National Identity and Syrian Migration: A Journey for Self-Discovery

Fulya Kincal[1]

[1] Assist. Prof., Tekirdag Namik Kemal University, Tekirdag, Türkiye / fkincal@nku.edu.tr.

Abstract: This article explores how Syria's historical and social structure hinders the development of a strong national identity among Syrians, and how this lack of identity impacts their experiences as refugees. It analyzes the historical dynamics of Syrian identity, revealing that Syrian culture and history have not provided a stable and coherent sense of self for its people. By discussing the identity crisis faced by Syrian refugees and incorporating testimonials from individuals of diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds, the article illustrates that establishing a national community has been a long-standing effort for Syrians. The displacement and relocation of Syrian refugees in other countries pose challenges to contemporary notions of identity, which view identity as fluid and constantly shaped by cultural encounters. However, there remains an undeniable essentialist layer that highlights the similarities within a nation. The experiences of Syrian refugees underscore the significance of this essential identity layer, which fosters a sense of belonging to a nation. In their search for a new identity to construct a brighter future in a safer environment, many Syrian refugees attempt to abandon their national identity while embracing the new culture around them. Additionally, they often downplay their ethnic roots, favoring a process of assimilation over integration. This study examines the stories of Syrian refugees, emphasizing the importance of essential identity in promoting national integration and maintaining connections during the process of acculturation.

INTRODUCTION

In multiculturalism, the concept of cultural identity is defined through various aspects. The last century has discussed multicultural identity with a specific focus on post-colonialism. Theorists such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha have attempted to cover one aspect of this complex concept. However, as history creates new situations and unique experiences, multicultural identity also requires new definitions. Today, forced migration is a growing concern and provides context for understanding new experiences of identity. Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shows that refugee numbers have increased by 23% from 2015 to 2016 and 10% from 2016 to 2019 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2021). Displacement is a longstanding human condition, but levels in the contemporary age are higher than ever. The forced migration of Syrians to different countries after the breakdown of Syria in 2011 is a prime example of this phenomenon. Places are inherently and intimately tied to identities and their formation and reformation (Linhard & Parsons, 2019). As such, Syrians have faced an enigma in their identity as the label of refugee blurs their differences and causes changes in reaction to the loss of their homes and the hardships they have experienced. As the poet Ovid (2018) wrote to reflect on his exile from Rome two millennia ago in *Tristia* - a fate he described as "worse than death" (Ovid, 2018: 103)- Syrian people had been denied nationality and thus deprived of national existence.

Although postmodernism deconstructed the essential notion of identity as stable and rigid, emphasizing its fluidity and multiplicity, this article suggests a return to the significance of the essentialist identity layer as a prerequisite of connection and relation. The increasing refugee problem emphasized the consequences of devaluing

the essentiality of core aspects of identity. In order to draw attention to a more nuanced understanding of the concept of identity, his study adopts a qualitative methodology to explore the intricacies of multicultural identity, emphasizing the plight of Syrian refugees in Turkey and using key terms such as 'multiculturalism', 'forced migration', 'Syrian refugees', 'identity formation', and 'diasporic identity,' focusing on literature from 1980 to the present day to encompass modern perspectives. These theoretical frameworks provided by scholars like Stuart Hall, Wendy Pearlman, and Homi Bhabha shaped the thematic trajectory of the article.

This analysis predominantly features a thematic dissection of Syrian refugees' literature and personal accounts, concentrating on identity formation, displacement, and cultural continuity. It has implemented a critical discourse analysis approach to unearth underlying ideologies, societal frameworks, and power relations.Thus, the research questions explore the journey of Syrian refugees in Turkey as they grapple with their identity amidst forced displacement. Moreover, the article delves into the impact of geographical location on identity formation and the role of Syrian national culture and history in carving the diasporic identity of these refugees. It will highlight how Syrian national culture and history play a critical role in the psychology of refugees, providing them with a unique diasporic identity following their forced migration to Turkey. This article will explain the unique experience of Syrian refugees by shedding light on how space and identity are intertwined in a landscape.

2. THE HISTORICAL DYNAMICS AF THE STRUCTURE OF SYRIAN IDENTITY

In his canonical essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall (1990) analyses the concept of cultural identity. He develops a two-layered structure which comprises an essentialist conceptualisation of identity and a more contingent and fluid aspect of identity. Although many historians see these two as different definitions of identity, these two structural facets of identity are the layers; each represents a level and part within the identical structure. The first layer, which Hall (1990: 223) describes as the essential part, is defined by concepts such as "one true self', "oneness", and "truth and essence" with stable, unchanging frames of reference and meaning. For Hall, this is the core of the cultural identity, emphasising the similarities resulting from belonging to a group of people "with a shared history or ancestry hold in common" (1990: 222). This layer represents the core of cultural identity, emphasising similarities resulting from shared history or ancestry. The core is the centre of identity as it represents our being cultural and social living creatures who produce meaning through some shared cultural codes and everyday historical experiences. People are born into a certain race, the values, traditions, and shared understanding of the world around us. This essentialist aspect of their identity represents this preconceived self, which is stable, rigid, and predestined. In Aristotle's metaphysics, this core or inner layer is called "substance, which is the essence or true nature and makes us sure that someone exists", and the most outstanding aspect of the substance is its ability to remain the same and simultaneously receive different and contrary qualifications (Aristotle, 1947: 147). In other words, this substance is the core that lays the foundation for all other categories. The second layer, on the other hand, represents the ruptures and discontinuities of the first layer. It highlights how personal identity is not fixed but an ongoing process of becoming subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power.

Hall points out that identities "belong to the future as much as to the past…Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power" (1990: 224). He emphasizes that identities are historical; they change in and through power relations. They are vulnerable to

influences aroused by culture, history, time and place. The past in this context refers to the first layer of personal identity, which represents the authentic similarities of a group of people hidden beneath the many imposed selves constructed by configurations in time and space. This first layer changes its cover and is both active and static. Therefore, Hall describes identity as an ongoing process of becoming and being.In contrast to the core layer, the second layer of identity is prone to change and is constantly in flux. It is vulnerable to the "continuous play of history, culture and power" (1990: 225). While the authentic essential layer of identity is defined by its oneness, implying a stable, unchanging, and ever-present nature, the surface layer is contingent.

Considering the Syrian people's dislocation and the reshaping of their identity in light of Hall's theory, their situation offers intriguing perspectives. The two layers of Hall's identity correspond to two dimensions in which identity politics re-emerge: "the identity of social subjects and the identification of the place in which subjects participate or that they traverse" (Gao-Miles, 2019: 312). The dislocation of Syrian people from their countries and their relocation to Turkey offers a new perspective on the relationship between culture, ethnicity, and space that disrupts the prescribed identity of a nation. Personal experience cannot be devoid of the past and present social, cultural, and historical context in which it unfolds. Who I am or who I am not, what I remember or forget, and what I keep or leave always occur in the interplay of cultural norms and social organisation. It suggests that essential and anti-essential parts of our identity cannot be separated from each other. The process of assuming a new identity depends on the previous practices of the social and cultural identity to which one belongs. We can comprehend the identity crisis experienced by Syrian refugees by understanding how their core layer of identity cannot provide a base for the second layer, which emphasises historical and social contingency. They are expected to experience a feeling of defeat and dispossession of a sense of belonging, representing the essential part of their cultural identity. However, Syrian people's social and historical heritage dissipates their sense regarding their core identity by leaving them with an absence of essential cultural identity. This lack manifests in their response to their conditions in the host countries.

It seems crucially necessary to look at the historical dynamics of the structure of Syrian identity to analyse and judge the resurrection of their cultural identity. During the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s, Syria was not a nation-state. However, it was composed of two ancient cities, Damascus and Aleppo, which were still the main settlements of many Syrian people before the war. However, Syrian folk move from one city to another without feeling or being considered foreign, as William R. Polk (13 December, 2013) claims on "the Atlantic", an online journal, that they tended to live in "segregated neighbourhoods that resembled medieval European urban ghettos or modern American Little Italy or Chinatowns". After the First World War, France invaded Syria and became a colony. In 1921, the League of Nations designated Syria as a mandate. France divided Syria into separate administrative units and united them under the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. They also imposed the French language, customs, and Catholicism to create social and cultural change. However, this attempt at assimilation led to a national reaction in the Syrian community, resulting in violence. This ultimately led to a desire for freedom from French domination and resulted in many Syrians looking to Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt, for help.

After three and half years of unification with the United Arab Republic, Syrians were thrown back on their resources in 1961 as the Union did not work. Although they gained freedom after a long time, Syrian society encountered a severe problem. After an age of bondage, Syrian people were deprived of a sense of belongingness to a

nation-state and, therefore, a solid cultural identity. They could not define what it meant to be a Syrian. In his article "Who Needs Identity?", Hall defines this situation as being devoid of a "collective core self-constructed on the back of the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with a group or ideal" (2007: 17). Syrian people were not a part of the Arab community as they are descended from ancient Semitic groups who occupied the region in early times. However, most Syrian people define themselves as Muslim Arabs because of their contemporary language and religious and historical bonds to Arab culture. On the other hand, some remaining parts of the society could not see themselves as Arab, and they tended to segregate themselves by living in "economically autarkic areas of the countryside and quarters of most of the cities and towns of the country" (Polk, 13 December, 2013). Syrian society was not an integrated country with a clear cultural identity.

Apart from the controversy regarding their origin, two different groups of Syria were pursuing very different ideals about Syria's social and political structure and struggling with each other for dominance. John Mchugo (2015) points out that the group defining itself as the Muslim Brotherhood was fighting for the idea that the nation must be a separate Arab Sunni Muslim Baath Party, which required Syria to be a part of the Arab world but domestically unified. It can be said that this religious and ethnic struggle was heightened through the border clashes between Syria and the American-supported state Israel from 1948 to 1981. During these years, Israel occupied and added 1200 square kilometres of Syrian territory, and as an answer to Syrian weakness and disorder of Syrian political life, the first Assad regime was established in 1970 by Hafez al-Assad, the current leader's father and continued until the present (Polk, 13 December, 2013). As Patrick Seale (2022) argues, Hafez al-Assad and his family, the governing family of Syria, came from the Alavi minority, a heterodox Shia sect, which has long been persecuted in Syria and was elevated to privileged positions under World War I French Mandate. The Assads presided over an autocratic and, even worse, kleptocratic system. As Syrian society has historically been composed of many groups whose differences from one other were defined in religious and ethnic terms, the tendency of the Assad government to prioritise and grant privilege to some groups and persons heightened the diffusion in the society. The social structure became much more patriarchal and highly heteronormative, oppressive, and discriminative. These structures were responsible in part for a racial struggle and, a class struggle and struggle between the ideas about the form of government. Under the rule of Assad, deep-seated tension between Islam and Baath, between Sunni and Alawi, and between town and country heightened and became the true catalyst for the conflict (Seale, 2022). The Syrian Civil War was the inevitable consequence of the lack of unity within Syrian society.

When the civil uprising against the four-decade rule of the Assad family, which brought a lack of freedom and economic woes, turned into a civil war in Syria, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were killed, and the violence displaced millions of people. They fled for their life. Neighbouring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey have hosted the displaced, with Turkey alone accommodating over three million Syrians, thereby straining its limited governmental resources (Baban, Ilıcan, & Rygiel, 2017). Syrian civil war was one of the latest catastrophic events which created refugees. UNHCR, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines refugees as "involuntary migrants pushed by life-threatening and coercive political conditions, and owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted, are unable or unwilling to return to the country of their nationality" (Hron, 2009: 286). Today, the refugee crisis is a displacement and identity crisis. Many citizens of different nations have become refugees who have escaped from their own countries for political reasons, deprived of all subjective cultural experiences. They were

separated from their nation, where they initially felt they belonged and started to occupy a space unknown to them.

It is widely acknowledged that many refugees suffer various psychological and physical disorders resulting from displacement. Refugees experience a variety of hardships, from mental disorders to somatic pain, from social alienation to economic discrimination. Syrian people fleeing the Assad regime were already experiencing well-founded fear of persecution, imminent threat to their lives and torture for centuries when they had to leave their home country during the civil war. In other words, they were familiar with alienation and marginalisation even before the civil war forced them out of their country into the refugee position. They have been living in disunity as a nation since the sixteenth century. They defined themselves through different names, values, and ideals. Moreover, they were fighting for dominance over each other. Therefore, as the civil war broke out, they rushed to leave their country as voluntary resettles pulled by the expectation of a better future and life. Many people accused them of simply seeking a more leisurely life in Europe, of burdening social services or the health care system. Syrian refugees from Europe gave the impression of seeking an easy life because they were already in exile and living as refugees by experiencing foreignness, displacement, and alienation in their own country. Under repressive regimes, they were subject to torture, displacement, subjugation, discrimination, poverty, and violence in their national country for centuries. Fleeing from a war-torn, violence-ridden, or repressive society, they followed a route to reaching a different life. They are required to be integrated into a new society.

As in the French Revolution and 1917 Russian Revolution refugees, medical and psychical theorists expect refugees to live in an identity crisis following the migration as their essential identity and imposed selves enter combat in the newly acquired territory. The essential identity concerns belonging to the nation-state and everything that represents this belonging. Hall (1990) defines this core identity as oneness, the underlying essence of a people. When refugees leave their homelands, they lose their social, familial network, language and culture in which they were born. These are the constituent parts of the first layer of the identity concept. Although the identity problems are primarily modelled on the shared experience of refugees, Syrian people provide a different perspective. As mentioned above, the Syrian historical structure prevents the people from constructing a healthy core identity. This essence is defined by Aristotle (1947) as "substance", by Hegel (Haas, 2007) as "being", which is simple self-identity and by Hall (1990) as "stable, authentic cultural identity". Refugees need to have a strong and stable core identity to develop a healthy integration into the new country and social environment. This first layer is foundational to the acculturation process. The experiences denote the feeling of a missing past, missing spatiotemporal markers, missing national affiliation and an alienated sense of identity resulting from a lack of core cultural identity.

The displacement of Syrian refugees from their nation to Turkey disrupted their prescribed identity. Their predetermined ethnic, cultural and national identities were called into question. Research on migration and displacement shows that encountering new cultural and social environments challenges the displaced person's cultural identity. However, a strong and stable self-identity and cultural identity lay the foundation for a healthy adaptation to a new cultural environment. Syrian refugees must successfully transition from 'being' to 'nothing' and then 'becoming' perpetually passing into each other. All people begin with 'being' posited as simple self-identity, the prescribed one related to the national codes. Then, following a national displacement comes nothing due to the identity crisis experienced. However, further broadening our perspective, they are both aspects of 'becoming'. Becoming, then, is

the refugees' ability to identify linguistically or culturally with the host country. When being is lacking, it no longer allows for cultural inscription. Being represents the truth and essence regarding the national identity, and it is to be transcended but preserved during the process of becoming.

Heidegger highlighted the importance of essential participation worldwide in constructing an anti-essentialist identity, pointing out that people are always "open to the world" or "in direct relation with the world" (Stabbed, 1967: 233). However, the starting point for the relationship with the world must be supported through a historical context. Syrian refugees' concern for their cultural identity leads us toward a similar position: a stable and robust self-identity is fundamental to constructing a new identity in the new society. So, the idea of a relationship with the new country is characterised, on the one hand, by recognition of newly imposed selves and, on the other hand, by an awareness of similarities and shared values stemming from conditions imposed by the national country. Syrian refugees need to consider themselves their essential identity, together with the present imposed and possible future identities, to affirm their destiny. However, the ancient heritage of the Syrian community does not allow them to develop an essential core identity. Freud (1939) suggests that a people's national identity can be passed on via ancient heritage. The ancient heritage includes dispositions, consciousness, and memory, as well as traces of the experiences of former generations. Societies or communities preserve in their minds and transfer memories and knowledge of their sense of national identity to other generations. As memories are historical constructs and passed on through evolution, the Syrian history of disunity blurs their conscience regarding the essential identity.

The painful experience of leaving behind one's country, home and environment with loved ones is a modifying experience. Dislocation is a disruption of the mechanism that regulates an individual's identity. The breaking up of an existing balance leads to seeking a new equilibrium. The outcome of the dislocation in terms of identity depends upon an individual's core identity and resources. This is the case that defines especially many Syrian's attempts to integrate into the host country, Turkey. Many Syrian refugees have started to live in cities such as Sanliurfa and Gaziantep at the border of Syria and Turkey following the displacement. These two cities show similarities in season and landscape in the Syrian landscape. The exciting thing is that most Syrian refugees who migrated to Turkey felt a strong desire to forget their past and to be citizens of Turkey. They became very eager to free themselves from the historical and cultural essential characteristics that are the very ground of their national identity. At first, Syrian refugees were accepted as guests who were expected to return to their country after a while. They were hosted communally by large populations in some regions of the Turkey-Syria border. Although their existence started to create inevitable tensions with the local populations in Turkey, they could quickly develop a flourishing sub-culture by forming neighbourhoods. Many Syrian refugees spend energy on acculturation by opening Syrian shops, bakeries, and markets, sending their children to schools to learn Turkish, and changing their traditional clothes. They tried to exist as separate individuals rather than refugees, to be acknowledged, and to belong to a space essential for overcoming hardship and difficulties of life.

3. SYRIAN SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The quest for the identity of Syrian refugees in Turkey is closely related to the question of how culture and history shape the psychological experience of a nation. As refugees, Syrian immigrants' response to displacement from their country is more thoroughly defined by their culture and history than we tend to realise. Syrian people's history, which

narrates a segregated nation, sheds light on their choices regarding their refugee position. People of long-lasting civil wars had to turn away from building a national identity. As William R. Polk (13 December, 2013) asserts, Syria has historically been a place of protection for small groups of people whose differences from one another were defined in religious and ethnic terms. Several of the communities in Syria were survivors of previous invasions or migrations. Concerning this historical fact, Syrian people could not preoccupy themselves with finding their self-identity.

The search for self-knowledge and identity must be accomplished within a social framework. It requires the citizens to be in close contact with other citizens and internalise a sense of belonging to the territory and the society in which they live. However, the idea of representing a nation-state did not enter Syrian society's consciousness until the nineteenth century. They felt they belonged to only a city or town of the Ottoman Empire where they had lived. Under the safe and protective territories of the Ottoman Empire, they did not have to create a national territory. Their experience with the French mandate and Arab Union increased the segregation within the nation's social structure. In their nation, many Syrians learned how to fight and face fear in a context in which living conditions were difficult. They have suffered from the oppression of autocratic governments. They have lost their sense that they could master their own life. They had to live with a growing feeling that they were in danger and without prospects. In his epoch-making study, Stephen W. Porges (2011) asserts that a long-term sense of the lack of safety became so disruptive that it resulted in a loss of personal identity and created severe difficulties in social relationships. Syrian refugees lost their social connections to their nation very soon as their nation could not represent the safe and trusting relationships that citizens need to have with each other as a biological and cultural imperative. At the psychological level, the constant deficit in Syria's reciprocal social and national engagement system prevented the Syrian people from developing and strengthening a national identity. The dislocation of Syrian refugees was primarily motivated by the desire to feel secure and become active participants in life rather than a victim. The arrival in Turkey represented freeing from feeling insecure and a sense of belonging to a place crucial for human existence.

Forming multicultural identities based on ethnic identity is an elusive, complex and contested process. The inextricable relationship between national identity and newly assumed identities sheds light on the various implications of the refugee experience. Fresh insights and undeniable evidence from the everyday life of Syrian refugees show that possessing, maintaining, and managing national identity is constitutive to re-frame and represent a new accultured self. An Argentine novelist and essayist, Eduardo Mallea, shares his experience when he was away from his native country by summarising that "nationalism results when a man has created within himself his spiritual territory and has wedded it to the spiritual territory of his country" (1967: 64). The spiritual territory Mallea highlights is the passion that people need to feel for land. The feeling of commitment to the land arises from the memory of communal experiences, sometimes a celebration, commemoration, and other times a lamentation. Syrian refugees in Turkey could not derive national and group characteristics from the idea of a familiar land as they could not come together to form a shared sense of belongingness to the land throughout their history. They were unborn to their own Syrian identity when they came to take refuge in Turkey.

It is worth noting that Syrian refugees of Turkey encounter a crisis in subjective and cultural identity. This crisis takes its source from the Syrian cultural and historical past, which does not provide a stable and coherent self-identity for Syrians. Although they arrive in foreign lands in search of a new identity under the name of refugees,

they fail to pass through the path of acculturation because of their estrangement from their own national identity. Historically, many immigrants and passengers from different ethnic origins have stopped in Syria. It was also a shelter for many people left from previous invasions or migrations. Therefore, the Syrian government and land fail to provide the foundations of the national identity for its citizens. It is not only the Assad regime but the old governmental bodies of Syria could not invest in the issues related to nationality. Syrian people moved to many foreign countries when the civil war broke up because of a long-lasting lack of freedom and corruption. The experience of Syrian refugees from dislocation to relocation in new countries provides fresh definitions of identity. In Turkey, we witness the impact of their collective history as they search for a new identity. The swift process of not only the assimilation of many Syrians into Turkish social and cultural life but also their rapid evolution into Turkish citizens proves the conflicts they have been experiencing in their minds.

4. THE UNFOLDING OF THE TESTIMONIAL LIFE ACCOUNTS OF SYRIANS

Historical and political events can be analysed using a wide range of different sources and materials. However, personal testimonials about how people have lived and been affected by traumatic events are an important way of understanding their experiences. The experiences in their lives shape who they are and how they describe their path and choices in life. These testimonials mirror the most meaningful moments in their life that describe to them and others what has made them as them. In other words, these life experiences that shape them enable us to understand their identity struggle. In this sense, the exploratory structure and process of reflections put in motion by Wendy Pearlman's seminal book *We Crossed a Bridge, and It Trembled* (2017) tells personal and self-shaping life stories of many Syrian immigrants and becomes a rich source to observe their identity. Pearlman's book is paramount in providing a profoundly human perspective on the Syrian conflict. Offering firsthand accounts of refugees grants invaluable insights into the article's argument. In Pearlman's profound narrative, which starts from the oppressive grasp of the Assad regime and reaches the intricacies of a multi-dimensional war, readers are transformed from passive observers to active absorbers of poignant testimonials. These firsthand accounts poignantly illustrate a longing and search for identity, suggesting a profound void in the core of their sense of self. These narratives underscore the challenges in establishing a unified Syrian national identity and shine a light on the dire consequences of war atrocities. Pearlman's study emphasises the essence of personal testimonials. It stands as a testament to the resilience and challenges faced by Syrians throughout their revolutionary journey, highlighting the profound implications of displacement.The portrait of Syria is of a nation composed of different ethnic and religious communities, each with distinct outlooks, speaking distinct languages, and displaying distinct ways of dealing with life. Therefore, the question of national integration is the most important issue regarding the conflicts within Syrian society. The lack of attachment between the disparate parts of society and the inability to bring them together appear as a common problem pointed out by all testimonies. The background information on the Syrian conflict underlines that achieving a monolithic cultural oneness could be a solid base for a friction-free and democratic-minded society.

The conflicts that cause massive displacement of many Syrian refugees originate from the disunity between the citizens of the society. Multiple horizontal and vertical divisions and political, governmental, historical, and social problems bring forth distrust and disunity among people. This distrust led to the civil war. The personal stories of Pearlman's Syrian interviewers show that Syria was not only a pluralistic society but that its different groups were at

odds with and even distrustful of one another. A dentist from rural Hama, a city on the banks of the Orentes River in west-central Syria, states that Syria is not a stable country as "nobody trusted anyone else, brother did not trust brother, children did not trust their father" (Pearlman, 2017: 55). As the testimony illustrates, national integration requires a sense of affinity with other members who make up the nation. Without a bond, attachment, and connection between the members of a nation, no country in modern times can achieve internal stability. Unlike many other pluralistic nations, Syria has not united its different parts. Wendy Pearlman's book of testimonies demonstrates that Syrian society has always lacked a sense of shared identity. A Syrian education expert, Yasmine, who migrated to Sweden, emphasises the importance of unity by stating, "What is a homeland? It is not rocks or trees. It is humans who build the land. It is where you feel safe and trust" (Pearlman, 2017: 246). The feeling of belonging to a whole due to an internal aspect common to all members of this whole is the foundation of a sense of concern for the well-being of the nation above all else. This core aspect carries within it the power to transcend inescapable divisions and make them appear less significant than other issues. It includes a consciousness that binds together those constituting a nation so strongly that it overrules all social, economic, and political conflicts.

The deep feeling of identification among the masses is the foundation of national identity, which is a feeling that prevents wanting to belong to any other nation. However, many of Pearlman's interviewees long to leave Syria and go to a foreign nation. Both those forced to flee from Syria during and after the civil war and many others admitted that they did not see Syria as their nation. A Syrian from Damascus supports this argument by stating, "I am not a traitor. I love Syria. But I believe in human rights, and I cannot feel like I belong to a society that oppresses women or children or people from ethnic backgrounds" (Pearlman, 2017: 256). As the testimony suggests, identifying with the nation becomes the primary need of society members. It requires agreement and harmony between diversities, leading to unity in which all varieties are preserved. However, the Syrian social structure does not allow people to unite around shared values and beliefs beyond their many differences. Finding common cause with people who share similar practices and values encourages people to feel part of a whole.

The Syrian government's oppressive regime exacerbates the crisis by attempting to gain political advantage by exploiting disagreement among society members by favouring some groups and suppressing others. It is clear that throughout Syria's political history, the Assad regime has encouraged, exaggerated, and manipulated communal, regional, and ethnic differences to prevent the development of national unity around shared aspects. One of Pearlman's interviewees, Mohammed from Jawbar, a professor, claims that;

> Hafez al-Assad was a military person who did not believe in democracy, pluralist politics, or all of the liberal ideas that other national figures believed in at that time. He relied on Alawites more than others, even though he later killed many of them because they were his rivals. Using primordial relationships to consolidate power was pragmatic but ultimately created more divisions in Syria' (Pearlman, 2017: 50).

As the interview indicates, the government created, resolved, and recreated the problems. Provocations and incitement to violence, disunity, or indiscipline generally stem from the attitude of the leaders. Instead of taking steps to strengthen the forces of unity, the regime in Syria has aided in fostering disunity and negativity. The government has only taken measures to protect the leaders' position rather than the nation's unity. This has led to a threat to

national unity from within, unleashed by leaders prioritising their self-interest above loyalty to the nation.

The stories in the book that describe the journey of becoming a refugee indicate that Syrian refugees are trying to start a new life wherever they find themselves. All of them emphasise that the struggle does not end when people reach a place of relative safety; instead, it is a new cycle of challenges that comes into play. The literature of immigration and the typical experience of becoming a refugee follow a pattern in which individuals separate from a place, an identity or belief system, go through a transition or initiation, and finally come full circle as bi-cultural people. However, the diaspora of Syrian refugees who have separated from their homeland and undergone painful and profound transitions in their host countries embrace the values of the host country fully. Syrian refugees in Turkey, in particular, provide a different perspective in which they abandon their language, cultural customs and aspirations for Syria to feel like they belong in Turkey. They easily acculturate to the middle-class values of Turkish society rather than maintaining their cultural core and adding necessary elements of the new culture. Being successful and happy in a new culture requires balancing traditional Syrian values and beliefs with new Turkish behaviours. However, Syrian refugees seem to acculturate to Turkish values easily.

The majority of people Pearlman speaks within Turkey are mainly coming from modest and rural backgrounds. Although most are seen as lost and confused when arriving in Turkey, they have found contentment in their new lives there. Suppose we categorise Syrian refugees into three different groups. In that case, the first group includes intellectuals, political officials, or the wealthy, who have the means and education to assimilate into the new society quickly. The second group consists of people from modest backgrounds who were employed as minor civil servants. The third group comprises the rural poor, farmers, and manual labourers. The refugees in the second and third groups are those who go through painful experiences to reach a safe zone, in contrast to the first group, who have the resources to build a comfortable life in a new society. They are more likely to suffer from identity crises and poor mental health due to the trauma surrounding their migration. The second and third groups of Syrian refugees have already experienced profound changes in their perception of their national identity due to the oppression and segregation of the government and their identity due to the traumatic journey. Their experiences of living under the threat of violence, danger and death were intensely stressful incidents. Marcel from Aleppo appropriately asserts, "I am afraid that I am forgetting who I am… I want space to heal. I want to find the space to be me" (Pearlman, 2017: 259). The testimony illustrates that the displacement of Syrian refugees has resulted in a loss of identity and a sense of alienation. The traumatic experiences of violence and danger have deeply affected their perception of national and personal identity. As a result, many Syrian refugees in Turkey have found the opportunity for a fresh start and a chance to belong to a new nation. The displacement has also led them to reflect on the social practices and discourses that have shaped their identity and has challenged the notion of the superiority of homeland and national identity over exile and multicultural identity. Yasmine, a Syrian refugee from the Yarmouk camp, exemplifies this attitude by stating,

> "I was not going to return until it became a homeland for me again… When the revolution on corruption turned into a worldwide war, I could not consider it a homeland anymore…In the future, I will have grandchildren… They will not have any traces of where we came from. They will not be Syrian" (Pearlman, 2017: 247).

The testimony provides evidence of their sense of alienation from their homeland and their longing for a new sense of belonging. The events of war and corruption have shattered their previous understanding of what it means to be Syrian, leading them to question their national identity and the possibility of returning to their homeland. Instead, they look towards building a new future and identity in their host country, accepting the loss of their previous cultural heritage and traditions for safety and security. This shift in identity and belonging highlights the profound impact of displacement and war on individuals and communities.

CONCLUSION

The case of Syrian refugees challenges postmodern notions of identity by emphasising the relationship between self-definition and the reconstruction of new identities. While identity is fluid and constantly produced through encounters with cultural differences, the essentialist aspect of individual identity, emphasising national similarities, cannot be denied. The essentialist aspect of identity highlights the importance of authentic cultural identity, rooted in an ancient heritage or common core shared by a group of people, which forms the foundation of civilisation and nationality. This study examines the cultural identity of Syrian refugees and their acculturation process in Turkey. By analysing Stuart Hall's definitions of cultural identity, the social and historical background of Syrian national identity, and the psychological acculturation process of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the study highlights that Syrian refugees are searching for a new identity to construct a brighter future within a safe landscape. They go through a process of assimilation, rather than integration, into Turkish culture and life, which involves discarding their ethnic roots. However, integration allows for a dual identity, which helps refugees to exist in both worlds and negotiate between their roots and those of the host country. The displacement and relocation of Syrian people turned into a search for a new national identity. They adapt quickly to the Turkish language and culture, get education and jobs, and learn to accept the need to stay in Turkey, a safe place to focus on reconstructing a new self.

In conclusion, this study emphasises the crucial role of maintaining a core essential identity for refugees during acculturation. The displacement of many Syrians as a result of war has highlighted the impact of historical and social disunity on the cultural identity of Syrians. The book *We Crossed a Bridge, and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* by Wendy Pearlman (2017) provides evidence of the importance of essential identity for refugees. Unlike immigrants, refugees have not prepared emotionally or practically to leave their homes and begin their lives in a new country. Many Syrians have chosen to assimilate into the dominant culture of their host country and apply for full citizenship rather than integrate through a multicultural approach to develop a sense of belonging to a nation-state and share a civic identity. Acknowledging the unique experiences and challenges refugees face as they navigate the acculturation process to support their successful integration into new communities is important.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. *The Metaphysics I-IX*. Translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1947.

Baban, F., Ilican, S., & Rygiel, K. "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Pathways to Precarity, Differential Inclusion, and Negotiated Citizenship Rights." *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 41–57.

Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1939.

Gao-Miles, Lining. "The Politics of Space and Identity: Making Place in a Suburban District." In *Mapping, Migration, Identity and Space*, edited by Timothy H. Parson, 311-331. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by J. Sutherland, 223. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs Identity." In *Identity: A Reader*, edited by Paul du Gay and Jessica Evans, 17. London: Sage Publications, 2007.

Haas, A. "Being and Implication: On Hegel and the Greeks." *Cosmos and History* 3, no. 3 (2007): 192–210.

Hron, Madelaine. *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Linhard, Tebea, and Timothy Parsons. "Introduction: How Does Migration Take Place?" In *Mapping, Migration, Identity, and Space*, 1-21. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

McHugo, John. *Syria: A Recent History*. Saqi Books, 2015.

Ovid. *Tristia, Book III*. Creative Media Partners, LLC, 2018.

Pearlman, Wendy. *We Crossed A Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria*. Custom House, 2017.

Porges, Stephan W. *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.

Polk, William R. "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad." The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/

Seale, Patrick. "Understanding Syria." Middle East Policy Council. https://mepc.org/commentary/understanding-syria.

Stabb, Martin. *In Quest of Identity: Patterns in the Spanish American Essay of Ideas, 1890-1960*. Durham: The University of North Carolina, 1967.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2021 Global Compact on Refugees Indicator Report. www.unhrc.org/global-compact-refugees-indicator-report.