

Palestinian refugees in the Arab world: the right to have a right
By Sari Hanafi

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The borders between states in the Arab East were historically porous so that refugees were able to move quite easily. Waves of refugees were able to be managed with tremendous tolerance: 800,000 Palestinians, 1 million Iraqis in the 1990s and 2.4 million Iraqis since 2003, 1 million Sudanese since the 1990s. Since the Arab nation-states cannot stop the waves, they instead organize later on their marginality and exclusion from the right to have a right, to paraphrase Hanna Arendt. Nation-states are often composed of authoritarian or security regimes that formulate a tough definition of who is inside or outside the nation. This way produces a mass of non-citizens, such as around 150,000 Kurds in Syria, many thousands of bidoon [stateless Bedouins] in Kuwait, and around 150,000 stateless kids from Egyptian mothers and Gulf fathers.

Although the construction of national identity in the region began during the British and French mandates, the crystallization of this national identity - which occurred within a multilayered context of space and time - is a relatively recent phenomenon. Because of the relative tenuousness of this process of crystallization, the state in the Arab world became a nationalizing state. i.e., "after making Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan ... it must make the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Jordanians ..." The process of importation of state-formation has a tremendous impact on identity formation. The citizenship relationship becomes an exclusionary force that embodies the techniques and processes by which states secure their legitimacy in the eyes of the people they govern. Citizenship process becomes not part of the process of democratization and creation of citizens but struggles that are at the heart of state legitimization strategies, including the formation and transformation of political identities and communities; the distribution and redistribution of rights, responsibilities and resources; and negotiations over representation and participation.

The way the nation is formed has not brought about the deconstruction of primary allegiances, such as tribes and sects, but has accommodated them. The construction of the nation and nationalism often were based on enmity and unicity (uni-allegiance).

Concerning the enmity of the other, the other is often defined ethnically, racially, and also culturally. Refugees and stateless people become in this construction the scapegoat of the nations. In Jordan, Syria and Egypt, refugees experience numerous difficulties when attempting to participate in political activities and are widely considered to be interfering in internal and local affairs. Mourid Barghouthi noted in his biography that "the stranger is the person who renews his Resident Permit. He fills out forms and buys

the stamps for them. He has come up with evidence and proofs. [...] He does not care for the details that concern the people of the country where he finds himself or for their 'domestic' policy. But he is the first to feel its consequences. He may not rejoice in what makes them happy but he is always afraid when they are afraid. He is always an 'infiltrating element' in demonstrations, even if he never left his house that day."

Regarding unicity, migrants are not encouraged (and are sometimes hindered) to declare allegiance to either their countries of origin or their host countries. In Jordan, for instance, it is strictly prohibited to raise any national flag in a demonstration, except the Jordanian one. This fact explains the manner in which some refugees are rather assimilated into their host societies (Palestinians or Sudanese in Egypt), while others retain a sense of unstated double identity, with sort of feeling of alienation.

While refugee survival becomes possible only through adopting a low profile and living in the peripheries of the society, some of them become active political agents for advancing the cause of their refugee-ness, and sometimes they are used as agents in proxy conflicts in the region.

Identity politics in the region has brought relentless waves of violence. The idea that socioeconomic and civil rights should be given only to nationals is clear in the discourse of the sweeping majority of the interviewees that I interviewed in the last few years in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt. I will use as an example the Lebanese debate about giving the Palestinian refugees who have lived here for 60 years and for more than three generations the rights to work and to own property. This debate reveals that even the educated people in Lebanon have a very chauvinistic conception of rights. This is an excerpt from an interview I conducted in October 2008 with an influential officer of the Lebanese government, pro-March 14 coalition:

Me: Do you believe in giving the Palestinians the right to work?

Interviewee: But they are working.

Me: Working in manual jobs and in the informal economy, underpaid and without any social security system. What about professional jobs, such as medicine, accounting, engineering, nursing, etc.?

Interviewee: Well, how do you want us to let them work when our graduates are emigrating to the Gulf because they don't find jobs?

Me: Studies I did show clearly that the number of Palestinian professionals are relatively small and they would not constitute a serious threat to the Lebanese in the labor market. At the same time, their work is very important in generating entrepreneurial activities.

Interviewee: We cannot interfere with the business of the professional associations (al-naqabat al-mihaniyya) who don't accept the Palestinians.

Me: But it is the responsibility of the political body. Parliament could request a change in the bylaws of the professional associations as these bylaws are approved by them.

Interviewee: Look! I am in favor of improving the humanitarian situation of the Palestinians here, but not for giving them full access to the labor market.

Me: Humanitarian aid is usually for the people in emergency situations during the conflict. A solution, however, should be more sustainable. So they are bodies to be fed and sheltered. They have no rights.

Interviewee: Why do you want rights for this people? The poor are everywhere like in Akkar.

Me: But these people have full rights, while Palestinians don't. There is a difference between being entitled to rights and barring access to them, and being categorically discriminated against.

Interviewee: Please don't use the word discrimination. They are not; they don't have any rights. They are just temporary refugees here.

Me: But according to the Refugee Convention of 1951, refugees should have the right to work and to own property. So Palestinians are treated as foreigners and not as refugees.

Interviewee: They are refugees, and also foreigners.

Me: But do you admit that this status of semi-refugee and semi-foreigner leads to poverty and urban squalor in the camps and contributes in creating a generation without any attachment to the Lebanese society?

Interviewee: Palestinians are responsible for their situation. They participated in the Civil War, and then with their militias, they made the camps into what they are today.

Me: Yes, but they were denied the right to work and to own property before the civil war. Maybe the discrimination was one of the factors of the war.

Interviewee: Please again don't use the word discrimination. We should be careful about how to treat the Palestinians; the opposition will consider it tawteen [resettlement and naturalization].

Me: Do you yourself consider it tawteen?

Interviewee: No but the others will. This is why for now it is better to work on improving the situation of the Palestinians and to solve the security problems of the camps.

I pointed out this excerpt because it can be considered typical of an interview with a Lebanese politician. What is very revealing is that in his discourse the notion of rights is absent, considering the population has lived here for 60 years. The envisaged solution is of a humanitarian and security nature. When the interviewee felt cornered by his own logic, he escaped by talking about tawteen. Even a scholar very close to Hizbullah told me that the Lebanese climate is not ready for giving the Palestinians the right to work. For him "the March 14 coalition will badly interpret any call in this direction." General Michel Aoun is a champion of talking about tawteen, which has been a common feature in his discourse in the last two years. He, like Amin Gemayel and Samir Geagea, used this issue to mobilize their Christian community. The Lebanese politicians have succeeded in creating a climate in which tawteen is the scarecrow which has been used to generate a public phobia against granting basic rights to the Palestinians. Any debate about civil and economic rights starts by affirming that the objective should not be tawteen and ends with the same melody, to the point that rights come to be substituted with quick humanitarian or security solutions.

Throughout this debate the individual Palestinian is invisible. The deployment of bio-politics by humanitarian organizations (regarding Palestinians as bodies to be fed and sheltered without political existence) is one end of the spectrum and the tawteen discourse is the other end. For those participating in such a discourse, the Palestinians are mere figures, demographic artifacts and a transient political mass waiting for return. Between humanitarian discourse in the zones of emergency on the one hand, and the tawteen discourse on the other, the rights-based and entitlement approach for the Palestinians as individuals and collectives, as refugees with civil and economic rights, as well as the right to the city, is lost.

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