

Insecurity of habitat for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

by Rosemary Sayigh

As Israel refuses to accept responsibility for their exodus from their Palestinian homeland – and Lebanon refuses to allow them to resettle – displaced Palestinians have to deal with the knowledge that their homes in Lebanon are not really homes, while their real homes are not about to be restored to them.

Studies of Palestinian refugees have tended to by-pass the domestic domain, ignoring the many ways in which 'home' is articulated in the national struggle, as a symbol of loss, as the ultimate goal of struggle and also as the basis of daily life needs and ambitions. Palestinian studies have focused on an idealised world in which the concepts of homeland and home are usually collapsed, precluding the possibility of examining one as related to but not necessarily reducible to the other.

We cannot simply transpose the concept of 'home' into an Arab milieu without noting the problem of cultural translation. In English there is an etymological distinction between 'house' and 'home'. 'House' comes from roots that mean 'cover' or 'shelter', and refers to a physical structure, whereas 'home' derives from words that mean a group of dwellings, a neighbourhood or village. The closest equivalents of 'home' in Arabic – *beit* and *dar* – mean both more and less than 'home'. They refer both to a 'house' but also to the family that lives in it, as 'home' does not. From their reference to a 'family', conceived in Arabic as a lineage that continues over time, *beit* and *dar* have a connotation of permanence, security and projection into the future. Unlike 'home', *beit* and *dar* do not imply enclosure and privacy – whether for the family or the individual – but rather a sense of sharing a common space with others. Furthermore, they do not carry the

sense of 'origin' that enables 'home' to be stretched to mean 'homeland'; Arabic has another word for this – *watan*.

Beit has implications of security and permanence that have been violated in Lebanon more than in the other countries which 'host' Palestinian refugees. The Palestinian villager's *beit* in Palestine was built to last forever. It might frequently be extended, it might be abandoned, but it was rarely an object of commercial exchange. Whereas in European autobiography the 'home' is often positioned as the womb-like beginning of a life, a place that the individual leaves but cannot ever fully return to, the word *beit* refers both to a structure and to a lineage that continues to exist somewhere, whether or not its original physical shell still stands.

The strength of this sense of *al-beit* as inalienable property is suggested by several aspects of refugee behaviour during the expulsions of 1948. They stayed in their villages after the fall of the cities until they were directly attacked. They remained in the neighbourhood of their villages until expelled across borders and then made attempts to return. Once having crossed into the 'host' countries, many remained near the border until chased away by the Lebanese army and installed in camps, as the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) registered refugees, and residence rights became fixed in specific localities.

Palestinian *hijra*

Little research has been done on the Palestinian *hijra*¹ but accounts I have recorded myself, or heard others tell of, bear all the signs of an absence from home expected to be temporary, because permanent separation was as unimaginable to rural Palestinian Arabs as the sale of a house. From this unimaginable separation grew the symbolism of the key, kept by most refugee families as evidence of possession, passed on to heirs,

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displayed in Palestinian exhibitions, and increasingly used as motif in posters and children's art work. Attachment to original homes continued to be manifested long after it became evident that Israel's refusal to repatriate the refugees was endorsed by the 'international community', and even after the fading of the hope that Palestinian armed struggle would lead to repatriation.

Refugees in Lebanon have been subjected to serial displacement, violence and insecurity. Camps such as Shateela have been destroyed more than once. One informant told me that since childhood she had been forced to move nine times and had lost four residences as a result of war. The size of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon today tells its own story. In 1948-49, the number of Palestinians who entered this country was around 100,000. Had the population grown at the expected rate there should have been some 540,000 by 2001 but the official number of registered refugees in 2001 – according to UNRWA – was only 384,000. The real number of those residing in Lebanon in 2001

was estimated to be not more than 200,000. Such a low growth rate is unparalleled in any other of the host countries and contradicts the arguments of those Lebanese politicians who exaggerate the Palestinian population and Lebanon's 'burden'. For Palestinians, Lebanon has been a site of population loss. Though some of this loss is accounted for by naturalisation, the major cause is emigration induced by displacement and insecurity.

The initial displacement of the exiled Palestinians became in Lebanon a continuous insecurity of shelter, a rightlessness in regard to present and future residence that denies them a basic attribute of *al-beit*.

This historic insecurity is currently exacerbated by rumours of plans to cut roads through certain camps, by government restrictions on building and repair, by new laws forbidding property ownership, and by repeated official statements negating the possibility of *towteen* (re-settlement). As Edward Said delineated so well, the multiply-displaced person looks at his/her home with different eyes from those of 'normal' people. Painfully suspended between two rejections, Palestinians in Lebanon struggle to lead 'normal' lives, to give their children at least the hope

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of a 'some day' normality. But normality cannot even be imagined with its core element, the right to a secure and stable *beit*. This is a dimension of the question of refugee habitat that surveys reporting on space ratios or building materials do not approach.

Memorialisation of villages

Blocked from playing a part in the Palestinian national struggle since the Oslo Accords and excluded from Lebanese political life, Palestinian exiles in Lebanon have tentatively re-opened memories of original localities that were overlaid by Palestinian nationalism in the days of the PLO. The void left by the PLO's

engagement on the Oslo 'road', with its implicit abandonment of diaspora refugee rights, has been only partially filled by the movement for Return.² Emigration and despair are other reactions to the long stagnation. But memorialisation of original villages has also re-emerged to fill the political vacuum, as in the re-establishment of village-based funds and cultural clubs, the publishing of village histories and, whenever possible, visits to original homes in 'Israel'/'Palestine'.

For Palestinians, especially those of rural origin, a *beit* is necessarily set among familiar neighbours. They are more essential to its description than its 'look' or structural features. This sociality of settlement is continually reconstructed out of new social and material elements, and can be viewed as a historically produced form of resistance to insecurity, displacement and coercive exile.

Drawing on an already existing cultural repertoire, the settlement of Palestinian rural refugees in Lebanon has shown strong patterns of pre-existing village-based familiarity. The mindset of village solidarity and self-defence continued long after 1948 into the period of exile and, in camps like Bourj al-Barajneh or Nahr al-Bared, the layout preserved inter-village demarcation lines. The slightness of boundaries of 'home' in refugee camps has been underwritten by relations of affinity and consanguinity which laced the homes of a single village into 'one family' (a phrase often used with positive connotations to describe relations within a single village or camp quarter, sometimes rhetorically enlarged to include the Palestinian nation).

As UNRWA camps were established, people tended to settle close to co-villagers, so that most camps were divided into village quarters, a feature that was still strongly marked in the 1970s, though less so today after three decades of conflict and displacement. Men who reached positions of importance, whether in UNRWA or the Resistance movement, were identified less by their

family name than the village they came from. This is a pattern that has persisted in spite of war destruction, and population change through emigration and immigration, transmitted in the names of areas and through intense social interaction. Suppressed in periods of national mobilisation, village identities have persisted just below the surface, even among third and fourth generation exiles. Even children aged three and four can mostly tell what Palestinian villages they belong to.

Separated from their sites of collective memory – since camps do not count as places that bestow identity – social relationships become invested for Palestinian exiles with even greater value and necessity, as anchors of history and identity. Families scattered by national frontiers manage to meet to mourn deaths, exchange news and wedding videos. Common belonging to a village or urban quarter links third and fourth generation exiles in countries of work, study or migration. Visits to homes of origin, and the stories they generate, need to be set within this larger framework of destruction and reconstruction of social relations. They are not visits to 'homes' in the unitary sense but a reconnecting with a territory, a landscape and a social body that form the proper context of *al-beit*.

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This is a summary of a much longer article, online at: www.fmreview.org/pdf/sayyigh.pdf

1. 'Hijra' means migration, and was used by refugees of peasant origin for the expulsions of 1948, perhaps from a desire to euphemise a humiliating experience, or in echo of the Prophet Muhammad's 'hijra' from Mecca to Medina, and imbued with a Muslim sense of Palestine as a Holy Land.

2. www.al-awda.org