

# PALESTINIAN DIASPORA IN TURKEY

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The Arab-Israeli war that took place in 1948 was the beginning of many crises. The first major migration occurred after this very war. Approximately one million Palestinian civilians had to immigrate to the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan to protect themselves from the attacks by Zionist Jews.<sup>1</sup> The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), founded in 1949 and started its activities in 1950, provides assistance to Palestinian refugees in these five regions, with a population of approximately six million, in the fields of education, health, infrastructure and social services. When the issue of "Palestinian refugees" comes up, UNRWA's field of activity usually comes to mind. But in the 72-year history of occupation, Palestinians have dispersed to many countries around the world.

Turkey also hosts between 25,000 and 30,000 Palestinians from different regions.<sup>2</sup> The first

Palestinian migration to Turkey dates back to the 1970s. Until the 2000s, the number of Palestinians who came to Turkey had been small. This is because Turkey's past economic and internal political problems had stirred off migrants from viewing the country as a refuge.

After 2010, the Arab Spring and the unstable administrations in the Middle East made Turkey to be seen as a security blanket. Turkey is host to many migrants not only from Syria but also from different countries in the Middle East. After 2010, Palestinians from different Middle Eastern countries also came to Turkey.

The legal status and living conditions of Palestinians living in Turkey vary; depending on the countries and history from which they come. In this article, Palestinians living in Turkey will be categorized into six groups. This article is based on face-to-face interviews with Palestinian refugees from different regions.



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Palestinian Diaspora In Turkey	Total Number of Families	Date of Coming to Turkey	Reasons for Coming to Turkey
First Generation from Palestine	500	Before 2000	Education
Palestinians from Iraq	250	After 2010	War
Palestinians from different countries after Arab Spring	1.000	After 2011	Instability
Palestinians from Syria	3.500	After 2013	War
Palestinians from the Gulf	400	After 2018	Economic and political pressure
Students from Palestine	8.000 (person)		Education

## 1. First Generation

Palestinians who came to Turkey for education before 2000 and then settled in the country are usually known as the “first generation”. A Palestinian man would usually come to Turkey to study in medical or engineering departments. He would later settle in Turkey by marrying a Turkish or Palestinian woman. Many of the first generation have become Turkish citizens, and their children are also born in Turkey. It is estimated that there are 500 families of the first generation living in Turkey for the last 20-25 years. An average Palestinian family usually consists of five people. Therefore, it can be said that around 2,500 Palestinians live in Turkey from the first generation. Socio-economically, people of this group usually work as a doctor, engineer or merchant, the same as that of an average Turkish citizen.

Vail Salmanali, who came from Gaza to Turkey in 1994 when he was 18, says that the first generation came to Turkey because previously there were no medical and engineering departments in schools in Arab countries, or because very few people were admitted to these departments. Salmanali studied engineering in Turkey. He came from Gaza, a region under multifaceted pressure with a provisional scrip issued by Israel. He was not able to visit Gaza until he finished his undergraduate, master’s and doctoral studies. He was finally able to visit Gaza for the first time in 2010, 16 years after arriving in Turkey.

Salmanali says that the biggest problem for the first generation is not being able to visit their homeland, and he blames Israel’s policy for pressuring young Palestinian people from visiting their country. According to Salmanali, Palestinian youth - especially those from Gaza-who receive education in Turkey were usually arrested by Israeli forces on their way out of their country and forced to inform about the Palestinian diaspora in Turkey. Otherwise, it would not be possible for them to return to Turkey and continue their education. He says that he refrained from visiting Gaza to avoid Israeli forces mistreatment and to complete his education.

Salmanali says he benefited from Turkey’s free healthcare because he came as a student to the country. But he remembered that at that time, university education in Turkey came with a cost, and all foreign students paid three times as much as Turkish students. But after becoming a Turkish citizen in 2016, he had no health and education fee problems.

Unlike other Palestinians living in Turkey, Salmanali does not describe himself primarily as a “Palestinian.” First, he says, he is a “Turkish” or “Turkish citizen”, and then he is originally a Palestinian. Although he is occasionally subjected to racism when he says he is an Arab, he says their perspective changes positively when he says he is a Palestinian.

Salmanali says that the first generation consists of people who have important professions and make significant contribution to Turkey.

He underlines the need for the convenience in obtaining work permit and conferring citizenship to these people.[3]

## 2. Palestinians from Iraq

Iraq is one of the countries where Palestinians immigrate due to Israeli threats and attacks. Palestinians living in Iraq were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) under the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. According to official figures, 23,000 Palestinians lived in Iraq before the US invasion.<sup>4</sup>

After the US invasion in Iraq in 2003, many Palestinians were displaced for the second time and forced to leave the country. They usually went to nearby countries such as Syria, Jordan, and TRNC (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus). During this period, the number of immigrants who came to Turkey was small, as Turkey had intricate rules in accepting refugees. Some of the Palestinians who were forced to leave Iraq were resettled by UNHCR in a third country, such as Switzerland, Germany, Canada, Australia; some of them began living as irregular migrants in Syria and surrounding countries, usually undocumented.

After 2010, some Palestinians from Iraq were displaced for the third time due to conflicts – especially the Syrian War - in the Middle East. During this period, many Palestinian immigrants came to Turkey. Palestinians who fled to Turkey from the war in Iraq and displaced for the third time, applied to UNHCR's offices in Turkey and registered, and most of them were resettled in a third country. Although most migrants use Turkey as a country of transit, it is known that between 250 and 300 families of Palestinian origin from Iraq currently live in Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

Among the Palestinian groups living in Turkey, those living under the most difficult conditions are families from Iraq. Files related to official transactions are transferred from UNHCR to the Republic of Turkey's Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management. Difficulty in obtaining work permit has forced

them to work illegally. This, in turn, caused labour exploitation. On the other hand, although children and the elderly do benefit from limited healthcare services, there are still problems in this issue. Around four million Palestinian migrants of Iraqi origin in Turkey who cannot meet their needs for registration cannot receive regular assistances. Some families live in very difficult conditions and depend on the help of relatives living in other countries.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Palestinians from Different Countries After the Arab Spring

After The Jasmine Revolution, which began in Tunisia in 2010, anti-government demonstrations began in many countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Bahrain. Demands for freedom and justice, which soon spread to the Middle East, was put to a stop by pressure from authoritarian administrations in many countries. There have been extremes of repression, be it in the form of a military coup in Egypt or a war in Syria. Almost in every country, opposition groups have faced different dimensions of dictatorial regimes, and instability has prevailed in these countries. Many people have gone to different countries for reasons such as security threats as well as failure to meet economic and political expectations. It is estimated that about 1,000 Palestinian families came to Turkey from different countries in the Middle East during this period.<sup>7</sup>

These Palestinian families that came to Turkey on a travel visa or residence permit have come in the hope to return. Due to the ongoing crises and unstable political structure in many countries, they have not been able to return. Many of them continue to live in Turkey by establishing their own businesses or working in different jobs.

## 4. Palestinians from Syria

One of the biggest results of the Syrian War is the displacement of more than 13 million people living in the country. Palestinian refugees in Syria, whose number was 496,000 in 2011, have also been affected by this crisis.<sup>8</sup> According to UNRWA, at least 124,000 Palestinians have

been forced to migrate from Syria to Lebanon, Jordan or more remote areas in the nine-year period.<sup>9</sup> Turkey is also one of the countries where Palestinian refugees have gone to since the beginning of the Syrian War.

The number of Syrian Palestinians arriving in Turkey has increased, especially after Bashar al-Assad's forces bombed the Yarmuk Camp in December 2012 and forced 210,000 people living in the camp to immigrate. It is estimated that 3,500 Palestinian families in Turkey came from Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Since Palestinians living in Syria are stateless, they tried to enter Turkey illegally until 2015, and there were problems in terms of their registration. Since the "travel document" issued by the Syrian state in pre-war period had no legal equivalent in Turkey, Palestinians from Syria were not officially recognized. So until 2015, it was very difficult for Palestinians to enter Turkey from Syria. Those who could enter could not benefit from any services such as healthcare or education.<sup>11</sup> Following the arrangement in 2015, Palestinians who came from Syria to Turkey began to be treated as Syrians and were granted temporary protection.

Palestinians from Syria, the most populous Palestinian group in Turkey, are divided into five groups according to their legal status:<sup>12</sup>

1. Tourist visa holders: People who enter Turkey through official channels from border crossings, official ports and airports.
2. Refugees with work permits: Those who invest in Turkey through property purchase or work in different institutions in Turkey.
3. Refugees with humanitarian residence: It is a type of residence that gives the right of protection to the people who find asylum in other countries for the reasons specified in the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Turkey is signatory to the convention.
4. "ID card" (*kimlik*): It is the group of people that holds temporary protection card and

makes up the vast majority. The Turkish government granted many Palestinians from Syria with the same status as Syrians after the 2015 arrangement. They benefit from free education and healthcare services and have work permits. But they have to stay in the city where the "ID card" is given; they have to have permission from the police to move between cities.

5. There is a group of a small number of people, the majority of whom live in Istanbul, who do not have any legal documents. This group is divided into two within itself:
  - a. Although they are registered in different cities, they are those who come to Istanbul to work or live with relatives. On July 22, 2019, the governorship of Istanbul gave the refugees living in Istanbul one-month period to leave the city, although they were registered in different provinces.<sup>13</sup> According to the decision, refugees captured in different provinces were sent or deported to the provinces where they are registered.<sup>14</sup>
  - b. People who are caught trying to enter or exit Turkey illegally. These people who are not given ID cards must go to the police once every 15 days or every month. Immigrants in these two groups cannot obtain ID cards because they enter Turkey illegally and cannot enjoy the rights of refugees in areas such as healthcare and education. They also face the risk of deportation to Syria, where the war is ongoing.

Ibrahim Al-Ali, who went from Syria to Lebanon at the end of 2012 and from Lebanon to Turkey in 2017, divides his life into two parts, before and after 2013. Al-Ali, whose family came to Syria in 1948 and lived in the Yarmuk Camp, explains that before the Syrian War they had the same rights as any Syrian, except for right to elect and be elected. In December 2012, when Bashar al-Assad's forces began bombing the camp, a second period began for all the camp residents and it was as if a new Nakba happened to them. Al-Ali points out that refugees in Lebanon live in very difficult conditions. He

believes that the biggest problem in Turkey is the difficulties in official transactions. Al-Ali, who lives in Turkey on a tourist visa, says he must renew his visa every year, and some people at the Syrian Consulate accept bribe of hundreds of dollars each time. He says that despite the difficulty of official transactions, the attitude of the Turks to the Palestinians is quite intimate and it is his wish to continue living in Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Palestinians from the Gulf

After 2017, the US-backed political alliance between Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed has supported many authoritarian administrations in crises in the Middle East, from Egypt to Yemen. The UAE and Bahrain have moved into a period of normalisation in their clandestine relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia is also expected to sign a peace agreement with Israel soon.

The change of policy on the Palestinian-Israeli issue directly affects Palestinians living in some Gulf countries. There are 429,000 Palestinians in Saudi Arabia and 101,000 in the UAE.<sup>16</sup> Palestinians who live there do not have refugee status, because these countries have not signed the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. These countries do not have international obligations regarding immigrants, and they place bureaucratic barriers that hamper immigrants from easily obtaining their visas.<sup>17</sup> New economic burdens associated with residence renewal and work permits have left Palestinians in a difficult position. In addition to economic pressure, the Palestinians are also faced with political pressure.

In 2018, Saudi Arabia arrested 68 Jordanian and Palestinian citizens on vague grounds. Among the detainees was 82 year-old cancer patient Mohammed al-Khudari, former representative of Hamas to Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup> After two years of detention, the defendants began their trial at the special terrorism court.<sup>19</sup> Crown Prince MbS, known for his crackdown on opponents in the country, is also trying to neutralize Palestinians who oppose cooperation with Israel.

It is estimated that 400 families of Palestinian origin from Saudi Arabia and the UAE have come to Turkey by economic and political grounds since 2018.<sup>20</sup> Mohammad Ghazal came to Turkey with his family for the same reasons in the beginning of 2019. Ghazal's decision to leave Saudi Arabia was because he felt a security threat due to his anti-Israel stance.

Ghazal, who is a lecturer in geological engineering, expresses that although he has sufficient financial resources, he still wants to work according to his profession. But his inability to speak Turkish is the biggest obstacle to his work. Ghazal says that the biggest problem for Palestinians living in Turkey is related to work opportunity. And in this case, he points out that the principles of employing foreign workers in Turkey are an important factor.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Students from Palestine

Approximate 8,000 Palestinian students from Palestine and different countries are educated in Turkey. 500 of them benefit from the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) scholarships. While students who benefit from the YTB scholarship receive free healthcare services, this remains a major problem for many students.

Like many international students in Turkey, Palestinian students' problem is language barrier. 5,000 Palestinian students in Turkey study English programs at private universities.

Palestinian students, spread in 55 cities of Turkey, often live in a closed social circle among themselves in large cities such as Istanbul. But in small cities where there are only a few Palestinians, they develop more intense social relations with the Turks.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The Palestinian diaspora in Turkey differs according to the countries they come from, and Turkey has become the third or fourth country in which they live. Some Palestinians come to Turkey through legal channels and live here with tourist visas, residence or work permits,

while others – especially those who have fled the war – come through illegal channels. While there were 508 irregular migrants of Palestinian origin who entered Turkey in 2014, this number increased to 12,210 in 2019.<sup>23</sup>

Health, education and work sectors are their main problems. Although Palestinian families from Syria can receive partially free health treatment and medication, a significant part of migrants have to pay high fees. While the children of refugee families who have been living in Turkey for many years do speak Turkish, new immigrants have problems in their education due to language differences. And they are forced to opt for private schools. Their inability to speak Turkish is also a major obstacle in finding a job. Immigrants who have work permits also have difficulty finding work due to principles of employing foreign workers. In addition, some employers hire these immigrants illegally for the sake of cheap labor. Cheap labor is made of immigrants without work permits or illegal immigrants. It is known that illegal workers are employed at very low wages in many regions of Turkey, especially on the Turkish border and Istanbul.

Despite other problems, almost all of the Palestinians interviewed state that they are not exposed to racism in Turkey. They point out that some Turks do have a negative attitude, thinking that they are “Arabs” or “Syrians”, but when they say, “I am Palestinian”, the Turks shifted their attitude. It is understood that the concept of “Arab” – given the established historical narrative in Turkey - and “Syrian” - due to the fact that Turkey has become the most important

agenda with the rapidly growing numbers of Syrian migrants - evoke racism in some Turkish citizens. As Turkish politicians and people have supported the Palestinians since the 1960s, Turkey has grown a positive view of the Palestinians.

The Palestinian issue has become a unique issue in which different political parties in Turkey share a common ground. However, there is a misunderstanding in Turkey that the Palestinians living in the country negatively affect humanitarian relations between the two peoples. As a result of Zionist propaganda, there is a widespread perception in Turkey that Palestinians sold their land to the Jews; when in fact, before 1948, the British Mandate regime sold public lands while some Lebanese and Syrian landlords sold their lands in Palestine to Jews. During this period, less than 1% of the land sold by the Palestinians. After 1948, Israel occupied most of the historic Palestinian Territories.<sup>24</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who live in different countries and never see their country feel a sense of belonging to their land. Almost all Palestinians living in Turkey identify themselves as “Palestinian” and want to return to Palestine one day. But they are happy to live in Turkey until their return is possible. The most basic demands are in the convenience in terms of healthcare services, education, business, and other official transactions. Turkey has a great responsibility because it has a large migrant population. But should a stable policy is developed, Palestinian youth and qualified human resources would make a significant contribution to Turkey.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Fahir Armaoğlu, Filistin Meselesi ve Arap-İsrail Savaşları (1948-1988), Kronik Yayınları, İstanbul, 2019, p.110-111.
- <sup>2</sup> Palestinian students in Turkey are not included in this number.
- <sup>3</sup> From the interview with Vail Salmanali on September 1,2020.
- <sup>4</sup> From the interview with Tamir Misheynish on September 12, 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> From the interview with Tamir Misheynish on September 12, 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> From the interview with Mohammad Misheynish, President of the Palestinian Solidarity Association on August 27, 2020.
- <sup>7</sup> From the interview with Mohammad Misheynish, President of the Palestinian Solidarity Association on August 27, 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> Selim Sezer, “Suriye Savaşının Yermuk Filistin Mülteci Kampı Üzerindeki Etkileri”, Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol: 6, No: 2, pp.133-165, 2019, p.143, <https://dergipark.org.tr/download/article-file/891185>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>
- <sup>10</sup> From the interview with Ibrahim Al-Ali on September 1,2020.
- <sup>11</sup> Hafize Zehra Kavak & Emrin Çebi, “Suriye’den Türkiye’ye Göç Eden Filistinli Mültecilerin Durumu”, INSAMER, 13.04.2015, [https://insamer.com/tr/suriyeden-turkiyeye-goc-eden-filistinli-multecilerin-durumu\\_191.html](https://insamer.com/tr/suriyeden-turkiyeye-goc-eden-filistinli-multecilerin-durumu_191.html)
- <sup>12</sup> Ibrahim Al-Ali, “الواقع القانوني للاجئين الفلسطينيين من سورية إلى تركيا”, مجموعة العمل من أجل فلسطينيي سورية, 25.08.2020, <https://www.actionpal.org.uk/ar/pdf/palestinianstatusturkey.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> “Düzensiz Göçle Mücadele İle İlgili Basın Açıklaması”, Republic of Turkey Governorship of Istanbul, 22.07.2019, <http://www.istanbul.gov.tr/duzensiz-gocle-mucadele-ile-ilgili-basin-aciklamasi>
- <sup>14</sup> “Savaş Bölgesine Geri Gönderildiler”, Amnesty International, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4411022019TURKISH.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> From the interview with Ibrahim Al-Ali on September 1,2020.
- <sup>16</sup> [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/14276/SA](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14276/SA)
- <sup>17</sup> Esra Uludağ, “Suriye Örneği Üzerinden Türkiye ile Kritik Aktörlerin Göç Politikalarına Karşılaştırmalı Bir Bakış”, Turkish Center for International Relations & Strategic Analysis, 18.04.2018, <https://turksam.org/turkiye-ile-kritik-aktorlerin-goc-politikalarina-karsilastirmali-bir-bakis-suriye-ornegi>
- <sup>18</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Abuses Taint Mass Terrorism Trial”, Human Rights Watch (HRW), 17.04.2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/17/saudi-arabia-abuses-taint-mass-terrorism-trial>
- <sup>19</sup> “Dozens of Palestinians face ‘terrorism court’ in Saudi Arabia”, Al Jazeera, 09.03.2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/dozens-palestinians-face-terrorism-court-saudi-arabia-200309162620286.html>
- <sup>20</sup> From the interview with Mohammad Misheynish, President of the Palestinian Solidarity Association on August 27, 2020.
- <sup>21</sup> From the interview with Mohammad Ghazal on September 1, 2020.
- <sup>22</sup> From the interview with Yasser Alashi, President Of The Palestine Students Association, on September 1,2020.
- <sup>23</sup> “Düzensiz Göç”, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikler>
- <sup>24</sup> Mohsen Mohammed Saleh, “Filistinliler topraklarını Yahudilere sattı mı?”, Asalet Yayınları, July 2020, p.12-17.