

# **The island of (in)stability**

or a hotel for visiting foreigners in the middle of town

## **Diploma project description**

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What do you imagine when you hear the term refugee camp?

20 years is the average amount of time a refugee spends in one of UNHCR's refugee camps. In Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp established outside Beirut in 1948 and one of the world's oldest refugee camps, a fourth generation of refugees are now growing up within a state of exception, their lives on hold from birth as the international community look for solutions.

Except human lives are never on hold. Time passes, lives unfold and experiences are lived. Rows of tents become concrete towers filled with homes. The temporality embodied in the term camp, prevents us from recognizing the placemaking that happens when humans live their life in a physical environment. The stories and systems propagated by journalists, NGOs, UN agencies tell a story of constant crisis, one that robs people of dignity, and leads to an endless cycle of either failing or inefficient aid development projects.

Because it is so centrally located in the city that functions as the hub for western foreign correspondence, aid and diplomacy for the middle east, Shatila has become the poster child of the refugee crisis. In the constant reproduction as the backdrop for stories of misery and desperation there is no space for the portrayal of a complex urban area that in certain respects can be said to function as Beirut's actual center.

This project engages in an architectural anthropology, explores the logic of its built environment, attempts to map and draw the spaces created by the population of Shatila over the past 70 years seriously, as well as analyzes its place within the city. Furthermore, the project try to critically explore the relationship of outside NGOs, researchers and audiences have to urban development of the camp.

I am proposing a hotel on the site of a defunct water tower, another international aid project to that failed because of poor knowledge of local context. The hotel will be a

United Nations - private sector joint venture, attempting to bypass the dysfunctional and gridlocked politics, in an attempt to revive the failed project. The hotel will host the international aid workers, journalists, researchers, language students, political sympathisers and so on. Needing water, the hotel will run the pumps and desalination systems already installed in the water tower, and as a by product will provide water to the rest of the refugee camp too.

Constructed using local techniques and labour, by buying services from businesses in the camp and selling a highly refined product that invites the visitors to leave as much money as possible inside the camp ecosystem, the hotel promises a new form of sustainable market driven development.

Hotels are sites with complex geopolitical functions; Islands that provide a sense of normality during war, neutral ground in which to meet, spaces for both transparent and shady transactions, as well as sites for neutral leisure and containers for projecting dreams. Tourism is a popular, but also very controversial tool for development as there is a whole set of issues that comes with it. The architecture of the hotel becomes a model structures of the camp, its relationship to the outside, and to question the ethical practices of aid workers.

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Diploma Program, Bjørnar Skaar Haveland  
Bergen School of Architecture 2019

## **Introduction to the Program and Diploma process.**

This program is a collection of texts and fragments that in different ways talk about Shatila, a refugee camp in Lebanon that is the site of investigation in this diploma project.

The project comes as a response to the year I lived in Shatila camp though a fellowship project in 2015. Its a place few other outsiders know as intimately as I do, yet its also a place where I know there will always be too big limits to my un I knew what place I wanted to work with, but not what kind of problem to adresss. To make the problem worse; I felt as though I have no right to propose. This process has been about finding out how to ethically work in a place where I really felt like I have no right to act.

Slowly I realized I was motivated by countering at what I perceive as a constant misrepresentation of the camp. Shatila, being so centrally located in Beirut, the hub for all journalism, diplomacy and developmental work targeting the middle east, is the go to refugee camp for journalists needing a refugee story. Shatila as a place of desperation and misery is reproduced and sensationalized again and again. The placemaking, the qualities created by three generations of people and history, and the role it plays as an autonomous territory in the centre of the capital city doesn't fit with narratives of the refugee story.

I could see that there was a space between architecture and anthropology where I could position myself, mapping, analysis and representing the built environment created by the residents of Shatila over seventy years.

And while easily reached, the architecture with its narrow and confusing alleyways, towering buildings, exposed infrastructure, and intense overcrowding is far from accessible to outsiders. Making it difficult to do this kind of work without having spent considerable amount of time there to do this kind of work.



# Shatila camp

## Quick Facts:

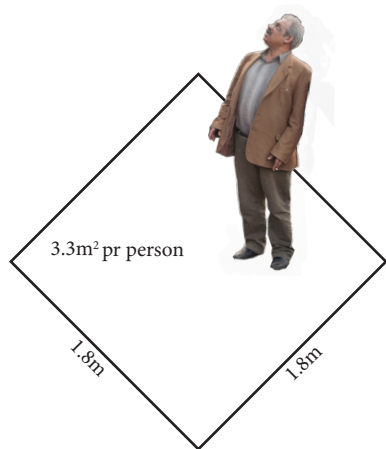
Established:	1949
Area:	67,000m <sup>2</sup> (6,7ha)
Population:	20-30,000
Nationalities:	30% Palestinian, 65% Syrian, 5% others
Religions:	Mainly Sunni muslim,
Governance:	Unclear
Security:	Stable
Schools:	2 UNRWA, many others run by NGOs
Health Centers:	1 UNRWA, 2 MSF
Electricity:	4 hours/day
Water:	Salty
Typical Rent:	2015: 450USD, 2018: maybe 300USD

## Major Challenges:

Environmental health conditions in Shatila are extremely bad and prove a lethal hazard.

Shelters are damp and overcrowded, and many have open drains. The sewerage system needs considerable expansion. The storm water system struggles to cope even with moderate amounts of rain and flooding happens on a regular basis.

Water network is based on private groundwater wells that provide salty and contaminated water.



# Intentions

This diploma is a research into the logics of the built environment of Shatila refugee camp in Beirut.

Inherent in the concept of *camp*, is a refusal to recognize the process of placemaking. When you remove the connection between people and the place they inhabit, they are easier to dehumanize and portray through a political lens as outsiders, enemies, workers, sufferers, soldiers, martyrs, victims, refugee etc. The refugee camp is a tool, used by governments to create a *space of exception* where inhabitants are suspended from normal rules and rights of society, in a timeless warehousing, that is justified through a frame of temporary crisis and . Through a conceptual suspension of time, refugee populations can be stored and excluded for generations.

This work attempts to do two things. First, seriously map, draw and explore the logics of the built environment of Shatila. Anthropologists are finally arguing that the camp's residents are more than noble sufferers and political subjects in a never ending Palestinian/Israel conflict, and that their experience and connection to their place of displacement matters. But the built environment, the accumulated physical manifestation of this experience, is treated only as a backdrop and remains undocumented. I want to take part in an architectural anthropology, analysing the spaces people create as important expressions of identity to learn more about what the camp as a *place*.

The second element of this diploma is searching for a way to *react* architecturally to a vulnerable and highly contested setting. What approaches to architecture are appropriate here? Planning? Spatial interventions? Analysis? Speculation? Humanitarian? Subversive? Naive? Cynical? Is it appropriate at all for a privileged outsider to employ his pencil and ruler to meddle with vulnerable people's habitat, even with the best of intentions? A luxury prison is a prison all the same. Applying "spatial makeup" won't provide anyone passports or fundamental human rights, and can just as easily prove to be destructive. Not that one has to fix all the most fundamental problems in order to justify doing anything at all, but still there is such a thing as addressing too little. Shatila is an extremely resilient place inhabited by vulnerable people. An architectural response must be sensitive yet bold.

After carefully investigating several sites and different sets of issues, one site, that of a defunct water tower appears as the most promising subject for architectural speculation in Shatila. What kind of program can be used to circumvent the processes that stop it from working, and engage the logics of both the camp and the system of International Aid provide clean water for Shatila. How can local skills and construction logics be used in designing so that Shatila residents can be contracted to build, and how can the architecture be flexible enough to add value even when the program fails.

In the middle of Beirut, a massive water tower is looming above a small overcrowded refugee camp. The tower, together with series of other secondary water towers, wells, pumps, filters and a high tech desalination system, is supposed to provide potable fresh water to the Palestinian camp that after 70 years still lacks basic infrastructure such as water, sewage and reliable electricity.

All that remains is to turn the system on.

*-In this place I have no right to provoke*



Luxury hotel for UN employees, facing inwards around the Shatila water tower. The hotel would ensure the operations of the water infrastructure, but also restructure the power relations between the “helper” and the “helped”. Revealing the absurdly elevated position of western do gooder, while putting their existence at the hands of the population they serve.







# Welcome to Shatila

Its easy to get to Shatila from almost anywhere in Beirut. From downtown, a taxi or min-van will take you there in less than ten minutes. They drop you off at the airport road, a highway connecting the airport to downtown. Then you gotta walk for five minutes through one of the informal neighbourhoods that surround the camp. At this point it can be difficult for an outsider to disseminate what is camp and what is not, and often the whole area around the camp is confusingly called Shatila or Sabra-Shatila. Streets get smaller and smaller and grow busy with people and shops. You know you are in Shatila when the buildings suddenly grow from an average of 3-4 stories to 8 or 9, and you pass underneath a large picture of Yasser Arafat.

Shatila is bustling with activity. The narrow streets are filled with children running, people talking, scooters zooming past, tiny delivery trucks slowly forcing their way through a crowded street, construction, people shopping, people selling, and people in plastic chairs enjoying coffee or argile. Everywhere you look there are commercial signs for shops, dentists, delivery services and schools, battling for space with propaganda posters from various Palestinian parties. Above you, large curtains and forests of laundry hang from balconies creating a colourful canopy. Here you can find bakeries, hardware stores, internet providers, pharmacies, mini markets, olive retailers and internet cafés. If you are a westerner like me, people will look at you, some people will want to talk to you, ask you where you are from, what on earth you do in Shatila, or ask you advice on how to travel to Europe. You look out of place and people are well justified to be suspicious of your presence, however, most people really just want to talk and be friendly. Children will shout “Khow are you” or “Khwaats your name” after you in the street. In the smaller streets buildings are so close to each other you can’t see the sun, and many places the streets are literally encapsulated by buildings to become tunnels. Electrical cables and water tubes hang suspended just above your head, exposing a sprawling interconnected network of ad-hoc infrastructure. Smells are intense: exhaust, bread, food, some trash, cigarettes and sweet argile mix together. The sounds can be loud too. You might be surprised by the diversity. Many women wear Hijab, many don’t. Some people look very poor, others are meticulously dressed and groomed.

I can’t help but think that Shatila has all the urban qualities that we in Norway dream about implementing in our sprawling towns. You have

a high density of people and a diverse population. A couple of mini markets, a bakery, a pharmacy, a cafe group together to make a sort of urban program unit, that organically is repeated every 30 meters or so to create small functional neighbourhoods based around services these essential services. This place has the same content as a city, just condensed into a small area. Everything is close, everywhere is walkable. Tiny alleys criss cross the camp, allowing you to move around efficiently, as well as avoid whoever you want to avoid as there are always a high number of alternative paths. There are eyes and ears everywhere and streets filled with social interactions.

At nights the streets quickly grow quiet. Some people gather in cafes, or sit in silence smoking argile to enjoy a moment of calm before bed, but then the streets are deserted. Its dark, and it can sometimes even be hard to see where you walk. Rats get bolder and get out in the open searching for food. I once even saw a large rat chase a cat. The few lights there are create abstract patterns, and reveal details and colors the daytime is way too busy for you to see.

Shatila is a place of many myths and stories, as a location that played a central role in the Lebanese civil war, and as an image of the Palestinian diaspora; a state in exile. Later, its also become one of the symbols of the war in Syria. For many Lebanese its a place they would never go, a blank spot on the map. For the inhabitants, Shatila is many things, the place they grew up, where their family lives, opportunity and work, a place of security, but also a place of insecurity, fear of the future, for some people its a place to channel dreams, for many others it's a place that forces them to channel their dreams for the future elsewhere. The older generations of Palestinians maintain the dream of return, but for younger generations, Shatila is their home, and dream not of returning to Palestine, but to escape to Europe. You could say Shatila is not one, but many different heterotopias overlaid on each other. However first and foremost, it's a bustling and vibrant city in the city, where thousands of people live their daily lives.





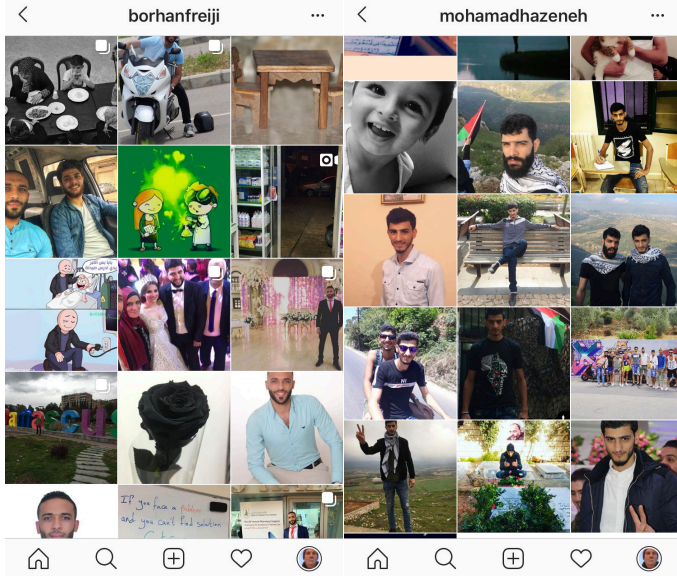
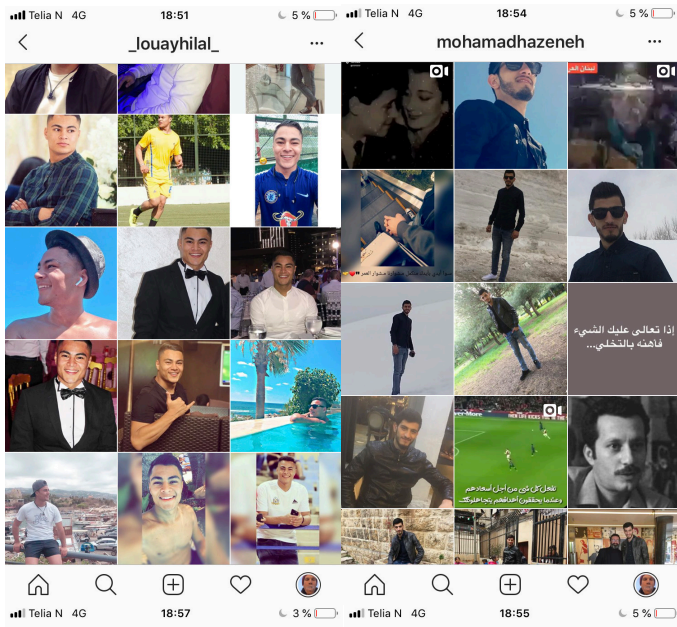
The portal that tells you this is Palestinian land.



At night, the building's heights disappear, and the cables overhead turn the streets in a set of winding intimate spaces.









# Contested Territories

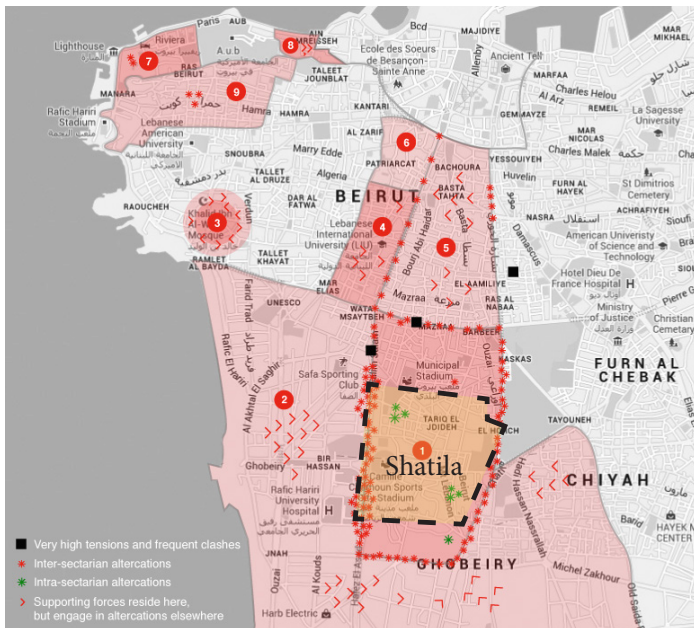
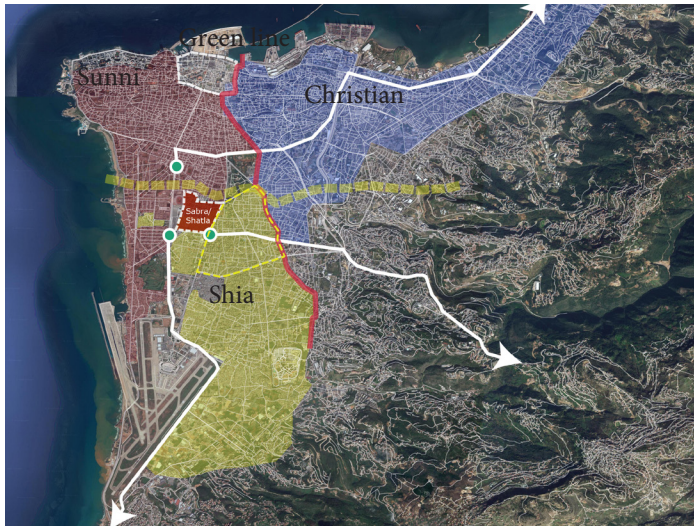
Shatila is on Lebanese territory, on land rented by the UN to host Palestinian refugees from 1948. The United Nations Works and Relief Agency (UNRWA) are responsible for the Palestinian welfare and camp infrastructure, however they don't really run the camp. The Cairo agreement from 1969 grants the Palestinians autonomy within the camps in Lebanon, and the camp is today controlled by a patchwork of Palestinian militia groups, in constant negotiation with each other and a range of outside actors like the Lebanese state and non state actors, UN, NGOs, international aid agencies and private interests.

The camp and the slum that surrounds it, holds a neglected, but vital geographic location in Beirut. Not only does it host the capital's largest market street, but Beirut's 3 main regional transport hubs are centered around the area, as are two main highways. Furthermore it splits the affluent north part of the city from the poorer south, and separates Sunni from Shia neighbourhoods. Sectarian divisions split Beirut into fragments, and Shatila lies on the crossing of several of the fault lines.

The large Syrian and Palestinian refugee populations in Lebanon add extra fuel on the fire of sectarian conflict. Palestinians can move freely around in Lebanon, but have no other civil rights nor are they allowed to work or own property outside the refugee camps. They are forced to run shops inside the camp, find work with the UN, work illegally outside, or otherwise creatively utilize the few opportunities that can arise from a centrally located territory outside the reach of the law. Syrian refugees in Lebanon, of which there are more than a million, have become one such opportunity.

Syrians are treated as illegal immigrants, and have to pay for expensive short term residence permits or risk arrest and deportation. Shatila, sheltered from the eyes of the police, cheap rent, centrally located and with access to NGOs providing aid and some health care, as well as networks of informal labour, remittances and human trafficking, makes an attractive place for Syrian refugees. Construction has boomed as Palestinians try to construct rental properties to accommodate and benefit from the newcomers. Today there are twice as many Syrians than Palestinians in Shatila.

Sabra-Shatila in relationship to demographics and lines of frequent sectarian tension in Beirut.





# THE TOWER

In 2013 the Swiss development agency funded a water tower and a set of filters, reverse osmosis system and infrastructures to provide potable water to the inhabitants in Shatila. The project cost was 10 million Euros.

Years later the tower stands there, and the equipment is being maintained to a working order by UNRWA. However the project have never provided water to the refugees. UNRWA struggles to cooperate with the political factions of Shatila to organize the collection of fund's needed to operate the plant. UNRWA is underfunded and doesn't have the capacity to operate the pumps and desalination without collecting a small service fee.

Such a fee, 5USD pr family a month, is much less than the current cost of water, where families rely on multiple sources for different needs. Salty water in the tap, desalinated water for washing, purchased from water merchants, and bottled water or soda from mini markets to drink.

In interviews with UNRWA officials, they expressed great frustration over how difficult it is to cooperate with the popular committee, and political factions of Shatila. However, pushing the full responsibility for the failure of the project over on the local representatives is extremely unfair. As the organization that works most closely with the Palestinian community should have enough knowledge of the situation to understand the layers of distrust between local residents and the different militia groups, and planned for a different way





# A place of extremes

Shatila is a place of extremes that make cooperation and implementing project difficult. Marginalized, overcrowded, underserved, pressured by local and international biopolitics and sectarian conflict. An unregulated free market refugee camp.

Competition for resources and influence is a battle for survival, and so intense all aspects of life become political and contested. The Palestinian factions that control the camp have few resources, but act as gatekeepers for outside humanitarian, political and private interests.

The water tower failed because it was impossible to agree who would be responsible for collecting the 5 dollar monthly fee from each family needed to sustain operations. The faction that would take responsibility for collecting such funds would become more powerful, and thus cause a shift in a fragile power balance. The gatekeeper role must be exercised in order for a group to stay relevant, and for the factions the importance of grasping hold of whatever power and relevance they have is crucial and more important than even fresh water.

## ***What is a camp?***

**The camp is first and foremost a temporary space, although its temporariness often endures for decades or even centuries.**

**Secondly, the camp is also a space of exception managed under a particular mode of governance and outside the normal legal, social, political and spatial order.**

**Third, it is a space created by or for specific populations with a distinct ethnic, cultural, political or other specific identity.**

(Katz, Irit 2017)

# Space of exception

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's writings about the *Spaces of Exception* have been paradigmatic in the studies of refugees. He draws on Hannah Arendt's writings about the plight of refugees and stateless during the second world war, and the ultimate expression of rightlessness of the concentration camps. Agamben takes these perspectives when looking at modern day treatment of refugees and migrants.

The space of exception is where migrants, refugees or other undesirables that don't fit into the logic of the nation state system, are warehoused in camps and detention centers in a state of "bare life", kept biologically alive for an indefinite amount of time, and robbed of any political agency.

This view has become a prominent tool for understanding the refugee camp in anthropological research, also the study of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, shaping the image of camp as places containing voiceless victims suspended from time and history.

A useful tool for understanding what camps really are from the perspective of governments and sovereigns, seeing the camp only as a space of exception can make one blind to the human experience and the subversive actions of the people that grow up in the camp. Shatila is a space of exception, but not completely bereft of any agency.

"The camp is the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule" (Agamben, 1998: 168).

# Boomtown

## The Laissez-faire economy and commuter camp

The Syrian civil war created a new exodus of refugees to Lebanon, and Shatila as a cheap, central location, protected from the police, became a popular destination. While overwhelming the camp's already poor infrastructure, the influx of newcomers also presented opportunities. Palestinian land owners rushed to add new floors to their buildings, to rent out to Syrian refugee families. In 2015 the pressure on the Shatila housing market was so high, it would take less than 2 years of renting out to cover the cost of construction. A massive demographic shift means the camp is now 2/3 Syrian. Still, Palestinian factions are still in control, and Palestinian imagery still dominates its visual character. Many Palestinian families have used the situation to leave the camp, renting properties elsewhere and commuting back into the camp to work and attend their properties.

The camp is a flexible space. While congested, with terrible infrastructure and endemic poverty, the regulations are lax. Income is quickly reinvested, and construction can happen fast. To build you simply have to negotiate with your neighbours. Disagreements can be solved with monetary compensations. Thus the camp grows fast, accommodating ever increasing arrivals. This change towards a rent driven economy is creating some potential problems, conflict between long time residents and newcomers being a big one. Another little researched topic is the changing nature of ownership. Where the camp before was owned by families, I see a tendency for ownership to become more consolidated, with investors acquiring more and more property, and investing money earned outside, on for-rent apartment inside.



# **Is Shatila a Space of exception, or an autonomous land granting freedoms that are denied elsewhere?**

Even though the Cairo agreement granting the Palestinian camps autonomy being annulled, the Lebanese state have made very limited attempts at enforcing control over them. Being a space of exception assumes a sovereign enforcing control over the space. The 2007 siege of Narh el-Bered camp north of Tripoli saw the entire camp being levelled to the ground, with the army sustaining heavy losses, and highlights the limited means the state has to actually enforce total domination over these spaces. Today only a few camps have military checkpoints, and the reconstructed Narh El Bered the only camp with Lebanese presence inside. In this sense, the Palestinian camps represents the fragility and weak sovereignty of the Lebanese state.

Palestinians are stripped of rights everywhere outside the camp, and makes the camp a soft but efficient tool that confines so many Palestinians to it. For a state with limited means it represents a pragmatic option of exercising control; confine the undesirable population to camps by suspending their rights on the outside, and ensure their oppression by leaving the control and security inside the camp to the myriad of competing militias.

From the point of view of the international community the state of exception describes the situation perfectly. A system of extraterritorial spaces for containment, a UN agency dedicated to dealing with the problem, with the result that Palestinians are not counted as normal refugees and cannot seek asylum or help from organization like the UNHCR. The insides of the camps are inaccessible, informal and poorly documented. Without a clear ecosystem of representation, it allows for the camp to remain a “temporary” and technical solution.

After the Oslo treaty the PLO gave up the right to return for the Palestinians that had been exiled. The patchwork of Palestinians political parties represented in the camps of Lebanon nevertheless kept on claiming to represent the struggle of the Palestinian people. Indeed, many in Shatila view their camps in Lebanon as the “true” Palestine as the political groups here never gave up the right to return, and thus haven’t compromised with Israel the way PLO did in 1993.

**The camp represents a space of political autonomy. Freedom of speech, freedom to organize, to own property, freedom to wear arms, freedom from Lebanese authorities. The unprecedented lack of rights Palestinians enjoy in Lebanon are juxtaposed with unprecedented political autonomy inside the camp.**

While the camp might provide a space for political autonomy for groups, this is debatable from perspective the individual. The groups that can take advantage of the autonomy, are the armed factions that remain from the political Palestinian parties, today a patchwork of gangs and militias. While there today are more Syrian refugees than Palestinians in Shatila, it looks overwhelmingly Palestinian as they still maintain the power.

Your personal security is based on your family and friendship ties. Those with larger networks are safer than those without a network. Since no group is strong enough to enforce total domination over the camp, balance of power maintains a certain stability and lawfulness. You are safe when actions against you will cause retaliation from others. However, without a network there is no deterrence, leaving you extremely vulnerable.

Therefore the ideas of autonomy and freedom inside the camp is not applicable to everyone. Many indeed, even Palestinians, express a desire for the camp to be controlled by the regular Lebanese police like a normal neighbourhood. This is because the “politicians” and militias are considered corrupt and unjust in their exercise of power. The camp is certainly a type of oppressive typology despite giving access to a range of resources and rights not available outside. The few opportunities the camp presents cannot be taken for granted, with no room for dreaming of a future.