



# **National Identities and Identity Documents in between Wars: Palestinians of Syria along Multiple Displacements**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the sense of “otherness” between refugees and the host society has been a prerogative of the Palestinian exile, the intensity of this distancing process varies according to the country of exile. This paper will study the consequences of the socio-political events and dispositions over Palestinian refugees from Syria fleeing the current civil war in order to find a sanctuary in the neighbouring Lebanon. The core of the work inquires how a previous experience of displacement serves as a social and cultural resource and questions the current Palestinian presence in the Middle East. Moving from these interrogatives, I tried to shed a light over the way the concept of “Palestine” seems to act as a catalyst for the individuals in determining how their own identity of “double refugees” is shifting nowadays. I argue that the current emigrations towards Europe constitute a pattern in redefining assumption concerning Palestinian refugees’ relations with national memory and collective spaces. Trying to connect refugees’ narratives around national identity and identity documents, I will show how the current international refugee legal system is structurally inappropriate to effectively deal with stateless persons who currently find themselves once more on the way.

**Keywords:** Migration, Syria, Palestine, Refugees, Borders, Identity

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# Savaşlar Arasında Ulusal Kimlik ve Kimlik Belgeleri: Suriye’deki Filistinlilerin Göç Hikayeleri

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## Öz

Filistinli Mülteciler ve ev sahibi toplum arasındaki “ötekilik” duygusu, her ne kadar Filistin sürgünü için ayrıcalıklı bir durum olsa da iki grup arasındaki uzaklaşma mesafesinin yoğunluğu ülkeden ülkeye değişmektedir. Bu makale, Suriye’den iç savaşın etkisiyle uzaklaştırılan Filistinli mültecilerin komşu ülke Lübnan’da sığınma yeri taleplerini ve sosyo-politik olayların sonuçlarını incelemektedir. Çalışmanın özü esasen yerinden olma deneyiminin sosyo-kültürel kaynaklarını inceleyip Ortadoğu’daki mevcut Filistin varlığını sorgulamaktadır. Bu sorgulardan hareketle, “çift mülteci” kimliğinin günümüzde nasıl değiştiğini belirlemek adına “Filistin” kavramının bireylere karşı nasıl katalizör görevi gördüğüne ışık tutulacaktır. Bu çalışma ise Avrupa’ya doğru göçlerin, Filistinli mültecilerin ulusal bellek ve kolektif alanlarla ilişkileri hakkındaki varsayımını yeniden tanımlamada bir model oluşturduğunu iddia etmektedir. Mülteci anlatılarını ulusal kimlik ve kimlik belgeleri etrafında birleştirerek mevcut uluslararası hukuk sisteminin vatansız kalmış mültecilerin sorunlarını çözme noktasında etkili olmadığı ve yapısal düzenlemeye gitmesi gerektiği savunulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göç, Suriye, Filistin, Mülteciler, Sınırlar, Kimlik

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*“The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any one of those many modern barriers where identities are checked and verified. What happens to Palestinians at these crossing points brings home to them how much they share in common as people”.*

*(Khalidi, 1997: 1)*

## **1. Introduction**

Analyses and debates on the reconfiguration of rights, democracy, social justice and dignity in the Middle East “suffer from a chronic methodological nationalism, which perpetuates the idea that people seek and fight for rights and self-determination solely in their national territory, seen as the natural context for achieving a full social personhood”.<sup>1</sup> Despite quite recent enthusiasm for the development of a “global law without the state” emphasised during the last decades, the States still remain the distributors and guarantors of rights. In this realm, the individual who is stateless becomes a non-person, “a body that can be moved around by armies and police, customs officers and refugee agencies”.<sup>2</sup> While this statement may apply to several past and contingent situations, we should consider how forced population movements have extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes and involve people who find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments.<sup>3</sup>

Even within the current debate following the Arab Uprisings, refugees regularly find themselves excluded and silenced, if not represented as unintended and desperate victims in need for material support. This paper collocates within the contemporary debate emerging in the aftermath of the current displacements experienced by millions of people fleeing the war-torn Syria. Within this recently expanded framework, I will shed a light on the peculiar migrating trajectories experienced by Palestinian refugees

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<sup>1</sup> Ruba Salih . From Bare Lives to Political Agents: Palestinian Refugees as Avant-garde. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, (2013), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Seyla Benhabib . & Robert Post. Another cosmopolitanism. *The Berkeley Tanner lectures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (2008), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Liisa H. Malkki, *Refugees and Exile: From Refugees Studies to the National Order of Things*, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (1995), Vol. 24, pp. 495-523.

fleeing Syrian war and recently finding a sanctuary in the neighbouring countries.

With media mainly focusing on political and sectarian rifts dominating the Syrian scenario, national communities such as Palestinian refugees have turned into hyper-visible in the media solely in the aftermath of the government siege and almost complete depopulation of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk.<sup>4</sup> Just recently, Al-Hardan and Gabiam have recently published two monographs hinging on this community.<sup>5</sup> While the former focuses on significances the *Nakba*<sup>6</sup> among the Palestinians in Syria, the latter expounds on the humanitarian situation of the camps before and during the current conflict. Nevertheless, no exhaustive work has rather been published about the trajectories experienced by the Palestinians fleeing Syria and the meanings associated with the current multiple displacements around the neighbouring countries.

With the aim to contribute to the development of this recent argument, this paper will shed a light on the consequences of the socio-political events and dispositions over Palestinian refugees from Syria around the region. Indeed, in respect with Syrian citizens, the Palestinians of Syria have fled the country carrying a previous burden of a “general condition of homelessness”<sup>7</sup> after the 1948-expulsion from Palestine. While most of the past researches investigated forms of commitment and belonging between homeland and the current place of residence, Palestinians experienced several transnational discourses and practices between various so-called Host States. During the last decades, Palestinians have endured a progressive reconfiguration of spaces in the region in the aftermath of several displace-

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<sup>4</sup> Nell Gabiam & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh E, *Palestinians and the Arab Uprisings: political activism and narratives of home, homeland, and home-camp*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Anaheed Al-Hardan, *Palestinians of Syria: Memories of a Shattered Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, (2016). Gabiam, (2016), *The politics of Suffering. Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps*. Indiana University Press Griffiths, (2001).

<sup>6</sup> It is the Arabic term meaning “The catastrophe”, that refers to the Palestinians’ collective memory for the military collapse in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and the consequent exile of around 700.000 Palestinians around the region. About the issue, Nasim, Ahmad (2012) *Understanding The Nakba. An Insight Into The Plight Of Palestinians*. Palestinian Return Centre

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims*, in *Social Text* No.1, Duke University Press. (1979).

ments occurred in several countries, such as Kuwait in 1991, Libya in 1996 and Iraq in 2003.<sup>8</sup> Despite the sense of “otherness” between refugees and the host society has been a prerogative of the Palestinian exile, the intensity of this distancing process varies according to the country of exile.

Therefore, the core of my work inquires how the current Palestinians’ migration from Syria contributes to reconsider the issue of national attachment and collective belonging. Focusing on the overlapping trajectories currently emerging the Palestinian camps around Lebanon, I will expound on how the specificity of the place of exile determines the intensity of “distantiation” from the host country and contributes to practices of invisibility towards national fellows sharing the national origin but confined for decades in different national contexts. Therefore, how is the mutual interaction between Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon contributing to reshape refugees’ imaginaries and perspectives grounded in decades of exile? Moving from a reflection connecting national identity and identity documents, I will show how the current international refugee legal system is structurally inappropriate to effectively deal with stateless persons who are currently once more on the way.

## **2. Displacements and Identity: Theory and Methodology of the Research**

Within the recent scholarship on migration, several authors from different fields have grasped the evolution of refugee identities during their respective trajectories of displacement. The anthropologist Malkki, one of the most relevant scholars on the issue, underlines how “the implicit functionalism of much work in refugee studies is especially clear when one is dealing with questions of identity, culture, ethnicity, and tradition”.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the same Malkki focused on how the lived experiences of exile shape the construction of national identity and historicity between two groups of Hutu refugees inhabiting very different settings in Tanzania.

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<sup>8</sup> Noura Erakat. “Palestinian Refugees and the Syrian Uprising: Filling the Protection Gap during Secondary Forced Displacement” in *International Journal of Refugee Law*, (2014), Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 581–621.

<sup>9</sup> Malkki, *Refugees and Exile: From Refugees Studies to the National Order of Things*, p.508.

Contextually, El Boushra's analysed how identity is perceived relevant for understanding the nature of violent conflict and especially for probing the motivations of different actors in the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, dealing Kurd refugees in Europe, the psychotherapist Griffiths expounded on the complicated process of identity reformulation as a result of displacement.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the Palestinian exile going on since 1948, both collective traumas and major obstacles have played a role in shaping and expressing a separate Palestinian identity.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the national political identity is connoted as a function of collective memory and collective claims making.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the Palestinian identity is constituted also through the suspicion, mistrust and outside categorization: in this way, numerous boundaries of exclusion reinforce the articulation of Palestinian-ness.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Palestinian refugees spread around different exiles around the region, especially the ones living in the refugee camps, have never ceased to demonstrate their allegiance to the value and meaning of Palestinian nationalism.<sup>15</sup> Grounded on the paradigm of resistance and memory reinvigorated by international solidarity networks, the collective political identity and camps have always been considered as deeply interconnected aspects of the so-called Palestinian cause.

While the danger of "identity politics" in contexts of fragile states, transitional governance and ethno-political division has been well documented<sup>16</sup>, the scholarship has given less attention to how contested identities or the

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<sup>10</sup> Judy el-Boushra, *Transforming Conflict: Some Thoughts on a Gendered Understanding of Conflict Processes*. In Jacobs S., Jacobson R. & Marchbank J.(eds.), *States of Conflict, Gender, Violence and Resistance*. London; Zed Bookd Ltds, (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Griffiths, *Counseling asylum seekers and refugees: a study of Kurds in early and later stage of exile*. In *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling & Health* 4 (2), (2001).

<sup>12</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. New York, Columbia University Press, (1997).

<sup>13</sup> Diana K. Allan, *Refugees of the revolution: Experiences of Palestinian exile*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, (2014), p.6.

<sup>14</sup> Juliane Hammer, *Palestinians born in Exile: Diaspora and the search for a homeland*. University of Texas Press, (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Luigi Achilli, *Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, (2015), p.11.

<sup>16</sup> Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past*. London: Routledge, (2012).

“politics of Othering” are transmitted and maintained through processes of remembering through self-narratives of the daily life.<sup>17</sup> In this context, while refugees experience has almost exclusively understood through the ideological and orthodox lens of national attachment, the everyday aspects experienced by refugees are mainly occluded since emergent subjectivities do not conform to the communitarian ideals of nationalism.

In this field, processes of multiple displacements and allegiances endured by Palestinian refugees of Syria contribute to grasp on the impact of de-territorialization on the resources of local and transnational experiences.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, deterritorialization affects the loyalties of groups, especially in the context of long-terms displacements such as the Palestinian exile. Especially around within refugee camps, the relationship between place and identity may be regarded as mutually constitutive, where the construction of identity involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences.<sup>19</sup>

With numerous Palestinian camps in Lebanon currently turning into a “transitional zone of emplacement”<sup>20</sup> providing refuge to a huge number of Syria’s refugees, I focused on which extent the mutual interaction between Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon reshapes self-narratives of collective belongings grounded in decades of exile.

The paper adopts a multi-disciplinary methodology moving from the implications of international relations and border studies within the field of refugee studies into a socio- anthropological attempt to probe the people’s living experiences in a transnational perspective. As regards the researcher’s positionality in the fieldwork, I have fruitfully benefited from Al Hardan’s critical approach towards a current epistemological approach treating “Palestinian refugees in Syria as objects, rather than subjects, of

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<sup>17</sup> John McGarry & O’Leary, B. *The politics of ethnic conflict regulation: Case studies of protracted ethnic conflicts*. London: Routledge, (2003).

<sup>18</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Public Worlds Volume 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Panteon Books, (1978), p.332.

<sup>20</sup> Maja Janmyr & Knudsen A. J. “Introduction: Hybrid Spaces” in *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, (2016), Volume 7, Number 3, Winter 2016, pp. 391-395.

history and memory”.<sup>21</sup> Her paper deeply constituted a relevant reference point in my research, together with Mitchell’s reflections on the outsider’s shifting role in stories of resilience, survival and pain narrated from Palestinian refugee camps.<sup>22</sup>

The on-going fieldwork for this paper has been conducted in the twelve official Palestinian camps in Lebanon since July 2014. Undertaken as an attempt to examine in depth the causes and implications of the current trajectories of displacement, my research has been constantly reformulated in parallel with several episodes occurred in the course of my fieldwork. Throughout my fieldwork, my attention has thus been shifting in focus from a political analysis, mainly dependent on external networks, to the exploration in depth of refugees’ daily experiences and self-narratives. Inspired by works such as the ones carried out by Bayat<sup>23</sup> and Cronin<sup>24</sup>, I stress the importance of focusing on daily contingencies as a key to better especially grasp human dynamics dealing with dispossession and marginality.

Therefore, this socio-anthropological work combines long-term participant observation, informal discussions, focus groups and interviews in depth. Especially during the first year of my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to conduct long and durable observation sessions and interviews in depth with forty individuals from the twelve official camps in Lebanon<sup>25</sup>. Among them, fifteen female and eighteen male adults coming from Yarmouk camp represent the core of my informants. Since my research questions metanarratives conditioned by “outsiders” or internal political networks<sup>26</sup>, I have

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Hardan, *Palestinians of Syria: Memories of a Shattered Community*, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Mitchell, “Who tells the stories? Storytelling project in Lebanon camp”. In *Index on Censorship*, March 2015, vol. 44 no.1, pp. 31-33.

<sup>23</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, (2010).

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie Cronin, *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*. Routledge, (2007).

<sup>25</sup> The interviews in depth were performed in Arabic and English. As per the interviews in depth performed in Arabic, I availed myself of cultural mediators coming from the same Lebanese camp where I held the interviews. All interviews were confidential: the full names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

<sup>26</sup> About the issue, see S.Hanafi, *The emergence of a Palestinian globalized elite: donors, international organizations and local NGOs*, Jerusalem: The Institute for Palestine Studies and Muwatin, the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, (2005)

carefully tried to include within my informants numerous people not directly affiliated with political organizations parties.

### **3. Contested Past Integrations in view of the Current Catastrophe**

Before focusing on how Palestinians from Syria reshape their political identity along multiple displacements, we should consider that, if compared to their national fellows in Jordan or Lebanon, their trajectories were not extensively researched in the literature. This “under-exposition” mainly finds its reason in the “fair assimilation” of the Palestinian experience in Syria if compared with the antipodal conditions of displacement in Jordan and Lebanon. In respect with the former, the Hashemite Kingdom has granted the citizenship to most of the refugees. On the contrary, Palestinians in the Syrian have maintained the legal status of stateless persons. On the other side, in sharp contrast with the negation of civil rights imposed by Lebanese policies, the Palestinians in Syria have been regarded as Syrians in origin in terms of civil and economic rights. On the same perspective, most of the refugee camps in Syria were considered as an integral part of the national social fabric and could benefit of the national public services.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, after having rebuilt their own life in Syria, Palestinians had on the other hand developed a strong affiliation with the country and its people. Mahmoud, a young guy coming from Yarmouk, confirms how “the relations between Syrians and Palestinians were very good, at least before the war. We respected each other. In the camp, as well in our building, it was even rare to distinguish who was Palestinian and who was Syrian.”<sup>28</sup> While stressing on the affiliation developed by Palestinians in Syrian exile, it should be also remarked how the collective political identity of the refugees was affected by the direct intervention of the Syrian regime inside the Palestinian political affairs due to Assad’s tutelage over some affiliated factions. In this perspective, the relatively fair treatment of Palestinian refugees inside Syria did not hinder the country’s leaders from systematically using the Palestinian resistance as a political tool and ensuring that no independent Palestinian power centre emerged in the region, as it could

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<sup>27</sup> Hamad S. al-Mawed, *The Palestinian Refugees In Syria: Their Past, Present and Future*. Ottawa: IDRC, (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Mahmoud (September 2016,4) in Burj el Barajneh camp

have challenged his hegemonic position.<sup>29</sup> Nassar, a father on his forties met in a tiny dwell around Burj el Barajneh camp, resumes this ambiguous situation:

*We as Palestinians enjoyed life in the same way as Syrians did. In the same way, when they used to suffer, we did too. As per myself, I was arrested by the regime with some Syrian friends in the 1990s after we had criticized Syria's occupation over Lebanon at the end of the Civil War.<sup>30</sup>*

Despite the strong level of integration within Syrian dynamics reported above, the refugee community officially tried to keep itself out of the direct violent confrontations erupted since March 2011. Due also to the absence of an institution representing effectively the Palestinian community, refugees in the camps were aware of the dangers related to a direct involvement in the fighting. Now, any attempt of invoked impartiality has rapidly vanished after that most of the camps turned into battlefields just few months after the beginning of the clashes. Moreover, the violent fights in Yarmouk camp broke out into bloody intra-Palestinian bloody clashes.<sup>31</sup> Ghassan, an old man who left the camp at the end of 2013 recalls:

*During the first year of the war the camp stayed neutral, we as Palestinians did not side with any group. Meanwhile, the camp had welcomed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians as well as Syrians coming all over the country. This is why we were considered as traitors by the Regime. Nowadays you cannot even know who is sided with whom; all the ones who were able to flee left the camp. There is no life in the camp, Yarmouk itself is dead.<sup>32</sup>*

The camp, which had hosted not less than 150.000 Palestinians before the war, has been under siege seized by Islamist factions since December 2012 after being sieged by the regime forces. The rapid collapse of the cultural and political capital of the refugee community became the emblem of the Palestinian tragedy and resulted to become the key-date for all the community. Following the same violent dynamics pervading most of the country starting from 2012, the security situation has deteriorated in almost all the

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<sup>29</sup> Magda Qandil, "The Syrian Revolution and the Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Realities and risks.". Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, (2012).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Hassan ( December 2014, 13) in Borj el Barajneh camp

<sup>31</sup> Nidal Bitari, Yarmuk Refugee Camp and the Syrian Uprising: A View from Within. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 43 (1), pp. 61–78, (2013).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Ghassan ( February 2015, 10) in Al-Buss camp

camps around the country. After several years of fighting storming most of the camps in the war-torn Syria, both UNRWA and several agencies claim the death of thousands of Palestinians<sup>33</sup>.

#### **4. “There Was No Other Way than Lebanon”**

Following a trajectory similar to the one experienced by millions of Syrian refugees, more than half of the about 600.000 Palestinians in Syria are currently displaced due to the violence and the extension of the conflict.<sup>34</sup> Being *de facto* stateless, Palestinians’ trajectories differ from their Syria’s counter parts due to a more severe immobility, since their condition of homelessness is strictly connected with the one of “passportlessness”. Moreover, due to an “exclusion clause” stated both in UNHCR’s Statute and in the 1951 Refugee Convention, Palestinians from Syria fall within the competence of UNRWA and cannot so that legally benefit from the assistance and the protection offered by UNHCR to Syrian nationals<sup>35</sup>.

Due to these overlapping legal implications, “double refugees” have been currently facing additional restrictions on entering Syria’s neighbouring States. Therefore, since 2014 Palestinians are left with nowhere to legally seek a second refuge out of Syria. Indeed, even if the number was quite insignificant if compared to the Syrian citizens who crossed the same borders, Palestinians refugees from Syria had to face additional obstacles to flee the country. Since most of the Palestinians used to reside around Damascus before the conflict, very few thousands of people tried to get into Turkey because it implied crossing Syria through a long and dangerous route scattered around fragmented territories. Therefore, especially before the “inauguration” on mass scale of the so-called Balkan route through

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<sup>33</sup> Among the other, one of the most updated accurate source is the Action Group for Palestinians in Syria, a group based in London working on different levels with regards to Palestinians of Syria in terms of documenting and monitoring daily field events to their situation, and directing humanitarian appeals for them.

<sup>34</sup> Information included in “UNRWA Syria regional crisis response: january-december 2014”. Cfr <http://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-response-and-services->. Check all the data about Palestinians refugees and Syria crisis at <http://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis>(accessed March 30, 2015)

<sup>35</sup> This is not the case of Turkey, where UNRWA is not operative and therefore the government and the UN Agencies do not legally make distinctions between Syrians and Palestinians.

Turkey, most of the Palestinians from Syria tried to find refuge either in Jordan or in Lebanon.

The impact of an international and national distinguished legal treatment has become crushing on Palestinians' daily lives, especially concerning borders politics in Jordan and Lebanon. Concerning the Hashemite the Kingdom, which is currently hosting around more than 600.000 Syrian refugees<sup>36</sup>, the State authorities started denying entry to Palestinians from Syria in April 2012 and officially declared a non-admittance policy in January 2013.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, at the time when Yarmouk as well as many other camps finally collapsed causing the displacement of thousands of people, Jordan had already closed its doors for Palestinians. Abu Khaled, a father of four children who left Yarmou at the end of 2012, states:

*At that time we as Palestinian were forbidden from entering Jordan. I personally know some Palestinian families who went to the border and were not sent back by the Jordanian authorities. At the same time, I did not go to Turkey because I was afraid the Syrian government would not have allowed us to come back. Lebanon was the only choice available to leave Syria.<sup>38</sup>*

Therefore, also benefiting from numerous pre-established Palestinian transnational familiar networks between the two countries, most of the Palestinians of Syria took refuge in the neighbouring Lebanon. Mahmoud, a Syrian young guy from Aleppo countryside whom I met in Beirut, reveals the fundamental role played by this kind of pre-established familiar connections beyond the borders:

*My father is Syrian and my mother is Palestinian from Lebanon: I was born in Borj el Barajneh camp in Beirut and moved to Syria when I was 15 years old. My village was so close to the Turkish border that few years ago we used to walk there. Once I decided to leave my village in order to avoid the military conscription I have immediately thought about coming back to Borj el Barajneh. I was used to living here and I knew a lot of people who could support me to find an accommodation for my family.*

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<sup>36</sup> All the data regarding Syrian refugees in the Middle East can be found on the website of UNHCR at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>37</sup> On the issue, check Human Rights Watch report: "Not welcome: Jordan's Treatment of Palestinians Escaping Syria". <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/07/not-welcome/jordans-treatment-palestinians-escaping-syria>

<sup>38</sup> Abu Khaled ( November 2014, 7). Personal interview, Beddawi camp.

*Even if I am just Syrian by citizenship I really do also feel Palestinian: this camp is part of us.*<sup>39</sup>

In the first half of 2013 around 6.000 Palestinians were monthly crossing the border areas between Syria and Lebanon, till reaching the overall number of 66.000 people in July of the same year<sup>40</sup>. Although Palestinians represented a very small proportion of the total number of refugees entering the country<sup>41</sup>, the Lebanese authorities issued new and cumulative arbitrary entry policies on the entry of Palestinians from Syria. After that they were made official in May 2014, fewer and fewer Palestinians have tried to cross the border: almost just the ones who have a valid ticket and visa for a third-country get a 11-hour transit permit to reach the airport. Due to the restriction at the border with Syria and the contemporary high emigration rate toward Europe, the number of the Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon has levelled off at around 44.000 persons<sup>42</sup>.

Palestinians of Syria in Lebanon have to deal with further obstacles as regards their legal status in the country. The historical and political origin of these mistreatment must be retraced in the past: Palestinians from Syria currently inherit the “special” system implemented for the about 300.000 Palestinians of Lebanon. Specifically, the newcomers have to deal with further obstacles as regards their legal permanence in the country. Also due to arbitrary national policies intertwined with regular misunderstandings between the government and UNRWA, more than 80% of the Palestinians are living in Lebanon without legal valid papers<sup>43</sup>. The lack of formal le-

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<sup>39</sup> Mahmoud ( October 2016, 13). Personal interview, Borj el Barajneh camp.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Zizette Darkazally (07/11/2014) UNRWA *Public Information Officer, Beirut*

<sup>41</sup> Although numbers are extremely volatile due to gaps in the registration system as well as the huge rate of transnational mobility among the refugees, more than one million Syrian refugees have been registered by UNHCR in Lebanon since 2014. As per the last update held at 31/01/16, 1,07,785 Syrian are registered in the country as refugees. All the data regarding Syrian refugees in the Middle East can be found on the website of UNHCR at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (last access on January 31, 2016)

<sup>42</sup> According to an official survey carried by UNRWA in July 2014.

<sup>43</sup> These numbers collected during my fieldwork were later confirmed by an overall survey conducted by UNRWA in 2015. See “Chaaban, J., Salti, N., Ghattas, H., Irani, A., Ismail, T., Batlouni, L. (2016), “Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon 2015”, Report published by the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).”

gal protection of Palestinian refugees transforms them de facto into illegal migrants subject to potential *refoulement* towards Syria.<sup>44</sup> In such a significant extended situation, the concrete risks of arbitrary detention by the Lebanese authorities put their own mobility patterns at stake. As Zaher- a young activist coming from Yarmouk- reports:

*You have restrictions on movement because they may be arrested if they pass through checkpoints around Lebanon or the ones nearby the camps. They are illegal so that basically they can be detained and arrested. The authorities are not deporting people, so that they release them after being detained with a stamp ordering they have to leave the country within a certain amount of time”.*<sup>45</sup>

Within this context, the concrete risk of arbitrary detention prevents most of the refugees interviewed from going out of the camps. This recurrent strategy is motivated by the will of keeping yourself away from areas perceived as potential problem spaces in order to avoid experiencing hostility in an already discordant environment. According to a survey conducted by UNRWA, most of the Palestinians from Syria currently reside in the pre-established Palestinian camps in Lebanon.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the “forced invisibility” guaranteed by the overcrowded camps is vital in order to avoid security problems related to their precarious legal situation. Therefore, most of my interviewees complained how, in opposition with the former experience in Syria, discrimination and spatial marginalization have been the daily prevalent features of the Lebanese experience. “We could not imagine the situation was so catastrophic” says a Palestinian man coming from Yarmouk camp. “Here the situation is unbearable: you have to pay for everything, even for water! And there is no way to find a job: nothing is going well here. Palestinians from Lebanon are somehow used to it, but for us it is still more difficult because in Syria we were used to have some rights<sup>47</sup>.”

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<sup>44</sup> Kamel M. Dora'i, “Palestinian Refugees and the current Syrian conflict: From settled refugees to stateless asylum seekers?”. Allegra Lab, (2015).

<sup>45</sup> Mahmoud (October 2016, 13). Personal interview, Nahr el Bared Camp.

<sup>46</sup> For more information, see Chaaban, J., Salti, N., Ghattas, H., Irani, A., Ismail, T., Batlouni, L. (2016), “Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon 2015”, Report published by the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

<sup>47</sup> Interview with N.A. ( October 2014, 3) in Al Buss camp.

## **5. Distancing Individual and Collective Narrations**

After being “settled refugees” throughout the last decades in Syria, Palestinians currently find themselves once more on the move looking for protection in an adverse national and international environment. Moreover, after being violently scattered in different countries since 1948, several generations of Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon currently find themselves forced to share the tiny premises of inhospitable refugee camps. How do the mutual interactions emerging between them contribute to reshape refugees’ perspectives and certainties grounded in decades of exile? What are the intimate and communal implications related to the reconnection of time and space in terms of national unity and identity?

Historically, the current Palestinians’ displacement from Syria is not the first one throughout the several trajectories following 1948-*Nakba*. As significantly recapped by Edward Said, “Palestinians are a people who move a lot, who are always carrying bags from one place to another. This gives us a further sense of identity as a people”.<sup>48</sup> In this way, the paradigm of “Palestine”, within spatial and social contracted spaces such as refugee camps, has been supposed to work as a catalyst for the individuals in determining the social pattern of their exile. Consulted about the way he perceives the newcomers, the director of a local association explains: “We consider them as Palestinian refugees and we have to help and support them as much as possible. Even if we have not so much to offer, we should divide everything with them. The bread itself should be split, as everything in the house.”<sup>49</sup> This reflection goes far beyond the idea of fair hospitality between compatriots, in a situation where the host community sharing with the new comers the perpetual situation of exile.<sup>50</sup> Within the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, both the communities are thus deeply grounded in the diaspora and the search from a homeland.<sup>51</sup> In this way, the director’s quotation cited above recalls the official national rhetoric based on the unity

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<sup>48</sup> Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-determination*. New York; Pantheon Books, (1994), p. 115.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with C.C. ( November 2014, 7) in Beddawi camp.

<sup>50</sup> Said, *Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims*, in *Social Text* No.1.

<sup>51</sup> Juliane Hammer, *Palestinians born in Exile: Diaspora and the search for a homeland*. University of Texas Press, 2005.

of the Palestinian people defined as “a part of the Palestinian collective narrative central to its formation”.<sup>52</sup>

Peculiarly linked to this assumption, the relationship between an official discourse and individual elaborations recall Maria Holt’s works on the discrepancy between a collective and an individual identity, focusing on how Palestinian women chase this gap through personal stories and trajectories.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the deprivation the minimal rights thus causes in the refugees “a disjuncture between the places in which they feel rooted and the places where they currently reside”.<sup>54</sup>

In the case of the Palestinians of Syria, the second exile in an unwelcoming country cannot that challenge the refugees’ identitarian certainties and feelings of collective belonging. “They are left in an unexpected time their home to start a new life in a country that is not very friendly to them. They are people who had a life a couple of years ago and now they have no perspective”.<sup>55</sup> After being born in exile as refugees far from their collective homeland, these individuals are once more experiencing “the loss of home (*beit*), which doesn’t imply enclosure and privacy but rather a sense of sharing a common space with others”.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the new catastrophe faced in the last years inevitably turns into a distinctive factor in questioning the whole experience as Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. Even the 1948-Nakba has been experienced and elaborated at the light of the Syrian civil war, generating pervasive and fluent comparisons between the two tragedies. Revoking the mass displacement following the bombardment by the regime aircraft over Yarmouk camp in December 2012, Hussein recalls:

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<sup>52</sup> Meir Litvak, *Palestinian Collective Memory and National Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2009).

<sup>53</sup> Maria Holt, “The wives and mothers of heroes: Evolving identities of Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon”, in *The Journal of Development Studies* Vol. 43 , Iss. 2, 2007, pp. 245-264.

<sup>54</sup> Holt, *Women & conflict in the Middle East: Palestinian refugees and the response to violence*. Library of Modern Middle East Studies: Vol. 123. London, New York: I.B. Tauris. (2014), p. 99.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Zizette Darkazally ( November 2014, 7) in Beirut.

<sup>56</sup> Rosemary Sayigh, *Insecurity of Habitat for Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*. In: C. Brun and *Forced Migrant Review* (eds.) *House: Loss, Refuge and Belonging*, Conference Report, Oxford, Trondheim: *Forced Migrant Review*, NTNU, (2004).

*During that dark day, I was looking at thousands of people living their homes and saw a very old man, I guess he was around 90 years old, keeping the hand of his nephew and saying: "When I left Palestine in 1948, I was more or less on your age. Now we are leaving Yarmouk together and we are on our own and do not have anywhere to go."<sup>57</sup>*

During my fieldwork I grasped on the meanings behind a further split between a collective and an individual narration, with the latter shifting in an on going process according to the current situation the daily constraints. When precariousness and deep vulnerability affect the ordinariness, the stability of personal feelings and beliefs are inevitably affected by these kind of vital concerns. Contextually, many people have been wondering about the uncertainties regarding a collective Palestinian presence in a post-war Syria. Yaser, a young father of three children coming from Yarmouk, reveals:

*Once the war is over I guess I will not go back to Syria because the country is broken in thousands of pieces. Since the war started, the government refused us as Palestinians and we also started to split along two sides. More importantly, Yarmouk camp is over. If I could choose, I would go back to Palestine. But I know I cannot nowadays, so I would like to travel to Europe in order us to restart a new life as human beings. Palestinians of Syria do not have anything left anymore: we had rebuilt a new life and it has been destroyed once more after 60 years.*

## **6. Conclusions and Further Perspectives**

Double refugees' current displacement sheds a light over the misalignment between the urgencies of the ordinary and a pure orthodox narration pervading the literature related to Palestinian refugees. In a specific historical moment characterized by a shift in the alignment of people and place, the pattern of Palestinians from Syria to Lebanon may contribute to disrupt the archetype of the refugee as a mere resilient victim. Tricked in a new perilous context not perceived and experienced as "home", these persons are experiencing new forms of explicit disaffiliation against a nationalist discourse mainly focused on an all-embracing past and far from daily contingencies. As previously occurred in different contexts throughout the region, we cannot neglect how the role of refugee documents as-

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Hussein (December 2014, 17) in Borj el Barajneh camp

sumed paramount importance in post-Palestine generation. Reconnecting the past with the present displacements, we should consider how borders and checkpoints have been the bane of Catastrophe, a constant reminder of being out of place, an intruder and an unwelcome guest with no protection. Specifically, when these dispositions come into their own inside a country like Lebanon marked by historic discriminatory policies towards the Palestinians, effects over refugees' daily life achieve a more deplorable status. Paraphrasing several statements collective during the fieldwork, the relevance of identity cards goes far beyond any aprioristic debate regarding identity as itself.

With the unlikely perspective of the return to Palestine and the interrogatives pervading Palestinians' future presence in Syria, the trajectories of this community may be considered as a paradigm of the inconsistencies pervading the actual international refugee regime. Without any exhaustive presumption, my work would like to push the current debate beyond a mere legal approach anchored on the three alternatives proposed by UNCHR as solutions to any refugee crisis. Namely, as in the case of Palestinians from Syria, the eventualities of either return or integration within their Host States country risk fatherly entrap any kind of life trajectories.

Referring to the issue of "integration in the host country", this paper may be conceived as a contribution for a new approach where Palestinian camps are interpreted not just as "time machines" deeply grounded on a univocal nationalist rhetoric. As underlined in the previous pages, Palestinians from Syria are reinterpreting refugee camps as a temporary "departure base" where new migrations towards Europe can be imagined, planned and later on implemented. Within this perspective, discourses about daily-lived practises emerging along the tiny narrows of Palestinian camps contribute to delineate a picture less orthodox and at the same time closer to refugees' imaginaries.

Finally, as per the eventuality of a resettlement into a third State, Palestinians face the last but not least discrimination. Because of their "exclusive affiliation" with UNRWA in Jordan and Lebanon, they are barely involved in the resettlement policies by UNHCR and cannot thus benefit from this last legal opportunity. Subjected to further discriminatory forms of access and rights, Palestinians from Syria attest that they are nowadays living events that are questioning their perceptions and imaginaries. In this situ-

ation, the idea of return to Palestine as the only solution to their exile is deeply questioned by a chance of further emigration they had never even could imagine before 2011. Assumed the tidy rejection of the discriminatory system implemented in Lebanon, I could witness how a great majority of the refugees consider an “illegal” emigration towards Europe as the only practicable solution for their future. A vast majority of these have re-invented the trajectory of their own life, interpreting it once again through and beyond physical borders and legal boundaries.

Along these vibrant trajectories, the transnational connections generated by these movements are nowadays being reinterpreted as a key for appropriating a more dignified life. “We do not claim great slogans anymore” says Khaled, an English teacher coming from Yarmouk. “We just need to live a decent life: we are looking for peace, security, health care and a house where to sleep.”<sup>58</sup> Finally, while describing refugees’ refusal of the status quo and new imaginaries and practices oriented to new emigration patterns, I underline how migration to Europe constitutes nowadays an inescapable component in the reformulation of Palestinian-Syrian refugees’ national identity.

Broadly speaking in terms of academic engagement and future perspectives, innovative researchers hinged on the connections between the ordinariness in refugee camps and patterns of further migrations may offer some qualitatively alternative insights into a discourse still univocally focused on oppositional ideological lenses. Without any exhaustive presumption, a deeper emphasis on the concrete ordinary may also contribute to shed a light over the reasons behind current transnational discriminatory policies univocally performed through strict legal boundaries and reified material borders.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with N.A. ( December 2014, 2) in Borj el Barajneh camp.

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