

Review article

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The Ideal Refugees. Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2014 ISBN: 9780815633266

Spaces of Governmentality. Autonomous Migration and the Arab Uprisings

Martina Tazzioli

London, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. ISBN: 9781783481033

Refugee Politics in the Middle East and North Africa. Human Rights, Safety, and Identity

Akm Ahsan Ullah

Basingstoke and New York, Routledge, 2014. ISBN: 9781137356529

In the aftermath of the Jasmine revolution, one of the main concerns of European leaders in the summer of 2011 was to find collective solutions on 'managing' rapidly evolving migratory fluxes. Although migration and refugees are not a new phenomenon in the region, the Libyan and Syrian conflicts have further increased uncertainties for populations fleeing unemployment, conflict and poverty. Since March 2011, 9 Million people have fled Syria, going mostly to neighboring countries with 6.5 million in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. Migrants leaving mostly from Libya to reach Europe are also more likely to die in the Mediterranean Sea, which has become sadly an open-air cemetery. Solidarity amongst European Union (EU) countries has proven to be difficult, with difficulties to relocate and resettle people, while countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have to cope with huge numbers at times of economic, political and sometimes security difficulties. So far, research on migration and refugees in the Euro-Mediterranean area have been scarce, focusing either on Palestinian refugees or border management. Evolving migratory practices and geopolitics in the region however necessarily call for new ways to think about this common challenge for the European Union and MENA countries. The three books under study fill this gap by providing different, yet refreshing and complementary analyses of the current situation.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's book engages critically with the literature that sees Sahrawi refugees as 'ideal' due to their egalitarian social organization in camps, notably towards women, the lack of corruption and their 'secular' identity. The author explores the issues of representation of the 'ideal refugee' image and questions in particular why Sahrawi women refugees have been portrayed that way. Refugee camps and communities have thus been at the heart of a 'politics of survival' (p.3) for the Saharawi liberation movement. Against the widespread image that refugees are victims and vulnerable people, male-dominated leaders have portrayed Sahrawi refugee women as 'empowered and liberated women' (p. 7). Relying on discourse analysis, the author shows that this gendered approach to the 'politics of survival' has been driven by the physical and cultural survival of Saharawi refugees. The book is a very rich account of fieldwork conducted in various sites, from Saharawi camps to South Africa and with very diverse actors. Martina Tazzioli investigates the extent to which changing migratory patterns after the Arab uprisings have disrupted considerably the spatial and geopolitical stability of the Mediterranean, and more specifically the 'conditional and selected access to mobility

established by Euro-Mediterranean agreements' (p.xi). Contrary to the idea that Tunisians were fleeing poverty and unemployment she argues that their migratory practices were 'a way of enacting and continuing the revolutionary demands of freedom and democracy' (p.xi). This refreshing study therefore contradicts the widespread view according to which the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' is a failure from democratic transitions and instead that migration can be considered as a 'freedom practice' where migrants simply wanted to visit Europe and live in imagined spaces. Adopting the most accomplished theoretical framework, Tazzioli's militant research embarks innovatively in a process of counter-mapping used to identify cartographic practices that challenge governmental maps on migration. Drawing from Foucault, she argues that the Arab uprisings has opened the way for new spaces of governmentality. Indeed, since the nineties migration is seen an object of governmentality that ought to be managed by governments and international organizations also known as 'migration management'. Tazzioli's rich theoretical framework contends that 'spaces of governmentality' are 'spaces that, at some point, become contested sites of movements, politics, governmental interventions and struggles: spaces that often do not coincide with geopolitical border and that, rather, are the outcome of the emergence of a series of events, subjects and movements as a 'problem'- that is, as phenomena to govern' (xii). The third book written by Ahsan Ullah investigates forced human mobility in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. The book aims at testing a theoretical framework, which analyses refugees' rights, safety and identity (RSI) in the MENA region. The first chapter analyses the interconnection between these three concepts. Safety is seen as a fundamental prerequisite in the evolution of refugee's identity (p.8). Refugees fleeing uncertainties and danger are indeed in search of 'safer' places. If they do not find that security, it 'may trigger a certain cognitive disposition to resignation and alienation, stress and anxiety, mistrust and lack of confidence', especially amongst vulnerable groups such as children (p. 9). Further, refugee's human security is necessarily correlated by human rights (civil, political and socio-economic rights), which protect refugee's identity. Identity is particularly at stake in protracted refugee situations, especially when refugees stay several generations in a destination country. They may gain a new identity, forgetting about their country of origin identity but this can also lead to 'identity confusion' (p. 16). The RSI framework subsequently structures the book chapters and the case selection.

Three main themes tie these studies together: the influence of geopolitics, a Western-centric global refugee and migration regime and the rise of refugees and migrants' precariousness.

Firstly the three books analyse how **geopolitical uncertainties and socio-economic asymmetries**, often induced by globalization, impact upon refugees and migrants, furthering their vulnerabilities and precariousness. The study of Saharawi refugees as 'ideal-refugees' shows that the projection by the Polisario Front of their camps as 'democratic spaces', with an egalitarian social organization that empowers women is in fact at odds with the evolution of the camps impacted by remittances and social pensions coming from Spain and generating 'major socioeconomic differences among residents' (p. 124). Behind the smooth image of egalitarianism, practices are evolving. For instance, even though marriage is portrayed as a liberal practice, socio-economic changes in camps have led to consider money as a reason in partner choice. Chapter 2 of Ullah's book focuses, although less successfully, on geopolitical evolutions across three case studies: migration across the Egyptian-Israeli border prompted by economic differences and bad treatment of refugees in Egypt; the case of Israeli-Palestine dynamics and how Arab states have failed to deal with the status of Palestinian refugees; and finally how the Maghreb deals with refugees and migrants, even though the chapter only deals with Libya. Tazzioli's book similarly shows that migration is shaped by geopolitical contingencies, power and socio-economic asymmetries as well as by surveillance technologies. This then influences migration spaces and governmental mapping and tends to create

discriminations between insiders and outsiders; the elite who is granted mobility and those 'off the map'. EU visa policies and mobility partnerships concluded with Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia for the purpose of circular migration thus tend to create spaces of immobility.

Secondly, beyond the fact that geopolitics constrains migrants and refugees' choices and journeys, the three manuscripts converge towards the conclusion that the contemporary global refugee regime's main weakness resides in **its Western-centric nature and its political instrumentalization**. This is one of the central argument of Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's books which contends that the positive portrayal of Saharawi women refugees was used strategically by the Polisario Front to secure Western support for their cause. This book brings new knowledge to the understanding of the functioning of Saharawi refugee camps and the shortcomings of naïve Western solidarity networks, glad to support an idealized version of a liberal secular model in the Saharawi camps. The book shows however that this ideal-type has been ignoring shifting socio-economic and religious practices in the camps. The Spanish public opinion and NGOs have in particular been fond consumers of this positive narrative. They therefore promoted the image of 'secular, liberal and modern gender equality' (p. 45) and this in spite of widespread divergences amongst the refugees. In order to satisfy and ensure Western aid, Saharawi male-dominated leaders have also tended to portray Sahrawi refugee against 'Other Arab Muslim women' in the region. Again here the author evidences some paradoxes. Thus, as the Polisario Front maintained in official discourse that Saharawi women are not obliged to veil, have never veiled in the past, she shows that increasingly young Saharawi women tend to wear the veil or the *milhafa*, a traditional veil that follows Qur'anic requirements. The artificial alignment of Saharawi women refugees with their Spanish 'sisters' is further unpacked in Chapter 4. The same chapter demonstrates that against the official discourse claim that there are no mosques in the camps, this is however not the reality and in fact hides a diversity of religious practices in the camps. But the fear of loosing international aid and the recognition that the West associates negatively the Arab world and Islam pushed the Polisario Front to a differentiating logic. This strategy has in the end led to discrimination across families living in the camps as explained in Chapter 5. The women not fitting the 'ideal refugee' image were left aside, as well as young girls who did not necessarily benefited from the same support. Thus international solidarity networks have contributed to further accentuate this discrimination within Saharawi refugee camp populations. Beyond state's restrictive policies, international migration agencies have also their share of responsibility. Tazzioli explains that agencies like UNHCR have created 'moral geographies' performed by agencies like UNHCR, which distinguishes between those in needs of protection through lists of 'safe countries' and the others. For instance the adoption of Regional Protection Programmes by the EU, in cooperation with UNHCR, creates 'special' spaces with 'special zones and regional externalized spaces of protection which overlap with humanitarian zones' (p. 98). Similarly, Ullah studies in the fourth chapter of his book the emergence of a global 'new' humanitarian discourse, which aims at addressing, the root causes of conflict instead of their consequences and remaining neutral and independent. Coupled to a securitization of the refugee regime, Ullah argues that the 'humanitarian aid industry' is contributing to the alienation of refugees globally. Drawing from the Egyptian 'management' of refugees and the UNHCR urban refugees policy in the country, the author highlights, in one of his most accomplished Chapter (chapter 4), a series of policy challenges ranging from refugee agencies coordination, addressing community needs, integration, etc. that demonstrates the fault-lines of the new rights-based approach of humanitarianism that puts at risk refugee safety. Thus as Ullah notes the 'new humanitarian' discourse has led Western governments, non-state actors and international organization to increasingly tie reform to the global refugee crisis and to tend to mould the world 'so they resemble Western societies' (p.92)

Finally **the increasing precariousness of refugees and migrants** is analysed in detail. Ullah's theoretical framework on Rights, Security and Identity structures is at the heart of his account of the failure of refugee politics in the MENA region. Although the theoretical approach often gets lost in the flow of description and is not systematically visible, there are a few passages that are worth considering further. First, Ullah argues that refugees are most likely to experience 'identity crisis' in camps, not only because they are designated, in a humiliating way, by numbers, but mostly because there is a lack of social and psychological support which particularly affects the younger generation, such as Palestinian refugee children in Lebanese refugee camps under study in Chapter 3. Also, legal challenges to refugee protection are mounting and the fact that the Geneva Convention relies on a state-obligation based system, instead of a Human Rights-based approach, is a problem as illustrated by Chapter 5 with evidence from Malta and Egypt. The two countries have for instance restricted the application of the Convention, Malta treating any migrants arriving on its soil as 'illegal' migrant while Egypt has been conducting arbitrary detention of refugees and sent anti-riots groups to remove Sudanese demonstrating in front of the UNHCR office in Cairo. The reader will regret that most of the data in the book, especially for Malta is out-dated, going back to 2003 and 2008. The two final chapters discuss how the RSI situation has been aggravated by the Arab uprisings with major displacement, the phenomenon of mixed migration and the appearance of new camps at border region. In order to overcome the dependence of the refugee system on state responsibilities, Ullah suggests performing some interest-linkage with other policy areas. Unfortunately these policy options are underdeveloped and therefore take the risk of remaining wishful thinking without concrete policy steps suggested at global, regional and national levels. Going back to her counter-mapping approach, Tazzioli stresses that with the Arab uprisings, 'the cartographic order of the European space' (x), and more specifically, the spatial and political order of citizenship' (xii) has been disturbed. This has in turn led (European) governments to respond by 'fragmenting people's journey' forcing them to be stranded in places they do not want to be (i.e. Libya) and increasing the precariousness of their journeys. Chapter 5 deals with the difficult issue of disappearances at sea and how confronted with the silence of Tunisian authorities, families of victims self-organized to contest the absence of policies. Chapter 6 studies collective cartographic practices of EU situations, for instance via the iMap project created by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), European countries, third countries and agencies like Frontex, Europol, UNHCR and IOM. This cartographic practice structures the management of migration across various migratory routes, and fuels (although not clearly said in the text) the conceptualisation of migratory patterns and fluxes as part of risk analysis at EU's borders.

The three books also display some deficiencies. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh ought to be read as an ethnographic study and displays impressive fieldwork evidence. At times though this hinges upon the generalizations that could have been drawn from the specific case study of Saharawi refugee women. For instance, a discussion on the instrumentalization of refugees by states (or in this case a national liberation front), international organizations and Western states and non-state actors is lacking. Another caveat is that the author does not explain why this positive portrayal has not been more useful in the Polisario Front's objective to achieving self-determination. This is all the more relevant in a contemporary situation where the negotiations of the conflict reached a stalemate and that the Sahara is increasingly seen as an Arc of Instability where all kind of trafficking and terrorist activities are unfolding. The geopolitical context could have therefore been further analysed, especially in terms of outlook. Tazzioli's methodology is sometimes unclear, and even though Chapters 4 and 5 rely on fieldwork in Tunisia, more details on people interviewed, within the respect of confidentiality, and the sites where 'active migrant citizens' were met would have been useful. With a main focus on the Tunisian case, and given the Arab Winter that has characterised recent political dynamics in neighbouring countries, the reader wonders whether results would be replicable

to other countries. It would have been worth exploring the domestic specificities of the counter-mapping process, which would have required more fieldwork. Finally Ullah's framework would have been more effective if more rigorously applied, if data would have been more up to date and if more diverse cases would have been explored as it is difficult to hold that Palestinian camps, the situation of refugees in Egypt, Malta and a bit in Lebanon is representative of the overall MENA region.

Nonetheless, the three books constitute important contributions to the debate on migration and refugee protection in the Euro-Mediterranean area and plant the seeds for thinking outside the box. Tazzioli's very optimistically concludes that the objective should be to 'make space not border' (p. 183). While this seems slightly utopian in the current political situation, it will nonetheless stimulate readers to consider how Euro-Mediterranean cooperation amongst state and non-state actors should be strengthened. A central element of this approach should be driven by migrants and refugees needs and aspirations, which can be seen not only as a safety practice but also a freedom and democratic practice.

Sarah Wolff

Lecturer in Public Policy

School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary, University of London

United Kingdom

s.wolff@qmul.ac.uk