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REVIEW ARTICLE

BORN SOMEWHERE, CITIZEN NOWHERE: GULF-BORN PALESTINIANS, STATELESSNESS, AND THE PROBLEM OF RETURN IN ASYLUM DETERMINATION

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ABSTRACT

Palestinians born and raised in the Arab Gulf present an unusual problem for refugee status determination. A person born in the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia can spend decades there and never become a national of that state. Residence typically begins with a father's employment and family sponsorship and ends when that basis disappears. Many also carry a Jordanian temporary passport or another Jordanian travel document without being Jordanian citizens. In such cases, things that usually travel together come apart: birthplace and nationality, residence and a right to remain, a passport and citizenship. Drawing on scholarship on the Palestinian diaspora in the Gulf, citizenship and statelessness, Gulf migration and refugee governance, Jordanian nationality practices, and international refugee law, this article examines what that separation means for asylum determination. The central point is straightforward. Birth, long residence, and possession of a travel document answer different questions. None, by itself, establishes nationality or a secure right of return. I use the term fragmented membership for situations in which the protections and rights ordinarily gathered under nationality are divided among several states or authorities. For Gulf-born Palestinians who lack an effective nationality, that fragmentation makes nationality, former habitual residence, present admissibility, and effective state protection separate matters of inquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian diaspora has generated legal configurations in which nationality, residence, identity, documentation, and social belonging do not correspond neatly to one another. This is particularly evident among Palestinians born in the Arab Gulf. Consider an individual born in the United Arab Emirates because his Palestinian father obtained employment there. The individual may have spent his entire childhood in the UAE, attended school there, developed his closest social relationships there, entered employment there, and regarded the Emirates as the only home he personally knew. None of those circumstances, however, necessarily made him an Emirati citizen (United Arab Emirates 1972). A similar situation can arise in Saudi Arabia, where Palestinian families have lived for decades as members of the expatriate population without their children acquiring Saudi citizenship merely because they were born in the Kingdom (Saudi Arabia 1954, art. 7; Lysa 2023a). The legal position becomes more complicated when the same individual possesses a Jordanian temporary passport or another Jordanian travel document. To an asylum decision-maker unfamiliar with the institutional history of Palestinian documentation, such a document may appear to resolve the nationality question. Often it does not. Jordan has historically issued passports and travel documentation to categories of Palestinians who are not Jordanian citizens (Gabbay 2014; Human Rights Watch 2010). Some temporary passport holders lack Jordanian national numbers, an important distinction in determining citizenship status (Gabbay 2014; Human Rights Watch 2010). Birth and upbringing in one country, documents from another, and a Palestinian national identity may thus coexist with neither citizenship nor an unconditional right of permanent residence in either state. This configuration creates a particularly difficult problem in asylum law. The refugee definition ordinarily assumes that a person has an identifiable country of nationality against which the availability of state protection can be assessed. Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees addresses the situation of persons without nationality by substituting the country of former habitual residence for the country of nationality (United Nations 1951, art. 1A(2); UNHCR 2019, paras. 101–105). Yet that substitution becomes considerably more complicated when the country of former habitual residence is a Gulf state in which the applicant may have lived for decades while possessing only temporary, employment-related, or derivative immigration status. Former habitual residence

identifies a historical relationship with a territory. That is not the same as a present legal entitlement to enter or remain there. For a sociologist or country-conditions researcher, the first task is to separate relationships that are easily collapsed into one another: birthplace, nationality, former habitual residence, the meaning of a document, and present admissibility. A file may contain impressive documentation and still leave unanswered a basic question: where does this person actually possess durable membership and effective protection? Each of these connections is real, though they need not all lead to the same state. My concern here is sociological and country-specific rather than doctrinal. I draw on research on citizenship, statelessness, migration, social networks, and the institutions that govern Palestinian residence and documentation. I do not offer legal advice or decide whether a particular applicant qualifies for asylum. Refugee law enters the discussion because it poses questions that depend on these underlying facts. I make no new empirical claim about how adjudicators decide these cases. What I offer is a way of reading them: I bring together literatures on Palestinian statelessness, Gulf migration, Jordanian documentation, and refugee law, and I separate four questions that asylum files tend to run together: nationality, former habitual residence, present admissibility, and effective protection. Table 1 applies that separation to the documents that most often appear in these files. The legal consequences remain for lawyers and adjudicators.

Palestinians and the Gulf Migration System

Palestinian migration to the Gulf expanded significantly during the twentieth century as the rapidly developing Gulf economies required educated and skilled labour (Nassar 2026). Palestinians worked across education, administration, professional services, business, and other sectors and became an important part of the Gulf's expatriate economies (Nassar 2026). Their economic and social incorporation, however, was generally not accompanied by equivalent political incorporation. The relationship was predominantly structured through labour migration rather than through naturalization and permanent membership. The gap was visible early. By the early 1980s more than 600,000 Palestinians lived in the Gulf states, yet fewer than 400 of them had obtained citizenship in any Gulf country, about 250 of those in Kuwait (Rouleau 1985). The most directly relevant recent study is Yara Nassar's "(Un)rooted Elsewhere: Palestinians and the Making of a Diaspora in the Arab Gulf" (2026). Nassar examines Palestinians in the Gulf as a diaspora whose relationship to host states differs substantially from the relationship normally associated with citizenship. Palestinians in the Gulf have generally not been formally incorporated through a refugee regime, and UNRWA's five fields of operation are Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, not the Gulf states (Lysa 2023b; UNRWA n.d.). Instead, their legal presence has generally been mediated through migration categories, including employment and family residence arrangements (Lysa 2023a, 2023b; Nassar 2026). The result is a population that can become socially rooted while remaining institutionally temporary. Nassar also draws attention to the diversity of documentation among Gulf Palestinians. Members of the population may hold Palestinian Authority passports, full or temporary Jordanian passports, or travel documents issued by other Arab states. Some of these documents facilitate mobility without conferring citizenship. This observation is particularly significant for asylum analysis because documentation can easily be mistaken for nationality.

Social belonging and legal membership thus develop along different tracks. Families have lived in the same country for decades, building professional, cultural, and personal ties while remaining foreign in law. The discrepancy is often sharper for children born there. For them the country is simply where they went to school, made friends, grew up, and built careers. In law, their position still rests on residence rules written for expatriates, not on any claim of citizenship, and that can remain true for a lifetime. Jinan Bastaki's work on displaced Palestinians provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding this problem. Bastaki (2020) examines citizenship from the perspective of Palestinians who have experienced prolonged statelessness and displacement and demonstrates why citizenship cannot be treated merely as a symbolic marker of national identity. Citizenship profoundly shapes access to mobility, security, employment, residence, political rights, diplomatic protection and, critically, a legally recognized right to enter and remain in the state of nationality. Palestinian political concerns about preserving the right of return have historically intersected with the reluctance of several Arab states to naturalize Palestinians (Gabbay 2024). The League of Arab States' 1965 Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States (the Casablanca Protocol) expressed this approach in formal terms. Palestinians resident in member states were to have employment rights on a par with citizens, the right to leave and return, and travel documents, all while retaining their Palestinian nationality rather than acquiring that of the host state (League of Arab States 1965; Shiblak 2006). Adherence was never uniform. Saudi Arabia was among the states that entered reservations, and implementation across the region was uneven. After the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis, Arab League Resolution 5093 left the treatment of Palestinians to each host state's domestic law, effectively superseding the Protocol (Shiblak 2006; Albanese and Takkenberg 2020). The Protocol never gave Gulf Palestinians an enforceable right to remain. Whatever the political rationale, one practical consequence has been that Palestinian families have stayed outside secure citizenship regimes for generations.

The Gulf context intensifies this condition because the region's migration systems have historically been designed around temporary foreign labour. Longva's (1997) study of Kuwait describes a society organized around a sharp boundary between citizens and expatriates, however long the latter had lived there. Vora (2013) shows how Indians born and raised in Dubai can be thoroughly embedded in the city while remaining legally foreign, and Lori (2019) characterizes the UAE's management of non-citizens as permanent temporariness, in which residence is extended through repeated renewals and postponed naturalization, and in which some long-term residents were issued Comoros passports that gave them a formal nationality but no right to live in the issuing state. Charlotte Lysa's research on refugee governance in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states demonstrates the analytical consequences of this structure. Lysa (2023a) describes Saudi refugee governance as "ad-hocratic," showing how populations that might be classified as refugees elsewhere can instead be incorporated through migration mechanisms. Her subsequent study asks whether the common claim that there are effectively no refugees in GCC states reflects reality or instead the institutional categories through which displaced populations are governed (Lysa

2023b). The absence of a formal refugee category can make people with histories of forced displacement administratively indistinguishable from ordinary foreign workers. Palestinians demonstrate this phenomenon particularly clearly. A Palestinian father typically entered Saudi Arabia or the UAE as a worker, not a refugee, even though his family's wider history is one of displacement and uncertain nationality. His children are then born within the legal framework governing expatriate families. What appears administratively to be temporary labour migration can end up reproducing statelessness or insecure status across generations. Legal insecurity is not the same thing as protection risk, but the two can intersect. Human Rights Watch (2020) documented a Saudi mass trial involving 68 Palestinian and Jordanian residents after arrests that began in 2018 on vague allegations of links to an unnamed terrorist organization. Family members reported enforced disappearances, prolonged solitary confinement, and torture. The episode does not show that Palestinians in Saudi Arabia are persecuted as a class, and insecure immigration status should not be recast as persecution. It does show that the consequences can become much more serious when Saudi authorities perceive a Palestinian resident as connected to politically sensitive activity. In an asylum case, this country evidence bears on a question different from simple admissibility: what treatment might the person face in the country of former habitual residence, and why?

Birth, Residence, and Nationality in the UAE and Saudi Arabia: Territorial birth does not, by itself, resolve nationality in either the UAE or Saudi Arabia. Neither state follows an unrestricted jus soli rule under which every child born on its territory automatically becomes a citizen (United Arab Emirates 1972, art. 2; Saudi Arabia 1954, arts. 7–8). A birth certificate from Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, or Jeddah records an important biographical fact, but birthplace alone is not evidence of Emirati or Saudi nationality unless the requirements of the relevant nationality law are otherwise met (United Arab Emirates 1972; Saudi Arabia 1954).

That point matters in asylum files because country of birth is often recorded prominently and can quietly become a proxy for country affiliation. For a Gulf-born Palestinian, it misleads. Saudi Arabia presents the same basic difficulty. Its Nationality Law does not confer nationality merely because a child is born in the Kingdom to two foreign parents, and nationality at birth rests principally on Saudi parentage, with limited exceptions. So a Palestinian family can remain foreign in law even after a generation has been born and raised there. In each of the states considered here, nationality at birth runs principally through the father. Emirati and Saudi law make narrower provision for children of national mothers (United Arab Emirates 1972, art. 2; Saudi Arabia 1954, arts. 7–8), and Jordanian nationality passes through the father, so a Jordanian mother married to a non-Jordanian generally cannot pass her citizenship to her children (Jordan 1954; El Abed 2006). The mother's nationality therefore needs its own line of inquiry, because it can be the family's strongest legal link to any state and still give the child no claim on that state.

Residence for non-citizens in the Gulf has commonly depended on a recognized immigration basis, including employment and family sponsorship (Lysa 2023a, 2023b; United Arab Emirates Government 2026a, 2026b; Saudi National Platform 2026). The father's employment history is central to reconstructing the legal position of a Gulf-born Palestinian. A foreign worker obtains lawful residence and can sponsor qualifying family members under the applicable residence rules (United Arab Emirates Government 2026a, 2026b; Saudi National Platform 2026). Children are then born there. What appears from the child's perspective to be permanent residence remains, in law, contingent on the framework under which the family was admitted. The consequence is a form of intergenerational legal temporariness. The parent enters under a labour-migration arrangement understood in law as temporary, but the child is born into it and experiences the country as home. Twenty or thirty years later, that child can still be classified as a foreign resident. The fragility becomes visible when the basis of residence changes. Changes in the sponsor's status can affect dependent residence; for example, UAE rules link family residence permits to the sponsoring family member's permit, while currently allowing dependents a six-month grace period after expiry or cancellation to obtain a new residence permit, and Saudi family residence for relatives of a resident is tied to the duration of the resident's permit (United Arab Emirates Government 2026a; Saudi National Platform 2026). An old residence visa or Saudi iqama is good evidence of lawful residence at the time; it is not, without more, evidence of a present right to return. Country-conditions analysis can accordingly reconstruct the basis on which residence existed and establish whether that basis still exists today.

Palestinians are not alone in this. Recent research on temporary migration in the Middle East and Asia treats temporariness as a lasting condition of life (Yi and Paul 2026). In the UAE, some South Asian expatriate parents keep their children with them through university rather than sending them abroad, extending the family's life together within a system of temporary status (Paul and Parwani 2026). For many Gulf-born Palestinians, though, there may be no state of nationality to fall back on once that status lapses. Recent reforms have created partial exceptions to sponsor-dependent residence. Since 2019 the UAE has issued long-term "Golden" residence visas, valid for five or ten years and not tied to a local sponsor, to investors, entrepreneurs, skilled professionals, outstanding students, and other specified categories (United Arab Emirates Government n.d.). Saudi Arabia introduced a Premium Residency scheme in the same year that likewise dispenses with a sponsor, although it can be cancelled where the public interest is said to require it (Saudi Arabia 2019). In 2021 the UAE also amended the executive regulations of its nationality law so that selected investors, professionals, and specialized talents can be nominated for citizenship, which can be withdrawn if its conditions are breached (WAM 2021). These routes are discretionary, selective, and costly, and Saudi naturalization procedures have generally not been applied to stateless Palestinians (Shiblak 2006). They do not alter the general picture. They do, however, matter in individual cases. A Gulf-born Palestinian who holds sponsor-independent long-term residence stands in a materially different position on return from one whose residence depended on a parent or employer, and the type of permit held should be established rather than assumed.

Palestinian Statelessness, Jordanian Passports, and the Limits of Documentation: The concept of statelessness requires precision. Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines a stateless person as an individual "who is not considered as a national by

any State under the operation of its law" (United Nations 1954, art. 1(1); UNHCR 2014). Palestinian identity is not, then, proof of statelessness. Palestinians possess a range of legal statuses. Many are Jordanian citizens, some have acquired citizenship elsewhere, and others remain stateless (Shiblak 2006; Albanese and Takkenberg 2020; Gabbay 2024). The relevant inquiry is whether any state considers the particular individual to be its national under the operation of its law. A passport can also be a poor shorthand for nationality in the Palestinian context. I examined this problem in an earlier article, "The Status of Palestinians in Jordan and the Anomaly of Holding a Jordanian Passport" (Gabbay 2014). The anomaly is directly relevant here. A Jordanian passport held by a Palestinian does not invariably place its holder in the same legal position as a Jordanian citizen. In some cases the document serves identification and travel functions without carrying the full legal consequences that an adjudicator might ordinarily infer from a national passport.

The problem is particularly acute when the holder was born and raised outside Jordan. A Gulf-born Palestinian can hold a Jordanian temporary passport because of the family's historical connection with Jordan or the West Bank without ever having acquired Jordanian citizenship. In such a case the document establishes an administrative connection with Jordan, but it leaves open whether the holder is a national, has a permanent right of residence, or can obtain the protection ordinarily associated with citizenship. For country-conditions analysis, the passport is evidence whose institutional meaning requires further examination rather than a self-explanatory indicator of nationality (Gabbay 2014).

Jordan occupies an unusual position in Palestinian nationality history because it granted citizenship to substantial numbers of Palestinians, particularly following the incorporation of the West Bank after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, so being Palestinian is no evidence that a person is not Jordanian. The converse is the trap. As Gabbay (2014) emphasized, a Jordanian passport in a Palestinian's hands does not settle the question of citizenship. Jordan's 1988 disengagement from the West Bank further complicated the relationship among Palestinian identity, Jordanian nationality, residence, and documentation (Gabbay 2014; Human Rights Watch 2010). Subsequent administrative arrangements produced categories of Palestinians holding different combinations of ordinary passports, temporary passports, national numbers, identity cards, and crossing documents. Human Rights Watch (2010) later documented cases involving Palestinian-origin Jordanians whose nationality was withdrawn or placed in doubt.

The disengagement history applies principally to Palestinians of West Bank origin, many of whom held full Jordanian nationality before 1988 and whose present status depends on how the disengagement was applied to them (Gabbay 2014; Human Rights Watch 2010). Palestinians of Gaza origin entered the documentary system by a different route. Gaza was administered by Egypt, not annexed by Jordan, between 1948 and 1967, and its residents did not become Jordanian or Egyptian citizens; many travelled to the Gulf on Egyptian travel documents (Middle East Watch 1991). Gazans who came to Jordan after 1967 received temporary Jordanian passports, valid for two years, that served as travel documents and markers of temporary residence rather than evidence of citizenship (El Abed 2006). Two Gulf-born applicants holding the same kind of Jordanian temporary passport can thus stand in very different positions because of family origin. The Kuwait crisis showed how sharp the difference can be. After 1990, Palestinians holding Jordanian passports could generally go to Jordan, whereas those holding only Egyptian travel documents were often refused entry everywhere, and some were deported to the Iraqi border (Middle East Watch 1991).
The Jordanian national number is particularly important in this respect. Jordanian documentation distinguishes temporary passports without national numbers from documentation evidencing full Jordanian nationality (Gabbay 2014; Human Rights Watch 2010; Jordan Civil Status and Passports Department n.d.). From a country-conditions perspective, the important issue is not simply whether a Jordanian passport is genuine, but what status the document actually represents. Relevant factual questions include whether the holder possesses a Jordanian national number, whether the document is an ordinary or temporary passport, whether Jordan regards the individual as a citizen, and whether the document is associated with permanent residence or principally facilitates travel. These are institutional and documentary facts that become legally significant when counsel or an adjudicator considers nationality, protection, and return.

For a Palestinian born in the Gulf, the Jordanian passport anomaly can intersect with a second form of non-membership. The person acquired neither Emirati nor Saudi nationality at birth and may also lack Jordanian nationality despite carrying Jordanian documentation. His birthplace then points to one state, his travel document to another, and his Palestinian identity to a third territorial and political history. None of these identifies a state that must take him in and protect him as a citizen. The Gulf setting thus extends the problem discussed in Gabbay (2014): a document that looks like evidence of national membership can sit alongside a lifetime spent in another state where national membership was never acquired.

Fragmented Membership: One way to describe this configuration is fragmented membership. Citizenship usually gathers several legal functions into a single relationship: the citizen can enter and remain in the national territory, obtain national documentation, seek diplomatic protection abroad, and ordinarily cannot be expelled as a foreigner. In the cases considered here, those functions are split across several relationships.

The term is related to, but distinct from, several existing concepts. Bauböck (2011) uses partial citizenship to describe the incomplete membership of temporary migrants in the democracies where they live and work. Esposito et al. (2020) use fragmented citizenship for the intermediate positions, with partial and conditional access to rights, that migration-containment infrastructures produce along routes into Europe. Work on permanent temporariness, in the Gulf (Lori 2019) and in Europe (Tize 2021), shows how provisional status can last for decades and pass between generations. Fragmented membership differs in emphasis. It describes not a reduced or provisional version of citizenship in a single state, but the dispersal of citizenship's separate functions, namely entry, residence, documentation, and protection, across several states and institutions, none of which supplies all of them. That emphasis is useful in refugee status determination because the Convention inquiry asks precisely which state, if any, those functions attach to. A Gulf state may be the place of birth, schooling, employment, family life, and former habitual residence and still withhold citizenship. Jordan issues

temporary passports and travel documents to people it does not recognize as nationals. Palestinian institutions supply identity documents and a national affiliation, but not the full protections of citizenship in a sovereign state. UNRWA, where the person falls within its mandate, provides assistance and protection in five fields of operation but not in the Gulf states (UNRWA n.d.; UNHCR 2017), so even that connection lapses on Gulf soil, and the person is left tied, in real and legally significant ways, to several institutions, none of which provides the security of nationality. A thick file of documents sometimes hides the problem instead of resolving it. A Gulf-born Palestinian might hold a Gulf birth certificate, former residence papers, a Jordanian temporary passport, Palestinian family documents, and perhaps evidence of UNRWA registration. Those papers establish different facts, and whether any state recognizes the person as a citizen is a separate question that the file may leave unanswered.

Former Habitual Residence and the Problem of Return: The Refugee Convention expressly contemplates applicants who have no nationality in Article 1A(2) (United Nations 1951, art. 1A(2)). For them, the relevant reference point is the country of former habitual residence rather than a country of nationality. Someone born in the UAE or Saudi Arabia who lived there continuously for many years will usually have little difficulty showing that the Gulf state was a country of former habitual residence. The harder question is what follows from that fact when the residence was based on immigration permission that no longer exists.

Former habitual residence is a factual connection used by the Convention for stateless applicants; it does not itself create the reciprocal rights and duties associated with nationality. UNHCR's Handbook also makes clear that not every stateless person outside a country of former habitual residence is a refugee; the person must be outside it for the reasons the definition specifies (UNHCR 2019, paras. 101–105). Suppose a Palestinian lived habitually in the UAE, first while his father worked there and later under his own residence permit. Once those permissions have ended, his history in the UAE does not itself recreate a residence entitlement. This is where the position of a stateless former resident differs sharply from that of an expatriate citizen. A citizen who has lived abroad for years normally retains the right to enter his country. The stateless person, by contrast, risks losing lawful access to the country in which almost his entire life was spent, and removal may have no lawful destination at all (Gabbay 2026).

In Revenko v. Secretary of State for the Home Department, the Court of Appeal of England and Wales drew the same distinction, holding that a stateless person who cannot return to the country of former habitual residence is not a refugee for that reason alone and must also show a well-founded fear of persecution for a Convention reason (Revenko 2000). Canada's leading authority on the point, the Federal Court of Appeal's decision in Thabet v. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration), itself concerned a stateless Palestinian born in Kuwait who had also lived in the United States. It held that a stateless claimant with more than one country of former habitual residence must show persecution in one of them and inability to return to the others, and it directed decision-makers to ask why entry to a country of former habitual residence is being refused, since the reason for the refusal may itself be persecutory (Thabet 1998). A hypothetical example demonstrates the problem. An individual is born in the UAE to Palestinian parents and lives there for thirty years. He possesses no Emirati nationality. His residence initially derives from his father's employment and later perhaps from his own employment. He travels internationally on a Jordanian temporary passport but possesses no Jordanian national number. His UAE employment ends and his residence expires. The fact that the UAE was unquestionably his country of former habitual residence does not answer whether the UAE will readmit him for residence. Likewise, the existence of a Jordanian document does not answer whether Jordan regards him as a citizen or grants him a durable right of settlement. The central problem is not merely identifying former habitual residence. It is determining returnability: where can this individual legally go for lawful and durable residence, which state is legally obliged to receive him, and which state provides the protection normally associated with nationality?
Adjudicators sometimes ask why such an applicant cannot simply go to the West Bank or Gaza. Being Palestinian does not answer that. Since 1967, the right to live in the West Bank and Gaza has depended on registration in a population registry over which Israel has kept decisive control, even though day-to-day administration passed to the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo arrangements; Palestinians who were abroad at the time of the September 1967 census, and their descendants, were generally left without registration and without a right of residence (Middle East Watch 1991; Loewenstein 2006; HaMoked 2021). Many Gulf-born Palestinians fall into that category. A Palestinian Authority passport should be read in the same way as a Jordanian one, by asking whether it reflects a registered identity number and a corresponding right of residence. The question has gained practical importance since September 2025, when the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, France, and several other states recognized the State of Palestine (NPR 2025). Recognition invites the inference that a Palestinian passport evidences an effective nationality. Whatever its diplomatic weight, recognition gives an unregistered Gulf-born Palestinian no right to enter or live in the West Bank or Gaza, and it leaves the factual question of admissibility where it was.

These questions become especially significant because secondary displacement has repeatedly affected Palestinian populations. The experience of Palestinians in Kuwait during and after the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis demonstrated dramatically that decades of economic and social integration did not guarantee durable legal security (Nassar 2026). Even Palestinians born in Kuwait and resident there all their lives had remained legal aliens whose presence was, in law, temporary (Lesch 1991). Some 350,000 to 400,000 Palestinians lived in Kuwait in August 1990; by the end of September 1991 an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 remained (Middle East Watch 1991). The rupture disrupted employment, assets, remittances, and social and business networks (Nassar 2026). The episode illustrates the broader structural point that extensive residence and contribution to a host society need not create citizenship or an unconditional right to remain.

Sociological and Country-Conditions Evidence in Asylum Determination: For asylum determination, these are factual distinctions before they are legal ones, and the country-conditions task is to reconstruct the person's relationship with each state: nationality, residence, documentation, and the protection actually available. Birthplace and the cover of a passport begin that work, and family history, residence

records, and the person's actual dealings with each state have to complete it. Nationality is the logical starting point. Any state that might regard the applicant as a national has to be considered under its own law and in light of the applicant's family history. The documents can then be read for what they actually establish. An ordinary Jordanian passport, a temporary passport, a laissez-passer, an Egyptian travel document, a Palestinian Authority passport, a residence permit, and an identity card can perform quite different legal functions. If the applicant is stateless, the inquiry turns to former habitual residence. Long residence in the UAE or Saudi Arabia usually answers that historical question; the legal basis of the residence, and whether it survives, still has to be identified. A permit that expired years ago proves that lawful residence once existed; it does not prove that it can now be resumed.

Country-conditions evidence can also separate an existing right of residence from the possibility that a person might someday obtain a visa or sponsor. Those are not the same social or institutional position. A citizen with a continuing right of entry stands differently from someone who must first find employment, secure sponsorship, or obtain discretionary permission. Previous admission to Jordan matters too, but what it shows depends on the status under which the person was admitted. These distinctions can also affect credibility findings. An applicant may state that he is Palestinian, that he was born in the UAE, that he lived there throughout his childhood, that he has a Jordanian passport, that he is not Jordanian, and that he no longer has the right to live in the UAE. To an adjudicator unfamiliar with Palestinian documentation and Gulf residence systems, these statements might initially appear inconsistent. They need not be. Each describes a different legal or sociological relationship. The evidentiary inquiry should be individualized, drawing where available on birth certificates, both parents' nationality records, Jordanian national numbers or their absence, temporary passports, Egyptian or other travel documents, family books, Palestinian documentation including any registered identity number, former Gulf residence visas, employment records, Saudi iqamas, UAE residence records, evidence of any sponsor-independent residence such as a Golden Visa or Premium Residency, UNRWA registration where applicable, and evidence of previous admission or attempted readmission. Table 1 summarizes what the documents most often found in these files can and cannot establish on their own.

Article 1D and the Palestinian Context

Article 1D of the Refugee Convention raises a separate issue for Palestinian applicants. Article 1D concerns persons receiving protection or assistance from United Nations organs or agencies other than UNHCR and has particular application to Palestinian refugees in relation to UNRWA (United Nations 1951, art. 1D; UNHCR 2017). Its application is highly fact-specific. Palestinian identity alone does not resolve whether an applicant falls within Article 1D's personal scope or whether the relevant protection or assistance has ceased within the meaning of the Convention; those questions require application of the criteria set out in UNHCR's Article 1D guidance (UNHCR 2017). For Gulf-born Palestinians, the issue requires particular care because UNRWA does not operate in the GCC states (UNRWA n.d.). Some were born and raised outside UNRWA's fields of operation into families registered elsewhere. From a sociological and country-conditions perspective, the individual's own history, registration, eligibility, actual access to assistance, and reasons for being outside the relevant area should be documented rather than inferred from Palestinian origin. These facts provide the individualized factual record on which the legal analysis of Article 1D depends.

Social Capital Without Citizenship: Networks, Belonging, and Legal Exclusion

The position of Gulf-born Palestinians also exposes a limitation in conventional accounts of social integration. Long residence can allow people to accumulate social capital through relationships that provide information, obligations, support, reputation, and other resources (Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). Take a Palestinian who has spent most of his life in Dubai or Riyadh. Former employers know his work, friends have known him since childhood, relatives live nearby, and professional contacts supply information, introductions, jobs, and practical help. In sociological terms, such a person is deeply embedded in the society even though, in legal terms, he remains a foreign national or a stateless resident. What is striking in the Gulf setting is how far social belonging can develop without a comparable legal foothold. Citizenship and immigration status operate differently.

They determine whether the individual is legally entitled to enter the territory, remain there, work there, and continue participating in the networks through which social resources are mobilized. Dense and valuable relationships cannot themselves confer a visa, residence permit, or nationality. Considerable social capital in a country is entirely compatible with a weak legal claim to stay in it. The weakness of that arrangement is clearest once lawful residence ends. The relationships do not end when a permit expires or a job ends. Friends remain willing to help, former employers stay sympathetic, and relatives are still there. But if the individual cannot lawfully re-enter the territory where the network is concentrated, much of its value is stranded there.

Existing research likewise shows that immigration status and removal can limit the ability to mobilize otherwise valuable network resources (Menjívar 2000; Hagan, Leal, and Rodriguez 2015). Long-established ties can also carry costs when the person is excluded from the society in which nearly all of them were built, consistent with the broader literature on the negative consequences and liabilities that can accompany network embeddedness (Portes 1998). Strong attachment to a society in which the individual has no secure membership raises the costs of exclusion. The more that education, employment history, friendships, family relations, professional reputation, and everyday knowledge are concentrated in the Gulf state, the less transferable those resources are when the person is required to establish a life elsewhere. Networks developed over decades are not automatically reproduced elsewhere merely because the individual possesses documentation associated with another place; Nassar's account of the Kuwait rupture likewise records the loss of social capital and business networks following displacement from the Gulf (Nassar 2026). A Jordanian temporary passport, for example, can facilitate movement without giving its holder the network position, employment history, or social familiarity that decades of residence produced in the Gulf. For someone born in the Gulf to Palestinian parents, the mismatch is sharpest. The state in which he has the richest social capital is frequently the one in which he holds no citizenship, while the

Table 1. What common documents in Gulf-born Palestinian asylum files can and cannot establish

Document	What it can establish	What it does not establish by itself	Questions to ask
UAE or Saudi birth certificate	Place and date of birth; parentage as recorded.	Emirati or Saudi nationality; any right to reside.	What are each parent's nationalities? Does any route under UAE art. 2 or Saudi arts. 7–8 apply?
Former residence permit or iqama (including dependent permits)	Lawful residence while valid; the sponsor and the basis of residence.	A present right to return or re-enter.	Has it expired or been cancelled? Who sponsored it? Was the person ever independently sponsored?
UAE Golden Visa or Saudi Premium Residency	Long-term, sponsor-independent residence while valid.	Nationality; permanence, since both can lapse or be cancelled.	Is it still valid? On what grounds can it be cancelled?
Jordanian passport with a national number	Strong evidence of Jordanian nationality.	That the nationality has not since been withdrawn.	Has the holder's status changed since 1988?
Jordanian temporary passport without a national number	A travel document and an administrative link to Jordan.	Jordanian citizenship; a right to live in Jordan.	Is the family of West Bank or Gaza origin? Is the document valid? Does the holder have any residence status in Jordan?
Egyptian travel document for Palestinian refugees	Travel identity; usually a Gaza-origin family history.	Egyptian nationality; a right to enter or live in Egypt.	Is it valid? Is the holder registered in Gaza?
Palestinian Authority passport	Palestinian identity; a travel document.	A right to live in the West Bank or Gaza, unless linked to a registered identity number.	Is the holder in the population registry?
UNRWA registration card	Family registration in an UNRWA field of operation.	UNRWA assistance or protection in the Gulf; nationality.	Is the applicant personally registered? What access to assistance has there been, and why is the person outside the area?
Evidence of social ties (relatives, employers, friends in the Gulf)	Embeddedness and life history.	A right of admission or residence.	Is there a realistic, lawful route to sponsorship or residence?

Source: author's synthesis of the legal and documentary sources discussed in this article.

state whose passport or travel document he carries may be a place where he has weak ties and little lived experience. Fragmented membership takes a further form here, with the person's strongest relationships concentrated in one jurisdiction and the documents he depends on issued by another. In refugee status determination, this matters because evidence of strong networks answers a different question from evidence of a right to return. Social capital is relevant to understanding how an individual lived, where he was embedded, and what resources might realistically be available to him. Evidence that an applicant has relatives, former employers, or friends in the UAE or Saudi Arabia can demonstrate substantial social capital, and a contact might help with employment or sponsorship, but it does not establish a legal right of admission and cannot substitute for nationality, lawful admission, or durable residence. A network works well once a person is lawfully present; it cannot solve the prior problem of whether he is entitled to enter and remain. Gulf-born Palestinians make that distinction unusually visible because a person can spend decades accumulating relationships in the society he knows best while never acquiring the political membership that would guarantee continued access to those relationships.

DISCUSSION

The relevant scholarship has developed along several lines that do not always meet. Work on Palestinian statelessness and on Palestinians' status in Arab host states explains the historical and legal production of non-citizenship (Shiblak 2006; Gabbay 2024), while studies of Palestinians in the Gulf concentrate more often on migration, diaspora, labour, and belonging, and studies of Gulf citizenship regimes explain how long residence is kept apart from membership (Longva 1997; Vora 2013; Lori 2019). Lysa's work on Saudi Arabia and the GCC shows how migration categories can obscure populations with refugee histories (Lysa 2023a, 2023b). The Jordanian literature, including Gabbay's (2014) analysis of the Jordanian passport anomaly, addresses citizenship, national numbers, disengagement, and temporary documentation. Refugee-law scholarship approaches the problem from yet another direction through statelessness, former habitual residence, Article 1D, and the practical limits of returning stateless Palestinians (Gabbay 2026).

These strands come together in the history of a single asylum applicant. Someone may descend from an earlier Palestinian displacement, be born and raised in the Gulf, travel on Jordanian documentation without being Jordanian, and never acquire the nationality of the Gulf state in which he spent most of his life. Country-conditions and sociological analysis can establish the relationships underneath them: where residence was secure and where it was conditional, what a document actually signifies, whether citizenship was acquired, what protection was available, and what changed over time. I call this fragmented membership because different parts of membership can sit in different jurisdictions. One state records the birth, another once authorizes residence, another issues the travel document, while none necessarily supplies the security and permanence ordinarily associated with citizenship. Expert evidence is strongest when it stays close to these facts. Palestinians born in the Gulf cannot simply be described as stateless, because individual nationality histories differ. Nor should a Jordanian passport be read as self-explanatory proof of citizenship. A sociologist or country expert can establish narrower points with confidence: Gulf birth alone does not confer Gulf nationality under the systems discussed here; long Gulf residence can exist without citizenship or a continuing immigration status; and Jordanian documents have to be read according to the status they actually record. Family history, residence records, documents, and encounters with state institutions supply that evidence.

CONCLUSION

Gulf-born Palestinians sit uneasily within the territorial assumptions that often shape asylum files. A Palestinian born in the UAE or Saudi Arabia because his father worked there often spends most of his life in that country without ever becoming a citizen. Residence first depends on the father's employment and later on the person's own immigration status. When that basis ends, decades of lived experience need not produce a route back. A Jordanian temporary passport adds another state connection, but it can leave the central question of citizenship unresolved. The caution runs both ways. Palestinian identity and the absence of Gulf citizenship do not establish statelessness in an individual case; the relevant states' treatment of the person under their nationality laws still has to be known. But birthplace, former residence, and possession of a passport are not substitutes for citizenship either. This is where country-conditions work is useful. It can reconstruct nationality history, explain what particular documents represent, identify the basis and duration of residence, and show whether a continuing route to lawful residence exists.

In many nationality cases, these questions point toward one state. For a Gulf-born Palestinian, they can point in several directions at once: the country where he grew up sees him as a former foreign resident, the state named on his passport may not regard him as a citizen, and Palestinian identity does not, on its own, supply an alternative state of effective protection (see also Gabbay 2026). That does not mean that the absence of a state obliged to admit him automatically establishes refugee status. A stateless applicant still has to be considered under the applicable refugee-law requirements concerning former habitual residence, persecution, well-founded fear, and a Convention ground. My argument is narrower. Before those legal questions can be answered well, the underlying social and institutional facts have to be understood correctly. A Gulf birthplace is not nationality. Nor is a travel document proof of citizenship, or long residence a right to return. Making those distinctions visible is the contribution of sociological and country-conditions analysis.

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