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## Ambiguous loss of home: Syrian refugees and the process of losing and remaking home

Mary Bunn<sup>a,\*</sup>, Gina Samuels<sup>b</sup>, Craig Higson-Smith<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois Chicago, 1601W. Taylor Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

<sup>b</sup>Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice, University of Chicago, 969 E. 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

<sup>c</sup>Center for Victims of Torture, 2356 University Avenue West, St. Paul, MN 55114, USA

### Abstract

This constructivist-interpretive study examines social-relational dimensions of change and loss following experiences of political terror, war and forced migration from the perspective of Syrian refugee men and women who were presently living in Jordan (n=31). A process model derived from the analysis theorizes four dimensions of ambiguous loss (safety and security, social connections and identities, connection to place, and dreams and imagined future) and to capture the cyclical process of losing and remaking a sense of home in displacement. Our findings underscore a more complex set of processes that remain outside the array of supports and services provided by many current practices and policies with displaced populations generally, and Syrian refugees specifically. Thus, the findings highlight the need for ecological, integrative policies, interventions and services that support refugees' attempts to remake the multifaceted and stable phenomenon that is home as they transition into new communities.

### Keywords

Displacement; Humanitarian; Place; Grounded theory; Qualitative research

### Introduction

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2021) reports that approximately 90 million have been forcibly displaced from their homes and are living in communities not their own. Now for an eleventh year, Syria continues to present the largest displacement crisis in the world, with 5.6 million refugees in neighboring countries, and 6 million people displaced within Syria (UNHCR, 2021). Of these, 45% are children and 21% are women.

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\*Correspondence to: Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1601W. Taylor Street, Chicago, IL 60612, USA. mbunn@uic.edu (M. Bunn).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Although the greatest proportion of refugees from Syria are living in Turkey, over 650,000 live in Jordan. Most Syrian refugees (83%) live in Amman, with smaller groups living in the refugee camps of Za'atari and Azraq (UNHCR, 2021).

Although this paper is focused on the social consequences of war and forced migration, such consequences are inextricably interwoven with the individual impacts on mental health and quality of life which have been extensively documented (Henkelmann et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2020; Ibrahim and Hassan, 2017; Selmo et al., 2021; Steel et al., 2009; Wicki et al., 2021). Posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression are widely studied mental health phenomena among refugees and war-impacted individuals including Syrian refugees (Gormez et al., 2018; Al Ibraheem et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2016; Hoppen et al., 2021). Other research has focused on prolonged grief experiences (Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2020), sleep disturbances (Güzel Ozdemir et al., 2021) and culturally specific manifestations of distress (Backe et al., 2021; Vink et al., 2020). This research has made a significant contribution and increased understanding of the myriad of effects of persecution and forced migration on individuals. Yet, despite two decades of appeals for analysis that recognizes that war and forced migration are inherently social-relational phenomena impacting families, community ties and the broader social fabric of life (Summerfield, 1999; Wells et al., 2018), by far the greatest proportion of research on forced migration remains within an individualist paradigm.

### **The social consequences of political terror, war and forced migration**

War and political terror are social-political phenomena, which impact individuals, communities, and societies at large (Martín-Baró, 1994). Syrian citizens lived under repressive authoritarian rule for many decades prior to the current refugee crisis. Authoritarianism under the Assad regime included routine use of torture, surveillance, intimidation, clandestine detention, assassinations, and summary executions of nonviolent protestors (Pearlman, 2017; Worrall and Hightower, 2021). Authoritarian governments utilize these tactics to maintain power, stifle efforts to organize and challenge their power, and publicly punish those who dare to speak out or are presumed to be a threat to the government (Gerrity et al., 2001). In addition to threatening the health and safety of individuals, such experiences also damage attachment bonds, intimate ties and social systems of care, protection, and meaning that support human life (Herman, 2015). Thus, we entered this study informed by multisystem, eco-social understandings of refugee mental health, which emphasize numerous interrelated social factors that impact health and wellbeing. Such factors include significant change and disruptions to primary relationships and connection to others and community.

Forced migration further causes systematic ruptures to interpersonal networks. This includes separation from family relationships and loss of meaningful roles and connection to community. These experiences impact relationships within families, increasing interpersonal conflict and discord (Timshel et al., 2017; Weine et al., 2004). There are also community level consequences, culminating in the erosion of trust and social networks (Morina et al., 2016). The resulting strain on vital relationships and sources of support is associated with

the breakdown of social networks, isolation, and feelings of estrangement (Hynie, 2011; Stevens, 2016).

Losses to social-relational resources are particularly significant for refugees with sociocentric and collective cultures in which interpersonal relationships are central to life (Kirmayer, 2007; Kira et al., 2017). Syrian identity has been described as both sociocentric and cosmocentric—each individual is seen as linked to others and created in the image of God (Keshavarzi and Haque, 2013). Family relationships are foundational in the Syrian cultural context and viewed as the primary source of economic, social, and emotional support (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2003). These ideas are embedded in the various religious and cultural expressions of Islam in Syria, all of which share a strong emphasis on community, roles, and obligations (Hassan et al., 2016).

Simultaneously, there is a growing body of literature with conflict-affected communities highlighting the important role of social resources in combating stress and trauma post-conflict, including the presence of social support from the family and co-ethnic community and connection to one's social identity in the context of displacement (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018; Kira et al., 2021). Specific to research with refugees, social support has been found to predict positive outcomes in domains of health, mental health, wellbeing and quality of life, highlighting the vital role that support derived from others can play in the context of forced migration and conflict (Wachter et al., 2022). Research conducted with Syrian refugees identified social group membership and belonging as important protective factors for coping with the stressors of displacement and linked to lower levels of common mental disorders (Smeeke et al., 2017). Yet, many questions remain about how to effectively foster such social resources among conflict-affected communities. To date, there has been limited examination of the impact on, or repair of, social-relational resources, including the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to these experiences of relational loss and strain from the perspective of refugees. We also lack research that explores strategies for rebuilding social supports and networks in the context of displacement that create ripples of added losses located within these socio-relational dimensions of a home place.

### **Home, ambiguous loss and displacement**

Ambiguous loss theory, originally developed by Pauline Boss, is a family systems theory (Boss, 2004, 2006) that is based on the idea that some losses are not total but are partial either psychologically or physically. Boss (2006) refers to this ambiguity as, “there, but not there,” (p.105). A type I ambiguous loss represents losses where something or someone is physically absent but still psychologically present. Such losses are evident in families where a family member is lost at war, or a child is missing, or is relinquished for adoption. A type II ambiguous loss describes a condition of psychological loss with physical presence (Boss, 2002). This can occur when someone is psychologically absent but still physically present as in the case of Alzheimer's disease, mental illness, or substance abuse. Boss (2002) also asserts that people can experience crossover losses— where both Type I and II ambiguous losses are present and compounding one another. By their very nature, ambiguous losses often defy resolution and continue to exist for years, or even a lifetime (Boss, 2016). In most societies and cultures, ambiguous losses are often unrecognized and lack rituals to grieve or

even acknowledge the loss itself; this can leave victims to cope on their own without social supports. Thus, the very quality of an ambiguous loss complicates coping and grieving processes and can result in a sense of isolation, hopelessness, and increased trauma.

Despite its intuitive relevance, there has been surprisingly little research with refugees on ambiguous loss. What research does exist has focused primarily on members of the family and their physical presence or absence. This includes research exploring the family reunification process among refugee youth (Luster et al., 2008, 2009), therapeutic strategies for working with refugee families who have been separated (Rousseau et al., 2004), understanding psychological distress resulting from family disappearance (Comtesse et al., 2021) and the extent to which experiences of ambiguous loss predict mental health distress (Renner et al., 2021).

In the context of displacement, ambiguous loss can also include nonhuman and identity losses tied to a homeland and aspects of their sense of self and belonging in a home place (Perez, 2016). Relatedly, the construct of home is multidimensional and incorporates the physical geography of landscapes and constructed spaces, cultural identity and the associated place-based experience of belonging, familial, social, religious and occupational networks, as well as feelings of support and safety tied to a familiar home place (Mallett, 2004). Ambiguous loss theory, and specifically theorizing refugees' losses as rooted in a multidimensional conception of home and place, can be useful to characterize these added but often hidden layers of stress, loss, and grief.

Formal programs and supports for refugees are rarely attuned to ambiguous losses or multidimensional concepts of home. Instead, supports typically focus on immediate needs for physical survival, safety and housing, and psychosocial support programs often prioritize treatment of past individual trauma and coping with current threats and stressors (Klochok and Herrera-Espiñeira, 2021). This study seeks to add to the literature by emphasizing both multidimensional aspects of loss of home, and the more ambiguous and thus, hidden dimensions of that loss tied to identity, relationships, and psychological and emotional aspects of safety.

### **The current study**

This constructivist-interpretive study, using grounded theory methods of analysis examines the nature of past and present social-relational resources from the perspective of Syrian refugees who fled conditions of political terror and war and were presently living in Jordan. Our findings ultimately highlight multidimensional losses that Syrian men and women attributed to their experiences of war and forced displacement and a process of losing and of remaking home and self after displacement.

### **Methods**

This study received Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Chicago prior to implementation. The study protocol was also reviewed by the Ministry of Health in Amman, Jordan and determined not to need formal approval and reviewed and approved by a research advisory committee at the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT). The data used for

this analysis are derived from a larger qualitative study that explored the social consequences of war and forced migration and the role of social connection in healing. The study was conducted in partnership with CVT who assisted with the implementation of the study.

### **Study participants**

The study sample included 31 Syrian refugees living in Jordan, 18 women (58%) and 13 men (42%). Study participants ranged in age from 22 to 64 years of age. The majority were married (74%), followed by widowed (13%) and single or separated (13%). All study participants identified as Muslim and were living with family members in Jordan at the time of the interview. In all cases, participants also described being separated from important family members who remained in Syria or were displaced and residing in other countries in the Middle East. At the time of data collection, study participants had been in Jordan between three and seven years, originating from different cities and regions in Syria including Homs, Daraa, Ghouta, Aleppo and Damascus. All has previously participated in services (including some or all of psychoeducation, social support with meeting basic needs, referral to medical and other service providers as needed, physiotherapy, group counseling, and ongoing follow up) at CVT.

### **Recruitment**

Potential study participants were identified by the Center for Victims of Torture. Eligibility was restricted to adults, age 21 years and older who had already participated in services and had completed a three month follow up assessment. Exclusion from the study applied to minor age clients and those identified by the staff to be high risk, including those who expressed suicidal ideation at intake or follow up. We used a purposeful sampling approach to identify a demographically diverse sample according to gender, age and clinic location (Patton, 2015). Prospective participants were contacted by the research assistant and invited to participate in an interview.

### **Data collection**

All study participants gave written consent and interviews were conducted in Arabic and lasted approximately 90 min. Research participants received a transportation allowance and a supermarket voucher equal to \$15USD for their participation. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Interviews began with asking people to talk about themselves, their families, migration experience and current life in Jordan. The interviews progressed to open-ended questions to elicit descriptions of the participants' lives back home, meaningful relationships, social networks, daily lives and activities, living environment and families. Participants were then asked to consider how their lives were impacted by the war in Syria with particular attention to family and community relationships, sources of support, health and daily activities. Finally, participants were asked to share, in their own words, how migration and displacement to Jordan had affected them, their families and the community, what aspects of home they missed and aspirations they had for their lives now.

## Data analysis

Simultaneous data collection and analysis began with the first interview conducted. Bilingual Arabic-English speaking interviewers prepared a memo after each interview to summarize key ideas and reflections about the interaction. Using analytic memos (Padgett, 2017), we held weekly team meetings, and preliminary ideas were documented in charts or visually mapped.

Analysis continued with transcription and translation of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed into Standard Amiyah Arabic and Syrian Amiyah dialect and translated into English by members of the research team. The process involved close collaboration between the first author and research assistants and multiple readings of the transcripts. Words or phrases that were difficult to translate due to different dialects or challenges conveying meaning across languages were flagged and resolved through discussion. We tracked and recorded all Arabic phrases and vocabulary that required discussion, their English translation, and how each issue was resolved. During this process, interviews were de-identified, and participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Analysis proceeded with line-by-line open coding using a sample of six transcripts by three coders. This generated a list of descriptive codes (e.g., relationships in Syria, social losses of war and displacement), sub codes (e.g., effect of government on relationships, traditional values regarding family) and *in-vivo* codes, that is, codes that reflect the language and terms used by participants (e.g., fearing government, feeling like I am back home). All of the interviews were uploaded into Dedoose, an online qualitative and mixed methods data analysis application and codes were applied to all interviews.

In the next phase of analysis, we used these initial open codes as a bridge to more focused coding. Initial codes were used to examine the coded text, analyzing them for patterns and larger explanations. This stage of coding allowed us to raise initial codes to a higher level of abstraction by comparing them to other codes and identifying more abstract and interpretive categories (e.g., loss of social spaces, safety, roles and expectations) which formed the basis of our focused codes. Preliminary findings indicated that the changes in social resources – relationships, social ties and connections, for example, were closely related to identity, connections to home and homeland and sense of future. Moreover, the findings overwhelmingly pointed to a phenomenon of partial losses or an eroding of participant's social lives and sense of self in ways that were inconsistent with their experiences at home. Through this initial examination, *ambiguous loss* and *home* were identified as emergent concepts which fit well with the data and were meaningful for moving towards an increasingly conceptual understanding of the findings (Charmaz, 2008). For this analysis, we defined *home* as a multidimensional concept that could encompass physical, emotional, psychological, social and esthetic dimensions and meanings (Mallett, 2004). Next stages of analysis sought to code different dimensions of ambiguous loss of home, with terms such as *security*, *family roles* and *community roles* and the interrelated categories of losing and remaking home were clarified to capture losses and retention of core aspects of self, identity and relationships.

In the final stage, constant comparison techniques were used to examine concepts, categories and identify connections and contextual conditions between transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). The researchers used memo writing and data visualization techniques to record thoughts, ideas, insights, and to explore dimensions of and interrelationships between conceptual categories.

### Establishing methodological rigor

Several different strategies were used to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of findings (Creswell and Miller, 2000). During the two-year planning process, the first author took multiple trips to Jordan, conducted 28 initial interviews with providers and other key stakeholders at CVT and other humanitarian organizations, discussed the proposed research with partners including processes for ensuring privacy and confidentiality and hired, trained and hosted team gatherings with research assistants. This period of prolonged engagement expanded the first author's interpretive lens and allowed for relationship building and the establishment of trust between the first author, staff at the partner organization and study team. Establishing a relational context for the study was an essential foundation from which the work could proceed, particularly so, given our intention to engage with a highly vulnerable population around distressing topics of trauma and loss (Miller, 2004).

Our study was informed by methodological recommendations for conducting cross-language research including pilot testing all study documents for comprehension and acceptability, conducting research in participants' native language, retention of data in the original language (as well as English translations) and audits and consultation of translated materials (Squires, 2009). As analysis proceeded, there was a fluid back and forth between Arabic and English data with attention to local idioms, phrases, and cultural meanings in ways that enriched overall understanding and interpretation.

The research and authorship teams were comprised of members from the Global North and Global South with subject matter expertise, diverse cultural backgrounds, Arabic language abilities and lived experiences with forced migration pertinent to the research focus. The active inclusion of diverse insider and outsider perspectives was intended to minimize the domination of any one cultural perspective or position and provide a context for discussion of findings and alternate viewpoints in ways that contribute to the study's overall rigor. Team members were involved in all phases of research and met weekly to review relevant research materials, discuss interviews conducted, translation processes and coding.

### Findings

In Fig. 1, we present a conceptual model that depicts the ambiguous loss of home process derived from our analysis. As our findings will illustrate in detail below, *dimensions and meanings of home in Syria* was characterized by strong relationships, and experienced through social gathering within the houses, land, and neighborhoods where participants grew up and the cultural practices and values which marked their lives.

The explosion graphic represents how authoritarianism, war and forced migration and ongoing displacement fractured participants' experiences of home in their homelands. The dotted line represents ongoing conditions of threat, risk and precarity that defined their

lives in displacement (e.g., discrimination, employment problems, marginalization, and legal challenges) and which synergistically compounded and resulted in a process of *losing home*. This challenged participants in experiencing their “new” host countries as safe and dependable homeplaces. Collectively, these conditions also resulted in partial and evolving losses to safety, social connections and identity, connection to place and radically altered dreams and imagined futures. The dimensions are presented as overlapping to indicate their interrelated and simultaneous quality. *Remaking home* captures a process of retaining and reaffirming a sense of “home” including identity, values, culture, practices, relationships and future through quotidian activities, from children and family life and through new friendships. Finally, the arrows capture the cyclical back and forth process that Syrian men and women found themselves in, oscillating between loss of a complete concept of home and efforts to retain and remake a sense of home in displacement.

### **Dimensions and meanings of home in Syria - places, relationships, practices and identities**

To appreciate the ways in which war and forced displacement impacted Syrian men and women, it is important to first understand how participants understood home before the war started and before coming to Jordan. Participants characterized *dimensions and meanings of home in Syria* as enriching multigenerational relationships with family and friends, intertwined with culture, faith, a love of place, and core to definitions and expectations surrounding the self, roles and relationships. The central role of family in Syrian culture was especially evident in participants’ descriptions of their daily lives, most important relationships and gatherings for meals, holidays and religious rituals. As one man put it simply, “family is the foundation.” Beyond the family, Syrian men and women described social networks where faith was central and included close friendships with neighbors and community members and which reflected values and a way of life where others could be depended upon for support and care. Ibtisam, a 45-year-old widow from Daraa described it this way:

In Syria, if our neighbor was hungry, we’d send him food. If we were hungry, he’d send us food. We used to cut the loaf in half between us. If he doesn’t have water, we sent him water. Our neighbors’ and our conditions are one.

In this way, these relationships expended “family” outward to larger kinship networks that reinforced a relational sense of home. Men and women coming from urban and rural settings in Syria also spoke of their home places affectionately as evoking physical comfort, beauty, and safety. When remembering home, men and women often drew attention to spaces where social gatherings facilitated interconnected relationships to place and its people. As Zakaraya, a 52-year-old father described in his interview, “We used to be together all the time, during Eid, after prayers, if someone was sick, we visit him.” In this excerpt, Zakaraya describes the ways that physical spaces are inextricably linked to relationships and spiritual notions of self and tied to a sense of being within one’s culture.

Participants often referred to their homes as “traditional” places marked by certain clothing and where men and women gathered and socialized in distinct and often separate ways. For many women, much of their time was spent within their neighborhoods and houses, which were familiar and safer and where they cared for children, attended to household duties and



socialized with other women living in close proximity. Men, conversely, often remembered their lives more expansively, recalling travels to various parts of Syria and drew attention to a sense of fulfillment, accomplishment and identity that existed for them at home. One man, for example, used the metaphor of feeling like he could build towers in Syria to convey the sense of possibility that existed for him in Syria, free to move about, free to work, free to live out one's life in the way that one imagined.

### **Losing home**

“I miss home. I miss Syria. You feel like you are always missing someone, that there is something missing, that there is a black spot inside,”

Mohammed, 44 years old.

Previous experiences of home as steeped in nourishing relationships and marked by love of place and people became fractured by political violence and war but also by ongoing displacement within Jordan. Participants described losses of these socially anchored dimensions of self in place as psychologically present despite their physical displacement from them. Like Mohammed, many participants at the time of our interviews were working hard to accept these new circumstances, to adapt, work, make friends. Yet, many also noted the residue of these losses as not total or completely absent. Instead, these places and relationships were still deeply felt and present, “you are always missing someone ... something.” Their experiences of ambiguous loss often exacerbated feelings of displacement rather than helped participants heal or establish a sense of home in their new lives in Jordan.

### **Safety and security**

One of the primary purposes of a homeplace is its provision of safety not only physically, but emotionally, relationally, psychologically, and culturally. Loss of safety and security as an ambiguous loss were indeed multifaceted and highlighted the extent to which even when participants were physically safe, they reported losses of psychological, relational and cultural safety and security. Many participants identified political conditions in Syria including living under authoritarian rule which eroded their sense of personal and collective safety. While fleeing from Syria offered physical safety from these unsafe contexts, the loss of psychological safety stretched far beyond the physical borders and into their lives in Jordan. Duha, originally from Daraa, captured ambiguous loss of safety best when she said, “We're trying to adapt but what's in the heart stays in the heart and we could never forget.” Indeed, living under authoritarianism and war conditions made a deep imprint and prevented many from fully accessing a sense of safety once they had achieved physical safety in Jordan.

Many also made clear the ways in which the displacement process itself further eroded safety. Many participants had moved and settled several times between fleeing from their homes in Syria and their present life in Jordan – often to live in other towns in Syria and Jordan, with relatives and friends. In addition to these multiple transitions, the broader displacement environment introduced daily stressors, uncertainty, and risk so that each new “home” failed to offer the permanence, safety and familiarity as the original home place.

For many, the basic question of if they would be able to stay in Jordan as refugees remained an open and contested issue and created a sense of uncertainty for their future. The conditions of being a refugee also brought the impact of discrimination based on one's Syrian identity. People talked about being rejected for jobs or apartments because of who they were. In their everyday lives, going to the market, walking kids to school, they described feeling out of place and being looked down upon. In this broader climate of xenophobia and discrimination, bullying by teachers and other children at school was also commonly reported and exacerbated parent's fears and worries for their children's safety and healthy development. As Farah said, "My son tells me, *the word Syrian destroyed me.*"

Participants often noted how the refugee aid system was exacerbating, rather than disrupting, their sense of insecurity in their new homeplace. Many spoke of reductions in aid. For most, the aid system felt unpredictable, arbitrary, and lacked transparent predictable processes to know why some received assistance while others did not. All participants were consumed with worry about basic survival including having enough money to feed their families and pay their monthly rent. These contextual conditions created ambiguity, uncertainty, and precluded participants from grasping a sense of home in Jordan. While participants were physically safe from the dangers of war, their psychological sense of home in these new places remained elusive.

### **Social connections and identities**

Participants also described numerous ambiguous losses to their social connections including the loss of relationships, roles, and community ties that were closely linked to roles and sense of self. Though they were physically displaced from these aspects of home, psychologically these social connections and identities remained very much alive. Many remembered the way that the war had already broken down their social relationships. Particularly for families who were living in different cities during the war, they found it hard to maintain communication and spend time together due to roadblocks, the breakdown of phone and internet and the difficulty of safe travel from one part of the country to another. Escalating political violence and widespread targeting of Syrian citizens also made communicating increasingly unsafe, and men and women limited their contacts with family and friends to increase their physical safety.

Whereas families were defined by networks of extended kin, often living in close proximity, forced migration to Jordan widened these fractures and created barriers of geographic distance between family members. As a result, total physical separation from primary family relationships occurred including from aging parents, children, aunts, cousins, among others. Farah, a 36-year-old woman from Homs, shared the pain of being physically separated from her mother and the home place in which this relationship was experienced:

These days I really miss my family, especially my mom. We used to gather at her home every Saturday. It's been 5 years since I last saw her. Sometimes when we talk on the phone, she says, *We might not see each other again.* It really hurts. I wish I can see my family again.

This situation, in which one can tell the other “we may never see each other again” captures the painful paradox of living with ambiguous loss of family. The family tie, and sense of home, is still psychologically real but cannot be lived fully because of its physical absence.

Physical separation from beloved friends and family members were also interrelated with ambiguous losses of identities and roles that were inherent to participant’s sociocentric notion of self and identity – e.g., as a caregiver to aging parents, provider and protector for the family, neighbor, engaged member of the community. One woman, for example, emphasized the challenges of mothering long-distance and the pain of being physically separated from some of her older children, who remained in Syria. She said, “Before the war, I was in the same house with my kids. Whenever we miss anyone, we go visit them. But now, my family is far away from me. My whole life became far away from me.” Her identity as a mother is ambiguously lost, as the performance of this role becomes only partially, psychologically, accessible.

In Jordan, the struggle for basic survival in their new homeplaces also created new demands on Syrian families and often resulted in major changes to gender and family roles and identities to adapt to dire circumstances. Men were outspoken about the absence of work opportunities and losses to their identities as family provider. One male participant described it as “a loss of his manhood.” Syrian women often assumed the role as family provider by going out to access benefits through the refugee aid system. Though many women welcomed the new sense of social mobility, they also spoke of it as a loss of one way of life to adapt to another.

Beyond the family, Syrian men and women also described ambiguous losses of home that related to roles and identities within their community relationships and embedded in cultural and religious values, norms, and practices. While some participants developed friendships with new neighbors in Jordan, more commonly study participants described a sense of separation from other Syrian refugees who were also in Jordan and the difficulties of establishing new relationships with neighbors in the host country.

Whereas a sense of interdependence defined community relationships in Syria, many spoke of the ways that self-interest now consumed their daily life. As Ibtisam explained:

Here, no one cares about anyone. If you’re thirsty and have money to buy water, you go buy some. If you don’t have money, you’ll have to wait until you get it somehow. If you’re hungry for 2 or 3 days in your home, nobody knows about it. Everyone is looking out for themselves.

Participants’ sense of individualistic self-reliance as an indication that “no one cares” was further perpetuated by the dire conditions of life as refugees and the long-term residues of mistrust from the war. The absence of community ties understandably intensified feelings of isolation and loneliness and represents an ambiguous loss of homeplace as a container for the cultural practices and values that enable caring for one’s neighbor, practices which were hard to recapture in the context of displacement but lived on in the values that defined participants and their lives.

## Connection to place

Simultaneous to evolving, ambiguous losses to social connections were ruptures to participants' connection to home places to freely gather and experience a sense of joy and belonging within private family homes, public social spaces, and the natural environment in Syria.

With the uprooting from home, Syrian men and women talked about losing familiar, comforting, and welcoming places to gather once they had settled in Jordan. As one woman described, "my kids don't go anywhere and there is no place to take them." Aside from trips to gather necessary supplies, many study participants described spending most of their time in their homes during the day. Many were also living in very small apartments, which further restricted access to spaces for hosting gatherings. One man, for example, described living in a one-room apartment with his wife and four teenage sons and daughters. In addition to the obvious issues related to space and privacy, such living situations were not conducive to offering hospitality and spaces of belonging to neighbors and friends, a common and highly valued practice in Syria.

For many study participants, the limited public space and desert environment of Jordan were drastic changes from their home settings in Syria where they appreciated and had access to publicly accessible outdoor spaces. As Yasir, a 39-year-old father, described, "In Syria, and in Damascus particularly, any time or anywhere you felt bored, you'd find a place full of fruitful trees and water to entertain yourself. If you felt sick of the city, you are one or two kilometers far from green farms that would bless your mood and entertain your kids." As a function of their refugee status, economic problems and the nature of the city space in Amman and Zarqa, Syrian men and women felt constrained in their ability to move around the city and isolated in their home spaces which they contrasted with memories from home. Iman, a woman from Daraa described it this way:

I miss sitting on the balcony with a cup of coffee, or mateh (Syrian traditional tea), laughing with spring weather, and kids are playing around. It's prison here. If you are outside, you find the kids fighting, one of them is hurt and the other is wounded. No, it's better to stay at home. I miss all the time I spent with my sisters, and family there, all the jokes and talks, but now I am here in Jordan, one of my sisters is in Lebanon, and the other still in Syria.

Here, connection to place is conveyed through Iman's description of her balcony, the weather and ritual of morning tea and a sense of familiarity and joy is attached to places to gather and meaningful relationships where one belongs. The consequences of losing her physical home are multifaceted, breaking apart family relationships and creating a sense of physical insecurity—"it's prison here." Moreover, it functions as a barrier to accessing a more multidimensional experience of home in her new homeplace.

## Dreams and imagined futures

Ambiguous losses of home for Syrian men and women extended beyond the absence of places and people left behind. It also upended dreams that Syrian men and women had for their future lives in these places such as growing old with loved ones nearby, building up a business or passing on their trade to children. These are the kinds of common dreams for

one's life that are tied up in living in one's homeplace and connected to having a sense of predictability about what one's future holds. One woman tearfully described leaving for Jordan the day after a family wedding and the pain of saying goodbye to her brother who had been her childhood companion but also goodbye to her intertwined lives with this newly created family.

Uprooting from home naturally complicated those dreams and the conditions of unemployment, poverty and loss of material resources generated by their displacement made futures seem precarious and unpredictable. Such conditions often required that Syrian families shift family roles to protect their daily survival, and these adaptations altered how they would have anticipated their life trajectory. In many cases, participants described being unable to resume their professional roles and skills in displacement, instead having to work *just to survive*. Syrian men and women struggled to adjust to these new realities and lamented these lost futures and dreams. As Ahmad said, "I believe I've lost my future, Allah is the only one who knows." His comment underscores the unknown quality of his current life and the ambiguous loss of home that is the capacity to know what is in his future. Thus, affirming his own lost capacity to imagine what his future will bring he says, "only Allah knows."

Yet, other participants were still holding on to dreams for themselves, despite the precarity of their current circumstances. Many expressed hopes for their future, especially that the conflict would end in Syria, that circumstances would change and that it would someday be possible to create places wherein they might resume their life as imagined. Mohammad, a 22-year-old young man from Damascus, spoke about his aspirations to return to his work as an athlete and musician even though he was currently working as a tailor. As he said, "I have ambitions. I am still dreaming. I still have these kinds of dreams."

### Remaking home

Indeed, the loss of home was not absolute. *Remaking home* refers to the process that men and women engaged in to, like Mohammad, preserve important aspects of their former lives, identities, and relationships with members of their families and former communities, local traditions and cultural practices, and remake a sense of home alongside the ambiguous loss of it. One way that participants did this was by reengaging in practices and rituals that were core to their lives in Syria. One man, for example, spoke of a weekly routine where he called his friends just to see how they were doing. Women shared recipes and information about benefits and classes with friends who they met through the humanitarian aid system. As participants described, these activities brought to life the values and traditions from home and served as outward signs of their Muslim faith and identity whereby care is exchanged with others in community. Indeed, many participants remained firmly connected to their faith, and places of worship functioned as important spaces for reconnecting to one's culture and for community-building. One woman spoke of relationships developed with elders while taking classes through her local mosque. For her, the experience recaptured a sense of home in ways that were associated with status and feelings of safety, counterweights to the ongoing experience of marginalization as a refugee in Jordan. As she said, "I feel

comfortable. They respect me and I respect them. They make me feel close to Sham [Damascus], like sitting with my family in Sham.”

Indeed, new relationships with other Syrian refugees and Jordanian neighbors, developed through groups, organizations and in their daily lives helped with feeling more at home and came to be relied upon for support, love, and care. Gathering with new friends for meals, to visit, or exchange information recreated a sense of extended family, comfort and hope in the context of ongoing separation from their family of origin relationships. For women especially, life in Jordan expanded their social networks as they found themselves with increased need to travel around the city to access aid, take children to school and take classes offered through organizations where they met and befriended other Syrian women. Iman, a widow from Daraa, described this process in her interview.

Sometimes you sit beside someone on the bus and you start talking and take each other’s phone number and start talking over the phone. We also knew a man who used to take us on picnics, so we met his family and now we go together as if we were one family. We are coping with living here. We are growing to love Jordan.

Iman’s description conveys the incremental nature of recapturing a sense of belonging in displacement and that the process of healing from ambiguous loss of home involves living through the ambiguity and losses while rebuilding home in a new place that can be experienced more holistically, rather than only partially.

Healing ambiguous losses of home also occurred through efforts to stay in touch with family back home to the extent possible. For parents, remaking a sense of home in Jordan was also connected to their children’s transition and adjustment. In spite of obstacles, many expressed gratitude that their kids were safe from imminent danger in Jordan and for opportunities to educate their children. Parents spoke of their children’s desire to integrate into Jordanian life, making requests for certain clothes and social outings with school friends. In many cases, the family had travelled to Jordan when children were very young, and these children remembered little from their lives in Syria. “This is their home now,” as one mother put it. Though seeing their children grow up outside their country of origin was painful, it provided a path for parents to feel more at home and grasp a sense of a future for themselves through the future their children might have. Farah spoke of this in her interview saying, “they convinced us that there is a life here, and we should live it. Especially we as refugees, we should learn how to start again, to hold on, and do our best to live happy and strong.”

## Discussion

The study examined processes of social relational loss and change among Syrian men and women who fled conditions of political terror and war and were currently displaced as refugees in Jordan by drawing on ambiguous loss and a multidimensional concept of home. The resulting ambiguous loss of home process model suggests that the complex concept of home is fundamental to healthy human life, yet, for displaced refugees, fully experiencing home is hard to achieve. For many Syrians in this study, the sense of home was eroded before they left Syria, they may have lost the sense of safety, connections, place and future

long before they fled to Jordan and this process continued in displacement. Despite this, they retain a vision of home against which their current reality is compared, and typically found sadly wanting. People live with and children grow up with the simultaneous concept of the home that we have and the home that we lost.

These findings align with and reflect the very small body of research on ambiguous loss of home with other displaced populations (Falicov, 2002; Solheim et al., 2016). For example, our findings on “remaking home” echo the use of ambiguous loss by Perez (2016) to understand how Cubans who were exiled to the U.S dealt with the loss of homeland while trying to keep it present psychologically. As in this study, the author found that losses to homeland were multidimensional including family separation, identity and belonging and lifelong lack of closure. These findings go beyond the presence or absence of people, which has more commonly been the focus of ambiguous loss research with refugees and includes partial losses to a broader concept of home (Sanchez et al., 2021). Samuels (2009) first extended the theory of ambiguous loss to specifically theorize *ambiguous loss of home*, which conceptualized the experiences of youth in foster care coping with displacement from their families and homes of origin. Here, young people were at once grieving the ambiguous losses of homeplace with both biological and foster families while striving to create a sense of permanence and authentic family belonging in their futures. Similarly, in this study, the process of remaking home involved engaging in familiar practices, forming emotional ties, grieving losses, developing new attachments, and caring for children and family. These findings emphasize the idea of home as a multidimensional concept closely tied to identity and social relationships, which can include though transcends physical place and is temporally enduring in nature (Klodnick and Samuels, 2020, Simich et al., 2010). The findings also draw needed attention to strengths and adaptive processes at the individual, family and community level, which refugees engaged in to cope with these ambiguous losses that are relational in nature. These aspects of home, and attunement to ambiguous losses of them, can and should be built upon in our efforts to assist and accompany refugees in healing from their experiences and more fully realize a sense of homeplace in a new context (Dudley, 2011; Frounfelker et al., 2020, Ungar, 2011, Weine et al., 2011).

In many ways, our findings also reflect aspects of the trauma literature specific to refugees and conflict settings. For example, in this study, authoritarianism, war and displacement resulted in evolving and synergistic losses and emotional distress in ways that are consistent with contemporary trauma frameworks which highlight the impact of living in conditions where there is a realistic threat of present and future danger (Higson-Smith, 2013; Miller and Rasmussen, 2014; Stevens et al., 2013). These ongoing conditions and experiences gave way to multidimensional psychosocial and place-based losses to safety, interpersonal connections, identity and existential meanings in ways that are also consistent with conceptual work on the consequences of political violence and war (Kira et al., 2019; Silove, 2013), but which have been underrepresented in the empirical literature to date. Taken as a whole, these findings direct our attention to the broader interpersonal and social consequences of war and forced migration, the ripple effects of these losses, and barriers to fully accessing all dimensions of home in their new settings. Such attunement to multidimensionality and ambiguous loss of home requires consideration of the ways in

which services and supports may facilitate healing, building new and retaining existing social ties, critical identity work, and foster wellbeing.

Yet, our model is distinct from existing mental health frameworks, particularly in its attention to the place-based experiences of loss and ambiguous loss of home due to war and forced migration, especially after the transition to one's host country. In Jordan, many Syrian men and women found the arid, urban environment in Jordan unfamiliar and alienating and their relationship to the natural environment ruptured. The nature of rented apartments and lack of available public spaces constrained opportunities for gathering, socializing and connecting resulting in isolation, loneliness and a sense of being on one's own. These findings call to mind other research conducted with conflict-affected populations highlighting the interplay between home, conditions of spatial violence and mental wellbeing (Sousa et al., 2014). Such research is relatively rare as interest in the physical, spatial, and environmental conditions of conflict-affected populations has generally been poorly integrated into the mental health literature specific to refugees. Though much research and practice in this area is informed by social-ecological theories that attend to the interrelationship between people and their environments (Hawkins et al., 2021), this invariably lacks in-depth investigation into physical, spatial or place-based aspects of experiences. This is quizzical given that the single experience unifying refugees is that of uprooting from home and we commonly speak of such populations as *displaced* (Papadopoulos, 2018). Findings from this study, therefore, join other work in advocating for more environmentally oriented, place-based research and placemaking practices, which can inspire services and programs that more fully attend to a holistic view of people within their environments, and a multidimensional conceptualization of "home" (Magan and Padgett, 2021; Kemp, 2009).

The findings also differ from the extant refugee mental health literature in the focus on loss. Compared to the massive body of research on trauma experiences, PTSD and trauma-focused interventions for refugees, research on loss-related experiences or interventions designed to address grief-related experiences is comparatively small (Killikelly et al., 2018, 2021). Early work in the refugee mental health field introduced the concept of cultural bereavement to capture the bereavement phenomenon specific to Southeast Asian refugees and which included losses to social structures, cultural values and self-identity (Eisenbruch, 1984). There is indication of growing interest in grief and loss as evidenced by more recent research into constructs such as prolonged or complicated grief (Bryant et al., 2020, 2021; Higson-Smith, 2014; Nickerson et al., 2014), traumatic loss and the mental health impact of loss events (Vromans et al., 2017). Ambiguous losses as described in this paper are inherently entwined with other event-based traumas and grief reactions that are more frequently addressed in the refugee mental health literature, such as the trauma of war, tragic or violent death of loved ones, witnessing violence or experiencing violence. Investigation into the role of such experiences in refugees' lives are all critical areas of research. Ambiguous loss of home draws attention to the partial, continuous, social-relational losses that can be equally challenging to one's adjustment and success during resettlement and helps us understand grief as a potentially lifelong phenomenon that evolves and shifts over time. This is important because such losses are endemic to refugees' experiences, yet are frequently overlooked in research, practice and policy.



## Implications

The findings have implications for theory, practice, research and policy with Syrian refugee communities. In terms of theory, this is the first known study to utilize ambiguous loss to conceptualize the experiences of a refugee population in a humanitarian context. This can open new ways of theorizing the experiences of refugees in ways that go beyond the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) construct (Eagle and Kaminer, 2013). Whereas the original ambiguous loss theory is based on the idea of the psychological family, here we use the concept of *home* to capture the multifaceted construction of one's homeplace which can include and goes beyond physical structures to includes social experiences, identity, values and practices. This was found to be important for highlighting the less visible ambiguous losses associated with war and forced migration that go beyond the absence or presence of people as well as the adaptive strategies and processes that participants engaged in to cope and settle into their new environment. These findings are presented as an initial conceptualization of ambiguous loss of home of Syrian refugees in Jordan and one that will benefit from additional research and theory development.

Advancing ambiguous loss of home as a lens for refugees' experiences also raises practice questions about the kinds of services needed to support individuals and communities enduring and coping with such profound loss. In their case study, Utržan and Northwood (2017) emphasized the work of finding language to describe the experience of ambiguous loss, normalizing ambivalent thoughts and feelings, and working towards strengthening new forms of meaning, identity as well as new attachments. Family, group and community-level approaches may also be well-suited as they can break isolation and facilitate connections and new meaning (Bunn et al., 2016; Boss, 2006). There is an emerging evidence base for these types of interventions (Slobodin and de Jong, 2015; Tyrer and Fazel, 2014) and there are also many service organizations already practicing in this way, advancing psychosocial community-based and group service approaches to support forced migrants in displacement and resettlement contexts in recreating a sense of community and home in the context of displacement and exile (Bunn et al., 2022; Haroz et al., 2020; Murakami and Chen, 2019). There is an urgent need for additional research into such models to examine approaches that are well-suited to support these broader range of needs.

At a structural level, this study found that aspects of the refugee aid system including family separation, inconsistent benefits, and housing were disempowering and complicated Syrian men and women's efforts to create a sense of home in displacement. This raises questions about how we may re-envision systems-level policies to prevent some of these negative consequences.

This includes attention to how we reimagine the public sphere for Syrian refugees and similarly displaced communities and create spaces for connecting and socializing in the context of displacement. Placemaking strategies, for example, refer to activities where individuals or groups engage with and transform the spaces they inhabit in ways that can strengthen their connection to the places where they live, improve social networks and relationships in communities and positively impact mental health (Toolis, 2017). There are examples of this kind of work with immigrant and refugee communities that focus on the creation of real and metaphorical spaces, such as through urban gardening initiatives,

cooking groups and income-generation projects (Gerber et al., 2017; Perkins et al., 2017). Such models have not been well-researched to date though may offer an additional avenue for addressing needs related to displacement while simultaneously advancing livelihood, mental health and social relationships.

This study has implications for immigration policy more broadly. Historically, refugees remain stateless for prolonged periods before official resettlement, if permanent resettlement is ever possible. This study was conducted at a time when highly restrictive policies towards immigrants and refugees were put into place and when totals for refugee resettlement were at an all-time low. Data collection for this project coincided with the U.S refugee ban, preventing Syrians from seeking permanent resettlement in the U.S and similar restrictive migration policies have also been implemented across Europe (Pierce and Selee, 2017). These policies function to prolong the indeterminate status of Syrian refugees hoping for the security that resettlement offers to them and their children.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are grounded within a sample of Syrian refugees. This is important context when considering how the model may relate to other refugee and forcibly displaced communities or humanitarian settings. Yet, as described in the background literature and discussion, many of the key findings align with existing literature, including refugees and non-refugee displaced populations thus suggesting potential relevance across cultures and contexts. Future research can engage other refugee communities to develop the model further and with time, uncover culturally specific aspects from model elements that may be common across cultures and settings.

### Limitations

It is important to acknowledge some of the inherent challenges of conducting research with communities escaping long-term political oppression, as is the case with Syrian refugees. Along with other research with Syrian refugees (Pearlman, 2016), this study found that study participants continued to fear for their safety in displacement and expressed widespread mistrust. Though we took deliberate steps to minimize this by working with a trusted partner and maximizing self-determination through recruitment processes, this sense of fear very likely informed how study participants engaged with the research team in this study and they may have felt uncomfortable sharing aspects of their current experiences. Findings are viewed as a building block, intended to be refined through long-term engagement with the Syrian refugee community.

The study primarily engaged adult, married participants who identified as Muslim. Thus, additional research on ambiguous loss of home process model would benefit from inclusion of young adults, unmarried adults and older adults and Syrians from other faith backgrounds to enrich understanding and examine potential similarities and differences across their experiences. It is important to note that the findings reflect the views and experiences of Syrian men and women who were seeking and had received mental health services from the partner organization prior to the study.

Lastly, there are also numerous challenges associated with crosscultural and cross-language research. As authors educated and living in the Global North, we lack direct experience

of what home means to the people of Syria and how that has changed for people who have been forced to move to Jordan. While the study was designed to incorporate culture and context-specific points of view, meanings may have been lost or compromised through translation and analysis processes.

## Conclusion

This study highlights a group of Syrian refugees and their experiences of resettlement and remaking of home. By focusing on the social and relational dimension of that process, we were able to examine processes that are core to adjustment, particularly for persons from sociocentric and cosmocentric cultures, but are nonetheless often overlooked and understudied. While participants certainly required safe physical spaces during their transitions to Jordan, they deeply grieved dimensions of home that transcend the physical structure of housing. Ambiguous loss theory, and specifically theorizing participants' grief and struggles as rooted in four dimensions of ambiguous loss, helped to characterize these losses. Such theorizing also underscores a more complex set of processes that often remain outside the array of supports and services provided by many of our current practices and policies with displaced populations generally, and Syrian refugees specifically. We call on those supporting Syrians in exile to consider the constructs advanced in this paper in the planning and implementation of psychosocial and mental health care; for researchers to develop robust understanding of multi-faceted loss and change following war and forced migration and to develop evidence-based services and interventions that can foster social repair and support social connections and sense of community in displacement. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we hope that others, especially researchers with emic standpoints grounded in lived experiences of displacement will critically and conceptually engage this initial process model of ambiguous loss of home.

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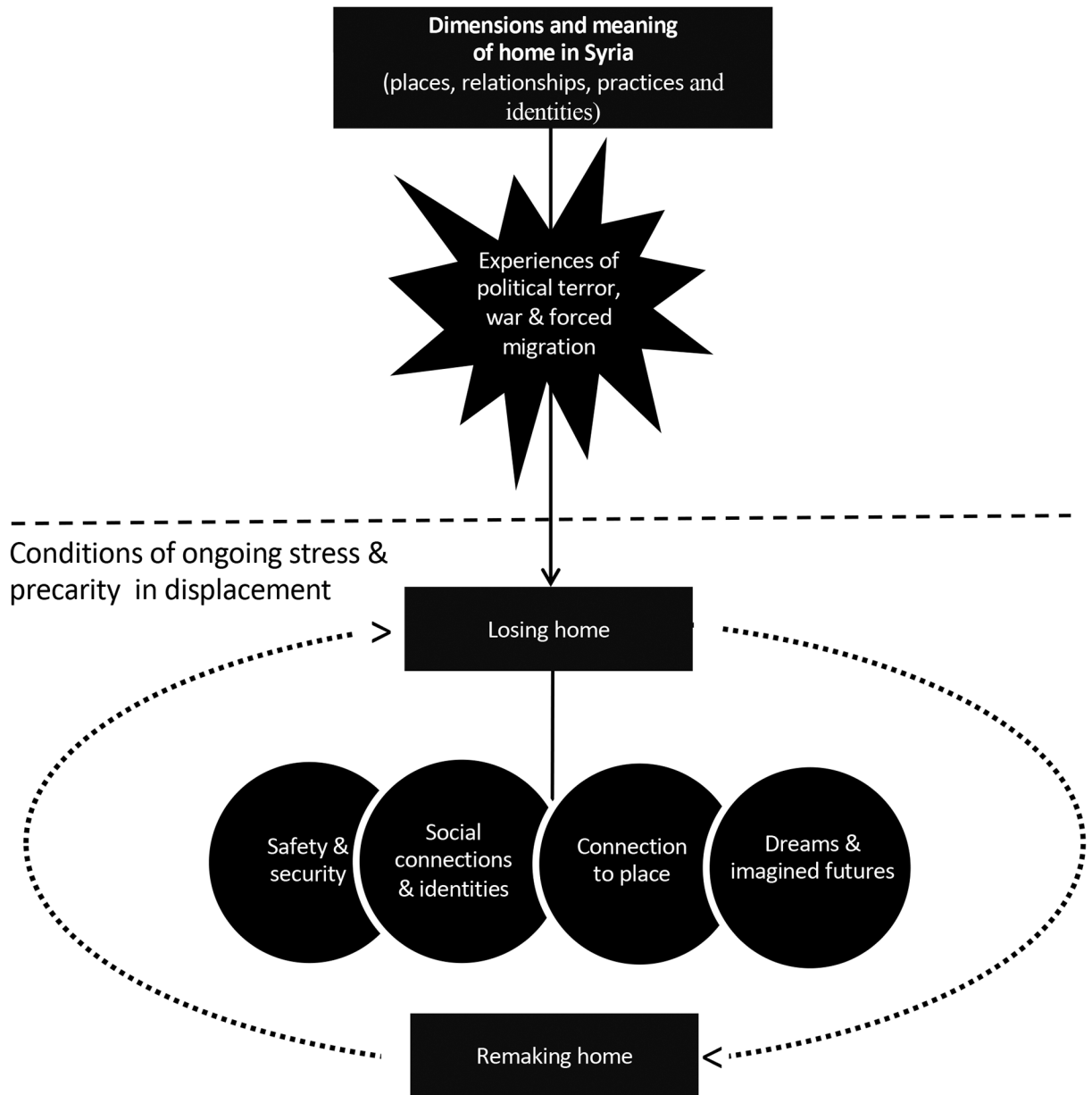
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**Figure 1:**  
A process model of ambiguous loss of home