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# Beirut's forgotten Palestinian refugees talk about harsh living conditions

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[Children playing next to their open window in Sabra W'Shatila. Children are educated in UN -run schools but the organisation stops giving our rations to families whose children do not attend school. Photo: Elsa Buchanan](#)

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Unlike Jordan or Turkey, which have been receiving thousands of Syrian refugees, Lebanon has no official absorption policy towards those whose escape was fraught with danger.

In March 2012, Hezbollah rejected the idea that Lebanon should come in help to the Syrian refugees by providing hard-built camps on its territory or allowing them basic rights.

According to the Daily Star, the political party number two, Sheikh Naim Qassem Shi'a argued camps would turn into military pockets. In a conference held in Ghobeiri –South of Beirut- the

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deputy general-secretary explained, “[camps] will be used as a launch pad against Syria and then against Lebanon.”

Qassem also added Lebanon would only follow standard convention of offering humanitarian assistance.

With 28.000 Syrian refugees in the country as for 28 June according to the UN, humanitarian organisations say the country should rethink its humanitarian strategy.

The Syrian refugees' precarious situation comes as a reminder of the 400.000 'forgotten' Palestinians, who have been living in the country for more than sixty years deprived of certain basic rights.

In a cramped building on the Sabra w/Shatila camp, Hajj Mahmoud Harb tries to hop back on his low sofa on one leg to get more comfortable. The 50-year-old was born in Lebanon, in the Palestinian refugee camp south of Beirut where he witnessed the traumatic 1982 massacres and the 1985 War of the Camps.

He explains his family fled the town of Niafa in Palestine in 1948 after the Arab-Israeli war when they lost their home and means of livelihood. Hajj Mahmoud proudly says, “They were the first to arrive at Shatila when it was built in 1949.” The man is among the oldest group of “laji'un” (refugees) in the world.

According to the UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, though 58 Palestinian camps exist throughout the Middle East, Hajj Mahmoud's is one of the poorest and most densely populated.

“The camp was made to accommodate 9.000 people. We are 23.000 now,” explains Hajj Mahmoud with exasperation. He says there are more and more Syrians refugees flocking in here everyday.

The squalid camp is a one-kilometre-square piece of land, separated from the rest of Beirut by high walls and grey empty buildings destroyed by the war, still boasting its scars.

Before reaching Hajj Mahmoud's small front door, one has to walk down the maze of small alleyways and high-rise buildings crammed together: extra flights storeys have been added over the years giving the aspect of a disorganized and continuously changing dwelling.

It is as if one entered another country, another territory far from resplendent Beirut as flags fly overhead, and pictures of Yasser Arafat and Palestinian colours are tagged on the crumbling walls. Electric wires hang from any window and balcony, and meander on walls still bearing the wounds of the many wars, with bullet holes left untouched.

After drinking the strong black coffee prepared by his wife Haji Salima, Mahmoud hops out of his house and takes a tour of his dusty neighbourhood. He explains the UNRWA and organisations such as Al-Najda, Beit Atfal Al-Soumoud, Norwegian Peoples' Aid, and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society run the place.

“Look around you,” he says looking at the shabby infrastructure, “does it look like a place that's being helped?”

Dodging dozens of residents chatting lively in the streets or queuing outside bakery shops, he stops by the only dispensary in the camp run by the PRCS, the Palestinian Red Cross Society.

There is one patient room next to the dentist operating theatre; there doesn't appear to be much equipment; the room is bare except for a hospital bed and a small cupboard behind a curtain. Hajj Mahmoud says hello to the nurse, and explains the place is funded and run by aid and volunteers: “This is the only health centre in Shatila.”

Stepping out of the building, Mahmoud declares, “there are still too many politics in the camp and



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voluntary money is being stolen.” He gives the example of a European funded project supposed to help building sewages system.

“They never finished the project, because the money disappeared,” says the refugee. “The acts are there”, he insists, “but the money keeps being stolen.”

Mahmoud adds, “I believe in aid but I don’t believe in the way it is portrayed.” He says only a change in basic rights, organisation and the economy could help ameliorate the 23.000 residents living conditions.

“We have a huge garbage issue for example: the UN funds garbage clean-up from 9am-2pm, but after that the garbage appears back again.” He adds, “Roads even have to be closed, but that’s not all. We only receive two or three hours of electricity a day, and after that we need to use expensive generators.”

The middle-aged man jokes, “When electricity is out, I leave the house and sit outside. And because I have no mobile connection here, I have to get out of my house and stand in that corner to make a call,” he says pointing out at a dark alley.

Around the house are dozens of children, playing with balls, sitting on ragged sofas, hanging from low windows, collecting rubbish to sell, or helping push handcarts full of fresh vegetables. Mahmoud explains the children here go to two schools run by the UN, but he says there are no facilities for the young ones, who invariably spend their time on the streets.

In the middle of an alleyway, a fight suddenly erupts between three very young looking boys. They must be around six or seven-years-old. Mahmoud explains they are trying to steal plastic and aluminium cans from a little boy who intended to sell them for a few cents. The man tells them off, and the little boy is left alone crying as the two others dash away, holding his treasure and laughing.

“It is difficult here; Lebanon is hard on us,” says Mahmoud. “I am not given citizenship in Lebanon because we are Palestinians. We cannot work as real professionals. We only do workmanship jobs”.

Contrary to Jordan or Syria, who allow some rights to Palestinians – for example, the law stipulates that Palestinians living in Syria have the same duties and responsibilities as Syrian citizens other than nationality and political rights according to UNRWA-, stateless refugees are not given citizenship or allowed basic rights in Lebanon and are barred from 73 jobs (ranging from medicine, law, to engineering).

“We are left with labour jobs, manual jobs,” says Mahmoud who explains that there are no more construction jobs in the camp, so workers have to leave the camp and venture out. “It’s also hard to get work out of here,” adds the refugee.

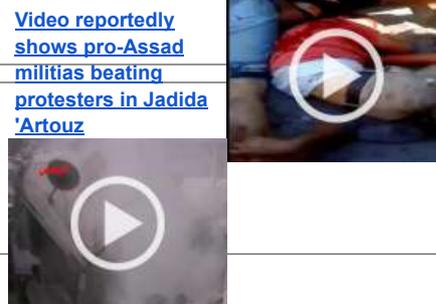
Hajj Mahmoud hasn’t worked in a while, “because of my leg and because I have no rights”. He says his daughter and his son help him with money to afford food from the Souk Sabra, one of the local markets.

“Traditions haven’t really changed here, even if we don’t have a homeland anymore,” he declares; but with politics changing in and out of the camp, Mahmoud says he now has to close his front door.

He is scared of the increasing violence and says it is getting more dangerous everyday in the camp: “It’s not safe anymore, because of the economic situation. The community used to be much closer before.”

Hajj Mahmoud and his friends believe new conspiracies are hitting the camp: rumours says pills are given to children to push them to become drug addicts: “kids are losing their control and their inhibitions go away. They commit theft and other things now.”

He says the children buy under the counter pills, or 5 bottles of cough syrup and down them all at once. “That’s where more violence comes from today: no work, no money, and drugs.”



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A Daily Star investigation had already exposed the rampant drug use in Palestinian camps throughout Lebanon in 2011, quoting a director of Nabaa -a child rights NGO that works with addicts in the Palestinian camps- as saying the problem was “partially because political parties within the camps use drugs ranging from hash to heroin as a recruitment method.” Children are said to start taking prescription drugs before turning to harder ones.

Hajj Mahmoud, who seems to be getting nervous now, says, “The Government doesn’t control it since the [cash] is hidden in banks but... the government only intervenes to stop the trafficking when there is enough money in the banks to benefit from it”.

As proof, Mahmoud states the results of an investigation into Hezbollah’s funding led by the Obama administration in 2011: “Hezbollah makes the most of their money from drug trafficking and money laundering” he says, before declaring the culprits are “always the same,” adding, “everyone has bloods on its hands here.”

Mahmoud is himself a survivor of the “War of the Camps”, and lost his left leg in 1985. He was 23.

Balancing on his crutches he says his three brothers died here, “after the Syrians decided to hit all Palestinian camps.” He says he was fighting for Arafat and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) at the time, because “I had to protect myself and my family.”

The war raged for three years, until 1988. He explains, “The [Syrian-backed coalition headed by the Amal militia] said they wanted to destroy the PLO in its strongholds, and decided to start the extermination in the camps. They sent rockets.”

The army was pushing his family out of their house. “My friend got shot in the head and died. My foot was hit right after, and my leg was on fire,” recounts Mahmoud, showing his mutilated right foot. His horror story doesn’t stop here.

He says he ran for cover in his house, trying to put the fire out of his right leg, but when he finally took shelter, his house was hit. “A rocket landed,” he says gravely before pointing to his missing leg. “That’s what happened.”

He was rushed out of the camp, and says what happened next was a massacre.

“The proof is all those graves.” 700 people were killed in this camp between 1985 and 1988, and a further 3000 deaths were reported across all Palestinian camps in Lebanon. “And that’s only what we know. There are many kidnappings we don’t know about.”

Going back in time, Hajj then recalls the first bloodshed known as the “1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres”.

He was twenty when Palestinian militants were wrongly assumed to be behind President Bashir Gemayel assassination. “Four days later three groups [mainly said to be from the Lebanese Christian Phalangist militia] organized a massacre and stormed my camp,” remembers Mahmoud.

He was on the streets when they started shooting, and ran away with everyone else. He says he was one of the first ones to come back to the camp, with the Red Cross.

“It was devastation. The groups had used chainsaws and swords to kill,” he affirms.

He reminisces about one of the women from the camp being hanged from the feet at a tree and her abdomen sliced in two. She was pregnant and was left there for days, her organs hanging out to rot. “She was a friend of mine. Her name was Salma,” Mahmoud says gravely.

He takes a deep breath, “There’s too much to tell you. You don’t want to hear anymore.”

On these final words, he says he needs to be at the Mosque in 40 minutes.

As he struggles to hop down the narrow streets of Sabra W'Shatila, he suddenly stops at what was previously an old mosque.

There, are buried the bodies of 700 Palestinians killed during the camp wars. The house of worship has now been transformed into a cemetery.

Photos of the deceased are resolutely glued to the walls, defying the passing time. Below a large Palestinian flag painted on the white partition is a 6\*3 meter marble plaque, on which the names of the 700 bloodbath victims are engraved. Hajj Mahmoud points out at three names. "My brothers," he says solemnly. He reads their names out, slowly, again and again.

Mahmoud, suddenly more taciturn, says he has a message to the world.

"There needs to be peace, we desire to return to our forefathers' homeland. I thank god for everything, but we need rights to live like the rest of the world."

He stays there, staring, for a few more minutes, and the air is suddenly tense. Anyone in the room can feel the emotion, struggle and pain anchored in the vicinity of the camp.

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