THE CIRCASSIAN HERITAGE IN SYRIA WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF MULTIPLE DISPLACEMENTS

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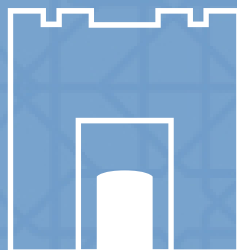
Photo: Circassian house in the village of Breiqa. Amjad Alkoud, 2001.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Circassians are an ethnic group originally native to the Northwest Caucasus region until they were driven out of their land by Russian conquest in the late 19th century, after which the Circassians resettled in agricultural communities in parts of the Ottoman Empire. In Syria, their communities were concentrated in the Golan Heights in the south-western parts of Syria, including Quneitra city and several surrounding villages. For many decades, the Circassians revived their heritage and lifestyle and became the largest ethnic minority group in southern Syria. In 1967, following the Six-Day War, the Circassians were yet again forcibly expelled from their homes; the Israeli Army bulldozed many villages and Quneitra city was never rebuilt, even after its return to Syrian control following the October 1973 war. Circassians became internally displaced people in Damascus or left abroad mainly to the United States following an offer by the United States government to move them to Paterson, New Jersey throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These periods of displacement made it difficult for the Circassians to maintain their traditions and sense of cohesiveness. In the Golan Heights, only two Circassian villages survived and were under Syrian control: Bir-Ajam and Breiqa. A minor attempt to reconstruct these communities took place at the end of the 1970s; however, it did not encourage many Circassians to return. By 2011, these two villages were home to around 5,000 inhabitants, as well as serving as a destination for Circassian cultural activities. These latest inhabitants were displaced after November 4, 2012, due to the Syrian Army's military operation against anti-government rebels. Many of these inhabitants and Syrian Circassians fled to neighbouring countries, Europe, and the Russian Federal Republics in the Caucasus (mainly The Karachay-Cherkess Republic, The Kabardino-Balkar Republic and The Republic of Adygea). This paper aims to explain the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Circassians in Syria within the historical and current contexts of displacement, integration, and diaspora. Additionally, it will examine internet-based initiatives by Syrian Circassians to preserve their rural architectural heritage in Bir-Ajam and Breiqa. This exploration will illustrate the importance of the Circassian heritage to the displaced society as well as the role of social media documentation in preserving this endangered heritage and people's memories.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

The "Circassian" or "Adyghe" ethnicity is one of the indigenous people of the Northwest Caucasus who was exiled from their land during the late 19th century as a result of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus (Richmond, 2013). Today, Circassians live in 52 countries. After their displacement in the 19th century, they resettled in agricultural communities in various parts of the Ottoman Empire (Richmond, 2013). In Syria, many Circassians were resettled in the Golan Heights, where they built over 16 villages and they became a powerful community in the main city of Quneitra as well. Later, in 1967, the Circassians were forced to leave these districts and became internally displaced within Syria. After the 1973 war, the Circassian presence in the Golan Heights was limited to two heavily damaged villages with approximately 700 inhabitants combined (2004 Census). More recently, following the start of the conflict in 2011 and as other members of the Syrian society, many Circassians left Syria and became refugees in neighbouring countries, in Europe, and the Russian Republics in the Caucasus.

In light of these multiple displacements, this paper aims to investigate the Circassian architectural heritage in Syria and how war and forced displacement affected the vernacular and cultural practices of the Circassians in the realm of the built environment – mainly the structure of the small community of the "Aul" (i.e. village) and the structure of the "Wuna" (i.e. the dwelling).

Online archives, websites, and social media were searched to identify historical and literary sources about the life of Circassians in the Golan Heights region since 1878. The identified photos and documents were analysed using historical and content analysis with a focus on indigenous buildings and construction methods. The analysis identified the main features of Circassian settlements in both their homeland and in Syria and explored the use of media as a tool of exploring, archiving and conserving heritage, and people's devastation, memories and aspirations.

The first three sections will provide background about the Circassian livelihood and diaspora (Historical Background at Caucasus Region; Circassian-Russian Wars; and The Road to the Middle East and Syria). Finally, the results of the analysis regarding "The Circassian Heritage in Syria" will be presented.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN THE CAUCASUS REGION

After the Georgians and the Armenians, the Circassians came closest of all the Caucasian peoples to developing the prerequisites for nationhood. They had traditions of roots extending back to the dawn of recorded history.

Paul B. Henze (Henze, 1990, p. 10)

Pre-War Geography

No place called "Circassia" can be found on any contemporary map; however, on maps drawn before the 19th century, the name "Circassia" would be boldly incontestable (Figure 1, Figure 2). At that time, "Circassian" was the term used to describe the tribes of the largest indigenous ethnic group; those who were believed to have inhabited the area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea (Jaimoukha, 1998). "Historical Circassia" is a term used to designate Circassian lands before Tsarist imperial conquests at the beginning of the 19th century (Jaimoukha, 1998). 'Circassia' occupied an area of approximately 100,000 squares kilometres, roughly a quarter of the size of the whole Caucasus; this made it the largest country in the region, with a population of approximately 1.7 million by the 17th century (Richmond, 2013).
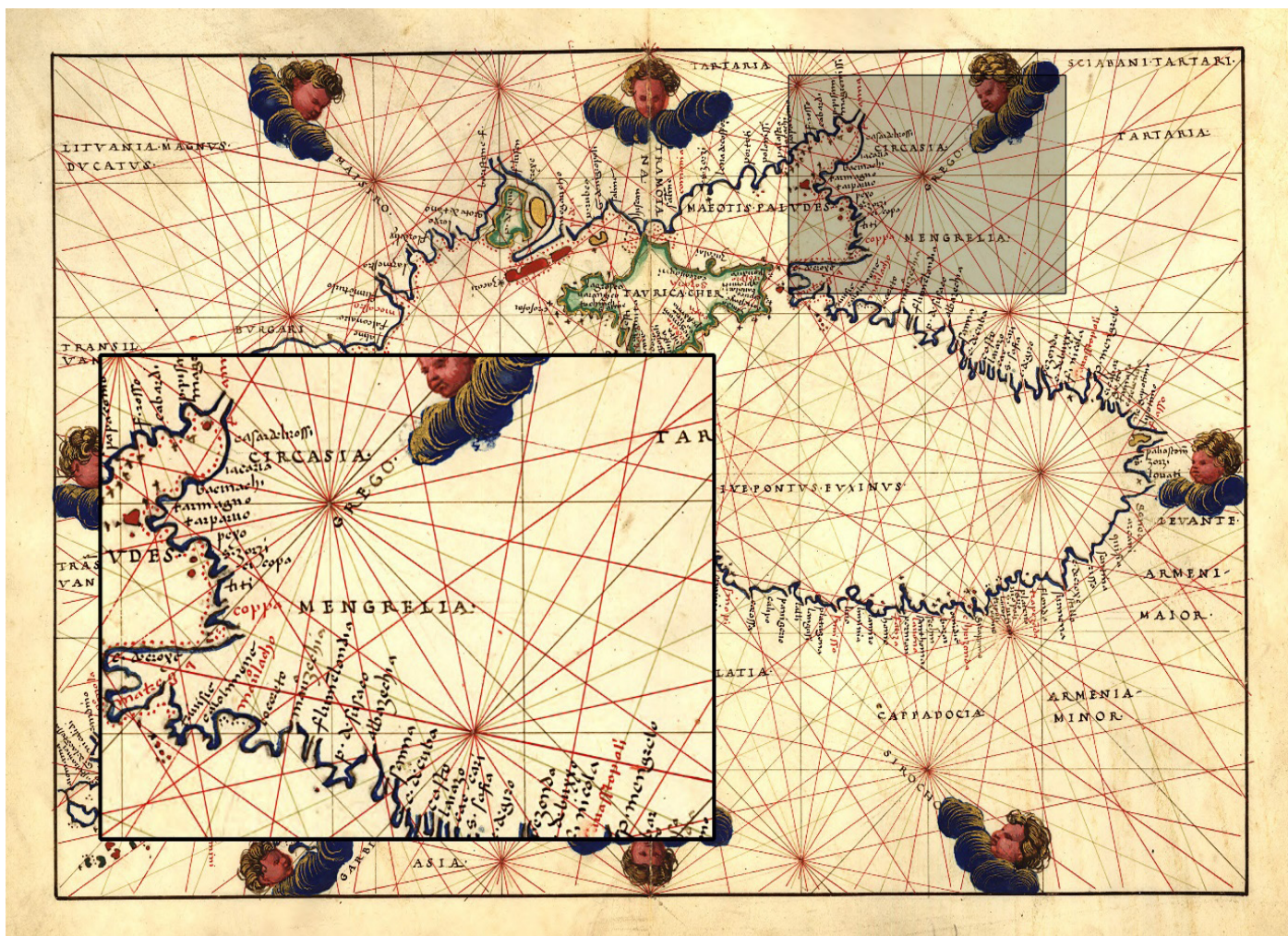
Figure 1. Map of Circassia in the 16th century A.D. by Battista Agnese (Genoese Cartographer; c. 1500 - 1564) [Retrieved from Library of Congress, American Memory]
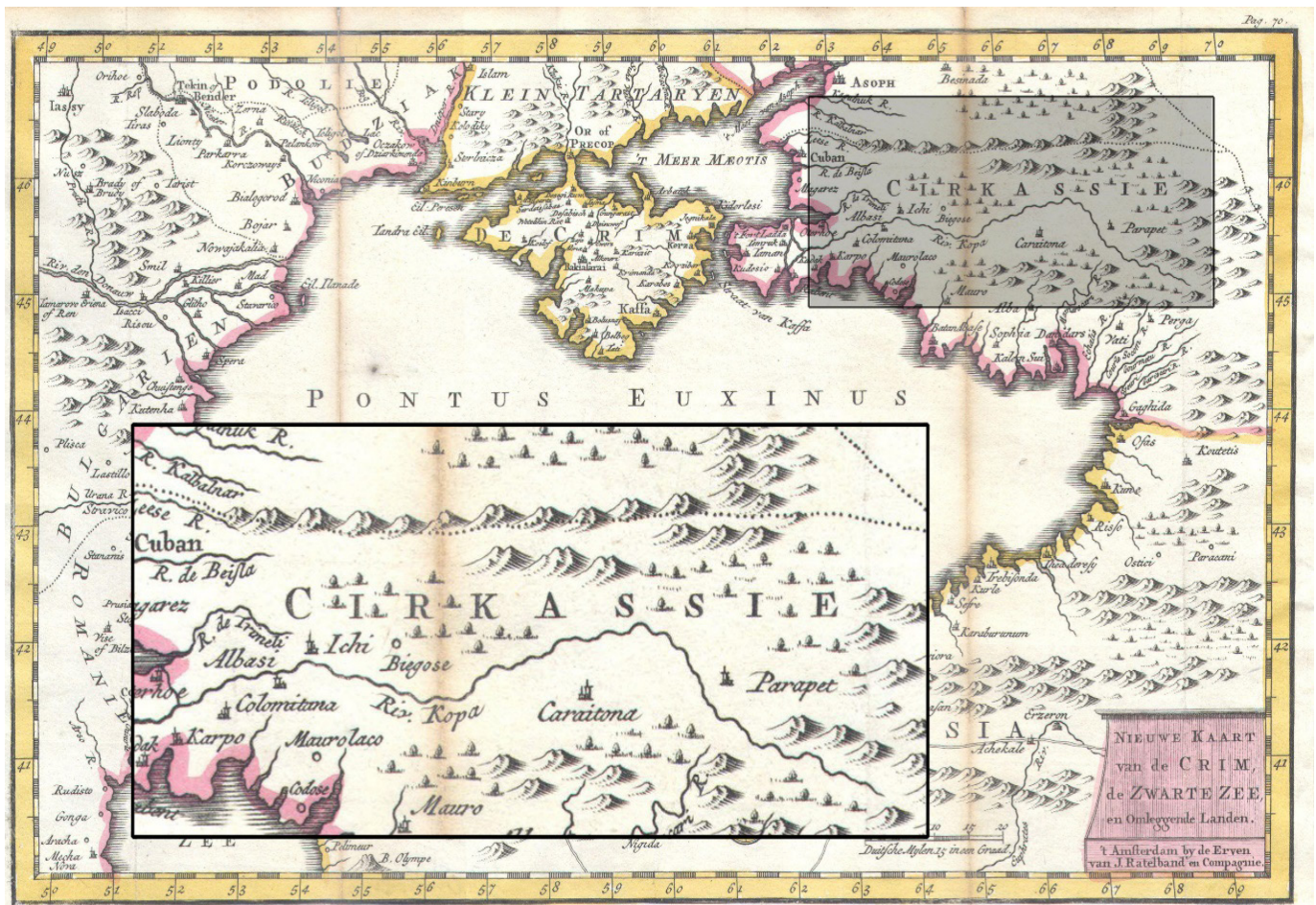
Figure 2. Map of Circassia "Nieuwe Kaart van de Crim de Zwarte Zee en Omleggende Landen". c. 1747 (undated) 7.5 x 12 in (19.05 x 30.48 cm)

Identity and Tribal Structure

Originally the term Circassian was used to describe all the people of the North Caucasus. By the 19th century, Cherkes, the Russian variant of the term, became attached exclusively to the Adyghe people and was then translated into "Circassian" in Western Europe (Richmond, 2013).

The Circassian people are composed of twelve tribes: the Ubykh, Abkhaz and Abaza (considered one tribe), Besleney, Kabardians, Natuhay (a.k.a. Natukhai), Shapsugh, Bjedukhs (a.k.a. Bzhedugh), Egerukays, Hamysh, Hatukay, Mahoash and the Temirgoys. Each tribe is represented by a star on the gold and green Circassian flag (Jaimoukha, 1998). The fragmentation into these different tribes happened primarily due to two factors: first, the highly complex non-navigable nature of their region; and second, the linguistic evolution of their language (Shami, 2009) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Map of the Circassian tribes [Source: (Richmond, 2013)]

The twelve tribes of the Circassians were distinguished into three national groups that are ethnically related and closely allied: the Ubykh, the Apsua or Abkhaz-Abazians, and the Adyghe (Jaimoukha, 1998):

- The Ubykh used to inhabit the south-western portion of "Circassia" on the Black Sea coast.
- The Apsua was comprised of the Abkhaz and Abaza. The Abkhaz occupied the south-western part of Circassia between the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains.
- The Adyghe was by far the largest nation. They were made up of two sub-groups, including the Eastern and Western Adyghe, which were further divided into several clans.

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An overview of the social structure of the tribes can be seen in Table 1. The original social structure of Circassian tribal society was hierarchical with four classes: Princes (Pshi), Nobles (Vork, Uzden), Freemen (Tokav, Thfokotl), and Serfs (Pshilt). No one prince was ever powerful enough to overpower all the Circassian tribes and establish a central authority (Jaimoukha, 1998).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Circassian tribes

National groups	Main dialect	Tribes	Social System
1. Ubykhians (Adyghe of Krasnodar Krai)	1. Ubykh	1. Ubykh	Aristocratic/ Hierarchical
2. The Apsua	2. Abkhaz & Abaza	2. Abkhaz & Abaza	Democratic
3. Adyghe	3. East Adyghe (Kabardian)	3. Besleney	Aristocratic/ Hierarchical
		4. Kabardians	
	4. West Adyghe	5. Natuhay	Democratic
		6. Shapsugh	
		7. Bjedukhs	Aristocratic/ Hierarchical
		8. Egerukays	
		9. Hamysh	
		10. Hatukay	
		11. Mahoash	
		12. Temirgoys	

Pre-War Livelihood and Economy

Before the Circassian-Russian Wars, the group's main economic activities were pastoral and agricultural in nature, and the community shared collective ownership of the land. There was little differentiation of professions. Everyone farmed and most kept livestock. Those who were wealthy owned many horses in addition to large herds of cattle. The harsh climate of the Caucasus was associated with a quite short growing season; famines were frequent and widespread, occurring during late spring or early fall. As a result, the Circassians lived a semi-migratory life, raising herds of sheep and cattle. Other economic activities included a large-scale commercial exchange with the Turks, such as: selling furs, leather, wax, honey, copper, hardwoods, jewelry, and other goods (Richmond, 2013). Additionally, horse breeding was a common and widespread practice by the Circassians. As a result, they had a thriving trade exporting horses to Russia and Persia. The "Kabarda" was the most well-known pedigree, which is still considered to be the best mountain horse (Jaimoukha, 1998).

CIRCASSIAN-RUSSIAN WARS

The Circassian-Russian Wars began in 1763 and ended in 1864 (Jaimoukha, 1998). The Circassians made their last stand against the Russians in May of 1864, in a small canyon located twenty-five miles from the Black Sea coastal city of Sochi, which was then known as Qbaada. After the Circassians' surrendered on May 21, 1864, the Russians expelled the majority of the surviving Circassians to the Ottoman Empire via ships from Sochi (Richmond, 2013). Figure 4 shows a timeline map of the shrinking Circassian territories. Further details of these events will be discussed in the following sub-sections.
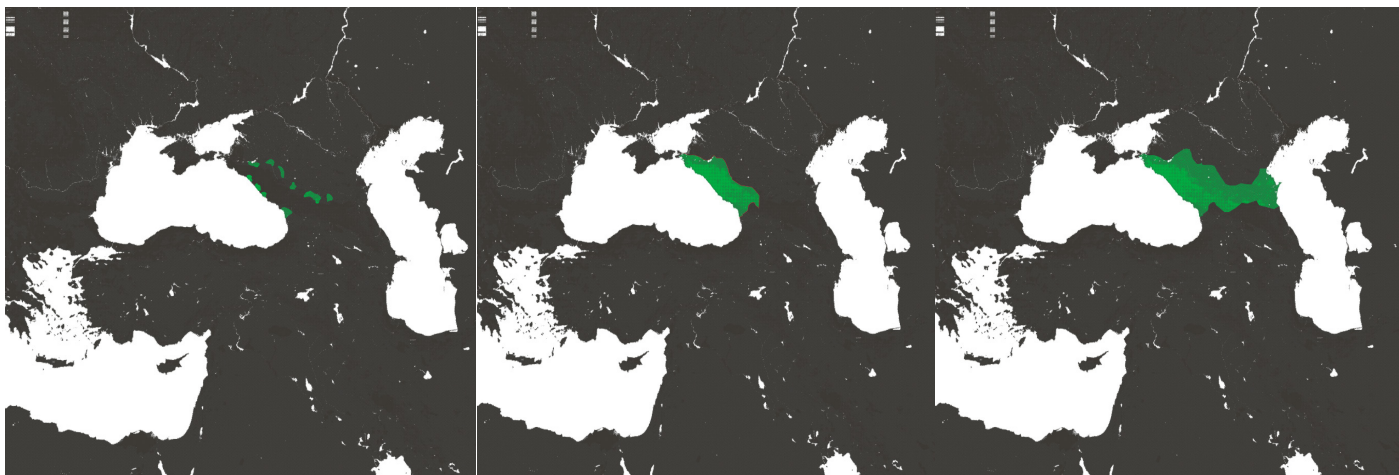
Figure 4. Timeline map of Circassian territories, from right to left [Source: (Meiqari, 2018)]

Phase I (1735-1826): The Line

From the Middle Ages until the 17th century, Circassia remained mainly peaceful and quiet. The Kabardians had been allied with Russia since 1557. However, that was about to change at the beginning of the 17th century, when Peter the Great designated the Caucasus as a territory to be conquered, as part of his vision to take control of Iran. Circassia also had a valuable location; since Russian influence extended to the south of the Caucasus (i.e. Georgia), Circassia became a buffer state that stood as a barrier blocking the free travel of Russian troops to newly-acquired territories in Georgia and Armenia. The tsarist historian Vasily Potto summarises the Russian position as follows (Richmond, 2013):

> *Between native Russia and [Georgia] lay a single path of communication across an isthmus between two seas occupied by the Caucasus range, populated by unconquered tribes who blocked the path through the Caucasus Mountains with every means at their disposal. Obviously, if Russia's rule of the South Caucasus was to be permanent, it was necessary to compel the peoples occupying the Caucasus lands not to interfere with communications through those lands. And if the system of peace and gifts didn't achieve this goal, then one path remained for Russia, the path of war, regardless of how many victims it would demand.*

In 1722, Peter the Great launched an invasion that resulted in Russia's acquisition of a small part of the western shore of the Caspian Sea and subsequently established a military line in 1735 that eventually stretched from the Crimean Peninsula to the Caspian Sea. The Kabardians (Eastern Circassians) become the subject of a series of attacks and armed clashes. Walter Richmond (2013) mentions that the Russian generals repeatedly accused the Kabardians of raiding Cossack villagers on the military line, and this led the Russian military to launch a series of attacks on Kabardians. The Kabardians were gradually driven out, as the Cossacks became firmly established in the region. The Russian control over Kabardia was accompanied by a mass migration of the Kabardian villages "Aul" across the Kuban River, where they built more than sixty settlements from 1821 to 1822. The Kabardians either took refuge among the tribe in Western Circassia or fled even further to the Ottoman Empire; this was the group's first forced migration to the Ottoman Empire (Richmond, 2013).

By the year 1826, the conquest of Kabardia, the first phase of the Russo-Circassian War, ended. The vast majority of the Kabardians had either been killed or expelled to Western Circassia. The end of the first phase of the war resulted in a major social disruption that ultimately

broke the Kabarday traditional class structure. When elements of civil society were slowly but surely being established, the Russians launched the second phase of the war that pushed this fledgling nation to the brink of extinction (Jaimoukha, 1998).

Phase II (1829-1864): Into the West

As Western Circassian tribes (Natuhay, Shapsugh, Bjedukhs, Egerukays, Hamysh, Hatukay, Mahoash,Temirgoys, Abkhaz & Abaza) occupied two hundred miles of the Black Sea coast-line east of Crimea, Russia was determined to take this strategic region as well. The Russian military started pushing westward. Unlike their unopposed military action in the East, this effort to extend Russian territory created international tension. The Russians had to neutralize international political obstacles to exercise control over the Black Sea Coast. In the 18th century, the Black Sea was considered an Ottoman lake. However, that changed on September 14, 1829, when Russia and the Ottoman Empire signed the Treaty of Adrianople. Article 4 of the Adrianople treaty contained the following stipulation: "All the coast of the Black Sea from the mouth of the Kuban to the wharf of Saint Nikolai inclusive shall enter into the permanent possession of the Russian Empire". In other words, Russia was given a free hand in the Caucasus, even though the Ottomans had no claim whatsoever over Circassia (Richmond, 2013). This move turned the Black Sea into an arena of international competition.

Russia acquired Circassia based on its interpretation of the Treaty of Adrianople. The analysis of the Russian generals operating in the Caucasus concluded that Russian control was not limited to the coast of the Black Sea, but it extended to the east and included the Circassians' territories. This interpretation violated Article 5 of the 1827 Treaty of London, in which the signatories (i.e. England, Russia, and France) agreed not to seek "any augmentation of territory". Accordingly, Russia's acquisition of Circassia was a violation of the Treaty of London. Also, Russia's attempts to gain complete control of the Black Sea threatened an important British route to Persia and India. Russia's westward expansion faced strong western opposition, especially from England. As a result, "The Circassians' question" entered the consciousness of European policy and became an international issue. Some even called for British military action to address Russia's disrespect for the Treaty of London. A possible war with Russia to establish a protectorate over Circassia was even debated in the British Parliament. Between 1828 and the 1860s, many British actors such as the diplomat David Urquhart lived among the Circassians, and promised them international support and urged them to magnify their war against the Russians. Subsequently, Circassians became a key element in European travellers' descriptions and the artwork of war correspondents (Richmond, 2013).

The Circassians kept hoping for Western intervention on their behalf. However, although the Russians lost the Crimean War in 1857 to the British, French and Ottomans, this did not improve the odds for the Circassians. Ultimately, for the British, going to war with Russia over the Circassians was a risky geopolitical gamble.

The Circassians' fate was sealed in 1856, during the negotiations leading up to The Treaty of Paris, which was an updated version of the Treaty of Adrianople. Under the influence of England and France's geopolitical calculations, the Circassians' land was declared a Russian territory, but the Circassians themselves were denied the rights of Russian subjects. Russian forces had neutralised the last obstacle to exercising control over this region. The Circassians were overly confident in their ability to hold off the Russians indefinitely. They underestimated the full extent of the Russian war machine. They were able to hold on for few more years

until the last battle was fought and lost in Sochi in the year 1864 (Jaimoukha, 1998).

Circassian-Russian Wars Aftermath and Deportation

By 1864, the Caucasus was officially completely conquered and had become part of Russia. In this long war, the Circassians suffered heavy losses concerning human life, which is estimated to have caused the deaths of 800,000 people (Richmond, 2013).

The majority of surviving Circassians were rounded up to ports on the Black Sea and deported to the Ottoman Empire's seashores. Scores of people died from epidemics spread among the crowds at the ports of departure and arrival, while others perished at sea when some ships caught fire and sank en route to their destinations. It is estimated that more than 1.5 million people were forced to emigrate, but only 1.1 million ultimately settled in the Ottoman Empire. Just a small group of 150 thousand remained in the Caucuses (Shami, 2009). This deportation irreversibly changed the demographic balance in the Caucuses. As a result, many tribes were almost exterminated. The Ubykh dialect became extinct in 1992 with the death of its last speaker in Turkey. Meanwhile, some Abkhazian clans such as the Abzakh are presently represented by only two villages in the Caucasus (Jaimoukha, 1998).

THE ROAD TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND SYRIA

Although the Circassians' deportation to the Ottoman Empire occurred in 1864, most Circassians who settled in the Middle East arrived in 1878; this resulted from a non-linear and divisional resettlement process. When the Ottomans agreed with the Russians to resettle the Circassians in the Ottoman Empire, the agreement aligned with their policy of encouraging immigration to Ottoman areas. The policy was formulated due to a shortage of manpower in the Empire and with the aim to increase the Muslim population in "rebellious" regions; therefore, group resettlement was a longstanding geopolitical tactic practice of the Ottomans (Shami, 2009). During the process of resettlement, the Circassians went through several phases of displacement (Figure 5).
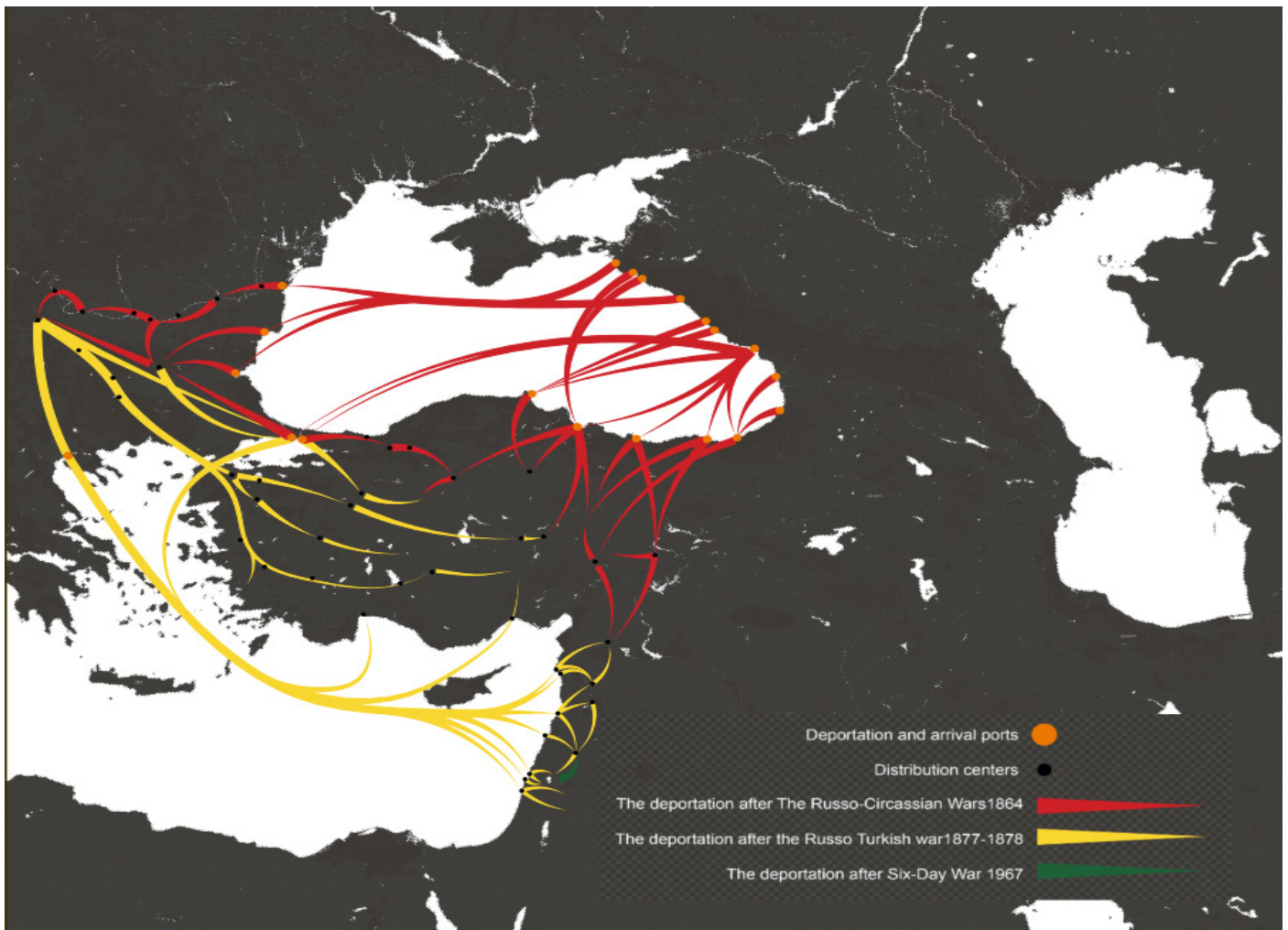
Figure 5. Map of Circassian deportation [Source: (Meiqari, 2018)]

In total, almost 1.5 million Circassians left the Caucasus for Turkey. Of these 1.5 million, only 1.1 million eventually arrived and settled in Ottoman lands (Shami, 2009). About half of the 1.1 million were resettled in Central Anatolia, while the other half were resettled in the Balkans. However, after another Russo-Turkish war (The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78), the Circassians were again driven out of their new homes in the Balkans by Russian troops from 1877-1878. These Circassians migrated further into the Middle East, mainly to Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. In summary, Ottoman Empire officials oversaw immigration movements for the Circassians from the Caucasus in the 1860s, and from the Balkans to the Middle East in the 1870s.

Ottoman Provincial Officials were instructed to block the refugees' movements into cities, to grant Circassians free land and building materials, and to exempt them from taxes (Shami, 2009). The land given to the Circassians formed a line connecting the city of Samsun in Turkey to the Holy Land, an uninhabited land which was otherwise used by Turkman and Bedouin nomads (Figure 6). Eventually, new villages were built within The Levant province of Syria, Jordan and Palestine (Shami, 2009).
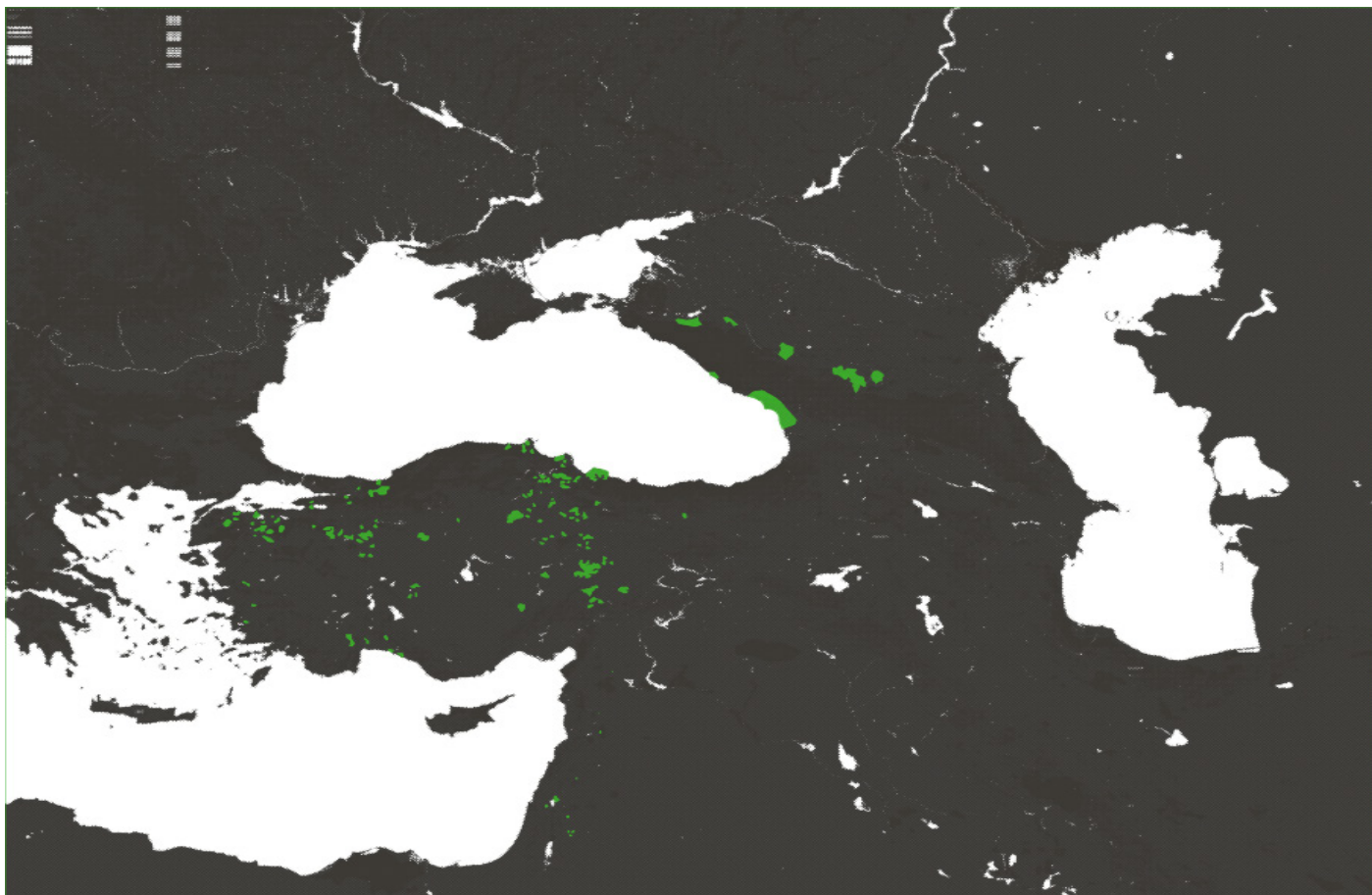
Figure 6. Map with a visual representation of Circassians' communities after the two phases of deportation at the beginning of the 20th century (*Note: Highlighted areas do not indicate demographic density, as, some areas were denser than others*) [Source: (Meiqari, 2018)]

In Syria, the Circassians' settlements were notably concentrated in the Golan Heights. The Circassians built 16 villages in the Golan Heights and also settled in the small town of Quneitra. In Palestine, the Circassians established two villages: Kfar-Kama and Rehaniya. Most Circassians who settled in Transjordan took refuge in the old Roman ruins of Amman; others established settlements in Jerash, Sweileh, Russeifa, Wadi-Al-Seer, and Na'our.

In these new villages, the Circassians introduced agriculture into areas previously used as grazing land. They applied their agricultural skills to establish large and well-kept farms. They developed transportation and commerce by introducing large-wheeled carts and restructuring the remains of the old Roman Roads (i.e. Decapolis), connecting the Golan Heights, Transjordan, and Palestine. Slowly, their villages became geopolitically significant. For example, during the late Ottoman Empire, Amman became a main station for the railway line from Damascus to Hejaz (currently Saudi Arabia). Also, the Circassians had a strong presence in the city of Quneitra, which had become the cultural and economic capital for the Circassians in Syria, with around 16 thousand living in the city and the 16 surrounding villages.

For several generations, the Circassians were able to maintain their Circassian roots and preserve their language. However, in the post-Ottoman, European colonialism, and post-colonial periods, many political and social factors hindered the preservation of Circassian heritage in the Middle East, and a process of assimilation started following the establishment of Syria, Transjordan as separate states.

In Jordan, the villages of Amman and Jerash grew into cities. In 1928, the Circassians established connections with the Royal Family and became influential members in the modern

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history of Jordan after its independence. Currently, there are around 170,000 Circassians in Jordan, the majority of whom live in Amman – a city of 4 million inhabitants. However, their demographic distribution has been heavily fragmented by rapid urbanisation and economic development. Once Amman was transformed from a village into a city, the Circassians became an urban minority (Jaimoukha, 1998). In Palestine, the Circassians of Kfar-Kama and Rehaniya became Israeli-recognized citizens. They remained neutral in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and kept their community in these two villages isolated.

In Syria, the Israeli invasion of the Golan Heights in June 1967 forcibly expelled the Circassians once again from their established villages and homes. The Circassians who left the Golan Heights as internally displaced people either resettled in Damascus or left the country. One group took up an asylum offer by the United States to move to Paterson, New Jersey which created a small Circassian community of 5,000 Circassians (Richmond, 2013). By late 1990, the number of Circassians in Syria was estimated to be almost 100,000. The majority of them lived in Damascus and its suburbs; some lived in the cities of Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. Only a small community of 5,000 remained in two villages in the Syrian-controlled area of the Golan Heights.

THE CIRCASSIAN HERITAGE IN SYRIA

The Circassian culture is a strong example of a culture in motion (Shami, 2009). For several generations, the Circassians in Syria tried to maintain their common language, shared history, and a strong commitment to traditions and culture. The Circassian culture was depicted by artists and travellers through the Caucasus, both before the deportation and during the refugees' settlement in the Middle East. Comparing those images and historical records in the Caucasus to the settlements in Syria illustrates the Circassians' attempt to maintain cultural cohesiveness, while also illustrating the cultural integration that occurred during the settlement process in Syria. The style in which the Circassians built villages in the Golan Heights presents a strong example of the geographic transportation of the Circassian culture manifested itself in architectural form.

The Circassian communities in the Golan Heights as cultural and architectural heritage

By comparing the house structures of the Circassians in the Caucasus to the houses of Circassians in Syria, it is possible to say that Circassians had brought a multitude of construction skills into the realm of vernacular architecture in the Golan Heights. Therefore, the elements of Circassian vernacular architecture in Syria represents a tangible form of culture that was created through intangible skills and traditions, passed on from one generation to another. These intangible skills had also emigrated with Circassians from the Caucasus to the Middle East.

In the Caucasus, Circassians lived in small communities. The Circassian way of life revolved around the small community of the "Aul" (i.e. village). Forests were rich and widespread and provided more than enough wood for construction. At that time, the Circassians rarely built with stone; they preferred wood and thatch. The forests also provided a mean of isolation for the farmsteads, keeping them surrounded by groves of walnut trees (Henze, 1990).

Turkish traveller Evliya Chelebi described the settlements:

Circassians organized their settlements in the treeless terrain as a camp, or a circle; building houses made of combining wattle of reed branches, hazel and other lightweight materials and walls of clay.

Turkish traveller Evliya Chelebi (1611-1682) (Çelebi & Hammer-Purgstall, 1834)

According to Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Evliya Chelebi, the formula of life in the Circassian settlement in the Caucasus looked like this (Kubishev, 1982):

It is a small municipality of several houses (20 to 50). The appearance of each house should imply the ability of the owner to co-exist in a large society and not standing out in front of the neighbours financially. The principles of justice and strength were reflected in the construction of settlements, cohabitation, and total material equality.

Similar to the Caucasus, the Circassians attempted to maintain their way of life. Their settlements in Syria, Jordan, and Palestine were connected to forests. Circassians settled in areas with access to water, surrounding mountains, and trees. The Circassians also brought with them the "know how" for making Circassian carriages (Jaimoukha, 1998). The use of these carriages influenced the structure of Circassian villages and roads in Golan Heights, as mentioned by American archaeologist Gottlieb Schumacher in his book, "The Jaulan," which documented his tour of the Golan Heights villages (Figure 7).

62   THE JAULÂN.

advance is most difficult. But everywhere traces of the old Roman roads with stone paving are to be found, which, as they have not been preserved, are, except in short stretches, entirely in ruins. The roads leading to the Circassian settlements, by reason of the better care bestowed on them, are a praiseworthy exception, so that the two-wheeled conveyances of the immigrants, although clumsily enough built, can easily overcome the stiffened floods of lava. In the north there is a more southerly road,

Figure 7. An excerpt from the book "The Jaulan", by Schumacher, illustrating the effect of using the Circassian cart on the old Roman roads*denser than others*) [Source: (Meiqari, 2018)]

Moreover, the structure of the houses built by the Circassians in the Middle East was also influenced by the "Wuna," a type of traditional Circassian house in the Caucasus. Despite the

evolution of Circassian dwellings based on local context, many distinguished elements of the Circassian architecture remained in Circassian villages in Jordan, Golan Heights, and Palestine (Figure 8, Figure 9).

The most constant element of Circassian houses was the shape of the layout: a long rectangle with either a single chamber or multi-chambers in a row. The entrance of the dwelling would be open to the outside; this quality of easy access is believed to be a sign of hospitality and openness. All Circassian houses in the Golan Heights, Palestine, and Jordan had this rectangular layout.

Another distinct element was the inclusion of a porch in front of the entrance to the house. In many houses, the extension of the roof beyond the front wall of the house created a covered porch, which was supported by several wooden beams, which were connected to the roof with a support in the decorative shape of the letter "T".

As for the roofs in the Caucasus, the shape and materials used were influenced by the natural and climatic conditions of the area. In areas of heavy rainfall, the roof was made steeper; while in areas of less rain, the roof would be flat or sloping. The roof rested on special strong wooden beams that were connected to the walls. Peaked roofs had truss construction, with a hook at the top of the beam where they connected to the columns they supported. These details of construction were present in Circassian houses in the Middle East. The roofs of the houses built in both Syria and Palestine were of the steeper type.

Figure 8. Three pictures from "The Atlas of the People of the West Caucasus" collected by the Soviet Institute of Ethnography in the 1930s. Left: An illustration of the rectangular layout of a Circassian house; Middle: A photo for a Circassian house in the Caucasus; Right: An illustration of the "T" column of a Circassian house

Figure 9. Plans and detailed photos of a Circassian house in the village of Breiqa. The house has similarities to a traditional Circassian house. For example, it has a rectangular layout with chambers that open to the front porch, the "T" element of the columns, and the construction of the roof; however, the house's material and window details have a local influence of the architecture in the Golan Heights region [Source: Architect Amjad Alkoud, 2001]

In the Caucasus, the walls of the Circassian "Wuna" house were built of clay. Building with stones was rare because it was considered a sign of weakness. For Circassians, stone houses would show fear and failure to protect and defend themselves from the enemy (Cherkasov, Ivantsov, Smigel, & Molchanova, 2015). In the Middle East, building materials were mud and clay in Jordan; however, stone dwellings started to appear in Syria and Palestine, where Circassians used local stones for construction. The influence of local construction can be seen in the windows details and the use of brick materials for roofs. This architectural style also influenced the design of mosques in Circassian villages, where the roof was constructed from bricks and the layout was rectangular (Figure 10).

100   THE JAULÂN.

Hâmi Kursu. The village comprises at the present day 100 buildings, with about 450 inhabitants above the age of 10 years. The buildings are composed of basalt stone, without any mortar, but the walls are firm and solidly built. Each dwelling-house, with its little vegetable garden, is encircled by a court.

On an open place bordering the spring is the Mosque, shaded by willows, never absent from a Circassian village. The whole conveys an impression of industry, order, and cleanliness. In opposi-

Figure 10. An excerpt from the book "The Jaulan", by Schumacher, describing houses in the village of Ayen al Suwan and the fixtures of the mosques in Circassian villages in Golan Heights

Circassian houses in Syria had a vernacular from that was transported through intangible heritage and skills. When the majority of Circassians were deported from their homeland, their construction skills were passed from one generation to the next during the process of displacement, resulting in the reproduction of the Circassian cultural practices in exile (e.g. Syria), and by extension the architectural environment. Circassians in Syria and in the region relayed on mixing their oral building traditions and local materials in building their houses and villages, even though the local climate and the location influenced the architecture of these newly built houses, for example the building material in the Golan Heights was mainly black stones and in Jordan it was mostly mod. Still, the houses the Circassian built in Syria had more similarities to the houses of the Circassians in the Caucuses (Adyge Wuna) and fewer similarities to the houses built by other locals in the region. Therefore, the origin of the building forms and some construction methods of the Circassian settlements in Syria actually lay in the distant past, in a distant location in the Caucasus.

The Circassian culture was a key element in the integration process of the Circassians as refugees in Syria. However, the geographic location of most Circassian villages in the Golan Heights affected both tangible and intangible Circassian heritage. Given the context of local climate, and geopolitical location close to the Israeli borders, in 1967, after the Israeli invasion of the Golan Heights, the Israeli military controlled 14 of the 16 Circassian villages, and the inhabitants fled to Damascus. Afterwards, the villages were immediately bulldozed by the Israelis in preparation for colonisation. Although the Israeli army left the Quneitra village

unharmed, it was later destroyed in 1974 before it was given back to Syria. By the end of the active war, only two villages, "Bir-Ajam" and "Breiqa" survived. These two villages became a cultural symbol for Circassian displaced in Damascus, and a venue for cultural celebrations (e.g. the Circassian Spring Day every May 1st). There were some development projects carried out in the villages and by 2012, these two villages were home for 5,000 inhabitants. However, Circassian life in the Golan Heights was never restored, and further destruction was done to the villages during the recent conflict. "Bir-Ajam" and "Breiqa" were almost completely abandoned (Akbulat, 2017).

Use of social media for heritage documentation

Circassians in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo went through war conditions forcing some of them into a further displacement. The overwhelming majority of the Circassians who left the country are currently living in Turkey and Jordan because it was easier for them to get entries to those countries and the local Circassian communities in Jordan and Turkey acted as a positive force to help them settle down. The number of Syrian Circassians in Turkey and Jordan is approximately 10,000 people combined (Akbulat, 2017). Some Syrian-Circassians returned to the Caucasus, the land of their ancestors, in what is presently known as the Kabardino-Balkar Republic. In total, 3,000 Circassians from Syria applied for asylum in Russia. In 2016, 1,000 of them departed Russia, as they preferred to be in Turkey and Europe, because of the difficulties of obtaining legal status in Russia. The estimated number of Circassians from Syria is between fifty to one hundred thousand people (Akbulat, 2017).

In a sense, the Syrian Circassians became further displaced. Their identity was reshaped in the context of migration and war; however, many of them still share an idea of belonging to the Golan Heights. As visible through the many social media initiatives documenting Circassian history and culture that featured personal memories and described their connection to Golan Heights. Eventually, social media, with its broad connectivity, online participation, and online observation, presented repositories of cultural heritage for the Circassians in Syria. The internet-based initiatives mediated habits, skills, ideologies, impressions, feelings, emotions and individual/collective memory connections with the tangible and intangible Circassian culture heritage by both the observers and the collectors. One Facebook page has gathered and presented over 2000 photos of the village of "Breiqa". Although these social media photos and videos were not presented in distinct categories, four distinct themes emerged. Using content analysis, and by cross-referencing the objects and in this social media content, while also linking them to historical and current events, four different themes emerge. They are outlined below.

First: Pre-1967 Oral History

Many former inhabitants of the destroyed villages in the Golan Heights shared personal photos of life before the displacement and destruction that took place in 1967 (Figure 11). Other photos documented the family names of aerial photographs of some villages (Figure 12, Figure 13).

Figure 11. A personal photo by a former resident of the village "Ein Zywan"

Figure 12. Some houses in the village "Ein Zywan" with former family names

Figure 13. Some houses in the village "Al Mansurah" with former family names

Second: Current Situation in the Occupied and Destroyed Villages

After the Israeli occupation in 1967, the Circassians had no access to their villages. With the help of members of the Circassian community in Russia, it became possible to determine what is left of their villages. In the villages of Kheshneyah and Solymanyah, heavily damaged mosques are still standing (*Figure 14*, *Figure 15*); while in Al-Mansurah and Ein Zywan, the graveyards are the only trace left of those Circassian villages (*Figure 16*). Some remains of house walls in several areas can be seen as well (*Figure 17*).

Figure 14. Recent photo of the mosque in the "Kheshneyah" village in the occupied territory of the Golan Heights

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Figure 15. Recent photo of the mosque in the "Solymanyah" village in the occupied territory of the Golan Heights

Figure 16. Recent photo of the cemetery in the "Ein Zywan" village in the occupied territory of the Golan Heights

Figure 17. Traces of walls from houses' remains in the occupied territory of the Golan Heights

Third: Current situation and effect of civil war on "Bir-Ajam" and "Breiqa" as the last surviving Circassian villages in the Golan Heights

Residents who remained in "Bir-Ajam" and "Breiqa" would share photos to document changes in the villages, in light of the current war. The destruction of the old houses in Breiqa was not reported in any news outlet and only became known through Facebook (*Figure 18*).


Figure 18. Recent photo of the Breiqa village: the roof of the old Circassian house (bricks and wood) were stolen during the current conflict

Fourth: Aspirations and memories

People's photos on social media concerning Breiqa village collects the new intangible heritage that was created throughout the past decades, people's memories in the village, and it also presents people's reflections on the loss of normal daily life in the village (*Figure 19, Figure 20*).

Figure 19. A photo believed to be taken sometime in the beginning of the 21st century during an annual "Circassian Spring Celebration" in Breiqa village, the Golan Heights, Syria
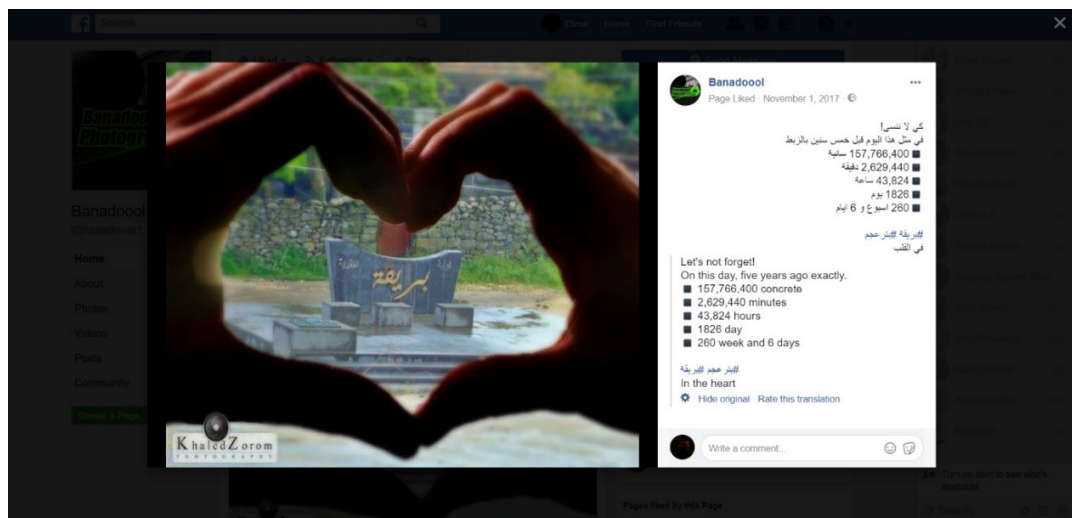
Figure 20. A photo posted on Facebook on a page created to collect photos of Bir-Ajam and Breiqa – the post is a remembrance of the fifth anniversary of the village's destruction in the current conflict

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

At first sight, the rise in internet activity of Circassians could be seen as a collective effort to distinguish the Circassians as a group from other communities; however, a deeper analysis shows that this is an effort to explore their history. It contains elements of the Circassians' integration into their host communities, besides their links to their homeland in the Caucasus and the host communities in the Middle East.

The social media activities were used as a tool to

- First, rediscover and document the Circassian traditional architectural knowledge that was utilised to build the Circassian Houses (i.e. "Wuna") in several Circassian villages in the Middle East in a different context from its original location in the Caucasus after the first deportation in the 19th century.

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- Second, understand the contexts of the 20th and the 21st century in terms of the effects of urbanisation on one hand and war and displacement on another, when Circassian architectural and cultural heritage was inevitably declining. As an ethnic group, Circassians worldwide started to rely more on the modern aspects of life instead of traditional knowledge. In Syria, Circassians transformed from rural farmers into urban refugees in Damascus after the 1967 displacements. Later on, the second generation was integrated into the urban life. With a lack of practice, the Circassians in Syria lost their culturally distinct tangible houses and their intangible knowledge, and the cultural practice became in favour of more cultural impression, such as marriage traditions and, in case of state approval, ethnic festival celebrations like the annual spring Circassian day on the 1st of May.

Five generations after the Circassians left the Caucasus, the Circassians were innovative in finding different means to document their culture worldwide including Syria; this illustrates the value of understanding identity and heritage even after displacement and integration. This also illustrates the value of identity and culture to Syrian Circassians to remain as part of society in the contexts of any future return, reconstruction or integration.

If the understanding of the value of culture and traditional knowledge for Circassians was also reflected on other displaced Syrian communities, an effective effort to reconstruct the communities after the war should have an element of reconnecting with architecture and cultural heritage of all the communities. Post-war effort should consider investigating the traditional knowledge and cultural heritage of several ethnic and cultural groups, and it should not focus on simple narrations of the past as a symbolic nostalgia, but it should also include reviving their social collaboration with each other in the context of the modern post-war lifestyle. The community of returnees should have the opportunity to be able of representing their identity through understanding the past and placing it in line with the present and positive interaction across several coexisting cultures.

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This paper was presented at the fourth Lemkin Reunion, held in February 2018 and organized by the Shattuck Center at the School of Public Policy, Central European University in Budapest. Each year the Shattuck Center hosts the Lemkin Reunion, a gathering named in honor of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who lost his family in the Holocaust and first coined the word genocide. He campaigned tirelessly during his life to ensure that the crime of genocide was enshrined in international law. The Lemkin Reunion will gather policymakers involved in responding to atrocity crimes and assess the lessons they learned.

This year, the Lemkin Reunion, with the participation of expert panelists, and external seminar participants, as well as specialists from the CEU community, examined the obstacles to return through the identification and categorization of the different obstacles that those who decide to fully or partially return are facing, in addition to the categorization of actors causing these obstacles.

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