



In Lebanon, Palestinian refugee camps - like Shatila - are isolated communities, alienated from their surroundings. Palestinians. More than 60 percent of Palestinians live below the poverty line. Cramped into the notoriously lawless camps, they're banned from all but the most menial professions and barred from owning property.

Permanent Temporality

by David Brunetti

Palestinian refugees from Syria are arguably the most vulnerable sub-population affected by the Syrian crisis. Having been uprooted from their homes again, those now in Lebanon face a myriad of additional challenges.

Part of the 'Dreaming of Syria' series, in which David Brunetti documents the everyday lives of Syrian refugees across the region, 'Permanent Temporality' reflects on the precarious situation of Palestinian refugees from Syria have been surprised to discover that their Palestinian identity has become an influential factor in determining access to proper safety, shelter and work in Lebanon.



Lebanon looks at Shatila and only sees a growing number of refugees who refuse to leave, despite living in poverty.

It stands as a living example of why the Lebanese government has so far refused to formally welcome refugees from neighbouring Syria. It's a testament of what can happen to neglected refugees and the country that tries to ignore them.

In the collective memory of Palestinian refugees, the history of Shatila consists of nothing but sieges, destruction, and massacres. Forever suspended in a state of waiting, the camp and its residents are shackled to their past.

Shatila bursts at the seams. It's a dark, cramped and overcrowded concrete labyrinth. Narrow, unlit alleyways wind between buildings resembling crudely stacked concrete shacks. Water is dripping down the crumbling walls. Each level is built hastily as families grow and require more space.

Nobody wants to live here.

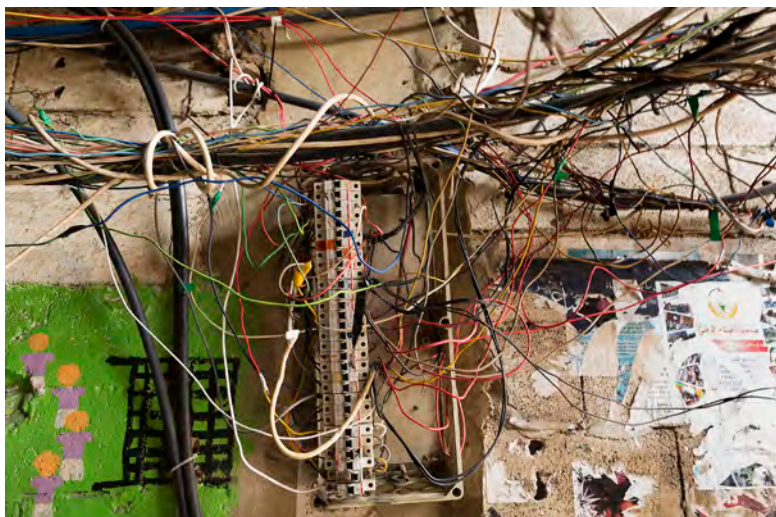
Life for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon means to be deprived of basic human rights and being discriminated against by government policies.

Yet tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees have fled violence, chaos and destitution in Syria to seek sanctuary in Lebanon. The vast majority are now living in dire poverty and are trapped in chronic insecurity.

In Shatila, I met with many Palestinian refugees from Syria who felt like they survived a second Nakba (the catastrophe): the destruction of Yarmouk in Damascus – the only home they had ever known.



The city doesn't provide any municipal services to the Shatila refugee camp. Everything here is organised communally. The camp has its own power generator, which will work only as long as there is fuel to run it. The air is heavy with the stench of uncollected rubbish and sewage. A tangled web of electrical cables is dangling above the narrow alleys connecting homes with power. The improvised electricity supply often cuts out for hours on end almost every day. The residents have to resort to small generators for electricity that fill the cramped homes with petrol fumes. The water running from the taps tastes salty. Drinking water must be bought.





In Syria, before the war, Palestinians enjoyed many more freedoms and a higher standard of living. Syria had a reputation for being a good refuge and though it did not grant citizenship to Palestinians, it never placed significant restrictions on them in regards to profession or property ownership. Now they're moving from Syria, where they faced the least discrimination within the Arab world, to a country where they are seen as a burden and are loathed by a large segment of the local population.

“The lives we established in Syria became our home.”

Adnan, a young father, sits on the ledge waiting for a job opportunity. He spoke fondly about Yarmouk, desperately about its destruction, and with hope that someday he might return to it. “I do not wish to live in Lebanon,” said Adnan. Before the war he had a nice apartment, a decent job and a safe place to raise his children. The war in Syria has torn his family apart and he now lives in Shatila – without his family. His home and business was destroyed when Yarmouk turned into a battlefield. He lost everything. Unable to provide for his young family, his wife took the children to live with her parents in Iraq. Adnan was distraught about the separation from his family. He hasn’t spoken to children in months.

The years of war in Syria have taken their toll, and Palestinians are caught between fronts. They have nothing to do with the current war in Syria, but it is affecting them. The conflict started to reach Palestinian communities and transformed

neighbourhoods like Yarmouk into the frontline. The opposition holding the centre of the camps and government forces surrounding them.

“We came from Syria where we heard nothing but bullets,” says Jameel who owned an internet café in Yarmouk. “When they destroyed my shop, we had to leave in a hurry. At night, in our pyjamas and my daughter wrapped up in blankets. It was horrible. There were bodies everywhere. Blood and human flesh was splattered all over the place. It was living nightmare.”

The people I met did not want to leave their homes. But the crisis worsened and armed groups moved into the camp and the government responded by attacking and besieging Yarmouk. With tight restrictions in place, none of the UN agencies could access Yarmouk or reach its trapped civilian population. The people began to die of starvation. It was and still is a war zone. It was imperative to leave.



Adnan has been separated from his family, "I had a life in Syria, we had everything. We felt like we belonged. But we've lost everything. And here, we are only shadows amongst others."

Arriving in Lebanon, Palestinians find themselves in an administrative morass.

Here, they are only numbers. Contested statistics. Ever increasing numbers of unwanted displaced persons – who have no rights or claims – threatening to destabilise an entire country. The numbers riddle the imagination. But every single one of these numbers is a person whose life was deeply touched by war. Their lives changed forever.

Lebanon would struggle to fulfil its obligations to protect Palestinians if it recognised them as refugees. Instead newly arrived Palestinians – much like their compatriots already resident in Lebanon – are labelled as “guests,” “migrants” or “displaced people.” They’re stateless. They have no rights. No protection. No hope. No expectations.

This fear of all refugees – of Syrians and Palestinians alike – the supposed threat they pose to stability should they be allowed residency is often aired by politicians and the media; it permeates Lebanese society.

Yet there is a stark difference between the administration of Syrian and Palestinians refugees. Though they've escape the same violence, when

they enter Lebanon they face entirely different sets of regulations.

Securing residency papers is one of the biggest problems for Palestinian refugees from Syria. They're only granted one-week visas that require constant renewal. Eventually, unable to pay visa renewal fees, faced with imprisonment or a perilous return to Syria, many seek protection in one of the Palestinian camps because Lebanese security services are not allowed to enter. Without a valid visa many are terrified to leave the camps.

They're also subject to the same longstanding discriminatory laws as Lebanese Palestinians that exclude them from accessing Lebanese schools, healthcare, the labour market and other basic civil rights and services.

In contrast, passport-holding Syrians – though experiencing their own set of grim conditions – are issued six month residency visas that can be extended free of charge and allows Syrians to seek employment.



Lubna tells me, "My other boy was injured by a bomb. He had surgery before we left to make sure he was ok to travel. Healthcare was free in Syria but is very expensive here. I'm petrified my kids will need medical treatment. We can't afford it."

Lebanon is no easy sanctuary for refugees.

Palestinians find themselves stuck in Palestinian camps, like Shatila, where they're unable to adapt to the new environment. The camps have limited resources and their feeble infrastructures are close to collapsing.

The camps are absorbing tens of thousands of people, with little or no extra provisions to accommodate the increased need. But it falls to the most impoverished, dispossessed and vulnerable community in Lebanon to host a wave of new refugees, often by sharing an already overcrowded home with friends and relatives. They have no privacy and they can't be independent.

Fadi, a young man from Yarmouk, who shares two rooms with his parents and siblings, describes his first impressions of Shatila, "When I first came here, I was shocked. Our life in Syria was easier. Better. It's a different life here. Yes, we knew that the situation in Lebanese camps was bad but no one cares about the camp or the people living here. The Lebanese government doesn't provide any services here – no electricity, no water, no plumbing or rubbish collection. There's a lot of suffering here.

And we, coming from Syria, were surprised by this place. Cockroaches. Mice. Dirt. The camp isn't clean. Nothing is clean."

His mother, Um Fadi, interjects saying, "we have no water. Nothing! There is no water to wash our hands. We have no electricity. Nothing! The Arab countries – their heart is not with us, they don't care about our fate."

Accommodation available is often desperately overcrowded with as many as 10 people sharing a single room. Many Palestinian refugees from Syria lack the most basic facilities such as refrigerators, electricity, and access to running water and sanitary facilities.

"We're eight people. We only have four mattresses; we're sleeping on top of each other. And our house is so damp that our clothes were rotten. It's filthy here, so dirty. My daughter cried when she noticed and I felt helpless. I'm ashamed because I try to keep the house clean," says Lubna and echoes a sentiment I heard from many Syrian Palestinians, "I don't like it here in Lebanon. Even my children ask me why we don't move out. I wish I could leave as soon as possible."



Um Fadi, with her youngest son Rafe, is shocked about the conditions in the camp “Can you smell it? The air smells of burning fuel. Power is hardly ever on, we must use the generators but the children cough.”

Syrian Palestinians often had to leave most of their possessions behind and are almost entirely dependent on aid and goodwill. Only a small percentage of the new arrivals was able to find employment. And though the Palestinian community has shown incredible altruism in opening up their homes to host those arriving from Syria the community has nowhere near sufficient resources to provide what is needed. Lebanese Palestinians are now also feeling the strain and this is generating tensions between different communities.

“This home is like a prison.”

Shahd, Jameel’s wife, tells me while preparing slightly salty arabic coffee, “when you go outside, you’re Syrian, and you’re not really welcomed here. And they say that they hate Syrians here. I get nervous when I go out.”

“We are discriminated against here. The Palestinians think we take their jobs and other things. But you see, here, we have nothing. We don’t feel welcome,” says Jameel. The young family arrived just over a year ago and now rent a small, dark and damp flat. “We didn’t have a lot of money in Syria but we were comfortable, we tried to make

a beautiful home. My little girl has no place to be a child here. The flat we live in is so small she can’t move around.” Jameel now admits they might never have come if they had known what awaited them: hardship and discrimination.

Maha remembers how “in the beginning everyone would welcome and support us.”

“But now they think we take all the support away from them. All the people started to feel that they didn’t like us. They think we’re taking all their jobs because we might do a job cheaper,” says Maha, who moved to Shatila in early 2013.

She’s frustrated because the “children are bullied in school! The other children call them Syrians; it’s a swearword. My kids dropped out because of the bullying. School is already difficult for our children. They’ve seen things no child should see and they missed so much school because of the war. Here, many subjects are taught in English and French but in Syria they were taught in Arabic. All this made my children believe they’re not smart enough. And then the kids from the camp pick on our children.”



The men I met in Shatila told me that they're unable to stand the pressure. They're incapable of providing for their families and feel like they don't have a role in the family any more. They feel useless. Helpless. Unable to influence their fate.

“We've been making tents since 1948,” says Rami.

His family fled the violence in Damascus. They were hoping to find safety and stability but the only thing they found is despair. “Sometimes I regret leaving Syria thinking it would have been better to die there with dignity than to live here. We have nothing – no income, no food – only our bare lives. But I have my family. I have to be strong for them.”



And Jameel tells me, “I have my little girl. We had to leave Damascus and come to Lebanon. Refugees don't come here for fun. Nobody wants to be a refugee. If I had everything in Syria – safety, my home, work, food – I wouldn't have come here and left my home.”

He continues, “I'm tired. I can't stand it anymore. When I came to Lebanon I weighed 78kg. Now, look at me, I've lost a lot of weight because I worry. I can't find work and everything I have is for my family – I don't want my daughter to be hungry. I don't want much. I only want to live a simple life here. I want to work, to feel I'm doing something useful and to be able to provide for my family.”



Jameel, his daughter Suheir, and wife Shahd in the small flat their rent from a local family in Shatila.



Beesan's oldest son is working in a supermarket. "He's stacking shelves from 8pm to 1am and earns \$400. Our rent is \$300. My husband works as a builder but there isn't much work for him."

When they lived in Syria, Palestinians dreamed of one day returning to Palestine.

Today they dream of returning to Syria. Most refugees express a desire to return home as soon as the fighting stops, but the prospects for a quick return or even a return at all are faint.

Beesan told me she'd rather go back as soon as the fighting stops, even if she had to "pitch a tent between the rocks and rubble of our former house," than stay in the humiliating circumstances in which she finds herself.

"In '82 when Lebanese refugees came to Syria, we opened our homes for them. A Lebanese family stayed in my parent's home in Damascus. We didn't treat them the way they're treating us now. Even when they donate food they tell us we're taking their share. I find it hard to deal with the people here and I'm not used to begging. I'm used to give to others. This is really difficult for me. I always helped others and now I have to beg."



Bilal complains about the lack of support available - especially from UN agencies and international NGOs. "We receive help from a [local Palestinian] organisation but \$100 a month doesn't go very far."

"There is no humanity," says Bilal. "We are the world's unwanted people. Here, we live only because of a lack of death, you know."

Within the overall Syrian tragedy, the situation of Palestinians contains another layer of sorrow and misery and central to the Palestinian struggle. The flight of Palestinian refugees from Syria can be best understood within the wider context of on-going Palestinian exile, displacement and insecurity.

Their statelessness lies at the heart of the problem. There is no government to represent or advocate for them. They are reliant on goodwill and UNRWA, which is chronically underfunded and almost entirely dependent on contributions from donor states. It cannot provide the robust representation so desperately needed.

As a result, the Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria are especially vulnerable and their sanctuary is perilously insecure.



Abeer in her home in Shatila. "We are forgotten. They're only talking about the Syrians. Nobody thinks about the Palestinians."

Abeer, from Damascus, is determined to persevere, "What is most important for us is to find money for the rent and to cover our children's needs. We think about our own needs last. A mother always puts her children first. If I can't provide for my family no one is there to support me, there only is death. So I have to be strong for my family. I try to smile for them. I have to protect them. My children are so much more than just a beloved part of me. God entrusted them to me and I have to live up to this."

She gazes into the distance as she says, "We grew up wanting to return to Palestine. Now I want to return to Syria. We keep getting thrown out of our homes. We go from catastrophe to catastrophe, from refugee camp to refugee camp, we have no place to call home but at least we are alive. I want to go back to Syria."

"Insh'allah I will go back."



Rami with his wife Rania. The family lives with relatives in Shatila, "Our relatives are doing their best to help but they too are having problems. Life here is hard for them too. We try not to ask for help."

Rami says he struggles finding work, "I'm not young anymore. The only work you can get is in construction or odd jobs here and there. It's hard work for young men, but even they are struggling to find work."



Maha sits on a mattress donated by residents of Shatila. This small, dark, damp and bare room is now home to her and her family. They arrived only with the clothes on their back. Everything they have was donated by residents or local charities. Like many Palestinians from Syria, Maha is disappointed about the lack of help – especially from the UN.



Fadi in his friends' home who is also from Damascus and now lives in this kitchen - that must also serve as bedroom and living room - with his cousin.

Fadi described his shock at the state of disrepair, the poverty of Lebanese Palestinians, the level of discrimination as well as the lack of services, "we knew that the situation in Lebanese camps was bad but no one cares about the camp or the people living here."

Life here is expensive. Consumer prices are 50% higher than in Syria. It's hard for refugees to get by, even if they bring assets. Rents are high - a room in Shatila, without water and often no power, costs \$300.



Lubna's son, Sultan, was injured in Syria before fleeing Syria. He still needs follow-up treatments but healthcare in Lebanon is extremely expensive and the family struggles to raise the money needed.



Ibrahim and Um Ali now share a small flat in Shatila with their children's families. Ibrahim tells me he's grateful his wife reminded him to bring the deeds to their homes in Yarmouk. They hope to be able to return to their home.



Maha's son, Mohammed is still attending the local UNRWA run school in Shatila. His older siblings have dropped out. And he's unhappy at school because the local kids bully him and he struggles with the curriculum. The classroom is crowded, the school struggles to accommodate the number of children enrolled. Palestinian children from Syria can only attend UNRWA school, while Syrian children are free to attend any Lebanese school.



The cemetery and memorial to the victims of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre.

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