**Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile**. *Diana Allan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014, 328 pp.

Brian Callan

*Goldsmiths University*

*Refugees of the Revolution* is a finely detailed ethnographic account of Palestinian narratives on identity, statehood, and the “right of return” encountered by Allan in refugee camps in Lebanon. Distrusted by their hosts, banned from entering the workforce, and sidelined in the Oslo Accords, the pragmatic struggles and survival strategies of refugees in Lebanon are reshaping what it means to be Palestinian almost seventy years after their forced exile in the 1948 *Nakba*. In presenting case studies of emergent and novel Palestinian nationalist imaginaries, Allan’s work is a provocative and important contribution to understanding the decades-long struggle for Palestinian statehood in particular, as well as the general phenomenon of generational forced exile.

The “revolution” in the title of the book refers to the arrival of Palestinian resistance movements in Lebanon in the early seventies, an era known to the Palestinians as *al thawra*. This period occurred partially as a result of the 1967 Six Day War in which Israel defeated Jordanian forces and occupied the West Bank, referred to in Arabic as the *Naksa*. Allan sets the context of contemporary camp life with an historical review of the time when Palestinian refugees of the 1967 *Naksa* joined those of the 1948 war to establish the Israeli state (*Nakba,* or catastrophe in Arabic) already in camps in Lebanon. As a result, the Shatila camp, the key ethnographic site in the book, became a center of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) mobilization and operation, providing support, protection, and employment for the camp residents. This “revolutionary” era was experienced as a period of “considerable prosperity and conviction” (p. 3) for Palestinians, but came to an end when the PLO evacuated to Tunisia in 1982, a period also synonymous with the infamous massacres at the Sabra and Shatila camps. With the loss of the PLO and the employment and support it provided, life in the camps deteriorated and is now one of extreme unemployment, financial scarcity, and changing relationships to what were considered traditional underpinnings of Palestinian identity and selfhood in the diaspora.

A key political question for Palestinian refugees has always been the right of return. In structuring memory, social practice, and future imaginaries, it has helped define Palestinian identity for decades. The central tenet of the book is that this hegemonic idealism of what a “true” Palestinian is (or should be) represents a diminishing reality for refugees of the Shatila camp. Israeli intransigence, corruption and cronyism in the various Palestinian political movements, and discriminatory practices and attitudes in Lebanese society have led these residents to question the viability of return and so concern themselves with alternative needs and possibilities. It is a text whose focus is on the practiced present and alternative futures, rather than imagined pasts.

Allan analyzes the lived experience in Shatila through a number of core anthropological concepts, including memory, subjectivity, kinship, and affective and material practices. Having set out the historical, legal, and political context of Lebanon’s Palestinian refugees in her introduction, Allan turns to the “cottage industry of commemoration” (p. 40) of the *Nakba*. In this she finds such memories practiced and stylized to the extent that they are circulated “almost as commodities” (p. 47). Chapter Two examines how the traditional obligations and responsibilities of kinship are being attenuated by the structural poverty of camp life, as corruption, factional clientism, and the normalization of aid dependency reduce the extent and capacity of familial support. In focusing on material need, Chapter Three looks at the particular phenomenon of stealing electricity. In this, she argues, camp residents are engaged in a form of resistance, but one in which national aspiration is entirely absent. Allan attends to future imaginaries in her discussion of “dream talk” in the following chapter. The narration and interpretation of dreams, as practiced by women in the camp, is understood by Allan as inherently political as it “shapes social and moral relations” (p. 157), an interesting argument that is somewhat distanced from the materiality of the rest of the book. The last two chapters are also future oriented, describing first the plans by young Palestinians to emigrate and the “consecration” of the right of return in the Palestinian narrative. Finding a complex range of motivations, viewpoints, and imagined possibilities – often at odds with the absoluteness of the nationalist discourse – Allan returns to the core of her argument: that camp life and the refugee experience may be producing a form of “Palestinianness” distinct from a national identity tied to ancestral land and the certainty of return. Allan is herself an activist for Palestinian rights and came to this ethnography through a project to record *Nakba* testimonials from the older refugees in the camp, those who have memories of the 1948 exodus. As such she is openly honest about the dangers of misreading this text. To write about changing forms of Palestinian identity in the diaspora, in which a primordial link to the land is not the central concern, can be misconstrued as the depoliticization of camp life in Shatila and a betrayal of hope and national solidarity.

However, we know that new forms of deterritorialized solidarity and political expression are always being created, such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement which itself re-centers the right of return in its discourse. Up until Syria’s collapse into brutal conflict,

Lebanon had the reputation among Palestinians as being the worst place to be a refugee, in terms of rights and access to the labor market. Under such circumstances many forms of political expression can emerge and the weakness of Allan’s text is that it does not access such voices that may exist.

This is, though, a finely detailed and beautifully written ethnography, which draws on solid anthropological theory to discuss tensions between the pragmatic difficulties of camp life and the aspirations of stateless people in the early twenty-first century. It should be read by anyone with an interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including academics, activists, policy-makers, and diplomats, as well as those engaged with forced migration of other peoples to other places. The work is not, as Allan stresses repeatedly, meant to undermine the right of return and she is openly wary of such disingenuous use of her work. However, the nuanced detail of what that means to the Palestinians still living in extremely precarious conditions almost seventy years after being forced from their homes deserves to be part of the public discourse on how statehood, identity, and justice must be achieved for the Palestinian people as a whole.

*Keywords*: refugees, refugee camps, Shatila, Palestinians, memory,

nationalism