



The wondrous life of legal documents. Transformations and continuities in the encounter of Syrian papers with German bureaucracy

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Abstract

This working paper traces the trajectory of Syrian official documents across Syria and Germany in times of political upheaval, flight and integration. Documents issued by the Syrian state continue to be a fundamental element in the life of Syrians in Germany as they are still needed for certain mundane, yet crucial, purposes. Syrians are therefore forced to engage with Syrian state bureaucratic apparatuses at a distance. The journey of the papers across time and geographical borders unveils the highly political ambivalences and tensions embodied in Syrian paperwork in the context of German policies of asylum and integration. In Syria, the documents and their retrieval are embedded in the politics of security governing the Syrian citizenship regime. On arrival in Germany, the papers gain new meanings in their encounter with the German integration process and legal system rooted in the Rule of Law. At the same time, the papers' enmeshment with German bureaucracy reproduces (from a distance) the political dynamics between Syrians and the Syrian state in the past. Situated at a crossroads of the web of state(-s) power in and between Syrian and German bureaucracies, the papers re-integrate Syrians' past into their present in Germany. By revealing this complex web of relationships, this working paper offers a reflection on the limits of studying the European context of integration and asylum 'from within'.

Introduction

This working paper traces the life of Syrian official documents across Syria and Germany in times of political upheaval, flight and integration.¹ By following the journey of

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people and papers across geographical borders, I examine the multiplicity of meanings and values Syrians attribute to these papers and to the act of retrieving them in the context of German law, bureaucracy and integration. Mundane legal papers are official proof of legal identity, education and relationships to kin. Therefore, they are vital for Syrians seeking asylum in Germany, where they are required for the asylum procedure and, afterwards, for numerous mundane, yet essential, procedures.² Syrian documents are needed to get married, continue education and obtain German citizenship. Thus, these papers are crucial tools for continuing life (or starting a new one) abroad, and this forces Syrians to work hard to retrieve them either prior to their flight from Syria or after, when they are already in Germany.

Anthropological analysis of papers and paperwork in migration and citizenship regimes highlights the centrality of these material artefacts in the everyday lives of migrants, asylum seekers and non-citizens (Kelly 2006; Gordillo 2006; Reeves 2013; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Tuckett 2018). Papers are part of the project of making citizens and non-citizens legible (Scott 1998), transforming documents, especially identification ones, into a mechanism of control (Torpey 2000). Gordillo rightly argues that identification documents are a form of state control and, simultaneously, a tool of empowerment, in that they grant specific rights. This exemplifies the paradox at the heart of the modern concept of citizenship (Gordillo 2006: 163), a paradox that extends to non-citizens, as it is at the heart of contemporary migratory regimes too. Studies on legal documents and migration unpack the ambivalent power of documents over the lives of migrants and refugees as they enable state control over non-citizens as well as forms of non-citizen agency and resistance (Borrelli and Andreetta 2019). This ambivalence is intrinsically tied to the way "these documents produce legitimacy and establish 'truths' upon which bureaucrats as well as migrant individuals act" (Borrelli and Andreetta 2019: 3). How-

¹ This article is based on my research in the framework of the project *Normality and Crisis: Memories of Everyday Life in Syria as a Chance for a New Start in Germany* funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (funding code: 01UG1840X). One section of the article draws on my PhD thesis "A State of Permanent Loss: War and Displacement in Syria and Lebanon" (Ferreri 2018), research for which was funded in part by the Bucerius Ph.D. Fellowship at the Trajectory of Change Programme (ZEIT-Stiftung) and the Orient-Institut Beirut Doctoral Fellowship. The sole responsibility for the content lies with me. I am grateful to Samuli Schielke and Larissa Vettors for their generous feedback on the earlier version of this paper, and to Svenja Becherer for her valuable work during the publishing process. I thank Katharina Lange for her insights and reflections on this research and for her rigorous and attentive reading of my work for this project, including this paper. I am grateful to Franziska Ortlieb and Sophie Ataya, student assistants for the Normality and Crisis' group, for their work on the literature review for this paper and for translating German documents into English. I also thank Inana Othman, Schluwa

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² Asylum Act (2008), Section 16 (https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_asylvfg/englisch_asylvfg.html).

ever, any truth upheld by these documents is necessarily unstable and at times even fictitious. Indeed, this feature does not inherently belong to the papers themselves, but to the way people construct their significance and employ them in relation to broader constellations of meanings, practices and institutions. The indeterminate nature of documentary regimes (Kelly 2006) and migration law may require migrants to produce authentically fake paper trails to gain access to legal status (Tuckett 2018).³ Yet, the proliferation of authentically fake documents may also lead state representatives to search for 'truths' not in the papers themselves, but in the bodies of the holders through racial profiling (Reeves 2013). The ambivalent power of documents in the context of migration is also tied to their ever-shifting meanings and effects as they are reshaped by individual agency (Cabot 2012), and by the nature of the institutions issuing them, including states (Navaro-Yashin 2012).

This working paper specifically examines the ambivalent nature (and power) of Syrian documents in their encounter with the German bureaucracy by showing how these papers escape any single legal, political and moral definition, as does the process of retrieving them. Indeed, this paper moves away from an understanding of papers in relation to the 'legal production of illegality' (De Genova 2002). Instead, I expand the ethnographic gaze to look at the constellations of practices and discourses as well as of laws and regulations that make up paperwork between Germany and Syria to foreground a reflection on the limits of studying the European context of integration and asylum from within. Specifically, this paper sheds a light on the intricate web of dependencies and overlaps characterizing the German legal system and its ties to the Syrian one, which deeply impact the lives of Syrians in Germany. By doing so, I suggest that looking at the process of integration from Syria and thinking about it as a *re-integration of the past into the present and future* can offer new routes to engage with migratory phenomena in Germany and, more broadly, with the limits of the German citizenship regime.

Looking at the process of integration from Syria entails an in-depth engagement with the political significance of citizenship and the workings of state bureaucracies, as both elements reverberate in the way Syrians deal with paperwork and state authority in Germany, as well as in the meanings they attribute to documents and legality. Reflecting on the different ways in which citizenship and paperwork function in Syria and Germany implies an examination of the zones of contact of these two different citizenship regimes. These zones of contact are undoubtedly represented by the papers themselves and their functionality in the interactions between Syria and Germany. These zones are also embedded in the modes of retrieval of these papers from Syria and the disparate procedures and regulations governing the recognition and

legalization of Syrian papers in Germany. The journey of these documents from Syria to Germany shows how the legal and the illegal (and, the moral and immoral) have unstable values and meanings. These unstable political meanings also infiltrate deeper into Syrians' experience of non-citizenship in Germany through the integration process. This process aims to incorporate Syrians into the German polity by having them learn the German language and, ultimately, by instilling in them different political and legal principles and values so as to mould newcomers into liberal subjects. Fundamental components of the 'integration course' (*Integrationskurs*), which refugees have to attend in order to qualify for state benefits, are respect for authority and legalistic notions – such as corruption and the rule of law, among many others. By including the dynamics at work in the integration course and other educational initiatives designed 'for refugees', I show how these notions and hierarchies shape newcomers' lives in Germany and how they engage with German state authorities and bureaucratic apparatuses. By widening the gaze on paperwork in Germany to include the retrieval of documents in Syria and the integration courses in Germany, this paper also captures the contradictions of the German integration process itself and its production of precarious non-citizens in front of the German law.

The ethnography

This paper draws on my long research trajectory and combines my findings in Berlin with the ones from Lebanon that are included in my doctoral dissertation (Ferreri 2018). My interest in the lives of Syrian documents and the entanglement between law, bureaucracy and warfare in times of political upheaval and migration started with my ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon (2014–2015, with subsequent four short visits between 2016 and 2019). Since my arrival to Berlin, I continued this research as part of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research-funded joint project *Normality and Crisis: Memories of Everyday Life in Syria as a Chance for a New Start in Germany*. The primary objective was to document experiences of everyday life in Syria before the uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad began in 2011, problematizing the notions of normality and crisis regarding Syria and Germany, past and present (Lange et al. 2021).⁴ The case of legal documents and paperwork, legality and bureaucracy across Syria and Germany is a powerful example that breaks down the teleological approach to (forced) migration and the causes at its origin. This teleological approach implies a normality followed by a twofold crisis – the one within the country of origin and a second occurring through migration to a country of refuge. However, a study of the wartime migration through the social lives of Syrian legal documents offers a novel perspective on the unfolding relationship between Syrians and the Syrian state, as well as between Syrians and the German state.

³ Authentically fake papers are legally authentic documents, but false and fictitious. Tuckett employs the case of domestic work contracts used by many migrants in Italy to regularize their legal status or to renew their residency permits, showing that these contracts and their paper trails – such as proof of tax payments – are original and authentic, however the actual work relationship is fictitious (Tuckett, 2018: 82).

⁴ The Normality and Crisis project's main aims and findings are included in its online exhibition: Lange et al. (2021), *Anfänge und Erinnerungen: Verbindungen und Begegnungen zwischen Syrien und Deutschland*. Online-Ausstellung des Forschungsprojektes "Normalität und Krise" (2018–2021). Berlin: Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient. <https://anfaenge-erinnerungen.zmo.de>

This paper is based on the findings from my ethnographic fieldwork in Berlin, conducted between roughly October 2018 and March 2020.⁵ Because my research centred on Syrian papers and because I was a foreigner and migrant in Germany, part of my fieldwork in Berlin ended up being about Syrians and their integration into Germany.⁶ As part of this integration process revolves around learning German – a language I also had to learn – I took part in an integration course designed to teach German as a language and as a way of life. It was offered by a Berlin continuing education school (Volkshochschule) for a year (2019–2020). In autumn 2018, I also attended a legal seminar with the theme “WiR. Wir im Rechtsstaat” (Us in the Rule of Law State). This legal education project was created in 2016 by the Berlin Senate’s Department of Justice and was incorporated into its anti-discrimination agenda that revolves around courses to combat racism, right-wing extremism and anti-Semitism. My fieldwork included extensive participant observation and hanging out with Syrians living in Berlin, regardless of their legal status.⁷ The sensitive political nature of my research cut me off from many ‘ethnographic possibilities’, either because of Syrians’ legitimate mistrust regarding my role as a researcher in the integration context, or because of my ethical and political concerns regarding the knowledge I gained through the friendships I formed.⁸ The paper begins with a focus on Syria and the challenges Syrians face in retrieving documents from inside Syria due

to the entanglement between state bureaucracies and security apparatuses. Sometimes, the retrieval of documents requires social connections and bribery, practices that have complex political and ethical dimensions as they allow Syrians to flee from their home, thus collapsing the distinction between the legal and illegal in times of war. The study follows the arrival of Syrians in Germany and their inclusion in the integration process with a focus on education courses. I sketch how the classroom dynamics – as a microcosm of the integration process – function to transform Syrians into liberal subjects-to-be. This context produces a strict hierarchy between the teachers and Syrian students. I show how teachers produce this hierarchy by recognizing and denouncing racism and discrimination in German society, while, conversely, reproducing these discriminatory practices while working with Arab or Muslim students. This reproduction of hierarchy also occurs in teaching a normative understanding of legality based on the rule of law. Finally, I investigate the encounter of Syrian documents with German law and bureaucracy. It highlights the contradictions and ambivalences at work in the journey of these papers from Syria to Germany. As German bureaucracy requires updated Syrian documents, it unintentionally revives political dynamics at work inside Syria, reifying Syrians’ connections to their state of origin. Syrian documents of course bear traces of this connection, but their incorporation into the German bureaucratic system also transforms the meanings of these documents – as their legal value is ambiguous – as well as the practices necessary to obtain them from Syria.

Legal documents and the limits of citizenship rights in Syria

Contemporary Syria features a concept of citizenship rights tied to loyalty to the al-Assad regime and Ba’athist ideology, and the boundaries between the citizenship and loyalty are blurred and overlap.⁹ Indeed, the complex constellation of bureaucratic practices necessary to retrieve legal documents from inside Syria shows how a legalistic liberal notion of citizenship rights has little bearing on this case. Obtaining and retrieving papers is embedded in broader relations of power and control fractured by different forms of sociability tied to state apparatuses. More importantly, this legalistic reading excludes *a priori* the wider forms of sociability and social relations involved in these constellations, as well as the meanings of citizenship in the Syrian context. In Syria, these social relations intersect with state bureaucratic and security apparatuses and are encapsulated in the term *wasta* (connection). *Wasta* includes practices of patronage and intercession in state-citizen relationships that were considered a form of corruption (*fasaad*) tied to the shadow state prior to 2011 (Ismail, 2018). Yazan Doughan offers a more nuanced reading of these practices in the case of Jordan, where *wasta*, he argues, has ambivalent meanings as it is both a form of corruption and an ethical practice to achieve equality (Y. Doughan 2018: 8). In post-2011 Syria, this reading of *wasta* is further complicated as social connections become a crucial aspect of Syrians’ attempt to

5 The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affected the ethnographic fieldwork deeply. Fieldwork was interrupted by the first lockdown imposed in Germany in March 2020 and had to be ended shortly afterwards as its continuation by other means (i.e. digital ethnography and phone calls) proved to be unsuccessful due to the nature of the research. As such, the findings obtained are limited compared to what had been envisioned.

6 My experience of the integration course was that of an observant participant. As a foreigner with no previous knowledge of Germany and its bureaucratic system, I adopted a non-nativist approach (De Genova, 2016) to my work on the German asylum regime and integration process.

7 Syrians who reached Germany as asylum seekers (Holmes and Castaneda 2016) were granted different legal statuses by the German asylum regime. The German asylum regime granted Syrians political asylum based on Article 16a(1) of the Grundgesetz (German Basic Constitutional Law); refugee protection under the Geneva Convention as envisioned by Section 3(1) of the Asylum Act (2008); or subsidiary protection under Section 4(1) of the Asylum Act (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2015: 17). Political asylum and refugee status (full protection) means a person is granted a three-year residency permit (*Aufenthaltslaubnis*) that is later replaced by an unlimited settlement permit (*Niederlassungserlaubnis*). In the case of subsidiary protection, the residency permit is granted for one year only, with possible two-year extensions; a *Niederlassungserlaubnis* may only be granted after seven years and if certain criteria – such as adequate knowledge of German and the ability to earn a living – are met. Subsidiary protection for Syrians in Germany may be revoked if Syria is declared a safe country (BAMF, 2015). Asylum and full protection grant Syrians the right to apply for family reunification with facilitated conditions, whereas subsidiary protection grants family reunification only under certain conditions.

8 I examine the methodological, ethical and political issues encountered in my fieldwork in Berlin and their connections to my previous fieldwork in Lebanon in a forthcoming article, tentatively titled ‘Too Close, Too Foreign: the Ethnographic and the Private in Doing Fieldwork in Berlin’ (Ferreri 2021).

9 This does not exclude the existence of other notions of citizenship in Syria.

obtain legal documents and can become enmeshed with practices such as bribery.

In times of war and state repression, Syrians' attempt to obtain mundane legal documents and the practices involved in this difficult endeavour transcend the rigid legalistic approach governing a liberal understanding of the rule of law. As the workings of Syrian bureaucracy and its embeddedness in the politics of security transform obtaining papers into a political act. Prior to the uprising, Syrian authorities strictly regulated citizens' international mobility, imposing restrictions (on Syrian men who did not complete the compulsory military service and on civil servants) and travel bans on dissidents, conscripted men and others. Travel bans and restrictions were based on the specific procedure to obtain or renew passports, as requests made at the Department of Migration and Passports required the approval of the Syrian security services, which checked the status of the applicants. The strict control exerted through the Database of the Department of Migration and Passports extended even further, as this database was shared with Syrian border posts, and security agencies could arrest men fleeing conscription on the spot, even if they held valid passports.

Obtaining a passport was not the only instance in which the regime's politics of security was intrinsically tied to state bureaucratic procedures. This logic of control also infiltrated mundane bureaucratic procedures such as retrieving school certificates from within Syria. Syrian embassies also followed the same procedures. Requests made by Syrian citizens abroad for civilian documents – such as birth certificates and passports – were sent back to Syria for the approval of the Secret Services.

This dynamic changed in April 2015, when the regime lifted the requirement of security clearances from Syria's intelligence services for bureaucratic requests from Syrians abroad (Ferrerri 2018: 239). Syrians' obedience and loyalty were also evaluated through the numerous security checks (*diraasa amniyya*) required for changes of address, marriages and obtaining state employment (public school teachers, for example).

Syrians' attempts to deal with paperwork in Syria highlight the political nature of their encounters with state bureaucracy and the discriminatory practices of the Syrian regime. These barriers were met by Syrians' defiance through social connection and bribing. In times of war and state repression, these defiant practices punctuating Syrians' retrieving papers – as well as other practices such as obtaining information about political prisoners, collapse the distinction between the legal and the illegal but also the moral and immoral proposed in a strict legalistic reading of corruption and the rule of law.

For Syrians who had the chance to plan ahead for their journey, the collection of documents was a fundamental and time-consuming step in their preparations. Fadi, who was a university student in Damascus in 2014, decided to flee Syria because he feared he would be drafted into the army and be made to fight in the war. At that time, hundreds of security checkpoints had been set up in Damascus, and in nearby towns, raids had begun on homes to ferret out young men to be conscripted into the army (Suerbaum 2021; Monroe 2021). The risk of being conscripted

on the spot at checkpoints infused his everyday life with fear. Although he was not a wanted citizen yet, he lived en attendant of becoming one. Since 2011, the state security apparatus has had the power to declare any Syrian wanted by virtue of being considered a possible threat to the regime based on their engagement in different aspects of political life, such as evading conscription and political activism. Being wanted entails arrest, curtailed freedom of mobility and even torture or 'disappearance' (Ferrerri 2018: 78–89).¹⁰ This security and bureaucratic designation permeates the everyday lives of those – women included – who are wanted for their connection to revolutionary activism, uprooting them from their social and family life. The fear produced by wanted status in its different facets and degrees powerfully manifests itself in the encounters of Syrians with state bureaucracy, or rather the impossibility of engaging with state bureaucracy, even for mundane purposes.

Fadi, who reached Germany in 2015, recalled the difficulties in obtaining the different documents he needed there. He managed to obtain documents from the university, but they had to be stamped by the Syrian Ministry of Education and certified by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to be recognized as valid certificates abroad, which was not an easy enterprise in 2014. Indeed, in my fieldwork in Lebanon, even retrieving school certificates was described as difficult. "To obtain education certificates", one Syrian researcher and activist had explained to me, "you have to appear in person at the school or university authorities. Close members of your family (immediate family) could also ask for them, but it is not easy. Fadi managed to obtain a valid document stamped and certified by the various Syrian ministries because he had enough time to request the papers, but also because he had *wasta* and money. Like many other Syrians, he is fully aware of how the lists of wanted citizens work and has adopted 'tactics' (De Certeau 1984) to defy these limitations and the discriminatory nature of the Syrian bureaucracy using a social connection who, among many other things, facilitates Fadi's paperwork.

A *wasta* is generally a state agent with whom an ordinary Syrian has a special relationship. This relationship hinges on the state agent facilitating and speeding up different bureaucratic processes, such as the issuance of official documents, authorizations for economic activities (Anderson 2013) and state employment – at times in exchange for money. Indeed, a *wasta* can be a medium to obtain benefits and exploit the shadow state within the Syrian regime (Ismail 2018). However, a *wasta* is also an acquaintance who has crucial knowledge of state practices – but also beyond state practices – or has connections to state agents. In wartime, the social relations revolving around *wasta* were used to rupture the regime's politics of security, transforming these practices into a form of ethical and political solidarity. During my time in Lebanon, social connections featured prominently in the recollections of many Syrian activists who avoided arrest thanks to an acquaintance who leaked information about the inclusion

¹⁰ Before 2011, citizens were declared wanted mainly for illegal practices, although that too had a political angle in relation to the regime's politics of security (see Ismail 2018).

of a person in a security service's list. In other cases, people were able to cross the official border, retrieve official documents and get information regarding the fate of prisoners or the disappeared only through a social connection and bribery.

The reconfiguration of the meanings and functions of *wasta* and bribery highlights how these practices are forms of political and ethical solidarity. Indeed, these practices can restore a sense of individual agency and, at times, may even save someone's life, even as they perversely reproduce the same political system of control, corruption and repression that they attempt to rupture (see Schielke 2015).¹¹ Syrian official documents are part of the regime's web of power and control, and the distinction between the politics of security and other aspects of state authorities, such as bureaucracy, is never clear, especially for those who are or might become wanted citizens; social connections and money tame this unpredictability. This is why many continue to cultivate social connections – which entails exchanges of favours as well as different degrees of acquaintance – even outside Syria. These relationships and the practices they enable have a political and ethical dimension too, as they are forms of social solidarity that not only restore a degree of individual agency, but also offer an alternative to prison and army conscription. Syrian documents function within this constellation of possibility and, in terms of migration to and asylum in Germany, they work as material evidence of legal identity, kinship ties, education and profession.

Educating and integrating newcomers

Syrians who reach Germany as refugees are required to attend different types of courses, such as a language and orientation course and legal education. The paradigm of integrating Syrian newcomers into Germany operates through different education initiatives to provide them with new knowledge and skills. These are meant to help Syrians navigate German society and state apparatuses, and make them new liberal subjects and (probably) future citizens. This incorporation hinges on learning the German language and more broadly, the cultivation of liberal sensitivities, construction of the self, and ways of being in relation to the broader society and state authority. Through a series of ethnographic vignettes, I argue that the creation of liberal subjects envisioned by the German integration paradigm does not account for Syrians' past as subjects and citizens of the Syrian state and is in contradiction with the working of the German bureaucracy. The multiple and contradictory outcomes at the heart of the integration project are accomplished through moralizing and disciplining attitudes, and the creation of a rigid hierarchy between students/newcomers and the teachers who represent state authority.

Recent anthropological literature on forced migration to Europe discusses the entanglement between the moral and the legal as a manifestation of the emergence of new

configurations of refugeehood and citizenship regimes. In her analysis of *sans-papiers* and the illness clause in immigration policy in France, Ticktin (2011) focuses on how humanitarianism, as a transnational system of governance, infiltrates new forms of citizenship. Citizenship rights may be granted through suffering and precarity, and citizenship becomes imbued with a discourse of moralism that blurs the boundaries between different domains – political, legal and ethico-moral. Suffering and precarity were also central to the emergence of what Cabot (2019) calls 'humanitarian citizenship' in Greece. With the overlapping of the economic crisis with the refugee crisis, Cabot (2019: 750) describes how 'the rights and entitlements of citizenship, for wide swaths of the population, become increasingly codified through humanitarian logics and sentiments' that shorten the gap between citizens and non-citizens in terms of rights, survival strategies and notions of deservingness.

In the case of Germany, the entanglement of the moral with the legal in the integration process is less infiltrated by transnational humanitarianism; it instead recalls the concept of education (*Bildung*) historically rooted in the notion of German citizenship itself (S. Doughan 2018). *Bildung* is an emancipatory project and a form of moral self-cultivation that emerged even before the legal concept of citizenship, as an antithesis to the rationality of the Enlightenment (S. Doughan 2018: 53). In the eighteenth century, the Prussian state reshaped *Bildung* in relation to state- and citizenship-building by transforming it into a form of individual internalization of the state, a modern project that mainly took place through public schooling (S. Doughan 2018: 54).

Sultan Doughan traces how *Bildung* became central to the incorporation of (religious and racial) minorities into the German polity, arguing that, in this case, *Bildung* was transformed into a racial historicist project (S. Doughan 2018). In his work on liberal state formation as a modern political project of racial exclusion, Goldberg defines racial historicism as a concept that sees the perceived inferiority of non-European communities as a historical immaturity that can be ameliorated through progress and by instilling civilized notions such as tolerance (Goldberg 2002; see also S. Doughan 2018). Infused with paternalism, racial historicism echoes the civilizing mission embedded in European colonialism, while coexisting with racial naturalism.¹² In contemporary Germany, *Bildung* as a racial historicist project is at the heart of the incorporation of Muslim minorities using political education courses intended to fight anti-Semitism through the cultivation of tolerance as a moral attitude (S. Doughan 2018).

In the case of Syrian newcomers, this incorporation works through the integration course (and other courses) being embedded in the German asylum regime. Syrians embody different, even contradictory, forms of alterity. On the one hand, they are essentialized as victims of war and refugees, and therefore subjects deserving protection and access to different forms of aid. On the other hand, they are also essentialized as Arabs and Muslims with political,

¹¹ For instance, families' attempts to obtain information on or the release of relatives in prison lead to extortion and exploitation, such as ransom (Jalabi 2021) and the sale of family land and property to war profiteers tied to the regime. Often, even after acquiescing to such demands, families get no results (Jasim 2015).

¹² Racial naturalism conceives backward societies as inherently irrational and, thus, excluded from any form of development and progress any possible development and progress (Goldberg 2002).

cultural and moral values and sensibilities that are antithetical to those of Europe and Germany.¹³ The constellation of integration courses functions as a crucial vector to smooth down these features of otherness embodied by Syrians, so that they can be integrated, that is incorporated, into the new society. However, the outcome of this *Bildung* is not so much the formation of a new self but the inculcation of a set of affective dispositions (Shoshan 2016) that Syrian newcomers develop within the class setting and in mundane interactions between teacher and students. These dispositions coalesce in the production of a rigid hierarchy between Syrian students and the teacher, and in the inculcation by the teacher of a moral, political and legal knowledge in the students.

The integration course

The German system envisions the integration course as a fundamental aspect of the asylum regime.

The course is constituted of two modules: a language course from A1 (basic) to B1 (intermediate) lasting between 600 and 900 hours and an orientation course on politics, history and everyday life in Germany, whose duration is 60 hours. These courses are offered by public continuing education schools accredited by the BAMF (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge / Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) that decides on the teaching curriculum and materials.¹⁴ Moreover, enrolment in these courses requires prospective students – regardless of legal status – to fill two different, yet complementary, registration forms: one for the school administration and the second for the BAMF.¹⁵ The intricate administrative entanglement between integration courses and state authorities does not end with the enrolment, it infiltrates the class too. Course attendance is mandatory for refugees and is tied to state benefits and the prospect of eventually obtaining German citizenship.¹⁶ Students have to attend 80 per cent of the course hours and have to record their attendance by signing a school register and a BAMF one. The BAMF monitors the attendance register and uses it as an official document for state benefits evaluations procedures. As teachers are in charge of attendance, they also exercise part of the state surveillance (see also Heinemann 2017: 179), albeit with a certain power of discretion, functioning like street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980 in Partridge 2008: 667) in representing the state and translating laws, policies and regulations into bureaucratic practice.

¹³ This does not mean that all Syrians are Arab or Muslim; Syrians have many different ethnic and religious groups.

¹⁴ Private schools accredited with the BAMF can also offer these types of course.

¹⁵ For EU citizens, the BAMF registration is not compulsory but the school administration advises them to register in order to receive a partial refund of the course fees after the exam.

¹⁶ The 2004 Immigration Act (Zuwanderungsgesetz) establishes mandatory integration courses for asylum seekers, refugees, non-EU labour migrants and migrant requesting family reunification visas (Williams 2018: 1–2). For EU citizens, language course attendance is not compulsory, however they have to attend the orientation course if they apply for German citizenship. Migrants who succeed in the language and orientation exam (one year after the course ends), the BAMF reimburses half of the fees.

While integration course teachers are like street bureaucrats as they work at the interface between the classroom and the BAMF, they are also responsible for inculcating knowledge in newcomers to transform them from non-citizens into liberal subjects who deserve to be integrated. This moral knowledge is also mediated through the figure of the teacher whose unquestioned authority requires students' compliance through the act of silencing. First, I show how teachers in the integration course acknowledge the existence of racism outside the classroom setting, in broader society. However, this recognition has its shortcomings. It excludes any acknowledgement of racism within the class setting. Thus, this recognition suggests that the teachers are morally superior to the newcomers since their denouncing the existence of racism excludes themselves from any confrontation with their own discriminatory attitudes in the class.

The evening integration course I attended hosted a very heterogeneous group of students: Syrian refugees entitled to full protection, non-EU citizens – including Syrians, Russians, Bosnians and US nationals – and EU migrants from Italy, Spain and Eastern European countries. While the group of students remained almost unchanged for most of the language course, the composition of the orientation course changed as new students joined, including four men from West Africa, a woman from South-East Asia and two Arab men – one from Palestine and the other from Morocco. Our language teacher, originally from an Eastern European country, was in her early sixties and had become involved in the integration courses out of passion; she had a full-time day job. She was critical of her role in recording attendance for the BAMF and used a certain amount of discretion to accommodate certain students' needs if they missed more hours than allowed. Her critique of the policy was accompanied by other forms of critique or defiance of the strict rules governing the integration courses – she refused to use the official BAMF textbook adopted by the school. Moreover, the frequency and intensity of the time we spent in the course – three times a week, three hours a day, created at times a relaxed atmosphere and organic group dynamics that allowed our teacher to share with us her critique of certain German cultural and social practices and discourses. Her openness to critiquing Germany was, however, coupled with veiled or openly racist comments about Islam and Arab culture. At times, she showed discriminatory attitudes towards two of my classmates – both single Syrian men in their mid-thirties living in collective accommodation – on the rare occasions when they did not comply with her authority by either ignoring her questions or openly defying her in their answers. While my two Syrian classmates were aware of the racism and discrimination underlying certain comments – it was a topic we discussed outside the classroom – they were generally not interested in confronting the teacher. In the class, their silence in the face of racism and discrimination was tied to their unwillingness to jeopardize the outcomes of the integration course as it was a necessary step to build a stable present and future for themselves in Germany, as they repeatedly told me during our coffee breaks. The silences filling the interactions between our teacher and my Syrian schoolmates were thus crafted out of the fear

of possible negative consequences regarding their files at the jobcentre and the BAMF.

Silencing and compliance with the teacher's authority also characterized the orientation course. Our orientation teacher, a woman in her mid-forties, was involved in pro-refugee political activism. Her leftist stance was revealed on several occasions during the course. First, her classes were very eclectic. She deviated from the standard BAMF teaching curriculum and methods to offer a critical view about long-term migration to Germany since the Nazi era, and discussed questions about different forms of discrimination, including racism, misogyny and anti-Semitism. Her commitment to the cause was also translated into practice after the racist murders in Hanau.¹⁷ She drafted a statement of condemnation and circulated it among teachers and students to pressure the school to issue the statement publicly. However, like our language teacher, her critique was always offered about the broader society and rarely addressed the classroom and its dynamics that transformed the teacher into a benevolent and liberal authority figure.

In one class, she introduced to us gender identity and the working of privilege in relation to capitalism and patriarchy, employing material she designed that was not included in the textbook. The main aim of the class was to teach newcomers that gender is a social construct. She wrote down the seminal quote from Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* "du wirst nicht als Frau geboren, du wirst zu einer Frau gemacht" (one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one) as a starting point to discuss gender fluidity, sex and sexual orientation, drawing on a simplified version of Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity. Although her intention was to disrupt the hegemony of heteronormativity, the entire discussion was very confusing for most of my classmates due to their unfamiliarity with these theories, even for those involved in same-sex relationships. Despite the general puzzlelement that emerged during the group work and the plenary discussion, the teacher became interested in what my Syrian classmate, who was in his mid-thirties and divorced, thought about same-sex relationships and heteronormativity, a question also addressed to the Palestinian student, who was dressed in traditional clothes. This question was addressed neither to the Moroccan student nor to the other men in the class. She asked these questions standing in front of the desk of each student; both remained silent. The Syrian student did not understand the question in German, so the other Moroccan student and I translated it for him. However, he remained silent even after the translation, as he did not know what to say in reply; he merely nodded, hoping to deflect the teacher's attention. The Palestinian student, who had already heard the translation but did not know what to say, reacted similarly. Our teacher discussed gender issues and non-heteronormativity in order to offer a more complex picture of the working of capitalism and patriarchy in mainstream

society and their forms of oppression. However, her motivations became enmeshed with paternalism as she only questioned the two Arab Muslim men – perceived as the ultimate Others – as subjects who needed to learn new (liberal) moral values and norms (see Heinemann 2017).

Teaching the law

The production of hierarchies between the teachers and student newcomers and the students' compliance with the knowledge taught in the classroom are central elements in other courses offered in the integration framework as well. In this section, I focus on the legal knowledge instilled in newcomers to show how notions such as the rule of law and corruption are explained using a normative legalistic approach to which the students have to comply. In autumn 2018, I attended a three-and-a-half-hour legal education seminar titled "WiR. Wir im Rechtsstaat". Led by Berlin-based judges and public prosecutors, these seminars are organized ad hoc for refugees interested in learning about the rule of law, the legal and political architecture of the German state, and individuals' rights and duties as laid out explicitly in the German Constitutional Basic Law. The seminars were also open to anyone living in Berlin and one of the judges involved explained that the group of attendees is always very heterogeneous, including newcomers, migrants who had lived in Germany for twenty years and young people. The seminar complemented the orientation course, as most of the themes discussed in WiR were also included in the first part of the orientation course's textbook. The themes centred on political life in Germany and included the rule of law, the division of power and institutions within the German state. Our course took place in a classroom in a Berlin state-run school where desks were arranged in a horseshoe pattern to give participants the chance to see each other as well as the whiteboard/screen. The course was led by a female judge in her mid-fifties. It was simultaneously translated into Arabic by a male translator sitting next to the screen that was used to display illustrations or diagrams. The audience was constituted of seven people, mostly Syrians of different ages and sexes, accompanied by a German teacher working in an integration course. As I joined the class late, I missed the brief introductions of most of the participants, only getting to hear the German participant's explanation that her interest in the seminar had been sparked by her Syrian students' fears of dealing with state authorities. Another student, a Syrian woman in her early forties, also joined the class a little late. The atmosphere was formal as most attendees had met each other for the first time and the seminar was a lecture given by the judge with the help of the translator.

In the first part of the session, the judge explained the core principles of the German state and its institutions: the division of power among the state's different institutions, *Rechtsstaat* [the Rule of Law State], *Rechtsstaatlichkeit* [Rule of Law] and the police.¹⁸ Attendees had no questions regarding the judge's explanation and the material shown in the slides, so she went on to address corrup-

¹⁷ On 19 February 2020, a racist far-right extremist killed nine people – mostly Germans of Middle Eastern and Balkan descent – and injured six in the city of Hanau, not far from Frankfurt am Main. Despite the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, several gatherings using the hashtag #SayTheirNames took place in various cities to remember the victims and confront racism in Germany.

¹⁸ Some of the materials used in the class can be found at <https://www.berlin.de/sen/lads/schwerpunkte/rechtsextremismus-rassismus-antisemitismus/projekt-wir-wir-im-rechtsstaat/artikel.749154.php>.

tion. She gave the example of a driver who, having been caught speeding, tries to bribe the police officer to avoid a fine. The anecdote was illustrated by a series of images projected onto the whiteboard. She then asked the students whether it was legal to bribe the officer, to which the entire group of students answered 'no' in unison. This response, however, did not stop the judge from explaining that bribery is a form of corruption and, therefore, illegal in Germany and that it has legal consequences. Her emphasis on bribery as a form of corruption and, therefore, as an illegal practice was rooted in a normative understanding of citizens' equality being at the heart of the rule of law and a concept of authority as legal and rational (Y. Doughan 2018: 6). However, for me, her eagerness to explain corruption to the students highlighted that it is not only illegal but also immoral. Indeed, her emphasis on this topic implies the need to educate newcomers on new moral values regarding legality as they lack the capacity to understand that bribery is a form of corruption since it is widespread and normalized in Arab countries (Y. Doughan 2017). However, this view recognizes the existence of this (illegal and immoral) practice as a fact purely through the lens of the rule of law and does not question the political dimension characterizing certain legally ambiguous practices in Syria, as I have shown in the case of retrieving legal documents. Other stereotypes about Arab and Muslim society appeared in the content of the seminar. For instance, the judge used the example of a robbery to explain that the victim should not use violence against the robber but should immediately call the police and wait for them to arrive, pointing out that the use of force by an individual is not seen in a positive light in Germany. This explanation implied that the students could not understand the difference between legitimate and illegitimate violence, as if their lives in their country of origin had been entirely lawless, unlike in Germany.

Students listened silently to the judge's explanation and the short translation of her intervention that followed, at times looking at the whiteboard. The flow of information offered to the students was interrupted only a few times; sometimes by the judge herself asking the participants questions, at other times by sarcastic whispers from the Syrian woman who had arrived late and was sitting close to the touchscreen whiteboard used by the judge and the translator. During the coffee break, the participants' conversations did not touch on the themes of the session. We were busy sipping coffee and socializing, learning about each other's experiences in Germany and levels of German language skill. A woman in her late thirties, originally from Northern Syria, shared that she had lived in Germany earlier, when her husband used to work there, but that she had moved back to Syria after a couple of years. She had returned to Germany recently, although she struggled with the German language. The Syrian woman who made sarcastic comments during the class asked me what I was doing there and after listening to my explanation regarding my research, she walked away without a word and joined the other women. The two young girls, in their late teens, and one of the men were mostly shy and silent.

At the time, I was a bit surprised by the collective indifference to the racist undertones of the judge's lecture, as

it was my first encounter with the German integration system. Only when I attended the integration course did I become more familiar with the teacher-newcomers hierarchy and the degree of Syrians' compliance with what was being taught, even when it echoed racial historicism. However, my initial reading of the context at the legal seminar was wrong. Indeed, the second half of the class saw an open conflict sparked between the judge and the Syrian woman who had been so sarcastic about the judge's explanations before the break.

The judge introduced more concrete examples of the rights of citizens and non-citizens in relation to different types of contracts such as house rent. She used the example of the right to complain about a neighbour making too much noise and to call the police over this. The Syrian woman raised her hand and asked for advice on her own case – her neighbour had repeatedly complained about noise and called the police several times. She said that this puzzled her because she lived alone with her two children, aged thirteen and fifteen, and they go to bed early. She shared that she had been threatened with eviction from the apartment because of the complaints. The woman implicitly tried to 'convince' the judge that this may be a case of racism, something she hinted at in one of her questions. She asked about possible ways to defend herself from these accusations. The judge was perplexed and elusive in her answers but, eventually, admitted that this might be a case of racism, adding that we – as state authorities – could not force her neighbour to change who she is. Although the translator did not translate this sentence, the judge's statement was an admission that racism is a *de facto* element of German society (see also Shoshan, 2016), while excluding it from her understanding of the rule of law. The student continued to ask questions to the judge who, clearly irritated, ended the discussion abruptly by saying, 'This is my class, I decide what to do'. At this, the student left the class, whispering in Arabic, 'I won't take this anymore'. The judge did not look at her, everyone was silent and after a few seconds, the lesson continued. The conflict showed the rigidity of the hierarchy between the teacher and the Syrian students embedded in the class setting and, overall, in the integration process. This hierarchy and the precarious condition inhabited by Syrians in Germany produce silence regarding their knowledge about and experiences in Syria and Germany. The interactions between the teacher and the newcomers inform and shape the ways Syrians engage with other German state authorities. Syrians' relationships and encounters with German bureaucracy are part of this hierarchy, in which Syrian documents also become incorporated as they are crucial during and after the asylum procedure.

Syrian documents and German bureaucracy

Syrians who reached Germany through informal routes could not carry these documents on the perilous journey to Fortress Europe. Documents can become a liability in the process of crossing different state borders (Lewkowicz, 2021) and can easily be lost along the hazardous journey. Asylum seekers are reunited with their documents only after they reach their destination and begin the asylum procedure. Papers are usually dispatched by courier, or

entrusted to friends or acquaintances with legal status in Europe who happen to be travelling between the Syria's neighbouring countries. Sarah, a mother of three in her early forties showed me the legal documents she had salvaged from Syria and told me their story. As soon as she arrived in Germany with her children in 2015, she asked a close relative who was in the Middle East at that time to send her the documents she left behind.

I was lucky, a bit lucky. The bundle, this one. I gave it to my brother together with my computer. I didn't bring it with me *bi-taryq al-bahr* ['at sea', referring to her journey across informal borders from Lebanon to Berlin through the Balkans route – Turkey, the Greek islands, Croatia and Slovenia]. I brought only my ID and passport to sea, folded in plastic bags. Those other papers, and the ones about my work in Syria and Lebanon and so on, I gave my brother and his wife, who travelled to the US. I told them, 'If I arrive safely [*bi-salame wa bi-khayr*], maybe bring me the documents and my computer.'

Sarah's documents included the birth notifications from the hospital and birth certificates of her children, her university certificates (fully certified for recognition abroad) and medical documents. She also had the *ikhraj al-qayd* (extracts from the civilian registry). These extracts included an individual one indicating the legal identity of each family member, and one for the family – as a substitute for her family booklet (*daftar al-a'ila*). Sarah carried with her the extract from the civilian registry belonging to her ex-husband together with the divorce certificate from the Sharia Court and the documents granting her full custody of her children. She had collected most of these documents when she was still in Syria and obtained the last documents regarding her divorce and the custody of her children while in Lebanon in 2015. These documents were crucial to speeding up her asylum procedure since they provided proof of her legal identity, civic status and relationship with her children. For these papers to be recognized by the judicial authority in Germany, she had to have them translated by a sworn translator before her 'meeting' with BAMF decision-makers. This process was laborious and expensive, especially for someone who had just arrived in Germany. Sarah had no previous knowledge of the country and its functioning, and had little money at disposal:

This is the reason why when I did the interview [for the asylum] in front of *al-qaady* [the judge – referring to BAMF decision-makers]. Every time he asked me 'I want this document' I just passed him the document. I was asked how I could possibly have all these documents with me [prepared for the interview] [...], I translated them. [...] I paid 30 euro for each paper to be translated, I wanted to die!

She points out that most people who reached Germany at that time *bi-taryq al-bahr* (by the sea, meaning 'by the Balkans route') carried only money, thinking the documents were not important or necessary. Although these documents may be stored in the first country of refuge with a trustworthy person and delivered to Germany – as Sarah did – many Syrians did not get a chance to retrieve their documents prior to the journey, reaching Europe al-

most paperless. For others, the possession of Syrian documents may not be enough if they are not recognized as valid by the German bureaucracy because the documents do not comply with the strict German regulations governing the legalization of Syrian documents.

Thus, in certain cases Syrians have to retrieve brand-new documents from Syria even after the end of the asylum procedure, because they are needed for other processes, such as continuing education, practising certain professions (such as medicine, pharmacy or engineering) and recording key life events, such as new births. For this reason, Syrians are forced to retrieve updated documents, even if they have received full protection or are entitled to political asylum.

For key life events, such as marriage and obtaining German citizenship, the need for updated Syrian documents is even greater. German law requires Syrians – as foreign citizens – who want to enter a legal marriage in Germany to present a series of German documents, such as a certificate of residence, as well as Syrian documents to the *Standesamt* (local registry office).¹⁹ The main Syrian documents include a birth certificate or civil record attesting to the legal identity of the person, and a certificate of no impediment to marriage (or single status attestation certificate, *waraq a'azab/Ehefähigkeitszeugnis*) – a paper that did not exist in Syria until recently and which, therefore, was not even issued by its state authority. Article 39, Paragraph 1 Clause 3 of the Civil Status Law stipulates that foreign refugees, in accordance with the Agreement on the Legal Status of Refugees with Ordinary Residence, have to provide a certificate of no impediment to marriage (as indicated by clauses 1 and 2 of the same paragraph).²⁰ Thus, the German bureaucracy still requires Syrians (regardless of their legal status) to retrieve and legalize their Syrian documents.

These documents are legalized through the German embassy in Beirut, even when the Syrians requesting the procedure reside in Germany. The German guidelines for the legalization of Syrian documents require Syrians to submit the original documents, printed and stamped by the authorities responsible for issuing them, together with an official translation. The translation must be over-authenticated (*Überbeglaubigung*) by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs before being sent to the German embassy in Lebanon, which verifies the authenticity of the papers.²¹ The originals must be accompanied by a certified translation into German by a sworn translator. In Germany, the marriage is then validated by the *Kammer-*

19 The legal basis for getting married in Germany is the *Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch* (German Civil Code) sections 1303, 1304, 1306, 1307, 1308, 1309 and the *Personenstandsgesetz* (German Civil Status Act), sections 12, 13, 39 (Section 9 of the Ordinance on the Implementation of the Personal Status Act, Berlin State). See also Service Portal Berlin (n.d.).

20 This clause also applies to stateless persons and homeless foreigners. I thank Katharina Lange for translating this article of the Civil Status Law from German to English.

21 This information is drawn from the "Checkliste: Legalisation syrischer Urkunden per Post", an internal document regarding the procedure for the legalization of Syrian documents at the German Embassy in Beirut for use by German state institutions such as job centres. I thank Franziska Ortlieb for translating it from German into English.

gericht (Higher Regional Court).²² According to German law, both documents obtained from the Syrian bureaucracy are valid only for six months from the official submission date of the marriage application at the Standesamt. In case of delays, these documents expire and the procedure needs to be started over, including the request for new documents. If the procedure at the Standesamt is delayed and the six months pass, the local registry officer can decide whether to accept these papers as valid and proceed with the marriage application or to reject the application, forcing the applicants to reapply, as one interlocutor explained to me. This system is peculiar to Germany and is not found in other European states. In Italy, for instance, refugee status severs the connection between the refugee and their state of origin. This disconnection means that Syrians with refugee status receive new birth certificates from the Italian state authorities and do not need to request these documents from Syria.

For many of my friends and interlocutors in Germany, the struggle to obtain these documents from Syria revives certain dynamics that had been at work in their past relationship with the Syrian regime, as obtaining these papers through formal channels has a political significance. The mundane bureaucratic procedure of getting married reinstates the hierarchy created by the integration process, as the marriage procedure can be rejected at the discretion of a bureaucrat in case of delay. This hierarchy also emerges in the unpredictability of the success or failure of the procedure as Syrians struggle to 'navigate' (Tuckett 2018) the German bureaucratic system and the seeming impossibility of explaining to German bureaucrats the difficulties involved in retrieving Syrian official papers – both from the Syrian embassy in Berlin and from within Syria.

Indeed, Syrians residing in Germany with subsidiary protection and those who reached the country on student, work or family reunification visas can request these documents – as well as Syrian passports – from the Syrian embassy in Berlin. However, legal status in Germany does not mean that people may be categorized as wanted in Syria and, therefore, may remain fearful of engaging with the embassy, although the regime lifted its ban on the retrieval of official documents of wanted persons from the embassy in 2015. Some of my interlocutors were fully aware of the contradictions of a system that forced them to pay large amounts of money to the very Syrian state that persecuted them and forced them to exile – the consular fee for a new Syrian passport is \$800 and the renewal fee is \$400. This contradiction – as pointed out by the lawyers Anwar Al-Bounni and Nahla Osman –²³ is even more poignant in cases of family reunification. At times, Syrian documents requested by the German authorities are not so easily retrieved even from the Syrian embassy in Berlin because Syrian bureaucracy might have lost files and records, as the case of birth certificates of older citizens or non-citizens.

The struggle to obtain official Syrian documents for those with full protection is even more difficult and uncertain, as the German law forces them to engage with the bureaucratic apparatuses within Syria to obtain new documents, for instance, in order to get married in Germany. For Syrians with full protection, engaging with the Syrian bureaucratic authorities inside Syria requires money, patience and time as well as 'good wasta' and someone inside Syria with power of attorney (*wakala 'amma*).²⁴ In certain cases, Syrians might have to pay a lawyer to request and collect the plethora of documents required from state institutions such as the Nufous (Civil Registry Office) and religious courts. However, those who are wanted by the regime are also banned from requesting and obtaining civil papers from inside Syria.

This paradox leaves few options, and the retrieval of documents must occur through illegal means. Many friends and interlocutors who are wanted in Syria and decided to get married in Germany described how stressful the months leading up to their weddings were. The uncertainties of the success of retrieving the documents from Syria, the legalization of the documents at the German embassy in Beirut and their recognition by German authorities filled the six months preceding the wedding with apprehension. On top of these uncertainties is the fear of possible risks to family members still in Syria. At times, these labyrinths of laws and bureaucracies across Syria and Germany force many Syrians to decide not to get legally married in Germany. The alternative is to travel to another European country where marriage procedures are less rigid and demanding, such as Denmark, and then register the marriage in Germany. In other cases, the solution is a religious wedding that has no legal validity.²⁵

As German law continues to require Syrians to produce certain documents from Syria, the linkages between Syrians entitled of different types of protection and the Syrian state have not ended. On the contrary, these linkages are reproduced and reinforced even abroad, and with them a concept of Syrian citizenship and political loyalty – even when it is not about Syrian citizenship anymore. More importantly, the reproduction of this relationship between Syrians and the Syrian state is rooted in the German asylum system and its contradictions. One of these contradictions lies within the working of the German law and bureaucracy that require Syrians' official documents from the state of origin, even when this is the state from which they are fleeing. Because of the rootedness of Syrians' legal identity within the Syria state, the possibility for Syrians to re-integrate their past in Syria into their present and future in Germany is, at times, tied to illegal practices such as resorting to wasta or bribery. Dealing with German bureaucracy, and its rules, language and practices, gave new meaning to Syrians' methods of retrieving documents as well as to the documents themselves. As bribery becomes an immoral practice of corruption and the distinction between legality and illegality is complicated

²² Kammergericht is the highest state court for the city-state of Berlin; in the other states (Länder) of the Federal Republic of Germany, the equivalent is the Oberlandesgericht.

²³ Letter dated 21 October 2018 drafted by the Syrian Legal Centre and sent to the German Ministry of Foreign Office. I thank Sophie Ataya for translating it for me.

²⁴ This formal procedure cannot be carried out by any Syrian who is abroad.

²⁵ This practice can also be motivated by factors unrelated to the legal procedure, such as already being legally married to another partner or trialling the relationship (Akhtar et al., 2018: 375).

by the labyrinth of German red tape, its rigid time scales and modus operandi, these documents and their retrieval have become embedded into the integration process too. Thus, the legal and political meanings attached to these papers rooted in the dynamics at work inside Syria become entangled with new legal, moral and political values tied to Syrians' new precarious condition in Germany. As these documents become part of Syrians' own biographies, they also bear traces of the 'grey zone' made up of legally ambiguous practices, corruption and illegality, and the different political and moral values attributed to paperwork and citizenship in the two countries.

Conclusion

Syrians, whether in Syria or Germany, attempting to retrieve documents from Syria demonstrate the crucial role played by these mundane papers. The invisibility of the hard work required to retrieve those papers in the context of German integration is partly tied to the legally ambiguous routes asylum seekers take to reach Europe and to the rigid legalistic framework in which the papers gain new meanings. Throughout this working paper, the journey of these legal documents between Syria and Germany highlights how they escape a single definition, as they encapsulate different legal, political and even moral meanings in their encounters with different legal systems at different times. In Syria, these papers are an extension of the politics of security governing the concept of citizenship. They also bear traces of the development of Syrians' forms of political and ethical solidarity to defy the regime's repression, even when these practices involve legally ambiguous practices, such as *wasta*. However, the meanings attributed to these practices and official papers are transformed dramatically in the German context, where a strict understanding of the rule of law is instilled in Syrians as part of the integration process. In the integration framework, the emphasis is on the present and future of newcomers, their ability to learn German and their incorporation into German society, whose ultimate aim is to mould a liberal subject. This liberal project has its shortcomings, in that it hinges on a hierarchy in which Syrians occupy an inferior position as non-citizens on the path to citizenship, which further increases their precarious condition in Germany. The value of Syrian documents is also to smooth out this precariousness, as they allow the re-inscription of the past onto the present and future either by allowing Syrian students to continue their studies or by serving a proof of parental ties, in case of families. Thus, these documents have also a political and ethical value in the life of Syrians in Germany, which is at the source of their having to go through the tribulations of retrieving these documents. In addition to these meanings, Syrian papers also re-integrate the dark side of this past into the present. By requiring Syrians to retrieve updated papers from Syria, German bureaucracy paradoxically reproduces the relationship between the Syrian state and Syrians, even when it is about neither citizenship nor loyalty. However, this reproduction occurs in the new German bureaucratic context in which certain Syrian practices such as *wasta*, bribery and legal ambiguity are interpreted as purely illegal according to a normative understanding of the rule of law.

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