

»I Am an Immigrant, Not a Refugee«

Palestinian Migrant Workers, Global Citizenship, and the Politics of Belonging

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Introduction

Amid enduring Israeli–Palestinian political tension and shifting migration flows, Palestinian nationals routinely leave home seeking work abroad, as migrants driven by necessity and the desire to sustain their families. Yet, global discourse often mischaracterizes them as refugees. This mislabeling strips away their agency, reduces their struggle to passive victimhood, and risks justifying policies that perpetuate inequality.

Responding to the prompt »Global Citizenship Education« this article examines how Palestinian migrants navigate belonging beyond borders and challenge dominant representations of their status. Based on 40 semi-structured interviews,³⁰ with migrant workers in Israel and 10 with those in Germany, it addresses these research questions:

1. How do Palestinian migrant workers distinguish themselves from refugees, and why?
2. In what ways does this distinction reflect their understanding of global citizenship, grounded in rights, dignity, and participation?

By examining issues of identity, labor, and political change, the article clarifies an underexplored dimension of global citizenship, migrants' self-determination in the shadow of conflict, and calls for policymaking that addresses both power, mobility, and dignity.

Migration vs Refuge: Differing Concepts and Terminologies

Migration and refuge are closely related phenomena in human mobility, but carry distinct meanings and implications in sociology and international discourse. Migration refers to people's movement from one place to another, often by choice, to find better opportunities or living conditions. In contrast, refuge (or refugeehood) is needed when people are forced to flee their home or country to escape danger or persecution and seek sanctuary (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). These are not merely semantic differences, but reflect fundamentally different circumstances and statuses. A historical example can be found in the Prophet Muhammad's *Hijra* (migration) from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE as a strategic and empowering relocation, undertaken to preserve his community and expand its reach, rather than a flight as a helpless victim (Peters, 1994). This contrasts sharply with the modern concept of a *refugee*, who is typically perceived as a vulnerable person escaping peril with little control over their fate. This chapter explores the distinct terminology and sociological frameworks of ›migrant‹ versus ›refugee‹, and why these distinctions matter – discussing why certain groups, such as Palestinian migrant workers, have defined themselves as migrants and not refugees.

Migration as Voluntary Movement and Agency

In academic and policy contexts, migration usually implies voluntary movement driven by agency and aspiration. A migrant is defined as people choosing to move to improve their life, seeking better employment, education, or quality of life. The migrant's decision is not primarily due to immediate threat of persecution or violence, but rather a desire for opportunity or growth. Migrants might leave their country (or move within it) for various reasons: economic betterment, family reunification, pursuing higher education, or personal adventure. Crucially, migrants are generally assumed to be able to return safely to their home country if they wish. If they do or do not return home, they continue to enjoy their home government's protection as citizens. This ability to return and the element of choice underscore the agency typically associated with migration (Carling, 2002).

Sociologically, migration often involves a deliberate strategy by individuals or families to overcome impeding economic and social structures. Classic migration theories speak of ›push‹ and ›pull‹ factors: push factors (lack of jobs or social unrest) encourage people to leave, while pull factors (labor demand

or higher wages abroad) attract them to a new destination (Massey et al., 1993). However, even under significant pressures, the migrant is viewed as exercising control in the decision to move. For instance, labor migration, a central theme in migration studies – usually entails workers moving to where jobs are available, as a proactive pursuit of better livelihood. Migrants are often seen as economic actors who contribute labor and skills to host societies, rather than as passive recipients of aid. This characterization imbues the term »migrant« with connotations of strength, adaptability, and initiative.

Refugeehood as Forced Displacement and Vulnerability

Contrastingly, according to international conventions refugees are protected by international obligations differing from those for migrants, especially the provisions of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which define a refugee as someone who has been compelled to flee their home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, war, or violence, and who cannot safely return home (Zetter, 2007). stipulating the assistance and rights they should receive (UNHCR, 2011). A refugee is usually threatened because of who they are or what they believe (their race, religion, ethnicity, political opinion, or social group). In other words, refugees run for their lives, their migration is driven not by pursuit of a better life, but by the urgent need to find safety and refuge from danger. This element of coercion means refugees typically leave home suddenly and involuntarily, often with few possessions and little planning. They do not migrate out of strength, but out of desperation and the instinct for self-preservation.

Sociologically, refugees are often viewed as vulnerable individuals or populations. Having lost the protection of their home state, they depend on the goodwill and aid of other nations or international agencies for survival. They commonly find themselves in humanitarian camps or emergency housing, reliant on organizations like the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) or (in the Palestinian case) UNRWA for food, shelter, healthcare, and education. This reliance underscores the image of the refugee as needing help because, at least initially, they are unable to fend for themselves in the host society. This social portrayal emphasizes refugees' weakness and suffering: victims of circumstances beyond their control (war, persecution, displacement) they appeal to the compassion and assistance of others for their basic needs and rights. While many refugees display resilience and agency in rebuilding their lives, the label »refugee« is laden with connotations of trauma, loss, and dependency.

Global Citizenship, Migrant Workers and their Rights

The concept of global citizenship emerged from the philosophical idea that the individual belongs to a universal human community, expressed in the Stoic ideal of *civis mundi* (world citizen) and Immanuel Kant's thought on »eternal peace.«

In the 20th century, especially after World War II, this concept was expressed in declarations of international human rights and empowerment of supranational organizations. This marked a change in perception of citizenship: rights which had depended on national membership were increasingly perceived as stemming from universal humanity. Declarations of universal rights and increased human rights discourse created a normative foundation for all human beings to acquire basic rights, even superseding the sovereign state's jurisdiction. Simultaneously, globalization and the establishment of multinational associations such as the European Union, engendered multiple levels of membership: authorities distributed between national and supranational levels, and facilitation of transborder identities and social statuses.

This slightly undermined the classical model of exclusively state citizenship: migrants and permanent residents who were not state citizens began to enjoy civil, social and even partial political rights in some states, and phenomena such as dual citizenship emerged. For example, the Citizen of the European Union holds certain rights beyond national citizenship. Researchers such as Soysal (1994) described a state of »post-national citizenship«, in which »personal logic« and universal rights supersede »national logic«. Consequently, differences between »citizen« and »foreigner« become blurred: some rights are extended to migrants and minorities, reducing but not annulling gaps between people with different statuses.

Nevertheless, formal state citizenship grants the individual political and legal membership in the sovereign state and effective protection of their rights and migrant workers live and work without citizenship where they work, and some even lack recognized legal or civil status. This creates a deep discrepancy between the universal promise of human rights and their actual realization. Theoretical »declared« rights are unsecured for migrants lacking full citizenship; as Hannah Arendt noted, without »the right to have rights« there is no political-legal means to enforce even fundamental rights. Arendt (1951) investigated stateless refugees' distress after World War II. She argued that those refugees painfully illustrated the void left by human rights rhetoric, detached from the state apparatus: they were »the most symptomatic group

in contemporary politics« because their situation exposed how hollow universal human rights are, when individuals have no effective membership in a national community. This insight is also valid regarding millions of migrant workers: many may have some form of citizenship (in countries of origin) but their status in destination states resembles »weakened citizenship« lacking full protection both from their home and destination states.

To summarize: The concept of global citizenship envisages a just world order, where migrant workers are protected not by their passport or nationality, but by virtue of their humanity and contribution to global society. However, current reality reflects the tension between this vision and a world founded on sovereign state policies and inequality. The gap between universal human rights and the political status of citizenship forms the heart of this debate: migrant workers are situated in between. Critical approaches remind us that as long as global citizenship remains an unrealized ideal, it must be pursued through existing systems, strengthening fundamental human rights enforcement, demanding fair work agreements and reinforcing foreign workers, while encouraging international cooperation to realize their rights. Only a combination of the global vision with local and international political commitment can close the gap between migrant workers and other recognized world citizens.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative research, conducting in-depth interviews, focusing intentionally on workers' experiences in two distinct contexts: Israel (n=30): Palestinian citizens or residents moving internally or from the Occupied Territories under labor permits. Germany (n=10): Palestinian nationals who obtained work permits or used EU labor schemes.

Interviews lasting 60–90 minutes each, were conducted in Arabic between 2023 and 2024, and covered motivations for migration, employment experiences, identity, agency, challenges, and future plans. Transcripts were analyzed thematically, coding recurring motifs such as agency, dignity, boundary-making, structural exclusion, and aspirations. While my own positionality as a Palestinian researcher brought proximity, reflexive practices were applied to address bias throughout.

Findings

The findings were elicited from in-depth interviews with Palestinian migrant workers in Germany and Israel, describing how interviewees experienced, defined and oriented themselves regarding concepts of refugeeism, migration, global citizenship and belonging. Their narratives reveal subjective perceptions challenging legal and discursive distinctions between ›refugee‹ and ›migrant‹, and suggest alternative interpretations of citizenship, agency and human dignity.

Two main themes emerged: (1) »I am a migrant, not a refugee« – agency, choice and dignity. Interviewees reject labelling as refugees in favor of the identity of an active, independent and enterprising migrant. (2) ›Global citizenship is perceived not as state rights or formal legal status, but as interpersonal relationships based on respect, loyalty, and everyday partnership. These themes expose the tension between formal state definitions and the human experience of migration, belonging and identity, reflecting the interviewees' attempts to conceive a possible living space for themselves based on mutual respect and responsibility, and striving for agency, even in a reality of exclusion and blocks.

»I am a migrant, not a refugee«: Agency, choice and dignity

Palestinian migrants in Germany rejected the label of ›refugee‹, defining themselves as temporary migrant workers, although they had entered Germany as refugees. They felt that identification as migrants reflected their control over their lives, free choice and aspiration to contribute, contrasting with the perception of a refugee as passive, dependent and lacking agency. The definition of ›migrant‹ allowed them to identify as active valuable people, not helpless victims. Most emphasized the importance of their work and financial independence, thus retaining their dignity, while relying on religious and cultural narratives emphasizing autonomy and labor. One noted: »I work, pay taxes, speak the language. Refugees wait – I build«. However, interviewees who had returned to Gaza with a sense of mission, but failed to reintegrate, were angered by German institutions that considered them as refugees, ignoring their past in Germany. Disappointment also stemmed from the gap between their global awareness and the migration authorities' oppressive bureaucracy. Most interviewees expressed a sense of alienation, even if some noted acceptance by German citizens.

Global citizenship in human connections and not state rights

The interviewees' perceptions of global citizenship relied especially on interpersonal relationships – respect, loyalty and responsibility – not on formal rights. In both locations, the migrant workers emphasized their significant contribution to the economy and workplaces, while distinguishing between ›loyalty‹ to employers and ›belonging‹ to their homeland – Palestine. For example, one interviewee explained »I am loyal to my workplace, like my home. Respect my employer as if he was a relative«.

In Europe there was obvious disappointment regarding the gap between public discourse on global acceptance and the authorities' actual behavior, in Israel interviewees' described severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, exclusion from the public sphere and security suspicions. The sense of belonging, if it existed, was formed through daily relations with neighbors or workmates, not through the state. As one interviewee noted: »They still see me solely as a worker, but I just want them to respect me – shake my hand, not disrespect«.

Summary: interviewees suggested relative understanding of global citizenship, founded on interpersonal relationships, solidarity and mutual responsibility, while rejecting formal categorization which annulled their agency and humanity. The gap between the declarations of ›amenability towards migrants' and their practical experiences created a sense of alienation in both countries, although in different strengths and manners.

Discussion

The above-described findings indicate that Palestinian migrant workers in Germany and Israel, developed a complex multifaceted identity, intertwining loyalty and yearning for their homeland with partial assimilation in the life of the countries to which they migrated. This identity, without any legal foundation is rather a sense of human value, aligning with social global citizenship ›that emphasizes interpersonal relations, mutual respect and ethical reciprocity, rather than formal rights or affiliation to a state« (Oxley & Morris, 2013; Millar et al., 2024).

Interviewees saw themselves as active migrants contributing to the host society and economy, not passive refugees dependent on institutional compassion. Thus, they retained a sense of agency, honor and a positive self-image,

while rejecting the humanitarian narrative that labelled them as weak dependents (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). This approach challenges the conventional dichotomy between ›refugee‹ and ›migrant‹ and affirms what Goncalves (2025) called the ›categorical fetishism‹, or policy-makers' use of fixed categories which often do not reflect individual's self-identity. The gap between migrant workers' expectations, stemming from concepts of equality, human rights and global citizenship, and the actual institutional reality, arouses frustration. In Germany, a state considered a liberal democracy espousing discourse of inclusion, interviewees expected egalitarian consideration and recognition of their status and contribution. When they encountered strict bureaucratic mechanisms, rejection or suspicion, they felt alienated and disappointed. This sharpened the paradox at the core of global citizenship, a vision of inclusion and equality, which is implemented in practice by systems that exclude foreigners (Wessendorf, 2019; Millar et al., 2024).

The findings reinforce claims of researchers such as Soysal (1994), identifying the transition to post-national citizenship, but also the limitations of this vision: as long as sovereign states continue to operate categorizing mechanisms and control based on place of origin, truly egalitarian affiliation cannot exist. Arendt (1951 already warned that in the absence of »the right to have rights«, universal rights remain empty rhetoric, especially for migrants without effective political status.

Comparison between Palestinian migrant workers in Europe and Israel, and Palestinian refugees in Arab states, indicates that political contexts shape the meaning of identity. While migrants in Europe avoid labelling as refugees to be seen as active agents, in Arab states, Palestinian refugees insist on maintaining that label as a political memory and symbol of their struggle for the right of return (Fawadleh, 2022). This illustrates the tension between individual affiliation and collective identity, and between universal moral discourse and historical demands for justice.

In conclusion, the case of the Palestinian migrant workers highlights the significance of recognition of the migrant's subjective perspective, not only as a ›problem‹ of migration policy, rather as an autonomous agent with identity, eligible for egalitarian affiliation. As long as global citizenship remains a normative concept detached from official realization, it cannot mediate existing gaps. Migrant workers' rights should be reinforced, developing just migration policies and intercultural-sensitive education for professionals as necessary steps to bridge between the ethos of global citizenship and the reality of marginalized migrants.

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