

## From Syria to Lebanon: Migratory and militant trajectories of three Palestinian women

### **Abstract:**

This article retraces the migratory and militant trajectory of three Palestinian women from Syria who fled to become refugees in Lebanon due to the current conflict. Apart from reconstructing the migration stages and the settlement in Lebanon, this article examines more specifically the heterogeneous effects of the forced displacement on the forms of activism undertaken by these women who, before leaving Syria, were involved to varying extents in fields like humanitarian relief and information. By examining these women's trajectories, this article would also like to understand whether "gender" constitutes or not a constraint to the engagement of these refugee women.

### **Biography:**

She received her Ph.D. in Political Studies from EHESS, Paris, and presented a thesis entitled "*S'engager à Yarmouk. Sociologie de la militance palestinienne en Syrie*" (*Commitment at Yarmouk. Sociology of Palestinian Militancy in Syria*), related to the theme of militant commitments in a context of conflictive and authoritarian situation. Among her latest publications: "La mobilisation des réfugiés palestiniens dans le sillage de la «révolution» syrienne : s'engager sous contrainte" (The mobilisation of Palestinian refugees in the wake of the Syrian "revolution": commitment under constraint), *Cultures et Conflits*, n°87, fall 2012, pp. 119-137; " Hamas and the Syrian Uprising: a Difficult Choice," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 20, no. 3, fall 2013, pp. 73-85; "Palestinian Civil Organisations in the Syrian Uprising. Militant Conversion and Forms of Self-management in Crisis Time," *al-Majdal*, n°57, summer 2015, pp. 11-16.

Five years of violence have just elapsed in Syria<sup>1</sup>, causing one of the most serious migration crisis in contemporary history<sup>2</sup>. Lebanon, one of the most concerned neighbouring countries, hosts now more than one million Syrian refugees<sup>3</sup> and 44,500 Palestinian refugees from Syria<sup>4</sup> who represent one of the most vulnerable<sup>5</sup> components of the migration resulting from the Syrian crisis, especially because of their fuzzy legal status and of the uncertainty resulting from their original status as Stateless persons<sup>6</sup>.

However, despite the insecurity experienced in this new exile, the Palestinian refugees from Syria have undertaken new forms of political and social commitment, on which this article would like to bring attention by retracing the migratory and militant trajectory of three women: Dania, Ruba and Itab<sup>7</sup>. Besides reconstructing migration and settlement stages in Lebanon, this article questions more specifically the heterogeneous effects of forced displacement on the forms of activism undertaken by these women who, prior to leaving Syria, were involved to varying degrees in fields like humanitarian relief and information. By examining women's trajectories, this article would like to understand whether "gender" constitutes or not a constraint to the engagements of these refugee women.

This article is based on interviews, conducted remotely through Skype in March 2016, with three interlocutors who were contacted through the help of Palestinians met in the Yarmouk camp<sup>8</sup>, during a field work visit carried out between 2008 and 2011 in the frame of a political

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<sup>1</sup> On march 2011, pacific demonstrations began in Syria, calling first for reform, then for the fall of Bachar al-Assad's regime. They were faced by an unprecedented repression. Gradually, the pacific mobilisation of the first months receded, seeing the spread of an armed conflict in which an increased number of local, regional, and international actors faced each other. On the stages and dynamics of the Syrian conflict, see: Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorransoro, Arthur Quesnay, *Syrie : anatomie d'une guerre civile*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2016; Ziad Majed, *Syrie: la révolution orpheline*, Paris, Actes Sud, 2013; François Burgat, Bruno Paoli (eds.) *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie. Acteurs et défis de la crise syrienne (2011- 2013)*, Paris, La Découverte Editions, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the conflict has resulted in the displacement of about 6,5 million persons inside Syria and of 4,5 million refugees in the neighbouring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq).

<sup>3</sup> See the statistics published by the UNHCR in March 2016:  
<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

<sup>4</sup> This data comes from statistics published in May 2015 by UNRWA (United Nations Work and Relief Agency). It must be specified that before the beginning of the conflict, the Palestinian community in Syria included about half a million people due to the demographic expansion of the refugee community that arrived since 1948, after the creation of the state of Israel, through several migratory waves. Palestinian refugees were mainly based in camps situated near cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, Homs, Hama and Latakia) and also integrated in the Syrian urban tissue.

<sup>5</sup> Kamal Doraï, Jalal Al Hussein, "La vulnérabilité des réfugiés palestiniens à la lumière de la crise syrienne," *Confluences Méditerranée*, vol. 4, no. 87, 2013, pp. 95-107

<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that Palestinians of Syria are known to be among those who have benefited from the best welcome conditions compared to the situation in other Arab countries, they did not obtain the Syrian nationality. Their legal status is ruled by law no. 260, adopted in 1956 which states that "Palestinians living in Syria are considered as indigenous Syrians in all fields covered by the law and concerning work, commerce and military service, while keeping their original nationality".

<sup>7</sup> With the authorisation of the interviewed, we kept the real first names and withdrew the family names.

<sup>8</sup> I especially want to thank Khalil Khalil and Aiham al-Sahli for their help which was essential to the accomplishment of these interviews.

sociology thesis on Palestinian militancy in Syria<sup>9</sup>, and also with the help of Lebanese activists involved in refugee assistance<sup>10</sup>. While "remote investigation" is now a tool that is increasingly operated due to the escalation of the conflict in Syria and the inability of social scientists to access the investigation field<sup>11</sup>, this method is, in most cases, legitimised by prior knowledge of that same field. In the case of this article, however, remote investigation presents a number of limitations. It was carried out among women from a country of departure, Syria – which contours are familiar to the author – but they are now located in a new hosting country, Lebanon, in which they have not been observed. Their account is reported to the author without it being in the social environment context in which it is produced. It then cannot be verified, cross-checked, nor contextualised<sup>12</sup>. It is for this reason that we tend to present the trajectories in this article as testimonials, and do not claim that they shed light on the circumstances of all Palestinians from Syria that fled to Lebanon.

### **Before exile: between humanitarian commitment and 'wait and see' attitude**

Most Palestinians who joined Lebanon due to the conflict come from the Yarmouk camp<sup>13</sup>. This is however not the only Palestinian camp to have been affected by the repression of the Syrian regime against the protests. The refugee camps in the cities of Daraa, Latakia, and Homs have suffered since the first months from bombardments by the Syrian army, because of their proximity to the Syrian neighbourhoods where the first demonstrations took place, causing the massive displacement of its inhabitants<sup>14</sup>. However, Yarmouk is the largest Palestinian agglomeration in Syria with a population of about 150,000 refugees officially registered by the UNRWA (United Nations Work and Relief Agency) in December 2012<sup>15</sup>. Located at the south of Damascus, near the road that leads to Lebanon, Yarmouk is particularly affected, as of September 2012, by the clashes between the lawful Syrian army and the groups of the armed opposition. This camp also hosts a mainly middle class

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<sup>9</sup> See: Valentina Napolitano, *S'engager à Yarmouk. Sociologie de la militance palestinienne en Syrie*, thesis in political sociology, EHESS de Paris, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> I especially want to thank Nawal Mdallaly and Wafiq al-Hawari.

<sup>11</sup> About the ethnographical investigations lead in the context of Syrian conflict, see: Thierry Boissière, "L'anthropologie face au conflit syrien : replacer la société au cœur de l'analyse," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 138, 2015, pp. 117-130.

<sup>12</sup> However, we have tried to cross-check information collected via these three interviews with those collected by Lebanese research centres which have worked on Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. See specifically, the report written by Hisham Dabsi and Wafiq al-Hawari, "Results of a survey concerning needs of Palestinian refugees coming from Syria," Beirut, Tatwir Centre for Strategic Studies and Development, 2015. Furthermore, and thanks to Wafiq al-Hawari, researcher and activist in the humanitarian field, we have distributed five questionnaires to Palestinian women living in Lebanon, essentially in Sidon region, that have allowed us to contextualise the information received via the interviews.

<sup>13</sup> Hisham Dabsi and Wafiq al-Hawari, *op. cit.*, p.7.

<sup>14</sup> For a chronology of the Palestinian implication within the Syrian crisis, see: Valentina Napolitano, "La mobilisation des réfugiés palestiniens dans le sillage de la « révolution » syrienne : s'engager sous contrainte," *Cultures & Conflits*, no. 87, 2012, pp. 119-137.

<sup>15</sup> Due to the conflict, the camp is now emptied from its population who fled massively as a result of the intensification of bombing by the regime forces, seeking to retake control of this area which is controlled by the Syrian opposition.

population who has the financial resources needed for the expenses of the trip and of settlement in Lebanon.

Two of the interviewed interlocutors lived in the Yarmouk camp. Dania, aged 23, was a student in Graphic Design at the University of Damascus. Following the start of the anti-regime uprising in Syria, the Yarmouk camp – which stayed at a distance from violence at least during the first year – hosted thousands of Syrian displaced persons fleeing close neighbourhoods, al-Hajar al-Aswad<sup>16</sup> and Tadamon<sup>17</sup>, as well as the cities most affected by the repression of the Syrian regime, Homs and Deraa<sup>18</sup> in particular. In response to the humanitarian crisis confronting the Yarmouk camp, Dania became involved in solidarity actions in favour of displaced Syrians. Knowing a member of the "Charity Organisation for the Palestinian people" (*al-Hay'a al-Khayria lil Sha'ab al-Filastini*)<sup>19</sup>, she decided to mobilise within this organisation and participated in psychological support activities for displaced children, and in distribution of food baskets. As a Palestinian, Dania considered her commitment a "duty" towards Syrians, with whom she "grew up and lived."<sup>20</sup> These motivations correspond to those presented by many other Palestinians who have decided to integrate the Syrian protest because they lived together with Syrians and shared the same political and social aspirations.<sup>21</sup> Many women from Yarmouk camp have mobilised in the organisation of relief actions targeting displaced Syrians. This is probably due to the relative immunity that they enjoyed, allowing them to move more easily to collect aid and cross Syrian police checkpoints and roadblocks.

Ruba, 28 years old and holding a bachelor's degree in Arabic Literature, was also involved in humanitarian work in Yarmouk. Prior to the Syrian uprising, she was a dynamic and fulfilled woman, but she had to leave her job due to the increasing violence, with the road between Yarmouk and Damascus centre becoming too dangerous. It is in this context of forced unemployment and facing a mounting crisis that Ruba took part in the organisation of relief provided to displaced Syrians received in the schools of the United Nations Work and Relief Agency (UNRWA.) Her activities included collecting clothes and blankets, assisting in the provision of psychological aid, and searching for missing persons.

The case of Itab, 32 years old, is different from the precedents. She didn't live in Yarmouk, but Damascus centre, and for her, the Syrian uprising is not associated with the beginning of an engagement. She was a journalist at the Iranian channel "al-'Alam" and at the Syrian state news channel. Itab found herself in a complicated situation when the first protests began in Syria. Supporting the principles of the Syrian protest, she says that she was overwhelmed by the fear of the brutal repression practiced by the Syrian regime, especially the violence against women. She also thought that it would be an error for Palestinians to meddle in the

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<sup>16</sup> Popular neighbourhood situated at the south of the Yarmouk camp and mainly inhabited by displaced persons coming from the Golan, occupied by Israel in 1967.

<sup>17</sup> Popular neighbourhood situated east of the Yarmouk camp, where a mixed population of Palestinians and Syrians lives.

<sup>18</sup> On the first phase of the Syrian uprising, see: Zyad Majed, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 53-73.

<sup>19</sup> Charitable organisation linked to the Palestinian Islamist Jihad Movement that existed before the Syrian uprising and which is, since then, particularly invested in humanitarian aid.

<sup>20</sup> Interview via Skype, carried out with Dania on March 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Valentina Napolitano, *Op. Cit.*, p. 128.

affairs of their hosting country. This is the reason why she decided to keep a neutral position.

With further protests and hardening of the repression by the Syrian regime, the working atmosphere of Itab became unbearable. TV channels in which she was employed relayed the official narrative of the regime and the information was often built entirely in an effort to strengthen this narrative. Moreover, despite the fact that she kept her distance from the anti-regime protests, her failure to express explicitly her "loyalty" to the Syrian regime got her into trouble, because she was *de facto* associated with contentment with the opposition. Itab increasingly became the target of psychological pressure from her colleagues who suspected her to be close to the opposition. These pressures intensified further when Hamas, the Palestinian movement, declared to be in favour of the Syrian uprising.<sup>22</sup> Immediately, all Palestinians were accused by the Syrian regime of "treason" and "ingratitude". However, it is only following the arrest of her colleague Muhannad, who is also Palestinian and involved in anti-regime demonstrations, that Itab decided to leave her job in March 2012, as she considered the situation too dangerous for her.

### **The road to Lebanon and ambivalence towards exile**

For these women who endured the rising violence, the choice to leave Syria became unavoidable. Their departure took place between 2012 and 2013, a period when migration to Lebanon reached its height for the Palestinian community from Syria.<sup>23</sup> Several developments on the Syrian level help explain this temporality. First, the intensification of bombardment from the lawful army on the Yarmouk camp, which came under the control of the opposition, with the use of air force – for the first time in December 2012 – caused a mass exodus of inhabitants outside the camp. This episode is even referred to by Palestinians from Syria as a "second Nakba."<sup>24</sup> It is at this point that Dania and Ruba left the camp, with their respective families, to find shelter with relatives in the city of Damascus. Then, Yarmouk camp turned into a battlefield and was gradually subjected to a blockade affecting the free movement of people and goods, specifically food. While camp residents who had moved, like Ruba, to Damascus continued initially to carry out round trips to the camp, this was no longer possible in July 2013, when the camp's siege became complete.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hamas movement established a representative office in Damascus since 1993, in the frame of an alliance of Palestinian factions, promoted by the Syrian regime in order to counter the Oslo Agreements. In 1999, the movement moved the headquarters of its political bureau to the Syrian capital and this is how Syria became a part of the "Resistance Axis," a coalition that included Syria, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah. For Hamas' position towards the Syrian uprising, see: Valentina Napolitano, "Hamas and the Syrian revolution: a difficult choice," *Middle East Policy*, vol. XX, no. 3, fall 2013, pp. 73-85; Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, "Le mouvement national palestinien et la crise syrienne: une division contenue," in François Burgat, Bruno Paoli (eds.), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie*, Paris, La Découverte, pp. 264-276.

<sup>23</sup> Hisham Dabsi and Wafiq Al-Hawari, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Arabic word that means "disaster," used for the first time by the Syrian intellectual Costantine Zureik, in reference to the 1948 events. Then, the Palestinians reclaimed this term to point at the establishment of the State of Israel on the territories of historical Palestine.

<sup>25</sup> For the siege of the Yarmouk camp and other regions in the south and the east of Damascus by the

Therefore, the choice to travel to Lebanon was included in a context of increasing violence in Syria, which particularly affected Palestinians. Lebanon was privileged mainly owing to the presence of relatives on whom refugees can rely at arrival, and to the geographical proximity that allows round trips to Syria and considering a definitive return once the crisis is resolved.

However, the paths to arrive to Lebanon were different. In December 2012, after spending a few days in the neighbourhood of Roukn al-Deen in Damascus, Dania took a bus to Lebanon. After a ten hours wait at the Syrian-Lebanese border, she managed to enter the Lebanese territory. She first settled with her family in the Shatila camp in Beirut, due to the Palestinian presence and, especially, cheaper rents. However, living conditions in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon are much more degraded than those known in Syria. Dania and her family decided then to join relatives in the city of Sidon where many Palestinians from Syria have settled.

For Ruba, the trip to Lebanon was more complicated. In March 2013, she went to the border with her sister. Syrian police submitted her to questioning and forbade her from crossing the border. Back in Damascus, she tried the trip again a few weeks later, illegally this time. She paid a smuggler who brought her to Beirut's centre. She then joined her family which had already settled in the camp of Ain el-Hilweh, at Sidon. As for Itab, threatened with imprisonment in Syria, she left the territory in March 2012, accompanied by her family. She settled in the region of Wadi al-Zaina, near Sidon, with her uncles, while her family returned to Damascus.

Depending on the period of arrival in Lebanon and the route that was taken (legal or illegal,) the type of residency permit granted by the Lebanese authorities and the treatment adopted towards Palestinians from Syria are different. But, in general, they are still subject to arbitrary decisions. Indeed, the presence of Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon is not regulated by a well defined policy. They do not benefit from the same processes regulating the residency of other refugees and are, consequently, kept in legal uncertainty.<sup>26</sup> Dania and Itab have been able to obtain, at the time of their arrival, a tourist residency permit for a period of one month; but they could not renew it afterwards, and are currently residing irregularly on Lebanese territory. They are thus forced to move with caution and fear of being sent back to Syria – this has already been the case for other Palestinians. This is why Itab says that she is even afraid of going to the office of the Lebanese General Security to renew her residency permit.

"When I arrived, I got a residency permit for a month. Then, I stayed a long time without a permit until December 2015, when an amnesty was declared and three months residency permits were granted to Palestinians. At that time, I went to the General Security, but with my uncles, as I was afraid! I said that I was staying at their home without saying anything about my work as a journalist in Lebanon... I was very

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Syrian regime, see: Valentina Napolitano, "L'enfer de Yarmouk, camp palestinien en Syrie. 'La faim ou la soumission'", *Orient XXI*, February 2014.

<sup>26</sup> On this subject, see: Kamal Dorāi, Jalal Al Hussein, "La vulnérabilité des réfugiés palestiniens à la lumière de la crise syrienne," *Confluences Méditerranée*, vol. 4, no. 87, 2013, pp. 95-107.

scared that they would send me back to Syria. Between 2014 and 2015, many Palestinians from Syria were expelled [...]."<sup>27</sup>

As for Ruba, who entered Lebanon illegally, she only managed to get a residency permit in December 2015, when a three months permit was granted, but which has not been subsequently renewed because of her illegal entry into the country. The irregular legal status thus makes these women vulnerable and afraid of being repatriated to Syria as Itab stated:

"Two weeks ago, I was going back from Beirut to Sidon. During a police check, they took my documents and saw that my residency permit was expired. Then the policeman said, "We need to take you with us!" I started crying and the men who were in the van tried to dissuade him... That was enough to put me in a state of depression... I do not want to face this anymore, this constant fear of being brought back to Syria [...]."<sup>28</sup>

With the continuation of the Syrian crisis, Lebanese authorities have gradually implemented restrictions to limit the entry of Palestinians from Syria. Therefore, as of summer 2014, the borders were blocked to them. The renewal of residency permits, when possible, was granted for two hundred dollars per person, a sum that a large family cannot afford. Roadblocks and police checks increased, particularly at the entrances of Palestinian refugee camps. Ruba even says that in 2014, a group of nine girls and fifteen boys were imprisoned in the camp of Ain el-Hilweh because they didn't have regular papers, which provoked demonstrations demanding their release.

The humanitarian assistance and services for Palestinians from Syria who arrived in Lebanon are not guaranteed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), as for Syrian refugees, but by UNRWA, the United Nations Agency created in 1949 specifically to assist Palestinian refugees in the neighbouring countries of historical Palestine and in the occupied territories. This organisation, which is facing a long-established budget deficit, manages to provide services in the field of education, but has proven widely incapable of meeting health needs. Furthermore, although the organisation dispensed financial aid and food baskets to Palestinians from Syria, that aid ended in February 2016, causing protests.

Despite the precariousness arising from the lack of a defined legal status and adequate support by international authorities – which could have resulted in a withdrawal of the community of Syria's Palestinian refugees into its own, particularly its female component – forms of activism and mobilisation have emerged.

### **New commitments and disengagement**

Within the crisis arising from the presence of more than one and a half million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and increased politicisation resulting from the ongoing conflict, many associations and humanitarian organisations have been created by Syrians, Palestinians from

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<sup>27</sup> Interview via Skype with Itab in March 2016.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Syria, and Lebanese people. These organisations are, in some cases, the place of adaptation for militants who had already mobilised in favour of the Syrian uprising and who wish to pursue their social and political engagement even in exile. Among the women interviewed, Dania and Ruba undertook social activities once settled in Lebanon.

Dania first became a volunteer in the Najda-Now<sup>29</sup> organisation in Shatila camp, then in Jusoor,<sup>30</sup> where she works as a teacher. It is through networks of acquaintances that Dania had established in Yarmouk, as part of the mobilisation in solidarity with displaced Syrians, that she could integrate these organisations founded by Syrian activists. Due to the lack of a residency permit, Dania's work was undeclared, but she managed to have a symbolic salary as a volunteer.

As for Ruba, her arrival in Lebanon was first associated with a period of depression, resulting from the stress experienced before managing to leave Syria. However, with her parents' encouragement, Ruba managed to find a position in a Lebanese private school where she gave courses to Syrian students who were to take their Junior Certificate and Bacculaureate exams in Syria. In this frame, she began to familiarise with the psychological problems faced by young refugees as a result of the conflict's repercussions. This work encouraged her to be more involved in organising activities to help young people. One particular episode pushed Ruba to be interested in the defense of refugees and human rights in general. In 2014, one of her students went to Syria to take his Junior Certificate exam and was stuck at the Syrian-Lebanese border for over a week. In order to solve this problem, Ruba began to contact various organisations for the defense of human rights.

"I did not know exactly what the problem of that boy was, but it was the period during which the Lebanese authorities had blocked the borders to Palestinians from Syria. It was at that point that I tried to contact people around me, activists. I got in contact with the Committee of Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon (*Lajne Filastiniyyun Surya fi Lubnan*), in the camp of Ain el-Hilweh... Together, we contacted *Amnesty International*, calls began circulating on the net, we alerted the Embassy of Palestine... it is during this time that I came to meet activists from the *Palestinian Organisation for human Rights (al-Mounazzame al-Filastiniyye li Huquq al-Insan)* in the camp of Mar Elias. This organisation was organising a training for refugees to increase their awareness about their rights in Lebanon and I was recruited to participate in it."<sup>31</sup>

After having received a training on refugees' rights in Lebanon, Ruba began to go more and more often to Syrian refugee camps, and continued to follow training courses in the field of documentation of human rights' violations. During the summer of 2014, she participated in organising a collective action for the release of a group of Palestinians detained by Lebanese authorities because of their illegal status. Meanwhile, she collected information about the

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<sup>29</sup> A non-governmental organisation founded in Syria in 2012 and established in Lebanon due to the pursuit of the conflict. It is particularly active in providing humanitarian aid in Syria and among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. See the web page: [www.najda-now.net](http://www.najda-now.net)

<sup>30</sup> Jusoor association was founded in June 2013 and focuses mainly on the education of Syrian refugees who are not able to integrate the Lebanese education institutions.

<sup>31</sup> Interview via Skype with Ruba in March 2016.

cases of exploitation in the workplace, as well as cases of sexual harassment, suffered by people around her. Wishing to dedicate herself to the help of adolescents more specifically, Ruba also decided to create, with her younger sister, a group of dabkeh that she called "The 'Refugee' band for Folklore and Modern Popular Arts" (*Firqat laji' li l-turath wa al-funun al-sha'abia al-haditha*) which involves young Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese persons. She continued this activity despite the difficulties encountered in the camp of Ain el-Hilweh as a woman working with a group composed mainly of men, and despite the attempts of many many at dissuading her.

Ruba was then recruited by a Lebanese organisation, "The Human and Environment Development Association" (*Jam'iet al-tanmie lil insan wa al-bi'a*)<sup>32</sup> who took notice of her activism and capabilities. At the same time, she continued her volunteering activities, particularly within initiatives dedicated to the defense of the rights of Palestinians from Syria. Hence, Lebanon represents for Ruba the beginning of an intense social activity in a context of increased mobilisation resulting from the Syrian crisis. This dynamism also allowed Ruba to face the precarious situation, experienced daily following the displacement and increasingly so, after the departure of a part of her family abroad.

Conversely, the Lebanese exile is synonymous to a period of isolation and inaction for Itab. This young journalist managed to find an employment at the Palestinian television channel "*al-Quds*." However, she feels downgraded, since the position she holds is less important than the one she has, and she gains a lower salary compared to her colleagues. While in Syria, she was not politically engaged but had a very active life socially and intellectually, in Lebanon, she feels isolated and does not have sufficient financial means to cover the costs of transport in order to attend events and activities taking place in the Lebanese capital. Moreover, the departure abroad of much of her friends who were active in the Syrian uprising discouraged Itab from advocating any political or social initiative. Her activism is limited exclusively to the dissemination of information in order to highlight some issues or persons in difficulty in the media. This inaction is nevertheless a source of frustration for Itab, and so are her professional situation and irregular legal status.

Therefore, the effects of forced displacement and of the Syrian conflict on these Palestinian women were heterogeneous, including in some cases an over-investment in social action, and in other cases, a withdrawal into the private sphere. The level of social integration and of self-fulfillment also results in a different perception of the host society, although we note that several collective representations are shared by the three women.

### **Dealing with the new hosting society**

The interaction of Palestinian refugees with Lebanese society must be understood both in the context of socio-economic and political crisis resulting from the Syrian conflict in Lebanon, but also through a set of collective representations relevant to the history of this

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<sup>32</sup> A nongovernmental organisation created in Lebanon in 2013 and that offers several projects in the field of human development.

country where the Palestinian presence remains a sensitive issue, owing to the discrimination faced by Palestinians<sup>33</sup> as well as the legacy of the Lebanese civil war.

For Dania, Ruba, and Itab, the relationship with the Lebanese society is, at first, described in negative terms. They talk about discriminatory words pronounced by Lebanese persons against them, cases of sexual harassment, or the unpredictable behaviour of police officers at paper checks.

"The first contact with the Lebanese society was hard. When I was getting into a taxi, I was hearing the driver say, "What about those Syrians who have stolen the country from us?" It was hard... I could not have discussed with the driver, it would have been useless... Unfortunately, some intellectuals also shared the same vision. They were saying, "But what do you want from the revolution?" And I used to say to them: "But what do you know? Who told you that when my house was bombed, I was participating in the revolution..." At first, I had a very negative perception of Lebanese society!"<sup>34</sup>

For Itab, the difficulties encountered by all Syrian refugees in their interaction with the host society are exacerbated for Palestinians because of their nationality, source of antipathy in Lebanon.

"In general, Lebanese people do not like Palestinians; so what to say about those who are Palestinian and Syrian at the same time?"<sup>35</sup>

However, these general considerations will be differentiated later. Through their work, Ruba and Itab met Lebanese persons from a more educated social strata and from the intellectual sphere, who expressed their support and with whom they have friendly relationships.

"My views on the Lebanese society have changed when I entered the Association for Development. I met nice people who treated me like a human being, who supported me a lot psychologically and supported my projects!"

The interaction of these refugee women with the Lebanese society is governed by dynamics and representations that are common with other societies facing a major migration phenomenon, which is a source of political and economic instability in the host country. However, in Lebanon, Palestinians from Syria also face a specific component of society, the local Palestinian community, and paradoxically, it is with this community that divisions are the strongest.

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<sup>33</sup> These discriminations include especially the right to work since Lebanon's Palestinians are excluded from the practice of several professions in private and public sectors. Therefore, they form one of the most disadvantaged segment of the society. For the Palestinian refugee status in Arab countries, see: Jalal al-Husseini, "Le statut des réfugiés palestiniens au Proche-Orient. Facteur de maintien ou de dissolution de l'identité nationale palestinienne ?", in Jalal al-Husseini, Aude Signoles (eds.), *Les Palestiniens entre Nation et Diaspora - Le temps des incertitudes*, Paris, IISMM, Karthala, 2011, p. 37-65.

<sup>34</sup> Interview via Skype with Ruba, March 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Interview via Skype with Itab, March 2016.

Indeed, Dania, Ruba, and Itab perceive remarkable differences between the Palestinian society in Syria and in Lebanon. All three of them notice the lack of solidarity with refugees coming from Syria who, instead of being treated with special attention as "co-nationals" are more exploited than Syrian refugees.

"When I was in the Shatila camp, the Palestinians in the camp rented us apartments for very high prices... They immediately tried to exploit the situation! There was no solidarity with us as Palestinians, and instead, they treated us worse than they treated Syrians!"<sup>36</sup>

Itab, too, encountered many difficulties in connecting with Lebanon's Palestinians. In her view, the long history of violence and marginalisation that Palestinians have faced is the cause of their troubles and social problems. She also denounces the attempts to exploit her, especially by the Palestinian channel for which she works, and which assigns her a lower salary than colleagues who are Palestinians from Lebanon.

"I think that the history of Lebanon's Palestinians fashioned a mass psychology, a condition of collective disease. I fail in having relationships with them (...) While we had always been in solidarity with Palestinians in Lebanon, we were faced with an opposite reaction! They exploited the situation, they increased the apartments' rents in the camps, although they knew that we were refugees, that we were Palestinians like them. They should have helped us! When I started working for the *al-Quds* TV, I felt that it bothered Palestinians in Lebanon, as if I had stolen their work (...)." <sup>37</sup>

Finally, another factor accentuating divisions between Syria's and Lebanon's Palestinians is the position taken by some Palestinians from Syria in favour of the Syrian protest movement; a position deemed unjustified due to the good living conditions granted by Syrian authorities to Palestinian refugees.<sup>38</sup>

"I have often heard: "You, Palestinians from Syria, you had all your rights... You had no reason to rebel!" It is as if we had to thank the regime for our rights... I think we should rather thank the Syrian people and not the regime... If I got my rights, it is through a law approved long before this regime came to power... But the Palestinians in Lebanon do not know that! There is a lot of ignorance and superficiality..."<sup>39</sup>

The behaviour of Palestinian factions did not improve the relationship between Syria's and Lebanon's Palestinians. The three women are critical to the political factions, especially those belonging to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), and accuse them, in the Syrian context, of having sided with the Syrian regime. In Lebanon, these organisations are accused of participating fully in discriminating against Palestinians from Syria and of being

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<sup>36</sup> Interview via Skype with Dania, March 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Interview via Skype with Itab, March 2016.

<sup>38</sup> The favourable legal status given to Palestinian refugees in Syria has promoted their socio-economic integration in the country.

<sup>39</sup> Interview via Skype with Ruba, March 2016.

unable to pressure Lebanese authorities so that their status in the country would be legally formulated.

### **Lebanon, a temporary stage before a new exile**

While Dania, Ruba, and Itab are finally socially or professionally integrated in Lebanon, this host country represents for them a temporary stage. The three women are considering moving to a third country. For Dania, the reasons for an onward travel are to be found in the living conditions and instability experienced in Lebanon.

"I do not see my future in Lebanon! How could I, if the locals themselves do not see one? With my family, we wish to go, we find life here very complicated, there is no work, life and health care costs are very expensive... The situation is difficult... But at the same time and as Palestinians from Syria, we do not have much hope of getting visas to go abroad!"<sup>40</sup>

Ruba, meanwhile, is waiting for the first opportunity to join her family who has already taken the road of illegal immigration to Europe.

"As soon as I can, I will leave Lebanon! It is an unfair country! My father is now in Greece, my mother and some of my brothers are already in the Netherlands. Here, I stayed with my sister and my little brother. Maybe God decided that I remain in Lebanon because people here need me more than my family does, who knows..."<sup>41</sup>

For Itab, whose family is still in Syria, her hope to go back to her country is now thwarted and a trip abroad is the only possible solution. She wishes to escape the insecurity and injustice that she faces in Lebanon.

"I still hope that the Syrian crisis would end and that I could go back home, but the only real solution today is immigration to a country that gives me a residency permit! I don't want to be humiliated anymore! I want to go to a country that respects me!"<sup>42</sup>

Despite its geographical and cultural proximity with Syria, Lebanon does not provide the conditions necessary for a long term settlement of Palestinian refugees from Syria, given the lack of adequate legal treatment. Compounding this is the fact that a possible resolution of the Syrian conflict still seems distant, and that Palestinians from Syria are basically state-less persons, which further encourages them to immigrate to the West, in the aim of obtaining legitimate documents.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we examined the migration route and forms of commitment advocated by three Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon. We showed that forced displacement exerts

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<sup>40</sup> Interview via Skype with Dania, March 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Interview via Skype with Ruba, March 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Interview via Skype with Itab, March 2016.

various effects depending on the specific trajectory of each woman and her previous engagement. In the case of Dania and Ruba, we noticed that, in Lebanon, there is continuity of the forms of mobilisation that began in Syria, particularly in the context of the anti-regime uprising that started in March 2011. In the Lebanese context of intense politicisation fueled by the echoes of the Syrian protest movement, the pursuit of a commitment in exile represents for Dania and Ruba a means for social integration, which allows them to restore a network of relationships, broken by displacement. This commitment also helps them overcome the situation of psychological fragility in which they are immersed following the conflict and their displacement. In the case of Itab who, on the contrary, was not settled in the camp of Yarmouk and kept herself away from the anti-regime mobilisations in Syria, the exile in Lebanon is rather a source of uprooting, insecurity, and isolation. The decline of the forms of past sociability, caused by the exile, is associated with a lack of social and political engagement.

Regarding the weight of gender on activism in exile, this article shows that it is not a constraint for our respondents. It is mentioned only intermittently and never as a hindrance to their activism. This is mainly explained by the sociological profile of these women who all share a very high level of education that allows them, even in exile, to achieve significant personal and professional accomplishments. Despite the varying perceptions of their own situation in Lebanon, Dania, Ruba, and Itab were able to take part in highly qualified professional and engaged fields: education, human rights, and information. However, one can imagine in many respects that for women from lower social classes, the constraints of exile and gender are cumulative and a source of exclusion and social marginalisation.

Women presented in this article are not representative of the situation experienced by the entire population of Palestinian refugees from Syria, but are rather its elite. However, they share with the whole community a part of its experience, representations, and expectations in the context of conflict and forced displacement. Their migration trajectories show that Lebanon is favoured by Palestinians from Syria because of the geographical proximity and the presence on-site of family networks. Still, Palestinians here are confronted to a situation of instability, emphasised by the arbitrary treatment to which the Lebanese authorities submit them due to their refugee status. Interaction with the host population is a source of divisions, and exacerbates a sense of insecurity, leading many Palestinians to go to third countries.

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