



FIGURE 6. Women carrying eggs in Nahr el-Bared camp. Photograph: Ali Alloush.

## “The Nest of the Crazy”

### *The Ethnographic Setting*

Prior to starting my research, I visited Nahr el-Bared camp numerous times. The experience was always the same. Upon approaching the Lebanese army’s check-point, my stomach would tie itself in knots as I found myself entering a different world; a world of military control and surveillance, destruction, destitution, and injustice. The proximity of this world to the world I was coming from always overwhelmed me. I have to confess, even if I run the risk of sounding weak and self-centered, that as I made plans to live in Nahr el-Bared I worried about how it would affect me. Would I become depressed? Would I be able to handle it?

Amazingly, what I found was that the overt signs of poverty, misery, and hardship, so visible to me on my visits, actually disappeared. I no longer noticed the holes in buildings, the dark alleys, the corrugated iron roofs, the piles of rubble, the bullet- and shell-holes. It is not that they went away, but they just melted into the background; what became visible in their place was misery in its detail and daily occurrence. No longer in the forms of buildings or roads, this misery was instead to be found in mundane things, such as the choice of room to sit in, of fruit to buy and of hot drinks to consume, as well as in life-changing decisions about pursuing an education or searching for employment. Everything that a person did or did not do was determined by material necessity. However, what this misery in its detail revealed in turn was the survival techniques, the ingenuity of the refugees in making their lives. To me, Nahr el-Bared was no longer just a place of destitution, but also, and more importantly, a place of collective survival and great inspiration.

#### THE SETTING

When I first moved in with the Talal family, they lived in a rented apartment in a partially destroyed building situated on the main road of the new camp. The owner



FIGURE 7. Snow-capped mountains surrounding Nahr el-Bared camp. Photograph: Perla Issa.

had repaired part of the floors while others still bore the signs of war with large shell holes visible.<sup>1</sup> The outside of the building was not completed, with cinder blocks and concrete pillars remaining exposed. A series of shops lined the ground floor. There was a computer and internet store, a vegetable seller, a grocery store, and a calling center. The building stood next to an open field of gravel, which extended to its left and behind it. The winter rains had created large puddles of water in which wild vegetation was growing. The field was used as a storage place for cinderblocks for sale, as a parking lot for cars, and as a playground for children.

The building's entrance, situated at the back, was reached through a slightly elevated path that circled around the structure. A few steps led up to the building's concrete hallway, where electric cables dangled out of countless circuit breakers and the occasional electricity meter. On the left, next to an apartment door, stood a concrete stairwell leading to the upper floors. The rough and uneven finishing of the concrete made cleaning the stairwell and the hallway very difficult. Despite the frequent attempts of residents to sweep them or hose them down with water, they would remain dirty and dusty.

The Talal family lived on the third floor in an apartment that faced the main street. The apartment consisted of three bedrooms, a salon, a short but wide hallway that had been turned into a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and two balconies on the eastern and southern sides of the building. A rarity in the camp, their home had a lot of natural light, a nice breeze when doors and windows were opened, and a great view of the snow-capped mountains of Akkar in the distance. When the

family first moved back to Nahr el-Bared camp after the war, they had lived in a two-room apartment, where Um and Abu Muhammad shared a room while their children slept in the other. On my earlier visits to Nahr el-Bared I often visited them in that home and would even take the opportunity to nap to beat the afternoon heat. However, once Muhammad got married and was working on a project with a local NGO, they moved into the present apartment. Here Muhammad and his wife occupied one room, Um and Abu Muhammad took another, and Mahmud, Ahmad, and Nadia shared the third. The rent was partially covered by Muhammad and by a rent subsidy that UNRWA provided for displaced Nahr el-Bared families whose homes had been demolished. However, after a few months the project on which Muhammad was working ended. Despite assurances from the NGO that they would keep him on staff after the end of the project, they did not do so and he lost his job. Looking for new employment, Muhammad found a position in another NGO in the south of Lebanon, where he relocated. At that point the family began to look for a smaller home to rent, as Muhammad was still helping them and they wanted to eliminate that expense for him. Homes were difficult to find in Nahr el-Bared as few of them were left standing after the war and there was a large number of families who, like the Talal family, had been made homeless by the war and were searching for housing. Throughout my stay with them, the family was not able to find a cheaper apartment to rent.

At the time of my arrival, Nadia had moved into the room that Muhammad and his wife used to occupy, and it was this room that I shared with her. The house was scarcely furnished, mostly with foam mattresses that doubled as beds at night and as sitting areas in the day. There were two different kinds: a thicker and harder mattress that was in the salon, handed out by Hamas after the war, and a thinner and softer type that was used in the sitting area and the children's bedrooms, distributed by UNRWA. The rest of the furniture consisted of one bed that Um and Abu Muhammad used, two old wardrobes, and a plastic kitchen table with four chairs. In the winter, the tile floors of the living room and salon were covered with plastic rugs, handed out by UNRWA, in an attempt to insulate feet from the cold. The walls were bare. The kitchen had second-hand appliances with a gas stove, a washing machine, and a fridge notorious for its breakdowns. There was an electric heater with "donated by ECHO" (for the European Community Humanitarian Office) printed in large letters on it in the hallway. Finally, their son Mahmud had bought a used computer and he obtained a wired Internet connection from the ground floor shop.

Most of the time at home was spent in the hallway that had been turned into a sitting area. Connecting the bedrooms at one end of the apartment to the kitchen and salon at the other, three of its walls were lined with mattresses; a television set was against the fourth. It was a windowless room with little natural light. I always wondered why the family picked this room to spend so much of their time in, when the rest of the rooms were well-lit, with either windows or balconies that had such nice views of the mountains. At first I wondered if the Nahr el-Bared conflict had had a lasting impact on the family, who now always worried about sudden and

indiscriminate bombings. Hallways were always deemed the safest in times of war as they increased the number of walls between the person and incoming missiles; maybe the family was continuously worried about its physical safety. However, I soon realized that that my preference for a well-lit room with a mountain view reflected my privilege. I was thinking of looking at nice scenery, while they were worried about saving money. Being the smallest room in the house, the hallway was the easiest and therefore the cheapest room to heat during the winter. Often, just the heat of our bodies under a pile of shared blankets would be enough to warm it up; if not, then a small electric heater would suffice. In the summer, with the lack of electric fans, let alone air-conditioning, it was important to look for the coolest room in the house. The lack of direct sunlight turned into a blessing, which kept the hallway cooler than other rooms; a breeze still crossed it when windows and doors were opened.

Evening family gatherings soon became one of my favorite times in the camp. Ahmad would often be on the computer browsing the Internet for news about the Arab Spring, Mahmud would try to distract him by making jokes, while Abu Muhammad would purposely tease his sons by commenting that the only “*real thawra*” was the one of his generation. This would have the intended effect of provoking Ahmad, who would get angry and tell his father not to talk to him of a *thawra* that ended up in the Chadian desert of Aouzou, referring to his father’s six-month involvement in the 1987 Libyan-Chad war. In the meantime, Um Muhammad would tap her husband on his shoulder, telling him not to instigate trouble, while Nadia would laugh and tell me “see, this is why I don’t like politics.” It is those evenings that made Um Muhammad call her family “the nest of the crazy” (*ish al-majānīn*) and it is those evenings that warmed my heart and made me look forward to visiting Nahr el-Bared. Abu and Um Muhammad’s life course and past political engagement were often the topic of conversation in these nightly gatherings and these helped me better understand the challenges facing the family and the strategies it adopted to overcome them.

#### *Abu Muhammad*

Abu Muhammad, a humorous man, often told me that if I wanted to understand Palestinian politics all I had to do was listen to his personal experience. In many ways he was right. His story featured many of the defining experiences of the *thawra*: the initial enthusiasm, the suspension of education in favor of joining the struggle, the witnessing of corruption, the subsequent disillusionment, the betrayal and abandonment by the leadership, the retreat from politics and finally the attempt to make a living, and raise a family, as an unskilled laborer. However, what was even more telling about Abu Muhammad’s experience was his lack of desire to talk about it. Indeed, despite his insistence that his life story alone would be enough for me to “complete my research,” he did not like to elaborate on it. Later, Um Muhammad explained that he did not want to talk about his experience

in too much detail in front of his children, afraid that his stories would inspire them to partake in political work that could jeopardize their lives or their futures. This did not mean that he was not proud of his past actions, but the lesson he wanted his children and me to learn was: don't get involved with the factions, don't waste your time with Palestinian politics, it is all "nonsense" (*haki fāḍi*), it is better to build a future and raise a family.

Abu Muhammad was born in the Zarqa Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan in the mid-1950s. At the age of fifteen he became a *shibil* in Fatah, following in the footsteps of an older cousin who was a *fidā'i*.<sup>2</sup> This was in 1969, two years after the Arab defeat of 1967, and as Fatah increased its military operations against Israel. During Black September in 1970 he was imprisoned for several months by the Jordanian authorities at the age of sixteen.<sup>3</sup> When I asked him if he was beaten, he laughed and told me that I better not ask and then recounted how his older cousin, who had initially inspired him to join the struggle, had been shot dead outside his family's home by the Jordanian authorities. After his release from prison in Jordan, Abu Muhammad still feared for his life and hid for a year in the hills, until his parents used their connections to fly him out to Kuwait to join his brothers. There, he worked as an electrical technician. He remained active in Fatah and in 1976 went to Lebanon to help in the defence of Tal al-Za'tar camp.<sup>4</sup> The camp fell three months later and Abu Muhammad went back to Kuwait for another three years. In 1979, he left Kuwait permanently to join Fatah's Force 17 in Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

Abu Muhammad did not like to talk of his experiences in Tal al-Za'tar or as part of Force 17. He was more interested in discussing the dual effect of petrodollars. He would highlight how the money pouring from oil-rich countries made many Palestinian fighters prefer to be in office jobs in Beirut rather than on the frontline in the south, and how the influx of money gave foreign countries influence over Palestinian decision-making. However, when I asked him how he lost his passport and became a non-ID,<sup>6</sup> I learned that during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon Abu Muhammad had taken part in famous battles at Khalda and the Beirut airport.<sup>7</sup> To my great disappointment he did not provide me details of these battles, which I had only read about in books and which I had been longing to hear about from people who had fought in them. Instead, Abu Muhammad just recounted how, during the airport battle, they were able to repel the Israelis on two occasions, but on the third attack Israeli tanks managed to reach the runway. Abu Muhammad explained that as the tanks were driving down the runway, he and fellow fighters asked the leadership to bomb the tanks, which they refused to do. He then added that he witnessed the looting and burning of the airport by fellow Palestinians. When he attempted to call the firefighters, he was told by a commanding officer that "there is no need for that." This, he said, was the beginning of his troubles with part of the Fatah leadership.

Following the fall of the airport Abu Muhammad went back to the offices of Force 17 in Beirut, where he had left some of his clothes and passport; however,

he found his bag open, his clothes spread everywhere, and his passport gone. He assumed that it had been burned. The loss of his passport was a major problem, as the Jordanian Embassy refused to issue him a new passport, and thereafter he became a “non-ID.” In September 1982 Abu Muhammad left Beirut with the departing PLO forces for Tunisia. He had little to say about his stay in Tunis other than the fact that it basically consisted of “eating, drinking, sleeping, and sitting.” But crucially, it was in Tunis that he learned that his passport had not been burned, but had been stolen by a Fatah official in Beirut. Abu Muhammad was keen on naming the given official, whom I will call Official X. He mentioned that, in the post-Oslo years, he often saw Official X standing behind Yasir Arafat on television.

Upon confronting Official X, Abu Muhammad was accused of being a Jordanian spy and imprisoned in the hotel nightclub in Tunis. Abu Muhammad laughed, saying that they had turned the nightclub into a prison just for him. However, security was lax and Abu Muhammad was able to escape within a few days and then hid in Tunis for the next seven months. He later made contact with a friend, who informed him that both Fatah and the Tunisian police were looking for him and advised him to leave the country. Abu Muhammad thought of his aunt, who lived in neighbouring Algeria, and decided to attempt to cross the border on foot. He took a train to the last town before the Tunisian-Algerian border and started walking along the train tracks. Soon his shoes fell apart and he continued barefoot until he reached a small village. Tired and hungry, his only option was to knock on someone’s door and hope that they would help him. He heard the voice of an elderly woman coming from one house and decided that this was probably the safest place. He knocked on the door but, to Abu Muhammad’s surprise, the door was opened by a young man, not an old woman. Once the young man realized that Abu Muhammad was Palestinian, he invited him inside, served him food and tea, and gave him a pair of boots. Abu Muhammad learned that he was still in Tunisia and the young man directed him on how to walk the rest of the way to Algeria.

He walked all night until he reached a river and found a fisherman. Again, once the fisherman realized that Abu Muhammad was Palestinian, he offered him food and a place to sleep and informed him that he had now crossed over the border. The next morning Abu Muhammad took the train to his relative’s village, where he spent a week until he heard that there would be a meeting of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) in Algiers.<sup>8</sup> He decided to go to try to speak with the head of the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) and seek his help.<sup>9</sup> Upon meeting him, the head of the PLA, to Abu Muhammad’s distress, called Official X, who was also at the PNC meeting. After a heated argument they agreed to give Abu Muhammad a six-month Tunisian travel document, a one-way ticket to Cyprus, from where he could take a boat to reach Tripoli in Lebanon, and a small amount of pocket money. He arrived in Lebanon just as the Fatah mutiny was taking place.<sup>10</sup> The mutineers called themselves Fatah al-Intifada and were engaged in armed combat against Fatah. Upon reporting to his assigned commanding officer, Abu Muhammad

was put in charge of a hill facing Fatah al-Intifada and asked to lead an attack that evening, even though he was unfamiliar with the terrain and didn't know any of the men he was supposed to lead. In fact, it was his first time in the north of Lebanon. Abu Muhammad felt that he could not obey his orders; he had lost trust in the leadership of Fatah and was even afraid that they might want him dead. He thought that maybe they wanted him to lead an attack either to get killed by Fatah al-Intifada or to get killed from behind. He decided to disobey his orders and fled to Tripoli, where he hid in a school that was sheltering newly displaced Palestinians from the fighting. He spent three days thinking about his options. Without a valid passport he could not leave Lebanon, and certainly could not return to Jordan. He could not stay in Tripoli, for Fatah would soon find him and he feared what would happen to him if they did. He thought that his only option was to defect to Fatah al-Intifada.

He knew that Fatah al-Intifada now controlled Nahr el-Bared camp. However, two Fatah checkpoints separated him from it. He carefully selected a shared taxi with two women as passengers, thinking that it would not be stopped at the checkpoints. Indeed he was right. He reached Nahr el-Bared safely and defected to Fatah al-Intifada, with one condition. He argued that, since he refused to lead an attack against Fatah al-Intifada, similarly he would not fight Fatah. They agreed that he would go to Syria until the end of the battles. Two weeks later, as Fatah forces withdrew from Tripoli, Abu Muhammad returned to Nahr el-Bared and became a guard at one of the camp's checkpoints. This was how he met Nasser, Um Muhammad's brother-in-law, who introduced them to one other. They were engaged a few months later and married in the summer of 1984. The following year their first son, Muhammad, was born.

Over the next two years Abu Muhammad continued to work as a guard for Fatah al-Intifada, until Qaddafi went to war with Chad over control of the Aouzou strip in 1987. Fatah al-Intifada, which had close ties to the Qaddafi regime, gave its fighters the option of going to fight in Aouzou, northern Chad, offering double pay if they did so. One salary would be paid immediately to the fighter's wife in Nahr el-Bared, while the second installment would be paid to the fighter upon his return from Aouzou. However, Abu Muhammad explained that it was not money that made him go, but a friend who had signed him up without his knowledge. He smiled as he told me that he would have been deemed a coward if he had removed his name. He therefore went to Aouzou while Um Muhammad was pregnant with Ahmad. He stressed the fact that in Aouzou there was in fact no fighting and that they basically just sat around in their barracks in the desert.

Upon returning from Aouzou Abu Muhammad was asked to fight in Shatila. The War of the Camps was over, but a battle between Fatah and Fatah al-Intifada erupted when the splinter group wanted to expel the remaining Fatah loyalists from Shatila and began bringing in fighters from other camps.<sup>11</sup> Abu Muhammad refused to join the fight. He remembered how he told his leadership that "my

fingers don't know how to shoot" (*aṣābi'ī mā bya'irfū yṭukkhū*). He explained that he stayed home, at which point they refused to pay him the remaining six months of pay they owed him from his trip to Aouzou.

I realized that there were several reasons why his children often mentioned this trip to Aouzou. It not only reflected how the *thawra* went astray by fighting other people's wars, but also referred to what Abu Muhammad had to leave behind when he refused to fight in Shatila. The renunciation of six months of pay was not a small sacrifice. I learned from Um Muhammad that at the time she had just given birth to Ahmad; they were still living in a rented apartment and were desperate for money so they could settle down. Abu Muhammad's dissociation from Fatah al-Intifada also meant that he now had to fend for himself. His children had not missed this important point. One night, Mahmud pointed out to his father that former Fatah fighters now received a pension from Fatah, and suggested he could try asking for it. Um Muhammad laughed, telling Mahmud that his father gave up six months of salary not to fight in Shatila—did her son now want him to beg Fatah for a pension? Abu Muhammad added that Fatah never forgave the Intifada people and he would not go to them.

Abu Muhammad finished his story by saying "My dear, I became a porter at the port from that day until now, twenty-two years" (*yā sittī 'attāl ala bawwābat al-mīnā min waqtha lal-yawm, 22 sana*). Abu Muhammad's past involvement in the *thawra* meant that he had no particular skill or trade, let alone education, in order to find a stable job. His only choice was to find work as a day laborer, which he did as a porter at the Tripoli port. Abu Muhammad was a hard-working man, waking up everyday at 6:00 a.m. except on Sundays. I never saw him tired, nor did he ever complain of any ailment, although he was approaching his sixties and was performing physically taxing labor everyday. His life experiences taught him to be wary of grand political claims, stating that "all look for their interests and if someone comes and talks to me about freeing Palestine from the water to the water I will bring out my shoe and hit him in the head."<sup>12</sup> He often said that the best thing he did in life was to start a family with Um Muhammad.

### *Um Muhammad*

Um Muhammad was the family's center of gravity and kept everyone on their feet and well-balanced. She was the one who knew where everyone was, what they were doing, when they would come home, what they needed, whether they had problems, and what to do about it. At the time of my research, Abu Muhammad's role was to make money, while Um Muhammad's was to find ways for the family to survive using that money. Faced with this daunting task, she never complained.

Um Muhammad was born in Nahr el-Bared camp in the early 1960s and lost her father in her teens. Her oldest brother, Muhammad, who resided in the United States at the time of my research, soon dropped out of school and began to work in

different electrical jobs in the camp. Um Muhammad, the second-oldest daughter, decided to also help the family. While she worked during the summer picking and sorting tobacco, she felt it was not enough, and participated in a sewing workshop offered by the General Union of Palestinian Women in Nahr el-Bared camp. She explained that this was how she began her involvement with Fatah. Um Muhammad often used Fatah and the Women's Union interchangeably while she spoke. While she was certainly aware that the Women's Union was supposed to be an umbrella organization for all Palestinian political factions, she also knew that it was controlled and funded by Fatah, so for her there was little difference. She explained that once she became involved in the workshop, she started participating in different political events, marches, and conferences. At that time, Israeli raids and incursions into the camp were frequent and she often helped deliver food to the fighters and provided first aid to the injured. Her family's home was itself destroyed at least three times by Israeli bombardments and she helped rebuild it, both by partaking in the physical labor of rebuilding the house and by funding the purchase of required materials through her earned income.

In addition to her sewing activities, Um Muhammad started working in Fatah's radio communication department and later worked in "the cooperative" (*ta'awuniyya*) operated by Fatah, where the popular committee was located along with several shops selling household items from furniture to cleaning products, all at a lower price than in the market. Um Muhammad ran a small cassette shop. She explained that after the 1983 Fatah mutiny she left her job and went home (*rawwahit 'al-bayt*). She did not work after that, and although Fatah told her that they would keep on paying her even if she remained at home, she told them to stop as she worried that the Syrian authorities would know of her involvement with them.

This was also when she met Abu Muhammad. She explained that the first time she met him and learned that he was with Fatah al-Intifada, she argued with him. She told him that she disliked them and accused them of destroying the camp. He apparently smiled and told her that she was right and that all Palestinian factions were bad. After that they got along, she explained. Although Um Muhammad did not seek formal employment after her marriage, this did not mean that she was not working: it was rather that the nature of her work changed. She was now responsible for raising a family and making ends meet with the income that Abu Muhammad brought home. Daily survival soon filled her days.

#### DAILY SURVIVAL

Abu Muhammad went every day to the port of Tripoli to look for trucks to load or unload for a wage. Occasionally he would be hired for petty jobs such as taking furniture apart and helping in a move. Throughout my stay with the family they never discussed in front of me whether Abu Muhammad was successful at finding work on a given day or not, and I never asked. They seldom spoke to

me directly of their financial difficulties, but these were visible in every detail of their lives.

### *A Day*

A typical day for Um Muhammad started at 6:00 a.m. when her husband rose. While he would always tell her not to get up, as he liked to prepare his own breakfast, she argued that she didn't like the mess he usually left behind. Nadia would soon wake up too and begin her studies for the baccalaureate exam. Having failed the matriculation exam the year before, she wanted to retake it, but decided not to go back to school and to prepare for it on her own. Mahmud, who was working as a day laborer in the old camp, would be next to wake up. After a quick breakfast he got ready to leave and soon a discussion with his mother began about which clothes he could wear for work and which boots he could use. The debate about clothing and footwear was fuelled by necessity. The Talal family had some old clothes that Mahmud could use for work and they did not want to damage good clothing during construction work. This meant that Um Muhammad had to wash Mahmud's work clothes almost daily in order to make sure that he had clean clothing to wear the next day. However, shoes were the real cause of concern. At the construction site where Mahmud worked there was a large number of nails on the ground, which frequently pierced his flimsy shoes and caused injury. His mother feared that he would contract tetanus. Mahmud had already used—and pierced—most of his old shoes, and discussions would revolve around the possibility of getting new, tougher shoes, or which old shoe would withstand the day better.

Soon after Mahmud's departure, Ahmad would wake up and have his breakfast. By that time, Um Muhammad would have decided what the daily meal would be and would send Ahmad on errands to obtain the required ingredients. After this errand Ahmad would go to college and it was at that point that Um Muhammad, Nadia, and I would have our breakfast, before starting our cleaning chores. Um Muhammad always insisted that Nadia should concentrate on her studies and not partake in them, but Nadia continuously refused. However, they would both agree that my cleaning skills were even worse than mediocre. They would therefore assign me easy tasks such as doing the dishes, cleaning the stove, and putting the bedding away. They also both agreed that my sweeping skills, with or without water, were not good enough and far too slow. While I was always impressed by the speed and effectiveness of their work, I suspected that the real reason behind their insistence on doing most of the cleaning was simply kindness.

After the cleaning chores were done, the cooking started. This, along with the evening gatherings, was my favorite moment of the day. In addition to my learning how to cook many Palestinian and Arabic dishes, it was also the only time that Um Muhammad and I had on our own to talk. I would often tell her about the people I would be visiting that day, or the stories I had heard the day before. To my continual amazement, she seemed to know everyone in the camp, often correcting

certain information I had misunderstood, or giving me more background information about the family history of a certain person I would meet. Time always flew by before we could finish our conversation, as Mahmud would be back for his lunch break and food needed to be ready so he had time to eat before going back to work. Then the conversation would invariably turn again to the shoe situation. After Mahmud's departure, Um Muhammad had a few hours where she would leave the house. She usually went to different NGOs if paperwork needed to be handed in, visited her sisters in the camp, or else stayed home to relax—or, more often, to wash laundry.

Um Muhammad's extended family was an essential component of the family's daily life. She had two sisters, Mariam and Fatima, who returned to Nahr el-Bared after the war, and another sister, Najah, and a brother, Sami, who preferred to remain in Beddawi camp. Mariam was not married and Nadia often slept over at her house with her other female cousins. In actuality, Mariam never slept alone as far as I could tell: every day a different cousin would stay over with her. Um Muhammad, Mariam, and Fatima visited each other almost daily. Their children's work, education, and study efforts would be discussed as well as everyone's health. News of new NGO or UNRWA programs would be spread and advice would be sought if needed.

In the early evening Um Muhammad would go back home. She liked to be home whenever her husband or children came back. In addition to making sure that they were eating well, by reheating the meal she cooked earlier in the day and making sure that it was enough for everyone, she also had the opportunity to hear about their day and get the latest news of what was going on. I suspect she also wanted to make sure that they were not facing any problems. I soon realized that she was the confidante of her children, who always came to her with their worries and not to their father. Mahmud's schedule was the most erratic as he worked several jobs, but Um Muhammad always knew when he would be coming home and always made sure that he had food ready to eat whenever he did, even if it meant that she stayed up late. Food, I soon realized, was a major cause of concern for the family.

### *Food (In)Security*

During one of my mornings cooking with Um Muhammad, I learned that UNRWA considered them a special hardship case. I was helping Um Muhammad make a dessert by mixing milk powder with water in a saucepan on the gas stove and Um Muhammad explained to me that it was milk from UNRWA. She showed me the grey milk bag, which had the French flag on its upper half. She explained that the milk was bad quality and did not dissolve easily, which was why the water needed to be heated. UNRWA special hardship cases were considered amongst the poorest in the camp and they received food aid. Um Muhammad explained that it was dispensed every three months and that each person was entitled to

2.5 kilos of rice (which Um Muhammad added was bad quality, as it required a lot of cooking time to become tender and it would then be sticky), 2.5 kilos of sugar, 3 liters of oil, 2 kilos of milk powder, 2.5 kilos of lentils, 2.5 kilos of beans (also bad quality, according to Um Muhammad, as again they required a lot of cooking time and would still remain hard to eat). She added that they used to receive chickpeas, which she appreciated, but that had stopped for a reason unknown to her. Um Muhammad did not like grains that took a lot of time to cook, as that meant that they consumed a lot of cooking gas. Over the next few months I witnessed the family going to an UNRWA food distribution center to collect the aid in boxes with stickers of the European Union flag. Individual food bags inside also often exhibited the donor country's flag.

A family needed to qualify to receive the food aid. This was done by proving that the main breadwinner, in this case Abu Muhammad, was not earning enough to feed his family. In Um Muhammad's case, she also had to justify the fact that Mahmud was working, as that usually meant that the family would be "removed from the list," as Um Muhammad put it. However, in this case, Um Muhammad was able to convince the UNRWA social worker overseeing her case that Mahmud's income was essential to help pay for Ahmad's tuition. The social worker agreed but told her that as soon as Ahmad graduated they would be "removed from the list." In addition, the family was the target of annual surprise visits from that same social worker. Um Muhammad explained that she could run into her in the street and the social worker would still not tell her that she was coming over to visit. Soon I realized that they also received surprise visits from another UNRWA employee, from the rent subsidy department. This employee came every three months, also unannounced. However, Um Muhammad did not like this particular worker. When she visited, she would not take off her shoes. Camp roads and alleys were notorious for being dirty and muddy, so residents and visitors would always remove their shoes upon entering a home in order to keep them clean. This was why Um Muhammad and Nadia cleaned the floors every day in order to keep them spotless, as everyone walked barefoot. The UNRWA employee, who came from the camp, certainly knew this, but showed her superiority over the family by not abiding by the custom. Um Muhammad explained to me that not all UNRWA employees were like that, but that some enjoyed being part of UNRWA "to be able to control people" (*tayithakkamū bilnās*). The stated purpose of the surprise visits was to verify the information given by the family, such as who was living in the house, the size of the home, and the type of furniture in the house, which might disclose that the family had an additional income.

However, the family's level of food insecurity was revealed to me when I attempted to buy supplies for the household. Living with them in their home, I was fully aware that I was an additional mouth to feed. I was concerned about the extra burden that I represented, especially since the family categorically refused any attempt on my part to help them financially. I therefore decided that I would

just buy groceries for the house from time to time. I thought that I better purchase a few items at a time, hoping that they would go unnoticed. I started to be on the lookout for items that they might need and soon I noticed that they were running low on tea and oranges, which they had a big stock of when I first moved in. Therefore, on my next errand outside of the house I came back with a box of tea and some apples, thinking that maybe they would like some change from oranges. When I got home my actions were contested and I protested that I could not feel at home if I did not also contribute to the house. Um Muhammad looked unconvinced but she did not reprimand me for too long and I thought that I had done well. I did not want to offend the family by acting in a way that openly acknowledged the extent of their poverty, but at the same time I could not ignore the extra burden that I represented for them. I wanted to find a way to contribute without upsetting them, and I thought that I had found it. A couple days later, Um Muhammad asked me if I liked apples. Her question took me off guard. I didn't know what to say, I thought we had settled the matter, but I realized that there was something special about the fact that I got apples. I finally answered that I didn't like fruit in general. She nodded and changed the topic of conversation. On my next errand outside of the house I passed by a grocery store and noticed that apples were in fact more expensive than oranges. I realized that variety was a luxury that the family could not afford. I never got apples after that and I became especially cautious to not only look for what they needed but also to learn which brands they bought to get the exact same items. This incident revealed to me just how precarious their situation was.

However, the biggest difficulty that the family faced, beyond their low income, was its unpredictability. I didn't realize the full implications of that until a few months into my fieldwork. It came to my attention when I was talking with Um Muhammad and Nadia about their participation in *jam'iyyāt*, informal savings associations.<sup>13</sup> Nadia was telling me that she and two of her friends from school, as well as their mothers and sisters, made a *jam'iyah* where they would each contribute 500 LBP a day, the equivalent of 0.33 USD, and that each in their turn would get 10,000 LBP, the equivalent of 6.67 USD.<sup>14</sup> Um Muhammad told me that she did not participate, as she was unsure she could afford to pay 500 LBP every day, since Abu Muhammad did not work every day and she might need the money to purchase food instead. I was taken aback that Um Muhammad could not commit to such a small sum. The implications of a daily wage were suddenly clear to me. Although the signs were all around me, I hadn't put it all together until Um Muhammad put it plainly enough for me to hear. I now understood what initially puzzled me about Um Muhammad's daily routine. As I explained earlier, every morning Um Muhammad decided what would be the meal of the day and she would send out Ahmad to buy the required ingredients. They always purchased food items in small quantities, just enough for one meal. That surprised me, since buying in small amounts meant that they would not take advantage of bulk prices

and also that Ahmad had to go on errands every day. But now it made sense. Since income was unpredictable it meant that Um Muhammad could not commit a large sum to buy, for example, a large quantity of soap, since she could not be sure that there would be money made in the next days to cover, for example, the price of bread. Um Muhammad had to purchase items on almost a daily basis, adjusting her expenditures to the immediate financial situation.

I realized the difference between Um Muhammad and her brother, Sami, who worked as a driver for a Tripoli businessman. Sami had explained to me that although his wage was lower than the other Lebanese drivers working for the same businessman, and although he did not receive the school aid for his children that the other Lebanese drivers got, he was grateful that the job was at least stable. Sami's wife could therefore plan her monthly expenses. At the beginning of every month she would buy all non-perishable food items for the month, taking advantage of bulk prices; she highlighted that she even bought the meat once a month—a package of 2 kilos, that she divided into ten smaller packets of 200 grams and froze individually so that she could make ten different meat dishes a month. I could not help but remember how my mother taught me when I first went to university that whenever I cooked I should plan for 200 grams of meat per person per serving. Sami's wife would plan the same amount for a family of five. The difference astounded me.

Um Muhammad's occupation, round the clock, was to save money. No member of the family ate outside the home. The daily meal that Um Muhammad cooked would be both lunch and dinner. Breakfast usually consisted of tea accompanied by bread and *labna* (strained yogurt) or sometimes eggs. Sweets were never bought but were always made at home. Soon I realized that fruit in general, not just apples, was a luxury. The stack of oranges I saw initially was probably purchased in my honor, as I was just moving in. A one-cup bag of Nescafe, priced at 250 LBP, about 0.17 USD, was a special treat that Nadia saved for particular occasions, usually when her close friend visited her. The more usual hot drink was tea. One tea bag boiled with several cups of water for a few minutes could provide a hot drink for the whole family, so it was much cheaper. The usual Arabic coffee was also made daily, but the used ground coffee was kept, mixed with fresh ground coffee, and reused. The family never bought fresh milk, yogurt, *labna* or cheese. Rather Um Muhammad would make yogurt and *labna* from milk rations she got from UNRWA, which always ran out a month before the next scheduled food aid distribution. They reused water bottles, and when the plastic turned opaque from usage, Um Muhammad poured grains of salt in them with a little bit of water and shook them vigorously. This cleared the plastic bottles and they would be ready to be refilled again. Children's spending would be discussed and compared between family members. Stories told about anything and everything would be punctuated with details of the price of things. When Muhammad's first daughter was born, Um Muhammad visited him and wondered how he paid for the pistachio that

he used to garnish the usual desert of *mughli* that was offered by new parents to their visitors.

The importance of shoes was made clear to me again and again. It was not just an issue for Mahmud, but for most people in the camp. In the winter months, rain was common, and with the lack of proper street drains, the camp alleys quickly accumulated water. In the absence of proper heating, wet feet would remain wet for the rest of the day, increasing the chances of illness among children and adults alike. This explained why many parents worried about the distance that their children needed to walk to reach school. I realized that my waterproof boots were a marker of wealth in the camp. When I would go out on rainy days, Um Muhammad and Nadia always protested that I should stay home because of the rain. I was surprised. Um Muhammad had lived through countless Israeli bombings and the destruction of her home, not to mention the latest Nahr el-Bared war, and she worried about the rain? However, as often happened during my stay in the camp, my lack of understanding, and often my hasty judgment, was a reflection of my privilege. Material necessity regulated every aspect of the family's existence: the structure of their daily life as well as the long-term options available to them.

#### STARTING A LIFE

Mahmud, the youngest son of the family, was a tall, skinny, and highly energetic young man. He was outspoken and outgoing, rarely home, but when he was, he usually created a festive mood, making his mother and sister laugh at his jokes. On paydays he would bring home a bottle of juice and some Nescafe "one-cup" bags for his sister. He was also the one who used to give her pocket money. In this section, I trace the life choices and opportunities available to Mahmud as an example of how young Palestinian males "make it."

During the Nahr el-Bared war of 2007 Mahmud was studying hospitality management at a technical college in Tripoli. When the war started and his family took refuge in Beddawi camp, Mahmud stopped studying for his upcoming exams and instead volunteered with an NGO in the camp. He helped in the distribution of aid, and was an entertainer for children, organizing activities in the UNRWA schools where fleeing refugees had found shelter. This was not Mahmud's first encounter with NGOs. As I mentioned earlier, Muhammad, Mahmud's older brother, had been working with different NGOs for several years. He had introduced his younger brother to this line of work and Mahmud had already volunteered for several NGOs prior to the war.

Typically NGO volunteers were paid a nominal sum on a month-to-month basis, varying from 100,000 LBP (about 67 USD) to 100 USD. Volunteering was often a time when young Palestinians, men or women, attempted to prove to the heads of NGOs that they might be capable of a paid position. They provided a lot of their time, and sometimes even put in a bit of their own money on things such as trans-



FIGURE 8. Playing football in Nahr el-Bared camp. Photograph: Perla Issa.

portation or phone calls in the hope that they would be made part of the NGO's permanent staff. Mahmud volunteered for a total of two years after the war and worked on several projects. However, the experience left him bitter. He explained to me that towards the end of his two years and as he began to work on a new project, his superior told him that he needed to prove himself before they would hire him. Mahmud in response worked for two months without pay, organizing activities for other youth in the camp and even buying juice boxes for the participants from his own money. Following these two months, his superior told him that they did not have the funds to continue the program. Mahmud felt betrayed and left them.

Mahmud's efforts to search for employment were not confined to NGO work alone; he was active in seeking any type of occupation. He worked in Tripoli as a painter for a contractor and was paid 10 USD a day. He worked in a restaurant located across from one of the main entrances of Beddawi camp where he made 40 USD a week working twelve hours a day from 2:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. He worked in a restaurant in Tyr, where his older brother lived, making 10 USD a day. At the time of my fieldwork he was working as a day laborer in the old camp, making 20 USD working from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., with an extra 10 USD if he worked overtime from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., which he usually did. This made a total of 30 USD for twelve hours of work and was certainly the best-paying job he had had up until then. Additionally, he worked on a part-time basis with a new NGO in the camp, entertaining children with clown activities and theater and

helping in the distribution of aid when available. Finally, throughout his previous years of work, he had saved some money to be able to buy a set of speakers, a mixing console, two microphones, and a used laptop. This allowed him to begin operating his own DJ business and he performed at weddings, bachelor parties, engagement parties, as well as political protests and conferences. When I asked Mahmud what work he preferred, he explained that he most enjoyed being an actor and an entertainer for children but, at this point, the only thing he wished for was stable employment.

Um Muhammad disliked the fact that Mahmud was working. Although the family was in dire need of the additional income he earned, she wanted him to continue his studies. She believed that the war was to blame for his renunciation of an education, as well as for his recent habit of smoking *narghile*. However, she was happy that he was now toiling in the hard work of construction, hoping that this experience would teach him that it was better to obtain a degree than to labor for a daily wage. She had therefore stopped arguing with him, and was patiently waiting for him to reach his own conclusions in due time. At the beginning of the next school year, Um Muhammad was almost proven right as Mahmud went back to college to continue his degree in hospitality management.

However, a few months into the semester he quit again. His reasons for quitting were numerous. Firstly, he no longer believed that education would allow him to be more successful in life. While working on the construction of the old camp he met countless college graduates who, due to Lebanon's discriminatory laws, could not find proper employment and who, like him, had to work as day laborers in construction. Um Muhammad disliked this line of argument the most, as she felt it encouraged Nadia not to study hard to obtain her baccalaureate. Second was the ever-repressive issue of money. Mahmud was well aware that by going back to school, he stopped bringing an additional income into the household, and became a burden again on his parents, having them spend money on his expenses and tuition. Thirdly, the prospect of potential failure loomed. Failure in his exams would not only represent a personal disappointment but would also mean that the money spent on him would have been lost for nothing. That was a heavy burden for him to carry.

Finally, he saw what his older brother, Ahmad, had to go through to obtain enough aid to cover his tuition. As I will explain in chapter 5, Ahmad's tuition was paid from four different sources: a Palestinian political faction, the Palestinian embassy, an international NGO, and finally the family itself. His tuition cost 2 million LBP, the equivalent of 1,334 USD. However, at no point in time did the family know how much each party would be paying, so as to know how much would be left over for them to cover. Mahmud explained that he could not live with this type of uncertainty, preferring instead to live with the uncertainty of a daily wage. Uncertainty and precariousness were features of Palestinian life in Lebanon, and the daily struggle to make ends meet was often punctuated by conflicts which only furthered people's sense of insecurity and vulnerability, such was the case with the 2007 Nahr el-Bared conflict.

## LIVING THE 2007 NAHR EL-BARED CONFLICT

In the early hours of May 20, 2007, the Talal family woke to the sound of bombs. Abu Muhammad got up and went up on the roof to see what was going on. Having been a fighter for eighteen years, Abu Muhammad had developed a sense of invulnerability to physical danger. He watched the bombs fall on the camp and called the rest of his family to come up and join him. He initially thought it was an Israeli attack on the camp, as those had been frequent in the 70s and the 80s. After all he had initially met Um Muhammad while she was carrying cement blocks to rebuild her parents' home after it was demolished by an Israeli attack. Over the years that home was to be bombed and destroyed by Israel and rebuilt by Um Muhammad's family three times. However on this occasion the shelling was from the Lebanese army stationed not far from Abu Muhammad.

Um Muhammad, less interested in the theatrics of war and more concerned with the practicalities of survival, took a shower right away. The electricity had been cut off and she thought that it would take at least a week for it to be repaired again. Without electricity there would be no hot water and more importantly, within a couple days, there would be no water at all, as the water pump would stop functioning. She told her husband that since he was enjoying himself on the roof he might as well bring down the laundry she had hung out to dry the night before, otherwise it would soon smell like gunpowder. She woke up her two sons Mahmud and Ahmad, asking them to shower too, but they refused to get out of bed. Their sister Nadia was sleeping at her grandparents' home in the old camp, and their eldest brother Muhammad was working with an NGO in the Buss camp in Sour. Everyone thought that the clashes would last a few hours, or maybe a few days, but that it would be over soon. No one thought that this would be the last time they would see their home, their neighborhood, and the entire camp. Abu Muhammad went out to get some food and heard from other people in the camp that it was a battle between the Lebanese Army and Fatah al-Islam.

Abu Muhammad was unhappy with the news. He had first heard of the newcomers to the camp at the end of the previous year. Rumours started circulating that Fatah al-Intifada was bringing in people into the camp, people who didn't even speak Arabic. Then at the end of November 2006, his son read to him the public statement distributed in the camp declaring the establishment of Fatah al-Islam and announcing its split from Fatah al-Intifada. Next, when members of Fatah al-Islam took over the main office of Fatah al-Intifada, which lay on a main crossing between the old and the new camp, Abu Muhammad stopped walking on the main road, not wanting to come face to face with them and have to salute people he distrusted. Um Muhammad would always tease him that he would take the long way home just to avoid them. In contrast, Um Muhammad and her daughter Nadia welcomed their presence at the main intersection, as they could now take that road to the market. When the office had been under

the care of Fatah al-Intifada, their members had been notorious for sitting outside the office, occasionally harassing women passing by. But since Fatah al-Islam took over the space, no such incidents occurred; they were most often seen reading the Qur'an.

Several members of Fatah al-Islam rented apartments close to where the Talal family lived. On one occasion the wife of a member of Fatah al-Islam asked Um Muhammad for advice on where to seek medical help for her sick child. Abu Muhammad was unhappy about that; he didn't want any member of his family to have contact with Fatah al-Islam. He was suspicious of their presence and felt that trouble was about to befall them. He told Um Muhammad that he wanted to leave the camp but he did not want to sell his home to members of Fatah al-Islam, the only people buying apartments at that time. Um Muhammad, on the other hand, would argue that if these people were here to fight and cause trouble they would not have brought their families with them.

Regardless of their past positions towards the newcomers, both Um and Abu Muhammad were now in agreement that they had to leave their house immediately. They feared that their area, inhabited by several families of Fatah al-Islam, would be targeted by the Lebanese army. Um Muhammad called her sister Najah and learned that her extended family was congregating at Najah's house. Located in the middle of the old camp, it was deemed the safest as it was far from Fatah al-Islam and far from the edges of the camp that always bore the brunt of any attack. Um Muhammad put an *'abaya* over her nightgown and took her most precious possession: a plastic bag full of documents. Abu Muhammad, and all of his children, were not legally recognized by the Lebanese government. As we saw, Abu Muhammad lost his Jordanian passport in 1982 during the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Thereafter the Jordanian government refused to issue him a new passport. His four children, born in Lebanon, were not recognized by either the Jordanian or the Lebanese government. Legally, they did not exist. Their mother Um Muhammad, a holder of the blue identity card issued by the Lebanese government for Palestinian refugees, could not register her children under her name according to Lebanese law. During the 2006 war with Israel Um Muhammad had collected all papers into a plastic bag, with a sturdy handle, that was ready to be taken at a moment's notice. No paper, no matter how insignificant, was deemed unworthy of protection. Abu Muhammad laughed at her when he saw her taking the bag, but it was Um Muhammad who later laughed at him, pointing out her foresight. With the bag in hand, they waited for a lull in the bombings, but no such moment occurred, so they dashed through the alleys as quickly as they could and made it to Najah's house safely.

They found the three-floor house bursting with people. Um Muhammad's brother Sami was present with his wife and three children, her other sister Fatima was also there with her husband and four children, and her third sister Mariam and her mother also joined them with Um Muhammad's daughter Nadia. Finally,

looking for safety in numbers, neighbors had also converged onto the house. Everyone discussed the latest political developments, as well as any updates as to which homes got hit, who got killed and who got injured. The third floor of the house was left empty as it was deemed to be too dangerous. At times of war the number of walls and roofs separating people from the outside world were counted as a form of protection against deadly flying missiles. Following that logic, the women settled into the bottom floor of the house, considered the safest, and the men on the second floor. The children could move from one floor to the other in an attempt to deal with their fears and the feelings of confinement caused by being indoors surrounded by so many people.

On the second day of bombing Abu Muhammad decided to go and check on his home. It had taken him and Um Muhammad twenty-two years to secure a small home which possessed two critical features: it was theirs and it had concrete walls and roofs. It initially took them fifteen years to be able to secure one room that was five by seven meters with a small kitchen and bathroom attached. That room was allocated to them by the popular committee of Nahr el-Bared in an area called *al-muhajjarin*, which in Arabic means “the displaced.” *Al-muhajjarin* was initially built to accommodate the refugees who had been displaced by the Tal al-Za’atar massacre in 1976. The Talal family had only able to obtain that room once it was considered unfit for living and UNRWA, under an agreement with the PLO, built new housing units for those previously living there. As the previous residents of *al-muhajjarin* moved into their new units, their old unlivable homes were given to people who were desperate for any place to call their own.

At first the family divided the space into a two-by-five-meter room where Um and Abu Muhammad slept while their children slept in a five-by-five-meter room that was turned into a sitting and study area during the day. The roof was made of overlapping zinc metal sheets. With the pouring of concrete roofs banned by the Lebanese authorities, they had to live under these flimsy metal sheets that were notorious for water leakage during the rainy and cold winter months, then transformed homes into ovens in the summer as the metal radiated the sun’s heat into their small living space. It took three years and a Norwegian NGO to convince the Lebanese government to allow them to pour concrete roofs. Then it took two more years and the help of Um Muhammad’s brothers to pour a second concrete roof, which gave the Talal family another floor. However, they had to wait yet another year in order to save enough money to be able to buy the concrete blocks to add walls to it. They first built one room, and then later added another. Finally, a few months before the war, they bought a new batch of cinderblocks, which now laid on the roof, as they were planning on adding a third floor to the house to make room for their eldest son Muhammad, who was starting to make marriage plans.

However, those plans and the house itself were now under threat. Abu Muhammad found that a missile had struck the outer wall of their neighbor’s house but had not

detonated. Members of Fatah al-Islam used that house. He went in to tell them that an unexploded missile lay outside their wall, but they did not speak any Arabic and seemed lost and confused. He gave up on trying to communicate with them and instead decided to remove the missile himself. From his past training he had learned that if a missile doesn't explode once its head explodes, which had happened when the missile struck the wall, then it was safe to manipulate it. He therefore carried it to Najah's house. When the women saw him approaching carrying a missile in his hands they started screaming at him. He tried to reassure them that it was not dangerous but they told him to get rid of it. The question for him was, where? He went to the office of the PFLP, who again screamed at him, and in the end he decided to throw it into the sea.

Um Muhammad, meanwhile, ventured out of the house occasionally with her sister Mariam. They would wait for the bombing to decrease and they would run through the alleys to go to their mother's house, which was the closest, in order to get additional food supplies. They didn't want to use up all of Najah's food reserves, believing that it was unfair for her to carry alone the financial burden of feeding five different families.

Finally, on Tuesday May 22, after three days of indiscriminate and continuous bombings, a cease-fire was declared. Rumours circulated that UNRWA had sent trucks full of bread into the camp. Abu Muhammad collected the UNRWA ID cards of all the different families present and was happy to go out and collect their rations. Mahmud, Um Muhammad's fifteen-year-old son wanted to go out with his cousins, Aboud and Ammar. Mahmud and Ammar in particular had a very special relationship; they both had cheerful dispositions and were always seen together laughing and joking. However, Um Muhammad did not let Mahmud go, telling him that she needed him with her. Ammar, who was studying in the UNRWA technical school in Sibline, had come home on Saturday for the weekend and bought a new outfit. Unable to leave again for his classes on Monday due to the bombings, he was eager to go to his home and change into his new clothes. His brother Aboud accompanied him and as they sat outside their home, Ammar in his new attire, they heard that the media was present with the UNRWA bread trucks. They decided to seek them out.

As they reached the bread truck, and as Abu Muhammad was walking away from it, loaves in hand, a missile struck the truck. Abu Muhammad felt the blow but was not injured; Aboud was thrown to the ground; and Ammar was killed. In the great commotion that ensued Aboud could not locate his brother and he simply thought that Ammar must have returned home on his own. He therefore got up and went home. In the meantime Jihad, the cousins' father, had heard the explosion and went out to look for them. He overheard people saying that "ibn Jihad" ("the son of Jihad") was killed. He asked them where the bodies had been taken without telling them that he was Jihad. There were, after all, many Jihads in the camp. He went to the clinic and to his great distress he found his son's body.

He pushed himself to go back home and tell his family. His wife was devastated. Everyone was screaming. Aboud could not believe it. "He was standing right next to me," he kept repeating. At that moment, Um Muhammad's oldest brother, also named Muhammad, called from the United States. While speaking to him Um Muhammad dropped the phone on the floor and all that could Muhammad hear on the telephone was screams; he thought that the house had just been hit and began to go crazy in distant Washington, DC. In a desperate attempt to keep some cool he called the one person he knew who was not in the house, the sister of the wife of his brother Sami. Fortunately, she answered the phone, and living nearby she went to check on them, learned the news, and reported back to Muhammad.

The shelling of the camp had now started again and Jihad urgently needed to go back to the clinic to bury his son. His two brothers-in-law, Abu Muhammad and Sami, decided to accompany him. Upon arriving they discovered that the staff of the clinic, due to the renewal of the bombing, had already buried Ammar in the mass grave they had dug for those who were killed in the previous three days. The mass grave was partitioned so that each person buried had a specific spot. However, when Jihad asked which spot was his son's two were indicated. To this day, when Fatima goes to pray for her dead son, she is unsure where his body has been laid to rest.

Back in Najah's house, while everyone was still in shock over the killing of Ammar, a quick decision needed to be taken about whether to stay in the camp or to flee. Um Muhammad wanted to leave the camp with her children. Sami's wife, Rania, was of the same opinion. The bombing of the bread truck had signaled to them that this conflict was being played by a different set of rules than previous ones. It was hard to interpret the truck bombing as anything other than a deliberate targeting of civilians. They feared for their lives and believed that they had no role to play in this fight. They viewed it as being between the Lebanese army and Fatah al-Islam, and they preferred not to be caught in its midst. They were encouraged by the great number of refugees who had begun to leave the camp. However, Fatima, who had just lost her son, and her sister Najah were too afraid of leaving the camp. They worried that they would not reach the outside of the camp alive and they wondered where they would go. Their fears were compounded when they heard that a man and a pregnant woman had been shot dead and others injured as their fleeing bus approached a Lebanese army checkpoint. Fatima and Najah decided to stay in the camp, while Um Muhammad and Rania decided to leave with their children.

Um Muhammad told her husband to go home, as she and her children were still wearing their sleeping clothes from the first day of the battle. Abu Muhammad brought back a big bag of garments, but upon opening the bag, Um Muhammad realized that he had brought back the clothing that was in the closet. These were old discarded clothes that were torn and that she kept aside for her husband and sons to use when working on construction sites. Their wearable clothing laid on

her bed, unfolded; Abu Muhammad had forgotten that he had placed them there when he brought them down from the roof on the first day of the bombings. They would keep talking about this misfortune for years to come, as once their home destroyed they could simply not afford to buy any new outfits and had to keep on wearing their old, previously discarded ones.

The next morning, in a brief lull in the fighting, Um and Abu Muhammad and their three children left with Sami's wife and her three children, looking for a way out of the camp. Abu Muhammad spotted a car with the flag of the Lebanese Future movement, the party of the Hariri family. At first Um Muhammad refused to get in, but upon looking closer she realized that a Palestinian from the camp was in the car and the car was actually his, although the driver was from the Future movement. At that point they got in the car. Abu Muhammad sat in the front with the two other men, Um Muhammad, and her daughter, Sami's wife, and her three children sat in the back seat, and Mahmud and Ahmad sat in the open trunk. They soon realized that they had done well, as they went through the Lebanese Army's checkpoint without being stopped or searched. Instead, the man from the Future movement just waved at the soldiers and passed through while they watched other camp residents wait in a long line at the checkpoint. The car took them to a house outside the camp that had turned into a relief station for Nahr el-Bared residents. They were given juice boxes, and from there other cars took them to Beddawi camp. They were surprised at how well organized the evacuation was, and they started wondering: why was the Lebanese Future party helping them leave the camp? But there was no time to dwell on such thoughts; they first needed to find a refuge. Um Muhammad planned on going to Tyr, to her eldest son's home. However, when her other children saw that most of Nahr el-Bared, and therefore many of their friends, were now in Beddawi camp, they convinced her to stay at her relative's home in the camp. It was a few days later, and in that home, that I first met them in 2007.

. . .

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live on the fringe of Lebanese society. For more than seven decades their experience has been one of constant pressure, crisis, and turmoil. Living with the Talal family gave me a glimpse into the survival mechanisms that Palestinian refugees adopt. Such a window is essential if we are to understand the continued relevance of Palestinian political factions in everyday life. Through this account we were able to identify different features of daily life, notions that we will go back to in the next chapters: the general disillusionment with Palestinian political factions; the importance of family and interpersonal trust; and the struggle, the daily and grinding struggle to make ends meet.