

Reimagining “the Arab Way” in Exile

Futures “Off Line” among Syrian Men in Amman

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Introduction

The young Syrian men with whom I worked in the Jordanian capital of Amman imagined, dreamed of, and worked toward a safe return to the lives and places they used to inhabit, although this would be an impossible feat for most. For some, the houses they called home in Syria had been erased from the earth, leaving nothing and no one to return to. For others, the country they left had been transformed by ongoing warfare in ways that rendered it inaccessible and hostile. For all, their places of origin remained a reference point and haunted their present lives in Amman. But during the course of three years, from early 2016 to late 2018, new lives took shape among these young men in Amman. In this chapter, I attend to their gradual process of recognizing the contours of new lives and futures in exile.

Sara Ahmed (2006: 14) thinks of “lifelines” or simply “lines” as directing us and helping us find our way. A lifeline symbolizes a way of life and an expression of who we are (Ahmed 2006: 19). Hence, being “in line” is dwelling in the present while orienting oneself toward a particular and available future. Among my interlocutors, this way of inhabiting life was described as “normal,” as “simple,” and as “the Arab way.” Importantly, to Ahmed (2006: 160), being forced off a particular lifeline may be disconcerting. Such “enforced unfollowing”—excluding one from a future that used to

be a given—may, however, reorient one toward other ways of leading a life. That which is “off line” thus holds the potential of opening up new worlds (Ahmed 2006: 19).

In the everyday of exile, the young men with whom I worked were struggling to “catch up with” life, as they put it, and to get back in line by means of particular “chances” appearing in the everyday. As this chapter explores, such “chances” were imagined to enable the “normal” lives to which they aspired to live, but “chances” also presented them with new perspectives and paths. Thus quite unexpectedly, in their daily yearnings for the “normal,” I argue, they increasingly found themselves included in and reoriented toward other ways of living.

This argument has three parts. Following a brief outline of the situation among Syrian refugees in Jordan and my work in this particular context, I introduce the story of Hani as an ethnographic starting point for an initial exploration of the young Syrian men’s notion of “the Arab way.” Engaging further in Ahmed’s (2006) theory on the lines that direct us, I propose to think of “the Arab way” as a particular lifeline shaped by social, historical, and political circumstances of Syrian society, and I demonstrate how “the Arab way” oriented Hani and the others in certain directions—for example, toward the masculine position as the family’s breadwinner. In the second part of the chapter, I attend to the experience of being excluded from the masculine trajectories these young men used to take for granted and to their struggles to meet local social expectations related to proper manhood. In the third and final part of the chapter, I demonstrate how Hani and the others engaged in daily attempts to “catch chances,” as they put it, to “catch up with life” and get “back in line.” Such “chances,” however, made it possible to engage in other ways of imagining a good life in the context of exile. For Hani, I argue, one such unexpected “chance” was to care for his mother in Amman.

Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has displaced the largest number of people in recent history. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 6.6 million people are currently internally displaced, while 5.6 million are estimated to have fled the country. A large number of these people now live in Jordan. In response, the Za’tari refugee camp was established in July 2012. As of November 2019, it hosts 76,143 registered refugees. In total, 654,681 Syrians have been registered as refugees in Jordan; along with large numbers of Palestinian, Yemini, and Iraqi refugees, this number makes Jordan the country with the second highest share of refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR 2019). This number is,

however, likely to be much higher, as Jordan is host to displaced Syrians who have not been officially registered as refugees by the UNHCR. Only an estimated 16 percent of the refugees in Jordan reside in camps such as Za'tari. The majority of refugees have settled in Jordan's rural areas close to the Syrian border or in and around the capital of Amman. Despite large numbers of refugees, Jordan does not have domestic legislation targeting refugees and has not signed the UN 1951 Convention on Refugees. Instead, the legal framework for the treatment of refugees is a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding signed between Jordan and the UNHCR, allowing the UNHCR to provide international protection to persons falling within its mandate. Displaced people registered as refugees by the UNHCR in Jordan receive cash assistance to help meet essential needs such as shelter and food. The memorandum provides that Jordan accept the definition of "refugee" contained in the 1951 Convention and, further, that Jordan accept that asylum seekers and refugees should receive treatment according to internationally accepted standards.

Methods and Interlocutors

During 2011 and 2012, the uprisings in Syria intensified, and life became increasingly dangerous for young men in Syria. At that time, many faced mandatory military service in the Syrian army, while others were under surveillance for being active in demonstrations in Syria's urban centers. Consequently, they were forced to flee their homeland and to seek refuge in the neighboring country of Jordan. For these reasons and many more, the names appearing in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Initially, Hani and the other young men with whom I worked assumed that they would have to stay in Jordan for just a short time, believing that the situation in Syria would soon improve. Weeks, however, turned into months, which turned into years, and with time Hani and my twenty-one other interlocutors began to think through a future in Amman. I found that these young men shared a particular imaginary of their futures, and this imaginary, they explained, was experienced in stark contrast to prospects of life in exile. In Syria, Hani and the others were parts of resourceful middle- or upper-middle-class families who expected them to become good and responsible young people with educations, jobs, and families. In the everyday of exile in Amman, however, it was difficult, if not impossible, to meet these expectations.

I spent a total of twelve months in Amman, during which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD dissertation. In the spring of 2016, 2017, and 2018, I sought to understand how the experience of war and exile shapes possible ways of being in the world with others. In exploring this question,

I engaged in participant observation and semistructured interviews: I talked with the young men about their everyday lives, about the challenges they faced in Amman, and about the futures for which they persistently strived. The vast majority of the many interviews and conversations I conducted were recorded in English. As university students, eager to develop their chances of finding a job or a scholarship, these young people would often insist on speaking English with me as a way to practice their spoken language. As my spoken Arabic developed, our conversations would include a combination of English and Arabic expressions and phrases in order to nuance my understanding of their experiences, their lifeworlds, and their struggles in exile.

During my stays in Amman, I observed the young men’s daily struggles to reimagine and enact futures as good men. In order to get a better sense of their experiences of, and struggles in, exile, I sometimes asked them to illustrate the future as they used to imagine it in Syria, as well as life as they experienced it in Amman. “Draw your future for me” or “draw a good life,” I would ask sometimes, while at other times I asked them to illustrate the difference between life “before and after” the war. Illustrations of their lifelines in exile (for example, see figure 8.1) took shape and became the analytical starting point for considering exile as an enforced unfollowing, bringing one out of line with particular ways of life while making space for new ways of imagining a future.

Hani

During a conversation in Amman in early 2018, Hani reflected on his future prospects. Although his story is unique, it resonates with other stories I collected during fieldwork in Amman. “Ah, Emilia,” Hani said, as he sighed and reached out for another cigarette. “We broke up yesterday. It’s OK. Me and her decided together.” We were silent, and I took a moment to observe people grocery shopping in the street below us. “You know, Emilia,” Hani continued, “my heart is very weak. If my situation gets better, I will go to engage her. But in my situation, I can’t, I really can’t. Don’t ask me how it feels. Please. It’s hard. I cried yesterday. I don’t want to cry again.” He looked down. “If I am alone in Amman without my mother, my situation would be very different, you know,” he mumbled, “If I was married now and I had a good job, I would start to think forward. I would have a plan for that. Not like my friend Firaz. I feel very sad for him. But what can I do, Emilia?” Hani rhetorically asked me.

I hardly said a word that entire evening. Hani spoke, only interrupted by brief moments of silence. Most of the time, he spoke about the girl he loved, about the circumstances surrounding their secret relationship, and about

the fact that it had now come to an end. The girl, whose name Hani never shared with me, had approached him the previous day and asked him when he was thinking about getting engaged. According to Hani, she wanted to take their relationship to the next level and involve their families. Caught off guard, Hani had no good answer: “I really don’t know. I don’t have anything,” he had said, and, to Hani, it was the truth. At least he needed a better job—“so I can afford to have a wife,” he explained through the smoke from his cigarette. “In my job now, I really can’t. For instance, if we go walking, and she sees something in a shop or something, maybe I cannot buy it.” He pointed to a window of a shop across the street and turned to talk about his friend, Firaz, who recently had a baby. Around the time of Firaz’s engagement, Hani had advised his friend to keep his job, despite a ruthless boss, in order to take good care of his new family as a responsible husband. Compared to local standards, Firaz’s salary was good. “I told him, ‘Firaz, don’t change your job. Keep your job. It’s stable!’” Hani recounted. But Firaz quit and was unemployed for almost eighteen months. Hani shook his head and continued: “He sometimes calls me saying, ‘Hani, I need money.’ I give him money. Sometimes it’s like two or three days before I have my salary, and I have maybe 25 Jordanian dinars [approximately US\$35] left with me. I give him the half. But after that I tell him ‘Firaz, find a job!’” Hani was far too familiar with his friend’s situation to refuse such a request. “The guy is alone here; his family is in Syria. He married a Syrian girl here, but no one from his family could attend the wedding. They were present via WhatsApp and Skype. I know his situation,” Hani explained and added, “He has no one.”

As an only child, Hani was responsible for his mother in Amman. Upon their flight in 2013, it was not possible for an entire family to cross the border between Syria and Jordan. Consequently, Hani’s father stayed behind in Hama and was meant to join soon after. But then the border closed, and Hani’s father fell ill. He died in Hama in 2017. To support his mother and himself, Hani worked in a dental clinic twelve hours a day, six days a week. But the money was never enough, and Hani rarely had time or energy for any social activities after work. Worrying was tiring. Usually, he would watch a movie and smoke cigarettes as a way to empty his mind and ease his worries, he told me. That was why it was so nice to have a girlfriend. The two had met through Hani’s mother when they were still new to Amman. For two years, they texted each other secretly, meeting in the staircase behind the houses. Although their respective families spent many hours together every day, none of the young people’s family members knew of their love for each other. To me, it was clear that Hani cared about the girl, and he had often shared his worries about their future with me. The biggest frustration was that he did not have “any of the basics,” as he put it—no savings, no education, no salary—in order to marry and care for his girlfriend or, for that matter, any other girl. Hani often talked about the need to “catch a chance,”

as he put it in English, in order to improve his situation and comfortably inhabit life “the Arab way.” In the spring of 2018, however, Hani doubted that his situation would ever change and that he would ever be able to marry. “I don’t have a future,” he would say; “I don’t have a good job to help me build my future. Here, I can’t do anything.”

Hani’s situation resembled the situations of most of the Syrian men with whom I worked in Amman. Just like Hani, they struggled to thrive in exile and to support their families with what they could. Importantly, however, they were largely on their own in Amman. Their families were spread across the world: throughout Syria, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Sudan, to mention just a few of the countries to which they had fled. But Hani was responsible for the wellbeing of his mother, who had fallen ill after the loss of her husband, and, in Amman, his everyday life was primarily structured around his responsibility to care for her. They lived together in a small apartment, and Hani did his best to spend time with his mother when he was not working. Her health made it difficult for her to leave the house; he made sure to do the grocery shopping and buy the things his mother needed. On Fridays, they usually had lunch together when Hani returned home from the Friday prayer at the local mosque.

“The Arab Way”

To Hani, “the Arab way” described what he perceived as a “normal” and fairly “simple” life. It was “simple” because it was not grandiose, and yet he was aware that it might not be accessible to all. It was, however, in his words, what “any young guy in Syria” expected from life, and what the majority of them had already planned for themselves. To Omar, another good friend and interlocutor of mine, “a house, a car, and a wife” comprised his own and “any other Syrian guy’s biggest dream.” Among these young men, “the Arab way” thus described the given, expected, and predictable lifeline among contemporary urban middle-class men in both Syria and the region at large, a well-trodden path, and a perceived temporally linear forward motion from childhood through different stages, to marriage, and to providing for a family. In their reflections on “the Arab way,” these young men perceived themselves as belonging to both an imagined community of young Arab men and to a smaller community of Syrian male youth. They thus identified as simultaneously Arab and Syrian, collectively striving for a form of life that they described as “middle-class” or simply “normal” and that they found represented in local variations among peers across the region.

To Hani, a “normal” life was made up of stages leading him to the position as a father and head of a family (see Suerbaum 2018). A good job and

a stable income was a precondition for this. In order to reach such a necessary basis of, and for, a family, he had planned to become a nurse after the mandatory military service. He had also considered going abroad, maybe to the Gulf, in order to earn more money. But that was not a necessity; Syria would also suffice, and Hani in fact preferred to start a family with wife and children in Hama in close proximity to his parents. He was, after all, an only child and therefore socially obliged and expected to take good care of his parents (see Joseph 1993).

Exactly because of its inevitability, “the Arab way” was not of much concern to the young men in Syria. In fact, it was not until they arrived in exile in Jordan that they came to appreciate the “normal” lives they had previously taken for granted. As argued by Ahmed (2006), particular lifelines give one a certain direction and make some kinds of lives rather than others appear possible and desirable. She writes, “The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there” (Ahmed 2006: 15). Thus, when following certain lifelines, we are included in particular perspectives and excluded from others. I take “the Arab way” to be such a lifeline, followed by many and invested in by those who go along. With certain points of orientation, “the Arab way” directs attention and shapes the perspectives, bodies, and lives of its followers. Among the young men with whom I worked, following “the Arab way” was a way to live a “normal” life and thus to be comfortably in line with, and included in, particular social communities.

The Background: Lives Left Behind

Importantly, lifelines, as well as the points of orientation appearing on these, such as family and the masculine position as breadwinner, are shaped by particular political, social, and historical circumstances. Together, these can be thought of as the background on which something arrives and appears as given in the present (Ahmed 2006: 30). To Ahmed (2006: 37–8), a background is, in a sense, what explains the conditions of the emergence or arrival of something as the thing that it appears to be in the present: “The background would be understood as that which must take place in order for something to appear.” Hence, in order to fully understand “the Arab way” as a particular imaginary of a “normal” and good life among contemporary middle-class youth from Syria, as described by my interlocutors, it should be located in the historical, political, and social context of Syrian society and the secular Arab socialist Baath Party, led by President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited the position after the passing of his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2000.

As a result of educational policies undertaken by the regime in the 1960s, prewar Syria had a relatively well-educated labor force. Formulated as a “so-

cial contract,” the population was guaranteed low food prices and a better educational system in return for loyalty and political disengagement (Sparre 2008: 6). Over time and during Hafez al-Assad’s rule from 1970, the Baath Party developed into an instrument of political control and indoctrination, and all levels of the educational system were tightly controlled by the government, which used the classrooms as spaces of and for Baathist indoctrination (Cleveland and Bunton 2009: 401–403). As described by William Cleveland and Martin Bunton (2009), for all its restrictions on intellectual and political freedom, the Assad regime continued with social transformation through reform toward secular nationalism. Gender equality and equal access to education and employment were important ideological platforms for the Baath Party, and women were used as a symbol of the nation’s development and modernization (Sparre 2008). However, as demonstrated by Sara Lei Sparre (2008), as a result of socioeconomic changes and the influence of an Islamic discourse in both public and private sectors of Syrian society, from the 1990s the official discourse on gender roles changed. Now, women were portrayed in the roles as mothers and housewives with references to an Islamic moral code (Sparre 2008: 8–9). During this period of time, Islam thus became an important social and ideological discourse in Syria, shaping local notions of gender roles.

To Hani and his peers, “responsibility” in English, or “*mas’ūliyya*” in Arabic, was an important and defining aspect of manhood. Responsibility was understood as the ability to take care of themselves by not relying financially on their families, but more importantly by the capabilities, emotionally as well as financially, of taking care of a wife and a family. To them, one was only really a man when one was a “responsible” provider. A proper man was thus defined not in terms of independence but in terms of the ability to respond to social expectations and to provide for loved ones (see Ghannam 2013; Naguib 2015). Hani, as well as the other young men with whom I worked, grew up in Syria during the 1990s and early 2000s, and their notions of a good life and of proper manhood have been shaped by, among other things, the Islamic discourse positioning women in the homes and men as providers. Exemplified with Hani’s reflections in the ethnographic vignette above, their gendered notion of “the Arab way” reflects this orientation toward the position of responsible family breadwinner.

The imaginary of a masculine trajectory is, as suggested above, found in local variations among people in the Middle East, where young men are expected to become responsible, serious, and productive in their mid-twenties (Ghannam 2013, 71). In the context of recent war, political unrest, and financial downfall, others describe how young men across the region are struggling to meet social expectations to marry and to create stable lives with families of their own (see, e.g., Schielke 2015).

Off Line

Hani's experience demonstrates the specific emotional, financial, and social struggles of being excluded from a previously accessible and given lifeline. For Hani and others, this experience of exile also existed in relation to the formation of the masculine self. To Hani, a "normal" life now belonged to a different time and place. In the everyday of exile, he expressed his frustrations from being forced off "the Arab way" in temporal terms as being "delayed in life," in spatial terms as being "out of place," and in existential terms as "not having a future." Ahmed (2006: 21) writes, "For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course." For Hani and other young men I met, failing to inhabit local social norms and expectations related to proper manhood, such as responsibility, breadwinning, and fatherhood, constitutes a threat to their standing as good men. As demonstrated above, Hani knew that he was incapable of providing a future wife with a good level of material comfort and wellbeing in exile, as it was otherwise expected. Such failure to inhabit the masculine role of breadwinner would be judged negatively by others as a sign of irresponsibility. Hani was well aware of this—he had seen how his friend Firaz had suffered—and, for those reasons, Hani declined to pursue his relationship with his girlfriend. In Amman, love was not enough to make him a proper man. As long as he could not provide for both his mother and a wife, a romantic relationship could, if anything, only remain a "nice" but futureless secret between the two.

"Chances"

However, in attempts to "catch up with life" and once again follow the direction promised as a social good, Hani worked hard to "catch chances." Such "chances," he imagined, could eventually bring him back in line. As perceived openings toward a specific imaginary of the future, "chances" simultaneously pointed backward in time to what existed and forward to what was desired. In the everyday, "chances" sometimes appeared in unanticipated and unexpected forms, while at other times came about as the result of hard work. The kinds of "chances" Hani was drawn to took various forms, but perceived "good chances" often came in the shape of a potential job, a scholarship, or a meeting with a Danish anthropologist. In and of itself, however, a new job did not bring the individual young man back in line but was imagined to be a "step on the way" toward "the Arab way." In either form, "chances" needed attuned presence and awareness in order to be "caught," and although "chances" were imagined to direct the

young men back into line, the outcome of “taking a chance” could not be predicted.

Exactly because the outcome of particular “chances” could not be predicted, a “chance” sometimes brought the young men to an unexpected end. It was as if individual “chances” disclosed a range of potential futures to Hani and the others. Whenever Hani was engaged in an attempt to “catch” a particular chance, he was also engaged in imagining a particular future, a future that was not always akin to “the Arab way.” Recently, he had engaged in the idea of applying for resettlement for him and his mother in Germany. He thought that a fresh start in a new place might bring about a better future. In exile, life thus took on an open-ended form, and, with time and by “chance,” other ways of leading a life slowly took shape in Amman.

Care

In Hani’s daily life, the care that he provided for his mother and that he at times experienced as an obstacle to life “the Arab way” in fact constituted another “chance” for him to position himself as a responsible young man. The experience of exile had taught Hani that life does not unfold in stages or along a straight line, at least not any longer. Instead, it includes detours, unpredictability, and “options.” The life that brought Hani “out of Syria” and toward “building a life” in Amman led to an undefined future.

“Depending on which way one turns,” Ahmed (2006: 15) writes, “different worlds might even come into view.” Being off the line in exile had provided Hani with a different perspective on life. But despite the fact that particular lives were lost in Syria, exile was, perhaps surprisingly, related to important personal gain for Hani. Exile had forced him to explore himself in different ways and to “adapt” to his new life in Amman. As he illustrated in his sketch (see figure 8.1), his life in exile was comprised of untrodden paths and open endings, but, most importantly, it was structured around his mother. Here, he had, in his own words, become “mature” and “grown-up” in unexpected ways, and Hani thus experienced becoming more responsible after all. Although his future looked vastly uncertain in the spring of 2018, he considered himself a better and stronger young man who managed to take good care of his mother. In exile, Hani and his mother shared an everyday life. Hani worked in order to secure money for rent, groceries, and his mother’s medicine. But he provided much more for his mother than financial stability. He kept her company, took her to the hospital, and shared her worries. Hani was well aware that he was the only person left to care for his mother and that she was part of any future he engaged in.

In her work on care and masculinity, Farha Ghannam (2013: 86) demonstrates the powerful role of women in the making of a proper man. From a

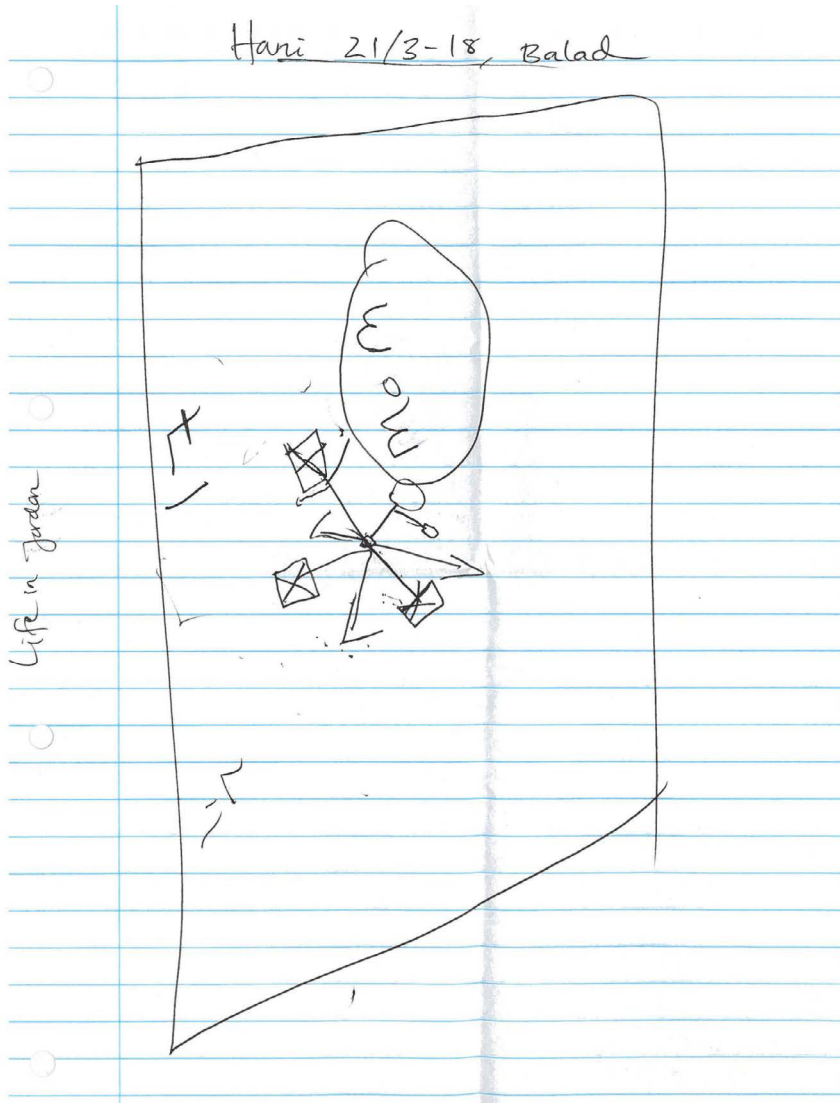


Figure 8.1. Hani's Drawing of His Life in Jordan, March 2018, Amman. Reproduced with permission.

young age, boys and young men are supported to materialize the norms that define masculine identifications by their mothers. Running daily errands outside the home is just one way young boys are taught to act as providers for their families (Ghannam 2013: 130). Thus extending the notion of care to include men's labor and work outside the home, Ghannam (2013: 133)

argues that labor is a gendered form of care, as work often is motivated by a desire or a burden to provide for loved ones. I suggest that the daily care Hani provided for his mother in the everyday of exile enabled him to inhabit the role of provider, ultimately positioning him as a good and responsible man. In his everyday life, specific forms of care labor stood in the way of engaging in a romantic future with his then girlfriend and for becoming a good man according to “the Arab way,” but care simultaneously made the formation of a responsible masculine self possible in exile. Although Hani’s future was still unknown, his mother certainly belonged to it; in fact, Hani was no one without her.

Conclusion

Focusing particularly on forced displacement among a group of young Syrian middle-class refugee men living in Amman, this chapter provides an ethnographically grounded perspective on the experience of being excluded from a certain way of life, locally referred to as “the Arab way.” In exile, Hani felt “off line,” an experience that caused both great frustration as well as daily attempts to get back “in line” by “catching chances.” Hani was, as he put it, “looking for all options.” But being engaged in attempts to catching various “chances” did not direct Hani back in line. Rather, encountering a number of different “chances” in the everyday of exile gave life an unsettled and open character, offering a range of potential new directions (see also Suerbaum 2017, 2018). Exactly because the experience of exile constitutes an enforced unfollowing, in a spatial, existential, and temporal sense, unexpectedly excluding people from a particular lifeline, it provided Hani with a different perspective on the future and made him sensitive to other ways of living. Off line, I argue, there is thus space for imagining and including oneself in alternative masculine futures.

One such future was provided by an obligation to care. In the everyday of exile in Amman, the responsibility Hani had to care for his mother was an obstacle to, and in a sense excluded him from, living according to “the Arab way.” Care thus offered Hani an opportunity to become a good and responsible young man after all. He did not have a wife in exile, but he had a mother to whom he was the responsible breadwinner. In the context of their household in Amman, he was thus the caretaker, practicing the masculine role of provider. But life was difficult in exile, and Hani was continuously looking out for “chances” to improve the situation for himself and his mother. In the fall of 2019, a “chance” to resettle in Europe emerged, and his life took yet another unexpected turn. With his mother, he moved to Germany, where they once more faced the difficult task of having to re-imagine the future.

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