

Unsettling “Refugees” as a Category

Labeling, Imagined Populations, and Statistics
in a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Beirut

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Introduction: Contextualizing Paper and Camp

What do generalizing labels, such as “Palestinians,” “refugees,” and “refugee camps,” which appear so habitually in statistical studies (Tiltnes 2005, 2007; Ugland 2003), policy papers (UNRWA 2007, 2010), and the “state-of-exception” literature (Hanafi 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Hanafi and Long 2010), effectively mean? This chapter illustrates the problematic nature and consequences of some of these abstractions—“imagined populations,” as I call them—employed by statisticians and policymakers. While Palestinians undoubtedly face barriers for legal inclusion in Lebanon (Al-Natour 1993; Al-Natour and Yassine 2007), I argue that, together with other sectors of the population, Lebanese or otherwise, they also face barriers to social and economic inclusion. Despite efforts of Palestinian nationalism to make Palestinians a singular case, there appears to be much in common between Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp in the outskirts of Beirut, where I conducted fieldwork for two years, and other poverty-stricken districts of Beirut. By accepting the terms of Palestinian nationalism and emphasizing Palestinians’ “Palestinianness,” researchers may have contributed to the Othering of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, simultaneously downplaying other categories of belonging, such as class. Can class enable “Arab encounters” of a different kind and serve as a basis for political mobilization?

I tackle most of these questions through data collected from three families, whose biographies are portrayed in the next section of this study. To contextualize these biographies, I now present a brief history of Shatila and of the Palestinian saga in Lebanon.

Shatila

Located in the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila, today a sprawling and increasingly vertical shantytown, was home to an estimated population of 13,000 people at the time of my fieldwork (2008–10). Several residents, though, were not Palestinian, but poor Lebanese and Syrians, Iraqi refugees, and Dom, among others. The camp's history reflects the saga of the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon. Prior to the recent influx of some 1.5 million refugees, including Palestinians (Meier 2016), due to the civil war ravaging Syria, Lebanon was a country of some four million inhabitants, belonging to eighteen different sects. Often placed at the intersection of various local, regional, and international interests, Lebanon has been historically prone to conflicts (Picard 1996; Salibi 2005; Trabulsi 2007). To safeguard their interests, the Lebanese sects seek support from powerful foreign allies. Since 1948, Palestinians have also played a role in Lebanese sectarian politics.

Shatila's bare two square kilometers have played host to several episodes marking Lebanese-Palestinian relations (R. Sayigh 1979, 1993). The establishment of the camp dates back to 1949, when the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) leased the area for the first refugees. In the 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) established its headquarters in the vicinity of the camp, and Shatila became a cradle for the *fidā' iyyīn*, or freedom fighters. Thus began the so-called *'ayyām al-thawra* (the days of the revolution), the heyday of the Palestinian resistance in its military form in Lebanon and other diasporas (Y. Sayigh 1997).

The year 1982 marks a turning point in this history. In 1982, upon the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon, Shatila was left vulnerable, and the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacre took place (Nuwayhed al-Hout 2004). In 1985, Amal, a Shia militia, kept Shatila under siege for two years. In 1987, the camp wars broke out in Shatila, opposing Palestinian factions backed by Damascus and their anti-Syrian enemies. After 1990, in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, Shatila fell under Syrian control, which was to last until 2005, when the Syrian army and intelligence were forced to leave Lebanon. Since 1982, laws depriving Palestinians from civil, social, and economic rights—including the rights to work and to acquire real estate—have been enforced more consistently, hitting Shatilians hard.

Methods

This chapter is based on two years of participant observation in Shatila between 2008 and 2010, during which I lived in the camp for one year. Fieldwork, conducted mainly in Arabic, consisted of informal interactions, workshops to discuss nationalistic songs and present-day rap with older and younger camp residents, interviews with fathers and sons (and sometimes daughters and mothers), and a household survey. With the help of research assistants from Shatila, I performed the translations from Arabic to English for this chapter. The household survey yielded the stories of the three families who are the focus of this chapter. While they appear similar in terms of socioeconomic standing, they are fundamentally different in one specific way.

The More It Changes, the More It Remains the Same: A Biography of Three Families

The Abu Sahar Family

Forty-one-year-old Um Sahar struggled with the remote control of the recently purchased air conditioner. Regardless of the fact that summer had not yet begun, the thermometer was already over 30°C. Remittances sent back to Lebanon by 47-year-old Abu Sahar enabled the purchase of the device. Abu Sahar had moved to Dubai just three months before my interview with his family. Unemployed in his native Lebanon, Abu Sahar had secured a position as a construction worker in the United Arab Emirates. The couple decided that he should travel alone: as life is cheaper in Lebanon, it made sense for Um Sahar to stay in the country with their three children—ages eight, thirteen, and sixteen—to help the family save money. “But he calls us all the time because he worries with us here. You know, Lebanon is not a safe country,” Um Sahar was telling me when the phone rang. It was her husband.

Um Sahar has always dedicated herself to housework. She performed well enough in high school to study chemistry at the university, as she wished. Originally from the Tal Al-Zaatar camp, she left it upon its destruction in 1976 and moved to Libya. It was there that she met Abu Sahar, whom she married at the age of twenty. Shortly thereafter, the birth of a mentally challenged daughter forced her to relinquish her academic pursuits. While the child died young, other pregnancies ensued, and Um Sahar had to stay home and care for the children. “Having to take care of three kids is a lot of work,” she noted, laughing. But she made a point of adding, “Mind you: I have no difficulty with the idea of women working outside the home to help their families. For example, it wouldn’t be a problem for me if my daughters

got jobs outside of Shatila. But it would have to be respectful (*muhtaram*) work, suitable for women.”

Um Sahar left Libya in 1994. It was becoming increasingly difficult for Palestinians to find work in that country, so the Abu Sahar family returned to Lebanon and settled in Shatila. “I didn’t expect the situation for refugees here would be even worse,” she lamented and was about to continue when we heard a knock at the door. Her future son-in-law, nineteen-year-old Mahmud, and his mother had arrived for a visit.

In Mahmud, Sahar, sixteen years old, has a partner who supports her in her academic and professional projects: once she has completed her intermediate cycle at school, Sahar wants to enroll in an institute (*ma’had*) and then find a job, keeping it after the wedding. “But of course women can work outside, if they want, to help their families,” Mahmud defended. The marriage will take place in two or three years—the time Mahmud needs to raise money to pay the brideprice (*muqaddam*) and finish building their home.

“Our house is almost done,” he celebrated. “But I still need to buy the furniture,” he added. To earn money faster, Mahmud dropped out of his vocational training course in hospitality and was working double shifts as a delivery boy. He is also counting on money that his brother, who had emigrated to Germany, sends to the family. In fact, Mahmud would like to take the same course as his brother, but he knows how difficult it is to get the appropriate visas. His mother has tried three times but has not obtained the visa that would allow her to see how her eldest son is living in his new country with his newly acquired German nationality. Despite his mother’s negative experience, Mahmud has not given up hope: “I will try anyway, because life in Germany is easier than here. And Europe is a better destination than the [Persian] Gulf . . . If we, Sahar and I, can emigrate, life will be easier. If we stay here, we will face poverty. But we’ll deal with it.”

Once the interview ended, Mahmud accompanied me on my way out of Abu Sahar’s house. He confided to me, “Sahar and I, you know we’re not relatives, don’t you? We met as volunteers during relief efforts in the 2006 war. We fell in love immediately. We’re getting married out of love.”

The Abu Ubaida Family

A strong, sweet smell of mutton came from Um Ubaida’s kitchen. Once again, my interview with a Palestinian family would turn into a banquet, and my tentative plans to become a vegetarian would have to be postponed one more time. Often my Palestinian hosts chose to ignore my predilection for *mujaddara*—a combination of rice, lentils, and caramelized onions, delicious to my taste but considered to be of lower status. Guests must be treated properly, which requires a lavish menu, with meat invariably served as the

main course. I had no way to decline the Abu Ubaida family's generous offer of hospitality: meat is a relatively expensive item, reaching 20,000 Lebanese pounds (about US\$14 at the time of fieldwork) per kilo at a butcher's shop in the popular Sabra market, and my hosts' family budget was tight. In this, as in other features, the Abu Ubaida family seemed like the Abu Sahar family, but, as this chapter will show, they were different in one important way.

"My monthly income varies a lot. Sometimes I make 600 dollars a month; sometimes I don't make anything," Abu Ubaida, a 56-year-old carpenter, said. His professional life began very early when, at the age of nine, he worked as a helper in a hair salon and, over summer vacation, in a juice store. He dropped out of school prematurely, halfway through middle school, claiming that his teachers beat him. At fourteen, Abu Ubaida was working full time, following the career of one of his brothers, a talented carpenter. On another front as well, the brother served as a role model for Abu Ubaida: he was a Palestinian fighter, a *fidā'i*. "I also raised weapons, because we were being attacked and we had to defend ourselves," said Abu Ubaida. My roused expectations at the prospect of an account punctuated by daring guerrilla activities in the Palestinian Territories were thwarted by the no less heroic and far more dramatic outcome of his military career: "I served time in an Israeli jail in Eilat for a year and a half. From there I was transported to Algeria." He was back in Lebanon in 1984.

Abu Ubaida's sister had a decisive influence on another of Abu Ubaida's decisions, with long-term repercussions. She was the first to set eyes on Um Ubaida, eighteen years younger than her future husband, and thought she would be a good match for her brother. Belonging to a family originally from Kfar Shuba, in southern Lebanon, Um Ubaida is Lebanese and was born in the Fakhani area, in the vicinity of Shatila. She spent most of her youth in Fakhani, except for the periods when she was forced to brief relocations. She and Abu Ubaida met only two or three times before marriage. "There was no love or anything like that," Um Ubaida recalled and added, "It made no difference in my family's eyes that my husband was Palestinian. My brothers and sister got married the same way. Lebanese, Palestinians—there's not so much difference between us." At the time, Abu Ubaida was earning enough money to start a family. It was from his salary that he saved the US\$800 for the *muqaddam*.

Um Ubaida stopped working only briefly after marriage. Her professional life also began early, when she was fifteen years old. Teenage Um Ubaida divided her time between work and school. She has had a number of short-term jobs: junior clerk in a company, nursery school teacher, junior hairdresser, and accountant. Her academic experience superseded that of her partner: she studied until the final years of middle school and only stopped because her family could no longer afford tuition.

Just three months before our interview, and the ensuing mutton banquet, Um Ubaida began working at a Palestinian nongovernmental organization (NGO), tutoring underperforming students from the UNRWA schools. She has substantial experience with NGOs: she received her hairdressing and accountancy training through vocational courses offered by such institutions and worked in a day care center belonging to one. Her new job provides the family with 400,000 Lebanese pounds (around US\$270) a month, much-needed added income at a time when Abu Ubaida’s earnings are so erratic. With three children—aged five, thirteen, and sixteen—to provide for, Um Ubaida was almost shocked by my question about whether women should work outside the household: “*Lāzim* (it’s necessary)! You know, we don’t exactly lead easy lives around here.”

Still, and despite having relatives in Denmark, Canada, and Saudi Arabia, the Abu Ubaida family has no plans to emigrate, even though they have considered it. Um Ubaida was very realistic about the family’s slim chances of leaving Lebanon: “To begin with, we would have to show embassies bank statements with large sums of money, and we have none. So what’s the point of getting passports and applying for visas when we know in advance that we have no chance? We have never even tried.”

Abu Ubaida’s assessment of his family’s prospects was even darker: “We have no future here,” he remarked. The most striking comment about the situation of the Abu Ubaida family, nonetheless, came unexpectedly from thirteen-year-old Ubaida. Toward the end of the interview, I decided to check which appliances existed in Abu Ubaida’s residence. The family has all the basic appliances, but none of the luxurious ones, with the notable exceptions of a battered car and an obsolete computer. When I asked if the family had air conditioning or *chauffage* (heating), Ubaida expressed shock, exclaiming, “*Chauffage?* But what is that?!” as if my question was somewhat absurd.

The Abu Walid Family

Abu Walid’s children—aged seven, nine, and eleven—were well dressed, waiting for “the researcher.” In what was probably an unbearably boring experience for them, they remained quiet and well behaved for the two hours I talked to their parents. It was my friend Ahmad who made arrangements for me to visit Abu Walid’s house. His eldest daughter is one of Ahmad’s private students: he helps her with the rather demanding homework of the relatively expensive school she attends. Abu Walid has already considered sending his children to study in Syria, where education is free. “Every once in a while, my boss pays the school fees, because if my salary lasts until the tenth day of the month, that’s a feat!” Abu Walid, thirty-six, complained. Working with aluminum, he does not earn enough to cover his family’s ex-

penses: in addition to the children's school fees, he pays US\$200 as rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Shatila. He moved to the camp in 1997, shortly after his marriage to 32-year-old Um Walid.

Abu and Um Walid are cousins—marriage with cousins being a favored, if waning, pattern in the region—and come from the same village, which facilitated the negotiations that led to the wedding. Um Walid completed high school, but, for now, with her husband's approval, she prefers not to work. "I am not against women working, but, you know, we have three children for her to take care of," Abu Walid remarked. She nodded.

Um Walid expresses herself in Palestinian Arabic. As a result of his wider exposure to society outside of Shatila, Abu Walid shifts, speaking Lebanese Arabic with the Lebanese, Palestinian with the Palestinians, and Syrian with the Syrians. Despite the adaptability revealed by his language skills, he confessed to me that he was not completely comfortable in the camp:

I like the building where our apartment is. I have known my neighbors for a long time They are all from the same extended family (*'ā'ila*). After all these years, they think of us as members of the *'ā'ila* as well. For example, if something happens here with my family while I'm at work, I can count on my neighbors to help. But it is not so throughout the camp. Shatila has changed a lot over the years. Before, it was a respectable (*muhtaram*) place to live in. It is no longer so, with all these loose (*falsānīn*) lads (*shabāb*), carrying guns in the alleys.

Abu Walid had a chance to move out of Shatila. He chose to remain because of his supportive neighbors and his short commute to work. He has been working with the same aluminum company since 1997: "I used to carry my boss's son on my shoulders, and now the son has become my boss!" he said, laughing. Previously, Abu Walid was in the army for three years, between 1994 and 1997. In 1989, having failed halfway through middle school, he dropped out and worked as a janitor until 1994.

He has such confidence in his neighbors and they in him that he has associated himself with his building's *jam'iyyāt*, a joint pooling of resources to be used by participants when and if the need arises. This is precisely why he does not seriously consider moving out—from Shatila or Lebanon: "I feel like a fish out of water when I travel, even for short trips," he told me. Without any money in the bank, the Abu Walid family believes that if they have to meet emergency expenses, such as a hospital bill, they can count on their cousins' help in addition to the *jam'iyyāt* funds. He clarified: "As you can imagine, I don't have any health insurance."

At about 10:00 PM, the children's eyes showed clear signs of exhaustion, and I realized it was time to leave. It was already cold by then: I interviewed the family in winter and there were no luxury amenities—computers, air conditioners, or *chauffage*—at Abu Walid's house.

Inclusion/Exclusion in a Palestinian Camp in Lebanon

"Be careful when you are collecting those figures, Gustavo," Abu Mujahed warned me. I had come to him early in my field research, hoping to gather some data on the size, composition, and wage levels of Shatila's residential units to satisfy my scientifically trained obsession with numbers. Abu Mujahed knew exactly what he was talking about: before becoming the director of a local NGO, he had studied social sciences during his exile in Cuba and written precisely about the Palestinian housing situation in Lebanon, under the name he shares with the Palestinian politician Mahmoud Abbas (Abbas et al. 1997). He explained to me the reasons for his distrust of numbers: "You might find, for example, that on average 3.5 people live in a room in refugee camp homes. But that says absolutely nothing about the condition of the rooms or the way the inhabitants interact." The solution was clear: visit the rooms in question and meet the residents. I followed Abu Mujahed's advice, which launched a household survey that I conducted with thirty families, recording their living conditions and collecting their work biographies. In the end, I was left with a fair amount of quantitative data, along with a sharp discomfort with the numbers collected and a pronounced awareness of the limits of the story they revealed.

At first glance, the biographies of the three families above tell the same story: of economic hardship, interrupted education, inadequate housing, and attempts at immigration in search of a brighter future. However, there is something fundamentally different between the three families in question, despite similarities in terms of socioeconomic indicators. Of the three, only Abu Sahar's is Palestinian and lives in Shatila. While Abu Ubaida's family is Palestinian (although Um Ubaida is Lebanese), they live in Sports City, just outside the camp, and while Abu Walid's family members live in Shatila, they have Syrian nationality. This serves as an indicator of the problematic nature of some of the abstractions that statisticians work with: "imagined populations," I call them. In the process of constructing such "imagined populations," generalizations, and bureaucratic stereotyping (Zetter 1991), what is omitted and what remains unspoken? To what extent do numbers demonstrate the "reality" and convey the experience of the residents of Shatila? What realities and alternative stories do the numbers silence, as Abu Mujahed warned? What are the methodological and epistemological foundations of these stories based on numbers, and what are their limitations?

Indeed, scholars often portray families like Abu Sahar's, but rarely visit those similar to Abu Ubaida's and Abu Walid's: mine was their first interview with a researcher. While Palestinians in Lebanon undoubtedly face barriers to legal inclusion—free access to the labor and real estate markets are banned to them (Barbosa 2013)—they, along with other sectors of the population, Lebanese or otherwise, also face obstacles to social and eco-

conomic inclusion. In this respect, and despite the effort of Palestinian nationalism to singularize the situation of the Palestinians, there seems to be more in common between Shatila and other poverty-stricken districts of Beirut than initially assumed. By bending to the terms of Palestinian nationalism and emphasizing the Palestinians' "Palestinianness," researchers may be contributing to the exoticization of refugees in Lebanon, minimizing other forms of belonging, such as class (Allan 2018). Indeed researchers and activists often fail to recognize the political violence implied by thinking, proposing, and eventually dictating that there is a univocal Palestinian identity and history (Allan 2014). The supposed unity of the Palestinian people is probably more a requirement of the state-making project than of the people themselves. In a conversation with Salman Rushdie, Edward Said (1986) argues for the multiplicity of Palestinian experiences and histories. Investigating "Palestinianness" at the lived level will indeed reveal its depth and diversity.

What if my own and other surveyors' research questions are designed in such a way that the very framework of what counts as "the economy" is of limited scope for understanding the economy of the refugee camp? What difference would it make if analysts invited research participants to discuss forms of brideprice as mechanisms for making money circulate in the camp; bracelets and gold rings, often collected by women, as forms of savings; and *jam'iyyāt* as instruments of social security, rather than inquiring about salary levels, bank savings, and access to formal social security programs? What would happen if researchers simply asked how respondents spent their days, rather than inquiring about formal and informal work biographies? Would this type of investigation yield a more accurate portrayal of an economy such as Shatila's, which functions otherwise? While I had started my household survey in Shatila searching for statistical certainties, my final results were marked by heuristic doubts about the distances between numbers and realities, figures and life, words and things.

Conclusion: The Limits of Labels

The label "refugee" is obviously inadequate to reflect the complex lives of the Abu Sahar and Abu Ubaida families. In fact, the labels I was using on my statistical graphs and quantitative analyses—such as "Palestinians," "refugee camps," and "Lebanon"—are crude and overly generalizing. If "Lebanon" includes the Hariris, one of the wealthiest families in the Arab East, with commercial ties to the Saudi royal dynasty, it is not surprising that "Lebanon" is sharply distinct from "camps." However, the analytical *démarche* in this direction not only ignores the similarities between the Shatila camp and its immediate vicinity—also part of "Lebanon"—but also overlooks

similarities in the lives of Um Sahar and Um Ubaida, although the former is Palestinian and a resident of the camp, while the latter is Lebanese and lives outside of Shatila.

Statistical studies and the “state-of-exception” literature lump together in an overarching unit—“camps”—socioeconomic realities that are simultaneously very similar and very different. Taken individually, each camp tends to be similar to its immediate surroundings and different from other camps, according to its history, its integration within the neighborhood, the origin of its residents, and the denominational composition of its surroundings. The very generalizing units, through producing “imagined populations” such as “Palestinians,” “camps,” and “Lebanon,” render both these similarities and differences invisible. The biographies of the three families presented above function as counterevidence for such discourse.

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