

Life and Law in Limbo

The houses that weren't destroyed by the warplanes are being destroyed by the state now. [...] I didn't live the first Nakba [Arabic word for 'catastrophe' used to indicate Israel's 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from Palestine], but I heard from my grandfathers about it. Now I feel I am living the Nakba myself.

[woman threatened with eviction, author's group interview, Shabriha, 14 June 2013]

A new highway will soon cover a part of Shabriha, the unofficial camp (gathering) where I am currently doing fieldwork. This is in many ways a hallmark of development and post-war reconstruction. People in South Lebanon have broadly welcomed the already completed part of the highway which decreased travel time to Beirut from 4 to about 1,5 hours. Moreover, the highway is being built on public land, owned by the state and hence for the state to use as it sees fit. The people who live on this public land do so there illegally and without paying taxes. For fifteen years, they have been warned about the construction of the highway and their looming eviction. Despite their status as squatters, there is a widespread belief, also among state representatives, that evicted households will receive compensation. So at first sight the eviction of some 40 households from Shabriha seems a perhaps unfortunate, but by all means justified procedure: a warranted humanitarian sacrifice for a greater good.

But in Lebanon things are always messier than they appear. In this case because a substantial part of the households to be evicted are Palestinian (even if the eviction will also affect Lebanese households, who were displaced from their villages during the Lebanese Civil War). The legal status of Palestinians in Lebanon is one of systematic marginalization. Palestinians are not allowed to own and register real estate. Whereas some people suggest they could simply rent an apartment, their exclusion from some seventy job categories makes it extremely difficult for them to earn enough money to make a living, let alone afford Lebanon's relatively high rents. On top of this, official Palestinian camps are notoriously over-crowded and cannot possibly absorb more people, especially as the country is already facing a dire refugee crisis as a result of the war in Syria. Hence, Palestinians currently living illegally on public lands do so not because they have consciously chosen a cheaper but unlawful living option, but rather because of a lack of alternatives. Nor would their future settlement in another place be a matter of simply buying (because they legally cannot) or renting (because they have no means to earn money for the rent when the compensation money runs out) a new house.

In the highway project, the Lebanese government is represented by a council specifically tasked with all infrastructural development programs in Lebanon. This council has granted the project to a consultancy firm that has hired a local contractor to do the construction work. In addition, the state is represented by the court that has informed the affected residents of their situation. So, all in all, there appears to be a transparent and coherent institutional structure to implement a generally welcomed development project. But since the Palestinians living in

Shabriha are recognized by the state as neither citizens nor owners they have no legal position in the entire process and their experience throughout the project's history is one of chronic uncertainty and insecurity. They have received only piecemeal information – a court order here, some informal advice from engineers coming to document their presence there and occasionally some news of a municipal employee people befriended. None of the organizations or institutions involved in the process has been given (or has taken) the responsibility to structurally communicate with these people about their future. This problem is exacerbated by the absence of a Palestinian representative body formally recognized by the Lebanese authorities, making people's relations with the various institutions in the highway project fragmented and haphazard.

As a result, the Palestinians threatened with eviction have adopted two broad strategies. First, they have chosen to by and large ignore the situation in the hope it will simply go away (a stance that is less naïve as it might seem considering that many Lebanese development projects strand in lack of finances or yet another political crisis). In most of my interviews, people expressed variations on the theme of “we can't do anything until the bulldozers are actually here, then we will protest and then some people might rally to our cause.” Interestingly, the state has apparently mirrored this approach: it has known for fifteen years about the upcoming challenges with the situation in Shabriha, but it nevertheless opted to not seriously address the issue until the rest of highway was built. Second, Shabriha's Palestinians have turned to ‘the politicians’ to plead their case. They have, rather desperately and randomly, turned to each and every authority they could find – from the *mufti* to the Palestinian ambassador and several MPs. But, while they have strategically teamed up with Lebanese residents who found themselves in the same predicament allowing them an audience with Lebanese political leaders, much of these attempts seem to peter out due to the absence of a coherently operating and authoritative Palestinian representative and, sadly, the apparent lack of real resolve of Palestinian and Lebanese leaders to help them.

The threatened residents of Shabriha no longer believe the highway can be stopped and what they ask for now is not to be sent away with a solely financial compensation which they are not allowed to spend on real estate anyway, but to be allocated another piece of land to live and financial support to rebuild their homes.