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# Returning to Nowhere

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I always wonder how I first learned that we were different, that we didn't come from the city we had always known but from a faraway, perfect place, of which maps were framed and hung on our walls or around our necks. This was a place, we were led to believe, where injustice, misfortune and even our daily-life problems would have not existed. A place "where none of this can happen," as Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani wrote in his novella *Returning to Haifa*.

In Kanafani's story, a young Palestinian couple from Haifa is forced to leave their five-month-old son in a sudden escape during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. They spend two decades wondering about the fate of their lost child as Haifa becomes part of the newly established Israel, where Palestinian refugees are not allowed back.

When they finally obtain a permit to visit their city, they find their son, Khaldun, in their old house, which is now inhabited by a Jewish family. He has become a slender man, serving in the Israeli army. In the dramatic meeting with

his parents, the son rejects his unknown Arab family, declaring Israel his homeland.

I was thirteen when I read Kanafani's novel, in an orange and gray book on my father's shelves. I remember the breaking disappointment I felt for the father. But I was even more astonished that the young Khaldun did not know the truth of his own history, ours.

My father's father was eight when he was forced with his family, like Khaldun's, out of their home in Al-Ja'una, a mountain village northeast of Palestine. It was a hot day in 1948. The flight would last a few days or weeks until the Arab armies pushed some Jewish armed gangs away, he was told.

The waiting became our unending history, our identity and the ground of our existential right, the "right to return."

At six, on my first day at school, I learned from my classmates, my teacher and later my parents that the simple question of where I came from should be answered: "Al-Ja'una, near Safed, I am Palestinian." It didn't matter that I didn't know where Al-Ja'una was exactly on the map back then, or even Safed. I don't think any of my classmates knew where their cities and villages were either. But we all knew their names. And we knew that we were the grandchildren of a group of people who fled from historic Palestine to Syria in 1948.

We grew up in a “camp” which was previously made out of tents that shielded my ancestors decades ago upon their displacement from Palestine. Yarmouk Camp, with its name, its streets that were named after lost Palestinian villages and its primitive national graffiti and posters of all the Palestinian national leaders, defined what we were—refugees—and what we were there for—to try to return to the homeland. The camp was the physical link to the “homeland” that we, second- and third-generation Palestinians, had never seen.



Around seven hundred thousand Palestinians left their homes in 1948. Some were expelled, whether forcibly or by the threat of violence to be inflicted at the hands of Zionist paramilitaries (a threat exacerbated by reports from what has come to be known as the Deir Yassin massacre), while others were encouraged to seek temporary refuge by Arab leaders who assured them the displacement would be temporary. Most of those who fled resettled in Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. They were registered as refugees at the UNRWA, a United Nations agency that was created to look after them and their descendants.

In the absence of a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem over the past decades, the children and the grandchildren of the refugees who had registered at the UNRWA back then are still regarded as refugees by the agency and most of their hosting countries. They grew from seven hundred thousand in 1948 to more than 5.6 million refugees today.

In Syria, the government regarded Palestinian refugees as guests, granting them a range of rights and a temporary status that, at least officially, assumed that they would return to their country of origin at some point. The descendants of those refugees were granted the same temporary residency.

Syrian law prohibits the naturalization of any Palestinian, even if they were born in Syria. This arrangement was supported by all Palestinian political groups, on the grounds that naturalization would threaten their right of return to Palestine. For sixty years, until the start of the Syrian civil war, no one questioned that premise, in part because the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations never reached a phase that would allow refugees to say: What about us? There was also no acute need to push for a Syrian citizenship, as Palestinians in Syria had enjoyed most citizens' rights.

Whether we realistically expected to return to Palestine one day is a difficult question to answer. If casually asked—as I did while interviewing people in the camp for a short film I made eight years ago—many of us would say, “Yes, of course we will return to Palestine.” But I don't know if we were ever able to seriously consider the question apart from its emotional weight.

A year into the Syrian uprising in 2012, the camp got caught up in the fighting, becoming a battlefield between rebel groups and the Syrian army. Most of its residents were displaced for a second time, reliving their grandparents' original

escape six decades earlier. They were scattered over Damascus, Lebanon, Jordan and Europe. The camp became the skeleton of a ghost town.

We left with nothing, and when the fighting was over, nothing was left.



I always wonder whether one can lose a home more than once. If I could go back, then where to? I keep asking myself. To the streets I always knew, or to the abstract history that was made into that map?

For the first two and half decades of my life, I was convinced that I was purely and only Palestinian. This was a nationality that couldn't offer me an official identification card, a national passport or even the possibility to visit. (Due to Israel's control of the Palestinian territories, Palestinian passports are issued only for people residing in the West Bank or Gaza Strip.) Being a Palestinian meant I could always, however, justify why I was born in "the camp," studied in United Nations-funded schools and had an official UN refugee number.

I kept that simple answer for where I came from until I met Palestinians whose families hadn't fled Palestine in 1948. We met at the United Nations building in New York, for a training dedicated to showing us how the UN deals with our problem. They were around the same age as me, all journalists, from Jerusalem,

Ramallah and Bethlehem. Those were the people I thought I belonged to when Syrians considered me an outsider. Even though I only knew them as the kids from the newscasts, fighting tanks with rocks, I imagined those were my people.

But we were different: I spoke a different dialect, slower and thinner, not exactly Damascene, but not theirs either. I didn't know of the places they mentioned in their conversations, the checkpoints they shared crossing, the community they gossiped about. They were real Palestinians, and I wasn't.

I also learned that in Palestine people are divided between those "from the camp," internally displaced Palestinians who generally belong to a lower economic class, and those who were not. They embraced me like a family welcoming an expat back home, whose ignorance of their way of life is always tolerable. I learned that I too harbored stereotypes of how Palestinians lived: they weren't battling the Israeli army all day, they ate more than za'atar and olive oil. They were not fighters but people like me, with dreams and disappointments. One dream we shared was to build careers as reporters from a place whose news the world is no longer that eager to hear.

"I don't wish for any Palestinian refugee to return to Palestine as it is in this state," one of them told me. "The image they have in their head of a paradise is better than the disappointment of the truth."

In the reality of living in war, in the West Bank and in Damascus, I found solace that we did share more than ancient history: all of us had learned to accept the unexpected losses of an unending war, adjusting to the need to move on over and over again. But by the end of that training, I learned there was a different answer to the question of where I came from: Damascus, Syria.



Trying to flee the war in Syria with no citizenship made vivid just how vulnerable I was, as a stateless person. As millions of Syrians fled war and persecution over the past nine years, we, the Palestinian-Syrians, were systematically discriminated against at the borders and airports. Embassies, border checkpoints and airports are a source of fear for me as a laissez-passer holder (a one-way travel document or “emergency” passport) who always has to be ready to justify and document my good intentions.

When the American consulate in Frankfurt rejected my visa application to study journalism at Columbia four years ago, I called my father in Syria crying, hoping he could solve my problem, as we always expect fathers to do. When he couldn't, I blamed him for passing his statelessness on to me. He said his travel documents had expired one after the other, without a visa on them ever being stamped.

In a cold, bureaucratic procedure—it entails proving that I have learned the language, paid my taxes and stayed in the country for the required period—Germany will one day extinguish my fears with a national passport. It will, at least on paper, end my statelessness: I will become the first “citizen” in three generations of my family, the first to be entitled to full national rights, to see borders as transition points and not as potential prisons: the first who can for once grieve, like everyone else, over personal matters, as Mahmoud Darwish once wrote.

Becoming a citizen doesn't happen overnight. Like living with war, it's slowly becoming the new normal. For me, it began when I was recognized as a refugee in Germany, like all Syrians, more than five years ago. Germany had offered me a home decades after it stripped millions of its own citizens of their houses and all of their rights and pushed them into concentration camps. Of course, Nazi Germany could be seen as the *Hauptverursacher*—the “main cause” for the mass migration of Europe's Jews to Palestine and therefore our later displacement. When looking at this circle of human movement, suddenly history does not seem like an impartial observer that is forever heedless of its injustices, but a moral force that can account, for instance, for why I should not be ashamed today to feel at home only in Berlin.

As I begin to build a new home in Berlin, I sometimes feel inspired to leave everything behind, to move forward unencumbered by hopes for a homeland I have never seen for myself. Gradually, I have begun to grieve over personal



matters: a story I had worked hard on that was eventually spiked; a spring I was hoping to spend with my parents in Berlin after years of separation being rendered impossible by the emergence of an unpredictable virus. At the same time, gaining citizenship in Germany can also feel like a loss. What if I fail to find a cause to live for greater than the national one? What could give my life more meaning than the struggle to deliver justice to a defeated nation?

Ironically, my little glossy red book means the village from which my grandfather had come could become more than a childhood fantasy. I could travel there now, though it would be as a kind of foreigner. I imagine myself standing by its deserted stone houses, telling the villagers what we had been through all those decades ago, how my father's uncle died of hunger in the camp during a siege, how we left another home abandoned in Damascus, why I come alone, why I will at last need to leave. But for whom would I make this pilgrimage? For my still-stateless father, for the eight-year-old child who is now my late grandfather, or for the ghost camp?

The passport, certainly, cannot settle the seemingly simple question: Where do I come from? Maybe it is Syria and Palestine; maybe neither. Sometimes I identify with what a German immigration officer accidentally stamped on my documents and future German passport, "*ungeklärt*"—undefined.

First and foremost, I come from the camp whose loss I haven't fully accepted yet, the only homeland that didn't need an explanation to embrace me. But maybe the question of where someone comes from is not so simple, and should not be answered with either actual or imagined maps. I come from all the places that made me what I am today: Damascus and its camp, Palestine and our lost village, Berlin and its cold hospitality or even New York, where I learned to be a journalist. For the full answer, I have to tell the whole story.

*Art credit: Jordan Nassar, James Cohan Gallery*