



Unknown Hell

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

A report by Labour MPs

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This pamphlet follows a delegation to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 2011 which included:

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP, Michael Connarty MP, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Derek Vaughan MEP, Alexandra Thein MEP, Frank Engel MEP, Robert Goebbels MEP

The visit was organised by the Council for European-Palestinian Relations and the Palestinian Return Centre. A full report of the visit is available (<http://lfpme.org/files/Lebanon.pdf>). This pamphlet was edited by Tom Charles. Thanks to Nicolette Petersen.

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Cover picture: Jeremy Corbyn MP at the entrance to Bourj al-Barajneh camp, Beirut

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

Tom Charles, Media Officer, Labour Friends of Palestine

For the past 63 years millions of Palestinians have lived as refugees in areas of the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT) and in surrounding countries. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) describes their plight as “by far the most protracted and largest of all refugee problems in the world today”.¹

Three quarters of a global Palestinian population of 11 million are refugees and their plight is a core issue in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Many of the key issues in the Middle East, political and humanitarian, arose as a consequence of Israel’s denial of the right of refugees to return to their land.

Multiple international treaties and conventions recognise the inviolable characteristic of the right of return of refugees including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. The right of return for refugees is guaranteed under Humanitarian and Human Rights law and countless UN resolutions.

Approximately 400,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon’s 12 ‘official’ (United Nations Relief and Works Agency-run) and its many ‘unofficial’ (non-UN) refugee camps, amounting to approximately 10 per cent of Lebanon’s population. In 1948 Palestinians from the North of Palestine, namely Haifa, Safad and the Galilee were forced from their homes by Israeli attacks and ethnic cleansing. Around 100,000 fled to Lebanon. By the 1960s, with Israel consistently refusing to implement UN General Assembly Resolution 1942, the initially tolerant attitude of the Lebanese was replaced by fear of *tawtin* (naturalisation of the refugees) and its impact on the delicate balance of Lebanese politics. Harsh measures began to be imposed on the Palestinians including prevention from undertaking housing improvements, classification as foreigners in order to make work permits difficult to

¹ <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/9748B379B9E5F1168525715B0051431D>

² ‘that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for the loss or damage to property which, under principles of international law and in equity, should be made good by the governments or authorities responsible’

obtain, and the imposition of martial law on all refugee camps. This would later extend to the banning of Palestinians from owning property.

In the 1970s and 80s the refugee camps were a key source of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) resistance to the occupation. Israel's response was brutal and included attacks against the Lebanese, further eroding host support for the Palestinians. In 1975 civil war broke out in Lebanon with the refugees and Lebanese paying a terrible price. Israel destroyed Nabatiyeh refugee camp while Phalangist militias destroyed three other camps, including Tel-El-Zaater to which they laid siege for 51 days, followed by the massacre of an estimated 3,000 inhabitants. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon sent the PLO in to exile. Despite American promises, Palestinian refugees were left exposed to attacks from Israel and their Christian militia allies, including the notorious Sabra-Shatila massacre.

Lebanon is the host country in which history and politics have most exacerbated the difficulties faced by Palestinian refugees. Politically marginalised, without basic social and economic rights, trapped in often squalid camps, and without hopes for the future, Palestinian refugees suffer more in Lebanon than in any of the other countries that host them.

While Israel, virtually free from international pressure, has been able to deny the refugees their right of return, Lebanon has fallen woefully short of fulfilling its responsibility to the refugees it hosts.

The Palestinian refugee issue has long been at the heart of Lebanese politics, often a trigger for violence. Currently it is the source of debate and, while all Lebanon's political parties offer rhetorical support to improving refugee living conditions, this has not yet translated into tangible changes.

Lebanon's confessional system and *tawtin*

Lebanon's delicate religious balance dictates that the Palestinian refugee issue is handled carefully by politicians. Lebanon's population of just over four million is made up of Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Maronite Christians, all constituting approximately the same proportion of the population. Smaller but nevertheless significant groups include Greek Orthodox and Druze among the total of 18 religious groups in Lebanon.

The highest offices of government in Lebanon are constitutionally reserved for representatives of certain religious communities. Lebanon's constitution dictates that the President is a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the House a Shia Muslim.

The Christian leadership in particular has taken advantage of concerns that the Palestinian refugees will become naturalised (*Tawtin*) citizens and tip Lebanon's demographic balance in favour of Muslims. One MP told the International Crisis Group in 2008: "Our official policy is to maintain Palestinians in a vulnerable, precarious situation to diminish prospects for their naturalisation or permanent settlement"³.

Christian fear appears to be at best exaggerated, as neither the Lebanese nor the refugees themselves want *Tawtin*, as that would likely entail abandoning their right to return to Palestine. Another argument made against improving conditions is that the Palestinians would take jobs from the Lebanese. This also appears exaggerated as the number of working age Palestinian refugees would constitute only around five per cent of the country's population.

August 2010 Law

The last decade has seen a slight and gradual improvement in the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon. In 2005, Lebanon eliminated a ban on Palestinians holding most clerical and technical positions, provided they obtain a temporary work permit from the Labour Ministry, but more than 20 skilled professions remained off-limits to Palestinians and the permit system relies on employer cooperation, the result of which is insecure black market labour for many Palestinians.

In August 2010 a proposal was put before the Lebanese parliament to improve significantly the rights and conditions of the Palestinian refugees. "Should we deprive Palestinian refugees in Palestinian camps of their rights, so that they become terrorists in the future?" out-going Prime Minister Saad Hariri asked during a parliamentary debate. "We have an historic opportunity to vote on this proposal"⁴.

³ Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps, International Crisis Group, 19 February 2009, p.16

⁴ <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2010/06/201061651947386938.html>

The outcome was a slight improvement for the refugees. If the law is implemented, and there is no guarantee that it will be, the refugees will be able to claim free work permits for private sector work and claim for work-related accidents, retirement and limited social security benefits.

No overall change in their economic position was secured and the law was effectively watered down by opponents who campaigned against it. Restrictions remain that bar Palestinians from working in professions that require syndicate membership, including law, medicine and engineering.

In February 2011, the Palestinian Return Centre and the Council for European Palestinian Relations took the members of the delegation that have written this report to Lebanon to assess the situation in the refugee camps. The delegates visited the Bourj al-Barajneh and Sabra-Shatila camps in Beirut and the destroyed Nahr el-Bared camp near Tripoli in the north. What the delegation saw was wretched and desperate. With UNRWA unable to expand significantly the size of the refugee camps since their establishment, the growing Palestinian population is forced to build upwards and share the limited space they have been granted to live in.

Those seeking to improve their lives are faced with intolerable restrictions and bureaucracy leading to virtually forced child labour in many cases. Palestinians in Lebanon are isolated from their compatriots living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and within Israel. They constitute a virtual state within a state, thinly spread, marginalised and powerless throughout Lebanon.

Socio-economic deprivation in the camps is worsened by the fact that refugees are barred from owning property, working in many professions, travelling overseas and receiving basic social services from the government. Army checkpoints exist at many camps and a dignified standard of living is hard to come by.

Many refugees see what is happening as a form of collective punishment for the role of Palestinians in the civil war⁵.

Lebanese government policy is the most immediate reason for the continued dire conditions. Despite this the Lebanese government agree with UNRWA that the living standards of the refugees are catastrophic, and the

⁵ Nurturing Instability, International Crisis Group, p.16

meeting the delegation held with new Prime Minister Najib Mikati offered some hope that Lebanon is now prepared to take steps to improve the humanitarian situation.

Meanwhile Israel and the international community have chosen not to take action that would alleviate the refugees' suffering.

Humanitarian crisis in Lebanon

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP

The image that haunts me most after the visit of our delegation to Lebanese refugee camps is that of two huge eyes. They belonged to a two-year-old boy, clutched in his mother's arms. His mother was part of a cluster of refugees who surrounded our group when we went to the camp, and voiced their needs and complaints.

Dominating the dialogue was an elderly man who repeated, again and again, his yearning to return to his family's home in Palestine, for 63 years situated deep inside present-day Israel. I take the pessimistic view that he will never see that home: that the Israelis will never let back into their state the vast number of Palestinians - scattered through the occupied West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the wider world - who were displaced and fled during the 1947-49 Israeli war of independence and subsequent wars in and surrounding former British-mandated Palestine. It is estimated that, in total, there were 1.4 m refugees.

It is an abomination that, of the global Palestinian population, three-quarters - seven million - are refugees. No other national entity in any continent suffers such a plight. The refugees in Lebanon are barred from owning property, working overseas, travelling and receiving social services from the government. They are not helped by internal political divisions, with different factions, representatives of which we met and frustratingly tried to share a dialogue with, too often jockeying for advantage rather than working for the common good.

Yet whether or not it is possible for these Palestinians to fulfil their aspirations to go back to where they or their families once lived, it certainly is possible for the needs of the two-year-old boy with the big eyes to be satisfied. He was asthmatic, and all that he needed was medication for his condition. He was not receiving it. All that his mother could get hold of was the insufficient palliative of Panadol.

The predicament of this child, troubling but with a solution available if only it was supplied, is typical of what we saw during our visits to a batch of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: to Nahr el-Bared, Bourj al-

Barajneh, and Sabra-Shatila. It is also typical of the other camps we did not visit. Nobody is sure how many of these camps there are; there are 12 camps labelled official and others that are dubbed unofficial. Nobody is sure how many Palestinians are dumped in these camps; 400,000 is an estimate, but nobody is counting.

What is for sure, though, is that these Palestinian refugees are enduring some of the worst living conditions imposed on any human beings in this planet. I say that having visited South African townships during apartheid, villages in Nicaragua during the civil war, the appalling slums of New Orleans, and other Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, the occupied West Bank, and even the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian camps in Lebanon are a hell on earth.

Poverty-line

They have needs, and fulfilling these needs costs money. This year DfID gave \$2.4 million for health assistance in the Lebanese camps. That was generous, certainly; but it lasted one month. Far more money is needed just for health. Then there is food, for children living on the poverty-line or below it. There is money for schools. There is money to tear down appalling, crowded housing and build decent accommodation.

In some camps, the need is so dire that it is impossible to see how it can be fulfilled without tearing down everything and starting again. Bourj al-Barajneh is the worst single place I have ever seen, with children haunting narrow gullies with sewage flowing down the middle; with no legitimate electricity supply, with tangled wires from bootlegged electricity hanging so low in the alleys as to constitute a near-mortal hazard. Yet 20,000 are doomed to live out their lives there, from childhood to old age, in a tiny area that has more people per square kilometre than Hong Kong or Mumbai.

Nahr el-Bared should be work in progress. Its population is estimated to be 30,000, but this is notional, since this camp does not exist as a meaningful entity. In fierce fighting in 2007, it was destroyed totally and is now officially being rebuilt. Except that building contracts are appallingly hard to negotiate and even more appallingly hard to fulfil. Money is so stingily available that many Palestinians, desperate for work, are reluctant to sign on for what resembles indentured slavery. When we went there, we saw lots of wreckage but not much work in progress.

Thirty years later Sabra-Shatila remains notorious as the place where, in 1982, Lebanese Christian Phalangists carried out a massacre that murdered 3,500 Palestinians. That massacre was wilfully assisted by Israeli forces who were then occupying that part of Lebanon. An Israeli commission of inquiry found the then defence minister, Ariel Sharon guilty of "personal responsibility" and ruled that he should not hold public office again. So he subsequently became Prime Minister (and, for five years now, has been in a coma).

Of course, complete eradication of these camps, with their inhabitants going back to their families' old homes, is the only sensible solution. If that is not to be available - in the near future or ever - then whatever conscience the international community possesses should be deployed to alleviate the refugees' suffering. The Lebanese government, which imposes stringent restrictions on rights of movement and employment, should relax those restrictions.

Sensible solution

Yet the refugees are not really the direct responsibility of this small and far from affluent country, which at any rate does allow them to stay there, however dreadful their conditions. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency does its gallant best, but is shackled by operating restrictions and dire shortage of cash. It is the duty of the West, comparatively affluent even in this recession, and of the richer Arab countries to formulate, finance and carry out a plan which will help to solve this tragedy. If I go back in future years I want to see transformative change. But will I ?

Everybody's victim, nobody's problem

Michael Connarty MP

Returning to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 2011 was one of the most disheartening things I have done in a long, and hopefully supportive, association with the Palestinian people. It is not that the living conditions are the worst I have seen compared with those I saw in the one million strong Kebira slum outside Nairobi, Kenya. The difference is that Kebira is in an impoverished country and is only sustained by charity, whereas Bourj al-Barajneh camp is the result of vast expenditures of UN Aid (through UNWRA) in the rich well-developed European-standard country of Lebanon.

When I visited Sabra and Shatila camps in the 1990s they were still recovering from the damage and trauma of the Civil War. Staff in the hospital I visited where Dr Pauline Cutting and Scottish Nurse McDougall had stayed treating the injured throughout the terror talked of the promises of better days with new houses and new rights. Yet in 2011 I found the vast majority of retail outlets and enterprises in the camps were owned by Syrians, not Palestinians. The terrible overcrowding and the absolutely appalling level of water, sewerage and electricity utilities in Bourj al-Barajneh camp were just barely above the standard of the barrios I visited in post revolution El Salvador. It is difficult to comprehend that the Palestinian people have been living as refugees for 62 years in Lebanon, not recent outcast arrivals.

So who is responsible for the terrible condition in which Palestinians are trapped in Lebanon – for they are trapped, unless something changes substantially? Obviously the source of all their blighted lives is Israel who drove them from their homeland in 1948. Equal responsibility lies with the international community and particularly the USA and the UK who have colluded in defending Israel's land grab, both in 1948 and 1967 and in every incremental land theft since. In Lebanon the entire focus of the UK government appears to be the security of the situation in Lebanon. This may be seen as reasonable if you set aside every human right that should have been accorded to the Palestinians as a people dispossessed by Israel's violence. Even today I found

no evidence of British attempts to develop any initiative that would solve the problem of Palestinian refugees but merely support for a series of schemes that maintained them as victims. Successive governments have much to be ashamed of but I still hope they will show some courage in trying to help Palestinians break the social and political chains that trap them at present.



Palestinian refugees living in temporary accommodation while the Nahr el-Bared camp is rebuilt

Unease

While the UN and UNWRA brought recognition and resources to Palestinians as refugees there is clearly a question around their approach and competence through the years. I have been in many camps over the past 25 years which have UNWRA funding and administration but none which gave me such a feeling of unease as those I saw in Lebanon. There is predictable Palestinian resentment that UNWRA appoint and control the relatively comfortable livelihood of over 1,800 staff, rather than allowing Palestinian groups to nominate the employees. The greatest failure of UNWRA lies in the obvious inability to deliver resources effectively or projects efficiently. This was powerfully illustrated by the obvious failures in the rebuilding of the Nahr el-Bared camp in Northern Lebanon which had been destroyed by the Lebanese government on the pretext of

driving out an international Islamic fundamentalist grouping in the camp. I photographed the few workers actually working on the site (from the very much larger number present) actually stripping the outer plasterwork from the walls of previously completed apartment blocks. Every section of the rebuilding was months and a year behind schedule with UNWRA admitting they knew there was illegal and uncontrolled sub-contracting on the site in addition to Lebanese government impositions that slowed progress and added costs. In comparison, the schools and medical facilities being paid for and built with separate and targeted funds from Arab nations were a hive of activity rising steadily within budget, making a mockery of UNWRA's sorry efforts.

From any assessment of UNWRA's long term failure over 60 years to provide adequate and decent accommodation and infrastructure for the Palestinian refugees there is a clear need to ask whether it is time UNRWA was replaced by a more effective organisation? There is clearly a malaise with the UN problem of both being seen as 'United Vacations' and the clear abuse, if not corrupt, absorbing of international funds by Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian organisations and enterprises in a cycle of dependency.

Fragile balance

The Arab nations who should be a larger part of the solution seemed to demonstrate their competence in their projects at Nahr el-Bared but correctly say the Palestinians in Lebanon are victims of the governments of Israel and Lebanon. Why should they accept them as a problem they must solve? There is no doubt the past attitude of the Lebanese government has been a barrier to progress. They would reply that the past behaviour of the Palestinian leaders led to the horrors of the Civil War and any move to give civil or democratic rights would destabilise the fragile balance of Lebanon's confessional system of government. It is obvious that votes for Palestinians would lead to an even larger majority of Muslim voters making it harder to sustain the 50/50 allocation of elected representatives between Christian and Muslim parties. Even more problematic for the Muslim politicians would be the addition of at least 200,000 Sunni voters which would reduce the number of

Shia party MPs dramatically. The Palestinians therefore remain victims of many vested interests disenfranchised both in their homeland and their country of residence.

More indefensible is the denial for the past 60 years of the right to pursue legally many trades and all professions if you are a Palestinian in Lebanon. On my visit to the hospital in Shatila camp in the 1990s it was obvious the patients were often Lebanese, not Palestinians but the Palestinian medical staff could not have treated them legally if they were outside the camp area. On the 2011 visit there was much talk of the new 17th August 2010 law that would allow Palestinians to pursue trades and professions in Lebanon. However, it was clear the syndicated professions had closed ranks and their formal registration process to Palestinians with government collusion.

62 years after arriving in Lebanon most Palestinians are living on the edge of a society. Lebanon could use their skills, education and talents positively yet the best Palestinians can hope for is to be hired illegally, informally and cheaply. There is a new proposal on the table from the new Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, which may be a way forward, and this needs to be assessed in the context of asking the question if the Palestinian people are also victims of the Palestinian political groups?

The Lebanese Prime Minister's offer which he set out to our parliamentary delegation quite precisely was that the Palestinian Authority (or government, if it becomes one) should issue the Palestinians living in Lebanon with a Palestinian Identity Card. He would then propose to the Lebanese Parliament that they be treated like every other overseas resident in Lebanon with full Civil rights short of the right to vote. The instant plea that "Israel would not allow it" from Palestinian organisations opened my eyes further to the degree to which the ability to deal with, or use the Palestinians as victims in Lebanon may be preferred to actually viewing their abused position as a problem that requires workable solutions.

Right of return

There were, of course, the probably sincere but seemingly rehearsed wailing of elderly gentlemen in the camps about only wanting to return to their homeland 'near Haifa'. Not wanting "Food, drink or a new house – only

to return to Palestine” is powerful stuff from a great grandfather of 80. It would have been more convincing as the real aspiration of Lebanese-born Palestinians if not contradicted by a university graduate mother who said, “I just want to get back into a decent home in Lebanon with my children, to get my life back”. On our recent visit we were directed from group to group who suggested the only improvement required was the “Right of Return” to their pre-1949 land area. Over 12 years ago MPs who visited were freer to meet and talk with Lebanon born Palestinians when even a disabled veteran of the Civil War made clear that the solution they sought was the right to work, to have a decent home and a decent life in Lebanon. Sadly the old Right of Return gentleman could not actually remember any details of that land that far in the past. In contrast those ordinary citizens during the 1990’s visit and in 2011 had a clear view of the real, relevant and present changes that they sought to make a decent life in Lebanon with at least as much vigour as any claim of a right of return to Palestine.

In all, we met nine factions claiming to represent a strand of political thought and support within the Palestinian Diaspora in Lebanon. Each one I accept as sincere in thinking they have the best approach to the Palestinian cause but I could also discern the gradations of theoretical cynicism regarding the relevance or irrelevance of the reforms in the present day life chances of their constituents. If any suggested improvement was likely to diminish the leverage of the demand for the Right of Return it was immediately dismissed as proof of the need to both give their faction more control over international aid budgets and for a final need for all Palestinians to return to Palestine / Israel.

The various strands of thought came together around reactions to the ‘Prime Minister’s offer’ of new economic and civil opportunities based on the granting of an Identity Card by the Palestinian Authority recognising Palestinian people living in Lebanon as citizens of a present and future Palestinian state. It was strange to hear organisations which claim statehood for Palestine, argue that it could or should not be done because “Israel would not allow it” or “Israel would have to agree to recognise such an ID card”. There is no doubt that the serious acceptance of such a proposed solution to the plight of the Palestinian people in Lebanon would have a

challenging effect on the other major partners who have failed Lebanon's Palestinians for long. Not only Israel but the UK, the US and the international community would have to face up to the fact that Palestinian refugees remain Palestinian with the right to be recognised by a Palestinian state (to which they claim they are committed) and to its present precursor authority.

Quartet

So long as the Palestinians in Lebanon are stateless they can be used to threaten the security and stability of Lebanon by being used to protract tensions and even actions against Israel. To agree to accept the right to be given an identity card by the Palestinian Authority forces Israel to move to a position where their talk of a two state solution could be taken seriously whereas many presently regard it as a posture with no credibility. The international communities including the Quartet would have to engage seriously in the process of defining the rights that such an identity card would give the Palestinians resident in Lebanon. In particular the rights to return given by all UN resolutions would have to be accepted but they would have to be discussed in the context of the present day aspirations of the Palestinians living in Lebanon. Some method would have to be found to gauge and respond to those aspirations that would have to cut through the political postures and doubtful claims of each group to speak for the Palestinians during our recent visit.

Our meeting with the International representative of Hamas was significant in illustrating the context in which forward progress must be developed. The gentleman concerned, Osama Hamdan, was actually from Jordan but spoke with the self righteousness I had last encountered when listening to Sinn Fein / IRA representatives during the killing years in Northern Ireland. The Lebanese Prime Minister's suggestion was dismissed out of hand and the only way forward that was countenanced was the return of all the Palestinians to Palestine / Israel. In the context of other statements by Hamas that called for an end to the State of Israel, this position is predictable but not helpful. It was also sadly a sense of déjà vu in the Hamas position as we had heard the same analysis from Hezbollah representatives (non Palestinians) on my previous 1990s visit. Personally, I had argued for recognition of the democratic choice of the Palestinian people in Gaza and railed against both the stupidity

of Hamas's rocket launches and the barbarity of Israel's violent atrocities against the citizens of Gaza. I was convinced after our meeting with Hamas in Lebanon that they offered little but further victimisation of Palestinian refugees in pursuit of Hamas's unattainable goals.

Shameful

I therefore conclude that those who are truly interested in the future peace and prosperity of Palestinians in Lebanon should encourage the new Lebanese Prime Minister in his offer. The Quartet together with the Arab countries and the EU should realise it has elements of a solution to one part of the most shameful period in UN history in the Middle East. That means they must ensure that Israel does not try to block a forward movement to allow the Palestinians to break out of the tragic life that Israel precipitated for former residents of lands they now illegally occupy.

One of the overarching conditions must be that any solution is developed within a recognition that Palestinians retain the Right of Return to Palestine. I personally assess that if they are allowed to develop and use their immense intelligence, ability and resourcefulness to make a fulfilled life in Lebanon, most Lebanon-born Palestinians will not wish to return to Palestine. Most of that responsibility will lie with the state of Israel whose abuse of every strand of civil life of the resident Palestinians should make every right-thinking person ashamed. Some of it will be the positive action and choice of the Palestinians who will grasp the opportunities offered to build a full life for themselves and their families. By doing so, they may be better placed, having solved their own major problem to speak up for and develop solutions for the Palestinians who are victims back in their own homeland.



The Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, completely destroyed by the Lebanese army in 2007

Sabra and Shatila

Jeremy Corbyn MP

It was a suitably miserable, cloudy and drizzly day as we walked under handheld umbrellas around the Palestinian refugee camps on the outskirts of Beirut, where two of the most famous camps exist: Sabra and Shatila. The names are famous for the most tragic of reasons: in 1982 in the middle of Lebanon's conflict, a particularly gruesome slaughter of Palestinians was carried out by militiamen facilitated by Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon and the Israeli Defence Force. Indeed, the Israeli Defence Force was surrounding both camps when the massacre took place. This was a war crime, as an unarmed civilian population were murdered in cold blood.

Even now, there is no exact number of deaths (which certainly runs into the thousands), and there are survivors who live with their own memories of those days. Whilst visiting the camps, our parliamentary delegation laid a wreath on the spot where many of those victims are buried. We subsequently met an elderly man who retold of his experience since being driven out of Palestine during the Nakba (literally 'catastrophe' in Arabic) of 1948, on the foundation of Israel. He is one of almost 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, nearly all of whom are supported by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) and who suffer the ongoing humiliation of living in desperately sad circumstances with tragic memories, reminding us of the huge importance of the Right to Return. The Nakba drove approximately 750,000 Palestinians into exile. Mohammed Omar Deeb outlined his memories of that event, and most significantly, his undying hopes that he would one day see his village in Palestine. He had poignant memories of the pristine beauty of the Palestinian village he'd left behind. With sadness in his eyes he told us how he was forced to flee and make his home in the Shatila camp where he has lived ever since.

In Israel, where the Labour party was in opposition at the time, there was some criticism of army tactics: too little and too late clearly. And in the UK today, everyone, and especially Labour Party members have a duty to ensure that justice is restored to those Palestinians who were expelled as a result of the Nakba – an event that it is now illegal to commemorate in Israel. The Israeli government have made it illegal to remember!

The cover-up of Sabra and Shatila was shoddy, but then again, the size of the massacre was never going to be covered up by family members of the dead, who must continue to tell of their experiences.

The 1982 attack was a brutal extension of Israel's intention to bring about the end of the PLO and was thus designed to root out any support that existed among the wider civilian population, particularly those who had fled Israel, and who had become refugees.

It is not yet 30 years since the tragedy and the endless utterances about a peace process mean very little to those stuck in refugee camps. There have been international legal processes but they have not achieved anything in respect of Sabra and Shatila, just as Israel has not respected the Goldstone Report into the Operation Cast Lead bombing of Gaza.

The Lebanese government only reluctantly makes substantive gestures of generosity to the refugee population so as not to upset their own demographic makeup. Having suffered themselves at the hands of the Israelis they are sympathetic but unprepared to extend significant civil rights to these "visitors" who might take Lebanese jobs in what is already a struggling and war torn economy. A law (the August 17th law) was passed last year with a view to improving their lot, but it remains to be seen just when that law will be implemented and to what extent. That said, the newly elected Prime Minister Mikati is only just settling in so we must be hopeful. Meanwhile, Gaza is one big refugee camp and Labour Friends of Palestine actively seeks to bring an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine by recruiting Labour members and supporters whose consciences refuse to allow them to overlook the atrocities being committed by the Israeli regime, which acts with impunity. Successive Israeli governments have virtually destroyed any possibility of a two state solution by appropriating the most fertile and strategically positioned lands to build (illegal) settlements on, by building a wall that is far greedier than any border that ever existed! Motorways that Israelis use between settlements exclude Palestinians who are barely able to undertake their daily business due to the huge number of checkpoints with all the humiliation that goes with them. There is so much more.

Labour and the Middle East

Looking back, the post-war Labour Government under Attlee conceded to the Zionist forces, allowing the state of Israel to be established, and instantly recognised it. The Labour Party, from then until 1982, had a position of uncritical support for Israel, including during the six day war of 1967 when Israel invaded the Golan Heights, Jerusalem, and Sinai.

The 1982 Labour Party conference at last woke up to the reality of Israel's behaviour towards the Palestinians after the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, and condemned them. The most recent Labour government seemed very happy to always equate Israel and Palestine as though they were equivalent powers of equivalent size and strength. The reality is that Israel is a First World Power, the fourth largest arms exporter, and the biggest recipient of US aid. There is no equivalence with the occupied Palestinian Territories with its limited and partially functioning government, and the imprisonment of 1.5m people in the Gaza Strip.

In 2006 Israel launched yet another attack on Southern Lebanon and disgracefully, the Labour Government did not even call for a ceasefire for several crucial weeks as the bombs rained down on Lebanese and Palestinian people alike. No one supports bombing any more than they support rockets or suicide bombs. By any stretch of the imagination Operation Cast Lead in September 2008 was disproportionate to the "threats" that Israel faced from Gaza. The use of phosphorous weapons and attacks on civilian targets is illegal in the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Now that Labour is back in opposition I think it's time for a serious debate about how one brings justice about for the Palestinian people and how international law, including Universal Jurisdiction is made a reality for those who have committed war crimes. Many in this country do not understand the imagery that Palestine has for ordinary people all over the Middle East and North Africa, and at a recent Prisoners Release Rally I attended in Tunisia, all of the speakers expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine. Labour can and must do better next time.



Laying a wreath at the burial ground of some of the victims of the 1982 Sabra-Shatila massacre