

Unsettling the “Refugee Crisis”: Notes from Beirut¹

How can one think through the fact that at least 1 out of every 4 individuals living today in Beirut is considered a “refugee”²? We can start by describing the devastating impacts that this massive influx of destitute populations has had in a city notorious for its crumbling infrastructure, its lack of affordable housing, and its aversion to planning. We can note the waste accumulating on sidewalks, the more frequent water shortages and electricity outages, and numerous other failures of a dysfunctional and overwhelmed system of public services. We can deplore the sight of children and mothers roaming the streets of busy shopping districts, desperately begging for food and money. We can mourn the plight of families rummaging daily through the garbage, children sleeping on sidewalks, and multiple other symptoms of human despair. We can denounce rising urban violence: petty crimes reflecting the social schisms engendered by glaring inequalities and hate crimes increasingly targeting refugees who are demonized with charges such as stealing jobs, conducting improper lifestyles, or allying with terrorist organizations.

In order to critically understand the disturbing snapshot of the refugee as a “destitute beggar”, we first need to re-inscribe the discussion of the “refugee crisis” in relation to the global economy of humanitarian aid (Fassin, 2010) and the hegemony of a state-centered management of displacement (Gill, 2010). To further question the validity of the snapshot as the only documented image of the refugee, we need to look away from well-off urban districts for possible inscriptions of refugees in areas of the city where their status as beggars, powerless and destitute, gives way to a resourceful quest for work and home. We also need to listen to the intensely political discussions in which refugees negotiate daily their entitlement to the city and its services with host community members, with other refugees, and with migrant workers with whom they share overlapping physical, economic, and social spaces. Against the gloomy image of the destitute beggar, it is indeed possible to juxtapose the patterns of human resilience and resourcefulness, to celebrate social solidarities, and perhaps also to shed light on the positive possibilities of living together rarely cited in discussions of urban refugees (Fábos and Kibreab, 2007). This should neither deny the scale of human suffering that we are witnessing nor alleviate the responsibility that the global community, particularly the West, bears for fuelling a series of wars that

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² These numbers reflect population estimates of both formal and informal refugees published regularly by United Nation’s refugee agency UNHCR on its website at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122> (visited last on July 10, 2016) as well as Palestinian refugees registered since 1950 by the United Nations Relief Agency in West Asia (UNRWA).

have torn the Middle East apart for the past sixty years. It should however allow us to reclaim the “refugee crisis” outside the preconceived labels of passivity and acquiescence that displaced and dispossessed people and communities are often framed through (Chatty, 2016: 4) and to propose more effective forms of documenting and understanding processes and experiences of forced population displacements.

A pre-requisite for such an alternative reading of the “refugee crisis” to emerge, I argue in this short essay, it to unsettle the categories through which we record and analyse population displacements. Building on my experience as a resident and researcher in Beirut, I investigate assumptions about the timing, subject and spatial materialization of the refugee crisis by focusing on the three categories that embody these assumptions, namely the “camp”, the “refugee” and the “crisis”. For each, I contrast the legal, neatly-framed definition of the category with the messiness of the realities it describes.

Camps: The Spatiality of the Refugee Crisis

In Beirut, most refugees who arrived since the beginning of the war in Syria have sought shelter in the city’s swelling informal settlements where a now burgeoning rental market of re-subdivided housing units, make-shift rooms often added on the roofs of existing buildings, and stores turned into apartments or multi-purposes spaces has provided most of the needed shelters –albeit frequently in substandard conditions (UNHCR and UN-Habitat, 2014; Fawaz 2016). Thus, while Lebanese national stakeholders and international organizations argued for the first two years of conflict over whether UNHCR will be allowed to establish refugee camps in Lebanon, refugees secured shelters through the heavily segmented urban housing markets that channelled the low-income among them to the city’s informal settlements (Fawaz, 2016).³ Today, many of these neighbourhoods are popularly referred to as “de-facto camps” because refugees outnumber all other community groups but also because refugees were able to recreate a sense of communal belonging and safety embodied visibly in the socio-spatial practices (e.g. store fronts, accents, dress codes) that make of these neighbourhoods “small spaces of the nation in exile” (Peteeet, 2007: 5).

But how do we think and label zones as “camps”? Legally, camps are established on land allocated by nation states in negotiations with global humanitarian organizations to temporarily settle populations fleeing danger until repatriation is possible. Spatially, camps are often areas where populations are fenced in, prevented from engaging in the local economy, and consequently dependent on aid agencies for food and shelter. There is however ample empirical evidence that these attributes of the camp do not stand a reality check. “Temporariness” is for instance contradicted by the fact that only a few camps have

³ Unlike most other national contexts where States prefer the establishment of camps as a strategy to confine and frame refugees, the Lebanese government fiercely rejected the UNHCR proposal to establish camps, despite pleas by relief agencies that camps presented the only feasible shelter policy. The Lebanese government position is motivated by its experience with Palestinian refugee camps that were established temporarily in 1950 but have remained areas outside national jurisdiction for over 60 years. Despite the Lebanese position, an estimated 11-15% of refugees in Lebanon are currently occupying housing in what is described as “tented settlements”, areas where they rent access to land and establish settlements that bare the same spatial elements of camps (e.g. tents, make-shift bathrooms). These settlements are typically located in peri-urban and rural areas (for more, see NRC, 2014).

been dismantled in the Middle East over the past decades, and their dismantlement has come as a result of violent political altercations rather than problem resolution and repatriation. In fact, most camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and elsewhere have functioned as active city-like areas with bustling life and strong networks of social and economic exchanges (Agier, 2002; Branch 2013, Feldman 2015). Furthermore, the assumption that camps are sites of enclosure and exclusion is contradicted by numerous examples where boundaries between city and camp are indistinguishable, although enclosure and social exclusion have been part of the encampment experience at particular historical junctures (Dorai, 2010). More importantly, a critical understanding of Beirut's historical and contemporary urbanization tells us that throughout the city's history, many low-income city dwellers have experienced camps as spaces of exceptional opportunity where disenfranchised new entrants to the city, irrespective of their nationality, have been able to secure shelter in an otherwise unaffordable city. In other words, camps have often served as "entry point" and/or "shelter of the last resort" for the most vulnerable social groups, whether they are refugees or not.

Lifted off Beirut's speculative real estate market through international agreements, the land on which these camps were established has in fact provided for decades a precious reserve of affordable housing (Fawaz, 2013). Thus, areas earmarked as camps for Armenian refugees in the 1930s and later for Palestinian refugees in the 1950s⁴ have gradually developed from temporary tents to multi-story apartment buildings supplying unequivocally Beirut's cheapest rental units. Other refugee quarters in today's Beirut had historically developed in close vicinity to these refugee camps, as camps spilled over their surroundings through squatting and illegal land developments. Yet other refugee quarters developed when war displaced populations during the years of civil strife (1975-1990) occupied with the help of militias both public and private lands as gestures of defiance towards the national authority (Fawaz 2013). These so-called "informal settlements" of the city, grown in a combination of "encampment" and illegal land occupation, form what Martin (2015) has recently labelled Beirut's "campscapes", areas displaying the physical attributes generally associated with "camps" such as incremental building, high density, narrow streets, or dilapidated infrastructure. Extended to also encompass the social aspects of spatial production, "campscapes" rather than camps may indeed be a useful term because it allows us to question definite legal and spatial boundaries in the definition of the "camp" and instead recognize the hybrid and changing role that such spaces are playing for city dwellers, hence a different spatiality for understanding the refugee crisis.

Refugees: Subjects of the Refugee Crisis

Unsettling the categories through which we understand forced population displacements requires us furthermore to question the quintessential subject of the crisis, the "refugee". UNHCR defines refugees as those who are unable to return to their homes without exposing their lives to danger. In doing so, UNHCR enables its staff and other relief agencies to

⁴ It is worth noting that when Armenian camps were set in 1930, Lebanon had not gained its independence. Armenian camps were set in negotiation between the French Mandate Authorities, the League of Nations, and the International Red Cross (Kevorkian, Nordiguian and Tachjian 2007). Palestinian refugees were negotiated in 1950 between a special UN commission that established the UNRWA and the State of Lebanon (Sayigh 2007).

“target” specific population groups as legitimate aid recipients. But for those interested in analysing urban processes, this label may obfuscate more social realities than it illuminates. To illustrate my point, let me take the example of Nab’ah, a neighbourhood located immediately outside the edge of Municipal Beirut. Nab’ah had developed in the 1940s as a “spill over” of the Armenian neighbourhoods of Beirut. Since then, the neighbourhood has witnessed several waves of population movements owing to the repatriation of the Armenians who responded to Stalin’s call in 1946 (Nalbantian, 2013), rural migration as of the 1940s, violent evictions and population swaps during the civil war (1975-1990), and the economic trends of the post-war reconstruction.

Today, UNHCR estimates that more than 20,000 Syrian refugees have settled in Nab’ah since the beginning of the war in Syria.⁵ No one knows however how many Lebanese individuals, foreign migrant workers, or refugees of other nationalities share the space with the 20,000 recorded Syrian refugees since Lebanese authorities are far from sharing UNHCR’s obsession with population counts. No one knows how many Syrian families and/or individuals have arrived to Nab’ah after May 2015, when the Lebanese government instructed UNHCR to stop registering refugees in the country, effectively rendering latecomers invisible to the relief agency. Furthermore, no one knows how many of these registered refugees would have been considered Syrian “migrant workers” before 2012, or how many of the pre-2012 “migrant workers” were in fact Kurdish-Syrian refugees who had fled severe persecution by the Syrian government years before the outbreak of the war. No one knows how many women have changed the status from national to refugee or vice-versa because of inter-marriages in the shadow of the Lebanese law that allocates citizenship only through patriarchal channels. No one knows how many of the neighbourhood residents who are not counted as Syrian refugees because they hold Lebanese passports are in reality Syrians who exchanged their passports with Lebanese individuals in a calculation that it can improve their access to local employment while Lebanese men who can afford the costs of a trip across the Mediterranean purchased the passport with the hope to secure asylum in Europe. And what if we compared the conditions of these so-called refugees, as these refugees themselves often do, with those of Sri Lankan, Ethiopian, Filipino, or Egyptian migrant workers sharing the same urban quarters and found that the living conditions of those forcefully displaced by the war are no worse than those forcefully displaced by economic destitution? And what if we interrogated the Lebanese members of the host communities and found that their economic conditions, perceptions of refugees, and experiences of the transformations in their neighbourhood are far from homogeneous, that many among them feel the same level of powerlessness and destitution that refugees experience and that in fact many among them envy the relief that the latter receive from aid agencies?

What if certain solidarities along the lines of shared religious and/or political beliefs transcend those of national belonging so that distinctions among population groups often do not coincide with the assumptions of clear national divides upheld by the label of refugee as a distinctive social attribute? In Nab’ah, there is ample evidence that by labelling particular groups as “refugees”, we are concealing important distinctions among the

⁵ The exact number of refugees has been hard to estimate since the Lebanese government took the decision to stop refugee registration in May 2015. For more on these figures, visit UNHCR website at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

subjects of the crisis. There are also clear indications that these labels, particularly when they are pegged with aid packages targeting only “refugees”, are reinforcing social divides and fuelling social tensions between host and refugee communities (Carpi 2014). In sum, the category of “refugee” may conceal more than it elucidates in the experience of forced population displacement and create unforeseen problems for those labelled as such.

Crisis: Rethinking Temporality and the Exceptional

Finally, Beirut also invites us to unsettle the temporality of forced population displacement, as embodied by the category of the “crisis” and its correlation with the “exception” with which war and the refugee experience are always addressed. In 2015, UNHCR estimated the total number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people as a result of conflict and persecution around the world above the 60 million bar. UNHCR also estimated that 60% of these displacements stem from crises classified as “protracted”, hence neither temporal nor exceptional.⁶ This is hardly an unusual moment in history. On the contrary, so intertwined are forced population movements with the history of cities such as Beirut that it is impossible to understand the city’s urbanization outside of their analysis. In fact, Beirut was a refuge for populations fleeing regional wars before it was the capital of Lebanon... before there was a Lebanon (Fawaz 1983). And Beirut grew, was built and developed by these refugees who brought their labour, their capital, their know-how from Mount Lebanon and Damascus in 1860 and, since then, from Armenia, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and numerous other corners of the world. In sum, there is nothing “exceptional” in this moment. There is however a clear tendency to depict the refugee moment as “apocalyptic”, as evidenced in the ways in which newspaper records of these events, whether they date back to the turn of the previous century or this one, eerily refer to the threatening imagery of spreading epidemics and rising unemployment.⁷ Similarly, numerous histories of Beirut depict the arrival moments of refugees as the “breaking point” after which the city will decline, thus fuelling a negative perception that is often contradicted by the fact that each of these narratives begins with an identified idyllic moment that follows the population displacements decried by its predecessor (Davie 1996, Eddé 2010). This history of representation is, of course, outside the scope of this short essay but it helps drive the point for revisiting the temporalities in which the refugee crisis is too often framed.

Conclusion

I have attempted in this short essay to unsettle three of the most typically used categories in the analysis of population displacements: the camp, the refugee and the crisis and argued that these categories produce ill-founded preconceptions about the spatiality, temporality, and subjectivities studied to understand the crisis. I have shown that if we embrace the “messiness” of what is truly encompassed in each of these categories, we may be able to inscribe the crisis in spaces, times and individualities that represent better the changing socio-spatial realities engendered by population displacements.

⁶ See <http://www.unhcr.org/562793289.html>, last visited on October 30, 2015.

⁷ Editions of the daily al-Muqtatam dating back to 1923 for example illustrate well the trend with articles denouncing the role of Armenian refugees in stealing jobs away from Lebanese workers in Beirut. See Eddé, 2010.

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