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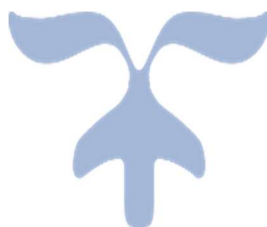
# PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN EGYPT

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*The forgotten refugees*

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**Abstract:**

Seventy-two years after the Nakba, Palestinian refugees remain forgotten in Egypt, without basic rights or even official refugee status (Mousa, 2013). This paper demonstrates that rather than supporting the right of return and the preservation of the Palestinian identity as argued by the Egyptian government, shifting state policies and the lack of a refugee regime have left Palestinians in limbo and denied them both rights and identity. The lack of a formal refugee regime has contributed to a loss of their civil rights, a decline in their sense of Palestinian identity and a lack of scholarly or humanitarian attention to them. The situation of Palestinians in Egypt also necessitates more scholarship and literature to better understand and shed light on this understudied community, which, as this paper argues, could also help attract more humanitarian work for them.

**Introduction**

Seventy-two years after the Nakba, 3,000 Palestinians remain forgotten and stateless in Gezirat Fadel, a “recently discovered” “informal village” in Egypt's Nile Delta, housing descendants of Palestinians with no basic rights - not even official refugee status (Mousa 2013, 1). For 65 years, this village was “almost completely forgotten and off the radar, by choice or ignorance, of any institution - whether be it the Egyptian or Palestinian authorities, non-governmental organisations or activists” (Mousa 2013, 1). The village is in a state of extreme poverty with an average family income of 10-15 Egyptian pounds (\$2) a day (Ahmad 2015, 1). All the men of the village “support their families by collecting and selling garbage from other villages. The nearest hospital is an hour away. There is no plumbing or sewage system and women have to go and get water daily from old fashioned wells in neighbouring fields” (Ahmad 2015, 1). “We waited and waited, governments changed, kings fled, presidents died, and nothing happened”,

explains one of the remaining 1948 refugees on the island (Ahmad 2015, 1). The refugees in Gezirat Al Fadel claim that they “have it worse than others who fled to Jordan, Syria or Lebanon” (Crane 2015, 1).

Egypt’s Fadel Island represents the country’s forgotten 70,000 Palestinian refugees. The case of Palestinian refugees in Egypt is special, because they differ from other Palestinian refugee communities in the Middle East (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria), where UNRWA is mandated to operate. This raises many questions: Who is responsible for this community falling between cracks? Why has it not been the source of academic study or advocacy—quite literally, unmapped and unimagined? Why have the experiences of the islands residents not been the source of humanitarian, academic or solidarity work? Egypt classifies Palestinians as foreigners, but “shies away from calling them refugees,” which places them under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, tasked with assisting and relocating asylum-seekers (Crane 2015, 1). As the community leader of Gezirat Fadel mentions, “Under President Abdel Nasser, we were granted equal status with Egyptians, so nobody set up specific services for us. But now, they classify us as foreigners and nobody knows about us. International charities don’t know about us” (Crane 2015, 1). In its defense, the Egyptian government argues that “improving Palestinian conditions and giving them basic rights would facilitate their full integration in the host society and thus weaken their Palestinian identity, leading them to forget Palestine” (Abed 2014, 1). This argument for preserving Palestinian identity and nationality is translated in the host country not wanting to create conditions suitable for Palestinian refugees to remain by denying them access to services and protection provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (Naoum 2016, 14).

Against this backdrop, the main question this paper seeks to address is how the absence of a refugee regime in Egypt has impacted Palestinians living there, and what this has meant in terms of their daily life and rights. In this paper, I argue that rather than protecting Palestinians and safeguarding their political claims as the Egyptian government argues, the lack of a refugee regime has stripped away both their rights and their Palestinian identity. I further argue that the lack of a refugee regime has also decreased scholarly interest in the topic and resulted in a lack of data and resources, and consequently less attention to and knowledge of Palestinians' situation and conditions in Egypt. Since there is very little written on the topic, this paper aims to contribute to the literature by exploring this understudied community, and hopefully attracting scholars to study it, with an end goal of bringing more international attention to their situation.

I begin by providing a historical overview of Palestinians in Egypt and the difference in treatment according to the ruling government, offering a historical account of the two main discourses: the "Golden" Nasserist era (the 1950s-1970s) and the era of decline (from 1978 to the present day). Following this, I provide an assessment of the consequences of these policies and measures, which ultimately resulted in protection gaps for Palestinians including a loss of their civil rights, difficulty in accessing legal status, employment, mobility, health, education, and property ownership. I then assess how the deprivation of Palestinians' rights has led them to hide or suppress their identity and assimilate in order to survive, and explore the reasons behind that. Finally, I focus on explaining the relationship between refugee regimes/humanitarian work (humanitarian economies) and policy/scholarship/advocacy work (critical discourse).

## **1. Historical Overview**

Around 15,500 Palestinians arrived in Egypt after the 1948 Nakba (Abed 2011, 1). Under Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule, the policies and measures adopted by the Egyptian government were accommodating to Palestinians and supportive of their political representation. In fact, during what became to be known as the "Golden era", Palestinians were "treated on a par with Egyptians" as they were allowed to work in government and public sector jobs, according to law 66 of 1962, and were not required to obtain work permits (Abed 2009, 4). Moreover, Palestinians were granted access to "free public education, including discounted university fees, and government services". (CITATION) One of the old residents of Gezirat Fadel remembers the days when she "could pick up bread, sugar, oil, and rice for mere pennies. Growing up, she never worried about having the right papers" (Crane 2015, 1). In a testimony, the Island community leader, Said el Namudi states that in the days of Nasser, they had to renew their papers every five years, and that they received aid from the government before Ramadan and before every Eid" (Ahmad 2015, 1).

However, this Golden era came to an end in 1978 following the signing of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel and the assassination of Egyptian Minister of Culture Yusif al-Siba'I (Abed 2009, 6). In fact, under the rule of under Anwar el Sadat, the Egyptian Government withdrew all the rights that had been previously granted to Palestinian refugees. Ever since, Palestinians residing in Egypt have been assigned the category of foreigners and their situation remains stagnant. This was also "accompanied with widespread arrests, surveillance, detentions, and anti-Palestinian sentiment" (Naoum 2016, 10).

A common aspect throughout both periods is Egypt's position within the international refugee regime. Established in 1950, the UNHCR was charged by the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees with the protection of their interests as it relates to political and economic

rights in the host country, and eventually voluntary repatriation (Crisp 2009, 1). However, the Arab League feared that Palestinians, if protected by UNHCR and resettled to other countries, would lose their identity and cause (Abed 2003, 1). An alternative was UNRWA, whose roles include registering refugees and providing them with personal documentation; administering and managing the camps where they are usually accommodated as well as ensuring that they have access to shelter, food, water, health care and education. UNRWA has an “operational mandate in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza” (Abed 2014, 537). In the case of Lebanon, which is part of the international refugee regime, camps could be described as “the quintessential humanitarian space – in the sense of a space apart from the conditions of crisis that enables the provision of assistance to people in need” by UNRWA (Feldman 2014, 246). However, UNRWA’s operation does not include Egypt, as the government did not want to “create conditions suitable for Palestinian refugees to remain” that could eventually lead them to “forget Palestine” and “lose their identity” (Naoum 2016, 14). In fact, offering basic rights to Palestinian refugees was viewed “as a contributor to resettlement, counter-productive to the right of return” (Mousa 2013, 1). Instead, the Egyptian government ended up excluding Palestinians in Egypt from “being part of the international relief and assistance” (Abed 2014, 537). This lack of a refugee regime for Palestinians in Egypt is translated in the fact that Palestinian refugees are excluded from a number of UN-related conventions and agencies, including protection and assistance from the 1951 Convention, UNHCR and UNRWA. In that sense, Palestinians in Egypt find themselves in a protection gap, without any international protection since their crisis started, and as of 1978, without any national protection, either.

## **2. Loss of Civil Rights**

Egypt's adopted policies and treatment of Palestinian refugees since 1978, and the virtual lack of a refugee regime to protect them, have affected many aspects of Palestinians' livelihoods. By being categorized as foreigners, rights to free education, employment, property, and even residency were taken away from them. First of all, as it relates to the provision of education, as of 1978, educational services became possible only in private schools, and university education had to be paid for in British sterling pounds. This has significantly decreased the rate of education within the Palestinian community in Egypt. According to Abed, "from 1965 to 1978, Palestinian students studying at universities had numbered 20,000, but by 1985 the number had dropped to 4,500" (2003, 1). Another example is Gezirat Fadel, where "very few are able to send their children to school, and none of the village's students have been able to continue their education beyond high school" (Ahmad 2015, 1). As for employment, "accessing a job became impossible as the public sector was blocked for Palestinians" (Abed 2014, 541). As no new Palestinians were hired by the state after 1978, and the private sector required skills and education, all Palestinians have become left with is mainly the informal economy, in activities such as "driving trucks and taxis, bicycle repair shops, petty trade in commodities such as used clothing on the street" (Abed 2003, 1). Along with their declining rates of education, this has contributed to a deterioration in their standards of living and available prospects. As for property ownership, all Palestinian privileges regarding property rights were revoked once they became foreigners, preventing them "from owning agricultural properties or fertile or desert lands in Egypt" (Naoum 2016, 28).

This decline in Palestinians' civil rights in Egypt since 1978 further raises questions previously posed by **Jacqueline Bhabha** in "Arendt's children: Do today's migrant children have a right to have rights?". Bhabha defines "Arendt's children" as the "subset of migrants who lack their own government," a definition which applies to and helps us understand Palestinians born in

Egypt in this case (2009, 411). Before 1978, Palestinians born in Egypt “never thought to question whether they had the right to be there” (1). However, they have since lost access to food subsidies, free education, and free health care (1). Even “Palestinians who were born in Egypt and have spent all their lives there face tight restrictions on their access to education, to work, to own land or property, to benefit from government services, and to secure residency” (Abed 2009, 1). This has further complicated their situation; since they lack a refugee regime to protect them, Palestinians in Egypt have thus found themselves stranded with no government or basic rights. As explained by el Namudi, the mayor of Gezirat Fadel: “All we want from the Egyptian government is for someone who lives in Egypt and was born in Egypt to be treated like an Egyptian. ... Today, our poor pay the prices of Egypt’s wealthiest. All we want is for our poor to be treated as the Egyptian poor” (Crane 2015, 1).

### **3. Loss of Palestinian identity**

The lack of a refugee regime for Palestinians in Egypt has affected more than just their civil rights. Along with the loss of civil rights, under the Egyptian Emergency Law, “the activities of Palestinians were also strictly regulated, sweeping arrests made, and surveillance sanctioned” (Abed 2011, 4). This “intrusive security atmosphere made Palestinians suspicious of each other, and afraid of being reported to the authorities, especially by other Palestinians” (4). In response, this has led the Palestinian community in Egypt to look for coping mechanisms and survival strategies. Among these, a common coping strategy is assimilation and their attempts to integrate within Egyptian society. This combination of legal, political and socio-economic factors has, in some cases, affected Palestinians’ feelings of identification with the rest of the Palestinian community in Egypt and with Palestine itself (Abed 2014, 545). In fact, “Palestinians have tended



to hide their identity and assimilate socially within Egyptian society”, through speaking with the Egyptian dialect, for example, instead of their own (545). In addition, Palestinians’ unstable legal status (i.e. renewal of residency permit, having a work permit or a student card) has often resulted in them concealing the fact that they were Palestinians” (Abed 2003, 16). Another common strategy among new generations of Palestinians, in order to integrate with their host community and access more rights and secure more rights for new generations, has been to marry Egyptians (16). In fact, it has now become “difficult to determine who is Palestinian and who is Egyptian on the basis of appearance and dialect” due to these intermarriages and the overall assimilation strategies of the community (Abed 2014, 544).

For these new generations, in particular, it could be argued that they are significantly disconnected from their Palestinian identity, in relation to the previous generations. As explained by a third generation Palestinian born and raised in Egypt: “To a certain extent, we differ from our parents in the way we talk, and the way we live” (Abed 2014, 544). In fact, Palestinians in Egypt do not live in a community, they are dispersed throughout the country. As explained by the mayor of Gezirat Fadel, there are Palestinians scattered widely across the country, in towns such as “Sharqiya, Zagzig, Abu Kabir, Fakous and Belbis” (Mousa 2013, 1). As a result, new generations do not grow up surrounded by a social network or relatives that remind them of their Palestinian identity, unlike in camps under UNRWA operations in other countries, such as Shatila in Lebanon, where Palestinians have tried to build a replica of the culture and old villages they left behind in Palestine. Another reason behind this intergenerational gap in identity is cultural-educational exposure. Palestinian children who go to schools in Egypt are exposed to a very politicized educational curriculum, aimed at “promoting the Pharaonic and Egyptian identity” rather than “promoting the sense of belonging to the Arab nation”, as well as portraying “the Egyptian

citizenship independently of the Arab or Islamic nation” (Abed 2014, 545). This is in contrast to the experience of Palestinian children who go to school in camps under the operations of UNRWA, who are “taught about Palestine and their villages because of the locality (being in the camp) and because of the teachers who come from the camp community and manage to strengthen the Palestinian identity informally, since they come from the same background” (545).

Parents also play an important role in younger Palestinians’ sense of identity. In Egypt, “memories of Palestine and knowledge about the history of the family are rarely communicated to the children” (Abed 2003, 16). Because of their need to assimilate in Egypt for protection and survival, children were sometimes asked by their family members “not to emphasize the fact they were Palestinians, telling them to lower their voices when talking about Palestine or Palestinian relatives” (544). This is opposed to countries which are part of the refugee regime, such as Lebanon, where parents in the Shatila camp such as Um Mahmoud, for instance, are keen to sing “traditional songs”; go “to the mountains above Beirut to collect za‘tar in the spring”, just as they did in their youth in their old villages, keep “close ties with relatives in other camp”, preserve the “values of family and fellaheen culture, keeping alive the rhythm and traditions of rural village life in their household” (Allan 2013, 193). The only similar case to this is Gezirat Fadel whose residents are more similar to Shatila camp residents than to other Palestinians living in Egypt in the sense that they are strongly maintaining Palestinian cultural behaviour and dialect, having cultural days, passing on food recipes, music, traditions to new generations (Al Jazeera 2019). Another way of keeping their “Palestinian culture alive” in Gezirat Fadel is by “solving their own problems, especially between families, by themselves using their traditional reconciliation system” (El Gundy 2013, 1). Finally, in Gezirat Fadel, intermarriage between Palestinians is very common as a “means to strengthen ties to Palestine” and help “maintain identity, since both the man and

the woman share the same Palestinian values, culture, and rituals” (Abed 2014, 546). As stated by the Mayor of Gezirat Fadel: “Sixty-five years on, village residents say they are fighting to preserve their traditions” (El Gundy 2013,1). Geziret Fadel represents an exception as a very rare, if not only, example of Palestinians living in a community in Egypt, where, as previously explained, the lack of a refugee regime has pushed Palestinians more towards assimilation and blending in.

#### **4. Humanitarian economies and critical discourse**

The lack of a refugee regime for Palestinians in Egypt has further impacted their visibility when it comes to research and scholarly interest. Their case presents a counter-example to **Heath Cabot’s** “The Business of Anthropology and the European Refugee Regime”, in which she evokes the excessive scholarly interest in the business of anthropology and the European refugee regime (Cabot 2019, 261). Cabot argues that the business of anthropology reinforces the European refugee regime, which makes border crossers into targets of policing, intervention, and study. She highlights the potential pitfalls of “crisis chasing” in migration studies, which is the tendency to take “crisis as a main theme of scholarship on displacement, as opposed to contesting or undermining crisis critically” (Cabot 2019, 264). In fact, this is translated by focusing on the “hot refugee crisis” in Europe, as opposed to less visible ones, such as the case of the Palestinian refugee community in Egypt, which remains understudied and invisible on both the national and international levels. Building on Cabot’s point, it could be argued that the existence of refugee and humanitarian regimes also helps generate and encourage critical discourse and vice versa, generating a positive reinforcement loop. This is the case with Palestinian communities living in areas under the operations of UNRWA, such as Lebanon, where humanitarian work attracts

advocacy work and scholarship interest, which in return help attract even more humanitarian economies.

The opposite is demonstrated in the case of Palestinian refugees living in Egypt, where there is no official refugee regime or humanitarian work being done and virtually little written on the topic. In fact, other than Oroub Al Abed, Dian Naoum, Elżbieta M. Goździak and Alissa Walter, very few scholars, if any, have studied this community. This demonstrates a negative reinforcement loop in contrast to the positive one mentioned above. The lack of a refugee regime and humanitarian work can be argued to lead to an absence of policy/advocacy work and scholarship on this community. As a result, they attract the attention and interest of few critical discourses, as illustrated above, and remain invisible and unprotected. The opposite can also be argued, where the lack of such critical scholarship decreases the attention and work provided to this community by the humanitarian field. A third explanation could also be that the geographic and community dispersion of Palestinians, as part of their assimilation strategies in response to the lack of a refugee regime in Egypt, makes it harder for both scholars to study this population and humanitarian workers to target and reach them.

Gezirat Fadel, which was “discovered” by coincidence and attracted national media attention through Al Jazeera or Al Ahram in 2013, remains an exception in its conditions and the interest it received. However, even that has not dramatically improved its situation. The problems Fadel Island faces have drawn the attention of Egyptian and Palestinian activists who sought to make public the plight of the forgotten village and to advance some changes. In fact, under former President Mohamed Morsi’s short rule, the government responded with humanitarian work, and “electricity was installed in the village, and the Morsi government started to build a hospital near

the village” (1). While Morsi was expected to improve the living conditions of the island residents, however, “they removed him before he was able to change anything” (Ahmad 2015, 1). Following Morsi’s removal from power, under Abdel Fattah El Sisi, all of these plans came to a halt, and the government is now “consumed in political turmoil” and is too distracted with “its declared war against the Islamists and the activists of the 25 January revolution” (1). In fact, one of the women from the Island explains that the “Sisi government had set up a rationing system, providing five pieces of bread to each person daily...No more bread for Palestinian refugees!” (1). Amidst these political changes and in light of the lack of a refugee regime in Egypt, it is thus unlikely that anyone will be able to improve the situation of the forgotten Palestinian refugees in Gezirat Fadel or those dispersed around Egypt, whose situation is less known and thus more difficult to address. This is where an increase in scholarly attention to Palestinians in Egypt and advocacy work could potentially help increase interest and redirect the attention of international humanitarian organizations, such as the UNHCR, to help these communities and overcome the lack of a refugee regime.

## **Conclusion:**

The above discussion of Palestinian refugees in Egypt demonstrates that rather than supporting the right of return and the preservation of the Palestinian identity as argued by the Egyptian government, shifting state policies and the lack of a refugee regime have left Palestinians in limbo and denied them both rights and identity. The lack of a formal refugee regime has contributed to a loss of their civil rights, a decline in their sense of Palestinian identity and a lack of scholarly or humanitarian attention to them. This further shows the need for a right-based approach on the side of the Egyptian government, in order to make sure that the community’s

Palestinian identity is upheld and its refugee status maintained, like in other settings, until a solution is found and return is possible. This would, in turn, create an environment where Palestinian communities can flourish, and could be reached and supported by local and international bodies in order to shed light on this forgotten community, and better address its needs. The situation of Palestinians in Egypt also necessitates more scholarship and literature to better understand and shed light on this understudied community, which, as this paper argued, could also help attract more humanitarian work for them. This paper has contributed to the literature on this invisible community by explaining the impact of the lack of a refugee regime on their daily life, hopefully attracting scholars to study it with the end goal of bringing more international attention to their situation.

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