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PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON: IS THE CAMP A SPACE OF EXCEPTION

Abstract

This article engages the Agamben-Agier perspective on refugee camps, which has become dominant in the last few years but has received little critical analysis. Both Giorgio Agamben and Michel Agier at times define the refugee camp in relation to broader scenarios. While Agamben thinks of the camp as a way to define the modern nation state and law, Agier often digresses from the camp with the city in mind. While the work of both teaches us a great deal about the nature of the camp, discussing some of their limitations is essential even to fully develop their own potential. This article aims at contrasting key elements of the Agamben-Agier perspective to my own experience in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Three main questions underpin this paper: Is a refugee camp indeed a space of exception? Should we understand the refugee camps in their symbolic and practical continuity or discontinuity to the urban space? Should we consider the camp as having the same properties of the “city” in Agier’s sense?



INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the writings of philosopher Giorgio Agamben and anthropologist Michel Agier have become hegemonic in refugee studies. Given these authors’ insightful production, they both certainly deserve such praise. Nonetheless, this article aims at presenting a few limitations to the Agamben-Agier perspective by introducing fragments of my own research experience in Palestinian refugee camps, especially in Lebanon.

I will show how Agamben’s concepts of the *state of exception* and *bare life* should not stand alone defining the refugee condition. Instead, these concepts can benefit from being coupled with more ethnographic and practical approaches. If on the one hand this is part of what Agier does, on the other hand he still depends too much on Agamben’s perspective, which seems to be much more inspired by concentration camps rather than refugee camps, as presented in his own work.² Also, *Leonardo Schiocchet is Postdoctoral Researcher in CAPES/Brazil and guest researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences/Austria. Email: schiocchet@gmail.com*

in spite of his more recent interest directly in the Palestinian case, Agier draws inspiration mainly from the case of refugee camps in Africa, which, as I show, are sometimes diametrically opposed to the camps (and refugees) I studied.³ In the process, I seek to discuss and answer the following questions: a) Is a refugee camp indeed a space of exception, as in the Agier elaboration of Agamben's perspective, or in that of some of the authors he inspired? b) Should we thus understand the refugee camps in their symbolic and practical continuity or discontinuity to the urban space? Or even, c) should we consider the camp a "city" in both or either Agamben's or Agier's sense?

I argue that refugee camps are indeed exceptional spaces in relation to the city, but not exactly bare life (devoid of law and politics) as Agamben claims. I conclude defending that Agier's understanding of the camps – mainly through their continuities with the urban space (that is, understanding the camp in relation to the city and not apart from it, however that may be depending on the specific context)⁴ – is helpful especially if the urban space of the city is the object of analysis, but less so if the goal is to understand the specificities of the refugee camp. Finally, refugees tend to experience the environment of the camps as exceptional spaces, defined and lived in contraposition to the city and the host nation. The camps' refugees tend to be perceived and to perceive themselves as foreigners whose identities are defined at least as much by the symbolic continuities with their places of origin and discontinuities with the space outside of the camp, as by the continuities with their surroundings and discontinuities with their places of origin.

AQUA ET IGNI INTERDICTUS: FROM AGAMBEN TO AGIER AND ON

Agamben first introduced the notion of "state of exception" in *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*,⁵ and subsequently developed it in another book called *State of exception*.⁶ In the first book, he first defines the concept through the idea of *exceptio*, or "a limit-figure of life, a threshold in which life is both inside and outside the juridical order, and this threshold is the place of sovereignty"⁷ . . . "the exception is the structure of sovereignty . . . it is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it."⁸ He further explains, "a pure form of law is only the empty form of relation. Yet the empty form of relation is no longer a law but a zone of indistinguishability between law and life, which is to say, a state of exception."⁹ "The originary political relation is marked by this zone of

indistinction in which the life of the exile or the *aqua et igni interdictus* borders on the life of *homo sacer*, who may be killed but not sacrificed."¹⁰ In the second book, named after the concept itself, state of exception – the “*arcanum imperii* [secret of power] of the national order of the world¹¹ – is also defined as a “no-man's-land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life.¹² Or, “as the technical term for the consistent set of legal phenomena that it seeks to define. This term, which is common in German theory (*Ausnahmezustand*, but also *Notstand*, ‘state of necessity’), is foreign to Italian and French theory, which prefers to speak of *emergency decrees* and *state of siege* (political or fictitious, *etat de siege fictif*). In Anglo-Saxon theory, the terms *martial law* and *emergency powers* prevail.”¹³

In other words, the state of exception is germane to the English “martial law,” although historically these concepts entailed relatively different things in each tradition. To Agamben, what is common to all is that the sovereign occupies a place of liminality, as he is neither fully contained by Law¹⁴ – since he is its very source – nor fully detached from it – since he is also himself subject to Law thus created. Likewise, according to Agamben, the refugee is also a modern symbolic reincarnation of “*homo sacer*,” who by living in liminality – on the threshold of law and its absence – defines the very subject of Law, this being a precondition to sociality itself.

According to Agamben, when the state of exception is actualized, the affected subjects lose all social (and Human) rights and belonging, becoming what – inspired by Hannah Arendt – he calls “bare life.” That is, neither *zoē*, nor “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” nor *bios* “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.”¹⁵ Arendt intended to show that in a world defined by the nation state model, Human Rights (and the rights of all humans) come only through citizenship, and thus the refugees emerging from all corners of Europe after the Second World War were in practice not protected by any rights.¹⁶ Agamben then utilizes the term ontologically as a heuristic device. The very possibility of humans being neither defined as *zoē* nor *bios* goes even further than the Thatcherian assemblage of individuals in which society is merely a fiction, toward a supposed ontological (even if supposedly only logical and heuristic) “state of nature.”

Agamben is philosophizing about the emergence of Law and Politics, and thus we must take this presupposition of a non-social human moment with a grain of salt. He seems to be presenting how the sovereign perceives such objects – dispossessed of all subjectivity and

agency – and not how or what they are in practice. For Agamben then, such a perception renders politics inexistent, for politics is possible only in the space of bios (social existence). Nonetheless, I must admit to having difficulties accepting even this reasoning, since in the real world cases I witnessed “the sovereign” might even have tried to treat refugees as just bare life, which could never be possibly accomplished in practice.

Agamben claims to meet Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault on the middle ground between the juridical-institutional perspective of the first and the biopolitical perspective of the later.¹⁷ However, in spite of showing correctly how biopolitics is the object *par excellence* of the modern state policies, Agamben characterizes these “bodies” as destitute of politics, and thus agency, as *zoē*. As such, I understand that Agamben neglects a central piece of Foucault’s theory: the microphysics of power,¹⁸ in other words, the realization that power is not located in the subjects but in relational dynamics. This means that there is always a space for “resistance,” as I will develop through the ethnographic case, even when policies seem to be completely imposed top-down. Agamben already neglected this system of forces in his discussion on the character of the sovereign itself, which by its turn resembles the Contractualist thought and especially Hobbes’ Leviathan.¹⁹ That is, in Agamben, as in Hobbes, the sovereign is a homogenous and even unidimensional force that has the potential to exercise power beyond the limits of law and the consideration of other forces in the system. One could almost think of it as an individual person comparable to, for instance, Machiavelli’s prince.

Nonetheless, Agamben seems fully aware of the limitations of an institutional point of view and seeks to couple it with a biopolitical one. Oddly, his Foucauldian influence drives him further away from real life scenarios into a generalization that he considers a more biopolitical approach for the state of exception is located between juridical order and life, as he states. The exception is not to be found in practice – as it was for at least some of the social contract theorists – but only insofar as a logical space. After all the state of exception is “the opening of a fictitious lacuna in the order for the purpose of safeguarding the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation.”²⁰ Thus, “bare life” is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being.²¹ In short: Agamben’s perspective is almost a purely institutional one, and its biopolitical component is named as

such only because the object of the modern state sovereign's top-down policies is seen as the human body (*zoē*), or simply what he calls "life."

To sum up, Agamben's logical exercise is excellent food for thought insofar as it exposes the fragile stability of Citizenship and the very juridical and political order in which it depends. Its main limitation, as I see it, lies in the impossibility to show relative subject positioning and in qualifying such positions within this fragile order—which, to be fair, was never a key theme in his models' design. In short, it is intended as a grand theory and it best suits this purpose.

Nevertheless, many are those who have reappropriated Agamben's theory for more specific purposes. Of special interest here are those who use Agamben's examples of the concentration and refugee camps to define their exceptional character *vis à vis* the rest of the social order. Throughout his career, Michel Agier has written much on the nature of the refugee camps, frequently using Agamben's state of exception to express the liminality of the refugee life and the fundamental connection between refugee camps and exclusion. The refugee camp is then what he called a "space of exception," and as such, it becomes germane to other such spaces such as American ghettos, French *banlieuses*, or any other marginalized urban spaces. In my understanding, this use of Agamben's concept requires a certain intellectual gymnastics to dislocate it from its Universalist perspective and make it fit another completely different frame.

In an early reflection, published in 2002, articulating his fieldwork experience in refugee camps, Agier already expressed the main driving question behind his subsequent anthropology of refugeeness. "Can the refugee camp become a city in the sense of a space of urban sociability, an *urbs*, and indeed in the sense of a political space, a *polis*?"²² Agier's definition is thus symbolic, more than geographic. That is, spatial continuities and discontinuities are conceptualized in terms of lived experience, rather than physical boundaries alone. Drawing upon the practical perennial presence of the camps in today's world *vis-à-vis* their supposed temporary existence, Agier defined refugee camps then as "novel sociospatial form of 'city-camps'."²³ Bringing individuals together solely due to their "status of victims," "the humanitarian system" would "induce" "the social and political non-existence of the recipients of its aid."²⁴ The 2002 article acknowledges that this process "creates opportunities for encounters, exchanges and reworkings of identity among all who live there." In this sense, the "humanitarian device of the camps" "produces cities, 'de la ville'," in Bernard Lepetit's words, which determine "'the

transformative capacities of the urban'."25 The main specificity of the camp when compared to a city would be in its beginnings, founded on the principle of being an "authentic desert"—a concept he borrows from Hannah Arendt's own borrowing of Nietzsche. The desert being "the antinomy of the social and political exchange that links all humans, that simultaneously brings together and distinguishes them."²⁶ In other words, the camp was to Agier a "space of exception," a place of proto-politics and proto-sociality, bare life. As he developed in a more recent publication:

Everyone who has observed the refugee camps can see there a kind of town, not just in terms of size, but by the forms of life that seem to seek new expression.²⁷ The camp is comparable to a town, but this status is unachieved. Everything is potential but nothing develops, no promise of life is really fulfilled. . . . the camps are thus more comparable to 'townships' of apartheid South Africa, set up under the Group Areas Act of 1950, 'Townships' were urban forms amputated of an entire part of life, that of economics, politics, and the encounter with the higher social classes (and whites).²⁸ The camps thus form an urban reality marked both by the frozen time of the indigenous quarters of colonial towns, and by the amputation of apartheid towns.²⁹

In this sense, Refugees are "at the end of the day undesirable, kept apart from the world, far from the city."³⁰ However, are refugee camps indeed bare cities, or spaces of exception, in Agier's sense? Agier claims that extremely poor urban enclaves such as favelas in Brazil are also the manifestation of bare life, while refugee camps in dense urban areas—such as Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut—have become more and more part of the urban landscape. Therefore, all of these constitute spaces of exception in relation to the city. His conclusion is that the refugee camp has to be understood in continuity with the urban landscape (inclusion through marginalization) as opposed to something apart from it. The space of exception is thus not a predicament of refugee camps only, but of any major marginal human enclave. In this sense, Sari Hanafi created a typology to understand the Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East with relation to their degree of isolation from the surroundings. For instance,

camps in Syria were then considered “open,” as opposed to camps in Lebanon, which the author considered “closed.”³¹ The limitations of Hanafi’s derivation of Agier and Agamben will be dealt with toward the conclusion.

As the general Agamben-Agier frame has its merits, it also has a few shortcomings.³² The most important merit is the importance given to the broader context involving the camp. On the shortcomings’ side, it must be pointed out that refugee camps are marked not only by entropic processes relating to the urban surroundings, but also by processes that are not triggered by the urban landscape. A refugee camp can possibly have at least as many continuities with symbolic spaces outside the host city/nation as it has within its surroundings. In particular, this article intends to show how social belonging processes of Palestinian refugees tend to be at least as much defined by ascription to an imagined (“transnational”) Palestinian nation as they are defined by the local urban (or rural) symbolic space surrounding them. In this sense, while the camp may be seen as a marginal space of exception from the lenses of the urban landscape, it is sometimes the very core of an imagined community. My study also illustrates how different camps in the same host country can vary in their organizational structure and symbolic configuration, and relate differently to their surroundings. In this way, and regarding different issues, refugee camps (even in the same host country) can be thus more “open” or “closed” depending on the way camp dwellers, surrounding populations, religious leaders, the host state, humanitarian relief agents, local grassroots movements, and other local and international social actors, interact and relate to each other.

Furthermore, the refugee camp – just as the Brazilian favela – is not necessarily a space of “bare life” without rights or sociality. In this article, I will also illustrate that morality and local rights may emanate not from a centralized state government, but from dynamic local belonging and organization processes generated and transformed within the camps, and related to the continuities between the camps and their imagined (national) community. Also, unlike what happens in ghettos, banlieues, and other marginalized urban spaces, the local discontinuities of the refugee camp do not emanate only or mainly from a local negative sense of social distinction, but they evoke the refugees’ very legal foreign – and thus exceptional – character.

WHITHER CITY, WHICH NATION

Al-Jalil Palestinian refugee camp was located at the entrance of the city

of Baalbek in the Beq'a, a fertile valley located in the east of Lebanon close to the eastern boundaries with Syria. This was a Shi'a majority territory, and consequently, Baalbek was one of the most important strongholds of Hizballah.³³ The area was rich in symbolic political elements defining a territorial *dominium*. In its extension, there were posters of the "martyrs" of Hizballah, party flags, and religious messages attuned with the ideology of the group. Close to the city, there was a real war tank standing tall on a concrete pillar; the whole monument was displayed in a public square among other Hizballah paraphernalia—undoubtedly, an imposing symbol of the group's military might.

I first arrived in the camp using a local van service operated by residents of the region in which the itinerary was inscribed. The van left a Shi'a dominated southern suburb of Beirut to arrive at the Shi'a territory to the east of the country. When I told the van driver that I wanted to stay "*bi-al-mukhayyam*" (in the camp), he did not acknowledge my request, probably because he could not make sense of the fact that I wanted to go to a Palestinian refugee camp. I insisted, to which he asked me puzzled, "which camp?" As soon as I replied "the Palestinian camp," I heard a few mocking comments from some passengers, while others acknowledged respectfully the existence of such space.

During all my fieldwork in al-Jalil, I perceived these two kinds of reactions the most. First, individuals who simply mocked the Palestinians and even harassed them. Second, those who would acknowledge respectfully the existence of the camp and its refugee dwellers, typically thinking of them as a different kind of people mostly known to them through their collective plight. Good or bad, the Palestinians were almost invariably perceived as foreigners, inhabitants of a secluded territory. Timidly in that van, a young boy next to me confessed in a low voice that he was from al-Jalil. When the time came, he paid for both of us, helped carry my luggage, and escorted me to a checkpoint at the entrance of the camp.

Al-Jalil (officially named Wavel, by UNRWA) was a space apart, secluded. It was removed from the urban space that surrounded it, yet in a distinctive way from many other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon or elsewhere. Some, like Shatila refugee camp on the southern outskirts of Beirut (right where I took the van that delivered me to al-Jalil at the entrance of Baalbek) were less physically secluded, in contrast to al-Jalil.

The perimeter of Shatila was less defined than that of the Baalbek camp, and a few conflicts with the former's surroundings were mostly responsible for that. Most of these conflicts occurred during the Lebanese Civil War itself, which pitted different Lebanese political factions against each other, one of which was supported by the Palestinian PLO—which, in turn, achieved a firm grasp on almost all the refugee camps in the country. One of the darkest chapters of this war was the infamous “Sabra and Shatila Massacre” in 1982, when thousands of Palestinian refugees and some Lebanese Shi'a were executed by the Christian Lebanese militia called *Al-Kata'eb al-Lubnaniyya* (The Phalangists). Then, in 1985, within the so-called “War of the Camps,” the Shi'a militia AMAL tuned into rubble most of the conurbation made up by the camps of Sabra, Shatila, and Burj al-Barajne refugee camp located directly in front of the Palestinian conurbation.³⁴ With time, these Palestinians rebuilt their homes, but this time they were limited to the new possibilities and restrictions imposed by the Lebanese surrounding them, especially the Shi'a politico-military establishment. As a result, Sabra is essentially today a *suqq* (market) within Shatila, serving as a workplace mainly for Palestinian refugees from this and the Burj al-Barajne camp. Anyone can potentially enter Shatila, since there are no checkpoints on the disputed boundaries of the camp and no Palestinian-only policy was enforced on the territory.

In fact, many Lebanese families lived within the perimeter of Shatila, most of them being Shi'a, and some of whose histories in the camp were directly related to the AMAL siege. Due to economic, social and political reasons, the camp was also at the time home to a myriad of other social groups ranging from gypsies to illegal migrants coming from many parts of Africa and East and Southeast Asia. However, in spite of this diversity, Shatila was still very much marked by Palestinian symbols, and the pace of social life still revolved mainly around social processes directly related to the Palestinian question. That is, the space was still heavily inscribed within a symbolic Palestinian territory and, as such, was marked at least as much by a symbolic continuity with the Palestinian nation as it was marked by mundane continuity with the urban surroundings of the city (Beirut). Most importantly: both Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike recognized the camp as Palestinian claimed territory. Graffiti, posters, banners, flags and other Shi'a Lebanese symbolism coming from the exterior to the center of the camp—coexisting with similar Palestinian display that departed from within the camp—left no doubt of such a

conceptualization of the territory, despite the toll that the dispute had taken on both sides. Besides, after the war just as before it, the Lebanese state formally recognized the relative autonomy of this and the other camps as Palestinian territory by tacitly agreeing, for example, to keep the Lebanese army or police outside the camps, except when Palestinian authorities failed to secure the interests of the Lebanese state.

However, this tacit autonomy was neither perennial nor taken for granted, but always fraught and suspended by the delicate Palestinian political situation in Lebanon. Until the late 1960s Palestinian resistance activities were concentrated in Jordan. Moreover, from the outset of the PLO move to Lebanon, they were regulated by the Cairo Agreement (1969), brokered by Gamal Abdel Nasser, and signed by the Lebanese army commander Emile Bustani and the PLO chairman, Yasser Arafat. This agreement stipulated, among other things, that the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon would fall outside Lebanese government jurisdiction (as represented by the army's *Deuxième Bureau* – as the intelligence branch was called) and within the PLO's jurisdiction. This in itself was already a point of contention that contributed to the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. In 1982, after the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the PLO was forced to move out of Lebanon to Tunisia, leaving the refugee camps unprotected. Despite guaranteeing Palestinian civilian safety, the almost non-existent Lebanese state was unable to prevent several massacres of Palestinian refugees, such as those of 1984–1985 comprising the so-called War of the Camps. Moreover, it was not until 1987 that the Lebanese president Amine Gemayel annulled the Cairo Agreement.

It must be noted here also that the Lebanese state has been at least since the outset of the Lebanese Civil War, a fragile and powerless entity at best, with political power residing with different non-state groups, most of which were and are still today hostile to granting full human and social rights to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, let alone citizenship. Throughout the war, not only did the Lebanese army lack the power to enforce any resolution over the myriad of militias involved in the conflict, but also the Lebanese state itself was involved in breaches of this agreement. For instance, at the end of the civil war, Lebanese army shelling targeting Christian militias that had refused to disarm actually destroyed about 40 percent of Dbaye refugee camp. Today there is only a tacit agreement in place between the Lebanese authorities and the Palestinian leadership, granting Palestinian

privilege to overseeing order and security in the refugee camps, but not full Palestinian autonomy. While the Lebanese police indeed steer away from the camps, and Palestinian political factions manage local security, the army may still intervene. Examples of contemporary Lebanese interventions in the camps abound. To cite a more recent one, in 2007 Nahr al-Bared camp was invaded and destroyed by the Lebanese army, which was targeting a Salafi transnational rather than Palestinian militia called Fatah al-Islam.

This arrangement would be precisely a case for Agamben's state of exception, if such a space were not already exceptional. Incidentally, for Agamben, the space of exception includes by excluding, or a subject not inscribed in the law is accounted for by it precisely being the exception that makes it possible. What I describe here in turn can be seen as just the opposite: the space of the camp is excluded by inclusion. Or, the camp is set as an exceptional space so long as it is bound to the national will. In any case, it is not the institutional point of view or that of the sovereign that is the nodal point of my argument, but that which departs from the camp to the city instead. In other words, I do not depart mainly from a legal or state perspective, but from the dynamics of the lives of the refugees themselves. As mentioned earlier, the urban space of al-Jalil was different from that of Shatila in many aspects. First and foremost, the perimeter of the camp was very much controlled by the Palestinians, and secured, at least symbolically, through a *hajiz* (checkpoint) at the main entrance of the camp where Palestinian men in military gear holding Kalashnikovs had the internal directive of managing the boundaries of the camp. "Outsiders," essentially non-Palestinians, had to have their entrance in the camp approved before being able to step inside. The same, of course, was true of me when I first arrived in al-Jalil, although I had already negotiated my stay with a local Palestinian social work institution, which had the approval of the local political authorities.

The camp was a former French barracks, its format thus being perfect for perimeter control. At the checkpoint, the men with their Kalashnikovs seemed entertained by my presence; the young man had asked me to stand there and wait while he went inside to summon my friend. After about five minutes, the two men arrived making signs to those who needed to know that I was finally home. Were it in Shatila, I would have just entered the camp, although I am certain that local leaders would have kept an eye on me.

According to UNRWA's last official number (2013), in 2003 there were "almost 8,000 Palestine refugees" registered in the total area of 42,300 square meters of al-Jalil.³⁵ During my field research, walls made of interconnected small concrete buildings surrounded the camp. At the center of the camp, larger buildings that once served as French barracks still stood above a large number of other small buildings, sometimes built on top of each other creating two story buildings. This configuration left just enough space for a paved street to cut out the outer wall of small buildings from the cluster of buildings surrounding the old French Barracks where the camp was built. The main street was shaped like a closed square. It was about the width of a car at its narrowest part, and that of two cars at some of its wider parts. Narrow alleys between the buildings cut across irregularly throughout the whole camp, where young men gathered to smoke *argile* (water pipe) and chat, while old men and women chatted at the doorsteps of their houses. The Lebanese government barred Palestinian refugees in Lebanon from most jobs, while informal work that was either urban (such as vendors, artisans, and taxi drivers) or rural (such as planting and harvesting crops for Lebanese landowners), was scarcely available. Thus, the local alleys filled up with *argile* smoking.

The camp's public spaces mostly faced the main street, where there were stores (*mahal*, plural, *mahalat*), political offices (*maktab siyasi*, plural, *makatib siyasiyya*), NGO and charitable organization centers (*markaz*, plural *marakaz*; or *jam'aiyya*, plural, *jam'ayat*), as well as the mosque and the UNRWA school. The main entrance to the camp, located across the checkpoint on the right, if one is standing inside the camp facing the entrance, was a *zawya* (corner) clear of buildings and regularly used as a gathering place for discourses, demonstrations, strikes, celebrations, etc. The back of this *zawya* harbored the UNRWA office, and usually the main speakers in an event were photographed and filmed by local organizations in front of UNRWA's office. This was the *locus par excellence* to voice the community's demands and denunciations to the world.

Among the stores were at least two pharmacies, four or five food markets, two *mana`ish* bakeries, a falafel sandwich shop, one *qahwa* (café) and another that also offered *argile*, an internet games room with six computers, a room with a pool table and a football table, four or more barbershops, a trendy CD store, and a general store where one could buy anything from frying pans to blankets. In addition to these, a cooking gas store, a mechanic's workshop, an internet café, another barbershop, and a cell phone shop all faced the road to Baalbek.

Al-Jalil had at that time twelve political parties and movements³⁶, most of which had one office of their own. The most important among them were Fatah, Fatah al-Intifada, PFLP, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad (not in any particular order of importance). As mentioned above, one could also find UNRWA's administrative office among many other offices of charitable organizations, cultural centers, and NGOs, such as the *Markaz li-huquq al-insan*³⁷, *al-Najda al-Ijtima'iyya*, *Beit Atfal al-sumud*, and *Caritas*. It is important to notice that other groups were also active and evident in al-Jalil even if they did not have offices of their own. These groups tended to be composed mostly of youngsters. They could be fairly independent, as in the case of one debka group and a musical band, or more linked to one or another association or *haraka* as in the case of another debka group, the boy scouts, and a soccer team. While the shops provided services for the community and economic sustenance for their owners, social work centers and other associations and NGOs had above all a social function. There came a certain status with being active in such organizations, as also with owning a pharmacy or a barbershop or an *argile* store. For example, barbershops and the *argile* shop were very important gathering places for the youth. Thus, owning such an establishment generally led to an accumulation of social capital, besides economic benefits.

Al-Jalil camp had a very defined and frequent set of public practices and discourses ranging from the simple day-to-day social interaction to a specific calendar of events. That is, a certain "*ritual tempo*"³⁸ socialized members of the community into a set of values, practices, and behaviors, helping demarcate the boundaries of the community *vis-à-vis* others, and organize history by providing frameworks for understanding and engaging the world. Al-Jalil's ritual context was marked by ubiquitous symbols of "Palestinianness," such as the Palestinian flag, images of the fighter and the martyr, the key, map of the political borders of historical Palestine before 1948, etc. While the Palestinian flag and map evoked the continuum of the nation in Palestine and in exile, the fighter, the martyr and the key evoked the process by which the community engaged in searching for the utopian union.³⁹ These symbols were generated inside the offices, public gathering places, social organizations, and creative minds of individuals, and then reproduced and dispersed throughout the community via group networks, and public performances—such as commemorations and celebrations (*ihftifalat*), rallies and

demonstrations (*masirat; muzaharat*), and strikes (*idrab*) – constitutive of the ritual tempo of the community.⁴⁰

Catastrophic events, such as those leading to *Yawm al-Nakba* (the Israeli Independence Day in the eyes of the Palestinians; the event that turned Palestinians them into refugees, and which Israelis celebrate as Independence Day), are unfortunately very frequent, each with the potential to become transformed into a memorial of struggle, just as every fallen Palestinian has the potential to become a national martyr. This potential is often achieved and these events become part of the Palestinian collective memory, giving meaning to their condition and operating as mnemonic devices to convey ideologies and assemble partisans. The 2008 Israeli invasion of Gaza has the potential to be a similar commemorative event. As in 1976, when Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon held demonstrations against the land expropriation in Galilee, in 2008 al-Jalil inhabitants mounted a big demonstration to support Gazans.

Also, in al-Jalil, religious celebrations such as *Eid Milad al-Naby* (The Prophet's Birthday) can take very similar shades to the political demonstrations. During my fieldwork, refugees celebrated the Prophet's day amidst religious, political, and nationalist themes. Flags flew over the camp as they did during demonstrations. Ululating women cheered up the crowd that was gathering in the main streets of the camp bearing slogans. "*La illahu Ila Allah*" (There is no God but God) was chanted while the participants walked around the main streets of the camp in circular fashion, just as they would do when circling the Kaaba (*tawaf*) during the Hajj or lesser pilgrimages to Mecca. I am certainly not suggesting that the center of the camp was venerated like the Kaaba; I am suggesting instead a ritual resemblance that was evocative of religious symbolism and empowering of local performances. In addition to these religious symbols, many of the refugees were carrying nationalist symbols such as Palestinian flags, key necklaces⁴¹, and posters with nationalist motifs, while many also voiced nationalist hymns and themes. Even political parties (not necessarily Islamist ones) were represented in such events. Some were involved in the event's promotion, as they would likely be with any camp celebration including marriages and funerals. That is to say, on the social level almost any occasion was good for remembering Palestine and the struggle, and for expressing claims for justice. The birth of the prophet was celebrated with the hope that God's justice would free al-Jalil inhabitants from their concrete prison in the camp, and set them free in an idealized Palestine. Many of the less optimistic

residents would say that whatever the enemy destroyed they would later rebuild.

Such celebrations were almost invariably bound to the interior of the camp, and the same held true in Shatila and other camps. This means that they happened inside a territory that they considered Palestinian and that was also recognized as such by the Lebanese living in the surrounding areas. I learned that whenever refugees held celebrations outside the camp, they had formal authorization from the surrounding power – this was the case at least in al-Jalil, around which the Lebanese authority was Hizballah. This suggests that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon tended to perceive their camps as a continuity of the Palestinian national space and a discontinuity of the local city, to the extent that the Lebanese accepted at least the Palestinians' limited autonomy.

Moreover, the space of the camps was far from being marked as Palestinian only during such rituals. One day after the celebrations of *Yawm al-Nakba* the social environment did not change much, as there were still posters, music, flags and other symbols everywhere. The same happened after every other ritual. There were always other celebrations, and the same topics were repeatedly expressed, discussed, reaffirmed and transformed. Al-Jalil residents were used to the repetitious symbolism not only from the collective rituals, but also from daily exposure to life in the camp. The local ritual tempo was a mnemonic clock constantly readjusting/readjusted by people's feelings, thoughts, aspirations, desires, and actions. Children went to school, a social work center, or other institutions where they drew pictures that very frequently featured Palestinian symbols. Birds, olive trees, rivers, the sun, and everything that represented happy settings were generally indexed by Palestinian flags, the key, the map, the Dome of the Rock, or another symbol of an idealized Palestinian past. The same symbols indexed the future and present, but generally conveying respectively dreams and despair. They did not draw or talk about these subjects only at school, but everywhere.

In fact, most people brought up topics and practices like those highlighted during calendric celebrations on a daily basis. Like bread eaten in various forms throughout the day, these topics were part of the quotidian, and their pervasiveness was hardly noticed. Like any other local actor's imaginaries, children's imaginaries were developed upon the social referents available to them in the local ritual tempo. While every individual organized this material in different ways, children generally had fewer chances to draw upon cultural material

from outside the camp. Aside from love stories, the most common stories told by children in al-Jalil were about Palestine, Israel, the occupation, and related themes. They dreamed of an idyllic Palestine, and their imaginaries also incorporated the reality of the occupation as a recurrent nightmare. Instead of TV or comic book heroes, the youth aspired to be like the *shuhada* (martyrs) displayed in posters throughout the camp or celebrated with parades in the streets inside its borders. Alternatively, they also aspired to be like *Handala* (a Palestinian comic book character) or political, social or religious leaders whose discourses of steadfastness they heard every day during lunch, religious sermons, when cutting their hair, in the grocery shops where they bought their candy, and virtually everywhere. Sometimes the heroes of these stories were their own parents, siblings or other close relatives, while the enemies were those whom they saw as responsible for their misery.

Overall, religion, politics or economics formed a basis for each of al-Jalil's social institutions and associations, but nationalist themes invariably tied them up. In other words, refugees were inscribing "Palestinianness" into all other matters—religious, ethnic, political, economic, or social—and not the opposite. This was so precisely because being Palestinian was the cause of their refugee condition, and a Palestinian nation that encompassed their places of origin and thus return was the only solution to this present conundrum.⁴² This powerfully reinforced the difference between the refugees and the Lebanese context, and concomitantly deepened the gap between the camp and the city.⁴³

THE CAMP IN THE CITY OR THE CAMP AS A CITY?

Beyond identity conceptions and the consequent territorialization of the space of the camp, there were, of course, practical processes that involved the camp and the city. These continuities were, in most Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, also political, ethnic, religious, and social, but especially economic. Their existence, however, did not seem to be enough to efface the experience of exceptionality of the refugees *vis-à-vis* the nation in which such camps were inscribed.

Besides al-Jalil and Shatila, there were ten other official Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Among these, the one that I could single out as perhaps the most "open" of them all by most social criteria was Dbaye. This was a Christian Palestinian refugee camp (today the last of its kind in the world), located in Christian dominated Mount Lebanon. Lebanese and even Palestinian common sense held

that the camp's total lack of militarization and Palestinian institutions, coupled with the dim and blurred expression of "Palestinianness," was a simple consequence of Dbaye's Christian character. That is, Christian Palestinians were simply not attached to "*al-qadiyya al-Filastiniyya*" (the Palestinian Cause) as were their Muslim counterparts, and this was mouthed in Lebanon both positively and negatively by whoever mentioned the camp.

My research, in part based on local oral historical accounts, showed a much more complex picture. Dbaye had been involved mainly in four large conflicts, mostly related to the Lebanese Civil War. The first was as early as in 1973. Then, in 1975/1976 after the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War, Dbaye was attacked in the same wave of violence that destroyed *Tall al-Za'atar* and *Karantina* Palestinian refugee camps. Furthermore, Dbaye residents claim that the 1982 Israeli invasion also affected their camp. Finally, in 1990, even after the Ta'if Agreement had brought an end to the civil war, Dbaye was again the stage to a conflict, this time between the Phalangist militia and the Lebanese Army led by Michel Aoun. Because of the location of the camp in Christian dominated Lebanese territory, the PLO could never defend Dbaye from hostile militias, and thus these Christian militias permanently occupied the camp. In the process, despite Palestinian resistance, not only were many of the refugees' houses taken, but also many refugees themselves were stripped of other belongings, killed, raped, or forced to fill sandbags used to demarcate the Green Line that separated East and West Beirut. The militia not only prohibited displays of "Palestinianness," but the Palestinians themselves would circumvent such displays in order to avoid conflict in an area where they did not have any means of defense. It is true that culturally and religiously many of Dbaye's residents already strongly identified with their Lebanese surroundings, but this seems to not have been enough to guarantee their acceptance by most locals. After a few generations, the young learned to avoid being associated with the Palestinians and their cause, and many of them, at the time of my fieldwork, did not know much about Palestine, the Palestinians, or even the Lebanese Civil War at all. More to the point, most of the time many preferred to identify themselves simply as Lebanese, despite the fact that only some of them held Lebanese citizenship. There was an important categorization at play that, if mostly not uttered, was always present and had a central role in the local dynamics: local camp dwellers and the surrounding Lebanese considered the camp inhabitants to be located anywhere in a continuum from Palestinianness to

Lebaneseness. The *muwatinin*, Palestinian refugees who held Lebanese citizenship, composed less than half of the camp and were what made possible transitions and nuances between one national belonging and the other.

The story behind the *muwatinin*'s Lebanese citizenship is complex and cannot be addressed in this article.⁴⁴ However, what is important to grasp from this story is that, at the time of my fieldwork, Dbaye residents in general were ironically indeed much more part of the local Lebanese surroundings (as a marginalized part of the whole) than they were symbolically contiguous to a Palestinian nation. Effacing the camp by means of assimilating it seems to have been the objective of a plan put into place especially in that camp by local Lebanese leaders. Furthermore, such assimilation was also an entailment of a social belonging process that was only possible due to the plasticity of the local Palestinian refugees and the local Lebanese population alike. This, in turn, could only happen precisely through a negotiation of identity that dislodged the national principle by means of seconding a religious (Christian) one. In other words, were it not for the widespread misconception that "The Palestinian Cause" was essentially religious (Islamic), local Christian Palestinians would never have been able to succeed into making it into a local truth in order to survive.

Dbaye is the only present exception to the rule of relative autonomy given to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, discussed earlier. Since it was located in Lebanese Christian territory, only minutes away from the shores of Jounieh, and since from the beginning it was under pressure from Lebanese Christian militias, Dbaye was never managed by the PLO or other Palestinian institutions. On the contrary, it was always under pressure to cease to exist as a refugee camp, and to assimilate to the Lebanese surroundings as a poor marginal neighborhood. The possibility of assimilation existed only insofar as its Palestinian refugees were all Christians.⁴⁵ In sum, Dbaye is an exceptional camp in the Lebanese context because it was the only space in which a regime of assimilation was put in practice, rather than a regime of complete segregation. This was by no means a "positive" development. It is better appreciated as another form of population control—or another technology of power, to use Liisa Malkki's concept.⁴⁶ This characterization is based on the effacement of the Palestinian character of the population through the maximization of the Christian component of its identity. One of the most important implications for the camp's space and its relation to the broader urban

space is that, in this way, it never enjoyed the relative autonomy given to other camps.

However, there is another detail in this story worth revealing: without UNRWA's backing, Dbaye could never have hoped to become closer to its surroundings and distant from a Palestinian imagined community. "The plan" existed only insofar as the camp could be transformed into a ghetto on purpose so that its surroundings could swallow it up. The local UNRWA office was usually closed and the management of the camp was in practice entrusted to the Lebanese chapter of Caritas (Migration Center). Despite old demands from some of the refugees, there were no Palestinian priests or Palestinians in official leadership positions in the camp. Furthermore, Dbaye was located on Lebanese church territory, and the church wanted the land back. UNRWA made no public efforts to maintain its hold on the camp, despite the fact that many of the 4,000 registered refugees – mainly the ones who did not have any citizenship (not even a Palestinian one, of course) – would find themselves in dire conditions and with no social support whatsoever in the event that the camp was indeed reclaimed. This did not seem to have sprung from any malevolent intention, as UNRWA's resources were dwindling, and in any case most Dbaye residents (particularly the youngest generation) wished to become Lebanese. Nevertheless, it is important to read these facts against the background of an institution that claims to be "apolitical," as if this could ever possibly exist in practice. Given the certain adversity faced by many, UNRWA clearly had to make a choice that conserved its precarious standing among the Lebanese. In the end, those Palestinians who did wish to be Lebanese and blend in would not be able to do so completely, and were often reminded that they were Palestinians and thus did not belong in Lebanon. After all, Dbaye's boundaries, until the last time I saw them in 2009, were still marked by the graffiti of Lebanese Christian political parties hostile to the Palestinians. This was a stout reminder that despite the absence of resistance and the blurred boundaries, some Lebanese did not want to forget that there were still Palestinians there. No matter how "adapted," Dbaye was still a foreign space, a refugee camp.

At the time of my fieldwork, it was virtually only through marriage that a Palestinian refugee could become Lebanese, in Dbaye or elsewhere. This was never a possibility for the man, given that in Lebanon citizenship was exclusively patrilineal, and many perceived this to be a political safety net, given the male-centric character of local politics. Yet, due to reasons only partially evoked in the previous

paragraphs, and that I will not be able to explore in full here, intermarriage was far more common in Dbaye than in the other eleven camps. The blurring of boundaries between the city and the camp occurred mostly through other process in the other camps. As I suggested in my earlier discussion of al-Jalil and Shatila, politics tended to adapt to local possibilities. Hence, in al-Jalil, there was strong support for Hizballah (and today even for the Syrian president Bashar al-Asad), while in Shatila it was far more difficult to see Hizballah paraphernalia within the camp, due especially to confrontations with the Shi'a. Accordingly, in Beddawi and Nahr al-Bared refugee camps in the Sunni north of Lebanon, it was far more common to find Palestinian support for leaders such as Saddam Hussein who, together with Saudi Arabia, frequently occupied a diametrically opposed political space to that of Hizballah, the Shi'a and Iran.

Religion was a principle that could bridge the distance between the city and the camp in yet another way. For instance, in 2007 a conflict pitted the Islamist group Fath al-Islam, which was firmly entrenched in Nahr al-Bared, against the Lebanese army. Although the group itself did not represent much of the local population, it did have the support of other local Lebanese Salafi movements, a situation similar to that in the Palestinian refugee camp of 'Ain al-Helwe on the outskirts of the mixed city of Sidon. These Salafi movements essentialized a Sunni Islam identity that left no space for national considerations. Thus, the extreme location of nationalism not only outside, but against the realm of religion – that which alienated most local Palestinian refugees to the Salafi cause – was precisely what brought Fath al-Islam close to the Lebanese. Whether Palestinian, Lebanese, or even Iraqi, Saudi, or Pakistani, nationality simply did not matter at all, or mattered only insofar as it was an impediment to the realization of a radical Sunni utopia – that of the return to the Caliphate. In other words, such groups were located in the camps as much as in the city and elsewhere, for they were by definition transnational or even anti-national. They could maintain a stronghold in the refugee camp for especially two reasons: first, they could take advantage of the difficulty authorities would have to root them out – as the Nahr al-Bared story proved, since the Lebanese army supposedly had to destroy the whole camp in order to uproot the Islamists. Second, a refugee camp could be an ideal place to find disenfranchised subjects ready to engage their cause. However, in this case, the last factor was fortunately not as strong as probably expected. Given the local attachment of the Palestinian refugees to their

national cause, many of Fath al-Islam's members were not Palestinians, as was the case with almost all of the group's leadership.

As much as religion, broader ideological attachments played a significant role in refugees' sense of social belonging. This was particularly so in the 1970s and 1980s, when pan-Arabist and pan-Syrianist movements exerted a strong influence in the camps. For instance, the Lebanese Nasserist Al-Murabitun militia maintained a strong alliance with the PLO during the Lebanese civil war, and the region around Shatila was one of its most important strongholds. In any case, religious, political, ethnic or other social approximations between the camp and the city tended to exist almost exclusively insofar as they were conceptualized from a Palestinian standpoint, and as moving in the same direction as "The Palestinian Cause." One exception to this general rule is the singular trajectory violently imposed on Dbaye, as presented earlier in this section. Here, one must only remember that for as long as Dbaye remains a camp, it is no exception to the rule. Again, this is precisely what explains the violence through which some Lebanese sought to efface it, in this case through a tentative marginal integration, just as much as it happened in other camps.

The one element that seemed to have some autonomy along the lines of this logic of belonging was economy. For instance, working for a proprietor did not necessarily entail loyalty, as the refugees were paid on a daily basis and did not have any contracts or guarantees. Similarly, services offered by the refugees did not bind them to their Lebanese (or Palestinian) clients in the same way that political, ideological, or religious belongings did. After all, one can sell a falafel or fix someone's car without compromising one's Palestinianness or moving beyond the practical and symbolic confines of the camp. Finally, as far as I know, there were no local guilds or unions open to the Palestinians, at least in the camps where I resided the longest (al-Jalil and Dbaye, with frequent trips especially to Shatila). In other words, economic factors did not seem to serve as much for the refugees' conceptions of themselves and that of territory, which by definition has a symbolic dimension.

On balance, can we define the camp mainly through its relation with the city, or even as a city in itself? As Julie Peteet has stated, while the result of "multiple contexts," themselves generating "ever mutating contexts in their local, regional, and global environments," a refugee camp is "produced by and productive of everyday social relations and practices." The diversity I portrayed so far among the different Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon reinforces Peteet's

claims. However, Peteet also offers another angle from which to gaze at the refugee camp. A unique aspect of its character is its production through “violent discursive and spatial practices” – not violence of any kind, however, but that which specifically accompanies “displacement and attempts at denationalization.”⁴⁷ Exceptionality is certainly experienced by other marginalized urban groups, such as for instance inhabitants of Brazilian “*favelas*” – or, as they call themselves, “communities,” American ghettos, or even the French *banlieues*. The main difference here is already implicit in the Brazilian group denomination: they perceive themselves as part of the nation. They feel excluded precisely because they feel that they should not be so. Their exceptionality relates to being a part of the whole that was left out, forgotten. Most Palestinians in Lebanon were yet something else: even in their fourth generation, they were officially not citizens, and a majority of the Lebanese did not consider them to be part of the local social fabric, as social policies and public opinion at the time clearly conveyed. They were tolerated aliens, foreigners, given the right to wait in Lebanon until they could go back to their own country. They were not simply at the lower echelons of society, as in the Brazilian case. They simply did not belong to the nation at all, and their camps were within the physical limits of, but not included in, the country.

Parallels with American ghettos and French *banlieues* could perhaps be much closer, given the local relation between these spaces and immigration to the USA and France – in the latter country, especially of Muslims and Arabs. The main difference, as I see it, is that most residents of ghettos and *banlieues* not only want to be part of the American and French nations, and are even welcomed by a portion of the nation itself, but also feel that they are indeed part of the nation, and rally around this notion. This is true only in the atypical case of Dbaye, an official camp that in many ways was bullied into not being a camp anymore. Even though the ghetto and the *banlieue* are partially foreign to the nation, for the most part they are inalienable to it; in fact, they are generally regarded as an ineluctable consequence of the city itself. By contrast, Shatila and Burj al-Barajne were almost never perceived solely as consequences of Beirut’s own urbanity, al-Jalil was certainly not perceived as an urban effect of Baalbek, while Dbaye was fated to disappear in order to become part of the nation. Instead, so long as they remained refugee camps, they were perceived as alien to the cities in which they were physically anchored. In addition, the relation between city and camp will continue to consist mostly on the unwanted extraneous influence of the latter on the former – even when

the flux of cheap labor, services and manufactured products from the camp is integral to the city and the country at large. As a result, the space of the refugee camp was generally perceived mainly as a continuity of the Palestinian nation and not of the Lebanese one as would be the case of favelas, ghettos and *banlieues*. Moreover, at least in the Palestinian case, I claim that this is the fulcrum from which to depart when discussing the nature of the refugee camp and its relation to the city.

In the case of Lebanon, the foreign essence of the camp was not just imposed by the host nation but also stressed by refugees who sought to turn stigmatization inside out. In other words, they strove to transmute the negative stigma tied to Palestinianness into positive meaning. This was one of the central local variations of what I will broadly call here “resistance,” that is, any force exercised against or in a different direction to hegemonic ones, in the overall system of forces thus constituted. There is more than one word for resistance in Arabic, some of which acquired meaning through the Palestinian usage referring to their exile. I have dealt with this topic elsewhere, and here what is important to grasp is mainly that resistance is one of the key elements setting the distance between the camp and the city.⁴⁸ Wherever it is strong, so the difference between the camp and the city tends to be stronger; wherever it is weak, so the distance between one and the other tends to be weaker. In Dbayeh, the distance between the camp and the city was not as strong as in other refugee camps in Lebanon. This was not because there never was resistance, but because the initial resistance – as weak as it could potentially have been – could not circumvent or adapt to the local political context as in many other camps in Lebanon, given the extreme local intolerance to Palestinianness. Thus, Dbayeh became a part of the city more than a citadel, in contrast to al-Jalil, ‘Ain al-Helwe, Rashidiye, Burj al-Barajne, or what once was Nahr al-Bared – though Shatila, too, was forced to succumb to the city more than once.

Economic circuits crisscrossed most Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, their surroundings in Lebanon (mostly via the informal sector), the Palestinian national continuum (via political membership as much as via project funding), and the humanitarian order of the world (through employment at UNRWA and social projects through NGOs). Such camps tended to be economically dependent spaces in relation to both the host and the original nation, and yet semi-autonomous in their politics and social organization. The relatively small al-Jalil, for instance, had a council represented by all the diverse

political leadership, which, for the most part, seemed to have been able to contain most strife to a safe level notwithstanding the rare outbreak of political violence. However, this was not the rule in all Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. In this sense, al-Jalil's economic dynamics resembled in part that of a small town that depends on its relation to a big center. There seemed, however, to have been in al-Jalil no single such center besides the humanitarian order present through UNRWA's institutions and international NGOs, despite the preponderance of Baalbek's informal sector. Bigger camps, such as Nahr al-Bared before it was razed to the ground, concentrated an immense industrial capacity and offered scores of human resources for local businesses around the camp—even though the Lebanese army checkpoint controlled the entrance to that camp (which was one of the reasons for the eruption of the conflict).

In the face of this reasoning, one must exercise caution before generalizing the relations of the camp to the urban space of the city, and take into consideration the plural profiles of refugee camps, even those situated in the same country, and whose inhabitants share common origins. Incidentally, this also begs for a refinement of Sari Hanafi's classification of the "open" Syrian Palestinian refugee camps in contrast to the "closed" Lebanese ones.⁴⁹ It is not only the case that different camps in the same host country can be more open or closed; the question becomes: how open in relation to what? Religion, politics, economics, ethnicity, culture, arts, population interaction, all these and other elements may vary from camp to camp in Lebanon. For example, while al-Jalil was closed in demographic terms, since there is virtually no Lebanese living inside the camp, unless she/he is related by marriage or bloodline to a Palestinian refugee, politically it tended to collaborate significantly with its surroundings—most of the refugees being supporters of Hizballah, which was certainly not the case in other refugee camps.

In contraposition, if one is compelled to use Hanafi's concepts, Dbaye could be considered open in all respects, but this openness was in part forced on it, rather than born of willing interaction, as many still think. Finally, Shatila could be considered open in demographic terms, but could never be considered to fit politically with its surroundings as al-Jalil could at least appear to be. In this way, Hanafi is perhaps the best example among the authors inspired by Agier, of one taking the argument of the camps as "spaces of exception" to its extremes. Accordingly, the more closed the refugee camps are, the more they constitute unruléd environments, dispossessed of social organization

and order, exceptional spaces, naked expressions of bare life. All camps in Lebanon are then lumped together in this classification, which together with Gaza receive the highest marks for closedness.

As opposed to this perspective, I understand that one can conceive of the camp as an urban space, but not because it is unavoidably part of the city, or because it is essentially like a city in itself. The essence of the camp lies elsewhere. Whether it be more or less part of the city (more or less open or closed, in Hanafi's terms, for instance), or more or less a city in itself, it is foreign, and therefore does not belong to the host nation no matter how much solidarity the host shows to its refugees and no matter how deep are the local economic veins.⁵⁰

One might contend that the modern era is defined by the creation of the nation-state model, and its tentative implementation throughout the globe,⁵¹ and that it is precisely the failure to implement this new order in every corner of the world that has created the refugees as we know them, and thus the humanitarian order as an ineluctable counterpart to the national one. As Liisa Malkki puts it, camps as "technologies of power" (Malkki, 1992, p.34) are envisioned to control a population that is not granted any other space in the national order of things (Malkki, 1992, 1995). Moreover, as Agier stated, Humanitarianism is the other hand of the same order that generated refugeeness.⁵²

JUST ANOTHER VICTIM?

Agamben's depiction of our modern political condition seems to be quite accurate. It is possible to understand his main argument as a demonstration of how the state of exception is a condition to the democratic modern state rather than just a manifestation of totalitarian tendencies which reached their apex in the middle of the twentieth century before fading from view. In that sense, the more recent War on Terror, the American government's stance on Guantanamo Bay detainees, the Patriot Act, and even hardline political stances on occasional NSA employees who dare to speak out⁵³—which many citizens see as breaches of law or even of the Constitution—were nothing more than expected. They were only a common realization of the potential latent in every modern nation-state. This potential exists insofar as the conditions of possibility of law itself are given by the state of exception. Law itself—not any particular law—can only come into being when it is not yet in place, and it entails the legitimation of a

sovereign. In other words, the state of exception is, according to Agamben, the very liminal space between the law and the absence of *nomos* (norm), in which we find the sovereign.⁵⁴ Thus, because the sovereign is located beyond the law, every citizen runs the risk of having his or her rights stripped. Thus, because of its inherent potential and frequent manifestations, the state of exception is not so much exceptional today as it is the norm.

If Agamben is indeed right on the modern state's normalization of the exception, as I think he is, then we must consider why it would be useful to understand the refugee camp as a space of exception. That is, if the state of exception is the norm, then the refugee camp is no more than an instance of the actualization of the sovereign's potential to act over all subjects in a given state (including, but not limited to, its citizens). The study of a camp according to such a perspective would not focus on its particularities *vis-à-vis* the local context, but rather on the political condition of the state as a whole. This seems to be what inspires Agier to apply Agamben's logic to understand the connections between the refugee camps and other marginalized urban spaces from French *banlieues* to American ghettos. Since Agier seems to prefer to deploy Agamben whenever it befits his points rather than to draw limitations to the philosopher's work in relation to his own, I understand the above to be one of the main limitations of what I will call the Agamben-Agier thesis; that is, its urban-centric perspective. It is important to stress that I do not consider this perspective to be without analytical purpose but only that it cannot be applied across the board, and in particular to draw out the distinctions of the camp against its national surroundings. Finally, it is also important to note that I deal here only with refugees, and not internally displaced people. This article does not seek to postulate a general theory of displacement, but only to provide some perspective on the Agamben-Agier thesis through a particular case study.

OBJECTS OF HUMANITARIANISM: LAWLESS AND BEYOND POLITICS?

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes:

The state of nature is, in truth, a state of exception, in which the city appears for an instant (which is at the same time a chronological interval and a nontemporal moment) *tanquam dissoluta* . . . Yet this life is not simply natural reproductive life, the *zoē* of the Greeks, nor *bios*, a qualified form of life. It is,

rather, the bare life of *homo sacer* and the *wargus*, a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture . . . the originary juridico-political relation is the ban . . . what the ban holds together is precisely bare life and sovereign power.⁵⁵

While I agree that Agamben's perspective allows us to see through the veil of the nation-state's principles, I do not think that this is the most suitable approach for an ethnographical work focused on a refugee camp. In other words, it is perfect as an institutional analysis of the principles and logic governing the modern nation-state, but not as a biopolitical tool to account for the interplay of such principles and the actual social processes associated with refugee camps. In particular, as remarked before, it does not suit the purposes of those who wish to draw out the exceptional nature of the refugee camp *vis-à-vis* the urban space.

Defining the treatment of refugees as bare life and the refugee camps as spaces of exception, and to some extent trying to do so in practice, is in part what humanitarianism and national states do. Nonetheless, as stated before, this ideology could never possibly become the sole reality of state policies and humanitarian action. This was the case, for instance, among the groups of Palestinian refugees I studied both in Lebanon and in Brazil, and for a very simple reason best put by Bruno Latour: despite all our efforts, we have never been modern.⁵⁶ In other words, as much as sovereigns might have tried to objectify refugees by means of treating them as *zoē*, in line with humanitarian prescriptions, refugees were always first and foremost a political problem, and thus one belonging to the arena of *bios*. For instance, in Lebanon, laws existed for foreigners made especially with the Palestinians in mind, and in Brazil, the decision to give citizenship to "resettled" Palestinians rested on a case-by-case scenario where the state representative decided personally on the matter.⁵⁷

Furthermore, one thing is to say that the law of the nation-state does not reach within the camps' perimeter, and consequently extend over the lives of refugees, but to stop there is to fail to consider the reality of other norms inside the camps. Thus, in my experience, refugee camps are far from "spaces of exception" in the terms of Agier or Agamben, for Palestinian refugee camps tend to be in practice bursting with culture, political life and – markedly – resistance. In fact, despite the considerable differences between various Palestinian

resistance movements, they all expend much effort upon managing narratives of victimhood and transforming them into narratives of righteousness and empowerment. The well-known occasional ritual burning of humanitarian aid in some of the camps in Lebanon stands as a powerful example of such efforts.⁵⁸

So, if indeed the Palestinian camps are generally bursting with political life, and if host states – despite the “modern” ideals of the national order of things and its extension, humanitarianism – tend in practice to treat refugees politically rather than just as mere humans, what is the point in defining the refugee camps as lawless, devoid of politics, deposits of bodies? As I have contended, Agamben’s arguments were not geared toward defining the camps themselves, but toward drawing attention to the conditions of the modern nation-state – an effort that, despite my reservations, I consider successful. It is to those employing such concepts and at the same time seeking to understand the refugee camps in their exceptionality that we must turn a critical eye.

CONCLUSION

As related as they might be, the city and the camp are not exactly conurban spaces *tout court*, and they cannot be so because the camp is essentially defined (by refugees or not) through its extraneity to the city. The camp is symbolically a foreign territory, although in practice much of its activities and mechanics intrinsically tie it to its surroundings. Despite the common ground it shares with neighboring areas, then, it is identified by discontinuity rather by continuity. The urbanity of the camp, it is clear, is secondary to its foreignness. Whether in Lebanon or Africa, camps evoke otherness and estrangement in the eye of the beholder. Thus, while refugee and urban studies can certainly benefit from cross-pollination, the “urban” (or rural) character of the camp must be discussed on a case-by-case basis. We must continue to define the camp as a camp, and not in relation to the city, otherwise we run the risk of losing from sight some of the most important social processes that characterize the camps. In such a scenario, urban studies would also be losing rich insights on the nature of the relations between the city and the camp. By the same token, we must also not treat the camp essentially as a city, for treating the camp only as a *momentum* of urbanity is to lose sight of some of the most significant ways in which it affects refugees and host societies alike.

Furthermore, it is in the refugees' utmost interest that we understand that the camps are indeed very much alive, their inhabitants resilient in their claims, and that for this very reason host sovereigns have dealt with them politically, rather than just as if they were bare life. As far as I understand, it was never in the agenda of Agamben or Agier to efface the reality of the camps and with it their political goals and demands. On the contrary, both authors seem to have chosen to develop their thoughts on the matter to call attention to the importance of social inequality and to change the lives of the dispossessed. However, while Agamben's arguments about the nature of the nation state resonate with my own, applying his concepts to any specific instance *vis-à-vis* others can be problematic. The refugee camp may still be usefully understood as an instance of a state/space of exception only in so far as these concepts point to its unique present condition, as opposed to an inherent potential to national state citizenship at large. In other words, to understand the refugee camp in depth, it is important to continue stressing its exceptionality, at least as much as traits it may share with any other national space.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this article was published exclusively in Bulgarian in *Critique and Humanism* (2013). The author would like to thank the editor of both *Critique and Humanism* and *Mashriq & Mahjar* for making the publication of this new and enhanced English version possible.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben. *State of Exception* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

³ More recently, Agier has been interested in Palestinian refugee camps. Nonetheless, the African camps seem to continue to determine his work, as I will present in what follows.

⁴ Michel Agier, "Between War and City towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps," *Ethnography*, 3, no. 3, (2002): 317-41; Michel Agier, "Les camps aujourd'hui, un présent qui n'en finit pas," in Thierry Paquot, *Habiter, le propre e l'humain La Découverte*. Armillaire (2007), 89-101; Michel Agier, "The Ghetto, the Hyperghetto and the Fragmentation of the World," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33, no. 3 (September 2009): 854-57; Michel Agier, "Politiques de l'exception - Réfugiés, sinistrés, sans-papiers," *Terra: Réseau scientifique de recherche et de publication*. Le sujet dans la cité / Actuels n°1 (Janvier 2012); Michel Agier, "campement urbain," *De(s)générations*, 16, rejets urbains (Juliet 2012): 27-34.

⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

⁶ Agamben, *State of Exception*.

⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, *Homo Sacer*, 66.

¹¹ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ Law (capitalized) here refers to the originary Law, as in the social contract theorists' thought on the "state of nature."

¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, 1962).

¹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; Agamben, *State of Exception*.

¹⁸ James D. Faubion, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Paul Rabinow, series editor, Vol. 3: Power (New York: The New Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2010).

²⁰ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 31.

²¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 81.

²² Michel Agier, "Between War and City towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps," 322.

²³ *Ibid.*, 320.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁷ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹ Sari Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps. Disciplinary Space and Territory of Exception," in *CARIM AS 2008/44* (Robert Shuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico de Fiesole (FI): European University Institute, 2008).

³² Diana Allan's *Refugees of the Revolution* (2014) expresses a potential shift away from viewing Palestinian refugees primarily as nationalists and political actors, to focus on human suffering, coping strategies, and bare life through what she calls "survival." Although brand new, the book has been widely acclaimed. Moreover, while it does not follow Agier's perspective per

se, it is in profound dialogue with Agamben and Agier's arguments. Like Agier, Allan's emphasis is on how the refugee camps are an intrinsic part of their contexts. However, Allan's portrayal of refugee life is far more detailed and nuanced than Agier's. Overall, her book shares many of Agamben-Agier's merits, and only a few of its shortcomings.

³³ My narrative is set in the past as I can only claim that my description is accurate for around the time of my fieldwork in the region, which was between 2006 and 2009. For the same reason, that is, the acknowledgment of the subjectivity of the ethnographical experience, I chose to use the first person instead of the more often used third person.

³⁴ Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

³⁵ According to local sources, about 70 percent of these refugees were actually living in northern Europe, especially in Denmark and Sweden. In turn, there were many other refugees who were not registered by UNRWA.

³⁶ Or *tanzimat* (organizations; singular, *tanzim*) as they were also called.

³⁷ This name is fictitious in order to protect the identities of my main interlocutors in the camp.

³⁸ Leonardo Schiocchet, "Between the Catastrophe and the Promised Return: Palestinian Refugee Trajectories and Conceptions of Time in Lebanon" (Vienna: Modernities Revisited, 2011).

³⁹ Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Ted Swedenburg, "The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 63, no. 1, (1990).

⁴⁰ Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies*; Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Leonardo Schiocchet, "Palestinian Sumud: Steadfastness, Ritual and Time among Palestinian Refugees," in *Palestinian Refugees: Different Generations, but One Identity* (Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies. Birzeit: Birzeit University, 2013). Sayigh mentions these events as composing the "*tempo of daily life*." Building on that, I explored this tempo as an arena for the ritualization of the quotidian (see Schiocchet, "Between the Catastrophe and the Promised Return: Palestinian Refugee Trajectories and Conceptions of Time in Lebanon," and Schiocchet, "Palestinian Sumud").

⁴¹ The key was one of the most important Palestinian nationalist symbols, as it represented the key to the refugees' former homes in Palestine (some of them being not mere representation but actually the real keys themselves). This, in turn, was a powerful symbol of the right of return and thus of the end of the refugee condition.

⁴² It is important to note here that another possible solution was to become Lebanese (or Danish, or Brazilian, or any other nationality for that matter,) and in fact many refugees who could conceive of the possibility sought after

this. In al-Jalil, this was less the case than among those disenfranchised refugees inhabiting the city space or other distinct settings in Lebanon and elsewhere (see for instance Schiocchet, 2013). Once more, this was the case as much because they felt compelled by the situation to think of no other scenario, as because of strong adherence to their justice plight. It is also important to note that living as a refugee in Denmark did not necessarily entail Danish citizenship and less so forfeiting a future Palestinian one.

⁴³ It is important to emphasize that the gap mentioned here refers to the symbolic relationship between the camp and its context rather than between Palestinians and Lebanese, since this pair of ideal typical oppositions (Lebanese vs. Palestinian / city vs. camp dwellers) not always overlapped. It remains very important to not essentialize Palestinian-Lebanese relations. To point to a powerful centripetal tendency toward differentiation does not mean that there were no other centrifugal tendencies contributing toward integration. However, while there were also well-integrated middle and upper class Palestinians and Lebanese living in the camps, both Palestinians and Lebanese – refugees or otherwise – largely conceived of these camps as Palestinian dominated spaces marginal to the city. In this point, my argument does not differ from those of Agamben and Agier.

⁴⁴ It is important to know, however, that in the 1950s, in line with the Maronite church's desire, the Lebanese president Camille Chamoun offered citizenship to all Christian Palestinians. The idea then was to tip the balance of power in favor of the Christians by increasing their numbers. Most, but not all, Palestinian Christians did indeed obtain Lebanese citizenship at that time, including many Dbaye refugees. However, most of those Christian Palestinians who did not obtain Lebanese citizenship then were from Dbaye. During my fieldwork, local residents offered me several reasons for this. The two most important ones were the following: first, many thought that by acquiring Lebanese citizenship they would lose the right to return to Palestine, and most thought that the war would soon be over and that their sojourn in Lebanon was only temporary. Second, some mentioned the bureaucratic process as a barrier to citizenship, stating that some refugees simply could not organize themselves to go through this process, which, according to them, also involved paying a fee that they could not afford. It should also be noted that many wealthy Muslim Palestinians, especially those who were already arriving in Lebanon in 1947, were also granted citizenship, while the majority of Muslim Palestinians were never offered such a possibility. In sum, while Christian Palestinians tended to take up Lebanese citizenship, Muslims did not. Moreover, while many wealthy Palestinians regardless of sect could afford the choice, poor Palestinians, seen as a burden, could not.

⁴⁵ Dbaye is the last remaining Christian Palestinian refugee camp in the world, hence an important component of its exceptionality. Furthermore, it is located in a Christian territory – a very touristic spot in Lebanon with a water park and the hotel "Royal," about fifty meters away – which has deep

consequences for the Lebanese state policies involving the camp and its surroundings.

⁴⁶ Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology*, 7 (1992): 24–44.

⁴⁷ Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*, 94.

⁴⁸ I use this term here emphasizing the refugee's point of view. Therefore, "original" here means "the country of origin."

⁴⁹ Hanafi's article was written before the Arab Spring, and thus before the events that took place in Syria departing from March 15, 2011. Therefore, Hanafi could not have foreseen the effects that the civil war had on the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria and in Lebanon due to the new refugee influx. My discussion here thus refers only to how such camps supposedly were before the war. Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps. Disciplinary Space and Territory of Exception"; Sari Hanafi, "Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23, no. 2 (May 2010): 134–59.

⁵⁰ Not much in the case of Lebanon.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Hobsbawm 2012.

⁵² Agier. "Between War and City towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps," 320.

⁵³ AlJazeera Network, "Ex-CIA worker exposed US spy programme," 10 June 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2013/06/2013692013638922.html>.

⁵⁴ Agamben's main influences here are the work of Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 2004, 2006) and Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1994, 2003).

⁵⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 65.

⁵⁶ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ The state representative in question was that of CONARE (*Comitê Nacional para os Refugiados*); or in English: National Committee for the Refugees

⁵⁸ Today, some Syrian refugees in Lebanon are also ritually burning Hizballah aid – a powerful device to reinforce political claims and to refuse the status of bare life (*The Daily Star*, 2013).