

Dorothee Klaus ·
Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

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von

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Dorothee Klaus

**Palestinian Refugees in
Lebanon – Where to Belong?**



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List of Acronyms

| | |
|---------|---|
| ANM | Arab National Movement |
| AUB | American University in Beirut |
| DFLP | Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine |
| ICRC | International Committee of the Red Cross |
| LF | Lebanese Forces |
| LNМ | Lebanese National Front |
| NFLP | National Front for the Liberation of Palestine |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| PA | Palestinian Authority |
| PFLP | Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine |
| PFLP-GC | Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command |
| PLO | Palestine Liberation Organization |
| PSP | Progressive Socialist Party |
| SSNP | Syrian Socialist National Party |
| UNRWA | United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees |

Palestinian Camps in Lebanon

Nahr al-Bared (Tripoli)
Badawi (Tripoli)
Dbayeh (North of Beirut)
Wavell (Baalbak)
Bourj al-Barajneh (Beirut)
Shatila (Beirut)
Mar Elias (Beirut)
Ain al-Helweh (Sidon)
Bourj al-Shemali (Tyre)
Al-Buss (Tyre)
Rashidiyeh (Tyre)

Nabatiyeh (Nabatiyeh, destroyed by the Israeli army in 1973)
Tell al-Zatar (Beirut, destroyed by Christian militias in 1976)
Jisr al-Bacha (Beirut, destroyed by Christian militias in 1976)

Lebanese Presidents

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Beshara al-Khoury | 1943-52 |
| Camille Chamoun | 1952-58 |
| Fouad Chehab | 1958-64 |
| Charles al-Helou | 1964-70 |
| Suleyman Franjieh | 1970-76 |
| Elias Sarkis | 1976-82 |
| Bashir Gemayel | 1982 (assassinated) |
| Amine Gemayel | 1982-88 |
| Michel Aoun | 1988-89 (appointed by A. Gemayel) |
| René Mouawad | 1989 (assassinated) |
| Elias Hrawi | 1989-99 |
| Emile Lahoud | 1998- |

Chronology

- 1943 Lebanese independence from French colonization
- 1947 End of British colonization of Palestine
- 1948 Expulsion and flight of Arab Palestinians from Palestine
Defeat of Arab armies by Jewish armed forces in Palestine,
establishment of Israeli state
- 1964 Establishment of PLO
Installation of PLO representative in Lebanon (Shafiq al-Hout)
- 1966 Collapse of Intra Bank
- 1967 Arab-Israeli war, defeat of Arab armies
Israeli occupation of West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem
- 1969 Cairo Agreement between PLO and Lebanese state
- 1970/71 "Black September," expulsion of PLO from Jordan
- 1975 Outbreak of Lebanese civil war
- 1976 Christian militias attack and destroy Tell al-Zatar and Jisr al-Bacha camps and expel Palestinians and Moslems from East Beirut
Syrian army enters Lebanon
- 1982 Israeli army invades Lebanon
President Bashir Gemayel, head of Kata'ib Party, assassinated
Massacre of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila by Kata'ib militiamen in Israeli controlled area
- 1983 Withdrawal of Israeli army to southern Lebanon where occupation continues
- 1985-1988 "War of the camps"—Bourj al-Barajneh, Shatila, and Rashidiyeh camps are attacked and besieged by Shiite militias
- 1989 Outbreak of the "first intifada" in occupied West Bank
- 1989 Lebanese peace accords signed in Taif
- 1993 Oslo accords, resolution of refugee issue postponed to final negotiations
Shafiq al-Hout resigns as PLO representative in Lebanon
- 2000 Withdrawal of Israeli army from southern Lebanon
Withdrawal of Syrian army from Beirut (except for Palestinian camps) and Christian areas in Lebanon
Outbreak of the "second intifada"

Introduction

This work is based on extensive field research carried out in Lebanon between April 1997 and June 1998. I conducted over 180 personal interviews with Lebanese and Palestinians of different social, confessional, and local backgrounds. This figure does not include the many informal discussions and encounters with friends and acquaintances that added to my understanding of Palestinian-Lebanese relations in Lebanon. Establishing close contact with various families and individuals allowed me to participate in the region's everyday life.

Preceding the actual field research were six months of study of relevant literature. Five months spent in an intensive Arabic course followed preparation of an outline for the research program. The interviews, some of them quite informal, were mainly conducted in English, but also in French, Arabic, and German. Following the research was a year and a half of writing, during which I returned to Lebanon twice to visit local libraries.

The framework for my research on the Palestinian community emerged during the first six months of preparation for the field. I realized then that most research on the Palestinian community in Lebanon, particularly from an anthropological point of view, had been carried out in the camps. Information on Palestinians living outside the camps, on their relation with Lebanese society and the Palestinian camp inhabitants, was limited.¹ Palestinians in Lebanon were discriminated against by law, deprived of basic rights such as that to work in many professions. I became interested in the survival strategies of those who had become socially, politically, or economically integrated into Lebanese society.

The fact that Lebanon was a highly fragmented country, consisting of a multitude of socially, regionally, and confessionally distinct communities. Posed clear questions regarding the relative extent of integration or segregation on the part of those Palestinian refugees who had arrived in 1948. Politically and economically, Lebanon was in postwar circumstances. The Palestinians were accused of having played a major

¹ For basic studies of the topic see Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies. The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994); Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis. Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

and destructive role during the civil war, and this had an effect on their civil image. Palestinians in Lebanon were without coherent and legitimate political representatives. Shafiq al-Hout, PLO representative in Lebanon from 1964 until 1993, had resigned after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and PLO chairman Yassir Arafat had not replaced him. Several Palestinian leaders took it upon themselves to deal with Lebanese government officials, usually without any wider resonance.

A great many Palestinian refugees felt themselves left without future prospects by the Oslo accords, and in its role as their host country, Lebanon, like Syria, refused to participate in the multilateral negotiations with Israel. Refusing to accept the accords, Palestinian representatives in Lebanon called for steadfastness. Meanwhile, the refugees in the camps endured deteriorating conditions and faced an unknown future. The Lebanese public feared that the international community would arrange to resettle the refugees in Lebanon—an idea a substantial portion of the Lebanese population had been against from the beginning. Because the Lebanese political system relies on a demographically defined balance between the confessional communities, a resettlement—*tawtin*—and naturalization of large numbers of Palestinians was seen as endangering the constitution, since most Palestinians are Sunni Moslems. The sense of insecurity could only be compounded by Lebanon's own future depending on overall regional political developments, since Syria directed national politics from Damascus. Israel occupied the south; following its withdrawal in 2000, it continued to be perceived as a potential threat.

The hostility of the Lebanese towards the Palestinian presence in Lebanon and to the prospect of integration was paralleled by Palestinian party officials who insisted on the right of return in line with UN resolution 194. In the case of Palestinians now living in Lebanon, this meant a return not to the West Bank or Gaza but to the Mediterranean cities in what had been northern Palestine. While Lebanese and Palestinian officials refused to compromise about this, Palestinians in the negotiation teams in Jerusalem were already thinking about solutions to be addressed in the "final status" discussions due to begin in late 1999.² Against this complex and conflict-laden international and domestic backdrop, my research approached the relation between Palestinians and Lebanese from a socio-political vantage point and with the use of

² For a general review of the negotiation process see: Salim Tamari, *Palestinian Refugee Negotiations. From Madrid to Oslo II. A Final Status Paper*. Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1996.

anthropological research methods, taking into account data on the Lebanese political system and the Lebanese civil war as they were relevant. My intention was to establish a context for the distinct experiences of Palestinians and Lebanese when interacting with each other on a variety of levels. In addition, I was interested in recording mutually held sentiments ranging from resentful to sympathetic in order to help understand the sources of both continuous stalemate and coexistence, that is, the persistence social, political, and economic exchange.

Some Theoretical Premises

My study, then, explores the different frameworks defining the relationship between the Palestinian refugee community and Lebanon as a state and society. To what extent have Lebanese economic, social, and political preconditions enabled or prevented Palestinian integration or segregation? What are the particular moments in which integration has been possible or impossible? Where have tendencies toward segregation developed, and on what grounds? And in what ways has the Palestinian refugee community developed within the fragmented Lebanese environment?

Two prominent theorists from very different historical and academic spheres have strongly influenced my approach to anthropological research: Max Weber and Clifford Geertz. In its emphasis on the importance of sociological or anthropological interpretation of a phenomenon, in contrast to its mere reproduction within a theoretical frame, Geertz's approach, particularly his well-known study of the social dimension of cock-fighting in Indonesia, has been central to my work.³ This concept of interpretation has two dimensions: it relies on the discourse of the individuals being observed, but it also emerges from the researcher's particular perspective. The interpretation relates data to meaningful structures. The fact that several systems of meaning may coexist needs to be kept in mind when considering a given social field, for the sake of an ethnographical investigation that is at once interpretive and descriptive.

Geertz calls this form of investigation "thick description." It is uninterested in any verification of theories. Instead, it aims at a highly differentiated portrait of discourses and situations within a social context. Any

³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

generalizing interpretations are only gained through detailed interpretative descriptions of daily events. There is no effort to develop a universally applicable system of laws—but instead a generalized view of a *particular*, that is geographically or heuristically limited, social field.

Cultural studies are naturally incomplete in the sense that a reproduction of reality is impossible. Heuristic and epistemological shortcomings are inevitable. Yet Geertz does not see these consequences as implying an impossibility of research in a social field. Instead, he advocates a type of cultural studies that sticks as closely as possible to concrete social situations and practices, thus producing concentrated or “thick” ethnographies. Geertz describes his approach as (1) generally interpretative and (2) interpretation of social discourses in particular, meaning (3) that situational discourse is related to the wider social context. Like Bourdieu, he emphasizes the *habitus*, the praxis of social rules that in the end affirm or negate ideological concepts and values.⁴

Geertz argues that the tension between ideology, value, and situational (pragmatic) action creates social dynamics. This tension reappears in contributions to social and cultural studies attempting to describe social contexts. The tendency of such efforts has been to emphasize either ideologies and values as prescribing and guiding human action and cultural processes or social and historical events as defining and transforming, social values. This dialectical problem has been discussed in terms of subjective versus objective or functional versus structural phenomena, and in certain philosophical contexts as the question of freedom and constraint. “Thick descriptions” address precisely this tension between situational and particular types of action on the one hand and systems of meaning on the other. The resulting detailed presentation of the social field involves describing the tension instead of treating it as a social paradox or deviation from a norm.

Within Geertz’s cultural-theoretical framework, the concept of “meaning” has to be understood as closely related to that of “value.” Geertz, however, does not focus on the significance of values and ideology in social contexts. It is Max Weber, who does so, in his wide-ranging analysis of various cultural-historical systems. For Weber, only an approach to ideological concepts as imaginative contexts describing an ideal type of social reality allows an ascription of meaning to empirical data.⁵ He assumes a potential incongruence between the ideas guiding

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

⁵ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: Mohr J.C.B., 1980, 1921.

human action and the ideal types used by the social scientist. This marks the point where my research has departed from Geertz' advocacy of methodological adherence to a social scientific discourse. In line with Weber's central argument, I would maintain the absence of any objective social science—rather the presence within that discipline of “ideal” concepts (e.g., identity, Islam, nationalism) allowing us to estimate the meaning of social reality, as in an epistemological looking glass.

I have followed Weber's sociology in attributing primary importance to sometimes intermeshing functional spheres such as economics, politics, and religion. Such spheres, I would argue, precondition culture, thus holding the key to understanding the meaningful structures emerging from a given social context. In this manner, both Geertz's “thick descriptions” and Weber's functional, value-oriented sociology inform the field data—the personal and collective narratives and related forms of discourse—presented in the following pages. Through an analysis of such data, I hope to clarify the conflict between Palestinians and their hosts in Lebanon, as played out in its everyday and political dimensions, as well as its “preconditioned” relation to broader social, economic, and political spheres.

1. Observation-Linked Dilemmas and Modes of Self-Integration as a Researcher

1.1. Becoming a Participatory Observer in a Heterogeneous Field

Needing to become familiar with the environment under observation and gain people's trust and confidence, the field researcher is caught in a dilemma. This act of socializing is generally a non-utilitarian act. In general, it is considered highly inappropriate to merge friendly social interaction with an overt interest, be it political, social, or economic. And yet, everyone involved with the researcher knows that the main reason—as it were the hidden agenda—for such social interaction is to study the social patterns of his or her hosts. At the same time, the more the researcher becomes intimately familiar with the latter, the more he or she is expected to forgo a research interest. On several occasions, my own hosts referred disparagingly to people engaging in such self-interest and self-promotion. Typical in that respect are the following remarks of a middle-aged male Palestinian camp inhabitant from Baddawi regarding a much younger female journalist—herself Palestinian—from Beirut:

They do not like her in the camp. She comes for visits to join the social activities here and says she is dedicated to the Palestinian cause. At the same time, she is very pretentious about it. Actually, they laugh about her in the camp. She thinks she can be one of us, but not the way she behaves. She wants to be something special here. She thinks she is better because she lives outside. She thinks she can use the camp to make herself feel as if she is something else.

The researcher's initial role as stranger is an obstacle and a privilege at the same time. To follow Clifford Geertz, the researcher has to transform this stranger-status to that of one who becomes initiated, the degree of initiation varying. At one point in his *Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz reflects on the turning point following which he was accepted into the Indonesian village he wished to study.⁶ The circumstances were ideal: the police, serving as outside enemy, were breaking up a communal gathering, the forbidden cockfights, and both the anthropologist and his wife reacted the same way as their hosts by running away from the police. This behavior pleasantly surprised the villagers, indicating that the couple had chosen to be like them, despite all possible disadvantages.

⁶Geertz 1973

Within Geertz's classical episode, a basis of trust and integration is firmly laid. However, such distinct, socially visible acts of initiation are only feasible in communities that are geographically limited and socially cohesive—and my locus of research was quite the opposite. My intention was not to concentrate on any one of Lebanon's various communities, but to meet as many people as possible, from different communities, Palestinians, and Lebanese—the *others*. I could not, of course, expect to receive the same degree of initiation on all occasions.

Marked by deeply felt mutual resentment and animosity, the post-civil war circumstances required a great deal of sensitivity when crossing communal borders. Although people from one community advised me to be careful not to believe *the others*, no one seemed to have any objections to me crossing such borders. Upon doing so, I soon discovered the extent to which, in this context, the categories of truth and falsehood were geographically and socially fixed—there *always* was an opposing perspective. But at the same time truth was not something here located “in between” received notions. Rather, it was attached firmly related to the subject in question and conceived of as an epistemological system with a social dimension.

If I was sitting with people, sipping coffee, smoking cigarettes, chatting and discussing, they assumed that I possibly could not do the same with *the others*. The others I would ‘interview,’ but it seemed impossible that I could relate to them in an informal and familiar way. For some it was even unimaginable that former mortal enemies might also have family gatherings with lunch, coffee, jokes, children, and countless hours of “hanging around.”

Acceptance naturally came more easily when a friend or a family member had invited me, no matter how long I had known the person before. In general, my identity—a German female Ph.D. student, hopefully friendly and polite—was not questioned as much as my intentions. I was fixed more firmly in Lebanon than the majority of journalists or business people, driving around, buying groceries, and so forth like most Lebanese. Knowing the basic setting and being able to speak the local Arabic, I was not one of them but not a complete outsider. My open, clearly defined location in the community also made my identity easier to grasp: I was affiliated to the German Oriental Institute in Zokak al-Blat, and I was staying in the house of a respectable Shiite family. I had already been talking to this or that person, and so-and-so was a good friend.

Discussing social contacts sometimes needed to be approached carefully, with a mind to existing resentments. To mention acquaintance with prominent and wealthy persons was not necessarily tactful in more modest households, and had the potential for causing serious discomfort—having arrived as a stranger, having been welcomed and somehow integrated into a certain household setting for the time being, I now became locatable within the wider communal landscape—but somewhere on the distant, outside end. Inversely, mentioning acquaintance with modest households in wealthier ones created similar irritations, and even generated sarcastic queries such as *Do you really dare eat there, isn't it too dirty and disgusting?* In this more prosperous setting, my contacts with households on the lower end of the social stratum were only accepted as part of my work. The relation was considered time-restricted, for a certain purpose only, and expected not to include the usual forms of social reciprocity of friendship.

Sensitivity regarding my movement between different social levels was more pronounced in the intra-confessional than cross-confessional framework. A Shiite grocer would be much more concerned about my having close friends among a Shiite feudal family than about my visit to the house of a prominent Maronite family. The communal distance with the Maronite bourgeoisie was too great for the visit to have a significant social meaning—perhaps the grocer could not even assess the position of the Maronite family in social terms. At the same time, prominent Lebanese families recognized the influence and social position of families belonging to other confessional groups. Even if one or another group had been a recent political foe, it was seen as completely acceptable for me to have contacts with it, so long as the contacts were on an identical social level. Class-context was thus far more central than confession.

Throughout the time of my field work, my Roman Catholic religious background was never taken very seriously, and my own social background was of little interest—I would be asked if I had a family and siblings, but hardly ever about the living standards of my father or mother. Possessing a social and confessional identity not anchored in a local confessional community, nor in a family, and consequently being endowed with an ambiguous social-symbolic value, tended to serve as a distinct advantage: not being significantly pre-marked in a way posing an obstacle to open conversation about the Palestinian-Lebanese conflict, I was able to enter everywhere. And yet, it was paradoxically apparent to me that my incomprehensibility in terms of belonging was frequently

disconcerting, demanding clarification. Sometimes, I had the impression I was being transferred to a local context in order to fill the information gap. I realized that the statement "I am from the south" (of Germany), *min al-janub*, would stir associations with the particular meaning of *al-janub* in Lebanon. Once, a Shiite artist who perceived me as socially lost, simply integrated me into the Shiite family of a friend because he thought I looked like one of their daughters; to him, I became Dorothée Charafeddine. Family names readily indicated a person's locus: regional origins, confession, class. *People here are curious*, I was told. *They will insist on knowing who you are*, meaning my social and confessional identity. This was the primary basis for dealing with other people in general: how much respect they were owed; gauging how careful one had to be during conversation not to say the wrong thing. In this way, I began to sense what it would mean for a refugee to arrive in such an environment.

The extent to which one remains neutral and impartial in the field is largely a question of one's particular program, personality, and circumstances. On the one hand, it is impossible not to become involved somehow. On the other hand, the anthropologist's hybrid status prevails: it is impossible to abandon one's role as outsider, impossible to gain full confidence of one's hosts and fully integrate into their daily life. As long as I pursued my professional interest, my hosts could not be sure whether I was staying with them out of pleasure at their company or mere curiosity—and I could not be entirely sure myself. When does field-research time end and private time begin? There were of course dates and meetings, announced by telephone call or personal introduction. But such official meetings tended to turn into relaxed get-togethers, family members or friends joining in and leaving, the roles of researcher and object of research distinctly switched. Inversely, a simple shopping foray could unintentionally change into a research situation when a person met by accident showed promise of being an interesting interviewee.

I found myself embroiled in a standard parking-space battle on the jammed streets of Beirut one busy morning. My car had managed to dent one of several others, and my insurance having expired two days before, I had to arrange a special deal with the insurance company. I ended up chatting with the person responsible, a Lebanese Shiite man around thirty from Bourj al-Barajneh who lived near one of the Palestinian camps, and I took the opportunity to visit his family—he was the perfect informant for learning more about Palestinian-Lebanese relations from his generation's perspective. In general, I did not hide the fact that any person I met was of potential research interest.