

Finding (a) Home in Beirut: Palestinian Refugees from Syria Negotiating Unfamiliar Spaces of Exile in Lebanon

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Abstract:

The displacements caused by the Syrian conflict have highlighted the fact that refugees across the Middle East are increasingly taking shelter in cities rather than in geographically isolated and clearly demarcated refugee camps. This rise in urban refugee populations raises the question of how these recently displaced people find a place to live and acquire the means to maintain it despite often lacking legal residency or the right to work. This paper analyzes this question in the context of Palestinian refugees from Syria currently living in Beirut's urban Palestinian refugee camps. Based on interviews and participant-observation with Palestinians from Syria in Beirut's camps, this paper argues that understanding the various factors that have shaped refugee efforts at finding housing can illuminate the broader social, political and material conditions of displacement they face in Lebanon. In particular, it reveals how these refugees negotiate the insecurity represented by the camps' deteriorating infrastructure and antagonistic governance structures, how they build social relations with members of the Palestinian refugee from Lebanon host community, and how they make claims on development and humanitarian NGOs for assistance with rent and shelter rehabilitation. In doing so, this paper provides important insight into daily struggles faced by urban refugees in the region and the strategies they employ to accommodate these challenging circumstances.

I was sitting with Abed in a first-floor office of an aid NGO in Beirut's Shatila refugee camp. It was the second time that I had spoken to him in a week, but, in the short time between our meetings, much had changed for Palestinian refugees in the country—both for those who had long lived in Lebanon and for those, like Abed, who only arrived in 2012 after fleeing the civil war in Syria. We were talking about work.

“They’ve just released a decision banning Palestinians from working, did you hear about it?” Abed asked.

I had. The Lebanese ministry of labor, then headed—before his resignation in the face of the ongoing revolution in Lebanon—by Camille Abou Sleiman, had announced a month before our meeting that the ministry would sanction businesses that hired foreign laborers without work permits. Widely understood to be targeting refugee workers, the decision gave employers 30 days to ensure that their employees had permits before the ministry began inspections. Just after the deadline passed, inspectors closed two Palestinian-owned businesses for employing workers without labor permits. Palestinians in camps and gatherings across the country reacted with fury, launching protests and strikes aimed at overturning the decision, affirming that they were not foreigners and were deserving of the right to work in Lebanon without any permit.

On the day I was speaking to Abed, the Right to Work campaign had organized a demonstration at the nearby Cola intersection. Palestinians from camps across the country were planning to bus to Beirut to join the demonstration and march on Lebanon's Parliament downtown. Back in Shatila before the march, I had to close the window of the small office Abed and I were sharing to muffle the nationalist songs and speeches being played through large speakers on the street outside.

“Did you hear about it?” Abed asked and, then, after mentioning the strikes and the day's planned protest said: “When they say you can't work, it's like they're saying: die of hunger, you and your kids. That's what's happening. They forbid you from your most basic right. This is my right. I have a family. How can my family live if I don't work? How can I feed my family? Steal?”

In this paper, I want to consider the conditions, evoked by Abed's statement, that Palestinian refugees from Syria in Beirut face. I will argue that these conditions are characterized by a resurgent instability which affects the sorts of futures these refugees can expect and shapes how they accommodate to their situation in the present.

I had arrived in Beirut to conduct preliminary research, planning to speak about housing with Palestinian refugees, like Abed, who had fled to Lebanon as a result to the Syrian Civil War. In contrast to the conventional experiences of mass displacement, Palestinians from Syria arriving in Lebanon did not move into purpose-built tented camps. Since the start of the crisis, the Lebanese government has taken a firm policy against constructing formal camps for refugees from Syria, fearful that they would one day come to resemble those Palestinian camps, like Shatila, that have transformed from tented camps for then newly-displaced Palestinian refugees after 1948 into dense urban spaces that appear far too permanent for the liking of Lebanon's sectarian political class. Therefore, in the absence of camps with neat rows of tents and clear boundaries—spatial characteristics that, as Liisa Malkki argues (1992), reflect refugee camps' role as a technology of care and control for a people out of place—many of these Palestinians from Syria instead headed for urban areas where they had to find their own shelters. My goal for the summer was to start to understand why Palestinians from Syria that settled in Shatila decided to do so and how they went about finding shelter there.

And while such questions on housing remain central to my ongoing project, the labor crackdown and the constant reemergence of the talk of work in my conversations with Palestinians from Syria led me to rapidly broaden my research. Rather than focusing narrowly on refugees' material accommodations, I came to realize that I must consider broader factors to understand how these refugees accommodate to the precarious conditions they face in Shatila. This involves studying not only how refugees find and secure shelter, but also how they go about locating the work opportunities necessary to maintain these shelters and make ends meet. For while cash aid from UNRWA provides a steady source of income to these refugees, it is rarely enough to pay rent, let alone buy food and pay other costs of living. I am interested, therefore, in understanding the lives of Palestinians from Syria in Shatila as working refugees, rather than solely—or even primarily—as aid-receiving refugees.

In what remains of this paper, I want to consider the consequences of these conditions for refugees' attempts to maintain their housing and find work and how they shape the relationship between the present and the imagined future. Specifically, drawing on recent work by Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, I will argue that the propensity for housing and employment opportunities to disappear suddenly and without warning, what I provisionally refer to as *resurgent instability*, forecloses these refugees' horizons of expectation. In doing so, this instability renders their futures both radically uncertain and absent of any promise or prospect of normalcy or improvement. I will conclude by exploring a potential conceptual framework through which to understand these refugees' attempts at adaptation and improvisation in the present despite facing uncertain futures, which I refer to as *accommodation*.

In their recent text, *Anthropology of the Future*, Bryant and Knight (2019) theorize *expectation* as an orientation towards the future that resonates strongly with the experiences of Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. For Bryant and Knight, expectation is fundamental to what it means to have a future. Expectation, they argue, is grounded in that which is familiar and ordinary in one's past. The ability to expect, therefore, stems from the habits and practices that this familiarity allows us to perform in the present and imagine into the future. Ruptures like displacement, however, destroy or render spatially distant many of these familiar and ordinary anchors of what was normal life. As a result of these ruptures and the loss of normalcy they precipitated, refugees are often unable to expect what may come next, thereby lacking a future and the sense of an ordinary life that expectation fixes. Abed, describing the destruction of Yarmouk, put it this way: "the camp is gone, it was destroyed. Like a fish in the water, when you take a fish out of the water, the fish dies. That's what happened to us. We don't know where to go, what to do." Another refugee from Yarmouk, Mai, described her loss of normalcy, and the rupture of the habitual, in relation to her Friday routine with her sisters in Syria: "It was totally different. Every Friday, they would come to have breakfast and we would go to the mosque, to Friday prayers. And we would come back and drink coffee and then everyone would go back to their house. Now, I sit in my house, there isn't anyone."

While Bryant and Knight emphasize the moment of rupture as central to the foreclosure of expectation, my preliminary research has shown that the feeling of an absent future extends well beyond the event of initial displacement. Rather, despite having fled Syria nearly eight years prior, Palestinians from Syria still lack, in Bryant and Knight's terms, the "expectation of expectation." This is as a result, I suggest, of the form of precarity that Palestinian refugees from Syria experience in Lebanon. If, as Anna Tsing (2017) writes, precarity is "life without the promise of stability" (2), these refugees experience a precarity characterized by the ephemerality of opportunities for housing or income that I refer to as *resurgent instability*. It arises in moments

when formerly regular opportunities for housing or income disappear, such as when a landlord raises the rent and forces a family to find a new place to live, when income disappears after an NGO work program runs out of funding, or when a new government policy seeks to ban the entire community from working at all. In these moments, the uncertainty that accompanied these refugees' initial arrival in Beirut, where they suddenly had to find a place to live and a source of income in an unfamiliar city, reemerges and, in doing so, precludes the possibility of expectation. Seen in this light, Abed's reaction to the ban on Palestinian labor—that telling one not to work is tantamount to telling them to starve and die—acutely reveals the sense of foreclosed futures that Palestinians from Syria face in Lebanon.

That the question of work is so central to refugees' feelings of a lack of future in Lebanon is hardly surprising given the conditions that they face. As I alluded to previously, since early in the crisis, Palestinian refugees from Syria have received emergency monthly cash aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. However, the amount, 100 US dollars per month for rent and 40,000 Lebanese Lira, or about 27 US dollars, per person per month for food, falls well short of refugee needs. The cheapest rent I heard of in Shatila, which is among the least expensive places to live in the city, was 250,000 Lebanese Lira or around \$170. Most refugees told me they pay \$250 or more per month. Faisal, who paid the 250,000 lira for a small room for him, his wife and his four children, told me that he merely collects his cash from UNRWA each month and immediately pays the landlord, with barely any left over for food and drink. Furthermore, given the state of public services in Lebanon, the cost of housing well exceeds rent. Camp residents must pay various fees and subscriptions, the total amount of which can reach double or triple the aid that they receive from UNRWA. Mahmoud, a refugee from Yarmouk in his early twenties who lives with his parents and three siblings in Shatila, pays \$320 per month for rent, about \$27 to the camp's popular committees for non-drinking water and electricity, \$20 for drinking water, \$50 for a generator subscription, \$30 for internet, and \$25 for his and his father's phone subscriptions—all of which equals \$472 prior to buying any food. His total aid from UNRWA only reaches \$260, meaning that he must find \$212 dollars per month before food just to maintain his housing. Adding in an estimated \$15 per day for food, he must secure \$402 per month from aid and work on top of the cash his family receives from UNRWA.

Facing these conditions, refugees must turn to informal labor to make up the shortfall. However, even before the government crackdown, these opportunities were often ephemeral. Both Abed and Mahmoud, for example, had previously worked for an NGO-administered make-work program. While the salaries the program paid had them to clean up garbage around the camp were small, its closure in January 2019 represented a loss of previously regular income. As of July 2019, when I spoke with each of them, they were still searching for ways to adapt to the resurgent instability caused by this disappearance of employment. Abed told me that sometimes he could find odd jobs around the camp offered by Palestinian refugees from Lebanon who would pay him 30,000 lira, 20 US dollars, a couple times a week, but sometimes he might go ten or more days without working.

Mahmoud's friend Ahmad, who had also worked for the make-work project until its closure, lived in an apartment just outside of the camp with his young son. He had yet to pay rent that month and wasn't sure how he would be able to or what would happen if he didn't. When I asked Mahmoud and Ahmad about the community they have built in Lebanon since arriving nearly eight years ago, they were ambivalent. Mahmoud told me that they really only see one another, and that people don't make a lot of friends because they are so busy trying to survive. Ahmad agreed, stating that he can't think much about the future when he must focus so much on

living day by day. Furthermore, while both expressed their desire to find a future elsewhere, returning to Syria was not an option. Both shared names with persons wanted by the regime and neither had done compulsory military service. Migrating west was impossible as well. There were no legal means by which to reach Europe and, as for smuggling, the cost was too high—several thousand dollars—and the chances of actually reaching the continent were too low.

When we parted after our conversation, which occurred a few days before I would leave the country, I told them I would like to meet up when I returned to the city for my full year of fieldwork, if they were still around. “Where else would we be?” Mahmoud asked.

It is clear, therefore, that the resurgent instability faced by Palestinians from Syria in Shatila renders their futures profoundly uncertain. However, the members of this community that I spoke to are by no means paralyzed in the present. Bracketed out, in Povinelli’s (2011) terms, in the everyday corrosive conditions of quasi-events, these refugees find ways to improvise and adapt in the face of uncertain futures. As I continue my research among members of this community, my goal is to illuminate the practices that these refugees deploy in efforts to secure and maintain housing and employment opportunities and analyze what these everyday practices can reveal about their broader efforts at adapting to the conditions of precarious urban displacement. In order to think through these questions, I am provisionally combining these practices under a broader conceptual rubric that I term *accommodation*. By accommodation, I refer on one level to the material shelters in which members of this community live, the networks and strategies they deployed to locate them and the acts of everyday dwelling, like hosting and visiting friends and kin, that refugees practice. Secondly, I understand accommodation as encompassing the practices of adjusting and improvising necessary to secure the employment required to maintain their material shelters and pay the cost of living. Finally, I see accommodation more abstractly as a sense of attachment encompassing feelings both of belonging and alienation. Viewing Shatila as a space of accommodation may offer a way to capture the social and spatial ties that emerge over time living in a place while also accounting for the instability that makes long-term futures uncertain. Therefore, by analyzing refugee attempts at locating housing and work, I hope to offer a conceptual means to understand how Palestinians from Syria and other working refugees accommodate to precarious urban displacement despite foreclosed horizons of expectation.

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