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“It’s the God factor”:

A qualitative study of Syrian Muslims’ post-war religious meaning-making

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Author note

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Abstract

Objective: Religious meaning-making may facilitate psychological adjustment to even the most extreme traumatic stressors, including war and forced displacement. Yet few studies have examined the religious meaning-making trajectories of refugees and none from an Islamic perspective. **Method:** This qualitative cross-sectional study investigated Syrian Muslims' post-war meaning-making experiences, guided by Park's (2010) meaning-making model. **Results:** Thirty-three Syrian Muslim refugees living in Portugal were interviewed eight years after the onset of the war. Thematic analysis was used to explore cognitive reappraisal processes informed by Islam. Key results suggest: the recurrent nature of meaning-making throughout refugees' displacement trajectories; religious struggles as a key determinant of religious meaning-making; meaning-making as dynamic trajectories with no clear end; place of settlement as a source of meaning; and the ability of Islam to withstand extreme challenges and provide a last-resort narrative, even for those individuals with severely eroded beliefs. Findings highlight the need for practitioners in host countries to incorporate faith and religious traditions in the provision of care.

Keywords: psychology of religion; psychology of Islam; trauma recovery; religious coping; spirituality.

Since 2011, the Syrian war has caused the mass displacement of millions of civilians fleeing a conflict fueled along political, religious, and ethnic lines (Hassan et al., 2015). What started as a peaceful uprising, soon descended into an all-out civil war inflamed by internal, regional, and international actors (Yacoubian, 2021). Combat, torture, disappearances, loss of home and country, and repeated internal and international displacements are some of the extreme events that have persistently challenged Syrians' assumptions of safety, justice, controllability, and predictability, and caused significant suffering (Kakaje et al., 2021; Matos et al., 2022). Like other countries in the Arab world, the vast majority of Syrians largely derive their individual and collective identities from their Islamic background (Hassan et al., 2015), with an estimated 87% of the population identifying as Muslims, 74% of whom Sunni (U.S. Department of State, 2021). As a meaning system, Islam provides a core lens through which the faithful interpret life events and express suffering (Hasan et al., 2018) and is therefore expected to anchor Syrians' post-war meaning-making experiences.

The ability to find meaning in life's most painful events has long been theorized as playing a critical role in trauma recovery. Numerous scholars have proposed models of psychological adjustment to trauma that center on cognitive-emotional processing and the possibility for stress-related growth (Park et al, 2012). These theories generally contend that individuals possess cognitive structures (e.g., worldviews, core beliefs, or schemas; Koltko-Rivera, 2004) through which they interpret their experiences and which give their lives predictability and control. When faced with an event that violates such structures, such as an untimely death, life-altering diagnosis, or, in the case of refugees, severe and compounded human rights violations, individuals experience significant distress. According to Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model, this distress triggers meaning-making efforts aimed at restoring coherence between the meaning assigned to the event (i.e., situational meaning) and shattered global meaning composed of core beliefs, life goals, and sense of

purpose. Meaning can then be restored by changing one's view of the stressor in a way that fits previous assumptions (e.g., acceptance) or reappraising shattered cognitive structures (e.g., gaining new perspectives on life). When successful, meaning-making is posited to lead to perceptions of psychological wellbeing, including posttraumatic growth, which has been documented across different refugee samples (Chan et al., 2016).

From a worldview perspective, religions offer the most comprehensive meaning systems available, provide consistent models of how the world is or ought to be, and imbue every aspect of human life and the full range of history with meaning (Hall & Hill, 2019). Religions also provide sets of rules and behaviors that structure the everyday practices of societies (Bhatia, 2012). Religious individuals are thus expected to use self-regulation skills to control behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in a manner that is consistent with religious teachings (Vishkin et al., 2016), and can derive support from the divine in times of distress. Under conditions of hardship that challenge core beliefs, the faithful often manifest religious and spiritual struggles as they face deeply unsettling questions about dimensions of the divine and life's ultimate meaning that can have significant implications for psychological wellbeing (Zarzycka & Zietek, 2019). These struggles are posited to be both a source and result of psychological distress (Pargament & Lomax, 2013), and can be appeased through rituals and personal practices of what individuals hold sacred (i.e., spirituality), support from one's religious community (Hall & Hill, 2019; Lakitsch, 2018), as well as cognitive reappraisal efforts aimed at more benevolent understandings of the stressor and its significance (Wortmann & Park, 2009). As such, religion can also play a central role in trauma recovery by offering solace in the midst of suffering and providing pathways to benevolently reframe life's extreme events (Park, 2005). To date, research on religious meaning-making (i.e., posttraumatic cognitive restructuring processes informed by a religious meaning system) has largely focused on Christian samples and survivors of one-time, individual traumatic events

(Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011) and been narrowly explored as religious coping (i.e., religion-informed cognitive and behavioral strategies that facilitate or impede psychological adjustment; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). In a field largely dominated by secularized research paradigms (Iqbal & Skinner, 2021), it is important to capture the religious meaning-making experiences of non-Western survivors of cumulative, collective trauma, who profess to other religions, such as Islam.

Most individuals and communities with refugee life experience, including resettled refugees, asylum-seekers, and other forcibly displaced migrants, originate from non-Western countries with strong collective traditions (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014). When they reach safe third countries in the West, refugees have to negotiate their postdisplacement self in secular societies that emphasize the wellbeing of the individual over the common good and where meaning-making is predominantly articulated through reason, to the detriment of the divine and sacred (Bathia, 2012). This context may hinder successful psychological adjustment of individuals whose identity derives greatly from both faith tradition and the collective, as religion can provide a source of group cohesion (Lakitsch, 2018), enable group members to interpret shared experiences (Matos et al., 2021; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), and is expected to serve as the core meaning system within which the faithful frame their losses and derive coping resources (Park, 2005). Posttraumatic psychological adjustment may be particularly challenging for Muslim refugees living in secular countries of Christian tradition who may be deprived of their full religious and spiritual coping resources (Bhatia, 2012). The emerging body of empirical research on the psychology of Islam has underscored the importance of Islamic beliefs and practices as key determinants of mental health in Muslim populations (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011). Like other major religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, Islam includes a set of beliefs (e.g., in Allah as the one and true God, in the Day of Judgment, or in divine predestination), practices (e.g., prayer,

testimony of faith, pilgrimage, or fasting), and ethical guidelines that determine one's conduct (e.g., generosity or humility), which are expected to impact the physical and psychological wellbeing of Muslims (Abu-Raiya, 2012). Given the complex nature of refugee trauma and the centrality of Islam to Syrian identity, it is important to investigate how Islamic beliefs, values, and practices contribute to post-war meaning-making of Syrian Muslims.

The Current Study

Guided by Park (2010)'s integrated meaning-making model, this qualitative study examined the post-war meaning-making experiences of Syrian Muslim refugees, eight years after the onset of the war. This study corresponds to Phase 2 of a larger two-phase mixed-methods research project investigating psychological adjustment to trauma in Syrian refugees living in Portugal. Although not a traditional refugee destination country, refugee arrivals to Portugal rose significantly between 2015 and 2017, with Syrians representing the largest protected group (Observatório das Migrações [OM], 2021a). Refugees arrived primarily through four protection mechanisms: resettlement from first countries of asylum (e.g., Egypt or Turkey); relocation from Greece and Italy; spontaneous asylum applications; and higher education programs for refugees, such as the Portuguese Platform for Syrian Students (OM, 2021a). Albeit symbolic in the wider EU context, this surge translated into a significant, and often enthusiastic, commitment by the Portuguese Government, resettlement and community agencies, and the wider civil society to welcome and host refugees (OM, 2021b). In a secular country of Catholic tradition, where only an estimated 0.2% of the population is Muslim (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012), refugees were distributed across the national territory, mostly in urban communities, and provided government-sponsored assistance. Not only was it pertinent to investigate post-war religious meaning-making in arriving communities, but especially so given their resettlement circumstances (Bhatia, 2012).

Because the meaning-making model was Western-developed, its conceptual applicability to a non-Western Islamic context was pilot-tested during Phase 1 Focus Groups (FG; September – November 2018). Principal findings suggested that: the concept of holding core beliefs that can be shattered by events appraised as cognitively-discrepant appeared to reflect Syrians' understandings of their experiences; religion informed beliefs about justice, control, safety, and aspirations of continuity, which were central appraisal lenses of the war; and the war provided a common baseline for pre-/posttrauma investigation. Detailed Phase 1 findings are published elsewhere (Matos et al., 2023). In Phase 2 (January – May 2019), we used qualitative methodology to investigate the content of religious meaning-making experiences. We expected pre-war religious structures to remain resilient despite exposure to extreme trauma and for refugees to engage in meaning-making throughout flight trajectories.

Method

Participants

Inclusion criteria were: Syrian adults (i.e., 18yo or older), living in Portugal for a minimum of six months, with English or Portuguese fluency. Forty individuals participated in the study. One man dropped out after becoming distressed during the interview. Two Druze and four Christian individuals were excluded from the final sample due to their non-Islamic religious affiliation. The final sample included 33 participants: 16 men (48.5%) and 17 women (51.5%), with ages ranging from 19 to 36 ($M = 27.3$; $SD = 4.6$). Twenty-five individuals (75.7%) were beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (i.e., student-refugees), 5 were relocated refugees (15.2%) and 3 were (9.1%) spontaneous asylum-seekers. Participants' mean length of stay in Portugal was 28.0 months ($SD = 20.3$). The vast majority were single ($n = 28$; 84.8%) and five (15.2%) were married. All participants had completed at least high school education, one held a PhD (3.0%), 10 master's (30.3%) and 15 bachelor's (45.5%) degrees. Family-inherited religious background was: Sunni ($n = 18$,

54.5%), Alawite ($n = 6$, 18.2%), and Ismaili ($n = 2$, 6.1%); seven participants did not specify their branch of Islam (21.2%) and, where pertinent, are designated as “Other.” Of these, 2 participants (6.1%) now reported being unsure about their faith and 3 identified as atheists (9.1%). In resettlement, 19 (57.6%) did not regularly practice structured religious rituals.

Materials

The research protocol included: (1) a sociodemographic questionnaire designed to collect common determinants of refugee mental health, such as gender, education, or legal status, as well as religion-specific questions pertaining to religious background, belief, and practice; and (2) a semi-structured interview script informed by the integrated meaning-making model designed to guide participants through post-war cognitive reappraisals of shattered global beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose. To invoke reflections on belief systems, participants were first offered a common background to help ground them – “all of us have beliefs and thoughts about how we see ourselves in the world or who might be in control of our lives – am I in control? Is God in control? Is someone or something else in control?” –, or, for example, whether the world is fair and safe. This was followed by two questions with probes to invoke pre- and post-war global beliefs and any perceived violations: “When you think back on your life before the war, can you describe your beliefs or views of the world? What was your relationship with God then?”; and “What about now? Do you feel that those beliefs and relationship changed? Can you explain how they changed?”

Procedures

Data was collected by the Lisbon-based first author, who is trained and experienced in interviewing survivors of refugee trauma, and had previous field experience providing direct services to refugee communities in Portugal and abroad. Syrian nationals were recruited across continental Portugal using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Outreach strategies were devised in consultation with an Expert Committee (EC) gathered for

the purposes of the study and composed of community leaders, resettlement organizations, Arab and Syrian subject-matter experts, and key stakeholders, who facilitated access to the target population. Postings on social media and snowball recruitment by study participants who spontaneously recruited others in the community constituted the principal Phase 2 recruitment strategies. The latter was key to validate the study and trustworthiness of the Researcher among prospective participants. Study materials were developed in English, forward-translated to Arabic by a Syrian professional translator, and pre-tested in interpreter-assisted Phase 1 FG to assess language-, culture-, and trauma-informed issues. Because FG participants expressed concerns with remaining anonymous related to the presence of an Arab interpreter, Phase 2 interviews were conducted without language interpretation, in English or Portuguese, based on participant preference and fluency. Print Arabic versions of the materials were available to participants to ensure consistency of language. Interviews were held in the northern districts of Braga and Oporto ($n = 14$), in central Aveiro, Coimbra, and Lisbon ($n = 18$), and in southern Évora ($n = 1$). Researcher and participants met in quiet places convenient to participants and interviews lasted 90 minutes on average. The purpose of the study, voluntary nature of partaking, and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were reviewed, and participants were offered an opportunity to ask questions prior to signing consent forms. Due to the potential for retraumatization associated with revisiting past traumatic events, participants were briefed on the nature of stress reactions and, when appropriate, offered the possibility of referral to pro-bono psychosocial services. All interviews were audio recorded. At the end of the interview, participants received a €10 gift card. The study received ethics approval by Instituto Universitário's Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018) in September 2018.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, names were replaced and coded, and a top-down, theoretically-driven approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore post-war cognitive reappraisal trajectories, following the main elements of the meaning-making model: global meaning, situational meaning, meaning-making processes, and meanings-made. The data analysis team included refugee trauma and psychological adjustment researchers and two research assistants (RAs), all of whom were trained in thematic analysis. The first author did a first in-depth reading of all transcripts, generated initial codes, and created a preliminary set of themes organized according to the elements of the meaning-making model. The themes were subsequently reviewed and discussed with the co-authors. RAs then analyzed the dataset using those themes and met regularly with the first author to examine disparities and find consensus. Given the scope of the study, all transcripts went through a second round of analysis to identify religion-informed meaning-making processes. When needed, new themes were created or revised to ensure that the analysis faithfully represented the meanings of participants' experiences. During both phases of analysis, team members met regularly to review findings, discuss narratives that deviated from themes, and clarify specificities to achieve richer interpretations of themes and congruence of subthemes. Where divergent opinions arose, a Syrian Muslim member of the EC was consulted. The latter made final recommendations on the resulting thematic map. All data were managed and analyzed using MAXQDA 20 software.

Results

We identified 7 themes of religious meanings that are discussed below and presented in the Thematic Map (Figure 1) with a proposed outline of meaning-making trajectories.

Pre-war Beliefs

Theme 1: Inherited Muslim Identity

In pre-war Syria, most participants were adolescent or young adults and described their religious identity as inherited from family, shared by the community, and informing group belonging. Religious knowledge was transmitted through both formal and informal education, and rituals like prayer, going to the mosque, and social expectations of religious conduct structured all aspects of Syrians' daily lives. Young men spoke of the mosque as a place of worship and religious instruction that also offered a collectively-sanctioned opportunity for socialization. A 24yo Sunni man described being sent to the mosque every summer as a child for religious school to "learn the Quran" instead of "playing in the streets or in the park." Another Sunni man (27yo) recalled Friday prayer as an opportunity for worship but also an occasion to "get all the people together, to meet, to talk with each other." He, who now lived in a small Portuguese town and no longer engaged in regular religious practice, contextualized the mosque's dual function in the lives of Syrians: "People are not going [to the mosque] only because of religion. It's more related to the culture. So, I go there basically because of the prayer, but actually I'm going there to meet my friends and go out afterwards." This entangled relationship between culture and religion was also expressed through all-encompassing statements pertaining to rituals or conduct that were collectively shared, sometimes regardless of the one's religiosity (e.g., "In my family – I don't know if we are really a religious family – we pray and everything like all Syrians;" woman, Sunni, 23). One last aspect of this theme was the universality of Islamic values and beliefs, which invariably permeated participants' narratives and informed their lived experiences. A young Sunni woman summarized her predisplacement life along the main tenets of Islam, including the power of prayer, the belief that being a good Muslim made her deserving of good things, the comfort and hope provided by faith, and the temporary nature of suffering, as follows:

When I was in Syria, I was always praying for a better life. (...) So I always believe that God will give me what I ask because I am a good person. (...) And this faith gives me the hope for tomorrow. (...) So there is still hope in every dark moment. If I

believe this, I know that I can survive for tomorrow. Being in a bad situation doesn't mean it will be bad forever. It will end.

Situational Appraisals and Cognitive Processing of Shattered Meanings

Religious meaning systems were repeatedly and cumulatively challenged during the war, flight journeys to Europe, and resettlement. As Syrians appraised the unfolding events, two major themes were apparent: "Acceptance of the war" reflected situational appraisals that were congruent with previous expectations about the self and/or the world, and thus did not constitute a threat to global meaning or a major source of psychological distress; and "Religious struggles" reflected the spiritual and cognitive strains both triggered by, and the result of, meaning-making processes. Themes and subthemes are explored in detail below.

Theme 2: Acceptance of the war

This theme was present in only a small number of accounts, but it was significant given those individuals' ability to integrate such an extreme event into their pre-war global meaning. Participants recalled deriving benevolent appraisals anchored in three protective factors: expectation of war (e.g., "we were raised to know that we were living near the enemy, which is Israel, so we always knew that there was going to be a war"; woman, Sunni, 28); the belief that war and forced displacement were a test from God "to see if we can keep our faith" (man, Sunni, 36); and the promise of continuity where war was downplayed as a part of life (e.g., "all countries have had war inside. Not only us. So we should overcome these problems and live a new life"; woman, Sunni, 36).

Theme 3. Religious struggles

"You don't realize this, but [with the war] people started to lose their faith." That is how this 30yo Sunni woman perceived the impact of the war on herself and those around her. Like her, most participants gradually perceived distressing discrepancies with beliefs in a benevolent, all-powerful God that triggered significant religious and spiritual struggles. Individuals articulated their narratives in the conditional as they tried to make sense of the

events around them. Formulations such as, *if God* “loves people” or “exists” or “is watching what is happening in Syria” prefaced interrogatives that suggested irreconcilable discrepancies: *then* “...*why* is He letting everybody die?” (man, Sunni, 23); “...*what* is He doing? *What* is His plan?” (man, Sunni, 24); “...*where*'s God? If there is a God, He would not allow this to happen,” (woman, Sunni, 30); or “... *why* doesn't God do anything to help Syria? People in Syria go to the mosque, they pray, but nothing changes!” (man, Sunni, 27). Interrogatives such as why, what, or where, expressed hurt, confusion, and abandonment, as well as negative appraisals of an all-powerful God who remained passive in the face of horror. We identified three subthemes of religious struggles as individuals tried to restore coherence and appease distress: “Pleading with God”; “Examining faith and identity”; and “Seeking spiritual comfort.”

Pleading with God. Automatic, unconscious meaning searches largely focused on trying to make sense of the events, determine the extent of the threat to one's life and future, and even negotiate salvation. These searches were recalled as prompted by intense fear, feelings of injustice, as well as upward comparisons that led the faithful to reach out to God in anger and frustration. A 25yo Sunni teacher fleeing forced conscription recalled angrily pleading with God during his difficult and humiliating journey through Turkey: “How did You let us [Syrians] get to this low point? We also have a right to live! We have a right to be home with our families!” This collective framing of the experience was common across participants' narratives. For example, a 22yo Sunni gay man, and thus a “sinner,” retold calling out to God when faced with the possibility of death at sea and negotiating salvation for the children in the boat with him: “God, I'm a very bad person, so you don't need to save me. Just save these people. These kids didn't do anything [to deserve] to die in this place.” As the faithful pleaded with God and attempted to make sense of the events, a concurrent need

for worth and ultimate meaning appeared to arise. A 36yo Sunni father of two spontaneously and sequentially retold his inner struggles along the meaning-making model, as follows:

I am Muslim, so I believe in one God. So, what was happening to us raised a lot of questions. Why us? Why me? Why my family? I had a lot of problems while some people are just enjoying their lives. It's kind of unfair. (...) And when you reach this point, you *need* [emphasis added] to find the way to find another path in life.

In his narrative, the cognitive dissonance related to violations of assumptions of justice, peace, and safety provided a significant source of distress thus prompting him to search for more benevolent interpretations, life trajectories, and aspirations.

Examining Faith and Identity. The journey to find and make sense of their beliefs, spirituality, and even identity as Muslims was initiated at different points in Syrians' lives and often prone to being revisited. Because religion was inherited, several participants discussed having gone through different periods in their lives where they questioned their faith and Muslim identity. A 30yo Sunni woman explained that growing up, she "spent some years just searching if [God] exists or not." Having concluded that God did exist, during the war she now struggled to reconcile the role that religious leaders, endowed with divine authority, played in fueling divisions along religious and ethnic lines. The meaning-made of those struggles was "lost trust" in the men, which allowed her to preserve higher-order beliefs in the divine. In resettlement, as the sole hijab-wearing woman in a small Portuguese town, this young woman faced significant hardships that again tested her faith. She felt betrayed by God – "I trusted You, but You disappointed me" – and the cumulative discrepancies she perceived after years of war and displacement caused great suffering and cumulative loss of faith: "The feelings were very complex because I started to really feel emotional pain. And that made me question [God]. (...) Now I feel that I am no longer able to pray."

Despite the need several participants felt to examine their faith and discuss beliefs and values in light of the war and their new life circumstances, Islam's major tenets remained unamenable to discussion. Religious doubts created tensions with family, friends, religious

and other authoritative figures, which essentially relegated these cognitive reframing processes to the intrapersonal sphere. For example, a 25yo Alawite woman recounted her frustrating attempts to question God's existence and explained how her religious teacher would tackle the subject with a simple solution: "If you start thinking about whether God exists or not, you just have to stop thinking and say that God exists." A 24yo Sunni man shared in the frustration and described his religious "journey" as being focused on openly discussing the dogma, on "destroying the taboo, talking about it, and, at the end of the day, refuse it." Invariably, these individuals took pride in their journeys and in the courage it took them to examine their beliefs and ask the ultimate existential questions. A 27yo Sunni man, who eventually reported increased spirituality and religiosity as a meaning-made of his journey, praised himself for having the courage to examine his beliefs: "It was a big question of me to ask 'where is God?' I really wanted to know if I am Muslim. I believed in Him but I had never questioned myself regarding Him."

Seeking Spiritual Comfort. Although not specifically inquired during the interviews, some participants spontaneously narrated the strategies they used to reduce distress, which were largely informed by religious beliefs and practices, as well as current life circumstances. The most common strategy was prayer, through which individuals sought comfort (e.g., "when I feel worry or fear, I go to [God]. I just start speaking with Him in the prayer," woman, Sunni, 23) and protection (e.g., "all the time I was asking God, 'please protect me, please protect my family. My family needs to be safe,'" woman, Alawite, 27). Even those men and women with shattered religious beliefs admitted to praying to God as the ultimate regulation strategy. Faced with death, one young man recounted:

Okay, at this point there's nobody: I cannot help [the other refugees] and they cannot help me, you know? So there's only God. In the middle of the sea, only God can help us. So I looked at the sky – I was crying, it was raining – and I asked God to save us.

Self-talk was another common regulation strategy. Some people made downward comparisons with others whose suffering they perceived to be greater than theirs. The war robbed a Sunni 36yo of his dreams “to build [his] own house, get married, make a family, improve [his] position at work.” Although the appraised violation of his life goals caused him to “feel depressed,” when he thought of Syrians with worst life circumstances, he felt lucky: “at that time I told myself, ‘at least I am safe. I am healthy. I am not affected physically.’ So, thank God at least, you know?” Lastly, self-talk also served to remind the faithful that God was an ever-present source of hope and protection. A Sunni woman explained: “when I feel full of stuff, then I say, ‘no, God is with me. I can do everything. Nothing is impossible.’”

Meanings-Made of Trauma

Resettlement in a secular Western country marked an important turning point in the sample’s meaning-making trajectories. Despite significant ongoing stressors, the ability to live in peace in a country where refugees generally reported feeling welcome (e.g., “[In Portugal], people are friendly and warm. If they see that you are a foreigner, they always try to help you;” man, Sunni, 32) provided an important opportunity for individuals to make meaning of their experiences and/or revisit previous appraisals. At data collection, participants had reached four themes of religious meaning-making outputs: “Unresolved beliefs,” “Changed religious practice,” “Decreased faith,” and “Resilient beliefs.”

Theme 4: Unresolved Beliefs

The narratives of participants whose religious beliefs remained unresolved were filled with formulations in the conditional (e.g., “even if God exists,” man, Sunni, 32) that suggested ongoing struggles and distress. There were three important elements to this theme. First, in our highly educated sample, individuals with unresolved beliefs appeared to be cognizant of the non-stagnant nature of their reappraisal journeys, including the potential for “one day find[ing] a clear answer” (woman, Alawite, 25) or for their beliefs to keep evolving to meet

their life circumstances. As a 32yo Sunni woman explained: “I’m trying day-by-day [to be a good person]. Now I have this belief, but I don’t know if tomorrow it will change.” Second, this learned ambivalence appeared to provide a more flexible cognitive structure that, if sustained, may be protective and better able to accommodate future stressors (e.g., Yes [I believe]... Hmm, no... yes. Yes, I believe, but at the same time, I don’t believe,” man, Sunni, 25). And third, to a significant few, unresolved beliefs were keenly perceived as a major source of distress and thus any attempts to resolve higher-order beliefs were deliberately avoided. Participants felt anxious and overwhelmed by the challenges of postdisplacement lives and confided to avoiding conversations and thoughts about religion. A 32-year-old graduate student (Other), preferred to focus on his immediate daily responsibilities and leave any attempts to settle life’s existential questions to a later time:

Life is already hard as it is, not to mention for somebody who came from a war zone and all the psychological travels that you have that culminate in this period. And you have to compete in the new country and do quite a lot of stuff... So many challenges and you have to put more stress on yourself? (...) It’s futile to think about it right now, because even the greatest minds cannot agree on [God’s] existence.

The “psychological travels” described by this participant alluded to the recurrent nature of refugee trauma, meaning violations, and appraisal journeys that cumulatively contribute to depleting refugees’ cognitive resources. For these individuals, establishing a hierarchy of needs and delaying meaning-making journeys may be temporarily protective.

Theme 5: Changed Religious Practice

“As Arab people, everything in our lives is linked to religion. But [in Portugal] there are no restrictions, no religious rules in my life, and it’s very easy to explore the world,” (man, Sunni, 32). Life in resettlement offered participants the opportunity to practice according to their life circumstances and strength of their faith. This was experienced on opposite ends of the spectrum: distressing by some and life-affirming by others. For example, the absence of an Islamic cultural context in a majority-Catholic country made it difficult for

a 23yo Sunni woman “to stay on the same path” and fulfill her religious obligations, including remembering to pray, whereas a 21yo man (Other) described with frustration the practical challenges of fasting during Ramadan. For those who experienced resettlement as an opportunity, secularism allowed individuals not to put too much pressure on themselves (e.g., “I wear a scarf and everything but I don’t follow all the rules,” woman, Sunni, 30), to take pride in the symbols of their Muslim identity (e.g., “I tell people, ‘it’s my choice to wear the scarf,’” woman, Sunni, 23) or, conversely, to rid themselves of what they perceived to be symbols of oppression: “I still remember the first day outside without the hijab. It was amazing. I was just dancing. (...) The feeling of the air touching my hair was really worth it,” (woman, Sunni, 30).

Theme 6: Decreased Faith

The repeated assaults on meaning experienced by the sample appeared to weaken the beliefs and faith of a sub-sample of participants and manifested through three subthemes: “Learned self-reliance,” “The God factor,” and “Atheism.”

Learned Self-Reliance. “I think maybe during the war something happened, the mentality of people changed. God still exists, but we cannot link everything to the God. Because some circumstances depend on us humans,” stated a 32yo Sunni man. To preserve preexisting beliefs in an almighty, benevolent God, some participants adaptively reframed them by decreasing their dependence on God’s plan through self-reliance and learned trust in others. As a 36yo Sunni man explained, “It’s a different point of view. Now I believe in people more than I believe in God.” This sentiment was echoed by a young Sunni man whose refugee life experience had thought him that it was a matter of luck to “find the right person to help you. It’s not about God. You’re in control of your life.” This shift in the locus of control appeared to be protective as it allowed this young man to make peace with God. He explained: “I don’t hate Him. I just don’t like Him as I used to. I’m just at peace.”

“The God Factor.” Numerous participants in our sample had, at different points in their journeys, attempted to reconcile science and religion. Events that transcended reason and could not otherwise be explained by science were, until another explanation could be found, attributable to God. A 32yo man (Other) pointed to all the “illogical stuff” that religion explained that defied comprehension, whereas a 36yo Sunni man articulated this ultimate, ever-present narrative in relation to the unknown as the “God factor:”

There’s always a risk factor in any decision. So, this risk factor we can call it the ‘God factor.’ Because [God] only gives you the good and the bad and you have to choose the path. We don’t know if the path is correct, but we should try.

Atheism. Four participants self-identified as atheists. This new postwar identity allowed them to resolve otherwise insurmountable discrepancies: “I used to believe in God. And when I believed in Him, I hated Him [because of the war]. But then I discovered that you actually don’t have to believe,” (man, 24). These young men and women spoke proudly of their journeys, despite suspicion, disappointment, and even rejection by their families and community. For example, one participant (25yo) stated that she avoided conversations about religion with her friends, who would promptly remind her that “if you don’t believe in God, you are going to hell.” Yet, despite pride-filled journeys, it remained hard for these individuals to clearly articulate their new self (e.g., “I tell people: ‘I am Muslim, but atheist.’”) and negotiate the often distressing void created by the absence of such a core cognitive structure. When asked how the war had impacted his religious beliefs, one young man, who had proclaimed to be “100% atheist” replied, “Are we talking about me and the war? Not *the war in me?*” [emphasis added], which suggested severe ongoing distress.

Theme 7: Resilient Beliefs

I was always thinking, ‘why is God letting people die this way - under torture, in prison, bombings?’ So because of this, I tried to understand why I am wearing the scarf at all. (...) So basically I think that maybe God wants us to see how human beings can be bad. And for those who are victims, I think that maybe God wants them to understand how strong they are, to be more patient. Because we have something in

my religion that says that the more you are patient, the stronger you are, and the more you will receive from God. (Woman, Sunni, 23)

Theme 7 entailed the experiences of those for whom Islam provided sufficiently flexible beliefs to withstand repeated meaning violations, to the point of, in some cases perceiving strengthened faith, religiosity, and a “New Muslim” identity (subtheme). Eight years after the start of the war, these individuals had successfully integrated their experiences and build narratives that were congruent with pre-war religious beliefs about: continuity (e.g., “I think nothing changed. The world is the same. The point is that you have different experiences,” woman, Sunni, 31), suffering as a test to one’s faith (e.g., “I believe that God has good things for people and that we face these difficulties as a test to our faith,” man, Sunni, 36), benevolence (e.g., “I keep going with my life. I don’t worry about the future, because everything with God is good,” woman, Alawite, 19), and of the possibility of transcendence (e.g., “So, in my point of view, God is fair and the world is fair, because what we lose now, we will gain later, maybe after this life,” woman, Sunni, 23).

“New Muslim” Identity. Reports of increased religiosity and spirituality as a result of intense religious struggles were also present (e.g., “[After the war], I decided to read the Quran to find answers and know more why I am Muslim. (...) Simply put, it was the hardest three months of my life”). These individuals now felt a renewed faith in God, to the point of perceiving psychological benefits. A 21yo Sunni woman, who fled Syria on foot with her family after her father had been tortured, resiliently spoke of luck: “I feel closer to God. Despite everything that I went through, I feel that God is with me. I even feel a little bit lucky...” Whereas a 27yo Sunni man proudly referred to his new identity as a new Muslim: “I like to say that I’m a new Muslim. (...) Now I’m more open to life, more open to understand that things don’t always have to be black and white.”

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the religious meaning-making experiences of resettled Syrian Muslim refugees. Qualitative methodology was used to explore the content of cognitive reappraisal processes of Muslim war-exposed civilians living in urban communities across Portugal, a secular European country of Catholic tradition. Our results suggest that: Islam provided and continues to provide a central appraisal lens of the war and forced displacement; despite significant and cumulative violations of assumptions of safety, justice, God's benevolence, and controllability, Islam remains a foundational cognitive structure that offers continuity with a prewar life and self, and, often, a last-resort narrative (i.e., "the God factor") for events that defy human comprehension, control, science, and reason; and the faithful routinely accessed religious frameworks through complex religious struggles (Pargament & Lomax, 2013), to restore coherence, decrease distress, and find purpose. By comprehensively exploring individuals' reappraisal journeys informed by Islam in a non-Western refugee sample, this work addresses a gap in the existing Western-centered literature and makes important contributions to the fields of psychology of religion and psychological adjustment to adverse events.

Data collection took place eight years after the onset of the war, in a sample of generally young, highly educated, single adults, who identified as members of the Muslim community regardless of the strength of their faith. Seventy-five percent were beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (i.e., "the other one percent" [UNHCR, 2016]) who had to navigate extreme, concurrent, and cumulative challenges to their inherited religious beliefs and identity. Despite using a pre-war/present time structure in our interviews, participants spontaneously narrated complex meaning-making processes over different periods of their refugee life experiences. This finding aligns with earlier theoretical propositions (Steger & Park, 2012) as well as more recent empirical studies with refugee populations (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2021) suggesting that meaning-making is

both a trajectory and a dynamic process subject to being revisited with time, context, and new stressors, and therefore may not have a clear end. In their Middle Eastern context, Syrians had been taught to expect war, which offered a protective narrative that helped preserve universal beliefs in continuity beyond life on Earth and trials as a test of faith, consistent with other Syrian samples (Zbidat et al., 2020). This form of cognitive-based coping, namely with regards to beliefs about suffering, is posited to lead to successful adjustment through effective coping efforts that prevent an event from being appraised as discrepant and, thus, not traumatizing (Park, 2005; Park 2010); this finding is also consistent with the faithful's ability to flexibly alter situational meanings to preserve existing frameworks (Vishkin et al., 2016).

With the exception of a few individuals whose initial and/or post-displacement appraisals were non-discrepant and subsequently integrated their inherited universal Islamic beliefs, most of the sample reported distressing violations and doubts that triggered complex searches for meaning. This work has three principal findings. The first pertains to religious struggles as a key determinant of meaning-making. The centrality of search for meaning in the cognitive processing of adverse events has been advanced by numerous theorists (see Park, 2010, for a review). As expected in survivors of the refugee experience (Matos et al., 2018), participants retold complex and reoccurring searches throughout the war and migration journeys, as they drew on their religious orienting systems to find purpose in suffering (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016). Religious struggles manifested through interrogatives directed at God, namely "why" questions – a common formulation across different cultural and faith traditions (e.g., Christian women in Australia [de Castella & Simmonds, 2013] or Jewish settlers from Gaza [Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014]) – and as complex processes (Pargament & Lomax, 2013) that were both subsequent to traumatic events and keenly perceived as sources of distress. These individuals reported feeling abandoned, angry, and disappointed in God, as well as conflicted about institutionalized religion, leading them to

question faith, identity, and, ultimately, God's existence at different points in time. This experience of questioning in the face of significant suffering, albeit common among believers (Fisher, 2017), appears to have been aggravated by the extreme and cumulative nature of trauma in our sample. Because Muslims are expected to submit to suffering as a test of faith, these religious struggles can lead to stigma and loneliness (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011), and be especially distressing for displaced Muslims as it may aggravate the disconnect from homeland, family, and larger social support networks.

The second finding concerns the pertinence of examining posttraumatic adjustment in refugees from a cognitive reappraisal lens given that refugee trauma events are seldom amenable to active problem solving (Steger & Park, 2012). In our sample, transformation of meaning, whether situational or of core assumptions, through religious struggles played a key role in posttraumatic responses. Except for a small few with resilient beliefs who reported no changes in prewar religious worldviews, participants endorsed varying degrees of altered religiosity – from atheism to renewed faith – as a result of their refugee life experience, that align with recent studies with other Syrian samples (Skalisky et al., 2020; Zbidat et al., 2020). By taking an integrated approach to meaning-making, we identified four clusters of meanings-made that suggest dynamic trajectories of cognitive processing that are expected to contribute differently to psychological adjustment (Steger & Park, 2012) and be revisited to meet life circumstances. As one young woman keenly noted: “Now I have this belief, but I don't know if tomorrow it will change.” These results challenge the concept of trauma recovery as an end state, even for those, like the atheists in our sample, who may perceive psychological benefits and feel pride in their journey and new self, which are key domains of perceived posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Although apparently adaptive at the time of data collection, the existential, cultural, community, and identity void left by the shattering of such a comprehensive cognitive structure may be too distressing and

unsustainable in the long-run for non-believers, and thus require new appraisals until more benevolent interpretations are reached or a similarly comprehensive global meaning system is found. Future studies should assess trajectories of changes in religious beliefs across different stages of displacement and allow the inclusion of atheists, to capture the experiences of this understudied group (Fisher, 2017) and provide a more complete picture of religion-informed posttraumatic responses.

The last finding pertains to the importance of place of settlement as a source of meaning (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Life in Portugal offered refugees critical opportunities for meaning-making through renegotiated identities, restored sense of belonging as well as religious affirmation. The freedom offered by secularity and low perceived discrimination (European Commission, 2015) allowed refugees to practice according to the strength of their faith. Yet, it remains unclear the extent to which the absence of a wider Muslim context impacted, positively and/or negatively, the sample's religious meaning-making trajectories.

Limitations

This study used a convenience sample largely composed graduate and postgraduate student refugees, an understudied segment of the refugee population, whose experiences may not be representative of other Syrian samples. Meaning-making was assessed retrospectively, eight years after the war, therefore the extent to which pre-war religiosity, developmental stage, and time since the events impacted trajectories and outputs is unknown. Also, the experiences of participants from different branches of Islam may have differed in ways we were not able to explore. The fact that the interviews were not conducted in participants' native Arabic, despite providing an important opportunity for participants to speak anonymously about their processes, including potentially stigmatizing religious struggles, may have hindered their ability to express more complex or nuanced experiences. The research team was composed of European of Catholic background and one atheist with

inherent biases; although minimized through consultations with subject-matter experts, these biases cannot be discounted in how results were interpreted. Lastly, this study focused on meaning-making informed by religious beliefs and hence does not represent the totality of participants' meaning-making experiences, nor does it provide a full depiction of posttraumatic responses in the sample. Future research with longitudinal designs that include measures of religiosity and comprehensively assess religious struggles and coping as key determinants of meaning-making trajectories will be important to advance the conceptual work on psychological adjustment to adverse events.

Conclusion

Resettlement in a secular Western country may offer unique opportunities and significant challenges to religious meaning-making for refugees from Islamic societies. Although Islam was able to withstand major meaning violations and provide a source of continuity for most refugees, in resettlement, refugees reported significant ongoing religious and spiritual struggles that may require guided reappraisals through psychological growth-promoting interventions. Host countries should promote clinical and psychosocial interventions that incorporate refugees' faith and religious traditions.

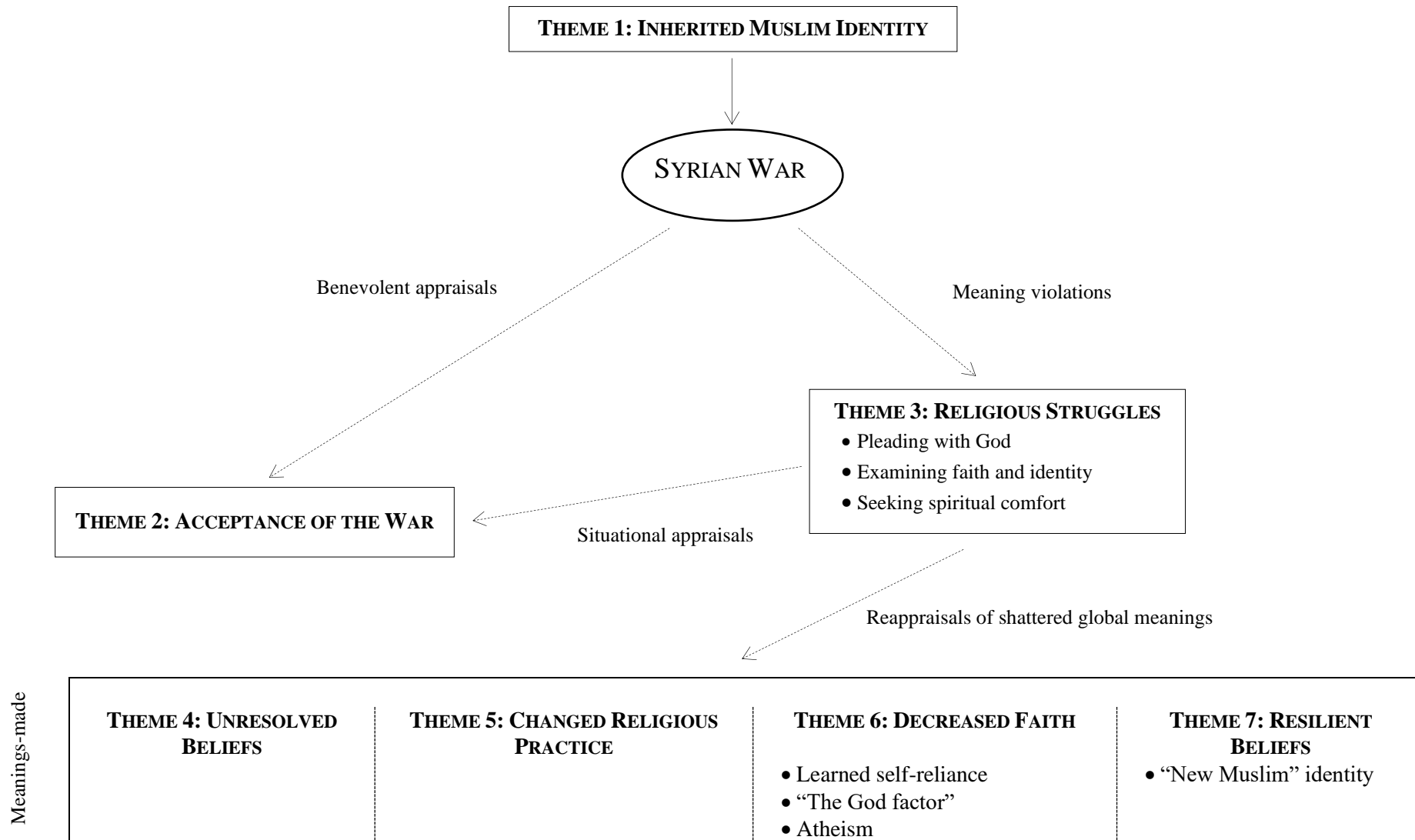


Figure 1. Thematic Map with Suggested Pathways of Cognitive Processing

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