

## Lebanon Refugee Crises through the Sectarian Lens

On March 10, 2017, a regional television channel aired an interview with Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi, the head of Lebanon's Maronite Church. While responding to a question about his ambiguity toward Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, Al-Rahi stated, seemingly extemporaneously, "The Palestinians are the ones who stirred the war against the Lebanese army in 1975 in Lebanon, and as a result we went through a civil war."<sup>1</sup> As might be expected, his statement raised some ire. In fact, it precipitated a brief debate between those who opposed the Patriarch's opinion and those who supported it. When that debate began to wane, it was replaced with one focused on another, fresh group of



From right to left, three pictures featuring chronologically the Syrian, Palestinian and Armenian asylum to Lebanon.

"refugees" that had begun arriving in Lebanon a few years before.<sup>(\*)</sup>

Another "incident" occurred several weeks later. Just as Lebanon's prime minister was preparing to attend the "Supporting Syria and the Region" conference in Brussels (coordinated by the European Union), he reportedly disclosed to a group of "foreign media correspondents in Beirut" that Lebanon was at the "point of collapse." He also expressed concern that the 1.5 million Syrians in Lebanon could cause strife between the refugees and their Lebanese hosts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> Sky News Arabia interview broadcast March 10, 2017.

<sup>(\*)</sup> Please review the sidebar "Refugees" vs. "Displaced" on page 2.

<sup>(2)</sup> An Nahar. April 1, 2017. [http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/annahar-20170401-01\\_08.pdf](http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/annahar-20170401-01_08.pdf) Also, "Lebanon near 'breaking point' over Syrian refugee crisis: PM Hariri," <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-lebanon-idUSKBN1722JM>

Then, somewhere between Patriarch Al-Rahi's spontaneous observation (which remains controversial among the Lebanese) and the prime minister's dire warning, Lebanon's minister of tourism (a man of Armenian descent who is thus affiliated with a refugee community that once sought shelter in Lebanon) also spoke seemingly out of turn. While criticizing Turkey, the minister angered some Lebanese by implying that he favored his loyalty to Armenia over his Lebanese nationality.<sup>3</sup>

One need not be a meticulous observer of Lebanese affairs to encounter, almost on a daily basis, disclosures that approximate at least one of the three situations mentioned previously. After all, many such declarations express, sometimes quite unintentionally, the centrality of the very notion of "asylum" in Lebanese life—past, present and most likely in the future. A vital pillar (whether hypothetical or historical) that supports the idea of "inventing Lebanon" holds that at some time in the past, the "Lebanese" (more precisely the group related to geographical Lebanon) also sought asylum in the country. Some did so because of prejudice directed toward them in their countries of origin, while others were persecuted for a variety of

### **"Refugees" vs. "Displaced"**

On December 2014, 15, Lebanon and the UN launched the first "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan." The plan and follow-up actions still being taken today are prefaced by the equivalent of a disclaimer titled "Terminology in the LCRP," to which the following information relates:

“ Lebanon is not a State Party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and has not signed its 1967 Protocol. Lebanon implements some provisions of the Convention on a voluntary basis and considers that granting refugee status to individuals lies within its margin of discretion. The Government of Lebanon stresses on all occasions its longstanding position reaffirming that Lebanon is neither a country of asylum, nor a final destination for refugees, let alone a country of resettlement.

Lebanon considers that it is being subjected to a situation of mass influx and reserves the right to take measures aligning with international law and practice in such situations. The Government of Lebanon refers to individuals who fled from Syria to Lebanon after March 2011 as "displaced." The United Nations characterizes the flight of civilians from Syria as a refugee movement, and considers that most of these Syrians are seeking international protection and are likely to meet the refugee definition.

Therefore, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan uses the following terminologies to refer to persons who have fled from Syria after March 2011:

- (1) "persons displaced from Syria,"
  - (2) "persons registered with UNHCR as refugees," and
  - (3) "de facto refugees."
- [Number] 1 can, depending on context, include Palestine refugees from Syria and Lebanese returnees as well as registered and unregistered Syrian nationals, while [numbers] 2 and 3 refer exclusively to Syrian nationals who are registered with UNHCR or seeking registration. ”

<sup>3</sup>C.f. <http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/Al-Jareeda-20170401-21.pdf>

reasons until they feared for their lives.<sup>4</sup> It must be noted, however, that the notion and practice of asylum has not only had a bearing on Lebanon's history and founding mythology, but also in determining and shaping Lebanese national pride. Almost to an individual, the Lebanese describe their country as a mosaic of religions and sects, a diversity oriented attitude that has helped instill another essential Lebanese quality: the ability—periodically of course—to "coexist peacefully."

From the time Lebanon first appeared as a discrete country—and despite its emergence as a destination for the disenfranchised and persecuted—the issue of asylum has been associated inextricably with "sectarianism." Any latter day analysis that fails to disclose the important role played by sectarianism will also have failed to recognize the "bigger picture" in Lebanon. In decree No. 60, which was issued March 13, 1926, Lebanon's "historical sects" were listed. Chief among them were the Armenians, who achieved their "historical status" due to contingencies associated with World War I. This official action underscores the enduring presence of a naive bias, which clearly has demonstrated a unique ability to emplace obstacles in the course of Lebanese life, particularly in the society's ongoing debate

over how their coexistence can be weakened. Examples of such naiveté abound, and some people claim that even the simple mention of their existence can inflame "sectarian" tensions that pose a direct threat to civil peace in the country. That notwithstanding, it is always beneficial to recall that Lebanon's reluctance to welcome and assimilate newcomers is not indicative of a demeanor based on systematic mechanisms. Rather, the attitude is *selective* in nature and origin.

In parallel with Lebanon's institution as sovereign state, Armenian refugees (among others) were given Lebanese nationality. Similarly, thousands of Christian Palestinians also received Lebanese citizenship during the 1950s and 1960s. As they did, their Palestinian status changed instantly from "enemy" (a general characterization applied to Palestinians by certain civil war era Lebanese militias) to "Lebanese nationals." Of course, it could be argued that these two examples are archaic and no longer apply to "21st century Lebanon." Thus, a closer look at recent events in the country is necessary to freshen this inclination toward selectivity.

In March 2015, just a few months after the "Zero Refugees" policy had been adopted

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<sup>(4)</sup> Firro, Kais. *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate*, I.B. Tauris, 2002.

by Lebanese authorities, an exception was granted by those same officials to welcome a number of Assyrian families from Hassakeh.<sup>5</sup> In the final months of that year, the United Nations brokered the exchange of several hundred wounded fighters and their families between the predominantly Sunni area of Zabadani (just outside Damascus) and the Shia areas of Kifrya and Foua (Idlib, northern Syria). Ultimately, more than 100 people from Zabadani arrived in Turkey and over 300 from Kifrya and Foua arrived in Lebanon. Of note, there is no evidence that anyone from that latter group has ever departed Lebanon....<sup>6</sup>

These recent developments may seem burdensome to some

### Old Lebanese vs. New Lebanese!

On May 6, 1926, the newly constituted Lebanese parliament met to discuss a draft law on municipalities submitted by the government. The following is an excerpt of the official minutes of the discussions which took place that day.

“Mr. (Ibrahim) al-Munzer asked whether the refugees were categorized in the census according to their nationality or their religious affiliation.

The government's representative (Salim Bey Takla) answered that they were categorized according to their religious affiliation. In other words, they emerged as new sects. For example, with Greek Orthodox already in the country, there are now Armenian Orthodox as well. The reason the government categorized them as such in the census is because of its fear that they would take over the “seats” [within municipalities] that had been earmarked for the old Lebanese (sic). If the government's suggestion is accepted, then each sect preserves its seats.

Dr (Jamil) Talhouk said that, according to

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## حين كانت الكنائس تطلب تجنيسهم

مَثَّل وضع اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في لبنان، رغم أنه «ليس بلد لجوء»، مادة دسمة للسيااسيين يلجأون إليها عندما «تتلخبط» المسابقات في تقاسم المكاسب، استناداً إلى عدد المنتسبين إلى كل طائفة، وإذا كان الخوف «الديموغرافي» من التوطن هو المانع الأساس، فإن التجنيس لم يكن دوماً مستبعداً عن الفلسطينيين

### أليسار كرم

العاصفة التي أثارها اقتراحات اللقاة الديمقراطية للقوانين المعجلة المكررة، بهدف تحسين أوضاع اللاجئين الفلسطينيين، أثار توكيات العديد من العاملين على هذه الحقوق منذ الخمسينات والستينات. هكذا، يستذكر بعض هؤلاء موجة تجنيس الفلسطينيين التي حصلت في خمسينيات القرن الماضي وستينياتها وذلك في عهد الرؤساء السابقين كميل شمعون والرئيس فؤاد شهاب والرئيس شارل حلو هكذا إذا؟ سبق أن جنس اجددهم الفلسطينين؟ من يكونوا يخافوا من التوطنين؟ من

اختلال التعداد الديموغرافي؟ ولكن عن أي فلسطينيين نتحدث؟ وهل تم ذلك بطلب من اللاجئين أنفسهم أم كيف؟ يفاجئ الباحث بأن تجنيس هؤلاء أيامها جرى بناء على طلبات قدمتها الكنائس التي لجأ إليها الفلسطينيون المسيحيون يومذاك بعيد نزوحهم القسري إلى لبنان إثر نكبة فلسطين أو بناء على طلبات تقدم بها زعماء العائلات اللبنانية الكبيرة يومها والتي بدا أنها راغبة في زيادة نفوذها، طالما أن تغير العائلات يزيد في لبنان نفوذها، وذلك عبر ضم أقاربها الفلسطينيين كعائلة الأسد وقدره والحمام والتجار وغيرها فمن المعروف أن العائلات في لبنان وفلسطين وسوريا موزعة عبر الحدود منذ أيام الامبراطورية العثمانية حيث لم تكن هناك حدود فعلية بين البلدان التي قسمتها معاهدة ساكس بيكو إثر النكبة، كان جرح الناس ما زال مفتوحاً، وتوافد المرحلين عن أرضهم مستمراً، ما دفع رجال الدين إلى احتضان أبناء طائفتهم من التارحين ومساعدتهم على الاستقرار من دون التفكير في ما يحفظ حق العودة أو يطبحة يومها لم تكن هذه الإشكاليات السياسية مطروحة فحجم المسألة نفسها لم يكن قد تم استيعابه بعد، ويرى باحثون في الشأن الفلسطيني أن النفوذ المسيحي في لبنان بعد

الاستقلال أدى دوراً أساسياً لمصلحة تجنيس الفلسطينيين المسيحيين، وخصوصاً من بينهم أهالي المدن ذات الغالبية السكانية المسيحية مثل صفر والناصرة وغيرها. يوضح الباحث في الشأن الفلسطيني صغر أبو فخر أن «النقل المسيحي في لبنان الخمسينيات

بلد صغير ليس مسيحياً ولا مسلماً وسط محيط إسلامي» يضيفه «في الستينات قام بعض الفلسطينيين المقتدرين بما يشبه شراء الجنسية اللبنانية، إذ استحصلوا عليها لقاء مبالغ طائلة»، ويأسف أبو فخر لغياب إحصاءات وأرقام دقيقة تشير

إلى عدد الذين سُخِّجوا الجنسية، غير أن التقديرات تصل إلى نحو 30 ألف مجنس اندمجوا في المجتمع اللبناني وتوزعوا بين مناطق جسر الباشا وسن الخليل والضبية ومار الناس وخرجوا من مخيماتهم ليستقروا الأحياء الفقيرة أو المتوسطة، ويقدّر



سطوح مخيم ضبية (أرضيف)

The title of this article (*al-Akhbar*, June 28, 2010) reads, "Once upon a Time, [Lebanon's] Churches Wanted [Palestinian Christians] To Receive Lebanese Citizenship.

<sup>5</sup> C.f. [http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/si-almustaqbal-20150301-01\\_18.pdf](http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/si-almustaqbal-20150301-01_18.pdf) and <http://www.memoryatwork.org/public/uploads/files/misc-annahar-20150304-05.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive analysis of this exchange, see: "The Zabadani-Kefraya/Foua Evacuations – Linking the Capitals of 'Resistance.'" <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/629>



the text [submitted by the government], they are refugees...and since a refugee is not a national, he does not enjoy the rights of a national.

According to the government representative, they became citizens via the Lausanne Treaty.

Sheikh Yousef el-Khazen said that it would be better if they were categorized in the census according to their nationality before they receive the right to be elected.

The government representative stated that all residents of the countries split from Turkey [who found themselves in Lebanon] received Lebanese citizenship in accordance with the terms specified in the Lausanne Treaty.

According to Sheikh (Yousef) el-Khazen, the Lausanne Treaty mentions those residing in the countries split from Turkey. Lebanon did not separate from Turkey according to that Treaty.

The government representative said that he does not want to discuss the Lausanne Treaty, but prefers to discuss the government's draft law. He believes this law [as it is formulated] preserves the seats of each sect within the municipalities.

Dr. (Jamil) Talhouk said that regardless of how ambiguous the issue may be, the government should give the parliament sufficient time to discuss it.

According to Mr. Shibl Dammous, arguing about the rights of refugees who acquire [Lebanese] citizenship does not obviate the fact that they became Lebanese because the countries that have the power to grant citizenship have given them [Lebanese] citizenship. As such, the matter is out of our hands now. Thus, we must pass the government's bill, to prevent these refugees from gaining the chance to capture the seats that were and still are [reserved] for the Lebanese.

(Kheir ed-Dinn Bey) Adra said that it is unjust to give the Armenians the same rights as the Lebanese.

(Dr. Massoud) Yunis asked why they are given the right to municipal seats, but are denied the right to have a seat in parliament. ”

Lebanese who are already confused about agreements regarding their sect-based "right" to revisit the history of asylum in Lebanon. After all, many of us might wonder who would dare analyze the stances that have been instituted by the country after peering at life through a "sectarian lens." Accordingly, these same people might reflect on the essential role sectarianism has played in preventing the Lebanese State from establishing an effective and rational asylum policy rather than one that is motivated by security considerations and/or "begs for international aid." Considering the many other problems Lebanon is facing, such an exercise may include a genuinely therapeutic dimension...especially compared to the intransigence associated with choosing to remain in denial over the very nature and value of asylum.