Northumbria Research Link

Middle Eastern Reflections on Forced Migration, Solidarity, and HCI Research

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HCI research with refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly displaced populations has grown over the years. Indeed, our passionate community working at the intersection of design and technology has expanded, with several researchers conducting their work in the Middle East, where a large number of refugees reside. However, with this growth comes a need for reflection on how our research acts in solidarity with forcibly displaced populations and scholars in the Middle East. In this article, we outline the ways in which inadvertent harm may arise as we situate ourselves within Middle Eastern spaces and how a reflexive process facilitates our avoiding them. To do so, we present a brief history of migration and colonization within the Middle East as a backdrop that shapes how humanitarian work and research is currently being conducted. We also provide our experiences and perspectives as Middle Eastern HCI researchers that not only research forced migration but are also undergoing our own migration journeys. We hope that through this piece we can instigate dialogues within our research community on how we can work toward a vision of research solidarity that is characterized by reflexivity and is devoid of neocolonialism. While in this piece we reflect on HCI research and forced migration in the Middle East, such reflections may be extended to other contexts of migration in countries and regions that have their own unique cultures and histories of migration, colonialism, and conflict.

Migration Flows Throughout Middle Eastern History

In 2015 the Western world was confronted with what has been termed the migration crisis of our time. Refugees and asylum seekers, the majority from the Middle East, journeyed to the borders of Europe and then on to other countries. To this day, we are still witnessing such journeys, as people continue to flee conflict, economic hardship, and persecution, and it is expected that forced migration will continue increasing due to the climate crisis. While the migration crisis was deemed a new challenge that Western nations have to come to grips with, such migratory trends are not new to those of us from the Middle East. The 1948 conflict in Palestine led to an influx of Palestinian refugees into neighboring countries Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, who to this day are still residing in refugee camps [1]. During the most recent Iraq war, we also saw the movement of Iraqis to neighboring countries [2]. The Syrian war led to a further influx of refugees into Jordan and Lebanon that not only included Syrian but also Palestinian refugees who had previously resided in Syria. Therefore, being Lebanese (Reem) and Syrian (Eiad) meant growing up in countries where refugee issues were discussed around the dinner table. It is within this history in the Middle Eastern region that we situate ourselves as Middle Eastern HCI scholars who are in solidarity with refugee causes.

However, the migration of Middle Eastern refugees is not the only migration trend we find in the region. Indeed, one can view the colonization of the Middle East after World War I to be a key form of migration that has shaped the politics in the region, and even the geographic boundaries between Middle Eastern nations. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Middle Eastern politicians, academics, and religious scholars came together in Damascus to draft our first constitution for a democratic state [3], a state in which religion and state were separate and parliamentary rule was within a constitutional monarchy.

However, at Versailles, there was no agreement on the proposition for an independent Middle Eastern state, and soon the region was colonized by French and British forces [3]. The reason we provide this history of colonization is not to dredge up the past as a causal factor to the current conflict in the region, but rather to provide a historical context to the persistent colonial notions that currently shape humanitarian responses and research in the Middle East.

Moving forward to 2015, while all eyes were on the migration of refugees to Western states, a more salient and formalized migration from the West to the Middle East was taking place. Rooted in the humanitarian system's way of providing aid, the Syrian conflict instigated the movement of humanitarians, who are typically from the West, to the Middle East. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly established themselves in countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. A similar trend can be observed in research. The Syrian refugee crisis resulted in increased research by Western scholars in the Middle East [4]. We have witnessed similar trends within HCI research where there has been an increase in HCI research on migration and refugee issues in the Middle East by scholars either like ourselves, Middle Eastern but working in the Global North or other nations, or by Western scholars. There is a noticeable dearth of HCI publications on migration led by Middle Eastern scholars in Middle Eastern research institutions.

Here, again, we are by no means saying that Western scholars are not welcome within the space of migration and HCI research in the Middle East. On the contrary, global solidarity is wanted and needed. However, we provide an overview of these trends to link the current state of humanitarian (HCI) research and the historically rooted ways of humanitarian response in postcolonial contexts.

We provide this overview as it is the historical context through which we reflect on our own positionalities as Middle Eastern researchers affiliated with non–Middle Eastern institutions. We continuously find ourselves engaging in this reflexive process, as we are aware of the potential harm that may arise from a lack of engagement with our and other Middle Easterners' colonized pasts and migration histories.

What we are calling for in this article is for our HCI community engaging in migration research in the Middle East to practice similar reflexivity in order to avoid inadvertent harm. Inadvertent harm that prioritizes Western knowledge and scholars rather than actively uplifting the voices of Middle Eastern scholars through equitable partnerships. Inadvertent harm that centers the white scholar's experience in the Middle East rather than the experiences of refugees and Middle Easterners themselves. Inadvertent harm through the fetishization of Middle Eastern resilience. Inadvertent harm through undervaluing Middle Eastern knowledge, histories, power dynamics, and cultures that shape the region.

More Than Just Hummus
Within five minutes of a Middle Easterner meeting non-Middle Easterners, the topic of hummus is bound to come up. Indeed, hummus and the Middle East are immediately associated with one another. In this section we use hummus as a metaphor as well as in reference to Middle Eastern food. As a metaphor, when saying "we are more than just hummus", we are saying Middle Eastern scholars are more than how we are configured

within Western research and academic structures. Indeed, we are more than a Middle Eastern flavor that is brought in to a research project. We are knowledge producers and our world(s) is more than the foods encountered within neocolonial narratives. When we say "More than just hummus", we are referring to hummus as more than just food. Food is at the heart of Middle Eastern social interactions that are intertwined with a culture of humility and hospitality.

Middle Eastern scholars are knowledge producers. The history of forced migration in the Middle East has entailed a growth of humanitarian research knowledge and capabilities within local research institutions, where Middle Eastern scholars have an embedded knowledge of the social makeup, political economy, and nature of the conflict in the Middle East. Despite this, Sibai et al. [4] have highlighted that in current North-South research collaborations, "institutions in high-income countries are incentivized to be the conceptualizers and producers, while Middle East partners become facilitators and executors" (i.e., the data collectors and the translators). The perceived value of Middle Eastern scholars accompanies us even as we move to Western research institutions. We have both been invited onto research projects with Western colleagues only to find that we have been assigned the role of translators, with our input in the conceptualization and implementation of the project minimized. We have both been added on to grant proposals as the tokenistic "Middle Eastern co-investigator" in order to increase the chances of funding success. The view that Middle Eastern scholars are not conceptualizers is reflected in the authorship of publications. While an extensive survey of HCI publications has not yet been conducted, we can look at other fields of study where such surveys have been implemented. A survey on public health research conducted on the Syrian crisis in the Middle East found that 92 percent of publications showed no collaboration with authors affiliated with institutions located in Syria, and only 55 percent had authors based in other Middle Eastern countries [5]. Furthermore, when accounting for first authorship, which is reflective of research leadership, the survey found that publications are predominantly authored by Western scholars. Such findings are not only indicative of the migration of Western research and researchers to the Middle East but also a prioritization of Western scholars as knowledge producers. The idea that Middle Eastern research institutions are lacking expertise and capabilities is a myth. Universities such as Birzeit University in Palestine, the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, and Princess Sumaya University in Jordan have a rich history of conducting rigorous research as well as translating it into policy and action.

Therefore, as Middle Eastern scholars based in other regions of the world, we refuse to engage, currently and in the future, in research in the Middle East that is not part of an equitable partnership with local institutions. We do so in an effort toward an equitable vision of how research is conducted that eschews neocolonial traits. We take this conscious step of solidarity in respect to the brilliant Middle Eastern scholars and their investment in their local research infrastructures and capacities. We ask for others within our HCI community to take similar stances—and actions—of solidarity so as not to replicate the inequitable research collaborations evident in other fields of research.

The Middle East is our reality. Another pathway toward realizing the aforementioned vision is being reflexive of our positionalities when writing and communicating HCI research with refugees in the Middle East. We have both endured presentations and meetings, and read articles in which the Western researchers lead with descriptions of the food, the smells, and

the sounds of our Middle Eastern homes, progressing to their experiences in refugee camps. We are proud of our heritage, but such accounts leave a lingering aftertaste that we as a society, and our refugee brothers and sisters, are being scrutinized under a microscope as others, similar to colonial anthropological research. Narrative accounts by Western scholars of their experiences in the Middle East provide insights on how to engage in research from an outsider perspective. However, the overemphasis on white perceptions centers the voice of the Western scholar as they describe their experiences in what to them is a new world. This can cause inadvertent harm, as the world they are depicting is not new at all but rather a reality and space that Middle Easterners themselves shape and live. Narratives that emphasize the Western experience in Middle Eastern refugee spaces inadvertently contribute to a narrative of neocolonial discovery.

Furthermore, such narratives are usually accompanied by narratives that fetishize the resilience of refugees, by glorifying the ways in which they are hacking technology, reappropriating refugee camps, and maintaining their heritage. However, the resilience of Middle Eastern refugees is a symptom of systemic trauma, oppression, and socioeconomic deprivation. When Reem was codesigning a booklet with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, participants titled the booklet "The Suffering of Syrian Refugees: Despite the Austerity We are Living." Everyone debated that title at length; they wanted to show their resilience but also wanted to highlight the sociopolitical and economic factors that have *forced* them to be resilient. Middle Eastern activists have repeatedly said that resilience is "the act of the broken" [5] and should not be glorified. Therefore, we need to approach the narratives we build around HCI and refugee research with care because our narratives are bound to be intertwined with wider political narratives. As Professor Rima Habib [6] stated, "To study refugee populations is to participate in a political struggle being waged by powerful interests who are attempting to shape the narratives that dictate public policies and perceptions." Rather than just glorifying the coping mechanisms and technology adaptation practiced by refugees, we should shed light on the system that maintains their marginalization.

…and it is more than just food. Such a reflexive approach also entails practicing our research with humility. Entering a refugee camp or settlement as researchers is laden with privilege. The fact that we can also leave at the end of every day is a privilege not afforded to refugees. When we enter a refugee community accompanied by an NGO, refugees do not feel like they have a choice to not engage [7]. Indeed, no matter how much we say in our consent scripts that participating in research is voluntary, welcoming researchers is expected from refugees, as it is a means of ensuring that they are in the good graces of NGOs and that they may receive benefits from the research (e.g., increased social capital, access to services and technologies they may not access otherwise). Navigating the complexity of the inherent power dynamics that are established the moment the researcher sets foot within a Middle Eastern refugee camp or settlement requires a nuanced cultural understanding that is intertwined with Middle Eastern customs and language.

Refugee camps and settlements are complex spaces that enforce the marginalization and isolation of refugees. They are also spaces in which humanitarian action and research take place. However, more important, refugee tents are homes that are arguably the only space left in which refugees can practice their agency and identity. Therefore, entering such spaces should not be taken for granted and should be handled with humility and respect.

Researchers entering refugee camps/settlements are guests; they should therefore abide by the traditional customs of hospitality and be aware of the interactions that they entail. In the Middle East, we grow up knowing the custom of not entering someone's home emptyhanded; it is within this custom that we bring food. Not aid to be handed out by saviors, it is rather a sign of respect to the homes that welcome us. The food is bound up in a social interaction in which we signal that we are guests—and therefore, the research engagements and our presence in the camps and settlements is on our refugee hosts' terms.

Conclusion

We write this piece as Middle Eastern HCI researchers who have migrated to the countries where we work for security and for the future of our families. Our ability to undertake our migration paths is reflective of our privilege. However, as we sit at our desks in the U.K. and Malaysia, we are still yearning for a day when we can flourish alongside our communities and within our Middle Eastern homes. It is that yearning that drives us to act in solidarity with Middle Eastern scholars and refugees, and indeed to write this piece.

We hope this piece sparks similar reflections on our positionalities as HCI researchers migrating into Middle Eastern refugee spaces. Through these reflections, we recognize with humility the value of Middle Eastern knowledge, histories, and hospitality. We hope that our words help us, as a research community, to conduct research on migration in the Middle East in true and equitable solidarity with Middle Eastern refugees and scholars.

Endnotes

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Image captions:
One of the last pictures Eiad took when he was in Syria showing the open road, landscape and greenery on his way to engage with a community he was working with.

A picture sent to Reem by her uncle, Ramzi Alaawar, taken from their family home to remind her of Lebanon.