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Jordan
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Transformation of Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp

Al-Wihdat is a legendary camp in the history of the Palestinian struggle for liberation, self-determination and national identity. It was established in 1955 for 5,000 refugees, three kilometres to the south of Amman's city centre and inhabited by refugees from the villages between Jaffa and Jerusalem. Shelters and tents dominated the camp scene until the early 1970s. Al-Wihdat was a main centre of activity of Palestinian nationalists in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

After 'Black September' the Jordanian government and the UNRWA initiated numerous projects to improve living conditions. With the conclusion of the agreements of Oslo and Wadi ʿAraba, the Palestinians of Jordan, now excluded from the so-called peace process, have opted increasingly for Jordanian strategies.

Today Al-Wihdat constitutes an important urban area, with more than 2,000 officially registered shops and enterprises that offer an impressive variety of goods and services. Administratively, Al-Wihdat is a part of Al-ʿAwda quarter of Al-Yarmouk district. The current estimate of 48,000 inhabitants includes about 8,000 local gypsies, Egyptian labour migrants, Iraqi refugees and other low-income non-Jordanian groups. In Arabic Al-ʿAwda means 'The Return'. It seems ironic that the most integrated refugee camp in Jordan carries this name. Nevertheless, it is a way to keep the hope of return and a separate identity alive. The paradigms of refugee versus citizen and Palestinian identity versus integration have dominated the socio-political discourse of Jordan in the last 30 years. Although the absolute majority of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan have Jordanian citizenship, they accepted and understood it, until the late 1980s, to be a 'transit' solution on the way back to Palestine. The Oslo and Wadi ʿAraba treaties caused a change in public opinion, and at present a large majority in the refugee communities has come to terms with the fact that Jordan is their permanent place of residence. But it was not without disappointment and scepticism that they recognized that the question of the refugees was excluded from the Oslo and Wadi ʿAraba agreements.

Al-Wihdat was one of the main centres of the formation of the Palestinian liberation movement in Jordan. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s Al-Wihdat was synonymous with 'Palestinian' in public life; protest actions, demonstrations, petitions and even Al-Wihdat soccer club's matches were all indicators of an all-Palestinian public stance and national self-identification. The takeover of Al-Wihdat in 1970 by the Jordanian armed forces marked the conclusion of the September clashes in the country. The crackdown on the in-camp demonstrations in the 1970s put a further restraint on Palestinian political activities. The later elections for the executive committees in the camp's NGOs reflected the passive political mood inside the Palestinian community after the repression. In the first democratic elections in Jordan in 1989, the inhabitants of Al-Wihdat were reluctant to participate, demonstrating the degree of political self-identification of the refugees. However, in the 1990s, assimilation strategies became the dominant trend among the Palestinian refugees.

Political 'Jordanization'

In the wake of Arab-Israeli peace talks and treaties, Islamic movements gained a huge popularity with their fierce criticism, in particular concerning the negotiation tactics of Arafat and the Jordan-Israeli peace treaty. The Islamic Action Front – the political branch of the Muslim Brothers in Jordan – and numerous welfare organizations filled the political and social gaps that existed in the camp in the early 1990s following Arafat's failure to continue financing his local allies and the social networks in the camp. The PLO now focused on the foundation of the Autonomy Authority in the West Bank and Gaza. Moreover, the PLO lost many of its former sponsors due to Arafat's stance during the Second Gulf War. In contrast, the Islamists gained a lot from their legal status and their strong welfare network. In short, an officially registered Jordanian political party became the representative body for Al-Wihdat. The fact that it concerns an oppositional party with a clearly Palestinian agenda does not alter its national character, orientation and loyalty. Each Jordanian political organization puts the Palestine issue high on its agenda, because it is the practical way to address the 'patriotic emotions' of the Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who make up at least 50% of the potential voters.

The HAMAS crises in 1999 and the local actions of solidarity with the Intifada al-Aqsa in 2000–2001 show the efficacy of this 'Jordanian' domination of political life in Al-Wihdat. While in winter 2000 a few hundred extreme radical leftists and Islamists were involved in street fights with the police in the streets of Al-Wihdat, the authorized Islamic actions and events were peaceful and indeed very moderate in their expressions. The meetings and demonstrations organized by the Islamic Movement followed the official regulations. Even the protests against the last Israeli military aggressions in March–April 2002 were most disciplined; the populous protests took place outside of Al-Wihdat and were mainly under an effective command of the Islamic Action Front. In contrast, in Al-Baqʿa, the largest refugee camp in Jordan, various protest manifestations occurred beyond the control of the Front.

Another aspect of notice is the participation of Al-Wihdat refugees in the various national and local elections. In 1989 about 40% of the potential voters went to the polls. In 1993 the number of voters increased to 61%, but in 1997, following a call by the Islamists to boycott the elections, only 22% cast their votes. The votes drifted from pro-Arafat traditional personalities, who had good connections with the Jordanian establishment (in 1989) to contra-Arafat radical candidates with critical attitudes towards the Jordanian national establishment (in 1993) and new agitated rhetoric (in 1997) about 'the candidate of the Jordanians of Palestinian origin'. The integration of the camp in Jordanian politics put an end to its role as a 'factory of return illusions', as it was sometimes called, and strengthened the influence of the refugee-citizens in the domestic political life. The forthcoming national elections may demonstrate whether this political integration is stable and functional, especially in the context of the last Israeli invasion in the Palestinian Authority areas.

Urban integration

Compared to other former refugee camps, the changes in Al-Wihdat following the liberalization of the political life in Jordan since 1989 are impressive. The boom in the construction and commerce sectors following the arrival of Palestinian-Jordanian returnees from the Gulf States after the Second Gulf War has accelerated the transformation. Today Al-Wihdat is the commercial and service centre south of Amman. More than 2,000 enterprises are located in the camp. While the eastern quarters of Al-Wihdat have been developing as low-middle class housing areas with three- and four-storied buildings, the southern quarters have degraded to slum-like areas.

The practical inclusion of Al-Wihdat in the spatial planning of the metropolis of Amman started in 1970, with the crushing of the Palestinian national movement there. The first streets were built across the camp's territory mainly for security purposes. Later, electricity, telephone and – in the 1980s – waste-water lines were installed. The housing reconstruction boom began in the early 1980s with the new regulations for permanent-cement roofs (until that time the housing units could only have tin-plate or zinc-plate roofs) and limited second floor permissions.

The situation changed radically after the Second Gulf War. About 300,000–350,000 Jordanians of Palestinian origin were forced to leave the Gulf region, mainly Kuwait. The returnees caused a boom in the commerce and construction sectors. The geographic location and cheap real estate prices in and around Al-Wihdat as well as the intensive urbanization to the south of Amman attracted numerous small businesses. Between 1990 and 1993 the number of shops and enterprises in the camp more than doubled: from 450 to 980, and by 1997 they numbered 1,700. However, it is not only the number of enterprises that is impressive but the type and variety as well. At the beginning of the 1990s, these enterprises were mainly small, simple, family-owned businesses with a low level of technical expertise. Today they include banks, jewellers, pharmacies, travel agencies, appliance and electronic shops, and a huge number of grocers, clothing stores, vegetable shops and fast food outlets.

The development of commerce and services fuelled the construction boom and the real estate market in the camp. Despite the fact that the selling, buying and renting of units in the camp is officially prohibited by the UNRWA, it has become a common phenomenon, which is indirectly supported by the Jordanian authorities. Returnees and ex-camp inhabitants are the main residents in the extensions to the south and east. However, unlike the camp itself, these expansions are formal areas, outside of UNWRA jurisdiction. Al-Wihdat continues to be the centre of social, commercial and political life for these new quarters as well. The UNRWA schools, clinics and social networks strengthen its dominant local position.

Palestinians have been citizens of Jordan since 1951. Their economic and demographic weight in the country, as well as the increased state of integration, is only partly reflected in the Jordanian political fabric. The majority of the refugees distinguish between the right to return and the prospect of return. The dilemma of integration versus assimilation will remain on their agenda for the years to come. Essential for further modernization and democratization of Jordanian society – and for that matter for a more stable and peaceful situation in the region – is the formulation of a new (Jordanian) national identity, that accommodates the needs and aspirations of the Palestinians in Jordan. A more balanced representation of the urban areas, where the refugees live, in the electoral laws would be a first requirement.

PHOTO: ALA HAMARNEH, 2001

A commercial street in Al-Wihdat.

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