

Navigating Research and Reality in an Informal Palestinian Camp in South Lebanon

Nora Stel (MSM Research Fellow and UU PhD Candidate)

“The situation here is totally clouded and unclear; and it is meant to be cloudy; we are meant to not be able to understand it.”

Author’s interview with youth group leader (Sour/Tyre, 7 May 2013)

Since two months, I am living in Shabriha, an unregistered Palestinian camp hosting some 260 families located just next to the city of Sour (or Tyre) in South Lebanon. Since the expulsion of the Palestinians from Palestine in the *Nakba* of 1948, on the 15th of May exactly 65 years ago, Lebanon has struggled to deal with the Palestinian refugees in its territory. Today, after a traumatizing history characterized by violent conflict, while some better off Palestinians are integrated in Lebanese society, the majority of Palestinians in Lebanon lives rather segregated from the Lebanese in camps administered by the UN. Some Palestinians, however, mostly those with Bedouin roots, live in unofficial camps – so-called ‘gatherings’ – that are neither administered by UNRWA nor serviced by the Lebanese state. It has been my hypothesis that in these more hybrid contexts there would be more need and opportunity for interaction between Lebanese and Palestinian authorities – specifically Lebanese municipalities and Palestinian ‘popular committees.’ Therefore, it is in one of these gatherings that I now do fieldwork for my PhD research exploring how and why Lebanese and Palestinian governance authorities interact.

This obviously is no sinecure and because the subtleties of my preliminary findings and methodologies are beyond the scope of this short field note, I will focus here on two aspects of my fieldwork that have particularly struck me so far: the fluidity and relativity of concepts mostly used in default mode and the ethical dilemmas related to this for the researcher.

Who is Lebanese and who is Palestinian after a history in which people from a village on the disputed borderline between now Israel and now Lebanon were Lebanese before 1921, Palestinians after and got Lebanese citizenship again in 1995, albeit still living with fellow Palestinian refugees? What does it mean to be a Palestinian refugee when even your parents have been born in exile and when you are now confronted with a new influx of ‘twice displaced’ Palestinian refugees from Syria? How do you define poverty when you do have a roof over your head, (delicious) food every day and even a smart phone paid for by your relatives in Europe but are legally banned from working in most professions and cannot own or inherit land or real estate? Who represents the state when the municipality tells you you are occupying their land, but the police called in by the same municipality is willing to look the other way when you are building on that land?

These and many other ambiguities do not merely have methodological repercussions – demanding an approach that seeks out and investigates such inconsistencies rather than

removing them from the equation – but also ethical ones. What to do when your host family structurally refuses any payment for the room you are staying in and the food you are eating every day while Palestinian refugees from Syria are extorted to pay highly inflated prices for shelter, draining them of all their savings in a few months? How to respond to the (misplaced) faith put in you as a foreigner by people threatened with eviction due to the construction of a new highway when they cannot be convinced to stop equating ‘research’ with ‘human rights organizations’? Where to go when the niece of your research assistant who fled the war in Syria hears from the doctor she will die within one year because she hasn’t been taking the medicines that were free in Syria but unaffordable for her in Lebanon?

If it is true that good research raises more questions than answers, my project seems to be a promising one...