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Title: **Beyond legality and illegality: Palestinian informal networks and the ethno-political facilitation of irregular migration from Syria**

Abstract: Contemporary studies on human smuggling and irregular migration have often overlooked the importance of national ties in the formation of transnational networks able to support refugees throughout their journey and settlement in the country of arrival. Nonetheless, the ability to support and help people through informal networks is something that has increasingly characterised the flow of refugees from areas of conflict. This paper focuses on the experience of Palestinian refugees from the Yarmouk camp – a refugee camp established in the outskirts of Damascus that fell under the control of the Islamic State (IS) and other fighting forces after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Our research provides an anthropological investigation into the social and political roots of networks of solidarity established by Palestinian youth from Syria across the Middle East. In so doing, the paper strives to accomplish two goals. First, it aims at analysing the importance of informal networks in irregular migration, beyond the narrow framework of exploitation and criminality. Secondly, it seeks to move beyond the discussion of whether migration flows are best defined in terms of legality or illegality and to examine how these aspects are ultimately interconnected.

MAIN TEXT

Introduction

Blinded by the dramatic clarity of the diverse patterns of exploitation that proliferate during war, scholars have often overlooked the importance of informal networks of solidarity that play a central role in facilitating the journey and settlement of refugees outside the conflict zone. The ability to support and help people through informal networks is something that has increasingly characterized the flow of Palestinian refugees from Syria. These networks and connections are the focus of this article.

By documenting Palestinian refugees' most recent experience of displacement, this article strives to accomplish two goals. First, the paper aims at analysing the importance of informal networks in irregular migration, beyond the narrow framework of exploitation and illegality. Criminological and legalistic approaches to irregular migration have consistently failed to account for the inner dynamics of irregular migration and its facilitation (Baird and van Liempt 2016). While a body of work has begun to dismantle over-simplistic depictions of the facilitator-traveller relationship and their communities,[1] the assumption that the facilitators – known in public discourse as "smugglers" – are reckless criminals driven exclusively by profit remains evident in much of the literature. This is in part explained by the prominence of the criminological approach in the field of migrant smuggling and the obvious difficulties in obtaining empirical data (see also Xiang and Lindquist 2014). This article departs from the idea that the facilitation of irregular migration obeys only to exploitative logics, inviting instead to a more complex understanding of its inner dynamics. In this sense, despite the unicity of our case study, the facilitation of irregular migration as a socially embedded and collective practice is not something unique to Palestinian refugees. Studies have observed similar dynamics in Africa (e.g. Ayalew Mengiste 2018; Brachet 2018; Maher 2018), the Americas (e.g. Gonzalez 2018; Sanchez 2014; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018; Vogt 2016), Asia (e.g. Khosravi 2010; Kook 2018), and the Mediterranean (e.g. Achilli 2017; Baird 2016), among other places. What the case of Palestinian refugees offers is an opportunity to improve our understanding of the phenomenon, by shedding light also on the

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[1] Doomernik and Kyle (2004) summarized the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants as a spectrum that ranges from the altruistic assistance provided by family members or friends to dynamics of exploitation based on the intent of hardened criminals. Since their work, empirical research has shown that trust and cooperation seem to be more the rule than the exception in the interaction between smugglers and migrants (e.g. Bilger, Hofmann, and Jandl 2006; Galemba 2018; Koser 2008; Spener 2004).

patterns of cooperation and mutual support that characterize irregular migration flows as well as the ethno-political motivations that prompt this form of solidarity.

The second, and perhaps most important goal of this article builds on, is to move beyond the discussion of whether migration flows are best defined in terms of legality or illegality and to examine how these aspects are ultimately interconnected. Most efforts to understand irregular migration have focused on its criminal dimension and the abuses suffered by its victims (e.g. Campana and Varese 2016); attention has been placed especially on the facilitation of smuggling by organized crews of criminals (UNODC 2010), or on mapping its intersections with other markets (e.g. Aronowitz 2001). Yet, all this has largely ignored the fact that irregular immigration emerges and unfolds often within legal or licit mechanisms – for example, through the overstay of tourist visas or the use of temporary transit papers (Pastore, Monzini, and Sciortino 2006). The over-emphasis on the illicit and criminal dimension of irregular migration has failed to acknowledge the empirical complexity of migratory systems and indicates that there is still not a clear understanding of the complex interplay between legality and illegality that defines irregular migration.[2] As Cvajner and Sciortino put it, "this theoretical shortcoming renounces any attempt at understanding how is it possible […] that in Western Europe hundreds of thousands – maybe millions – migrants may live and manage their irregular status for years without significant problems, most of the times thanks to the systematic self-restraint exercised by democratic liberal states" (2010, 395).

From our point of view, it is correct to claim that irregularity is first and foremost a juridical status produced by the state (De Genova 2002). However, this does not imply that the state has the power to unilaterally fashion migration flows; its policies are only one factor among many others in the establishment of a migratory system (Massey 1999). Building on Latour, Xiang and Lindquist argue that "it is not migrants who migrate, but rather constellations consisting of migrants and non-migrants, of human and non-human actors" (2014, 124). Following this logic, we agree with Cvajner and Sciortino on the need to situate the development of irregular migration into the mismatch between different systems – e.g. the economic, humanitarian, political, legal, etc. (2010, 394). If irregular migration takes place within the encounter of these concomitant and, at times, conflictual forces, a closer scrutiny reveals how irregular flows are in fact seldom, if ever, truly "irregular". Our research findings show how Palestinians on the move have jockeyed between legality and illegality, in the loopholes produced within the encounter of these systems, to carry out their journeys. After all, it would be indeed impossible for a migrant to carry out a completely clandestine life. The patterns of displacements that characterize the flow of Palestinian refugees outside Syria is reflective of the complex interplay of legal and illegal channels characteristic of many irregular migration flows today – which, indeed, cannot be defined as "irregular" tout-court.

This article seeks to tackle these issues by providing an anthropological investigation into the networks of solidarity established by Palestinian activists used to facilitate the escape of their

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[2] For a notable exception, see Busse and Vasquez Luque (2016).

fellows from Syria after the outbreak of the war in 2011. It builds on empirical research largely based on interviews with, and participant observation of, Palestinian refugees and facilitators, and activists of different national backgrounds, held in Europe (mostly Italy and Greece), Turkey, the Arab region (mostly Lebanon and Jordan), and the United States (mostly in California) between 2011 and 2018. Data collection involved interviews and informal conversation with men and women formerly smuggled across the Eastern Mediterranean route — mostly Palestinian refugees from Yarmouk Camp — who either reached their destination or considered the possibility to continue further their journey. To recruit participants, we relied on our social contacts in the field and friendship with Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan, obtained through long-term fieldwork with Palestinian refugees in the Arab region. We could also rely on the large network of Palestinian young activists that we built through our long-term research involvement in Palestinian grassroots organizations. These networks allowed us to follow and be constantly in touch with migrants and facilitators throughout Europe, the Arab region and the United States. We thus began to meet Palestinians and other communities who had migrated irregularly to Europe, and then we extended our network of participants to these people's acquaintances, contacts, and relatives across borders. Because the facilitation of irregular migration is a moral and political imperative among our research participants rather than a frowned-upon practice, we were not only able to approach migrants but also some of their facilitators willing to share their experiences. The intensive and long-term exposure to the Palestinian community of migrants and activists allowed us to identify complex displacement patterns that characterizes the irregular migration of Palestinian refugees from Syria, as well as the day-to-day interactions and forms of cooperation that emerge among Palestinians in *al-shatat*.[3]

War and displacement

Palestinians feature a long history of displacements. All began with the destruction and mass evacuation of most Palestinian villages following the Arab-Israeli war and the Zionist plan of ethnic cleansing in the late 1947 (Pappe 1992). Palestinians refers to this first event in a long history of displacements as al-Nakba – "the catastrophe". Palestinians from southern parts of Mandatory Palestine fled to the Gaza Strip; those from the centre dispersed to the West Bank; and refugees from the north spread out into southern Lebanon and Syria (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993). Between 75,000 to 100,000 of them fled to Syria (ibid.).[4]

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[3]*Al-shatat* can loosely be translated as "diaspora".

[4] Further waves of refugees arrived in the following years, especially after the Suez War in 1956, the Six-Day War' between Israel and the Arab states in 1967, the Jordanian civil war known as Black September in 1970, and the outbreak of the Gulf War in 2003 (HRW 2006).

In the cities and in the villages, Palestinians found a refuge among their relatives, in the religious institutions, and informal settlements in towns and villages. Some found refuge in the camps settled by the international community, others in those established by the government. In 2011, on the eve of the Syrian war, there were around 560.000 Palestinians in Syria. Among them, about 170,000 lived in the nine Palestinian refugee camps recognized by the UNRWA, five of which are situated in the Damascus region (BADIL 2000). The Syrian state granted partial citizenship rights to Palestine refugees who moved to the country after the Arab-Israeli war and their descendants in virtue of the Law No. 260 of July 1956. The law provides them with the same rights and duties in regard to employment, trade and military service, but exclude Palestinians from political rights and the right to own real estate. The government issued also "travel documents", which in theory functioned as any other Syrian passport; yet, freedom of movement for Palestinians outside Syria varied considerably, depending upon the receiving country and the regional context. As Laurie Brand pointed out, the ambiguous status of Palestinian refugees in the country has "gradually paved the way for [their] thorough integration into the Syrian socioeconomic structure while preserving their separate Palestinian identity" (1988, 621).

What best exemplifies this ambiguity is perhaps Yarmouk refugee camp. Originally set up in 1957 on a 2-square-km area on the south side of Damascus, the capital of Syria, the camp was allocated by the state to Palestinians who had fled the violence and dispossession following the establishment of the State of Israel. Over the year, Yarmouk became the physical manifestation of Palestinianness in Syria (Bitari 2013, 62). As of 2011, the camp was home of 180,000 refugees, almost one-third of the entire Palestinian registered population in Syria, and the headquarter for all the Palestinian factions in the country (ibid). And yet, Yarmouk was also an open space and rich commercial area that resembled a residential neighbourhood of Damascus, almost undistinguishable from the surrounding neighbourhoods of Damascus (Brand 1988). Here, refugees have developed intricate social relations and drawn complex and varying life trajectories by moving outside the camp, returning to it at a later date, or, equally plausibly, never coming back. Its inhabitants not only left, but also split, sold, changed, and bought new houses in the camp. Shelters have also been rented to Iraqi refugees, Egyptian labourers, and low-income Syrians and migrants who could afford only the cheaper rents of the camp.

The ambiguous status of Palestinian refugees reverberate also at the level of their social and political activism in Yarmouk. Nidal Bitari – a Syrian Palestinian journalist who left the camp at the onset of the war – is very clear on this point: "though unspoken, the essential underlying condition for the Palestinians' advantageous situation in Syria has been that they remain outside the Syrian political sphere; for Palestinians, political activism and expression were confined to specifically Palestinian issues and events."(2013, 62). So, while the settlement into the camp and, more broadly, Syria was considered by Palestinian refugees a temporary necessity awaiting to return to Palestine, they reorganized their social and political structures in order to improve not only their daily economic conditions but also to advance their political demands and struggle for self-determination and return. The political life of Palestinians in exile has, therefore, been very dynamic and characterized by the effort to re-unify the scattered society. Transnationalism, in this sense, has been an inherent element of Palestinian organizing: political institutions, *in primis*

the PLO,[5] but also popular unions and associations were established and functioned across borders, connecting and coordinating different sectors of Palestinian society despite dispersion and exile. The camps, and particularly Yarmouk in Syria, have played the fundamental role of "political hub" of Palestinian mobilization in the whole Arab region and beyond it. Political parties, factions, popular unions and movements had a branch in Yarmouk and from there maintained their connections with other Palestinian groups inside Palestine and across the world. When the Syrian war swept through al-Yarmouk refugee camp in 2012, it unfolded against the background of these pre-existing socio-political networks.

The first signs of the conflict took place in March 2011. Set in motion by previous malcontent and galvanized by regional political ferment, protests demanding democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners sparked in Damascus, the Syrian capital, and the city of Dera'a in the south. The harsh response of the government and the interfering of foreign actors triggered a series of events that spiralled up into the bloody armed conflict that still rages on today, which – as constant in the long drama of Palestinians in the Arab World – has hit the inhabitants of Yarmouk with even more violence.

When the conflict sparked out in 2011, however, Palestinians from Yarmouk strove and to a certain extent managed to remain neutral. Since the beginning, the war raised serious concerns among the relatively well integrated Palestinian community of Yarmouk about their future in the country. Many were conscious that the fall of a regime did not necessarily lead to a better regime. It was still vivid the memories of the hardships that they had to endure in Syria over the years for their chronic condition of statelessness that neutrality seemed to most the only viable solution. According to Bitari, "the great majority of Palestinians in the country were determined to remain neutral. This was the case both for the factions, including those tied to the regime, and for ordinary people. Everyone knew about the September 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres in Beirut and about the mass expulsions of stateless Palestinians from Kuwait during the first Gulf War, not to mention what happened to them after the U.S. invasion of Iraq." (2013, 63; see also Batrawi 2017).

In 2009, Joe Sacco contends in his *Footnotes in Gaza* that "Palestinians never seem to have the luxury of digesting one tragedy before the next one is upon them" (2009, xi). A few years later, this statement turns to be a prophecy for the Palestinian community in Syria. By the end of 2012, it became clear that neutrality was no longer an option for Palestinians, least of all in the refugee camps. When the war spread throughout the country, the neutral al-Yarmouk and other refugee

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[5] The PLO was established in 1964 and is the umbrella organization under which all the

Palestinian movements and groups such as political factions, armed groups and sectoral unions

work to achieve national liberation. See Hamid (1975).

camps were inexorably drawn in.[6] Khan al-Shien, Ein el Tal, and many others Palestinian camps experienced massive shelling and destruction (Abu Moghli, Bitarie, and Gabiam 2015). Yet, it was perhaps Yarmouk to suffer the most the brunt of the war. After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the camp became the scene of fierce armed clashes between the government troupes and the Free Syrian Army. The place was subsequently besieged by the regimes' forces in December 2012 and, then, occupied by Daesh[7] – which still control most of the camp; the remaining part is under the control of the regime and its allies (Rollins 2017). The intense fighting between the various factions over the years deprived the village of basic commodities and the possibility of supply from adjoining areas. The resulting hunger, disease, and high death of rate forced many to leave (Amnesty 2014).

On the "move"

The violence that swept the country since the outbreak of the war triggered one the most dramatic refugee crisis in modern history. It is estimated that around 6.5 million are internally displaced (IDPs) and almost 5 million have left Syria (OCHA 2016). Quite telling, Palestinians refer to this as their second Nakba: out of the 530,000 Palestinian refugees who lived in the country prior the outbreak of the conflict approximately 270,000 Palestinians are internally displaced in Syria, while over 120,000 have fled to neighbouring countries, especially in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and, now, increasingly to Europe (UNRWA 2018). The situation is even more bleak when we look at Yarmouk: by 2015, only 18000 dwellers remained out of the almost 150,000 that used to populate the camp (ibid.). The war and the hardships pushed outside a population with no desire to move elsewhere. As a shop owner from Yarmouk put it, "they bombed my shop, arrested me, shot me three times. I never left! Only when they physically took the keys of my house, we left the camp."

Leaving, however, was everything but easy for Palestinian refugees, especially in the besieged Yarmouk. The different forces that controlled Yarmouk for the past few years had generally prevented the entry of people, goods, and food into the camp. Facing starvation and diminishing medical supplies, the wounded and sick residents of the camp died. Likewise, many residents who had attempted to leave the siege area were shot down by snipers (Amnesty 2014; Rollins 2017). Leaving the camp, hence, required the services of intermediaries, whose knowledge of

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[6] For an exhaustive account of the first days of the war and the loss of neutrality in Yarmouk, see Bitari (2013) and Diab (2014).

[7] Also referred to as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State (IS), "Da'ish" is the acronym of "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham" (lit. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant).

the area and sometimes acquaintance with key elements of different fighting parties were pivotal to avoiding the crossfire of snipers and to negotiating the passage across conflict lines.

If escaping the siege of Yarmouk did not entail any promise of safety in the war-raged Syria, crossing international borders and reaching neighbouring countries came at a great cost. Anticipating and magnifying a discrimination that now involves all Syrians, neighbouring countries had issued an increasing number of measures have prevented Palestinians from entering legally and subjected some of those already in their territories to harassment, marginalization, and even deportation (BADIL 2014, 2015).

It is estimated that out of the total number of Palestinians who left Syria, the large majority – around 85.000 – has sought international protection in Europe (Action Group 2018). Once again, however, Palestinian unique status has made the journey even more complicated: not only Palestinians have often been subject to severe forms of discriminations in the countries that 'hosted' them", but this differential treatment is also mirrored at the level of the United Nations (Sayigh 2013). Palestinians do not fall under the broader regulation of refugees as it is implemented and managed by the UNHCR, but they have to refer to the specific agency the UN had established for their case: the UNRWA (United Nation Relief and Work Agency). Unlike the UNHCR, UNRWA does not provide protection of refugees, and its mandate is limited only to basic services. All this has had clear negative repercussion on the situation of Palestinian refugees from Syria. The impossibility for Palestinians to get asylum to Europe from one of the Arab host countries has meant that that their only option has been to go to embark on irregular journeys fraught with danger and uncertainty. Furthermore, while some successfully obtained asylum in Europe, the majority has faced several bureaucratic challenges to secure support and protection (Sayigh 2013; Graham 2017).

When it was clear that legal channels of migrations were largely precluded to Palestinian refugees, Turkey become a gathering point for people wishing to travel to Europe. To reach the border, people often required the services of drivers and the guides (*dallala*), whose knowledge of the area was pivotal for avoiding checkpoints and smuggling them out of Syria. To cross the border clandestinely, they often take the inland route – via the Syrian-Turkish border near the village of Khirbat al-Joz in the northern Syrian governorate of Idlib; others are smuggled by boat from the Syrian coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus. Both routes to the border are extremely dangerous and expensive as refugees had to travel across areas controlled by armed groups. Stories of exploitation and bribery were not uncommon (see for example ICMPD 2015). Several refugees claimed that they have suffered abuses and beatings at the hands of the Turkish authorities. "I never thought that at my age I had to go through all this", so burst out a Palestinian in his late sixties who we interviewed in the lobby of a shabby hotel near Bodrum, on the South Western cost of Turkey. "We crossed at night alone. On our way, we were intercepted by border guards who shouted at us and severely beat myself and my wife. They pushed us back to Syria. I was desperate... I could not go back, so a few hours later we tried again, and we made it". When we met them, the man and his family were waiting to leave for Greece on board of a rubber dinghy that smugglers arranged for the day after.

Displacement patterns from Turkey to Europe vary considerably depending to the fast-changing scenarios of border control. Prior 2016, the journey to Sweden, Germany or another European country was relatively easy. In 2015, transit countries' policy vis-à-vis refugees and migrants veered toward a facilitation of irregular migration by issuing temporary transit papers for asylum seekers and migrants crossing their territories. The vast majority of those interviewed indicated that they had reached Greece from the isolated areas near the Turkish port of Izmir and Bodrum. Here, smugglers arranged transportation, for around 1200 USD per person to Lesbos or the numerous Greek islands near the border with Syria. The proximity of the departure points with the Greek islands often meant a one-hour journey with a ten-metre rubber dinghy. Time and price, however, were likely to change according to a number of factors that ranged from the type of boat and number of people aboard to the weather condition and the relationship with the smugglers. This, however, does not mean that the journey is devoid of risks. Knowledge of the route remains limited, and few refugees have a full awareness of the risks entailed in the sea passage. Many of the people interviewed recalled the journey as a dreadful experience. Humanitarian workers providing medical care for asylum seekers landing on Greek shores reported several cases of dehydration, shock, and pneumonia from the sea journey.

The situation has changed since early 2016. The EU-Turkey agreement on March 20 and the decision of many Western Balkan countries to seal their borders in winter 2016 have considerably stemmed the flow of people (FRONTEX 2017). Yet, if the number of people crossing irregularly through Balkan countries dropped, the risks faced by migrants on the move increased substantially (Achilli 2017; Mandic 2017). Different sources report that effectively blocking smuggling networks only redirected unauthorized migration flows on different routes. The European border agency FRONTEX concurs that even if "the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes are ever more difficult to traverse successfully, the reduction on these two routes is made up for by increases in the Central Mediterranean and Western Mediterranean" (2017, 7). As a matter of fact, raising numbers of Palestinians that we have interviewed are smuggled daily across this route – a sea corridor that that has tellingly gained the appellative of *al-tariq al-mawt* ("the death road") for the number of people who lost their lives in attempt of crossing.[8]

Palestinians' Networks of Solidarity

Numerous studies have shown how the abuses and deception suffered by smuggled migrants may provide the basis for the emergences of more solid mechanisms of protection within the migrant community (e.g. Sanchez 2014; Zhang 2007). When we started researching trends and

[8]In 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 5,000 people lost

their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean to enter Europe – a thirty-five percent increase

since 2015. By April 2017, a further 942 people had died or were reported missing in the

Mediterranean (2017).

trajectories of Palestinians in the context of the Syrian war, we soon noticed that while the routes, the stop-overs and even the facilitators of irregular migrations were very often the same for all refugees, regardless of their nationality, there was an element peculiar to the Palestinians: many of them could rely on the practical and moral support of other Palestinians in the different countries through which they would transit. "90% of the people who asked our help are Palestinians from Yarmouk", explains Sharif a Palestinian originally from Yarmouk, who moved to Portugal in 2013. "They either know us personally or they have friends who know us. Sometimes, we heard of people in need of help through our relatives. Some other times, people who managed to leave Syria would contact us and explain that they have family or relatives still in Yarmouk and ask us to help them reaching him/her. It also happens that Palestinians from other refugee camps in Syria contact us: they have friends or relatives in Yarmouk who know us and advise them to talk to us."

Shared geographical proximity and kinship links explain only in part these dynamics of solidarity and reciprocity. However, we found interesting that many of these irregular travellers found contacts and eventually support from people they had never meet before simply on the basis of a feeling of self-identification as Palestinians and allegiance to their national predicament.[9] These wide-spanning networks of solidarity did not arise in a vacuum – they had their roots in the long history of displacements that has afflicted Palestinians over the past 70 years and the transnational political engagement that has traditionally characterised Palestinians in *al-shatat*.[10]

The first grassroots organisations aiming at helping Palestinian refugees from Syria following the 2011 events were established by youth from Yarmouk. Their political activism prior the war provided them with the social and relationship capital needed to set up networks of solidarity inside and outside the country. Political experience was acquired specifically at a youth association in Yarmouk: "Awda". The centre was established in the late 90s, and it recruited dozens of members throughout the years of activities before the war. The association had a clear political vision that emphasised mass mobilization and grassroots activism. Particularly relevant to the scope of this articles are the vast international exchanges and relations the association was able to establish with other Palestinian groups, parties and organizations inside historical Palestine as well as transnationally. The association developed strong relations with international actors, mainly Palestinian groups in diaspora as well as solidarity movements all over Europe. In particular, since 2006 the effort of Palestinian youth throughout the world to reinvigorate their

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[9] With "Palestinian nationalism" we refer here to the shared experience of colonization and exile that is at the core of Palestinian history. It is this collective predicament that shapes Palestinian social political and cultural identity regardless of the geographical fragmentation imposed on the people (see, for instance, Schulz 1999).

[10] For a similar argument, see Napolitano (2015).

participation in the national movement led to the increase of communications and exchanges among different groups worldwide and the establishment of a transnational network in which several members of Awda played a leading role. The political and cultural work within the youth association provided its activists with the transnational contacts as well as the in-depth knowledge of the local community that they later needed to mobilise from exile. According to Walid, a young Palestinian from Yarmouk who participated in several international activities between 2006 and 2011, "we, at Awda, established a large network of contacts with political organizations but also just individuals all over the world. Through our transnational engagement we came to know and work with several other young Palestinian living in Europe the US and even South America. By working together, we learned how to trust each other. I knew I could count on their support when I left Syria."

Yarmouk maintained, hence, its historical role of political hub also for Palestinian newer generations and hosted several initiatives, meetings and summer camps for Palestinian youth from all over the world. These exchanges reinforced a shared feeling of belonging among Palestinian youth from different socio-economic and geographical backgrounds, positioning Yarmouk at the centre of contemporary Palestinian mobilisation and, by doing so, favouring, on the verge of the Syrian war, the emergence of informal cooperation in support of Palestinian refugees crossing militarised borders escaping war.

It is difficult to provide a snapshot of the informal networks that became a central reference point for Palestinian-twice-refugees from Syria. Indeed, it is almost impossible to identify the exact number of groups and networks that were established since 2011: being informal and relying mainly on social media, several groups took shape and disappeared in just a few hours. It is also hard to identify the members of these groups whose involvement changed over time and varied among people. Nawar, a young man who left Syria in 2012 and obtained political asylum in Spain, explained: "there was not a moment in which we said: 'ok let's organise a group or a network'. No. We simply know each other, we used to live together or to be politically and socially active together. We had our group back home and we would keep in touch even once we left Yarmouk, it was just natural to mobilize to help other people from the camp."

Although these groups and networks of Palestinians have different and even contradictory goals, agendas, and interests, they all shared as common denominator allegiance to Palestinian nationalism/Palestinian national predicament. This was the guiding principle of their solidarity after the outbreak of the Syrian war. In other words, the boundaries between who will be prioritized, the extent of the assistance provided, and the type of support delivered change according different criteria and vary among beneficiaries. However, they all converged on a similar methodology to define the limits of their assistance: solidarity toward the Palestinian flying the war in Syria.

National ties and political activism led people to participate in the effort to support fellow Palestinians fleeing the war. Despite the difficulties to clearly identify the structure of these groups, our research suggests also that the participation into these networks is structured around concentric circles: an "inner circle" and the "outward circle". The core of the networks

consists of the Palestinian activists who had worked together within or around Awda in Yarmouk and who moved in other countries after 2011. These people – who shared the same sense of belonging to the camp and the same political background– stayed in touch with both those who left and those who still stayed in the camp. As Nawar put it, "when the political situation in Yarmouk worsened and the number of people attempting to leave the camp increased, we simply found ourselves assisting them in their attempt to find refuge in safer countries. We did not decide to establish a network. It just happened! People would contact us and ask for our support."

At the same time, the "inner circle" of Yarmouk's refugees would rely on a bigger circle of Palestinians based everywhere in the Arab region, Europe and the United States. These Palestinians were usually "friends" met in political initiatives during previous political militancy. The common political experience and the shared feeling of belonging allowed the "bigger circle" to function: the shared political background assured the "trust" and reliance among these people necessary for assisting other Palestinians in their irregular journey. Nawar goes on and explains:

> we would contact our Palestinian friends in other countries and ask them to help by collecting money or providing other contacts for a fellow reaching a specific country. We knew we could rely on their support as we share the same vision, the same analysis and the same awareness of the complexity of the situation. Often our Palestinian friends would put us in touch with other people willing to help, not necessarily Palestinians, but locals who could assist, for example, someone who just arrived in that country. We would trust these people in the country because our Palestinian fellows vouched for them"

It is important to remark here that informal networks often fill the void left by the Palestinian political establishment. The activists that constitute the "inner circle" of the groups under analysis have stressed the inability of leaders of the PLO to provide Palestinian refugees from Syria with viable alternatives to their "second Nakba" or, at least, with the bureaucratic support refugees might need in understanding the legal procedures specific to their status as stateless refugees when leaving Syria. In fact, Nawar has pointed out that "many Palestinian contact us asking about the legislation of different European countries and want to be advised on when it would be easier for them, as Palestinians, to apply for asylum. Some wants to understand how their application for asylum in a European country would impact on their Palestinian rights. Some others have more specific issues, for example, a man holding a PA ID[11] but who had been residing in Yarmouk for years, asked what kind of legislation would apply to him in Europe".

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[11]A document issued by the Palestinian Authority for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Authority is and administrative body established within the framework of the Oslo Accords in 1993.

Palestinian informal networks have thus sought to accomplish two goals: on the one side they provide as much practical support as possible to their fellows leaving Syria and throughout their journey. On the other side, they tried to coordinate political initiatives with other Palestinian activists transnationally denouncing the failures of PLO institutions as well as the discriminations and the hardships Palestinians from Syria have to endure due to their ambiguous status.

Patterns of Solidarity

The transnational political engagement among Palestinians from Yarmouk has provided the basis for the establishment of a trustful relationship among activists and refugees attempting to leave Syria. But how have these informal networks concretely supported Palestinians during their irregular journeys across militarised borders?

Support and solidarity travel often under form of financial help. "Most of the time people ask us financial support. They need money to pay their travels or to help their relatives joining them." Farah explains us. Through his involvement in informal networks, this young woman and other activists managed to raise money to support the journey of many fellow Palestinians who sought to reach Europe. Money are often collected through informal fundraising among activists and people sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. The exacerbation of the Syrian conflict and the tightening of border control in the region have made human smugglers indispensable for those wishing to leave and concomitantly increased the costs of irregular channels. Refugee families have coped with the cost of the journey by liquidating the few assets that they were able to bring along with them and getting into debt (Achilli 2017; Baird 2016; Mandic 2017). Providing financial support to people prior and after their irregular journeys considerably reduces the risk of entering into cycles of debt typical of war economy (Monsutti 2005) and clandestine migration (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis 2012), which might ultimately increase the likelihood of exploitation and the shading of smuggling into trafficking (O'Connell Davidson 2013).

At this regard, financial support Palestinian activist provide to their fellows does not simply address the smuggling fees or other expenditures that migrants might face during their journeys. The search for reliable information plays a major role on the choice of itineraries of smuggled migrants (Bilger et al 2006). Many Palestinians rely on word of mouth or the information provided by the relatives, friends and members of the diaspora – their stories being often regarded as the most trustworthy. Verbal accounts make up a large part of migrants' knowledge of the route. The accuracy of these stories and the attention to minute details by their narrators reflect the enormous importance that this oral knowledge has for people. However, as recent studies show, global transformation in connectivity has had new profound implications on irregular migration: strengthening social and family bonds; facilitating access to smuggling networks and diaspora communities; and building and sharing knowledge on migration faster than ever before (e.g. Dekker & Engbersen 2014). It is thus not surprising, then, that Palestinian refugees and the network of activists increasingly rely – before, during, and after their journeys – heavily on Viber, Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp, Twitter and Google Maps to communicate and find out about the route, the best facilitators, the dangers, and the opportunities that migrants

face on their way to Europe. This also allows Palestinian activists to monitor their migrant fellows in the several stop-over of their journeys and putting them in contact with other people who provide them with help in the different countries through which they travel.

The support available through informal networks is often a combination of financial help and information sharing. In doing so, these networks did not enquiry over the modality and regularity of the journey. As one of the activists that we interviewed in Lebanon put it, "We help our people [Palestinians from Yarmouk] who wants to leave [the camp], legally or illegally. Legally [...], we help them finding the hotel, or the money, or making sure that once they are at the border the guards don't give them hard time. If they cannot leave legally they need to find a smuggler. We try to help with that too, providing contacts. We try to make sure they can get a good deal."

Blocked or limited legal channels of mobility have increased the reliance on human smuggling in the Mediterranean. At times, Palestinian informal networks have subcontracted the illegal transport of their fellows across international border to groups of trusted facilitators, mostly of Palestinian origin. In some cases, these groups were already operating; in others, they were established *ad-hoc* for facilitating the crossing of international borders of Palestinians from Syria. Often based on pre-existing political and friendship connections that can be traced back to Yarmouk Camp, these groups were at the time of our research present in different legs of migrants' journey, both in and outside Europe Schengen area. They operated either land, air, or sea routes and provided their fellow Palestinians with a variety of services that ranged from border crossing, to food and accommodation, and forged documents. They offered their services either for free or considerably restricting their margin of profit and using good-quality transportation. Significantly, none of the facilitators that we interviewed ever used the term *muharrib* (Arabic for "smuggler") for describing themselves in light of its pejorative connotation.[12] Yet, whereas most informal networks of Palestinian youth operated only in purely altruistic terms, self-financing their own activities and not pursuing material gain, the activities of sea facilitators can be situated somewhere in the continuum between "humanitarian smuggling" (Landry 2016) and smuggling tout-court: they offered free or almost no-cost services to Palestinians, but they did not disdain the smuggling of other ethnic or national groups at more expensive fees.

In this context, we suggest that ethno-political links remain central in the work of transnational informal networks as well as traditional smugglers. In the triangular relation between the smuggler, the migrant and the young activists that connect them, ethno-political belonging

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[12]Again, this is not unique to the Palestinian case. Zhang, for example, points out how Chinese

migrants coming to the United States often perceive smugglers as philanthropists (2007, 89).

becomes what we define a "wasta"[13] element. Unlike the "pure solidarity" of the activists, the work of the smugglers was also business oriented. In this "solidarity of business", ethno-political connection was often the "broker", the *wasta* that allows people to get a special treatment. It is the element that young activists use for negotiating prices with smugglers who share their same background for their people. In this specific dynamic, ethno-political belonging is the ring, the connection, between the "pure solidarity" that inspires youth involvement in informal network and the "solidarity of business" of facilitators.

In this sense, the establishment of these groups of facilitators on an ethno-political basis would serve to stretch the extension of those forms of solidarities between facilitators and migrants that scholars have argued to fade the further migrants are from their country of origin (see, for example, Van Liempt 2010). However, the intensification of border controls has at times led to the disintegration of these groups and considerably increased the risks faced by migrants. As one of these Palestinian facilitators put it: "After the EU-Turkish deal, the Turkish government started to make our life impossible. It was too dangerous, I could be arrested any time [...] Who will take care of my family, then?! [...] And Greece stopped people there – so my work was useless. I said 'stop' and I left the country when I still could." The flow of Palestinians fleeing the war did not stop, thought; yet, the risks for migrants increased. Devoid the assistance of these groups, many Palestinians trapped along the way recurred to desperate measures to reach their destination. This is the story of Lana.

Lana was 26 years old when she decided to reach Europe through the sea. It was the end of 2015 and she was stuck in Libya with her just born daughter. For help, Lana contacted Mira – a friend of her cousin who had access to the large network of solidarity among Palestinians. Mira recalls the first time she spoke with Lana:

> I told her that I would help her whatever she decided but that I believed she should think of a plan B, because the sea was dangerous. We evaluated other options to reach Europe but everything seemed even more complicated than being smuggled through the sea [e.g. the central route]. Lana's husband had already reached North Europe, he was smuggled from Libya. He had been in Europe for over one year and had applied for family reunion so to take Lana and their young daughter safely there. But there were some bureaucratic complications that made family reunion unlikely to happen. [...] Lana was decided to take her chance through the sea. She told me 'please don't try to change my mind. Do you know how long it took me to finally find the courage to do it? I have already been there [at the point of departure] last week, I thought I could make it but then I got scared and decided to go back home. El-hamdulillah I had not approached the smuggler yet. If you talk to him then you cannot change your mind anymore. [...] But what kind of

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[13] *Wasta*, in Arabic, refers to both the process of intermediation and the person who, by virtue

of his connections and reputation, provides services and connectivity.

life is this? I am here alone with my daughter, she has never seen her father, here we cannot move, war is around us.

Mira was contacted again only a few days later by Lana's cousin who told her Lana was now in Palermo and she needed urgent help: "I called a few friends in Sicily and asked them if they could connect me to people I could trust in Palermo. I was put in touch with Jamal a Palestinian man and Gianni an Italian man, they were willing to help". [...] The two activists visited several migrant shelters before they actually found the woman. Apparently, Lana was in shock: her daughter was nowhere to be found, lost after the boat capsized. At that point, Mira coordinated with Lana's husband what to do next:

> Lana was too traumatised to continue her journey to North Europe alone. Her husband told me he would pay some 'friends' to travel to Italy to pick her up as he could not cross borders. Jamal and Gianni assured me they would take care of her, they brought her some clothes and tried to make her eat. Jamal assisted her in all the bureaucratic, he translated for her and gave her his phone to talk to her family and her husband, [...] and then coordinated the following steps with Lana's husband: he took her to a train station, bought her a ticket to Rome, there her husband friend would be waiting for her. [...] Two days later he told me she had reached her husband.

Lana's story is important in many ways. At one level, it shows how the assistance provided by Palestinian informal networks to irregular migrants come under multiple forms – from the practical organization of the trip to advice and even moral support. Of particular importance, however, it is that her tragedy attests the efficacy and limits of these groups, which often operate along the fault-line between regularity and irregularity.

Conclusion

In *Men in the Sun*, Palestinian novelist Ghassen Khanafani has vividly portrayed the fate of Palestinians whose corps left abandoned under the scorching desert sun only reveal the bitter reality of the delusive dream of mobility. Half a century after, statelessness and denied entry continue to haunt Palestinians from Syria. Those of them who have embarked on dangerous journeys and drown without a trace in the vast Mediterranean Sea inhabit the enduring memories of a past that has become the defining mode of the Palestinian present.

Palestinians, however, have capitalized on decades-long experience of displacement to lay the foundation to re-organize their society in the context of a lasting exile. Informal networks were established precisely to provide Palestinians fleeing the Syrian war with viable alternatives for survival other than situations that can be characterized by exploitation and abuse. These groups were born under the impetus of young activists from Yarmouk but operate a geographical area well beyond the camp's administrative borders. These networks are acutely conscious of the political and humanitarian limitations inherent the status of Palestinians in the Middle East and the risks that they face as a consequence of the war. If a clear awareness of the vulnerability of

Palestinians fleeing the war in Syria motivates their action, the strong commitment to the Palestinian national predicament informs their approach. The kind of help that they have been able to provide unfold in the interstice between regularity and irregularity, and at times overflowing into the overt illegality. These networks have circulated information, offered financial support, moral comfort, and logistic help to two-time displaced Palestinians.

In a time of huge distress for Palestinians in Syria, these informal networks represent a successful effort to connect them to their broader transnational community overcoming not only the limit of the status of statelessness of the Palestinian people but also the failures of Palestinian leadership (see, for example, Abu Samra 2015). The success of these informal national networks relies on the history of transnational mobilisation that has characterised the Palestinian national movement as a result of the stateless condition of its people. However, their action was considerably hindered by the recrudescence of political instability and the tightening of border control in some of the territories that refugees cross during their displacement. In the long term, these factors have not substantially stemmed the irregular flow of Palestinian refugees. Yet, they have ultimately increased Palestinians' vulnerability of being arrested, shot and even tortured along the way or upon arrival by authorities as well as their reliance on organizations of facilitators that compensate the risks of operating in a highly dangerous context with a fundamentally predatory and exploitative approach (BADIL 2014, 2015).

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