

Dr Maria Holt
Memory, identity and change: a case study of palestinian refugee women in Lebanon
End of Year Report for 2007

The project has been dogged by the extremely insecure situation in Lebanon. My second research field trip, in July 2006, was cut short because of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. I returned to Lebanon in January 2007 to continue with my fieldwork. Again my visit coincided with violent political events. The day after my arrival, the Lebanese opposition (led by Hizbullah) held a general strike which closed the city of Beirut completely and led to clashes and several deaths. Later the same week, I was conducting interviews in the Gaza Building (a former hospital located in the Sabra area of Beirut) when we heard gunfire close by. I terminated the interview and left the area. Clashes had erupted on a university campus and these had escalated into an armed battle in which cars were set alight and several people shot dead. The Lebanese government imposed a curfew. In May 2007, fighting broke out between the Lebanese army and Islamic militants inside the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon. The violence, which continued for several months, caused the destruction of most of the houses in the camp and the flight of most of its inhabitants to other camps around the country. In the south of the country, too, particularly in the Ain el-Hilwe refugee camp in Sidon, armed Islamist groups have gained a foothold and the situation in the camp, which I visited in June 2006 and January 2007 to interview women, remains very tense (foreigners are now only allowed to enter the camp with written permission from the Lebanese army).

Following my evacuation from Beirut in July 2006, I focused on the effects of violent events on Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon, specifically on the role of massacres in Palestinian history since 1948. I carried out further background research and, in December 2006, presented a paper on this subject at the annual conference of the British International Studies Association, in Cork. I have since developed this paper into an article which I have submitted for publication. I have made several further field trips to Lebanon in 2007. In July, I had the opportunity to meet and interview some women who had been displaced from the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon.

During six weeks of fieldwork, I interviewed a total of 73 people (including representatives of Palestinian academic and non-governmental organizations and three men), ranging in age from 18 to over 80, in refugee camps in Beirut and southern Lebanon. In November 2006, I gave a paper ("Memory and forgetting: Palestinian women and the struggle for a future in the camps of Lebanon") based on the findings of my research at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, in Boston. I developed the paper into an article which has been submitted for publication. In September 2007, I was invited to attend a workshop in Bergen, Norway (*From exodus to exile: Palestinian lives in the Levant*), where I presented a paper entitled "A world of movement: memory and reality for Palestinian women in the camps of Lebanon".

