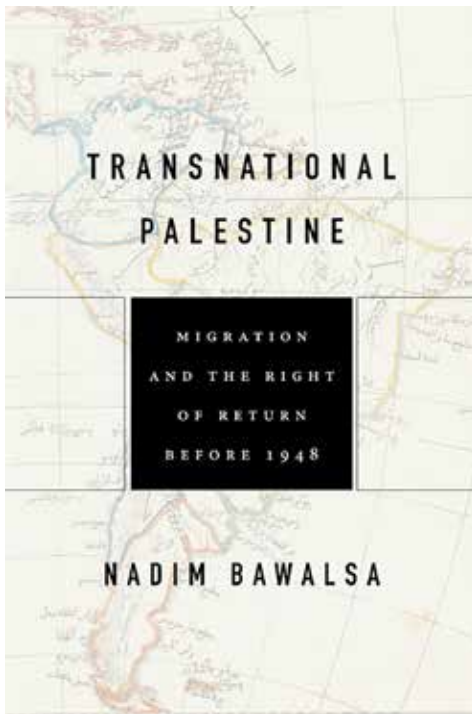


BOOK REVIEW

From Palestine and (Maybe) Back: Migration and Palestinians' Rights

Nadim Bawalsa, *Transnational Palestine: Migration and the Right to Return before 1948*. Stanford University Press, 2022. 296 pp. \$90.00 hardcover, \$28.00 paperback.

Review by Maria Chiara Rioli



Abstract

The history of Palestinian migration prior to 1948 represents one of the fields in Palestinian studies that has witnessed significant expansion in very recent years. Nadim Bawalsa's *Transnational Palestine: Migration and the Right of Return before 1948* constitutes an outstanding advancement in the historiography of Palestinian mobilities and diaspora studies. Bawalsa uses a prism of sources gathered from state and private archives and libraries from Mexico to Chile, and from England to Palestine and Israel. Through his analysis of the strategies and forms of claims of citizenship in the interwar world, the author offers a groundbreaking historical appraisal of Palestinian immigration to Latin America.

Although historians have given increasing attention in recent years to Palestinian mobilities during the late Ottoman and British Mandate period, the features, biographies, and archives of Palestinian voluntary migration before 1948 remain open to numerous paths of research.¹ With *Transnational Palestine*, Nadim Bawalsa provides an outstanding historical appraisal of Palestinian migration to the Americas, and specifically to Latin America, where tens of thousands of Palestinians have moved – temporarily or permanently – since the end of the nineteenth century.

The book proposes an innovative history of the Palestinian diaspora in Latin America, historicizing migration since the nineteenth century. By doing so, Bawalsa, who has authored important articles on the subject,² connects, and

provides a fresh contribution to, the extensive scholarship on voluntary mobilities from Syria in the late Ottoman empire, more specifically, on Palestinian migrants before 1948. This approach is crucial to fully include Palestinians into the trails of global networks of workers, artisans, entrepreneurs, and political dissidents, but also of objects and practices, that circulated in the nineteenth century across and beyond the Middle East.

Bawalsa illuminates a wide array of unexplored records in public and private archival repositories, from Mexico to Chile (the country with the largest Palestinian community outside the Middle East), from England to Palestine and Israel. These sources are analyzed through the prism of the strategies and forms of claims to citizenship by Palestinian migrants, in particular during the British Mandate. This objective is reached through the use and analysis not only of diplomatic and consular sources but also of petitions, periodicals, and letters authored by Palestinian migrants themselves. In so doing, the author connects Palestinian migration history to the most recent works in migration and refugee studies that highlight the importance of sources authored by migrants themselves, going beyond diplomatic and institutional archival collections.³

Over six chapters, Bawalsa defines the historical framework of the growing migration flow from Greater Syria at the end of the nineteenth century: “Worsening political, social and economic conditions in the Ottoman empire left many with little choice but to pack up and leave” (p. 21). The Young Turk Revolution of 1908, the spike in censorship, imprisonment, and exile, and new Ottoman conscription laws “drove thousands to board ships at Beirut, Jaffa, or Alexandria in the hope of escaping, at least until things improved back home” (p. 21). A large proportion of these were Christians, whose itineraries included the return to Palestine after making large profits. Approximately six hundred thousand persons emigrated from Greater Syria to both North and South America between 1860 and 1920. A high proportion of Palestinian migrants headed to Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. Most of the marriages of Palestinian migrants were within their community.

In the first two chapters, Bawalsa situates his work in the context of the scholarship on Ottoman Syrian mobilities to the Americas since the late nineteenth century. He retraces the flow of migrants from Palestine, and especially of individuals and families from Bethlehem, Bayt Jala, and Bayt Sahur who chose an intermediary economic development zone in Chile to avoid competition with other Syrian migrants. Many ended up in high positions in the banking, manufacturing, and textile sectors. Discriminatory laws and the blockade imposed by the Allies on the port cities of the Ottoman empire in 1915 acted as a contrast to the flow that had increased in the years immediately before the First World War (the number of Syrian migrants entering the United States was 5,525 in 1912; 9,210 in 1913; and 218 in 1918).

In this scenario, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the British Mandate over Palestine made the option of return increasingly difficult or impossible. As the author depicts in the second chapter, the First World War posed serious consequences on migration. After the Balfour Declaration, petitions driven

by religious interests but also in the name of the Arab cause, affirming the right of self-determination to Palestinians and contesting Zionist ambitions over Palestine, circulated globally, consolidating a transnational identification with Palestine.

With the establishment of the British Mandate, profound transformations in the status of Palestinian migrants occurred: the 1925 Palestinian citizenship Order-in-Council, analyzed in chapter 3, “in theory . . . was equitable. In practice, however, it would prove difficult to implement equitably since citizenship was significantly linked to the mandate’s built-in-mission of creating a Jewish ‘national home’ in Palestine with a population of Jewish citizens who would contribute to Britain’s modernizing global empire” (p. 75). Bawalsa points out that “over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, . . . Palestinian migrants came to occupy unique positions in a new world order defined by borders, citizenship, and nation-states. That is, while they had been considered Ottoman subjects prior to 1923, they effectively became stateless following the Treaty of Lausanne and Britain’s refusal to offer them transnational recognition and representation as Palestinian citizens” (p. 75).

More specifically, the confusing time requirements of residence in Palestine constituted the main source of difficulty for Palestinian migrants to apply for citizenship. This ambiguity reflected the deliberations at the beginning of the British Mandate that had as their objective the settlement and naturalization of Jews in Palestine, therefore excluding Palestinian migrants on an ethnic and racial demographic basis.

“We shall always be Palestinians, never admit change of nationality,” was how Jesus Talamas, a Palestinian migrant in Saltillo, Mexico, concluded a petition addressed to the high commissioner Herbert Plumer on 2 January 1927. Following that, a number of Palestinian migrants were denied Palestinian citizenship by the Government of Palestine in Jerusalem. Talamas’s petition testified to the stateless condition common to Palestinian migrants in the aftermath of World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire; they were left without Ottoman citizenship and denied Palestinian citizenship by the legislation of the British Mandate over Palestine, without consular and legal representation, and lost any claim to inheritance and ownership in Palestine.

The response by Mexico’s Palestinians, unpacked in chapter 4, is depicted via the study of forms of activism pursued by committees created mostly in the towns of Linares, Monterrey, Saltillo, San Pedro, and Torreon, in northern Mexico. Petitions were addressed to the high commissioner for Palestine, but also to the League of Nations in Geneva; the Colonial, Foreign, and Home Offices in London; and the Arab Executive in Jerusalem. They expressed vivid – and courageous – criticism and disseminated on a transnational scale the demand for a commitment to the principle of self-determination in the new interwar liberal world order. Bawalsa analyzes the contents and discourse of these petitions: the author argues that these documents contained an acknowledgement of British rule over Palestine, but also denounced the abuse of power perpetrated by the colonial ruler in the domain of migration, land distribution, and, for migrants, citizenship legislation. In this sense, according to Bawalsa, “the petition functioned as a mechanism of colonial control, but it also

functioned as a means of transnational political claims-making and group identification for a rising collective” (p. 136).

Periodicals in Arabic published by Palestinian migrants in Chile are fascinating sources presented in chapter 5, while chapter 6 highlights how the narrative of the Palestinian right to return began in the 1920s and not after 1948, elaborated and articulated in Palestinian newspapers, as in the case of *Filastin*.

To conclude, *Transnational Palestine* opens fundamental itineraries of research to newly understand and historicize unfulfilled Palestinian rights: “It is time to write the Palestinians into transnational histories, and the transnational into Palestinian history” (p. 7).

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Endnotes

- 1 In this growing field, see the studies of Lauren Banko and Jacob Norris and, in a long-term perspective of voluntary and forced migrations, the contributions by Mezna Qato and Kjersti Berg. See Lauren Banko, “Claiming Identities in Palestine: Migration and Nationality under the Mandate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46, no. 2 (2017): 26–43; Jacob Norris, “Return Migration and the Rise of the Palestinian Nouveaux Riches, 1870–1925,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 46, no. 2 (2017): 60–75; and the online workshop entitled *Camp Histories: New Studies of Palestinian Migrations*, organized by Mezna Qato and Kjersti Berg in December 2021, funded by the Norwegian Center for Humanitarian Studies, and sponsored by Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the Margaret Anstee Centre for Global Studies at the University of Cambridge.
- 2 See among the various contributions, Nadim Bawalsa, “Citizens from Afar: Palestinian Migrants and the New World Order, 1920–1930,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, ed. Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (London: Routledge, 2015), 123–35.
- 3 On these perspectives, Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, “What Is Refugee History, Now?” *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2022): 1–19; Peter Gatrell, “Refugees, What’s Wrong with History?” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 170–89; Paul V. Dudman, “Oral History and Collective Memory: Documenting Refugee Voices and the Challenges of Archival Representation,” *Atlanti+* 29, no. 2 (2019): 33–43.