

Introduction

States of Displacement: Middle Eastern Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Asylum Seekers in Global Context

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Abstract: The plight of forcibly displaced persons may have lost the spotlight in the global news cycle due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Middle Eastern refugee crisis has continued unabated. Nearly 80 million people have been forcibly displaced, including millions of Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians, Syrians, and Yemenis. In this special issue, anthropologists highlight different states of displacement – protracted, repeated and recent – amongst Middle Eastern populations that have fled to Germany, Greece, Jordan and Turkey. Amidst profound precarity, refugees manage to negotiate new geographies of displacement, re-create a sense of home, plan their reproductive futures, organise protests to claim their asylum rights, and engage in activism and solidarity. Featuring nuanced ethnographic studies, this special issue bears witness to refugees’ fortitude and resilience.

Keywords: asylum seekers, Germany, Greece, Jordan, Middle East, refugees, solidarity, states of displacement, Turkey

When coronavirus infections began spreading around the world in early 2020, the reports of the severity and reach of the disease eclipsed prior news of forcibly displaced people seeking refuge from war and violence. Yet while the world was not watching, refugee numbers and refugee fatalities have kept rising, and while government resources have been diverted to stall the spread of COVID-19, refugees’ situations have been deteriorating. According to a report issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees resettled in safe countries during 2020 is on course to be the lowest in almost two decades (Siegfried 2020). When 74 migrants drowned off the coast of Libya in November 2020, it barely made headlines in the mainstream news (UN News 2020).



Writing against the current ‘refugee fatigue’, this special issue on *States of Displacement: Middle Eastern Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Asylum Seekers in Global Context* engages directly with the worst humanitarian crisis of this century, providing critical analysis of the ongoing challenges that refugees face. The importance of this task is clear. By the end of 2019, nearly 80 million people were forcibly displaced, which is the highest number the world has ever seen (UNHCR 2020). Amongst those displaced are 26 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. Syria, with its decade-long, government-led war against its own people, is currently the country with the highest number of forcibly displaced persons, ahead of Venezuela, Afghanistan and South Sudan (UNHCR 2020). Of the 45.7 million people around the world who are internally displaced persons (IDPs), Iraq and Yemen have amongst the world’s highest percentages. Moreover, Palestine has the longest history of forced displacement in the Middle East, now spanning more than 70 years. Roughly 5.6 million Palestinian refugees continue to receive United Nations humanitarian assistance, and some Palestinians have been doubly or triply displaced as a result of the ongoing wars in Middle Eastern countries.

Countries which are in geographic proximity to war zones generally become the first destination of refuge for those forcibly displaced. More than 5 million registered refugees from Syria currently reside in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon (UNHCR 3RP Plan 2020). The number of unregistered refugees living in neighbouring countries is impossible to know. In contrast, all 27 member states of the European Union (EU) combined registered less than 700,000 asylum claims in 2019 (Eurostat 2020). While Germany continues to accept the largest number of asylum seekers within the EU, applications have fallen. Yet, along the Mediterranean, in countries such as France, Spain, and Greece, asylum applications have increased (Eurostat 2020), especially as refugees board boats, dinghies, and rafts in often desperate journeys to Europe across the open sea.

By international law, individuals who have crossed international borders as refugees have a right to protection from host states if returning to their own states would harm them. However, the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention left outside its mandate IDPs who fled their homes but did not make it across any international borders. Moreover, the Convention left unspecified what forms of protection host states must provide to refugees. This lack of clarity has generated a patchwork of largely inadequate refugee and asylum policies and practices in nation-states around the world (Volk and Inhorn 2021).

It is important to distinguish clearly between “refugees” and “asylum seekers.” Every asylum seeker is a refugee, but not all refugees become asylum seekers (Gibney 2004). For asylum to be claimed, a person must be near or inside the border of the country where an asylum petition will be lodged. Most of the world’s refugees remain in countries close to the ones they left, waiting

to return to their homes once the conditions that forced them to flee cease to exist. However, because conditions may not improve, as is the current case in Syria, more and more refugees are travelling from their home countries to Europe to seek asylum there. It is this growth in Middle Eastern asylum seekers – primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan – that has made refugees ‘such a burning political issue’ in Europe (Gibney 2004: 9).

Upon arrival, Middle Eastern refugees are faced with different political and legal regimes in each host country, meaning that asylum applications receive different kinds of attention and assessments of merit, and lead to different kinds and amounts of aid. How refugees manage the political and legal hurdles in any given locale depends on their own cultural and financial capital, and their abilities to forge networks of solidarity. States of displacement, in other words, differ greatly from one nation to another, and even from one local setting to another, depending upon the attitudes and reception provided by local officials and residents. However, these important differences are often neglected in official reports about refugees, leading to the homogenisation and misrepresentation of refugees’ experiences.

Considering this variability in states of displacement and refugee reception, this special issue foregrounds the experiences of Middle Eastern refugees in a variety of sites, including two in the Middle East (Jordan and Turkey) and two in Europe (Greece and Germany). In particular, our goal is to showcase how individual refugees cope with three different states of displacement – protracted, repeated and recent. *Protracted displacement* situations are those in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years (UNHCR 2020). In terms of the Middle East, protracted displacement most accurately reflects the situation of Palestinian refugees, who fled to neighboring Middle Eastern countries beginning in 1948 and have become long-term exiles in several nations, primarily Jordan and Lebanon. Unfortunately, thousands of Palestinian refugees have also experienced *repeated displacement*, especially those who had been living in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria before the 2011 onset of the government-led war. Palestinians are now among the 5.6 million people who have fled Syria as refugees. Syrians themselves provide the most prominent example of *recent displacement*. Over the past decade, as the fighting inside Syria has intensified and involved increasing numbers of external actors, more and more Syrian individuals and families have been forced to flee. Europe’s 2015 ‘migrant crisis’ was the initial tipping point, as European nations began to grapple with an unprecedented influx of newly arriving Syrians along with Iraqis and Afghans fleeing from the ongoing United-States-led wars in their home countries (Inhorn 2018).

Even more recent is the displacement of Yemenis. As described by the UNHCR (2020), ‘after five years of war, Yemen remains the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. More than 3.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes and 24 million Yemenis are in dire need of humanitarian

assistance. Almost two-thirds of the population – approximately 20 million people – are on the brink of famine⁷. Although most Yemenis are internally displaced, nearly 30,000 have fled outside their country, primarily to parts of East Africa (e.g. Djibouti), but also to other parts of the Middle East and Europe (UNHCR 2020).

All of these fleeing Middle Eastern populations – Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians, Syrians and Yemenis – are represented in this special issue. These diverse Middle Eastern refugees end up in urban settings and small towns; living in camps, squatter settlements and cramped apartments; and experiencing moments of trauma, disorientation and loss amidst larger geographic, historical, political and economic conditions not of their own making. Yet, despite the immense adversity facing this group of people, the studies in this issue make abundantly clear that Middle Eastern refugees possess fortitude, courage and resilience. They may lack the protections that citizenship rights afford, yet they manage to build meaningful life-worlds – with great ingenuity and active engagement – within the limited options available to them. If anything, citizens in host countries should learn from these examples, which demonstrate mutual aid and care, careful deliberation, community building and public advocacy for a world that is both kinder and more just.

The first article, by Michael Pérez, “*Min Al-Mukhayyam*” (“From the Camp”): Discourses of Difference and the Boundaries of Exile amongst Palestinian Refugees in Jordan⁸, draws our attention to the essentialising effects of protracted displacement on contemporary social relations within host communities and within refugee communities themselves. Palestinians have been displaced by multiple wars from their homeland, and for more than 70 years they have pleaded unsuccessfully for their internationally guaranteed right to return to Palestine. In Jordan, where a large number of Palestinians resides as both officially registered UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) refugees as well as unregistered refugees, distinct perceptions have emerged that ascribe different characteristics and aspirations to refugees based on their place of residence. While the Palestinian refugee camp used to be valued for being the site of nationalist struggles to obtain Palestinian statehood, non-camp-based urban Palestinians have come to see UNRWA-run refugee camps as sites that foster ‘dependency and destitution’. In contrast, leaving the camp behind and finding a home in a neighbourhood in Amman is seen as a sign of personal drive and upward mobility. With reference to a nostalgic framing of a revolutionary past that no longer exists, Pérez carefully deflects the idea that there is truth in the contemporary views of camp and city as opposed sites of exile. Instead, the boundaries around both camp and city are quite blurry, and the lived realities do not match the discursive differences.

The desire to create a home in the context of repeated displacement is described by Nell Gabiam in her ethnographic account of the refugee-led Al Nur Centre in Istanbul, Turkey. In ‘Recurring Displacement, Homemaking and

Solidarity amongst Syrian and Palestinian Syrian Refugees in Turkey', Gabiam introduces us to Khaled, the Centre's director, who had been displaced from the Palestinian Yarmuk refugee camp near Damascus by the war in Syria. Al Nur was initiated through his personal efforts to recreate a familiar space where friends and acquaintances could congregate and support each other. While some language and training programmes are offered, the Centre has become a place where persons displaced from Syria can come to share a simple meal, meet friends and exchange news. The physical and emotional comfort experienced at Al Nur stands in contrast to Turkish and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are seen as 'more formal, revolving around reports, numbers, and statistics', or, as one volunteer described the Centre, 'it's not a bunch of foreigners handing out things to refugees'. While the Syrian and Palestinian Syrians who frequent Al Nur call it 'home', they also understand that this is only a temporary refuge. During the time of Gabiam's fieldwork, many Palestinian Syrians had left Turkey to find permanent residence in Europe. Yet, Al Nur was a place that helped these refugees obtain scholarships, language skills and job skills which helped them go off in search of a new life elsewhere. For some, however, moving on meant moving back. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach Europe legally and with the help of smugglers, one of Gabiam's Palestinian Syrian interlocutors, Talal, chose to return to Damascus, because he preferred a life of dignity to one of dependency. In this sense, Gabiam's scholarship highlights Palestinian Syrian refugees' ongoing agency, movement and complex decision-making, as they are forced to grapple with repeated states of displacement.

In "Life Is Tight Here": Displacement and Desire amongst Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan', Morgen A. Chalmiers illustrates the challenges of recent displacement amongst Syrian mothers as they try to build and care for their families in Jordan. Giving birth and raising children in less than adequate housing provides endless sources of anxiety and stress. Yet despite experiencing tight living quarters, lack of privacy, limited financial resources and unaffordable healthcare, Syrian women still express strong 'child desire' (Inhorn 1996) and hopes for the future for their children. In her article, Chalmiers presents three refugee women in various states of displacement with very different reproductive desires. All three tell of experiences of financial and spatial constraints, but they make different reproductive decisions. As Chalmiers carefully explains, the question of what refugees might want is often subsumed under the perspective of what humanitarian agencies believe they need. The assumption of Western agencies is, for the most part, that refugee women need birth control to curb their reproductive desires. The conception of refugees as predominantly persons who need educating or 'civilising' can also be replicated in anthropological studies of refugees within humanitarian aid contexts, as Chalmiers critically notes. In order to appreciate nuanced personal responses to 'life without the promise of stability' (Tsing 2019), Chalmiers argues that

anthropologists must critically examine their own theoretical frameworks for implicit or explicit biases. Instead of asking refugees only about what it is that they need, anthropologists must pay attention to what refugees want in order to allow refugees' subjectivities as 'desiring subjects' to be heard.

Starting with a cogent critique of the 'crisis discourse' that characterises much of the refugee reporting we see in popular media, as well as 'ambulance-chasing' works of anthropologists who solidify it, Zareena Grewal sets the stage for a more critical anthropological engagement with refugee solidarity. In 'The Obligation Is the Point: "Refugee 2 Refugee" of Care and Solidarity in Greece', Grewal emphasises that refugees adapt to a lack of resources and government aid through self-help initiatives – acts of 'Refugee 2 Refugee' solidarity – that are informed by a broad array of religious and secular values and beliefs. When speaking with individuals at refugee-run organisations, such as Jafra-Athens, United Afghan Community in Greece, and City Plaza Initiative in Solidarity to Economic and Political Refugees, Grewal found refugees engaging with Marxist anti-capitalist, Islamic and Palestinian-liberationist tropes simultaneously. Such mobilisations, Grewal argues, represent activist responses to being marginalised, racialised and discarded by governmental or official humanitarian institutions that have mandates to protect them. Engaged in ongoing, long-term 'patchwork ethnography' with Middle Eastern Muslim refugees who move to and from Greece, Grewal is able to gather compelling testimony of refugees engaging in individual acts of solidarity, as well as with larger solidaritarian networks that help refugees more generally. For instance, documenting unexpected experiences of deep friendship between refugees across ethnicity, language and gender, Grewal is able to illustrate the strong sense of mutual obligation that sustains refugees amidst harrowing experiences in (intentionally) under-resourced refugee camps in Greece. Rather than surrendering to 'carceral humanitarianism', Grewal shows how these refugees actively challenge racism, xenophobia, disaster capitalism and state violence, and fight for a better world for all.

In the final article, 'Enacting Citizenship: A Case Study of a Syrian Refugee Protest in Germany', Lucia Volk similarly engages with refugees who challenge existing rules and norms and actively push for the implementation of rights afforded to non-citizens. The case of a protest camp planned and run by Syrian refugees with the help of local refugee activists in Dortmund, Germany, in the summer of 2015, proves that permanent residency rights can be won through sustained and joint public activism. Paying careful attention to local political contexts and the competition between politicians on federal, state and local levels, the protesters were able to plead that asylum petitions should be processed more quickly and that even rejected asylum cases should be given a second review. Receiving important logistical and financial support from members of Refugees Welcome Dortmund and other pro-refugee groups and individuals, and, crucially, under around-the-clock police protection against

neo-Nazi attacks, Syrian refugees stayed in the public eye for 53 days, demanding that employees in Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees follow their mandate to adjudicate asylum petitions promptly. The protest action occurred prior to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's declaration 'Wir schaffen das!' ['We can manage!'] that was meant to encourage German citizens to extend their welcome to incoming refugees. In August 2015, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees suspended an important EU law that requires each refugee to be processed in the first EU country of entry. With that legal turn, large numbers of Syrian refugees who had traversed Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece or Italy were able to receive asylum in Germany. In Dortmund, protesting Syrian refugees participated in the ongoing national debates over the need for better (implementation of) German asylum legislation, enacting citizenship without legally possessing it.

As this special issues shows, Middle Eastern refugees who find themselves in varying states of displacement respond in a number of ways, utilising the resources and skill sets available to them. They strive to create places where they and their families can feel safe, and they confront the limitations that political and legal regimes place upon them. Refugees experience different kinds of constraints and possibilities based on the geographies of their exile, and the ways in which these constraints and possibilities are discursively and pragmatically reinforced in everyday encounters. Although refugees face legal limbo, limited resources and state surveillance, they seek nonetheless to create feelings of home that permit them to live dignified lives while affording them future opportunities. Indeed, life in exile is not without desire, nor without the will to create new forms of mutual aid and permanent resettlement.

As seen throughout the articles in this special issue, Middle Eastern refugees are demanding their rights and making their voices heard. As anthropologists of the Middle East who are studying states of displacement, all of the authors in this special issue believe in the importance of presenting refugees' voices to a larger audience, thereby allowing Middle Eastern refugees to speak about and for themselves.

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