



A Unifob Global Research Project

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The University of Bergen



GLOBAL MOMENTS in the **LEVANT**

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Leif Manger and Øystein S. LaBianca
Editors



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ARE KNUDSEN

BERGEN, NORWAY

*From Refugees to Revolutionaries:
Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon, 1990-2007*

SUMMARY

The more than 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are the country's poorest and most disenfranchised community. Traditionally, research on Palestinian refugees has been dominated by a focus on displacement, suffering and loss. In recent years, there has been tendency to focus on the more problematic side of refugee existence, including studies that see refugee camps as breeding grounds for Islamic "extremism". This project critically re-examines the social, political and religious dimensions of Lebanon's enduring refugee problem.

From the start, the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon has been very open to all forms of research. This strategy has paid off in the sense that the refugee issue “will not go away” and is one reason why the refugee issue continues to command international attention.

My project is concerned with the period since the fifteen-year Civil War ended (1990) to the present, and focuses on the contested social, political and religious dimensions of Lebanon’s enduring refugee problem. It involves field-based research in the refugee communities of Lebanon, including interviews with representatives, officials, leaders and spokesmen for Palestinian political parties and factions (of which there are many), meetings with members of the NGO community and conversations with individual refugees. Importantly, this project also seeks to understand the views of the host society, hence it includes meetings and interviews with senior Lebanese politicians, scholars and bureaucrats.

The more than 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are the country’s poorest and most disenfranchised community. In the country’s twelve refugee camps, poverty is the norm. Of all Arab countries hosting refugees, Lebanon has the highest number of individuals living in abject poverty. Lebanon also has

the most politicized refugee community, with armed groups and factions in frequent conflict. The bloody battle between the Lebanese Army and militants in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in 2007, is an example of this volatile mixture. The battles not only highlighted years of systematic neglect from Lebanese authorities but also internationalized the refugee issue and placed the “refugee problem” back on the global political agenda.

Civil War (1975-90) devastation still visible in the Shatila refugee camp, Beirut, the site of the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982.

Photo: Are Knudsen





The Palestinian refugees are subject to stringent policy measures designed to limit their social and political freedom and curtail their employment opportunities. In the post-civil war period (1990-present), the refugees' situation has progressively worsened due to new laws and administrative decrees aimed at reducing their civil liberties and preventing

The more than 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are the country's poorest and most disenfranchised.

them from permanent settlement in Lebanon. The question of naturalising refugees is (besides disarming them) one of the most contentious political issue in Lebanon today.

Despite enduring 60 years in exile, most refugees insist on their "right of return" to Palestine (Ar. haq al-'awda, "right of return") which has made it possible to maintain a distinct Palestinian identity. This, together with residence in refugee camps, has also prevented refugees from being assimilated into host populations (Bowker 2003). This has made camp-based refugees one of the most important sources of Palestinian nationalism. At the same time, political developments such as the Oslo Accords (1993) weakened the refugees' rights and they have largely also been marginalised within the larger discussion of a future "two-state solution".

(top) Posters showing young martyrs alongside slain Hamas-leaders Sheikh Yassin and Rantissi

(bottom) Murals from the Mar Elias refugee camp, Beirut; The mural depicts the passing of the "key", a symbol of the "right to return" to Palestine (Ar. haq al-awda).

Photos: Are Knudsen



Traditionally research on Palestinian refugees has been dominated by a focus on displacement, suffering and loss. Studies using oral history have been an important part of this research (Sayigh 1994). Much of the research on refugees is eclectic and dominated by studies that measure poverty and document its impact, but often leave difficult political

issues causing poverty either unexamined or understudied. In recent years, there has been tendency to focus on the more problematic sides of refugee existence, including studies that see refugee camps as breeding grounds for Islamic

They also tend to neglect the vast number of refugees who, against heavy odds, struggle to make ends meet in squalid camps resembling urban slums.

“extremism” (Rougier 2007). Refugee poverty (“deprivation”), in this perspective, is seen as the driving force behind the shift towards militant Islamism. While such trends cannot and should not be ignored, these studies tend to leave the question of local support to such groups unanswered (Knudsen 2007). They also tend to neglect the vast number of refugees who, against heavy odds, struggle to make ends meet in squalid camps resembling urban slums.

In September 2007, in an effort to examine the wider implications of the “refugee problem” in the Levant, CMI in collaboration with Muwatin organised a workshop entitled From Exodus to Exile: Palestinian Lives in the Levant, which attracted 20 researchers specialising in Palestinian refugees. An edited book from the workshop is planned for publication in 2008. In 2008, it will be 60 years since the refugees’ fateful exodus from Palestine (Ar. al-Nakba, “disaster”) and the birth of the refugee problem. This makes 2008 a Global Moment in the lives of Palestinian refugees and a painful reminder of the international community’s neglect of the refugee problem.

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Poster showing the late President Yassir Arafat (1929-2004), chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and leader of Fatah, the PLO's largest faction.

Photo: Are Knudsen



ARE KNUDSEN IS CURRENTLY RESEARCH DIRECTOR AT CHR. MICHELSEN INSTITUTE (CMI) IN BERGEN, WHERE HE LEADS THE RESEARCH GROUP ON

PEACE, CONFLICT AND THE STATE. Knudsen began his academic career in Northern Pakistan where he studied for his master's degree in social anthropology (1992). Knudsen's PhD examined violence and belonging among a little studied group of tribesmen in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province.

Based on CMI's long-term co-operation with the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy (Muwatin), Knudsen began in 2003 to study Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and political Islam in Palestine. At present, Knudsen is involved in several studies of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, including the lack of civic rights, the role of Hizbollah (Party of God) as a steward of Palestinian affairs and a study of the political implications of the battle in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp (2007) that left more than 500 soldiers and militants dead. Funded by Global Moments in the Levant, Knudsen together with Palestinian collaborators is preparing a documentary film on the impact of the Nahr el-Bared crisis on the 30,000 refugees displaced during the conflict.

Knudsen's research has been funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Development Co-operation Cooperation and the Research Council of Norway. He is the author of articles, book chapters and reports on Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian Hamas and is a frequent contributor to news media on refugee affairs. His PhD dissertation is forthcoming in 2008 as *Violence and Belonging: Land, Love and Lethal Conflict in a Kohistani Community, Northern Pakistan*.

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