

Introduction

Return migration and the burden of borders

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The papers in this collection are mainly the outcome of a project carried out by the Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Center (Shaml) under my direction and continued later on when I was at the American University of Beirut. The project was sponsored by International Development Research Center (Ottawa, Canada).¹ It was centered on the effort to understand the issue of return migration to Palestine from a sociological point of view.

The papers grouped here are part of the background to that project in that they examine various human situations among Palestinians, ranging from inhabitants villages that have been divided by borders such as the “Green Line” (the 1949 armistice line) to populations of Palestinian origin that have been cut off from their roots in Palestine and are now seeking to establish their lives and those of their children outside Palestine and even outside the Arab world. The final two papers deal with real and virtual efforts at return to Palestine by two quite different groups (youth; professional experts). The theme that runs through these papers is thus the role of borders and boundaries— those that people seek to cross and those that the wider political processes establish around existing populations (such as the Green Line and the new line represented by the Israeli wall).

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People on the one hand are moving, and on the other hand they are developing survival strategies to deal with new political “shadow lines”² that impede their movement. Freedom of movement and its lack are part of the sociological base whose knowledge is necessary for the understanding of choices regarding return migration, i.e., migration back to geographic Palestine if not back to the original home situation.

The papers are also contributions to the dilemmas that faced different segments of the Palestinian population in the period preceding the construction of the Israeli wall, beginning in 2005, which further cut up and divided the Palestinian areas and prevented some of the patterns of movement that had emerged since the Oslo agreement in 1993 (the “Declaration of Principles”). Since the Palestinian situation is in constant flux, this historical moment has to be kept in mind while reading these papers.

Palestinian Refugees: Movement and Return

The return of refugees to their country of origin seen as a “natural” and thus a “problem free” process is one of the major misleading myths surrounding the process of repatriation in the imaginaries of many refugees and Palestinian politicians, and of course not only in the Palestinian case but elsewhere. This collection addresses this issue by placing it in the broader context of movement across or around borders by Palestinians. The broader conclusion is that networks and relationships with other people as social capital are as important as a nostalgic sense of place in understanding voluntary migration, forced migration, and return migration.

² Amitav Ghosh’s novel describes Bengal as having been divided between India and Pakistan in 1947 by arbitrarily drawn boundaries, which he calls “shadow lines” because they do not correspond to any social difference (Ghosh 1988).

By drawing insights from various disciplinary approaches to borders, boundaries, and social networks, this volume sets out to analyze the manifold implications of some socio-economic and cultural factors for an eventual Palestinian return migration. Boundaries are symbolic, cultural, and social, constituting a cognitive or mental geography which influences the transnational ties between different Palestinian communities and shapes their identities. By the same token, the impermeability of some borders has constructed and reinvented new boundaries of difference and distinctiveness among these communities. First, displacement and separation of refugees from the place of origin inevitably created new boundaries between them and those who remained. Second, the institutions and readjustments of geopolitical borders after 1948 and 1967 foster the emergence of such boundaries. Finally, the crossing of borders separating refugees from their place of origin entails power relations and conflicts that reinforce boundaries between groups and affect. Some boundaries remain, some are invented, some are remembered: this is the burden of borders in this highly partitioned part of the world.

This issue of the *Cairo Papers in Social Science* includes contributions of scholars who have addressed directly or indirectly the question of the movement of the Palestinian populations over the sixty-year period since the first exodus in 1948 and the different identities they have developed. There have been several waves of refugees caused by the expanding power of Israel, migrations of Palestinian men and sometimes families in search of better economic circumstances in the Arab world and beyond, and movements of individuals across borders to profit from the differences between the two sides of a border. With all this, there is a yearning to return to the point of departure.

While some Palestinians have been able to return to Palestine under the auspices of the Palestinian National Authority or otherwise, others have found their movements restricted by shifts in the internal map of Palestine, and still others, already outside Palestine, are looking to move outside the Arab world altogether. At all times, one of the key links among Palestinians is kinship. This is the reason why many contributions in this volume explore and examine the social and specifically the kin networks between Palestinians abroad and within the Palestinian territories and Israel as one of the factors facilitating return. On the one hand there are borders, on the other kin ties. These kin links often have an economic dimension, as economic actions are embedded within the kin networks. Embeddedness (Polanyi 1957) refers to the fact that diverse economic transactions are inserted into overarching social and political structures that affect their outcomes. Thus Palestinian economic transactions cannot be understood without referring to the social and legal status of the Palestinian communities. Palestinian choices on where and how to migrate in other words reflect social links as much as economic logic.

The “Right of return”

The study of borders, boundaries, social ties, and identities/belongings is an element of the sociology of return, part of the debate about the return of the Palestinian refugees. This debate is dominated by a legalistic discourse. Dealing with a solution for the Palestinian refugee problem means to address not only their very just right to return, but also many factors which can influence their decision especially when the forced migration experience is extended over 60 years, and a third and fourth generation is

appearing in the host countries. Many unspoken and unthinkable issues are unexplored in the dominant discourse of right of return. Palestinian refugees interviewed in the Shaml center survey³ have a much stronger feeling of nostalgia for the land of Palestine than for the people of Palestine. In interviews, refugees insisted on talking about property, the land, the Mediterranean Sea, al- Aqsa Mosque, or Deir Bor'om Church, and avoided the question of how they would live and with whom. I am not suggesting here the impossibility of the coexistence between Palestinian returnees and their Jewish neighbors but the necessity of thinking the return not only in term of geography but also in term of social relations.

The right of return of Palestinian refugees to their place of origin is enshrined in four separate bodies of international law: humanitarian law, human rights law, the law of nationality as applied to state succession, and refugee law. Beyond these bodies of laws, which apply to all refugees in the world, the UN General Assembly specified the Palestinian case in Resolution 194, paragraph 11, December 11, 1948, which sets forth a framework for a solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees, including the possibility of return:

The refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under

³ In 2004, the Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Center (Shaml) conducted a survey among Palestinians living in Palestine/Israel which displays the variability of the transnational ties. As a team leader, I conducted this survey between January and October 2003. Five hundred sixty questionnaires were completed by refugees and non-refugees living in the camps and outside them.

*principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the governments or authorities responsible.*⁴

To understand the importance of the refugee issue to Palestinians, we must understand that the Palestinian nation and Palestinian nationalism as it exists today was born following the expulsion of over half the Palestinian population from their land in 1948, and that one of the fundamental aspects of Palestinian identity is “refugeehood.” Such an understanding obliges us to address the problem of the Palestinian refugees as fundamental to any solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

There are five reasons for this: First, as long as the Israelis do not take into consideration what happened to the Palestinians in 1948 and the expulsion of the indigenous population from 78 percent of the land of historic Palestine, they will keep bargaining about the remaining 22 percent (the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip). There is no solution to the land issue without coupling it with the refugee issue. This may be the reason why the Oslo Accords failed.

Second, resolving the refugee issue is not just a technical matter of absorption, nor is it a matter of reciting international law as if it were a self-implementing text. Rather, it involves deconstructing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to its very premises, to understand how its causes led to a certain kind of colonial practice, and to recognize the need for a debate not just to understand, but also to acknowledge and accept, historic

⁴ See “194 (III). Palestine -- Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator,” *The United Nations*, December 11, 1948, (<http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/0/c758572b78d1cd0085256bcf0077e51a?OpenDocument>).

responsibility. This is the very precondition for true reconciliation and mutual forgiveness, as suggested by the late Edward Said (1999).

Third, irrespective of whether the final resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict takes the form of a two-state or a bi-national state solution, the refugee issue cannot be considered secondary. The current intifada has revealed the importance of the refugees; they are the social and political actors most unable to bear the impasse in the Oslo process.

Fourth, beyond the moral and symbolic value of achieving a right of return, the right is useful in creating a framework for providing refugees with a choice between remaining in their host countries, returning to their places of origin or coming to a future Palestinian state (or third countries). The right of choice is a necessity for those who have, for more than half a century, been forced to live as aliens without basic rights in miserable camps and in states that have not always embraced them with open arms.

Finally, if the right of return and the right of choice is accepted, it will open many possibilities for the refugees to choose from. The movement of refugees depends on many factors related to their social, economic, cultural and identities. The return of refugees does not mean that the whole refugee community will move back to Israel. In almost all cases, the experience of refugees across the world shows that the number of those who return is less than those who choose other solutions. The Israeli phobia of a massive return is unjustified.

Hannah Arendt, in her study of totalitarianism (1985:280), reminded us of “the decision of statesmen to solve the problem of statelessness by ignoring it.” She insisted on the necessity of examining displacement through the prism of often xenophobic nation-states, and she traced the political and symbolic logic that had the effect of “pathologizing” and even criminalizing refugees. The contemporary linkage that has been forged between Palestinian return and a disturbance of the regional order, especially in Israel, attests to the continuing relevance of Arendt's point.

Factors Influencing the Movement of Refugees

Many factors influence a refugee's decision whether to return or to choose another option. Understanding the likely patterns and pressures regarding Palestinian return cannot be achieved by focusing on macro processes of globalization or the operation of global markets according to neo-classical principles, but, rather, must be achieved by a sociological understanding of the political, social, and cultural attributes of the Palestinian people. One needs to examine elements related to the economic sociology of Palestinian refugees (and Palestinians abroad in general), both in the host country and in the country of return (the Palestinian Territories or Israel). Focusing on these elements should not overshadow other important factors.

For instance, geographical factors also influence refugees' decisions. Here it is worth noting the importance of Salman Abu Sitta's work (2001) in opening the debate concerning absorptive capacity of Israel. His efforts demonstrate that, after dividing Israel into three demographic areas, 68 per cent of Israeli Jews are now concentrated in 8

per cent of Israel and that the areas in and around the former Palestinian villages remain empty and could absorb returning refugees. For him, this empty rural area also corresponds to the original home location of the many rural refugees who are the majority of Palestinian refugees. However, it is important to ask if after so many years these refugees can still be considered peasants. The majority of them have become residents of big cities; it is thus pertinent to ask if they would accept to be resettled in their villages of origin. Those who became urban refugees were stripped of their ecological and sociological relationships. They may no longer identify with the land upon which they were working, which is what happened with Algerian refugees after independence. (Lustick 1993:123). Moreover, according to the 2003 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) survey⁵ in the Palestinian territories, the former dwellings of half of these refugees have been destroyed; more importantly, 40 per cent declared themselves unwilling to return if a family home no longer exists. In other words, a right of return will not necessarily lead to an actual return; there are many intervening factors.

The return of Palestinian refugees is still closely connected with three elements: first, the right of return; second, the urban situation of the refugee camps; and, finally, the position of the Arab host countries. These three elements condition the degree to which the applicability of the right of return may be realized. It is also worth mentioning that many studies show that refugees have low expectations as to whether a political solution would allow most refugees to return. The 2003 PSR survey found that half accepted the idea

⁵ The PSR survey was conducted between January 16 and February 5, 2003 targeting 1,498 Palestinian refugee households distributed among 150 localities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. See Results of PSR Refugees' Polls in the West Bank/Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon, *PSR* (<http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2003/refugeesjune03.html>).

that, once a Palestinian state is established, the refugee issue will be postponed to an indefinite future.

Methodology for a Sociology of Return

This volume aims to be one of the first contributions to the sociology of the Palestinian return, moving away from many mythologies.⁶ Many myths were circulated not only in popular thought but also within the scholarly community about the Palestinian refugee problem and their return. These myths must be researched and analyzed and perhaps debunked. The research agenda used in this book thus has three major features.

First, it is not a purely nation-centered approach to migration, nor a purely individual approach. As Elisabeth Longuenesse (2005:180) argues, since the 1980s, the study of the forced/voluntary/return migration utilizes less a nation-centered approach and focuses more on the individual benefits/disadvantages of the migrant in his/her relation to the family, to his/her solidarity networks, to his/her professional strategy, etc. Weak state control over the market, especially the labor market, is the primary reason and may be a consequence, but the market is not the only factor. The approach of this volume is to choose an individual approach in almost all of the chapters and an intermediary level where the individual and nation-centered approaches are coupled in the chapters by Totry and Hanafi.

The second feature is linking voluntary migration with forced migration, as the frontier elaborated by the researcher is not always justifiable. New studies in

⁶ See Hanafi 1997, 2001, and 2002 for more elaboration.

transnationalism, diaspora, cultural studies, and hybridity suggest an analytical linkage between the migration experience, the exile experience, and return migration (see chapters by Dorai and Hanafi). And, as Malkki notes (1995:514), both displacement and emplacement are seen as historical products and never-ending projects.

The third feature is a deconstruction of the notion of homeland and the form of the nation-state (see for instance chapters by Parizot and Hanafi in this volume). Any thinking on the right and sociology of return should address the meaning and the validity of classical theories of sovereignty, democracy, state, and citizenship. Many functionalistic studies, as Malkki reminds us, have real consequences for the shape of intervention in refugee crises. For example, functionalist visions of an identity that can only be whole when rooted in a territorial homeland reinforced the assumption that state sovereignty as we know it, is part of the natural or necessary order of things (Malkki 1995).

This Collection

Sheerin al-Araj analyzes some parts of Shaml survey and examines different aspects of social capital that influence the decision of the refugees to return to al-Walaja village in Bethlehem District after the Green Line was established in 1949. She shows that in the case of al-Walaja the social ties between village dwellers and those living abroad remain stronger based on the identity with the land and with each other. She portrays the effort to retain a presence even on a remnant of the original village land. The presence of the al-Walaja Charity Society in Amman seems to be one of the most effective tools for

maintaining ties between the al-Walaja refugee community in Jordan and al-Walaja village. However, she demonstrates an instrumentalization of this relationship, especially at the time of the election of the Executive bureau of this Society. Thus, one should not look to simple contact as the generator of a relationship.

Two case studies on the social and economic ties between Palestinians inside Israel with people in the Palestinian Territories and abroad are very compelling in illustrating the impact of protracted rupture. Mary Totry's case study chooses a very interesting case to test the impact of the boundaries in identity construction and the emergence of the new Otherness. She studied how interactions evolved between the two parts of Barta'a village living either side of the 1949 armistice line as a result of the division of the community between Israel and the West Bank, so that regional politics and legal issues affected the two parts of what was once a single kin group differentially. The village is now faced with a more terrible problem: the new Israeli wall cuts it off from the rest of the West Bank and circumscribes people's movements harshly. Cédric Parizot's study analyses the trans-border exchanges that have evolved throughout the many political changes between the Bedouin in the Negev and their kin and network members, who became refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and Jordan after 1948. He stresses how such encounters have linked cross-border populations through an intricate web of relations, while still fostering between them feelings of differences, power relations, and even antagonisms between groups. Occurring in an unequal framework of relationships, exchanges across borders are moments and places where people experience their differences and develop antagonisms. Indeed, while crossing borders, they rework and retain boundaries.

These two studies do not directly deal with a refugee population but the analysis that they provide is very important to grasp the role of protracted rupture in breaking down and restructuring kinship ties. Moreover, because they directly address the changing relationships between the different groups in the Palestinian populations, they emphasize the importance of seeing the refugees in close relationship and interaction with their environment and the people who remained in their place of origin. This indirect manner is thus crucial to understanding and predicting spatial movement among refugees.

Mohamed Kamel Doraï gives some insights into the efforts of the Palestinian refugees especially since the beginning of the 1990s to find a more congenial resting place than Lebanon with its restrictions. Their goal is to hold families together and to secure a reasonable income. Some have tried other Arab countries, notably Iraq, while others seek to move outside the Middle East, toward Europe. Contrary to the population in Palestine (refugees or not), transnational ties seems to be important in the case of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. For him the Palestinians do not use the same kind of transnational resources (i.e., economical, juridical, or educational) as the élites. Deprived of nationality and passport, they do not enjoy the same freedom of movement. Therefore, they use transnational family and village resources (mutual assistance, exchange of information) that facilitate migration. This know-how does not rely on an economical or juridical basis but on family and village-of-origin ties that cross national borders.

Tamara Tamimi presents a very interesting case on the negotiation of identity among American-born Palestinians who have returned with members of their families to live in the West Bank. Palestinians, like other diasporic communities, live in their host

country while maintaining emotional, social, and often economic ties to their country of origin. The children of this population living in exile however, not having lived the history nor owning the nostalgia or pain of loss associated with exile, inevitably possess an identity at variance and often in conflict with that of their parents. Palestinian-American returnees then, come to the West Bank to live knowing only what aspects of Palestinian identity, culture, and traditions were passed on to them by their parents while in the U.S. They also bring with them those aspects of American society which they have internalized and display as markers of their individual and group identity, and here tensions emerge between residents and returnees as each seeks to define the other based on an often limited knowledge of their respective societies. Tamimi offers us an excellent analysis of the cognitive and behavioral aspects of Palestinian identity these particular returnees possessed while living in the United States and how the everyday reality of physically being in the homeland of their parents influenced or modified their identity and how it is expressed. If Palestinians are to return, the scenarios described here will become increasingly common.

This collection also examines the experience of the Palestinians who have already returned to the Palestinian Territories. The work of Sari Hanafi evaluates the volume of the “return” to the Palestinian Territories since the Oslo Agreements, and then assesses the contribution of expatriates to the development of the Palestinian territories in terms of know-how and expertise. He compares two experiences of real and virtual return: the UNDP program that encourages repatriation called TOKTEN (The Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals) and the internet-based network, PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Aboard), which connects Palestinian scientists

and professional expatriates to the Palestinian Territories. He concludes with a critical assessment of the role of new media (like the Internet) in facilitating the connectivity of the diaspora with the place of origin.

We hope that these papers will give the reader an understanding of the dilemmas of Palestinians expelled from their ancestral homes, or coping with divided villages, or traveling the world in search of a place to settle and raise a family. The difficulties of crossing certain borders, the shifts in the boundaries themselves reflecting large-scale political conflicts, the place of these borders in the imagination of people as they seek shelter and try to reconstruct their lives, maintaining the significance of kinship and other direct personal relations over the broader abstract categories of identity politics, all of these processes and others are well illustrated in this collection.

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