

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN LEBANON: GOVERNANCE AND VIOLENCE

Abstract: The paper focuses on the violence affecting Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. It investigates leadership failures which make them objects of state governance and subjects of interpersonal violence. It contends that the violence is not only the result of an Islamist militant ideology for a specific political or social cause, but also of horrible living conditions. The lack of legitimate governance structures in the refugee camps has prevented any improvement in living conditions. This has generated types of violence that compromise the security of Lebanese and Palestinians living in Lebanon, especially in the neighborhood of refugee camps. Long-term deprivation and marginalization are mainly the results of state policies towards refugees that have generated unique forms of violence in the refugee camps.

Keywords: *Palestinians, Lebanon, camps, violence, governance, refugees, Islamic movements, Hizballah*

Introduction

Post-Taif¹ Lebanon is a country with a confessional political system in which the Palestinians constitute a minority. However, they do not have a recognized place in the confessional system of the country. This makes them politically, economically and socially marginalized. However, the main problem for this group of refugees is that they are mostly “enclaved”. The right-wing Lebanese political party leaders and Lebanese security and military agencies enclave undesirable groups and confine them in what (following Giorgio Agamben) can be called “spaces of exception”.² This applies not only to refugee camps, but also to violence-prone, well-known quarters such as Bab al-Tabaneh and Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli. It is considered a necessary measure for ensuring Lebanon’s security.

¹ The Taif accord (National Reconciliation Charter) is the document adopted by the Lebanese parliament at their session in Taif (Saudi Arabia), in October, 1989 to resolve the issues at the core of the Lebanese second civil war (1975-1990). See Dilip Hiro, *The Essential Middle East*, “National Reconciliation Charter”, (New York, 2003), 364-365.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1985). See also Sari Hanafi and Taylor Long, “Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 23, no. 2, (2010), 34-60.

In “Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life”, Giorgio Agamben described this kind of condition as living under a “state (space) of exception”.³ The paradox of the camp-based Palestinians in Lebanon today is that they are “excluded from rights while being included in law-making”.⁴ They enjoy neither the civil rights of the Lebanese, upon whose territory they reside, nor those of foreigners living in Lebanon. Excluded from the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, which stipulates that refugees have the right to work without a specific work permit, Palestinians in Lebanon have to not only secure this permit, but are also required to pay a rather high fee. By virtue of their statelessness refugees represent a disquieting element in the ordering of the modern nation-state. For all practical purposes, in that it is only rarely and arbitrarily enforced, Lebanese law has been suspended within the confines of the refugee camps. In this sense, the camps have become “spaces of exception”. The residents live in a “zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer make any sense”.⁵

Order and governance in the Palestinian refugee camps

There are currently 15 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The most violence-prone are Ayn al-Hilweh (near Sidon (Sayda), South Lebanon), Burj al-Barajneh (near Beirut), Burj al-Shemali (near Tyre (Sour), South Lebanon), Nahr el-Bared and Beddawi (near Tripoli, North Lebanon). The creation of “popular committees” in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon was based on the Cairo Agreement (1969).⁶ Before the agreement, the camps in Lebanon were governed by a state of emergency and were under the control of the Lebanese security agency (Deuxieme Bureau). Between 1970 and 1982, the Cairo Agreement stipulated that the police had to negotiate access to the camps through powerful “popular committees”, which granted or refused entry on a case-by-case basis. At the time, traditional authority structures remained in place, as did customary forms of dispute settlement. However, the camps thereafter witnessed the emergence of a new elite, whose legitimacy was based on the Palestinian national

³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 121.

⁴ Stephanie Silverman, “Redrawing the Lines of Control: Political Interventions by Refugees and the Sovereign State System”, *conference paper “Dead/Lines: Contemporary Issues in Legal and Political Theory”*, University of Edinburgh, (2008), 10.

⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 121.

⁶ Article 2 of section 1 of the agreement calls for a reorganization of “the Palestinian presence” in Lebanon through “the foundation of local administrative committees in the refugee camps, composed of Palestinians, in order to defend the interests of the Palestinians residing in those camps, in collaboration with the local authorities and within the framework of Lebanese sovereignty”. See Palestinian refugee research Net “*Appendix: The Cairo Agreement (1969)*”, http://prn.mcgill.ca/research/papers/brynen2_09.htm (accessed April 07, 2019)

struggle. This situation changed after 1982, when the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) military bodies had to leave Lebanon and move to Tunisia.⁷ After the forced departure of the PLO headquarters and leadership from Lebanon, the PLO's "popular committees" and security committees were dismantled (except in the camps in the south) and were replaced by committees that were weaker and largely pro-Syrian. The new committees lacked legitimacy because their members were not elected as before, nor were they recognized by the Lebanese authorities. The camp residents instead resorted to traditional power brokers such as imams, local notables (wujaha) and local security leaders to resolve quarrels and disagreements before turning to the police. While such informal conflict resolution methods were mostly successful in the past, the refugee camps are no longer communitarian and headed by local notables. This is mainly because of urbanization and migration. The continual transformation of power-sharing within the camps is critical, especially after the departure of the PLO in 1982.

The current situation of the refugee camps in Lebanon has demonstrated a fundamental crisis of governance in the camps⁸, which suffers from the presence of dozens of competing factions fighting for power and influence. The committees are comprised of representatives from each faction who are appointed, while those not elected yet are expected to keep the peace, solve internal disputes, provide security, interact with the Lebanese government and aid agencies, and administer the camp in coordination with UNRWA.⁹ In some camps, such as Ayn al-Hilweh, an additional education council was established, composed of representatives from all factions as well as local religious authorities. However, although there were very rare cooperation and coordination between the many popular committees, some focus group participants complained that these committees largely did not agree on important issues nor coordinate their activities, did not enjoy popular legitimacy and were not recognized by the Lebanese government. The committees were neither able to protect their constituents from harassment by the Lebanese security forces controlling the camp perimeters nor hold UNRWA accountable for its shortcomings.

⁷ Julie Peteet, "Socio-Political Integration and Conflict Resolution in the Palestinian Camps in Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (1987): 29-44.

⁸ Sari Hanafi, "Governance of the Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Arab East: Governmentalities in Quest of Legitimacy", *working paper*, Issam Fares Institute for Public and International Affairs, AUB, (2010).

⁹ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) also maintains its own administrative apparatus in the camps. The highest-ranked UNRWA official wields significant power. In at least one of the focus groups, this official referred to himself as "director of the camp" ("*mudir al-mukhayim*"). UNRWA typically appoints members of the new educated elite to leadership positions, such as engineers, teachers, and pharmacists, many of whom have a history of political activism and enjoy good relations with the camp residents.

Briefly, committees promoted factional infighting and supported patron-client politics, causing Palestinian disunity. As Knudsen observed during his field research in the camps in 2003, “Both among the secular and Islamist lobbies we find a plethora of smaller and larger groups, often with conflicting views and sometimes involved in fratricidal battles that weaken the refugee community and ultimately undermine their quest for political hegemony. None of them are able to speak on behalf of the whole refugee community and this serves to “compartmentalize” and therefore weaken the Palestinian national struggle to regain their homeland”.¹⁰

During the last few years, little has changed in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Today, Ayn al-Hilweh has two popular committees and two security committees, which represent the camp's 70,000 actual residents.¹¹ Recently, a new layer of governance was created - a “follow-up committee” composed of representatives from all the camp factions, both secular and Islamist. Yet, there is still a lack of a political reference - a unified Palestinian position in the camps.

In 2007, the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp was destroyed in a 15-week battle between a militant Islamist group, Fatah al-Islam, and the Lebanese Army. The focus group participants warned that unless Palestinians in Lebanon are permitted to strengthen their own political and security authorities, they will not be able to prevent a similar outbreak of violence. One of Nahr al-Bared residents argues, “There has to be a higher council ... to represent the Palestinian people as a whole, especially in the diaspora camps in Lebanon such as Nahr al-Bared, Ayn al-Hilweh, and Beddawi, because we are no longer sure that the developments of Nahr al-Bared could not happen elsewhere”. Another resident agreed, stating, “If the Lebanese state had permitted politicians or the PLO leadership to form a Palestinian security force, Fatah al-Islam would never have gained a foothold in the camp”.¹²

Indeed, in the months leading up to the conflict in Nahr al-Bared (December 2006 to March 2007), the residents of the camp tried repeatedly to remove Fatah al-Islam members from their camp. To this end, the PLO engaged in armed clashes with the militants in March.¹³ However, the outcome of these clashes was inconclusive and was dismissed by the Lebanese authorities as merely “routine” Palestinian infighting, in spite of the fact that Fatah al-Islam was largely comprised of non- Palestinians.¹⁴ The

¹⁰ Are Knudsen, “Islamism in the Diaspora: Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (2005): 216-34.

¹¹ According to the UNRWA, officially, number of residents is 47,500.

¹² Sari Hanafi and Sheikh I.Hassan, “Constructing and Governing Nahr al-Bared Camp. An “Ideal” Model of Exclusion,” *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Falastiniyya*, No. 78, (2009): 40.

¹³ Samet Abboud, “The Siege of Nahr al-Bared and the Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No 1-2 (2009): 31-48.

¹⁴ According to the Lebanese Judiciary Council, Fatah al-Islam was composed of 69 Lebanese nationals, approximately 50 Palestinians (43 from Syria), 43 Saudis, 12 Syrians, one Tunisian,

security committee of Nahr al-Bared and the PLO lacked both the resources and the mandate to deal with Fatah al-Islam on their own. The popular committees lacked resources, which prevented them from fulfilling their municipal functions. Moreover, the committees lacked skilled technicians with expertise on urban regulations, water, sanitation and electricity.

There is a tapestry of multiple sovereignties, which include “real sovereignties”, such as the Lebanese government, but also “phantom sovereignties”, such as the PLO and other factions, as well as the UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies, which also contribute to the “state of exception” and participate in the suspension of the law through various emergency measures. These measures are contradictory. Rather than creating order in the camp, they leave it in a state of chaos. Each government-actor, faction or agency must compete, not for the allegiance of each Palestinian resident, but instead for control over each refugee. “Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty, only bare life is authentically political”, suggests Giorgio Agamben.¹⁵

Among the refugees, there is conviction that the popular committees and the factions, in their current form, do not represent the interests of Palestinians in Lebanon.

Political disenchantment in the camps

The focus groups testified to a low degree of political activity among the youth in the camps. Out of eighteen people, only three had engaged in political activities in recent years. This differs significantly from the situation in the past, when most people participated in a variety of political activities. Among those in the youth focus group, some were busy securing life’s necessities, while others appeared weary of politics and disinclined to join political factions. The only exceptions are the Hamas supporters, who are quite active both in the Nahr al-Bared and Beddawi camps. One of the indicators of the strength of each faction can be inferred from the results of the election of the UNRWA Staff Union. In the election of April 2009, Hamas won the majority of seats in the north of the country, while Fatah¹⁶ won in Beirut and in the south.

The consequences of the disillusionment are very important for the long-term relationship between the youth and their community and society, as well as for social cohesion within the community. The tendency to favor migration is another indicator of this political disillusionment. According to

one Algerian, one Yemeni and one Iraqi. See Hanafi and Hassan, “Constructing and Governing Nahr al-Bared Camp. An “Ideal” Model of Exclusion,” 39-52.

¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 106.

¹⁶ Fatah (Arabic: acronym of Harakat al Tahrir al Falastini, Movement for Liberation of Palestine). It was founded in 1958 by Yasser Arafat, Salah Khalaf and Khalil Wazir in Kuwait.

the International Information survey, if a Palestinian state were declared without acknowledging the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland, 36% of respondents would prefer resettling in a Western country, about 11% moving to an Arab country, whereas about 32% would prefer to remain in Lebanon.¹⁷

Typically, young people expressed anger and pessimism toward the Lebanese and Palestinian polities. They considered the popular committee lacking in relevant experience to manage the camps, and felt that the committee members had “lost contact” with their constituency. Many of the Palestinians felt that the unpopular Palestinian political authority reflected a crisis of substantive moral purpose. They asserted that it demonstrated the ways in which the Lebanese authorities undermined the popular committees. Yet a few of them believed that Islamic conceptions of good governance were not being followed. Many felt unrepresented by the political factions.

When the International Information survey asked respondents which “Palestinian factions live up to their expectations”, 37.4% of surveyed youth named Fatah, 25.5% named Hamas and the more marginal secular and Islamist factions got only 18%. The remaining 19.1% of the respondents stated that none of the factions were performing according to their expectations.¹⁸ Young people are not necessarily “depoliticized”, but rather disillusioned with the fragmented and factional political structure (except for Hamas, which is considered an alternative to the traditional Palestinian factions).

Violence in the camps: Attacks on property and individuals

Investigating social and political violence in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon is not an easy task as there are very few statistics on the subject. The only statistics are in the report on violence monitored by the Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO).¹⁹ Additionally, other reports provide indicators of violence, such as the annual reports of the Palestinian Association for Human Rights²⁰ and the “Najdeh” Association²¹, which

¹⁷ International information Survey of Media and Communication Channels, Actors and Messages in Palestinian Camps. Unpublished report, 2009.

¹⁸ Karma Nebulsi, *Palestinians Register: Laying Foundations and Setting Directions*, (Oxford: Nuffield College, 2006).

¹⁹ Palestinian Human Rights Organisation. *Report on Violence. January-May 2010. Unpublished report*, 2010. Palestinian Human Rights Organisation. *Report on the Lebanese Restrictions on Freedom of Movement: Case of Nahr al-Bared*, November, (2010).

²⁰ Palestinian Association for Human Rights (Witness). *2009 Annual Report* Unpublished report, 2009.

²¹ Association Najdeh, *Domestic Violence Program Annual Report January-December 2007*.

include information on domestic violence. Additional data can be found in Lebanese newspaper articles on violence in the camps.²²

The PHRO report for the first five months of 2010 shows three types of violence: the Lebanese authorities' violence, attacks on individuals and property and violence between factions (see table 1). The large majority of the incidents, about 84 % (62 out of 74 incidents), were in the Nahr al-Bared camp in the north.²³

Type of violation	North	South	Beirut	Total
Attack on individuals	2	5	2	9
Arbitrary arrests, torture and humiliation	16	-	1	17
Hindering mobility	11	-	-	11
Violation due to discrimination against refugee status	1	1	-	2
Violations of the right to decent housing	11	-	-	11
Violations of the right to education and social care	2	2	1	5
Violations of the right to health ²⁴	19	-	-	19
Total	62	8	4	74

Source: Palestinian Human Rights Organisation (PHRO), *Report on Violence, January-May 2010*.

As the table shows, thirty out of seventy-four incidents of violence (40% of the total violence in the refugee camps) were perpetrated by the police and army intelligence. This violence is under-reported by the media. The statistics indicated many arbitrary arrests and the obstruction of freedom of movement for the refugee population. This is persisted by another PHRO report²⁵ that shows a systematic pattern of violating Palestinians' right to unrestricted movement, especially in Ayn al-Hilweh and Nahr al-Bared camps. This not only hinders individual mobility, but also business. According to a recent Fafo survey²⁶, the checkpoints at the camp perimeters

²² See Kortam, Marie, *Jeune et violence dans le camp de Baddawi et le banlieu parisien*, PhD Thesis, University of Paris VII, Paris, (2011).

²³ Palestinian Human Rights Organisation (PHRO), *Report on Violence, January-May 2010*.

²⁴ This category includes all forms of medical malpractice and refusal by UNRWA to subsidize medical treatment.

²⁵ Palestinian Human Rights Organisation, *Report on the Lebanese Restrictions on Freedom of Movement: Case of Nahr al-Bared*, November 2010.

²⁶ Zhang Huafeng, Tiltne Age A., "Socio-economic Assessment of Ein El-Hilweh Refugee Camp", *Tabulation report*, Fafo, December 2009.

hamper business activity and prevent customers and suppliers from entering, adding to the daily suffering of the resident refugees.²⁷

In the absence of a formal mode of law enforcement and camp policing, different Lebanese security agencies are intervening. One UNRWA area officer reported that, historically, “I used to receive calls from one or two agencies of the camp’s security administration in case there was a problem. Now there are at least four such agencies. This shows how far the Lebanese security agencies have infiltrated the camp and appointed collaborators”. One member of the popular committee in the Beddawi camp confirmed this account, stating that “a few years ago, we used to denounce and isolate the collaborators. Now who is not a collaborator?” Instead of bringing attention to the asymmetrical power structures and collusion between the popular committees and military intelligence, the media, particularly newspapers, emphasize a mode of cooperation between them.²⁸

Former Prime Minister Fuad Siniora²⁹ has referred to Nahr al-Bared as a model of camp governance to be implemented in other camps. The Vienna document issued in 2008 by the Lebanese government for the donors’ conference to rebuild the ruined Nahr al-Bared camp uses the term “community policing”. However, in practice, the Lebanese authorities have opted for a militarized governmental regime in the form of counter-insurgency policing. Some refugee camps, such as Ayn al-Hilweh, are under siege by the army, which monitors entry and exit points. The Nahr al-Bared camp and its surrounding area are a military zone governed by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) through the semblance of a police station.³⁰ However, the camp residents seek to resist such militarized governance and a few resort to violence. In the new governance plan, a division of labor emerges through which the army ensures a regime of separation and control, while the ISF controls the economic and political status of the camp, facilitating economic extraction and exploitation.³¹ State governmental control is characterized not by the enforcement of well-defined rules and laws, but by the suspension of these rules through a bureaucratic apparatus that imposes different modes of intervention and whose very unpredictability is the key to its effectiveness. The intervention takes the form of real or suspended violence. Some researchers and human rights activists were arrested in 2010 because of their criticism of the Lebanese Authorities Forces’ (LAF’s) role

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For the army declaration after the theft of a gun from a policeman, see Abdel Khafi Samed, “Attack on a Security Officer”, *al-Akhbar*, September 2, 2008.

²⁹ Fuad Siniora was Prime Minister of Lebanon from July 18, 2005 till November 9, 2009.

³⁰ Hanafi, “Constructing and Governing Nahr al-Bared Camp”, see Lebanon’s Palestinian Dilemma: The struggle over Nahr al-Bared, International Crisis group, *Middle East Report No 117*- March 1, 2012.

³¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, (New York: Verso, 2003).

in governing the Nahr al-Bared camp³², and another activist reported staying away from his home in the Nahr al-Bared camp for more than three months because he was afraid of being arrested by the LAF.

Militarized camp governance is based on two principles: nominal inclusion of the camp under Lebanese sovereignty, with simultaneous geographic exclusion. The inclusion is institutionalized by discrimination, especially through the 2010 law on “the right to work” for Palestinian refugees and the 2001 ruling that limited their access to “property ownership”. The material outcome of separation and its twin pillars of legal persecution and enclaved geography create a deep sense of spatial exclusion and disorientation for both the Lebanese and Palestinians.

The inclusion and the separation of the camps both presuppose the exclusion of their residents from the pale of law and the normalization of a “state of exception”, in which the Palestinians collectively, as well as individually, are subject to arbitrary violence and coercive regulation of their daily lives. In some cases, Nahr al-Bared in effect becomes an experimental “laboratory” for control and surveillance by the LAF and ISF.

According to a PHRO report, minor offences against property and individuals represent a very small part of the violence in the camps (only nine out of 74 offences during the first five months of 2011).³³ In 2007, a local NGO undertook a study of domestic violence based on data from counselling centers that worked with 209 female victims, the majority of them single women (52%). Some 89% of this violence was of a psychological nature. Young girls between 15 and 19 years are the main sufferers of domestic violence (38% of the victims).³⁴ This illustrates the problem of gender-based violence in Palestinian society inside the camps.

Some of the above-mentioned violent incidents are localized familial disputes which escalate into problems between political factions. An example from the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp began as a quarrel between two youths over the outcome of a game of pinball, which sparked a clash between Fatah and a local Islamist group.³⁵ We should also take note that vandalism targeting schools reveals communitarian tension and a problematic relationship between this camp and its non-Palestinian neighbors. In mid-July 2010, a Christian school in the Burj al-Shemali camp near Tyre was vandalized by graffiti praising Imam Ali. The culprits were a group of young men from adjoining neighborhoods.

On September 14, 2010, a clash erupted between armed men in a street in the Ayn al-Hilweh camp, wounding one bystander. Reports attributed the scuffle to a crack-down on drug dealing after the head of the

³² See Lebanon’s Palestinian Dilemma: The struggle over Nahr al-Bared, International Crisis group, *Middle East Report No 117*- March 1, 2012.

³³ Palestinian Human Rights Organisation, *Report on Violence*, January -May 2011.

³⁴ Association Najdeh, *Domestic Violence Program Annual Report* January-December 2007.

³⁵ See Palestinian Human Rights Organisation, *Report on Violence*, January -May 2011.

PLO's armed militia had promised that drugs would be eradicated from the camp and drug dealers handed over to the Lebanese judiciary.³⁶

Violence between Palestinian factions

In 2009, about 700 homicides were reported in Lebanon (most of them politically motivated), but only a few of them took place in refugee camps.³⁷ Thus refugee camps are not the major sites of violence in the country, nor are refugees the only agents of violence. Still, factional in-fighting remains a major source of violence inside the camps.³⁸ However, political factions can be sources of disorder in the camp. In recent years, political violence in the refugee camps has increased because of heightened tensions of violence between different factions. The only camp where there has been no such increase is Ayn al-Hilweh. This is due to a certain political rapprochement between the political factions and the establishment of a “follow-up committee” composed of all political factions, including the Islamists. According to International Information survey³⁹ in 2009, some 89 % of the camp residents found that the security situation was bad or very bad”. The deteriorating security situation came as the second most pressing problem (37.4 % of the respondents), followed by the lack of jobs and the terrible economic situation. The Pursue survey, conducted in 2010 in the Ayn al-Hilweh camp, showed a significant reduction in the camp’s security situation.⁴⁰

When there are clashes in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, employees stay away from work and checkpoints, schools and shops are closed and medical services are disrupted.⁴¹ The following examples illustrate the nature of violent encounters, particularly concerning “strategic” areas (such as mosques) inside the camps. In September 2010, three people were wounded in the al-Buss refugee camp near Tyre, after a dispute between clerics loyal to either Fatah or Hamas resulted in armed clashes. The clerics disagreed on who would lead prayers at the camp’s mosque.⁴²

³⁶ See “Ayn al-Hilweh Killing Raises Fears of Deteriorating Security in Camp”, *The Daily Star*, September 15, 2010.

³⁷ Jawad Adra; “The Oppressive, The Marginalized and The Missing Third”, *Information International Monthly*, No. 98, September 2010.

³⁸ Marie Kortam, *Jeune et violence dans le camp de Baddawi et le banlieu parisien*, Omn. Univ. Europ, Paris, 2011, 362.

³⁹ International Information Survey of Media and Communication Channels, Actors and Messages in Palestinian Camps.

⁴⁰ Interview with Edward Kattaura, a political consultant affiliated with Pursue Ltd., Beirut, April 2012. See Palestinian Human Rights Organisation, *Report on Violence*, January -May 2011.

⁴¹ Zhang and Tiltne, The Socio-economic Assessment of Ein Al-Hilweh refugee camp, Vol. II, *Summary of Survey statistics*, 2012.

⁴² The dispute started after an argument between Sheikh Hussein Qassem Maghreb (the imam of the mosque), who is loyal to Farah, and members of the mosque committee, who are loyal

Another clash over the control of a mosque happened in 2008 in the Burj al-Barajneh camp between Islamic Jihad and Fatah that resulted in the death of one person.

Some incidents involve violence by Palestinian political factions directed against the camp residents. An example of this is the murder of Reem, a 17 year old female living in the Shatila refugee camp (Beirut).⁴³ A Palestinian from Syria residing in Lebanon, she was reportedly afflicted by psychological problems and drug addiction. At around 4:15AM on July 1, 2008, at the western entrance of the Shatila camp, Reem was stopped at the gate and asked by the head of the security committee in the camp why she was entering at night with her boyfriend. When she replied that it was none of his business, she was shot by the personal bodyguard of the head of the local security committee. The security committee came to the scene to review the incident, but left her bleeding for 45 minutes before an ambulance arrived and took her to the hospital. A coroner came to the hospital to investigate the murder, but quickly closed the file. Soon afterwards, her family was authorized to pick up her body and she was buried later the same day. The PHRO fieldworker asked the security committee whether the murderer would be handed over to the Lebanese security forces. They replied that they were waiting for a response from Reem's family whether they would file a formal complaint or accept financial compensation (*fidyya*). What is particularly interesting in this story is the complicity between the Palestinian security committee and the Lebanese police, both treating Reem as a person who can be eliminated by anyone without punishment.⁴⁴

Still, political factions can and occasionally do play a positive role by mediating between parties in conflict and enforcing certain community norms and customs. Indeed, some focus group participants, the members of security committees in particular, insisted that the security situation in the camps would be worse without the political factions, stating, "The factions have their advantages. They serve the people in the camps and act as a buffer. The factions stand in the way of those who want to create havoc".⁴⁵

"Globaljihadi" groups in Ayn al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp

Over the past decade, the refugee camps in Lebanon have been the scene of a religious revival, influenced by the growth of conservative Sunni Islam in urban areas such as Tripoli and Sidon, where Lebanese Islamist

to Hamas. See "Hamas, Fatah Clash in Refugee Camp after Prayer Dispute", *The Daily Star*, August 24, 2010.

⁴³ Palestinian Human Rights Organisation, *A Case to Register in the Name of Humanity: Where are our Camps Going? Whom to Serve? And Until When?*, Unpublished document.

⁴⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

groups such as al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafist preachers have been competing for new bases of support. This conservative Islamic ideology has also been aided by the growth of satellite media, especially Saudi ones like Iqra, al-Majd, Annaas etc. This religious transformation has at times also featured elements of sectarian rhetoric, which takes aim at Shia Hizballah in order to foster a sense of unity within the Sunni community. Additionally, the Lebanese authorities' discrimination against refugees and the lack of a coherent refugee policy have left the camp residents in a state of poverty. Finally, there is growing bitterness at the retreat from the Palestinian national project due to the infighting between Hamas and Fatah in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as the American occupation in Iraq in 2003 and their military and political intervention in the region.

The research work of Laleh Khalili concerning Palestinian commemorative practices widely illustrates these changes.⁴⁶ According to her, in the 1970s these practices were related to transnational ideologies and world events. At that time, the PLO was a liberation movement connected to other world liberation organizations. However, from the 1990s onwards, the collapse of the communist bloc and the rise of Islamism interacted with the fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement to modify commemorative themes. The guerrilla hero melded with the image of the martyr, and heroic battles were replaced by massacres, which demonstrated a lack of hope and a prevailing retreat from the development of the national project.

In an attempt to understand to what degree Islamic movements are supported by young Palestinians in the camps, the International Information survey asked them "which of the main Islamic movements" projects performed up to their expectations". The majority of the youth (74.7%) responded that no one group lived up to their expectations, while a tiny percentage opted for the Islamist groups.⁴⁷

In contrast to the picture transmitted by the media, the vast majority of the youth do not believe violence against civilians to be "always justified". However, about 70 % maintain that they consider what is referred to as Palestinian suicide bombings to be martyrdom operations against their Israeli enemy and thus always justified. A smaller number (about 20%) find martyrdom operations to be "sometimes justified". Based on the latter two findings, it is obvious that the youth distinguish between resistance and terrorism. While the majority rejects indiscriminate violence, they consider martyrdom operations legitimate.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ International Information Survey of Media and Communication Channels, Actors and Messages in Palestinian Camps.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The focus group interviews with members of two of the Islamist movements, Usbat al-Ansar⁴⁹ and the Islamic Jihadist Movement⁵⁰, demonstrated that these groups are playing a major role in curtailing camp-based violence and not, as the Lebanese media would have it, simply generating it. Moreover, there is no evidence that camp-based Islamist groups are connected to al-Qaida, as stated by many Lebanese politicians and the media. Some of the Islamist groups inside the camps, while unaffiliated with al-Qaida, may nevertheless espouse rhetoric of “global jihad” similar to that of al-Qaida, and some groups have even sent men to Iraq to fight against the coalition forces. Let us argue that in 2000’s tremendous change has been observed in the organization and outlook of these Islamist groups: the dissolution of Jund al-Sham⁵¹, the near-elimination of Fatah al-Islam and the political transformation of Usbat al-Ansar into a more mainstream Islamist group with a local social agenda rather than a global *jihadist* one.⁵² Thus, this paper is trying to debunk the sweeping image of Ayn al-Hilweh as a stronghold of al-Qaida⁵³, and the claim that there is a significant shift in the identity of camp residents from national identity towards a broader Islamic identity.⁵⁴ Even if there is an unresolved problem of “fugitive” Palestinians inside the camp, their purported contribution to a “global jihad” is no different from that of any Sunni locality in the region. Recently, the PLO, Hamas and other political groups sought to consolidate the camp’s many factions and organized a follow-up security committee composed of all the secular and Islamist parties. In December 2011, the PLO established a new police force in the camp that included most, but not all factions, yet the internal divisions within Fatah remain the main impediment to this effort. The case of Ayn al-Hilweh is therefore different from that of Nahr al-Bared, where the presence of Fatah al-Islam was primarily a phenomenon in the camp and not of the camp, that is, the militants used the camps for “strategic localization”⁵⁵ in order to wage guerrilla warfare. Thus, Fatah al-Islam’s presence in Nahr al-Bared was an exception rather than a typical case. There is no global al-Qaida phenomenon among the Palestinians in Lebanon.

⁴⁹ The League of Partisans (*Usbat al-Ansar*) was founded in 1986 and boasts a strong presence in the Ayn al-Hilweh camp.

⁵⁰ The Islamic Jihadist Movement (*al-Harakatal Islamiyya al-Mujahida*) was very popular in the 1980s, but lost influence after being banned in Lebanon in 1991.

⁵¹ Jund al-Sham is an Usbat al-Ansar splinter group. Its members were originally located in the Taamir neighborhood adjoining Ayn al-Hilweh camp before moving to the Tawareh area in the camp.

⁵² A PLO official claimed that there were plans to transform the camp into a stronghold of al-Qaida

⁵³ Hazem Al-Amin, *The Lonely Salafist: A Palestinian Face of the Global jihad and al-Qaida* (in Arabic), Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2009.

⁵⁴ Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵⁵ Knudsen, “Islamism in the Diaspora: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon”, 216-234.

The Islamists in Ayn al-Hilweh do not have a military agenda in Lebanon. Instead, a lot of Palestinian refugees in mid-2009 found that they were staying operational, waiting for the day to fight for Palestine. A leader of Usbat al-Ansar argued that the Ayn al-Hilweh camp was being targeted by the media and Lebanese politicians in order to destabilize Lebanon and create sectarian tensions (Sunni-Shia). A leader of the Islamic Jihadist Movement claimed, “The objective of some Lebanese authorities is to make Ayn al-Hilweh become like Nahr al-Bared in order to destroy it”. However, Islamist actors recognize the specificity of Ayn al-Hilweh, arguing that unlike the other camps, “the presence of Islamists in Ayn al-Hilweh is an integral part of camp life. We have been here since the 1970s. We are not foreigners. Our main objective is to help people to abide by Islamic values. Historically, our social environment is plagued by alcoholism, delinquency and drugs”.⁵⁶

The Islamist Party of Liberation (Hizb al-Tahrir) is also active in the Ayn al-Hilweh camp. A party member in the camp stated, “Since its establishment, Hizb al-Tahrir has denounced any participation in the political system, such as joining committees or other elected councils. Hizb al-Tahrir thus does not have any political agenda in Lebanon. We are a party that preaches the good of Islam and is interested in a social agenda. We do not have even light arms in Lebanon”.⁵⁷

On behalf of Islamic Jihad, which is a nationalist Islamist group, the group’s leader in Ayn al-Hilweh declared, “Yes, we are supported by Iran but we have an independent position. Our agenda is exclusively Palestine. We don’t even wish to operate from Lebanon. We are here to support our brothers in Palestine. We only have light individual arms here”.⁵⁸

Despite the fragmentation of the Islamic scene in Ayn al-Hilweh, there is one figure who is very influential and respected by the majority of the camp residents and political factions. He is Sheikh Jamal Khattab, the leader of the Islamic Jihadist Movement and imam of the camp’s al-Noor Mosque. For the past twenty years, he has intervened in all sorts of family, neighborhood and social problems. During his interviews about the security of the camp, Sheikh Khattab declared, “We cannot afford to threaten the security of the camp or its residents in order to protect one or more people. Safety of the camp is the most important consideration”. He was aware that some Lebanese authorities wanted to use Ayn al-Hilweh as a stronghold against Hizballah and emphasised the good relationship with this party by stating, “We have held several meetings with Hizballah and we supported

⁵⁶ Are Knudsen and Michael Kerr, eds, *Lebanon after the Cedar revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 118.

⁵⁷ Rosemary Sayigh, “A House is Not a Home: Permanent Impermanence of Habitat for Palestinian Expellees in Lebanon”, *Holy Land Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (2005): 17–39.

⁵⁸ Meltem İnce Yenilmez, The Impact of Forced Migration in the Middle East: Syrian and Palestinian Refugees, *PERCEPTIONS*, Vol. XXII, No 4,(2017):183-201.

them in the 2006 war by welcoming those displaced (from the south) to Ayn al-Hilweh. People here gave them blankets and food. We even sent blankets to Sidon. We didn't participate with Hizballah in the war because it was fought with rockets and not fighters. We only have light arms which would have been useless anyway. We have a very good relationship with some Lebanese Islamist groups".⁵⁹

Ayn al-Hilweh cannot be considered a hideout for al-Qaida fighters, nor does al-Qaida's "global jihad" find support among the camp population. Its influence among the residents is also insignificant, as the findings from the International Information survey demonstrate. They asked respondents (youth from the four camps) whether murdering civilians was justified in order to solve grievances with their government. The large majority, about 73 %, answered that such actions were "never justified" and only about 5% answered that they were "always justified".⁶⁰

Conclusion

The paper has aimed to challenge the misunderstanding that the Palestinian refugee camps are "islands of insecurity". As we have noted, the everyday violence prevalent in the camps is not the result of a militant ideology, but rather of discrimination, urban segregation and state violence. Both political and everyday violence are found in the camps.

The paper has demonstrated that internal camp governance in Lebanon is in a deep crisis. The popular committees have been delegitimized by both the Lebanese authorities and the camp population. This governance crisis may be aggravated in the near future. The recent uprising and crisis in Syria has resulted in refugees flowing across the border into Lebanon, and these new regional developments threaten the uneasy truce between the PLO and the many pro-Syrian regime factions in the camps. Weakened Syrian influence in Lebanon, likely a result of the "Arab spring" uprisings, could provoke conflict over power and authority within the camps, as opposing factions, including the PLO, seek greater influence at Syria's expense.

Islamism has emerged during the past decade and has become a new and powerful force in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. On the one hand it has compelled the people to behave in "sound" and "Islamic" ways, abating violence, delinquency and moral degeneration while simultaneously encouraging increased cooperation among neighbors, as well as improved health and social services. On the other hand, the Islamist factions have brought new problems with them, especially the inability to engage with existing or historical modes of governance, both Lebanese and Palestinian.

⁵⁹ Knudsen, *Lebanon after the Cedar revolution*, 119.

⁶⁰ International Information Survey of Media and Communication Channels, Actors and Messages in Palestinian Camps.