

The Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait⁽¹⁾

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Introduction

The book *The Nakba and the Emergence of the Palestinian Diaspora in Kuwait* falls within the purview of academic studies on Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian diaspora. Such studies have differed in their approaches, with some focusing on suffering and the process of purification, the Nakba phase, and refugee camps and the resistance movements within them. Other approaches examine the legal conditions of Palestinian refugees under International Law and international organizations, the distinctive nature of Palestinian refugees' experience, issues of identity and integration, and other topics.⁽³⁾ In a contribution to the last two groups of academic studies, both of which involve discussion of diaspora communities generally and the Palestinian diaspora in particular, Professor of Political Science Shafiq al-Ghabra employs the technique of oral history to shed light on a topic which is still open to further research, namely, the experience of the Palestinian

diaspora in Kuwait, including its emergence and its direct association with the Palestinian Nakba of 1948.

Palestinians first began working in the Gulf states in the 1930s. In particular, the year 1936 marked a milestone, in that it was the first year in which there came to be a notable Palestinian presence in the Gulf. This was the year when – at the request of Sheikh Abdullah Jabir al-Sabah – the Mufti of Palestine, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, sent a mission of five Palestinian teachers to Kuwait.⁽⁴⁾ Waves of Palestinian migration to the Gulf increased after the Nakba of 1948 and the Naksa of 1967, particularly given the lack of work opportunities in the countries bordering directly on Palestine. Unlike other Arab states, the Arab Gulf countries have not treated Palestinians as refugees and have not granted them preferential residency privileges. Moreover, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) does not operate in any of the Gulf states.⁽⁵⁾

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3 Are Knudsen & Sari Hanafi, *Palestinian Refugees in the Levant: Identity, Space and Place*, Dima al-Sharif (trans.), Jaber Suleiman (rev. & intro.) (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015), pp. 47-48.

4 Samir al-Barghuthi, "al-Filistīniyyūn fī'l-Khalīj," *Tasamuh Magazine*, no. 19 (2007), p. 59.

5 Anis Fawzi Qasim, "The Legal and Political Status of Palestinian Expatriate Communities in Gulf Cooperation Council States," in *Buldān Majlis al-Ta'āwun li-Duwal al-Khalīj al-'Arabiyya: al-Taḥaddiyātu al-Ijtīmā'iyya wal-Iqtisādīyya* (Doha/Beirut, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2016), pp. 163-169.

In this connection, al-Ghabra discusses the experience of the Palestinian community and the socioeconomic makeup of its mechanisms of resistance in the diaspora by studying the case of Palestinians who came to Kuwait after the Nakba of 1948 as a model to understand the behavior of the Palestinian community in its various other locations. Similarly, al-Ghabra examines the strategies adopted for survival and the reconstitution of the Palestinian social fabric and networks after they were geographically uprooted and their community scattered, by focusing on the family and transnational family networks, that is to say, informal relationships and ties as a basic unit of social, cultural, and economic survival and reorganization. Herein lies the academic contribution of this book, which offers a theoretical approach to understanding stateless communities and peoples. By means of this approach, al-Gabra seeks to answer two main questions, namely: How have family ties and village/town relations functioned to preserve and rebuild the Palestinian social fabric in new states? And why have the Palestinians not integrated with the peoples of Arab host countries? Wouldn't such integration help them to forget the Nakba, which has wielded such control over their material and spiritual existence? The book is also concerned with two related sub-questions: What impact did the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait have on the relationship between Kuwaitis and Palestinians? And how did the Palestinian expatriate community lose its influence in Kuwait (p. 21)?

This book relies for its information on 110 interviews with individuals who relate personal experiences. By means of these interviews, al-Ghabra examines the role of family networks in adaptation, survival, and the documentation of the collective experience of the Palestinians of Kuwait, as well as why they came to Kuwait and how they reached the country. Such means included human smuggling across the Kuwaiti border, experiences reminiscent of those described by Ghassan Kanafani in his novel, *Men in the Sun*.⁽⁶⁾ The interviews begin with the first farmers to reach Kuwait in the 1950s. Each interview leads into another, thereby opening up new threads

of investigation and revealing the transnational Palestinian family's mechanisms of communication and the means by which the family network has both survived and restored the Palestinian social fabric (pp. 16-19). The book's methodology relies on oral history which, despite the difficulties it presents as a historical methodology, nevertheless provides direct interaction between the narrator and the researcher while drawing on memory as an aid to enriching and complementing written sources. As such, the oral history methodology is indispensable for an understanding of the experience of the Palestinian diaspora, which lacks its own archive for reasons that are well understood.

The book consists of ten chapters. In Chapter One, the author identifies the book's theoretical framework while reviewing the literature on migration and defining the principal concepts of the study. Chapter Two provides a historical introduction to the Palestinian Nakba, while Chapter Three explores the earliest migration of the Palestinian elite to Kuwait and the factors that have structured the Palestinian diaspora there. Chapter Four sheds light on the role of family cohesion and social networks in bringing about serial migration. In Chapter Five, the author moves on to discuss the distinctiveness of the migration of Palestinian farmers, including the ways in which they were smuggled into Kuwait. Chapter Six discusses the Palestinian family as a transnational system, using the stories of three Palestinian families as a case study. Chapter Seven analyzes the behavioral functions and patterns of Palestinian family networks, including collective family security, housing patterns, and practices relating to marriage. Chapter Eight addresses the forms of Palestinian solidarity in the diaspora as revealed in the emergence of village and town funds and family centers. Chapter Nine discusses the impact of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on the relationship between Palestinians and Kuwaitis, while Chapter Ten offers a reading of the future of the Palestinian diaspora in Kuwait and the difficulties it has faced since the Iraqi invasion.

6 Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1978 [1972]).

First: The Family and the Palestinian Network in Light of the Evidence

At the beginning of April 1948—before the official declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel—Zionist organizations seized most of the coastal regions of Palestine, including areas that had not been granted to the Jews under the 1947 Partition Resolution. This seizure took place through attacks known as Plan Dalet (10 March 1948), as a result of which nearly 300,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced. The Palestinians at that time were without arms or defensive capabilities, hoping to receive help from Arab countries that had reassured them of their support. Then on 9 April 1948, the Deir Yasin massacre crushed these hopes, spreading terror throughout Palestinian towns and villages, and causing many Palestinians to flee for refuge to places such as Gaza, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Similar massacres took place in other areas, including an attack on 24 April 1948 on Jaffa's Manshiyah neighborhood by a joint force of Irgun and Hagana fighters. Only a few Palestinians realized that they were setting off into exile and would not be coming back – most expected to return within days (pp. 58-61). Less than a month after the arrival of fewer than 28,000 Arab troops on 15 May, the first ceasefire had been signed. Most Palestinians had not yet left their villages. However, more massacres took place and more Palestinians were expelled by the Israelis. Similar developments occurred in Lydda and Ramle (12 and 13 July 1948) following the Arab army's sudden withdrawal. Thus, it was that after a thriving life in Palestine, the Palestinians began their long sojourn as refugees and families got dispersed in the diaspora countries, scattered and marginalized politically, economically and socially (pp. 62-63).

In this connection, al-Ghabra argues that statelessness has been a defining feature of the Palestinian experience. He notes that the Palestinians' resort to Kuwait was not a traditional refugee story: rather than heading for a more advanced country, they chose to work in an Arab country that was still in the process of developing (pp. 14-16). al-Ghabra defines statelessness as "any loss of nationality and the rights associated therewith through the revocation and withdrawal of

nationality from a given party, or its revocation as a result of ethnic cleansing and mass forced migration without permission to return as happened with the Palestinians in 1948" (p. 22). Stateless individuals become perpetual victims of political problems and global events, while lacking safety even in the event that they obtain another nationality. Some stateless individuals reject attempts at assimilation and the establishment of an alternative homeland out of a refusal to give up the historic right to their original homeland. Consequently, statelessness becomes an ongoing condition experienced by peoples in diaspora, a condition which gives rise to practices and/or institutions that enable them to survive (pp. 23-25).

In 1948, the Palestinian family was the basic unit of economic and professional life,⁽⁷⁾ in that members of a single family ran a business and passed the profession down from one generation to another. It was the basic unit of residential organization, with households expanding to become neighborhoods/villages in parallel with the expansion of the family. And it was the basic unit of political action and party organization, with families like the Husaynis and Nashashibis taking on key leadership roles (pp. 25-27). After 1948, however, the material unity of the Palestinian family was ruptured, and patterns of Palestinian integration into the social network began to change. In this context, the author discusses the network in which displaced persons become involved on two levels. The first level is the "extended network," defined by Arnold L. Epstein as "a broad set of relationships among relatives and previous residents of a single neighborhood and village, including bonds of friendship. This set is not necessarily highly cohesive overall." The second level is the "physical network," which is "a set of intense and highly organized relationships which may exist among individuals bound by ties of family, kinship, friendship, and neighborhood." Members move back and forth between these two networks in response to various factors and/or crises (pp. 38-39). The importance of the role played by the network lies in the fact that its members support one another and provide means of stability, survival, and social care. In addition, they

7 Perdigon agrees with this assessment, being of the view that the Palestinian family is an exception of sorts given that it is the ongoing institution which forms the Palestinian experience. See Sylvain Perdigon, "The One Still Surviving and Viable Institution," in Knudsen & Hanafi, pp. 315-329.

impact the family's natural life cycle, as they tend to reside close to each other and, in general, are blood relatives or natives of the same town (p. 43).

Based on a review of the theoretical literature on networks, statelessness and the family, as well as the Palestinian diaspora, al-Ghabra lays out a set of suggestions/hypotheses for the study: (1) The first Palestinian diaspora emerged in Kuwait due to the presence of suitable socioeconomic conditions. (2) The Palestinian diaspora emerged in Kuwait due to the Kuwaitis' desire to assimilate the Palestinians. (3) The Kuwaiti elite believed that the Palestinian presence would be beneficial for development and autonomy from Britain. (4) The Palestinians used the family as a primary means of human and social survival. (5) Palestinian society would have disintegrated and fused with its surrounding Arab environment had it not been for the family's role in its survival. (6) The Palestinian family dealt flexibly with the crisis by absorbing and adapting to changes. (7) A worsening of the crisis transforms the extended network into a physical network. (8) Through its networks, the Palestinian family was active in shaping its existence and social relationships. (9) The family is an independent factor which both absorbs and impacts changes (pp. 52-54).

Based on the Kuwaiti model, the author presents an anthropological analysis which draws richly on the behavioral functions and patterns of the Palestinian family network and the relationship between it and the villages and cities from which it emerged. The family network strengthens relational ties through traditional obligations and duties. Moreover, through socialization, the relationship with the original homeland endures (pp. 161-162). In order to ensure collective family security, family members would seek each other out so as to live side by side, thereby activating the physical family network and recreating the atmosphere of the traditional Palestinian village. Such phenomena show the role played by housing patterns in reinforcing networks and ensuring their continuity (pp. 163-165).

Prior to 1967, most members of the Palestinian community in Kuwait were unmarried. After 1967, however, with the increasing waves of immigrants and the formation of nuclear families in Kuwait, marital ties flourished in the diaspora community, thus leading to their institutionalization. In addition to various other social occasions, wedding celebrations came to be among the most important events for joining the various branches of a family scattered in various locations (pp. 165-170). These powerful social bonds among natives of a single village thus reflected the mechanisms of solidarity and patriotic duty toward Palestine, and the determination not to allow its memory to be lost (pp. 186-187). This preservation of memory is especially important given the fact that the memory of the post-Palestine generation is "imagined," so that their vital attachment to this imagined past is developed and maintained through the generation that lived through the Nakba.⁽⁸⁾ Consequently, activation of the family social network helps to recreate identity. For identity is not a historical given but, rather, is continuously formed anew as an intention which is modified in keeping with the collective interest.⁽⁹⁾

Given accumulating economic pressures⁽¹⁰⁾ in the 1970s coupled with the existence of both physical and extended family networks, there emerged village and town funds in the Kuwaiti diaspora—much like the funds located in former villages. These funds illustrate the expanded role of the family in the diaspora, in that the effort expended to provide economic support was familial and institutionalized, with each family member paying a monthly sum. The money would then go to help whoever in the family was in need, not only in Kuwait, but in other areas of the diaspora as well as in Palestine. Hence, the fund became transnational in nature (pp. 204-205). Another emerging phenomenon was that of the family center, or diwan, which led to the activation of the physical and extended family networks alike (pp. 206-208).

8 Anaheed Al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 114, 130-131, 156.

9 Azmi Bishara, *Ṭurūḥat 'an al-Nahḍa al-Mu'āqa* (Riyadh al-Rayyis lil-Kutub wal-Nashr, 2003), pp. 175-176.

10 According to Sari Hanafi, the refugee problem in the GCC countries is economic rather than cultural. See: Sari Hanafi, "Rethinking the Palestinians Abroad as a diaspora: The Relationship Between the diaspora and the Palestinian Territories," in: André Levy & Alex Weingrod (ed.), *Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 97-122.

Second: Migration of the Palestinian Elite

The author points out that those who first came to Kuwait did not belong to the traditional Palestinian elite, as the families of the traditional elite had lost their sources of political and economic influence after 1948 and lived in hope of returning. This shrunk their investments and increased their liabilities, forcing them to look for work as others had been forced to do (pp. 112-113). The author lists six responses which served to structure the Palestinian diaspora in Kuwait, that is to say, to transform it from temporary exile into a lasting diaspora. First, after the destruction that followed upon the Nakba and the attempt to adjust to the conditions of refugee life, Palestinians began searching for work, and their choice of location fell on the Arab countries. In order to succeed, therefore, they would have to meet the needs which these countries faced. As a result, hundreds of educated Palestinians headed for the Gulf countries, including Kuwait, between 1948 and the early 1950s, given that Kuwait was "the most open of the Gulf states at that time, the most pan-Arab, and the most prepared for advancement and progress since the pre-oil decades." The Kuwaiti elite viewed the arrival of the Arab Palestinians as a factor that would help to preserve Kuwait's Arabness as it established its autonomy from Britain. Second, after reaching Kuwait, this educated Palestinian elite began building ties that would lay a foundation for their new society. Third, after securing jobs in Kuwait, they were moved by professional concerns to gain, and keep, the confidence of their employers by relying on their competencies, and in this way they were able to obtain permanent positions. Fourth, based on the aforementioned preoccupation, there developed a concern to improve their educational level as a requirement for survival. Fifth, in a particularly pivotal response, Palestinians embraced their family responsibilities by rescuing and reuniting family members. Sixth, the Palestinian elite succeeded in reclaiming and giving expression to their identity (pp. 69-72).

In the context of relating a number of experiences he has encountered, al-Ghabra notes that social networks, including personal and familial relationships and acquaintances, played a significant role in helping people find work, thus contributing to the migration

of many Palestinians to Kuwait, most of them in their early to mid-twenties (pp. 74-80). Palestinians contributed by leaving a developmental mark on Kuwait, whether economically, administratively, militarily, or educationally. They also made up a significant portion of the workforce. In 1965, for example, 49 percent of the employees in the public sector, and 41.4 percent of the private sector, were Palestinians. With the introduction of the government's long-term policy of "Kuwaitization" of the public sector, however, numerous Palestinians resigned from high-level government positions and shifted to the private sector (pp. 84-88).

al-Ghabra is of the view that were it not for family cohesion, the collective Palestinian presence in Kuwait would not have endured. For what brought the first newcomers to Kuwait was their quest to rescue their families and improve their living conditions, as well as to support their siblings in their educational endeavors. On this point, particularly due to Palestinians' poor financial situation, Palestinian women began to pursue a similar path by going abroad, in some cases to Kuwait, and leaving home for the first time in order to support their families. In this way, the traditional view of the woman began to change after 1948. At the same time, the first Palestinians to arrive in Kuwait formed a kind of bridge which, by establishing a social network in the country, enabled more and more Palestinian to secure work, and it was this that brought about what we are terming "serial migration." Yet, despite the first arrivals' adjustment to the material situation after the Nakba, they did not adjust psychologically. In fact, their bond with Palestine and their dream of returning was what gave backbone to the Palestinians' collective existence in Kuwait and preserved their identity, which rested in large part on resistance to the Zionist enterprise and created the human connections needed to change the reality of the Nakba. Increased Arab marginalization of the Palestinian community and the need to justify their existence politically led also to the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 and, in 1965, to the launching of the modern Palestinian revolution (pp. 107-109).

al-Ghabra offers an important anthropological analysis of the political role of the social structures and bonds which have attempted to compensate for the condition of statelessness suffered by the Palestinians. Nevertheless, he overstates the role of the family and the social network in creating and preserving identity. The family alone does not create a collective patriotic identity. In order to understand the Palestinian community's success in preserving

its unity and cohesion in the various regions where it has found itself, we must recognize the role played by political institutions, the most important and prominent of which has been the PLO. Similarly, in the case of Kuwait, we must not disregard the role of the Kuwaiti state which, unlike many other countries, has adopted policies that support the formation of Palestinian political and institutional frameworks on its soil since even before the occupation of Palestine.

Third: Migration of Palestinian Farmers

The situation of Palestinian farmers was more difficult than that of the educated social sectors, since most farmers had no profession other than agriculture and, for this reason, the economic choices before them were quite limited. On the social plane, these farmers had been accustomed before 1948 to living in accordance with the model of the extended family in which parents and married children live in the same house, and where the village is made up of a number of families. This sector had difficulty adjusting when its members arrived in Kuwait in the early 1950s because of their having shifted to other professions, and because of the impossibility of obtaining visas from the British, as a result of which, they had to be smuggled into the country. What enabled them to survive and find work was the fact that they sought help from the social network. In the 1960s and 1970s, farmers and their families made up 60 percent of

the Palestinian expatriate community in Kuwait (pp. 119-121).

These farmers were able to find employment thanks to the efforts of sympathetic Kuwaiti officials, and of the educated Palestinians who had led the way for them. Most of the farmers now coming to Kuwait were in their early twenties or younger and lacked experience in anything but agriculture. However, they would be appointed as assistants and trained in new professions. At the same time, Palestinians worked to earn secondary school diplomas and college degrees while financing the educations of their younger siblings, then helping to bring them to Kuwait. They had seen that more job opportunities were available to those with a better education, and over time, Palestinians would become an educated professional class (pp. 135-141).

Fourth: Palestinians' Dilemma: The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

al-Ghabra posits that despite the close ties between Palestinians and Kuwaitis, various anxieties began to roil this relationship. After the October War of 1973, Kuwaitis began to worry that the regional political solution might lead to Palestinians remaining in Kuwait at a time when they made up more than half of Kuwait's population. In the 1970s, Kuwaiti authorities began imposing restrictions on visas, work permits, and educational opportunities for non-Kuwaitis. In parallel, they began enforcing the policy of Kuwaitization in the government sector, to which the Palestinian civil presence was a competitor. When Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990,

Palestinians were the most influential non-citizens in Kuwait, while Kuwait was more positive in its treatment of Palestinians than any other Arab country, and the most supportive of the Palestinian intifada of 1987 (pp. 239-243).

When the crisis erupted in August 1990, the Palestinian community in Kuwait responded to it in various ways in view of the conflict between nationalist values and practical interests. Influenced by their particular experiences, Palestinians were divided into the following three groups: (1) Palestinians who sympathized with Iraq in varying degrees, given that this event might benefit the Arabs and the Palestinian

cause. Most members of this group suffered from poor economic circumstances, and their stance became all the more vehement when Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwaiti was tied to Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. (2) Palestinians who opposed the invasion and who sympathized with Kuwait, certain of the rashness of the step taken by Iraq. At the start of the invasion, as many as 30 percent of the Palestinians in Kuwait took this position, after which the percentage began to rise, especially in light of the treatment many Palestinians suffered at the hands of the Iraqi army and Iraq's clear intentions behind the invasion. (3) Thirty percent of the Palestinians in Kuwait took a neutral stance, convinced that Iraq would leave Kuwait in a matter of days. This stance was based on the desire not to get involved, as this group had not taken part in Palestinian political activities even prior to the invasion. However, those who had initially taken a noncommittal stance turned completely against the invasion after seeing the practices engaged in by Iraqi soldiers (pp. 244-248).

Although this categorization is reasonable, a methodological problem presents itself here. The question is: How can Palestinian public opinion be measured, and how can one come out with generalizations and percentages based on a mere 115 personal interviews and conversations? The same objection applies to the statistical observations made by the book in its categorization of the 200,000 Palestinians who left Kuwait during the invasion,

and whom the author describes as being opposed to the occupation (pp. 259-260). The oral history methodology does not allow one to draw statistical conclusions, and it is only with difficulty that it can help us to fill in research gaps which cannot be filled through the use of social science methodologies due to the absence of an archive. For this reason, studies which rely principally on oral history must be approached with reservations, and definitive conclusions should be avoided.

By early 1992, the number of Palestinians in Kuwait had shrunk from 150,000 to 30,000. These individuals, be they Palestinians with Jordanian passports or Palestinian holders of an Egyptian travel document, succeeded in staying thanks to their Kuwaiti sponsors. However, this number does not include the hundreds of illegally resident holders of the Egyptian travel document who had nowhere to go. Nor did this number include Palestinians who held other nationalities, such as Kuwaiti or American, for example. Security restrictions (the suspicion of having cooperated with the Iraqi regime during the invasion) continued to prevent many Palestinians from finding employment, particularly among Egyptian travel document-holders (pp. 292-295). After 1991, Kuwait began to treat Palestinians with Jordanian passports as Jordanians. Official relations between the Palestinians and Kuwait were restored in 2001, and in 2013, the Palestinian Embassy was opened in Kuwait (pp. 296-299).

Conclusion

In this book, Shafiq al-Ghabra offers a panoramic view of his topic based on a field study and recorded interviews dealing with an undocumented aspect of the life of the Palestinian community in Kuwait. In so doing, he sheds light on the central role of the Palestinian family and transnational social networks which have served to ensure socioeconomic survival while contributing to the preservation and recreation of identity. Through his case study of Kuwait, which is distinct from other destination countries in which Palestinians have remained, the author offers a thesis that might be used as a theoretical framework for a

study of Palestinians' experience in other areas of the diaspora. After discussing various aspects of social solidarity and the dynamics of social networks, the book touches on unstudied topics in connection with the Palestinian diaspora, including farmers' migration to Kuwait and the methods by which they were smuggled into the country. Through a discussion of the relationship between Kuwaitis and Palestinians, the author sets out to debunk fallacies surrounding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait while shedding new light on the solidarity between the Kuwaiti and Palestinian people during and after the invasion.

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