

FROM BARE LIVES TO POLITICAL AGENTS: PALESTINIAN REFUGEES AS AVANT-GARDE

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Refugees and displaced have been, by and large, absent from recent analyses of the Arab uprisings, unless as accidental victims and consequences of violence. Analyses and debates on the reconfiguration of rights, democracy, social justice and dignity in the region suffer from a chronic methodological nationalism, which perpetuates the idea that people seek and fight for rights and self-determination solely in their national territory, seen as the natural context for achieving a full social personhood. The implication is that those who are at the margins of nation-states or who are displaced from their own original nations/territories, like Palestinian refugees, come to be twice marginalised and their predicament is made even more invisible. The idea of return as their only life project does not give justice to the complexity of their aspirations and claims that comprise the right to have rights, alongside the right to return to their lost land and properties, which could be conceived, more broadly, as a return to dignity. The implications are extremely significant and point to the need to rethink nationalism and the classic modern project of the nation-state as the only site for self-determination. Refugees' narratives and practices call for a critical examination of the classic notion that access to rights should be dependent upon belonging to territorially bound and homogenous national communities, a notion that is flawed to start with in most Middle Eastern nation-states, where structures and opportunities for power, rights, and resources reflect and reinforce complex hierarchies based on ethnic, religious, gender, and class divisions.

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Those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of 'indecenty', get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of Gentiles.¹

The novelty of our era, which threatens the very foundations of the nation-state, is that growing portions of humanity can no longer be represented within it. For this reason – that is, in as much as the refugee unhinges

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¹ "We Refugees", a short essay by Hannah Arendt that first appeared in 1943 is reprinted in M. Robinson (ed.), *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers in Exile*, Boston/London, Faber and Faber, 1994, 111–119.

the old trinity of state/nation/territory – this apparently marginal figure deserves rather to be considered the central figure of our political history.²

1. Introduction³

My name is Jamila. I want this message to reach all. It is about the right of the original refugees. These people are paying the price for their national cause. Their houses are not healthy and nobody takes care of them, neither the State nor UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency]. Any type of care is denied to us. Why did they abandon us? Where are the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] and all these people who visited us? Where are the rich Palestinians who go around talking about the Palestinian cause? And where is the haqq [right] of the poorest Palestinian people and the first generation who had the burden of carrying the Palestinian question? They come and take pictures of us and then say: ‘we are happy with/like them and then we leave them and forget about them’. I want the message to reach the rich. And these poor old people who get themselves tired, who are old and dying here and they are asking ‘we want to go back ‘they are those who carry for you the qadiya [cause] and ism watanak [the name of your nation]. And you do nothing. Your power and your abilities get them out to reach those who need them.’⁴

In *Homo Sacer*, political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, drawing from the influential work of Hannah Arendt, argued that the figure of the refugee represents one of the most potent and dramatic embodiments of the constitutive fallacies of the modern nation-states. The refugee symbolises the bare life that lies beneath the citizen and that constitutes its foundation, and yet is excluded from rights and sovereignty and confined to a zone of indistinction or dependence on humanitarianism.

Human rights have had a specific historical function in the formation of the modern nation-state. The declaration of human rights represented the inscription of the natural life in the political juridical order of the modern nation-state. It is the fact of being born, the mere fact of being a human being, which confers in principle membership into the political community. The human being melts in the citizen figure where rights are conserved. Sovereignty is then transferred onto the nation. As Agamben puts it, the fiction lies in the idea that by virtue of

² G. Agamben, *We Refugees*, Symposium, 49(2), Summer 1995, Michael Rocke (trans.), 1995, 117.

³ The paper presents the preliminary results of a research project conducted together with Dr Sophie Richter-Devroe (Exeter) about Palestinian refugees’ political cultures on return and “rights” in three different locations of exile, Jordan, the West Bank, and Lebanon. The research, which involved interviews and participant observation with over a hundred refugees, (in and outside refugee camps) has been conducted through several research fieldworks between 2009 and 2012. This research was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Council for British Research in the Levant. I would like to thank Ilan Pappé and Rosemary Sayigh for reading drafts of this chapter and providing crucial insights.

⁴ Jamila, Gaza camp, Jordan, Jun. 2011.

being born, a subject is a holder of rights, which are attributed to the man, or derive from him. However, how to identify who is a citizen and who is not has constituted the essential political question of the modern nation-state. Indeed, already in the early 1900, many European nation-states started to enact policies of mass denationalisation or de-naturalisation of their citizens. France in 1915 denaturalised those subjects who originated from enemy countries. In 1926, the Italian fascist regime made a law denationalising those who were considered to have committed anti-Italian acts. Nazi Germany and the Third Reich took this principle to its extreme, with the notion of the protection of the German blood and honour, dividing German citizens into first and second-class citizens and introducing the idea of citizenship as something to be deserved rather than to be granted upon birth.⁵ Later, through racism and eugenetics, Nazi Germany will effectively differentiate between an authentic life and a bare life, which has no political value. As Agamben remarks:

One of the few rules the Nazis faithfully observed in the course of the ‘final solution’ was that only after the Jews and gypsies were completely denationalized (even of that second-class citizenship that belonged to them after the Nuremberg laws) could they be sent to the extermination camps. When the rights of man are no longer the rights of the citizen, then he is truly *sacred*, in the sense that this term had in archaic Roman law: destined to die.⁶

Between the First and the Second World Wars the refugee dramatically started to embody the constitutive contradictions of the modern nation-state. The *droits de l’homme*, which were the basis upon which citizenship rights were conferred, begin to be divorced from the latter and started to be used outside the context of sovereignty with the aim of protecting a bare life which comes to be expelled from, or located at the margins, of the nation-states and managed by human rights agencies. A plethora of humanitarian constructions perpetuated the separation.⁷

Agamben’s analysis is of striking importance to unfold some of the less explored strands of Palestinian refugeehood.⁸ Indeed, once refugee camps ceased to be active sites of national struggle and resistance, it may seem that all is left is a humanitarian management that ultimately separates Palestinian refugees from

⁵ G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda*, Turin, Giulio Einaudi, 1995.

⁶ Agamben, *We Refugees*, 117.

⁷ An insightful analysis of the ways in which human rights discourse is mobilised in occupied Palestine is L. Allen, ‘Martyr’s Bodies in the Media. Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada’, *American Ethnologist*, 36(1), 2009, 161–180.

⁸ The Palestinian refugee question has been studied at length. Amongst the many publications see the essays in J. Ginat & E. Perkins (eds.), *The Palestinian Refugees. Old Problems-New Solutions*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2001; the excellent collection B. Riccardo, B. Destremau & J. Hannover (eds.), *Palestine, Palestiniens. Territoire national, espaces communautaires*, Amman, Cermoc, 1997; N. Aruri, *Palestinian Refugees. The Right of Return*, London, Pluto Press, 2011; L. Takkemberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998. Among the socio-anthropological studies: J. Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair. Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005; L. Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. See also D. Chaty & G.L. Hundt (eds.), *Children of Palestine. Experiencing Forced Migration in the Middle East*, Oxford, Bergaham Books, 2005.

the political sphere of sovereignty and citizenship, contributing to reproduce the camps as biopolitical paradigms of the space of exception.⁹ The “permanent temporariness” that characterises refugees’ lives is a powerful reminder of Agamben’s zone of indistinction. Palestinian refugees’ status could be seen, at best, that of temporary citizens (Jordan) and, at worst, that of stateless subjects (Lebanon).¹⁰ In Jordan, Palestinians have been at times the assimilated – docile – nationals, at times the “other” against which contingent and precarious national identities were historically fabricated. In Lebanon, for many years throughout the civil war and until 1989 the Tai’f agreements that put an end to the civil war, they have been central actors in drawing the past and contemporary political configuration of the country, paying a very high price in terms of marginality, death, and finally abandonment.¹¹

However, this is only a partial picture. I suggest that Palestinian refugees articulate powerful critiques from below, which make them, in Hannah Arendt’s terms, the potential “vanguard of their people”.¹² Partha Chatterjee coined the notion “political society” to denote those new aspirations and claims that in many postcolonial contexts emerged outside, and somehow in opposition to, the earlier liberal consensus of state-civil society relations.

[...] the historical task that has been set by these movements is to work out new forms of democratic institutions and practices in the mediating field of political society that lies between civil society and the nation-state.¹³

While their idioms are still nationalist, these movements may encompass sub, post, and transnational allegiances, aspirations, claims, and solidarities. Attempting to take seriously Appadurai’s urge to rethink the linguistic imaginary of the nation-state, Partha Chatterjee argues that these projects are located in an interstice between civil society and the nation-state which they may contest. Moreover, these agencies are interested in a project of democracy rather than in one of modernity or modernisation, from which they were excluded or only partially included.

Taking Palestinian refugees’ narratives to their full depth, one could suggest that they are forming a “political society”, composed of new claims, narratives,

⁹ See S. Hanafi, “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon as a Space of Exception”, *Revue Asylon(s)*, 5, Sep. 2008; M. Kortam, “Politics, Patronage and Popular Committees in the Shatila Refugee Camp, Lebanon”, in A. Knudsen & S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, London, Routledge, 2011, 193–205.

¹⁰ On statelessness among the Palestinian refugees: A. Shiblak, “Passport for What Price? Statelessness among Palestinian Refugees”, in A. Knudsen & S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, London, Routledge, 2011, 113–128.

¹¹ Crucial studies on the life of Palestinians in Lebanon and various aspects of their political history are: R. Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: the Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, London, Zed Books 1994; R. Sayigh, “Palestinians in Lebanon: (Dis)Solution of the Refugee Problem”, *Race and Class*, 37, 1995, 27–42; R. Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*, London, Zed Press, 2007 (1979).

¹² H. Arendt, “We Refugees”, in M. Robinson (ed.), *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers in Exile*, Boston/London, Faber and Faber, 1994, 111–119.

¹³ P. Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation? Or Within?”, *Social Text*, 56, Autumn 1998, 57–69.

and political practices, which they base on a different moral ground than that of nationalism and the nation-state. Indeed, having been left out of the post-Oslo consensus of the two-state solution, refugees are urged to make new sense of their 64 years of dispossession and exile.¹⁴ In the current predicament, nationalist narratives sound like mere rhetoric that perpetuate producing refugees as pawns and instruments, but depriving them of any real perspective of justice and agency. The starting point is refugees' bitter disillusion with the official narrative that their lack of rights was the pre-condition for return. Third or even fourth generations of Palestinian refugees in most cases still do not have basic rights and their return has never been as jeopardised and distant as it is today.

In many senses, this research builds on Rosemary Sayigh and Julie Peteet's influential works on refugee camps in Lebanon.¹⁵ It takes the work further in two directions, a geographical and a temporal one. First it interrogates what it means for refugees to think of return and self-determination at a time of a crisis of the national project. Secondly, it tries to show, through a comparison between Jordan and Lebanon, how refugees' subjugation to specific and diverse forms of control and exception remains sadly at stake even when they became refugee-citizens of the host country in which they sought refuge.

Notwithstanding the persistent manoeuvre to reduce them to bare life, in their daily existence, refugees question their status as a mass of indistinct beneficiaries, as stateless subjects or as temporary citizens. Significantly, they defy the opposition between return and rights, which they do not see as mutually exclusive political projects. This process can be mostly observed in the ways in which Palestinian refugees' identity is retained simultaneously with practices of emplacement. In refugees' narratives and life strategies, displacement and emplacement are simultaneous projects and life strategies defying the "national order of things".¹⁶ Refugees' imaginaries of return seem to substantiate this point. As well

¹⁴ Laleh Khalili conducted an interesting study, which looks at Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as agents, through mnemonic and commemorative practices of the rural, local, pre-exilic life as opposed to the nationalist commemorations. The former are interpreted as critical narratives towards the national leadership and elites. See L. Khalili, "Grass-roots Commemorations. Remembering the Land in the Camps of Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 34(1), Autumn 2004, 6–22.

¹⁵ Rosemary Sayigh argued in a recent article that Palestinians in Lebanon are developing a camp local/national "group identity" which gives birth to a latent "oppositional consciousness" towards nationalist leaderships and institutions. See R. Sayigh, "Palestinian Camp Refugee Identifications. A New Look at the Local and the National", in A. Knudsen & S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, London, Routledge, 2011, 50–64. Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair*. This study also tries to unfold some major questions that have been addressed by Sari Hanafi in his many publications on the topic. Sari Hanafi rightly argues that Agamben fails to account for the agency of the refugees and shows how the camp is in fact regulated by a multiplicity of actors and semi or phantom sovereigns: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local committees amongst others. S. Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory: Territory of Exception and Locus of Resistance", in A. Ophir, M. Givoni & S. Hanafi (eds.), *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion; Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*, New York, Zone books, 2009, 495–519.

¹⁶ For an analysis of the construction of categories of refugees, emplacement and displacement see: L. Malkii, *Purity and Exile. Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995; and L. Malkii, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), 1995, 495–523.

as a right to go back to one's properties and land, return is associated with tropes that recall pre-national and post-national meanings on self-determination. Most notably, return is seen as return to dignity, freedom, personhood where the latter is signified by being *ahl el ard*, the original land owners and inhabitants, a notion that is crucial in informing people's individual and collective identities and status.

In this and other senses, refugees' narratives call for a critical examination of the classic notion that access to rights should be dependent upon belonging to territorially bound and homogenous national communities, a notion that is as flawed to start with in most Middle Eastern nation-states, where ethnic, religious, gender, and class divisions have created complex hierarchical structures and opportunities for power, rights, and resources.¹⁷

2. Precarious citizens, stateless subjects: Palestinians and exception in Jordan and Lebanon

2.1. Jordan: Palestinians as diuf / guests

Jamila's bitter words at the outset of the paper are a lucid and powerful example of camp refugees' types of claims and aspirations, where the centrality of their endurances and suffering for the Palestine question are vindicated and uttered. Jamila, it appears clearly, makes her statements from a precise standpoint, that of the stateless and disenfranchised dwellers of the Gaza Camp, and is directed to Palestinian elites and leadership, as well as to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Jordanian State. Jamila echoes the sentiments and dispositions of many other Palestinian refugees in both Lebanon and Jordan who, in addition to being the historical victims of Israeli ethnic cleansing,¹⁸ are the archetypes of disenfranchised subjects fighting against exclusionary nation-states, where rights and entitlements are highly layered and hierarchically distributed according to ethnicity, religious affiliation, nationality, class, gender, and family status.

For over 60 years, Palestinians have been unable to return to their original lands and/or to obtain any compensation for their material and human losses. Indeed, Israel has adamantly refused to be considered accountable for the tragedy of the *Nakba* and had only been ready to accommodate, in historical Palestine, a symbolic number of first generation refugees. Simultaneously, many host countries have endorsed the idea that naturalisation and access to full rights (*tawtin*) and even *tatwir* (development) would constitute a *de facto* assimilation of the refugee populations and would, eventually, undermine their right of return.¹⁹

¹⁷ S. Joseph (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2000.

¹⁸ I. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oneworld Publishers, 2006.

¹⁹ See the essays collected in A. Knudsen & S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, London, Routledge, 2011.

However, as refugees themselves underline, in Lebanon and Jordan ‘Palestinianness’ has decisively shaped (and has been shaped by) nation-building processes and projects. In Jordan – a country with a large majority of Palestinians – what it means to be (or not) a Jordanian is inextricably linked with the selective incorporation and exclusion of Palestinians in the country’s economic, political, and socio-cultural structures. After 1948, following the *Nakba*, (the catastrophe) a high portion of the ca. 900,000 Palestinian refugees sought shelter in Jordan and subsequently, during the *Naksa* following the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, another high number of Palestinians were forced to flee and sought refuge in Jordan.²⁰ Significantly, most of these refugees were fleeing from refugee camps like *Ariha* (Jericho) or *Balata* (Nablus) that had become their homes after the 1948 expulsion. Aside from the class of Palestinian merchants who lived, since Ottoman times, in the territory denominated by the British as Transjordan, and who were immediately co-opted when the territory was given the status of independent nation-state by the British, most Palestinians were granted citizenship after the annexation of the West Bank to Jordan in 1950. In fact there are now many categories of Palestinians residing in Jordan, with various degrees of access to, or lack thereof, to civil rights and resources, ranging from those who hold a two or a five years valid passport, those with or without a national number (*rakam watani*), those with a green or a yellow travel card, according to whether they reside in the West or the East side of the Jordan river, respectively, and those with no documents whatsoever, like the so-called Gazawi. The latter’s “fault” was to have sought refuge in the Egypt administered Gaza strip in 1948. By virtue of this, they were not given Jordanian nationality in the 1950s and following the occupation of the Gaza strip by Israel in 1967, those displaced in Jordan were granted a temporary residence of two years, and have since then been considered as foreigners with no access to rights in the Hashemite Kingdom.²¹ In fact, these seemingly administrative categorisations, not only carry the complex political history of Ottoman and colonial projects, but were re-signified with new contradictory meanings in post-colonial and nationalist times, and have been implicated in structures of power that imprisoned people’s futures for generations.

Since the 1988 disengagement of Jordan from the West Bank (*fakk-el-irtibat*) Palestinians with Jordanian nationality residing in the West Bank cross the bridge with a green card, a colour that constructs them as citizens

²⁰ Studies of Palestinian refugees in Jordan include: A. Abu Odeh, *Jordanian, Palestinians and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process*, Washington DC, Institute of Peace Press, 1999; L. Brand, “Palestinian and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 34(4), Summer 1995; R. Farah, “Palestinian Refugee Camps Re-inscribing and Contesting Memory and Space”, in C. Strange & A. Bashford (eds.), *Isolation Places and Practices of Exclusion*, New York/London Routledge, 2003, 191–208.

²¹ Gazans are considered and treated as foreigners in Jordan. For a full documentation of the categorisations of Palestinians in Jordan and elsewhere see O. El-Abed, *Palestinian Refugees in Jordan*, undated, available at: <http://www.forcedmigration.org/research-resources/expert-guides/palestinian-refugees-in-jordan/fmo025.pdf> (last visited 1 Jan. 2013).

of a fictional Palestinian sovereign State, and by virtue of which Jordan justifies its arbitrary withdrawal of their citizenship.²² We heard numerous accounts of refugees who were confiscated their *rakam watani*, and who were given no clear or convincing explanation, except that they are Palestinian nationals [*sic.*]. According to a report compiled by Human Right Watch, between 2004 and 2007, over 2700 Palestinians have seen their nationality withdrawn and more than 200,000 Palestinians who fled Kuwait in 1990–1991 can be subjected to the same treatment.²³ Umm Maher, who raised seven children in the Hittin camp suggested: “If you ask them [her children] for the *balad asliya* [the original place, country], they would all say Palestine, but if you ask them for the *jinsiya* [citizenship] they would say ‘Jordanian’”. She also added: “I lost my *hawiyya* [Palestinian card], so I should at least take care of my *raqam watani* [Jordanian national number].” Taking care of the *rakam watani* for Umm Mather, as well as for many Palestinian refugees, means avoiding any act or indulging in behaviours that can lead the *tafteesh* (the Inspection office) to withdraw it from her.

This exercise of exception is justified through the rhetoric of *tawtin*, (naturalisation) and the need to prevent Israel from emptying the West Bank of its Palestinian residents, (as well as by reference to the Arab League veto for dual nationality for Arab nationals). In real terms, the effect of these hierarchies and categorisations is the construction and naturalisation of differences between Palestinian “nationals”, and Jordanian “nationals”, a category that includes some assimilated Palestinians, who are represented as legitimate members of the sovereign Hashemite Kingdom. These discourses tend to crystallise the identities of the holders into various degrees of Jordanianness or Palestinianness, seen as mutually exclusive entities, in contrast with the much more fluid and complex ways in which people themselves experienced historically these identities. As Abu Ghassan, a former Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) cadre who was jailed in Jordan after Black September, suggested: “[. . .] it was not like that before the 1970s [. . .] These differences between Jordanians and Palestinians did not exist like today before *harb Ajlul* [Black September . . .] it is all very recent.” Umm Ghazi, who lives in Asharfyeeh, a Palestinian neighbourhood close to the Wihdat refugee camp, and whose father joined the Army soon after the family was displaced to Jordan from their Gerico refugee camp in 1967, remembered with sadness how during Black September the fight was very often between Palestinian guerrillas and Palestinians who were in the Jordanian army. Indeed, a distinct Jordanian national identity was fabricated and institutionalised consistently after Black September, when the Jordanian army smashed the Palestinian resistance in Jordan and following on that, in the early 1970s, a process of

²² Palestinians permanently residing in the East Bank have been given a yellow card, to differentiate them from those who reside in the West Bank under the PA, who are now seen as Palestinian nationals and in that respect not entitled to hold a Jordanian nationality, while Palestinians residing permanently in the East Bank and those who came before 1948 are naturalised Jordanians.

²³ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Stateless Again: Palestinian-Origin Jordanians Deprived of their Nationality*, Report, New York, HRW, 2010, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/node/87906> (last visited 1 Jan. 2013).

Jordanisation of the public sector and the bureaucracy started to be wholesale applied.

According to Joseph Massad, the aftermath of Black September constituted: [...] the country's moment of implosion, which proved crucial for national redefinition. Much of the country's elite, including the Palestinian-Jordanian elite, backed the regime. The guerrillas were defeated and a major campaign of Jordanization, which had already been in existence before the Civil War, went into full swing after it. The other of the Jordanian was no longer the external British colonialist but an internal other, namely, Palestinian Jordanians.²⁴

The modern national configuration, which naturalises Palestinians and Jordanians into different peoples, is subject to intense scrutiny and is often contested by refugees. In expressing his view on intermarriages between Jordanians and Palestinians, Osama, a young volunteer and dweller of the Talbyieh camp whose family is originally from Beir Sab'a, offered a lucid and poignant reflection on the material and symbolic issues supporting the hierarchies between Jordanians and Palestinians. Here the specific location of Talbyieh, an agricultural area, significantly marked the nature of refugees' relations with the local populations, composed of Bedouin families and tribal landowners who hired Palestinians as land workers in the early stages of their arrival.

There is not much intermarriage between people from the *mukhayyam* and Jordanians. Us and them, we both don't want. They consider us from lower class, and I don't want to give my girl to someone who thinks that way about us. It is not us who are doing the differentiation, it is them. They are saying "we are Jordanian" [...] but we all know that the division between Jordan and Palestine is *ardi*, it is a territorial division. The families of the south of Palestine were the same families. If we are the same family, why do you consider yourself as something better? In the 50's Palestinians were working as peasants on Jordanian land, [for Jordanian landowners . . .] it is not right to say that someone is superior just because he is the owner of land [*malik al-ard*] [...] later, because we did not have any land, education became our way to invest. Our children have to be educated, to make an investment. Now we have the highest level of education as Palestinians. If you look at the newspaper, in the upper part of the best students, you see Palestinian names and Jordanian names appear only later.

Jordanianness and Palestinianness became, over time, national identifications with specific, albeit diverse, meanings to people. The drama of displacement and the expulsion and oppression that Palestinians faced as an unwanted nation, together with the birth of the resistance movement, all contributed to reinforce a

²⁴ J. Massad, *Colonial Effects. The Making of National Identity in Jordan*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, 10.

distinct Palestinian national identity.²⁵ However, there is awareness and contestation over the ways in which these identities have been naturalised and are strategically called upon to reinforce hierarchies and legitimise exclusion and discrimination. Abu Ahmad, a shopkeeper we interviewed in the Hittin camp, provided us with a very compelling and symbolic example about the ways in which Jordanians differentiated the Palestinians to exclude them from the Army: “When they recruited for the army, they showed an onion to them and asked them to say what it was. Those who said *basala* were Palestinians and did not get into the army, those who said *ibsala* were Jordanian Bedouins, those they took into the army.” The story, which may be one of the many oral legends, is nonetheless strikingly evocative of how Palestinians de-sacralise these discursive constructions and simultaneously contest them as basis for their exclusion from Jordanian state-building, an exclusion that still tends to be framed through the theme of the right of return, but in fact particularly targets the poorest and the less loyal to the Hashemite Kingdom amongst the Palestinians in Jordan. Wisam, whose family was expelled from Kuwait after the Gulf war in the early 1990s and found shelter in the Hittin camp, where some of his relatives already lived, clearly conveys what most refugees we talked to widely espoused:

They do not give the *raqam watani* to the Gazawi. And they say it is related to *nuzul haqq al-awda* [the issue of the right of return]. But the Gazawi want the *raqam watani* not so that they give up *haqq al-awda* [...] they want it to improve their situation here [...] Even those who [already] have *raqam watani*, they don't see a relation to *haqq al-awda*.

The Hashemite project of assimilation and the reduction of Palestinians into an invisible political and national community is internalised by certain refugees and highly contested by others. Um Ghazi who is a Jordanian citizen, noted in the course of one long conversation: “I am Jordanian, but my origin is crucial to me [...] here in Jordan we just live [...] we are just guests, *diuf*, we are not *ahl el ard*, (the original owners/people of the land).” What this means is eloquently illustrated by Abla Abu Helbe, a Palestinian member of the Jordanian parliament who talked to us at length about the contradictions and difficulties that Palestinians face in Jordan:

I am in the parliament [...]. I have the right to be elected and to elect and to all civil rights [...] however, like for the Jordanians, citizenship does not mean rights [...] [In addition] Not all Palestinians here have civil rights. There are 500,000 people who have no rights, the [dwellers of] Gaza camp, 30 km from *Jarash*, [those in the] South and Aqaba [...] they don't have any rights [...] they get accepted only into private universities, thanks to the money received from migrants in the *Khalij* [...] they get high scores, but then they don't have work [...].

²⁵ R. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

2.2. Hierarchies of lives in Lebanon

Most of Lebanon's recent history revolves around the presence of Palestinians. At the end of 2009, Palestinians in Lebanon represented 10 per cent of the Lebanese population and 53 per cent of the 425,640 refugees lived in the 12 UNRWA administered camps or in other areas and gatherings.²⁶ The 1975–1990 civil war saw a high toll of death, with Palestinians being attacked by both Israel and the Christian right wing militias. While the ingredients of the war were to do with sectarianism, class, and regional interests and interferences, at the end of the civil war Palestinians were and still are today perceived in the collective memory as those to be blamed for the shaky political and sectarian grounds on which the country still stands. The life of Palestinian refugees, especially in Beirut, is marked by vivid memory of massacres where thousands of innocent refugees, including women and children, were slaughtered. During the civil war, on 16–18 September 1982 after the withdrawal of the PLO from Beirut, the Sabra and Chatila refugees were massacred at the hand of Christian Phalangist militias protected by the Israeli army, which surrounded the camps, supposedly in retaliation for the assassination of President Gemayel for which Palestinians were held wrongly responsible. This was the first act of a prolonged “war of the camps”, which lasted until 1987, a time in which Palestinian innocents would be furthered attacked by the Shi'a Amal militas backed by Syria, a war that left behind the destruction of the Beirut camps and thousands of martyrs. Seldom, a family we interviewed in Bourj el Barajneh, Sabra, or Chatila have not had a martyr buried during the war of the camps.

Since the exile of the PLO, the life and prospect of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has progressively deteriorated. Most notably, Palestinians are today suffering the exclusion from most civil, social, and political rights and entitlements, institutionalised with the suspension of the Cairo agreements signed by Lebanon in 1969 and only recently slightly alleviated. Such discrimination and exclusion from civil and social rights is legitimised through a two-fold legal and discursive expedient. On the one hand, the trap of the need for a clause of reciprocity, which is of course not possible for Palestinians in the absence of a sovereign nation-state. On the other hand, political rhetoric maintains this exclusion as necessary to avoid *tawtin* (naturalisation) and to ensure the right of return for Palestinians. In fact, most refugees perceptively underline that the real reasons for the ban of Palestinians from social and political rights is the preservation of a precarious sectarian ‘balance’, which in turn contributes to maintain Palestinians as a docile population, dependent on humanitarian aid, ultimately a class of disenfranchised subjected to exploitation and easily transformed into scapegoats in case of internal and international cleavages.

²⁶ J. Suleiman, *Marginalised Community. The Case of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty University of Sussex, 2006.

Imad, who works for an international NGO in one of the Beirut camps, described the plague of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in the following way:

Here in Lebanon the Lebanese say that if the Palestinians work, they will forget the Palestinian cause. But this is only a pretext [...] Lebanese consider giving us rights *tautin* because we are Sunni. They are afraid that we will become the majority [...] that we would change the balance in the parliament [...]. But this is only a pretext. When Hariri [father] came, it started to be forbidden for Palestinians to own property: now you can rent, but you cannot buy. You might be able to buy, but not properly register your properties. Of course, if you have someone in your family who is Lebanese or a foreigner, then you can register your property in their name. The only way here to be and live properly as Palestinian is when you have another passport. Most people here try to get another passport. We have the UN card, but then everyone tries to get a foreign passport to claim rights.

And he added:

[...] It is completely unfair: all Arabs can come here and buy, but we can't. Most Gulfi have bought here. For example most houses on the seaside are owned by Gulfi, Saudi, Qatari [...].

Abu Ayman is one of those Palestinians lying at the bottom of the hierarchy. One of the hundreds of forgotten, invisible Palestinians abandoned after a life devoted to the resistance movement. A several times displaced and a refugee, then cast off by the departure and exile of the PLO in 1982 and finally left stateless with the withdrawal of his documents from the Jordanians, Abu Ayman, who trained as an engineer, lived his life between the West Bank, Turkey, where he studied, Syria where he joined the resistance movement, Iraq and finally Lebanon. He is one of those 4,000 non-ID refugees who came to Lebanon as a result of the exile of PLO troops or cadres from other Arab countries.²⁷ He resorted to sell Chinese toys on a cart in the narrow streets of Chatila camp to support his family. Abu Ayman narrated his story in his bare house in Chatila. His words were not filled with bitterness as one would imagine, but rather imbued with that profound awareness, which so often accompanies refugees' narratives, of being part of a larger, deeper, complex collective history where the single had not agency to act upon.

[...] During my early years in Lebanon, I was part of the resistance. I worked in journalism and civil engineering, translation, graphic design on the computer. Ten years later, I was no longer part of the factions of the revolutionary movement – so I had to resort to civil work to help my children. In reality, there is an exception to my case because I carry the Jordanian nationality so I came to Lebanon illegally. I don't have any

²⁷ *Ibid.*

papers – the Jordanians stopped my papers – not to me only, but also to my wife and my children. And the Lebanese won't give me papers either, so I faced a very complicated situation. When I got married in 1989, my wife and my seven children didn't have any official documents related to the Lebanese state. So when I searched for a job in my field – be it engineering or journalism – I faced an issue, because whoever wants to hire you needs [you to have] documents. These documents however don't exist. So they could not let someone work without papers issued in Lebanon. This drove me to selling toys on a cart. [...]

3. Emplacement and displacement

3.1. Jordan: From the “camp as the nation” to the “nation as a performance”

Randa Farah writing about the political life of refugees in Jordan in the 1960s represented it as an epoch:²⁸

[...] when the poetics and politics of place coincided: the spatial, albeit imaginary, boundaries of the camps henceforth invoked a constellation of political meanings, primarily the right of return, now positioned at the core of the national narrative. The camp as icon of the nation became central to the Palestinian imaginary.²⁹

Abla Abu Helbe, a Palestinian MP in the Jordanian Parliament during a long conversation we had in her office in Amman, described refugees in the camps as:

[...] like any other society [...]. Palestinians are part of the society [...] there are rich and poor amongst Palestinians like among Jordanians [...] it does not have necessarily to do with being refugee in a camp [...] many people could not go out from the camp, because they did not have money [...] however] the camp remains also a symbolic site [...] for the Palestinian question. The ones who live in the camp are more linked to the *Awda* than those outside, their identity is more influenced by that [...] they are all linked to the Palestinian question not so much from a political perspective, but from a social perspective [...] by going to UNRWA, by the things that they wear, such as their *tatreez* [embroidered dresses] [...] For example, you see women waiting outside the UNRWA offices doors who would always

²⁸ R. Farah, “Refugee Camps in the Palestinian and Sahrawi National Liberation Movements: A Comparative Perspective”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 38(2), Winter 2009, 76–93.

²⁹ Randa Farah suggests that “Despite UNRWA’s decisive role in shaping the refugees’ social and economic universes, humanitarian aid was insufficient to sustain families. To supplement their rations in host societies, many refugees worked as seasonal laborers or in low-paying jobs outside the camps. Economic insecurity and the leadership vacuum, combined with political repression and alienation, reinforced informal personal relationships rooted in reciprocity, kin ties, and patronage links extending to multiple institutions. For example, having connections with Jordanian officials or UNRWA employees could improve one’s chances of obtaining better services, while former village networks and camp neighborhoods provided moral, social, and economic support”, in *ibid.*, 83.

say: 'May Allah get us out of this issue and let us return to Palestine so to finish from this *wikala* (UNRWA)'. So all these social dimensions push them to have more relation with the Palestinian identity and question.

In these two quotations, we are offered very vivid illustrations of the shifts undergone by refugee camps and/as the "nation". While in the 1960s the camp was the nation, in the sense of privileged political and symbolic sites for fashioning the nation in exile, today, with the end of the camp as an active and armed space of national resistance, the nation is a social and cultural performance and UNRWA its Janus-faced side. The nation is mainly evoked during the commemoration of the crucial dates in Palestinians' history of dispossession, such as May 1948 or June 1967. On these memorial occasions, children of the camps are dressed up with Palestinian embroidered outfits and perform scenes of the past life, the peasant life of 1948, the resistance and fighting, the martyrs and the hope for return, symbolised by the key.³⁰ These practices could be defined as "performances of return", and carry simultaneously a political and poetic meaning which also denote a refugee "group identity" inscribed in and across the camp.

However, socio-economic integration is enacted along with the creative retention or reinvention of a distinct camp and refugee identity. Camps like Bak'a and Wihdat today operate simultaneously as refugee camps and as urban or semi-urban neighbourhoods and represent urban focal spaces with their popular and competitive markets, shops, and social activities that attract thousands of residents also from other areas. As a dweller in Wihdat put it:

It is a city, a big city. It has a lot of people, many shops, it is life. I know every inch of Wihdat. That is why I came back to Wihdat. I see a lot of people come and go to the market. I smell the good flavours, I eat the fresh food. These things you cannot see anywhere else. Not like Shmeisani. There you don't know who lives above you. Now in Ramadan we share food between the neighbours. This is the life in the camp it is not like that outside.

The camp is a space of warmth and intimacy, characterised by a unique moral economy of relatedness and support, and yet interconnectedness and porosity are also at stake. In Jordan, many camps have extended outside the official boundaries that territorially delimit them and developed in areas in close proximity. Wissam, like many others, mentioned in this regard: "When I marry I will move to Marka. It is outside of the camp, but at the same time it is near to it."

Refugees represent this moving out not as an exit, but as a process of extending the camp beyond its official territorial borders. The camp in this perspective becomes a flexible, symbolic, and political, rather than territorial

³⁰ See Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*.

space. It is an identity space represented by the willingness to carry a memory and a right, and not to assimilate, as Ali's words' convey:

My grandpa had a big family. Wihdat was too small to get all families next to each other. So the camp became bigger, like an onion. We made the borders of Wihdat. The government puts it much smaller.

As evidence of the unwillingness to assimilate, refugees have adamantly resisted the persistent attempts by the Jordanian government to name the camps into *hai*, urban districts, as this would symbolically and politically erase their history of suffering and temporariness which is still awaiting recognition and compensation.

For a long time it was also believed that people in camps would be more linked to Palestine by virtue of their poverty and encapsulation. However, class, political culture, generation, and access to rights intersect and produce different narratives and imaginaries of return. Most notably, adhering to the right of return as a project is clearly transversal to camp and non-camp dwelling.³¹ Many refugees in Jordan are keen in underlining that their resoluteness to holding onto the right of return is disconnected from living or not in a territorially delineated refugee camp:

Abu Fadi, a sympathiser of Hamas from Hittin camp, for example, believes that the relation between willingness to return and leaving the camp is a rather weak one. He said with political lucidity and without hesitation:

[. . .] If *haqq al-awda* had any relation to the *mukhayyam* [the camp], they would have taken the camps away long time ago. There is absolutely no connection between the two. It is a *qadiat al-qalb, mish as-sakan* [an issue of the heart, not the place of living].

Another dweller stresses how leaving or not leaving the camp depends on having resources to do so and does not impact on the right of return:

There is no possibility to leave the camp. You need money. People want to leave. Palestinians living in Europe should also have national belief (*aqida wattaniyya*). It should not depend on the place you live whether you have national belief or not. It does not depend on whether you live in the *mukhayyam* or outside either.

For many who moved out of the camp particularly, their refugee identity and status and the right of return is embedded with and transferred onto the *card al wikala*, the UNRWA registration card: "If you lose your *card al wikala* that is like losing Palestine" it was told to us by a refugee of Hittin. Indeed, upon visiting families in both Jordan and Lebanon, the UNRWA registration card was shown to us almost simultaneously with the pictures of the martyrs. Whether it represents a passport to survival, as it is the case for the most disenfranchised, or a

³¹ For a compelling analysis of the weak relation between nationalism and camp dwelling in Lebanon see S. Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon: Laboratory of Indocile Identity Formation", in M.A. Khalidi, *Manifestations of Identity. The Lived Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut, Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), 2010, 45–74.

symbolic piece of paper stored in a box together with other “return memorabilia”, the *card al wikala* remains central in Palestinian refugees’ identities.

3.2. Lebanon: Exception as a third space

Despite the suspension and exception Palestinians in Lebanon are subjected to, emplacement and displacement stand in a dynamic relation. Bourj el Barajneh and Chatila by virtue of their location in urban Beirut have, with time, become fluid urban spaces, and developed zones of interaction with the sovereign territory and subjects. Refugees from Chatila and Bourj el Barajneh are simultaneously excluded from and included into the “sovereign” territory in hierarchical ways. For example chemists, small clinics, and opticians operate in the camps privately and unofficially, but face severe hindrances as they can only prescribe certain basic medications and are obliged to smuggle medicines in the camp from outside. As it was explained to us by a Chatila resident:

Doctors can practice inside the camp, but not outside. They rent a house, but there is no insurance (if something happens to the patient). He [the doctor] can write prescriptions for medicines then you can get this medicine inside the camp in a pharmacy, but for neurological medicines for example, you can only get it outside [...] a doctor needs a certain government registration number in order to prescribe this sort of medication. The ones in the camp don’t have this registration, they operate unofficially.

Exception extends beyond the spatial boundaries of the camp. Palestinian taxi drivers, whether they live in the camps or not, are not able to be fully insured, they buy the plate and pay the fees to drive privately, but are not covered in case something happens. Similarly, manual workers are offered the lowest working conditions and subject to arbitrary firing with no protection. As one taxi driver put it:

Palestinians can work as chauffeur. They buy the number plate but it is very expensive. Lebanese get benefits from social security. Palestinians buy the plate, but do not get anything in exchange. A Palestinian cannot get a license as a taxi driver. So if you have an accident, you are in trouble. At the checkpoint, they usually don’t do anything. There is no law! If there is no law it is much more difficult. So they might even take the number from him.

A whole system partially sidestepping the suspension and exclusion to which Palestinians are subject to emerged over the years making these camps today into relatively porous social and territorial spaces characterised by a moral economy of exchange and fluidity through markets, marriages, smuggling, emigration, and immigration.³² The juridical-discursive apparatus of exception does not

³² On mobility and migration flows and urbanisation see: M.K. Dorai, “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon. Emigration, Mobility and the Urbanization Process”, in A. Knudsen & S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, London, Routledge 2011, 67–81. For the transformation that refugee camps are undergoing in different parts of the world, see: M. Agier, *Managing the Undesirables. Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011.

incarcerate or separate refugees as bare life but it rather ends up normalising an ephemeral space of partial, insecure, and informal entitlements for Palestinians in Lebanon. As will be shown later, it also gives birth to a grey area of interconnectedness, a lively third space of critical awareness, a standpoint from which detecting and critically uttering the aporia of the Lebanese shaky nation-state building project.

4. Rights and return. Return as dignity

Accessing rights is one of the major priorities of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. A unison claim can be summed up like: “We don’t want their citizenship, we don’t want to be Lebanese, give us just the rights!” A variation of the theme was vividly expressed by an elderly refugee from Bourj el Barajneh, who eloquently stated: “*Jinsiya hiya wasila* – nationality is just a means to an end. Nothing more than that.”

In this re-articulation of rights as something detached from national belonging and membership, the *watan*, homeland, maintains its centrality as the place of origin, the place where refugees “own the land” and are “*abl el ard*” a notion that carries much wider and profound meanings than personal propriety or national identity. As I described earlier, being *abl el ard* points, in most dispossessed refugees’ eyes, to land owning which conferred personhood and status, dignity, but it also refers to belonging and identity, to family genealogy, roots, and legitimacy.

One day we had a revealing conversation with Abu Ayman about “*watan*” (homeland), *tawtin* (naturalisation), and rights. *Watan* is in his narrative equated to a mother, something very common in Palestinians’ iconography, where gendered narratives of the nation as a fertile land, as a violated and fragile spouse or as a mother are allegorically evoked. The mother/*watan*, in Abu Ayman’s view, can never be exchanged:

[...] the *watan* to the person is the mother. My mother may be old, she may not be pretty, and she may be imperfect. But if you ask me to replace my old mother with a younger, healthier girl, I cannot. She is my blood and flesh. My *watan* is my mother. The *watan* is a mother. You cannot replace your *watan*. Your real mother is your original *watan*. You cannot replace your *watan* with another, even if it provides you with opportunities and with all what you may want. I believe that *tawtin*, for the Palestinian people, is like cutting the Palestinians from their roots and their land, their ancestors. For me, and I believe that 90 per cent of the Palestinians in the *shatat* [diaspora] share my idea, *tawtin* would kill the Palestinian people. If you cut the roots, the tree will die. *Tawtin* would cut the roots of the Palestinians. *Tawtin* is a case of death, in the material and emotional sense. [Yet] Palestinians in the *shatat* hope that these states will provide humanitarian and civil rights, which will allow them to work.

Abu Ayman’s articulation of *tawtin* as death of the nation evokes his refusal of assimilation, his fear of the annihilation of Palestinian national identity,

the cutting of the tree from the roots. *Tawtin* means being forced to accept another *watan*, another homeland, and this is unacceptable for Palestinians. However, Abu Ayman explains, rights could be and should be dissociated from the *watan*:

When you give Palestinians a nationality, you are giving them a *watan*. However, I find a difference in the core. So, the Palestinian who migrates to Germany, and a few years later takes the German nationality, this is not bad because it means giving him a nationality which will allow him [*sic*] mobility. *Tawtin* is in the way it is offered [...] it is keeping them [the Palestinians] and liquidating them into the host country – and this is unacceptable. But, giving the Palestinian in Germany or Sweden or wherever he may be, a nationality in order to ensure mobility, so he can get married and live with dignity – I don't think this is bad.

Even if a person can only have one homeland, as one only has only one mother, rights can and should still be achieved in the country where one lives. Accessing rights, according to Abu Ayman, is different from top-down *tawtin*.

Particularly revealing and recurring in our interviews is the distinction that refugees operate between an individual, “bottom up” strategy of life that includes accessing rights and citizenship in the host countries, and a “top-down” imposition of naturalisation and assimilation from above, a form of forced *tawtin*, which threatens the refugees with assimilation, disappearance, and politically disqualifies them from their right of return.

4.1. *Shi'a vs Sunni* Fattoush. *Rethinking rights, contesting sectarianism*

In Bourj el Barajeh and Chatila, most refugees we interviewed echoed the following statement by Um Muhammad: “We are *sunni*. The *shi'ia* don't want our *tajnees* [naturalisation], because it would create imbalance between *shia* and *sunni*.” Most Palestinians we talked to in Lebanon are adamant that their exclusion from most entitlements is not about upholding their right of return, as political rhetoric maintains, but is in fact clearly tied to racism and to the wish of preserving the balance of a problematic sectarian, confessional system.

In the Bourj el Barajeh camp Samira, who acts as the director of the women's association, and other women who were present during our visit, offered an eloquent picture of how sectarianism operates in Lebanon. Fadia, from the Bourj camp, maintained:

[...] there is a lot of talk that *sunni* would take over [if Palestinian get *tajanus*, nationality], but if someone takes an American passport do they ask him whether he is a Muslim? It shouldn't play a role. They asked me whether I would become Christian [to get *tajanus*] but I refused [...] This issue [of rights] should have nothing to do with being Muslim or Christian [...]

According to Fadia citizenship in Lebanon has never been about belonging to a nation: “If you had money you could buy citizenship. But today it is not like

this anymore. It was more after the war of the camps. I was 21 when it happened. Now it doesn't happen anymore. Now they don't want to *tajanus* anyone anymore", and her friend Amal adds: "If you had any respect for yourself you wouldn't stay here. Many people think like that."

Not only belonging to a specific religious sect shapes, most notably, identities, access to resources, political positions, and kin relations. It also fuels passionate debates on food and football as Samira notes:

My husband likes Hariri. He talks all the time about Hariri. So I asked him: where are we? And I put a picture of Arafat [...]. The mother of my husband is Lebanese and they grew up with Lebanese [...]. But there are also other Palestinians who support Hariri. In the football world cup it was like this: those with Hariri supported Germany, and those with Hizbullah supported Brazil. When there was the world cup, nobody would care about Palestine – everybody was just with the football. Al *Tareq al-Jadideh* [mainly Muslim- Sunni neighbourhood] was with Germany and Al-*Dahyah* [the Muslim-Shi'a neighbourhood] was with Brazil [...].

Another young lady in the room was convinced that "In Lebanon there will never be an agreement. You have this [factionalism] everywhere – in football, in basketball, everywhere" and another woman joined the discussion maintaining that "[...] There are even arguments on how to make *Fattoush* [Lebanese salad] the *Sunni* versus the *Shi'a* way!"

The discussion acquired a more serious tone when Samira mentioned that some close members of her family converted and became *Shi'a* to manage through their life. Conversion, as a way to exit disenfranchisement and to access entitlements, was frequently referred to during our interviews and conversations, although there are no official data confirming this:

There are Palestinians who are becoming *Shi'a*. It is happening now [...] My sister in law and her husband turned *Shi'a*. Her husband now works for Hizbullah [...] In the hospitals or anywhere else nowadays everything is always just for *Shi'a* [...] There are many who became *Shi'a*.

In addition to the strong feeling that the negation of rights to Palestinians in Lebanon is the result of sectarian cleavages and political arithmetic, refugees' narratives make constant reference to "being used" in national and sectarian political cleavages, or of representing an easy scapegoat, all in the name of their right of return.

Fadia again expresses this widespread feeling very clearly by suggesting that even the vexed question of the impossibility for Lebanese women to transmit nationality has been framed by the government as an attempt to avoid the *tawtin*, naturalisation, of children and spouses of Palestinian men.

The government said that its resistance to allow women to passing on citizenship is because of Palestinians – but that's not true! Anybody could buy it [...] and there isn't a high number of marriages between Palestinians

and Lebanese. Maybe 10 per cent [...] Sometimes we are the exception, and other times we are blamed as the cause [...]. They should stop using us Palestinians as scapegoats for everything.

The perception of being scapegoats, pawns used in the local, national, and foreign politics of Lebanon, also thanks to the co-optation and agreement of the factions, is widespread and is particularly poignantly expressed by Raed who is an NGO worker and very active in his camp, Chatila. He embodies the disillusion of the young generation of Palestinians with factionalism, nationalist politics as well as with Lebanese rhetoric on *tawtin*. Raed, whom we visited in his house on several occasions throughout the last two years, offered lucid and realistic political perspectives that shaped our understanding of internal dynamics within the camp and more widely in Lebanon. On many occasions, he denounced the corruption and the lack of accountability of the factions and urged Palestinians not to be instrumentalised by Lebanese internal politics and by Palestinians' factions' power games.

An eloquent illustration of these worries were the dynamics around the demonstration of May 2011 on the occasion of the *Nakba* commemoration day, when a few thousands Palestinian refugees marched to the border between Lebanon and Israel and two of them were shot. This demonstration, which was part of a global campaign was, in Lebanon, organized with the necessary logistical support of Hizbullah, which real aim, according to Raed, was to channel, control, and instrumentalise Palestinian political mobilisation for other ends, rather than genuinely supporting the Palestinian right to return. A similar episode happened when Hizbullah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers in July 2006. Again Hizbullah asked the pro-syrian Palestinian coalition, *Tahalof*, to send Palestinians to demonstrate at the Bab Fatima gate, to distract the attention of the Israeli army, while Hizbullah guerrillas kidnapped the Israeli soldiers at another point of the border. On that occasion, many thousands refugees from Chatila and Bourj el Barajneh went down to the demonstration and a few were shot dead. While Raed recognized that also Palestinian prisoners were exchanged thanks to Hizbullah's operations, he and other young refugees adamantly contest the ways in which Palestinians are turned into an unaware mass, used as cannon fodder, denied of political agency and equality in the political process and decision-making.

Similarly, during and after the 18 months confrontation between Hizbullah and The Future Party in 2008–2009,³³ guns were distributed in camps in an attempt to foster Palestinians support for the Future party in the conflict. “The Lebanese army does not enter the camp, but everyone has a gun in the house. Even outside the camp some people have guns.” Yet, guns have been in camps

³³ The confrontation was sparked by the Government on 7 May 2008 in an attempt to seize and shut Hizbollahs' telecommunication system by The Future Party.

much before the very recent confrontation, since the times of the war of the camps, Raed explained:

Weapons inside need political agreement with, for example, Syria. Some camps have no check points [...] there is no checkpoint in, for example, Chatila. In Ein Hilweh there are agreements between Lebanese [the Army] and the camp. The Lebanese army cannot enter the camp, so they need someone to control from inside. But when Abbas came here he said: “we live here under Lebanese law, we must go by that.” So that means that he is for the withdrawal of weapons from the camp [...]. The Lebanese want to get the weapons out of the camp, but in exchange they must offer something: rights [...]. We are concerned only about practicing the rights, not about being Lebanese. But they say offering rights is *tawtin*. Both the Lebanese and Palestinian factions say that. The Palestinian faction’s existence depends on the difficult situation of the Palestinians. So the Palestinian factions use this in a clever way. If you want to make the camp look nice: that’s *tawtin*. If you want to change the sewage system: that’s *tawtin* [...]. And probably half of them [members of the *lajna*, factions] live outside the camp.

In this quotation, Raed compellingly conveys the frustration of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, especially of the younger generation, towards the rhetoric of *tawtin* as expressed by the powers-that-be. As I have tried to show above, for the older generation who has seen the defeat of the resistance movement in Lebanon, who sacrificed its children and who now feels abandoned by the national leadership, the ways in which *tawtin* is mobilised to avoid granting Palestinians rights and dignity disclose mere racism. On the other hand, the younger generation, of which Raed is a member, shows disenchantment and disaffection towards views which, in the current climate, sound purely hypocritical and merely aiming at the self-survival of the political factions.

4.2. Ahl al ard

In this context, the imaginary of return emphasised by Umm Ghazi earlier in the paper acquires full sense. Being *ahl al ard*, in Umm Ghazi’s terms, confers identity, belonging, legitimacy, and status. It is the original land that once provided refugees with dignity and social personhood. Return, at least for the first two generations of refugees, is therefore imagined and represented, in the first place, as a return to the land from which the Palestinians were expelled in 1948, since status and identity can never be reclaimed and achieved through return to the 1967 land. Wisam’s uncle, who lives in Hittin, poignantly clarifies this point:

I am originally from Zeita, a village in 1948 near Khalil, which was completely destroyed. From there we moved to Khalil and in 1967 we came to Jordan. First we lived in Amman, at my uncle’s for a short time, then we moved here to the camp Schniller [Hittin] [...]. My children moved out of the camp. There is no space here. They built outside the camp. However, all

my kids are very attached to the 1948 land [...] '48 is our land, not '67. We are both *lajieen* and *naziheen*.³⁴ In the '67 we had just a house, but not land. In the '48 [areas] we have land and we have the registration papers for this land. It is ours. I am not sure I would return. I would stay here – I have my work here, I live here, my children and my family are here. Why would I go back? However, if I would return, I would return only to Zeita, to my village in 1948. I would not return to 67 [West Bank]. I would go back to 48 and become a *fellah* [peasant]. I would do agricultural work there. In '48, we have 600 dunum land. It's better, here we have no property or land and I have no lands in 67. My property land is in 48. I would build a house there.

Clearly, return is not simply about national self-determination or national membership, but it is rather and mainly imagined as a re-rooting or a re-inscription into the moral economy and status that owning the lands conferred Palestinians with.

Political orientation, religious, and cultural identifications also impinge upon imaginaries of return. For Abu Fadhi, who sympathises with Hamas, return would be first to dignity, embodied by a “country” with no racism, but also to Palestine as home to the sacred Islamic holy sites, for which loss there can be no compensation:

Life in Palestine would be better. There would be a government and no *'unsuriya* [racism]. Here there is *'unsuriya*. We are not from here [*mish ibn al-balad*]. Our idea is to return. We would definitely return [...]. There is no place [*dawla*] in the world more beautiful than Palestine. That is why the Jews picked it [...]. *Taw'eed* [compensation] is unconceivable for us. Everyone who has a brain must understand that we must return to Palestine. The Muslims must return to their holy sites. [...] Are they going to bring our holy sites here, the *haram*? We are without country and without a nation [*bidun balad and bidun watan*]. In Islam they say those who are without a country, have no *karama*. Like the fish without water.

4.3. The birth of a “political society”?

Upon meeting refugees in Lebanon, the conversation would often commence with a long description of the day. Typically, one of the women of the family would have just come back from a visit to an organization, a charity, an NGO in search for resources: “We had to take debts. There are some charitable organizations, but they only give a fourth of what is needed. Nothing more than that. NGOs give only a little, and UNRWA pays for two-three days hospital” uttered Um Muhammad when we interviewed her in her house in the Bourj camp. Other common statements would point to the ways in which docility and control are highly tied with distribution of resources and to how political parties and

³⁴ Refugees from 1948 and displaced from 1967.

organizations distribute resources in exchange for loyalty and consent: “Some of the Lebanese Islamic organizations help us [. . .]. Hamas charitable organizations help, but you need to be with them, I tried to get help, but they didn’t give it to me, because I am not with Hamas.” Similarly, we hear that “The parties are still strong, because they are the only ones that actually help. But the old ones, where should they go? The parties are not interested in them.”

After the departure of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982, which provided not only a political identity and a national project but also strong economic and social support and protection, humanitarian aid, political factions’ conditional provisions, and remittances from relatives who managed to emigrate, became the main means of survival. Everything, from being cured to finding a job to even obtaining a place to bury a deceased requires a constant and strenuous hunting for resources, a draining activity that becomes a full-time occupation. This has become a systematised mechanism for managing and controlling affiliations and loyalties. Palestinians are obliged to resort to *wasta* (connections) or to beg for the right contacts, networks, charities, and NGOs, to reach the necessary amount of money to be treated or buried. Resting in peace is not to be given for granted for Palestinians, who have no automatic right to be buried in the local cemeteries in Beirut. Piling bodies on the top of each other, in the limited space available in one grave, has become common practice amongst Palestinian refugees in Beirut, while the elites and the PLO cadres, even from the Diaspora, have often secured a space in the cemetery of the martyrs, a sad and tragic continuation of their privileges during their life time.

“Everything is through *wasta*” explained with resignation Um Muhammad from Bourj and other common complaints composed a litany: “There are some international donors that help”; “I needed 500 dollars for an operation, but no one helped me.” Of course, we also collected statements where the exception confirmed the rule. “A Fatah guy from Rashidiyya helped me, and without any *wasta*.” And further “I don’t want to be in any connection with any political party”.

Other persistent narratives conveying the frustration and anger of camp dwellers revolve around the lack of proper supply of electricity and water and the lack of transparency over the destination of the fees dwellers have to pay to the factions and camp committees who control the distribution of these provisions. In addition, we heard stories from camp refugees who had to fight with the popular committees to claim their properties back, as houses’ transactions are only informally registered in the camps. Outside the camps Palestinians need a Lebanese to register the property in his/her name, meaning that arbitrariness and inability to take possessions back can always be at stake, but propriety in the camp maybe similarly gloomy and uncertain.

In this context, younger generations of educated Palestinians are expressing a ferocious criticism not only towards the Lebanese juridical-discursive exception and its underpinning confessional rationale, but also towards Palestinian popular committees, the UNRWA system and the humanitarian logic. Popular committees are described as corrupted, lacking any accountability and political

representativeness. Such criticism is uttered through various forms and languages, ranging from emerging hip-hop radical bands such as the Khatiba 5, now very popular across the region, to new independent grass-root organizations which priority agenda is to activate networks of support outside the humanitarian circuits.³⁵ This is the agenda of a small but very active organization, “People-to-People”, which headquarter is the Sabra gathering and whose declared aim is to reactivate solidarity chains bypassing the humanitarian machinery altogether, a system that in their view reproduces itself and reinforces dependency rather than creating opportunities for those it declares to assist.

In Chatila, the “Refugee Dream Organization” is trying to challenge existing forms of camp governmentality and representations and to initiate alternative, democratic, and bottom-up representative bodies that can truly bring people’s needs and interests at centre stage. In an interview with one of the founders of the Refugee Dream Organization it became clear that part of younger generation of the camp is not willing to put up with old forms of camp control by the factions (*Tanzimat*) and the committees. The latter have ultimately produced elites and secured privileges for themselves exhausting in so doing their previous political legitimacy. They became intimidating entities busy with distributing resources, controlling affiliations, and securing loyalties for their survival. The changing configurations of the camps of Chatila and Bourj el Barajneh, particularly their slow transformation into urban slums and the ensuing dynamics this entails (drug selling, violence, lack of security), together with the end of old forms of solidarities and relatedness that constituted the ethos of the camp in the past also contribute to create the feeling, among some components of the new generation, that new forms of democratic representation and bottom up political participation are needed to address the future challenges.

On the occasion of the Arafat memorial day in September 2011 in the Chatila camp, in a rare moment of self-criticism, one of the local leaders of the Popular Front avowed: “[. . .] people have no trust in us anymore, they gave us their children, they gave us their lives and we gave them back nothing.” This admission does not only dramatically symbolise the end of an era, that of the nationalist resistance movement in exile and its the human losses that have never been compensated for and are rarely commemorated, but it lucidly underscores the final outcome of this era: the implicit exclusion of refugees from the two-state consensus of the post-Oslo era, which contributed to the making of refugees in Lebanon into one of the most disenfranchised national communities in exile.

³⁵ For a critique of the humanitarian management of Palestinianians see in particular, I. Feldman, R. Bocco & J. Al Hussein, “Dynamics of Humanitarian Aid, Local and Regional Politics: The Palestine Refugees as a Case Study”, in A. Knudsen & S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, London, Routledge, 2011, 128–147; Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair*. For a more general analysis see: Agier, *Managing the Undesirables*; J. Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

5. Conclusions

The emergence of the Palestinian refugee issue was concomitant with that of modern independent nation-states in the region. Refugees' life histories, identities, and socio-economic status are profoundly implicated in processes of othering, essential to the fabrication of these instable and precarious national identities and communities. The diversity of the various locations of displacement cannot and should not, of course, be ignored. Palestinians live under different predicaments in their countries of exile.³⁶ In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees are a class of disenfranchised, deprived of most civil, socio-economic, let alone political entitlements and are subjected to a dehumanising humanitarian assistance. In Jordan most, but certainly not all, Palestinians are given full rights, symbolised by a "*rakam watani*", a "national number" but are increasingly subject to an arbitrary withdrawal of their passports, an intimidating practice aimed at completing the transformation of Palestinians in Jordan into docile subjects by the Hashemite Sovereign. Docility reinforces the widespread and rooted narrative of Palestinians as "guests" (*diuf*) rather than citizens. This process astoundingly echoes Agamben's analysis of the sovereign's historical prerogative to suspend the rule of law and sovereignty at his discretion.

However, Palestinian refugees' practices, accounts, and analyses, matured from various standpoints of marginality or suspension of the rule, offer formidable grounds for analysing not only refugees' predicaments, but also the specific aporia, contradictions and precarious nature of nationality, citizenship, and rights in the host Arab States in which they have been displaced over 60 years ago. Palestinian refugees offer a "subaltern" voice, that strives to re-inscribe itself in the political, by deconstructing and challenging the dominant tropes that have sustained their exclusion from rights (in Lebanon) or that have constructed and naturalised them as a "different" yet "assimilable" population (in Jordan), a strategy they perceive to aim at legitimising their precarious status, and simultaneously at making them a politically invisible and silent, national community. Jamila and others' accounts presented in this paper, give shape to an embryonic refugee political identity, a new political subjectivity that destabilises nation-state configurations, and simultaneously unfolds the specific drawbacks of nationality and citizenship in the Middle East. This appears crucial at a time when the symbolic, political, and material dimensions of dignity, rights, and state/society and minorities/majorities relations are at stake all over the region.

All refugees across gender, generation, and locations share the idea that return is an individual, inalienable right, which cannot be negotiated or dismissed from above. This sacred principle does not, however, contrast with individual and collective strategies and narratives of rights and political agency from below. Far from being just passive victims, Palestinian refugees articulate a

³⁶ In fact, a recurrent narrative is that the more politically, economically, and socially integrated Palestinian refugees can be, the more they would be likely to achieve the social and political capital, which is critical to mobilize for the right of return, in creative and productive ways.

powerful critique towards sectarian neo-patrimonial regimes where resources and entitlements are highly layered and hierarchically distributed according to ethnicity, religious affiliation, nationality, class, gender, and family status. They utter their frustration towards the lack of accountability and the corruption of their local leaderships, they loudly outcry the dehumanising humanitarianism to which they are confined. Furthermore, they contest the old nationalist/political space as a terrain through which scarce resources are distributed and affiliations and loyalties are controlled and managed.

Their daily practices of survival and political negotiations highlight and unfold the pitfalls of postcolonial nation-state formations in the region. In this light refugees contribute to the emergence of what Partha Chatterjee calls a “political society”. They operate through a framework of democracy and self-determination that precede and overcome the modern Arab nation-state project, which they represent as imbued with serious flaws. Palestinian refugees articulate demotic narratives where discrimination, integration, rights here and now, are integrated with a right to “return”, conceived as return to origin and roots, land and properties, personhood, freedom. Self-determination and dignity involve claiming simultaneously for rights to rights and right to return.

Refugees’ narratives and practices contribute to the emergence of a new discourse and space of the “political” which, although saturated with contradictions or uncertainties, parallels the disillusion with modernist political formations and organizations across the region, and echoes the calls for dignity that have been so central in the Arab revolts. The urge to reconcile rights with “return” is an arena where we can see Palestinian refugees turning into a political avant-garde, highlighting the need for new democratic state/society configurations.