Palestinians in Lebanon: A Racialized Minority or One of Many “Others”?

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Abstract

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon occupy a uniquely racialized position, but some observers and segments of the Lebanese public, as well as the Palestinians themselves, downplay the racialization of Palestinians. By examining the events that took place in the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al-Bared in 2007 and in the Lebanese town of Arsal in 2013, and basing its findings on interviews and archival research of Lebanese newspapers, this study claims that Palestinians are not simply one of many “others” in a country divided along confessional and political lines. The issue of boundary creation and maintenance between Lebanese and Palestinians, as an integral part of the racialization process, is also analysed. The focus is on racialization as a practice of the Lebanese state, and not as a phenomenon between Lebanese and Palestinians as peoples. The article concludes by questioning whether the Palestinian presence in Lebanon lends Lebanese national identity a relative degree of coherence.
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Introduction

This article is part of a wider study conducted on the exclusion of Palestinian refugees by the Lebanese state, in which extensive research led to the demonstration of a link between exclusion and racialization. This exclusion is analysed using critical race theory and the theoretical concept of racialization. Employing the theories of Michel Foucault and David Theo Goldberg on the racial state, and Zygmunt Bauman’s theory on the gardening state, the study deals with racialization as a phenomenon of modern states. It focuses on the practices of the state, and not on racialization between Lebanese and Palestinians as peoples. While the exclusion of Palestinians in terms of institutional discrimination can be analyzed in its own right, racialization as a theoretical concept incorporates discrimination but also goes beyond it. Racialization reveals the “ideology” or rationale behind discriminatory practices.

Racialization as a theoretical concept is understood and used differently by different scholars. The definition given by Goldberg has been adopted in this study: “to impute exclusionary or derogatory implications to social conditions.” It emerged, through this four-year study, that Palestinians are racialized through multiple dominant narratives in the Lebanese political discourse. With regards to the Lebanon’s recent past, Palestinians are blamed for the breakout of the Lebanese civil war by large segments of the Lebanese population. When the civil war ended, following the signing of the Taif Accord in 1989, Palestinians were considered “guests” who did not respect the hospitality offered to them by the Lebanese, and who consequently brought about the destruction of Lebanon. Currently, due to the idea of tawteen, or the naturalization or permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon, Palestinians are seen as a demographic and

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cultural threat to the Lebanese world order and way of life premised on consociation, sectarian balance, and religious coexistence.³ Palestinians are equally thought to be a military danger.

While derogatory categorizations of Palestinians by Lebanese politicians exist, they remain rare. However, this does not mean that Palestinians are not racialized, according to Goldberg’s definition. Rather, Lebanese politicians evade being labelled as racist by reiterating the danger of tawteen, The institutional racism faced by Palestinians is justified by arguing that such discriminatory practices prevent the demise of Lebanon which is premised on consociation and religious coexistence, and serve to protect the Palestinian right of return to their homeland which they would otherwise forgo if they were integrated and offered a comfortable living in Lebanon.⁴ Palestinians are denied their civil and social rights in Lebanon under the pretext of preventing tawteen, which is made out to be detrimental and even catastrophic to Lebanese and Palestinians alike.

In this article, the position of Palestinians refugees is analysed as a uniquely racialized minority in Lebanon. One commonly hears that in a Lebanon deeply divided on confessional and political lines, Palestinians are only one of many “others.” This narrative implicitly glosses over and downplays the plight and predicament of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. It also makes their racialization appear natural in such a divided society, thereby rendering it unworthy of mention, let alone of academic study. The article starts with exploring the boundaries between Lebanese and

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³ In Lebanese political discourse tawteen signifies the naturalization or permanent settlement (even without naturalization) of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. As Palestinians are predominantly Sunni Muslims it is believed that their permanent presence will tip the “delicate” sectarian balance between Lebanese confessional communities. In this discourse, this scenario is portrayed as the demise of Lebanon which is founded on religious coexistence and power-sharing between confessional groups. The rejection of tawteen was instituted in 1990 as an amendment to the Lebanese Taif constitution of 1989.

Palestinians, and then moves onto examining this uniquely racialized position through archival research of Lebanese newspapers regarding two similar incidents. The first relates to a Palestinian refugee camp and the second to a Lebanese town in East Lebanon. The discourse used by Lebanese politicians and newspapers in relation to these two incidents is analyzed. This brings up the question of whether this position of Palestinians as the “ultimate other” factors into the construction of the Lebanese “self.”

**Methodology**

Fieldwork was conducted during several visits to Lebanon during 2010, 2011, and 2012. During the summer of 2012, fourteen in-depth interviews were held with members of the political elite and intellectuals who are engaged with Palestinian presence in Lebanon. Archival research of Lebanese newspapers was conducted at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The library of the Institute of Palestine Studies, with its vast and diverse literature on the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, was also consulted.

A Foucauldian methodological approach is adopted by focusing on the racial state, which uses Western theories to analyze and explain Arab societies. Although this could be described as a Eurocentric approach, this is not necessarily the case; Foucault’s approach and conceptual structures are indeed applicable to non-Western societies. Timothy Mitchell has argued that the fact that Foucault focused his analyses on France and Northern Europe has tended to obscure the colonizing nature of disciplinary power. He explains that the “panopticon” as a model institution of surveillance and discipline was a colonial invention that was first applied on the frontier of Europe with the Ottoman Empire, and only later in Europe. For example in Egypt, the French then British colonizers designed a disciplined army that became a model for the entire social body and created a new order in colonial Egypt.\(^5\) Goldberg has also shown how colonial

states such as France and Britain trained local elites in governance until they had acquired the political maturity necessary for self-rule. Consequently, these elites adopted and maintained racial forms of governance in the postcolonial era. The fact that Arab countries are not industrial or post-industrial capitalist states in the sense that Western states are does not mean that they have escaped the disciplinary and racial practices discussed by Foucault.

It is also a mistake to assume that the Western world and the developing world, or the Occident and the Orient, are completely separate entities. The relationship and impact between the global and the local has been explained at length in globalization studies. Edward Said demonstrates that there has been a continual colonial or neo-colonial presence of Western powers over various parts of Africa and Asia even following the wave of decolonization after World War II. To have been colonized was a fate with lasting and gravely unfair results, especially post-independence. To Edward Said, there is thus no way of understanding our own Arab culture without also apprehending the imperial experience and its legacy in the postcolonial era. This is not to understate the question of how the developing world writes its own history. Rather, post-colonial criticism occupies a space that is neither inside nor outside the history of Western domination but is rather in a tangential relation to it.

**Interviewing of Elites**

Interviewing members of the Lebanese elite was the main research method for this study, which interprets the perspectives of those placed in powerful positions. Herbert

6 Goldberg, *op. cit.*


Gans had suggested that the social sciences serve as a dialogue mechanism between elites and the general population, but as this process is asymmetrical, it further contributes to the power imbalance in favour of the elites. Elites are thus provided with knowledge about the population, but rarely does social science knowledge flow the other way.\(^9\) Although some researchers may argue that studying the socially disadvantaged and the under-represented gives them a voice, their relative powerlessness is exhibited by the fact that their lives are so frequently recorded.\(^{10}\) Conducting research on the powerful becomes a political act whereby acquiring knowledge from and about elites allows it to be distributed more broadly in the public domain.\(^{11}\) A more thorough understanding of elites may provide useful knowledge that empowers the less powerful to challenge their control, exploitation, and subjugation.\(^{12}\)

For this study, politicians, academics and a journalist were interviewed, from both sides of the political spectrum and both Muslims and Christians. Some were sympathetic to the Palestinian plight and others were strongly opposed to the Palestinian presence. Seven of the respondents were Lebanese and seven were Palestinian. Six of the Lebanese respondents were politicians, some of whom were also academics, and they were chosen for the positions they occupy within the state and/or their profound understanding of the Lebanese political establishment. By interviewing politicians and academics it was possible to gain insight into how policy pertaining to Palestinians was formulated and justified.

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\(^{11}\) Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

Palestinian politicians and academics were interviewed to obtain their interpretation of events and their understanding of Palestinian conditions as a subjugated group. Some of the Palestinian respondents have a long history of dealing with the Lebanese state and struggling for Palestinian rights. Their involvement offered them insights into the workings of the state from a Palestinian perspective and experience.

While the full study incorporates excerpts from the fourteen interviews, given the space limitation, this article only employs two interviews, which focus on one aspect of the question: the rationale behind the Lebanese state’s policy in managing the Palestinian refugee population. These interviews also yielded an understanding of the state’s interpretation of events and its legitimating narratives, which is especially important as these interpretations and narratives resonate within Lebanese society and hence influence the racialization process and perpetuate exclusion. Through these interviews, information was obtained that is not typically revealed in the media. The narratives and interpretations provided by the Lebanese politicians were contrasted with narratives presented by the Palestinian respondents. This gives both Palestinian and Lebanese respondents a voice, but their voices remain unequal in society. Lila Abu-Lughod, writing on the resistance of Bedouin women to unequal family structures in a male-dominated society, shows that women resist and assert themselves by taking advantage of contradictions in society but that their tactics of resistance are confined within culturally acceptable forms. This implies that their form of resistance is produced by power-relations dominated by men and cannot be seen as independent of them. In such a scenario resistance is not independent or outside the system of power. In the same way, the oppositional voices and resistance of Palestinian intellectuals and politicians cannot be understood outside the realm of the power relations produced by

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the Lebanese state. Their voices are not only those of resistance or opposition, but are also determined by the power relation in which they are implicated.

Yet the Lebanese and Palestinian political spectrum is too wide and diverse for this sample to be representative; rather, the sampling was purposeful. The study participants were not chosen on a random basis, but based on the relevance of their position in and relation to the state system, in terms of providing answers to the research questions.¹⁴

Archival Research

Archival research of local Lebanese newspapers was also conducted, consisting in oriented investigation of key events and legislation in the post-Taif Accord period, to examine how Palestinians are uniquely racialized in comparison to the many Lebanese sectarian and political groups. The importance of newspapers lies in demonstrating how Palestinians are presented to various readerships who have different political affiliations and sectarian allegiances, and hence how the position of Palestinians as a racialized minority is constructed.

This study focuses on two events that particularly reveal Palestinians’ racialized existence. The first incident is the conflict in Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon that broke out in 2007 when a group of Islamist militants attacked a Lebanese army post. The conflict lasted for four months and received almost daily coverage in Lebanese newspapers. The second incident occurred in 2013 and also involved an attack on a Lebanese army post, this time in the region of Arsal in eastern Lebanon. Research on both incidents allows for a comparison between the representation of Lebanese and Palestinians in the media and among Lebanese politicians, but more importantly it reveals the very different state governance practices

towards Lebanese and Palestinians, applying “soft” mechanisms in the former case and brute force in the latter.

The study relies mainly, but not exclusively, on two newspapers with a wide readership: Assafir, a pro-Palestinian newspaper of an Arab Nationalist orientation, with a religiously diverse readership and Annahar which is, generally speaking, opposed to the Palestinian presence, and predominantly represents the Lebanese right.

**Boundaries: Blurred or Defined**

Mary Douglas has shown that what disturbs cultural order is when things turn up in the wrong category or fail to fit a certain category within a classification system. If certain individuals find no place within a social system and are therefore marginalized, then others tend to disparage them fully. Stable cultures require that categories and boundaries are clearly defined, as elements out of place represent a source of instability. The creation and maintenance of clearly defined boundaries in a shared culture is worth examining, especially since the racialization of Palestinians presupposes the creation of a boundary between Lebanese and Palestinians. This demarcation is also of analytical interest once one takes into account that Palestinians and Lebanese share an ethnicity and a culture. Their shared identity goes deeper than simply falling under the wider umbrella of Arab ethnicity, which also includes Moroccans, Kuwaitis, Sudanese, and other Arabs.

More precisely, Palestinians and Lebanese share culture, history, dialectic, cuisine, norms, traditions, religions, sects, and even physical appearance that are distinct to

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17 Hall, *op. cit*, p. 162.
their region. Historically, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria had been referred to as Greater Syria or Bilad al-Sham. To this day, Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians are referred to as *shami* or *shwam* by other Arabs. The term *shami* is derived from *sham*, which is translated by “Damascus” in English and also denotes the region of historical Syria. Arabs from North Africa are referred to as *maghariba* which is derived from “Maghreb,” which signifies the Arab region of North Africa and translates into Morocco. Similarly, Arabs from the Arab Gulf States are referred to as *Khaleejyeen* from the word *Khaleej* meaning “gulf.” These terms are not empty signifiers and they represent a specific culture and history of each region of the Arab world.

In historical Syria prior to the year 1917, there were no borders between Lebanon and Palestine, nor were there political territorial entities or sovereign nation-states. Under the Ottoman administration, the Mediterranean coast from Latakia in Syria to Jaffa in Palestine formed a single administrative district. People residing in the South of Lebanon regularly travelled southwards into what became Mandatory Palestine. These travels were not restricted to recreation, but Lebanese people also travelled to Palestine in search of work or as investors interested in purchasing real estate. Wealthy Palestinians in the Galilee also regularly travelled northwards into Lebanon for its attractive mountain resorts and the cosmopolitan charms of Beirut, while Palestinian farmers visited southern Lebanon frequently to trade agricultural and manufactured products with Lebanese farmers. Intermarriage between Palestinians from northern historic Palestine and Lebanese from southern Lebanon commonly characterized the relationship between the two peoples.\(^{18}\) It is even difficult for an outsider to distinguish between the two groups in terms of physical appearance. To elucidate this, one need

only refer back to the painful memories of the Lebanese civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990.

The long and interconnected history of the people of historical Syria preceding the French and British Mandates had thus resulted in strong commonalities in cultural, social, and ethnic characteristics between Palestinians and Lebanese. The partition of the region began with the arrival of the British and French mandates after 1918. Under the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 which aimed to create spheres of influence for the mandatory powers in the region, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria were divided into separate nation-states. The mandates not only led to the consolidation of separate national identities, but also heightened sectarian tensions, especially in the case of Lebanon.\(^\text{19}\)

The Lebanese civil war witnessed many atrocities; one of the most inhumane of which was the practice of killing or abducting “by ID.”\(^\text{20}\) Many Lebanese and Palestinians acquired fake identification cards to avoid such a fate when moving between areas controlled by different religious groups. The only method to identify people was then through slight differences in accent: checkpoints demanded that they say the word “tomato,” which is pronounced as “banadoura” with a Lebanese accent and as “bandora” with a Palestinian accent.

When Najah Wakim, leader of the leftist People’s Movement and former member of parliament, interviewed in June 2012, answered the question as to the differences


\(^{20}\) During the war, political parties set up checkpoints, some of which were fixed in location and others were “flying checkpoints” set up in random locations and at random times. If a person held a Lebanese-Muslim or a Palestinian ID card at a Christian political party checkpoint, they were directly killed or taken hostage for prisoner swaps. Similarly Christians and Palestinians stopped at some Muslim political party checkpoints also met the same fate. Thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians are registered as missing persons because of this practice.
between Lebanese and Palestinians, he said: “Palestinians are not similar to the Lebanese... that is a lie... we are in fact one people.” He continued, “if the request of the Lebanese Christian patriarch to Great Britain in the 1940s to have the Shia region of Jabal Amel [in southern Lebanon] made part of Palestine instead of Lebanon had materialized, then the inhabitants of Jabal Amel would have now been saying that there is cultural similarity between them and the Lebanese.”

As complex as it may appear, the creation of ethnic boundaries within a shared culture does not constitute an extraordinary phenomenon. Fredrik Barth has shown through his research on tribes in Central Asia that although ethnic categories do take cultural differences into account, one cannot assume a direct correspondence between ethnic units and cultural units. The features that are ascribed importance are not based on the sum of objective differences, but only those which the actors themselves perceive to be significant.

The work of Michael Ignatieff on the Bosnian conflict furthers this perspective. He notes that Sigmund Freud once argued that the smaller the difference between two people was, the larger it was bound to grow in their imagination. Freud called this effect the “narcissism of minor difference.” It implies that enemies need each other to remind themselves of who they really are. A Croat, is therefore, someone who is not a Serb; and a Serb is someone who is not a Croat. Without hatred for the other, there would be no clearly defined national self. Minor differences between Lebanese and Palestinians

21 Najah Wakim, personal interview, Lebanon, June 2012.
in terms of accent, cuisine, and dress are exacerbated to create and maintain ethnic boundaries.\textsuperscript{24}

Barth’s depiction of boundaries described above omits the categorization of more powerful actors such as the state. Steven Loyal and Kieran Allen, building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu concerning state categories, and on that of James C. Scott about how society is made legible, show that instead of granting all residents the same civil, social, and political rights, bureaucratic classification schemes engender systematic patterns of discrimination. The legal and administrative categories of “asylum seeker,” “refugee,” and “migrant worker” are important state categories and classifications that confer different rights and entitlements on different segments of the population. These categorizations, in turn, enter public consciousness as key categories for seeing the social world.\textsuperscript{25}

Palestinians were first categorized as outsiders by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which was the first to legally define them as refugees in 1949. UNRWA formulated its own working definition of who constitutes a Palestine refugee, which states:

[Palestine refugees are] “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948


conflict”26 “and took refuge in one of the countries or areas where UNRWA provides relief, and their descendants.”27

The category of refugee in itself tends to depoliticize and de-historicize the situation, and hence subjects refugees to states’ and/or humanitarian intervention agencies’ control. This is cogently argued by Liisa Malkki.28 Yet being categorized as refugee is only the starting point of an outsider’s trajectory. This category was adopted by the Lebanese state, but Palestinians have been further racialized as constituting the cause of the civil war, and a demographic, cultural, and military danger.

“Telling”

The question of boundaries is important because their creation and consequently the separation of Lebanese and Palestinians into distinct ethnic groups is a prerequisite for the racialization of Palestinians, or more accurately this is an integral part of the racialization process. However, when it comes to boundary maintenance in Lebanese-Palestinian social interaction the work of Erving Goffman on the question of stigmas can offer some insights. Goffman describes a stigma as an undesired differentness that is deeply discrediting to the stigmatized individual. If a stigmatized individual’s differentness is already known about or recognizable on the spot, then she/he is


discredited. If the stigmatized individual’s differentness is neither known beforehand by the “normals,” nor immediately perceptible by them, then he/she is discreditable.  

In the absence of cultural or physical markers that differentiate between Lebanese and Palestinians, Palestinians in Lebanon fall between the discredited and the discreditable. If they choose to speak with a Palestinian accent then they can easily be identified as Palestinian. They are also identifiable when dealing with governmental offices and departments, or at the numerous security checkpoints spread across Lebanon, simply by possessing an identification card that is specific to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In other instances, Palestinians may desire to pass as Lebanese, which is easily done by overcoming the only perceptible barrier/marker, and acquiring a Lebanese accent. The vast majority of Palestinians already have a command of the Lebanese accent in the post-1989 Taif Accord period; if they do so, however, they are discreditable.

The absence of cultural markers means that Palestinians are discreditable by stigma symbols that convey social information which can lead to “visibility” or the identification of one’s social identity. In Lebanon, such symbols or markers include family name, place of residence, and place of origin. It is a socially acceptable and common practice to “innocently” enquire about these details in daily social encounters. This practice not only aims to determine who is Lebanese and who is Palestinian, but also to determine which sect the Lebanese themselves belong to. This can offer guidance as to what is permissible to say and what is not, and as to deciding who to include or exclude, in the case of both Lebanese-Palestinian and Lebanese-Lebanese encounters.

This process has a similar logic to that of the practice of “telling” between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Telling is a necessary social skill to avoid embarrassment in a sectarian milieu, a means by which Protestants and Catholics avoid

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30 Ibid.
offending each other in social encounters where they are unsure of the other’s identity, a subject studied by Rosemary Harris.\textsuperscript{31} Other ethnographers have noted that telling is also used for more nefarious purposes. According to Frank Burton, the cues used in telling, such as first names and place of residence, are used to single out Catholics and Protestants for intimidation, beatings, and discrimination in employment.\textsuperscript{32} Andrew Finlay suggests that telling is a form of communal discipline, of putting people in their place.\textsuperscript{33} Orlando Patterson observes that civil society in Northern Ireland had collapsed into competing religious/political blocs, or what Hannah Arendt terms “communities of meaning,” whereby each group has a tendency to degenerate into mutually opposed self-absorbed worlds.\textsuperscript{34} Finlay delineates that telling helps sustain these communities of meaning.\textsuperscript{35}

**Strangers or One of Many “Others”?**

The boundaries and the process of telling between Lebanese and Palestinians examined thus far could also hold true for social or ethnic/sectarian relations between various Lebanese sects. Is it therefore plausible to suggest, as the argument goes, that Palestinians in Lebanon constitute just one of many “others,” one of many diverse identity groups?

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\textsuperscript{35} Finlay, op. cit.
One such account was given by Hassan Kabalan, a member of the political bureau of the Shia Amal Movement. When he was asked what factors transformed Palestinians into the “other” in Lebanon despite the vast cultural similarity between Lebanese and Palestinians, he explained:

The issue of the “other” for Arab people is not only an issue for Lebanese and Palestinians, but rather it is an issue in all corners of this Arab World. Regretfully, the “other” in our countries is the Christian against the Muslim, the Shia against the Sunni, the Salafist against the member of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jordanian against the Palestinian, the short against the tall, or the one with green eyes against the one with black eyes. We belong to a culture of division and fragmentation, with the absence of the national and nationalistic dimension to our causes.

Some Palestinian observers, such as the Palestinian researcher and academic Mahmoud al-Ali, endorse this narrative. In his answer to the same question on what transformed Palestinians into the “other” in Lebanon, he said:

In Lebanon, we are not living in a national environment to judge the Lebanese as Lebanese. You have to judge seventeen [types of] Lebanese [i.e. sects], each depending on where they are coming from, and above the seventeen you need to judge an eighteenth type [i.e. the secular Lebanese] that does not fall within the framework of the seventeen. As for the Palestinians, you have those that are living inside and those that live outside the camps, and recently we have those with an Islamist orientation and so on.

36 Hassan Kabalan, personal interview with the author, Lebanon, June 2012.
Given the acute divisions between the various sects in Lebanon, one might be inclined to accept such an interpretation. This is especially true when some Lebanese political parties on the left of the political spectrum may appear on the surface of things to have more in common with some Palestinian factions than with some Lebanese Christian right-wing political parties. However, two recent examples can be adduced to demonstrate that in practice this is not the case, and that Palestinians are uniquely “othered,” or to put it more accurately, racialized, in Lebanon.

In May 2007, a Lebanese army post was attacked by a Sunni militant Islamist group, Fateh al-Islam. The group was comprised of a vast majority of non-Palestinian Arab nationals who were predominantly Lebanese citizens or citizens from the Gulf countries. The group carried out an attack on Lebanese soldiers who were killed in a barbaric manner. The Islamist group was stationed in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon and the Lebanese army decided to eradicate the group through military means very shortly after the attack. The Lebanese army's decision received full political cover except from Hezbollah, which initially called for a political settlement but later acquiesced due to political considerations. The conflict lasted for four months and the camp was completely razed to the ground, leading to the displacement of its approximately 30,000 inhabitants.

A survey conducted by ARA research and consultancy three days after the breakout of the fighting revealed that 72% of the Lebanese population as a whole, including 85% of the Sunni sect, supported a military solution by the Lebanese army in the Nahr al-Bared


camp. Idolizing the army became a daily practice in Lebanese media. A TV video sketch aired numerous times daily on Lebanese television channels, showing Lebanese from all social strata and walks-of-life as well as both genders looking with amazement at an army soldier as he walks down the street, and stopping to salute him with an elated sense of pride. The glorification of the army and the direct and indirect denunciation of Palestinians was a daily routine during the four-month conflict. In one day and on a single page of Annahar newspaper, five articles were published praising the army and its soldiers, highlighting the heroism of the army, and lamenting the martyrs of the army. On this same page one article accused a Palestinian faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, of smuggling weapons into Lebanon, and another article reported that the Lebanese Army Command requested that Palestinian civilians in the camp refrain from turning themselves into human shields.

The Palestinian camp population in Lebanon as a whole was criminalized and stereotyped, and it was common to refer to their camps as “security islands” and “terrorist havens” in Lebanese newspapers. The Lebanese Prime Minister at the time, Fouad al-Sanyoura, stated that “we will enforce the rule-of-law and security on those residing in the camps and outside the camps. The choices ahead of us are extremely difficult and no one will carry arms except the army.”


42 Khaledi, op. cit.

Despite the portrayal of events in these terms, Assafir, considered pro-Palestinian, differed from Annahar which is less supportive of the Palestinian presence in that it portrayed a humanitarian angle to the events when they related to the civilians of Nahr al-Bared. It was common to find headlines such as the following in Assafir: “People Need More Than Just a Loaf of Bread: the Displaced Need Medicine, Clothing, Detergents... and Return.”\(^{44}\) This humanitarian appeal, however, did not change the course of events or the conditions of the civilians.

In February 2013, a similarly barbaric attack against the Lebanese army occurred. This attack was carried out by Lebanese Sunni Islamist militants in the town of Arsal, a Lebanese region in eastern Lebanon bordering Syria. From the start, a political consensus arose to resolve the issue through judicial means by arresting the perpetrators and allowing justice to take its course. The numbers of those wanted for trial diminished from 300 wanted persons to 80 in a matter of one week, and ultimately no arrests were made despite the fact that the Lebanese state knew the location and identity of those involved. Only checkpoints were set up by the Lebanese army at the entrances of the town.

In an article published in Assafir entitled “Future Movement Calls on the Army to End the Siege of Arsal,” the Future Movement, Lebanon’s largest Sunni political party, stressed that “the town of Arsal and its decent and kind inhabitants are not rebellious or outside the confines of law and order” and requested “the government to conduct a transparent and just investigation by the military judiciary to expose what occurred, as the evidence is strange and incomprehensible... we also call on the army to lift the siege of Arsal.”\(^{45}\) The events on the day the attack occurred and the day that followed were

\(^{44}\)“People Need More Than Just a Loaf of Bread: The Displaced Need Medicine, Clothing, Detergents... and Return,” (Arabic), Assafir, May 31, 2007.

\(^{45}\)“Future Movement Calls on the Army to End the Siege of Arsal,” (Arabic), Assafir, February 6, 2013.
described by Lebanese newspapers as “a very vague incident.” The Head of Military Intelligence, speaking on behalf of the Lebanese army, stated:

Arsal is not an Imara [Islamist Emirate] for al-Qaeda or extremists. We will not interrupt people’s lives, smuggling of diesel will be overlooked, and we will not enter people’s homes to confiscate their weapons. The army will not fight the Lebanese people. [...] There is no siege on Arsal, but there are 80 wanted persons who were involved in the ambush against the army. They move under pseudonyms and arresting them will take some time.

The Prime Minister at the time, Najib Mikati, stated that “the army has full cover to carry out its duties,” but went on to elaborate that “it’s important to resolve the problem in Arsal as soon as possible, and to hand those who fired at the army over to the specialized judicial authorities.” The leader of the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Walid Jumblatt, expressed “What occurred in Arsal, the noble Arab town that had struggled and continues to struggle on the right side of history, requires an unequivocal and transparent judicial investigation.” The leader of the Christian Maronite Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea “advised Arsal residents to hand over those wanted by the army.”

The Sunni League of Muslim Scholars (known as Hayaat al-Ulama al-Muslimin), in an attempt to protect their Sunni counterparts in Arsal against sectarian interpretations of the issue, stated that they “reject attempts to create strife between the army and the Sunni sect, and called for “an independent investigation committee to look into the

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46 “Two Martyrs for the Army in an Arrest Attempt,” (Arabic), Assafir, February 2, 2013.
47 “Arsal Is a Stronghold for Freedom Fighters and Revolutionaries and Not an ‘Imara,’” (Arabic), Almustaqbal, February 5, 2013; emphasis added.
49 “Jumblat Warns of Attempts to Create Confrontation Between the Army and Arsal,” (Arabic), Almustaqbal, February 6, 2013.
incident,” while stressing that “the Lebanese army ought to represent and protect all the Lebanese.”

When these two incidents are juxtaposed, one may notice that Palestinians are singled out for differential treatment, or uniquely “othered,” within the Lebanese context. A consensus existed among Lebanese sects on this question. Even the Lebanese Sunni sect failed their Palestinian Sunni counterparts in the case of Nahr al-Bared, but went to great lengths to spare their Sunni counterparts in Arsal who are considered part of the “Lebanese people.” Palestinians in Lebanon, in Giorgio Agemben’s terms, live in a “state of exception” whereby they are a “homo sacer” or “bare life” (killable bodies). In a state of exception, certain constitutionally guaranteed rights and protections are suspended so as to confront a clear and direct danger or threat to the state. In the 2013 event, Lebanese lives were being protected and valued, while in the case of Palestinians, they were unquestionably reduced to a state of exception and thereby exposed to an unconditional threat of death.

Agamben’s reading of Carl Schmitt’s state of exception not only rests on the sovereign suspending the law and simultaneously enacting it, what he terms a “zone of indistinction,” but also on the notion that the nation, and not the citizenry or residents within the borders, is what needs defending. This is in line with Foucault’s concept of the biopolitical state in terms of protecting and fostering the life of the dominant population. Yet for Foucault, what defines a nation is its relation with the state. The nation is not in essence characterized by its relations with other nations; it is not defined by a horizontal relationship with other nations, ally or enemy.

50 “The Muslim Scholars Condemn the Vague Incident,” (Arabic), Almustaqbal, February 5, 2013; emphasis added.


52 Lentin, Thinking Palestine.
characterizes the nation for Foucault is rather a vertical relationship with the state; within this nation-state axis or intersection is where the nation is to be situated and characterized.\textsuperscript{53}

Following on this line of thought, racialization is a phenomenon of modern states that are racial states, and is not a relation between different nations. While racism and reverse racism exist between Lebanese and Palestinians, one needs to acknowledge that vast segments of the Lebanese population have made grave sacrifices for the Palestinian cause, and Lebanon is, without dispute, the Arab country that had paid the heaviest price in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although those who formed the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) during the civil war also embodied the racial state towards Palestinians when the Taif Accord was signed in 1989, the LNM played a role in supporting the Palestinian revolution (\textit{al thawra}) of the 1960s and 1970s, which has been documented in detail by Rosemary Sayigh and Julie Peteet.\textsuperscript{54} Yet, as Ronit Lentin succinctly put it, "for racism to function it needs a political apparatus. That apparatus is the state, its bureaucracy, and its institutions, which in turn influence the hearts and minds of people who live within it."\textsuperscript{55} This paper’s focus on the state is based on this methodological and theoretical rationale.

Zygmunt Bauman’s analytical concepts of “strangers” and “cosy antagonism” may also support this analysis. Bauman sees modern states as concerned with creating and maintaining order and eliminating chaos, whereby strangers are seen as a source of chaos and ambivalence. The relationships between various Lebanese sects should be understood as those between friends and enemies. If there are no enemies, there will

\textsuperscript{53} Foucault, \textit{Society Must Be Defended}.

\textsuperscript{54} Sayigh, \textit{Palestinians}; Peteet, \textit{Landscape of Hope and Despair}.

be no friends. In this relationship or binary opposition, the “other” is still recognized as a subject; it counts and remains relevant. As opposed to this cosy antagonism among the Lebanese, there is the Palestinian stranger who can be either friend or enemy but who needs to be eliminated as a source of ambivalence that disrupts the binary oppositions between Lebanese groups and calls them into question. Palestinian strangers disrupt the order of the Lebanese by blurring the distinctions between them, distinctions necessary for the continuation of the consociational system and the relationship between the sects that Lebanon is founded on. We see thus that the modern state is primarily designed to deal with or eliminate strangers and not merely enemies.\textsuperscript{56} This is also congruent with Mary Douglas’s analysis on the need for clearly defined boundaries. Palestinians are “out of place,” disrupting the cultural order and blurring the distinctions of state administrative classification systems.

The analysis of these two incidents may be fruitfully compared to Monique Nuitjen and David Lorenzo’s analysis of state violence in a Peruvian commune. They emphasize how different segments of the population are subjected to different forms of power and governmentality by the state, making some subject to softer forms of governance and others to brute force.\textsuperscript{57} In Lebanon, this means the judiciary in case of Arsal, and the destruction of the camp in the case of Nahr al-Bared. Similarly, Aihwa Ong’s concept of “graduated sovereignty” may be applied to the Palestinian case in Lebanon. She shows how in southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, various segments of the population are subjected to differential treatment by the state based on their position within globalized economic networks.\textsuperscript{58} This angle of analysis is useful even when the link between the

\textsuperscript{56} Bauman, \textit{Modernity and Ambivalence}.


Palestinian case to globalization processes and market calculations might not be evident. The events of Nahr al-Bared and Arsal send out the message to Palestinians and Lebanese, but especially to Palestinians, that Palestinian blood is cheap in state calculations and that Lebanese lives are valued more highly. Lebanese daily lives are not to be disrupted, while those of Palestinians are of little worth. While Lebanese politicians are careful to avoid being labelled as racist and no Lebanese politician has described matters in these terms, this could reasonably be inferred from the actions and discourse of the Lebanese state in dealing with these two events.

Given the above, it is fair to ask whether the construction of the Palestinian stranger or interloper strengthens relations between Lebanese friends and enemies, and enhances the coherence of the Lebanese “self” or that of the Lebanese “people.”

The Construction of the Lebanese “Self”

Before delving into whether the Palestinian presence is useful for Lebanese self-construction, one should take into consideration the fact that Lebanese identity had been problematic since the mid-nineteenth century, in particular when Mount Lebanon was enlarged to Greater Lebanon in 1920, bringing in a large Muslim population.59 There existed a dichotomy between, on one hand, the Muslims and a segment of the Christians who favoured being part of Greater Syria or Arab unity, and on the other, the majority of Christians who championed an independent Lebanon tied to the West. This dichotomy lasted until the breakout of the civil wars in 1958 and 1975.60 In addition, Lebanon did not wage a decolonization struggle that could have formed a basis for a


unified national consciousness. Rather, independence consisted in a series of compromises between local elites and the French mandatory government.\(^{61}\)

It could thus be argued that the “racialization” of Palestinians factors into the construction of the Lebanese self. This proposition can carry more weight with a close examination of the Lebanese constitution of 1926 and the Taif Accord constitutional amendment of 1989. The Preamble of the 1926 Constitution states:

I. Lebanese territory is one for all Lebanese. Every Lebanese is entitled to live in and enjoy any part of the country under the sovereignty of the law. The people may not be categorized on the basis of any affiliation whatsoever and there shall be no fragmentation, no partition, and *no colonization*.\(^{62}\) [emphasis added].

The Preamble of the Taif constitutional amendment states:

H. Lebanese territory is one for all Lebanese. Every Lebanese is entitled to live in and enjoy any part of the country under the sovereignty of the law. The people may not be categorized on the basis of any affiliation whatsoever and there shall be no fragmentation, no partition, and *no tawtin* [repatriation or naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon].\(^{63}\) [emphasis added].


In both constitutions many rights and duties of Lebanese citizens ensue from belonging to one of the officially recognized sects, despite the fact that the constitution provides for equality in these rights and duties between citizens. Paragraph C of the Taif Preamble stipulates:

Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary republic founded on respect for public liberties, especially the freedom of expression and belief, on social justice, and on equality in rights and duties among all citizens, without discrimination or preference [emphasis added].

However, Article 2 of section III of the Taif amendment, entitled “Other Reforms,” stipulates:

To ensure the principle of harmony between religion and state, the heads of the Lebanese sects may revise the constitutional council in matters pertaining to:

1. Personal status affairs.
2. Freedom of religion and the practice of religious rites.

In the 1926 constitution, prior to the events of 1948, Lebanese identity was constructed against a colonial “other.” In the 1990 constitutional amendment, the term “colonization” was replaced with “tawteen.” Through this constitutional clause, tawteen becomes a threat as grave as colonization, if not more, to the continuation of the Lebanese people and entity. No matter what the differences or antagonisms are between the Lebanese, tawteen is a superior danger.

In matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and in certain cases in education and voting in elections, Lebanese citizenship is practiced through the sect, thereby making
Lebanese citizenship incomplete without sectarian belonging. Palestinians are excluded because they are not officially recognized as constituting a sect per se; rather they are officially categorized on a citizenship basis as Palestinian refugees, or precisely as belonging to the wider diaspora of the Palestinian refugee population regardless of sect. Yet Palestinians in Lebanon are predominantly Sunni Muslims, and we can see why they constitute strangers who disrupt the binary opposition around which the Lebanese consociational system is constructed; that is, they are neither friends nor enemies in Bauman’s conceptualization of these terms. As such, Palestinians, especially, need to be singled out.

The constitutional singling out of Palestinians confirms Goldberg’s analysis whereby, following Foucault, he perceives all modern nation-states as racial states that use their state power to construct homogeneity through exclusion. Modern states, each according to their specific circumstances and in their own way, are characterized by their power to exclude and include in racially determined terms, with the aim of producing a coherent and homogenous population. This is achieved by excluding racialized others and by legislating against the “degeneracy” of minorities. Those who do not fit the administrative state categories are constructed to be a danger that needs to be externalized.64 And yet, the Lebanese do not constitute a homogenous population, as the sectarian and political divisions among them are clearly visible even to a non-specialist outside observer. When asked whether Palestinians can constitute a unifying factor for the Lebanese, Sakr Abu Fakhr, a Palestinian researcher and journalist, responded: “[the Lebanese] might agree on a certain stance in a certain historical moment but it is impossible for them to be unified... you can see them vehemently attacking each other every day... it’s impossible.”65 This, however, does not contradict the argument that Palestinian presence, to a certain extent, helps resolve the problem

64 Goldberg, *The Racial State*.
65 Sakr Abu Fakhr, personal interview with the author, Lebanon, July 2012.
of a divided Lebanese people and lend Lebanese national identity and a certain degree of coherence, if not unity or homogeneity.

**Conclusion**

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are racialized by the Lebanese state, but this racialization process is downplayed by some politicians, intellectuals, and members of society. Instead, it is argued, in a Lebanon deeply divided along confessional and political lines, Palestinians constitute one of many “others.” This article first examined the significance of the creation and maintenance of boundaries between Lebanese and Palestinians. As Palestinians face draconian exclusionary measures that are articulated into law and the constitution, their exclusion necessitates a prior creation of boundaries on racial/ethnic as well as cultural terms. Despite the cultural similarity between Lebanese and Palestinians, boundaries are created by exacerbating minor differences and maintained by a process of “telling” and racializing narratives.

State categories and classifications not only have prominence, but they also enter public consciousness. If Palestinians are excluded and racialized, it is because they are “strangers” who do not fit the administrative state categories of consociation; instead, they call them into question and disrupt the “cosy antagonism” between the Lebanese.

To show the uniquely racialized position of Palestinians in Lebanon this article analysed the discourse on and policy towards Palestinians in the case of two events with a similar context, in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared and in the Lebanese town of Arsal. In the case of Nahr al-Bared, the Lebanese state and society were almost unified in their support of a military solution, while in the latter the Lebanese state and society promoted a resolution through judicial means. These two events reflect the uniquely racialized position of Palestinians in relation to both the Lebanese state and society; that is to say, Palestinians are not part of the Lebanese people, despite the divisions and antagonisms among the Lebanese people. The study concluded by finally
questioning whether the Palestinian presence goes some way in lending coherence to Lebanese national identity.
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