



# Episode 38: Plight of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

## Complex Plight of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

### VOICEOVER

Welcome to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities, and cultural offerings of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is available on the web at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au). That's [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au).

### JACKY ANGUS

Hello and welcome to Up Close from the University of Melbourne, Australia. This is Jacky Angus. Today I'm talking to Dr Kylie Baxter about the complex question of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Kylie Baxter's recent doctorate featured 'British Muslims and Global Jihad'. Dr Baxter is also a member of Australia's National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies. Well Kylie, I gather you have just come back from Lebanon, what were you doing there?

### KYLIE BAXTER

Jacky, I spent January and February in Lebanon and the West Bank doing some research on the Palestinian refugees in the camps of Lebanon and also in the broader Palestinian situation in the West Bank.

### JACKY ANGUS

And you actually went into the camps, is that right?

### KYLIE BAXTER

Yes, I was lucky enough to have access to the camps in the north, and also the camps around Beirut, both with the United Nations and with some of the Palestinian and Lebanese NGOs accompanied me.

### JACKY ANGUS

What is it like over there?

### KYLIE BAXTER

It was quite depressing, to be honest. It was very difficult, but from a research

perspective it was an amazing experience, which I was very, very lucky to have.

JACKY ANGUS

And how many refugees are there, there now?

KYLIE BAXTER

In Lebanon, the UN has a formal register of just over 400,000 Palestinian refugees. But most UN and Lebanese sources suggest the actual figure of Palestinians living in Lebanon is between 300,000-350,000.

JACKY ANGUS

Now, they originally came over after the war with Israel in '48, but that is 60 years ago, there must be an awful lot of them being born there, I mean, whole generations.

KYLIE BAXTER

Yes, that is correct. In the late 1940s around 100,000 Palestinians left the area of mandate Palestine because of the conflict that surrounded the establishment of the state of Israel. So that original 100,000 took refuge, shelter inside Lebanon, where they were assisted by the United Nations and also various other humanitarian bodies and that population has obviously grown over the course of 60 years.

JACKY ANGUS

And what is going to happen to them?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, this is one of the big questions if we consider Middle Eastern politics because the issue of the right of return is one of the big sticking points when we look at peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

JACKY ANGUS

The right of return to Israel or Palestine as they see it?

KYLIE BAXTER

This is the debate. Whereabouts will these people go? What is their future? Is one of these huge issues. Historically speaking, the idea of the right of return, which the UN has supported through various resolutions, is that the Palestinian refugees have the right to return to the homes that they lost in the 1948 conflict. Obviously today that land is the state of Israel. So, how the international community and the Palestinian leadership and Israel manages the fate and future of these people is one of the big questions.

JACKY ANGUS

What are the resolutions exactly?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, the UN has passed a series of resolutions, historically speaking, regarding the Palestinian refugee community. UN Resolution 194 of 1948 is probably the major

resolution on Palestinian refugees and that explicitly calls the right of the refugees to return to their homes, if they are willing to live at peace with their neighbours. And that is a resolution that has obviously never been implemented. And that, internationally speaking, is why we have a Palestinian refugee community of around 4.5 million.

JACKY ANGUS

I suppose, one of the problems is that phrase: 'if they are willing to live at peace with their neighbours?'. If a lot of these refugees went back to northern Israel, which I suppose is where they're headed, or the West Bank, would they in fact, live at peace? I mean, is it a practical option?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well again Jacky, this is one of the big questions, if we consider the future of the Palestinian community then we have a range of alternatives. The implementation of 194, the right to return to their homes, is strongly resisted by Israel. Because obviously, the return of the Palestinian refugees is an issue that is just related to Lebanon, it is related to the Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East, and indeed throughout the international community. So, for Israel, the return of 4.5 million people would be a huge threat to the composition of the state of Israel, which as we know is explicitly conceived and established as a Jewish homeland. So, in terms of resolution the idea of a full return is very, very problematic. And the will of the international community led by the United States, appears to be that Israel, is in fact, a Jewish homeland. So, this raises the idea of a partial implementation of UN Resolution 194. The idea being that Palestinians would have the opportunity to return to a Palestinian state. In the current climate, Gaza is not a viable alternative. So, what I guess we are really discussing here is whether or not it is acceptable for Palestinian refugees to have the opportunity to return the West Bank.

JACKY ANGUS

Well, they can't all go. So, if the ones from Lebanon go, isn't that going to create an imbalance and all sorts of anxieties all across the Middle East?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, this from a research perspective, is something I had to come to terms with, why did I pick Lebanon? I think if you consider the situation in Lebanon, it is a very, very volatile state. Currently, Lebanon is in a political deadlock, it has had 15 years of devastating civil war. Very factionalised society. So, the Palestinian refugees inside Lebanon are incredibly vulnerable. If we compare it to a situation like Jordan, for example, which has a high Palestinian community, while there are still political issues, there is a higher level of socio-economic integration. Palestinians have the rights in Jordan to work freely, to own property, and these same rights are not extended in Lebanon.

JACKY ANGUS

In the situation in Lebanon, I guess 350,000 give or take, that is around 10% of the population of Lebanon, they've been absorbed, have they? Assimilated, and yet

they're living in refugee camps? What's the story there? Some of them presumably are not in the refugee camps, they've actually moved into Lebanese society and have become Lebanese.

KYLIE BAXTER

Over the last 60 years, the experience of Palestinians in Lebanon has been varied. We need to keep in mind that we are talking about a state that – as I mentioned before – was in horrific civil war for many, many years. And the Palestinians were quite empowered actors in the early stages of that conflict and quite suppressed as a minority by the end of those years. So, the composition of the Palestinian community in Lebanon today, is, I would say, roughly half have been absorbed, in some levels, into Lebanese society, either through marriage, or moving away from the refugee camps, and living in the surrounding areas, certain access to education and jobs, where there is a core of around a 110,000 to a 150,000 who remain within the series of refugee camps, which were created by the United Nations in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

JACKY ANGUS

You're listening to Up Close at the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jacky Angus and I'm talking to Dr Kylie Baxter about Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Kylie, can you tell me a bit more about Lebanon and its relationship with Syria, and the other players, for example, Hezbollah, Iran – they've all got their fingers in the pie of Lebanon, haven't they? Can you explain that a bit for us?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, the situation in Lebanon has been historically, a very, very volatile one. Lebanon from the 1940s has been based on a situation of confessional politics, whether various sectarian groups are represented, in some could argue, a very problematic way in the system. So, there is an idea of ascribed representation. This is to create some sense of balance, ideally, in Lebanese society because Lebanon was envisaged and created as a state that was to be governed, by, let's say, the Christian community. And over the years, the Christian community, has from a demographic perspective diminished somewhat while the Muslim – both Sunni and Shia Muslim communities have grown. So, the situation in Lebanon today is one of extreme tension and at times, open conflict, because we have a system of governance there that is not representative in a democratic sense of the majority of the community. So in terms of the international players, Syria has been historically very influential.

JACKY ANGUS

And how does that impact on the refugees?

KYLIE BAXTER

I think within any situation, I think it is the most vulnerable sections of society that are really affected and for the Palestinians inside Lebanon this is a disaster because if the Lebanese cannot resolve their own politics from an official level, the willingness to deeply engage and make meaningful steps to alleviate the suffering of

Palestinians within Lebanon is a very difficult ask.

JACKY ANGUS

I understand that the Lebanese army is not keen to protect people in the camps, now, is that a fact and is that the reason why Nahr el-Bared was such a disaster? Can you tell us a bit about that?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, firstly Jacky, the situation in the camps is a very special one, I think, historically speaking. As a result of the Cairo agreement, which was 1969 negotiation between the PLO and the Lebanese authorities, the camps gained absolute autonomy. So, the Palestinians within the camps, in the 1960s gained the right to bear arms, and most importantly for Lebanon, gained the right to continue to take the fight to Israel. So, basically we had a situation which developed in the 60s and early 70s of the idea of a state within a state. So the camps became pockets of literally autonomy, within the broader Lebanese state, where Palestinians had a really unparalleled and unprecedented amount of freedom to run their own affairs and to control their own security issues.

JACKY ANGUS

And presumably, attack Israel too.

KYLIE BAXTER

In the south, that was an issue. The PLO used southern Lebanon as a staging base for militia incursions into northern Israel.

JACKY ANGUS

Well, in 1982 when Lebanon was invaded by Israel, they did claim, the Israelis that they found, virtually, military installations at some of these camps, and they accused the UN of really turning a blind eye.

KYLIE BAXTER

The UN has had a very, very troubled role inside Lebanon. In terms of the Palestinian refugees, in the camps, the UN is only responsible for the integrity of its own facilities, which according to the mandate that the UN operates under in the Palestinian community, is essentially basic humanitarian assistance, schools and hospitals. So, the health care clinics, and the schools are UN installations and the UN is responsible for what happens within those installations. The UN is not formally accountable, in terms of what happens in the broader camps, so there was a lot of conflict historically speaking between Israel and the UN because Israel did feel that these camps were being utilised as hot spots, by militia groups and the UN was very, very clear that it had an apolitical mandate. Its role was to provide basic humanitarian services. But obviously, this was a difficult situation.

JACKY ANGUS

What does one do with a camp when you've got kids of 15 growing up on the idea of going back to Palestine, but in fact, Israel? What do you do with the whole idea of the

mythic nature of the right of return? It doesn't exactly resolve problems, does it?

KYLIE BAXTER

I think the situation in the early 1980s is significantly different to what we have today. In the 1980s, you're looking at the heyday of Palestinian militant resistance. Yasser Arafat's PLO, the Freedom Fighters, a strong degree of European support for quite a militant stance by the PLO in fighting Israel and if we fast forward to 2008, where we've had since Oslo, the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, a Palestinian community that has broadly been party to or one could argue, subjected to, years of unfulfilled peace negotiations. So, in the situation in Lebanon in 2008, you have a state in crisis, you have political deadlock in the broader Lebanese state, you have a Palestinian community that is encouraged constantly into a peace negotiation with Israel, that does not deliver real results. So, this idea of the mythic right of return, I think it is human nature to cling to the basics when you don't have results in the international system.

JACKY ANGUS

Bit hard to have results though, if you declare that the enemy, so-called, Israel, has no right to exist. Very hard to resolve that, isn't it? It cuts two ways, really.

KYLIE BAXTER

And this is one of the most complex areas of Middle East politics for this reason. The Palestinian authority, as a result of the Oslo process, formally acknowledged Israel's right to exist, but as you are pointing out there have been, over the years, different positions taken. But, if we focus on Lebanon, for example, we have 150,000 Palestinians who have lived for now, two, three, sometimes four generations in camps that were created in the 1950s; they are overcrowded, they lack economic opportunity and they are very, very depressed and depressing places. So, these people are sort of stuck in a limbo that they have no direct control over. It is such a complex issue, that it is very tempting, but I think, as an Australian observer, it is very important to try and see both sides here. I think this is a process that has been frustrated by actors on all sides.

JACKY ANGUS

Absolutely. And Abu Mazen, he's actually supporting the right of return isn't he, now?

KYLIE BAXTER

In terms of the Palestinian leadership, the stance on the right of return, is one of increasing compromise as well. In terms of the top-level political negotiations, everything is on the table, in the words of one advisor I spoke to in the West Bank. This is not necessarily reflected on the ground in Lebanon, or in parts of the West Bank as well, because I think this is a strongly held belief, the right of this belief is strongly held issue within Palestinian popular culture. It is a cornerstone of the Palestinian identity. But in terms of the leadership stance, there are negotiations on this point. About how and when and how many?

JACKY ANGUS

But pretty difficult to actually implement isn't it?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, since 2004 the US has made it clear that it supports the right of return with limitations. So it supports the idea of Palestinians having the right to move back to a future Palestinian state, essentially the West Bank. Historically speaking everyone has turned to the US to take a leading role in resolving the situation between Israel and the Palestinians. The idea of the US as the self-appointed honest broker has been a feature of the last two decades. Whether or not it is possible to act as an honest broker when you are so closely aligned to one side in the equation is an open question that I don't think any administration in the US government has dealt with particularly successfully.

JACKY ANGUS

And also I suppose when you are opposed by the other side, when you have got players in the proxy war like Syria and Iran. It is not looking too hopeful is it?

KYLIE BAXTER

No, I think that the broader situation in the Middle East, which has been profoundly destabilised by the war with Iraq, is a pretty bleak one. You have a mixture of powerful players that are looking to use Lebanon in particular, but also the broader Palestinian-Israeli issue to further their own agendas, so that is not a positive situation for Palestinian refugees, who are disempowered within the context of peace negotiations generally between Israel and the Palestinians, and are even further disempowered in an international arena where there are so many powerful players.

JACKY ANGUS

Because it seems to me, if you are really going to get some sort of resolution, certainly you can blame Israel and the US for certain objectives and lack of clarity, and as you say, a certain capriciousness, but you've really got to look to the other side, if it is a proxy war, which it almost is, it seems to me it would be interesting to know, what do you think the Arabs are likely to do? are they able to unite, and have some sort of real strategic options on the table?

KYLIE BAXTER

Well, if we look at the history of the twentieth century, the idea of the Arab states uniting has never been a particularly successful one. There's a lot of rhetoric of pan-Arab solidarity, but in reality we are talking about a sovereign state system. And states act on self-interest.

JACKY ANGUS

You're not sounding all that optimistic.

KYLIE BAXTER

No, I think the current situation for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in particular, but in terms of the broader region is quite bleak.

JACKY ANGUS

You're listening to Up Close at the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jacky Angus and I'm talking to Dr Kylie Baxter. Kylie, the thing about the right of return, of course, is that you've got a couple of generations having grown up with this almost mythic reality. How does that operate actually in one of the camps in Lebanon, which I know you visited?

KYLIE BAXTER

The situation in the camps, I think ? that was the core of my research in Lebanon ? and it was a truly incredible experience because in terms of the territory of the camps, they haven't changed since the 1950s, but obviously the population has increased dramatically. So, today, a lot of the camps, most UN officials and Lebanese sources would say up to 50% of the people in the camps are children.

JACKY ANGUS

Under 15, that is?

KYLIE BAXTER

Very, very young kids. Huge families and the UN operates schools and health care clinics, but it is a pretty depressing existence. So, it is a very factionalised political scene and politics is the life-blood of this part of the world. It is discussed on every street corner, in every coffee shop. It is constantly the focal point of human existence in a way that is very, very different to an Australian context.

JACKY ANGUS

So, it is really part of the school curriculum?

KYLIE BAXTER

Not necessarily part of the school curriculum, but it is absorbed along with the air of what happens now, where do we go, what's the next step? And what I found fascinating is, from an outsider's perspective, to be speaking to young children in these camps who could eloquently describe the olive grove near Haifa that their family came from in the 1940s when they were born in 1996 and have never left Lebanon, is quite fascinating. So, in terms of political strategy, this is how you inspire a population, how you give them hope, but you need to ask the question, is this a realistic way forward? Because the will of the international community, the will of Israel, indeed the will of the Palestinian authority, is not to return these people to Haifa. So, for me, one of the most fascinating parts of this is, how the Palestinians themselves are going to manage a situation where the right of return ? this cornerstone element of Palestinian identity ? in the way in which it is taught and believed in the camps, is not going to be fulfilled.

JACKY ANGUS

It is a fantasy and it seems to be not a very helpful one to their own process of growing up and understanding the world.

KYLIE BAXTER

But, I guess, if you don't have a stake in any system, which the Palestinians in Lebanon don't, then it is these kinds of mindsets that you fall back on.

JACKY ANGUS

You have a stake in the fantasy.

KYLIE BAXTER

You have a stake in a dream.

JACKY ANGUS

Thank you very much, Kylie Baxter.

KYLIE BAXTER

It's a pleasure. Thank you.

JACKY ANGUS

Relevant links, a full transcript and more information on this episode can be found on our website at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au). We also invite you to leave your comments or feedback on this or any other episode of Up Close. Simply click on the 'add comment' link at the bottom of the episode page. Melbourne University Up Close is brought to you by the Marketing and Communications Division in association with Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Our producers for this episode were Kelvin Param, Eric van Bommel and myself, Jacky Angus. Audio recording by Craig McArthur. Theme music performed by Sergio Ercole. Melbourne University Up Close is created by Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jacky Angus, until next time, thank you for joining us. Goodbye.

VOICEOVER

You've been listening to Melbourne University Up Close, a fortnightly podcast of research, personalities and cultural offerings of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is available on the web at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au), that's [upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au](http://upclose.u-n-i-m-e-l-b.edu.au). Copyright 2008 University of Melbourne.

© The University of Melbourne, 2008. All Rights Reserved.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.upclose.unimelb.edu.au/episode/38-plight-palestinian-refugees-lebanon>