

IDPs of East Beirut versus the Lebanese State

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This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Taif agreement that formally ended the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990. Three decades later, some communities remain internally displaced because of the actions of the State.

The eastern tip of Beirut, commonly known as Quarantina, is a lower-income neighbourhood bordered by the Beirut River to the east and encircled by the port to the west and north. During the late 19th century a nomadic Sunni tribe of Arab cattle herders settled in Quarantina and began operating a slaughterhouse along with weekly livestock and meat markets (although land ownership was only formalised under the French Mandate between 1920 and 1943). Due to their association with this trade, the residents later became known as *Arab al Maslakh* – Arabs of the Slaughterhouse.

The slaughterhouse and its by-product industries needed quick access to labourers, and migrant labourers and refugees flocked to the area in search of livelihoods. In the years leading up to the Lebanese Civil War, the neighbourhood had earned a reputation for being a slum, where an estimated 30,000

labourers lived in cramped wooden and tin shacks. The slum dwellers included a mix of Armenian, Kurdish and Palestinian refugees who lived in close proximity to rural Lebanese and Syrian migrant labourers. The addition of these new populations to the *Arab al Maslakh* had, over the years, transformed the neighbourhood into a predominantly Muslim quarter within Christian eastern Beirut.

The displacement of the population of Quarantina was the first major forced removal to take place during the Lebanese Civil War. Fuelled by confessional and political motivations, the militia of the Christian right-wing forces attacked the neighbourhood in January 1976 – part of a larger plan to divide the country and capital into distinct confessional zones. Eastern Beirut was meant to become Christian and this predominantly Muslim neighborhood stood in the way. This event, known as the

Quarantina massacre, led to 1,500 deaths and displaced those who remained. Due to its strategic location, Quarantina was turned into the military headquarters of the local militia and a large majority of the buildings owned by the original inhabitants were destroyed or repurposed by the occupying forces as bases for their operations. Locals estimate that 500–600 families were affected by the displacement.

Today, a small percentage of this population, those whose properties were not entirely destroyed or repurposed during the war, have been able to return to their homes (around 40 plots). Most of these families said the modest compensation paid by the Ministry of the Displaced was insufficient and required supplementary personal funds. The remaining 80% of the population have not been able to return due to specific State-imposed obstacles.

State-condoned protracted displacement

Despite the Taif Agreement's clear statement of the right of every citizen to return to their place of displacement, the text fails to address specific scenarios such as the Quarantina case. The complete return of the *Arab Al Maslakh* community is today prevented by, first, the continued presence of the Lebanese Armed Forces on their private property and, second, cabinet decision No 322 issued in 1994 which explicitly excludes cities from a special exception to building regulations for IDPs.

The Lebanese army, acting in the name of the State and in an effort to reassert its sovereignty over the territory, took over the different Quarantina bases but showed no intention, as time passed, of relocating its troops. The local population was then faced with the difficult task of negotiating property reclamation with a State entity. In the words of one of their spokespersons: "We shifted from a scenario of illegal occupation by militiamen to a legal one imposed by the State."¹ Three decades later, the army still operates bases on around 75 plots of privately owned property, preventing these individuals from claiming their land.

At the conclusion of the war, the Ministry of the Displaced dealt with civilian/private squatting by paying a relocation fee to families in return for vacating private property and

allowing their rightful owners to return.² But no such measures have been adopted to address the occupation by the armed forces. No politician or public figure has dared to take an official stand, and the *Arab Al Maslakh* have thus had to attempt the delicate task of negotiating with an apparatus of the Lebanese State on their own, to no avail.

Cabinet decision No 322 was meant to regulate the process of reconstruction but also make it more accessible by reducing building permit fees and other legal costs – but the first clause of the decree excludes city dwellers from these new facilities.³ This has affected all IDPs in Beirut and more particularly the remaining *Arab Al Maslakh*. Faced with the high cost of building permits and other related fees, those whose buildings had not been destroyed by shelling and fighting have had to resettle in substandard conditions (40 land plots) while many others have not been able to return at all due to the irreparable damage done to their property or its complete destruction (50 land plots).

The longer this status quo is maintained, the greater the challenges. Since the situation arose more than 30 years ago, the affected families have grown and multiplied, creating a more complex web of claimants. Today, many of Quarantina's original land owners have died, leaving several dozen heirs to share ownership of one parcel or split the increasingly smaller portion of the value of the property.

Reasons for the dispossession of Quarantina's refugees and migrant workers are multiple, and are compounded by economic interests in prime property. Together they are responsible for the deplorable current situation of the *Arab Al Maslakh* community which exists in a state of protracted internal displacement with long-frustrated hopes of return.

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1. Private communication, 18 January 2019.

2. Assaf G and El-Fil R (2000) 'Resolving the issue of war displacement in Lebanon', *Forced Migration Review* issue 7, 31–33 www.fmreview.org/land-and-property-issues/assaf-elfil

3. Law 322, issued on 24/3/1994, Section 1. The Arabic text of the law can be found at bit.ly/Lebanon-Law322.