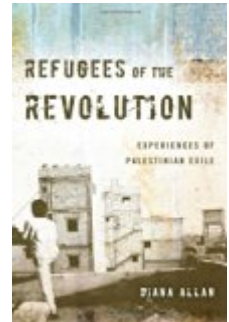


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Refugees of the Revolution

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), some 425,000 Palestinian refugees have registered with the agency in Lebanon since the creation of Israel and the subsequent expulsion and displacement of the native Palestinian population in 1948. Currently about 260,000 still live in refugee camps scattered around Lebanon, including 9,154 who reside in the camp of Shatila on the outskirts of the Lebanese capital Beirut. In addition, a large number of refugees are essentially unaccounted for because they never registered with UNRWA. *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* is an ethnography of the Palestinian residents of Shatila, which, along with the neighboring area known as Sabra, was the site of the horrific 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians at the hands of right-wing Lebanese militias acting under the oversight of the invading Israeli army. Drawing on the pioneering work of Rosemary Sayigh (*Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* [1994]) and aiming to pro-

duce what Lila Abu-Lughod calls “ethnographies of the particular,” Diana Allan, a British anthropologist and activist, has written an important, provocative, and compelling account of the “fractured,” “embattled,” and “pragmatic” lives, and the “lived experiences” of the camp’s Palestinian residents (p. 1).

The “revolution” in the title of the book refers to the Palestinian Resistance Movement’s arrival in Lebanon in the early seventies, an era known commonly among the Palestinians as *al thawra*, “the revolution.” The Shatila camp effectively became the headquarters of the Palestinian leadership, ushering in a period that residents of Shatila have described as a “time of considerable prosperity and conviction” (p. 3). With the evacuation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon in 1982, the residents of Shatila, like the rest of the Palestinians of Lebanon, lost their protectors, providers, and employers, and became refugees a second time, originally as refugees of

the 1948 catastrophe (*Nakba*) when they lost their homes and country, and now as refugees of the Palestinian revolution that had sheltered and protected them. As a result, unemployment levels in all camps, including Shatila, are extremely high, and approximately two-thirds of Palestinian refugees subsist on less than six dollars per day.

Expelled by Israel, marginalized and impoverished by Lebanon, and ultimately deserted by the Palestinian revolution, the stateless and abandoned refugees of Shatila were left to fend for themselves, with some support from UNRWA, various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and some international solidarity networks. In focusing on the “pragmatics of everyday life” in the camp, Allan explores how the refugees have come to terms with “radical exclusion, alienation, and the indignities of refugee existence, and the daily struggle with poverty, loss, and political disenchantment” (p. 27). In doing so, she gives voice and agency to the refugees themselves, exploring with them their inner feelings, the questions they ask, and the compensatory tactics they employ as they consider all the options open to them. Individuals, as Allan asserts, are not “objects of knowledge but active practitioners” who should be allowed to speak for themselves (p. 28). She grounds her theoretical and methodological approaches in the anthropology of practice; the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his theory of practice and his notion of *illusio* (the ability to invest oneself in a meaningful life); and the language of social phenomenology. This is a book not only about how refugees relate to the past, a topic that many authors have extensively explored, but also, and more significantly, about how they orient themselves to the future. The past is the source of national and community identity, the remembered, the imagined, and the ever-present Palestine. It is built on a discourse of steadfastness and eventual return to Palestine; its language is the language of what is arguably the single most important tenet of Palestinian identity and Palestinian exile, namely, the right of return, held dear especially by

Palestinian refugees, and recognized and established by international law.

While the orientation to the future is filled with talk of the present realities of the camp residents—discrimination, repression, and poverty—it is also filled with the “murmured” and whispered talk of the seeming futility of waiting to return to Palestine and the need for assimilation, emigration, or asylum (p. 32). No one is willing to concede the right of return, but the poverty and harsh realities of everyday life are forcing people to rethink the language of the national discourse. What does the right of return mean as one tries to imagine a personal and national future? This is a hard question for all Palestinians, but especially so for those living in camps like Shatila. How should one think of the return? Is the return actual, both physically and spatially? Should it take the form of monetary compensation in return for resettlement elsewhere? Is it national, communal, and symbolic, perhaps culminating in a truncated Palestinian Authority state on the West Bank and Gaza? Or is it a personal one, one that demands the return of humanity and personal dignity, the recognition of the injustice of the *Nakba* that must be acknowledged first and foremost by the Israeli state and its people? In an interview, a refugee named Munir expressed these sentiments loudly and clearly. When asked by Allan if he imagined himself returning to Haifa from where his family was expelled, Munir stated: “My life is not in Haifa; what is there for me now?... I want the right to knock on the door of my father’s house and say to the people living there, ‘This is my father’s house, which you took from him in 1948. I understand that you are living here now, and that’s okay. I don’t want to live here, but I want you to acknowledge that you took this from him and from me.’ ... When we talk about return, this is what we are talking about—the return of our dignity” (p. 195).

Allan’s initial contact with the people of Shatila came as part of her volunteer work with a women’s NGO in the camp. Returning a year later to

do anthropological research on narrative re-creation of pre-1948 Palestine, she was struck by conditions in the camp and especially by the “willful optimism, resilience, and forbearance” of the people of the camp, particularly Umm Mahmud, the woman from whom Allan rented a room and who extended ties of fictive kinship and support to her. She shifted the focus of her research away from the “discursive continuities of nationalism toward the contingencies of everyday experience” (p. 21). The six chapters that form the core of this book provide the reader with a clear and vivid appreciation of the daily lives of the camp’s residents, their struggles and challenges as well as their hopes and dreams.

In the book’s first chapter, “Commemorative Economies,” Allan describes and critiques what she calls the “cottage industry of commemoration” of the Nakba and subsequent disasters that have befallen the Palestinians in Lebanon (p. 40). While collecting oral stories from the refugees, she was struck by the “practiced, even stylized” nature of the memories of the refugees of 1948, which are now “unconsciously performed” and have become “standardized and circulate almost as commodities” (pp. 46-47). NGOs and solidarity networks are complicit, directly and indirectly, in the perpetuation of a Nakba industry, a heroic nationalist discourse of suffering that “obscure[s] localized, less tangible legacies of 1948 currently existing in the memories, experiences, and hopes of refugees in the diaspora” (p. 45). The chapter ends with interviews with the younger generation of Palestinian refugees who never experienced the Nakba, who are “wary of ... fetishization of the national entity,” and who “refuse to inherit” the Nakba (p. 61). Allan’s call for a new scholarship that “moves beyond the coercive harmony of a national identity rooted in past history in order to include emergent forms of subjectivity ... and [recognizes] that these new forms may privilege individual aspiration over collective, nationalist imperatives” is heartfelt and valid, but it is also a bit problematic (pp. 66-67). The split between individual and collective

aspirations is at some level artificial and need not be absolute; the focus on the subjective exigencies of the refugees’ everyday life, so vividly described by Allan, need not preclude a continued emphasis on the political and historical discourse surrounding the Palestinians’ national hopes and aspirations, even if the memories are stylistically performed. After all, the Palestinians, like all other people, have the right to narrate their history and perform their culture as they see, experience, and feel it, regardless of how artificial, inauthentic, or staged it may seem to the outside world.

Chapter 2, “Economic Subjectivity and Everyday Solidarities,” considers the changing political economy of Shatila following the departure of the PLO in 1982. Allan shows how structural poverty transforms social relations, reducing the role of kinship as an important principle that governs familial rights, obligations, and responsibilities. Through the lives of three camp women, she demonstrates the decline of customary relations and communal solidarity built around notions of “moral familism,” and the simultaneous rise of “new forms of sociality and support motivated by the imperative of economic survival and by an ethics of care rooted in the shared experience of privation” (p. 73). Though still active, village associations that provided financial support for camp dwellers gave way to the mosque as a source of funds for needy families. Friends and neighbors have gradually replaced relatives as a source of social and economic support, although as Allan points out, the “primordial ties of kin and village ... have an afterlife and are being newly inhabited” (p. 99). Political loyalties and allegiances based on nationalist goals and collective interests have been replaced by an entrenched system of “clientelism and factionalism,” made necessary by the politics of everyday existence (p. 93). The proliferation of NGOs following the departure of the PLO did little to ameliorate the economic duress that camp inhabitants faced. Accusations of corruption as money was being siphoned off and the “normalization of dependency” were mentioned by camp

residents as they questioned the ubiquitous presence of NGOs in the camp (p. 94). The support provided by UNRWA, which had reclaimed its role as the agency responsible for providing water, electricity, and sanitation services following the departure of the PLO, was paltry and subject to crippling restrictions, such as a provision that only those under sixty could be granted assistance in situations of chronic illness (p. 69).

Continuing her theme of the “need to develop alternative paradigms for conceptualizing camp communities and Palestinian identity” and “shifting analytical attention away from the discursive continuities of nationalism toward the contingencies of lived experience and material practice in local environments,” Allan considers the politics of “electrical piracy” by camp residents as a form of resistance, the subject of her book’s third chapter, “Stealing Power” (p. 102). She traces the history of electricity provision to Shatila, focusing on the camp residents’ relationship with Lebanon’s state-run power company known by its French acronym EdL. The void left by the departure of the PLO was filled by the elected “People’s Committee,” which became the principal mediator for the camp’s residents not just with EdL but also with the Lebanese authorities. Her description of the People’s Committee elections in 2005, during which the community attempted to confront corruption and reclaim moral leadership, neatly illustrates how material struggles reshaped political engagement in the camp. She concludes the chapter by explaining that times of crisis produce sporadic actions that “effect political change by producing structured, harmonized, and articulate movements [that are] neither explicitly nationalist nor ideological in structure”; these movements, she argues, become intelligible only when one considers them “in relation to an intricate politics of everyday survival” (pp. 134, 135). She is correct to point out that people’s daily struggles need not be imbued with nationalist or ideological motives; stealing electrical power is but one example of how the poor develop strategies of survival, re-

gardless of their sense of national identity and their nationalist aspirations. It is interesting to note that electricity theft is an effective and popular strategy used by many refugees and poor people all over the world. Reports coming out of the Zaatari refugee camp housing Syrian refugees in Jordan relate similar incidents of electric power piracy.

In chapter 4, “Dream Talk, Futurity, and Hope,” Allan explores the world of dream narration and interpretation practiced by women in the camp. She calls it “dream talk,” explaining it as a ritual that “informs how people relate to one another, even assert power over one another” (p. 138). She is interested in dream talk not in a Freudian psychological sense, but in its social significance both as a “discursive practice to make life more bearable or facilitate continuity in the face of rupture” and as a “medium through which to explore future-oriented thought and imaginative practice, individual and shared,” one that can “enable refugees to imagine a future different from their present” (pp. 140, 139). The author’s interest in dream interpretation, a highly gendered activity, was met with skepticism by men in the camp. “Do dreams have any bearing on the larger political questions and concerns of the community,” asked Abu Ali, the father of Umm Mahmud. I admit that Allan’s response to the question—that dream talk is “inherently political because it shapes social and moral relations and establishes new forms of connectedness, both in the actual world of the camp and in invisible but meaningful worlds beyond,” and that it “forms the basis of reciprocal relations that can extend beyond the human to include the divine and the invisible”—left me unconvinced and unsatisfied (pp. 157, 138). Perhaps I am one of the “rationalists and secularists [for whom] dreams are murky, obscure, and unverifiable,” but I confess I find it hard to see how her notion of dream talk can enhance the arguments that she pursues in the book (p. 139).

The remaining chapters return to what I believe is the heart of the book: the future of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and by extension Palestinian refugees elsewhere. As has become clear to the rest of the world, the possibility of any immediate and just solution to the Palestine question is at best remote. More than anyone else, the refugees of Shatila have known this sad truth for a long time, as it has been obvious to them that while there is little likelihood of a bright future for any Palestinian refugees, prospects for the refugees of Shatila and those living in Lebanon's other camps are especially bleak. They are people caught in an untenable situation, an "existential impasse," with no promise of hope for a meaningful life (p. 174). Torn between attachments to a camp that ideologically and symbolically represents both their national identity and their resistance to displacement and resettlement on the one hand, and the "hostage" state of constant struggle, dispossession, and "terminal limbo" on the other, many have turned to emigration and asylum as practical and material options that would afford promise of a better life in Europe or elsewhere (pp. 188, 173). In so doing, they are clearly aware that leaving the camp and moving to Europe or Canada undermines the right of return which they continue to hold on to dearly, but perhaps only rhetorically. As Allan points out, "lives established elsewhere have unsettled and redefined the relationship between home and homeland in subtle but significant ways," thus complicating "the relation of refugees to a Palestinian 'homeland' and by extension the meaning of 'home' and 'return'" (pp. 187, 188).

As discussions about the right of return become more open and more inclusive, various meanings and forms of return are being considered and debated by Palestinians—from all social and economic classes, both refugees and non-refugees—using language that was considered forbidden until recently. The survey conducted in 2003 by Khalil Shikaki of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research led to both anger and much soul-searching among Palestinians in its

finding that if the "legal and material conditions of refugees in Lebanon were to improve, the majority would prefer to remain, with only 23 percent electing to return to their ancestral villages" (p. 202). In response, an international Right of Return Movement sought to define the right of return in purely nationalistic terms, culminating in the 2011 "March of Return" in which Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan marched to the Israeli borders; the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* described this as the "nightmare scenario Israel feared since its inception" (p. 203). While in practical terms the march had no territorial impact, it nonetheless served to solidify the Palestinian refugees as a "newly visible political collective" of "rights-bearing claimants" (p. 209).

Recognizing the extreme delicacy of critically discussing the discourse over the right of return, and aware of its power as a signifier of Palestinian national identity, Allan is careful to clearly state that her "scrutinizing of the moral ambiguities of the discourse of return for communities like Shatila ... [is not] morally prescriptive"; rather, her argument takes to task the "scholars, writers, and activists who constitute a kind of loose-knit international solidarity group for Palestinians" (p. 211). She is very clear in her demand for "more supple and reflective forms of solidarity, forms that engage and integrate the range of refugee perspectives on this issue." And lest the reader think that she is talking only about the work of others, she explicitly and unambiguously includes herself among the "scholars, activists and chroniclers ... who set out to give voice and end up taking it away" (p. 213). The book is suffused with self-doubt and worry—about the implications of what she is describing, about the fear that her ethnographic descriptions are not sufficiently nuanced, and about the manner in which she conveys to the reader what the camp's inhabitants told her and what she has observed. In the final analysis, of course, Allan is talking here about representation: Who speaks for the refugees in the camps, and by extension, who speaks for the Palestinians as a

whole? The failure of so many Palestinian political structures and the factionalism that plagues Palestinian politics and society have made the question of representation that much more thorny and critical.

This is an honest and provocative book that demands close reading and clear understanding of what the author describes and writes about. Allan is a very careful and introspective writer, acutely aware of every word she writes. She understands how easily these words can be misconstrued and misinterpreted. A compassionate sympathizer with the Palestinian predicament, she nevertheless places her duty as an ethnographer and anthropologist above her personal commitments as an activist. "While I have reservations about the way my work may be interpreted and used, as an anthropologist, my first duty," she writes in the book's conclusion, "is to represent the concerns and experiences of my interlocutors and friends, as they have described them to me" (p. 224); in this richly researched, amply annotated, and theoretically grounded ethnography, she has done so eloquently and courageously.

This book should be read by anyone interested in the question of Palestine and the Palestinian people, especially by politicians and diplomats who debate and negotiate the future of the Palestinians as refugees, as a people, and as a nation. It should also be read by Palestinians around the world: the "elite" who have the luxury of abstractly negotiating their personal identity and their ties to Palestine; middle-class Palestinians who have assimilated to varying degrees, throughout the world; those who live as Palestinian citizens of Israel, or have lived under Israeli occupation for many decades (West Bank), or are under perpetual siege by Israel (Gaza); and the refugees who continue to live in camps throughout the Middle East. The themes and issues the book discusses should be part of the global Palestinian conversation, in both its private and its public domains. Most especially, however, this book should

be read by Israelis who—knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly, willingly or unwillingly—ultimately bear so much of the responsibility for the misery and misfortune that the refugees of Shatila, and many other camps in Lebanon and elsewhere, have had to endure.

Allan rightfully insists that the ambivalence and disaffection among refugees that she documents cannot be construed to mean that "Zionism has won," nor to in any way "undermine the rights and claims of the refugees" (p. 223). If anything, this book helps restore to the Palestinians the moral authority that they are entitled to, and that their lives so richly deserve. For new generations of Palestinians to come, the right of return may be defined and redefined, interpreted and reinterpreted, imagined and reimagined, in multiple and complex ways, but it will not go away. As long as Israel has a "law of return" that allows any Jewish person anywhere in the world exclusive rights to Israeli citizenship and identity, but excludes the rights of the native peoples who were displaced and dispossessed, Palestinians will always hold on to their "right of return," however they choose to define and interpret it.

Note

[1]. Lila Abu Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137-162.

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