



# Urban Trajectories and political experiences of Migrants in São Paulo: The Case of “Al Janiah” Workers, a Cultural and Gastronomic Space in the City

*Trajetórias Urbanas e Experiências Políticas de Migrantes em São Paulo: O Caso dos Trabalhadores do “Al Janiah”, um Espaço Cultural e Gastronômico na Cidade*

*Trayectorias Urbanas y Experiencias Políticas de Migrantes en São Paulo: El Caso de los Trabajadores de “Al Janiah”, un Espacio Cultural y Gastronómico en la Ciudad*

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the urban trajectories of migrants and refugees within Al Janiah, a Palestinian-founded cultural and gastronomic space in São Paulo, Brazil. Functioning as a restaurant, bar, and cultural hub, it fosters integration through music, workshops, and language classes, attracting a diverse audience. Through interviews with six workers, the research explores sociability, network formation, and integration processes. Findings show that relationships at Al Janiah facilitate professional opportunities and urban navigation. Shifting from ethnic or legal frameworks, this study approaches migration through urban spaces, highlighting Al Janiah’s role in city-making and supporting displaced populations in São Paulo.*

*Key words: Migration; Urban trajectories; São Paulo.*

## RESUMO

*Este estudo examina as trajetórias urbanas de migrantes e refugiados no Al Janiah, um espaço cultural e gastronômico fundado por palestinos em São Paulo, Brasil. Funcionando como restaurante, bar e centro cultural, ele promove a integração por meio da música,*

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*workshops e aulas de idiomas, atraindo um público diversificado. A pesquisa, baseada em entrevistas com seis trabalhadores, explora a sociabilidade, a formação de redes e os processos de integração. Os resultados mostram que as relações no Al Janiah facilitam oportunidades profissionais e a navegação urbana. Ao invés de abordagens étnicas ou legais, o estudo analisa a migração através dos espaços urbanos, destacando o papel do Al Janiah na construção da cidade e no apoio às populações deslocadas em São Paulo. Palavras chave: Migração; Trajetórias Urbanas; São Paulo.*

## RESUMEN

*Este estudio examina las trayectorias urbanas de migrantes y refugiados en Al Janiah, un espacio cultural y gastronómico fundado por palestinos en São Paulo, Brasil. Funcionando como restaurante, bar y centro cultural, promueve la integración a través de la música, talleres y clases de idiomas, atrayendo a un público diverso. La investigación, basada en entrevistas con seis trabajadores, explora la sociabilidad, la formación de redes y los procesos de integración. Los resultados muestran que las relaciones en Al Janiah facilitan oportunidades profesionales y la navegación urbana. En lugar de enfoques étnicos o legales, el estudio analiza la migración a través de los espacios urbanos, destacando el papel de Al Janiah en la construcción de la ciudad y en el apoyo a las poblaciones desplazadas en São Paulo. Palabras clave: Migración; Trayectorias urbanas; São Paulo.*

## Introduction

The interaction between people from various places of the world has become increasingly common in the urban life of São Paulo in recent years. Like other Brazilian cities, in the 2000s, the São Paulo capital became part of the migration routes from different countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. Notably, there was an increase of over 13.236,3% in asylum requests in Brazil between 2010 and 2019, rising from 619 requests to 82.552; According to the Brazilian Federal Police registry, which counts the total number of immigrants with regular residence visas in the country, 46,055 new registrations were made in 2010. In 2023, this number jumped to 201,932 registrations. In other words, there was more than a fourfold increase in the number of new residence visas during this period.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Brazilian legislation, following international law guidelines, differentiates between immigrants and refugees, who have distinct statuses and rights. People classified as immigrants are not included in the cited statistics. Information available at <<https://www.datamigraweb.unb.br/>>, 04/06/2024.

These people come from Haiti, Senegal, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Haiti, and especially Venezuela, among other countries<sup>6</sup>. In general, national statistics follow the global trend of exponential and increasing displacement, with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic period when this trend decreased, resuming in 2022. After Roraima, São Paulo is the main state with asylum requests, having 13.787 applications in 2023. Unlike the northern region of Brazil, where the flow is mainly due to geographical reasons, with almost 80% of Brazilian refugees coming from territories in the northern part of South America (notably Venezuela and Cuba in 2022), São Paulo, particularly its capital, attracts due to its urban characteristics and the wide range of work and hou-

<sup>6</sup> Information and data available at: <<http://www.justica.gov.br/noticias/brasil-tem-quase-9-mil-refugiados-de-79-nacionalidades-1>> and <<http://pt.slideshare.net/justicagovbr/sistema-de-refugio-brasileiro-balano-at-abril-de-2016>>. Access date: 03/06/2024.

sing opportunities, both formal and informal (Junger da Silva et al, 2023).<sup>7</sup>

São Paulo appears as a destination for many migrants, leading the topic to become a subject of journalistic and cinematic productions, debates in various political and social spaces, and raising questions about existing public policies.

In light of this new scenario, there has been an expansion and creation of institutions to welcome and assist these newly arrived groups with international and national funding. The Coordination of Immigrant Policy of the São Paulo City Hall, established in 2013, created a reference center and shelter specifically for this public, but much of the assistance work continued to be carried out by non-governmental and religious organizations. These institutions provide support and protection for newly arrived migrants, offering help with documentation, housing, employment, language learning, and other social assistance services. Although there are particularities in the services provided by each of these NGOs, making them often complementary, certain organizations have become key references for migrant networks of specific nationalities.

<sup>7</sup> There is an extensive field of discussion in the sociology of migration that addresses the ways in which classificatory categories of people in mobility are used. Terms such as immigrant, emigrant, refugee, asylum seeker, and migrant, among many other variations, aim to characterize the person in mobility, highlighting one or another aspect of their relationship with territory, states, and citizenship. Some critics point to the explanatory emptiness of the immigrant/emigrant dichotomy (the one who leaves and the one who arrives in a new territory), as circulatory mobilities challenge the notion of multiple belongings or an understanding strictly focused on economic reasons as the drivers of mobility. Others criticize the methodological nationalism implicit in the idea of refugee or asylum seeker, blurring the boundaries between the different reasons that compelled the person to leave their places of origin, whether economic problems, wars, environmental exhaustion, or various persecutions. To circumvent this debate, in this article, we will refer to the set of people in mobility as migrants, highlighting the variants related to refuge. (Çaglar and Glick-Schiller, 2018).

Despite the existence of a support network for migrants in São Paulo, these people face many difficulties in their urban experience, particularly regarding access to housing, both due to the documentary requirements of rental contracts and the rental prices; also facing problems such as employment and income generation. In other words, many of them end up facing the same problems of precarious housing, employment, and access to services and urban spaces that most of São Paulo's inhabitants experience. The relationship of migrants in the production of urban spaces in São Paulo and the operation of transnational networks was addressed in the works of Silva (2008 and 2015), Cortes (2013), and Minvielle (2018), specifically among groups connected to sewing workshops (Silva, 2008; Cortes, 2013) and the informal economy (Silva, 2015; Minvielle, 2018). Thus, despite not starting from national categories, the authors ended up focusing on specific migratory dynamics and routes, mainly encompassing people from South American countries, Koreans, Chinese, and Africans.

As a form to analyze the migrant condition Glick-Schiller and Çaglar (2015, p.5) puts them at the same level of the other inhabitants of the city. It's about stating the obvious; migrants are people that face the same adversities as other inhabitants of the metropolis<sup>8</sup>, aug-

<sup>8</sup> To illustrate this reality, we recommend watching the film "Era of Hotel Cambridge" directed by Eliana Caffé (2016). The film is set in São Paulo, where newly arrived refugees in Brazil share an old abandoned building in downtown São Paulo with a group of homeless people. In addition to the daily tension caused by the threat of eviction, the new residents of the building have to deal with their personal dramas and learn to live with people who, despite their differences, face life on the streets together. We highlight a scene from the film where a Palestinian refugee character playfully says, "I'm a palestinian refugee in Brazil, you are 'Brazilian refugees' in Brazil," precisely portraying that they are in the same vulnerable condition in the city, regardless of national origin.

mented by a new set of issues related to the personal and collective histories that put them in mobility (persecutions, poverty, wars, environmental disasters, etc.). These difficulties are directly or indirectly related to the capitalist dynamics of urban space production, which create forms of dispossession (Harvey, 2017), expulsion, and displacement (Sassen, 2014).

It is in this context that Al Janiah, a restaurant and cultural center in downtown São Paulo, emerges as an important case to materialize this reality of refuge in the city within a microspace. First it is important to understand that Al Janiah was chosen as the main spatiality because as a restaurant, bar and cultural center built by Palestinians, proved to be in itself a space that reveals the reality of many refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations. Located in Bixiga neighborhood, downtown São Paulo, Al Janiah was created by refugees who lived in an informally occupied building (therefore, not recognized by the public authorities of the city of São Paulo) in the Liberdade neighborhood, downtown São Paulo, called *Ocupação Leila Khaled* in reference to the Palestinian political activist who dedicated her life to the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon<sup>9</sup>. The Occupation Leila Khaled, as an informal urban housing shelter, housing families of Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Bolivian and even Brazilian living in extreme poverty.

It is notable how migrants create new meanings for a city as unequal and oppressive as São Paulo. Articulate migrants build fields of possibility for living and resisting in São Pau-

lo. New worlds are produced through articulations like the one that engendered the Leila Khaled occupation. In this sense, highlighting this type of migrant articulation and connection—rather than naively celebrating a pluralistic and cosmopolitan city—is about recognizing new possible ways of producing life. These articulations in adversity overcome linguistic, cultural, and material boundaries, consolidating new spatialities and political articulation hubs in the city. Despite the fact that Brazil has an inclusive legal apparatus with regard to the reception of foreigners in a vulnerable situation, the reality of the insertion process of these individuals demonstrates that, in practice, such insertion is not positive or fully inclusive. In this sense, looking at Al Janiah reveals pathways of articulation and resistance.

The case of Al Janiah materializes the diffuse and sometimes violent sociological process of integrating refugees and other vulnerable migrants. From the Leila Khaled occupation this migrants created Al Janiah cultural and gastronomic Center as a space for articulating diverse local networks with varied scope, often restricted to specific urban circuits, bringing together displaced people (migrants, refugees and Brazilians) with unequal insertions in the city of São Paulo. Generally speaking, it is precisely because of this unifying character, that Al Janiah has become an important territory for encounters and opportunities for those seeking to establish themselves in São Paulo. They are people who carry out the most varied activities: music, handicrafts, gastronomy workshops, Arabic and Portuguese language classes.

From this space, understood here as a privileged point of observation of the daily life of different groups and people in the city, we interviewed six migrants (four men and two

<sup>9</sup> To understand the social dynamics of the Leila Khaled Occupation, we recommend watching the documentary series “Babel SP”, created by André Amparo and produced by Samantha Capdeville, released by HBO and Filmegraph in 2019.

women) with the main objective of understanding the construction processes of sociability, relationships and networks, through which displaced people enter and circulate in São Paulo, as well as reflect on the role played by Al Jannah in this dynamic.

This article is the result of a project financed by the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUCSP) Research Incentive Plan (PIPEq), that we developed in 2020 and 2021, coordinated by Reginaldo Nasser together with a group of researchers<sup>10</sup> that initially consisted in analyzing the trajectories of different origin migrants that worked at Al Jannah, through interviews with these individuals. The aim is to understand not only the conditions of access for these people to the city, in terms of spaces, goods, facilities, and services, but also how they participate in practices that redefine urban spaces, including political mobilizations around the “right to the city”, such as the space of Al Jannah.

Besides this overview of São Paulo’s migratory situation and the identification of Al Jannah in the city, the article is composed of a theoretical and methodological section that aims to explain the literature that substantiates our understanding of displacement, migration, and the social condition of refugees. Following that, there is an empirical section documenting our research work through interviews with Al Jannah’s workers. Finally, we provide an analysis of how the political dimensions of São Paulo city affect the social interactions between them and the city.

## Migration studies from the perspective of city-making

We approach migration studies from the perspective of urban spaces rather than focusing on ethnic, national, or legal groups that are commonly studied in research on displacement, migration, and refugee studies - some theorist such as Saskia Sassen (2014), Michel Agier (2015), Feldman-Bianco (2012; 2015; 2018), Glick-Schiller and Çağlar (2011; 2015; 2018) are examples of academics on which we base the theoretical aspect of our research. By employing these theoretical references, we can develop a broader understanding of migration that allows us to connect phenomena that were previously examined separately as part of the same process linked to the economic and social dynamics of global capitalism. As Feldman-Bianco suggests, “the varieties, scales and spaces of displacement (and immobility) as part of an integrated logic for producing inequalities in the current conjuncture of global capitalism” (2018, p.195) and that seem to reveal “a new logic of expulsion, which perpetuates social inequalities and generates new groups of the marginalized” (Feldman-Bianco, 2018, p. 203). We understand Sassen’s (2014) hypothesis of the emergence of a new logic of expulsion in the current phase of the global political economy, reinforces the argument of adopting a global perspective of social displacements, beyond its national and legal differentiations in immigrants, refugees, internally displaced people, homeless people and environmental displaced persons. In this regard, Glick-Schiller and Çağlar (2015) define displacement as a range of different types of mobility that encompass not only cross-border immigration but also the increasing precarity of local residents, facing forms of dispossession such as

<sup>10</sup> In addition to its coordinator: Reginaldo Mattar Nasser, the research team was composed by: Rodrigo Augusto Duarte Amaral, Tiago Rangel Côrtes, Carla Herminia Mustafa Barbosa Ferreira, Isadora Souza, Barbara Cyrillo Blum, Barbara StiubienerAbraham, Marina Mattar Soukef Nasser, Victória Perino Rosa, Isabella Arca Vieira.

unemployment, precarious employment, early retirement, low wages, and evictions.

These approaches challenge and critique the prevalent “methodological nationalism”<sup>11</sup> found in migration studies (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002) within the field of International Relations. In it, instead of dealing with migration to cities or the life of migrants in cities, it was proposed to analyze the relationship between migrants and the city, understanding the migrant as a social actor who plays a leading role in the global processes that produce, interact and restructure the urban spaces. Therefore, criticizing approaches centered on ethnic, national and legal categories, we point to the need to research migrants as active social actors in the cities where they live, favoring the observation of their interaction with other urban characters. Çaglar and Glick-Schiller propose the concept of “city-making” to understand the processes through which cities are continuously shaped and reshaped by various social actors, including migrants. This concept focuses on how cities are not static entities, but are dynamic and evolving, influenced by the actions and interactions of diverse groups and individuals. Through the concept of city-making, the authors provide an understanding of urban transformation, emphasizing the importance of agency and political struggles in the continuous making and remaking of cities (Çaglar and Glick-Schiller, 2018).

The notion of “city-making” underlines the importance of non-governmental actors, such as diverse communities, civil society organizations, social movements, as well as public management itself in interaction with these political actors.

These are different forces that play an active role in transforming urban space, creating solidarity networks, defending rights and promoting specific demands. The concept developed by Çaglar and Glick-Schiller (2018) is powerful in addressing the transnational dimension of city-making processes, highlighting how migration and transnational connections influence local urban dynamics. Furthermore, by placing disputes at the center of the debate on urban production, the authors highlight the multi-scalar constitution of localities, in which migrants become important operators of these dynamics. Scale operators have the ability to articulate, connect and negotiate different scales of action and mobilization, making it possible to change the status of conflict from something that could be silenced, transforming it into an issue with major social repercussions, which articulates and connects social and power spaces. They play a fundamental role in building and reconfiguring relations between the local, regional, national and transnational levels. This includes actors such as municipal governments, international organizations, multinational companies, social movements, transnational networks and activists, among others. The concept of scale operator highlights the importance of power relations and the capacity for agency of actors at different scales. Operators have the ability to influence and shape governance processes, urban planning, economic development, migration policies, social policies, among many other actions that directly impact people’s lives. They play a key role in the construction of ways of emplacement, in the (re)configuration of social and spatial dynamics in cities and beyond.

In this sense, we should think about the condition of vulnerable migration or refugee not based on their national identity, but through their social and political condition. In the case

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11 For Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002, p.301) “Methodological nationalism is understood as the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world”.

of Al Janiah, it would not be absurd to assume that the Arab ethnic issue, or even the Islamic religious value, would be the constant in the positive relationship between those who frequent its community. However, what we find when entering the empirical research is that what connects their community are different socioeconomic reasons and there is no prevalence of ethnic sociability, as is often thought. Starting with the diversity of origins of its employees, we find Palestinians, Syrians, Cubans, Algerians and Brazilians. So, what do these have in common?

The research method utilized was the urban and life trajectory of the interviewed characters (Telles, 2006). This is a methodological approach aimed at understanding the complexity of individual experiences over time, particularly within the context of social and economic transformations. The analysis of urban and life trajectories allows for an examination of how individuals experience and respond to changes in their personal, family, professional, and social circumstances. It aims to provide a deep and situated understanding of individuals' lives, highlighting the intersection between individual biography and shared social history, structure, and agency, as well as the complexities of human experiences in a world where translocal mobilities accelerate, and territories come to connect and share daily experiences, even when they are tens of thousands of kilometers apart. New sociabilities are produced, altering political scenes and bringing new fields of local and global action, situated within the specific spatialities of the city.

The proposal for a multi-scalar analysis, as discussed by Çaglar and Glick-Schiller (2018), together with the use of the concepts of agency to examine the city-making of transnational migrants, is based on the construction of a theoretical reference that allows us to see migration

as a complex urban phenomenon that relates to the other inhabitants of the city on multiple and varied scales. In this way, we seek to demonstrate the more or less ephemeral connections that build fields of possibilities and new ways of life. Without losing sight of the specificity of the migrant experience, we believe it is necessary to show how such presences insert other sociabilities and new institutional actors into the logic of urban production, located in other political fields, with another set of knowledge and in different hierarchies of power. These are the processes we are interested in tracing and debating: the alliances and sociabilities that bring together new relationships which leads to the city-making.

## **Interviewing the Workers of “Al Janiah”<sup>12</sup>: identifying points of convergence**

By the empirical work through the interviews we were able to identify points of convergence. Such points reveal that the description of the difficulty of their insertion in São Paulo was associated less with their cultural and

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12 Between September and December 2020, we interviewed six foreign employees/former employees of the restaurant Al Janiah: four men and two women. They came from Cuba, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria (2). The interviews were conducted at the physical space of Al Janiah, except for two: one conducted online because the interviewee was traveling, and another conducted at an ice cream shop, the current workplace of one of the interviewees. The interview guide followed the chronological and spatial order of the interviewee's life trajectory. We aimed to structure the interviews considering each life phase, within the context of family, housing, work (and other forms of income generation), education/training, political engagement, activities during free time and leisure, support networks (social or institutional), access to documents, and relationship with nation-states. For ethical reasons, we chose not to name the interviewees. All official documents and reports produced by the research project that inspired this article were submitted to the Research Advisory Board of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo in 2021

ethnic issues and more with aspects related to public policies aimed at immigrants. During this interview process we identified five dimensions: health, documentation, language, housing, and work.

Initially, regarding the health issue, the expectation was that this topic would appear prominently in the reports, given that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 crisis. However, analysis of the interviews revealed that little was said about health issues and the effects of the pandemic on the lives of our interviewees. What did emerge were occasional mentions of the use of the Unified Health System (SUS) in São Paulo. Generally, the interviewees did not report difficulties accessing the SUS for medical appointments and immediate procedures, such as vaccinations. However, they indicated difficulties with treatments and exams that were sometimes necessary due to delays. This is a social issue that affects the general population using the SUS. The only particularity identified in the context of COVID-19 is that the notification of COVID-19 cases to the Municipal or State Health Department, as well as the forwarding of data to the Ministry of Health, does not include a field for nationality. Migrants or refugees, regardless of their legal migration status, may be rendered invisible in pandemic response actions due to not being included in official records, except in cases of death, as the death certificate includes a field for nationality.

Regarding documentation, even though all interviewees reported having managed to regularize themselves in Brazil, obtaining the necessary documentation, some problematic aspects stand out, which indicate bottlenecks in the public bodies that serve or should serve the immigrant population. For example,

we highlight the lack of access to information and communication by the public authorities on document acquisition processes. This sensitive point underscores the need for effective implementation of certain actions outlined in the current Municipal Plan of Policies for Immigrants (2021-2024), such as “expanding and improving the dissemination of information about services provided by the municipality to ensure the dissemination and access to timely information, including for those residing in peripheral regions” (São Paulo, 2020, p. 32).

Another sensitive aspect concerns the communication barriers due to language, which hindered acquiring information and regularizing documentation, especially for interviewees of Arab origin. Although the Municipal Secretariat of Human Rights and Citizenship (SM-DHC) created the Reference Center for Immigrant Assistance (CRAI) to provide multilingual support, interviewees reported difficulties because professionals did not speak Arabic or even English in some cases. Similar issues were noted with agencies like the Federal Police, indicating sensitive points in immigrant services.

There were also complaints about excessively bureaucratic and impersonal services in public agencies, which disregard situations of vulnerability and sensitive life trajectories until arrival in Brazil. These issues highlight the need for expanded training and sensitization of professionals serving immigrants and employing immigrants in these roles. This approach improves service quality and promotes labor inclusion. Finally, researchers noted that most interviewees had applied for and obtained refugee status, even though some did not legally qualify or identify as refugees. It became clear that applying for asylum is a more accessible way to regularize status and is therefore widely used.



Regarding the language item, they reported having difficulty communicating in other public services and facilities, as well as in city environments and services. Simple issues such as the correct spelling of the name or affiliation on the identity document can become problematic when one does not have the perception that there are linguistic differences between the Portuguese and other languages, leading to misunderstandings and even further prolonging access to documentation. One interviewee reported that due to an error in one letter of his mother's name, he had to wait months for this situation to be corrected before he could have his identity document properly updated.

São Paulo's Municipal Policy for Immigrants and the Municipal Plan for Migrants (São Paulo, 2020) emphasize respect for diversity, interculturality, and ensuring migrants' access to public services. The Reference Center for Immigrant Assistance, a public municipal facility, provides multilingual staff (including migrants and refugees) to improve understanding of the offered guidance. Linguistic and sociocultural diversity can pose challenges for migrants and refugees seeking information and services from institutions such as public authorities, civil society, and private initiatives. Therefore, the services for migrants and refugees must be accessible in both language and communication style to ensure proper understanding.

From the aspect of urban housing, it appears as a sensitive issue. Most of the interviewees complained about the rent prices, which forced them to move house in short or medium periods of time, mainly in the initial years in São Paulo. Many have gone through precarious and unregulated housing, like Occupation Leila Khaled itself.

Indeed, as shown by the FipeZap index, rental prices in the city increased by 114.8% from January 2008 to November 2019<sup>13</sup>. Research groups and researchers mapped this increase and identified it as one of a series of dispossession processes caused by the expansion of the real estate frontier and the scarcity of housing policies that ensure the right to housing.

It was also noteworthy that none of the interviewees sought medium- and high-complexity social assistance services, such as shelters. It was not possible to identify whether this occurred due to their irregular status, lack of access to information, the precariousness of the shelters, or other reasons. What was known is that all the interviewees had support networks composed of family and/or friends, which they could rely on for housing, even temporarily, suggesting that it was neither necessary nor desired to use public services. Besides staying with family and friends, some immigrants reported living in an occupation where mainly Arabs and Palestinians resided.

Finally, the "work" dimension was the most mentioned by the interviewees. It was common to mention the initial period of insertion in the labor market as a moment of exclusion, precariousness and insecurity. This is because the positions assumed by the interlocutors had little or no labor guarantee and, in some cases, were jobs classified as not decent or dignified. References to "odd Jobs" and intermittent jobs were common, some of them under conditions of low labor protection - without contracts. Work considered illegal or on

13 The FipeZap index measures the evolution of prices in the Brazilian real estate market, with data disaggregated by municipality. Available at: <<https://fipezap.zapimoveis.com.br/>> Accessed on 20/04/2024.

the borders of “legal” and “illegal” was also reported, which reinforces, in some cases more than others, the low insertion or exclusion in the labor market.

With regard to the search for work, regularization of personal documents, equal socioeconomic status and difficulty in finding adequate regular housing are transversal elements in the history of all of them. In fact, the very creation of Al Janiah as a workspace is intimately connected with these points of convergence, as Leila Khaled was the first occupation project in the city of São Paulo to have in its initial political project the objective of bringing together newly arrived immigrants in a single building under the banner of the right to the city. If with the occupation, the housing problem had a provisional solution, albeit uncertain due to the always imminent possibility of eviction, the same cannot be said about the work, which follows a pattern of precariousness and instability among all residents of the building, Brazilian or immigrants.

It was from this experience that Al Janiah was born, inaugurated in January 2016, with the proposal to establish itself as a meeting point for activists in São Paulo, while at the same time opening professional opportunities to immigrants/refugees. Initially, this project was restricted to a few Palestinian refugees due to the small number of available jobs. But, as the space grew in activities, it began to incorporate immigrants of other nationalities, in addition to Brazilians living in the peripheries or with histories of displacement.

Recognized, on the one hand, as a political space open to diversity, and on the other, as a place of opportunities for social inclusion, Al Janiah, in just over a year, has become a point of reference for various social groups, immigrants

and localities, with unequal forms of access to the city. Also, because it is a restaurant and cultural house, the space quickly began to attract people from São Paulo who identified with the Palestinian cause, representations of leftist political parties, Brazilian intellectuals, even just supporters and consumers of Arab food. Thus, the space has become a political place, where patrons and staff interact with the public dynamics of São Paulo city, across various spheres. They are active not only in the dimensions of municipal migration policies but also in the city's political life.

### **The Political Dimension of São Paulo in the Social Interactions Among Al Janiah workers**

Finally, we particularly highlight the political role of Al Janiah and its employees involved in various expressions and political mobilizations in the city of São Paulo, with expressions that extend from international political issues, such as the Palestine cause itself, but also Brazilian national political issues, such as a space of opposition to Bolsonarism in Brazil. For these reasons, the Al Janiah and its employees were the targets, more than once, of violent and expressively xenophobic actions. In this sense, the political dimension necessarily emerges in the social experience of Al Janiah and its workers.

On the political dimension, we can categorize three different relevant aspects concerning Al Janiah as a sociopolitical space. First, the individual aspect of its employees identified at the interviews. Here, individual experiences evidently mobilize different perspectives on how they actively participate or not in the political life of the city. Second, Al Janiah as

a meeting point for politically engaged people, particularly aligned with progressive political agendas and political parties identified with the left of the political spectrum, even serving as a meeting place for leftist intellectuals and politicians in the city of São Paulo. Finally, the institutional positioning of Al Jannah as a politically engaged entity with agendas that go beyond migration issues in the city, or the Palestinian cause itself. Underlying this is a fundamental aspect: the identification of the Palestinian cause as a “leftist” agenda<sup>14</sup>.

Conversations with each interviewed worker revealed that their experiences and political interests differed. These ranged from cases where the interviewees expressed that they had never been involved in “politics” as an expression of institutional non-involvement and disinterest, to politically engaged cases, mainly focused on two themes: the struggle for the liberation of Palestine and the construction of a better Brazil. This latter group of workers forms part of the activist experience of Al Jannah as a political place where the migrant’s resistant experience constitutes its formation. It is no coincidence that it is known for being a space used and frequented by “left-wing” clients.

There are numerous examples of Al Jannah being used as a space for the expression of debates and contemporary political agendas. For instance, take the posts and mobilizations in favor of protests against the genocide in Gaza perpetuated by Israel since October 2023. In

this context, Al Jannah has hosted various Brazilian intellectuals and public figures who discuss or defend Palestinian self-determination, Israeli political violence against Palestinian lives, among other topics, such as Arlene Clemesha (professor at the University of São Paulo), Thiago Ávila (influencer and political activist), Breno Altman (journalist), Paulo Galo (political activist for delivery workers), Rita von Hunty (artist and influencer), Monica Seixas (state deputy from the Socialism and Liberty Party - PSOL)<sup>15</sup>. Al Jannah has also been the venue for the launch of electoral campaigns, such as the state deputy Edilene Maria from PSOL, who is also the coordinator of the Homeless Workers’ Movement (MTST) in 2022, or more recently the councilman Toninho Vespoli from PSOL, who is running for re-election in 2024. Other important Brazilian politicians, such as councilman Eduardo Suplicy from the Workers’ Party (PT), federal deputy Guilherme Boulos (PSOL), and the Brazilian Minister of Agrarian Development, Paulo Teixeira (PT), are among the regulars and have already held political and academic events at Al Jannah.

Some examples of the political mobilization of Al Jannah as an institution, and its workers as individuals with similar social and political experiences in São Paulo reveals the main argument of Saskia Sassen (2014), Çaglar and Glick-Schiller (2011; 2015; 2018), MichelA-gier (2011; 2015), and the other authors.

Beyond being a political connector space, Al Jannah is an operator of scales, meaning it is a space for the production of new scales of political action. In May 2017, the Brazilian government was in the process of voting on

<sup>14</sup> It is not our objective to properly work on this theme, but it is crucial to identify research that connects this rationale, such as Haugbolle and Olsen (2023, p. 129) affirming that “Palestine assume the position of an iconic global leftist cause alongside other anti-imperial, decolonization and national liberation struggles, such as South Africa and Vietnam, and how it happened.”

<sup>15</sup> They even held a meeting for Palestine with these public figures at Al Jannah on November 5, 2023.

the new Migration Law that would replace the Foreigner Statute drawn up during the Brazilian military dictatorship in 1980, with ways to improve the legal status and insertion of migrants of the most diverse categories in Brazil. Among other measures, the law would update the condition of migrants in Brazil in several aspects, such as: Promoting regular entry, humanitarian reception and equal treatment and opportunity for migrants and their families; Guarantee equal and free access for immigrants to services, programs and social benefits; Repudiate practices of collective expulsion or deportation; Eliminate discrimination and guarantee migrants the same human rights guaranteed to Brazilians.

In response, extreme right groups such as the *Direita São Paulo and Juntos pelo Brasil* movements organized demonstrations on Avenida Paulista against the new law with signs and shouts: “against the Islamization of Brazil”; also, and we quote “people came here from another country to commit terrorist attacks”. Xenophobic expressions. In addition to the declarations that associate Islamists with criminals, the demonstrators repeatedly chanted collectively, stating that these immigrants were potential terrorists. The same argument also appears on the social networks of the groups responsible for the protests, where other discriminatory arguments can be read. In reaction, Al Jannah employees who were passing through the region at the time of the demonstration clashed with them. Six people, including restaurant employees accused of bodily injury, criminal association, and resistance, were arrested during the disturbance. Brazilian lawyers, activists, and politicians immediately mobilized in defense of the prisoners, claiming that they were victims of xenophobic violence.

By that time, the Counsitor (and current federal deputy) Sâmia Bonfim from the PSOL, as well as lawyers associated with the PT, both left-wing parties, were among those who spoke out. Eventually, the prisoners were released. It should be mentioned that the aforementioned law was approved throughout 2017.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to highlight that, aside from the presence of some individual Arabs and Islamic activists, no Brazilian Arab or Islamic authority or institution publicly expressed a firm opinion on the incidents or acted in defense of the prisoners. This evidence indicates that these migrants’ connections are more related to political representation and social mobilization rather than to a cohesive “Brazilian Islamic or Arab community”.

In another episode, on 1st September 2019 Al Jannah was attacked with bottles and gas by three unidentified men - in an explicit demonstration of xenophobic violence. From the outrage, a police report was filed at the 5th Police District for property damage and endangerment to the life or health of others.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy to point out that the episode occurred during Jair Bolsonaro’s presidential term, who is the foremost political representative of the Brazilian far-right. One of his first actions in foreign policy was to notify the United Nations (UN) of Brazil’s withdrawal from the Global

16 For an in-depth understanding of the aforementioned case, we recommend reading the news article produced by El País at the time. Available from: <[https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/05/04/politica/1493851938\\_726291.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/05/04/politica/1493851938_726291.html)> Accessed on 26/06/2024.

17 For an in-depth understanding of the aforementioned case, we recommend reading the news article produced by UolNotícias at the time. Available from: <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/01/bar-de-refugiados-palestinos-sofre-ataque-com-garrafas-e-gas-em-sao-paulo.htm>> Accessed on 26/06/2024.

Compact for Migration, an agreement the country had joined in December 2018. Through the social media platform Twitter, Jair Bolsonaro commented that “Not just anyone enters our house, nor will just anyone enter Brazil via a pact adopted by others”, further warning that “those who may come here must be subject to our laws, rules, and customs, as well as sing our anthem and respect our culture.”<sup>18</sup> It can be inferred that the president’s ideological stances and actions at the time inflamed the possibility of intolerance-driven violence, as seen in this case. The case mobilized a public audience at the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo (Alesp), and it was treated by authorities as a crime of intolerance and xenophobia, but no one was legally prosecuted or arrested<sup>19</sup>. This case exemplifies how Al Jannah, as a symbol of political resistance and cultural diversity, became a prime target of xenophobia and intolerance in the city of São Paulo.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we understand that by the case study of Al Jannah and its workers, we can affirm that its community is built firstly by the similar experience over their vulnerable trajectories from their home countries to the global city of São Paulo. This means that these migrants are actively shaping a city with new

political actors, connecting spatialities, and creating new scales of political contention in a globalized world. The so-called Global South manifests actively in an endeavor like this, where politically motivated connections circulate rapidly, with a restaurant/cultural center acting as a connector, diversifying scales of various resistances, particularly focusing on the Palestinian cause. Secondly, and most importantly, their identity in the city is forged by their political and social action, in which they are seen not as palestinians, cuban, algerian, syrian but as refugees, expelled by their home and that still have to fight for its existence and its basic rights in a foreign territory. We can conclude that Al Jannah is both a product created through these trajectory connections that brought its founders together and serves as a space to face the various forms of precariousness in life in a global metropolis. To bring Al Jannah and its workers into perspective is not about celebrating a cosmopolitan and multicultural city; rather, it is to highlight how political struggles for housing, transportation, quality of life, and more unfold similarly in different locations around the globe. more than that, it is to highlight how political struggles for housing, transportation, quality of life, etc., unfold similarly in different locations around the globe.

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- 19 The specifics of the public hearing can be read in an article published by the Alesp news center itself. Available from: <<https://www.al.sp.gov.br/noticia/?id=402684>>Accessed on 26/06/2024.
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