Sectarianism and the Rejection of Tawteen: Lebanon and the Palestinian Refugees

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Lebanon’s sectarian system

Lebanon is one of the four main regions with Palestinian refugee concentrations (the other three are Jordan, Syria and the occupied territories). The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon represent the second largest community of the Palestinian diaspora. The historic importance of the Palestinian community in Lebanon is based on its size; its tradition of political activism and support for the Palestinian national movement up to 1982; its creative participation in the intellectual life of both Lebanon and the wider Arab world; and its geopolitical proximity to, and connectedness with, Galilee/Israel/Palestine.1 Almost all of Lebanon’s refugees came from the Galilee region in northern Palestine. A survey of refugee camps in Lebanon in 1991 found that between one-third and one half said they had relatives in Israel; few had family members living in the occupied territories.2

The influx of Palestinian refugees in 1948 potentially posed more severe problems in Lebanon than any other Arab host country. Historically, sectarianism and the free market economy characteristic of the Lebanese system gave birth to two contradictory trends in Lebanese policy towards the Palestinian refugees. After 1948, Lebanese governments officially and consistently refused to integrate the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon while at the same they encouraged a free market economy in which Palestinian businessmen and middle-class wealthy people prospered. In the post-1948 period, the Lebanese regime also allowed some Palestinian refugees, especially Christian refugees, to obtain Lebanese citizenship and Lebanese passports.3

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1 Rosemary Sayigh, ‘Palestinians in Lebanon: (Dis)solution of the Refugee Problem’, *Race & Class* 37, No. 2 (October-December 1995), p. 27.


On the whole, however, Lebanese government policy towards the Palestinian refugees was shaped to a large degree by the fragile sectarian balance in the country, on the one hand, and the fact that the refugees constituted a relatively high proportion within the Lebanese population as a whole (constituting 10-12 per cent of the population), on the other. In 1950 the roster of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) included 127,600 refugees in Lebanon. The Lebanese authorities tend to deliberately overestimate the size of the Palestinians at 500,000, in order:

(a) to show that it was shouldering a large responsibility; and
(b) to emphasise that Palestinian tawteen (implantation or resettlement) in Lebanon would radically transform the delicate sectarian balance in the country. In 1994, Minister of Higher Education Michel Eddeh even put the total number of Palestinians at 600,000 (almost double the real number) adding: “Lebanon absolutely refuses the implantation of Palestinians on its territory because this risks the partition of the country.”

In 1999, the country hosted 370,144 Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA and with the Department of General Security and Refugee Affairs and who are legally and technically given special travel documents. In addition to UNRWA registered refugees, another 42,000 unregistered Palestinians live in Lebanon, and because about 22,000 of these trace their exile to the 1967 war, they fall outside the UNRWA definition; they are technically illegal in the country and are generally denied government services. Another 20,000 are considered to be of Lebanese origin, but identify themselves as Palestinians.

Since 1948, an estimated 50,000 Palestinian Christians and a much smaller number of affluent Sunni Muslim Palestinians and Shi’ites from border villages have received Lebanese citizenship, partly with sectarian considerations in the forefront, because Christian and Muslim Sunni and Shi’ite officials each sought middle-class Palestinian co-religionists to shift the sectarian balance. However, there is no doubt that these Palestinians of the middle class (non-refugee population) became integrated into the economic and social life of Lebanon.

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7 See interview in L’Orient Le Jour (1 September 1994).