It's All in the Family

Here in the east it used to be simple. The elder controls the family and no one can say no to him; the father would distribute land and houses. But now each one has an opinion and the father can't decide – sons control their fathers and women have the most authority these days.

[regional Palestinian representative, Shabriha, author's interview 7 May 2013]

While family dynamics are not the focus of my research, the family is a daily life reference that touches all aspects of life here – governance and politics included. The family seems to be the main carrier of agency, the main organizational and social unit. Hardly anyone ever talks to me about 'the people,' 'the community,' 'the society,' or 'the households.' Instead, all these notions are almost without fail captured by referring to 'the families:' it is the families that define and constitute Shabriha. Anyone we go to interview systematically informs '*min meen*' (from whom, i.e. which family) my interpreter is and it never takes long to find out they are either related or, at least, have an acquaintance via a far-removed cousin.

Clichés are rife when it comes to the nature of family in the Arab world, from reference to the incredibly rich vocabulary that allows one to specifically pinpoint each and every family member with a single term to the truism of the Middle East's 'collectivist' society and the observation that every taxi driver is an uncle and I am everyone's sister. Some people did stress to me that family is losing some of its social significance, as expressed in the opening quote of this blog entry. And the tribal nature of the Bedouin Arab village I live in might not be entirely representative for the majority of people, Palestinians or Lebanese, living in Lebanon – considering for instance that the threat of extremely extended Bedouin families being divided over several (official UN) camps was an important reason for people to opt to live in the gathering (an unofficial camp) that is Shabriha in the first place. Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the conclusion that family dominates everything. 'Private' here does not mean 'individual,' but the core family and 'public' does not refer to the state but to the extended family.

The importance of family is, unsurprisingly, first of all social. It is the main reference in any conflict management, where not the individual, but his or her family is held accountable. Starting a family of one's own through marriage is the motivation driving, for example, the illegal building spree that changed the face of the gathering some two years ago. These marriages, as some hard-core Romeo and Juliet stories I heard here testify of, are hardly private affairs and very much family business.

Family, it seems, is an important characteristic of, and instrument towards, social unity. People have often told me that all problems here can be solved 'internally,' meaning without reference to the police, because everyone is related. It is also often explained to me that the Lebanese side of the village is doing so much better because they are all from the same family and therefore follow the same leader. When there are problems between the Lebanese and

Palestinian parts of the settlement these are habitually soothed by a discourse stressing either symbolic or real family ties. Yet this discourse of unity and coherence bred by family relations is partly illusory. If the strength of Lebanese Shabriha is attributed to family ties, so is the perceived 'weakness' of Palestinian Shabriha, where family fights take on a communal edge and where no authority is seen as neutral enough to mediate in such conflicts. Moreover, members of the same family often differ widely in political affiliation, religious observance and communal standing. Moreover, the closer the affiliation to one family, the greater the distance to other families, as one local state representative seemed to indicate when he urged me "to bear in mind that people in Shabriha are not from the families [here]; they're just residents on the land."

The family, it seems, on a personal as well as a social level, is a curse and a blessing at the same time. The obligations that come with it are both prison and safety net. Whereas one benefactor motivates his contributions by saying that "people here are family, it is my responsibility to help them where I can," others are deeply frustrated by the family traditions that compel them to seek family consensus for each and every personal move they make. This paradox extends to the realm of politics. Family is the key to legitimacy. The 'respected people' so often surfacing as core governance decision makers are mostly described as family leaders, or those that "make decisions for more than one house." The communal committees created as alternative to the somewhat discredited 'popular' committees governing the Palestinian camps and gatherings in Lebanon are tellingly called 'family' committees. And while some Lebanese would have you believe otherwise, this 'family politics' is hardly a purely Palestinian trait. In Lebanon most political parties are little more than formalized family dynasties. Moreover, all personal status issues are governed by religious rather than civil law and implemented through a family ID card.

Thus, in Lebanon, both access and opposition to the state are (still) mediated through the family, despite the lamentation opening this story. In fact, the notion of family might well be one of the main lines connecting the dots between the themes of my previous entries. It is the strong family ties and the obligations that come with it that have kept many Palestinian refugees from Syria from sleeping in the streets, being taken in by distant relatives they have often never even met before. It is my being here on my own – without a family as a social reference point – that might be the most estranging aspect of my foreignness to people here. The inevitability of family ties mirrors the reification of politico-sectarian affiliation that underlies much of what is captured under the omnipresent doom of 'the political situation.' The strength of family bonds both facilitate migration and simultaneously sharpen the consequences of a missing generation and dampen its disastrous effects through the social media diaspora. The family as a social institution, finally, also provides an important coping mechanism for dealing with the legal vacuum – as exemplified in the highway eviction case – Palestinians in Lebanon find themselves in.