

Dawn Chatty

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Academic interest in the study of forced migration as a specific field developed only in the late 20th century. But its conceptual tools had a much earlier incarnation in the United States. In the early 20th century historical linguistic and ethnographic research was being conducted with Native American peoples who had been subjected to massive ethnic cleansings in the preceding two centuries. Much of that early work was with tribes who had been displaced, dispossessed, and involuntarily marched into resource-poor reservations. The scientists working with them thought they were engaging in a kind of salvage operation to record ways of life before they disappeared. These researchers largely ignored or failed to recognize the impacts of displacement—destroyed settlements, land occupation, nonviable reservations, inadequate welfare, and hostile administrations and lack of legal rights—and focused instead on trying to reconstruct memory culture of “what life was like in the old days.” Nevertheless, these studies gave us many of our basic concepts to describe and analyze the experience of uprootedness and dispossession. These fundamental concepts have become important in the discipline of forced migration studies. They include understandings of: role and identity, hierarchy, social networks, conflict mechanisms, reciprocity and trust, boundary creation, rites of passage, liminality, and the role of myths.

The 20th century, which saw dislocation and dispossession on a scale never experienced before, has been called the “century of the refugee.” After World War I, with the collapse of empire, millions of people saw the League of Nations establish an office for refugees. One of the main services of this office was the issuing of travel documents—the Nansen passport—to allow refugees and stateless people legal movement to find sustainable livelihoods. After World War II, with more than 4 million Europeans displaced and needing resettlement or repatriation, the United Nations established a temporary agency to assist in that process and thus the United Nations High Commission for Refugees came into being. With more people forced to move in the 21st century than ever before, it is not surprising that our current era looks to become known as the “century of displacement and dispossession.”¹

It can hardly be denied that forced migration has come to be the defining feature of the contemporary Middle East, a region that is currently both the source of and host to some of the largest forcibly displaced populations in the world. By the start of 2017, more than 60 percent of the world’s 21.3 million refugees—including 5.5 million Palestinian refugees—as well as 30 percent of the world’s 38 million internally displaced persons

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were found in the Middle East.² Seeking safety from violence, family unification, and sustainable livelihoods, millions of people from the region have moved within and across social spaces that are at once strange and familiar, and in which they themselves are familiar and strange to others. Over the past few years, Turkey has become host to the world's largest refugee population of nearly 3 million displaced Syrians. In Lebanon one out of every fourth person is a Syrian seeking safety and security within its national border. In Jordan, similarly large numbers of Syrians have been granted entry, and since the start of the Syrian armed conflict, the United Nations refugee camp at Za'tari that has accommodated many of them has grown to become one of the world's largest refugee camps. With an additional 7.6 million Syrians internally displaced in the country, the Syrian state now has the highest number of both internally displaced people and refugees who have crossed international borders. In total more than half the population of the country has been displaced and dispossessed. Thousands of Syrians, Libyans, and Iraqis have undertaken perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea to seek asylum in Europe and elsewhere. Palestinian refugees are now in a fourth generation of exile, making their plight the longest running, unresolved refugee situation in the world.

Although the scale of forced migration in the current moment is unprecedented, forced migration itself has long been a defining feature of the Middle East and the region's history. Beginning in the mid-19th century—with what some historians call the first modern genocide of Circassian people—the Middle East has been existentially defined by the stories of displaced and dispossessed people, as well as by communities and associations offering asylum and refuge. However, refugees' stories have rarely been at the heart of most narratives and life histories. Moreover, the Middle East remains largely bereft of legal, national, and regional asylum mechanisms, offering instead important customary traditions of hospitality, generosity, and sanctuary, as well as a patchwork of local responses and bilateral agreements with UN agencies.

The articles in this special issue of *IJMES* address both our historical understandings of forced migration in the region as well as contemporary legal and social challenges. Chris Gratien's article, "The Ottoman Quagmire: Malaria, Swamps, and Settlement in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean," offers us an entirely new perspective on Ottoman refugee and immigrant settlement policy. Political economy perspectives long underpinned the way in which the Ottoman Sublime Porte dispersed populations of Circassians, Chechnyans, and other Trans-Caucasian refugees to the hinterlands of its "underpopulated" Arab provinces to achieve certain goals. That is, the dispersal of populations was seen as, rather than entirely altruistic, a mechanism either to bring an end to some of the interethnic fighting between Bedouin and Kurds, or Druze and Kurds, or to create frontier settlements to define the borders of its territory. Gratien answers a puzzle with which I have long grappled: Why did so many of these Circassian—especially Chechnyan—settlements fail to thrive? That is, why did some seem to disappear off the map after a few decades? And, in addition, why did some of the settlements that were continually replenished by new forced migrants from the Caucasus seem to remain in a steady state and never outgrow their original settlement boundaries? The answer lies, in part, in the malarial swamps which some of the forced migrants chose to settle against the advice of the Ottoman Refugee Commission—such as the Chechnyan settlement at Ra's al-^ḥAyn, a winter camping area for Bedouin generally abandoned in spring and summer. In 1917–18, the Chechnyan settlement was decimated by typhus carried by passing Armenians on the last legs of their death march to Deir ez-Zor.³ Malaria along with

smallpox and cholera also reduced their numbers. Many other malarial locations were purposively given to these hardy settlers in the hope that they would be able to drain the swamps and bring the areas into successful cultivation. Gratien's examination of the relationship between malaria and settlement in the Mediterranean lowlands in the 19th century makes an important contribution to the emerging environmental historiography of the Middle East. It also extends our understanding of forced migration by shedding light on the role of nonhuman factors in historical events and the ways in which issues related to disease, climate, and geography impact the forced movement of people.

Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's article, "Circassian Refugees and the Making of Amman, 1878–1914," also breaks new ground. It considers the Circassians who settled in Greater Amman after their forced migration from the Balkans, seeing them less as victims than as facilitators of Ottoman capitalism and integral to the expansion of Ottoman networks of capital. The Ottoman state encouraged these Circassian *muhajirs* (a term that can be translated as either "refugee" or "immigrant") to settle in underpopulated areas, providing them with land to transform themselves into farmers and further incentives such as exemption from taxation and military conscription for a period of years while they integrated in their surroundings. Focused on the economic aspects of this Circassian resettlement, Hamed-Troyansky explores the actual processes of integration of the village settlements that were to become Amman as part of the regional economy of the Balqa' and the broader Ottoman Levant. He shows how a vibrant urban community emerged in the first decades of the 20th century bringing together Circassian, Syrian, and Palestinian lineages in the foundational narrative of the city of Amman. Rather than seeing the Circassians as "imperial pawns" in the power games between the Russian and Ottoman Empires, or as settlers of frontier towns designed to control nomadic incursions, Hamed-Troyansky explores how the Circassians used the legal framework of the state to their advantage. Focusing on the 1858 Land Code and the 1857 Refugee Code, he sets out the ways in which land tenure and property sales were managed in the Balqa' region. The confluence of Salti, Damascene, and Nabulsi mercantile capital and Circassian real estate resulted in the growth of commerce and urban development. By 1910 Amman was a town of a few thousand residents; by 2016 it was an urban sprawl of over 4 million. And although it benefited from the influence of new, more numerous waves of refugees (Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians), it was the economic basis laid out by the Circassian *muhajirs*, together with Levantine merchants, that was crucial to its growth.

At the end of empire, mass expulsion, displacement, and dispossession reached higher levels than could ever have been imagined. World War I, the "war to end all wars," saw the creation of Woodrow Wilson's dream articulated in the fourteenth of his Fourteen Points. President Wilson wanted a "general association of nations" that provided a forum for solving international crises with diplomacy instead of bullets.⁴ The realization of this point was the creation of the League of Nations in 1920 as a system of collective security, cooperation, and peacebuilding or monitoring of world peace. Ironically, although these Fourteen Points were enthusiastically received in Europe where the notion of self-determination was implemented, it did not extend beyond Europe and left the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in neocolonial relations with the Allied powers. It is this setting that Laura Robson addresses in "Refugees and the Case for International Authority in the Middle East: The League of Nations and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East Compared."

The member states of the League of Nations did not include the United States as a Republican Congress chose to reject Woodrow Wilson's handiwork as a Democratic President. Thus, the League was dominated by the European powers that were eager to extend their colonial and neocolonial reach. Having decided that the Kingdom of Greater Syria (1918–20) was not fit to be an independent nation, it divided up the territory between British and French Mandatory authority to bring these peoples to full independence. By adopting the Balfour Declaration into its covenant in 1923, the League made clear that it was institutionalizing new forms of international authority in the Middle East. One of its first steps in this direction was the setting up of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees in 1920 and proceeding to appoint the Norwegian humanitarian, Fridtjof Nansen, to be its first high commissioner. Nansen attempted the return and resettlement of the 800,000 Russians who had been stripped of their citizenship by Lenin in 1921. The Nansen passport was issued to refugees and other stateless people to allow them to move freely in Europe and among the other forty countries that recognized the passport in the search for work to support themselves and their families.

In the Middle East, however, as Robson makes clear, a different set of goals was emerging. Rather than permit the refugees in the region freedom of travel to find employment as was being arranged in Europe, a containment policy seemed to take hold with the mainly Armenian and Assyrian refugees pushed into discreet ethnic blocks in permanent enclaves on outskirts of cities and certain rural areas. This policy was intended to solidify Mandatory rule and counter any expressions of Arab nationalist feelings. In 1948, following the British abandonment of its Palestine Mandate and the subsequent forced migration of nearly three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs, the new United Nations revived this concept of a refugee crisis requiring internationalist intervention. What Robson illuminates so clearly is the remarkable parallels between the League of Nations use of Armenian and Assyrian refugees after World War I and the United Nations deployment of Palestinian refugees after 1948. League and UN attempts to use refugees to establish and buttress an internationalist presence in the Middle East foundered in part because of active resistance from refugees and their host states, which forced the abandonment of schemes for land development or permanent resettlement.

Turning to the current humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, in "Middle East Encounters 69 Degrees North Latitude: Syrian Refugees and Everyday Humanitarianism in the Arctic," Nefissa Naguib reflects on the reception and accommodation of the nearly 2,000 Syrian asylum seekers to reach Norway via the Arctic passage from Russia. She articulates the local resistance of ordinary people to the harsh Norwegian government policy vis-à-vis Syrian asylum seekers. Here, where memories of deprivation during World War II are particularly strong, local people used food as an enactment of compassion to connect in very personal ways to the humanitarian enterprise.

Naguib recounts the remarkable story of how 2,000 Syrians managed to reach Norway via an Arctic route by obtaining business or study visas for Russia, then traveling through Moscow, north to Murmansk, and on to the town of Nikel where they bought bicycles which they loaded onto taxis to drive to the Russian–Norwegian frontier called Storskog, the only legal crossing point between Norway and Russia. The refugees then cycled across the border, circumventing laws on both sides. Russia did not allow people to cross the border on foot, and Norway did not permit drivers to carry people across

without documents. But neither state had any rules against cycling across the border. Once the refugees crossed into Norway, the Norwegian police would collect the bikes in one big heap—an image of these abandoned cheap bicycles adorns the front cover of this issue—where they would be collected by a scrapyards lorry and destroyed because they did not meet Norwegian safety standards.

Although this route has since been shut down by the Norwegian government, Naguib tells a moving story of local voluntary movements' responses to this refugee crisis. With the government unwilling or unable to provide basic emergency assistance to the migrants, local people responded by setting up a movement, Refugees Welcome to Norway, wherein food was the central element of aid. Becoming both an observer and a participant in the Refugees Welcome to Norway food distribution effort, Naguib set out to understand this domestic inroad of humanitarianism and specifically the provision of food and how it came to exemplify an astounding domestic response to a crisis taking place on the other side of the globe.

The final three articles in this special issue address displaced Syrians and their reception in the neighboring states of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Seçil Dağtaş's article, "Whose *misafirs*? Negotiating Difference at the Turkish–Syrian Border," bridges the past with the present. Dağtaş seeks to understand the local view of Syrians as *misafirs* (guests) in the Hatay province, a region of Turkey which was only ceded to Turkey in 1938 by the French Mandatory authorities. "Whose guests are they," asks Meryem, one of Dağtaş's key informants. By that, she was asking were they guests of the state, or more locally emplaced as guests of the local community in the daily relations of hospitality. Displacement has been an integral part of the processes of state building in the Middle East and continues to shape the regional and national governance of difference. In focusing on the displaced from Syria, Dağtaş ably explores how these Syrians are perceived by the region's formerly displaced minorities. A comparison is made between the "guesthood" of Syrian refugees and that of the Hatay's non-Muslim communities against the backdrop of the entangled histories of their minoritization and displacement. Dağtaş reveals how the everyday hospitality of the Turkish citizen in the Hatay—with its codes of reciprocity, recognition, intimacy, and hostility—has been deployed by the Turkish state to frame its relations to citizens, minorities, and noncitizens.

In "Governance Strategies and Refugee Response: Lebanon in the Face of Syrian Displacement," Tamirace Fakhoury discusses how the Lebanese state has responded to the Syrian displacement crisis and how the resulting policy processes have constructed the relationship between the host state and the refugee. With this backdrop, Fakhoury explores the dynamics that have led to Lebanon hosting such a large number of refugees—approximately 1.1 to 1.5 million out of a Lebanese population of 4.5 million—when its own infrastructure, social policies, and management of public goods have been highly erratic and largely dysfunctional. Fakhoury develops a three-part argument for understanding the nexus between Lebanon's political repertoire and its refugee response: replication of its own style of governance and reliance of informal elite transactions; delegation of refugee assistance to alternative providers in the third sector; and state benefit from the presence of refugees.

Fakhoury argues that the Lebanese state's response, far from an unusual strategy to an "exceptional" mass influx, has built on its existing repertoire that sustained it as an "improbable nation" with its controversial system of sectarian power sharing. She shows

how political gridlock, divided loyalties over Syria's conflict, and worsening security explain the set of choices that have been made by the Lebanese political leadership in terms of policy development and inaction. Though Lebanon is often considered distinctive in its sectarian model of power sharing, like Turkey and Jordan it has resisted calls for establishing a rights-based refugee regime. Instead, a complex set of dynamics and constellation of political actors have shaped the state's responses to displacement.

In Giulia El-Dardiry's "People Eat People: The Influence of Socioeconomic Factors on Experiences of Displacement in Jordan," social divisions are not so much between refugees and citizens but rather are derived from socioeconomic, tribal, and ethno-religious factors. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2013 among Iraqis and Jordanians, it attempts to make sense of a multiplicity of factors—income, education, profession, and experiences of displacement—from the perspective of the host community and Iraqis. El-Dardiry examines how Jordanians and Iraqis drew upon an emergent socioeconomic framework that transcended state and regional identities to understand the presence of refugees in the country. At the same time, she makes clear that the ethnographic material she presents is rooted in important changes to the socioeconomic history of Jordan that occurred prior to the recent influx of Iraqis and Syrians. By taking the broad view alongside a historical perspective, El-Dardiry offers an alternative approach to understanding how connection and disconnection, solidarity and resentment, emerge—both between hosts and refugees and among refugees themselves.

Eschewing a Foucauldian analysis based on biopower and juridical statuses as well as an anthropological lens of sometimes-romanticized cross-border identifications, El-Dardiry focuses on the manner in which people who are displaced and those who are enclaved inhabit a shared context in which socioeconomic capacity plays an important part in how people live. The focus of the study is on actions of the Iraqis and Jordanians and leads the way to an understanding of how alternative solidarities and antagonisms amongst them have emerged.

The seven papers in this issue span the history of the modern Middle East and the transformation of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire into neocolonial Mandate states and then, after World War II, nation-states of varying degrees of independence. This history has witnessed the displacement and dispossession of peoples commencing with the Circassians of the Trans-Caucasus and most recently Syrians fleeing the complex civil and proxy war in their country. Hospitality and hostility have emerged as features of this displacement from within the neighboring states of the region to as far away as Norway. Within the region, Syria's neighboring states have addressed the mass influx of Syria's displaced people in political, juridical, and social terms that are deeply embedded in their own sociopolitical and economic histories.

NOTES

¹Elizabeth Colson, "Forced Migration and the Anthropological Response," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16 (2003): 1–18.

²United Nations High Commission for Refugees, "Figures at a Glance," accessed 6 July 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

³Norman N. Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 103.

⁴John Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).