

# **From Camp Dwellers to Urban Refugees?**

## **Urbanization and Marginalization of Refugee Camps in Lebanon.**

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### **Summary**

Most of the studies on refugees establish a clear difference between *refugees in camps* and *urban refugees* living in cities. The Palestinian case, due to its exceptional duration and the context of rapid urbanization of their host countries, invites us to re-examine this dichotomy. Most of the refugee camps in Lebanon (as well as in most of the Middle Eastern cities) are now part of the main Lebanese urban areas. On the one hand they appear to be marginalized and segregated areas due to the special - and often changing - regulation and mode of controls as well as the legal status of their Palestinian residents. On the other hand, refugee camps are strongly connected to their urban environment through the daily mobility of Palestinian refugees, the growing presence of other groups of refugees and migrants (such as Syrian or Asian workers and Iraqi or Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees), and the development of commercial activities that blur the boundaries of the refugee camps, making it a part of the city. This presentation will be based on fieldwork research in Beirut and Tyre (Lebanon).

"The traveller stops and comes back full of doubt: he  
cannot distinguish between the different places of the city,  
his own mental categories get mixed up."  
Italo Calvino  
*Les villes invisibles*

### **1. Introduction**

The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are today marginalized in their host society. The specificities of their settlement and the urgent need to find a durable solution to their situation were underlined by both the Israeli and Palestinian delegations during the negotiations of Taba in January, 2001. This community, because it crystallizes the geopolitical stakes both on the regional and national scales, is a privileged field of investigation which makes it possible to raise many questions dealing with the relationship between refugees own socio-political dynamic, political actors and space. The migrations generated by multiple changes on the Lebanese and Middle-Eastern political scene singularize these refugees within the Diaspora (Dorai, 2003). Since the departure of the PLO from Lebanon in the Eighties, the attention paid to the Palestinians of Lebanon is diminishing. The civil war, as well as the different Israeli invasions, deeply marked this population. It is currently one of most underprivileged of the Diaspora. Today in Lebanon, more than 50% of the refugees reside in the UNRWA camps. This

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high rate is one of the signs of the precariousness of the Palestinians installation in Lebanon. Moreover one has to add the legal constraints that affect Palestinian refugees which deprive them of many essential rights like the access to large parts of the job market. Paradoxically, during more than ten years, from 1969 to 1982, the Palestinians have known in this country a liberty of action that no other host state gave them, which enabled them to mark their presence in certain spaces like camps and to transform deeply some urban neighbourhoods. Due to the rapid urbanization of the Middle Eastern countries most of the refugee camps are part of the different main cities in their respective countries or host regions. As mentioned by Ishaq Al-Qutub :

"In the case of the Palestinian Arab refugee camps – such as those existing in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria – they are prevailing features of the urban structures of these states. [...] The camp cities, both small and large, can be considered as urban conglomerations in the demographic and ecological sense. [...] These cities represent a unique urban pattern, which has special features, problems, structures, and consequently requires a special classification in the study of urban societies in the Middle East." (Al-Qutub, 1989: 91, 107)

After discussing the categories of urban refugees and camp dwellers I will present two examples, Mar Elias and Al Buss camp in two different urban context, to illustrate the urbanization of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

## **2. Urban Refugees vs. Camp Dwellers?**

These last years researchers had shown a growing interest on the issue of urban refugees in the world, pointing mainly the problem of protection and access of services they face in the third world big cities<sup>2</sup>. The differences between urban refugee and camp dwellers have been studied (e.g. Agier, 2001 & 2002; Hyndman, 2000; Malkki, 1995), but the transformation of refugee camps into urban areas has not been studied as such except in a few cases (e.g. the works of Michel Agier, Sari Hanafi, Sylvaine Bulle, Hélène Seren).

### *2.1. Urban refugees.*

The UNHCR makes a clear distinction between *refugees in camps*, and *urban refugees*. This categorization is linked to the implementation of its policies of protection and assistance.

"UNHCR protection and assistance programmes are generally implemented at the field level. A key question in every project is the settlement pattern of the assisted population: are refugees living in camps, in urban areas or in rural areas among the local population? The exact numbers of refugee camps and people living in them are difficult to establish, for many reasons, including the lack of definition and the dynamic of camps. Should a camp have a minimum size or population density?

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<sup>2</sup> A special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* on Urban refugees (vol. 19, n°3) have been published in September 2006.

Should camps have a clearly marked perimeter? Should detention centres, transit centres, collective centres and settlements be considered as camps? Moreover, reliable camp statistics may not always be available due to lack of UNHCR access or presence."<sup>3</sup>

Refugee camps, that focus attention of many observers are not, according to UNHCR statistics, the main location of refugees in the world. It gathers around 25% of the whole refugee population worldwide.

"In 2005, the type of location was reported for some 14.2 million persons in 129, mainly non-industrialized countries. This represents 77 per cent of the total population of concern. Of these, 3.6 million were residing in camps or centres (26%), 2.5 million (18%) in urban areas, whereas 8.1 million persons (56%) were either living in rural areas among the local population or their type of settlement was unknown."<sup>4</sup>

Due to the relatively high proportion of refugees living in urban areas, the UNHCR has decided to develop specific approaches towards this population, who is more difficult to assist and protect due to their geographical dispersion. UNHCR policy has changed these last years to take into account their specificities.<sup>5</sup>

In the Palestinians case, the situation is quite similar to the other refugees, even is the proportion of refugees living in camps is higher -around one third of the registered refugees are still living in camps – and variable depending on the area where they are settled.

**Registered Palestinian Refugees, UNRWA - 31 December 2006**

Area	Official camps	Registered Refugees	Registered refugees living in camps	% of refugees living in camps
Jordan	10	1 858 362	328 076	17,6
Lebanon	12	408 438	215 890	52,8
Syria	9	442 363	119 055	26,9
West Bank	19	722 302	186 479	25,8
Gaza strip	8	1 016 964	478 272	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>4 448 429</b>	<b>1 321 772</b>	<b>29,7</b>

UNRWA, <http://www.un.org/unrwa/>, 2007

In reality, the number of refugees living in camps is higher if we add the refugees living in unofficial camps or informal gathering that do not benefit from the same assistance and services from international organizations or host states. The boundary between camps and gatherings is blurring, and some refugees live in camp-like situation.

## 2.2. The Palestinian case.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2005: 55.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2005: 55.

<sup>5</sup> Obi, Naoko; Crisp, Jeff (2001) *Evaluation of the implementation of UNHCR's policy on refugees in urban areas*, UNHCR – Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, EPAU/2001/10, 15 p.

The classical distinction operated between refugee camps dwellers and urban refugees is mainly an operational one produced by international organisation. This categorization has to be differentiated from the evolution of refugee camps and from the practices developed by the refugees themselves, as mentioned by Michel Agier.

"Due to their very heterogeneity, camps may become the genesis of unexpected cities, new social environment, relationships and identification" (Agier, 2002)

Refugee camps can become parts of urban areas, as it is the case of many Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East, or become themselves urban centres due to their demographic weight and the variety of activities developed, such as socio-economic activities, political centres of decision, and the central role they play in the Palestinian society in exile. In some specific cases, the categorization depends upon the institution in charge of the refugees. For example in Damascus, Yarmouk is considered by the Syrian authorities as a refugee camp whereas UNRWA does not recognize it as such. In the West Bank refugees camps does not benefit from municipal services even if they are part of the urban area. At an operational level (international responsibility, access to services, legal context, etc.) a clear distinction exists between camp dwellers and urban refugees. But analyzing the geographical development of refugee camps in their local context, the different scales of mobility (daily movements, in and out migration, settlement of new migrant communities), the practices developed by the refugees living in the camps (economic, political, cultural and/or social activities) leads us to consider the refugee camps as urban areas. The temporal dimension of the Palestinian exile is also a key element to take into consideration. Nearly sixty years of exile have led to a specific relation with their host societies, with a strong local integration linked to a rapid urbanization of the different host countries parallel to a strong segregation due to the socio-political and legal context.

### *2.3. Palestinian Urban Experience in Lebanon.*

In the Palestinian case, forced migration of individuals and families during war periods have been studied, whereas other forms of internal migrations or mobility have not been addressed as such by scholars. As mentioned by Rosemary Sayigh, living in a camp does not protect Palestinian refugees from being forced to move to escape violence, occupation, etc. The camp cannot be considered only as a place of memory, continuity and stability in exile, but also as a vulnerable place.

"During the conflicts of the last thirty-five years, several camps have been completely razed, others severely damaged. Originally 15, the refugee camps today number 12. Some camps, for example Shateela, have been destroyed more than once. A survey carried out in 1988 found a total of 4,468 Palestinian families (around 25,334 individuals) scattered over eighty-seven locations. Of the surveyed families, 75.2% had been displaced more than once, 19.7% more than three times. A later study found that between 1972 and 1988, 90% of Palestinian refugees had been forced from their home at least once, two thirds had been forced twice, and 20% three or more times" (Sayigh, 2004: 5)

Instability and mobility are two major aspects of Palestinian life in Lebanon. This leads to blur the distinction between camp and urban settlement. If we consider Palestinian itineraries on a long term (i.e. individual, familial and intergenerational itineraries), most of the refugees have experienced life in and outside the camp. Daily mobility also crosses camp boundaries. Refugees can live in a camp and work or study outside the camp, or the other way round. Other practices, such as shopping, visiting family or friends, accessing services or assistance, often leads to go in and out of the camps or to frequent other neighbourhoods.

The categories of *urban refugee* and *camp dweller* are often considered through their residency place and not according to their short and/or long term spatial practices. Mobility is a key practice to take into consideration because it reveals the complementarities of different urban spaces, and the different kinds of relations they have. Refugee camps, even if they are segregated and marginalized, are part of the urban settings that host them.

To the spatial constraints refugee camps suffer one has to add the legal restrictions concerning the refugees themselves. The Lebanese legislation is very strict regarding Palestinians since the arrival of the first refugees. This legislation has been modified according to the agreements, and the disagreement, between the PLO and the various Lebanese governments. It limits the access of the refugees to the labour market, to the education system, to the international mobility, to the social and health system, as well as to the property (Al-Natour, 1996; Said, 2001). The legal status of the Palestinians has important implications on the socio-spatial organization of this community in the Lebanon. The refugees tend to be confined in the informal sector or in the least profitable labour activities which do not require a work permit. Furthermore, the departure of the PLO in 1982 deprived number of refugees of jobs developed by the strong presence of the Palestinian political institutions in Lebanon. In a Lebanese economic context fragile since the end of the Civil war, the Palestinians are marginalized on the strongly competitive Lebanese labour market with the arrival of an important foreign manpower (Jureidini, 2003; Chalcraft, 2005).

### **3. Mar Elias, a Urban Refugee Camp in Beirut**

#### *3.1. Geographical Location*

Mar Elias camp has been created in 1952 by the UNRWA, on a small area of 5,400 m<sup>2</sup> in the South West of the Beirut municipality. In 1958, according to UNRWA figures, the camp hosted 449

registered refugees and 612 in 2005<sup>6</sup>. The camp was established next to Mar Elias Greek Orthodox convent. Today, the camp is situated at the crossroad between Beirut Southern suburbs of Bir Hassan and Ouzai, Ras Beirut and Cola intersection (see Map). This central location facilitates circulation both for camp dwellers who can easily reach other neighbourhoods in Beirut and for people from outside the camp wishing to come whether they are from Beirut or from other regions of Lebanon (especially the Southern coastal region).

Location Map of Mar Elias Refugee Camp



3.2. A High Level of In and Out Migration

This central location has played a key role in the development of the camp, role that I will develop in this contribution. First, it has contributed to the settlement of new migrant communities in the camp. Second, it has permitted the development of commercial activities relying mostly on customers living outside the camp whether they are Palestinians or not. Third, it has facilitated the mobility of Palestinian refugees, who can for example live in the camp and work outside or the other way round.

<sup>6</sup> For 2001 and 2003 UNRWA gives respectively the figure of 1,403 and 1,413 registered refugees. In 1995, UNRWA registered 635 refugees.

"Following the massacre of Deir Yasin in Palestine, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948, and following the creation of Israel on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1948, a boat accosts in the port of Beirut, in May of the same year, transporting refugees fleeing Palestine. The rescue teams of the government take care of these newcomers and notice during their landing, that most of these passengers come from Haifa and Jaffa and that all of them are Christians. They are transported to the Greek Orthodox convent of Mar Elias, where they are accommodated in the dependences of the convent and in the garden until year 1952. The same year the orthodox patriarchy decides to open a noviciate to the convent. The refugees are evacuated, but are resettled in a camp set up in the *horch* (wood), close to the convent"<sup>7</sup> (Sfeir-Khayat, 2001: 36).

Due to high level of international and internal emigration, only a few families that settled in the camp in 1952 are still there. They have been gradually replaced by Palestinians coming from other refugee camps like Tell al Zaatar in Beirut after its destruction in 1976, or Rashidiyyeh South of Tyre. Other refugees settled in Mar Elias in 1991 after having been internally displaced during the war. The high level of emigration can be explained by three factors. First, a large part of the Palestinian refugees who came to Mar Elias Convent had Lebanese family through marriage. Their local integration has thus been eased by the previous connection they had with their host society. Second, their urban origin has facilitated their integration in the city, contrary to most of the refugees coming from a rural background<sup>8</sup> in other camps such as Shatila or Burj al Barajneh in the Beirut urban area. Third, and this last point is related to the previous one, their good education level have lead to higher international emigration. A combination of different interrelated factors – urban origin, religious affiliation, family networks – has generated important departure from the camp to other Beirut neighbourhoods and abroad.

Parallel to this out migration, the camp has witnessed arrival of Palestinian refugees coming from other parts of Lebanon as well as arrival of few Lebanese citizens and Syrian, Asian and African immigrants who settled with the end of the civil war at the beginning of the 1990's. Through the settlement of international migrants, the camp is playing a role in the city as a host area for newcomers, mainly poor immigrants. The camp has thus hosted different waves of refugees and immigrants, like other deprived areas of the southern and eastern suburbs of Beirut metropolitan area<sup>9</sup>. This attraction of migrants in some specific urban areas is stressed by Karen Jacobsen:

"Like all urban migrants, asylum seekers are attracted to urban centres because economic resources and opportunities, including education for their children, are concentrated there, and in cities migrants can access the social networks and ethnic enclaves that supports newcomers, and which initiate the process of integration" (Jacobsen, 2006: 276).

These migratory dynamics are part of the urban dynamics. The camp plays a role of host space for different waves of migrants for different reasons. First, Palestinian does not have the right to work in Lebanon. Some of them decide to build a new floor on the top of their house and rent it to migrants for

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<sup>7</sup> Original text in French. Author own translation.

<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that two thirds of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are from a rural origin (Khalidi, 1992)

<sup>9</sup> See for example Berthomière & Hily, 2006 or Deboulet, 2006

100 to 150 \$ per month. It gives them a supplementary income. Second, because many Palestinian families have emigrated abroad or change their place of residence in Lebanon – when they have enough money many refugee families leave the camp to rent apartments in the city – some houses are free and are rent to other families. Third, prices in the refugee camps are lower than in other places, especially in Beirut where accommodation is expensive, it attracts poor new migrants (Sudanese, Bangladeshis, Sri lankis, etc.). Fourth, security forces do not enter the camps. This brings security to undocumented migrants who feel more secure in these areas. For a variety of reasons, a refugee camp such as Mar Elias, but also Shatila, or Fakhani - a vast Palestinian urban gathering – became host places for new migrants.

Another sign of the relative integration of the camp in the city is the development of some commercial activities in Mar Elias since the end of the war at the beginning of the 1990's. Most of the shopkeepers do not live now in the refugee camp and were not born in Mar Elias. They haven't lived there before, after having been displaced during the war. These refugees thus disconnect their residential location from their economic location. One of them is living near Saïda, in a village, because renting a house there is less expensive, but working in Beirut gives him more opportunities to develop his business. Most of the shopkeepers interviewed decided to open shops there because the prices were lower and the camp is well connected to other parts of Beirut. The majority of their customers are not living in the camp – except for the groceries and fruit and vegetable shops – but come from the neighbourhood because the prices are lower.

#### **4. The Urban Development of Al Buss Refugee Camp (Tyre).**

In the Tyre region, the areas occupied by Palestinians did not increase these last years. This is mainly due to the relative demographic stagnation of the Palestinians living in there. If the natural balance is still positive the migratory balance is negative since 1982, and emigration is increasing since the War of camps. The internal migrations in Lebanon - towards Saïda and Beirut -, as well as the international emigration - mainly towards Northern Europe -, limits the growth of the Palestinian population and even engenders its progressive decline.

##### *4.1. An Area under Lebanese Control.*

The control of the entry of the camp plays an important role in the degradation of the Palestinian housing situation. These measures have been applied in a very strict way from the beginning of the 1990's until 2005. The camp still has a single entry controlled by the Lebanese army (Cf. map). Cars can be searched and it was forbidden to bring any building material inside without a previous authorization. These authorizations were rarely given. These limitations prevent any maintenance or



renovation of houses. Another consequence is the impossibility for the young couples to settle down in the camp, because they cannot build new house. The control of the camp materializes in the space by the physical presence of the army at the entry of the camp, and the closure of all the secondary roads that connect the camp with its immediate spatial environment, leaving only a single entry for the cars.

These limitations were sometimes abolished and new constructions appear in the camp. Since spring, 2005, Al Buss witnesses an important densification of building, numerous families taking advantage of the abolition of the limitations to add a floor to their house, others to build new rooms. These limitations can be again imposed on decision of the Lebanese authorities.



Palestinian camp and gathering in Tyre



#### 4.2. The Camp Today.

Al Buss camp can be subdivided into two different spaces. The first one concerns the area developed around the former Armenian camp. In this part of the camp, building is dense. The more one goes away from the border of the camp, the less the built space is dense. The maximum of density is in the northeast of the camp. This part of the camp is composed of terraced houses with two or three floors. Inside the camp, houses are more spaced out, and have more rarely of a second floor, some of them having a private garden. In this part of the camp, streets are rather wide.

The western part of the camp developed in an informal way. The more one goes to the southwest part of the camp, the less the construction is dense. The streets that separate houses are narrow and tortuous. This extension hosts Palestinians native of the village of Damoun, who partly specialized in the culture of orchards. Some houses have one or two floors with an inner courtyard. The UNRWA schools are situated between the east and the west part of the camp and occupy a very large area.

#### 4.3. The Camp and the City: Local Forms of Integration.

Al Buss camp has a particularity compared to the two other camps around Tyre, as well as to the other camps in the Lebanon. It hosts two non-Palestinian spaces: a Lebanese public hospital as well as a Maronite church. These two spaces are in fact Lebanese Armenian and Christian inheritances, the first hospital of Tyre have been built by the Armenians of Al Buss, and the church has been built on a plot belonging to the Maronite church. This camp embodies spatially the interweaving of communities, Palestinians and Lebanese on one side, Moslems and Christians of the other one.

The northern limit of Al Buss camp is more densely built than the other parts. The northern road leads towards the city centre. The eastern one leads southward Lebanon either the inside of lands. It is a zone of intense traffic on which converge travellers' influxes. The Al Buss circle (Duwwar Al Buss) which is situated at the intersection of these two roads, is a bus station where gather buses and collective taxis that go to Sidon, Beirut or to South Lebanon. This area became a commercial zone, where one can find any types of grocer's shops and craftsmen. Since the war of camps, the commercial zone is occupied both by Palestinians and Lebanese. Most of the customers frequenting this commercial space are not from the camp. Most of them come from small villages around the city, coming to Tyre for work, administrative reason or health, and they stop there to buy food and goods they need. They choose this commercial space because it is cheaper and well connected to their village. Shop selling spare parts and accessories for the cars developed also, because they are at the crossroad of the main roads in the region. Small cafés and fast foods have also been created to satisfy the travellers from the south to Sidon or Beirut while they are waiting their bus or their taxi. This means that the camp is not only a built up area inserted in the urban space but it plays a role in the socio-economic organization of the city.





Two factors can explain this relative dynamism: (1) the camp and the informal gathering, even if they constitute closed spatially bounded areas, become integrated to a certain extent to the urban development of Tyre. It is for example more and more difficult to distinguish the western limit of the camp. Many Lebanese Shiite families exiled from the south during the Israeli occupation built by an informal neighbourhood next to the camp. The numerous businesses that have been established along the main road on the North and East sides of the camp, developed both by Palestinians and by Lebanese, integrate the outside fringe of the camp into the townscape. (2) The economic, especially commercial dynamism, of these spaces, by the incomes they generate, allows the Palestinians to improve their environment, which tends more and more to look like that of the poor areas. It is the geographical situation of the camp of Al Buss at the entry of the city, at the crossroads of main roads that facilitates this evolution.

## 5. Conclusion.

The Palestinian society, scattered since 1948, has concentrated in refugee camps in the Middle East that became the symbol of this Diaspora. The Palestinian camps represent three aspects of Palestinian socio-spatial dynamics: territorial permanence - it is a place of relative stability and continuity -, a place of “between-oneself”, and a space of contact with the host society. I will emphasize in this presentation on this last aspect. The relative concentration of Palestinian in camps and gathering has facilitated the permanence of village and family solidarity. The refugee camps have a real effectiveness in the organization and the development of the Palestinian social networks in exile. But they are also spaces of conflicts with the host societies, which, while targeting the refugee camps, try to destabilize the Palestinian society as a whole (Black September in Jordan or Sabra and Shatila, the War of the camps or the last events in north Lebanon). Far from being only spaces of memory, the

camps became the place of the social change and the construction of a Palestinian society in the exile, reinforcing its cohesion, but also rich of its multiple experiences in its various locations.

"The city is never simply the spatial organization of the mosaic of territories: territories of second settlements upset sooner or later this organisation, to produce more confused moral, composed of cultural hybrids themselves produced by successive migrant population belonging to the same community or to different ones"<sup>10</sup> (Joseph, 1998: 93)

The refugee camps and informal gatherings tend to evolve by becoming integrated into the economic activity and into their urban environment. Even if they are still marginalized and segregated areas they are now part of the major cities in the Middle East. Economic activities, daily mobility, presence of new international migrants, strong political and cultural significance for the Palestinian refugees, are the different elements that characterize the refugee camps today as urban settlements.

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<sup>10</sup> "La ville n'est jamais simplement l'organisation spatiale de la mosaïque de territoires : les territoires de deuxième implantation viennent tôt ou tard bousculer cette organisation pour fabriquer un moral bien plus confus, composés d'hybrides culturels produits par la succession des populations migrantes, appartenant à la même communauté ou à des communautés différentes".

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