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Struggling to Fit: The Case of Saudi-Born Millennial Returnees of Palestinian Origin to Jordan **

صراع التكيف: حالة مواليد السعودية الفلسطينية من جيل الألفية العائدين إلى الأردن

Abstract: This paper examines the ramifications of the Expat Dependent Levy Taxes (EDLT), implemented by the Saudi government in July 2017, on the Palestinian community in Saudi Arabia. It focuses on Saudi-born millennials of Palestinian origin (SBMPOs) belonging to the second and third generations of families who originally migrated to Saudi Arabia for work. The autoethnographic paper narrates the personal experiences that prompted the forced return of SBMPOs to Jordan following the imposition of EDLT. It further examines their psychological acculturation phases, illustrating the transformations in their cultural identity before and after relocating to Jordan. The paper introduces a novel theoretical framework that conceptualizes acculturation processes as interconnected life stages, with cultural identity as a mirror reflecting these changes. The nuances of this complex and multilayered identity become apparent over time. The paper underscores the profound psychological and cultural repercussions of EDLT on SBMPOs, emphasizing its impact on their sense of belonging after departing from Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Expat Dependent Levy Taxes; Palestinian Community; Saudi Arabia; Jordan; Acculturation; Cultural Identity; Belonging.

ملخص: تبحث الدراسة في أثر فرض المملكة العربية السعودية ضريبة مرافقي العاملين الوافدين، التي طُبِّقَت في تموز/ يوليو 2017، في الجالية الفلسطينية المقيمة في المملكة، ولا سيما الفلسطينيين من جيل الألفية المولودين هناك، والذين ينتمون إلى الجيلين الثاني والثالث من الأسر الفلسطينية المهاجرة للعمل. وباستخدام الإثنوغرافيا الذاتية منهجًا للبحث، تعرض الدراسة التجارب الشخصية التي دفعت بهذا الجيل للعودة القسرية إلى الأردن بعد فرض تلك الضريبة. وتستكشف مراحل التوافق النفسي، في محاولة لتبيين التحولات الطارئة على هوية هذا الجيل الثقافية قبل انتقاله إلى الأردن وبعده. وتعتمد في هذا إطارًا نظريًا جديدًا، يتصور عمليات التوافق بوصفها مراحل حياتية متداخلة، تشكّل فيها الهوية الثقافية مرآة تعكس هذه التغييرات. وترى الدراسة أنّ ملامح هذه الهوية المعقدة والمتعددة الطبقات تتبيّن مع مرور الوقت. وتبرز الدراسة التأثيرات النفسية والثقافية الهائلة لتلك الضرائب في فلسطينيي جيل الألفية المنتقلين إلى الأردن، وأثرها في شعورهم بالانتماء بعد مغادرتهم السعودية.

كلمات مفتاحية: ضريبة مرافقي العاملين الوافدين؛ الجالية الفلسطينية؛ المملكة العربية السعودية؛ الأردن؛ التوافق؛ الهوية الثقافية؛ الانتماء.

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Introduction

The first major Palestinian migration to Saudi Arabia followed the events of 1948 and 1967, coinciding with the Gulf's oil boom. These new migrants significantly contributed to Saudi Arabia's development in multiple sectors, receiving preferential employment opportunities second only to Saudi citizens,¹ because their education aligned with the developmental needs of the country.²

In July 2017, Saudi Arabia implemented the Expat Dependent Levy Tax (EDLT) and other policy changes, which placed financial burdens on non-Saudi residents, prompting many Palestinians, including established second and third generations of Saudi-born millennials of Palestinian Origin (SBMPO), to relocate, predominantly to Jordan and Turkey.³ In this paper, I discuss the two categories of Palestinians with Jordanian documentation falling under the broader umbrella of SBMPOs. My research indicates no significant differences in cultural identity between either category. These are Jordanians of Palestinian origin possessing full Jordanian citizenship with national numbers,⁴ enjoying government privileges, including employment priority, subsidized higher education, and complete ownership rights (for those with permanent residence in Jordan between 1948 and 1967), and Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank holding temporary Jordanian passports without national numbers, characterized by limited rights and the permanent risk of being stripped of their passports.⁵

I use a dual methodology comprising of autoethnography and snowball sampling interviews, leveraging my personal experience. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.⁶ As a 33-year-old Palestinian man, born and raised in Saudi Arabia, and having completed higher education in Jordan, my journey offers an insider's perspective on Palestinian, Jordanian, and Saudi societies and cultures.⁷ This unique standpoint plays a crucial role in framing and moulding my analysis, results, and conclusions, aligning with the applicable theoretical framework.⁸

¹ Pamela Ann Smith, "The Palestinian Diaspora, 1948-1985," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (Spring 1986), pp. 90-108; Abdulhadi Khalaf, Omar AlShehawi & Adam Hanieh (eds.), *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Taher Labadi, "The Palestinian Diaspora and the State-Building Process," *Research*, Arab Reform Initiative, 5/12/2018, accessed on 29/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/hlvEM>

² Are Hovdenak, "On the Gulf Road: Palestinian Adaptations to Labour Migration," in: Are Hovdenak et al., *Constructing Order: Palestinian Adaptations to Refugee Life* (Oslo: FAFO Institute for Applied Social Science, 1997); Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); John Chalcraft, "Monarchy, Migration and Hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula," *LSE Global Governance*, no. 12, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, London School of Economics and Political Science (October 2010), p. 43; Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010), pp. 53-94; Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, George Holoch (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³ For those with greater financial means, the United States and Canada were more viable choices.

⁴ The national number in Jordan is a 10-digit code given to every citizen who holds Jordanian citizenship, distinguishing Jordanian citizens from others. Palestinians who hold temporary Jordanian documents are not entitled to this number. Thus, this number becomes a marker of Jordanian citizenship, which can only be taken away if the holder is stripped of their citizenship.

⁵ Oroub El-Abed, "Palestinian Refugees in Jordan," in: *FMO Research Guide: Palestinian Refugees in Jordan* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2004); Oroub El-Abed, "Palestinian Refugees of Egypt: What Exit Options are Left for Them?" *Refugee: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, vol. 22, no 2 (2005), pp. 15-30.

⁶ See Appendix (1) for details of the respondents who were interviewed for this study.

⁷ Some may have reservations about the sharp divisions of these three cultures due to the linguistic and religious commonalities. Despite the validity of this reservation, these commonalities do not negate the existence of characteristics that distinguish each culture from the other, and I will indicate some of these determinants and characteristics in the course of this study. The clear differences include the organic connection of Palestinian cultural identity to the occupation of their land, to where they are forbidden from returning. The Saudi cultural identity is also linked to the specificities of the Gulf, and both Saudi and Jordanian cultural identities have an intrinsic connection to nomadism as an ultimate reference. For more see: Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Al-Rasheed.

⁸ Bogusia Temple & Alys Young, "Qualitative Research and Translation Dilemmas," *Qualitative Research*, vol. 4, no. 2 (August 2004), pp. 161-178; Margaret U. D'Silva et al., "Reflexivity and Positionality in Researching African-American Communities: Lessons from the Field," *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2016).

In this article, I adopt John Berry's⁹ theory of Fourfold Acculturation to examine the life transitions of SBMPOs, focusing on the psychological acculturation process intertwined with immigration and cultural identity formation. Acculturation occurs through interactions with a new group, resulting in cultural changes and a shift in cultural identity.¹⁰ The four acculturation strategies – integration, marginalization, assimilation, and separation/segregation – are viewed as stages in an individual's life, influenced by factors like changes in host society policy. The acculturation process itself is seen as a dual-dimensional adaptation involving the preservation or rejection of an individual's culture of origin and the culture of the host society.¹¹ Thus, adaptation becomes an outcome influenced by the strategies individuals adopt throughout the acculturation process.¹²

Drawing from my personal experience as an SBMPO I explore the psychological acculturation phases experienced by SBMPOs both before leaving Saudi Arabia and upon returning to Jordan. Throughout the discussion, I elucidate the representation of Saudi culture in SBMPO identity, its post-relocation impact, and how their feeling of belonging or non-belonging was influenced by this forced displacement,¹³ considering the involuntary nature of their departure amid new financial constraints in the country.

I posit that Palestinians in Saudi Arabia undergo a unique diasporic experience, navigating two distinct displacements, with many perceiving their host countries as transitional stages rather than permanent destinations. Moreover, I propose a new theoretical framework that links acculturation processes as interconnected phases or stages of the individual's life. This approach examines how changes in host policies influence the chosen acculturation means within the Palestinian community. I employ cultural identity as a medium to illuminate how these acculturation changes manifest over time, contributing to the formation of a multilayered identity.

The Literature on Palestinian Diaspora

The term "diaspora" denotes the dispersal or dispersion of a specific group from their homeland to various parts of the world, typically due to forced displacement. The diasporic experience compels dispersed communities to engage with their new host societies. In the case of Palestinians, their diverse diasporic experiences, marked by multiple displacements, have required them to encounter and interact, or to acculturate, with different societies during each displacement. While various works contribute to our understanding of Palestinian diasporas,¹⁴ the majority focus on Palestine's neighbouring states, leaving a significant gap in the literature regarding the Palestinian diasporic experience in the Gulf.

⁹ John W. Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," *Applied Psychology*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 1997), pp. 5-34.

¹⁰ Sunil Bhatia & Anjali Ram, "Rethinking 'Acculturation' in Relation to Diasporic Cultures and Postcolonial Identities," *Human Development*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2001), pp. 1-18; Seth J. Schwartz, Marilyn J. Montgomery & Ervin Briones, "The Role of Identity in Acculturation Among Immigrant People: Theoretical Propositions, Empirical Questions, and Applied Recommendations," *Human Development*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2006), pp. 1-30.

¹¹ Berry, pp. 5-34.

¹² Jean S. Phinney et al., "Ethnic Identity, Immigration, and Wellbeing: An Interactional Perspective," *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 57, no. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 493-510; John W. Berry, "Acculturation and Adaptation: A General framework," in: Wayne H. Holtzman & Thomas H. Bornemann (eds.), *Mental Health of Immigrants and Refugees* (Austin, TX: Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, University of Texas, 1990), pp. 90-102; Berry, "Immigration," pp. 5-34.

¹³ It should be noted here that the nature of indirect coercion does not negate the coerciveness of the displacement of the Palestinians of Saudi Arabia to Jordan. Therefore, coercion, whether direct or indirect, is considered a determinant of forced displacement. Many Palestinians, specifically those I interviewed, did not choose to leave the country voluntarily, but were exposed to structurally violent policies that forced them to make the difficult choice to leave. See: Ali Ali, "Conceptualizing Displacement: The Importance of Coercion," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 49, no. 5 (2023), pp. 1083-1102. Furthermore, much of migration studies literature considers the distinction between the concepts of forced and voluntary migration to be highly ambiguous. The two are closely related, often overlapping in a way that renders the process of distinguishing them difficult. See: Marta Bivand Erdal & Ceri Oeppen, "Forced to Leave? The Discursive and Analytical Significance of Describing Migration as Forced and Voluntary," in: Francis L. Collins & Jørgen Carling, *Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 73-90.

¹⁴ Khalidi; Juliane Hammer, *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005); Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

In the context of neighbouring Arab states, numerous studies have explored either directly or indirectly various facets of the Palestinian diaspora's acculturation. These investigations have explored host policies, such as legal status and Palestinian response,¹⁵ Palestinians' selected acculturation processes in countries where they relocate,¹⁶ and identity representations and formations, encompassing national identity and the impact of "refugeeness" on the social fabric of Palestinian society.¹⁷

The concept of identity occupies a central position in studies on the Palestinian diaspora worldwide, helping to measure how well individuals integrate with their host society while maintaining loyalty to their roots.¹⁸ Some studies demonstrated signs of integration and transnationalism in the formation of a global identity and maintaining connection to home across generations,¹⁹ while others have scrutinized the role of repeated displacement and statelessness in the formation of identity.²⁰ Additionally, further research has investigated the relationship between transnationalism and the assimilation of Palestinians into their host societies.²¹

Shafeeq Ghabra's pioneering research on the Palestinian diaspora in Kuwait represents one of the earliest studies in this area outside the neighbouring Arab states.²² He examines the initial Palestinian diaspora in Kuwait, providing a thorough examination of the acculturation process within the Palestinian diasporic experience there. Ghabra's contribution highlights a successful acculturation narrative for Palestinians during the 1950s and 1960s, characterized by integration. In Kuwait, Palestinians relied on informal networks, such as family, friends, neighbours, and former town connections, to redefine and preserve their Palestinian identity. This intricate social fabric not only safeguarded the Palestinian existence but also played a vital role in shaping the country's social, economic, and political development.²³

Following their displacement from Kuwait, Kuwaiti-Palestinians underwent diverse acculturation processes, either returning to Jordan or immigrating beyond the Arab world. Le Troquer and Al-Oudat's examination of Kuwaiti-Palestinians returning to Jordan sheds light on psychological and economic factors that hindered their acculturation process.²⁴ The study reveals a sense of exclusion and comparisons of livelihood standards between Jordan and Kuwait. Nonetheless, they did not emphasize the shared identity of

¹⁵ Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinians in Lebanon: Harsh Present, Uncertain Future," *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1995), pp. 245-263; Julie Peteet, "From Refugees to Minority: Palestinians in Post-War Lebanon," *Middle East Report*, no. 200, Middle East Research and Information Project (July-September 1996), accessed on 29/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/pU469>; Oroub El-Abed, "The Discourse of Guesthood: Forced Migrants in Jordan," in: Anita Hausermann Fabos & Riina Isotalo (eds.), *Managing Muslim Mobilities: Between Spiritual Geographies and the Global Security Regime* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 81-100.

¹⁶ Jaber Suleiman, *Marginalised Community: The Case of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon* (Brighton: Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex, 2006), p. 3; Hadeel Fawadleh, "Migrations and Diaspora: The Experience of Palestinian Christians in Jordan and the United States of America," PhD Dissertation in Geography, Université d'Angers, 2017; Yafa El Masri, "72 Years of Homemaking in Waiting Zones: Lebanon's 'Permanently Temporary' Palestinian Refugee Camps," *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 5 (2020).

¹⁷ Laurie A. Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 46-61; Hillel Frisch, "Ethnicity, Territorial Integrity, and Regional Order: Palestinian Identity in Jordan and Israel," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 34, no. 3 (August 1997), pp. 257-269; Zeina Halabi, "Exclusion and Identity in Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps: A Story of Sustained Conflict," *Environment & Urbanization*, vol. 16, no. 2 (October 2004), pp. 39-48.

¹⁸ Stephanie Anna Lodo, "Palestinian Perceptions of Home and Belonging in Britain: Negotiating between Rootedness and Mobility," *Identities*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2017), pp. 1-20; Helena Lindholm, "Emotional Identity and Pragmatic Citizenship: Being Palestinian in Sweden," *Diaspora Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (November 2020), pp. 133-151.

¹⁹ Esmat Zaidan, *Palestinian Diaspora in Transnational Worlds: Intergenerational Differences in Negotiating Identity, Belonging and Home*, The Forced Migration and Refugee Unit (Birzeit: The Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies, Birzeit University, 2012), accessed on 29/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/exISY>

²⁰ Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh, "On the Threshold of Statelessness: Palestinian Narratives of Loss and Erasure," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2016), pp. 301-321.

²¹ Abed Monawar, "Cultural Assimilation among Palestinian Immigrants in New Mexico," PhD Dissertation in Anthropology, Texas Tech University, 2006; Tom Brocket, "From 'in-betweenness' to 'Positioned Belongings': Second-Generation Palestinian-Americans Negotiate the Tensions of Assimilation and Transnationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 43, no. 16 (December 2020), pp. 135-154.

²² Shafeeq Ghabra, *al-Nakba wa-Nushū' al-Shatāt al-Filasīnī fī al-Kuwayt* (Doha/ Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2018).

²³ Laurie A. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution building and the Search for State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

²⁴ Yann Le Troquer & Rozenn Hommery Al-Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan: The Palestinians' Third Exodus," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Spring 1999), pp. 37-51.

Palestinians who lived in the Gulf. Rothenberg's ethnographic work on the Kuwaiti-Palestinian community in Canada highlights this shared identity, particularly among those who directly immigrated from Kuwait and other Gulf states, setting them apart from other Palestinian groups that arrived from Palestine and other Arab states.²⁵

The literature on the Palestinian diasporic experience focuses on identity formation and acculturation, exploring how Palestinians survive and interact with host policies. Key themes include integration and transnationalism, underpinning how individuals balance their connection to both their host societies and their roots. However, the literature also reveals a tendency to employ analytical and conceptual tools that often focus on a singular type of acculturation, such as assimilation, integration, or marginalization. These tools scrutinize the Palestinian experience by envisioning its representations and intersections with identity, host policies, or the different means of maintaining a sense of belonging, connection, and home. Despite this extensive research, there is a notable lack of research on Palestinians in Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia.

Changes in Host Policies: A Brief History of Saudization

In 2011, the Saudi government introduced the *Niṭāqāt* (lit. “ranges”) program designed to increase the proportion of Saudis in the workforce.²⁶ This initiative marked a revival of earlier Saudization efforts dating back to the 1980s, which had previously yielded limited success.²⁷ Before 2011, Saudization sought the localization of 30% of the workforce in private companies with 20 or more employees.

In later years, the responsibility of Saudization shifted to national governmental representatives who issued stricter laws to limit the number of foreigners in the workforce. These regulations encompass “charges for work licenses or Iqamas, retreat-reentry visa expenses, and the issuance of occupation visas”.²⁸ It is noteworthy that the Saudization program *Niṭāqāt* essentially aligns with the social hierarchy of the Gulf states. Foreigners, constituting a significant percentage of the population, are subject to a structure of policies that tend to systematically enclose them in a lower socio-economic status, including heavy taxation, while citizens are exempted from the costly taxes and receive subsidies to pay the rest of them.

This, in turn, elevates citizens – the *Khalījīs*/Saudis – to a higher and carefully guarded social status above most expatriates, including those from more developed countries.²⁹ This system has become increasingly visible to many foreigners living in Saudi Arabia in recent years. In an interview I conducted with Sameh, a 34-year-old engineer and SBMPO, he stated:

I have reflected on the last 15 years in Saudi Arabia and found that before 2015, foreigners were living on an equal footing with Saudis in terms of life quality and social acceptance. But after that, things changed. Life in Saudi Arabia became harder as financial difficulties started to be unbearable [...] Saudis are living a very luxurious life. Under-skilled Saudis take positions with huge salaries just because they are Saudis ... On my last visit, I went to a new place named the Boulevard in Riyadh. I did not see any foreigners, only natives were there because no one else could afford it.³⁰

²⁵ Celia E. Rothenberg, “Ties that Bind: The Gulf Palestinian Community in Toronto,” *Communal/Plural*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2000), pp. 237-255.

²⁶ “al-Su’ūdiyya Tuṭliq Barnāmaj ‘Niṭāqāt’ al-Muṭawwar li-Tawfīr 340 Alf Waṣīfa,” *Al Arabīya*, 23/5/2021, accessed on 25/12/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/4dbXKPKQ>

²⁷ James Wynbrandt, *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010); Helen Perrin, “The Nitaqat Program: What Employers in Saudi Arabia Need to Know,” *Global Workplace Insider*, 11/11/2013, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/jkyBH>; Mahmoud Kamal Abouraija, “Saudization Framework and Unemployment in Saudi Arabia: Antecedents and Consequences,” *European Journal of Business and Management*, vol. 6, no. 17 (2014), pp. 199-207.

²⁸ Abouraija, p. 199.

²⁹ Christopher M. Davidson, “Expatriates and the Gulf Monarchies: Politics, Security and the Arab spring,” *Asian Affairs*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2014), pp. 270-288.

³⁰ Sameh, Personal Interview, Amman, 2021.

The program introduced a new method of evaluating private companies, linking the required Saudization percentage to the number of employees. In addition, a hierarchical system for companies developed where those with a higher proportion of Saudi workers receive more government support and were subject to fewer restrictions. Companies are classified into four categories based on the Saudization score, ranging from the lowest red, up to yellow, green, and premium.³¹ Those in the red and yellow categories face limitations on expansion, hiring new foreign workers, and participating in new governmental opportunities such as bidding for tenders or securing contracts with governmental entities.³²

Following the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, King Salman ascended to the throne, appointing his son Mohammed bin Salman as defence minister and later, in 2017, as crown prince. Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen in 2015 with “Operation Decisive Storm”, imposing economic burdens on the country.³³ However, declining oil prices, governmental disputes, and unemployment among highly educated Saudis represented major domestic challenges,, posing a threat to the aspirations of the Crown Prince, who sought popularity among the Saudi youth and financial liquidity to fund his ambitious projects. He subsequently developed “Vision 2030”, to diversify income sources and reduce oil dependence through economic reforms and taxes, implemented in 2017.³⁴

This section explores the sociopolitical and economic contexts that prompted the imposition of the EDLT in 2017. The tax charges foreign residents a monthly fee for every registered dependent³⁵ they support, at a rate that increased over the four years following its imposition³⁶ until 2021, when stabilized at the highest rate which is equal to 400 SR (106.67 USD) monthly. Failure to pay the fees results in accumulating fines, ultimately preventing the renewal of the *Iqāma* (residence permit) and leading to immediate exclusion from all public services. This includes freezing bank accounts and health insurance, rejecting transactions by governmental entities, and potential deportation. Consequently, numerous defaulters and their families grapple with substantial, growing governmental debts, unable to meet payment deadlines.

Over the past five years, Anwar’s family has faced considerable hardship, beginning in 2017 with the implementation of the EDLT. Anwar elaborated on this by saying:

Initially, these fees started at 100 SR and increased to 400 SR in 2021, a rate that persists. Renewing residency now requires settling these fees, along with the expense of medical insurance, costing individuals 3,000-5,000 SR [approximately 800-1,333 USD] annually, depending on age and gender. The past three to four years have been the most challenging period we’ve experienced in our life in Saudi Arabia because of the financial burdens. They have put us under relentless psychological pressure; it has become an everyday part of our lives. The cumulative impact of these costs has exhausted and financially strained us. You can imagine that anyone earning a salary of 5,000 SR [1,333 USD] is now considered very poor – a stark contrast to the economic conditions ten years ago when such a salary was sufficient for many families.³⁷

³¹ A newer version of the Niṭāqāt program, under the name “The Updated Niṭāqāt Program”, was introduced after this paper was written, and launched on 13 May 2021. For more on this, see: “al-Dalīl al-Ijrā’ī: Barnāmaj Niṭāqāt al-Muṭawwar, al-Iṣdār 2,” *The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development*, accessed on 30/4/2024, at:

<https://shorturl.at/gTVX8>

³² Al-Asfour & Khan, p. 199.

³³ May Darwich, “The Saudi Intervention in Yemen,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 2018), pp. 125-142; Wynbrandt.

³⁴ Carolyn Canham, “Saudi Arabia Vision 2030,” *World Economic Forum*, 20/1/2017, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/jkW12>

³⁵ The definition of dependent encompasses the “wife or wives (two to four), children, parents, in-laws, and housekeepers”. See: Aarti Nagraj, “Saudi’s Expat Dependent Fee: Everything You Need to Know,” *Gulf Business*, 6/7/2017, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/hGIU1>

³⁶ Refer to Appendix 2 for more details on the amount that has to be paid by an immigrant family based on the number of dependents for an average non-Saudi family in Saudi Arabia with six dependents (a real average for immigrant families, particularly Palestinians holding Jordanian documents with or without national numbers).

³⁷ Anwar, Phone Conversation, 2021.

These numbers hit the non-Saudi middle to lower classes hard; the costs of living exceeded half of the average middle-class income, and all of the lower-class income. Additional financial responsibilities such as rent, education costs for children, and utility bills, leave minimal to no disposable income or savings potential. The huge sums of money that every family must pay for living in Saudi Arabia have compelled many non-Saudis to leave the country or send their families abroad. For example, my extended family (the families of both my maternal and paternal aunts and uncles) is now dispersed across six countries: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt. Moreover, most of my former colleagues in Saudi Arabia have either relocated or sent their families to Jordan.

In this context, Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh argue that the Gulf governments employ two methods to control the demographic imbalance caused by the oil industry and its substantial revenues.³⁸ The first is creating a neo-patrimonial system,³⁹ specifically to inhibit the formation of a cohesive society. Under this system, citizenship guarantees exclusive access to legal, economic, and political rights, in exchange for loyalty to the ruling family. The second method is limiting the political and economic rights of the ostracized “Other”. Many welfare state privileges, such as building capital and owning property, became an exclusive right for citizens only. Therefore, socio-economic and political systems became a tool to control both citizens and foreigners. This structure played a pivotal role in prohibiting the integration of different communities into the national society.

The implementation of the EDLT, as part of the extensive history of Saudization, can be interpreted as a form of demographic control. Non-Saudis, constituting over half of the total workforce in Saudi Arabia in 2016, were subject to forced displacement through this process. Ghassan Badakok, in his column for *Okaz*,⁴⁰ outlines two advantages of EDLT: “The replacement of (some) departing foreigners with citizens, especially those working in administrative positions [...] [and] starting to correct the imbalance in the population after the percentage of non-Saudis reached 40% of the total population”.⁴¹

Consequently, the implementation of the EDLT forced many Palestinians with Jordanian documentation who had been living in Saudi Arabia for decades to leave due to their inability to meet the new financial requirements. Their primary destinations were Turkey and Jordan, while some of the more financially well-off stayed in Saudi Arabia or migrated to European states, Canada, or the United States.

Palestinians in Saudi Arabia are not entitled to refugee status, as the Saudi government has not ratified the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol, the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, or the 1961 Convention relating to the Reduction of Statelessness.⁴² Instead, they are labelled *Ajānib* (foreigners)/*Wāfidīn* (expatriates), by both the government and the public.

Residing in Saudi Arabia for Palestinians with Jordanian documents, like all non-Saudis, is contingent upon being under the sponsorship of a citizen or local company. This system is known as the *Kafāla* (sponsorship)⁴³ system, where every non-Saudi/ “Other” is required to have a fixed-term contract to stay

³⁸ Khalaf, AlShehabi & Hanieh (eds.), pp. 39-56.

³⁹ A modernized hereditary system, based on social hierarchy, in which patrons use state resources to secure the loyalty of clients rather than the general population.

⁴⁰ Ghassan Badakok, “Rusūm al-‘Amāla.. Mā Lahā wa-Mā ‘Alayhā,” *Okaz*, 15/7/2017, accessed on 25/12/2021, at: <https://shorturl.at/flqHZ>

⁴¹ Appendix 3 shows two tables that demonstrate how the demographic distribution changed in response to government policies between 2016-2021.

⁴² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Compilation Report-Universal Periodic Review: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (March 2013), p. 1, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/gmoA5>

⁴³ The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (2021) issued some changes on the *Kafāla* system as a part of the National Program Transformation named the Labor Reform Initiative, which gives relative freedom for the non-Saudi employee in relation to the employ mobility, automatic exist and re-entry visa, and automatic exit visa, without having to take permission from the sponsor. See: “Dalīl al-Mustakhdim li-Khadamāt Mubādarat Taḥsīn al-‘Ilāqa al-Ta‘āqudiyya,” *The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development*, 14/3/2021, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/ghDR9>

in the country. Once the term is up, the *Kafil* (sponsor) has the option to either renew it, provide the individual with an extension to find another sponsor, or initiate deportation within a week.⁴⁴ Consequently, Palestinians in Saudi Arabia are part of the “Other”⁴⁵ group, dependent on their employer, as their *kafil*, to secure residency, which has significantly contributed to shaping Palestinian identity in Saudi Arabia since the Nakba.⁴⁶

The First Phase of Acculturation

The first generation of Palestinian migrants in Saudi Arabia clung to their right of return, with many turning down naturalization.⁴⁷ Both the first and second generations of Palestinians not only held a keen awareness of their right to return but also embraced a purely Palestinian identity. Whether stemming from their direct connections to Palestine (in the case of the first generation) or through detailed storytelling about historical events and places (in the case of the second generation), the influence of the homeland significantly outweighed that of Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the second generation, and the place where the first generation spent most of their lives.

SBMPOs, unlike the first and second generations, have no direct ties to Palestine. The transfer of memories from older generations to the third was less effective than it had been between the first and second generations. Many SBMPOs view Saudi Arabia as a habitual residence,⁴⁸ and lack firsthand experience with their Palestinian homeland. In addition, those who are stateless face restricted travel opportunities due to document limitations. This means they do not know any community as well as that of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, their identity was significantly impacted and shaped by their psychological acculturating with Saudi society and culture.

There are two stages to the first phase of the SBMPO psychological acculturation process in Saudi Arabia: The first stage encompasses childhood and adolescence before attending university; and the second stage covers the period after attending university and entering the workforce. During the first stage, SBMPOs find a balance by forming an intertwined identity consisting of Palestinian and Saudi cultural layers. The transition between the first and the second stages awakens the SBMPO’s awareness about the reality of being non-Saudi/“Other” in Saudi Arabia, which may lead to a lack of adaptation that motivates them to consider immigration.

Childhood to Adolescence

The relationship between SBMPOs and the host society during childhood is inherently organic, involving a strong attachment to and internalization of Saudi culture, particularly in the absence of decisive interventions from families. SBMPO children predominantly spend their time at Saudi state schools, Quran schools, and with neighbourhood friends. Consequently, these children form numerous relationships with host society

⁴⁴ “Nizām al-Iqāma wa-l-Ta’dilāt al-Šādira ‘Alayh,” *NSHR* accessed on 5/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3UeK4ef>

⁴⁵ Jean-François Staszak defines the process of othering as a “result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us”, the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (“Them”, Other) by stigmatizing difference— real or imagined—presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination [...] The asymmetry in power relationships is central to the construction of otherness. To state it naively, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse”. See: Jean-François Staszak, “Other/ Otherness,” in: Rob Kitchin & Nigel Thrift (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009).

⁴⁶ Issam Nassar, “Reflections on Writing the History of Palestinian Identity,” *Palestine-Israel Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2001), pp. 24-37.

⁴⁷ This narrative is frequently recounted by Palestinian elders, asserting that Saudi passports were readily obtainable and extended to them on numerous occasions. However, they declined the offer, steadfast in their belief that Palestine would regain its freedom, and they would eventually return to their homeland. Nevertheless, some Palestinian families opted for naturalization.

⁴⁸ The habitual residence is the “country in which a person has established the permanent or habitual center of their interests”. This is usually the country where the person lives or spends most of their time. See: Dietmar Baetge, “Habitual Residence,” *Max Planck Encyclopedia of European Private Law*, accessed on 14/12/2022, at: <https://shorturl.at/uBHY2>

members, become proficient in the Saudi dialect, adopt traditional clothing, and wholeheartedly embrace the local culture.

Schools and neighbourhoods in Saudi Arabia exhibit a rich mix of nationalities, facilitating interaction among children from diverse Arab and non-Arab backgrounds. This diversity is evident in school classes, especially in public schools, comprising a blend of students hailing from various Arab countries alongside Saudi students. Reflecting on my own experiences, I had the privilege of forming friendships with individuals from Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Palestine, Somalia, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere. During this time, it was a norm for us to converse in the Saudi dialect, especially outside the house.

One of the interviewees, Manar, offers her insights: “My children were deeply immersed in socializing with the Saudi community, to the extent that even their dialect was influenced by it”.⁴⁹ During this life stage, SBMPOs unconsciously undergo the process of assimilation. For instance, Salwa, another interviewee, was born in Al-Qassim city, raised in Riyadh, graduated from a private university, married a Palestinian, and gave birth to her two children in Saudi Arabia. She highlights the organic relationship with her teachers at school compared to her experience after graduation:

When I was in elementary school, I was loved by all my teachers, even though they were all Saudis, because I was an excellent student. They were on very friendly terms with me and my mother [...]. But when I grew up and went to university, everything changed.⁵⁰

The difficulty of the acculturation process varies according to host society’s ideology.⁵¹ Some societies pursue positive multicultural policies that resemble the integration strategy.⁵² But some societies follow other ideologies beside integration, such as assimilation, separation, or marginalization, as they adopt non-welcoming attitudes toward “others”. Accordingly, we can understand that “many immigrants and their descendants [will] continue to ‘stand out’ as minorities [or Others] – both visually and culturally [...] even after mastering [...] and adopting aspects of ... [host’s] culture”.⁵³ In this regard, Salwa said:

During our years in elementary and high school, interactions between Saudis and non-Saudis were generally free of problems. However, upon entering university, there was a noticeable shift and we became more comfortable with non-Saudi company. That is because the generations have changed, and as the years pass, a growing sense of racism became evident, and it became apparent that we were no longer as well-received as before. You become aware that they do not like you anymore.⁵⁴

The Saudi society’s attitudes lead SBMPOs to follow assimilation strategies unconsciously to fit in during childhood. Assimilation manifests clearly in the act of mastering the Saudi dialects, Najdi or Hijazi, depending on the region in which the individual has been raised, as well as in dress; many SBMPOs wore the Saudi Thobe (traditional male dress) as it is mandatory for boys at school. Moreover, the combination of Saudi and Palestinian cuisines became a part of Palestinians’ daily lives, with the majority of Palestinian households in Saudi Arabia, including my own family, embracing traditional Saudi dietary practices. This includes making it a regular habit to enjoy Saudi coffee with Qasimi dates, dipping dates in tahini, and relishing kabsa.

From Adolescence to University

Among other individuals from other non-Saudi groups, SBMPOs are an example of Gulf-born people who spent their entire lives in their place of birth, maintaining no connection to their homeland. Despite

⁴⁹ Manar, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

⁵⁰ Salwa, Personal Interview, 2019.

⁵¹ Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, pp. 1-30.

⁵² Berry, “Immigration,” pp. 5-34.

⁵³ Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Salwa.

being labelled as “foreigners” and “Others” by the political systems,⁵⁵ SBMPOs have their birthplace at the core of their imagined identity. Many of them established a peculiar sense of belonging to Saudi Arabia, experiencing a genuine connection to the place due to their upbringing. However, they are still denied basic citizenship rights that would be a birthright in many other countries.⁵⁶

SBMPO’s progression into higher education marks the starting point of their awareness of the real problems in assimilation as an acculturation strategy. Therefore, assimilation gradually weakens as SBMPOs get older and more aware of their differences and their position in Saudi society. The disparity of opportunities and rights between Saudis and non-Saudis/ “Others” becomes more apparent after adolescence. After graduating high school, SBMPOs often have to complete their education abroad, mainly in Jordan, as non-Saudis in Saudi Arabia are rarely accepted into Saudi state universities, and private universities are unaffordable.

On this point, Nawal remarked, “In Saudi Arabia, you see everyone struggling after finishing high school. Everyone is just looking for a university, but most of them end up leaving. All of my friends went to Egypt or Jordan; they’re just scattered everywhere”.⁵⁷ The disparities in higher education opportunities between Saudi citizens and SBMPOs foster an awareness of the “othering” practiced against them, leading to a shift in SBMPO acculturation strategies.

Post-University and Rediscovering Roots

Changing Saudi attitudes toward non-Saudis became evident in the employment restrictions and the emergence of a hostile public discourse against them. As SBMPOs/non-Saudis experience “othering” and exclusion, wherein “the other is constructed as inferior”,⁵⁸ they are led to embrace Saudi culture and assimilate more into the Saudi identity to escape the feeling of “otherness”. Norah reflects on her school experience, stating, “There was a feeling given off by Saudi classmates that we are foreign, and they are Saudis. This sentiment can be sensed even if not explicitly expressed”.⁵⁹

Therefore, many SBMPOs start thinking about the meaning of living in Saudi Arabia and how that would reshape the future. I remember my discussions after graduating and returning to Saudi Arabia with friends and colleagues about leaving the country because of the rapid change in rules, especially the Saudization policy; we felt that the future would not be as stable for us as it was for our parents. There was a feeling of built-up resentment toward non-Saudis who seemed to be demonized by propaganda.

Furthermore, SBMPOs start to recognize their status as non-citizens with no route to citizenship in Saudi law. They also become aware of their Palestinian roots and the impossibility of returning to Palestine. The inability to return to Palestine and to engage with the daily life of their country of origin lead to an existential detachment from it. Suriah, a 40-year-old woman, who was born, married, and lived her entire life in Saudi Arabia, said: “When anyone asks us, we answer that we are Palestinians, but we are born in Saudi Arabia. I consider this country my homeland; I know nothing about Palestine, I never went there. I was born and raised here, all my family lives here. I know I am Palestinian, but I don’t feel it”.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Françoise De Bel-Air, “Demography, Migration and Labour Market in Saudi Arabia,” *Explanatory Note*, no. 1, Gulf Research Center (2014), accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/jLS34>; Nadeen Dakkak, “The Absent Voices of Second-Generation Migrants in the Gulf States,” *Migrant-Rights.org*, 27/6/2020, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/AFJL6>

⁵⁶ For more on the law of the Saudi Arabian nationality, see: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers, *Law of Saudi Arabian Nationality* (Riyadh: 2/9/1954), accessed on 2/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3xWHcLA>

⁵⁷ Nawal, Personal Interview, Jeddah, 2019.

⁵⁸ Sune Qvotrup Jensen, “Othering, Identity Formation and Agency,” *Qualitative Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2011), p. 65.

⁵⁹ Norah, Personal Interview, Amman, 2020.

⁶⁰ Suriah, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

Eventually, SBMPOs rediscover their roots, not through historical knowledge or family cultural teachings, but by understanding the reality of their situation in Saudi Arabia. Awareness of the Palestine question as a vital part of SBMPO identity began when attitudes toward non-Saudis started to change. Suriah, who mentioned earlier about not feeling Palestinian, expressed in another part of the interview: “I felt after the implementation of [EDLT] how our displaced predecessors were feeling. I felt that I am closer to Palestine than before, I understood the injustice that they underwent”.⁶¹

Another reason behind the detachment of SBMPOs from their ancestral homeland is the recollection of negative memories, especially when elders of the first generation talk about Palestine. Naif, an SBMPO who lived his whole life with his family in Khobar, said:

Palestine is an essential part of our identity; it must be a part of our identity. But unfortunately, it is more a sad part than a happy one. I mean, it is ok to be proud of your origin, but whenever I recollect the events that my grandparents told me about, I recognize that all of them are sad ones. We don't have any happy connections [...] all stories make you feel and remember sorrowful things.⁶²

Even though SBMPOs try hard to assimilate into Saudi society, they cannot fully integrate and become an intrinsic part of the social fabric. In this regard, Nowar, who was born and lived all his life in the Kingdom, studied at one of the private Saudi universities, and worked for a long time as a skilled engineer after graduation, said: “Regardless of how long they live in Saudi Arabia, Palestinians will never become Saudis”.⁶³ Naif added:

I look at myself these days: how I used to look at Saudi Arabia versus how I'm looking at it now? There is a huge difference. In the past, we thought the country loves and cares about us, but now these state policies have left us feeling like they don't want us. They only like a certain rich class, the bourgeois. Ordinary people like us do not matter to them. The change came violently, there was no prelude [...] They dispossessed many people and replaced them with Saudis coercively [...] For example, all mobile shops owned by Yemenis were closed and repossessed by Saudis. This change was a wilful injustice to force people to leave.⁶⁴

After graduating and returning to Saudi Arabia, all the individuals I interviewed had started their new adult life by stepping into the job market. The differences in opportunities, wages, ownership, and access to governmental services and support had become too marked to miss by this point. Considering the above, many SBMPOs do not adapt well to Saudi society, but rather live as outsiders, despite their earlier efforts to assimilate into the culture through dialect, cuisine, dress, and habits of consumption.⁶⁵

Suriah describes the relationship between Palestinians and Saudis as follows:

There was no significant socialization with the Saudis, we always felt that there was a gap between us [...] but we never hated them [...] I had so many close friendships with my Syrian and Egyptian girlfriends, more so than with Saudis [...] I feel like non-Saudis were closer to us, as if we were similar by virtue of our shared struggle.⁶⁶

Suriah refers here to the role that government policies has played in shaping social relations between members of society. The millennial generation's relationship to Saudi society before university years is

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Naif, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

⁶³ Nowar, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

⁶⁴ Naif.

⁶⁵ Soraya W. Assad, “The Rise of Consumerism in Saudi Arabian Society,” *International Journal of Commerce and Management*, vol. 17, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2007), pp. 73-104; Shahid N. Bhuian & Alhassan G. Abdul-Muhmin, “Consumerism in the Arab Middle East: The Case of Saudi Arabia,” in: Ajay K. Manrai & H. Lee Meadow (eds.), *Global Perspectives in Marketing for the 21st Century: Proceedings of the 1999 World Marketing Congress* (New York/ Dordrecht/ London: Springer, 2015), pp. 93-95.

⁶⁶ Suriah.

characterized by more cohesion and assimilation than that of the older generation who has a lukewarm relationship with the host society. With time, and as the young grow older, they become more aware of the the government policies' impact on their relationship with the host society as their Saudi peers' relationship with them and their behaviours change.

I see this phase as the final product of the acculturation of SBMPOs in Saudi Arabia. It can be fairly described as fragile adaptation. The indications of this fragility manifest in the constant fear of the future, the sense of non-belonging, and the feeling of having wasted one's life in the country. Therefore, many of my friends had immigrated to Canada and the United States before July 2017, when they sensed a severe change looming, while many others started to plan for similar departures. However, the Palestinian elders never felt the same danger. They were not aware of the coming transformations, and they were ready to cope with any situation to maintain stability. One friend of mine told me that his 60-year-old mother refused to leave Saudi Arabia and preferred to sell off her jewellery and valuable possessions to stay in the country.

After Leaving Saudi Arabia: Resentment and Sorrow

Leaving Saudi Arabia for Jordan inflicted a deep wound on the identity of SBMPOs. The forced transition gave rise to profound resentment and sorrow that culminated in a sense of identity confusion. The acculturation process started all over again just when SBMPOs were on the verge of achieving a state of balance. Suriah's words serve as an exemplary portrayal of this resentment: "When I remember that I was forbidden from entering the country where I was raised and lived my entire life, a feeling of sadness overwhelms me".⁶⁷ Mira is another example. She reflects on this challenging period:

The aspect that deeply saddens me is that they did not make exceptions for certain individuals with these new rules they enforced, such as my father, who lived in Saudi Arabia for 50 years. They could have issued exemptions for those born in the country and lived there for a substantial period. My father's sister worked as a teacher for a long time, but when they implemented the Saudization policy, she was immediately expelled and replaced by a Saudi! Why is there no appreciation for what we have contributed to this country?⁶⁸

Saudi society nurtured a doctrine of separation that prompted SBMPOs to try and adapt through assimilation to better fit in. This eventually led to weak adaptation and a confused identity. Many SBMPOs managed to find a balanced identity made up of interlinking Palestinian and Saudi cultural layers in their first and second phases of life. However, the acculturation process in Saudi Arabia was never completed, leading to confusion and disappointment following changes in the social attitudes toward non-Saudis. This confusion does not erase the Saudi cultural layer in their identity, but rather emerges from and remains with it.

Moving to Jordan: The Second Phase of Acculturation and its Impact on Cultural Identity

After the implementation of the expat fees in July 2017, many SBMPOs left Saudi Arabia altogether and many breadwinners of SBMPO families moved their dependents to Jordan while continuing to work in Saudi Arabia. Some relocated only their elders, sisters, and younger brothers who cannot work to cut EDLT for each dependent, including newborns. Accordingly, a significant number of Palestinian families with Jordanian documents returned to Jordan.⁶⁹ I made the same decision for my family, taking a calculated risk

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Mira, Personal Interview, Amman, 2021.

⁶⁹ Even Though, there are no official numbers, Palestinians community in Saudi Arabia has decreased heavily and no family members we know do not have a relative who departed from the country.

by returning to Jordan. Having studied in Jordan, it was the rational choice, considering that my family has never lived outside Saudi Arabia, so living anywhere else would be a major social challenge.

However, some did not return entirely due to economic fears about the instability in the Jordanian market. Additionally, they were aware of their inability to maintain the same lifestyle for their families if they were to take up employment in Jordan. Most of them had not made any backup plans for themselves outside of Saudi Arabia because they never imagined having to leave it. For example, Nowras, who is almost 60 years old, said: “The biggest mistake my brothers and I made was that we lived our whole life in Saudi Arabia without considering establishing business opportunities in Jordan to support us when we retire”.⁷⁰

Many SBMPOs complete higher education in Jordan. Some of my respondents returned to work in Saudi Arabia after July 2017, while others were still studying in Jordan at the time. Those who returned before the imposition of the 2017 taxes quickly found jobs in less than six months. However, for those still studying, the renewal of the *Iqāma* became increasingly challenging, leading their families to terminate their *Iqāma* to avoid the financial burden. Some of them hope to obtain a new visa after graduation to return to Saudi Arabia, but many have seen their dreams dissipate after the application of the new levy fees.

The relocation initiated a new acculturation process that influenced the two intertwining layers of the SBMPO identity, reshaping it by adding a new layer overlapping with the previous Saudi and Palestinian layers. However, the second psychological acculturation experience, which started upon their relocation to Jordan, was not the same for all SBMPOs. This variation stems from the inherent uncertainty in psychological acculturation, a highly variable process dependent on different moderating factors, including the personal, social, and psychological attributes of the acculturated person.⁷¹ One of the most critical issues influencing SBMPO’s transition to Jordan is the identity distress resulting from the disparities in economic, social, and cultural conditions between Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

All Returnees to Jordan of Palestinian Origin (holding full or temporary Jordanian passports) shared the same socio-economic status and legal rights when they were in Saudi Arabia. Both groups were classified as non-Saudis, Jordanians, or foreigners in the eyes of the Saudi government. There, they had lived in a country with ample job opportunities and government regulations that permitted their engagement in almost any profession before they were forced to relocate. However, upon moving to Jordan, they face significant challenges, particularly the scarcity of job opportunities in the struggling Jordanian economy.⁷²

Job seeking in Jordan heavily relies on social networking, a challenge for newcomers such as the SBMPOs who lack established connections. Additionally, wages in Jordan are much lower than in Saudi Arabia,⁷³ where the cost of living was more affordable before 2017. Returnees holding temporary Jordanian passports are now considered refugees (stateless in Jordan), a shift in status that complicates their cultural context and intensifies acculturation stress. Furthermore, factors such as quality of life, livelihood conditions, and loss of social capital contribute to the disconnect between SBMPOs and their new communities.

⁷⁰ Nowras, Phone Conversation, 2021.

⁷¹ Berry, “Immigration,” pp. 5-34.

⁷² Jalal Al Hussein, “Challenges Facing Jordan’s Labour Market,” in: Myriam Ababsa (ed.), *Atlas of Jordan: History, Territories and Society* (Beyrouth: Presses de l’Ifpo, 2013).

⁷³ Take for example the minimum wages for Saudi nationals which is 4,000 SR (1,063.64 USD) and for foreigners 2,500 SR (664.78 USD). See: Valentine Marie, “Average Salaries and Minimum Wage in Saudi Arabia,” *Expatica Saudi Arabia*, 24/4/2024, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/44exuQN>

The minimum wage for Jordanian citizens in Jordan is JOD 260 (366.56 USD) and JOD 230 (324.27 USD) for foreigners, see: Batoool Ghaith, “Minimum Wage Falls Short of Living Costs-Experts,” *The Jordan Times*, 1/8/2022, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3WcQIV3>

Working Struggle

After returning to Jordan, SBMPOs began searching for job opportunities in Jordan. Unfortunately, they either found nothing or secured employment with a much lower salary compared to Saudi Arabia. All interviewees expressed concerns about the challenges they faced while looking for a job. The first issue was the scarcity of job opportunities as unemployment in Jordan soared to 24.7% in the fourth quarter of 2020, breaking historic records.⁷⁴

Another challenge was the lack of social capital that could assist SBMPOs in entering the Jordanian job market through networking. It is important to note that in this context, the term “social capital” does not refer to “*Wāṣṭa*” in the sense of nepotism or favouritism. Specifically, it means professional networking, which is “the more positive version of connection usage in order to get ahead, be successful, or avoid retribution [...] such networking is widely considered a beneficial form of social capital. Its connotation is of being meritocratic and fair, justly honoring a person’s abilities and efforts”.⁷⁵

A third restriction is related to cultural and dialect differences. Locals initially assume SBMPOs are Saudis. Nobody guesses that they are Palestinian or Jordanian. I experience this daily. Whenever I meet a new person, they ask, “Where are you from? Are you from Saudi, Yemen, or the Gulf?” The same happens for Nawaf; he jokingly says, “They thought I was a Saudi in the bank before I gave them my employment papers”.⁷⁶ Additionally, according to Rafeef, SBMPO returnees are subject to false impressions, preventing them from being considered for many job opportunities.⁷⁷ This is compounded by issues of nepotism/favouritism related to the rampant corruption in the Jordanian labour market.⁷⁸

This false impression makes the employment environment uninviting for them, as many think anyone from Saudi Arabia is super-rich. This misconception exposes them to unprofessionalism and sometimes to fraud. Rafeef talked about her experience as an interior designer in Jordan when she returned from Saudi Arabia:

Every job offer I got was below 400 JD. I cannot accept this salary as

a designer with three years of experience, especially that I know the rates for design projects in Jordan. The managers here are greedy and do not appreciate the profession of interior design. They consider it as something that anyone with common sense can do. I also tried to work as a freelancer with many design agencies, but I faced too much fraud, theft, and cheating.⁷⁹

Another restriction is the difference in workplace professionalism between Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Many returnees state that they face numerous challenges in accepting and understanding the Jordanian working environments. Saif, the former head of the design department in a well-known Saudi university, who opened a small business after returning to Jordan, said:

I feel like people in Jordan do not want to work. I am tired of trying to build a business here. I am truly thinking of returning to Saudi Arabia. People here are not careful about time and lack accuracy when executing the work.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Department of Statistics, “24.7% Unemployment Rate during the Fourth Quarter of 2020,” 9/3/2021, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/fuTU9>

⁷⁵ Annika Kropf & Tanya Cariina Newbury-Smith, “Wasta as a form of Social Capital? An Institutional Perspective,” in: Mohamed A. Ramady, *The Political Economy of Wasta: Use and Abuse of Social Capital Networking* (New York/ Dordrecht/ London: Springer, 2016), p. 4.

⁷⁶ Nawaf, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2020.

⁷⁷ Rafeef, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2021.

⁷⁸ For more on issues of nepotism/favoritism related to the rampant corruption in the Jordanian labor market, see: Mohammad Rawabdeh et al., “The Extent of the Phenomenon of Wasta and Favoritism in the Jordanian Public Sector,” Queen Rania Center for Jordanian Studies and Community Service, Yarmouk University (July 2020), accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/hoqv7>

⁷⁹ Rafeef.

⁸⁰ Saif, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2020.

Non-Belonging Among Returnees

Many returnees find settling into Jordanian society challenging. Some may argue that non-belonging is only limited to SBMPOs who do not have a national number. However, I found that non-belonging is a familiar feeling among all returnees, with or without national numbers. In this respect, Nowras talked about his difficult experience: “When I came to Jordan, I felt like everything was strange to me. The people are not the same, their thinking is not the same. I did not feel comfortable in Jordan”.⁸¹

The causes of non-belonging range from general lifestyle changes to specific cultural differences that hinder coping with the new society. The most evident reasons can be summarized as follows: First, a severe and negative change in the quality of life, which includes changes in product availability, health systems, purchasing power, and the supply of basic utilities (gas, electricity, and water). These changes are described clearly in Nawal’s words:

Everything here is different [...] Maybe it is a psychological thing, but I cannot find the same feeling for anything that I found in Riyadh [...] Even hair shampoos and water are of different quality. Even the texture of my hair changed in Jordan. The product’s quality is the most important thing, but people here care only about the price [...] Regarding water, there are permanent plumbing emergencies because the pipes get clogged continuously by the high concentrations of salt and dust in the water. And because the water comes only once a week from the water company, we only do our laundry when the water comes. We never thought about these things in Riyadh.⁸²

Secondly, SBMPOs see that they are not considered genuine members of any of the three cultures that constitute their identity. In this regard, it is crucial to consider the term biculturalism, which is used to refer to individuals who “adopt the ideals, values, and practices of the receiving culture and retain the ideals, values, and practices of the heritage culture”.⁸³ In this context, SBMPOs already returned to Jordan as bicultural individuals. Belonging to both the Saudi and Palestinian cultures creates a situation referred to by Schwartz et al. as a “tug of war”⁸⁴ for returnees, where an individual is having problems adapting to the old and new cultures. As a result, natives of both cultures do not treat the individual as a genuine member of either. Consequently, returnees are not considered true Jordanians, Palestinians, or Saudis, but rather a blend of these three cultures.

In our annual vacations when we would visit my grandmother and paternal aunts in Jordan, my neighbourhood friends would dub me “The Saudi Abdullah”. Relevant to that, Naif said:

When I was in Saudi Arabia, my identity was built upon being Palestinian, so when a Saudi talked badly about Palestine, I felt that I was being harassed. Now that I am grown up, the Saudi part of my identity has become clearer. Thus, when in Jordan the feeling of love for Saudi Arabia became deeper. Therefore, when anyone makes a mockery of Saudi Arabia, this makes me feel like they are mocking a part of me [...] I really feel that I am a Saudi because everyone who sees me says, ‘you are a Saudi; you sound like a Saudi’; or ‘I swear that you are not a Jordanian’!⁸⁵

SBMPOs do not speak in one pure dialect. They use a mixture of the Saudi/Palestinian/Jordanian dialects. Thus, the new acculturation process in Jordan becomes difficult as speech is an essential part of “fitting in” in society. In this regard, Siraj said:

No matter how hard you try to hide that you’ve lived in Saudi Arabia, people here will know that you are not a local. They will immediately consider you a *Khaliji*. The words people use here to refer to things are different, which is why they always mock me when I talk, rendering me more silent. Some colleagues call me “The Saudi” and frequently ask me for favors, such as lending them my

⁸¹ Nowras, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

⁸² Nawal, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2020.

⁸³ Berry, “Immigration,” pp. 5-34.

⁸⁴ Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, pp. 1-30.

⁸⁵ Naif.

headphones or sharing my internet. They would also teasingly call me a wealthy man if I bought a bottle of water from the canteen.⁸⁶

Additionally, SBMPOs feel that there is nationwide negativity, wherein public opinion, in general, is frustrated about the future and economy in Jordan. This feeling coincides with the latest polls and surveys that the International Republican Institute has conducted.⁸⁷ In the last three surveys, the polls showed an increase in dissatisfaction about the country and economy. In this regard, Naif says, “Everyone is complaining about life, and everyone is frustrated which makes you also feel frustrated. This negativity makes you feel as if your life will be destroyed”.⁸⁸

Furthermore, extreme shifts in the levels of religious adherence and practices are another major change. For SBMPOs raised in the conservative Saudi environment, where clear gender segregation and intensive religious education and practice exist, moving to Jordan exposed them to new, less strenuous standards of religious practice.. Nowras shared his experience:

When I came here, I felt something strange about the society: many people here do not pray! When I was in Saudi Arabia, even the least religious person who would give you the impression that he has never prayed, suddenly, when he hears the call to prayer, you see him enter the mosque [...] prayer here is not prioritized, which is a thing that breaks my heart. The same goes for fasting; religious adherence here is too low.⁸⁹

The literature reveals similarities between SBMPOs and Kuwaiti Palestinians who returned to Jordan after the First Gulf War, in several aspects, such as the sense of exclusion and comparisons of livelihood standards between Jordan and Kuwait.⁹⁰ There is also a shared sense of a common identity that differentiates them from the locals.⁹¹ This similarity is promising, especially considering that Le Troquer and Al-Oudat’s research reveals the longer the returnee resides in Jordan the healthier their adaption is to the society in the long run.⁹² However, I must note that my sister’s husband’s family, despite living in Kuwait and returning to Jordan in the 1990s, eventually returned to Kuwait after approximately twenty years of living in Jordan due to the challenging economic conditions in the country. This underscores the need for longitudinal studies that can trace the long-term outcomes of the acculturation process.

New Layer of Cultural Identity

The new changes faced by SBMPOs after their relocation to Jordan started a second acculturation experience, where they accommodated the Jordanian culture by adding a new layer to their identity. However, some returnees found interaction with Jordanian society/culture harder. Elaborating on that, Siraj answered the question “how do you identify yourself?” by saying: “to anyone asking me this question I say: I am a Saudi, then a Jordanian, then a Palestinian, based on the places I have lived in”. On the other hand, many SBMPOs feel that they lack identity or do not know “who they are”. Naif said: “I do not feel Jordanian even though I am Jordanian. Inside, I see myself without identity. Maybe the closest one for me is being a Saudi!”⁹³ and Marwan agreed to this statement.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Siraj, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

⁸⁷ “Survey of Jordanian Public Opinion, May 22-25, 2017,” *National Poll*, no. 15, The International Republican Institute, accessed on 9/5/2021, at: <https://shorturl.at/nyGLX>; “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Jordan, November 14-22/11/2019,” *Public Opinion Survey*, The International Republican Institute, accessed on 9/5/2021, at: <https://shorturl.at/ajqE5>

⁸⁸ Naif.

⁸⁹ Nowras, Personal Interview.

⁹⁰ Le Troquer & Al-Oudat, pp. 37-51.

⁹¹ Rothenberg, pp. 237-255.

⁹² Le Troquer & Al-Oudat, pp. 37-51.

⁹³ Naif.

⁹⁴ Marwan, Personal Interview, Irbid, 2019.

Their feelings of non-belonging to the Jordanian society lead to a distorted cultural identity, living as outsiders who draw a shell around their sub-culture and gradually isolate themselves from the new host society. However, I consider this more of a life stage where personal characteristics determine the ease and smoothness of the acculturation process. That is, some individuals have less flexible personalities and require more time to find a suitable acculturation strategy for them.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's imposition of the EDLT, part of longstanding Saudization efforts, significantly impacted the Palestinian community, leading to their migration and often resettlement in Jordan. As a result, SBMPOs faced many changes in their life during the resettlement experience. In this article, I have explored these changes along with their effect on the cultural identity of SBMPOs using an adjusted form of the fourfold theory of psychological acculturation. I have proposed a new theoretical approach that connects acculturation processes as interrelated phases or life stages, utilizing cultural identity as a tool to elucidate the evolving nature of these acculturation changes over time, playing a role in shaping a complex, multi-layered identity.

I have examined SBMPOs' acculturation process from childhood until resettlement in Jordan, comprising two main phases: before and after relocation to Jordan. The first phase includes two stages: initially covering childhood and adolescence before going to university, and second, the period after going to university and returning to work in Saudi Arabia. During the initial stage of childhood, SBMPO unconsciously assimilated to fit into the Saudi/host society. By the end of this stage, SBMPOs had become well-adapted to Saudi society, forming an intertwined Palestinian and Saudi multi-layered identity. However, the feasibility of assimilation as an acculturation strategy declined in the second stage, coinciding with the completion of mandatory education and the transition to university. Their recognition of the unequal rights and opportunities they had access to in contrast to their Saudi peers sparked their awareness of the state of "otherness". This coincided with cumulative and hostile changes in social attitudes and governmental policies toward foreign communities in Saudi Arabia. SBMPOs began contemplating how living in Saudi Arabia would impact their future, leading to poor and unhealthy adaptation, as the final product of acculturation in Saudi Arabia.

In the second phase, after immigration to Jordan, SBMPOs started a new acculturation process that involved intense socio-economic changes. They faced numerous restrictions in the Jordanian job market, including a scarcity of work, lack of social capital, differences in the work environment, and cultural and dialect disparities. This made belonging to Jordan challenging from the SBMPO perspective, and subsequently, a sense of non-belonging to any of the three societies they were part of. As SBMPOs acculturated to Jordanian society, their former Palestinian and Saudi cultural layers interacted with their new Jordanian culture, forming a complex three-sided identity. However, some SBMPO returnees found it challenging to acculturate with Jordanian society/culture, leading to isolation and a distortion in their cultural identity.

A notable limitation of this article is its focus on the recent impact of relocations on the Palestinian community in Saudi Arabia. Further research is needed to understand the long-term repercussions of acculturation and the type of adaptation it might yield. Because the SBMPOs have only lived in Jordan between 2 and 5 years so far, the coverage of the Jordanian phase of the acculturation process is limited by a temporal constraint. Nevertheless, the findings indicate some similarities with studies on Kuwaiti-Palestinians, particularly in the early stages of their return to Jordan, reflecting a shared distinctive identity shaped by their experience in the Gulf and feelings of exclusion, along with the comparisons they draw of living standards between Jordan and Kuwait.

Appendix 1

Table (1): List of interviewees and the type of passports they hold

Age	Gender	Type of Document	Highest Education	Place of Higher Education
52	Female	JPNN***	High school diploma	Saudi Arabia
38	Female	PTJP****	High school diploma	Saudi Arabia
37	Male	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
36	Female	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Saudi Arabia
33	Female	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Saudi Arabia
32	Female	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
32	Female	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
32	Male	PA*****	Bachelor's degree	Saudi Arabia
31	Male	PTETD*****	Bachelor's degree	Yemen
30	Female	PA and PTETD	Bachelor's degree	Canada
29	Female	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
27	Female	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Saudi Arabia
27	Male	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Saudi Arabia
26	Female	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
25	Male	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
24	Male	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
24	Female	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan

*** Jordanian Passport with National Number.

**** Palestinians (from Gaza or West Bank) with temporary Jordanian passports.

***** Palestinian Authority Passport.

***** Palestinians with temporary Egyptian travel document.

Age	Gender	Type of Document	Highest Education	Place of Higher Education
24	Female	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Saudi Arabia
23	Male	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
23	Male	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
22	Male	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
22	Male	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Cyprus
21	Male	PTJP	Bachelor's degree	Online
21	Male	PTJP	High school diploma	Saudi Arabia
21	Male	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Turkey
21	Female	JPNN	Bachelor's degree	Jordan
19	Female	PA and PTETD	Bachelor's degree	Canada

Appendix 2

Table (2): The tax amount that has to be paid annually by an immigrant family (USD)

Number of Dependents	July 2017-June 2018	July 2018-June 2019	July 2019-June 2020	After July 2020
One	160	640	960	1,280
Two	320	1,280	1,920	2,560
Three	480	1,920	2,880	3,840
Four	640	2,560	3,840	5,120
Five	800	3,200	4,800	6,400
Six	960	3,840	5,760	7,680

Source: "Bad' Taḥbīq Istiḥsāl Muqābil Mālī 'an al-Murāfiqīn wa-l-Murāfiqāt lil-'Āmilīn al-Wāfidīn fi al-Qiṭā' al-Khāṣ," General Directory of Passports, Ministry of Interior, 6/7/2017, accessed on 25/5/2021, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mpc2mj49>

Appendix 3

Table (3): The population, growth, and average growth rates in Saudi Arabia (2016-2021)

	Saudis	Non-Saudis	Total
Third quarter of 2016	20,081,582	11,705,998	31,787,580
Mid-2021	21,690,648	12,420,173	34,110,821
Growth	1,609,066	714,175	2,323,241
Average Growth Rate	7.42%	5.75%	6.81%

Table (4): The increase in Saudi vs. non-Saudi employment (2016-2021)

	Saudis Employment	Non-Saudis Employment	Saudis Unemployment
Fourth Quarter of 2016	43.5%	56.5 %	12.1 %
Fourth Quarter of 2021	51.5 %	48.9 %	11 %

Source: Prepared by the author based on: *Demographic Survey 2016* (Riyadh: General Authority for Statistics, 2016), accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/atCET>; "Labour Market 2016 Fourth Quarter, Main Data Indicators of the Labor Market," General Authority for Statistics (2016), accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/fxHTZ>; "Population Estimates in the Midyear of 2021," General Authority for Statistics, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/iqAY1>; "Labour Market 2021 fourth Quarter," General Authority for Statistics, accessed on 30/4/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/fwxBF>

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