

Migration: Money over Morals?

The people used to be simple and poor, but then they migrated and their mentality changed and they made new homes. Their mentality changed and they've become selfish.

[Author's interview with central community figure, Shabriha, 15 April 2013]

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Shabriha, the gathering (informal Palestinian camp) where I'm currently doing fieldwork, is the extent to which it is affected by migration to Europe. Apparently, people in the gatherings tend to migrate more than those living in the formal refugee camps. And among the gatherings, Shabriha is particularly well-known for its European diaspora. Almost every family has at least one, and often more, members abroad. A community leader in Shabriha told me that of his ten siblings only he and his brother still lived in Lebanon, an account that does not even seem to be very exceptional.

Initially fleeing from the War of the Camps – an episode in the Lebanese Civil War that pitted the Lebanese Amal militia against the Palestinian refugee camps – in the 1980s, the families of Shabriha have established a solid migration chain to Europe's Scandinavian countries and Germany. After the war, this migration continued, now spurred by the Palestinians' socio-economic marginalization in Lebanon evidenced by their being legally banned from working in over seventy job categories and owning real estate. Over the years, and as a consequence of stricter policies in Europe, the migration pattern changed from entire families moving to Europe to the young men adventuring to enter 'Fortress Europe.'

Social and material ties to Shabriha remain strong and most people that migrated stay in touch daily via the internet, send remittances and visit every summer. They also often build houses in Shabriha, not just for themselves, but for their children as well, resulting in six-storey apartment buildings empty for some ten months per year – gaining the upper part of the gathering the nickname of 'German Shabriha.' As people have explained to me, more than a residence, these houses are a tangible link to the surrogate Palestine that the Palestinian communities in Lebanon embody (even though many migrants chose to use their new European passports to visit the 'real' Palestine that is solidly out of reach for Palestinians living in Lebanon).

This migration, and the remittances it generates, has complex and paradoxical social effects. On the one hand, everyone I spoke to agrees that Shabriha's vanguard abroad is the reason that Shabriha is relatively well off compared to the other camps and gatherings and faces less acute poverty. The illegal building spree that had almost all households in Shabriha add at least one floor to their house, for instance, was almost entirely financed by migrants. (Where exactly they get the huge sums of money from remains murky, but people generally refer to a combination of a Spartan lifestyle and good interest rates on Lebanese banks). On the other hand, the effects of migration create envy and tension as well. The people 'left behind' are annoyed by the migrants coming each summer to show off their wealth yet parasiting on their

family in Shabriha for their entire ‘holiday.’ The constant exposure to a ‘better life’ in Europe makes the electricity cuts, sewage flooded streets and water shortage even harder to bear. At the same time, the people in Shabriha confided in me that their relatives in Europe are secretly jealous of those in Shabriha as well, missing the strong family relations and social life and living an austere life in Europe to save for the annual few weeks of playing the migrant success story in Lebanon. Stories abound of extended families living in small houses to pool resources and eating supermarket leftovers to save up for remittances and their moment of summer glory in Shabriha.

Everyone in Shabriha seems to want to ‘travel’ and there are few young men left in the gathering. Elaborate marital strategies (and the accompanying divorce tactics) have been developed over the years. Indeed, for the younger generation as well as their parents, migration is also one of the few ways to address the number one challenge for all Palestinian settlements in Lebanon, namely how to ensure a future for your children when you are not even allowed to build or buy a house for them. The impossibility of designated camp areas that haven’t been expanded since 1948 and now host five times the number of people they were planned to accommodate just after the Palestinians’ expulsion from Palestine is infamous worldwide. This whole situation makes me, as a young Western woman, a prime resource and there are regular semi-serious jokes about the making of a contract stipulating that in exchange for a generous payment I’d agree to marry one of Shabriha’s guys. Disappointment is rife when I admit I’m already engaged and, ‘unfortunately,’ not even with a Palestinian. Strangers routinely assume I am the (passport generating) wife of my interpreter’s brother.

But migration is not undisputed. Because it creates winners and losers – the fancy phones and cars of those migrants returning in summer stand in stark contrast to the situation of those duped by their ‘fixers’ and the ‘left-behind’ guys financially depending on their younger brothers to provide for the family. This polarization is only deepened because all remittances are provided on the basis of family ties and there is no support for the community as a whole. But migration gains a problematic edge particularly because it is broadly perceived as a targeted government policy to get rid of the Palestinians: ‘make them forget Palestine’ and force them to give up their right of return. This belief is fueled by the fluctuating ease of gaining visa and travel documents. Someone explained to me that ‘just when the Arab Spring had started, they all of a sudden encouraged a lot of young Palestinian men from Lebanon to migrate to Britain, lowering document fees and shortening procedure times,’ suggesting that the Lebanese government sees migration management as a way to solve the ‘Palestinian problem.’ Some people therefore also suggested that ultimately it would be best for both Palestinians and Europeans if European countries ‘help themselves by helping Palestinians in Lebanon,’ rather than have them migrate to Europe.