

SPECIAL FOCUS

PLURALISM IN EMERGENC(I)ES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

“Safe but Frozen Camps”: Syrian and Palestinian Refugees around a Football Field in Beirut

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Abstract

Palestinian camps in Lebanon have turned once more into “transitional zones of emplacement” for thousands of people recently fleeing the Syrian conflict. In this context, the plural subjectivities emerging within the camps highlight a further connection between spatial marginalization and precarious legal statuses. My research hinges on the interconnectivities evolving around the Palestinian Bourj el Barajneh camp and Hezbollah-controlled Beirut southern suburbs moving from an ethnographic insight of the Palestinian football society. Inside the “Refugee Football Leagues,” Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese players find a space in leagues whose matches are mostly disputed within the numerous refugee camps scattered throughout the national territory. Moving from newcomers’ strategies for protection, the essay investigates how refugees living in camps experience different scales of mobility and develop a wide range of practices that extend beyond the camp’s boundaries, exploring how imperceptible and hyper-mobile tactics of existence re-elaborate Palestinian refugee camps into meaningful places of elusive contestation.

Keywords: Refugees, camps, Palestinian, Lebanon, space, football

Introduction

Since its establishment in May 2015, the “Generations of Return Football Field,” located in the heart of the Borj el Barajneh refugee camp, has rapidly become an attraction point for thousands in southern Beirut. Due to its openness and strategic location, the field has turned into a reference space for many residents of the camp as well as neighboring areas. As the only large covered open-air space available in a refugee camp

inhabited by some 45,000 people, the field has served as the grounds for national commemorations, wedding parties, and other events that regularly draw hundreds of attendees.

Compared to the dozens of cafés and kiosks scattered across the camps, the spatial extension of the football field, together with the popularity of the sport itself, has attracted greater numbers of people from a wider-ranging variety of economic, political, and social backgrounds. Inside the “Generations of Return Football Field,” people of different nationalities and temporalities of exile produce a daily microcosm that is a far cry from the mainstream images and narratives of refugee camps as a ghetto-like site of misery. Instead, they foster their own social connections under the informal landscape of football.

This aspect has been particularly evident since 2011, when Borj el-Barajneh, similar to other Palestinian camps in Lebanon, began admitting Syrian refugees. Unofficial estimates report that 20,000 Palestinians and a roughly equivalent number of Syrians (of which 3–4,000 are Palestinians from Syria) currently reside within the 0.2 square kilometers of the camp.¹

Throughout decades of exile, Palestinians have endured a progressive reconfiguration of spaces in the region in the aftermath of successive conflicts and displacements in and from numerous countries, such as Kuwait in 1991, Libya in 1996, and Iraq in 2003.² More recently, the Palestinian community of Syria has experienced mass displacement and paid a heavy toll in the loss of life and economic damages. More than half of the approximately 600,000 Palestinians living in Syria have been internally displaced due to the violence, and more than 100,000 have found refuge in one of Syria’s neighboring countries.³ Until May 2014, when arbitrary and cumulative restrictions⁴ on the entry of Palestinians

¹ Such estimates were confirmed by several organizations operating inside the camp. However, it is difficult to find reliable data on the number of inhabitants in each camp due to the lack of recent surveys. According to a report drafted in November 2017 by Basmeh & Zeitoneeh, a Syrian NGO operating inside the camp, Palestinian refugees from Syria and Syrian comprise 50 percent of the 40,000 camp residents. Full report available at: https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/bz_november_2017_barriers_to_education_for_female_and_male_syrian_youth_in_shatila_and_bourj_al_barajneh.pdf.

² Noura Erakat, “Palestinian Refugees and the Syrian Uprising: Filling the Protection Gap during Secondary Forced Displacement,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 26.4 (2014): 581–621.

³ According to the “Action Group for Palestinians in Syria” (AGPS), a monitoring group based in London working on different levels with regards to Palestinians of Syria, over 79,000 Palestinian Syrian refugees fled to Europe until mid 2016, <http://www.actionpal.org.uk/>.

⁴ See Amnesty International’s report: “Denied Refuge: Palestinians from Syria Seeking Safety in Lebanon” (2014), http://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/mde180022014en_1.pdf (no longer active).

from Syria were imposed and, simultaneously, tens of thousands left the region for Europe,⁵ Lebanon had provided sanctuary to at least half of these “double refugees.”⁶

In Lebanon, these newly displaced Palestinians from Syria inherited the “special” institutionalized policy implemented for the 300,000 Palestinian refugees already living in Lebanon, thus assuming the problematic relationship between the state and the Palestinian community.⁷ Grounded in many decades of violent confrontations between Palestinian factions and Lebanese state institutions, which peaked during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the refusal of the further settlement of refugees into Lebanon is widely endorsed by the country’s political class, which justifies this policy with the desire to limit the “risk” of settlement of unregistered Palestinians in Lebanon and to preserve their right of return.

Most of these “double refugees,” together with numerous Syrian nationals, settled in or around the twelve Palestinian camps established across the country in 1948. Subjected to a “regimen of socioeconomic strangulation and the denial of basic human rights,”⁸ the response from Lebanese officials is reflected in its counterinsurgency policies, which treat the Palestinians as “security” subjects and refugee camps as *juzzur amniyyat* (security islands).⁹ While labelled for decades as marginalized “spaces of exception,”¹⁰ recent literature has focused on investigating how Palestinians transcend the link between the host state and the homeland, extending to a plurality of spaces, with “home-camps” turning into spaces of belonging and longing even after refugees have relocated elsewhere.¹¹

With the arrival of newly displaced Syrians, the already overcrowded Palestinian camps in Lebanon have once more turned into new spaces of encampment.¹² In this context, the daily refugee-refugee relations

⁵ According to UNRWA, 31,500 Palestinians from Syria were recorded in Lebanon in 2016.

⁶ Albie Sachs, “Apartheid, Destabilization and Refugees,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2.4 (1989): 491–501.

⁷ Daniel Meier, “The Blind Spot: Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon,” in *In the Eye of the Hurricane: Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings*, eds. M. Wählisch and M. Felsch (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁸ Muhammad Ali Khalidi, and Diane Riskedahl, “The Lived Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon,” in *Manifestations of Identity. The Lived Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, ed. M. A. Khalidi (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies; Ifpo, 2010).

⁹ Sari Hanafi, “Governing the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon and Syria: the Cases of Nahr el-Bared and Yarmouk Camps,” in *Routledge Studies on the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, eds. Are John Knudsen and Sari Hanafi (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).

¹¹ Neil Gabiam and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Palestinians and the Arab Uprisings: political activism and narratives of home, homeland, and home-camp,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2016).

¹² Maja Janmyr and Are John Knudsen, “Introduction. Hybrid Spaces,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7.3 (2016): 391–95

between Palestinian and Syrian refugees inside Lebanon's refugee camps constitute new spaces of recognition in respect with the institutionalized paradigm of hospitality as univocally operated or mediated by the State institutions. Within the current landscape of "overlapping displacements,"¹³ the interactions between Palestinians and Syrians are spatially materialized through new geographies and mental configurations of the camps, where the mutual social relations are deeply related to peculiar "daily practices of mobility that implicate exteriority and co-presence."¹⁴

This article aims to analytically challenge the narrative about Palestinian camps in Lebanon through the subjective perspective of the people who live in them,¹⁵ showing how a more insightful approach toward certain humanitarian and nationalist accounts of the Palestinian experience in exile could generate a more nuanced understanding of refugees' everyday life.¹⁶ How are socio-spatial relations altered with new groups of people entering and settling in a particular geography such as a previously established refugee camp? My research depicts how the arrival of "newly displaced" people from Syria within the already overcrowded Palestinian camps challenges the definition of a refugee camp as an extraterritorial space of exception,¹⁷ circumscribing a zone of "bare life,"¹⁸ and sheds an alternative perspective on the morphology and socio-spatial dynamics of Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

Methodology and Fieldwork

As an outsider working on an ethnographic project inside such securitized spaces, my main challenges concerned accessibility and the feasibility of undertaking fieldwork on a daily basis.¹⁹ In contrast with most research

¹³ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Invisible Refugees and/or Overlapping Refugeedom? Protecting Sahrawis and Palestinians Displaced by the 2011 Libyan Uprising," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 24.2 (2012): 263–93.

¹⁴ Kamel Dorai and Nicolas Puig (eds.), *L'urbanité des marges. Migrants et réfugiés dans les villes du Proche-Orient* (Ifo – Téraèdre, 2012).

¹⁵ Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, "The Right to the Camp: Spatial Politics of Protracted Encampment in the West Bank," *Political Geography* 61 (2017): 160–69.

¹⁶ Luigi Achilli, *Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

¹⁷ Rami Siklawi, "The Dynamics of Palestinian Political Endurance in Lebanon", in *The Middle East Journal* (Vol. 64, n°4, Autumn 2010)

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ In some Palestinian camps in Lebanon such as Nahr el-Bared and Ein el-Hilweh, foreigners who are not employed in the humanitarian sector can enter the camp only with permission from the Lebanese authorities, which is rarely granted.

on Palestinian camps, my fieldwork was deliberately framed outside of the overwhelming presence of NGOs²⁰ and other networks that usually deal with foreign researchers. Far beyond the specificity of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, I was inspired by other research that has shown how refugee camps have been reshaped and influenced by humanitarian interventions, democracy-promotion programs, and developmental projects.²¹ Unsettled by the dominant influence of NGOs, solidarity networks, and UN Agencies on the popular understanding of refugee camps as unequivocal spaces of governmentality,²² I sought to frame the fieldwork outside of such intermediaries.

As a result, the informative and relational potential usually provided by established networks and NGOs had to be replaced through an alternative research methodology that implied the necessity of freely communicating without any kind of linguistic intermediaries. Benefiting from previous experiences inside the camps, an ability to speak the Lebanese dialect, and a long-term passion in football, in early 2016, I began spending time with several people gathering in the only football pitch inside Bourj el-Barajneh camp. After several months of preliminary work, I decided to focus my research in the camp, located in southern Beirut, since it combined relatively easy accessibility with a strategic and significant spatial dimension in terms of interconnectivities with the surrounding Shi'a dominated neighbourhoods known as al-Dahiya.

My research mainly concentrated on the northern and eastern parts of the camp, where it merges with the Shi'a suburbs of Haret Hreik. The post-Civil War period saw more construction and an increase in population and urbanization – trends which rapidly expanded during the reconstruction following Israel's destruction of many areas during the 2006 war.²³ These areas are unanimously recognized as Hezbollah's stronghold, where the Party acts as a para-state that organizes public spaces and controls movements through a hyper-visible multi-level presence. Around such a super-securitized area, refugees' socio-spatial

²⁰ Sari Hanafi S. and Linda Tabar, *The Emergence of a Palestinian Globalized Elite. Donors, International Organizations and Local NGOs* (Beirut: Palestinian Institute for Democracy Study-Muwatin and Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2006).

²¹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

²² Michael Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2007).

²³ Abir Saksouk-Sasso, "Making Spaces for Communal Sovereignty: The Story of Beirut's Dalieh," *Arab Studies Journal* 23.1 (2015): 296–319.

practices significantly contribute to reveal the socio-spatial articulations between the camp and its surroundings.

After playing football for several months with several young Palestinian and Syrian males informally and gathering at the pitch, I deepened my relationship with people in the camp by becoming part of Al-Aqsa Team, a football team that gathered four times per week and competed for the Football Refugees' League of Beirut.²⁴ In this context, my fieldwork benefited from the fact that most of my football team's trainings and matches were held in a separate football field located in the heart of Haret Hreik. The daily trips from the camp to the stadium in the company of my teammates were particularly relevant for investigating practices of mobility in the context of permanent strong securitization policies around al-Dahiya.

While much of the literature conceives of the Palestinian camps as spaces exclusively socially organized through familiar and political relations, my fieldwork has insisted on examining alternative dimensions such as local leisure activities situated in a spatial perspective. A football team is organized around live ritual events happening at a specific moment that generate intense moments of bodily co-presence around a specific place.²⁵ The football field where Al-Aqsa team usually trains inside Bourj el-Barajneh camp is regularly frequented by a number of Syrians and even Lebanese mainly from al-Dahiye who choose to play there due to the cheaper rent. Also, the open and jovial atmosphere of this sport pitch makes it an inviting meeting point for many residents of such an overcrowded camp.

Throughout my fieldwork, this football sphere was critical in facilitating my access to interlocutors while simultaneously overcoming relational, linguistic, and logistical obstacles.²⁶ While initially intended as mere moments of fun, my participation in the team trainings and matches quickly became crucial to my fieldwork: the leisure and play it afforded my teammates revealed wonderful and surprising information about the daily practices of spatial appropriation performed by Syria's refugees settled inside Bourj el-Barajneh camp. I investigated how the multi-dimensional

²⁴ Despite being established in 1981 by a committee composed of Palestinians born in Lebanon, Al-Aqsa football team is not organized on an exclusive national basis: Palestinians from Syria and Syrians (as well as an Italian) are officially members of the roster.

²⁵ John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 234.

²⁶ Joel Rookwood, "Learning, travelling, writing, communicating - a central quest in academia," in *The Sporting Image: What if?*, ed. Clive Palmer (Preston: UCLAN University Press, 2010).

networks developed inside a football team extend their potentialities beyond the boundaries between the camp and its neighboring areas.

The football fields around Beirut's southern suburbs turn into arenas where social space has the potential to be dynamically reinterpreted and to reconfigure the urban geographies far beyond simple leisure time. As such, football was not conceived as a "modern sport" tied to a system of global institutions, but rather as a daily "simple playing of games"²⁷ linked to the need for creative activity, the imaginary, and play according to the "right to the city."²⁸

While researching mobility practices in and around the camps, I needed to ensure my fieldwork was flexible enough to allow for observations of people's movements. According to this approach, "the ethnographer first participates in patterns of movement, and then interviews people, individually or in focus groups, as to how their diverse mobilities constitute their patterning of everyday life."²⁹ This article is thus mainly based on informal conversations that took place before and after football practices, in visits to my teammates' households, and during matches outside the camp.³⁰

Beyond numerous informal conversations with team managers and coaches, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with current teammates and former players. While the great majority of the interviewees are Palestinians from Syria and Syrians, my research sample also includes Palestinians from Lebanon, Lebanese, and finally a family of Palestinians who recently returned to Lebanon after living for thirty years in Libya. In order to reconstruct a broader picture out of the peculiarity of my fieldwork, I conducted numerous semi-structured interviews with members of the Camp Popular Committee, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and local associations.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," *Social Science Information* 17 (1978): 819–40.

²⁸ Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, eds. Eleonore Kofman, and Elizabeth Lebas (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

²⁹ Urry, *Mobilities*.

³⁰ All my teammates and a great majority of my interviewees are young men, as the camp's narrow streets during night-time are almost exclusively frequented by male residents, for a number of structural, social, and cultural reasons that go beyond the scope of my research. Nonetheless, moving from the football field, I conducted a few interviews with my teammates' family members – including women – when visiting private households. These informal conversations proved particularly significant throughout my life and fieldwork inside the camp: my feeling of "familiarity" inside their houses especially was decisive in the sharing of our respective past biographies, as well as the framing of the relationship outside the banality of a football field.

“Frozen Camps”: Between Walls and Checkpoints

While examining practices of mobility and intra-refugee recognition in and around the camps, the issue of legal status necessarily constitutes an entry point³¹ from which a complex social hierarchization develops according to the different temporalities and trajectories of exile. Since their arrival in the country, newly displaced people in Lebanon have to deal with institutionalized practices that increasingly render migrants “irregular” or “illegal,” making their access and permanence in the country insecure and, in turn, putting their mobility patterns at risk. Specifically, Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon have to deal with further obstacles with regard to their legal permanence in the country: at the end of 2016, more than 80 percent of the Palestinians from Syria³² and 78.7 percent of Syrians³³ were staying in Lebanon without a valid residency permit.

The legal status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has had important implications on the daily socio-spatial organization of the newcomers since the very first entries during Spring 2011. According to a nationwide survey about the perception of security among Syrian refugees and the Lebanese community, the great majority of the refugees reported that residency requirements impact their safety, and more than half said they do not feel comfortable moving around within Lebanese territory.³⁴ On multiple levels, including mobility, risk of assaults, checkpoints, and access to services, legal residency requirements shape refugees’ daily life in Lebanon. Benefiting from the porous and transnational connections between Syria and Lebanon³⁵ many Syrian refugees have found shelter within Lebanon’s Palestinian camps.

Thus, numerous Syrian families confirmed that, beyond the economic benefits of cheaper rents and living costs, they moved inside Palestinian

³¹ Diana Martin, “From Spaces of Exception to ‘Campscapes’: Palestinian Refugee Camps and Informal Settlements in Beirut,” *Political Geography* 44 (2015): 9–18.

³² Jad Chaaban, Nisreen Salti, Hala Ghattas, Alexandra Irani, Tala Ismail, Lara Batlouni, “Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon 2015” (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 2016).

³³ Carole Alsharabati, and Jihad Nammour, *Perception of Security among Refugees and Host Community* (Beirut: Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth, 2017).

³⁴ Published by the Institute Des Sciences Politiques, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth: “Perception of Security among Refugees and Host Community”. The report is available at: <https://www.usj.edu.lb/intranet/actu/pdf/5663.pdf>.

³⁵ See Estella Estella, “Syrians in Akkar: Refugees or Neighbours? Rethinking Hospitality towards Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Refugeehosts*, January 15, 2017, <https://refugeehosts.org/2017/01/15/rethinking-hospitality-towards-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon/>.

camps in order to avoid being subjugated to restrictive state measures.³⁶ In fact, the Lebanese military authorities do not usually exercise their coercive power inside the perimeter of the Palestinian camps.³⁷ With the recent influx of thousands of Syrians and Palestinians from Syria, the social effect of “freezing the camp” for people without legal documents additionally extends to thousands of newly displaced people. Checkpoints constitute a heavy physical and mental burden, especially with respect to people living in the camp who do not have valid legal documents.

Throughout my fieldwork I noticed how the local and national authorities have intensified restrictions on the right of freedom of movement for Palestinian and Syrian refugees moving outside Lebanon’s twelve camps, whose entry points play an important role in the reduction of Syrian refugees’ freedom of movement and perception of safety. The “historical” spatial relegation imposed on Palestinian camps by Lebanese authorities turns into tactics of survival in respect to the increasing securitization trajectories adopted to control the Palestinian camps. As “extraterritorial spaces” resulting from Lebanese legislation,³⁸ Palestinian camps have continued to perform their primary role as “spaces of refuge” for thousands of undocumented migrants. Following the influx of arrivals from Syria, the camps’ social function of providing shelter for undocumented aliens has extended to the bulk of Syrian refugees.

Khouloud, a Palestinian woman from Yarmouk who resides in Nahr el-Bared, describes how the uncertainty of her legal status has impinged on her freedom to move within Lebanon: “My visa is expired, and I do not know what to do. I have just come back from the General Security office. They told me: ‘Go home: it’s better for you’ and they gave me a 15-day permit. After that, I should return to Syria. But I will never do it. I will stay inside the camp in order to avoid any problem.”³⁹ Fatma, a young woman also from Yarmouk whom I met for the first time in 2014, reveals

³⁶ Starting in April 2015, both in the cases of “entry for work” and “entry not for work”, the applicant needed to provide a “pledge of responsibility” at the General Security Office and pay a fee of \$200 per person above 15 years old for a 6-month residency permit (Janymr, 2016). However, the difficulty in collecting the required documents, the cost of the sponsor, and the volatility of the whole sponsorship system, which is very much relegated to the informal level, created a challenging procedure that most Syrians were unable to follow.

³⁷ Internal security management is exercised by the Palestinian military forces linked to the PLO, that in some cases collaborate with the Lebanese Army patrols located on the outskirts of the camps in case of military joint operations.

³⁸ Rami Siklawi, “The Dynamics of Palestinian Political Endurance in Lebanon,” *The Middle East Journal* 64.4 (Autumn 2010).

³⁹ Khouloud (December 2014, 14). Personal interview, Nahr el-Bared camp.

how new “practices of transcending” the checkpoints at the entrance of the camp have emerged since summer 2016. “The Army has all our information and does not ask for documents: except for a few cases, they do not arrest people anymore.”⁴⁰

This informal and rather precarious arrangement between refugees and the authorities allowed many people to seek job opportunities outside the camp, where higher salaries compensate for the shortage of work opportunities inside the camps, the lack of social services, and funding cuts by charity associations and the UNRWA. Fatma’s youngest brother, Abed, has a job in one of the concrete factories located in a neighborhood adjacent to the camp. While feeling quite satisfied with his job, he constantly referred to the precariousness of his status:

I have just accidentally broken into two pieces my ID, and now I cannot get a new copy unless I return to Syria. As an alternative, I may also ask for a passport at the Syrian embassy in Beirut, but this process is too expensive and, moreover, I do not feel comfortable with that. So, after breaking my documents, I started restricting my movements, avoiding passing by Dar el Aamar checkpoint.⁴¹

With checkpoints materializing the geographical and psychological boundary between being inside a “safe place” and outside of it, newly displaced refugees find themselves forced to reshape their mobility patterns. Through a deeper analyses of Bourj el-Barajneh camp as an urban ethnographic case, I will depict how a refugee camp becomes both a place of segregation implemented by the political authorities, and a place socially constructed by the relationships and interactions between the refugees and other subjects.⁴²

Bourj el-Barajneh and Dahiye: Socio-Spatial Hierarchies in Motion

Following the initiative of a prominent Palestinian family, Bourj el-Barajneh camp was established in 1948 by the League of the Red Cross Societies to accommodate Palestinian refugees from five villages in the northern part

⁴⁰ Fatma (November 2016, 10). Personal interview, Nahr el-Bared camp.

⁴¹ Abed (November 2016, 10). Personal interview, Nahr el-Bared camp. Abed here refers to the Lebanese Army checkpoint located on the coastal road leading to Tripoli

⁴² Elena Fontanari, “Afterword: An Ethnographic Gaze on Power and Refugees,” *Ethnography and Qualitative Research* 1: 143–155.

of historical Palestine.⁴³ Intended to host a few hundred refugees on the land of a small village on the southern outskirts of Beirut, the camp underwent several transformations throughout the last few decades. After enjoying a relatively flourishing period during the days of the revolution (*ayyam al-thawra*) from 1969 and 1982, when it was under the control of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the camp was then severely damaged during the Lebanese civil war as it was considered as an important military base and training camp.⁴⁴

As a consequence of the Ta'if Agreement (1989) signed at the end of the Lebanese civil war, the further restrictions on the territorial expansion of the camp forced Palestinians to extend vertically in order to accommodate the dramatic increase of the population. Simultaneously, migration played a crucial role in the social evolution of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.⁴⁵ A number of poor Lebanese families and migrant workers – mainly Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, and Sudanese, as well as Egyptians and Syrians – settled in the camps for their cheap rents and accessibility to the main cities.⁴⁶ Similar to other Palestinian camps in Lebanon, since 2011 Borj al-Barajneh has also provided refuge to many Syrian refugees.

Bourj el-Barajneh's boundaries – with the exception of the southern area confining the poor Shi'a neighborhood of al-Raml – are clearly demarcated by a road system that separates it from the surrounding Shi'a-dominated neighborhoods known as al-Dahiya. All the main roads thus constitute a main access route to the city for the camp inhabitants: the urban margins, where refugees and migrants settle, are not disconnected from the urban dynamics of the surrounding cities. Although the main entrances are presided over by the Lebanese Army's barracks, controls over human mobility are less strict than in the cases of other camps like Ein el-Hilweh and Nahr el-Bared.

Strictly connected with the spatial organization of spaces imposed by authority, the different legal statuses of “historical” and “newly displaced” refugees have important implications on the socio-spatial organization of this community in Lebanon. Throughout my fieldwork, the dimension of

⁴³ Gorokhoff, P., “Création et évolution d'un camp palestinien de la ban- lieue sud de Beyrouth Bourj el-Barajneh”. *Politiques urbaines dans le Monde Arabe* (Lyon: Maison de l'Orientméditerranéen), 313–329.

⁴⁴ Sherifa Shafie, “Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Forced Migration*, 2007, retrieved from <http://www.forcedmigration.org/research-resources/expert-guides/palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon/fmo018.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Mohammed Kamel Dorai, M.K., “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon. Migration, Mobility and the Urbanization Process,” *Palestinian Refugees. Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, 67–80.

⁴⁶ Latif, N., “Space, Power and Identity in a Palestinian Refugee Camp,” *Asylon(s)* 5 (2008), retrieved from <http://www.reseau-terra.eu/article800.html>.

leisure and play became a useful occasion to examine practices of spatial appropriation and the (re)production of new daily sociocultural practices beyond the imposed margins of the camp. On these occasions, the days of Ashura – one of most important Shi‘a celebrations – traditionally constitute the epitome of the security measures around the area, with strict checkpoints monitored by Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army throughout the quarters. During one October day in 2016, I was moving from the camp to the training field in Haret Hreik with Abu Ahmad, a 31-year-old Palestinian from Syria who fled to Lebanon at the end of 2012. He stated:

In football as in all the other aspects of life, Palestinians in Syria were considered as locals and did not have any special preclusions. Here in Lebanon the system is completely different and we, considered as Palestinians and Syrians at the same time, are relegated out of the society. Most Palestinian-Syrians I know in the camp have left Lebanon during the last two years towards Europe. As for me, I decided to stay here and continue my career in Lebanon, but in football we as Palestinians from Syria are considered as foreigners and are restricted from access. Because of that, I have not been able to find a team since I came to Lebanon and I am currently working “bil-assuad” (informally) as a trainer in a football academy.⁴⁷

Right after crossing the footbridge over Al-Amliyah road just beyond the entrance to the camp, a Hezbollah guard stopped us, asking: “*Ento suriyeen aw falastiniyeen?*” (“Are you Syrians or Palestinians?”) Beyond the guard’s initial surprise once I showed my Italian passport, Ahmad declared himself to be Palestinian, and we were immediately released. Informal discussions following that episode were particularly relevant in shedding light on people’s daily hurdles in a context of what I conceptualize as “hierarchical spatialities” imposed by Hezbollah around the camp through practices of control and regulation that make de facto borders for disadvantaged populations.⁴⁸

In the peculiar situation of Lebanon’s Palestinian camps, refugees from Syria state how they are constantly forced to reshape their own mobility patterns according to any specific location they cross. The checkpoints

⁴⁷ Abu Ahmad (October 2016, 10). Personal interview, Borj el-Barajneh camp.

⁴⁸ Lundsryd Heide-Jørgensen, “A World of Checkpoints: Border Crossing Experiences of Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon” (Master’s Thesis, University of Lund, 2014).

around the camps represent a threshold to a “safe place” that risks being “frozen” from the outside by forces that treat these spaces as “islands of insecurity.”⁴⁹ In this regard, the control of the camp materialized by the physical presence of the army overlaps with Hezbollah’s militias in the area, conditioning refugees’ life far beyond their ordinary activities.

Numerous interviewees confirmed that the ongoing Syrian war constitutes a turning point in the relational landscape around al-Dahiye. Souheil El-Natour, a Palestinian lawyer and researcher, explained:

Before 2011, Dahiye was perceived as a “friendly space” for Syrians moving around that space; Syrian citizens at Hezbollah checkpoints were privileged above Palestinians because [they were] considered “natural political allies.” After the flow of about one million of mainly Sunni refugees, Syrians somehow turned from allies to potential enemies, especially in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks striking al-Dahiya. In order to regain a favorable equilibrium and minimize the dangers, Hezbollah is currently investing in its relationship with Palestinians living in the camp to prevent them from affiliating with Sunni extremist movements. Among the measures adopted, Palestinians are barely stopped at the checkpoint since Hezbollah does not want to have any problems with the Palestinians as happened a few years ago.⁵⁰

Souheil was referring to an armed clash that took place near the refugee camp in 2013 between members of Hezbollah and Palestinian young men after a wedding convoy refused to allow their cars to be searched at a Hezbollah checkpoint. After one Palestinian man was shot dead by another young Hezbollah guard, the situation was pacified when local leaders apologized to the victim’s family and paid an indemnity.⁵¹ Therefore, while allegiances and affiliations among regional actors are reshaped by the events of the Syrian war, daily mobility has been hierarchically reframed according to the national and, at times, sectarian membership of the individuals involved.

As mentioned before, Abou Ahmad’s personal biography underlies the gap between institutional categorizations and the daily practices on the ground:

⁴⁹ Rosemary Sayigh, “Greater Insecurity for Refugees in Lebanon,” *Middle East Research Information Project*, March 1, 2000. <https://www.merip.org/mero/mero030100>.

⁵⁰ Souheil El-Natour (October 2016, 26). Personal interview, Mar Elias camp.

⁵¹ Rowell, A., “Hezbollah Shooting Stokes Palestine Ire”, *Now News*, September 12, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/hezbollah-shooting-stokes-palestinian-ire> (no longer active).

After being stuck for two years in an unfavorable condition preventing me from working with football and creating problems for me at the checkpoint, a teammate informed me about the possibility of buying a new identity card from a Palestinian from Lebanon who left for Europe a few months before. Just through sticking my picture instead of the original one, with my documents I can now move more easily than before. Moreover, according to these new documents I am 25 years old, and being younger also means that I get more chances to be employed by Lebanese teams. A few weeks ago, I signed a contract with a team playing in the fourth division: a thousand dollars every three months. It is not that much but, together with my job as a trainer, I can maintain myself just through football.⁵²

In this account, Ahmad's socio-spatial trajectory informed practices and narratives of transcending the spatial marginalization imposed by both state and non-state actors. Within this process, the reformulation of his own legal position within the socio-spatial landscape does not depend on individual solutions, as most of the decisive contacts for the new documents inexorably passed through his teammates. Ahmad's narrative thus suggests how, in struggling with such a multi-levelled hostile context, refugees manage to mobilize resources along a spectrum of networks. In this way, I was able to trace a mushrooming network of translocal and cross-generational connections between "historical" and "newly" displaced people. Activities performed during leisure time often overlap with the other dimensions of daily life, providing contacts and resources going far beyond mere leisure-based spatio-temporalities.

"I feel safe here": Extending the Virtual Space of the Camp

The dynamics evolving around Al-Aqsa football team have exemplified the functionalities of such networks. For instance, about half of the team's players work together in a factory managed by Rami, the current Al-Aqsa coach. While four members of the team had already been working in his factory for a long time, another four found employment right after meeting the owner on the training field. Khaled, a young Syrian man living in the camp and playing for Al-Aqsa, explained:

Once I arrived from Damascus in 2013, I knew just a few Syrians living in the camp. After I moved to an apartment close to the football field,

⁵² Abu Ahmad (October 2016, 10). Personal interview, Bourj el-Barajneh camp.

this has become my second home. I started playing with the Nash'iin (Youth Club) while my father was appointed as Vice Coach of Al-Aqsa. I found a job in Rami's factory around al-Dahiya: he picks me up at 7:30 in the morning and I return to the camp in the afternoon. Even if we have never renewed our papers, once I started working with Rami, I have had no any problems while moving outside the camp.⁵³

While Palestinians from Lebanon have historically developed diverse social relationships inside Dahiye, newly displaced refugees from Syria barely move around the southern suburbs due to their precarious legal status. The newcomers switch strategies between soliciting protection⁵⁴ and transcending the nexus between legal vulnerability and mobility practices through a wide spectrum of communal practices of "taking the space," grounded in translocal informal networks.

As stated by Khaled, several in-between localities become reconnected to other urban spaces, which refugees move around beyond mere work time. For instance, numerous camp dwellers refer to al-Dahiya as the privileged area for their socio-economic activities: "I buy just a few things in the small shops of the camp while purchasing most of the items outside: food in Dahiye is so much tastier and healthier than here."⁵⁵ Hussein's accounts configure a polycentric conceptualization of the city, where neighboring areas are materially and mentally connected with the social life of the camp. In this realm, as these practices of spatial re-bordering contribute to reshaping "intimacy" with different places, newly arrived refugees from Syria are able to reinterpret the category of "familiar and unfamiliar spaces."⁵⁶

While I investigated feelings of belonging through the margins of the camp, my participation in the football teams revealed the extent to which people perform mobility and reshape commitments within a plurality of spaces. Through this lens, outdoor-play practices must be seen as forms of spatial appropriation and reproduction⁵⁷ moving from marginalized and securitized spaces. Here, beyond transcending forms of spatial marginalization, these

⁵³ Khaled (March 2017, 21). Personal interview. Bourj el-Barajneh camp.

⁵⁴ Nadya Hajj, *Protection and Chaos: The Creation of Property Rights in Palestinian Refugee Camps* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁵⁵ Hussein (October 2016, 20). Personal interview. Bourj el-Barajneh camp.

⁵⁶ Joel S. Migdal, *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ Joelle Hatem ed., *Planning the City through Play: Youth Efforts in Making Communal Football Fields in Beirut* (Beirut: Project by Public Works Studio, 2016).

practices contribute to a reconsideration of how places outside the camp interconnect with other forms of home-spaces.⁵⁸

While assisting a match from the bench, Khalil, a Palestinian from Aleppo in his thirties, explained: “Despite the five-minute driving distances from my house, this field to me is like part of the camp. I work in a factory around Sabra – very close to here – and that place to me is like a camp because I feel safe here.”⁵⁹ By recreating a feeling of translocal familiar belonging, even outdoor activities introduce unpredictability and consequently new possibilities of reshaping the map of the city. Indeed, through a redefinition of spaces according to their own perceptions and daily mobility patterns, refugees from Syria recreate a whole translocal area that blurs physical boundaries while moving away from the pervading and ontological “ethos of insecurity.”⁶⁰ By emphasizing an effective feeling of refuge, Khalil reshapes the map of Beirut according to familiar and unfamiliar places, extending the mental space of the camp and going above the spatial marginalization intrinsic to his legal status in the country.

Concluding Remarks

Most of the actors involved in migration issues tend to conceptualize a clear spatial distinction between so-called national spaces and refugee camps, with the latter effectively labelled as “spaces of the displaced.” The production of locality in these urban formations thus faces the related problems of displaced and deterritorialized populations, of state policies that restrict neighborhoods as context producers, and of local subjects who cannot be anything other than national citizens.⁶¹ However, while most Palestinian refugee camps and their neighboring areas have moved spatially closer due to synchronic urbanization processes, Palestinian camps have typically been analyzed as physically and psychologically besieged areas.

In this article, I expound on how the arrival of “newly displaced” people from Syria within the already overcrowded Palestinian camps highlights further national hierarchizations in the link between spatial marginalization and precarious legal statuses. In this realm, the community of Palestinians

⁵⁸ Gabiam N. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh E., “Palestinians and the Arab Uprisings: political activism and narratives of home, homeland, and home-camp,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2016).

⁵⁹ Khalil (October 2016, 23). Personal interview, Beirut.

⁶⁰ John Gulick, “The Ethos of Insecurity in Middle Eastern Culture,” in *Responses to Change: Society, Culture, and Personality*, ed. DeVos G. A. (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1976).

⁶¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

from Syria currently settled in Lebanon further complicates the picture and highlights new patterns related to the link between mobility and territoriality. Specifically, besides their peculiar historical connotations and current contingencies, the interconnectivities between camps and other forms of camp-spaces reveal dynamics that may be traced to the many poor suburbs that have recently sprung up around cities in the region and beyond.

Moreover, as this article attests, this particular refugee camp has materialized into a space for play and leisure time even for non-camp dwellers who expressly commute to Bourj el-Barajneh camp for playing football. Through ludic activities such as football, “new” and “old” refugees experiment with peculiar feelings of familiarity and belonging with respect to the “magnetic and repellent space”⁶² of a refugee camp. As observed in a football pitch, Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese players and supporters renegotiate presence, space, and timing. In the larger Bourj el-Barajneh camp itself, Syrians and Palestinians from Syria confront and transcend spatial marginalization, renovating commitments to a plurality of local home-spaces. When surveying how refugees organize diverse places around the camp as a whole territory, it becomes clear how translocal networks contribute to reshaping daily practices and blurring boundaries between the camp and its margins. While camps turn into what I conceptualize as “meaningful places of elusive contestation” in light of international gaps in protection, national securitization policies, and arbitrary measures by local non-state actors, refugees invisibly “appropriate” access to diverse locations that have been reshaped in the same manner as familiar spaces.

In such a politicized and securitized context, mobility is not explicitly claimed as a political common right; rather, it is daily conquered by the performance of simple everyday activities. More specifically, the dimension of leisure and play constitutes an alternative perspective to examine practices of spatial appropriation and the (re)production of new meanings starting from the margins. As Palestinian refugee camps go through a period of radical transformation in the arrival and resettlement of refugees from Syria, this work invites additional exploration into the multiplicity of refugee-refugee relations from a longer temporal perspective. How will the protracted co-existence of Palestinian and Syrian refugees inside restricting spaces impact their mutual perceptions and

⁶² Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Youssef Qasmiyeh, “Refugee Camps and Cities in Conversation” in *Rescripting Religion in the City: Migration and Religious Identity in the Modern Metropolis*, eds. J. Garnett and A. Harris. Burlington (UK: Ashgate, 2013).

how it will condition the social tensions inside a refugee camp? While lying beyond the scope of this research, the analysis of the transnational social connections emerging between camp dwellers and the numerous Palestinian and Syrian diaspora communities “originally” moved from such camps may enrich our understanding of the transformations of spaces and roles emerging in such a local albeit multi-connected landscape.