

# Living in Permanent Temporariness: The Multigenerational Ordeal of Living under Germany's Toleration Status

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Toleration status (temporary suspension of deportation) has been Germany's hesitant answer to providing humanitarian relief for Palestinians escaping the dismal conditions of refugee camps and the civil war in Lebanon in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the same time, the status has subjected families to years, even decades, of insecurity and uncertainty through constant threats of deportation and restrictions on work, travel and higher education. Based on 19 months of ethnographic research, the article shows the story of one family during their 16 years on toleration status and their experiences after gaining permanent residency. The family's experiences illuminate the insecurity and uncertainty large communities on toleration status in Berlin-Neukölln experienced, all sharing the fate of constantly wavering between hope, fear and disillusionment. Their struggles also show how the permanent temporariness of long-term toleration status affects both the parents who fled the conflict and their children, most of whom were born and raised in Germany. I argue that toleration status limits the capabilities of children stuck in the stagnant realities of their family's insecure status, along the lines of gender and birth order. Moreover, toleration status as a multigenerational ordeal persists long after the legal insecurity has ended.

Keywords: *Duldung*, toleration status, Palestinians, Berlin, Germany, permanent temporariness, refugees

## Introduction

'You live on the edge of your nerves. They treat you like animals! No rights—no nothing!' Fatima<sup>1</sup> grimaced, recalling her family's 16 years on toleration status (*Duldung*), Germany's answer to rejected asylum seekers who face impediments to deportation. For 16 years, Fatima and her family—the Al Tahans—had to renew their permission to stay in Germany every three to six months in order to again be

granted a temporary deferral from deportation (Castenada 2010: 246). And they were not alone. They came to settle in the low-income multicultural *Ausländer Bezirk* (foreigner district) of Berlin-Neukölln, in an area nicknamed the Gaza Strip or Little Beirut due to the large number of Palestinian and Kurdish asylum seekers from Lebanon who came to shop on the street and lived on or around it—most facing the same insecurity of toleration status. This area, in the 1990s and early 2000s, also became renowned as a no-go zone, ruled by gangs, family clans and violence.

Refugees and asylum seekers who flee war, violence and poverty often continue to endure great psycho-social challenges after resettlement (Fazel *et al.* 2012). In fact, post-migration stressors such as experiences of discrimination, poverty, loneliness and unemployment have been shown to worsen the mental health of refugees (Shakya *et al.* 2014). Rather than creating refuge, insecure legal statuses, such as toleration status, can cause constant living in fear and experiences of retraumatization (Dimova 2006; Heyken 2014). While there has been a substantial amount of focus on how individuals cope, struggle and resist the ambiguity and uncertainty of displacement (e.g. *ibid.*; Griffiths 2014; Abrego and Lakhani 2015; Ramsay 2017), there has been little attention on the family, and how both parents and children are affected by the parents' war experiences and flight, and how children then (re)interpret and (re)shape experiences of resettlement (Denov *et al.* 2019; Berckmoes *in press*).

This article explores how a family struggled to work towards prospering futures, embedded in a diaspora of permanent temporariness. The concept of permanent temporariness refers to how the 'legal status both animates and, simultaneously immobilizes daily life, yet itself becomes a force for action, reaction, and movement' (Bailey *et al.* 2002: 141). In other words, I use the concept to highlight both the temporal stagnation (e.g. legal insecurity, lack of mobility and work restrictions), as well as how those on toleration status act and react to their environment and create everyday tactics of active resistance. By highlighting how permanent temporariness is lived and acted upon by various family members, I explore the multigenerational effects of long-standing insecurity. The focus is on how long-term toleration status affects both the parents who fled the conflict and also their children who were mostly born and raised in Germany. Furthermore, I show how the effects of permanent temporariness have the ability to persist long after the legal insecurity has ended.

Based on 19 months of ethnographic research<sup>2</sup> between 2013 and 2015 and two return visits, this article takes an in-depth look at how the Al Tahan family has coped with their experiences of war and flight from Lebanon, and how they have navigated the legal insecurities and everyday stressors of toleration after arriving in Germany. By engaging with the story of one family, and particularly the oldest three children, this piece falls in the range of anthropological work that uses a single life story—or, in this case, one family's life history—to extrapolate greater sociopolitical processes affecting power inequalities and the social worlds of groups or communities (e.g. Biehl 2005; Fassin *et al.* 2008; Reimers 2018). The focus on one family may not reach the entire breadth of experiences I collected

during the 19 months of ethnographic research, yet the various Al Tahan family members open up a plurality of insights and provide the ability to explore the long-term processes, experiences and dispositions for those Palestinian-Lebanese asylum seekers on long-term toleration. Collective histories are:

embodied in individual biographies as an objective condition resulting from the inscription of the social structures in the material existence of the person and as a subjective experience through which the course of events is reinterpreted from the perspective of the vanquished (Fassin *et al.* 2008: 227).

This method situates their predicament in relation to social forces and shifting environments—shared by many on toleration status in Berlin-Neukölln. The interaction between different forces provides different avenues, opportunities and challenges for family members based on their gender and age. Thereby, I will explore the ways in which the personal and collective experiences of asylum seekers who raise children or grow up in insecure legal positions shape their history, present and imagined futures (Ramsay 2017).

### **Germany's Hesitant Legal and Social Reception of 'Foreigners'**

During the decades following World War II, Germany had a long-standing negligent, as well as tense, attitude towards its growing migrant population. In fact, Germany did not see itself as a country of immigration until the late 1970s, when public fears of *Überfremdung*, which literally translates into 'over-foreignization' or 'over-alienization', started to feature prominently in the media and public discourse. Suddenly, immigration was on the political agenda. Most of the initial fears of over-foreignization draw back to West Germany's recruitment of guest workers between 1955 and 1973. These workers were recruited from countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain and Turkey. As guest workers, they were seen as temporary and transient non-citizens, limited to temporary contracts, and they were denied similar rights to those of the native population (Bock and Macdonald 2019: 14). These workers were housed in dismal living conditions and were denied dignified lives through social and political exclusion. At the time, it was not fathomable that they could become German. East Germany also recruited workers from communist countries such as Cuba, Vietnam, Mozambique, Algeria, Poland and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—they were treated with further segregation through self-contained accommodations and a disallowance of relationships with native Germans (Wolle 2015: 2).

In 1973, Germany stopped recruiting guest workers and asylum became the primary means of entering the country. In response, misuse of the asylum system became a political-agenda point and a matter of migration control (Ellerman 2009: 20). The *Asyl Debatte* (the Asylum debate) that followed polarized Germany just after the reunification of East and West in 1989 and attacks on asylum centres and individuals singled out as 'non-German' occurred across East

and West Germany (Bock and Macdonald 2019: 18). Simultaneously, protests against xenophobia and neo-Nazi movements displayed Germany's full spectrum of reactions to the influx of migrants into post war Germany (*ibid.*).

Already in 1977, the political discourse became dominated by fears of the *Asylantenflut* (flood of asylum seekers) and fears of *Scheinasylanten* (bogus asylum seekers) (Bosswick 2000: 45). These fears mounted as a result of a new influx of refugees fleeing conflict in the Balkans and the Middle East, namely Lebanese and Palestinians. Palestinians were already seen as especially 'threatening' as a result of the 1972 Olympic Massacre in Munich, where 11 Israeli Olympic team members were first held hostage and later killed alongside a German police officer by the Palestinian terrorist group 'Black September' (Prantl 1993: 301).

As a result of the fall of the Iron Curtain and continuing conflicts in the Balkans between 1988 and 1992, asylum applications quadrupled, with a peak of 438,000 in 1992 (BAMF 2019: 5). This seemingly large influx of *Ausländer* (foreigners) began to be considered threatening to social unity and the German identity (Mandel 2008: 7) and, in the early 1990s, it became a political focus to control the influx of asylum seekers. The result was a massive grassroots backlash, demanding a more restrictive asylum policy and control of asylum abuse, 'bogus asylum seekers' and 'economic migrants' (Ellerman 2009: 54). Deportations soared as a means of migration control and the restrictive toleration status was distributed in mass as an emergency measure. In other words, toleration became a means to regulate the large influx of 'threatening' asylum seekers.

While the establishment of toleration status resulted from EU pressure, Germany presents itself as a particularly unique case because of the high numbers of refugees provisionally accepted and the duration for which people remained under toleration status. The term *Ketten-Duldung* is often used to refer to those whose toleration status is particularly insecure, long-lasting or has no end in sight. *Ketten* means 'chain', referencing the repeated approvals of short-term permission to stay, each adding another 'link' to the toleration chain. For some of my interlocutors, beyond the Al Tahan family, this status lasted for up to 25 years, while others were still counting as I departed from fieldwork.

By distributing toleration status, the government was able to grant humanitarian relief to refugees without allowing them to apply for asylum or other legal status. Toleration was provisional and, once their home country was deemed safe, the government intended such refugees to return at the earliest opportunity. Toleration status required renewal every few months and provided neither legal rights nor permission to work, travel, attend higher education or integration courses, or obtain a driver's licence. Movement was restricted within the registered *Bundesland* (state) and Berlin, being a city state, forbade movement outside its boundaries. Although it was only meant to be used for short-term stays, the lack of a definition of what 'temporary' status entailed resulted in years, and in some cases decades, of legal insecurity through constant threats of deportation.

Despite Germany's initial attempt to prevent 'unwanted' foreigners entering Germany on a permanent basis through restrictive guest-worker permits and toleration status, regulations started to shift in the 1980s, permitting guest workers

to have permanent residency and family reunification. Despite the difficulty of toleration status, those on the status were often able to stay long term and conditional residency started to be granted to ‘well integrated adults and youths’ (AufenthG 2015: 1). This meant they had to, amongst other requirements, reach the A2 level of language requirements and prove they did not have encounters with the law or try to deceitfully hinder deportation attempts—requirements that remained challenging for many.

Germany’s long-standing hesitancy, on both a political and a social level, to accept those on toleration status has left its mark on those exposed to the experience. The next sections, through the story of the Al Tahan family, explore the family and social processes resulting from permanent temporariness and the resulting effects of not being wanted or included. As such, the following sections seek to answer: What were the immediate and long-term effects of permanent temporariness? What were the family and social processes affecting those on toleration status? And, how did they choose to act and react as a result?

### **Fatima and Kaleb**

#### *The Mental and Physical Toll of Permanent Temporariness*

Fatima arrived in Germany with her two young children, Imani (three years old) and Samir (one year old) in 1990—in the midst of the rising fears of asylum misuse and rising xenophobic attacks following the reunification of East and West Germany. She was escaping the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) as well as the Palestinian refugee camps, which remain one of the most dire, long-standing refugee crises in the world (UNRWA 2011). As the first generation born in exile since *Al Nakba*—the Palestinian catastrophe marking the establishment of Israel—Fatima and her husband Kaleb were part of a generation who experienced Israeli occupation, Palestinian Intifadas and political demoralization (Allan 2014). The Lebanese civil war in which the Palestinians were both perpetrators and victims caused both Lebanese and Palestinians to flee—many to Germany. Fatima followed her two older brothers and took advantage of the ‘East Berlin Gap’. In the 1980s, the East Berlin airport presented a legal loophole: new arrivals received a transit pass to West Germany, where they could apply for asylum. Although this gap was closed in 1986, another opportunity soon presented itself: for nearly a year, between the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989) and the official day of German reunification (3 October 1990), easy and unlimited access into Germany was possible; this route was particularly appealing to those escaping Lebanon. Palestinians residing in Berlin are estimated to number 30,000–45,000 (Ghadban 2008: 69). This wide-ranging estimate remains, because of the Palestinians’ various routes to Germany (e.g. via Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) and the different types of residency statuses and naturalization. A further complication comes from the fact that many Palestinians, like many Kurds, were listed as

*ungeklärt*—meaning their nationality was ‘unresolved’ or ‘open’, since Palestine could not be placed as a country of origin.

Upon arrival, Fatima, Imani and Samir received toleration status and settled into a Berlin asylum centre. It took Kaleb another two years to save enough money to join them. Because the ‘Berlin Gap’ was closed, he had to enter the country illegally and pay a substantial sum to smugglers. After much difficulty, the family was finally reunited, spending another four years in asylum centres around Berlin. On top of the insecure toleration status, they recalled the asylum centres being extremely stressful due to overcrowding, lack of respect for residents’ diverse cultural traditions, and with dirty and unsafe bathrooms. In 1996, when Imani was eight years old, Samir was six and Laela was two, the centre they were housed in closed its doors. Because of the constant threat of deportation, finding other housing was difficult; few landlords would take in a family who could be deported any day. They finally found a place in northern Berlin-Neukölln, an economically neglected low-income neighbourhood, which used to border the Berlin Wall. Cheap housing, growing migrant communities and the establishment of religious and social infrastructure were a big appeal to the family. The apartment they found was small, unheated and on the fourth floor with a shared toilet in a hallway. The then-youngest child, Laela, was constantly sick and the family struggled to keep warm through the long, cold Berlin winters.

Despite the relief of leaving the asylum centre, life in Neukölln was difficult for the family because of their inability to work, the constantly changing, yet minimal, amount of money they were receiving from the government and, most of all, the continuing insecurity of their status. They were unable to move ahead with their lives. Many of the legal proceedings fell on Fatima’s shoulders; she had finished high school while Kaleb had only completed a few years of primary school and was nearly illiterate. Fatima learned German and took on much of the fighting for the family to remain in Germany.

During the continuous renewal proceedings, families like the Al Tahans had to simultaneously deal with what occurred in the past (e.g. trauma and exile), what is occurring in the present (e.g. discrimination, financial difficulties) and what would occur in the future (e.g. possible deportation, immigration-law changes) across a whole range of subjective experiences (Laban *et al.* 2008). The insecurity of toleration status entails constant threats of rejection and forced deportation, and the resulting fears played a pertinent role in family life:

I was always afraid. Once, I cried when they rejected me because I had forgotten a stamp from my lawyer. They only gave me four months because of a missing stamp! I was about to break down completely—really! I was done. I can assure you, those were sixteen difficult years (Fatima).

Heyken (2014) and Dimova (2006) provide rare insights into the psychological effects of reiterative phases of insecurity of toleration status. Focusing on the Bosnian-refugee population in Germany in the early 1990s, they show that toleration status resulted in retraumatization, rather than providing a refuge. The

family's experience can be linked to Heyken's description of toleration status as a 'flight without arrival' (2014: 84) and a 'new war in Berlin' (*ibid.*: 89). Some used creative tactics to prevent deportation, such as illnesses, repeated pregnancies by activating Germany's *Mutterschutz* (Maternity Protection Period) (Castenada 2010: 256) and the destruction of personal documentation to stall and even hinder deportation (Ghadban 2008: 8). Like the Bosnians in Heyken's and Dimova's research, Fatima and Kaleb's family could not find peace or move on from the traumatizing experiences of the civil war or the marginalization that resulted from the German toleration system while their status was so insecure. As Fatima explained, anger and frustration were part of the dehumanizing encounters with foreigner services—leaving her constantly on the 'edge of [her] nerves' and close to mental breakdown. And, as shown above, this fear was strong and ever-present.

With permission to stay expiring every three to six months, feelings of security were fleeting, especially with family members who had different statuses and expiration dates: even as one family member was granted an extension, another was simultaneously engaged in legal action to prevent forced deportation after having their extension rejected. Deportation of one parent has not been uncommon (Ghadban 2008: 9) and Kaleb and Fatima dreaded the letters from foreigner services, which seemed to arrive at a constant rate. Fatima joked that their lawyer nearly became part of the family during the lengthy and intensive process. As in Griffiths's (2014) research with rejected asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, the chaotic and constant upheaval with intervals of stagnant periods of waiting created an inability to imagine the near or distant future, forcing Fatima and Kaleb to only live in the present moment. The feelings of insecurity and powerlessness they experienced were rooted in the 'tension between anticipating constant change and fearing indefinite stasis' (*ibid.*: 2002).

This continuous stress takes a physical as well as mental toll on asylum seekers (Steel *et al.* 2006)—a common phenomenon among many of the families I visited. Kaleb had long suffered with lower-back issues, contributing to his inability to be an active part of his children's lives. Likewise, Fatima had endured issues with her stomach and back, and could not carry groceries, let alone carry her younger children.

The family's wellbeing was particularly impacted by investing in a small restaurant after a change in toleration regulations in 1995. Permission to work was granted under a stipulation of 100 per cent self-sufficiency. In other words, for two years, no money would be provided from the state and temporary residency would be considered if the family could prove to be fully financially independent. Following years of stagnation and no integration or language courses, for the majority of those with toleration status, this was unachievable. For Fatima and Kaleb, the restaurant was exhausting work and the entire family remembers those times as some of the worst they have experienced. Succeeding meant safety for the family, though, so Fatima and Kaleb sacrificed their family life for the success of their restaurant. Imani, Samir and Laela, now caring for their younger siblings (Jazmin (born in 2003), Jamal (2004) and Kayla (2007)), often returned from school to an empty fridge and no power because the family could not pay the bills.

Fatima said those years ‘broke her’, both psychologically and physically, and she wondered whether it was worth it, since they do not believe it helped them gain residency earlier. Fatima and Kaleb spoke freely about their experiences of toleration and the continuous stress, ill health, fear and insecurity they experienced as a result. While the parents carry the burden of the conflicts they experienced back in Lebanon as well as the flight to Germany, their children share these experiences and, as we will see, the insecurity of toleration also left its mark on them—especially the oldest three.

### **Imani and Laela**

#### *The Blurring of Generational Roles and the Burden of Silence*

Living under toleration status was a family affair and the children, Imani especially, shared the burden with their parents. As the oldest child, Imani took on whatever her parents could not do within the family. Although she learned German quickly and showed academic potential, home responsibilities prevented her from excelling at school. Germany has a three-tiered schooling system and only with completion of *Abitur* in Grade 13 is higher education possible. After Grade 6, she was tracked into the *Hauptschule*, the lowest level of the three-tiered school system, which concludes after Grade 9. Despite Fatima’s hope that her daughter would continue to study and finish school, she was unable to relieve the burden of her family responsibilities. This resulted in Imani failing Grade 9 and leaving school during her second attempt. Without a graduation certificate, Imani was left to care for her younger siblings. Imani recalled with sadness: ‘the doctor thought the children were mine, because I was there so often with them— and I was only 16!’ Her departure from school and adoption of the caretaker role for her three youngest siblings occurred during the restaurant-ownership period. Imani frequently attended parent–teacher meetings, either to be the cultural broker for their mother or to take on the parent role herself.

From a young age, Imani recalls serving as a cultural and language broker, helping her mother with the complex letters and proceedings from foreigner services. She became closely involved with the legal processes of her family’s toleration status:

**Imani:** I knew everything that was going on. I translated for my mother when she didn’t understand.

**Carola:** So, you knew about the deportation letters [from Germany]?

**I:** Yeah. Always.

**C:** Did you talk about what was happening with anyone?

**I:** No! I kept it to myself. Even my cousins who knew about our status, I never talked about anything with them . . . Also not with my friends. I was ashamed. At that time, we were the only ones on toleration, not like to today where there are lots.



**C:** How about with your parents?

**I:** No, they had enough on their plate. Why should I add to their problems or worries? I just kept it to myself . . .

**C:** How did you view your future while you were on toleration status?

**I:** Horribly. I couldn't leave Berlin or do vocational training . . .

Children tend to acculturate faster than their parents, and children acting as culture and language brokers for parents has been shown to be a source of significant stress (Marks et al. 2011). Imani was well aware of the pressures and stresses her parents were under and how insecure their legal status was. Not wanting to add to her parents' strain, Imani kept her worries to herself. She was further isolated by her parents' insistence that their children not talk about family problems outside the home. The emphasis on keeping family problems private prevented interventions from schools, foreigner or social services; fear and shame encapsulated the stress within families, preventing the development of strong support networks.

The silence Imani enacted points to the isolation and shame that she felt. For a long time, she believed her family was the only one with toleration status, since nobody talked about it at school or in her family. Because of this conversational taboo, local elementary and secondary schools were largely unaware of the number of children on toleration status, since they were only listed as receiving a Berliner Pass—a form of welfare subsidy not specific to refugee children. The mobility restrictions of toleration status resulted in many children unable to go on field trips outside of Berlin and teachers were often led to believe this was because the parents *wanted* to keep their children close to home (which frequently was also true, particularly when it came to the girls, who were much more restricted in their mobility; see Tize and Reis 2019).

To escape the responsibilities and pressures at home, and growing conflicts with her younger brother Samir, at 19, Imani married a cousin from Lebanon whom she had never met in person. Suddenly, Laela was left to take over Imani's former roles in the household. However, while Imani was taking care of the home and their younger siblings, Laela was able to complete Grade 13, the highest track of high-school education. Like her siblings, she was smart, had good grades and excelled when given the opportunity. However, when her older sister left, she had to postpone her dreams of continued education and go onto welfare to care for her younger siblings.

Honestly, we didn't have support from our parents like you were supposed to. I ran the household with my older sister and we learned responsibility early on—exactly what we are trying to avoid with our younger siblings. They are little, and they should enjoy their childhood . . . I'm like a mother to the little ones (Laela).

Imani and Laela, by sparing them the burdens of caretaking and allowing them to have a childhood, hope their 'sacrifices' will benefit their younger siblings, allowing them to grow up with greater stability and future prospects in education.

Parents' and older siblings' hopes and aspirations for children/younger siblings and future generations rest on their not growing up with the stress and instability of toleration status—hopes that were unanimous amongst the families who took part in this research. Young people who were able to finish their education frequently had older siblings helping to care for the family, paving the way for their younger siblings to have childhoods and complete their educations.

In the Al Tahan family, Jazmin (10 years old) was the first person I interviewed. Talking with her clearly highlighted how older siblings' sacrifices play out in family dynamics and the opportunities afforded to younger siblings. At the time, Jazmin was in Grade 4 and was extremely polite and well-spoken. She talked at length about her older sister Laela—her role model—who helped her with her homework every night. However, when I interviewed Jazmin during a recent return visit in secondary school, she no longer saw her sister as a role model. Laela was again on welfare and about to be married, and Jazmin adamantly confirmed that she did not have any role models, thereby distancing herself from the admiration she had for her older sister who was the first to finish Grade 13 in her family. Interestingly, she had a very different view from her sisters about toleration:

I don't know much about toleration status. I don't have much interest in it. People come and go and when they then become residents it's kind of a thing. They are sort of these standard procedures that happen here. It's totally normal (Jazmin).

Jazmin was young when the family gained residency and, additionally, her sisters absorbed the family stress by acting as caretakers, thus protecting Jazmin from enduring the hardships in her young life. As such, younger siblings may gain a different perspective and different opportunities through the protection of their older siblings.

## **Samir**

### *Seeking Gratification in the Present*

While silence was also a way of coping for the second-oldest, Samir navigated it in a very different way from his two sisters. Like his sister Imani, Samir recalled a taboo towards sharing problems, fears and insecurities with both his parents and anyone outside the family. While Imani held her feelings in and expressed her concerns by helping her family through taking over the 'mother' role for her younger siblings, Samir's outlet was joining the bands of Lebanese-Palestinian boys on the streets:

I could never go to my parents when I had problems— they had enough problems. When I was little, I couldn't express myself and I kept everything within. Later, I was a boy of the streets, my parents don't know anything about that. The things I've seen and done! My friends were my family and when we had a problem we'd go and solve it how boys do—we got our own quick money, used our fists and we solved everything amongst us (Samir).

Young men like Samir, in part due to their own, their peers' and their parents' experiences, had a lack of trust in others, and especially German institutions, which continuously disappointed or rejected them. As a result, even young men who wanted to stay within the law felt the pull of the streets and the black markets. Samir, like several of his peers, explained how his feelings of being stuck eventually led him to work illegally and to join the gangs of boys on the streets during his high-school years. His activities gained him a criminal record and multiple, but unsuccessful, deportation attempts.

The turn to crime for young migrants, especially Arab young men in Neukölln, has been a subject of national focus and contributed to fears of self-segregation and the creation of 'foreigner ghettos' (Eksner 2013) or 'parallel societies' (Gestring 2011). This fear is driven by statistics showing that young Arab men (namely Lebanese and those who are stateless/have unresolved nationality) are disproportionately represented among young offenders (Landeskriminalamt 2014).

While on toleration status, schooling did not provide a future, because of work and education bans, and Samir would simply become stagnant like his parents once he graduated. The gratification of education was also too far in the future and the streets gratified his desires in the present. The presence of many other young men with the same insecure status led to the formation of gangs looking for their own income, without any prospect of attaining higher education or employment after high school.

These young men shared similar home experiences: their parents were stuck and helpless in a system that bound them in permanent temporariness. As a result, they fought against their parents' 'victim' status, commonly using insults towards each other like '*Du Opfer!*' ('You victim!') and '*Du Flüchtling!*' ('You refugee!'). Joining gangs on the streets was a way to feel empowered and engage in some resistance against the constraints of toleration status. Through the black markets and the streets, the younger generation created a countermovement to their parents' disempowerment.

## **Becoming Residents**

### *Between Hope and Disillusionment*

In 2006, the Al Tahan family finally gained residency following 16 years of toleration status. They sold their restaurant after years of gruelling work and family sacrifice, and went on welfare to recover their broken minds and bodies. Welfare was initially a short-term plan to get healthy; however, Fatima and Kaleb still remain on it to this day—their health has been too poor to start working again. Residency gave them security, but Fatima believes it did not change their living circumstances: 'Now that we have residency, nothing has changed! All poverty. Everything we have worked for we have had to pay out again. We have saved nothing.' The acute insecurity may be behind them, but the family continues to battle displacement through the inability to follow the existential desire to form a

stable future or to have the economic factors to control it (Ramsay 2019: 15). In other words, while the family now had access to rights and services that stabilized the legal aspect of their lives, citizenship did not provide full inclusion, or existential security. Instead of putting the state of permanent temporariness behind them, their futures remained uncertain and subject to forces outside of their control.

Immediately after gaining residency, Fatima flew to Lebanon to rest and to see her family for the first time in 16 years. She was shocked to see how everything, including herself, had changed.

I've been here since 1990, and in 2005 I was psychologically broken! I could not go on. The hard work broke me. I flew to Lebanon for 10 days to recover. After being gone for so long I saw that everything had changed. Everything was not my home anymore, what I used to love. It was also not a time when things were safe. The people had changed. I am homesick for Lebanon, but when I was there, after three days I wanted to leave. I looked at the people and cried. I wanted to go back to Neukölln and I wanted to go back right away. I could not keep going. I wanted to change my ticket, but my mother and sister took me to the doctor. It was a strange feeling. I do not know, I never felt safe. Here in Germany I found myself. There, I have the feeling that I am nothing—I am nothing! Even though it is my home (Fatima).

Fatima returned to Neukölln with a greater sense of belonging. Her introductory statement of being 'treated like animals' is relative in relation to how she and other Palestinian refugees were—and still are—treated in Lebanon. Feldman (2015: 429), describing the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, uses Povinelli's definition of endurance as 'the ability to suffer and yet persist' (Povinelli 2011: 32) to describe the living circumstances in the camps. The emergency that marked the initial displacement has turned into chronic and intergenerational conditions of limited political rights, poverty and restricted economic opportunity (Allan 2014). For many, emigration to countries like Germany remains an aspiration—a way to escape the suffering and lack of a future in the camps (*ibid.*: 166).

Fatima was the first in her immediate family to realize how relative their suffering in Germany was compared to Lebanon; this changed once the whole family visited a few years later. Imani, Samir and Laela were shocked to realize that Lebanon was not the idealized home they had imagined. There they encountered extreme poverty and could not relate to cousins who had grown up in Lebanon. The house Kaleb had told them about was in ruins.

The effects of this trip were particularly devastating for Samir. His proud Palestinian sense of identity—rooted in Lebanon and shared with his peers—was shattered during this visit. All he found was poverty, destruction and pain. He felt an evil spirit (a *Jinn*) possess his body, which, upon his return to Germany, increased his criminal and substance-abuse issues until he got caught by the police—an incident that ultimately ended his criminal life on the streets. His idealized past was shattered and it affected his present and future perspectives. He remained a proud Palestinian yet sought to return to Palestine instead of Lebanon.

Once naturalized, Samir, like his peers whom I interviewed, expressed regrets for their involvement in crime and lack of caring about their education. Furthermore, a criminal record was often a reason to postpone or hinder gaining permanent residency, and sometimes it affected the entire family. Samir declared himself somewhat bipolar, with mood swings, periods of depression and emotional instability—a self-diagnosis his family agrees with. He struggles to hold down a job and wishes he had helped his parents with their restaurant, instead of seeking his own financial freedom via drug dealing and theft. He would then have a past, and a future, that he could be proud of. Gaining permanent residency years after graduation was a step in the right direction; however, by then, it was not enough to create social mobility or positive future opportunities. After naturalization and ending his criminal activities, Samir struggled to decide what to do. Islam played an increasingly important role in his life but he did not go to the mosque because he believed he had sinned too much. He lacked trust in those around him: ‘I know that we can’t depend on others. Especially not the police!’ His experience on the streets furthermore resulted in distrust towards his own community. He fears for his younger siblings and his older sisters out in public, and therefore imposes strict rules for his sisters whom he calls ‘too free’, which his father does not necessarily agree with, yet does not protest.

For the Al Tahan family, Neukölln was fraught with tensions and ambiguous feelings of belonging. Laela explained: ‘I’ve always felt safe here. I feel misunderstood, but I feel safe.’ While the family feels safer in Germany, they are still unsettled, looking to find their place amidst now largely ex-toleration communities that lack a sense of trust in and connection to both greater German society and each other. Mass gentrification of the area, coupled with experiences and feelings of discrimination, increases feelings of being misunderstood and unwanted (see also [Tize and Reis 2019](#); [Tize \*et al.\* in press](#)).

In the past five years, the rise in Islam as a way of coping with everyday stigmatization and discrimination has gained a lot of attention amongst service providers and the local schools. Whereas, during Samir’s school days more than 10 years ago, many were involved in crime and drugs, in recent years, religion has taken on an ever-increasing presence, especially amongst the younger generations—as a way of coping with feelings of discrimination and marginalization ([Tize \*et al.\* in press](#)).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many of the Muslim faith, not just Palestinians, have taken on the Palestine conflict as a symbol for Muslim discrimination in Europe. It has become their fight for recognition and a symbol of the (vicarious) experience of victimization (see [Eksner 2014](#)).

Amongst my informants, remembering their pasts and identifying as Palestinian were in tension with wanting to belong and have a future in Germany. Allan, in her research with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, argues that

it is thanks to their mnemonic tenacity that Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, despite the long years of exile, have defied all predictions that they would eventually become Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, or other nationalities ([Allan 2014](#): 42).

The Palestinians' refusal to forget or symbolically disappear has grounds in their suffering and marginality in exile and provides them with a 'latent form of power' (Sayigh 2006: 134, in Allan 2014: 42). Lebanon and Palestine are considered by many as 'where [they] are from' or even 'home' despite never having set foot there. The inability to fully belong in Palestine, Lebanon or Germany is an ongoing source of tension throughout the diaspora and the stresses of long-term toleration status do little to resolve or alleviate this tension.

## **Conclusion**

### *Toleration Status as a Multigenerational Ordeal*

The experiences of the Al Tahan family in Neukölln show how toleration status affects feelings of belonging and future perspectives, not just while on the status, but also once granted conditional residency. Without the ability to participate in society and without any form of long-term stability, first in Lebanon and now in Germany, the experience of 'living in the space controlled by an Other' (Kublitz 2015: 82) is prolonged and creates a barrier to shaping a sense of belonging and a true home. Instead of providing refuge and peace, the German system, like other European countries' asylum policies, amounted to a continued source of traumatization for people who already endured great stress from war and flight (Dimova 2006).

Despite great variability in how refugees and asylum seekers adapt (Steel *et al.* 2006), the findings here show how enduring stress as a consequence of long-term toleration status affects not just those who experienced war and flight themselves, but also their children who grow up in Germany from a young age or are born there. Similarly to Kublitz's research with Palestinians in Danish Camps, the Al Tahan family was suffering from never-ending everyday 'minor mundane catastrophes' (2015: 3) caused by legal insecurity, chronic illness, unemployment and discrimination. A history of temporary protection can become an intrinsic part of how young people experience and socialize within the host country, leading to feelings of rejection and non-belonging, thereby contributing to processes of polarization.

I do not argue that the collection of stories of the family, heard in different settings and varying compositions of family members and individual meetings, is complete or comprehensive or spans all the experiences of those on toleration status. However, the focus on one family shows how the parents absorb the stress and feelings of rejection by the German bureaucratic processes of toleration status, as well as project or transmit these dispositions and resulting reactions to their children. The parents share their suffering with the older children and, by acting and reacting to their environment, the children either accept or reject what is being transmitted to them (Trommsdorff 2009). Thereby, agency plays a role in how young people shift and reinterpret their environment—and this can be seen in how Imani, Samir, Laela and Jazmin differently interpreted and reacted to their environments based on gender and birth order. Through exploring the various

experiences within the Al Tahan family, I reinforce the argument that refugees cannot be homogenized into the experience of the singularity of their asylum status (e.g. [Malkki 1996](#); [Allan 2014](#)). These young people are not passive victims, but active participants in their lives and, given the opportunity, are potential agents of change with transformative capacity and political agency ([Shakya et al. 2014](#): 134).

For young men like Samir, joining bands of boys involved in crime and violence was often an answer to rejecting their parents' victim status and their inevitable stagnancy once they left school. Despite being located within an urban, multicultural setting, Samir and his peers had a similar shift in generational roles to young Algerian refugees living in a camp in Ghana (see [Hampshire et al. 2008](#)). Instead of depending on their parents, young men took on economic responsibilities, in part to support their families, but also to establish independence from their parents' relative meagre support from the government.

Samir's choice to join his peers on the streets, instead of focusing his attention on school, was part of a larger environment that gained media attention in 2006 called the 'Rütli Incident'. Teachers at the Rütli *Hauptschule* (lowest-tiered school) wrote a letter to the Senate of Education and the media, requesting the school be shut down, attributing much of its failure to the growing Arab population, exemplified by a lack of caring about education or positive future perspectives, and exhibitions of violence, a lack of respect and ignorance towards adults ([der Spiegel 2006](#)). The media frenzy that followed portrayed the Rütli School, and the migrant district of Berlin-Neukölln, as the prime example of failed integration in Germany ([Eksner 2013](#)). Interestingly, the reports failed to mention that these young people came from families who fled conflict and largely held toleration status, and thus had no future in education unless they were naturalized. It is also this group of young men who had contact with the justice system who were considered 'least deserving' of receiving citizenship ([Ellerman 2009](#): 155) and faced increased deportation attempts, constant fear and citizenship refusals. These processes contributed to these young people struggling to find a sense of belonging in Germany (see also [Tize and Reis 2019](#)).

For the oldest daughters in the Al Tahan family, caretaking became a means of ensuring family security. The responsibilities that children in asylum-seeking families take on are not unique to Palestinians, nor to the context of Germany. In Canada, for example, children in asylum-seeking families are the 'resettlement champions' and take on extensive caretaking tasks such as navigating services, doing interpretation, taking care of family-sponsorship applications, earning income, finding housing, sending money back home, mentoring siblings, as well as caretaking responsibilities and giving emotional support ([Shakya et al. 2014](#): 138). Similarly to the findings shown here, the young people had 'a tenuous and ambivalent relationship between empowerment and vulnerability' (*ibid.*: 132) with the extra roles they took on in resettlement.

Through taking care of the younger children in a large family, and acting as cultural and language brokers, Imani and Laela tried to reduce the stress for their parents. [Orellana \(2009\)](#) has argued that children acting as caretakers are not

victims stripped of innocent childhoods; rather, it is a reciprocal interaction wherein both parties play an active role and receive benefits (e.g. [Bolden 2012](#)). The beneficial impact of young caretaking has been shown to strengthen inter-generational family relations ([Garcia Sanchez 2018](#)) and build social trust ([Katz 2014](#)). Older siblings acting as linguistic and cultural mediators for their parents additionally create social benefits for the family and promote the relations and functioning of social institutions that the family interacts with, such as schools, clinics and social services ([Antonini 2016](#)). However, the burden of caretaking should not be neglected and, for the girls in this family, and in many others, the family came first. For Imani, and later Laela, caring for younger siblings meant sacrificing their own education and future aspirations—something they were both well aware of.

Children engaging in cultural and language brokering for their parents can choose what information to translate for their parents—and can thereby spare their parents from harmful or discriminatory information ([Guan et al. 2016](#)). However, the price was, as Imani chose, to carry the burden in silence. Silence towards parents as well as outsiders creates great challenges in helping young caretakers such as Laela and Imani, since they are often hidden within family structures, with little to no contact with service providers, which can result in neglect from policymakers and services. This isolation can prevent individuals, such as Imani, from finding ways to finish their education.

While older siblings as caretakers provide younger siblings with opportunities, the younger generation still faces difficulties. Immersed in a community and a school with other students with family histories similar to their own, they have limited positive role models and are often lacking in the support needed to succeed. Their parents are largely on welfare after years of stagnancy on toleration status, and many older siblings did not (or were not able to) complete their education, instead immersing themselves in crime, caretaking, early marriage and parenting or going onto welfare like their parents. Germany remains one of the countries with the lowest chances of social mobility for those coming from the lower classes, especially for those with a migrant background ([OECD 2015](#)). As such, despite changes in legal status, recent school reforms and efforts to provide equal opportunities, children of migrants—and, as I have shown, children of those exposed to toleration status—face numerous obstacles from social mobility, causing a high trend of intergenerational reiteration of social vulnerabilities such as low levels of education and poverty. Toleration status needs to be seen as having a profound effect not only on the parents, but also on their children—with detrimental impacts on educational trajectories, sense of belonging as well as future perspectives.

Despite the 2015 widely mediatized ‘*Willkommens Kultur*’ (welcoming culture), when nearly a million refugees mostly from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan entered Germany (Bundesministerium des Inneren 2016: 89), the polarizing responses by both the government and civil society do not appear to have had a long-term effect on the strict immigration rules or the high numbers of deportations ([Bundestagsdrucksache 2019](#): 1). Toleration status is still actively distributed and, in 2019, over 190,000 were living in a state of permanent temporariness (*ibid.*: 38).



Thankfully, toleration status has undergone some policy changes, such as the possibility of studying and the distribution of work permits ([Handbook Germany 2019](#)) as well as shortening the amount of time prior to being able to apply for permanent residency—especially for young people and their families ([AufenthG 2015](#)). However, all these possibilities for (early) residency are dependent upon the stipulation of proving successful integration (e.g. successful education/work/appropriate social conduct) (*ibid.*). For young families, the pressure to apply is dependent particularly on the children's success in their integration efforts. As I have shown, constant threats of deportation and a state of permanent temporariness can impede successful integration in the short and long term—not just for the parents, but also for the children. The crux lies in the chronic forms of displacement as they create

the existential experience of existing in a contemporary situation in which external forces or pressures make the future seem impossible to navigate, and the present unable to be aligned with an aspired to or projected future ([Ramsay 2019](#): 16).

For this reason, the multigenerational impact of toleration status, and living in permanent temporariness, requires further exploration. Such attention could provide new insights into how children of asylum seekers situate their present and future perspectives in the host country.

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1. All names and other identifying details have been changed or omitted to protect the identity of the family.
2. The story of the Al Tahan family is drawn from my larger PhD research project, which focuses on the process impacting the intergenerational reiteration and resistance of social vulnerabilities, such as low levels of education, poverty and marginalization among children of migrants in Berlin-Neukölln. While the effects of toleration status were not an initial focus of the research, its significance became increasingly clear during conversations with the families.
3. [Kublitz \(2016\)](#) provides a very relevant and interesting discussion of the generational shifts of Palestinians in Danish Camps. She argues that the shift has been from revolutionaries to Muslims.

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