After Making Light’s launch event at Lambeth Palace on 27 September 2017, Dunya Habash began conducting the first collection of oral histories with five CARA fellows across the UK. She visited the fellows in their homes or university offices and recorded between 2 and 4 hours of interview with each participant. In one case, a fellow’s spouse joined the interview as well. The following report is meant to highlight some of the narratives Dunya has collected thus far, showcasing the power and beauty of this work.

All names used in this report are pseudonyms.
Descriptions of Syria Through Memory

Melhim Zane is a CARA fellow from Damascus now doing a PhD in Chemistry at the University of Kent in Canterbury. A simple question about his new life in Canterbury brought back detailed memories from his childhood in Syria.

“How is life here in Canterbury?”

I really like it to be honest because it reminds me...well when I first arrived here, the first thing that made me feel welcome here, that minimised the struggle of being far from home, was seeing the similarities between Canterbury and Zabadani [a mountain town in rural Damascus]. I spent a lot of time in Zabadani with my family, especially during school breaks. We used to visit the town nearly every weekend. I really used to like visiting the town. So the nature, the greenness, the simple houses here made me feel like something is familiar and I can get used to this place and even love it. These similarities have really helped me. [Zane, 2:04-2:55]

Tell me about this place, Zabadani.

Zabadani is in the countryside, in rural Damascus. It is the escape place for the Damascene people. Almost every weekend, Damascus becomes empty as its families make there way to the countryside, especially to the small towns like Zabadani and Bloudan [another country town close to Zabadani]. A lot of Damascene families, and we are one of them, have a small house in Zabadani. We would visit and relax there, eat in its garden, there were some trees we would pick fruit from and eat. We would spend nice hours there before we had to go back to normal life and start the following week. This used to be a major part of my life. When we were young, we used to get annoyed when our parents would wake us up early in the morning, telling us to hurry up and get ready for the trip. We would complain, ‘Oh my God, its the weekend, we want to sleep. We couldn’t wait for the weekend so we could rest.’ We would really get annoyed at the beginning but then when we got there we would be happy to see the greenery. We would run and play in the open spaces. We really had fun.

One of the things we really loved doing there was making a barbecue; as you know the Damascenes love barbecues. We loved when my uncle would put the meat on the grill and start grilling. We [the children] would come up to him every few minutes and ask, “uncle, please can we have a small piece straight off the grill, please while its fresh?” We would spend nearly the whole meal like this eating small pieces straight off the grill. So there are lots of beautiful memories from this place.

My grandmother loved giving us a basket and asking us to “climb the trees and pick the apricots, cherries, and mulberries while I go and pick the grape leaves.” We used to run away and hide from her, complaining that “oh man, now tete [grandmother] is going to come and give us the basket and tell us to climb the trees and pick the fruit when we don’t feel like it, we want to play and have fun, we didn’t make Light
come here to pick fruit.

But now, to be honest, I would give anything to take this basket and climb those trees to pick apricots, mulberries, and cherries.” [Zane, 3:04-5:57]

Zane was not the only fellow to mention Zabadani and its connection to the Damascene people. Yunus Mustapha, a CARA fellow now doing a PhD in medical science at the University of Leicester, also recalled the town’s important daily connection to the capital through its famous souk in the Baramkeh district.

Yunus: We had a souk in the Baramkeh district [in Damascus] that we called ‘Zabadani Souk’. The souk would start opening from around 3:30 to 4:00 in the morning. The farmers would come from Zabadani and set up their produce. They would come around 3:30 in the morning when it was still dark outside, before the morning prayer…The lucky person [was] the one who would get there between 3:30 and 4:00am to purchase produce from the first pickings. [Yunus, 41:40-42:56]

Other important physical and cultural descriptions of Syria surfaced through memories of place.
very close to each other. The population living there is very large and because of this the street is very busy; it’s always crowded, noisy, and full of activity. But the nice thing about it is the people living there. Always, right when you enter the neighbourhood you must say hello to all the store owners and everyone sitting in the shops because you know everyone and they know you and know all the parents. They know who your siblings are, who your parents are. So the relationship with these people is very nice. Sometimes when you are in a hurry you don’t have enough time to stop and speak to all these people but even so its very nice to stop and chat with them, to see how they think, how they see life. Many times, I remember listening to some simple people share a thought that would be so deep, wisdom coming from a long life lived, from an old man standing in front of me speaking from his experiences...so I would take lessons from the experiences he lived and apply them to my life. [Zane, 26:15-30:15]

**Cultural Practices and Traditions**

Another theme that surfaced through the interviews was Syria’s cultural practices and traditions, especially in relation to geographical space and location. Life in rural towns differed from life in urban Syria. An interview with CARA fellow Ahmad and his wife Noor, both from small towns in rural Hama now living in Cardiff, highlights some wonderful and fascinating cultural norms in small town Syria.

**Noor**: I was born in Hama, [in a village] called Kafar Zita...It is an area in the northern part of rural Hama. [The village] is about 20 kilometres away from Hama. It was a calm area, most of the people living there worked as farmers. It had most industrial services [available to us]. It wasn't a very big village, I don't really now exactly how large it was, but it had schools and [the basics of living]. [Ahmad-3, 00:30-1:24]

**Ahmad**: I was born in Tibat al-Iman. Tibat al-Iman is also a small town to the north of Hama. It is between Kafar Zita and Hama; Kafar Zita is to the north of Tibat al-Iman. The people also worked as farmers. It also had many schools, hospitals, services. Most of the people there were employed by the government but in the evenings, after working hours, many of them would work in their shops or on their land. Many people owned some land in the outskirts of the town. So, they would go and work their lands [after work]. It was a simple, rural area...Over time, the town really grew and started connected more with the towns around it. But I remember that the traditions [of the town] during the 90s were like those of a small insular town. There were probably around 15,000 or 20,000 residents at the time. Now, there are many more residents, probably around 50,000 people. So, of those 15,000 people, basically everyone knew other [in the town when I was growing up]. We were a groups of families...everyone knew each other. For example, where there were weddings, everyone in the town would come to the wedding. During funerals, people would do a bayt shaar [religious vigil] in the street in front of their homes and people would come to give their condolences...The town was very simple. We didn't have internet, the television was in black and white, we only had two channels because we didn't have dish...I still remember that our television was red and played in black in white, and we had to hit it to turn it on...My dad was a teacher and after he finished the work day, he would go and work in the field—we had some land [on the outskirts of town]. It was a very simple life. [Ahmad-3, 1:54-5:30]
Noor: You have forgotten something, the people of Tibat al-Iman loved knowledge and learning. Always, the smartest students across Syria would come from there. They were very serious about school and students [from there] studied intensely.

Dunya: Did they put a lot of pressure on the student?

Ahmad: There was a lot of competition.

Noor: [There was a lot of competition] between the kids and between the schools.

Ahmad: For example, the parents would [tell their kids], “Why did so and so become a doctor and you not?…Why did your cousin become a doctor? You have to become a doctor, too.” Each family had to have [someone from the family] become a doctor. For example, my brother become a doctor. My cousin also became a doctor.

Noor: There was intense competition between relatives. [Ahmad-3, 5:35-6:27]

Ahmad: People’s habit was to wake up early, which was normal for a more rural culture. I imagine, even in the cities at that time, people would wake up early. So, people would wake up early. I remember we used to go buy bread, not like here where you go and buy pre-packaged bread in the store, we would go to a bakery and buy fresh bread. This was the most delicious thing…the bread is so good.

Noor: We even had families who would make bread at home. They would take the tanoor, knead it into dough, and make bread.

Dunya: Wow, that is amazing!

Ahmad: It is like the saj bread.

Dunya: That is the most delicious kind.

Ahmad: Yes, this is the most delicious.

Noor: I remember my mother would make this bread from scratch once a week. She would make muhamara with it.

Ahmad: And Zaatar, we call it manaqeesh [dough topped with thyme, cheese, or ground meet]. [Ahmad-1, 7:14-8:09]

Displacement and Dispossession

Lama Sakkal was an English professor in Syria before escaping to the UK with CARA’s help. She is now doing a PhD at Northumbria University and generously hosted by a British family in Morpeth, a family she has grown fond of since arriving in 2015. She spoke of her journey to safety, and the overwhelming challenges she faced in Syria before deciding to leave her family and country. However,
she also spoke of dispossession and the unique challenge of integration into a new society: the challenge of integrating into a new sense of self.

**Lama:** I left our home, the one that I never saw again, on 23 August 2011...the area was besieged the time that I left so my parents could not take me to the airport in Damascus. My brother took me instead...The last time I saw our home was 23 August 2011—our home was demolished later. Until now, the images of our home never leave my mind. For example, pictures of our garden...we had around 60 different kinds of plants. Father loved plants and gardening. I feel that these memories will never leave me. The image of our doves in the garden...we were living in the first floor of the building and the house was very spacious. We owned a supermarket which was on the ground floor of the building and my brother and his family were living on the third floor. On the fourth floor, we built a terrace with a garden, doves, and a seating area. The point, as I told you, after I left Syria [that first time to do my masters in the UK], I never saw this home again. I remember my room, or I remember this home we used to live in and a feeling [wells up within me], a feeling I really cannot ever explain. A feeling like a scar in my chest because I know that this house is gone, its now [rubble] under the earth.

And you know that you can never return to it, but at the same time you want to return. It becomes a kind of conflict within you. You smell something and [it reminds you of] the smell of your room, the smell of the terrace. For example, you remember the smell of the lemon tree that was in front of the house. There was a school close to our home, [so you remember] the sound of the children playing there. There really are sounds and things that take you back [to these memories], or maybe you see a certain view like a tree or you hear someone and you go back in time.

In Syria, we have Palestinians, and [some of] my friends were Palestinian. They used to tell me a lot [about their loss], and I used to feel sympathetic towards them. But it is impossible for you to know the feeling of a person who has to leave his home, to become a displaced person and no longer have a home; no one can feel this feeling for real until he goes through it himself. [Lama-1, 22:30-24:50]

**Lama:** In Syria, I had a job. This work for me was my sense of self. I lost this. I lost [my work and my sense of self] when I came here. It is true that I am [now] living with a family in their house. But I am living with them...it's like you are living with them as a guest, they opened their home to you as hosts. And here I receive my salary from the university, whereas in Syria I had my own salary that I worked for. I felt strong [in Syria]. However, when I arrived here I felt like I lost everything. I started from scratch again.

Here, you don't only integrate with the environment and situation, you also must integrate with a new sense of self, with your new self. Here, you feel yourself weak, the way people around you look at you makes you feel weak. For example, when they hear you speaking in a different accent, without realising it, they start using body language. Why are you using body language with me? If I speak in English and you do not understand me, then use body language.

Without realising it, when they see a woman who wears the hijab—of course, there is the fact that a lot of refugee hijabi women who come here don't know how to speak the language—but when they see a hijabi woman, they automatically assume that she doesn't know how to speak the language. This really bothers me, especially since in Syria I was teaching English. Why are you treating me in this way? I know how to speak [the language]. For example, the bus driver without realising it [always uses body language] and I ask myself why is he doing this. [Lama-2, 43:10-44:42]
When societies are disrupted by terrorism and conflict, the more difficult challenge is not necessarily stopping the bloodshed, but making sure that the youth can still access the tools they need to become contributing members of society. Those who recognise this disparity and have the courage to sacrifice their lives for the sake of making sure that the next generation has what it needs to continue are often not remembered. However, it is these very people who lay the groundwork for peace and stability in the post-conflict phase.

Yunus: I am very proud that all my sisters are academics. My older sister was a professor at…Al-Baath University in Homs and then [moved to] Damascus University. My younger sister is also a professor at Damascus University. I am very proud of this but another reason why I am proud [of them] is that they are refusing to leave Syria because they want to be a part of the reconstruction during the war. They don't want to wait for the war to end. They are refusing to leave Syria [for this reason] regardless of all the danger they are living through…They are still there teaching, saying that ‘if we leave our students, who will teach them?’ I support them in their decision. If we all leave Syria, who will be there to teach the students, to teach the next generation? [Yunus, 16:54-17:44]

CARA’s Critical Role in Saving Syria’s Academics

CARA’s role as saviour came up in all the interviews. Beyond the logistical help that CARA provided to the Syrian fellows in terms of physically helping them leave Syria by securing visas and placements in British Universities, it was also the human kindness that individuals at CARA extended to the fellows that was most treasured and appreciated.

Lama: I came here and [my British host] family was very wonderful. Now, I seriously feel that they were a blessing…my [host] family, my supervisor, and CARA. These individuals, their presence in my life was a big blessing even though I don’t [personally] know the people who work at CARA, but seriously they were people who stood with me step by step. People like Alister and Zeid [from CARA], personally I don't know them, but they were individuals who helped me greatly. Until now…they send me emails to check on me, until now I feel like they care about checking in with me. I feel like they understand the difficulties I went through and the experiences I endured. In general, with me and with my friend, from the first time we emailed them they have been supporting us. [Lama-2, 37:05-37:58]
Why this Work Must Carry On

At the end of every interview, Dunya asked the fellows to share their impression of the project. All of the fellows reiterated the importance of this endeavour in regard to preserving Syria’s history by capturing a recent moment in time when Syrians were living normal lives. Those moments of perceived normal life highlight important cultural traditions missing in displacement. The fellows suggested that such awareness might be the start of a conversation between British and Syrian communities so that clearer understanding of—or appreciation for—cultural difference can take root.

Lama: To be honest, I really like this project. [It is important because] it preserves the history [of Syria] because it is possible that after a while we will forget many things. It’s a nice project because people will know that we lived normal lives in Syria before the conflict, that we were happy with our way of life—and maybe I am not the best example. In general, maybe the experiences I lived through were not ideal but we in Syria were very happy before the war. We were living a very normal life before I came here. Even during the war, I had my work, my dreams, my aspirations. And this is one of the things that really bothers me. For example, many British people think that we were living in camps in Syria. They have no understanding that our country is very beautiful—very, very beautiful. Maybe if the situation was different…That’s why this idea is very good because it preserves the normal histories of people, especially since nowadays people only see the terrible things about Syria. So maybe it will be very nice if [British people] hear these Syrian stories and know that we were very happy. All we asked for was a little freedom but the situation turned into a very unfortunate direction. We had many things that here I feel is not available, even though it was very simple living [in Syria], we were happy, we were living. [Lama-2, 52:50-54:25]

Noor: It’s very nice. On the contrary, Syria’s history will not be forgotten. It will be preserved, the way in which we were living will become a part of history. The fact that you chose us [to interview], that we helped in this preservation, is wonderful. [Ahmad-4, 6:05-6:40]

Ahmad: I think this project is nice. It’s idea is very nice especially since it explores Syria’s history before the conflict, uncovering the variety of peoples, cultures, and ways of life—rural life, city life, traditional, modern. It paints a picture of how people were living [in Syria] before the conflict…This is very nice especially for people who lived outside of the country, or for people who have children who were born outside and don’t know anything about Syria. This will be very exciting for these Syrians to listen, read, or listen in the British Library documents about Syria, its history and culture. Of course, this is very wonderful. [Ahmad-4, 6:40-7:45]