

Tucked away in the Metn Hills, Lebanon's Christian heartland north of Beirut, the Dbayeh refugee camp occupies a peculiar place in the histories of the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples. It is a locus of contending narratives involving questions of identity that are fluid and frozen in time.

Primarily, Dbayeh Camp belongs to the Palestinian refugee saga, which for more than 50 years has been dominated by the Israeli expulsion of Arabs from their villages during Israel's war of independence. Coupled with exile, Dbayeh's residents were drawn into Lebanon's civil war (1975-90); Palestinian militants had joined Lebanese secular leftist

groups to overthrow the constitutionally enshrined sectarianism of the country. During the chaos, waves of displaced Palestinians and Lebanese found refuge in Dbayeh, playing bit parts in the war.

Since the end of the civil war, the Lebanese have scorned the Palestinian refugee camps as hotbeds of criminality — “security islands” in local parlance. Lebanese law reinforces the segregation, strictly circumscribing the rights of refugees, who are barred access to some 70 professions (clerical and professional) and prohibited from owning property.

Where Dbayeh most strikingly departs from Lebanon's other official camps is perhaps its Christian identity — the vast majority of



Palestinians, and Palestinian refugees, are Sunni Muslim. Therefore, Dbayeh not only shares in the Palestinian refugee saga, but in an older story involving the region's Eastern Christian minorities and their relationship to the Muslim majority and the Christian West.

Recent visits to Dbayeh coincided with a renewed scrutiny of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps. Since 20 May, fighting has broken out between Islamist radicals ensconced in these camps and the Lebanese army. Though largely centered at the Nahr el Bared Camp, near the northern city of Tripoli, there have been incidents in other parts of the country. And while most of the Islamist militants fighting the army are not

Palestinian, the clashes have ignited waves of latent anti-Palestinian sentiment throughout Lebanon, making the experience of visiting Dbayeh all the more incongruous.

Nestled in a once-bucolic setting on a hillside adjacent to Dbayeh, the camp's four parallel streets extend over 84 *dunums* (1 dunum equals 1,196 square yards or 1,000 square meters) of land owned by the Maronite Monastery of St. Joseph. The village's population, like that of the camp, is Maronite and Melkite Greek Catholic.

Mookie's cafe welcomes the visitor, but the camp's most prominent neighbor is a five-star hotel, La Royale. No wall or fence surrounds the camp, and the army positions seen around other Palestinian camps are absent here. The familiar blue-and-white sign of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reminds visitors that this is in fact a Palestinian refugee camp. Next to the UNRWA office is a simple structure housing the Little Sisters of Nazareth.

The camp houses some 4,000 residents — mostly Palestinian refugees but also a significant number of displaced Lebanese, some of whom avail themselves of the camp's meager social services — but the streets are often empty. Well-maintained shelters, some of which still sport their original corrugated metal roofs and doors, make Dbayeh a fossil, revealing how all the camps once looked.

Dbayeh Camp was established in the early 1950's to absorb Palestinian refugees expelled during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. "Most of the residents originally came from villages in Galilee," said Hasan Ayoub, who heads the UNRWA office in the camp. Seeking the familiar and perhaps finding strength in numbers, the refugees grouped themselves by extended family and villages.



# Defining

# Dbayeh

by Jim Quilty

A refugee camp near Beirut mingles Palestinian and Lebanese identities

“When the first wave of refugees began arriving in 1948, they found the Lebanese were at first very welcoming,” said Suhayl al-Natour of the Palestinian Human Development Center at the Mar Elias refugee camp.

At the time, the Palestinian exodus was considered temporary. Secular and religious leaders met the refugees at the Beirut port and offered sanctuary. Bishops, priests and religious extended hospitality to Palestinian Christians, offering shelter in their churches and monasteries.

“From first contact, the Lebanese reception of refugees was sectarian,” Mr. Natour said.

The monks in Dbayeh set up a tent camp on a parcel of land near the monastery. UNRWA — in partnership with the Pontifical Mission of Palestine, which Pope Pius XII founded in 1949 to coordinate aid from the Catholic world for Palestinian refugees, entrusting its leadership to the secretary general of CNEWA — replaced the tents with one-room shelters. These, too, were supposed to be temporary until the refugees could return to Palestine. Lebanon’s authorities insisted that the roofs were to be made of zinc as a means “to ensure there was no vertical construction,” Mr. Natour said.

Some refugees fared better than others and left Lebanon eventually for the West. Many also found work in the Persian Gulf for American and British oil companies. The companies “needed mediators who could communicate in both Arabic and English,” Mr. Natour said. “That role was filled by the Palestinians, who were homeless but educated in English, where in Syria and Lebanon most were educated in French.”

Lebanese President Camille Chamoun (1952-1958), convinced that educated and successful Palestinians would strengthen the economy, encouraged them to become naturalized citizens.

Though the president, a Maronite, was most interested in Palestinian Christians, he understood that Lebanon’s confessional politics demanded the inclusion of Palestinian Muslims in any naturalization plan. Many wealthy Christian and Muslim Palestinians, therefore, became Lebanese citizens at this

time. But the vast majority, including those with means, declined to renounce their Palestinian identity. (UNRWA reports that an estimated 215,000 of Lebanon’s 408,000 registered Palestinian refugees now live in 12 official camps.)

Refugees of Dbayeh  
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**Previous pages**, the Demianos family waits for a visit from the Little Sisters. **Opposite**, Sister Laure Haddad takes a blood sample from Malakeh Shaabeh, a native of Nazareth.

Tensions in the camps escalated in the years before the civil war, particularly as rival Palestinian groups sought to consolidate their grip. In 1969, a violent power struggle between the Lebanese secret police and the P.L.O. ended when Palestinian commandos

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expelled the Lebanese police from the camps. Lebanese and Palestinian leaders later signed the Cairo Accords, which stipulated that the P.L.O. was responsible for security in the camps while barring Lebanese authorities from entering.

The accord eroded Christian confidence in the country's central government.

Retaliatory killings in 1975, usually pitting Lebanese Phalange against Palestinian militia, sparked massacres and widespread fighting, including attacks on three refugee camps located in the Christian areas to the east and north of Beirut — Jisr el Basha, Tel el Zaatar and Dbayeh. Though the first to fall, Dbayeh was the only camp to survive the ruthless bloodletting that would mark Lebanon's civil war:

"Two teachers from the secondary school and one from the primary school were killed," reported Constantine Vlachopoulos, the Pontifical Mission's executive director in a letter in February 1976 to CNEWA's Msgrs. John G. Nolan and Edward C. Foster.

Hasan Ayoub, who heads UNRWA's Dbayeh operations, added that when the Phalangists entered the camp, they killed its leaders. Grisly acts, including rape and decapitation, also have been recorded in oral testimonies of survivors by a Lebanese scholar at the Collège de France in Paris, Dr. Jihane Sfeir.

Once the violence abated, those Christian Palestinians who survived the destruction of Jisr el Basha trickled into Dbayeh. Another wave of displaced refugees fled to Dbayeh during the War of the Camps (1985-1988).

Dbayeh would witness another heavy round of violence in 1988, as Maronite General Michel Aoun, who commanded the Lebanese army, pounded the positions of the Lebanese Forces, the country's largest Christian militia.

"The old school had become a Lebanese Forces base, so the army shelled it and everything around it," Mr. Ayoub said. By the end of the war, more than 25 percent of the camp's shelters were destroyed.

"Palestinians in Lebanon have paid a big price," reflected Suhayl al-Natour.

"Their camps were systematically destroyed — first by Christian extremists, then by Shiite extremists and now, as we can see in Nahr el Bared, by Sunni extremists."

**A**cross from the UNRWA office, in the partially derelict school compound that Pontifical Mission, in partnership with UNRWA, built, funded and once administered, 10 youngsters were sitting in a semicircle rehearsing their First Communion. All wore white cassocks; wooden crosses hung around their necks while the girls wore gardenias in their hair. Men and women stood by, offering moral support. Among them was Sister Anita, a Little Sister of Nazareth, a community inspired by the French hermit Blessed Charles de Foucauld. While her two colleagues in Dbayeh are Belgian, Sister Anita is a native of Bshirri, a village in north Lebanon.

The Little Sisters of Nazareth have had a family of three nuns stationed in Lebanon since 1971. Sister Anita and Sister Rosa have served for four years, while Sister Joanna arrived a year ago, though she has long experience in Lebanon. Based first in Jisr el

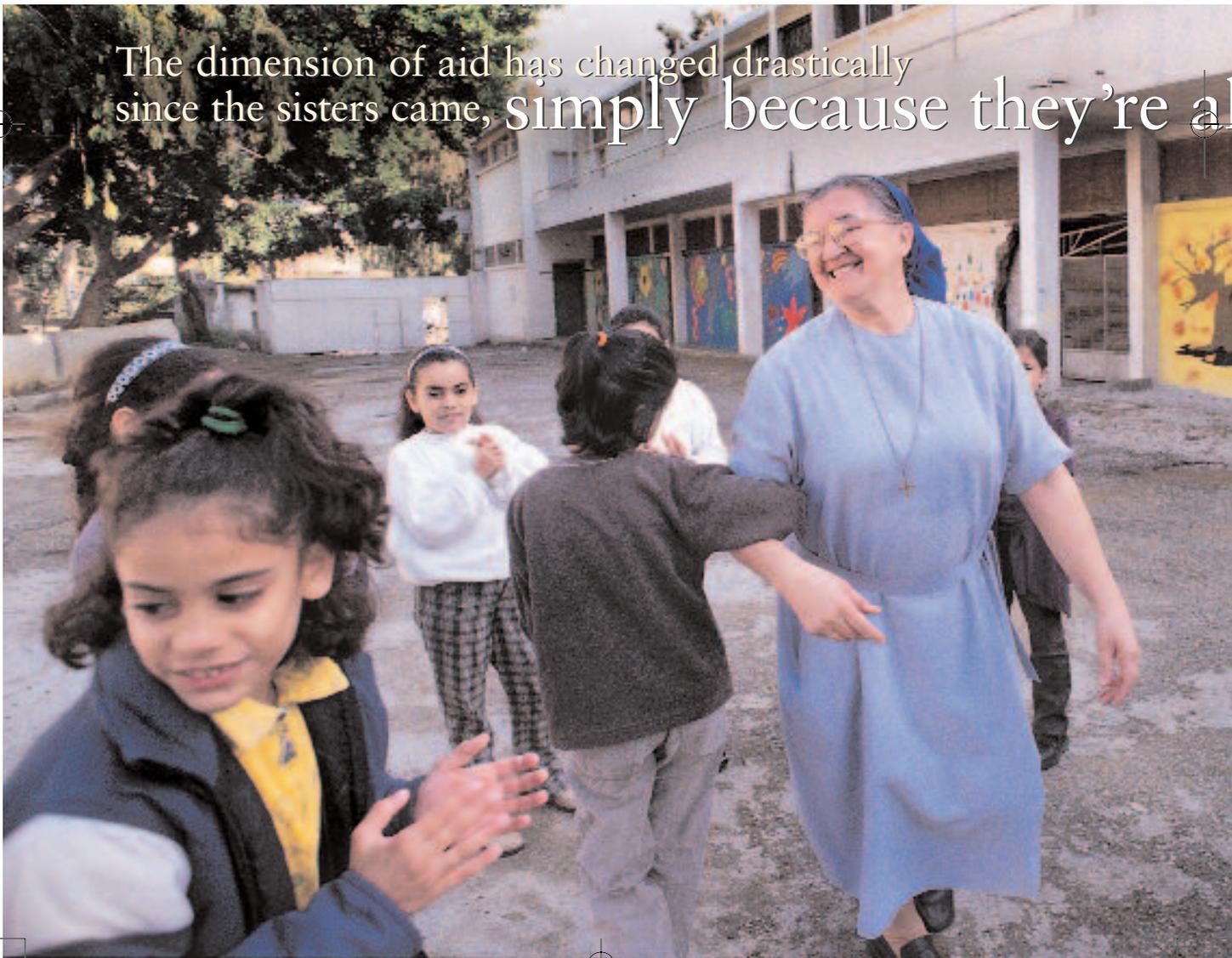
Basha, the sisters left Lebanon briefly for the safety of Jordan after the camp was razed in 1976. But in 1978, the Pontifical Mission approached the sisters and, to ease their return, offered living quarters in Dbayeh.

"We found them an old house we had in Dbayeh Camp," said Issam Bishara, Pontifical Mission's regional director for Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. "The dimension of aid has changed drastically since the sisters came, simply because they're always there — they care deeply about the needs of the people."

With CNEWA's support, the Little Sisters began their work at the camp in 1984.

"There were no other organizations working here," Sister Joanna said. Since then they have been joined by several aid organizations, including World Vision and Caritas Lebanon. Through CNEWA, benefactors have sponsored many of the camp's needy children and also fund educational programs, emergency health care and even infrastructure repair,

The dimension of aid has changed drastically since the sisters came, simply because they're al



such as sheathing the camp's open sewers. UNRWA has limited funds and its services in the camp are not sufficient, Mr. Bishara said.

"This camp just doesn't receive enough aid. Who should fix the camp's water system, UNRWA? Pontifical Mission?"

Sister Joanna said the Little Sisters' mission is to live and work among the people, like a family. Ordinarily, one of the sisters stays home to tend to the house while the others work in the community. "The same is true all over the world, wherever the Little Sisters have a mission," she said.

The needs in Dbayeh are such that none of the sisters works outside the camp.

The "unemployment level in Dbayeh is high, as in all the camps," said UNRWA's Hasan Ayoub.

"Most of the men here work as fishermen. Others work in construction and in manual jobs. Some of the women work for a sweets manufacturer called SeaSweet."

The sisters fill the gaps in services as best they can. One works with Caritas, which focuses on the medical needs of the elderly, while another works at the camp dispensary. Many residents also come to the sisters' residence to receive minor medical attention. "There is a clinic in the camp, but people know us, so some prefer to come here," Sister Joanna said.

Health care is one of the camp's greatest needs. Dr. Ahmad Halabi has run UNRWA's clinic in Dbayeh for three years. A Palestinian from Ein el Hilweh, the nation's largest refugee camp located near the city of Saida, Dr. Halabi was once forbidden by law to practice medicine in the country, though he did work informally in his home camp.

Dr. Halabi spends just two days in Dbayeh; most of his week is spent in Beirut's southern suburbs at Bourj el Barajneh Camp, which is home to about 16,000 Palestinian refugees.

Residents in Dbayeh claim the camp does not receive the social services other camps receive. "The clinic here is open only a couple days a week," said one resident, Saada Khayyat-Nahas. And the clinic is limited in what it can do for patients, she continued, adding that it is difficult to get treatment more complicated than a pill.

"We can only make referrals to Haifa Hospital in Bourj el Barajneh," Mr. Ayoub said. "If the patient needs something we can't provide, they go to Rafiq al-Hariri Hospital in Bir Hassan," a suburb south of Beirut.

The Little Sisters pitch in, but their primary focus remains social and pastoral care. They work out of the school, which the Pontifical Mission partially restored a few years ago. Sister Anita spends her afternoons teaching many of the camp's teenagers while in the evenings, she teaches young adults. On Saturdays, she works with children between the ages of 3 and 13. On Wednesdays, she trains older youths to teach.

During the civil war, the Pontifical Mission school was occupied by Phalangists, Syrians, the Lebanese Forces and the Lebanese army.

"The army left only five or six years ago, after we asked them to leave so we could use the facility again," Mr. Bishara said. But we were unable to restore it, he added. The monks, who own the land, opposed it.

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*The Pontifical Mission's school — especially the playground — remains in dire need of repair.*



The closest UNRWA school is in Bourj Hammoud, a congested neighborhood south of Dbayeh, but many families lack the money to bus their children there. Many refugee youths avoid school altogether and, because “they don’t have anything to do with their time, they drink alcohol,” Sister Joanna said. “To pay for drink, there’s theft and even prostitution.”

**T**here is no unanimity regarding questions of identity. On the day of the children’s First Communion, one young man identified himself as Lebanese, and though mildly concerned, he pushed it further, saying, “most of the people here are Lebanese.”

Hanna Ghantous, an elderly gentleman with Lebanese nationality from Kfar Bar’am, considers himself Palestinian. “I want to return to my country, to Palestine,” he said, revealing a sole tooth. But the Maronite church is the only extant building in his village, the ruins of which now make up Israel’s Baram National Park.

It is difficult to put your finger on Dbayeh Camp. It has all the institutions of a Palestinian refugee camp, but other visual cues suggest it is something else. There is none of the Palestinian political iconography that you find at other camps. But there are posters of a smiling Pierre Gemayel, the late Phalange deputy and industry minister, who was gunned down in a north Beirut suburb in November 2006. Incongruous, given the uneasy relationship historically between Phalange and Palestinians.

There are also spray-painted stencils of the cross-and-dagger emblem of the Lebanese Forces. One shelter flies the militia’s flag from its rooftop. The ruthless military offspring of the Phalange, the Lebanese Forces sought to unify all Lebanon’s Christian militias under a single command — a particularly bloody affair during a bloody war. The Lebanese Forces perpetrated the infamous 1982 massacre of Palestinian noncombatants in Beirut’s Sabra-Shatilla refugee camp — another incongruity.

“Refugees of Dbayeh Camp are caught in a no man’s land of identity,” wrote Dr. Sfeir. “They are marginalized by the Palestinian refugee community and by the Lebanese

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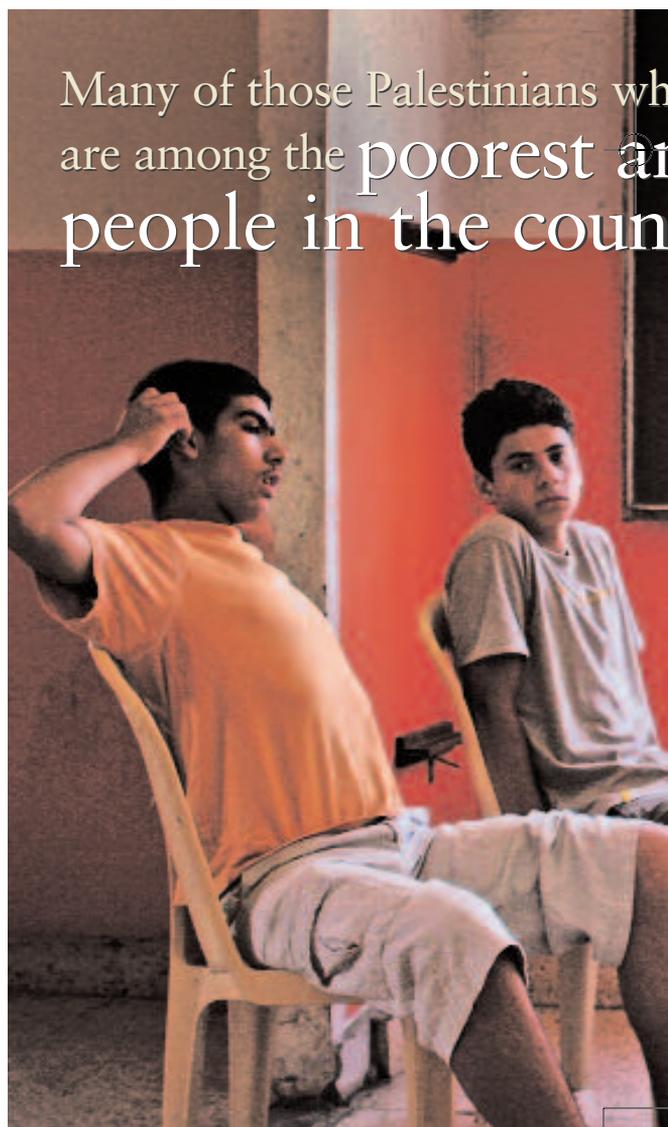
*There is little to keep Dbayeh’s youths occupied, except perhaps pool.*

population. They feel deeply Christian because it is the only identity that is left for them to live openly.”

Hasan Ayoub and Sister Joanna echo each other’s analysis on this point. With Palestinian political activity erased, some camp residents have found these parties the sole source of protection from arbitrary violence. Others support the Christian rivals of the Phalange and Lebanese Forces, Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement.

It is unclear just how many of the camp’s residents are in fact Palestinian. During the civil war, there was an influx of displaced Lebanese Christians, many of them from the south. “The [Phalange] put them in shelters in Dbayeh Camp,” Mr. Ayoub said. “Some 250 Lebanese families came into the camp in this way.”

At the same time, many of the Palestinians who remain in Lebanon are among the poorest and ill-educated people in the nation.



"You just have to look at the number of vacant UNRWA positions we have," said Mr. Ayoub, gesturing to papers announcing job openings. "There isn't anyone here who's qualified to take the posts."

"Now, it's not really a 'Palestinian camp' anymore," said Jean, a Christian Lebanese who declined to give his family name, but who admitted that his Palestinian mother is buried in the camp. "It's a poor people's camp."

Dr. Sfeir insists that nearly 65 percent of the camp's population is in fact Palestinian, many of whom hope to return to their homeland. "When I talk to older people here, they say they want to return home," UNRWA's Mr. Ayoub said.

"There's a lot of discussion about this: 'Will they force us to settle?' 'Will they ship us to other countries?' It's a genuine concern."

In large part, intermarriage, political and economic necessity and a shared Christian faith have blurred the distinctions between

Dbayeh's "Palestinian" and "Lebanese" residents. And though memories of the civil war may linger, mutual concerns about survival have united them around the political banners of Lebanon's Christian parties.

They also share a precarious existence. For while the Palestinian refugees of Dbayeh Camp are denied rights that are available to citizens of the Republic of Lebanon, their Lebanese neighbors are not much better off.

"Even if I take Lebanese nationality, what advantage will it give me?" Mr. Ayoub wondered aloud. "Yes, of course, Lebanese papers provide more opportunity, fewer work restrictions, better medical coverage. But the Lebanese people are facing the same problems we are. The young people need to migrate to find work. The government doesn't provide adequate services. What does Lebanon have to offer us?"

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*Jim Quilty is a Beirut-based journalist.*

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