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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Death of the *Gharīb*: A Window towards a Regional Understanding of Displacement in the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical and analytic possibilities of the concept of *gharīb* to offer a new understanding of regional displacement in what we know as the modern Middle East. The concept of *gharīb* (pl. *ghurabāʾ*) has accrued a wide range of meanings across time and space, including stranger, outcast, and exile, as well as pauper. By occupying the space between estrangement and poverty, the g*harīb* allows for an intersectional understanding of inequality, experienced by a growing number of marginalized and displaced communities in the Middle East. This paper honors the g*harīb* while making an analytic shift away from the category of the "refugee," which has long been the dominant framework for personhood in the study of displacement. Combining genealogical analysis of the word g*harīb* with ethnographic accounts of displaced and impoverished communities in post-2011 Lebanon, I argue that legal binaries such as refugee versus citizen, and internal versus external displacement, have been further blurred against the backdrop of ongoing and interlocking forms of structural violence, inequality, and lack of protection for marginalized groups. The right to belong, therefore, is less about citizenry and more about a mode of social and economic poverty. This is particularly the case in the margins, where the repercussions of the ongoing crises are first and foremost felt. The *gharīb*, in contrast to such legal binaries, can be an analytic tool that allows us to delve deeper into the complexities of belonging, futurity, and rights without falling into the traps of methodological nationalism and top-down regional demarcations.

Keywords: displacement; refugee; marginalization; poverty; belonging; death; Syrian; Palestinian; Lebanon; Middle East

al-gharīb gharīb al-qabir.[1]
The stranger is the stranger of the grave.
Old saying attributed to Imām Zayn al-Abidīn (659–713 AD)

> One could argue that anthropology is precisely in debt to the strangers through which it has come to know: it knows only through them, and through the transformation of their being into knowledge (Ahmed 2013: 66).

Gharīb arrived in Lebanon in the late 1970s. He crossed the border on foot across the mountainous routes that connect the north of Lebanon with Syria. When he arrived in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Barid, in northern Lebanon, he had his Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) uniform on, and a rifle hanging from his shoulder. Whereas most of the residents of Nahr al-Barid were resettled in the camp after being expelled from their homes in northern regions of Palestine in 1948, Gharīb was originally from Gaza and arrived a couple of decades later, as a PLO fighter and with no family. Before moving into the camp, he had studied political science in Moscow, then joined the liberation movement to fight in Jordan, Syria, and south of Lebanon alongside other PLO fighters. Distinguished by his politics and way of life, he was named Gharīb, a "stranger" or "strange one," by the Palestinians of Nahr al-Barid. He stayed in the camp, married a Palestinian woman there, and had six children. But he remained Gharīb until his death in February 2020. Many people, even in his close social circles, did not know his real name until the walls of Nahr al-Barid were covered with his death announcements. One of those, written by his son, reads: "Gharīb traveled. Lived as a stranger. And died as one. The story of us all." By traveling, living, and dying as a stranger, Gharīb completed a story that is shared by all who live and die as strangers in *ghurba*, a life of estrangement.

Estrangement: A Path toward Death

"Living as a *gharīb* is one thing, dying as one is another," Gharīb's son, Said, told me once when I asked him about the saying: "The stranger is the stranger of the grave." As I gathered stories of death and displacement throughout Lebanon in 2018–2019, the saying had come up on multiple occasions in my conversations with Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese friends. Often, it was the first reaction I would receive after explaining my research on burials of displaced communities in Lebanon. The phrase comes from an ancient ode that is still sung by Arabic speakers throughout the Levant, the Gulf, and North Africa. It is attributed to Imam Zayn Al-Abidin (659–713 AD), the fourth Shiʿa Imam and a descendent of Prophet Mohammad. The ode starts with these words: "The stranger is not the stranger to Yemen or Sham (Syria), though the stranger is the stranger of the grave and coffin. The stranger certainly has more right to his estrangement than the ones who reside in [their] homelands and dwellings.… I am traveling far away, and my provisions are not sufficient, my strength has weakened, and death is calling unto me."[2]

[1] I use the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) system to transliterate Modern Standard Arabic. Conventional Arabic spelling is used for proper names, and in certain cases, my transliteration of specific terms follows the appropriate Levantine vernaculars.

[2] For the full ode in Arabic see: https://ar.wikisource.org/wiki/%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A8.

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The verses that follow describe the hardships of living in *ghurba*, the state of estrangement, and how these hardships will lead to the stranger's death. His every step away from where he *belongs* counts as a step toward his death. The further he moves from his ties to the world, the poorer and more estranged he becomes. He continues despite the anguish caused by his *faqir*, poverty, and lack of provisions. The act of letting go of, or having to let go of, what binds one to the fabric of the world brings about his *faqir*, poverty, while at the same time it becomes the source his righteousness, as one who dares to stare into the eyes of solitude and has come to know his estrangement. The ode juxtaposes estrangement and poverty, speaking to the ways in which death bleeds into life. Here, death is not a rupture in living, but a process of alienation and impoverishment, experienced through loss of belonging. One's gradual death is marked by the lack of belonging(s), both materially and socially.

The eventual death of Gharīb, the Palestinian PLO fighter from Gaza, transcended his singular lived experience to resonate with that of many more in the refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid, where displaced Palestinians have lived in exile for generations. His story, however, is not merely a metaphor nor is it limited to Palestinians in Lebanon. Being a *gharīb*, or feeling like one, is a way of living and dying that is marked by not fully belonging. It is what connects the story of this PLO fighter to my Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese interlocutors who have been internally and externally displaced, as well as economically and socially marginalized, in post-2011 Lebanon.

This paper considers estrangement as a way to understanding processes of marginalization and regional mobility in their variegated yet overlapping forms. I explore the theoretical and analytic possibilities of the concept of *gharīb* as a regional construct, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of displaced and marginalized communities' ways of being, living, and dying in what we know as the modern Middle East. Throughout this paper I employ the concept of *gharīb* as an analytic tool that allows us to delve deeper into the complexities of belonging, futurity, and rights without falling into the traps of methodological nationalism. I argue that legal binaries such as refugee versus citizen, and internal versus external displacement, have been further blurred against the backdrop of ongoing and interlocking forms of structural violence, inequality, and increasing marginalization of the poor and the displaced.

In so doing, this paper makes an analytic shift *away* from the category of the refugee, the dominant framework in the study of displacement. The refugee has long been under construction, not only within rights-based and policy-oriented platforms but also as an analytical framework in the literature on displacement. Within anthropological and refugee studies, the refugee has become a contested figure whose integrity and relationality to the world has been deconstructed, questioned, and reframed so as to *capture* its distinctiveness. This distinctiveness is a recurrent theme in the literature of displacement, legitimized by the spatial, legal, and social particularities of the condition of refugeehood. Much of the ethnographic study of displacement, worldwide, is bound to the spaces of refugee camps (Agier 2002; Davies and Isakjee 2015; Gabiam 2016; Khalili 2005; Peteet 2005; Sayigh 1994), despite the fact that only 22 percent of refugees worldwide live in camps, whether formal or self-settled.[3]

[3]At: https://www.unrefugees.org/news/refugee-camps-explained/#:~:text=Approximately%2022%20percent%20of%20the,an%20estimated%206.6%20million%20people.

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The focus on camps has, in turn, rendered refugeehood into the embodiment of Agamben's state of exception (Agamben 1998; 2004; Ek 2006).[4] Following Arendt's contention that the refugee is "a new kind of human being" (1994[1943]), the exceptionality associated with conditions of displacement, particularly external displacement, has framed a displaced person's life as a distinct *form of life* (Fassin, Wilhelm-Solomon, and Aurelia Segatti 2017), or more so, as an utterly different *ontological being* (Perdigon 2018). Despite their analytical appeal in studying displacement through the lens of legal frameworks or in the spaces of camps, these renditions fall short in exploring the sociopolitical, economic, and spatial entanglements of the lives of the majority of displaced persons, outside of camps, with the rest of the society they live in.

Within the Middle East, long a hotspot of so-called humanitarian and refugee crises, refugeehood has inevitably been a dominant scholarly framework for studying regional displacement. This has partly been due to the gravity of the Palestinian experience, marked by the shortcomings of UN-run camps and the Palestinians' protracted refugee crisis. In this context, many displacement scholars have engaged with the concept of the refugee, while calling for the scholarship to move beyond the confines of this rights-based framework in understanding the multifaceted forms that lives of displacement can take (Allan 2014; 2018; Balkan 2015; Carpi 2023; Chatty 2010; El Dardiry 2017; Feldman 2012; 2017; Frangieh 2014; 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; 2020; Janmyr 2016; Khalili 2005. Recent studies have furthered the discussion by "deexceptionalizing" displacement in a world led by dispossession and alienation (Cabot and Ramsay 2021), whereas others have (re)introduced regionally contextualized languages and discourses, better reflecting experiences of displacement (El Dardiry 2017; Zaman 2020).

By recentering displacement in the Middle East around the concept of *gharīb*, this paper helps move the discussion forward in three main ways. First, it reveals the shortcomings of the international platforms' rights-based language, and bears witness to how displaced persons perceive, formulate, and act upon their conditions and navigate their displacement differentially.[5] Second, it propels us to rethink the analytic lines that are often drawn between marginalized communities—such as refugees, the internally displaced, the poor, or the stateless—and to instead explore the similarities of their structural positioning, their overlapping lived experiences, as well as their shared struggles against inequality and oppression. The temporal modes of belonging, or lack thereof, experienced by my interlocutors in this paper bring together refugees, the internally displaced, and impoverished citizens in ways that are indeed ontologically and analytically inseparable. And third, by tracing the *gharīb*'s traveling footsteps historically and geographically, it allows for a regional

[4]Agamben's conceptualizations of the state of exception and *homo sacer* are much more fluid, incorporating statelessness beyond the figure of the refugee. He further expands upon his conception of camp in the last chapter of *Homo Sacer* as the "nomos" of the modern world and emphasizes its nineteenth-century colonial roots (1998). (Refugee) camp exceptionalism was a product of later interpretations of Agamben's thesis.

[5]The rights-based language falls short particularly in the context of post-2011 Lebanon, where the majority of more than a million and a half Syrians residing in the country are not registered with the UN or any other legal platform as refugees. As of 2020, more than 80 percent of displaced Syrians lived with no proper paperwork or legal status. For more on this see: https://ialebanon.unhcr.org/vasyr/files/vasyr_reports/VASyR%202020.pdf.

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fluidity that surpasses not only the modern demarcations of nation-states but also the regional contours of what we know as the Middle East.

I build on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork—which involved semi-structured and life history interviews with Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese in Beirut, north, and east of Lebanon—as well as archival and media analysis, to thread together the lives of impoverished and displaced communities of contemporary Lebanon. I combine ethnographic data with a genealogical analysis to bring together the nomads of Eastern Europe with the outcast of Turkic, Kurdish, Persianate worlds, and the Indian subcontinent, all the way back to the medieval Islamic era and the rise of Islam. In seeking the overlapping identities and spaces of the *ghurabāʾ* in post-2011 Lebanon, this project took me to the poverty-stricken regions of the north and east, as well as the outskirts of cities like Beirut, Tripoli, and Zahle, where hundreds of thousands of Syrians reside in either makeshift camps or short-term rentals.[6] I traveled to Lebanese villages and local cemeteries, and UNRWA-run Palestinian camps, including Nahr al-Barid, where I met Gharīb. I visited Al-Ghuraba Cemetery in the northern city of Tripoli, where hundreds of Lebanese and non-Lebanese *ghurabāʾ* lie next to one another in the ground. The cemetery is not only a resting place for those *ghurabāʾ* who die in Lebanon but also a refuge for living *ghurabāʾ*. By 2019, when I was conducting research in northern Lebanon, Al-Ghuraba Cemetery was home to more than a thousand poor Lebanese and displaced Syrians—all of whom were referred to as *ghurabāʾ*, strangers—who had set up informal dwellings in the graveyard for years and even generations (Farhang 2022). In many ways, this cemetery epitomizes *gharībness* in a space that abides by the rules of exception, in its very Agambenian sense, while not being bound by the category of the refugee.

In this paper I embrace the *messiness* of categories of belonging—analytically and methodologically—which in turn precludes clearcut and extractive analytical frameworks.[7] It allows the non-conforming, capacious, and fluid forms of the *gharīb* to lead us to the rich history of mobility and displacement, before and beyond the set contours of nations and regions. Here, the *gharīb*, as a traveling concept, moves in between variegated categories of belonging: citizen, (im)migrant, internally displaced, externally displaced, refugee, marginalized, impoverished, and more. Embracing this messiness is at the very least an adventure into the widening cracks between legal and analytic categories and at most an interrogation of the Eurocentric and colonial categorizations of peoples and regions.

The fluidity of the *gharīb*, however, does not suggest that the concept floats in an ideal-typical vacuum. The analysis that follows attends to the *gharīb*'s ties, or lack thereof, to the dynamics of social and moral repertoires that govern relations between those who assume belonging and those who lack it. While multifaceted and singular in its complexity, the status of *gharīb* can be discerned only in relation to the social systems that define it as such. One such social system is manifested within the framework of hospitality, guesthood, and reciprocity, specifically that of Arab

[6]Syrians are the first and largest refugee community in Lebanon with no formal camps. I will discuss the repercussions of Syrians' non-encampment in further detail in the section "Becoming Ghurabāʾ in Lebanon."

[7]While grappling with the complexities of the concept of *gharīb*, I remain attentive to Ahmed's precaution against "stranger fetishism," which in turn conceals political processes and social relationships that are at work in excluding, expulsing, and constantly constituting boundaries of us versus them. In so doing, I "avoid welcoming or expelling the stranger as a figure which has linguistic and bodily integrity" (Ahmed 2013: 6).

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hospitality, *karam al-ʿarab* (Shryock 2004), dating back to pre-Islamic ideals of care, sovereignty, and sanctuary (Rosenthal 1997). Here the *gharīb*, and more generally the stranger, molds into and out of temporally bound metaphors such as *ḍayf* (guest), *nāziḥ* (displaced), and *darwīsh* or *faqīr* (the poor), as outlined throughout this paper. The label at times embodies the hostile outsider, while at other times it represents the eschatological subject that characterizes upstanding pious individuals within a given society.

Juxtaposing the *gharīb* with the *qarīb*—the latter term means relative, kin, or close person, and is contrasted to the *gharīb* with a close assonance—I will further reflect on kinship systems and their changing patterns within exacerbating flows of migration. I also situate *ghurabāʾ*, plural of *gharīb*, within Islamic history and in relation to early Islam's *Muhajirūn*, to Ibn Khaldun's *ʿasabiyya* in medieval Islam, and all the way up to the shifting meanings of belonging among *ʿashāʾir,* nomadic communities, in Syria in the years leading to the Syrian uprisings. Doing so allows exploration of the *gharīb* concept on its own terms, while grappling with the structures that define its relationship with the broader societal and moral worlds surrounding it. These structures also outline the social lexicons that those rendered as *ghurabāʾ* use to perceive, and at times oppose and resist, conditions of estrangement. The paper's last vignette discusses such conditions in relation to *zulum*, oppression, in order to unpack the modes of structural inequality and systemic violence that are at play in marginalization, impoverishment, and alienation of a growing number of people within crumbling, fragmented systems of governance in Lebanon and elsewhere. To start down this path, we must first ask: what is a *gharīb*?

The Faces of the *Gharīb*

The concept of *gharīb* has accrued a wide range of denotations and connotations over time, including a stranger, outcast, or exile (Wehr 1976: 668), as well as a poor or lowly person (Steingass 2000[1892]: 886), and even someone who is foreign or extraordinary (Platts 2000[1884]: 770). The ways *ghurabāʾ*, strangers, have been received and the ways they have seen themselves throughout history testify to the many faces of *gharīb*, features and facets which have survived from before the establishment of nation-states. As a matter of this regional rather than national definition, one can be born within the geographical borders of modern nation-states and still identify, live, and die as a *gharīb.* A *gharīb*, therefore, does not abide by the international contours of these states, but rather by a complex set of social and affective relations to the world through which meaning-making becomes possible. To understand what the concept of *gharīb* stands for requires an interrogation of many taken-for-granted assumptions regarding national borders, citizenship, and displacement, as well as a revised understanding of the above issues as they intersect with class, gender, legal status, and local categories of un/belonging. The *gharīb* comes to a chorus of meanings, aspirations, and patterns of both individual and collective identifications through these competing lineages.

Within the literature, dynamics that set the boundaries of self and other have largely been outlined in the regional, religious, and historically contextualized modes of hospitality, guesthood, and reciprocity. Hospitality has indeed been framed as "the problem of how to deal with strangers" (Pitt-Rivers 2012: 502). Or as Da Col frames it, a system of strategies "for keeping the stranger in abeyance or incorporating the *outside* into the *inside*" (2019: 20). To incorporate or to draw a renewed line between

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the outside and the inside manifests itself in the way the host—whether it be a state or the head of a household—exercises sovereignty in relation to those outsiders, as Shryock outlines in his classic account of the Belga Bedouin hospitality (2004; 2012).

Whereas strangers appear frequently in the literature on hospitality, their status is often up for debate. Pitt-Rivers, for instance, argues that strangers have no place within the social system since they lack direct jural relationships with anyone in the community and therefore possesses no status. This, in turn, leads to a contradiction of "the status of being statusless" (2012: 503). As a matter of this "status of being statusless," the stranger has occupied various positions within the hospitality discourse, spanning from enemy,[8] to hostile outsider, to shifter, to stranger-guest, and guest (Da Col 2019; Herzfeld 1987; Fortes 1975). A guest's status, Pitt-Rivers argues, stands "midway between that of hostile stranger and that of community member" (2012: 503).

The stranger, in this context, carries a potential, bound by the very temporalities that grant them the leverage to *come out* and mold themselves into holding a more established and familiar status, such as that of a guest. It is precisely through this temporality, this mode of *abeyance*, that Kant argues for the "rights of strangers" as a condition of "universal hospitality." In Perpetual Peace, he writes: "Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another. […] It is not the right to be a permanent visitor that one may demand. It is only a right of temporary sojourn, a right to associate, which all men have" (1957 [1795]: 357). Universal hospitality, therefore, grants the "right of temporary sojourn" to strangers, while distinguishing it from a right to become a "fellow inhabitants for a certain length of time" (ibid.), allowing for a subjective evaluation of the length strangers are to be welcomed by the sovereign host.

It is not a coincidence that the rhetoric of hospitality has been provoked over and again by host states and host communities in response to contemporary waves of mass migration and displacement, particularly in the Middle Eastern and European contexts. In the Greek context, hospitality, *filoksenia*, is provoked as a national and traditional Greek virtue, through which the state rhetorically compensates for the poor living conditions of millions of asylum seekers there (Rozakou 2012). In Turkey, Turkish hospitality, *Türk misafirperverliği*, has welcomed more than three million Syrians who have fled their war-torn homes since 2011, while assigning them the officially distinct status of *misafir*, guest, "until the conditions for their return were secured" (Dağtaş 2017; also see Alkan 2021; Al-Khalili 2023; Carpi and Şenoğuz 2019; and Zaman 2020).

Discourses and practices of hospitality are not limited to host states and communities. Providing, reciprocating, and hosting are common ways in which displaced and migrant communities practice mutual care and redefine their positioning within the new societies they have entered (Ramadan 2008; Vandevoordt 2017). There is a distinction, however, between these intra- and inter-communal modes of hospitality which predate nation-states and so-called refugee crises (see Rosenthal 1997; Shryock 2004; 2008; 2012) and those provoked by host states (Alkan 2021; Dağtaş 2017). Caught between the top-down and bottom-up approaches and swaying between the language of rights and that of generosity (Rosello 2001), hospitality has allowed for vernacularized versions of

[8]In the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski wrote: "The fact that to a native every stranger is an enemy, is an ethnographic feature reported from all parts of the world" (2013[1922]: 355).

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displacement policy that act as a double-edged sword. It does so by rendering displaced subjects into welcomed strangers—guests—who participate in an unfulfilled host-guest loop of reciprocity so long as they remain temporary and transitory. At the same time, hospitality works by obscuring the actual dynamics in play, where the displaced persons often make up an exploitable labor force and are deprived of protections associated with legal statuses such as "refugee" (Rosello 2001; Zaman 2020).[9]

In post-2011 Lebanon, where the rhetoric of hospitality still serves as a "humanitarian toolkit" (Carpi and Şenoğuz 2019), it has arguably been less emblematic of the state's discourse toward the many Syrians who fled there as the 2011 civil war erupted. At the communal level, the long-term ideals of Arab hospitality as well as the historical connectivity between the two neighboring countries have created ties of trust—and modes of distrust—between Syrians and Lebanese that transcend the humanitarian limits. That said, since 2011, and with the large number of Syrian newcomers whose return is not necessarily on the horizon,[10] the semantics of hospitality have shifted (Ferreri 2023; Thorleifsson 2016). To many of my interlocutors, words such as *ḍayf*, guest, occasionally used in media accounts or by Lebanese locals, felt imposed, or rather unwelcoming, since they carried the connotation of temporariness in the neighboring country that felt too close to and yet too far away from *home*. "Guest is not about hospitality, it's about a person who leaves in the end," one of my Syrian interlocutors responded to my inquiry about his frustration with Syrians being called *ḍuyūf*, guests, in Lebanon. It gave a false image of Syrians as being served, provided for, or taken care of, which is far from the reality of intense labor, exploitation, and impoverishment that shapes their experiences of displacement in Lebanon. In this context, politics of the *gharīb* appears to be more appropriately framed as *inhospitality* rather than hospitality.

Whereas the framework of hospitality provides a gateway into exploring the relationalities that inform my interlocutors' experiences of displacement, poverty, and exile, it falls short in that it understands the *gharīb*, not as a temporary and empty container that other social metaphors, such as guest, can be molded into, but as a category in *itself*. My interlocutors' experiences suggest more the persistence of *gharībness*, or estrangement, and the stigmatizations and openings that are brought about through this persistence. This mode of estrangement appears to be closer to the way Simmel defines his sociological form of the stranger. In his short essay "The Stranger," Simmel introduces the stranger as a figure that represents the union of closeness and remoteness. The stranger, here, is understood not as "a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow" (1971[1908]: 143). As Simmel goes on to say, "His position within it [i.e., a social group] is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it" (ibid.).

Simmel's figure of the stranger can be positive, and even welcome, as an objective observer whose sense of clarity comes from his lack of belonging and biases. But there exists a different, negative form of strangeness that Simmel recognizes as a form of

[9]In *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*, Rosello (2001) critically examines the relation between hospitality—as a form of gift-giving, following Derrida—migration, and nationalism to analyze "perverse consequences of discourses that idealize hospitality as if one universal generic type existed" (ibid.: 19).

[10]Since December 2024 and the fall of the Assad regime, many Syrians in Lebanon have either returned or are savoring the possibility of returning.

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"non-relation" built around "a stranger to the country, the city, the race, and so on, [where] what is stressed is nothing individual, but alien origin, a quality which he has, or could have, in common with many other strangers. For this reason, strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type. Their remoteness is no less general than their nearness" (ibid.: 148). This union of remoteness and nearness, which Simmel's essay showcases in the marginalization of Frankfurt Jews in Middle Age Europe, is similar to the forms of estrangement I identify in relation to the displaced Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese living in the margins of Lebanese society. Being regionally from the Levant and speakers of intimate vernaculars of Levantine Arabic, while at the same time displaced or lacking meaningful and necessary social bonds with the rest of the society, they are at once "close" and "remote." Furthermore, in the *gharīb*, Simmel's two facets of the stranger overlap, which both allows and disrupts the cultivation of new forms of being for them. It is in this light that I bring together the story of the Palestinian Gharīb together with Palestinian refugees, illegal Syrians, or internally displaced and poor Lebanese. By relating different versions of the *gharīb* experience, these narratives allow us to explore the intersection of poverty and displacement and to contextualize displacement regionally, beyond the borders of nation-states.

Within the Middle East, one can trace the *gharīb* back far beyond and before the formation of nation-states, and linguistically, back through Arabic, Persian-Kurdish, Turkic, and Urdu literature for centuries. Throughout its long history, the *gharīb* concept has been embraced in different regions to serve social, economic, and political boundary-making. It has then traveled and been repurposed. Its geographical contours, its socio-ethical connotations, and the prevalence of its applicability have shifted across the centuries.

The word *gharīb* comes from the *gharaba* root in Arabic and indicates "to go away, depart, absent, withdraw, leave, to be a stranger; to be strange, odd, queer, obscure, abstruse, difficult to comprehend … to expel from the homeland, banish, exile, expatriate … to say or do a strange and amazing thing; to exceed the proper bounds, overdo, exaggerate … to go to a foreign country, emigrate; to be (far) away from one's homeland; to become an occidental, become Westernized, be Europeanized; to find strange, odd, queer, unusual; to deem absurd, preposterous, grotesque" (Wehr 1976: 668). The *gharīb* then traveled into Persian languages to denote "uncommon, strange, outlandish, foreign; extraordinary; rare; a foreigner, stranger," as well as "poor, needy, humble, gentle" (Steingass 2000[1892]: 886). Through Persian, it passed to Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, and many other Indian languages to mean "foreign, alien, rare, wonderful, unusual," and "poor, destitute,… lowly; a poor man; a meek or humble person" (Platts 2000: 770). In everyday Arabic and Persian, the word *gharīb* mostly carries the first denotation—being strange, stranger, abnormal, and unusual—but can certainly connote weak social relationships and a lack of social roots in specific contexts. In Turkish, *garip* can mean miserable, desolate, and poor, as well as alienated, estranged, and weird (Zirh 2012).

In Persian, a derivative of *ghurbat*, the same as *ghurba* or estrangement in Arabic, is *ghurbatī*, which literally means being away from home or exiled, but it has a plainly pejorative connotation. It is used as a derogatory term to refer to people with low socioeconomic status who arrive in metropolitan areas from faraway villages or towns or from non-sedentary, that is, nomadic, backgrounds. *Ghurbatī* is also the name of a nomadic ethnolinguistic minority of a few thousand people in Iran and Afghanistan who speak a dialect of Domari language, also known as "Middle Eastern

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Romani." This endangered Indic language is spoken by nomadic communities all across the Middle East and North Africa, including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, the Indian subcontinent, Syria, and Lebanon (Richardson 2020). In Turkish, and other Turkic languages, *gurbet* (being away from home) and *gurbetçi* (one who left for *gurbet*) are commonly used as a way of "portraying the socio-spatial dimensions of migration," whether it be rural to urban migration, or labor migration to Western Europe and various waves of exile, particularly since the 1960s (Zirh 2012: 139–40). *Gurbeti*, the Muslim Roma community of former Yugoslavia, is from the same ethnolinguistic origin. The word traveled with the nomadic community to mean "gypsy" and "wanderer," and to cast the people as "foul" and "untrustworthy," in Serbia and Kosovo (Cvorovic 2006). The largest diasporic community of *ghurbatīs* is now in Austria, where most of them are employed in menial and low-skilled construction work (Pelekani 2018).

The etymology of *ghurba*, estrangement, and its variegated denotations and connotations—that is, in *ghurabāʾ*, *ghorbati*, and *gurbeti*—eloquently conveys the regional and cultural connectivity throughout not only the modern Middle East but also east to the Indian subcontinent and as far west as Central Europe. In his study of the term *gharīb* in the medieval Mediterranean, Pifer looks at the *gharīb* as a loanword that traveled far beyond its Arabic roots, linguistically and geographically. He argues that the *gharīb* can be viewed as an all-encompassing term which brought together "a broad range of theological concepts, social categories, affective states, and topics of literary production among medieval Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike" (2018: 15). What brings these different peoples together under the umbrella term of *gharībness* is the juxtaposition of their mobility and their lack of belonging to the spatio-temporality of their surroundings—socially, culturally, linguistically, and economically. The poverty of every one of the above-mentioned forms of capital reinforces a vicious circle of estrangement and subjugates people to it.

According to Taneja (2018), in everyday Hindi-Urdu *gharīb* specifically means "poor." In his study of *gharīb nawazi*, the culture of hospitality to the stranger, in the ruins of a medieval palace and a saint shrine in Delhi, Taneja reflects on the potentiality of the word *gharīb* in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, asking:

> Is it that Arabic, Persian, and Urdu hold the potential of imagining being foreign or strange as *a poverty of social relationships*, being estranged (and hence impoverished) by distance or by circumstances? Perhaps these languages hold open the potential of seeing estrangement as a lack, a poorness in the quality of one's social world?… To be gharib can mean to be mad, to be outcast, to be estranged from family and friends, to be transgressive, to be polluted, to be unable to repay your debts—to be, in some fundamental sense, alone, unable to fit into normative society. But the *gharibi*, the strange(r)ness encountered here, is not just abject but also productive of new possibilities. Being estranged from one's family and communal identity is often the beginning of the remaking of the self and its relation to the world (ibid.: 93).

The juxtaposition of the adjectives "outcast," "mad," and "polluted" with" rare" and "extraordinary" in all the above-mentioned languages indeed gives the *gharīb* the possibility of remaking itself spatially and temporarily. From the conception of *gharīb* to the many faces of the *gharīb*, the route is filled with "wonderful" and "unusual" turns,

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as Platts puts it, where in one spatio-temporal setting they stand for moral decay and in another as opening up a different world to the society they enter.[11]

While by no means limited to Islamic history and *hadīth*,[12] the *gharīb* has a palpable presence in Islamic traditions. *Al-ghurabāʾ* is an eschatological denomination that characterizes upstanding pious Muslims in the larger society, either Islamic or otherwise.[13] A well-known prophetic *hadīth* states: "*Badaʾ al-Islāmu gharīban wa sayaʿūdu gharīban kamā badaʾ fa ṭūba lil ghurabāʾ*," meaning: "Islam began as something strange and it will return to being strange as it began, so glad tidings to the strangers" (Mundhirī and Ibn Al-Hajjaj 2000: 270). This is a reading of *gharībness* that unites all Muslims through their strangeness, and more so, holds it up as a virtue. In other iterations of the *hadīth*, the people ask, "Who are they [*al-ghurabā*], O Messenger of Allah?" and the prophet answers, "Those who are pious and righteous when the people have become evil" (Ājurrī and Badr 1983: 18). A ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhāri narration, "Live in this world as though you are a stranger or a traveler," also suggests that a life of estrangement is the correct conduct in this world (al-Bukhari 1996).[14] In the centuries since, the perception of *ghurabāʾ* and their relation to the social and political order of societies, Islamic or otherwise, has taken radically different directions.

In *The Muqaddimah* (1958[1377]), Ibn Khaldun elaborates on the dynamic relations that *ghurabāʾ* form with the rest of the society and with the political leadership. In his social theory, dynasties, or civilizations, rise and fall in a cyclical manner marked by their '*aṣabiyya*, a fluid term coined by the author to capture the essence of community cohesion or group feeling. Strangers' positioning within the hierarchy of a dynasty, in Ibn Khaldun's view, marks the strength of the dynasty and the amount of its '*aṣabiyya*: you would know that "the destruction of the dynasty is imminent" when the strangers are employed as followers (ibid.: 244). What makes the outsiders and strangers the least reliable for community formation and the least favored allies for the ruling power has to do with their lack of familiarity and the temporality of their social cohesions with the ruling dynasty. Embedding this view within his cyclical narrative of civilizations, Ibn Khaldun describes how strangers have to occupy the bottom of social strata for political leadership. This is when a community's '*aṣabiyya* is at its strongest. As the political leadership gets more powerful, it loses its necessary connection to the followers who have the tightest

[11]Merchants and visitors who arrived in the late Ottoman Levant through the Mediterranean, for instance, opened a new chapter on "strange" for locals. This is one face of *al-gharīb*, but on the other hand, we see the poor migrating from rural to metropolitan areas as outcasts, and as a cheap labor force. For the shifting meaning and connotation of non-Muslim foreigners in Ottoman and post-Ottoman Turkey, see (Bouquet 2017) where he elaborates on the transformation of terminology used for strangers (from *ecnebi* to *yabanci*).

[12]*Ghurabāʾ* and *gharīb* are cross-national and cross-linguistic terms that are defined beyond religious/denominational and ethnic/racial boundaries. They are deployed by different ethnic and religious groups—Christians, Muslims, Druze, et cetera—within the Middle East and beyond.

[13]The ideal of estrangement in Islam has sociohistorical roots in Prophet Muhammad's *hijra*, departure or migration, from Mecca to Medina in 622 AC. The first people to embrace Islam faced torture and the boycott of their clans and had to flee to Medina to escape persecution, hence becoming the Muhajirūn, the migrants. It is understood that Islam began as something strange practiced by strangers; that is, outcasts in a place of estrangement.

[14]Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim and Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī are two of the Kutub al-Sitta (six major *hadīth* collections) of Sunni Islam. The two are considered the most authentic and correct versions of prophetic *hadīth* and are known as *Saḥīḥayn*.

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social closeness with it, and the necessary hierarchy of followers starts crumbling. This is where the ruling power starts accepting strangers as its followers and putting them in the place of its old and original ones.

The threat that the *ghurabāʾ* pose to social cohesion, as outlined by Ibn Khaldun, has long positioned them in the margins of the society and at the bottom of social hierarchies. These modes of exclusion persisted through the formation of modern nation-states, translating themselves into the more elaborate structures at play in perpetuating marginalization in the region's modern and contemporary societies. *Gharībness* as, first, a fleeting way of dwelling in the world, and second, a byproduct of the uneven distribution of capital—economic, social, or otherwise—highlights the othering processes that push not only the displaced and the stateless, but also the poor, into the realm of *gharībness*. In this sense, one can be a *gharīb* in the home country and, by the same token, a migrant in a different country can cultivate a sense of belonging by creating socioeconomic bonds that connect them to their surroundings in meaningful ways. The relationship between low socioeconomic status and lack of a sense of belonging is where all the different characters in this paper meet.

Becoming *Ghurabāʾ* in Lebanon

In his political history of Lebanon, Lebanese-Palestinian intellectual Samir Kassir says the word *gharīb* means "foreigner" while carrying "the pejorative connotation of an intruder, and only in connection with an Arab foreigner; a European or an American is called *ajnabi* (plural *ajanib*)" (2010: 474). He explains how the word underwent a shift in meaning in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, with "the intensification of xenophobic feeling in the press in early 1968 and [when the word *gharīb*] came to be used against Palestinians as well as Syrian workers" (ibid.: 475). Kassir's remarks on the use of *gharīb* still resonated with many of my Syrian and Palestinian interlocutors five decades after the shift he described. As Arab foreigners of Lebanon, they have long been viewed as strangers, where their *gharībness* has been an amalgamation of political and socioeconomic marginalization. In the same vein, the word *gharīb* has long been used to refer to the Lebanese poor who migrated or were displaced from more remote rural areas to the country's larger cities. To be identified as *gharīb* when one is a visitor or a newcomer to a different region or city need not carry a pejorative connotation, but remaining a *gharīb* while not *new* to a place certainly does. The way out of *gharībness* passes through the cultivation of social and economic ties to one's surroundings, which is often denied to *ghurabāʾ*, whether they are of Lebanese or non-Lebanese Arab descent. The right to belong, in this sense, is less about citizenry and more an intersectional mode of social and economic poverty, marked by racial/ethnic and linguistic differences, that brings the displaced and the poverty-stricken together in the margins of Lebanese society.

The spaces and identities of impoverished and displaced communities have been increasingly mapped together in the context of 2011 Lebanon. Following the forcible removal of Palestinians from their occupied country and exile in Lebanon with the 1948 Nakba, the outbreak of the 2011 civil war in Syria led to a mass migration of Syrians to the country, making them Lebanon's largest displaced community. Again, many Syrians were not newcomers; the country had long benefitted from large numbers of Syrian seasonal workers who kept the country's agricultural and low-

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wage labor economy up and running for several decades (Chalcraft 2008). As the war took its toll and displaced many more Syrians, Lebanon imposed a non-encampment policy on Syrians who fled from their hometowns to the neighboring country.[15] This dispersed Syrians within Lebanon's already saturated landscape of displacement. Today, in this small Mediterranean country that has long been a refuge for the region's displaced peoples, almost half of the population are either non-citizens or not of Lebanese descent.[16] In this intimate and overlapping geography, the daily struggles of the many displaced communities and the poor and marginalized Lebanese coalesce in meaningful ways. The ongoing and interlocking forms of structural violence, inequality, and increasing marginalization of both the poor and the displaced communities have further blurred the legal binaries such as refugee versus citizen, and internally versus externally displaced, particularly in the margins of the state, where the repercussions of the country's ongoing economic and political crises are first and foremost felt.

Throughout my fieldwork in Lebanon, I came across many experiences of *ghurabāʾ*, strangers, that capture the multifaceted quality of regional displacement in the Middle East. Hiba, a Syrian farmworker who had lived in east Lebanon since being displaced from Hama in 2012, described *gharībness* to me as a state in which "the stranger (*al-gharīb*) is treated differently from the relative (*al-qarīb*)."[17] She delineated her experience of gradual strangeness through her mother's passing and her siblings' resettlements in Europe, one at a time. For her, Lebanon could have become home—despite the illegality and economic hardship that inevitably came with it—only if death and resettlement did not divide her family. To her, *gharībness* was strictly a matter of kin relations irrespective of homeland and one could fall into its void simply by leaving one's family or being left behind. "We didn't have anything in Syria either, but we had each other," as she put it. For Hiba, nothing, even economic prosperity, could compensate for feeble kin relations and that was where she drew the boundaries of estrangement.

In contrast to Hiba's experience, *gharībness* and its lack of kinship ties allowed for Yassin's self-exploration as a young non-binary Syrian man from Al-Hasaka in the north-easternmost region of Syria. He escaped mandatory military service in Syria and moved to Beirut, where he knew nobody. Living in humble shared housings in Beirut and working at a local bar near Hamra Street, a lively nightlife scene in Beirut, Yassin refashioned himself into someone he viewed as a more truthful version of himself, beyond the confines of familiarity and communal identity. In the year and a half of our friendship I witnessed his gradual embrace of a new way of being and

[15]The non-encampment policy aimed at Syrians was a result of an agreement between the UN and Lebanese authorities.

[16]There has not been a national census in Lebanon since 1932, which many attribute to the fear of possible demographic shifts in religious denominations that would in turn have repercussions regarding the sectarian state's power. But, according to demographic figures, as of 2023 Lebanon is home to 5.8 million people (see: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/lebanon-population), of which between 1.6–2.2 million are recently displaced Syrians (https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1351361/are-there-really-over-2-million-syrians-in-lebanon.html), near half a million are Palestinians (https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon), and 156,000 are naturalized Armenians (https://lebanon.mfa.am/en/community-overview/). Plus there are thousands of Egyptians, Iraqis of Arab and Kurdish backgrounds, and others.

[17]بيعامل الغريب بطريقة مختلفة عن القريب. In Arabic, the close assonance of the two words and their contrast in meaning makes the phrase even more worthwhile.

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living, through which his experience of displacement and lack of kin relations was constantly reformulated. His remaking of himself in Beirut likely came with many unsettling conditions, due to his lower-class background, his "accented Arabic" (from the perspective of the Lebanese), and more, which ultimately left him feeling an outcast and at times fundamentally alone. In such circumstances, he could only imagine a future for himself outside of the region, where "the Lebanese, the Syrians, all of us, are strangers … all of us, Arabs." Ending up in Beirut, after the inevitable cutting of ties with his life in Syria, his situation appeared to be halfway between liberating and belonging, and yet neither. Being an accented non-binary Arab man in an Arab country and working in a luxurious bar for a low wage—and yet again being Syrian[18]—limited Yassin in such a way that his future aspirations embraced *gharībness* as the only possibility of living without being torn apart.

The forms of exclusion Yassin experienced as a non-binary man were brought up in different shades and forms in my conversations with other self-identified *ghurabā'* of Lebanon. Noor, a young Syrian-Palestinian rapper whom I met in 2019 in Badawi, the UNRWA camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon, viewed *gharībness as* directly correlated with racism. "Wherever there is racism, there are *ghurabā'*," he argued. He was born in the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk, near Damascus, until he was displaced midway through the ongoing war. His experience of *gharībness* was tied to his forced move from Yarmouk,[19] which felt like home to him, to Baddawi, where he believed all Palestinians were *ghurabā'*. When I asked him what constituted the stark difference, he responded: "Have you heard any Palestinian in Lebanon call themself a Lebanese-Palestinian?" and, after a short pause, "No. Because the system (*niẓām*) is racist (*'unsuri*) in Lebanon."[20]

Similarly, Fatma, a Syrian primary school teacher from Damascus now living in Tripoli, viewed racism as at the core of Syrians' experiences of *gharībness* in Lebanon. She was particularly taken aback by the treatment of the Syrian dead in Lebanon, seeing it as the ultimate level of estrangement. "Racism has even reached to the two meters where we bury our dead,"[21] she said. In both Fatma's and Noor's articulations, the connection between racism and *gharībness* was not geographically set, but fluid and changing. Further, it was understood as a systemic imposition rather than a case-by-case and arbitrary form of exclusion. In separate conversations, they both recounted stories heard from friends, and friends of friends, in the UAE or Europe, where Arabs were treated poorly, viewed as inferior, or excluded in various ways. The Lebanese version of it, however, represented the most intimate experience of Simmel's simultaneous closeness and remoteness, where deep linguistic and cultural ties were in drastic contrast with the structures of alienation. In Lebanon, it was as if the violence of

[18]Most Syrians in Lebanon struggle with renewing their residency since Lebanese authorities imposed further restrictive regulations on Syrians' stays in Lebanon. For more context, see https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/10/syrians-in-lebanon-we-can-neither-leave-nor-stay among others.

[19]Established in 1957, Yarmouk was home to more than 160,000 Palestinians in Syria until the Syrian war erupted. It was never officially recognized by UNRWA and has functioned only as an unofficial camp with an informal economy and infrastructure.

[20]Differential modes of belonging between Syrian-Palestinians and Lebanese-Palestinians falls beyond the scope of this paper, but this vignette comes together with the rest of the ethnographic accounts in this paper—including the last vignette—to give a better sense of structures of estrangement within Lebanon's fragmented state and privatized system.

[21]العنصرية وصلت حتى للمترين اللي منندفن.

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estrangement, and its constant presence, were not expected—and therefore more deplorable.

The racism entrenched in the Lebanese system can be traced back to what Kassir identified as the rise of Arab *ghurabāʾ*, a pejorative category fabricated in the 1960s within regional politics and shifting economic relations. The juxtaposition of Palestinians and Syrians in the last few decades in definitions of Arab intruders is not a coincidence. The timeline of structural forms of estrangement in Lebanon relates directly to the rapidly changing political map of the region. As the Palestinian resistance movement has been increasingly disempowered and stigmatized by regional powers since the Arab-Israeli War, displaced Palestinians have been pushed out to the further margins, socio-politically and economically. The presence of Syrians, on the other hand, categorically labeled as seasonal migrant workers and predefined under the shadow of the long-term military occupation of the Syrian regime in Lebanon, triggered long-term political rivalries and reinforced class hierarchies. The production of *ghurabāʾ* and the remaking of their categories, in this sense, denotes a constant back and forth between different scales of belonging —from the most intimate, the personal, and kin-based, to the larger national and regional configurations of power.

The Syrian Conflict: A View from the Side of *Ghurabāʾ*

Abdallah, a displaced Free Syrian Army fighter from the outskirts of Homs, viewed himself as a lifelong *gharīb*, even though he was only displaced from his hometown in 2012. He was smuggled into northern Lebanon by his family after being rescued from a deadly battle between the free Syrian Army and Bashar al-Assad's military forces in Homs. Abdallah understood his positioning within any given society as that of an outsider and identified the forms of exclusion he had lived through and survived as the source of his non-conformist spirit. In Lebanon, he was a freelance humanitarian worker involved with various local and international NGOs in the north and east. He was not recruited by any of the organizations he worked with in Lebanon, due to his lack of residency papers. Despite his constant financial struggles, he did not mind the demanding work and travel.

When I first met him in the fall of 2018, he was thirty years old, with a limp and a partially disabled arm, reminders of his last battle as a revolutionary in Syria. His articulation of *gharībness* was intimately entangled with what he viewed to be the underlying reasons for the start of the Syrian revolution. He argued that the sectarianization of Syrian society by the Assad dynasty—with Hafez al-Assad's rule starting in 1971—was the main reason for the estrangement of Syrians from their country and the ultimate uprisings of 2011. "Before the Baathist rule,[22] there was only the nation of Syria and no sectarianism," he observed. Abdallah's argument about the sectarian factionalism of the Baathist regime has been a focus of scholarship on Syrian politics, particularly since the eruption of civil unrest there (Dukhan 2022; Holliday 2011; Menshawy 2022; Phillips 2015; Pierret 2014), with large-scale revolts in the predominantly Sunni regions since 2011.

[22]Although the Baath party came to power in 1966 with Nureddin al-Atassi (1966–1970), many Syrians identify the Baathist rule over Syria with the Assads, and here Abdallah as well is using the two interchangeably.

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Among the Sunnis hardest hit by the exclusionary politics of the Assads' regime were the *ʿashāʾir* or nomadic communities.[23]

ʿAshāʾir, the plural form of *ʿashīra*, means clans or nations and is often used to refer to nomads or communities who are viewed as not yet fully "urbanized." Although many of these communities have lived sedentary lives for generations, their dress and traditions, vernaculars of spoken Arabic, and their communal ways of living on the outskirts of towns and cities are viewed as distinct from normative modern urban life. Abdallah was born to one of these formerly nomadic communities, believed to be a Qahtanite tribe,[24] which originated from the ancient south Arabia region. In urban settings in Syria, nomadic and rural communities are often viewed as *ghurabāʾ*. Just like *ghorbati* in Persian-speaking regions and *gurbeti* in Turkish and Eastern European context, being born to *ʿashīra* automatically associates these mobile subjects with strangeness and its multifaceted forms. Being an *ibn ʿashīra*, born to a clan, as Abdallah was, was the basis for his political marginalization as well as the revolutionary and anti-establishment spirit that carried him through war, injury, and further displacement in Lebanon. In Syria, people born to *ʿashīra* are often perceived as true Arabs,[25] descending from the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula,[26] the region unified by the Prophet Mohammad under Islamic rule in the years following his migration to Medina in 622. By the same token, they had been the perpetual outsiders in the rapidly urbanizing setting of Syrian society under the self-identified secular modern rule of the Assads.[27]

The estrangement of *ʿashāʾir* and the sectarian production of *ghurabāʾ* during the Syrian Baathist rule can be further uncoiled in light of Ibn Khaldun's theory of social *ʿaṣabiyya* and the rise and fall of dynasties. Scholars of the modern Middle East have explored Khaldunian frameworks for understanding religious and sectarian politics and the rapidly changing configurations of power in the regions (Khuri 1990; Lacoste 1984). Goldsmith (2011) looks specifically at the consolidation of power under Hafiz al-Assad and its decline during Bashar's rule in the years leading up to the 2011 uprisings. He uses the term "sectarian *ʿaṣabiyya*" to analyze the formation and shifts in the security regime's apparatus[28] and its changing relations to Syrian society.

Sectarian *ʿaṣabiyya* "can function similarly to Ibn Khaldun's social or tribal *ʿasabiyya* in terms of the rise and decline of dynasties" (ibid.: 39). Much of the political history of and scholarship on post-2011 Syria has focused on the sectarian aspects of the conflict (among others, see Balanche 2018; Berti and Paris 2014; and Phillips 2015). These studies, however, have not looked at the way the declining

[23]Entrenching and reinforcing sectarian boundaries appears to be "a foundational fact of Assad family rule since November 1970" (Droz-Vincent 2014: 40). As members of the minority Alawi community, which made up 12 percent of the Syrian population prior to the start of the civil war, the Assads emphasized the significance of sustaining minorities' rights as part of their Baathist secular ideology.

[24]Qahtan peoples are believed to have roots in the southern regions of the Arabian Peninsula, in contemporary Yemen. Qahtanites migrated to the conquered territories between the seventh and fourteenth centuries during Arab conquests.

[25]Which in sectarian terms incorporates Sunni Arab as opposed to ʿAlawi, Ismaʿili, Shiʿa, et cetera.

[26]Geographically, the Arabian Peninsula is bound by the Persian Gulf in the east, the Red Sea in the west, and the Indian ocean in the south.

[27]Here, the terms "secular" and "modern" are discussed as cultural constructs promoted by the Assads—their rule as minority Alawites over the majority Sunni Syrians benefitted from them.

[28]Goldsmith further elaborates on the way the initial secular aspirations of the Syrian Baath party were ultimately turned into sectarian politics as a matter of what he calls "sectarian insecurity" (2011: 40).

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ʿaṣabiyya of the Baath regime and the ongoing conflict in Syria in the years following 2011 have been closely tied to the rise of multiple groups who in fact self-identify as *ghurabāʾ*. As a byproduct of the Syrian state's exclusionary politics, different groups of *ghurabāʾ* self-organized and formed their oppositional movements. These forces, nevertheless, were not limited to the *ʿashā'ir*, or the poor and marginalized from within Syria. With the outbreak of war, the long-lived jihadi groups of the region joined the fight under the banner of *ghurabāʾ*, claiming their righteousness through a contested interpretation of *al- ghurabāʾ* in Islam.

In Syria, and since the start of the conflict, the category of *ghurabāʾ* and its Islamic interpretations have been contested. Many active warring parties carried the denomination of *al-ghurabāʾ*, among them fundamentalist jihadi movements.[29] The most prominent *ghurabāʾ* jihadi groups during the Syrian civil war are Firqat al-Ghurabāʾ Brigade and Ghurabāʾ al-Shām. The former consists of Arab and non-Arab Muslim youth who traveled mostly from Western European countries to be settled in tents at the edges of Idlib. They fight against the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies, as well as the locally organized forces of Idlib youth who aspired to independence from the Syrian regime. The members of this jihadi group unite under the banner of "strangers" as a way of both acknowledging their foreignness to the region and to claim their Islamic righteousness. Since their settlements, there have been many conflicts between them and the locals who view the group as threatening outsiders who only attract more military attacks by the Syrian Army.[30] The latter, Ghurabāʾ al-Shām, has a longer history, dating back to the Iraq war (2003–2011). First founded in Aleppo, the militia smuggled its fighters to war zones in the Middle East, mostly from the former Eastern Bloc, Turkey, and Arab Sunni majority countries.

These militias' claim to *gharībness* and the righteousness derived from it created uncomfortable and contested points in my conversations with displaced Syrians in Lebanon. My interlocutors claimed *gharībness* not only due to their external displacement but also as people who took it upon themselves to fight against oppression and further marginalization. While many, including Abdallah, maintained that the jihadists could not legitimately call themselves *ghurabāʾ*, their objections gestured toward different readings of estrangement and its appeal. To Abdallah, that "real revolutionary Syrians" were appalled by these jihadists was basis enough to reject their claim to the righteous *gharībness* of Islam. As an *ibn ʿashīra* who felt estranged by the Baathist regime and joined the anti-establishment movement, Abdallah was committed to a journey that brought the many faces of *gharīb* together.

To Umm Ali,[31] a middle-aged Syrian woman born to a religious *shaykh* in Al-Raqqa, it all boiled down to distinguishing truth from falsehood (*tamyīz al-ḥaqq min al-bāṭil*). The jihadists were not righteous, and therefore not true *ghurabāʾ*, because they were not fighting for the good cause, as is the Islamic command. In a similar vein, Yassin, my friend from Al-Hassaka, believed that *ghurabāʾ* are always in opposition, and fighting oppression rather than seeking a position of power. For him,

[29]Many jihadi movements have announced themselves as *ghurabā*, the last righteous Muslims who aim to guide the misled wider society. Usama Bin-Laden has praised the *ghurabā* and has counted himself and his followers among them in written poems. *Al-Ghuraba* is also the title of a popular jihadi anthem and the name of one of ISIL's anthems, and the Islamic State of Syria and Levant media outlet. See, for instance, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/08/battle-lines-jihad-creswell-and-haykel.

[30]At: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coups-allies-hts-rids-syrias-idlib-opponents.

[31]*Umm* means mother of and is usually followed by the name of the first child of the family.

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the jihadists' claim to rule already pushed them beyond the sacred boundaries of *gharībness*.

Not all my interlocutors agreed upon or highlighted the virtuousness of the positioning of *ghurabāʾ*, but they each sewed oppression into the fabric of *gharībness* as emblematic of the way *ghurabāʾ* are positioned in larger societal settings. Oppression, in its very structural form, acts as the intersection between a *gharīb*'s solitary path and those of others who experience exclusion, marginalization, and estrangement in their multiple forms throughout life and death. That estrangement transcends individual, communal, and national forms of belonging allows us to see shared modes of resistance, as well as contestations and disagreements that *ghurabāʾ* bring to their surroundings. Let me now return to Lebanon to further explore the entanglement of oppression and *gharībness* and the ways it reorganizes social boundaries of self versus other, and us versus them.

Ghurabāʾ and the Silencing Oppression

"Of course we are *ghurabāʾ* (strangers) here," Amer responds when I ask whether he thinks of himself as a stranger in Lebanon. When I met him in the summer of 2019 in a makeshift camp near the city of Zahle in the Beqaa Valley, he had been living in eastern Lebanon for five consecutive years. Following the capture of his hometown, Dayr al-Zur, by the ISIL in the spring of 2014, he left Syria with his wife and four children, leaving behind their aging parents. For Amer, Lebanon was not only a postwar destination. Before the start of the Syrian conflict, he had crossed the border multiple times as a migrant seasonal farmworker, spending four to six months per year in agricultural fields of north and east of Lebanon and returning to his family in Syria during the cold months. The camp he was settled in with his family was in fact one that he had frequently stayed in while a seasonal worker in the Beqaa Valley. Knowing his way around eastern Lebanon and being part of the seasonal labor network, in a way, facilitated their finding a tent in an informal settlement, and day-labor jobs, though they were poorly paid and precarious. Now he, his wife, and their twelve-year-old son worked intermittently long shifts in the nearby farms for 6,000 Lebanese lira (about US$3) per day, which still left them under the poverty line.

In 2019, and with the exacerbating criminalization of paperless Syrians, having three day-labor wages coming into the household was rare for Syrian families settled in the Beqaa Valley and north Lebanon. "*Alhamdulillah*" ("Praise be to God") he whispered a few times in between his sentences while acknowledging how much more arduous conditions of displacement could be for Syrians without the long history and local knowledge that he had acquired in Lebanon prior to being displaced. These subtle differences in Syrians' living conditions, however, did not change the fact that they all were *ghurabāʾ* in Lebanon.

"There is oppression (*ẓulum*) everywhere, but if you could respond back, it means that you have rights, you're not a *gharīb*," he exclaimed, adding, "Here we just remain silent [in the face of oppression]."

"But doesn't it help to speak the language, know the culture and the region?" I asked. "Aren't Syrians more like *ghurabāʾ* in Europe?"

"It's not the language. Even Lebanese can't say anything [to oppression]. It's the system (*nizām*) here. You need connections (*maʿārif*) or a lot of money (*maṣāri*), or you can't say anything."

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Amer's pointed response challenged many presumptions about what it means to be, or feel, like a stranger. He started by redirecting my question from whether he views *himself* as a *gharīb* in Lebanon and instead responded in plural "*we* are *ghurabāʾ* here." Throughout the conversation, the "*we*" Amer viewed himself to be part of shifted fluidly from Syrians to include "even Lebanese" who were deprived of the unevenly distributed privileges that he succinctly defined as indicating connections and wealth. Thinking aloud, he divulged conditions of *ghurabāʾ* beyond geographic, linguistic, and historic familiarities, or a lack thereof, and instead highlighted their positioning as marginalized subjects who faced oppression. To him, merely speaking a language or knowing one's way around did not make one any less a *gharīb*; rather, what separates those who belong to the structure of any given society from those excluded from it is whether they can speak up against oppression or must remain silent. Amer's juxtaposition is remarkable, particularly coming from someone who was displaced from his home country precisely because of a collective uprising led by people who decided to at last speak up against oppression. The aftereffects of speaking up—which in Syria turned out to be intensified state violence, mass killing, torture, and the displacement of millions—appeared to Amer as the price Syrians paid for asking for their rights; that is, for saying no to being estranged. Lebanon, in contrast, represented a system (*niẓām*) that automatically silenced the voices of people deprived of connections and money, which for Amer loosely defined the condition of estrangement.

On my visit to the makeshift camp a week later,[32] Amer recounted his father's last days in February of 2019, in a way that extended his contrasting of the two states. He fell ill while on a visit in Lebanon from Dayr al-Zur, where the majority of the population is now elderly, and widowed women, with no desire or means to leave. As his health deteriorated, he had decided to visit his family for what they all feared would be the last time. A few days after his arrival he was hospitalized. Amer first took him to a Lebanese hospital, "thinking," he said, "that it's like in Syria where at least hospital care was free (*bi balash*) [free of charge or affordable]." But they were stopped at the hospital gate and told they had to pay a one-night hospitalization fee up front and show their residency permits. Having neither the money nor the permits, they ended up in Al-Nasra, the Palestinian Red Crescent hospital in Bar Elias, a twenty-minute drive from Amer's camp. Established in 1968 for displaced Palestinians, the hospital is now much less frequented by Palestinians than by Syrians and lower-class Lebanese with no access to medical insurance and unable to pay the high rates of Lebanon's increasingly privatized health care system.

Amer expressed bewilderment at the scene of the small Palestinian hospital's waiting room crowded with "the poor from the area (*fuqarā min al-manṭaqa*)," who, like him, could not afford a Lebanese hospital. His father was hospitalized in Al-Nasra for only four days, at which point he was turned away since the hospital could not *spare* a bed for a terminally ill patient. Amer was not aggrieved so much by the hospital's decision as by the structures that conditioned growing numbers of people

[32]In the summer of 2019, for two and a half months, I accompanied four social workers on their weekly visits to a total of eighteen makeshift camps in the Beqaa Valley. During this time, I traveled to the Beqaa Valley two or three days per week and made visits to three to four camps per day, depending on the social workers' schedules. I started with attending group and workshop sessions held by the social workers in the camps, which is where I met many of my interlocutors. That way, I got to meet with my interlocutors every week or every other week, depending, again, on the social workers' schedule. I kept in touch with and visited these groups until the end of my fieldwork in late November 2019.

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to a scarcity of resources. "The government (*al-dawla*) must recognize that we are *darawīsh* (impoverished),"[33] he contended, "but all troubles come to *us* unfailingly."[34] Amer's father was eventually set on the road back to Syria and died from a pulmonary infection the day after arriving in Dayr al-Zur. "We say *alhamdulillah*, for he passed away in Syria. He was buried in our family grave plot." Amer said.

For Amer, the waiting room of Al-Nasra, a humanitarian-run Palestinian hospital packed with poor Lebanese and displaced Syrians, encapsulated the *ghurabā experience* that he had explained to me a week earlier. The system (*niẓām*), or rather its failures, which rendered increasing numbers of Lebanon's inhabitants into silent strangers, was manifested in Amer's medical journey with his father. In his understanding, *ghurabā'* were a direct product of the uneven distribution of capital, whether economic, social, or otherwise, which leaves people estranged from the care that very system is intended to provide; that is, public goods. The public healthcare systems in the two countries displayed the contrast he drew between Syria and Lebanon in our first conversation. That poorer Lebanese who were pushed to the margins of a malfunctioning system of governance shifted Amer's *we* from Syrians, or categorically speaking the displaced, to *darawīsh*, the poor, whether it be from Lebanon or elsewhere in the region.

In the last decade, concurrent with Lebanon's deteriorating economy and the Syrian civil war, the extent to which living standards have deteriorated has further intertwined the lives of impoverished Lebanese and displaced communities, and for many of them living and dying as *ghurabā'* has become the only affordable option. As such, *gharībness* and its Levantine particularities are unraveling the complexities of the lives and deaths of the marginalized beyond legal binaries such as refugee versus citizen, internal versus external, and voluntary versus displaced migration. The long history of regional connectivity and the fluid bordering practices that have existed since well before the Levant's modern nation-states formed, have cultivated and multiplied forms of *gharībness* not easily mapped onto the territorial and legal frameworks of the international governance of populations.

Binary legal categorizations are especially useless in Lebanon, a country with many regionally displaced peoples which also rejects the ratification of major refugee laws within its territories (Janmyr 2017).[35] Despite the ostensible differences in their legal statuses, all communities—Palestinians, Syrians, and the ever-more-impoverished Lebanese—have been conditioned to occupying a status of not fully belonging.

Conclusion

This paper has followed the *gharīb* as a productive analytic to explore regional displacement and its accompanying forms of social exclusion and marginalization. It has not shied away from the fluidity, expansive histories, and geographical unboundedness of the *gharīb*'s travels. Instead, it has brought together ethnographic accounts and combined them with an expansive genealogy of the concept of *gharīb* that

[33] *Darawīsh* in Arabic is the plural form of *darwīsh*, originating from *darvīsh* in Persian and with the equivalent of *dervish* in Turkish, and refers to wanderers who denounce their material possessions, often living off of alms. It may or may not contain the Sufi connotation. Here, Amer is using *darawīsh* as *fuqarā*, or the poor.

[34] "الدولة لازم تعرف انو نحنا دراويش، بس دايما القصص بتوقع براس الدراويش"

[35] Lebanon is not a signatory of either the 1951 Refugee Protocol or the 1967 one, which further legitimizes its arbitrary treatment of its displaced communities.

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reaches far beyond Lebanon, the Levant, or the modern Middle East. By occupying the space between estrangement and poverty, the *gharīb* allows for an intersectional understanding of the inequality experienced by marginalized and displaced communities in Lebanon and elsewhere. This approach further attunes us to the overlapping processes through which the internally and externally displaced, along with the poor, are pushed to the margins. In doing so, the *gharīb* concept helps expose interconnected forms of oppression marked by the unequal distribution of capital—whether economic, cultural, linguistic, or social. It also allows us to contextualize these oppressions at the intersection of national identity, race, and gender. Throughout, I have outlined how the *ghurabāʾ* continue to remake not only their own image, but also every social space they enter. As they travel farther away from home territories, they stretch the locally accepted boundaries of belonging, or exclusion. Outsiders and outcasts challenge our top-down and at times static understanding of societies, power relations, and ethical rigidness. From jihadists of the Syrian civil war to those making a life in Al-Ghuraba Cemetery, strangers disrupt the spatial, political, and economic order of things.

The shift to an analytical framework that pivots around the *gharīb* offers another path for moving beyond the inadequacies of the category of refugeehood. This shift does not aim to *assimilate or flatten* different degrees of displacement and marginalization and their varied social and structural impacts on different displaced populations. Rather, it allows us to delve into the long history of migration, long-lasting kinship ties, and shared cultural and linguistic practices that bring Syrians' lives and deaths in Lebanon together with the experiences and cultural histories of many Lebanese, Palestinians, and others. Unlike "refugee," the concept of *gharīb* avoids the analytic pitfalls of international development platforms' definitions of legality and citizenship. It has long acted as an umbrella term that brings together different peoples from across the region who live with the juxtaposition of mobility and a lack of belonging—socially, culturally, linguistically, and economically—to the spatio-temporality of their surroundings. It long predates the constructs of modern nation-states and national border policies, and hence escapes methodologically nationalistic frameworks for analyzing displaced communities.

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