



*Lukemista Levantista 1/2017*

## Seeking better life: Palestinian refugees' narratives on emigration

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*And human rights [in Europe]. Here, you don't have human rights here. (H, al-Bass camp)*

*In Europe everything is good. Not everything but probably it is better than here. (R, Burj al-Shamali camp)*

Among refugee communities living in a protracted displacement, Palestinians form a distinctive case that is defined by over-generational refugeeness and by a refugee status that is inherited from one generation to another. Most of the Palestinians holding a refugee status have been born in exile and, in the case of Lebanon, have never had the chance to visit the places where their families were forced to flee in 1948. There are approximately 500 000 Palestinians living in Lebanon, where the current situation is characterised by radical and protracted uncertainty as the state continues to deny the refugees basic rights. Furthermore, Israel's continuing refusal to acknowledge its responsibility for Palestinian refugees means the UN resolution for the right of return (Resolution 194, issued in December 1948) is unlikely to be implemented in the foreseeable future.

After years of uncertainty and marginalisation, many Palestinians do not believe they can affect the situation in Lebanon, which makes emigration seemingly the only option for the refugees to change their living conditions. This idea is so widely shared – and discussed in every social situation from coffee tables to service taxis and buses – that many remarked that the camps and gatherings in Lebanon will be empty only a few years from now. An elderly man from Burj al-Shamali camp went

as far as predicting that in only six months' time barely one quarter of the camp's residents will still be living in Lebanon.

### **Palestinians' place in Lebanon**

To understand the current situation of Palestinians in Lebanon, one has to scrutinize the spatial and historical processes that have been central in the making of the small Mediterranean state. Lebanon is defined by its sectarian system in which power is divided along religious lines. The arrival and the continuing presence of mainly Sunni Muslim Palestinian community has been seen as a threat to the fragile balance between the different sects. In practice this has meant that Palestinians have not been granted any rights that would equate them with citizens and give them official bearing in the political life of the country. Permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon (*tawteen*) is practically the only issue on which the political parties in Lebanon do agree.

The Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) had devastating consequences not only for the Lebanese but also for Palestinians living in the country. The relocation of Palestinian resistance from Jordan to Lebanon in 1971, following the events of Black September (September 1970 – July 1971), redefined the Palestinians community and dwelling places in Lebanon, politically and socially. It made Palestinians central players in the civil war that broke out a few years later, as the Palestinian resistance attacked Israel from Lebanese soil and took part in the fighting. Massacres in Tel al Zaatar and Sabra-Shatila, multiple dislocation, bombing by Israel, a siege of the Palestinian refugee camps by Amal militia during the War of Camps (1984–1989), and the social and political prostration after 1982, when Palestinian leadership was forced to leave from Lebanon to Syria and Tunisia when Israel occupied southern parts of the country, defined the lives of Palestinians during the war years and after. Palestinians are widely considered to be at fault for the civil war by the Lebanese nationals, which can be detected, for example, from the current social isolation of the Palestinian community.

Palestinians' vulnerable, precarious situation is an outcome of historical events with concrete social and spatial consequences. The Palestinian landscapes in the country are embedded with memories of violence and dispossession, and camps continue to be the primary place of dwelling together with unofficial gatherings. In contrast to other countries where the United Nation Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) operates, over 50 percent of Palestinians in Lebanon still live in the camps. Those who do not, mostly live in unofficial gatherings that can be even more precarious spaces than the official camps. Palestinians cannot own houses, or commercial properties, outside the camps. This is one of the main reasons, together with high rents in Lebanese neighbourhoods, why Palestinians have continued to dwell in them.

The camps and gatherings are scattered around Lebanon, but Tyre, where I conducted my fieldwork, could be described as the most Palestinian city in Lebanon. In its vicinity lie three refugee camps, among them the second and third biggest in the country, and closer to ten gatherings. Camps form distinctive spaces from their surroundings, and in most cases their borders are governed by the Lebanese military. Palestinian camps in Lebanon can be divided to closed and open, based on their official accessibility. The camps in Tyre are all closed, and all but Lebanese Palestinian and Lebanese need to have an official permit from Lebanese General Security to enter them. Even Syrian Palestinian currently living in the camps need to apply for a permit that has to be renewed every three months.

## No work, no income, no family

The limitations of working rights have the most far-reaching consequences for Palestinians. When it comes to finding employment, Palestinians are in a more difficult position than foreigners since on top of having to apply for work permits they are restricted from working in over seventy professions. The deteriorating situation of UNRWA, which has been the most important employer of especially educated Palestinians, after PLO left from Lebanon in 1982, has made earning a livelihood increasingly difficult for Palestinian refugees. Furthermore, the arrival of Syrian refugees was often stated to be a reason why there are even less working opportunities for Palestinians as Syrians work for less in the same jobs that are vital for the Palestinian community, such as agriculture and construction.

The lack of work opportunities in Lebanon not only influences economic well-being but also unravels the social fabric of the community. People are getting married at an older age or not at all. Due to cultural expectations, a man is not able to start a family if he does not have the means to build a house and provide a living for his wife and children. Even those who have the opportunity to get married have fewer children than the previous generations did, usually only one or two, as they could not afford to feed and educate more.

Furthermore, many expressed a hope to marry a foreigner or a local Palestinian who has secured a citizenship in another country as this would enable them to get a residence permit and maybe even acquire a citizenship abroad. I was shared stories about “not so beautiful” and “not so intelligent” girls who were able to get married only because they had a citizenship to offer, whereas many other Palestinian girls were forced to stay with their parents because they could not find a spouse.

## Negotiating immigration

I don't want to leave my father and mother alone in the house. It's not a good idea. I don't know what to do. But my mother told me that she would want me to travel. It's better for me and for my future. This is a very hard thing, to choose from you're future and from you're mother and father.

R (a 19-year-old university student, youngest girl of the family)

Although emigration is extremely common, it can involve complex negotiations defined by one's age, gender, position in the family, and, of course, economic situation. As an oldest son of the family, one might either be encouraged to leave or feel the pressure to stay to take care of one's elderly parents and other members of the family. Even though there are exceptions, daughters are usually less often encouraged to travel than sons, and sometimes they are even prevented going abroad by their parents. Children can feel obliged to stay with their parents even when the parents actually encourage them to emigrate, as is evident in the quotation above. Living close to one's family is important to many, and it is telling of the current situation that even that is not a good enough reason to stay.

In the process of negotiating emigration, people were reflecting on what type of people are preferred in Europe and in doing so condemned part of those leaving as less deserving of residency in Europe:

R: You know, most of the people travelling now, they have no degrees, they just, they are not educated. So they travel to Germany in non-organized way [referring to irregular migration].

So they stay in Germany, the government (...) will be responsible for giving them money, all of them, safety. But government [would like to have] the ones who have a degree and will benefit the country. (...) Germany would like very much to have people from different nationalities that would work and build up the economy of the government. But sure they will refuse the ones who just sit in the house and are just getting money [from the government].

When one's economic situation precludes emigration, its benefits were downplayed by my interlocutors. They concentrated on the negative effects immigration would have on the living conditions, usually by referring to the high prices in Europe. Some claimed that those travelling had overly positive view of life in Europe and thought they would be arriving to "a land of honey" where everything would be easy and possible. Furthermore, weather was brought up surprisingly often when reflecting one's decision to stay in Lebanon, or challenging others' decision to leave. In the early winter months of my fieldwork, it was brought up repeatedly how Palestinians could not handle the weather in Europe, where it would be too cold and dark, and how those emigrating did not understand the weather conditions in the countries they hoped to travel to.

### Seeking better opportunities

Access to better services was an important reason for many to seek a life in Europe. The deteriorating quantity and quality of UNRWA services was the most important reference point to many when they considered the benefits of leaving Lebanon. The anger of refugees was directed almost as much to UNRWA as to the Lebanese state that has not given them the right to work. Due to diminishing funding, the agency is not able to provide as much to the refugees as it used to. The support for healthcare and for families in poverty has diminished, and the UNRWA education was constantly blamed for its bad quality. Furthermore, UNRWA is not able to employ as many people as before in its current economic situation, which has further aggravated the refugee community. Though the mandate of the agency has been in place for almost seventy years, now many among the Palestinian refugees believe that UNRWA will slowly be closed down. If that were to happen, the results would be catastrophic in Lebanon where Palestinians rely heavily on UNRWA services.

Though the lack of rights, in finding employment and in other fields of life, is the most concrete and the most often stated reason for Palestinians to emigrate from Lebanon, also the feeling that they are not respected as human beings and are not welcomed to the country play a role in Palestinians' eagerness to leave.

R: You know, most people when you ask them about why you want to travel, they told [sic] you for money. But you know, if you look inside them, the most logic in the [sic] fact, there is no value for their humanity, no respect. This is the more painful point.

The disillusionment with the peace process between Israel and Palestinian representatives has further increased the appeal emigration as it is now seen as the most achievable way to change one's living conditions. Though return and Palestine have not lost their meaning, at the moment the right of return might appear to be a future too far ahead for Palestinian refugees. Migration, on the other hand, is seen as something that can be obtained and that could counter the hopelessness experienced in the everyday lives. Acquiring a citizenship in a European country is also presented as a route to Palestine, as it would make it possible for the refugees to visit the places thrive to return to.

Still, some people I interviewed linked emigration to abandoning the Palestinian cause. A member in the Popular Committee in one of the camps in Tyre stressed that the emptying camp should not be destroyed because "camp is the right of return". Camps are seen as a reminder of Palestinian

refugeeness and dispossession, and as a sign of refugees' on-going struggle to return to Palestine. This understanding can also be detected among those who plan to emigrate: they were trying to counter the claims by emphasising their commitment to Palestine. They highlighted that those living in Europe are also committed to advocating for and defending the rights of Palestinians. Palestine was named the most important place in the world and some talked longingly of returning to their villages, but at the same time future was seen in Europe. It is clear that at the moment Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are – rather than putting all their hopes and expectations on return – looking for a place that would enable them to start a new life in better conditions.

### The routes to travel

As is evident, mobility is not equally distributed, and power relations, social and economic inequality as well as spatial position influence the possibilities people have for being mobile. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are one of the less fortunate when it comes to the possibilities to move from one place to another. As Palestinians born in Lebanon do not hold citizenship of any country, they do not have a passport, but only a travel document issued by the state of Lebanon. Only a couple of countries admit holders of a travel document without a visa, and some states do not recognise the travel document as a valid entry document at all. The travel documents are till today written by hand, which has caused further problems for Palestinians. One of my interlocutors complained about this, and saw it as another example how the Lebanese state has made the lives of Palestinians unbearable on purpose. According to him, Lebanon has received funding from France for beginning to issue electronic travel document to Palestinian refugees, but the state has not proceeded to do so.

On 24 November 2015 International Civil Aviation Organisation's (ICAO) published a recommendation to stop accepting handwritten travel documents as they fall short of basic standards of security and reliability. As a result, Palestinians holding Lebanese-issued travel documents face even more restrictions than before. Although the ICAO has clarified that the new regulation should not be applied to refugees and stateless persons, the organization cannot guarantee that all states will follow this guideline.

Restrictions that make official routes even less accessible for the Palestinian refugee community, will with no doubt, result in increase of irregular migration. As conditions in Lebanon are not likely to improve, more and more people will seek the possibility to emigrate, even if they have to rely on smugglers to reach the places where they hope to find the conditions for a better life.

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