


The Endurance of Palestinian Political Factions: An Everyday Perspective from Nahr el-Bared Camp

Perla Issa (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).
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In *The Endurance of Palestinian Political Factions: An Everyday Perspective from Nahr el-Bared Camp*, Perla Issa asks the central research question: What explains the endurance of political factions in Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp despite the fact that many such factions hold little to no political legitimacy in the eyes of those they claim to represent? Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the PLO-Fatah and other factions' slogan of “*umm al thawra*” (mother of the revolution) has rung hollow for Palestinian camps strewn across Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.

Issa argues that, despite the multitude of political factions, the community still lacks meaningful representation and, in fact, this multitude may compound difficulties in the camps for everyday Palestinians. The mundane challenges of meeting basic necessities, accessing health care, and attending school are often made *more* difficult by the posturing, in-fighting, and bureaucracy of political factions. Yet the political parties persist. Issa argues that factions have a “double nature,” which explains their longevity (p. 4). On the one hand, they are loose networks of people bound together by different degrees of trust and cohesion, often mediated through kinship frameworks; while on the other, they operate as bounded structures defined by stated ideologies.

Factions persist because they are deeply embedded in resonant and relevant kinship networks *and* because they provide financial benefits to members. For example, when Issa traces intergenerational connections to Palestinian political factions in Nahr el-Bared, she discovers that even if a party has actively hurt some families by jailing people, as in the case she describes of Abu Muhammad, the party also served as a vehicle to connect different families in the camps. Although Abu Muhammad fought alongside Fatah's Force 17 at the 1982 airport battles in Lebanon, he was later suspected of being a Jordanian spy and imprisoned in Tunis by other party members. One might imagine that this would have inspired Abu Muhammad to reject Fatah. However, he also met his future brother-in-law through the party, who introduced Abu Muhammad to the woman who would become his wife.

The pervasiveness of kin and friendship networks in tying individuals to offshoot parties—such as Fatah al-Intifada—was made evident when Abu Muhammad revealed that it was a friend who signed him up to serve a tour, this time in Aouzou in northern Chad, with Qaddafi's forces. He felt pressured not to be seen as a coward by his friendship networks in Nahr el-Bared, so he continued to fight. Additionally, the party paid him double for his fighting tours, and this helped his family weather the daily struggles of life in the camp. Despite Abu Muhammad's ups and downs with the party, his son continued the legacy, also serving the political faction.

While I find Issa's detailed recounting of everyday life in Nahr el-Bared powerful, alongside its connections to political factions, her argument would have been bolstered by exploring additional factors for the endurance of such factions. Issa's primary research question echoes Lisa Wedeen's central inquiry in *Ambiguities of Domination*.¹ Wedeen asked: What explains the durability and dominance of Hafiz al-Asad's regime despite its obvious lack of legitimacy? However, the deeper question both Wedeen and Issa care about is *how* political

¹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

institutions like parties and leaders persist and engender such allegiance when they are completely bereft of real legitimacy. In the case of Syria, Wedeen explores the use of coercion and a cult of personality, rhetoric, and symbols—or disciplinary symbolic power—to explain how Asad maintains his power. I wonder, in the context of Nahr el-Bared, the degree to which it is not just the parties’ “double nature” but also other factors like coercion or disciplinary symbolic power that might explain the durability of Palestinian factions.


For example, I spent some time perusing Nahr el-Bared’s Facebook page and noticed that, in the winter of 2021, the accountant of a political party was murdered.² The accountant, a woman from a large family in Nahr el-Bared, was found dead after questioning some of the party’s bookkeeping practices. The party absolved itself of any responsibility, and her family was urged not to pursue further inquiry. A criminal investigation yielded few people willing to talk about the specifics of her death, and, at the time of writing this review, the murder remains unsolved by Lebanese authorities. This example indicates the pervasive use of coercive threats levied against members that challenge party dominance, akin to a mafia’s protection racket. In the words of Charles Tilly, “If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making—quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—qualify as our largest example of organized crime.”³ It may be that factions endure because they are protection rackets that dole out coercive threats on an already marginalized and vulnerable refugee community.

In sum, Issa’s book would make a wonderful addition to a seminar class on Palestine and Israel or an undergraduate class on Middle East studies, as it could provide fruitful and animated debate around notions of legitimacy, dominance, and obedience when paired with complementary works like Lisa Wedeen and Charles Tilly. Her book also suggests future paths of inquiry that test a variety of hypotheses (“double nature,” coercion, and disciplinary symbolic power) for why political parties endure in Palestinian refugee camps when their legitimacy is lacking.

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The Quest for Democracy: Liberalism in the Modern Arab World

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In *Quest for Democracy*, Line Khatib strives to document liberal ideals in Egypt and Syria both before and after the Arab revolts of 2011. The book’s main argument is that these ideas have continuously existed in the region in complex and varied ways, but have not been adequately studied or even acknowledged by observers and scholars alike. The author cites a number of reasons for this neglect, including the fact that liberal ideals have failed to gain traction on the ground; have not managed to build durable institutions and, as a result, have not proven their existence or viability in the region; and, the fact that resilient autocratic regimes’ defeat of such ideas in the revolts of 2011 evidenced an inability to impose themselves. Some

² <https://www.facebook.com/670940576249549-الان-شبكة-اخبار-محمّد-نهر-البارد-ان>.

³ Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter D. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–70.