

Gabiam, N. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2016) 'Palestinians and the Arab Uprisings: Political Activism and Narratives of Home, Homeland, and Home-Camp,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, in production.

Palestinians and the Arab Uprisings:

Political Activism and Narratives of Home, Homeland, and Home-Camp

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Introduction

Following the North African popular uprisings which started in Tunisia in December 2010, the states and populations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have witnessed 'multiple and complex emergency situations on an unprecedented scale' (UNHCR 2015) with concomitant processes of mass displacement on international and internal levels. Alongside affecting MENA citizens, protracted refugees within the region have often experienced conflict and displacement for the second or third times as a result of the Uprisings, including a large proportion of the more than 5 million Palestinian refugees in the region. In spite of the magnitude of these impacts, however, few studies have examined how Palestinians have been affected by the Uprisings, whether from the perspective of Palestinians in the 'near diaspora' (those remaining within MENA), or of those living further afield in the 'far diaspora,' including those living in Europe. Against this backdrop, this article offers both an empirical contribution and a theoretical reflection based on the experiences and perspectives of Palestinians in this complex scenario.

We begin by examining how Palestinians fit within the literature on

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diasporas and argue that despite the application of the concept of diaspora to Palestinians being problematic in many respects, it is the most appropriate frame for capturing the social networks, affective attachments, and political forms of mobilizations that link Palestinians inside MENA with those outside the region. The remainder of the article engages more concretely with the Arab Uprisings and is divided into two parts.

The first examines the impacts of the Uprisings on Palestinians in the near diaspora through two contrasting examples: it starts by documenting the case of Palestinians in Libya whose experiences of being hosted and expelled from the North African state before, during, and after the Uprisings have been largely invisible in the international media. It then turns to the experiences of Palestinians in Syria, who have in many ways been hyper-visible in the media through international condemnation on the siege and almost complete depopulation of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk as a result of the on-going war in that country.¹

The second focuses on Palestinians in the far diaspora, moving concretely to Europe where we analyse the narratives of 49 Palestinians who were based in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom at the time of interview (between 2012 and 2014) to examine how they have been affected by the Arab Uprisings. While only a small number of our interviewees had arrived in the EU as a direct result of the recent Uprisings (only one in the UK, two in France, but none in Sweden), all had encountered disruptions in their contact with family and friends in the region, and many had participated in, or sought to participate in, these Uprisings from afar.²

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This article makes two central arguments. First, it demonstrates that Palestinians in MENA developed forms of mobilization and/or identifications with regard to the Arab Uprisings that transcended the link between the host state and the homeland, extending to a plurality of spaces outside of that binary. As we argue below, in-between spaces, such as Palestinian refugee camps, Arab host states, and Arab countries experiencing Uprisings are also meaningful to broader constructions of Palestinian identity.

The article's second contribution is an extension of the first. It emphasizes the importance of going beyond the homeland-host state dichotomy and of focusing on the in-between spaces mentioned above. Indeed, we demonstrate that these spaces became salient to broader conceptions of Palestinian identity and activism *because* Palestinian-ness is shaped not only through attachment to place, but also through particular experiences that are associated with Palestinian identity. These experiences, even when they are not personally lived, are felt viscerally, in that they speak to understandings of Palestinian suffering and capture a collective sense of injustice felt by Palestinians.

Theorising Diaspora

Diaspora Studies and the Palestinian Experience

Diasporas are frequently defined in relation to the dispersion of a group of people or its expansion to at least two countries of the world; an orientation toward a real or imagined homeland; a strong sense of community with others who claim belonging to this homeland; and an uneasy relationship with the host society (Brubaker 2005; Cohen 1997; Lindholm-Schulz 2003; Safran 1991).

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Whether or not Palestinians can or should be defined as a diaspora has been contested both within and outside academic scholarship. Cohen identifies Palestinians as quintessential members of a 'victim diasporas' expelled from their homeland by a traumatic event (1997), and yet precisely *which* Palestinians are conceptualised as remaining 'in' the homeland and which are 'in the diaspora' is less clear. For instance, Palestinians living outside the borders of pre-1948 Palestine are often referred to as part of the Palestinian diaspora, and yet no clear academic consensus exists on the exact boundaries of the Palestinian diaspora. Inter alia, scholars have questioned the inclusion of Palestinians who live in Arab host countries into the diaspora category, arguing that these Palestinians are living in a geographical, cultural, historical, and linguistic context that is not completely foreign to their identity as Palestinians (Hammer 2003; Peteet 2007).

In turn, others have questioned the exclusion of Palestinians living in historic Palestine. They point out that a significant number of Palestinians in Israel were internally displaced after the 1948 war (Lindholm-Schulz 2003); that although many Palestinians are living on their native land, they have undergone a process of political, cultural and social alienation that is equivalent to internal exile (Kodmani-Darwish 1997); and that since the beginning of the 1967 occupation, West Bank and Gaza residents have undergone a form of diasporisation, characterized by the loss of land and, thus (especially when it comes to groups such as peasants), alienation from previous forms of existence (Lindholm-Schulz 2003).

Debates around the use of the term diaspora in relation to Palestinians have also

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centred on the moral and political implications of such use. The literature on Palestinians has extensively used the term 'Palestinian refugees', with many scholars arguing that other concepts such as 'diaspora' inadequately capture, or weaken the Palestinian political cause (Hanafi 2005; Kodmani-Darwish 1997; Lindholm-Schulz 2003). It is suggested that the term diaspora might indicate to Palestinians a potential acceptance of the Palestinian dispersal (Lindholm-Schulz 2003) and, contrary to the term *refugee*, it sidesteps the political–legal dimensions of Palestinian displacement (Kodmani-Darwish 1997; Peteet 2007). Despite recognition that the use of the term *diaspora* can be problematic in relation to Palestinians, it is nonetheless clear that Palestinians are at least in some sense of the word, 'diasporic' (Hammer 2003; Hanafi 2005; Lindholm-Schulz 2003; Peteet 2007). Additionally, as argued by Peteet, a 'critical engagement with the question of Palestinians as a diaspora can contribute to our understanding of the term itself' (2007:631).

In effect, there have been efforts to clarify the concept of diaspora in the wake of its proliferation in the 1990s and its 'application to an ever broadening set of cases,' a development that some scholars see as threatening to strip the concept of any analytical usefulness (Brubaker 2005:1; Cohen 2008; Peteet 2007). Some attempts to clarify the meaning, boundaries, and analytical usefulness of the term *diaspora* offer us a way of acknowledging features that make Palestinians diasporic without effacing the historical context or political–legal implications of their displacement. For example, Lindholm-Schulz proposes that we consider the term *diaspora*, in relation to the Palestinian case, as 'a "condition" of alienation and estrangement, of "shattered lives and homes" rather than

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referring to specific processes of migration or displacement' (2003:21). For his part, Brubaker argues that 'we should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity' but rather as a category of practice that is used 'to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties' (2005:12). Lindholm-Shulz' conception leaves room for underscoring the traumatic roots of Palestinian displacement (both past and ongoing) and their implication, while Brubaker's allows for a focus on the practices, including political ones, that link Palestinians across a diversity of spaces and geo-political contexts.

Building upon the above, our article further contributes to attempts to explore the analytical usefulness of diaspora and the ways in which the term can be productively applied to Palestinians. What united our interviewees as a group was their presence in a European country (France, Sweden or the United Kingdom) between 2012 and 2014, as well as their understanding of themselves as Palestinians. Nonetheless, our interviewees can be compartmentalized into three broad categories according to their legal statuses in Europe at the time of interviews: the first group were holders of various temporary as well as permanent or long-term (French, British, or Swedish) residency documents; the second held a national passport (usually British, French, Israeli, or Swedish); and the third held a Palestinian Authority 'passport.'

Within the first group, a few Palestinians had recently fled Syria where they had been registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, (UNRWA) while most were Palestinians who had moved to Europe from various Arab MENA countries and were residents of Europe, but had never been granted the

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citizenship of their European country of residence. The third group included Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, several of them students who were in Europe to complete their higher education.

[Table 1 here]

The aim of the interviews, which included a mapping and genealogical exercise, was to develop a sense of how our Palestinian interlocutors understood themselves as Palestinians as well as identify the social and political networks that informed their sense of Palestinian identity. Most of our questions focused on how our interlocutors defined themselves in relation to fellow Palestinians and non-Palestinians, the different places that had marked their lives and toward which they felt a sense of attachment, and their feelings toward the official Palestinian statehood project. While the research was not initially framed by the Arab Uprisings, this became a salient theme in many of the interviews, given that the interviews coincided with the unfolding of these events across the Middle East.

The Arab Uprisings and their aftermath provide a useful frame for capturing larger transnational Palestinian socio-political networks and highlighting the affective attachments and modes of political activism that are enabled by them. With regard to activism, using the term diaspora as a framing concept allows us to highlight forms of political expression and resistance that are not necessarily captured by other terms, such as *refugee*, a term that tends to be associated primarily with the experiences of Palestinians living in camps in the Middle East. As evidenced in this article, these forms

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of political expression are not necessarily in tension with the political discourse associated with the term *refugee* (which revolves in particular around the Palestinians' right of return), but often tend to echo or complement it (also see Peteet 2007).

Refugees, Diaspora, and Multi-Centered Belongings and Affiliations

Diaspora studies have traditionally focused on the diaspora's connections to, and mobilization activities regarding, the historic homeland (Safran 1991; Cohen 1997). As such, investigations have often examined the relationship that exists between Palestinians in the near and far diasporas with the Palestinian homeland, exploring the ways in which Palestinians remember, memorialize, and mobilise around key historical events and political aims such as the *Nakba* and Right to Return (Kodmani-Darwish 1997; Lindholm-Schulz 2003; Hammer 2005; Hanafi 2005; Khalili 2005).³ Prioritizing the commitment to Palestine - as the Palestinian homeland - is pivotal in many regards. However, researchers have more recently investigated the extent to which refugees in the diaspora develop emotional and existential commitments to places which fall 'in between' the (current) 'host' and (historical) 'home' arenas as they have frequently been conceptualized (i.e. Farah 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013). Such studies have, inter alia, argued that, in spite of refugee camps often being conceptualised as spaces of liminality and 'spaces of exception' (following Agamben 2005) refugees' 'home-camps' can themselves become spaces of belonging and longing even after refugees have relocated elsewhere (ie. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013).⁴ In many regards, such analyses reflect the 'transnational turn' in migration studies, which has centralised the extent to which

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individuals and communities develop and maintain attachments and political commitments to multiple places inhabited by dispersed family members and co-ethnics (Vertovec 2001). They also reflect the social constructionist turn in diaspora studies in the 1990s, which emphasized the flexible and situational character of identity and sought to 'decompose' 'notions of "homeland" and "ethnic/religious community"' (Cohen 2008:1–2).

Recognising this multiplicity and highlighting the significance of 'multi-local life-worlds' (ibid: 578) constructed across 'transnational social fields' (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992), has the potential to transcend the spatio-temporal binaries of past/sending/homeland and present/receiving/hostland which have long framed studies of migration. Highlighting the simultaneity of multiple spatialities of belonging, for instance, Brun draws on Olwig's research into 'the contradictions of being physically present in specific localities, but at the same time being part of translocal communities 'rooted' in distant places,' to argue that '[al]though many refugees and migrants *feel that they live*, or want to live, their lives elsewhere [ie. the homeland], they have a present life, where they need to survive' (Brun 2001:19, emphasis added). Brun thereby disrupts the notion of the homeland being a place inhabited in the past, longed for in the present and desired for the future, by recognising that migrants may feel that their lives are *currently* lived in the homeland, even if this is from a physical distance.

As these and other examples illustrate, however, analyses undertaken through diasporic and transnational lenses alike have often continued to reproduce the focus on migrants' and refugees' connections with their past/homeland and the place in which they

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are currently present (ie. see Vertovec 2001). For instance, this is exemplified in Mason's insightful analysis of Palestinians in Australia, where she draws on Brah to argue that the 'relationship between the "home" of the homeland [past] and the "home" of the lived reality [present] is central to feelings of belonging for diaspora Palestinians' (Mason 2007). While the homeland and the "'home" of the lived reality' are clearly of great significance on individual and collective levels, a gap in understanding nonetheless remains regarding the complexities of being simultaneously affected by, attached to, and mobilising for, not only the homeland and the current place of residence, but also other places which may or may not be physically inhabited by family members or co-ethnics.

Importantly, these extend to spaces which have rarely been identified as 'home-spaces' or spaces of belonging in the existing scholarship, including refugee camps – depicted not only as 'liminal spaces' (op cit), but even as 'non-places' and 'spaces of indistinction' (Diken, referring to Auge, 2004:91) – and also specific countries which researchers have often argued have never been seen 'as home' or as places of 'affinity' by Palestinians due to their states' policies of discrimination and overt hostility towards refugees in the past and present. Such is the case presented by Mason's ex-Kuwaiti Palestinian interviewees in Australia who reportedly 'expressed little affinity with Kuwait, where they were never allowed citizenship or any other marker of belonging, and as such never saw it as home' (2007).

In contrast, although far from all of our interviewees expressed a sense of nostalgia for the discriminatory and frequently violent places they and their families had inhabited in the Middle East, a small number of these did. For instance, 60-year-old

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Hakim had been subjected to discrimination and personal violence whilst living in Libya from the 1970s onwards, and was forcibly expelled from that country in the 1990s in an episode of mass displacement documented below, and yet he recalled Libya with a (measured) sense of longing: 'I felt very settled in Libya, and I miss the country.

Although conditions are not suitable at the moment, I look forward to the day that I will be able to return' (quoted in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015:131).

Attentive to historical continuities and ruptures alike, this article therefore now turns to the particular vulnerabilities of Palestinians to the ongoing upheavals across the region, particularly in Libya and Syria. It then moves to documenting the ways Palestinians in Europe have both been affected by, and have participated in, these upheavals from afar. In doing so, we show the importance of recognizing Palestinians' attachment to or identification with in-between places, such as specific Palestinian refugee camps and specific Arab countries (and including places currently and/or formerly characterised by hostility and exclusion), in accounting for expressions of Palestinian identity and forms of Palestinian political mobilization.

Palestinians and the Uprisings in Libya

Before the Uprisings in that country in 2011, Libya hosted an estimated 50,000–70,000 Palestinians through a framework officially guided by the principles of Pan-Arabist brotherhood (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015). Since the 1970s, Palestinians were exempted from visa and other bureaucratic requirements to enter and remain in Libya, providing them with access to the Libyan labour market and education system (ibid).

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Such policies were particularly notable given the broader regional insecurity faced by Palestinians, including as a result of the discrimination and xenophobia, occupation, civil wars, and mass expulsions which have affected Palestinians across the MENA region and the Gulf since the *Nakba* (ibid). However, far from idealising Libya's approach, Palestinians have experienced multiple processes of mass expulsion within and from that territory, and the official rhetoric of Pan-Arabist support for Palestinians ultimately enveloped a series of policies and processes which can more appropriately be denominated one of *hostipitality* (following Derrida 2000; see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015, 2016).

This coinage highlights that 'hospitality' – in this context, the welcoming attitudes, policies and practices which were presumed to exist towards Arab brothers and sisters – is always "parasitized by its opposite, 'hostility', the undesirable guest which it harbours as the self-contradiction within its own body" (Derrida 2000:3). Such self-contradictions are reflected not only in Libya's oscillating policies vis-à-vis Palestinians' access to employment and education in the country between the 1970s and 2011 (as documented in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015), but perhaps most clearly through former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's repeated mass expulsion of Palestinians: hundreds of Palestinian migrant-workers were expelled in March 1971 (Otman and Karlberg 2007:36); Gaddafi protested the Palestine Liberation Organisation's signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1995 by deporting Palestinians – including Hakim, referred to above - over the course of eight months (Al-Majdal 2010:47); and in March 2007, Gaddafi had once

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again threatened to deport all Palestinians to Gaza 'in retaliation for the latest Arab peace initiative' (Nahmias 2007).

This vulnerability was accentuated even further in 2011, when - following the uprisings which started in Tunisia in 2010 - anti-government protests in Libya rapidly escalated to a major conflict characterised by widespread attacks between pro- and anti-Gaddafi forces, a NATO-coordinated bombardment of the country, and mass internal and international displacement. Between February 2011 and late-August/early-September, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that over 1,460,000 people had fled to Tunisia and Egypt; during this period over 200,000 people had been internally displaced within Libya itself (UNHCR EXCOM 2011). Amongst others, this acute crisis affected an estimated 50,000–70,000 Palestinians who were living in Libya at the time.

Whilst largely invisible in international media and NGO reports, Palestinian refugees working and studying in the country were reportedly targeted by both pro- and anti-Gaddafi supporters alike throughout the 2011 conflict. The particular vulnerability of Palestinian refugees studying in Libya was highlighted by the sister of a young engineering student originally from Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip who was killed during the violence (cited in IMEMC 2011):

there is a dangerous level of incitement against the Palestinians in Libya [...] the mercenaries of the Qaddafi regime are responsible for several attacks against the Palestinians in the country.

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Other MENA-based news reports also asserted that Gaddafi's forces had 'detained Palestinians studying at a military college in the northwestern city [of Misrata] after they refused to join the pro-regime forces' (Ma'an 2011). In turn, these and other examples of Palestinians' refusal to join pro-Gaddafi forces strengthened anti-Gaddafi supporters' assumption that Palestinians were themselves Gaddafi's mercenaries (*murtazaqa*) precisely due to the support which he had offered them – including military scholarships – throughout the preceding decades. The Arab Spring therefore affected Palestinians in Libya in numerous ways: they experienced the generalised violence but also, at times, were targeted precisely because of the close political relationship with Gaddafi which had influenced the diverse policies which had facilitated their presence in Libya to begin with.

Palestinians and the War in Syria

Similarly to Libya, the Syrian government was officially welcoming to the Palestinian refugees who arrived in the country in the aftermath of the *Nakba* and pan-Arabism was also a key factor underpinning the official response (Kodmani–Darwish 1997). However, the Syrian government went further than Libya, legally enshrining the rights of the recently arrived refugees. In 1956, it passed law No. 260, providing Palestinians on its territory with employment, education, and health-care rights, and allowing them to own property (Takkenberg 1998).

Ordinary Palestinians as well as their political leaders made great efforts to stake an official position of neutrality in the conflict at the beginning of the Syrian Uprisings and subsequent war (Steele 2015). In practice, and as the Syrian civil war has dragged on,

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efforts by Palestinians and some of their leaders to maintain neutrality have proved tenuous (Hassan 2012; Steele 2015). Palestinian political factions such as Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC, Fatah al-Intifada, and the Palestinian-Baathist militia al-Sa'iqa, have actively supported the Syrian regime while Hamas expressed support for the anti-government uprisings (Gabiam 2016; Hassan 2012). Additionally, not all ordinary Palestinians remained on the sidelines of the Syrian conflict: Palestinian-Syrian youth activists 'participated in the uprising since the very beginning as demonstrators; organizers of aid and relief work for wounded and internally-displaced Syrians; or as citizen journalists, photographers and media activists' (Hassan 2012). However, such activism largely took place outside of the Palestinian refugee camps (Bitari 2013).

Yarmouk was one of the first Palestinian camps to become embroiled in the Syrian uprisings and has been one of the Palestinian camps that has been most severely affected by war. The camp held its first demonstration against the Syrian regime on August 17, 2011 (Bitari 2013), primarily in response to the regime's invasion of the Al-Ramel Palestinian refugee camp on the edges of the Syrian coastal city of Latakia, during a crackdown on Syrian protestors. Several other anti-regime demonstrations followed over the next months, 'all in response to [Syrian government] actions directly targeting other [Palestinian camps]' (Bitari 2013:70). Palestinians in Yarmouk also participated in the Damascus general strike on May 29, 2012, which was organized by members of the Syrian merchant class to protest the massacre of civilians in the Syrian town of Houla (Hassan 2012).

On December 16, 2012, Syrian government jets bombed Yarmouk, later claiming

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that the bombings were a mistake (Steele 2015). This served as an excuse for Syrian rebel forces to infiltrate the camp, drawing Yarmouk into the war (Steele 2015). The Syrian government responded by further bombing the camp, which resulted in the flight of a large number of the camp's population (Amnesty International 2014). In July 2013, the Syrian government cut off all access to Yarmouk as a strategy to defeat the rebels who had infiltrated the camp. According to Amnesty International, "Scores of civilians [from Yarmouk] are reported to have died as a direct result of the siege or as a result of attacks by the Syrian government forces," with starvation, lack of adequate medical care, and shooting by snipers said to be the three main causes of death (Amnesty International 2014:4).

Contrary to their experiences during the Libyan Uprisings, Palestinians did become involved, even if to a limited extent, in the war in Syria, some in support of the regime, others against it. However, they have, as a collective, avoided being associated with either one side or the other (see Gabiam 2016). Furthermore, although there are still no signs of the Syrian regime turning against Palestinians, as a collective, the post-uprising period contains several examples of Palestinians being blamed for some of the unrest or being framed as underserving outsiders or foreigners (Bitari 2013; World Tribune 2012).

In light of the dramatic events recounted above, Yarmouk has in many regards become both a key symbol of the vulnerability of Palestinians in Syria, but also of the brutality of the Syrian conflict as a whole (see Steele 2015).

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The centrality of the siege of Yarmouk camp to the international community's understanding, and denunciation, of the conflict, and the extent to which civilians – citizens and refugees alike – have been targeted and subjected to attacks by state and non-state actors has also resonated deeply with Palestinians, including those in the near and far diaspora alike. Indeed, the centrality acquired by Yarmouk, as a symbol of the ongoing *Nakba* (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007) that has been regularly disrupting Palestinian lives is summarized by Baroud (2014a) who argues that 'the hermetic siege [of Yarmouk] will be remembered by historians along such infamous memories like that of Deir Yassin, Sabra and Shatilla, Jenin and Gaza'.

Indeed, Palestinian refugee camps that have been attacked and destroyed have taken on great symbolic and political significance on an individual and collective level both amongst former residents *and* those who have never resided in those camps and who are currently situated within and outside of the MENA region. Such examples also include the ongoing resonance of the military destruction of Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Northern Lebanon in 2007.

Qasmiyeh's account of the significance of the destruction of Nahr el-Bared is particularly pertinent in this regard, as it is offered from the perspective of a Palestinian who was born and raised in Baddawi camp in North Lebanon and yet has developed this vantage point as a British citizen who was in the UK at the time of the camp's destruction by the Lebanese army:

We used to visit my mother's family in Nahr el-Bared.... [T]hroughout my life, the journey itself to Nahr el-Bared has embodied an unbreakable link between one

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camp and another through a non-camp space. However, the unbreakable nature of this link was both amputated and transmuted due to the Lebanese military's destruction of Nahr el-Bared in 2007, which entailed the physical erasure of the camp and the relocation of the entire camp population, including my relatives, to my own home camp – Baddawi – and other camps across Lebanon. Despite the physical destruction of the camp infrastructure, or what Ramadan [2009] refers to as an instance of 'urbicide,' this space, this land, still bears the traces of both the living and the deceased, and my mother has continued to visit the cemetery where my grandparents and relatives are buried in Nahr el-Bared. If the destruction of Nahr el-Bared in and of itself embodied a *Nakba* within the *Nakba*, the determination to return, visit and revisit the cemetery there has become a central form of solidarity with memory and history.

Cited in Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013:132-133

The notion of 'a *Nakba* within the *Nakba*' therefore refers to an additional catastrophe (such as the destruction of the camp and subsequent displacement from Nahr el-Bared) within the overarching national catastrophe (i.e. the loss of Palestine and the displacement of Palestinians from their territory). Such a notion can clearly be extended to the siege of Yarmouk, but also more broadly to the violence experienced by Palestinians across Syria throughout the Uprisings in that country. For instance, Palestinian activist and journalist Bitari (2013:78), referring to his experience of the Syrian war on Yarmouk, explains that there is

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the realization for the first time in our lives of what it means to be "Palestinian," what it means to be stateless, feelings we never had in Syria. The sense of not being welcome anywhere, not treated like other Arab nationals, of having to feel lucky when you find a place to stay... We heard much about the *Nakba* from our parents and grandparents, about their suffering when forced to leave their country, at having lost everything. They worked hard to build their lives in Syria, and what they built is destroyed. And now we, the third generation, are experiencing this also, of starting from zero in other countries.

As posited by Adonis, 'Place is not outside of a human being but rather inside and so every spoilage of the place is damaging to human beings' (2003:15). In spite of typically being conceptualised as liminal spaces of exception (as discussed above), refugee camps may thus be places that hold deep meaning for Palestinians. In effect, scholarship increasingly demonstrates that Palestinian camps have been transformed into meaningful places by their inhabitants who have developed affective attachments and forms of belonging towards them that may be comparable to those one might have toward one's homeland (Petee 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015, 2016).

However, forms of attachment and belongings to places other than Palestine do not necessarily come at the expense of refugees' sense of connection with the Palestinian homeland or their political activism in relation to the homeland. Not only do affective links to the camp and the homeland often co-exist (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015, 2016) but they can also feed off each other. This is illustrated above when Bitari compares the

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pain and suffering of the Palestinians who were violently displaced from Yarmouk to that experienced by older generations of Palestinians 'who had to leave their country' and 'lost everything.' Earlier in his article, Bitari states that before the war, he felt a sense of belonging to both Syria and Palestine and never felt any contradiction between the two. However, he continues, recent events in Yarmouk made him realize for the first time 'what it means to be Palestinian.' The pain and suffering caused by the loss of Yarmouk (and, one might argue, Syria) evokes the original moment of collective pain and suffering: the *Nakba*. The way that recent events in Yarmouk underscored for Bitari what it means to be Palestinian demonstrates how camps are more than reservoirs of memory of the 1948 *Nakba*, sometimes coming to embody the *Nakba* itself, as an ongoing event, in terms of both its material and affective meaning (also see Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007).

This brings us to one of our main arguments, which is that Palestinian identity is not only a question of attachment to Palestine but is also emblematic of a particular condition of suffering and injustice that Palestinians are prone to, wherever they may be. In this sense, it is not surprising that Yarmouk found resonance not just in what we have referred to as the near and far diaspora but also in the homeland itself (Sly and Ramadan 2014; Shaker 2014). According to the organizers of a children's protest held in Gaza against the siege of Yarmouk 'only the residents in the Gaza Strip can really feel the suffering of the besieged Palestinian refugees in the Yarmouk camp. The Palestinians in Gaza have been under siege since 2006, so they understand first-hand what the siege is' (Middle East Monitor 2014).

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The connections made between Yarmouk and Gaza compel us to reconsider the border between those who inhabit the diaspora and those who inhabit the homeland (Lindholm-Schulz 2003). Acknowledging the complexity of this border entails recognizing that Palestinian identity and political claims exceed the relationship that Palestinians who are technically situated in the diaspora have with their homeland. It is, we argue, simultaneously actively constructed and expressed through a variety of in-between spaces.

In order to further illustrate this latter point, we now turn to focus on the various ways that Palestinians who were living in Europe between the summer of 2012 and early-2014 were affected by and participated in the Uprisings taking place in the Middle East.

The Effects of the Uprisings on Palestinians Living Outside the MENA Region

While most of the Palestinians interviewed in France, Sweden, and the UK had not found themselves in those countries as a result of the Arab Uprisings, they were nevertheless affected by events in the region. Of course, there is no comparison between the experience of these Palestinians in the EU and that of Palestinians in places like Libya and Syria that directly experienced Uprisings and subsequent war. Nevertheless, it became clear, when EU-based interviewees discussed their family and larger social networks, that these networks had been impacted by ongoing events in the Middle East. Several interviewees, despite having sometimes spent long periods and even their entire lives in Europe had maintained or created relationships with places other than the Palestinian homeland and their current host society. In a context where the Palestinian

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homeland is not physically accessible to most Palestinians, some of these places had been or continued to be central to the constitution of their Palestinian identity and were usually located in the MENA region.

Several interviewees mentioned the disruption that had occurred in their social and family lives as a result of events in Syria. One of them, Jalal, was a university student in his twenties who held French citizenship and had lived in France for most of his life and yet identified as both French and Palestinian. His father had grown up in Syria, in Yarmouk refugee camp, while his mother had grown up as a Palestinian refugee in Jordan. In fact, the majority of Jalal's family members were split between Syria and Jordan. Pointing out that most of his paternal relatives lived there, Jalal referred to Syria as his family's 'anchor point'. Before the Uprisings started there, Jalal and his family would visit Syria every year, and he had even been contemplating the possibility of continuing his university studies at Damascus University. At the time of the interview, however, it had been three years since their last visit, with a planned visit in 2011 having been cancelled after their relatives cautioned them against it since 'the revolution had erupted' (interview in France, May 2012).

Another interviewee, Mahmoud, a bar-owner in Marseilles, had grown up in Yarmouk camp, spending 10 years in Ukraine to continue his studies prior to moving to France. Despite having siblings and other family members scattered around the world, a significant number of relatives remained in Syria, mostly in Damascus and in Al-Ramel camp near Latakia. In addition to expressing a strong emotional bond to Yarmouk camp where he had lived for some time, and to Damascus, more generally, Mahmoud also

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expressed fond memories of Al-Ramel camp, where his family would spend 'every summer' and where he still had relatives (interview in France, Jun. 2012).

Mahmoud would clarify throughout the interview that of all the places he had lived in, Syria and, more specifically, Damascus, continued to be central to his identity: 'Currently I feel that I am more attached to Damascus than here (Marseilles) [...] I have not been able to grow roots here. My roots are there (in Damascus).' Simultaneously, however, Mahmoud also felt emotionally close to Ijzem, the village of his parents and grandparents in Palestine, near Haifa.

Before the Uprisings, Mahmoud would return to Syria every year and his mother, who had stayed in Damascus, would visit him in France every two years. These visits had now become interrupted. Ironically, however, events in Syria had brought Mahmoud closer to another Damascus relative: his sister Amal. Amal, her young daughter, and her Syrian husband had fled Damascus in summer 2010 due to the latter's political activism during the Uprisings, and had recently moved to Marseilles where they were seeking political asylum.

Our research also confirms that a significant number of interviewees made connections between the Arab Uprisings and the Palestinian struggle, some positive, and some negative. For many interviewees these connections were based on interviewees' experiences as political activists in the diaspora, with several interviewees being or having been active in organizations such as the Palestinian Youth Movement and the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS). Many were involved in the transnational Palestine solidarity movement, regularly taking part in pro-Palestinian protests or

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awareness-raising activities within their European country of residence as well. Some of those who had European passports would also participate in solidarity activities in the Middle East and in the homeland (pro-Palestinian activism in the homeland also extended to some of our interviewees with Israeli passports).

It is worth noting here that, in contrast to dominant definitions of diaspora, Palestinians have been described as diasporic specifically in terms of their participation in transnational networks of political activism in relation to the homeland (see Brubaker 2005). Also, as illustrated by Mavroudi (2008) in her research on Palestinians in Greece, living in Europe, or even acquiring the citizenship of a European country does not imply a loss of emotional connection with the Palestinian homeland. Finally, our research shows that transnational Palestinian activism, whether overtly political or not, can also focus on, or be articulated in relation to, places other than the homeland or to events that do not directly involve the homeland. Nagel and Staeheli (2010) come to a similar conclusion in their work on Palestinian activists in the UK and the US, pointing out that many of these activists were involved in the al-Awda (right of return to Palestine) movement as well as social justice causes unrelated to Palestine. What we wish to underscore here, however, is that in several cases our interviewees' activism in relation to places other than the homeland or host state, or that focused on issues happening outside the homeland, was nonetheless informed by their Palestinian identity and the political claims linked to this identity.

Most of our interviewees who talked about activism, whether their own or that of other Palestinians, made direct references to the ongoing Arab Uprisings. For some

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interviewees, their activism has directly revolved around responding to the Uprisings – such is the case of Sara and Ibrahim, who have mobilised financial and material support for the 7,000 Syrian Palestinians displaced to the Burj al-Shamal Palestinian refugee camp in neighbouring Lebanon (interview in UK, Nov. 2013).

Another interviewee, Saleem, who is a political activist in his early-thirties, had been inspired by the Uprisings in Tunisia. He grew up in France and now has French citizenship and is a founding member of the Europe-based youth organization Génération Palestine which draws parallels between discrimination experienced by youth in Europe and youth in Palestine (Génération Palestine 2016). He credits a GUPS awareness-raising trip to the occupied territories as providing the inspiration for the creation of Génération Palestine. Saleem identifies as Palestinian and while his father (who is Palestinian) and mother both live in France, most of his paternal relatives live in Jordan and Syria. Despite growing up in France, Saleem would travel to Jordan and Syria 'regularly,' spending his summer vacations there. He only discovered Palestine, as a physical place, later on, during his adult life, when he started travelling there as a political activist. Saleem, whose official home has always been France, credits Jordan and Syria, his 'vacation homes,' as having played a crucial role in the formation of his Palestinian identity as a child:

I was Palestinian, but would go to Jordan...and Syria a little bit, Aleppo and Damascus. And so really that was really the matrix, if you want, of my family life and of the construction of my Palestinian identity...

Interview in France, Jun. 2012

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In direct connection to the MENA Uprisings, Saleem was considering moving to a new 'home,' Tunisia. Given its role as the initiator of the ongoing Uprisings, he was planning on relocating to Tunisia and making that country the 'platform' of his political activism. Indeed, after having witnessed the Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Saleem had become convinced that 'the future' lay in the Middle East rather than Europe:

Growing up, I quickly realized, once I conceived most of my activities as political and activist activities, [that] I wasn't going to be able to do much in the [prevailing] Jordanian, or Syrian, or Lebanese context. And so, OK, I gave up the idea of going and living there, and then basically, the real change that allowed me to reconnect in a really, really different way with the Arab world was the fall of the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak...that opened a new space that allowed me to re-invest myself in the Arab world, through a door that I wasn't expecting at all...

Interview, Jun. 2012

Now that this door had opened in the Middle East, Saleem believed that post-Ben Ali Tunisia was the perfect place for him to work on 'the emergence of an awareness that will enable working at that scale for the liberation of Palestine and the Arab world' (interview in France, Jun. 2012).

Saleem's story represents an example of how the Arab Uprisings, despite not taking root in the Palestinian homeland itself acted as a galvanizing force for pro-Palestinian activism among Palestinians, including those in the diaspora at large. They

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provided some Palestinians in the diaspora with new ways of connecting politically to the Arab world, and of connecting events in the Arab world to the Palestinian cause.

It is important to note here that most of the interviews referenced above were conducted in May and June 2012. At that time, interviewees had more reasons to be hopeful that the Arab Uprisings would lead to positive regional change or that they would have a positive impact on Palestinians. Tunisia was preparing to hold democratic elections following the downfall of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, Egypt was preparing to hold democratic elections following the downfall of military dictator Hosni Mubarak, and Syria had not yet descended into its current bloody war. Since then, however, Egypt has returned to authoritarian military rule and Syria is in the fifth year of a war that has resulted in the deaths of more than 250,000 people, the displacement of over seven million people within Syria, and of more than four million people across Syrian borders (UN OCHA 2016). Only Tunisia seems to still be on the path of political reform. In direct contrast with the optimism frequently expressed in 2012, interviews conducted later in our study reveal a generally more negative outlook on the impact of the Uprisings on Palestinians.

Jumana – a 23 year-old born in Gaza – noted with apprehension that 'Ever since the problem started, especially in Syria, Egypt... attention is no longer given to Palestine or to refugees, even to Gaza. There is no longer a focus on breaking the siege [in Gaza] or anything. It's hardly in the news any more. So that's one way in which Palestine has been affected by the Uprisings' (interview in the UK, Dec. 2013).

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John, a 23-year-old who lived in Yarmouk camp from the age of 7 and who had been granted asylum only one month after arriving in the UK in 2012, noted that, as a result of the uprisings in Syria he felt 'more and more Syrian, kind of than Palestinian.' He further stressed that

now people feel more compassionate with Syrian refugees than Palestinian refugees. People in general now [think] that Syrians are going through the hardest time, not the Palestinians inside Palestine. Even in the media, there is very little on Palestine even though Palestine is kind of the major case in the Middle East. But it seems like it isn't any more, with the revolutions and the wars. So.... I would say it made the Palestinians less special.

Interview in the UK, Dec. 2013

Although he had repeatedly expressed his solidarity with Syrian refugees, John nonetheless recognised the extent to which ongoing events in the region were deflecting both attention and compassion away from Palestinians 'inside Palestine,' including those in Gaza. More vocally, Ahmed, who had been born in Libya in 1976, shared his belief that the Arab Spring 'is just destroying us from within... it is not helping the Palestinian cause at all. As a matter of fact it's confusing the Palestinian cause, and setting the Palestinian cause back a few hundred years' (interview in the UK, Dec. 2013).

Conclusion

The above accounts have chronicled Palestinians' experiences and views of the Arab Uprisings in the near and far diasporas, confirming that it is not just Palestinians in Arab

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countries that witnessed uprisings who have been affected (although their experiences have understandably been much more harrowing), but Palestinians further afield, including in Europe. The nature of the ripple effects on Palestinians in faraway places like France, Sweden, and the UK reflects the need for academic research on diasporic populations to continue looking beyond the (past) homeland and the (current) host society in order to capture and make sense of the experiences of such populations.

Scholars rightly point out that the post-national and transnational turn taken by diaspora studies since the 1990s has created a situation in which the term can apply to almost any group of migrants and is at risk of being diluted of its meaning. With regard to Palestinians, scholars are also right to point to the potentially depoliticizing effects of using diaspora as a framing concept for Palestinians. However, we have shown that in the context of our research the flexibility afforded by the term *diaspora* is useful in examining simultaneously the experiences of Palestinians located in a variety of geo-political spaces. Nonetheless, it remains essential that the term be coupled with historical contextualization and ethnographic research to prevent it from becoming a catch-all concept devoid of meaning (Petee 2007).

By using diaspora as an analytical frame, while drawing on the historical context of the Arab Uprisings and our interviewees' narratives, we have shown that although their experiences are characterized by a significant degree of diversity, they are also connected through larger affective, social and political networks. We have illustrated that refugee host states and the refugee camps located in them can be meaningful, not only to Palestinians who reside in Arab host-states, but also to Palestinians located further afield.

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This is especially the case given the inaccessibility of the Palestinian homeland. We have also illustrated that Palestinian identity is not simply a matter of attachment to or identification with place, but also about a visceral identification with suffering and injustice occurring within and across a particular place. Through their shared sense of injustice in relation to Palestine as a cause and as the embodiment of particular kinds of suffering (rather than just a place) our Palestinian interviewees could relate to the uprisings in ways that simultaneously reinforced their Palestinian identity, despite their physical distance from the uprisings and regardless of whether they themselves had physically experienced suffering or the sense of injustice expressed through the Arab Uprisings.

Overall, this article has shown that Palestinians in the far diaspora may continue to have affective and social connections to a multiplicity of spaces, including former home-camps (such as Yarmouk) and host states (including Syria); that they may identify with places that have become emblematic of Palestinian suffering even if neither they nor their families have ever lived in those places; and that their Palestinian identity, in this case, and political activism linked to this identity, may lead them to develop relationships with particular places that are neither home-camp, host-state, nor homeland. Furthermore, this article has shown that the political links between Palestinians in the homeland and those in the diaspora may take forms other than resistance against Israeli occupation or the ongoing struggle to achieve the right to return to Palestine. Instead, or rather in parallel, it may take the form of political solidarity in the face of hardships that are not directly connected to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and yet point to a shared Palestinian

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condition. This shared 'diasporic' condition can therefore be understood as being shaped both by the historic and current displacement in and from Palestine, and by the recurring and at times overlapping forms of dispossession, persecution and forced migration experienced by Palestinians across the MENA region. Indeed, while many interviewees viewed the upheavals taking place since 2010 as having the potential to prompt positive changes for Palestinians and the broader region, the Arab Uprisings have nonetheless unfortunately become a reference point for what can be characterized as an ongoing *Nakba* that permeates time and space.

Notes:

¹ Libya and Syria were selected for analysis for two reasons: they are sites of prior research with Palestinian refugees conducted by the authors and they offer contrasting examples of almost total invisibility (Libya) versus hypervisibility (Syria) in accounts of Palestinians affected by the Arab Uprisings.

² This paper forms part of a broader comparative project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which examines individual and collective meanings of diaspora and statelessness from the perspectives of Roma, Kurds, and Palestinians based in the France, Sweden, and the UK.

³ *Nakba* is the Arabic term used to denote the Palestinian catastrophe arising from the mass exodus from Palestine in 1948.

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⁴ Following the work of geographer Doreen Massey (2005) we see space and place as relational categories that are constitutive of each other. Thus, we think of place as the product of intersections within the wider realm of interrelations that constitute space.

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