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978-0-521-81792-9 - Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East

Dawn Chatty

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Dispossession and Forced Migration in the Middle East: Community Cohesion in Impermanent Landscapes

The problem today is that scholarship has had thrust upon it the necessity of partisan practice, and about this I would like to be very exact. When power of any sort, be it political, professional or institutional takes a hostile stance toward certain directions of study and the results of such study, then scholars can no longer pretend to escape political consequences. Antigone might wish only to give her brother decent burial, but Creon has ruled otherwise and, like it or not, she is forced to perform her private duties within a context defined by the king. This is what I mean by “political intrusion” by now a nearly universal affliction in private as in public lives, for men and women dedicated to knowledge no less than for men and women committed to action. The curse is general, and scholars are neither immune nor exempt.

(Des Pres 1988:111)

Although academics seek to be objective in their research, I can think of few fields of study more affected by partisanship than forced migration. The very nature of the phenomenon cries out for moral positioning; that a people’s dispossession and ensuing suffering should be recognized and, whenever possible, made less painful. Such a stand leaves to one side any judgements regarding the causes of the dispossession, the rights and wrongs of the events leading up to the forced migration, and the national and international politics which often underwrite these events. The Middle East in particular has been the scene of continuous forced migration over the past 150 years. Inevitably, a shadow of political correctness has been cast over some of these tragic and violent events; observers have taken sides and given primacy to certain interpretations and positions. I am as much affected by such bias as the next researcher or reader. That, however, is not

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the concern of this study and I make a concerted effort to put my political positioning to one side. My primary interest in this work is to convey to the reader an understanding of how various peoples, forced to migrate into or within the Middle East, have survived, founded new communities, integrated, and generally exhibited remarkable coping strategies and resilience. Integration of minorities without assimilation has led to exceptional cultural diversity, which I believe is derived from a particular historical context. Unlike many other parts of the world where culturally diverse communities often face a stark choice between assimilation into dominant cultures or general exclusion, the Middle East strikes me as unique in that it seems to provide a framework whereby different peoples can successfully find a place for themselves without either being assimilated or excluded. It is an approach to 'multi-culturalism' or perhaps a form of 'local cosmopolitanism' that we in the West could do well to understand (Zubaida 1999).

Commonly, when we think of dispossession, forced migration, or exile, our minds turn to the plight of the Palestinian people. At a stretch of the imagination, we might also consider what has come to be called the 'Kurdish problem'. This study seeks to situate both the Palestinian and Kurdish involuntary migrations of the twentieth century into the wider dispossessions and forced movements of populations, which have indelibly marked the region throughout the last hundred years. Furthermore, it aims to locate the dispossession of peoples in the Middle East as part of the policy of empire, carried further by the colonial encounter and then revitalized in the Arab socialist awakening of the mid-twentieth century.

By drawing on the individual narratives of forced migrants and their descendants, an understanding of their coping strategies and mechanisms emerges. Neither solely victims nor totally political actors, the lives of the dispossessed and often involuntary migrants are drawn out to portray the communities that have been shaped and redrawn by the significant migrations of the recent past (Barber 2002; Chatty & Lewando Hundt 2005; Farah 1999; Sayigh 1988; Sayigh 1994). Finally, this study sets out to contextualize the dispossession, statelessness, and forced migration in the Middle East. Whereas some communities, which have been forced to move within the region, have succeeded in physically assimilating and creating new identities as minorities (e.g., Armenian, Circassian, and Chechnyan), many others have been left stateless (e.g., Palestinian and Kurds), some of whom have had their attachments to their land erased from under their feet without even moving.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I have mainly relied on secondary sources to write the historical background to the dispossessions and forced migrations in the Middle East. The narratives and oral histories, which I quote extensively in the study, are derived from interviews I collected between 2005 and 2007 in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. I set out to interview the oldest surviving members of the social groups who had been forced into the Arab Middle East over the last 100 years. Using research assistants from the communities themselves, I was able to identify a representative sample and negotiate permission to interview a total of thirty-six key informants from among the Circassian, Kurdish, Palestinian, and Armenian communities. I developed a topic guide which sought to stimulate interviewees' memories of their childhood and youth, their memory of forced migration or those of their parents, their recollections of places where they sought refuge, the institutions and networks in their new places as well as their perceptions and aspirations regarding home and homeland. All interviews were taped and digitally recorded in order to accommodate requests for copies of the interviews by family members. The tapes represented a tangible 'memory' which the extended family could listen to repeatedly in the future. At many of these meetings the interviews became occasions for significant family gatherings with grandparents or great-grandparents opening up and talking about a past that had never before been shared. For some of the oldest subjects who were very frail or terminally ill, there was the added pressure of knowing that this was possibly the last opportunity to gather such memoirs. There would be no repeat visits to clarify points or elaborate on others. The interviews were poignant but not sad, often wise and tinged with cynicism, but in essence warm and reassuring of the human spirit for recovery. To protect the privacy of these individuals, some names have been changed and, unless otherwise indicated, interview dates and places appear in the bibliography.

SCOPE OF THE TERM MIDDLE EAST IN THIS STUDY

For the purpose of this study the Middle East includes the Arabian Peninsula or the Arab East (Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq) and Turkey. The justification for limiting the study to these states is that they encompass what was once the Ottoman Empire and still share a dominant religious and cultural tradition formed and shaped by Islam. It is also similar to geographical boundaries used by

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Roger Owen (1981b) and proposed by Joel Beinin (1998). Some stimulating parallels could be drawn from North African material on the involuntary movements of communities as well as the dramatic refugee flows in southwestern Asia. These, however, deserve to be independent studies based very much on French language sources in France and North Africa, and Persian and Pashto sources in Iran and Afghanistan.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK CHAPTERS

The study naturally falls into two parts: the first theoretical and historical and the second grounded in contemporary case studies, which link to the past through the oral testimony and narratives I collected. The first two chapters set the stage by laying out the debates, issues, and concepts surrounding the term *migration*, both voluntary and involuntary, as well as aspects of what I call *local cosmopolitanism*. It moves on to set the historical background and context for the waves of dispossessions which characterized the Middle East as the greatest producer of unassimilated forced migrants in the twentieth century. It presents the migration of discrete, ethnic communities in the late Ottoman period as the direct outcome of Great Power struggles between Imperial Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the rapidly declining Ottoman Empire. The movement of populations in the face of defeat, shrinking borders, and purposive siting of some of these communities by the state for internal security (Abkhazian, Circassian, Chechnyan, Dagestani, and Albanian) are examined, with a particular eye to the way in which the communities maintained their social and cultural cohesion and separateness as part of a larger 'virtual' whole. The efforts at integration without assimilation and of the creation of new age *millet*s (semi-autonomous cultural communities organized and administered on the basis of common religious faith) in the last days of the Ottoman Empire are an important focus of this section.

The second, and major, part of the book examines contemporary communities who faced dispossession and involuntary migration as the result of lines drawn on maps at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or who were already isolated and set apart as 'others' as a result of earlier identification with the Ottoman period *millet* status (*dhimmi*). Chapter Three looks at the Circassian, Chechnyan, and other Muslim communities expelled from the Caucasus and the Balkans. The earliest groups to be forced out of their homelands on the borderlands of the Ottoman and czarist Russian empires were mainly Muslim forced migrant groups (and also some Jewish communities), who were moved or fled to Syria

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and Jordan. Some were attracted to land packages provided by Ottoman decree to establish border settlements to fight off Bedouin incursions; others gathered on the Jaulan Heights and further south in the area that became known as Greater Amman. These European Muslims maintained their cultural uniqueness – their languages, customs, and traditions – while achieving significant economic successes nationally in the following decades.

Chapter Four examines the formerly protected Christian minorities: the Armenians along with the Copts, Greek Orthodox, and Christian Nestorians. These special communities (often previously the *dhimmi* communities of the Ottoman period) were recognized by the interwar years mandate authorities and experienced a chequered existence in the Middle East over the twentieth century. These non-Muslim minorities were coerced to leave and, in some cases, expelled as a whole by governments seeking to create homogenous nation-states or searching for scapegoats to blame for their modern ills. In Egypt, the wealthy, mainly Greek Orthodox and Christian Copts, were targeted for land and property confiscation. In Iraq, it was the Nestorian Christian community. The continuing oppression of some of these minority groups at the close of the twentieth century – particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey – has resulted in the steady flow of people out of the region seeking refuge, asylum, and new lives in diaspora communities in the West. This chapter, however, is concerned with those that remained in the Middle East. Oral testimony and narratives of members of the Armenian communities in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, particularly regarding their sense of loss, their feelings of social and community cohesion, and also their complex feelings of nationalism form the underpinning of this chapter.

Chapter Five turns to the Palestinian dispossessions. It looks at the forced migration of Palestinians throughout the Middle East and not just in the UNRWA field sites. It draws back to nineteenth-century colonialism and the neocolonial projects in the southern Ottoman *sanjaks* (administrative districts) to get a sense of the social and cultural dimensions of Palestine before the 1948 *Nakbah* or ‘catastrophe’ which saw the end of the existence of the political state of British-mandated Palestine. The chapter focuses on the life stories of Palestinians, some refugees, some exiles, some living in refugee camps and others in middle-class neighbourhoods in the major cities of the Middle East. It integrates the stories of the landless Palestinian labourers, the nationalist elite reformers, and the members of the Palestinian middle class in an effort to understand the resilience and cultural survival coping strategies of a people still wishing to return to villages and towns of origin often less than 100 miles away.

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Chapter Six examines the Kurdish forced migrations, the dispossessions, later political recognition, and finally abandonment. If one can measure suffering on a scale, then perhaps one can say that the Kurds suffered most by the fall of the Ottoman Empire. With their mountainous homeland once an integral part of the Empire, the Kurds were dramatically undermined by the setting out of four state boundaries – Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq – through the middle of their homeland. Although promised a state of their own – and actually seeing a Kurdistan exist for a period of one year in the late 1940s – the Kurds have struggled for self-determination and, in some cases, the mere rights of citizenship for decades. Some Kurds are well integrated in the states that have been created underneath their feet. Others, however, have been ignored, persecuted, stripped of citizenship, and declared stateless. Kurds in the Middle East continue to maintain their cultural, social, and linguistic heritage. But for some of them, the recognition of their human rights and the cessation of state-sponsored persecution are goals for which they continue to strive.

Chapter Seven then concludes with a reexamination and summary of the thesis ‘Community Cohesion in Impermanent Landscapes’. The history of dispossession and forced settlement in the Middle East has been mediated by a shared Ottoman history and League of Nations Mandate experience, both of which, ironically, have given strength to small minority communities. Survival in shifting landscapes has resulted in numerous communities existing as islands in a sea of ‘others’. Identity formation, social cohesion, and sense of community separated from territoriality give many of the dispossessed communities in the Middle East the means to survive and transcend the limitations of political boundaries and geographical isolation. It is an adaptation to history and geography that has given rise to a special kind of cosmopolitanism. The Kurds, Palestinians, Armenians, Circassians, and the numerous social, linguistic, and religious communities bound together by a shared Ottoman and Mandate history have been forced to move innumerable times over the last century. Most have re-created themselves across borders, transcending the limitations placed on them by political boundaries and geographical isolation, to become coherent social communities bound together by radio, television, telephone, email, aeroplane, and the other trappings of global and local culture. They are becoming the transnational communities of the twenty-first century, setting an example for other similar communities in the region and elsewhere.

I

Dispossession and Displacement within the Contemporary Middle East: An Overview of Theories and Concepts

We came in carts – big carts – we didn't stop. Eating and drinking were all done in the carts – all the way from Abkhazia to Sham [Syria]. What can I say? Death would have been much better. When a person dies, he is rested. But those grandfathers of ours suffered a lot, as no other people ever did. They came from Abkhazia in carts, as I told you, all the way through Turkey to the Jaulan. In the Jolan, you know, it was like implanting a piece of wood in a member of your body. If a piece of wood were inserted in your arm, would your arm accept it? It has been continuous tragic mishaps and suffering. Then, just when we started to belong, to become rested, and as if to make things worse, the Jews took over and we were driven out. We left the Jolan empty-handed with nothing but the clothes on our backs.

Abdul-Salam (2005)

INTRODUCTION

Abdul-Salam was 93 years old when he recalled the story of his parents' and grandparents' dispossession, eviction, and forced march out of the Northern Caucasus at the end of the nineteenth century during one of the many Russian–Ottoman wars. The Russian Imperial Empire, determined to expand south and west, had conquered the Ottoman Empire's borderlands in Abkhazia, sending hundreds of thousands of Muslim peasant and Jewish artisanal and trader families south and west into Anatolia and the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Surrounded by his many sons and daughters, as well as grandchildren, Abdul-Salam told, for the first time, the stories he had heard from his parents about their involuntary march out of their 'homeland' and then his own story of dispossession and migration as a result of the Six-Day War in June 1967.

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Now living in a suburb of Damascus where many other Abkhazi families had resettled, he was the ‘paterfamilias’ of a kin group of sixty or more people. My interview session with Abdul-Salam had been anticipated by the family for some time; most of his children, grandchildren, and nieces and nephews wanted to know more about their family history and this was an occasion, they felt, not to be missed. He had been recently diagnosed with cancer and, although still appearing very hearty and fit, no one expected him to live for much longer.

Most human beings reside somewhere near their place of birth. Willingly leaving home to live and work elsewhere or being dispossessed and forced out seems, for many, to be more the exception than the rule of human existence. Yet migration is the story of human life. It is the story of population movement across the face of the earth. Migration has seen the planet conquered and societies and cultures shaped and reshaped by successive waves of human movement. Forced migration is one part of the migration history of humanity. Forced migration is generally big, sudden, violent, dangerous, painful, and compelling. It is documented in religious texts, in folk tales, and in oral narratives of peoples around the world. It is detailed in ancient myths such as Gilgamesh, in the Old Testament story of the Hebrew Exodus, in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in Virgil’s tale of the Trojan refugees, in the *Aeneid*. It is the tale of the Han people in China who colonized non-Han regions to the south and west to create a vast empire. It is the story of the Central Asian Turkic people who migrated to Anatolia and founded the Ottoman Empire and then the Turkish state. It describes the Viking colonization of Normandy and then the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066. It is also part of the legacy of the end of imperial and colonial empires and the coming of age of the nation-states of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries have continued to see waves of forced migrants; four million people in five waves fleeing from Kuwait in the 1990s (Van Hear 1993); another two and a half million people, if not more, escaping Iraq since 2006.

Forced migration in the contemporary Middle East is most often associated with the Palestinian people’s dispossession from their lands and homes in the 1947–8 war that brought the modern Israeli state into existence. Perhaps next on the list of forced migrants in the Middle East one might consider the Kurdish people, whose homeland has been divided across four modern states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Given the significance and enormity of these two cases, this book aims to situate both the Palestinian and Kurdish dispossessions and forced migrations of the

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twentieth century into the wider range of involuntary movements of peoples, which has indelibly marked the region throughout the last 150 years.

The Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, that highly contested stretch of land, has been the focus of centuries, if not millennia, of movements of people. Invading hordes from the East, mounted fighting forces from the Arabian heartland, and colonial armies from the West have resulted in the terrified flight of communities and the opportunistic entrance of others as land was appropriated and new states created. Then, for much of the last five hundred years, the largely involuntary movement of peoples in the Middle East declined as a system of government emerged, which encouraged pluralism and tolerated diversity among peoples under its rule; the drawing out of differences between neighbours, and the encouragement of unique identities based on cultural, linguistic, or religious grounds prevailed. However, the empire upon which such identities were based – the Ottoman Empire – came to an end with World War I.

Amid the rubble left behind in the grab for land and new nation-making out of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires were the discrete communities of people sharing common beliefs about their identities based on ideas of ethnicity (Barth 1969; Eriksen 1993; Gellner 1983; Richmond 1994) and, as often, religious variation. In the Middle East heartland of the Ottoman Empire, belonging was based not on a physical birthplace alone, but specifically included the social community of origin (Humphrey 1993; Kedourie 1984). It was rooted in the connections and links between and among a specific group of people as much as, if not more than, in a territory.

The twentieth century saw an array of involuntary movements of communities once rooted in the shifting borders disturbed by the ending of empires. This included communities on the Russian–Ottoman borderlands such as the Armenian, the Circassian, and other Northern Caucasus peoples (Barkey & Von Hagen 1997; Brubaker 1995). Much of this region has remained deeply contested, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as we have seen between Georgia and Russia over the disputed territory of South Ossetia in 2008. Other dispossessions had their origins in the lines drawn on maps by the Great Western Powers to create new nation-states (Bocco et al. 1993; Chatty 1986; Gelvin 1998; Helms 1981; Morris 1987; Wilkinson 1983). These included the Palestinians, the Kurds, the pastoral Bedouin, and a variety of ‘stateless peoples’. Other cases of forced migration, such as those of the Yazidis, the Assyrians, and some Armenian groups, were closely linked to the regional repercussions of pan-Arab, socialist, and Islamic political movements (Al-Rasheed 1994; Khalidi 1997; Lerner et al. 1958).

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Given such competing forces, many communities of single identities were deprived of their land base and forced to move, seeking security elsewhere in the region (and abroad). In the Arab Middle East, I contend, they set about restoring their social cohesiveness and cultural identity but without the tie to territory which largely had been the cause of their earlier undoing.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study sets out to understand not just the broad historical context within which the dispossession of communities in the Middle East has taken place, but also the anthropological context, that is, the individual and social group life experiences of home and imagined homeland, of single and mixed identities, of spaces and places. By focusing, whenever possible, on individual narratives of forced migration, resettlement, integration, and compromise, this work seeks to humanize and lay bare the significance of such experiences while also celebrating the unique adaptive quality of human social life and its resilience. In addition, the study addresses the on-going pressures on marginal societies – minority groups, ethnic and religious communities – to change, adapt, and conform to the practices and identifying features of mainstream communities or to migrate out of the region altogether. Such an understanding may go some distance in helping to comprehend the relationship between politics and identity formation, forced migration, globalization, and localization in the Middle East. The study does not seek to explore the international and legal implications of such movement but rather to give this phenomenon a significance that has resonance in the imagination and life experience of the reader.

Although contemporary Middle Eastern society has been the focus of detailed scholarship, the substantive topic of forced migration has not seen much research. In part, this may be related to the seriously limited research capacity in the region, with the general lack of baseline studies and databases, the limited funding and sponsorship opportunities, as well as the generally inadequate training in academic institutions in the region. In spite of a wealth of particular case studies, the Middle East has been under-represented in comparative studies of displacement, refugees, and forced migration; one exception is Shami's excellent analysis of causal factors of forced migration in the region (Shami 1994:4). There were two important survey works in the 1980s and 1990s: Hansen and Oliver-Smith (1982) did not include any discussion of the Middle East; although