

Emerging Identities from the Current Refugee Crisis

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An Interview with Lubna Fahoum

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215

Brown Journal of World Affairs: Much of your work has focused on Arab and Palestinian identities. To begin, what would you define as identity? Do you adopt the perspective that identities are constructed or that they are already established?

Rashid Khalidi: To start, I'm a historian; I've dealt with issues of identity, whether Arab or Palestinian, in my work, but I have done so via historical methodology: reading memoirs and newspapers, among other sources. I agree with most theorists who see national identity as being both relatively modern and constructed—though identity is quite frequently constructed from preexisting materials. These can be religious, historical, cultural, or geographical. It's not as if when you say that identity is constructed, you mean that it is completely imaginary. Thus when Benedict Anderson uses the term "imagined communities" to describe groups that never actually meet, he understands that they have a clear sense of themselves—a national identity—via the impact of what he calls "print capitalism." These identities are modern and constructed, but they are

nevertheless quite real. This is equally true of Palestinian or Turkish or Israeli national identities, regardless of all of the enormous differences between them.

Journal: In your book *Palestinian Identity*, you note how the Arab population under British-mandated Palestine experienced what you describe as “overlapping identities.” Could you elaborate on that?

Khalidi: Well, the nationalist myth of any nationality or national movement stipulates that there is a deep preexisting identity that has always been there. It is eternal, in the view of most nationalists, and just needs to be awakened or revived—or whatever term you use to describe its coming to the surface. For example, for

a French nationalist, the French were always there—Vercingetorix, Charlemagne, and Joan of Arc are all iterations of a preexisting identity that eventually emerges

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216

or comes to the surface—thus implying that a central French identity has always been present. This is nonsense. The idea that people in France thought of themselves as French at the time of Julius Caesar, or even at the time of Louis XIV, is ludicrous. In these eras that predate the national era, there is no such thing as a nation as we understand it now. Furthermore, even if the term was used then, it was in a very different sense.

So, first of all, there is no such group as Palestinians, in the sense that people in Palestine did not think of themselves first and foremost as Palestinians approximately 300 years ago, any more than Jews at the time thought of themselves as Israelis, or the inhabitants of France as French for that matter. Palestinians had various ways of seeing and identifying themselves; my grandfather, born in the 1860s, might have seen himself in terms of his family, his religion, his city, Jerusalem, and maybe even as an Ottoman subject and as an Arab. But these identities overlapped with various others.

As far as Palestine is concerned, such a thing as a Palestinian identity didn’t exist for people in the premodern era. There was an idea of Palestine, of *al-ard am-muqaddasa*—the holy land—that eventually transformed into an identity. And there was an idea of its limits, but this was not a national identity in the premodern era. This was also equally true of every other Middle Eastern nationality, including Turks, Israelis, Egyptians, and so forth.

Journal: Do you feel that Palestinian identity, if understood as being fully invested in maintaining Palestinian cultures and norms, is being lost due to these overlapping identities?

Khalidi: The honest answer is that I don't know because I'm not a sociologist. I haven't spoken to nor have I surveyed thousands of people, and so I can only give an impressionistic answer to the question. One thing I would say is that the forms of hardship that Palestinians are subject to or have been subject to have helped forge a sense of identity, and that process is probably still operating in the present. It's not uncommon. Conflict and collective, shared hardship has helped shape national identity in many nations. If the past is any guide, these kinds of events, especially the struggle with Zionism before 1948 and the Nakba and its aftermath, have been successful in strengthening some sense of Palestinian common identity, but have not been particularly successful in creating any kind of political unity. The era of the establishment and flourishing of the Palestine Liberation Organization—the PLO—would be one of the few exceptions to that.

If you look at culture, however—cinema, theater, poetry, literature, and a number of other cultural realms—it would seem that the process of developing a common identity is still ongoing amongst Palestinians, in spite of the political vicissitudes.

217

Journal: What do you think is the most effective way to promote the maintenance and consolidation of Palestinian identity?

Khalidi: Clearly it would be to the benefit of all Palestinians if they were able to put their house in order politically and they were able to establish a clear consensus on goals, strategy, and leadership—but that does not seem imminent. The process that I see as playing a huge role in the past and the present, partly because of the absence of political leadership, is culture, as I have said. Cultural expression is alive and well and transcends the fragmented boxes that Palestinians are put into. If you go to Palestine, whether the areas occupied in 1967 or the Arab regions forcibly incorporated into Israel in 1948, you'll see a remarkable arts scene that transcends these geographic or civic boundaries and reaches out into the Palestinian diaspora. Similarly, work done outside of Palestine has its echo inside Palestine. Culture seems to be one area where the boundaries hemming Palestinians in can be transcended.

Journal: Do you see any similarity or relation between the Israel-Palestine conflict, specifically the displacement of Palestinians from their homes, and the current crisis in Syria, especially with regard to refugees?

Khalidi: No, not really. It is true, however, that it is another episode of forcible displacement for Palestinians. We have had this before. We had it in the 1982 war when many Palestinians had to leave Lebanon because of the expulsion of

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the PLO, and again in Kuwait after the 1990–1991 Gulf War.

What is happening in Syria to Palestinians is a similar case, whereby former refugees are

being made refugees again. The ongoing calamity for Palestinians in Syria, which is just a part of the tragedy that affects vast numbers of Syrians, is much more akin to those displacements than to the expulsions and displacement of the Nakba in 1947–48 and afterwards. Those affected an absolute majority of Palestinian society.

218

Journal: How would you say the displacement of Syrians from one place to another—be it in refugee camps or seeking refuge in the West—has affected their identity? And to that end, to what extent do you think the role of these external powers will influence the development of Syrian national identity, if at all?

Khalidi: It is difficult to say. Much will depend on when, how, and even whether the Syrian civil war-cum-proxy war is resolved, and how soon the many millions who have fled their homes are able to return.

Journal: How has the recent mass displacement of Syrian refugees affected Palestinian refugees? Are Palestinian refugees seeking asylum through the same routes that Syrians have been in the past year?

Khalidi: The ongoing civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen and the simultaneous overt and covert external interventions in them have shattered these countries' states and societies. They have created a level of chaos and a humanitarian disaster in the Middle East of proportions not seen since World War I, which witnessed famine, massacre, and massive human displacement. The template for these four chaotic ongoing conflicts is Lebanon, where a similar civil war, fueled and exacerbated by foreign military and covert intervention, dragged

on for 15 years. The Iraq War has been going on now for 12 years, the others for four or five years. They have all produced huge refugee flows, especially the Syrian war, which has affected Palestinians in Syria just as it has affected Syrians. I could not say at this stage what might be the impact in terms of asylum or identity for the Palestinians, any more than for the Syrians, Iraqis, and others displaced by these savage wars.

Journal: Is there anything further you would like to close with and share with our readers?

Khalidi: As I have suggested, the Middle East is undergoing an upheaval the likes of which the world witnessed during World War I, which inflicted massive popular suffering, eventually resulting in the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire, the imposition of new frontiers, and the creation of new states. Until this upheaval has calmed, of which there are currently few signs, it would be foolish to predict what its impact will be. It has already shaken the European Union to its very foundations by threatening the open borders that were its *raison d'être*. It has already produced several failed or failing states and challenged borders that have been in place for nearly a century. What the ultimate impact of this upheaval will be is impossible to say. 

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