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► **To cite this version:**

Mohamed Kamel Dorai. The meaning of homeland for the Palestinian diaspora : revival and transformation. Al-Ali, Nadjé Sadig ; Koser, Khalid. New approaches to migration ? : transnational communities and the transformation of home, Routledge, pp.87-95, 2002. halshs-00291750

**HAL Id: halshs-00291750**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00291750>**

Submitted on 24 Sep 2013

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# **The meaning of homeland for the Palestinian diaspora**

## **Revival and transformation**

*Mohamed Kamel Dorai*

Lost partially in 1948, and completely in 1967, the idea of a homeland continues to live in Palestinian social practices and through the construction of a diasporic territory - a symbolic substitute for the lost homeland. This chapter aims to analyse the mechanisms by which the homeland has been perpetuated in exile, and focuses in particular on Palestinian refugee camps and settlements. It shows how a refugee community can partially transform itself into a transnational community, and examines what role the transformation of home plays in this process.

After fifty years of exile, Palestinian refugees continue to claim their right to return to their country of origin. 'Durable' solutions - traditionally repatriation, local integration or third-country resettlement - have been elusive for these refugees. Return has been impossible in the absence of a homeland, those in Lebanon in particular have faced obstacles to settling permanently, and only the elite have been able to take advantage of resettling in a third country, usually in the capitals of the Arab world or Europe or North America. During fifty years of exile, relationships between the expatriated Palestinian refugee communities and their homeland have evolved significantly. This process has accelerated during the protracted Peace Process.

The transformation of the homeland can lead to significant changes in the diaspora-homeland relationship. After the total loss of the Palestinian territory in 1967, the relationships between Palestinians in the diaspora and their homeland became mainly symbolic. The political and economic networks of the diaspora have been centred on countries of exile such as Jordan and Lebanon. However, after the Oslo Agreements and the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) on some parts of the Palestinian territory, parts of the diaspora have begun concretely to refocus their attention on the homeland.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I examine the emergence of a Palestinian transnational community, resulting in part from the transformation of Palestine following the Oslo Agreements. Second, I analyse the role of the homeland in the construction of transnational migratory networks. Finally, the role of these networks in the formation of a Palestinian identity in exile is explored. This chapter is primarily based on interviews with refugees as well as observation during fieldwork trips in Lebanon, Jordan and Sweden.

### **The Palestinian diaspora: towards the emergence of a transnational community?**

The transformation - and loss - of their homeland in stages between 1948 and 1967 led among the Palestinians to the evolution of a range of transnational actors and networks. At an informal level, contacts were maintained between Palestinian refugees and Palestinians living inside the Occupied Territories, particularly between Jordan and the West Bank. More formally, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) structured itself in exile and evolved a strong political and associative movement that continues to federate the dispersed communities (Picaudou, 1989; Kimmerling and Migdal, 1994). And private organizations such as the Badil Centre in Bethlehem, Al Awda and the Council for Palestinian Restitution

and Repatriation (CPRR) in the United States also continue to assist refugees and to disseminate information internationally.

The 'transformation' of the Palestinian homeland has taken a new direction since the beginning of the Peace Process, which started with the signature of the Declaration of Principle (Oslo 1), in 1993. The Gaza-Jericho Agreement, signed in 1994, enabled the partial return to Palestinian leadership of the West Bank and Gaza. The Oslo II Agreement, signed in 1995, placed under Palestinian authority more than thirty administrative functions in these areas, including health, taxation, education, industry, justice and the police. In January 1996, a Palestinian legislative council (PNA) was elected, so that two structures now co-exist to govern the Palestinian people - the PNA in Palestine and the PLO in the diaspora.

It is important to stress that the political evolution of Palestine has not yet resulted in the creation of a full Palestinian state. The transformation of the homeland has only been partial, and its impact on the diaspora has similarly only been partial. It has had a particular impact on the Palestinian elite, who generally hold European or North American passports, and have been able to travel back and forth to Israel / Palestine on an increasingly regular basis. What is suggested in this section is that from within the united Palestinian diaspora there is emerging a new transnational community, focused on the commercial activities of the elite.

### ***The emergence of a transnational community***

Gabriel Sheffer (1993) identifies three main criteria to define a diaspora. One is a common ethnic identity, a second is internal organization and the third is a significant level of contact with the homeland. According to Portes *et al.* (1999), the central difference between diasporas and transnational communities lies in the nature of their relationship with the homeland. For the former, the relationship is normally symbolic; for the latter they are real. Before the beginning of the transformation of their homeland under the peace process, the Palestinians' only relationship abroad with their homeland was symbolic. However, for certain elements of this diaspora - particularly the elite - contact has now become real and physical once more. They represent an emerging transnational community.

Following the typology elaborated by Portes *et al.* (1999), several constitutive elements of transnational communities are now beginning to be found in the Palestinian case. In the economic realm, there has been the formation of 'small businesses created by returned immigrants in their home country' (*ibid.*: 222). For Palestinians 'home country' might be taken to include both Palestine and neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan) from which many subsequently departed for Europe and North America and in which they are now investing once more. In many cases Palestinians have not physically returned; they are investing and managing their businesses from abroad. An example of a transnational business on a much larger scale is proved by the Shuman family that founded the Arab Bank - a top-ranking bank in the Middle East with branches all over the world. Sari Hanafi (1997) provides other examples of transnational Palestinian entrepreneurs in the United States, Canada and Egypt. The economic development of the town of Ramallah in the West Bank has also largely been a result of investment by Palestinians overseas.

These transnational activities arguably take place from a privileged position. They reflect Palestinian social organization prior to 1948. While most Palestinians were displaced locally, the elite migrated to the capital cities of the Arab world and Europe and North America. By the 1960s many had acquired citizenship in these host countries, which generally has provided

them both freedom to migrate and a source of international security. Sari Hanafi (1997) has observed how the Palestinian entrepreneurs in Canada shuttle back and forth between Canada and the Gulf pursuing business opportunities, while opting to live permanently in Canada for an enhanced standard of living.

The Palestinian elite have therefore taken on many of the characteristics of a transnational community. They have dual citizenship and live and work between at least two countries. Transnationalism for them minimizes the risks related to war, terrorism and the blockading of Palestinian territories by Israel, while maximizing their benefits in the economic, legal and educational spheres.

The political and economic significance of the Palestinian elite clearly outweighs its numerical significance. It is worth observing, however, that the creation of a Palestinian state and the normalization of relations between Israel and its Arab neighbours may enable a larger proportion of Palestinians to 'become' transnationals. It would allow them to establish effective relationships with their homeland, to engage in regular visits and investments, and would mean that they would not necessarily have to leave their actual place of residence to enjoy these rights.

### **Migratory networks and identity: reconstruction of homeland solidarity**

For the time being, however, these transformations in the homeland have yet to take place, and transnationalism, at least at a more commercial scale, has yet to filter down beyond the Palestinian elite. At the same time, a different type of transnationality characterizes many other Palestinians, particularly those living in refugee camps and settlements, in the form of migratory networks. Gradual changes in the homeland have yet to impact on these networks. A point to make straight away, therefore, is that while transformations at home can impact on certain members of a transnational community, they can leave others largely untouched.

The Palestinian diaspora is geographically dispersed - in countries that neighbour Israel / Palestine, across the Arab world and also in Europe and North America. Studying the networks that have evolved between these geographical locations highlights the significance of family and village organizations, inherited from the social organization of Palestine prior to 1948, and rebuilt in exile. Where once society was organized locally, around a village, today it is organized transnationally, between different countries.

### ***The evolution of transnational migratory networks***

While the Palestinian elite can move relatively freely, on the basis of dual nationality and passports issued in Europe and North America, the movement of most Palestinians is much more severely restricted. Still they move, and their movement is facilitated through transnational migratory networks. In what approximates to a migration system (Gurak and Caces, 1992), friends and family overseas send back information and money, to assist Palestinians to migrate from refugee camps in countries such as Lebanon. The social links on which these migratory networks are founded are characterized by strong interpersonal transactions, based on common interests, obligations, understanding and memories. They are especially found within restricted communities, such as the family.

An example of the importance of social networks in facilitating migration is provided in this excerpt from an interview with Jaber<sup>1</sup>, a Palestinian from Al Buss camp:

I chose Berlin because obtaining refugee status there is easy. Also, it was easy to find work ... illegal work of course. Many people from my village of origin in Palestine have restaurants or work in the building industry in Berlin. We all help each other when in need. When I arrived, I stayed for three months at my brother's place before finding a flat. They found me work at one of their friends' restaurants, I washed the dishes. Now I work legally on a building site. The owner is an Arab. I am a painter.

While Palestinians who arrived in the industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s were usually granted refugee status, it is now rarely granted to Palestinians. In addition, formal routes for labour migration have largely closed. As a result, Palestinians are often forced to migrate clandestinely - and this increases their need for information and money from transnational social networks.

Muhammad, a young Palestinian who had since returned to the Al Buss camp, explains:

I left for London to work, one earns more money there than here. I chose London because my brother is already there, he knew people from the same village as us who helped him settle down and find a job. It is easier to immigrate when one knows people. In my case, they sent me money to travel, it costs a lot to leave clandestinely from here, about \$5,000; when one has relatives in the host country to help, it is easier.

It is not only restrictions in Europe that oblige Palestinians to draw on the resources of transnational networks. Their situation in Lebanon is also an important driving factor. Nearly 150,000 Palestinian refugees arrived in Lebanon in 1948, within just a few months. They mostly come from north Palestine. About 90 per cent of them are Sunni Muslims, and their arrival disturbed the sectarian balance upon which the Lebanese political system had depended. Since they first arrived, Palestinians have faced difficulties with the Lebanese authorities. The civil war in Lebanon (1975- 1991) and the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982 increased the gap between the two peoples. Palestinians face legal discrimination and have no political or social rights. For example, more than fifty professions are prohibited for the Palestinians. They also face restrictions on travel abroad. They need a visa to leave and to enter Lebanon. Many do not have passports - they have only been issued a travel document by the Lebanese authorities - and as a result many other countries refuse to give them visas, or even to let them transit their territories.

Abu Taraq, who migrated to Germany with his family in 1994, explains his motivations:

In Lebanon, we do not have any rights, to work, to education, nor to health. What is the future for my children? The Oslo Agreements have forgotten us... At least in Europe they respect us as human beings; we have the same rights as everybody else. My children can get an education, they can work, build a future.

What is striking about all of the above excerpts is that they are from interviews with men. Rather than reflecting any methodological bias, this is a reflection of the fact that migration tends to be dominated by young males. Indeed their migration has created a significant sex

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<sup>1</sup> All of the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

imbalance in the refugee camps. Young women are finding it harder and harder to marry, and this can make their status and security even more precarious. On the whole women have little access to transnational resources, even though they play the major role in maintaining social practices. Again, the point to emphasize is that transnationalism is by no means a universal phenomenon.

Besides providing a motivation for emigration, the exclusion of Palestinians in Lebanon has also reinforced their ethnic identity. This is reminiscent of what Portes (1999) labels 'reactive ethnicity', which he explains can be an important underlying cause for the maintenance of transnational identities. The last part of this chapter focuses on the process of identity building among Palestinians, and shows how they have used the homeland as a resource in that process.

### **Homeland as a resource for Palestinian identity**

In order to maintain their ethnic identity, the scattered Palestinian people have needed to build common identity references around the lost homeland and the exodus that created the diaspora. These references take different forms. For 'rank-and-file' Palestinians ethnic identity is more important than for the elite. Palestinian ethnic identity is based primarily on two elements: the village of origin and family networks.

The village is a privileged place of memory for the Palestinians because it represents the very expression of their Arabic Palestinian culture and identity. Family and group links were very strong there. This reference point for identity has its roots in Palestinian history when religious and political power was centred on the Palestinian village<sup>2</sup>. Colonization by the Ottomans, then the Zionists and British, progressively deterritorialized the Palestinian people. The village of origin came to symbolize the lost territory and became a central part of the diasporic consciousness.

### ***Memory in exile***

In exile, camps have replaced villages:

The camp thus continues to fulfill the function formerly performed by the village, namely the maintenance of a moral balance of the individuals who make it up, but on a level of organization and a demographic scale of a higher order, that of the Palestinian national identity.

(Ghazzawi, 1989: 37)

Oum Fahd, a refugee in the Rashidiyyeh camp, explains:

Here, we all gathered according to our village of origin in Palestine, otherwise how would we have survived here, far from home? We continue to perpetuate our Palestinian traditions, so that the younger generations know how things were prior to 1948 - they know everything about Palestine, even though they never saw it.

It is always astonishing to hear children of the third exiled generation name the village of their grandparents when asked where they come from. Their answers are all the more astonishing

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<sup>2</sup> The head of the village as well as the imam of the mosque were elected with the agreement of the population of the village (Ghazzawi, 1989: 22).

given that most of the villages were completely destroyed long ago, and exist nowhere but in the memories of the refugees<sup>3</sup>. In the camps photographs, and even small gardens, evoke memories of villages in Palestine. Berque (1990: 79) observes that 'the speeches on the landscape are often metaphorical speeches on the national identity, and blossom when the latter seeks to be affirmed'.

Special attention must be given to the oral history of the exodus that has been transmitted from one generation to the next, and acts as a true account of the *nekba* (catastrophe). In a way oral history also transmits the land, the Palestinian landscape. Not only can children name villages, but also they can even describe them too. Farid, a young Palestinian from Borj Shamali camp, told us:

My parents and my grand parents told me so much about Palestine and our village that I'll be able to find my way the day we go back to Palestine.

Oral history serves as an identity reservoir, where the images of the past are read again and again and idealized in the light of the difficult circumstances in which many Palestinians currently live. It is primarily produced within families.

### ***Family memory: core of the Palestinian village society***

Family memories are transmitted orally through narrations of the exodus and recalling a past life. Life in the camps is thus justified by the history of the exodus and the camps therefore assume a new meaning for their inhabitants. The camps have become more simply than somewhere to survive, they also symbolize the exodus. It is as if Palestinians brought with them a piece of their land and deposited it in the camps, thus recreating a part of Palestine. There is a relationship between memory and territory. This is particularly true for those who live in camps and settlements. The Palestinian bourgeoisie, who live outside camps or in Arabic cities or in the West, do not share the same attachment to the place where they live.

In a more literal sense, the camps often spatially recall settlement patterns in Palestine, as refugees have tended to settle according to their village or area of origin. Different parts of the refugee camps often bear the names of the villages of origin of the refugees in Palestine. Abu Yasser, an old Palestinian refugee who lives in a settlement, explains how he settled in Lebanon:

When I arrived in Lebanon, I did not come directly here. I was in a Red Cross camp. I only came here when I knew that my family was here. Up to the 1960s, people of our village came to settle here, we were almost all here. It was the best way not to lose our culture, it made it easier for us to adapt here, we helped each other to build houses, to find work and we thought that it would be easier to return to Palestine if we stuck together.

The geography of Palestine is thus to some extent reformed in exile. Insisting on organizing their own settlement patterns was one way that Palestinians found to maintain their identity in the face of bureaucratic obstacles. An old refugee, Abu Ziyad, from Borj Shemali told us:

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<sup>3</sup> Of the 475 Palestinian villages which existed before 1948, 385 were destroyed by the Israeli Army.

They tried to settle us far from here, but we didn't want to go, we resisted. So we settled here without any authorization. We built our houses on our own, without any help. We wanted to be together and to settle close to our homeland in order to always be able to go home quickly, and not forget Palestine.

The refugee camps have simultaneously become a place to recall the homeland (by safeguarding the old social order, and by the dissemination of memories and Palestinian images) and a place to wait to return home. They can be understood as memory areas, where the permanence of the homeland is registered in everyday life. Palestinians have recreated, in the space of the refugee camps, a temporal continuity. They 'feel at home'.

## **Conclusion**

This short chapter begins the part of this book that is concerned with the implications for 'transnational communities' of transformations in their homeland. The Palestinian homeland has begun to transform in recent years, as a result of the Peace Process in the Middle East, and its transformations have been suggested to have impacted differently on different parts of the large Palestinian diaspora. There are indications, for example, that they have engendered the evolution among the Palestinian elite of a transnational community, which is increasingly investing in the 'new' homeland.

In contrast, the transformations appear so far to have had less of an impact on the majority of Palestinians, and especially those living in Lebanon. A form of transnationalism also characterizes them - many have transnational social networks that they mobilize for migration, and even more maintain a transnational identity in refugee camps. Yet these networks and identities have been largely unaffected by ongoing changes in Palestine. Instead they draw on an idealized version of the homeland, and bear the imprints of pre-1948 Palestine. Arguably, the elite had the resources to respond to changes at home, while for the majority maintaining a crystallized view of Palestine has become a central survival strategy.

The key conclusion is that transformations at home have had a differential impact on the diaspora, and in this way the Palestinian case study provides some broader insights into the process of transnationalism. First, it is a differentiated process. This chapter has highlighted differences not just between the elite and the 'rank and file', but also between the genders and between the young and old. Significantly in the case of the Palestinians, these differences do not appear to have undermined their unity or community. Second, the case study reveals how transnationalism can be - but is not always - dynamic. It has evolved within the elite in response to changes at home, while it has remained virtually unchanged among the majority. Finally, and here there are echoes of the conclusions made by Khalid Koser later in this volume, this case study has shown how refugees can 'become' transnational. In different ways, both the Palestinian elite and the rank and file have evolved transnational networks, activities and identities. For them, transnationalism has provided an alternative 'durable' solution. The Palestinian refugees have 'transformed' into a transnational community, and what remains to be seen is how further changes in Palestine will impact on that community.

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