

# The blind spot: Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon

Daniel Meier

► **To cite this version:**

Daniel Meier. The blind spot: Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. Maximilian Felsch; Martin Wahlisch. Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings: In the Eye of the Hurricane, Routledge, pp.104-118, 2016, 978-1-13-888584-4. halshs-01947542

**HAL Id: halshs-01947542**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01947542>**

Submitted on 6 Dec 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

in Martin Wählisch and Maximilian Felsch (eds), *In the Eye of the Hurricane: Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings*, London, Routledge, 2016 (forthcoming)

### **The Blind Spot: Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon**

Daniel Meier – CNRS, PACTE, F-38000 Grenoble - France

Several studies have been produced about the impact of the massive influx of Syrian refugees on neighbourhood states. This is also true for Lebanon where the amount of refugees from Syria now reaches the level of one quarter of the population<sup>1</sup>. Much less has been said about the Palestinian refugees in Syria of which many have fled to Lebanon. On two occasions their dramatic fate became visible on local TV screens. The first occasion was in December 2012 when thousands of them were fleeing the shelling of their houses in the Yarmouk camp in the suburbs of Damascus. Twenty months later, in the fall of 2013, starving Palestinian children showed up on the world's TV screens as the Syrian regime blockaded the Yarmouk camp in order to pressure the insurgents to leave the part of the camp they controlled. From a few thousands in late 2012 the Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon numbered 44.000 people registered early 2015 according to United Nations relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)<sup>2</sup>. These figures, however, disregard those entering without registering and those leaving Lebanon, or returning to Syria. In a summer 2014 census, conducted in a door-to-door inquiry, UNRWA reached another figure of 42.000 actually living in Lebanon<sup>3</sup>.

Most of the Palestinian refugees from Syria initially settled in overcrowded camps or informal settlements where they found relatives or friends. UNRWA started to assist them in such difficult circumstances although some could not receive any assistance as they entered Lebanon for political reasons illegally. The Lebanese immigration policy towards Palestinian refugees from Syria has changed several times. Initially they were allowed to enter Lebanon with a Syrian authorization. However, but in May 2014 Lebanon has closed its border for them without any official explanation.

In the light of the long and troubled history of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the political divide among the Palestinian factions in Syria due to the uprising, this chapter examines the impact of the influx of the Palestinians from Syria on the Lebanese social and political environment as well as on the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon.

At first sight, the arrival of this contingent from Syria shed a crude light on the social and humanitarian conditions of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon compared with the one in Syria prior to the uprising. The specific situation they face in Lebanon has been analyzed as a “state of exception”<sup>4</sup>. This chapter argues first that this “state of exception” expands to those refugees arriving from Syria due to the limit of UN's mandate but also due to Lebanon's lack of investment in the improvement of their living conditions as an inherited aspect of the troubled history of the Lebanese-Palestinian relationships. Second, I

will contend that the Syrian crisis was a catalyst for a rapprochement of rival Palestinian factions and that all of them rather opted for a neutral position towards the Syrian crisis. Both the relative weakness of the Hamas, the post-Syrian Lebanon context after 2005 and the low politicisation of the refugees arriving from Syria can explain this posture when it is put in relation to the collective trauma faced by the Palestinians in Lebanon with the brutal destruction of the camp of Nahr el-Bared by the Lebanese army in 2007<sup>5</sup>.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first deals with humanitarian aspects regarding the Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS). With the help of UNRWA information and statistics, their social and economical conditions can be related to Lebanon's restrictive refugee policy. Both aspects are showing how PRS inherited the "state of exception". The second part addresses the security issue related to the arrival of thousands of PRS. It evaluates the impact on the internal equilibrium among the Palestinian factions as well as in the balance of their relationship with the Lebanese political parties.

### **Palestinian refugees from Syria: inheriting the "state of exception"**

The *nakba* in 1948 had caused an influx of 75.000 to 100.000 Palestinian refugees in Syria. Most of them settled down in five camps in Damascus and three unofficial ones near the Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia. By the time of the Syrian uprising in 2011, this refugee community has grown to nearly half a million. A significant part of them were living in the camps as well as in informal gatherings. Palestinians in Syria received UNRWA services and were entitled to almost the same restricted civil rights as Syrian nationals and became relatively well integrated into the Syrian socioeconomic structure.<sup>6</sup> Inserted in secondary and third economic sectors, most of them were located in urban cities.

When the Syrian uprising began in spring 2011, PRS were more often exposed to violence than Syrians. Although some PRS have joined the governmental forces and some others the opposition, the bulk of the Palestinians in Syria chose to carefully follow a neutral and distanced posture towards both sides. Despite this neutral position, two thirds (270.000 people) of PRS have been displaced by early 2014, of which 75.000 have left the country.<sup>7</sup> During an initial period of several months following December 2012 when the war affected them most intensively, they mainly sought refuge in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. When both Turkey and Jordan unilaterally decided to close their borders for PRS, Lebanon remained the last haven.

Facing the impacts of the huge Syrian refugee community, which grow to more than one million, the Lebanese authorities seem to regard PRS as the sole responsibility of UNRWA and the international community. In May 2014, the General Security of State even decided to shut down the Lebanese borders to Palestinian refugees without any official decision or justification. In order to understand such behaviour, one can refer to the specific and tensed situation which Palestinians in Lebanon are facing. To conceptualise their Lebanese environment, Sari Hanafi and Taylor Long<sup>8</sup> borrowed the concept of "state of exception" from Giorgio Agamben. Understood as a "zone of indistinction

between exception and rule, licit and illicit”<sup>9</sup> the term can be applied to the Palestinian refugees as “the suspension of the law by the sovereign state, usually in the name of national defence or security”<sup>10</sup>. But the authors add the suspension of the law and the practice of measures of exception involve all institutional actors related to the Palestinian refugees issue namely, the Lebanese state, the NGOs, and the PLO. All of them are part of a system of interactions where the Palestinians are treated within a state of exception because of the lack of political will to deal with their situation in Lebanon.

The situation PRS are facing in Lebanon is by most described as bad. Only 7% among those fleeing Syria have found a job in Lebanon and most of the refugees are traumatised by direct exposure to violence – a fifth have lost a close relative or friend.<sup>11</sup> The bulk of the PRS arrived after the Yarmouk camp attack by the end of 2012 and continued to seek refuge in Lebanon in 2013 and 2014 despite the poor living conditions they will experience in Lebanon.<sup>12</sup> There are several reasons why Palestinian refugees from Syria flew to Lebanon: their concentration in Damascus neighbourhood (which is close to Lebanon), kinship, intermarriages, labour ties, and the fact that the Turkish and Jordanian borders have been closed. Contrary to those two countries, Lebanon left its doors open for those refugees from Syria – provided they paid an individual entry fee of 25.000 Lebanese Pounds (17\$) for a seven-day entrance visa<sup>13</sup> – until May 2014.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the Lebanese authorities have blocked the process *sine die*. Syrian travel documents or ID cards were required for Palestinians to leave Syria and an exit visa costs 1.500 Syrian Pounds (approx 32\$) for an entire family. For some refugees it was difficult to leave the country, like for those who stayed in Yarmouk camp because they were suspected to have sided with the insurgents. The same problem occurred to men who had not done their military service in the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) – the Palestinian corpse of the Syrian Army. Thus, the illegal crossing of the porous Lebanese border became the last option for many.

When arrived in Lebanon, the PRS faced harsh living conditions. UNRWA provided them at least with basic health care, social service and education as well as some other direct material help. However, as the Beirut based Palestinian NGO “Tatwir Study Center” stated, the main challenges for the refugees were to find accommodation and to get legal residences. The NGO also mentioned the limited health services, as UNRWA reimburses only 50% of any emergency surgery, compared to a full support in Syria.<sup>15</sup> In terms of shelter, UNRWA’s insufficient assistance is partly compensated by programs of the Palestinian Authority.

In 2013, the number of Palestinian refugees arriving from Syria rose from 10.000 to more than 80.000, an approximate figure that includes those not registered.<sup>16</sup> UNRWA’s Director<sup>17</sup> explained that half of them joined Palestinian camps in Lebanon after having been displaced more than once within Syria. The other half of them stayed outside camps, in gatherings, or spread in main cities. These refugees are equally located in the South of Lebanon, in the North of Lebanon and in the Beqaa Valley. No more than a few thousand PRS settled in Beirut due to pricy renting and overcrowded spaces. In the South, as mentioned

by Kamel Dorai<sup>18</sup>, Palestinian refugees who possess houses (acquired prior to the 2001 law that has banned such acquisition) eased the stay of some relatives from Syria there and also provided them with connections to Europe and the U.S. thanks to earlier migrations. In July 2013, an international pledge of \$45 mio was made to finance assistance in terms of sheltering, health, education and cash distributions. Main donors are the EU, the US, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> Still, an additional influx of refugees will strain already encumbered refugee communities. For 2015, the projection of UNRWA's urgent assistance estimates their number up to 44.000 people in Lebanon and the agency required \$415,4 mio for the year, affecting US\$ 63,5 mio to Lebanon's Palestine refugees only.

In spring 2014, UNRWA succeeded to provide a monthly cash distribution by ATM card for individuals and families of respectively 30\$/each person a month and 100\$/each family for the renting<sup>20</sup>. UNRWA's financial assistance is nevertheless insufficient, given the high living costs in Lebanon. A second issue related to the residence permit also appeared after the first year of residence as the General Security Office required from refugees to pay a 200\$ fee for the renewal of the permit in order to stay in Lebanon another year. As most of them cannot afford such a sum of money, the refugees end up staying inside overcrowded refugee camps as they face forced repatriation if the Internal Security Forces catch them<sup>21</sup>. This illegal status prevents them from leaving the camp, even to withdraw their cash assistance by ATM as there are no ATMs within Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

More serious implications of their illegality slowly appear as time passes: death, birth and marriages happen but cannot be recorded legally as no legal civil registration is possible without a legal status. Among them, the lack of birth registration is probably the most severe consequence as without a legal status those children become stateless people without any civil rights. How UNRWA tries to find solutions for this issue is described by its PR officer: "UNRWA tries to keep a record of these births but in order to make them official, we have discussed the possibility to have an official authorization from the Lebanese Republic to register them. A project is now trying to put a control ahead of the birth process with a medical certificate that should be delivered to every pregnant woman at 7 and 9 months pregnancy in order to avoid the void of registration with an approx birth ratio of 100 births per months"<sup>22</sup>.

Observing the effects of the PRS presence in the camp of Shatila, Diana Allan described a social tension and sharper boundaries between PRS and local Palestinian inhabitants of this camp, one of the most heterogeneous in Lebanon<sup>23</sup>. Memories of the war of the camps are vivid here: people of Shatila keep in mind the brutal siege they faced during three years (1985-1988) when the Syrian Army was helping the Amal militia to shell the camp that killed hundreds of its residents.<sup>24</sup> In such environment, the PRS are perceived as intruders and small differences between the two communities are seen as major differences that render any cohabitation difficult. However, for a short time during demonstrations and mobilizations in the context of the 2014 Gaza war in August 2014, a feeling of unity and collective belonging was shared by most Palestinians.<sup>25</sup> On the other

hand, division between the two Palestinian communities continued to exist in the field of education. UNRWA even had to organise different classes for two thirds of the 7,530 students enrolled in UNRWA schools because of the difference in their school backgrounds as PRS are mostly only Arabic speakers.

PRS in Lebanon as well as Jordan and Turkey are also struggling for their human rights, as stated by the Geneva Convention, to be respected. Human Rights Watch criticises the deportations of Palestinian refugees from Syria by both Jordan and Egypt.<sup>26</sup> In line with such cases, Lebanon is playing the same game as illustrated by the deportation the General Security organized in May 2014. More than 40 Palestinian refugees either from Syria or from Lebanon were caught by the security as they tried to embark on flights for Libya or Egypt with fraudulent visas. The case was divulged once the refugees had been expelled to Syria but among them three men succeeded to get out of the bus in the transit zone after the Masnaa border crossing.<sup>27</sup> Claiming they would surely be tortured and killed in Syria, they chose to stay in this no man's land for nearly two months with sandwiches they purchased from a kiosk and also thanks to the occasional help of people passing by and providing with blankets or material to ease their stay. Eventually, the Palestinian Embassy in Beirut and the Lebanese General Security negotiated an agreement according to which the three individuals will not be arrested on their return to Lebanon.

To better understand Lebanon's harsh treatment of PRS one has to look at the history of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon as their arrival unveiled old demons of the civil war time (1975-1990). Lebanon's collective memory agrees on the guilt of the Palestinians for having dragged Lebanon into the Arab-Israeli turmoil and ruined their country by triggering a civil war, although this recount of the civil war is clearly partial, the social and political effects of this vision structured the post-civil war era.<sup>28</sup> Since the end of the civil war, the Syrian tutelage over Lebanon used this mindset to keep the Palestinian refugees as a marginalized group. Most of the Lebanese parties and political actors were happy to have found a scapegoat instead of doing the work of memory, which left scars open deep inside the society and did not allow any improvement of the Lebanese perceptions about the Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. This explains the institutionalisation of the marginalisation of the Palestinians in Lebanon that enforces a state of exception in the way the Lebanese state operates with the Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.

A good illustration of this lack of consideration for Palestinian refugee's fate is given through the repeated rejection of the "implantation" (*al-tawteen*), by which any kind of social and economic integration of the Palestinian community is meant. In fact, such an attitude prevents any serious effort to improve the living conditions of the refugees in Lebanon and contributes to raising fear of a "Palestinian burden" among the Lebanese.<sup>29</sup>

In the post-Syrian era, after the military withdrawal of 2005, the Lebanese government set up a Lebanese-Palestinian body to build a bilateral relationship after the Lebanese Siniora government had recognized the legitimacy of a Palestinian diplomatic representation in Beirut in 2006. This committee, labelled the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) turned to be inefficient

and political turmoil and military confrontations slowed down its work. More largely, LPDC's action during all these years gives the impression its margin of manoeuvre is generally narrow.<sup>30</sup> LPDC policy should be questioned as their only answer when facing the influx of Palestinian Refugees from Syria was to minimise the problem. The lack of serious policy to cope with this situation reveals the low level of importance the fate of Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon have for the Lebanese state.

### **The security impact: mapping the Palestinian forces**

Considering the current Syrian civil war as the main effect of the Arab uprising that has deeply affected Lebanon so far, the Lebanese state took some unilateral decisions about the refugees from Syria. One year after their first massive arrival in December 2012, the General Security decided to slow down the admission of Palestinian refugees at the border and it finally shut it down in May 2014. Since then, the only authorized persons among PRS to enter Lebanon are minors under the age of eight, Palestinian refugees with a Lebanese mother or relatives in Lebanon or a valid visa for three months. Another possibility is to have an appointment with the Palestinian Embassy for a visa to travel to a foreign country. In the latter case, the General Security allows PRS to enter Lebanon no more than nine hours before their flight departure. In addition, the Ministry of Interior has decided not to extend visas for PRS anymore. Current negotiations between the Lebanese state and UNRWA tend to secure that no PRS will be deported to Syria.

The Lebanese media usually exaggerates the security threat posed by PSR. They stated one should fear internal troubles from internecine feud Palestinian refugees would bring to Lebanon. It is a fact that a divide exists among them as Hamas took side with the uprising while some other Palestinians factions like Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) stood along the Syrian regime. This worry is linked with the perception of Palestinian camps as sanctuaries or training camps for jihadists. There is a palpable fear linked to a strong belief among a significant segment of the Lebanese society of a Palestinian “security issue” when seeing the “extra-judicial” spaces refuge camps constitute.<sup>31</sup>

This fear is linked to the symbol of power the Palestinian resistance represented in the pre-civil war period and refers more specifically to the Cairo agreement signed in November 1969 between the Lebanese army and Yasser Arafat as the head of Fateh, at the time the leading group of the Palestinian resistance. Regarding the camps, the Cairo agreement granted Palestinian refugees of Lebanon with freedom of organisation in the camps. The intelligence services of the Lebanese army then withdrew from the camps putting an end to a bleak period of bad treatment of Palestinians in Lebanon. Then camps became the symbol of a powerful Palestinian identity. The cleavage that divided the Lebanese society led to a contradictory perception of what the camps were, alongside with their perception of the political meaning of the ‘Palestinian resistance’. For the Leftists and the National Movement (LNM)<sup>32</sup>, camps were the symbol of the struggle for liberating Palestine and an internal ally to bring revolution within the

Lebanese political scene. For the rightists and the Lebanese Front<sup>33</sup> in general, the camps incarnated dangerous military strongholds and were seen as the vectors for a destabilisation of the Lebanese state, an undermining of its sovereignty and a peril regarding their control over the State. With the weakening of the military wing of the Palestinians after the 1982 Israeli invasion, this second vision became preeminent. Although the Lebanese parliament abrogated the Cairo Agreement in 1987, the camps stayed autonomous partly due to a lack of state capacity to impose its authority over the various Palestinian militias that would fight against for their autonomy. The origin of the discourse on the Palestinian camps as ‘security islands’ (*juzzur amniyyat*) is also clearly linked to the Syrian tutelage policy over Lebanon. This Syrian hegemony over the post-civil war state tended to use the “Palestinian card” as a common scapegoat amongst various Lebanese groups, in line with the fear of “implantation” already mentioned.

### **Palestinian groups toward the Syrian uprising**

The Syrian uprising and war have caused deep divisions among Palestinian refugees in Syria. During the initial conflict period, in early December 2012, the Palestinians were fighting on both sides: with Assad’s government as well as with the rebels. The PFLP-GC on the government side and the Storm Brigade (*Liwa al-Asifa*) on the insurgents’ side have even fought against each other causing casualties mainly on the pro-government side.<sup>34</sup> In this fierce battle, the oppositional Free Syrian Army and allied Islamists were able to take control of the Yarmouk camp which provoked the Syrian army to attack the camp by air-strike bombing.<sup>35</sup> As a direct spill-over of these clashes and violence, fights occurred few months later in Lebanon’s Ain el-Hilweh camp near Sidon between Islamists of Osbat al-Ansar that joined Al-Nusra Front, one of the strongest jihadist militia of the Syrian battlefield, and the pro-Bashar PFLP-GC.<sup>36</sup> In March 2013, other clashes happened between Fatah and Osbat al-Ansar. Although the latest fight seems related to an older issue<sup>37</sup>, these tensions must have rung the bell among the factions of the camp, in fear of any renewal of Nahr el-Bared scenario.<sup>38</sup>

A general agreement to bring back a quiet and safe environment in Ain el-Hilweh emerged as a means to undermine any scenario of a new Islamist stronghold.<sup>39</sup> This does not mean that all conflicts and controversies have disappeared but rather that they will be discussed by the local committee of the camp.<sup>40</sup> A good example of this behaviour happened in June 2013 when few dozens of young Sunnis radical Palestinians from Jund al-Sham and Osbat al-Ansar tried to counter attack the Lebanese Army Forces in order to support the Lebanese Salafist Sheikh Assir and his militiamen during the confrontation that erupted near Sidon.<sup>41</sup> The unified forces of the camp succeeded in pressuring the young Palestinians to pull back from this battle as their involvement could do harm to the whole Palestinian community.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the massive influx of PRS in Lebanon, Palestinian factions surprisingly stayed neutral. In fact, as seen above, the fear of new tensions with the Lebanese army leading to a “new Nahr el-Bared” is probably a key element



explaining such collective behaviour. But one also has to take into account the fact that Palestinians from Syria are far less politicised than their Lebanese brothers<sup>43</sup>, an aspect that is congruent with the whole process of de-politicisation of the society under the Assad regime.<sup>44</sup> Another aspect of such Palestinian neutral policy is a long and harmful experience of internal divide among Palestinian factions in Lebanon nurtured by the Syrian power. From its intervention in Lebanon's turmoil in 1976 onward, the Syrian regime tended to oppose the Arafat wing of the PLO and to nurture an internal divide that eventually turned to a success in 1983 with the formation and dissidence of a new Palestinian militia "Fateh-Intifada" that obviously defied the authority of the Fateh over Palestinian refugees. Lebanon was then a vantage ground for Syria to develop clientelistic Palestinian organisations like Fatah-Intifada or PFLP-GC – a dissident branch of the PFLP in 1968 under the lead of Ahmad Jibril.

The Oslo Agreement in 1993 deepened the rift between Arafat and the Syrian authorities and in 2001 Hamas chose to settle down in Damascus as Syria appeared as a strong political ally in its opposition to Oslo. The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 led to a new trade-off between Palestinian factions and the Lebanese State that carried out a more homogeneous policy between the pro-Syrian factions (Saiqa, PFLP-GC, Hamas) and the pro-Arafat factions (mainly Fateh, PFLP, DFLP) in Lebanon. In addition, following the Hamas move to Damascus in 2001, a clear "axis of resistance" emerged aggregating Hizbullah and Hamas around the Syrian/Iranian alliance.<sup>45</sup> Today the Syrian popular uprising disturbs this "resistance" in contesting the Syrian regime with a "revolution" discourse that transforms the "resistants" into oppressors.<sup>46</sup>

During the first year of the Syrian uprising (2011-2012), Palestinian refugee camps stayed away from the mobilisation against the Syrian regime. The Palestinians were still mobilized against Israel. At that time, Hamas had a distinct position from the PFLP-GC's towards the regime: it tried to mediate between Assad and its opponents. Things changed in June 2011, during the *naksa* commemoration under the guidance of the Syrian regime<sup>47</sup> when 23 young Palestinians demonstrators were killed by the Israeli army on the Golan border. During the funeral in the Yarmouk camp, a PFLP-GC office was vandalised by Palestinian refugees accusing this group and the Syrian regime of using the Palestinian cause for its ideological profits.<sup>48</sup> This first warning calmed down all the factions who did not want the Syrian crisis to become an internal divider among Palestinians. Nevertheless, in July 2011 an attack launched by the Syrian Army on a Palestinian refugee camp in Latakia increased the tension between Syria and the PLO.

For Hamas, the neutral posture slowly broke down in the Spring of 2012 during the siege of the Syrian city of Homs. Ismael Haniyeh, the Hamas prime minister in Gaza, took side with the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo and in Syria disregarding Hamas' strategic alliance with Syria and Hizbullah in the "axis of resistance". Fateh, the leftists and the Islamic Jihad movement, on the other hand, tried to diminish the tension during the December fight between the Syrian army and the opposition in Yarmouk camp by staying neutral. Only the PFLP-GC took side with the Syrian army but also faced an internal division leading to the

defection of some of its members. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, Hamas took part in the Turkish AKP congress that led Damascus to accusing Khaled Mechaal of being a traitor. On the ground, several militants from Gaza enrolled in the Syrian opposition movements, Hamas being more and more sympathetic with the figure of the revolutionary (*al-tha'ir*) and less with the resistant one (*al-muqawim*). For its part, the Islamic Jihad in Palestine did not make the same calculation as its own story is marked by an exclusion of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood when the leader of the movement took side for the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The nationalist and third-world paradigms seem to have a bigger weight in regional politics than Sunni belonging or religious orientation.

Facing this tension among Palestinians in Syria, Hizbullah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Tawhid movement and Jamaa Islamiyya held common gatherings during the year 2012 with the purpose of preventing the conflicts in Syria from spreading to Lebanon and its Palestinian refugee camps. It is significant that even in 2013, when Hizbullah was facing several bombings of its strongholds and when investigations put the blame on Hamas members, the "Party of God" issued a statement explaining the continual meetings the party organised with Hamas. For its part, Hamas expressed its will to cooperate and immediately mentioned the importance of its alliance with Hizbullah against Israel.<sup>49</sup> This behaviour shows that due to its weakness in Lebanon, Hamas tries to keep a multiple alliance system to stay on the safe side in order to deal with the unpredictable evolution of the Syrian uprising, after the Egyptian military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Gaza war in summer 2014 reinforced the Hamas-Hizbullah links when, for the first time since 2012, Ali Baraka, the Hamas political official in Lebanon appeared publicly alongside with Mahmoud Qomati, the vice president of Hizbullah's political office. In this context, Hamas was useful for Hizbullah to show its solidarity with Gaza. It also allowed Hizbullah to assume a different policy towards the Palestinian movement from the one of the Syrian authorities. Although some interlocutors saw the move as a means for Hizbullah to keep the movement close to its axis of power when Lebanon was facing the rising threat of ISIL, it is also possible to read it as Iran's interests in keeping a Palestinian card in the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>50</sup> Although the rising tension in Lebanon because of Syrian Jihadi groups and especially ISIL and despite the rumours about ISIL recruiting within Palestinian camps, there is a very low probability of significant collusion.<sup>51</sup> The changing evolution of the Hamas-Hizbullah relationship tend to show the key importance of strong strategic alliances and ideological values in the quite volatile environment in the Middle East.

Hamas continues to share with Islamic Jihad main political opinions like their opposition to the Palestine Authority or the definition of Israel as an enemy; and both movements are using the same Islamic discourse. For their parts, explained Dot-Pouillard, leftist groups tend to stay neutral and have more fears of the Islamisation of the uprising<sup>52</sup>. They are also defiant towards the Syrian regime. Surprisingly, leftist groups are also allied with Hizbullah and Islamic Jihad – two radical Islamic formations – which is understandable regarding their

anti-Imperialistic ideology. Fateh, for its part, seems to be ambivalent: Fateh and the Palestinian Authority condemned the Syrian regime for its behaviour towards the Palestinian refugees, but they seemed to have shifted their position when Hamas left Damascus as the victory of the insurgents on Assad could bring new political opportunities for Hamas. In this perspective, a new “rapprochement” seemed to occur with Hizbullah, the closest ally of the Syrian regime in Lebanon, during the year of 2013. One should also mention the interest for Hizbullah to gather non-Shi’a political forces to aggregate new loyalties among the Lebanese and Palestinians. In this perspective, the “Party of God” seems to have expanded the recruitment of young jobless Palestinian refugees in its non-Shi’a battalion known as *Al-Saraya al-Muqawama*.<sup>53</sup>

The siege of the Yarmouk camp by the Syrian government forces in December 2013 with the cruel strategy of starving its inhabitants progressively united all the Palestinian forces. Fateh was prompt to pay attention and to denounce the siege; other groups did not take long to make statements upon it and to collect donations. Soon, many rallies and protests were organized in different countries of the Middle East, from Lebanon to the Gulf with fund-raising campaigns. UNRWA has set up its own campaign to help the besieged camp. Images of poor people becoming refugees once again and seeking for shelter after having been exiled since 1948 were like a shock, as was one of the first images UNRWA displayed on the front page of its website picturing food delivery early February 2014 in Yarmouk camp.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless the timing for the Yarmouk campaign was convenient for many Palestinian groups to mobilise. The best example is given by Fateh that took this opportunity to show its leading role in the Palestinian national movement, reminding basic rights for refugees and advocating for the right of return. As Fateh stayed more neutral towards the Assad regime than Hamas, PLO happened to be more successful at getting food into the camp which counts now less than 50.000 people (originally 150.000).<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the impacts of the PRS in Lebanon from both the humanitarian and security perspective. It was shown that contemporary issues of the PRS in Lebanon cannot be detached from historical events as the Lebanese-Palestinian relationship is strongly influenced by civil war memory. It was argued that the “state of exception” in which most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live is the result of a tense and complex Lebanese-Palestinian coexistence. This mode of governance, which is based on arbitrariness and lack of clear rules for the Palestinian refugees, is now affecting those Palestinians who have fled from the war in Syria.

From a humanitarian perspective, PRS are facing harsh difficulties in Lebanon due to the traumatic events they lived before seeking refuge in Lebanon. This country appeared as the easiest destination from Damascus the moment their camp in Yarmouk, a Damascus suburb, was bombed in December 2012. Although some of the PRS found relatives in Lebanon, many men had to cross illegally the Lebanese border either because they were not able to pay the entrance fees in

Lebanon or because they feared to be enrolled in the Syrian military or put in jail. While UNRWA eased their living conditions in Lebanon including cash distribution since 2014, the institution was unable to provide shelter to PRS families. On the highest estimation including non-registered people, PRS numbered 80.000 and dispersed for half of them in Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Since the closure of the Lebanese border for PRS during the summer 2014, this figure stabilized around 44.000, not including illegal PRS residents. This number increased year after year as the Lebanese General Security Office required from refugees to pay a 200\$ fee to renew their residence permit. This could have severe repercussion on newborn babies of illegal parents: they could become stateless and rightless refugees as no legal civil registration is possible without a legal status. Finally, the PRS situation in Lebanon mirror the lack of interest Lebanese State historically pay for them. The perception of Palestinian refugees as a burden for the Lebanese society is not helping to improve the current fate of the PRS.

Such a residence policy continues to feed the myth of camps as “violent” or “dangerous” spaces as most of the illegal PRS are seeking refuge there due to their fear of being deported to Syria. Palestinian refugee camps are becoming the subject of all types of rumours about security issues. The Palestinians from Lebanon know that these places can even be destroyed if the Lebanese security is threatened as it was the case in 2007 with Nahr el-Bared camp. In consequence, the Palestinian factions have expended lots of efforts in security coordination within camps – and the case of Ain el-Hilweh is probably an interesting case to follow with the implementation of a new security plan last Spring.<sup>56</sup> Thanks to a post-Syrian era that saw new collaborations between Palestinian factions in Lebanon, the policy followed today in camps tends to promote neutrality towards the current Syrian civil war. In the meantime, the effect of the general context helped the Islamic radical movements among Palestinian camps to mobilise segments of the Palestinian youth. But so far neither the radical Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir nor the Islamic State has succeeded in building up a radical front in the Palestinian environment. And if it happens in the future, nothing seems to significantly relate the PRS with such a mobilisation. After all, the internecine fights among Palestinian radicals or with Fateh have a long story in Lebanon clearly pre-dating the arrival of the current refugees from Syria.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the ideological and strategic link between Hamas and Hizbullah seem strong enough to keep Palestinian Sunni radicals away from possible Sunni-Shia clashes.

Disregarding this overall positive outlook, there are still some unsolved critical issues that could cause serious problems for the Palestinians in Lebanon. The main problem is that the security coordination in camps is not prepared to face what could be the next challenge in this Palestinian refugees’ environment: tensions between Palestinians from Syria and Lebanon and a growing resentment among PRS against what they perceive as a lack of dignity in their treatment in Lebanon. In light of the difficult Lebanese-Palestinian relations, any terrorist action committed by a Palestinian individual could once again turn the Lebanese anger against the “usual suspect”, the scapegoat that helps to hide an internal lack of national cohesion among the Lebanese.

---

<sup>1</sup> Apart from international agencies' reports, see for instance Paul Salem (2012): *Can Lebanon survive the Syrian Crisis?* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace); International Crisis Group (2012): *A Precarious Balancing Act. Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict*, Middle East Report 132, (Brussels); International Crisis Group. (2013): *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*. Middle East Report 141, (Brussels).

<sup>2</sup> See UNRWA's website <http://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-response-and-services-palestine-refugees-syria-prs-lebanon> (accessed on 18 March 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See *Monthly Briefing*, Issue 37, 31 July 2014.

<sup>4</sup> These authors propose to follow the theory of Giorgio Agamben when talking about Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. It posits the existence of communities of refugees living in "bare life", meaning that their treatment referred to a state of exception as no protection can be granted. See Giorgio Agamben (2005): *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Sari Hanafi, Taylor Long (2010): "Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian refugee Camps of Lebanon" in: *Journal of refugee Studies* 23 (2): 134-159.

<sup>5</sup> The camp was under siege between late May and early September 2007 when a group of Jihadists took position in Nahr el-Bared thanks to the security vacuum after the departure of the Syrian secret services in 2005. Mainly composed of Lebanese, Palestinian and Saudis, Fatah al-Islam took over the office of Fatah-Intifada, a pro-Syrian Palestinian faction, in the camp and intended to set up an emirate in Northern Lebanon. Facing a deadly assault from Fatah al-Islam, the Lebanese Army besieged the camp and bombed it intensively during three months, killing 222 Jihadis and suffered 164 dead soldiers. For the Palestinian refugees, this war provoked the destruction of most of the camp and the fled of more than 30.000 of them. It also deeply tarnish their relationship with Lebanese citizens of the north of Lebanon from where most of the soldiers were from. See Bernard Rougier (2008): *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme?* (Paris: Fayard).

<sup>6</sup> See Anaheed Al-Hardan (2012): "The Right of Return Movement in Syria: Building a Culture of Return, Mobilizing Memories for the Return", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 41 (2): 62-79. A complete picture should mention the lack of possibility for Palestinians in Syria to get the Syrian citizenship and restrictions towards land owning of agriculture parcels. See Mohammed Kamel Dorai, Jalal al-Husseini (2014) : "La vulnérabilité des réfugiés palestiniens à la lumière de la crise syrienne" in: *Confluence Méditerranée* (under publication).

<sup>7</sup> See UNRWA's website: <http://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis> (accessed on 4 March 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Sari Hanafi, Taylor Long (2010): "Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian refugee Camps of Lebanon", *Journal of refugee Studies* 23 (2): 134-159.

<sup>9</sup> See Giorgio Agamben (1998): *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press):170.

<sup>10</sup> In Sari Hanafi, Taylor Long (2010): "Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian refugee Camps of Lebanon", *Journal of refugee Studies* 23 (2): 147.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, see the 2013 mid-summer overview at <http://electronicintifada.net/content/war-syria-highlights-vulnerability-palestinian-refugees/12640> (accessed on 25 September 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For example, late December 2012 ICRC helped UNRWA to face the crisis in providing first aid kit. Interview with ICRC head of mission Jurg Montani in Beirut, April 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Palestinian refugees must go to the General Security Office to obtain a free-3 month residence permit that is renewable every three months during a year.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Doris Rochelle, Abbie Taylor (2013): *Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: a Snapshot from Summer 2013*. (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University): 20.

<sup>15</sup> Tatwir (Study Center), *Report 1* (in Arabic). Beirut, October 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See: Mohammed Zaatari, *Daily Star*, 25 September 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Mohammed Kamel Dorai (2014): "L'impact des déplacements des réfugiés irakiens et palestiniens en Syrie". Paper Presented at *La crise au Proche-Orient, les réfugiés et la Suisse*, University of Geneva, February 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

- 
- <sup>20</sup> See *Monthly Briefing*, Issue 37, 31 July 2014, p.1.
- <sup>21</sup> See Kamel Dorai (2014), op. cit.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview at UNRWA in Beirut, with Mrs Darkazally, August 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> See Diana Allan's blog at <http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2014/07/boom-a-photo-essay.html>
- <sup>24</sup> See Rosemary Sayigh (1994): *Too Many Enemies. The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed Books).
- <sup>25</sup> See Diana's blog at <http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2014/07/boom-a-photo-essay.html>
- <sup>26</sup> See the sum up provided by HRW for the 2012-2014 period at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/07/jordan-palestinians-escaping-syria-turned-away> (accessed on 27 August 2014).
- <sup>27</sup> See the first report early May 2014 at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/05/lebanon-palestinians-barred-sent-syria> (accessed on 16 August 2014)
- <sup>28</sup> Daniel Meier (2010): "Matrimonial Strategies and Identity Relations between Palestinian Refugees and Lebanese after the Lebanese Civil War" in: *Journal of refugee Studies* 23 (2): 160-183.
- <sup>29</sup> The danger of their implantation resides in the perspective of the subversion of the sectarian balance in the country and the subsequent shift of power this change could create. On this question see Daniel Meier (2010): "Al-Tawteen: The Implantation Problem as an Idiom of the Palestinian Presence in Post-Civil War Lebanon (1989-2005)" in: *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 32 (3): 145-162.
- <sup>30</sup> As mentioned by LPDC advisor Lina Hamdan, due to the current Syrian crisis, less money was available for LPDC, which led its members "to prepare a Lebanese policy on the Palestine issue" in the perspective of a regional peace, in order to decide "how to apply the right of return". Interview at Grand Sérail LPDC office, Beirut, September 2013.
- <sup>31</sup> That is one of the heavy memories of the "Fatehland" that goes along with the common fear often heard about of the "extra-judicial" spaces that Palestinian camps are.
- <sup>32</sup> The LNM gathered several leftists groups and pro-Palestinian factions headed by the Progressist Socialist Party (PSP) under the lead of Kamal Jumblatt. The Movement disbanded after the assassination of its leader in 1977.
- <sup>33</sup> The Lebanese Front was a gathering of Christian formations at the beginning of the civil war to unify its military front towards the LNM. It was diluted in 1980 when its components unified under the lead of the Lebanese Forces and its chief Bachir Gemayel.
- <sup>34</sup> An account of these initial events can be found at <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/9tkqz6Zhuxv5juicH82PiL/Syrian-jets-rocket-Palestinian-camp-in-Damascus.html?facet=print> (accessed on 5 March 2014).
- <sup>35</sup> See Anas Zarzar, Marah Mashi, *Al-Akhbar*, 17 December 2012.
- <sup>36</sup> See Amal Khalil, Qassem Qassem, *Al-Akhbar* English, 4 February 2013.
- <sup>37</sup> On that topic, see Bernard Rougier (2007): *Everyday Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam Among Palestinians in Lebanon* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press).
- <sup>38</sup> This camp was destroyed after a 3-month battle between the Lebanese Army and the jihadi-led group Fatah al-Islam, causing an immense distrust among Lebanese citizens towards the Palestinian refugees. For details on this case, see Adam Ramadan (2009): "Destroying Nahr el-Bared: sovereignty and urbicide in the space of exception", in: *Political Geography*, 28: 153-163; Adam Ramadan (2010): "In the Ruins of Nahr al-Barid: Understanding the Meaning of the Camp", in: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 1: 49-62.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with a leading figure of the Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Beirut, April 2013.
- <sup>40</sup> Camps committee are local institutions gathering the residents' representatives and armed groups of the camp. For details about their history and difference between camps, see Daniel Meier (2015): "La gouvernance des camps au Liban : entre luttes d'influence et tensions politiques", *Cultures & conflits* (under publication).
- <sup>41</sup> *Al-Nahar*, 25 June 2013.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with a Palestinian security officer in Ain el-Hilweh, September 2013.
- <sup>43</sup> Interview with a Jaber Suleiman, Sidon, August 2014.

---

<sup>44</sup> See Lina Blin (2011): “Entre ici et là: Intégration et comportement politique des réfugiés palestiniens de Syrie”, in Jalal Al Hussein & Aude Signoles (eds), *Les Palestiniens entre Etat et diaspora* (Paris: Karthala): 211-33.

<sup>45</sup> Far from a supposed Shiite crescent, their common ideology is all but religious: the discourse is full of Third-World symbolism, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist ideology.

<sup>46</sup> See Nicolas Dot-Pouillard (2013): “Le mouvement national palestinien et la crise syrienne: une division contenue”, in: François Burgat & Bruno Paoli (eds), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie*, (Paris: La Découverte): 264-275.

<sup>47</sup> That commemorates each year the 6th June as a great Arab states defeat against Israel in 1967 during the Six-Day war.

<sup>48</sup> See Anaheed Al-Hardan (2012): “The Right of Return Movement in Syria: Building a Culture of Return, Mobilizing Memories for the Return”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 41 (2): 62-79.

<sup>49</sup> See Haytham Mouzahem, *Al-Monitor*, 27 August 2013.

<sup>50</sup> See Nasser Chararah, *Al-Monitor*, 8 August 2014.

<sup>51</sup> When reading back interviews conducted since 2013 with several Palestinian interlocutors from political factions, NGOs and Fateh security apparatus, I notice they all agree on this very low risk profile PR are in the current Lebanese context.

<sup>52</sup> See Dot-Pouillard (2013), op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a Palestinian security officer in Ain el-Hilweh, September 2013.

<sup>54</sup> See <http://www.unrwa.org/galleries/photos/morning-yarmouk> (accessed on 6 March 2014).

<sup>55</sup> See Daoud Kuttab, *Al-Monitor*, 27 January 2014. The siege imposed to Yarmouk camp started in the fall of 2013 and was lifted late February 2014. More than 100 people died of hunger and lack of any assistance. Although UN and other organisations succeeded to bring aid from time to time, they were constantly interrupted by war.

<sup>56</sup> See Amal al-Khalil, *Al-Monitor*, 29 April 2014.

<sup>57</sup> See Bernard Rougier (2007): *Everyday Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam Among Palestinians in Lebanon* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press).