

PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON

Marvine Howe

Ms. Howe is a former reporter for The New York Times. Her latest book is Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Behind the gloss of the new Beirut City Center, the sparkling luxury hotels and boutiques, the plethora of new banks, restored office buildings and residences, the revived disco and restaurant scene, life in the Palestinian refugee camps appears bleaker than during the darkest days of the civil war. Most Palestinians in Lebanon find themselves trapped in an impossible situation: deprived of basic civil rights and denied the right to return to their homeland in northern Israel. Long able to sustain the hardships of the camps because of their dream of return, many refugees now believe that Gaza is the first and last stop on the Roadmap.

A senior emissary from the Palestinian Authority, Abbas Zaki, announced in early August that refugees in Lebanon would be given priority to return to Gaza, according to instructions from the late Chairman Yasser Arafat, who had called living conditions for Palestinians in Lebanon “the worst” of all those his refugees had to endure. The Gaza offer was received coolly however, because the families of most of the 425,000 registered refugees had originally come to Lebanon from Galilee during the 1948 forced exodus.

Many of these Palestinians say they would still be refugees in Gaza and would rather stay in Lebanon, pending a solution to their problem.

Among the estimated 25,000 Palestinians who had fled to Lebanon from the West Bank and Gaza after the 1967 war, the response to Israel’s evacuation of Gaza was positive. The situation of these refugees is even worse than that of their predecessors, because they are generally undocumented and classified by the United Nations as displaced persons, not refugees. But it was young, jobless males, desperate to escape the barren life of the camps, who celebrated the “liberation” of Gaza and were said to be signing up eagerly for the Gaza security forces.

Young Palestinians, in particular, find it difficult to believe in a peace process that ignores refugees from Israel proper, and they have begun to rebel against the grueling poverty of the camps. Abeer Kassim, a 24-year-old assistant at the Children and Youth Center in Shatila Camp, recently voiced the anger I was to hear over and over again:

How long can we go on living here in these dark holes, these chicken boxes without air? Every night now, there’s

gunfire in Shatila, generally over drugs, and I'm afraid to go out after 9 P.M. What are we struggling for — the right to go to Gaza, where we would be aliens all over again? We must fight for the right to return to our homes in Galilee.

“Palestinians in Lebanon are generally unhappy and don't want to be settled where they are,” said Ahmed Khalifa, the soft-spoken research director at the Institute for Palestine Studies, the leading non-profit think tank on Palestinian affairs. “But Palestinians see their homeland being expropriated by a wall and ever bigger settlements, and believe the Israelis will not pull out of the West Bank.”

Jaber Suleiman, a Palestinian expert on refugee issues, expressed the view that “the Roadmap leads nowhere.” In a conversation in a West Beirut café, he succinctly summed up Palestinian demands: “the right to self-determination, meaning the free choice of return, compensation or restitution.” Suleiman emphasized that the current campaign for civil rights in Lebanon “should in no way prejudice the right to return.”

The special problems facing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon stem from discriminatory legislation of 1995, depriving them of the right to work in the public sector, the professions and skilled jobs. Subsequent laws bar them from the purchase or inheritance of property or even making repairs to their homes. Palestinians also have restricted access to Lebanese government services and depend almost entirely on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for education, health and social services, which are spread much too thin.

In justifying these harsh legal provi-

sions, many Lebanese point to the country's high unemployment and the widespread destruction of schools and clinics during the civil war. But they acknowledge privately that the measures were designed to discourage Palestinians from settling permanently in Lebanon.

I had covered the fierce sectarian fighting in Lebanon from 1977 to 1979 and the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 and had not been back since. My curiosity about developments in Lebanon crystallized after last spring's Cedar Revolution, when Christians and Muslims massed together to protest the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February and forced Syrian occupation forces to leave the country. What, I wondered, had become of the Palestinians in the New Lebanon? During my one-month stay in Beirut, I visited five refugee camps (out of a total of 12 in Lebanon), and several health and educational facilities for refugees outside the camps. I talked to numerous UNRWA employees, representatives of Palestinian and foreign voluntary organizations, academics, and of course, refugees. I came away with a profound sadness because it seems that many Palestinians have given up hope.

Actually, on a personal level, Lebanese hostility towards the Palestinian refugees has declined since 1982, when multinational forces expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization, which many Lebanese held responsible for the civil war. It was clear how vulnerable the Palestinians had become during the War of the Camps from 1985 to 1987, when Syrian-backed Shiite Amal militia laid siege to the Beirut camps, killing hundreds of Palestinian civilians.

The pullout of Syrian troops last spring, however, has not eased conditions for the

Palestinians. The new Lebanese government has come under increasing international pressure, led by the United States and France, to implement fully last September's UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for the dismantling of the armed militias, as well as the departure of the Syrians. This was a reference to the Lebanese Shiite organization, Hizbollah, which is listed by the United States as "a foreign terrorist organization," and to the Palestinians. Hizbollah, backed by Iran, led the long struggle to end Israeli occupation in South Lebanon in 2000 and has now become part of the Lebanese political establishment, with a cabinet minister and 14 seats in the 128-member parliament. It is unlikely the government would confront Hizbollah, officially described as a Lebanese resistance movement.

That leaves the Palestinians. Some Lebanese politicians have focused attention on the presence of arms in the Palestinian camps as the source of political violence in the country. With the Syrians gone, the Palestinians make a convenient scapegoat for the new spate of bombings. Salah Salah, a member of the Palestine National Council (PNC) and a former negotiator in arms talks with the Lebanese, told me that the Palestinians had turned over their medium and heavy arms to the Lebanese army in 1991. Receiving me at his apartment in a working class neighborhood of Beirut, Salah said:

The Lebanese told us they didn't want to enter the camps and that internal security was our responsibility. Now, even at Ain el Helweh, all you'll see is small arms — pistols and Kalashnikovs. And it would be better if we put them aside, too, because all we do is kill each other. Most of the recent

shootouts have been between Palestinians, Fatah and Muslim extremists known as Jound Sham Osbat al Ansar.

Salah, who is chairman of the PNC's standing committee on refugees, was pessimistic about the current peace process and declared there would have to be new negotiations on the refugee question. But, meanwhile, he stressed, something has to be done to improve the condition of the refugees in Lebanon. He planned to raise the issue of restrictions on Palestinians' right to work and own property with the new Lebanese government.

"We have the poorest of the poor, the highest percentage of refugees enrolled as special hardship cases — over 11 percent of the more than 400,000 registered refugees in Lebanon," Hoda Samra Souaibi, UNRWA public information officer for Lebanon, said in an interview. The main problem is the ban on jobs, which means many Palestinians have no source of income, emphasized Samra, one of the few Lebanese staff members at UNRWA, the main employer of Palestinians in Lebanon. Samra acknowledged that the quality of UNRWA's services in Lebanon has declined, not because of any decrease in the budget of \$52.8 million, but rather the increase in population, needs and costs. Funding comes from voluntary contributions of UN members, with the European Union the largest donor and the United States the leading individual country. UNRWA does not run the camps but provides services: clinics, schools and special relief. The camps are administered by "people's committees" made up of local Palestinian factions.

UNRWA, which was set up in 1950 to serve the needs of some 880,000 Palestine

refugees in the Middle East, now provides humanitarian assistance to a total 4,255,120 registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Those in Lebanon are said to be the most disadvantaged because of restricted access to government schools and health-care facilities. Also, Lebanon has the highest proportion of refugees living in camps: 211,000, compared to 190,000 outside them.

In reality, the camps look very much as they did a quarter of a century ago — not camps at all but urban ghettos. The tents have long since disappeared, replaced by concrete blocks and corrugated roofs. Only now the neighbor-

hoods are much more crowded and delapidated. The narrow alleys are covered with a maze of makeshift electric wires and lined with sewage

and water pipes, many leaking. The pockmarked walls — a reminder of the War of the Camps of the mid-1980s — are still adorned with portraits of Yasser Arafat, Palestinian martyrs and Syrian leader Bashar al-Asad. There is no sign of the armed militias that used to careen about in jeeps. The narrow passageways are full of children playing in the dust and vendors hawking water, chewing gum, used clothing, second-hand appliances and other items.

UNRWA personnel made little attempt to gloss over their problems. At the Polyclinic of Bir Hassan next to Shatila camp, doctors admitted their facilities are overcrowded, with 34,750 patients registered, including some Lebanese. The average

consultation takes about three minutes.

The Polyclinic was proud of its 100 percent vaccination coverage of babies, but stressed that malnutrition — specifically iron deficiency in children under three — is a concern. Two general practitioners, a dentist, a cardiologist, a gynecologist and an eye doctor, provide primary health care, while more advanced cases are referred to one of five hospitals of the Palestine Red Crescent Society. All cancer drugs are available at the clinic, but UNRWA pays only 50 percent of the cost and many patients were said to have died from lack of affordable cancer drugs.

Poverty is the most pressing problem in

the camps. Forty percent of the 17,000 registered refugees at Bourj Al Barajneh Camp live below the poverty line, according to Jamal Qassem, the

UNRWA camp officer. A social worker at the UNRWA Health Center described a typical case: a sick, jobless, 46-year-old man with a wife and five children to support. After his clothing shop burned down six years ago, he suffered several heart attacks. The PLO and the United Nations helped with the costs of open-heart surgery, and UNRWA provides modest cash assistance to pay the utilities and send his children to vocational school.

The situation is worse in nearby Shatila, whose name has become indissolubly linked to the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians by a Lebanese Christian militia with the assent of the Israeli army. Munir Maarouf, the camp officer, said that 60 percent of the camp population of

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13,000 (including 3,000 Lebanese) lives below the poverty threshold, while the unemployment rate is 90 percent.

Everyone in Shatila knows Abu Moujahed, a fatherly figure with thick white hair and moustache, and his Children and Youth Center, established in 1997 in an old clinic of the Palestine Red Crescent. The center is open daily to all children aged 9 to 18 and offers music, dancing, games, a gender course, remedial classes, workshops, kindergarten and summer camp.

“My generation suffered but we had an easier time than today’s youth,” said Abu Moujahed, 63, whose father was a farmer from Safad in Galilee and who still has uncles and cousins there. A local leader of the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Abu Moujahed summed up the decline of the PLO in a nutshell:

In my day, we felt the Arabs were with us against the Israelis. The Socialist camp was with us against U.S. imperialism. Dozens of UN resolutions supported our cause. The PLO was strong and represented us and the resistance. After the Gulf War, the United States pressured the Gulf countries not to give money to the PLO. Many militants left the PLO to join the Islamic organizations, which became rich. Now we admit we are weak, and the United States has created a serious problem for all of us.

Abu Moujahed spoke with concern for those children whose parents have “given up the nationalist ideal and turned to crime.” There was a ten-year-old boy who left school to live in the street and is always fighting; his father is an alcoholic and drug addict, his mother a prostitute.

Another boy, 12, “with an angel face” — whose father was in jail — stole \$100 from a volunteer and only gave it up when they threatened to call the police. Then, more in sorrow than anger, Abu Moujahed showed me half a dozen pocket knives that he had confiscated from nine- and ten-year-olds.

“Our youngsters see the TV news, the discrimination against Palestinians, the hellish conditions of the camps, and some choose the negative way of revenge against the Big Snake (the United States),” the Palestinian militant said. “At the Center we try to teach them that we are not alone, that we have support from UNICEF and UNESCO and European volunteers. But the environment breeds extremism.”

Since half of UNRWA’s budget goes to education, I asked to see the schools, but they were closed for the summer. I did visit the Siblin Training Center, which includes a soccer field, gym and tennis courts, undoubtedly the brightest spot on the Palestinian horizon in Lebanon. Perched on a hill about 20 miles south of Beirut overlooking the Mediterranean, Siblin was built in 1962 on 128,000 square meters of land donated to UNRWA by Kamal Jumblatt, the late Druze leader. It was closed from 1982 to 1987 because of the insecurity but now operates at full capacity year-round, with 830 students, 55 percent of whom are girls.

“More than 65 percent of our graduates get jobs, 20 percent of them abroad, mostly in the Gulf,” Hussein Darraj, deputy principal of Siblin boasted. He was hopeful about a recent Lebanese ruling to relax some employment restrictions. It meant Palestinians would be able to work legally in construction, farming and mechanical trades, which they were doing illegally anyway.

Siblin offers 22 specialized courses

consisting mostly of two-year programs in vocational trades such as auto mechanics, electrical installations and construction. There are also two-year technical and semi-professional courses like industrial electronics and computer technology. Vocational courses for girls include hair-dressing and beauty culture and a one-year course in computer typing and data processing. The courses are free for Palestinian refugees, and the school provides on-the-job training, placement and career guidance.

Contrary to common perception, there are still Palestinian Christians in the camps, and they suffer from the same hardships as the Muslims. After the 1948 exodus from Palestine, many well-to-do Christians and some Muslims emigrated to Europe and the United States. During the early 1950s, large numbers of Palestinian Christians were given Lebanese nationality to counter the rapidly growing Muslim population. Then there was the 1976 massacre at Tal Zaatar, the only Palestinian camp in the Christian sector of East Beirut, when Lebanese Christian militias slaughtered an estimated 2,000 Palestinians and poor Lebanese in revenge for the massacre of some 200 Christians by Palestinians and Lebanese leftists at the resort of Damour, south of Beirut.

Mar Elias is the smallest camp, in the heart of Muslim West Beirut. It has a population of 1,500 — mostly Lebanese Muslims — with only 612 registered Palestinians refugees, including 280 Greek Orthodox survivors of Tal Zaatar, according to the UNRWA camp services officer. “Families came here to be safe,” Nayef Sarris, the officer said. He noted there are no Christian-Muslim problems and that many Christians observe the Muslim fast of

Ramadan with their neighbors. The main problem at Mar Elias, as in the other camps, is the lack of jobs and income, he said, pointing to the long line of children waiting outside a PLO food distribution office. Only about 25 percent of the people are employed, as teachers in UNRWA schools, clerks in shops or common laborers.

When the Ghassan Kanafani Center for Children with Disabilities in Shatila was demolished in 1985, they relocated to Mar Elias. The center provides therapy for about 150 children afflicted with cerebral palsy, blindness, heart problems and other disabilities. This Lebanese foundation, named for a Palestinian author killed by a car bomb in Beirut in 1972, operates six kindergartens, two rehabilitation centers and two children’s libraries in camps around Lebanon.

A few miles north of the Lebanese capital, on a hillside overlooking the sea, rises the huge new, ostentatious hotel complex Le Royal Beirut, incongruously located at the entrance of the Palestinian refugee camp of Dbayeh. “What’s worse, they didn’t employ any Palestinians to work in the hotel or even in its construction,” complained camp officer Hassan Ayoub, who has a degree in business management.

Dbayeh has 4,000 registered refugees and is “100 percent Christian,” including some Lebanese Christian refugees and mixed marriages, according to Ayoub. During the civil war, the Christian militias set up a checkpoint at this strategic site and used the UNRWA school as a military post, forcing many Palestinians to flee to West Beirut. After the war, Palestinian families came back to Dbayeh and found Lebanese Christians who had been driven out of Damour by Muslim militias. Now

some men from Dbayeh earn a meager livelihood by fishing, and girls sell sweets at beach stands. But most of the refugees live on handouts from Roman Catholic nuns, UNRWA or relatives overseas.

The Ghattas family is Greek-Catholic and lives in a modest two-room shelter whose roof is threatening to cave in. The father, 50, used to work nights as a *garçon* in a cafe but is now unemployed. The family had been living on what the oldest daughter earned in a candy shop at the resort of Junieh. But she stopped working after she was hit by an automobile six months ago and now plans to get married and move out.

Ayoub has done what he can for the Ghattas, who fall under the poverty line and benefit from special assistance — rice, flour, oil and a small cash subsidy. The two young boys are

bused to the UNRWA school at the Bourj Hammoud section of Beirut because there's no school in Dbayeh. But the camp officer doesn't know why the Lebanese authorities refuse the permit to repair their ceiling.

Only after visiting the camps did I fully appreciate how difficult it must have been for Khaled El Nemr and Hanan Dahche to escape the life of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. I had first met the two students last June, when they graduated summa cum laude in sciences from Roanoke College in Virginia. Awarded full scholarships, they had arrived at the traditional southern college at the worst possible time

— just before September 11, 2001 — but the college was very supportive of its first Palestinian students. Khaled, a large, gregarious, 23-year-old, proved early on to be a natural leader and was president of several academic associations. This fall, he begins work on a Ph.D. at the University of Alabama, with a fellowship from NASA at Huntsville, where he will be doing research in mathematics and physics. Hanan, 22, is quiet and self-assured and often taken for a Spaniard, with her olive skin and dark hair and eyes. She has obtained a five-year assistantship to work on a Ph.D. in biochemistry at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

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Their principal benefactor was Fahim Qubain, a retired Palestinian-American academic, who in 2000 set up the Hope Fund, a non-profit organization to provide scholarships for Palestin-

ian refugees in American schools. Dr. Qubain and his wife Nancy, who live in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, have personally canvassed scores of private colleges and obtained ten scholarships and promises of more from such noteworthy schools as Bryn Mawr and possibly Haverford. Now they have expanded their mission to approach colleges in the Midwest and New England. "We want to give the best minds a chance... and hope they'll go home to improve conditions for their families and contribute to their communities," Qubain said, emphasizing that he receives no aid from the U.S. government.

The student beneficiaries of the Hope

Fund are selected by AMIDEAST, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that administers scholarships in the Middle East. Until five years ago, there were no U.S. scholarships available for Palestinians in Lebanon, according to Hala Karakalla Kaadi, coordinator for AMIDEAST'S educational and scholarship programs. Now a number of Lebanese have obtained scholarships and a few Palestinians have gone to American schools with help from the Scholarship Search Fund and the Youth Exchange Scholarship program, as well as the Hope Fund. UNRWA had planned to suspend its scholarships to Lebanese universities for lack of funds, but it has received new donations and continued the program for this academic year.

With typical Middle Eastern hospitality, Hanan and Khaled had invited me to visit their homes when I went to Lebanon. Hanan, who returned at the same time to see her family, had warned that I would have to obtain permission from the Lebanese Army to visit the Ain el Helweh camp. I had laughed at the idea. After all, I had visited Ain el Helweh innumerable times during the civil war. But on arrival in Beirut, I heard that Ain el Helweh had become a dangerous place, a kind of Wild West, home to Palestinian extremists and Lebanese outlaws. UNRWA confirmed I would have to get special permission to enter the camp.

On the day of my planned visit to the Dahches, I applied for a permit at the

office of Lebanese Army Intelligence in Saïda, 25 miles south of Beirut. It would take four days to process my application, the official in civilian dress said in good English. All foreigners need permits to get into Ain el Helweh, even Iranians, he said pointing to two bearded men next to me. He added that even if I had a permit, he could not let me in that day because "the environment was hostile to Americans." Palestinians confirmed that the situation at Ain El Helweh was volatile, but they stressed that it had been allowed to fester deliberately by the Lebanese and the Syrians. In the wake of a failed assassination attempt on the minister of defense in mid-July, the Lebanese arrested two Palestinian suspects from Ain el Helweh and increased security measures around the camp.

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Lebanese military with heavy armor were posted at the entrance to Ain el Helweh. A guard intercepted me, but waved me through when I gave my permit number. I remained in the camp for most of the day and saw no other arms, no militia, no threatening demonstrations. Ain el Helweh resembled any other poor urban neighborhood of Lebanon, only noisier, busier and more congested. Officially, 45,000 registered Palestinian refugees live here, but residents say the population is closer to 75,000.

My first stop was the Social Communication Center, an NGO run by Salah Salah's wife Samira. Sixteen young women had come to the center that day — students and school dropouts, housewives

with jobless husbands, daughters with ailing siblings — all trying to boost the family income. They were given the materials and instruction on how to embroider colorful geometric designs on purses, dresses and jackets, which were sent to Beirut to be marketed. A 20-year-old girl, who left school to care for two young brothers when their mother died, said she can make a small embroidered bag in one day, for which she receives 1,500 Lebanese pounds or one dollar. The center also provides courses in English, math, Arabic and computers.

Mohamed Dahche picked me up at the center in his aging Mitsubishi, a reminder of better times when he had worked as a lathe operator in Libya. Muammar Qadhafi had ordered the expulsion of all Palestinians in the wake of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, seen as a Palestinian capitulation. The Dahches moved into a large house with two of his brothers and their families in Ain el Helweh; now they run a lathe machine shop in the camp.

Mrs. Dahche, wearing a traditional headscarf, long skirt and blouse, welcomed me to her home and apologized for the heat and lack of electricity, which meant no relief from the electric fan. Appearing very American in her T-shirt and jeans skirt, Hanan introduced me to the five younger children, for whom she feels “responsible.” She has taken it upon herself to help them find scholarships when they finish UNRWA high school. Three older sisters are married, an older brother goes to Beirut Arab University, and another brother is working in the United Arab Emirates as a photographer. Over a tasty meal of roast chicken and vegetables, Hanan talked about her dream to become chair of the Department of Biochemistry at the Ameri-

can University of Beirut. With a doctorate from an American college, she would be able to teach at AUB or an UNRWA school, or work for a private company.

When it grew cooler, Hanan took me for a tour of Ain el Helweh. She spoke with pride of the camp — “the nicest one in Lebanon” — quite independent, with its own dentists, restaurants, shopping centers and jewelry stores. She seemed unconcerned about going out with her head uncovered, accompanied by someone who looked typically American. Earlier she had explained that she had decided not to wear a headscarf in the United States “for security reasons.” Had she remained in Ain el Helweh, she would have covered herself like most girls, because religious people said it was “God’s way.”

“I feel perfectly safe in Ain el Helweh,” she declared. “I am scared when I go outside the camp. Everybody here knows everybody. If the rumors were true about all the criminals, there wouldn’t be so many people shopping. Even Lebanese come to the camp because there are no taxes and goods are cheaper.”

Khaled El Nemr’s father Walid came in a taxi to take me to their home in Beirut’s Bourj Al Barajneh neighborhood just outside the refugee camp. Khaled had spent the summer at Roanoke College doing research, but his parents had urged me to visit them anyway. Walid El Nemr was two when his father and uncle fled with their families from Nazareth to Lebanon in 1948. They had brought money to live for six months and rented an apartment in the Muslim quarter of Bourj Al Barajneh. When this exile was prolonged, the brothers, both tailors, went to work in a small textile factory. Later, the young Walid took up the family profession and by 1952

had become a major tailor in his own right, with a shop in Achrafieh in Christian East Beirut.

For some 20 years, business prospered, Walid El Nemr recounted. He had many Lebanese Christian clients, and two of his sisters married Lebanese Muslims. Then in 1975, the civil war broke out. The El Nemrs escaped to Bourj Al Barajneh. When the Shiite militias' rockets pounded Bourj Al Barajneh camp, El Nemr again fled with his family to Abu Dhabi in the Gulf. There he worked with a younger brother, manager of Elégance Boutique. But life was expensive in the Emirates and there were no UNRWA schools, so the El Nemrs came "home" to Lebanon in 1990. When El Nemr's eyesight began to fail, he could no longer work as a tailor and now manages a small toy shop for his brother in the Gulf.

The El Nemrs live in a pleasant apartment with a large living-dining room and two bedrooms for the parents and five children — minus Khaled. When we arrived, a tanker was pumping water into the building; the city water supply is erratic, and most people have their own tanks. Since there are only four hours of electricity a day, El Nemr has installed a parallel system using an old car battery.

There were other guests, relatives from the Palestinian Diaspora: sister-in-law Tamar Samara, whose husband has an Arab food store in Denmark, and her five children. They all have Danish nationality but dream of going back to Palestine. Her 25-year-old son will finish medical studies next year and hopes to work as a doctor in the new Palestinian state of the West Bank and Gaza. Her sister Fida Samara, who lives in Daytona Beach, FL, with her husband, had come back because she is

worried that their two young children will lose their Palestinian identity. Although the family has American citizenship, they plan to move to the Emirates, where her husband will try to get a job with a newspaper.

After the traditional feast of roast chicken, Walid El Nemr and I walked to his shop nearby. The neighborhood was a friendly mix of Lebanese Shiites and Palestinians, and nearly everyone greeted Walid warmly. "This is where Khaled used to do his homework, and now his brother is following in his footsteps," the father said with pride. There was 18-year-old Tariq with his school books, in the midst of the jumble of toy guns, teddy bears and games mostly from Taiwan. Business was slow, Tariq apologized; only one sale all day, some sparklers for 1,000 Lebanese pounds — about 70 U.S. cents.

Like most Palestinians, the El Nemrs survive thanks to help from relatives abroad and UNRWA. Walid said he wanted to go back to Nazareth, where he still has family, although Israelis have occupied his father's land. "But I would be a foreigner in the West Bank or Gaza. I am more at home in Lebanon ... if only we could have normal civil rights."

This idea that Palestinian refugees might become permanent residents drives most Lebanese — Christians and Muslims — into a state of panic; because they tend to blame Palestinians for all their woes, from the tense relations with their neighbors Israel and Syria, to the disastrous state of the economy. But a growing number of Lebanese — Christian and Muslims — view the Palestinian refugees as a humanitarian problem, which must be engaged urgently. Some Lebanese-Palestinian NGOs are working along with European volunteers to alleviate the

hardships of camp life.

Dr. Kamal F. Badr, chairman of the Department of Internal Medicine at the American University of Beirut, is a founder of the Volunteer Outreach Clinic in Shatila camp. Every Saturday, a dozen Lebanese medical students and professors from different schools give their services to anybody who walks into the one-room clinic in an unused building of the Palestine Red Crescent Society. Fundraising campaigns are held to buy the medicines.

“Our patients’ needs are overwhelming,” Dr. Badr said. “Some have advanced heart disease, diabetes, cancer or high blood pressure and are so destitute they can’t afford the cheapest medicines.” Dr. Badr, who comes from a Lebanese Protestant family, admits that when he was young, he believed that the Palestinians threatened the Christians in Lebanon. For a while, he sympathized with the Phalangist party, which was allied with Israel in its struggle against the PLO. But, by the time

he went to Harvard Medical School in 1982, he had changed radically and opposed all killing, particularly in the name of Christianity. After teaching at Vanderbilt and Emory Universities in the United States, Dr. Badr returned to AUB in 2000 with a mission: to help Palestinian refugees, “who are still generally ignored by Lebanese society.”

In mid-August, Abbas Zaki, Palestinian minister for refugee affairs, held extensive talks with Lebanese government, political and religious leaders, reassuring them that the Palestinian Authority has not relinquished its claim for the refugees to be granted the right of return to their homeland. Meanwhile, the Palestinian official stressed, the refugees should be given basic civil rights while they are in Lebanon — education, social needs, decent living conditions and the opportunity to work. The response was positive; everyone agreed that it was time to establish a Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue.