



FIGURE 1. Boy in wheelbarrow, Nahr el-Bared camp. Photograph: Ali Alloush.

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# Introduction

## “Empty Buildings”

After the departure of the PLO [in 1982] factions became empty buildings.

— ABDUL-RAHMAN, SHATILA CAMP, OCTOBER 12, 2011

A Fatah veteran told me this once: if there was a building that was a charitable organization and used to help people a lot, or if it was for a good man, and this person died, [ . . . ] this doesn't mean that the building was still good, because there was a good man in it. So yes. This was how he explained it.

— FARIS, BEIRUT, OCTOBER 10, 2011

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon often referred to Palestinian political factions as buildings. For example, Palestinians talked of “entering a faction” (*dakhalit tanzīm*) as if they were entering an edifice. Palestinians also referred to factionalized Palestinians as having a “back” (*dāhir*). This expression was meant to indicate that factions provided a sort of protection to their members. This image of having something behind you, protecting you, was reminiscent of the walls of a building. Finally, they talked of a “political ceiling” (*saʿaf siyāsī*) to indicate the hierarchy, or the vertical limitations within the factions. The notion of “entering,” of a “back” and a “ceiling,” pointed to an imagination where factions appeared as edifices. Visualizing factions as building-like structures is indeed appealing: it draws boundaries that separate faction members from non-members; it represents the hierarchy inside factions, with the rank and file at the bottom and the leadership at the top; it demarcates the faction from other factions, other buildings; and it helps explain how the faction exists even when the people “inside” change. In other words, the metaphor of a building-like structure illustrates how factions seem to exist separately from the people “inside” them.

This image of the faction as an entity with a life of its own is also evident in the academic literature on Palestinian politics. Factions are mostly viewed as autonomous bodies, studied as a whole and spoken of in the singular (“Fatah did this”

or “*Hamas declared that*”). Factions are mostly examined through an analysis of party literature, the writings of party founders, and interviews with the leadership (e.g., Abu-Amr 1994; Broning 2013; Y. Sayigh 1997). In other words, they focus on the intentions, actions and words of the leadership and chart the founding, histories, ideologies, regional and international alliances, funding sources, and evolution of the factions throughout the years (Baumgarten 2005; Brynen 1990b; Cobban 1984; Cubert 1997; Gunning 2008; Hroub 2006; R. Khalidi 2006; Knudsen 2005; Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010; Y. Sayigh 1997; Usher 2006). As such, the literature implies that it is possible to study factions without examining the practices of those who form their very core. With the exception of the leadership, studies of factions rarely examine the lives, ideas, actions, and desires of faction members; instead, they study factions as if they were shells, existing separately and independently from the people they are supposed to encompass. Very little ethnographic evidence documents how the abstract notion of factions takes concrete shape in the daily lives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, how Palestinians encounter factions, and whether factions retain their unitary appearance or disintegrate. As such, research on Palestinian political factions has failed to illuminate the quotidian practices of Palestinian refugees that tell us about the production and reproduction of factions in everyday life.

This lack of attention to the everyday interactions between Palestinian political factions and Palestinian refugees is even more puzzling when we realize how unpopular the factions are and how well-documented this unpopularity is. Indeed, numerous studies highlight the general dissatisfaction of Palestinian refugees towards Palestinian political factions (Frisch 2009; Khalili 2005; Kortam 2011; Peteet 1995; R. Sayigh 2001, 96; 2011; 2012; Suleiman 1999). They have been accused of factionalism (R. Sayigh 2012, 22), of corruption (Brynen 1995b, 25; R. Sayigh 2012, 22), and betrayal (Allan 2014; Khalili 2004; Peteet 1995). Some voice concern for the future of Palestinian factions in light of their inability to establish an independent Palestinian state (Broning 2013, 5), others call for new Palestinian political parties to form (Kuttab 2011), while others refer to them as failed national movements (Ghanem 2010). Despite such attention to the current dismal state of Palestinian political factions, the actual process through which discredited factions are produced and re-produced in everyday life remains largely unexplored.

This book is an ethnographic study of Palestinian political factions through an immersion in daily home life, carried out in Nahr el-Bared camp in the north of Lebanon. It probes two interrelated sets of questions. Firstly, it asks how unpopular and discredited factions are reproduced on a day-to-day basis. How do they remain the center of political life in the face of widespread condemnation? Suleiman (1999, 76) states that “one of the main challenges facing Palestinian society in the refugee camps of Lebanon is the lack of a political and social authority that is regarded by the Palestinians themselves, as well as by others, as their legitimate representative.” The lack of meaningful representation not only affects the conduct

in and future of peace negotiations, but also the daily lives of Palestinians worldwide; it compounds their existing problems. Even the simplest task of replacing a broken electrical generator in a refugee camp becomes complicated (Kortam 2011), not to mention finding solutions to major crises such as the destruction of Nahr el-Bared camp (Knudsen 2011). My research aims to understand the dynamics at play. How are factions maintaining a monopoly over political representation and camp organization even when they are delegitimized in refugees' eyes? Officially, the different political factions in the camps are divided along broad political stances vis-à-vis the "peace process," whether they support the Oslo accords or not, and whether they are Islamic or secular in nature. Are these broad political and ideological differences more important to the refugees than the resolution of their daily problems of water, electricity, education, and health?

Secondly, this work inquires into the ontological nature of factions. It asks how Palestinian political factions, which are clearly made of people, came to be imagined both in the academic literature and in everyday speech as "entities" or "buildings" with lives of their own, existing separately from the very people and practices they contain. Scholars routinely use a multitude of metaphors to refer to factions: they are called "actors," "players," "political bodies," or "political structures," and these in turn are ascribed actions, aspirations, intentions and identities. All of these metaphors point to an imagination where factions form particular "entities" that "exist" in their own right. These "actors" or "structures" are then studied through an examination of their ideologies, regional and international alliances, and sources of funding without examining the daily practices of those who form their very core—their members. For example, a study of seven major political factions in Palestine that aims to introduce the different parties to the readers does so by providing an overview of key historical developments to trace the ideological foundations of each faction, followed by biographies of key personalities, interviews with persons in positions of authority, excerpts from election programs and party communiqués, and finally organizational charts (Broning 2013). This study does not interview or refer to a single party member outside of the leadership, nor does it discuss what type of practices party members engage in. Palestinian political factions appear to exist independently from their members, which allows them to continue to exist even if they have no members. Indeed they become "empty buildings." Additionally, these buildings' defining characteristic is seen to be ideology. Scholars point out that Fatah is secular-nationalist, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) are Marxist, while Hamas and Islamic Jihad are Islamic. In turn, the difference between the PFLP and the DFLP and between Hamas and Islamic Jihad is also explained as emanating from ideological differences, most notably from a different approach to militarism (Broning 2013; Hasso 2005) and *jihad* (Gupta and Mundra 2005; Milton-Edwards 1992; Abu-Amr 1994). This work questions this dominant understanding of Palestinian political factions. It asks, what is the ontological nature of factions?

In what sense can we say that factions are “entities” with lives of their own that are defined by ideology? And if indeed factions are not “actors” or “structures,” then what are they? And why and how do they appear to be so if that is not their nature?

While the first set of questions—how unpopular and discredited political factions are reproduced in everyday life—was the initial drive behind this book, the second set of questions—how factions, which are clearly made of people, come to take on the appearance of a bounded structure defined by ideology that exists separately from the people it seeks to encompass—quickly came to the fore as I delved into my fieldwork. With time it became clear that the answers to these two sets of questions are closely intertwined. Through an examination of factions at the micro-level—the daily, mundane practices of Palestinian refugees in Nahr el-Bared camp—this book traces how factions are formed through local interpersonal relations imbued with high levels of trust, and how they take on the appearance of impersonal structures that exist separately and independently from those personal relations that form their very basis. In other words, this book explores how people coming together to form a political faction end up creating the appearance of a structure that can then be referred to in the singular as “Fatah did this” or “ Hamas declared that,” then studied by scholars as bodies through an examination of their ideologies, regional and international alliances, and sources of funding without examining the daily practices of the people involved in factional work. In contrast, this book, by focusing on everyday practices, argues that factions have a double nature: they are loose networks of people bound together by different degrees of trust and cohesion, yet they also appear as bounded structures defined by their stated ideologies. This book posits that it is precisely this double nature that allows unpopular and even despised factions to remain the center of political life.

#### A LATERAL APPROACH: EXAMINING FACTIONS THROUGH EVERYDAY LIFE

This study adopts an unconventional theoretical and methodological framework in the study of factions, what I refer to as a “lateral approach.”<sup>1</sup> The book does not study factions based on their stated ideologies, publications or interviews with the leadership (the “top”) (cf. Broning 2013; Cobban 1984; Cubert 1997; Gunning 2008; Hroub 2006), nor is it an ethnography based on what appears to be the “inside” of factions, such as factional offices, youth clubs, or associations (the “bottom”) (cf. Hoigilt 2016; Jensen 2009; Roy 2011). Rather it explores how factions appear in the daily life of Palestinians, how refugees encounter them on a day-to-day basis. In other words, this study examines factions *laterally*, from what appears to be the “outside” of factions, from daily home life. By positioning myself on what appears to be “outside” of factions, I was able to look at how that very distinction comes into being, how factions appear as bounded structures, and how that line drawn between the “inside”

and the “outside” produces power and allows discredited political factions to remain the center of political life in the face of widespread condemnation.

The “lateral approach” adopted by this study is largely inspired by the study of another “political structure” of great interest to both political scientists and anthropologists: the state. In doing so, I am not arguing that factions are like states, state-like, or quasi-states, nor am I ignoring the role the Lebanese state plays in the lives of Palestinian refugees. What I am arguing is that state literature helps me develop a novel analytical and methodological approach which provides me with fresh insights and allows me to denaturalize the nature of factions by investigating it through an exploration of everyday life.

The state has often been understood by international relations theorists to be an “actor,” a “player,” an “organ,” or a “political structure” that exists “above” society and acts upon it. For example Asad (2004, 281) explains, “according to the modern concept, the state is an entity with a life of its own, distinct from both governors and governed.” In other words the state is perceived to be an “entity” that exists separately and independently from those inside it (government employees) as well as those outside it (society at large), similarly to how Palestinian political factions are represented in academic scholarship and everyday speech. However, research on the state has gone a long way to question these assumptions and will help us develop an analytical and methodological way forward.<sup>2</sup>

Of particular relevance here is the argument that Timothy Mitchell (1988; 1990; 1991; 2002) has put forward regarding the “appearance of structure” of the state. Mitchell argues that the state *appears* to be a structure separate from society, due to the modern microphysical methods of order that Foucault (1977) calls discipline. Discipline refers to the meticulous organization of space, movement, position, and time sequences and the systematic methods of surveillance and inspection that were developed around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in factories, schools, prisons, hospitals, and government offices. Mitchell argues that modern disciplinary practices created a peculiar metaphysics, reordering the world into what appears to be two distinct entities: people and practices on one end and immaterial structures on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Mitchell illustrates his argument through the example of the army. The order, precision, and repetition of the disciplinary practices of the army, including the specific division of space, the regular timing, and the coordination of movements, all work to create “the effect of an apparatus apart from the men themselves, whose structure orders, contains, and controls them” (1991, 94). The army now appears as an “artificial machine” (92) that stands apart from the men and the practices that constitute it. This artificial machine is non-material, it cannot be touched, it is only represented through its soldiers, officers, emblems. . . . Mitchell contends that a similar two-dimensional effect is at work in other institutions of the state (such as the bureaucracy, organized schooling, and urban planning). This contributes “to constructing a world that appears to consist not of a *complex of social practices* but

of a binary order: on the one hand individuals and their activities, on the other an inert structure that somehow stands apart from individuals, precedes them, and contains and gives a framework to their lives” (94, my emphasis). Reality seems to have a “two-dimensional form of individuals versus apparatus, practice versus institution, social life and its structure or society versus state.”

The appearance of the state as an immaterial structure existing separately from society is therefore an effect of modern disciplinary practices. The state should not be studied as an actual structure but as “the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist” (Mitchell 1991, 94). By approaching the state as an effect Mitchell both acknowledges that the state *appears as a structure* and at the same time *accounts for its elusive nature*. Moreover, Mitchell insists that the appearance of separation of the state from society helps maintain a certain configuration of power. He argues that “the boundary of the state (or political system) *never marks a real exterior*. The line between state and society is not the perimeter of an intrinsic entity, which can be thought of as a free-standing object or actor. It is a line drawn internally, *within* the network of institutional mechanisms through which a certain social and political order is maintained” (90, emphasis original).

Building upon these insights I now turn to the ethnographers of the state, who similarly stress the importance of examining practices in order to understand the nature of the state. However, they focus on everyday practices and examine how individuals experience the state, and how the state appears in their daily lives. As such, they provide us with a method to trace empirically the creation of the “appearance of structure” identified by Mitchell. Ethnographers of the state refuse to look at the state as a coherent set of institutions working for public interest, instead arguing that one should seek to study the state by investigating the everyday practices through which people experience and therefore perceive the state (Das 2004; Das and Poole 2004; A. Gupta 2001, 2005; Ismail 2006; Wedeen 1999, 2010). The basic premise that underlies this work is that the mundane practices that bind the people with the state, such as applying for a passport, receiving unemployment benefits, watching a military parade, using an official letterhead, denouncing the corruption of the state, and so on, cause a certain popular and even scholarly imagination of the state (Sharma and Gupta 2006). One of the main contributions of this alternative approach of relevance is the way it examines how certain practices create a particular imagination of a structure that is separate and above society, while other practices break down this very idea (Asad 2004; Fuller and Harris 2001, 14–15; Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 5; Ismail 2006, xxxi–xxxiii). I will be focusing on this double movement of *building and breaking the appearance of structure*, as those are precisely the types of practices that I explore in this book.

Upon examining the practices that the ethnographers put forward as drawing the state as a bounded entity autonomous from society, we find that they relate to the imagination of the state as a protector of public good and justice.

Conversely, the practices that break down this image are practices of corruption and injustice. For example, Hansen's (2001, 33) study of the Indian state's response to the Mumbai riots in 1992–93 shows that the “‘myth of the state,’ the imagination of the state as a distant but persistent guarantor of a certain social order and a measure of justice and protection from violence” was shattered as the anti-Muslim bias of the Mumbai police became blatantly apparent during the riots. Interestingly, he shows how the myth was shattered differently for different communities (Muslims, middle-class Hindus, right-wing Hindus, and the high court judge), as they all had different imaginations of the state based on their different experiences with it. Nevertheless, even when the “myth of the state” was shattered, they all still remained dependent on the idea of the state, even if contesting it (63). More importantly, he argues that the state established a commission of inquiry and a special court to regain its appearance of autonomy from society, as it needed to re-establish itself as a provider of universal and impartial justice. Whether this move was successful is left open.

The lack of corruption and the presence of justice are not the only ways through which the state obtains its appearance of separation from society. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) examine how certain Indian governmental practices of supervision, registration, and mobility produce the spatial imagination of a high above and all-encompassing state in both popular and academic discourses. In this situation it is practices that create the imagination of the state as a “thing” that stands high above and all around society, as opposed to breaking down this imagination, as was the case with the practices of corruption. Ferguson and Gupta argue that surprise visits of inspectors, the mobility of the higher levels of the bureaucracy over the Indian territory and the amount of information that needs to be logged in by locals, verified by inspectors, and reported in official reports all serve to create rituals of surveillance. “What such rituals of surveillance actually accomplished was to *represent* and to *embody* state hierarchy and encompassment” (985, emphasis original). They argue that the mobility over the Indian territory of the higher levels of the bureaucracy is precisely what allows them to disavow the particular knowledge of the local NGO workers and “to claim to represent the ‘greater’ good for the ‘larger’ dominion of the nation and the world” (988).

These studies demonstrate how the examination of daily practices (such as corruption, criticism, and methods of surveillance) elucidates how the state can appear to be an entity in its own right as well as break down this idea—in other words how the line between the state and society is drawn as well as erased. This book follows this tradition by ethnographically examining the everyday practices of Palestinian refugees to trace how factions are produced through everyday life. It posits that daily life provides a crucial window through which to understand the forms of political organization that Palestinians adopt. The everyday practices of Palestinian refugees are the crucial ways through which the abstract notion of factions take concrete shape and form. Factions would simply not exist outside

of those social relations, and their exploration is therefore essential. Using Mitchell's insights in dialogue with the work of the ethnographers of the state proves extremely helpful in studying the nature of Palestinian political factions. As we saw, Mitchell resolved the conundrum of how the state appeared to be separate from society while this was not the case. Additionally, he directed our attention to the importance of modern disciplinary practices. The ethnographic study of the state follows smoothly from Mitchell's argument, as it also focuses on practices. However, it emphasizes the everyday practices, and as such allows us to take people's experiences with and perception of the factions seriously.

By combining both approaches I advance a novel approach to the study of Palestinian political factions. Through an ethnographic study my work aims at highlighting *both* how factions are not bounded entities defined by their stated party ideology, and yet how they appear to be. To do so this book explores two sets of practices. Following a chapter on the ethnographic setting, it first looks at how Palestinians join factions (chapter 3) and how their relationship evolves over time (chapter 4). Exploring these practices and the personal narratives of Palestinian refugees reveals that Palestinians approached factions based on interpersonal relations imbued with high levels of trust: family, friendship, and neighborhood ties were the main vehicle behind factional affiliation. Palestinians seldom spoke of party ideology as an initial driver behind factional contact. Rather contact occurred depending on where people had friends or family, and sometimes depending on which faction had the closest youth center to their home. In fact, it is those personal relationships, including those developed with other faction members, that keep Palestinians affiliated to factions in spite of widespread criticism and disapproval. Factions appear as a loose group of people whose unity changes with time and context. This is their first nature.

Secondly, this book explores another set of practices: those of aid distribution (chapter 5), physical representation, and factionalism (chapter 6). This examination, in turn, exposes how factions gain a life of their own, how they metamorphose from loose networks based on interpersonal relations into impersonal structures defined by party ideology. This is their second nature. I show how these practices create the effect of structure, similarly to Mitchell's argument. These practices cause factions to take on the appearance of impersonal containers that exist separately from what they contain (their members). They also conjure up a line that seems to separate those on the "inside" (faction members) from those on the "outside" (independents). They create a new position from which an individual appears to be able to observe, grasp, critic, and study factions from the "outside" while being "inside" all along. Finally, they effect the appearance that factions are immaterial structures that exist independently from the very practices that bring them into being. Factions can never be touched; they are only represented in their emblems, stamps, flags, sports clubs, and so on. Additionally, this exploration brings to light the mechanism through which structures built on relations infused

with high levels of trust end up inducing distrust in the community and controlling people's lives.

Finally, the book concludes (chapter 7) by showing, through two empirical examples—the 2012 protest movement that led to the annulment of the military permit system in Nahr el-Bared camp and the 2005 election of a “people’s committee” in Shatila camp—how the double nature of factions allows them to remain in control of political representation despite their extensive unpopularity. It will elucidate how their first nature, as loose networks of people, allows them to “blend” into the masses at times of protest or dissent while their second nature, as structures, allows them to suddenly “appear” as actors in their own right when certain practices are needed, such as negotiating with official bodies like the Lebanese government or army. Like chameleons, Palestinian political factions have the ability to “appear” and “disappear” depending on the circumstances. This chapter will show how this chameleon nature, this “appearing” and “disappearing” act, allows unpopular political factions to continue to assert their relevance in the face of widespread dissent.

What is at stake in this re-conceptualization of Palestinian political factions is not just the definition of their nature; rather it is also the factions’ source of power. By focusing on everyday life, this book shows that particular practices allow factions to metamorphose into structures while hiding the social relations that form their very core. The factions’ chameleon nature is not out of some intrinsic aspect of their being, but simply due to practices. By providing a detailed account of these practices, by showing how intimate, interpersonal and kin-based relations are transformed into political networks and how these political networks are in turn metamorphosed into structures, this book exposes the process through which discredited factions remain in charge, helping us better understand the political impasse that Palestinians find themselves in with unpopular organizations representing them politically.

While this study was conducted within the specific context of the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared in 2011, its findings on the double nature of factions and the analytical and methodological “lateral” approach it suggests are not confined to those experiences. Finalizing this manuscript while living in Lebanon and experiencing first-hand the Oct 17, 2019 Lebanese uprising only reminds me that Palestinians are not unique in the situation of having unpopular political parties dominate their political landscape. Practices certainly change from one setting to another—for example, the practices that bind Lebanese citizens to their political parties are different from those examined in this study, and are certainly different from the practices that bind Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to political factions. However, the reality that political parties or factions are made of people, people who enter into different types of relationships with each other, still holds true regardless of the particular setting. In that sense the double nature of factions is not something peculiar neither to Nahr el-Bared camp nor to the Palestinian

case. While more studies are needed to see how it is enacted and experienced in different settings, I see this study as a point of departure for our understanding of the double nature of political structures and not as a moment of arrival. What I hope to do in this study is to suggest a new way to study any “entity” that we commonly refer to as a “structure,” or “agent,” or “body,” such as the state, political factions or parties, NGOs, or UN agencies, through an examination of the daily practices that constitute them and to question our taken for granted assumptions about the nature of those “structures.”

Returning to my particular Palestinian case of Nahr el-Bared in 2011, it is important to note how my choice of place and time affected my findings. I conducted my research four years after the camp’s destruction in 2007. This meant that the Palestinian political factions no longer carried arms within the camp, a situation which stands in sharp contrast to other places, whether within Lebanon, such as Ein el-Helwe camp,<sup>4</sup> or outside Lebanon such as in the West Bank or Gaza. I therefore could not directly experience the everyday occurrence of this practice and its ramifications on the factions’ relationship with camp residents. This could be seen as a disadvantage as it meant that the context I was working in was vastly different from other contexts. However, I believe that this was an advantage, as I had to answer the more difficult question of how discredited factions are able to maintain monopoly over political representation in the absence of coercive measures. This made the question of their continued relevance even more puzzling and allowed the other roles factions played in everyday life to be highlighted, away from their more visible, abundantly photographed, and highly publicized armed component.

In this book I aim to describe in minute detail the texture of daily life and social relations that bind Palestinian refugees to factions. I strongly believe in the importance of giving an exposition of everyday life in the camp, an exposition that speaks for itself without it being overwhelmed by my own analysis. In that spirit I devote an entire chapter (chapter 2) to provide the ethnographic setting of this study, introducing the reader to the home and family that welcomed me, to their everyday struggles as well as to their endurance and ingenuity in building their lives. My rendering of everyday life is not confined to one chapter, however. Rather, throughout this book I employ a narrative format, quoting conversations verbatim to provide in-depth portraits of individuals and their highly political lives. In other words, I strive for a writing strategy “molded largely by the requirements of narrative rather than analysis” (Pachirat 2011, 18). I let the complexities and ambiguities of the stories take precedence over neatly packaged analysis to challenge the reader to think through what it means to be a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon today and navigate through the web of social and political relations in the context of chronic war, repeated displacement and longstanding legal discrimination.

*The Palestinian National Movement in Lebanon:  
“Some Built Castles and Some Built Graves!”*

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live on the margins of Lebanese society. Since the Nakba of 1948, the mass expulsion and de-Arabisation of Palestine at the hands of Zionist militias (Masalha 2012; Pappé 2006; W. Khalidi 1992; R. Khalidi 2007), their experience has been defined by war, displacement and discrimination. In the early years of exile, and especially after the Lebanese turmoil of 1958, Palestinians were severely restricted in all aspects of life. They needed permits to visit other camps, meetings of a non-domestic nature were not allowed, listening to the radio or reading the newspaper was forbidden, and building or repairing homes required an unobtainable permit. There were no private bathrooms or drainage systems and everyone, whether young or old, male or female, had to walk, night and day, to reach public latrines. Added to these practices were the daily harassments, humiliations, extortions, arrests and sometimes torture at the hands of the Army's Intelligence Bureau, also known as the Deuxième Bureau, who controlled the camps starting from 1958 (R. Sayigh 1994, 68–71; 2007, 139–47, 56–58).

During that period organized political mobilisation was clandestine, and first took the form of Nasserist pan-Arabism with the founding of the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM) in the early 50s in Beirut (Y. Sayigh 1997, 71–75). It emerged around a group of predominantly middle- or upper-middle-class students from across the Arab world at the American University of Beirut. Its membership, though, encompassed all classes with a base in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan, recruiting principally students and teachers in United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) schools. It espoused a secular socialist pan-Arab ideology, believing that to liberate Palestine Arab unity had to be first achieved and that Gamal Abdel Nasser was the Arab leader able to achieve said unity (Baumgarten 2005, 27–31).

The defeat of the Arab armies (and Abdel Nasser) in the June 1967 war dealt a deadly blow to pan-Arabism and led to the gradual transformation of the ANM into the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the liberation of Palestine (DFLP). In parallel another group was beginning to form among Palestinian refugees from Gaza who had studied in Cairo or Beirut and later moved to the Persian Gulf States. Fatah, as that group came to be called, was a broad-based organization that adopted a Palestinian—as opposed to pan-Arab—liberationist nationalism. Founded in the late 1950s, it came to prominence after the 1967 war when Palestinian armed struggle appeared as the only alternative to the defeated conventional Arab armies (Y. Sayigh 1997, 80–87; Baumgarten 2005, 31–36).

Starting from the mid-1960s these organizations started to publish magazines, pamphlets and newspapers targeting the refugee camps (Khalili 2007, 47). They benefited from the increase in education levels, due to UNRWA's services, that

created a generation of teachers and young professionals who would become the leaders of these organizations. In 1969, in an unplanned revolt, camp residents across Lebanon chased out the much-hated *Deuxième Bureau* (Kanj 2010, 64–70; R. Sayigh 2007, 169–70). The liberation of the camps ushered the era of the *thawra* in Lebanon, when Palestinians felt they had regained their self-respect, pride and dignity. They felt back in control of their destiny and struggling as part of a mass movement to return home. Um Nasser explained to me:

The revolution was a sacred thing at the time; no one could even criticize it. We didn't see anything negative in it or rather we didn't want to see anything negative in the revolution. Due to the oppression we were facing, we were waiting for anything to save us from the situation we were in. And indeed after it people started to build. . . . People could enlarge their homes; there were no more restrictions. The people of the camp became responsible for the camp!<sup>5</sup>

This mass uprising led to the signing of the Cairo Accords in 1969 between Yasir Arafat, who was soon to chair the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the Lebanese army commander.<sup>6</sup> The accord granted Palestinians the right to manage their own camps and to engage in armed struggle in coordination with the Lebanese Army (Cobban 1984, 47; Khalili 2007, 47; Peteet 2005, 7). Palestinian camps were thereafter administered by the combination of a popular committee, which acted like a municipality dealing with services such as electricity, water, and garbage collection, and the armed struggle command, which acted like a local police force (Peteet 1987, 32–33). Appointed by the Palestinian factions, rather than elected from the camp's residents, they were a welcome change to the rule of the *Deuxième Bureau* (R. Sayigh 2007, 179). Aided by the local population they quickly started to engage in infrastructural improvements and established health, economic, social and cultural institutions in the camps in addition to their recruiting programs and military training (Khalili 2007, 48; Peteet 1987, 33; R. Sayigh 1994, 95–96; 2007, 182–87).

Funding and resources started to flow to the PLO and the Palestinian political factions, especially from Arab oil-producing states, which allowed to them to expand the services and jobs they offered to Palestinian refugees. They soon grew dramatically in size and came to be known as the “Palestinian sector,” absorbing about 65 percent of the Palestinian workforce (R. Sayigh 1994, 109). As the Palestinian resistance movement developed into a major force in Lebanon it increased its military operations against Israel, which augmented its air, naval and ground attacks, leading to heavy Lebanese and Palestinian civilian deaths with often minimal losses to PLO combatants, the presumptive target of any attack (R. Khalidi 1986, 20–21). This Israeli tactic was designed to alienate the Lebanese masses from the PLO and increase Palestinian-Lebanese tensions. Additionally, Palestinians became the target of right-wing Christian militias and continued to be attacked by the Lebanese army regardless of the Cairo accords (R. Sayigh 1994,

97). Allying themselves with the Lebanese National Movement, Palestinians were drawn into the Lebanese civil war.<sup>7</sup> With the breakdown of the Lebanese state the PLO continued to grow in influence until 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon and expelled PLO forces.<sup>8</sup> The departure of the PLO and *fedayeen* forces from Lebanon was a critical turning point for the Palestinians in Lebanon, who lost an important source of employment and protection. The period that followed was marred with massacres and sieges and much of the PLO infrastructure was destroyed (Brynen 1990b, 180–81).

Meanwhile in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) of the West Bank and Gaza a popular uprising (*intifada*) erupted in 1987 and impacted the Palestinian community in Lebanon. First, Hamas, a new Palestinian political movement, emerged, growing out of the Muslim Brotherhood Gaza branch. Similarly to how Fatah presented itself as an alternative to pan-Arabism, Hamas presented itself as an alternative to secular nationalism by advocating “Islam as the solution and the alternative” (Baumgarten 2005, 37). Secondly, the attention of the PLO leadership shifted from Lebanon to the OPT, leaving the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon feeling abandoned (Khalili 2007, 54). This abandonment was concretised in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was created as an authority over the West Bank and Gaza with no official ties to the refugees outside of Palestine (Hilal 1995). Starting from that date funding to the PLO was severely cut, with both the Palestinian leadership and the international community shifting focus from the PLO to the PNA (Frisch 2009; Hilal 2010, 27–30). Palestinian refugees, formerly the core of the *thawra*, felt a deep sense of betrayal and exclusion after years of struggle and sacrifice, which has led them to be called not only refugees of the *Nakba*, but also “refugees of the revolution (*thawra*)” (Allan 2014). This led the vast majority of the people to believe that the factions were not sincere in their initial calls for the liberation of Palestine. Abu Ali explains:

This is what they make us feel, that [the stated goal of liberating Palestine] was a lie; that they were not honest. Those who accept Oslo and 27 percent of the West Bank can't be the same person that is holding the slogan 'Armed struggle until victory' and protecting it. It was a lie, unfortunately. We spend our life in the *thawra*. Some built castles and some built graves!

In the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, Palestinian political factions were split among supporters and detractors and thereafter the camps were internally governed by a web of complex power structures composed of the PLO popular committee, committees formed by dissident political parties, notables, factions, Islamist non-Palestinian groups, imams, PLO popular organizations, and UNRWA directors (Suleiman 1999). The post-civil war era brought an even sharper increase in the insecurity and marginalization of Palestinian refugees (Abbas 1997; Haddad 2003). While they were already excluded from key aspects of social, political and economic

life in the country—for example, they were prohibited from practicing many professions—in 2001 they were also barred from owning property (Al-Natour 1997; Saghieh and Saghieh 2008; Suleiman 2006). Restricted to working in menial jobs, and unable to achieve a minimum of stability in the form of homeownership, Palestinians have been pushed to emigrate (Al-Husseini and Bocco 2011, 133–34; R. Sayigh 2001, 100). Those unable to escape from Lebanon’s suffocating laws lived in physical misery and with the constant fear that even the precarious lives that they had painfully built for themselves could be taken away at a moment’s notice, and with impunity, as the 2007 Nahr el-Bared conflict taught them.

#### NAHR EL-BARED CAMP AND THE 2007 CONFLICT

Sadness is our fate  
 Trouble is our fate  
 Our dreams cannot be measured  
 And by God no one cares  
 I swear I miss our neighborhood  
 I swear I miss our home  
 I miss the shouting of our neighbor  
 I wish I stayed in Nahr el-Bared

—10-year-old Palestinian girl displaced from Nahr el-Bared camp, singing and drumming in the courtyard of the UNRWA school in Beddawi camp where she was sheltering with her family, June 2007



FIGURE 2. Hanging laundry. Photograph: Ali Alloush.

Nahr el-Bared was the second-largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, housing in 2007 about 33,000 refugees (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 31). It was situated on the Mediterranean shoreline, on a main road connecting the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli to Syria. After the end of the Lebanese civil war in the 1990s residents used the camp's strategic location to turn it into an important commercial hub. It was a trading center for goods smuggled in from Syria, for agricultural products going from the countryside into Tripoli, and for cheap manufacturing goods moving from Tripoli to the villages (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 31; Quilty 2007b). This commercial activity meant that Nahr el-Bared had strong economic and social ties with the adjacent area, which translated into many mixed marriages between Lebanese and Palestinian refugees.

However, things changed dramatically and fast at the end of 2006 and early 2007 with the arrival of Islamic militants, who later called themselves Fatah al-Islam. The story of Fatah al-Islam is difficult to piece together, as many of its alleged members are either dead or in prison. However, its composition of mostly

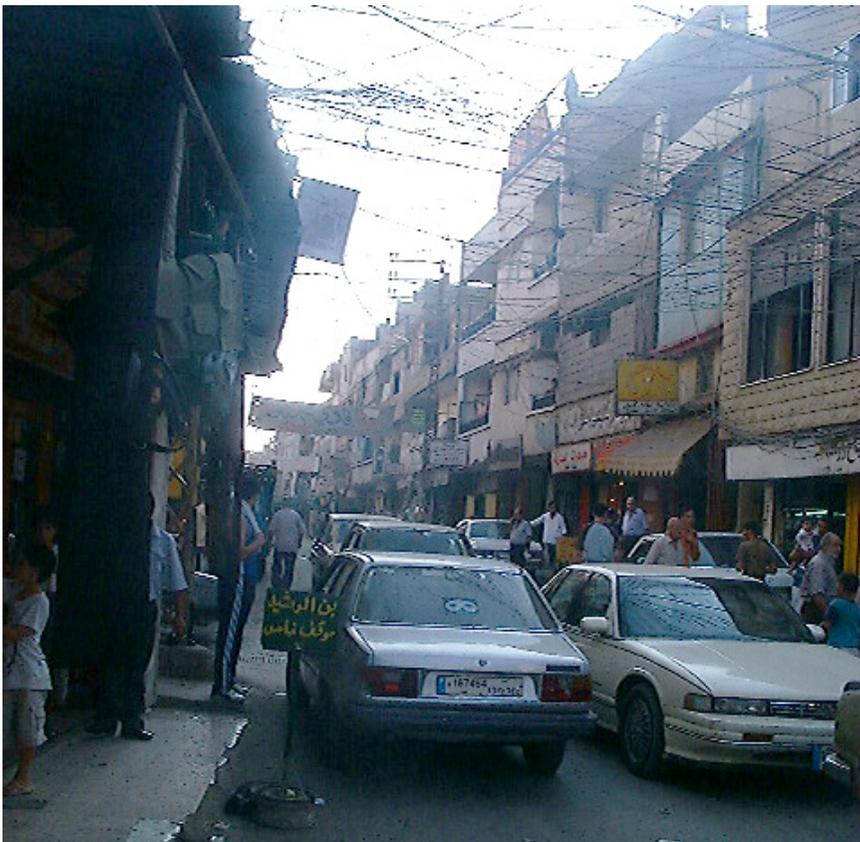


FIGURE 3. A commercial street in Nahr el-Bared before its destruction. Source: Wikimedia.

non-Palestinians is not in dispute, as even the Lebanese Judiciary Council confirmed it (Haddad 2010, 559). Its origins, by contrast, are debated. The Lebanese government of the time, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, saw Fatah al-Islam as a Syrian implant in Lebanon with ties to al-Qaeda, while the opposition, led by Hezbollah, saw Fatah al-Islam as the creation of the Future Movement, accusing it of wanting to create its own militia. Ultimately, what became apparent was that all parties, including the Lebanese government and its armed forces, were well aware of the movement and settlement of these militants in the Palestinian camps in the north of Lebanon (International Crisis Group 2009, 26; Khalidi and Riskedahl 2007, 28–29). The newcomers were not welcomed by the camp population (*The Daily Star* 2006). Instead, many residents staged protests demanding that Fatah al-Islam leave the camp (Bathist 2007a; Ramadan 2009, 155; Taarnby and Hallundbaek 2008, 5–6). Two separate armed incidents ensued in which one member of Fatah al-Islam was stabbed to death (*The Daily Star* 2007); a month later a member of Fatah was shot dead (Bathist 2007b).

On May 19, 2007, members of Fatah al-Islam robbed a bank in Amyun, a small town south of Tripoli. Subsequently, the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) raided their apartments in Tripoli and a firefight ensued (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 34). In response, Fatah al-Islam launched a brutal night attack against the Lebanese army barracks outside Nahr el-Bared camp. Twenty-seven Lebanese soldiers died, some of whom were killed in their sleep (Human Rights Watch 2007c; Khalidi and Riskedahl 2007, 28–29).<sup>9</sup> The army responded by carrying out heavy and indiscriminate shelling of the camp. The battle turned into a hundred-day conflict and was framed by the Lebanese government in terms of the global “war on terror,” with Fatah al-Islam labeled an international terrorist organization linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>10</sup>

At the time, there was no public criticism against the army’s actions in Nahr el-Bared (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 34; Quilty 2007b). Instead, strong support was shown across the entire Lebanese political spectrum.<sup>11</sup> While it was the Hariri government that led the offensive on the camp, Nasrallah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, labeled both the attacking of the camp and the army as red lines. However, no action was taken as the army systematically demolished the camp. While all parties claimed that the battle was against Fatah al-Islam rather than Palestinians, the newly displaced refugees were routinely detained and abused by the Lebanese military as they were fleeing the camp and at different checkpoints around Lebanon. Harassment included being stripped, forced to lie on the ground, being kicked, beaten, insulted and humiliated (Amnesty International 2008; Human Rights Watch 2007b).

Initially the attack continued for three consecutive days, causing the death of twenty-seven Palestinian civilians, before a cease-fire was declared which allowed the first wave of refugees to flee (Human Rights Watch 2007c). Most of the displaced went to Beddawi camp to stay with relatives and friends or to shelter in offices,

garages, storerooms, and schools (FAFO 2007, 3). The refugees initially thought that their displacement from their camp was temporary; however as days turned into weeks they soon feared that there would not be a return to Nahr el-Bared camp. Young children and adults alike began to voice their fears, despair, and most importantly their longing for their homes and neighborhoods, regardless of all their drawbacks, as expressed in the song quoted at the beginning of this section.

The position of the Palestinian leadership was deeply unpopular during the conflict. On the fourth day of fighting and as civilians were being killed indiscriminately, the PLO representative to Lebanon, Abbas Zaki, declared to the media that the PLO had no objections to the Lebanese military sending troops to Nahr el-Bared, that “this is a Lebanese decision” (quoted in Qawas and Zaatari 2007). Many also pointed out that if the Palestinians had a united and effective leadership, then the conflict and the camp’s destruction might have been averted as the armed factions themselves could have acted against Fatah al-Islam (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 33; Ramadan 2009, 161). Abu Ali, a resident of Nahr el-Bared in his fifties, expressed this commonly held-view:

The crisis of Nahr el-Bared was the biggest indicator of the weakness of the factions and our leaders. Look at where we are today! They took the decision to displace 30,000 refugees! For what? Because they were not able to take a decision to fight a gang?<sup>12</sup>

The battle continued until September 2, 2007, when the Lebanese army declared its first victory over global terrorism. Chawki Masri, the army chief of staff during the conflict, later declared:

The LAF’s [Lebanese Armed Forces] morale was very high after the conflict and we were proud that all the Lebanese, and the US, UK, Spain and other friendly countries, were astonished by how we were able to throw a 4,000-pound bomb. They came here and asked how we did all this with such limited capabilities, and they told us they were very proud. It was a very good sign for us that not only the Lebanese but also the great armies from around the world said they were proud of what we did in Nahr el-Bared (International Crisis Group 2012, 3).

The army had effectively won a battle fought against a group of militants whose numbers, even by the account of the Lebanese government, did not exceed 450.<sup>13</sup> In the process, the conflict led to the death of 42 civilians, 168 Lebanese soldiers and 220 militants, as well as the displacement of over 30,000 refugees (Amnesty International 2008). All 1700 buildings in the old camp were reduced to rubble (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 34), and about 65 percent of the new camp buildings needed repair (IRIN 2007), including 100 totally demolished buildings (Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi 2010, 34).<sup>14</sup>

Once the battle ended residents were denied access to the ruins of their own homes. While the army had declared that the camp was disarmed and free from Fatah al-Islam, they still did not allow Palestinians to return. Instead, they surrounded the new and old camps with two sets of barbed wire and concrete

blocks. Checkpoints, manned by the Lebanese army, now controlled the entrance of people and goods. The old camp was completely off-limits to its previous residents.

This was the continuation of a long series of humiliating experiences for the residents of Nahr el-Bared, who now needed a military permit to access rubble. Even more upsetting was that once they got access to their homes and businesses in the camp they found them vandalized, looted, and burned. Racist graffiti had been written on the walls insulting Palestinians (Amnesty International 2008; Ramadan 2009, 2010). Upon visiting a burned-out and looted dental clinic in Nahr el-Bared camp in October 2007 I saw “Fuck you Palestine! With regards from the 5th Brigade” spray painted on the walls. While it is hard to believe that the destruction of the entire camp was a military necessity in a fight against a group of 450 militants, the accompanying looting, burning, vandalism, racism, and the subsequent militarization of the disarmed camp made it clear that Palestinian refugees were being treated as a guilty party. Although Lebanese officials repeatedly declared that Fatah al-Islam was not a Palestinian entity, they nonetheless seemed to blame the Palestinian community for their emergence (International Crisis Group 2009, 12). Residents felt used as scapegoats yet again, as they knew full well that the Lebanese government and its security apparatuses were all well aware of the presence of the militants who formed Fatah al-Islam, and had allowed them to move around and operate openly. Furthermore, Palestinians felt that by leaving the camp they had in effect sided with the army. They saw their departure from the camp as supporting the military campaign, as the army could lead a more aggressive assault on the camp without the fear of civilian casualties. Their subsequent treatment by the army as a suspect community only aggravated their feelings of betrayal and distrust.

Finally, in May 2008 the army commander during the conflict, General Michel Suleiman, became the consensus presidential candidate for the two main rival political coalitions who had been deadlocked for months (Quilty 2008). To mark the occasion, Lebanese newspaper *The Daily Star* published a biography of the general entitled “Nahr al-Bared victory launched Suleiman to Baabda” (Elghossain 2008). Simply put, the destruction of the second largest Palestinian camp in Lebanon became a source of unity for Lebanese politicians.

#### PRODUCTION NOTES

Like any researcher, I started my fieldwork with my own set of ideas and goals (Abu-Lughod 1991; Fontana and Frey 2005; Shehata 2006). I am a Palestinian refugee, but one who was born with Lebanese citizenship and who has studied and lived in the West for many years. My first visit to a Palestinian refugee camp was in 2005 when I volunteered to teach English in Shatila camp in Beirut. However, my formative experience came at the end of 2006, when I began working with



FIGURE 4. Marching cows. Photograph: Perla Issa.

Palestinian refugees from Iraq. They were being kidnapped, tortured, killed, expelled from their homes, and their neighborhoods were being shelled. Neighboring countries closed their borders to them and four different camps were erected on the borders between Jordan, Syria and Iraq. This experience opened my eyes to the inadequacy of the current Palestinian political leadership, as neither the Palestinian Authority (PA) nor the PLO were willing to act.

As an outcome of this experience, colleagues and I decided to make a six-part documentary series exploring the experiences and opinions of Palestinian refugees around the world.<sup>15</sup> Through the making of the series and its screening I came to be exposed even more to Palestinians' dissatisfaction with their leadership. Out of the three hundred interviewees only one person responded positively to the question: "Does anyone represent you politically today?" The remaining interviewees responded negatively. The uniformity of the "No" answer across geography, age, and socio-economic status was striking.

At around the same time I began to visit Nahr el-Bared and Beddawi camps in the north of Lebanon. I became involved in local initiatives trying to rebuild the camp and to break the military siege that was imposed on the camp after the end of the battle. Throughout these times the inadequacy and impotence of the Palestinian factions and leadership was painfully visible and a constant source of discussion among local activists. These experiences made me begin my research

project, at the onset of which I believed that there was no greater, or more important, step for Palestinian activists to work on than on finding a way to change our current political representation. I wanted to know how discredited factions remain the center of political life in spite of widespread condemnation.

I decided to carry out my research in Nahr el-Bared camp, as I had developed sustained relationships with many of its residents over the three years of my involvement. However, this prior engagement with my eventual “field site” did not shield me from experiencing ethical dilemmas, which can be conveyed through one simple incident. About a month into my fieldwork, I was introduced to a group of young kindergarten teachers. The head of the NGO explained that I was a PhD student doing research in the camp. She then left the room to attend to other business. The young women all looked at me, waiting for my questions. When I did not come forward with any, one of them asked me, “What do you want? You want to solve our problems?” The sarcasm in her voice could not be mistaken.

This incident brought to the fore all the dilemmas I experienced conducting research in an over-researched and under-privileged community (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013). Switching from being an “activist” to a “researcher” in Nahr el-Bared, I found it difficult to accept my new position. It seemed so passive. In the past I always felt, rightly or wrongly, that I was part of some immediate action. I believed that I was active, debating particular strategies as well as suggesting and working towards certain courses of action. In contrast, as a researcher, I was trying to go along the normal course of the day and was more interested in listening than talking. This was, after all, the reason why I had chosen to do a PhD. In my prior work I felt I was in too much of a hurry, always visiting the camp with a certain objective and never stopping to just hang out with people. I now wanted to take my time, to observe and listen. This yearning to take it slow continuously clashed with my desire to be—or maybe it is just to feel—more useful. While I told myself that I was doing this research with the hopes of bettering our understanding of the dynamics of the community, I could never ignore the fact that it was I who would ultimately benefit from this research, as I would gain a PhD while the circumstances of the community would remain the same. This point was certainly not lost on the young women meeting me in the NGO that day. They were highlighting the role often taken by researchers, who would express sympathy and exhibit a desire to form friendships only to disappear after their fieldwork was done (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013, 504–5). Respondents in the field continuously expressed their fear that I would soon forget about them. It was in great part for this reason that I chose to conduct research with individuals and families I had known for several years prior to my research. These refugees already had longstanding relations with me. I hoped that their fears would therefore be minimized.

There was an additional reason for wanting to work with past acquaintances. In short, they already knew me. They were familiar with my background, my past

experiences and stances on political issues. This created a sense of openness and honesty conducive to building trust (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 77–88; Kanaaneh 1997). In order to study the everyday interactions of Palestinian refugees with political factions I needed my respondents to understand my opinions and thoughts as much as I needed to understand theirs. I wanted to know how and why people joined factions, how they obtained aid, how and why they did or did not participate in factional events, how their relationships evolved over time, what their fears, doubts, and regrets were over the years. Those were private and sensitive issues that I could only explore through knowing people intimately and over time (Schatz 2009). Therefore, I considered mutual trust to be the most important factor in determining my choice of camp, host family, and interviewees. While I certainly did not shy away from meeting new people, I only performed in-depth conversations with people that I felt trusted me and understood my research and my motivation.

In my research I did not prioritize or focus on a given faction; again, my criteria in selecting my interviewees was mutual trust. In an effort to obtain more honest and sincere answers I believed that it was important that I only interview people whom I felt understood why I was asking the questions I was. These people, as it happened, were affiliated with different factions. This was an advantage, as I was able to look at political membership across factions. However, my choice of Nahr el-Bared camp implied that a good majority of my respondents would be linked to the PFLP and DFLP, as those two factions had the largest presence in the camp in the form of well-funded and large NGOs. Nevertheless my interlocutors did encompass a number of other factions, including the Islamic Jihad, the PFLP-GC, Fatah, Fatah al-Intifada, and Hamas.

I lived in Nahr el-Bared camp, in the north of Lebanon, for seven months with the Talal family, whom I had known for over three years prior to my research. The family was very generous to allow me to stay with them as long as I needed, even though their financial situation was very difficult. I accepted the family's offer to host me for two reasons. First, I was acquainted with their extended family. In particular, I was close to Um Muhammad's, the mother's, family. I knew her brother and his family very well, as well as her own mother. Those relationships made my presence in the Talal family's home less peculiar. Second, I was encouraged by the fact that in the previous three years they had never treated me like a special guest that needed to be pampered. They always made me feel welcomed without ever making me feel like I was burdening them with, for example, the cooking of special meals. While I never really lost the status of guest, I nevertheless felt like I was part of the household. Family fights would happen in front of me and people would often ask me for my opinion on personal matters. The Talal family's household became my home in the camp, where I was able to rest, read, write notes, or just relax. I usually spent my mornings and evenings with

the family, and in the afternoon I visited other acquaintances. I was free to come and go as I wished, as the family provided me with a key to their home, although I took care never to be out past 9:00 p.m. They were always very considerate of my “work,” although it was sometimes obvious that they did not understand why I was troubling myself so much with Palestinian politics and not just getting married and having children.

In addition to participant-observation, my research was also based on open-ended Arabic-language interviews (Bevir 2006; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2006; Maynes 2008). In total, I conducted seventy-three in-depth interviews: fifty-one with people I had known for at least two years prior to my research and twenty-two with those I met during my fieldwork. For the remainder of the book I will refer to those two categories as “close” and as “newly-met” Palestinians. In my interviews I included both women (thirty-one) and men (forty-two), as well as thirty Palestinians of the *thawra* generation—the generation that lived through the Palestinian *thawra* and the Lebanese civil war, born before 1975—as well as forty-three members of what I refer to as the “young generation,” born after 1975. As mentioned earlier, in selecting the interviewees I took extra care to approach people whom I felt knew me and understood my research. In this sense my discussions with the refugees resembled more a mutual exchange of experiences than interviews (Kanaaneh 1997, 5; Soss 2006, 135; Worth 2006) and I was able to tape-record forty-three interviews without feeling like the technology was intruding on our conversation. All names have been altered to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees.

#### ACCESSING NAHR EL-BARED CAMP

In December 2010, when I began making arrangements to move to Nahr el-Bared, I needed a permit from the military to access the camp. I began by asking fellow Palestinian and Lebanese activists for advice. Everyone’s answer was less than encouraging—that is, until I met the wife of a prominent businessman who offered to help. Her staff submitted an application for my permit and I received a call on the following day from the army asking me to meet with the head of the Lebanese Military Intelligence (LMI) in the North. I went to the appointment with a heavy heart; it is never an enjoyable experience to meet with military intelligence in any country. The head of the LMI in the North asked me about my research and for whom I was doing it. Once he realized that I was a PhD student and not an NGO worker he called the army’s Chief of Staff on the phone in my presence. They discussed my situation and the Chief of Staff asked to see me in person. My heart sank even further; I now needed to go to the Ministry of Defense and meet with the Lebanese army’s second-in-command to be able to conduct research in a Palestinian refugee camp, which was already under heavy military surveillance.



FIGURE 5. Barbed wire fence around Nahr el-Bared camp. Photograph: Perla Issa.

I went to the appointment but was thankfully accompanied by an aide of the businessman, and surprisingly—or maybe I should not have been surprised—the meeting went very smoothly. I was not even asked about the topic of my research as the conversation revolved around the weather and the political situation in Lebanon. I was then taken to a different room with a couple of officers and I wrote down a brief description of my research. The officers proceeded to tell me about the “liberation of Nahr el-Bared” while showing me pictures of the different types of bombs and ammunition that were used in the war that obliterated the camp. At the end of the encounter I was told that my permit was approved for a full year but there was still a simple bureaucratic procedure they needed to perform and that they would call me once it was ready. I was ecstatic and a bit in shock about how unreal the meeting was.

About two weeks later I received a phone call from an army officer informing me that the permit had been granted. I was delighted and I asked him where I should go to obtain it. He replied that he did not know, that his job was simply to inform me of my permit’s approval. The very next day I received another call from yet another army officer who explained that he had been informed that I obtained a permit to conduct research in Nahr el-Bared but that he regretted to inform me that “Nahr el-Bared was empty.” I did not understand and asked him to elaborate. He explained that the residents of Nahr el-Bared had not returned to the camp

yet; that no one was there. I responded that I was aware that the refugees had not returned to the original camp, but that my permit was for the adjacent area where Palestinians currently lived. The fact that I had applied to the adjacent area of Nahr el-Bared was actually written on the permit and the officer should have known this. He excused himself and hung up.

A few days later I received a call from the businessman's aide, telling me to go meet again with the head of the LMI in the north, this time to get my permit. I went back to Qobeh on my own, and I was told that I had obtained the "approval" for my one-year permit from the Chief of Staff's office but that they—the northern LMI office—were the ones who issued the permit and had the last word. I was again asked about my research topic, which I again explained. I was then issued a two-month permit and was told that I needed to visit them every two months to renew my permit and to provide them with a copy of "what I write." I explained that I would not be writing anything immediately and that I would be happy to provide them with a copy of what I would publish. They responded that, no, they wanted a copy of my field notes. I objected and explained that it was against my ethical standards and against university rules. They said I had no choice. I left the office very angry, with a two-month permit in my hands.

For the next two months I lived in Nahr el-Bared camp. Once my permit expired I went back to the head of the LMI in the north; he was not present and I went to see his lieutenant. Sitting in his office and facing a series of framed joint Lebanese and American training certificates in "interviewing" and "counter-terrorism," I explained that I could not hand in my field notes and that I could provide them with my work once it was published. I added that it would be unfair to hold me accountable for what I wrote in the field, that my ideas were not fully developed yet, and that I should be held accountable for my ideas once I deemed them ready to be published. I was told bluntly, "we are not interested in your ideas but in *information!*" I pointed out that the Lebanese army was in the camp, so they did not need me to gather information for them. The lieutenant's only answer was that "Nahr el-Bared is special." I was given another permit for ten days and told that by then I needed to give them my notes. I took the permit and decided to leave the camp within ten days. I spent those remaining days in the camp informing my friends of the situation and explaining why I had to leave. Then I went to Beirut and did not attempt to renew my permit any longer.

Later during the month of July, my friends in Nahr el-Bared called to inform me that the army had announced that women no longer needed a permit to enter the camp. I decided to give it a try and went to one of its checkpoints, which consisted of two military posts, the first manned by the LMI and the other by the army. At that point in time women no longer needed to stop at the LMI post but could proceed directly to the army's post. I just walked past the LMI officers and went straight to the army's post. A soldier took my ID, wrote down my informa-

tion on a notebook, and told me I could go in. He did not call headquarters. This was how I entered the camp for the remainder of the year.

This story shows how arbitrary rules regulating Palestinian life in Lebanon can be. A permit system was enacted and then revoked without explanation and without any change in the camp's situation. An officer of the LMI was unable to explain to me why he needed me to be an informant, his only answer was that "Nahr el-Bared was special."

. . .

Living in Nahr el-Bared camp was a deeply humbling experience. Not only was I constantly made aware of my privileges as a Palestinian with Lebanese citizenship, but more importantly, I was repeatedly faced with the inadequacies of my own explanations and understandings of Palestinian politics and of life in the camps in Lebanon (Pader 2006). My interlocutors in the field often asked me what I had learned from my research, what I had "uncovered." Nothing was more humbling than relating to them what had taken me several months to understand only to be met with a "that's obvious" stare. Refugees saw little value in my attempts to grasp their understanding of their world. What was the point of me learning what was so obvious to them? Wasn't my time better spent exposing the complex and multilayered system of domination that Palestinian refugees were subjected to? While the latter project is certainly crucial, I contend that understanding the internal dynamics of an oppressed community is just as vital (Ortner 1995). Exploring the quotidian interactions and encounters between Palestinian refugees and factions brings us valuable insights into the nature of factions, how we should study them, or work with—or against—they as activists interested in bettering Palestinian political representation. Indeed the very questions I ask about our conventional understanding of factions as building-like structures were directly precipitated by the alternative methodological approach I adopted.