

# Palestinians in Lebanon

## Status, governance and security

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Palestinians in Lebanon have been ‘protracted’ refugees for over 60 years. They are often deprived of their socio-economic and civil rights, such as the right to work or practice professions, run businesses and own property. The majority are confined to camps or segregated settlements where they are partially dependent on humanitarian assistance and often live in poverty.

During the 1948 Israeli-Arab war some 100,000 Palestinians fled to Lebanon. Most refugees gathered in camps, and some intended as transit camps subsequently became permanent. The leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) relocated to Lebanon after it was expelled from Jordan in 1970, and the Lebanese refugee camps became the centre for Palestinian resistance.

**“Palestinians have been discriminated against by the Lebanese state for decades, and there are few signs that this will improve”**

Around 450,000 Palestinian refugees are currently registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Lebanon, which supports them through education, health care, relief, camp infrastructure and emergency response. However, a 2010 Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon by UNRWA and the American University in Beirut (AUB) and funded by the EU estimated that only 260–280,000 are actually resident in the country – 62 per cent of whom live in twelve camps across Lebanon, and the remaining 38 per cent in ‘gatherings’, largely in

the vicinity of camps. Many Palestinian refugees have left Lebanon, especially after the 1982 Israeli invasion and the ‘War of the Camps’.

Two thirds of Palestinian refugees are poor, which equates to an estimated 160,000 individuals; 6.6 per cent spend less than the monetary equivalent necessary to cover their basic daily food needs and live in extreme poverty.

### Legal and institutional discrimination

Palestinians have been discriminated against by the Lebanese state for decades, and there are few signs that this will improve. To take one example, a new law approved by the Lebanese parliament in 2010 to facilitate the employment of Palestinian refugees, in fact further institutionalised discrimination by prohibiting Palestinians from more than 30 ‘liberal’ professions – including medicine, law and engineering.

Owning property is also a major issue. Until 2001 non-Lebanese, including Palestinians, had the right to own property up to a certain size. However, in that year the Parliament adopted amendment 296 to the existing Presidential Decree 11614. This amendment, originally intended to encourage foreign investment, excludes individuals who do not have a recognised nationality from owning property. The new law also prevents Palestinian refugees from bequeathing their property, even if the property was acquired before 2001.

The naturalisation of Palestinians (*Tawteen*) is particularly controversial and potentially destabilizing for an already fragile country. Many Lebanese from all denominations oppose it. The majority of Christian Palestinian refugees were in fact naturalised in the 1950s. However, most



A Palestinian refugee shows her UNRWA card near the town of Tyre 2009 // © Julio Etchart/Panos

Agreement between Lebanon and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) facilitated the PLO presence in Lebanon. This provided the framework for the establishment of Palestinian popular committees to promote governance within the Palestinian camps. This was to take place under the umbrella of the PLO, which was at that time the federative structure of all Palestinian political parties, armed groups and social institutions in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Before this, camps in Lebanon had been managed according to the state of emergency policy.

Until 1982 the police were not allowed to enter camps without negotiating with the popular committees. The Palestinian resistance accommodated traditional authority structures by building upon customary procedures of dispute settlement. The camps witnessed the emergence of a new elite, whose legitimacy was based on the Palestinian national struggle under the leadership of the PLO. However, this situation changed after 1982 with the departure from Lebanon of PLO cadres and militants, such that participation in the national struggle was no longer sufficient to establish someone as a powerbroker.

After 1982, PLO popular and security committees were forced to dismantle almost entirely, except in the south. These were replaced by committees that were seen by camp populations as weaker and significantly pro-Syrian. This perception was cemented by their lack of financial resources and their lack of legitimacy due to the fact that they were not made up of elected members (as they had previously been), nor were they recognised by the Lebanese authorities. Camp residents instead looked to different actors like imams, local notables and local security leaders to resolve quarrels or problems before going to the police. Refugee camps no longer enjoyed harmonious communitarian structures, while social tensions were aggravated by rapid urbanisation and forced migration.

After the end of the civil war Palestinian armed groups and militias were kept out of the disarmament process. There has been a tacit Palestinian-Lebanese agreement since 1991 that neither the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) nor the Internal Security Forces (ISF) will enter the camps – although they are de facto present through informants and occasionally enter camps, while also controlling entry into the camps. As 'extra-territorial' spaces the refugee camps provide shelter for Lebanese and foreign criminals and extremist Islamist groups. In 1999 members of a Sunni radical group based in the Ain al-Hilweh camp killed four judges in the city of Sidon before escaping back to the camp.

Today there is a real crisis of governance in camps. Each is home to dozens of factions: PLO groups, pro-Syrian

Palestinians in Lebanon are Sunni, and their naturalisation would threaten the country's confessional balance. Meanwhile, Lebanese across confessions accuse Palestinians of involvement in crimes and destruction of property during the civil war. They hold them collectively responsible for the war. Indeed, reaction to discrimination against the Palestinians combined with tension over the autonomy of the Palestinian military vis-à-vis the Lebanese national army were major triggers for the war.

*Tawteen* is also strongly rejected by Palestinians, who insist on their right to return to Palestine. The 1993 Oslo Accords failed to secure the return of refugees, while Israel refused to let Palestinians originating from territories that are now a legal part of its state to return or enter the West Bank and Gaza. Some international initiatives have proposed to facilitate emigration of some Palestinians from Lebanon and the settlement of the remainder in Lebanon.

## Governance in camps

Governance of the camps has also provided sources of tension – between Lebanese and Palestinians, but also among Palestinians themselves. The 1969 Cairo

factions and Islamist militant groups. Popular and security committees seek to govern each camp under the supervision of the PLO or through coalitions of factions. They include appointed representatives from each faction, and are expected to keep the peace, solve internal disputes, provide security, interact with the Lebanese government and aid agencies, and generally administer the camp in coordination with UNRWA.

Popular committees are seen by many Palestinians as unable to, either agree on important issues, coordinate their activities, or protect their constituents from harassment by Lebanese security forces. They are also viewed as doing more to enable factional infighting and bolster patron-client politics than promoting Palestinian unity. Popular committees have scarce resources which hinder them from fulfilling their municipal functions. They lack skilled technical experts on urban regulations, water, sanitation and electricity and neither women nor youth are represented.

## Conclusion

Post-2005, what impact might the divergent attitudes of the 8 and 14 March coalitions have on the future of the Palestinians, such as their right to work or own property? While 14 March parties from all denominations oppose granting Palestinians the right to work and own property, resentment against Palestinians is also felt among Christian and Shia constituencies of 8 March parties who are likely to keep using the Palestinian issue for populist ends.

Allowing Palestinians in Lebanon to centralise and strengthen their own political and security authorities may increase their capacity to help the Lebanese state prevent outbreaks of violence linked to the camps – such as that which took place between Fatah al-Islam Sunni militants and the Lebanese army in the northern refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in 2007. Many refugees believe that popular committees and the political and military factions, in their present form, do not represent the best interests of Palestinians in Lebanon. This situation pushes many to be politically disillusioned, and a minority toward radicalisation.

Between December 2006 and March 2007, in the months leading up to the conflict in Nahr al-Bared, residents of the camp tried repeatedly to excise Fatah al-Islam members from their midst, and to this end the PLO even engaged in armed clashes with the Islamist militants. The outcome of these clashes, however, was inconclusive, and was dismissed by the Lebanese authorities as ‘routine’ Palestinian infighting, in spite of the fact that Fatah al-Islam was made up largely of non-Palestinians. The security committee of Nahr al-Bared and the PLO lacked both the resources and mandate to deal with Fatah al-Islam on their own.

This crisis of camp governance may be aggravated in the future. Recent uprisings in Syria have resulted in new flows of Syrian refugees across the Lebanese-Syrian border, and these new regional developments have threatened the uneasy truce between PLO and pro-Syrian factions. Weakened Syrian influence in Lebanon (a likely result of the Arab uprisings) could provoke renegotiations of power and authority in the refugee camps (especially in the Beddawi, Nahr al-Bared, Burj al-Barajneh, and Ain al-Hilweh camps), as opposing factions, including the PLO, seek greater influence at Syrian expense. History suggests that these sorts of renegotiations of power and authority in the camps by the factions generate conflict and often result in armed violence.

Camps in Lebanon comprise a complex tapestry of multiple and partial sovereignties: the Lebanese government; the PLO and other factions; as well as UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies. The only rational-legal act these ‘sovereigns’ can agree together is the imposition of temporary or emergency powers. A more constructive approach to governance and rights for Palestinians – inside and outside camps – would help to both clarify Lebanese sovereignty and bolster its security.

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