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Al-nuzuh: Displacement as Keyword

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Abstract

In 2022, more than half of Syria's population have been displaced as they escaped from the destruction of their homes and livelihoods, forced resettlement, terror and overall defeat. This article focuses on the keyword *al-nuzuh* (displacement). It explores how *al-nuzuh* generates new representational codes for Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian experiences concerning the politics of displacement and an accumulated sense of loss. These codes encompass the material hardships of displacement but also make visible Syrians' and Syrian-Palestinians' affective, social, and existential experiences of precarity and abandonment. In this sense, my explanation of *al-nuzuh* departs from humanitarian and conflict management discourses to center on the perspectives of those who feel defeated in Syria and its diaspora. The article explores cultural production by Syrians and Syrian-Palestinians and how they relate to new forms of memory and collectivity about uprooting and defeat. These forms reject existing rhetorical modes of depicting mass displacement to re-write the connections between the contemporary destruction of social worlds in Syria and earlier in the former and Palestine since 1948.

Keywords

nuzuh – displacement – Syrian war – Golan Heights – *nakba* – green buses

1 Introduction

This article focuses on the keyword *al-nuzuh*, which I argue is used to capture a sense of defeat following the lived devastation of the Syrian war and vanquishing of the revolution that began in 2011 for Syrians opposing the Assad regime and its allies. The evolving meanings of this cultural and political keyword, explored in works that adopt the perspective of the defeated in the war, have their origins in the denotive meaning of *al-nuzuh*: displacement.¹ However, contemporary uses within the Syrian context depart from past uses that linked *al-nazihin* (the displaced) to those who lost homes and lands during the Israeli seizure of the Golan in 1967 or the present century to drought. In 2021, more than half of Syria's population was displaced: 6.6 million are refugees, and another 6.7 million are IDPs (internally displaced persons) (UNHCR, 2021a). More broadly, *al-nazihin* refers to all of Syria's IDPs, a status recognized in international humanitarian and media discourse as a 'descriptive rather than legal definition' for those coerced to move from their place of habitual residence (Mooney, 2005, 13–14).²

Yet as a cultural and political keyword for contemporary Syria, *al-nuzuh* centers the experiences of those who supported the 2011 revolution and were defeated, as well as the perhaps non-politicized individuals—anonously represented as crowds in tents—who fled their homes during the destruction of the Syrian conflict. *Al-nuzuh* and its associated imagery—the green buses the regime used to remove Syrians from defeated territory—form a lens making visible material affective, social, political and even existential precarity effaced in humanitarian discourse and images of IDPs. Accordingly, *al-nuzuh* names and generates new representational codes for Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian experiences of politics and accumulated loss since 2011. Syrians and Syrian-Palestinians are using the mass quality of *al-nuzuh* to explore new forms of collectivity in defeat and to rewrite connections between today's displacements and those within Syria and Palestine since 1948. These explorations of *al-nuzuh* extend beyond its non-partisan meaning of internal displacement. They express a pervasive, if exhausted, outrage at the regime's role in producing

1 There are multiple possible translations for the verb *nazaha* (to flee, be displaced, abandon) from the gerund noun *nuzuh* (displacement, exodus, flight); for consistency here, I favor 'displacement'.

2 An estimated 438,000 Palestinian refugees remaining in Syria retain refugee status. After crossing an international border, IDPs are technically considered refugees, yet since 2015 Syrians who cross into neighboring Lebanon, for example, have not been permitted to register legally (UNHCR, 2021b).

the abjection, geographies and scale of the nation's displacement. Accusatory, *al-nuzuh* departs from humanitarian and conflict management discourses that depoliticize displacement as an unfortunate consequence of regional 'civil wars' (Mundy, 2015, 9–16).

Al-nuzuh is a life resembling 'daily death' as an anonymous Syrian near Idlib pithily described it (in Abu Shams, 2019). A mass experience, once begun in the lives of individuals, it tends to blur identities into crowds. It merges subsequent displacements (one family interviewed in 2016 recalled having been displaced 25 times) and disasters (e.g., wildfires, floods, Covid-19, the Beirut port explosion of August 2020) into a single state of perilous uprootedness (Qasef, 2016, 24). Journalist Mustafa Abu Shams, in an article titled '*al-Nuzuh* Within *al-Nuzuh*', uses a flood to describe this violence: 'the scene looks like a torrent that starts from the top of a mountain before sweeping away everything and everyone in its path' (2021). With millions displaced, countless ties of memory and practice binding people to one another, objects, and the environment have been obliterated. These cuts, as well as pervasive imagery of looming death, constitute a major theme of contemporary writing and film on *al-nuzuh*. With an emphasis on the body, affect (fear, numbness, grief), and the collapse of irretrievable worlds, uses of *al-nuzuh* today are abbreviated yet evocative. They recall how the imported Ottoman term *Safar barlik* encapsulated, in twentieth-century popular and cultural memory, World War One as a mass trauma of famine and social collapse in Syria.³ *Al-nuzuh* today represents an equivalent mass trauma of social worlds and memory swept away in floods of displacement intentionally imposed on the population. The work of cultural production, in turn, is to refuse anonymous and banalized vocabularies of displacement, forcing loss and uprooting 'back' into political discourse as icons of loss and sites for collective mobilization.

2 Green Buses

Green buses symbolize a conviction that the regime not only went to war against its people but redistributed the population for its political ends. The government notoriously transported people out of rebel-held areas follow-

3 The Ottoman expression refers to the mobilization of approximately three-fourths of adult men during World War One; however, in Arabic names, the famine that devastated Greater Syria, killing as many as half a million people from a pre-war population of 3.5 million. Britain and France 'knowingly used the famine as a weapon of war' to incite revolt against the Ottomans (Thompson, 2000, 21–22). I am indebted to Nancy Reynolds for this point.

ing bombing campaigns that targeted civilian infrastructure and blockades that caused mass starvation—dubbed ‘surrender or starve’ tactics by Amnesty International (2017). As the regime recaptured areas (e.g., Aleppo in 2016; eastern Ghouta in 2018; Idlib in 2019), residents, regardless of their political engagement, faced a choice between death by barrel bombs or snipers; starvation; disappearance into the regime’s prison archipelago; or displacement on green buses. These last ferried them to unknown fates, pushing people notably towards Idlib in the north and Deraa in the south, where they might reside in displacement camps (*mukhayyat al-nuzuh*), informal housing, or fields (Majed, 2018). In an egregious example, during the winter of 2019–2020, the regime’s assault to retake Idlib generated a new wave of *nuzuh* that displaced 900,000 people, many of whom had already been deprived of electricity, housing, medical care and access to humanitarian convoys (UNHCR, 2020).

In a collection of articles titled *The Syrians of the Green Buses*, the Syrian-Palestinian writer and literary critic Rachid `Issa frames the green buses as a unifier of the displaced: ‘a symbol’ of shared humiliation, a harbinger of national futures (`Issa, 2020, 735; see also Dost, 2019). His point is not that every Syrian has experienced displacement equally, equivalently or even at all. Displacement on green buses captures living on the receiving end of a politics that willingly obliterates people and their life-worlds. `Issa lingers on the unvoiced thoughts of Syrians on buses and speculates on what they saw: fellow Syrians going about their business, unconcerned with the brutal siege raging nearby; faded slogans of the revolution on city walls; signs that pro-regime villagers made to greet the displaced with curses, mockery and threats. ‘What did “the Syrians of the green buses” say to themselves?’ ponders `Issa; ‘their words, their contemplations, their thoughts during that journey, on those roads, might draw Syria’s future’ (`Issa, 2020, 762).

Displacement for Syrians committed to the revolution is withdrawal, but it also means the loss of a community formed by revolutionaries and the future(s) they signified. In an autobiographical essay gliding between literary and political modes—a genre the website *al-Jumhuriya* has centered in recent Syrian cultural production—author Ibrahim al-Fawwal reflects on his decision to leave besieged Duma in 2015. Calmly announcing the bitterness of defeat, ‘Duma: A Tale’s Displacement [*Nuzuh Hikayah*]’ takes refuge in future narratives. ‘I hope that whoever eats our lemons in the coming years will taste the bitterness of the past’, and that stories will tell how ‘the residents of this city tried, made mistakes, did right, and one day left to complete the “victory” of the executioner over us’ (al-Fawwal, 2018). Just as cruel is the idea that al-Fawwal and others (‘my family’) should, with displacement, be forced to forget their revolution (‘the first cry of freedom’), suffering (eating animal feed, living in darkness)

and disappeared loved ones in surrender to a sanitized national narrative (al-Fawwal, 2018). Al-Fawwal condemns two expulsions: of ‘disloyal’ people into the precarity of *al-nuzuh* and of the revolution from narratives of the nation. Yet he can only defy one. Writing and defining *al-nuzuh* as a contemporary political experience thus becomes a form of resistance in defeat.

3 Words for Displacement

‘The word *al-nuzuh* has transformed in our dictionaries’, observes Abu Shams (2021). The old meaning of ‘a person leav[ing] his region to settle elsewhere’ for economic, political or social reasons ‘collapses’ as a new meaning emerges: ‘the closest area you can reach fleeing death’ (Abu Shams, 2021). Abu Shams uses a geographical image to capture the terror of *al-nuzuh*, while other authors link it to the loss and looting of one’s home. These contrasting definitions point to *al-nuzuh* as enduring material and political states with profound implications for community, identity and memory. In this sense, *al-nuzuh* differs from *al-tahjir* (forced displacement or migration), which conveys violence, for example, forced transportation via the green buses, but is largely restricted to the event of traumatic expulsion. It is used today when describing the forcibly displaced (*al-muhajjarin*), but not to explore layers and repetitions of displacement or their cultural and psychological effects. *Al-nuzuh* put otherwise, contains the act of having been forced from one’s home, but exceeds it, even encompassing the anticipation of displacement in works discussed below.

With an etymological tie to the drying up of water in a well, *al-nuzuh* previously described rural migration to cities. After 1967, *al-nazihin* named Syrians displaced by Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights, and in the first decade of the present century, the term became associated with rural populations uprooted by the drought of 2006–2010 and neglected by the state (Daoudy, 2020, 198–199). Cultural actors today make connections to these past displacements—rural or Golani—in line with wider efforts to excavate the Syrian communities and areas that the regime maintained in conditions of underdevelopment, neglect and oblivion, all while it celebrated itself as the triumphant unifier of the nation. For this reason, meditations on *al-nuzuh* can be found in works tracing Syria’s plants and wildlife, dialects and ancient monuments (see e.g., Sharaf, discussed below). These works document what the displaced left behind; they also speculate on the ties between contemporary *nuzuh*, which demolishes Syrian social worlds, and the regime’s pre-2011 efforts ‘to keep Syrians ignorant’ of the diversity of their country (on the Golan, see al-Saleh, 2019a).

These nuances of *al-nuzuh* differentiate it from asylum (*luju'*) and exile (*manfa*). As noted, asylum is a political status for those leaving the home nation and is particularly used in reference to Syrians arriving in Europe. Exile has been the subject of extensive theorization by opposition thinker Yassin al-Haj Saleh, who uses the Arabic etymology of exile (to negate) to conceptualize power under the Assad regime.⁴ Exile, alongside prison, becomes a violent expression of the state's desire to negate whatever it dubs 'social, political or religious "waste"'—either casting out or incarcerating inside—with the goal of the nation's 'purification' (Saleh, 2019). Saleh links exile to an originary act of power's founding: the creation of a division between national inside-outside. In Arabic literary and cultural memory, notably via the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, exile is associated with the viewpoint of an isolated intellectual, distanced from the homeland. Saleh's view implicitly re-frames this atomized stance as one outcome of power's construction of the ground for expulsion and separation. Current cultural work around *al-nuzuh* thus bears a certain political resemblance to Saleh's re-writing of exile. The point is not, as Saleh himself has noted, to claim exile in an E.U. capital and displacement in Idlib are the same (Saleh, 2021). Rather, critical and creative uses of *al-nuzuh* are part of a broader effort to think anew and across Syrians' inheritances of language and political thought. Key among these is Palestine.

4 Lineage, Entanglement

To flee to (*nazaha ila*) and take refuge in (*laja' ila*). They're intransitive verbs that require prepositions. They're like "to die" and "to fall". I mean, "the wall fell", but where's the active subject? Something made the wall fall, it can't do that on its own. A person [...] doesn't flee by his own will [...] So he isn't a real active subject then.—`Abboud.

YAZJI, 2014

What are the stakes and risks of asserting that Syrian *nuzuh* is similar to the displacements of Palestinians in 1948 and 1967? The comparison is pervasive in today's cultural production for good reasons, including the presence of Syrian-Palestinians among the displaced, the scale of *al-nuzuh* and emerging battles over future possibilities of return within Syria.⁵ Nevertheless, comparisons to

4 These can be compared to *al-iqtala'* (uprooting) in contemporary ecocritical scholarship on Palestine, which foregrounds ties to the land and the ecosystem.

5 On *al-nuzuh* and Palestine, see Habibi (1970), which traces how social structures left by 1948

Palestine in cultural production can be distinguished between critical engagements with this lineage and what I term an accumulative approach. The latter uses familiar imagery and rhetoric to place Syria on a continuum of Arab displacements whose paradigm is Palestine. An example is Mahmoud Hassan al-Jasim's 2015 novel *Nuzuh Maryam (Maryam's Journey)*, written in the voice of Sara to her child, Maryam. The dedication is freighted with images of the fertile, maternal body and the child's-nation's promise to return: 'I left you the house key [...] You will return, Maryam, with the key to the house, calm, strong, and blessed. You'll bathe in the nation's jasmine and bury the shame of *al-nuzuh* ...' (al-Jasim, 2015, 5). The novel is not 'about' *al-nuzuh* but the ISIS occupation of Raqqa. Yet al-Jasim's opening imagery of keys, mass displacement and a promised return (*al-'awdah*), evoke twentieth-century discourse on Palestine, reinforced in opening scenes that depict Syria's displaced as wretched crowds whose 'faces speak of a [new] *nakba*' (al-Jasim, 2015, 9).

Syrian-Palestinian author Ra'id Wahsh satirizes such accumulative approaches to *al-nuzuh* as a 'linguistic massacre' (2015, 33). In Wahsh's hybrid novel *A Missing Piece of the Damascus Sky*, a Palestinian doctor performs the massacre: 'weren't we displaced in '48 when we took refuge in the Golan', and again 'in '67 when the people of the Golan were displaced and we [came] to Damascus. How many displacements (*kam nuzuhan*) is that?' (Wahsh, 2015, 32). Mathematical, the list accumulates equivalent displacements in rhetoric that de-individualizes and re-effaces lived experiences of *al-nuzuh*. Symptomatically, the displaced in al-Jasim's novel are a mute mass, their meaning to be extracted: they are objects rather than agents of politics. Their antithesis appears in Liwaa Yazji's 2014 film *Haunted (Maskun)*. Her camera offers an uninterrupted voice to, among others, a young Syrian-Palestinian man who reflects on the losses of his parents and himself; on the psychology of his father's daily routine in Beirut; on his exhaustion at the prospect of beginning anew again.⁶ The result is a Syrian-Palestinian narrative rooted in body, voice, and memory that resists equivalence: that experiences today's *nuzuh* as sedimented loss, but whose meanings cannot be summoned into ready-made political discourse.

The rejection of accumulative rhetoric on *al-nuzuh* takes distance from political culture and rhetoric normalized under the Assad regime, which

influenced behavior in 1967. On return within Syria, see e.g., disputes over identity cards for the displaced to Afrin in al-Saleh, 2019b.

6 Yazji's use of the extended interview echoes Omar Amiralay's influence on contemporary Syrian film, foregrounding individual stories against media objectification. For further information, see David, 2007.

adopted Palestine as an anti-imperialist symbol. To this end, some authors narrate green buses as sites of connection within trauma for Syrians and Syrian-Palestinians, whose meeting in contemporary displacement lets them critically re-map norms and geographies long accepted. 'Issa reflects on Syrians finding new, regretful meaning in stock phrases they once said to displaced Palestinians. Fida' al-Saleh recounts the words of Haji Muhammad, a *nazih* from the Golan and now again in northern Syria. He describes how in the 1970s and 1980s, while the state paid lip service to its resistance against Israel, the Golan's *nazihin* were kept 'in isolation' from Syrian society and lived in 'areas for the displaced', synonyms for slums, their makeshift homes periodically destroyed by Syrian municipalities (al-Saleh, 2019a).

As they re-map memory around *al-nuzuh*, cultural actors convey historical ruptures and continuities—specifically, continuities of rupture and neglect—not as a function of accumulation into known politics and established slogans, but from the singular perspectives of myriad individuals. To this end, writers and filmmakers have broadened the time of *al-nuzuh* from pure aftermath—the stock imagery of trudging, abjected crowds—to encompass the effect of anticipating displacement. Packing for homelessness becomes a recurring, terrifying theme. Poet Khulud Sharaf's *Return to the Mountain: Diaries in the Shadow of War* (2019) features a text titled 'Nuzuh' that lists books, make-up, perfume her narrator will take and 'pens because I think the country I'm heading to doesn't have ink' (Sharaf, 2019, 115). Her brisk tone, 'now my bag is ready for *al-nuzuh*', and ironic speculations on ink are flattened by a sudden, prosaic dread: 'I don't know which road will take us to death faster' (Sharaf, 2019, 115). Yazji's film circles packing, unpacking and repacking as traumatic experiences integral to *al-nuzuh* but invisible in established representational codes for the war's displaced.

5 Conclusion

By depicting the anticipation of displacement, Syrian cultural works recall that mundane items in cardboard boxes are 'the worldly objects among which [people's] inherited knowledge and rights, protective social fabric and safety, bliss and happiness, sorrow and death are inscribed' (Azoulay, 2019, 2). People are not just attached to material structures and objects but intimately entangled in them. This point can be understood, initially, through objects as bearers of memory. Writing of Raqqa, author Malika al-'A'ida describes the elderly's loss of 'walls that mixed with their lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren' (al-'A'ida, 2018). In *Haunted*, an old man sitting in a ruined building

in Lebanon mourns his long-dead son; he lost the last photograph of him and can no longer remember his son's face. Abboud, under siege and preparing for *al-nuzuh*, shows the camera a banknote, his adult daughter's childhood allowance. The smile in his voice, immersed in memory, is cut by his wife's question from another room: 'Abboud, what do you call yourself once you leave your house? Refugee, *nazih*, exile, what?' He doesn't reply.

It is perhaps customary to imagine that displaced people live injured yet somehow the same after their objects of memory are obliterated. Syrian cultural production presses further on the violence of *al-nuzuh*, suggesting that annihilated life-worlds leave individuals with invisible and irreparable scars. Some contemporary work on *al-nuzuh* insists that Syrians' life-worlds weren't just obliterated, they were ransacked. The homes of displaced Syrians were looted, with items sold off in open-air markets, and occupied by fighters (e.g., Bulos, 2018). These acts register, for those facing displacement, as cruel opportunism that echoes the mocking slogans seen from the windows of green buses. The anticipation of looting also frequently appears in cultural work as an intimate violation of the self. When self and environment are irrevocably entwined, the prospect of *al-nuzuh*—death, defeat, erasure, looting, violation—manifests in experiences of the body fragmenting. Sharaf writes, on the threshold of *al-nuzuh*, 'there's no space for the pictures I drew with my fingers on the walls, I'll take my fingers with me' (Sharaf, 2019, 115). This could be read as comforting: all is well, she can make new pictures after *al-nuzuh*. Yet such a portable subject can clash with Sharaf's text, which lovingly documents her entanglement in the nature of southern Syria. When she confronts *al-nuzuh*, she can (or must) decide to take her fingers. Her subtly dismembering body is best interpreted by one of Yazji's interlocutors, who gestures with his hands to describe the anticipation of departure: 'my soul is being shredded'.

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