Diasporas of the Modern Middle East
Contextualising Community

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EDINBURGH
University Press
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Introduction
Diasporas of the Modern Middle East – Contextualising Community
Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian

A Diasporic Middle East

Movement, migration and diasporisation lie at the heart of the Middle East, in the past and in the present day. Historically, the region has been a heterogeneous site where distinct communities, differentiated by origin and orientation, have coexisted through many periods of conflict and longer times of peace. Some of these displaced communities have been threatened and persecuted; others have kept their difference discreet and maintained low profiles in order to blend in. At different points, some communities rose to positions of prominence and power, while, for others, their very existence was precarious. From the late nineteenth century, dynamic political changes meant that many of these groups have struggled to claim and negotiate a space for themselves, and, increasingly, to protect and sustain it.

Although there has been substantial interest in Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the West, diasporic and minority communities within the Middle East have been relatively neglected in recent academic scholarship. As an ancient concept, diaspora has proven remarkably durable, resonating with both old and new communities created through war and displacement, shaped by the forces of repressive politics and global capitalism, yet allowing for creative and dynamic articulations and mobilisations within. The Middle East provides fertile ground in which to explore the concept and lived reality
of diaspora. Rich in communities of religious belief and ethnic identity, affiliations to territory, and human societies that have bound empires and nations but also identified outsiders, the Middle East can be regarded as central to the concept and configuration of diasporic communities.

This collection brings together eleven case studies that look at how diasporic groups have been organised and sustained, balancing an attachment to a ‘homeland’ – real or imagined – and living in the diasporic space, or settled in ‘host states’, that are, in practice, their homes. They offer collectively a sustained engagement and exploration of how diasporic communities are vital, even volatile, sites of political, social and cultural expression that must be understood within their specific context. Regardless of their varying circumstances, we posit that these communities are nevertheless embedded in the region, and, therefore, entangled in the politics of the wider Middle East, sometimes being at the very centre of conflicts, sometimes its peripheral victims.

This book is the result of a symposium that we convened at the University of Edinburgh in October 2011, entitled ‘Contextualising Community – Diasporas of the Modern Middle East’. We wish to gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Language-Based Area Studies (LBAS) initiative of Research Councils UK led by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), under the auspices of the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World (CASAW), to thank all of the participants, and to express our appreciation to Sophie Lowry for her role in the organisation of this event. The workshop assembled a critical mass of international scholars working on a number of diasporic groups of the Middle East with a range of different, yet interrelated, concerns. In bringing together the contributions of many who attended, this volume seeks to marry the two fields of Diaspora Studies and Middle East Studies, drawing on the theoretical and conceptual developments of the former with the specificity, empirical richness and dynamism of the latter. Through a series of in-depth studies, the contributors address how different groups have struggled to claim a space for themselves in their particular contexts, and how these efforts have been aided and hampered by the legal, historical, social, political, economic, colonial and postcolonial peculiarities of each host state. Taken as a coherent collection, this exploration of how old and new communities are established, consolidated and maintained
in a diaspora, rooted in their host states but oriented toward a transnational nation, vision or homeland, in practice challenges, revives or reconfigures the established triadic diasporic framework. The volume also reflects more widely on how communities are built and maintained in a diasporic space, examining issues of identity, citizenship, inclusion/exclusion and belonging in the modern Middle East.

Most importantly, we seek to situate the particular communities within their own narratives – of conflict, resistance, war, genocide, persecution, displacement, migration – and to analyse how these intersect with the wider historiography of the region that has neglected, dismissed or essentialised them. In so doing, we seek to reconceptualise the Middle East from the perspective of the Other/the minority, while arguing that the historical legacies and developments of the region have made and continue to make its cultural and social pluralism distinctive. In conceptualising the Middle East through the prism of diasporic communities, we wish to unveil and articulate a counter-history to the prevailing state narratives. Together these communities embody and represent the depth and range of historical experience of the region, most often as casualties rather than enforcers of political projects, be it as victims of colonialism, remnants associated with imperial rule, survivors of genocide or the jetsam of nation-building. Viewed in this way, a diasporic Middle East provides a multilayered and dynamic framework for understanding the colonial and postcolonial, the processes of state formation and state building, and nationalist and transnationalist projects at play in the region and beyond.

The diasporic experience in the Middle East yields a rich history from below, and from the margins of mainstream political developments, which provides insightful counter-narratives to hegemonic discourse and essentialist politics. While certain emancipatory epistemological projects have unearthed and articulated silenced and sidelined voices in the region, most notably in the case of women,3 there has been hitherto little attempt to marry the marginalised experiences represented by minority communities of the region with the theoretical concerns of Diaspora Studies. Taken together, these groups challenge our understandings of time, place and space: some date back to bygone empires or to colonial times; some are the results of new global trends like neoliberalism and military interventions. Approaching the Middle
East as a series of communities, networks, webs, migratory paths and trajectories allows us not just to subvert state boundaries and national projects but to emancipate diverse and rich histories that challenge, undermine and complement reigning narratives, as well as shedding unfamiliar light on these very political projects, their legacies and their continuing impact.

**Diasporas in the Middle East**

A region of great religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity, the Middle East has a long record of demographic movement, displacement and forced migration. Since ancient times the elements of the archetypal Jewish diaspora – dispersion, loss and desire to return – have been repeated in many variations and configurations. Some cases have been the result of dramatic and often violent rupture, most notably the massacres and dispersion of Armenians during the late Ottoman period. Others have been prompted by changing economic and social circumstances, where demand for labour and commercial opportunities has encouraged relocation and community transplantation.

In the pre-modern era religious affiliation, as the primary marker of identity, determined both dominant and minority communities. In a region dominated by Islam for centuries these displacements often involved non-Muslim minorities, such as the Armenians transplanted to Isfahan in the early seventeenth century, or the scattered resettlement of Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. However, especially on the margins of empire, Muslim groups were not immune to such pressures. As the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire shrank so Muslim communities were displaced – during the nineteenth century Caucasians moving south to Anatolia, or Turks from the Balkans seeking security in the Ottoman heartland – and would themselves constitute diasporas. During this period, new ideas of nationalism fuelled by aspirations for liberation from imperial rule began to challenge the primacy of religious identity. Perhaps most obvious and successful in Greece and the Balkans, where culture, faith and territory closely lined up together, the influence of such ideas would spread across the region and be taken up by others. Intersecting with these communities defining themselves by religious and ethnic identity were other transnational actors. Anarchist, mercantile and masonic networks, Sufi brotherhoods and cultural elites, sustained by
the pluralist milieu of multiethnic society and cosmopolitan circles, variously reinforced, countered or were eroded by these developments.

At the end of the First World War, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire offered an opportunity for the nationalist ambitions of ethnic groups such as Arabs, Jews and Turks to be realised. The subsequent creation of new states, although largely determined by the imperial interest of the victorious powers of Britain and France rather than the peoples of the region, set in train a process of nation-building that presided over the ideological and sometimes brutal construction of new national societies that created diaspora groups. Many were the direct or indirect by-product of war, and resulted in the expulsion or relocation of religious and ethnic groups. The 1922 exchange of populations between Greece and the emerging Turkish Republic, made notionally on the basis of religious identity but determined by the nationalist ambition of two states, serves as a prime example of this reordering of people and territory. In Mandate Palestine the failure of the British to reconcile conflicting nationalist claims set the stage for the events of 1948, a seminal event in the record of dispossession in the Middle East. The establishment of the state of Israel and the displacement of about 750,000 Palestinians outside of the borders of the new state created a diaspora not only in the neighbouring Arab states but, in time beyond, in Europe, North America and Australia.

Subsequent armed conflicts in the Middle East have presided over the expulsion and resettlement of communities, at first notionally temporary but often becoming more permanent. The civil wars of Algeria (1953–62) and the departure of the French Algerians (Pieds-Noirs), the mass exodus from Lebanon during the civil war (1975–90), the ongoing conflict between Turkish and Kurdish forces, and more recently Sudanese refugees fleeing the conflict between north and south are but a few examples. The apparent logic of this nation-building process, engendered both by the colonial context of these new states and the way that ethnic identity has been invoked as a means to legitimate them, has guaranteed that the presence of non-national groups, such as the Kurds, has been seen often as a threat and at least an anomaly in the development of nation-states. Yet, with the reinvigoration of religious identity as a political marker since the 1970s, religious differences not only between Muslims and non-Muslims but also within Islam itself,
such as between Sunni and Shi’a populations, have arguably revived a sense of scattered but connected communities.

The relocation of communities in the Middle East has not only been represented in terms of expulsion or dispersal. Some of these movements were ideological ‘returns’ to rhetorical homelands: the transfer of Greeks from Asia Minor to the state of Greece in 1922; the response of Armenians to the call to ‘return’ to the Soviet Republic of Armenia in the late 1940s and 1960s; of Jews to Palestine and Israel; and Greeks and Italians from Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s to their putative motherlands. The irony of such migrations has been twofold: first, many of those concerned had very tenuous connections to the homeland and second, the return of one diaspora led to the creation of new diasporic communities. The Zionist policy of the ‘Ingathering of the Exiles’ of Jews from the Yemen, Morocco, Iraq and Ethiopia has generated a number of separate diasporas built on cultural affinity and historical experience. The dispersion of Egyptian Jewry in a number of directions after 1948, not only to Israel but also to France and to the United States, created another diaspora within an already diverse community. Italians, Greeks, Armenians, Maltese and Cypriots who left Egypt during the same period resettled not only in their titular homelands but also in communities in new lands where they were often sustained by a sense of loss of community and nostalgia for their former homes.

In diaspora, displaced and dispossessed communities were reconstituted or constituted themselves in refugee camps or other marginal, usually urban localities. Often coalescing around religious institutions, such as a church, mosque or synagogue, or other ethnic associations, these communities established their own schools to promote their culture and language and took up residence in distinctive urban quarters. Some established formal institutional communities, others relied on cultural clubs, sporting bodies, commercial chambers and political organisations, often affiliated to transnational networks, to provide a community framework, contested but constitutive. Yet others were sustained by more informal personalised links. In time, these communities established the social and economic relation with both the host state and society and the lost homeland. By such means these diasporic communities forged a local identity and sense of belonging that provided the means by which to represent the specific interests of the community, engage
with host governments and society, and maintain links either real or notional with homeland governments. Transnational organisations such as the World Zionist Organisation, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) played their role in coordinating social and political programmes.

War, conflict and the often ruthless logic of nation-building have not been the only impetus to the creation of diasporas. While the entrepreneurial trade networks nurtured international links within extended mercantile families even before 1800, the growing forces of globalisation during the nineteenth century, and with increased momentum and vitality in the twentieth and twenty-first, generated a mass movement and flow of labour and diasporic communities. The nineteenth century was characterised by the mass migration of skilled and unskilled labour of European nationals and Mediterranean peoples, such as Greeks, Italians, Maltese, Cypriots and Dalmatians, to settle in North Africa and Egypt and establish local resident communities. Often prospering under the colonial order, some of these groups had a historical lineage that preceded its imposition and, in any case, were far from being simple creatures of foreign patronage. Nevertheless, the political changes after 1945 saw the departure of many of these communities in the face of increasingly strident narrow nationalism and unfavourable economic policies.

Despite the political impetus behind the forging of new, homogeneous national societies, there persisted a wide range of the ‘old’ diasporic and transnational communities across the Middle East at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Significant if dwindling Jewish communities remained in Turkey, Iran, Tunisia and Morocco; various Christian populations and denominations maintained themselves across the region, even as they established bridgehead presences elsewhere beyond. Meanwhile, economic opportunity and the desire to improve living standards continue to drive the movement of peoples from, to and within the Middle East. The possibility of relatively well-paid work in the Gulf attracted many Arabs, particularly Egyptians and Palestinians, from the 1970s on. More recently, Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Filipinos have filled different sectors of the Gulf job market. White-collar European workers have become significant resident communities (most often termed expatriates) where their expertise has been
utilised in the hypermodernisation of oil-rich Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Elsewhere, the desire for a cheap or quiescent workforce in a region chronically underemployed has generated other diasporic movements: Syrian labourers to Lebanon; Egyptians to the Gulf and Libya; and Thai workers, encouraged to replace Palestinian labour after 1993, to Israel. Yet these economic forces have often been overtaken, disrupted or rerouted by political circumstances. In the lead-up to the Gulf War of 1991 many Egyptian workers were expelled from Iraq, and then Palestinians from Kuwait after the ejection of Iraqi forces. Beyond the region, Middle Eastern populations continued to establish, maintain and reorder themselves: the Lebanese diaspora globally, the Turkish and Kurdish populations in Germany, Palestinians and other Arabs in Western Europe and beyond.

The Terrain of Diaspora Studies

In the age of globalisation, diaspora as a concept has attracted unprecedented academic interest. Alongside an apparent proliferation of ‘new diasporas’, Khachig Tölölyan identified this as being partly due to ‘the move towards renaming as diasporas the more recent communities of dispersion . . . which were known by other names until the late 1960s as exile groups, overseas communities, ethnic and racial minorities, and so forth’. The revitalisation of diaspora and the birth of Diaspora Studies may be traced to the founding in 1991 of the journal Diaspora – A Journal of Transnational Studies, edited by Tölölyan himself, and the opening up of the field of transnationalism with influential scholars like Avtar Brah, Nina Glick Schiller, Pnina Werbner, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Arjun Appadurai, Paul Gilroy, Robin Cohen, Gabriel Sheffer, William Safran and others working across disciplines. The increased currency of the term ‘diaspora’ suggests that it enjoys a wide resonance as a way of formulating identities and loyalties of diverse groups of people who cultivate a sense of common origin and a meaningful connection with one another.

Originating from the Greek ‘diasparein’, meaning ‘to disperse, scatter and spread’, ‘diaspora’ was associated with a sense of tragedy in its identification with the Jewish experience. The archetype of the Jewish case continues to serve as a reference point, but increasingly scholars have called, implicitly
or explicitly, for the need to transcend this template. Some scholars have cautioned against the danger of reifying the Jewish model of diaspora as a normative one, or have rejected Israel as homeland and hence challenge notions of centres and peripheries, while others have defended the centrality of the Jewish diaspora in the new wave of diaspora study. ‘Old’ diasporas, such as the historical experiences of the Armenians and the Greeks, owe their theoretical conception to the ‘classical’ diaspora of the Jews, but the term has been extended so that the galuyot of the Jews and spiurk of the Armenians has had to accommodate the more recent phenomena of the mass migration of Italians and the shatat of the Palestinians. The 1960s and the advent of African Studies led to the term being applied to a diaspora born out of the trauma of slavery.

The intricacies of definition, dynamics and direction of diaspora continue to be debated, ranging from the idea that diaspora is ‘any ethnic collectivity which lacks a territorial base within a given polity’, to the narrowest characterisation that true diasporas result from forced dispersion, have a distinct collective cultural memory and resist assimilation to the dominant host culture. Here we propose that a working definition of diaspora is one that respects its historical and etymological roots but is open to new creative uses, within the broad triadic (homeland–diaspora–host state) parameters.

Historical studies of diasporas emphasised their exile, their bond to a (real or imagined) homeland, and a creed of displacement and return. In the modern era, the hegemonic nation-state framework meant that diasporas were seen as something of an anomaly, a temporary misfortune on the way to another ‘normal’ stage, principally assimilation into a host state or return to the homeland. With the postmodern turn in scholarship, Diaspora was brought out of the wilderness where it had drifted along as an ambiguous anachronistic ‘Other of the nation state’ to promotion as ‘exemplary communities of the transnational moment’. The concept was appropriated by Cultural Studies in the 1990s, decapitalised (‘diaspora’) and given a new lease of life as the paradigm of dislocated and deterritorialised existence where identities are fluid, evolving and changeable, ‘out of place’, ‘hybrid’, exhibiting ‘double consciousness’, or indeed ‘multiple consciousness’, to name but a few. This wave of study produced a counter-narrative of diaspora, arguing that alongside exile, whose ‘essential sadness can never be surmounted’,
living in diaspora can be a liberating, exciting and meaningful way of life rather than a tragic aberration. In the decentred postmodern world where boundaries are ever-challenged, diaspora is potentially the ‘new catchword in the global theorization of diversity’ and the embodiment of the marginalised Outsider who maintains a critical distance and insight into the society of which she or he is a part. The latter role has popularised diaspora as a useful theoretical position from which to study the nation-state, and the success (or failure) of its policies like multiculturalism or assimilation/integration. In Critical Studies, diaspora identity is seen as pluralistic, shifting, flexible and heterogeneous. Living in an in-between space and feeling comfortable (enough) in multiple sites can be a privileged position where one is free to construct an identity that is hybrid, fluid and multilayered. Clifford considers this the ‘empowering paradox of diaspora’. Despite ‘diaspora’ being a concept that the humanities and social sciences have embraced enthusiastically, there are significant differences in approach and emphasis, as Knott and McLoughlin stress, particularly when it comes to the state, and identity theory. They argue for an ‘inclusive approach’ to the ‘broad church’ that Diaspora Studies has become.

Despite the countercultural potential of diasporas, there is no reason to consider them as being intrinsically counter- or post-national. Many diasporas function as nationalist projects, with conservative or reactionary aims and ethos. The embodied tension of the diaspora as concept and practice challenges nationalism and the hegemony of the nation-state, and offers diasporans the opportunity to be creatively transgressive. Yet many diaspora communities are far from being emancipatory projects and depend on their patriarchal and elite leaderships and the associated internal struggles to shape and represent their interests. Accordingly, it is perhaps most useful to view diasporas as being complex and multilayered, with competing internal voices and trends.

In reviewing Diaspora Studies from a social science perspective, there are several clear themes around which the literature coalesces. These include: the politics of belonging in the host state, whether framed around citizenship and state policies like integration and assimilation or framed around feelings and perceptions of belonging (identity issues); diasporic communities as challenging to the home state as political dissidents and representatives...
of an alternative form of political authority and vision; and diasporic communities as a Latent threat to the host state by virtue of having transnational allegiances and loyalties that may be contrary to the principles and values of the host state. In the latter two cases, diasporas are viewed as entities that need to be managed, negotiated and controlled by the state. In the case of the United States especially, diasporic groups are accused of hijacking foreign policy, particularly in the example of the powerful Zionist lobby; in more positive portrayals diasporic emigrants are considered potential agents of change (democratising and liberalising) in the homeland.

The latest development in this literature concerns the spreading of more policy-defined and institutionally shaped new diasporas, which has shifted the focus to the role played by the homeland state. This particular kind of diaspora is distinct and unmistakably neo-liberal in its foundation. Its construction emanates from the homeland state that seeks to reconfigure its emigrants and expatriates as a new constituency that it is connected to, and lays claims on institutionally. In the past few years there has been a huge upsurge in the number of states, from India to Turkey to Mexico, reimagining their co-ethnics abroad as a diaspora, and developing policies and institutions to harness their economic and political potential in particular. Latha Varadarajan and others have rightly cast this development as a tentacle of neo-liberalism with policies and initiatives designed to maximise states benefiting from their emigrants. This has been the subject of much debate, especially where it concerns citizenship and voting rights. States viewing their nationals abroad as a potential resource rely on constructing a neo-diasporic instrumentalist discourse that emanates from the (historic) homeland and is supported by relevant initiatives. This new trend of states, widening their nationalist project and remit to recast the relationship between states and their nationals abroad, is the latest development in the apparently ever-expanding appeal of diaspora as a concept and its versatility and applicability in informing and enabling policy.

This collection approaches the Middle East through the lens of Diaspora Studies, through the experiences of transnational communities in the region. The rootedness of diasporas in their respective host states, which are, in practice, their homes, has been relatively ignored in recent academic literature more enamoured of their mobility. Indeed the terminology of Diaspora
Studies has been slow at recognising that, for second and third generations, the ‘host’ has effectively become the home. Tölöyan’s distinction between home and homeland (ancestral place of origin) is a useful intervention here and applies to many of the cases in this collection, whether the community explicitly acknowledges it or not.25 In recognition of the ‘settled’ nature of many diasporas, we situate our work in the agenda laid out by Tölöyan, Kokot and Alfonso:

[E]thnographic studies of diaspora must also not neglect the realities of sedentary diasporic life. They must critically take into account the ideological status of the celebratory anti-national rhetoric of mobility characterizing many theoretical texts on diaspora, as well as the political discourse of uprootedness and dispersal among diaspora elites. This ‘official’ model of a ‘pure’ diasporic identity, permanently endangered by threats of assimilation, must be contrasted with studies of the day-to-day experience of individual actors, balancing the various claims brought to them by diasporic elites, society of residence and personal situation alike.26

The chapters of this volume testify to the range and depth of diasporic life in the Middle East and explore its changing conceptions and practice in the context of the modern Middle East, while making a theoretical contribution to Diaspora Studies. In doing so, the authors seek to revitalise the use and validity of the concept of diaspora, and apply it to a region that is home to some of the world’s oldest diasporas.

The connection between the Middle East and diaspora is in fact inextricably linked. The quintessential Jewish diaspora and other ‘historic’ diasporas, such as the Armenians and Greeks, are closely associated with the region and central to any historical understanding of the term and the phenomenon. Upon these models of diaspora a substantial Western scholarship developed that relied heavily on the troika of community, host state and homeland. As some of our contributors explicitly acknowledge, the Jewish paradigm remains a potent point of reference in the study of diaspora, but a central argument of this volume is that contemporary notions of diaspora have expanded beyond traditional frameworks conceptualised through a triadic relationship to an accommodation of a multiplicity of fluid, decentred experiences and identities. We situate our approach with Stuart Hall’s influential
essay, which argues against the Zionist paradigm of diaspora, as ‘the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising form of ethnicity’, and urges for diaspora to be defined ‘not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity’. While recognising the three sites represented in the triadic approach, this volume considers that the idea of fluidity as central to diasporic identity best captures the richness of the different diasporas in the region. Accordingly, the chapters demonstrate that central concepts to diaspora like ‘homeland’, ‘host state’, ‘exile’, ‘longing’, ‘memory’, ‘home’ and ‘return’ have been deconstructed and reinstated with meaning through each particular diasporic experience and through political and social projects.

Guiding Questions and Core Themes

The chapters of this book speak to and across one another along a number of overarching themes and concerns. The place of origin, the Homeland, is central to the classical conception of diaspora, from which it is considered to be tragically exiled. The Homeland lies at the heart of the displacement that is diaspora but maintains a continuing relation to it. Brah suggests that diasporas have a ‘homing desire’; the desire for ‘return’ is one that ‘returns’ the diasporic subjects to the way they were or to an imagined past created in memory. The chapters here all centralise the importance of a homeland, real or imagined, experienced or constructed through memories passed down from generation to generation. In studies of diasporas formed by forced dispersion, the homeland where it exists is sometimes relegated to the status of nostalgia. This is especially the case when there is a historical diasporic tradition independent of the homeland, or where there is a troubled or problematic relationship with the homeland. We consider that there are many different kinds of homelands – imagined, historic, virtual, constructed, lost, occupied and so on – and a range of relationships that a community may maintain at any given point, through, for example, political mobilisation (Ilias), exilic consciousness (Holt and Farah) or subversive tourism (Turan and Bakalian).

We also consider how the ‘homeland’ and its evocation functions as a tool to build group cohesion and identity. In many cases like the Armenian,
Homeland is an orientation that gives the heterogeneous and multilayered diaspora coherence and meaning, and helps construct their identity as diasporans (Kasbarian). For the Palestinians in Lebanon, the recollection and narration of the homeland keeps the younger generation of refugees grounded in their identities and perpetuates the sense of loss and displacement. Here the concept of diaspora may be seen as central to the construction of Palestinian identity (Farah) or rejected in being applied to the temporary condition of refugee status (Holt).

We also recognise that the distinction between the terms ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ can be very fluid. Homeland is a place of origin, often abstract or ideal, which represents a place that is fixed and unchanging even if attitudes towards it may alter over time. In contrast, Home is contemporary and adaptable, shifting and elusive, multiple and movable. As demonstrated in this volume, our notions of home and belonging are challenged by the lived realities of diasporic communities, revealing a life that is vibrant and multi-locale even when an acute sense of loss lies at its core. These case studies grapple with the tension represented by the lived everyday locality of home on the one hand and an ideal, symbolic Home on the other. Each of these chapters engages implicitly or explicitly with the way that home is represented through diaspora mediators and its cultural production.

Our distinction between home and homeland does not detract from diasporic narratives of displacement and loss, which highlight the centrality of memory. The importance of the collective narrative whether grounded in an idiom of nostalgia or resistance and exile functions as a way of identity-making, and creating community and cohesion (Holt, Gorman). As bearers of the nation, biologically and through their articulation of the nation, women can play a critical role in remembering the lost homes and Homeland, and transmitting those memories to the younger generations that is key to the construction of a national narrative and identity (Holt). Many of the chapters speak more widely of the generational dimension – the importance of grandparents and parents in passing down a sense of loss and displacement, through stories, memories and cultural production, which mould a diasporic identity among the younger generations who have not experienced it at first hand.

But what happens when diasporans actually encounter the ancestral
homeland in its current manifestation? For Turkish Ossetians visiting the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania, rediscovering the Caucasian homeland can be a fracturing and painful experience, resulting in, ‘a rapid destruction of its long-standing idealised representations and an acquaintance with its real problems’ (Chochiev). Indeed, for some it may be preferable to retain the mythologised memory of the Homeland rather than face the disappointing realities of a formal state. This, however, is not the case for the North American Armenians who visit their ancestral lands in Turkey, where the phenomenon of Armenian diaspora tourism to eastern Turkey has become a kind of pilgrimage that transgresses the state’s metaframe that denies the truth of their history in these very lands. Return in this form can provide a counter to the official Turkish and Armenian diaspora narratives, a therapeutic journey and personal closure, as well as function as subversive social and political acts in and of themselves (Turan and Bakalian).

In contrast to the Homeland, the ‘host state’ is neither ambivalent nor ideal. Its realities and policies are arguably the most crucial factors in the development of minority communities. Several of the chapters look at how identity is constantly negotiated in different and changing state contexts (Farah, Gorman), looking at how state policies and mainstream social attitudes have defined, set apart or integrated diasporic communities. Other chapters highlight the way that the state is almost bypassed through transnational political activity (Ilias, Holt, Kasbarian).

The significance of citizenship and belonging in the modern Middle East is one key aspect of understanding diasporic reality as nuanced and changeable. In certain contexts foreign nationality could convey privilege and protection, as in nineteenth-century Egypt (Gorman), but the denial of citizenship in the more contemporary world of nation-states and, particularly the status of the refugee, represents one of the most precarious and alienating points on the diaspora map. While the young Iraqi refugees in Egypt are living ‘in limbo’, marking time and waiting for their (real) lives to begin (Pascucci), the Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon, denied local citizenship by the Lebanese state and excluded from Palestine, are even more marginalised, displaced and insecure (Holt, Farah).

Just as states are evolving, they contribute to shaping these communities’ self-perception, identity and orientation. The contingency of diasporic
and minority identity is taken up by a number of contributors, whether the fluidity of Rum identity in Turkey and Syria who move between ‘being’ Ottomans, Christians, Arabs, Syrians and nationalists (Theodorelis-Rigas), or the Ossetians in Turkey who can draw on ‘multiple identities of Ossetian, Caucasian, Turkish, or Muslim’ (Chochiev). This diasporic fluidity is not generally viewed as a positive attribute by the state, however, and can arouse suspicions of diaspora groups as fifth columnists or a threat to the nationalist vision of the state. A historical community, whether the Rum or Armenians in modern Turkey, are by their very existence a subversive element that challenges nationalist discourses and deconstructs the idea of the nation.

The underlying task for our authors was to explore the enduring concept and understanding of ‘community’ in the Middle East. The postcolonial legacy has meant that many of these communities, and hence their related diasporic identities, are inscribed by the state (Theodorelis-Rigas, Kasbarian). In some cases community institutions, formal and informal, are well developed (Farah), and in others burgeoning or dying (Toledano, Chochiev, Gorman). Distinct cultural practices are also central to maintaining a sense of community, whether embodied in the press (Gorman), literature (Bayeh) or distinct language and customs (Toledano). Several chapters reveal the hierarchies and competing discourses within communities (Kasbarian, Turan and Bakalian, Gorman), or deconstruct the internal community dynamics and struggles to represent and speak for the group (Kasbarian, Theodorelis-Rigas, Gorman). These sites of conflict and contestation allow for new and creative articulations of diaspora, unbound from the triadic framework but nevertheless acknowledging its enduring legacy. In contextualising each community within its own narratives, struggles and wider environment, the chapters deconstruct the multilayeredness and complexities of being a minority or diasporic group in the Middle East. We centralise the community as being at the heart of this exercise, positioning ourselves in line with James Clifford’s view that diaspora is simultaneously ‘rooted and routed’, and that the ‘term diaspora is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement’. 29

Furthermore, this collection maintains that although movement is central to the definition of diaspora, many of the communities in the region
have a core that is stationary, settled and permanent. Several of the chapters deal explicitly with sedentary diasporic communities (Kasbarian, Farah, Theodorelis-Rigas); others explore different kinds of diasporic movement – ‘limbo’ and ‘waiting’ (Pascucci), resistance (Holt), travel and (subversive) tourism (Turan and Bakalian). This conceptualisation of diaspora departs from many traditional studies that approach diasporas as successful or unsuccessful – assimilated, integrated or preserved, empowered or disempowered.

The potent effects of recent globalisation and continued political instability, itself a legacy in part of the imposition of state boundaries in the post-Ottoman past, have led to a proliferation of refugees, migrants and scattered communities, and the resurrection and extension of the term ‘diaspora’ to include many of these new groups. Two chapters in this volume focus on examples of these ‘new’ diasporic communities: Malayalee migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf (Ilias), and Iraqi refugees in Egypt (Pascucci), where the urban environment is a key factor and actively contributes to their marginalisation in the case of the former, and strandedness in the latter case. And, yet, despite this, both groups manage to be transgressive in their practices, whether in social spaces (like the mall) or in religious solidarity and charity in the case of the Iraqis, or in their transnational political activity in the case of the Malayalees. The construction of novel interpretations of home and homeland is also evident in diaspora literature (Bayeh), where the writings of authors in exile articulate different configurations of identity and groundedness. It is this creative and subversive potential that diasporas hold that our volume celebrates.

This Collection

We have grouped the chapters of this volume into four parts that engage with different but overlapping themes.

The first section, ‘Post-Ottoman Reconfigurations’, presents a number of case studies of diaspora communities constituted before the end of the Ottoman period and follows their trajectory and reconfiguration in the period after the dissolution of the empire. The second section, ‘Exile, “Return” and Resistance’, focuses on the response of two diaspora communities, North American Armenians and Palestinians in Lebanon, to the condition of exile and the resistance strategies employed to sustain notions of return. The third
section, ‘Community in Host States – Establishing New Homes’, examines two case studies, that of the Armenians of Cyprus and of the Palestinians of Lebanon, and how these communities have engaged with their diasporic environment, interacting with the local conditions of their home while maintaining their distinctive sense of homeland. The final section, ‘New Diasporas’, looks at two more recent cases, the Keralites of India in the Gulf and Iraqis in Egypt, displaced following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and demonstrate that displacement, whether for primarily economic or political reasons, continues to provide new articulations of diaspora.

Part 1: Post-Ottoman Reconfigurations

In his discussion of the genealogy of the appellation ‘Rum’ (Greek Orthodox) Haris Theodorelis-Rigas explores its diverging configurations in post-Ottoman Syria and Turkey. In tracing the historical trajectory of the term and its appropriation by a series of communities, from the classical dhimmi of the Greek-speaking community of Ottoman times to the more recent Arabic-speaking Rums from the Turkish province of Hatay who have migrated to Istanbul, he both highlights the fluidity of the term that has been used for self-identification and emphasises the importance of the larger political context of the modernist-secularist projects of Kemalism and Ba’thism (and their successors) and their distinct strategies in coopting and constituting the national community.

While diasporas are often thought of as weakened, discriminated and marginalised groups in society, Ehud Toledano examines a diaspora group of a different order, namely the Turko-Circassian elite whose position was threatened and subsequently provoked a response to avert their exclusion from the newly established states of the post-Ottoman Middle East. Situating this in a process of localisation and Ottomanisation that began taking place throughout the Ottoman Empire from the seventeenth century, Toledano focuses on the career of Egyptian nationalist leader, Muhammad Farid, as a representative of the Ottoman Turcophone diaspora elite in the newly emerging nation-states of the Middle East and North Africa. The dual socio-political and sociocultural processes that challenged the position of these elites in the second half of the nineteenth century with the advent of nationalism saw these elites struggling to keep their privileged status by joining
forces with the local middle classes to lead national liberation movements. In this process, and even more so with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, these Ottoman-Local elites found themselves in the position of diaspora communities in their own countries.

Georgy Chochiev discusses the case of the Ossetians who migrated from their homeland in the Caucasus in the 1850s and 1860s to settle in the interior of Anatolia. In exploring the subsequent trajectory of the community, itself part of a wider process of movement of the North Caucasian mountaineering peoples after their defeat in the Russo-Caucasian War, Chochiev examines the establishment of the Ossetians in their initial rural settlements in Anatolia where they maintained close contact with neighbouring North Caucasian immigrant peoples and constituted an integral part of the Middle Eastern Circassian supra-ethnic community. In time, with the growing impact of the statewide modernisation and nationalistic tendencies of the republican period, the community underwent gradual changes in demographic structure and the nature of its collective identity. He shows that by the end of the twentieth century Turkish Ossetians had been transformed into an urbanised community concentrated largely in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir with a high level of integration within mainstream society.

Anthony Gorman examines the Italian community of Egypt, part of the global movement of Italians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and one of the notable resident foreign communities of that country. Encouraged if not constituted as a result of the modernising programme of Muhammad ‘Ali and his successor rulers of Egypt, the Italian population grew steadily beyond the end of the century and into the 1930s. Contested, conflictual, yet coherent, it established a familiar presence across wider Egyptian society, founded on a rich and diverse community and commercial life that maintained strong connections with the Italian state. With the departure of much of the community in the period after the Second World War, the Italians of Egypt would disperse, some to return to the homeland but others to other countries where they would constitute a new diaspora of Egyptian Italians not nurturing dreams of permanent return to Egypt but maintaining the social connections and the memory of their life there.
Part II: Exile, ‘Return’ and Resistance

The second section of the volume engages with themes of exile, ‘return’ and resistance, examining the case of two notable diasporas, that is, Armenians and Palestinians, and explores the way in which these two groups have experienced exile and seek to invigorate the concept of return.

Zeynep Turan and Anny Bakalian explore the phenomenon of diaspora tourism to ancestral homelands in Eastern Turkey, which was first taken up by Armenian-Americans during the 1990s. Through organised tours conducted by specialised guides, these groups visit ancestral villages and significant sites of Armenian history and experience a journey that is ultimately one of healing, personally and collectively. Participants gain first-hand knowledge of landscape and contemporary conditions and generate new experiences, memories and perspectives on the genocide and deportations. Upon their return home, travellers disseminate their reflections and photos/films at community venues and online in a way that often challenges nationalist narratives and establishes alternative histories. Thus, Armenian-Americans engage in ‘subversive tourism’ through their very presence in these lands, and their transgressing of official narratives and state structures. Based on participant observations of two such tours, email surveys and interviews with the operator who has guided more than 1,200 Armenian-Americans to villages and towns in Turkey, this study explores the evolving dynamics between Armenians, Kurds and Turks as it speaks to the complex relationship between the physical landscape, national and personal narratives, identity, memory and representations of traumatic histories in diasporic communities.

The dispossession and dispersal of the Palestinians during the events of 1948 serves as one of the potent examples of a modern diaspora in the Middle East. Focusing on one particular element within this group, Maria Holt examines the plight of Palestinian refugee women living in the camps of Lebanon as a community that faces deteriorating living conditions and few prospects of peace or security. She examines how women refugees, as both victims and active participants, have adopted various modes of resistance to protect themselves and their families and how they have sought to confront attempts to negate their identity through the construction and articulation of a national narrative, a ‘story of unfulfilled desire’. These women’s narratives,
which are both personal and communal, take many forms and are used to preserve the memory of 1948, as well as to remind the world that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains unresolved.

*Part III: Community in Host States – Establishing New Homes*

While maintaining their relationship with a homeland and the past, diasporic communities have, by necessity, engaged and developed their organic life in host states that have, in time, evolved into permanent new homes.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork, Sossie Kasbarian approaches the Armenians in Cyprus as a minority community situated between two mutually dependent nationalisms of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot. She charts the history of the Armenian community in Cyprus, discussing how the Ottoman and British colonial legacies in particular continue to impact their political status and identity. The chapter situates the community’s position in light of the developments emanating from the Republic’s full membership in the European Union (EU) since 2004, and the wider effect of supranational entities like the EU and the Council of Europe in reconfiguring and empowering diasporic groups. The chapter weaves together the picture of a contemporary diasporic community increasingly rooted to its ‘host state’ through policies, measures, the passage of time, and political realities, and increasingly confident as Cypriot citizens. The Armenian community is a reminder that ‘Others’ can also lay claim to a long and constant attachment to a modern state. Their continued presence acts as a confrontation to nationalist narratives, issuing a challenge to rethink Cypriot history and offers hope for a more inclusive, diverse society.

May Farah examines how the Palestinians in Lebanon, bureaucratically and legally excluded from mainstream Lebanese life, have negotiated the transition from a physically (spatially) rooted national identity to an imagined national affiliation, contingent on the circumstances of their exile. Having been torn loose from their nation, refugees nevertheless remain connected to their homelands, to their national identity, through certain practices: constant recollections of the past, the passing down of stories and, increasingly, through media. By such actions they have sought to reinforce the temporality of their refugee status, remind themselves of their common origin and imagine that they are part of a national community.
Part IV: New Diasporas

While the break-up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the establishment of its successor states in the postcolonial era prompted demographic change and movement, in recent decades new Middle Eastern diasporas have been created by the force of globalisation and the political disruption of the region. Here two examples of such recent phenomena are addressed.

M. H. Ilias addresses the case of the Malayalee migrant workers of Kerala established in the Gulf and examines how their presence has generated various forms of translocal politics within the restrictions of the host Gulf monarchies. In exploring the creative political agency shown in response to this very controlled political environment he demonstrates that rather than a simple extension of Kerala-centric or India-centric politics pursued beyond the boundaries of homeland, the specific circumstances of the Malayalee workers in the Gulf has allowed the opening up of new avenues of expression for the otherwise politically constrained population. The active Islamisation of political life among Kerala Muslim migrants to the Gulf, not in tune with the global trend but with the Kerala-specific sociopolitical developments, is also discussed.

Elisa Pascucci examines an even more recent displacement, that of Iraqis following the invasion of 2003. Until the recent crisis in Syria, this was considered to be the most significant refugee flow within the Middle East since 1948. She discusses the community settled in the upscale residential areas of Cairo, such as Madinet Nasr, Masr El Gadida and 6th of October City. This was a state-employed urban bourgeoisie dispossessed by war and targeted by sectarian violence, representing a remarkable case of middle-class refugees. Based on extensive ethnographic research carried out among young (unmarried) women and men, her chapter explores both their narratives and the material and embodied performances that constitute their struggle for local and global inclusion. It shows how, while institutional discrimination, limited access to economic rights in Egypt and the deterioration of social and family ties in Iraq often make their future uncertain, the spaces of consumption and leisure that mark Cairo’s postmodern urbanism offer them what can be defined as a ‘simulacrum of inclusion’ in emerging global modernity.
In exploring the potential of the literary text as a medium through which to sustain a diasporic consciousness, Jumana Bayeh engages with another aspect of diaspora experience. Her discussion of Lebanese diaspora literature addresses the centrality of home in the work of a number of authors writing in English but redolent with Lebanese identity, and examines how the concept of home is configured and specifically how it engages with origins, movement and the relation between these roots and routes that are negotiated with each other with different political implications.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The contributions presented in this volume are testimony to the range and variety of diaspora experience in the Middle East over the last hundred years and more from the late Ottoman to the postcolonial period. The precarious state of political affairs in the Middle East has continued to produce the movement of peoples under threat. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent political instability has seen the displacement and the departure of significant numbers of Iraqi Christians and Muslims. The outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 has seen yet another variation on the same theme where Syrian refugee communities have set up home across the border in Turkey and Jordan, or gone further afield to Egypt, Dubai, Armenia and beyond. While the recent and ongoing nature of these displacements has not yet allowed for the foundation of some of the classical features of a diaspora, these groups are in the process of settling themselves into a long-term, perhaps permanent, exile.

At the time of writing, the Middle East appears to be in an even more turbulent state than ever, with Gaza still under siege by Israel, Syria in a state of civil war, Iraq a failing state, and Egypt back full circle to military rule after an abortive revolution. Amidst these volatile situations and competing uncompromising forces, it is the minority ethnic and religious communities that are the most vulnerable, as example after example shows. In the north-west of Iraq, ancient Yazidi communities have been driven out of their towns, as Islamist militants ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) mount a genocidal campaign against them while Kurdish communities seek to defend themselves. Iraq’s ancient Christian communities are under similar attack, with wider fears for the future of Christians throughout the region now a common refrain.
As they have done before, these latest events will generate displaced communities, new diasporas, the reconstitution of societies, the reconfiguration of social structures and the creation of new narratives of dispersal and imaginings of homes and returns.

Notes


17. Tölölyan, ‘Rethinking Diaspora(s)’, p.28.


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