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# **Processes of Forced Departure: The Case of the Palestinian Population of Syria**

**Salim Salamah and Mette Lundsryd Heide-Jørgensen**

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## Introduction

- 1 The Palestinian exile and distribution all over the geography of Syria goes back to 1947–1949 following the Arab-Israeli war on the land of Palestine and the displacement of at least 300,000 Palestinian refugees. In Syria, most of them settled in refugee tent camps with primitive buildings and limited or no infrastructure. Prior to the current-day Syrian crisis, these were urban quarters integrated with their urban surroundings, housing Syrians and Palestinians alike.<sup>1</sup> Yet, August 2011 drew a new threshold in the Palestinian-Syrian relationship. The unique territory of permanent refuge was attacked by the forces of the Syrian regime at Al Ramel camp in the coastal city of Latakia. This forced 5,000 refugees to escape outside the administrative borders of Al Ramel. Since then the countdown of the existence of Palestinian communities in Syria accelerated. Deraa camp in southern Syria was and still is subject to several heavy attacks from the regime and in Yarmouk camp, a heavy siege claimed the lives of 194 Palestinians and the last UNRWA food distribution took place in August 2013.<sup>2</sup> Likewise Khan Eshieh camp, south of Damascus, is seen as “not accessible”<sup>3</sup> according to locals and UNRWA.
- 2 One might argue that in times of war, the initial decision for a person to leave his or her permanent residence territory has clear reasons, for example: violence, instability and persecution. Yet for a Palestinian of Syria, between the decision to leave a place, the urge to stay, and the actual departure, there is more than just logical reasoning. There is a history of belonging for three generations, there is the factor of “statelessness” that hinders the relatively free movement that nationals enjoys when they cross international borders, and there is a whole history of discrimination against Palestinians when they attempt “to leave” or “change” their geography. Even more,

there is the memory of the 1948 Nakba (Catastrophe) and its implications legally and logistically, nationally and internationally on the livelihood of Palestinians. Finally, there is the fact that for generations Palestinians have been forced to move further and further away from their place of origin. Understanding these different processes of departure, and how they express the far and the near past, as well as the violent present is our main objective. The individual stories, though subjective, offer us insights into the new displacement of the Palestinian communities in Syria, the history of their relationship to the places they once “belonged to”, and their future relations to places they will belong to.

## I. Escaping Death – Crossing Borders

- 3 Escape is most often the direct result of persecution, war, and violent assaults. However, we find it important to make an inquiry into the processes of departure, “why” and “how” people leave their habitual places of residency. When inaugurated, we find that the subjective reasons and processes of escape of Palestinian communities in Syria, help us to both understand the violent conflict, but also reveals modes of resistance, intertwining histories and tells valuable stories about the local communities which might be lost if they are not documented now. Moreover, the oral history accounts show that crossing borders as a way of escape starts at the outskirts of the refugee camps and not at the international recognized borders. The departure thus includes several border-crossing experiences, which influences people’s chances of return.

## II. Contextualization

- 4 This paper aims to provide insights into how the process of departure for the Palestinian communities in Syria took shape and which frontiers were met. The first departure most often lead to circular movements and multiple displacements from Yarmouk and other Palestinian camps to other neighbourhoods in Damascus and Syria, then to neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey and eventually to Europe.
  - Following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, we do believe that several major events contributed to the decision of Palestinians to leave their habitual places of residency at first and to leave Syria eventually, among them the following:
  - During the month of July/August (Ramadan 2012) the Syrian regime initiated a major military operation against Al-Midan, a bordering neighbourhood of Yarmouk. The result of the operation was tens of thousands of refugees taking shelter in Yarmouk UNRWA schools. This specific event marked an important threshold for locals and led them to believe that Yarmouk might be next in the clash lines between the armed opposition and the Syrian regime.
  - At the end of that year, December 2012, another major escalation took place with the bombardment of Yarmouk by MiG fighter jets. What followed was collective mass displacement.
  - The beginning of the siege of Khane el Sheih in 2013. Many Palestinians from Yarmouk had taken refuge in the suburb of Khan el Sheih – a Palestinian camp, which since 1956 has developed into a well-functioning suburban neighbourhood predominantly inhabited by

people with Palestinian national identity. In the fall of 2013, shelling and siege took over in Khan el Sheih as well.

- Today both Khan el Sheih and Yarmouk camp are seen as “non accessible” areas by UNRWA (UNRWA, “Syria Regional Crisis Response”, 80).<sup>4</sup>

- 5 Yet, in our quest to expand knowledge on the processes of departure we find that the subjective stories of departure are closely linked to different intersections of persecution due to activism against the regime, political affiliation, experiences of detention, connection with the local community, assaults from secret intelligence services, and self-organizing of resistance all play a role in the processes of departure. At the same time, we have found that in the description of the process of departure, there is a close connection between the departure and experiences of being Palestinian, stateless and having nowhere else to belong to.

## Presentation of Narrators<sup>5</sup>

- 6 Here we present five of the main narrators of the project. They are all from the Palestinian communities in Syria, Yarmouk and Khan el Sheikh, and have departed these areas in different ways between June 2013 and April 2014.

- Kamal was born in Palestine in 1946; He lived in different locations in Syria, first in Dera’a, then in Jobar and finally at Yarmouk where he settled until he was forced to flee in 2012. Kamal worked as a philosophy professor at Damascus University. First, he fled to Damascus downtown, going back and forth between Damascus and Lebanon during 2013 and ended up in Sweden in October 2013.
- Noura was born in Syria in 1963; she is a Syrian national, married to Kamal. She was instructor of pedagogy in Damascus University. Since she was married she has lived in Yarmouk Camp. She departed with Kamal, her husband, by the end of 2012 and settled down in Damascus downtown. She escaped to Sweden in October 2013 crossing the official border at Al-Masnaa to Lebanon and arrived in Sweden.
- Roula was born in 1984 in Yarmouk Camp; she is mother of five children (2–16 years of age). Roula has graduated elementary school. Roula’s husband and son escaped Syria to Germany via Turkey in 2012. Roula and her four children escaped Syria in April 2014 by car via Al-Masnaa border crossing. She lives in a camp in Southern Beirut and is waiting for family unification with her husband and son in Germany.
- Omar was born in 1986 in Yarmouk Camp. He is educated as an artist in music, dance and theatre. Before the conflict he worked as a music and drama teacher at a UNRWA youth and women’s centre. Omar has escaped to Lebanon twice, but was forced to go back to Syria to renew his passport in June 2013. He fled the bombings by car through the official border crossing at Al-Masnaa during both escapes.
- Walid was born in 1988 in the Khan El Sheikh Camp. He is educated as a computer technician. Prior to the conflict in Syria, Walid lived and worked in Damascus. Walid escaped Syria by foot over the mountain El Sheikh alone in November 2013. Walid has found shelter in a refugee camp in Southern Beirut. Walid has no valid passport and does not hold official travel documents.

### III. Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

- 7 Methodologically, the use oral history recordings and ethnographic-participant observation has predominantly inspired our work.<sup>6</sup> We believe as Donna Haraway argues that knowledge must be situated, in order to show “real aspects of the world”.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the oral history approach allows us to inquire into the process of subjective memory of recent and past historical events, and to capture parts of history, is at risk of being silenced by grand narratives.<sup>8</sup>
- 8 In our research design, we combined several geographical fields of study: firstly the places in Syria from where the narrators departed and were displaced to, and secondly their experiences in the new places of displacement, Lebanon and Sweden. Through five main narrators, we tell the subjective stories of the departure process from Palestinian communities in Syria to Lebanon, and for two of them further on to Sweden. We include these fields in our inquiry in order to bring into light both the stories and destinies of those who managed to reach a safe haven in Sweden and those who reached Lebanon but who are forsaken there now due to a lack of resources and the discriminatory Lebanese border regulations.

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### NOTES

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4. <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/emergency-reports/syria-regional-crisis-response-update-80>.
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**Geographical index:** Syrie, Palestine, Yarmouk camp, Al Ramel camp

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