



**HAL**  
open science

# From family dispersion to asylum-seeking: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria

Kamel Dorai

► **To cite this version:**

Kamel Dorai. From family dispersion to asylum-seeking: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria. Delphine Mercier; Víctor Zúñiga; Kamel Dorai; Mustapha El Miri; Michel Peraldi. Experiencing Ruptures in Migration. The ordinary and unexpected journeys of global migrants, Transnational Press London, pp.47-59, 2021, 978-1-80135-022-8. halshs-03507191

**HAL Id: halshs-03507191**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03507191v1>**

Submitted on 6 Aug 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **From family dispersion to asylum seeking.**

### **Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria and the Syrian conflict**

Kamel Dorai

*French Institute for the Near East - Beirut*

#### **1. The Syrian conflict: a new migration crisis for the Palestinian refugees**

In 2011, when the Syrian crisis began, many families gradually left Syria to seek asylum in neighbouring countries. Palestinian refugees in Syria have gradually been caught up in the conflict and for some of them forced into exile. While most neighbouring countries closed their border very rapidly to this group of refugees, Lebanon adopted a more flexible position (Dorai and Al Hussein, 2013). More than 50,000 Syrian Palestinians have found asylum in Lebanon. The geography of this exile is singular. Lebanon is one of the countries in the region where the legal status of Palestinians is most precarious. More than half of the Palestinians in Lebanon still live in one of 12 refugee camps, where socio-economic conditions are very difficult. This polarization of Palestinian migration from Syria to these areas may, however, be explained by the historical ties between Palestinian refugees in both countries (Dorai, 2015). Forced migration related to the current conflict in Syria is based on forms of mobility developed since the 1948 exodus (*Nakba* in Arabic).

This chapter is based on the story of Umm Maher, a native of Haifa, whose family have been scattered - like many Palestinians - at a regional level. If the majority of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon originates from the North of Palestine and have settled directly in the nearest country, some families have experienced more complex trajectories. Thus, refugees did

not all arrive directly from Palestine to Lebanon in 1948. Some headed North of Palestine staying inside Palestinian territory to join relatives. West Bank was a first step for Palestinian families, especially the city of Nablus. The exodus has dispersed families in several host countries while the Israeli border was closed to the return or even the crossing of refugees. Palestinians had to suffer long journeys trying to gather families divided between several countries. But for the vast majority exile meant the permanence of dispersion. Perceived as a constraint, resulting of a forced exodus, this dispersion can also be considered as a resource following Emmanuel Ma Mung (1999). Multiple internal and international forced displacements, but also mobility and circulation for family reasons, contribute to the emergence of a space of cross-border mobility. From a constraint, dispersion becomes a resource available in different contexts, to establish matrimonial ties but also to facilitate access to asylum space in case of conflict. The trajectory of Umm Maher, watermark of this chapter, echoes the experience of many Palestinian families that were built into exile and dispersion.

As many writers have pointed out since the mid-1990s (e.g. Richmond, 1994), rather than opposing the so-called forced migrations to those considered voluntary, migration trajectories developed in the close social sphere of Umm Maher rather show the continuities between different forms of migration and their articulation in time. In relation to other Palestinian in Lebanon, Umm Maher is a rather sedentary person. The mobility of her children, their spouses but also relatives who circulate, is organized around her. Some settle temporarily at her house or her relatives in Tyre. This relative immobility, that can be qualified as a form of local anchorage, is central the structuration of the mobility of her relatives. This experience also allows to discuss the notion of rupture in migratory trajectories. Time of migration allows to consider forced mobility in a longer time perspective. This long-time perspective shows how long circulations need to develop and consolidate, alternating periods of distancing and reactivating in specific events (wedding, conflict, etc.).

This chapter is based on interviews conducted since 1999 in the region of Tyre in Southern Lebanon. The story of Umm Maher was collected for the first time at this date. The evidence gathered focused on her journey of exile, that of her family, her settlement in Lebanon and the consequences of the wars on her experience. This narrative was then contextualised on the long term through multiple and regular stays in the area since then. The recent outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011 allowed me to analyse current migration through the observation of the Palestinian mobility that I analyse since the mid-1990s, which led me to follow the path of split families between Lebanon and Syria. More recently, I did two series of surveys in the Palestinian camps and informal gatherings around the city of Tyre, and more particularly the camp of Al Buss. Both surveys were conducted in December 2013 and May 2014 with 25 families<sup>1</sup>. Following Benezet and Zetter's findings (2014), one aim of this chapter is to explore the role of social networks in terms of constraints and opportunities during asylum-seeker and refugee journeys. These surveys over the long term have allowed me to observe a new migration trend in the region. Palestinians in Lebanon have long been more concerned by conflict. Many experienced forced displacements, while Palestinians in Syria was one of the most stable groups. The conflict that began in 2011, have dramatically changed this reality, Lebanon today hosting the majority of Palestinian refugees from Syria fleeing war in Syria.

## **2. Conflicts, displacement and secondary migration. Some contextual elements**

### **2.1. The forced displacement of Palestinians since 1948**

In most cases, the exodus of Palestinians in 1948 was not conducted in a single direct route but counted many migration steps. The complexity of migration patterns is related to five main factors: (1) the progressive advance of the troops of the future State of Israel who have gradually pushed Palestinians to neighbouring countries, (2) the mode of transport used by refugees, train and boat take them more often directly refugees outside of Palestine, other means

of transport, slower, like cars or walking, induce many stops, (3) policy distribution of refugees implemented by international organizations and by local authorities in the host countries, which often thwarted the will of the refugees to settle wherever they wished, (4) the housing and job opportunities offered to the Palestinians arrived without resources, and (5) the previous knowledge of the host region and the presence of relatives there.

The period from 1948 to 1956, is characterised by a significant dispersion of the Palestinians. This geographical dispersion is related to the character of the exodus. The hasty and unorganized departure of the refugees resulted in the dispersion of families that did not all left together. The exile was first considered as temporary. Refugees headed to the closest safe areas, without thinking at first to gather and to organize themselves in their host countries. Some were temporarily settled in border areas close to their region of origin, others in transit camps set up by the international community. Some were hosted by their families, as it was the case of Umm Maher. It was only after 1956, when Israel completely closed its borders and settled permanently in the regional environment, that refugees tried, for those who had the possibility; to rebuild family ties existing before 1948 that the brutality and rapidity of the exodus had destroyed.

Settlement, with family reunification at the local level, has been strained by the multiple displacements due to the successive conflicts in Lebanon since 1975. Forced mobility becomes an integral part of the lives of Palestinian refugees Lebanon. Umm Maher and her family had to flee repeatedly the fighting, but without being able - or willing - to leave Lebanon. Syria was involved in the Lebanese conflict. As a result, it was not considered at this time as a safe space for most of the Palestinians, as relations between Syrian authorities and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) were very bad. During the war, Umm Maher's family became internally displaced and sought refuge in informal gathering in different locations in Lebanon. The conflict was of such intensity that family networks played only a minor role. Palestinians

acquired a culture - or an experience - of forced mobility during conflicts, which will be re-mobilized in other contexts on the future.

The Lebanese civil war that began in 1975 and the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982 will result in very significant population displacement. More than 170 000 Palestinian refugees were forced to flee in 1982. It covers most of the population residing in the invaded areas and occupied by Israel. The Israeli invasion is accompanied by significant material destruction (Schiff, 1995). The War of the camps is in direct continuation of the Israeli invasion of June 1982. It begins in 1985 just after the withdrawal of Israeli troops and expands into West Beirut and in the Tyre area, where Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites cohabited. It took place in several phases of more or less intensity. The total blockade of some Palestinian camps alternates with periods of fighting and bombing. A central objective of the war of the camps was to reduce the presence of Palestinian population in the areas populated by Shiites around the city of Tyre and some districts of Beirut. Civilians were prime targets for *Amal* militia. They were driven to pressure the PLO, resulting in significant population displacement. The War of the camps is still very present in the Palestinian consciousness. The current Syrian conflict lead to new forced displacement of Palestinian refugees at a regional level.

## **2.2. Umm Maher, history of a family of dispersed at a regional level**

The story of Umm Maher, a Palestinian refugee arrived in the mid-1950s in Tyre (Southern Lebanon), even if it is always a singular experience, is almost similar to many other trajectories that led to the dispersion of many Palestinian over all the countries in the region. Following the Exodus 1948, Umm Maher family found herself dispersed in 3 countries, one of her sisters moved to Amman in Jordan, the other in the Neirab camp near Aleppo in Syria.

Umm Maher is born in 1944 in Haifa. She was forced to leave in 1948 when she was only four years old. She narrates her exodus even if she was not able to remember the exact facts. She first went with her grandmother, her two sisters, her father and his wife to her aunt's house. Her mother died when she was very young. Her stepmother's family lived in Jordan, that's why she did not go to Lebanon during the 1948 war. When she arrived in Irbid, North of Jordan, her father went back to Palestine to look for his business, to secure their living cost ... He had left all the money at home. He and her stepmother never came back, they died in Palestine. Umm Maher was taken in by a Christian monastery where she stayed three years. Then, her paternal aunt came to take her, and took her to a refugee camp in Nablus, called Askar. As she was an orphan, she was put in a school in Nablus and then Jerusalem until 1955.

In 1955, her grandmother, who was responsible for her, wanted to see her son, who fled Haifa and found asylum first at the Lebanese border in a village called Rmeich, then further North in Tyre. During vacation, they went to see him crossing first through Jordan. They stopped in Syria to see one of her other aunts who was in the camp of Mezzeh in Damascus. They stayed two or three months in Syria. Then they headed towards Tyre, in the camp of Al Buss. During their stay in Tyre her grandmother, who was 90 years old, died. She was buried there. Having no parents, she stayed with her uncle. He was very poor. Sometimes he did not even have enough money to buy flour. Since she was his niece he did not let her down. Four years later, when she was fourteen, she got married her cousin and they settled in Nahr al Samir, right next to the camp in November 1959.

Her two other sisters will experience similar trajectories that will lead one to settle in Jordan, her first country of exile, the other to find refuge in Northern Syria. While the family of Umm Maher moved to Tyre in a small informal gathering, the family grown. In a difficult socio-economic context, the Palestinians are trying to reconstruct their society in exile. Relatives

gradually came to settle around the house where Umm Maher and his family settled. Palestinian refugee camps tend to evolve by becoming integrated into the economic activity and into their urban environment (for the history of refugee settlement in Lebanon Cf. Sfeir, 2017). 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, presence of new migrants, strong political and cultural significance for the Palestinian refugees, are the different elements that characterize the refugee camps today as urban settlements. Due to the demographic pressure, most of the camps have informal extension. Nahr al Samir is actually an informal extension of Al Buss camp that is located at the entry of the city of Tyre. Some of the families who lived in the camp left to build larger houses outside the camp. They settled nearby on empty land along the small river *Al Samir*. Other families, who arrived later wanted to join their relatives in Al Buss camp but did not find any housing units available. They settled in the informal housing around the camp. Family networks play a central role in the development of the settlement spaces in Lebanon.

The story of this family is then characterized by the dispersion of 3 sisters at a regional level. The conflicts that followed one another, especially the wars that tore Lebanon from 1975 to 1990 made it difficult to travel between the different settlement spaces of the family in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. This period has however seen intense internal displacements of Umm Maher and her close family. Her husband was imprisoned by the Israelis in the camp of Al Ansar and some of her children were wounded. The family was forced to flee repeatedly to safer areas inside Lebanon. These repeated experiences of forced mobility have developed in them a culture of asylum that will be mobilized later to host family members fleeing the Syrian conflict in 2011.

### **3. Lebanon and Syria, a space of mobility that developed in the 1990s**

With the end of the Lebanese war, the period that begins is characterized by the reconstruction of the relations between Palestinian families living in different countries. Security



conditions allow to circulate again between Syria and Lebanon. The location of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon then played a central role as a reception area for Palestinians from Syria circulating. Umm Maher's sister visits her relatives in Lebanon. Later, two of Um Maher's son got married respectively with two of their maternal cousins who used to live in the Aleppo region. The second generation of refugees will contribute to rebuild family ties despite the dispersion and the conflicts. Both sisters will come to Lebanon and settle in the Palestinian gathering. Following their installation, their mother will come several times to visit Lebanon strengthening ties between the two branches of the scattered family.

Family relations between the sisters settled in Lebanon and their relatives in Syria remained strong, maintained by frequent visits. The second generation, born in exile, strengthens these ties through marriage between the two branches of the family in the 1990s and early 2000s. The sister of Umm Maher narrates the relations between the two branches of the family.

We did not choose to be separated when we were young. In Irbid [*a city North of Jordan*], we were all in the house of the son of the sister of my grandmother. My sister [*Umm Maher*] who had been a time in a residential school in Jerusalem joined us. I was the oldest, they had only small kids. I was cleaning at home. They gave us a room and we lived there. I spent all day at home, and the night I went to sleep with my grandmother and my sisters. When I was 12 years old, they told us that we have to leave and live in the family of our father that scattered between Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, there were my cousins, children of my father's uncles. One of my uncles wanted to marry me to his son. We arrived in Syria with my sisters and my grandmother. I told them I did not want to marry my cousin. I did not like him. I told them I wanted to go to my aunts, sisters of my mother, in Aleppo. I personally decided to go to Aleppo. My sister went to Lebanon. I

stayed in Aleppo alone until 1955. I married in 1958 and settled in Syria, in the Aleppo region.

Until 1982 I did not see my sisters. We had no relations. I had small children and my husband was poor. For my sister in Lebanon it was the same... One of her sons was wounded and lost a hand, others were injured. In 1982, when I heard what had happened, I came to visit them. At the time it was easier to cross the border than today [1999]. Now it is difficult. When my son was in the Syrian army<sup>2</sup>, he spent time in Beirut, I went to see him in Barbir<sup>3</sup>. I just came with my Palestinian ID. Then it became more difficult to travel between the two countries. Syria gives us the right to go to Lebanon, with all the facilities, it is the Lebanon that does not let us in. Difficulties to travel started in 1996, I think. The Palestinian from Lebanon can easily go to Syria, the opposite is difficult. I married my daughters in Lebanon. I want to come to see them when they give birth to their children. But it is difficult, the Lebanese does not let us in.

I decided to marry two of my daughters here in Lebanon. A son of my sister lost his hand, the poor ... my younger sister [*Umm Maher*] lived the *Nakba*, the difficulties. I really wanted to give my daughter to her son, because they really lived a difficult situation. I love his son, I saw him when he was young, when he lost his hand in 1982. Then when I saw my only daughter in Tyre - the one who married first - I thought it would be a good thing that her sister also settles in Tyre. My oldest daughter will not be alone. A girl cannot be alone like that.

Subsequently, these matrimonial alliances between Tyre and Aleppo will continue. A granddaughter of Umm Maher, born in Lebanon, married with one of her cousins in Syria. So, the next generation takes over and the relationships between the two families are strengthened,

but this time it's a young woman who left Lebanon to live in Syria. Ties were consolidated across generations.

Alongside this strengthening of family ties by various matrimonial strategies, relatives came to Southern Lebanon to work as seasonal workers, as did many Syrian workers at that time. Despite the obstacles put in place by Lebanon on the entry of Syria Palestinians on its soil - such as those mentioned by the sister of Umm Maher - there is some movement of migrant / refugees between the two countries. It is always possible to get, even if it was difficult, an entry visa for family reasons. Other Palestinians entered illegally in Lebanon. We must remember that until 2005 Syria occupied militarily most of Lebanon territory and that traffic at the border was very important. Seasonal work in Lebanon thus represented for some Palestinians from Syria an additional income. For example, Mohamed, a relative of Umm Maher, came in 1999 for a few weeks to try to work. A son of Umm Maher then hosted him during his stay. These migrations for both family and economic reasons have helped to create a dense cross border space of circulation. These families are hosting relatives and facilitate their insertion on the local labour market.

In July and August 2006, Israel bombed Lebanon destroying local infrastructure in the country. The South was particularly affected. Part of the family of Umm Maher tried to find temporary refuge in Syria. The two daughters-in-law of Umm Maher, who are Palestinians from Syria, tried to put their family in a safe place in Syria during the conflict. They left Tyre in car and headed towards the Northern border. They however were not allowed to cross the border, the Syrian authorities refusing the entry of Palestinians from Lebanon on its soil during the war. Only the two sisters were allowed to enter Syria because they had their Syrian Palestinian identity documents. Both their husbands and children were registered as Palestinians from

Lebanon. Legal constraints therefore limit the mobility of refugees. Family support networks are in these particular situations unable to play their role.

#### **4. The Syrian crisis. Remobilization of family migration networks**

##### **4.1. The Syrian conflict, towards a new exile of Palestinians.**

The conflict that began in 2011, has rejected Palestinians in Syria into their stateless status and forced them to seek asylum abroad. The Syrian conflict left Palestinians in Syria in an ambiguous situation, oscillating between individual forms of protest and more structured opposition movements to the regime and to some parts of the Palestinian leadership (Napolitano, 2012). In 2018, a total of 120,000 have fled Syria, according to UNRWA figures, heading mainly to countries in the region (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt) but also Europe<sup>4</sup>. However, in Lebanon, this number has decreased from more than 50,000 in 2015 to 31,000 in 2018 due to re-emigration mainly towards European countries or return to Syria.

This refugee movement, largely overshadowed by the scale of the Syrian crisis, raises many questions about the status of refugees forced to leave their country of first settlement to seek asylum in another, outside any framework of international protection (Bastaki, 2017). Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA has a limited mandate of protection. As mentioned by Jalal al Hussein (2015): "*The fact that Palestinian refugees have benefited from the humanitarian services of an agency, UNRWA, dedicated exclusively to their basic needs for more than sixty years has not yet filled this vacuum of protection. Although its relief, health and education activities have played a protective role in conflict, they do not replace the political and physical protection activities covered by UNHCR's mandate*".

This displacement is a continuation of other forced Palestinian migrations in the region and questions the asylum policies implemented by the states in the region (Doraï and Al

Husseini, 2013). In countries bordering Syria, the relative closure of the border to Palestinian refugees contrasts with the reception of Syrians, related to the specific and singular position of the Palestinian question in the region. The treatment of Palestinian refugees from Syria makes it possible to develop a more global reflection on the selectivity of the migration policies of the Middle Eastern countries in a context of crises. In the field of forced migration there is confusion between legal categories (refugees, asylum seekers, etc.) and those of the migrant experience (Zetter, 2007). Palestinians, although recognized as refugees in their country of registration, find themselves in a singular situation when they cross an international border. They remain stateless and deprived of formal protection. Lebanon, like some other Arab countries in the region, is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. The category of "refugee" - with the exception of Palestinians who are recognized as refugees in the state where they have permanent residence - does not exist as such (Zaiotti, 2006).

#### *4.2. Cross-border circulation and asylum seeking.*

The migratory space developed by the Palestinians between Syria and Lebanon was mobilized again and more extensively with the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. While hostilities began in Syria in early 2011, the circulation between the two countries increased. Palestinian refugees from Syria headed towards Lebanon for various reasons: to escape the fighting in their area of residence, to access health care or escape a high-tension situation. As long as circulating between the two countries was possible for them, very few Palestinians decided to settle "permanently" in Lebanon. They were moving back and forth regularly between Lebanon and Syria. The restrictions imposed by the Lebanese authorities regarding access to education, health, or the labour market, and the high cost of living urged Palestinians not to settle permanently in Lebanon but rather considering Lebanon as a temporary shelter space. The escalation of the conflict in Syria and in particular the attacks on the Yarmouk camp in

Damascus in December 2012 changed completely the situation. The return to Syria as long as the conflict lasts, is no longer an option for Palestinians who settle now "on the long term" in Lebanon, in a highly constrained legal and socioeconomic context. While a family originally from Yarmouk camp interviewed in December 2013 planned to go back to Syria in light of the many socio-economic difficulties they were facing since their installation in Tyre, in May 2014, this option was no longer considered. The destruction of a large part of Yarmouk camp, the siege to which it is subject and fighting between different factions and the Syrian regime completely annoyed their hopes of return. The temporary shelter has turned into a quest for asylum over time.

Like their counterparts settled since decades in Lebanon, just over half the recently arrived Palestinian refugees from Syria concentrate in one of the 12 existing refugee camps. Others settle in neighbourhoods or rural informal gathering where the Palestinian presence is strong. The geography of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon has therefore not been heavily modified by new arrivals, with the exception of new settlements in the Beqaa Valley, which is close to Syrian borders and a first step for those who left Damascus by the main road that connects it to Lebanon. There is a densification of populated areas by the Palestinians and a polarization of migration towards the outskirts of the main Lebanese coastal cities. The logic behind this geography of asylum is based on the existing family relationships between the two groups in Lebanon and Syria. When the conflict escalated, the first Palestinian who sought refuge in Lebanon are those who had relatives.

#### 4.3. From Aleppo to Tyre.

The region of Aleppo, home to the sister of Umm Maher and her family, has not been affected by the conflict at the beginning of the Syrian revolution. It was only after several months that the first family members came to Lebanon to find temporary refuge in Lebanon. It

was at this stage of the conflict to protect themselves from the fighting. The situation on the ground has then rapidly evolved and security came back. The family members decided then to go back to Syria. Until 2013, it was quite easy for Palestinians to travel between the two countries. Umm Maher said here that her family did not want to lose their jobs or interrupt the education of their children. They also feared for their goods and properties in Syria. At that time mostly women sought refuge in Lebanon, while men remained in Syria to keep their jobs.

It should be recalled that Palestinians in Lebanon are one of the most underprivileged Palestinian Diaspora community (Chaaban et al., 2010). Palestinians in Syria, who sought refuge in Lebanon, are facing the same discrimination that Palestinians in Lebanon face. After the Israeli invasions of 1978 and that of 1982, which destroyed much of the Palestinian infrastructure and forced the PLO to leave the country, Palestinian refugees have been marginalized on the socio-political scene. This stigmatization of the Palestinian population in Lebanon is spatially translated by their high concentration in camps, more than 65 years after their exodus. These spaces are marked by the informality of housing and the lack of public infrastructure.

It is only when the security situation deteriorated significantly that an increasing number of refugees have stopped their movement between the two countries to settle on the long term in Lebanon. The mobility restrictions imposed by the Lebanese authorities subsequently helped stabilize in their second home country, for fear of not being able to return if they visited Syria, even for a short period. As we are facing a protracted conflict, and Palestinians in Lebanon having limited resources, the situation tends to be difficult in families that do not have all the capabilities to host relatives on the long term, as it has been shown in Shatila camp in Beirut (Abou Zaki, 2015). Mohamed, who came to seek a better future in Lebanon in 1999, came back again following the conflict in Syria. He tried to find a job. He also needed a medical treatment.

He then settled at one of Umm Maher's son house. His family in Lebanon tries to assist him, contacting associations with which they are in touch to reduce the costs of his medical treatment. Tensions arise when it does - or cannot - not afford the medical fees. The situation can also be tense as the Syrian Palestinians in Lebanon may receive UNRWA assistance, which the Palestinians of Lebanon are not entitled. Labour market tensions are also important. Palestinians in Lebanon are confined to low-skilled and low-paying jobs. The influx of Syrians - and to a lesser extent of Palestinians from Syria - tends to increase competition in certain labour market segments such as daily workers in the construction or agriculture sectors.

Due to these multiple challenges, and internal tensions in the family related to the attitude of Mohamed condemned by several family members, he was forced to leave Umm Maher's informal gathering. Family solidarity is fundamental in the reception of new refugees but constrained by the limits inherent to the socio-economic context in which the Palestinians are living. These solidarity networks are also not free of tensions and this tends to limit their impact on the long term. Another limitation is the inability in some cases to limit the effects of legal constraints imposed on refugees. From 2014, it becomes almost impossible for a Palestinian to enter Lebanon from Syrian. Members of the family of Umm Maher are unable to find asylum in Lebanon as the situation in the region of Aleppo has sharply deteriorated due to the fighting between the central government, the opposition and Organization of Islamic State.

The family finds itself again unable to gather because of a conflict. The sister of Umm Maher, if she came to find temporary refuge at the beginning of the conflict, decided to return to Syria to stay close to her children and grandchildren stayed behind. Today it would not be possible for her if she wanted to get an entry visa to come back to Lebanon.

## **5. From settled refugees to precarious asylum seekers**



The absence of legal framework for Palestinian refugees who are forced to leave their country of normal residence (e.g. Syria in this case) as well as the specific legal treatment of the Palestinian refugees by states in the region, raises the problem of secondary migration during conflict (Erekat, 2014). Secondary migration is often analysed in the literature through the resettlement of refugees outside their area of first asylum to Europe or Northern America (e.g. Hein, 1993). The Palestinian case, despite its specificities, raises the question of the refugee status and secondary mobility. The refugee status of the Palestinians is linked to their country of residence. When they leave their country of residence they do not fall under the mandate of the UNHCR and can only access limited humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA. Palestinian refugees tend to be transformed in asylum seekers by conflicts, and most of the time considered as illegal migrants in their country of temporary residence. As they are stateless they cannot even seek the protection of their country of origin. The singularity of the Palestinian experience is related to the non-resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, to their stateless status as their exclusion from the 1951 conventional asylum system. To what extent this experience can be considered as unique in the field of social sciences research? As Michael Kagan (2009) notes the *"plight of Palestinian refugees offers lessons for others, and the norms and knowledge developed from other refugee situations offer a great deal for Palestinians"*. Palestinian experience is very instructive since it shed light on the question of cross-border mobility in the context of protracted conflicts. While protracted conflicts develop in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Yemen), Palestinian experience can help to understand and analyse other refugees' mobility.

Since 2012, a growing number of members of the family came from Syria began to seek temporary asylum in Tyre, welcomed by their relatives. Some have made back and forth movements as long as the security situation in Syria was not too bad. Because they have close relatives in Lebanon, obtaining a visa until restrictions were established, was easier than for Palestinian refugees without family ties. The establishment of a mobility system based on

transnational family networks has facilitated the movement of Palestinian refugees from Syria. The forced dispersion of the Palestinian refugees since 1948 has been used as a resource in times of conflict. A migration experience has been built up over the years by different family members, with different mobility practices (marriage, visits, circular labour migration, etc.). These networks also facilitate access to economic opportunities and accommodation. Access to local resources is also facilitated, and links are reactivated with family members living in third countries, such as the Gulf States or those of Northern Europe. Some family members are trying to resettle on their own with the help of family networks in countries like Sweden, Germany or the United States of America. This raises the question of the role of transnational networks in shaping forced migration.

Since the mid-1990s there has been growing interest in the relations between refugees and transnationalism (Shami 1996; Al Ali et al. 2001; Wahlbeck 2002). Studies of refugees' transnational activities have contributed to a more comprehensive analysis of the role of previous migration in shaping migrants' networks, bridging forced and voluntary migration. Black comments: 'Focusing on the role played by refugees in transnational activities could help to dispel some of the more idealistic notions of transnationalism from below as a people-led process, which take advantage of processes of globalization and ease of travel in the modern world' (2001: 66). Refugee movements resulting from conflicts are often fashioned by previous migration flows and correlated network structures that are re-mobilized during the humanitarian crisis. Therefore, tracing a genealogy of Palestinian refugees from Syria between their place of normal residence and Lebanon can help to better understand current forced migration processes and their connections with other forms of social organization built over time in a regional area.

## **References**

- Abou Zaki, Hala. "The Syrian refugees in the camp of Shatila: legitimacy of conflict and solidarity between" new "and" old "refugees" *Confluence Méditerranée*, n°92 (2015): 49-59
- Al-Ali, Nadjé, Black, Richard and Koser, Khalid. 'Refugees and transnationalism: The experience of Bosnians and Eritreans in Europe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27:4, (2001): 615–34.
- Bastaki, Jinan. "The Legacy of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Palestinian Refugees: Multiple Displacements, Multiple Exclusions", *Berkeley Journal of Middle Eastern & Islamic Law*, Vol. 8, n°1, (2017) Available at: <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/jmeil/vol8/iss1/1>
- Benezer, Gadi, and Zetter, Roger. "Searching for directions: Conceptual and methodological challenging in researching refugee journeys", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 28(3), (2014): 297-318.
- Black, Richard. 'Fifty years of refugee studies: From theory to policy', *International Migration Review*, vol. 35, n°, (Spring 2001): 57–78.
- Chaaban J., H. Ghattas Habib R., Hana S., Sahyoun, N., Salti, N., K. Seyfert, Naamani N., *Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, Report published by the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the United Nations relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 2010
- Doraï, Kamel. "From Syria to southern Lebanon. Course of Palestinian refugees seeking asylum", *European Journal of International Migration*, 31-3, (2015): 103-120.

- Doraï, Kamel, and Al Hussein, Jalal. "The vulnerability of the Palestinian refugees in the light of the Syrian crisis," *Confluence Méditerranée* , 87, (Fall 2013): 95-108.
- Erekat, Noura. "Palestinian Refugees and the Syrian Uprising: Filling the Protection Gap during Secondary Forced Displacement", *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 2014, Vol. 26, No. 4, (2014): 581–621
- Hein, Jeremy. "Refugees, Immigrants, and the State", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 19, (1993): 43-59.
- Ma Mung, Emmanuel. "The dispersion as resource", *Cultures & Conflicts* [Online], 33-34, (spring-summer 1999), URL: <http://conflits.revues.org/225>
- Richmond, Anthony H., *Global Apartheid. Refugees, Racism, and the New World Order*, Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994
- Shami, Seteney. "Transnationalism and refugee studies: Rethinking forced migration and identity in the Middle East", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 9:1, (1996): 3–26.
- Sfeir, Jihane. "Le Liban, pays de refuge. Généalogie des réfugiés arméniens, palestiniens et syriens (1915-2015)", *Relations internationales*, 4, n°172, (2017): 39-50.
- Wahlbeck, Östen. "The concept of diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28:2, (2002): 221–38.

---

<sup>1</sup> These surveys were conducted as part of the ANR MOBGLOB. I would like to thank Jaber Abu Hawash for the valuable assistance he gave me to select Palestinian families from Syria and giving me the proper contextual elements to understand the local issues of the presence of this new group of refugees in Southern Lebanon.

<sup>2</sup> Palestinians in Syria had to join a special unit of the Syrian army.

<sup>3</sup> One of the Beirut districts where the Syrian army was stationed

<sup>4</sup> [www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis](http://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis) (accessed 01/02/2018)