Al-Wihdat was a main centre of activity of Palestinian nationalistists 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 ‘Arabá, the Palestinians of Jordan, now excluded from the so-called peace process, have opted increasingly for Jordanian nationalist 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-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-Awda 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 paradoxes 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 Palestinian land. The Oslo and Wadi ‘Arabá 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 ‘Arabá 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 Palestinian 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 activism. 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, simulation strategies became the dominant trend among the Palestinian refugees.

Political ‘Jordanisation’

In the wake of Arab-Israeli peace talks and treaties, Islamic movements gained a huge popularity with their fierce criticism, in particular concerning the negotiations 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 local political and social gaps that existed in the camp in the early 1990s following Arafat’s failure to continue financing their activities and the social networks in the camp. The PLO now focused on the foundation of the Authority in the West Bank and Gaza. The later elections for 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 political and social success in the occupied territories. Therefore, the PLO had to leave the Gulf region, mainly Kuwait. The Islamists gained a lot from their political successes in the occupied territories. Therefore, the PLO had to leave the Gulf region, mainly Kuwait.

The situation changed radically after the Second Gulf War. About 300,000-350,000 refugees have decided to leave the Gulf region, mainly Kuwait. The returnees caused a boom in the commerce and real estate market in and around Al-Wihdat as well as the intensive urbanization to the south of Amman attracting a large number of new quarters. 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 new camp inhabitants are the main residents in the extensions to the south and east. However, unlike the camp itself, these extensions are formal areas, outside of UNRWA jurisdiction. The development of commerce and services strengthens 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 Palestinians are concentrated between the right to return and the prospect of return. The dilemma of integration versus assimilation has become more acute 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, which accommodates the needs and aspirations of the various sections. A more balanced representation of the urban areas, where the refugees live, in the electoral laws would be a first requirement.

A commercial street in Al-Wihdat.