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PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN LEBANON MIGRATION, MOBILITY AND THE URBANIZATION PROCESS

Mohamed Kamel Dorai¹

Introduction

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), make a clear distinction between *refugees in camps*, and *refugees outside camps*, whether in urban areas or rural settlement. This categorization is linked to the implementation of their policies of assistance and eventual protection. The rapid development of refugee movements in the Middle East since the 1990's, such as Sudanese in Cairo or Iraqis in Damascus and Amman, and the permanence of the Palestinian question invite us to reconsider the modes of settlement of refugee groups. Refugee camps, that focus attention of many observers are not, according to UNHCR statistics, the main location of refugees in the world. Refugee camps gather around 25% of the whole refugee population worldwide. In the Palestinians case, the situation is quite similar to the other refugees, even is the proportion of refugees living in camps is higher -around one third of the registered refugees are still living in camps – and variable depending on the area where they are settled. In reality, the number of refugees living in camps is higher if we add the refugees living in unofficial camps or informal gathering that do not benefit from the same assistance and services from international organizations or host states. The boundary between camps and gatherings is blurring, and some refugees live in camp-like situation.

Palestinians are the oldest refugee community in the region since World War 2. Today in Lebanon, more than 50% of the registered refugees still reside in the UNRWA camps, which symbolize the vulnerability of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. On the one hand, Palestinians face a wide range of legal, political and social constraints in Lebanon. On the other hand, from the *Cairo Agreement* in 1969 to the Israeli invasion in 1982, Palestinians have enjoyed in this country a freedom of action that no other host state ever gave them. Sixty years of exile have generated new forms of local

integration, especially in urban areas where refugee camps are now part of the cities that surround them. Since late 1940's, refugee camps transformed deeply from tents to highly dense built up areas. As mentioned by Jihane Sfeir (2008: 208), since the 1950's the places where Palestinians settled in the suburbs of Beirut were not only Palestinian areas, but poor and segregated neighbourhoods where marginalized migrants, such as Syrians, Kurds or Armenians also settle. Parallel to the urbanization process, refugee camp population has profoundly changed due to emigration, internal displacement and social mobility. The Palestinian experience in Lebanon challenges the dichotomy between *urban refugees* vs. *camp dwellers*, and leads us to reconsider the boundary between these two categories.

After discussing the problematic use of the categories of *urban refugees* and *camp dwellers*, the urbanization process of Mar Elias camp is developed, to analyze the role of migration and mobility in the redefinition of the boundaries between the camp and the city. This article is based on semi-structured interviews with Palestinian refugees living or working in Mar Elias refugee camps and foreign workers living in the camp conducted between 2005 and 2007. A total of 20 interviews have been made (15 with Palestinians and 5 with foreign workers) as well as regular informal discussion with key informants in Mar Elias and Shatila. Observations on daily mobility of the camp dwellers and outside visitors have also been made during regular visits to the camp and its surroundings during the same period².

Urban refugees vs. camp dwellers

Blurring categories

Refugee studies have produced since the 1970's a wide range of categories to describe refugee movement or settlement such as *urban refugees*, *camp dwellers*, *self settled refugees*, etc. (Black 1991; Fábos and Kibreab 2007; Kunz 1981; Rogge 1977; Zetter 2007). Recently, researchers have shown a growing interest on the issue of urban refugees in the world, pointing mainly the problem of protection and access to services they face in the third world big cities (Jacobsen 2006)³. The differences between urban refugee and camp dwellers have been studied, but the transformation of refugee camps

into urban areas spaces has not been studied as such except in a few cases (Agier 2001 & 2002; Bulle 2008; Hyndman 2000; Malkki 1995; Seren 2004).

The classical distinction operated between *refugee camps dwellers* and *urban refugees* is mainly an operational one produced by international organisations. This categorization has to be differentiated from the evolution of refugee camps and from the practices developed by the refugees themselves. Refugee camps are not closed areas even when they are geographically isolated, they can be connected to a wider urban environment through mobility or transnational connections such as remittances (Dorai 2003; Fresia 2006; Horst 2002).

In the Palestinian case, due to the rapid urbanization of the Middle Eastern countries most of the refugee camps are part of the capitals and main cities in their respective countries or host regions, as mentioned by Ishaq Al-Qutub :

In the case of the Palestinian Arab refugee camps – such as those existing in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria – they are prevailing features of the urban structures of these states. [...] The camp cities, both small and large, can be considered as urban conglomerations in the demographic and ecological sense. [...] These cities represent a unique urban pattern, which has special features, problems, structures, and consequently requires a special classification in the study of urban societies in the Middle East.

(Al-Qutub 1989: 91, 107)

Refugee camps can become parts of urban areas or may become themselves urban centres due to their demographic weight and the variety of activities developed, such as socio-economic activities, political centres of decision making, and the central role they play in the Palestinian society in exile. In some specific cases, the categorization depends upon the institution in charge of the refugees. For example in Damascus, Yarmouk is considered a refugee camp by the Syrian authorities whereas UNRWA

does not recognize it as such. At an operational level (international responsibility, access to services, legal context, etc.) a clear distinction exists between camp dwellers and urban refugees. But the analysis of the geographical development of refugee camps in their local context leads us to consider the refugee camps as urban areas. Camps tend to look increasingly like that of the poorer informal urban areas nearby. The temporal dimension of the Palestinian exile is also a key element to take into consideration. Sixty years of exile have led to a specific relation with their host societies, with a strong local integration linked to a rapid urbanization of the different host countries parallel to a strong segregation due to the socio-political and legal context.

Place and mobility

The categories of *urban refugee* and *camp dweller* are often considered through their residency place and not according to their short and/or long term spatial practices. Mobility is a key practice to take into consideration because it reveals the complementarities of different urban spaces, and the different kinds of relations they have. Refugees living in camps experience different scales of mobility (daily movements, temporary and long term emigration, forced displacement, etc.) and develop a wide range of practices (economic, political, cultural and/or social activities) that extends beyond the camp's boundaries. Mobility and migrations have to be understood in their different temporalities (Rémy 1996). On the long term, the refugee camp population changes, some refugees leaving the camp to settle elsewhere, newcomers come to settle in the camp for a variety of reasons that will be developed. Different generations of refugees have experienced life in exile, each of them having a specific relation to the camp, due to specific socio-historical context. Individual trajectories also contribute to blur the distinction between urban refugees and camp dwellers. Many refugees reside successively inside and outside camps during their life to access different kind of resources (Hyndman 2000: 158-162; Fresia 2006).

Refugee camps themselves host temporarily or more permanently different waves and groups of refugees. New immigrant communities also settle in the camps and/or around the camps. In Damascus for example, Iraqis refugees settle in neighbourhoods

composed of Palestinian refugees, internally displaced Syrians from the Golan and internal migrants coming from the countryside. The same pattern can be found in most of the Middle Eastern cities such as Beirut, Amman or Cairo (Al Ali 2004: 9-12). Urban margins, where refugees and migrants settle, are not disconnected from the urban dynamics of the surrounding cities.

"The city is never simply the spatial organization of the mosaic of territories: territories of second settlements upset sooner or later this organisation, to produce more confused moral, composed of cultural hybrids themselves produced by successive migrant population belonging to the same community or to different ones"⁴

(Joseph 1998: 93)

Refugee camps develop ties with their urban environment and even if they are segregated and marginalized, they are part of the urban settings that host them. Daily mobility crosses camp boundaries. Refugees can live in a camp and work or study outside the camp, or vice versa. Urban practices - such as shopping, visiting family or friends, accessing services or assistance - often lead refugees to go in and out of the camps and to frequent other neighbourhoods.

The camp and the city: local forms of urban integration

Since the arrival of the refugees in 1948, the Palestinian presence in the Lebanon has always been problematic, and the Lebanese authorities oscillated for a long time between support for the Palestinian cause and the will to control the Palestinian political and military activities. The PLO, created in 1964, developed its institutions in its different host countries. The rise of Palestinian power, which coincided with the decline of the Lebanese state's authority, was sustained by an important institutional development in the Palestinian camps. There is a clear link between military and political empowerment of the PLO on the one hand, and the growth of Palestinian social and economic institutions as well as the development of infrastructures in camps. Since 1975, the different conflicts (civil war, Israeli invasions and Syrian

interventionism) have aggravated the tensions between the PLO and its allies on one side, and certain parts of the Lebanese society and militias on the other one. After the Israeli invasion of 1982, the eviction of the PLO-leadership and militia has deeply changed the relations between Palestinians and Lebanese.

The present situation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is the result of sixty years of contested residence in the country. From their arrival in Lebanon until the signing of the *Cairo Agreement* (1969), Palestinians were marginalized by the host society and deprived of basic rights. The aim of this agreement was to regulate Palestinian - Lebanese relations. It has opened new opportunities for Palestinians, giving them the possibility to work and develop their political activities as well as their military presence in the camps. The military activities of the Palestinian commandos were allowed, theoretically in coordination with Lebanese authorities. The self organisation of the camp residents was also promoted through the creation of local committees (Klaus 2000: 57-68).

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon, a marginalized population.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are currently one of most underprivileged of the diaspora communities in the Middle East. They suffer from a wide range of legal restrictions. The Lebanese legislation is very strict regarding Palestinians since the arrival of the first refugees in 1948. This legislation has been modified according to the agreements - and the disagreement -, between the PLO and the various Lebanese governments. It limits the access of the refugees to the labour market, to the education system, to the international mobility, to the social and health system, as well as to the formal property market (Al-Natour 1997; Said 2001). The legal status of the Palestinians has important implications on the socio-spatial organization of this community in the Lebanon. The refugees tend to be confined in the informal sector or in the least profitable labour activities which do not require an official work permit. Furthermore, the departure of the PLO in 1982 deprived a number of refugees of jobs developed by the strong presence of the Palestinian political institutions in Lebanon. In the fragile Lebanese economic context since the end of the Civil war, the Palestinians

are marginalized on the informal Lebanese labour market with the arrival of low-cost foreign manpower (Jureidini 2003; Chalcraft 2006).

Today the situation is more and more precarious for Palestinians and due to the political confrontation between the current parliamentary majority and the opposition. Although the Palestinians are not strictly speaking part of the internal political conflict in Lebanon, the question of their permanent settlement in Lebanon (*tawtin*, “implantation”) as well as the presence of weapons in camps challenges the political neutrality of the Palestinians, in a conflict with a strong regional dimension that tends to implicate them *de facto*. Since 2003, some improvements – most of them very marginal – show a possibility of partial normalization of the Palestinian–Lebanese relations. For example, relations with Lebanon improved with the partial – and controversial – abolition of the ban on working in certain job sectors. In December, 2005 posters produced by the organizations of the Palestinian civil society to claim the right to work, to own a property, for security in Lebanon beside the right of return, indicate the evolution of some parts of the Palestinian civil society in its relation to its host society. The destruction of Nahr al Bared refugee camp in Tripoli symbolizes the reversibility of the Palestinian settlement in the country⁵. The case of Nahr al Bared shows that refugee camps - as well as urban informal areas - because they are considered as temporary spaces can always be subject to destruction or unilateral state intervention.

Camps in Lebanon are also under strict control of the authorities. The situation varies between the camps considered, depending on "security" reasons. The camps in the South are under strict control because of the presence of Palestinian political parties and their militias (such as Rashidiyyeh camp south of Tyre), or jihadist groups (such as Aïn al Helweh near Saïda). Mar Elias, the focus of this chapter, is not controlled by the Lebanese army. Other camps in Saïda, Tyre or Tripoli are under the strict control of the army, non Palestinians have to ask for an authorization to enter some camps. The control of the entrance of refugee camps plays an important role in the degradation of the Palestinian housing situation. These measures have been applied in a very strict way

from the beginning of the 1990's until 2005. Some camps still have a single entrance controlled by the Lebanese Army. This only applies to the camps in the south and Nahr al Bared in the north. The other camps are not surrounded by the Lebanese army. Cars can be searched and it was forbidden to bring any building material inside without a previous authorization. These limitations prevent any maintenance or renovation of houses. Another consequence is the difficulty for the young couples to settle in the camps in single-family units, because they cannot build new houses. The control of the camp materializes in the space by the physical presence of the army at the entry of the camp, and the closure of all the secondary roads that connect the camp with its immediate spatial environment, leaving only a single entry for the cars.

These limitations were sometimes abolished and new constructions appear in the camps, depending on the relations between Palestinian organizations and the Lebanese State. Since spring 2005, some camps, such as Al Buss in Tyre, witness an important densification of buildings, numerous families taking advantage of the abolition of the limitations to add a storey to their house, others to build new rooms. Yet, these limitations can be again imposed on the refugees by decision of the Lebanese authorities (Doraï 2006).

Mar Elias, a camp in the city

Mar Elias camp was been created in 1952 by the UNRWA, on a small area of 5,400 m² in the South West of the Beirut municipality. In 1958, according to UNRWA figures, the camp hosted 449 registered refugees and 616 in 2006. The first inhabitants of the camp arrived by boat following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Most of them had an urban background mainly coming from two Palestinian cities, Haïfa and Jaffa. The vast majority of them was Christian and they have been first accommodated in the Greek Orthodox convent of Mar Elias. In 1952, they have resettled in a camp set up in the wood close to the convent. The large movement of emigration – especially Greek Orthodox families - characterizes this camp, which population remained stable since its creation (Sfeir 2008: 238-240).

Today, the camp is situated at the crossroad between Beirut Southern suburbs of Bir Hassan and Ouzāi, Ras Beirut and Cola intersection. Most of the refugee camps are located far from the city centres. Mar Elias is located in privileged area at the crossroad between the one of the main centre of Beirut (Ras Beirut) and the southern suburbs that gather poor internal migrants and internally displaced people from the south of Lebanon, as well as more recently arrived refugees such as Sudanese and Iraqis. Cola intersection is one of the most important transport hub in Beirut that connect to most neighbourhoods of Beirut and all the southern part of Lebanon. This central location facilitates circulation both for camp dwellers who can easily reach other parts of Beirut, and for people from outside the camp wishing to come whether they are from Beirut or from other regions of Lebanon, especially the Southern coastal region.

Mar Elias camp is a densely built-up area, with narrow streets, in most of them cars cannot enter. If old small house of one-floor still exist, most of the buildings are now composed of two or three floors. As it is the case for most refugee camps in Lebanon, the only way to accommodate more refugees is to add new storeys and to existing buildings and take advantage of each unoccupied squared meters inside the perimeter of the camp. The prohibition of any spatial extension of the camps since their creation has led to the existence of highly dense spaces. The camp contrasts strongly with its environment by its density in an urban environment with higher buildings separated by large streets. The quality of the building also characterizes the camp. While Palestinian buildings are irregular, most of them are in bad condition as well as the camp infrastructure (sewage system, electricity, roads, etc.). The camp appears as a pocket of poverty in an urban environment in rapid evolution since the end of the civil war, even if, according to its inhabitants it is perceived as one of the best camp in Beirut, where Palestinians with a certain level of income live. Mar Elias residents often emphasize the relative quality of the infrastructure (water and electricity) as well as the quality of life due to the small size of the camp. It is often opposed in the discourse to Shatila camp which is described as overcrowded with a very deficient infrastructure. The fact that a

large proportion of the residents in Shatila are not Palestinians is also pointed out and often linked to the rise of criminal activities, which are not described in Mar Elias.

The camp's location has facilitated the development of different sets of activities. A number of Palestinian NGOs are present in the camp, such as *Beit Atfal Al-Soumoud*, *Palestinian Martyrs' Association*, *Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation*, *Al Inaach*, *Palestinian Red Crescent Society*, *Aidoun*, *Palestinian Human Rights Association*, etc. They developed their activities in the camp because of its central location in Beirut and the relative freedom they can enjoy as being Palestinian NGOs, even if they must have a Lebanese to head them, who can be from Palestinian background. The camp also host offices from most of the Palestinian political parties.

Commercial activities developed in the camp, some dedicated to the Palestinian population of the camp and others to Lebanese customers living in the neighbourhood or workers employed in the surrounding manufacturing businesses. A typical example is the experience of the Palestinian refugee who first opened a restaurant in the camp before deciding to reside there⁶.

I arrived in Mar Elias in 1992. I lived previously in Tell al Zaatar and Damour. I bought a house in the camp and opened a small restaurant. In 1994 I came to live here. I opened the first restaurant in the camp. It was a good economic opportunity. Most of the customers come from the enterprises around the camp as well as daily workers working in the construction sector. Eating here is less expensive for them than in other restaurants, that's why they come here.

Two different small commercial areas have been developed along the eastern and western boundaries of the camp. The western one is situated on the main urban highway from southern suburbs of Beirut to Ras Beirut. The activities (garage, manufacturer of furniture, grocery, etc.) are not geared towards the camp population, but to customers coming from other areas of Beirut. The eastern one is mainly

composed of small groceries, fruit and vegetable sellers, etc. This area is frequented both by camp dwellers and inhabitants of the neighbouring districts. Prices are generally lower in refugee camps than in other places. The same phenomenon can be found in other camps, such as Al Buss in Tyre (south Lebanon) or Jabal Hussein in Amman (Jordan).

Mar Elias can be qualified as an urban space due to four main elements. First, the temporary camp has been transformed in a dense built-up area, composed of two to three storeys buildings connected to the infrastructures such as water, electricity, telephone, etc. Second, originally conceived as a place to accommodate Palestinian refugees and offer them a temporary shelter and humanitarian assistance, the social composition of the refugee camps have deeply changed, some refugees leaving the camp other settling in along with a growing presence of non Palestinians in certain camp such as Mar Elias or Shatila. The camp became one stage in the migratory trajectory of the Palestinians. Third, the location in or outside the camp is the result of a residential choice, linked to renting prices, work opportunities like in other neighbourhoods in Beirut where migrants settle. The camp can no longer be considered *only* as a place of refuge. Fourth, the development of economic activities tend integrate the camp in its local environment; Mar Elias is visited by outside non-Palestinians individuals. As mentioned by Michel Agier (2002): "*Due to their very heterogeneity, camps may become the genesis of unexpected cities, new social environments, relationships and identification*". A new social environment emerges due to the high level of in and out migrations in the camp and the diversity of social backgrounds of its inhabitants since the end of the civil war in Lebanon.

The key role of migration in the evolution of the refugee camps

Migration plays a crucial role in the social evolution of the Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. As shown by Rosemary Sayigh, Palestinians refugees have been internally displaced several times during the Lebanese wars. Three refugee camps have been totally destroyed – and not reconstructed - during the wars. 90% of the refugees have been forced to leave their home at least once during the war (Sayigh 2004: 5). State

instability and spatial mobility are two major aspects of Palestinian life in Lebanon. This leads to blur the distinction between camp and urban settlement. If we consider Palestinian journeys over the long term (i.e. individual, familial and intergenerational itineraries), most of the refugees have experienced life in and outside the camp. International emigration also plays an important role in creating a dynamic house and rental market, and bringing in new migrants who move in and settle in the camps and Palestinian gatherings.

Palestinian migrations

Due to high level of international and internal emigration, only a few of the families that settled in Mar Elias camp in 1952 is still there. They have been gradually replaced by Palestinians coming from other refugee camps like Tell al Zaatar in Beirut after its destruction in 1976, or Rashidiyyeh south of Tyre. Other refugees settled in Mar Elias in 1991 after having been internally displaced during the civil war. The high level of both internal and international emigration can be explained by three factors. First, a large part of the Palestinian refugees who came to the Mar Elias Convent had Lebanese family ties through marriage. Their local integration has thus been eased by the kinship connection they had with their host society. Second, their urban origin from Haifa and Jaffa has facilitated their integration in the city, contrary to most of the refugees coming from a rural background⁷ in other camps such as Shatila or Burj al Barajneh in the Beirut urban area. Third and last, this point is related to the previous one, their high education levels have lead to higher international emigration. A combination of these interrelated factors – urban origin, religious affiliation, family networks – has facilitated their movement from the camp to other Beirut neighbourhoods and abroad.

The Palestinian population currently living in Mar Elias camp is the result of different migratory experiences, be it internally displaced population by war and/or other forms of internal migration (economic opportunity, renting market, geographical location). The case-studies that follow show the plural role of the camp in the life-long migration process. Most of the refugees interviewed between 2005 and 2008 have lived successively in and outside refugee camps during their life. Their migratory experience

is also made up of a combination of forced displacement – for example after the destruction of Tell al Zaatar – and search of a better economic and/or housing situation. The camp is a stage in the professional career, in the family life or in the migration process. Most of the refugees who are currently living in the camp originally came from other camps, even if they reside outside the city for long periods. The main purpose of the internal Palestinian migration towards the camps in Beirut is to find employment and improve the quality of life, such as the families settling in Shatila (Sayigh 1994: 65).

The first case illustrates the plural roles played by the refugee camp as a temporary refuge at the end of the Lebanese civil war, before being able to access to a better housing situation outside the camp.

My parents left Palestine in 1948 and settled in Tell al Zaatar. In 1976, when the camp was destroyed we left to settle in Damour. We stayed there until 1982. Then I went back to Beirut where I squatted a free apartment in the Raouché area. I opened my small workshop in Verdun, but rent price increased and I began to look for another place. At the end of the civil war in 1991, I had to leave the apartment and I decided to buy one in Mar Elias from a Palestinian who left to Denmark. I chose Mar Elias for two main reasons. First, it was a central location where my previous customers could easily come. Second, prices for accommodation and for my workshop were lower than in other parts of the city because Mar Elias is a refugee camp. Buying an apartment in a refugee camp is easy for a Palestinian, you just have to register the transaction at the popular committee and then at the UNRWA. As I have children I decided to move with my family and rent an apartment outside Beirut. I rent mine in Mar Elias to a Palestinian NGO for 200 USD per month and now I live in a largest apartment in Naameh [a village south of Beirut] for the same price. I come here everyday to work.

This skilled workman has combined his residency outside the camp – while keeping a property in the camp - and his economic activity inside the camp. The end of the civil war and the prohibition of buying properties for Palestinians have generated attraction towards the camps, while it is impossible to buy a house in other parts of the city. The legal discrimination faced by Palestinians in Lebanon leads them to buy property in the refugee camps where they can access some of the basic rights denied them outside the camp like property ownership and paid work, as mentioned in this second case.

I was working in the 1970's for the PLO in Rashidiyyeh camp then I moved to the southern suburbs of Beirut in the 1980's. I stayed in Haret Hreik until 1987 and then I moved to Raouché. I came to Mar Elias because I was working for a Palestinian political organization here in 1997. As I was displaced during the war, the Ministry of Displaced gave me 7,000 USD at the beginning of the 1990's. I bought a house in the camp with this money. In parallel, I opened a grocer's shop in the camp. I rent the store for 100 USD per month. I appreciate to live in Mar Elias, it's a quiet area with a good infrastructure compared to the other camps in Beirut.

Due to the fragile political environment in Lebanon, some Palestinians prefer to live in a camp, where most of the inhabitants are Palestinians. Along with the relative low prices for accommodation, camps are still playing a strong symbolic role in the Palestinian society in exile, attracting refugees as it is expressed in this third case.

I am originally from Tell al Zaatar. When the camp was destroyed I left to Damour and then to Saida. In 1988 I came back to Beirut to find employment. After working in different sectors I decided to settle in Mar Elias because it is a quite place with a central location. In 2000, I bought my shop for 14,000 USD and I work as a hairdresser. Most of the customers come from outside the camp because they know me and also because it is cheaper here. With four other Palestinians we bought a piece of land in the middle of the camp and built a four-storey building. Each apartment will

cost us around 30,000 USD. I decided to buy something here because my mother wanted to live with Palestinians in a quiet area. We feel more secure to live in a Palestinian environment.

One of his employees is a Palestinian from Iraq who came back in Lebanon in 1999 when the situation there deteriorated.

The growing foreign presence in the camps

Parallel to the Palestinian secondary migration towards camps, these areas has witnessed the arrival of Palestinian refugees coming from other parts of Lebanon as well as arrivals of few Lebanese citizens and Syrian, Asian and African immigrants who settled with the end of the civil war at the beginning of the 1990's. Migrants in transit, staying for longer or shorter periods in Beirut, tend to settle in the marginalized “popular” neighbourhoods of the city. Their presence is visible in the public space, through the development of businesses with bilingual signboards on the streets and by the periodic influx of migrant populations - mainly housemaids but also construction workers - on Sundays in certain neighbourhoods like *Dawra* (East of Beirut). This attachment of migrants to specific urban areas is stressed by Karen Jacobsen (2006: 276):

"Like all urban migrants, asylum seekers are attracted to urban centres because economic resources and opportunities, including education for their children, are concentrated there, and in cities migrants can access the social networks and ethnic enclaves that supports newcomers, and which initiate the process of integration".

Through the settlement of international migrants, the camp is playing a role in the city as a host area for newcomers, mainly poor immigrants. The camp has thus hosted different waves of refugees and immigrants, like other deprived areas of the southern and eastern suburbs of Beirut metropolitan area.⁸ These migratory patterns are crucial parts of the urban dynamics. The camp plays the role of temporary “host space” for

waves of migrants settling in the city for different reasons. Palestinian refugees living in poor, low -income areas are well placed to play host the new immigrants. Deprived of the right to work in Lebanon, they can earn money from renting property. Some of them decide to add a new floor on the top of their house and rent it to migrants for 100 to 150 \$ per month. It gives them a supplementary income. A Palestinian owner in Mar Elias camp summarizes the reason why he decided to extend his apartment and rent it.

"As I am Palestinian I am not allowed to work legally in Lebanon. In the mid-1990's I decided to build a supplementary floor on the top of my house. I constructed a two-rooms apartment plus one single room separated by a small terrace. This brings me around 200 USD per month. The room is rented by two Sri-Lanki domestic workers and the apartment by a Sudanese family with two children."

Thus, because many Palestinian families have emigrated abroad or changed their place of residence in Lebanon – when they have enough money many refugee families leave the camp to rent apartments in the city – some houses are free to be rented to other families. A Palestinian grocer in Fakhany explains:

"My sister and her husband own an apartment in the neighbourhood. They left for Denmark in 2005, where they live now. They left their apartment for rent and, as I am living here, I manage the renting for them. Presently a group of six young Sudanese share the apartment for 200 USD. They just arrived in Lebanon a few weeks ago. We never see them; they wake up in the morning, they go to work, and they come back at night. Sometimes they buy food here."

The house rent in the refugee camps is lower than in other places, especially compared to central Beirut where accommodation is expensive, hence attracts poor, new migrants (Sudanese, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, etc.). The fact that security forces do not enter the camps is an advantage to undocumented migrants who feel more protected from eviction. Thus, for a variety of reasons, a refugee camp such as Mar Elias, but also

Shatila, or Fakhani - a vast Palestinian urban gathering – became host places for new migrants. The presence of recently arrived migrant workers or refugees generates a variety of interactions and complementarities with migrant population settled in Beirut for decades like the Palestinians.

Palestinian refugee camps - or areas with strong Palestinian concentration - host an increasing number of migrants since the mid-1990s. Some of them are refugees or asylum seekers as is the case of Iraqis in the Shatila camp in 2003, the majority being irregular migrant workers. Various groups of immigrants live in the camps: low income immigrant workers, irregular migrants, asylum seekers, unrecognized refugees, domestic workers, etc. Some settle there on the long term with their family, others – mainly newcomers – transit through the camp before finding employment and activating community networks of solidarities which will allow them to improve their situation and move to another neighbourhood or to pursue their migratory journey towards western countries. The presence of this non-Palestinian population in refugee camps leads us to reconsider the traditional perception of refugee camps and to view them as spaces of urban relegation. The migrant communities participate to the blurring of the boundaries between the camp and the city.

Accommodation of migrant populations in precarious situation obey certain imperatives: a relatively low cost given the low level of migrants' resources, a secure space that allows them to avoid being exposed to police controls and a rather central location that facilitate access to employment and minimize the distance between employment and residence for security reasons. The Palestinian refugee camps, as well as Palestinian gatherings, offer numerous advantages for irregular migrants. A Sudanese living in Mar Elias explains why he settled there.

I left south Sudan because of the insecurity which reigns there. I moved initially towards Khartoum. I could not stay there because it was impossible to find a job, and because of the discrimination we face. I have then decided to leave. Egypt tightened its migration policy and it was not easy for us to

cross the border to go there. I thus took a plane ticket for Damascus, Syria does not ask for a visa for the Sudanese. Once in Damascus, I found other Sudanese already leaving there. As there is no work in Syria, one advised me to go to Lebanon, the wages are better, and the Sudanese find there rather easily work, especially in the cleaning sector. I crossed the border illegally, by paying a smuggler and I arrived in Beirut. As I do not have residency permit I prefer to live in a refugee camp where the police does not enter. Also it is cheaper and close to my work.

Forms of socio-economic complementarities emerge between migrant and refugee populations originating from different waves in these areas of urban relegation. A renting market develops in the Palestinian camps and gatherings, which satisfy the host (Palestinians) and hosted (newcomers) populations. The small grocers stores which we find in camps or the Palestinian gatherings also benefit from the presence of these customers according to the interviews with Palestinian small shopkeepers settled in these areas.

Conclusion

The Palestinian refugee camps tend to evolve by becoming integrated into the economic activity and into their urban environment. Even if they are still marginalized and segregated areas they are now part of the major cities in the Middle East. Economic activities, daily mobility, the presence of new international migrants, and the strong political and cultural significance for the Palestinian refugees, are the different elements that characterize the contemporary Lebanese refugee camps as urban settlements. Mar Elias situation is not isolated in Lebanon. Al Buss camp, in Tyre region, witnesses a similar development. It is becoming increasingly difficult to discern the western boundary of the camp. Many Lebanese Shiite families driven from the Israeli-occupied southern border zone built an informal neighbourhood next to the camp. The numerous businesses that have been established along the main road on the northern and eastern sides of the camp, developed both by Palestinians and by Lebanese, serve to integrate the outer fringe of the camp into the townscape. It is the geographical situation of the

camp of Al Buss at the entrance of the city and at the crossroads of main roads that has facilitated this evolution (Dorai 2006).

Most of the studies on refugees establish a clear distinction between *refugees in camps* and *urban refugees* living in cities. The Palestinian case, due to its exceptional duration and the context of rapid urbanization of their host countries, invites us to partly re-examine this dichotomy. If some refugee camps appear to be isolated from their urban environment – such as Aïn al Helweh, Borj al Shamali or Rashidiyyeh -, most of the refugee camps in Lebanon (as well as in most of the Middle Eastern cities) are now part of the main Lebanese urban areas. A diachronic analysis of the different camp's evolution should be developed to retrace their specific history and the ties with their local environment. On the one hand camps appear to be marginalized and segregated areas due to the special - and often changing - regulation and mode of controls as well as the legal status of their Palestinian residents. On the other hand, refugee camps are strongly connected to their urban environment through the daily mobility of Palestinian refugees, the growing presence of other groups of refugees and migrants (such as Syrian or Asian workers and Iraqi or Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees), and the development of commercial activities that blur the boundaries of the refugee camps, making it a part of the city.

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³ A special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* on Urban refugees (vol. 19, n°3) has been published in September 2006.

⁴ "La ville n'est jamais simplement l'organisation spatiale de la mosaïque de territoires : les territoires de deuxième implantation viennent tôt ou tard bousculer cette organisation pour fabriquer un moral bien plus confus, composés d'hybrides culturels produits par la succession des populations migrantes, appartenant à la même communauté ou à des communautés différentes".

⁵ Nahr al Bared is a Palestinian refugee camp established in 1949 in the northern part of Lebanon, 16 km north of Tripoli, hosting more than 30,000 individuals. Between May and September 2007, fighting between Fatah al Islam and the Lebanese army has led to the displacement of the camp population and the destruction of the camp infrastructure and houses. The camp was composed of two parts: the "old camp", the official one was totally destroyed, while the "new camp", the unofficial extension was partly destroyed. There is an ongoing project to reconstruct the camp, but until now most of the refugees are still displaced living in precarious shelters in and around Beddawi neighbouring camp and elsewhere. Some families have managed to return to the camp in prefabricated houses in March 2008.

⁶ Interviews in Mar Elias camp have been conducted in 2006 and 2007. I would like to thank Jaber Abu Hawash for his precious help.

⁷ It is estimated that two thirds of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are from a rural origin (Khalidi, 1992)

⁸ See for example Berthomière & Hily (2006) or Deboulet (2006)

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