

Palestinian refugees: homes in exile

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In Palestinian refugee camps, the right of return now encompasses, and stands for, a wider universal demand for freedom, dignity and rights - including the right to go back or to stay, and to move across borders.



Mural in the Idbaa Centre, an NGO in Dheisheh

Amidst the numerous images circulating during the last few months about the conflict in Syria, two have powerfully epitomised the plight of Palestinians refugees caught up in the fighting. The [first image](#) portrayed an enormous mass of ravenous people in a hollow Yarmouk on the outskirts of Damascus, queuing for food under siege, and the other, in the shape of a [short clip](#), displayed the surreal and joyful music of pianist Ahmad, against the background of an otherwise silent and besieged camp accompanying the voice of children whose song, full of hope, invited those who left during the war to return home.

*Enough staying outside, come back loved ones
It's enough, absence has been too long*

*Mother, I've really missed you
Come back and ease our minds with your tenderness*

*My mother, you've been gone for a while,
We've really missed your laughter*

*Let's all come back to the house and remember when we were young
Play on the roof and hide behind the walls*

Yarmouk's eyes are crying, and it asks why did my people leave me?

These two images vividly express the paradoxical predicament of contemporary Palestinian camps as spaces of both uprootedness and rootedness, as simultaneously refugee camps - where by definition life is in limbo - and yet as "homes".

At the time of writing, almost two thousand people have been killed by the Israeli army in the criminal

operation “Protective Edge”. With the unbearable loss of lives also comes the destruction of Palestinians’ memories, possessions, life projects, emotions, belongings: the destruction of places that also become homes in exile. The razing of Gaza to the ground can also be read as a clear intention to detach Palestinians from experiencing any part of Palestine as home.

The wall of a Palestinian refugee's home

Today, Palestinian camps represent complex realities: places of belonging, filled with memories for long term refugees, and temporary shelters for the newcomers displaced by ongoing destruction and wars. The keys to houses Palestinians were forced to abandon in 1948 still hang on walls as symbolic reminders of their transient status for Palestinians awaiting return and repossession of their lost properties. However, the house doors of today’s camps/homes significantly have no keys, symbolically enacting a new collective political culture and solidarity-in-refugeehood, a moral economy of ‘homing and hosting in exile’. In this political culture, the right of [return](#) encompasses, and stands for, a wider universal demand for freedom, dignity and rights, including the right to go back or to stay, or to move across borders.

At the outset of the conflict in Syria, I came across many families in urban Palestinian camps such as Chatila in Beirut, and Wihdat in Amman, who sheltered Syrian families fleeing from the war. In Wihdat, I was told that many of the Syrian refugees who tried to avoid being confined and registered in the Zaatari camp at the Jordanian-Syrian border could always find someone to host them or help them by renting rooms cheaply. Apart from thousands of Syrian refugees, Chatila had also previously opened its doors to waves of Palestinian refugees who could not ‘return’ to their camp/home in Nah el-Bared, once it was destroyed by the Lebanese army in 2007 in retaliation for Islamist militants’ occupation of parts of the camp.

In December 2012 the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat-al-Nusra entered the Yarmouk camp, considered a crucial outpost on the way to Damascus, following fighting between the Palestinian faction of Ahmad Jibril (PFLP-GC) and mercenaries loyal to the Assad regime against rebels on the outskirts of the camp. The camp was seen by all parties to have lost its neutrality, and what followed was a dramatic siege by the Syrian army and their loyal Palestinian faction, which led to the death by starvation of 158 women, children and men, as [documented](#) by the Palestinian League for Human Rights-Syria (PLHR-S). During the siege, the number of Yarmouk residents dropped from a peak of 900,000 to 80,000, and at one point to 18,000 people escaped yet again to surrounding safer areas or abroad.

Palestinians, however, are systematically [refused entry](#) into neighboring Arab countries. In [Jordan](#), Palestinian refugees are seen as a demographic threat. In Lebanon they are presented as a menace to the sectarian logic of the country, and in Egypt they are subject to systematic demonization and harassment, and have become vulnerable and easy [scapegoats](#) for Egypt’s internal problems.

The case of Yarmouk illustrates how, even though ordinary Palestinians strove for neutrality in the conflict as their only avenue of survival, circumstances did not allow them to remain neutral while some chose to engage. Some Palestinian youth genuinely supported an uprising that started out as a non-violent grass-roots revolt for democratizing Syria, a country where their families had been living for generations, and which they felt part of.

Palestinian refugees whose lives and spaces have been entangled for 66 years - with those of Syrians, Lebanese and Jordanians (among others) are forcibly pushed into an untenable situation that becomes punitive and gruelling during conflicts: their national aspiration serves as an excuse to reduce them to “guests”, and whether they take sides or fail to do so they are faced with expulsion, destruction, imprisonment, renewed statelessness and endless new routes of exile.

A mural adorns an exterior wall in a refugee camp

Nidal Bitari, a member of the youth coalition in Yarmouk and founder of the Palestinian Association for Human Rights in Syria, in an intense and dramatic [account](#) of the events unfolding in the camp since

2011, recounted how the FSA refused to issue statements in favour of the Palestine question, and how the Syrian National Council in Turkey turned down requests to help with the asylum demands of desperate Palestinians trying to flee to Turkey, even those who had proved their genuine support for the opposition fighters. In some instances, members of the FSA did not hesitate to define Yarmouk 'as their own land' and to scream at Palestinians that they had to go back to where they came from.

On the other hand Bitari also recounted how most of the Palestinian factions, such as Fatah and Hamas - but also the PLO and the Palestinian Authority - proved uninterested or unable to protect their own people, leaving them with a profound sense of abandonment, vulnerability and powerlessness. The same feeling is experienced and narrated daily today among Palestinians in Lebanon, for whom, ironically, the status of Palestinian refugees in Syria was the best example of "integration" before the war.

Fares, a former resident of Yarmouk I interviewed in February 2014 in Italy where he is currently living, also recounted how fragile, unprotected and leaderless the residents of Yarmouk felt in the face of the violence exercised by all parties during the Syrian war. Fares is himself a symbol of the multiple entanglements of the lives and identities of Yarmouk refugees/residents. His father was born in Palestine and he died at the outset of the Syrian war. His sisters and mother, a Syrian national, escaped to Chatila camp in Lebanon, where other relatives live. One of his brothers is incarcerated in Assad's prison in Hama, another one fights with the opposition in Yarmouk, while yet another is with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (FPLP) of Ahmad Jibril, the pro - Assad faction.

Not only are the homes and lives of ordinary Palestinians deeply enmeshed with those of Jordanian, Syrian or Lebanese "nationals", but the genealogy of the Palestinian resistance movement is best described as one of entanglement with dominant movements and ideologies in the Middle East. Palestinian nationalism was forged within and across ideologies such as pan-Arabism or Baathism, but it was also caught up in, and instrumental to, Sunni-Shi'a- Christian, Syrian-Lebanese violent confrontations, most notably in the 1970's (the massacre of Tal al Za'atar is still very vivid in the collective memory) and during the 1980's "war of the camps" in Lebanon.

The story of Palestinian refugees during crucial moments of conflicts or civil wars is also one of co-existence, solidarity and proximity, as well as enmity, with Arab nationals in and out of refugee camps. During [Black September](#) in 1970, for example, when between 7000 and 20,000 Palestinians were slaughtered by the Jordanian army seeking to erase the PLO presence in Jordan, Palestinians and Jordanians fought together in the Jordanian Army while as many as 5000 soldiers deserted or refused to comply with orders to shoot at Palestinians. The sharp division between Jordanians and Palestinians as members of separate national groups was not so prominent and visible before the 1970's, as many Palestinians often recall.

What is noteworthy about the contemporary situation is the current way in which Palestinian refugees are being excluded from the two state consensus informing the national project set out by the Palestinian Authority. This exclusion was further endorsed by Abu Mazen's declaration in November 2012 during an interview on the Israeli Channel 2 TV that he does not have a right to return to Safad, his village of origin: "it's my right to visit, but not to live there", he declared.

In view of these conundrums, the pertinent question today is what kind of "politics of return" could grant Palestinians the right to self-determination and simultaneously counter the exclusionary politics towards Palestinian refugees of both Arab nation-states and of the Palestinian nationalist project?

Palestinian refugees, and their camp/homes as social - historical sites giving new meanings to contemporary refugeehood - lie at the heart of a potential new political counter culture. At the core of this antagonistic politics should be the recognition that the refugee issue today is no longer solely about return, but also about rights writ-large, which involve a radical rethinking of citizenship and individual and collective self-determination in the region. The Palestinian refugee question, seen in this light, becomes a prism through which we can understand and critique long-term processes of national,

sectarian and confessional boundary making in the Middle East. It therefore raises the question of how to radically reconfigure post-colonial national projects in Arab countries which have so far failed to meet aspirations for rights, democracy and pluralism for refugees and non refugees alike.