

Palestinian Refugees

Ghosts of Israeli Conquest

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Of all the issues raised by Israel's fifty year anniversary, none holds more pain and longing, nor embodies the Palestinian experience more, than that of the refugees.

Numbering approximately 3.3 million, the Palestinians are the largest such group in the world and have suffered that status longer than any other. Besides being scattered in a diaspora in places as far-flung as Sweden and metropolitan Detroit, many continue to reside in refugee camps close to the land they were forced from a generation ago.

In southern Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank as well as in Libya, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, they occupy a gulag of refugee camps marked by squalor and hopelessness. When the state of Israel was founded, the problem was viewed as so desperate that the UN established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the early 1950s as the main benefactor for Palestinians, providing social services and employment. However, this placed them outside the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and more specifically the 1949 General Assembly Resolution 194, with its call for either Palestinian repatriation or compensation for their losses.

Israel's refusal to abide by the resolution leaves Palestinians stranded in host countries where they are often perceived as alien and unwanted elements, designated as social and economic prey in the service of molding national identities.

An acute example of this process involves the 400,000-plus refugees in Lebanon who face a seemingly impossible living situation of high unemployment and diminishing social services, with no hope of return to their homeland. Lebanon refuses to participate in multilateral talks on refugees while pressuring the Palestinians to leave by making their lives unbearable—a policy referred to by refugees as strangulation.

The refugees in Lebanon are those displaced during the 1948 war, which established Israel as an exclusive Jewish state, as well as their descendants. They lived relatively quietly until 1969 when Israeli attacks on southern Lebanon forced the Lebanese government to accept an armed Palestinian presence. A newly established Palestinian resistance movement assumed daily management of the camps, providing security, jobs, education, etc. This autonomous takeover of the camps was short-lived, however, when repeated assaults on refugees involved the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon's internal strife during its ruinous civil war which began in 1975.

As the violence escalated, Israeli-backed Lebanese Phalangist militias began attacks on refugees that resulted in numerous massacres. Syria's invasion of Lebanon in the 1970s, and its support of Christian forces, resulted in thousands of refugees being massacred such as at the Tel al-Zaater camp that was overrun in August 1976. Palestinian autonomy came definitively to an end with the Israeli 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

When the PLO left a destroyed Beirut in the summer of 1982, the refugees were reconfinned in camps and subjected to repeated attacks from militia forces ranging from the Syrian-backed Amal militia to the right-wing Christian Phalangists. Three months after the Israeli invasion and two days after the assassination of Lebanese prime minister, Phalangist Bashir Gemayel, Israeli-transported and armed Lebanese militia units entered the Palestinian

Sabra and Shatila camps and carried out one of the worst massacres in recent history, leaving over 2,000 Palestinians dead in 38 hours.

This military assault on an increasingly defenseless population was followed by a legal one; in December 1982, the Lebanese government issued laws restricting Palestinian employment opportunities by categorizing them as foreigners. A decree by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs excluded 73 categories of employment for foreigners from banking to cutting hair. Another detailed the jobs open to those with work permits—as workers in car washes, construction and excavation, agriculture, textiles, and the leather industry, and as servants, etc. In other words, Palestinians were allowed to be exploited in menial jobs.

The camps, which once were permitted autonomous and semi-autonomous status by the Lebanese state because of its own internal weaknesses and as a buffer against Israeli attack, were transformed into virtual concentration camps. Current tight control and surveillance is an interim process until the Israeli-PLO peace process determines their fate. Meanwhile, military encirclement of the camps creates and sustains an atmosphere of intimidation where refugees are fearful to leave because of the likelihood of harassment and physical attack. Since the Lebanese state sees the refugees as a potential force for revolution or as a strong and sustainable movement of resistance against their treatment as an exploitable underclass, the ability of refugees organizing politically and culturally has been strongly curtailed.

Lebanese policy toward the Palestinians is rooted in the refugee concept itself. Refugee camps are designed to manage uprooted people into a process of re-nationalization to another nation-state. This means that along with de-linking the refugee situation from its root causes, such policies shifts the burden of solutions to host countries and to the refugees themselves rather than holding the original country accountable. This not only places a greater burden on both parties, it sets refugees up as a target for xenophobic hostility directed at them in host countries.

Another confining measure has been the restriction of travel imposed on Palestinian refugees. In 1995, as a protest against the peace process, Libya expelled 1,000 Palestinians to Egypt and stopped renewing work permits for thousands more. About 4,000 with *Laissez-Passers* (Lebanese passports) tried to return to Lebanon. At the same time, Lebanon's interior ministry issued a decree requiring those with *Laissez-passers* also to have entry and exit visas. Since most Palestinians did not have them, the function of the decree was to prevent Palestinian re-entry.

Economic conditions have also steadily worsened. According to a recent study of 1,500 women both in and out of camps in Lebanon, 94 percent of the respondents' households had a monthly income less than the sum that UNRWA considers the basic minimum for a family of five. On top of Lebanese apartheid, UNRWA's own system further maintains Palestinian marginalization by creating categories such as "registered," "nonregistered" and "displaced persons" in order to minimize refugee numbers. The agency's accountability to the UN Secretary-General and to UN major donor nations, rather than to the people it allegedly serves, not only leads it to ignore human rights abuses, but to suppress refugee voices.

The biggest gap in UNRWA's ability to provide services has been chronic deficits despite a budget increase of 70 percent from \$32 million in 1993 to \$55 million in 1997. UNRWA began imposing austerity measures, including tuition fees in UNRWA schools that led to a 1997 nine-day hunger strike. Relief came following an emergency appeal to donor countries which covered the deficit, but refugees still walk a precarious line.

Palestinians are frequently forced to move from one camp to another in order to escape violence or because of transfer programs designed to fragment the community and to control this potentially revolutionary bloc. Self-identity is therefore determined by power relations at specific points in time. In the pre-1968 era, Palestinians rejected the term "refugee" as insulting and demeaning, preferring the label of "returner." According to this idea the word "refugee" defines the problem as purely humanitarian, rather than acknowledging a distinct national identity and history that allow Palestinians to reclaim their homes and their hopes.

Following the 1960s emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement, refugees in Lebanon refashioned themselves from passive spectators to active resisters.

But in post-1982 Lebanon, Palestinians became refugees once again, not by choice, but out of necessity. This gave them access to badly needed UNRWA services, but meant relinquishing their dream of returning to their homes. The new status also required subjecting themselves to their host government with the desperate hope of gaining rights and recognition in a foreign land.

This isn't likely, given that the Lebanese state has emerged stronger and more solidified recently, with a renewed sense of national identity which does not include Palestinians. The "refugee" label is a method of exclusion enabling the Lebanese ruling class to control and exploit Palestinians. A renewed Lebanese national identity comes with the predictable chauvinism with which nationalism is built.

Nationalism requires an enemy whose presence leads to the creation or strengthening of state mechanisms that can remove and contain the object of national scorn. In Lebanon, the rise of a renewed national identity dangerously parallels that currently found in fascist and xenophobic movements in Europe and North America. It is ironic that the Palestinians, originally expelled by Zionist colonialism for the same reasons, find their descendants receiving similar treatment from other Arabs.

The possibility of expulsion continues to loom for refugees in Lebanon at two remaining Palestinian camps outside Beirut—Shatila and Bourj al Barajneh—located on land near the international airport. The camps are slated to be razed to make way for shopping malls and the expansion of a sports arena. Also, anti-refugee sentiment continues to be expressed by government officials such as in a recent statement by Lebanese Interior Minister Michel Murr on a 1997 trip to France. He said the refugees are a security threat comparable to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

Palestinians want to leave, but voluntarily and to their historic homes. Israel, of course, vehemently opposes this since it would both require the return of stolen Palestinian property and challenge the Israeli state's exclusive Jewish identity. In the meantime, Palestinians in Lebanon want civil rights—the right to work, to open cultural organizations, etc., but reject naturalization, which would be a negation of their right to return. Many don't identify with Yassar Arafat's Palestinian Authority and reject resettlement in the West Bank because it's not their land. They understandably demand a return to their specific villages of origin, many of which are in Israel. This orientation toward the tradition and place of the village functionally negates any larger nationalism or nationalist solution.

In the face of continual reversals for the Palestinians, a recent breakthrough has been the emergence of self-representation by the refugees themselves. In spite of the physical depredations, the camps can be sites for exciting and long-range struggle, which has also marked the Palestinian refugee experience. Previously, being the objects of scholarly study, refugees occupied a vacuum that didn't regard them as agents of history or producers of culture. Edward Said mentions the 1955 book *Social Forces in the Middle-East* by Sydney Fisher, as an example which only mentions refugees "as a minor irritant to progress ... or as statistics on the United Nations agenda for refugees in general."

Even the defenders of the refugees are marginalized. At the 1994 Oxford Conference on Palestinians in Lebanon, Palestinian presenters on camp conditions were crammed into a single panel with less time to speak than international and Lebanese speakers. However, despite past and continued marginalization of refugee voices under the weight of the scholarly work about them, self-representation is finally emerging in film, plays, poetry and essays. Refugee voices are emerging and expressing their viewpoints unhindered, like that of the study of refugee attitudes to the peace process released by the Campaign for Refugee Rights to Return.

Hopefully, it won't take another fifty years to see the emergence of a determined Palestinian identity free of politically nationalist trappings, even in the face of increasing repression from host countries as well as further Israeli aggression. Already the victims of ethnic cleansing, refugees will likely be targets for further land dispossession and expulsion. Their only defense that won't lead down the dead end road of nationalism is a revolutionary movement on par with the early resistance movement of the camps, firmly grounded in anti-authoritarian principles. The potential lies in their identification with their villages of origin as opposed to a modern nation state.

But that could easily change, given the history of other movements, such as Zionism, which faced similar conditions and wound up operating on authoritarian models mirroring their oppressors. If so, the Palestinians will continue to suffer the degradations of the state and capital, a common thread to which all nations are bound. Whatever the future, the fact remains that the refugee existence is the product of racism and colonialism, and further evidence of the failure of nationalism and the nation state.

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