



FIGURE 10. Protest in Beddawi camp demanding to return to Nahr el-Bared, June 29, 2007.
Photographs: Ismael Sheikh Hassan.

“We Are the Factions”

Political Faction Membership

Perla: During the [2007 Nahr el-Bared] conflict you were with the PFLP-GC?

Um Jihad: Yes. No, no!

Abu Jihad: We were taking aid from the PFLP-GC.

Um Jihad: We had a sort of superficial relation (*kunna hayk ya'nī innu fī 'ilāqa sathiyyi*).

Abu Jihad: A relation, a relation.

Um Jihad: I used to be in the “progressive women association” [the PFLP-GC women’s union].

The sister of Um Jihad: It was a belonging [to a political organization] (*intimā'*). You know how everyone has a political belonging? Each person had to have a belonging.

Perla: I can’t keep up with the three of you!

—Conversation between the author and Um Jihad, her husband, and her sister, all members of the *thawra* generation, Beddawi camp, July 20, 2011

You say you are independent but really you are with the DFLP!

—Half-serious, half-joking accusation hurled at Dr. Salah, who smiled in return as he was signing up as an “independent” for the media committee of the May 15, 2011 march to the southern Lebanese border, Beirut, April 10, 2011

When I first asked Mahmud, the youngest son of the Talal family, about his political affiliation, he answered that he was “in theory” (*mabda'iyyan*) with the DFLP. His choice of words seemed to imply that there was potentially a different “in practice” answer. Yet when I inquired further in an attempt to obtain the “real” answer, I was left dissatisfied; Mahmud just recounted how he had volunteered with the Najdeh NGO during the 2007 Nahr el-Bared conflict.¹ He explained that he then found himself invited to meetings and “became DFLP.” It seemed that

Mahmud was not willing to self-identify as a DFLP member, but was just telling me that “officially” he was a member.

It was rare for Palestinians to declare a clear and direct affiliation to factions. Of the fifty-one close Palestinians with whom I had in-depth conversations, only eleven refugees openly claimed an affiliation to a faction (six of twenty-three members of the *thawra* generation and five out of twenty-eight of the younger generation), and eight claimed no contact with factions (two of the *thawra* generation and six of the younger generation). The rest seemed to fill a grey area that did not fit any conventional definition of factional membership. Some maintained that they were not affiliated with factions, but I would later see them at faction events and offices, which seemed to cast doubt on their earlier statements. Others used vague language to define their relationship, such as “superficial” or “not deep.” Or, similarly to Mahmud, they would qualify it as “theoretical.” A few would describe their affiliation as a form of “coloring” (*sabgha*).

In her study of women’s involvement in the *thawra* in Lebanon in the 1970s and the early 80s, Peteet (1991) identified three different levels of mobilization within the factions. Palestinians could either be “organized” (*munazzam*) or “friends.” “Organized” Palestinians were considered members of factions and were divided into two other categories: cadres (*mutafarrigh*) and members (*anāsir*). Cadres were usually employed by the faction on a full-time basis. They could be active in the political, military, social or administrative sectors of the faction. Regular members were Palestinians who paid their dues. These were expected to attend party meetings, carry out assignments, and had an organizational rank within the faction (143). Peteet highlighted that “there is no affiliation without action” (146), implying that the key to factional membership is active participation. Finally, “friends” were considered supporters but not official members. They might identify with the factions and attend factional events but did not participate in factional meetings (145). This classification became the conventional way of looking at factional membership in the literature and was adopted by numerous scholars (Brynen 1995a; Hasso 2005; Roy 2011). It implied that it was possible to separate factionalized Palestinians from independents, as highlighted in studies of “independent” and “grassroots” initiatives in Palestinian camps in Lebanon (Abou-Zaki 2012; Kortam 2011; R. Sayigh 2011).

The formal classification of factional commitment in terms of cadres, members, friends, and independents did little to help me navigate the confusing terrain of factional affiliation that I found myself in. However, I soon noticed that this inability to clearly define a person’s relationship with a faction was not just something I experienced; Palestinians themselves often had discussions regarding their political affiliations. I experienced many such discussions, especially in meetings where popular actions were being organized, such as the planning of the 2011 march to the southern Lebanese border where people needed to openly declare their associations, as quoted in the epigraph to this chapter.

The difficulty in defining Palestinians' relationships with factions was only resolved once I began to question some of the assumptions that underlie conventional thinking about faction membership. The official classification of friend, member, and cadre implied that the relationship between a Palestinian and a faction was a relationship between a person and a structure with different degrees of commitment. It drew faction membership as a person's relative position vis-à-vis the *faction* seen as an entity. Palestinians often used this classification to characterize their relationship with factions as it reflected their official position. However, as the first part of this chapter will demonstrate, through my immersion in daily home life it became apparent that this classification missed the complexity and ambiguity of the actual relationship. Factional affiliation should not be seen as a snapshot of a person's present position in relation to a structure; rather it should be seen as a continuously unfolding story of human interactions.

It is these stories, in all their diversity and intricacies, that I seek to highlight in this chapter. Through them we realize two important points. First, factional membership should not be looked at as the fulfillment of a contractual agreement, but rather carries with it an important dimension of self-identification, which was independent of whether a person was meeting their obligations within the faction or not. I highlight this point by contrasting the stories of two young Palestinians: Shadi, who deeply identified with the PFLP while his official membership was in doubt, and Lina, who did not consider herself factionalized even though DFLP regulations indicated the contrary. Second, through an examination of what it meant to end factional associations, I demonstrate that the relationship of a Palestinian to a faction was not a relationship of a person to a structure that he or she "entered" or "left," but a relationship between people. As we have already seen, Palestinians' initial contact with factions was mediated through personal relations, and it is an extension of that same argument that the relationship between a person and a faction was a relationship between people. It was about personal associations, and those carry different grades of closeness and distance that could change according to time and context. This cannot be accounted for if we expect factional membership to fit into ready-made categories. This point also clarifies how refugees made sense of the seeming contradiction of partaking in the reproduction of Palestinian political factions while openly critiquing them.

A LATERAL APPROACH

The story of Mahmud's relationship with the DFLP was the initial impetus that led me to rethink the nature of political membership. Living with the Talal family I was privy to the mundane micro-interactions that textured political membership. My interactions with him over the course of several months were instrumental in helping me better understand people's relations with Palestinian political factions.

As we have already seen, Mahmud initially characterized his relationship with the DFLP as “theoretical.” About a month later I referred to him as a DFLP member, at which point he burst out: “I already told you I am not with anyone, I am with my own interests” (*maslaḥti*). This sudden burst of dissent surprised me. I wondered whether I had misunderstood him earlier. Mahmud was responding to the common criticism of the factions in the camp: that they worked for their own interests rather than the people’s general good. Mahmud was underscoring that he was not a fool and he knew that he had to protect himself. It was early evening. Mahmud had just returned from working in the old camp and had to shower and eat quickly before heading out again to DJ a bachelor party on the rooftop of the house across from us. His cousin soon came over and helped him carry his four speakers down the three flights of our building and back up the three flights of stairs of the building across from us. There was no time to continue our conversation, and Um Muhammad and I took two of the kitchen chairs out onto the balcony to watch the party.

It took me about a week to be able to catch Mahmud and learn the details of the incident that had infuriated him that evening. He was home for his lunch break, and after eating the daily meal of *muḥammara*² he took a longer than usual break and sat down to enjoy a midday *narghile*. He explained to me then that the DFLP’s yearly anniversary was approaching and they were planning, like every year, to have a celebration, which consisted of a series of speeches by its leadership and some Lebanese politicians in a hall in the camp. Mahmud’s immediate supervisor in the DFLP, Abu Mustapha, had asked him to provide the sound system for the event and told him that they would pay him 70,000LB, about 47 US dollars. Mahmud refused and handed in his resignation through a text message to Abu Mustapha: *kul ‘ām wa antum bikhayr wa la’ilkun ghayr*. The closest, but still inadequate translation, as the Arabic sentence actually rhymed, would be: “Happy Anniversary and you better find someone else.” When I asked Mahmud why he refused the job, he told me that he knew that the previous year they had paid 100 US dollars for the sound system. He thought this was unfair: they should pay him as much as anyone else—or even more, as he was starting up his DJ business and could use their support. He said that he wanted to leave the DFLP, that he didn’t like the factions anyways. His mother agreed: “They are no good.” He then got up and went back to work.

About a month later, as we were riding back together from Beirut to Nahr el-Bared, Mahmud told me of a romantic relationship he was having with a girl in the camp. He explained that he had met her in one of his NGO activities and they were sending each other text messages. As the conversation proceeded, I learned that the girl’s father was Abu Mustapha. I was taken aback; his ex-supervisor in the DFLP, the person to whom he had sent his daring text message a month earlier, was now the father of the girl he liked. It seemed his relation with Abu Mustapha was entering a whole new level. However, the story did not end there. Several months later, at the beginning of the school year, Mahmud

decided to go back to technical college to complete his degree in hotel management. He told me that he had seen Abu Mustapha and they had agreed that the DFLP would give him the yearly stipend of 200 USD that they usually gave their students.

Mahmud's tumultuous story made me begin to question the way we imagine faction membership. Trying to define Mahmud's position as being "inside" or "outside" the DFLP would have not only been impossible, but would have also missed a lot of the complexity of this relationship. This story underscored the importance of following an ethnographic approach to the study of factional membership. Faction interactions such as "joining" or "leaving" might merely consist of sending a text message or having a conversation. They were informal practices, not confined to offices or political events, but interwoven with everyday activities such as meeting girls or deciding whether to continue an education. By following Mahmud's relationship with the DFLP over several months I realized that faction membership was not about determining a person's present classification as a faction member or not; rather, faction membership represented an evolving story of personal interactions. To properly understand faction membership, we therefore need to investigate people's life histories.

Mahmud's story also highlights the two main points I make in the next two sections of this chapter. To begin with, it revealed that there was a difference between a contractual understanding of factional membership and a personal sense of belonging that was fostered (or not) in trusting environments. Indeed, it was Mahmud's direct experience of corruption in the form of reduced pay which made him eager to distance himself from the DFLP. Additionally, it illustrated with forceful clarity that the relationship between a person and a faction is mediated through interactions between people who likely also have non-political relations. Factional and personal relations intermix; it is difficult to separate the two. This is not only highlighted by the fact that Mahmud's supervisor in the DFLP was also the father of a girl he had an interest in, but also by the fact that once Mahmud needed the DFLP again—in this case to help him finance his education—he was able to get that help, no matter how minimal it was. This meant that his relationship with them was not over, as "leaving a faction" would imply. Although Mahmud's "return" to the DFLP was financially motivated, it was obvious that it was more complicated than that as he could have gone to Fatah who paid their students twice the amount the DFLP did.³ Choosing not to go to Fatah but to "return" to the DFLP showed that the relationship was still ongoing even if he had "left" them.

"EACH PERSON HAD TO HAVE A BELONGING"

I can't see myself in a *tanzim* other than Fatah, but I cannot go back to Fatah, therefore I stay outside.

—FATIMA, THAWRA GENERATION, SAIDA, DECEMBER 3, 2011

Young Palestinians often explained to me that being part of a faction's youth club did not necessarily entail membership in the faction. In particular, they highlighted that they could not attend party meetings, as those were confidential and only fully-fledged members could participate in them. However, upon looking at people's own understanding of factional affiliation we get a different picture. Factional affiliation could not be limited to an evaluation of whether a person was officially a member or a friend; it was also about how people identified themselves and how other people perceived their political affiliation. It was in that sense that Palestinians sometimes referred to their adherence to factions as a sort of belonging, an *intimā*.⁷ This was a self-assigned label which some chose to take on while others, like Mahmud, did not. I explore this process by recounting my interaction with Shadi, one of the rare young Palestinians who openly self-identified with a faction. It is ironic that it would take a committed young Palestinian, whose factional belonging was not in question, to highlight how official ways of looking at factional membership are lacking. I then recount the story of Lina who, as opposed to Shadi, did not consider herself a member of a faction—even though she attended closed party meetings.

Shadi

A young man in his thirties, Shadi was a well-known PFLP figure in the camp, which was rare for his age and for any Palestinian faction. Trained as a nurse, his notoriety increased during the 2007 conflict when he remained in the camp, along with a doctor, for several weeks. Shadi became an important mediator for the Red Cross as well as a main contact for the media. Reflecting upon that time he once explained to me that he felt he “was living life and death at the same time.” Shadi was highlighting that this new phase in his life, when he began to play a more prominent role in his community, was ushered in as destruction and death had befallen them. Shadi also linked his activism and his interest in community work to both his parents. His father was a prominent PFLP figure, and his mother a much-loved nurse who had inspired him to take up nursing himself. Following the refugees' return to Nahr el-Bared, Shadi was recognized by the local PFLP leadership for his organizational and mobilization abilities and was asked to lead their efforts in establishing a new NGO in Nahr el-Bared camp.

Throughout the next few years I often visited the NGO and always found it bustling with children and young adults. The NGO lacked any sense of visible hierarchy. It occupied a one-floor house with a caged-in dirt strip that was used as a football training ground. The center had a kitchen, four rooms, and a large open hall at the entrance of the house. Shadi's office door was always open, but I seldom found him there; instead, young Palestinians would sit at his desk and use his computer. The couch and armchair, situated across from the desk, were often overcrowded with other young people jostling to fit more people on them. The rest of the rooms were used in a variety of ways. There were tutorials, *dabka* practice, musical rehearsals, photography and film workshops, as well as football training.

The many tables and chairs were constantly moved around to create the spatial layout desired by the participants. There was also a large terrace that looked onto the football strip, which was also always full of children and teenagers chatting, doing homework, or playing games. In the summer, European activist groups would come and participate in events, and over the years Shadi developed an important network of international support and funding.

It was therefore with great surprise that I heard in the summer of 2011 that the administrative committee of the NGO had relieved Shadi of his responsibilities and brought a different person to head it. Shadi believed that the leadership wanted to control the funding he was bringing in, while the official version was that he was no longer following orders and acting too independently. It seemed that the two versions corroborated one another. Subsequently, I went to see Shadi to discuss the situation with him and see how this had affected his relationship with the PFLP. I asked him whether he was thinking of leaving the PFLP. Below is an extract from our discussion. While it is long, it is useful to relate in its entirety as it shows how Shadi and I had two different understandings of what faction membership was; consequently, we had difficulty understanding each other.

Perla: You didn't think of leaving the PFLP?

Shadi: No.

Perla: Why?

Shadi: If there is something wrong, we should not ignore it but fix it.

...

Perla: So you want to fix the PFLP like you want.

Shadi: You can say not my way, but the *Jabha* way, but not with these people.

Before, the leaders of the *Jabha* were role models for the people, and Ahmad Saadat is still a good example for leaders inside the *Jabha*. If we look at the *thawra*, of course many factions gave a lot, but if we look at the *Jabha*—Leila Khaled, Ghassan Kanafani, Wadih Haddad, Che Guevara Gaza—it has many people who left an important legacy, so I am proud of these people and I would like people in the *Jabha* today to be like them.⁴ So I am disappointed when I see people in the *Jabha* who are not like that.

Perla: You are attached to the *Jabha*.

Shadi: Yes, of course.

Perla: You wouldn't accept an alternative?

Shadi: Of course I would, I am with anyone who works right. Now if Hamas proposes something new, something good, of course I would support them. I would stand with them.

Perla: And you would leave the *Jabha*?

Shadi: What? No! Why would I leave the *Jabha*? If Hamas wants to do something good, something that is to the benefit of the people, will they refuse the help of someone because he is with the *Jabha*? For example.

Perla: No, of course you can help, but I mean if you want to join them.

Shadi: I can work with them even if I am with the *Jabha*.

Perla: Forget about Hamas. Suppose a new group forms and wants to do military work. If you want to work with them you need to join them, you need to leave the *Jabha* and join this new group.

Shadi: Why?

Perla: You can't remain *Jabha* in the new faction.

Shadi: I remain *ibn Jabha* [the son of the *Jabha*] and I [would] do everything in the new faction, but as *ibn Jabha*.

Perla: But the logic of a faction is that you become part of it.

Shadi: No.

Perla: Can you be Fatah in the PFLP?

Shadi: I can do something with Fatah.

Perla: But you can't be leading a military operation in Fatah if you are with the PFLP.

Shadi: You are correct.

Perla: So forget about Fatah or Hamas, something new is starting and you figure out that they are working right and in the way you like.

Shadi: I would go along with them.

Perla: But you need to leave the *Jabha*.

Shadi: Who needs to leave the *Jabha*? Me?

Perla: Yes.

Shadi: OK, I accept that I would stop going to *Jabha* meetings and not to participate in their events or anything factional. But I can't leave the *Jabha* as *Jabha* because I will remain *ibn Jabha*. I will participate in the new faction, and go to their meetings and I will become a member and do everything that is required, to work, but I would still be known as *ibn Jabha*.

Shadi's last sentence is quite revealing. Shadi was laying out a scenario in which he would no longer be a member of the PFLP according to any official criteria. He would no longer attend meetings nor participate in their events, and would basically "leave" the PFLP. But he still insisted that even in that case he would remain *ibn Jabha* (the son of the *Jabha*). Shadi simply could not envision a situation where he would not be linked to the *Jabha*, regardless of what the official membership regulations specified. I could not initially understand this point, insisting on envisioning a situation where he would have to leave the *Jabha*, for example if he had to lead a military action with another faction. But Shadi was always surprised at my assertion that he would then need to disassociate himself: "What? No! Why would I leave the *Jabha*?" While he could not understand why I was implying that he needed to quit the PFLP to join another faction, I could not understand how that precise implication was not obvious to him. The reason for our mutual puzzlement was that we each had a different understanding of factional affiliation. For me it was about being a member according to the official regulations of the faction,

while for Shadi it was something personal and was not related to whether he was an official member or not.

My conversation with Shadi also highlighted the use of the word “son” (“*ibn*”) or “daughter” (“*bint*”) in reference to a person’s relationship with a faction. Shadi was not the only Palestinian I met who chose to use those terms. Shadi’s use of the word *ibn* highlighted that he considered the *Jabha* family, that membership in a faction resembled membership in a family. Recall Rabieh, the young Palestinian who liked his tea dark because it brought him closer to the *thuwar*’s experience. Just like Rabieh, Shadi was also born into a PFLP family; his father, Mustapha, was a prominent PFLP figure in Nahr el-Bared camp. When I asked Mustapha whether he believed he had influenced his son in choosing a path similar to his, he did not seem sure. “God knows!” was his immediate answer as he waved his hand in the air. He continued: “I used to encourage [my children] to do the right things, but then they stopped listening to me!”

We were in Mustapha’s home at the time, sitting in his living room, and he pointed to a rather uncommon red Bob Marley poster hanging on the wall. “Who is this?” he asked with obvious disapproval. This seemed like an attempt to illustrate to me that not only had his son stopped listening to him, but that he, the father, could no longer even control what hung on the walls of his own home. Shadi answered, laughing, “Doesn’t he look like me? It’s my picture”—pointing at his own curly long hair. His father brushed off his answer: “No really, who is he?” “We got used to having Che Guevara as a symbol of the left, this person also sang for freedom,” Shadi replied. His father seemed unconvinced, at which point Shadi asked me to back him up. I answered that it was Bob Marley, that he did sing for freedom, and that Mustapha would probably like his music. “I see, so like Sheikh Imam then!” Mustapha exclaimed, which made Shadi and I laugh. Shadi’s father realized that he had unintentionally made a joke and laughed with us.⁵

Shadi added that his father was rarely home when he was a child; he was either travelling or residing in different bases around Lebanon. While he used to be afraid of Mustapha, he was also proud of him, as “at that time a fighter was a good thing, I was proud, it was about sacrifice.” Shadi mostly saw him in the PFLP summer camps that he attended as a child. “A small organized army (*jaysh mnazzam sghir*)” was what he felt they were. He added that the camps were quite rigorous and that punishments “actually meant something.” They had to crawl bare-chested on thorns as a form of reprimand. He liked it though, as he could then brag about his scratches to his friends. I later realised that his early fear of his father was linked to the severe punishments that he used to deliver to his children. Shadi added that they also used to sing revolutionary songs, learn about Palestine, and perform plays. “We used to see the *fidā’i*, he was the main picture, so whatever we could do to be like him made us happy,” he explained. Shadi’s childhood was typical of young Palestinians who were raised in a faction family. However, his

self-identification with the PFLP was unusual for Palestinians of his age. I asked him to elaborate:

Perla: It's incredible how attached you are to the *Jabha*.

Shadi: Yes of course, I am proud of being in the *Jabha*. For its principles, for its history, for its ideas. . . . It is great! Honestly, it educated me. It is one of the factions that made me hold on to the cause and made me love Palestine more than anything else.

Here lies the double meaning of "*ibn*." For Shadi the PFLP was not just a family, something that was personal and close to him, but it was also a learning center that taught and educated him. He was in a sense the "offspring" of the PFLP, its descendant. Shadi later explained to me that his involvement in the PFLP increased in high school as he participated in a sit-in with many of his friends in Beirut, aimed at pressuring UNRWA to open a secondary school for Palestinians in Tripoli.⁶ Once the sit-in succeeded, Shadi became active in developing a PFLP scout troop and youth group in Nahr el-Bared. He explained that he had begun by enlisting his close friends who were from PFLP families as well as non-factional families. With time their activities increased: they had summer camps, musical groups, and political meetings with Palestinians of the *thawra* generation who would discuss their experiences. They started visiting the martyrs' cemetery, commemorating national events, and organizing traditional Palestinian weddings. The PFLP youth center had a computer room, a library, and an exhibition of Palestinian heritage. It was these activities and the human relations that they fostered that cultivated in Shadi a sense of belonging and a feeling of being forever related to the PFLP. His association with it could not be described as the satisfaction of internal regulations. It was an identification as strong as any family identification.

Identifying oneself as a son or daughter of a faction was rare among young Palestinians. For the older generation it was more common, as during the *thawra* the factions were much more active and people often felt a deep and close association with them. For many, their identification with a faction was so strong that they felt they would betray it by joining another faction. Such was the case with Fatima, quoted at the beginning of this section. Fatima left Fatah after experiencing firsthand the corruption of officials stationed in Beirut; but she felt she could never affiliate to another faction and as a result she remained "outside." This behavior contrasted with the younger generation, whose sense of belonging was less deep. This was also the case with Lina, to whose story I turn to next.

Lina

Lina was a university graduate in her late twenties with an infectious smile. I quickly formed an affinity for her as she was highly inquisitive and always keen on partaking in group discussions but would, nevertheless, always second-guess

herself. As I got to know her more I realized that she had vast experience working in the camp and was highly knowledgeable about community affairs. However, she remained humble and held other people's opinions in high regard. She was a good listener. I first met her, and would regularly see her, in the Nahr el-Bared Reconstruction Commission compound where she worked.⁷ Located next to the Lebanese Army checkpoint that marked the entrance to the old camp, its premises consisted of several air-conditioned metal trailers painted in white. Lina and her colleague Rania usually sat in an inner room lined with filling cabinets, while colleagues would come in and out handling different tasks.

Lina often stated that politics was a "headache" in which she was neither interested nor involved. She added that her dislike of factions, which for her were synonymous with "politics," did not mean that she was indifferent to the Palestinian cause. On the contrary, she just "didn't care about being in a faction." Her co-worker Rania, sitting with us, interjected that Palestinians needed to be part of a faction to have a "back" (*dahir*), evoking the image of factions as edifices that encompassed and protected their members. However, later in our conversation Lina explained that she was in the DFLP student union. This came as a surprise to both Rania and me. She explained, "I entered the DFLP student union because it was the closest to me, and I knew the most people in it; they are in the same area where I live and my friends are there too." Rania voiced her surprise: "I didn't know this and I don't like these things at all." Lina continued, explaining, "I am [still] in the union, but I don't consider myself to be politically affiliated (*munazzami siyāsiyyan*)."⁸ Confused about how she did not consider herself a member if she was technically a member, I asked her to elaborate.

Lina: Each faction has a student union. They say that this is separate from politics when you first join, so you imagine yourself getting into something that works for students, for student goals . . . and it is supposedly separate from politics, and I don't like politics. . . . [But] when I started to learn more, I started to see that things are not separate at all. It is true that their main goals are the students and the universities and when we want to mobilize about a topic it is all about scholarships and university matters . . . but there is still a link to their political ideology that you may not believe in. . . .

I support their general political demands, the right of return and the refusal of naturalization in Lebanon (*tawfīn*). These are not just slogans, they really work on this. They have meetings and they go see members of parliament and ministers. They are not silent. But I am not with their internal political goals.

Perla: Which are?

Lina: Now I am talking about these things? [Laughter]

Perla: Please continue.

Lina: I am not with their internal politics, which is secularism, political secularism. They separate religion from politics. Now I studied social science and I read a bit of philosophy, so I know how those people they talk about think, they follow

Lenin and I am not too convinced of these things. I am wary of them. But on matters related to students and Palestine I am with them.

This discussion was revealing. Lina believed that the DFLP student union was actively and effectively trying to improve the situation of students. She later told me about a new project they were working on: establishing a Palestinian university in Lebanon. She enjoyed attending those meetings as the topic interested her and she “liked to know what was going on.” However, Lina was not convinced by the stated ideology of the DFLP and was uneasy at how the DFLP student union had attempted to disguise that connection in order to get her to participate in their meetings. This increased her general dislike for factions, which was always somewhat “suspicious” (*mashbūh*). She explained:

I feel like [politics] is confusing and a lot of talk and talk and talk, and now politics is more like problems and the goal is no longer the country, or the people, but the goal is to destroy someone or someone take authority. So I don't spend my time on this, I don't care who is in charge or who his deputy is or who is in control. I really don't care. I think that they [the factions] are all the same.

Lina's dislike of factions was related to her lack of trust in “politics” in general. It was related to how factions were perceived in the Palestinian camps, and she worried about how her participation might be viewed by the community. She explained: “as soon as you talk to someone, people consider you to be affiliated with this someone. And I told you I don't like political factions and I will be considered a member of them.” Her personal involvement in local meetings was not enough for her to counter the general feeling of distrust she felt. She therefore did not want to appear to be affiliated, which explained why her close friend and colleague did not know of her involvement. Additionally, she did not feel a sense of belonging to the organization, although according to the DFLP's internal regulations she was a member. This raises the question: was Lina a member or not? We may want to say that she was, since the DFLP considered her to be so. However, if she did not see herself as a member, should we still count her as one?

The official membership regulations were about drawing lines, lines that separated those on the “outside” from those on the “inside.” However, a closer examination revealed that it was impossible to draw that line in practice. Looking at how individuals spoke of their own involvement in factions added another layer of complexity. Political membership cannot be seen as the fulfilment of a contractual agreement, as it was also about a sense of belonging that was nurtured over time through personal and trusting relations with other faction members. The examples of Shadi and Lina were constructive in their opposition. Shadi felt he belonged to a faction to the point where he identified himself as its offspring, regardless of whether he was technically a member or not, while Lina, who believed in the work that the DFLP student union was doing and attended their meetings, did not feel she was politically affiliated. Lina expressed her desire to leave the DFLP, as she

felt she could not be with them “one-hundred percent.” I asked her if she could simply stop attending meetings. She explained that that was not enough, she needed to make sure that her name was “crossed out,” otherwise they would always consider her one of their own. It is to a discussion of ending factional affiliations that I turn to next.

“TERMINATING” FACTIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Being part of a faction has become a crime!

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Investigating the process of ending factional membership is particularly interesting in light of the current premium attached to “independent” and “grassroots” initiatives. Many of the ills in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon were attributed to the incompetence and disunity of Palestinian factions. It was in light of such criticisms that being factionalized became an indictment, and many scholars point to “grassroots” organizations as being in opposition to factions (Kortam 2011; R. Sayigh 2011; Suleiman 1999). In this section I look at one such grassroots initiative whose rise and fall I witnessed during the Nahr el-Bared battle of 2007. *Rajiin* (“We will return”) was a group of young Palestinians from Nahr el-Bared camp who regrouped in Beddawi camp, where they were taking shelter.⁸ They attempted to make their voices heard to the Lebanese government and to their leadership. It was through their activities that I initially came to meet the Hamdan family, whom I introduced in the previous chapter. I explore this initiative to highlight how difficult it was to draw a distinction between “factionalized” Palestinians and “independents.” This section examines my own understandings of and reactions to Abu Ali and Rabieh’s involvement with *Rajiin* and their subsequent rapprochement with the PFLP upon their return to Nahr el-Bared camp. This example will also help us understand how Palestinians made sense of their involvement with factions while openly opposing them.

Rajiin

Walking into the garden of the Ghassan Kanafani nursery of Beddawi camp, I saw a group of young Palestinians sitting and chatting together. Several plastic chairs had been brought outside and everyone was seated in the shade underneath a vineyard facing a deserted children’s playground painted in blue. It was the second week of the Nahr el-Bared battle and many Palestinians had sought shelter in Beddawi camp. A friend introduced me to the group, which went by the name *Rajiin*. Compelled by the ongoing destruction of their camp, they wanted “to do something.” A discussion was in progress about the need to organize a sit-in in the school’s courtyard to demand the end of the fighting. Having escaped from Nahr el-Bared a week earlier, the only form of mobilization they had witnessed from

different organizations, whether the factions, UNRWA, or local and international NGOs, was the distribution of food, blankets and T-shirts. While relief assistance was needed, they worried that everyone's focus rested solely on delivering immediate relief aid and not on halting the destruction of their homes. They wanted to make clear that what they needed was not cardboard boxes (*karātīn*), which epitomized relief, but a return to their homes. Ali was one of the more vocal activists in the group and following several meetings he introduced me to his family, who were living at the time in the corridors of the UNRWA school.

Ali explained to me that after fleeing from Nahr el-Bared camp they had first sought shelter with friends, and only came to the school several days later. By this point the school had already been occupied, with at least three different families in each classroom. He noticed that they could claim the space that extended from the end of the hallway, which was lined with windows, to the first classroom door, without interfering with anyone else's private space. The family marked their space by hanging a blue tarpaulin across the corridor next to the classroom door, which gave them a personal space of about five by eight meters. Our discussions during those days revolved around what Fatah al-Islam was, the fear that the onslaught on Nahr el-Bared was a pre-planned campaign to destroy the camp and render its residents permanently homeless, and the role that factions played (or, more accurately, did not play) during the battle.⁹ In particular, Ali's younger brother Rabieh was highly critical of the factions, arguing that they should have intervened militarily to disarm Fatah al-Islam. "What's the point of having arms if we do not use them to protect our camp?," he often repeated. He explained that he was a trained fighter in the PFLP and was on guard duty during the beginning of the battle, but he had left the PFLP and handed in his weapon when his supervisor told him on the third day of the battle that "the battle does not concern us" (*mā ilna bi hal ḥarb*). He felt betrayed, and departed from the camp with the first wave of refugees.

Rabieh was not the only one disappointed by the inaction of Palestinian political factions. A general sense of frustration could easily be felt, and this was what contributed to the making of Rajiin. While the group began to organize sit-ins they soon decided that they needed to increase their visibility and called for a protest on June 29, about six weeks after the fighting in Nahr el-Bared broke out. That day the school courtyard filled with thousands of refugees, well beyond the expectations of the young organizers. Soon the march started out along Beddawi's main road. As the leading group turned left into one of the camp's alleys, other protesters continued along the main road and exited the camp. They were marching towards Nahr el-Bared, which was still fifteen kilometers away, when they encountered a Lebanese military roadblock. From eyewitness reports that I gathered that same day, I learned that the people in the front sat on the ground, implicitly indicating to the army that they neither aimed to storm the roadblock nor were they willing

to go back to Beddawi camp. However, after firing warning shots in the air, the army began shooting at the protesters.¹⁰ As a result, two young Palestinian men were killed and several were injured. This experience was particularly traumatic because protesters were not only attacked by the army but also by local residents who wielded knives and sticks, attacking fleeing protesters who had sought refuge in the hallways of buildings adjacent to the protest.

Following the march and the death of the two protesters, the Palestinian ambassador to Lebanon, Abbas Zaki, condemned the protest and declared that Palestinians should respect the army and should not “cause disruptions” or “cause any further strain on the army” (Ghazal 2007). In another statement Zaki referred to the protesters as “*fawdawiiyyin*,” loosely translated as “anarchists” (Nahrelbared 2007). Abbas Zaki’s statement became famous among the young men and women of Rajiin. To them it reflected the distance that existed between them and their leadership, as they were risking their lives to return home and their official political representative was calling them “anarchists.” But more importantly, they feared that these statements were a signal to the Lebanese army that the Palestinian leadership would not object to their arrest. A few days later Fatah released a statement referring to the organizers as “reckless young men” (*shabāb tāyshīn*) who sought to destroy Beddawi camp. At that point the young refugees felt that they not only had to worry about the Lebanese army, but also had to fear the political factions. They continued to meet with each other, and to assist activists and journalists visiting the camp, but they refrained from organizing further direct action. These events clearly situated the Rajiin initiative as an “independent” grassroots initiative and positioned its organizers as being “outside” the factions. However, as we will see upon closer inspection, no such line could be drawn.

“It Was Not Your Average Friendship”

When I first met Abu Ali, as part of the Rajiin activities, he explained that he was a “friend” of the PFLP. This meant that he was not an official member of the faction but a supporter who attended events periodically. A few years later, I heard the entire story that had led to his resignation in the early 1990s. His decision related to the revamping of the Soviet Union exit visa policies, as a result of the perestroika reforms, which favoured mass emigration of Jews to Israel (see Al-Haj 2004, 83–84). He believed that the leaders of the Soviet Union, and subsequently of Russia, were encouraging this mass immigration to Israel. He went on to explain that at a meeting to discuss the issue he had voiced his opposition. In his words:

In the meetings we had, I was against the perestroika; I was the only one against it. I registered my opposition and my reaction was nervous (*aṣabi*). In one of the meetings in the office, there was a Lenin statue on the table; from my anger and frustration I hit it with my shoe.¹¹

[Laughter]

What infuriated me; what made my blood boil, was that, I adopted your [the Soviet Union's] ideas, I, as a Palestinian with a rightful cause. And now I see the Soviet Jews immigrating to Palestine and you [Russia] are allowing them and providing them with the means to go to my country that was stolen from me and that I am fighting to return to. Look at the contradiction! . . . Honestly my mind could not handle it. Maybe my actions cannot be understood, maybe my colleagues could not accept them but in my opinion they were justified. I have a cause (*sāhib qadiyyi*) and to see those who considered themselves my allies [help my enemies]. . . . So yes my reaction was strong, maybe I should not have acted like that, maybe I should have communicated my position in a more civilized way.

After hitting the bronze Lenin statue with his shoe, Abu Ali was sent to the PFLP correctional committee and then demoted. At that point he decided to leave the organization. He explained that he handed in his resignation, which was discussed and accepted. He then returned his weapon, became a civilian, and opened a thrift shop. This was a decade and a half prior to the Nahr el-Bared conflict in 2007.

Upon the Hamdan family's return to Nahr el-Bared camp, after the end of combat, Abu Ali starting working with the head of the PFLP in Lebanon on increasing the media coverage of the camp. By that time the head of the PFLP in Lebanon was also the official liaison between the Palestinian Embassy and the Lebanese government on the reconstruction of Nahr el-Bared camp. Abu Ali was highly qualified for this position. He was a seasoned writer, an active member of his community, and a person with substantial relationships with journalists in Lebanon. However, this job opportunity made me wonder if he had "returned" to the PFLP. When I inquired, he answered that no, he was not a member of the PFLP, and that the position was not with the PFLP but with the PLO. This was technically correct. However, others in the camp pointed out to me that it was the PFLP who provided him with a computer and an Internet connection, which seemed to implicate him in the "internal" workings of the faction.

Around that same time I began seeing Rabieh at the PFLP youth centre. When I asked him whether he had returned to the PFLP, he explained that while he was still upset at the leadership's decision to stand idle during the battle, it was impossible for him "to deny his origins" (*yinkur aslu*). This was a surprising statement following the scathing denunciations he had directed at the PFLP leadership just a few months earlier. He expanded:

It is difficult, I would be upset at them, I witnessed a lot of things that I was unhappy with and I say that I don't want to be [with them], but after that, without even realizing it, I go back, I return and I enter the *markaz* (center).

At first glance, by using the word "origins" it seemed that Rabieh was implying that what he described as an almost involuntary return to the PFLP youth center was the result of a longstanding family association with the faction. However,

upon further discussion it became clear that “origin” did not refer to his family but rather to the strong personal ties he had built with other people in the faction. In his words:

Most of my friends are in the *Jabha*. I met [my brother in-law] when he was very young in the *Jabha*, through him I met other people. I was the oldest among them and they respected me. I felt we were friends, like I am their older brother. We would think together; work together; do things together. . . .

We were friends not just in the *Jabha*. We would sleep over at each other's homes at night; we would decide today we are all staying at Muhammad's; tomorrow we stay with Ali. We spent our nights and days together. For example, my friends called my mother, mother, and I called their mothers, mother.

We have already seen that the strength of a person's relation with a faction really reflected the strength of that person's link with other comrades. In this case, we see how those personal ties should also alter the way we look at “ending” factional memberships. What Rabieh was highlighting was that even if he disagreed with a particular political position of the PFLP, in this case their stand during the 2007 conflict, it did not mean that he could or would cut his links with his friends. Trying to determine whether Rabieh was “factionalized” or not was simply impossible. It was this precise point that I had missed in my earlier understanding of Abu Ali's new work opportunity. Abu Ali's association with the head of the PFLP was not the reflection of a “covert membership” in the PFLP; it was quite simply the reflection of a long-term trusted friendship, the strength of which was eloquently related to me by Abu Ali himself:

[I am still friends] with everyone [in the PFLP]; we visit each other, things are normal between us. What joined us together was something big, not a small cookie (*Yalli kân yirbutna shi kbîr, mish ḥabbi*). It was not your average friendship. We were comrades in struggle, comrades in arms (*rafîq nidâl, rafîq silâḥ*). We ate together; we slept together in the cold and in winter. We guarded together. We did a lot of things together. You can't forget that. We shared one tent, one blanket.

Abu Ali's description of his relationship with his comrades suggests the strong ties that he developed with his peers. What linked Abu Ali to his comrades was a lifetime of shared experiences in what were sometimes life-threatening circumstances. These ties were not going to end just because he had “left” the PFLP. This did not mean that he could “infiltrate” the PFLP by having a close friendship with its leadership. This assumption could only be based on looking at factions as bounded structures where only members were allowed “inside.” But Abu Ali's story highlights how difficult it was to separate the “faction,” seen as an entity with a life of its own, from the personal relations that were its basis. It also explained how Abu Ali made sense of his opposition to the PFLP's political program while appearing to personally engage with them. This was not a contradiction. When the head of the PFLP chose Abu Ali as his media consultant he was not only

looking for someone with proper qualifications; more importantly, he was looking for someone he could trust. After all, mutual trust was paramount when working on raising the visibility of a camp that was declared a military zone and that required journalists to obtain special military permits to access it.

Examining the process of ending factional membership was fruitful for me, as it showed how Palestinian refugees made sense of the seeming contradiction of partaking in the reproduction of political factions while openly critiquing them. Interpersonal trust, between Rabieh and his mentor or between Abu Ali and his comrades, helped maintain a relationship with the PFLP even as they clearly distrusted it. In other words trust and mistrust coexisted within the same relationship. While Palestinians may oppose a faction's *political stance* and openly voice their opposition, this did not mean that they would sever their ties with the *people* who had been their trusted friends for many years. Palestinians' relationship with a faction was not just a relationship with an impersonal framework defined by its stated ideology; it was also a relationship between people. In that sense attempting to classify Palestinians as being "factionalized" or "independent" was not appropriate if I wanted to properly understand the dynamics that animated factional politics in Palestinian camps. Factional affiliation could not be separated from the personal relationships that brought it into being; it was impossible to delineate the political associations from personal ones.

"WE ARE THE FACTIONS"

The stories of Palestinians' relations with factions did not all feature deep friendship ties like those experienced by Abu Ali and Rabieh. While some did, others included personal disputes over non-political issues, such as a disagreement over the location of a new cafeteria, which then was a cause to terminate factional affiliation. Individuals implicated in such behavior would label it as "tribal" (*ashā'iri*). This indicates that Palestinians themselves viewed the intermixing of political and personal relations as undesirable and reflecting, in their view, a "backward" form of political behavior that should be eradicated in "modern" times. However, what these stories really point to is the importance of trust in building political associations. Indeed, if individuals had personal disagreements and felt wronged by each other, it was unlikely that they would then collaborate in political work, regardless of whether they espoused a similar worldview or not.

In the context of repeated forced expulsions, wars, and severe political oppression, as well as social and legal discrimination, it was not surprising that Palestinians placed a high value on interpersonal trust. The image we get of factions from examining people's life histories is that of a network of people coming together with varying degrees of cohesion, which could change with time. Viewed laterally in this way, factions lost the appearance of bounded entities defined by party ideology. A friend made this point to me early on in my fieldwork, but I could not grasp it as

I was still looking at Palestinian political factions as entities with boundaries. I was sitting in his home, asking him how factions could destroy so many “grassroots” initiatives. He answered that the factions were not something outside this community; rather, “we are the factions.”

Reinscribing the agency of Palestinian refugees into accounts of factional (re)production means that factional membership should not be looked at as the evaluation of a person’s position in a present moment vis-à-vis a structure, but rather needs to be seen as an evolving story of human interaction. Factional adherence was not about the respect of internal regulations but was about how Palestinians identified themselves. Additionally, we saw how the relationship between a person and a faction should not be imagined as the relationship between a person and a building that a person “entered” or “left.” Rather, it was about personal relations, which carried a lot more complexity and ambiguity that went unaccounted for if we expected them to fit into ready-made categories. Factions had no independent existence; they were quite simply people coming together with varying degrees of trust and cohesion that changed with time.

The alternative view I have presented was precipitated by the different methodological approach I took, which consisted of approaching factions not from the top or bottom but laterally, through immersion in daily home life. In light of these conclusions, a new line of questioning arises. The Palestinian refugees I spoke with were well aware that personal relations underlay factional relations; however, the everyday terminology they used still reflected an imagination of factions as buildings with “walls” and “ceilings” that they “entered” and “left.” Could a lateral view help me elucidate this puzzling observation? In the next two chapters I look at the practices of aid distribution, physical representation, and factionalism and show how they served to inscribe distance between people and factions—the very distance that disappeared by looking into people’s life stories. The central question that the next two chapters seek to answer is: how do people coming together appear to create the effect of a structure with a life of its own?