

## Six decades on, Palestinian refugees still in cramped Lebanese camps

Contributed by Rana Moussaoui, in Burj el-Shemali for AFP  
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Hassan Rhayyel has been trapped in a cramped refugee camp in south Lebanon for 61 years, ever since he fled Palestine with his family after the creation of Israel.

He was 12 then and full of hope that within two days the family would return home.

But that hope has dimmed for Rhayyel who raised eight children in a tiny two-room flat in Burj el-Shemali, one of Lebanon's 12 refugee camps.

"For us the future is bleak," he said. "This camp is my Palestine."

His frustration is shared by most of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and has been compounded by the stalemate in peace talks and Israel's staunch refusal to allow refugees to return to their native land.

The UN Relief and Works Agency lists nearly 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon but the number actually resident in the country has dwindled to between 250,000 and 270,000 as many have moved abroad, according to Lebanese and Palestinian officials.

Those who remain live in overcrowded camps where the visitor is struck by the misery and hopelessness that prevail.

Children play amidst rubbish that piles up on the streets and the houses are so close to one another that sometimes it is difficult to get a glimpse of the sky.

In Burj el-Shemali camp in the southern coastal city of Tyre, 20,000 people survive in an area no larger than one square kilometre (0.4 square miles). The camp was built five decades ago to accommodate 7,000 people.

For those born and raised in the camps, Palestine is a mere notion.

"We were born as refugees and we will die as refugees," said Hiba Idriss, 23, a resident of Burj el-Shemali.

The young woman has no illusions about a better future although she was lucky to obtain a UN scholarship to study information technology at a Lebanese university.

But her diploma will not open many doors for her in Lebanon, which prohibits Palestinian refugees from practising most professions or owning property.

The ban is for fear that otherwise the Palestinians would stay on in the country. "Nothing belongs to us. We live day by day but there is no solution in sight," said Idriss.

Her grandfather fled Palestine "to protect his family," she added.

"But as the years went by, he felt guilty at the conditions we were living in in the camps and would say that it would have been better to die in dignity in Galilee."

According to some estimates, only 10 per cent of all the refugees still remember the exodus from Palestine.

Rhayyel is one of the few who recalls standing on the roof of his family home in Hula (now in northern Israel) to watch the fighting between the Jews and Palestinians.

"I did not realise then that I was losing my homeland," he said. "When we left, I really thought we would return two days later but we ended up building this camp."

Idriss recalls the first time she stepped out of Burj el-Shemali and discovered that "there is life outside the camp".

"I did not know there was another world out there," she said.

Many young men, too disenchanted to do anything, while away the time smoking shishas or ride around the narrow alleyways on battered scooters.

"How could it be possible that for the past 61 years Palestinians are trapped in these camps," complained Mahmoud al-Jomaa, who chairs an organisation that provides health programmes for children.

What hurts the most for the refugees is the feeling that they have been forgotten by the world - and particularly by other Arabs.

"Seven million Jews worry about the fate of Gilad Shalit, while 300 million Arabs couldn't care less what happens to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians," said Walid Taha, who lives in the Shatila camp in Beirut.

He was referring to an Israel soldier held by Gaza militants since June 2006, who has been at the centre of intensive German-brokered talks on a prisoner swap.

"Here we merely survive for lack of dying," said Taha, a labourer and father of six who ekes out a living on barely 100 dollars a month.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/6752245/Six-decades-on-Palestinian-refugees-still-in-cramped-Lebanese-camps.html>