



REPORT FROM LEBANON

THE CURRENT POLITICAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, AND SECURITY SITUATION IN THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS OF LEBANON

JABER SULEIMAN

This report analyzes the political situation in the camps against the background of its historical genesis and in light of domestic and regional pressures and the changing organizational alliances of the various political factions involved. After looking at one camp, 'Ayn al-Hilwa, as a microcosm of the Palestinian scene in Lebanon, the author points out the differences in the other camps in other parts of the country.

THE CURRENT POLITICAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, and security situation in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon is the cumulative result of developments on the Palestinian scene in the wake of the PLO's withdrawal from Beirut in 1982, and especially since the inception of the peace process in Madrid and Oslo. But the situation is also complex and dynamic, differing in the various camps according to region and even within the same area, being subject to such factors as the distribution of Lebanese sects, the Syrian presence, and the nature and extent of enduring PLO alliances dating back to the pre-1982 period.

Despite differences from camp to camp, however, all are subject to the same basic parameters, at least since the Ta'if Accord of October 1989 that ended the Lebanese civil war. These parameters are subject to the Lebanese state's concerted effort to extend its authority and law over the whole of Lebanon. This domestic Lebanese agenda is, in turn, linked to the regional scene, namely the developments in the peace process, especially on the unified Syrian-Lebanese negotiating track. Thus, the whole issue of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon—and particularly the presence of the refugees—is directly linked to the evolution of the peace process and to the consequent ups and downs in Syrian-Lebanese-Palestinian relations.

JABER SULEIMAN, a visiting research fellow at the Refugee Studies Programme at Oxford University in 1997-98, is an independent researcher working in Lebanon.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1948–90)

Statistics concerning the Palestinian presence in Lebanon are always politically loaded, given the delicate sectarian balance and demographic sensitivities in the country.¹ Most reliable estimates agree that the number of Palestinians currently residing in Lebanon is around 350,000. More than half live in the twelve refugee camps distributed around the country, with the remainder living in the major cities and towns as well as in rural settlements, especially in the south.

To prepare the ground for an analysis of the current situation, it is useful to begin by summarizing the main historical developments that led up to the current historical phase. The history of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon can be divided into the following main phases:

Adaptation and Hope (1948–58). This phase began with a welcoming stance toward the Palestinians seeking refuge in Lebanon both by the Lebanese government and the population at large. It was also characterized by a relatively acceptable level of freedom of expression and political activity.

First Crackdown and Covert Activity (1958–69). This phase began with the Arab nationalist rebellion against President Camille Chamoun in 1958, which resulted in the coming to power of General Fuad Chehab. Towards the end of this phase, the Palestinian resistance established its first bases in southern Lebanon and began to launch guerrilla raids on Israel, prompting Israeli aerial bombardment and other attacks on Lebanon. Chehab's regime initiated an aggressive policy toward the Palestinians, subjecting the camps to tight control, which led to the 1969 "uprising in the camps" against the Lebanese security forces. The phase ended with the 3 November 1969 Cairo accords signed by the PLO and the Lebanese state, which effectively sanctioned Palestinian guerrilla activity in Lebanon.

Overt Activity and Institution-Building (1969–82). This phase was characterized by a sharp increase in political, military, and organizational activity, in addition to union action, cultural endeavors, and the building of social institutions. Especially after the outbreak of the civil war in 1975 and the weakening of the central authority, Palestinian political and military power continued to grow until the PLO was expelled from Lebanon following Israel's 1982 invasion, at times constituting a "state within a state" and challenging Lebanese sovereignty in parts of the country, particularly the south. The resulting atmosphere of distrust has continued to characterize Palestinian-Lebanese relations in subsequent phases.

Discord and Internecine Conflict (1982–85). Even after the PLO's ejection from Lebanon and the collapse of most of its institutions in the country, Palestinian forces continued to be deployed in the north and the Biqa' Valley.

This phase, during which the Palestinian population was under attack both by Israel and the Lebanese right-wing forces, was dominated by a split within Fatah on 9 May 1983, which had a profound impact on the political and organizational situation in the camps of Lebanon. The Fatah breakaway faction led by Abu Musa gained the support of Syria and engaged in armed confrontation with loyalist forces in northern Lebanon and the Biqa' Valley. These confrontations ended with the defeat of the loyalists led by PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat, who had returned to Lebanon to direct the battles, and their evacuation from the camps near Tripoli. Meanwhile, the Fatah dissidents joined with the other opposition groups to form the Damascus-based National Salvation Front (NSF)² and were able thanks to Syrian support to rebuild their bases in the camps of Beirut and some camps in southern Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal from parts of the south.

War of the Camps (1985–89). Despite the defeat of the Arafatist forces in Tripoli, the Lebanese Amal militia launched a war against the Palestinian camps in Beirut and southern Lebanon in mid-May 1985, ostensibly to liquidate all pro-Arafat Palestinian forces remaining in the country. This war rearranged the alliances within the camps, since the NSF and Amal, both Syrian allies, were on opposite sides, with the NSF undertaking the defense of the camps against Amal's indiscriminate attacks. Amal's unrelenting siege, during which hundreds of Palestinians died,³ continued until 16 January 1988, when it was finally lifted under Syrian pressure shortly after the beginning of the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories.

The War of the Camps gave way to a period of intra-Palestinian conflict: now that Amal's siege was over, loyalist and opposition forces battled it out in Shatila camp in Beirut. The conflict ended with the removal of loyalist forces from Beirut and their redeployment in the camps of southern Lebanon. At the end of this period, the camps of southern Lebanon (Rashidiyya, al-Bass, Burj al-Shamali, 'Ayn al-Hilwa, and Mieh Mieh) were controlled by Fatah and loyalist contingents of the PLO, while the camps of Beirut (Burj al-Barajneh, Shatila, and Mar Elias) and northern Lebanon (Baddawi and Nahr al-Barid) came under the control of the NSF—though both groups maintained a presence in all camps. Meanwhile, the War of the Camps resulted in the withdrawal of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) from the NSF and its alliance with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).

TA'IF, OSLO, AND BEYOND (1990–PRESENT)

The current phase, which begins with the return of civil harmony to Lebanon, is marked by five landmark political events that took place outside Lebanon but which had a profound impact on the Palestinian scene in Lebanon: the Ta'if agreement, which put an end to the Lebanese civil war in 1989; the Madrid peace conference, which brought together the major parties to the

Arab-Israeli conflict in October 1991; the Israeli-PLO Oslo accords of September 1993; the Gaza session called to abrogate the PLO charter in December 1998; and the convening of the Palestinian opposition groups in Damascus to counter this move. Many of the developments that have marked the current phase of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon can be traced to the repercussions of these defining political episodes. The effects of these events will be summarized below.

The Ta'if and Madrid Conferences. The official Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue formally resumed in the atmosphere of openness that followed Ta'if.⁴ After years of lack of contact, the first official meeting took place at the Arab foreign ministers' meeting in Cairo in mid-May 1991 between Lebanese foreign minister Faris Buwayz and PLO Political Department head Faruq al-Qaddumi. The two men agreed to resume the dialogue in Lebanon, and a Lebanese ministerial committee headed by Minister of Defense Muhsin Dallul and including Brigadier General Nabih Farhat was created to take charge of the dialogue. The Cairo meeting was followed by two sessions in Beirut: a political meeting between Buwayz and Qaddumi, and a procedural session between General Farhat and Salah Salah, an official of the Leadership of Palestinian National Action in Lebanon.⁵

A three-point agenda was discussed at the Salah-Farhat meeting: (1) the Palestinian military presence in Lebanon, (2) the security situation in the camps, and (3) the social and civil rights of Palestinians in Lebanon. This was followed by meetings between Defense Minister Dallul and Salah. According to the Palestinian version of events, an agreement, never published, was reached whereby the Palestinians would hand over their heavy and medium weaponry and redeploy Palestinian military personnel inside the refugee camps, in exchange for the Lebanese government's agreement to give the Palestinians civil and social rights (short of citizenship and eligibility for government positions).⁶ At all events, Palestinian weapons were handed over and military personnel withdrew into the camps, with limited skirmishes taking place east of Sidon. On 27 June 1991, the Lebanese army took up positions in Sidon and the rest of the south.

In the wake of these developments, a new Lebanese ministerial committee, composed of Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Abdallah al-Amin and Minister of Agriculture Shawqi Fakhuri, was formed to conduct the dialogue. The Palestinians, meanwhile, responding to the ministerial committee's charge that there was no single Palestinian position, formed a new unified Palestinian committee including Salah (representing the Leadership of Palestinian National Action) and Fadl Shururu (representing the NSF). At the first meeting in September 1991, the Palestinian delegation submitted to the ministerial committee a memorandum entitled "The Civil and Social Rights of the Palestinian People,"⁷ but the Lebanese committee requested more time to study the Palestinian demands, and the dialogue never resumed. It has been suggested that the indefinite suspension of the talks may be linked to the

formation, not long after the September meeting, of the multilateral Refugee Working Group following the Madrid Conference in October 1991; the Lebanese government may have wanted to see how the talks developed and to avoid making what it considered unjustified concessions.

In sum, these developments resulted in the deployment of the Lebanese army in south Lebanon and the establishment of checkpoints at the entrances to the four refugee camps there, which became subject to close surveillance. Internally, the camps of the south remained under the control of the loyalists.

The Oslo Accords. In the wake of the Oslo accords, Palestinians were split among supporters and detractors. Some resistance groups, including the DFLP, the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF), the Arab Liberation Front (ALF), and the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), even split into two factions—one supporting Oslo based in the areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the other opposing Oslo centered either in Damascus or (in the case of the ALF) Baghdad. In 1993, the opposition formed an alliance called the Coalition of Ten Contingents,⁸ but after the DFLP withdrew in 1997, the coalition was formally renamed the Palestinian National Alliance (though “Group of Ten” continues to be used in common parlance). The Fatah-Revolutionary Council (the Abu Nidal group), which operates mainly in secrecy, remained outside the oppositional coalition, while the DFLP, even after leaving the “Ten,” continued to be allied with PFLP in the “unified leadership” that the two organizations had agreed to (as a new manifestation of their alliance) in 1992.

These political configurations at the wider Palestinian level were reflected

in organizational realignments inside the camps. However, the disarray in the Palestinian movement as a whole precipitated by Oslo did not produce any real fighting among the Palestinian groups in Lebanon, though the propaganda war intensified. The heightened tensions between the loyalist PLO groups and the opposition has made any kind of real cooperation

within the camps impossible, exacerbating the competition for resources and the unnecessary duplication of services.

The heightened tensions between the loyalist PLO groups and the opposition has made any kind of real cooperation impossible.

The Damascus Conference and Gaza Legislative Session. The PLO leadership’s acquiescence, at the behest of Israel and the United States, to amend or abrogate various articles of the PLO charter led to further realignments within the resistance movement as a whole, at the national level. In an effort to preempt the amendment session held by the Palestinian Council in Gaza on 14 December 1998, the oppositional National Alliance held a two-day conference in Damascus on 12 and 13 December, which was attended by around 350 Palestinian opposition figures from Syria, Lebanon, and other countries. The conference produced a Higher National Follow-Up Commit-

tee charged with “outlining a new form for the national project.”⁹ In Lebanon, the Damascus conference had the effect of reviving the opposition alliance, giving the groups a focus in opposing the abrogation of the charter and reaffirming some of the traditional positions of the Palestinian movement.

THE VIEW FROM ‘AYN AL-HILWA

In order to address the current Palestinian political and organizational situation in Lebanon without dealing individually with the various camps in different parts of the country, this report will focus on the scene in ‘Ayn al-Hilwa camp. Though ‘Ayn al-Hilwa has distinctive elements, it is in many ways a microcosm of the entire Palestinian scene in Lebanon and contains in miniature most of the important features present in the other camps.

With 40,000 officially registered refugees according to UNRWA figures, ‘Ayn al-Hilwa is not only the largest camp in Lebanon but is also the political and commercial center for various surrounding neighborhoods and informal settlements with a majority Palestinian population. The camp lies on the outskirts of the southern Lebanese port city of Sidon, which has a majority Sunni Muslim population but which serves as the gateway to southern Lebanon with its majority Shi’a population—a significant fact in Lebanon’s delicate sectarian calculations. Sidon had always been one of the strongholds of PLO presence outside Beirut in the pre-1982 period, serving as logistical center for the Palestinian forces in southern Lebanon. The PLO’s strong local alliances at the time, especially with the Popular Nassirite Organization then led by left-wing leader Ma’ruf Sa’d, still survive to an extent despite the different context and conditions.

Security Islands Beyond the Law?

‘Ayn al-Hilwa is seen by many Lebanese as epitomizing the conflicted relationship between Lebanese officialdom and the Palestinian population in Lebanon, and, more particularly, the status of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon as “beyond the reach of Lebanese law.” This perception is fueled by a series of assassinations and counter assassinations, conflicts and in-fighting among Palestinian factions—especially between Fatah and Islamist groups such as Islamic Jihad and the Ansar Group. These have accelerated in the past year, though there was some score settling in the few years prior to the latest spate of assassinations. Among the more prominent of these events were a car bomb attempt on the life of Islamic Jihad official Muhammad al-Majzub in October 1998 and the assassinations of Fatah security officials Colonel Amin Kayid and Captain Jamal al-Dayikh (aka Jamal al-Dib) on 19 May and 21 May 1999 respectively.

The perception of ‘Ayn al-Hilwa and of the camps in general as being beyond the law is likewise fanned by rumors of outlaws finding refuge there. In 1996, for example, after the leader of the Ansar Group, Ahmad ‘Abd al-

Karim al-Sa'di (code named Abu Mihjan), was sentenced to death in absentia by the Lebanese judiciary for the 1996 murder of a rival in Beirut,¹⁰ he was

The perception of the camps as places beyond the law is fanned by rumors of outlaws finding refuge there.

widely reported to have been sheltered in 'Ayn al-Hilwa.¹¹ Similar rumors followed the assassination of four Lebanese judges at the criminal court in Sidon on 8 June 1999 and the disappearance of the perpetrators. Though a number of Lebanese officials, including the president, called on the public not to jump to conclusions concerning the identity of the killers,

prominent personalities such as Maronite League official Shakir Abu Sulayman stated that what happened in Sidon was the result of the existence of "security islands" that lay outside the authority of the state.

The Lebanese media have been particularly active in feeding the perception of lawlessness ever since the national workers' strike of 19 July 1996, when clashes in Sidon between police and demonstrators were described in Lebanese official circles as the doings of Palestinian provocateurs receiving orders from "abroad."¹² The term "islands of security" has become a much-used euphemism for the Palestinian camps. Following the Sidon killings of the judges in June, prominent journalist Jibran Tuwayni wrote in the supplement to the daily *al-Nahar*, "We do not intend to accuse the Palestinians of the massacre in Sidon before the investigation has ended. But the mere presence of Palestinian camps outside the authority of the state, with their weaponry and armed elements, naturally leads one to point fingers at the prime cause behind the security disorder and to the situation of disarray inside the Palestinian camps." Tuwayni also called on the state to neutralize the "security islands" by entering into the camps, so that "the cancellation of the Cairo Accord [of 1969] is not just a symbolic act."¹³

In actual fact, the charge that the camps are "security islands" beyond the law is false. The Lebanese Internal Security Forces do enter the camps in coordination with camp authorities to arrest suspects and carry out similar missions. They also have informers and other contacts inside the camps. But the Lebanese state appears unwilling for political reasons to base the police or army in the camps, preferring to leave internal policing to the various Palestinian factions operating in the camps. Thus, while the camps are not regularly policed by Lebanese law enforcement, they are not beyond the reach of Lebanese law.

The Principal Actors on the Scene

'Ayn al-Hilwa, like all the Palestinian camps, is home to a plethora of Palestinian parties and forces. In general, as in other camps in Lebanon, these can be divided into four basic groups—loyalist, Islamist, and oppositional, with the PFLP/DFLP forming a separate group¹⁴ that oscillates between the loyalists and opposition depending on the issue.¹⁵ In the case of 'Ayn al-Hilwa, the Arafatist groups have recently regained the upper hand, after having undergone a long eclipse beginning with the Lebanese army's redeploy-

ment in the south in the summer of 1991 and increased Syrian presence, and exacerbated following the signing of the Oslo accords. In general, however, it should be noted that the realignments and political machinations have little effect on ordinary camp residents' lives, the political groups by and large remaining distant from their concerns.¹⁶ The groups are listed below.

The Coalition of Fatah and the Contingents of the PLO. This coalition, which includes the PLF, PPSF, and the People's party (the Palestinian Communist party) in addition to the dominant Fatah, is headed by Sultan Abu al-'Aynayn, nominally the secretary general of the leadership of Fatah and the PLO contingents in Lebanon, who generally resides in Rashidiyya camp. After five years of a crippling split within 'Ayn al-Hilwa's Fatah forces, a reconciliation was effected late in 1998 with the return to the fold of Colonel Munir al-Maqdah after having formed what he called the "Fatah Movement to Liberate the Whole of Palestine," in the wake of Oslo. Maqdah's movement, which remained localized, was primarily a manifestation of tensions within Fatah in the areas outside the occupied territories caused partly by competition over resources, and never really represented a force on the ground. The movement's primary importance was that it further weakened the Fatah/PLO forces within the camp, allowing for ever increasing challenges from the secular opposition and the Islamist groups.

The Islamist Forces. The Islamist Forces do not represent a unified bloc but consist of a plethora of competing and sometimes conflicting forces. In general, there has been a gradual rise in the importance of the Islamist groups in the camps since 1982, partly in reaction to the defeat of the secular PLO at the time of Israel's invasion, and nourished by the rise of Islamist groups in Lebanon, especially Hizballah. The most prominent organizations are the following:

- The Ansar Group: Because of the media attention that the group attracted after being implicated in the 1996 assassination of Shaykh Nizar Halabi in Beirut, which intensified after being accused in the media of killing the four judges in Sidon this July, the group has gone underground and now operates in partial secrecy. But it still maintains a visible presence in the camp and plays the role of a "moral police force" and competes with Fatah in providing basic services, such as water pumps, to the residents of the camp.
- Islamic Philanthropic Association: The adherents of this group are popularly known as "Ahbash" (singular: *Habashi*, meaning Ethiopian), in reference to its spiritual leader Shaykh Abdullah al-Harari, who comes from the city of Harar in Ethiopia and who currently resides in Beirut. The association is active in both Lebanese and Palestinian circles and was represented by a member of parliament in the previous Lebanese legislature. The Association is outspoken in expressing abso-

lute support for Syria on public occasions, particularly for Syrian policy concerning Lebanon and the Middle East peace process.

- **Islamic Grouping (al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya):** It is not clear whether this organization exists independently or whether it is simply the Palestinian branch of the Lebanese organization of the same name (part of the wider Muslim Brotherhood movement). In any case, it has a presence in the camp and a number of Palestinian followers.
- **Hamas and Islamic Jihad:** While the focus of their activities is in Palestine proper, they have representatives, spokespersons, and supporters (rather than regular members) in the refugee camps in Lebanon. As members of the oppositional National Alliance, they share the secular opposition's positions with regard to the PLO and the peace process, though, as Islamist organizations, their stances on other issues differ.
- **Miscellaneous Islamist Groups:** Among the smaller Islamist groups represented in the camp is the movement of Shaykh Jamal Salman, associated with the Lebanese Hizballah and whose members fight alongside Hizballah against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

Unified Leadership of the PFLP and DFLP. This alliance has not been constant, but has been dissolved and reconstituted a number of times, subject mainly to the vicissitudes of the peace process. At this point, it would appear that the DFLP is closer to Fatah while the PFLP is closer to the opposition, though the PFLP itself is now viewed with suspicion by some members of the opposition for opening a dialogue with Arafat in August 1999 (see below). Despite the formal break in the alliance and the political tensions following DFLP Secretary General Nayif Hawatmah's handshake with Israeli president Ezer Weizman at King Hussein's funeral in Amman, the organizations continue to coordinate their activities for practical reasons. Both the PFLP and DFLP have organizational bureaus and run popular activities in 'Ayn al-Hilwa, channelling their services to camp residents through the Popular and Union Action Bureau of the PFLP and DFLP.

Palestinian National Alliance. The main opposition coalition, successor to the "Ten Contingents," is represented in 'Ayn al-Hilwa mainly by the PFLP-General Command and Sa'iq. (The PFLP, though officially a member on the Palestinian-wide level, moves more or less independently in the camps and seems to maintain a relative distance from the alliance there, while Hamas and Islamic Jihad are dealt with under the Islamist Forces.) The other opposition contingents maintain a largely symbolic presence in the camp.

Trade Union Groups. In addition to the political forces, many of the trade unions and associations maintain branches in the camp. Following the PLO's evacuation from Beirut in 1982, the unions were reconstituted without reference to their official bylaws concerning membership, elections, and so on;

because their reorganization was on partisan and undemocratic bases, they lost touch with the sectors they were supposed to represent. Among the unions with a presence in the camps are the General Union of Palestinian Workers, General Union of Palestinian Women, General Union of Palestinian Jurists, and General Union of Palestinian Engineers. While some of these groups do provide some services (e.g., the women's union runs nurseries and kindergartens), most have a primarily symbolic presence.

The essentially "paper existence" of the unions provides a good example of the way the factions function. With both the loyalists and the opposition liking to claim that they constitute the "real" PLO and the true spirit of the Palestinian national movement, both lay claim to Palestinian institutions, including the unions—even if the unions are effectively an empty shell in the camps of Lebanon. Thus does the *modus operandi* privilege political maneuvering over genuine grass-roots work.

Village Committees. A truly grass-roots phenomenon, the village committees were formed because of the collapse of the social security system maintained by the institutions of the PLO in the pre-1982 phase. Building on forms of social support and cohesion characteristic of village society before 1948, they group together individuals with common origins in various towns and villages of Palestine before 1948. The committees, found in all the camps of Lebanon,¹⁷ are the only bodies that have no connection whatsoever to the political contingents. They are, however, tolerated by the political contingents for two reasons: (1) because they are not in direct competition for political influence and do not play an overt political role; and (2) because they are too powerful, being based on historic communal ties that the political groups probably cannot break. The village committees often help out with funerals, marriages, and the like by providing a place to hold ceremonies, aiding with expenses, and so on.

A similar grass-roots phenomenon is the so-called "effective figures" (*fa'aliyat*), generally independent individuals (though they may have had political affiliations in the past) who enjoy a degree of popular influence because of their social or professional standing or because of their traditional status in society. Such figures often mediate conflicts between the various political groups.

Popular Committees. In terms of governance in the camps, this function was originally fulfilled at least to an extent by the Popular Committees set up as a result of the political vacuum created by the departure of the PLO in 1982 in the wake of the Cairo agreements of 1969 to serve a quasi-municipal function. With the fragmentation and duplication that has increasingly marked the camps since the withdrawal of the PLO in 1982, several such bodies linked to the various political forces now exist simultaneously. In 'Ayn al-Hilwa, the Popular Committee was originally controlled by the loyalist forces but later, with the weakening of Fatah, it was taken over by the opposition,

in particular Sa'iqā (whose representative holds the chairmanship). Despite Fatah's progressive resurgence, the committee continues to be controlled by the National Alliance. Meanwhile, Fatah and the loyalist PLO contingents have set up their own "Popular Action Council" in an effort to duplicate the role of the Popular Committee (which is a quasi-official body); the PFLP and DFLP have done likewise with the analogous body they control, the Popular and Union Action Bureau. While in some camps the committees try to secure water distribution, build reservoirs, and extend electricity and phone lines, this is not always allowed by the Lebanese authorities, and for the most part their role today is more limited than in the past.

The diversity of the organizational landscape creates an atmosphere of competition and partisanship, resulting in the absence of a single "referential authority" (*marja'iyya*) that can speak for the people of the camp. This has a negative impact on people's lives, since it interferes with the smooth resolution of pressing social problems. For example, the current Director of UNRWA has recently received three memoranda from three different organizations in 'Ayn al-Hilwa (the Popular Committee, Popular Action Council, and Popular and Union Action Bureau), all of which repeat the same basic demands. Similarly, when European Union envoy Miguel Moratinos and the coordinator of the Refugee Working Group of the multilateral negotiations Andrew Robinson visited 'Ayn al-Hilwa in 1997 on separate fact-finding missions, they each had to meet with several different groups and to repeat the same discussions. Therefore, one of the main challenges facing Palestinian society in the refugee camps of Lebanon is the lack of a political and social authority that is regarded by the Palestinians themselves, as well as by others, as their legitimate representative.

VARIATIONS IN OTHER CAMPS

To what extent does the above sketch of the political and organizational situation in 'Ayn al-Hilwa fit the rest of the refugee camps in Lebanon? The same groups are found in all the camps of southern Lebanon, with only slight variations in configuration. Burj al-Shamali and Rashidiyya (near Tyre), for example, never fell under Syrian control, so the opposition was never strong in either camp. Rashidiyya, in particular, has always been Fatah's main stronghold in Lebanon and the headquarters of Sultan Abu al-'Aynayn. It was thus that the Popular Committees in those two camps always remained in the hands of Fatah and the PLO contingents, though in Burj al-Shamali there is also a committee consisting of representatives of the opposition National Alliance known as the Follow-Up Committee.

Burj al-Shamali has a number of other distinctive features. Some additional Islamist groups—the Islamic Liberation party and the Da'wah party—are active there. Burj al-Shamali is unique in containing an appreciable number of residents who trace their origins to the so-called "Seven Villages" (originally considered to lie within Lebanese territory but annexed to British

Mandatory Palestine) and the villages of the Galilee panhandle. These residents were recently covered by a Lebanese naturalization decree, and many of them received Lebanese citizenship as a result.¹⁸ This development provided an opening for activity in the camp by some Lebanese parties and parliamentarians especially during the parliamentary campaign of 1996 and the municipal campaign of 1998.

The situation in the camps of Beirut, the Biqā', and the north differ insofar as they are securely under the control of the opposition rather than PLO loyalists—in all cases, for example, the Popular Committees are controlled by the opposition and there are no rival Fatah committees (though in the Beirut and Biqā' camps Fatah does maintain low-profile offices and individual supporters). In the northern camps, there is virtually no Arafatist presence at all, and the ascendancy of the opposition has been unchallenged since the split within Fatah in 1983. Because the oppositional National Alliance is so strong in the northern camps, the Popular Committees also have a stronger hold there and play a greater role. It is because of the greater strength of the opposition, too, that the Hawatmah-Weizmann handshake had greater impact in the north, leading to the DFLP's ejection from the Popular Committees and internecine conflict in Baddawi camp. The northern camps also manifest significant activity by the principal Islamist groups, such as the Ahbash (Islamic Philanthropic Association) and the Islamic Grouping (al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya), both of which have a strong presence in Baddawi and Nahr al-Barid, where there are also followers of the Islamic Liberation party, the Da'wah party, and Wahhabi groups. The camps of northern Lebanon feature appreciable activity by the village committees and associations, in addition to local branches of professional unions (engineers, drivers, nurses, doctors, jurists, teachers, etc.). Generally speaking, there is an attitude of greater openness and tolerance in northern Lebanon toward the Palestinian refugee camps there, perhaps because their distance from the border with Israel reduces the security problems surrounding them. For example, some unions and professional associations in the north allow Palestinians to become members. Political parties, elected officials, and the institutions of civil society in northern Lebanon all exhibit greater concern for the plight of the Palestinian camp dwellers and their problems.

COMPETITION OVER AUTHORITY

The current situation, following the election of Ehud Barak as Israeli prime minister and the likelihood of a serious resumption of Arab-Israeli negotiations, is characterized by a jockeying for position on the part of all the major players in the camps.

In competing to be recognized as the sole referential authority for the Palestinians in Lebanon, the principal actors have recently intensified their efforts on three fronts: dialogue with the Lebanese state (represented by the new Lahoud regime), consolidation of their position inside the camps, and

reconstitution of alliances both inside and outside the framework of the PLO. Three main developments can be isolated as contributing to this competitive atmosphere:

First are the repeated visits to Beirut made by PLO Executive Committee member As'ad 'Abd al-Rahman, who holds the refugee portfolio in the PA. The 25 April 1999 memorandum submitted by 'Abd al-Rahman to the Lebanese cabinet member charged with Palestinian affairs, Minister of Telecommunications Isam Na'man, calls on the government to issue an executive order or propose parliamentary legislation granting Palestinians in Lebanon civil and social rights. This is the principal demand, but the memorandum also calls for the formation of social authorities in each of the camps akin to municipalities and village councils, which would be subject to Lebanese legislation concerning municipal bodies.¹⁹

Almost at the same time, a delegation representing the Palestinian National Alliance, composed of some of the members of the follow-up committee created by the Damascus conference of December 1998, met with high-level Lebanese officials, including President Lahoud. This delegation, headed by Khalid al-Fahum, former head of the Palestine National Council, called on the Lebanese to regard the members of the delegation residing in Lebanon as the link with a Palestinian referential authority.

Meanwhile, the Fatah movement has taken various initiatives in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon, especially 'Ayn al-Hilwa. These were focused on conscripting new recruits and reshuffling some leadership positions, particularly the command of the militia.²⁰ At the same time, some of the PLO contingents allied with Fatah, such as the PPSF and the PLF, reopened their offices in 'Ayn al-Hilwa for the first time since the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993. These developments caused some consternation among supporters of the National Alliance in the camp, who saw them as a sign that Fatah intended to revitalize its political, social, and security role in Lebanon with 'Ayn al-Hilwa as its base.²¹

A fourth development that could contribute to the competitive atmosphere are the recent initiatives by Fatah to open a dialogue with some of the resistance contingents not represented in the PA, especially the PFLP and DFLP. The first high-ranking meeting between Fatah and the PFLP took place in Cairo on 2 August 1999 and resulted in a communiqué that called the meeting "a prelude to a comprehensive national dialogue between the main forces on the Palestinian scene in order to face upcoming challenges."²² The Fatah-PFLP meeting took place under a media spotlight, partly because it occurred in the wake of press reports that Syrian vice president 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam had informed the Palestinian opposition contingents based in Damascus that the stage of armed struggle had ended and that they should turn to political, informational, and social activities. When the PFLP reported back on the meeting to the other contingents that had taken part in the Damascus conference, some did not hide their displeasure, while others expressed caution. A similar dialogue took place shortly afterward between

Fatah and the DFLP in the form of a summit meeting in Cairo on 22 August 1999, which was also regarded as a prelude to a more comprehensive inter-Palestinian dialogue. In the wake of these meetings, the PA called for a national dialogue to be held in Ramallah before the resumption of final status talks.

The results of the inter-Palestinian dialogue, events on the Lebanese domestic scene, and regional developments will together determine the future of the political situation in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

NOTES

1. The number of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA up until 31 March 1999 was 368,527, of whom 201,226 (54.6%) live in the camps. The UNRWA figure may include some registered refugees who are currently not in Lebanon or ones who have acquired other nationalities (including Lebanese nationality). See "UNRWA Registration Statistical Bulletin for First Quarter 1999," Department of Relief and Social Services, April 1999, tables 1 and 3, pp. 4 and 11.

2. The members of the NSF were Fateh-Uprising, PFLP, PFLP-GC, Palestine Liberation Front, Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, and Sa'iqa.

3. Estimates go as high as 2,500.

4. The details of this dialogue and its implications are summarized in a memorandum submitted to the Lebanese government in April 1999 by PLO Executive Committee member As'ad 'Abd al-Rahman, who heads the Palestinian Authority's Department for Refugee Affairs. The document, entitled "Memorandum Concerning a New Palestinian-Lebanese Relationship," and dated 25 April 1999, was submitted to the government following a meeting with President Emile Lahoud on 20 April 1999. The visit appeared to represent a new openness to dialogue with the PLO (see last section below).

5. The fact that Salah, a PFLP official, and the Leadership of Palestinian National Action, an opposition coalition, would take over contacts with the Lebanese state from the PLO's Qaddumi is an example of the complexities that exist within the PLO. It should be noted, however, that the dialogue with the Lebanese state involved the Palestinian presence and rights in Lebanon in general and was in that sense beyond party politics.

6. See the "Memorandum Concerning a New Palestinian-Lebanese Relationship."

7. The memorandum was signed by "The Unified Palestinian Delegation" and dated 12 August 1991. It addressed the following topics: residency, work, freedom of movement, education and professional training, institutions, trade unions, reconstruction of the camps, displaced persons, and democratic freedoms.

8. The ten contingents are Fatah-Uprising, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, Sa'iqa, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Palestine Liberation Front, Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, the Revolutionary Communist party, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad.

9. See Doc. B2 in *JPS* 111 for the conference's final statement.

10. Shaykh Nizar Halabi, leader of the Islamic Philanthropic Association.

11. At the time, the Lebanese army closed off all entrances to the camp, and reports circulated that it would be raided by the security forces, but no such action was taken.

12. Interior Minister Michel al-Murr spoke at the time of "suspect" characters, in an obvious reference to the denizens of the camps in the Sidon area, and suggested that the refugee camps posed a threat to Lebanese civil peace. Murr has consistently been the most outspoken of Lebanese officials on the Palestinian issue: following the June 1999 assassination of the Sidon judges, he spoke of the arms in the camps as a "threat to the security of the Lebanese outside the camps" and raised Lebanese demographic fears by charging that the natural annual rate of increase of Palestinians in Lebanon stands at 10 percent (Television interview on

"Kalam al-Nas," Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, 5 August 1999) whereas in fact that rate does not exceed 3.5 percent.

13. *Nahar al-Shabab*, no. 320 (15-21 June 1999).

14. It should be noted that while the PFLP has a separate alliance with the DFLP, it has continued simultaneously to be a member of the Palestinian National Alliance.

15. Following the oppositional Damascus conference of December 1998, the official spokesman of the conference, Dr. Anis Sayigh, predicted the emergence of a simpler configuration in Lebanon as regards the non-Islamist forces: two main groupings "standing face-to-face: Arafatists and their opponents." This assessment was based on the breakup of the PFLP-DFLP alliance following Hawatmah's violation of the resolutions of the unified leadership and the Palestine National Council and the perception that the PFLP would now move closer to the opposition. (See *al-Safir*, 23 April 1999.)

16. Many of the political groups do, however, provide certain services, particularly through NGOs, some of which are affiliated with one group or another. (For the history and legal status of Palestinian NGOs in Lebanon, see Jaber Suleiman, "Palestinians in Lebanon and the Role of

Non-Governmental Organizations," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 10 no. 3, pp. 397-410.) Activities consist of running children's nurseries and medical clinics as well as giving vocational training, literacy classes, handicraft workshops, and similar services. The Islamist groups also offer lessons in religion.

17. Among these committees are the following: the Committee of the People of al-Nahr, League of the People of Umm al-Faraj, League of Dayr al-Qasi, Committee of 'Alma, League of the People of Suhmata, League of the People of Qaditha, League of the Salem Family, League of the People of al-Suwayalat, and Committee of Bassa (which runs an academy for professional training).

18. Government of Lebanon, Decree no. 5247 of 1994.

19. Details are found in the document entitled "Memorandum Concerning a New Palestinian-Lebanese Relationship."

20. Fatah has a militia in the formal and nominal sense, though officially there are no heavy weapons in the camps. Most groups do not have formal militias, but many have full-time members on fixed salaries who carry personal weapons (automatic rifles, pistols, etc.).

21. *al-Safir*, 23 July 1999.

22. *al-Nahar*, 3 August 1999.