COMMENTARY | REFUGEES

Researching Palestinian Refugees: Who Sets the Agenda?

By: Anaheed Al-Hardan · April, 2017

Overview

Only a handful of research articles on Palestinian refugees in Syria could be found until a few years ago. After the uprooting of a significant part of the community following the bombardment and siege of Yarmouk Camp at the end of 2012, research and publications proliferated. Completed and in-process dissertations, scholarly articles, and research projects on the community are now numerous, especially in English. This sudden flood of research on and interest in Palestinians from Syria has not been limited to academia, but has also taken root in journalism and the policy world.[1]

This transformation in research interest is due to a rising concern about the plight of these Palestinians, and to researchers having better access to the community in the refugee camps and cities of Syria's neighboring states, as well as in Europe. There are also underlying reasons that have driven the shift. These relate to structures of knowledge production in both material and epistemological, or theoretical, terms. These structures are material in that research is carried out on the ground and is part of a larger industry of global knowledge production. They are theoretical in that certain ideas drive this industry and its research methods.

The ways in which these two facets of structures of knowledge production drive research can be seen in studies that have already been carried out. For example,

camp-based Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were the primary choice for research when it came to Palestinian refugees before their current eclipse by those from Syria. Indeed, since the 1990s, a massive number of academic monographs and articles on Palestinians in Lebanon were accompanied by an almost complete absence of those on the community in neighboring Syria.

This can be explained by the fact that Syria was never as open or accessible to researchers as was Lebanon. Moreover, Palestinians in Syria constituted a relatively better-off community in terms of their integration, socioeconomic status, and overall living conditions, in contrast to those in Lebanon, who have been denied basic rights, such as the right to work and to own property. As a result, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, particularly those in the camps, provided and continue to provide a fertile ground for a politics of "researching down." Palestinians from Syria now join them in this status.

Researching down, rather than up or horizontally, is characteristic of the social sciences. Researchers usually justify this preference as a way to "give voice to the voiceless." Assuming that such communities are in need of spokespersons has its own set of problems. These claims also obscure the fact that accessing poor and deprived communities is easier than accessing, for example, assimilated Palestinians who are Lebanese citizens or middle class Palestinian professionals outside of Lebanon's camps. These research trends can skew knowledge in that after reading this literature, one could be left with the impression that no Palestinian refugee community exists outside of the camps.

This commentary examines the material and epistemological structures of knowledge production that make circumstances ripe for the exploitation of researched communities – in this case, Palestinian refugees. It also considers the type of theory of knowledge and university that makes this system possible. It concludes by examining the challenges that lie ahead for Palestinian communities on the receiving end of this research, as well as for researchers and allies. Its aim is

to initiate a conversation on how to confront these challenges – an urgent task given the lack of a coherent and representative Palestinian political anti-colonial liberation project, as well as institutions or structures that such a movement could potentially mobilize to confront the repercussions of exploitative research practices.

A Global Colonial Division of Academic Labor

The politics of researching down is premised on inherently unequal power relations, which can lead to "misery tourism." In this phenomenon, some visitors will travel to certain popular and accessible economically deprived sites for research and to write articles, and some will come in search of an adventure or just to look. A resident of Shatila Camp, a popular research destination in Beirut, described misery tourism to a researcher. He said that outsiders who visit the camp

> walk around for a while, take some pictures and, yes, some even cry about the desolation, but then they leave again and everything is as before. In his view, the camps have become like "zoos" and the refugees like "animals to stare at." Some come for research and to write articles, but, he asked, have all these writings ever changed anything about the situation, have they brought help or at least some money into the camps? As researchers come to visit over and over again, the inner wounds of people are constantly reopened.

Misery tourism is often made possible through promises of furthering the Palestinian cause or benefiting those researched. In reality, there is no such thing as charity in research when that research forms the basis of livelihoods and careers. This is not to say that some researchers are not motivated by political

solidarity. Nevertheless, claims of solidarity can be used to simply legitimate research. In addition, claiming proximity to those being researched can obscure the researcher's own proximity to or location in the centers of global power. Solidarity thus does not preclude researchers from engaging in problematic research and research practices. Unethical research practices can also arise due to the fact that researchers are responsible for their own adherence to their professional associations' code of conduct (if they belong to one).

Ultimately, misery tourism is predicated on acquiring snapshots of the private lives, hardship, and pain of economically deprived and politically disenfranchised people, fashioning them into a product for academic consumption, and selling them on the international market of ideas. The exchange value for the researcher is professional advancement in the Global North. The exchange value for the Palestinian research participant, the proletarian laborer in this scholarly multinationalism, is, for the most part, nothing.

For the handful of Palestinians for whom there is a return, the best case scenario is monetary remuneration or prestige gained from associating with foreign researchers – though this can present its own set of problems. These Palestinians essentially become "native informants." They serve as the researchers' translators, influence their research questions, and conduct, transcribe, and analyze their interviews; in short, they become more than just research assistants, and are perhaps the unacknowledged researcher herself. Their names may appear in the acknowledgement sections of books or articles, or they may not. Those who receive compensation are usually given a pittance when compared to the amounts set aside in research budgets for the same services in the wealthy countries of the Global North.

The politics of researching down and its offshoot, misery tourism, is part and parcel of a global colonial division of academic labor. Much like the global colonial division of labor more broadly, in which the price of both the commodity

and the labor to produce it is determined in the Global North, at inequitable rates, the institutional framework that creates the academic division originates in the contemporary metropoles of Europe and North America. These are the locations of the main funders, designers, and consumers of academic research, who deem certain topics to be in fashion and worthy of study. The raw material to be processed is in the formerly, or current, as is the case of Palestine, colonized world. The assembly line production is also often undertaken by the proletarian laborers, that is, the researchers, translators, and fixers from studied communities. The polishing of the research and its eventual ownership, marketing, and consumption to secure lucrative careers occurs in the Global North.

Producing Colonizing Knowledges

A theoretical apparatus – the epistemological facet of the structures of knowledge production – legitimates this global colonial division of academic labor, and is embedded in the "Westernized University." This is a particular type of university emerging from a colonial and historical experience rather than geography. The Westernized university's curriculum deems human knowledge to be the philosophy of a handful of dead white European men, writing in a handful of modern European languages over the last three or so centuries. This is the case regardless of whether the university is in Buenos Aires, London, Kampala, Beirut, or New Delhi. Europe remains the site of universal truth in the hegemonic version of what constitutes knowledge, glossing over the fact that the white imperial subject is speaking this truth while disavowing himself as a subject historically and politically constituted through five centuries of (ongoing) conquest, genocide, and slavery.

In contrast, the rest of the world is only capable of producing culture, which is to be processed through the universal histories and theories of Europe. This is why it is unthinkable to consider studying, for example, French or German societies without the knowledge of these societies' languages and serious consideration of

their thinkers as subjects of history and theory. Rudimentary Arabic, on the contrary, is for the most part considered acceptable for research on Palestinian refugees. Worse, Palestinian refugee communities are always objects of study, never the subjects of history and theory whose societies can be understood through their own corpus of knowledge.

Thus, the normative structures of knowledge production and the way they are deployed are deeply colonial, exclusionary, and racist. The objects of this knowledge cannot be given "voice" given these structural realities. The idea that research is inherently beneficial to Palestinian refugee communities is therefore an ideological position inculcated through a specific kind of academic training. Particularly given the Palestinians' settler-colonized and stateless reality, the research produced about them more generally is part of a global colonial structure of knowledge production. The material and the theoretical facets of the process of research production work together to create problematic conditions of on-the-ground research and subsequent knowledge claims on Palestinian lives that do not always serve liberatory purposes.

The Challenge: Decolonizing Research

There is much that Palestinians can learn from the experiences of indigenous communities that have been subjected to similar research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith demonstrates how research has been connected to the colonization and even extermination of indigenous peoples, and discusses the ways in which Maori communities in New Zealand have attempted to reclaim research by training researchers from their communities and ensuring a community-based vetting process. She argues that those conducting the research should ask such questions as: "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will results be disseminated?"

The challenge is to imagine how Palestinian communities can come to have a stake in the knowledge produced about them. We must first define the colonial terms of the problem and begin an earnest conversation around it, with an eye to possibilities for the decolonization of research. For researchers and others who visit Palestinian refugee communities and write as allies, the urgent task is to begin by unlearning colonizing epistemologies and the taken-for-granted modus operandi of conducting research in Palestinian communities.

This means seriously considering Palestinians as subjects of history capable of producing theory and knowledge about their own societies. Centralizing and acknowledging the unequal global relations of knowledge production will not make the problems disappear. Yet accounting for the ways in which unequal material structures of global knowledge production are diffracted through researchers' knowledge claims, and are central to their constructions of truths, which cannot be "reflected" away, can begin to mitigate knowledge produced under the force of unequal historical, political, and social realities.

Only time will tell how the previously under-researched Palestinians from Syria will relate to the numerous researchers who have descended upon them, as has long been the experience of their counterparts in Lebanon, and how this will affect their communities. What is certain is that until there are representative Palestinian institutions capable of establishing research bodies or representative Palestinian refugee community structures that can oversee the researchers and adventurers in their midst, Palestinian refugees, increasingly from Syria, will not be able to set the research agendas of the proliferating number of projects focused on them. In turn, they will continue to only serve as objects of study, unable to have a say in the research output that directly concerns them and their communities.

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1. To read this piece in French, please click here . Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.

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