

SYMPOSIUM SYNOPSIS

Exploring Migrations in Jordan: Insights from a Recent Symposium

Amal Khaleefa and Valentina Napolitano (symposium coordinators)

Abstract

This is a summary of a two-day symposium on migrations in Jordan, by the symposium coordinators Amal Khaleefa and Valentina Napolitano. The event, held in May 2023 at the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Amman, aimed to challenge prevailing political narratives on migration in Jordan and deconstruct stereotypes, while exploring the role of archives in the production of these narratives. It featured four panels and a Policy Council, bringing together researchers, humanitarian workers, and migrants. Presentations focused on the role of humanitarian actors in producing narratives on migrations, highlighting UNRWA's history, archiving projects involving Palestinian youth, and reconstructing familiar and village histories. Participants also explored narratives and archives produced by other non-conventional and marginal actors, including Circassian accounts and the Melkite Church involved in assistance to Palestinian refugees. Lived experiences and representations were discussed with a focus on Rohingya migrants, the racialization of Black refugees, and solidarity practices among Syrians settled in Jordan during the 1980s. The symposium also addressed the production of spaces and norms, including narratives of Syrian refugees in Palestinian camps in Amman, an experience put in perspective with that of Syrians in the Biqa' Valley in Lebanon.

Keywords

Archives; bottom-up approach; documentation; IFPO-ITHACA project; Jordan; migrations; Policy Council; representations; (counter)narrative.

A two-day symposium on migrations in Jordan that we coordinated was held on 2–3 May 2023, at the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Amman within the framework of the Horizon 2020 project ITHACA (Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency). The symposium gathered researchers, humanitarian workers and representatives of migrant communities with an aim to challenge the dominant political narratives on migrations in Jordan and explore alternative (counter) narratives that emphasize the active role of migrants in shaping Jordan’s social fabric. Adopting a bottom-up approach, participants addressed the issue of who produces narratives on migrations and with what aim. They investigated the impact of power dynamics on narratives, and the importance of archives in documenting migrant histories, and in dismantling victimization and security-oriented perspectives on migrants, while challenging the dichotomy between host communities and migrants.

The symposium opened with a keynote speech by Lex Takkenberg, senior advisor at Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), and former UNRWA chief ethics officer. Takkenberg discussed the ongoing Nakba, the UN’s role in documenting, protecting, and “containing” Palestinian refugees, and the importance of UNRWA archives in asserting Palestinian rights. He highlighted the role of humanitarianism as containment of the “Palestinian refugee question, not so much in the sense of preventing the refugees from moving to the West – which at the time was not feasible for the vast majority of them – but rather as taking the pressure away from refugee return.” Takkenberg also pointed out the depoliticization of the question within UNRWA’s discourse and hypothesized that the agency’s ongoing financial crisis hinders its ability to fulfil its mandate, thereby perpetuating the suffering of Palestinian refugees and preventing them from claiming their rights.

UNRWA was also at the heart of the symposium’s first panel, moderated by Falestin Naïli, on the role of humanitarian actors in the production of narratives on migrants. Maria Chiara Rioli and Francesca Biancani discussed the social history and visual culture of Palestinian mobilities and humanitarianism using UNRWA archives. Their presentation emphasized the importance of retracing UNRWA’s social and archival histories in order to keep track and understand their impact on the humanitarian history of the Middle East and beyond. Confirming this perspective, Valeria Cetorelli presented a project of digitalization of UNRWA archives of Palestine refugee family files, which capture up to five generations of significant life events of registered Palestine refugees since 1950. The presentation also addressed ongoing digitization efforts to retrace family trees and histories for individual access and research purposes. Jalal Al Hussein delved deeper into the representations of refugees in UNRWA’s archives. He emphasized the significance of critically engaging with narratives about the “good” or “bad” refugee, shedding light on diplomatic and operational objectives that underpin these representations. He also highlighted the important fact that assistance programs are designed “for” refugees, rather than developed in collaboration with them.

The second panel, led by Valentina Napolitano, delved into the significance of narratives and archives produced by migrants themselves, independent of major humanitarian actors. Falestin Naïli’s presentation explored how migrant narratives

challenge traditional archival work and the marginalization of individuals and groups within those archives. By examining two projects in Jordan's Circassian communities, Nāili highlighted the intentional messages left by these marginalized voices. Adnan Bazadogh's archive and museum in Zarqa transcend territorial boundaries and contain diverse materials from Jordan and the Near East, while the oral history project in the Muhajirin quarter in Amman collects and shares residents' stories in various formats. By analyzing these unconventional approaches, the paper emphasized the importance in giving voice to people who are often silenced or overlooked in conventional archival systems.

On a different note, Norig Neveu explored the narratives surrounding Palestinian refugees and the role of faith-based humanitarianism in shaping and preserving these stories. The presentation focused on the archives of the Melkite Church in Jordan and their contribution to humanitarian efforts for Palestinian refugees, with the support of the Jordanian government and UNRWA, especially in the education and health fields. The narrative about refugees, which was disseminated by these actors with the aim of obtaining international support, was put into perspective with letters from refugees themselves asking for services and providing a (counter)narrative.

The conclusion of the symposium's first day was marked by the noteworthy organization of a Policy Council Event (PCE) titled "Voices of Migrants in Jordan: The Role of Archiving and Narrating for Enhancing Political and Humanitarian Actions." Moderated by Amal Khaleefa, Valentina Napolitano, and Maria Chiara Rioli, the PCE had two main objectives: First, it examined prevailing representations and stereotypes of migrants in Jordan, exploring strategies to promote alternative narratives and influence practitioners and policymakers. Second, it explored the impact of archives and documentation on shaping migration policies. The event brought together ten stakeholders, including humanitarian workers, researchers, and migrant social actors from various backgrounds. The narratives shared by Circassian, Palestinian, Sudanese, and Rohingya participants underscored the importance of active listening, recognizing commonalities, and embracing diversity to find a shared understanding. The discussions highlighted the important role of migrants' active participation in archiving and storytelling, which strengthens both political and humanitarian efforts.

On the second day of the symposium, Jalal Al Husseini moderated panel discussions that focused on representations and lived experiences of migrants. Amal Khaleefa's presentation shed light on the invisible lives and unheard narratives of Rohingya migrants in Hayy al-Pakistan in Zarqa. Through ethnographic research, the study explored its historical background, living conditions, and the migrants' struggles for recognition without official status. It highlighted the impact of lack of documentation on access to services, providing a broader insight into Jordan's migration policies. Solenn Al Majali focused on the racialization of Black refugees in Jordan, challenging racial prejudices and stereotypes. By collecting narratives from African-origin forced migrants, her study uncovered the systemic racializing approach toward African refugees and examined associated stereotypes and stigmas. It also explored how these narratives contributed to the creation of ethnic borders and avoidance strategies

in interactions with local populations, questioning dominant discourses on ethnic minorities and inter-ethnic relations.

Valentina Napolitano discussed the experiences of Syrians who settled in Jordan in the 1980s, exploring their representations, social status, and forms of solidarity. The study examined their narratives and the impact of the Syrian refugee influx after 2011 on their social status and representations within the host society. It highlighted the downward social mobility experienced by these “ancient” Syrian migrants due to Jordanian authorities’ restrictions put in place in the frame of the crisis response, portraying the shift from being “guests” to being “refugees.”

The panel then concluded with Hanna Josefina Berg, who offered valuable insights into the bureaucratic nature of humanitarianism in Jordan. Her study focused on the role of paperwork in daily humanitarian work, specifically in the Azraq Syrian refugee camp, analyzing the production of information and data about the refugees, as well as the regulations and evaluations that shape their involvement in humanitarian bureaucracy. By challenging victimization and security-based approaches and deconstructing the master narrative, Berg’s study aimed to dismantle the exceptionalization of displacement and questioned the temporary nature of humanitarian responses.

In the fourth and final panel, moderated by Amal Khaleefa, the focus shifted to the production of spaces and norms within the context of migration. Ruba al-Akash discussed the role of digital technologies in marriage and divorce among Syrian refugees in Jordan. The research highlighted how young Syrian women use the internet as a private space for emotional expression and engagement in intimate and marital practices. It emphasized the dual nature of digital technologies, empowering refugees while also shaping gendered discourses and practices. Online connectivity was found to be crucial for maintaining relationships, accessing information, and improving livelihoods. Another presentation by Jake Cassani delved into the narratives and social dynamics of Syrian refugee workers by providing a comparative perspective with the Lebanese field. Through extensive fieldwork, the research examined how these narratives challenge social hierarchies, with a focus on forced migration, labor, gender, and ideology. The findings revealed how Syrian laborers navigate exploitation in Lebanon, reshaping social relations while grappling with the challenges brought about by displacement. Continuing the panel discussions, Ayham Dalal presented on the narratives of Syrian refugees in Amman. The study highlighted the role of urbanized Palestinian camps within the city as transitional zones for the poorest segments of the Syrian refugee population. Settlement patterns were influenced by traditions and pre-war transnational networks, emphasizing that camps, cities, and displaced populations are part of a larger urban system offering opportunities for new urban ecologies.

The symposium concluded with a visit guided by Saleem Ayoub Quna, a Circassian journalist, to Amman’s al-Muhajirin neighborhood, which served as an initial settlement for Circassian migrants in the city. The visit engaged participants in the captivating “Tales of Amman” project, exploring the narratives of one of the city’s historic migrant neighborhoods.

Amal Khaleefa is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique–French Institute for the Near East (CNRS–IFPO) Amman, working on the Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency Project (ITHACA). Her research focuses on representations, language practices, and the transmission of culture in migratory contexts, specifically in Jordan, in the Syrian refugee camp of Za‘tari, in the city of Zarqa among Palestinian refugees, and in al-Pakistan neighborhood for Rohingya. She is the author of the forthcoming book Les langues au cœur de l’exil: les Syriens du camp de Zaatari, based on her award-winning thesis, to be published by Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Valentina Napolitano is a sociologist and researcher at the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), and at Laboratoire Population Environnement et Développement (LPED) in Marseille. Her research deals with forced migrations, political violence, and family transformations in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Jordan. Among her recent publications: with Falestin Naïli and Pauline Piraud-Fournet, “Introduction: Charity, Relief and Humanitarianism as a Means of Maintaining Social and Political Stability in the Middle East – A Longue Durée Analysis of Actors, Categories, and Practices,” Endowment Studies 6, no. 1–2 (2022); and “Les émotions d’ex-militaires syriens. Donner un sens et une cohérence à la désertion en contexte de guerre,” Critique internationale 9.