homework and we had only been through a few irregular verbs before her daughter-in-law Reem started chasing after her three young children, Layla, Nizar and Yasmine, who were running around the tables, asking them to calm down. ‘Do you want a snack, my darlings?’ Um Bashir cooed at them before she got up, prepared three wraps of *labna* (strained yoghurt), which she gave to the children and returned to her homework. Minutes after that, her youngest son Khalid entered the café with a strange haircut, causing a commotion in the room. The back of his head was shaved unevenly; locks of different lengths dangled from his head. They all teased him that the family reputation on the street would now be compromised, thanks to his new look! One of Widad’s children was sent to fetch me. Widad, Um Bashir’s eldest daughter, was on the phone with the bank in the upstairs flat and she needed help with translation. When the call was resolved, Widad, her two daughters, who were watching TV, and I joined everyone in the café. We returned to the homework, or at least attempted to, before their other son Salih emerged from another room with a tablet. A videocall from Gaza! Updates from relatives about some official papers that the family were awaiting. Two customers came into the café. They seemed unsure whether it was full, now that almost every table had family members occupying it and the noise was reverberating to the street: Um and Abu Bashir, Salih, Widad and her three children, Reem and her three children, Khalid and me. A spontaneous reshuffling immediately began. The children were moved out of the way to free up a table. ‘Come in, come in!’ Abu Bashir beckoned. In his broken English and playful manner, he explained, pointing his index finger in the air with exaggeration, ‘All these people ... one family! Only you [are] the customers!’ to everyone’s laughter.

This lively scene exemplifies the centrality of the café as a living space for the Gazzawi family. The feeling that a patron has just entered a family living room was one of the appeals of Al-Zaytuna that emphasized the homeliness of the place. Family members ate together in the café, hosted friends, did their homework, conducted business and spent a good portion of the day chasing the little children out of the way, especially when the café was busy. Upstairs were a sizeable living room decorated with photos of the family and Palestinian embroideries, three bedrooms<sup>21</sup> that miraculously fitted everyone’s belongings, and two bathrooms. Since the upper part of the property did not have a kitchen, the family used the café kitchen, separated from customer tables and chairs by a display fridge, to prepare their own food. It was not uncommon to see members of the family going into the kitchen in

their pyjamas to make a latte, to fry an egg or even to heat some food from the display fridge, as Manal did.

When I began my research, the upstairs flat attached to the café hosted Um and Abu Bashir and their three unmarried children – Salih, Manal and Khalid (see [Figure 0.1](#)). Their two eldest sons were abroad. Bashir, a medical doctor, had been living in Canada since the early 2000s with his wife and daughter. Their second son Walid was living in Gaza with his wife and four children. Their eldest daughter Zahra was living in Scotland with her husband and three children. In London, Salih had just found a job after graduating from university, Khalid had just been granted refugee status after a two-year wait and Manal had arrived earlier that year when she applied for asylum after her life in Gaza became increasingly overbearing. Soon after, Widad and her three children followed suit and, as the asylum application was being processed, they also stayed temporarily with Um and Abu Bashir until the family was granted housing in another area of London ([Chapter 3](#)). Their son Muhannad had been in London the longest. He had a good job, which he juggled with Al-Zaytuna after he and his wife helped Um Bashir set up the business. Although he, his wife and children lived in a flat about forty-five minutes away from Al-Zaytuna, they spent most of their time in



**Figure 0.1.** The Gazzawis: A Family Tree (illustrated by Letizia Bonanno)

the café, partly because Reem played an important role in the business, and partly because the children were attached to their grandparents. Soon after I started my research, Muhannad was offered a job abroad and decided to try it out while his wife and children remained in London. Reem and her two children moved to Al-Zaytuna.

I had met Muhannad through London's Arab community. A few friends and I had visited the new café a number of times and enjoyed Muhannad's gushing hospitality. When I started my field research, I was interested in Arab migration to London and had envisioned a street ethnography that would capture migrant experiences outside of the concentrated Arab hubs of Central London (e.g. Edgware Road). Greenway Lane seemed ideal since there were a few Arab restaurants and grocery shops in that multicultural street nestled in a neighbourhood in South London – an area where there was a small but burgeoning Arab community. I was counting on Muhannad to introduce me to shopkeepers, and I began to hang out in the café as I familiarized myself with the street. At that point, Muhannad was anxious about leaving London. His parents and Khalid, with the help of his wife Reem, were doing well in running the café, although Reem had signed up to a course and was finding it difficult to commit more of her time. Given that Um and Abu Bashir could not speak English, and Khalid's was still basic, Muhannad was looking for someone to help, especially with communication. I volunteered to spend a few days a week in Al-Zaytuna and started helping out after Muhannad trained me on the basic operation processes of the café. My café work led me to meet regular patrons and to appreciate the trials of sustaining a family business. I had the pleasure of spending time with different family members. I accompanied Abu Bashir to a nearby street market that he was fond of; I sipped tea with Um Bashir and her friends in the flat; I flipped through job and university websites with Manal, who was trying to plan her new life; I accompanied Manal and Reem to charity shops they liked, searching for the next bargain; and I hung out with Khalid and the different porters who were 'on duty' at different times, listening to music, cooking and, as Khalid would say, 'plotting' (*nu-khattit*) in relation to his plans to improve the café.

Just before his departure, Muhannad expended a lot of energy on supporting his sister Widad in her asylum case. He escorted her to meetings with lawyers and government officials, he researched schools for her children when she was granted housing in North London and continued to offer advice on Skype after he left. Still, there was a mountain of bureaucratic labour required to ensure that she and her children were settled, until her husband Ismail was able to join them later that year. I tried to fill Muhannad's shoes and began to accompany Widad to her meetings, translating and explaining processes, many of which I was discovering for the first time. Our friendship blossomed as I was incorporated into her family and as I became a *khālto* (auntie) to her children. It was a privilege to

share Widad's experience as a new migrant facing the maze of British bureaucracy. It was even more of a privilege to gain an insight into the tolls of migration on children and the ways they exercise their own agency in making a new life.

My time with the Gazzawis was spent in a combination of the café, the upstairs flat, and Widad's accommodation, without much more space for a street ethnography. I was at home in the different spaces of this family who shared their life with me. Against the highs and lows of the UK, the Gazzawis armed themselves with a big meal. Food was a language of family, love, nation, the past and the present. Big, late Sunday lunches after customers dispersed were the norm. Spontaneous pescatarian feasts that Widad cooked up – without necessarily needing an excuse – were common, when we were all summoned back to her flat to savour her fried fish in the middle of the week. A graduation, a birthday, *Id*, an engagement, all called for the closing of the café and rearranging the space to feast with the family, often with neighbours and friends in London.

This book spans the period of twelve months (2010/2011) in which I document the changes in the Gazzawi extended family, with a focus on the family members that laboured to settle in London. The aim of this in-depth portrait of one family is not to generalize or to represent an essentialist Palestinian (or other migrant) experience. Rather, it is to tell a story that, at least in part, will resonate with migrants who strive to make life worth living in the act of anchoring in a new place.

## An Anthropology of Anchorage

'We have anchored here now!' This book takes Um Bashir's expression as an invitation to think about how anchorage<sup>22</sup> might advance our understandings of home and migration. What actions, manoeuvres, negotiations and adjustments does anchoring entail? What happens in the 'stops' when people drop anchor? What kind of states (material, social, existential) do these pauses produce? And what temporalities can we unearth in anchoring? For example, at what point does a temporary 'mooring' become permanent? By exploring the investments made in states that appear temporary, these questions push the explanatory power of anchorage as a concept of mobility. While there has been extensive literature on movement since the 'mobilities turn' in the social sciences, anchorage and mooring have received little critical attention, even when they are often used in their conventional sense in the English language to mean stopping a movement or fastening someone to something.<sup>23</sup> One exception is Andrea Verdasco's work with asylum seekers in Denmark. Writing against the sedentarist bias in the migration literature

(Malkki 1992; 1995), Verdasco (2018: 5) uses ‘anchoring points’ to explore how people create a ‘community of meaningful social relations’ in uncertain situations. Her aim is to show that belonging, identity and community can be created even when people are not ‘permanently grounded in a particular place’ (ibid: 5). Building on this generative approach and taking inspiration from literatures on homemaking and emplacement, this book conceptualizes anchorage as an existential state that produces particular modes of being and doing that are mediated by different temporalities. Let us consider the different components of this argument.

### *Beyond Linear Temporalities*

Um Bashir’s statement ‘we are here, *now*’ suggests a form of presentism. Migration, however, is a process that is simultaneously backward and forward-looking. ‘By its very nature it involves the migrant in different temporalities of past, present and future’ (Pine 2014: S98–99). Being ‘here now’ is framed by a not-so-distant past and at the same time by the possibility that tomorrow we might not be. Implicitly then, Um Bashir opens the possibility for alternative futures. In time, she and other members of the family might ‘sail’ again; they might stay in London permanently; they might leave for a while only to return and drop anchor again. Indeed, this was the case with several Gazzawi members who years down the line would return to London after having left, supposedly for good. Even upon their arrival, family members envisaged different temporalities of anchoring. While for Um and Abu Bashir, migration was accidental and temporary, for their children who sought asylum, their plans were different. For their son Khalid, for example, life in London was a permanent plan. For their daughter Widad, who sought a life of order, safety and growth for her family, her aspiration was to give her children a good education. ‘My pledge is to get them through university so that they can secure their future’, she would say. After that, the future was unknown. In other words, her plans suggested a longer kind of ‘temporary’ than her parents, but with the possibility of sailing again, nonetheless. In capturing these migratory experiences, anchorage goes beyond the sedentarist bias inherent in arboreal images of roots (Malkki 1992; 1995). It offers a set of possibilities that enable different kinds of mobilities: staying put temporarily *as well as* settling permanently. Serendipity, temporariness and fluctuations are interwoven in these possibilities. They are not, at least from an analytical perspective, exceptions or temporal ruptures. In this sense, anchorage enables us to overcome the determinism that sees migration as a linear process. It encourages us to trace ethnographically the phenomenological experience of anchoring and the existential sense of ‘feeling anchored’ beyond the temporal frames of pre-migrancy, migrancy and postmigrancy (Çağlar 2016; Bachelet 2019).

### *Beyond the Liminal Subject*

Liminality has produced rich and necessary ethnographic insights into migrant experiences and agencies. This is especially true of refugee studies literature. Yet, it has not managed to do away with the reification of ‘the refugee experience’. This is to the extent that, as Georgina Ramsay (2020) observes, anthropologists tend to focus on tragedy even when their aim is to analyse agency. Linear thinking tends to portray migrant subjectivity as an exceptional form of being in which the migrant languishes in liminality and the ‘permanence of transitoriness’ (Bauman 2002: 438). The underlying assumption here is an ‘in-between’ mode of existence that would eventually be resolved.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, people fleeing violence face not only the uncertainties of returning home but also the anxieties of attaining legal permissions in host countries. These experiences are very real to displaced people. They were certainly real to Um Bashir’s daughter Widad, who struggled with extended periods of waiting, unpredictability, feelings of ‘stuckedness’ and the threat of deportability – or as she would say ‘the torture of bureaucracy’ (Chapter 3). In a sense it is difficult to understand waiting without exploring its entanglements with hope, doubt and uncertainty. And yet, the wealth of literature has shown that waiting can be agentic (Hage 2009). It can ‘trigger ... forms of social energies’ (Bandak and Janeja 2018) and a ‘state of wakeful navigation and vigilance’ for change (Khosravi 2020); in other words, active modes of doing, as I explore in the next subsection. It is also important to note that, while legal status is essential to migrant stability, legality in and of itself does not necessarily guarantee the end of displacement and the beginning of ‘existential security’ (Ramsay 2020: 395; see also Malkki 1995). Palestinians worldwide, as I explored earlier, consider themselves dispossessed refugees despite their legal statuses.

By asking what relationships, socialities and subjectivities people forge beyond ‘the waiting’ and ‘the liminal’ subject, we may be able to excavate an analysis that transcends the ‘damaged’ (Tuck 2009) or the ‘suffering’ (Robbins 2013) subject that remains a hallmark of refugee and, one might add, Palestinian studies (Allen 2009; 2013; Sukarieh and Tannock 2013). As this book shows, even in temporary conditions, when Um and Abu Bashir believed they would return to Gaza imminently, they still sought to achieve a degree of stability (*istiqrār*) and to settle. And, as I explore further in Chapter 5, centring joy rather than suffering in public representations of Palestinians was a crucial issue for the Gazzawi family. The book takes food to be a rich and productive way to analyse sociality. Cooking, consuming and selling Palestinian food creates familiarity at home and in the café and connects people with others through commensality and conviviality. Food therefore constitutes an essential aspect of anchoring and contributes to what

I am calling the work of re-Palestinianization, a politics of presence that involves narrating, imagining and constructing a past that has relevance in the present, against a fear of cultural erasure (Chapters 1 and 5). Departing from the lens of liminality, anchorage allows us to explore how people find stability even when they feel their vessels are adrift.

### *Modes of Doing*

When we think of anchoring, we envisage a stop, a ‘fixity’ or a pause from movement. But, as I indicate above, this pause is anything but a lull. It is rather characterized by an intensification<sup>25</sup> of activities: finding appropriate housing, establishing a business, getting familiar with new spaces, searching for shops that sell familiar foods, learning new bureaucratic regimes (new financial and educational systems, new terminologies and logics for utility services) and so on. This book sets out to understand what the proverbial dropping of anchor entails. It explores the processes of *anchoring* that the Gazzawi family embarked on. By this I mean a set of activities, practices and investments that are social, economic, political and affective, which facilitate emplacement and feelings of home – in other words an overall sense of ‘being anchored’. Whether this happens two months or two years into migration, or how long this feeling or state persists, are questions to be pursued ethnographically. One might succeed in feeling settled while anchoring. But turbulences in personal circumstances might shake the sense of stability way after one may have begun to feel emplaced. A marriage, a divorce or a job opportunity in greener pastures elsewhere might prompt an ‘anchored person’ to set sail. We will see, for example, how a job prospect for Muhannad unsettled not just his family but also the sustainability of the entire café project and called for readjustments (Chapter 2). Similarly, external transformations such as a financial crisis or the rise of racism due to political changes might also lead to the desire to sail again – indeed, official government responses to the genocide in Gaza in 2023/24, with their unswerving support for Israel, despite growing protests, has challenged the longstanding security and stability of some of the Gazzawis, who began to experience the UK as ‘no longer home’ (Conclusion).

The following chapters trace the intensifications of anchorage in two parts. In one part, I focus on the activities, conversations, negotiations and challenges that transpired in running a family business (Chapters 1 and 2). These discussions tease out the different anchoring processes of individual family members who had distinct aspirations and ambitions in the city and were not all able to commit to the café. They also unpack the question of representation, and the political work the family was undertaking in reconstructing a national cuisine in London and turning the café into a site of representation

and cultural exchange that served to correct mainstream misconceptions of Palestine and Palestinians (Chapters 1 and 6). These chapters show how the café served as a familial, communal and political anchor to the Gazzawis.

In another part, I focus on the experience of anchoring for ‘new arrivals’, detailing Um Bashir’s daughter Widad and her children who sought asylum and began their journey of becoming British citizens (Chapters 3 and 4). Here, the intensification is played out in the bureaucratic work needed to understand and sustain legality, entitlements and status and to secure housing and schools. What will become clear is that one’s age, gender, legal status and trajectory play an important part in anchoring. The anchorage of some, moreover, might unsettle the anchorage of others. In this sense, my analysis of anchorage considers social differentiations and their intersections. In keeping with my water metaphor,<sup>26</sup> the chapters overall consider the ‘social navigation’ (Vigh 2007; 2009) required of migrants who are faced with unfamiliar and sometimes challenging social environments that they find themselves having to manoeuvre. In time, as people cultivate a sense of familiarity, home and place, the intensification reduces as people fall into familiar rhythms of life, unless, or until, stormy waters shake their sense of stability.

### *Modes of Being*

If anchoring prompts certain modes of doing with the practical intensification of activities, I suggest that it also creates particular modes of being that also intensify and de-intensify as migrants settle. For new migrants, there is a sense that one is rendered ‘a novice’ (*mubtadi*), facing the unknown while eager to absorb novelty and to share parts of oneself. The chapters capture processes of learning that entail faux pas, perplexities, frustrations as well as wonder, humour, friendship and positive exchanges that render the multicultural encounter in London palatable. Like other migrants, my interlocutors from the Gazzawi family experienced mixed affects and emotions in different moments of their migration: longing for Gaza, alienation in the UK, anxiety about getting things right in London, fear of the unknown, concern over legality, worry about children and grandchildren’s adjustments, among other things. But these negative emotions and affects were always mixed with hope, excitement, curiosity, vigilance and a sense of possibility in a new city that promised a better future. How do migrants face these tensions, and what conceptual repertoires do they employ to counter them? It is useful to explore how idioms such as steadfastness (*sumūd*) – a key Palestinian concept<sup>27</sup> – and patience (*sabr*), prominent Palestinian, Arab and Muslim virtues, are operationalized in the face of new and uncertain situations and how they facilitate anchorage. In Chapter 4, I focus on *lakhbata*, a colloquial term that I translate as discombobulation – in keeping with the onomatopoeic

sound – which connotes a sense of disorder that leads to confusion, imbalance and ambivalence. In new places, such ambivalence and tension can be productive in the ways that they lead to situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) and reflexivity that occur through interactions with others. Through these exchanges, migrants reflect on what might be taken for granted, about how one is and how one ought to be with the self, family, neighbours, community and the state.

Anchorage, I have argued, is an existential state in which people hold fast in motion (by dropping anchor against waves, tides and storms). Anchoring galvanizes particular modes of doing that see intensifications in activities that lead to feeling settled (legally, socially, affectively, economically and politically), in the short as well as the long run. It creates particular modes of being as migrants find themselves novices, having to learn how to exist in a new world. This world does not only shape them. As they bring something of themselves to it, they reconfigure it so that it becomes viable. It is in this exchange that one can begin to feel anchored. My aim through this anthropology of anchorage is to tell a story of how moving people make a life in a world that is itself always on the move.

## Notes

1. I am using pseudonyms for all the names of individuals, streets, areas and businesses throughout the book. Some identifying details have also been altered to protect the anonymity of my research participants.
2. The pseudonym ‘Gazzawi’ literally means from, or of, Gaza. Gaza is by no means a homogenous space. It is home to large refugee populations dispossessed in 1948. The extended family I write about has a mixture of native Gazans and descendants of refugees who still maintain a refugee identity (see the work of Ilana Feldman, for example, 2006; 2008a, 2008b; Filiu 2015; Masalha 2018). Nevertheless, the family has a strong Gazan identity, which was very much pronounced in the diaspora.
3. R-a-s-u is the root of the word – *Yarsi* (to anchor or to moor); *marsa* (anchorage or mooring).
4. This figure, which is used in the media, reflects official numbers from the Health Ministry in Gaza. However, estimates suggest that the numbers are much higher on the ground. *The Lancet* argues that ‘it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186,000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict in Gaza’ (Khatib, McKee and Yusuf 2024: 237).
5. This problematic issue is particularly stark in the coverage of Israel’s 2023 war on Gaza.
6. For example, the police were seen arresting protestors wearing *keffiyas* (chequered black-and-white scarf emblematic of Palestinian nationalism) in London; Home Secretary Suella Braverman considered waving the Palestinian flag as glorifying terrorism; See Hunter (2023) [https://link-springer-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/content/pdf/10.1057/978-1-137-58802-9\\_4?pdf=chapter%20toc](https://link-springer-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/content/pdf/10.1057/978-1-137-58802-9_4?pdf=chapter%20toc).

7. The UK, and London specifically, have had a tradition of pro-Palestinian solidarities and campaigning that traverse local and international groups: from student groups, trade-unions, Muslim and Jewish associations to Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement. These campaigns were effective within certain scales, but they had not managed to challenge mainstream political discourses on Palestine. Since Israel's 2023/24 war on Gaza, new forms of protest and visible mobilisations are emerging in the UK and worldwide – for example, student encampments on university campuses.
8. In their special issue, Jelena Tošić and Annika Lems (2019) focus on migration between Africa and Europe. Here I extend their argument to non-White migrants more broadly. Without losing the specificity of their discussions, demonisation of migrants from South Asian, Arab and Central Asian countries also neglect historical connections and legacies that give shape to different mobilities.
9. Cabot makes the point that the refugee regime is a business ('the refugee industry') in the ways it is entangled with political and economic interests. 'Often unacknowledged, however, is that scholarship – itself a business – is also a part of the refugee regime' (2019: 262).
10. See, for example, a critique of the limitations of the concepts and theoretical binaries prominent in the migration literature: agency/structure (Tošić and Lems 2019); emplacement/displacement (Jansen and Löfving 2009; Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016; Lems 2016); transit migration (Bachelet 2019).
11. A similar expression is documented in Sayigh (1977: 21): 'Wherever he is, a Palestinian is homeless.'
12. A division was created between Palestinians who stayed inside the boundaries of what became the state of Israel (today commonly known as 'the 1948 Arabs' or 'the 1948 Palestinians') and the millions rendered outside its borders. In 1967, further divisions ensued when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were driven out of the West Bank and East Jerusalem into Jordan (see Masalha 2012).
13. The trauma genre began with particular texts in Holocaust studies (Felman and Laub 1992; Caruth 1995; 1996). Sayigh, however, is interested in anthropological work focused on suffering, namely Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997) and Das and Kleinman (2001), which she critiques for its exclusions; for example, of an analysis of colonialism and the Palestinian Nakba as sources of suffering.
14. See Khalidi (2020) for a comprehensive history.
15. Building on the work of Lena Jayyusi (2007), who works with the idea of a 'subjunctive mood' to explore memory work among Palestinian refugees, Leonardo Schiocchet calls Palestinian social belonging a 'subjunctive space of Palestinianness', referring to the ways Palestinians articulate their present in relation to an idealized past (historical Palestine before the Nakba) and a utopian future ('based on dreams of return to an idealised Palestine' (2022: 77).
16. While some advocate for the use of *shatāt* (forced dispersal) or *ghurba* (estrangement; exile), for example Schiocchet (2022), other scholars still use diaspora despite the critique (see Lindholm Schulz and Hammer 2003; Hanafi 2005; Shibliak 2005; Zaidan 2012; Suleiman 2016).
17. See, for example, Roy (1995); Allen (2008; 2012).
18. Paolo Boccagni uses *homing* to point to the processes through which 'people negotiate a sense of home vis-à-vis their external circumstances' (2017: 3). See also Ann Christin Wagner (2019), who uses 'homing' rather than homemaking to move away from ideas

of linear movement or the bounding of home to one place in the context of her work on Syrian refugees in Jordan.

19. I follow scholars who take emplacement to mean a set of processes that continuously embed and entangle people in their environment and through which belonging is contested and articulated (Jansen and Löfving 2009; Bjarneson and Vigh 2016; Lems 2016; 2018). This departs from conceptions of place as an a priori location and suggests instead a notion of place as process.
20. Palestinian migration to the UK and Europe began in the 1950s. More Palestinians followed after the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Lebanon's civil war, which made life for Palestinians difficult legally, economically and socially. These migrants were mainly students, civil servants and professionals. Estimates published in the mid 2000s suggest a number of 20,000 Palestinians in the UK (Mahmoud 2005; Shiblak 2005; Loddo 2006). See also Majd Abuamer's recent demographic study on 'Palestinians worldwide' (2020).
21. Technically, the flat was considered a two-and-half-bedroom flat. The 'half' was what is known in the UK as a 'box room', intended as a storage space but often used as a small bedroom or office.
22. I am grateful to Andrea Verdasco and Atreyee Sen for initiating this conversation in a workshop with the same title at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark in 2017, as I mention in more details in the Acknowledgements section of this book.
23. A few productive examples are worth mentioning here, not least because they have anchoring or mooring in their titles: Andie Diane Palmer's (2005) *Maps of Experience: The Anchoring of Land to Story in Secuepemic Discourse*; Jacqueline Nassy Brown's (2005) *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*; and Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry's (2006) programmatic article *Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings*. While these texts, in different ways, aim to interlace motion with location, none of them develop anchoring or mooring as analytical concepts of mobility per se.
24. Ayse Çağlar (2016: 958) is particularly critical of the teleological perspective of the integrationist model of migration in which the migrant, unable to live up to the 'ideal' integration models of the host remains in a 'perpetual state of integrating'.
25. I borrow this notion of 'intensification' from Ghassan Hage (2021), who in his book *The Diasporic Condition* shows how people strategically intensify and de-intensify the multiple realities they inhabit. For example, a person in Lebanon who is about to migrate to Australia will intensify the Australian reality by the activities needed to make that trip happen and de-intensify one's attachments to Lebanon.
26. Water images and metaphors have often been used to express rapid social change and instability. In the European context, metaphors of floods, waves, streams, tides and flows have been mis(used) in public and media discourses to talk about migration in the context of Fortress Europe's punishing border regimes (Ahmed 2004; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Porto 2022).
27. *Sumūd* is a key term in literature on Palestine and Palestinians. For a sample of its use, see Allen 2008; Schiocchet 2012; Allan 2013; Bascuñan-Wiley 2019; Wick 2023; Taher 2024.

Chapter 1

## Home and Nation in the Palestinian Kitchen



Al-Zaytuna's kitchen was steaming with the heat of aromatic vegetables frying in a big pan. With her sleeves rolled up and beads of sweat on her forehead, Widad welcomed me with a feigned cry for help: 'Ah, God has sent you to rescue me!' She continued, 'Look! My family is exploiting me!' as she removed golden florets of cauliflower in a steel strainer and placed them on a flat plate filled with chunks of fried potatoes, peppers and carrots. Widad was making *maqlūba*, a traditional Palestinian dish that has variants across Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Once the vegetables are fried, they are lined at the bottom of a pan and cooked with rice and spices until the rice is ready. As Widad explained, she liked to drop whole cloves of garlic in the pan so they would melt in the mouth when the rice is consumed. The pan is then flipped 'upside-down', as its name suggests (*maqlūba* [overturned]), resulting in a colourful cake-like shape, garnished with fresh parsley and fried pine nuts.

Widad closed the lid of the pan and turned the heat down, addressing the adults scattered around the kitchen and two of her own children who were munching on freshly fried falafels: 'You will eat your fingers after my *maqlūba*!' Indeed, among other special dishes, Widad was famed for her perfect mouthwatering *maqlūba*. I asked if there was a special occasion on that day since it was only the middle of the week and Um Bashir had already cooked lunch for the family, a green bean stew (*lūbia*) with a side of vermicelli

rice. This was on top of the daily food cooked for café consumption that was lying abundant in the fridge.

‘We were on Skype with my brother Walid in Gaza’, Widad explained. ‘And there he was with his whole family sat around an appetizing platter of *maqlūba*. “*Shawwaq-na lil blād*” (we felt a longing for the country/nation). I told my father, “This day will not pass without feeding you *maqlūba*.”’ Pleased with the attention of his daughter, Abu Bashir quietly nodded, smiling with satisfaction. ‘Listen’, Manal interjected half-jokingly, ‘we can name this meal “the meal of longings” (*walimat al-ashwāq*). They will eat *maqlūba* in Gaza and we will eat *maqlūba* in London.’ Almost immediately, Manal began to phone her brother Salih at work to entice him and his new fiancé Hanan to join the family for the unexpected big meal.

As something that provides us with multisensory experiences, food invokes feelings of nostalgia and longing. It sustains connections between people and places. Food invokes remembrance (Sutton 2001; Ben-Ze’ev 2004; Holtzman 2006) and it can ‘effectively transport migrants back home’ (Abbotts 2016: 117). It encourages a sense of continuity among migrants whose lives are likely to have undergone various disruptions through the processes of migration. In other words, food is one of the ways migrants create a sense of familiarity in new and unfamiliar places and it facilitates processes of homemaking in the diaspora (Hage 1997; Obeid 2013; Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni 2020). It is no surprise that the ‘migrant-origin’<sup>1</sup> restaurant business is one of the most common projects that migrants embark on in host countries (Warde 2000; Beriss and Sutton 2007).

As new migrants, the Gazzawis also chose to turn an everyday activity, cooking, into a business when Um and Abu Bashir decided to open a café specializing in Palestinian food in London in 2009. In spite of their familiarity, however, culinary practices such as preparing, consuming and selling home foods are not static in the diaspora; neither, of course, are they in places of origin. Rather, they are subject to various negotiations and influences as new migrants anchor and emplace themselves. In this process, the materiality and symbolism of food play an important part in articulating and reiterating belonging. As Ghassan Hage argues, expressions of nostalgia provide a feeling of ‘being there *here*’ (1997: 109), therefore yearning not just for a time but also for a place (Hage 2021). The *maqlūba* that Widad prepared, inspired by a gathering of the family back in Gaza, was mitigated by a family gathering in London. What may seem like yearning for the past can very much contribute to the creation of place in the present and the future.

Food, in this respect, enables the creation of new migrant subjectivities as markers of identity, home and the past all come to bear new significance outside places of origin. If buying Palestinian and Arabic food, cooking, eating and sharing it with family contributed to the recreation of home, this chapter

explores the ways that opening a café specializing in home-made Palestinian cuisine entwined home with nation and embedded the nation in quotidian practices.

I begin by showing how, against the backdrop of Israeli historical and cultural erasure, making Palestinian culinary culture visible in a capital such as London contributed to a politics of presence, which I am calling acts of 're-Palestinianization'. The sections that follow shed light on the discussions, negotiations, creativity and adjustments required to recreate an authentic national cuisine in the diaspora, with 'home' as its primary site and with hospitality and generosity as its hallmarks.<sup>2</sup> From creating menus to making decisions about serving Palestinian wine as well as *halal* food, these questions were entangled in the belief that the café was a hub in which patrons in London experienced, or 'tasted', Palestinian culture writ large; opinions could be swayed through this form of embodied learning. Given that Al-Zaytuna was also home for the Gazzawi family, different kinds of commensality were practised and performed in the space of the café. The ability to exercise hospitality and engage in conviviality is crucial to the processes of anchorage. The chapter explores how the entanglements of home, cuisine and nation facilitated process of emplacement as the family used the café as their anchor in London.

### National Cuisine Against Erasure of Palestine

The idea of a Palestinian cuisine was still unfamiliar in London at the time of my research in 2010. At least until the publication of chefs Yotam Ottolenghi<sup>3</sup> and Sami Tamimi's book *Jerusalem: A Cook Book* (2012), most popular in London was 'Lebanese cuisine', a category that conflated a number of East Mediterranean, Arab and Levantine cuisines in eateries dispersed around Edgware Road and other parts of West London. The Gazzawi family project to construct and sell a national Palestinian cuisine that is part of a historical tradition, and to do so in London, serves to maintain the sense of Palestinianness that I highlighted in the Introduction: feelings of 'commonality', 'sameness' and a 'diaspora-wide sense of national belonging' (Sayigh 2012: 13). National cuisines are imagined, invented or even fabricated (Appadurai 1988). They are one of many means to create boundaries and distinctions between one group and another (Zubaida and Tapper 1994; Wilk 1999; Avieli 2005; Holtzman 2006). Yet, despite this analytical axiom, we need to take seriously the possibility that food *does* represent some form of national 'essence' for our research participants (Ichijo, Venetia and Ronald 2019). For Palestinians, food occupies a significant place in the symbolization of Palestine. It conjures up commonality in a context where national

identity and Palestinian culture have been constantly undermined. The olive, for example, on top of comprising an essential part of Palestinian diet, remains one of the most powerful symbols of Palestine. Nasser Abufarha shows how the olive tree has come to symbolize ‘rootedness of Palestinian identity in the land of Palestine’ (Abufarha 2008: 354).<sup>4</sup> The olive tree stands for land, people and cuisine at once, writes Anne Meneley (2021). The durable qualities of olive trees make them ‘central to nationalist discourses, and the olive tree (al-zaytūna, singular) the symbol of Palestinian nationalism’ (Meneley 2021: 120). It is no coincidence that the Gazzawi family chose the name Al-Zaytuna (the olive/olive tree) for their café and followed it with the motif ‘flavours of Palestine’.<sup>5</sup>

The recent rise of fusion cuisines, food blogs, TV cooking shows and social media networks make it difficult to set national boundaries when talking about food.<sup>6</sup> Globalization of food, however, is not a new phenomenon, as any historical analysis of the movement and mutations of food – Levantine foods included – and their appropriations tells us (Zubaida 2021). Yet, this concern to distinguish Palestinian cuisine is fuelled by a general fear of cultural erasure coupled with the specific flourishing of a global Israeli restaurant industry, in which Palestinian and Levantine dishes are served without reference to or acknowledgement of their origins. The contestations surrounding this appropriation has been articulated in mainstream and academic circles as the ‘hummus wars’.<sup>7</sup> Culinary appropriation has been central to the construction of an Israeli national culture since the creation of the state of Israel (Ranta and Mendel 2014; Raviv 2015). In spite of Palestinian influences on what Ronald Ranta and Yonatal Mendel (2014) call ‘Israeli food culture’, the omission and often deliberate forgetting of this influence have led to a process of de-Arabization, or to be more specific, de-Palestinianization.

At the time of my research, London had begun to see the rise of a few pop-up cafés or canteens selling ‘Israeli *falafel*’ or specializing in ‘Israeli *hummus*’. The Gazzawis believed that Israel’s cultural appropriation of Palestinian food was doomed to fail, dwarfed by the quantity and quality of London’s Arabic food and the lack of ‘authenticity’ in Israeli claims to Palestinian food (*mush aslī* [it is not authentic!]). I often heard the justification that ‘the grandparents of our grandparents were cooking the food we are still eating!’ In other words, ‘the Israelis don’t know what we have known through generations!’ Scholars of Palestine suggest that food practices among diasporic Palestinians are a form of ‘diasporic *sumūd*’, or steadfastness, against Israeli erasure of Palestinian culture, heritage and memory (Bascuñan-Wiley 2019: 101). This preoccupation with erasure is also evident in the recent rise of a particular genre of Palestinian cookbooks that are written in English<sup>8</sup> and that attempt to make visible Palestine’s culture in ‘palatable ways’ (Saggar 2018).<sup>9</sup> Writer and cookbook author Reem Kassis, for example, maintains that food becomes

a way to ‘reclaim our country at least psychologically and emotionally, if not geographically’ (2021: 134). ‘It is a way to preserve and share a culinary and historical narrative that might otherwise slip through our hands’ (2021: 136). Similarly, in an interview with Laila El-Haddad, the Palestinian coauthor of the cookbook *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey* (EL-Haddad and Schmitt 2012), she tells Lina Alsaafin, ‘When a people has been threatened for decades, its culture denied or appropriated by a colonizing power, the effects do not stop short of the kitchen table’ (Alsaafin 2018: 16). Indeed, *The Gaza Kitchen* does not shy away from foregrounding the effects of the Israeli occupation on life in Gaza, interspersing the oppressive conditions of life in the relatable ethnographic vignettes, family histories and colourful photos that frame the recipes.

In a climate that represents Palestinians through two predominant tropes, the menacing threat or the trivial victim (Introduction), promoting a different representation has the potential to transform the narrative in the diaspora and reframe questions of power and belonging. I think of these new cookbooks and the work of other Palestinian cooks, chefs and restaurateurs, like the Gazzawis, who are concerned with the denial of their culinary culture, as a form of *re*-Palestinianization. In the way that it draws on the trope of an authentic past, this national cuisine is used as a ‘technology’ (De Cesari 2010: 633) to assert a Palestinian presence that is being deliberately erased through Israel’s processes of settler colonialism. In the following, I explore the *re*-Palestinianization of cuisine in the café as the Gazzawis carved out a ‘Palestinian niche’ through food and drink that signalled an authentic past that resonated with Al-Zaytuna’s diverse patrons in different ways.

### *Reconstituting a Palestinian Cuisine in the Café*

Constructing a ‘traditional Palestinian cuisine’ in a context where representation seemed at stake was doing some kind of work in the process of anchoring. I am suggesting that this work can be read as *re*-Palestinianization, because it involves narrating, imagining and constructing a past that has relevance in the present. Tracing Palestinian foodways helps us shed light on the social contexts that ‘make food meaningful’ (Gaul and Pitts 2021: 2). Al-Zaytuna café did not just evoke Palestine through symbols such as the olive. It promised a multisensory experience of the nation that would be embodied through taste, sight, smell and sound. The framed Palestinian embroidery on the walls, the aromas of fried *falafel*, the sounds of Arabic music in the background and, of course, the taste of Palestinian food were all intimations of the nation. However, the (re)creation of a Palestinian national cuisine in London was not necessarily straightforward. It required negotiation, iteration and creativity.

In the early days of the café, one of the challenges was to differentiate Al-Zaytuna from the wide range of Arabic, Levantine and Mediterranean restaurants in Central and West London. Common mezze dishes such as *hummus*, *fattush* and *falafel* – the latter having chickpeas as its base, as opposed to fava beans (in the Egyptian version) or a mix of the two beans (in the Lebanese version) – were prepared in a Palestinian home by Palestinian cooks. Apart from their toothsome taste, they were not identifiable as ‘Palestinian’ in a distinguishable way. So, it was important that the café offered main dishes and specialities that could stand out as distinctly Palestinian. One of the creative culinary adjustments was the introduction of the all-day ‘Palestinian breakfast’, which soon became Al-Zaytuna’s most popular offering. This was in addition to two hot dishes: traditional Palestinian *qidra* rice (slow-cooked rice traditionally prepared in a special clay pot) served with chicken or fish, and *musakhan*, another traditional dish made from bread, sumac-marinated chicken and caramelized onion. The café also served a ‘dish of the day’, which was usually a stew with rice. Dessert was a choice of two home-made options, *kunafa* (a semolina base with sweet cheese and rosewater syrup) and *basbūsa* (a coconut cake). Ready-made *baklāwas* were also on the menu. Um Bashir and Muhannad eventually developed a catering menu for parties and events, with a focus on special foods usually associated with Palestinian feasts and weddings: *kharūf* (stuffed lamb), *mansaf* (a rice dish on a bed of bread, soaked in dried yoghurt broth and chunks of lamb), *fatta* (a rice dish on a bed of broth-soaked bread, layered with chicken) and *maqlūba*. Together, these different items constructed a menu that was identifiable – and marketable – as ‘traditional Palestinian food’.

The menus in Al-Zaytuna did not distinguish between regional food in Palestine – even when some dishes were specific to Gaza or when a dish had variations across different Levantine regions (for example, *kunafa*). The national cuisine the café aimed for was a metaphor for Palestinian unity. Palestinians could identify with it regardless of their political standing, or where they were in the world. This identification transcends the Israeli occupation. It also transcends the experience of Palestinian exile (*shatāt*) and the political divisions that continue to divide Palestinians. For example, it was not uncommon for both Hamas and Fatah<sup>10</sup> supporters in London to dine together in Al-Zaytuna during a Ramadan *iftar* or *Īd*, enjoying and celebrating Palestinian commensality, as we shall see later. The construction of a national cuisine in this sense requires a choreography between historical and political emphasis and suppression. It also pries open how ‘traditional’ foods accrue and maintain symbolic value, even when their preparation, serving and consumption are ‘modernized’<sup>11</sup> (Howell 2003).

The ‘Palestinian breakfast’, the café’s most popular dish, was modelled on the ubiquitous ‘English breakfast’, a national dish in its own right (O’Connor 2009). Muhannad had noted the prevalence of the ‘platter’ in different restaurants in London. ‘Customers like to savour several dishes on one plate; a little bit of everything’, he observed. This serving style differed from how breakfast (and other meals) was served both at home and in Mediterranean restaurants more broadly, each item in a separate bowl or plate. Rather than having eggs, sausage, fried tomatoes and beans, this breakfast platter contained *hummus*, *falafel*, *ijja* (a herby omelette), *shakshūka* (spiced eggs baked with bell peppers) and a salad, all served in generous portions on a big platter. Um Bashir and Muhannad had figured (correctly) that the popularity of the ‘breakfast platter’ in London would encourage the demand for the Palestinian version. Adjustments were made to another dish, *musakhan*, which was cooked and served in a pragmatic manner that suited its high demand in the café. Rather than layering the bread, chicken and onions in a tray and baking it, the dish was turned into individual wraps served with a portion of *hummus* and salad. An alternative version was devised that replaced the chicken with *halloumi* cheese and *za’tar* (dried thyme) to cater to vegetarians. ‘It’s easier to prepare the chicken in advance and wrap it with *khubz* [flatbread]. Then, all we need to do is warm the wrap for the customer. The wraps are also lighter and healthier since they do not require the same amount of olive oil. The taste is still good even though it’s not *‘al-usūl* [authentic, or “the right way”]’, Um Bashir explained.

If from a practical perspective, traditional foods were modernized, some special occasions called for cooking and serving in ‘the right way’. For example, Um Bashir had met a new network of Palestinian women in a kite-flying community event. They had not heard of Al-Zaytuna. When they booked the café for twenty people after she spent a day with them, Um Bashir was keen to present the food as it was traditionally served back home rather than in its modernized forms. The women’s intimate knowledge of Palestinian cuisine made them a more challenging audience. In this sense, different consumers, in the ways that they represented types of audiences, whether they were Palestinian or international, shaped how Palestinianness was performed – an issue I will come back to in more detail in [Chapter 6](#). In addition to Palestinians and Arabs, the Gazzawis had a multifarious audience that was consuming a Palestinian cuisine made more ‘authentic’ by being produced at home, as the next sections shows. Patrons included tourists, locals, government officials and what the Gazzawis generally thought of as a British/international public. The family envisioned the café and its cuisine as a site in which these audiences would experience and therefore learn about Palestine.

### *Halal Food and Palestinian Wine*

Within a year and a half of establishing Al-Zaytuna, Muhannad was buzzing with a new idea. His networks in the West Bank were enthusiastic about the opening of the first commercial winery that was beginning to export its wines internationally. He put forward to his family the idea of applying for an alcohol licence.<sup>12</sup> Until then, the café had followed a BYOB ('bring your own bottle') policy, which means that while only nonalcoholic beverages were sold on the premises, patrons were allowed to consume alcoholic drinks bought from somewhere else. This strategy usually encourages footfall in eateries that do not, for various reasons, possess an alcohol licence. Selling Palestinian wine in Al-Zaytuna, I suggest, embedded the nation in the café and promoted the Gazzawis' work of re-Palestinianization through their project of re-creating a national cuisine in London.

The Gazzawis identified as Muslim, even when some family members were more observant than others when it came to the core practices of Islam, such as praying and fasting. The majority of Muslims in the world recognize the abstinence from consuming alcohol and pork,<sup>13</sup> in addition to praying, fasting during Ramadan and eating *halal* food, as important markers of being Muslim. The Muslim identity of Al-Zaytuna was arguably marked by the '*halal*' sign pinned just under the name board. This meant that the café served certified *halal* meat,<sup>14</sup> an issue that attracted Muslim patrons keen to observe religious prescriptions and taboos. In addition, the family consumed *halal* meat in their home cooking. Although other Muslim establishments might refuse to serve alcohol as a matter of principle, the Gazzawis believed that the BYOB policy did not impinge on the family's religious practices. As the varied ethnographic record on Muslim practices – and the nature of piety more broadly – confirms, 'no aspects of Muslim foodways are truly universal' (Gillette 2016: 53). Muslims exercise their judgement about ethical consumption (Tayob 2020), which is almost always intertwined with other identifications and obligations (Ding, Wei and Liu 2022). As scholars of food have shown us, food weaves important connections between family, economy, religion and, in this case, national identity (Mintz and Du Bois 2002).

The introduction of alcohol to the menus did not seem to conflict with the Gazzawis' religious commitments. The women in the family did not drink and the men knew better than to consume alcohol at home, Um Bashir explained, when I asked her how she felt about a possible contradiction between serving *halal* food and alcohol at the same time. 'If customers want to drink, the choice is theirs and it is a personal decision', she continued. 'We don't drink, but we are running a business here. If we were in Gaza, it would be a different story. And if we were in Ramallah, it would also be a different story.' Um Bashir was pointing out that in conservative settings such as Gaza,

it would be unacceptable to serve alcohol, but not in London or Ramallah, a Palestinian city renowned for its liberal character. This view on ‘alcohol in context’ chimed with the family’s understanding of *i’tidāl* (moderation), a religious disposition that carved out room to incorporate beliefs and practices of the other, without compromising on one’s own.<sup>15</sup> This was especially the case in a new place, where a degree of openness to others was necessary. In a new cultural context, reflections about the self and its relation to various others is key to processes of anchorage.

If the idea of selling alcoholic beverages, rather than merely allowing them on site, raised ethical concerns, these were mitigated by the broader gastronomic identifications and claims. Muhannad explained that alcoholic beverages, while frowned upon by some Muslim Palestinians, still comprised an important aspect of the national cuisine:

People here think that Arab countries don’t produce wine because they think Muslims don’t drink. But in our region, there are Christians and Muslims and alcohol is served in restaurants in Palestine itself. In Ramallah, in Jerusalem, people drink wine, beer, *arak* [distilled liquor from the Levantine region]. Palestinians have for a long time even made these drinks at home, and some still do. It’s normal to have alcohol on the menus in restaurants. The Israeli occupation hides all these cultural aspects of Palestine. It serves them to represent us as closed minded, fanatic, as suicide bombers without culture.

Muhannad’s comment reinforces the idea presented earlier about the imperative to represent the Palestinian nation as unified, coherent and undivided. His point brings out an expansive notion of Palestinianness that has room for difference. Christians and Muslims, with their varying practices and beliefs, share belonging and a national identity. The project of the café, Muhannad felt, had the opportunity to correct these misconceptions about Palestinians, entrenched in Western imagination through the powers of Israel’s public relations machine. The gastronomic experience of Palestine, he contended, through the consumption of its cuisine is seen to provide an embodied experience of a different truth. ‘In London’, Muhannad argued, ‘we [the café] have a special concept, a successful Palestinian restaurant. We always tell customers, “You are tasting Palestine here.” If you bring in Palestinian wine, this is unique. You can show everyone that Palestine is also able to produce wine and fine dining.’

Wine production forms part of the broader Palestinian gastronomic struggles – the growth of both Palestinian and Israeli wine export is not without controversy and continues to be embroiled in questions of national identity, legitimacy and the complexities of settler colonialism.<sup>16</sup> ‘Tasting place’, or what the literature calls ‘terroir’, indicates a naturalized

association between a particular place and its character through processes of production and consumption (Trubek 2008). Like other settings, ideas of terroir in the Palestinian/Israeli context are tied to claims of indigeneity and historical continuity. Both Zionist and Palestinian narratives draw on terroir to establish authentic national identity (Monterescu and Handel 2019). For example, one of the main wineries associates winemaking with historical roots that reiterate Palestine's ancient existence. In its 'our story' section of its website, the winery writes the following: 'Winemaking in Palestine can be traced back thousands of years. The ancient land of Canaan was one of the earliest regions to cultivate grapes for wine. Palestine was described to have a copious supply of wine such that "wine is more abundant than water".'<sup>17</sup> Statements like this, quite apart from asserting historical legitimacy, challenge ideas that alcohol is foreign to Palestine and the rest of the region. They even suggest that wine is 'at home', its consumption even more common than water.

James, a regular patron who was a wine writer and had recently published a book on wines of the world, encouraged Muhannad to pursue his idea after he took his advice. If the response to the surge of Lebanese wines in restaurants and independent wine shops was anything to go by, James believed, Palestinian wine was bound to be a hit in a wine market that increasingly craved international variety.

From a business perspective, Khalid, whose role in the café was growing, believed that the introduction of a wine list would give the café an economic boost, especially when he had been lobbying with his family to reshape the concept of the café (see Chapter 2). He gave the example of Mike, a regular customer who spent hours on Saturdays consuming his BYOB alcoholic drinks after eating the all-day Palestinian breakfast. 'We could be making profit from customers like him if we charged for wine!' The inclusion of Palestinian wine, a novelty in London, would add to the niche of the café and bolster its claim for a Palestinian national cuisine. Moreover, it would elevate the café to the status of a competitive restaurant.

I have discussed how the reconstruction of a national cuisine in London, by offering food and drink that referenced past eating – whether real or perceived (Holtzman 2006) – enacted a politics of presence and served as a form of re-Palestinianization in the diasporic context. The analytical lens of anchorage allows us to trace moments and conjunctures that call for rethinking, shifting or asserting forms of belonging and identification that facilitate emplacement. If Al-Zaytuna's Palestinian cuisine constructed a unified nation and people, the intertwinement of home in this mix redoubled the claim to authenticity. In establishing Al-Zaytuna, the Gazzawis felt they were providing a 'unique' dining experience since they were not only offering Palestinian food, but they were also doing so at home.

## A Home-Made Palestinian Cuisine

There is a recognizable distinction between mass-produced food (or restaurant food) and food that is produced at home. Home cooking, especially when prepared by mothers, is considered superior because it emanates ‘that specifically homely goodness: intimations of sound nutrition, careful choice of ingredients and careful labour (of love)’ (Hage 1997: 101; Harper and Faccioli 2010). It is no surprise that restaurants selling home-made food and cookbooks draw on the figure of mothers and grandmothers to assert authenticity, for there is a strong association between mothers, feeding and nurturing, and the mother-child bond is a powerful metaphor for relationships of care (Counihan 1999). Um Bashir added another ingredient to the wholeness of the home-made.

As we waited for Widad’s *maqlūba* to cook, Um Bashir elaborated on why her daughter’s cooking was so enticing. The food she was making was surely available in other homes and commercial eateries. But *tabīkh* (cooking hot food), she argued, required *nafas*. *Nafas* can be translated as ‘breath’ or ‘soul’, and is considered the essence of home cooking. The belief here is that a cook needs something more than just technical skill to infuse good taste into the process of cooking. ‘You can ask two people to make *mujaddara* [a lentil dish]; the two of them could use the same ingredients. *Subhān Allah!* The one with the cook’s *nafas* will turn out delicious. The other you may not want to eat even if you were starving!’ Cooking is not merely the mixing of ingredients, nor is it a repetition of practical steps. Anyone can follow a recipe, yet the outcome is not necessarily always palatable. Equally, having a passion for cooking without the right technical skills or experience cannot guarantee good results. It is therefore the combination of experience, memory, practical skill and warmth exuded through labour of love (or passion) that is perceived to enhance the quality of cooking. In some ways, the idea that ‘mothers are the best cooks’ is an articulation of these assumptions. The kitchen, (*al-matbakh*) is an important site where (gendered) family relationships, home, as well as the nation are performed and negotiated.<sup>18</sup>

Although Al-Zaytuna’s initial crew – Um Bashir, her son Muhannad and her daughter-in-law Reem – worked on standardizing their recipes in preparation for the opening of the café (see Chapter 2), the idea that home cooks with *nafas* relied more on their memory and senses than fixed measurements and recipes still prevailed (see Sutton 2013). For this same reason, while Khalid, Reem and Manal gained different experiences of cooking through their contributions to Al-Zaytuna, it was always Um Bashir and her eldest daughter Widad who cooked the special family meals, such as *maqlūba*, mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. When I asked either of them what measurement of cumin or coriander was needed in one dish or another,

their reply was often *'al-taqdīr'*, meaning it is a question of appreciation and judgement.

The visibility and proximity of the kitchen to the dining area of the café emphasized the homeliness of Al-Zaytuna. Since the upper part of the property did not have a kitchen, the family had to use the café kitchen, separated from customer tables and chairs by a display fridge, to prepare their own food. In this sense, the physical location of Al-Zaytuna kitchen was crucial in the amalgamation of home and café and the feeling that 'one is eating a mother's food'. Patrons were privy to the family's domestic commensality (Chee-Beng 2015), and this served to reaffirm their affective and familial bonds. Everyday food practices, habitual special weekly meals and more elaborate feasts were often performed in the common dining space.

This experience of 'home' appealed to Al-Zaytuna's wide range of patrons that I mentioned earlier. To Palestinian and Arab clients, especially ones who were themselves new migrants, the consumption of Arabic food cooked at home evoked memories and important values such as Arab sociality and family, particularly the central nurturing role of mothers. Samir, for example, a single young professional whose Palestinian parents lived in the West Bank, visited the café regularly. He would cheerfully greet Um Bashir and ask her, 'What have you cooked for us today?' as if he were one of her own children who had just come home from work. He relished the special dish of the day, often a stew of vegetables and meat with a side of rice. The first time he was presented with a plate of okra stew (*bāmya*), Samir became emotional. He expressed delight at the opportunity for *taghmīs*, dipping a folded piece of Arabic flat bread – and inevitably his fingers – into a sauce-based stew. He said he had missed the savour of this slightly messy experience associated with eating at home, since restaurant eating usually demanded more attention to etiquette, the use of cutlery as opposed to 'eating with your hands' and awareness of one's surroundings. Um Bashir felt sorry for bachelors and young men living away from home who stereotypically tended to eat *nawāshif*, literally dry food, meaning sandwiches, wraps and fast food, as opposed to the preferable wet home-cooked hot meals. Samir's expression of pleasure in *taghmīs* is synesthetic, involving 'not just taste and smell [of food], but color, texture and temperature' (Sutton 2005: 217). As David Sutton maintains, synaesthesia 'is both socially cultivated and produced' (ibid). For Samir, the synesthetic experience of *taghmīs* was associated with home, family and nation. This was a compliment to Um Bashir, whose smile would widen when Samir told her that 'it is as if the *tabkha* [stew] was made by the hands of his own mother' or that the dish had *rā'ihat al-blād* (the scent of the nation/country). Regardless of his bodily presence, *taghmīs* situated Samir in both London and Palestine, both places in dialogue with each other in that moment (Hage 2021).

For British and European patrons, home was consumed in different ways. Palestinian food was, to an extent, a novelty that stoked the curiosity of culinary ‘cosmo-multiculturalists’ (Hage 1997).<sup>19</sup> Whereas generically labelled ‘Arabic’ or ‘Middle Eastern’ and, more commonly, Lebanese restaurants were a staple in the multicultural food scene in West and Central London, specific national cuisines from the region (for example, Palestinian, Yemeni, Syrian or Egyptian) were less common. Here is what a British couple who returned for the Palestinian breakfast platter on Saturdays told me.

We love Middle Eastern food, but you get something a bit different here ... There are Palestinian specialties that we have not tried anywhere else, like *shakshūka*. And Um Bashir is always so lovely to us! We love that we are eating food which she makes for her own family. They are always so generous.

Increasingly, home-made food in restaurants has had an appeal in a growing market that sets itself apart from the commercialization and globalization of food. The ‘home-made’ signals authenticity and superiority, not least due to the idea that cooks use better ingredients and quality products from places of origin. Although the Gazzawis bought most of their specialized products from Arab suppliers in London, they imported herbs such as dried thyme (*za‘tar*) and sage from the West Bank, thus distinguishing their products from industrial ones found in the market. When I passed on the feedback of the British couple to Um Bashir, she was pleased but not surprised. She told me that home-made is ‘naturally healthy (*al home-made sibhi*)’. Other restaurants will reuse the same oil to refry their *falafel* tens of times. We never do this. We are eating the same food. What works for our family should work for others.’ For Um Bashir, cooking was a practice of care that ought to extend from her own family to everyone she and the café were feeding, even in the context of a business aiming for profit. This ethos came across to customers, who could see family members eating the same food from the kitchen. That Um Bashir made a point of greeting the regulars, asking them about their lives in her broken English and checking on how they liked the food exacerbated the homeliness of the culinary experience and conjured up images of warmth and labour of love. Abu Bashir’s welcoming invitations and jokes, the little children running around and the ‘on-the-house treats’ that were offered to regulars emphasized the importance of hospitality that patrons were receiving in this home/café.

In the early days of this enterprise, the Gazzawi approach to customer service was, as Um Bashir’s son Muhannad told me when he trained me, ‘spontaneous’ (*afawi*). A warm welcome, generosity and a ‘real family’ atmosphere appealed to patrons. If people wanted a formal dining experience, Muhannad believed, then London was full of such places. ‘But to be greeted with a sense

of humour, to be offered delicious home-made food as if you were visiting a family you know, to be given treats and free food as a gesture, this is what gives the British a new experience, that is a taste of Palestinian hospitality.’ When Muhannad served food, he filled the room with his presence. He made customers laugh, gave them nicknames and jokingly suggested they take away his own children with them when they ran around the tables noisily. ‘What? You are full already?’ he would feign shock after someone had just asked for the bill. ‘In Gaza, all of this is the taster! Wait ... wait ...’ He would run to the counter and come back with a plate of *kunafa*. ‘My mum will be upset if you don’t try her dessert ... it’s on the house.’ Indeed, it is this kind of charm that mitigated some of the mishaps and sometimes chaotic functioning of the café, as we will see in [Chapter 2](#). Between the home-made food and the style of service that aimed to treat patrons as if they were visiting a friend’s home, the Gazzawis strove to single out their café in a broader Arabic market by creating an association between Palestinianness and homeliness, unpretentious hospitality and quality.

### **Palestinian Commensality**

I have so far discussed how, through their project of Al-Zaytuna café, the Gazzawi family reconstructed a national cuisine that is anchored in the home. In the ways that it blurred the boundaries between home, family and business, this cuisine intertwined notions of authenticity and Palestinian hospitality within the space of the café. In this section, I extend these discussions to the family’s commensal practices that reproduced convivial experiences associated with ‘home’ in the café. Home, as I discussed in the Introduction, is made through affective process that create a sense of security and belonging. Commensality, in its everyday and feasting forms – for the two are extremes of the same practice (Dietler 2001, Chee-Beng 2015; Wojnarowski and Williams (2020) – creates and consolidates social relationships (Bourdieu 1984). The sharing of food enables the exchange of sensory memories and affects that ‘incarnate remembrance and feeling’ and ‘replicate social knowledge in time and space’ (Seremetakis 1994: 37). Beyond family meals that focused on domestic commensality, the Gazzawis used the space of Al-Zaytuna to celebrate special occasions. Such events called for the closure of the café when the space was used as an extension of their home to host parties and special meals. These events were marked by a show of hospitality through the generous offering of abundant food and drinks in the manner of a feast, and a convivial atmosphere with music and dancing on occasions such as birthdays, graduation parties or when one of the children who were abroad came for a visit. Friends, neighbours and

sometimes members of the Palestinian community were invited to share these special moments.

### *A Birthday Party*

It was Widad's daughter's thirteenth birthday party. Abir had invited three of her classmates from school and two Arab girls she had befriended in the neighbourhood. Um Bashir invited their mothers, who were her friends, and two of her classmates in her English language course. Two Palestinian families whose daughters were the same age as Abir were also invited. Um Bashir's daughter Zahra and her three children travelled from Scotland for the occasion and were spending the weekend in Al-Zaytuna's adjoining flat. Around six o'clock on Friday evening, as the last diners left the café, Manal and Khalid brought out tinsel and tens of balloons they had blown up upstairs and began to decorate the café in preparation for the party. Reem styled Abir's hair and, given the special day, applied some modest make-up on the excited teenager. '*Arūs wallahi*' (you're as beautiful as a bride!) her Aunt Manal fussed when she saw her all made up in her new blue frock. When all the guests had arrived, the family and guests sat together to eat. Mezze plates had been spread around the café tables. Big platters of *mansaf* and freshly grilled meats were served. Once the food was consumed and cleared, Khalid moved all the tables for a makeshift dancefloor. He played a list of music he had prepared especially for the party, a mix of Arabic and English pop music and *dabka*. Grown-ups and children enjoyed dancing together before some of the men retreated to the outdoor garden seating area to drink tea and smoke *shisha* (sweetened tobacco). After about an hour of dancing, it was time for the cake. The lights turned off as Um Bashir brought in a big heart-shaped cake framed by thirteen lit candles. Walid Tawfik's iconic Arabic 'Happy Birthday to You' song filled the room as invitees circled around Abir, clapping and swaying their bodies. In addition to the cake, the guests were offered trays of *baklāwas* and home-made Palestinian desserts. As the party began to wind down, the Palestinian mothers complimented Um Bashir on her hospitality (*busn al-diyāfa*). Flattering her hostess further, one of them told me in front of Um Bashir that the atmosphere of the Gazzawi parties always transported them back to the '*blād*' (the country). Um Bashir took the compliment with grace, although, with slight sorrow, she told me later the scale of events they hosted in London was but a portion of the kind of hosting they were used to back home, in their big house and endless social networks. Nevertheless, she was pleased that her family could still enjoy their Palestinian customs (*'ādāt*) and way of life in London. Celebrations like this were nostalgic, in the sense of triggering memories of past experiences, but ones that gave meaning to homemaking pursuits in the present.

These celebratory events provided spaces for ‘communal commensality’ (Chee-Beng 2015) where the Gazzawis, both as family and individuals, forged and reinforced their relationships with various groups across their diasporic social landscape as they consumed Palestinian food and exercised the hospitality and generosity inherent to it. It was not just children’s parties like Abir’s that merited the closure of the café. As a new employee, Salih, on more than one occasion, hosted big meals for his colleagues. He once invited twelve colleagues from work for dinner at Al-Zaytuna. As Um Bashir and Khalid prepared food from the special menu, Salih explained to me that back in Gaza it was quite common to invite colleagues to meet your family. ‘I want to introduce them to Palestinian hospitality’, he told me. By impressing British colleagues with the generosity and hospitality of his family, Salih believed that this would reflect on the kind of person he was and add to his social capital at work. In this sense, hospitality is scalable. It references ‘a quality of persons and households, of tribal and ethnic groups, and even nation-states’ (Shryock 2012: S20). Hospitality, especially in the manner of feasting, plays an important role in shaping diasporic worlds as migrants anchor themselves. As Chloe Nahum-Claudiel writes, feasts can ‘both achieve concrete goals – mobilising resources, exciting passions, negotiating political positions – and realise deeply held values’ (2016: 1). This was particularly relevant to the kind of hosting and feasting that took place during the holy month of Ramadan.

### *Feasting During Ramadan*

Despite the challenges of fasting, especially when Ramadan happens to fall on long hot summer days, not to mention the added labour placed on women who tend to manage cooking and hosting, the holy month is romanticized as a time of family, community and the suspension of ‘normal’ social life among many Muslim communities. Whether in the Arab world or in the diasporic context, Ramadan is a time of year associated with social intensification<sup>20</sup> and the sharing of lavish meals after the daily fast. Whereas the increasing commercialization of the month has provoked debate about the effects of mass consumerism on religious practice (Ambrust 2002; Salamandra 2004), indulging in special foods in large quantities over *iftar* all the way to *subūr*, the last meal before the fast begins in the morning, remain an important practice in Ramadan. Indeed, many consider the sharing of this food a religious duty, in addition to practices such as praying and charitable giving (*zakāt* and *sadaqa*). Sociability around food during Ramadan serves to enhance the collective aspect of religious observance as well as the feeling of community (Buitelaar 1993).

To enable all this extra hosting, the business of Al-Zaytuna had to change during Ramadan. At the outset of the holy month, the café was

decorated in Ramadan-themed ornaments – garlands of arabesque lanterns and crescent moons hanging on the walls. While the usual lunch menu remained on offer, like other Arabic restaurants in London, Al-Zaytuna opted for an *iftar* buffet rather than à la carte menu in the evenings. This made sense from a practical perspective since the café was receiving large group reservations daily from customers, especially Arabs and Muslims, who wanted to break their fast and enjoy home-cooked food, but also from regular customers who showed interest in sampling Ramadan special foods. Small plates of dates and bowls of lentil soup were placed on the tables before the evening *adhān* (call to prayer) so patrons could immediately break their fast. After that, customers would serve themselves from the buffet, which included a typical spread of mezze (*fattush*,<sup>21</sup> *hummus*, *falafel* and yoghurt) and a daily special ‘traditional’ dish: Palestinian *fatta*; *mansaf* and *kharūf*, offered with Palestinian *qidra* rice. This time, the café served the rice in an impressive clay urn placed on the buffet. There were additional hot dishes on different days, including grilled chicken, *kufta* (mincemeat kabab) and *musakka’a*, an aubergine and chickpea dish cooked in a tomato sauce. The buffet offered special Ramadan desserts such as *qatāyif* (sweet dumplings filled with cream or walnuts).

During my research year, the Gazzawis hosted more than one private Ramadan *iftar* that called for the closure of the café. Such events highlighted conviviality and served to reinforce their emplacement in London and their communal status. One such *iftar* was to celebrate the return of Bashir, their eldest son who was visiting from Canada with his wife and daughter, and staying until *Īd al-Fitr* (the festival that marks the end of Ramadan). The invitees were a mixture of the Gazzawi family, their friends and some of the close neighbours on Greenway Lane. The set-up of the buffet, coupled with the arrangement of the tables, drawn together to make one long table, created a communal feast experience in which guests (Muslims and non-Muslims, Palestinian, British and other nationalities) ate together and engaged with those in proximity, even if they had not met them before. The reordering of the café for Ramadan facilitated this participation in conviviality. After the *iftar*, Bashir joked that his parents seemed to have more friends in London than he ever had in Canada! Later, he elaborated on his meaning in a more serious tone. The relationships that his parents were cultivating with a diverse group of friends through the café reassured him that they were increasingly feeling at home in London.

The second *iftar* was a bit more formal as it was for members of the *jāliya* (the Palestinian community). Between Um and Abu Bashir and their sons who had lived in London for several years, the Gazzawis were well connected to other Palestinians in the capital and beyond. Among invitees were some elite members of the Palestinian community, such as the Palestinian ambassador

and his family, and guests on different sides of the Palestinian political divide, some affiliating with Fatah, others with Hamas. Although Um Bashir's family was critical of the politics of Hamas and their governance of Gaza, the family believed that Palestinian differences needed to be transcended in the diaspora. In a political hub like London, where political agendas were seen to determine the fate of the Palestinian cause, it was imperative to present a united front. 'Here in Britain, there [ought to be] no Fatah and Hamas', Um Bashir asserted in our assessment of the *iftar* event later, 'there is just Palestine. We are one people [*sh'ab wāhid*]. We share Palestinian customs and traditions; we eat Palestinian food together. There is no room for difference here.' By transcending political differences and actively focusing on unity and coherence in people, nation and food, Um Bashir was privileging commonality – Palestinianness to be precise – and the collective sense of Palestinian national belonging that take on special relevance in the diasporic context. The ability of the Gazzawis to provide this space for unity, even if ephemeral, through communal commensality and feasting in Al-Zaytuna enhanced the status and capital of the family and contributed to achieving the 'concrete goals' of mobilising networks and enhancing social and political positions as they anchored themselves in the UK.

This chapter has shown how food played an important part in the Gazzawi family's experience of anchoring in London. Through the recreation of a national cuisine that establishes authenticity through its production at home, and through practices of domestic and communal commensality that provided a feeling of 'being there here', Al-Zaytuna café became a site for acts of re-Palestinianization. In these politics of presence, Palestine was made visible in palatable ways to Palestinians and Arabs in London as well as British and international consumers. Food was a tool for telling and experiencing a narrative of a unified, coherent nation beyond the realities of the occupation and Palestinian divisions. In [Chapter 5](#) I continue with this discussion of authenticity and performance as I discuss the role the Gazzawi family played in representing Palestine in a multicultural festival. If Palestine was performed within the home/café in this chapter, in the final chapter I explore how it was performed to a significant 'public' – 'the world' – and what that meant for the unity of the 'Palestinian community'.

While this chapter reflected on the ways that home, café and nation were entangled in the everyday lives of the Gazzawis, [Chapter 2](#) explores the development of the café as family members began to build their personal projects in London. The tensions rising between the commitment to family and the expected commitment to the business of the café frame the challenges surrounding the survival of the 'family business' in the diasporic context and the anchorage of this family in a new place.

## Notes

1. Alejandro Miranda-Nieto and Paolo Boccagni (2020: 1025) argue for the use of the term 'migrant-origin restaurants' instead of 'ethnic restaurants' to steer away from a 'static view of symbolic nationality or ethnicity'. Also see Ray (2016), who argues that the term ethnic is a sign of the 'unequal relationship between the self-proclaimed normative center of Euro American imagination, its dominating institutions, and numerous categories of others such as the foreigner ... the stranger, the immigrant' (6).
2. The term hospitality in Arabic is *diyāfa*; with its root word *dayf* meaning 'guest'. In his work on Jordan, Andrew Shryock (2012: S20) translates hospitality as *karam* (generosity). See also Chatty (2017) on hospitality in the Middle East, Herzfeld (1987) on hospitality in the Mediterranean, and Candea and da Col (2012) for a broader cross-cultural discussion.
3. Ottolenghi had owned a deli since 2002 and since then had opened a few restaurants around London. He is credited with creating his own brand of colourful and tangy food within the UK and beyond. Despite publishing *Jerusalem*, his food draws on Levantine and Persian traditions rather than being associated with a particular cultural cuisine.
4. Abufarha argues that symbolizing is a 'dynamic cultural process'; therefore, symbols and their meanings are historically constructed and change in response to political realities (2008: 365).
5. A London-based social enterprise that supports fair trade for Palestinian farmers also chose the name Zaytoun <https://zaytoun.uk/>.
6. Nevertheless, discussions of what constitutes appropriation are vibrant in mainstream and social media. See, for example, this *Guardian* article <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/10/the-guardian-view-on-food-cultures-sharing-not-snatching>, or this blog from Solid Ground <https://www.solid-ground.org/cultural-appropriation-of-food/>, or indeed this conversation between Laila Al-Haddad and her coauthor Maggie Schmitt with Yotam Ottolenghi as they discuss their books *The Gaza Kitchen* and *Jerusalem* <https://www.bonappetit.com/people/chefs/article/ottolenghi-gaza-kitchen-conversation>.
7. See, for example, Ghandour (2013) and Avieli (2016).
8. For example, Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt's *The Gaza Kitchen* (2012); Joudie Kalla's *Palestine on a Plate* (2016) and *Baladi* (2018); Reem Kassis's *The Palestinian Table* (2017).
9. In a postcolonialist spirit, Shelly Angelie Saggar (2018) sees these cookbooks as 'recipes for resistance'. Straddling the 'twin strands of tactical exotification and elegiac memorialization, [they] offer a marketable image of Palestine as a culture that can be sampled, and thus saved, through its gastronomy' (2018: 465).
10. The Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah – reverse acronym for its Arabic name *Harkat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini* – emerged in the 1960s as a nationalist anticolonial movement. Over the years it has managed to dominate the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), which was established in 1964 as an umbrella organization for different political factions. The Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas – acronym for *Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya* – was established in 1987 and marked the formal entry of Islamists into power. In a nutshell, Israel tactically supported the establishment of Hamas at the beginning in a bid to weaken Fatah. The 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, which excluded Hamas, entrenched divisions between these two main factions. A combination of settler-colonial and neoliberal economic policies deepened the divisions over the years. Hamas' surprising sweeping victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections was rejected by Fatah, Israel and the international community, who imposed a boycott on

- Hamas. After the violent Battle of Gaza in 2007, Hamas seized control of Gaza, while Fatah remained in control of the West Bank. See Sayigh (1997); Ayyash (2010); Allen (2013); Haddad (2016) and Qarmout (2023).
11. *Mansaf*, Jordan's national dish, provides a good example of the modernization of food with a symbol of national status. The dish was "disembedded" from its domestic moorings' (Howell 2003: 217) as it became a national symbol of a new state, sold to local and international audiences. But in recent years, *mansaf* has been re-embedded in the everyday as a consumer product, while still maintaining its national symbolic status (Wojnarowski and Williams 2020).
  12. Licensing Act 2003: 'An Act to make provision about the regulation of the sale and supply of alcohol, the provision of entertainment and the provision of late-night refreshment, about offences relating to alcohol and for connected purposes' (see <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/17/introduction>).
  13. Gillette (2016: 54) sites the Pew Research Center's survey of Muslims in thirty-nine countries, which showed that 'Ramadan fasting was the single most widely shared Muslim ritual (2012: 9), in addition to abstaining from pork and considering alcohol immoral.'
  14. See Tayob's (2020) interesting discussion on processes of *halal* certification, an increasingly complicated field that takes us into the realms of religious neoliberal governmentality.
  15. Without being reductionist about the individual family members and their religiosity, I mention here that the Gazzawis considered their family to be conservative '*muhafidhin*': there was more control over women's behaviour than men's, they encouraged their children to marry early and they placed important emphasis on family. However, they criticized behaviour that they deemed irrational. For example, one woman from the community refused to accompany her family to a wedding that another family had invited them to, because alcohol would be served. They found her decision extreme because it affected conventions and expectations of social exchange.
  16. There has been a running controversy over labelling wine as 'made in Israel' when wine is produced in West Bank settlements. More recently, the European Court of Justice (2019) and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) (2022) ruled against this labelling of wines.
  17. From the website of Taybeh Winery <http://taybehwinery.com/taybeh.html>.
  18. I note here that the kitchen is an ideologically charged space. While we often tend to associate it with warmth, care and giving, it can also be a classed and patriarchal space that reproduces oppressive practices.
  19. Ghassan Hage (1997) considers cosmo-multiculturalism a predominantly city-based 'consumer-centred world of ethnic restaurants and ethnic eating'. Working in west Sydney, he critiques the practice of 'multiculturalism without migrants' in which capital is derived from consuming other cultures without much investment or interaction with their people.
  20. Ramadan nights are cherished, as families stay up to watch anticipated Ramadan TV soaps and shows, go out to cafés that open late or attend late-night prayers (*tarawih*) (see Tobin 2016).
  21. Lentil soup and *fattush* are staples of *iftar* in Ramadan to the extent that there is often an outcry over the rise in prices of vegetables during the holy month as Sarah Tobin's (2016) chapter on 'Making it Meaningful' shows in the Jordanian context.

## Chapter 2

# Family Business and the Business of Family



It was approaching noon on a sunny Saturday in early May. The streets were crowding in the nearby market as locals and tourists enjoyed a cheerful mood that seemed to celebrate the first glimpse of summer. Khalid had just woken up with puffy eyes and was making himself a latte. Next to him, Tijil, who the family endearingly called Badr after he explained that his Gujarati name meant ‘moon’ – Badr means full moon in Arabic – carried on washing dishes as he shook his head in disapproval and pointed to the clock hanging on the sidewall. It was not unlike Khalid to emerge from upstairs so late, but Saturdays tended to be busy, and Tijil had already been working by Um Bashir’s side for more than three hours. Um Bashir rolled the last batch of *musakhan* (sumac chicken wraps) in anticipation of a busy day. She washed her hands and said that she would go downstairs to rest and catch up with her daughter Zahra, who had arrived with her family from Scotland to spend the weekend with her parents. ‘I have done my bit’, she sighed. ‘Everything is ready now. The rest is yours’, she continued, to no one in particular. Within half an hour, the café began to fill up and punters queued to get a table. Abu Bashir returned from the market to find a full house. Carrying his shopping bags, he rushed through the dining room as he gave out instructions, not to forget this table and to pay attention to that table. As he took his position firmly behind the till, Abu Bashir started to wave ‘hello’ and ‘come in’ to the regulars.

Khalid and I had agreed on a new system that would organize our work. We were expecting a busy bank holiday weekend. The previous week had

been emotionally charged as Khalid had been complaining that he could not handle the heavy weekend load by himself and requested more help. As a compromise, his siblings, Salih and Manal, who did not usually work in the café, were on call that day. We had decided on a clear division of labour that would help us face the busy weekend hours and counteract the pressures they were causing the family. If each person handled a particular task, then perhaps we could manage the day in an orderly and efficient manner. Duties were thus assigned according to a 'front of house' and 'back of house' division. Khalid would prepare the food based on the numbered orders he received from the dining room staff, Reem would take charge of the drinks, Tijil would wash the dishes and Abu Bashir would handle the till. In the dining room, Manal and I would take orders and serve food while Salih would cater to the outside tables. The plan seemed reasonable, and everyone agreed to it, until a scene of chaos unravelled less than an hour later.

Khalid began to multitask, preparing food and serving it, making hot drinks and pacing back and forth between tables with his oversized white chef's hat. He took orders from customers and yelled them back at everyone in the kitchen. Abu Bashir had left his post and was also taking orders but without writing them down. Putting his arm around my shoulder as if we were sharing a secret, he whispered, 'Listen, can you go and check what that woman wants? I didn't understand. She ordered in English and I said, "Yes of course!"' (with a heavy English accent) smiling mischievously as he sought rescue. Salih was shouting at Tijil to hurry with the order of mint tea. 'Where is Reem?' Salih asked grumpily. 'She should be serving the drinks, not me!' Reem, Manal revealed, had gone out to pick up some shoes that were on sale in the market. Um Bashir was now back in the kitchen preparing plates as different people overwhelmed her with orders: 'Two more falafel platters; one fish; two mixed *mezzes*!' Ten minutes later, I found Zahra, her husband and daughter, who had been sipping coffee downstairs, behind the counter; one was squeezing orange juice, another claimed the till and yet another hovered around us repeatedly asking what he could do to help! At this point, the stove stopped working, creating more mayhem at the back as Um Bashir began her phone calls to find an engineer who would treat this as an emergency. '*Khalas!* That's it! Fry the fish on the hob!' Khalid commanded, and there was Abu Bashir now serving fried fish to a customer who had asked for the café signature dish of grilled fish.

Surprisingly, the afternoon passed without significant complaints from customers, who seemed to take the situation in their stride. In spite of the developments of the day, the Gazzawis joked with their patrons, offered them *baklāwas* on the house and managed to maintain a welcoming atmosphere. By five o'clock, we were all exhausted. Widad and her three children arrived just in time as we finally sat down for the family meal. 'Another day in the life

of the Gazzawis!’ Manal exhaled sarcastically, mimicking a radio presenter, as she dipped a large piece of bread in the plate of *hummus*. ‘Division of labour, you say?’ Khalid teased me. ‘Orderly fashion?’ he pressed on, quoting me. ‘It will never work (*ma-byinfā’sh*)! This can never be a business.’ Annoyed with him, Um Bashir begged to differ: ‘What are you talking about? Why won’t it work? This is a *family* business (*bisnis ‘āīla*)!’ stressing on family, and all the implicit references this assertion carries.

In this chapter, I draw on Um Bashir’s statement to explore the imbrications of ‘family’ and ‘business’ and the limits of each. How do the values she ascribes to the family, and the obligations and solidarity it imparts, illuminate the processes of running a business, particularly in the diasporic context? To what extent are her values shared by different family members? The role of kinship in family firms has invited attention in recent business and management research, which has brought to light the absence of data on kinship in the established research area of ‘family business’ (see, for example, Stewart 2003; Stewart and Hitt 2012). The main concerns in this strand of literature are the improvement of business performance, the development of strategies that would elevate family firms to the standards of non-family firms (professionalization, for example), and the exploration of variations in these firms to move away from treating them as a homogenous category.

Bringing an anthropological perspective to Critical Management Theory, Andrew Jones argues that the silence on kinship in mainstream management literature relates to the ‘socially constructed association of family firms with the domestic, “private” domain of the home (and women), and as separate from the public, economic and political domain of the market (and men)’ (2005: 277). This view of the family as a private domain that is extraneous to the workings of economic and political institutions has long been refuted in anthropological thought, especially by feminist writers (MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Strathern 1980; Yanagisako and Collier 1987). In fact, the limited research on family firms has shown that familial and professional relations are often entangled.<sup>1</sup> For example, Antónia Pedroso de Lima shows how family values, ‘the ways of being and living in a family’ among the Portuguese family firms she observed, are ‘crucial elements in defining the ways in which the economic group works and continues through time’ (2000: 152). In a different ethnographic context, household and business were so intertwined among the Mexican furniture producers that James Acheson (1996) studied, to the extent that it was difficult to distinguish between the two. This was especially pronounced where, like the Gazzawi case, house and business quarters were in the same building, and family members shifted regularly between the two. The way the domestic and public – or rather kinship and political and economic – relations interlace or disconnect, therefore, ‘should be a matter of historical

and ethnographic inquiry' rather than a set of givens (McKinnon and Cannell 2013: 13).

In my research with the Gazzawi family, kinship seemed to trouble the café business. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), the café constituted part of the economic, social, political and affective investments the family made in their processes of anchoring in London. While the purpose of the café was to bring the family together (*lamm al-ā'ila*) in the diaspora ([Introduction](#)), family members had different interests and varying senses of ownership of this project. As they anchored themselves in London, they sought to follow the diverse ambitions that they felt the city afforded. However, the kinship obligations that demanded commitment to the family simultaneously expected commitment to the café, thus blurring the lines between work and family and the obligations towards both. And yet, it was the family that enabled the business. Affective bonds and obligations towards the well-being and upkeep of the family framed the enterprise. This analytical tension speaks to Gerald Creed's argument that the manipulation of family relations often occurs 'without denying the apparent cultural power of family ideas and commitments' (2000: 340).

In the following, I trace the ways in which tensions between family and business played out in the management and operation of Al-Zaytuna in its early days as it was being established. While the café facilitated the overall anchorage of the family, the demands of running this business came in the way of the anchorage of individual family members who sought different prospects. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the motivations of different family members and the ambitions that drove them in the diaspora. These shaped the intermittent commitment that they were able to offer to the business. The result was erratic work routines that threatened the survival of the enterprise, particularly after Um Bashir's son Muhannad left the country. As I outline in the [Introduction](#), 'being anchored' is a temporal state and an anchored person might well decide to set sail, or sail yet again, for various reasons. Muhannad kept the option of returning to the café (and London) open, should things not work out for him in the Gulf. His departure nevertheless had ripple effects on the Gazzawi 'family process' (Oxfeld 1993: 27). The unfolding of the family structure called for an intensification in negotiation, manipulation and activity in response to the changes triggered by his leaving. I will explore in the chapter the extent to which it was possible to 'professionalize family' in attempts to anchor the business in the family's changing structure. In my discussion, I draw connections between household and domestic arrangements, the demands of the business and the values attached to the family to address the balancing acts required in mediating tensions arising from the overlapping demands of *bisnis ā'ila*.

## A Reluctant Workforce

It is not uncommon for migrant businesses to rely on kinship obligations and family members' 'labour of love' to guarantee cheap and flexible labour. Family labour is considered instrumental to the reduction of cost, particularly when family members are paid less than market wages. As Allan and Josephine Smart argue, 'Petty capitalists regularly operate in the ambiguous boundaries between capital and labor, cooperation and exploitation, family and economy, tradition and modernity, friends and competitors' (2012: 1).<sup>2</sup> It is precisely the variations of these that bring about economic success or failure in different contexts. Inherent in family labour is the idea of 'family work contract' that expects children to 'help out' – as a 'good will and a willingness to contribute one's labour' – with the understanding that family relationships, unlike employer/employee, are somehow special (Song 1997: 698). But the extent to which children help out in family businesses is often contingent on opportunities in the labour market as well as their skills and educational achievements (Sanghera 2002). In this sense it is worth investigating instances of 'not helping out' (Villares-Varela 2017), which might occur when parents desire trajectories for their children that lie outside the family enterprise, or when children themselves seek such ambitions, particularly when work in family business risks deskilling. In the Gazzawi family, the reluctance to help out reveals the diverse aspirations of migrants and the different types of social mobility they wanted to pursue and enact in the diaspora – in other words, the sense of possibility that drives existential foreword movement.

One of the most significant challenges for the café in its earlier months was the establishment of a work regime that relied on consistent work. At first, Um Bashir took charge of the cooking with the help of her daughter-in-law Reem, while her son Muhannad ran the café. For Muhannad, the café business seemed like a good 'practice' for his degree specialization in business management. But uncertainty arose in the Gazzawi family when Muhannad began to consider the possibility of leaving London after completing his degree. Thanks to his transnational Palestinian networks, and a postgraduate degree from a respected British university, he was offered the opportunity to manage a new business in the Gulf. He seriously pondered the offer, which he felt had promising career and financial prospects. Like his parents and some of his siblings, he aspired to return to Palestine one day. The Gulf, he felt, would be a good stepping-stone. Muhannad could leave his wife Reem and his three young children in London for a few months until he was sure that this was the right move for his family. He could always return to London if things did not work out, given the security of his legal status as a British citizen. His plan in the meantime had inevitable implications for his wife, his parents and the business itself.

In Muhannad's absence, Reem and her children had to live with her parents-in-law. While Muhannad was finishing his degree, the young family rented a flat close to Muhannad's university. But they often stayed the night in the upstairs flat of Al-Zaytuna, especially on weekends. With Muhannad gone, there would be new arrangements. Now, Reem would have to move in with her in-laws until Muhannad was certain that the job and life in the Gulf were suitable. The temporariness of these circumstances in the diasporic context consolidated ideologies of gender, for often 'ideologies of gender hierarchy are repeatedly instantiated in spatial arrangements' (Wardlow 2006: 11). Intergenerational and multiple household living are not unheard of in Palestinian families (see, for example, Haj 1992; Rothenberg 1998). Reem enjoyed a harmonious relationship with Muhannad's family and she was grateful for the love and childcare her in-laws offered. However, she was concerned about adjusting to living with her in-laws now that she had become used to her independence, living in her own marital home.

Before Reem had her first child, she worked in a high-end restaurant that provided its staff with extensive training in customer service and kitchen duties. Reem's skills were therefore valuable to the family business, especially at the beginning. But when Al-Zaytuna was up and running under Muhannad's management, and with enough people in the flat to watch over her children, Reem signed up for a course in fashion design. 'When we go back to Palestine, my dream is to open my own boutique. I can bring something new and introduce the fashions that I am learning here', Reem told me. During the months of the course, she was relieved of café duties, apart from weekends, when family members were asked to help during busy hours. With Muhannad's departure, Reem feared that she would have to fill in his shoes and worried about the challenges she had to face in the following months as the fate of her family unravelled.

Muhannad's departure also put immense pressure on his parents. Although Um and Abu Bashir had control over the finances and decision-making in the business, they did not speak English and were new to the city, its networks and resources. Basic daily tasks such as taking phone reservations or purchasing products seemed daunting without Muhannad. Um and Abu Bashir believed that this would be the time to convince their youngest son Khalid to step in. After all, their long-term plan for this business had him in mind from the very beginning. 'Khalid is the victim of the occupation', Um Bashir would often remind me. 'He grew up a child of the *Intifada* [uprising] with violence around him, without completing his school education. He came here [the UK] young and now we must help him. His siblings are doing well for themselves. But he still has a long way ahead of him.' The parents were certain that they would eventually return to Gaza once they had the chance. They believed that Khalid's siblings were bound to have prospering careers,

given their ambitions and skills. That is why they wished for Khalid to take charge of the business. Perhaps a few years down the line he would find a wife who would support him and together make a decent life in the café. Khalid had sought asylum a couple of years before his parents and had previously lived in Sheffield. This was a result of his ‘dispersal’ outside of London upon his asylum application.<sup>3</sup> But when his case was resolved and he was granted refugee status, he returned to London to stay with his parents. Over the course of a few months, he worked his way up in several Lebanese restaurants in West London and became a sous chef. His parents felt that Khalid’s experience would serve him in taking over the café now that Muhannad was leaving. All he needed was some guidance, given his young age.

Having experienced the professional restaurant industry, Khalid was reluctant to take Muhannad’s place. He did not seem persuaded by the outlook of the café: ‘*al* “home-made” *mush jaddi!* [is not serious!]’ he complained. If their business was to be taken seriously, he argued, they would have to change their approach to live up to the other Arabic restaurants in London, especially the established Lebanese restaurants on Edgware Road. This conflicted with Um Bashir’s vision to create a ‘home-made niche’ in the Arabic food market (Chapter 1). The tensions that ensued resulted from Khalid’s desire to be given a leading role in the café, which would allow him to change its scope. He was, after all, the one who had most experience in the industry, he would insist. It is true that his parents had led a successful business in Gaza. But the sum of their expertise was not in the food business. The Gazzawid had owned a successful furniture workshop and a couple of showrooms in the city before the closure of their business in the aftermath of Israel’s blockade and the 2008 war.

Khalid’s actual commitment to the café, however, undermined his leadership pitch. ‘Party boy’, as Tijil called him, would go out with his friends until late in the night and sleep through the day, leaving Um and Abu Bashir, along with Tijil, to clamber through. Khalid struggled to earn the independence he sought, while his parents doubted his readiness to fulfil his responsibilities and manage the café.

The other siblings, Manal and Salih, played a marginal role in the café, even though they both lived in the adjoining flat. Salih had a full-time job in a company in the city and worked long hours. He seemed to consider work in the café somewhat emasculating and he avoided taking part in kitchen work or cleaning, which he saw as the domain of the women in his family. On a few occasions, he would offer to help when we were busy, only to receive a friend or colleague, sit them at one of the tables and begin to order food from the rest of us. Salih was engaged to a Jordanian woman, Hanan, and was hoping to move to a new flat after they married. His fiancée was amused when Salih’s sisters Manal and Widad once crowned him ‘the prince’.

They were teasing him about his 'hard work' in the café after he called them to come up and deal with a customer when he found himself alone in the dining room.

On her part, Manal was supportive of the café business, but she saw it more as her parents' project rather than her own. She had a successful career in Gaza working in an accounting firm. Since her arrival in London, she was determined to improve her English, as she recognized that she could not find a desirable job without language training, so she enrolled in an intensive English course and would spend the evenings studying and exploring job opportunities. Still, when she returned home, she found herself, like Reem, having to negotiate the gendered expectations around café work when her mother, sister-in-law, father or brother asked for her help with the cooking and cleaning. The intermittent positions the two women held in the business, while they fulfilled their family obligations, were not as such an opportunity for their professional development.<sup>4</sup> It is no surprise then that they would resist these expectations when they could, sometimes in ways that resembled James Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak'.<sup>5</sup> Reem would slip away to the market without notifying anyone, as we saw in the opening vignette, taking a break from café work and childcare. And Manal would nestle herself in the funny name she gave her boxroom upstairs, '*al-suite*' (the suite), oblivious to urgent yells that warned that the café was filling up with customers.

These instances of 'not helping out' put strain on the functioning of the café as family members found themselves navigating the tensions between family and business. Although the 'commonness' of 'the common family project' (Lem 1999: 108) was challenged in Al-Zaytuna, the emotional and cultural value attached to the family was what ensured the functioning of the café, as kinship dissolved the boundaries between family and business.

### **Arrhythmic Work Patterns**

Muhannad's decision to leave London, and the imminent departure of his wife, who was a core café worker, captured a moment that analytically and ethnographically illuminates the temporality of anchorage. The unfolding of the Gazzawi family structure caused upheaval. It brought to the fore the tense relationship between family, household and business. I find useful Ellen Oxfeld's notion of 'family process', which she uses in her work with immigrant Hakka Chinese tanners in Calcutta, to capture how individuals and families utilize and act within their kinship structures 'to obtain their objectives and respond to both their existential and practical problems of living in their host societies' (1993: 27). The discussion below brings out the arrhythmic work routines that transpired as the business found itself

relying on what we can think of as fragile work contracts. These included both ‘the family work contract’ – the ‘implicit “understanding” that all family members should help out in the family business’ (Song 1997: 698) – and causal low-wage labour so prevalent in the restaurant industry in London (Evans et al. 2007; McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2007; 2008; Alberti 2014). The fragility of these contracts was brought about by the dissonance perceived between the time and labour that different people put into the café and the rewards they received.

In the ‘business handover’ meeting before his departure, Muhannad assured his nervous younger brother that he would not be alone. Um Bashir would still cook in the morning, Tijil was still there as kitchen porter and Khalid had a team of volunteers who would support him at different times. This included me, after I promised Muhannad I would help his parents a few days a week, Reem (whenever her time allowed), his father, and Ayad, a Palestinian who had just relocated from Finland with his young family and had rented a flat next door to the Gazzawis. Ayad was considering setting up business in London. The Gazzawis immediately adopted him into their family and he began to spend most of his days in the café as he researched his possibilities in the city. The handover was predominantly cushioned in the affective language of kinship. ‘Your parents need you, Khalid’, Muhannad reminded him softly. ‘You have to be there for them.’ Trying to flatter his brother, he addressed me: ‘You wouldn’t believe that this man here can whip up twenty meals before I am able to make a cup of tea! *Wallahi* [I swear by God] he is a natural!’ Khalid only needed to put his mind to the business and change his whimsical approach to work, he suggested. ‘A bit of discipline and patience is all he needs.’ The weeks that followed tested the limits of Khalid’s, and everyone else’s, patience as different strategies were employed to ensure the organization and steady rhythms of work.

### *The Limits of Casual Labour*

Between the reluctant and intermittent labour of family members and volunteers, a substantial amount of work seemed to fall on Tijil, the only casual paid labourer, who was not family and who earned the minimum wage for ten-hour workdays. Tijil had come to London to study, but his desperate need for income meant that he spent his days earning little money to survive in the expensive capital. He told me that he shared a room with fifteen of his extended cousins and that he, unsurprisingly, was not doing very well on his course because ‘there was no time to study’.<sup>6</sup>

Tijil’s circumstances reflect the wider job conditions in the hospitality industry in London, which are characterized by low wages, long working hours and insecure contracts (see Dutton et al. 2008; Lucas and Mansfield

2010). Their precarity is made worse by the fungibility of this kind of ‘free floating labour’ (Anderson 2010: 308), which employers also treat as easily disposable.<sup>7</sup> Arab restaurants in the city also rely heavily on the informal labour economy. Conversations with Arab migrants working in other Arabic restaurants confirmed to me that workers are often recruited through their social networks and they rely on their Arab connections from back home and within London to secure this type of casual labour, regardless of their qualifications. As Ramy Aly (2015) shows, Arab staff in the capital’s Arabic restaurants and Shisha cafés are subjected to webs of exploitation, often as a result of the misfortunes that usually bring them to London from the region (namely oppressive regimes, wars and conflict). Yet, their work is seen to contribute to the authenticity of the places they work in and their ‘Arab atmosphere’ (*jaww Arabi*). Aly describes the distinctions perceived among Arabs and other ethnicities in London, for example South Asians and Somalis, and practices that reinforce ‘othering’ in shared social spaces. The entanglements of ethnicity and class play an important part in work relations too, especially in the informal market.<sup>8</sup> Tijil’s ethnicity and class, confirmed by the nature of a job considered to lie at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy in restaurants, coupled with his status as non-family and non-Arab, exacerbated his precarious position in the small family business. Disheartened by his life in London, and unsure that his experience would improve his skills and therefore future, Tijil looked forward to returning to India.

In spite of his precarious conditions, Tijil was usually cheerful. He had an affectionate relationship with the Gazzawis, who always insisted he went home in the evenings with containers of food, even when he had already eaten. He particularly enjoyed his bantering relationship with Khalid and called Um Bashir ‘Boss Mama’ to refer to her tough yet maternal approach with him and Khalid. But Tijil was frustrated by his workload that exceeded his job description as kitchen porter. Unlike other restaurants where this role tended to be limited (see Stephenson 2012), in Al-Zaytuna his role seemed undefined, expansive and reactive. He would abandon the sink to take orders from a customer when no one else seemed to be around. He would serve food and settle bills. He would chop onions, clean chickens, wash dishes, make hot drinks, and so on, depending on who was missing and where he was needed. Sometimes, just when he was relieved to see Manal and Reem enter the café, they would disappoint him by leaving to visit the market instead of taking over from him. The absence of a clear work structure, coupled with his work ethic that led him to ‘fill in the gaps’, as he liked to call it, sometimes resulted in disapproval and bickering. Once, Abu Bashir returned with stocks of vegetables that would last through the weekend. A few minutes later, Tijil followed him, having bought almost exactly the same items. Abu Bashir was annoyed and reprimanded Tijil, not for taking initiative, for usually Abu

Bashir praised him for that, but for acting without checking with him first. These actions wasted money, Abu Bashir complained. But Tijil argued his case. ‘Boss would be equally upset if I *didn’t* remember to buy these supplies!’ He then went on with his work in the kitchen unfazed, whistling a tune as he scrubbed a pan. On that day, Tijil had to go out to the shop twice, which suggested to him that supplies were missing. The first time, Reem noticed they had run out of tea; the second time, they ran out of bread. Observing this exchange, Ayad asked who oversaw the inventory, a question that led Tijil and Reem to laugh. ‘Everyone!’ was Tijil’s reply. ‘The shop is right there’, pointing to the street. Reem then jokingly reminded Ayad of the principle they were following, ‘spontaneity in business’ (*afawiyyah*). In more serious tones, the idea of a rota had been flagged more than once, but it was yet to be actualized.

The situation became urgent when Tijil fell ill and was hospitalized after experiencing severe stomach pains. Khalid visited him in hospital every other day for a week and the Gazzawis sent him money and good wishes in the hope of his quick recovery. We were unsure whether Tijil ever completely recovered, but he decided to return to India soon after he left hospital. In the weeks that followed, a temporary replacement appeared in the kitchen every few days, in a manner characteristic of the precarious regime of work in the restaurant industry in London.<sup>9</sup> As no day-worker lasted, the pressures on Khalid – and Reem who had hoped that she would be exempt from café work – exacerbated the pressures on the family and the overlapping demands of café and household.

### *Rotas, Visibility and Remuneration*

Reem’s point about the spontaneity of work, although made in jest, echoed the views of all those who contributed to Al-Zaytuna. Tijil’s departure, coupled with family members’ pursuits outside the café, made the need for structure increasingly urgent. Not long after the last kitchen porter failed to show up, Khalid took out a piece of paper and sat down with his parents and me in an attempt to draw out a weekday rota. He suggested that his parents continued to work in the mornings. His mother and Reem would prepare the food before Reem set out to her course. His father would attend to café service until about lunchtime, when it was least busy. I would help during the day, and Khalid would work a later shift that covered the afternoons and dinner. On weekends, he asked that his siblings and Reem offer more hours in busy times. Ayad would help out, still, whenever his time allowed, since he was still jobless.

Apart from diffusing the workload, Khalid felt this schedule would make his work more visible. His grievance was that his family undermined how

hard he worked. 'It's true, I wake up late, but then they all leave me and I end up doing more than sixty hours a week without anyone's help!' Only the next day, however, he was nowhere to be seen when it was time for his shift. When I arrived, Reem was making drinks in the kitchen while Ayad prepared appetizing *falafel* platters. Reem looked upset. It turned out that Abu Bashir had suddenly found himself alone with the three little children and had to look after them as well as attend to customers ordering lunch. Abu Bashir had to phone Reem and ask her to come home urgently, when her youngest daughter Yasmine threw a tantrum on the café floor. This meant that Reem had to interrupt her class and miss the afternoon session. She felt frustrated about still having to stretch herself across the café and the household, when she was hoping for more time to complete her course.

One of the irreconcilable problems that led to this arrhythmic work pattern was that family members did not receive salaries. Rather, like other family enterprises, they operated a 'general fund' (Acheson 1996: 338), which was used to pay both household and business expenses according to need. This meant that a lot of the work in the café reinforced the cultural construction of 'activities as family duty rather than work' (Greenhalgh 1994: 761). In a conversation that Reem, Um Bashir and I were having about the advantages and disadvantages of salaried work in a family business, Reem thought that salaries might motivate family members to be more serious about their work, though she did admit that, in effect, the business took care of all those living on the premises. The current approach, she pondered, was confusing and lacked control over spending: it was hard to monitor when and how much money different family members took from the till. Um Bashir agreed that the financial needs of the household and its members sometimes overwhelmed the finances of the café. 'Khalid alone needs ten pounds a day even when he hasn't left the house! And we have the [grandchildren]. If you buy each a sweet a day, a shirt here and colouring pencils there, that's the money in the till gone! How can we cope?' But, of course, it was Um Bashir herself, in her role as mother and grandmother, who not only insisted that the children stay with her, but was the one to enjoy spoiling them.

From Khalid's point of view, the general fund approach prioritized his married sibling. 'When has anyone in this place ever said to me, "Here, take these 200 pounds to thank you for your hard work?"' Abu Bashir chose to ignore his son's comment over lunch. But Um Bashir humoured him and promised that if he proved himself, he could also get married. 'See how much money we will offer you then.' The point is that Al-Zaytuna's access to unpaid labour within the family, like other 'petty capitalist projects', served to ensure the survival of the business in spite of the ambivalences and conflicts created through family relations (Smart and Smart 2012). Nevertheless, the heavy dependence on 'family work contracts' that blurred the lines between

household and café, supported by precarious casual labour, rendered the work regime in Al-Zaytuna erratic.

### ‘Professionalizing’ Family

In her work on family capitalism in Italy, Simone Ghezzi develops the notion of ‘entrepreneurial familism’<sup>10</sup> to capture how family firms survive because of their members’ ‘instrumental cooperation’, which includes several forms of capital: financial, human, social and cultural (2016: 245). As we have seen so far, however, cooperation requires different forms of negotiation that can cause emotional distress in ‘family-oriented attitudes to doing business’ (ibid: 246). Emotions were running high in the Gazzawi family following Muhannad’s departure and the family’s attempts to establish organized and consistent work patterns.

I arrived at the café one afternoon to find Um Bashir serving customers in the café, something she had not usually been doing at that time of day. ‘My mother sacked [*tard*] her son!’ Manal said in a teasing tone, pointing to Khalid who sat at one of the café tables staring at his laptop screen. ‘He can sleep and eat here, but he can’t work.’ She whispered to me that he was looking for a new job as we spoke. In the kitchen, Um Bashir explained that she would no longer tolerate a ‘whimsical attitude’ to work, which was affecting not only the business but also the wellbeing of the family. Abu Bashir was experiencing blood pressure problems during that period, and she did not want the café to be a source of stress. Moreover, she felt that her daughter-in-law Reem had the right to invest in her course, and the current work arrangement was not supporting that: ‘[Khalid] can’t just work *fi al-busy* [in busy times] and do what he pleases just because he happens to be my son. He is not serious. I have managed tens of employees in Gaza [referring to her previous business]. This boy needs to step up his game.’ Um Bashir told me that she was hoping that some intervention from Bashir, her eldest son, who was to arrive in a week, would influence Khalid.

Later, when I was checking on Khalid, he repeated that working with family was always going to be a challenge: ‘They don’t understand or appreciate my way. If you don’t do things their way, they think you don’t like to work. Maybe I should work somewhere else.’ When I spoke to Widad about this later, she sympathized with her parents but also felt sorry for her younger brother: ‘There is pressure on Khalid. He can be strong-headed, but he’s not even twenty years old! He needs to be dealt with calmly. Let’s see if Bashir can sway him.’

These internal dilemmas in structuring and managing the enterprise came at a crucial moment for the café. Despite the challenges described in this

chapter, the café was doing well with its customers and, increasingly, had a growing demand for outside event catering. Al-Zaytuna, Um Bashir believed, was now well known in the Arabic food scene. ‘We are becoming like Baiti [a large chain of Lebanese restaurants in London]; people know us and we need to keep up our reputation, not go down.’ But in small family enterprises like Al-Zaytuna, expanding the business can be challenging when the focus remains on the wellbeing of the household. Michael Blim’s (1990) work on small Italian family enterprises, for example, shows how, in such a context, profits tend to continue to be redistributed to family needs rather than business growth. However, Um Bashir was keen on consolidating the success of the café and was in the midst of planning refurbishments when Khalid fell from grace. She had bought new textiles in order to upholster the furniture, ordered a set of wooden tables and shelves with Arabesque designs and planned to paint the walls in shades of olive green. The aesthetic she aimed for would upgrade and transform the space of the café. The removal of the ready-food display fridge that separated the kitchen from the dining room would alter the feeling of being in a canteen and make for a more refined dining experience.

With the financial investment at stake, the café could not afford to continue to operate in the current inconsistent manner. In the upgraded Al-Zaytuna, Um Bashir sought to professionalize<sup>11</sup> the enterprise by attempting to sharpen the divide between business and family, if that was at all possible. In family firms, professionalization, ‘in its simplest form’, denotes ‘[the hiring of] full-time salaried employees ... [with the possible] delegation of managerial authority’ (Stewart and Hitt 2012: 4). This was not fully possible in Al-Zaytuna. The café could not afford a full-time manager and, while Um Bashir wished to delegate some duties (to Khalid ideally), she still wanted to oversee the business. However, she saw it useful to hire a part-time manager, particularly to look after the accounts, website, communications and some of the tasks that were challenging her and Abu Bashir. She also considered hiring another part-time worker in the kitchen to help her with cooking. This solution, she thought, would relieve Khalid and Reem from their duties while guaranteeing the commitment that comes with remuneration. By the time her eldest son Bashir arrived, a Syrian part-time manager had been hired and was completing his first week at the café.

Bashir was delighted to see his parents energized with the renewal of the business. But their distress with Khalid’s situation and the implications for his future concerned him. So did the future of the business itself, the sustainability of which was entangled with the unfolding structure of the family. If Khalid was really disinterested in the café, and if his parents would inevitably leave the UK to return to Gaza, as they had planned all along, then what was the purpose of this business? Would it not be better to sell it? The café might

be even more appealing now with the facelift. Would it be wise to reconsider the 'family' in family business and bring in a partner?

During his week in London, Bashir had a series of conversations with different parties, including the Lebanese owner of the Italian café next door, who was looking to expand his restaurant and showed interest in a partnership. However, Bashir believed that this expansion would change the nature of their family business. As far as he was concerned, one of the main objectives of the business was to anchor the family in the diaspora as their uncertainty unfolded. This meant ensuring a stream of income for different family members while they lived in London, safeguarding Khalid in the long run and giving some meaning to his parents' stay in their temporary *ghurba* (exile) from home. Bashir still believed that if Khalid could be persuaded to change his ways, both family and business would be salvaged and he intended to use his position in the family as respected eldest son and brother to ensure that.

By the end of his visit, Bashir succeeded in his reconciliatory mission. His intervention brokered an understanding between Khalid and his parents and reached a compromise that satisfied all parties. There was agreement that, on top of the money assigned to the part-time manager, Khalid would be granted a small salary as the main chef, on condition that he would honour his commitment to work his hours. This meant that three staff members were now remunerated: the chef (Khalid), the part-time manager and the kitchen porter, a post that continued to be abandoned almost on bimonthly basis after Tijil's departure. Reem would no longer work in the café so that she could focus on her course before she joined Muhannad. As for the parents, their role would now be supervisory, although Um Bashir still offered to cook meals for lunch, leaving Khalid to take charge of the evenings. One might interrogate the extent or even possibility of professionalizing family, in terms of precise organizational structures or meritocratic values (Chua, Chrisman and Bergiel 2009). Yet, the agreed arrangement settled, at least for the moment, the immediate risks to both business and family that emerged from Khalid's potential exclusion. But the dynamic between the economic value of the family and family values continued to play out in Al-Zaytuna 2.0.

### **Family and Business in Al-Zaytuna 2.0**

One evening, we returned from a trip to a nearby shopping centre to find café tables covered with white linen, sprinkled with rose petals and decorated with origami napkin flowers. Khalid had placed a small vase carrying lavender bundles on each of the tables. Wine glasses and cutlery were polished and sparkling. Table candle flames gently swayed against the sound of romantic

Lebanese singer Elissa in dimmed atmospheric lighting. Abu Bashir grinned with surprise as he inspected the transformed room. In his playful manner, he exclaimed, 'Son! this looks so romantic! I might invite your mother to this restaurant tonight!' Busy evenings such as the one that followed became the norm in Al-Zaytuna. Khalid's newfound commitment to the business encouraged his parents to take him more seriously in the discussions around the reconfiguration of the café. The refurbishments presented an opportunity to rethink menus, content and pricing. Yet, Khalid found that he still had to navigate established hierarchies that permeated both family and business. In the following discussion, I continue to explore the limits of professionalizing family and the balancing acts and compromises required to mediate between family and business, especially when business priorities did not sit easily with the value of family.

In his capacity as new chef, Khalid wished to make changes to Al-Zaytuna's menu. He returned to his argument that Al-Zaytuna should be looking towards big Arabic restaurants in West London and lobbied for the inclusion of common *mezze* items such as, among others, *tabbula* salad and *mutabbal* (an aubergine dip), and *mashāwi* (grilled meats) as one of the options for the main dishes. 'You won't be taken seriously if a customer comes to an Arabic restaurant and cannot order *mashāwi*!' Khalid complained. However, Um Bashir resisted Khalid's attempt to stretch the remit of the café beyond its Palestinian home-made food niche, which, she and other family members agreed, was what made the café desirable. She insisted on maintaining their small menu of Palestinian specials and made it clear that she would not permit the café to be 'as any another Arabic restaurant'. Yet, to encourage Khalid, she agreed to 'give and take', to debate some ideas, and even conceded to a couple of his suggestions.

Some of her counter-arguments were economic. For example, some ingredients were too expensive to offer on a daily basis. 'You would have to change the price of *mutabbal* every time the price of aubergine fluctuated! Customers would think you are tricking them. It's too much hassle, so better not to have it at all.' Similarly, she vetoed his idea to introduce a Moroccan lobster tagine to the evening menu, in spite of Khalid's insistence that, although customers sought Palestinian food, 'there will be others who prefer high cuisine'. It was only when he found out that a frozen headless lobster was sold at eight pounds sterling at the local fishmonger that he admitted it was not feasible. He would have to price the dish at £18, at least. Although he believed that the current prices underestimated Al-Zaytuna, what with the quality of the food they offered and the refurbished space, at other times he also recognized that the appeal of the café was precisely the good food offered at reasonable price. 'Maybe my mother was right!' he confessed sheepishly. 'Don't tell her that, though', he warned me.

In the end, Um Bashir did agree to a limited expansion of the menu with popular Arabic starters such as spinach pies and stuffed *kubba* balls to the daily menu. She enlisted a Lebanese woman from her English language class, who had already helped out during the month of Ramadan, when the café filled up for daily *iftars*. She would come for a couple of hours, twice a week, to prepare these starters, which could be frozen for later use. ‘Poor her!’ Um Bashir told me, ‘the woman was a widow and needed some help.’ She was also a skilled cook; the delicious food she made in Ramadan attested to this. Um Bashir also agreed to Khalid’s idea for a separate ‘evening specials menu’ (including *mashāwi*) to complement the all-day menu. Now that the café was granted an alcohol licence, which Muhannad had applied for weeks before he left (Chapter 1), Khalid believed that transforming the space in the evenings, such as the candlelit night described at the beginning of the section, would enhance the business.

With the help of a friend who was a graphic designer, Khalid introduced a new olive logo to the menus (to match the name of the café and the new colour scheme after the refurbishment) and took me on a mission one afternoon to find the right shade of green paper from a stationary shop. We bought leather menu holders that Khalid had seen online and spent that evening designing the pages and rewriting the descriptions of the dishes. We also designed a separate menu for event catering, which was growing in popularity as the café began to receive orders for weddings, private parties, business meetings and Christmas lunches.

Within two months from the refurbishments, the upgraded menus and the new arrangements that gave Khalid more responsibility, the café finally seemed to fall into a rhythm, despite the busy weekends. As Khalid worked on perfecting his food and presentation, he felt a growing sense of ownership. And as we shall see in Chapter 5, his growth and confidence as he felt ‘anchored’ led him to embark on exciting initiatives for Al-Zaytuna and the Palestinian cause through his involvement in a multicultural street festival. Eventually, Um Bashir gave her son more room to shape the café within the limits she had set for him as she and other family members focused on their own activities. On top of her English classes, Um Bashir enjoyed the benefits she received for ‘over sixties’. She enrolled in exercise classes in the local leisure centre and began to spend more time with her daughters and grandchildren.

The different ways people experience anchorage tend to vary according to life trajectories, gender and age. While other family members focused on their life projects, Abu Bashir continued to help in the café, not necessarily out of need, but because the café continued to be his space of socialization. Abu Bashir’s family were sensitive to his plight as an elderly migrant. They worried about the risks of social isolation as he got used to his new reality,

navigating a new language, social relationships and etiquettes. As the project of Al-Zaytuna developed, it became an anchor not just for Khalid but also for his father. Abu Bashir faced his displacement with a remarkable mix of stoicism and quiet humour, which he infused in the café. He laughed with regular customers when they could not pronounce the Arabic words he tried to teach them. He shouted out '*ta-faddal*' (please come in!) to passers-by in the neighbourhood, even those who did not speak Arabic, beckoning them to come in for a hot drink. And he took in his stride blunders that might otherwise cause embarrassment.

As the family watched a Turkish soap opera in the upstairs flat one evening, patrons began to fill the dining room. Feeling slightly bored, Abu Bashir decided to help in the café. I was taking orders and serving diners, while Khalid took care of the back of the house, along with Amir, a Nepalese migrant who was working as a kitchen porter that week. Abu Bashir went around the tables in his usual pleasant manner, checking that customers were happy and asking if they needed anything. I heard a man ask for two glasses of house red wine for him and his partner. A minute later, I saw Khalid step out of the kitchen. With a panicked look on his face and hysterical gestures, he pointed to his father, as if to alert me that something was amiss. I must have looked puzzled at first as I did not notice anything wrong, until Abu Bashir came closer to me, revealing a bottle of balsamic vinegar, which he intended to pour into the diners' wine glasses. Khalid must have seen his father carry the bottle, wondering why he was taking it into the dining room. I discreetly pointed to Abu Bashir that this was vinegar, not wine! His face broke into laughter, appreciating the mistake and perhaps imagining the potential awkwardness of pouring the condiment into the polished glasses. 'It's all grapes!' he commented cheekily with a twinkle in his eye. Later that evening, Khalid entertained the rest of the family as he recounted the earlier blunder in dramatic detail. 'Get ready *yāba* [Dad]', he playfully threatened his Muslim-practicing father, 'I will take you on a wine tasting tour in the South Bank tomorrow!'

After the laughing settled, Abu Bashir commented that 'there is a lot of learning to be done in *ghurba*.' His comment may well be about the broader experience of migration than the vinegar incident itself, which could have happened to anyone, let alone someone who does not speak or read English. As we shall see with other family members in the rest of the book, misunderstandings and faux pas are generative moments to think about how migrants deal with the (un)familiarities of a new context. They help us (and the migrant) gauge the extent of anchorage for different people. On his part, Khalid had to find ways to compromise as he navigated the balance between family and the professionalization of the business. When the chips were

down, the wellbeing of a father who found his anchor in Al-Zaytuna '2.0' tipped the balance.

The discussion of the Gazzawi experience in establishing Al-Zaytuna café, and the trials of sustaining the business in its initial months, illustrates the interchange between kinship and economics and the entanglements between family and work that are so characteristic of family enterprises. The chapter has shown the extent to which the workings of familial values, 'the ways of being and living in a family' (De Lima 2000: 152), determine economic activity, the economic group itself and its continuation. Equally, the success and sustainability of the business, particularly as a family business that promotes Palestinian food and culture, has become a symbol of kinship.

In this and [Chapter 1](#), I explored the intensifications of anchorage, which I argue produces modes of being and doing as migrants invest and engage in activities and practices that facilitate emplacement and feelings of home. I have suggested that the project of Al-Zaytuna was an anchor that united the dispersed Gazzawi family in London. The construction of a Palestinian national cuisine intertwined home and nation in the space of the café and anchored the family in the neighbourhood and the city. In this chapter, I focused on the challenges of sustaining and growing the family business and the demands made on kinship in this enterprise. I showed how the experience of anchorage differs from one person to the other (even within one family) and how the anchorage of one family member might disrupt that of others. In [Chapter 3](#), I continue to explore the centrality of family and social networks in the experience of anchorage. Focusing on the Gazzawis' eldest daughter Widad, the chapter explores her efforts in establishing a home and re-creating a sense of stability and normality after she was granted refugee status in London. For a 'new arrival' this process involved encounters with state bureaucracy and challenges of learning to negotiate a new bureaucratic regime.

## Notes

1. See Creed for a review of anthropological literature on family businesses and working families (2000: 338–42).
2. Smart and Smart define petty capitalists as 'individuals or households who employ a small number of workers but are themselves actively involved in the labor process' (2012: 1). They suggest that this term is more useful ethnographically than 'entrepreneur' or 'family business', the former for covering a range of enterprise sizes and the latter for assuming that the premise of organization is kinship. In this chapter I maintain the use of 'family business' because: (a) it constitutes an ethnographic category; and (b) because the premise of this organization happens to be kinship in this case.

3. 'Dispersal policy' was introduced in 1999 and aimed to relocate asylum seekers and refugees to cities in the north of England and Scotland in order to lift the pressure off London and the south of England (see Sales 2002; Darling 2016).
4. See Susan Greenhalgh (1994) for a similar analysis of family businesses in Taiwan.
5. James Scott's (1985) seminal book on a Malaysian village, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, turns our attention to subtle, everyday forms of resistance that depart from large-scale attempts of social change, such as, for example, uprisings and revolutions.
6. See Anderson (2010) for a discussion of how immigration controls in the UK shape precarious labour and lives for immigrants with different-tier visas.
7. Panikos Panayi draws a connection between deregulated migrants in London and black slaves, the Victorian underclass, and foreign sailors: all 'remain outside of mainstream London employment without regular pay, while also playing a central part in driving the metropolitan economy' (2020: 61).
8. Literature on migrant labourers in the Middle East has highlighted the xenophobic and discriminatory practices that migrants are subjected to. See, for example, Longva (1997); Jureidini (2003); Gardner (2010); Kanna (2011).
9. Gabriella Alberti (2014) argues that the turnover of labour might also reflect migrants' mobility strategies that challenge employers' assumptions about their willingness to endure long hours for low pay.
10. Ghezzi is aware of the 'amoral' implications of the term 'familism' as used in Italian and other contexts (for example, in my own work, Obeid 2019). She uses 'a less biased definition' to explain 'the prominent role of the family in different institutional contexts' (2016: 246) such as the economy.
11. See Stewart and Hitt (2012) for a discussion of the different meanings of professionalization.

Chapter 3

## Encountering British Bureaucracy



Widad had just returned to the Al-Zaytuna flat after a long assessment with her housing officer at the local council in London. She took her headscarf off and dropped herself on the sofa as she sighed with exhaustion. Um Bashir, who had been waiting for her daughter to return with news, handed her a glass of home-made mint lemonade to help her catch her breath. ‘The same questions every time!’ she complained. ‘These interviews bring you *stress* [using the English term].’ This was not her first meeting. Since Widad had been granted refugee status in 2010, when she sought asylum with her three children (ages 13, 10 and 7), she had found herself navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth. She had to deal with interviews, letters, forms and phone calls relating to her rights to welfare in the UK. For the first time in her life she was in charge of the fate of her family. Her husband Ismail, who had stayed behind in Gaza, had applied to join her through a family reunion scheme and it would be months before he was allowed to travel to the UK. Without him, Widad found herself under pressure to deal with issues that were usually ‘his domain’ – bureaucratic matters that involved paperwork and dealing with officials in banks and institutions. The terms and procedures she was facing in the UK seemed alien to her, especially as a beginner to the English language. Her unmarried sister Manal and her brother Khalid had each gone through the asylum process before her. But while they were able to advise on some issues, her case seemed different to theirs because they did not have children. In her early months in London, Widad felt alone and burdened with worry.

As she recounted with exasperation the details of her assessment, she reflected on what practices of British bureaucracy say about the British.

The British are straight [*dughbrī*]! [The official] may feel for you, and there is a lot of respect, but the rules stay the same. You want to live in their country, you have to play by their rules. But I feel like a novice [*mubtadi'a*] in this system. You have to learn everything from the beginning! The repetition, the waiting ... it brings *stress*.

For asylum seekers and refugees, anchoring occurs, not only but predominantly in the realm of bureaucracy as migrants seek legal status – though as I argued in the Introduction, legality alone may not guarantee a sense of feeling anchored. In Widad's experience, her bureaucratic pursuits produced an intensification in modes of doing as she sought to understand the scope of her entitlements and rights and how to access them. But, as she expresses in the quote, these processes produced a particular mode of being, that of the 'novice'. The experience of being a novice is not uncommon among new arrivals who find themselves burdened with the challenge of discerning new bureaucratic regimes. Neither is the simultaneous admiration and frustration that Widad expresses about bureaucracy. As a wealth of scholarly work has argued, bureaucratic practices are affectively charged (Navaro-Yashin 2007), they can be empathetic and efficient (James and Killick 2012), sites of disturbance (Stewart 2007) and shock (Ahmed 2000; Wilson 2017).

There seems to be a 'paradox' that drives 'organized encounters' between claimants and officials. On one hand, these encounters hold the promise and potential of effecting change. On the other, they are fraught with unpredictability and unknown potential (Wilson 2017: 607). This is perhaps what makes them sites of ambiguity. While ambiguity can be frustrating, anxiety-producing and 'stressful', as Widad complained, I want to argue that ambiguity is not without interest; it 'invites us to consider what gets lost in translation and to discover what other possibilities are let loose in those moments of miscommunication and reinterpretation' (Best 2012: 101). It is often through the mysterious workings of bureaucracies that errors and blunders are unearthed (Tuckett 2015). Bureaucratic encounters, therefore, can be generative grounds for understanding the ways in which social categories and inequalities are negotiated and disputed, particularly in the context of social services (Silver 2010). It is on these very grounds that claimants learn to perform expected bureaucratic identities (Hacking 2004; Humphris 2017), especially in a climate where longstanding language, expectations and imaginations of categories of claimants are already established. In the context of the UK, asylum seekers and refugees continue to endure a 'hostile political environment where they are variously characterized as an economic and

welfare threat and are even included within security and terrorist legislation and language' (Mulvey 2010: 456).

In my aim to document the 'anchoring' of migrants, I follow Widad's bureaucratic journey as a refugee in London. The question that drives this chapter is how claimants come to learn, and therefore know, what constitutes a legitimate claim to rights and entitlements. By the same token, how do they come to inhabit bureaucratic categories and identities to make themselves legible and recognizable to state officials? In pursuing my questions about how migrants learn in this and Chapter 4, I draw on Susan Blum's recent invitation to pay anthropological attention to the 'formal, informal and nonformal ways of being formed, shaped and changed' (2019: 643). But Widad, like other migrant learners, is not a *tabula rasa*, even when she describes herself as a novice. The chapter will therefore focus on learners like Widad as 'agents and experiencers rather than outside forces acting on them' (ibid: 643). These questions are central to understanding how anchorage, as a process of relating to new places in uncertain times, is realized for new migrants. Acquiring the knowledge necessary to claim benefits and negotiate rights to welfare – for example, housing, school, income, health care, among others – is essential to facilitate anchorage in the early phases of migration.

The chapter focuses on Widad's negotiations with officials to secure council housing that would not only provide her family with a roof over their heads, but also offer the right conditions to (re)create home through a sense of stability and normality, at the heart of which was her proximity to her social networks. This is because home is not just a material dwelling, but an affective space that is built through social, spatial and communal familiarities. The repetitive nature of the bureaucratic encounters that Widad was subjected to in her early practices of anchoring sensitized her to the official language and values employed in processes of refugee inclusion and integration. Although 'integration' is a vague term that has proven to be a 'contested terrain' (Phillips 2006: 540) in a 'state-driven discourse of multiculturalism' (Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona 2005: 171), this principle has been central to the British government's approaches to community cohesion and the resettlement of migrants and refugees (Home Office 2005).

Widad was soon able to establish that 'stress due to social exclusion' was a legitimate discourse of wellbeing that would aid her negotiations for housing rights. Indeed, Home Office policy reports emphasize the importance of 'social bonds' as 'connections within communities defined by ethnic, national or religious identities, [that] are seen to be crucial for feelings of inclusion' (Ager and Strang 2004). The material I present here confirms the uncertainty and unpredictability inscribed in bureaucratic encounters (Wilson 2017). But it also shifts our attention to the *predictable*, in order to explore the ways

repetition and iteration shape how Widad responded and acted in anticipation of official questions and expectations.

I will explore the extent to which her learning experiences were shaped by her knowledge of previous legal and bureaucratic regimes. Over time and through different encounters, we see how her learning curve developed. The predictability of the encounter helped her sense the legitimate as she tested its boundaries. While this had its frustrating moments, it allowed room for creativity and humour in the presentation and negotiation of herself and her case. In the spirit of paying attention to emic idioms and how they structure the lives of the people we write about, the chapter shows how the value of patience (*sabr*), coupled with Widad's moral sense of honesty and deservedness, helped her endure the uncertain times that would determine the anchoring of her family.

### **So Near and Yet So Far: Housing and Social Exclusion**

During her asylum application, Widad and her three children stayed in the Gazzawi residence in an Al-Zaytuna's three-bedroom flat that at the time hosted her parents, her brother Muhannad's family (with his wife Reem and their three children), and her unmarried sister and two brothers (Manal, Salih and Khalid). With a legally recognized status, however, refugees are entitled to the same welfare services enjoyed by UK citizens, including the right to housing. There is general recognition in both government and voluntary sector organizations that housing determines access to education, employment and healthcare and is considered to enhance social cohesion and the development of communities. It is thus crucial to the settlement and quality of life of new migrants. Yet, in spite of government immigration policies on integration, poor housing has created experiences of social exclusion (Spicer 2008). In processes that blur the boundaries between state, market and third sector (Forbess and James 2014; Koch 2018), social housing organization, like other welfare provision, has increasingly been outsourced. Housing associations and private landlords manage a large proportion of houses occupied by low-income tenants. The realities of housing markets in desirable and expensive areas mean that new migrants often end up in deprived estates in areas with poor housing conditions (Phillips 2006). In such areas, schools tend to lack the ability to deal with displaced children and language barriers challenge the experience of settling (Sales 2002). This is what happened to Widad and her children.

When she was granted refugee status, Widad was keen to move into council housing that suited her family so that the children would feel settled and go to school – Widad was worried that they were already missing out

because they arrived in London in the middle of the academic year.<sup>1</sup> But the process is not straightforward. Council housing operates on a points-based system that usually involves long waiting lists. Councils have different rules, but priority is given to applicants living in overcrowded conditions or threatened with homelessness, although being homeless does not necessarily guarantee housing rights. As the charity Shelter explains on its website, applicants must 'be legally homeless; meet immigration and residence conditions; have a priority need; be homeless through no fault of [their] own and usually have a local connection with the area'.<sup>2</sup> Once an applicant qualifies for a permanent tenancy, the council is obliged to find suitable temporary housing until a permanent accommodation is available. Applicants are entitled to choose the areas they wish to reside in, although this depends on availability. Turning down temporary housing because of location may jeopardize their chances. Hoping to be given priority as a single mother of three children,<sup>3</sup> Widad filed an application for emergency housing in a council in South London, based on her current cramped living conditions.

To help Widad's application, Muhannad, whose name was officially on the rental agreement of Al-Zaytuna, had to do what he described to me as one of the most trying tasks: write an official letter that stated he was no longer able to accommodate Widad's family because of the overcrowded condition of the accommodation.

How can I sign my name on a paper like this, when my beloved sister [*ukhti habibti*] is always welcome in her family's house? Even if fifty people lived with us, we will make space for her and her children! We would never let her be homeless! But the British [government] won't have it. They want everything to be official even between brother and sister!

Indeed, after inspection, her case was deemed to be one involving a plausible threat of homelessness and Widad was given immediate priority.

Given the difficulties of finding properties in the South London borough where Widad had listed her priority, the council began to look for accommodation outside of the borough. First, Widad was offered a house close to Heathrow Airport. Um Bashir and Muhannad accompanied her to view the house. They returned to Al-Zaytuna late in the afternoon and their arrival caused a commotion as the space of the café filled up. Adults and children wanted to know whether they should celebrate. Simultaneous questions fired at the three: How many bedrooms? Was the place nice? How far from Al-Zaytuna? Will the girls get their own room? Will Widad's husband Ismail like it? But Widad's face betrayed her disappointment. The place was apparently awful! Although it was a two-storey house, it was tiny with only two bedrooms, each with a single bed. The rooms had no space for spare beds and this house would not have fitted

the family, especially when Ismail joined them. Muhannad was appalled at the state of health and safety in the house and brought back photos on his phone of exposed wires on the floors and rubbish in the garden. The next day, Muhannad rushed with Widad to the council office to protest. Widad was worried that she would be seen as ungrateful and that she might lose her chance if she rejected the offer. But Muhannad reassured her that she had the right to ask for a better and safer place. 'You are not begging anyone for anything. And no one is doing you a favour! People have rights in this country!' Widad was only soothed when her housing officer apologized and promised that her team would look for a better and more fitting accommodation. She also confirmed to Widad that their rules stipulate that each child needs a bed and that, for her family size, she is entitled for three bedrooms. In other words, even if she did agree to a small flat, the council ought not give it to her.

Soon after, the council offered Widad appropriate temporary housing, a flat with three bedrooms, but in another borough in North London. Very few Arabs lived in that area. Arab communities tended to concentrate in central, western and north-western parts of the capital (for example, Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, Hammersmith and Fulham) (Aly 2015). Widad's flat in North London was in a social housing estate that hosted a large number of residents, the majority of whom were of Turkish and Caribbean backgrounds. Shops nearby were owned by Turkish speakers and the local medical centre only offered Turkish interpretation services. Using her ability to count in English, coupled with sign language, Widad managed to get by. But the language barrier exaggerated the cultural differences between her and her neighbours and reinforced sentiments of isolation and vulnerability. Despite her sociable personality, Widad was unable to make any friends in the neighbourhood. Her children also found the move difficult. In Chapter 4, I delve deeper into the 'state of discombobulation' that the children experienced in their family's migration. For now, my point is that moving from their grandparents' house in South London, which felt familiar and safe, to an area in which very few Arabs resided, unsettled the children and disrupted the feeling of being anchored.

Widad made sure to enrol each of her children in after-school extra-curricular activities. She also opted for the 'lunch at school' meal scheme to encourage her children to integrate by doing whatever the other children were doing. But she felt it was unsafe to let them play outside in the estate after school. Within the first month of their dwelling, there was a murder on the estate, and she felt intimidated when the police knocked on her door to question her and other neighbours. 'We couldn't wait to flee the violence in Gaza and now the police are at my door here!' Widad complained to me. Threatened by her surroundings, she tightened her parental supervision and controlled her children's mobility. When she forbade them to play on

the streets of the estate, they responded with anger and frustration (see Spicer 2008). Typical of many asylum seekers and refugees in the UK who are “parachuted” into new areas’ without preparation (Phillips 2006: 546), Widad’s family found themselves in a situation of isolation and exclusion.

The children seemed to struggle with the English language at school. This meant that they found it difficult to communicate their abilities to their teachers and to make friends with their classmates. It was in the initial meetings with the school and the general practitioner that Widad began to appreciate the extent to which ‘stress’ was recognized and taken seriously in the UK – while expressions like *‘daghr’* (pressure) or *‘a’sāb’* (nerves) are used in Arabic vernacular, there is no equivalent to ‘stress’ as a recognized psychosomatic condition. The children’s psychosomatic reactions to change were frequently explained away as ‘stress’ that was ‘expected’, ‘normal’ and ‘sure to go away with time.’ Widad soon started using this term in her Arabic parlance to explain the insomniac attacks and loss of appetite that she herself was experiencing, despite her apparent composure: ‘I stay up till the morning tossing and turning in bed, my thoughts entangled ... it must be all the *stress* and exhaustion [*al-stress wa al- irhāq*].’

Although her parents tried their best not to make her feel alone, the trip from Al-Zaytuna to Widad’s flat took about an hour and a half, with two changes on the train lines, which was not feasible for daily visits. From time to time, Abu Bashir would spend a night at her place, pretending that he wanted to explore a nearby shopping centre. Her sister Manal, and sometimes Reem with her three younger children Layla, Yasmine and Nizar, would stay for a weekend. Similarly, Um Bashir would stay the night when she felt she could leave the café on quiet days. But as soon as her family members left her, Widad and the children would nurse feelings of loneliness. Equally, Um Bashir felt that Widad might as well be in another city: ‘She is so close, in the same city, and yet she is so far away from us.’ She worried about her daughter and felt guilty that she could not give her more support. After a few weeks, Widad decided that she would try to persuade her housing advisor of the urgency of her situation. But as Widad would discover, making a claim was not the issue per se. The question was rather how to claim in a persuasive manner. The discussion of the encounters that followed between Widad and various officials explore how she learnt to structure her claim gradually into recognizable policy language, particularly in relation to social exclusion.

### **‘It’s Torture but It’s Fair!’ The Dual Nature of Bureaucracy**

Almost three months into her move to London, Widad still had to face an excruciating amount of paperwork that determined her embeddedness in the

system. Social security in England is fragmented and ‘labyrinthine’, requiring navigation of a variety of institutions with different rules and procedures (Forbess and James 2014: 74). Neither Widad nor I could keep up with the forms that were coming from the disconnected welfare offices. As soon as we had filled in a form for the child benefit office, we would receive a package with more forms from the tax credit office, often asking for the same information. For any clarification, we would wait on the phone sometimes for over forty-five minutes to reach a government agent. The logic of verification that set out the terms of engagement between the client and the bureaucrat bewildered both of us. For example, once I got hold of an agent, I would explain the purpose of my call and that I was interpreting for my friend. Despite this, the agent would ask to speak to Widad and still list a few questions in English, most of which – at least at the beginning of her move – she did not understand, though she eventually learnt to anticipate: first and last name, date of birth, address, National Insurance number and a security question. Much laughter ensued after one particular phone call, when I saw Widad grimace and, for the first time, heard her utter in what sounded like a stern tone the word ‘dog’. It turned out this was her response to the security question ‘what is your favourite animal?’ The shock on my face suggested to Widad that I worried she was insulting the agent, considering the offensive implications of calling someone ‘dog’ in Arabic’ and my conviction of the impossibility of Widad favouring this animal, given how she felt about domestic pets. ‘The British are driving me crazy, but not to this extent’, she corrected me playfully. The tedious repetition, the waiting and the constant demands of certification that Widad experienced had their own ‘affective energies’ (Navarro Yashin 2007: 81).<sup>4</sup> The anxiety and fear of losing her entitlements counteracted the dullness of bureaucratic measures. She referred to these processes as the ‘torture of bureaucracy’ (*adhāb al-buruqrāṭiyya*). And yet, Widad’s dealings taught her that it is precisely the meticulousness and rigidity of these procedures that ensured the sustainability of a fair system that treated citizens equally (Du Gay 2000; Heyman 2004).

Widad was learning to engage with a new system that operated along very different lines than the one she was familiar with. As a general principle of bureaucratic governance, ‘reiterative authority’ has always been part of government routines in her hometown Gaza in different historical moments (Feldman 2008a). Back home, however, bureaucracies operated on personalistic and clientelistic principles.<sup>5</sup> Personal networks facilitated transactions and mediated the impersonal nature of the state through the deployment of idioms such as ‘the family’, among others (Joseph 1999; Alexander 2002; Obeid 2019). In this sense, Widad’s inability to personalize relationships in some of her bureaucratic encounters revealed a rigid side to the British system that frustrated (‘tortured’) her at first. The impression of the ‘rigid/

impersonal/professional' bureaucrat, however, did not necessarily characterize the agents she was dealing with. For example, her housing officer herself was empathetic and supportive.<sup>6</sup> But it was the inflexibility of rules, in contrast with her experience in the Arab world, that established her understanding and imaginations of bureaucracy in the UK. Moments of crisis, such as the following encounter in hospital, revealed to her the 'workings of the British system'. It also brought home the extent to which she was isolated from her social network.

Widad was preparing a feast for her whole family to celebrate the short visit of her brother Bashir, who was in London for a conference. Shadi had just returned from school and was complaining that his swollen arm hurt after he had fallen in a football game. At first, she was not sure how serious his injury was. When Shadi began to cry with pain, Widad decided to take him to hospital, which was a short bus ride away from her flat. Her parents would need at least a couple of hours to reach her. Her eldest daughter Abir was still at school so she was on her own with her youngest daughter Lana and her cousin Layla, both under the age of ten. Under pressure, Widad left the two children on their own, and a meal half prepared in her kitchen, thinking that her son's case would be treated as an emergency and that she would return soon. Widad and Shadi had been at the hospital for over three hours when Bashir and I found them still waiting in the Accident and Emergency department, Widad's face flushed with anger. In her broken English, she had tried to explain to the nurse that two children were at home by themselves and that she could not wait any longer. The nurse apparently reprimanded her for leaving two small children on their own, a legal offence in the UK, and advised her to go back and stay with them until they had adult company. She could then return to the end of the queue. Frustrated by the nurse's lack of empathy and offended by her implications about her parenting, Widad protested that even in the Arab world the hospitals were more efficient! 'Is this how London will be? We left our life to come to a better place and a child's arm is broken and we have to wait three hours?!' Widad then burst into tears.

Within twenty minutes, the doctor saw her son and determined that there was no serious problem with his arm. Relief showed on Widad's face as she ruffled Shadi's hair, laughed at the whole situation and hoped that her mother, who would have reached her flat by now, would have started frying the fish. Still, she felt sore about her inability to move the nurse emotionally and complained about the nurse's harsh manner all the way home. Her brother reminded her of the ethos of equality in this system: attention is given first to those in need rather than people of rank or connections. Bashir's words presaged the views she would eventually come to hold about British bureaucracy. While clientelistic relations are functional in the sense

that they enable a subject to bypass what might normally be a prolonged and frustrating procedure, these relations are exclusive and render citizens' access to state services uneven, if not uncertain. Despite the 'torture' they inflict, bureaucratic procedures came to symbolize effective state-citizenship relations driven by what Widad considered a British essence that extended from people to the state: patience and discipline. She came to see discipline (*nizām*) in Britain as the antithesis of chaos (*fawda*) in Arab governments that encourage corruption and discriminate against their subjects. Such sentiments that valorize the rule of law can be read as a sign of a 'globally "modern" society' (Newendorp 2011: 96). That same evening, Widad agreed with her brother. 'Here [in Britain] you can't call your cousin or uncle to pull strings and get things done for you. Everyone is under the law. Your religion and colour don't matter.' Moreover, she endorsed approaches that based themselves on filtering the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' (Sales 2002). 'The system here is fair. It will drive you crazy first, but you know you will be treated justly eventually. If they don't do this, imagine how many people will take advantage of their resources.' Widad bought into the discourse of 'the trickster' (Ahmed 2004) as well as the 'rationality' and 'fairness' of 'good bureaucracy'. She accepted that tolerating its procedures is a means to proving the authenticity of one's claims.

This and other encounters were instructive about the 'nature' of the British and their state as well as the correct way of being a subject. To make claims on the state, Widad felt she had to prove her deservedness while exercising patience. Despite her actual, everyday experience of the disparateness and disconnectedness of this system, she perceived the bureaucratic apparatus to be a unified entity joined together by civil servants dispersed around various administrative bodies. This is perhaps reinforced by the similarity and repetition in the procedures, materiality and routines of the different agencies and agents with whom she was dealing (Gupta 2005). Through this lens of unity – and in the attempt to prove her deservingness – she set out to persuade any official that she thought represented this system of the authenticity of her housing case, regardless of whether they were directly involved in decision-making related to housing. But how to articulate what she believed was a rightful and honest request into bureaucratic discourse? The discussion of the following encounters demonstrates how Widad learnt the parameters of claim-making.

### **Tense Encounters and an Unsolicited Kiss**

Widad's claims about the ramifications of her social exclusion were not unfamiliar to official discourses. The experience of stress, anxiety and depression

among refugees is an officially recognized problem in the UK, as it is an internationally acknowledged issue (Ager 1993; Malkki 1996). For example, an earlier Home Office study established that for refugees of different communities, 'the effects of war and persecution were compounded by social and cultural isolation, unemployment and language difficulties. Stress was aggravated by delays in processing applications, the threat of deportation and by separation from families' (Sales 2002: 466).<sup>7</sup> Official knowledge, however, continues to operate in a climate of suspicion and hostility towards the figure of the overdemanding refugee. In the following interaction, this tension emerges in the encounter between Widad and a health and safety officer, who was inspecting her living conditions in relation to the required standards.<sup>8</sup> The hospital incident discussed above brought home Widad's isolation and the extent to which this was causing her and her family 'stress', a matter that she was keen to convey to the officials she was dealing with.

Widad received a call from her housing officer informing her that she should be expecting a visitor. She understood that the landlady, from whom the council was renting and with whom Widad had only spoken over the phone, was coming to inspect her flat for the first time. The mixed aroma of brewed coffee and bleach filled the air; Widad always kept an immaculate flat. But on that day, she especially wanted the flat to sparkle, to give the right impression to her supposed landlady. Her visitor arrived with a male companion and they introduced themselves as Jenny and Iqbal. I quickly realized that Widad had misunderstood the purpose of the visit. Widad warmly welcomed her guests and took Jenny by surprise when she gave her a peck on the cheek, only to realize through my translation that she was not her landlady. Slightly embarrassed, but maintaining a cheerful and hospitable tone, Widad offered the visitors coffee as a mark of hospitality and an attempt to personalize the encounter. But Jenny declined politely and gave a clear impression that she was ready to start the inspection. Laughing at this blunder later and at the discomfort the kiss caused, Widad recalled that 'the British' – unlike Palestinians – 'don't mix the social with the professional!'

With a checklist at hand, Jenny launched into questions about the alarm and the carbon monoxide detector as she and her colleague went around each room. The four of us were stood in the corridor when she asked if Widad had any additional needs. Knowing that the inspectors' role was a technical one, Widad still chose to raise the challenges that were causing her stress. I was translating both ways, as I normally did when I accompanied Widad to her interviews.<sup>9</sup>

Widad started by asking for extra armchairs, framing her request with the discourse of 'stress' caused by the conditions of the estate. 'The estate has no gardens or parks and the children feel *stressed*. They can't really play outside. When we all sit down at night, we are on top of each other.' But

before I finished translating, Jenny abruptly and firmly replied, 'We are only required to give one seat per person and you have a three-seat sofa and an armchair. If you need more, then it is up to you as a tenant to buy the extras.' Widad could sense that this was non-negotiable, so she conceded, perhaps wanting to concentrate on the more pressing question. She continued that, although the flat was comfortable, the area was too far from where her family lived. As decisively as her first reply, and almost in a rehearsed fashion, Jenny said, 'There are no spaces in that part of London. The council is obliged to find appropriate flats for people, but we cannot guarantee placing them in areas of preference.' Widad already knew this but pushed on her point, trying to explain that it was not so much the area or the distance, but rather the feeling of exclusion in the area, and the inability of her children to communicate with other children on the estate. Jenny suggested that Widad go to community centres, where she could meet people. But, again, Widad evidenced her effort by listing the school events she had attended and the children's centre she had registered in, hoping to meet other mothers, to no avail. In an attempt to nail down the point about language and exclusion, she continued, 'I don't mind if *after* two years the council moves me here. If I could speak English and knew my way around, I wouldn't mind being far from my family. But now is the time that I need support.'

Jenny then addressed me: 'Well, she could go to the local mosque and find Arab speakers there. She just has to find the community.' Slightly provoked by what I felt was a micro-aggression in her suggestion, I found myself replying before translating to Widad. 'I don't think this is an appropriate suggestion! You are assuming that there are Arabic speakers in the mosque, which is not necessarily the case. She is not asking to be introduced to *Muslims* who go to mosques but to *Arabic speakers*.' Defensively, Jenny continued, 'If I were moving to a new country, I would go to church and find people of my community there.' Again, I argued before translating to Widad, 'It is not something that women do, going to the mosque to "find people". I'm not sure that is appropriate.' At this point, Iqbal, with the authority of being a Muslim himself, confirmed my point, that 'going to church for Christians is not the same as going to the mosque for Muslims'.

Upon translation, Widad calmly asked me to make sure to convey that she does not need to be around Muslims. What she needed was to be able to communicate with the people around her.

Here, I feel under a lot of stress. I am by myself. I don't feel safe. I cannot be outside of the house after dark. There was a murder on the estate and it scared us. If something happens, I have no one to resort to. The children feel *depressed* [in English] because they have no one to speak to and we are confined indoors. I need my family around me.

Through me, Widad invoked the incident at the hospital when she found herself alone and endangered her younger children by leaving them in the flat by themselves. Interestingly here, Widad used this example instrumentally, after she had learnt that leaving children unaccompanied is an offence in England. Outside of the encounter, Widad compared parenting practices in the UK to those back home, where children as young as three would be sent to the grocery shop across the road on their own, or where a ten-year-old would 'raise younger siblings'. Indeed, at Al-Zaytuna, café patrons were amazed at Muhannad's four-year-old son, who knew how to walk to the nearest grocery shop, buy sweets on his own and return with the right amount of change. But Widad's views on the scope of Arab children's responsibilities had to be restrained, given her acquired knowledge of the consequences.<sup>10</sup> Instead, her potential legal offence was used as an example of how her circumstances victimized her. At this point, Jenny sheepishly explained that she was just trying to help. Her tone mellowed and she began to show more sympathy and understanding about the difficulties Widad was expressing. She even promised to report Widad's situation to the council and to make recommendations for a more appropriate housing in which she could be closer to her community.<sup>11</sup>

In this encounter, the ambiguities and misunderstandings at play, despite their discomfort, are generative. This is partly in terms of 'the novice's' gradual appreciation of how to position herself in certain bureaucratic spaces and partly in the negotiation that occurs in aligning the incongruent perspectives of the claimant and the bureaucrat. Widad sought to prove to Jenny that her demands were legitimate by evidencing her efforts to 'integrate' – whether by actively 'looking for a community' or by showing her willingness to be in whichever area the council chooses, once she has gained language skills – and by recognizing when to concede in her negotiation. For example, she knew better to drop her request for furniture upon a reasonable answer that disassociated her children's 'stress' from the interior conditions of the flat.

The tension in my own exchange with Jenny opens up analysis of how we might capture multiple meanings and intentions and 'what slips out or is mistranslated' (Best 2012: 86) in bureaucratic encounters. In this exchange, Jenny invokes a widespread sentiment that Muslim migrants are unable (or even refuse) to integrate in multicultural Britain. It is also an image conjured up in Home Office statements. Irene Gedalof analyses the ethnicized and radicalized image of 'the migrant woman' as a problem of a particular kind. She is a problem defined by her linguistic isolation and limited awareness of cultural difference, and by her entanglement in the 'backward practices' of arranged marriage and gender subordination (2007: 90). Jenny's retort that Widad should just 'find the community' also beckons Insa Koch's argument about the 'moral economy of blame' in Britain's housing sector, which she argues contrasts with a 'politics of

welfare” [that ought to] place at its core a logic of collective solutions and a moral economy of redistribution’ (2018: 223). Perhaps my intervention created an affective moment that changed the dynamic of the interaction. My tone and implicit accusation of racism, coupled with Iqbal’s position in the conversation, ‘affected’<sup>12</sup> this exchange and recalibrated the balance of power. At least Jenny felt compelled to soften her position and take on board Widad’s story.

The tension in this episode elaborates how different subjects can affect the bureaucratic encounter in different ways. While, as the anthropologist, I was in a position to challenge bureaucratic discourses, as a refugee claimant, Widad gained legitimacy through submitting herself to these discourses and inhabiting categories. She was able to frame her claim about the emotional and mental repercussions of social exclusion in a way that chimed with official knowledge. Widad presented her predicament through a ‘victim trope’, once she demonstrated that she had tried everything expected of her to accommodate to her new housing situation. As Lauren Silver contends, public service systems ‘are more likely to empathize with victims of circumstances as opposed to victims of one’s own actions’ (2010: 292). The fact that an official like Jenny, who appeared remarkably adamant at first, could accept and even endorse Widad’s narrative, armed her with a sense of righteousness and consolidated the legitimacy of her claim.

### Differentiating Stress

Widad was summoned to do a mental health assessment at the office of the council only two weeks after the health and safety checks. Through her meetings, she continued to construct her case based on her claim of ‘stress due to social exclusion’. Widad was appropriating the vocabulary of mental wellbeing<sup>13</sup> that remains predominant in the context of refugee regimes and humanitarianism.<sup>14</sup> However, as Erica James argues, bureaucratization tends to alienate the experience from the subject in the process of creating a ‘trauma portfolio – the aggregate of documentation and verification which “recognises” or transubstantiates individuals ... into “victims”’ (2004: 131). Yet, some of the universalizing categories used in these processes become ‘instruments’ for refugees who then use them to press their own claims (Feldman 2008b: 500). Through her bureaucratic encounters, Widad was learning to do just that, to produce a discourse – as recognized and valuable representations of knowledge – that was resonant vernacularly and bureaucratically. I find James’ idea of ‘the portfolio’ instructive in Widad’s case, as she engaged in compiling verifications that made her a recognized claimant to different bureaucrats.

By the time the mental health assessment was due, Widad had learnt through her encounters with officials that: (a) stress is an important category that has currency, but only certain kinds of stress are recognized in official claims; and (b) that her claim needed to be discursively organized into a coherent narrative. How the narrative gels together was equally important. For example, another Palestinian woman, also holding refugee status, tried to persuade her housing officer that she needed new accommodation. She argued that she was 'depressed' because she was living with her parents at the age of thirty and wished to be independent. On that basis, she wanted separate accommodation. Recounting the story to Widad and me, she laughed at the reaction of the officer: 'You are depressed? Welcome to London. Everyone is depressed!' In other words, while her condition might be recognized, her narrative was not persuasive.

On the day of the meeting, Widad and I were met by a very friendly mental health officer, Anthony, who took us into a room where we sat at a round table. He brought with him a form, which seemed to revolve around three categories: 'mental health', 'social health' and 'accessibility in the accommodation'. Looking at his forms, he began with the now familiar and predictable list of background questions, which prompted a 'here we go again!' from Widad, who continued to answer them without translation.

Despite the order of the form, Widad took control of her own priorities. Once Anthony finished writing down the background details, she impatiently launched into the stressful problem of her location. Her aim was to appeal emotionally to the officer, as she had done previously with Jenny, and even asked me to make sure to convey the emotionality of her plight in my translation. This time, Widad came armed with a new detail, which she was certain would strengthen her argument about the challenges of living in North London. 'It is a dangerous place', she stated. 'On our way back home last week, we found a fox! Can you believe it? A fox! This cannot be a good place for children.' Although I had explained to Widad when she initially expressed her shock at the sight of the animal that it is very common to see foxes in London, and that they are not seen as wild beasts in this country, she insisted that this made her case strong, perhaps even more so than the murder example. But Anthony laughed at this and said that in West Africa, where he came from, foxes are considered good luck! Widad found this news strange (*gharib*) and tactically returned to what she now knew was a recognized and acceptable narrative. She described the pressures she and the children had been facing, the lack of support at schools and her children's psychosomatic symptoms. She also recounted the examples of the murder and the hospital incident, all of which she reiterated were causing the family stress.

After Widad's elaboration on her children's coping difficulties, Anthony got to the question that asked, 'Do you have mental health problems?' to which Widad replied, 'No, just stress because of the situation', she had just described.

Unlike Jenny in the above example, Anthony showed sympathy to Widad's claims of hardship. But his job was to organize her narrative into the medium of the form, a task that will always reduce the complexity of the narrative itself (Silver 2010). Anthony read out his version, saying, 'No, just stress because of parenting.' When I translated to Widad, she asked me to correct him. It was not 'parenting' per se that was stressful, she clarified, but rather parenting away from her social network. Here, as in the hospital, Widad rejected the implication that her stress might in some way affect her parenting skills and instead made sure to emphasize the kind of stress that was condoned, one that is caused by lack of social bonds. Agreeably, Anthony changed his notes and repeated to us everything he had noted down, the information now organized under the headings of the form. Anthony concluded that Widad was 'feeling stress as a result of her displacement and social exclusion and hence her social health was suffering'. We conceded to his summary and the interview ended with him promising to convey Widad's 'stress' to her housing officer.

The instrumental repetition of a coherent narrative to various state representatives served Widad's aim to be recognized as a deserving claimant who was struggling with a legitimate kind of stress that resulted from social exclusion. Widad hoped that this would eventually confirm her honesty and affirm the authenticity of her case.

### **'Patience Is the Key to Solace'**

Widad's bureaucratic negotiations evoke what might seem like an irreconcilable contradiction: that migrants might invest their time and effort in 'playing the system' while at the same time learning to trust it. However, when we explore how these contradictions are implanted in actual contexts, we realize that 'the simple choice of "either/or" is a very rare instance' in everyday life (Jovanović 2016: 4). Instead, we could think of these contradictions as ambivalent situations that enable us to unearth various conditions of possibility. Bureaucracy seemed like a 'disenchanted iron cage'<sup>15</sup> for Widad. Her encounters pained and bewildered her. And yet they also acted as learning spaces in which she could learn to be a citizen as she anchored herself in a new and unfamiliar regime. These encounters, in other words, had a productive face. Widad maintained that she approached them with honesty and that the claims she made were legitimate and deserved. She hoped that by exercising patience (*sabr*) and enduring the 'torture' of this early phase in her settlement in a dignified and orderly manner, she would prove herself to the British state, which she believed would honour and reward her patience and righteousness.

Four months of lobbying with housing officials finally culminated in the long-awaited phone call. The council had found her an appropriate

temporary housing. The location could not have been better: only a few streets away from Greenway Lane in South London. She was presented with two documents that she was required to sign at the council office: a letter of offer and a nonsecure tenancy.<sup>16</sup> Widad was desperate for this opportunity but felt anxious about signing a contract without having seen the flat, especially after the mishap of the accommodation near Heathrow Airport. The interaction with a young council employee, Rav, who we had not met before, did not inspire confidence in his knowledge. He seemed impatient and a bit too curt with his answers. When I asked him to explain to us what a nonsecure contract meant, he replied that he 'could not be sure' because he was new. He nevertheless thought that the main issue in these contracts was that the owner had the right to evict the tenant anytime with a notice, though the council would have the responsibility to find an alternative for the tenants. He was adamant that the council was not obliged to show properties to homeless applicants, even if they had done so before. But he assured Widad that the council would have considered her circumstances in detail.

The contract seemed hefty, but Rav only focused on a few main points and conditions: expectations of good behaviour, respecting neighbours, informing the council if she expected to be away longer than a week, and no pets. At the mention of pets, Widad disarmed him by telling him in English, 'Pets? I have three children! More than enough! Please, no pets!' Rav laughed heartily at her reaction. Pleased with her ability to break the ice and to find some kind of personal connection with him, she playfully said that he looked like someone who knew what she was talking about. He admitted that his son wanted a dog, 'but dogs are more expensive than humans! So, no pets!' At this sudden exhibit of friendliness, Widad saw a window to ask for a washing machine, although she anticipated the answer. She told Rav that the previous landlady had given her a washing machine because she appreciated that she had children. But he reiterated that she should buy her own. She conceded and told me later that she would be more than willing to buy a washing machine if that was all that was needed, now that God had responded to her prayers and granted her wish for better accommodation. We left the council office with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Widad had a list of chores awaiting her: packing her family belongings in the old flat in just a few days, registering her children in schools in the new area and changing her address with all the government offices she was dealing with. These errands, she hoped, would distract her from the worry about the condition of the flat she was to discover the next day.

Um Bashir, Abu Bashir and Reem met Widad at the new flat the next morning. Widad sounded overjoyed on the phone. I could barely hear her as her parents interjected with details from behind her. 'Three big bedrooms!'

shouted Um Bashir. ‘Very sunny living room!’ added Manal. ‘It’s beautiful! Tell her that Um Bashir and I will come here for a second honeymoon’, joked Abu Bashir. I could sense the delight of the family. Laughing at their excitement, Widad told me, ‘It’s like a hotel *ya* Michelle! *Al-hamdu lil-lah, Al-hamdu lil-lah* [Thank God]! The council did not fail me.’

Late in the evening, we took a break from packing and sipped fresh mint tea as we stared at the stacked boxes and semi-filled suitcases in Widad’s North London flat. Widad sighed with relief and disbelief. ‘I was about to collapse with my situation’, she confessed. ‘It was so difficult to endure ... I was so tired by it all!’ But Um Bashir consoled her daughter and reminded her that ‘patience is the key to solace, *habibtī* [my darling]’ (*al-sabr muftah al-faraj*). Her daughter had endured and as a result had been rewarded. Like her mother, Widad was convinced that her luck was due to a combination of divine and British state interventions. Both saw her truthful claims and honest intentions to build a decent life for her family in the UK. With her social bonds closer to her, and her husband’s application nearly approved, she would now begin to create home as she resettled in London.

This chapter explored how, for new migrants, anchoring takes place through bureaucracy, but not only that. Widad was granted the legal status of refugee. She was also offered housing as part of her legal rights and entitlements. And yet she and her children did not feel anchored, because this feeling is not possible without the conditions that enable the recreation of home. The unfamiliarity of the space in North London, the lack of a community she could feel part of and communicate with, and the distance from her family and social networks, all made it difficult to foster the *feeling* of being at home that is key to homemaking. The chapter captured the intensification of activities and affects required in the social navigation of British bureaucracy as Widad discerned the scope of her entitlements and the means to claim them. Anchorage, I have argued, produces particular modes of being. New migrants like Widad may well feel reduced to the status of ‘novice’, having ‘to learn everything from the beginning’, as Widad said in the opening vignette. But, as learners, they are never really ‘at the beginning’. Widad’s exchanges were informed by her past knowledges, experiences, agency and values. These helped her affect and, to an extent, shape bureaucratic encounters and exchanges in London. If this chapter zoomed in on Widad’s experience as a new migrant mother, [Chapter 4](#) delves deeper into the experiences of her children and husband and their anchorage in a new social world.

## Notes

An earlier version of this chapter was originally published as 'Novices in Bureaucratic Regimes: Learning to be a Claimant in the United Kingdom' in *Focaal* (2019), 85: 70–85.

1. In the UK, one of the criteria for admission in state schools is proximity of residence. People who live close to school are given priority. So, Widad had to move into her accommodation first before applying for her children's schools.
2. [https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing\\_advice/homelessness/rules/longer\\_term\\_housing\\_when\\_homeless](https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/homelessness/rules/longer_term_housing_when_homeless).
3. Single, particularly male, applicants struggle to be given priority and often join a long queue of homelessness until accommodation is available.
4. Scholars have described different 'affective energies' that bureaucratic systems and their material cultures elicit, ranging from fear and panic (Aretxaga 2003; Navarro-Yashin 2007) to humiliation and entrapment (Jansen 2009).
5. See, for example, the work of Gellner and Waterbury (1977) and Gilson (1977).
6. This resonates with the empathetic relationships described in the welfare literature (Hoag 2011; James and Killick 2012). A focus on bureaucrats themselves, an important growing area in the study of bureaucracy, was outside the scope of my research. I am thus unable to establish the extent of the maneuvers and 'discretion' they exercised in their respective agencies as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980).
7. Sales (2002) cites a Home Office study (Carey-Wood et al. 1995) in which two-thirds of the 263 refugees interviewed in the UK experienced stress, anxiety and depression.
8. Under the Housing Act (2004), the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) was established for the evaluation of the potential risks to hazards in homes.
9. My personal intervention later in this particular encounter directed the course of the interview. I point here to my multiple roles as anthropologist, translator and mediator.
10. Rachel Humphris argues that welfare encounters 'provide occasions for the interference in mothers' intimate lives to become sites for bordering due to their precarious migrant status and designation as "vulnerable"' (2017: 1194).
11. At the time of this encounter, we did not think that this was in the remit of health and safety inspectors. But the HHSRS document (footnote 9) states that, although it is not concerned with 'matters of quality, comfort and convenience', such matters could be considered if they 'have an impact on a person's physical or mental health or safety' (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2006: 7).
12. Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckj argue that affect 'captures a way of acting on other actions [or actors] due to its inherently reflexive quality ... that makes it particularly useful for documenting how subjects are mutually constituted' (2009: 60).
13. In his influential essay on the discourse of stress, Allan Young argues both Western vernacular and expert (scientific) views on stress naturalize it to an extent that renders social context and unequal social relations that reproduce the discourse irrelevant, and hence unexamined: 'theoretical knowledge and social relations that produce facts about stress simultaneously produce evidence that conventional (Western) beliefs about the social order are accurate descriptions of the universal social condition of human kind' (1980: 136).
14. The universalizing frameworks used in these regimes tend to flatten refugee conditions and depoliticize and dehistoricize them (Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2006).
15. See Bear and Mathur's (2015) interesting volume for a critique of this approach to bureaucracy.
16. Nonsecure tenancies are types of contracts offered to homeless people placed in temporary accommodation. They exclude some rights afforded in secure tenancies such as subletting rooms, buying property through the 'right to buy' scheme and transferring

## Chapter 4

# 'Discombobulated' Subjectivities



Shadi and I sat together on the train. We were heading back from Al-Zaytuna to his home in North London. The rest of his family were offered a ride in Salih's car, along with Um Bashir, who was going to spend the night at her daughter's flat. Shadi had taken the tube on his own once before, but not this late, so I offered to accompany him. Starting a conversation, I asked how he was getting on at school. The children had been attending their new school for about three months. Shadi started recounting an event that had taken place just a few days ago.

I was in class when the teacher asked all of us to go to the main hall. '*Māshi*' 'Let's go!' I told myself. When we got to the hall, all the other classes were there as well. And the police! I learned that some kids had broken the glass of a big window in school. Imagine, the teacher was explaining why the police were in the school, and one boy just laughed! So disrespectful! I was so shocked to hear the teacher shout for the first time. Usually, she is so kind this teacher. She shouted, 'IT'S NOT FUNNY!'

Shadi, who had just turned ten, felt that he was coping well with school and the broader changes in their lives as a family. But it was not always easy. 'When I started this school', he explained, 'I hated everything, even myself! [*krihit hāli!*]. I was shocked at the vanity of the kids. All they care about is the new music they have downloaded. And girls! They have no other interests.' I probed Shadi into what interests he felt other children should have. 'I have never heard one of the kids ask the others if they wanted to do homework together, or if they had read something new!' Shadi loved reading. He also

loved writing. He kept a diary in which he wrote reflections and some impressive Arabic poems, which he sometimes shared with us. Shadi's family kept a copy of a well-known pan-Arab newspaper that had selected one of his poems and published it along with his picture three months before he moved to London. He smiled shyly as his mother showed me a copy of the newspaper and explained how proud Shadi's school 'and all of Gaza' were of him. 'I'm not saying everyone should write poems', Shadi commented in our conversation on the train. 'But all they ask me is if I know this song or that song, and if I have a girl!'

Shadi recognized that his classmates were trying to be inclusive, but he did not share their interests. 'In Gaza, things were very different with my friends', he said with a hint of sorrow. On reflection, he explained that in Gaza too, the boys he knew contemplated 'doing wrong things' – he did not explain what those things were and I did not press him – but that he was close enough to them to lay down some rules and say clearly 'this was not his thing'. The Gazzawi children were the only Arabs in their school. Concerned with public discussions surrounding bullying in schools in the UK at that time, in addition to the treatment of children from minority ethnicities as 'racialised others' (Evans 2020), I worried that Shadi might become a target for bullying or rejection. So, I asked if despite his feelings he still talked to any of the children. He said that he played football with them, but that he preferred to keep to himself as he did not approve of their 'lifestyle'. Echoing what I had often heard the adults in his family say, 'My aim from this country', he stated, 'is to take their *nizām* [order] and *ilm* [education]. These are the things I admire about this country, but I want to hold on to my Palestinian *tarbiya* [upbringing].'

In a precocious manner, and as we were approaching our destination, Shadi said that he and his family were 'working towards their future [*mustaqbal*]'. 'In the future, it would be much better for all of us here. It is difficult now. You find yourself *mit-lakhhbat* [discombobulated] when you are not used to life in Britain.' Pausing as if re-evaluating his statement, Shadi continued, 'But we are better than other refugees. At least we have family here.'

In this chapter, I would like to explore this state of discombobulation that Shadi referred to in our conversation. The Arabic term *lakhhbata* is an onomatopoeic word that describes a loss of order when, for example, things are jumbled, messed up or upside-down. Someone who is *mit-lakhhbat* is feeling confused, disoriented or topsy-turvy. Different members of Widad's family would often express *lakhhbata* as 'not knowing if they were coming or going!' Disorientation, as a mode of existential displacement (Ramsay and Haugen Askland 2022; Obeid 2023), coupled with a sense of loss or diminishment of the self are likely to occur as new migrants anchor in new places. At the same time, migration is a promise of advancement, of a viable life, of endless

possibility and security, among others. *Lakhbata*, therefore, describes the sense of imbalance and ‘emotional ambivalence’ created by migration processes (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Clayton 2019; Evans 2020) as people of different ages negotiate their transitions through space and time.

This affective state of being has a complex temporal dimension in which people grapple with contradictory timelines – ‘from past experiences “there” to their present lives “here”, and imagined futures’ (Pine 2014; Clayton 2019; Evans 2020: 2) – and multiple realities (Hage 2021). My interlocutors all believed that *lakhbata* was a temporary though inevitable state of flux that could be weathered out by the implicit process of familiarization that transpires in the everyday. In holding fast through anchoring, one ‘gets used to things’ – *yata’awwad* (literally render things normal) – by encountering and learning the new, strange and unfamiliar and by acquiring new knowledges, habits and embodiments. In this sense, contexts of social change constitute ‘moments of potentiality because they introduce new ideas, discourses and ways of being’ (Liberatore 2017: 16). For example, this was the case with Widad, who learnt to be a particular kind of claimant, legible and legitimate, through her encounter with a new language and regime of governance. In this sense, if *lakhbata* is alienating and uncomfortable, it is also an opportunity and a site for learning how to be(come) in a new social world. It is precisely the feeling that one has attained sufficient familiarity that indicates a new migrant might have stopped being ‘new’, regardless of how long they have been in a new place (Introduction). This realization may not come as a ‘eureka’ moment but is, rather, woven into the rhythms of everyday life. It is just as possible that we may feel familiar and at home in one set of practices but not in others and find ourselves once more discombobulated as we figure out our way around them.

Although we are constantly learning as humans, learning takes on a slightly different urgency for new migrants who find themselves in new and unstable social environments. In this sense, the process of anchorage is characterized by a heightened attentiveness to learning as modes of being and doing are intensified. My focus on the affective dimensions of these learning processes provides new insights on the construction of migrant subjectivities. Gender and age are key in how social transformation is experienced and navigated. But the experience of migration is relational and cross-generational. For both children and adults, learning is situated in mundane social interactions, ‘between people and with the world’ (Lave and Wenger 1991; Toren 1993; Ingold 2001; Marchand 2010: S3). My exploration in this chapter incorporates adults and children together to bring out these cross-generational and relational aspects of learning, which constitute a key element of being anchored.<sup>1</sup> Particularly when different social norms and rationalities clash, *lakhbata* poses unexpected questions that prompt migrants to think about the self and its relation to others. What, for example, makes

for a good parent? What is the role of a husband and a man in a new social environment? What is childhood meant to look like and what are the rights and duties of a child? And what is one's place in and obligations towards community in the diaspora?

### **Children's Emotions on the Move**

Widad's family<sup>2</sup> had been in their new council flat in North London for less than a month. The children, in their different ways, seemed to be struggling emotionally (Chapter 3). The two months they had spent at their grandparents' residence in Greenway Lane in South London resembled an extended holiday. They hung around in the café, ate their grandmother's food, went out to buy ice cream, ran errands for their uncles and grandparents, watched Arabic television and played with their little cousins in the local playground. Although the café residence was a new space for them, it was still familiar in its homeliness. The move from Al-Zaytuna to North London was particularly unsettling for the children, as the disruptions caused by their migration became more tangible. Children's emotional experiences are intertwined with space and place. In the movement 'away from home or indeed, between "homes", emotions themselves are on the move' (Blazek and Windram-Geddes 2013; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015: 74). A focus on emotional life, as Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar (2015) argue, gives us meaningful insights into subjectivities and the ways people (adults and children) engage with old and new reference groups.

In their first few weeks in their new home in North London, a feeling of being 'out of place' overwhelmed the children. The two younger children, Shadi and Lana, were almost immediately placed in a primary school. Abir, on the other hand, could not find a place in a nearby secondary school, and this was making her anxious. Language was a key factor in the children's experiences of social alienation. They found it difficult to make friends on the estate. They spent their afternoons watching children's animated programmes. Widad had been advised by the school that these programmes aided children's comprehension due to their use of simple language and colourful visuals. Widad was confident that sooner or later all her children would master the English language. Nevertheless, she still worried about them, especially when they began to express their distress in different ways.

#### ***Is It Because They Don't Like Arabs Here?***

Unlike her articulate brother, Lana did not verbalise her confusion and feelings of displacement. Yet, throughout the first month of school, she

seemed anxious in the mornings. She began to wake up with stomach cramps and would refuse to go to school. Her mother would coax her with promises of treats after school as she encouraged her to take each day at a time while she got used to her new life. Widad was confident that Lana would make friends eventually; Lana was a delightful, well-mannered child. The school had assured us that Lana's 'stress' was normal (see [Chapter 3](#)) and that they were looking for ways to help her integrate. For example, they had just started pairing her with a new Turkish pupil, who, like Lana, could not speak English. However, although the two girls shared a similar predicament, Lana was slower than the other student, who seemed to accommodate better. Unlike Lana, her new friend was supported by a Turkish-speaking teaching assistant who could at least explain to her what was going on. This made Lana feel left out. 'Is it because they don't like Arabs here?' she asked, wondering whether this was the reason she did not get the same attention.

Lana's self-consciousness as an Arab was perhaps a combination of her own experience of exclusion and her observations of her mother's interactions and negotiations with officials about her housing rights and the discussions taking place among her family members about the difficulties of living in a part of London far away from an Arab community ([Chapter 3](#)). Either way, here I take seriously Lana's situated perspective on her world as a migrant child who was working out her experience of migration and belonging (Ní Laoire et al. 2010). Widad tried to explain that there were not any Arab teachers in the school or even in their part of the city, assuring her daughter that the teachers cared about all the pupils equally.

Although Shadi was less withdrawn than Lana socially, his self-esteem was also affected when he struggled to communicate his aptitude to his teachers and classmates. In his second week of school, Shadi came home sobbing. He was unable to express his knowledge of the mathematical formulas they learnt on the day. 'I knew all of it, more than any of them!' he cried. 'We learnt fractions last year, but I couldn't say anything in English!' While he still attended all his classes, one of the teachers introduced ten new words of English to him every day to gradually build up his repertoire. Shadi felt demeaned by the low expectations now placed on him. How could ten words a day compare to the accolade he was receiving before his family's migration, when, as a young poet, words were his playground?

About a couple of weeks into his new school, Shadi came home hungry three days in a row. He had not eaten his school lunches because he was concerned he was being served pork. Widad had informed the school that they were a Muslim family and specifically ticked a box in a form that had 'halal food' as a requirement. Widad did not believe that the school would neglect her request, but she wanted to double check so that she could allay Shadi's concerns. Shadi worried that he might be taking on un-Islamic (*harām*)

practices. He may have also been worried about being rejected as a Muslim in a non-Muslim social context. When Widad informed the teacher of Shadi's apprehensions, the teacher was surprised to hear this. She insisted that pork was not served in school at all and suspected that Shadi might have confused a beef sausage for pork. Nonetheless, the teacher instructed Shadi, in front of his mother, to express himself assertively, whether in or outside school: 'You can say "I am a Muslim, please no pork!"'

Although the school had a multicultural student body with a notable Muslim Turkish proportion, Shadi's worries about food and Lana's concern that Arabs were not liked in London were perhaps tied to a strong sense of being a Muslim/Arab 'other'. The children's selfhood, constructed along national, linguistic and religious signifiers, was being threatened. As active participants 'in their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout 1997: 4; Morelli 2017), children are not oblivious to the positionality of the racialized migrant (Silverstein 2005). They often find themselves having to navigate these wider social contexts that are shaping their subjectivities. In this sense, Shadi's sense (or fear) of being an 'out-of-place Muslim' and Lana's ideas about 'the disliked Arab' need to be located in the hegemonic discourses surrounding them – a broad European context that sees Arabs and Muslims as a problem 'not simply solvable through national integration policies' (Silverstein 2005: 375) – and their own imaginary of what it means to live in a non-Muslim majority country. Yet, interactions with the school, adults and other children served as moments of situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) where questioning, understanding and thinking about issues such as identity, selfhood and subjectivity occurred in social situations. For example, the children were learning certain values and discourses associated with multiculturalism, that in a context like London one *could* (even should, according to the teacher) assert their Muslim and Arab identity. As the children navigated the disruptions of their move, they were simultaneously renegotiating themselves and their immediate social world. We could see this in Shadi's statement in the opening vignette. As he felt more anchored in his new environment, he was reflecting on his desire to hold on to his Palestinian upbringing while 'taking' what he perceived as specific British virtues – education and order.

### *'Where Is Abir?'*

It goes without saying that people experience migration in diverse ways even within one family. Like her younger siblings, Abir struggled with the move to North London, though it took longer for her to appreciate or express how the move was affecting her. At first, Abir was busy supporting her mother. She helped with cooking, cleaning the house and looking after the children,

to the extent that one could easily forget she was only thirteen years old. By mid-March, Abir was getting anxious about her own situation. She still had not found a place in a secondary school. Would she ever be able to catch up with her studies? Finally, one secondary school offered her a place. It was not ideal, for the school was in a different borough. Abir had to take two buses over three-quarters of an hour to get to it. In spite of her mother's and her own worries about this commute – she had not yet travelled alone on public transport – she was eager to start.

Abir felt intensely homesick in the first few weeks of school. She missed her girlfriends and cousins in Gaza. Like her siblings, she struggled with the English language. Her teacher was sending home piles of exercise sheets in mathematics. 'They must recognize the genius in you!' her uncle Khalid teased. She explained that because maths was the only thing she understood with her basic English, 'out of pity, the teacher dumped all this maths on me to make me feel like a real student!' Over the next few weeks, Abir kept a brave face and worked really hard. While everyone huddled in Al-Zaytuna to watch Arabic satellite TV programmes on weekends, Abir took her dictionary to the next room and worked on translating all the words she could not understand from her English literature text. She often asked me if I could spare an hour after my café shifts to help her with her homework. Widad worried that Abir might exhaust herself. 'She is trying to speed up time', something Widad felt was bound to take its toll on her daughter. And eventually it did.

I was surprised to see Abir curled up in her bed at lunchtime on a school day. She had been sobbing for a couple of hours since her mother brought her home from school. The teacher said Abir was finding it difficult to breathe. Sitting on the edge of her bed, Widad asked her daughter tenderly, 'Why are you so upset *habibtī* [my darling]? Didn't you say your Brazilian teacher loves you?' With a hoarse voice, Abir answered that it was true, the teacher repeatedly told her she believed in her. 'But this situation ... it is not easy!' With her tears now flowing, she continued, 'Let us not pretend that this is a normal situation ... I can't find myself! [now sobbing] Where is Abir? [*Fain Abir?*] I was a sociable girl, who had friends, who was respected, who knew herself. Where is that girl now?'

Abir was expressing a sense of loss intensified by the discontinuity in her familiar life and the ambivalence of migration. Stability, success, the sense of possibility and advancement, these promises did not match her current experience of instability, diminishment and sadness. 'You will find Abir', her mother assured her. 'This *lakhbata* will not last.' Widad was asserting that discombobulation was but a temporary state, inevitable, but not insurmountable. One only needed to ride it out through perseverance and a sanguine outlook that had the future self in its purview, anchored, content and secure in her belonging.

True to her mother's promise, Abir seemed much happier by the summer term. She felt independent, travelling on her own and discovering North London in ways that would not have been possible in Gaza for a thirteen-year-old girl. After a study group session at the local library once, Abir phoned her mother to ask if she could have dinner with her friends at McDonald's. It was the first time Widad allowed her to go out in the early evening without anyone from her family. When she came back home, everyone teased her that she had now become a true London teenager, hanging out with her *shilla* (gang). Abir was increasingly enjoying her new friendships and she was beginning to feel a sense of belonging in her new city. She was also improving in her school work at an impressive speed; for example, she was already reading JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, armed with a pocket Oxford Dictionary to make the task easier.

This emotional state would not last for Abir. She would endure extended states of emotional ambivalence; it was time to move again. Widad was finally offered the awaited permanent accommodation in South London. Her family would no longer 'live in waiting' as they had been since their arrival. The younger children were ecstatic. 'Finally!' Lana beamed, 'we can be close to *Sitti* (Grandma)!' 'You wait and see', Shadi added, 'there will be so many Arab students in my new school, the English kids would have to learn Arabic!' But Abir did not want to leave her school, even after the move to South London. Widad tried to reason with her daughter, arguing that the commute was far too long, an hour and a half each way on the underground train, every day. How would she do this in the dark winter days on her own? But Abir would not relent. Over the next two weeks, she would use different tactics to persuade her parents to keep her in her North London school. She tried to lobby her father on the phone, her grandmother when she came to stay the night, and even me, asking me to support her argument that her pace of learning English would slow down in South London: 'We will be in Al-Zaytuna *all* the time. We will only speak Arabic. It's better for me to stay here. Look how fast I picked up my English here!' When none of this worked, she enlisted her supportive teacher to lobby on her behalf. The teacher came to their flat and tried to make her case with Widad and Abir's father Ismail, who listened attentively on Skype. The teacher even offered to accompany Abir on the train to show her the fastest route to their new home. Abir's parents were impressed with her teacher's conviction. On the call, Ismail explained: 'In our culture, we would prefer Abir to be closer to home. Her mother, her grandparents, they all agree.' He asked for some time to make their final decision.

Over the next week, tension brewed between Widad and Abir. Widad was frustrated one afternoon that Abir had not helped her clear up after the KFC-style fried chicken she had prepared for the children. 'What is this?

*Idrāb* [a strike]?’ she puffed half-jokingly. When Abir broached the subject of the school move again, Widad had had enough of this debate. With a firm tone, she retorted that it was not up to Abir. ‘If you find a place in a school [in South London], then better to take it now so you can get adjusted.’ For the first time, I heard Abir snap at her mother, ‘No one asked for your help in adjusting anyway!’ We were all taken aback by Abir’s unusual conduct. But Widad understood. ‘We have put the children through so much *lakhbata*’, she told me later. ‘The girl has just about managed to find herself, and now we are disrupting her life again.’ Widad was torn between two decisions. ‘Part of me wants to listen to Abir and respect her wishes. I am proud of her for asserting herself. The other part just wants to settle. We all need *istiqrār* [stability], once and for all.’

Abir’s school decision was not resolved straight away. The family moved to South London. As a compromise, Abir was allowed to commute to her school in North London for another six weeks, until the end of the school year. She would move to a new school after summer. ‘I know it was not realistic to carry on commuting’, Abir told me, reconciled with the decision. ‘It’s just that’, she sighed, ‘I finally started feeling like myself again.’

The migration process with multiple moves between homes proved to be ‘a powerful catalyser of change in emotional life’ (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015: 74). But children, not unlike adults, learn how to navigate their new social and emotional landscapes, despite their restricted agencies. Scholars working with children have urged us to see children as competent social actors whose modes of engagement are embedded in their day-to-day interactions (Toren 1990; James 2007).<sup>3</sup> Widad’s children dealt with discombobulation in their own different ways. We saw in this section how their different ages, stakes and understandings of migration shaped their emotional states as they anchored in London. These states prised open questions about the self and its relation to others, family, school, friends and city.

## Police in the Playground

In this section, I continue to explore *lakhbata* through an unexpected encounter with the police in the neighbourhood that discombobulated both children and adults, and opened up questions about the management of social relationships. The incident I describe below brought out a clash of norms surrounding parenting cultures, and the protocols and responsibilities that govern child/adult relationships in public spaces. Ultimately, not unlike some of the encounters Widad had in the [Chapter 3](#), this incident articulates how parenting becomes a domain in which diversity, belonging and citizenship are negotiated (de Koning, Johansen and Marchesi 2020). The involvement

of the police in a playground fight was a moment of instruction on what child citizenship means in the UK and the delicate relational work that takes place in the construction of gendered migrant subjectivities.

### *Shadi's in Trouble*

There was a commotion behind me in Al-Zaytuna. Frantic noises were interfering with my online discussion with Muhannad on Skype. He was giving me feedback on the café's new website from his office in the Gulf when I heard Um Bashir's alarmed voice. 'Shadi should not get involved with the Somalis!' Her younger grandchildren had just relayed to her that Shadi had been in a fight. Um Bashir's friends from the neighbourhood had been complaining about a group of Somali teenage boys who were caught selling weed and she worried that young Shadi would be drawn into these contentious relations. Not unlike Arabs, Somali communities have suffered a share of negative stereotyping in public culture, an issue that has been carefully challenged in ethnographic scholarship (see Liberatore 2017). In a context where 'race and class become structuring forces that mark the city landscape' (Aly 2015: 66), the Gazzawis, like other settlers in London, came to decipher the city and the social world they were now operating in through ethnic and national lenses – note, for example, how earlier, Widad's family referred to the school teacher as the 'Brazilian' (*al-Baraziliyya*).<sup>4</sup> These categorizations will emerge again in the discussion I outline below.

Shadi's father Ismail, who finally arrived in London two weeks before this incident, was in the café when the children stormed in to seek help. His family had only been in their new flat in South London for a few weeks before he joined them, and the children were thrilled with the presence of a playground so close to their new home. Ismail assured his mother-in-law that it all sounded like a mere playground row and nothing more serious. Within minutes, however, Abir phoned us in panic to say that the police were in the playground and that her father needed to get there immediately with me so I could translate.

Ismail and I arrived to what was more akin to a crime scene than a children's neighbourhood playground! Nine police officers were speaking to two groups of children. On one side, there was a group of Somali children of different ages, the oldest around fifteen, the youngest around three. On the other side were Shadi and Abir with their uncle Khalid. A woman who everyone referred to later as 'the Yemeni woman' hovered with her toddler around the Palestinian children, interjecting in Arabic and English as they spoke to one of the police officers. We soon learnt that it was actually Khalid who had called the police, believing that Shadi was in the right. With her limited understanding of English, Abir also seemed to believe that her

brother was at an advantage and that the officers were suggesting appointing a security guard in the playground to protect them.

When Ismail and I approached the officer, a different story emerged. It seemed the officer was told that Widad had touched one of the children. He caught us off guard when he stated that there were only two courses available to us. The first was ‘the formal’ course, in which Widad would have to make an official statement. The second course was to try to resolve the matter informally, which is what the officer was hoping we would do. A bit confused by the whole situation, I asked whether we might just encourage the children to apologise to each other and call it a day. But the woman referred to as ‘the Yemeni’ complained that her older son had also been subjected to bullying and that the Somali children were ‘trouble-makers’ who did not care about apologies.

At this stage, another officer, who seemed in charge, asked to speak to Widad. I offered to accompany him for the purpose of translation. On our way, he explained that the children had alleged that Widad tried to strangle one of them. Shocked by this accusation, I emphasized that it was simply impossible that Widad would do such a thing. During the course of my research and my friendship with Widad, I was privy to the challenges and stresses (see [Chapter 3](#)) she faced as a new migrant and as a mother of three children who were themselves struggling with the unsettling experience of displacement. Never once had she laid a hand on her children. In fact, I was often impressed with how skilled she seemed in deflecting tension with humour, calming anxious states with soothing words and giving her children space when she needed them to reflect on their actions. When it was necessary, she might raise her voice or use a stern tone, but physical assault was certainly not in the repertoire of the parenting I was witness to. I tried to explain some of this to the officer. But speaking to a foreigner, he felt the need to explain that ‘in this country, we take what kids say *very* seriously. It is not advisable for adults to touch any child that is not theirs.’

Parental encounters such as this – ‘encounters that people have in relation to their parenting with a variety of institutional and non-institutional actors’ (de Koning, Johansen and Marchesi 2020: 321) – become spaces of contradiction, dilemma and paradox. They create states of discombobulation, especially if conflicting rationalities are irreconcilable (Johansen 2022). The dilemmas that ensue, however, are generative in the ways they provide contexts for situated learning. Moreover, they capture the ‘affective, practical-cum-ethical concerns, doubts, and deliberations that go into the making of Europe’s increasingly diverse societies’ (de Koning, Johansen and Marchesi 2020: 321). Widad had previously encountered situations in which her parenting had been questioned by an official. She

had grasped that parenting was one gauge of immigrant integration and that social and cultural differences in parental approaches needed to be negotiated. Still, I suspected that she would find the expectation to not intervene – at least not in the way she did – when her son was threatened slightly absurd.

As we walked on, the officer continued what seemed to me like a lesson in culture. 'Children', he stated, 'do not usually lie!' My immediate retort then was, 'Do you have children?' Perhaps anticipating where I was going with this, he sighed without entertaining my question.

### *Can Children Be Vicious?*

We reached Widad's flat and entered only after she took a moment to put her headscarf on. Right away, the officer asked her to tell him what had happened. I began to translate before the opportunity to inform her of the accusation.

I was at home and the children were playing downstairs. Suddenly, there was a bang on the door. Some twelve or thirteen children were shouting that something was wrong with Shadi or that he was in trouble. I couldn't really understand what they were saying, but one of the children made a sign on his neck [a throat-slitting gesture]. I ran after them to the playground. But they took me from one side to another and yet another. A Yemeni woman there pointed to a child and said he was the one who hit Shadi. So, I went to him, tapped him on the shoulder and said [in English], 'Was it you? Believe me, if Shadi is hurt, I will tell the police!' And that's that. They are just kids and kids always fight. Then I walked back. After that, I wasn't worried because I knew Shadi was back in Al-Zaytuna with his father. That's it really!

From Widad's account and tone, it seemed to me that she too was of the opinion that it was just a playground row that did not merit police intervention, and even seemed to be playing down the harm by stating that she was no longer worried about Shadi. At this point, with the officer's permission, I told Widad what the children were saying. The officer observed how her features transformed in shock. This was a completely different situation to the one she had in mind. 'This is really alarming!' Quietly, she pondered almost to herself, 'Can children be so vicious? Can they really come up with such a harmful accusation?' The officer explained, this time to Widad, that 'in this country, you can't touch kids'. But she clarified that she did not touch the boy in a violent way; she was only catching his attention with a tap on the shoulder. Indignantly, she told the officer that he could cross-check her account with the Yemeni woman, who had witnessed the whole event.

By now, her husband Ismail, her brother Khalid and her children had all arrived together. Widad told the officer that now *she* was the one feeling under threat. She had heard all the complaints about the Somali children. She was worried that they might hurt her children in the future. Appearing a bit more sympathetic, the officer told her that he had all the details he needed and that the officers had spoken to the children, which he believed should be enough to restrain them.

Speaking to all of us, the officer said he suspected that Shadi was targeted because ‘he was the new kid on the block’. Perhaps because he still did not speak English, he might have seemed to be ‘the different one’. The officer finally said that if something like this occurred again, we should contact the Neighbourhood Watch,<sup>5</sup> who would send someone to help. This perhaps explains Abir’s optimism earlier, when she believed that the police would appoint a security guard to protect the Arab children. Echoing the nurse at the hospital in [Chapter 3](#), the officer counselled them all that ‘in this country, an adult must accompany children, even if they are only across the road from their home’, the lesson being that the onus is on the parent to attend to their (and only their) misbehaving child. He asked for Widad’s details, namely her mobile number and date of birth, and then left.

### **Holding Oneself in *Lakhbata***

We all started heading back to the café. We were still taking in the mixture of bewilderment and relief that lingered after this incident when Ismail burst into infectious laughter, bringing confused smiles to our faces. Laughing with her husband, Widad protested, ‘Look at this guy laughing when his wife almost went to prison!’ Still sore from the encounter, she commented, ‘That little rascal [referring to the child who accused her]! How can a child think of something like this!’ Ismail chuckled and shook his head. ‘They say a child hit another, and the police came to question the victim’s mother! What a *lakhbata* (*eish hal lakhbata!*).’ This sequence, which Ismail delivered in the familiar formula of an Arabic joke, defied Ismail’s expected logic in such a situation. In that logic, it is the child perpetrator who should be questioned and reprimanded; certainly not the victim (Shadi), and most certainly not the parent (Widad), whose role ought to be to bring naughty children back in line, whether or not the children were hers.<sup>6</sup> The presence of the police in a trivial childish squabble seemed absurd to Ismail and signalled a discombobulated state, where the roles of children, parents and the police were all scrambled. With the voice and authority of experience, Widad responded, ‘Eee, you have seen nothing! Here in Britain, you can’t go out of line! Children ...

humans ... animals, all *have to* be in line! But', she went on with an after-thought, 'they all have rights also.'

Widad's response was not entirely new to Ismail. He had been hearing her reports of her own experience of British values, how frustrating they seemed at times, but also how enchanting at the same time. Ismail contended that, on one hand, one must admire this respect for children. The fact that a child's word is taken seriously – so seriously that the police might believe a child over an adult – suggested impressive degrees of civilization (*darajāt hadāra*). But he was contemplating the task facing the new migrant, to unlearn certain taken-for-granted social conventions. Coming from cultures where it is 'instinctive' (*bil-fitra*) to intervene in neighbourhood affairs, as Ismail put it, keeping to yourself when children fight in your presence was not the first thing that came to mind. If anything, this expectation consolidated the common association of the West with a detrimental form of individualism (*al-fardāniyya*). 'Where we come from', Ismail elaborated, 'other parents would be the ones to blame you if you didn't discipline their child in such a situation!' This conversation reminded me of Bashir's anecdote during his last visit, when the Gazzawi siblings were reminiscing about their childhood. Bashir beguiled us with stories about the first *Intifada*, telling us how he and all the other children in his neighbourhood in Gaza were 'more terrified of his father than the Israeli soldiers!' – a particularly amusing comment, given Abu Bashir's quiet and understated manner. Bashir was describing how keen the boys were to take part in the uprising and how they found throwing stones at the Israeli soldiers thrilling.<sup>7</sup> Out of fear for their safety, Abu Bashir forbade them to engage in such 'play', but they still did it.<sup>8</sup> Whenever any of the neighbourhood children saw him coming from the end of the street, they would warn the others and hide away so they would avoid his rebuke. His authority as Bashir's parent extended to the whole neighbourhood. To limit parenting to one's own child in public spaces such as the playground, therefore, did not seem intuitive to someone who values relationality that extends beyond oneself and one's own family.

Preoccupied with the contradicting norms that had been presented to him, Ismail told Shadi that he was proud of him. 'We are in a new country, *ya* Shadi. We don't speak their language; we don't know their traditions [*taqālid*]. So, we should not enter fights. We need to exercise self-control [*timsik nafsak*] in the meantime.' *Mask al-nafs*, holding oneself or holding fast, allows pause and caution, while new embodiments, affects and knowledges are acquired. In the British and European contexts, 'emotions, feelings, norms and values ... come to play a central role in the debate on what it means to be a citizen' (Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016: 3). This is part of the 'culturalization of citizenship', where citizens, especially migrants, are expected to demonstrate new 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 2003). The subject then needs to hold fast

and pull through discombobulation. While uncomfortable and unsettling, *lakhbata* is seen to be temporary and, also, illuminating, for dilemmatic situations such as the playground fracas can be generative sites of situated learning where migrants discern modes of affective and embodied behaviour and responses.

### Discombobulated Masculinities

Back at Al-Zaytuna, Um Bashir was waiting anxiously after hearing the police were at her daughter's house. A tray with a big pot of mint tea and snacks awaited us. Um Bashir, Abu Bashir, Ayad (the Palestinian neighbour we met in [Chapter 2](#)) and Salim, a Palestinian builder who was doing some work on the café kitchen, began to listen attentively to Shadi, who finally had the chance to give his version of the story. Shadi recounted that he was on his bike, minding his own business, when one of the younger children kicked him. Shadi walked up to the child and admonished him: 'Why did you kick me?' he asked, 'I have done nothing to you!' But the child pushed Shadi, causing him to lose balance and bounce off the fence. The child then called his siblings and friends. One girl, he reported, slapped him. Shadi was keen to justify that the girl was bigger than him. Even so, he continued, 'I was so frustrated! I couldn't hit her back. I would never hit a girl!' Apparently, all the smaller children then charged at him and started pushing him. Shadi held back his tears to 'preserve his dignity' in front of the children, he explained. But when he saw his father in the playground, he broke down. 'I don't understand why they were all against me', he cried to Ismail, who held his son and comforted him with soft words as he stroked his hair. At the café, Um Bashir cooed at her grandson, '*Habibi*, you've done well, it's good you "held yourself"!'.

Salim, who perhaps felt less inclined to control the self, begged to differ, albeit in a slightly insensitive way. 'You *should* have hit these children!' he told Shadi. '*Wallahi!* you are only defending yourself.' To the rest of us, Salim protested, 'They need to learn that they can't bully him just because he is Arab!' Salim meant well. He was moved by Shadi's tears and wanted him to stand up for his rights in a racialized context. But his combative approach was met with tuts of disapproval and echoes of 'no, no ... not like this!' In the heat of the moment, Salim perhaps did not register the extent of Shadi's worry. Would he be considered a coward? If he had hit the girl, would he not then be seen as a thug or a bully? Shadi's defensive rejoinder suggests that Salim's response, if not the incident itself, might have made him feel emasculated. 'I *could* have hit the children, if I wanted to', he stated indignantly.

'But I would never hit girls!' He was the one to challenge Salim now, 'Do you want me to hit girls?'

We have no way of finding out whether Shadi would have hit a child back, regardless of the child's gender.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that Shadi's response conveys his concern with how he had appeared to other children and, more importantly, how he was appearing to his own family who were now his audience. As this chapter has been arguing, situated learning is relational. Interactions with other children and with different adults provide social spaces for questioning, reflecting and understanding selfhood, identity and subjectivity, all of which are gendered. In emphasizing that he would never hit a girl, Shadi was rehearsing a particular model of masculinity and his competency in enacting it in a challenging situation. Salim's reaction unsettled this. Aware of the affective intensity of this exchange, and with the intention to validate his son's actions, Ismail contested Salim's version of *rujūla* (manhood). Semi-jokingly, he teased Salim that while it might work in *Baq'a* (the area in Jordan in which Salim grew up), in the UK, this *rujūla* was a recipe for a car crash. Ismail was suggesting that Salim's hegemonic 'ethnicised masculinity' (Aly 2015: 70) had no place in the UK.<sup>10</sup> 'As you saw', he addressed Salim, 'we are in a place where the police will come and see to the matter. Where in the Arab world would the police bother to make peace among children in a playground?'

Although Ismail had found the involvement of the police with young children ludicrous, in this conversation his comment verged on enchantment as he interrogated hegemonic masculinity. Patriarchal values such as might, bravado and 'honour', he was suggesting, become redundant when recourse is readily available to 'adults, children and even animals', as Widad stated earlier. Such views may point to the hope – sometimes naïve optimism – and faith that migrants invest in ostensibly greener pastures. State-society relations in the Western context are imagined to be governed by benevolence, even when this does not necessarily ring true with more critical associations of the police with punishment (Fassin 2019), brutality, discrimination or racism in the UK and Europe more broadly.<sup>11</sup> Arguably, such views are likely to change and become more complex as migrants settle and immerse themselves in their new (unequal) social and political contexts.<sup>12</sup> And yet, these encounters and the deliberations they produce redefine gendered identities and subjectivities, for both masculinities and femininities are always 'emergent' (Inhorn 2012; Ghannam 2013; Obeid 2019), their practices changing with time, in the body and in the social world. Ismail himself was already beginning to experience migration-induced vulnerabilities that questioned what it means to be a man in the diasporic context. In this sense, both he and his son were working out relationally, with other family members, how 'to be' in London.

Like his children in their early days in London, Ismail experienced a loss of self and purpose. He had to reckon with the fact that, as he told me, ‘the tables have turned’. Speaking of his wife Widad, ‘Now, I am depending on her. She knows everything, and I don’t.’ It is not uncommon for gendered expectations to clash with migratory ones (Salih 2003; Elliot 2022). Soon after his arrival, Ismail learnt that his university degree was not accredited in the UK. The experience of the job centre proved demeaning. He was demoralized every time he was offered menial jobs that made him feel ‘small’. Without the ability to speak English, one blunder after another made him feel helpless. Within one week, for example, he misunderstood the school pick-up time and was summoned by the headteacher who reprimanded him by saying, ‘Nothing is more important than your children!’ when he tried to explain himself. A couple of days before that, he was distracted by a phone call in a government office, where he accompanied Widad to declare a change in their family situation and update their housing benefit record. Widad had asked him to watch out for their ticket number to appear on the screen as she and I filled out the required form. We had to go back to the end of the queue when Ismail missed our turn. Instead of a quick stop, after which we had planned to go out to a restaurant, we ended up waiting for another hour and a half, feeling hungry and grumpy.

The accumulation of such experiences began to weigh on Ismail. They did not seem to match the ‘affective possibilities’ (Conradson and Latham 2007) that London promised to its migrants. ‘I don’t know whether I am going or coming these days!’ Ismail would say to express his discombobulation. Once he came to the café looking agitated. He reported that he had ‘walked and walked around London for five hours’, not knowing where he was going. ‘*Makhnūq*, I feel suffocated.’ Widad, Reem and I listened sympathetically to him.

I don’t feel like a man in London [*mush bāsis hālī zalama*] ... I am not used to doing nothing. I can’t just sit. I am not used to relying on other people ... even my wife. I feel uncomfortable asking people for all these favours: ‘Translate this for me; Come with me to an interview at the job centre.’ The children have their lives. They now speak English to each other, and I don’t understand them. Widad is the queen of London now. But who am I [*ana min*]? Everything is *mit-lakhat* [discombobulated]. I am *mit-lakhat*.

Ismail’s inability to achieve what he had presumed to be straightforward steps left him feeling stuck and even lagging behind, especially in comparison to other members of his family who seemed to be getting on with their new lives.

The ambivalence in migration and the imbalances it creates in gender roles, particularly among men (Charsley 2005; Choi 2019; Wojnicka 2019), gives us a deeper context into Ismail’s attunement to his son’s particular

vulnerability in the discussion of his gendered positionality in the playground. After his gentle rebuke to Salim in the café, Ismail turned to his son and assured him that, by choosing not to retaliate, he acted as ‘the best man’. He reminded Shadi that an important aspect of being a man (*zalama*) was knowing when *not* to hit back.<sup>13</sup> As if realizing that he ought to have shown more compassion towards Shadi, who was quite upset by what happened in the playground, Salim dropped his counter-argument. He even diffused the tension by shrewdly flattering Um Bashir in a way that would make everyone laugh. ‘The entirety of the British *umma*’, he declared, as he munched on a big bite of cake, was guaranteed to be a happier place if only everyone could try her delicious *basbūsa* (coconut cake)!

In my discussion of *lakhbata*, I have explored how people of different ages and genders experience and navigate this state. The police incident was a source of considerable discombobulation as it brought to the fore a set of frictions in social relations that are otherwise taken for granted. The nature of child citizenship in the UK, the management of child-adult relations, the boundaries of parenting, the breadth of relationality with neighbourhood and community, and state-society relations were all interrelated issues that poured into the construction of cultural citizenship. New migrants are expected to embody these knowledges, affects and practices. Yet, encounters that topple what one knows and how one is in the world are uncomfortable and unsettling. As the discussion has shown, these situated encounters are sites in which learning occurs through questioning, discussing, deliberating and the comparative work new migrants engage in as they reckon with the (sometimes contradicting) rationalities and norms that shape their old and new lives. These experiences are part and parcel of the processes of anchoring. Anchorage, as I am theorizing it in this book, is an existential state in which people hold fast against the highs and lows of settling and ‘hold themselves’ through the affective and practical intensifications that lead to ‘feeling anchored’. In [Chapter 5](#), I explore how Al-Zaytuna’s participation in a multicultural festival became a measure of the emplacement of the Gazzawi family in London, as the inclusion of a Palestinian performance along other nationalities on an international stage promoted their sense of feeling anchored.

## Notes

1. In line with Catherine Allerton’s argument, without this relationality, we risk reducing children’s experiences to ‘childhood studies’ (2016: 6).
2. I borrow the expression ‘emotions on the move’ from Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar’s article with the same title (2015).

3. Catherine Allerton reminds us that while it is important to capture children's agency, and to pay attention to their active contributions to social life, we must not forget that 'most children are (even if only for some of the time) in positions of structural disadvantage' (Allerton 2016: 6).
4. See Rami Aly's discussion of the complexities of Arab identification and discourses 'that make the Arab', thus leading some of his interlocutors to declare statements such as 'I'm Arab, but not that kind of Arab' (2015: 34).
5. The Neighbourhood Watch is a voluntary grassroots crime prevention movement that operates in England and Wales. Its website cites more than 2.3 million members (<https://www.ourwatch.org.uk/>).
6. Since I have become a parent in the UK, I have had interesting observations, conversations and cross-cultural comparisons with other parents about the boundaries of parenting and the extent and limits of one's duty towards others (and their children) in one's neighbourhood and community spaces.
7. This form of resistance garnered symbolic value, given the disparity of power between Palestinian protesters and the heavily armed Israeli soldiers.
8. I have come across similar narrations of war as a 'playground' among my own friends, mainly men, who lived through the 1975–1990 civil war in Lebanon. The theme of warzone as 'playground' or 'adventure' is quite prominent in Ziad Doueiri's 1998 film *West Beirut*. Rami Aly's interlocutors also described their experiences of war in Iraq as 'fun' (2015: 79).
9. At the time of completing this book, Shadi was a grown man. In his teenage years, he was never involved in physical altercations or fights.
10. Scholars of Arab and Muslim masculinities have in recent years made extensive efforts to reform the stereotypical and orientalist representations of men, so prevalent in mainstream media as well as academia, and produce scholarship that shines light on aspects of life, practices and personalities that do not fit neatly into the dominant lens of 'patriarchy' (for example, Marsden 2007; Amar 2011; Ghannam 2013; Schielke 2015; Elliot 2022; Inhorn and Naguib 2022).
11. See, for example, Vikram Dodd's article in *The Guardian* on 21 March 2023: 'Met police found to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic.' <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/metropolitan-police-institutionally-racist-misogynistic-homophobic-louise-casey-report>.
12. Indeed, the views of Ismail and other family members on the police and government seemed much more critical in 2023/24, more than a decade later, as they processed the reaction of the British government to Israel's war on Gaza.
13. This chimes with Farha Ghannam's (2013) work on masculinity, in which 'being a man' in Cairo is judged by when and how a man chooses (or, more importantly not) to use violence.

*Chapter 5*

## **On the World Stage**

### Performing Palestine in London



Once upon a time, an angel was sent on a mission to inspect hell. God had placed each community in a deep container to maintain order. The only way out was through a tall ladder. But a guard stood at the top of each ladder to stop anyone from escaping. When someone tried their luck, the guard pushed them back down. The angel was mystified when he learned that the only container without a guard was that of the Arab community. When he investigated, he found that Arabs didn't need a guard: Every time one of them tried to escape, another Arab would pull them down! That's how Arabs work, especially Palestinians. They compete so much, particularly when they are outside Palestine.

This anecdote was recounted to me by a Palestinian artist, Ruba, in the build-up to Greenway Lane's Annual Cultural Street Festival. For the first time, the festival was going to include a Palestinian component in its multicultural programme, thanks to Khalid's lobbying with the Neighbourhood Forum on behalf of Al-Zaytuna.<sup>1</sup> Ruba did not live in the neighbourhood, nor had she previously taken part in the festival. But given her experience in artistic events as a Palestinian musician in London, she offered to help the Gazzawis on this occasion.

Ruba was enthusiastic about the street festival, which she felt was a good way to promote Palestinian culture beyond the formal venues in which she usually performed. The Palestinian slot was initially thirty minutes, but

Khalid, who was leading this initiative, yearned to showcase a breadth of Palestinian talent that would draw the multicultural audiences of the area. So, he set out to invite a variety of Palestinian artists who would bring different genres to the stage. In the month that followed, the organization and practicalities of the event proved challenging as the programme began to take shape. Invited performers, as well as wider community members, unanimously lauded Khalid's project. They thanked him for his 'work for Palestine' and expressed their willingness to take part in this opportunity that made Palestine more visible. But, soon enough, conflicting opinions, diverging agendas and a clash of personalities began to interfere in the process. Ruba's anecdote in the vignette was her attempt to express frustration at her coparticipants with whom she disagreed, a feeling that was perhaps mutual. The issues causing contention, however, may well be attributed to higher stakes. While in the larger scheme of things a thirty-minute performance in a neighbourhood festival seemed unworthy of the differences that ensued, the tensions revealed the crucial questions that all parties were negotiating. Who (which art and artistes) was best suited to represent Palestine, particularly in the context of a 'superdiverse' (Vertovec 2007) city like London? Which artistic genre constituted an 'authentic' portrayal of Palestinian culture? And who garners authority to make decisions about these important questions? Ultimately, the question that sums up these concerns, and that is at the heart of this chapter, is why did it matter so much that Palestine was represented in a particular way in this diasporic context?

In previous chapters, I discussed the work of re-Palestinianization that the Gazzawi family were involved with in their project of *Al-Zaytuna* and its centrality in their anchorage. In establishing a Palestinian café that constructed an 'authentic' Palestinian cuisine produced at home, the family provided a space that aimed simultaneously to recreate family and community in the diasporic context and offer British and international patrons a window into Palestinian 'culture'. This politics of presence seemed necessary against a context of erasure and the sidelining and diminishing of Palestinian history and culture in Britain (Introduction). In these efforts, Palestine was made visible materially, sensorially and affectively in the semi-public space of the home/café and in everyday rhythms and practices. The opportunity to showcase Palestinian culture on an equal stage with international performers in a multicultural festival raised the stakes. The inclusion of migrant populations in multicultural festivals underscores cultural diversity as a 'positive social fact' (Frost 2016: 569). Festivals provide sites for cross-cultural contact that has the power to demystify certain characterizations and stereotypes and offer deeper understanding of the other (Phipps 2016). The neighbourhood festival was an opportunity to perform Palestine and foster meaningful cross-cultural interactions that departed from mainstream discourses and imaginations of

Palestine. In this sense, *who* Palestinian cultural production was addressing and *how* audiences might gauge it became crucial questions (Jawad 2014).

Scholars working with Palestinians have pointed to the centrality of performance in the Palestinian national struggle (Bishara 2008; Allen 2009; Jawad 2014). Rania Jawad argues that, particularly in the post-Oslo period,<sup>2</sup> Palestinians have tended to internalize what she calls a 'performance-based logic', an awareness and anticipation of how they will be evaluated and judged by 'the global spectator' (2014: 31),<sup>3</sup> the assumption often being that the mere acts of hearing, seeing or witnessing would right the wrongs done to Palestinians. This same logic of 'a world watching' framed my interlocutors' conversations. Those involved in the festival agreed in their desire to seek equal recognition for Palestinians on a multicultural stage (Taylor 1992). But they disagreed on how to deliver their politically charged message. Their differences were couched in the vocabulary of representation and authenticity of cultural production and music specifically. As Mosleh Kanaaneh argues, Palestinian musical expression cannot be divorced from the direct and indirect influence of the Israeli occupation on 'all discourses and processes in Palestinian reality, whether in the Occupied Territories, inside Israel, or in the Palestinian diaspora' (2013: 7). Kanaaneh does not discount the changing or dynamic qualities of Palestinian music and the inspiration it derives from other musical and cultural traditions. His point, rather, is that Palestinian lives remain shaped by colonial conditions, against attempts of analysts and scholars to understand them through postcolonial frameworks. Music and dance are expressive media that act as 'tools of mobilization' (McDonald 2013: 31). They reflect wider political issues. As Martin Stokes (1994) suggests, what music *does* is as important as what it represents, for often individuals, groups and even nations use music to transform representations of themselves. The discussion of the negotiations surrounding the Palestinian programme in the neighbourhood festival articulate this strategic deployment of artistic expression to recast Palestine and its communities in relation to Western audiences in the diasporic context in Britain. By establishing that Palestine's rich culture is worthy of celebration and display on an international stage along with other world cultures, Palestinian participants and organizers were invested in counteracting mainstream depictions of Palestinian culture as violent and conflict-ridden and in *re*-presenting themselves through the prism of a shared humanity.

### Bringing Palestine to London

As Um Bashir brewed some mint tea, Abu Bashir asked me if I could help Khalid with the big Palestinian *hafla* (party) that he was arranging with the

council. ‘We are going to *nu-walli*’ [light up] the festival!’ Khalid shouted with a wide grin as he appeared from behind the kitchen door, holding a big knife in one hand and a slice of meat in the other. Abu Bashir muttered, ‘As long as he does not burn us!’ and chuckled at his own joke. Abu Bashir was still dismayed at the notorious ‘party for thirty’ that Khalid had booked in Al-Zaytuna, of whom only half showed up. In his bid to follow popular trends in other Arabic restaurants, Khalid hired a singer and a belly dancer to entertain the guests. Um and Abu Bashir had their reservations about the kind of atmosphere the belly dancer would bring to their family-oriented café. A symbol of Arab culture, as Ramy Aly argues, the belly dancer is ‘the trope for erotic Oriental or Arab sexuality and is used unabashedly for cultural and commercial capital at parties and restaurants around the city’ (2015: 147). Yet, the parents had gone along with Khalid’s plans as part of their promise to give him room to develop the business (Chapter 2). Abu Bashir, therefore, had reason to worry that this festival would be another misadventure. By contrast, Um Bashir maintained that this time was different: the councillor himself wanted the Palestinians to join the festival, for Philip, a local ward councillor and a regular customer at Al-Zaytuna, encouraged Khalid to pursue his idea. ‘They are taking Palestine seriously’, Um Bashir retorted.

Um Bashir’s confidence sprang from the increasing public profile the café was garnering in the last few months. Chapter 1 explored how the materiality of the café, with its claim to authentic Palestinian culture and food, carried a political message: in spite of the Israeli occupation and inter-Palestinian divisions, Palestine was on the international map, and it was a civilized place with a rich history and culture. The high-profile patrons that were using the café confirmed to the Gazzawis the reach of their message. The café had only recently catered to an embassy staff lunch and, twice, a big dinner for Labour Party members that exceeded thirty people. On another occasion, two Conservative MPs enjoyed a breakfast meeting at Al-Zaytuna. The Gazzawis credited these visits to their efforts in making Palestine visible in London. As Um Bashir told me, ‘Let them all know that even the Conservatives support Palestine. Why would they come and eat here, otherwise?’ In this vein, having one of the councillors encourage the café to take part in the neighbourhood festival was a sign, Um Bashir reasoned, that Palestine is ‘being taken seriously’. Their participation in the festival would recognize the place of Palestinians in London’s multicultural tapestry.

The councillor, Philip, and Evan, one of the Neighbourhood Forum representatives, were excited by Khalid’s informal proposal to include a Palestinian contribution to the 2010 Annual Cultural Festival and encouraged him to pitch it to the forum committee taking place that afternoon. Khalid had invited the two men and their wives for dinner in Al-Zaytuna the night

before. After a lavish meal, he showed them a YouTube clip of Mawakib, a children's dance club. Dressed in colourful traditional Palestinian attire, children of different ages synchronized their steps as they danced the Palestinian *dabka*. The four of them were impressed with what they saw, offering expressions of admiration towards the talented children. 'The show *must* include these kids! The audience will love them', Philip commented. 'And really', he continued, 'this more than anything represents Palestinian culture. It's authentic stuff' This was precisely the reaction Khalid was anticipating, for as we shall see, like many of his Palestinian counterparts, he too associated folklore with authenticity.

On our way to the meeting the next day, Evan tried to temper Khalid's eagerness to showcase Palestinian culture in its vitality and generosity, which seemed to overshadow his attention to mundane details and their importance in planning the event, not to mention his appreciation of how his own plans might affect other participants. The festival, Evan reminded us, was meant to function as a site of social integration and inclusion, rather than exclusion or alienation (Duffy and Waitt 2011; Frost 2016). He found himself having to coach Khalid by gently pushing him to reconsider the scope of his plans, even when his patient style of communication, which relied on using hypothetical examples to show him why his suggestions needed more thought, frustrated Khalid. For example, Khalid wanted to offer free Palestinian food on the day of the festival to display Palestinian cuisine and hospitality. But Evan calmly challenged him: 'You want to give free food; your neighbour wants to sell his Portuguese or Algerian food. How would they feel about it?' The point was for Khalid to consider the spirit of the festival and not to compete or outdo other participants. Khalid also asked for a two-hour slot to fit in all the artistes he wanted to invite. Although he had presented the young folk group as the main show, he had bigger plans that included other Palestinian artistes: a folk singer, a pop singer, a rapper, a guitarist, a DJ, and another dance group. But again Evan patiently asked him, 'Can you convince me so I can convince the others? A Caribbean [participant] comes up to me now and says they want two hours. Should I say yes?' By the time we arrived at the meeting, Khalid conceded that if he wanted the committee to agree to his requests, he needed to be realistic and focus on three main issues: (1) Stating the multicultural relevance of a Palestinian performance in the festival; (2) Reserving a food stall in the main area of the festival; and (3) Requesting to build (with funding from the council) a small stage outside Al-Zaytuna, where the café would have its own Palestinian party.

Our turn to present Al-Zaytuna's plan finally arrived after listening to committee members discuss neighbourhood issues at length for an hour and a half: building permits, regeneration plans and problems with youth and alcohol. The committee unanimously welcomed the proposal of a Palestinian

participation, especially that there had been no Arab performances in previous festivals despite the existence of Arab residents, especially a notable North African community in the ward. Despite their heterogeneity, as an imagined group, Arabs in the UK have oscillated between being an ‘invisible minority’ (Nagel 2002: 267) and one that is arguably hypervisible,<sup>4</sup> perceived through racialized discourses that became accentuated in the aftermath of 9/11 in the US and the 2005 London bombings: ‘The language of war, hijacking, terrorism, freedom fighters, hostages, sieges, plots, militancy and hit squads have become important in the repertoire of terms associated with Arabs’ (Aly 2015: 69). These images are even more pronounced when referring to Palestinians, given how the Palestine/Israel conflict is represented in the media in the UK (see [Introduction](#)).<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the prospect of showing a different face to Palestinian/Arab culture on one hand articulated ideas of British multiculturalism and on the other enunciated the universalist assumption that art is ‘a uniquely valuable and uncompromised agent of cross-cultural understanding’ (Winegar 2008: 652).

The only issue that the committee raised was a practical one. The concern was with potential bottlenecks that the expected volume of pedestrians would create as a result of the small stage party. We promised to be mindful of street dynamics and to take breaks with the small stage performances in order not to disturb main stage events. As we left the meeting, Khalid felt triumphant with his initiative to shine light on Palestinian culture. Indeed, when we reported on the meeting to the family, much excitement ensued and Um Bashir and Reem began to discuss menus for the stalls and the traditional dresses they were going to wear on the day. Khalid blasted the stereo with *dabka* music. As the little children began to dance excitedly, he shouted over the top of the music, ‘Dance kids! *Yalla!* [Come on!] Prepare yourselves, we will “bring Palestine to London”’ (*n-jib Filastin ‘ala London*).

### **Too Many Cooks!**

Ella Shohat writes that ‘for artists and cultural critics on the margins, speaking, writing, and performing are a constant negotiation of [the burden of representation]’, not least because these performances tend to ‘sum up a presumably homogenous community’ (1995: 169).<sup>6</sup> As the idea of the festival became a reality, the burdens of representing Palestine to a multicultural audience began to manifest in the sensitivities that emerged over the content of the programme and the decision-making process. The project of the festival, considered to be an opportunity to perform Palestine, soon became the concern of the ‘community’. Through Al-Zaytuna’s networks, the word spread fast. Within a few days, Um Bashir received a phone call from the Palestinian

ambassador's wife to congratulate the family and urge them to email her the poster once it was ready to circulate it widely. Towards the end of the phone call, the ambassador himself asked to speak to Khalid to commend him on his initiative. As the phone rang repeatedly that evening, it became clear that, although the Gazzawis were the ones who embarked on the festival project, its ownership transcended the family. Um Bashir pointed out proudly to me after yet another phone call about the festival that the project now belonged to the 'entire Palestinian community' (*al-jāliya kulha*).<sup>7</sup>

Because Um and Abu Bashir were keen for the event to succeed, they valued the guidance of more experienced members of the community who volunteered to advise Khalid as he began to organize the Palestinian component of the festival. Although Khalid himself appreciated the support of these volunteers, established professionals who led busy lives, the well-intentioned interventions of different actors overwhelmed him at certain moments and seemed to disrupt the flow of the preparations. Over the next couple of weeks, Khalid and I found ourselves dealing with more than one person who at different points assumed the role of 'coordinator'. They would set meetings to agree agendas, go over the programme and the marketing, and spend long evenings discussing possibilities as they sipped fresh teas and savoured the snacks and Palestinian desserts that Um Bashir kept bringing out. Particularly, three people overlapped in their role as coordinator, though they often brought a company of volunteers and concerned Palestinian friends with them: Samira, a human rights activist; Amer, the dance teacher and choreographer in Mawakib; and Ruba, the musician we met at the beginning.

First, Samira, oversaw the leaflet and Facebook announcement. She led a couple of meetings of which her devoted assistant diligently took notes. For about a week, we received group emails copying the councillor and Forum representative (Philip and Evan, respectively) with instructions and edited versions of the announcement text (see [Figure 5.1](#)). Eventually, there was some confusion over the length of the slot allocated to the Palestinian show. I was under the impression that we had thirty minutes; Khalid still believed he had two hours; and some emails between Samira, Evan and Philip suggested we had one hour. Khalid was frustrated that he was not involved in these conversations, when the emails were eventually forwarded to us. By the time we had confirmation from Evan that we had an hour and a half, Khalid had already agreed time slots with the performers. The programme now had to change.

Just after the announcement was released outlining the line-ups on the main and small stages, Khalid became agitated as we encountered an unforeseen dilemma. 'All the artistes will have to go on the main stage', he declared, taking me by surprise, after we had spent quite some time editing the programme. All the artistes, including the DJ, we discovered, were expecting to

**Facebook Announcement of the Palestinian Performance in Greenway Lane's Annual Festival**

Palestine comes to the Neighbourhood Festival

As part of the 2010 Neighbourhood Festival - a day of food, entertainment, arts, crafts, music and dance celebrating the diversity of London's renowned Greenway Lane – Al-Zaytuna Café is proud to present the sounds and flavours of Palestine.

Join us at the main festival stage between 12.30 pm - 2 pm, where legendary musician and singer RUBA SULTAN will be joined by jazz guitarist WAEL SHAKER for an inspirational session of alternative Palestinian music. This will be followed by folkloric performances of the much-loved MAWAKIB and GHAZAL Dance Groups, whose interpretations of the dabka never fail to bring joy to the heart.

The party then continues at our very own Al-Zaytuna Café stage, where you'll be able to savour the ever-popular singer RAMI ALAA and musician SAEED SALEM, the unique sound of premiere urban act MC SLO-MO and RANIA OMRAN, and latest Arabic hits, courtesy of DJ JO. All this, and the very best Palestinian food this side of Gaza!

**Figure 5.1.** Facebook Announcement of the Palestinian Performance in Greenway Lane's Annual Festival

go on the main stage of the festival. The first complaint immediately came from the pop singer. 'Rami is upset [*za'lan*]', Khalid reported after a tense phone call with the singer. 'He told me he is far more famous [*mashhur*] than all the others! If we ask him to perform on the small stage, he won't come. And he expects to be the main act for the last twenty minutes of the show!' It was not just the 'famous' artistes who complained. Although we had been dealing with Amer from Mawakib, the director of the dance club, Mona, who had not been involved so far, phoned Khalid to ask why one of the singers in the children's dance troupe – Tahrir, who was only ten – was left out of the programme. Until then, we were not aware that she was going to be part of the show as a solo singer. Mona felt that Tahrir's photo should have been added to the festival flyers because, as an 'innocent child', she argued, she would be a much better representation of Palestine than all the others on the list.

As we grappled with these complaints, it dawned on Khalid that the distinction between main stage and small stage was not a mere programme practicality. It was rather a statement on the status of the performers. The implication was that the more important artistes – 'famous' and/or professional – and ones perceived to be more 'authentic' in their representation of Palestine, deserved to perform on the main stage and reap a greater audience. The others would have to enjoy the attention of a smaller, more localized crowd. In the next section, I expand on the ways my interlocutors valued the

different musical genres in terms of how they symbolized Palestine – or failed to – in the context of a multicultural festival. The pressure was mounting for all those involved while they pondered how they would be evaluated as a ‘presumably homogenous Palestinian community’. The problem for Khalid now was that he had to renegotiate with the artistes regarding their time slots and the main stage performance, a matter that began to seem impossible.

Almost a week and a half was left before the festival. The organizers began to press us to submit our stage specifications for each performance. But we were yet to finalize the programme. Samira was now out of the picture as she was away on a work trip, so Amer, the dance teacher at Mawakib, stepped in to support Khalid. He began to communicate with the artistes and liaise with the festival organizers. However, both he and Khalid struggled to resolve the issue of the reduced slots and they were becoming increasingly frustrated with the process. ‘If I can cut down my own *dabka* [performance] even though I trained the children to do a thirty-minute show, why can’t the others? They *have* to be flexible!’ To his consternation, they were not. When he contacted Ruba about her slot, and after reporting the difficulties he was facing with the artistes, she decided that it was time she intervened. Before he knew it, Amer found himself sidelined.

Ruba showed up at Al-Zaytuna that same evening. I had not met her before, although I had attended one of her performances in London. She had a commanding presence, confident, warm and, as she described herself half-jokingly, ‘*majnūna*’. ‘I know I am bonkers’, she commented to us in English after joking with some Egyptian customers who sat at the table next to us. ‘*Masr um al-dunya!*’ she shouted to an amused group: ‘Egypt is Mother of the World’, as Egyptians and other Arabs refer to the country and its capital. By the time tea arrived, she had that group singing with her a Sheikh Imam song as other customers grinned at the unexpected performance.<sup>8</sup> When we settled down, Ruba told me, ‘Khalid should have asked for my help earlier. This is what I do! Now I am here and I will help him sort everything out.’ She then turned to her notebook and began to rework the festival programme.

We were not surprised when Amer called to protest a couple of days later. Ruba had reduced Mawakib’s timeslot, as well as those of all the other artistes. Khalid, Um Bashir and I could hear snippets of his voice through the phone. Amer reminded her that we had changed our deal with him twice since he agreed to the participation of the children’s dance troupe. Ruba maintained a polite tone, as she resisted his request for a longer slot and reassured him that even her own performance was now down to seven minutes. She gently suggested that he prioritize the *dabka* over the child singer, Tahrir. But he argued that he needed Tahrir to fill the gaps between the dances. Ruba had already expressed to us her concerns regarding the involvement of Mona, Mawakib’s director. They had known each other for some time and had even

worked together on some community events. But they had different visions on how to represent Palestine. She worried that Mona would try to impose Tahrir's performance at the expense of other artistes she deemed worthier of the occasion. 'One cannot avoid the foreseeable', she warned us. 'Mona and I have had our share of disagreements before.'

The tension between Amer and Ruba was perhaps inevitable, given that Ruba appeared to have usurped the role of coordinator and taken control of the event, including his show. Although courteous, by the end of their conversation, both were nursing an unpleasant feeling. Amer resisted Ruba's authority by asserting his own track record in stage work but, in doing that, Ruba felt he was undermining her experience as a professional artiste. When Amer failed to sway Ruba to change her mind, he reminded her that 'we are all working for Palestine and this is what matters in the end'. After the phone call, Ruba furiously dismissed this kind of 'posturing', as she called it. 'As if the work we all do for Palestine does not count!' It is then that she recounted the anecdote that opened this chapter. Her point was that working with the Palestinian community was difficult because it was divided and she worried that these divisions would spoil the festival, when, as she put it, 'the world will be watching'.

Listening to Ruba, Um Bashir, who by now was used to her honesty, avoided taking sides as she was fond of both Amer and Ruba, whom she knew through her social networks. 'The main thing', she counselled us, 'is that someone has to take charge on the day. Otherwise, the broth will be spoilt.' Against her advice, Khalid and, to an extent, I soon found ourselves amid 'too many cooks'. Khalid especially felt that he was drawn into a battle of wills between different actors, Ruba, Amer and Mona, who had different visions of how Palestinian expressive culture ought to be performed to a multicultural audience; the festival organizers, who were no longer sure who exactly was coordinating the Palestinian show and the artistes themselves, all of whom did not feel the small stage was worth their while.

### **Authenticity Between Suffering and Joy**

To perform, writes Deborah Kapchan, is 'to bring something to effect – whether it be a story, an identity, an artistic artefact, [or] a historical memory' (1995: 479). In outlining the negotiations that took place over the Palestinian programme, the discussion below captures the performance-based logic at play as my interlocutors, in their different ways, sought a particular 'effect' out of the Palestinian participation in the festival. The question of who should be afforded priority in the limited show time brought to the fore nuanced conceptualizations of authenticity – or rather *authenticities* – and its

power to reveal something about Palestine and Palestinians that might chime with the audience and create some sort of a desirable connection.

As they disputed their entitlement for more time, Mona and Amer from Mawakib argued that in the context of this particular festival, the children's show was more relevant than the pop section, for it was a more authentic representation of Palestine. When Mona phoned to complain about the absence of Tahrir's picture in the festival promotion, she challenged Khalid by asking him, 'Who do you think is a better representation of Palestine? Rami, with his *hishik bishik*, or an innocent little girl [*tifla bari'a*] singing about justice for Palestinians?' *Hishik bishik* is a derogatory expression that describes a type of pop music considered 'vulgar' and is often affiliated with belly dancing.<sup>9</sup> Arabic pop music is of course ubiquitous in the Arab world as well as among Arab diasporic listeners, whether through Arabic radio and TV stations or in people's homes, cars, restaurants and parties. But Mona did not think that pop music was 'truly' Palestinian in the manner that *dabka* or traditional Palestinian songs were. Although Palestinian himself, Rami Alaa would perform Egyptian, Lebanese and Tunisian songs trending in the world of Arabic pop music charts. Despite his fame and the atmosphere he might bring to the festival, they did not think his show was authentically Palestinian. Umbach and Humphrey's (2018: 2) definition is helpful in articulating what Amer and Mona might have meant.

To be authentic is to identify with, or claim ownership of, a narrative of origins, or a sense of original and unadulterated selfhood. To assert or reclaim authenticity is to reject any force or process that separates or alienates the individual from their true identity, character, or sense of purpose.

The various meanings associated with the concept of authenticity underscore the idea of a 'truthful representation' (Trilling 1972; Handler 1986; Lindholm 2008; Theodossopoulos 2013: 339). Anthropologists, however, have advocated for an approach that considers the plurality of authenticity and accounts for its multiple dimensions (Field 2009). Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2013) warns us of the 'trap' of authenticity that leads to dichotomous thinking, that something is either authentic or *inauthentic*. In the Palestinian case, it was difficult for any of the genres in the festival to claim authenticity as 'original and unadulterated true identity'. Yet, rather than dismissing the conceptual ambiguity of authenticity, I subscribe to Theodossopoulos' suggestion to consider this ambiguity a generative tool to illuminate people's own evaluations to understand the effect they were seeking. After all, the discursive trope of authenticity is a way to tell others: 'This is what is really significant about this music', and 'this is the music that makes us different from other people' (Stokes 1994: 7).

For all my interlocutors, *dabka* was considered an important part of Palestinian national heritage (*turāth*). Listening to Khalid and me reflect on the programme updates in the evening, Abu Bashir commented, 'A Palestinian party without *dabka*? It can't happen!' He had misunderstood that Ruba wanted to exclude the *dabka* show altogether as Khalid went into the details of her disagreement with Amer. *Dabka* was indispensable in a Palestinian musical event, Abu Bashir was asserting. However, it is inaccurate to claim a particular 'origin' or 'truth' when it comes to *dabka*. The dance in its different variations is associated with the whole Levant region (Rowe 2010; Silverstein 2012). But *dabka* has come to be one of Palestine's national signifiers<sup>10</sup> and an important cultural medium to express symbols of belonging in displacement (Van Aken 2006). Especially after the 1967 war, which was seen to defeat pan-Arabism,<sup>11</sup> the PLO embarked on a cultural programme to bolster a Palestinian national identity that separated itself from other Arab traditions (Kaschl 2003; Rowe 2010). This identity drew heavily on the figure of the steadfast peasant (*fallāh*) as a historical agent who became 'the epitome of what it means to be *samid*, to stay put, anchored to the earth with stubborn determination' (Swedenberg 1990: 21/22). Although *dabka* has been employed by different Palestinian (and appropriated by some Zionist) factions for their own oppositional political agendas (Kaschl 2003; Karkabi 2018), many still consider the dance as an 'indigenous practice' that needs to be preserved (McDonald 2013: 17). David McDonald considers *dabka* a kind of 'folklore that is resistance' (2013: 22).<sup>12</sup> The mere participation in the dance is seen as an expression of Palestinian nationalism, a 'performance of belonging'.

Arguably, Ruba's own art can be considered 'folklore as resistance', even though it is marketed as 'alternative Palestinian music'. In her drive to preserve Palestinian rural heritage, Ruba's music is based on reviving traditional folkloric songs, which she rearranges and performs with Western instruments and musical genres. Her *mawwāls* (sung poetic verses that precede a song) fuse with sounds of jazz and blues. For the neighbourhood festival, she had prepared a repertoire of Palestinian songs with a jazz arrangement. Ruba made it a point in her performances to explain the meaning of the lyrics she sang and to provide her audiences with the context in which Palestinians sang them. Her Arab admirers saw her concerts as educational moments for Western audiences, who she introduced to Palestinian life beyond media discourses and the prevailing lens of spectacular violence that seems to overshadow Palestinian representation (Kelly 2008). Most of Ruba's songs portrayed timeless everyday rural activities such as harvests, women walking to the field or men preparing the groom for his wedding. Ruba's focus on these seemingly apolitical themes is very much a political decision. As Ted Swedenberg argues, the drive for many Palestinian artists and intellectuals for

cultural preservation is not motivated by mere romanticism. 'It is rather part of a communal attempt to "save" by establishing and reasserting an Arab [/Palestinian] cultural presence, in the face of the challenge of continual colonial effacement' (1990: 21). It is no surprise that between Ruba and the two *dabka* troupes, more than half of the programme was initially dedicated to folklore (see Table 5.1).

Ruba had no objections to *dabka* per se, for the reasons outlined so far. But she did take issue with the mixing of professional and amateur performances. While she appreciated Ghazal, whose work she thought 'was highly organized and respectable', she was less enthusiastic about Mawakib. Her agent, Amy, who had joined us for tea at Al-Zaytuna, supported her view. 'How can we claim that we respect our audience when we put an amateur group like Mawakib with a professional artist like Ruba?' But the event was a community festival and most of the performers were going to be amateurs. In addition to local bands that were going to perform reggae, rock and Latin music, the festival flyer listed a Capoeira dance to be performed by one of the neighbourhood classes; a twelve-year-old guitarist as one of the 'younger performers' and a beat boxer from a local school. 'Well, of course everyone adores children – Palestinian or not!' Ruba admitted when I pointed out the festival's character. But if there was an opportunity to perform Palestine to an audience, then she wanted to display 'our Palestinian best' rather than appealing emotionally to an audience through 'cute children'. Preoccupied with the weight of spectatorship, she was keen to deliver a high-quality Palestinian programme. 'We don't want to be humiliated [*bidnash nit-bahdal*] in front of the world', she kept warning us.

Ruba's apprehension may have derived from her previous experiences with Mona in other Palestinian events. But the tensions ensuing over Tahrir and the children's performance ought not be reduced to personal histories alone, for they also speak to a trend in Palestinian cultural expression to focus on victimized suffering and struggle (Allen 2009; McDonald 2013; Karkabi 2018). In making a case for Tahrir's participation, Mona argued for the appeal of 'an innocent child' singing about the pain of Palestinians. The authenticity in this vision relates to the presumed innocence of the figure of the child as an emblem of purity, outside time, space and social norms (Ticktin 2017). The assumption here is that a message delivered by an innocent girl who has not been tarnished by violence or the corrupted nature of politics has some sort of universal 'human' resonance and 'truth' that would inevitably move audiences into solidarity. This beckons Jessica Winegar's contention that Palestinian, Middle Eastern and Muslim artistes feel under pressure to play the 'humanity game' especially in Western contexts – to 'always remind Westerners that they are "humans"' (2008: 675).<sup>13</sup> But does a shared humanity need to be asserted only through pain and suffering?

Nadeem Karkabi brings a different angle to this discussion of humanity by accounting for the agency and motivation of artistes as well as the manner in which audiences interact with them. It is possible, he argues, to ‘forge people-to-people solidarity through cultural performance and reception’ (2018: 188). His discussion of the success of *electro-dabke* (the fusion of traditional *dabka* with electronic music) in different settings, including London, attests to a shared human desire to celebrate and to be joyful through dance and the rhythms of music. It is precisely this that Khalid had in mind when he began to curate the Palestinian programme. Khalid did not object to Tahrir’s participation. His reservation had more to do with his desire to honour the ‘festive’ in the festival. ‘*Bidnāsh ghamm!*’ ‘We don’t want gloom!’ he told me. Tahrir’s songs were sombre, and while he had no doubt that her singing about justice would move an audience, he wished to move them in a different way. The upbeat sounds and rhythms of *dabka*, Rami Alaa, Ruba and the rapper SLO MO were bound to ‘fire up’ the audience and invite them to take part in what Khalid considered a Palestinian cultural experience of joy. As he explained to me, he wanted the festival ‘to feel like a wedding [*urs*]’, where the music and ecstatic atmosphere become so irresistible that audiences almost involuntarily found themselves ‘swaying and shaking’ their bodies. Khalid had first-hand experience of the engagement of non-Arab revellers in London’s ‘Arab night’ parties and clubs. As we saw in Chapter 2, he enjoyed partying, sometimes on several evenings a week. He socialized with a couple of Arab DJs, including DJ JO, who prided themselves in mixing ‘Eastern and Western music’ when they played house, techno, hip-hop and pop Arabic and Turkish music at their gigs.<sup>14</sup> Khalid was confident that the festival line-up would provide a tantalizing immersive experience in which the audience would find themselves moving to these sounds, as if they were in a Palestinian wedding. ‘I want the world to know that Palestinians know joy [*ya’rifu al-farah*]’, he told me, ‘that they love life [*yu-hibbu al-hayāt*]. We’re not just sitting there feeling sorry for ourselves.’

My interlocutors approached the festival as an opportunity to ‘bring into effect’ a different story about Palestinians, one that challenges tropes of ‘otherness’ so prevalent in mainstream British society and the Western context more broadly. In this quest, the overriding perception was that performances that were ‘authentic’ would serve that purpose, for they revealed and displayed some truth about Palestine and its culture. Yet, despite this common motivation, what constituted authenticity and the manner of its articulation were disputed. These divergences mattered as a matter of course, but they mattered even more when they were about to be subjected to a presumably scrutinous spectatorship.

**Table 5.1.** Suggested Running Order of the Palestinian Show

| <b>Palestine comes to Greenway Lane</b> |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Running Order                           |                                  |
| 1.00–1.03                               | Ruba Sultani (vocals)            |
| 1.03–1.07                               | Ruba with Wael (vocals & guitar) |
| 1.08–1.13                               | Wael Shaker (jazz guitar)        |
| 1.17–1.35                               | Ghazal (dancing group)           |
| 1.39–1.46                               | SLO MO (m/c rapper)              |
| 1.51–2.06                               | Rami Alaa (vocals & keyboard)    |
| 2.10–2.29                               | Mawakib (youth dancing troupe)   |

### **Palestine Comes to Greenway Lane**

Two nights before the festival, Ruba emailed Evan her revised running order, which honoured the ninety minutes allocated to the Palestinian slot, entitled ‘Palestine Comes to Greenway Lane’ (Table 5.1). Almost immediately, Evan sent his reply: ‘Dear All, I am so sorry but this line up is an impossibility. I hope you will be able to help me finalize this on the day.’ Evan had warned us before that we needed to leave a few minutes between each act (he suggested ten). Just the night before the festival, however, both Ghazal and SLO MO pulled out of the programme. Although we were disappointed, especially with the rapper’s withdrawal, given the global rise and popularity of Palestinian rap (see, for example, Maira 2008; Swedenburg 2013), we were somewhat relieved as this meant we did not have to cut the performances any further. But on the day of the festival, we were faced with some knots that stymied the flow of the show. In their resolve to ensure that the ‘show will go on’ under the gaze of ‘world spectators’, my Palestinian interlocutors had to ‘flow around’ (Symons 2016: 701)<sup>15</sup> the tensions and hurdles that transpired on the day.

#### *Stumbling Blocks*

On the morning of the festival, Al-Zaytuna was abuzz with people. In one corner, Ruba and a jazz guitarist, Wael, practised their song, as Ruba’s powerful voice and the euphonious sounds of Wael’s guitar filled the room. Um Bashir, Reem and Manal moved between the kitchen and the dining room. They brought out plates of breakfast for the artistes and volunteers. They loaded food in containers that were soon to be moved to the food stall. The women had woken up early that day to style their hair and do their make-up.

They put on their traditional embroidered Palestinian *thobe* dresses, each in a different colour – black, red and white – and emerged from downstairs looking magnificent. Zahra and her family travelled from Scotland for the occasion and arrived with a grand entrance, the children amplifying the noise in the café as they ran to greet their grandparents and cousins. Excited by the commotion around them and the fact that the street offered new freedoms on that day, since cars were not allowed, the little children started to chase each other in and out of the café. The thrill of the morning, however, was soon interrupted by a couple of unpredictable incidents that threatened the mood of the day.

First, little Yasmine was lost just when café members were ready to transport the food to the stall. The children had disappeared from our sites, but everyone must have assumed that Widad's older children would keep an eye on the three-year-old. Her mother Reem went pale as one of the children delivered the news. Before we knew it, family, artistes and volunteers all bolted to the street, frantically searching for the child, until a friendly policewoman brought Yasmine back to the café. 'I believe this one is yours?' she stated with a smile and a raised eyebrow. She reported that she had noticed Widad's eldest daughter chase after Yasmine earlier as she headed to the French café on her own. Familiar with their favourite patron, the staff of that café indulged her with an *éclair*, the traces of which still draped her face. A huge sense of relief descended on the café as the family promised the policewoman that Yasmine would be accompanied throughout the day. Unable to resist Um Bashir's gratitude, the policewoman found herself carrying a heap of Palestinian cakes and *baklāwas* after giggly members of the Gazzawi family took photos with her, taking turns to borrow her helmet for the photo opportunity, to the amusement of onlookers. The focus then returned to the food, which needed to be moved to the stall.

Ruba was now feeling anxious as the rest of the performers who were meant to report to the café by 11 o'clock were yet to arrive. Rami Alaa's keyboardist and *darbuka* (goblet drum) player showed up half an hour after that. But Rami was nowhere to be seen. His bandmates believed he was taking a stroll 'in search for a croissant'. Feeling slightly impatient, Ruba sent Khalid to look for Rami. We were running out of time and she wanted to make sure the artistes were ready. As we waited for Rami, the others were offered tea and snacks. In the meantime, Amer came to find Ruba. He was still not sure whether Mawakib would be given a full twenty minutes. The schoolchildren had arrived and were getting ready for their performance. Instead of reassuring him, Ruba said she would try to give them fifteen minutes, 'only if time allowed', referring to Evan's last email that asked them to restrict the programme. Amer was aware that there was more room in the programme after the cancellations, so her response unsettled him. 'It looks like it's going

to be a long day', Ruba sighed, as she instructed me to find Khalid, who was meant to be looking for Rami.

The street started coming to life as the music travelled from the stage. Families and children with painted faces wandered this way and that as they sampled food and examined crafts at the stalls that dotted the two sides of Greenway Lane. Eager children awaited their turn in front of an inflatable climbing wall at one end of the street. I finally found Khalid, who was confronted with a second unpredictable development that morning. Sweaty and flustered, he was carrying the boxes of food that were moved earlier to the stall. It turned out that the Forum had assigned a spot for the Palestinian food stall just outside a Moroccan café. Its owner took this as a personal affront since his stall was selling similar food (for example, *hummus*, *falafel* and chicken wraps). Khalid tried to explain that it was not intentional, and that he had not even seen the map of the stalls until that morning, but to no avail. To avoid conflict, and taking on board Evan's earlier comments about the inclusive spirit of the festival, Khalid asked the steward's permission to move the stall. 'I don't want problems with anyone on our street', he told me, 'even if he was rude to me.' His brother Salih, his brother-in-law Sufyan, who had driven all the way from Scotland for this occasion, and Ayad, the neighbour who spent his free time at the café with the Gazzawis, all rushed to help Khalid pack everything and move. Slightly shaken by this last-minute change, Khalid ensured the stall was set up and rushed to find Rami and Ruba just in time for the show.

### *The Unravelling of the Foreseeable*

After an effusive introduction of the Palestinian show by an MC, Ruba opened her performance with a powerful *mawwāl* that soared over the gently expanding crowd. She interacted with the audience, inviting them to sing along to an easy-to-pronounce refrain and, like a seasoned maestro conducting a large orchestra, gestured for a soft and fading sound in one moment and waved for a crescendo in another. Keeping to her habit, she explained the meaning and context of each of the songs: a soothing lullaby to put a baby to sleep; the journey of a group of women to the mountains; the gratitude of a parched land to the first rain. When Wael joined Ruba with his guitar, the audience punctuated his musical phrases with '*yeah*' as one man in the crowd ululated, ascertaining the fusion of Palestinian folklore with jazz. After Ruba and Wael, Rami Alaa opened with 'Sidi Mansour',<sup>16</sup> a crowd-pleasing Tunisian pop song that got the North African residents of Greenway Lane singing along and dancing. By now the crowd was swelling and more people were drawn to the stage. The audience moved and clapped to Rami's songs and the beats of the *darbuka*. Little children joined in, some jumping

around, others attempting to belly dance. The show was going well and the audience seemed engaged.

The children of Mawakib began to queue in anticipation as Rami thanked Greenway Lane and blew kisses to the cheering audience. Tahrir went up to the stage alone in her traditional *thobe* dress and began her melancholic but beautifully performed Arabic song. I could see from a distance a commotion and what looked like a heated discussion between Evan and the Palestinian organizers, so I walked to check if everything was in order. Evan was adamant that the young children of the troupe were not allowed on stage, and that no more than six dancers could be on the stage at the same time for health and safety purposes. Amer, however, had brought twenty-five children, all dressed up and ready to dance. Given that *dabka* was the main act, Ruba asked Amer to 'be flexible' to make it work. Although clearly disappointed, Amer approached the problem with good spirit as he 'flowed over' this unexpected barrier and rushed to instruct the children about the choreographic changes.

I walked back to my spot to get a good view of the children's troupe. Tahrir finished her song, but before the applause faded, the music started again and she launched into another song, this time in English, which had as its theme the sorrow and pain of children. Tahrir sang with emotion. Although the energy of the audience was dwindling, she still received applause and encouragement after her song. She did not leave the stage, however. It looked like she was about to sing a third song when the music came on again. But, suddenly, the music stopped mid-tune – which, I discovered in the remainder of the festival, was not a complete anomaly. Ruba, rather than the MC, appeared on stage with the microphone and shouted, 'Let's hear it for Tahrir!' thus ending her performance. A moment later, the music changed and six older children hopped on to the stage hand in hand to lively *dabka* music. Performing the exact same steps, the rest of the children formed two lines on the ground and snaked to the front of the stage, swaying their bodies and stomping their feet with great precision. Between the colours of the costumes, the dynamism of the children and the uplifting music, the spectacular scene drew everyone to the stage. The atmosphere was ecstatic as the audience shouted, jumped and clapped. As soon as the song ended, however, Evan rather than Ruba went on stage and thanked the Palestinians for 'their excellent performance'. The people standing around me marvelled at the performance. 'That was brilliant!' one commented. 'It was absolutely fantastic!' another responded. As expected, the children were a feat. But I wondered why the show was cut short after only one dance. Ruba's earlier riposte that 'you cannot avoid the foreseeable' echoed in my mind. Had Ruba's differences with Mona interfered in the flow of the show?

Behind the stage, the atmosphere was tense. Ruba and her agent Amy were livid. 'We knew this would happen!' Amy told me through her teeth.

'Mawakib did what they wanted.' Time was running out, Ruba explained breathlessly, and Mona wanted Tahrir to do three songs. 'One song, OK, but three? The other children were waiting to go on stage!' Ruba said she warned Mona that there would not be time for *dabka* and that the parents were demanding to see their children dance. Ruba felt she needed to intervene to end Tahrir's performance, and she did so in order to 'save the show', as she put it. But this offended Mona, especially given their previous disagreements. The Mawakib leaders were now leaving, while the troupe children dispersed to find their parents. Amer looked dismayed. He was complaining to Khalid that no one should have the right to control the content of their performance. 'It took me two hours just to dress the children! I would have left, but *al-ālam* [the world] is watching and we don't want to give Palestine a bad name.' The performance had clearly ended with disagreement, though not to an extent that was visible to the audiences. Still, Ruba was so consumed with emotion that she could not get herself to go on stage and end the show, as she told me later. In an attempt to calm the waters, Khalid and his sister Widad insisted that they all go back to Al-Zaytuna to rest and enjoy some hospitality. Mona declined politely, while Amer, Ruba and her team of volunteers walked back separately.

### Who We Are

Although the much-anticipated *dabka* performance was cut short, and in spite of the back-stage tensions, the reception of the show was successful. The immediate feedback from spectators, Palestinians and others, was full of praise. The acclaim continued at the overcrowded Al-Zaytuna where customers occupied tables and chairs spread over the pavement in both directions. Inside the packed café, diners squeezed around the tables, and two people even sat at the corner table usually used for *idāra* (administration), their *salafel* platters positioned inches away from the laptop, files and stationery, which were now pushed to the wall. Every able member of the Gazzawi family was either in the kitchen or serving food. Upon our arrival, Khalid and the performers were met with congratulations, handshakes and hugs. 'You've done us proud', one woman said. Another confirmed, '*ishi bi-sharraf*' (we feel honoured). The ambassador and his wife were in the café, socializing with members of the community. They too complimented us all on the show, and the jubilant reception seemed to pacify the disgruntled participants, if only for the time being.

Despite its local scale and short performance time, the Palestinian participation in the annual neighbourhood festival was in its own right an indication (or at least an aspiration) of equal recognition on what my interlocutors

considered a 'world stage'. For the Gazzawis and members of London's Palestinian community, the festival was an opportunity to transform imagination of Palestine in the diasporic context as a historically violent and militant place and to correct audiences' knowledge through exposing them to Palestine's rich cultural and artistic heritage. But as the material in this chapter indicates, this quest came hand in hand with the burden of representation as organizers and artistes approached the festival with a performance-based logic, a heightened sense of awareness of the gaze of a global spectatorship. Intensified by personal histories, this burden created tensions among my interlocuters in the process of working out how to frame the political and aesthetic delivery of the performances. As Martin Stokes contends in relation to music, 'listening, dancing, arguing, discussing, thinking and writing about music, provide the means by which ethnicities and identities are constructed and mobilised' (Stokes 1994: 5).

My discussion of the debates surrounding musical genres and the content of the programme probe understandings of authenticity as 'original and unadulterated true identity' and its power to move audiences in certain ways, be it through artistic prowess, recognition of universals such as innocence and suffering or the human propensity for joy. The participants' concern with establishing a shared humanity through authentic representation speaks to a broader concern among Palestinians to garner solidarity and recognition through this trope across different social domains, whether in humanitarian regimes or in expressive media. Other scholars have rightfully problematized the 'humanity game' in its reductionist scope that has shifted the Palestinian national and anticolonial struggle to 'proving humanity' to a Western audience. The Palestinians I worked with were also entertaining this game through their performance of Palestine in the diaspora. Yet, I want to argue that the performance was not just for the benefit of 'a world watching' in the hope that it would ultimately fathom the significance of the performance. It was also directed at other Palestinians in London in a manner that tells not just the other but also oneself, 'this is the music that makes us different from other people' (Stokes 1994: 7). Nowhere could this be done more than in multicultural festivals, which provide important spaces for the making and remaking of groups and are known to be solid grounds for ethnogenesis (Roosens 1989; Leal 2016). The delight that permeated Al-Zaytuna after the festival and the shared sense of achievement, in spite of the premature yet climactic finale of the children's *dabka*, attests to the role of the festival in constructing community and articulating a sense of 'who we are'. In its local yet international outlook, we can think of the festival as a site in which this form of belonging is woven into London's multicultural society.

As the postperformance rush in Al-Zaytuna abated, Khalid took the place of DJ JO, who had been playing his blend of 'Eastern and Western' music

on the small stage in front of the café, and blasted his favourite *dabka* album. Ruba, who was still in the café, the volunteers, his brother, cousin, sisters and the children all held hands as they began to dance on the street. Other meandering Arabs who were familiar with *dabka* joined in the line. Although tired, Abu Bashir showed off his moves for a fraction of a song as Widad's older children instructed interested bystanders on the basic *dabka* steps, and soon they too were holding hands and stepping back and forth. The festivities carried on until the early hours of the evening as more spectators came to watch or try out the dance. Khalid was ecstatic. 'Mabsūt?' I asked him, 'are you happy?' 'I told you it will be like a wedding!' he responded with a wide grin. 'This is us; this is our *jaww* [atmosphere]', he said with satisfaction. For in that moment, Khalid was enacting his simultaneous belonging to both Palestine and London, where he now felt anchored.

## Notes

1. Neighbourhood forums in the UK are established through a formal application by individuals or groups who wish to lead the neighbourhood planning process in areas that do not have a parish or town council (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2>).
2. The Oslo Accord, signed in September 1993, is considered the beginning of a 'peace process' that would end the conflict between Israel and Palestine. It was meant to give Palestinians the right for self-determination through the creation of a Palestinian Authority (rather than a state) that would govern Gaza and the West Bank.
3. Jawad draws on Jon McKenzie's (2001) book *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, which takes a Foucauldian approach that examines notions of normativity and domination in performance.
4. Paul Amar explains hypervisible subjects as 'fetishized figures that preoccupy public discourse and representations but are not actually recognizable or legible as social formations and cannot speak on their own terms as autonomous subjects rather than as problems to solve' (2011: 40).
5. Luke Peterson argues that in both the US and the UK, coverage of Arab communities, Muslims or Islam affect public perceptions of the Israel/Palestine conflict, 'given the transference of meaning from "Muslim" or "Arab" to "Palestine" or "Palestinian"' (2015: 57).
6. See an interesting contrast in Jennifer Jajeh's theatrical performance *I Heart Hamas: And Other Things I am Afraid to Tell You*, in which she tries to break away from communal representation (Shahadi 2012).
7. The Palestinian diaspora in the UK set up the Association of the Palestinian Community in the UK (APCUK), with two main objectives: 'to help maintain the cultural identity of Palestinians, and ... to prevent divisions within the small community' (Mahmoud 2005: 102). APCUK regularly organizes community events and social activities. My interlocutors referred to the organization in Arabic as '*al-jāliya*' (the community). Um Bashir, however, used the term to mean members of the Palestinian community in London rather than the association itself.

8. Popular between the 1960s and 1980s, Sheikh Imam, singer and composer, was known for his genre of protest music against the Sadat regime, especially during the 1970s student and worker movements. He was imprisoned several times, along with poet Ahmad Fouad Negm, whose poetry he popularized through his songs (see Booth 1985; Swedenburg 2012; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014).
9. Arguably, the word is an onomatopoeia for sounds of percussions and belly dance coin belts and tassels.
10. For a discussion of transformations of Palestinian symbolism, see Abufarha (2008).
11. In what is known as the Six Day War in June 1967 between Israel on one side and Egypt, Syria and Jordan on the other, Israel was able to seize the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights from Egypt, Jordan and Syria respectively.
12. McDonald uses the term 'resistance music' to express 'a genre category based not in stylistic attributes, but in terms of musico-political processes: its articulation within larger projects of social change' (2013: 5).
13. Winegar (2008) is critical of the universalist assumption that arts necessarily create some sort of a 'bridge' of cultural understanding. She argues that the attempt to prove humanity reduces one to stating what they are not. Humanity then becomes apolitical and excludes those who *are* political, especially when they engage in political activities that are frowned upon in the Euro-American context, such as liberation movements.
14. See Ramy Aly's (2015) discussion of London's Arab parties in his *Becoming Arab in London*.
15. Writing about the workings of a parade in Manchester, Symons uses the metaphor of flow – 'flow[ing] over, through, under and around' (2016: 701) to examine how organizers and producers responded to obstacles and blockages.
16. Originally a folkloric Tunisian song made famous by singer Saber Ruba'i who released a new version in 2000.

## Conclusion

# 'For Now, We Are Still Here'



The door to Al-Zaytuna was held open with a crate of soft drinks. Salih's car boot was wide open. He stood next to it in a 'managerial fashion' as his sister Widad teased him, hands on waist as he gave instructions on how to optimize space while we stacked the tens of boxes and containers of salads, dips and falafels, and bags full of snacks. 'There is more on the counter', Khalid shouted to us. Dozens of skewers of an assortment of fresh meats and chicken lay on a large tray, wrapped with cling film, next to some kilos of potatoes. 'Don't worry!' Abu Bashir joked with me. 'We have packed one or two foods for the *'khubdarjiyya'*, still enjoying the joke about calling me 'a vegetable seller' when he referred to my vegetarianism. 'It's going to take us half a day to unpack!'

The Gazzawi family were having a picnic. It was a sunny day in June, five years since Widad and her family had arrived in London and since my research year. The day promised to be fun and beautiful, not just because the sun was out, but because the family was excited about their reunion. Salih was getting married to Hanan and, apart from his brother Walid and his family in Gaza, all his siblings were in London for that occasion: Bashir and his family from Canada, Zahra and her family from Scotland, Muhannad and his family from the Gulf, Manal and her family from Norway, Um and Abu Bashir, and Widad and her family who had remained in London throughout.

Khalid had picked a park in West London that had a designated barbeque area. We offloaded everything under a tree big enough to shade the blankets

and picnic mats, the two large cool boxes that stored our drinks, the tens of bags and boxes of food and the games the children had brought with them. Between noon and about 4pm, the barbeque kept going and the smell of food wafted towards other parkgoers wandering by. Khalid made sure everyone ate their fill. Adults and children played ball together. Bashir took the children for ice cream. Ismail and Abu Bashir had naps in the shade. Shadi and Lana played cards. Their cousins challenged their uncles to do cartwheels. Salih's siblings teased him about the third instalment of meat he was consuming, wondering where all the food went, given his slim build. Widad refilled the mint-soaked tea flask and bantered with Muhannad. Um Bashir smiled with content. Her children and grandchildren were enjoying the pleasures of the day with her.

It was just 8pm when Khalid and Muhannad fired up the barbeque again for some more meat. 'It's now time for dinner!' Khalid announced. There were only a few takers in the family by then, after a day of indulgence. 'Eee! These ones, *'Uqūlhum fi butūnhum!*<sup>1</sup> They think with their stomachs!' Zahra complained, a common Arabic expression to reflect the excessive focus on food. Khalid, Muhannad, Sufyan and Ismail now stood by their barbeque and began to call on random people walking by to come and join them. '*Tā'āl, tā'āl!* [come here!]' Khalid beckoned in Arabic. 'Palestinian barbeque!' Ismail offered, now slightly more confident with his English than he was upon his arrival. 'Are you sure?' a reluctant young couple asked. 'Yes, please eat!' Muhannad encouraged them. 'We Palestinians, we like to eat with other people', he explained, to the delight of the couple who stood around the barbeque with curiosity and enjoyed sampling the meat and chatting with their funny hosts. On the picnic mat, the women laughed at the scene. 'Not even London can change these *majanīn* [crazies]!' Widad remarked cheerfully. 'You would think they are on the terrace of our house in Gaza!' By around 9pm, the meat had been fully distributed, after recruiting some more people ready to accept wraps and skewers and to engage in commensality with a family they had just met at the park. The brothers' plot to 'bring Palestine to London' through conviviality, generosity and humour did not seem to have changed. And yet, much had changed since my time with the Gazzawis.

Over five years, family members had left the UK. Others left and then returned. The elder siblings remained where they had been living: Bashir in Canada, Walid in Gaza and Zahra in Scotland, though Zahra's eldest daughter moved to London for university and was staying with Um and Abu Bashir. Muhannad's career took off in the Gulf and he was joined by Reem and their three children about a year after he left. The children were settled at school and Reem opened the boutique she had always dreamt of. The family spent August of every year in London to escape the Gulf summer heat and to spend time with their London relatives. Salih was due to move with Hanan

to a house on the outskirts of London after their wedding. Widad and her family thrived after their move. Ismail never completed his English lessons, but he joined a company that worked between London and Jordan and enjoyed his 'split between the Arab World and the British World'. Widad's English became more proficient by the year, even when her children made fun of her heavy accent and pronunciation. The English language was now second nature to them. Abir was about to start university and even received offers from three prestigious programmes across the country. '*Akbar farha!*' There was no 'bigger joy' than this news for Widad. Over the five years, she continued to encourage her children to be ambitious and to make the best of the opportunities available to them in London, while honouring their Palestinian upbringing. Shadi sailed through his new school. He had a solid group of Arab, Muslim and British friends. His mother called him '*the mukhtār*'.<sup>2</sup> Like a village elder, he spent most of his time socializing and holding court. He no longer wrote poetry. Lana moved freely in London. She joined study groups in the library, hung out with friends and spent time in Al-Zaytuna with her grandparents and uncle. 'They have regained their childhood in London', Widad would tell me on the phone when we caught up, and 'were happy living their lives' (*āyshīn hayāthum*). Manal completed a master's degree in a London university, where she met a Palestinian/Norwegian man on the programme. They married and moved to Oslo after completing their studies. A few years later, the couple, now with two children, would decide to re-join the Gazzawis in London. Khalid continued to run Al-Zaytuna. Um and Abu Bashir were now 'retired' – but only up to a point, for Um Bashir still advised on further renovations and adjustments to menus and management structures.

Um and Abu Bashir never returned to Gaza. They finally managed a visit in the spring, just before the 2014 war that summer. They reported an emotional reunion with neighbours, relatives and friends. And they even contemplated returning to Gaza, now that family members were settled in different parts of the world. But that was never to be. The 2014 war and its toll of destruction prevented them from this awaited return. They would remain in London, which has become (another) home. As the loved parents and grandparents of an ever-growing family, they would continue to consider the capital their 'centre of gravity' (Hanafi 2005), a repositioned meeting point for this dispersed Palestinian family that has undergone multiple migrations.

This book detailed the experience of the Gazzawi family, who, in their displacement, joined the ranks of Palestinians in the *shatāt*. Indeed, after 2014, Um and Abu Bashir felt the weight of what it means for Palestinians to be 'perpetual refugees' (Introduction). As their temporary migration protracted, it dawned on them that they may not return to a life they had left behind, or at least not yet. 'For now, we are here still!' Um Bashir would tell me when

I phoned to check on her, always retaining the sense of possibility that framed her and her family's migration. In the meantime, they were still in London, 'at anchor', continuing to live as best as they could in a world that they had not imagined would be theirs before their 2007 visit. And yet, their story is not one of victimhood or exile. If *shatāt* is a condition of displacement, fragmentation and estrangement, the story I present here, without undermining the loss and longing of the people I write about – or other Palestinians for that matter – is one of emplacement, familiarization and home.

My starting point in documenting this story of migration was that the idioms we use structure our world. Taking these idioms seriously is generative for novel ways of thinking, understanding and theorizing the experiences of migrants. I have privileged Um Bashir's expression '*arsayna*' in this book and argued for an existential concept of anchorage that captures the processes and activities that people embark on, and the ways they are in the world (their modes of doing and modes of being). The Gazzawi family invested in home-making and place-making to make their lives viable. It is not my intention to romanticize these processes of anchoring. They are not cosy realms; or at least not just so. As I have shown in the book, yearning, frustration, exclusion, alienation and negotiation are part and parcel of these experiences. But these affects are often mixed with degrees of aspiration, hope and different forms of joy that temper the estrangement and uncertainties of migration. For this reason, we are better off considering both home and place as 'struggles' that require the reconstitution of 'conceptions, embodiments and inhabitations of space' (Jansen and Löfving 2009: 8). But in doing so, the space itself becomes reconstituted, as I have tried to show in the chapters.

My interlocutors were conscious of a way of being in the world that they inhabited in everyday interactions. At home, in the café, in the neighbourhood park, in a multicultural festival and in meetings with government officials, they felt they were, in Khalid's words, 'bringing Palestine to London'. This act of bringing something of the self ought not be reduced to an essentialized national identity – it goes without saying that everyone has multiple identities and belongings. My interlocutors embodied what they believed was a shared Palestinian disposition shaped by notions of hospitality, generosity, authenticity and openness to the world. These were things that said something about who they were, especially in a context in which Palestinians have long been vilified. They affected the quality of engagement with others in London and repositioned the place in which they were now building their lives.

I have theorized anchorage as a novel way of understanding mobility and migration that not only goes beyond the linearity of temporal frames (pre-migration, migration and postmigration), but also captures serendipity, temporariness and fluctuations in both the life of people on the move and

the places that they inhabit. The premise of anchoring is that it is not just the migrant who moves, but the times and places we live in. What then become the anchors that hold us fast and make our lives liveable? In this line of enquiry, this book has taken for granted neither sedentarism nor mobility as natural states of being. Instead, it has traced the practices, investments and endeavours that produce a sense of 'being anchored', whether in the temporary or the long term. I have explored anchoring as a set of intensifications (and de-intensifications) of activities and affects (modes of doing and modes of being) that is temporal, in the sense that these intensifications may not be directly linked to how long one has felt emplaced, though it is likely that intensifications will occur in early days of migration.

For new migrants especially, there is a lot to learn and to work out. This learning process can be thrilling and enchanting. But it can also lead to mistakes, blunders and misunderstandings that cause *lakhbata* (discombobulation). I have argued that *lakhbata* can be generative. It serves to reinforce what sort of things matter in the sociabilities forged in new places. For all the individuals in the Gazzawi family (including the children in as far as they could articulate their aspirations), their migration was a promise of order and advancement, a sense of possibility and 'moving forward' (Hage 2009). In addition to this, as I have explored in the chapters, they were also preoccupied with the re-creation of family and community, both of which were profoundly shaped by what it means to be Palestinian, regardless of where one is in the world. The picnic I describe in the opening of this concluding chapter perhaps conveys this sense of being anchored in London, at home and emplaced, surrounded by family members who are able to cross borders, who can take pride in sharing their cultural practices and heritage with each other and with the world, random people in the park even.

The picture of bliss that I describe as I end this book, does not negate the challenges and tensions migrants go through in 'finding themselves', to use the expression of Widad's daughter and husband, who struggled to do so at first. I have followed a phenomenological approach that has given voice to this struggle through the stories of several individuals in this family. What these stories show is a picture that is not visible enough in mainstream discourses that permeate the increasingly hostile environments of the UK and 'Fortress Europe': that migrants desire to pursue viable lives, to find their place and to be part of these societies that they often find so enchanting. Migration in all its forms is to an extent driven by the optimism inherent in the very notion of 'moving forward', regardless of what was left behind and the reasons for migrating. As I have suggested in Chapter 4, sometimes, as migrants immerse themselves in new societies and regimes, they acquire critical sensibilities that chip away at this enchantment. In the rest of this conclusion, in keeping with my conception of anchorage, I will reflect on this issue. For as I have argued

all along, tides and storms could unsettle the feeling of being anchored even after one has felt secure and emplaced.

It is unfitting to finish a story about the Gazzawis without stopping at the reverberations of Israel's genocide in Gaza on their lives in London. As I write this conclusion in 2024, the Israeli military continues its brutal assault on the city. Israel has waged another war on Gaza in response to an unprecedented violent attack by Hamas fighters in October 2023. The fighters succeeded in overrunning Israeli defences. They killed soldiers and civilians and took hostages. The violence that has ensued since then has been couched in the language of 'self-defence' against an 'unprovoked' attack, a rationale that has received sympathy and reinforcement from Western governments. To those who have first-hand experience of the tolls of a colonial occupation, history does not begin with the Hamas attack. But therein lies the power of the occupier; its ability to dominate not just land and bodies but also time. The discourse of self-defence obscures decades of violence, dispossession, expulsion, deliberate dehumanization and the systematic undoing of Palestinian life that has led to this moment. The Gazzawi family had experienced life in what is known as the 'largest open-air prison in the world', a city under siege for nearly sixteen years, before they migrated to the UK. It was the suffocating blockade that had led to their displacement to begin with. Yet, even in the height of the blockade and despite six major Israeli wars on Gaza since year 2000,<sup>3</sup> Gazans persisted and found ways to live and to be. They exercised *sumūd* (steadfastness) by refusing to make their city, even under siege, a place you run away from, and by rejecting 'bare life'. There is equivalence between existence and resistance. In the face of colonial annihilation, *wujūd*, existence, becomes an everyday practice.

In London, the Gazzawi family followed live on mainstream and social media the methodical destruction of their city in this newest war. Entire neighbourhoods were razed. Universities, schools, hospitals, shops and playgrounds – none were spared. Every day the family would awake at five o'clock in the morning to get a hold of their brother Walid and their relatives on the phone. Every night they went to bed unsure whether they would find them alive. Many were not. Whole families were eliminated. Some were missing. Others lost contact when they opted for an imminent death at home rather than on the streets, where people who were warned to leave were killed anyway. The family watched as the people of Gaza were killed, maimed, displaced and intentionally starved in the name of 'self-defence'. The death toll was harrowing, the images of the dead unbearable and the devastation on the faces of survivors holding their loved ones for the last time heart-breaking. Um and Abu Bashir's luxurious house with its two living rooms, and the lively echoes of a family growing up in it, were demolished.

British support of Israel was no surprise to the Gazzawi family. Neither is it to Palestinians in the world, supporters of their cause and the rich scholarship of Palestine. ‘ Hamas is a terrorist organisation ’ and ‘ Israel has a right to defend itself ’ have become normalized mantras in the UK, even when there have been longstanding solidarity networks and voices challenging Israel’s Zionist settler-colonial project in Palestine. However, the recent silencing of the critique of Israel and its criminalization in a society that supposedly cherishes ‘ freedom of speech ’ has signalled the creep of ‘ Orwellian times ’ (Fekete 2024), as proponents of civil rights have feared. Academics, journalists, Members of Parliament, and outspoken voices against a televised genocide soon found themselves facing accusations of antisemitism and even terrorism in the manner of a witch hunt. The refusal to condemn Israel for the scale of civilian death, at least in the first few weeks, and the silence around the racist and dehumanizing discourses unashamedly used by Israeli leaders who threatened to ‘ eliminate everything in Gaza ’,<sup>4</sup> compounded the feeling among different groups in Britain that ‘ brown populations are expendable ’ (Sultany 2023).

My phone calls with the Gazzawis were filled with dread, when I regularly checked on their updates from Gaza. I was lost for words against the news of death: a cousin, his wife and three children in one blow, with only their youngest alive, a five-year-old; an uncle, a wife, four children and twelve grandchildren, in another blow to a multistorey building in which they all lived; a ten-year-old nephew crying on the phone as he recounted how he had to leave his friend wounded on the street when he ran away from the bombs with his family. ‘ Imagine ’, Widad asked of me, ‘ how will this boy grow up? ’ “ *Khālto* [auntie] ”, he swore to me, “ I didn’t want to leave him! ” Widad recounted these tragedies to me as they wove themselves into the fabric of her family’s daily rhythms. Her children, the three of them now grown up, were devastated at the destruction of their city of origin – one they strongly related to even when they had not gone back since their migration. Abir, Shadi and Lana could barely go to work and to university. In Widad’s stoic manner, she urged them to persist, to wake up, to go to work and to keep holding fast against the storm of grief that has washed over them. This is the predicament of the Palestinians, she told me. We must all ‘ *nasmud* ’, hold up, endure and be steadfast, for in this collective *sumūd*, Palestinians practise together the ‘ restoration of sense in the face of colonial violence ’ (Taher 2024).

In our conversations, Widad reflected on her years in Britain. Ever since her move to her new flat, she had always felt at home in London, especially after her children and husband had ‘ found themselves ’. Her experience of anchorage had been relatively calm, notwithstanding the everyday highs and lows of life. The escalation of the war in Gaza and the response of the British government, particularly Parliament’s refusal to call for a ceasefire, prompted

an uncanny realization that, after all this time, Britain still considers Palestinians, even its own citizens, ‘the other’. Everyone is *not* equal in this system. Her enchantment with a society that was ordered, respectful and fair, something which drove her perseverance in the first few months of migration, was now unravelling. ‘In my entire life in Britain, I have never been made to feel like this’, Widad told me. ‘Are we not human? Can they not see what Israel is doing to children?’ In her despair in the possibility and efficacy of human intervention, Widad placed her hope in the divine. ‘God will save us!’

Abir was devastated. London could not be home after this. Now an eloquent and outspoken woman, with a Masters in Postcolonial Studies, Abir experienced the genocide, and the unwavering British support for the state of Israel, as a profound ‘encounter with White Supremacy’, to use her words. As a Palestinian, an Arab, a Muslim and a self-identifying brown person in the racial landscape of Britain, this encounter questioned her emplacement. It displaced her, existentially at least (Ramsay and Haugen Askland 2022; Obeid 2023). The waters were in that moment too tempestuous for her to feel settled at anchor. It was time to set sail. When I spoke with her, Abir was planning a move to Jordan. She would move to a place in which she did not have to justify her humanity; when being Palestinian, Arab and Muslim was not something ‘to be self-conscious of’.

The genocide in Gaza prised open enduring racial hierarchies in Britain and the Western world, and the ‘global apartheid order’ (Hage 2016) that we live in. Official discourses and right-wing media tried to reduce the outcry against the death and destruction to an issue of a ‘Muslim identity’, particularly at a time when national elections were imminent, and parties were concerned with voter numbers. This attempt to water down the global nature of this conflict and its entrenchment in neoliberal capitalism was soon thwarted by the growing scale of horror among people of different walks of life, in Britain and elsewhere, who began to call out the hypocrisy of their governments. Protests on the streets of London, as well as their policing, grew on a weekly basis. Resignation of MPs indicated wider discontent with the silence against ethnic cleansing. Student encampments across the country, following the lead of campus mobilizations in the United States, heartened the Gazzawi family. ‘The whole world can see’, Widad told me, after a protest that her entire family, young and old, attended. Weekly protests were now the gathering point for the family. Palestine marches, in the way that they served as convergence spaces for different forms of solidarities, offered solace. In these spaces, they would join their voices with those of thousands chanting, ‘Free free Palestine!’ ‘Gaza is going to change the world order’, Ismail told me. For the first time, he was witnessing a public and international shift in

discourse. Eyes heavy with grief, and lines surrounding them with sorrow, he wondered, 'At what price?'

On a video call with Um Bashir, I asked how she was doing. With her natural smile she replied, 'For now, we are still here. Who knows what will happen tomorrow?' Still at anchor, and never losing hope, Um Bashir and her family's futures remain full of possibility.

## Notes

1. The standard Arabic expression '*uqūlubum fī butūnibim*, which translates into 'their brains are placed in their stomachs', rhymed in its colloquial iteration.
2. Literally meaning 'the chosen or selected one', *mukhtār* is an administrative role that goes back to Ottoman legislation that sought to allow representation in villages. The office still exists in Arab countries.
3. Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, writes that 'a 23-year-old in Gaza has lived through six Israeli onslaughts on Gaza', <https://al-shabaka.org/roundtables/genocide-in-gaza-global-culpability-and-ways-forward/>.
4. Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant referred to Palestinians as 'human animals' as he announced a complete siege on Gaza, denying people water, electricity and food. Similarly, Israeli ambassador to Germany, Ron Prosor, referred to Palestinians as 'blood-thirsty animals', and former Israeli ambassador to the UN, Dan Gillerman, also called Palestinians 'horrible, human animals' (Miyashiru 2023).

# GLOSSARY



## Note

The grave accent (‘) in Arabic transliteration denotes the letter غ. In this glossary, I have ordered the words without the mark to make it easier for English readers.

The Arabic article (*al*) means ‘the’ in English. It prefixes nouns. I have opted to keep the prefix in the glossary as the words appear in the text.

|                                |                               |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>‘adāt</i>                   | customs                       |
| <i>‘adhāb al-buruqrātiyya</i>  | torture of bureaucracy        |
| <i>adhān</i>                   | call to prayer                |
| <i>‘afawi</i>                  | spontaneous                   |
| <i>‘afawiyya</i>               | spontaneity                   |
| <i>akbar farha</i>             | the greatest of joys          |
| <i>al-‘ālam</i>                | the world                     |
| <i>al-Barazīliyya</i>          | the Brazilian                 |
| <i>al-dār</i>                  | the home                      |
| <i>al-fardāniyya</i>           | individualism                 |
| <i>al-Filistīnī lāji</i>       | the Palestinian is a refugee  |
| <i>al-hamdu lil-lah</i>        | thank God                     |
| <i>al-jāliya</i>               | the community                 |
| <i>al-jāliya kulha</i>         | the entire community          |
| <i>al-matbakh</i>              | the kitchen                   |
| <i>al-sabr muftah al-faraj</i> | patience is the key to solace |

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>al-stress wa al-irhāq</i>    | the stress and exhaustion   |
| <i>‘al-taqdīr</i>               | using estimation or approximation   |
| <i>al-tarīqa ‘al-Filistīnia</i> | the Palestinian way   |
| <i>al-usūl</i>                  | the authentic, ‘the right way’  |
| <i>al-zaytūna</i>               | the olive tree  |
| <i>ana mīn?</i>                 | who am I?   |
| <i>‘arak</i>                    | distilled liquor from the Levantine region  |
| <i>‘arūs</i>                    | a bride   |
| <i>arsayna</i>                  | to be anchored in a place, R-a-s-u is the root of the word <i>yarsī</i> (to anchor or to moor); <i>marsa</i> (anchorage or mooring) |
| <i>a‘sāb</i>                    | nerves  |
| <i>‘āyshīn hayāthum</i>         | living their lives  |
| <i>baklāwa</i>                  | dessert of filo pastry, nuts, rosewater and honey   |
| <i>bāmya</i>                    | okra  |
| <i>basbūsa</i>                  | a Palestinian coconut cake  |
| <i>biddik tikhlaqīh</i>         | you need to create it   |
| <i>bidnāsh ghamm</i>            | we do not want gloom  |
| <i>bidnāsh nit-bahdal</i>       | we do not want to be humiliated   |
| <i>bil-fitra</i>                | instinctive   |
| <i>bisnis ‘ā’ila</i>            | a family business   |
| <i>blād</i>                     | the country   |
| <i>dabka</i>                    | traditional step dance and musical genre with variations in style in different countries of the Levant                              |
| <i>daght</i>                    | pressure  |
| <i>darajāt hadāra</i>           | degrees of civilization   |
| <i>dār al-‘ā’ila</i>            | family home   |
| <i>darbuka</i>                  | goblet drum   |
| <i>diyāfa</i>                   | hospitality, from the root <i>dayf</i> , meaning guest  |
| <i>dughrī</i>                   | straight, proper  |
| <i>eish hal lakhbata</i>        | what a <i>lakhbata</i>  |
| <i>electro-dabka</i>            | fusion of traditional <i>dabka</i> with electronic music  |
| <i>fain</i>                     | where is  |
| <i>fallāh</i>                   | peasant   |
| <i>Fatah</i>                    | see: <i>Harkat al-Tahrīr al-Watanī al-Filastini</i>   |
| <i>fatta</i>                    | a Palestinian rice dish on a bed of broth-soaked bread, layered with chicken  |
| <i>fattush</i>                  | herb-rich salad   |
| <i>fawda</i>                    | chaos   |
| <i>fi al-busy</i>               | in busy times   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>gharīb</i>  | strange  |
| <i>ghurba</i>  | estrangement, exile  |
| <i>habibtī</i>   | my darling (feminine); <i>habībī</i> (masculine)   |
| <i>hafla</i>   | party  |
| <i>halal</i>   | lawful, permitted under Islam, conceptually opposed with <i>harām</i>  |
| <i>Hamas</i>   | see: <i>Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyya</i>  |
| <i>Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyya</i> ( <i>Hamas</i> acronym)               | the Islamic Resistance Movement, establishment in 1987 marked the formal entry of Islamists into power   |
| <i>Harkat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini</i> ( <i>Fatah</i> reverse acronym) | emerged in the 1960s as a nationalist anticolonial movement, now dominates the PLO   |
| <i>harām</i>   | un-Islamic practices, conceptually opposed with <i>halal</i>   |
| <i>hishik bishik</i>   | vulgar pop music (derogatory)  |
| <i>hummus</i>  | a dish made with mashed chickpeas and tahini   |
| <i>husn al-diyāfa</i>  | hospitality  |
| <i>Īd</i>  | an Islamic holy day; <i>Īd al-Fitr</i> is the festival that marks the end of Ramadan   |
| <i>idāra</i>   | administration   |
| <i>idrāb</i>   | a work strike  |
| <i>iftar</i>   | evening meal that ends the daily fast in the month of Ramadan  |
| <i>‘ijja</i>   | herby omelette   |
| <i>‘ilm</i>  | education or knowledge   |
| <i>Intifada</i>  | rebellion, uprising, Palestinian direct action in response to Israeli settler colonialism  |
| <i>ishi bi-sharrif</i>   | we feel honoured   |
| <i>istiqbāl</i>  | offering hospitality   |
| <i>istiqrār</i>  | stability  |
| <i>i‘tidāl</i>   | moderation; in the religious context, it denotes a disposition that provides room to incorporate beliefs and practices of the other, without compromising on one’s own |
| <i>jaddī</i>   | serious  |
| <i>jāliya</i>  | community  |
| <i>jaww</i>  | atmosphere   |
| <i>jaww ‘Arabi</i>   | Arab atmosphere  |
| <i>karam</i>   | generosity   |
| <i>keffiya</i>   | chequered black and white scarf emblematic of Palestinian nationalism  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>khālto</i>                           | colloquial term for ‘auntie’  |
| <i>kharūf</i>                           | stuffed lamb  |
| <i>khubz</i>                            | flatbread   |
| <i>khudarjiyya</i>                      | vegetable seller  |
| <i>krihit hāli</i>                      | I hated myself  |
| <i>kubba</i>                            | stuffed fried balls   |
| <i>kufta</i>                            | mincemeat kebab   |
| <i>kunafa</i>                           | semolina-based dessert with sweet cheese and rosewater syrup  |
| <i>labna</i>                            | strained yoghurt  |
| <i>lakhbata</i>                         | discombobulation, connotes a sense of disorder that leads to confusion, imbalance and ambivalence   |
| <i>lamm al-‘āila</i>                    | the uniting of the family   |
| <i>lūbia</i>                            | green beans   |
| <i>mabsūt</i>                           | happy   |
| <i>ma-byinfā‘sh</i>                     | it does not work  |
| <i>majnūna</i> (plural <i>majanīn</i> ) | bonkers or crazy  |
| <i>makhnūq</i>                          | suffocated  |
| <i>mansaf</i>                           | a rice dish on a bed of bread, soaked in dried yoghurt broth and chunks of lamb   |
| <i>maqluba</i>                          | literally ‘overturned’, a traditional Palestinian rice dish   |
| <i>mashāwi</i>                          | grilled food, especially referring to meat  |
| <i>māshi</i>                            | it is fine or ‘let’s go’  |
| <i>mashhūr</i>                          | famous  |
| <i>mask al-nafs</i>                     | holding oneself, holding fast   |
| <i>Masr um al-dunya</i>                 | Egypt is Mother of the world  |
| <i>Mawakib</i>                          | procession or convey; in the text it is the name of a Palestinian youth dancing troupe  |
| <i>mawwāl</i>                           | sung poetic verse that preceded a song  |
| <i>mit-lakhbat</i>                      | discombobulated   |
| <i>mubtadi’</i>                         | a novice (masculine); <i>mubtadi’a</i> (feminine)   |
| <i>muhafidhīn</i>                       | conservative  |
| <i>mujaddara</i>                        | a lentil dish   |
| <i>mukhtar</i>                          | literally ‘the chosen or selected one’; an administrative role that goes back to Ottoman legislation that sought to allow representation in villages; the office still exists in Arab countries |
| <i>musakhan</i>                         | dish made from bread, sumac-marinated chicken and caramelized onion (can be served as a wrap)   |

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>musakka‘a</i>                  | aubergine and chickpea dish cooked in a tomato sauce  |
| <i>mush aslī</i>                  | it is not authentic   |
| <i>mush hāsīs hālī zalama</i>     | I do not feel like a man  |
| <i>mush jaddī</i>                 | it is not serious   |
| <i>mutabbal</i>                   | an aubergine dip  |
| <i>mustaqbal</i>                  | the future  |
| <i>nafās</i>                      | breath, soul  |
| <i>Nakba</i>                      | ‘The Catastrophe’, forced displacement of around 700,000 Palestinians during the creation of the state of Israel          |
| <i>nasmud</i>                     | hold up, endure, be steadfast   |
| <i>nawāshif</i>                   | literally ‘dry food’, sandwiches, wraps and fast food, opposed to ‘wet’ home-cooked, hot meals                            |
| <i>nizam</i>                      | discipline, order   |
| <i>n-jīb Filastin ‘ala London</i> | bring Palestine to London   |
| <i>nu-khattit</i>                 | plotting, planning  |
| <i>nu-walli‘</i>                  | light up  |
| <i>qatāyif</i>                    | sweet dumplings filled with cream or walnuts  |
| <i>qidra</i>                      | a special clay pot  |
| <i>rāha wa amān</i>               | feelings of comfort and security  |
| <i>rā‘ihat al-blād</i>            | the scent of the nation/country   |
| <i>rujūla</i>                     | manhood   |
| <i>sabr</i>                       | patience  |
| <i>sadaqa</i>                     | charitable giving   |
| <i>salon</i>                      | living room; <i>salonayn</i> (two living rooms)   |
| <i>sāmid</i>                      | to stay put   |
| <i>sha‘b wāhid</i>                | one people  |
| <i>shakshuka</i>                  | spiced eggs baked with bell peppers   |
| <i>shatāt</i>                     | forced dispersal, fragmentation   |
| <i>shātra</i>                     | skilled   |
| <i>shawwaq-na lil blād</i>        | we felt a longing for the country/nation  |
| <i>shilla</i>                     | gang  |
| <i>shisha</i>                     | sweetened tobacco   |
| <i>Sidi Mansour</i>               | popular song, originally a folkloric Tunisian song made famous by singer Saber Ruba ‘i who released a new version in 2000 |
| <i>sihhī</i>                      | healthy   |
| <i>sittī</i>                      | my grandma  |
| <i>Subhān Allah</i>               | literally ‘Allah is without flaws’, conversational exclamation used for emphasis  |

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>suhūr</i>               | pre-daylight meal consumed before the fasting period in the month of Ramadan          |
| <i>sumūd</i>               | steadfastness   |
| <i>ta'āl</i>               | come here   |
| <i>tabbula</i>             | a fresh herb salad with parsley as its main ingredient                                |
| <i>tabīkh</i>              | the cooking of hot food   |
| <i>tabkha</i>              | stew  |
| <i>ta-faddal</i>           | please come in  |
| <i>taghmīs</i>             | dipping (for example, in a sauce)   |
| <i>taqālīd</i>             | traditions  |
| <i>tarawīh</i>             | late-night prayers  |
| <i>tarbiya</i>             | upbringing  |
| <i>tard</i>                | sacking from a job or expelling someone from a place                                  |
| <i>thobe</i>               | traditional Palestinian embroidered dress   |
| <i>tifla barī'a</i>        | innocent little girl  |
| <i>timsik nafsak</i>       | self-control  |
| <i>turāth</i>              | heritage  |
| <i>ukhtī habibtī</i>       | my beloved sister   |
| <i>umma</i>                | nation  |
| <i>uqūlhum fi butūnhum</i> | literally 'their brains are placed in their stomachs', they think with their stomachs |
| <i>'urs</i>                | wedding   |
| <i>walimat al-ashwāq</i>   | the meal of longings  |
| <i>wallāhi</i>             | I swear by God  |
| <i>wujūd</i>               | existence   |
| <i>yāba</i>                | dad   |
| <i>yalla</i>               | 'come on'   |
| <i>ya'rifū al-farah</i>    | knowing joy   |
| <i>yata'awwad</i>          | literally 'render things normal', to get used to things                               |
| <i>yu-hibbū al-hayāt</i>   | they love life  |
| <i>zakat</i>               | praying   |
| <i>zalama</i>              | man   |
| <i>za'lān</i>              | upset   |
| <i>za'tar</i>              | dried thyme   |
| <i>ziyāra</i>              | a social visit  |

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