



A Refugee Landscape: Writing Palestinian Nationalisms in Lebanon

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Abstract

The symbolic landscape of Rashidieh camp, Lebanon, plays an important role in the Palestinian refugee cultural and political system there. Palestinian political factions produce and display wall paintings, posters and graffiti, which promote Palestinian nationalism by prompting people to recall popular discourses of their homeland. A close reading of this landscape reveals the political divisions between different factions, which share a commitment to Palestinian nationalism but diverge in their articulation of that nationalism and how to achieve the liberation of the homeland. The landscape is both an arena through which Palestinian factions attempt to communicate with people and produce and reproduce a sense of Palestinian identity and solidarity with the Palestinian nationalist movement, and an arena through which Palestinian factions compete with each other for support from the Palestinian populace. These efforts function as one of a range of power practices performed by the dominant political factions in the camp, but ordinary people's divergent and critical readings of the landscape's messages can shed light on the workings and failures of these processes.

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Introduction



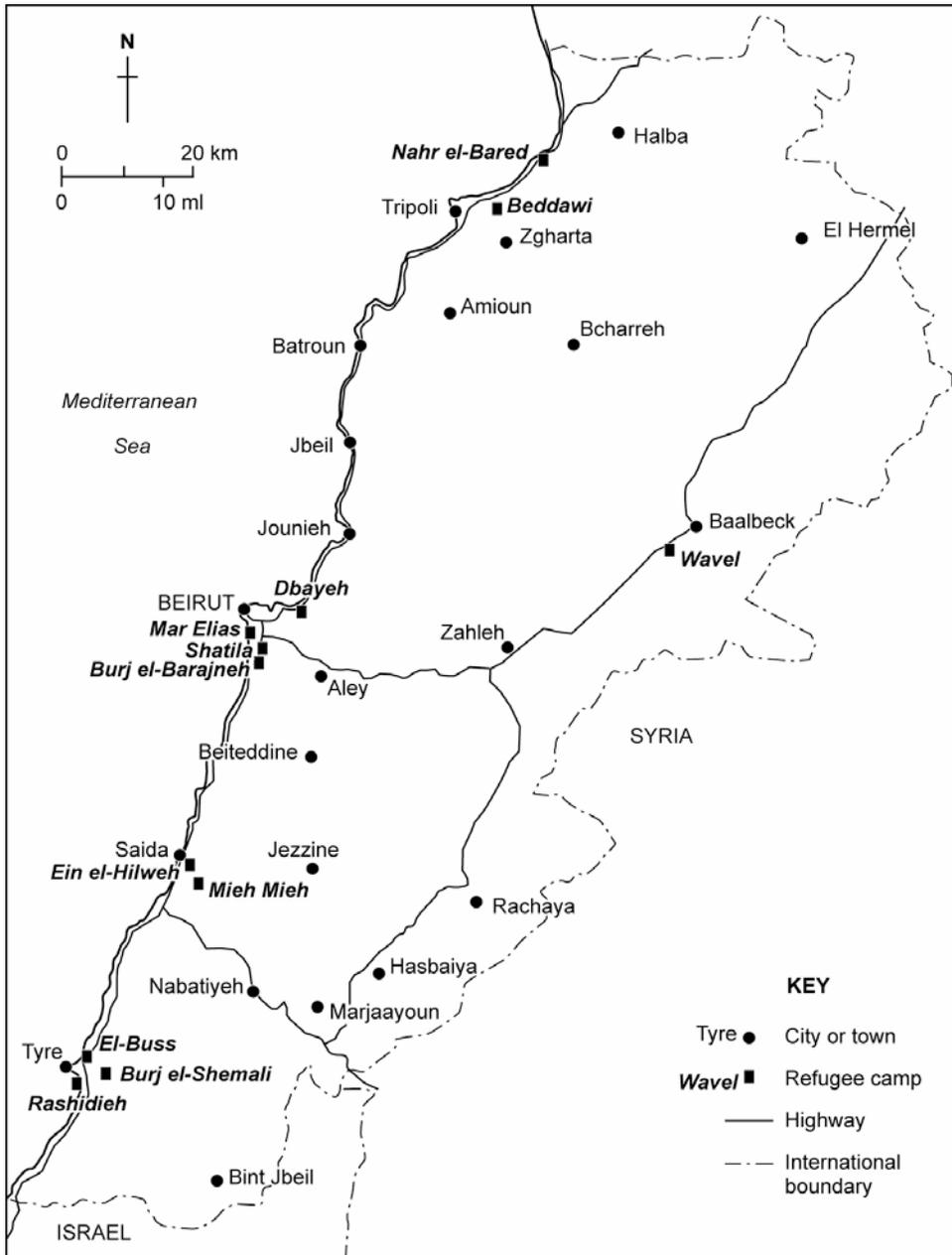
Image 1: No homeland for the Palestinian people except Palestine

On the outer wall of an office belonging to the Palestinian political group Fateh, on one of the main roads into the upper part of Rashidieh ‘old camp’ in southern Lebanon, on 11th June 2005, this image stood out. It is a combination of words and images, with the slogan ‘no homeland for the Palestinian people except Palestine’ above the logo of Fateh, and within the borders of a Palestinian flag, Yasser Arafat gazes at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, while the sun shines brightly.

This image prompts a series of questions. What messages are contained within the mural, and what is the intention of those who wish to display this message? Who commissioned this mural in a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon, who designed it and who painted it? How is the mural read, and what effects does it have? And how does this one image fit into a wider geography of display that marks walls as Palestinian walls, concrete as Palestinian concrete, a slum in South Lebanon as a Palestinian refugee camp, human beings as Palestinian refugees, the newborn as displaced, home as elsewhere, now as transient, then as Eden, tomorrow as return?

This paper explores how Palestinian political factions use the built landscape of a refugee camp. Through the display of posters, murals and flags,

Palestinian groups attempt to produce and reproduce a Palestinian national identity among those living in the camp, and direct that identity towards the ideas and ideologies they espouse. The landscape is a space of communication, competition and contestation, a medium through which Palestinian factions attempt to articulate and reproduce their power and influence, and one open to disparate readings and interventions by oppositional groups and ordinary people.



Map 1. Locations of Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon.

This paper presents largely my own reading of the landscape of the refugee camp, as a non-Palestinian elite outsider familiar with the situation of Palestinian refugees, as well as academic literatures on reading landscapes in Northern Ireland (there is a wide literature on Northern Ireland's murals; see, for example, Rolston 1991 and 1992, Jarman 1998) and elsewhere (e.g. Duncan, 1990). It follows work over five years in Rashidieh, El-Buss, Burj al-Shemali and Nahr el-Bared refugee camps in Lebanon, and draws on more than 100 semi-structured interviews and group discussions conducted in 2003, 2005 and 2007, and more than 500 photographs taken mainly in 2003 and 2005. This paper is about Rashidieh camp, and while we might read similar messages and contestations in the landscapes of other Palestinian camps, their different political configurations and particular histories would mean telling a slightly different story from the one told here. Rashidieh is a camp with 29,361 registered refugees (UNRWA, 31 December 2006) on the coast a few kilometres south of Tyre/Sur (see Map 1), and close enough to see the border with Israel (or Palestine, depending on your viewpoint).

Palestinians in camps

The creation of Israel in 1948 caused the dispossession of the Palestinian people, and created almost 750,000 Palestinian refugees, who fled or were expelled from their homes and villages into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The events of 1948 are referred to in Palestinian discourse as the 'Nakba', or the 'catastrophe'. 104,000 Palestinian refugees crossed into Lebanon in 1947-9 (Sayigh, 2007: 100). The descendents of these original migrants have inherited their refugee status, so that today there are 413,962 Palestinian refugees registered in Lebanon, of whom 219,201 remain in 12 refugee camps (UNRWA, 31 December 2007).

The United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 194 in December 1948, calling for all Palestinian refugees to be allowed to return to their homes in what was now Israel, and this resolution remains the foundation of Palestinian refugee claims to a 'right of return'. This right is rejected by Israel, for whom the return of Palestinian refugees is incompatible with maintaining a Jewish majority nation-state. Meanwhile, the rejection of *tawteen*, the permanent resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, is one of the few issues that unite all elements of Lebanese society (Sayigh 1995:27). For Palestinians it would amount to abandoning the 'right of return', while naturalising perhaps 400,000 mostly Sunni Muslim Palestinians would prove a heavy assault on Lebanon's fragile sectarian balance between Shi'a, Christians, Sunni, and Druze, an issue so sensitive that no census has been carried out there since 1932. To maintain their transient status, the Lebanese state has granted as few rights as possible to its Palestinian refugees, seeing the granting of rights as the first step towards permanent resettlement.

In consequence, Palestinian refugees have remained the most marginal group in Lebanese society, consistently denied rights, including citizenship, civil

and voting rights, even though the vast majority today were born there. Education and healthcare services are provided in the refugee camps by a United Nations agency called UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). Palestinians face intense work restrictions, banned from all public sector jobs and most private professions. There are further restrictions on building in the 12 official refugee camps, and on buying property outside the camps.

The refugee camp is an exceptional space,² within and through which Palestinian subjects are produced (see Hyndman, 2000, on how refugee camps produce refugee subjects), a manifestation of Palestinian refugees' geopolitical situation, exiled, refused return, and refused (and rejecting) integration in situ. Inside, Palestinians receive services from UNRWA, they can work, buy and sell property, and Palestinian factions effectively (though not sovereignly) govern. Lebanese army checkpoints monitor all that goes in and out, but they very rarely penetrate the borders of the camps; since 1969, Lebanon has not governed the camps. Although in Lebanon, Lebanese sovereignty (if one can speak confidently of such a thing in any circumstance) does not extend in a conventional way to the spaces of the camps. It was in the camps of first Jordan then Lebanon that a revolutionary nationalist movement grew up, centred around the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), a confederation of Palestinian factions waging armed struggle to 'liberate' the homeland. These years of the 'Revolution', when the PLO became so powerful in Lebanon as to constitute a 'state within a state', ended when the PLO leadership was expelled from Lebanon during the Israeli invasion of 1982.

These years of the Palestinian Revolution were important for consolidating a sense of being Palestinian, and helped focus feelings of loss and placelessness into a determination to regain what was lost. What it meant to be Palestinian shifted from a positionality of passive victim (those who were expelled by the creation of Israel) to one of an active liberation fighter (see Sayigh, R. 2007), and "[t]he heroic imagery and language of armed struggle gave new substance to the imagined community of the Palestinians" (Sayigh, Y. 1997: 20). In both cases, identity formation is a relational process, formed in relation to an adversarial 'other', Israel, which first attacked Palestinians, then is there to be attacked and defeated by Palestinians. As Rashid Khalidi has convincingly shown, the core elements of modern Palestinian national identity were in place well before 1948 (1996: 204-5, 1998), but there is no doubt that the 'Nakba' of 1948 is the single

² I do not want to go into a lengthy discussion here of Giorgio Agamben's theories on the state of exception (Agamben, 2005). Briefly, the camps do function as spaces in which the rule of law (or its enforcement) is suspended in important ways. This is an argument I elaborate in a forthcoming paper.

most important event around which Palestinian identity was subsequently constructed (see Sa'adi and Abu Lughod, 2007). The founding myths of modern Palestinian national identity that I will discuss here, the signs and symbols written on walls, are focused on, orientated around and emerge from these events.

To be a Palestinian refugee is also to be marginalised in Lebanon, and the camps are both an articulation of Palestinian refugees' geopolitical situation and organising centres where this situation can be rejected and resisted. The refugee camps are populated by Palestinians, culturally and politically Palestinian, within Lebanon but not a part of it, of Palestine but not in Palestine. Today, cut off from the main Palestinian political apparatus of the Palestine National Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, and excluded from formal political participation in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees nevertheless remain politically active and engaged. This can be seen in the fabric of the refugee camps, in the writing on the walls.

A walking tour of Rashidieh camp

Taking a walk around Rashidieh camp, we find words and images painted and pasted on walls, and hanging down from archways across streets. These slogans and icons attempt to nationalise the space, turning concrete into Palestinian concrete, a slum in southern Lebanon into a Palestinian refugee camp. The slogans recall and refer to wider discourses, while the images function as signs, signifiers emptied of their original meanings and linked to new signifieds defined by the context of Palestinian people in a refugee camp. Because of this symbolism, the landscape is a text that can be read by those familiar with the discourses and narratives to which it refers (see Duncan, 1990, Barnes and Duncan, 1992). This symbolism is a crucial component of what distinguishes the camp from the rest of Lebanon. In the camp, distinctively Palestinian space is constructed, attempting to make a mini-homeland in which Palestinian society can be renewed until its return to Palestine.

Studies of the symbolic content of landscape, that treat landscape as a text, have been criticised for being depoliticised and failing to recognise the materiality of landscape. But this landscape is highly politicised, produced by political actors for political reasons, and performing political work in the refugee camp. And any dichotomy between discursive and material landscapes is unsustainable, as this landscape is both simultaneously. These murals cannot be understood properly without seeing them in their refugee camp context; they "[take] meaning from their location and the location in turn [has] a differing significance because of the paintings" (Jarman, 1998:81, discussing murals in Northern Ireland). This landscape is an assemblage of images and words of Palestine and the walls and streets of the refugee camp, which is itself both an effect and cause of the Palestinian predicament.

Don Mitchell (1996) argues that landscape conceals the work that goes into its production, but this landscape memorialises its production, overtly speaking of and to Palestine, recording and commemorating Palestine and the Palestinian story in the fabric of the refugee camp, showing how Palestinians became refugees in camps, then revolutionaries fighting to return to Palestine, to erase the camp and return to Eden. The camp itself is a site of memory, the lived space of Palestinian refugees for six decades, through the armed struggle of the 'Revolution', through two Lebanese civil wars that produced sieges and massacres, like those at Sabra and Shatila camps in 1982, heroes and villains. The landscape mobilises Palestinian memories of the homeland and the camp, before 1948 and after, to perform political work.

Writing on the walls

Around the main square in the very centre of the camp, almost every section of wall has been inscribed with messages. On the main road running north into the 'new' camp, the whole outer wall of an UNRWA compound has been painted with slogans (Images 2 and 3), a mixture of nationalist and religious sentiments, unambiguous and highly political, with quotes from the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Mohamed), as well as direct political demands.



Image 2: On green background: We demand from everybody the unity of Palestinian forces in order to end the occupation and return to our sacred land. *Nady Badr al-Kubra*



Image 3: Do not depart, except to three mosques: *Al-Masjid al-Haram* [The Sacred Mosque, in Mecca], this my mosque [in Medina], and *Al-Aqsa* mosque [in Jerusalem]. Noble *Hadith* [sayings of the Prophet Mohamed]

Two nationalist slogans, one calling for the unity of Palestinian forces and the other calling for Palestinians to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine, are juxtaposed with two Islamic messages, the first a quote from the Prophet Mohamed stressing the importance of *Al-Aqsa* mosque in Jerusalem, the second a quote from the *Qur'an* talking of the importance of Islamic conquest. Taken together, these four slogans seem to stress the significance of the land of Palestine for all Muslims, and the importance and in effect divine mandate of a Palestinian national movement that re-conquers those lands from the 'Israeli enemy'.

The mixing of nationalist and religious messages is repeated on the walls along the road running east from the main square. In Image 4, the message 'Jerusalem is the capital of the state of Palestine' is flanked by two large Palestinian flags, each amended to include the words 'there is no God but Allah; Mohamed is the prophet of Allah'. Again, the juxtaposition of Palestinian nationalism with Islam stresses the Islamic importance of Jerusalem and the Palestinian national movement, and invokes the authority of God in the Palestinian case.



Image 4: [in the Palestinian flag] There is no God but Allah; Mohamed is the prophet of Allah; [on red background] Jerusalem is the capital of the state of Palestine

Symbols of Palestine

Alongside the written slogans, within them and around them, are signs. As Barthes would argue, signs are objects (signifiers) emptied of their original meanings that come to recall other objects (signifieds) within the Palestinian discursive field. The signs are objects of language, just like the written texts we have already seen. The Palestinian sign *par excellence*, present throughout the camp, is the Palestinian flag, which symbolises the Palestinian nation and the future Palestinian state. It is painted on walls, on posters, on the logos of several Palestinian political factions, while cloth flags fly above buildings and hang in offices and homes.

“You know, the Palestinian flag is our identity.”

- Palestinian male, 44, 2007 interview.

As Barthes argues, ‘real’ objects have a ‘facticity’ which myth must ‘deform’, whereby objects become alienated from their actual histories so they can signify new meanings (Barthes cited in Duncan & Duncan, 1992:19). The Palestinian flag

is based on the flag of the Arab Revolt during the First World War (Midura, 1978), but new narratives and myths have emerged to explain its significance:

“The flag is a symbol of the Palestinian people, like any country in the world. It differentiates it from the rest of the world. Red stands for blood, green for the land, black for the darkness of war, white for peace.”

- Palestinian male, 24, 2005 interview.

More important than its ‘true’ origins is that the flag is a symbol for the nation, around which Palestinians in Palestine and outside can unite, a country and a cause to believe in and fight for. The narrative of red-blood, green-land, black-war and white-peace may have more meaning and relevance to Palestinian refugees today, as it stresses the land they have lost, the war and blood they are willing to wage and give to win back that land, and the peace they dream of once the land is liberated.

Another symbol on display is the map of historic Palestine, which includes all of the territories that now comprise Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Image 5). Displaying the map is both a means of reminding oneself of the lost homeland, and a statement of intent: this will be Palestine in the future, whole, without Israel. The map is featured in the logos of all the main Palestinian political factions, and is frequently depicted in wall paintings and on posters. Many homes I visited had the map displayed prominently on living room walls, and I have received several maps as gifts from students and friends.

The map is a symbol, the map is in my heart. I have a map in my house - every Palestinian house has the map of Palestine, of the village, the *balad* [locality].

- Palestinian female, 31, 2003 interview

Like the flag, the origins of this map’s borders, drawn up by the League of Nations and Britain after the First World War, are obfuscated by myths of a primordial Palestinian nation. The Palestine depicted in maps is the Arab state never established in the space between Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt, the space usurped by Israel, and Palestinians are the people from that space who never achieved the statehood that Israelis did.

A third icon present throughout the camp is the Dome of the Rock, the 9th Century ‘Mosque of Umar’ at *al-Haram al-Sharif* (the ‘Noble Sanctuary’) in Jerusalem, the site of *Al-Aqsa* mosque. Images of the golden dome are reproduced across the camp, in both public and private spaces, and are present in the logos of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both Islamic parties. As the third holiest site in Islam,

al-Aqsa has a special importance for Palestinians who see themselves as the guardians of the site for all Muslims:

“*Al-Aqsa* is important for Muslims, not just Palestinians. It is number 3 in Islam [third holiest site]. We must not allow it to be destroyed or desecrated.”

- Palestinian male, 24, 2005 interview.



Image 5: Wall showing a stylised map of historic Palestine.

“We insist on *Al-Aqsa* – it is part of the conflict to keep it on your wall, not to forget it.”

- Palestinian male, 23, 2003 interview.

This desire to protect *Al-Haram* has come through strongly during my research (see Image 6). In one case, I asked a number of children to draw pictures of how they

imagined Palestine to be, and several drew a large mosque or dome at the top-centre of their pictures, which they told me was *Al-Aqsa* (although they usually looked more like the Dome of the Rock). Two children told elaborate stories of how their pictures depicted Palestinians protecting *Al-Aqsa* from Israeli aggression.



Image 6: A Palestinian fighter, with kuffiyeh, flag and Kalashnikov, guards the Dome of the Rock. The Palestinian flag to the left suggests the liberation of Jerusalem by Palestinian forces – in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem, flying the Palestinian flag is illegal today.

The soldier in Image 6 wears a *kuffiyeh*, a headscarf worn by Palestinian *fellahin* (peasants) before 1948, and now an iconic symbol of the Palestinian people and national movement. The *kuffiyeh* has been drawn into discourses of pre-1948 Palestine that identify Palestinians as rural peasants, and romanticise their lives among olive and orange groves (Klaus, 2003: 138). When it is worn or displayed, the *kuffiyeh* recalls these discourses of Palestine and its imagined, memorialised landscape. It was worn for decades by Yasser Arafat and the fighters of the Palestinian nationalist Revolution, a symbol of their humble origins and their rootedness in the land of Palestine. The *kuffiyeh* now symbolises both the peasants and the revolutionaries, particularly Arafat and his Fateh movement, and is worn around the world as a symbol of solidarity with the Palestinian people (in recent years it has become a popular fashion accessory in the West, worn no doubt by many people unaware of its political legacy and meanings).

The scarf ... symbolises ... reminds me of the scarf that Abu Amar used to all the time [wear] ... it reminds you of Fateh ... when you wear it, you are wearing a symbol related to Fateh

- Palestinian female, 26, 2007 interview.



Image 7: A dedication to Yasser Arafat, Islamicised Palestinian flags, and an advertisement for *Nady Badr al-Kubra*

Image 7 shows a mural dedicated to Yasser Arafat, and is fascinating because of the interaction of different symbols and words. The *kuffiyeh*, representing Arafat as both peasant and fighter, sits like a crown on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the glorious throne of all Palestine. The Dome and Jerusalem are thus claimed as Palestinian, while the naming of the regions of Palestine allows the mosque and the *kuffiyeh* to extend their power over the whole land. On either side are quotations of ‘the President, the Symbol, Yasser Arafat’, about Jerusalem and the Palestinian homeland and state, while below the words ‘he is steadfast – the precious one’ are a direct reference to Arafat. Through the combination of symbols and words, the viewer is asked to witness Arafat’s rightful place as the ruler of Palestine, and the importance of Jerusalem to Arafat.

Yasser Arafat is central to many of Fateh’s displays. He is a crucially important figure, a man almost beyond criticism for many supporters of Fateh, for whom he is the father and ultimate figurehead of the Palestinian nationalist

movement. His status is captured in the phrase ‘The president, the symbol’ used before his name on many wall paintings in the camp, placing his image on a par with the flag and the map as a symbol of the Palestinian nation.

Abu Amar was not only a fighter and not only a leader for the organisation, he was a grandfather to us, to all the Palestinian people ... he is a spiritual leader, not only a political or military leader ... and you see everywhere inside the camps ... things leader Abu Amar said are written on the walls ... it is loyalty to him ... the leader of this people.

– Palestinian male, 44, 2007 interview.

As ‘the symbol’ of the Palestinian nationalist movement, its founder and greatest leader, Arafat naturalises the rule of Fateh, even after his death. This also gives credibility to Fateh under their new leader Mahmoud Abbas, who was deeply unpopular in Lebanon when he was appointed Arafat’s Prime Minister, under US pressure, in 2003:

[Mahmoud Abbas] is full of shit ... he’s more with the Israelis, the Americans appointed him ... Only Abu Amar [Arafat] will represent us.

- Palestinian male, 56, 2003 interview.

There are many other examples of the combinations of symbols into a form of narrative. In Image 8, a key (an important symbol of the lost home, keys from Palestine have been saved and venerated by many Palestinians in exile until today), the map (the lost homeland) and the word ‘*intifada*’ combine to make the claim that the *intifada* (uprising) holds the key to the Palestinians’ return to their homeland; the whole wall on which this is depicted is painted in the design of the Palestinian flag, so that the wall is completely saturated with Palestinian symbols.

Landscape and discourse

One of the greatest challenges for Palestinian nationalism in Lebanon is the reproduction of public memory, of Palestine and life there, and two landscapes play very important roles in this process. The power of icons and signs written into the landscape of the camp lies in how they link to public memory in the form of popular discourses of Palestine shared by the ‘interpretative community’ (Stock, 1983³) of Palestinians in Lebanon. Memory is not pre-existent and dormant, nor a

³ Stock, Brian. 1983. *The Implications of Literacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Cited in James Duncan (1990: 23).

projection from the present, but a “creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past” (Boyarin, 1994:22⁴).



Image 8: The *Intifada* holds the key to returning to the homeland

At this level, we can theorise a different kind of landscape from that we see in the camp: the imaged landscape of Palestine. For a few, Palestine exists in memory. The elderly remember life in Palestine before 1948; some Palestinians saw across the border while fighting for the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) before and during the Lebanese civil war, and some were taken to prisons inside Israel; others were able to visit the border and looked down over Galilee in 2000, after the withdrawal of Israeli forces. Palestinians are now denied access to the border areas of South Lebanon. For the rest, the post-Nakba generations of ‘postmemory’ born into a society “dominated by narratives that preceded their birth” (Hirsch, 1999: 8)⁵, Palestine exists only in the spoken and written discourses

⁴ Boyarin, Jonathan. 1994. *Remapping memory: the politics of timespace*. London. Quoted in Nuala Johnson (2004:317)

⁵ Hirsch, Marianne. 1999. Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy. In, Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural*

that describe it. For all, Palestine is spatially and temporally remote and inaccessible, and must be either forgotten or maintained in the realm of discourse.

Palestinian public memory is structured around the events of the Nakba, and bound up with it temporally and spatially. The Nakba is “the focal point for what might be called Palestinian time ... the point of reference for other events, past and future”, while the places of Palestinian existence before the Nakba, the land of Palestine itself, are “not simply sites of memory but symbols of all that has been lost” (Sa’di and Abu Lughod, 2007: 5, 13). As Nuala Johnson argues, memory recalls not only times past, but also “spaces past where the imaginative geography of previous events is in constant dialogue with the current metaphorical and literal spatial setting of the memory-makers” (Johnson, 2004: 320). This dialogue is a two-way process, so events after 1948 might be interpreted in light of the Nakba, as being like or as a result of the Nakba (the destruction of Nahr el-Bared camp in 2007 was described to me by many Palestinians as being a ‘second Nakba’, ‘like the Nakba’, even ‘worse than the Nakba’), while the pre-1948 past is idealised in light of the harshness of the Palestinian experience in exile. Public memories of Palestine are a kind of dialogue between multiple individual memories that are “*similar but different*” (Jayyusi, 2007:110, emphases in the original), from pre- and post-Nakba periods, and imaginative geographies and discourses of Palestine before 1948 and the geographies of exile.

Popular discourses of pre-Nakba Palestine centre on the village, and present the idealised image of the local in the homeland: the beautiful green village and its happy community, the stable life rooted in the land (see Lindholm Shulz, 2003). It is the opposite of life in Lebanon, and is presented as the life Palestinians should have had. Discourses of the Nakba itself tell the story of Palestinians’ national-scale expulsion from this Edenic homeland, how the perfect life was lost, and injustice done to every Palestinian past and future. Together, these discourses set up a discourse of return that draws on – and draws legitimacy from – United Nations resolutions and seeks to reverse the injustice of the Nakba by bringing about the return of the Palestinian nation to their villages of origin in Palestine. Taken together, this discursive triad provides a powerful impulsion for identity in the present, defining one’s true origin, the fundamental injustice one has suffered as a Palestinian, and one’s central ambition: to return home.

Myths surround these discourses, transcending social divisions of class, family and local origin, and are part of a nationalist strategy of overcoming the geographical dispersion of the Palestinians (Klaus, 2003: 134-5). For Klaus, the romantic nationalist myth of the olive and orange groves, of the Edenic Palestine

where everything was perfect in every respect that life now is difficult, was created later as a response to the harshness of life in exile and as a means of politicising Palestinians in support of the Revolution (Ibid. p138). I would temper this with the point that while memory is always selective and partial, and while peasant life was undoubtedly more difficult than is remembered or told to a British researcher almost 60 years later, many older people do remember Palestine with genuine fondness, and have passed on personal memories to their children.

“My mother used to tell us about the beauty of the country. She spoke about it like it was heaven. When she ate fruit and vegetables, she used to remember the fruit and vegetables in Palestine. She used to tell us all the time that we were Palestinians.”

– Palestinian female, 23, 2003 interview.

Furthermore, recognising the partiality, selectivity and political implications of Palestinian public memory should in no way distract attention from the very real losses, of homes, lands and livelihoods, and the violence inflicted on Palestinians as individuals and as a people. It would be wrong to claim that Edenic Palestine is a complete invention of the Palestinian nationalist movement: it is a combination of memories of real places and events and selective amnesia, prompted by the harshness of life today.

However, memory and representation of the past is “an important political resource” (Duncan, 1990:22), and “re-membering the past – the putting together of its constituent parts into a single, coherent narrative – has been profoundly significant for the emergence of a popular nationalist identity” (Johnson 2004: 318) in the Palestinian case. This is not unique, as Agnew argues, “[t]ying the nation to territory has often involved identifying a prototypical landscape as representative of the collective identity” (Agnew, 2004: 233), and separation from that homeland through migration “has often underwritten nationalism rather than written its epitaph” (Ibid. p226).

The idealisation and remembrance of the lost homeland, through the formalisation and mobilisation of public memory, is a crucial element of the “social engineering” (Hobsbawm, 1990:10) required in the construction of an “imagined political community” (Anderson, 1991:6) committed to liberate that homeland from enemy hands. Equally important is the filling of that imagined geography of Palestine with a unique Palestinian culture, through the construction of unique national traditions (Hobsbawm, 1990) and their maintenance. This ‘re-membering’ imagines a landscape of beauty in which Palestinians lived a routine, stable life of happiness and contentment. Hence, what is remembered and yearned for is not only the place but “the whole life that place represents” (Lindholm Shulz, 2003:110), and the time in which that life was set. This is a very powerful

discourse: and it is recalled by every image of the map, and every *kuffiyeh* worn or painted on the walls of the camp.

Within the spaces of the camp, the texts and symbols inscribed onto walls constitute a language. Public memories and discourses are made material in the landscape, and space becomes “a signifying system rather than just a material backdrop to interpretation” (Johnson, 2004: 321). This language in the landscape is read by an interpretative community familiar with the discourses upon which it draws. To a stranger, the shape of the map, the pattern of the *kuffiyeh*, the slogans and images of *Al-Aqsa* and so on, may mean little, or may carry alternative meanings. They have particular symbolic meaning to Palestinians familiar with popular discourses of the Palestinian homeland, and narratives of Palestinian history.

The power of the landscape is not that it literally tells the Palestinian story – no Palestinian will stop to read the entire history of the Palestinian people or the full manifesto of Fateh painted on a wall. The landscape has a ‘rhetoric’ (Duncan, 1990). Signs and words in the landscape function as tropes that “encode and communicate information” (Ibid. p19) in an efficient way, such that someone passing by can be prompted to recall whole narratives at a glance. When the landscape calls into play those discourses, it generates meanings in the realm of intertextuality – between the texts of landscape and discourse.

This is what happens when one sees a wall painted with nationalist slogans, and images of the flag, the map, the Dome and the *kuffiyeh*. And the repetition of these symbols throughout the camp attempts to reinforce the same message over and over again: this is Palestinian space, you are Palestinian. Repetition of slogans, the flag, the map and so on turns background space into national, distinctively Palestinian space. The painting of a wall in the pattern of the *kuffiyeh* (Image 9) serves no purpose except to mark that wall as a Palestinian wall; the simple act of painting a flag nationalises the surface on which it is painted and the space from which that flag can be seen.. The repetition of Palestinian symbols helps turn the space of the camp into a national space: a part of Palestine, not Lebanon or anywhere else.

The production of Palestinian space in the camp is an important context and means for the producing and reproducing of Palestinian identity. As people familiar with the discourses of Palestine move through the spaces of the camp, through this highly textualised and symbolic landscape, they are repeatedly prompted to recall their Palestinian origins and to affirm their commitment to the Palestinian nationalist cause. Thus the slogans and symbols are not just a language but also a practice: they are instructions, actions that ask people to pledge their allegiance to an ideology of Palestinian nationalism, to act on behalf of that ideology and those who represent it.



Image 9: A wall painted in the chequered pattern of the *kuffiyeh*.

Contested Landscape

The prevailing messages of the landscape in Rashidieh camp, those the landscape signifies, stress the Palestinian nature of the camp and its residents, and the righteousness of the Palestinian nationalist cause, as a just cause and an Islamic cause. These messages are produced by several different sources, mostly political factions and a group called *Nady Badr al-Kubra*. These different groups share the same fundamental goals – to liberate the homeland and establish a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital – and these common goals are reflected in the fact that much of the material displayed by the groups is quite similar.

However, a closer analysis of the materials displayed, and of who is actually producing or commissioning those displays, reveals a greater subtlety to the message of the landscape. While the fundamental goals of different Palestinian factions are very similar, the means of achieving those goals are different (revolutionary nationalism versus Islamic holy war, for example), and these differences are articulated in the materials groups display. In this way, the landscape is a medium of competition between groups, who unite to promote nationalism, but articulate that nationalism differently and make claims to having the most effective nationalist struggle.

Paul Brass's work on ethnicity and nationalism stresses the role of social and political elites that attempt to manipulate group identity in order to further their own power. These elites draw upon and use particular aspects from the culture of the group they wish to represent, "attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group" (Brass, 1991:75). This view sheds some light on the adoption and use by Palestinian groups of the Palestinian flag, the map and the *kuffiyeh*, symbols which, as discussed above, have been emptied of their original meanings and filled with new meanings linked to the Palestinian nationalist movement.

What is crucial is that the manipulation of identity and the furthering of a party's position of power are intimately linked, because a nationalist movement is every party's *raison d'être*. The party that can most effectively persuade people to identify with their version of Palestine, and their strategy for achieving nationhood, will become the most popular among residents of the camp, giving them greater manpower, winning votes to dominate the popular committees that run the camps, and giving them the right to represent and speak officially on behalf of Palestinian refugees. As a means of communicating Palestinian identity, the landscape is also a medium for competition between rival factions: by placing their own symbols alongside symbols of Palestine, and articulating a convincing campaign to liberate Palestine, different factions attempt to gain people's support by encouraging them to identify with their version of Palestinian nationalism.

An important qualification to make here is to note that Fateh have long dominated Rashidieh camp. The commander of Fateh in Lebanon, 'Sultan' Abu al-Aynan, is based in Rashidieh, and receives and distributes PLO funding for Palestinian refugees across Lebanon. There is significant scope for corruption, and evidence of a clear personalisation of politics under the Sultan. One of the responsibilities of the PLO is to provide salaries and aid to those in need, but a number of interviewees complained of how the Sultan disburses aid only to members of Fateh and their families. This tendency towards patrimonialism attaches material benefits to membership of Fateh.

"That money is not for the Sultan, it's for all people - not for him to send his sons abroad to study, or to buy his Mercedes. Many people in the camp need that money"

- Palestinian female, 22, 2003 interview.

Since the election of Hamas to run the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza in February 2006, funding for Fateh has been heavily curtailed and Hamas have received increased funds, although given the international aid boycott of the Palestinian Authority, this has not been a vast increase. However, Fateh remain the dominant group in Rashidieh, and this is reflected in the landscape.

Contested walls

The landscape is a heavily contested space, in which different factions compete to make their message dominant. In many of the busiest parts of the camp – the ‘best’ sites around the main square and along main roads – the landscape is dominated by the messages of Fateh and *Nady Badr al-Kubra*. *Nady Badr* is an Islamic social club, funded by Fateh directly and through the PLO (interview with head of *Nady Badr*), and can be seen as a partner or client organisation to Fateh. Alongside their own logos, *Nady Badr* paint Fateh logos; alongside their nationalist slogans and quotes from Islamic sources, *Nady Badr* paint quotes from Yasser Arafat and Fateh. Although a secular party, the juxtaposition of quotes from the *Qur’an* and references to *al-Haram al-Sharif* with those of Yasser Arafat or Fateh give Fateh’s message an Islamic flavour and lends a religious weight to their political agenda. This allows Fateh to appeal to a more religious constituency that might otherwise support rival groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The relationship with an *Nady Badr* has instrumental value to Fateh, potentially undermining opponents and strengthening Fateh’s ability to govern.

Within this Fateh space, there is some contestation. Image 1 showed a mural dedicated to Yasser Arafat and the Fateh movement, but to the left of the picture, somebody has affixed a poster for the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). While this is not an aggressive move – the main message of Fateh’s mural is untouched and Yasser Arafat is not defaced – it is nevertheless a form of contestation. The PLF are laying claim to a section of Fateh’s wall. A similar PLF poster is present in Image 7 (to the right), while in Image 8, three posters have been put up, two of which have been removed. We can therefore read three layers of message: the original mural in favour of Fateh, the response in favour of the PLF, and the counter-response against the PLF by removing their poster. In this “battle of the walls ... each layer of paint [and poster] indicat[es] a partial and temporary victory in an ongoing battle” (Petee, 1996: 139).

There were very few areas in the camp dominated by large murals or official looking displays for groups other than Fateh. The main concentration of these were near the entrance to the camp (Image 10), a large display of poster boards including seven displays by Hamas, three by Islamic Jihad, and one each by the PLF, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and Fateh.

Like Fateh’s emphasis on Arafat, other factions present images of their leaders. The Hamas displays include an image of Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi & Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, leaders of Hamas assassinated by Israel in 2004, behind whom a Palestinian flag is depicted with the familiar phrase ‘there is no God but Allah; Mohamed is the Prophet of Allah’. Alongside is a dedication to Yehya Ayash, one of the founders of Hamas, assassinated by Israel in 1996, and further to the right an image of the Dome of the Rock. These images are surrounded by slogans about the

intifada continuing, the memory of the Nakba, the Palestinian refugees' right of return, and *jihad*. Islamic Jihad display their logo and an image of their 'martyred' leader, alongside the slogan 'we will not surrender or break'. The PLF and DFLP also display pictures and details of their leaders of the faction. Throughout the rest of the camp, posters announce the 'martyring' of leaders or operatives of different factions; the posters in Images 1 and 7 are examples of this. By presenting their leaders to the population of the camp, the competing factions present themselves as worthy and capable of the task of leading the Palestinian people. 'These are our leaders, let us lead you', in other words. Secondly, by presenting images of their 'martyrs', and how they were killed fighting Israel, those factions showcase their ongoing efforts to liberate the homeland, to fight the Israeli enemy on behalf of the refugees they are seeking to lead and represent.



Image 10: Collection of oppositional poster boards and banners at the entrance of Rashidieh camp; in the centre is a board for UNRWA.

While the large murals were almost all promoting Fateh, the vast majority of oppositional displays were less 'official' looking, posters and graffiti. Such displays often looked hurried, appearing less official than the Fateh displays. I was able to find posters for the PLF, Islamic Jihad and Fateh, and graffiti for the PFLP, PLF, Hamas and Fateh.

Posters and graffiti for different groups often appeared together, as if an initial message in favour of one group were being contested by another – as if the claiming of space in the landscape by one group were being contested. Image 11 shows a slogan for Hamas, at the top, with a stencilled logo for the PLF added to the left, and an incomplete slogan beneath, 'the symbol Abu ...' (Abu Amar is Yasser Arafat, often referred to as 'the symbol'). Three Palestinian factions are represented on this small section of wall, in brief, rushed messages, in one case

unfinished. We cannot know why the last message is unfinished without finding the person who painted it. Was this person interrupted in the act of inscribing the wall with Arafat's name? We can attempt to read these layers of messages in the landscape, but unless we can find the graffitist our reading can only be partial.

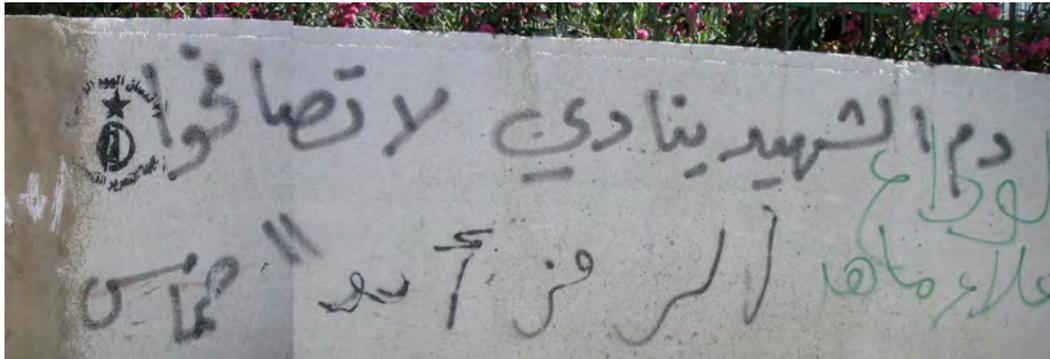


Image 11: Graffiti for Hamas, Fateh and the PLF contest this wall space.

Similarly, who defaced this poster of two 'martyrs' of Islamic Jihad (Image 12)? Was it a political opponent, attacking the Islamic Jihad movement by ridiculing and lampooning its martyrs, or was it a bored and mischievous child? Whichever it is, the defacing of this poster points to one important possibility: that Palestinians might not all read the landscape in the way that is intended by those who write in the landscape. In seeing landscape as a text, we recognise the roles of author and reader, and both are active personalities. Both are positioned within social context, institutional setting, and political and historical context (Clifford, 1986:6), and both generate meanings from their own extra-textual (experiences) and inter-textual (ideas from other texts) fields of reference (Duncan & Ley, 1993:9). People read the landscape in light of their own individual experiences: knowledge is multiple and positional, and "there are many ways of seeing and reading the landscape" (McDowell, 1994: 163).

However, recognising the multiple readings of landscape does not entail adopting a wholesale relativism that precludes the possibility of an interpretative community. Palestinians do share certain common interpretations of the discourses and narratives of Palestine and Palestinian history. The construction and reproduction of such an interpretative community has been an important aspect of the Palestinian national movement for decades. But within this discursive field, these boundaries of interpretation and understanding, individual knowledge and interpretations will vary, as people draw on nationalist and other discourses differently, and as people's own personal circumstances vary. Given this, individual interpretations of landscape must vary. And divergent readings of the

landscape can be very useful in understanding how and when communication through the landscape fails.



Image 12: A defaced poster for Islamic Jihad, with moustaches, beauty spot and spectacles added in black marker pen.

Divergent Readings

The use of the landscape by political factions is part of a wider strategy to influence the production of Palestinian subjects, who identify themselves as Palestinian nationalists, give their support to those factions, and for whom the factions can speak. It is a process of cultural reproduction that does important political work, part of a wider project of Palestinian governing, dominated by Fateh. One interviewee in Burj el-Shemali camp in 2003 caustically referred to Rashidieh camp as ‘the capital’ and Fateh as ‘the government’. However, while the leadership of Fateh attempts to exercise power and control over as many aspects of camp life as it can, it does not govern totally. This is clear when we read divisions in the landscape of the camp, where other factions compete for space on walls, contesting Fateh’s messages with their own messages and articulations of Palestinian nationalism. These oppositional factions contested Fateh’s ability to exercise control over the landscape, and this “battle of the walls” (Peteet, 1996:139, describing the constant struggles of Palestinian political graffitiists against Israeli

erasure) stands as a microcosm of the wider contest to govern the camp, to win supporters among the population, to shape the formation of subjects, to control people, and to maintain the right to represent those people.

Using the landscape as a means of communication is potentially problematic, because when political groups write on walls, their message is laid open to divergent and potentially critical readings, and such readings may shed light on the workings and failures of the factions' performances of power. When people read in the landscape different factions' boasts about their military prowess or how they will fight for the right of return, people may be prompted to ask: what are they really doing, and are they doing what they say?

It's different from one person to another, if a person from Hamas reads [Fateh's messages] they will try to compare it with reality: are they like this, are they applying this what they write?

– Palestinian female, 26, 2007 interview.

Fateh promotes a revolutionary nationalist message, centred around fighting for the liberation of the homeland and the right of return. But the 'Revolution' ended with the evacuation of PLO leaders from Lebanon in 1982, and since the end of the Lebanese civil war, Fateh has not been a significant fighting force in Lebanon. Far from fighting, Fateh cadres are often to be found sitting on plastic chairs on street corners, Kalashnikovs over their shoulders, glasses of tea in their hands, gossiping or reminiscing (see Image 13). This is not to suggest that Fateh organisations, like the General Union of Palestinian Women, do not do important work. Rather, the most visible representatives of this group that claims to be fighting are fighters who no longer fight.

These are from Fateh ... they don't have to do anything, that's what I see ... they are having *narghileh* [smoking a water pipe] as you see ... nearly all the men who enter Fateh, don't do anything, just sit ... I have just to register my name with Fateh, then to take money and just sit

– Palestinian female, 27, commenting on Image 13.

At the same time, while Fateh in Lebanon actively promotes a discourse of the right of return, the Fateh leadership of the PLO was involved in negotiations with Israel throughout the 1990s that did not envision the wholesale return of Palestinian refugees to Palestine. Rather, the Oslo 'peace process' attempted to redefine the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a dispute over the territories occupied by Israel in the war of 1967 (Pappe, 2001: 73-4), and focused on creating



Image 13: Three men sit smoking beneath the slogan: “Our enemies are the address of our pride, and the source of inspiration of our people. With their blood we write victory – The president, the symbol, Yaser Arafat, Headquarters of the Emergency”

zones of limited Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, that might eventually lead to the creation of a Palestinian state. For the Fateh/PLO leadership conducting negotiations, the foundation of a Palestinian state was a greater priority than the prospect of enlarging its population base through the return of refugees (Klein, 1998:1). While Fateh in Lebanon support the right of return, that right appears dispensable to the Fateh/PLO leadership negotiating to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

[what Fateh did during negotiations] is completely contradicting with their dialogue here about the return and the commitment to liberate Palestine.

- Palestinian Male, 37, 2007 interview.

These contradictions between what Fateh says in the landscape and what Fateh does in practice open a space in which critical opinions can be formulated and aired. A critical reading of the landscape can lead people to reject Fateh, not support them. And the repetition of Fateh’s message repeats its contradictions, and repeated rejection may strengthen opposition to Fateh.

Concluding

The refugee camp is supposed to be a temporary place that provides shelter and other basic needs to refugees – people from Palestine who will one day return to Palestine. This temporary status, of both camp and its residents, is an important justification for the restrictions placed on Palestinians by the Lebanese state, and while Palestinians curse this, they may acquiesce in it if it makes their permanent settlement there less likely. The fabric of the camp is highly politicised, so that walls tell all who will read about the Palestinian homeland and the national movement seeking to liberate it. In doing so, the landscape of the camp calls for its own destruction, because its message is that the Palestinian people belong in Palestine, and they will one day leave Rashidieh camp for their true homeland.

By pursuing a textual reading of the symbolic landscape of the camp, I have shown the role of the landscape in a Palestinian refugee cultural and political system. The prevailing messages of the political landscape in Rashidieh camp stress the Palestinian nature of the camp and its residents, and the righteousness of the Palestinian nationalist cause, as a just cause and an Islamic cause. People walking through the streets of the camp are repeatedly prompted to think of Palestine, to recall the popular discourses of Palestine, to reaffirm their commitment to Palestine and the Palestinian national movement, as the man in Image 14 has done.



Image 14: This man has had the word ‘Palestine’ tattooed on his arm, a marker for all to see and a constant reminder to himself.

But the messages written into the landscape are read by diverse and intelligent people, and those readings may be more or less critical. Both the symbolic landscape of the refugee camp, and ordinary people's divergent readings of it, can reveal much about Palestinian politics in Rashidieh. This is a politics dominated by Fateh, but open to contestations and interventions by oppositional factions and individuals. The landscape is part of a cultural system that influences the production and reproduction of Palestinian subjects, whom Fateh and other factions compete to govern. But in critically reading the landscape, ordinary people can reject the messages to which they are exposed, potentially undermining dominant relations of power in the refugee camp.

Acknowledgements

I have gratefully received funding from a number of institutions for my research and travel: the University of Cambridge (2003), the Council for British Research in the Levant (2003 and 2005), and the Economic and Social Research Council (since October 2004). I am also very grateful to Ailsa Allen, who drew the map, to Claire Dwyer, Kevin Gould, Derek Gregory, Chris Harker, Jennifer Hyndman, James Kneale, Linda McDowell, Tyler Pearce and Ali Rogers for their supervision and comments on this project, to two reviewers for their very helpful suggestions, to Thoraya El-Rayyes for help with translating slogans, and to Ibrahim Al-Ali and the Ajjawi family in Lebanon for their continued help and support.

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