



FIGURE 13. Protest in Nahr el-Bared camp, June 2012. Photograph: Ismael Sheikh Hassan.

Conclusion

*“The Guys Were Doing Something Great,
the Factions Destroyed It”*

If the people want to live the factions need to die. If the factions want to live the people need to die.

—AHMAD, YOUNGER GENERATION, SHATILA CAMP, DECEMBER 7, 2010

I know that the factions are killing me. I have a lot of ideas for the camp but I can't execute them. If I propose them, people right away tell me that this or that faction will step in my way.

—MUHAMMAD, YOUNGER GENERATION, NAHR EL-BARED CAMP,
NOVEMBER 12, 2011

The primary goal of this study has been to explore how unpopular and discredited political factions are (re)produced on a day-to-day basis in the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon, how they remain the center of political life in the face of widespread condemnation. In answering these questions I had to question the ontological nature of factions; I had to explore how factions, which are clearly made of people, appear to take on a life of their own and can be invoked in the singular: “Fatah did this” or “ Hamas declared that.”

What I found was that our understanding of the nature of factions changes depending on which practices we focus on. By examining the personal narratives of Palestinian refugees we saw how the initial contact with factions occurred out of close, personal, and trusting relations. Palestinians encountered factions not as party ideology but as people, people who were most often family members, friends or neighbors. Space was instrumental in fostering these connections and took various forms, including homes, classrooms, neighborhoods, and factional centers. The strength and longevity of the relationship of a Palestinian to a faction was a reflection of the closeness of the personal relations that were developed in those spaces. As such, the relationship between a person and a faction is not a relationship between a person and a structure, but a relationship between people:

it is about personal relations. Faction membership was not a reflection of a person's present position vis-à-vis a structure that she or he "enters" or "leaves"; rather it is a continuously unfolding story of human relations. In short, factions appeared as loose networks of people bound together with various degrees of trust and cohesion.

The centrality of personal relations in fostering and maintaining factional associations did not reflect a "backward" or "tribal" form of politics, where people were putting their analytical faculties on hold and blindly following those around them. Rather, Palestinians were constantly engaged in a critical analysis of the political situation and were often defiant of parental authority even when it was a family member who initially inspired them to partake in factional activities. Interpersonal trust played a crucial role in building personal/political relations in a world defined by constant war, displacement, and discrimination. 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. This helped explain how Palestinian refugees made sense of the seeming contradiction of partaking in the reproduction of factions while openly critiquing them. Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, the DFLP, amongst others, were networks of people where ties were forged, experiences shared, skills gained, and knowledge transmitted. That was their first nature.

Factions, however, also appeared to have a second nature when we examined a different set of practices. By looking at practices of aid distribution, physical representation, and factional conflict, factions took the appearance of impersonal structures that existed separately and autonomously from the trusting personal relations that brought them into being. By relying on surveillance and monitoring techniques, and by being unaccountable to the Palestinian refugee population, aid distribution practices turned factions into impersonal structures that had power over people's lives. They now appeared as containers that encompassed their members with a top in control, and a bottom that lacked it. Factions also gained a life of their own through the creation of what appeared to be an "outside," a position from which we were made to believe that it was possible to see, critique, and study factions. It was this very illusion of being an "outside observer" that created the imagination that factions were bounded structures defined by their ideologies. However, ethnography makes this position untenable. Through a detailed examination of people's lives it became apparent that what appeared to be the "outside" was actually a position within the factions' network of relations.

By exploring the motives and methods of Palestinian refugees in joining factions as well as the subsequent evolution of that relationship, we realized that factions were loose networks of people coming together with varying degrees of trust and cohesion which changed with time and circumstances. Yet when we examined practices of aid distribution, physical representation, and factionalism, we concluded that factions appeared as immaterial and impersonal structures that

controlled people's lives and fostered mistrust in the community. In other words, factions were formed through local *personal* and *trusting* relations, yet took on the appearance of *impersonal* structures that were *distrusted* by the community. Factions had a double nature.

What is the significance of exposing this double nature? Few people, whether Palestinian refugees or scholars, would probably disagree with the statement that factions are not actually edifices apart from the people that make them, but they nevertheless continue to treat them, speak about them, and study them as structures. What effect does that have and why is it important to point it out? I argue that when we treat or conceptualize factions as entities in their own right we create the belief that it is possible to remove them or change them. If we conceptualize factions as structures that exist apart from the people whom they encompass then it is only natural to believe that if they are unpopular then they should no longer be relevant, that they should "die." New popular or "grassroots" initiatives must then be able to change, replace, or unsettle the discredited factions. It is that very assumption that made me ask my initial question about how obviously unpopular and discredited political factions remained relevant. The question itself assumes a certain ontological nature of factions as self-contained entities. Yet as we have seen, factions have another nature: they are networks of people bound together by interpersonal relations that co-exist simultaneously with the heavy criticism of factions. This second nature makes these attempts to unsettle factions practically difficult, if not impossible, since factions do not exist separately from people. This impossibility creates in turn the illusion that the unpopular factions are powerful as attempts to unsettle them ultimately fail.

I illustrate this point through two examples: the 2012 protest movement that led to the annulment of the military permit system in Nahr el-Bared camp and the 2005 election of a "people's committee" in Shatila camp. Through these examples I show that in the current context of continued dissatisfaction towards factions Palestinians, as well as scholars, often put factions in opposition to "grassroots" or "independent" initiatives that attempt to better camp organization and life. When these initiatives fail, people and scholars are quick to point to "factions" as the spoilers. But factions, as we have seen, are made of people, people who are often part of these initiatives all along. And while these initiatives collapse for varied reasons, their failure or unsustainability is blamed on the factions. This act of denouncing the factions has two effects. One is to reify factions: by giving agency to factions we further their appearance of structure. And we also create the impression that *unpopular* factions have the power to destroy *popular* initiatives.

THE 2012 NAHR EL-BARED PROTEST MOVEMENT

On Friday June 15, 2012, a Lebanese army patrol accosted a young Palestinian man sitting on a motorcycle in Nahr el-Bared camp. An altercation ensued which quickly



FIGURE 14. Protest in Nahr el-Bared camp, June 2012. Photograph: Ismael Sheikh Hassan.

grew in size as more young Palestinian men converged on the scene and as the patrol called for reinforcements. Soon armored personal carriers were rolling down the camp's main street, using tear gas and shooting live ammunition. A fifteen-year-old water delivery boy named Ahmad Qassem was fatally shot in the head, and five other Palestinians were injured. Young men began throwing stones at the army, burning tires and building barricades. The army eventually retreated and the young men decided to remain in the streets and begin an open-ended sit-in. Three days later, at Ahmad's funeral, protesters stormed a barricade separating the funeral procession from the army. The army responded with live fire and a grocery store owner, Fuad Lubani, was fatally shot while standing at his home's doorstep, allegedly attempting to convince the protesters to move back. In a further act of provocation the army shot and injured two of his brothers and a cousin as they each, in turn, attempted to bring the bodies of their wounded relatives inside the family home.

The killings of Ahmad Qassem, and later Fuad Lubani, were the most immediate events that infuriated the protesters, but what drove the residents of Nahr el-Bared to rebel against the army was their treatment at the hands of the military apparatus for the past five years.¹ Residents repeatedly pointed out how they needed a permit to access their own homes (a process often used by the army to coerce residents to provide "information" about camp activities, somewhat as the army had attempted to do with me). Residents also found the conduct of soldiers

at checkpoints to be particularly degrading. Protesters demanded the end of the military permit system, the return of confiscated land and homes, the expansion of the camp's cemetery, which could no longer accommodate new burials, and the release of those detained since the beginning of the events.

Many of the residents I spoke to about the initial days of the sit-in expressed both fear and defiance in the face of the army's response.² People were especially proud to state that Nahr el-Bared "was like Gaza," or "like Palestine," highlighting how through their resistance to the Lebanese army's repression they felt closer to their compatriots in Palestine who were seen as perpetual resisters. Nadia, the Talal family's daughter, who was fond of Turkish soap operas, told me how she ran faster than tanks as she looked for her brother during the initial clashes. Other residents described how women threw garbage bags from their windows and balconies onto the moving tanks and APCs; others explained how young men took their shirts off, publicly displaying their lack of fear at facing the army with nothing but their bare chests. Everyone's favorite story featured soldiers retreating in the face of stones or burning tires.

However, the Palestinian political leadership issued statements criticizing the sit-in and supporting the army. In a statement released in the first few days of unrest, they declared their deep relationship with the army and expressed their solidarity (Al-Jadeed TV 2012). The Palestinian Authority representative Azzam al-Ahmad declared to the media that "foreign elements" were trying to steer problems between the army and the residents of Nahr el-Bared (Ma'an News Agency 2012; Mroueh 2012). These statements infuriated the protesters, who feared that their leadership would not object if the army continued their violent repression. While the popular mobilization was clearly aimed at the Lebanese army's control over life in the camp, the protest also carried within it a second condemnation aimed at Palestinian political factions. The mother of the Talal family, Um Muhammad, explained to me how on the first day of unrest, several heads of factions attempted to approach the young men along with the army and stones were thrown at them, which amused her greatly. A common chant during the protests was "*hīrī hīrī hīrī, qiyāda shī bikharri*" (loosely translated, "shitty leadership"). Young protesters appearing on YouTube videos distanced themselves from political factions (SolidarityPalestine 2012). Condemnations of the factions began to appear on blogs (Rami 2012).

Nevertheless, according to my interviewees, the factions were able to "take over" this budding opposition movement after the death of Fuad. They explained that the factions had been able to do so for three reasons. First was the issue of who would care for the families of the martyrs. The protesters did not have the financial resources needed to provide for the families who had lost a member and a breadwinner. Second, the need to negotiate with the army became more pressing after the killing of Fuad. The young protesters knew they could not protest endlessly without entering into discussion with the army. The best intermediary was

considered to be the factions. Young protesters repeatedly explained to me that they felt it was wrong to speak to the army directly, as if it would dishonour the martyrs' sacrifices. They were also well aware that the army would not enter into direct negotiations with them. "At that time, the army is not going to talk to me, they will talk to the factions," said one young protester.

There was also a general sense that the political situation in Lebanon was too unstable, and everyone feared that the events in Nahr el-Bared would be wrongly linked to the Syrian uprising. Barely a month prior to the protests two prominent sheikhs, affiliated to the Syrian opposition, had been killed at a checkpoint by the Lebanese army. Demands for the withdrawal of the army from northern Lebanon grew louder at that time. Camp residents feared that local Lebanese leaders would use the camp mobilization as a way to further increase the pressure on the army towards their own ends. While everyone, including the protesters, wanted to protect the protest from Lebanese meddling, some felt that the situation was dangerous enough to warrant the intervention of more "experienced" parties, meaning the factions.³

Over the next month, the army refrained from entering the camp and the protesters continued their sit-in. It featured nightly events, such as dance and music performances, film screenings, political speeches, or just discussions between the different participants. Donations were collected locally and from the Diaspora to sustain the sit-in. The protesters also took it upon themselves to clean the streets of the residue of burned tires, a health hazard. Finally, in July the army released the detainees. A few weeks later it lifted the permit system and handed over confiscated land and properties. The protesters had achieved their goals, and this created much joy in the camp. However, many individuals were unhappy that this development was being portrayed as a victory for the factions. They were outraged that Palestinian political factions, who stood on the sidelines at the beginning of the protests, had managed to claim the fruits of this popular mobilization. Their credibility vis-à-vis the Lebanese government had increased and new security and coordination committees were now formed in conjunction with them (Dockery 2012).

Yet I contend that it was possible to have a different reading of how and when the factions' involvement began. Through my discussions with camp residents and by looking at pictures on Facebook and videos on YouTube, it was apparent that many of the people who participated in the initial events, even before Fuad's killing, were themselves part of the network of factions. For example, two of the Talal family's sons, Mahmud and Ahmad, attended several rallies. Ahmad was a self-identified Islamic Jihad member (chapter 3), while Mahmud kept a complex relationship with the DFLP (chapter 4). Similarly Rabieh (chapter 3)—who "left" the PFLP because of their non-involvement in the 2007 battle but had deep friendships with part of its youth group—and his father Abu Ali (chapter 4)—who hit the Lenin statue with his shoe—were part of the protests. Finally, Shadi (chapter 4), the ex-head of a PFLP NGO who was relieved of his services over a financial dispute, was also

present early on and actually became one of the spokespersons for the young protesters. It seemed that factions had been part of the mobilization all along.

How can we explain this discrepancy in the accounts? Examining the moment when factions were said to have “taken over” helps us answer that question. From the narratives of camp residents, it appears that factions “took over” and “took credit” for the movement’s successes once particular actions needed to be taken: the care for the martyrs’ families, negotiating with the army, and analysing the political situation. These fall under three categories of practices, which I already investigated as causing the structural effect: the provision of care, the need for representation, and the apparent monopoly over political knowledge.

It seems then that our understanding of the factions’ involvement in the protests depends on our conceptualization of factions. Looking at factions as a network of people we realize that factions had been part of the movement all along; they were never “outside” it. However, if we understand factions as entities with a life of their own, separate from the people, then their involvement appeared to occur only after Fuad’s death. In other words, the participation of individuals who were part of the network factions did not seem to implicate the factions in the mobilization; it was the involvement of factions as entities in their own right that did. This point can be further highlighted by examining the involvement of the factions in the organizing committees of the protests.

Protesters I spoke to explained that factions became part of the organizing committees after Fuad’s killing. However, this was again difficult to substantiate. Those same protesters added that the initial ad-hoc committees comprised a representative of the youth, of the popular committee, and of the inhabitants who lived close to the protesters’ encampment. Since the popular committee was itself appointed by factions, it meant that faction members were already part of the organizing committees from the first day. However, the involvement of the popular committee members was not seen as involving the factions. For the protesters the involvement of the factions only began when certain individuals participated in the organizing committees as representatives of factions. In other words, factions only gained a presence once they were represented. It was not a person’s involvement in the network of factions that involved the factions, but the factions’ representation. In the latter case, the factions as bodies appeared to be involved instead of individuals.

There are therefore two ways to speak of this popular mobilization. We could say that at its beginning the 2012 protest movement was independent of factions and that the movement was actually against them; that ordinary people fought on their own against the army and against the factions that were in opposition to them. They sacrificed and finally won concessions from the army that the factions were later able to claim as “theirs.” In other words, factions were able to reap the fruit of a popular mobilization that initially targeted them.

The second way we could write about these events would be to say that factions, seen as a network of people, were never outside this movement; they were present

all along. They only appeared as entities in their own right once particular practices that cause the structural effect needed to be undertaken, such as the provision of care, the negotiation with the army and the need for political expertise. It was those practices that made the factions suddenly appear to be disconnected from the people who formed their very basis and who formed the protest movement. Like chameleons, they initially blended into the masses, only to appear later as actors in their own right. This does not mean that they were working “undercover,” “plotting” their course of action and waiting for the right moment to appear and take over the protest movement. Their appearance and disappearance was a direct result of particular practices.

This was the power of the structural effect; it turned a network of people into a structure while hiding the actual social relations that form its very basis. The lifting of the permit system was no longer attributed to people, but to factions. Factions became something the media—and activists—could point to, while either crediting them with victory or accusing them of profiting from people’s sacrifices. By appearing as structures the factions became the center of political life despite their widespread unpopularity. They were the ones with whom the army wanted to negotiate, they were the ones to whom funding was given, and they were the ones seen to have adequate political knowledge. In other words, the structural effect increased the occurrence of those very practices that caused it in the first place. It was a self-perpetuating mechanism, reproducing itself at each juncture.

This process can be further understood through the example of a popular election in Shatila camp in 2005, which, unlike the 2012 protest movement in Nahr el-Bared, has been examined by scholars. Through it we will see how the way we speak and/or write about factions and popular mobilizations affects the factions’ abilities to morph into structures and gain relevance.

THE 2005 SHATILA ELECTION

In 2004 one of Shatila’s main generators exploded and the camp went without electricity for eight months.⁴ The faction-appointed Popular Committee was unable to remedy the situation. It was criticized as being inefficient and corrupt, and some residents even accused it of sabotage. In May 2005 as the electricity blackout was still ongoing, two Palestinian factions clashed in the alleys of Shatila and a man was killed by a stray bullet. Factions were not only seen as being unable to deal with the electricity crisis but were also seen as being a cause of insecurity in Shatila camp. Following this incident protests erupted that led to a public meeting in the camp’s mosque attended by over two hundred people. The attendees decided to hold an election for a new eleven-member committee that was to be called the *Lajnat ahālī al-mukhayyam*, loosely translated “The Committee of the People of the Camp.” I will refer to it as the *Ahālī*. The Palestinian political factions that were present at that time in Shatila camp were part of what was called the “Alliance”



FIGURE 15. A saved news clipping from al-Safir newspaper, May 23, 2005: “80 percent participated in ‘wedding-like’ elections in Shatila.” Photograph: Perla Issa.

(*Tahāluf*) (Strindberg 2000, 60–76). Those factions were seen as being pro-Syrian. In 2005 the Syrian military left Lebanon following the assassination of then-Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, which triggered massive demonstrations demanding the departure of Syrian troops. It was in that context that the Shatila elections were held. The Syrian military, which was seen as backing the *Tahafuf* factions, had just left, and the PLO factions had not yet had time to establish themselves in the camp.

On May 22, 2005 approximately eight hundred people voted in Shatila’s first election, about 30 percent of eligible voters (Kortam 2011, 202); organizers had hoped for a turnout of three hundred. According to contemporary newspaper articles, the event was joyful. “It’s a wedding!” declared one of the organizers in Shatila camp (Alouwa 2005), emphasizing that the election was a great celebration. An elderly woman was quoted as saying: “I got out of bed in spite of my sickness [to vote], maybe now we will have representatives in the committees and we will have services and the corruption will end.” An eleven-member committee was elected, and within a few months they resolved the electricity crisis in the camp and restored power. However, the committee did not remain active for very long, with several members resigning.

The literature on this election has presented it as an independent and grassroots initiative that was aimed against the factions. Kortam (2011, 202) explained that

“the Palestinian population were fed up with their illegitimate leaders and needed a radical change” and Sayigh (2011, 59) added that the elected committee “would represent the camp’s residents rather than the Resistance groups.” Electoral rules stipulated that eligible candidates needed to be unaffiliated with any Palestinian political factions, a point the literature did not dispute (Abou-Zaki 2016, 65; Kortam 2011, 201; R. Sayigh 2011, 59) with the exception of Allan (2014, 129) who stated that her friends in Shatila observed that “of the thirty-two candidates who did register not one could claim political neutrality.”

Discussing the demise of the elected committee, Kortam (2011, 203) mentioned that “six of the committee members withdrew their membership because they could no longer ignore the threats directed against them.” Similarly, Abou-Zaki (2016, 69), Sayigh (2011, 59), and Allan (2014, 133) also mentioned that “political pressures” and “threats by pro-Syrian factions” forced members to resign. Kortam and Abou-Zaki added that the provision of water and electricity were commercialized in the camp. By repairing these services “the *Ahali* directly threatened an important financial resource of the local power brokers in the camp” (Abou-Zaki 2016, 70). Kortam (2011, 203) explains that the success of the *Ahali* “threatened the legitimacy of the Popular Committee” and that the “dominant political actors and factions wanted to prevent a new popular and dynamic force in the camp from changing the status quo and imposing a new balance of power.”

From the literature it seemed that the story of the election was about a popular and grassroots initiative that was aimed against the corrupt factions who were ultimately able to bring it down as “their political and individual interests were at stake” (Kortam 2011, 203). However, by interviewing former members of the *Ahali* a more complex picture emerged, which put in doubt two claims that were repeated casually by scholars as well as by camp residents: the supposed independence of the elected candidates from factions and the factions’ responsibility for the demise of the elected committee.

During the course of my work I met with seven former members of the elected committee and the vast majority, if not all, seemed to exhibit the type of complex relationships to factions that closely resembled the relationships that we explored in chapters 3 and 4, where people could not be neatly categorized as being “inside” or “outside” the factions. For example, when I first met Um Ali, the wife of Abu Ali, one of the elected members, she told me that eleven “independent candidates” were elected and that Abu Ali had received the most votes. However, as the discussion proceeded, complexities and nuances started to emerge. Um Ali told me that Abu Ali was actually “close to the PFLP.” When I asked Abu Ali about his ties to the PFLP, he explained that really he had been a member of the DFLP but had left them. When I inquired into his reasons, he laughed and said, “It’s a long story, a film.” I then asked him if he was “independent,” as the criteria for candidacy for the election required. Abu Ali answered that he was a “friend of the PFLP” but followed that assertion with a strong criticism of the factions.

Similarly, when Abu Steif, another elected member, saw me looking at the two pictures of Yasir Arafat hanging on the wall of his grocery store, he explained that he was officially a member of Fatah but that unofficially he had left them. His father had been an early member of Fatah before 1969 and as a child Abu Steif participated in the first training of the Fatah scouts (*ashbāl*, “lion cubs”) in the early 1970s. He left Fatah in 2004 “for personal and not political reasons,” but said “no matter where I go or come, for the last twenty years and for the next twenty years, people still tell me that I am Fatah.” This scenario repeated itself with the other elected members who all claimed various types of relationships and histories to different factions including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP and Fatah.

When I started to ask about the reasons for the demise of the *Ahali*, I found a lack of agreement between the former members, with two major points of contention. The first related to the resignation of three members, Abu Ali and Abu Steif as well as a third member who had since passed away. Abu Ali and Abu Steif explained that they had resigned out of personal conviction that work in the committee was no longer possible because of internal disputes. Abu Ali explained that problems started inside the committee. Only three or four people were working, not the eleven elected members; he had worked for a year and two months with no return, they were volunteering with no compensation, and it was starting to weigh on him both financially and physically. He then pointed to one incident in particular which finally led him to resign. He explained that he had heard that another elected member, Hajj Ismael, had gone to meet with Electricité Du Liban (EDL), the public Lebanese electricity company, with his brother, who happened to be the head of the faction-appointed Popular Committee. It seemed that Abu Ali had lost trust in one of his counterparts, who was the brother of the head of the *Tahaluf* Popular Committee that the *Ahali* was struggling against.

Abu Steif echoed Abu Ali by saying that the factions had not exerted pressure on him to quit. According to Abu Steif, the elected committee faced too many internal disputes on how to direct the work, disputes that related to different types of personalities and not to different factional affiliations. However other former members accused Abu Ali and Abu Steif of bowing to pressures from their respective factions, the PFLP and Fatah, who wanted them to quit, as the PLO was getting ready to form a popular committee of its own.⁵ When I inquired into how they knew that the factions had requested that they quit and that they had indeed obeyed their factional leadership, I was told by one former member, Abu Ahmad, that he had himself witnessed a now-deceased PFLP official, who I will call Official Y, asking Abu Ali to quit. When I asked Abu Ali about this incident, he laughed, explaining that Official Y was a close friend of his and it was normal for him to discuss such an important decision with close friends. He proceeded to point out that the person accusing him of following orders, Abu Ahmad, was himself a member of Fatah who was part of the PLO Popular Committee at the time of my research.

Abu Ahmad, Abu Ali said, was used to obeying orders himself and thus might think Abu Ali did as well!

The second point of contention seemed to be related to the relationship of the *Ahali* with a French twinning committee from the municipality of Bagnolet, and in particular to a welcome reception that was being organized to greet a delegation visiting the camp. According to one version of the story told to me by two former members, Hajj Ismael and Abu Mustapha, the *Ahali* committee had made a group decision to hold the welcome reception in a hall in Shatila named *Majd al-Kurūm*, but at the very last minute the same PFLP Official Y convinced the other members to change the location of the reception to the People's Hall—a hall linked to the PFLP. Abu Mustapha even recalled that one day he was coming back from work and found Official Y waiting for him on the street in an attempt to convince him to move the reception. He added that this was being done even as the French delegation had already arrived at the edge of the camp and a small group of people had gone to accompany them to *Majd al-Kurūm*. How could they now change the location of the event? Hajj Ismael and Abu Mustapha refused and held the event in *Majd al-Kurūm*, but after this the rest of the members voted to freeze their memberships.

Abu Mustapha, who had gone to Cuba as a young student on a scholarship from the PFLP, explained that Official Y might have been able to influence him in other circumstances but not in this case, implying that when it came to the work of the *Ahali* committee, he acted as an “independent” who did not bow to pressures from factions. He then added that maybe Official Y had influence on others, implying that these others—but not him—might have caved to factional pressure. When I inquired about this incident with the other members I was told that this was their version of the story, but that what had actually happened was that Hajj Ismael and Abu Mustapha had met on their own with the French delegation and made their own decision to hold a reception for them. According to one member they had even decided to sign a partnership agreement with them without consulting the rest of the *Ahali* committee. This was why their memberships were frozen.

Looking at the demise of the *Ahali* committee, it seems hard to point fingers at the factions. How and even whether they had interfered was disputed. Those who did blame the factions mentioned two ways. One was to pressure “their people” to resign, and two was to cause divisions within the committee once that committee started to act as a representative for the camp. In both cases blame accrued to one person in particular, Official Y, a personal friend of one of the former members. How do we judge whether Abu Ali and Abu Steif quit because of their own personal conviction or under pressure from the factions seen as entities in and of themselves? How do we draw the line between personal opinions and factional political stances? Between a discussion among good friends or between faction members? These are important questions that stress how hard it is to treat factions as entities in their own right. These factions are first and foremost people who were part of the community, and not outside it.

Similarly, when I asked Hajj Ismael about his relationship with his brother who was the head of the *Tahaluf* Popular Committee, he explained that this was a source of constant pressure. He illustrated this point by saying that his brother would say that Shatila's wells were in good condition and did not need any rehabilitation, while Hajj Ismael would contradict him. He added that a lot of people used to criticize his brother in front of him, which was difficult for him. Hajj Ismael's predicament, that his own brother was part of the *Tahaluf* Popular Committee (and therefore part of the "enemy"), underscored how the Popular Committee and factions were comprised of individuals with whom other individuals may have personal and intimate relations.

These may be nuances, but they are important ones which scholars and others need to pay attention to when speaking and writing about such initiatives. In the current context of continued dissatisfaction with factions, Palestinian refugees, as well as scholars, have a strong desire for a change in Palestinian leadership. Therein lies the importance of the 2005 Shatila election, the first time that Diaspora Palestinians participated in an electoral exercise. This created much joy and excitement that I relived again and again as interviewees pulled from their closets and desks old binders and folders filled with newspaper clippings, electoral sheets, and various documents that they had proudly safeguarded for many years. This joy and enthusiasm about changing corrupt officials and again being at the helms of their own futures led many to claim that the election was an independent and grassroots initiative and that the candidates were unaffiliated to factions, as Um Ali told me and as the literature repeats. Yet everyone knows that factions, as people, are part of the initiatives all along, a claim that often arises later in the same conversation, for example, as Um Ali later told me, that Abu Ali is "close to the PFLP" or, as Allan mentions, that none of the candidates could claim political neutrality. Yet we repeat the claim of independence, which only serves to reify factions as distinct entities, creating the impression that they have boundaries and can therefore be removed from among the population, like a cancer that we can cut out.

The same false concept is at work when we blame the factions for the demise of the *Ahali*. Even Allan (2014, 133), who was aware that the elected candidates could not be labelled as "independents," blamed the demise of the *Ahali* on the factions, concluding that "threats by pro-Syrian factions compelled six committee members to withdraw." It is worthwhile to note that while she devoted eight pages to relate the circumstances of the election, she discussed the committee's breakdown in only one paragraph. Returning to the field to speak with participants, however, it seemed that again factions were chameleons; they appeared in people's everyday accusations and in academic writing, but disappeared when I started looking for them on the ground. Searching for how the factions destroyed the *Ahali* it was difficult to locate an answer. Abu Ali and Abu Steif blamed lack of commitment from other elected members; internal disputes; fatigue; and financial pressures. While pointing to "factions" Hajj Ismael, Abu Mustapha, and Abu Ahmad really put

the blame on one specific individual, Official Y, doubting whether specific people acted according to their own will or someone else's, even when this someone else was a close friend or a relative. In this closeup view factions as entities disappear and are replaced by people, people with whom *Ahali* members and camp residents have various relationships. Yet our discourse and the literature gives them agency, blaming them for the complex failure of initiatives. This chameleon nature makes it seem that it is impossible to get rid of them. People might think that they are doing something without them, "independently," or even in opposition to them, only to discover that they had been present all along.

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Palestinians are not unique in trying to change their political leadership while having intricate relations with those same parties they are trying to unsettle. As such the findings of this study about the factions' chameleon nature, as well as its lateral methodological approach, are not confined to it. While contexts change from one setting to another the reality is that what we commonly refer to as "political structures" are made of people, people who enter into different types of relationships with each other. What this study reveals is the importance of looking at these everyday relationships and practices while taking people's experiences with and perception of those "structures" seriously, in order to better understand the overall dynamics that may unintentionally give resilience to those very same "structures" that people are trying to unsettle.

I began this journey with one goal in mind: to find out how unpopular and discredited factions remained in charge. How did "empty buildings," mere shells, maintain their status as the center of political life in the face of widespread condemnation? What was their power? With time I realized that their source of power was my own formulation of that question. It was the "they." By making me believe that "they" were a discrete entity that I needed to struggle against, I was unknowingly strengthening "them." In my way of speaking, thinking, and acting I was reinforcing "their" appearance of structure. In other words, this study taught me that I too am part of the network of factions. This may seem like a depressing conclusion, as the prospect of change seems to be that much more elusive. But this study also points out that the factions' ability to blend into the masses and then appear as actors in their own right was not some intrinsic aspect of their being, but simply due to practices. This means that the appearance of structure was not pre-determined. There was no inherent reason necessitating that factions, for example, distribute aid with little transparency, or that they commemorate annual anniversaries. These practices could always be otherwise, with significant implications for what factions are or could be. Put bluntly, different practices would create different imaginations. Armed with this new understanding a different journey begins. Knowing that we are on the inside rather than the outside, and that practices are at fault and not "factions," the new question becomes: can this novel perspective be used to destabilize the appearance of structure?