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Elif Aksaz and Jean-François Pérouse (ed.)

## **“Guests and Aliens”: Re-Configuring New Mobilities in the Eastern Mediterranean After 2011 - with a special focus on Syrian refugees**

Institut français d'études anatoliennes

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# **The Role of Transnational Networks and Cross-border Circulation in Palestinian Migration in a Conflict Situation**

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# *The Role of Transnational Networks and Cross-border Circulation in Palestinian Migration in a Conflict Situation*

Kamel Dorai

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- 1 The Syrian conflict has profound consequences for the Palestinian population in Syria. Palestinians in Syria were enjoying access to education and to the labour market without particular discrimination before 2011. The conflict, which began in 2011, rejected the Palestinians in Syria to their stateless status and forced more than 70,000 of them to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, like the Palestinians from Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The current Syrian conflict is part of a longer regional history, which has seen the involvement of refugees, often as victims, sometimes as protagonists, in the different conflicts of the post-1945 Middle East.
- 2 While studying Palestinian migration and its impacts, this contribution discusses the temporality structuring migration flows and thereby, it questions the dichotomy traditionally established between “forced” and “voluntary” migration. Forced migrations have usually been described as “spontaneous” migrations and analysed in terms of political and security constraints. However, even refugee movements resulting from conflicts are often fashioned by previous migration flows and correlated network structures that are re-mobilized during the humanitarian crisis.
- 3 The Syrian conflict has caused the forced displacement of many refugees. In November 2014, UNRWA estimated the total number of Palestinian refugees displaced inside Syria at just over 250,000 (half of the total registered in Syria), a large part originating from the Yarmouk camp in Damascus. About 12% of registered refugees have left the country to go mainly to Lebanon (50,000), Jordan (6,000) and Egypt (9,000). About 250,000 are still in Syria, in safer places, but without any guarantee on the long term.
- 4 According to figures published by UNRWA in October 2014, 42,000 Palestinians from Syria have entered Lebanon since the beginning of the crisis. These figures should be taken with caution, as they are not the result of a census on the presence of Palestinian refugees

from Syria in Lebanon. As long as the border was not closed for them, many Palestinians were going back and forth between Lebanon and Syria, depending on the evolution of the situation in the camps and / or cities of habitual residence in Syria. Some families are *de facto* divided between the two countries by the crisis. Some Palestinians, whose family members resides permanently in Lebanon, find asylum with relatives, some outside the camps, and are not supported by UNRWA.

- 5 This article is based on my research on the movement of Palestinians refugees since the mid-1990s as well as a field study carried out in December 2013 in South Lebanon, which shows strong relationships between secondary migration and other forms of international migration of Palestinians, and their local effects in Lebanon.

## The role of kinship networks in the reception of refugees

- 6 The protracted presence of Palestinians in Lebanon has an impact both on the geographical location of the recently arrived refugees, as well as the forms of local solidarity that developed. The Diaspora networks, sometimes structured since the Palestinian exodus in 1948, can play a crucial role when they are reactivated during a crisis period. This role will be examined through two case studies.

### Sixty-five years of exile: Diaspora and cross-border mobility

- 7 The family of M. settled in Tyre since the early 1950s. Like many families, the exodus of 1948 led to the separation of three sisters, one is settled in Tyre (Lebanon), a second in Aleppo (Syria) and a third in Amman (Jordan). Family relationships between the sisters settled in Lebanon and Syria are strong, materialized by frequent visits in both countries of settlement. The second generation, born in exile, continues and strengthens these ties through marriage. Two girls born in Syria married their cousins in Lebanon, and a daughter born in Lebanon married a cousin in Syria. These matrimonial exchanges strengthened connections between the two branches of the family in the 1990s and early 2000s.
- 8 Meanwhile, family members, sometimes more distant, came to southern Lebanon to work on a seasonal basis, as did the Syrian workers at this period. Links are thus constituted in the long term, with an intergenerational dimension. These migrations, for marital or economic reason, helped to create an area of dense and structured cross-border circulation. The latter has been mobilized with the outbreak of the Syrian crisis.
- 9 Since 2012, members of the family from Syria began to find temporary asylum in Tyre, accommodated by their relatives. Some were going back and forth according to the changing security situation in Syria. As they have close relatives in Lebanon, obtaining a visa – until recent restrictions were established – was not very difficult. Circulation of Palestinian refugees from Syria was thus facilitated by the establishment of a mobility system based on family networks. Rather than a constraint, dispersal became a resource in a period of conflict.
- 10 This network also facilitates accommodation and access to economic opportunities. Access to local resources is made easier and bridges are created among members of the family living in third countries. Some members of the family try self-resettlement abroad

with the help of kinship networks in countries like Sweden, Germany or the United States of America.

### Migration to third countries and transnational solidarity networks

- 11 A family that I met in December 2013 in the Palestinian informal settlement of Bourgholiyeh, north of the city of Tyre, had a different itinerary. They did not have many relations with their relatives in Lebanon before the Syrian uprising. They were living in the Babila neighbourhood in the southern suburbs of Damascus. The family was forced to flee because of the fighting and destruction that hit the area. The husband, who worked as a labourer in the public sector, was afraid at first to leave Syria because he did not want to be considered as belonging to the opposition. All civil servants in Syria, whether holding Syrian or Palestinian citizenship, must obtain prior permission to leave Syrian territory to go abroad. Therefore, they first moved inside Syrian territory to escape the fighting, hoping that the situation would improve. With the increase of combats in this area between the Syrian government troops and the opposition, as well as the stigmatization of Palestinians accused by the regime of supporting the armed opposition, he decided to send his wife and children to Lebanon and then try to join them.
- 12 His choice fell on Lebanon because he has family that lives in the Palestinian informal settlement of Bourgholiyeh. Moreover, when he left Syria, the other countries in the region had already closed their doors to Palestinian refugees. He entered Lebanon legally with his family, but soon found himself unable to renew his residence visa, and found himself in an illegal situation as many Palestinians from Syria. He contacted his relatives who asked him to come and live with them. His family thus initially shared housing with their Palestinian relatives. Subsequently, they offered them to settle on the top floor of a building under construction in the same area. While construction has been banned for a long time in informal settlements by the Lebanese authorities, a temporary relaxation of controls a few years ago allowed many Palestinian families to add floors to existing buildings.
- 13 These settlement areas in southern Lebanon had a very high emigration rates during the 1980s and 1990s. These emigrant families who kept strong ties with their places of origin have contributed very significantly to the development of infrastructures and new buildings in these informal settlements, primarily for two reasons:
1. To improve the living conditions of their relatives who stayed in Lebanon and
  2. To have a house in which they can come during the summer vacations or during other holidays.
- 14 These vacant housing units are used today since the arrival of Palestinian refugees from Syria. Complementarity networks are developing between the different Palestinian groups in exile. These new types of assistance connect Palestinian refugees who remained in Lebanon, those located in third countries and new refugees from Syria recently arrived. This family settled in the Palestinian informal settlement on the top floor of a building under construction. Funds were then gathered from relatives in Europe and the Gulf countries to purchase windows, the front door, and the installation of a kitchen. Other families are in very different situations. Inside one refugee group, some can benefit from a diasporic connexion that helps them circumvent, even partially, many difficulties, while others remain isolated facing trouble. The absence of a legal framework concerning Palestinian refugees, who are forced to leave their country of residence, as well as the

political treatment of Palestinian refugees by different states in the region, highlights the problem of secondary migration during conflict.

- 15 The Palestinian case, despite its specificities, raises serious questions regarding the refugee status and secondary mobility. The refugee status of the Palestinians is linked to their country of residence. When they leave their country of residence, they do not fall under the mandate of the UNHCR and can only access limited humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA. Palestinian refugees tend to be transformed in asylum seekers by conflicts, and most of the time considered as illegal migrants in their country of temporary residence. As they are stateless, they cannot even seek the protection of their country of origin.
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## INDEX

**Keywords:** statelessness, Palestinian refugees in Syria, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

**Geographical index:** Yarmouk camp

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