

**Lebanon 2017/2018**  
**Fewer Refugees**  
**More Refugeeism**



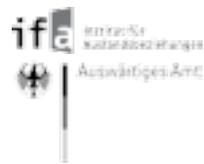
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# Fewer Refugees

# More Refugeeism

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2017/2018

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**Fewer Refugees, More Refugeeism**  
**Why is it so?**

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As 2017 ended, two important numerical assessments of the Palestinian and Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon were published. On December 21, responding to invitations from the Lebanese Central Office of Statistics, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (under the patronage of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whose November trip to Saudi Arabia almost cost him his job), "ministers, ambassadors, diplomats, Lebanese and Palestinian political leaders, heads of international organizations, representatives of military institutions and a crowd of researchers and journalists, as well as representatives of Palestinian and Lebanese civil society" took over the hallway in the Grand Serail where the prime minister's office is situated.<sup>(1)</sup> All of those spectators were there to witness the results of the "National Population and Housing Census of Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon 2017." Though the main findings of that census had been leaked intentionally prior to the kickoff of that pompous ceremony, the crowd's behavior seemed rather like a deafening ovation for the figures that were being announced, and things progressed accordingly.... After an hour of suspense interrupted by tedious speeches and a

documentary that both illustrated the various stages of the work and heralded the use of the newest global positioning technologies to verify the data collected, the results were displayed on two large screens. The suspense peaked as the veil began to lift: "the number of Palestinian refugees in the camps and gatherings reached 174,422 individuals in 2017, living in 12 camps and 156 Palestinian gatherings in the five governorates of Lebanon."

A few days after that ceremony (and with much less spectacle), a respected international news agency quoted a UNHCR spokeswoman as having said, "As of the end of November [2017], the U.N. refugee agency counted 997,905 Syrian refugees [...] registered in Lebanon. The number reached one million in April 2014, and this is the first time it [has dropped] below that [level]."<sup>(2)</sup>

Regardless of whatever coincidence may have caused these two figures to be announced within a week's time, one should have expected them somehow to assuage the acerbic belief cultivated deliberately among the Lebanese within the last several years that these refugees posed an "existential threat" to Lebanon, a belief that has been embraced vigorously by many people in the country.<sup>(3)</sup> In reality, however, neither the Palestinian figure nor its Syrian counterpart had any significant impact! On the contrary, aside from some lingering doubts about the accuracy of the Palestinian figure (the "half million" number is preferred by many),

that disclosure rekindled a longstanding debate over the naturalization decree adopted by one of Lebanon's first post-Taif cabinets.<sup>(4)</sup> Although criticized for allegedly amplifying the confessional imbalance between Lebanese Muslims and Christians, the decree served as the vehicle by which several thousand Palestinians became Lebanese.<sup>(5)</sup> Further, not only did the Syrian figure go almost entirely unnoticed, it also made no impact whatsoever on the extant political discourse. This muted response should not be surprising, of course, as estimates of the number of Syrians in Lebanon released by official Lebanese sources vary widely.<sup>(6)</sup> Similarly, since estimates of the cost of Syrian asylum also vary tremendously, the slight drop noted in the UNHCR figures is unlikely to have any dramatic impact.<sup>(7)</sup>

That notwithstanding, there is little wonder why hundreds of thousands of people have, in such a short time, sought solace in Lebanon as refugees. Interestingly, just a few years after Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, the country experienced the first wave of (Palestinian) refugees crossing its southern borders and settling down. Not only did their arrival effectively disturb many aspects of daily life in the newly independent country, but those refugees were also accused ultimately by a substantial part of the Lebanese population of providing the impetus for the 1975 outbreak of Lebanon's Civil War. That conflict, particularly sharp in nature, ravaged the country for 15 years and continues to inspire unrelenting fear

among many Lebanese despite the 1990 Taif Agreement that ended the war so inconclusively.

As Lebanon prepares to commemorate 100 years of "statehood" two years from now, it apparently neglected during that century to develop the legal tools it needs to deal with the broad issue of asylum. As if to exacerbate this already problematic situation, Lebanon is not a signatory to any international agreement focused on asylum.

Every time Lebanon faces an asylum situation, it purports to be a neophyte unprepared for the attendant realities and therefore condemns itself to fail massively on every such occasion. Of course, legalistic-minded people may lament Lebanon's legislative shortfalls where asylum is concerned and call on parliament to address the situation. Alternatively, human rights practitioners might extol Lebanon's urgent need to sign any or all international treaties and protocols focused on asylum. But since both extremes seem somewhat misguided, a third might inject a dose of so-called "pragmatism" that would center on using the tools already at hand, which may range from local legislation to other international treaties to which Lebanon is a signatory.

While debates such as these are both welcome and laudable, a number of essential questions remain unanswered. For instance, why do these circumstances exist in Lebanon? Why has the country

continued to sidestep any attempt to devise a policy on asylum? Why does Lebanon choose to deal with asylum using a piecemeal approach while it demands timely responses to existing public policy mandates? More aggressively, is the absence of Lebanese public policy and widespread contentment with both the litany of rhetorical statements and the oppressive silence on this important topic the most genuine example of targeted Lebanese policy?

We can state confidently that not a single instance of asylum that has challenged Lebanon throughout its history has ever been resolved satisfactorily, and it is not particularly difficult to identify the chief reason: Lebanon ignored the problems associated with the arrival of the first waves of asylum-seekers. Officials in the country, however, developed an appreciation for the trickiness and riskiness involved with delving into the framework of the inter-Lebanese debate over defining the notion of national identity vis-à-vis the geographic boundaries of the country they inhabited. *According to some Lebanese narratives, asylum is the cornerstone of Lebanon. Thus, it is unsurprising that welcoming or rejecting latter day asylum-seekers depends largely on whether those refugees affirm that narrative and thus can assimilate easily into the country's predominant sociopolitical structure.*<sup>(8)</sup>

Each year since Lebanon gained its statehood in 1920 or achieved its

independence in 1943 can be viewed from the perspective of refugeeism. Of course, such a process cannot be restricted to calculating Lebanese losses or gains vis-à-vis those refugees. Instead, it should focus on the space asylum has occupied in the national life; the impact it has had on inter-Lebanese relations or those between the Lebanese and the refugee communities; the extent to which official and public opinion about asylum in Lebanon has (or has not) changed, ad infinitum. The absence of any such systematic review (which can be attributed to the enduring Lebanese reluctance to deal with the country's past) or of any appropriate asylum-related legislation are perhaps indicative of a wider problem, which may have exacerbated asylum-related issues in the country. Clearly, it would be worthwhile to analyze the root causes of these conditions. More to the point, however, it is also worthwhile to suggest that one of the causes behind this statewide malaise is the culture of denial that has defined Lebanon historically and which substitutes for effective policy decisions, particularly when those in power promote that culture of denial as the de facto state religion—any breach of which is considered nothing short of heresy!

Taking stock from the foregoing, 2017 proved that, in the Lebanese parlance, the "files" on Palestinian or Syrian asylum in Lebanon—despite published figures—are unlikely to be closed anytime soon.

Where Palestinian asylum is concerned, various developments and positions have added tremendous difficulty, such as the U.S. decision to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem—and Palestinian reaction to that decision—or to reduce UNRWA funding after questioning its relevance. To some degree, developments such as these have helped justify Lebanon's decision to deprive its Palestinian residents of some basic rights in a patently sophomoric effort to advocate their inherent "right of return." Despite this state-level playmaking, the fact remains that Palestinians in Lebanon are not likely to leave Lebanon anytime soon!

With respect to Syrian asylum, it is obvious that conditions in Syria have become much more complicated of late. These negative changes have foiled all attempts to reach a political solution, and any thought of Syrian refugees returning home in the near future is little more than naïve hope. Thus, it is sufficient to review the response plans for dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis that were prepared by the Lebanese government (or conveyed via pledges from donor countries) and forecast to remain in effect until 2020. Part of this planning effort includes trivial bargaining by the Lebanese authority about the share Lebanon's host communities will receive through such aid and the amount actually targeted for the refugees. Distribution of those resources among and within the host communities remains subject to petty inter-Lebanese calculations that are beset by corruption

and often self-serving personal and partisan agendas.

On a related note, it is impossible to overlook the security considerations associated with asylum in Lebanon. The Ain el-Helwe (Palestinian refugee) camp, referred to caustically as one of Lebanon's seven wonders due to the constant ambiguity about what occurs behind its newly erected fence, reminds the Lebanese periodically about the threat to Lebanon's stability posed by Palestinian asylum.<sup>(9)</sup> Such reminders confirm Lebanese notions of refugee camps more than they disclose the real threat levels. As proof, Ain el-Helwe is the only Palestinian camp among 12 others that has experienced armed clashes motivated by politics or ideology. Apparently, the other camps are uniformly *apolitical*....

With respect to Syrian asylum, 2017 can be considered a pivotal year where Syrian-related security threats are concerned, whether actual or exaggerated, especially based on the way they were presented to the Lebanese. To counter such threats, Hezbollah "volunteered" in August 2017 to "liberate" the outskirts (*jurd*) of Orsal. After Hezbollah completed its operation, the Lebanese Armed Forces followed it with Operation "Dawn of the Jurd," a coordinated action taken to regain control of what remained of Lebanon's "terrorist-held" eastern border. Despite the bizarre developments and outcomes that accompanied those two

operations, they eventually overcame all "organized, armed Syrian asylum-seekers," leaving only "civilian asylum-seekers" in their wake. Ultimately, little distinguishes the remaining civilians (some of whom are vaguely accused of belonging to "terrorist organizations" and are frequently apprehended by Lebanese authorities) from others, Lebanese or otherwise, who also reside in Lebanon and have been arrested for similar reasons.

In sum, Palestinian refugees will remain in Lebanon unless they have an opportunity to leave it for another asylum/migration destination. Syrian refugees will remain in Lebanon unless they too have an opportunity to leave it in favor of another asylum/migration destination. Threats to Lebanon's security because of asylum-seekers have been dealt with harshly, since such threats represent the primary impetus for ignoring all of Lebanon's many responsibilities toward its refugee populations. Thus, 2017 ended according to an axiom which holds that regardless of the number of Palestinian and Syrian refugees in the country, Lebanon will find itself dealing increasingly with the contentious issue of refugeeism among the Lebanese, but less so with refugee populations that will follow normal rates of birth and death....

It may seem that since fall 2016, when a president of the republic was finally elected after a long presidential vacancy, a government was formed and state institutions seemed to begin working

again, the prevailing political consensus in Lebanon has rendered refugeeism obsolete as a contentious issue among Lebanese. After all, we hear representatives throughout the political spectrum discussing the same kinds of complaints about the weight being exerted on Lebanon because of asylum, and we may interpret that as consensus. But that conclusion would have been accurate only if (a) the issue had been debated adequately and public concerns about asylum were being alleviated and (b) if the reasons behind that consensus would have been any less apparent—which certainly is not the case! Indeed, a driving force behind this example of "Lebanese consensus" is the deal recognized implicitly or explicitly by all internal and external actors, which concludes (1) that Lebanon's new status quo tips the balance of power in favor of Hezbollah and the regional interests it continues to pursue and (2) acknowledges the miserable economic situation facing the country—a situation none of Lebanon's decision-makers could possibly deny. Thus, it is highly advisable to remain skeptical about the notion that this consensus, which involves the asylum issue, is immutable. After all, it is perhaps more prudent to discern within that panacea of consensus yet another example of the culture of denial—which still holds the upper hand in Lebanese politics.

Remaining committed to its mission of countering this culture of denial, UMAM

D&R launched *MOST WELCOMED? Lebanon through its Refugees* in early 2017 thanks to a grant from the *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa)*. While the mainstream discourse about refugeeism in Lebanon centers on the number of refugees, the cost of hosting them, the security threats they pose and other considerations that are similarly difficult to quantify, this program seeks to examine the positions on asylum Lebanon has taken in the past and present, and the extent to which the positions being adopted today seek to reanimate the ghosts of Lebanon's past. In general, by using highly customized tools, this program seeks to situate refugeeism as a particularly Lebanese issue and stoke the ongoing debate in the country over the issue of asylum.

Since documentation reigns supreme among the tools used by UMAM D&R, its *MOST WELCOMED? Lebanon through its Refugees* project includes a documentation component that has augmented its online Memory At Work database, a number of beneficial workshops and conferences and the publication of several detailed papers. This book incorporates six such papers as examples of that overall effort.

(1) All quotations in this paragraph are drawn from the website of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee at <http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/statements/key-findings-of-the-national-population-and-housin/398/en>

(2) "Syrian refugees in Lebanon drop below one million: UN," *The Daily Star*, December 26, 2017. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Dec26/431509-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-drop-below-onemillion-un.ashx>

(3) Unfortunately, use of the expression "existential threat" has become widespread, not only among some high profile Lebanese, but also by the president of the republic. Multiple examples are available on [www.MemoryAtWork.org](http://www.MemoryAtWork.org)

(4) Several days after the census was released, the Maronite patriarch referred again to half a million Palestinian refugees in his 2017 Christmas address: "Lebanon houses today some one million seven hundred thousand Syrian refugees, several hundred Iraqis as well as a half million Palestinian refugees." *An-Nahar*, December 23, 2017. Regarding the renewed debate over the naturalization decree, the most outspoken initiative was advanced at a press conference

called by two MPs, Nimatallah Abi Nasr and Hikmat Deeb. It focused on implementing the decision made by the High Administrative Court to rescind the Lebanese nationality of several individuals to whom it was accorded in 1994. *An-Nahar*, January 3, 2018.

(5) According to Guita Hourani:

In 1994 a decree was signed by the President of the Lebanese Republic, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior naturalizing a large number of persons [88,278]. This decree, which was preceded by the establishment of the Commission on Naturalisation in 1992 during the first post-war government led by Rafic Hariri, aimed at naturalizing some stateless groups such as the Kurds, the Arabs of Wadi Khalid, and the Bedouins, among others. However, the majority of those who acquired Lebanese nationality under this decree were not stateless: over 42% of the naturalised were Syrian nationals versus 36% stateless, 16% Palestinians, and 6% from the rest of the world including descendants of Lebanese immigrants.

The full text of the article is available at <https://www.academia.edu/1189727/>

(6) The variances between the figures provided by the international agencies and the various Lebanese offices in charge of the portfolio are readily apparent, an issue that was examined at length by subject matter expert Ziad Sayegh during a conference hosted by UMAM D&R on December 16, 2017. Sayegh's presentation is available at <https://vimeo.com/249051761>

(7) According to Maja Janmyr: UNHCR is furthermore not permitted to freely register Syrian refugees without interference from the Lebanese Government. In April 2015, the Ministry of Social Affairs requested that UNHCR de-register over 1,400 Syrian refugees who had arrived in Lebanon after 5 January 2015. With the exception of humanitarian cases approved by the Ministry, in May 2015, Lebanese authorities even instructed UNHCR to temporarily suspend registration of Syrian refugees, including individuals already in the country and new arrivals. The reason given for this new ban was that a new mechanism for registration of refugees was to be established, but as of mid-

2016 this new instrument has yet to materialise. While there have been negotiations about a joint UNHCR-Government registration apparatus, amid the Government aim of reducing the number of refugees in the country, some remain sceptical of the political will to actually re-start registration. In the meantime, UNHCR has resorted to 'recording' rather than 'registering' individual refugees for the purpose of both assistance and protection, including resettlement abroad.

Excerpted from "Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 35, Issue 4, December 2016. Available at <https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/35/4/58/2609281>

(8) According to Fida Nasrallah: *Liban asile*, *Liban refuge* was another device to forge a common identity. This new ideology portrayed Lebanon as a haven—a protectorate for persecuted minorities. Ideas such as these were cultivated and made the basis for a Lebanese national identity. Circulated by Père Lammens, they had potential amongst Christians,

Druzes, and Shi'as alike but not amongst the Sunnis: this ideology 'was considered hardly complimentary... to the Sunni Muslims... who were presumed to have been, historically, the persecutors and oppressors.'

From "Lebanon: The Two Republics,"  
in: *The Politics of Multinational States*,

edited by Don MacIver, Palgrave  
Macmillan, 1999, p. 144.

(9) In November 2016, the Lebanese Armed Forces began building a wall to enclose Ain el-Helwe refugee camp. Despite some protests, the Lebanese authorities proceeded with this task, which ultimately transformed Ain el-Helwe into something of a ghetto.

## Keep It Quiet...

# Lebanon's Refugee Crisis through a Sectarian Lens

April 2017

On March 10, 2017, a regional television channel aired an interview with Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi, the head of Lebanon's Maronite Church. While responding to a question about his ambiguity toward Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, Al-Rahi stated, seemingly extemporaneously, "The Palestinians are the ones who stirred the war against the Lebanese army in 1975 in Lebanon, and as a result we went through a civil war."<sup>(1)</sup> As might be expected, his statement raised some ire. In fact, it precipitated a brief debate between those who opposed the patriarch's opinion and those who supported it. When that debate began to wane,

it was replaced with one focused on another, fresh group of "refugees" that had begun arriving in Lebanon a few years before.<sup>(2)</sup>

Another "incident" occurred several weeks later. Just as Lebanon's prime minister was preparing to attend the "Supporting Syria and the Region" conference in Brussels (coordinated by the European Union), he reportedly disclosed to a group of "foreign media correspondents in Beirut" that Lebanon was at the "point of collapse." He also expressed concern that the 1.5 million Syrians in Lebanon could cause strife between the refugees and their Lebanese hosts.<sup>(3)</sup>

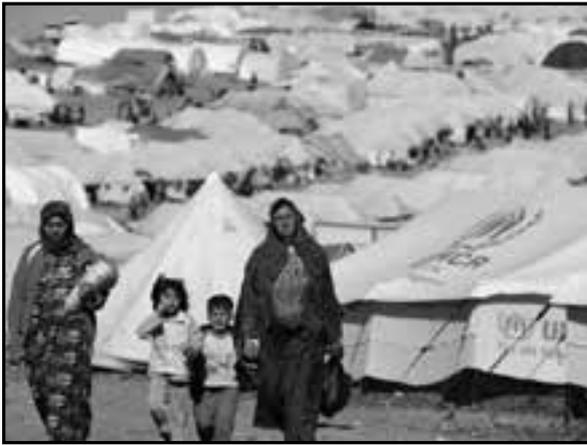
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<sup>(1)</sup> Sky News Arabia interview broadcast March 10, 2017.

<sup>(2)</sup> The sidebar, "Refugees" vs. "Displaced" on page 23 provides further information.

<sup>(3)</sup> *An-Nahar*. April 1, 2017. <http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/annahar-20170401-01,08.pdf>

Also, "Lebanon near 'breaking point' over Syrian refugee crisis: PM Hariri," <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-lebanon-idUSKBN1722JM>



From left to right, three images of the Syrian, Palestinian and Armenian asylum eras in Lebanon.

Then, somewhere between Patriarch Al-Rahi's spontaneous observation (which remains controversial among the Lebanese) and the prime minister's dire warning, Lebanon's minister of tourism (a man of Armenian descent who is thus affiliated with a refugee community that once sought shelter in Lebanon) also spoke seemingly out of turn. While criticizing Turkey, the minister angered some Lebanese by implying that he favored his loyalty to Armenia over his Lebanese nationality.<sup>(4)</sup>

One need not be a meticulous observer of Lebanese affairs to encounter, almost on a daily basis, disclosures

that approximate at least one of the three instances mentioned previously. After all, many such declarations express, sometimes quite unintentionally, *the centrality of the very notion of "asylum" in Lebanese life—past, present and most likely in the future.* A vital pillar (whether hypothetical or historical) that supports the idea of "inventing Lebanon" holds that at some time in the past, the "Lebanese" (more precisely the group related to geographical Lebanon) also sought asylum in the country. Some did so because of prejudice directed toward them in their countries of origin, while others were persecuted for a variety of reasons until they feared for their lives.<sup>(5)</sup> It must be noted, however, that the notion

<sup>(4)</sup> Cf. <http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/Al-Jareeda-20170401-21.pdf>

<sup>(5)</sup> Firro, Kais. *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State Under the Mandate*, I.B. Tauris, 2002.



and practice of asylum has not only had a bearing on Lebanon's history and founding mythology,

but also in determining and shaping Lebanese national pride. Almost to an individual, the Lebanese describe their country as a mosaic of religions and sects, a diversity-oriented attitude that has helped instill another essential Lebanese quality: the ability—periodically of course—to "coexist peacefully."

From the time Lebanon first appeared as a discrete country—and despite its emergence as a destination for the disenfranchised and persecuted—the issue of asylum has been associated inextricably with "sectarianism." Any latter day analysis that fails to disclose the important role played by sectarianism will also have failed to recognize the "bigger picture" in Lebanon. In decree No. 60, which was issued March 13, 1926, Lebanon's "historical sects" were listed. Chief

### "Refugees" vs. "Displaced"

*On December 15, 2014, Lebanon and the UN launched the first "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan." The plan and follow-up actions still being taken today are prefaced by the equivalent of a disclaimer titled "Terminology in the LCRP," to which the following information relates:*

“ Lebanon is not a State Party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and has not signed its 1967 Protocol. Lebanon implements some provisions of the Convention on a voluntary basis and considers that granting refugee status to individuals lies within its margin of discretion. The Government of Lebanon stresses on all occasions its longstanding position reaffirming that Lebanon is neither a country of asylum, nor a final destination for refugees, let alone a country of resettlement. Lebanon considers that it is being subjected to a situation of mass influx and reserves the right to take measures aligning with international law and practice in such situations. The Government of Lebanon refers to individuals who fled from Syria to Lebanon after March 2011 as "displaced."

The United Nations characterizes the flight of civilians from Syria as a refugee movement, and considers that most of these Syrians are seeking international protection and are likely to meet the refugee definition.

•  
Therefore, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan uses the following terminologies to refer to persons who have fled from Syria after March 2011:

- (1) "persons displaced from Syria,"
- (2) "persons registered with UNHCR as refugees," and
- (3) "de facto refugees."

[Number] 1 can, depending on context, include Palestine refugees from Syria and Lebanese returnees as well as registered and unregistered Syrian nationals, while [numbers] 2 and 3 refer exclusively to Syrian nationals who are registered with UNHCR or seeking registration.



among them were the Armenians, who achieved their "historical status" due to contingencies associated with World War I. This official

action underscores the enduring presence of a naive bias, which clearly has demonstrated a unique ability to emplace obstacles

### Old Lebanese vs. New Lebanese!

**On May 6, 1926, the newly constituted Lebanese parliament met to discuss a draft law on municipalities submitted by the government. The following is an excerpt of the official minutes of the discussions which took place that day.**

“ Mr. [Ibrahim] al-Munzer asked whether the refugees were categorized in the census according to their nationality or their religious affiliation.

The government's representative [Salim Bey Takla] answered that they were categorized according to their religious affiliation. In other words, they emerged as new sects. For example, with Greek Orthodox already in the country, there are now Armenian Orthodox as well. The reason the government categorized them as such in the census is because of its fear that they would take over the "seats" [within municipalities] that had been earmarked for the old Lebanese. If the government's suggestion is accepted, then each sect preserves its seats.

Dr. [Jamil] Talhouk said that, according to the text [submitted by the government], they are refugees...and since a refugee is not a national, he does not enjoy the rights of a national.

According to the government representative, they became citizens via the Lausanne Treaty.

Sheikh Yousef el-Khazen said that it would be better if they were categorized in the census according to their nationality before they receive the right to be elected.

The government representative stated that all residents of the countries split from Turkey [who found themselves in Lebanon] received Lebanese citizenship

in accordance with the terms specified in the Lausanne Treaty.

According to Sheikh [Yousef] el-Khazen, the Lausanne Treaty mentions those residing in the countries split from Turkey. Lebanon did not separate from Turkey according to that Treaty.

The government representative said that he does not want to discuss the Lausanne Treaty, but prefers to discuss the government's draft law. He believes this law, as it is formulated, preserves the seats of each sect within the municipalities.

Dr. [Jamil] Talhouk said that regardless of how ambiguous the issue may be, the government should give the parliament sufficient time to discuss it.

According to Mr. Shibl Dammous, arguing about the rights of refugees who acquire [Lebanese] citizenship does not obviate the fact that they became Lebanese because the countries that have the power to grant citizenship have given them [Lebanese] citizenship. As such, the matter is out of our hands now. Thus, we must pass the government's bill to prevent these refugees from gaining the chance to capture the seats that were and still are [reserved] for the Lebanese.

[Kheir ed-Dinn Bey] Adra said that it is unjust to give the Armenians the same rights as the Lebanese.

[Dr. Massoud] Yunis asked why they are given the right to municipal seats but are denied the right to have a seat in parliament. ”

on the path of Lebanese life, particularly in the society's ongoing debate over how their coexistence can be weakened. Examples of such naiveté abound, and some people claim that even the simple mention of their existence can inflame "sectarian" tensions that pose a direct threat to "civil peace" in the country. That notwithstanding, it is always beneficial to recall that Lebanon's reluctance to welcome and assimilate newcomers is not indicative of a demeanor based on systematic mechanisms. Rather, the attitude is *selective* in nature and origin.

In parallel with Lebanon's institution as a sovereign state, Armenian refugees (among others) were given Lebanese nationality. Similarly, thousands of Christian (and other wealthy) Palestinians also received Lebanese citizenship during the 1950s and 1960s. As they did, their Palestinian status changed instantly from "enemy" (a general

characterization applied to Palestinians by certain civil war-era Lebanese militias) to "Lebanese nationals." Of course, it could be argued that these two examples are archaic and no longer apply to "21st century Lebanon." Thus, a closer look at recent events in the country is necessary to freshen this inclination toward selectivity.

In March 2015, just a few months after the "Zero Refugees" policy had been adopted by Lebanese authorities, an exception was granted by those same officials to welcome a number of Assyrian families from Hassakeh.<sup>(6)</sup> In the final months of that year, the United Nations brokered the exchange of several hundred wounded fighters and their families between the predominantly Sunni area of Zabadani (just outside Damascus) and the Shia areas of Kifrya and Foua (Idlib, northern Syria). Ultimately, more than 100 people from Zabadani arrived in Turkey and over 300 from Kifrya and Foua

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<sup>(6)</sup> Cf. <http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/si-almustaqbal-20150301-01,18.pdf> and <http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/misc-annahar-20150304-05.pdf>

# حين كانت الكنائس تطلب تجنيسهم

سمح بمرور عملية التجنيس يوماً وسياستياً تلك المرحلة أدركوا أن زيادة عدد المسيحيين في لبنان سيكون لهم صلاحياتهم في نقل مسؤولياتهم وهو ليس له نفع عن أبناء الطائفة الاثنية في المنطقة الذين يرغبون التحول إلى مغلوب على امرهم في

الاستقلال أدى دوراً أساسياً لصلحة تجنيس الفلسطينيين المسيحيين، وخصوصاً من بينهم أهالي القرى ذات الغالبية السكانية المسيحية مثل صفد والناصرة وغيرها. يوضح الباحث في الشأن الفلسطيني صفير أبو فخر أن «القلق المسيحي في لبنان الخمسينيات

إختلال التعداد الديموغرافي» ولكن عن أي فلسطينيين نتحدث؟ وهل تم ذلك بطلب من اللاجئين أنفسهم أم كيفاً بفاجيء الباحث بان تجنيس هؤلاء أياها جرى بناء على طلبات قدمتها الكنائس التي لجأ إليها الفلسطينيون المسيحيون يومذاك بعد نزوحهم السري إلى لبنان إثر

مثل وضع اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في لبنان، زعم أنه «ليس بلد لجوء» مادة دسمة للسياسيين يلجأون إليها عندما «تتلخبط» الحسابات في تقاسم المكاسب، استناداً إلى عدد اللبنانيين السكليين في لبنان كان

The title of this June 29, 2010 *al-Akhbar* article reads, "Once upon a Time, [Lebanon's] Churches Wanted [Palestinian Christians] To Receive Lebanese Citizenship."

arrived in Lebanon. Of note, there is no evidence that anyone from that latter group has ever departed Lebanon....<sup>(7)</sup>

These recent developments may seem burdensome to some Lebanese who are already confused about agreements regarding their sect-based "right" to revisit the history of asylum in Lebanon. After all, many of us might wonder who would dare analyze the stances that have been instituted by the country after peering at life through a "sectarian lens." These same people might

reflect on the essential role sectarianism has played in preventing the Lebanese State from establishing an effective and rational asylum policy rather than one that is motivated by security considerations and/or "begs for international aid." Considering the many other problems Lebanon is facing, such an exercise may include a genuinely therapeutic dimension, especially compared to the intransigence associated with choosing to remain in denial over the very nature and value of asylum.

<sup>(7)</sup> For an extensive analysis of this exchange, see: "The Zabadani-Kefraya/Foua Evacuations – Linking the Capitals of 'Resistance.'" <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/629>

# Ain el-Helwe Redux: What's Still Palestinian in Those Refugee Camps?

June 2017

The Ain el-Helwe Palestinian refugee camp, seen by its residents as the locus of the "Palestinian diaspora," lies to the east of Saida, some 45 kilometers south of Beirut. Between April 7 and 11, 2017, the camp was home to some of the most violent clashes since the Lebanese civil war ended more than 25 years ago. The simplest way to explain the significance of those events is by referring to a headline run at the time by *al-Akhbar* newspaper, which characterized the clashes as "The Second Battle of Abra."<sup>(1)</sup> The gravity of that comparison is evident, since it refers to the LAF's June 2013 assault on the Saida-based mosque-headquarters of Lebanese Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir and his group, situated relatively close to

Ain el-Helwe.<sup>(2)</sup> Of note, "the first battle of Abra" wrecked al-Assir, his headquarters and his organization, and forced him to seek refuge in Ain el-Helwe (he was ultimately captured at Beirut–Rafic Hariri International Airport while trying to flee the country).

As a preamble, it is necessary to consult the timeline of events from last April. In early March 2017, a decision coordinated by the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority, Hamas and other smaller Palestinian entities (not for the first time, but on this occasion with substantial, official "chaperoning" by Lebanese authorities) was made to form a "Joint (Palestinian) Security Force" (JSF), which would be tasked with maintaining the camp's

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<sup>(1)</sup> *Al-Akhbar*. April 11, 2017.

<sup>(2)</sup> Several investigative reports suggested cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah in that military operation. The most interesting of these is "Who fired the first shot?" broadcast in March 2017 by al-Jazeera TV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqzyITXnnCU>

order and security.<sup>(3)</sup> Before proceeding, it may also be helpful to remind readers that "Lebanese authorities" are by no means restricted to State-oriented institutions. By extension, since antagonism between the Lebanese state and its primary non-state actor (Hezbollah) is fading quickly, the concept of "Lebanese authorities" must be taken with a grain of salt....<sup>(4)</sup>

As the JSF began its deployment, it was stopped after being fired upon by the so-called "Bilal Badr group," which bears the name of its founder. Notably, the group is neither particularly large, nor does it have a clear structure or agenda. Moreover, it is referred to intermittently as "Islamist," "mercenary" or "terrorist" in nature. Soon enough, the clash intensified into an armed standoff, and while the viciousness of the confrontation certainly captured the attention

of many observers, the vehemence displayed in the associated verbal exchanges was proportional in nature...at least during the initial phases.

In the first two days of clashes, statements published by the JSF's political mouthpieces insisted that the operation was "conclusive" and would not be stopped until the "phenomenon of Bilal Badr had been ended."<sup>(5)</sup> As time passed, however, that rhetoric was diluted, and an ad hoc cease-fire was eventually brokered to stop the clashes. The most interesting feature of that agreement was its stipulation that Bilal Badr would no longer lurk in the camp's alleyways! In true Lebanese style, therefore, the entire event was ended by brushing its dust under the carpet.<sup>(6)</sup>

This fiasco of a military engagement, however, cannot overshadow the

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<sup>(3)</sup> For information about the JSF, see A. Ayyash's "The constitution of the Joint Security Force in Ain el-Helwe," published by *an-Nahar* on March 5, 2017.

<sup>(4)</sup> See "Revisiting the purported antagonism between Hezbollah and the Lebanese State." *ShiaWatch*. June 2017. <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/650>

<sup>(5)</sup> Consider the various statements made on April 8, 2017, the most vocal of which was given by Mounir Makdah, the head of the so-called "Palestinian National Security," who lauded the "conclusiveness" of the operation.

<sup>(6)</sup> See, for instance, "The battle is over in Ain el-Helwe...Who Won?" *An-Nahar*. April 14, 2017.



As many observers note, despite the fighting that periodically strikes Ain el-Helwe, the camp has been subjected to extreme security measures for many years. Taking those measures a step further, construction of a fence to cordon off the area in earnest began last fall....

dynamic that enabled it to surface. In fact, the April 2017 clashes were preceded by a string of smaller skirmishes. For instance, tensions flared when construction began in fall 2016 on a wall and fence project just outside the camp.<sup>(7)</sup> Concurrent with those daily clashes, a steady number of individuals "wanted" by the Lebanese security forces surrendered in the hope of sorting out their cases. Additionally, several unprecedented actions also occurred. In September 2016, an LAF intelligence team captured a purported terrorist who had been residing in the camp. That development

was unique, as the Lebanese security forces typically refrain from operating within the camps.<sup>(8)</sup> Equally novel was that information was being disclosed to the Lebanese authorities concerning the training of Fatah combatants in various Lebanese camps.<sup>(9)</sup> Finally, statements made by Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during his visit to Lebanon in February 2017 seemed to suggest that the LAF should not only enter, but also take charge of the camps' security.

The events that reached

<sup>(7)</sup> A *Daily Star* article published November 21, 2016, "Construction of wall around Ain el-Helwe in full swing," described the early stages of that project.

<sup>(8)</sup> See, for instance, "Imad Akl Caught by the LAF." *Al-Akhbar*. September 22, 2016.

<sup>(9)</sup> See Ridwan Akil's article, "Fatah Fighters trained in Rashidiyyeh with the knowledge of Lebanese Authorities," published by *an-Nahar* on March 6, 2017.

their apex in Ain el-Helwe last April are yet another flagrant example of what can surely be described as the "Lebanonization" that has encompassed Ain el-Helwe and other Palestinian refugee camps in the last several decades. Of course, the notion of *Lebanonization* can best be understood by reviewing its semantic layers. The first and most obvious layer refers to the role played by the Lebanese authorities in the April 2017 clashes. In one case, Palestinian fighters equipped with arms and ammunition were transferred from camps in Tyre to Ain el-Helwe under Lebanese supervision.<sup>(10)</sup> Yet, other features of *Lebanonization* must also be considered. Taking the example a step further, it can be asserted that Lebanese authorities are "managing" Palestinian infighting to impose their will on the camps, to include their unique concepts for camp and resident security.<sup>(11)</sup>

Today, some 51 years following the establishment of Palestinian refugee camps on Lebanese soil (Ain el-Helwe was among the first), we must ask ourselves a relatively simple question: what particularly Palestinian aspect remains present in those camps? A logical response would likely be prefaced by three preparatory questions. First, isn't it true that several thousand Palestinians still reside in those camps? Second, hasn't the number of Palestinian organizations that exert and compete for influence in those camps increased in tandem with the emergence and diversification of Islamic factions in the camps? And finally, hasn't the issue of "Palestinian weaponry" escaped resolution?

Despite the fact that the answer to all three of those preparatory questions is an emphatic and immediate yes, the original question, *what's*

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<sup>(10)</sup> See, for instance, "Ain el-Helwe moves towards a full conclusion of the battle: more troops moved in." *LebanonDebate*. April 8, 2017. <http://www.lebanondebate.com/news/325525>

<sup>(11)</sup> Beyond open-source resources related to the extent of this "managerial approach," UMAM D&R interviewed several social and human rights activists involved with the discord in the camp. They described most of the camp's key political and military figures as simply implementing the will and policies advanced by the various Lebanese security apparatuses.

*still "Palestinian" in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps,"* remains unanswered. At this point, we are faced with a conceptual mismatch, especially since our chief concern is to produce a qualitative rather than a quantitative assessment. Since we must also consider the evolutionary processes that have affected those camps, the correct answer is that *not much remains of the original Palestinian influence in those camps.*

Based on today's penchant for political correctness, the 1982 Israeli invasion, the 1985 Tripoli War (that forced Yasser Arafat and the PLO out of Lebanon) and the "War of the Camps" (1985-1988) must be seen as chapters in the civil war. More often than not, however, political correctness fails to produce a shortcut to the "truth." Indeed, the simple act of considering the aforementioned events as chapters of the Lebanese civil war effectively strips the Palestinians of the part they played in those engagements. Thus, the *Lebanonization* of these Palestinian refugee

camps has made them auxiliary battlefields, simple *geographic extensions* of the Lebanese civil war. Along with the lengthy struggle for power and influence in Lebanon, the camps rode the very same waves of turmoil that all but destroyed the country. Over time, the scope of some of those camps was reduced; other camps were simply destroyed.

Beyond the civil war-era *Lebanonization* described previously, Palestinian camps also experienced that process during the era of Syrian tutelage, a period that imposed a certain degree of *equality* among the Lebanese and Palestinians. But when Syria's forces finally left Lebanon in 2005, that equality was altered *in favor of the Lebanese*, who shared little of their collective relief with their Palestinian counterparts. Over time, it seems Lebanese decision makers—despite their disagreement over various policy and ideological issues—agreed that the Palestinian camps should remain as they were following the civil war and

during the period of Syrian tutelage.

Perhaps the most concrete example of this propensity can be seen by examining the Nahr al-Bared camp—though the reality of "the war" that rocked Nahr al-Bared in 2007 is becoming increasingly ambiguous over time.<sup>(12)</sup> But while we can choose to ignore the "historical truth" about that war, we cannot do the same where its legacy is concerned. Using that frame of reference, it is very telling that it took a Lebanese minister 10 years following the end of that war to "realize" that reconstruction of *Nahr al-Bared* would not only reaffirm the refusal to obliterate the Palestinian national identity, but would also, by asserting a national position, align Lebanon with Palestinians' right to return to their homeland....<sup>(13)</sup>

By understanding that the minister believes that refugee camps are a fundamental aspect of a

resilient Palestinian national identity and a reaffirmation of their right to return (a questionable statement in and of itself), we can deduce that this decade-delayed reconstruction process is an actual representation of the consistently poor management of the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon—to say nothing of Palestinian-Lebanese relations before, during and after the various wars.

Yet, it appears this same "paradoxical Lebanon," beset and seemingly haunted by the Ain el-Helwe camp, is striving to "forget" the need to commit to reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared. Further, it seems this state-level vacillation (and confusion) is a common factor in the general context of the Lebanese management of Lebanese and Palestinian affairs.

Just as this constant vacillation continues to dominate the Palestinian diaspora, it also

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<sup>(12)</sup> As part of the Saudi/Qatari media war, *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* (the semi-official Saudi pan-Arab daily) published a lengthy report on June 11, 2017 that accused Qatar of having helped fund the terrorist group that confronted the LAF in Nahr al-Bared in 2007.

<sup>(13)</sup> See statements made by the Lebanese Minister of Displaced following his June 8, 2017 visit to Nahr al-Bared with the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon.

seems to permeate the Syrian diaspora. Today, one of the most pervasive notions related to refugees in Lebanon is that the huge number of displaced Syrians and Palestinians in Lebanon represent a fundamental threat to the "Lebanese entity." In reality, however, that same Lebanese entity

is plagued by never-ending internal conflicts among the Lebanese themselves. Ultimately, that reality leads us to conclude that unless dramatic changes take place in policies and practices, creeping *Lebanonization*, in its worst sense, indeed awaits Syrian asylum seekers in Lebanon!

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# Weighing "National Unity" against Human Rights **Policing Lebanon's Syrian Refugees**

July 2017

**O**n June 30, 2017, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) "Directorate of Orientation" published the following statement (reproduced verbatim):

*Today at dawn, while an army force was searching el Nour Syrian refugee camp in Ersal, a suicide bomber blew himself up using an explosive belt in one of the raiding patrols, leading to his death and the light injury of 3 soldiers. Later on, 3 other suicide bombers blew themselves up with no injuries being registered among soldiers. Moreover, the terrorists detonated a bomb [and] while army forces confiscated 4 bombs set for detonation,*

*the military expert worked on detonating them in place. Furthermore, while another army force was performing a search operation in el Qaariya Syrian refugee camp in the same region, a terrorist blew himself up using an explosive belt with no injuries being registered among soldiers. Moreover, another terrorist threw a grenade towards a patrol, leading to the light injury of 4 soldiers.<sup>(1)</sup>*

Clearly, these risky actions should have drawn praise from everyone, not just the Lebanese people. After all, the LAF "neutralized" several individuals who would otherwise have posed

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<sup>(1)</sup> <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/executing-vast-raid-operation-syrian-refugees-camps-ersal-and-death-several-terrorists>

a danger to the refugee community within which they were allegedly hiding, to the host community in Lebanon, to Lebanon per se and perhaps to other countries to which these individuals might have traveled. But when the entire situation devolved into a fiasco, the LAF's respect for human rights was called into question. Beyond a collection of photographs that captured the remarkably poor treatment of dozens of civilians rounded up during the two raids, the deaths *under ambiguous circumstances* of an indeterminate number of individuals being interrogated or awaiting questioning complicated the issue further.<sup>(2)</sup> Facing mounting pressure from human rights activists and organizations to explain those deaths, the LAF quickly published a patently unconvincing statement in which it attributed the deaths

to "chronicle diseases," an explanation that exacerbated rather than mitigated the disquieting situation.<sup>(3)</sup>

As these deadly "incidents" pitted the LAF against Syrian refugees who had sought solace in Lebanon, it soon became a topic of debate among the Lebanese themselves. Sadly, the presumed victims of the incident were forgotten nearly as quickly as was the point of the debate itself. Specifically, since the threat of terrorism looms these days from every direction, *is it politically acceptable to hold the institution responsible for the country's protection accountable for the actions it takes while providing that security?* To develop a better appreciation of this debate, we should probably add that the criticism being heaped on the LAF was not restricted to a few jousting matches on social media

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<sup>(2)</sup> See: "Syrian refugees 'tortured' during Lebanese military raid on Aarsal camps," *The New Arab*, July 1, 2017. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/7/1/syrian-refugees-tortured-during-lebanese-military-raid-on-camp>

<sup>(3)</sup> See: "Lebanese army says four detainees died from illness," Reuters, July 4, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-refugees/lebanese-army-says-four-detainees-died-from-illness-idUSKBN19P291>



A powerful photograph taken following the June 30, 2017 raid showing two Lebanese soldiers standing guard over a number of handcuffed refugees lying face down in the blistering sun.

sites. Rather, it prompted calls for demonstrations and counter demonstrations, a situation that ultimately convinced Lebanon's interior ministry to prohibit street-based actions of any kind on the day the demonstrations were to be held.<sup>(4)</sup> The least we can write about the angry debate that followed the *incidents* mentioned above is that it disclosed an ongoing Lebanese feud over the role the LAF plays in policing the country, to include its Lebanese *and* non-

Lebanese residents—enmity fueled very effectively by a historical precedent. On the one side, consider a well-worn image from the past in which a single, Lebanese man in uniform is humiliatingly imposing order on an entire Palestinian refugee camp. From the other side, recall the image of a Lebanese man in uniform being stopped and humiliated at a Fedayeen checkpoint.<sup>(5)</sup>

It can always be asserted that Syrian refugees in

<sup>(4)</sup> See: "Lebanon bans all protests after calls for demonstrations by Syrian activists," *The National*, July 17, 2017.

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/lebanon-bans-all-protests-after-calls-for-demonstrations-by-syrian-activists-1.609558>

<sup>(5)</sup> These two themes are representative of the leitmotifs conveyed in literature that explains the state of pre-civil war Lebanese-Palestinian relations.

Lebanon are completely unassociated with these stories, but the large portion of the Lebanese population that considers those Syrians "unwelcomed guests" does not share that perception. By extension, the criteria used to welcome, proffer citizenship to or discard refugees onto the country's ever-growing "human slag heap" is also an issue with which neither today's Syrian "guests" nor their Palestinian predecessors were involved.

Actually, refugee "processing" is quite a unique affair in this country. Upon their arrival in Lebanon, refugees of any origin are tossed into Lebanon's confessional/sectarian sorting machine and then labeled according to the roles they could eventually play within the scope of Lebanese competition and its balance of power. Of course, other factors are involved in categorizing these guests as "welcome" or "unwelcome" (especially economic considerations), and where such guests are concerned,

the roles played by each of Lebanon's major communities have changed according to their specific interests and relative strength compared to other communities. All told, however, the attitude behind these approaches remains consistent in Lebanese politics.

Thus, the debate over the LAF's accountability for its actions should be understood and assessed only after developing an appreciation for this complex and enduring context rather than restricting it to the tight framework of respect or disrespect for human rights. Stated otherwise, prevailing opinions about holding the LAF accountable for, or exempting it from such accountability are related directly to that context. Demonstrably, today's preferred course in Lebanon includes advocating—under the guise of unanimity—an especially restrictive attitude toward refugees in general (particularly *Syrian* refugees) and extolling a quasi-worshipful respect for military

might, in both its state (LAF) and non-state (Hezbollah) forms. Under these conditions, it is little wonder that *ranger boots* have become the

symbol of national pride—a symbol which, by the way, has proven to be especially well suited to trampling down human rights....

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# Demonizing Lebanon's Syrian Refugees Will More Security Quiet Lebanon's Traumatized Memory?

August 2017

On January 9, 2015, Lebanon's (now defunct) *as-Safir* newspaper published an editorial written by a very informed political analyst. Titled "What Derbas Saw In [His] Dream and How He Interpreted It," the "Derbas" referenced was none other than Rashid Derbas, who served as Lebanon's Minister of Social Affairs from February 2014 – December 2016. The article describes a nightmare Derbas once had:

*I was at home with my wife, when a lot of people—men, women and children—suddenly burst inside and demanded a place to sleep. They commandeered our bedroom, so I slept in my child's cradle. Afterward, [I remember] my wife walking me downstairs,*

*where I found myself in a tent. A loud voice shouted suddenly, "Tents forbidden!"*

Derbas goes on to explain that the nightmare actually coincided with the arrival in Lebanon of Syrian refugees in numbers that exceeded all expectations. Yet, this strangely metaphoric nightmare is neither a unique nor an unprecedented reflection of the prevailing Lebanese mood regarding Syrian asylum. Numerous signs of every shape and size disclose this sense of Lebanese dismay. Of course, statements by Lebanese politicians head the list, but those made by clerics (particularly the Christians among them) are also plentiful. But we cannot disregard the weight and

significance of other, related forms of expression, such as a banner displayed within a municipality that warns its Syrian residents not to circulate after a certain hour, disparaging tweets and Facebook posts in Arabic and other languages, and even videos being circulated online that show Syrians being "proudly" humiliated. Clearly, the "prevailing Lebanese mood" described above is evolving quite literally into public opinion. Unfortunately, this emerging public opinion is not being subjected to harsh criticism, nor is it being countered logically. Rather, it is being fed daily by a host of pseudoscientific figures seeking to decry the high cost of Syrian asylum vis-à-vis damaging Lebanon's already inefficient infrastructure, increasing Lebanese joblessness or exacerbating the country's overall rate of negative growth.

Undeniably, the costs of Syrian asylum in Lebanon are high, and it has indeed produced a number of related problems for both the host and refugee

communities. However, it is a blatant misconception to blame all of Lebanon's ills on Syrian asylum, and it is inappropriate not to question how some Lebanese contributed to this situation by dismissing Syrians from their homes to show support for the Assad regime. Similarly, it would be improper to fail to recognize the assistance provided to Lebanon by the international community to help it deal with the issue of Syrian asylum by stabilizing the situation within the country and improving local services in some rural areas—initiatives the Lebanese state has never considered! In other words, this oppositional and sometimes xenophobic public opinion toward Syrian refugees is not a "natural byproduct" of the ongoing situation. Instead, it can be characterized as something that approximates a "purpose-built byproduct."

If one considers this public opinion carefully and learns how it evolved into its present form, it will become obvious that trends in Lebanese

public opinion have changed according to the developing situation in Syria. Lebanese public opinion toward Syrian refugees became increasingly aggressive as the popular uprising within Syria degenerated into a civil war that transformed Syrian soil into a stage for regional and international confrontation. Thus, as the situation in Syria became ever more complex and removal of the Assad regime seemed increasingly farfetched,

Syrians in Lebanon were no longer welcome, especially in areas that had originally greeted them warmly or were at least indifferent to their sudden presence. As stated above, this progressive tendency toward "unwelcoming" not



By Justin Terrell

"I was at home with my wife, when a lot of people—men, women and children—suddenly burst inside and demanded a place to sleep."

only ignored the situation that forced Syrians to abandon their homes and seek shelter in Lebanon, but also prompted a gradual acceptance of Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime. Again, none of this occurred spontaneously!

A landmark "accomplishment" in the process of depicting the Syrian refugees as "squatters" can be found in the debate that coincided with the arrival of the initial waves of refugees and revolved around whether to host them in camps.

Whether we like it or not, in Lebanon, the word *camps* represents the mother lode of evils, specifically, the long-lasting and definitive period of Palestinian asylum in the country. "Camps" evoke memories of areas within the state that were not under its control. In short, the word is "code" for the country's civil war period and the cascade of painful images it still summons. Ultimately, the establishment of "refugee camps" is an enduring example of collective Lebanese trauma. Further scrutinizing the word "camps" will reveal that it gained other, more terrifying meanings, highlighted by fears about demographic imbalance causing seismic shifts in the sect-defined Lebanese strata. Some people saw these newly added numbers of refugees

as an advantage that could be used viciously by some Lebanese to fight others. That outcome, of course, would only open the door to further waves of violence....

Without delving further into the issue of camps, the Syrians who sought refuge in Lebanon were, in many ways, left to their own devices once they arrived. Rather than establishing a certain number of camps to house them, the state turned a blind eye toward the situation. Today, these refugees are spread throughout more than 1,000 unofficial settlements of various sizes within the country. Thus, "camp phobia" was summoned forth within the country to prevent the revival of a trauma that has never been addressed adequately by the Lebanese. This phobia is expressed routinely through the various signs mentioned above, but there is also more to the story. Most of these Syrian refugees are Sunni, and thus belong to the same community as the al-Qaida and Islamic State militants who sow fear whenever and

wherever they can. Slowly but surely, Lebanon's camp phobia deteriorated into a mix of vague anti-Syrian prejudices and a trendy fear of terrorists and terrorism.

The predictable outcome of this systematic demonization of camps (hotbeds of evil) and refugees (eventual terrorists) is an overreliance on "security measures," "preventive security operations" and other thematic activities. A very capable illustration of this is evident in the raids conducted by the Lebanese Armed Forces in June 2017.<sup>(1)</sup>

It may seem ambitious to link current Lebanese attitudes and responses to Syrian asylum to the unsorted legacy of Lebanon's civil war and the reciprocal distrust that characterizes Lebanese-Palestinian relations. However, since it does not seem likely that Syrian asylum in Lebanon will end anytime soon, it is becoming increasingly probable that more Lebanese phobias will surface, and that an even greater reliance on "security" will be needed to calm the traumatized Lebanese memory.

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<sup>(1)</sup> See "Policing Lebanon's Syrian Refugees" on p. 33, above.

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# Tawteen Ad Nauseam... Lebanon's Obsessive Fear of Refugee Settlement

October 2017

According to the statistics that appear on the official website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, some 28,300 people are being forced daily to abandon their homes to escape conflict or persecution. Those same statistics indicate that the number of homeless people on our planet now exceeds 65 million, a number the UN terms "unprecedented." It is therefore unsurprising that U.S. President Trump, in a speech he gave during the 72<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2017, highlighted this global issue. He concluded those remarks by stating

that the United States would "support recent agreements of the G20 nations that will seek to host refugees as close to their home countries as possible," and justified that intention by noting, "For the cost of resettling one refugee in the United States, we can assist more than 10 in their home region."<sup>(1)</sup> Although Trump made no direct reference to Lebanon or the Syrian refugee crisis in that speech, Lebanon's minister of foreign affairs tweeted afterward, "I say we can assist 100 in their country."

Though the minister's words probably failed to rob



<sup>(1)</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-revives-rhetoric-on-keeping-refugee-in-host-countries/4035754.html>

the U.S. president of any sleep, after the tweet was published some Lebanese media outlets gave it a political spin by asserting that Lebanon and the Lebanese had declined to "settle" refugees. In this case, it may seem that the Lebanese somehow misunderstood Trump's words, and while such misunderstandings indeed have precedents, very few can be attributed to problems in translation. Consider the May 2016 UN report titled "In Safety and Dignity: Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants."<sup>(2)</sup>

While Lebanon is indeed mentioned in that extensive report, its 38-page Arab language counterpart mentions Lebanon just once and then only when listing the countries involved with Syrian asylum in the context of the UN's 'response plans. Even though Lebanon was not particularly concerned about the conclusions and recommendations given

in that report, Lebanese officials soon began asserting that the UN was planning to resettle Syrian refugees in the country. Eventually, Lebanon accused the UN of conspiring against it, which prompted the UN to enlist the assistance of its resident coordinator, who declared that the organization had no intention of settling those refugees in Lebanon.

It may be convenient to attribute these Lebanese "settlement sensitivities" to some transient, populist reasons. After all, a number of Lebanese politicians today base their platforms on flaunting some national fear of settlement, particularly since such national level apprehension has often succeeded in mobilizing and manipulating public opinion—and not just during the civil war. Instead, a more accurate interpretation of the Lebanese response is that (1) "settlement" is assumed to be a clear concept and

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<sup>(2)</sup> [https://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/08/21-Apr\\_Refugees-and-Migrants-21-April-2016.pdf](https://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/08/21-Apr_Refugees-and-Migrants-21-April-2016.pdf)

(2) its political meaning can be distinguished from recent use.

In truth, "settlement" in the Lebanese political vernacular refers to a set of "bad intentions" focused against Lebanon by its enemies (who themselves may be bitter enemies), the result of which would force the Lebanese to consent legally to sharing their country, its resources and its citizenship with a group of refugees. Those plotting such an outcome would either be the group of refugees itself or a third party seeking to compel a refugee community to decline to return home. Thus, it could reasonably be stated that in the minds of the Lebanese, settlement indicates some form of coercion or duress, while



A 1970s-era example of public sentiment regarding "settlement" in Lebanon.

rejecting such an outcome equates somehow to heroism or resistance.

Where the nuance of heroism is concerned, the notion of war is present as well, since a chief contributor (and indeed a *casus belli*) to the Lebanese civil war was a dispute among the Lebanese over Palestinian asylum. In that case, Lebanese Christians resorted to

violence to underscore their "No to Settlement" attitude, while Lebanese Muslims employed it to advance their notion of "Preventing Division and Defending the Unity of Lebanon" (Lebanese Christians had threatened to "secede" from a Lebanon dominated by Muslims, whether they were Lebanese or Palestinian). Considering those harrowing fault lines, it is apparent why the preamble to the Taif Agreement, which officially ended civil war hostilities, sought to balance the rejection of "partitioning" (the Muslim slogan) with that of "settlement" (the Christian slogan).

In the early 1990s, the initial two-pronged rejection was not intended to close the door on those who called for "partition" or "resettlement," and in reality, the two Lebanese antagonist parties had become too weak to do anything but acquiesce. Moreover, it

facilitated creation of the Syrian tutelage authority, which was entrusted with managing Lebanese affairs in an effort to achieve the two goals of (1) appeasing (defeated) Christian public opinion by exploiting fears of "settlement" and thus diverting attention from the tutelage process itself, and (2) ensuring that by rejecting settlement, Lebanon would shun any further peace negotiations. By utilizing such a strategy, Syria protected itself from regional isolation.<sup>(3)</sup>

During the Syrian tutelage-era terms of Lebanese Presidents Elias Hrawi and Emile Lahoud, the philosophy of "settlement rejection" found its way into internal and external policy statements. Two actions were thus accomplished under the pretext of frustrating Palestinian refugees from feeling "at home" in Lebanon: (1) they were subjected to extraordinary pressures and (2) Lebanon was prevented

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<sup>(3)</sup> For further information, see: Mayer, Daniel. "Settlement as a Nickname for the Palestinian Existence in Lebanon after War (1989-2005)." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Summer 2010).

from participating actively in the peace negotiations.

During the period of Syrian tutelage, so-called Lebanese-Syrian solidarity prevailed over Lebanese national will and interests. Today, it is no coincidence that those who spread fear about settling Syrian refugees in Lebanon are the same individuals urging Lebanon's government to resume relations with the Bashar Assad regime in Syria

and begin discussing the return of Syrian refugees who abandoned their homes because of that regime. Clearly, the precedent for rejecting settlement of any type, coupled with the flagrant propagation of fear about settlement "plots" should today convince the Lebanese to respond cautiously to all attempts to reproduce that scenario where the Syrian refugees are concerned.

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# Praising Dual Allegiances **Lebanese Armenians** **Vs. The Rationalization Process**

December 2017

On December 3, 2017, during the run-up to Lebanon's spring 2018 parliamentary elections, the Tachnag Party (the most powerful political organization within the Lebanese Armenian community) announced that a dinner would be held at a Zahle (east Lebanon) restaurant. The rather vague title given to the event, "Re-uniting [sic] the Armenian families of Zahle," was chosen quite deliberately.

According to election pundits from all sides, Zahle is among the most complex electoral districts in Lebanon due not only to its tremendous political and confessional diversity, but also because it is almost impossible there to distinguish familial from partisan

allegiances. Consider the confessional affiliation of Zahle's seven parliamentary representatives: two must be Greek Catholics (Zahle is considered the capital of Levant Greek Catholicism), one Maronite, one Greek Orthodox, one Armenian Orthodox, one Sunni and one Shia Muslim! The Tachnag lost the Armenian seat of Zahle during the 2009 election (yielding it to a "non-Armenian" Lebanese Christian Party) because of that diversity, so it is considered vital to regain that Zahle seat and expunge the defeat it sees as indicative of a fissure in its representation of the Lebanese Armenian community.

The December 3, 2017 event in Zahle was chaired by

the head of the Armenian parliamentary bloc, who also serves as secretary-general of the Tachnag Party. Thus, since elections are simply battles fought with ballots, the secretary-general embraced Sun Tzu's axiom that "Invincibility lies in the defense; the possibility of victory in the attack":

Those who didn't attend this meeting will regret it [meaning the Armenians who belong to "non-Armenian" Christian parties].

Those who forget about their origins and ancestries have neither origins nor ancestries.

Those who do not remember their own martyrs cannot be respectful to Lebanon's martyrs....<sup>(1)</sup>

Notably, the expression "non-Armenian" was also used in that speech.

Prompted by the notion that *the end justifies the*

*means*, the need to mobilize the electorate emerged as justification for casting broad aspersions against the Armenians' political foes. Nevertheless, this speech by one of Lebanon's most senior Armenian authorities should be reviewed and understood as a discourse with far-reaching importance.

Simply put, Tachnag's secretary-general stated that an Armenian is untruthful where his allegiance to Lebanon is concerned *unless* he maintains (and asserts) his Armenian heritage. For that party official, at least, doing so is not especially difficult, particularly since the dual allegiances he maintains—an Armenian affiliated with the Armenian party he runs—are both safe and acceptable. In contrast, when an Armenian belongs to another party, *that* example of dual allegiance becomes a source of

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<sup>(1)</sup> A full report on this function, including excerpts from the speeches that were delivered, is available on the Lebanese National News Agency website at <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/317582/>

suspicion and distrust. From a practical perspective, the Tachnag secretary-general's approach is acceptable. His party is actually the strongest in the Armenian community, so it can exert significant influence over Lebanese politics. But how can he be so certain that the dual allegiance he advocates is tantamount to some form of political insurance? Actually, the origins of that assurance can be found in the first few lines of his speech:

As early as 1920, from the very first days of the *migration* into Lebanon during the years of the genocide perpetrated by the Ottomans, we chose Lebanon as a homeland, for Lebanon is a country of freedom and independence.

One may politely accept the politically correct notion that the Armenian "presence" in Lebanon is ancient.<sup>(2)</sup> After all, a group

of Catholic Armenians that arrived in Lebanon during the 18th century were aided by the Maronite Church (by definition a *sui juris* Eastern Catholic Church in full communion with the Catholic Church) and several feudal Maronites in their 1742 establishment of a convent in the heart of Kesrwan, which lies within Lebanon's "Maronite land." Nevertheless, acceptance of the foregoing notion also requires that two key issues be ignored: (1) that those Armenians were considered religious brethren but not fellow citizens and (2) that Lebanon did not exist as a state at that point in history. We can corroborate the preceding narrative with similar politeness by referring to the number of merchants who began flocking to Beirut around 1880 due to its pivotal role in regional trade. However, accepting that narrative also means that we must ignore the fact that those merchants were

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<sup>(2)</sup> The word "presence" was accepted by the Armenian community to avoid recalling the circumstances associated with the Armenian settlement in Lebanon and their short path to citizenship per the international agreements that followed WWI.



**الصلح قدمت للمدرسة الأرمنية تجهيزات  
كيشيشيان: مساهمتنا أساسية في إعمار لبنان**

عضوية الميثاق لدى الطوائف الأرمنية-ارثوذكسية رئيس مؤسسة الوليد الإنسانية الوزير السابق أمين الصلح خصامه، برافقها الأمين العام لندوب الطوائف الأرمنية، أوب، بارادونيان، مطرانية الأرمن الأرثوذكسي، والسفيرة العامة المطران شامس باتوسيان. ثم انتقل الجميع إلى المدرسة الأرمنية الواقعة في برج حمود، حيث جالت الصلح في الساحة بعد إنجاز أعمال البناء فيها ليوصلها مدرسة نموذجية بمواصفات حديثة ومتطورة تستعد لاستقبال أكثر من 1000 تلميذ من المراحل

الترابية كافة، ولتدبر سيناقون بها مع بداية السنة المقبلة. وشاركت الصلح في الاحتفال الذي أقيم في بلدة المدرسة بمناسبة انتهاء الأعمال، في حضور بھريرك الأرمن أرام الأول كيشيشيان والوزير السابقين زئور نظاريان والرئيس بوس صعب وشاهي برسوميان وأعيد الترحيب بمراد، وزير الأعمار اللبنانيين، وشخصيات اجتماعية وإعلامية وممثلين من الأمازيغ والجمعيات الأرمنية ورجال الدين، والأصدقاء والتلامذة. وانطلقت الصلح في المناسبات

مستعدة مؤسسة الوليد الإنسانية في تجهيز المدرسة بالمسم معلوماتي. وألقى المطروران كيشيشيان كلمة لقي فيها من ثناء وشكر عملاً وديناً وتعلقينها وتخليها بما تميز، ويشكل لبنان مركز الحدث هذا. لأن بلدنا العزيز هو القلبي، ونسوم لبنان برؤية جديدة لهذا الحدث وبعنده نعدنا خلفه. لا سيما في ما يتعلق بمشاورتنا المتواصلة الأرمنية في إعادة إعمار لبنان. هذا هو لبنان، ورحمنا لا تقتصر رأيتنا على حدوده وتكتنا موجهون في قلب لبنان. نحن

النظر مع البطاركة كيشيشيان والنايب جاد وديان

منشغلون بشأنهم وفي شكل كامل في إعادة الإعمار. "لقد سكرس والدكم الرئيس المعمورة الأرمنية"

رئيس الصلح، دوراً مهماً عندما قدمت إلى لبنان كخلاص بعد المعمورة الأرمنية

On the eve of the 2017 Armenian Christmas, a charitable foundation headed by former minister Mrs. Layla Solh (the daughter of Riad Solh, Lebanon's first prime minister following the country's independence) donated a substantial sum to the largest school in Lebanon run by the Greek Orthodox Armenian Church. In thanks, the Greek Orthodox patriarch mentioned clearly in his speech the positive role played by Riad Solh "when we [the Armenian community] arrived in Lebanon as refugees in the wake of the genocide." The picture accompanying the article, above, shows Mrs. Layla Solh seated between the patriarch and the Secretary General of the Tachnag party.

(1) Ottoman fellows and (2) belonged to the Orthodox Church—quite unlike those 18th-century Armenians!<sup>(3)</sup>

When subjected to such scrutiny, the Armenians that were the focus of the secretary-general's speech in Zahle did not belong to either category. Rather, driven by their fear of an unrelenting genocide, many Armenians fled to Lebanon during WWI seeking asylum. Thus, it is clear that the Tachnag secretary-general

was forced to choose his words very carefully. Had he used the word "asylum," his "dual allegiance" theory would have collapsed. According to him, Armenians sought shelter in Lebanon not as a matter of survival, but because they had chosen it as their new homeland!

But if Lebanon had been selected because of its "freedom and independence," then to which "freedom and independence" is he

<sup>(3)</sup> For an overview of the Lebanese Armenian community, see Scott Abramson's "Lebanese Armenians: A distinctive Community in the Armenian Diaspora and in Lebanese Society," *The Levantine Review*, Vol. 2, Nb. 2 (Winter 2013), available at: <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/levantine/article/download/5363/4822>

referring? We surmise that the Tachnag Party's secretary-general and other community leaders were acknowledging the freedom of having multiple allegiances while remaining independent as a community!

The narrative that informed the Zahle speech is certainly not shared by a large number of Lebanese Armenians. On the contrary, a great many members of

that community consider the nature of their large-scale asylum in Lebanon to be far more significant than was alluded to in the secretary-general's speech. Ultimately, that speech is yet another example of the larger Lebanese political discourse that seeks to continue hiding certain facts. After all, many people in Lebanon prefer not to be reminded that they are Lebanese "simply because of asylum...."