

# THE PALESTINIANS IN EGYPT: IDENTITY, BASIC RIGHTS AND HOST STATE POLICIES

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*Egyptian policy towards the estimated 50,000–70,000 Palestinians residing on its territory has resulted in depriving them of basic rights. Practice belies the apparent commitment to help them preserve their Palestinian identity. Consistent denial of rights has eroded, not bolstered, Palestinian identity. Palestinians remain excluded from the international assistance regime in place elsewhere in the region. The welcome that Nasser gave to dispossessed Arab brethren has turned into suspicion of unwelcome foreigners. State policies, security surveillance, and intimidation by the media have forced Palestinians to hide or suppress their identity. The Palestinian community is seen as a threat to Egypt's stability despite the fact that they constitute a mere 0.1 per cent of the population. Thousands of vulnerable young Palestinians are "illegal" despite having been born in Egypt. Unable to leave with any confidence of being allowed to return, they live in constant fear of discovery. As the third or fourth post-nakba generation, they have minimal knowledge of Palestine or connection to traditional kin networks. State policies have left them in limbo, denying them both rights and identity.*

## 1. Introduction

There is often a conflation between citizenship and/or settling Palestinians (*tawtin*), and the provision of basic rights and protection when addressing the issue of Palestinians living in Arab host countries. It is frequently argued that improving Palestinian conditions and giving them basic rights would facilitate their full integration in the host society and thus weaken their Palestinian identity, leading them to forget Palestine. In other words, the politics of the host countries risk depriving Palestinians of their rights in order to preserve their Palestinian identity.

This fallacy of a supposed link between the provision of basic rights and the loss or weakening of Palestinian identity, is perfectly illustrated by the situation of Palestinians living in Egypt. Observations from fieldwork conducted for almost six months, in Cairo and other northern governorates in Egypt during

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2001–3, demonstrated that the major factors encouraging Palestinians to hide or even lose their sense of Palestinian identity, are the deprivation of basic rights and the uncertainties arising from their precarious legal status.<sup>1</sup> State policies have spawned a culture of fear in which Palestinians often tend to hide their identity. Thus, the purported objective of the host state – the preservation of identity – has been subverted, not attained.

Changes to the Egyptian Nationality Law enacted in 2004, suggest that there is a lack of logic behind ongoing moves aiming at withholding basic rights from Palestinians in Egypt. The revision to the law guarantees automatic Egyptian citizenship to all children born to Egyptian mothers (including those married to Palestinians). It gives citizenship rights to children born to mixed Palestinian–Egyptian couples after the law’s passage. Those born before 2004 continue to be holders of Egyptian travel documents and live in limbo in Egypt, often prevented from accessing rights and basic services. This state of affairs promises to develop into a major divide as years go by, cutting across families, with younger siblings having Egyptian citizenship and the privileges that go with it and older ones consigned to being “Palestinians”, and as such only holding temporary Egyptian travel documents that give them practically no rights to education, work, residency, or even re-entry to Egypt if they go abroad.

Egypt has always played a role in the forging of Palestinian representative structures, from the Government of All Palestine<sup>2</sup> to the formation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO/Fatah). As the first Arab State to sign a peace agreement with Israel (at Camp David in 1978), Egypt has consistently mediated between the conflicting parties, be it the Israelis and the Palestinians or the Palestinians themselves, as it has done during recent conflicts between Fatah and Hamas. The paradox between the very supportive role Egypt has played on the Arab and international stage and the restrictive and injudicious policies it has simultaneously pursued towards Palestinians living on its territory, raises many questions. Why is Egypt unable to accommodate the Palestinians when they represent such a miniscule proportion of the Egyptian population? Why has Egypt seemed impelled to ever more tightly constrain such a very small group with limited rights, restricting their activities and seriously limiting their mobility to and from Egypt?

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<sup>1</sup> This article reflects findings of the research project, “The livelihoods of Palestinian refugees in Egypt”, funded by the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa, Canada and hosted by the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program at the American University in Cairo in 2001–3. The author, the principal researcher, had five field assistants who worked with her in the field to conduct the interviews in the six governorates in central and northeastern Egypt. The findings of the field work, with thorough analysis, were recently published (O. El-Abed, *Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt Since 1948*, Beirut, Institute for Palestinian Studies/IDRC, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The Cairo-based shadow government established under the auspices of the Arab League in Gaza on 22 Sept. 1948 and sponsored by Egypt. GAP was led by Hajj Amin Husseini, during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. Its sovereign territory was Gaza, as the West Bank had been annexed to Jordan. Its sole function was to issue travel documents to Palestinians in Egypt and Gaza from 1949 to 1960 when Egypt replaced them with Egyptian travel documents.

The first part of this article examines the international, regional, and local mechanisms designed to address the Palestinian refugee issue. For political reasons, they have failed to ensure Palestinians their right of return, protect them, or compensate them for their losses. In Egypt, Palestinians continue to be denied the benefits of the assistance and protection provided for in international law. In a fluctuating political environment, Egyptian policies towards Palestinian representation (the PLO) are in flux and it is Palestinians living in Egypt who often pay the price.

The second part will analyse the policies designed to treat Palestinians in Egypt as Arab brethren (1954–78), an era when Egypt was accommodating the Palestinians and was supportive of their political representation. After the 1978 assassination of the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Yusif al-Siba'i, a new era started during which Palestinians were and are assigned the category of foreigners. It will trace the emergence of a culture of fear among the Palestinian community in Egypt, the rights which are available to them and how the deprivation of rights has forced many to assimilate in order to survive. Today Palestinians are scattered across the centre, north, and the northwest of Egypt, dwindling in numbers, often invisible due to their legal limbo. The Egyptian State pledged to safeguard the Palestinian identity, but in practice has managed to diffuse it and to stigmatize the Palestinian community.

## 2. Limits of aid and protection mechanisms

After a fact-finding mission to the area in September 1948, the United Nations Mediator in Palestine, Count Folke Bernadotte, presented a report to the UN General Assembly on the situation in Palestine and the situation of Palestinian refugees. He emphasized that the “right of the refugees to return to their homes” must be maintained and their return take place “at the earliest practical date.”<sup>3</sup> A Zionist terrorist assassinated Bernadotte soon after he submitted his report, but the UN took into account his recommendations and incorporated them in the well-known UN General Assembly resolution 194<sup>4</sup> that recognized the right of the refugees to return to their homes and to be compensated for losses or damages. It also instructed that Palestinian refugees be economically and socially rehabilitated, and that these tasks be coordinated by the United Nations. The resolution established the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) and gave it the broad mandate to achieve a final settlement of the outstanding issues between the parties, and the specific mandate to protect the Palestinian refugees, *inter alia* by facilitating their repatriation and ensuring payment of compensation.

The UNCCP was able to negotiate the return of a very limited number of refugees, no more than a few hundred, who were on the borders of Lebanon

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<sup>3</sup> Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator of Palestine, Part I, Section V.3 UN General Assembly Official Records: Third Session, Supplement no. 11 (A/648), 16 Sept. 1948.

<sup>4</sup> UNGA res. 194 (III) para.11, 11 Dec. 1948.

and Jordan. In 1950, it established a Refugee Office to determine the ownership, interest, and nature of each refugee property, and prepared an initial plan for the individual assessment of refugee properties relying on detailed information collected from refugees. Although the UNCCP failed to activate its protection mandate for Palestinians, it currently maintains the most comprehensive records in existence of Palestinian refugee properties. In 1952, the UNCCP reached the conclusion that it was unable to fulfil its mandate due to the lack of international political will to ensure the return of Palestinian refugees. The commission was not provided with the machinery or resources to carry out its mandate.

Palestinians in Egypt remain unprotected under international law and Arab League protocols, and are denied the protection offered to refugees elsewhere in the world. Palestinians in Egypt were excluded from the work of the UNCCP and subsequently excluded from the ongoing assistance and relief services provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which does not operate in Egypt. To make matters worse, Palestinians in Egypt were also excluded from the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Interpretations of UNCCP as a symbol of the unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict have varied. Terry Rempel from the Bethlehem-based Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights (BADIL) considered the dual mandate (the broad one to achieve settlement and the specific one to protect refugees by ensuring return and compensation) as a fatal impediment to UNCCP achieving its objectives.<sup>5</sup> The resolution in its Article III represented the right of return that was emphasized by Bernadotte's report. Yet the political realities and the non-supportive recommendations of committees and subcommittees did not help to move the discussion further.<sup>6</sup> Some UNCCP representatives from the United States, France, and Turkey (both close allies to the United States) were keen not to cross what Fischbach has called the "red lines." As repatriation was regarded as not feasible, the committee instead called for compensation for refugees.<sup>7</sup>

The UNCCP failed to achieve its protection mission and the 1951 Refugee Convention has also failed to protect Palestinians in Egypt who do not receive any assistance or protection from any UN body. Article 1D of the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to Palestinian refugees makes it clear that a case like that of Palestinians in Egypt applies perfectly well:

This Convention shall not apply to persons who are at present receiving from organs or agencies of the United Nations other than the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees protection or assistance.

<sup>5</sup> T. Rempel, *United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine*, Information and Discussion Brief No 5, Bethlehem, West Bank, Badil, 2000, 3.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the recommendations against return made by the UN Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East, established in 1949.

<sup>7</sup> M. Fischbach, "The United Nations and Palestinian refugee property compensation", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31(2), 2002, 36.

When such protection or assistance has ceased for any reason, without the position of such persons being definitively settled in accordance with the relevant resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, these persons shall *ipso facto* be entitled to the benefits of this Convention.<sup>8</sup>

According to the 1951 Convention's drafting history, however, as detailed in *Les Travaux Préparatoires*, "the shared intention of the Arab and Western states was to deny Palestinians access to the Convention-based regime so long as the United Nations continues to assist them in their own region."<sup>9</sup> The Arab States led by Egypt are on record as favouring the Palestinian refugee exclusion clause of the 1951 Convention and of the UNHCR statute. Takkenberg states that the main reason that emerged from an examination of the *Travaux Préparatoires* was their concern that if the Palestinians were included under the scope of the 1951 Convention, they "would become submerged [within other categories of refugees] and would be relegated to a position of minor importance", which could have a negative impact on the refugees' chances of repatriation. The Arab States, according to Akram, argued that the Palestinian refugee problem was to be resolved in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 194(III); that is, on the basis of a special formula of repatriation and compensation, rather than the formula commonly accepted for refugees at the time, resettlement in a third country.<sup>10</sup> Arab Nations believed that funding relief efforts was the responsibility of the Western States that had supported partition and the creation of Israel. The Arab States, "were concerned that assistance or protection be extended to the Palestinian refugees irrespective of whether [UN] relief would continue to be provided."<sup>11</sup> They made it clear that the "exclusion" provision was to be only temporary.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the PLO opposed for many years the provision that would grant individual Palestinian refugees the status bestowed by the 1951 Convention because this was considered prejudicial to the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Art. 1D of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. See further in S. Akram, "Reinterpreting Palestinian Refugee Rights under International Law and a Framework for Durable Solutions", in N. Aruri (ed.), *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return*, London, Pluto Press, 2001, 167.

<sup>9</sup> J. Hathaway in L. Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, 90.

<sup>10</sup> S. Akram, "Reinterpreting Palestinian Refugee Rights under International Law and a Framework for Durable Solutions", in N. Aruri (ed.), *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return*, London, Pluto Press, 2001, 173.

<sup>11</sup> Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, *op. cit.* 66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

### 2.1. Accommodating Palestinians in Egypt

Current estimates of the size of the Palestinian population in Egypt range from 50,000 to 70,000.<sup>14</sup> They are dispersed in most of the central and north-eastern governorates, living in major cities and in some rural towns. They do not live in camps and there are no special assistance bodies or organizations that serve them. The Palestinians arrived in Egypt after 1948 in several waves. Some were forced out by war and Israeli military occupations in 1948, 1956, and 1967. Others were motivated to go to Egypt for socioeconomic reasons, as well as prospects of tertiary education and/or employment. Palestinians tended to group in one place based on their village of origin, their profession, or previously established social networks in Egypt.

We are originally from Youbna (in the sub-district of Ramleh). When the 1948 War started, Youbna inhabitants, including my own family, fled to Ashdod. We had to leave all of our belongings, as well as abandoning our wheat fields. We later arrived in Majdal (now Ashkelon) and then Khan Younis. As the fighting approached, we moved to another area. We bought camels and left Khan Younis for Faqous (in Sharqieh governorate), where my cousins were living. When crossing Sinai, people either walked or travelled on camels to Faqous and lived in tents. We are one big family.<sup>15</sup>

The first wave of refugees arrived during 1948 from cities, towns, and villages close to Gaza, such as Youbna, Ramleh, and Majdal. They joined those who had arrived earlier, as individuals connecting with their social and professional networks, from northern Palestinian locations, such as Jaffa, and established business networks in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Egypt did not welcome the establishment of camps after the *Nakba*<sup>17</sup> in 1948, except for two temporary camps for a few thousand people in northwest Sinai (Azarita and Qantara Sharq). They were dismantled after a year and their Palestinian residents were either sent to Maghazi camp in the Gaza strip or were permitted to remain if they could produce a guarantor in Egypt. A camp established in Abbasieh, Cairo was dismantled in the 1980s and its inhabitants moved to other urban districts in Cairo, principally Ain Shams and Madinet El Salam. The overall number of Palestinians in Egypt after the 1948 war did not exceed 13,000 people.

The Higher Committee for Palestinian Immigrants was set up by the Egyptian State to deal with this modest flow of Palestinians and to take charge of those in need of economic assistance. Palestinians had to prove their

<sup>14</sup> According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) in 2005 there were 62,000 Palestinians in Egypt [<http://www.pcbs.gov.ps> (last visited 22 Feb. 2009)]. According to the Palestinian ambassador to Egypt in 2000 there were 53,000 Palestinians living in Egypt. In the same year, the Egyptian government reported there were 70,000 Palestinians. The 2002 report of the US Committee for Refugees (USRC) stated that there were 50,000 Palestinians in Egypt at the end of 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Field interview, Faqous/Sharqiyah Governorate, 14 July 2002.

<sup>16</sup> The relationship between Palestinians and Egyptians dates back to the 19th century where people used to commute between Northern Palestine and Egypt for business and educational purposes.

<sup>17</sup> *Nakba* or the Catastrophe refers to the ethnic exodus of the Palestinians in 1948.

status as refugees, defined by the Higher Committee as persons who sought refuge in the country from 1948 to 1950.<sup>18</sup> They did this by showing the residency cards issued by the Egyptian Department of Passports and Nationality that officially recorded refugee status.

UNRWA, established in December 1949, had an operational mandate in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza. Its operation did not, however, include Egypt. The same was true of international NGOs that also chose not to work in Egypt, except sporadically. Our research only identified one single family, in Faqous (Sharqiyyah Governorate), who mentioned receiving modest assistance from a foreign NGO, the Quakers, which was working in Gaza and providing limited assistance to those Palestinians in rural areas in Egypt.<sup>19</sup> The fact that both the Royal family of Egypt in 1948 represented by King Farouq and later the Free officers represented by Mohammed Naguib did not welcome the creation of camps, excluded Palestinians in Egypt from being part of the international relief and assistance.

The second flow of Palestinians arrived after Gamal Abdul Nasser came to power in 1954 and opened Egypt's borders to Palestinians living in Gaza (refugees registered with UNRWA and non-refugees) as a result of the dire economic situation in Gaza. They were offered work in the public sector and places at Egyptian universities. When the 1967 war broke out, most of this group was prevented from returning to their homes in Gaza.

The 1967 war brought two additional groups to Egypt. One group included persons expelled by the Israelis as they occupied Gaza and who were taken to the Egyptian border or expelled via Jordan.

I came to Egypt from Gaza via Jordan. When leaving Palestine, Al-Yahoud [the Jews, i.e. the Israeli soldiers] made us sign/fingerprint a blank white paper to let us pass. I had to sign. All I wanted was to run away with my children to a safe place.<sup>20</sup>

The second group included significant numbers of Palestinians who had served in Gaza, either as members of the Palestine Liberation Army/Ain Jalut Brigade or as part of the Egyptian irregular forces led by Mustafa Hafez.<sup>21</sup> Many of them

<sup>18</sup> M. Dajani, *The Institutionalisation of Palestinian Identity in Egypt*, Cairo Papers in Social Science, Cairo, American University in Cairo, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> The Quakers, in coordination with the Egyptian Government, had set up camps and provided other forms of relief until mid-1950, when UNRWA took over. J. Peteet, "The AFSC Refugee Archives on Palestine, 1948–1950", in S. Tamari and E. Zureik (eds.), *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis*, Jerusalem: Institute for Jerusalem Studies and Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Field interview, Bilbays/Sharqiyyah Governorate, 11 July 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Mustafa Hafez, Chief of Egyptian military intelligence in Gaza, formed a commando unit whose nucleus was a group of Palestinians who had been utilized by the Egyptians to conduct unarmed reconnaissance missions inside Israel since 1949. Y. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949–1993*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, 63. Following the Feb. 1955 raid, Hafez was authorized by the Egyptian high command to transform his *fedayeen* (who were paid out of the Egyptian administration in Gaza) into a formal military unit called the 141 Battalion. These special forces were commonly known as the Mustafa Hafiz Brigades.

were seized by the Israelis and taken to the Egyptian border. Some informants told us that Israeli soldiers had threatened to kill them if they were not permitted to enter Egypt. The International Committee of the Red Cross helped many Palestinians cross the Suez Canal. Egypt, which had ruled Gaza since 1949, took responsibility for sheltering Palestinians who had been associated with its administration. It accommodated almost 4,000 people from the Palestinian Liberation Army in areas such as Mudiriet Al-Tahrir, a rural area in northern Egypt, where they were expected to work in the agricultural sector. Three military camps were created to shelter families: Omar Bin Al-Khattab, Othman Bin Affan, and Ain Jalout. Palestinians working for the Office of the Administrative Governor of Gaza were given new jobs in Egypt. A number of men from Mustafa Hafez's forces and their families were sheltered in Wailey, Ain Shams, and Dar Essalam in Cairo. In 1969, the total number of Palestinians in Egypt was less than 33,000.<sup>22</sup>

The Egyptian Government, in assisting the Palestinians, gave privileges to those associated with the PLO. In several Governorates, the PLO was able to run clinics which continued to function until the 1990s when their budgets were cut and they were closed; only a single PLO health facility remained in Egypt, a Palestinian Red Crescent hospital that caters to PLO officials and retirees once employed by the Egyptian administration in Gaza. The PLO was also given considerable responsibility for allocating university scholarships to Palestinians, a privilege which, according to most of our informants, benefited PLO associates and their children.

Two unions, the Palestinian Labour Union and the Women's Union (both officially affiliated to the PLO), were approved by the Egyptian State to address the needs of the Palestinians. In principle, the Labour Union continues to be the administrative body responsible for assisting Palestinians with getting work permits. The Women's Union, a cultural and social union, is limited to working in Cairo. The Palestinian Charitable Association, established in 1983 and funded by the Palestinian Businessmen's Council, does not limit its services to the PLO community, unlike other PLO-affiliated organizations. Its activities, which include subsidizing education and health services and providing job opportunities for Palestinians and advice to employers, thrived in the early 1990s, but its resources are now limited. It currently serves several hundred Palestinian families who live below the poverty line. Many of those assisted by the association are women abandoned by their husbands when the latter left to join the Palestinian Authority in Gaza in the mid-1990s.

## *2.2. Political support for Palestinians*

Reacting to the dispossession of the Palestinians after the *Nakba*, most members of the Arab League pledged to provide assistance and political protection for the

<sup>22</sup> L. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for a State*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.



Palestinians living in their territories. In Article 1 of Resolution 462 of 23 September 1952, the Arab League's Political Committee advised Arab Governments to defer efforts to settle Palestinian refugees and called on the UN to implement resolutions on the return of Palestinian refugees and compensation for damages and property losses. More importantly, Article 2, while recommending that Arab host countries endeavour to improve the refugees' living conditions and coordinate with UNRWA to create work, reaffirmed at the same time, that these projects should not aim at settling Palestinians permanently and should preserve their right to return and compensation.<sup>23</sup> In Article 3, the Committee required Arab Governments to coordinate efforts to facilitate the travel of Palestinians and to cooperate in accommodating their temporary stay in host countries. In 1965, the Arab League, reiterating the same pledges and safeguarding Palestinian identity, adopted the Casablanca Protocol on the Treatment of Palestinians. Not all Arab host states abided by these agreements, however, and the conditions of access to basic rights by the Palestinians varied greatly. President Nasser's commitment to treat Palestinians on a par with Egyptians – as Arab brethren rather than refugees and offering them access to all services provided by the state – was not copied by many Arab host states.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned above, Egypt has always played a role in the forging of Palestinian representative structures, from the Government of All Palestine<sup>25</sup> to the formation of the PLO/Fatah. Egyptian support for the Palestinians and the PLO derived from the Nasserite ideology calling for Arabism and "Palestinianism".<sup>26</sup> In the early 1960s, Nasser emphasized the need for a separate Palestinian political entity, at a time when the Palestinians mostly got attention due to acts of military resistance. At the January 1964 Arab Summit in Cairo, Ahmad Shuqayri, the Palestinian delegate to the Arab League, was asked to initiate discussions with the aim of establishing a representative political entity. Nasser encouraged him to bring military elements into the new organization, which he persuaded the League to approve. The purpose for Nasser's sponsorship of the PLO was in large part to counter the growth of and to strengthen the new organization's appeal by drawing in Palestinian groups advocating armed struggle.<sup>27</sup> Even before the creation of the PLO, Palestinian student and workers' organizations of the diaspora had been founded in Egypt, opening space that was later broadened with the creation of the PLO in Kuwait.

<sup>23</sup> Although Muhammad Naguib, Egypt's first President (1952–54) was clear about rejecting a role for UNRWA providing services to Palestinians in Egypt, he did hold talks with UNRWA concerning Gaza, which under the terms of the 1949 Rhodes Agreement between Israel and Egypt was placed under Egyptian Administrative and Military rule.

<sup>24</sup> Syria continues to ensure Palestinians their basic rights in education, employment in the public sector and even in military service within the special Palestinian branch. Jordan in 1949 annexed the West Bank of Palestine and entitled Palestinians in the West Bank and the East Bank to Jordanian nationality.

<sup>25</sup> The Government established under the auspices of the Arab League in Gaza on 22 Sept. 1948, during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, *op. cit.* fn2.

<sup>26</sup> In the words of Maha Dajani, from that time forward "Nasserism and Palestinianism became two sides of the same coin." Dajani, 1986, 19.

<sup>27</sup> El-Abed 2009, *Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948*, *op. cit.* 133–4.

The activist Palestinian Women's league, which was later instrumental in establishing the PLO-affiliated Women's Union, was founded in Cairo.

The relationship deteriorated as the PLO criticized Nasser for his acceptance of the second Rogers Plan in August 1970.<sup>28</sup> PLO offices and radio stations in Cairo were closed. Notwithstanding the tense political relations, before his death in September 1970, Nasser tried to intervene between the PLO and Jordan's King Hussein during the bloody conflict (Black September), which opposed the Hashemite regime to Palestinian *fedayeen* groups.

Egypt co-sponsored the resolution at the 1974 Rabat Arab summit, which proclaimed the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Relations deteriorated after the 1975 Sinai II disengagement agreement, however, which basically signalled Egypt's withdrawal from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the subsequent Arab Summit in Tripoli where the PLO joined Syria, Algeria, and South Yemen in an anti-Egyptian coalition further aggravated tensions. The General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), the most active PLO body in Egypt, was closed in 1977 and has since not been allowed to reopen.

The February 1978 assassination of the Egyptian Minister of Culture, in Nicosia, Cyprus, by the renegade Palestinian Abu Nidal faction froze the relationship between the PLO and the Egyptian State.<sup>29</sup> At al-Siba'i's funeral, Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Riyad declared there would be "no more Palestine after today."<sup>30</sup> The formal break occurred when Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty on 17 March 1979. Relations between Egypt and the PLO were at a standstill.

Relations worsened further after the Israeli bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Tammuz in 1981. Two days after a meeting between Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in Sharm Al-Sheikh, Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, triggering even more popular support for the Palestinian cause. This was evident when Palestinian fighters who had been with Arafat (who headed for Tunisia) during the siege of Beirut, arrived in Egypt. In 1985, it was estimated there were over 100,000 Palestinians in the country.<sup>31</sup> Egypt has endeavoured to play an active role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and in more recent years, has sought to mediate between Fatah and Hamas.

The relationship between the PLO and the Egyptian Government has fluctuated but maintained the strong patriarchal flavour established by Nasser. Among those we interviewed, all talked about the effects on them every time

<sup>28</sup> A framework proposed by US Secretary of State William P. Rogers to contain further belligerence following the 1967 war.

<sup>29</sup> Though Abu Nidal had been expelled from Fatah and the PLO, with much fanfare, in the early 1970s and had become its bitter foe, the Egyptian government and media did not hesitate to stigmatize the Palestinians in general for the assassination. P. Seale, *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*, New York, Random House, 1992, 164.

<sup>30</sup> A.D. Miller, *The Arab States and the Palestine Question Between Ideology and Self-Interest*, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, 1986, 64.

<sup>31</sup> According to *Al-Ahram*, 16 July 1985, there were over 100,000 Palestinians in the country. Quoted in El-Abed, *Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948*, *op. cit.* 29.

wider political relations fluctuated. They noted that even after immediate political crises and relations are resolved, there is often little positive impact on their status and living conditions.

### 3. Acquisitions and denial of rights

The welcome given to Palestinians by Nasser in 1954 was formalized by an order he issued in 1962 to consider Palestinians as an exception to the general rules regarding foreigners and to permit them access to public sector services on a par with Egyptians. Law 66 and a subsequent decision in May 1963 to exempt them from having to obtain work permits from the Ministry of Labour marked the beginning of what Palestinians in Egypt continue to describe as a “golden era.”<sup>32</sup> Palestinians were permitted to reside in Egypt with no constraints. In 1960, the United Arab Republic Decision No. 28 regarding travel documents for Palestinians made clear that their possession of these documents would not in any sense jeopardize Palestinian identity. The decision was accompanied by instructions from the Interior Ministry to the Department of Immigration, Passports, and Nationality, emphasizing the need to preserve Palestinian nationality for Palestinian residents of the UAR because they would be returning to their original homeland after its liberation.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned earlier, 1978 marked a political turning point in Palestinian–Egyptian relations as the status of Palestinians was undermined and rights and privileges were taken away, never to be restored. Laws were changed and Palestinians were classified as “foreigners.” Now the only Palestinians who could attend public schools were children of PLO staff or those whose parents worked for the civil service. Private school fees were not always affordable especially when the breadwinner could not ensure a regular income. Accessing a job became impossible as the public sector was blocked for Palestinians. In the private sector, a law stipulated that foreigners could not exceed 10 per cent of the total workforce in any enterprise so as not to compete with the national labour force.<sup>34</sup> University education was no longer free and Palestinians were now required to pay in pounds sterling.<sup>35</sup> Today it is very difficult to determine the literacy and education levels for Palestinians in Egypt. It is clear, however, that only a small number attend school or university, which open avenues to a better and more stable future.

Because of our financial situation, I have never been to school. I wanted to go to school with friends, have a school bag and wear a uniform . . . just like

<sup>32</sup> A.Q. Yassin, “Palestinians in Egypt”, *Samed al-Iqtisadi*, Ramallah, West Bank, Shaml, 1996, 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Al-Ahram*, 20 Apr. 1960. Quoted in El-Abed, *Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948*, *op. cit.* 40.

<sup>34</sup> Law 25 of 1982, stipulated that foreigners could not exceed 10 per cent of the total workforce in any enterprise so as not to compete with the national labour force, *Official Gazette*, quoted in El-Abed, *Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt since 1948*, *op. cit.* 93.

<sup>35</sup> Often the way out for some interviewed students is to seek tertiary education at Al Azhar University which offers free education in Arabic and *sharia* (Islamic law).

my friends. I am so frustrated that it never worked out for me. I tried to look for work. I found a job cleaning in a dog yard. The dog once bit me and my mother asked me to quit since it could endanger my health. When I went with my sister to literacy classes, we could not pay the fees. All I do is sleep, wake up, wait for my friends to come back from school and then play in the streets and do some shopping for Mum. I could not find even a place to learn a skill. Instead, I became a servant bringing coffee and tea and cleaning.<sup>36</sup>

Mobility has become restricted. To ensure re-entry to Egypt, Palestinians holding a valid residency permit, and who are travelling, or residing abroad, must either return to Egypt every six months or provide the Egyptian authorities, in advance, with proof of employment or of current enrolment in an educational institution abroad. In such cases, a one-year return visa may be granted. No extension or renewal can be granted through Egyptian embassies abroad. Any delay beyond the stipulated deadline can result in denial of entry or deportation.

Residence permits for Palestinians have become contingent on providing a reason for remaining in Egypt. The grounds for continued residence are for education, work with a contract, marriage to an Egyptian, or a business partnership with an Egyptian. In all cases, an official document, proving that the applicant lives in Egypt for one of these approved reasons, must be provided. Those still employed or who have worked for the Egyptian Government, the Office of the Governor of Gaza, or the PLO have the least problems renewing residence permits as a letter from their workplace proving employment or retirement status facilitates renewal. Due to limitations imposed on formal employment, most Palestinians work in the informal sector, making it difficult to provide the requested work certificates. Palestinians often present a taxi driver's licence to the authorities to be able to renew their residence permits. These are not difficult to obtain. Alternatively, an agricultural labourer's licence, which can be obtained with a letter from the Labour Union, may also be used as proof of being an unskilled labourer and thus ensure a residency permit.

Residency permits for children are renewed automatically with those of their parents. Problems arise, however, when young people reach the age of 18 when they risk being deported or imprisoned if they are not still at school or again at the age of 21, if they have not found licensed work upon completion of their university education. For many Palestinians, the costs of remaining at school or university are prohibitive. The Egyptian State mostly turns a blind eye to the situation of the many Palestinian youth who are in violation of these regulations.

My son will soon turn 21. His father and I are thinking of getting him married soon. We have asked for the hand of my niece, an Egyptian, but her parents refused because my son is Palestinian. We have ensured the situation

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<sup>36</sup> Field interview, Faisal/Cairo, 15 June 2002.

of our two daughters who are both engaged to Egyptians. Eventually they will get Egyptian nationality.<sup>37</sup>

Amendments to the nationality law passed by the National Assembly in July 2004<sup>38</sup> gives Egyptian women equal rights as men in passing nationality on to their children. This is indicative of a step forward, and beneficial to Palestinians with Egyptian mothers and Palestinian fathers. Article 2 of the law states that an Egyptian national is a person born either to an Egyptian father or an Egyptian mother. Any person born after the passage of the law automatically becomes an Egyptian national. Regarding persons born to an Egyptian father or mother prior to the new law, Article 3 states that those who wish to obtain Egyptian nationality must apply to the Interior Minister. Citizenship will be granted either by decision of the minister or after a year the application is returned with a stamp indicating “no objection”. The law further stipulates a one-year grace period during which to apply. The decision is hence left to the Minister of Interior in respect of Palestinians born before 2004.<sup>39</sup> Given that an estimated one-third of all Egyptian women who are married to non-nationals are married to Palestinians, the passage of such a law promises to be the most significant development for Palestinians in Egypt since the Nasser era.<sup>40</sup>

Egypt has continuously maintained its patriarchal role towards Palestinian politics and has pledged to safeguard Palestinian identity. However, Egypt has simultaneously withheld rights from Palestinians and with the new decision related to the nationality law enabled the new generation of Palestinian-born children to Egyptian mothers to be naturalized. This decision is not without contradictory consequences.

### 3.1. Stigmatized community

I do not emphasize who I am. Some people look at me as a Palestinian, others as an Egyptian. I try not to say I am Palestinian. I like Egypt and I do not want to leave because I know it. We all feel like Egyptians.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Field interview, Abu Zaabal/Qalyubiyyah Governorate, 30 June 2002.

<sup>38</sup> *Law No. 154/2004 Amending Certain Provisions of Law No. 26/1975 Concerning Egyptian Nationality*, which granted Egyptian women the same rights as Egyptian men with regard to conferring nationality on their children. Thus, Art. 2 of the law states that an Egyptian national is a person born either to an Egyptian father or an Egyptian mother; in accordance with this law, any person born after the passage of the law automatically becomes an Egyptian national. As for persons born to an Egyptian father or mother *before* the activation of the new law, Art. 3 states that those who wish to obtain Egyptian nationality must apply to the Interior Minister; citizenship will be granted either by decision of the minister or one year after receipt from the ministry of the application stamped with the words “no objection.” The law further stipulates a one-year grace period during which to apply. R Leila, “The long-awaited, revised Egyptian Nationality Law has become a reality”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1–7 July 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Some interviewees confirmed that they applied to the Ministry of Interior in 2004, after the law was issued but have still to receive a response.

<sup>40</sup> L. Reem, “The Long-Awaited, Revised Egyptian Nationality Law Has Become a Reality”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1–7 July 2004.

<sup>41</sup> Field interview, Bilbays/Sharqiyyah Governorate, July 2002.

Palestinians are scattered widely across different governorates and interact socially, professionally, and culturally with Egyptians. They bond with them as Arabs, Muslims, neighbours, and most importantly, as Palestinians in their steadfastness, coming from the land of Palestine, with its holy places and its historic permanence. Over time, and due to intermarriage, it has become difficult to determine who is Palestinian and who is Egyptian on the basis of appearance and dialect. Several factors have played a role in moulding Palestinian identity in Egypt. The interviews did not reflect a clear pattern of identity. Some Palestinians have chosen to assimilate socially and build stronger ties with Egyptians than with Palestinians. Others, who have successfully integrated socially, revealed a strong sense of Palestinian identity and belonging.

I do not feel different from Egyptians. My brothers and I have lived here all our lives. We have definitely been affected by the Egyptian life. To a certain extent, we differ from our parents in the way we talk, the way we live. We differ even from the young people in Palestine. I went to live in Gaza and I felt a great difference. I do not know how, but the men there are strong and stubborn. They do not talk much and they do not make jokes. Their lives are very serious and hard, the exact opposite of here. They are very kind people and it may take me time to adapt but I like living in Palestine.<sup>42</sup>

The ways in which Palestinian identity was moulded among first-generation Palestinians in Egypt – those who have lived in Palestine and witnessed the dispossession and the dispersal of the Palestinian community – differ completely from those generations born and raised in Egypt. The role the first generation played in the fight and in the formation of a Palestinian national entity may have strengthened a sense of Palestinian identity. Nostalgia for the homeland, dreams of liberation, defeats in war, the oppression of Arab political systems, and disappointment with the Arab position made the first generation feel different from other Arab nationals. In many cases, they told us they felt more distinctly Palestinian.

For the second and subsequent generations, the situation is quite different. Born and raised in Egypt, they have been brought up in a community where Palestinians are not as easily identified as different. Some interviewees reported that their own family members had asked them not to emphasize the fact they were Palestinians, telling them to lower their voices when talking about Palestine or Palestinian relatives. Many reported that their closest ties and contacts were with Egyptians. Some second and third generation Palestinians said they did not feel like Palestinians, or different from Egyptians, except

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<sup>42</sup> Field interview, Shubra Al-Khaima/Qalyubiyah Governorate, 11 June 2002.

when visiting administrative offices such as *Mogamma* (government compound) or the office of the Governor of Gaza to renew residence permits or travel documents.

I do not consider myself Palestinian at all. I consider myself Egyptian. Only the papers make me Palestinian.<sup>43</sup>

The fieldwork reflected varying levels of Palestinian identification according to social, political, and economic factors. No clear pattern was found among interviewees, since one's identity is a personal choice. In some cases, Palestinians have tended to hide their identity and assimilate socially within Egyptian society. In other cases, Palestinians integrated while more strongly maintaining Palestinian cultural behaviour and the Palestinian dialect.

Second generation Palestinians in Egypt have had different cultural and educational exposure to Egypt. School children in Palestinian refugee camps in the five areas of UNRWA operations are taught about Palestine and their villages of origin because of the locality (being in the camp) and because of the teachers who come from the camp community and manage to strengthen the Palestinian identity informally. Their teachers come from the same background.<sup>44</sup> This is not the case in Egypt. A study of political education of Egyptian children through school textbooks noted that, in 1981, only 16 per cent of instruction was aimed at promoting the sense of belonging to the Arab nation, whereas 54 per cent was devoted to Pharaonic Egypt and 30 per cent to the Egyptian identity *per se*, above and beyond the stress placed on Egyptian citizenship considered independently of the Arab or Islamic nation".<sup>45</sup>

The Egyptian education system does not, understandably, focus on Palestine. In addition, private schools for Palestinians have not been permitted.<sup>46</sup> However, Palestinian identity and cultural folklore heritage are encouraged through the activities of the Women's Union and the Abbad Shams Choral of the Palestinian Red Crescent, where some Palestinian folklore dances are performed. Attendance and participation by Palestinians, however, usually only includes those affiliated with the Union or those living in Cairo.

<sup>43</sup> Field interview, Dar Essalam/Cairo, 2 June 2002.

<sup>44</sup> J. Hart, "UNRWA and children", in *UNRWA, A History within History*, Proceedings of the Centre d'Etudes de Recherches sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain (CERMOC) workshop, Amman, Jordan, 1998.

<sup>45</sup> K. Yehia, "The Image of the Palestinians in Egypt, 1982–1985", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 16(2), 1987.

<sup>46</sup> A school was created in El Arish, funded by the Businessmen's Association and the PA Ministry of Education. After completion, however, it was not permitted to serve either Palestinian or Egyptian students and is now used by local Bedouin to shelter sheep. (Interview with Ali Jowhar, head of the Palestinian Charitable Association and the Palestinian Businessmen's Association, 22 Oct. 2001).

The role of the immediate family in forming identity and in exposing younger generations to Palestinian culture is of prime importance.

My father is originally from Jaffa, but I don't know anything about his family. He has never been to Jaffa. All I know about Jaffa are stories my father heard from his father. I know no Palestinians here.<sup>47</sup>

Interviewees suggested that when the male household head was a PLO fighter or busy working in informal employment, they have had little time to spend with their families and rarely talk about memories of Palestine and family history. Traditional authoritarian relations between fathers and children prevent a participatory exchange of ideas, stories, reminiscences, and questions about the homeland. Regardless of whether they appreciate or understand Palestinian traditions, it is natural that Egyptian women married to Palestinians will pass on Egyptian culture to their children. In most families interviewed, second generation Palestinians expressed stronger ties with their Egyptian maternal family than with their Palestinian relations, because they know them better and see them more often.

It is clear that attachment to the family in Palestine often represents a search for identity and personal efforts to keep memories of the homeland alive. Communication with family at home is a way to reflect solidarity and to express concern. Events in the Occupied Territories are often discussed at family gatherings. Concern about the uncertain future of the state to be and about family members back in Palestine, all tie Palestinians to their homeland and to their social networks there.

My wife's family lives back in Gaza. We have been very worried about them during this [second] intifada. Since we don't have a telephone line, they sent us a mobile phone so we can send each other messages to know how things are doing . . . We are very close to our family in Palestine. My uncles tried to help me find work in Gaza when they found out that I was unable to find work here. They are both painters and cement masons. They sent me a visit permit and I worked with them in construction a few years back.<sup>48</sup>

Interviewees indicated that marriage to Palestinians is a means to strengthen ties to Palestine. Inter marriage helps maintain identity, since both the man and the woman share the same Palestinian values, culture, and rituals. Most importantly, marrying a Palestinian can be a means of long-term planning for the future and create a basis for return to Palestine. Out of a strong desire to

<sup>47</sup> Field interview, Hehya/Sharqiyyah Governorate, 15 July 2002. This interviewee was a third-generation Palestinian in Egypt whose grandfather from Jaffa arrived in Hehya with his Egyptian wife in 1948. He was involved in selling clothes between Jaffa and Egypt.

<sup>48</sup> Field interview, Shubra Al-Khaima/Qalyubiyyah Governorate, 11 June 2002. During the period of the fieldwork when we interviewed them it was clear that Palestinians in Egypt were the ones asking relatives in Palestine to send them financial assistance. Despite the occupation and the second *intifada*, Palestinians in Gaza were able to earn money from employment with the Palestinian Authority or in the informal economy. The shekel–Egyptian pound exchange rate benefitted those receiving funds in Egypt.



belong and to rediscover their roots, Palestinians value such marriages as an occasion to introduce their children to the village network. Palestinian villages and Egyptian villages share many of the same ceremonial practices. In Egypt, some Palestinians tend to build a replica of the culture they left behind.

My children's weddings were held the Palestinian way, with five to seven days of *taalile* [festivities for the bridegroom] before the wedding night. We usually do it in clubs and we bring Palestinian singers and dancers of *dabkeh* [traditional Palestinian dance].<sup>49</sup>

### 3.2. *Fear and mistrust*

Even those who feel strongly about their identity often find ways to conceal their "Palestinianism" for various reasons. The majority of Palestinians in Egypt speak the Egyptian dialect. This linguistic assimilation is a means of becoming accepted within the host community and avoiding scrutiny. The fact that in many cases Palestinians feel compelled to hide their identity in turn affects the construction of social networks and the sense of community among Palestinians. It has also distorted feelings of belonging to Palestine. The political fluctuations since 1978 in a security-oriented state have left its effects on the population, specifically in the way people tend to be suspicious of one another and limit social obligations or responsibilities towards the community. Many of those we interviewed spoke of how trust – both among Palestinians and between Palestinians and Egyptians – has been eroded by the repercussions of political events and media stereotyping.

Egypt has been living under emergency law intermittently since 1958 and continuously since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. The Emergency Law 162 of 1958 has given the authorities extensive powers to suspend basic liberties, including banning demonstrations and public meetings, arresting and detaining suspects without trial for prolonged periods, and the use of state security courts whose procedures fall far short of international standards. Using the Emergency Law, authorities are able to strictly regulate the activities of groups such as the Palestinians, use surveillance, and powers of mass arrest. There is thus an intense sense of suspicion. Interviewees said Palestinian "agents" are used to report to the Egyptian security forces on any actions or expressions of rejection of the *status quo*. In such an environment, Palestinians tend to be cautious when dealing with Egyptians as well as with other Palestinians.

It is better for me not to know [deal with] Palestinians because this can cause trouble. We are not living in our homeland and every move we make should be calculated. One should avoid people who may cause suspicion on the part of the government.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Field interview, Ain Shams/Cairo, 8 June 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Field interview, Port Said, 17 May 2002.

Fears are further ratcheted up by the persistence with which the Egyptian media stokes up negative public attitudes towards Palestinians. In the public mind, “Palestinian” conjures up an image of somebody fighting and dying for the liberation of their occupied lands. This sympathetic perception does not extend to Palestinians living in Egypt. There is much coverage of events in the Occupied Territory but at the same time – and particularly at times of regional political crisis such as after the Gulf War – stories are re-circulated about how Palestinians are allegedly apathetic, that they greedily sold their land to the Jews and have thus brought about their own misfortune, or that they are rich and successful businessmen who need no support.<sup>51</sup> This slander influences the Egyptian public and fuels resentment. Those we interviewed reported that they have been accused of selling their land to Zionists and of cowardice. To avoid such harassment, many thus hide their identity.

I know many people here and no one knows I am Palestinian. I do not want people to be sympathetic just because they know that I am Palestinian. Not many people can tell whether I am Palestinian or Egyptian. I look and speak like them. Once in a taxi that I was driving two Egyptian women who started talking about Palestinians and the second intifada. They argued that Palestinians deserved what is happening to them since they did this to themselves by selling their land. I had to speak up because I felt it is not right that people do not know what happened to us in Palestine.<sup>52</sup>

Egypt’s internal political circumstances have made Palestinians vulnerable and led to their depiction as a threat to stability, despite the fact that they constitute only 0.1 per cent of the population. A state, which has had a strongly patriarchal role in “preserving their Palestinian identity”, has decided, in an apparent contradiction, not to include Arab regional issues in school curricula and through its applied politics has prevented Palestinians from affirming their cultural identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Rather than protecting the Palestinians and safeguarding their identity, Egyptian policies have steadily stripped away both their identity and their rights as human beings and as refugees. The ambiguous legal status of Palestinians in Egypt has contributed to the precariousness of their situation. Burdensome and increasingly onerous procedures to renew residence permits make their lives tense and uncertain. The constant instability and uncertainty about residence status affects

<sup>51</sup> In 1993, Rose Al-Yusef wrote “Palestinians in Egypt: Refugees and Millionaires”, a newspaper article discussing how Palestinian businessmen had succeeded in Egypt. For example, “Asfour started as a worker in a construction factory and then became a millionaire in Egypt.” The article said that there are 2,500 Palestinians who own 15–20 million Egyptian pounds in capital and that they invest their money in services and transportation. See R. Al-Yusef, “Palestinians in Egypt: Refugees and Millionaires”, 13 Sept. 1993.

<sup>52</sup> Field interview, Ain Shams/Cairo, 23 May 2002.

opportunities for employment and education, which hinge on it. The “travel documents” given to Palestinians by the Egyptian authorities are a misnomer, for they do not facilitate travel abroad, but limit Palestinian’s freedom of movement and make it ever harder to reunify families.

In all the host countries they have found themselves in, Palestinians have focused on rights (not nationality). Today there are many thousands of young Palestinians in Egypt who are “illegal”, despite having been born there and never having known another home. They have no prospect of leaving Egypt unless they take the risk of leaving for good and they must live with the constant fear of being discovered. As the third or fourth post-*nakba* generation, their knowledge of Palestine and connection to traditional kin networks is minimal. They have ended up as a group in limbo, denied both rights and an identity. The changes to the Egyptian national law enacted in 2004 have not resolved the key problem. The law gives nationality rights to those born after 2004 to Egyptian mothers but offers nothing to the large number of young Palestinians, born before that date and educated in Egypt.

At the political level, Egypt maintains its important role in relation to Palestinian politics and its representation. The close relationship between Gaza and Egypt serves as a constant reminder of the geographic, historical, and political proximity between the two peoples. Inside Egypt, resident Palestinians have been victimized by policies that do not ensure their basic rights, especially since Egypt first started normalizing relations with Israel. Palestinians in Egypt are asking themselves several questions. What negative effects could such a small minority possibly have on Egypt and its people? How could giving Palestinians stability in their lives by bestowing rights on them, possibly destabilize Egypt and affect its political stances and alliances? How, they ask, can a neighbouring people with such a shared history and culture, be so meanly treated by its godfather?