

ANIMAL DISPLACEMENT FROM SYRIA: A STORY YET TO BE WRITTEN



Image by Bernard Gagnon (via Wikimedia Commons)

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<https://allegralaboratory.net/animal-displacement-from-syria-a-story-yet-to-be-written/?fbclid=IwAR2kAZkzdPnvpQzNI0jf2zFyblv1q2gJp1zZHwBwVT6Vyz62KHDWJ01xEuo>

During the Syrian war, which has now raged for a decade, the attention of scholars, media commentators and activists has primarily focused on human displacement. More than 60% of the world's refugee population – over 30% of which are victims of internal displacement – reside in the Middle East, mainly due to large-scale armed conflicts. The Syrian war, which began following a popular uprising in spring 2011, has led to half a million deaths ([United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#)), nearly seven million displaced people – 70% of whom still live in the Middle East – and 14 million in need of assistance.

Due to the tragically large scale of human loss, the destiny of fauna during the war in Syria has been under-explored, and any emphasis on it has often been frowned upon in informal conversations I had throughout the years with international researchers and opinion-makers working on this geographic area. With this post, I encourage readers to reason beyond inter-species hierarchies, which instil unproductive ways of thinking, such as that a species per se is more or less important than another. The haste to set up such existential hierarchies between animals and human beings derives from a human-focused understanding of animals that share our natural habitat as well as our built environment. In this sense, animal care becomes either 'good' or 'bad' in response to our personal habits, our everyday culture and, importantly, our social and economic capacity of care. Indeed, in Western societies, the care for animals – especially pets – has widely been associated with the lifestyle of global middle and upper classes, who are able and keen to feed, care and cater for animals. So to speak, the "bourgeoisization" of animal care – where the latter is frequently viewed as the care provided by wealthy people equipped with time and resources that enable them to think *beyond* human survival – and the critical reactions to it have ended up influencing our external gaze on human conflict and migration and have dangerously legitimated the exclusivity of human care. To look at the entirety of this multi-species ecosystem of war and forced migration reveals a complexity that goes unheeded as a result of an anthropocentric gaze.

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Animals affected by war have mainly been discussed in terms of human survival and sustainability, but with pointed exceptions. For example, in 2012, Reuters news agency dedicated a [photo gallery](#) to animals, such as turtles and cats, that were trying to survive bombings, seeking food in almost depopulated areas and, sometimes, receiving it from armed groups who lived, occupied or briefly stopped in these neighbourhoods destroyed by war. To expand on such snippet views, I focus on the animals' fate during the Syrian conflict and the discursive and logistic use of animal-fare in war narratives.

The omission of animals' fate in today's journalism and academic scholarship on armed conflict has led to ignoring a fundamental element in the lives of refugees who had to leave Syria: the incurable existential harm caused by the need to abandon their pets or, for those who had a rural lifestyle, their livestock, as it has been noted in [forced migration history](#). In many cases that I have witnessed throughout years of research on Syrian displacement in the Levantine region, the abandonment of their animals – even a cow kept for milk or poultry kept for eggs – has generated pain and emotional disorientation in the lives of the displaced. Such abandonments are experienced as an inevitable sacrifice when leaving the war-torn country and building a life elsewhere. Indeed, most of the Syrian refugees I have met in northern Lebanon's villages – and who often work in Lebanese farms – have a rural background. They often remember the cattle they owned and how they looked after them when they lived in Syria. Many of them say they regularly ask their neighbours about the fate of these abandoned animals; most of those who were not resold died of dehydration, starvation and disease.

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Despite this, animal displacement has been approached from the angle of the survival and proliferation of humans and the importance of exhuming Syrian agricultural production, which used to rely on the export of livestock before the conflict, making up [15% of the internal agricultural workforce](#). But what was the fate of these animals? Domestic, pack and farm animals alike were often killed as spoils of war, [smuggled](#) into the neighbouring countries, or were stolen, displaced, bombed or sold. As a consequence, the rate of private ownership of livestock within the country has dropped to [60%](#) since the beginning of the conflict. Many breeders have had to abandon their profession and lifestyle and leave the country or migrate to other locations in Syria in search of new livelihoods.

Animals and animal violence have been widely discussed as a soft power strategy for shaping relations between political actors, and as a tool for gaining credibility in local and international communities while morally discrediting political enemies. For example, there is some Arabic media material illustrating this trend, with videos showing the leaders of the *shabbiha* – thugs loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – throw a 'thoroughbred' Arab horse to their lions for food, as written in the [Tweet](#) of a Syrian political opponent included in an *al-Quds* article. Many of these videos, accessible on YouTube, show the [killing of livestock by armed groups](#) or the theft of livestock in some Syrian regions. Some accusations are not expressly aimed at either government militias or opposition groups, but they are used as such for political propaganda. Beyond the authenticity of this type of media material, which is continually the subject of journalistic debate, the treatment of animals plays a fundamental role in shaping the political rhetoric of each of the parties in conflict.

The same happens with the recent government decree, No. 221, through which Bashar al-Assad assigns the Ministry of Education to the directorship of the 'Animal Protection in Syria' project.

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As I wrote with Samira Usman in the past, the humanitarian mantra of 'human dignity', according to which every human life must be respected and protected, has indeed shed light on the importance of ensuring legal and social protection for refugees. However slow this has been to materialise on a global level, it has emphasized the importance for refugees to have their dignity recognized. In this vein, the rhetoric of human dignity, over-used by the international community as well as by activist groups, ended up ignoring the historical fact that war causes dramatic consequences to other species too. It is emblematic that only a small number of humanitarian projects (for example, *Animals Lebanon*) approach human beings as part of an entire ecosystem that is being destroyed by conflict, therefore actively subverting anthropocentrism.

Animals have also long been an object of debates among Muslim communities worldwide. There is a longstanding belief that Muslim-majority societies have little respect for animals, which has led scholars to speak of Islamic environmentalism only in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, namely, in the so-called 'Global North'. In this regard, some *fatawa* (plural of *fatwa*) in the Sunni Muslim world have warned Syrian internally displaced people and refugees not to kill or eat cats, donkeys and dogs, even in situations of famine and hardship. Such *fatawa* generate extensive internet discussions focussing on the precepts of Islam and serve as a spiritual, legal and social consultation space for believers. Some religious authorities have denounced the act of killing and eating animals without a valid reason, while others have allowed the act of eating them provided that these animals have already been killed by bombing. Yet, this has at times become a practice in today's Syria, owing to the famines and hardships that the conflict itself has caused. At the same time, the care and provision of food to animals, such as cats, is indeed praised and appreciated by God. The topic remains an element of animated discussion within the Muslim world.

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The animals that have accompanied human beings during their flight and that have shared their conditions of forced migration are often unspoken; for instance, many refugees crossing the Syrian–Lebanese border brought along sheep, goats and cows, which had not been vaccinated due to their sudden departure to flee war, violence and the resulting poverty. Since 2011, some Syrian refugees in Wadi Khaled (north-east Lebanon) have told me that they crossed the al-Kabeer river connecting the two borders on the back of a donkey. They later had to abandon the animal because it fell ill and they did not have the means to maintain it, having paid a large amount of money to smugglers.

However, the ethical discourse underlying human displacement has sometimes been at odds with environmental and animal ethics. The areas where refugees are resettling are taken from the local fauna; human settlement and methods of mass-producing food often lead to deforestation and erosion of the surrounding habitat. As in such paradoxical situations, only either of the two vulnerable conditions can be protected within the ecosystem, the defenders of environmental and animal rights find themselves in tension with those who advocate for human rights. This was the case of one million Rwandan Hutu refugees, who, in 1994, relocated to the Virunga National Park of neighbouring Congo, where ten gorillas were killed after the territory was plundered. Similar to what is happening in Syria, in the case of Virunga National Park, the refugees who went to live in the protected area, considered a heritage site of humanity, were accused of committing violence against the territory. It is instead the refugees' presence that becomes a favourable source of chaos, and some people take advantage of such chaos to carry out raids, using the refugees' presence for dissimulation.*

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In the context of the Syrian conflict, animal displacement is still a history yet to be written. I consider it important to highlight not only the anthropocentric and violent use of animals in conditions of forced migration but also the emotional bond that some refugees had with the animals they had to abandon, due to protracted political, economic, social and political instability. Remembering animals is often part of the stories told by refugees themselves; in some cases, animals explain refugee and internally displaced people's attachment to their home back in Syria. In order to fully understand the effects of conflict, violence and deprivation on mobile ecosystems, it is indeed inevitable to unravel these important inter-species relationships.

Crisis discourse traditionally omits the relational history with animals in forced migration narratives, while human beings – both refugees and political actors, as

mentioned above – often remember, thrive on, or instrumentalize animals in the real world. As long as the biodiversity of crisis goes unheeded, our knowledge of the 'politics of living' in displacement also remains maimed. In this sense, disrupting anthropocentric understandings of human-made crisis is not only an ethical issue, as animal-rights activists remind us through campaigns, but also an intellectual and epistemological one.

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Notes

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*Others use the presence of refugees in these territories as an instrument for political negotiation. This is also the case for some Syrian archaeological sites; the ruins of Idlib, a cultural heritage site, have become temporary shelters for local displaced people, who could not find alternative places for protection and survival. The Antiquities Center of Idlib is in charge of this issue.

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