

How Does the Refugee Crisis Enter Language?

Rethinking the forms of social science in terms of linguistics and philology

Jordan Case Study

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We Love Reading

1. Introduction

Humanitarian policy generally - and social scientific research specifically - often engages with the direct and visibly urgent effects of crises. While invaluable in its own right, this type of engagement can either overshadow other types of engagement or elide the importance of thinking along the *longue duree* in comprehending the ways in which protracted crises may have significant indirect and invisible effects.

Indeed, such crises often produce social and political dynamics which go unnoticed if the traditional tools of policy are the primary lens through which research is conducted. In this case study, we will redress this issue by pursuing an interdisciplinary project in which the traditional methods and approaches of the social sciences are reconsidered from *within* the terms of two fertile fields: linguistics and philology.

To that end, we aim to bring the question of language and interpretation to bear upon the historical and contemporary problems facing refugees in the city of Amman. How does the refugee crisis enter language, and to what effect? In what ways do words form over time to cope with, displace, or re-orient the refugee? How does the linguistic and philological study of how identity categories are formed condition the possibilities for injury in the future, on the one hand, or illuminate the possibilities for liberation, on the other?

Amman was built by generations of refugees, each with a unique conception of itself and a political role to play in the city. Indeed, the modern history of Amman extends from Circassians and Armenians fleeing religious and ethnic persecution to Palestinians and Iraqis entering the city in successive waves; from a record number of Syrians in the past ten years to the smaller but active communities of Ethiopian and Sudanese immigrants. This is in addition to the displacements caused by the urbanization of the region's farmers and indigenous Bedouin tribes.

The discourse around refugees is thus rich and complex, and includes vernacular, legal, and social categories, state-sanctioned historical narratives and local oral histories, and social dynamics between the host and the guest which are unnamed but nevertheless serve an

important ontological purpose. As such, we will be interested in asking two, complementary questions: on the one hand, how are the linguistic and philological dimensions of the term enacted in its historical and contemporary usage among Palestinian and Syrian refugee communities? On the other hand, how does its varying usage birth significant social dynamics between the host country and the refugees?

The project at large will work with both academic researchers and local communities in Amman. These include anthropologists dwelling upon notions of guesthood in Jabal Alnathief, philologists studying the historical and linguistic formation of the term, and critical theorists working on the intersection of postcolonial studies and sociology to develop new approaches to the refugee crisis. The local communities comprise the historically consolidated Palestinian refugees in a camp on the outskirts of Amman and a recently formed Syrian group in eastern Amman.

Methodologically, we will pursue primary fieldwork, conducting interviews with members of the communities; analyze a plethora of related archival resources and interviews already compiled by our affiliated researchers; and undertake historical and philological work. The result of the study will include notes towards a larger research program at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences in the context of refugees, and a preliminary report on how this type of research can be incorporated into or indeed transform humanitarian policy.

2. *'Refugee': A History of the Term*

The case study presented here will focus on the history of a specific term - 'refugee' or لاجئ - with a view to the project's larger focus on Palestinians and Syrians in Amman. What might the term's history - including its root structure, formal differentiation from synonymous terms, metaphysical implications, and theological register - tell us about the term's usage? How might such a history illuminate the commonness of the term in international humanitarian work, as well as resistance to it by local non-state actors? In what ways can a historical and philological study of such a sensitive term inform our social scientific approach to crisis?

In Arabic morphology, لاجئ is derived from the root ل ج ء, which means 'to seek asylum.' It implies the voluntary act of seeking from a position of want. The term, importantly, maintains this voluntary implication even as we use it in modern times with a view to the futility of the refugee experience, or the illusory agency at the heart of the Syrian crisis. As such, the term's relationship to agency can, in the first instance, elide the coercive circumstances of the conditions which cause the refugee to seek asylum in the first place. Such elision might counter our intuitive application of the term in humanitarian crises.

It is worth juxtaposing, in this context, the term with synonyms which have had historical importance in the Arab-Islamic world. Specifically, there are three terms which also describe the status of those moving from one territory to another, regardless of the situation involved. The terms are 'immigrant' or مهاجر; 'enterer' or دخيل; and 'expatriate' or وافد. Immigrant, we should note, has a particularly rich association with the beginnings of the Islamic tradition. The first

experience of spatial moment inscribed as such is found in the Quran, when the Prophet Muhammad migrated with his companions from Mecca to Medina. The act of migration, at the time, was familiar and not exclusively determined by unfavorable circumstances or escaping persecution.

Immigrant, in this regard, may be juxtaposed with the enterer. Immigrant, to begin, simply means the movement from an initial place; the term does not illuminate the cause for the movement or the nature of the chosen destination. Where the place left behind is concrete, immigrant denotes an open and amorphous future. The enterer, on the other hand, has an opposite implication. The verb 'to enter' does not take place, as a proposition, without the concreteness of the host community, a determined future.¹ While the immigrant implies a metaphysical experience without a determined future, the enterer moves towards the physical frame of concreteness, be it physical or material.

With this overview, the immigrant is allowed an individual confidence in the act of movement, which is metaphysical. The enterer moves with a similar confidence, only that it is materially linked to the host, whether a person, a tribe, a nation, which will receive them. In this context, refugee shares with enterer the expectation for a physical place in the future. The difference, however, is that the enterer has achieved confidence that such a future will take place; they are sure of the embrace to be received from the new place. The refugee, on the other hand, is only confident of the request for protection, not the outcome of the request.

The refugee, then, remains dependent on a realm external to the term itself. The agency implied by the act of seeking, which we mentioned above, is contradicted by the contingency of external approval. With the refugee, there is a sense of apprehension towards the application being received. There is no certainty in the past or in the future. The temporal reduction of the refugee only guarantees the present moment, the act of seeking asylum itself. This lack of content is what makes the refugee 'no one' or 'nothing' in the context of history, as has been written philosophically and sociologically by European thinkers in the aftermath of World War II.²

The lack of content is rendered more stark when we consider refugee in relationship to expatriate, a term which has recently gained traction as an economic category for movement. The word expatriate is intimately connected with the group left behind or the group to be represented in the host community. That's what makes the expatriate not an economic refugee, for instance, as the expatriate has already been granted a specific utilitarian request. Expatriate also implies a collective or communal origin, because of its linguistic association, in Arabic, with the representation of a plurality. The term, unlike refugee, excludes the state of compulsion and implies collective origin.

¹ The difference, then, between the immigrant and the enterer rests upon their respective relationships to faith and trust. The immigrant has faith in what the future holds while the enterer has trust in the assurance of the concrete place entered, with its human and institutional support.

² See Giorgio Agamben.

That the refugee does not imply collective origin resonates with the usage of the term by international organizations. The promise of what is to be provided by those organizations, for instance, is conditioned upon the emptying of collective content in the term itself. If the purpose of humanitarian organizations, then, is to provide a sense of internal security to the displaced person, then does the usage of this term undermine the guarantee that security does take place? If safety is often thought of only in material terms - or according to practical and political plans - then what happens to the human content of the displaced person?

Indeed, as Arabic owes its cultural inheritance, in addition to theological worldview, to the Quran, it may be useful to return, in this instance, to Islam's holy book. The tripartite root of immigrant, as it maintains the definition of 'seeking asylum,' is found in three separate surahs. In each case, the root manifests as 'مَلَجًا' and the term is used exclusively to frame God's capacity to approve the request for asylum. In other words, in the Quran, the status of the refugee is only conjured as a state of weakness which God alone is capable of resolving. In light of this history, what do we make of the incessant and naturalized usage of the term by nearly every sector of humanitarianism today? What is this usage felt by displaced people?

3. *Ethnographic Reflections*

"I am not a refugee," says a woman from Palestine who has been living in Jordan for the past thirty years. "This is a sour and sad word. From my heart, when you ask me if I am a refugee, then I cannot honestly say that I am one. I am only a refugee if I am seeking asylum from the word itself!" Participants in the interviews we conducted throughout the past month have returned time and time again to the strangeness of the term, especially when it was singled out in our questions.

A few participants did point the effectiveness of the term in rallying the international community, but maintained ambivalence as to whether it represented them. When we posed the question of what other terms would work, many took issue with why a term was necessary. A participant wondered what is achieved when the complexity of a difficult life is reduced to a single desensitized word.

As preliminary ethnographic research in Amman has reflected dissatisfaction with the ways in which the term is used, how can we take seriously the role of language. The first step, in our project, is to take seriously the linguistic form which purports to represent the experience of crisis. In the instance where we expect language to represent the individual, the term 'refugee' becomes restrictive rather than equipped to embrace. The term can reify the condition rather than direct the complex phenomenon of protracted crisis in a liberatory direction.

Indeed, administering displaced people as *refugees* sometimes leads to new issues. Camps funded by the United Arab Emirates in Jordan, for instance, have followed an exclusively materialist understanding of the refugee; as a result, they have seen gross cases of depression and suicide despite the plethora of material allowance. Those who integrate into host communities, on the other hand, as guests of friends or relatives, suffer fewer existential crisis.

Thinking about language, and its effects on infrastructure and development, is an important pathway to bridging the demonstrable gap among between the spiritual, on the one hand, and the material, on the other.

As the primary goal of host countries is to offer displaced people a place to be in a material sense, with all the physicality implied by home, the relationship to language is rarely taken into account. Programs to assimilate refugees in Europe and other northern contexts equate the phenomenon of assimilation with the amendment of the spiritual exclusion of the displaced person. The political structure of the term is conditioned today on the geographic traversal of territorial boundaries. Its usage thus reifies those boundaries and the political authorities' right to grant refuge.

From this political structure we can understand the hostility to refugees either at a political level or at a populist level, wherein the 'refugee' is seen simply as the person who takes material resources or whose eventual acclimatization would rob the country of its national character. This is particularly the case in a media landscape where material resources are connected to the plight of refugees. The resource for dismantling colonial and capitalist structures which have produced human suffering, such as the refugee crisis, must then reflect on the language use, especially as that language plays a role in maintaining the cause of suffering.

4. Conclusion

Thinking about language in confronting the effects of protracted crisis requires patience. It demands that we suspend the impulse to gauge the normative practice of policy or social science with the faith that a careful consideration of language would invariably benefit our long-term thinking about the fate of displaced people. We thus propose to consider how language affects not only the terms deployed by academics in the humanities and social sciences, but also the concrete and spiritual resources extended by the current stakeholders on the ground.

The next step in this project is to 1) deepen the intellectual history of the term in Arabic among the political, social, and cultural institutions of the region, as well as in English among humanitarian and international organizations; 2) to develop sustained and complex ethnographic accounts of the term's usage and reception among Syrian and Palestinian communities in Jordan; and 3) to think critically and creatively about how these histories and accounts might bear upon the future. What institutions can we develop? What practices of care? And how might agency return to those affected by crisis in their very conception of themselves?