

Identity Transformation and Transnational Solidarity in “Double Diasporas”: The Syrian Circassians in Türkiye

by

Bahar Ayça Okçuoğlu

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Diasporas”: The Syrian Circassians in Türkiye**

Koc University

Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities

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Bahar Ayça Okçuoğlu

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examining committee have been made.

Committee Members:

Prof. Ahmet İçduygu (Advisor)

Assoc. Prof. Çetin Çelik

Prof. Ayhan Kaya

Assoc. Prof. Damla Bayraktar Aksel

Prof. Deniz Sert

Date: September 12, 2025

ABSTRACT

Identity Transformation and Transnational Solidarity in “Double Diasporas”: The Syrian Circassians in Türkiye

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This dissertation explores the diasporic identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices of Syrian Circassians who were displaced by the Syrian civil war and resettled in Türkiye. Framed within the broader literature on forced migration, double diaspora, and transnationalism, the study aims to examine how a community already shaped by historical displacement navigates another forced migration. It particularly investigates how Syrian Circassians reconstruct their identities and maintain or reconfigure their transnational connections in a new sociopolitical context. This dissertation develops the concept of double diaspora to capture the layered experiences of Syrian Circassians, shaped by both historical exile from the Caucasus and recent displacement from Syria. By analyzing individual narratives and civil society dynamics, it contributes to diaspora studies by framing double diaspora as a lived process of ongoing negotiation across multiple homelands, identities, and solidarities. To address these questions, the dissertation adopts a multi-level methodological approach, combining individual and organizational perspectives. Through its empirical focus and reflexive engagement, this dissertation contributes both conceptually and methodologically to the study of double diasporas, illustrating how identity and solidarity are co-constructed across borders in the face of enduring displacement.

Keywords: Double Diaspora, Syrian Circassians, Diasporic Identity, Transnational Solidarity, Civil Society Organizations

ÖZETÇE

“Çifte Diasporalarda” Kimlik Dönüşümü ve Ulusötesi Dayanışma: Türkiye’deki Suriyeli Çerkesler

Bahar Ayça Okçuoğlu

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Bu tez, Suriye iç savaşı nedeniyle yerinden edilen ve Türkiye’ye göç eden Suriyeli Çerkeslerin diasporik kimlik dönüşümlerini ve ulusötesi dayanışma pratiklerini incelemektedir. Zorunlu göç, çifte diaspora ve ulusötesicilik literatürü çerçevesinde konumlanan çalışma, tarihsel sürgün deneyimiyle şekillenmiş bir topluluğun yeni bir zorunlu göç dalgasıyla nasıl başa çıktığını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Özellikle Suriyeli Çerkeslerin kimliklerini Türkiye’deki yeni sosyo-politik bağlamda nasıl yeniden yapılandırdıklarına ve ulusötesi bağlantılarını nasıl sürdürdüklerine ya da dönüştürdüklerine odaklanmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda tez, hem tarihsel olarak Kafkasya’dan sürgün edilmiş hem de yakın zamanda Suriye’den yerinden edilmiş bir topluluğun katmanlı deneyimlerini analiz ederek, “çifte diaspora” kavramını geliştirmektedir. Bireysel anlatılar ve sivil toplum örgütlerinin rolleri üzerinden yapılan analizle, çifte diasporayı çoklu anavatanlar, kimlikler ve dayanışma biçimleri arasında süregiden bir müzakere süreci olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Bireysel ve kurumsal düzeyleri bir araya getiren çok katmanlı metodolojik yaklaşımıyla bu tez, hem kavramsal hem de yöntemsel açıdan çifte diasporalar literatürüne katkıda bulunmakta; kalıcı yerinden edilme koşullarında kimlik ve dayanışmanın sınırlar ötesinde nasıl birlikte inşa edildiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çifte Diaspora, Suriye Çerkesleri, Diasporik Kimlik, Ulusötesi Dayanışma, Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The concept of diaspora has been theorized through a set of defining features that reflect both historical experiences and ongoing practices of dispersed communities. Foundational scholars such as Safran (1991), Brubaker (2005), and Tölölyan (1996) have identified several key elements that characterize diasporic formations. These typically include a shared history of dispersal from an ancestral homeland, the persistence of collective memories or myths related to that homeland, and a sense of estrangement or marginalization within the host society. Diasporas are also often marked by a sustained, if sometimes symbolic, desire for return—whether physically or imaginatively—to the homeland, as well as by forms of continued engagement with it, such as political activism, financial support, or cultural reproduction. Crucially, these elements are held together through a collective identity that transcends national boundaries and reinforces a sense of belonging among dispersed members. Rather than being static, this identity is dynamic, shaped by historical ruptures, contemporary geopolitical contexts, and evolving transnational connections.

Building upon this framework, diasporic identities are not solely defined by the condition of dispersion but are also actively constructed through multiple intersecting dimensions. As scholars such as Clifford (1994), Safran (1991), and Butler (2001) have argued, these identities can be shaped around shared cultural, religious, or linguistic features, as well as around collective memories of displacement and trauma. Nostalgia for the homeland—whether it is a place of origin, a symbolic center, or an imagined community—often plays a central role in sustaining diasporic belonging. In some cases, this longing is tied to discourses of real or imagined return, while in others, it is maintained through continued emotional, material, or political connections with the homeland. Contact with the homeland, whether through travel, digital communication, remittances, or activism, becomes a crucial mechanism for reinforcing diasporic consciousness. These identity constructions are fluid and relational; they emerge through everyday practices, intergenerational narratives, and the ways diasporic subjects navigate their positions between the homeland and the host society.

Thus, diasporic identity is not a fixed essence, but a negotiated process shaped by memory, mobility, and the ongoing negotiation of belonging across borders.

While existing scholarship on diasporas has offered valuable insights into collective identity, memory, and transnational engagement, the concept of the “double diaspora” remains largely under-theorized. In the limited academic work that does reference the term, it is typically framed within the context of voluntary return—where later generations of diasporic communities seek to reconnect with what they perceive as their ancestral homeland (Guo, 2016; Erciyes, 2008; Hang, 1995). These studies often treat “double diaspora” as a return migration narrative, wherein descendants of earlier exiles make a conscious choice to reverse the path of displacement.

However, such interpretations overlook a crucial dimension of diasporic experience: that subsequent generations may themselves become subject to forced displacement, not as voluntary returnees, but as victims of new conflicts and upheavals. This study seeks to address this gap by repositioning the concept of “double diaspora” to capture the compounded vulnerability of individuals who, already part of a displaced community, experience a second (or subsequent) wave of displacement. Rather than emphasizing return as a journey of self-actualization or cultural reclamation, this study foregrounds the recursive nature of exile—how the descendants of exiles are thrust into new cycles of rupture, and identity renegotiation.

While concepts such as return migration, protracted displacement, recursive exile, or secondary migration capture important aspects of mobility, they do not fully convey the specificity of the Circassian case. Return migration might be theorized as a process of voluntary or strategic movement back to an ancestral homeland (King and Kuschminder, 2022), whereas the trajectory of Syrian Circassians was not toward the Caucasus but toward Turkey, itself another locus of Circassian dispersal. Protracted displacement generally refers to refugee situations that extend for years without durable solutions (Kraler et al., 2021), but this framework overlooks the historical depth of Circassians’ diasporic condition, which long predates the Syrian conflict. The notion of recursive exile usefully emphasizes repeated cycles of uprooting (Clifford, 1994), yet it lacks the explicitly diasporic dimension through which Circassians themselves interpret their histories of dispersal. Similarly, secondary

migration, which describes onward refugee movement from a first country of asylum to another, is limited to legal and administrative trajectories and does not capture the cultural and transnational solidarities that shape Circassian mobility.

By contrast, the term double diaspora foregrounds the fact that what is at stake is not only another episode of displacement, but the experience of displacement as a diaspora community. Syrian Circassians' vulnerability cannot be reduced to their status as Syrians displaced by war; it is inseparable from their identity as Circassians, a people historically exiled from the Caucasus and resettled across the Ottoman domains. Their recent flight from Syria should thus be read not merely as a refugee or migration trajectory, but as a continuation of a long-standing diasporic form of existence, in which exile, rupture, and identity renegotiation are recursive features of life in a double diaspora.

The case of Syrian Circassians provides a particularly compelling lens through which to explore the overlooked phenomenon of repeated forced displacement. Originating from their ancestral homeland in the Northwest Caucasus, Circassians were exiled in the 19th century during and after the Russian-Circassian War, leading to their mass dispersal across the Ottoman Empire. They settled in regions including today's Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, and Türkiye. In Syria, where many arrived in the early 19th century, Circassians succeeded in maintaining a vibrant diasporic identity over generations. They preserved their language, practiced communal and cultural traditions in everyday life, and developed strong kinship and social networks through both village life and formal associations.

However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war marked a recurring rupture in this historical trajectory, forcing many Circassians to flee once again—this time to Türkiye, the Caucasus, or Europe. This new wave of displacement reactivated deeply rooted historical traumas while also generating new challenges under contemporary conditions of uncertainty. The emotional weight of this fourth exile often echoes inherited memories of the first, resulting in a multi-layered diasporic consciousness shaped by both collective memory and lived experience. This recursive exile—where descendants of those once displaced are again uprooted—illustrates the complexities of what can be theorized as a “double diaspora”: a condition marked not by voluntary return, but by repeated, and often traumatic, dislocations. In this sense, Syrian Circassians represent more than a community in transit; they embody a

diasporic subjectivity formed through the intersection of historical exile and present-day precarity.

Building on this conceptual framework of double diaspora and the historical trajectory of Circassians in Syria, this study turns to the lived experiences of Syrian Circassians who have been displaced once more in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war. By tracing their narratives of forced migration, adaptation, identity transformation, and transnational solidarity, the research seeks to unpack the complex interplay between memory, belonging, and mobility. The following sections outline the key research questions that guide the study, its broader significance within diaspora and migration scholarship, the methodological strategies employed in the field, and the scope and limitations that shape the inquiry. In doing so, the study situates itself at the intersection of diasporic memory and contemporary displacement, offering both an empirical and conceptual contribution to the evolving literature on diasporic formations.

1.1 Research Questions

This research aims to explore diasporic identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices through the conceptual lens of the “double diaspora”—a term that captures the layered experiences of communities subjected to multiple waves of displacement across time and space. It specifically centers on the case of Syrian Circassians, a community that exemplifies the complexities of such trajectories. Initially exiled from their North Caucasian homeland in the late 19th century following the Russian conquest, Circassians were resettled across various parts of the Ottoman Empire, including present-day Syria. For generations, they maintained a distinct communal identity, preserving language, customs, and kinship networks within the host society. However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war triggered another major displacement, forcing many to seek refuge in Türkiye, the Caucasus, or Europe. This renewed migration has not only reopened historical wounds but has also catalyzed new processes of identity negotiation and collective mobilization.

In this context, the concept of double diaspora offers a powerful analytical tool for understanding how diasporic identities are continuously reshaped under conditions of both historical memory and contemporary precarity. The study will explore this duality across

both individual and organizational levels. On the one hand, it will examine how individuals—often drawing on inherited memories of exile—navigate their current displacement, reconfigure their sense of belonging, and engage in identity work under shifting sociopolitical conditions. On the other hand, it will consider how Circassian civil society organizations (CSOs), especially those in Türkiye, mediate experiences of solidarity and support, and how they reinterpret diasporic obligations in light of contemporary crises. In doing so, the research aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of how forced migration, historical trauma, and transnational networks interact to shape the contours of diasporic life under conditions of repeated displacement.

This study aims to offer a significant contribution to diaspora studies by reassessing the concept of diaspora through the lens of repeated, forced displacement—an aspect often overlooked in mainstream theoretical debates. By foregrounding the experiences of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, the research addresses an empirical case that has received little scholarly attention at the doctoral level, thereby filling a notable gap in the literature. The study's originality lies in its multi-dimensional approach, which examines not only identity construction in the context of exile but also the complex web of transnational relations that sustain diasporic life across generations and borders. First, how Syrian Circassians, a diasporic community living in Türkiye, construct and maintain their diasporic identity after forced displacement; second, how transnational kinship ties provide solidarity for them; and third, the role of Circassian CSOs in transnational solidarity. Taken together, these three dimensions allow for a holistic understanding of the “double diaspora” condition and offer new insights into how diasporic communities respond to ongoing dislocation not only through survival strategies but also through renewed cultural and political agency.

More specifically, the main research questions are as follows:

- How do Syrian Circassians in Türkiye construct and maintain their diasporic identities in the aftermath of forced displacement?
- How do Syrian Circassians build and maintain transnational solidarity connections?
- What role do Circassian civil society organizations in Türkiye play in the establishment and maintenance of these connections?

The first research question delves into the intimate, lived experiences of Syrian Circassians as they navigate the complex interplay between their historical past, current realities, and future aspirations. This inquiry focuses on how individuals in the diaspora reconcile these temporal dimensions within a transnational context—meaning their sense of belonging and identity is not confined to a single nation-state but spans across multiple geographic and cultural spaces. The investigation considers belonging not as a fixed or singular attachment but as a dynamic and evolving sense of place and community, shaped by memory, tradition, and ongoing social interactions. Furthermore, the study looks at how cultural practices—such as language use, rituals, culinary traditions, and folklore—act as vehicles through which Syrian Circassians sustain their distinct identity and express continuity with their ancestral homeland. Yet, these cultural expressions are not static; rather, they transform as individuals encounter new socio-political environments, including the pressures and opportunities presented by displacement and resettlement in Türkiye.

A key analytical focus is on the fluidity of diasporic identities. This recognizes that identity among Syrian Circassians is not monolithic or essentialized but is continuously redefined in response to changing circumstances. People may negotiate multiple and overlapping affiliations—ethnic, national, linguistic, religious—balancing the preservation of Circassian heritage with adaptation to Turkish society and the broader regional context. This fluidity highlights the tension between cultural preservation and hybridization, as well as the agency of individuals in shaping their diasporic self-understandings.

The second research question turns to the transnational networks that connect Syrian Circassians beyond physical borders. It investigates how kinship ties, family connections, and community networks operate across countries, enabling social, cultural, and economic exchanges that sustain a shared diasporic identity. These ties may manifest in frequent communication, collective celebrations, mutual aid, and collaborative cultural activities that reaffirm a sense of belonging to a dispersed Circassian community. The analysis pays particular attention to the role of diasporic organizations, Circassian CSOs in Türkiye, which serve as institutional anchors for maintaining connections, organizing events, and advocating for community interests. These organizations help to formalize and coordinate practices of solidarity, and cultural transmission. The solidarity practices within these networks are not

merely symbolic; they are vital lifelines that provide both emotional sustenance and material support. In a context marked by forced migration and precarious living conditions, such networks help members cope with challenges by offering advice, financial aid, assistance in navigating bureaucratic processes, and opportunities for social integration. These mechanisms strengthen the resilience of the diasporic community and reinforce collective identity.

The third research question focuses on the organizational role of Circassian CSOs in Türkiye in mediating between Syrian Circassians and the broader social-political environment. This question examines how CSOs actively engage with the Syrian Circassian population, aiming to support the maintenance of diasporic identity while facilitating transnational solidarity. The analysis explores the practical activities of these organizations, such as helping newcomers with citizenship applications, offering language courses (notably Turkish and Circassian), assisting in employment opportunities, and providing housing support. These functions reflect the dual role of CSOs as both providers of cultural activities and social services. At the organizational level, the research assesses how these CSOs contribute to the integration of Syrian Circassians into Turkish society, helping them navigate legal, economic, and social challenges, while simultaneously nurturing their ongoing connection to Circassian cultural heritage and diasporic networks. This dual engagement illustrates how CSOs operate at the intersection of local adaptation and global belonging, supporting Syrian Circassians in sustaining a plural identity that embraces both their new context and their ancestral roots.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The unique contribution of this research lies in its ambitious theoretical and conceptual expansion of the double diaspora framework, an analytical lens that remains underdeveloped and underutilized in diaspora studies. While the concept of double diaspora has attracted some academic attention, it has predominantly been explored through the lens of diasporic communities or their descendants who engage in return migration—that is, those who reestablish physical, cultural, or political connections with their ancestral homelands after initial displacement (Guo, 2016; Erciyes, 2008; Hang, 1995). Existing scholarship tends to frame double diaspora primarily as a phenomenon involving circular or cyclical migration

patterns, where diasporic individuals or groups navigate multiple homeland affiliations over time, often emphasizing the processes of reintegration, reconciliation, and identity reconstruction linked to return. These studies highlight how the return journey shapes notions of belonging, collective memory, and identity within the community, portraying double diaspora as a two-way movement between original and secondary homelands.

This research challenges and extends that conventional understanding by shifting the analytical focus away from the paradigm of return migration and instead centering on the experience of forced displacement and recurrent migration. The case of Syrian Circassians, who have endured multiple waves of displacement—from their historic homeland in the Caucasus to Balkans, from Balkans to Syria, from today's Israel to Syria with the establishment of Israel, and subsequently from Syria to Türkiye—embodies a complex layering of diasporic identities shaped by ongoing ruptures and resettlements rather than by return. By emphasizing the conditions of repeated forced displacement, this study foregrounds how diasporic identities are continually negotiated, reshaped, and reconfigured in contexts marked by instability, uncertainty, and the absence of a stable “home” to return to. It highlights the fluid, non-linear trajectories of diaspora formation, where attachments to place and community are mediated through experiences of loss, adaptation, and transnational connections, rather than through a singular return journey. The study opens new avenues for understanding how multiple layers of displacement influence the ways in which diasporic subjects conceptualize their histories, cultural belonging, and political solidarities across borders. Thus, the study not only fills a critical gap in the literature by addressing a less-explored dimension of double diaspora but also provides a more nuanced and dynamic model that accounts for the complexities of forced migration, prolonged exile, and transnational identity construction in the 21st century.

By centering Syrian Circassians as an empirical case, this study offers a distinctive and valuable contribution to the broader field of diaspora studies by illuminating the complex experiences of a community that is already characterized by a history of displacement and exile, yet is now facing a fourth wave of forced migration. This unique trajectory provides a rare opportunity to explore how a community with a longstanding diasporic identity responds to new challenges of displacement, adapting and reconstructing its sense of self and

community within a new host country, primarily Türkiye. The study focuses on how Syrian Circassians negotiate the tension between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to a new socio-political environment, where their identity must be continually reinterpreted and renegotiated. It fills a critical empirical and theoretical gap by providing an in-depth investigation of how Syrian Circassians maintain, transform, and negotiate their diasporic identities within a transnational framework that spans their historical homeland, former residence in Syria, and new environment in Türkiye. This includes examining the roles of family networks, cultural practices, civil society organizations, and transnational solidarity in sustaining community cohesion and identity.

This research advances scholarly conversations in two fundamental dimensions that deepen both the conceptual frameworks and empirical understanding of diaspora phenomena:

a- Theoretical Contribution:

By reframing the notion of double diaspora through the specific context of repeated forced displacement, this study brings fresh conceptual clarity to how diasporic identities are not only preserved but also transformed through successive migrations. It moves beyond static or linear models of diaspora formation, emphasizing the interconnectedness between mobility, memory, and identity negotiation within shifting geopolitical realities. This approach foregrounds the importance of social actors—individuals, families, and organizations—in actively sustaining and adapting cultural identities amid discontinuities, rather than viewing identity as merely inherited or preserved unchanged. This analytical perspective enriches ongoing debates around the interplay between structure and agency in diasporic life, illustrating how communities creatively navigate constraints posed by displacement and resettlement.

b- Empirical Contribution:

Through an examination of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, this research contributes a much-needed context-specific case study that captures the lived realities of a community grappling with multiple layers of displacement. The empirical data reveal the nuanced ways in which displaced individuals and groups forge new solidarities, negotiate belonging, and maintain cultural ties—processes that are often obscured in broader migration narratives. The study

also highlights the critical intermediary role of Circassian CSOs, which act as bridges between diasporic identities and host country structures. These organizations facilitate practical support and cultural preservation, underscoring how institutional actors are integral to community resilience and social integration. This insight adds empirical depth to the understanding of how civil society functions within diasporic settings, moving beyond abstract theories to highlight tangible mechanisms of support and cultural continuity.

Together, these contributions position Syrian Circassians as a vital case that intersects key themes in diaspora studies: the ongoing challenges of identity formation under conditions of repeated disaster, the centrality of transnational and community networks, and the intersection between cultural preservation and socio-political integration. This research thereby enriches broader discussions within diaspora scholarship, transnationalism, and forced migration studies by illustrating how resilience and agency manifest in complex, multilayered diasporic experiences.

1.3 Methodological Approach and Reflexivity

To thoroughly investigate the complex processes of diasporic identity transformation and the practices of transnational solidarity among Syrian Circassians, this study employs a multi-level methodological framework that captures both macro and micro dimensions of the community's experience.

The data collection strategically targets two interrelated but distinct levels of analysis. First, the study engages with Circassian CSOs in Türkiye, which operate as formal institutional actors that structure, coordinate, and implement various forms of community support and cultural preservation. These organizations provide a critical perspective for understanding how solidarity is institutionalized, how cultural heritage is organized and transmitted, and how displaced populations are integrated within the socio-political context of the host country. Examining CSOs offers insights into organizational strategies, resource mobilization, and the ways collective identity is articulated and maintained in public and political arenas. Second, the study focuses on the individual lived experiences of Syrian Circassians who have undergone forced migration due to the Syrian civil war and subsequently resettled in Türkiye. This component allows for an intimate exploration of

personal narratives, identity transformations, and everyday practices that shape how individuals reconcile their histories, cultural attachments, and new social realities. By capturing these subjective dimensions, the research reveals how diasporic identities are actively lived and performed, highlighting the agency of community members amid displacement and transition.

The integration of both levels creates a comprehensive and nuanced analytical framework. It enables the study to bridge the often-segregated domains of institutional analysis and individual experience, demonstrating how macro-level structures and micro-level processes interact to shape the broader dynamics of a diasporic community. This dual focus uncovers the reciprocal relationships between organizational solidarity practices and personal identity reconstruction, showing how CSOs both influence and respond to the needs and aspirations of displaced individuals. Furthermore, this methodological approach allows the research to capture the multifaceted nature of diaspora, where identity and solidarity are not only shaped by formal institutions but also by informal networks, social interactions, and individual coping strategies. It highlights the layered complexity of diasporic life and provides a rich empirical basis to understand the resilience and adaptability of Syrian Circassians in the face of recurrent displacement.

Between July and December 2023, a total of 46 semi-structured interviews were conducted in three key urban centers—Istanbul, Ankara, and Duzce—which represent important hubs of Syrian Circassian settlement in Türkiye. This geographic diversity was intentional to capture a broad spectrum of experiences shaped by different local contexts, varying degrees of community infrastructure, and diverse integration dynamics. The interviewees were carefully selected to include two distinct but interconnected groups that are central to the research's dual-level analytical framework:

- 33 interviews were conducted with Syrian Circassians who had to migrate to Türkiye due to the Syrian civil war. This cohort comprises individuals of varying ages, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and migration trajectories, ensuring a rich diversity of perspectives on the challenges and adaptations associated with forced displacement. These interviews sought to illuminate personal narratives of identity transformation, belonging, and cultural practice, while also exploring how individuals

maintain and renegotiate connections with both their previous home in Syria and the broader Circassian diaspora.

- 13 interviews were conducted with officials from Circassian CSOs in Türkiye, including leaders and active members involved in managing programs, advocacy, and cultural activities. Engaging with CSO representatives provided crucial insights into organizational missions, the nature of solidarity practices, resource mobilization, and the ways these institutions respond to and shape the needs of displaced Syrian Circassians. These conversations also shed light on institutional challenges and opportunities in facilitating integration and cultural continuity.

The choice of a semi-structured interview format was critical to the study's methodological rigor. This format allowed for a consistent exploration of core themes—such as diasporic identity construction, transnational solidarity networks, and mechanisms of community support—across all participants, ensuring comparability and thematic coherence. At the same time, it provided the flexibility to adapt questions dynamically to each participant's unique circumstances and insights, fostering rich, nuanced narratives and uncovering unexpected dimensions of experience. The interviews aimed to capture not only how Syrian Circassians understand and perform their diasporic identity amid the ongoing challenges of forced migration but also how civil society actors mobilize collective resources to foster solidarity, cultural preservation, and practical assistance. Collectively, these interviews form the empirical backbone of the study, offering a layered and multifaceted picture of the Syrian Circassian diaspora's resilience and adaptation in a new national context, thereby enriching the theoretical and practical understanding of forced migration and diaspora dynamics.

An essential aspect of this study lies in the researcher's positionality as a member of the Circassian community, a factor that deeply shapes the research process, outcomes, and ethical considerations. Recognizing and openly acknowledging this insider status is crucial for fostering transparency, reflexivity, and methodological rigor throughout the study. Rather than viewing positionality as a limitation, this insider perspective is embraced as a valuable asset that enhances the depth and authenticity of the research.

Being part of the Circassian community grants the researcher unique access to cultural knowledge, norms, and practices that might otherwise remain opaque to external observers.

This intimate familiarity facilitates a richer, more nuanced understanding of the complex processes of diasporic identity transformation, enabling the researcher to contextualize participants' narratives within shared histories, languages, traditions, and emotional landscapes. It allows for an empathetic engagement with participants' lived experiences, capturing subtle meanings, unspoken assumptions, and community-specific references that deepen the interpretative quality of the analysis. Furthermore, the insider position enables the researcher to better comprehend the emotional and social contexts in which identity negotiations take place—contexts often marked by displacement, loss, resilience, and hope. This sensitivity is particularly important in studies of forced migration and diaspora, where personal histories and collective memory intersect with ongoing socio-political challenges.

However, this dual role of insider and researcher also presents significant challenges. A key tension lies in maintaining an appropriate balance between empathy and analytical objectivity. Close personal connections, shared community membership, and emotional ties could unintentionally shape data collection, interpretation, and presentation, potentially introducing biases or blind spots. Conversely, the researcher may face internal conflicts in critically examining sensitive or contested aspects of the community's identity and history.

To navigate these complexities, reflexivity assumes a central role in the research design and implementation. Reflexivity involves the researcher's continuous critical self-awareness and self-questioning regarding how her background, values, beliefs, and relationships influence all stages of the research process—from formulating questions and conducting interviews to analyzing data and drawing conclusions (Luttrell, 2019). It requires an ongoing commitment to interrogate one's own positionality, to recognize potential biases, and to transparently disclose these influences on readers. A comprehensive and detailed discussion of these issues will be included in the methodology chapter, where the implications of this dual positionality for objectivity and subjectivity will be critically examined. This section will provide readers with a clear understanding of how the researcher consciously negotiated the inherent tensions of being both a community insider and an objective analyst, thereby contributing to the overall transparency, rigor, and ethical grounding of the study.

1.4 Scope of The Study

The study is structured into seven chapters, each contributing a critical piece to the overall analysis of Syrian Circassians' diasporic identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices.

Chapter Two provides a thorough historical and sociopolitical overview of the Circassian dispersions, situating the community's contemporary experiences within a deep temporal and geopolitical context. It begins by tracing the forced migrations during the late Ottoman period, examining the circumstances that led to the initial Circassian exodus from the Caucasus and their subsequent resettlement in various parts of the Ottoman Empire, including Syria. This historical narrative sets the stage for understanding the complex legacies of displacement that continue to influence Circassian identities. The chapter then focuses on the Circassian presence in Syria, exploring how the community established itself, maintained cultural and social practices, and navigated local political dynamics over time. It pays particular attention to the impact of the Syrian civil war as a catalyst for a new wave of displacement, precipitating the movement of Syrian Circassians primarily into Türkiye. Moving forward, the chapter examines the Circassian community within Türkiye, highlighting the processes through which diasporic identities were formed and evolved in this new national setting. This includes an exploration of political activism and civil society engagement, illustrating how Circassian associations and organizations have sought to preserve cultural heritage, advocate for community rights, and foster transnational connections. The chapter also delves into the transnational encounters and solidarity networks that link Circassians across borders, providing a nuanced understanding of how these ties sustain a shared diasporic consciousness.

The theoretical chapter (Chapter Three) grounds the empirical study in the broader field of diaspora scholarship. It engages critically with classical diaspora theories, revisiting foundational definitions and debates about the nature of diaspora, identity, and belonging. This chapter also addresses categorization debates within the field and the implications of such classifications for understanding identity and community dynamics. Central to this chapter is the exploration of the concept of double diaspora, which serves as a key conceptual lens for analyzing the Syrian Circassian experience. The chapter elaborates on how this

framework helps illuminate the layered and recurrent displacements that shape the community's identity formation and transnational practices. Complementing these theoretical foundations, the chapter introduces the framework of transnational solidarity, emphasizing the importance of social networking and institutional channels—particularly through CSOs—as crucial arenas where diasporic activities are organized and sustained. This theoretical discussion sets the stage for subsequent empirical analysis by clarifying the key concepts and analytical tools guiding the study.

Chapter Four, the methodology chapter, outlines the research design and methods employed to capture the complexity of diasporic identity and solidarity among Syrian Circassians. This chapter provides a detailed account of the multi-level approach, explaining how data were gathered from both individual community members and institutional actors within Circassian civil society organizations in Türkiye. A significant portion of this chapter is devoted to discussing the researcher's positionality as an insider within the Circassian community, acknowledging how this dual role shapes access, trust, and interpretation. It emphasizes the practice of reflexivity, illustrating the steps taken to maintain transparency, mitigate bias, and ethically navigate the research process. Furthermore, the chapter elaborates on data collection techniques, including semi-structured interviews, sampling strategies, and fieldwork locations, as well as the analytical methods used to examine the qualitative data. Ethical considerations are highlighted, particularly regarding confidentiality, informed consent, and respectful engagement with participants.

The first analysis chapter focuses on the transformation of Syrian Circassians' identities against the backdrop of their recent forced displacement from Syria to Türkiye. This chapter delves into the often unspoken exile narratives—stories of loss, trauma, and resilience that remain largely untold or marginalized within public discourse. The chapter also critically engages with how Syrian Circassians conceptualize their homeland(s) in a layered and sometimes ambivalent manner, reflecting attachments not only to their ancestral Caucasian homeland but also to their more immediate former home in Syria. These multiple senses of place challenge simplistic notions of homeland and complicate their diasporic identity formation. Furthermore, the chapter examines the cultural dynamics of Circassian life in Syria prior to displacement, highlighting village-based traditions that fostered communal

solidarity, the efforts to preserve the Circassian language despite generational shifts, and the dense community networks that sustained social cohesion and cultural continuity. It situates these practices within the broader context of Syrian society and political structures, which shaped both opportunities and constraints for Circassian identity expression. The chapter then shifts focus to the present realities of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, addressing practical and existential dimensions of their lives, such as challenges surrounding citizenship acquisition, employment prospects, and processes of social integration in a new and sometimes unfamiliar environment. This discussion illustrates how identity transformation is not only cultural but also deeply embedded in socio-economic and political conditions, highlighting the interplay between structural factors and individual agency in the diasporic experience.

Building on this foundation, the second analysis chapter explores how Syrian Circassians have actively reconfigured their transnational connections in response to the disruptions caused by the Syrian Civil War. It investigates the enduring ties that many Syrian Circassians maintain with Syria—whether through family relations, memories, or cultural linkages—even as their physical presence there diminishes. The chapter pays special attention to the role of Circassian CSOs in Türkiye and beyond, which serve as vital institutional actors facilitating solidarity activities, cultural events, and material assistance. The analysis in this chapter highlights how such solidarity practices function as a bridge between personal experiences and collective mobilization, demonstrating how identity and belonging are continually negotiated through both intimate relationships and organized community efforts. It reveals the complexity of transnational engagement in a context of forced migration, where sustaining connections across borders becomes both a source of strength and a challenge amid political and social upheavals.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the study's key findings, underscoring the multidimensional nature of Syrian Circassians' identity transformations. Moreover, the conclusion engages with the study's empirical contributions, situating Syrian Circassians within broader discourses of forced migration, diaspora, and transnationalism, while also reflecting on the theoretical implications of reconceptualizing double diaspora and solidarity frameworks. It also openly addresses the limitations of the study. Finally, the chapter contemplates the potential influence of ongoing and future political developments in Syria

and Türkiye on the community's trajectory, recognizing the persistent uncertainties that characterize the Syrian Circassian diasporic journey. It calls attention to how shifts in regional geopolitics, migration policies, and socio-cultural dynamics may continue to shape their identity negotiations and transnational solidarities in the years ahead.



CHAPTER 2: CIRCASSIANS IN THE LITERATURE

2.1 Historical Context for the Circassian Dispersion

Before delving into the historical context featuring the forced migration of Circassians, it is crucial to address the ongoing debate in Türkiye about the definition of “Circassian”. This clarification will help establish the precise usage of this term within the scope of the study. The word “Circassian”, which describes the Caucasian peoples living in the geography of Türkiye, is an umbrella name used in the geography of Türkiye and Russia, given by the states before it was used by the peoples themselves. In Türkiye, Circassians have not agreed on a common terminology to describe their community, culture, and language (Besleney, 2016). Furthermore, Circassian civil society organizations and actors in Türkiye have not reached a consensus on the definition of the term “Circassian” and they continue to debate. This contradiction has created a fundamental identity debate for Circassian civil society actors in Türkiye since the 1970s and has become a determining factor in political and social organizations. Another argument is that some actors who develop different discourses in this field form the basis of the nationalist discourse of Circassians in Türkiye (Boz, 2019).

The differentiation used to define the term according to geographical regions, which varies depending on the language used, is generally categorized into three divisions¹. The name “Circassian” used in Türkiye and the name “Caucasian” used in Russia refer to peoples who migrated from or live in the Caucasus, covering all three geographical regions. The definition of the word “Circassian” is sometimes based on the Adyghe-speaking groups originating from the North Caucasus, while other times various Circassian groups are included. The reason for this is that despite being a single ethnic group of Caucasian origin, the name “Adyghe” is used synonymously with “Circassian”, especially in Russian and European literature (Boz, 2019). Besleney (2009; 2016) expresses three different conceptualizations of the term “Circassian”. The first is the use of the term “Circassian” as an umbrella name for

¹ North-western Caucasians, Northern (North-central) Caucasians and Dagestanis/North-eastern Caucasians.

all North Caucasian diaspora people in Türkiye. This term is used in the Turkish media and by various North Caucasus organizations. The second is the use of the term to encompass the people of the Northwest Caucasus, namely the Adyghe, Abkhaz, Abaza and Ubykhs of Türkiye. These communities are ethnically and linguistically related with each other, but linguistically distinct from the peoples of the Northeast Caucasus. The third meaning is the term given to the Adyghe in the world in the 18th and 19th centuries. The word “Circassian” used in this study includes the Northwest Caucasians, which Besleney explained as the second concept in his definition.

From their homeland in the Northwest Caucasus, Circassians dispersed to various parts of the Ottoman Empire, Rumelia, Anatolia and Mesopotamia, starting from the 19th century. These regions include today’s Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel and Türkiye. Until the early 20th century, present-day states of Syria, Jordan, and Israel comprised the southern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The forced migration of Circassians was due to the deportations that started in the late 19th century and continued until the early 20th century, the largest of which is considered to have taken place on May 21, 1864. As a result of these deportations, Circassians are thought to have reached numbers ranging between 500,000 and 2 million in Anatolia (Shenfield, 1999; Kaya, 2005; Karpat, 2013). Many tribes were almost destroyed. Thus, the exile of Circassians caused significant changes in the population and social structures both in the Caucasus and in the Middle East.

Accordingly, the historical background can be divided into four periods at this stage:

- 1) Displacement from the North Caucasus, The Circassian Exile (1850-1877): The first Circassians exiled by Russia to the Ottoman Empire were settled in Anatolia and the Balkans, in today’s Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus and Crete Islands. In the Balkans, the Ottomans settled around 175,000 Caucasians in 1864 (Karpat, 2013). It is claimed that Circassians were deliberately settled in these places in order to prevent possible rebellions by Christian communities (ORSAM, 2012). The Russian and the Ottoman Empires had negotiated a treaty and agreed to settle 40,000 to 50,000 Circassians in the Ottoman Empire (Karpat, 2013). About 150,000 Circassians were dispersed and resettled in Russian territories outside of the Caucasus, besides their exile to the Ottoman Empire

(Shami, 1994). In the end, the estimated numbers for dispersed Circassians are ranging between 500,000 and 2 million (Shenfield, 1999; Kaya, 2005; Karpat, 2013).

2) 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War, Circassian Transition to Anatolia and Mesopotamia:

After the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878, Circassians were forcibly deported to Anatolia and Mesopotamia for the second time, this time from the Balkans (Hamed-Troyansky, 2017). About 50,000 Circassians were forcibly displaced from the region and were all resettled in the Syrian province (Eren in Shami, 1994). At this point, it is noted that the concern for the expansion of agricultural production was intensified by the loss of the Balkans, the Empire's main agricultural region, and was one of the reasons why Circassians were sent to the grain-producing regions of Syria (Shami, 1994). Circassians were also settled in various parts of today's Türkiye, including the Marmara region. The line starting from Samsun and ending in Hatay, also known as the "Circassian line" in the literature, is the region where they were mainly settled in Türkiye (Meiqari, 2019; Okçuoğlu, 2019). These places were also places, like Kayseri, where internal struggles between Turks and Armenians between tribal groups took place (Yelbaşı, 2019). In this sense, it is also claimed that Circassians were deliberately settled in these places in order to prevent possible rebellions by ethnic and religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire (Doğan, 2009; ORSAM, 2012; Akbulat, 2017). Although the number of people exiled is estimated to be between 500,000 and 2 million, it is claimed that 1.1 million people came and settled in the lands of the Ottoman Empire (Karpat, 2013). As a result of this exile and settlement, Circassians in Türkiye have become the largest Circassian diasporic population in the world.

3) Establishment of Israel, 1967, The Six-Day War: Circassian communities in Syria were mostly located in the Golan Heights, including the city of Quneitra in the southwestern regions of the country and several surrounding villages. The third forced displacement of Circassians took place in 1967, following the Six-Day War, from today's Israel to Syria (Akbulat, 2017; Meiqari, 2019).

4) From 2011 to Today, The Syrian Civil War: Circassians experienced their fourth forced displacement after the Syrian Civil War. As of the first months of 2012, Syrian Circassians started to settle in Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkess Republics in the Northwest Caucasus of the Russian Federation. 3,000 Syrian Circassians applied for

asylum in Russia after the war (Meiqari, 2019). They also settled in Reyhanlı district of Hatay and Istanbul in Türkiye besides Lebanon, Jordan and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (ORSAM, 2012).

It should be highlighted that when studying this complete historical process, questioning of some aspects is necessary for analysis and understanding in the present. Which path, for instance, did the Circassians take before to being deported to Syria? More specifically, where and how were Circassians settled in the Ottoman Empire? When Israel was established, where did the Circassians who had been forcibly displaced in Syria go? How was the settlement of Circassians in today's Syria happened? How does this historical process take place in the collective memory of today's Circassians who were forcibly displaced from Syria?

2.2 Circassians in Syria

2.2.1 The Circassian settlement in Syria under the Ottoman rule

The settlement of Circassians in Syria took place in two stages: directly by land from the Northwest Caucasus and by sea from the Balkans. Most of the Circassians living in Syria before the civil war were Circassians who settled with the second forced displacement from the Balkans following the 1878 war. Thousands died of hunger and infectious diseases on the way to exile. By the end of 1878, there were 45,000 Circassians landing in different ports on the Syrian coast, mostly from today's Bulgaria (Baderhan in Akbulat, 2017). The lack of population statistics makes it difficult to determine the exact number of Circassians in Syria and other Arab regions. Additionally, hundreds of Circassian families are considered to settled in the region in the early 1900s (Baderhan in Akbulat, 2017).

In Syria, Circassians were mostly located in the Golan Heights, including the city of Quneitra in the southwestern regions of the country and several surrounding villages. Today's Syrian lands were formerly Ottoman Empire's provinces of Syria (Damascus), Aleppo and Beirut, part of Mosul province, and the Jerusalem and Lebanon sanjaks. The province of Syria (Damascus) included today's Jordan, and parts of Syria and Lebanon. The province of Aleppo consisted of today's northern Syria and the Urfa Sanjak, Antep and Iskenderun districts,

located within the borders of today's Türkiye (ORSAM 2012). In the second half of the 19th century, the Syrian-Palestinian region was one of the most unstable border regions of the Ottoman Empire, with religious and ethnic conflicts, a rising national independence movement, uprisings, and various anti-Ottoman demonstrations (Baderhan, 2017). Similar to their settlement pattern in Anatolian lands, Circassians were deliberately settled in places in order to prevent possible rebellions by other ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, namely Bedouins, Druze, Maronites, Alawites, (Shami, 1994; Baderhan in Akbulat, 2017). For instance, Circassian cavalry units were a part of the suppression of the Bedouin and Druze rebellions that broke out in the city of Kareke in 1893 and 1910 (ORSAM, 2012). It can be argued that, in formulating this policy, consideration was given to the historical context of Circassians engaging in long-time conflict with the Russians, and the ingrained martial aspect in their culture. In this scenario, one might also question: How did the assurance arise that the Circassians would not instigate an uprising against the Ottoman Empire? In fact, the empire implemented necessary precautions through its settlement policy, rather than relying on the assumption that a rebellion would not occur. Given the significant allegiance of Circassians to their tribe/lineage leaders stemming from their cultural structure, the Circassian tribes were dispersed across various regions, resulting in the separation of tribes from their leaders. Additionally, it is mentioned that numerous tribal leaders were elevated to higher positions in the army, and wealthy, esteemed families were settled in urban centers (Chatty, 2015). This has been one of the policies implemented to prevent the possible rebellion of the Circassians.

Circassians were settled in state treasury lands, where Druze and Arab tribes had lived for centuries. The Circassians found themselves in a situation where ethnic hostility was inevitable (Baderhan in Akbulat, 2017). Meanwhile, from the first days, the Ottoman administration began to recruit Circassians to administrative and military service. For instance, there was a cavalry unit of 300 people consisting only of Circassians in Amman. There were Circassian Cavalry Divisions located in Quneitra, Aleppo, Jerash and Kerak cities (ORSAM, 2012). The Circassians changed areas that had previously been utilized for grazing pastures into agricultural land in these new villages and established large farms. They also developed transportation and commerce between the Golan Heights, Transjordan, and Palestine (Meiqari, 2019).

As in Türkiye, Circassians in Syria have preserved their belonging, identity and traditions as a distinct ethnic group and became one of the largest ethnic minority groups in southern Syria (Meiqari, 2019). Despite facing increased oppression in the subsequent nation-states compared to the Ottoman Empire, the Circassians maintained their common language, shared history, and traditions. In 1928, the weekly newspaper “Marc” started its publication in Circassian using Arabic, French, and Latin scripts. However, with the end of the French mandate in 1936, the Syrian government closed down the schools, newspaper, and association that were previously established (ORSAM, 2012).

Until the early 1920s, there was a small-scale but continuous Circassian flow from the North Caucasus to Syria. The Circassians predominantly settled in the Golan Heights, Transjordan, and in proximity to the cities of Hama, Homs, and Aleppo. Over time, the villages they established expanded into urban centers, such as Amman, Jerash, Quneitra, and Mumbuc (ORSAM, 2012). Furthermore, in 1922, a delegation of Syrian Circassians visited Moscow to request permission from the Soviet leadership for the return of Syrian Circassians to their homeland. However, these efforts were not successful (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017).

In the 1920s, following the Ottoman Empire’s loss of these regions and turning into mandated territories of France and Britain, Circassians were again used to prevent rebellions by the local population (Baderhan, 2017). They persisted in holding their positions, thus preserving their social status, in both administrative and military domains. Some Circassians provided their support to the established French mandate, joined the French Army (Kusbahiev, 2012), and served as cavalry units responsible for maintaining internal order (ORSAM, 2012). During the 1920s and the 1930s, some Circassians residing in the Quneitra, Hama, and Homs applied to the League of Nations for the acknowledgment of Syrian Circassians as a minority and the creation of an autonomous Circassian region (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017). Despite their attempts, their overall support for the rebellion that turned into the Great Syrian Uprising of 1926 was limited, which was against the establishment of the French mandate and was especially concentrated in the western countryside of Aleppo (Chatty, 2015). Meanwhile, in response to challenges of French rule, some Circassians also support the Arab liberation movement in the 1930s (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017). With the end of the French mandate in 1936, Arab nationalists initiated an anti-Circassian campaign, accusing the Circassians of

collaborating with the French occupiers. Consequently, some of those who served in the French troops and cultural figures had to leave Syria (ORSAM, 2012). In World War II, most Circassian officers and soldiers joined the anti-fascist coalition forces (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017).

The final flow of Circassians occurred post-World War II, consisting largely of former Red Army soldiers who were taken captive by the Germans and did not return to the North Caucasus after the war. Additionally, this group included young individuals conscripted into the German army during the Nazi occupation of the North Caucasus in 1942 (ORSAM, 2012). The settlements of Circassians in Arab regions after World War II are known as the Golan Heights, Transjordan, Galilee, Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Alexandretta cities (Akbulat, 2017).

2.2.2 The establishment of independent Syria and the third Circassian displacement

From its declaration of independence in 1946 until Hafez Assad assumed power in 1970, Syria underwent several political crises. Following Assad's takeover, the country was governed by autocracy that endured until 2000. In December 1947, in response to the Syrian government's request, the Circassian diaspora provided support for the partisan movement of Palestinian Arabs. They formed a unit of volunteers that participated in battles in the Nablus area and engaged in military operations against Israeli troops during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948-1949 (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017). In 1948, the establishment of the Circassian Association in Damascus marked a significant milestone for the Syrian Circassian diaspora. The association, which remains active today, focuses on significant objectives like preserving the native language and national culture, developing and strengthening varied connections with the homeland, and establishing close relations with other diasporas. The association is also actively involved in philanthropic endeavors, helping low-income families, covering their medical expenses, and supporting the education of children in Russia (ICA, 2012).

During the 1950s, interactions between Soviet citizens and North Caucasians abroad were restricted due to ideological reasons. The connection of the Syrian Circassian diaspora with the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus were primarily maintained among intellectuals (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017). In the 1960s, some Syrian Circassians sought to

return to Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea independently. However, they confronted various bureaucratic obstacles upon entry, including challenges about Soviet citizenship registration, residence, employment, and foreign exchange transactions, with official records documenting cases of deportations for Circassians aspiring to return. Although the Soviet government granted partial rights to diaspora Circassians to engage in cultural and educational activities with their homeland, mass repatriation rights were denied (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017). Books, newspapers, magazines, and tapes from the Caucasus were imported during the 1960s. Despite the establishment of these transnational relations and the emergence of signs indicating the formation of a diasporic identity, Syrian Circassians faced the risk of language and cultural erosion. Factors such as their small and scattered population, coupled with the Syrian government's oppressive stance on cultural rights, contributed to this issue (ORSAM, 2012).

The Arab-Israeli War (the Six-Day War), which started in June 1967, created major changes in the social, economic and political position of the Syrian Circassian community. Following the war, the Circassians were internally displaced from their homes in Syria due to Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights, an area predominantly inhabited by Circassians. There were 22 Circassian villages in the Golan Heights, near the city of Quneitra (Baderhan in Akbulat, 2017). Many villages demolished and Quneitra city was never rebuilt, even after when the city returned to Syrian control following the October 1973 war. In the Golan Heights, only two Circassian villages, namely Bir-Ajam and Bariqa survived and had remained under Syrian control, with approximately 700 people (Meiqari, 2019). Most of the Circassians had to resettle in Damascus, thus "transformed from rural farmers into urban refugees" (Meiqari, 2019, p.21). The Syrian Circassian Association provided temporary accommodation for Circassians displaced from the Golan in schools and hospitals in Damascus (ORSAM, 2012). By the end of the war and with the return of Bir-Ajam and Bariqa to Syrian control, these two villages became a cultural symbol for Circassians who displaced in Damascus, and became the destination for their cultural activities (Meiqari, 2019). A group of Circassians also sought permission from the Soviet Embassy for the return of 3,000 Syrian Circassians to their homeland after the war, but this effort faced a negative outcome (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017).

Following the forced displacement in 1967, Syrian Circassians carried out their cultural practices through marriage traditions and cultural events, including as state-approved ethnic holiday celebrations like the annual spring Circassian day on the 1st of May (Meiqari, 2019).

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, Circassians were either internally displaced in Damascus or migrated overseas, primarily to the United States, when the U.S. government offered to settle them to Paterson, New Jersey, in return for surrendering their lands in the Golan. It is claimed that this flow created a small Circassian community of 5,000 Circassians in the area (Richmond, 2013). In this period, besides the Circassians had to settle in other neighboring Arab countries, notably Jordan, there were also Circassians who migrated to Western Europe (ORSAM, 2012). Meanwhile, the previously restricted 24-hour visiting hours were extended in the Soviet Union, providing diaspora Circassians more opportunities to visit their homeland. However, the Soviet administration also responded negatively to another application from Syrian Circassians seeking to return to their homeland due to policy changes (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017).

2.2.3 Syrian Civil War and the fourth Circassian displacement

The various waves of forced displacement brought about significant transformations in the social, economic, and political aspects of the Syrian Circassian community. In addition to resettling to the United States, Europe, and other neighboring countries, Circassians who resettled in urban centers within the country also faced the loss of their lands. Until recently, Syrian Circassians, with a minority involved in trade, predominantly worked as civil servants and were part of the middle class. Circassians in Syria primarily comprised three main sub-ethnic groups—Abzehs, Bjedugs, and Kabardians—with a smaller representation of other ethnic groups of Caucasian origin, including Dagestanis, Chechens, Abkhazians, Ossetians, and Balkars (Kusbahiev in Akbulat, 2017). It is claimed that about 100,000 Circassians lived in Syria during the early years of the conflict (ORSAM, 2012; Kusbahiev, 2012). The majority of them lived in Damascus and its suburbs; some lived in the cities of Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. By 2011, there were around 5,000 people living in Bir-Ajam and Bariqa villages (Meiqari, 2019). After November 4, 2012, these villages were evacuated with the military

operation against anti-government rebels of the Syrian army. Today, these villages are almost completely abandoned (Akbulat, 2017).

Like in every community, Circassians were positioned on two different fronts during the war. While some Circassians support the opposition and take part in their demonstrations but stayed out of the military actions, some of them followed a policy of neutrality. There are Circassians known to be supportive of the Assad regime. Until the 2000s, Circassian generals constituted 30% of the army generals but were excluded from the military system until 2011 when the civil war erupted. Consequently, when the war began, there were no Circassian generals in the country's armed forces, and Circassians were unable to hold any high-level positions within the regime (Kusbahiev, 2012). Many Circassians, both former military personnel and young Circassians who had not yet chosen their professions, left the country due to this liquidation process.

As a result of military movements and missile attacks, many Circassian families in Homs and other cities were left homeless, the extent of the economic crisis in the country increased, electricity and water cuts were made constantly in villages, production stopped and employees were dismissed, the country's currency depreciated and the inflation rate increased (Kushabiev, 2012). In the early years of the war, officially departing Syria posed significant challenges, mainly due to the challenges of accessing Damascus for passport acquisition and widespread corruption and bribery within state institutions (Kushabiev, 2012). Since 2012, Damascus and Aleppo airports have been closed to passenger transportation due to the civil war. Due to this circumstance, individuals seeking to depart the country had to choose the route to Lebanon. In Syria, the only feasible way to reach Lebanon was by air, as the air passage to Jordan and Türkiye was closed. Crossing into neighboring countries by road entailed significant risks, particularly with the escalation of conflicts in regions close to Türkiye (ORSAM, 2012).

From 2011 to the summer of 2015, Türkiye experienced the first wave of Syrian refugees entering the country. During this time, Turkish authorities implemented an "open door" policy and set up refugee camps in southern provinces such as Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Sanliurfa (İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016). It is crucial to highlight that individuals displaced from Syria cannot be formally recognized as refugees in Türkiye. Türkiye is a signatory to

the Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol, including a geographical limitation clause. This clause stipulates that only individuals fleeing from Europe can be eligible for refugee status (Altıok, 2021). Syrian refugees have begun to be referred to as “guests” and “brothers”, implying a temporary stay without legal rights and an expectation of their eventual return to their homeland. This situation is often paired with the concept of “ansar”, an Arabic term symbolizing solidarity and support for those fleeing persecution (Kaya et al., 2021).

In 2013, the influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye peaked. In 2014, the Turkish government adopted the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP): “This law specifies procedures for foreigners, refugees, and people in need of international protection, including the conditions for temporary protection, which is limited to situations where foreigners were forced out of their country, could not return, and were in need of emergency and temporary protection” (İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016, p.61). As of mid-March 2015, the Syrian refugee population in Türkiye had exceeded 1.7 million, representing a threefold increase from the numbers reported in December 2013 (İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016). To regulate and decrease the flow of refugees, the European Union (EU) and Türkiye established a Joint Action Plan on November 29, 2015. This agreement entailed that for every Syrian migrant deported to Türkiye, one Syrian already residing in Türkiye, who had not attempted illegal entry into the EU, would be relocated to the EU, effectively turning refugees into political and security assets (Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017). As part of the agreement, the EU pledged to rejuvenate Türkiye’s accession process by initiating more structured and frequent high-level dialogue and by opening new negotiation chapters. Additionally, the EU committed to expediting the process of removal of visa requirements for Turkish citizens within the Schengen zone by October 2016 and pledged an initial three billion Euros to improve the situation of Syrians living in Türkiye (İçduygu and Millet, 2016). In 2016, the Turkish government began issuing work permits for Syrian refugees who had been in Türkiye for more than six months, and on July 2, 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Syrians could eventually be granted Turkish citizenship, marking a significant step in the government’s acknowledgment of the potential for long-term or permanent settlement of Syrians in Türkiye (İçduygu and Şimşek, 2016).

Since 2017, there has been an increasing focus on the issue of repatriation for Syrians in state discourse, culminating in the development of concrete policies by 2019. In 2019, the initial adaptation policies were also formulated for Syrian refugees. In the same year, Türkiye initiated interventions into Syrian territory as part of its border security policies, leading to the securitization of Syrian refugees in both governmental discourse and public actions. The Turkish government primarily presented military interventions in its southeast as part of its efforts to prevent migrant crossings into the country from Idlib. Türkiye eliminated the control it had enforced on its sea and land borders, in order to demonstrate that in case these military interventions failed, Türkiye would not be able to stop migrant crossings to the EU. This change prompted thousands of migrants to the borders to cross into Europe. This was a strategic attempt to use refugees as diplomatic leverage against EU countries (İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022).

Over time, Turkish state's policy shifted from its initial aim of aiding the anti-Assad opposition to a strategy focused on limiting the territorial gains of Kurdish separatist groups (Kösebalaban, 2020). Even though the European Commission indicated that a part of the allocated budget had been directed towards suitable projects, Türkiye announced in February 2020 its decision not to implement the agreement, this indecent bargain, citing unfulfilled commitments. The abrupt shifts in these policies and discourses, driven by domestic and foreign political circumstances, have resulted in conflicting inconsistencies in migration policies and a lack of coherence in the Turkish state's approach to Syrian refugees (İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022). The integration of Syrians into the domestic political dynamics has increased their sense of insecurity, prompting civil society to swiftly and robustly engage with the issue. The civil society actors in this process include state organizations, non-state groups operating with several ideological frameworks, 'rights-based' groups, humanitarian service providers, 'faith-based' groups, labor unions, solidarity groups, volunteer initiatives, Syrian initiatives, expat collectives and individuals (Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017).

Today, there are 3.181,222 registered Syrian refugees living in Türkiye (UNHCR, 2024). However, many difficulties persist in daily life. Day by day, the discourse towards Syrians is becoming increasingly negative; with increasing xenophobic tendencies and discrimination. This trend can also be considered as the reflection of the economic challenges in the country

on Syrians. The labor market in Türkiye, marked by unregistered employment, irregular job opportunities, low wages, and various insecurities, intensifies the challenges and struggles of Syrian refugees, placing them to the most marginalized segment of society (Şahankaya Adar, 2018). Syrians show a tendency to remain in Türkiye, with many seeking citizenships. 46% of Syrians believe that they have largely or fully integrated into Turkish society by engaging in work, communication, and education. However, the perspective of the local population in Türkiye also highlights a significant integration challenge (Erdoğan, 2020; 2021).

On the other hand, Syrian Circassians who resettled in the U.S. after the 1967 war not only extended financial support to Circassians in Syria during the civil war starting in 2011, but also engaged in official initiatives to facilitate their resettlement to the United States. The Circassian diaspora in North America is claimed to have reached ten thousand people during the years when the war began (Ajans Kafkas, 2012). The majority of Circassians in the U.S. are coming from Syria, and they predominantly reside in New Jersey (ORSAM, 2012). In addition to the established Circassian Association in the U.S., they established the Nassip Foundation in 2010 to protect and promote the Circassian language, history, and culture (Nassip Foundation, 2022). After all the initiatives of Circassian diaspora, around 500 Syrian Circassians resettled to the U.S. with the support of Senator Robert Menendez (Ajans Kafkas, 2012). This case exemplifies how the Circassian diaspora establishes transnational networks, reflecting the efforts to build connections and provide support to those in need.

In December 2011 and January 2012, Syrian Circassian representatives reached out to the Russian Federation authorities and regional administrations of Russia (Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkess Republics) on behalf of 1,000 Syrian Circassians and directly sought assistance in returning to their homeland (Kushabiev, 2012). In March 2012, members of the Upper House of the Russian Federation Parliament conducted the first-ever official visit to Syria in the history of the Circassian diaspora. During the visit, they held meetings with members of the Syrian Circassian Association, Syrian ministers, and representatives of the Circassian diaspora (Kushabiev, 2012). Circassians encountered challenges with the return process included those who managed to obtain invitations to return to their homeland. The difficulties stemmed from the preparation of invitations and the extended duration for the issuance of Russian visas. Furthermore, Syrian citizen Circassians

who received invitations had to apply to the Russian Federation consulates in Syria and make payments. It was noted that the overall cost for a family to resettle from Syria to Russia and obtain a residence permit exceeded 2,000 USD (Kushabiev, 2012). While it should be recalled that this circumstance remained valid until the official prohibition on leaving Syria, the distinct class dynamics in returning to the homeland are noteworthy. Moreover, even if Syrian Circassians obtained Russian citizenship, they might encounter difficulties in reclaiming the lands and property they had to abandon. Overall, between 2012 and 2013, around 3,000 Syrian Circassians resettled to the Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkess Republics. However, from 2014 to 2015, approximately 1,000 Syrian Circassians migrated from the Caucasus to Europe, due to challenges with legal status, housing, employment, financial situations, visa issues, and the economic crisis in Russia in 2015 (Akbulat, 2017). As highlighted in this study's interviews, there are also Syrian Circassians who migrated to Türkiye after settling in the Caucasus.

In 2012, exploring resettlement options for Syrian Circassians involved reaching out to Israel, in addition to America and the autonomous Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation. Following the declaration that the quota limit for the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic had been reached, and Syrian Circassians had to apply for resettlement in Adygea or Karachay-Cherkess, a group of Circassian activists applied to Israel (Priymak, 2012). Ultimately, Israel did not approve the entry of any Circassians.

Since the beginning of the war, not only Syrian Circassians and activists but also diaspora members and associations have collaborated to establish initiatives facilitating the resettlement of Syrian Circassians from the country. During this period, as certain transnational networks were re-established and others persisted, civil organizations like the International Circassian Association (ICA, *Dünya Çerkes Birliği*) actively offered assistance both in facilitating the departure from the country and addressing the needs of those subsequently settled in other countries. In addition to providing aid, the ICA has made attempts to ensure the return of Syrian Circassians to their homeland by engaging in official negotiations with Russia (Akbulat, 2017). Furthermore, Jordan Circassian Association, the European Circassian Federation, the Australian Circassian Society, and the California Circassian Society reached out to Russian Federation authorities, urging Russia to assist the

Circassians in Syria (Akbulat, 2017; Kushabiev, 2012). Civil society organizations in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea and Karachay-Cherkess Republics also initiated official meetings with Russia, advocating for the resettlement of Syrian Circassians to Russia and providing essential assistance. Additionally, they submitted formal applications as part of their initiatives (Akbulat, 2017).

The previously mentioned Circassian Association in Damascus has specific goals, including preserving the native language and national culture, developing and strengthening varied connections with the homeland, and establishing close relations with other diasporas. The association also actively involved in philanthropic work. It is noteworthy that, especially given the escalating polarization and political climate in Syria over the last two decades, the Circassian association maintained a distance from becoming a political entity to the greatest extent possible. Expanding on this point, as mentioned in this study's interviews and as will be examined in the following sections, "whistleblowing" and disclosure created substantial fear in Syria before and during the early years of the civil war. In an atmosphere saturated with fear across various aspects of daily life, the Circassian association has consciously maintained a distance from assuming a political role.

Considering all this, it can be argued that the Circassian diaspora in Syria has experienced significant transformations, particularly over the last two to three decades. Despite the preservation of their culture and the creation of a diasporic identity among Syrian Circassians, there has been a noticeable shift from the traditional-closed Circassian society, especially in the last 20-30 years. This shift is particularly relevant for the life in the modern center of Damascus before the civil war. The shift from a closed society led to the widespread adoption of bilingualism among the Circassians, with urban Circassians speaking Arabic, and soon English. Over the last three decades, Circassians have embraced new professions. Beyond their traditional involvement in structures related to the army, security, and the Ministry of Defense, they have expanded their participation in areas such as science, culture, higher education, and medicine (ORSAM, 2012). Considering all these transformations, it is apparent that Syrian Circassians approached the resolution of forced migration after the civil war differently based on diverse age groups, sex and social classes. They also encounter

diverse experiences of cohesion, integration, social assistance, social exclusion, discrimination, and racism.

Similar to our lack of knowledge regarding the number of Circassians residing in Syria before the war, the current population of Circassians in Syria, as well as the destinations of those forced to migrate, remains uncertain.

2.3 Circassians in Türkiye

2.3.1 The emergence of the diasporic identity in Ottoman Empire and the Republic for Circassians

Religious affiliation was the key aspect of one's identity within the Ottoman Empire, structured under the *millet* system. This system categorized the population into four main groups—Muslims, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews—with various ethnic groups falling under these classifications. The Ottoman identity, a later invention, responding to nationalisms of various ethnic groups in the Empire was intentionally constructed as a political identity for the empire's subjects—an umbrella identity uniting the empire's subjects. Within this framework, each religious and ethnic group retained its distinct identity, encompassing both ethnic and cultural dimensions.

The Ottoman Empire's multicultural structure had started to change with the mass migration flows by the 19th and 20th century, including the Circassian exile. The territorial boundaries of the empire gradually contracted, leading to its confinement to Anatolian lands with a predominantly Muslim population. The mass migration during the last century of the empire involve displacement of over 5 million people, including the arrival of Tatars from Crimea, Circassians from the Caucasus, Muslims, and Jews from Bulgaria, and the exchange of Greeks and Turks (Kaya et al., 2011). Most of the Circassians were not Muslim when they were dispersed in the Ottoman land. Islam had been practiced in the Eastern Caucasus. In fact, the Circassians who settled in Yugoslavia are described as being “half pagan, half Muslim, and a little bit Christian also” (Popovic in Shami, 1994, p.193).

Long before their mass migration to the empire, Circassians were already a part of Ottoman society, engaging as traders and, unfortunately, slaves. As the slave trade from the North

Caucasus increased in the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire considered Circassians as key human resources to fulfill its growing needs (Yelbaşı, 2019). The Circassian social structure was defined by a class system, notably marked by the presence of slavery. The incorporation of Circassians into the Ottoman military involved a system of slavery. Under Sultan Abdülhamid II's rule, new legislation was introduced, requiring the state to pay the owner the price of the slave enlisted in the army. This legal change led to an increase in the number of Circassian soldiers within the Ottoman military. Members of Circassian upper-class families, in particular, were also able to position in the higher places of the army and bureaucracy. They joined the Ottoman army and royal military school, "becoming a new elite class in the Ottoman Empire, and used 'lower class' Circassians to solidify their own position at the center of the empire" (Yelbaşı, 2019, p.14). The Circassian slaves were also women who served in the Ottoman harem. Girls from Abkhazian and Ubykh tribes were either kidnapped and sold by slave traders or willingly given away by their families, hoping that it would enable them to join the Ottoman elite. In fact, this strategy not only facilitated the integration of some into the Ottoman elite but also served as a crucial pathway for Circassian men to enter the Ottoman bureaucracy and military.

In the last periods of the Ottoman Empire, ethnic nationalism (Turkishness) and Islam emerged as alternatives to unify the diverse population. Ottomanism, as an ideology promoting a common Ottoman citizenship regardless of religious or ethnic ties, gained prominence. Some intellectuals introduced the concepts of 'nation' (*millet*) and 'homeland' (*vatan*) to the society during this period. The Young Ottomans, known as the Young Turks, emerged as a highly influential revolutionary group. The failure of Ottomanism stemmed from its rejection by both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Subsequently, a new generation of nationalist intellectuals within the Young Turks embraced Turkish cultural nationalism, marking a shift at the turn of the 20th century (Üngör, 2011). Ethnic Turkish nationalism gained prominence after the decline of Ottomanism and the ascent of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) to power in 1908. This shift emphasized ethnicity, with 'Turkishness' becoming a crucial concept for the homogenization of the nation: "In other words, a concept of Turkishness was constructed which glossed over real diversity in an attempt to present the remaining population as homogeneous" (Keyder, 2005, p.7). Preferring to align themselves with the nation-state project, the Circassians refrained from publicly

asserting their ethnic identities and instead embraced the discourse of a homogeneous Turkish nation as defined by the republican elite, and considered themselves as integral components of the Turkish Republic (Kaya, 2004).

With the establishment of the Republic, the existence of various identities was perceived as a threat to and ignored by the state. Ethnicity became a principal in Turkish nationalism, and Turkishness became the opportunity to homogenize the nation. The creation of a national identity relies upon a homogeneous ‘Sunni-Muslim-Turk’ identity in the new Republic. This top-down approach excludes all religious, social, and ethnic identities from the public and even aimed to assimilate the ones who do not include in the ‘holy trial’ (Kaya et al., 2011). The legal and social changes regarding people’s clothes or music were aimed to ‘modernize/civilize’ the society. The creation of the national identity, needless to say, was a part of the nation-state building.

The regime’s restrictive policies towards the use of the Circassian language in public and private spaces during the transformation to a nation-state in the early republican period were a part of the Turkification process. The process appeared as large-scale educational and cultural policies by excluding non-Muslims, especially in the culturally diverse and historically multi-ethnic Eastern provinces (Üngör, 2011). Publications related to the Circassian language, culture, or history were also forbidden. The “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” (*Vatandaş, Türkçe Konuş!*) policy, which began in the 1920s and was largely enforced by 1937, aimed to compel minorities to use Turkish as the only language in public spaces (Toksabay, 2005). Interviews with Circassian people reveal that the impacts of these policies still persist in the group’s collective memory:

“I was born in the district, and my father was involved in trade. We started school in 1957, but I don’t speak Turkish. Everyone says something at school, but I don’t understand; we faced many difficulties. Speaking Circassian was forbidden. The teacher appointed secret monitors. If anyone spoke Circassian, they would report us to the teacher. The teacher would then make us stand in front of the class and say, ‘You spoke Circassian,’ and beat us. We struggled to learn Turkish; we didn’t even know how to say simple things like ‘toilet,’ which was a significant

problem. Circassian was completely banned whenever possible. Most of the time, we were too afraid or ashamed to say that we were Circassian.” (Okçuoğlu, 2019, p.143).

Areas that were settled by non-Turkish speaking immigrants from the North Caucasus, Crimea, and the Balkans were a matter of concern of the Republic as they had maintained their ethnic identities. The Law on Settlement adopted in 1934 as one of the most significant tools for the construction of national identity in Türkiye, by facilitating various policies on this matter. The implementation of the law entailed a new assimilation strategy aimed at non-Turkish minorities, involving mass and forced resettlement. The law divided people into three groups and the country into three zones: “those who spoke Turkish and were of Turkish ethnicity, those who did not speak Turkish but were considered to be of Turkish culture, and finally those who neither spoke Turkish nor belonged to the Turkish culture” (Kirişçi, 2000, p.5). Despite their ethnic differences, Circassians considered in the second category as Turkish, even ethnically they were not. The second group “included people whose Turkishness, in terms of culture and language, needed to be enhanced by resettlement policies” (Kirişçi, 2000, p.5).

Before the enactment of this law, in 1923, Circassians experienced another forced displacement within Anatolia. This decision was directly influenced by the national struggle and the role of “Çerkes Ethem” (“Circassian Ethem”). Ethem and his Circassian soldiers were a part of the National Struggle (*Milli Mücadele*) by suppressing the movements from South Marmara to Central Anatolia. Ethem was one of the key paramilitary leaders and most powerful people of the period. About that time, he commanded around five-hundred-foot soldiers and approximately five thousand cavalrymen, all of whom were equipped with high-quality military gear (Yelbaşı, 2019). Ethem was not merely an apolitical fighter. As his military and political influence grew within the assembly, he began to be perceived as a threat by the Ankara government. Following a series of military developments, Ethem’s disagreement with Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the struggle for the Republic’s establishment, led to Ethem joining an opposing army against him, which subsequently led to the emergence of the label “traitor Circassian Ethem”.

In May 1923, the Ankara government, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, offered a bounty to Circassian Ethem and his soldiers. The government sought to stabilize its political, military, and economic power in the region where these groups are active, to take effective control over and to cease bandit activity. This policy brought about a collective punishment for many civilian Circassians in the region. A month after the declaration, the government accounted the Circassians of the region as a security problem and decided to exile fourteen Circassian villages in the Gönen-Manyas region to central and eastern parts of Türkiye, in June 1923: “In order for the new state to develop an idea of a Turkish nation, a Turkish national grudge directed towards the Circassians proved useful, while also punishing their formerly close relationship with the sultanate” (Yelbaşı, 2019, p.122). The exile of the fourteen Circassian villages not only led to economic devastation but also triggered the collective trauma after their first exile from the North Caucasus by the late 19th century. In that sense, the Circassians from South Marmara had exiled for the second time around 60 years after the first one. While the Gönen-Manyas exile may not be classified as a massacre due to the relatively low number of casualties, it holds significance in the collective memory of the descendants of those who were displaced from the region (Akdeniz Göker, 2019).

Following the displacement of Circassian villages from Western Anatolia to central Anatolia, the Grand Assembly of Türkiye compiled a list of *personae non gratae* (*the Yüzellikler*), known as the “150’ers,” (*150’likler*) in 1925. The designation of ‘traitors’ was sanctioned by the Allies in the Lausanne Conference agreement. The state issued a general amnesty declaration for all members of the Istanbul government and all anti-nationalist bandits. However, an exception was made for 150 individuals who were named and listed. The Treaty specified that non-Muslims, including Armenians, Rums, or Jews, could not be included in the list, even if they were involved in anti-nationalist activities during the Turkish-Greek War. It appears that a considerable portion of those listed were locals, with only a handful being bureaucrats or political figures. Ultimately, out of the eighty-six names listed, the majority were Circassians, mainly comprising local people and villagers. Those listed faced the loss of their Turkish citizenship and were compelled to sell their properties. Furthermore, they were prohibited from repatriating their remains across the Turkish border (Yelbaşı, 2019).

“Çerkes Ethem” is still one of the significant names in Türkiye speaking of Circassians, and the incidents related to him are still vivid in the Circassian people’s collective memory. The characterization of Ethem Bey as a traitor, stemming from his opposition to the republic and his labeling as “Çerkes Ethem,” has led the Circassian community to grapple with this notion over time, often resulting in discriminatory generalizations. This has played a significant role in shaping Circassians’ diasporic identities in Türkiye.

The formation of Circassian diasporic identity cannot be adequately explored without considering the role of civil society organizations that emerged in the late Ottoman period. Therefore, the subsequent section will delve into the analysis of Circassian civil society organizations and their impact throughout history.

2.3.2 Political activism and civil society formulations of the Circassian diaspora

Circassians’ relationships with the state and the elites in the Ottoman Empire as a diasporic community starts in the post-exile period. Circassian elites benefitted from the new progressive atmosphere, by founding a Circassian school and launching a periodical focused on their history, culture, and language and the challenges they encountered within the empire at that time. The Circassian Solidarity Association (*Çerkes Teavün Cemiyeti*) was the first Circassian organization founded in Istanbul. It was established in 1908 by military generals and intellectuals to work for the independence of the Caucasus (Özgür, 2011). The ones who wanted to work more actively for the same reason founded The Circassian Progress and Solidarity Association (*Çerkes İttihat ve Teavün Cemiyeti*) in 1908, and women organized a formation called “The Circassian Women Solidarity Association” (*Çerkes Kadınları Teavün Cemiyeti*) in 1918. It is argued that these organizations had been founded intending to bring the Circassians together and create a Circassian identity with a single past, and a common future (Aksoy Arslan, 2008). In 1910, they were even granted permission to teach their language to students enrolled in their schools (Yelbaşı, 2019). These were the events regarding Circassian organizations in the Ottoman Empire prior to the establishment of the Turkish national identity, coinciding with the foundation of the Turkish Republic. All these associations were closed with the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, since the Circassians, like other Muslims in Türkiye, were not recognized as minorities. The treaty exclusively granted

minority rights to non-Muslims, allowing them to establish organizations or schools using their languages.

In the first years of the Republic, Circassians began forming their organizations but encountered interruptions due to nationalist policies. Following the Lausanne Treaty's dissolution of all Circassian organizations in 1923, the first Circassian organization "Hand of Friendship Assistance Association" (*Dosteli Yardımlaşma Cemiyeti*) was founded in Istanbul, in 1946. The name changed to "The Caucasus Culture Association" (*Kafkas Kültür Derneği*) in 1952, to mention the ethnic identity in the name of the organization. Then, starting in the 1960s, minority groups began to establish their own cultural associations in Türkiye. It is essential to recall the impacts of the constitution ratified in 1961. Circassians, migrating from rural to urban areas, established such associations to preserve their cultural heritage in their new settlements. In 1964, "Northern Caucasia Culture Association" (*Kuzey Kafkasya Kültür Derneği*) was established in Ankara, by giving emphasis to the culture.

The 1970s marked a period of politicization within the Circassian community in Türkiye, influenced by broader societal changes. During this time, Circassians began articulating their demands for political and social rights. Circassians, influenced by ideological confrontations and subsequent political transformations, formed political organizations characterized by two dominant factions as the *Devrimci* (revolutionaries) and the *Dönüşçü* (returnists). The revolutionaries believed that Circassian rights could be improved through a socialist revolution in Türkiye, while the returnists advocated for the return to their homeland (Kaya, 2004).

In 1980, Türkiye experienced a military coup, leading to the closure of numerous civil society organizations. The period silenced the Circassian associations as well. With the new constitution ratified in 1982, a Turkish-Islamic synthesis and a metaphysical-theological discourse became dominant in the country. The Circassians developed two new opposing political participation strategies in the 1980s: the discourse of Circassian-Turk and the Circassian nationalist discourse (Kaya, 2004). The Turkish nationalist narrative, thus the Circassian-Turk discourse was adopted by right-wing conservative Circassians. There were also Circassian nationalist intellectuals who challenged this discourse.

Minority politics has become a new strategy for political engagement that the Circassians have adopted since the early 1990s, as ethnic politics have gained popularity around the world. The term ‘exile’ was widely used within Circassian communities until the late 1980s. With the dissolution of the USSR and direct interactions of some Circassians with their homeland, the concept of ‘exile’ gradually replaced by the concept of diaspora (Kaya, 2005). With the changing framework in 1990s, Circassians explored “their *pasts, traditions, cultures, languages and the processes of migration, or of exile*” (Kaya, 2004, p.234, italics original). It is crucial to emphasize that the Circassian intellectual movement and civil society organizations play a significant role in highlighting the diversity of Circassian history and culture, countering the dominant Turkish nationalist narrative. The Circassians were encouraged by the Turkish state to form a variety of associations, most of which were centered upon the idea of eventually returning to their homeland. However, this represents a strategy adopted by older generations, while newer generations are adopting a different strategy. They utilize modern technologies to construct a contemporary diasporic identity. Through transportation and innovative communication methods, they can exist both here and there, creating alternative forms of diasporic identities (Kaya, 2004). The independence war in Abkhazia during the early 1990s served as a catalyst for uniting the diaspora around shared national values and strengthening diasporic identity, especially among younger generations.

Founded in 1990, the International Circassian Association (ICA, *Dünya Çerkes Birliği*), composed of diaspora and homeland community members, assembles each year to develop plans for Northern Caucasia. Representative groups from each country/area gather together and interact with one another through the International Circassian Association in this transnational organization. The Federation of Caucasus Associations (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu, KAFFED*) represents the Circassians living in Türkiye. Every year, the ICA organizes Circassian language courses in cooperation with KAFFED in Türkiye. Following the devastating earthquakes of February 6, 2023, in Türkiye, the ICA sent a delegation to Türkiye, engaging with Circassian associations in the affected region and coordinated aid campaigns in the Caucasus.

The 2000s were the most effective years of the Circassian associations, in terms of the establishment of federations and policies toward political recognition. With Türkiye’s

application for and process of accession to the EU, EU-based harmonization efforts changed legislative procedures, including mechanisms to ensure the protection of human rights as well as democratic governance. Besides, Secondly, associations receive a share of EU assistance and support (Altan-Olcay and İçduygu, 2012). The Federation of Caucasus Associations (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu, KAFFED*) was established in 2003 to gather the Circassian associations under a central organization. With over 50 member associations, this federation is still the most efficient and comprehensive civil initiative in Türkiye for Circassians with a liberal-nationalist discourse, by producing activities and academic/cultural publications. The Federation of United Caucasus Associations (*Birleşik Kafkasya Dernekleri Federasyonu, BIRKAFFED*) was established in 2004, based on the idea of the United Caucasus Republic (*Birleşik Kafkas Cumhuriyeti*) that was established in 1918. The federation stands for the ideal of a unified Caucasus state, and has Abkhaz, Chechen, and Karachay-Balkar member associations (Özgür, 2011). This state is intended to be an Islamic confederation in the Caucasus. The Federation of Circassian Associations (*Çerkes Dernekleri Federasyonu, ÇerkesFed*) was established in 2013 by the former KAFFED members.

In 2010, the Federation of Abkhaz Associations (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu, AbhazFed*) was established as an outcome of a long-standing discussion in the diaspora, regarding the “Circassian-Abkhaz” distinction. The debate relies on the “Circassian” term’s definition. While some diaspora members claim that the word “Circassian” defines Adyghe people, some members argue that this word is an umbrella concept that defines all Northwest Caucasus people and is used in that way. Regarding this discussion, some of the Abkhazian diaspora members argue that they need to establish their own associations and federation, to fight for Abkhazia’s independence at an international level.

Founded in 2000, the Caucasus Foundation (*Kafkas Vakfi*) is a prominent organization with an Islamic orientation. It is actively engaged in various initiatives concerning Syrian Circassians, particularly serving as a platform for youth involvement in intellectual discourse and creative endeavors. Aligned with the vision of a unified Caucasus, this foundation fosters initiatives and discourses encompassing all Caucasian ethnic groups, including the eastern Caucasians, under the broader umbrella term of “Caucasian” rather than the narrower term of “Circassian”.

Apart from the foundations, associations and federations, various platforms became efficient spaces for the construction and changes of diasporic identity consciousness. Online platforms like *Jineps Magazine*, *May21 Initiative*, *Kafkasya Forum*, *Kafkasevi*, *NoSochi2014Platform*, *Cherkessia.net* became alternative spaces to speak up, especially for the younger generations, who might have different opinions on Circasianness than their older generations. Platforms like *Kafkasya Forum* and *NoSochi2014Platform* were efficient among younger generations by organizing press releases and demonstration marches. It can be argued that those kinds of activities of platforms and organizations make significant contributions to Circassians to preserve their ethnic identities. All of these associations continue to play a crucial role in shaping and advancing the collective memory of the diaspora, they are still significant transformation places, especially for the ones who are living in the cities, and contribute to the evolving of Circassian identities (Akdeniz Göker, 2018).

Circassians lately have developed an ethnicity-oriented political participation strategy in Türkiye. In 2014, The Pluralist Democracy Party (*Çoğulcu Demokrasi Partisi*, ÇDP) was founded with the aim of representing Circassians and advocating for different ethnic identities. The influence of Türkiye's "Solution/Peace process" (*Çözüm/Barış süreci*), aimed to resolve the conflict between the Türkiye and PKK as part of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, is evident on Circassian identity politics. The ÇDP ran independent candidates emphasizing their Circassian identity in nine electoral districts for the general elections in 2015, but did not receive the anticipated support from the Circassian people. The issue is still being debated in the nominations and local elections axis.

2.3.3 Transnational diasporic encounters and solidarity of the Circassians

The consolidation and political awakening of Circassians in Türkiye around their diasporic identity have been significantly influenced by transnational interactions with Circassians residing in other countries. The establishment of the International Circassian Association in 1990 and the 1992 Abkhazian war of independence were significant events that catalyzed this transformation. Circassians from Türkiye, Jordan, and Syria joined the fight to defend their homeland.

During the 2000s, as the internet became an integral part of daily life, Circassians began connecting with each other worldwide through various online platforms. This initial virtual transnational encounter, which transcended physical borders, gave rise to the formation of numerous forums, chat groups, and solidarity networks. As a result of this evolution, which sparked the reshaping and evolution of diasporic identity, young Circassians became actively involved in the transnational network. This development brought about new dimensions in the sharing of historical and cultural knowledge.

In 2007, Circassians staged an organized protest in front of the Russian Embassy in Istanbul for the first time to commemorate 21 May 1864, the Day of Exile. After 2007, protests in front of the Russian Embassy, especially every May 21, becomes a new ritual for the Circassian diaspora in Türkiye. This circumstance resulted in the politicization of young Circassians and the formation of their diasporic identities.

Throughout the 2010s, during the Syrian Civil War, the Circassian diaspora and civil society organizations in Türkiye actively reached out to Syrian Circassians, initiating personal and organizational-level transnational solidarity activities. Donations collected in these organizations were transferred to Syrian Circassians. Civil society organizations of the Circassian diaspora in Türkiye organized assistance and guidance activities on many issues. They offered assistance with various essential matters including accommodation, employment, acquiring necessary official documents for residency in Türkiye, and enrolling school-aged children in educational institutions (Akbulat, 2017). KAFFED organized various events with its member associations across Türkiye. They protested in front of the Russian Embassy for the Circassians living in Syria to return to their homeland. The World Circassian Solidarity Committee was established in 2012 to coordinate solidarity efforts and disseminate information. During its meeting in Istanbul on Sunday, November 11, 2012, the Committee urged all Circassians to stand in solidarity with Syrian Circassians. Representatives from various cities convened, alongside Syrian asylum seekers. The gathering addressed the challenges encountered by Circassians in different areas and deliberated on potential solutions. Additionally, the meeting delved into the broader context of the Syrian conflict and the specific targeting of Circassians (Özgür Çerkes, 2012).

Due to the ongoing conflicts in Syria, the first Syrian Circassian group of 173 people was brought to Gaziantep on 28 March 2013 with the organization of the World Circassian Solidarity Committee, by renting a commercial aircraft. The Committee had meetings with the Foreign Ministry of Türkiye and the Internal Ministry, Disaster and Management Authority (AFAD) officials (Baş Bilge, 2019). The group was welcomed by the officials of the Committee with Circassian flags and ‘welcome’ banners in Circassian language (Ajans Kafkas, 2013).

On May 2, 2013, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye then, received a delegation from the World Circassian Solidarity Committee, Circassian Rights Initiative and ÇerkesFed, including Syrian Circassians who were brought to Türkiye via Lebanon and settled in Nizip camp, at the Residence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This example also reflects the favorable stance of the state towards Syrian refugees during the period of the open-door policy. Right after this visit, a program to teach the Adyghe language was launched in Nizip camp in collaboration with the World Circassian Solidarity Committee, ÇerkesFed, and the Adyghe Language Association. Around 300 Adyghe individuals in the camp underwent training. Circassian doctors were noted for performing health screenings for the residents of the camp. Furthermore, funds were raised on different occasions and allocated to Syrian Circassian students in Nalchik and Maykop, as well as to Syrian Circassians facing hardship in Türkiye (Akbulat, 2017).

Although there is no specific count, today, it is estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 Syrians Circassians live in various cities of Türkiye, especially in Istanbul (Akbulat, 2017; Sunata, 2019). There are still a number of vital challenges for Syrian Circassians, including unemployment and housing.

Following the thorough examination of the historical trajectory and current status of Circassians living in Syria and Türkiye, the subsequent analysis will delve into evaluating the Circassian diaspora within the broader framework of diaspora studies. Initially, the existing diaspora literature will be scrutinized and elaborated upon. Subsequently, the concept of double diasporas, a significant contribution of this thesis, will be explored concerning Circassians from Syria.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN DIASPORA STUDIES

3.1 Theorizing Diasporas

Diaspora studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field, focusing on the examination of dispersed communities, known as diasporas, and their complex social, cultural, economic, and political aspects. The origins of diaspora studies stem from early anthropological and sociological analysis concerning migration, and displacement. However, it gained prominence primarily in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly with increasing globalization and migration flows.

The discussion surrounding the defining characteristics of diasporas persists, particularly in light of evolving migration systems within a globalized context. Throughout history, the interpretation and application of this term have shifted alongside advancements in international migration discourse and the establishment of nation-state concepts during the 19th and 20th centuries. Consequently, the field of diaspora studies has undergone multiple phases as scholars grapple with refining the prototypical definition of a diaspora. To avoid the limitations of interpreting diaspora and to consider various changes throughout history, Reis (2004) discusses three critical historical phases of diasporization: the first as the Classical Period, which is associated primarily with ancient diaspora and ancient Greece. The second one is specified as the Modern Period which can be subdivided into three phases, starting from 1500 to 1945; and the third period as the Contemporary or Late-modern phenomenon, which refers to the period after World War II to the present day. The last period is emphasized as a phase that has the progressive effect of globalization, which affects the phenomenon of diasporization.

Initially, diaspora studies primarily focused on specific ethnic or religious diasporas, such as the Jewish, Armenian or African diasporas. Such that, according to Sheffer, the Jewish experience has become so integral to discussions about the diaspora that dictionaries define

the term “diaspora” based on the Jewish diaspora experience (Sheffer, 2003). Scholars explored issues related to identity, memory, homeland attachment, and cultural preservation within these communities. However, as the discipline progressed, it expanded its scope to include a broader range of diasporic encounters, encompassing experiences of labor migrants, refugees, and exiles.

In the first phase of diaspora studies, until the 1930s, scholars used the term diaspora mainly just for the three groups: Jews, Armenians, and Greeks. In that sense, the Jewish diaspora is defined as “the ideal type” of diasporas by several scholars (Tölölyan, 1996; Safran, 1991). With this reference, statements about a ‘diaspora’ were rather negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimization, alienation, and loss. This classical, victim diaspora phase is based upon the idea of dispersal after a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations. Since the late 1960s, the term diaspora has come to mean terms of transnationalism, globalization, ethnicity, exile, the post-colonial, and the nation. In that sense, the classical meaning of the term was systematically extended. Scholars analyzed transnational networks, practices, and identities, shedding light on how diaspora communities navigate multiple cultural, social, and political contexts. Since the 1980s, the changing meanings of belonging and citizenship took on the stage. Different categories of people like political refugees, expatriates, or ethnic and racial minorities were included in the definition. Key concepts such as transnationalism, hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and intersectionality have played significant roles in shaping scholarly debates and analyses within the field. From the mid-1990s, social constructionist theorists criticized two major key features of the term’s definition, namely the idea of homeland and ethnic/religious community. This notion argued that “identities have become deterritorialized and constructed and deconstructed in a flexible and situational way; accordingly, concepts of diaspora had to be radically reordered in response to this complexity” (Cohen, 2008, p.2). Thus, diaspora theories restructured to explore this diversity and comprehend how it shapes identity, belonging, and interactions within and beyond diaspora communities. Scholars have examined issues such as diaspora formation, cultural production, political mobilization, economic remittances, and diaspora-host country relations.

One of the first scholars to establish the main criteria of the classical theory of diasporas, William Safran (1991) the concept of diaspora has applied to minority communities whose members share several characteristics:

“1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (Safran, 1991, p.83-84).

These, then, are the main features of diaspora according to Safran: A history of dispersion, myths/memories (collective memory) of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return to the homeland, ongoing support of the homeland in various ways, and collective identity. In other words, as a diasporic self, one’s ancestors should be dispersed from a place, which has been identified as the “homeland”. The idea of “the homeland” (not necessarily a nation-state) should contain stories about itself (especially stories regarding life in the homeland and the dispersion), which hold places in one’s memory. With these active stories, the idea of belonging with consciousness and solidarity, one should believe that s/he should return to that homeland. Safran’s criteria suggest that four of them specifically pertain to this orientation towards one’s homeland.

Safran’s outlined criteria have become fundamental and guiding principles for future research within the field of diaspora studies. Since the 1990s, in most cases, Safran’s criteria remain largely unchallenged. Following Safran’s work, scholars began defining common or shared

characteristics of diasporas in the 1990s. The subsequent section will address these efforts, exploring the challenges and complexities of this framework.

3.1.1 Shared characteristics of diasporas for the classical theory

As mentioned above, following the studies on defining diaspora a tendency emerged to identify the common characteristics among diaspora groups. However, critics have argued that by prioritizing these categories within the theory may lead to the homogenizing and essentializing the diverse experiences, memories, and representations within the group itself (Harutyunyan, 2012). The expanding usage of the diaspora concept contributes to its comprehension, emphasizing hybridity. Stuart Hall posits that the diaspora experience is characterized by “...not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity: by a conception of identity, which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*...” (Hall, 1990, p.235, italics original). Although hybridity challenges the essentialist and homogeneous definition of the diaspora, its presence blurs the boundaries of theoretical frameworks and jeopardizes the clarity of the definition(s) of term. Therefore, the diaspora scholarship is faced with the question: What exactly defines a diaspora when groups are characterized by hybridity? (Harutyunyan, 2012). This framework further blurs the boundaries of the theoretical framework and contributes to the universalization of the term. As Brubaker argues, “paradoxically means the disappearance of Diaspora... If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so” (2005, p. 3). This paper asserts the necessity of a specific framework, although it recognizes that not all groups or individuals within them must strictly adhere to it. This is significant to avoid the scenario described by Brubaker (2005). It is noteworthy to highlight Bhabha’s insightful definition for diaspora at this point: “consisting of communities of hybrid identities positioned in-between host and original cultures, with a shifting character of ‘home’” (Bhabha, 1992, p.148).

Many scholars have emphasized the difficulty of formulating a definition that captures the common features of diasporas. When seeking to outline these shared characteristics, it is essential to recognize that no society is likely to exhibit all features consistently throughout its history. Moreover, no diasporic community can be expected to be a homogenous entity in itself or with other diasporas (Clifford, 1994.) Besides, taking diaspora as an entity that is

based on the moment of migration or the relationship with the homeland after that moment ignores the dynamics of social and historical processes. In that sense, the classical model of diaspora theory which aims to capture the common features of diasporas, does not provide an analytical framework to comprehensively grasp the phenomenon as a social condition and societal process (Harutyunyan, 2012). As a way to overcome the problems of defining the concept of diaspora with several common criteria, Brubaker conceptualizes diaspora “not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim; (...) a way of formulating the identities and loyalties of a population (Brubaker, 2005, p.12). In this context, examining the shared characteristics of diasporas in terms of dispersion from one to many locations, belonging and idealization of the homeland, and ethnic group identity would be beneficial.

The dispersion and immigration condition discusses the image of a journey when it comes to the notion of diaspora. Regarding this point, Reis (2004) argues that “whereas classical diaspora are to a large extent directly associated with exile, as is the case of the Jews, the Palestinians, the Africans, and the Armenians, dispersal to overseas territories need not imply a decisive break with the homeland nor is the uprooting of the diasporic group considered permanent in relation to contemporary diaspora” (p.47). Forced or traumatic, any kind of dispersion across or within state borders is one of the main criteria for defining the concept. The theme is related to the historical myths and dispersion stories (including heroic stories and figures), symbols, and places that constitute collective memory. The idea of ‘homeland’ also contains stories about life in the homeland and the dispersion. The role of the dispersal and the exile’s trauma on the diaspora’s collective memory is stated as one of the main factors for the foundation of the diaspora (Bruneau, 2010).

Brubaker (2005) identifies three core criteria that are widely used to define a group as a diaspora: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance. Forced or traumatic, any kind of dispersion across or within state borders is the first criterion for defining the concept. The second criterion is “the orientation to a real or imagined ‘homeland’ as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty” (Brubaker, 2005, p.5). The maintained material or symbolic ties are the significant points regarding this concept. Here, Brubaker emphasizes the importance of the second criterion for the definition of the concept, by

pointing to Safran's (1991) criteria, as four of the six were concerning the orientation of a homeland. The third criterion, what Brubaker (2005) called "boundary-maintenance" is related to the preservation of distinctive identity, by several forms of self-segregation or social exclusion. In the end, it seems that it is better to think of the framework as a whole to make a conceptual clarification of the diaspora.

The concept of homeland is strongly emphasized in the definition of common characteristics of diasporas by several academics. Grossman (2019) refers to this characteristic by emphasizing the living conditions and orientations of diasporas. It is argued that for a group to be a diaspora, its members should live outside the place that they collectively call and identify as their homeland (either real or imagined). Also, they should maintain some material and symbolic ties with this place as Brubaker (2005) mentioned. Whether a real or an imagined homeland thought, the material and symbolic ties with the specified place are the significant points. These ties might be exemplified by tourism, participation in homeland politics by voting in the elections, lobbying activities, sending remittances, or engaging in homeland cultural and religious movements. "People, goods, resources, ideas, and information travel back and forth between the homeland and the diaspora through legal and illegal trans-state networks" (Sheffer, 2003 in Grossman, 2019, p.1273). These connections are "a hallmark of diasporan identity" that distinguishes diasporas and other ethnic communities or groups (Butler, 2001, p. 204). As mentioned above, four of the six of Safran's criteria were concerning the orientation of a homeland. All other discussions include the idea of an 'ancestral homeland' or an 'ideal home'. Safran's (1991) idea of their ancestral homeland as diasporic members' true, ideal home which they would eventually return criticized in several ways. It is suggested that the idea naturalizes spatiality and supposes people's "boundedness and authenticity" (Axel, 2004, p.31). In fact, diasporas refer to constantly shifting categories of identification, by denoting displacement and deterritorialization. Though some places are considered sacred by the diasporas and the claims to imagined or mythical homelands persist among some communities. Clifford (1994) has criticized the idea by calling it a 'centered model' and exemplified the South Asian diaspora to mention not every diasporic group is oriented to a specific place and desires a return.

The idea of ‘homeland’ contains stories about life in the homeland and the dispersion. The active stories (re)produce the idea of belonging with consciousness and solidarity, the collective memory. It is suggested that diasporas have collective memory as a significant part of their identities, they put emphasis on maintaining their relations with each other, they continue the relationship with their homeland, and they express this link with homeland myths (Tölölyan, 1996). The idea or myth of the homeland is embedded in the diaspora’s collective memory. Members of a diaspora retained a collective memory of their original homeland, they typically idealized this specific place, were committed to the restoration of the original homeland and continued in various ways to relate to that homeland (Safran, 1991). In the host country, diaspora members create places of memory to maintain their bonds with the homeland. This spatial dimension enables diasporic members to transfer the collective identity through religious, cultural, and political gatherings. Constructing commemorative monuments, sanctuaries, monasteries and other symbolic (or functional) places becomes a way to preserve diasporic members’ cultural or religious belonging.

People live ‘here’ and ‘there’, not in a particular moment of dispersion from a particular territory. “The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there. But there is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation. ... [It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here)” (Clifford, 1994, p.322). This “in-betweenness” determines “how people construct the identity of their diasporic group: how they map its boundaries, invest in it materially and emotionally, and construct its difference from other groups” (Brodwin, 2003, p.384). Barth (2001) argues that ethnic groups define their identities by drawing upon common roots and shared history as foundational elements. Interactions with the “other” and the idea that this “other” is culturally different from oneself become crucial components of ethnic identity (Barth, 2001). Research conducted on Circassian youth in Türkiye found that the emphasis on Circassian identity became more pronounced when encountering “different” identities, notably in places like universities (Okçuoğlu, 2021). Additionally, the study showed how their diasporic identities evolved through participation in various activities, sharing of information, and socialization within these environments.

It is noteworthy to remember that identities are never fixed, and simultaneous diasporic identities are possible even within a single diaspora (Butler, 2001). Considering the perpetual encounters with ‘others’, as Hall has stated, identities “are never completed, never finished; they are always in process of formation” (1991, p.47). Therefore, rather than taking diaspora and diasporic identity for granted, the multidimensionality and heterogeneity through which these groups are formed, reformed, and revived should be explored: “The notion of diaspora no longer refers to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland which is the old, the imperializing, the homogenizing form of “ethnicity” but it is defined by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and hybridity that refer to identities which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference” (Doğan, 2009, p.61). Therefore, because ethnic or diasporic groups have various identity formations in themselves, instead of a stable, unique, and homogenous identity, there are *identities* within an example of a diasporic community.

Using the term “diasporic identity” instead of “ethnic identity” acknowledges the unique context of diaspora communities, which often involve dispersion from a homeland. While individuals with an ethnic identity may not necessarily have a homeland or experience dispersion, diasporas typically exhibit both characteristics. However, it is important to note that diasporas also retain a strong awareness of their ethnic identity, which distinguishes them from other groups. By employing the term “diasporic identity”, it emphasizes inclusivity and recognizes the complex interplay between ethnicity, dispersion, and cultural identity within diaspora communities.

Diasporic subjects define their identities by turning back upon various markers of the self, like homeland, memory, and loss. These identities can be based on different points, like common cultural, religious, or linguistic features; a shared history of displacement (Clifford, 1994); on nostalgia for the homeland and a real or symbolic return discourse (Safran, 1991); or on contacts with the homeland (Butler, 2001). One becomes diasporic through complex processes including collective memory and cultural aspects (Cho, 2018). In that sense, diasporic identities are ‘imagined’, and diasporas constitute ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991). Anderson’s conceptualization of nations as ‘imagined communities’ can be applied to the constructed nature of diasporas, since diasporic belonging is “socially

constructed on the basis of an imagined and symbolic common origin and mythic past” (Van Gorp and Smets, 2015). The socially constructed and shared characteristics and belongings like religion, language, historical myths, dispersion stories (including heroic stories and figures), symbols, and places constitute collective memory in these imagined communities.

3.1.2 Categorizing diasporas and the question of double diasporas

Based on Cohen’s (2008) work, the modes and reasons for exile or migration are combined with historical background and examples from the works of other theorists. Cohen notes that these types may overlap and change their character over time, and further expands Safran’s (1991) list of diasporas’ common features, by going along with Clifford’s (1994) argument that not every diaspora will exhibit every feature listed. He distinguishes diasporas as old and new ones as the main classification. Within this context, the main factor that determines the traditional-modern distinction is the age of capitalism. Cohen distinguishes diasporas as formed before capitalism (Armenian, Jewish, and Circassian), and as formed after capitalism (Irish, Chinese, Indian, Sikhs, Kurds, and Turks). He highlights diasporas’ most significant characteristics with additional emphasis on alternative routes to diaspora formation in search of work, trade or colonial ambitions; the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation; a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate; a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and the possibility of a distinctive creative life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism. Based on the modes and reasons of exile or migration, Cohen categorizes diasporas as victim/refugee, imperial/colonial, labor/service, trade/business/professional, and cultural/hybrid/postmodern (what he called ‘deterritorialized’ lately) diasporas (Cohen, 2008).

Sheffer (2003) categorizes diasporas based on their connections with their home and hostland, their historical background, and their activities. Based on their connection with the homeland, he categorizes them as stateless or state-linked. According to historical existence, he categorizes them as ancient (historical) or modern; and according to the activities of the diaspora, he categorizes them as incipient, dormant, or active. Sheffer also put the differences

according to diasporas' relationship with the hostland and homeland, as assimilationist, integrationist, communalist, autonomist, irredentist, or separatist (Sheffer, 2003). Besides the classification, he argues that the diaspora is not an imaginary community, but rather a concrete entity that is away from home. To research diasporas, Sheffer recommends combining positivist and constructivist approaches and discussing diasporas "as actual social formations as well as social constructs" (Grossman, 2019, p.1265), "as social form and as a type of consciousness" which is difficult to separate conceptually (Sökefeld, 2006, p.265).

Bruneau (2010) specifies four major types of diasporas with a combination of main characteristics. Instead of a religious or national aspect, he states the first diasporic group is based on its entrepreneurial characteristic. Like the Chinese, Indian and Lebanese diasporas, he proposes the entrepreneurial characteristic as the main element of the reproduction strategy of these diasporas, most of them emerging from a colonial context. Another diasporic group is based on monotheistic religion with a particular language, like the case of the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian diasporas. Bruneau mentions that when nation-states have been formed, the states have performed strong influence on these diasporas. Another diasporic group is formed in a political context that is illustrated by the Palestinian diaspora example. The role of their dispersal and the occupation's trauma on the diaspora's collective memory is stated as one of the main factors for the foundation of the diaspora. The fourth diasporic group is formed on a racial and cultural base, like African American and European Roma diasporas. The traumatic experiences of the slave trade and the slave economy of the plantations are stated as a significant part of their collective memory that affects the diaspora formation.

In addition to evaluating diaspora categories within a broad framework, it is crucial to explore the concept of "double diaspora" in shaping the dissertation's conceptualization. In the literature, this concept coincides with the notion of return. The notion of return is one of the keystones of the concept of diaspora in classical diaspora literature. Since the mid-1990s, global return migration has been studied through two approaches: the economic and political sociology of return (Hagan and Wassink, 2020). The economic sociology of return focuses on the economic models of migration, such as returnees' labor market activities and their connection with economic development. This approach considers international mobility as a

part of free and voluntary decisions and movements based on economic inequalities. The second literature, what Hagan and Wassink (2020) called the political sociology of return focuses on the growing number of deportees and rejected asylum seekers as well as the increasing role of both emigration and immigration states in controlling and managing migration. This approach focuses on the changing political contexts and state and institutional actors' roles in the reintegration experiences of deportees or rejected asylum seekers. Regarding diaspora literature, focusing on political sociology instead of the economic sociology of return approach might reveal some aspects of the country of origin's state actors. Their role in the return of diasporic members might become another dimension for the political sociology approach.

The return of the second-generation children of the first-generation immigrants to the 'original homeland', to their parents' country of origin is another concept regarding return migrants and diasporas. This issue brings together aspects of both identity and mobility in the conceptual discussions on the difference and similarities between diaspora and transnational approaches. Apart from the discussions regarding the 'secondness' of the generations (for instance, how to describe the generations if children who are born in the host country have been sent back to their 'home' countries for part of their schooling), the meaning of the term 'return' is debatable. "There is an ontological sense of return to a point of origin, a homeland" (King and Christou, 2010, p.169), but does the second-generation really 'returns' to the homeland? Since the second-generation members had no relationship with this 'home' before, can we consider this type of movement as a return? Bovenberk (1974) specifies this type of movement not as a return, but as a first-time migration to the place that has been called the homeland.

For the second generation, these kinds of transnational activities and visits enable them to communicate with their parents' country of origin. "Transnationalism and return migration are embedded in personal ties that introduce emotions, beliefs, and imagination into the debates" (Tedeschi et.al., 2020, p.612). The established emotional connection with the 'homeland' might transform into the decision to return or might be an alternative to consider the parental country of origin as not their own 'homeland' (King and Christou, 2010). Some of them established new forms of existence through constant back-and-forth movements,

become transmigrants, and sometimes settle in two (or more) locations (Vertovec, 2001). The “in-betweenness” of diasporas is reshaped by the experiences of second-generation diasporic members’ return movements. Fortier (2000) conceptualizes this with three dualities: here and there, homeland and hostland, and indigenoussness and foreignness. Mixings and crossings of the dualities are challenged by the experiences of second-generation diasporic members’ return.

The returnees (who had migrated to the ‘homeland’) have different experiences depending on the country where they had been born, and there are other cultural influences that they have been exposed to. In her study about Adyghe (Circassian) returnees, Shami exemplifies this argument regarding identity: “Even with the formation of collective approaches to the homeland, the people who journey back and forth, their motivations, aims, representations and the kinds of landscapes they construct as they travel these circuits vary significantly. The countries that they come from, the class and gender politics that they embody, also frame their encounters” (1998, p.633). Potter, Conway, and Phillips (2005) argue a similar perspective: “return migrants are demographically selective, behaviorally diverse, they possess differing stocks of human capital, they have divergent attitudes, divergent images of their island homelands, divergent backgrounds, and consequently their experiences, adaptations, and behaviors will rarely be commonly shared” (p.2). On the contrary, it can be argued that particularly diasporic identity and consciousness of diaspora members might be a reason for similar experiences in case of return. Especially in the case of second or subsequent generations, who are diasporic members in the same country, might have similar backgrounds, behavior, and aspects of cultural identity. Local and international diasporic organizations’ activities might influence a common sense of belonging for the diasporic identity and might reveal themselves in the decision process of return. Regardless of the similarities or differences, the return of second or subsequent generations is not an endpoint of the migration cycle, it is a new type of diasporic experience (Erciyes, 2008). With the new perspectives on the definition of diaspora, it is also argued that “multiple, circular, and return migrations, rather than a singular great journey from one sedentary space to another, occur across transnational spaces” (Lie, 1995, p. 304).

At this point, some scholars define the experiences of the second or subsequent generations' return with the concepts of "double diaspora", "diaspora of diaspora" or "diaspora within diaspora" (Guo, 2016; Erciyes, 2008; Aksoy and Tekten Sürmeli, 2018; Hang, 1995). Guo (2016) discusses the concept of double diaspora based on the experiences of Chinese Canadians in Beijing who had previously immigrated to Canada from China and later returned. He defines the term as "a hybrid experience that transcends boundaries of ethnicity and nationalism" (Guo, 2016, p.153). The focus here is the dualities, migrants' double role between the immigrated country and the country of origin while being simultaneously diasporic members and returnees. Erciyes (2008) focuses on the diasporic characteristics of Abkhaz-Adyghe (Circassian) returnees from Türkiye to the Caucasus based on the concept of "diaspora of the diaspora". She mentions how the relocation creates new post-return experiences and a new form of migrant experience while producing renewed diasporic characteristics. Aksoy and Tekten Sürmeli (2018) discusses the concept of "diaspora within diaspora" based on the experiences of the Alevi community, who migrated to Germany as 'guest workers' with other Turkish migrants.

These examples provided demonstrate how the concept of double diaspora is consistently evaluated within the framework of return migration. This research will contribute to the literature by analyzing the concept over repeated exile experienced by subsequent generation. With a specific focus on Syrian Circassians as a case study, the study aims to delve deeper into the complexities of double diaspora experiences. Through this analysis, the study seeks to deepen the understanding of the challenges and dynamics inherent in double diaspora experiences and their implications for diaspora communities.

3.2 Transnational Solidarity

3.2.1 *Transnationalisation and networking*

The term transnationalism has been used to connote everyday practices of migrants engaged in various activities, such as “solidarity within kinship networks, political participation not only in the country of emigration but also of immigration, small-scale entrepreneurship of migrants across borders and the transfer and re-transfer of cultural customs and practices” (Faist, 2010, p.11). It “provides an umbrella concept for some of the most globally transformative processes and developments of our time” (Vertovec, 2009, p.12). The key difference between transnationalism and diaspora lies in their focus and scope. While transnationalism emphasizes the fluidity and interconnectedness of migrants’ experiences and activities across borders, diaspora pertains specifically to communities dispersed from their homeland and maintaining cultural, social, and political ties with their place of origin. Transnationalism captures the dynamic and ongoing engagement of migrants in multiple social, economic, and political spheres across borders, whereas diaspora emphasizes the collective identity and shared experiences of a dispersed community. Additionally, transnationalism may involve individuals or groups with diverse backgrounds and motivations, while diaspora typically refers to a specific ethnic, cultural, or religious community with a shared heritage and sense of belonging. Consequently, while transnationalism captures the dynamic and evolving nature of migrant experiences, diaspora emphasizes the enduring connections and collective consciousness of dispersed communities. Together, these concepts offer insights into the diverse ways in which migration (forced or not) shapes individuals, communities, and societies on a global scale.

From the 1990s, transnationalism was a part of the discussions of migration studies, by identifying migrants as significant social agents. Foner (1997) stated in this sense that “much is distinctive about transnationalism today [in the 1990s], not only because earlier patterns have been intensified or become more common but because new processes and dynamics are involved” (p.356). A third perspective has emerged in the literature, which argues that some immigrants are simultaneously active both in the host country and in their homeland, participating in family, social, economic, religious, political, and cultural processes (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Although today the opposite is considered, the early literature on migrant transnationalism in the early 1990s suggested that all migrants engage in sustained

social, economic, and political engagement across borders. Today, it is assumed that modes or types of transnational contact and exchange may differ for every case. No matter what, the transnational approach in the sociology of migration has provided “a new analytic optic which makes visible the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labor migration” (Çağlar, 2001, p.607).

The term has been used to describe “a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity” (Vertovec, 2009, p.3). It is stated that in transnationalism, “a broad range of economic, sociocultural, and political cross-border activities and practices, and their various combinations, modify people’s sense of belonging to places; affect their citizenship and nationality; change their aspirations, imagination and decisions in everyday life; and influence their identity” (Tedeschi et.al., 2020). These definitions highlighted the point of migrants’ agency in a globalized world (Bauböck and Faist, 2010), with many overlapping economic, social, and political impacts.

Migrant transnationalism is defined as a subset of a broader range of transnational social formations, as “a broad category referring to a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people and organizations in their homelands or elsewhere in a diaspora” (Vertovec, 2009, p.13). Vertovec (2009) lists several kinds of transnational connections that migrant transnationalism deals with: the families were split between the countries of origin and destination, yet maintain strong emotional ties; migrants who return to their homeland or undertake some kind of movement back-and-forth; the ones who create and maintain strong long-distance networks; for the migrants who have ongoing communication with their families in the homeland, particularly through letters; for the migrants who sent remittances to families in the homeland; for the established migrant associations; for the migrants who establish businesses in both home and host countries, linking through imports and exports; for the migrants who sustain political interests in their homelands, including the organization of political rallies, lobbying and funding for political parties. Schiller et al. (1992) defined transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together

their country of origin and their country of settlement” (p.1). The maintained familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political relations that exceed borders combined with actions, decisions, and concerns. These ties enable transmigrants “to develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously” (*ibid.*, p.2).

The concept of transnationalism focuses on the activities of international migrants across borders. Being distinct from international relations and political science disciplines, migration studies use the term transnationalism with a focus on non-state actors. In the studies of academic literature, transnationalism was often associated not only with migration studies, but also with globalization, migration, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, diaspora, post-migration studies, and internationalism. Considering the challenge of determining a precise and clear theoretical definition of the concept, “instead of being based on a deductive approach, from theory to practice, the definition of transnationalism could more usefully be developed through a pragmatist inductive approach” (Tedeschi et.al., 2020), as recommended by Bauböck and Faist (2010). They suggest defining the concept with its actual empirical use, defining the macro-, meso- and/or micro-level of the empirical context, and then deriving the theory. The attempt to conceptually define transnationalism in a binary way as ‘transnationalism from above’ and ‘from below’ has been evaluated as inadequate, since the concept is “too entangled to allow such clear abstractions” (Vertovec, 2009, p.3).

Since the mid-1990s, critical assessments represent significant problems in the theoretical discussion on transnationalism (Kivisto, 2001; Vertovec, 2009; Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). Firstly, since the term ‘transnationalism’ is often used interchangeably with ‘international’, ‘multinational’, ‘global’, and ‘diasporic’, there was a lack of conceptual clarification. The nation and nationalism have been questioned in the term of transnationalism- suggesting that the transnational approach privileges ‘the nation’. It has been criticized that an incorrect dichotomy/ trichotomy between transnationalism vs. assimilation (vs. multiculturalism) has been positioned in the approach, rather than focusing on their inter-relationship. There is criticism for suggesting that all migrants engage in transnationalism. Migrants’ border-crossing practices vary even within local communities: “It has been recognized from the start that transnational activities are quite heterogeneous

and vary across immigrant communities, both in their popularity and in their character” (Portes, 2003, p.879). Thus, the questions of “how many? how ‘much’? what type?” should be asked regarding evaluating cross-border activities.

These critiques formulated theoretical developments of migrant transnationalism. Vertovec (2009) points out some of the typologies that have been formulated by theorists: transnationalism ‘from above’ – global capital, media, and political institutions; and ‘from below’ – local, grassroots activity (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998); ‘narrow’ – institutionalized and continuous activities; and ‘broad’ transnationalism – occasional linkages (Itzigsohn et al., 1999); ‘great’ – of state and economy; and ‘little’ transnationalism – of family and household (Gardner, 2002); ‘linear’; ‘resource-dependent’; and ‘reactive’ transnationalism based on economic and other sources (Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucido, 2002); broad’ – including both regular and occasional activities; and ‘strict’ transnationalism – regular participation only (Portes, 2003); ‘core’ – patterned and predictable around one area of social life; and ‘expanded’ transnational activity – occasional practices in a wider array of spheres (Levitt, 2001). “Such types of transnationalism are variably manifested among different groups of people depending on a range of factors including geographical proximity of sending and receiving contexts, histories of interdependence between nation-states and localities, patterns of migration and processes of settlement” (Vertovec, 2009, p.18-19). Vertovec (2009) claimed that the meaning of transnationalism is grounded in six theoretical premises: social morphology (social networks spanning borders), type of consciousness (multiple identities and sense of belonging), mode of cultural reproduction (hybridization of various cultural phenomena), avenue of capital (activities of transnational corporations), site of political engagement (cross-border public participation and political organization through technologies), and (re)construction of ‘place’ or locality (creation of new social spaces across countries).

The arenas where transnational migration is taking place are “multi-layered and multi-sited, including not just the home and host countries but other sites around the world that connect migrants to their conationals and coreligionists” (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, p.131). In this sense, transnationalism has a non-linear process, where its ties intensify in one period of time and decrease in another: “for certain individuals, transnationalism is a temporary, rather than

a constant, way of living, where physical and virtual, mobilities and immobilities, are lived as flexible, loose, and non-linear spaces in-between, and where imagination forms a bridge across these ‘in-between categories’” (Tedeschi et.al., 2020, p.611). In that sense, transnationalism refers to processes that exceed international borders. In general, “it refers to immigrants and their descendants who maintain connections with and are socially embedded in both their sending and receiving countries, as well as with members of their national or religious group dispersed elsewhere” (Grossman, 2019, p.1269).

It is stated that transnational activities “represent goal-oriented initiatives that require coordination across national borders by members of civil society”, also involving individuals and non-institutional actors (Portes, 2001, p.186). Vertovec (2003) supported this idea by claiming that citizens are regularly involved in transnational activities. These activities affect people’s sense of belonging, loyalty, and sense of attachment. “Meaningful and constant cross-borders relationships and activities connect all these aspects, which are inherently transformative, relevant, and widespread enough to bring about societal structural change” (Tedeschi et.al., 2020, p.606). The transnational activities encompass meaningful cross-border relationships and interactions that connect individuals across space, contributing to transformative changes in societal structures. The concept of space can be linked with the institutional channeling theory. In this way, it becomes evident how the physical and social environment influences the opportunities and constraints faced by migrants and transnational actors. Understanding the interplay between space, institutional structures, and transnational activities can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of migrant engagement, solidarity-building, and societal change on a global scale.

3.2.2 Institutional channeling theory: Civil society organizations as a space for transnational activities

Bringing attention to the legal conditions and political institutions of host countries, Ireland (2000) has examined the nature of immigrant political mobilization. Ireland’s formulation of the ‘institutional channeling theory’ offers an alternative approach to class and race/ethnicity theories, aiming to understand immigrant political strategies. The class analysis suggests that immigrants’ political participation hinges on their class identity, whereas the race/ethnicity

theory argues that the immigrants' ethnic identity is of fundamental significance (Kaya, 2004). However, the institutional channeling theory posits that migrants' choices are influenced and limited by legal and political institutions. These include political parties, parliament, religious organizations, citizenship, judicial bodies, and humanitarian institutions, which can either weaken or strengthen the impact of resource differences. The legal and political institutions play a significant role in shaping and limiting the choices available to migrants in terms of their political participation and engagement. Acting as institutional gatekeepers, they tend to regulate access to the venues of political participation available to immigrants or other marginalized groups. Kaya's (2004) analysis provides valuable insights into the strategies adopted by Circassian diasporic communities for political participation. He stated that the Circassian diasporic communities' strategies for political participation are closely linked to the policies of inclusion and/or exclusion of the governing political class. When minorities encounter barriers preventing them from accessing traditional political institutions such as parliament and political parties, they often resort to identity politics as a means of asserting their agency and visibility within the political sphere. Similarly, Kaya (2004) also argued that minorities often associate with identity politics by emphasizing their cultural, ethnic, and religious distinctiveness when they are not allowed access to political institutions like parliament and political parties by the dominant political and legal structures.

Besides immigrants' political participation strategies, this theory can also provide a framework for comprehending transnational solidarity and the operations of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in shaping the social and cultural landscape for immigrants and marginalized groups. Much like legal and political institutions, civil society organizations can serve as gatekeepers, controlling entry to spaces of social and cultural participation within the host society. They often establish norms, practices, and eligibility criteria that determine who can participate and to what extent. For immigrants and marginalized groups, access to these spaces is not only about individual engagement but also about broader issues of inclusion, representation, and empowerment.

The influence of civil society organizations extends beyond the local context and intersects with transnational solidarity strategies. Immigrant communities often rely on civil society

organizations to foster connections and networks both within their host country and across borders. These organizations facilitate the exchange of information, resources, and support networks, strengthening ties between diaspora communities and their countries of origin. Additionally, civil society organizations can serve as advocates for transnational issues and mobilize collective action on a global scale. Therefore, the role of civil society organizations in regulating access to social and cultural spaces is not only significant for immigrants' integration and participation within the host society but also crucial for fostering transnational solidarity and activism. By understanding and engaging with civil society organizations, immigrants and marginalized groups can navigate the complexities of social and cultural inclusion while simultaneously building connections and alliances that transcend geographical boundaries.

As stated above, transnational activities “represent goal-oriented initiatives that require coordination across national borders by members of civil society”, also involving individuals and non-institutional actors (Portes, 2001, p.186). The civil society is “a key agent in the unfolding ‘crisis’, first, as a provider of first aid in the form of local solidarity action, secondly, as a defender of human rights in the application and making of national or European law and policies, and thirdly, as a promoter of transnational solidarity in international politics” (Kanellopoulos et al., 2021, p.719). In this relationship, civil society organizations “mediate between the national and the supranational, thereby connecting national society to transnational governance” (Rumford, 2003, p.32). For long years, international organizations are one of the most influential actors in the field of migration with their effects on governments' migration, integration, service provision, and even border control/management policies (Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010).

Civil society organizations include nongovernment organizations (NGOs), professional associations, foundations, independent research institutes, community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations, people's organizations, social movements, and labor unions. Organizational and informal civil society initiatives have key operational, legislative, and dimensional differences. International NGOs (INGOs) are large-scale funded organizations working in various countries and various fields. Foundations are philanthropic or charitable organizations set up by individuals or institutions as legal entities (a corporation

or trust) to support causes consistent with the goals of the foundation. Faith-based organizations are religious-based groups organized around a place of religious worship or congregation, a specialized religious institution, or a registered or unregistered institution with a religious character or mission. Community-based organizations (CBOs) generally consist of small-scaled organizations that operate in neighborhoods for community members by organizing community meetings, providing intergroup dialogue, delivering mental health training and awareness, ensuring youth engagement, organizing annual celebrations of music and dance, planning recognition events, organizing field trips or soccer (Gonzalez Benson, 2020). NGOs may include all not-for-profit organizations that are independent of the state, or professional, intermediary, and nonprofit organizations that provide or advocate the provision of services (ADB, 2009). The term CSO is preferred by this paper, rather than NGO, to cover all kinds of activities in the literature.

Civil society organizations vary in their approaches, reflecting the diversity of organization types. The needs versus rights-based approaches focus on the discursive and activity-based differences among CSOs. ‘Needs-based’ (or service-based) approach usually focuses on providing material assistance, such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare; and the rights-based approach focuses on advocating for the rights of migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers by advocating for their legal rights and their empowerment (Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017). Simply, if CSOs are divided into two groups, the first group as service providers deliver public services most commonly in the fields of social and health care, education, shelter, sports, culture, environmental protection, etc., and the second group, advocates promote civic engagement, human rights, legal protection, asylum application, and other important issues of general interest and participate in policy making (Divjak and Forbici, 2017; Kleist, 2017; Gökalp Aras and Sahin Mencütek, 2020). “While a ‘needs based’ approach focuses on securing additional resources for delivery of services to marginalized groups, a ‘rights based’ approach calls for existing resources to be shared more equally and assisting the marginalized people to assert their rights to those resources, thus making the process explicitly political” (Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017, p.12). The right-based approach aims to bring change in legal terms, including institutional structures, practices, behaviors, and ultimately understandings (Zihnioğlu, 2019). As the definition suggests, the rights-based activist approach not only challenges the legal framework, but also the societal norms.

The debate between CSOs approaches includes different ideological backgrounds of the charity and solidarity notion as well. While the notion of charity proceeds from the traditional aid-giving ideology, the solidarity ideology is aligned through cooperation. CSOs that have charity-oriented goals pursue the needs-based approach with the activities such as immediate aid on food, shelter, or medication. Solidarity-oriented ones, on the other hand, may follow the rights-based approach with activities such as awareness raising on specific issues (Mogollón et.al., 2021).

Here, it would be deficient to evaluate CSOs with a dichotomy over these two approaches. This distinction is often not so neatly divided in response to migrants or refugees, that many CSOs provide both needs-based and rights-based services. Many CSOs adopt both of these approaches and actively pursue both of these roles, “the practice is not black and white, their work and activities have various impacts, often interlinked” (Divjak and Forbici, 2017, p.5). The blurred lines between rights-based and needs-based humanitarian response can be explained by the involvement of some CSOs in both protection and assistance activities. Religious-based organizations and cultural associations serve as prime illustrations of this overlap, as they address both aspects intermittently. Moreover, this phenomenon exhibits variability across different countries. For instance, while Circassian cultural associations in Türkiye may alternate between aid and rights advocacy, interviews suggest that the association in Syria primarily focuses on aid activities. Consequently, a dichotomous explanation fails to adequately capture the complexity of many instances.

CHAPTER 4: DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In conducting this study on diasporic identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices among displaced people, the choice of methodology is crucial to capturing the complexities of the subject matter and participants' experiences. The research design must accommodate the multifaceted nature of diasporic experiences and the role of transnational solidarity. The qualitative approach, specifically through in-depth interviews, was chosen for this study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics involved. This method allows for a more personal and nuanced insights into the lived experiences of the participants, and for a researcher to be involved in the study (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). For this study's topic, it also provides an opportunity for the researcher to capture the nuances of their identities and the impact of transnational connections on their lives. In-depth interviews emerged as the most suitable method, allowing for a deeper engagement with individuals' personal narratives where they can express their thoughts and feelings in their own words, offering invaluable insights that might be overlooked with more quantitative methods.

While in-depth interviews offer significant advantages, such as a closer connection between the researcher and participants and the ability to explore complex and sensitive issues in detail, there are also certain challenges. The researcher's positionality, including factors such as age, gender, appearance, and prior relationships with the participants, can significantly affect the interactions and the data collected. Understanding these dynamics is essential for interpreting the findings and ensuring the integrity of the research. In the following section, the discussion will delve into the implications of the researcher's positionality, recognizing the transformative nature of these dynamics beyond the initial framework. It will aim to illustrate a reflexive approach to the research by examining both the advantages and challenges associated with the researcher's positionality.

In the second section, the research design, data collection process, and analysis will be comprehensively outlined. This includes an in-depth description of the interview procedures,

fieldwork methodology, and the transcription process. Detailed attention will be given to the methods used for coding and analyzing the data, explaining how these approaches contribute to the overall quality of the research. Additionally, the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants will be discussed to underscore the commitment to maintaining data integrity and protecting participant privacy. This section aims to provide a thorough understanding of the research methodology and the steps taken to ensure rigorous and ethical data management.

It is important to note that an appropriate approach for studying people's particularly traumatic life stories would involve a long-term ethnographic study. This method would allow for extensive observation and provides various opportunities for interaction. It allows a comprehensive examination of participants' lives over an extended period, enabling researchers to observe their daily interactions, behaviors, and emotional responses in their natural contexts (Fielding, 2008). Many scholars have highlighted that individuals often frequently disclose personal and significant details about their lives when they do not perceive the interaction as being conducted by a researcher (Huisman, 2008). This phenomenon highlights the advantage of an ethnographic approach, which reduces the artificial barriers typically found in formal research settings and encourages a more genuine and open exchange. Although a long-term ethnographic method was not used in this study, there were instances where the principles of ethnography were applicable and others where they were not. Specifically, CSO officials tended to conduct interviews in a formal manner that reflected their institutional roles, whereas more genuine dialogues were achieved in interviews with Syrian Circassians. This variation in the nature of interactions is believed to be closely related to the researcher's positionality, which influences how participants perceive and engage with the research process. However, while positionality plays a significant role, it is not the sole factor affecting the depth and authenticity of the data collected.

4.1 Researcher's Positionality: Studying One's Own Community

As an insider within the Circassian community, I believe that acknowledging my positionality as a Circassian researcher is crucial for transparency and reflexivity in my research. Reflecting on my own biases, privileges, and standpoint allows me to critically engage with my research process and findings. Undoubtedly, the firsthand knowledge of Circassian culture, traditions, and experiences enriches my understanding and analysis of the diasporic identity transformations within the community. On the other hand, straddling the line between insider and outsider status, I faced challenges in maintaining objectivity while remaining empathetic to the experiences of my research participants. Balancing these roles required careful reflexivity throughout the research process.

The initial phase of my fieldwork involved planning to establish contact with various associations. My primary goal was to connect with Syrian Circassians through these CSOs and the federations they are affiliated with. Initially, I aimed to meet with the CSO founded by Syrian Circassians in Istanbul in 2020. Nonetheless, leveraging the advantage of my insider status, I began by compiling a list of potential contacts, which included CSOs and officials I was already familiar with, to facilitate these connections. Access to unique networks and resources within the community facilitates participant recruitment and provides valuable insights into social structures and support systems relevant to the study. This network access not only helps in gathering a diverse range of perspectives but also enriches the overall scope of the research by providing deeper insights into the community's social structures and resources. For instance, being perceived as "one of us/our girl" led to opportunities such as being invited by a CSO to the Caucasus to study Syrian Circassians who had relocated there. After one of my meetings with an association, I was invited to give a seminar at their venue, where I later connected with a Syrian Circassian attendee. These examples highlight the complex insider/outsider dynamic that particularly surfaced in my interactions with associations. Although I aimed to foster a more relaxed and friendly communication with the associations by leveraging my insider status and held the meetings in this way, I also needed to assert my objective role as a researcher. This balancing act sometimes blurred the lines, making it challenging to maintain the boundaries of my position. As a result, while the closeness I experienced in some interviews with CSO officials often led to rich storytelling moments, I occasionally struggled to maintain clear boundaries as a

researcher. My insider status facilitated connections with associations and Turkish Circassian intellectuals who were involved during and after the arrival of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye. These interactions provided foundational insights into transnational connections, which informed my research questions and led to the study evolving and adapting as my fieldwork progressed.

In my fieldwork, the intersection of being a young female researcher and navigating the complexities of conducting research in male-dominated spaces brought both challenges and opportunities. In preliminary meetings with associations and intellectuals, I often encountered situations where my research design, questions, and field plan were not just questioned but scrutinized in ways that felt demeaning. These interactions reflected broader gendered power dynamics that many scholars have explored, emphasizing how such dynamics can shape the experiences of female researchers in the field (Golombisky, 2006; Holmgren, 2011). However, these challenges also highlighted the nuanced ways in which gender and age can influence research interactions. While my identity as a young woman sometimes invited undue scrutiny, it also opened doors to more genuine connections. Specifically, in interviews with conservative female participants, my gender and age seemed to foster a level of trust and a sense of closeness, leading to more open and sincere narratives. In these settings, my gender seemed to bridge the gap between researcher and participant, creating a space where women felt more comfortable sharing their stories. The duality of these experiences illustrates the complex role that a researcher's positionality can play, not only in how they are perceived by participants but also in how they navigate the research process itself.

At this point, it is significant to highlight a crucial consideration. In studies utilizing snowball sampling, as this one does, there is a risk that the outsider researcher may be funneled towards a single ideological or social group by the participants, a tendency that can be particularly pronounced when researching activism (Doğan, 2017). Being aware of this potential bias as an insider researcher, I made a conscious effort to conduct interviews that captured the full heterogeneity of perspectives. The ease of access that comes with being an insider also warrants careful reflection. While it certainly facilitated my entry into the field, it also provided a unique advantage in critically examining the nature of that access and the

relationships or patterns it revealed. This critical perspective helps prevent the researcher—who might otherwise be seen as an outsider—from being excessively influenced or directed in a specific political or ideological direction. For instance, during an interview with a CSO official, it was mentioned that the Syrian Circassians who had come to Türkiye had largely assimilated into Arab culture, abandoning their fundamental Circassian traditions and customs. I was told that this would become evident as I conducted further interviews. This orientation could be something an outsider researcher might overlook without a critical perspective; however, as an insider, I understood this viewpoint in the context of the CSO's ideological stance. As will be explored in detail in the analysis section, Circassian CSOs in Türkiye have positioned themselves differently, often framing their activities for Circassians arriving in Türkiye through lenses such as “Arabism”, “Islam”, or “Circassianness”. There were instances during the interviews where nationalist discourses were strongly expressed. For example, one CSO official stated:

“If I was born in this country, if I live in this country, if this country accepted me as a homeland when I was exiled, if the Anatolian lands embraced me and my ancestors fought for independence... If they fought against people whose language they did not even know and became martyrs, if my ancestors' blood is on this land, if we are among the founding elements, and I flee when a war breaks out here, I would be a traitor. If I have a gun and the ability to fight, I do not approve of young, healthy, and conscious people coming here from there. Their families may come, but emotionally and instinctively, there is no justification for them. If it were me, I would send my family and children away if there were bombs falling, but I would fight until I became a martyr for my country. Look, there are nearly 3 million Syrians here. You see, they are all strong and healthy. They are traitors. Don't you think so?” (CS2)².

² The cited interviews are referenced in the study using codes such as “A3” or “D4.” In these codes, the letter represents the city where the interview was conducted, while the number denotes the sequence of the interview. The codes “CS” indicates the interviews with CSOs.

This kind of racist discourse presents a significant challenge for any researcher. Not only must one refrain from reacting verbally, but it is also critical to avoid any nonverbal cues—such as facial expressions or gestures—that could be interpreted as a response during the interview.

The research benefits from a deep, inherent understanding of the cultural context, which enhances both the interpretation and empathy toward participants' experiences. The insiderness provides several advantages into values: the value of shared experiences; the value of greater access; the value of cultural interpretation; and the value of deeper understanding and clarity of thought for the researcher (Labaree, 2002). My shared identity with the participants enhanced the ability to empathize with their challenges and aspirations. The situation provides a profound advantage in conducting this research. This empathetic understanding can inform the analysis and interpretation of data, leading to more nuanced findings. At this point, I was aware that I must assess the quality of my relationships with the community and take into account the associated complexities (Narayan, 1993). For instance, the empathy I developed, and the deep understanding of the challenges faced by those I interviewed became particularly difficult during a meeting I conducted in Ankara. One interviewee shared the painful loss of her village, the hardships she encountered from being unable to visit during holidays in Türkiye, and her anguish over the village being burned down, leaving her with no home to return to even if she could go back. As she recounted these experiences, she became emotional and began to cry. It led me to draw parallels between the stories shared and my own experiences, making it challenging to manage my emotional response. After the interview, I found myself hugging her and inviting her to visit my village in Duzce. This moment brought to the forefront the insider/outsider dilemma, prompting ethical questions about the boundaries of my role as a researcher. Was I overstepping the professional boundaries of my research by forming such close connections? How appropriate was it to develop personal relationships with participants after our interviews? Ultimately, my dual role as both a researcher and a member of the Circassian community led to significant ethical reflections. A similar experience occurred during another interview I conducted in Duzce. The female participant, whose husband was away working, spoke about the overwhelming loneliness she felt while caring for her small baby on her own. As a female refugee, I felt a strong sense of empathy and connection with her situation. I later

bought gifts for her baby. In a subsequent interview with another participant from the same neighborhood, I shared her story (without revealing her identity) and encouraged them to connect with her. My motivation stemmed from a growing concern that I was entering people's lives, prompting them to recount their traumatic experiences, and then leaving without offering any tangible support. In a similar vein, during another interview in Duzce, I was deeply moved by the hardships faced by one participant, so much so that I recommended her work to others in the hope of providing some assistance (details of the participant's profession are withheld to maintain anonymity). Beyond these individual instances, the narratives I encountered were consistently filled with stories of war and suffering. Not only was I personally affected by these accounts, but I also felt a profound sense of guilt for potentially reopening old wounds by asking participants to revisit their traumatic pasts. Some of these stories were rooted in the distant past, while others involved people who still had no news of their son or brother years after they were taken by the military.

I shared and discussed these concerns with my friends and colleagues. Despite participants consenting and voluntarily participating in my study, I couldn't help but question whether I was causing them harm. Shouldn't the participant-researcher relationship be mutually beneficial (Trainor and Bouchard, 2012)? What role should I assume, and to what extent can I involve myself in the participants' lives after the study is completed? These ethical questions, stemming from the insider/outsider dilemma, persisted throughout my research. I believe that it is crucial for researchers to actively engage with and reflect on such questions to uphold the ethical standards of their work. By exploring the advantages and challenges associated with the researcher's positionality, a reflexive approach is demonstrated, which enhances the credibility and rigor of the dissertation. Moreover, sharing these concerns and dilemmas is valuable, as they represent common challenges faced by researchers and may provide guidance for others encountering similar difficulties in their work.

This insider perspective fosters a greater sense of trust and sympathy, and even may encourage participants the telling of stories and share personal and sensitive information more openly (Earthy and Cronin, 2008). It is important to address the narrative data from CSOs alongside the stories shared by Syrian Circassians. Leveraging my insider position, I encountered situations where some CSOs even disclosed their involvement in illegal

activities related to Syrian Circassians. For example, although a more detailed analysis will be provided in the relevant section, one instance vividly demonstrates the significant advantage of being an insider:

“Then it became clear that Türkiye would not open the doors. They (Syrian Circassians) could not stay in Edirne. Then Edirne Governorship sent them back to Istanbul. Then we arranged a car from Istanbul again. (...) Association contacted human traffickers because they definitely wanted to go. We sent them all by sea from Izmir to Greece.” (CS7).

Another example involved the facilitation and acceleration of citizenship procedures for Syrian Circassians, thanks to a CSO official’s established connections with high-level government officials. While some of the specific details cannot be included in this study due to confidentiality concerns, these instances underscore the unique insights gained through my insider position.

Cultural sensitivity and nuance gained from being an insider enable more accurate data interpretation and prevent misunderstandings, with the advantage of being familiar with the values, traditions, and social dynamics that shape participants’ perspectives. The familiarity with the cultural norms and practices ensures the interpretation of participants’ responses accurately and contextually, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation that might arise from a lack of insider knowledge. Situations where participants expected me to demonstrate cultural sensitivity occasionally posed challenges. For instance, when I sought to interview a Syrian Circassian who taught the Circassian language to children at the association in Syria, I discovered that he had not learned Turkish and would refuse to meet with me because I did not speak Circassian. Even when I suggested using a translator, I learned that, as a member of the Circassian community, he expected me to know the language and therefore declined to participate in my research due to my lack of proficiency in Circassian. Although this situation allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of shared values, traditions, and social dynamics as an insider, it also highlighted how the expectations of potential participants influenced the course of the research.

Furthermore, the insider perspective enhances the ability to practice informed reflexivity. By questioning how personal biases and assumptions might influence the research process and findings, it allows a critical examination to maintain the integrity and rigor of the study. Overall, these advantages contribute to a more nuanced, respectful, and effective study.

4.2 Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis

As stated above, this research aimed to analyze diasporic identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices in the context of the term “double diasporas” with their individual and organizational dimensions. The research aimed to provide insights into the experiences of displaced Syrian Circassians and the role of transnational solidarity connections in supporting their diasporic identity and cultural continuity. How Syrian Circassians, a diasporic community living in Türkiye, construct and maintain their diasporic identity after forced displacement; how transnational kinship ties provide solidarity for them; and the role of Circassian civil society organizations in transnational solidarity were the main frameworks for this study to analyze.

To comprehensively analyze all dimensions, the study focused on gathering data at both individual and organizational levels, considering two-dimensional actors. It was determined that in-depth interviews were the most suitable method for addressing the research questions outlined in the study’s introduction. 46 semi-structured interviews conducted in Istanbul, Ankara and Duzce between July and December 2023 to understand diasporic identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices. The interviews were conducted with two groups, Circassian civil society organizations’ officials in Türkiye and Syrian Circassians who had to migrate to Türkiye after the civil war in Syria. 33 of these meetings were held with Syrian Circassians, and 13 of them were held with the officials of Circassian civil society organizations in Türkiye. Ankara and Istanbul were selected because they are the two largest provinces with significant Circassian populations. Duzce was also chosen for the field study due to its large population of both Turkish and Syrian Circassians. The fieldwork was initially planned to begin with meetings with federations in Ankara. Following these discussions, it was intended to seek referrals to Syrian Circassians. However, despite meetings with three individuals, progress was impeded as neither these contacts nor the organizations were able

to provide additional connections. Several factors could explain this issue. The federations and individuals initially approached might have had limited networks or connections within the Syrian Circassian community. Additionally, the federations or individuals contacted may not have been sufficiently engaged or proactive in facilitating connections, which could have affected the ability to expand the network. Although no issues were encountered in accessing interviewees in other provinces, this difficulty faced in Ankara was unexpected. Consequently, the fieldwork in Duzce was expanded from 10 to 15 interviews with Syrian Circassians to match the number conducted in Istanbul.

Initially, it was planned to include Balıkesir as a field site due to its numerous Circassian villages and the support that local civil society organizations had provided to Syrian Circassians after their forced migration. Some of these villages had hosted Syrian Circassians for a period. However, after the interviews began, it was discovered that Syrian Circassians had since relocated from these villages, leading to the exclusion of Balıkesir from the study. Similarly, Kayseri was considered as a potential site but was later excluded after it was learned through discussions with civil society organization officials and Syrian Circassians that only a small number of Syrian Circassians currently reside there. Ultimately, the fieldwork was completed with 15 meetings in Istanbul, 15 in Duzce, and three in Ankara with Syrian Circassians themselves.

13 of the total meetings were conducted with the officials of Circassian civil society organizations in Istanbul, Duzce, and Ankara: Adyghe Caucasus Cultural Association (*Adige Kafkas Kültür Derneği*), Istanbul Caucasus Cultural Association (*İstanbul Kafkas Kültür Derneği*), Istanbul Abkhaz Association (*İstanbul Abhaz Derneği*), Caucasus Foundation (*Kafkas Vakfı*), Ankara Circassian Association (*Ankara Çerkes Derneği*), Ankara Abkhaz Cultural Association (*Ankara Abhaz Kültür Derneği*), Duzce Adyghe Cultural Association (*Duzce Adige Kültür Derneği*), Duzce Abkhaz Cultural Association (*Duzce Abhaz Kültür Derneği*). The discussions also included the federations where Circassians are most actively engaged in Türkiye, namely the Federation of Caucasus Associations (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu, KAFFED*), the Federation of Circassian Associations (*Çerkes Dernekleri Federasyonu, ÇerkesFed*), the Federation of Abkhaz Associations (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu, AbhazFed*). At this point, background information on the establishment and

objectives of these federations was given in the section on political activism and civil society formulations of the Circassian diaspora, to contextualize the activities being examined.

Two of the interviewees were female, and 11 interviewees were male for civil society organizations' officials. This situation highlights the issue of female underrepresentation in leadership roles within associations, where organizations were largely male-dominated spaces of politics, with only a few activist women involved (Doğan, 2017). For Syrian Circassians, 20 of interviewees were female, and 13 interviewees were male. While gender-based equal representation was not a specific objective within the framework of generalizability, efforts were made to avoid a male-dominated study design. This approach was guided by a commitment to positive discrimination in favor of women, the intention to create a platform where women's voices could be heard, and the recognition that women, as the primary storytellers across generations, play a crucial role in preserving sociocultural heritage (Sunata, 2015).

The interviewees' ages ranged between 19 and 88. Although the sample was not fully representative, efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender and age to capture a range of perspectives. In the civil society organization section, the majority of interviewees were elderly men, whereas among Syrian Circassians, young women were more commonly interviewed. This difference can be attributed to the nature of Circassian organizations in Türkiye, where leadership tends to be male-dominated, while among Syrian Circassians, it reflects both the low rate of Turkish language proficiency among older individuals and the fact that women were more accessible and willing to participate. In cases where Turkish was not spoken or only minimally understood, one interview was conducted in English and three in Arabic, depending on the interviewee's preference. Notably, one of the Arabic interviews was conducted with a Syrian Circassian association in Istanbul. For two of these Arabic interviews, translation assistance was provided by a relative of the interviewer.

In this study, the term "Circassian" was used to encompass all Northwestern Caucasian peoples, and the research field was designed accordingly. The plan included meetings with Adyghe (such as Kabardians, Abzeks, Shapsugs, Hatukueys, Besleneis, and Bjedugs), Abkhazians, and Ubykhs during the interviews with Syrian Circassians. Interviewees indicated that in Syria, the term "Circassian" is commonly used to refer to all Caucasian

peoples, including those from the Northeast and East Caucasus. As a result, interviews were also conducted with a Chechen, a Balkar and a Karachay who were contacted. Apart from these, all interviews were conducted with Adyghes.

All of the interviews audio-recorded with participants' verbal consent, with durations ranging from 45 minutes to approximately an hour and a half. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, including organization offices, workplaces, cafes, and participants' homes. All interviews were conducted individually, except for one session where three participants were interviewed together. To capture highlights and themes to explore further in subsequent interviews, detailed fieldnotes were taken following each interview. Observations were made on the interviewee's general attitude and the interaction. These notes were captured either in written form or as audio recordings, and included in the transcription process and data analysis.

Verbatim transcription, which involves the exact word-for-word replication of verbal data, was employed in the transcription process. This approach was chosen to ensure that no potentially significant data were overlooked, to uncover themes that might not have been initially considered, and to facilitate a deep engagement with the data (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Given the time-consuming nature of this method, transcription software was utilized to expedite the process. Despite challenges related to transcribing non-English languages, local Turkish accents, and occasional background noise, the software provided a foundational transcript of each interview. Every interview was then individually reviewed, with the audio replayed to correct transcription errors and identify key themes, concepts and sentences for analysis.

The process of intensive fieldnoting, combined with a detailed transcription approach, played a crucial role in shaping the data analysis phase of this research. Instead of relying on computer-assisted coding tools, it was chosen to engage directly with the data through a manual approach to qualitative coding and analysis. This method allowed for a more intimate and nuanced understanding of the narratives that was studying, and enabled a holistic view of the narratives. By meticulously reading and re-reading the narratives, it is aimed to uncover the multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings within the data. The approach involved a deep engagement with the fieldnotes and transcriptions, which enabled identifying

key analytical themes and concepts. Through manual coding, it was able to draw connections between these themes, capturing not only the recurring examples but also highlighting striking stories and quotations that brought the data to life. This comprehensive perspective was essential for recognizing the interplay of various themes and for capturing the richness and depth of individual stories and quotations. Overall, the choice of a manual approach was intended to preserve the depth, context, and complexity of the qualitative data, providing a more thorough and nuanced analysis.

Ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants was a cornerstone of this study, and rigorous measures were implemented throughout all stages of the research process to protect sensitive information. From the initial data collection phase through transcription, analysis, and documentation, careful attention was given to maintaining the security and anonymity of participants. A comprehensive data management plan was devised to prevent data corruption, and potential loss. Data was backed up regularly on both the primary computer and an external hard drive to provide a secure fallback in case of hardware malfunction or accidental deletion. Access to all research materials was strictly limited to the researcher, thereby preventing any unauthorized individuals from accessing or mishandling participant information. This restriction of access was crucial in maintaining the confidentiality of the data and ensuring that personal information was not shared with third parties. All data folders were meticulously updated on a weekly basis to ensure that the most current information was protected. In terms of anonymization, transcripts were carefully reviewed and edited to remove any direct references to participant names or specific details that could potentially reveal their identities. This process included pseudonymizing any summaries or direct quotations included in the dissertation, thereby ensuring that participant identities remained protected throughout the research dissemination process. By implementing these rigorous data security and anonymity measures, the study upheld the highest ethical standards in safeguarding participant confidentiality.

CHAPTER 5: DIASPORIC IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION OF SYRIAN CIRCASSIANS IN TÜRKİYE

The analysis of diasporic identity is inherently complex, as the elements that shape and define it are deeply interconnected. For Syrian Circassians, the notions of “homeland”, “language”, “village life”, and “cultural practices” cannot be neatly separated into distinct categories. Each aspect influences and is influenced by the others, creating a fluid and multifaceted identity that resists easy classification. For example, the idea of “homeland” is not only tied to geographic or national boundaries but is also intricately linked to the language spoken, the traditions upheld, and the social fabric of village life. In examining how Circassians in Syria and Türkiye understand and express their identities, it becomes clear that these elements often overlap in ways that cannot be fully captured by discrete subheadings.

However, for analytical clarity, it is necessary to explore these elements individually, even while recognizing their interconnectedness. For instance, the role of Circassian villages in shaping identity is an essential part of the discussion on “homeland”, yet it warrants its own focus to properly highlight how village life contributes to maintaining cultural continuity in exile. Thus, the headings under the analysis of diasporic identity, while conceptually distinct, are not mutually exclusive but inherently inclusive. They overlap and interact, reflecting the layered nature of identity in the context of forced displacement. This analysis will address these interconnected elements to offer a comprehensive understanding of how Syrian Circassians negotiate their identity across multiple geographies and experiences of exile.

5.1 Unspoken Exile Narratives and Diverse Conceptualizations of Homeland

Before delving into the details of the diasporic identity (trans)formation of Syrian Circassians, it is important to clarify how the term “Circassian” is used by Syrian Circassians both in Syria and in Türkiye. Syrian Circassians employ the term “Circassian” in a very inclusive manner, surpassing the debates present in Türkiye. The term, which is sometimes

used geographically to encompass the Eastern Caucasus, extends beyond the discussions confined to the Northern Caucasus. This debate, which mirrors the Adyghe-Abkhaz distinction in Türkiye, also encompasses internal discussions about the Northern Caucasus, where the Eastern Caucasus is explicitly excluded from the term “Circassian”. As a result, there is an ongoing debate in Türkiye over whether the term “Circassian” should refer exclusively to the Adyghe people or if it should encompass the peoples of the North/Northwest Caucasus as a whole. The specifics of this discussion were addressed at the beginning of the second chapter of the study (see p.16-17).

Syrian Circassians, however, have expressed that such distinctions never existed in Syria, and they were quite surprised to encounter them in Türkiye:

“Since I arrived, people here have been calling me either Circassian or Abkhaz. Okay, but what’s the difference? Some are Abkhaz, some are Circassian. I didn’t even know there was a difference. I mean, we didn’t have anything like that (back in Syria). (...) What’s the difference between him being Abkhaz and someone else being Kabardian? We’re all the same. Our story is the same for all of us. Everyone came out of that war and just ended up in different places—some in Türkiye, and I ended up in Syria.” (D1).

The participant’s confusion and surprise reveal how diasporic identities are negotiated and redefined within different contexts. It appears that for this participant, the shared historical trauma of war and displacement appears to have fostered a more unified sense of identity among Circassians in Syria. The participant’s reflection underscores the role that different national contexts play in shaping the outlines of diasporic identities. The participant’s explanation regarding the term “Circassian” was not unique but consistent among all the Syrian Circassian participants interviewed. Given the uniformity of these responses, it is reasonable to generalize this framework as a valid representation of how Syrian Circassians collectively perceive their Circassian identities.

It was observed that among the interviewed Syrian Circassians, narratives about the exile from the Caucasus to Ottoman lands were not particularly strong, regardless of gender or age:

“So, I don’t really know the full story. It’s an old one, not even from my grandfather’s time—maybe from his grandfather. Yes, they came to Syria, but I don’t know the exact details of their story.” (A2).

The influence of homeland perception and the intergenerational transfer of traumatic events—collective memory—on the formation of diasporic identity was explored in the theoretical framework of this study. In this context, it was expected that exile narratives would play a significant role in shaping the Circassian identities of Syrian Circassians. However, despite the weak intergenerational transfer of the exile narrative and a perception of homeland that is not solely tied to the Caucasus, it is clear that Circassian identity still holds a very significant place in the lives of Syrian Circassians.

It is important to note that narratives about exile are more commonly found among younger individuals. However, it is also significant to highlight that these young people, especially those active in various Circassian associations in Türkiye, actively construct their own diasporic identities through independent reading and research on these topics, even if these narratives were not passed down as family memories. At this point, it is important to consider the response to the question about whether there were any exile-related activities in the Circassian associations in Syria, alongside the limited opportunities for Syrian Circassians to cultivate a collective memory of exile:

“Nothing. Because they are afraid—well, it’s not that they are afraid, but they can’t get permission. When there’s an organization within the association, the first step is to get permission from the State, from the municipality or something. But such activities are forbidden. It’s because Syria and Russia are very close” (D4).

The lack of exile-related activities within Syrian Circassian associations and the associated fear or inability to obtain permission from the authorities underscores the complex relationship between state power and the preservation of collective memory within Syrian Circassians. This dynamic illustrates how external political forces can shape the lines of

diasporic identity, not just by influencing which memories are preserved and transferred, but also by determining the spaces in which these identities can be publicly expressed and reinforced.

It is highlighted earlier that, particularly considering the escalating polarization and tense political climate in Syria over the last two decades, the Circassian association deliberately avoided positioning itself as a political entity. “Whistleblowing” and disclosure were significant sources of fear in Syria, both before and during the early years of the civil war. In an atmosphere pervaded by fear and state oppression, the Circassian association consciously maintained a non-political stance to protect itself and its community. The interviews reveal that this pervasive fear extended deeply into daily life. The oppressive presence of the regime was severely felt both prior to the civil war—before Syrian Circassians began being displaced to Türkiye—and continues today. Some participants expressed hesitancy to discuss Syria even now, with some refusing to be recorded during interviews. One participant noted that even in private social media groups where Syrian Circassians in Istanbul connect to share needs or information, political topics are strictly avoided. He shared his concern that any political discussions could potentially endanger relatives who remain in Syria. This avoidance of political discourse reflects a broader behavioral pattern, where individuals are conditioned to refrain from making political evaluations publicly or privately. Interestingly, some participants remarked on their surprise upon arriving in Türkiye, observing that people could engage in critical discussions about politics openly, even on the streets—something unimaginable in their previous context. All these factors inevitably influence the relationship and emotional bond individuals develop with their country and state. Over time, this dynamic can evolve to shape and redefine their perception of what constitutes a homeland.

It would be an incomplete analysis to attribute the shaping of homeland perceptions solely to the fragile sense of citizenship resulting from the oppressive regime in Syria. One notable observation from the interviews is the stark difference in how the concepts of homeland and nation are perceived in Syria compared to Türkiye. In Syria, there appears to have been little emphasis on a nation-state ideology, “Syrianization”, or the creation of a shared Syrian cultural identity. This lack of national cohesion is one reason many interviewees describe the war as “*not my war*”, devoid of any emotional attachment to the idea of defending the

homeland. There is no widespread sentiment akin to the Turkish perspective of staying to protect the homeland. In contrast, the internalized nationalism prevalent in Türkiye, including among Circassians, reflects the historical legacy of its nation-state policies. Türkiye's educational and ideological framework, instilled from childhood, promotes concepts of state, homeland, and nation through a shared narrative. However, this framework often centers on Turkish identity as inclusive while simultaneously excluding or marginalizing ethnic identities. As a result, a singular national identity is emphasized, relegating other identities to the periphery (Kaya, 2016). In Syria, by comparison, identity is preserved primarily through ethnic and religious affiliations rather than a centralized national narrative. This fundamental difference in how homeland, nation, and identity are conceptualized underscores the contrasting ways in which Circassians navigate their sense of belonging in each context:

“Nowadays, you hear some people say, ‘It’s our homeland,’ but for me, my homeland is where I live now. It’s where I earn my living and where I find my daily bread—that’s my homeland.” (D1).

“For me, my homeland is Bareka, my village.” (D6).

In another example, a participant intertwined the concept of homeland with his native language, illustrating the profound connection between these notions. He recounted a visit to the village where his father's generation once resided, now under Israeli occupation. The village had been deserted and uninhabited for 50 years. Reflecting on this visit, he stated:

“I am neither sad nor happy. I am uncertain of our home.” (I13)

While he did not experience a sense of returning home when visiting the village, he did so when visiting the Caucasus. He explained that the key difference lies in people and language, emphasizing that

“Circassian language is spoken at home.” (I14).

He also shared the unique challenges of being Circassian in Syria, where the population is small, and Circassians are largely unknown.

“In Syria, they don’t know Circassians. They ask if you are Muslim or if you speak Arabic. Because the Circassian population is so small, you always feel like a foreigner,” he remarked. This sense of foreignness persisted when he moved to Türkiye. “Now in Türkiye, we are already foreigners from two places. When I first came, we didn’t know Turkish, so we were strangers here, too. At first, it felt normal—it was just how life was. But when I visited the Caucasus, I realized I had always felt like a foreigner until then. It was only there that I truly felt at home. After that, I said to myself, ‘I am truly a guest here. My homeland is clearly the Caucasus.’ That’s where it became unmistakably clear.” (I13).

This participant’s reflection provides a significant commentary on the intersection of homeland, language and identity, emphasizing the profoundly emotional and multifaceted experience of being part of a double diaspora. His journey illustrates how homeland is not merely a geographical space, but rather an emotional and cultural construct tied to language, community and shared identity.

5.2 Circassian Life in Syria: Village Communities, Language Preservation, and Cultural Identity

As in the Circassian culture in Türkiye, village culture in Syria has a very significant place in the Circassian identity. The villages serve not only as geographical spaces, but also as cultural hubs where traditions, language and a shared sense of community are maintained (Sunata, 2015). For Syrian Circassians, the village represents continuity, providing a tangible

link to their heritage amidst the broader societal changes surrounding them. The significance of the village is reflected in the practices and social interactions that take place there, which serve to strengthen communal bonds and perpetuate identity across generations.

A notable aspect of Circassian village culture is the close-knit nature of the Circassian community, particularly in villages such as Bariqa and even in urban centers like Damascus, where individuals are well-known to one another. For instance, at the university in Damascus, Circassians tend to form close-knit groups and remain together, maintaining strong communal ties. Unlike larger cities like Istanbul, where universities are numerous and diverse, many regions in Syria have a single state university, which serves as the primary educational institution for the majority of the student population. This naturally fosters a sense of continuity in Circassian relationships, as they have been connected since childhood. This environment also eases in the establishment of relationships, as Circassians already know one another, thereby reducing the need to establish relationships with Arab students or others outside their community.

This interconnectedness is further strengthened by the role of villages in social life, as many families make weekly trips to their ancestral homes. These gatherings are not merely casual visits but deliberate acts of cultural preservation. During weekends, particularly on Fridays and Saturdays, villages such as Bir-Ajam and Bariqa become the nexus of Circassian social life. One interviewee described the vibrant scene along the road between these two villages, colloquially known as “Lovers’ Lane,” where young people would gather in such numbers that *“you couldn’t walk.”* (I2). This tradition is intended to facilitate the establishment of relationships among Circassian youth, for marriage purposes (*Kaşenlik*). This tradition also underscores the role of villages as spaces for fostering relationships and strengthening social cohesion within the community. The exclusivity of these village gatherings further highlights their cultural importance. On these special days, the roads leading to the villages were often reserved solely for Circassians, with few if any outsiders passing through. This uniqueness reinforces the idea of the village as a sanctuary for Circassian culture, where traditions can flourish without external interference. It is a powerful example of how space can be used as a means of cultural preservation and identity affirmation.

In Syria, Circassian villages are notable for their vibrancy and self-sufficiency, comparable in size and infrastructure to districts or small towns. These villages have their own schools, pharmacies, markets and restaurants, reflecting a blend of traditional and modern lifestyles. A case in point is Marj al-Sultan, a prominent Circassian village, which had approximately 5,000 households and even a residential complex with eight multi-storey buildings. Such developments underscore the semi-urban nature of these villages, distinguishing them from the stereotypical image of rural life.

The villages are also economically dynamic, with livestock farming and local businesses contributing to the livelihoods of their residents. This economic activity, combined with their proximity to urban centers, negates the need for many villagers to relocate, as illustrated by the example of Marj al-Sultan, which is only half an hour from Damascus, yet many residents see no reason to leave their village. This opinion illustrates the appeal of village life, where modern conveniences coexist with the cultural intimacy of a close-knit community.

In Circassian communities, wedding traditions begin with women-only ceremonies, during which women are fully covered. Subsequently, men join the women at the hall, and the event transitions into a mixed wedding. It is widely expressed that non-Circassians, particularly Arabs, are not permitted to attend these weddings. This restriction can be attributed to cultural practices that differentiate between men and women, raising concerns about potential conflicts. In contrast, urban wedding traditions are known to be more inclusive, with non-Circassians sometimes in attendance. However, it is important to note that the core tradition remains focused on maintaining cultural and social boundaries. Contrastingly, funerals are open to all, transcending these social distinctions and embracing a more inclusive approach.

Consanguineous marriages among Circassians are rare, particularly within the confines of a single dynasty or village. The marriage within the same lineage is generally prohibited, and while it is more permissible when the individuals are from different provinces or villages and are not direct biological relatives, close familial relations, such as those between cousins, are almost avoided. In rare cases where such relationships occur, they often involve elopement, as families typically disapprove of these unions. The preference among Circassians for matrimony within their own community is pronounced, and intermarriage with Arabs is

uncommon, although friendships with Arabs are not unusual. One of the participants shared as:

“There is no difference between us. We are all Muslims” (D1),

while emphasizing that marriage outside the Circassian community, particularly with Arabs, is generally not considered acceptable. This reflects a broader cultural commitment to preserving Circassian identity through endogamous practices.

A notable difference in identity perception emerges between village and city life among Circassians in Syria. For those who were raised in the villages, the dominant sense of identity was firmly rooted in being Circassian, often to the exclusion of other affiliations. One participant, who spent their childhood in the village reflected:

“In the village, I grew up as a thing. You are just Circassian—not Syrian, not Arab. You’re just a Circassian. Everyone in the village had this mentality. In other words, they did not see themselves as Syrians at all. Everyone there was Circassian.” (I3).

The findings demonstrate that the phenomenon is not universally applicable to the Syrian Circassian population, nor is it uniformly perceived among the sampled Circassian community. The expression of a dual sense of identity, encompassing both Circassian and Syrian identities, has been observed among certain individuals. It is a notable example of the multifaceted nature of diasporic identities. This circumstance raises a thought-provoking question: can the pronounced emphasis on Circassian identity within these villages be ascribed to the culture that has been preserved and nurtured within these communities? The villages, characterized by their close-knit communities and their deliberate preservation of traditions, language, and practices, appear to function as roots of ethnic and diasporic identity. This cultural environment may provide a rationale for the singular focus on Circassian

heritage observed in these villages, in contrast to the more integrated sense of belonging that is often reported among those residing in urban areas.

It is noteworthy that parallels can be drawn between this phenomenon in Syrian Circassian villages and life in smaller Turkish towns or rural areas. In such contexts, tight-knit communities often gather regularly, creating spaces for social interaction and cultural reinforcement. However, the Circassian example is distinctive in its deliberate focus on sustaining a diasporic identity.

Language plays an essential role in preserving cultural identity within these villages. Circassian is the primary language of daily life, while Arabic is used for formal education. Remarkably, the majority of the population, including children, learn to read and write in both languages. This bilingual proficiency not only strengthens ties to Circassian traditions but also enables integration into the wider Syrian society. The dynamics of language in these communities bear similarities to those in Türkiye. One such parallel can be seen in the challenges faced by some children in the next generation when learning Arabic in school. To help their children avoid similar difficulties, parents have been known to refrain from teaching their children the Circassian language. Conversely, there are families who deliberately opt to speak Circassian among themselves, whether as a means of maintaining the language or for private conversations. The older generation consistently speaks Circassian, and younger individuals with ties to the villages are often familiar with it as well. Although there is no formal Circassian education in schools, the language is taught in community associations and can be learned from a very young age, sometimes starting as early as kindergarten.

The previously mentioned Circassian Association in Damascus is primarily concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage through activities such as dance and language courses. In addition, the association organizes market-like festivals in certain Circassian villages, where dances, music, and the sale of traditional Circassian clothing provide opportunities for community members to connect and celebrate their heritage. A notable distinction in attendance patterns emerges based on religiosity. It was indicated that the more secular segment of the community tends to actively participate in association activities, while the more pious individuals limit their involvement, engaging primarily in specific activities like

Circassian language courses (I1). In Türkiye, the activities offered by Circassian cultural associations have been shown to significantly influence the preferences of Syrian Circassians regarding which associations to join. Participants reported, and the researcher observed, that Syrian Circassians tend to lean to associations that focus on practical and educational activities, such as training programs, seminars, and Circassian language education. The differing ideological foundations of Circassian CSOs in Türkiye have directly influenced their perspectives and activities regarding Syrian Circassians.

5.3 Life in Türkiye: Citizenship, Work, and Social Integration Among Syrian Circassians

The ideological differences among Circassian associations in Türkiye have also influenced their levels of activity and inclusiveness, particularly concerning the citizenship acquisition process for Syrian Circassians. A notable example involves a federation operating within a more conservative framework and maintaining favorable relations with the government. This organization played a significant role in facilitating Syrian Circassians' access to Turkish citizenship. Through political connections, the federation was instrumental in securing exceptional citizenship status for Syrian Circassians. A key contributor to this effort was a Syrian Circassian interviewee involved in this study, whose contributions were pivotal in compiling the citizenship application list. These efforts highlight the importance of political leverage and ideological alignment in shaping outcomes for displaced communities:

“Their needs were being met in the Nizip camp, but since they had language problems, we would go and give them moral support. Normally, they didn't need anything material, but for example, we would take them to educational programs or to doctors. We would go once a week. Then, over time, we started finding jobs for the qualified people there and helping them leave the camp. We began slowly taking out people who were barbers, welders, painters and finding them jobs and housing. Then we categorized their professions. We applied to the Ministry of Interior for their citizenship. They examined them, did research, and granted citizenship to people they thought could be in exceptional positions. In other words, people who would be useful to the Republic of Türkiye.

There was also something like this—we made this argument: The Circassians themselves didn't go there to Syria originally. The Ottoman State sent them there. They even became guards of the Hejaz Railway there. They formed small villages every 20-25 kilometers, as civilians—half civilian, half military. So, we said we had an obligation to take them in. We did something for every Circassian who came from there. Our state accepted them into the country—there was already an open door policy. They accepted them, and we facilitated their path to citizenship. We prepared lists, we submitted applications. We became intermediaries for the state by creating lists of all their professions and contact information.” (CS5).

Currently, Syrian Circassians live in a dispersed manner across Türkiye. After leaving the refugee camps, some settled in cities like Gaziantep, while others moved to various locations, including Tokat, Duzce, Kayseri, Ankara, Izmir, and Istanbul. Despite this geographical dispersion, many individuals maintain strong connections within their local communities. Most Syrian Circassians living in the same city are familiar with one another, forming networks based on familial ties, previous acquaintanceships from Syria, or relationships forged after arriving in Türkiye. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of communal bonds in sustaining their shared identity and providing mutual support in a new environment. Syrian Circassians tend to establish friendships and neighborly relations primarily within their own community, while their interactions with Circassians from Türkiye remain limited. One significant factor contributing to this divide is the language barrier—many Syrian Circassians have limited proficiency in Turkish, while Arabic is not widely spoken in Türkiye. Despite these linguistic challenges, Syrian Circassians generally do not struggle to communicate within their own circles:

“People always talk to those they already know, the ones around us. Turkish Circassians and our neighbors are also quite reserved, not very friendly. They don't even realize we are Circassian. Maybe they keep their distance because they think we are Syrians.” (I4).

Learning Turkish was particularly challenging in villages where neither Circassian nor Arabic was commonly spoken. As a result, many Syrian Circassians prefer urban life, including due to better job opportunities.

The challenges faced by Syrian Circassians in the professional sphere remain significant. A recurring issue is their reluctance to engage in business with Circassians from Türkiye due to negative experiences such as working without proper insurance or receiving inadequate wages. The emotional toll of these situations is particularly pronounced, with Syrian Circassians expressing deep regret that such exploitation occurs within their own community. Additionally, many young men who fled Syria during the war were compelled to abandon their education or are unable to practice their professions in Türkiye. As a result, a large portion of this demographic has been compelled to seek employment in unskilled labor roles. These jobs are often precarious, with little to no job security, and are impaired by wage exploitation from employers.

Language adaptation has been a significant part of the integration process for Syrian Circassians in Türkiye. Many attended courses to learn Turkish, while younger arrivals quickly picked up the language in school.

“It’s difficult to say that many individuals over the age of 60 have learned Turkish to a functional level. However, those who arrived as children, were born and raised in Türkiye, or came later but pursued university education here generally acquired the language much more quickly. Some managed to find employment, which also accelerated their learning. Additionally, Turkish language courses were offered in certain areas, particularly through Public Education Centers, which helped many integrate. Younger individuals—especially those living in urban areas and under the age of 50 or 60—tended to pick up Turkish more easily and adapt more rapidly to life in Türkiye.” (CSO10).

“Because they already knew some Circassian, it was easier for us to connect with them and build relationships. Many of them also participated in the Circassian language courses offered at the association, as—like us—they had limited fluency, especially the younger generation. While the elders generally spoke Circassian well, the youth often did not, so they joined the courses to improve.

In parallel, we supported their integration by guiding them toward Turkish language courses provided through Public Education Centers. We personally visited these centers, coordinated with the staff, and helped ensure Turkish classes were opened specifically for Syrian Circassians. The classes were quite crowded and eventually grew to include other Arabic-speaking groups, such as Iraqis and Syrians. Still, we tried to assist by encouraging everyone we knew to join. Of course, the most effective way they learned Turkish was through daily life and immersion. Since many of them lived in villages where Turkish and Circassian are both commonly spoken, acquiring the language happened more naturally and quickly.” (CS8).

However, Turkish language instruction in associations was not always sufficient to meet their needs. In some villages where they were resettled, individuals fluent in Circassian began offering Turkish courses to ease the transition. Upon their arrival in Türkiye, the linguistic barrier was stark—most Turkish locals did not speak Arabic, and many Syrian Circassians had no knowledge of Turkish. Communication often relied on associations using the shared Circassian language:

“My mother and father both speak Circassian fluently, thank God. Most of the adults around us here also know the language well, so they’ve never faced any issues in communication, thank God.” (A1).

“Everyone above a certain age spoke Circassian fluently. In fact, their command of the language was often stronger than that of Circassians in Türkiye. Nearly all individuals over the age of 30 spoke it very well. While a few younger people also knew the language, fluency was almost universal among those older than 30.” (CS5).

Interestingly, this dynamic has heightened awareness of the importance of language preservation in the community. Participants noted that Syrian Circassian children growing up in Türkiye now regularly speak Circassian:

“At home, my mother and father used to speak Circassian with each other, but they never taught the language to us. At the time, they didn’t think it was something important to pass on. Ironically, when we had to leave Syria, it was my mother’s knowledge of Circassian that helped us communicate with people—we could understand others thanks to her. Now, she speaks Circassian to our child. It’s as if she’s come to value the language more; she’s come to appreciate its worth.” (D1).

This quotation captures a common theme in many diasporic communities—the shift in perception regarding the importance of native languages. Circassian language, initially considered non-essential, has regained its importance, becoming an important cultural and communicative resource at a time of displacement. The act of the grandmother now speaking Circassian to the grandchild represents may not just a personal reassessment, but also a generational attempt at cultural preservation and repair.

The interaction between Syrian and Turkish Circassians has fostered a reciprocal exchange of linguistic and cultural knowledge. While Syrian Circassians work to learn Turkish Circassians as part of their life in Türkiye, they also contribute by sharing their expertise in Circassian, Arabic, and even Quranic studies.

“I used to give lessons here—Arabic, English, and Quran. For instance, a doctor would regularly come to me to practice Arabic; he continued attending for about a year and a half. My neighbor Ayşe also visits—we speak Arabic together, and in return, she teaches me Turkish. Yasemin, who lived in this house before me, helps me with Turkish as well, while I teach her Arabic and also share knowledge of the Quran and tafsir. It’s a mutual exchange—we support and learn from one another.” (D5).

“We usually speak Turkish with Syrian Circassians, but I make an effort to use Circassian as well—because, in fact, I improved my Circassian thanks to them. We had heard the language from our elders growing up, but we never really spoke it ourselves. In our environment, trying to speak Circassian often led to embarrassment—people would laugh or correct us, so we held back. But when the Syrians arrived, Circassian became our shared language, and I had no choice but to try. Through everyday conversations and casual interactions, my grasp of the language gradually improved. I wouldn’t say I’m fluent, but I can express myself and understand when others talk about their problems. So now, with some people I speak Circassian, with others Turkish—it depends on the situation.” (CS8).

This dynamic not only facilitates the acquisition of Turkish but also enriches the cultural and linguistic landscape of Circassians from Türkiye, allowing them to strengthen their Circassian language skills. This interplay exemplifies the concept of reciprocal integration, where both communities derive value from the shared exchange of knowledge and traditions (Paunova and Blasco, 2021). It highlights how integration is not a one-sided process but a mutually beneficial relationship that deepens cultural understanding and reinforces shared identity.

Today, Syrian Circassians have limited communication with Circassian associations in Türkiye. Even among those who actively participated in associations while in Syria, many do not attend the associations in the cities where they now reside. Early on, associations in Türkiye primarily focused on providing assistance to Syrian Circassians, with less emphasis on organizing cultural events or fostering community engagement. While there are exceptions to this trend, such as occasional events, this lack of outreach can be seen as a significant critique of these associations. Additionally, Syrian Circassians themselves have shown some hesitation in participating. Factors such as the challenges of adjusting to a new life, language barriers, and the demands of daily survival have often deterred them from engaging with local associations. This mutual reluctance—associations not actively inviting participation and Syrian Circassians being preoccupied or hesitant—has contributed to the weak ties observed between the two groups.

Engagement with cultural associations often requires a degree of financial and temporal flexibility that not all Syrian Circassians can afford. Participating in association activities, enrolling children in language or dance courses, or even attending social events presupposes a level of economic stability. For families struggling with precarious employment, high living costs, and the everyday challenges of displacement, allocating time and resources to such activities may not be feasible. This class-based disparity shapes who is able to access and benefit from civil society initiatives. As one CSO official aptly noted:

“Participating in civil society work assumes a certain level of income and available free time. You cannot expect someone working long hours on construction sites in places like Sultangazi to be actively involved in an association in the city center. There are certainly Circassians with lower income and education levels that make such participation very difficult.” (CS7).

Rare examples of community engagement with associations highlight unique cultural experiences. For instance, a Syrian Circassian couple who married in Türkiye shared their story. Initially, they faced challenges in organizing their wedding due to having no close family or connections in the country. However, the association stepped in to organize their wedding, resulting in a memorable event. Reflecting on the occasion, the participant stated:

“Since we came from Syria, it was neither a Turkish nor an Arab culture—it was entirely a Circassian wedding. It was a very traditional wedding, deeply Circassian from start to finish. I arrived without making any preparations and simply took on the role of the bride. Looking back now, it’s an incredibly beautiful memory, and I’m so glad they made it happen. They announced it everywhere, saying, ‘We’re hosting a wedding,’ and people I didn’t even know attended. I had thought only people I knew would come, just a few, but it turned out to be a wonderful gathering.” (I5).

Post-migration dynamics have introduced significant changes to marriage practices among Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, leading to more diverse marital arrangements. Before migration, there was a strong emphasis on endogamy, with families prioritizing marriages within the Circassian community to preserve cultural identity and continuity. However, the realities of migration, including dispersion, limited social networks, and evolving cultural pressures, have necessitated a more flexible approach. An illustrative example highlights this shift: some parents who would have previously arranged their daughter's marriage to a Circassian in Syria now consider Turkish partners to avoid situations such as elopement. This shift reflects both a practical adaptation to new social environments and a broader negotiation of identity. On one hand, marrying within the Circassian community remains ideal for cultural preservation; on the other hand, intermarriage with Turks is seen as a viable option to ensure familial stability and prevent potential conflicts.

Facebook continues to serve as a crucial communication platform for Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, reflecting its enduring role in diaspora communities. This platform, which gained prominence during the early 2010s, notably in the context of the Arab Spring, remains a preferred tool for fostering connections and facilitating information exchange. Its significance lies not only in maintaining transnational ties but also in its role as a virtual gathering space for a dispersed community. One illustrative example is the Facebook group "Syrian Circassians in Türkiye," boasting 5,500 members. This group functions as a central hub for sharing various forms of information, including birth, death, and wedding announcements, job postings, and community needs, such as the transportation of documents or goods between Türkiye and Syria. It also serves as a platform for promoting cultural and social events, reinforcing a sense of community among its members. The activities of the association founded by Syrian Circassians (Adyghe Caucasus Cultural Association) are also shared here. Importantly, some individuals have even located relatives in Türkiye through these Facebook groups, showcasing the platform's role in re-establishing familial and social networks disrupted by displacement. Beyond being a communication tool, it acts as a bridge between past and present, homeland and hostland, and individual and collective identity. However, the group notably lacks news or updates from Syria. This absence reflects both the challenging realities under the Assad regime and the broader constraints on information flow within the Syrian context. The political circumstances in Syria have undergone significant

changes, with the overthrow of Assad. This shift has the potential to profoundly impact the dynamics of the situation. The flow of information, the nature of engagement, and the focus of diaspora communication might expand, potentially reshaping the group's function and priorities.

5.4 Negotiating Identity in Türkiye: Circassianness and Syrian Belonging

To enhance the relevance and authenticity of the section on identity negotiations, it would be more meaningful to directly include the words of Syrian Circassians. In Türkiye, some Syrian Circassians deliberately avoid disclosing their Syrian identity to avoid discrimination and prejudice. Instead, they emphasize their Circassian heritage:

“People where I work talk a lot. They don’t know I’m Syrian; they know I’m Circassian. That’s why they talk [negatively about Syrians], and I try not to show it. Because I don’t know how they’ll react when they find out. I just say it’s very wrong. We experience such things.” (I4).

“When I say I am Syrian, it sometimes causes problems, but when I say I am Circassian, the problems disappear. People respond, ‘You should have told me from the beginning.’” (I12).

“I couldn’t find a house for four months because I said I was Syrian. Then, I told the real estate agent I was Circassian instead. He said, ‘Sit down, have some tea,’ and I found the house.” (I13).

“At first, I would say I was Syrian. When asked where exactly, I would provide details, but this was intentional because of the extreme racism refugees often face. I’ve learned the language, I carry myself well, and I don’t fit the stereotype many have of refugees as being poor and struggling. So, I would say I was Syrian on purpose. When people remarked that I didn’t look like a refugee and pressed me further, I would then explain that I was Circassian. It wasn’t about hiding my identity but rather trying to avoid experiencing racism. Initially, people were more supportive, perhaps even sympathetic. Over time, though, attitudes shifted; people grew

tired, and tensions started arising from both sides. There were also missteps from the government in managing the situation, which I believe is the biggest issue. It's not just about individuals or society; the problem lies in how the whole situation has been handled. This is why refugees are less welcome now.” (15).

The participant's experience is deeply rooted in Türkiye's historical narratives and socio-political attitudes toward Arabs. The historical framing created a legacy of mistrust and negative stereotypes, leading to modern-day prejudices. Racism in Türkiye has been on the rise, particularly against Arabs, a trend intensified by the influx of Syrian refugees after 2011 (Şimşek, 2021). Refugees are often scapegoated for economic challenges, unemployment, and the responsibility of public resources. This has intensified societal divisions, as being Arab or Syrian is frequently associated with poverty, dependency, and cultural conflict. For many Syrian Circassians, the choice to emphasize their Circassian identity presents as a strategic method to avoid engaging with these prejudices and to preserve themselves from discriminatory attitudes.

The differentiation between Circassians and Arabs is also cultural. Circassians, with their distinct traditions, language, and perceived alignment with Turkish societal norms, are regarded as “non-Arab” and are seen as more integrated within Turkish society. This perception is strengthened by the general familiarity and positive regard for Circassians in Türkiye, where they are often perceived as a respected and loyal ethnic community (Doğan, 2024). This favorable image allows Syrian Circassians to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with Arabs, thereby enhancing their acceptance in Turkish society.

Syrian Circassians perceive Arab culture as fundamentally different from their own, and these distinctions have been consciously maintained, preserved, and reinforced within Syria. These cultural boundaries are reflected in practices such as endogamous marriages, where marriages are deliberately kept within the Circassian community to protect cultural identity and traditions. A significant distinction emerges when comparing Arab culture and the dominant culture in Türkiye. Syrian Circassians often view Arab culture as more closed and restrictive, particularly in everyday practices related to gender roles, women's mobility, and

kinship dynamics. For instance, aspects such as stricter expectations around women's covering, the necessity of obtaining permissions for women's activities, and the prevalence of consanguineous marriages are regarded as hallmarks of Arab cultural life. These dynamics contrast with the culture in Türkiye, which Syrian Circassians perceive as more modern, open, and in many ways closer to their own cultural values. Therefore, making marriages with Turks are more socially acceptable, as Turks are seen as more aligned with Circassian values and lifestyle.

The perception of cultural similarities between Syrian Circassians and Circassians in Türkiye is widely acknowledged, with many believing that the differences are minor and primarily shaped by the dominant culture in each country. According to interviews conducted in Circassian associations, this understanding appears to be mutual. Syrian Circassian participants noted that while Syrian Circassians may have adopted certain elements from Arab culture, Circassians in Türkiye have similarly integrated aspects of Turkish culture. Despite these influences, key cultural components such as language, traditions, weddings, and cuisine are considered largely consistent across both groups (D6).

"I think there is a difference between the Circassians of Türkiye and the Circassians of Syria. Syrian Circassians are more protective of their culture. They teach their children more about the language and culture. But Turkish Circassians is trying to teach a little more with Turkish culture. For example, we do not have Arab culture at all. We grew up only with Circassian culture. But it is not like that in Türkiye. So, they actually grow mixed." (I4).

This participant named an encounter with a Turkish Circassian who did not know their lineage as an example:

"There are a lot of people who get lost or forget like that." (I4).

Criticism also emerged regarding the state of Circassian identity in Türkiye, with some claiming that it has become limited to superficial elements, such as awareness of being Circassian, knowledge of dances, and familiarity with traditional foods. According to one interviewee:

“There is no Circassianism where the culture is known in depth and the language is spoken.”
(18).

“Both when we were in Syria and when we came here... Circassians here are not like that. For instance, in Syria, when asked where we were from, we didn’t start by saying we were from Damascus and then mention that we were Circassian. Instead, it was always Circassian first. We’d say, ‘We’re Circassian,’ and then add, ‘We live in Damascus,’ or something similar. The response to ‘Where are you from?’ was always framed around being Circassian. This is not the case in Türkiye. Here, when Circassians are asked where they’re from, they might say Duzce or another city first. Only if the conversation continues, they might then mention, ‘I’m actually Circassian.’ That has never been the way for us. In Syria, we always led with being Circassian. Even now, when someone asks us here, we say, ‘We’re Circassian,’ but we also add, ‘We came from Syria.’ That’s why I think this is, first and foremost, a significant difference.” (11).

“For instance, if someone were to ask me where I’m from, I would first say Circassian, not Syrian. I’ve noticed this difference between Syrian Circassians and Turkish Circassians. Syrian Circassians always identify as Circassian first; only after that do they mention growing up in Syria. Their primary identity is Circassian. On the other hand, Circassians in Türkiye often respond differently. They might say ‘Turkish’ or ‘Turkish Circassian’ first, and only then mention being Circassian. That’s how they were raised. For us, though, we were brought up with the mindset that we should take pride in being Circassian.” (13).

Despite these critiques, it is crucial to recognize the diversity within Circassian communities in both Syria and Türkiye, and the diversified identities. While their statements provide valuable insights, they reflect personal encounters and experiences, and broad generalizations should be approached with caution.

A consensus has been observed among Syrian and Turkish Circassians regarding the shared fundamental cultural elements and identities that define their ethnic group. Differences primarily arise from the influence of the dominant cultures in their respective regions, with language being the most affected. Notwithstanding these differences, there is a common perception that the “basic essence” of Circassian culture remains preserved.

These reflections highlight how the sociocultural context and perceived identity norms influence how individuals prioritize and express their ethnic identities. In Syria, Circassian identity appeared central and unambiguous, while in Türkiye, it seems to be layered with identities, shaped by the broader ethnic and national belonging.

In Türkiye, the rise of neoliberal economic policies has driven significant migration from villages to cities, starting from the 1950s. Given the centrality of the village to Circassian identity, this urban migration has made it more challenging to sustain ethnic identities. As a result, the number of Circassian associations has increased, serving as a response to this shift. Syrian Circassians have also observed this dynamic, noting that young Circassians in Türkiye have increasingly assimilated into Turkish culture, which they attribute to the reduced connection with village life. They explain that in Türkiye, Circassians often leave their villages for cities, where exposure to Turkish language and culture is greater. In contrast, they highlight that life in Syrian Circassian villages remains more stable and advantageous, with fewer reasons to migrate to urban areas. This continuity has allowed Syrian Circassians to maintain their language and traditions. This perspective of Syrian Circassians’ places the village at the heart of Circassian identity, emphasizing the critical role it plays in preserving cultural practices and the challenges posed by the urban shift, including the evolving relationship with associations in cities.

“For instance, why do we go to Circassian associations here in Türkiye? It’s to stay connected with other Circassians, to meet them, and to build a network within the community. If we’re going to create an environment or support system, we want it to be centered around Circassians. Maybe that’s why we attend these associations. In Syria, it was different. We were already surrounded by Circassians, both in the city and in the villages. There was no need to actively create a Circassian circle or seek out Circassians—it was our natural environment.

Helping each other and practicing Circassian customs were simply part of everyday life. Those traditions were kept alive and practiced without requiring a formal association. That's why, in Syria, Circassian associations were often seen as just a place for dance. Everything else—customs, support, and community—happened naturally. There wasn't a need for an association to preserve or remind us of our culture. The only thing unique to associations there was the focus on dance.” (I4).

The socio-cultural context in Syria naturally facilitated the transfer of Circassian traditions and values through informal channels, thereby eliminating the need for formal institutions such as associations. Nevertheless, the association, which was formerly a non-central component of Syrian Circassians' cultural life, has evolved into a critical space for the transformation of Circassian identity in Türkiye. Associations played a very significant role not only in this respect but also in fostering transnational networks that connect Circassians across borders. This transnational dimension highlights the central role of associations in enhancing solidarity and support among Circassian communities.

CHAPTER 6: TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY OF SYRIAN CIRCASSIANS IN TÜRKİYE

The experiences of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye reveal a complex form of transnational solidarity, shaped by historical ties, shared cultural identity, and the socio-political shifts of recent years. This chapter delves into their migration stories, networks, and interactions with Circassian associations in both Syria and Türkiye, offering insights into how these connections have influenced their decisions and shaped their paths post-migration. The narratives reveal diverse motivations behind migration decisions—ranging from economic considerations and cultural familiarity to shared religious ties. These variations underscore the deeply personal and context-specific nature of migration, even among members of the same family. Their future aspirations are equally diverse, with some planning long-term integration into Turkish society and others dreaming of eventual repatriation, contingent on political developments in Syria. Through their voices, this chapter explores not only their lived realities but also the broader implications of transnational solidarity for diasporic communities.

The themes of repatriation and long-term integration will be revisited in the concluding section, providing a broader commentary on their implications for identity, community, and the potential for further studies. This discussion will also consider the possible effects of Assad's downfall, examining how such a political shift could reshape the aspirations, mobility, and transnational connections of Syrian Circassians, as well as the broader trajectory of their evolving narrative.

6.1 The Syrian Civil War: Rebuilding Transnational Connections

The onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 brought significant disruptions to the lives of Syrian Circassians, leading to forced displacement and resettlement in neighboring countries, particularly Türkiye. However, these movements did not occur in a complete vacuum. Longstanding transnational connections—rooted in familial, cultural, and economic ties—had already linked Circassian communities across Syria and Türkiye. This chapter examines how such pre-existing networks were mobilized, expanded, and transformed during and after displacement. These connections played a significant role in shaping mobility decisions, access to resources, and the reestablishment of social belonging in the aftermath of displacement. Before analyzing these reconfigured ties, it is necessary to consider the historical and social contexts that enabled and sustained cross-border familiarity and interaction prior to the war.

The pre-existing familial and kinship ties of Syrian Circassians played a significant role in shaping both the trajectories of displacement and the decisions around resettlement during the Syrian civil war. Individuals and families with relatives already residing in Türkiye prior to the conflict were often able to rely on these transnational connections for crucial forms of initial support—ranging from logistical assistance during border crossings to help with accommodation, access to services, and social integration. These relationships were not merely incidental but were grounded in a shared diasporic history, marked by a common origin in the North Caucasus and maintained through cycles of earlier migration, periodic visits, and cross-border exchanges. In many cases, Syrian Circassians with family connections in Türkiye were concentrated in provinces with established Circassian populations, such as Maraş and Kayseri. These kinship-based networks created a framework of familiarity and trust, offering displaced individuals a sense of continuity and cultural proximity in an otherwise disorienting context of forced migration. Building on this foundation of familiarity and trust, community responses to displacement often went beyond formal mechanisms of aid, instead drawing deeply on shared cultural norms and moral obligations. One such example illustrates how the Circassian community mobilized its own traditions of solidarity and mutual responsibility to assist newly arriving families under extremely vulnerable conditions:

“Initially, we didn’t approach the issue specifically as Circassians. What we saw were people in urgent need—out in the cold, desperate. Whether they were Syrian Circassians or Arabs didn’t matter at first. The primary instinct was to help. But as things developed, our focus increasingly turned to those with whom we shared kinship ties. It felt more comprehensible, more dependable. They trusted us, and we trusted them. This mutual trust created a sense of obligation—we thought, what if we were in their place? Surely, they would have helped us too. That’s how our sense of duty formed. Let me give an example: a family arrived, and at 3:30 a.m., the association president and I went to meet them. The woman had no husband with her; she was young—only 23 or 24—with two children. Her husband, still in Syria, had entrusted her to people he didn’t even know. We welcomed them in the middle of the night, had their home prepared in advance, bought what they needed, and ensured they were settled. Eventually, her husband also arrived. But this kind of situation—entrusting your wife and children to strangers—this doesn’t happen in other communities. An Arab, a Turk wouldn’t typically do that. But for us, this level of trust is rooted in our customs and traditions. In our villages, for instance, men can come and take your daughter to a wedding at midnight, and her father doesn’t worry. He trusts them, knowing nothing will happen. It’s this cultural framework that has made our aid efforts possible—trust, solidarity, and shared values.” (CS8).

The approach offers a compelling window into the intersection of trust, gender norms, ethnic boundaries, and cultural intimacy in humanitarian support practices within diasporic communities. The participant highlights how ethnic familiarity and shared moral frameworks—rooted in cultural traditions—enable forms of care that might not be possible or acceptable in other social contexts.

Before the war, the movement between Syria and Türkiye—especially among border regions—was not uncommon, particularly for economic or familial reasons. Some individuals had already established informal transnational routines, traveling back and forth to engage in trade, visit relatives, or explore work opportunities. These patterns of mobility fostered a certain degree of familiarity with Turkish society, geography, and even language. As a result, for some Syrian Circassians, Türkiye was not an entirely foreign or unfamiliar space when they later arrived as refugees. Instead, pre-existing connections and experiences laid the groundwork for a smoother, though still complex, process of adaptation:

“Actually, before the war, I used to travel here to shop and then sell the items back in Syria. I came to Mersin and Antakya several times—it was easy to drive across the border. Since I lived closer to this side, I made a few trips between Syria and Türkiye. I liked life here. It’s not entirely comfortable, of course, but it’s also quite different from life in Syria.” (D3).

However, the broader Circassian identities and their connected networks have been reshaping by the conditions of migration and the realities of displacement. For instance, while regions like Sakarya and Duzce are now home to many Syrian Circassians, these areas did not previously have connections to Syria’s Circassian community:

“Before the war, I personally had no direct contact with Circassians living in Syria—we simply knew of their presence. However, Circassians in Duzce and other parts of Türkiye, particularly those in regions like Hatay and Maraş, maintained more tangible connections. These ties were not only sustained through travel but also through intermarriages that reinforced cross-border kinship. Prior to the outbreak of conflict, such movement was relatively common. Especially during a period when diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Syria were warmer, we frequently heard of people traveling back and forth across the border.” (CS8).

In fact, many local Circassians in these regions were unaware that Circassians lived in Syria at all. The war and subsequent migration have thus not only brought these communities into contact but have also reshaped perceptions and created new relational dynamics within the broader Circassian diaspora. This changing dynamic demonstrates how historical upheavals and current issues are always redefining the identities and transnational connections of Circassians.

As the war in Syria intensified, the Circassian association in Damascus played a central role in disseminating information to the community, advising Circassians, suggesting Türkiye as a potential destination for refuge. Some initially moved to Reyhanlı, where they connected with the local Circassian association. The Reyhanlı Association in Türkiye became a critical

center by facilitating these transitions and utilizing the cross-border connections based on proximity, shared kinship, and established mobility patterns. In some cases, individuals reached out to the Circassian association in Istanbul through personal networks even before leaving Syria. This proactive communication allowed them to secure arrangements in advance, easing their transition into life in Türkiye and highlighting the importance of these associations in enabling cross-border solidarity and support.

The migration process did not always involve entire families moving together. In some cases, women were sent ahead as a precaution, while other family members stayed behind. Often, families delayed their departure, holding onto the belief that the war would be short-lived. However, as the conflict continued, circumstances frequently made it impossible for those who stayed behind to reunite with those who had already left, adding layers of separation and complexity to the migration narrative.

The decision to migrate was often driven by the desire to protect young men in the family from compulsory military service or direct involvement in the Syrian conflict. For many Circassians, nationalist sentiments in Syria are not as deeply rooted as they are in Türkiye. The concepts of homeland and nation are perceived differently, reflecting a more ambiguous connection to the nation-state. This divergence is rooted in historical and socio-political contexts, raising questions about the extent to which the nation-state framework has been fully embraced in Syria. In this context, the sentiment of

“Why should I fight? Why should my child die?” (D5)

resonates strongly, fueling the decisions of families to leave the country. The fear of forced conscription goes beyond traditional military service, encompassing broader concerns about arbitrary detention and the risks of being captured by either the state or extremist groups like ISIS. The lack of communication about the fate of soldiers and the prevalence of missing persons deepen these anxieties, cause families to prioritize safety and escape.

Conversely, some families left Syria motivated by religious principles. They rejected the idea of participating in violence against other Muslims, expressing opinions such as,

“We did not run away from war or death, but how can you kill an innocent Muslim as a Muslim?” (D5).

This highlights the complex elements of religious, cultural, and political factors shaping migration decisions. Religious considerations often play a significant role in the decision to settle in Türkiye after leaving Syria. Some Syrian Circassians expressed a preference for Türkiye due to its majority Muslim population, which aligns with their cultural and religious values. This choice is frequently contrasted with the possibility of migrating to Europe, which some actively avoided. Especially for women who wear hijabs, it appears that these factors weighed heavily in their decision-making:

“I have many relatives, many friends in Europe. We didn’t go. It is very important for us to live in a Muslim country. For example, hearing the call to prayer. I can travel comfortably indoors. These are very important for us. There, for example, all my friends are open, ok. They don’t realize that my friends are Syrians there anyway. It would be very difficult if I got out, for example, I might have difficulties. That’s why we chose to stay here. And also, so that we can be close to Syria. Maybe we’ll come back, maybe it’ll get better. I hope it will get better.” (D6).

It is important to emphasize a critical point that will also be revisited in the conclusion: migration decisions and processes are never singular, fixed, or static. They are dynamic, context-dependent, and influenced by a range of factors that vary across individuals and families. Among Syrian Circassians, motivations for choosing Türkiye are diverse and multifaceted. Some were drawn by the perception that Circassians are well-known and respected in Türkiye, while others were motivated by Türkiye’s relative economic stability and its image as a “strong country.” For some, pre-existing ties (whether through relatives, business connections, or previous visits) played a decisive role. Others viewed Türkiye as a practical choice due to its visa-free entry, the presence of established Circassian communities, and greater job opportunities compared to neighboring countries. For some, the decision to migrate to Türkiye was less about deliberate planning and more about seizing opportunities

as they arose. The circumstances and options available at a given moment often determined their choice:

“It could have been Lebanon; there were no friends or family there or in Türkiye. But when we heard about the flights, my brother came. Then I came, we took my family, etc. That opportunity just presented itself at that time, and it ended up being Türkiye.” (I8).

These individual migration narratives are closely connected with the networks and support mechanisms that enabled their settlement, particularly the role of Circassian associations in Türkiye. Circassian associations played a critical role during the initial stages of Syrian Circassians’ forced migration to Türkiye, focusing on welcoming and placement. They addressed critical needs such as housing, employment, facilitating weddings, and enabling communication with families via internet or telephone. Particularly during the initial years of displacement, Circassian CSOs played a critical mediating role by identifying available housing, often in rural Circassian villages, and facilitating arrangements where Syrian Circassians could live rent-free in unoccupied homes. These homes, typically offered by local Circassians who had migrated to urban centers or abroad, became temporary shelters for newly arrived families. While many Syrian Circassians relied on this type of informal housing support during their first years in Türkiye—until they secured employment and stabilized their lives—some families continue to benefit from such arrangements today:

“My husband’s uncle already knew the headman of this village. The headman told him, ‘Come and stay in the empty house here,’ for my husband. So, my husband moved into one of the houses in the garden and began helping with gardening and household maintenance. Later, they also helped him find a job. We were already engaged in Syria, and after I came to Türkiye, we married eight months later. We are still living in that house. God bless them—they never asked for anything, never even frowned at us.” (D10).

“We convened as the board of directors to discuss what steps we could take. After evaluating the needs, we reached out to association members. When a specific family required housing, someone immediately offered help. One member raised his hand and said, ‘I’m offering my house. We usually go to our village home in the summers—let us not go for the next three to five years so that this family can stay there.’

Some newcomers already had relatives here, and those families took immediate responsibility—providing shelter and basic needs. Then the association followed up to support them further. At one point, a businessman among us began providing regular monthly financial support to a family. Today, that family has bought a home, settled down, found employment, and is doing well.

The association also adopted a structured, collective approach. For example, if there were 40 families in need and 12 people on the board, we divided the responsibility so that each board member was accountable for about three families. If three families were assigned to me, I’d help them settle in, maybe arrange housing, and then assign a trusted person to guide them through the process. Whether they needed to go to Istanbul or deal with official paperwork, they had someone to rely on. When they ran out of supplies or faced urgent problems, they would call their point of contact, and we’d step in immediately. In this way, we shared the responsibility as a community and supported each other with a sense of trust and duty.” (CS8).

“Initially, our primary focus was to ensure that those arriving had access to basic needs such as transportation, shelter, a safe environment, and emotional support. Once some individuals began to express their intention to remain in Türkiye, a new set of priorities emerged—how to facilitate access to education for children and work opportunities for adults. Meanwhile, we also had to consider the varying financial situations of the newcomers: some had the resources to pursue resettlement elsewhere, while others required our assistance to explore such options. This led to an additional phase of planning, including evaluating budgets, identifying destinations, and managing travel logistics.

The more technical aspects—such as dealing with the Directorate of Migration Management, determining refugee status, and organizing international travel procedures—were mainly handled through KAFFED. We compiled and copied important documents like passports and created detailed files for each family, listing their relatives already residing in Türkiye. One of our goals was to facilitate contact between them and their local networks.

My own involvement was more focused on student housing. After I joined the association in 2016, I was contacted from Istanbul, where many families had already begun to settle. Some had left the country, some had married, and some had built stable homes. Their weddings were even held at the association. They told me, “We’re closing the student housing now. Can you also cancel your subscriptions?” You can imagine how long these accommodations had been maintained for children who had arrived from Syria.

The association had provided them with fully furnished homes, covered their rent and utility costs, and even prepared and delivered meals to the mothers. We ran hands-on workshops to teach them practical skills—how to cook, how to store food, how to manage their homes. Women from the community participated actively. We cleaned, organized, and did grocery shopping. Some members donated weekly supplies of fresh produce. This continued until families became self-sufficient and integrated into their new lives.

Throughout this entire process, we maintained continuous coordination with KAFFED and local associations. This close collaboration was crucial for responding swiftly to urgent needs. For example, when we realized that camp conditions were unsustainable, we began mobilizing housing options in Ankara. People brought us house keys directly, and we personally visited and inspected the homes. Some families were immediately placed in Circassian villages, where social support was already present.” (CS9).

There was a deeply communal and structured approach Circassian associations adopted in responding to the Syrian crisis. What stands out is not only the solidarity expressed in words but its institutionalization in practice—dividing responsibilities among board members, creating a system of care, and ensuring personalized support.

However, this type of support, particularly prominent in the initial years of arrival in Türkiye, diminished over time due to various challenges:

“Actually, there was more support before we came. In other words, it decreased after we arrived. For example, the first ones didn't pay rent for houses—the Circassian associations always paid their bills—but in my time, we were paying the rent, bills, etc. ourselves. Of course, when there was a need, we would ask the association, and we still do. For example, for residence permits, for citizenship... We definitely asked the association for support with those things.” (A2).

“The association's ties with Syrian Circassians have not been entirely severed. Sacrificial meat distributions still take place, and Syrian Circassians remain among the recipients. So, in that sense, the connection continues. However, support has tapered off primarily because the perceived need has diminished. Many have now become homeowners—some purchased properties, others rented in Circassian villages. A number have even started their own businesses. At this point, there aren't many visible problems.” (CS8).

While this narrative reflects a broader perception among some community leaders that the urgent needs of Syrian Circassians have largely subsided, field observations suggest a more complex reality. Many Syrian Circassian families continue to face economic hardship, precarious employment, and unstable housing conditions—issues exacerbated by Türkiye's ongoing economic crisis. The assumption that ownership or rental of a house signifies full socio-economic integration overlooks the multidimensional nature of vulnerability, especially for those navigating structural disadvantages in employment, healthcare access, and education.

Moreover, while associations played a pivotal role in providing immediate support during the initial years of displacement, their capacity to sustain such aid has been increasingly constrained by limited resources. This raises important questions about the extent to which the responsibility for long-term welfare should fall on CSOs. Some argue that expecting associations to fill systemic gaps in state provision places undue pressure on community-based structures and risks normalizing the withdrawal of institutional support. Thus, the declining aid does not simply reflect diminishing need, but rather resource inadequacy, and

the limits of what volunteer-driven organizations can sustainably provide in an enduring crisis.

Circassian CSOs' influence extended far beyond these immediate necessities; in some cases, they played a direct role in facilitating migration itself. For instance, The Federation of Circassian Associations (*ÇerkesFed*) organized four planes to transport Circassians from Lebanon, as Damascus Airport was closed at the time. Syrian Circassians were instructed to make their way to Lebanon, where the federation ensured their onward journey to Türkiye by air. Others arrived by car or alternative means. Upon arrival, many Syrian Circassians were placed in the Nizip refugee camp in Gaziantep. Associations worked closely with authorities to establish a separate section within the camp exclusively for Circassians, aiming to prevent potential tensions with Arab refugees and to provide a culturally comfortable environment. The Federation of Abkhaz Associations (*AbhazFed*) also played a significant role in facilitating migration during the war, arranging a plane to transport 500 families to Abkhazia. Apart from these organizations of CSOs in Türkiye regarding the return to the Caucasus, CSOs in the Caucasus also worked to bring Syrian Circassians back to their homeland:

“In the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, the organization known as Perit Xase played an active role in supporting the return of Circassians to their historical homeland. Notably, the organization facilitated a housing campaign that resulted in approximately forty families being resettled with residential support. However, these efforts were eventually constrained by shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly the evolving relationship between Syria and Russia. As bilateral tensions increased, Russian authorities began restricting visa access for Syrian Circassians, effectively halting further resettlement initiatives.” (CSO10).

Interestingly, not all associations and federations agreed with the methods used for settlement in Türkiye. Some opposed the placement of Circassian families in refugee camps, citing ethical concerns, and avoided from supporting the camp initiative prompted by *ÇerkesFed* in cooperation with the Turkish state. Instead, they organized alternative pathways for

migration, utilizing various land routes to bring families to Türkiye and settling them directly in Circassian villages:

“We established a Refugee Commission specifically to support Syrian Circassians, although we also occasionally assisted Chechen refugees facing acute challenges. The primary aim of the commission was to offer legal and logistical assistance, including help with residency procedures and addressing economic difficulties. To ensure coverage across the country, Türkiye was divided into eight regions, with designated representatives responsible for various tasks—some focused on legal matters, others on administrative affairs. At the time of the initial displacement caused by the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) had not yet been established. Instead, matters concerning foreigners were handled by police departments and the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). Once the DGMM was formed, we began to coordinate directly with its central office in Ankara.

Over the course of our efforts, we were able to provide support—shelter, food, and other necessities—to approximately two thousand families through the network of member associations under our federation. Notably, this was accomplished without any financial backing from the state. In fact, officials from the Migration Administration expressed surprise at the extent of our independent mobilization. While government assistance was typically tied to placement in official refugee camps, we consistently maintained the position that Circassians should not be accommodated in such camps, due to cultural and social concerns... Those arriving from Syria came from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds—Shia, Sunni, Arab, Kurdish—which often reflected deep-seated sectarian and ethnic divisions. From a sociological standpoint, these groups have historically experienced a degree of social distance from one another. Consequently, there was concern that placing Circassians in refugee camps, where they would be housed in close quarters with communities they were not closely aligned with, could lead to tension or conflict. In addition, given the presence of a sizeable Circassian population in Türkiye, it was deemed inappropriate and ethically troubling for Circassians to remain in camps under precarious and inhumane conditions. This conviction prompted our organizations to intervene directly on the ground to provide alternative forms of support and assistance.

As a result, our network mobilized its own resources—some individuals offered their homes or household items, while others created job opportunities for Syrian Circassians. Community-based campaigns such as zakat and fitr collections were organized, and additional aid flowed in from diaspora communities in the United States, Europe, Israel, and from the North Caucasus homeland itself.” (CS10).

This divergence in approaches underscores a multifaceted network of transnational solidarity within the Circassian community. At the heart of this effort lies a remarkable display of shared diasporic identity: Circassians from regions like Eskişehir, Düzce and Kayseri, who had no prior personal ties to Syrian Circassians, opened their homes or provided unused properties to accommodate families fleeing the war. Motivated by a sense of shared cultural heritage, religious affinity, or diasporic identity, these acts of support illustrate a complex transnational solidarity that transcends national borders. The transnational solidarity of Circassian associations extended beyond organized initiatives like arranging flights and land routes. For some families, the journey to safety involved illegal crossings by sea or other unregulated pathways. In such cases, there were instances where associations provided support, although these activities remained unofficial and highly sensitive.

The ideological distinctions significantly shape the engagement of the organizations with Syrian Circassians and the types of support they prioritized. The “rights-based vs. needs-based approach” dichotomy (Mackreath and Sağınç, 2017) does not fully cover the complexity of these activities. Observations and interviews reveal that many Circassian CSOs in Türkiye employed a combination of these approaches, adapting their methods to meet the immediate needs of individuals while also advocating for longer-term rights and integration. While avoiding another strict dichotomy in the analysis, broadly speaking, Circassian CSOs in Türkiye can be categorized as secular or conservative, though this duality is neither exhaustive nor entirely definitive.

While the distinction between conservative and secular Circassian CSOs should not be understood as a rigid binary, the organizations nevertheless display discernible differences in discourse, networks, and practices. Conservative CSOs often emphasize religious fellowship as a key component of Circassian identity, framing solidarity with Syrian Circassians through

Islamic values and humanitarian notions of the ummah. This orientation also brings them into closer relations with state authorities and religious charities, enabling access to official aid channels but limiting their engagement with politically sensitive issues. Secular CSOs, by contrast, ground their activities primarily in a shared diasporic identity, highlighting cultural preservation, kinship ties, and community solidarity. Their initiatives are more likely to take the form of language courses, cultural events, and community workshops, mobilizing support among urban, middle-class Circassians invested in heritage and identity.

Thus, while both types of organizations respond to the needs of Syrian Circassians, the ways they define solidarity, select partners, and structure their activities reflect differing ideological orientations and institutional alignments. While both groups share certain values, such as the significance of the native language and the concept of homeland, they diverge on key issues. More conservative organizations emphasized a sense of religious fellowship intertwined with shared Circassian identity, directing their political and social networks to provide humanitarian assistance. They often prioritize Circassian identity intertwined with Islamic values, sometimes placing religion ahead of ethnic considerations in their discussions and activities concerning Syrian Circassians:

“We recognized that oppression knows no ethnic boundaries—those who are oppressed remain so regardless of their identity. Whether Turk or Kurd, the suffering of the oppressed demands solidarity. However, in this case, our response was shaped by three intertwined factors: these individuals were our kin, they shared our religious identity, and they were among the oppressed. When asked why we did not extend similar support to Arab refugees, we emphasized a critical distinction: Circassians, unlike Arabs or Turks who have nation-states to represent them, are stateless and historically marginalized. Circassians are, in a sense, a people without formal protection—ownerless and isolated. This sense of historical abandonment and statelessness reinforced our collective sense of duty as Circassians in Türkiye to offer support where no other institutions would.” (CSO5).

“Our sustained contact with Syrian Circassians—through personal relationships, familiarity, and kinship ties—plays a central role in shaping our sense of responsibility. Among Circassians, kinship carries deep cultural significance; belonging to the same lineage fosters an emotional bond that naturally inspires solidarity. These individuals are not strangers—we share common ancestry, and although their migration occurred over 150 years ago, our renewed encounters in the context of displacement have revived that historical connection.

For many, offering support is viewed as a moral obligation—something akin to a debt of loyalty or kinship. It is not only a humanitarian response, but a fulfillment of what is perceived as a fraternal duty. There is a widespread belief that if we were the ones displaced, they would do the same for us without hesitation. Assistance is extended with the conviction that these are our brothers and sisters, and that they have arrived as guests. This motivation is grounded in a collective consciousness shaped by kinship, shared experiences of hardship, and being Muslim.” (CS6).

“Let me clarify: I do not distinguish between Syrian Circassians and Syrian Arabs. I myself am a descendant of refugees—my family arrived in these lands under very challenging circumstances and worked hard to build a life. I come from that legacy and tradition, so I can relate deeply to the experiences of Syrians. My approach is not grounded in national distinctions. The affinity we feel with Circassians stems primarily from kinship ties—we know each other, we understand one another more easily. Our cultural similarities facilitate that connection, making it more natural to extend help to those closest to us. This is the kind of relationship we’ve established, and we continue to uphold it. That said, if a Syrian who is not Circassian were to walk through this door in need, we would, without hesitation, offer support.” (CS7).

Secular organizations, on the other hand, framed their activities primarily around the concept of a shared diasporic identity. These organizations often encouraged Circassians from Türkiye to participate in their efforts, fostering a broader community-based support network. They tend to frame their approach around Circassian identity and kinship ties, emphasizing cultural preservation and solidarity:

“As a people who have historically endured genocide and exile, Circassians carry a deep collective memory of forced displacement. The recent forced migration of Circassians from Syria resonated strongly with this history, evoking a renewed sense of solidarity and moral responsibility within the Circassian community in Türkiye. The emotional commitment was palpable, and it quickly translated into organized efforts to support their displaced kin. For many Syrian Circassians, this was not their first experience of uprooting. In fact, for some families, it marked the third or even fourth wave of displacement since the original expulsion from the Caucasus in 1864. Several had initially resettled in the Balkans, only to be displaced again after the Ottoman Empire lost control of those territories. Others were resettled in Syria but later uprooted once more during the Arab-Israeli wars, particularly from villages near the Golan Heights. Given this long and painful history of repeated dislocation, the Circassian community in Türkiye felt a profound obligation to respond; indifference was not an option.” (CSO10).

“There are now people with the same surname as mine living in Abkhazia, Türkiye, and Syria. Our Circassian and Abkhaz associations have maintained connections with communities in Syria. As a people who have experienced war firsthand—exile, victimization, and even genocide—we carry a deep understanding of its consequences. So, when we realized that individuals in Syria shared not only our names but also our history, it became clear that they deserved our attention. This wasn’t about acting on behalf of the Circassian community as a whole, but rather about supporting those fragmented families with whom we share personal ties and can directly reach. In that context, we prioritized helping them. Assisting in the evacuation of the elderly, women, and children from a war zone was not only necessary—it was, above all, a humanitarian obligation, and we responded accordingly.” (CS12).

There is a symbolic thread connecting fragmented diasporic identities, reinforcing the notion that familial ties can transcend national borders and political divisions. Moreover, there is an emphasis to the act of solidarity not only within a familial framework but also within a deeply ethical and historical one.

6.2 Enduring Bonds: Ongoing Relations with Syria and Repatriation

Migration, in all its facets—including the initial decision to leave, the journey undertaken, processes of settlement and integration in the host society, and the ongoing maintenance of ties to the homeland—is a deeply multi-dimensional and non-linear experience. It unfolds differently across individuals and families, shaped by a range of intersecting factors such as legal status, age, gender, socioeconomic background, political context, and affective attachments to both the place of origin and the new host environment. Rather than representing a clean rupture from the past, migration often entails a reconfiguration of connections—where emotional, familial, and cultural ties to the homeland persist, adapt, or transform over time. For Syrian Circassians, this complexity is further intensified by their status as a historically diasporic community and by the evolving conditions in Syria following the civil war. This chapter explores how these enduring bonds manifest in participants' narratives—through memories, longing, hesitation, and strategic calculations around potential return—while also analyzing how notions of “home” and “repatriation” are negotiated in the context of prolonged displacement and ongoing uncertainty. This sense of enduring connection to Syria was reflected in the early expectations of many Syrian Circassians who viewed their displacement as temporary. For many, the departure from Syria was not accompanied by the idea of permanent resettlement, but rather a short-term necessity prompted by immediate danger. The belief that the war would soon subside shaped the way many approached their migration and framed their emotional and practical relationship with both Syria and their host country. For instance, many Syrian Circassians initially believed that the war in Syria would be short-lived and anticipated a return within a few months:

“The war broke out, and we had to leave. I was just in first grade. My older sister had only four courses left to graduate, and my younger brother had just finished middle school. That’s how it was... Since my father was already working abroad, we got our visas and joined him in Oman. We thought it would just be for a month or two at most. We said to ourselves, ‘Things are a bit chaotic now, but they’ll probably settle soon.’ So, we left. One month passed, then two, then five months, then five years. Now it’s been eleven years. Sadly, we never returned. We couldn’t return.” (A1).

Some even retained ties to their jobs, expecting to resume their lives after a brief absence. For Syrian Circassians, these layers of complexity are further intertwined with their enduring bonds to Syria and their relatives who remain there. The topic of repatriation emerges as a significant dimension of this discourse, not only for Syrian refugees but also for Turkish society, the Turkish government, and even European countries, which actively fund border control measures to prevent further refugee migration to Europe. It is stated in the previous chapters that in the first years of arrivals, the narrative was adopted to talk about the reception and protection of Syrians at the community level with reference to Turkish citizens' hospitality. The narrative refers to Syrians "guests" and "brothers" who would return their country soon. These notions were adopted to create Turkish public sympathy towards Syrian refugees (Gökalp Aras and Sahin Mencütek, 2020).

Since 2017, there has been an increasing focus on the issue of repatriation for Syrians in official state discourse. This growing emphasis was not limited to rhetorical shifts but was followed by the formulation of tangible policy frameworks by 2019, signaling a transition from emergency-based responses to more long-term governance strategies concerning Syrian refugees. Alongside these developments, 2019 also marked the formal introduction of integration and adaptation policies aimed at regulating the presence and everyday life of Syrians within Türkiye. However, this policy shift did not occur in isolation from broader regional dynamics. In the same year, Türkiye intensified its military interventions into northern Syrian territory under the banner of cross-border security and counterterrorism efforts. These operations—framed as necessary for national security and the prevention of new waves of migration, particularly from conflict zones like Idlib—were also tightly linked to the state's broader migration management strategy. As a result, Syrian refugees began to be increasingly viewed through a security lens, both in governmental narratives and in public perception. This securitization process contributed to a discursive shift wherein refugees were no longer primarily seen as humanitarian subjects in need of protection, but as potential risks or burdens whose return needed to be organized and facilitated. The Turkish government's emphasis on military operations and border management thus reinforced a narrative that normalized repatriation, often blurring the lines between voluntary and involuntary return. Scholars have noted that Türkiye's increasing involvement in northern Syria—through military, administrative, and infrastructural means—has functioned to

reframe northern parts of Syria as “safe zones,” thereby enabling a policy environment where return could be both encouraged and operationalized. However, as Gökalp Aras and Sahin Mencütek (2020) point out, this growing focus on cross-border security and return raises serious concerns about the voluntariness of these repatriation efforts, particularly given the unstable conditions in many parts of Syria and the lack of reliable guarantees for returnees. In this context, the idea of return has become both a political tool and a policy goal, placing Syrians under temporary protection in an increasingly uncertain and pressured position.

The concept of return is complex and cannot be easily grasped or approached casually. While it remains a recurring theme in policy debates and public discourse, return is not a singular or uniform desire among displaced individuals. Among the participants interviewed, attitudes toward return to Syria varied widely and were shaped by multiple, intersecting factors such as age, gender, education, familial obligations, and personal attachments to the notion of “home” or “homeland.” Some participants expressed a long-term hope to return, particularly older individuals who maintained strong emotional ties to their villages, land, or community networks. For them, return was envisioned as a means of reclaiming a lost life or dying in familiar surroundings. In contrast, younger participants—many of whom were educated in Türkiye or had established new social and professional networks—tended to be more future-oriented and saw their prospects rooted elsewhere.

Moreover, even the hypothetical scenario of a post-Assad, democratic Syria did not automatically generate enthusiasm for return. Several participants felt that the irreversibility of loss—of loved ones, homes, or the Syria they once knew—had fundamentally changed their relationship to the idea of going back. Others highlighted the trauma they experienced during the war or the uncertainty of future stability as deterrents. These reflections point to the deeply personal and layered nature of return decisions. There is no single or “correct” pathway; rather, each individual’s response is informed by mix of lived experiences, personal losses, practical constraints, and emotional negotiations. Return, in this sense, is not merely a political or logistical question but a deeply affective and situational one.

These diverse and often conflicting perspectives highlight that return is not a fixed or inevitable trajectory, but rather a deeply individualized process shaped by complex realities. The following reflections from participants who expressed no intention of returning to Syria

further illustrate the emotional weight, practical considerations, and generational differences that inform such decisions.

“It’s very difficult to start from scratch. I’ve been in Türkiye for 10 years.” (A1).

“At this point, I can’t imagine going back with the intention of resettling. I would like to visit, of course—go back to the village where I grew up, see the Circassian community there. Just to visit. I’d love to see my uncles and my grandmother, whom I haven’t seen in so long. But even from my family’s perspective, returning to settle isn’t really seen as a viable option. No matter how much things improve, it just won’t be the same as it was before.” (I3).

Here, the homeland is reframed not as a future place of residence but as a symbolic and affective site of memory. The participant expresses a desire to visit rather than resettle, indicating a shift in how belonging is negotiated across time and space. The emphasis on familial and communal ties—grandmother, uncles, the Circassian community—reveals a continued emotional investment, even as return is no longer considered a realistic or desirable long-term option.

Offered by a Syrian Circassian CSO official who himself experienced displacement, there is a reflection of a decisive shift in the spatial and emotional orientation of the diaspora:

“There will be no return to Syria from this point forward. Let me explain it like this: we can group people into three categories. Those who chose to stay in Syria remained there; those who decided to come to Türkiye are now here; and those who left for the Caucasus have gone there. The ones who settled in the Caucasus will stay there. Those in Türkiye will remain in Türkiye. And those still in Syria will not leave anymore. Movement now is limited to short visits. People in Türkiye go to Syria and come back, or they travel to the Caucasus and return. Likewise, those in the Caucasus might visit Syria, but then go back. That’s the current reality.” (CS3).

“I’m not sure. Right now, everything in my life is here—my university, my routine. My younger siblings are still studying, and my sister has built a future for herself here. My parents might still want to return because they haven’t seen their siblings in so many years. That’s their longing. But since my grandparents passed away, it has become more difficult for them. They left Syria while their parents were still alive, and now, going back means facing their absence. Psychologically, I think returning has become even more challenging for them.” (I4).

This quotation highlights the interplay between family dynamics and the psychological dimensions of return. The participant notes that while their parents may still harbor emotional attachments to Syria, the loss of key family members—especially grandparents—has made return emotionally fraught. The absence of those who were left behind complicates not only the logistics of going back but also the emotional readiness to confront what the homeland has become in their absence.

“To be honest, there’s nothing left in Syria anymore. It’s uncertain whether things will improve, but at least there’s no longer active conflict in the streets. I could consider returning under one condition: if I do leave Türkiye, it wouldn’t be for more than two years. I’d go, try to work somehow, and then come back. I’ve made up my mind to stay here for eight or ten years. Personally, I think—if we were going to leave, we would have done it long ago. But now it’s very risky, and the journey itself is complicated... You have to find the right people. As I said, there’s no longer an escape route like before. If I go, it will be with a proper ticket, legally, with a visa and a work permit. If I can work, for example, I can support my family here. That’s the only way it could work.” (D1).

The notion of return here is framed through pragmatic considerations rather than emotional longing. The participant sets specific conditions—legal travel, work permits, and temporary duration—indicating a shift in the meaning of return from resettlement to short-term mobility. The quotation reflects how return becomes less about recovering a lost home and more about navigating transnational bureaucratic structures to enable circular migration for economic or familial support.

“I do think about returning, but my husband doesn’t. He really hated being there. He was trapped in one place for two years—there was no food, nothing to eat. He even had to eat moldy bread. It was incredibly difficult for him. He came to hate the place because of that experience. When he finally got out, he was so weak. I didn’t even recognize him—he once showed me a photo of himself from that time, and I couldn’t believe it was really him. So, he refuses to consider going back. But maybe, if things truly improve in the country, he might change his mind.” (D6).

Here, the participant points to how shared familial histories of trauma influence collective decisions about the future, suggesting that return is often foreclosed not only by external conditions but by internalized memories of harm.

“I’ve gotten used to living here now — I even learned Turkish. But I’m tired of trying to keep learning. Once this is over, I either want to return to Syria or just settle here for good. That’s all. But the children, they still have so many dreams.” (A3).

The participant expresses a sense of emotional and cognitive fatigue tied to the ongoing process of adaptation in exile. While there is an acceptance of life in Türkiye, the exhaustion of continuously adjusting—exemplified by language acquisition—signals a desire for stability. Interestingly, this sense of closure contrasts with the aspirations of the younger generation, whose futures remain open-ended and forward-looking, thereby illustrating generational divergence in imaginaries of return and belonging.

A minority, however, expressed a strong longing for their homeland, stating they would return at the first sign of improvement. This divergence of perspectives highlights that there is no singular, definitive answer to the question of return. A common opinion among many participants is the lack of hope in Syria’s recovery, leading to a complicated negotiation between the desire to return and Syria’s reality for living conditions. Yet, for some, the idea of return persists—whether as a concrete intention, a symbolic gesture, or an emotional attachment. These participants framed their relationship with Syria through deeply personal memories, a sense of rootedness, or practical considerations such as property or work

opportunities. Even when full repatriation was not envisioned, the desire to revisit familiar places or maintain a symbolic connection remained strong. The following statements reflect this more nuanced and emotionally laden view of return:

“I only go there from time to time to see and visit the village or streets where I was born and raised, but that is it.” (I11).

“When the war ends, I could go back, but for example, my children wouldn’t. Their lives are here now — they study and work here, they’re in school or at university. It’s a bit more difficult for them. But for people my age, it’s easier. I’m not just talking about myself— I have a house there, a job, everything.” (I15).

This reflection reveals a generational divide in perceptions of return, where older individuals may retain a sense of rootedness in Syria due to past investments—such as property ownership and established livelihoods—while the younger generation becomes increasingly embedded in the host country through education and employment. The participant’s expression illustrates that return is not merely an individual decision but one negotiated within family units, with varying levels of feasibility and desirability across age groups. It underscores how integration in the host country can be cumulative and generational, thereby making the idea of repatriation unevenly distributed even within the same household.

Nevertheless, Syria remains an unforgettable part of the memories and identities of Syrian Circassians:

“One never forgets the place of his birth. Wherever I go, that place is on my mind.” (I6).

“I get goosebumps just thinking about it. People who have returned after a few years say, ‘This is no longer the country we were born in. This is not our village anymore. Nothing is the same.’ If I were to go back to the village now... they killed my best friend right next to the school. I don’t even know if he’s buried there. My house burned down. My closest friends died along the way. How am I supposed to go back to that place? Maybe I still think this way because I’m far away. The people who never left are not as sensitive anymore. So much has happened to them—they’ve become hardened over time.” (A1).

This expression illustrates how trauma and loss reshape the affective geography of homeland. The participant’s response—“I get goosebumps”—signals the depth of emotional injury tied to the violent transformation of familiar spaces. The village, once a site of belonging, becomes unrecognizable due to the physical destruction and personal tragedies endured. The participant’s acknowledgment of the emotional distance between those who stayed and those who fled suggests that time and proximity shape different modes of coping and memory.

Several participants mentioned how their elders, exiled from the Golan Heights during the War of 1967, continued to hold onto the hope of return, representing a collective longing that has transcended decades:

“As Circassians, we use this word a lot: we can never return, but we always say we will return. We never returned. No one returned. Those who came from the Caucasus could not return, those who came from Türkiye could not return to the Golan Heights, those who crossed from the Golan Heights to Damascus could not return, and we could not return to Damascus either.” (I11).

A similar approach was also expressed by a CSO official:

“A Syrian Circassian once told me, ‘My great-grandfather went to the Balkans four generations ago, and my grandfather was born there. Later, he was exiled to the Golan Heights, where I was born. From the Golan, we moved to Damascus. I experienced exile, and

my son was born in Damascus. Now, my son has moved to Istanbul.’ This kind of narrative deeply affected me. It reflects a generational legacy of displacement—migration that is passed from father to son.

We are a people whose exile stretches back centuries. We were forcibly removed from our ancestral homeland of twenty-five thousand years. Over time, we’ve adapted—we speak different languages now, we’ve developed new culinary traditions, our cultural practices have shifted—but the fact remains: we were exiled, displaced, and subjected to genocide. The memory of that loss is still very much alive in our hearts. Yet for Syrian Circassians, that memory is even more immediate and raw. I know individuals who have endured unimaginable suffering due to the war, and sadly, some of these stories have had tragic endings. Their experience is marked by a deeply felt, unhealed wound of repeated displacement.” (CS6).

Such reflections are not isolated; rather, they resonate with broader academic and policy debates that have emerged since the onset of the Syrian civil war, where the possibility—and implications—of return have become central to discussions about the future of displaced populations.

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the question of whether and how Syrians might eventually return to their country of origin has been central to academic, policy, and humanitarian discussions. The idea of return, often framed as a “durable solution” to displacement, is complex, politically charged, and highly contingent on a range of factors. In the Turkish context, the state has articulated varying and sometimes conflicting policies towards Syrians, including integration, third-country resettlement, and return policies. Initially treated as “guests” and expected to return immediately, Syrians were granted temporary protection status in 2014, and in 2016, limited work permits and pathways to Turkish citizenship were opened (İçduygu and Demiryontar, 2022). The policies towards Syrian refugees have shifted towards “repatriation” since 2017, with increasing discourse and concrete plans for their return, despite initial integration efforts.

The repatriation has become increasingly prominent in public and governmental discourse since 2017, particularly after Türkiye’s military interventions into northern Syria and the declaration of certain regions as “safe zones”. These interventions have been positioned by

Turkish authorities as attempts to facilitate voluntary returns, with state actors claiming that hundreds of thousands of Syrians have already returned under what is termed “assisted voluntary return” programs. Türkiye’s increased border security and militarization have also reframed refugee management as a security issue. This puts pressure on Syrians with temporary protection to consider return, even when conditions remain unstable (Gökalp Aras and Sahin Mencütek, 2020).

In principle, voluntary return must be based on informed consent and a genuine choice to return under conditions of safety and dignity (Mosoian, 2016). Yet numerous studies have demonstrated that the voluntariness of returns is often compromised by deteriorating living conditions in host countries, legal insecurity, and rising social tensions (Ihlamur-Öner, 2022; Braithwaite et al., 2022). In Türkiye, increasing anti-refugee sentiment, economic precarity, and tighter controls on residence and work permits have led some Syrians to perceive return not as a desirable option, but as a lesser evil among shrinking opportunities. It has been reported that Syrians have at times been pressured to sign voluntary return forms under duress or with the threat of deportation (HRW, 2019). In this sense, the line between voluntary and coerced return becomes blurred, complicating the ethical and legal dimensions of Türkiye’s repatriation policies. As of early 2025, Türkiye report that approximately 915,000 Syrians have returned from Türkiye to Syria since 2017, under what authorities describe as “voluntary, safe, and dignified” repatriation programs (Daily Sabah, 2024). Meanwhile, UNHCR reports that approximately 400,000 Syrians have repatriated from neighboring countries since the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024 (UNHCR, 2024), including 175,000 from Türkiye (Daily Sabah, 2024). Many returnees find themselves in regions with damaged infrastructure, limited access to healthcare or education, and few viable economic opportunities. In several cases, returnees have faced threats from regime forces, challenges in reclaiming property, or even re-displacement.

These post-return challenges reflect not only the volatile conditions within Syria but also the broader regional dynamics that shape the feasibility of sustainable repatriation. The lack of guarantees for safety, justice, and socio-economic reintegration underscores how return is not solely a matter of crossing borders, but a complex process influenced by both origin and host states. In this context, ongoing crises—including Türkiye’s foreign policy orientations and

its domestic political climate—further hinder the development of long-term, rights-based programs for the return and integration of refugees.

These structural and political constraints not only complicate the return process but also reinforce the uncertainties surrounding cross-border mobility. For many Syrian Circassians, the idea of visiting or returning to Syria is shaped as much by emotional and historical ties as by logistical feasibility and safety considerations. Transportation to and from Syria remains problematic with challenges, reflecting the precarious realities faced by many Syrian Circassians at the time of this study. Travel is described as dangerous, expensive, and highly risky, with airports frequently bombed and roadways filled with uncertainty. For some, returning Syria has meant disappearance or impossibility of return to Türkiye. Those who attempt to return are often subjected to interrogation, including questions about their reasons for returning, with some even being re-recruiting into military service despite having previously completed it. The potential threat of being on a government blacklist (determined through accusations of opposition, sometimes based on slander) adds another layer of fear and uncertainty:

“I genuinely want to return, but then I start to question everything. What will I encounter—something good or something dangerous? What will life be like there? On television, things may appear stable, but no one really knows how people are living on the ground. In Türkiye, they say, ‘Go ahead and leave,’ but it’s not that simple. There are marks—indicators—next to our names. Why are those there? For instance, we are against Assad. Some people leave and return with no issues, and no one says anything. But others leave and never come back. Why? Because the government detains them. They ask, ‘Why don’t you support Assad? Why did you flee? Why did you oppose him?’ And that’s it—you’re imprisoned, and you may never be released. Sometimes they check those marks, sometimes they don’t. Sometimes even without a mark, someone reports you and they still take you in. You don’t know what happens after that—maybe the person gets out, maybe not. I don’t want to face that kind of uncertainty. That’s why I won’t go back to Syria.” (I10).

While the idea of going back may carry emotional or nostalgic appeal, it is outweighed by the real and perceived risks tied to the Assad regime's surveillance and punitive measures. This quotation describes a precarious system in which returnees are exposed to arbitrary decisions: some are interrogated, some disappear, and others face detention for reasons as blurred as being associated with anti-regime sentiment or being named in a denunciation.

Despite the looming risks and emotional weight associated with return, many Syrian Circassians remain deeply connected to those who stayed behind or relocated elsewhere through digital communication. Most maintain relationships with relatives in Syria through internet communication, a crucial channel for staying informed about their well-being and activities. While physical return may be untenable, online communication allows individuals to stay informed about the everyday realities in Syria, including both the ongoing hardships and the cultural resilience of their communities. Participants noted, for example, that Circassian associations in Syria have sustained their cultural programming, offering dance, painting, and language classes for children.

In parallel, this digital connection becomes a way for transnational solidarity, enabling the transfer of financial support, essential goods, or medications to relatives in need. Notably, these connections are not limited to Syria, but also extend to Circassians who have migrated to the Caucasus, indicating the multi-sited nature of diasporic belonging and support networks among Syrian Circassians.

Building on the importance of transnational and familial ties, the role of local institutions—particularly Circassian associations in Türkiye—emerges as another crucial layer in the support systems available to Syrian Circassians. While digital communication sustains emotional and cultural links across borders, these associations provide more immediate, tangible forms of assistance within Türkiye itself. Their efforts, especially visible during religious holidays, help meet basic needs and reinforce a sense of communal care and solidarity. Currently, Circassian associations in Türkiye play a significant role in providing support to Syrian Circassians, particularly during key religious periods such as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha. In this way, Circassian associations serve as mediating actors between displaced individuals and the broader support landscape, functioning as both practical resource providers and symbolic extensions of diasporic kinship. Much of this assistance is

coordinated through localized networks, where associations rely on trusted community members at the neighborhood level to facilitate distribution. For example, an association may notify a well-connected individual in a neighborhood about incoming aid, and that person ensures the equitable distribution of resources to those in need. This approach creates a neighborhood-based cooperation network that relies on personal connections and mutual trust. Yet, despite their significance in moments of crisis, the limited day-to-day engagement with association-led programming points to more complex dynamics around belonging, participation, and the longer-term integration of Syrian Circassians into existing communal structures. Beyond these specific aid efforts, however, the level of participation in association-led activities remains relatively limited. While these associations are central in moments of urgent need, engagement with them on broader cultural or social activities appears to be minimal.

6.3 Diasporic Aspirations Beyond Syria and Türkiye

Although Syrian Circassians have found a degree of stability in Türkiye—with support from local Circassian associations and the ability to maintain ties with those still in Syria or in the Caucasus—their longer-term aspirations are not confined to Türkiye alone. Many continue to navigate complex considerations about future mobility, shaped by a combination of cultural, moral, religious, and economic factors. While migration to Europe was technically feasible for some, it was often dismissed due to concerns over perceived moral and social differences, including fears of cultural assimilation, loss of community cohesion, or challenges to preserving religious values. Some noted that the moral and social structures in Europe were perceived as incompatible with their own, citing issues such as the challenges of living as a minority Muslim community, potential discrimination, and difficulties in practicing their religion. Türkiye's familiar cultural and religious landscape made it a more acceptable destination, even if not an ideal one. Religious considerations often play a significant role in the decision to settle in Türkiye after leaving Syria. Some Syrian Circassians expressed a preference for Türkiye due to its majority Muslim population, which aligns with their cultural and religious values. This choice is frequently contrasted with the

possibility of migrating to Europe, which some actively avoided. Especially for women who wear hijabs, it appears that these factors weighed heavily in their decision-making:

“I have many relatives, many friends in Europe. We didn’t go. It is very important for us to live in a Muslim country. For example, hearing the call to prayer. I can travel comfortably indoors. These are very important for us. There, for example, all my friends are open, ok. They don’t realize that my friends are Syrians there anyway. It would be very difficult if I got out, for example, I might have difficulties. That’s why we chose to stay here. And also, so that we can be close to Syria. Maybe we’ll come back, maybe it’ll get better. I hope it will get better.” (D6).

“My father was offered an opportunity to go to Europe, but he declined. Although the invitation came from his own relatives who had already settled there, he felt a strong disconnection from the environment they described. Both of my parents are devoutly religious, and they believe that life in Europe is largely detached from the values they hold dear. I vividly remember how emotional my father became when his relatives visited Türkiye, and he heard the call to prayer—it reminded him of the spiritual atmosphere he missed. This is one of the key reasons he did not wish to pursue the idea of migrating to Europe.” (I4).

These personal concerns about integration, identity preservation, and religious life in Europe were echoed at the organizational level as well. Civil society actors who had worked closely with Syrian Circassian communities observed similar patterns. Over time, many who pursued asylum abroad moved out of the orbit of community networks, resulting in a visible decline in the number of families requiring support within Türkiye:

“Approximately five to six years after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, a notable shift occurred, particularly among the younger demographic, who began seeking asylum in various European countries. This wave of migration gradually reduced the number of Syrian Circassian families remaining in Türkiye and, consequently, the scope of support required. Those who remained were primarily older individuals or families who had secured employment and achieved a degree of stability. While the intensity and volume of financial

aid provided by Circassian associations have since declined, support remains accessible, especially for administrative challenges such as citizenship or residency procedures. The associations continue to respond to such needs with the resources available, reflecting a long-standing commitment to communal solidarity.” (CSO10).

The lack of economic and political stability in other potential destinations also influenced these decisions. The Caucasus Federations, Russia, for instance, was often not considered an option by many Syrian Circassians. Its economic instability, potential for conflict, bureaucratic uncertainty, lack of clear pathways for integration and geographical distance from Syria made it an unattractive destination. Many initially believed that the war in Syria would be short-lived and anticipated a return within a few months. Some even retained ties to their jobs, expecting to resume their lives after a brief absence. Similarly, the Caucasus—despite its historical and cultural ties to Circassians—was often not considered as an option. The influence of Russia, the Christian majority population, limited political stability, and restricted job opportunities were cited as factors:

“I did consider going to the Caucasus. My uncle had already settled there while we were still in Oman—he even had citizenship and encouraged me to join him, assuring me that I could continue my education there. But I hesitated. Russian seemed like a difficult language, and overall, I just didn’t feel comfortable with the idea. I decided against it. I wanted to stay close to my family. Also, my wife was in Türkiye—although we hadn’t seen each other yet, the thought of being even farther apart made me anxious. If I had gone to Russia, she might never have been able to join me. So, I told myself I would wait until I could come to Türkiye.” (I15).

The participant’s hesitation to move to the Caucasus is not merely about language difficulty or bureaucratic concerns; rather, it reflects a broader sense of emotional dislocation and the importance of proximity to loved ones in navigating uncertainty. His decision to delay movement in favor of familial cohesion exemplifies how personal relationships can override seemingly advantageous opportunities for resettlement.

“I had actually planned to fly to the Caucasus—Nalchik specifically. But I happened to meet my friends along the way, and that changed everything. If I hadn’t seen them, I probably wouldn’t have ended up in Türkiye. Looking back, I’m glad I didn’t go. My friends who came from there say Türkiye is easier, more manageable. The climate here is milder too. Some people talk about the homeland, the inns, all of that—but for me, homeland is where I live and work. This is home now.” (D14).

The participant’s expression suggests that a sense of “home” is not necessarily tied to ancestral land but is constructed through everyday practices, routines, and material stability. The shift from an idealized notion of the homeland to a more grounded, pragmatic definition of belonging (“*where I live, where I earn*”) underscores a recurring theme in diaspora studies: the fluid and contingent nature of home-making under conditions of displacement.

The Caucasus, occasionally imagined as a symbolic homeland, was met with a mix of emotional pull and pragmatic hesitation.

“I’m not sure what my family thinks, but personally, I would love to go. After all, we belong there. I often find myself imagining what life could have been like if none of this displacement had happened—what our home would look like, how we might have lived. I genuinely want to visit, even live there. But at the same time, I’ve heard from some people that life there can be difficult, particularly because of the presence of many Russians, and they say racism is an issue. Still, I feel that the Caucasus is where we truly belong—that it’s our ancestral home.” (I4).

This quotation underscores the powerful role of imagined homeland in shaping diasporic aspirations, even when practical obstacles—such as concerns about racism or economic instability—temper those desires. The participant articulates a longing for the Caucasus that is not grounded in lived experience but rather in affective ties to ancestry. Together, these narratives reveal how aspirations are often suspended between idealized visions of homeland and the constraints of real-world mobility.

While many participants expressed a symbolic or affective attachment to the Caucasus shaped by ancestral memory rather than personal experience, these sentiments were not limited to abstract longing. In some cases, they materialized into concrete mobility projects, supported and organized by Circassian civil society actors. The idealized vision of return was thus translated into coordinated actions that enabled actual relocation to the Caucasus for those willing and able. As the following quotation from a CSO official reveals, return migration to Abkhazia was pursued not merely as an emotional gesture, but also as a strategic and legal opportunity rooted in collective history and identity, despite the significant logistical and emotional challenges it required:

“There were also individuals who expressed a desire to relocate to Abkhazia of their own accord, and as a civil society organization, we sought to facilitate this path for those who showed genuine interest. If a person had no immediate connections in Europe and did not view Türkiye as a temporary transit point, then migration to the Caucasus was considered a viable alternative. After all, according to the legal frameworks in Abkhazia, all Circassians—regardless of where they reside in the world—are regarded as natural citizens. From this perspective, what might be termed “reverse migration” served not only as a symbolic return to the ancestral homeland but also as a practical mechanism for reclaiming historical rights and reinvigorating Circassian presence in the region.

Although born out of displacement and hardship, this movement also represented an opportunity—a chance to restore demographic presence in the homeland and re-establish a sense of rootedness. Several families who viewed this option positively were successfully settled in Abkhazia. Their integration involved intensive coordination: from establishing contact with local actors to organizing transportation and covering airfare. The logistical and financial aspects of this endeavor required sustained effort and collaboration. For those who arrived without prior familiarity with local systems or institutions, the association offered guidance and met their basic needs upon arrival. However, ensuring that this process was handled with sensitivity—without causing psychological distress or feelings of abandonment—proved to be a significant challenge. The effort to maintain emotional balance while navigating legal and bureaucratic hurdles highlighted the human dimensions of this complex undertaking.” (CS9).

Circassian associations in Türkiye not only encouraged migration to Abkhazia where appropriate, but also shouldered logistical, financial, and emotional responsibilities to ease this transition. In doing so, they facilitated what can be seen as a form of reverse migration—returning not to one’s personal homeland, but to a collective and ancestral one—thereby reviving transnational bonds between diaspora and homeland.

As the analysis chapters reach their conclusion, the multifaceted experiences of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye offer profound insights into the dynamics of diasporic identity, migration, and transnational solidarity. From the unspoken exile narratives and evolving notions of homeland to the complex processes of adaptation and integration in Türkiye, these stories highlight the complexities of identities. The transformation of Circassian identity is deeply intertwined with historical narratives, cultural values, and the socio-political realities of displacement. Syrian Circassians have fostered new connections while maintaining enduring ties to their past and their communities in Syria. The role of Circassian civil society organizations has been significant and central, reflecting a range of ideological and practical approaches to addressing the needs of displaced individuals. These organizations have actively shaped the integration of Syrian Circassians. Yet, the ongoing relations with Syria, characterized by a blend of hope, nostalgia, and uncertainty demonstrates the dynamic nature of migration. The lived experiences of Syrian Circassians reveal that identity formation, migration, integration, and transnational solidarity are fluid and multidimensional processes.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices of Syrian Circassians who were displaced to Türkiye in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war. The research was guided by three central questions:

- How do Syrian Circassians in Türkiye construct and maintain their diasporic identities in the aftermath of forced displacement?
- How do Syrian Circassians build and sustain transnational solidarity connections in light of their historical and contemporary experiences of dispersion?
- What role do Circassian civil society organizations in Türkiye play in the maintenance of these identities and in the facilitation of transnational solidarity?

At the heart of the study lies the recognition that Syrian Circassians represent a distinct and under-examined case of double diaspora—a community that has experienced multiple layers of displacement, first from their ancestral homeland in the North Caucasus to the Balkans, then to the Middle East during the late Ottoman period, then within Syria due to the establishment of Israel, and more recently from Syria to Türkiye due to the ongoing civil conflict. By focusing on this community, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how diasporic identities evolve under conditions of recurrent forced migration, and how cultural continuity, belonging, and solidarity are negotiated and sustained across shifting national borders.

The research places Syrian Circassians within a broader analytical framework that brings together insights from diaspora studies, forced migration scholarship, and theories of transnationalism and solidarity. It highlights how the lived experiences of individuals intersect with the institutional and political landscapes that shape diasporic life. In doing so, it moves beyond simplistic notions of diaspora as a fixed or inherited identity, instead framing it as a dynamic, relational, and often contested process, especially when communities face new forms of displacement.

To fully capture the complexity of these dynamics, the study adopted a multi-level methodological approach, collecting and analyzing data from both the individual and organizational levels. This included 33 in-depth interviews with Syrian Circassians and 13 interviews with officials from Circassian CSOs in Türkiye. This dual-level lens was critical not only for understanding the personal and collective dimensions of identity but also for revealing the role of CSOs as mediators of support, cultural preservation, and transnational engagement. By integrating both perspectives, the study was able to uncover the interplay between personal narratives of displacement and the institutional practices that shape diasporic belonging and solidarity.

The study reveals that Syrian Circassians' identities are shaped through a complex negotiation between Syria, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. Having been displaced multiple times across generations, their sense of identity is layered, fluid, and context-dependent. In Syria, Circassian identity was often preserved through village-based life, oral traditions, and informal transmission of customs and language. Many participants described their pre-war communities as culturally cohesive, even if not explicitly politicized or highly institutionalized. Displacement to Türkiye disrupted these structures. Participants now find themselves redefining what it means to be Circassian in a new national context, often encountering cultural and linguistic differences with Circassians from Türkiye. While Türkiye may be considered a place of refuge and cultural familiarity, the experience of arriving as Syrians—often refugees or under temporary protection—adds a layer of marginalization. The transition from rural to urban life in Türkiye also marked a significant shift. Many Syrian Circassians now live in dispersed settings without strong community infrastructures, making cultural reproduction more difficult. Yet, for some, this move has generated a more conscious and intentional engagement with Circassian identity, highlighting how identity becomes more actively performed when it is under threat or in flux.

The findings also highlight the importance of transnational solidarity in Syrian Circassians' post-displacement experiences. Despite the trauma and fragmentation caused by the Syrian civil war, many participants maintain strong emotional, familial, and symbolic ties to Syria. These connections are sustained not only through family communication but also through broader community bonds that transcend national borders. Digital communication tools—

such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram—have become essential in maintaining these ties. These platforms allow individuals to share information, organize support, and foster a sense of belonging to a dispersed yet connected Circassian world. Solidarity, in this context, is both emotional and practical, expressed through mutual aid, job referrals, and emotional support. However, the practice of solidarity is not without its limitations. Social and economic hierarchies among Syrian Circassians affect who can offer or access support. Some individuals are more deeply embedded in transnational networks than others, depending on factors such as legal status, Turkish language proficiency, or prior connections with Circassians from Türkiye. As a result, solidarity is experienced unevenly across the community. Despite these challenges, solidarity continues to function as a survival mechanism and a way to affirm collective identity. It plays a vital role in preserving a sense of community in the face of displacement and uncertainty. In many cases, it also serves as a bridge between the personal experiences of migration and broader diasporic belonging.

The role of Circassian CSOs in Türkiye emerged as a critical yet ambivalent part of Syrian Circassians' post-displacement experience. Initially, many CSOs responded to the arrival of Syrian Circassians with practical support, including help with Turkish language courses, job placement, housing referrals, and guidance on citizenship applications. These efforts were essential in the early stages of displacement, offering a lifeline to newcomers navigating an unfamiliar environment. At the same time, the study found that the engagement between Syrian Circassians and CSOs was often limited or inconsistent. Many organizations have made notable efforts to include and assist Syrian Circassians. However, the complex dynamics reveal both the potential and the constraints of institutionalized solidarity. On one hand, CSOs have the capacity to institutionalize support and cultural preservation, especially through cultural events, workshops, and advocacy. On the other hand, they often face internal challenges, such as limited resources, generational divides, or political sensitivities around Syrian refugees more broadly. Ultimately, CSOs serve as key mediators in the process of diasporic identity maintenance and community-building.

One of the primary theoretical contributions of this study lies in its reconceptualization of the double diaspora framework. Traditionally, scholarship on double diaspora has focused on communities whose members or descendants experience return migration—either

symbolically or physically—to their ancestral homeland after generations of dispersion (Guo, 2016; Erciyes, 2008). This line of inquiry tends to emphasize questions of origin, return, and the re-establishment of identity within an assumed homeland. However, such a focus risks privileging linear trajectories of movement and overlooks the complexity of recurrent, non-voluntary displacements, especially when return is not possible, desirable, or meaningful to displaced subjects.

This reconceptualization contributes not only to diaspora studies but also to broader debates in forced migration and transnationalism. By emphasizing recurrent and involuntary displacement as central to diasporic identity formation, the study challenges theories that return, or linear mobility trajectories. It demonstrates that diasporic belonging must be understood as a process shaped by disruption, instability, and the repetition of exile, rather than by continuity alone. In this sense, the Syrian Circassian case provides a conceptual lens for analyzing other “diasporas-in-motion” (e.g., Palestinians or Armenians), where displacement is recursive and identities are constantly renegotiated under shifting geopolitical pressures. Thus, the study advances a more dynamic and temporally layered model of diaspora that foregrounds instability and rupture as constitutive elements of diasporic life.

This study proposes an alternative conceptualization by centering forced and recurrent displacement as a defining characteristic of double diaspora. In the case of Syrian Circassians, the community’s experience is not shaped by a desire to return to their historical homeland in the North Caucasus, nor by a singular trajectory of dispersion. Instead, their identities are produced and reproduced through multiple waves of exile—starting from the Caucasus in the 19th century, ending from Syria in the 21st—each situated within different geopolitical, social, and cultural contexts. These repeated displacements fundamentally challenge the notion of a stable point of origin or an idealized return, calling instead for a dynamic, relational, and temporally layered understanding of diaspora. The Circassian case reveals that double diasporic identity is less about reclaiming an ancestral geography and more about navigating a series of in-between spaces, where memory, loss, and adaptation intersect. This perspective contributes to diaspora theory by emphasizing the instability and fluidity of identity under conditions of ongoing displacement. Rather than seeing diasporic

identities as inherited or preserved, this study highlights how they are negotiated in real time, shaped by political rupture, migration policy, socio-economic pressures, and cultural encounters.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that repetitive displacement generates a distinct kind of diasporic consciousness—one that is marked by reflexivity, resilience, and selective continuity. Syrian Circassians are constantly re-evaluating the meanings of “home,” “community,” and “identity” not in abstract, nostalgic terms, but through the practical demands of resettlement, integration, and survival. In this sense, double diaspora becomes less a fixed status and more a framework of movement, redefinition, and transformation, where cultural practices, identities, and solidarities are reshaped in response to new contexts of uncertainty. By shifting the theoretical lens from return migration to forced, repetitive displacement, this research expands the conceptual framework of double diaspora. It calls for greater attention to diasporas-in-motion, where identities are not anchored to a distant past but are continually reconstructed across ruptured temporalities and shifting geopolitical spaces. This approach offers a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of diaspora that is better complied with the realities of displacement in the 21st century.

The second theoretical contribution of this study lies in its empirical and conceptual engagement with transnational solidarity, particularly in the context of forced migration and diasporic fragmentation. This research broadens the conceptual understanding of transnational solidarity by demonstrating how it operates at multiple, intersecting levels—ranging from kinship-based networks and digital platforms to community-based organizations and cultural institutions. Among Syrian Circassians, solidarity is not confined to symbolic expressions of shared heritage or political causes; rather, it is functioned through concrete practices of mutual support, emotional care, and collective coping mechanisms in the face of displacement. These practices include finding housing for newcomers, sharing job opportunities, assisting with legal and bureaucratic processes, and organizing cultural events that affirm a sense of continuity and belonging. By foregrounding these practices, the study emphasizes that transnational solidarity is context-sensitive and relational. It is shaped not only by shared cultural or historical ties, but also by asymmetries of power, access, and integration within the host society.

The research also highlights the institutional dimensions of solidarity, especially through the role of Circassian CSOs. These organizations serve as platforms where solidarity is not only functioned but also organized and redefined. While CSOs initially functioned primarily as cultural preservation bodies for Circassians in Türkiye, the arrival of Syrian Circassians introduced new dynamics and expectations. Some organizations expanded their missions to include humanitarian support and integration efforts, thereby reshaping their position within the transnational Circassian diaspora. However, the extent and nature of this engagement varied significantly, revealing the limits and tensions within institutionalized solidarity—particularly regarding inclusion, representation, and internal community hierarchies.

Through this multi-scalar analysis, the study proposes that transnational solidarity should be conceptualized as a set of practices embedded in daily life, shaped by both structural constraints and individual agency. These acts—such as helping with legal paperwork, offering emotional support, or sharing resources—are shaped by both individual experiences and the broader structural realities of displacement, such as precarious legal status or limited access to employment. Yet despite these challenges, solidarity continues to be a crucial mechanism through which Syrian Circassians maintain a sense of community, rebuild trust, and assert cultural belonging in unfamiliar settings. By focusing on how solidarity is practiced in everyday life, this study offers a more grounded understanding of how diasporic communities respond collectively to displacement, and how they work to sustain their identities and social ties across borders and histories of upheaval.

This research has been deeply shaped by the methodological complexities and ethical considerations of conducting fieldwork as an insider—a member of the Circassian community studying other Circassians. While this position offered unique advantages, such as shared cultural understanding, linguistic familiarity, and easier access to respondents, it also brought forth important challenges related to trust-building, boundary-setting, and emotional labor. Throughout the research process, reflexivity emerged not only as a methodological tool but also as an ongoing necessity for maintaining analytical clarity and ethical integrity.

Being an insider researcher undoubtedly facilitated access and rapport, particularly with Syrian Circassian participants who often viewed the researcher as someone who could

intuitively understand their cultural references and concerns. This familiarity with Circassian customs, historical narratives, and community dynamics enabled the researcher to establish trust more quickly and interpret data with a depth that might have been inaccessible to an outsider. This shared identity sometimes created a sense of mutual recognition during interviews, especially when participants expressed that “you understand what I mean” without having to over-explain culturally specific experiences. In this sense, the researcher’s positionality enhanced the richness of the data, especially in discussions surrounding cultural loss, intergenerational memory, and community fragmentation.

However, this insider status also introduced methodological tensions and emotional challenges. One of the most significant issues was the need to continually navigate assumptions—both the researcher’s and participants’. In several interviews, participants would gloss over key experiences or offer incomplete accounts, assuming the context is already “known”. This required careful prompting and clarification, and it highlighted how shared identity can obscure, rather than reveal, detail if not handled thoughtfully. There was a consciously adopted position of both proximity and distance—recognizing familiarity while also encouraging participants to articulate their experiences in full, without relying on assumed knowledge.

The emotional dimension of conducting fieldwork within one’s own community was another challenge. Listening to stories of loss, dislocation, and disappointment often evoked strong emotional responses. Some interviews were particularly difficult, not just because of the content but because they involved people whose experiences closely mirrored the researcher’s own family’s migration stories or community life. To manage this tension, there was a rely on note-taking and reflexive journaling, using these tools not only to document findings but to critically examine reactions and potential biases throughout the research process. Moreover, the dual position—as both a researcher and a member of the community—meant that the researcher occasionally perceived by some interlocutors as a bridge to the broader Circassian public. Despite these challenges, the experience of researching within one’s own community also offered profound learning opportunities. The value of reflexivity was recognized not just as a methodological add-on, but as a continuous

stance—a form of self-awareness that allowed to embrace complexity rather than seek neat conclusions.

Ultimately, this research has reaffirmed that insider status is neither a guarantee of access nor an obstacle to objectivity, but rather a position that must be navigated with care and transparency. It demands attentiveness to the shifting dynamics between researcher and participant, between belonging and analysis. By critically engaging with one's own subjectivity, it was able to produce a more nuanced, contextually grounded account of Syrian Circassian experiences—one that acknowledges the emotional and relational dimensions of fieldwork as central to, rather than separate from, the analytical process.

While this study offers valuable insights into the identity transformations and transnational solidarity practices of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, it is not without its limitations. First, the research is geographically limited to three cities—Istanbul, Ankara, and Duzce—which, while significant hubs for Circassian life, do not capture the full diversity of experiences across Türkiye. Circassians in smaller towns or in different regions may face distinct integration dynamics or maintain different levels of engagement with CSOs. Second, although efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic background, the sample is limited to 46 participants, and the findings should not be generalized beyond this context. Moreover, the study primarily reflects the experiences of those who were willing and able to participate, potentially excluding more vulnerable individuals or those who are disconnected from community networks.

Another limitation relates to language and translation. While many interviews were conducted in Turkish, some participants expressed themselves more comfortably in Arabic or Circassian, and not all nuances may have been fully captured in translation or transcription. Finally, as an insider researcher, the positionality, while beneficial, may have shaped the framing of questions or interpretation of data in subtle ways. Despite applying reflexivity throughout the research process, complete objectivity remains an aspiration rather than a certainty. These limitations point to the need for further research across broader contexts and with more varied methodologies to deepen our understanding of double diasporas under conditions of forced migration.

This study opens several avenues for future research on diasporic identity, transnational solidarity, and the lived consequences of repeated displacement. As a case study of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye, the research has provided important insights into how a community already in exile responds to forced migration and reconstructs its identities in a new host country. However, the dynamic and evolving nature of both diaspora and displacement suggests that much remains to be explored. First, future research could expand geographically to include Syrian Circassians residing in other countries—such as Jordan, Germany, Canada, or Russia. A comparative study across multiple host states could highlight the impact of different immigration regimes, integration policies, and diaspora infrastructures on identity maintenance and solidarity practices. Such comparative perspectives would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how context-specific factors shape the trajectories of displaced double diaspora communities. Second, further research could delve into the generational aspects of identity transformation. This study primarily focused on adult perspectives, but children and adolescents who have experienced displacement at a formative stage may negotiate identity in different, more hybridized ways. Longitudinal or youth-focused studies could illuminate how cultural transmission, language retention, and belonging evolve over time and across generations in the aftermath of forced migration. Third, more research is needed on the gendered dimensions of displacement and diasporic belonging. While gender was considered in this study, a more focused analysis could reveal how men and women experience identity, integration, and community differently—especially in relation to family roles, work, and participation in civil society. Exploring how gender intersects with class, legal status, and mobility could yield more nuanced insights into diasporic dynamics. Fourth, there is significant potential for integrating digital ethnography into future research. As digital platforms increasingly mediate diasporic connections, solidarity efforts, and cultural exchange, scholars could explore how digital spaces serve as arenas of identity performance, memory preservation, and transnational activism. This would also enable access to more dispersed and hard-to-reach populations, particularly younger generations less engaged in formal associations.

Beyond these directions, future research should also address comparative theoretical work. For instance, a systematic comparison of Syrian Circassians with other double diasporas could illuminate whether recurrent displacement produces similar forms of identity

negotiation, or whether outcomes differ according to host-state policies, generational dynamics, or levels of institutional support. Likewise, integrating a class-based analysis could help to uncover how economic hierarchies within double diaspora communities affect access to transnational solidarity networks and cultural resources. Finally, longitudinal research could track how younger generations, especially those born or raised in Türkiye, reinterpret the meanings of diaspora and solidarity over time, offering insights into the intergenerational evolution of diasporic consciousness.

As this research comes to conclusion, it is important to reflect on the political and emotional terrain that shapes the lived realities of Syrian Circassians. Their journey—marked by historical exile from the Caucasus, the upheavals of the Syrian war, and the challenges of rebuilding life in Türkiye—offers more than a story of displacement. It reveals the deeply human dimensions of diaspora: not just as a condition of being scattered, but as an ongoing process of adaptation, negotiation, and meaning-making in response to loss and rupture.

The political landscapes of both Syria and Türkiye remain uncertain and volatile, and this has profound implications for the Syrian Circassian community. In Syria, more than a decade of civil war has left not only physical destruction, but also a profound sense of dislocation and fragmentation. Many of the Circassian villages that once fostered tight-knit communal life have been depopulated, destroyed, or rendered unrecognizable. Even if physical return were possible, the social fabric that once sustained Circassian life in Syria has been severely ruptured, making the idea of going back less about reclaiming home and more about confronting an unfamiliar and uncertain terrain. For many, the prospect of return to Syria is either impossible or undesirable, not only due to the war's devastation but also because of the fragmentation of communities and the loss of once-familiar places.

Meanwhile, in Türkiye, the situation is equally complex. Shifting refugee policies, growing xenophobia, political polarization, the fear of deportation, bureaucratic hurdles in securing citizenship or stable legal status, and socio-economic pressures add further complexity to questions of belonging and long-term settlement. These unsettled political contexts leave Syrian Circassians in a state of liminality—neither fully integrated nor entirely separate, always negotiating their place across multiple national and cultural frameworks. This dual displacement—first from Syria, then within the ambiguous terrain of Türkiye—places Syrian

Circassians in a state of perpetual liminality. They are caught between multiple points of reference: Syria, as a site of origin and loss; Türkiye, as both a partial home and a space of exclusion; and the Caucasus, as an ancestral homeland often imagined but inaccessible. This in-betweenness renders their position emotionally and politically fragile, requiring constant negotiation of identity, rights, and recognition across fluid and often hostile political landscapes.

This ongoing sense of liminality and displacement is not only structural or political—it is deeply emotional and personal. One participant described this exhaustion with striking clarity:

“Starting from scratch is not a good thing. We tried very hard to start from scratch... I mean, we tried very hard. Always start from scratch, start from scratch... Our grandfathers are the same way. From the Caucasus to Türkiye, they started from scratch in Türkiye. Golan Heights, again from scratch. Then they connected Israel to Damascus and started from scratch again. We came here, start from scratch again. Go to the Caucasus again and start from scratch... It’s very tiring. It wasn’t easy when we came to Türkiye, we started from scratch again. I’m tired of starting from scratch. I don’t want to go anywhere.” (I11)

This powerful reflection captures the emotional weight of generational displacement, and the persistent feeling of instability passed down through successive migrations. The notion of “starting from scratch” is not only a material reality—it is a psychological and cultural burden, experienced as a cycle of erasure and reinvention, of being forced to rebuild identity, home, and community again and again.

Finally, what emerges most clearly from this research is a sense of resilience and relationality. Syrian Circassians have responded to displacement not with withdrawal, but with efforts to reconnect—to build networks across cities, across countries, and across generations. Whether through digital platforms, civil society organizations, or informal family ties, they have crafted forms of solidarity that extend beyond national borders and challenge narrow definitions of community.

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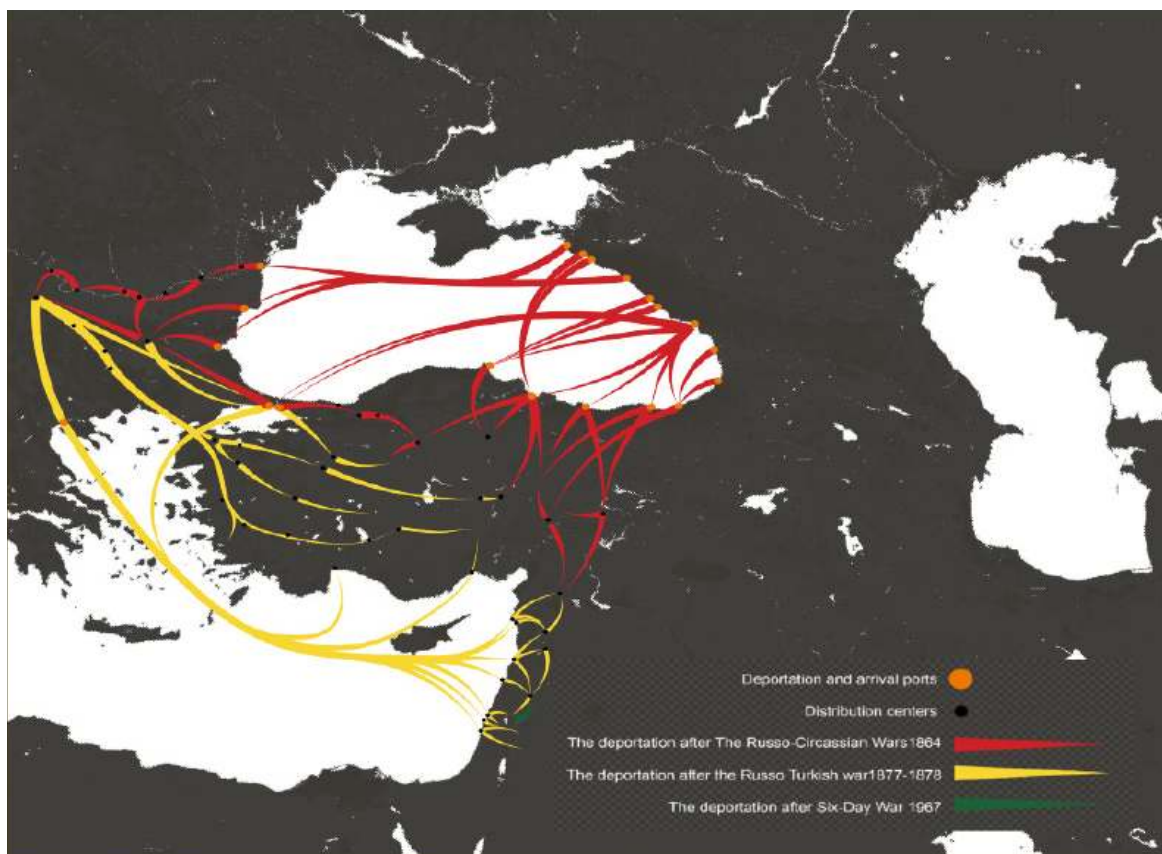
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Map of the Circassian Exile



Source: Meiqari, 2019.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guideline

For Syrian Circassians

1. Personal Journey & Story

a. From the Caucasus:

What stories have been passed down about your ancestors' migration from the Caucasus?

b. From Syria to Türkiye:

Can you describe your experience of arriving in Türkiye?

- Who or what facilitated your journey?
- How did you establish personal connections upon arrival?
- Did social media play a role in building these connections?
- What was your relationship with Türkiye before your migration?
- Were any Circassian associations involved in your journey? If so, what kind of support or connections did they provide?
- Did you live or visit any other countries before settling in Türkiye?
- What factors influenced your decision to choose Türkiye as your destination?
- Are you considering moving to another country or returning to Syria from Türkiye?
- If yes, why, and where would you consider moving?
- If no, what factors are keeping you in Türkiye?
- What conditions might prompt you to reconsider your decision?

2. Diasporic Identity

How do you identify yourself?

- What does being Circassian mean to you? Which traditions or customs do you consider central to Circassian identity? Are there specific practices that hold particular importance for you?
- How were Circassian traditions and customs maintained in Syria? What did being Circassian look like in your daily life in Syria?
- What are your impressions of how Circassian identity is expressed and maintained in Türkiye?
- What do you think about Turkish Circassians in different regions? Have you interacted with Turkish Circassians in other provinces or villages in Türkiye? In which provinces did you make these connections? Did you notice any differences in how Circassian identity is expressed between these regions?
- Some people identify as Arabs, Syrians, or Turks rather than Circassians. What are your thoughts on this, and how does it relate to your own sense of identity?

- What are your thoughts about Circassians living in other countries?
- What was your relationship with Circassians in Syria? You mentioned belonging to the tribe/ethnic group. What were your relationships like with other Circassian tribes or ethnic groups in Syria? How about relationships with other Caucasian peoples in Syria? How have these relationships evolved since your move to Türkiye?
- Do you still maintain connections with Syria or Circassians in Syria? If yes, how do you maintain these connections, and through which channels? If not, what has caused the disconnect?
- What are your impressions of Syrian Circassians in other parts of Türkiye? In which provinces or villages have you communicated with other Syrian Circassians? Have you noticed differences in how Syrian Circassians live or express their identity in various regions of Türkiye?
- How do you compare Syrian and Turkish Circassians? Are there differences in how Circassian identity and traditions are practiced in these two communities? How would you evaluate the Circassian community and Circassianism in Syria versus Türkiye?
- Are you a member of any Circassian associations? If so, which associations are you part of, and what motivated your membership? If not, have you been a member in the past? Why or why not?
- What are your thoughts about Circassian associations in Syria?
- What are your thoughts about Circassian associations in Türkiye?

3. Language

- What languages are commonly used in your daily life?
- What language(s) did your family use at home in Syria?
- What language(s) were predominantly spoken in your village in Syria?
- What about in your village or community in Türkiye?
- What language(s) did you use when engaging with people in the city in Syria?
- How does this compare to your experience in Türkiye?
- What languages are spoken by members of your family? What languages do your parents, siblings, spouse, and children speak?
- What is your native language?
- Do you think your native language should be the medium of education?
- How would you describe Circassian education in Syria?
- What are your thoughts on Circassian education in Türkiye?

4. Religion

- Are there members of different religions in your family?
- Were there varying religious beliefs and practices among Circassians in Syria?
- How did Circassians practice their religion in Syria?
- What are your thoughts on how Circassians practice their religion in Türkiye?

5. Homeland

- What does the concept of the homeland mean to you? How do you define your homeland?
- What do you think about policies related to the Circassian homeland?
- Have you visited the homeland before, or are you considering going?
- Are you thinking of settling in your homeland after your time in Türkiye?

6. State and Politics

- How would you evaluate the current political representation of Circassians? How do you see this representation in Syria, Türkiye, and other countries?
- What was the attitude of the Syrian state towards Circassians in the past, and how do you perceive it today?
- What do you think about Türkiye's attitude towards Circassians, both historically and in the present?

For Circassian Civil Society Organizations

1. Information

- Can you provide an overview of your association? How does the association define "Circassian? When was the association established, and what are its primary objectives? What types of activities or programs does the association organize?
- Do you have any programs or activities specifically targeted at women?
- Do you have any programs or activities specifically for young people?

2. Support for Syrian Circassians

- What activities has your association carried out for Syrian Circassians? Were there specific programs or services for women or children? Did the association provide legal support to Syrian Circassians?

- Can you share the story of the arrival of Syrian Circassians in Türkiye? Was your association contacted during this process? How did the association get involved in their resettlement or support?
- Did the association assist Syrian Circassians in relocating to other countries or the Circassian homeland? To what extent was the association able to help in these cases? Were there any specific criteria or conditions for this assistance (e.g., legal entry into Türkiye)?
- What was your association's relationship with Syrian Circassians before the war? Did the association have any previous contact with them? If so, what was the nature of this relationship?
- Do Syrian Circassians generally speak Turkish? What challenges do they face related to language in Türkiye?
- Did your association have connections with Circassians outside of Türkiye before the Syrian crisis?
- Where do Syrian Circassians mostly live in Türkiye?
- How many Syrian Circassians are estimated to be in Türkiye? What impact has your association made in supporting them?
- How does your association currently communicate with Syrian Circassians?
- What is your opinion of the Syrian Circassian community as a whole?
- Why do you believe it is important to assist Syrian Circassians? What were the motivations behind your association's efforts to support them?
- Did your association engage in activities during the Chechnya and Abkhazia wars?

3. Identity

How do you define yourself?

- What does being Circassian mean to you personally? Which traditions or customs are significant, and why?
- How do traditions and customs in Syria differ from those in Türkiye? How do you think Circassian identity is experienced in Syria compared to Türkiye?
- What are your impressions of Circassianism in Türkiye? Do you see differences in how Circassian identity is expressed based on region, urban vs. rural settings, age groups, or gender?
- Some people identify as Arabs, Syrians, or Turks rather than Circassians. What are your thoughts on this, and how does it relate to your own sense of identity?
- How do you feel about Circassians in other countries?
- What are your thoughts on Syrian Circassians in other parts of Türkiye? In which provinces or villages have you interacted with Syrian Circassians? Have you observed differences in how they live or maintain their traditions across various cities?

- Do you see any differences between Syrian Circassians and Turkish Circassians? How would you evaluate Circassians and Circassianism in these two contexts?
- Some Circassians identify themselves as Arabs, Syrians, or Turks. What are your thoughts on these alternative self-definitions?
- Have you held any roles in Circassian associations other than this one?
- What are your thoughts about Circassian associations in Syria?

4. Language

- What is your native language?
- Do you believe your native language should be the medium of education?
- What do you know about Circassian education in Syria?
- What are your thoughts on Circassian education in Türkiye?

5. Religion

- Do you have knowledge of different religious beliefs and practices among Circassians in Syria?

6. Homeland

- What are your thoughts about homeland? How do you define your homeland?
- What do you think about policies regarding the Circassian homeland?
- Have you visited the homeland, or are you considering doing so in the future?

7. State and Politics

- What do you think about the political representation or situation of Circassians today? How do you perceive this representation in Syria, Türkiye, and other countries?
- How would you evaluate the Syrian state's attitude toward Circassians in the past? How has this attitude changed over time, if at all?
- What do you think about Türkiye's attitude toward Circassians, both historically and today?

Appendix C: The List of Interviewed Participants and Civil Society Organizations

Civil Society Organizations

Name	Type	City	Number of Interviews
Adige Kafkas Derneği	Association	Istanbul	2
Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu	Federation	Istanbul	1
İstanbul Kafkas Kültür Derneği	Association	Istanbul	1
İstanbul Abhaz Derneği	Association	Istanbul	1
Çerkes Dernekleri Federasyonu	Federation	Istanbul	1
Kafkas Vakfı	Association	Istanbul	2
Duzce Adige Kültür Derneği	Association	Duzce	1
Ankara Çerkes Derneği	Association	Ankara	1
Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu	Federation	Ankara	1
Ankara Abhaz Kültür Derneği	Association	Ankara	1
Duzce Abhaz Kültür Derneği	Association	Duzce	1
Total			13

Participants	City	Sex	Age	Raised in city/village
A1	Ankara	W	18-40	Village
A2	Ankara	W	18-40	City
A3	Ankara	W	18-40	City
D1	Duzce	M	18-40	City
D2	Duzce	W	18-40	City
D3	Duzce	W	41-64	City
D4	Duzce	W	18-40	City&village
D5	Duzce	W	41-64	City&village
D6	Duzce	W	18-40	Village
D7	Duzce	W	65+	City
D8	Duzce	W	18-40	City
D9	Duzce	M	18-40	City
D10	Duzce	W	18-40	Village
D11	Duzce	M	41-64	Village
D12	Duzce	W	41-64	City
D13	Duzce	W	18-40	City&village
D14	Duzce	M	18-40	City
D15	Duzce	M	18-40	City
I1	İstanbul	W	18-40	City
I2	İstanbul	M	18-40	City
I3	İstanbul	W	18-40	Village
I4	İstanbul	W	18-40	City
I5	İstanbul	W	18-40	City
I6	İstanbul	W	65+	Village
I7	İstanbul	W	18-40	City
I8	İstanbul	M	18-40	City
I9	İstanbul	M	41-64	City
I10	İstanbul	M	41-64	City

I11	İstanbul	M	18-40	City&village
I12	İstanbul	M	18-40	City
I13	İstanbul	M	18-40	Village
I14	İstanbul	M	18-40	Village
I15	İstanbul	M	18-40	City
Total				33

