



Displacing Territory: Syrian and Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

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BOOK REVIEW

Karen Culcasi. *Displacing Territory: Syrian and Palestinian Refugees in Jordan*. University of Chicago Press, 2023, 200 pp. ISBN: 9780226827063 (paper); ISBN: 9780226827049 (cloth); ISBN: 9780226827056 (epub).

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Palestinians and Syrians displaced to Jordan remain profoundly connected to their homelands, experiencing deep, though indirect, suffering amid Israel's genocide in Gaza and political violence in Syria. Palestinian refugees have often stressed that their presence in Jordan is temporary, driven by the enduring hope of return (Adler, 2024). In **Displacing Territory**, Karen Culcasi critically explores how states construct territorial identities that differ from the forms of belonging created by displaced populations themselves. Using a combination of ethnographic fieldwork including interviews with refugees, analysis of legal documents and policies, and engagement with secondary historical literature, Culcasi examines how Palestinian and Syrian communities navigate, resist, and make sense of the territorial boundaries that dictate their life options under the refugee regime. This study integrates critical geography, post-colonial theory, and feminist approaches to intersectionality to examine how refugees in Global South settings, displaced for generations, not only experience territoriality but also actively construct their

own belonging that draws on pre-colonial historical ties and shared culture.

Chapter 1 introduces the methods Culcasi uses to engage with refugee experiences, including qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations conducted in refugee camps and urban spaces in Jordan. These methods allow Culcasi to capture both the personal and political dimensions of displacement. Chapters 2 and 3 expertly delve into the historical and conceptual background of territoriality in Jordan and problematize views of the "Middle East" as a producer of refugees by instead showing the ways in which states such as Jordan have hosted larger populations of refugees with significantly less brutality than within Europe. Chapters 4 and 5 explore how pre-colonial patterns of belonging and movement, which flowed more freely across the Ottoman Empire, continue to shape notions of shared homelands and identities among Arabs in contemporary Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Here, Culcasi introduces the concept of "hybrid territories" to describe how these historical connections blur the rigid

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territorial boundaries imposed by modern state systems. Chapters 6 and 7 explore Syrian and Palestinian hybrid territories that evoke and maintain their emotional connections to homelands through symbols, maps, and the layouts of refugee camps.

Culcasi's theorization of belonging offers a significant advancement in the study of displacement in Jordan by moving beyond state-centric frameworks to foreground the decentralized, pre-colonial cultural imaginations that shape refugee identities. While scholars such as [Scuzzarello and Moroşanu \(2023\)](#) explore how refugees craft "belonging from below," Culcasi extends this analysis to emphasize the importance of imagined belonging rooted in shared histories, cultural memory, and kinship ties that transcend colonially imposed borders. This is especially relevant in Jordan, where refugees constitute approximately 20% of the population ([UNHCR, 2024](#)). Culcasi's work addresses critical gaps in the literature, which has often neglected the historical and regional specificities of displacement in Jordan and challenges Eurocentric perspectives that dominate studies of forced migration. By centralizing how displaced communities actively construct belonging in contexts of confinement, Culcasi enriches our understanding of the interplay between refugees, territoriality, and belonging.

Culcasi's research concludes that refugees in Jordan construct belonging through a dual process that integrates shared cultural memory, pre-colonial territorial imaginaries, and kinship ties with more immediate, localized practices of community-building. For Palestinians, belonging is shaped by deeply rooted connections to a collective history of displacement and resistance, tied to the enduring memory of and claim to their homeland. This contrasts with Syrians, whose sense of belonging is often mediated through more recent displacement expe-


riences and shared cultural and linguistic ties within the region. Culcasi notes significant differences in how these groups navigate belonging, with Palestinians drawing on long-established networks and symbolic practices tied to their protracted exile, while Syrians negotiate more immediate forms of integration shaped by their relatively recent displacement. These findings underscore the importance of historical context and regional connections in understanding refugee belonging, particularly in a host state like Jordan, where shared histories and pre-colonial movements continue to inform identities and experiences.

While Culcasi's work makes a significant contribution to understanding the territorial dynamics of displacement in Jordan, two key points would have further enriched her analysis. First, the symbolic and territorial roles played by humanitarian actors, whose bureaucratic management of refugee lives is central to the dynamics of displacement, could have added depth to her analysis of symbols, non-state actors, and territorial control ([Fox, 2008](#)). While Culcasi notes the presence of over 200 international organization offices in Za'atari refugee camp, she depicts these actors as neutral supplements to the state rather than as powerful players shaping territorial dynamics. Second, despite Culcasi's emphasis on an intersectional approach, the lack of data disaggregation and attention to different aspects of identity limit the depths of her findings. Throughout the book, groups such as "Syrian refugees" and "Palestinian men" are treated as monolithic, without consideration of how intersecting factors such as gender, age, disability, or marital status shape distinct experiences of belonging. As demonstrated by [Nandi et al. \(2024\)](#) in their study on durable solutions in Jordan, an intersectional approach can reveal stark differences in how individuals

relate to their homeland. For example, older Syrian men often maintain a connection to Syria, shaped by pre-conflict memories and the desire to return, while younger men, having experienced Syria only during conflict as children, are less likely to harbour such aspirations. By overlooking this analysis, Culcasi misses an opportunity to further dehomogenize refugee experiences.

Culcasi's exploration of belonging deepens our understanding of both imagined historical homelands and Syrian and Palestinian experiences in protracted displacement. This book is essential reading for forced migration scholars working in the Jordanian context as well as practitioners seeking to grasp the multi-faceted nature of displacement, and what refugee communities do in the meantime as few solutions prevail. Her work beautifully illustrates the ways in which homelands endure in the hearts and minds of displaced Syrian and Palestinian communities across generations, persisting in ways that can never be erased.

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