

‘PRS:’ Problems Relating to Syria

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“There was a minister on the media saying they shouldn’t receive any Palestinian refugees from Syria and there was not one political party that objected to this discrimination. He said ‘we’re not ready to have more responsibilities for paying for Palestinian people; we have received them in the past and they are now living in our land.’ He said the government was not prepared to pay even 1000 Lebanese lira [E0,5] for any Palestinian coming from Syria.”

[Interview with Palestinian representative in the Sour/Tyre region – Bourj el-Shemali camp, Sour, 7 May 2013]

Thousands of people fleeing Syria are not Syrians, but Palestinians who have been living in Syria since they were forcefully displaced from Palestine in 1948. Since the beginning of the Syrian war, many of them fled to Lebanon, more specifically to the Palestinian camps and gatherings (unregistered camps) in the country. The complicated effects of this influx of so-called ‘PRS’ (Palestinian Refugees from Syria, a term coined by the NGO community) are the main concern for almost every person I talk to in Shabriha, the Palestinian gathering located next to the city of Sour in South Lebanon where I am currently doing fieldwork for my PhD. While exact numbers are lacking, the population of Shabriha is said to have doubled as a result of the PRS, many of whom are calling upon distant but obliging Bedouin family relations to find a roof over their heads.

One reason why the engagement with the PRS is so challenging is because all Shabriha’s, already by all means significant, problems are magnified by their presence. First, there is the political delicacy of South Lebanon being a predominantly Shia area loyal to Hezbollah, which results in a default support for the Syrian regime. Among the (Sunni) Palestinians in Lebanon, allegiances are more diverse and usually kept private not to upset the frail socio-political balance in the region. The arrival of a large group of people freshly scarred by the Syrian conflict and including supporters from both sides does little to relieve the tension.

Second, Palestinians in Shabriha already suffer from deprivation in various areas, ranging from housing to schooling, but specifically regarding the availability of water and electricity. The pressure the PRS, who do not pay any utility fees to the gathering’s ‘popular committee,’ put on these scarce resources is significant, with all due frustrations following suit.

This is not to say there is no help or relief for the PRS. Yet this support touches upon a third problem amplified by their arrival: the lack of coordination between various institutions, organizations and committees. The two committees in Shabriha, adhering to the rival Palestinian alliances of the PLO and Tahaluf, have their own registration lists. NGOs, subsequently, generally work with either one of them and get only a fragmented overview of the needs and availabilities in the gathering. Many people have complained that the first fifty or so families that arrived were registered by everyone and continue to get weekly support by

a bunch of organizations whereas the families that came after were not administered anywhere. I have heard countless variations on the theme that ‘some families have a house full of mattresses and food, while others have nothing.’ Whether this stems from ‘organizations’ inability or unwillingness is the subject of many a heated discussion in Shabriha these days. On top of the internal Palestinian divisions, there is a lack of coordination between Palestinian and Lebanese institutions, with the municipality and the Palestinian representatives not exchanging any information.

Fourth, all this is related to a tendency to pigeonhole and categorize – in this case between ‘PRS’ and ‘Syrian-Syrians.’ Despite regular rejections of such discrimination by many NGOs, this classification extends to official institutions, with the UNDP taking care of the Syrians and the UNRWA of the PRS. It is also apparent in the social mirroring on a community level, with some ‘Lebanese Palestinians’ treating ‘Syrian Palestinians’ the way the Lebanese treat them. While the Lebanese state sees the PRS as first and foremost Palestinians – registering them through security institutions and regarding them as a liability – many Lebanese Palestinians seem to regard them primarily as Syrians. Moreover, some see them as Syrians, that are rather unsophisticated yet threaten to take their jobs and might cause the next civil war; Syrians that used to have it so much better than the Palestinians in Lebanon but are now the darlings of all ‘organizations’ that used to help the Lebanese Palestinians.

Among all the generosity that is also there – I often wonder how the average western family would respond to a group of never-before-seen remote relatives taking refuge in their already cramped house for months and months – it is sad to see such processes of ‘othering’ so seemingly inevitably take hold.