

REFLECTIONS ON REFUGEE POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION. THE CASE OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA SUBJETIVACIÓN POLÍTICA DE LOS REFUGIADOS. EL CASO DE LOS REFUGIADOS PALESTINOS EN LÍBANO

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Leveraging Foucauldian perspectives on political subjectivation and its relevance to the refugee experience, this article addresses the socio-juridical violence surrounding Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, highlighting the lack of legal status, the instrumentalization of *tawteen* and the refugee camps as forms of subjection underpinning political subjectivation among them.

Ethnographic fieldwork findings support the argument that resignifications of both the refugee identity and the refugee camp experience, alongside early political socialization, social mobilization, and participation, serve as practices of resistance that, in themselves, account for processes, dimensions, and expressions of political subjectivation.

The main objective is to offer a critical approach to the political capacity of refugees, challenging traditional views that depict them merely as victims or threats.

Keywords: political subjectivation, Foucault, Palestinian refugees, refugee camp, resistance

Partiendo del aporte foucaultiano sobre la subjetivación política y su relevancia para la experiencia de los refugiados, en este artículo se aborda la violencia sociojurídica enfrentada por los refugiados palestinos en Líbano, destacando la ausencia de estatus legal, la instrumentalización del tawteen y de los campos de refugiados como formas de sujeción que impulsan su subjetivación política.

Hallazgos de trabajo de campo etnográfico respaldan el que la resignificación de la identidad de refugiado y del campo de refugiados, así como una socialización política temprana y la movilización social constituyen prácticas de resistencia que dan cuenta de procesos, dimensiones y expresiones de subjetivación política.

El objetivo principal es ofrecer una aproximación crítica a la capacidad política de los refugiados, desafiando visiones tradicionales que los representan meramente como víctimas o amenazas.

Palabras clave: *subjetivación política, Foucault, refugiados palestinos, campo de refugiados, resistencia*

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INTRODUCTION

Refugees' subjectivities as victims or threats have been strongly contested in scholarly literature (Diab et al., 2024; Kallio et al., 2019; Polychroniou, 2021; Williams, 2014). The fact that these lives are lived under conditions of exception as bare life and under the full control of sovereign power, as argued by Agamben (2004, 2016), could lead us to think that they are unequivocally subjected to the state with no agency. As such, the possibility of political capacity is considered solely under state support. Political subjectivation as a critical analysis category opposes this claim and aids in the examination of refugees' realities beyond normative perspectives.

According to Michel Foucault (1999, 2006), subjectivation is preceded by objectivation, highlighting the interdependence between both processes. This analysis suggests that resistance serves as an action aimed at counteracting power and governance, which in turn facilitates the transformation of power relations and those involved. Therefore, refugee subjectivation should be approached as an ongoing process that has its starting point in the power dynamics affecting refugees, to later acknowledge the strategies they employ to resist forces of subjection and reclaim their subjectivity through conscious and reflective actions.

To translate theoretical insights into empirical reality, the paper approaches to the case of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (PRL). PRLs are a highly marginalized community subjected to the exceptional humanitarian and protection international regimes created for Palestinians and to a myriad of challenges in Lebanon that obstruct access to rights and a dignified life.

There is no legal definition of a Palestinian refugee. For this discussion, the term "Palestinian refugee" may refer to individuals who hold Palestinian nationality, those who were displaced from Palestine in 1948 and 1967 and their descendants, individuals registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) or the Lebanese government as Palestinians, and those who possess a Palestinian identity document.

To elaborate on the central thesis, this article has four sections. First, drawing on Foucauldian insights, it will theoretically examine the concept of political subjectivation and its relevance to the refugee experience. Second, it will address the socio-juridical violence surrounding PRLs, taking into account the lack of a legal status and social exclusionary practices that exploit fear of *tawteen*¹ and the refugee camps, as forms of subjection underpinning political subjectivation among Palestinians. Third, we will discuss the methodological considerations in approaching our empirical case in the field. Fourth, it will present an analysis of political expressions observed through ethnographic work with this community, which sustains the argument that the resignification of both the refugee identity and the experience of the refugee camp, alongside early political socialization, social mobilization, and participation, serve as practices of resistance that account for processes, dimensions, and expressions of political subjectivation among PRLs.

This exploration aims to address the question: If refugees can express political agency, how is their political subjectivation enabled, and what factors contribute to this process?

¹ As it is known in the Lebanese political jargon, *tawteen* is the word in Arabic to name an assimilation or permanent settlement of Palestinians through their naturalization.

By answering this question, the objective of this analysis is to offer a critical insight into the political agency of refugees, challenging traditional normative perspectives that portray them solely as victims or threats.

THEORETICAL INSIGHTS ON THE REFUGEE POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION

The refugee condition encompasses a broad and diverse array of aspects that extend beyond the legal and administrative boundaries typically associated with the refugee status. Scholarly literature (Diab et al., 2024; Kallio et al., 2019; Lacroix, 2004; Polychroniou, 2021; Williams, 2014) addressing the political dimension of refugee subjectivity has aimed to critique the essentialist and abstract notion of the refugee figure, and to affirm their status as political subjects. Becoming political is manifested relationally and reflectively at both individual and collective levels and can be expressed through everyday actions or exercises of power undertaken by refugees.

The concept of political subjectivation is useful for examining the realities of refugees beyond a normative standpoint. The Foucauldian (1999) premise that subjects are bound to power relations that simultaneously create resistance is adopted for the analysis. Thus, any subject dominated by power also opposes, contests, and resists the dominating power that attempts to discipline or normalize it.

Foucault (1982, 1999) was interested in examining objectivation based on the subject's experience, particularly when confined within dichotomous normative categories such as the sane and the insane, or for the citizen and the refugee; those who belong to a political community versus those who, through persecution, are excluded. Accordingly, objectivation precedes subjectivation, showing an interdependence between the two processes (Foucault, 1999, 2006). His inquiry into how individuals recognize themselves as subjects of, for example, their sexuality, is useful if extrapolated to address the refugee condition. Specifically, this involves exploring how individuals experiencing refugee status, either as a legal or a social category, come to recognize themselves as subjects of this condition and respond to it.

Subjectivation, according to Foucault (2003), refers to the process by which an individual transforms themselves into the subject of their own practices and knowledge. Thus, the subject is neither completely subjugated nor entirely free. This concept of subjectivation implies a reappropriation of the self, resulting from interactions and connections with others and the world. Therefore, subjectivation accounts for an ethical process that produces knowledge about the subject, contributes to the subject's self-awareness, and generates knowledge concerning the world and the subject's place within power relations. Subjectivation is therefore political as it implies for the subject to claim a space of visibility and influence, asserting the capacity to redefine power relationships and challenge the subjugation structures applied upon them.

As such, political subjectivation is inherently linked to the subject formation from a critical and ethical standpoint (Foucault, 1999, 2006). This implies that subjectivation is a continuous process characterized by the questioning of "how not to be governed from that way, for this [purpose], in the name of these principles, in the face of those goals" (Foucault, 2006, p. 7). This analysis suggests that resistance is an action aimed at counteracting power and

governance, thereby facilitating the transformation of power relations and those involved. Consequently, to explore refugees' subjectivation, it should be regarded as a continuous process that starts with an examination of the power dynamics in which refugees find themselves, followed by an observation of the methods and strategies employed by refugees to resist subjection forces and reclaim their subjectivity through conscious and reflective actions.

To understand the power dynamics refugees face, it is important to consider citizenship, which Arendt (1974) defined as the right to have rights and therefore the traditional framework within which an individual can be considered a political subject. As such, elaborating on Foucauldian insights on biopower, it is suggested that this notion highlights how control over life became the primary concern of the State, leading to biopolitics.

Agamben's (2016) interpretation of Arendtian theoretical insights portraying the refugee as the true bearer of rights existing outside the fiction of citizenship led him to present the refugee as *nuda vida*, or bare life. Research focused on the political subjectivation of refugees centers its criticism on this aspect, as their interest stems from exploring refugees' everyday practices in confronting conditions of forced displacement and imposed identities. These studies problematize Agamben's characterization of the refugee as a life stripped of political capacity due to disconnection from a political community. In this context, the refugee is perceived as lacking political agency, recognized only within state boundaries.

The issue extends beyond an ontological dimension and includes the instrumentalization of legal categories serving as devices of biopolitical power (Foucault, 1998; Reid, 2010). From this perspective, refugees represent a non-place, a deficit in the modern nation-state system, with refugee status offering marginal protection acknowledged by the international community (Morales, 2015). This status implies the dispossession suffered by individuals as political subjects, politicizing refugees through their biopolitical construction as manageable victims or threats, and subordinating state protection under a humanitarian paradigm (Fassin, 2016). This suggests that although addressing refugees is an inherently political act, their political essence is subsumed under humanitarian management (Feldman, 2012).

The refugee, deprived of a citizenship that defines them as a political subject, encounters fragmentation, a lack of place and belonging, and an elusive universalist ideal of human rights. Despite these factors delineating their precarious existence where state power is evident, it is within this context that the refugee develops a subjectivation process (Morales, 2015). Accordingly, studies advocate for the premise that political experiences extend beyond state margins (Bonvillani, 2012; Polychroniou, 2021), which suggests that refugees become political subjects through the exercise of everyday acts of power (Butler & Spivak, 2007).

Critical deconstruction of the political and the refugee allows us to understand them as political subjects, which must be understood as social agents with historical consciousness that confronts their living conditions and societal rules by challenging dominant structures aiming to transform societal functioning (Bonvillani, 2012; Duque et al., 2016; Ruíz Silva & Prada Londoño, 2012).

As per the domination structures faced by refugees, it is acknowledged that two orders—legal and social—legitimize the power dynamics experienced by them, as well

as the representation and the discourse that surround them. Under this perspective, it could be suggested that being a refugee constitutes not only a legal category defined by international refugee law but also reflects a long-standing social classification often viewed as problematic (Holborn, 1975; Hope, 1939; Morris, 2004). As a result, refugees must conform to the definitions, representations, and behaviors expected of them within the legal and humanitarian frameworks governing their circumstances.

Furthermore, refugees find themselves subjected to social orders that differentiate them from citizens, who have "a right of being political" (Isin, 2002, p. 1), thereby designating them to the marginalized position of the Other. Within this framework, refugees learn to navigate these externally imposed identities, which ultimately lead to their subjectivation.

Introducing situated research into the political subjectivation processes that refugees face and identifying their created subjectivities helps to reflect on their political intentions, strategies, and projections within legal-administrative and social structures. Hence, the empirical case study will be introduced prior to presenting the methods and strategies employed by PRLs to resist subjection forces and reclaim their subjectivity through reflective and conscious acts of resistance.

A CASE OF LEGAL STATUS, *TAWTEEN* AND THE REFUGEE CAMP: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIO-JURIDICAL VIOLENCE SURROUNDING PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

The challenges faced by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are primarily attributed to their legal and social status, including restrictions on various rights, such as the right to work, to form associations, and to buy land. Following 1990, after the Lebanese Civil War, these restrictions became more severe, leading to increased alienation and stigma due to associations with internal instability and Israeli military incursions in Lebanon.

This discussion will examine the gaps in Lebanese law regarding the legal status of Palestinians and how this situation abandons them in a condition of exception that negatively affects the guarantee of their rights. Additionally, it will explore the ongoing social tensions towards Palestinian refugees, who are sometimes viewed as a threat to national unity, by portraying the fears that *tawteen* and the refugee camp evoke. These instances of violence towards PRLs should be regarded as forms of subjection that underlie their political subjectivation.

Legal status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

In juridical terms, the violence that surrounds PRLs is enabled by the absence of a clear definition of what will be considered a Palestinian refugee in the Lebanese law. El Kobrossi and Chidiac (2009) point out that the Lebanese State did not assign any specific definition when Palestinians first arrived in 1948, and in consequence, "every person who sought refuge in Lebanon as a result of the conflict in Palestine, regardless of nationality, original residence location and economic situation, is considered to be a [Palestinian] refugee" (El-Kobrossi & Chidiac, 2009).

Despite this, the UNRWA has established a definition of a "Palestine refugee" to consider "people whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948,

who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict" (UNRWA, n.d.-a), which also includes their descendants. This definition was, however, implemented to facilitate the operationalization of its relief programs rather than to protect the rights of the displaced Palestinians. Therefore, the definition excludes those Palestinians who arrived in Lebanon after 1948 (Frontiers Association, 2006).

While the political status of Palestinian refugees is considered an exceptional case for international refugee law (Chimni, 2000; Takkenberg, 1998), under Lebanese Law, Palestinian refugees are considered foreigners and de facto stateless; therefore, refugee presence in the country is regulated under immigration legislation (Janmyr, 2017; UNHCR, n.d.). Furthermore, "they experience restrictions, embedded in law and practice, in many areas of life, including with respect to employment, social security, property ownership, and mobility both within (in and out of the camps) and outside the country, as well as access to public services" (Albanese & Takkenberg, 2020, p. 214), and are also subjected to restrictions that can be tightened depending on the political and security environments in Lebanon and on changing political stances from decision-making actors (Houssari, 2021; Suleiman, 2008).

Moreover, Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Asylum provisions are narrowly assumed in Lebanese immigration laws, as the Lebanese reject the idea of Lebanon as a country of asylum (Janmyr, 2017); a paradoxical standpoint, as Lebanon is ranked globally as the country with the highest number of refugees per capita (ACNUR, n.d.). As a result, Lebanon relies on the UN—the UNRWA for the case of Palestinians and the UNHCR for the rest of the refugees—for their assistance and protection.

Despite the juridical gaps, the Lebanese Government allows for Palestinians to register at the Directorate of Political Affairs and Refugees (DPAR) within the General Directorate of General Security, heedless of their registration with UNRWA (Albanese & Takkenberg, 2020).

Setting aside Palestinians from Syria who arrived in Lebanon after 2011,² Lebanon categorizes Palestinian refugees residing within its borders into three groups: those with UNRWA registration cards, those registered with the DPAR but without UNRWA cards, and Palestinians who lack any valid identity documents as they arrived in Lebanon in the late 1960s and 1970s non-ID refugees. This complex registration system makes it difficult for Palestinian refugees to comply, as their recognition depends solely on their identity documents.

2 For recent and valuable comparative studies on Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, see: Ragi, Marie, et al (2025). Legal residency status and its relationship with health indicators among Syrian refugees in Lebanon: a nested cross-sectional study, *BMJ Global Health*, 10:e017767, available at: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/10/2/e017767>; Brun, C., Maalouf, M. (2022). Vulnerability amidst Compounded Crises in Lebanon: The experience of Syrian and Palestinian Refugees. *VULNER Research Report 2*, Beirut, available at: https://www.vulner.eu/117859/VULNER_WP7_Report-2.pdf; International Labor Organization (2021). *Assessing Informality and Vulnerability among Disadvantaged Groups in Lebanon: A Survey of Lebanese, and Syrian and Palestinian Refugees*, Beirut, available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@arabstates/@ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_816649.pdf; Abdel-Khalek, Ahmed, et al. (2021). "A Comparative Study of Resilience among Refugees in Palestinian and Syrian Camps and the Lebanese in Lebanon," *Journal of the Association of Arab Universities for Research in Higher Education* Vol. 41: 4, Article 2, available at: https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/jaaru_rhe/vol41/iss4/2/; Andersen, Lars Erslev (2016). *The neglected: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the Syrian refugee crisis*, DIIS Report, No. 2016:12, ISBN 978-87-7605-856-2, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen, available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/197637/1/878191410.pdf>.

Whereas registration gives Palestinian refugees legal residence (Albanese & Takkenberg, 2020), they face a continuum of restrictions and obstacles to accessing social protection and livelihoods. As a report by OCHA (2022) shows, 63% of Palestinian households reported being unable to afford basic needs.

The lack of formal legal status can be interpreted as part of a politically oriented policy of transferring responsibility for refugees to the international community, which opens the door for further diminishment of rights and increased marginalization. This policy comes with discourses that look to justify the government's decisions, and these in turn use nationalistic and security language to argue for the exclusion of Palestinians from a general granting of civil rights and economic rights.

The logic implied here is that providing Palestinians with full rights will pave the way for a permanent settlement, or *tawteen*, which will in turn prevent them from moving elsewhere abroad and push for their naturalization in Lebanon. Moreover, by becoming citizens, the Palestinians would stimulate the already volatile tensions in which Lebanon is immersed, internally and regionally.

The Lebanese government has repeatedly announced that the responsibility of the Palestinians' (re)settlement is and must remain an Israeli issue, along with their right of return and to compensation (Gemayel, 2018). As a consequence, *tawteen* becomes taboo, and any debate within the Lebanese political sphere regarding civil and economic rights leads to the "point that rights come to be substituted with quick humanitarian or security solutions" (Hanafi, 2010, p. 53).

The Palestinian struggle is grounded in the right of return to Palestine. As such, Palestinians do not intend to assimilate in Lebanon because this would mean giving up their struggle and losing an essential element of their collective identity. As the Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees shows,

[...] while Palestinians demand inclusion in the labor and real estate markets as well as free movement, political inclusion and governance of the refugee community is a more contested topic. Neither Palestinians nor Lebanese want the complete assimilation, or *tawteen*, of refugees into the Lebanese State. The ideal case scenario would be one where 'citizen-refugees' enjoy civil and economic rights as well as the right to space and mobility, all the while contributing through their consumption and taxes to the Lebanese economy as a whole, until their final settlement with the right to return. (Chaaban et al., 2010, p. x)

In Foucauldian terms, the absence of comprehensive legal recognition for Palestinian refugees indicates a disciplinary mechanism instrumental to the Lebanese State that classifies Palestinians using non-classification. This lack of status also suggests a state of exception (Agamben, 2004), where Palestinians are included through their exclusion, enabling the exercise of power through disciplinary and normalization practices endorsed by legal frameworks and societal norms.

Social Marginalization of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: The Threats of Tawteen and the Refugee Camps

The inherent suspicion surrounding the status and permanence of Palestinian refugees amplifies their exclusionary condition. Their social marginalization is reflected in their

relegation to a state of alienation, evident in legal terms and symbolically within collective imagery as a threat to the national unity of Lebanon and materially within camps and informal settlements. This negative outcome reinforces the perception of suspicion and danger associated with those considered Others and outlaws; individuals often perceived as dangerous outsiders confined to marginalized and unsafe areas, who do not belong with Us and may consequently pose a threat.

On the symbolic character of social marginalization, there has been an instrumental use of existing divisions within Lebanese society by the internal political groups for decades. The community has been fragmented into political and religious groups in a way that has affected its sense of unity, especially during and after the war. In this context, Palestinians have been identified as a factor that exacerbated these tensions. As Jihane Sfeir (2010) argues, “the [Palestinian] refugee became a potential disrupter of public order living on the margins of the society, but also an essential element in the formation of [the] Lebanese national identity because he or she reflected the anti-Lebanese identity” (p. 19).

The negative portrayal of Palestinians as a threat has been used in Lebanese politics as a primary source of political legitimacy, fostering ongoing social violence and denial towards them. The main expression of this violence is its depiction in terms of demographics. Particularly after the war, the number of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA served as the main source to profile this community. With minor adjustments from year to year, UNRWA has stated that there are around 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon,³ or approximately 10% of the total Lebanese population. In the post-war years, this image fueled distrust and accusations among the Lebanese society about the danger of having such Others in the country. Therefore, “the majority of the Lebanese vehemently oppose the permanent settlement of Palestinians in the country [...], [a position that] is sometimes used to justify discriminatory policies [...] with regard to the social, economic, and civil rights of the Palestinians” (Hanafi, 2010, p. 53).

Over the past few decades, scholars have noted that these numbers must be interpreted carefully, considering the different statuses refugees possess and distinguishing between recognized refugees and those residing in Lebanon (Hanafi, 2010; IFPO & CNRS, 2007; Pedersen, 2002; Ugland et al., 2003). These claims insist that UNRWA records only show the figures of registered refugees without regard to their permanence in Lebanon. Even the UNRWA recognizes that “registration is voluntary; deaths as well as emigration remain often unreported, and refugees can continue registering newborns as they move abroad through the UNRWA online registration system” (UNRWA, n.d.-b). Therefore, the use of UNRWA figures should keep these shortcomings in mind.

In 2018, the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC et al., 2018) led a household census that revealed that only 174,422 of Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA continue to live in the country, less than half of UNRWA registrations, an analysis that was supported by academia and UNRWA itself (Chaaban et al., 2016). Of those, 45% reside in the twelve existing camps and 55% in the 156 gatherings⁴ across

³ Up to February 2025, UNRWA reports that almost 500,000 Palestine refugees are registered.

⁴ The gatherings are unofficial settlements of Palestinian refugees located across Lebanon that were set up mainly by Palestinian refugees

Lebanon. Whereas the LPDC is said to impel the use of those figures in the public arena, it seems it will take time to change.

Attempting to counter these discourses and practices of social stigma and marginalization, the LPDC completed a series of consultations, the findings of which are presented in two publications that aim at “breaking the stereotypes prevailed against Palestinians that ruled the minds of large segments of the Lebanese population during the years of the Civil War” (Nehmeh, 2018, p. 4). Other than achieving its goal, negative aspects of the interaction between Lebanese and Palestinian communities emerged, particularly, regarding the Palestinian involvement in the civil war and events taken place between the late 1960s and up to 1982, a period that marked the presence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the country and its parastate government in what has been called a state within a state (Sfeir, 2010). However, the results indicate that after 1982, the stigma towards Palestinians was no longer justified as the PLO was expelled and further threats to Lebanon responded to internal conflicts and to “the continuation of the Israeli wars against Lebanon” (Nehmeh, 2018, p. 4).

Yet, the Palestinian and Lebanese interaction remains bittersweet. Whereas “*tawteen* is the scarecrow that has been used to generate a public phobia against the basic rights of the Palestinians” (Hanafi, 2010, p. 53), they think of themselves as forgotten, enduring “a hostile environment where [their] basic human rights... have no effective means of representation or protection” (p. 54). As such, ongoing social tensions towards Palestinian refugees persist as a continuation of their depiction as a threat to national unity (Houssari, 2021).

On the material character of the marginalization faced by Palestinians, the refugee camps are vivid proof of the exclusion applied to them. The camps are the place where the State has allowed the humanitarian government (the UNRWA) to locate them. The rule of law thus becomes a gray concept, creating the idea among the local population of, according to a government official, “threatening and outlaw spaces that must be avoided by the Lebanese” (Tyre, 2011).

In Lebanon, Palestinian refugee camps are under the management of UNRWA, while Palestinian political factions and their military order the life inside. These actors, despite overall criticism about their inefficiency and even corruption, are, to some extent, regarded as the shell of an internal government. After the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982, the resulting power vacuum led to the imposition of a

web of complex power structures [inside the camps]. This web was comprised of two popular committees (one pro-Syrian and the other pro-PLO), a security committee, a committee of camp notables, the local committee, political factions, Islamist non-Palestinian groups, imams, PLO popular unions and syndicates (workers, women, engineers, etc.), NGO’s, and UNRWA directors. (Hanafi, 2010, p. 59)

The Palestinian self-control of the camps resulted from an agreement made in 1969 between the Lebanese government and the PLO: the Cairo Agreements. The expulsion of the PLO from the country led to the agreement’s abrogation. In practice, however, control over those territories was never in the interest or capacity of the government. Thus, the camps are a material but highly symbolic frontier between the Lebanese and the Palestinians, which serves both sides for their own aims.

lacking identity documentation (the so-called non-ID refugees). The word “gathering” is used as it is the native term to name these places.

Other than promoting Palestinian autonomy, the fact that the State detached itself from the camps left the door open to place Palestinian refugees outside the law and to keep them as the constitutive other, while reviving the discourses that justify this treatment.

As a continuum of their marginalization, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are often seen as the most underprivileged when compared to Palestinians in Syria or Jordan. In contrast with the situation in these countries, 45% of PRLs still reside in the camps, and approximately 80% of them are living below the national poverty line (UNRWA, n.d.-b).

According to the UNRWA,

[...] the lack of governance in Palestinian refugee camps and the absence of a judicial and law enforcement system, as well as a stalled judicial system in the host country, contribute to an increase in protection risks that is still unattended. Levels of violence against children and gender-based violence are reported to be high, but individuals are often reluctant to seek support due to stigma and fears around a lack of confidentiality and reprisals. (UNRWA, n.d.-b)

Accordingly, the Lebanese fear of naturalization (*tawteen*) and refugee camps leads to the social marginalization of PRLs, and narratives that depict refugees as the Other that reflect the anti-Lebanese, intensify these fears, thus justifying exclusionary practices. From this theoretical perspective, the absence of legal status and the presence of social exclusionary practices exploiting these fears can be identified as significant factors contributing to the political subjectivation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The field intervention took place from August to July 2011. By using ethnography, the empirical case was approached through the triangulation of various methods: observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, along with continuous interactions with key individuals. The aim was to explore the particularities of the Palestinian refugee condition, life in refugee camps, the idea of return to Palestine, interactions with the Lebanese society in everyday life, historical relations between Palestinians and Lebanese, and the concept of resistance.

The field work occurred in six UNRWA Palestinian refugee camps located in Beirut (Sabra, Shatila, Mar Elias, and Bourj el Barajneh), Saida (Ail el-Helweh), and Tyre (Rashidiyeh), as well as in three settlements in southern Lebanon (Shabriha, Qazmiyeh, and Broughliyeh).

Based on observations during these visits, specific interviewees were identified and invited to provide first-hand accounts, while others were referred by third parties. Their selection criteria included participation and involvement in social and political organizations, irrespective of gender, age, or affiliation. Considering the significance of living in refugee camps for the Palestinian community in terms of subjectivation and collective identity formation (Hanafi, 2010; Järvi, 2024; Siklawi, 2019; Ugland et al., 2003), testimony collection from residents of these areas was also considered.

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Palestinian community actively involved in the PLO, Palestinian civil society organizations, UNRWA, and non-mobilized residents of the camps and settlements. Additionally, formal and informal conversations were held with staff from the Union of Tyre Municipalities in

southern Lebanon. All interactions were conducted under a confidentiality agreement, so the reference to them will primarily identify the profile of the interviewee, the location, and the date of the meeting. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants.

The interaction and interviews were primarily conducted in English, though some were held in Arabic with translation assistance from our contacts. The lack of fluency in Arabic presented a challenge, as communicating in the participants' native language could have provided more accurate information. The use of English limited the expression of ideas and emotions that could have been conveyed during interviews. However, efforts were made to mitigate misunderstandings with the help of a translator, and the researcher reviewed the direction and purpose of the questions beforehand to facilitate the translation process.

Despite the time elapsed since data collection, the material reflects the complex realities framing the life circumstances of the refugees studied. Considering the relational, social, and recursive nature of subjectivity, it is believed that these findings allow for an approach to political subjectivation as a critical analysis category to address refugees' subjectivities from their political dimension. This approach can then be extrapolated or compared with contemporary scenarios to uncover additional dimensions of subjectivity, providing further theoretical support for the topic.

ASSERTING POLITICAL AGENCY: POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION THROUGH RESISTANCE

The meaning given to the Palestinian refugee condition, to the notion of resistance, and to the experience of the refugee camp were issues approached during fieldwork that shed light on the Palestinian refugees' ways to cope and confront their reality.

As such, it is proper to introduce the meanings and practices of resistance echoed during the field study. Conceptually understood as an emancipatory action that contests domination (Hoy, 2004), resistance can have several denotations and aims from the different standpoints in which one individual is situated. Consequently, the idea of a Palestinian resistance or struggle only in its armed dimension must be overcome.

Building on the previous theoretical discussion, this section analyses political expressions observed among PRLs, from which it is argued that the resignification of both the refugee identity and the experience of the refugee camp, alongside early political socialization, social mobilization and participation, serve as practices of resistance that in themselves, account for processes, dimensions, and expressions of political subjectivation among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Through these practices, PRLs aim to challenge the condition of exception and the social exclusion associated with their Palestinian refugee status, thereby asserting their political agency.

The Meaning, Contention, and Reappropriation of the Palestinian Refugee Condition

To describe the Palestinian refugee condition, informants often referred to injustice, discrimination, and oppression; it is simultaneously a rejected category and an instrument of resistance. In this process of identity construction, the meaning assigned to the term refugee

plays a critical role in defining and defying the symbolic and material consequences that the refugee condition implies for them regarding the denial of rights, stigma, and marginalization.

To be a refugee, to be a Palestinian refugee, or to be a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon implies distinct meanings for Palestinians. As mentioned by one informant:

The refugee is someone who was forced to leave his land, his homeland, someone who lost his land, someone who lost his rights, everything, and the refugee in Lebanon is something else, different from what it means to be a refugee in Syria, or in European countries. The refugee in Lebanon has no rights, like Black people in the United States.⁵

Adding to the reflection, another informant shared:

All the pressure that is applied to our Palestinian people is easy, but the most difficult thing for us is the word refugee, the term refugee, to tell “this is a Palestinian refugee”... Refugee, if you ask about the term refugee you may find about 99 meanings but in general all these meanings are suffering, torturing, injustice, discrimination, everything that is related to injustice, related to suffering, painful [...] ⁶

From these perspectives, the experience of being a refugee should prompt his analysis to adopt a broader understanding of this category. It is a situational condition beyond a legal status encompassing what occurs after the denial of rights: injustice, stigma, and alienation.

Before the Oslo Agreement,⁷ the PLO established the Department of Returnees as a political stance under the claim to the right to return, deliberately refusing to use the term refugee. One informant commented that “the term returnee means that they have the right to return like all other refugees.” And then went on further saying that “if their countries are in a certain situation, they [other refugees] can return. [So, a Palestinian] returnee means that I have the right to return to my land, to my homeland.”⁸

The meaning assigned to the term returnee meant to highlight the situation of the Palestinian refugees; however, the peace negotiations between the PLO and Israel in 1993 implied a setback for this struggle. The recognition of the State of Israel by the PLO was one of the main reasons for opposition to the agreements among the Palestinian refugee community, as this suggested that “[Palestinian] refugees will remain refugees in the host countries.”⁹ Other than implying that Palestinians would not be integrated into their host countries, this quote illustrates the deceiving emotion showed from this interviewee in respect of being forgotten by their own leadership in negotiations with Israel. From this perspective, as a result of political bargaining, Palestinian refugees could be prevented from returning to Palestine and continue to be refugees. Moreover, according to our interviewees, after the signing of the Oslo Agreements, the term returnees was not proactively used.

Another relevant distinction among informants was the differentiation in international law between refugees protected under the UNHCR mandate and Palestinians under

5 Former PLO official and social activist. Beirut. May 2011.

6 PLO Commander. Saida, May 2011.

7 The signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993 marked a milestone in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, particularly for Palestinian refugees, as it postponed the resolution of their situation to future negotiations aimed at establishing a permanent peace settlement. On the agreement's key outcomes, they were: mutual recognition, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was acknowledged as the representative of the Palestinian people, while the PLO recognized the right of Israel to exist; and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to govern Gaza and parts of the West Bank until then under military Israeli control.

8 Former PLO official and social activist. Beirut. May 2011.

9 Former PLO official and social activist. Beirut. May 2011.

UNRWA's assistance. According to the testimony of one of our Palestinian interviewees:

The difference between Palestinian refugees and other refugees is that Palestinians have been forced to leave Palestine, to be refugees and to be forced to stay in other countries, they do not have the right to return [...], but other refugees are refugees because of some kind of poverty, because of famine, because of the political regime, some are political refugees, but Palestinians who are refugees in Lebanon, or in Syria, or in Egypt do not have the right to visit [Palestine], because nothing will change. You can say, for example, [refugees] from Somalia, if the regime changes, the Somalis will return, as in other cases. That is the main difference between Palestinian refugees without rights and Somali refugees with rights.¹⁰

There are distinctions among Palestinian refugees within Lebanon, particularly regarding non-ID refugees who are not registered with UNRWA or the Lebanese government. Only one interviewee fell under the profile of undocumented Palestinian refugees. He remarked that refugees with UNRWA documentation have privileges that he and his daughters lack, such as the ability to move freely within the country and to leave Lebanon using the travel documents issued by UNRWA. He noted that registered Palestinians “can go wherever they want.”¹¹ While having an UNRWA ID represents a significant difference in terms of certain freedoms compared to those without identification, findings show that it can simultaneously serve as both a device of exclusion and discrimination for some, while being seen as a privilege by others.

The purpose of selecting these extracts is to illustrate various aspects. First, the variety of understandings of the refugee condition. As such, a single definition keeps being disputed.

From the Palestinian perspective, to fully understand the refugee condition, this must be situated considering the specific population affected and their experiences of displacement. Additionally, it is essential to consider the context of their displacement within the host country. Moreover, a strong differentiation is made between the Palestinian experience and the rest of the refugees' experiences, among which, the main difference is that Palestinians are kept from returning to their homeland. Second, the ways of contesting the condition of denial imposed by external forces on Palestinians by making them “refugees,” which, according to one of the informants, is “the most difficult thing”¹² ; it is unjust, a condition that causes suffering and pain.

Among this contestation, the resignification of the refugee identity came not by proposing the use of the term “returnee,” with a highly political imprinting, but by excluding themselves from the refugee adscription that subjugates them to a condition of exception and to situations of injustice, stigma, and threat. This was evident when one informant previously mentioned that the word “refugee” is difficult to to assimilate, and when asked if he would rather consider himself a refugee, his answer was “to be called *fedayeen*.”¹³

When examining power relations through a Foucauldian lens, the Palestinian stance on the term refugee reveals a tension between their subjective experience and

10 Ibid

11 PLO representative, Shatila, October 2010.

12 PLO Commander. Saida, May 2011

13 Ibid. *Fedayeen* is a word that translates in Arabic as “those who sacrifice themselves”. This term has been used to refer to Palestinian fighters and guerrillas, especially those linked to armed resistance movements.

the normative forces of legal and humanitarian systems. This is because these systems impose a legal status in Lebanon, which results in conditions that lead to stigma and exclusion and other human consequences rather than providing protection.

This tension is expressed through a reflective process among Palestinians on their refugee condition, leading to a resignification of their refugee identity. This is enabled by an evident self-awareness process that introduces notions such as returnees or *fedayeen* to counter the image of victims or threats. The Palestinian refugee thus adopts an identity on their own terms, in the process becoming a political subject, “one who, through actions of reflexivity, creates transformative subjective meanings and becomes the protagonist of politics” (Duque et al., 2016).

The resignification of the refugee identity as not merely as a victim or threat but as a political subject can be viewed as a resistance mechanism comparable to what Castells (2001) describes as a resistance identity, i.e., a type of identity formed through a collective struggle within a defined social group, arising from feelings of alienation over a perceived unjust exclusion.

The Refugee Camp as a Source of Political Subjectivation

The refugee camp is the most salient physical probe of the exception in which Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon. One experiences an undeniable sensation of oppression while walking through the narrow, dark, and wet corridors. Moreover, the proximity of the buildings and the bad materials with which those were built prevent privacy for the residents. Thus, common scenes experienced in the camps include overcrowding, illness (mainly respiratory and mental), unsafe and poor infrastructure, and general chaos. However, the camps are a Palestinian territory and the symbol of their existence, the place where they govern themselves (in part because the government is not willing to take the responsibility of these spaces), and as Hanafi (2010) argues, the spaces for the creation of indocile identities.

Whereas the sole condition in which they find themselves in the camps is that of dispossession and neglect, Palestinians have created an enormous narrative “of a culture about Palestine,”¹⁴ which is spread from generation to generation with a profound national and emotional effect on people.

In the refugee camp, Palestinians build their subjectivities under the Other condition, as the camp, other than being seen as a place of exception, is also perceived as home where Palestinians feel secure against the hostility of the Lebanese host society. The next extract gives some hints of it:

In the camps we live in a way keeping our map of Palestine,... we're from Dzeeb [a village in Palestine] and there is a certain sector for Dzeeb [inside the camp], there is a street in [a] certain place near the mosque, this is the sector of Dzeeb, okay? And I'm happy to say that we are keeping all our customs and the traditions, even the village itself, they are talking [sic] now, still [speaking] the same dialect they used to speak in Palestine, so we are keeping the same dialect, we are keeping the same customs of cooking, of way of thinking, you can recognize it ... and in keeping these customs makes us different from Saida inhabitants, because they have their own customs and they are different from us.¹⁵

14 PLO Commander. Saida, May 2011.

15 Palestinian UNRWA staff. Saida, May 2011.

Palestinians in Lebanon strive to preserve their cultural heritage by recreating pre-Nakba¹⁶ Palestinian life. The Ain el Helweh camp exemplifies this, organizing sectors to keep families from the same villages together. Thus, younger generations learn through their family's and community's collective memory.

Furthermore, camp residents often express that they prefer staying in the camp due to feeling stigmatized and targeted outside. Thus, they view the camp as a place of protection and belonging:

[The camp] is the generator of fighters, of teachers, of doctors because discrimination makes us more united, ... I see Palestine near to me,... in the camp, all Palestinians are crowded, if there is some poor man, they wouldn't think that they are poor. This is the identity of the camp. During the siege of Shatila some old man and women, I came to them... they said to me, we have some beans, we don't need them, take them to others that need it... the hunger was among the people and those two old people gave me this to give it to other family. This is a refugee camp. You know, when I have been in Beirut during the siege? They steal you (laughs), if you have something, they steal something you have, but in the camp, it was a way of thinking about others, not about you.¹⁷

For Palestinians, the camp fosters community and collective memory, allowing them to express their identity and to live in alignment with their longstanding struggle. It also symbolizes their temporary settlement in Lebanon despite over seventy years of exile. To be a camp resident means that "Palestinians are not at home and so they are waiting to go back to Palestine."¹⁸

It is important to note that the structure of the camp mirrors the order found in a political, juridical, and territorial state, with actors seeking to gain political loyalty from inhabitants through networks of protection and patronage. Fieldwork findings show that Palestinian political factions, along with their armed groups, replicate the dominant structures of the State, thereby establishing a form of self-governance. Despite the chaotic scenario described in Section 2, the political factions assert themselves as the organizing elements of sociopolitical life within the camp, thus becoming a key feature of these spaces. Considered essential and supported by most Palestinians, the armed resistance aligns with the ongoing Palestinian struggle, which is expected to continue until the occupation concludes.

Early Political Socialization, Social Mobilization, and Participation

There is considerable discussion about the prolonged exile of Palestinian refugees hindering their continued efforts to assert their right to return to Palestine. As a result, they may either become naturalized in their country of residence or seek a third host country for relocation. Consequently, the idea of a Palestinian people will diffuse itself in time.

The experience of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon shows that, while the refugee situation is yet to be resolved, there is an ongoing process of identity production and conservation which keeps alive the consciousness of the Palestinian nation and their right to return. Moreover, young generations, despite not being physically connected with their family's villages in Palestine, are educated to remember the Nakba and the suffering caused by

¹⁶ Nakba ("catastrophe" in English), is the term used by Palestinians to refer to the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948.

¹⁷ NGO Treasurer and former UNRWA Teacher. Beirut, May 2011.

¹⁸ Activist and camp inhabitant. Beirut, December 2010.

displacement, their legitimate right to return, and the meaning of homeland. As Zacharia notes, “it is the idea of Palestine, ironically the absence of a physical place, that coheres a Palestinian national identity” (1996, p. 38). This does not undermine the legitimacy of Palestine as a place. For Palestinian refugees, however, it emphasizes the absence of opportunities to return, which highlights the importance of reimagining, recreating, and reproducing the concept of Palestine. Additionally, it presents a paradox where this process is crucial for recognizing their right of return, even if they cannot exercise it.

Finding themselves in a perennial condition of lack of belonging, Palestinian refugees undergo political socialization from an early age. This can be seen as a resistance mechanism, as it reinforces their collective Palestinian identity and fosters further forms of resistance such as social mobilization and participation.

Political Socialization From Early Ages

Palestinians develop a political consciousness through political socialization in various settings, such as camps, schools, and homes, learning about their identity and collective memory.

Several commemorations are celebrated in the camps, which seek to promote national consciousness among the youngest. Land’s Day on March 30th and the commemoration of Nakba on May 15th are two of the most important civic holidays celebrated by Palestinians. On these days, social organizations and political factions organize diverse activities in all the camps. During the festivities, children are taught about Palestine and the sense of belonging, as well as to recreate national folklore through music and dance. They are also asked to write and express their thoughts and desires about Palestine in public spaces.

As is shown in the next extract, what children learn from their parents about the catastrophe of the exodus directly impacts the development of their political consciousness.

This culture about Palestine was in our houses, among our culture, among our mother and father and among the schools, we get this, we say, resistance is the thing that can gives us some rights,... the suffering of our people, of our families, the discrimination against our people, all these created the thing inside me to continue resistance, to go ahead with resistance, against the Israelis... What I learned from my mother and father, what they told me about, what Israelis made the massacres in Saida and in Palestine, all these things made some type of power, energy inside me, made something like, why? Why we are refugees? Why we are without any right?¹⁹

This extract portrays, first, the way Palestinians have created a narrative of the idea of Palestine and the culture about it that is spread from generation to generation with a profound national and emotional effect on people. The premise clearly implies that through social interaction, the narrative of a Palestinian collective identity is built, particularly through family. Therefore, it could be suggested that the reproduction of the Palestinian identity through the development of an early political socialization is a rooted expression of resistance towards neglect, exception, and dispossession. In this socialization process, memory and emotions are embedded as catalysts of political positioning. As Duque (2016) mentions, emotions drive intention and aim for transformation, giving meaning to political action.

¹⁹ PLO Commander. Saida, May 2011.

Second, the testimony gives a clear example of the effects of that early political consciousness in defining how individuals decide to struggle against dominant forces, which in this case led this last interviewee to become a *fedayeen* and to uphold a very prominent position in the PLO in Lebanon.

Social Mobilization and Participation

According to the opinions of the Palestinians we interviewed, after the Oslo Accords, when the PLO negotiated peace with Israel, many felt betrayed and abandoned. In addition, the corruption and inefficient bureaucracy that characterized the PLO's representation in Lebanon, along with the greater necessities of the refugee population, paved the way for the rise of other forms of political participation and mobilization.

Members of the then-armed resistance started to criticize the military strategies and the actions of some leaders and groups. As a result, members of the resistance decided to detach from the political parties to become independent of their interests and ideologies. They felt that the political and armed struggle movements were not the only (or at least not the main) way of resistance, as to some extent, these became like the same state-like domination structures they were fighting against.

Health, educational, social, and economic needs increased, and youth were easily recruited by political factions. This, together with the fact that the Lebanese Civil War was over, led some leaders of the Palestinian community to target social issues previously forgotten by the political groups.

The perception of daily chaos among camp residents persists, as there is no singular and legitimate authority that, according to them, "works for the people."²⁰ Consequently, the presence of civil organizations in the camps and their surroundings is part of the common scenario. These organizations attract foreign funding for local programs and create networks with activists and researchers (many of them foreigners) to share the reality lived in the camps.

Creating Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is not easy for PRLs due to legal restrictions on forming associations. However, in collaboration with Lebanese citizens who are sensitive to the Palestinian cause, they found ways to establish non-governmental organizations to target the different social problems in the camps.

According to the LPDC (n.d.), as of 2012, 213 agencies and associations were working for PRLs, but no further updates are available. Most of them address children, youth, and women-related issues, while others focus on health care or psychological counseling, and vocational training. In cooperation with Lebanese organizations, they implement ongoing programs to provide the services needed by the camps' residents and to reconstruct social and community ties between the Lebanese and the Palestinians.

Engaging in the civil society sector is a form of resistance for Palestinians in Lebanon, countering restrictions on social security services and their right to mobilize. Through cooperation with donor countries or foundations, they can address medical service shortages and educational needs, fostering a sense of agency and autonomy.

²⁰ Youth activist and camp resident. Beirut, January 2011.

This involvement allows Palestinians to overcome their portrayal as victims, thereby becoming political subjects.

Mobilization and participation as a means of social transformation manifest as expressions of political subjectivation. Community leaders represent political subjects who, through their political experiences, embody this process of subjectivation by challenging practices and discourses of domination from both the host State and Palestinian political and military structures. Moreover, their actions aim to improve the living conditions of the Palestinian community while addressing the gaps in the human rights discourse that have not been ensured for them.

The meanings and practices of resistance observed during the field study overcame the common idea of the Palestinian struggle as only armed. Palestinian refugees assert their political agency by contesting the imposed condition of exception legally and socially when reproducing a collective identity and memory through carefully structured political socialization from early ages and (re)symbolizing the refugee camp from a location of humanitarian governance and exclusion to a place that provides a sense of belonging and enables them to assert their right of return. Additionally, they challenge their own leadership structures, both political and military, by engaging in social mobilization and participation to address needs that their leadership fails to meet. These practices of resistance can only emerge after a deep reflexivity process among Palestinians, leading to their becoming political subjects. Accordingly, among the various practices described, a common element is a conscious response to oppression and domination by attempting to use the very system that marginalizes them in their favor.

The process of political subjectivation throughout Palestinian life in exile in Lebanon appears to support the premise that they maintain a resistance identity. PRLs have established a dynamic of exclusion of the excluders by the excluded (Castells, 2001), building strategies of resistance and survival based on principles that oppose those of the institutions that subjugate them.

CONCLUSION

Examining the power relations in which refugees are embedded provides an insight into the political agency of refugees, challenging traditional perspectives that portray them as problematic victims or threats. Foucault's (1999, 2006) account of political subjectivation is relevant to refugee experiences as it allows an approach to those power relations and to acknowledge and reflect on how refugees contest the normative and subjugation forces applied to them through emancipatory and political actions. As such, resistance practices are constitutive to political subjectivation by instituting actions aimed at counteracting power and governance, thereby facilitating the transformation of power relations and those involved.

Refugee political subjectivation must be approached as a continuous process that starts with an examination of the power dynamics in which refugees find themselves, followed by an observation of the methods and strategies employed by them to resist subjection forces and reclaim their subjectivity through conscious and reflective actions.

By examining the case of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, empirical evidence is presented, showing that they assert their political agency through resistance practices enabled by a deep process of reflection leading to their transformation into political subjects. Palestinians contest the condition of exception in Lebanon by reproducing collective identity and memory through structured political socialization from an early age. They also transform the refugee camp from a place of humanitarian governance and exclusion to one that provides community, belonging, and supports their claim of the right of return. Additionally, they address unmet needs through social mobilization and participation, challenging both political and military structures within their own leadership.

Palestinian political subjectivation can largely be spotted in their challenging stance towards their refugee condition, which underscores a tension with the legal and humanitarian systems that impose a stigmatizing status. Their engagement in everyday experiences that produce ruptures, resistances, and dissidence can be viewed as indicators of political actions and highlights the agency of refugees, allowing for the emergence of new identities and modes of resistance beyond mere survival. As such, reflexivity, memory, political socialization, and social mobilization are factors that contribute to the political subjectivation of refugees.

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