

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: Righting a Perpetual Wrong

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Finally, a parliamentary debate in Lebanon over the human rights of Palestinian refugees. What is unfortunate though, is that granting basic civil rights to over 400,000 Palestinians – 62 years after their expulsion from their historic homeland and the issuing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – has been a topic of ‘debate’ in the first place. Equally regrettable is the fact that various ‘Christian’ Lebanese political forces are fiercely opposing granting Palestinians their rights.

Most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are second and third generation refugees. Impoverished camps are the only homes they have ever known. In Palestine, their real home, their villages were destroyed, their fields were burnt down and their culture was eradicated. An ongoing attempt at erasing every aspect of the Palestinian Arab identity in today’s Israel continues unabated, strengthened by the rightwing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who is recognized in many political circles as ‘fascist’.

But what 62 years of dispossession, massacres and untold hardship failed to destroy – the memory and the belonging – will certainly not be eliminated now by some rightwing politicians and few parliamentary bills at the Israeli Knesset, including one that forbids Palestinians from commemorating their Nakba (Catastrophe of 1947-48).

The ongoing debate in the Lebanese parliament, however, is of a different nature. Lebanon is striving to settle many hanging political questions. Despite Israel’s devastating wars, a more confident Lebanese populace is emerging. This was largely empowered by the success of the Lebanese military resistance to Israel. A country of law and order is replacing that of chaos and turmoil, and a level of political independence is making some promising appearances after decades of total political dependency and proxy civil wars.

However, there are those who want Lebanon to remain a country divided on sectarian lines, a characteristic that defined Lebanese society for generations. Only such a division could guarantee their survival at the helm of dismal clan-based, sectarian hierarchy that has long degraded the image of the country, and allowed outsiders, notwithstanding Israel, to manipulate the fragile structure for their own benefit.

The denial of rights for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is an old subject that often resurfaces as a political ploy to serve immediate interests. This time, however, things seem to be different. Lebanon needs to move forward. Denying 400,000 people living a most wretched existence in scattered refugee camps, surrounding by mass graves, military checkpoints and no political horizon whatsoever is not conducive to the process of political

and social progress.

Of course, those who dread the possibility of a modern Lebanon unified by one common identity – one that is not held hostage to sectarian allegiances or tribal affiliations – want Palestinian refugees to remain perpetual victims. The good news is that the bill is supported by who are otherwise political rivals in Lebanese politics – Saad Hariri, the Lebanese prime minister of the Future Movement, and Hezbollah and Amal, among others.

The bill, introduced by the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) on June 15 “would cancel prohibitions on property ownership and social security benefits for Palestinians, and ease restrictions on their right to work,” according to Human Rights Watch. Nadim Houry, HRW director in Beirut, said, “Lebanon has marginalized Palestinian refugees for too long (and the) parliament should seize this opportunity to turn the page and end discrimination against Palestinians.”

Indeed, it is an opportunity. But MPs from the Free Patriotic Movement, Phalange and Lebanese Forces are strongly opposing the measure. Phalange official Sami Gemayel, for example, has tried to delay the measure, hoping perhaps to deflate the strong movement that no longer tolerates denying Palestinian refugees their basic rights. “A matter that has created a number of crises for more than 60 years could not be tackled within three days,” the Lebanese Daily Star quoted him as saying. Of course he could not help but infuse the same old tired mantra, stressing that “integrating the Palestinians in the Lebanese society would undermine their right of return and fulfill an Israeli demand.”

Not one Lebanese could possibly believe that a Phalange official – whose party worked with Israeli forces in the summer of 1982 to orchestrate and carry out the killing of thousands of defenseless Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps – could truly be concerned about the Palestinian sense of belonging, identity and right of return. It is obvious that the measure could embolden refugees into demanding full integration into Lebanese society, which would completely undermine the foundation of the sectarian society that the Phalange official stalwartly champions.

But why should Palestinian refugees be humiliated for no fault of their own? Why should they live under the choice that they either suffer under draconian measures or risk losing their right of return? It’s like repeatedly punishing the victim for ‘allowing’ his victimhood. The fact is, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, like Palestinian refugees elsewhere are utterly clear regarding their right of return and their adherence to that right. They need not to be fined or jailed for adding a bedroom to their ramshackle homes in the refugee camps. They need not be treated like tenth class citizens to be reminded of their love for Palestine, the names of their destroyed villages, and the memories of their ancestors.

It is ironic how Mr. Gemayel found it implausible to reach a solution regarding the acknowledgement of Palestinian refugees basic rights in three days, while it was astoundingly achievable to butcher thousands of innocent civilians by Phalange forces in 36-48 hours in Sabra and Shatilla on September 16, 1982.

The survivors of those camps, and the rest don’t wish to impede the ‘Christian’ parties’ bid for demographic and sectarian ‘balance’ in Lebanon. Their home is Palestine and they cannot wait to return. But, until that day arrives, there is no need to deny them the most basic of rights and infringe upon their very dignity. One can only hope that Lebanon’s new political development overpowers those who wish to keep the country fragmented, sectarian

and forever hostage to the ghosts of its colonial past.

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