

ANTHONY GORMAN AND SOSSIE KASBARIAN, EDS.,
Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualising
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REVIEWED BY YAŞAR TOLGA CORA, Department of History,
Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, email: tolga.cora@boun.edu.tr



Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualising Community opens a dialogue between diaspora studies and Middle Eastern studies that contributes to the growing topic of diasporic and minority communities within the region. Editors Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian have brought together a volume of eleven chapters that, together, delineate the shape of struggle experienced by diasporic and minority communities in the distinct legal, social, economic, and postcolonial contexts of Middle Eastern host states. *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East* provides researchers a variety of opportunities to examine contested issues of identity, citizenship, inclusion/exclusion, and belonging in host societies. The book achieves its stated aim of showing the counterhistories these communities pose to prevailing state narratives (3) and reflects on some of the central concepts of diaspora studies by foregrounding these communities' experiences.

The editors divide the volume into four sections clustered around the issues of home, homeland, and their representation; citizenship rights; self-perceptions of diasporic and minority communities (both within host societies and as transnational groups); and—as an overarching theme—the meaning of “community” for diaspora communities, in the words of James Clifford, at once “rooted and routed in particular landscapes, regional and interregional networks.”¹ The first section of the book, “Post-Ottoman Reconfigurations,” offers a firm historical background of Turkey and Egypt in the nation-state period. In his examination of the Antiochian Greek (Rûm) communities, Haris Theodorelis-Rigas demonstrates the limits of the classic definition of diaspora communities as exiled groups. He employs Rogers Brubaker’s concept of “accidental

diasporas” to focus on the Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox community after the annexation of Antioch by Turkey. Their official recognition as a Greek Orthodox minority of their new nation-state, their migration to Istanbul, and their collision with the existing Orthodox community of that metropolis illuminate the ongoing nature of transformations within established minorities. In this case, transformation comprises the Arabization of the Greek community in the city, its Hellenization or Turkification in the long run, and its likely creolization in a productive synthesis of cultures.

Georgy Chochiev’s chapter on the Ossetians in Turkey draws a similar picture of opportunities yoked with challenges. Chochiev examines the evolution of Ossetian settlements in Anatolia: from closed rural communities with distinct North Caucasian cultural characteristics in the imperial era, to communities prone to assimilation during the urban migration of the republican period, and to the 1990s when the fall of the Soviet Union created opportunities for communities to establish links with their ancestral homeland. These changes created the need for the minority to choose an identity: Ossetian (supra-ethnic North Caucasian), civic Turkish, or Islamist.

In the same section, Ehud Toledano examines the creolization of imperial Ottoman and local Egyptian cultures through the biography of Muhammad Farid, a member of the imperial elite who turned Egyptian nationalist with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. By focusing on various incidents in Farid’s political career and social life, Toledano interrogates the relations between host, diaspora community, and homeland in this period of great political transformations, showing that hybridization of imperial and local-national cultures was the norm for some.

To wrap up the section, Gorman’s examination of the formation and dispersion of Italians in Egypt adds new dimensions to the understanding of the impact that the transformation from multiethnic entities to nation states has on diasporic groups. Gorman explores how the institutions (associations, a press, and websites) formed in the wake of the Italian-Egyptians’ post-1950 “return to diaspora” (140) created public memories of Egypt’s cosmopolitan past, but through a strictly mono-ethnic lens. This outcome highlights another dilemma posed by the re-diasporization of a diaspora group, and one which further calls into question the relations between host, home, and homeland.

The second section, “Exile, ‘Return,’ and Resistance,” delves into strategies of resistance used to sustain notions of return in the face

of denial. One such strategy, as examined by Zeynep Turan and Anny Bakalian, is “subversive tourism” by descendants of Armenian genocide survivors to their ancestral lands. Such journeys heal participants personally and collectively by transforming traumatic memories into commemoration, forming *communitas* among the participants, and reinforcing diaspora identity by the performance of ritual visits to significant sites. They also subvert “social and political taboos” (184) by simultaneously challenging Turkish official denial of the genocide, as well as anti-Turkish narratives prevalent in the diaspora, as the pilgrims connect with local people. Maria Holt’s chapter, on the other hand, focuses on a different kind of performance: Palestinian women’s role in the maintenance and transmission of both real and inherited memories which “give them a kind of power in the sense that they have not only survived but have come to embody the dream of return” (213). Women’s memories, with their less authoritative voice and focus on the mundane, may, Holt argues, be more effective in resisting exile, as they focus on the individual’s role in the events and on what has been lost, in contrast to the men’s narratives, which are subordinated to general political goals.

The penultimate section contains two contributions focused on the citizenship of minorities and exiled communities, and exclusionary practices in their host countries. Kasbarian examines the “inner exclusion” of the Armenian minority in Cyprus, showing that Cyprus’s integration into the European Union created opportunities for its Armenian citizens to gain a voice in the island’s national political space as minorities, but destabilized the community by challenging the power of the traditional elite. In her contribution, May Farah interrogates the concepts of home and homeland to demonstrate how Palestinian youth in Lebanon maintain a national culture and an attachment to a homeland in the face of legal exclusion from Lebanese society. Farah’s highlighting of refugee camps as a site of “recollecting and reconstructing stories of the past so as to maintain and encourage an emotional and psychological relationship to the land in the absence of any physical connection” (287) aims to question Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life” in the camps.²

The final section of the volume, “New Diasporas” in the Middle East, does not necessarily denote the examined communities’ temporal recentness; rather, it highlights the emergence of new spaces in relations between said communities and their homelands. Traditional political space is transcended, according to M.H. Ilias, in the translocal politics of Kerala migrants located in the Gulf. He argues that more

than two million migrants from Kerala in the Gulf, utilizing new spaces in their host lands, adjust to new conditions and form identities informed by the internet and Islamist movements, supplanting traditional power relationships, political orientations, and religious practices.

Elisa Pascucci's chapter on Iraqi migrant youth in Cairo focuses on their performances in everyday life, which result in their social exclusion and "strandedness, physical and social immobility" (344) within the networks of global education and labor. She frames her discussion around the concept of enforced "waiting," a diasporic space containing associated "identities, cultural and political subjectivities" (344). Finally, Jumana Bayeh highlights developments in the Lebanese exilic novel that allow researchers to rethink the relations between home and nostalgia, memory and desire, in diaspora studies by offering an alternative formulation.

Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualising Community avoids one of the main challenges faced by any edited volume: fitting the discrete chapters together. Despite varying degrees of theoretical and empirical depth, the chapters hang together well and can be read in dialogue with one another. Taken as a whole, the chapters do, however, raise a few questions. One of these is the use of identity, a static notion, as a central concept throughout the volume. A more fluid concept, such as the sense of belonging—touched upon in the introduction but not well developed in the chapters—might have been a better tool to explore the spatial and emotional transformations that the communities under discussion experience as a part of their diasporic and minority lives. Despite this minor reservation, *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East* makes an important scholarly contribution by speaking across fields: it establishes bridges between diaspora studies and Middle Eastern studies while simultaneously advancing them both.

NOTES

¹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 254.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).