

Refugee transfers in the Euro-Arab Mediterranean zone: Tying the past with the present

Towards a transregional and
tranhistorical understanding
in times of crises

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Refugee Transfers in the Euro-Arab Mediterranean Zone: Tying the Past with the Present

Migration is not a modern phenomenon. The Mediterranean region is characterized by migration flows from north to south and vice versa since antiquity. The area, which we consider today the Mediterranean, has benefited from a comprehensive exchange of knowledge between its northern and southern parts. It became an economical and scientific hub and grew to a driving force of development. Today, the perception of migration movements has changed largely; security aspects came to the fore rather than the opportunity for exchange.

The international AGYA workshop 'Refugee Transfers in the Euro-Arab Mediterranean Zone: Tying the Past with the Present' at the Lebanese American University in Byblos, Lebanon aimed to turn attention to the latter: It focused on the role of migrants and refugees as transmitters of knowledge and contributors to social and cultural development. In an interdisciplinary approach, AGYA members Tamirace Fakhoury and Jenny Oesterle gathered scholars from the fields of history, archaeology, social sciences, literature and others to discuss the potential of migrants as actors of change. The participants inquired paradigms of 'de-securitization' that allow to approach displacement flows from a developmental and humanitarian perspective rather than from a mere security-based point of view.

Keynote: Current Displacements in the Euro-Arab Mediterranean Region – 'Crisis(es)' in Regional and International Perspectives

After discussing the concept of crisis, Ibrahim Awad, Director of the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies in the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at The American University in Cairo, analyzed displacement in the Euro-Mediterranean region between 2011 and 2016. In a first sub-period, 2011-13, movements remained in the Arab Middle East. The civil strife in Syria generated large refugee flows to bordering and neighbouring countries. The crisis was in Jordan and Lebanon, where refugees came to represent 20 per cent of the population. Another displacement was that of nationals and migrants workers from Libya towards Egypt and Tunisia. When Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey could not receive additional refugees, these refugee streams flowed to neighbouring Europe. Relative to its population, flows to Europe are far from being a crisis, such as experienced by Lebanon and Jordan. But the refugee flows to Europe revealed other crises, such as that of solidarity among the European Union member states in sharing the responsibility for refugees as well as European integration. Europe and the international system as a whole have an interest in contributing to shouldering the responsibility of refugees in the Arab Middle East. The Syrian refugee flows are evidence that the symptoms of a crisis cannot remain confined to the region where it erupts. The Middle East is a sub-system of the international system. Any major dysfunction in the subsystem is bound to affect the system as whole. Preventing the breakdown of the sub-system is thus in the best interest of the neighbouring sub-systems, in this case Europe, and of the international system as whole. This is the rationale for providing protection to asylum-seekers and for assisting the bordering countries, who are hosts to the large majority of refugees, in securing for them decent livelihoods and living conditions.

Mass Migrations in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean

In his talk 'Mass Migrations in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean', Nicholas Terpstra, Professor and Chair of History at the University of Toronto, pointed out that the first massive population transfer in the Mediterranean zone took place after 1492, when over 500,000 Muslims and Jews were expelled from Spain and other European territories. After that, further population transfers correlate with the Reformation period, Muslim-Christian Wars but may also occurred with famines, plagues and slavery. Professor Terpstra's overview showed that in general, Europe and the Middle East have been dealing with massive population transfers for a long time and have found different ways of tackling this challenge. Interestingly, these mass expulsions also mean that Europe historically hosted a significant number of Jewish but also Muslim people. However, they were expelled after Christian ideology became obsessed with the 'removal of impure and contagious elements of the body' during the inquisition period.

Syria and Its Refugees: A Historical Perspective

Dawn Chatty, Professor of Anthropology and Forced Migration and former Director of the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, continued the historical coverage of refugee transfers by taking a closer look at the Ottoman response to forced migrants in the Levant of the 1800s. The Russian conquest of the Caucasus had pushed almost one million ethnic Muslims of Chechen and Circassian origin into the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans tried to respond to this challenge with decentralization – such as the Tanzimat reforms for non-Muslim and ethnic Muslim minorities – but also with the specific Refugee Code of 1857 that was designed to help the newcomers settle in the empire. Dawn also drew the circle to the 20th century by pointing out how the Russo-Turkish War in 1878 led to an influx of around two million Muslim refugees coming to the Ottoman Empire and pushing into Anatolia. This in return was an important factor to the expulsion of Kurds and Armenians which would lead to the tragic events of the 1910s.

Deportation in the Ancient Near East

AGYA member and Professor for Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Tübingen, Ammar Abdulrahman, took a historical perspective on refugee knowledge transfer by providing information on the practice of deportation as punishment in the ancient Near East. He particularly covered the Neo-Assyrian Period around 800 to 700 BC, when the rulers of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the neighbouring kingdoms over time forcibly resettled around 1.5 million people within their lands or expelled others. Abdulrahman also presented an ancient story of population exchange when King Yarim Lim was granted the city of Alalakh by his older brother Abba-El of the Kingdom of Yamhad, centered on Aleppo. He then participated in an exchange of population between his and his brother's territory.

Protection for Refugees in the First Decades of Islamic History

The Head of the Centre for Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University, Historian Jenny Oesterle, also AGYA member and workshop organizer, presented the historic roots of dealing with migrants in Islam: the First Hijrah from Mecca to Abyssinia in 615/16, when the followers of Prophet Mohammad sought refuge in the Christian Kingdom of Aksum. When approached by the polytheistic notables of Al Quraysh from Mecca, the King of Aksum denied handing over the exiles on the grounds that early Islam resembled his own religion. This reaction also demonstrates how early Islam featured many Christian and Jewish elements at the time. This historic episode is remembered in Muslim tradition as the First Hijrah, with most of the migrants being remembered and honored in person.

The Ruler as Refuge. Peril and Protection in the Medieval Mediterranean

With a focus on 'The Ruler as Refuge. Peril and Protection in the Medieval Mediterranean', Historian Theresa Jäckh, M.A. presented a poem from the Norman Kingdom of Malta, written between 1148 and 1152. While she acknowledged that the poem was not of high literary value, she pointed out that it is remarkable in offering a multitude of historically relevant clues to the attentive reader. The poem is addressed to 'George the Admiral' – believed to be George of Antioch, the admiral of King Roger II of Sicily – by which the poem in itself offers interesting hints on the relationship of the Norman monarchy in a Greek-Arab setting. The peaceful coexistence of a Norman-European palace and his Muslim-Arab and Byzantine followers and servants was a notable feature of the Kingdom of Sicily to which Malta belonged at the time. From the references the poem's author gives, one can deduce his Christian background, most likely from Southern Italy where he enjoyed a classical Latin Education but wrote the poem in Greek. From the content, style and other allusions, Jäckh concluded the author to be a Christian in Maltese exile, presenting a peculiar case of migration in a special time of migration and integration.

Remembering the Past, Looking to the Future: Creating Opportunities for Dialogue and Exchange in the Context of Displacement

Next to historical perspectives on refugee knowledge transfer, the workshop participants discussed the topic of refugee movements in contemporary perspective by contextualising and mapping their social, political and economic contributions. Professor Heaven Crawley, Chair of International Migration at Coventry University, presented the role that current waves of refugees play in European social and political discourse. According to her, racism and xenophobia have moved from fringe positions to the middle ground of society. Migration is not a new phenomenon but has become a touchstone issue, signifying a broad range of public concerns pertaining society and the wear and tear of public infrastructure: while the UK has accepted only 7,000 refugees from Syria, the public opinion towards them is mostly negative. This public attitude formation is intensified by parties like UKIP that brand migrants as corrupt and criminal, putting a strain on the country's infrastructure like schools, hospitals, housing and wage levels. On the other hand, Professor Crawley presented the concept of Coventry as a city of peace and reconciliation, working to remember the horrors of WWII while at the same time overcoming their differences and joining in peace. This could present a meaningful approach to deal with the current refugee crisis as well as with the conflicts responsible for it.

Conceptualizing Social Remittances in the Context of the Syrian Refugee Influx

Professor of Sociology/Anthropology Paul Tabar of LAU Beirut then made the case for a representation of refugees as positive active actors, keeping in mind their social remittances. In his opinion, in the West there are three common narratives characterizing refugees: either as victims, as a burden and problem, or as subversive elements impacting the host community's culture and security. Similarly in the Arab World, refugees would be perceived as fellow Arabs in need of help, an economic burden, or a political threat – either for security or as a strategic threat to sectarian balances. Tabar criticized the portrayal of refugees as passive actors in their social existence, being active actors only in a negative role. He therefore encouraged looking for opportunities to portray refugees as active actors in more positive roles.

Mapping Social Remittances in the Context of Forced Migration: Social Actors, Units of Analysis, Research Options

Associate Professor for Sociology at the University of Trento, Paolo Boccagni, took a detailed look at the concept of social remittances in the context of forced migration. He explained the idea of having remittances as a starting point in the analysis of migration as they are the most tangible and urgent practice to be executed cross-border, in particular when looking at financial remittances. Social remittances are much harder to even define, let alone track. While knowledge transfer may be seen as a part of social remittances, it is the relational embeddedness of the remittances with values, ethics, morals and viewpoints of the source – as well as host community that define them.

Competing Conceptions of Borders Regarding Refugees and the Syrian Conflict

LAU Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss at the Institute for Migration Studies (IMS) outlined the competing and complementary concepts of borders and maps. Regarding the case of Syria, she identified competing concepts of bordered entities based on territory, identity and idea that allow states to construct Syrian migrants through securitization as threats. Beyond national, ethnical and religious identities, Skulte-Ouaiss also identified gender, wealth and class, cultural borders of former foreign rule (Ottoman Empire) as well as the blurred line between victim and aggressor as potential concepts for securitization by host states. Our awareness of the construction of such abstract and concrete borders and maps can help us to counter today's ruling concept of securitization in favor of a more positive image of refugees.

Transnational Engagements and Agency of Afghan Refugees in the Diaspora and After Return

While most of the conference's analysis of modern-day forced migration dealt with the case of Syrian refugees, Migration and Development Anthropologist at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and at the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford, Marieke van Houte, focused on the case of Afghan refugees and returnees. She asked whether the refugees are agents of change or products of war. By analyzing dimensions of agency, she presented migrants as transnational agents, going beyond measurable impact. Based on a tridimensional concept (habitual – imaginative – judgmental), she argued that agency is about the many possible ways people engage with different aspects of their structural environment. Migrants in the country of origin and in host communities also differ on their level of engagement with society: returnees have chosen to engage (for the time being), while diasporans also have the choice not to engage.

Refugee Knowledge Transfers in Turkey

Dogus Simsek, Research Fellow at the Migration Research Center of Koç University, presented her interview-based research on refugee knowledge and its transfer in the Turkish context. She pointed out that the Turkish state provided very little valuable information on rights and procedures to the Syrian refugees in the country. Most information and resources – such as on access to housing, jobs but also the knowledge on smugglers and routes to the EU – are either provided by NGOs or by fellow Syrians who had arrived earlier to the country. Accordingly, the first Syrian refugees based their knowledge on personal and family contacts in Turkey. Another important aspect was the increasing use of social media and apps for the transfer and access of knowledge.

Writing as Strategy of Survival – The Contribution of the German-Iraqi Writer Hussein al-Mozany to German Culture

Another part of the workshop was designated to cultural and epistemic perspectives on refugee knowledge transfers. The Coordinator of the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg, Leslie Tramontini, pointed out that though her background is in literature, this was an important aspect of migration. In her talk, she analyzed migration and integration into the German host society as presented in the works of the late Iraqi-German writer Hussein al-Mozany. The author who had emigrated into German exile in 1980, processed aspects of migration, integration as well as language and identity in novels such as ‘Confessions of the Butcher’, ‘Mansour or the Scent of Occident’ and others. Having ‘sacrificed’ his mother tongue in order to write in German, he understood language and its use as a main aspect of identity.

Current Examples of Integrating Refugees into the University: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Transnational Student Exchange

AGYA member, Political Science Researcher and Head of the Cairo Office of the Freie Universität Berlin, Florian Kohstall, identified three stages of the German approach to provide refugees with an access to university education through specialized programs: First, refugee programs intended to provide access to education as guest students. Secondly through a program by the German Foreign Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), providing €100 million to support German language courses and preparatory programs (“Studienkolleg”) to help prepare refugees for regular study programs. In a third stage, the German approach shows a tendency to limit the initial selection of students to those who can be helped best: those who already have a graduation certificate from their home country, ensuring quicker access to higher education. Overall, success rates in Germany are good, having around 5,700 migrant students registered of whom 1,100 are in regular study programs.

Kohstall also talked about his own experiences in the field of migration as initiator of the successful AGYA program “Adopt an Academic”. It provides mentors to refugee academics to support their integration into the German academic system.

Refugees’ Use of the Media and Knowledge of their Destination Country, Germany, Before, During and After the Process of Flight

The final contribution came from AGYA member Carola Richter, who is Assistant Professor for International Communication at Freie Universität Berlin. She presented her research on the use of social media and communication technology by refugees in Germany, on their access to information, as well as the role of rumors and expectations. The aim of the study was to assess the reliability of the information that refugees have access to, concerning their country of destination but also within their host country. The research partially focused on the role of rumors and people’s belief in them while also studying if migrants’ expectations were met upon their arrival in Germany. One of the outcomes of this research was a recommendation to the German Government to refrain from negative advertising practices in countries of origin or Middle Eastern host countries. Instead, refugees within Germany should be encouraged to engage in discussions to present a realistic image of life in the EU to their fellow citizens who are still contemplating migrating to Germany.

Tying Challenges with New Perspectives and Opportunities: Success Stories, Drawbacks and Policy Reflections

The two-day conference was concluded by a brainstorming session based on input by international organizations and civil society organizations, moderated by International Alert's Country Director for Lebanon, Chiara Butti. She and her team were joined by UNHCR Assistant Representative for Protection Monique Sokhan and her team, as well as researchers and students of the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Byblos. After a short introduction to the work of International Alert and UNHCR and their perspective on the refugee crisis in Lebanon, working groups were formed to discuss several topics. The impromptu-formed groups discussed the cultural, political and social impact of the situation in Lebanon and compared it to Europe, brainstorming approaches to support the Lebanese host country as well as the refugees – with the main focus lying on the provision of quality education to both communities.

About the Workshop Organizers

AGYA member Tamirace Fakhoury is Assistant Professor in Political Sciences at the Lebanese American University and completing a research project on the modes of Arab diasporic mobilization with special focus on the 2011 uprisings at the GIGA Hamburg.

Jenny Oesterle is head of the Centre for Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University. There, she leads the research group "Protection in Periods of Religious and Political Expansion". She is AGYA member since 2014.

Images

1: Conference Poster

2: The international AGYA workshop 'Refugee Transfers in the Euro-Arab Mediterranean Zone: Tying the Past with the Present' took place at the Lebanese American University in Byblos, Lebanon.

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