

*Ali Nehme Hamdan*

RESEARCH NOTES: WAR, PLACE, AND THE  
TRANSNATIONAL



The current global turn in Middle East studies certainly does not want for material. For the last several years, historians have unearthed networks of interaction that provincialize nationalist myth-making. Meanwhile, politics everywhere are increasingly marked by forms of entanglement, mobility, and encounter that span great distances rather than confining themselves to dusty Cold War categories like “the Middle East.” Nowhere is this more undeniably so than with respect to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Whether one points to the intensity of support for the warring parties from the outside or to the ripple effects of mass displacement as they cause Europe’s current “migrant crisis,” the war over Syria is not necessarily a conflict *in* Syria. Rather, it is considered by many to be the worst humanitarian and political crisis of the twenty-first century.

Key to interpreting these new sorts of political encounters has been the concept of “the transnational” which, variously defined, suggests that phenomena that cross state borders differ qualitatively from those that do not. But do these new entanglements and encounters from afar merely constitute a new, albeit different, geography of politics for Syria or “the Middle East?” Or is there new room for agency opening up? New opportunities for domination? New conceptions of community? How, in other words, does this changing geography not simply reflect, but itself *alter* politics in the region?

Abuzz with these broad concerns I began work on my dissertation, “Exile, Place, and Politics: Syria’s Transnational Civil War,” seeking to use a geographic perspective to set conflict and displacement in dialogue with one another. Drawing on the conceptual tools of political geography in particular, I hoped to approach displacement and conflict not simply as connected temporally (one as a consequence of the other) but as spatially interconnected processes,

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breaking down what some geographers call “the false dichotomy between processes and zones of war and peace.”<sup>1</sup> To this end, I conducted preliminary visits to field sites along Syria’s borders that, although peripheral, were nevertheless deeply embedded in the transnational processes shaping Syria’s conflict. These visits clarified that many displaced Syrians have continued mobilizing against the Assad regime even from exile in Turkey and Jordan, but also that they face enormous structural obstacles that profoundly shape how they are able to “reach back” into Syria. The dissertation project thus aimed to sketch out how geographies of displacement give rise to and shape new forms of political mobilization that, in turn, shape the processes of conflict from which they arose.

Research on “the transnational” poses considerable challenges. Methodologically, I have confronted obstacles quite familiar to researchers investigating conflict, but also migration: that direct access to a conflict zone is often impossible; that displaced Syrians are spread across five different countries within the Middle East, to say nothing of the many thousands in Europe; that interlocutors often choose or are otherwise forced to relocate in unpredictable ways; and, crucially, that my topic of study is by its nature buried in layers of trauma. There are conceptual hurdles as well. For one, the category of the “Syrian refugee” masks considerable variation *within* countries hosting Syrians with regard to their everyday lives, in addition to *between* countries; likewise, it does not map onto a single, neat political subjectivity, since not all Syrians are pro-opposition, even if they express anti-regime sentiments. Moreover, the “opposition” (which itself does not quite merit status as a proper noun) is itself highly fragmented. No single government-in-exile or armed group encompasses the opposition sufficiently to offer a clear referent for delineating units of analysis, cases, or even method—all of the traditional elements of strong research design. Distilling patterns from the “messiness” of Syria’s fragmented transnational opposition thus calls for a different approach.

For this reason, I have sought analytical coherence in a perhaps unlikely place—in *place*. There are many ways geographers conceptualize place, but most converge on sensitizing us to how social contexts are “made through connection—connections between people, buildings, natural resources, places, environments, stories, even dreams. . . [and] are also made through the absence of connections.”<sup>2</sup> Part of a larger conceptual vocabulary, place, and its emphasis on connectivity and relation, pushes scholars to “locate sites where global,

national, and local processes are revealed in the social life of small groups.”<sup>3</sup>

In practice, this means not approaching field sites as a series of bounded, “taken-for-granted geographic units” that aid us in imposing uniformity and inferring universal patterns from social phenomena (i.e. by delineating cases), but instead interrogating the nature of relationships *across* space and, in so doing, politicizing the local by setting it against the wider relations in which it is positioned.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, choosing a field site does not mean embracing the epistemological wiring of the notion of “cases.” Conceptually, place offers a way around this bounded notion by helping us follow the mobilizing practices of the Syrian opposition as a single interconnected process unfolding across space, itself a topic which increasingly fascinates geographers.<sup>5</sup> Methodologically, this means taking seriously the Syrian opposition’s claim that it does in fact transcend the locales in which it is based, by investigating how practices of circulation are negotiated, sustained, represented—and contested—in specific locales. Rather than viewing spatial fragmentation as a problem for operationalizing research, the tool of multi-sited ethnography pushes us to include it as part of our investigation of Syria’s opposition in exile.<sup>6</sup>

The dissertation thus involved a considerable amount of fieldwork, divided more or less evenly between the two sites of Amman, Jordan (14 months total) and Gaziantep, Turkey (13 months). In this I was fortunate to receive support from the American Center for Oriental Research and the Sijal Institute for fieldwork in Amman. While in Gaziantep I was supported principally by an International Dissertation Research Fellowship (IDRF) from the Social Sciences Research Council. During fieldwork I collected semi-structured interviews, archival materials, and engaged in limited participant observation. The last method proved very difficult for studying an ongoing civil war: the private logistics contractors who dominated the “Syria response” in Gaziantep and Amman were reluctant to share trade secrets with researchers, and Syrians working for them understandably feared for their employment prospects. Moreover, while I was able to build relationships of trust with many Syrians in both cities, this did not always extend transitively to Syrians based “on the inside” who were, quite reasonably, suspicious towards outsiders who increasingly dominated the provision of support to Syria’s opposition movement in all fields of activity. The “data” for this dissertation thus emerged necessarily out of a humbling, ongoing

process of building and sustaining relationships with individuals, for whom my academic goals were hardly a first priority.

Nonetheless, many of the Syrians I met were quite candid about their experiences. Most interlocutors framed their activities in Gaziantep and Amman as a trade-off between unmediated (but unattainable) revolutionary (*thawri*) agency on the one hand, and an aspired-toward capacity “to help,” to sustain those living, governing, and to a certain extent, fighting in the opposition-held territories of Syria, on the other. Although many considered the trade-off worthwhile if it ultimately made a difference, others could not bear the growing role of Westerners in decision-making, the de-politicizing nature of aid work, or for the most cynical, the profit-driven *jaww al-munazzamat* (colloquially “NGO atmosphere”), that ultimately pushed many to leave with a bad taste in their mouth. Continuing the revolution from afar thus came with strings. Studying the transnational activities of Syria’s opposition actors thus involves tracing the many pressures and motivations that underpin this unsavory *jaww* and interpreting how this shapes political relationships among displaced Syrians in Gaziantep and Amman and those still residing “on the inside.”

Studying the transnational politics of the Syrian opposition thus is not so much about where one looks (at borders *per se*) as *how* one looks. Deciding to embrace, as it were, the transnational turn in research certainly poses formidable methodological challenges to researchers hoping to go into the field, but in important ways it is the conceptual underpinnings of such projects that can offer valuable opportunities for innovation. Future researchers would do well to explore alternative conceptual frameworks as they enter the archive or go into the field, and in this the language of place offers a valuable starting point. Thinking through the lens of place offers a way to reconceive both the nuts and bolts of research design, but more deeply, the new insights we might gain by thinking transnationally about conflict. Indeed, the activities of Syria’s fragmented opposition in Gaziantep and Amman have changed where Syrian politics “take place,” but, in doing so, they have created new opportunities for contestation and new conceptions of community, while encountering new obstacles to these very things. These struggles will not replace the Assad regime overnight, but they have certainly transformed how we see Syrian politics in the meantime.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Scott Kirsch and Colin Flint, eds., *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-war Geographies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Timur Hammond, "The Middle East without Space?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (May 2017): 320.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology," in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1–47; Jenna Burrell, "The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research," *Field Methods* 21, no. 2 (2009): 181–99; John Agnew, *Place and Politics in Modern Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Oslender, "Fleshing out the geographies of social movements: Colombia's Pacific coast black communities and the 'aquatic space,'" *Political Geography*, 23, no. 8 (November 2004): 957–85; Paul Routledge, "Acting in the network: ANT and the politics of generating associations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 2 (April 2008): 199–217.

<sup>6</sup> Ulf Hannerz, "Being there. . . and there. . . and there! Reflections on Multi-site Ethnography," *Ethnography* 4, no. 2 (2003): 201–16.