

# When wounds travel

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## Abstract

This article explores trauma as a form of ‘social wound’, entrenched in the intersections of local histories and social experiences of violence and displacement. Building on ethnographic accounts of displacement of Iraqis in Lebanon in the wake of the US occupation of Iraq (2003–2011), I ask: what happens when wounds travel across different social worlds and local histories of violence? The account presented tells the story of Hussein, an Iraqi refugee who escaped Iraq during the height of sectarian violence (2006–2007) and claimed asylum status as a torture victim in Lebanon. For displaced people like Hussein, the experiences of violence and uprooting were amplified by the uncertainties of everyday life in Beirut. His case shows that the selective sorting of refugees around questions of vulnerability and victimhood weaves further tensions into the social fabric of displaced peoples and their host communities. In contexts of layered histories of war, violence, displacement, and humanitarian interventions, which characterize much of the Middle East, wounds constitute the interstitial tissue of the social; they are what brings people together and what sets them apart. An ethnography of such ‘travelling wounds’ might account for the complex ways that discourses of trauma and histories of violence unravel in everyday encounters.

## Keywords

social wound, trauma, displacement, medical anthropology, Middle East

Before he can act as a physician he first has to wound; when he then stills the pain of the wound, he then at the same time reinfects the wound.

– Frederick Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* ([1887] 1989, 126)

## Introduction

I first met Hussein when he waited on my table at Abou Elie, the legendary ‘communist’ tavern in Beirut and one of the last remaining alleged ‘leftist bars’ from the Lebanese civil war period (1975–1990). It was somehow unusual to find a fellow Iraqi working in such a place, as it is a family-run bar and most employees are usually locals. At the time of that meeting, in 2008, the bar was too loud and busy, and my new friend was preoccupied with serving drinks and mezza plates of sliced apples and *thurmons*.<sup>1</sup> We exchanged numbers and decided to meet again when the bar was less crowded. I visited early in the evening a week later. Abou Elie was empty except for two regulars sitting at the bar. I sat at a table and waited for him to acknowledge my presence. He came by and greeted me, switching from a Lebanese-ish accent to his Iraqi dialect. I ordered a drink and invited him to join me. He politely refused. ‘I do not drink’ he explained. ‘For religious reasons?’ I asked. ‘Kind of’, he replied with a smile. I teased him, ‘This is a communist bar and you have to drink to work here’. He smiled and said, ‘One does not need to be a communist to work here. People in the bar are generous and kind to me. They are sympathetic to my situation. Customers come back to ask about me and leave me good tips’. Pulling his shirt up to show me the scars on his body, Hussein recounted how his whole family was killed in front of his eyes by militia thugs in Baghdad; Hussein was taken hostage, tortured, and then released after his relatives paid the ransom. Escaping further threats by the militia, Hussein left Iraq in 2007 for Syria and then in 2008 illegally entered Lebanon, where he claimed asylum.

Hussein’s torture wounds and fate of his family spoke to the scale of violence, loss, and terror that has created everyday uncertainties for millions inside Iraq, as well as for those who escaped the country in search of security elsewhere in the wake of the 2003 US occupation of Iraq. When we met, Hussein was in his late thirties, although he looked years younger. He was a petite man, soft-spoken but very talkative. I spent close to a month hanging out with him, sometimes during the day when he introduced me to other Iraqi refugees in Beirut and in the evenings during my frequent visits to the bar. Hussein was

1 A type of flowering legume.

registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a victim of torture and was in the process of being resettled in the United States. He was diagnosed by medical doctors working with one of the humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and was receiving medications to treat it. When I met Hussein in 2008, local and international humanitarian agencies were mobilized across Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon to respond to Iraq's refugee crisis, as close to two million people had become displaced. Given the scale of asylum cases, Hussein was one of the 'lucky' few selected for resettlement – a 'privilege' that was bestowed on those who were deemed most vulnerable. Like many asylum seekers, Hussein had to present a convincing case to the humanitarian officials, making visible the wounding effects of torture on his body. While the recognition of his wounds and victim status were critical in the processing of his asylum claim, his wounds would acquire a different social life – one of betrayal and suspicion – in his daily exchanges in Beirut, where other 'open wounds' shape alternate histories of violence and place across the region and in Lebanon in particular.

Recent work in anthropology has drawn attention to the critical role of transnational humanitarian institutions in the mediation of political conflicts and shaping the livelihood of societies under crisis (Ticktin 2014). Such work has further demonstrated how medical and legal discourses about physical and psychological trauma have become central to the development of humanitarian logics and practices – especially in their recognition of victimhood and suffering in war-ridden societies and other situations of emergency (Allen 2009; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; James 2010; Feldman 2004; Kelly 2011; Ticktin 2006). In the humanitarian setting, the 'suffering body' has become the main legitimate source of such claim making, as a constellation of diagnostic tools, medical certificates, and therapeutics are often operationalized to identify the 'scarring' of war on individuals and communities (Fassin and D'halluin 2005), and mitigate their effects through a range of medical, legal, and/or psychosocial interventions. More specifically, in the context of displacement and asylum claims, the recognition of trauma and victim status are further instrumentalized to produce hierarchies of vulnerability within political and bureaucratic processes of resettlement for refugees and immigrants (Ticktin 2011).

Through their ethnographic focus on humanitarian institutions, anthropologists have contested these universalizing and bureaucratic tendencies, showing how such processes are often fraught with effects that deepen social inequalities and obscure historical and cultural processes of collective experiences of suffering (Harrell-Bond 1986; De Waal 1997; Fassin 2011; Terry 2002; Weissman 2004). Some have even argued that humanitarian institutions are part of a transnational apparatus of governance aimed at the bureaucratic management of populations and bodies in the context of crisis, state 'failure', and insecurities (Pupavac 2001; Pandolfi 2008; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). It has been further suggested that, through

encounters with humanitarian institutions, the production, circulation, and performance of trauma discourses and suffering are often entangled in moral and political economies through which victims themselves seek recognition, claiming political and therapeutic rights as they attempt to mend their individual and collective losses and injuries (James 2004; Fassin 2011).

To build on this line of inquiry I explore how discourses of victimhood and vulnerability are refracted through the layered social worlds and histories of conflict and displacement in the Middle East. I take my cue from recent work in anthropology that calls scholars to examine the inherent tensions and transactions between the production of victimhood as a political and institutional construction, and the histories and lived experiences of the suffering of the victims (Jensen and Ronsbo 2014). Rather than highlighting the universal experiences and structures of suffering, I aim to show how institutional recognition – which is often taken up, strategized, and performed by victims themselves (James 2010; Slyomovics 2005) – is held up and/or contested as it refracts in, and through, everyday social intercourses between refugees and their host communities. In doing so, I shift the analytical gaze from institutional settings – such as clinics or humanitarian agencies, where the production of trauma discourses usually takes place – to explore how the recognition of ‘victim’ status undergoes transformation in the everyday life of the displaced person. Through focusing on the recognition, and later disavowal, of Hussein’s wounds at his work place and among his peers, I trace the different ways violence and wounds ‘descend into the ordinary’, structuring ambivalences of everyday social relations (Das 2006).

I use the ‘wound’ as an analytical framework to understand the multifaceted consequences of war as a process of physical and social injury (Scarry 1985). In the Arabic language, ‘wound’ (*Jurbh*) is a loaded term. In addition to its literal use in naming a physical injury, it is often used as a metaphor to highlight constellations of personal and social injuries, losses, and grievances.<sup>2</sup> To ‘be wounded’ (*majrouh*) is to carry on lingering memories, pain, or histories of wounding processes, that might range from a personal insult to the loss of one’s land or beloved ones. While referring to actual and literal wounds – such as Hussein’s torture scars – the notion of the ‘social wound’ also traces histories and geographies of violence that are

2 See the Al-Mawrid Al-Hadeeth dictionary (Baalbaki and Baalbaki 2013) for the multiple meanings of the root *J r B*.

entrenched in the ambivalences of everyday social experiences of war and displacement.<sup>3</sup> My framing of ‘social wound’ follows the insight of anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (2011), who has operationalized the notion of the wound to capture the social tensions and dissonances among the Harkis, a group of Algerians who fought with the French colonizers against their own people during the Algerian War of Independence. Crapanzano demonstrates how the pain and shame of such a history of betrayal and violence haunt the present in the social tensions across generations and families. This ‘double wound’ of the past and the present continues to shape the unraveling of the everyday socialites of the group through possession, anger, and disruptive behavior.

Wounds are embedded in everyday social relations, in the multilayered histories of violence that are interwoven and overlapping in the context of war and displacement. This is the case especially in Lebanon, a country that has had to absorb the effects of civil wars, foreign military interventions, and waves of regional refugee crises over the last fifty years. Following Julie Livingston’s (2013) insights into the social nature of bodily affliction, I ask: what is revealed in these wounds that travel, these wounds that enter new social worlds and multiple histories of violence? Unraveling the articulations of wounds and their histories may help us better understand the material and social vulnerabilities of afflicted lives and bodies under war, and their entanglement in the ongoing reconfigurations of borders across states and communities in the Middle East. In social settings where displacements is pervasive, such as Lebanon, where past and present violence continue to shape the histories and ambiguities of trauma discourses (Moghnieh 2015), notions of the victim, the vulnerable, and the innocent become blurred and subsumed by the wounds of others.

## Wounded displacements

This examination of the social life of wounds is part of a multisited ethnography tracing the social and medical fallouts of decades of war, international interventions, and displacement in Iraq and the broader Middle East. Over the past thirty years, Iraq has endured a bloody war with Iran (1980–1988), the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Second Gulf War of 1991,

3 This framing of the social wound echoes Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of the ‘historical wound’, which extends Charles Taylor’s discussion of the politics of recognition to ‘the sphere of public representation and debate by reflecting on the fact that the ‘wounds of misrecognition’ invoke the past as the site of the original slight and as the site that calls for redress in the present’ (Attwood, Chakrabarty, and Lomnitz 2008, 1). That said, my framing of the social wound is concerned less with the narratives and representations of such contested histories and claims for recognition. Rather, my analysis aims to elaborate on how the materiality of wounds are enacted in the everyday and contested in social intercourse.

UN sanctions (1990–2013), a US-led military invasion and occupation in (2003–2011), and political, sectarian, and militia armed conflicts of different intensities (2003–present). During the occupation and after the official withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011, there has been a continuation of suicide bombings targeting civilians, political assassinations in broad daylight of individuals based on their political and confessional backgrounds, kidnappings for ransom, killings and body mutilation by organized crime and militia members, and unlawful imprisonment of tens of thousands of Iraqis in detention camps and secret prisons (Amnesty International 2010).

Understanding the effects of the decades of war and violence in Iraq, a country that has been closed off to and marginalized by Western social science research (Ahram 2013), is a complex undertaking. Both the direct and indirect costs of these wars on the Iraqi social body have been unimaginable, as the scarring effects of violence extend beyond the counting of death tolls, injuries, and damage to state infrastructures and the physical environment. Under the US occupation, Iraq witnessed one of the largest population displacements in its modern history. According to UN statistics, there are close to four million people who have been internally or externally displaced (UNHCR 2015a). This represents close to one-sixth of Iraq's population. As a medical anthropologist/physician living and working in Lebanon, I have been part of ongoing global and public health efforts to respond to the fallouts of the different conflicts – in particular in Iraq and Syria. Since 2008, I have done extensive fieldwork following and interviewing victims of war injury and their entanglements in transnational and local institutional responses. I have also been working closely with humanitarian and international organizations and private and public hospitals, mapping the experiences and articulations of wounds and wounding across the region. My ethnographic work and the fact of living in a place that is at the heart of these ongoing conflicts have grounded my research in the realities of local issues and debates and have given me insights into the complexities of everyday experiences of war and displacement. These everyday experiences extend beyond the confines of institutional encounters and humanitarian interventions, and are further complicated by the layered incarnations of wounds from intersecting histories of violence.

Between 2006 and 2007, close to two million Iraqis were displaced as a result of the sectarian violence that plagued US-occupied Iraq (IDMC 2007). Most of the displaced fled to Iraq's neighboring countries of Syria, Jordan, Iran, and Lebanon, escaping the escalating violence, the deterioration of everyday security, and the country's collapsing infrastructures. The displaced – who mostly hailed from urban middle-class and professional backgrounds – settled in urban areas of regional states. Avoiding humanitarian camps, the displaced sought economic opportunities and lined up for resettlement in the West through the UNHCR. Confronted with such numbers, the United Nations declared the displacement of Iraqis a humanitarian crisis, and international and local organizations mobilized to provide

humanitarian assistance to the displaced.<sup>4</sup> Responding to this displacement presented many challenges, including its urban nature, under-registration with the UNHCR, and the lack of uniformity in the refugee laws of regional countries (Chatelard 2010; Chatelard and Morris 2011; Peteet 2007; Mowafi and Spiegel 2008). As the displaced had no intention to return to Iraq, one of the main problems pivoted around identifying the most vulnerable and prioritizing them for resettlement in the West (Leenders 2009). Out of an estimated two million Iraqis living in neighboring countries, only around 175,000 refugees have been identified for resettlement by the UNHCR since 2005 (UNHCR 2015b).

The movement of Iraqis into other states in the region due to the fallout of war has also given rise to other forms of ‘wounded’ displacement and mobility. Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have become accustomed to seeking critical medical and surgical care in regional states. While once a leading Middle Eastern country in the provision of healthcare, Iraqi patients have increasingly lost trust in their broken medical system after decades of war and the exodus of almost half of the country’s physicians (Dewachi 2015). Unable to provide healthcare to its national populations, the Iraqi government has begun a systematic program of outsourcing treatment of its afflicted citizens and military and security personnel to regional public and private hospitals in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, India, Iran, and Turkey. This has been especially the case for those physically afflicted by the military operations and the frequent suicide bombings that have plagued Iraqi cities after 2003. In Beirut, the Iraqi government has contracted with one of Lebanon’s largest private hospitals to provide reconstructive surgeries to such patients.

For many Iraqis, different wounds of war have become mapped over dynamic ‘therapeutic geographies’ that trace the ever-shifting trajectories of violence and survival across militarized state borders (Dewachi et al. 2014). The absorption of Iraqis into regional states – and the concomitant mobility of their war wounds – has been shaped by complex histories of violence and socioeconomic processes that cross over the boundaries of nation states, national and international institutions, and host communities. Experiences of displacement have entailed the negotiation of different spaces and modes of sociality that define processes of everyday survival. In what follows, I illustrate how displaced Iraqis in Lebanon were caught up in the limits of humanitarian logics and interventions attempting to mitigate the refugee crisis and to resettle those who had been displaced. I show how such interventions further produced tensions among the displaced through the cultivation of a wound economy

4 According to the UNHCR, most displaced Iraqis were identified as *prima facie* refugees – that is to say, they were given the status of refugees when they presented themselves to the UNHCR. Prior to the breakout of conflict in neighboring Syria in 2011, the Iraqi refugee crisis was deemed one of the largest global refugee crises at the time.

in which victims were required to foreground their scars in order to be granted resettlement rights.<sup>5</sup>

## Resettlement and its discontents

Hussein was one of almost fifty thousand displaced Iraqis who entered Lebanon by land from Syria, both legally and illegally, following the downward spiral of political violence in Iraq in 2006 (Harper 2008). In 2007, the UNHCR defined displaced Iraqis in the region as *prima facie* refugees, but fewer than 10 percent of Iraqis arriving in Lebanon registered with the UNHCR (Murphy 2007). For many of the displaced, their experiences of violence and uprooting from Iraq were further complicated by the uncertainties of everyday life in the Lebanese capital, Beirut. Daily struggles included searching for a place to live and work in the capital's informal labor sector, navigating the bureaucracy of humanitarian organizations, and escaping encounters with the Lebanese authorities who systematically cracked down on what they classified as 'illegal migrants'. Such social, political, and economic tensions further complicated the work of the humanitarian enterprise and set many limits for its outreach to document and provide aid for the displaced. It further contributed to the widespread frustration and social frictions that shaped the increasing visibility of the displaced in the capital.

The role of the Lebanese state in managing the displaced was fraught by legal ambiguities and political limits. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR 2013), and there is no other legal protection for refugees in the country. Having said that, the Lebanese government at the time recognized the crisis, but not the refugees. It used the presence of the refugee population to negotiate with the international community and receive more funding towards the management of the crisis. To this effect, the Lebanese government often inflated the numbers of refugees, and demanded support from the international community in the form of humanitarian aid to address the government's shortcomings in providing care. At the same time, the Lebanese Security Forces (ISF) arrested refugees daily and scores were deported back to Iraq (Global Detention Project 2014). The ISF stopped men at numerous checkpoints spread across the city, though women were mostly spared from this kind of harassment. Many Iraqi men tried to stay underground, figuring out clandestine routes to avoid any confrontation with the authorities (Dewachi et al. 2012). Others opted to stay within the vicinity of their neighborhoods, avoiding work in and excursions to other parts of the city. Confusion in recognizing refugees prompted back

5 There has been a wide range of work in anthropology commenting on the negotiation of biological and social afflictions as a way to claim political, legal, and therapeutic rights (see James 2004; Nguyen 2005; Petryna 2002).

and forth negotiations between UN agencies and the Ministry of the Interior to halt arbitrary arrests and deportations, and spurred attempts to develop legal processes for regularizing their status in the country (Murphy 2008).

While all displaced Iraqis were eligible for humanitarian aid from the proliferating local and international organizations working on refugee matters, such aid barely covered the cost of living – especially in Beirut, one of the most expensive cities in the region. Like other populations of undocumented migrant workers in Lebanon, Iraqis struggled to find work.<sup>6</sup> Many Iraqi men worked in construction and other menial jobs for very low wages, where Lebanese employers have long benefited from the country's widespread informal sector. With few humanitarian programs geared towards training men for work in Lebanon, women were more likely to be recruited by international and local NGOs engaged with providing social services to Iraqi families. This contributed to a growing number of women who opted to work to support the family, especially in cases where their male spouses were not able to find work in the informal sector.

For men, finding work depended predominantly on connections made through the local communities. Before Hussein started work at Abou Elie, he had worked illegally making deliveries for a local pharmacy on the same block as the bar. When offered work by the bar's owners, he was told that between a basic salary and customer tips, his daily income would improve substantially. The owners allowed him to work despite not having a permit. This was not unique. Other Lebanese business owners were doing the same, some out of sympathy, others out of the desire to exploit cheap unregulated labor. Most of the owners I met were doing both. In addition to his income from the bar, Hussein also received monthly aid from humanitarian organizations: pocket money, food coupons, and free psychiatric counseling. His PTSD medication – one of the few services available for displaced men – was provided by a local Lebanese NGO.

Hussein spent most of his mornings following up on his paperwork with the UN and the US embassy – the latter located outside Beirut. In the afternoons he visited with other Iraqi friends who he had come to know in the city. One day, I met with Hussein just before noon in front of Abou Elie. We took a cab together and headed for Shatila – the urban neighborhood of one of Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camps, located in a southern suburb of Beirut. Hussein had offered to introduce me to other Iraqi refugees who lived and worked there. The camp was originally established in 1949 to house displaced Palestinians

6 Generations of Palestinians since 1948, and more recently Syrian refugees, have also experienced this tension around work permits in Lebanon (ILO 2012; Reliefweb 2013).

who had been expelled from their lands in the 1948 founding of the state of Israel. More than fifty years later, the camp had evolved into an urban ghetto with unregulated property development and lively markets, and was populated by people of many nationalities including Iraqis, Syrians, Somalis, and Sudanese. Rent in the camp is cheap, and thus attracts those who cannot afford to live in other parts of the city. Given the limited reach of the Lebanese authorities inside the camps, it has become an ideal place for many undocumented migrants to live and work. Still, many displaced Iraqis in Lebanon prefer to live in other urban settings, renting and sharing cheap apartments in Beirut's poor neighborhoods and ghettos.<sup>7</sup>

The main street of the camp buzzes with small businesses, street vendors, and markets selling all kinds of cheaply priced goods. Most shops are either open air or housed in run-down and makeshift structures. We walked along the unpaved main road until we arrived at a small shoe shop where Abu Mukhtar, one of Hussein's friends, worked. After introducing us, Hussein excused himself to drop some paperwork off at the nearby UN offices. While Abu Mukhtar and I sat together sipping tea, he shared that he had been living in Lebanon since the early 1990s. He left Iraq after the failed popular uprising of 1991 in the south, escaping the brutal military backlash of the Saddam regime. Abu Mukhtar entered Lebanon through Syria and had held various jobs, as a manual laborer and later doing deliveries for a local restaurant. In the late 1990s, he married a Palestinian woman and they began living together in Shatila. Through his father-in-law's connections in the camp, he found a job in a shoe shop and had now been working there for about five years. When I asked him about the increasing number of Iraqis in the camp, he intimated that there had been sporadic clashes between Iraqis and Palestinians, as well as with Lebanese. Abu Mukhtar jokingly told me that in one instance, a small crowd of Palestinian teenage boys from the camp fought with their Iraqi peers and demanded that they 'go back home to where they came from', ironically echoing the strong sentiment among the Lebanese right against the long-term presence of Palestinians in the country.<sup>8</sup> Such events were not widespread, however, and Shatila seems to be able to absorb the diversity of the poor and the displaced who continue to find refuge there.

Speaking about his own story of asylum, Abu Mukhtar explained that when large numbers of Iraqis began fleeing the surge in violence in 2006, he saw an opportunity to apply for asylum

7 This includes the southern suburbs of Beirut that is under the control of Hezbollah, one the armed Lebanese political and religious parties.

8 There has been ample work on the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and their experiences of long-term displacement and living under international humanitarian regimes (see Feldman 2012; Allan 2013; Hanafi, Hilal, and Takkenberg 2014).

with the hope of being resettled in the West. He filed his case in 2007 and had been waiting to hear back for almost a year from the UN. He lied to the UNHCR and fabricated a story about how he left Iraq after 2003. However, unlike Hussein, who received his confirmation in a few months, Abu Mukhtar's case was not prioritized as an emergency. Speaking with a sense of disentitlement when comparing himself with Hussein, he emphasized that he, too, was suffering from psychological problems –uncontrollable bursts of anger, headaches, sleeplessness, and feelings of depression. He accused the UN officers of being insensitive to his case and explained that most cases really depended on the interviewing officer and whether they were convinced of one's story. Abu Mukhtar insisted that the long waiting period and the UNHCR's unresponsiveness have produced more psychological problems. He told the story of a man who, in a desperate spectacle to draw attention to his case, threatened to kill his whole family with a kitchen knife in front of the UNHCR offices if he was not resettled.

Abu Mukhtar's story and frustrations with the resettlement process were not unusual. Legitimizing an asylum case through 'fabricating' a convincing story was not uncommon for those who had arrived in Lebanon after 2006. As in other settings, asylum seekers strategized by using available resources and altered and/or exaggerated persecution narratives to strengthen their resettlement cases (Ticktin 2014). They were urged to present concrete evidence to support such narratives. For Hussein, his torture wounds were part of such evidence. Moreover, thanks to the psychiatrist's report about his 'disturbed' state of mind, his asylum case was stronger than that of other people stuck in Lebanon. Hussein was thus classified as belonging to a 'vulnerable population', which expedited approval for his resettlement.<sup>9</sup> Other vulnerable categories of Iraqi refugees included 'women as head-of-households', minorities, and 'interpreters' or 'contractors' who had worked with the US Army during the military occupation.

Trying to prove one's vulnerability became central to encounters with UN representatives. This was a common theme in the numerous interviews I conducted with both refugees and humanitarian officials working on the Iraqi refugee crisis in Lebanon. While many UN employees were sympathetic to the predicament of refugees, interactions between refugees and UN asylum personnel were sometimes tainted by suspicion and doubt, and, sometimes, resentment. One UNHCR employee expressed her frustration and anger to me when I asked

9 In the context of humanitarian language used in Arabic-speaking countries, the technical translation of the term 'vulnerable' has been coined as *bashasha* (sing. *bash*). In Arabic, *bashasha* means to become fragile, thin, or easy to break, and the term is often used in medical descriptions to refer to osteoporosis, or thinning of the bones. In borrowing the term for humanitarian contexts, the term now also describes social groups that are defenseless and at higher risk.

about some of the difficulties that many refugees face in confronting the UN bureaucracy. She snapped, 'Iraqis are so demanding. We have given them five-star treatment. It is much better than any other crisis we have catered for in Africa'.

Such skepticism also colored the bureaucracy that sorted Iraqis for resettlement. Often applying as a family, each member was subjected to numerous interviews to verify their stories. They regularly had to fill out and file paperwork and be present for updates on their cases. Families were asked to submit personal effects – such as letters, identity cards, photographs, videos, and so on – to support their claims. In different instances, the whole family had to fabricate and/or exaggerate stories of persecution to show that their lives were under immediate threat. Others resubmitted their claims after reconfiguring their social arrangements. For example, one married couple with two kids had to file for divorce to allow the wife to submit a new application under the category of 'woman head-of-household'. The goal was to speed up resettlement for the wife and children with hopes of reuniting the family in the future. In some cases, divorce was in fact real, motivated, for example, by anger and disappointment with the husband for being an obstacle to the family's resettlement. Other reasons for rejection were based on somewhat twisted logics. For example an engineer, a father of three, was declined resettlement along with his family because he had 'operationalized weaponry' during his mandatory military service during the 1991 Gulf War. The US delegation that interviewed the family classified the father as 'enemy combatant' and disqualified the whole family for resettlement in the US.

The stories of Hussein, Abu Mukhtar, and many other Iraqi refugees, speak to the different tensions that are complicated by the narrow, and in times incongruous, definitions of injury and vulnerability used by humanitarian and governmental bodies. While such institutional encounters were critical in creating a 'wound economy' for the purpose of resettlement in the West, they also revealed how the everyday lives of displaced people were interwoven with dwelling in a city shaped by war and violence, and all of its related spaces, histories, and modes of sociality.

## Showing one's wounds

When I saw Hussein the second time at Abu Elie we mostly talked about his story. He had been working there for a few months. As our conversation moved beyond updates on his asylum status, I asked him what had happened to him in Iraq. Hussein animatedly explained that during the *abdath* (events) of 2007, his wife, child, mother, and father were brutally killed in front of his eyes; he was the only survivor. He stated that a Shi'a militia killed his family. Hussein was a Shi'a himself, thus this was not a sectarian killing; Hussein believed that it was

in retribution for his father's position as an official in the Ba'th Party during the Saddam era, and for his work with the occupation authorities after the fall of the regime in 2003.<sup>10</sup>

Hussein was captured by militia and tortured. He was released a week later after his relatives paid a large ransom. As Hussein told his story, he pulled his shirt up in a seemingly practiced manner to show the healed scars from the torture wounds. He pointed to a long surgical scar that ran along his abdomen from an operation he underwent after his release from captivity, and said, 'They hit me, burned my body with cigarettes, and electrocuted my genitals. My intestines are all messed up, and my spleen was damaged'. After his departure from Iraq, Hussein suffered a nervous breakdown; he said he had also been very paranoid, and feared that militia operatives from Baghdad were after him in Beirut. He also said he was not able to sleep, which affected his daily activities, and that a psychiatrist had prescribed him 'drugs for *a'sab* [nerves]'. Towards the end of his story, Hussein said, 'I have the video of the killing of my whole family here', pointing to his worn-down smartphone. 'What?!' I exclaimed, 'How did you get the video?' 'A neighbor filmed the execution on our street. He gave it to me after my release', he replied, and continued, 'He told me that the video would help me in my journey abroad'. As he searched on his phone for the clip, I asked him to stop; I didn't want to see it. 'So', I asked, 'has it been useful to you?' He said, 'Yes, of course. I have shown it to the UN people and the Americans as evidence'.

Hussein's gruesome story was unsettling, though not uncommon. Many of my relatives and acquaintances from Iraq have undergone similar ordeals of pain and loss. Stories of death, torture, and kidnapping have come to define everyday conversations for many of us.<sup>11</sup> Such exchanges are also laced by the decades of war and violence that have plagued the country since the 1980s. In this time, victims have turned into perpetrators and perpetrators into victims. It has become difficult to discern whose wounds were more legitimate than others. These stories define a shared predicament, connecting many Iraqis as they piece together a wounded history that has marked the country's social body.

10 As anthropologist Hayder Al-Mohammed (2012) has shown, many of the cases of kidnapping and killings inside Iraq do not follow sectarian lines, but are instead shaped by an array of local motivations and uncertainties.

11 See the work of Hayder Al-Mohammed (2012). In his critical work on post-2003 Iraq, Al-Mohammed shows how the proliferation of kidnapping, in this case in Basra, colors everyday events for many Iraqis.

At Abou Elie, such social wounds compared and contrasted with other histories of violence and ‘wounded attachments’ (Brown 1993).<sup>12</sup> This hole-in-the-wall pub is located on the ground floor of an enormous ten-story building of 140 flats, called the Yacoubian Building.<sup>13</sup> The building was erected during the 1960s by a wealthy Lebanese Armenian, Yacoub Yacoubian. The property is located on prime real estate on a hill near Hamra Street, overlooking the Mediterranean. The Yacoubian Building has seen its glory days as one of the largest residential and commercial architectural projects of its time in West Beirut. In its basement it hosted one of Beirut’s renowned nightclubs, the Venus, which closed after the start of the civil war. Today, the building is poorly maintained. Yacoubian’s beneficiaries live abroad and are uninterested in solving the legal difficulties of their inheritance. Still, the building stands as a metaphor of Beirut’s urban history and its transformation after fifteen years of civil war.

Abou Elie, which means ‘father of Elie’ in Arabic, gets its name from its owner, Naya; it was his nickname during the civil war. Naya is an Armenian who grew up in Beirut after his family settled in Lebanon in the wake of the Armenian genocide in Turkey. During his youth, Naya was involved in the Lebanese Communist Party that attracted men and women from all sects and ethnic backgrounds across the country. Then, during the civil war, he was active in the militant arm of the party, fighting alongside party comrades against the Christian Lebanese Forces, the Syrian army, and certain Palestinian military factions. Abou Elie opened the bar in the mid-1980s, during the height of the civil war. The place was intended as a hub for a close-knit group of comrades who gathered nightly to drink, talk politics, share news, and plan activities.

After the ceasefire in 1990, Naya, like many of his comrades, found himself more or less mourning the unresolved consequences of the political struggle. Through word-of-mouth,

12 Wendy Brown’s (1995) work *States of Injury* has been instrumental in coining the term ‘wounded attachments’. Brown critically shows how contemporary identity politics in the West, often based on feelings of ‘injury’ of the group, are caused by exclusion from the presumed ‘goods’ of the modern liberal state. Such ‘wounded attachments’ often cultivate moral posturing that displays attributes of resentment – a moral discourse by the powerless that seeks ‘protection’ from the state, rather than to question its powers.

13 The name Binayat Yakobian (or Yakobian Building) resonates with Ala Al-Aswany’s famous Egyptian novel, turned popular film, of the same name. The novel tells a somewhat clichéd story of the biography of a building built during the Egyptian monarchy that was originally owned by a rich Egyptian Armenian, and it reveals the social tensions in modern Egypt through the building’s different tenants. They are portrayed in somewhat of a caricature of Egyptian social types, including the self-made and shady Muslim Brotherhood businessman, the bankrupt aristocrat, the half-French gay journalist, and the young college student who becomes seduced by a radical terrorist group after being humiliated by the police.

the bar became more popular, attracting like-minded leftists, especially in West Beirut where most of the operatives and sympathizers of the Communist Party lived. Soon his business was flourishing as new generations of the Lebanese left, activists, and students celebrated Abou Elie as the last fortress of the ‘revolution’ – referring nostalgically to the decline of the Left after the civil war.

At Abou Elie, one is haunted by the specters of loss. The bar is decorated as a shrine from a bygone era with pictures, postcards, and posters of local and international leftists covering the bright red walls and ceiling – Che Guevara, Marx, Castro, Lenin, Stalin, the late Kamal Jumblat (the head of the Progressive Socialist Party), the late George Hawi (president of the Lebanese Communist Party), Fairouz (the famous Lebanese singer), and her anarchist son Ziad al Rahbani. Different versions of the Cuban flag hang on the ceiling and walls. Soviet machine guns and military uniforms hang on one side of the room. There are pictures of dead comrades – some who were killed during the war, others assassinated in the postwar ceasefire. Making such iconography visible both celebrates the glories of the Party, and mourns the wounds of loss and betrayal.

Old and new customers frequent the bar to seek comfort in the relatively cheap drinks and snacks that compete with the high-priced bars and pubs sprouting up in today’s gentrified Hamra. It has also become a tourist attraction for those who have read about it in Lonely Planet publications as one of the places one ‘must check out’ in Beirut. Over the years, Naya has become notorious for his moody temperament. He is well known to prefer his customers based on their political views, and for saying, ‘Not everyone is welcomed at the bar’. Regulars enjoy regaling each other with stories of those who were kicked out after having heated conversations with him. Over the past few years, Naya has become tired and busy with businesses in other neighborhoods. He has left the everyday management of the bar to his wife, Umm Elie, and her childhood friend, Layla. The two women do most of the daily shopping and stand behind the bar, chatting with the regulars, taking orders, and serving drinks. There is usually extra help – someone in the kitchen preparing food and another person to wait on the few tables, which seat a maximum of twenty people.

Umm Eli and Layla met Hussein when he was working at the nearby pharmacy. They took a liking to him and had empathy for him when they heard his story. For many Lebanese, especially those on the Left, there is always a soft spot for Iraqis. Iraq used to have one of the largest communist parties in the region until the 1970s. After the Ba’thist regime came to power, many members were imprisoned or executed, and others went into exile. Many Iraqi communists found a home in Lebanon, falling back on their regional communist networks. After the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation, there was a rise in anti-American sentiment and Iraqis were seen as ‘double victims’ of decades of dictatorship and imperial

misadventures in the Middle East. Hussein's request for employment was received in the context of this history. Umm Elie offered him a job waiting on tables, and he proved to be a great asset for the pub. He worked hard and became a subject of amazement among the customers who sympathized with his stories and left him good tips. At the time, I felt that Abou Elie was a good place for Hussein to wait for his future. The empathy that he received and the owners' excitement about him working there were signs of social solidarity and recognition of shared predicaments.

I saw Hussein a few more times in Beirut, and the last time I saw him we spoke about his plans for travel. His date of departure was 'getting close', he said. I left Lebanon for a few weeks and tried to call him when I returned, but he never called back. I assumed he had left for the United States, and I returned to the bar to ask about him and his whereabouts. There was someone else waiting tables, a young Lebanese man. When I asked Umm Elie and Layla about Hussein, they said he did not work at Abou Elie anymore, and explained: 'We fired him. He turned out to be a big liar. He lied to us several times and began skipping work and not showing up. He also began bothering our customers'. Hussein apparently had begun telling his story to all the new customers, as he had done with me, and while this was seen as amusing in the beginning, some of the regulars began complaining. Some of these regulars and old comrades had themselves been subjected to imprisonment and torture during the civil war and the Israeli occupation of Lebanon (1982–2000). Many were uncomfortable with the way he was 'showing his own scars', as Umm Elie put it.

There was a sense of bitterness that tainted Umm Elie's characterization of Hussein's 'inappropriate' actions. Feeling concerned, I called Abu Mukhtar to ask him about the whereabouts of Hussein and if he knew what had happened to him. Abu Mukhtar seemed as clueless as I was. He explained, 'He disappeared suddenly. Maybe he left, maybe not. I do not know'. Sensing the worried tone in my voice, he added: 'You know, doctor, you should not really feel sorry for him. He is a *Klanchi* [a big liar]. I am not even sure about the truth of his story'.

The abrupt disappearance of Hussein was puzzling. If he did suddenly embark on his journey to the US, why did he fail to inform his friends and peers? Did he get into trouble with the Lebanese authorities, and get deported? Or maybe his paranoid fears of being persecuted by the Iraqi militia in Beirut were not far fetched? Was he lying about the truth of his injuries and experience? His disappearance left these questions unanswered.

## Wounded encounters?

Going beyond the narratives of religious wars, military interventions, and suffering that taint contemporary representations of political conflicts in the Middle East, I have tried to show how focusing on the wound can reveal broader ecologies of violence and care across states and institutional borders and boundaries. Shifting our analytical gaze from the medicalized and institutionalized discourses of trauma, we can begin to see the tapestries of the social worlds within which they are weaved. Entangled in the layered histories and geographies of war that characterize much of the Middle East, wounds constitute the interstitial tissue of the social; they are what brings people together and what sets them apart. Focusing on the entanglements of such wounds in everyday life offers insights into the reach and limits of institutional discourses of trauma, suffering, and victimhood in the context of war and displacement.

In 2012, the UNHCR declared the Syrian civil war as one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world, with more than four million Syrians displaced to regional countries of the Middle East. More than one-quarter is estimated to have fled to Lebanon alone – a country of close to four million people, already home to so many refugees. In response to the Syrian crisis, humanitarian organizations have reoriented their activities and remobilized their efforts, and the shifting focus of the humanitarian enterprise has introduced more confusion about the fate of other refugees and further complicated the landscapes of war and displacement in the region. In Lebanon, efforts to mitigate a range of political crises of different national populations have given life to contested economies of wounding. With this triage framework, certain wounds become more visible or acquire social and political value, while other wounds are dismissed or overshadowed, thus deepening those wounds.

Hussein's story tells of the instability of the value of the wound, its ambivalence as it is refracted through the lives of differently afflicted communities. Hussein's wounds were inseparable from, and intertwined with, the wounds of others, shaping his everyday social and emotional exchanges and modes of identification. Like many stories of displacement, Hussein's lacked a clear conclusion. Nevertheless, his encounters show how the coherence of victimhood unravels in everyday social relations. Hussein's wounds were at first recognized and nurtured by the leftist bar's owners and their customers – at a site of wounds that are less visible in the immediacy of the Iraqi humanitarian crisis. They were later disbelieved and rejected as Hussein's actions became disruptive and overbearing. The vanishing of Hussein further introduced elements of doubts about the 'truth' of his story among his employers and peers. This sense of betrayal was echoed by Hussein's friend Abu Mukhtar who developed feelings of envy towards Hussein's 'privileged' status with the humanitarian enterprise. His attachments to and performances of his own wounds eventually

added insult to injury, transforming relations of recognition and care into doubt and resentment; thus, his victim status was contested and challenged. Such back and forth between recognition and misrecognition, victimhood and betrayal, wounds and wounding, color the continuous and dynamic transactions of everyday life. These wounded encounters are a testimony to the layered histories of violence and to the rough and dynamic spaces of care and toxicity that define everyday survival across war-torn societies in the Middle East.

## About the author

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