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## Popular Music, Forced Migration from Syria, and Welcome Culture in Germany and Austria

„Migration is always political, and the forms of aesthetic expression that arise from it are necessarily politicized.“  
(Bohlman 2011, 151)

### Introduction

The years 2015/16 we saw the arrival of several thousands of people looking for refuge in the European Union, mostly coming from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. What in media and politics soon was called “refugee crisis,” has within migration studies been termed “the long summer of migration” (Hess et al. 2016, see also Kasperek and Speer 2015). This term captures the complex and heterogenic dynamics of the different movements of people travelling from different parts of the world across the Mediterranean Sea and the so-called Balkan route to Western European countries to find refuge. The movements had their peak in the fall of 2015, but the beginnings already date back to early 2015 or even 2014. In the year 2015, around 440,000 people requested asylum in Germany for the first time, and around 85,000 in Austria; in 2016, the number rose to over 700,000 people requesting asylum in Germany (Eurostat 2021). In late 2015 and spring 2016, due to a deal between the European Union and Turkey, the Balkan route was closed, leaving several thousands of people suddenly stranded, and hardly any more people managing to reach Austria or Germany (Hess et al. 2016).

Among the people arriving in Europe during the long summer of migration and in the immediate years before were also musicians who positioned themselves within genres of popular music. Re-constructing the musical developments of these musicians in the last five years, as I will do in this article, gives insights to transformations in individual music making, and in society in general, and to the agency and resources the musicians have and use, in order to gain control over their aesthetic, social, and cultural positioning in their new “home.” All the musicians have to react on, deal with, and position themselves against labels and categories imposed by the “welcoming” society, most prominently that of being labelled as refugees and of having ethnic/national background in Syria, a background that is widely connected to prejudices around an Arab and Muslim world. The musicians I discuss are the rock band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, the pop band Basalt, and the rapper Enana Alassar, who all have been featured repeatedly as musicians from Syria or “refugee” musicians in media and on stages in the immediate years after arrival. The data foundation for my arguments are media articles, musical releases of the musicians, the social media presentations of the musicians, and interviews and conversations I did personally with some of the artists.

In the following, I first situate this topic within research on music in migratory contexts. Thereafter, I discuss the term and label “refugee”, in order to then show the role of popular music within the so-called Welcome Culture, pointing to the contradictory role this period of solidarity and public support had for the musicians arriving and settling in. Zooming in on the pop

group Basalt, the rock band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, and the rapper Enana Alassar, I show the musical strategies since their arrival in Germany or Austria, accompanied by music examples. Discussing the ways of settling in and adapting to a new life situation gives insights into the individual musical developments and the musicians' agency to negotiate and perform their surroundings and new life situation in their music. Furthermore, it points to general transformations in regard to music-making by Syrians and the intertwining of political and social transformations and individual music-making choices.

## Popular Music and Forced Migration

As generally in social sciences and humanities, the newly arriving citizens in Germany and Austria immediately came into the focus of music research. Research approaches from ethnomusicology and music sociology included the role of music during the escape travels (Prieske 2018), the musical practices in refugee camps and refugee protests (Pistrick 2020, Christidis 2020), and the questions of categorization, Othering, and belonging (Präger 2018, Parzer 2020, Kölbl 2020). In the following, I add a deliberate perspective on popular music practices and their transformation and role for musicians in pop, rock, and rap with forced migration experience.

In popular music studies, migration is a regularly studied topic, as popular music around the world is often connected in one way or another to movements of sounds, people, and material (Toynbee and Dueck 2011, Krüger and Trandafoiu 2014). Migration issues connected to issues of popular music are often situated in the field of so-called "World Music," that is the marketing niche within the European and U.S. music market that covers any "foreign," "other," music (Howard 2010, Stokes 2003). Within the rich tradition in research on diasporic music making, including genres of popular music, also studies with an explicit focus forced migration did regularly consider popular music practices (Reyes 1999, Yamamoto 2017). As Hannes Liechti and I have argued, popular music is webbed into global structures of power, place and distribution of resources (Brunner and Liechti 2021). Processes of forced migration, and the musical practices therein, are too. I share the assumption of Adeleida Reyes that "the life-altering events surrounding forced migration and affecting whole culture groups inevitably find their way into expressive culture" (Reyes 2010, 127). This includes popular music practices. The potential to rethink and reflect on boundaries and their sources and potential crossing – for example negotiating ethnic and national categorizations – is especially high in popular music, because "music, particularly popular music, is a space in which the boundaries between insiders and outsiders blur" (Kasinitz and Martinello 2019, 858). Rather than seeking difference, popular music can often more easily than other music enable sameness and equality, while at the same time tell individual stories to the world. Research on popular music practices in context of forced migration can enhance our understanding on transformations in popular music.

## The Issue of Refugee Labelling

The Syrian musicians I put the spotlight on in this text would not have left Syria, had it not been for the civil war going on since 2011. They were fleeing life-threatening situations, and this is why they figure widely as refugees. This term is, however, not neutral. Any discussion on forced migration and refugees needs to distinguish between a legal status as refugee, and the refugee

label applied in everyday and political discourses. Legally, in Austria and Germany a person is recognized as a refugee after having requested asylum and being granted asylum or subsidiary protection. The legal status of being a refugee in a state leads to international protection and provides access to governmental support and assistance. As such, it is for many people fleeing prosecution or violent conflict situations a desirable status of safety they want to reach.

Quite different is the case, however, when it comes to the process of being labelled a “refugee” in day-to-day and political discourse. Such labelling is often disconnected from the legal status; it is rather used to put people into a specific social group, often linked more or less obviously to issues of Othering along intersecting aspects of race, nationality, ethnicity, and religion (cf. Hill Collins and Bilge 2020). Furthermore, the term refugee does not always mean the same: It “may have different meanings depending on the particular national origin or ethnic group in question” (Ludwig 2016, 6). In Austria and Germany, the public political discourse in the last years was more welcoming to Syrians as refugees than people fleeing from other countries. In general, the images put on presumable refugees are situated along two opposites: They are either perceived as vulnerable people, who need support and assistance, or as threat to cultural and social life in the receiving country. For the people looking for refuge, such labelling can mean to be classified as victims, and as dependent on governmental aid, it can remind people of the past flight and experiences, and it keeps people in the place of non-belonging (Ludwig 2016, 14–15).

In 2022, years after the long summer of migration, people with a Syrian background in Austria and Germany still seem to be automatically perceived as refugees. It probably does not come as surprise that many individuals with legal refugee status in Germany and Austria nevertheless reject the label “refugee.” The same counts for the terms “migrant” and “asylum seeker” (Diab 2021; for a discussion on the meaning of “migrant,” including the problematic distinction between voluntary and forced migration, see Carling 2017). Syrian musicians in Austria and Germany have frequently been faced with the labelling as refugees, and they have no choice but to deal with it. Due to their special status of being reliant on protection and shelter, there is no escape to this. As researchers, however, we have a choice and a responsibility. You will notice throughout this text that I do not use these semantically loaded terms to describe people because they are easily misunderstood, politically burdened, and – most important – rejected as self-description by the musicians themselves. Refraining from using these terms does of course not imply to hide the specific life experience of escaping a civil war, seeking refuge, adapting to living in a new country, and the connected loss and pain. But I prefer to present Syrian musicians as musicians and as new citizens in Austrian and German societies, in full awareness that this does not necessarily refer to their legal status in state administration. And the specific challenges and barriers that the musicians face due to the refugee label will be discussed in the following.

## **Welcome Culture, “Refugees Welcome,” and Popular Music**

When in September 2015 thousands of people arrived on foot and by train in Austria and Germany, numerous NGOs and volunteers engaged in helping with personal services and material goods. This rise and public celebration of solidarity has been framed as Welcome Culture (*Willkommenskultur*) in media, politics, and public (Hamann and Karakayali 2016, 69). The term *Willkommenskultur* had been in use before to indicate a welcoming form of politics for immigrants

in Germany, but was framed anew during the long summer of migration (Trauner and Turton 2017, cf. Hamann and Karakayali 2016). Accompanied by the slogan "Refugees welcome!" the peak of civil support lasted for several months, not only in Austria and Germany, but virtually everywhere in Europe, and also the U.S. With the closing of the borders along the Balkan route, the immediate, direct engagement faded, yet the atmosphere of Welcome Culture resonated in the following two years in the work of NGOs, educational institutions, and cultural organizations. Many activities were launched and realized with the honest intention to help Syrians and people from other countries to arrive well and to get a chance for a new life.

Popular music has a potential to comment critically on societal and political issues. Musicians often position themselves as critical individuals with responsibility to use their music to improve society (cf. Peddie 2006). It therefore comes as no surprise that German and Austrian pop musicians used their public power and audience to support the "Refugees Welcome"-activities with writing songs and donating the profits to NGOs, giving public statements, or taking part in charity concerts. One of the biggest events in this line in Austria was the "Voices for Refugees" concert that took place on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, in Vienna, only about four weeks after the March of Hope. The event was organized by the Volkshilfe, one of the major non-governmental charity organizations in Austria, and hosted among others the bands Die Toten Hosen, Bilderbuch, Zucchero, Conchita, and Soap and Skin. Over 150,000 people attended the concert, and it raised about 300,000 Euro for charity work (Seierl 2016). A similar initiative was the concert "WIR. Stimmen für geflüchtete Menschen" ("WE. Voices for refugees", translation A.B.) on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, in Munich, staging among others Sportfreunde Stiller, Wanda, Judith Holofernes and Herbert Grönemeyer (Deutsche Welle 2015). Another intervention gaining wide international media attention was the track "Schweigeminute (Traiskirchen)" ("a minute of silence (Traiskirchen)", translation A.B.) by Raoul Haspel, a track consisting of 60 seconds of silence; Traiskirchen is a small town in Austria known for hosting a refugee reception center. On Haspel's website, the song is called a "media hack" and described as being "a peaceful, silent protest against the appalling failure of the european [sic] refugee policy" (Haspel 2015). It was top of the Austrian charts for one week in September 2015; the revenues of selling the song online were given to an NGO supporting refugees in the camp in Traiskirchen. Other examples of support actions are the sampler "Refugees Welcome – Gegen jeden Rassismus" ("Refugees Welcome – Against all racism", translation A.B.), collecting newly composed songs by musicians from various popular music genres, and the sampler "Kein Mensch ist illegal" ("No one is illegal"), including existing songs of 36 German popular music groups or musicians. Again, the revenues of both projects were given to NGOs. Worth mentioning in this context is also the initiative "Aktion Arschloch" ("Action Asshole", translation A.B.): End of August 2015, a German music teacher organized a "revival flashmob", calling to bring the song "Schrei nach Liebe" ("Call for love", translation A.B.) by the German punk rock band Die Ärzte, first published in 1993, back into the German charts (see <https://www.aktion-arschloch.de/>, accessed October 1, 2021). The song is a clear message against xenophobia, neo-Nazis, and racism. The song reached top of the charts. The band Die Ärzte announced that the revenues will be given to an NGO. These are only some, albeit rather successful examples in terms of financial revenues and media attention, where the engagement of popular musicians and the use of popular music within the framework of Welcome Culture was obvious. In all these actions, it is clear that the goal was to support NGOs working with refugees and to support the general solidarity in society. This support could also include the staging of Syrian musicians, for example at the mentioned concert in Munich, when the pianist Aeham Ahmad was on stage with Judith

Holofernes. Ahmad became popular as the “pianist of the ruins,” playing the piano on the street in the middle of war-driven Damascus (for more on Ahmad’s biography see Ahmad 2017). Especially smaller and less media-covered events featured Syrian musicians regularly in this time of welcoming and enthusiastic support for those in need.

These engagements out of the field of popular music show, as Marcus S. Kleiner pointedly wrote, that political topics can lead to a “(micro) music trend” (“(Mikro-)Musiktrend”, translation A.B.), and that popular music in critical times can show solidarity, action, and engagement (Kleiner 2016).

Writing these lines in fall 2021, the enthusiastic drive of Welcome Culture is over and gone. It lasted until late 2017 or maybe even beginning 2018. By then, the political situation had changed: With the borders on the route from Turkey to Germany being rigidly closed one after the other, no more people were arriving, no pictures of full trains were in the media, many of the helpers had gone back to their daily life, the number of charity concerts and media reports decreased steadily. At the same time, the developments had also led to a rise in racism and right-wing populist and totalitarian perspectives announced publicly in these countries (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018). On the level of the European Union, the temporal permeability of borders was followed by an even more rigid border regime, that still leads to people dying in the Mediterranean Sea and has left thousands of people forgotten by politics in camps in Greece and elsewhere.

## The Welcome-Stage for Musicians from Syria

The musicians who had arrived in Austria and Germany, however, did not vanish with the Welcome Culture and the connected media interest. Quite on the contrary. They worked hard and steadily on building a (musical) life in their new countries.

Musicians from Syria in Germany and Austria are far from being a homogeneous group. They differ widely in age, gender, class background, ethnicity, religion, level of professionalism, and in the musical genres they perform and value. Syria before the war had an educational system that included the possibility for musical training, with public and private music schools and colleges, and the High Institute of Music in Damascus. Instruments that could be learned included instruments often associated with European (classical) musics, like violin, piano and guitar, and instruments associated with Arab musics, like oud, buzuq, qanun, and darbuka. Soundscapes that Syrians grew up with in the last decades included U.S. American (Crowcroft 2017) as well as Arab popular music genres, Arab instrumental music, folk music traditions, classical music of Western style, and various forms of religious music. The Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum and the Lebanese singer Fairuz range top in popularity. The Austro-Syrian author Luna Al-Mousli recounts in her biographical stories about her childhood in Damascus her love for Britney Spears and the censorship the adults put on Eminem, including to dub over “bad words” in Eminem’s song on the tape cassette (Al-Mousli 2018, 42–49). Consequently, Syrian musicians linked to very different fields of musical activities in Germany and Austria, dependent on their level of musical experience, skills, knowledge, their motivation to make music after migration, and their musical genre preferences.

What these musicians nevertheless share, is the experience of having sought refuge in a new country, of escaping the dangers of civil war. Connected to this, they share the challenges of living in a new country, of having to adapt to a new language, new surroundings, a new social status, a new family situation, often with relatives and friends scattered around Europe and the Levant region, or still in Syria. Frequently, they also share the travel routes to Europe. While some people arrived in Austria and Germany by plane, because they had a visa and then requested asylum, most Syrians travelled on buses, trains, and by foot, and crossed the Mediterranean Sea in rubber boats, organized by human traffickers. When a journalist asked band members of the Austrian band Basalt about their experience on the road, they simply replied: "The same boats, the same stories like of all syrian [sic] refugees" (cited in Grabner 2016). The experience of being a refugee, and having a common home country they left, groups Syrians around the world in some way together, both in the sense of a Syrian diaspora ascribed from the outside, as with many Syrians themselves feeling a belonging to such a diaspora. Musicians furthermore often share the experience to have left their instruments, of having studied at the same institutes or schools, and of having been to the same performance places.

No matter what genre they situate themselves in, Syrian musicians had in the years from approximately 2015 to 2017, the time of Welcome Culture, often numerous possibilities to be staged, if they accepted to be framed as "refugees." Events included in the "Refugees Welcome" activities and other events, like openings of exhibitions in galleries, were eager to host Syrian musicians; it was a gesture of support to give performance space to musicians. Most often, the musicians were not engaged to perform because of the kind of music they played; the prioritized aspect was the story that could be told, the story of a refugee. The musicians themselves were aware of this aspect of staging refugeeness. Michael Parzer described the phenomenon as "double burden of representation:" Syrian artists not only had to deal with categorizations along ethnic or national lines, like being "Arab," "Oriental," or "Muslim," but also with the fact of being classified as "refugee" in their artistic practice (Parzer 2020). These two lines of labelling obviously intersect; the labelling as refugee occurs out of a categorization along ethnic/national lines as Syrian. Looking closely at the three case studies will now lay open the developments Syrian musicians went through since their arrival, that are intrinsically linked to this labelling and the need to deal with it in one way or another.

## **Re-Establishing outside the Labels: The Band Basalt**

The Austrian-based band Basalt was founded in 2016 by the musicians Noor Eli Khoury (vocals, guitar, percussion), Amjad Khaboura (vocals, guitar) and Almonther Alshoufi (bass). All three of them came to Austria around 2014/2015. Amjad Khaboura and Almonther Alshoufi had known each other in Syria; they met Noor Eli Khoury in Austria. Performing occasionally in Austria in 2016, playing pop/rock cover songs and their own compositions, they became known to a wider public in 2017 due to their cooperation with the Austrian Eurovision Song Contest winner and drag queen Conchita Wurst. Conchita and the Austrian Broadcasting Cooperation ORF engaged the band Basalt to record a song with Conchita for the project "The New European Songbook" in 2017. This project, launched by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), aimed at producing six original songs of artists from the six participating EBU members, connected to the theme "Europe" including "the musical consequences arising from the phenomenon of migration" (European Broadcasting Union 2017). Clearly, the initiative

was set in the spirit and actions of solidarity and Welcome Culture described above. For Conchita and her team, it seems that it was clear that she had to work with Syrian musicians. In personal conversations with Syrian musicians in Austria, I was told that different musicians had been asked to join but turned the offer down for various reasons. It seems that it was not solely the music of Basalt that led Conchita and the ORF to cooperate with the group, but the ethnic and national origin and the “refugee” background. The members of Basalt were conscious about this fact, they were aware that Conchita “needed” a Syrian band for this project, as Noor Eli Khoury described in an interview with me in 2017. Given the interesting chance and new challenge for Basalt, they accepted the offer.

The song that Conchita and Basalt recorded together was the song “Small House,” that the three musicians had released in 2016 on Youtube. Guitarist Amjad Khaboura had composed the song already in Syria, adding the last part in Austria (Grabner 2016). In the accompanying commentary underneath the video we read the following sentence: “The song is based on a real situation where the hope that [what] we have been missing will grow again.” Before reading on, please do give yourself a break from text-based information and listen to this first recording of the song “Small House” by Basalt:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeNQJOIRmn0> (accessed October 1, 2021)

Conchita contacted them specifically for this song “Small House.” The song was changed to suit the new circumstances of performing it together with Conchita; this meant including an additional English text to the original Arab lyrics, sung by Conchita, to the same melody. A video was shot at the lake Neusiedlersee in Austria, featuring the four musicians as actors. The video prominently features suitcases, used to provide different symbolic meanings, carried as heavy and huge luggage, then floating away in the lake symbolizing what has to be left behind, and as a means to build a raft, symbolizing material to build a means of transport.

To see for yourself, listen and watch the video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2zOOqNFZ9Q> (accessed October 1, 2021)

The overall topic of the song and video point to the semantic field around travelling, leaving, and leaving behind – in the given context possibly to forced migration, to escaping, to loneliness, to uncertainty where one will go. The accompanying media narration around the whole project of “The New European Songbook” in general, and the cooperation between Conchita and Basalt in particular, was one of building bridges, successful integration, getting to learn from another, tolerance, and diversity (e.g. Weiss 2017, ORF 2017). However, the borders of this surely well-intended narration and project became immediately clear in real life. The song should have been performed live at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2017. Ironically, the three Syrian musicians were denied the visa to go to the United Kingdom; consequently, Conchita also did not travel to Edinburgh. A greeting message from Basalt and Conchita was shown previous to the screening of the music video of “Small House,” introduced by the moderator of the show simply stating that „they haven’t been able to travel, so they can’t join us here” (transcribed from YouTube, see RusUnstoppables 2017). There was no official mentioning that it was due to visa issues that they could not join an event that was all about migration, connection, cosmopolitanism, and musical boundary crossing. I am not aware of any official excuse or explanation mentioning this obvious contradiction. The four musicians had to clarify the reason for not performing live in their personal message.

After that incident, Basalt joined Conchita at her concert in the Austrian town Tulln in August 2017. Basalt then performed one more concert in Vienna in September 2017. Then the entries on the Facebook page stop. Only on March 11, 2020, Basalt declares themselves back with this message on Facebook: "After two years basalt is back, with new members new direction of music but the same message, to make our world a better place for everyone and to support with our music each kind of human behavior that brings peace, lofty values and good qualities into our "societies." Basalt then was not a "Syrian" music group anymore; Amjad Khaboura and Almonther Alshoufi are joined by Milan Conic (keyboard), Elias Alakhras (oud), Viviane Töbich (vocals), and Hermann Erber (drums). Singer and guitarist Noor Eli Khoury was no longer part of the group, because she went back to Syria in summer 2019, where in 2021 she was working as a German teacher and musician. The "new" band Basalt had occasional performances in 2020 and 2021, but as for all musicians, the pandemic situation did not allow for much. The musical concept has changed since 2016/2017, the music focused on experimental, alternative rock, with jazz borrowings, also due to the added instruments of keyboards, drums, and oud. To hear what Basalt sounded like in 2020, please watch this promotion video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9JJKgkpOk4> (accessed October 1, 2021)

In short, since its formation in 2016 and after the brief publicity due to their staging with Conchita within the migration and Welcome Culture media framework, Basalt took a break, to then come back as a very different music group in members and music. Such a transformation, I argue, is a rather common development in the last years for Syrian musicians in popular music, as we will also see for the next band I zoom in on.

## **Khebez Dawle** - خبز دولة

### **A Break with the Band, but continuing the Music**

Also the indie post-rock band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة had to deal with the specific form of attention addressed at Syrians during and after the long summer of migration. The self-description of the group on Soundcloud reads: "Khebez Dawle is a Syrian four-member rock band. Founded in Damascus, Syria in the late 2012 as a one-man project, the band consolidated in Beirut, Lebanon in early 2013" (<https://soundcloud.com/khebezdawle>, accessed October 18, 2021). The four musicians of Khebez Dawle خبز دولة are Anas Maghrebi (vocals, guitar), Muhammad Bazz (bass guitar), Bashar Darwish (guitar), and Hekmat Alkassar (keyboards). The band name "Khebez Dawle خبز دولة" literally means "governmental bread," referring to the bread that was given out by the Syrian government. In their indie rock songs with Arab vocals, they deal with their experiences in the Syrian Uprising and their life after fleeing Syria. The band members have been based in Berlin since 2015 and 2016, working in the band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة as well as in solo projects and other music groups.

Again, I invite you to listen for yourself, this time to the song "Belsharea' بالشارة" of their first self-titled album "Khebez Dawle" (2015), in the following link on Youtube accompanying the album release video filmed in Beirut:

"Khebez Dawle" launching album video, uploaded by Antoine Antabi. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_eaquWwrj4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_eaquWwrj4) (accessed September 23, 2021)



In 2015/16, during the height of the described “Refugees Welcome” activities, newspapers around the world celebrated the band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة for their ‘tournee-like’ escape travel through Europe. The Guardian headlined in December 2015 “How one group of refugees turned their plight into a musical tour” (Larsson 2015) and the German daily newspaper Tagesspiegel entitled a feature on the band in October 2015 with “Europe tour” (“Europa-Tournee”, translation A.B.) (Müller 2015). This is due to their travel story. In brief: The band members fled Syria, lived in Beirut, Lebanon, from 2013 to 2015, then three members took the risk to travel to Europe in August 2015. They crossed the Mediterranean Sea in a rubber boat, arriving at Lesbos at a hotel beach where they spontaneously gave out their CD to people on the beach; they had released the album some weeks before. On the way to Berlin, they played well-attended concerts in Zagreb and Vienna. They requested asylum in Germany in September 2015. The fourth band member took the same route in spring 2016, also arriving in Berlin (Grzeszyk 2016a, Makri and Grzeszyk 2016). In the media narrations, the unavoidable extreme hardships of such a travel were mentioned only in passing; rather, the success and musical engagement of the musicians were celebrated and observed with amazement. And this, it seems, was actually what the musicians intended. Scrolling through the entries in August/September 2015 on the Facebook page of the band, the public narration presented gives the impression that the musicians had simply left Beirut, went on a tour through Europe, and now settled in Berlin. A snippet from an interview with Anas Maghrebi done shortly after their arrival in Lesbos confirms this impression: “Even when we left Damascus to Beirut, we had in mind this intention, this idea, of trying to change this mass media image of refugees. The mass media is always trying to show refugees as poor people, just looking for food and a roof to sleep under, you know. Okay, this is true to some people, but what if I was looking for more than that?” (transcribed from a recording featured in Makri and Grzeszyk 2015). Maghrebi and his colleagues were very conscious about the image of refugees in the mass media, and they did not want to correspond to this image: “Don’t worry about us, we’re going thru all what our people are going thru. And we’ll prove to the world that we’re not just ‘refugees.’ We’re gonna get to Europa and continue our career and make people listen to our country’s story. Wish us luck, my friend” (Maghrebi, cited in Makri/Grzeszyk 2015). It is clear from these accounts on Khebez Dawle خبز دولة that the musicians did not only come to Europe for shelter. They had shelter in Beirut; they made music there, released an album. But in Lebanon, the conflict lines of the Syrian civil war were still very much present and ominous. The musicians were looking for something different – for more possibilities in life, a free life, maybe even a new home, a place and space to make their music. They were musicians, and as musicians they travelled, presenting the European public a widely easy-going travel and a general positive attitude deliberately contrasting the image of refugees widespread in the media.

Looking back five years later, however, it is clear that the labelling as refugees was hard to escape. No matter what Khebez Dawle خبز دولة did, it was applied to them. Already in early 2016, the band objected to the label “refugee band” (“Flüchtlingsband”, translation A.B.), as guitarist and keyboarder Hekmat Alkassar explained: “Since we have started in Europe, they say ‘It is a refugee band’. Somehow, I can’t accept this, because we were musicians before we became refugees. The name puts a label on you of what you not really are. Musicians are musicians” (cited in Grzeszyk 2016b, translation A.B.). In a short personal conversation in August 2021, one band member made it immediately clear that the musicians were tired of being defined solely along their “musical” travel story. The popularity the story brought them was a mixed blessing. In the euphoria after the long summer of migration, when civil society in Germany

and Austria was still thriving to help people arriving and settling in, Khebez Dawle خبز دولة was often booked in Germany; the “Refugees Welcome” framework brought them a considerable amount of attention, that they probably would not have had otherwise. However, they had to live with the refugee label, they could not shake it off. While of course their music was valued and liked, decisive for invitations in this time frame was not the music, but the possible refugee presentation, including their famous travel story. And the band then consciously decided against this presentation. On October 10, 2016, they posted on Facebook that they were on a “creative break.” Only on August 15, 2019, they announced to play some shows again.

But the individual musicians did not take a break – on the contrary. All the musicians of Khebez Dawle خبز دولة who had arrived in 2015 engaged in different musical projects, besides the hardships of daily life including learning German, finding a job or working, financially and emotionally supporting friends and family, and working on the release of traumatic experiences and loss that regularly come with living in war and fleeing it. Muhammad Bazz had founded the music group The Last Postman already in Istanbul in early 2015, where they already recorded four tracks. The band consists of Muhammad Bazz (multi-instrumentalist, bass), Louay Kanawati (multi-instrumentalist, guitar), Bahila Hijazi (vocals), Hekmat Alkassar (keyboard, guitar) and Mohamad Mousalli (visuals). In Berlin, they won a grant of the Music Board Berlin to record their first album “Two Years Later” that was released in 2019. They describe their music as “Psychedelic-Indie/Dream-Pop experiment with live electronic elements and found objects” on Facebook and their own website (see [www.thelastpostman.com](http://www.thelastpostman.com)). The music of The Last Postman stages a web of keyboard sound layers, short repeated melodic lines by the guitar, catchy, often danceable beats, and the high-pitched female voice of Bahlia Hijazi, singing in English. Sometimes, the music leans towards indie rock, but the experimental electronic sound remains the foundation. In live settings, their performance is accompanied by visuals projected. Please listen to the piece “Stereotyped Mind” by The Last Postman, released on their first album “Two Years Later” (2019).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0qUIzJky2g&t=7s> (accessed September 30, 2021)

Visual and electronic elements are also key aspects in the solo project Eqtibasat اقتباسات, literally meaning “quotes,” launched in 2018 by Hekmat Alkassar, the keyboarder and guitarist of Khebez Dawle خبز دولة and of The Last Postman. In 2020, he released the album “91 Portraits” that consists of 91 pieces of electronic music, each accompanied by a hand-drawn illustration by the artist himself in an accompanying book. The illustrations are also used in the videos, as you can see here:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLxBw0mShXGMzVwHrp4YdKth2Ne36nVk5U>, (accessed September 30, 2021)

The portraits are grouped into 28 Portraits of Existence, 39 Portraits of Misery and 24 Portraits of Love, framed by an Introduction and an Outro. In an in-depth interview it becomes clear that for Alkassar the project was meant “as a sort-of therapy to start a new path against depression and to start expressing more:” “I started two years ago when I would draw to overcome depression, traumas and experiences with psychotic episodes – and even to just express unspoken thoughts and emotions” (cited in Awad 2020).

The founder and leader of Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, Anas Maghrebi, also worked solo in different projects as a composer, producer, and singer-songwriter. On Soundcloud, he published with the pseudonym “abu mhd,” and he regularly put up “mashups and remixes of songs that

are not mine.” His self-description on Soundcloud reads: “musician/producer based in berlin. i like to make multi-genre music, things like hip hip, lo-fi, folktronica, synthwave.” ([sic], <https://soundcloud.com/anasmaghrebisolo>, accessed September 30, 2021). At the time of writing, Maghrebi is working on his solo album entitled “Daftar Layli.” Musically, Maghrebi is active in very different directions; to get a glimpse please do listen to the song “Betrabi” (“With all my dirt”, translation by the musician):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMZJW6B4QTo>, accessed September 30, 2021.

It is obvious in the current work of the musicians of Khebez Dawle خبز دولة that their lived reality of having sought refuge and the consequent need to deal with memories, experiences, and the new life situation as new citizen in Berlin resonates in their music. The categorization as “refugee,” however, is obviously and understandably contested and refused.

And Khebez Dawle خبز دولة? When working on this text in September 2021, the last entries to the group’s Facebook page were from December 2020, when they had released a new single entitled “Ara – أرى” (“I see”). The accompanying video shows a white human-shaped puppet floating, first through a dark world, then in a surreal world, at one point getting caught in a net, at another caught dangerously and nevertheless seemingly dancing, in a swirl, and then landing in what looks like an empty town, sitting down in what turns out to be a bus station. It then becomes visible that the puppet was floating in water; the water level sinks. The last pictures then, when the music fades, show singer Anas Maghrebi, wet, sitting at a bus stop.

You can listen and watch for yourself here:

Khebez Dawle خبز دولة – Ara (Official Video) | خبز دولة – أرى. Uploaded by Homeway Record. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2o7OVu8Fw4> (accessed September 23, 2021)

The hint of the video seems to be the escape journey; arrived, but still wet, and at a bus stop, so still on the journey, but where to? Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, as a group, have gone on a break. After an online concert in December 2020 (see Khebez Dawle 2020), they made no more public announcements and did no concerts. While the musicians themselves continued in various forms, for the project of Khebez Dawle خبز دولة this seemed hard to do. Too entangled was the history of the band with the fact of escaping the Syrian civil war and the labelling as refugees.

## Enana Alassar – Transforming Gender and Music Style

The third musician I zoom in on is the Berlin-based singer and rapper Enana Alassar, stage name Enana the Queen. Enana Alassar came out publicly as non-binary and trans on Instagram in July 2020, that is why I use the pronouns that Enana Alassar prefers, that is they/them. Born in Damascus in 1995, Enana Alassar grew up in a musical, intellectual family and learned to play the piano and guitar as a child and teenager. Being lesbian and a creative person, Alassar always wanted to leave Syria: “Being gay and an artist, with both of these, you can’t really get anywhere there. Since I started growing up, all my obsession was going towards getting the fuck out of there” (interview with Enana Alassar by the author, May 5, 2018). With the start of the civil war, discussions about leaving the country started in Alassar’s family, but things only went quickly when Alassar was attacked brutally by two policemen in Damascus because of being homosexual. Alassar travelled with their sister and their mother via the Mediterra-

nean Sea, on a rubber boat, to Greece, and then to Berlin, where they had family connections. Enana Alassar arrived in Berlin in August 2015. In Berlin, they found a place to rent with the help of an NGO supporting LGBT+ people, and started to make music again. At first, Alassar had to be talked into it. Their hand had been injured in the attack in Syria and not been properly treated afterwards, playing guitar was not possible at the time. Nevertheless, in January 2016, Alassar sang a small concert of cover versions accompanied by a guitarist. After this experience, Alassar wanted to continue to perform on stage; the artist's Facebook page started at the end of January 2016. Alassar was given a guitar, started to slowly re-train the hand, and by March 2016 they could sing and play themselves again. While mainly doing cover songs of English-language pop/rock music, Alassar also performed their own song called "Backpack" that deals with the travel experience from Syria to Germany; I invite you to listen to this song to get an impression of Enana Alassar during the first year in Germany.

Enana Alassar: "Backpack" (2016), performed at the Festival *Berlin lacht – Internationales Straßentheater Festival*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2xYHI8u92o> (accessed September 23, 2021)

At that time in 2016, Enana Alassar musically stuck to cover songs of English-language popular music pieces, sung solo and accompanied by acoustic guitar. The events Alassar were invited to were not primarily framed within the Welcome Culture, but were connected to queer political contexts in Berlin, like the Kreuzberger CSD on June 25, 2016, an anti-commercial alternative to the Christopher Street Day. Alassar's sexuality, which was an extremely relevant aspect of discrimination in Syria, led to immediate support by the LGBT+ community in Berlin in finding a place to stay and providing a network to present Alassar's art. Discrimination, however, remained an ongoing issue in Alassar's life in Germany, that they also openly communicate on Social Media channels, mainly on Instagram. As for the other musicians discussed, a main line of rejected categorization runs along the forced-on labelling as refugee. In an interview in 2018, Enana Alassar recounted the regular experience of being pushed towards a specific image expected of a Syrian refugee woman by the mainstream media, and to be used in order to stigmatize Muslims:

"I had many journalists who would ask me questions like 'so how horrible was it in that environment with the Islamic homophobic Arabs' – like in other words, but you know – 'and how great is it here for you now', and shit like that. And then I would be like, what, so you're using me to say how homophobic and regressive Muslims are? And how great and amazing white Germany the saviour is? While in fact it's just as homophobic and fucking racist, and I would talk about that, you know, but not using me to say, ha, you see, even the Arab refugee says that they are so bad, you know what I mean. It's disgusting." (interview with the author, May 5, 2018)

Alassar often mentioned racist experiences along the lines of language and along skin colour; Alassar described themselves as brown. That the refugee label sticks tight, can be seen in an incident Alassar described in a post on Facebook on January 22, 2020, re-posting an announcement from September 2019 for the film "Überleben in Neukölln" ("Survival in Neukölln", translation A.B.) that Alassar participated in. The musician was simply entitled "Refugee Enana," written in English, which was especially odd because the text was in German. This led Alassar to the following sarcastic comment:

“Apperantly [sic] my name is Refugee ENANA 🤔🤔🤔🤔 why no body has updated me with that?”

In 2017, Alassar did not perform publicly very much, but already started to develop a deep interest into hip-hop. During an interview in May 2018, Alassar obviously was already experimenting with electronic beats, and writing song lyrics. Alassar had always contested Arab traditional music, and Western classical music, and felt much more comfortable in singing and presenting themselves in English, than in Arabic. Alassar saw the reason in the sexual discrimination in Syria: “I think it has a lot to do with me refusing the culture, because it refused me.” (interview with the author, May 5, 2018).

Since around 2019, however, in parallel to shifting the musical focus to rap, the Arab language became more prominent in Alassar’s music. In February 2020, Enana Alassar released their first rap song “Vivid Dreams,” in which occasional Arab expressions are put in the English lyrics throughout the song, not as a special effect, but naturally complementing each other, with Arab words replacing English words (see lyrics underneath the video on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSDOv6qocWI>, accessed October 6, 2021). This track, so Alassar told me during an interview in February 2021, was “like a game changer because I found my voice.” Hereby, Alassar referred to rap as an art form to express themselves, but also possibly to open up to the Arab language. Since “Vivid Dreams,” five more tracks followed, and the last one released on Youtube at the time of writing is completely in Arabic, except for the occasional word “Damascene.”

Do take again a break and listen to the song “وين أروح / Wen Arou7” (“Where do I go?”, translation by Nihal Salama), to get an impression of Enana Alassar’s music in 2021:

ENANA: وين أروح / Wen Arou7 (prod. by Mahdy Alkelany) (2021)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYoCftOC4es> (accessed October 6, 2021)

In summer 2021, Alassar did a first live performance as a rapper, with own tracks, and since then, Alassar was regularly on stage as a rapper in Germany, mainly in Berlin. The transformations that Alassar in person and music went through since arriving in Berlin can be found on many levels: from singer-songwriter to rap, from only English to mainly Arab lyrics, from acoustic guitar to electronic music making, from a homosexual woman to a publicly outed trans non-binary person. Again: After some time of break and reflection, the creative potential emerged even more, the refugee labelling was rejected openly, and new musical paths were opened up. This, however, should not imply that discrimination vanished. Especially in the case of Enana Alassar, with an identity that intersects in racial, sexual, gender-related and ethnic/national terms, discrimination was an issue to be dealt with on a daily basis – and consequently a highly relevant issue in music making.

## Transformation over Time: Beyond the Labelling

The three case studies provide very different stories of Syrian musicians and their developments since arrival, but they all show a general tendency: Some time after arrival, Syrian musicians tend to take a break, consciously or not. Not necessarily from music-making, but from public appearance within the contexts they had first been positioned to. They start anew, with

changed musical horizons and perspectives, actively seeking out different, innovative directions. Basalt stopped performing and re-formed the group with different members. Khebez Dawle خبز دولة also stopped performing as group, while the musicians continued in different formations and solo projects, and the group still exists. Enana Alassar withdrew from most public appearances while changing their music genre. This has, so my assumption, on the one hand to do with the conscious rejection of the refugee labelling and the strategies employed to deal with it, and on the other hand with the fading out of the Welcome Culture, of course in an interlocking dynamic of these two issues.

As for the refugee label, Michael Parzer has shown that the problem around this label for artists is threefold: First, it puts all refugees together, any internal differentiation disappears, be it between musical traditions, nations, ethnic groups, or religions. Second, individuals are put to stage as representatives and experts for the topic of refuge and flight, but not as experts of their art. Third, they are staged as poor and in need, as victims, and therefore without agency (Parzer 2020, 2465–2468). The interdependent character of categories of discrimination, as demonstrated in theories of intersectionality (see for example Hill Collins and Bilge 2020), is striking. Looking at the ways that artists dealt with this situation, Parzer detects four strategies in self-presentation: adapting, masking, switching, and refusing. Adapting refers to complying with the expected frameworks in self-presentation; in masking, ethnic belonging is highlighted while refugeeeness is downplayed; by switching, musicians move between the categories depending on the given context; in refusing, musicians reject and critically reflect on both ethnic and refugee labelling. The chosen strategy influences the positioning in the field of art; and the strategies can be changed and altered with time (Parzer 2020, 2468–2472). The musicians I portrayed applied these strategies over the course of the last five years after arrival at different moments. In the immediate years after arrival, the strategies of adaption, switching, and masking were present in different forms. Basalt did accept the invitation of Conchita, in full awareness of the refugee label and ethnic staging that was happening. Enana Alassar and Khebez Dawle خبز دولة accepted performance options in refugee contexts as well as in Syrian, rock, or in queer contexts. In the nearer past, however, the strategy of refusal came into to the foreground. This went hand in hand with gaining more and more confidence in the new surroundings, with increasing skills in the German language, growing networks, stability in living situations, and knowledge about societal and cultural habits and structures – in short, in gaining new forms of agency. The musicians' growing agency made it possible to actively shape their own lives and musical works, and consequently to react consciously to categorizations and imposed labels. Parzer notes that the rejection "can be found in professional artistic milieus that are characterized by high amounts of cultural capital, and is typical for artists who had positioned themselves within an international art field when they lived and worked in Syria" (Parzer 2020, 2471). This certainly counts for the musical genres the musicians portrayed work in. In light of their stories, it is furthermore clear that it is more likely that the refugee label is rejected the more time is passing.

At the same time, the Welcome Culture also came to an end. While support activities for refugees in Austria and Germany continued, the public interest in people possibly labelled as refugees diminished steadily, and the public opinion about people looking for shelter increasingly switched to a non-welcoming atmosphere. Media coverage of events in the light of "Refugees Welcome" had decreased heavily by 2018. This change in public presentation, in general and in connection to musical performances by Syrians in Austria and Germany, went hand in hand

with the conscious denial of being labelled as refugees, and the break in public appearances of the musicians. The end of the Welcome Culture and the growing agency of the musicians that allowed for a rejection of the refugee label made new musical strands and innovative developments for the musicians possible. The COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to these developments, but at the time of writing these lines, all the portraited musicians are actively pursuing their musical ways – beyond any refugee labelling.

### **Summary: Musicians are Musicians!**

In this article, I have looked closely at musicians active in popular music who fled the Syrian civil war, arrived in Austria or Germany until 2016, and re-started their musical activities in their new surroundings. Looking closely at the musical developments of their first five years in their new countries reveals different transformations in societal structure and on the individual level of agency that occurred during this time, and shows how they consciously transformed their musical output and (self-)presentation.

All the Syrian musicians were immediately affected by the framework of Welcome Culture, which temporarily dominated media, society, and politics in Germany and Austria during and after the long summer of migration in the year 2015. There is, of course, no doubt that the initiatives were very important in that specific historical moment, helped the people arriving, and fostered understanding in society, be it through media attention, with financial support, or by local networking for finding language courses, housing, and medical support. These activities included initiatives with popular music and musicians. While this enabled and facilitated performance options for the musicians, it also required for them to be labelled as refugees, and consequently the framing in notions of victimhood, dependency on state aid, and non-differentiation. However, vulnerability might end, and also vulnerable people have agency and dignity. In the context of music, we need to take into account that the Welcome Culture put the musicians into a certain framework they could not choose, and that was – in the long run – not only to their advantage. They had to navigate the balancing act of using the proposed resources in order to be able to follow up on their art in their new situation, while at the same time keeping their dignity and conviction around their self-conception as musicians. Re-gaining more and more agency in life and musical work over time, the musicians increasingly rejected this labelling. The musicians portraited – the pop group Basalt, the indie rock band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, and the trans rapper Enana Alassar – are all situated in different fields of popular music, but in all their paths in the last five years is a remarkable change in musical orientation. Strikingly, they all withdrew from public appearances for a while. Furthermore, the specific experiences of forced migration continue to be crucial for making music. Their his-/her-/their-stories and biographies, the loss, traumas, and injuries appear in their musical output. Nevertheless, they need to be valued, visible, and possibly criticized for their music, their performances, their art, and not for having been refugee, or for being Syrian.

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music of the Balkan region in Austria (“Balkanboom. Eine Geschichte der Balkanmusik in Österreich”, Peter Lang 2014).

### **Abstract (Englisch)**

Among the people arriving in the European Union during the long summer of migration in 2015/16 and in the immediate years before were also musicians who positioned themselves within genres of popular music. In this article, I re-construct the musical developments of three selected musicians/bands, who fled the civil war in Syria, after their arrival in Austria or Germany: the rock band Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, the pop band Basalt, and the rapper Enana Alassar. Discussing the ways of settling in and adapting to a new life situation gives insights into the individual musical developments and the musicians’ agency to negotiate and perform their surroundings and new life situation in their music, including a handling of categorizations as musicians from Syria or “refugee” musicians in media and on stages within the activities of the so-called Welcome Culture. Furthermore, it points to general transformations in regard to music-making by Syrians and the intertwining of political and social transformations and individual music-making choices.

### **Abstract (Deutsch)**

Unter den Syrer\*innen, die während des “Langen Sommers der Migration” 2015/16 und in den unmittelbaren Jahren davor aus Syrien in die Europäische Union flüchteten, waren nicht wenige Musiker\*innen, die sich in Genres populärer Musik positionieren. In diesem Artikel diskutiere ich musikalische Entwicklungen drei solcher Musiker\*innen bzw. Musikgruppen nach ihrer Ankunft in Österreich bzw. Deutschland: die Rockband Khebez Dawle خبز دولة, die Popgruppe Basalt und Rap-Person Enana Alassar. Die Analyse von Strategien des Einlebens, Ankommens und Adaptierens gibt Einblick in die individuellen musikalischen Veränderungsprozesse ebenso wie die Handlungsmacht von Musiker\*innen, die ihre Umgebungen und neue Lebenssituation bewusst verhandeln und gestalten. Dies beinhaltet im Speziellen einen kritischen Umgang mit Kategorisierungen als „aus Syrien“ oder “Flüchtling” in Medien und auf Bühnen im Kontext der Aktivitäten der sogenannten Willkommenskultur. Sichtbar werden darüber hinaus generelle Transformationen im Musikschaffen und Musikleben von Menschen mit syrischem Background und die Verflechtung von politischen und sozialen Veränderungen und individuellen Entscheidungen im Musikschaffen.

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