

**NURTURING INSTABILITY:
LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS**

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NURTURING INSTABILITY: LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The vast Palestinian refugee population is routinely forgotten and ignored in much of the Middle East. Not so in Lebanon. Unlike in other host countries, the refugee question remains at the heart of politics, a recurrent source of passionate debate and occasional trigger of violence. The Palestinian presence was a catalyst of the 1975-1990 civil war, Israel's 1982 invasion and Syrian efforts to bring the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) to heel. Virtually nothing has been done since to genuinely address the problem. Marginalised, deprived of basic political and economic rights, trapped in the camps, bereft of realistic prospects, heavily armed and standing atop multiple fault lines – inter-Lebanese, inter-Palestinian and inter-Arab – the refugee population constitutes a time bomb. Until the Arab-Israeli conflict is resolved, a comprehensive approach is required that clarifies the Palestinians' status, formally excludes their permanent settlement in Lebanon, significantly improves their living conditions and, through better Lebanese-Palestinian and inter-Palestinian coordination, enhances camp management.

The history of Lebanon's Palestinian population has been always tumultuous, often tragic. All sides are at fault. Although their presence at first was peaceful, it rapidly became militarised; by the late 1960s, the PLO advocated armed struggle against Israel, and in 1970 it transferred its leadership from Jordan to Lebanon. Palestinians also involved themselves directly in the domestic strife that marred Lebanon for close to two decades. Israel's invasion, aimed at destroying the PLO, led to large-scale devastation as well as the ugly massacre at the Sabra and Chatila camps conducted by a Lebanese militia under the Israeli military's passive eye. Syria, seeking to assert its hegemony over its neighbour and ensure control over the Palestinian national movement, conducted its own military campaign against Yasser Arafat and his followers. The Lebanese state distinguished itself by shameful treatment of its refugee population.

Today, the refugee question is intricately related to Lebanon's sectarian divisions. Palestinians are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims and, as the prospect of any significant return of refugees – most of whom have never set foot in their former homeland – to Israel diminishes, fear has revived of their permanent settlement or naturalisation (*tawtin*) in Lebanon, which would affect the confessional balance. The Christian leadership in particular has played on such apprehension, deploying it as a tool to mobilise its base. In turn, successive governments have enacted measures to foreclose any such possibility, notably by ensuring that refugees live in extremely precarious conditions. Refugee camps are denied basic public services; Palestinians face severe employment restrictions; and, more recently, have been denied property rights.

The effort to hold refugees at bay and prevent their social or economic absorption has dangerous implications. Because their presence is deemed to be temporary and justified by the unresolved conflict with Israel, Palestinians have been granted a remarkable degree of political autonomy. The notion of armed struggle in particular remains sacrosanct and is used as a reason for the existence of multiple paramilitary groups. In the wake of the civil war, manifestation of this right to armed resistance increasingly has lost its meaning: Palestinians can bear arms, but only in their camps and on a few training grounds; these in turn become zones of lawlessness that Lebanese authorities cannot enter; and their weapons are aimed not at Israel, the purported rationale for continued armed status, but inward. The explosive end result is camps that harbour a marginalised, impoverished population; an abundance of weapons; and a leadership that, no longer in a position to fight Israel, is adrift, without a sense of purpose.

The situation has become more complicated still. Palestinian camps are another instrument in the regional tug of war. For the West and its Lebanese allies who currently hold power, challenging the status quo in the camps is one way of advancing both Lebanon's

sovereignty and the cause of disarming *all* groups, Hizbollah included. The internal Palestinian conflict opposing Fatah and Hamas also manifests itself in the camps. For Syria, some of the Palestinian armed groups are cards to be used both in the context of negotiations with Israel and as allies on the Lebanese domestic scene. Finally, the spread of militant Islamist groups within the camps suggests they are becoming recruiting grounds for international jihadist movements.

Despite the gravity of the challenge, management of the crisis by all relevant players has left much to be desired. Given their fragmented and discredited national movement, Palestinian refugees seldom have been as deprived as they are today of a legitimate and recognised leadership capable of providing them with either concrete assistance or a vision for the future. Until very recently at least, the Lebanese government had adopted an exclusively reactive, security-minded posture, focused on containing the destabilising impact of the Palestinian presence and of its own misguided policies. Nor has the international community been of much help. By concentrating almost entirely on the disarmament issue, it has polarised the situation without in any way helping to resolve it. Meanwhile, it has reduced support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the body responsible for providing vital health, education and other relief and social services to refugees.

Such short-sightedness makes sense neither for Lebanon nor for broader pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. As Israeli and Palestinian negotiators know well, the refugee population in Lebanon constitutes one of the more vexing problems: Lebanese do not want them to be assimilated in their country; Israel will not allow them to return; they are well-armed, socially marginalised and economically disenfranchised; and they could well be mobilised by opponents of an eventual peace deal to undermine it.

In 2005, in the wake of Syria's military withdrawal from their country, members of Lebanon's political class began long-overdue discussion of these issues. However, the domestic Lebanese crisis quickly brought it to a standstill. Today, after the Doha agreement between Lebanese factions, formation of a unity government and election of a new president, the possibility once again exists for a serious dialogue aimed at better managing the Palestinian problem. The worrying recurrence of camp-related violence – and, most notably, the weeks of bloody confrontation in May-September 2007 between the army and Fatah al-Islam, a jihadist group based in the Nahr al-Bared camp – should be reason enough to act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Lebanese Parliament and Government:

1. Adopt a law clearly defining and delimiting the notion of settlement/naturalisation (*tawtin*) that will
 - a) restrict *tawtin* to the acquisition of Lebanese citizenship and/or the right to vote; and
 - b) provide Palestinian refugees with all fundamental rights short of *tawtin*, including the right to work and to own property.

To the Lebanese and Syrian Presidents:

2. Begin negotiations aimed at dismantling Palestinian military bases outside the refugee camps.

To the Lebanese Government:

3. Re-energise the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) by:
 - a) increasing its financial and human resources; and
 - b) tasking it with drafting reports in short order on improving refugee living conditions; regulating weapons inside the camps; and dealing with weapons outside the camps.
4. Ensure proper behaviour of security forces with regard to refugee camps by clearly and publicly defining their code of conduct, harshly punishing any infraction and loosening restrictions on access to Nahr al-Bared by children, elderly persons and relatives of camp residents.
5. Involve Palestinian factions and Nahr al-Bared refugees in decision-making concerning the camp's future by holding regular meetings with former camp residents and consulting with organisations that managed it prior to its destruction.

To Palestinian Factions:

6. Establish, as previously agreed, a unified political command responsible for inter-factional coordination in the camps.
7. Reform the organisation currently in charge of law and order in the camps (Armed Struggle Organisation – al-Kifah al-Musallah) by:
 - a) ensuring broad representation of all factions and more consensual decision-making, the latter, for example, by requiring a two-thirds majority of the board members.

- b) agreeing to its status as the sole Palestinian organisation responsible for camp security and dismantling any competing structure; and
 - c) coordinating with Lebanese security forces, particularly in cases where the Palestinian organisation is unable to handle the situation.
8. Improve security in the camps by, inter alia, prohibiting public display of weapons and preventing as well as punishing acts of violence.
 9. Improve the effectiveness of popular committees (semi-official organisations fulfilling municipal functions) in the camps by immediately merging committees in camps that have more than one, increasing the factions' mandatory financial contribution and, in coordination with local NGOs, providing technical training to committee members.
 10. Establish a joint committee of technical experts to serve as the Palestinian equivalent of, and coordinate with, the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee.

To UNRWA:

11. Meet regularly with residents of each camp to inform them of both new and ongoing projects, as well as of any changes initiated as a result of UNRWA's internal reform process.
12. Establish an independent financial watchdog to oversee the organisation's use of funds and justify it in the eyes of refugees, donors and the international community.
13. Reform the education system in camps by strengthening teacher training and cooperation with relevant NGOs.

To International and Arab Donors:

14. Increase significantly contributions to UNRWA.
15. Consult closely with UNRWA, international NGOs and camp organisations to ensure funds are directed at priority needs.

To Arab Governments:

16. Help Lebanon deal with its refugee population by disbursing funds pledged to rebuild Nahr al-Bared and pressing the various factions to agree to the above reforms.

Beirut/Brussels, 19 February 2009

NURTURING INSTABILITY: LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS

I. INTRODUCTION: THE PALESTINIAN PRESENCE IN LEBANON

A. MULTIPLICITY OF ACTORS AND CAMPS

1. Main political actors¹

The Palestinian political scene in Lebanon comprises actors that can be divided into three broad categories:

- members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which was established in 1964 and recognised in 1974 by the UN General Assembly as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people”. It includes Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and several other, less significant factions.² With the 1993 Oslo Accords, the PLO recognised Israel, formally relinquished armed struggle and began the process of negotiating a final agreement;
- the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (Tahaluf al-Qiwa al-Filastiniyya), known as Tahaluf, founded in 1993 in opposition to the Oslo peace accords. Its members refuse to recognise Israel and advocate continued armed struggle. Today, it regroups eight factions that generally enjoy close relations with Syria: Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), Fatah al-Intifada, al-Saiqa (Lightning), the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian Liberation Front and the Palestinian Revolutionary Communist Party;

- jihadi-leaning Islamist forces, which are an eclectic assortment of movements that espouse the use of violence rather than a uniform, coherent or organised group. This disparate collection includes Usbat al-Ansar (League of Partisans), Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation), al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida (Fighting Islamic Movement) and Ansar Allah (God's Partisans), which, their radical orientation notwithstanding, engage with the Lebanese state and army as well as the secular Fatah. More extreme movements reject any dealing with Lebanese institutions or Fatah; they include Jund al-Sham (Soldiers of Greater Syria), Usbat al-Nour (The League of Light) and other less significant groups.

2. Palestinian refugees and camps

The number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is a matter of considerable dispute. According to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), it varies between 350,000 and 400,000,³ of which over half are said to reside in the twelve UNRWA-managed camps.⁴ Many observers believe this number is highly

¹For more details about the main Palestinian factions, see Appendix B below.

²This is not to deny the existence of sometimes intense disagreement among these factions. When attributing certain positions to the PLO, this report refers to the organisation's official stance, which often is not identical to that of all members.

³UNRWA bases its estimate on the number of Palestinians registered with the agency. It does not reflect migration, insofar as Palestinians who leave Lebanon remain on the list. Crisis Group interview, UNRWA official, 5 December 2008. In 1998, a report of its commissioner-general noted: “UNRWA registration figures are based on information voluntarily supplied by refugees primarily for the purpose of obtaining access to Agency services, and hence cannot be considered statistically valid demographic data”. UNRWA report, 28 October 1998, at <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/ec8db69f77e7a33e052567270057e591/b31ebc6196d144cb052566b1007bff25?OpenDocument>.

⁴See www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon.html. According to UNRWA's former director in Lebanon, approximately 18 per cent of refugees in Jordan live in UNRWA camps; in Syria the number is closer to 26 per cent. The remainder of the refugee population for the most part lives in cities and towns surrounding the camps, as well as in unofficial locations established in the wake of various conflict-induced internal displacements. Lecture by Richard Cook, “Palestinian Camps and Refugees in Lebanon: Priorities, Challenges and

inflated, failing to take account of both the civil war's impact and the subsequent wave of Palestinian departures; according to these estimates, there are currently between 200,000 and 250,000 refugees.⁵

Refugee camps are scattered throughout the country. Four are in the capital, Beirut, and its suburbs:

- Burj al-Barajneh, located in Beirut's southern suburb and established by the Red Cross in 1948, is home to approximately 16,000 refugees;⁶
- Chatila, located in West Beirut, was established by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1949.⁷ Following Israel's 1982 invasion⁸ and the bloody 1985-1987 war of the camps,⁹

Opportunities Ahead", American University of Beirut, 21 May 2008.

⁵This figure is echoed by most Palestinians interviewed by Crisis Group, as well as by several observers, including Jon Pedersen, "Population Forecast of Palestinian Refugees 2000-2020", in Laurie Blome Jacobsen (ed.), "Finding Means, UNRWA's Financial Crisis and Refugee Living Conditions: Socio-economic Situation of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip", Fafo-report 427, vol. I (2003), at www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/427/427-vol1.pdf, and Are Knudsen, "The Law, the Loss and the Lives of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", Chr. Michelsen Institute Working Paper, 2007, at www.cmi.no/publications.

⁶Samaa Abou Sharar, "Study on the conditions of Palestinian Refugees in Camps across Lebanon", 29 June 2008, at www.lpdc.gov.lb/Uploads/2008-06/Report19_1.pdf. Palestinians in Burj al-Barajneh are said to come from three Upper Galilee villages now in Israel, Tarshiha, Koueykat and al-Kabiri. See Jihane Sfeir-Khayat, "Du provisoire au permanent: les débuts de l'installation des réfugiés au Liban", *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 1, May 2001. Politically, it is largely controlled by members of the pro-Syrian Tahaluf coalition, mainly the PFLP-GC, Fatah al-Intifada and As-Sa'iqa, which head the committee responsible for camp management. Crisis Group interview, Jamal Qassem, former Burj al-Barajneh Camp services director, southern suburb of Beirut, 6 June 2008. Popular committees are local organisations set up to ensure camp management and security. See Section III. C. 1 below. Tahaluf's clout likely results from the camp's proximity to a Hizbollah stronghold.

⁷Sabra and Chatila have been connected in public minds due to the massacre that occurred there in 1982 (see fns. 8 and 29 below). In fact, UNRWA recognises only Chatila as an official camp. Crisis Group interview, UNRWA official, 17 February 2009.

⁸During that time, members of the Lebanese Forces militia committed a massacre in Sabra and Chatila in the wake of the PLO's withdrawal from Lebanon. See fn. 29 below.

⁹Between 1985 and 1987, clashes opposed forces loyal to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Amal, the Syria-backed

part of it was destroyed. It is now home to more than 8,000 Palestinian refugees;¹⁰

- Dbayeh was created in 1956 in the eastern suburb of Beirut. The vast majority of its almost 4,000 inhabitants are Christian.¹¹ Unlike in other camps, residents enjoy only loose ties to Palestinian factions and leaders; and
- Mar Elias, a relatively small camp in north-western Beirut, was established in 1952. At the outset, most of its residents also were Christian.¹² However it experienced an influx of Muslims after the 1975 civil war.

There are six camps in South Lebanon, in which Fatah generally boasts a strong, often dominant presence:

- Ain al-Helweh, the most populated Lebanese camp, was established by the Red Crescent in 1949 in Saida. According to official sources, it houses some 46,000 refugees¹³ though local residents and camp officials claim the number to be closer to 70,000.¹⁴ It is a microcosm of the Palestinian political universe. All PLO, Tahaluf and jihadi factions are represented and perpetually

Shiite militia. Several camps were under siege throughout this period.

¹⁰See www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon.html. By the late 1980s, foreign workers – Syrian, Kurdish, Sri Lankan and Egyptian in particular – had taken up residence in the camp. Crisis Group interview, Abu Iyad, Fatah leader in Chatila, Beirut, 27 April 2008. Until 2000, Chatila was dominated by pro-Syrian factions. In 2000, Fatah re-entered the camp, as relations between Damascus and the Palestinian Authority improved. By 2005, Fatah had consolidated its presence, a reflection of two other developments: Syria's withdrawal and the rapprochement between the PA and the ruling March 14 coalition. Today, two competing popular committees – one led by Tahaluf, the other by the PLO – vie for control.

¹¹See the UNRWA website www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon/dbayeh.html.

¹²These refugees had roots in Haifa and Jaffa. See Jihane Sfeir-Khayat, op. cit. Virtually all Palestinian factions have offices and provide social services in the camp in a relatively harmonious atmosphere. More than anything else, this is a symptom of its lack of strategic importance. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian NGO workers, Beirut and Mar Elias Camp, April and October 2008.

¹³See Samaa Abou Sharar, op. cit.

¹⁴Crisis Group interview, Munir al-Maqdah, commander of the Palestinian Armed Struggle Organisation (al-Kifah al-Musallah) – the PLO organisation in charge of camp law and order – in Lebanon and Fatah leader in Saida, Beirut, 4 May 2008; Crisis Group interview, camp resident, Ain al-Helweh, 29 March 2008.

compete for influence and power, resulting in frequent clashes;¹⁵

- Mieh wa Mieh, east of Saida, has fewer than 5,000 inhabitants;¹⁶
- Burj al-Shemali, under Fatah control and home to some 19,000 Palestinians, is located east of Tyre;¹⁷
- Rashidiyyeh, seven kilometres south of Tyre and with 29,000 refugees, has an older section, created in 1936 under the authority of the then-mandatory power, France, to welcome Armenian refugees, and a more recent one built by UNRWA in 1963;¹⁸ and
- Al-Bass, which adjoins Tyre, was also established by France in 1936. Palestinian refugees moved there in 1948 and, today, UNRWA estimates its population at roughly 9,000.¹⁹

Two camps are in the North:

- Nahr al-Bared, founded by the Red Crescent seventeen kilometres from Tripoli, consists of two sections: one, recognised by UNRWA, is known as the “old camp”; the unofficial one is called the “new camp”. Dominated by Tahaluf factions during Syria's military presence, it subsequently witnessed a power struggle that facilitated the growth of less disciplined jihadi groups. In mid-2007, violent clashes opposed the Lebanese army and one such group, Fatah al-Islam, destroying the old and much of the new camp. Most of the 30,000 refugees fled, but some 10,000 have returned.²⁰
- Beddawi, on a hill five kilometres from Tripoli, accommodates some 16,000.²¹ It was profoundly affected by the Nahr al-Bared events as many refugees sought sanctuary. More than most, it is known for maintaining cooperative relations among Palestinians who tend to focus on shared social, economic and commercial interests. Repre-

sentatives of both the PLO and Tahaluf sit in a joint popular committee.²²

Finally, al-Jalil, also known as Wavel, is located in the Bekaa Valley. UNRWA estimates its population at over 7,000, although local residents claim that more than half have emigrated.²³

¹⁵ For a more in-depth study of Ain al-Helweh, see. Bernard Rougier, *Le Jihad au quotidien* (Paris, 2004).

¹⁶ See www.un.org/unrwa/arabic/Refugees/Lebanon/UN_MiehMieh.htm.

¹⁷ See Samaa Abou Sharar, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon.html. Fatah enjoys a dominant presence in this camp as well. Crisis Group interview, Khaled Aref, PLO official in charge of foreign and political affairs and Fatah leader in Beirut, Mieh wa Mieh, 4 May 2008.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, UNRWA official, 5 December 2008.

²¹ Samaa Abou Sharar, *op. cit.*

²² Crisis Group interviews, Ahmad Lotfi, member of Nahr al-Bared popular committee, 28 September 2008; Abu Adnan Odeh, PFLP-General Command official responsible for public relations and political affairs and leader of the movement in the Beddawi Camp, 28 September 2008.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Mahmoud al-Hanafi, executive manager, Palestinian Association for Human Rights (Witness), Beirut, 7 June 2008. Those who left the camp did so chiefly for socio-economic reasons; they principally resettled in camps in coastal cities. Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, adviser to Abbas Zaki, Beirut, 19 November 2008.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS

In the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, close to 140,000 Palestinians sought refuge in Lebanon. Most came from the Upper Galilee and other areas in the north of what once had been Mandatory Palestine. At the outset, they found temporary accommodation in Lebanese homes, rented apartments or makeshift tents. In 1949, as Palestinian exile persisted, the United Nations created UNRWA, which assumed responsibility for refugees' basic needs and sought to improve their living conditions. Gradually, fifteen official camps were established, of which three (Nabatiyeh, Jisr al-Pasha and Tall al-Zaatar) were destroyed during the civil war.

In the early stages, refugees took a low profile and steered clear of political activism. At the time, the Maronite (Christian) elite dominated Lebanon and was determined to preserve state sovereignty, avoid renewed conflict with Israel and protect its interests from the majority Muslim population. As a result, Palestinians were subject to strict supervision and control by military intelligence, known as the "second bureau"; security services were present in the camps. Refugees required a special permit to move from one region of the country to another; gatherings of more than two people were banned in the camps; and residents were barred from reading newspapers or listening to news in a public space.²⁴

Notwithstanding these measures, Palestinians gradually became more active. The turning point occurred in the wake of the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, when Palestinians involved themselves directly in the domestic strife that was to mar Lebanon for close to two decades.

A. OPEN WARFARE (1969-1990)

The 1967 war radicalised Palestinians throughout the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon. What had been a largely peaceful presence rapidly became militarised

as the PLO, under Yasser Arafat's leadership, advocated armed struggle against Israel.²⁵ Palestinian fighters, known as *fedayeen*, launched several military operations from South Lebanon, provoking clashes with the Lebanese army. In response, the military tightened control over the camps. Tensions over army activity and harsh socio-economic conditions climaxed in 1969 as riots by Palestinians and their Lebanese allies broke out in Beirut, the South and Tripoli.²⁶ At the time, Palestinians were backed by large segments of the Lebanese population, including most Muslim and left-wing parties.

On 3 November 1969, Arafat and the head of the Lebanese army, Nabil Boustani, signed the Egyptian-sponsored Cairo accords, which put an end to the fighting.²⁷ The agreement – the first official document purporting to regulate the Palestinians' presence – ushered in a new era in Lebanese-Palestinian relations characterised by the former's relative weakness and internal divisions as well as the latter's relative strength. As fighting between the two sides triggered a several month-long ministerial crisis, Lebanon was virtually split in half, with predominantly Christian, right-wing parties hostile to the Palestinian "resistance" on one side and predominantly Muslim and left-wing parties that supported it on the other.

The Cairo agreement recognised both the Palestinians' right to wage their struggle against Israel from Lebanese soil and the refugees' political and socio-economic rights (to work, reside, move and so forth). It also endorsed the principle of camp self-management through the establishment of local administrative committees (known as popular committees) and the creation of the Palestinian Armed Struggle Organisation (al-Kifah al-Musallah), the organisation responsible for law and order as well as security coordination with Lebanese authorities.

The situation grew more complicated in 1970 when, in the aftermath of the bloody clashes known as Black September between Palestinian groups and the Jordanian army, the PLO transferred its leadership and

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Salah Salah, member of the PLO's Central Council in Lebanon and head of the Refugees Committee in the Palestinian National Council, Beirut, 2 August 2008; Jaber Suleiman, independent Palestinian researcher and consultant, Mar Elias Camp, 12 November 2008; Walid Mohammad Ali, general manager of Baheth for Studies Palestinian research centre, Beirut, 8 November 2008. See also Chafiq el-Hout, *Between Homeland and Exile* (Beirut, 2007).

²⁵ The PLO's establishment in Lebanon in 1970 came in the aftermath of two major developments: the 1967 Arab defeat and the events known as Black September when, in 1970, Jordanian forces cracked down on militant Palestinian groups. The PLO took advantage of the Lebanese state's weakness, inter-Lebanese divisions and the support of local left-wing parties to resettle. See Rex Brynen, *Sanctuary and Survival, the PLO in Lebanon* (Boulder, 1990), at www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PNRN/papers/sanctuary/contetns.html.

²⁶ See Albert Bourgi and Pierre Weiss, *Les complots libanais : guerre ou paix au Proche-Orient ?* (Paris, 1978).

²⁷ See Appendix D below.

military from Jordan to Lebanon. During the subsequent five years, and against this backdrop, the internal Lebanese conflict intensified. 13 April 1975 marked the official onset of the Lebanese civil war. In a sign of the Palestinians' central role, the triggering event was the killing of roughly twenty civilian Palestinians riding in a bus by members of the Phalangist (Kataeb) party, a Christian militia, in an act of blind reprisal for the murder of one of the party's leading members.

The PLO played a key part during the first phase of the conflict. Aided by its superior military might, it seized control of West Beirut, a large part of the south and, of course, the camps themselves. The movement enhanced its political, social and educational institutions, building an impressive network that improved refugees' living conditions. Together with their Lebanese allies, Palestinian militants in what was dubbed Fatah-land exploited the situation. They refused to pay restaurant bills, plundered stores and confiscated cars, generating sharp resentment in areas under their control.²⁸

Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon brought this process of expanding Palestinian control to a halt. PLO institutions and infrastructure were destroyed, and several camps wiped out. Leaders and cadres were forced to flee Beirut for Tunis, depriving refugees of a major source of funding, work and, most importantly, protection. To this day, the Sabra and Chatila massacre perpetrated by the Lebanese Forces against a suddenly far more vulnerable population remains a deep emotional scar among Palestinian refugees.²⁹

Until 1982, notwithstanding the large array of Palestinian actors in Lebanon, the PLO – and, chiefly, Fa-

tah – thoroughly dominated the field. However, subsequent years witnessed intensified fratricidal fighting, to a large extent fuelled and manipulated by Syria. In 1983, a group calling itself Fatah al-Intifada split off, with active support from Damascus.³⁰ The Syrian army fought Fatah loyalists in the so-called "Abu Ammar Battle" (Abu Ammar was Arafat's *nom de guerre*) in North Lebanon, forcing many to flee. The campaign against Arafat supporters also took place between 1985 and 1987 in the course of the so-called war of the camps, waged by one of Syria's Shi'ite Lebanese allies, Amal.

Syria, whose strategy initially had revolved around strengthening the PLO's presence in Lebanon, eventually banked on eliminating it.³¹ This shift played a critical role in reshuffling camp politics in the aftermath of the civil war; it also partially explains the na-

³⁰ Fatah al-Intifada opposed several of Arafat's decisions, principally his acceptance of UNSCR 242 and the Saudi peace plan presented at the twelfth Arab Summit Conference at Fez in 1981 that called for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 (see summit resolutions available at www.mideastweb.org/fahd_fez_plan.htm) and his visit to Egypt in 1983, as well as his willingness to discuss U.S. President Reagan's peace plan with Jordan's King Hussein. The movement also denounced Fatah's corruption and nepotism. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian leaders, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-October 2008.

³¹ In 1976, after Christian forces had mounted an offensive against Palestinians and their local left-wing allies, Syria intervened on behalf of the latter. Damascus then suggested a peace proposal that was rejected by the Palestinian-Lebanese alliance which, instead, attacked its Christian foes. At that point, the Syrian army came to the Christians' defence. In 1982, following Israel's invasion, Syria once again backed the PLO; that was short-lived, however, as pro-Syrian Palestinian organisations and Amal quickly attacked PLO forces. Syria's shifting positions have several explanations. Its principal objective was to remain chief power broker in Lebanon, a goal that entailed both preventing any one local side from gaining a decisive advantage and keeping regional rivals (Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) at bay. The PLO's growing strength in Lebanon, coupled with Arafat's determination to maintain the organisation's independence, threatened these ambitions. Damascus was looking to use the Palestinian organisation as a card in its regional strategy and eager to prevent a separate deal between the PLO and Israel; Arafat could not be trusted on either score. Likewise, the Syrian regime feared that Palestinian actions in Lebanon might drag it into war with Israel. Tensions between President Assad and Arafat worsened in the early 1980s, as the Palestinian leader improved his relations first with Syrian arch-enemy Saddam Hussein, then with Egypt. Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (winter 1986) pp. 1-20.

²⁸ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007, p. 4.

²⁹ At that time, the Lebanese Forces constituted the military wing of the Kataeb Party. During the civil war, divisions between the two factions led to the split of the Lebanese Forces. Today, they form one of the main Christian parties of the March 14 coalition. The attack on the camps was conducted by the Lebanese Forces militia between 16 and 18 September 1982, in apparent retaliation for the killing of their leader and newly elected president, Bashir Gemayel. The region in which the camps were located was then under Israeli control. An official Israeli investigation concluded that the Israel Defence Forces had allowed the militiamen into the refugee camps and passively watched as the killings went on. There are no reliable estimates of the number of victims, which vary from 800 (the Israeli Kahan Commission) to 3,000 (Palestinian sources). See Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org/arabic/mena/list/text/isr-pabg.htm.

ture of relations between the Lebanese state and Palestinian refugees.

B. THE POST-WAR YEARS (1990-2004)

In the years after the war, the PLO and in particular Fatah – already battered by successive conflicts with Israel, Lebanese militias, the Syrian army and dissident Palestinian factions – was further weakened. Between 1990 and 2000, the pro-Syrian Lebanese government restricted Fatah's political presence to the camps in the South, pushing it toward a quasi-clandestine status in other regions.³² Its rivals, chiefly Fatah al-Intifada, al-Saiqa and the PFLP-GC, extended their influence to camps in the North, Beirut and the Bekaa. Hamas's presence also began to be felt, even before it enjoyed an official status in 2000.³³ In addition, Syria reportedly took steps to limit any separate contacts between Lebanese authorities and Fatah.³⁴

According to Refaat Shanaa, a Fatah leader in the Beddawi Camp, between 1990 and 2000 Syrian intelligence detained hundreds of the movement's sympathisers: "Our only alternative was to strengthen our presence in the South. In other areas, which were under Syrian influence, Fatah operated in a clandestine manner. Our principal goal was self-preservation and survival".³⁵

The PLO and Fatah had other problems, many of their own making. In the eyes of a large number of Lebanese, they were responsible for the civil war's outbreak and guilty of widespread abuses during their heyday years in the South. This legacy poisoned relations with the local population and subsequently hindered dialogue on the refugee question. Syrian policy aside, most Lebanese factions preferred not to deal with the Palestinians and, until 2004, virtually nothing

was done to regulate Lebanese-Palestinian relations.³⁶ The PLO office, which was shut down in 1982 after the Israeli invasion, was opened for a few months in 1990 before once again being closed.³⁷

In post-war Lebanon, the refugee camps were kept beyond Lebanon's sovereign reach; their fate purportedly awaited conclusion of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. This, combined with the PLO's weakened status, left the camps without a clear, recognised leadership. Other Palestinian factions sought to fill the vacuum but did so only partially and haphazardly.

The overall situation affected the status of Palestinian weapons. The 1989 Taef accords, which ended the civil war, called on all militias to disarm, though in practice the Lebanese state – vulnerable and under Syrian influence – lacked the necessary authority and wherewithal to intervene in the camps. Moreover, peace remained fragile, and many feared taking action that could reignite the fighting.³⁸ Besides, Syria – mandated by the Arab world to maintain calm – had every interest in ensuring its Palestinian allies retained their weapons as leverage vis-à-vis both Israel and Lebanon. According to a senior official in the Lebanese army, Palestinian weapons within the camps remained intact, while those located outside by and large were turned in, except in the case of the PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifada.³⁹ These two factions, with close ties to Syria, maintained military bases outside the camps, in Nahmeh, south of Beirut, and in the Bekaa.⁴⁰ All in all, the question of Palestinian weapons essentially was ignored between 1990 and 2004.

³² The restrictions imposed elsewhere (e.g., curtailing mobility, preventing construction materials from entering the camps) were less onerous given privileged relations between Syria's intelligence services and the pro-Syrian factions that controlled those camps. Crisis Group interview, Palestinian camps leaders, April-May 2008.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Mohammad al-Haj, imam of al-Taqwa Mosque in Nahr al-Bared and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Abu Samra, North Lebanon, 25 December 2008.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Fatah officials, Beirut, April-May 2008.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Refaat Shanaa, Fatah official in the North, Beddawi refugee camp, 13 April 2008; Abu Iyad, Fatah leader in Chatila, Beirut, 27 April 2008; Fatah members, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-September 2008.

³⁶ Between 1990 and 2004, there was only one initiative to discuss Lebanese-Palestinian relations. In 1991, a ministerial committee was mandated to examine the refugees' economic and social rights. But there was no evidence of a genuine desire for dialogue, and the effort quickly floundered. Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 29 June 2008; Salah Salah, member of the PLO's Central Council in Lebanon and head of the Refugees Committee in the Palestinian National Council, Beirut, 2 August 2008.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, adviser to the PLO representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 19 November 2008.

³⁸ The only incident of note occurred in 1991 at the outskirts of Ain al-Helweh, where a brief battle pitted the Lebanese army against PLO forces. Crisis Group email communication, senior Lebanese army official, December 2008.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ There is little reliable information concerning these military bases, which are all closely guarded and practically inaccessible. They reportedly serve as both arms depots and training camps. Crisis Group interviews, former Lebanese fighter in Fatah, 27 September 2008; Lebanese journalist, 8 September 2008. See also *Asharq al-Awsat*, 14 June 2007;

C. 2004-2005: TURNING POINT OR DEAD END?

1. UNSCR 1559

The long-dormant question of Palestinian weapons publicly re-emerged on 2 September 2004, with the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 1559, calling for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon but also demanding that all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias disarm. Its sponsors were pursuing several goals: to strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty; end Syrian interference; prevent further attacks on Israel and, for the U.S. in particular, weaken the Iranian/Syrian/Hamas/Hizbollah axis.⁴¹

The 14 February 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which was widely blamed on Syria, set in motion a process leading to the withdrawal of Damascus's troops in April 2005. This ushered in a new phase in Lebanon's history, marked by the end of Syrian tutelage, deep domestic political polarisation and a series of murders principally targeting leading figures of the anti-Syrian March 14 movement.⁴²

In June 2006, fourteen key Lebanese leaders gathered for a so-called national dialogue, whose agenda included the question of Palestinian weapons. All participants ostensibly agreed on the need to remove military bases run by pro-Syrian factions outside the camps and "reorganise" the arsenal of weapons that exists within them.⁴³ Surface consensus aside, however, the Lebanese and Palestinian political scenes

remained deeply divided on this issue. This helps explain why, to date, no action has been taken.

For members of the March 14 coalition,⁴⁴ the weapons issue is one dimension of the struggle with Damascus. Militant Palestinian organisations are seen as Syrian proxies; their disarmament, therefore, would further curtail Syrian influence.⁴⁵ It also would constitute a precedent for Hizbollah's eventual disarmament.⁴⁶

For the PLO, whose military potential was seriously damaged and which officially has distanced itself from armed struggle since signing the Oslo accords, disarming factions that have challenged its authority also presents clear advantages.⁴⁷ On 7 January 2008, the PLO representative in Lebanon, Abbas Zaki, agreed that Palestinian weapons should be "subject to Lebanese laws".⁴⁸ Going further, the PLO suggested that the factions could stop ensuring security in the camps, leaving responsibility to the state. In the words of a PLO representative, "our official position is that the Lebanese state should be responsible for law and order in the camps. The camps are on territory governed by Lebanese law and falling under Lebanese sovereignty".⁴⁹ In return, the PLO insists that refugees be granted greater socio-economic rights.

Unsurprisingly, the more militant Palestinian organisations oppose UNSCR 1559, which they decry as an act of surrender. Usama Hamdan, Hamas's representative in Lebanon, described the resolution as an "attempt to tear up all signs of strength in the resistance

Nicholas Blanford, "Syrian soldiers return to Lebanese bases", *The National*, 29 April 2008, at www.thenational.ae/article/20080429/FOREIGN/544010081/1002/NEWS.

⁴¹ For more details about UNSCR 1559, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°39, *Syria after Lebanon, Lebanon after Syria*, 12 April 2005; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005.

⁴² For more details about the Lebanese crisis, see Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit.

⁴³ So far, the notion of "reorganising" Palestinian weapons remains ill-defined; a Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue is supposed to provide clarification. A Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee official said, "reorganisation means a process aimed at identifying the various groups that exist within the camps while defining the role of their weapons and the criteria under which they can be used. The goal is to ensure they cannot be used to destabilise or harm Lebanon. But reorganisation is merely a transitional stage until such time as the state can exercise a monopoly over military power". Crisis Group interview, Ziad al-Sayegh, Beirut, 23 October 2008.

⁴⁴ The designation "March 14" refers to the massive demonstrations that took place on that day in 2005 in response to Hariri's assassination. The coalition brings together Sunnis (mainly Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement), Druzes (the Progressive Socialist Party led by Walid Jumblatt) and Christians (the Lebanese Forces, Christian Phalangist Party and Union of Qurnet Shehwan), in addition to other anti-Syrian movements and figures.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mostafa Allouch, a Future Movement parliament member, Tripoli, 4 August 2008; see also Gebran Tuani, former March 14 member of parliament and editor of *An-Nahar*, who was killed in December 2005, *Al Jazeera*, 17 October 2005.

⁴⁶ In a speech delivered to commemorate the memory of his son, assassinated in November 2006, Amin Gemayel said, "the state cannot allow any illegal military presence on any of its territories ... not the weapons of Palestinian factions ... not the weapons of Hizbollah". *The Daily Star*, 24 November 2008.

⁴⁷ In Ain al-Helweh, several Fatah officials were targeted and in some instances killed by groups such as Jund al-Sham and Usbat al-Ansar. See Are Knudsen, op. cit.

⁴⁸ See Appendix C below.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group, Hisham Dibsi, media adviser to the PLO, Beirut, 8 September 2008.

against Israel in the entire region".⁵⁰ Although they no longer truly fight Israel from Lebanese soil, they claim their weapons are a means of exerting pressure.⁵¹ In reality, their military capacity allows them to challenge the PLO and present themselves as the refugees' sole credible defenders. They contrast their adherence to armed struggle with the PLO's purported feckless negotiations with Israel. Hamdan said, "the PLO merely formulates unrealistic promises it cannot deliver".⁵² Hizbollah's performance during the 2006 war bolstered this argument.

Abu Adnan, the PFLP-GC official responsible for public relations and political affairs, asserted: "We share Hizbollah's convictions. We back resistance as an existential matter. Hizbollah threatened the Zionist entity and demonstrated that resistance is the only way to confront Israel".⁵³ The link to Hizbollah is more than merely ideological. Like March 14, Hizbollah believes – in its case, fears – that steps to disarm Palestinian factions are a prelude to broader implementation of UNSCR 1559.

To date, Palestinian factions have reached only minimal consensus, spurred by the dangerous chaos that occurred in Ain al-Helweh in June and July 2008. A PLO official said:

We are carrying out several measures on which we all agree. The goal is to maintain camp security, mainly in Ain al-Helweh. For example, we agreed to ban the ostensible display of weapons in the camp, pointless firing in the air, steps that might provoke the Lebanese army, sale or rental of camp property to foreigners and monopoly control by specific armed groups of certain areas within Ain al-Helweh.⁵⁴

Even these modest measures – endorsed by jihadi groups – have had only limited impact on Palestinian ability to ensure order. Violence continues in Ain al-Helweh where, in September 2008, a clash between Fatah and Jund al-Sham resulted in the death of two

Islamists and one Fatah member.⁵⁵ The state lacks the means to go beyond these measures and restore calm, for that would require confronting armed Palestinian groups. A retired brigadier-general and former member of the Lebanese commission mandated to negotiate with the Palestinians acknowledged:

Without a stronger army and a coherent government, Lebanon cannot take over security responsibilities in the camps. Any significant progress to reorganise the weapons depends on a genuine inter-Palestinian and Palestinian-Lebanese consensus.⁵⁶

Another obstacle impeding efforts to disarm Palestinian groups goes beyond Palestinian and Lebanese divisions or even regional considerations. For many refugees, whose experience includes years of war, mass killings and the destruction of several camps, weapons provide a sense of security in the face of constant threat. Intense feelings of vulnerability have not abated; if anything, they have been rekindled by the crisis that has shaken Lebanon since 2004. The leader of an Islamist faction argued that verbal attacks by a number of Lebanese political leaders⁵⁷ had "revived old fears. The absence of a strong state and the growing militarisation of Lebanese actors worry us

⁵⁵ The incident took place against the backdrop of longstanding tension between the two movements.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Nabih Farhat, brigadier-general (ret.) and former member of the commission responsible for dealing with Palestinian weapons, Beirut, 8 September 2008. The PLO's plan raises problems of its own. Assuming Palestinian factions and the Lebanese government reach agreement, the PLO contends that fighters and military officials should constitute a Palestinian battalion within the Lebanese army – akin to what has happened in Jordan or Syria. Crisis Group interview, Abbas Zaki, PLO representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 17 August 2008. However, in light of sectarian tensions, concerns regarding permanent Palestinian settlement and fears left over from the civil war, such a scenario would be highly controversial. Nabih Farhat says, "this is an unrealistic idea. To put it into practice, one would need a strong state and powerful army. That is happening in Syria but cannot be applied in Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Nabih Farhat, op. cit. Some Palestinians have opposed the idea, fearing the Palestinian battalion would become "an army of informers working in the camps on behalf of Lebanese authorities". Crisis Group interview, Jaber Suleiman, independent Palestinian researcher and consultant, Mar Elias Camp, 12 November 2008.

⁵⁷ For instance, a senior Lebanese defence ministry official accused Palestinian civilians of helping Fatah al-Islam militants, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2007; a Progressive Socialist Party communiqué accused the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command of Ahmad Jibril of being a Syrian tool aimed at destabilising Lebanon, *Asharq al-Awsat*, 8 April 2006.

⁵⁰ *The Daily Star*, 8 July 2005.

⁵¹ "Our weapons are a means of pressure to prevent any resolution of the Palestinian question at the refugees' expense. Our weapons protect the right of return". Crisis Group interview, Abu Adnan Odeh, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command official responsible for public relations and political affairs and leader of the movement in the Beddawi Camp, 6 January 2009.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 28 April 2008.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Abu Adnan Odeh, 13 April 2008.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, adviser to Abbas Zaki, Beirut, 10 September 2008.

deeply, because there is no guarantee that we will not be the next target".⁵⁸ Echoing that sentiment, a Beddawi resident said:

We live in constant fear. We don't even have the time to forget an old pain before a new one arises. We know that everything can collapse in an instant. The camps are the weakest link that will continually be under assault.⁵⁹

Polls suggest that a majority of refugees reject disarmament in the name of self-protection.⁶⁰ The PLO's flexibility is criticised, including by its own members. A leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine said:

Within Fatah, not all leaders agree with Abbas Zaki's approach. Sultan Abu al-Aynayn⁶¹ and Munir al-Maqdah⁶² do not want to hand weapons over to the Lebanese authorities. Other former leaders believe Zaki has conceded a lot to the state without receiving anything in return.⁶³

The Palestinian presence is not felt through weapons alone. Palestinian vows not to intervene in domestic Lebanese affairs notwithstanding,⁶⁴ interaction with host country politics is inevitable, if only by virtue of local and regional alliances. Nor can one overlook

physical interplay between the country and the camps, several of which have become lawless.

2. The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee

Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 gave Fatah room to regain some of its lost influence. The movement reopened offices in several camps, particularly in the North, Beirut and the Bekaa.⁶⁵ Relations between the PLO and the government, now led by Fouad Siniora, also improved markedly, with a view to weakening the pro-Syrian Palestinian factions.⁶⁶ Official relations with Lebanon were restored in May 2006 after an almost fifteen-year hiatus.⁶⁷ The government also actively supported UNRWA efforts to upgrade camp infrastructure and housing, as well as educational and health centres.⁶⁸ Karen AbuZayd, UNRWA commissioner general, said, "2005 was a major turning point, allowing for the upgrading of infrastructure and housing in the camps. Before that, we couldn't even bring in a nail".⁶⁹

One of the clearest manifestations of a change in relations between Lebanon and its Palestinian population

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Jamal Khattab, head of the Fighting Islamic Movement (al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida), Ain al-Helweh, 29 March 2008.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Beddawi Camp resident, 5 May 2008.

⁶⁰ According to one poll, 56 per cent of refugees shared that view. See Marwan Kanafani and Elizabeth Schiffrin, "From massacre to militia: the case against Palestinian disarmament in Lebanon", *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 2 (March 2006), pp. 38-40.

⁶¹ Fatah secretary general and former PLO secretary general in Lebanon Abu al-Aynayn was the PLO representative in Lebanon prior to Abbas Zaki.

⁶² Commander of the Palestinian Armed Struggle Organisation in Lebanon and former Fatah leader in Saida.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Abu Imad Chatila, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader, Mar Elias Camp, 3 May 2008.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian faction leaders, Beirut and Palestinian Camps, April-May 2008. Palestinians regularly assert they will not interfere in domestic Lebanese affairs, a stance that was reaffirmed during the May 2008 clashes between Hizbollah and March 14. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008. On 18 May 2008, the PLO and Tahaluf leaders signed a joint statement asserting they would not intervene and asking Lebanese parties "not to use the Palestinians either politically or in their media campaigns". See *Asharq al-Awsat*, 19 May 2008.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Khaled Aref, official in charge of the PLO's foreign and political affairs and Fatah leader in Beirut, Mieh wa Mieh camp, 4 May 2008. In the wake of President Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000 and the outbreak of the second intifada later that year, relations between Damascus and Yasser Arafat gradually improved. The PLO regained a foothold in Beirut, though it was barred from opening political offices in the north, Beirut or the Bekaa.

⁶⁶ On Fouad Siniora's policy towards the PLO, see Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

⁶⁷ The PLO had reopened its office in 1990, after the civil war, but its activities were severely constrained due to its hostile relations with the then pro-Syrian regime. Later that year, the office was shut down and official relations severed. Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, adviser to Abbas Zaki, Beirut, 19 November 2008.

⁶⁸ For example, the government loosened restrictions on delivery of construction material to the camps. Crisis Group interview, Karen AbuZayd, UNRWA commissioner general, Damascus, 15 October 2008. In 2006, upon Siniora's request, UNRWA submitted to the government a brief on Palestinian refugee needs and urgent unfunded projects; the initiative is known as the Camp Improvement Initiative. Siniora met with 25 ambassadors accredited to Lebanon to urge donor states to fund UNRWA projects. Almost half the initial \$50 million requested was provided. "Partners in Responsibility", Report of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, undated; Crisis Group interview, Khalil Mekawi, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee president, Beirut, 18 August 2008.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 15 October 2008.

was the cabinet's decision to create an inter-ministerial consultative body, the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC). It is charged with improving refugees' living conditions, beginning negotiations on the question of weapons in the camps, taking steps against illegal military bases outside the camps and examining possible diplomatic relations between Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. It also aims at starting an inter-Lebanese dialogue on refugee-related issues.⁷⁰ According to the committee's head, "the Lebanese state has proved incapable of meeting Palestinian needs, so our committee will aim in part at filling this vacuum, by assisting UNRWA and helping it gather necessary funds".⁷¹ The committee includes representatives of the ministries of justice, foreign affairs, national defence, social affairs, labour, health and interior, as well as energy and water.

Several steps have since been taken. The committee sought to address the status of almost 5,000 refugees (known as non-ID refugees) who lacked official status, were considered unlawful aliens and virtually barred from exiting the camps.⁷² According to a committee official, over 1,000 have since been provided IDs, and other cases are being processed.⁷³ The LPDC serves as mediator between Lebanese authorities and Palestinians, seeking to deal with the latter's grievances. According to a member, "we repeatedly have interceded with the army, asking it to facilitate access to Nahr al-Bared's 'new camp', lift certain checkpoints or allow construction material into the camps".⁷⁴ Because legal changes are often difficult to obtain and time-consuming, the committee has focused its efforts

on modifying the ways certain laws are applied.⁷⁵ According to a Committee project coordinator:

We can't simply suppress the law requiring a permit to bring construction material into some of the camps. But that procedure used to take months. The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee lobbied the government and the army and, today, it takes approximately 24 hours.⁷⁶

The committee also launched a dialogue between Lebanese and Palestinian political parties and civil society organisations. An adviser to the committee's president said, "we have organised roundtables, meetings and other activities to improve relations between the two communities and begin a conversation on sensitive issues: right of return, socio-economic rights, camp security and so forth. It is a necessary step if we want to reach more concrete results".⁷⁷

Yet, despite these notable achievements, progress has been limited. The committee's efforts were significantly hampered by both Lebanon's political instability and Palestinian divisions. Only a few months after it was set up, the 2006 war broke out, followed by parliamentary deadlock.⁷⁸ Events pushed the Palestinian question aside, and the absence of a functioning parliament made it virtually impossible to organise an inter-Lebanese dialogue on the refugees' legal, political or socio-economic status. The 2007 conflict in Nahr al-Bared was another setback, forcing the committee to deal with the immediate crisis at the expense of its original, broader mandate.⁷⁹

Likewise, Palestinian divisions got in the way. Although the government officially recognises the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian

⁷⁰ "Partners in Responsibility", op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, Nadim Shehadi, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee consultant, Beirut, 6 November 2008.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Khalil Mekkawi, Beirut, 18 August 2008.

⁷² These are Palestinians who entered Lebanon between 1970 and 1982 and could not be registered with UNRWA (which only enrolled 1948 and 1967 refugees) or Lebanese authorities. Crisis Group interview, Dalal Yassine, lawyer and coordinator of the Najdeh Association's "Palestinians' Right to Work" campaign, Beirut, 2 August 2008. For more on the non-ID refugees, see "Survey Report on the Situation of Non-ID Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", Danish Refugee Council, Beirut, 2007, at www.drc.dk/fileadmin/uploads/pdf/English_site/Lebanon/Non-ID_Refugee_Briefing_Note.pdf.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Joanna Nassar, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee project coordinator, Beirut, 5 November 2008.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nadim Shehadi, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee consultant, Beirut, 6 November 2008.

⁷⁶ She added, "of course, this depends entirely on the security situation. A single incident and we'll be back to square one". Crisis Group interview, Joanna Nassar, Beirut, 5 November 2008.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ziad al-Sayegh, consultant to Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee president, Beirut, 23 October 2008.

⁷⁸ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°20, *Lebanon at a Tripwire*, 21 December 2006.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Khalil Mekkawi, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee president, Beirut, 18 August 2008; Abbas Zaki, PLO representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 17 August 2008; and Hassan Hodroj, Hizbollah political bureau member in charge of the Palestinian file, southern suburb of Beirut, 8 August 2008.

people,⁸⁰ it could not ignore the brewing intra-Palestinian conflict.⁸¹ Nadim Shehadi, an LPDC consultant, explained: "When they were asked by the prime minister to submit their demands, the PLO and Tahaluf factions put forward competing proposals. Siniora also asked them to form a joint technical committee to engage with the LPDC, but that never happened".⁸² Shehadi quipped: "It's a Lebanese-Palestinian Monologue Committee".⁸³

Some Palestinians claimed these divisions have been used as a pretext by Lebanon to postpone the dialogue. One activist explained: "Yes, there are Palestinian divisions. But the PLO's and Tahaluf's demands are largely similar. The government is using our internal problems as a means of justifying its own failure and its inability live up to its three-year-old promises".⁸⁴

Regardless of the reasons, the LPDC has yet to meet many of its self-proclaimed goals. It has focused on immediate crises, postponing more critical, controversial issues. Many Palestinians and Lebanese alike have come to question its relevance. In the words of a PLO official in charge of the refugee file, "since the committee's establishment, Palestinian conditions have not changed. Camps are still surrounded by roadblocks, and a policy of discrimination and marginalisation persists".⁸⁵ Still, its creation undeniably helped highlight the fate of Palestinian refugees, serving as a constant reminder of the problem and the need to address it.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ziad al-Sayegh, Beirut, 23 October 2008.

⁸¹ The committee's president said, "although the PLO is the only legitimate Palestinian authority in the eyes of the law, the committee cannot meet its objectives without minimal agreement between the PLO and Tahaluf". Crisis Group interview, Khalil Mekkawi, Beirut, 18 August 2008.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Nadim Shehadi, Beirut, 6 November 2008.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Samir Ahmad, general secretary of the Palestinian Writers and Journalists Union in Lebanon, Beirut, 11 November 2008. He added, "the government wants to waste time as it awaits a new regional and international context. Our divisions are a useful pretext for it to maintain the status quo".

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Salah Salah, member of the PLO's Central Council and head of the Refugees Committee in the Palestinian National Council, Beirut, 2 August 2008.

3. Nahr al-Bared: a difficult test case

In May 2007, violent clashes erupted between the army and Fatah al-Islam,⁸⁶ which took refuge in Nahr al-Bared. The conflict began in North Lebanon on 20 May, when suspected bank robbers – members of the jihadi group – were confronted by the internal security forces (Forces de Sécurité Intérieure, FSI). The fighting soon spread to Tripoli and near Nahr al-Bared, where army members were attacked.⁸⁷ Several hours later, an army patrol was ambushed in Qalamoun, a few kilometres south of Tripoli. That same day, two explosions racked Beirut. In Tripoli, the army and security forces took over the buildings in which some militants were located. Nahr al-Bared soon became the central arena of the confrontation, which lasted over three months. The army's inability to overwhelm a small but well-armed group exposed its fundamental weaknesses.⁸⁸

The conflict over Nahr al-Bared had obvious and devastating consequences for both camp residents and the army.⁸⁹ It also affected Lebanese-Palestinian rela-

⁸⁶ Fatah al-Islam's objectives and origins remain uncertain. Some observers and political actors believe the group was aiming to establish an Islamic emirate in the north; members of the March 14 coalition and some of their Palestinian allies claim it was created by Syria to destabilise Lebanon and undermine the international tribunal; Syria's Lebanese and Palestinian allies maintain that Saudi Arabia and the Future Movement backed the group in an attempt to form an anti-Shiite force and carry out anti-Syrian operations. Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese and Palestinian officials and sheikhs, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida and Palestinian camps, April-December 2008. It is at least equally plausible that its goal was to establish a jihadi base in North Lebanon to train militants for action against U.S. and other Western forces in Iraq or Afghanistan. What seems clear is that it skilfully played the local game, at least for a while, maintaining ties with a wide spectrum of Lebanese actors and sending messages to all relevant parties. See Bernard Rougier, "Fatah al-Islam : un réseau jihadiste au cœur des contradictions libanaises", *Qu'est ce que le Salafisme* (Paris, 2008).

⁸⁷ The attack was particularly bloody and provoked widespread outrage throughout the country. Televised pictures showed the corpses of soldiers; the militants had slit one victim's throat. According to unconfirmed reports, the soldiers were killed while they slept.

⁸⁸ The militants were well-trained and motivated; the army included young, inexperienced conscripts and ran out of ammunition barely a week after the fighting began.

⁸⁹ The overall costs include large loss of life (50 civilians, 179 soldiers and 226 Fatah al-Islam militants), displacement of close to 6,000 families; and destruction of houses and infrastructure, including in Lebanese villages surrounding the camp. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian officials, UN-RWA representatives and camp residents, April-September 2008. See also "A Common Challenge, a Shared Responsi-

tions. Despite repeated official Lebanese statements clearly distinguishing between the jihadi movement and the refugees,⁹⁰ many Lebanese blamed the latter for the former's emergence. A Tripoli resident said:

Fatah al-Islam was born in the camps. That is where it was able to recruit hundreds of members, arm itself and train, all in the Palestinian residents' plain view. Without the acquiescence and complicity of camp residents, it never would have been in a position to attack the army. The war would not have occurred.⁹¹

In the eyes of many, the events confirmed the perception of the camps as zones of insecurity – this despite the fact that until then Nahr al-Bared had enjoyed positive socio-economic relations with its immediate surroundings. A Palestinian camp leader commented:

Prior to the conflict we had very good relations with residents of Akkar and Dinniyeh. We shared a social life, commercial activities and even family ties. Since then, relations have deteriorated to the point that they are unwilling to rent land to UNRWA to build temporary shelter for the displaced. A local Lebanese official put it bluntly: All you do is bring us problems.⁹²

The 2007 clashes with Fatah al-Islam led the Lebanese army to break a political taboo: for the first time since the civil war, it entered a camp, conducted intensive, at times brutal, military operations and sought to impose order. This was particularly disturbing to Hizbollah, given the precedent it set for disarmament. On 25 May 2007, prior to the army's decision, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah had asserted that camp boundaries and use of the Lebanese army constituted two "red lines".⁹³ The government ignored his warning, authorising military operations that virtually destroyed the camp.

bility", report presented by the Lebanese government at the Vienna donors conference, 23 June 2008.

⁹⁰ On 5 June 2007, Prime Minister Siniora said, "the terrorist group was established among Palestinians, but it has no relation whatsoever with them, their habits or their lifestyle". See www.pcm.gov.lb/NR/rdonlyres/DF474868-7356-4A60-98F8-F26B51947571/0/200765%.pdf.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Tripoli resident, 15 August 2008. As mentioned, a defence ministry source accused Palestinian civilians of helping Fatah al-Islam militants.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Abu Jaber, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader in Nahr al-Bared, Beddawi, 13 April 2008.

⁹³ Speech by Hizbollah's secretary general, available at www.palestine-studies.org/files/wasaek/7476.doc.

Nahr al-Bared emerged as a test case of whether and how well Lebanon could assume security responsibility in the camps. The head of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee explained:

The state is determined not to let any armed faction return to Nahr al-Bared once it is rebuilt. It will be a pilot project. We are going to create special units of the Internal Security Forces and train them to be sensitive to Palestinian realities. The Palestinians themselves will take an active part in this. They need to feel that the state is not their adversary but that it protects them and is interested in their security.⁹⁴

So far, the experience has been at best mixed. Large-scale, at times fierce military operations deepened Palestinian mistrust of the state without strengthening faith in the army's efficiency. The fighting lasted for months, 47 civilians were killed, and the camp's infrastructure and housing were devastated. Some troops engaged in theft and gratuitous vandalism with impunity,⁹⁵ displaying contempt for the local population, all of which caused profound resentment.⁹⁶ Approximately 30,000 people were displaced. Most must now fend for themselves; the more fortunate are cared for by UNRWA or humanitarian NGOs.

The refugees lost everything. More than a year after fighting ended, their situation remains highly precarious. They lack any source of income, and only 10,000 moved into the "new camp".⁹⁷ There, families crowd in small areas, live in makeshift dwellings and are subject to draconian security measures at the four entrances. Most reside in temporary shelters in and around Beddawi Camp. A small number sought refuge in other camps.⁹⁸ Despite repeated promises that

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Khalil Mekkawi, president of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, Beirut, 18 August 2008.

⁹⁵ Responding to claims of looting and arson, a senior military official asserted that the army had initiated an investigation. He claimed that such acts were mostly committed by Fatah al-Islam members. Crisis Group email communication, December 2008.

⁹⁶ Abu Jaber, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Nahr al-Bared, said, "we did not want to oppose the army, and Palestinian officials in the camp had agreed to the military operations. But it is unacceptable that soldiers burn and pillage our homes. It's shameful. Even Israeli soldiers did not commit such acts". Crisis Group interview, Beddawi, 13 April 2008.

⁹⁷ As described, Nahr al-Bared consisted of two sections. The one that was officially recognised by UNRWA and known as the "old camp" was totally destroyed. The unofficial "new camp" was only partially destroyed.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, UNRWA official, 5 December 2008.

reconstruction will occur, former Nahr al-Bared residents remain deeply sceptical.⁹⁹

In June 2008, the Austrian government organised a donor conference in Vienna,¹⁰⁰ in cooperation with the Lebanese government, UNRWA and the World Bank. Reconstruction and recovery costs for the camp and its surroundings were estimated at \$445 million;¹⁰¹ only a fraction – \$120 million – was raised.¹⁰² Although Arab countries pledged to cover half the reconstruction costs,¹⁰³ this has yet to materialise.¹⁰⁴

Among refugees, events surrounding Nahr al-Bared – chiefly the use by the army of heavy weaponry and the ensuing large number of civilian casualties – rekindled painful memories and revived old fears. Once again, they felt, they were being made to pay for the acts of others. A former camp resident asked: “If Fatah al-Islam had emerged elsewhere, outside of the camp, in a Lebanese neighbourhood, would the army have acted the same way? Of course not! But when Palestinians are involved, it is okay to kill them and destroy their houses”.¹⁰⁵

D. THE REFUGEES' PRECARIOUS STATUS

1. The fear of *tawtin*

At the core of Lebanon's refugee policy is a powerful, widespread and clear-cut opposition to naturalisation (*tawtin*). Refusal of *tawtin* is enshrined in the constitution's preamble and has become, in the local jargon, a “national constant” (*al-thawabit al-wataniyya*). In his 26 May 2008 inaugural speech, President Michel Suleiman pointedly reaffirmed “Lebanon's categori-

cal rejection of naturalisation”.¹⁰⁶ The ministerial declaration reiterates this position, stressing the “government's determination to develop concepts and ideas aimed at strengthening Lebanon's rejection of naturalisation. The government holds all members of the international community responsible for the refugees' inability to return to their country”.¹⁰⁷

Paradoxically, despite unanimous support for this stance, there is no clear, agreed definition of *tawtin*. Some Lebanese leaders equate it with permanent settlement in Lebanon, regardless of whether the refugees acquire citizenship.¹⁰⁸ Others believe that becoming a citizen – and, it follows, enjoying the right to vote – is an essential component.¹⁰⁹ Different Lebanese groups have taken advantage of this ambiguity and manipulated the concept for political ends.¹¹⁰ The question of *tawtin* has also fuelled internal disputes, inter-Palestinian discord and regional tensions.

Some Lebanese see the refugees as a potential Sunni demographic and perhaps even military instrument in the domestic arena; indeed, during the civil war, Palestinians were commonly referred to as “the Sunnis' army”. Nader Hariri, the chief of staff of the country's most powerful Sunni leader, Saad Hariri, conceded that “historically, Sunnis backed the Palestinians and their desire to wage armed struggle against Israel from Lebanese territory. But that was a mistake, and Lebanon emerged weaker”.¹¹¹ Even after the civil war, disagreements have surfaced. In 1994, Prime Minister Hariri's government granted citizenship to several thousand Palestinians and Syrians; his opponents charged an effort to boost Sunni voter rolls in Beirut and the South.¹¹²

⁹⁹ This was made clear at a town hall meeting organised by UNRWA and the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee at which several former Nahr al-Bared residents spoke. Beddawi Camp, 18 July 2008.

¹⁰⁰ It officially is known as the “International Donor Conference for the Recovery and Reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp and Conflict-Affected Areas of North Lebanon”.

¹⁰¹ “A Common Challenge, a Shared Responsibility”, op. cit.

¹⁰² Al Jazeera, 24 June 2008.

¹⁰³ Ibid. During the conference, Prime Minister Siniora announced that four Gulf countries promised to cover half the reconstruction costs. However, they have yet to make an official pledge. See *The Daily Star*, 18 November 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis group interviews, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee officials, Beirut, October-November 2008. The current worldwide financial crisis has further reduced hope that the pledges will be honoured. Crisis Group interview, Palestinian analyst, Beirut, 1 November 2008.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, former Nahr al-Bared camp resident, Beddawi, August 2008.

¹⁰⁶ See full text of Michel Suleiman's inaugural speech, at www.psp.org.lb/Default.aspx?tabid=156&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=13152.

¹⁰⁷ The ministerial declaration can be found in *An-Nahar*, 6 August 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Mokhayber, Beirut, 1 August 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Mostafa Allouch, Tripoli, 4 August 2008; Khalil Mekkawi, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee president, Beirut, 18 August 2008.

¹¹⁰ This ambiguity traditionally has been used to justify harsh measures against Palestinians, such as the ban on real estate acquisition. See Section II.D.2 below.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Nader Hariri, Beirut, 21 November 2008.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, 8 September 2008. Several Palestinian and Lebanese political leaders echoed this charge. In response, Mostafa Allouch, a Future Movement member of parliament, argued that the decision was imposed on Hariri by Syria to undermine his reputation. The decision reflects “Syria's attempt to harm the Sunnis

The issue of *tawtin* also was used in the battle between then President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Hariri. Lahoud's backers, Syria included, presented him as the main bulwark against Hariri's alleged plan to naturalise refugees. They framed the 1998 renewal of his mandate (in violation of the constitution) as necessary to thwart the threat of permanent settlement. Mostafa Allouch, a Future Movement parliamentarian, asserted: "Syria used *tawtin* to scare people and prevent a Sunni-Christian rapprochement".¹¹³

Christians typically are the most worried. Many fear naturalisation of the refugees – almost 10 per cent of Lebanon's population¹¹⁴ – would tilt the demographic balance decisively in favour of (Sunni) Muslims. The most vocal today in expressing these concerns is General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. A member of its parliamentary bloc went so far as to call on "all Christians to confront *tawtin*, because Christians alone will pay a steep price....What have our politicians done for the last quarter of a century other than encourage a Christian brain drain? This is a premeditated policy aimed at paving the way for naturalisation".¹¹⁵

Christian members of the March 14 coalition, although equally opposed to naturalisation, of late have tended to use less inflammatory language. As they see it, it is largely a made-up issue, since neither Lebanese nor Palestinians want *tawtin*; instead, they argue, the problem is being raised by the opposition in order to divert attention away from today's real problems, namely Hizbollah's weapons and relationship with Syria.¹¹⁶ The Lebanese Forces, led by Samir Geagea and which engaged in bloody confrontation with the

Palestinians during the civil war, exemplifies this stance. Geagea's chief of staff said, "this is not a real problem. Nobody wants permanent settlement. Those who obsessively raise this issue are seeking to distract the public. What is more, they risk provoking tensions with the refugees".¹¹⁷ Amin Gemayel's Phalangist party, which also fought the Palestinians in the 1970s-1990s, organised a meeting of "candour and reconciliation" between Lebanese political leaders and PLO representatives on 13 April 2008.¹¹⁸

That said, as parliamentary elections loom, the issue once more has become an object of one-upmanship between various Christian movements. Each seeks to demonstrate its credentials as the more implacable foe of the refugees' permanent settlement. In November 2008, for instance, Gemayel criticised Fatah for organising a military parade, speaking of his "fears of the Palestinians' permanent settlement in Lebanon notwithstanding all international and Arab League resolutions".¹¹⁹

For its part, Hizbollah presents its opposition to *tawtin* not as demographically-motivated or anti-Palestinian, but rather as a politically-inspired effort to protect the refugees' right to return to Israel. Hassan Hodroj, in charge of the Palestinian file in the Shiite movement, said:

Any alternative to the refugees' return infringes on their natural rights. Our position flows from our understanding of the nature of the struggle against Israel. The threat of *tawtin* is genuine; it's not just a slogan. It is one of the ways in which Israel, backed by the U.S., is endangering the region. The problem is that some Arab, Palestinian and Lebanese actors have given up on the right of return, which is a fundamental Palestinian right. Our position has nothing to do with confessional calculations. We are not worried by the fact that the

and chiefly Hariri. It was taken during the era of Syrian domination: it was therefore a Syrian decision that Damascus sought to pin on the Sunnis". Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 4 August 2008. Another Future Movement leader asserted: "In 80 per cent of cases, the decision was warranted". Crisis Group interview, Nader Hariri, Future Movement president's chief of staff, Beirut, 21 November 2008. Nadim Shehadi made perhaps the most cogent case, arguing that "although the decree became a political argument used by various parties, it was neither a Syrian tactic used against Hariri, nor a Hariri ploy to promote *tawtin*. By 1994, there were thousands of outstanding naturalisation requests, delayed due to the civil war. The decree merely regularised the situation of several thousands of people". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 6 November 2008.

¹¹³ Mostafa Allouch, Future Movement member of parliament, Tripoli, 4 August 2008.

¹¹⁴ www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon.html.

¹¹⁵ See speech by Nabil Nicolas, Aounist member of parliament, at <http://vcoders.org/forum/showthread.php?t=32967>.

¹¹⁶ Speeches by Lebanese Forces and Phalangist leaders can be found at www.lebanese-forces.org and www.aminegemayel.org.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Elie Baraghid, Maarab, 4 November 2008.

¹¹⁸ On that occasion, Gemayel said, "we have a very different view of the Palestinians' presence in Lebanon, so long as they respect Lebanon's sovereignty and comply with our laws". Speech at www.kataeb.org/pictures/files/News0.5119745mousar7a_mousala7a.pdf.

¹¹⁹ www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=66488.

Concern that Christians from the majority and opposition coalitions would use the issue in their electoral campaigns was shared by Palestinian and Lebanese officials alike. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and Palestinian Camps, September-November 2008.

Palestinians are Sunnis. We are united with them in our fight against Israel.¹²⁰

Still, many believe that Hizbollah's posture also reflects sectarian considerations, all the more so in light of today's extreme Sunni-Shiite polarisation. Most Palestinians live in South Lebanon and in Beirut's southern neighbourhoods, areas heavily populated by Shiites. Their eventual naturalisation inevitably would alter the demographic map. According to an Aounist bloc parliament member, "*tawtin* does not worry Christians alone. It also frightens Shiites. It would have the greatest impact in the South, which explains Hizbollah's adamant opposition".¹²¹

The other Shiite movement, Amal, takes a similar posture, though it is more upfront regarding the demographic aspect. A political bureau member explained:

Rejection of permanent settlement is a means of ensuring implementation of UN General Assembly resolution 194 [on the right of return]. The U.S. administration and some Palestinian as well as Lebanese officials see the refugee issue merely as a financial problem that can be solved through compensation. In reality, it is a political problem, and it is linked to the fight against Israel. Besides, it has important consequences for our country's sectarian balance.¹²²

Sunni officials are quick to refute the charge that they are seeking demographic advantage. In fact, Saad Hariri's chief of staff said:

Precisely because Rafiq Hariri was a Sunni, he constantly felt the need to prove his good faith on the matter. His followers voted in favour of the iniquitous property law¹²³ in order not to be accused of promoting *tawtin*. More recently, Future Movement parliamentarians signed a petition aimed at making anything that smacks of *tawtin* impossible unless voted upon unanimously by all

members of parliament.¹²⁴ It is our way of ensuring that nobody can accuse us on this.¹²⁵

On the Palestinian side, all factions are united in categorically denouncing the possibility of *tawtin*. President Abbas made this clear during his August 2008 Lebanon visit: "Palestinians have a right to return, and we are discussing it with the Israelis. We oppose the Palestinians' permanent settlement in Lebanon".¹²⁶ That has not prevented the issue from being used in inter-Palestinian disputes. Fatah's rivals accuse it of having ceded the right of return and considering alternatives, including permanent settlement.¹²⁷ A leader of one of the more militant groups said, "we no longer can speak of a solution to the Palestinian question but of surrender. All Mahmoud Abbas does is give in to the Israelis. Abbas Zaki's policy in Lebanon is part of that pattern".¹²⁸ Hamas's Lebanon representative likewise argues that his movement has a "strategic disagreement with the PLO on this question. The PLO wants to change the status of 'refugees' to that of 'diaspora'. That's the first step toward their permanent settlement and displacement (*tahjir*). To relinquish the status of refugees is to relinquish the right of return".¹²⁹

In the past, Syria repeatedly invoked the spectre of *tawtin*, accusing the PLO of willingness to sacrifice the right of return in order to reach a separate Israeli-

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Hassan Hodroj, southern suburb of Beirut, 8 August 2008.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Mokhayber, member of parliament from General Aoun's Change and Reform bloc, Beirut, 1 August 2008.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Mohammad Khawaja, Beirut, 10 November 2008. Amal's relationship with the refugees is complicated, as memories of the camp war linger. See fn. 9 and Section II.A above. That said, Khawaja asserts that "war is behind us. Today, we enjoy very good relations with both PLO and Tahaluf factions. Nabih Berri, the head of our movement and speaker of parliament, more than once has mediated between Palestinian factions".

¹²³ See Section II.D.2 below.

¹²⁴ See www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=66691.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nader Hariri, Beirut, 21 November 2008.

¹²⁶ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7586360.stm.

¹²⁷ They pointed in particular to several unofficial Israeli-Palestinian agreements which in their eyes in effect nullify the right of return, such as the Geneva Accords. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°22, *Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Peacemaking*, 5 February 2004; Salah Salah, *Awraq Filastiniyya 'an Haqq al-'Awda wa Munazzamat al-Tahrir wa Oslo [Palestinian papers on the right of return, the PLO and Oslo]* (Damascus, 2008).

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abu Khaled al-Shemal, Palestinian Popular Struggle Front representative in Lebanon, Chatila refugee camp, 6 April 2008. A similar position is held by other Tahaluf and Islamist organisations. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian leaders, April/May 2008.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, southern suburb of Beirut, 28 April 2008. Like others, Hamdan argues that the status of refugee implies the problem remains unresolved, camps must be maintained, and Palestinians are entitled to struggle for their return. In contrast, diaspora is seen to suggest the necessary integration of the Palestinian community in various host countries. Crisis Group interview, PFLP-General Command official responsible for public relations and political affairs and movement leader in Beddawi Camp, 5 December 2008.

Palestinian deal. A former (Lebanese) Fatah member explained:

Syria took advantage of its hegemonic position in Lebanon to bar the PLO from engaging in any political or diplomatic activity. It presented itself as the true defender of the Palestinian cause and the right of return, repeatedly accusing the PLO of betrayal and capitulation.¹³⁰

Although most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon say they refuse permanent settlement, they also appear no longer to believe they will return to Israel, fearing their cause will be a casualty of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.¹³¹ A Palestinian leader gave voice to a widely held view:

Israel cannot accept the return of thousands of Palestinians, for they would threaten its existence. Several projects are being considered to resolve this question, including the resettlement of some of the refugees in host countries, in other Arab states and in Europe. In Lebanon, pressure will continue to build on refugees to migrate. Sooner or later, the U.S. and Israel will impose the permanent settlement of those who remain. Neither the Lebanese nor the Palestinians will be able to prevent such an outcome.¹³²

2. Marginalisation

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have no legal status. In 1987, during Amin Gemayel's presidency, the parliament cancelled the Cairo agreement that governed Lebanese-Palestinian relations. It has yet to be replaced. Instead, the refugees' living conditions are regulated by a patchwork of laws and a de facto situation that severely restrict their rights. A parliament

member asserted: "Our official policy is to maintain Palestinians in a vulnerable, precarious situation to diminish prospects for their naturalisation or permanent settlement. Our economic and security measures are guided by this. And yet, our real challenge today should be to reconcile rejection of naturalisation and acceptance of the need to grant Palestinians their rights and improve their living conditions".¹³³

Invoking the refugees' merely temporary presence, the state is virtually absent from the camps and has done little to meet basic needs. UNRWA and a range of local and international humanitarian organisations have sought to fill the void, but the refugees' living standard is deemed catastrophic by both the UN agency¹³⁴ and the government.¹³⁵ UNRWA attends to primary and secondary education, yet schools are plagued by an archaic educational system, lack of human and financial resources, as well as decaying infrastructure and equipment and overcrowded classrooms. High dropout rates, inadequate schooling and insufficient skills (combined with significant labour market restrictions, described below) hamper the refugees' ability to find adequate employment, pushing many to take menial jobs.¹³⁶

Unlike Lebanese citizens, Palestinians do not enjoy free medical care or social security benefits, regardless of whether they are employed. UNRWA and various NGOs have assumed healthcare responsibility, but here too substandard infrastructure and equipment badly impair quality.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, former Lebanese fighter and Fatah member, Beirut, 4 May 2008.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian camp residents, Beddawi, Chatila, Ain al-Helweh and Burj al-Barajneh, April/May 2008. See also Crisis Group Report, *Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Peacemaking*, op. cit. According to one poll, 79.6 per cent of respondents wanted to return to their villages in Israel; a mere 5.4 per cent were willing to settle in the West Bank and Gaza, and 6.6 would accept resettlement in Lebanon. See Mohsen Saleh, "The Political Views of the Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultation, May 2006. See also the poll conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Political and Statistical Studies, at www.pepsr.org/arabic/survey/polls/2003/reftable4.html.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Abu Khaled al-Shemal, representative of Palestinian Popular Struggle Front in Lebanon, Chatila refugee camp, 6 April 2008.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Mokhayber, Beirut, 1 August 2008.

¹³⁴ Lebanon's Palestinian camps "suffer from serious problems – no proper infrastructure, overcrowding, poverty and unemployment. The Lebanon field has the highest percentage of Palestine refugees who are living in abject poverty and who are registered with the Agency's 'special hardship' program". UNRWA's mandate covers Syria, Jordan and the occupied territories. www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon.

¹³⁵ "We have recognised that the living conditions of the refugees within the camps are dire and unacceptable....We have turned a new leaf over a difficult and painful past full of mistakes from all sides and for which both Lebanese and Palestinians have paid too high a price". Khalil Mekkawi, "A new Era", "Partners in Responsibility", op. cit.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, students, parents, social activists, Palestinian camps, April-May 2008. According to one study, Palestinian parents in refugee camps are better educated than their children who, by and large, lack motivation given the closed labour market. "Living Conditions of Palestinians Refugees in Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon", Fafo, February 2000.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, residents and social activists, Palestinian camps, April-May 2008.

Refugees are barred from several professions by severe job market restrictions.¹³⁸ Officials typically point to economic reasons and the need to protect Lebanese employment to justify this policy,¹³⁹ but the argument is questionable. According to Kamal Hamdan, an economist:

In the absence of a reliable census, we can estimate the number of working-age Palestinians at roughly 50,000. This represents close to 5 per cent of the country's active population. Giving the refugees free access to the labour market, therefore, would have negligible economic impact, all the more so since almost 30 per cent of them work in institutions run by UNRWA, the PLO and other Palestinian organisations.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, non-Palestinian foreign workers face fewer labour restrictions, suggesting that the real reason behind the discriminatory practice is political, aimed less at protecting Lebanese workers than at perpetuating the refugees' precarious situation. According to

UNRWA, the unemployment rate among camp residents exceeds 60 per cent.¹⁴¹

In 2001, Parliament adopted an amendment to the law governing property rights, proscribing the acquisition of real estate by "any person not a citizen of a recognised state or . . . in the event such acquisition would contradict the constitutional principle relating to rejection of naturalisation".¹⁴² However ambiguous, the phrase left no doubt as to its intended (Palestinian) target. Under the new regime, Palestinians are also barred from bequeathing real estate acquired prior to 2001.¹⁴³

Palestinians face other restrictions. Legally, they cannot form associations. In practice many organisations operating in the camps are not registered; others are registered under Lebanese names.¹⁴⁴ Army checkpoints monitor entry into and exit out of several camps, notably in the South and, more recently, at the entrance of the "new camp" in Nahr al-Bared. Intrusive identity checks and car searches provoke strong resentment among camp residents. One said, "these checkpoints aim at locking us up. They damage the camps' economic life. Many refugees limit as much

¹³⁸ A September 1962 decree gives the labour minister the right to list which professions are restricted to Lebanese citizens. Prior to 2005, Palestinians were barred from approximately 70 professions. A 2005 memorandum issued by the then labour minister, Trad Hamadeh, who is close to Hizbollah, reduced the number to roughly twenty. However, numerous professions – including pharmacy, medicine, engineering and the law – remain off limits. Many Palestinians say the reduction essentially legalised a pre-existing situation, since they had been able to work informally in many of these areas beforehand. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian camp residents, April-May 2008. One expert said, "the decree was significant not so much for its economic as for its political value. It gave rights to Palestinians". Crisis Group interview, Kamal Hamdan, head of the economic division of the Consultation and Research Institute, Beirut, 7 August 2008. Palestinians face other obstacles in entering the job market, in particular difficulties in obtaining work permits. See Jaber Suleiman, "Legal Issues Governing Palestinians' Right to Work and Social Security", Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee Briefing Note, 3 April 2008.

¹³⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Kamal Hamdan, Beirut, 7 August 2008. Sakr Abou Fakhr, a Palestinian analyst and journalist, echoed this point: "The Palestinian and Lebanese workforce are complementary. There are no more than 50,000 Palestinian workers. They mainly work in construction, agriculture, gas stations, bakeries or the fishing industry and as doormen. . . . In other words, they do not compete with the Lebanese workforce". *As-Safir*, 20 January 2006.

¹⁴¹ Richard Cook, "Palestinian Camps and Refugees in Lebanon: Priorities, Challenges and Opportunities Ahead", lecture at American University of Beirut, 21 May 2008.

¹⁴² Amendment to decree no. 11614. Prior to 2001, the law did not say anything specific about Palestinians, who, therefore, could purchase real estate.

¹⁴³ The law initially was supposed to be amended to encourage foreign investment. However, several Christian and Shiite deputies argued angrily that the proposed changes (such as tax exonerations and modalities to facilitate registration) somehow might pave the way to naturalisation or permanent settlement. For example, many Lebanese view the right to purchase real estate as a first step toward permanent settlement. Gebran Bassil, an Aounist parliament member, warned that foreigners should not be allowed to purchase Lebanese land, on the ground that "the Palestinians lost their country because they sold their land to Jews". Press conference, 10 September 2008. As a result, property restrictions were added to mollify any concern over *tawtin*. See "Report on First Ordinary Parliamentary Session", 20-21 March 2003, www.lp.gov.lb/NF%20Archive/hai2a_3amma/jalsat%20tachri3iya/jalsa2001/jalsat20-21-3-2001.htm.

¹⁴⁴ Palestinians complain that these restrict their right to free association and undermine the quality of their work. Crisis Group interview, Jaber Suleiman, independent Palestinian researcher and consultant, Mar Elias Camp, 12 November 2008. For more information, see Jaber Suleiman, "Palestinians in Lebanon and the role of Non-governmental Organizations", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (September 1997).

as possible their movements outside the camps in order to avoid checkpoints and searches".¹⁴⁵

Although Lebanon's political parties all offer strong rhetorical support for the need to improve refugee living conditions and grant them basic rights,¹⁴⁶ little has changed over the years. Many refugees describe Lebanon's policy as a form of collective punishment, the price they are compelled to pay for their role in the civil war.¹⁴⁷ Lack of hope and the absence of a viable economic horizon, together with social marginalisation and exclusion, fuel frustration and anger toward the state. Predictably, these also promote militancy and radicalism in the camps, increasing the potential for instability and violence. An official from one of the Palestinian groups said:

The state's policy toward Palestinians is very dangerous for Lebanon. Radicalism and violence are rising among refugees. The camps are a time-bomb that, sooner or later, will explode, with serious consequences for both Lebanese and Palestinians.¹⁴⁸

III. GROWING INSTABILITY IN THE CAMPS

A. INTER-FACTIONAL CONFLICT

Lebanon's refugee policy is conducted against the backdrop of inter-Palestinian divisions. Various Palestinian factions fought each other during the civil war, both prior to and after the Israeli invasion.¹⁴⁹ The PLO in general and Fatah in particular were weakened when Syria exercised its domination and backed a plethora of rival organisations. Since 2005, although the government maintains close contacts with Hamas, it is seen by the Islamist movement and some Lebanese actors, including Hizbollah, as tilting toward Fatah in an ever more bitter inter-factional struggle.¹⁵⁰

The PLO considers that it remains the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and Lebanese policy must reflect that reality. In the words of one of its officials:

Members of Tahaluf boycotted the PLO representative's office to undercut its authority. They formed their own, separate delegation to negotiate with Lebanese authorities. But their strategy is doomed to fail, because the government recognises that the PLO represents Palestinian legality.¹⁵¹

For their part, Tahaluf factions insist that representation in Lebanon must reflect changes in the inter-Palestinian balance of power that have taken place in Lebanon and the wider Palestinian arena since the 1980s. By virtue of its January 2006 electoral victory in the occupied territories, its growing constituency within Lebanon, its alliance with influential regional actors such as Iran, Syria and Hizbollah and the failure of the peace process, Hamas has emerged as Fatah's – and, therefore, the PLO's – most credible rival.

The Palestinian rift has serious consequences for the refugees, whom it has deprived of coherent, effective political representation, as illustrated in part by dysfunction-

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Dalal Yassine, lawyer and coordinator of "Palestinians' Right to Work" campaign, Beirut, 2 August 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Elie Baraghid, Lebanese Forces president's chief of staff, Maarab, 4 November 2008; Hassan Hodroj, member of Hizbollah's political bureau, southern suburbs of Beirut, 8 August 2008; Mostafa Allouch, Future Movement member of parliament, Tripoli, 4 August 2008; Mohammad Khawaja, member of Amal's political bureau, Beirut, 10 November 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Abu Jaber, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine official in Nahr al-Bared, Beddawi Camp, 13 April 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Section II.A above.

¹⁵⁰ Hizbollah believes that any Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue must include all Palestinian factions, including Hamas and the rest of Tahaluf. Crisis Group interview, Hassan Hodroj, member of Hizbollah's political bureau and official in charge of Palestinian affairs, southern suburbs of Beirut, 8 August 2008. On Siniora's policy toward the Palestinian factions, see Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, op. cit, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Hisham Dibsi, PLO media adviser, Beirut, 8 September 2008.

tions in the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee. More seriously, the infighting indirectly contributed to the tragic Nahr al-Bared events. Fatah al-Islam's emergence and radicalisation occurred at a time when various factions were too divided to settle on a sustained, common approach. Instead, they watched passively as a situation they knew to be risky became more dangerous still. Efforts to build a unified front – as exemplified by a series of joint meetings between Prime Minister Siniora, Abbas Zaki and Usama Hamdan¹⁵² – quickly came to an end, and, as the crisis unfolded, clear differences surfaced. Whereas the PLO favoured a more muscular, military response after Fatah al-Islam refused to surrender to Lebanese authorities,¹⁵³ Tahaluf factions continued to advocate peaceful mediation and dialogue.¹⁵⁴

All in all, discord and ensuing paralysis offered the jihadi group remarkable freedom of action and impunity; Palestinian refugees ultimately paid the heaviest price. A Tahaluf leader explained: “We suffered doubly: not only was the camp razed, but in the end we all had to accept the army's assault. Palestinian factions bear entire responsibility for what happened at Nahr al-Bared”.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Nadim Shehadi, Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee consultant, Beirut, 11 November 2008.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Fatah officials, Lebanese camps, April-May 2008.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Usama Hamdan, southern suburb of Beirut, 28 April 2008; Jamal Khattab, leader of al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida, Ain al-Helweh, 29 March 2008. The two factions have traded accusations. For a Fatah official, “we were uncomfortable with Fatah al-Islam when they first came to our attention. Many of its members were from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, North Africa, Syria and Lebanon, with very few Palestinians. At first, all Palestinian factions denounced it. Yet, after they were told that Fatah al-Islam wanted to stay in Nahr al-Bared and fight Israel, the pro-Syrian groups (Hamas, Islamic Jihad and PFLP-GC) changed their minds. They said they saw no problem”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 5 September 2007. By contrast, a sheikh with close Hamas ties argued that Fatah hindered a peaceful outcome. “We wanted to establish a security mechanism for the camp in which all factions would be involved. But Fatah opposed this. They wanted to put in place their own security structure. They accused Fatah al-Islam of being miscreants and, in turn, Fatah al-Islam accused them of being unbelievers”. Crisis Group interview, sheikh, member of the Palestine Scholar's League, 29 September 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Abu Khaled al-Shemal, leader of the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front in Lebanon, Chatila Camp, 6 April 2008. Abbas Zaki said, “we had clearly stated that our new policy would respect Lebanon's sovereignty. We also had said that we would not allow the camps to be-

The conflict between Fatah and Hamas has had the most significant repercussions. Unlike at the national level, the two movements generally have maintained a modicum of communication, a necessity given close proximity and interaction in the camps. A PLO official said:

Although the PLO's governing institutions ended all cooperation with Hamas following its Gaza takeover in June 2007, we asked that Lebanon be exempted. We did not want to transplant the conflict that rages in the Palestinian territories here. Our discussions with Hamas repeatedly have been interrupted, in particular due to our differences regarding Fatah al-Islam. But ultimately we reached an agreement. In April 2008, the PLO and Tahaluf factions created an Emergency Command (*qiyadat tawari*'), the first attempt at creating a coordinating mechanism since the reopening of the PLO office.¹⁵⁶

The agreement included formation of a Political Command (*qiyada siyasiyya*), to be presided over by the PLO's Abbas Zaki and comprising six members, three each from Tahaluf and the PLO; it was supposed to coordinate camp management as well as law and order. The agreement called for broadening membership in the Armed Struggle Organisation (which is responsible for law and order in the camps as well as security coordination with Lebanese authorities) to Tahaluf factions and reaffirmed commonly held principles: the right of return; rejection of Palestinian naturalisation or forced displacement; the need to rebuild Nahr al-Bared; and a commitment not to harbour any criminals in the camps.¹⁵⁷

But the ever-worsening conflict between Hamas and Fatah in the occupied territories inevitably affected Lebanon, and implementation of the agreement was halted. According to a PLO official:

For now, creation of a unified political command has been frozen as a result of the massacre perpetrated by Hamas against Fatah in Gaza in August

come islands of insecurity or sanctuaries for outlaws. The war in Nahr al-Bared was a test of our policy and credibility. We had to accept this war even though it was at the expense of our people and our popularity. The violence risked spreading to other camps. We sacrificed Nahr al-Bared to save Beddawi and the other camps”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 17 August 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Hisham Dibsi, PLO media adviser, Beirut, 8 September 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, Beirut, 10 September 2008.

2008.¹⁵⁸ The document had been signed by every faction and we were only days away from unveiling it. But that became impossible after the massacre. We could not sit down with Hamas. That said, we maintain relations with other Tahaluf factions, and there is some coordination even with Hamas at the local level.¹⁵⁹

The conflict began to spill over into Lebanon. As one Fatah leader put it, "Hamas wants to control the camps and rejects any power sharing. In Gaza, it exterminated its adversaries. In Lebanon, likewise, its goal is to weaken Fatah".¹⁶⁰ In Hamas's view, all "efforts aiming at coordinating between the PLO and Tahaluf have been torpedoed by Fatah. Its leadership has prevented Abbas Zaki from working with us".¹⁶¹

Several violent incidents have opposed members of the two movements. These were contained thanks to rapid intervention by Fatah and Hamas leaders, both of whom seem determined to avoid wholesale conflict or provoking their host country. Likewise, despite heightened tensions resulting from the Gaza war, the camps remained calm, as leaders from the two movements joined in public meetings and demonstrations in a display of unity.¹⁶² Still, every violent incident raises tensions in the camps and presents a risk of escalation.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ In August 2008, clashes between Hamas security forces and a pro-Fatah clan in Gaza resulted in nine deaths, tens of wounded and the arrest by Hamas of a large number of Fatah loyalists. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°24, *Round Two in Gaza*, 11 September 2008.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, Beirut, 10 September 2008.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Refaat Shanaa, Fatah official in North Lebanon, Beddawi, 13 April 2008.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, southern suburbs of Beirut, 7 November 2008.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian leaders and residents, Beirut and Palestinian camps, December 2008-January 2009. See also Section V below.

¹⁶³ Hamas and Fatah militants have traded gunfire on several occasions, notably in Mieh we Mieh and Burj al-Barajneh. Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, Beirut, 19 November 2008. Usama Hamdan claimed that a Hamas militant was assaulted in Ain al-Helweh by Fatah supporters and that they threw a grenade at another Hamas official. Crisis Group interview, southern suburbs of Beirut, 7 November 2008. That said, many observers believe that the Hamas-Fatah conflict has been and can be contained in the camps. Crisis Group interviews, Jaber Suleiman, Palestinian researcher, Mar Elias Camp, 12 November 2008; Walid Mohammad Ali, general manager of Baheth for Studies research centre, Beirut, 8 November 2008; Mohsen Saleh, general manager, Al-Zaytouna centre for studies and consultation, Beirut, 7 November

B. THE PLO AND FATAH

The Fatah-Hamas conflict is not the only one to have damaged the situation in the camps. Tensions within the PLO and, especially, within its dominant movement, Fatah – both of which intensified following Yasser Arafat's death in 2005 – also weakened internal cohesion.

A growing number of refugees no longer see in the PLO an effective representative capable of defending their interests. There are several causes. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1996 inevitably undermined the PLO's role, creating confusion as to where decisions were made and on whose behalf. Although in principle the PLO negotiates with Israel and represents all Palestinians – those in the occupied territories and in the diaspora alike – this has become more theory than reality. In many ways, the organisation is now essentially symbolic, unable to take key decisions. A camp resident said:

The PLO is sacrificing the refugees' interests. In negotiating with Israel, it relinquished the right of return. In Lebanon, it is serving the state's interests, as was made clear at Nahr al-Bared. It's almost as if it represented Lebanon, not the Palestinians.¹⁶⁴

An official from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (which belongs to the PLO), criticised "the total confusion between the Palestinian Authority and the PLO – the latter has become the former's instrument".¹⁶⁵ In November 2008, a further step was taken, when the Lebanese government decided to establish diplomatic relations with the PA; since then, steps have been taken to transform the PLO office into a PA embassy.¹⁶⁶

Some PLO factions also denounce Fatah's de facto monopoly over resources and decision-making within what was supposed to be an umbrella organisation. According to the local leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, "the PLO has become Fatah – or perhaps even just a few people within Fatah.

2008; Samir Ahmad, general secretary of the Palestinian Writers and Journalists Union in Lebanon, Beirut, 11 November 2008.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Chatila Camp resident, June 2008.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Abu Imad Chatila, Mar Elias camp, 3 May 2008.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian and Lebanese officials, December 2008. See also *Al-Hayat*, 29 November 2008. The decision was criticised both by Tahaluf and the Lebanese opposition.

There is no consultation. Decisions are made unilaterally by Fatah".¹⁶⁷

For many refugees, fundamental PLO reform has become a critical and urgent step to strengthen their representation and overall situation in Lebanon.¹⁶⁸

It is absolutely essential to reform and democratise the PLO. Its leaders have been around since the 1960s, and all they want is to maintain their personal assets. Corruption, inefficiency and the absence of democracy harm all Palestinians, both within the occupied territories and without. These problems are destroying the Palestinian cause.¹⁶⁹

Added to this have been growing problems within Fatah. Local leaders in Lebanon increasingly rejected any central authority. Each sought to exercise domination over a refugee camp or even an area within a camp. They built ties with Lebanese actors – Hizbollah, the Hariri family or others – or with regional players such as Syria. Taking advantage of their prolonged presence in Lebanon, many constructed autonomous and often corrupt power networks thanks to external funding sources.¹⁷⁰

In reaction, in November 2005 Abbas dispatched to Lebanon a close ally, Abbas Zaki, to restore order and discipline in the ranks.¹⁷¹ One of his main goals was to redefine responsibilities among Fatah leaders. The outcome has been mixed at best. The most significant decision to date was to demote Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, until then secretary general of Fatah and of the PLO in Lebanon.¹⁷² This, along with other

¹⁶⁷ Crisis group interview, Abu Jaber, Beddawi Camp, 13 April 2008. Many Palestinian activists interviewed by Crisis Group echoed this view. According to one, "decisions pertaining to the fate of refugees are taken unilaterally by Fatah, in the PLO's name. When he issued the Declaration of Palestine [a speech delivered on 7 January 2008 to mark Fatah's 43rd birthday], Zaki did not even consult other PLO factions". Crisis Group interview, Kassem Aina, director general of the National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training, Chatila Camp, 4 November 2008.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian officials and camps residents, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-October 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Anis Sayegh, Palestinian writer and former director of the Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, 1 November 2008.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian official, Beirut, November 2008.

¹⁷¹ Zaki is a member of Fatah's Central Committee and the PLO's representative to Lebanon.

¹⁷² The decision was all the more difficult for Abu al-Aynayn to accept since Kamal Naji – one of his principal rivals – was named Zaki's assistant in Lebanon. Many observers see the internal Fatah divisions, to a large extent, as a

changes, provoked considerable tension,¹⁷³ which reached its apex in the course of the October 2008 local Fatah elections, won by Sultan Abu al-Aynayn and his allies.¹⁷⁴ Between August and November 2008, Lebanon had two Fatah currents, one led by Abbas Zaki, the other by Sultan Abu al-Aynayn. Abu Al-Aynayn rejected Zaki's authority as PLO representative, saying:

His only role is diplomatic representation. We challenge all his decisions, appointments and dismissals. He violated internal Fatah rules. He acts unilaterally without consulting leaders who know Lebanon far better.¹⁷⁵

Infighting in Lebanon is a microcosm of broader turmoil and divisions within Fatah and of the struggle between Abbas and his many opponents within the movement. Fatah's gradual collapse as a result of internal rivalries and the absence of a strong leadership and political program is evoked with increased frequency by worried members.¹⁷⁶ Non-Fatah PLO members question the movement's capacity to rebuild

reflection of a power struggle between Zaki and Abu al-Aynayn. Crisis Group interviews, Anis Sayegh, former director of the Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, 1 November 2008; Kassem Aina, Chatila Camp, 4 November 2008; Sari Hanafi, Beirut, 3 November 2008; Walid Mohammad Ali, Beirut, 8 November 2008; Mohsen Saleh, Beirut, 7 November 2008; Samir Ahmad, Beirut, 11 November 2008.

¹⁷³ In another reshuffle, Khaled Aref was moved from Saida to Beirut, purportedly to cut him off from the power base he had built in the South. Crisis Group interview, former Fatah member, Beirut, April 2008. Aref denied this, saying that the move merely reflected "Abbas Zaki's desire to reorganise Fatah in Beirut and restore its former political weight". Crisis Group interview, Khaled Aref, PLO official in charge of external and political affairs and Fatah official in Beirut, Mieh wa Mieh camp, 4 May 2008. The decision to replace him with Munir al-Maqdah stirred further controversy. In 2003, Sultan Abu al-Aynayn had sought to dismiss Munir al-Maqdah; this resulted in armed confrontation. See www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/arabicNewsDesk.nsf/0/519A984A115485AE42256D520048A6FA?OpenDocument.

¹⁷⁴ Zaki, currently PLO representative in Lebanon, has yet to officially validate the election results. "Many Fatah militants have claimed that there was fraud and that Abu al-Aynayn and his allies exerted undue pressure. Their victory is thus subject to challenge". Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, adviser to the PLO representative in Lebanon, Beirut, 19 November 2008.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, Abra, South Lebanon, 30 October 2008.

¹⁷⁶ The prospect of Fatah's collapse is evoked by several factional leaders, including Fatah members. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian officials, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-May 2008.

internal coherence, though they note that the conflict with Hamas has become a unifying factor.¹⁷⁷ In November 2008, Zaki and Abu al-Aynayn ended their feud, or at least claimed to have done so.¹⁷⁸

A number of analysts argued that power struggles within Fatah and widespread corruption within the movement are a reason for growing chaos within the camps. They have undermined the credibility and effectiveness of important institutions, such as the Armed Struggle Organisation¹⁷⁹ and contributed to security breakdowns.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps most important, neither the PLO nor Fatah has been able to deal effectively with the challenge of jihadi groups that reject the organisation's nationalist project, strategy and alliances.

C. FAILED CAMP MANAGEMENT

1. Popular committees

Popular committees were established in 1969 in the wake of the Cairo accords. These semi-official organisations operate in the camps, fulfilling municipal functions such as providing water and electricity, collecting social contributions in return for such services, coordinating several UNRWA activities and managing security in cases of theft, personal disputes and so forth.¹⁸¹ They also purportedly represent camp residents before

Lebanese authorities, UNRWA and other organisations.¹⁸² However, they face two major obstacles.

The first is a shortage of resources and skills. Because Palestinian factions appoint committee members in rough proportion to their relative influence in a given camp, political criteria more often than not trump technical competence. Financial means also are in short supply. Funds are mainly provided by largely destitute camp residents and by factions, which for the most part are not well endowed. Criticism of the committees' performance runs high among refugees.¹⁸³

The committees are further hampered by political divisions and rivalries which, in some instances, have led to the establishment of competing bodies loyal to the PLO and Tahaluf. Moreover, each committee spawns a myriad of sub-committees that have become arenas for inter-factional competition and whose work on specific issues (safety, water, healthcare, education and information) is often uncoordinated, frequently duplicative and sometimes contradictory. Fund-raising, meetings and project proposals are seldom harmonised,¹⁸⁴ factions at times ignore what a subcommittee does, including on sensitive security matters.

Restoring orderly and effective camp management inevitably will require thoroughly revamping the committee system. This should entail, inter alia, electing members to bolster their legitimacy and accountability or, barring that, adopting criteria to ensure the nomination of qualified persons; unifying the committees in camps where more than one currently exists; and reducing the number of sub-committees.

2. UNRWA

Established by the UN General Assembly in 1949, UNRWA began operating on 1 May 1950. The agency was tasked with setting up programs to help Palestinian refugees in the areas of jobs, healthcare

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Abu Imad Chatila, Mar Elias Camp, 3 May 2008.

¹⁷⁸ *Al-Balad*, 21 November 2008. That said, little of substance has been resolved. During elections for the teachers union in Beddawi, Fatah was divided, as Zaki's and Abu al-Aynayn's supporters presented separate lists. A Palestinian official said, "I asked Sultan Abu al-Aynayn what the solution was. He answered: 'that Zaki leave Lebanon'". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2008.

¹⁷⁹ In Ain al-Helweh for example, a conflict between two Fatah leaders significantly weakened the movement. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian officials and residents, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-December 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Some observers believe that violent acts in Ain al-Helweh attributed to jihadis were perpetrated by Fatah members opposed to Zaki. Crisis Group interview, Sari Hanafi, American University of Beirut, 3 November 2008. This view was echoed by other Palestinian and Lebanese officials and sheikhs, Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, Tripoli and Saida, November-December 2008.

¹⁸¹ In other words, they do not deal with political strife between competing factions.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, Jamal Qassem, former UNRWA official in charge of services in the Burj al-Barajneh camp, southern suburb of Beirut, 6 June 2008.

¹⁸³ See Husayn Ali Shaban, "Al-Mukhayyamat al-Filastiniya fi Lubnan: min al-Diyafa ila al-Tamyiz [Palestinian Camps in Lebanon: from Hospitality to Discrimination]", *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*, Jerusalem, January 2002.

¹⁸⁴ In 1999, the two popular committees of Ain al-Helweh presented different memoranda to UNRWA, even though their demands were broadly similar. See Jaber Suleiman, "The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1999), pp. 66-80.

and education. Today, roughly 4.6 million refugees are registered with UNRWA, including 416,608 in Lebanon; 1,059,584 in Gaza; 754,263 in the West Bank; 1,930,703 in Jordan; and 456,983 in Syria, though these figures do not necessarily reflect the current number of refugees in each location.¹⁸⁵ Most of its 24,324 employees are Palestinian. Government funding – from the U.S., the EU, Sweden, Norway and others – accounts for approximately 94 per cent of its income.¹⁸⁶

In Lebanon, UNRWA is the single most important provider of camp services and largest employer of Palestinian refugees; in effect, it is a substitute for the absent Lebanese state. For Palestinians, its role is also highly symbolic, its existence highlighting the unresolved nature of the refugee problem. In the words of a Palestinian, “UNRWA’s existence matters deeply to us. It is a permanent reminder to the international community that there are Palestinian refugees and that this issue must be resolved”.¹⁸⁷

Yet, UNRWA’s resources lag far behind need, and refugees say that, over time, the quality of services has declined. The agency’s director in Lebanon explained:

This largely is due to the fact that decreasing financial support has coincided with increased refugee needs stemming from conflict and instability. In 2007, we had a \$70 million shortfall. We constantly struggle with underfunding.¹⁸⁸

Although funding is a crucial problem, bureaucratic impediments, nepotism and corruption arguably also play a part,¹⁸⁹ as does rivalry among Palestinian fac-

tions. A former UNRWA official who oversaw activities in Burj al-Barajneh said, “some UNRWA employees are not qualified. When a Palestinian faction insists that one of its members be recruited, the agency finds it very difficult to object”.¹⁹⁰ All this has hurt the agency’s image and relations with camp residents. UNRWA officials cite instances in which their colleagues have been physically abused by angry refugees.¹⁹¹ Acknowledging the need for reform, the agency’s director in Lebanon said:

Our structure and operating procedures must change. We initiated a reform process in 2006 with the goal of altering the prevailing hierarchical culture by empowering field staff, enhancing accountability and responding in a more targeted manner to refugees needs.¹⁹²

According to its general commissioner, UNRWA is in the midst of “a vast reform process with multiple ramifications”.¹⁹³ It has launched a needs assessment initiative as well as other steps designed to better identify refugees’ grievances and ensure more targeted, efficient and timely intervention.¹⁹⁴ Already, some partial results are being noticed, although the more fundamental budget issues remain unaddressed.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁵ See www.un.org/unrwa/publications/index.html.

¹⁸⁶ See www.un.org/unrwa/finances/index.html.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Mahmoud Hanafi, executive director of the Shahed Human Rights Association, Beirut, 7 June 2008. Many Israelis complain that Arab countries callously use UNRWA and the plight of refugees, preferring to keep the issue alive rather than absorbing the refugees fully within their own societies.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group email communication, Salvatore Lombardo, UNRWA Lebanon director, October 2008.

¹⁸⁹ “UNRWA procedures are very slow. This affects the quality of its work. Some urgent projects are delayed for weeks or even months”. Crisis Group interview, UN agency official operating in Nahr al-Bared, Tripoli, 13 September 2008. An NGO employee working in the camps claimed that “UNRWA employees take advantage of their position to help family members or political allies”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 10 August 2008. Many refugees told Crisis Group they suspected that agency funds were being diverted for personal use. Crisis Group interviews, camp residents, April-May 2008.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Jamal Qassem, former Burj al-Barajneh Camp services director, southern suburb of Beirut, 6 June 2008.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, UNRWA official, Beddawi, 10 April 2008.

¹⁹² Crisis Group email communication, Salvatore Lombardo, October 2008.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Karen AbuZayd, UNRWA’s general commissioner, Damascus, 15 October 2008.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group email communication, Salvatore Lombardo, October 2008.

¹⁹⁵ An official at a UN agency with close ties to UNRWA said, “there are some changes within the agency. Employees are better trained and prepared and empowered to take decisions on their own”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, December 2008. As for the budget, Karen AbuZayd explained, UNRWA suffers from a chronic deficit of some \$80 million to \$100 million”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 15 October 2008.

IV. JIHADISM

By the late 1980s, several converging factors promoted the rise of a salafist jihadi current in the camps:¹⁹⁶ the absence of any dominant political force on the Lebanese Palestinian scene; the camps' seclusion and isolation from the rest of the country; deteriorating living conditions; and the wider spread of Islamism throughout the Middle East.¹⁹⁷ The collapse of the peace process in the late 1990s intensified the process. Taking advantage of young refugees' identity crisis, socio-economic despair and leadership vacuum, groups such as Jund al-Sham, Usbat al-Ansar, Usbat al-Nour, al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida and, more recently, Fatah al-Islam, prospered. This was particularly true in the North, a traditional Sunni stronghold¹⁹⁸ which lacks a powerful Lebanese leadership, and in Ain al-Helweh, which – unlike the other camps – is not under any single faction's control.

In Ain al-Helweh in particular,¹⁹⁹ jihadi groups presented themselves as alternatives to a PLO leadership

viewed by many as discredited and corrupt and which the Islamists accused of capitulating to Israel and the West by renouncing Palestinian rights, notably the right of return.²⁰⁰ The leader of one group argued:

The only thing nationalist forces have achieved is serial defeat. Likewise, peace agreements have achieved nothing for the Palestinian people. Nationalists increasingly are marginalised. For most Palestinians in Lebanon, Islamism has become the only solution, a fact demonstrated by its rapid growth in all camps.²⁰¹

Having benefited from the vacuum in the camps, the jihadis also gained from Lebanese and Palestinian political divisions. Several groups – Usbat al-Ansar, al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida and Hizb al-Tahrir – joined Hamas and Islamic Jihad in a loose coalition known as the “Palestinian Islamic Forces” that opposes Fatah, rejects disarmament and advocates struggle against Israel.²⁰² According to a sheikh enjoying good relations with Hamas:

Hamas has every interest in influencing these groups because they constitute an additional means of pressure. They consult with Hamas before taking any significant decisions, and Hamas seeks to

¹⁹⁶ Jihadi salafists believe they are engaged in the military defence (or, in some cases, expansion) of *Dar al-Islam* (the “House of Islam” – that area of the world historically subject to Moslem rule) and the *umma* (Islamic community) against infidels. They should be distinguished from the salafiyya missionary movement, which concentrates on preaching as a means of reinforcing or reviving faith and preserving the cohesion of the community of believers. For a more in-depth analysis of Islamist currents, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

¹⁹⁷ Several of the most recent jihadi-related incidents in Lebanon involved Palestinians or weapons obtained in Palestinian camps. These include the May 1995 assassination by Usbat al-Ansar of a Lebanese Islamist it considered an apostate, Crisis Group interviews, sheikhs with close ties to Usbat al-Ansar, Tripoli, January-June 2006; armed clashes in December 1999-January 2000 between the Lebanese army and a jihadi group connected to Usbat al-Ansar and to Palestinian camps, *ibid*; a series of car bombs in 2002-2003 targeting restaurants and other public facilities, purportedly committed by a Lebanese/Palestinian group that had obtained weapons from Beddawi and Ain al-Helweh and several members of which are said to have been trained in the camps. Crisis Group interview, local researcher, Tripoli, April 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, sheikhs and Islamist militants, Tripoli, January-May 2006. Tellingly, several of Fatah al-Islam's communiqués were addressed to “families of Tripoli and Akkar”. Crisis Group interview, Mohammad al-Haj, imam of al-Taqwa Mosque in Nahr al-Bared and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Abu Samra, North Lebanon, 25 December 2008.

¹⁹⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, jihadi groups focused principally on Ain al-Helweh, taking advantage of the security vacuum

that followed Israel's 1982 invasion. The camp also lacked a dominant power, in contrast to those under the control either of Syria and its Palestinian allies (mainly in the North, Beirut and the Bekaa) or of Fatah (the other camps in the South).

²⁰⁰ In its first communiqué, Fatah al-Islam stated that it was fighting the PLO's “corruption” and “compromises”, which had betrayed its original mission and soiled the purity of its cause, 27 November 2006, at www.tajdeed.org.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Jamal Khattab, al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida leader, Ain al-Helweh, 29 March 2008. Although several Fatah officials seek to downplay the role of such groups, Crisis Group interview, Fatah leaders, Chatila and Ain al-Helweh camps, April 2008, there is little doubt that jihadi movements have grown, most notably in Ain al-Helweh. A PLO official conceded: “Regardless of how many there are, Ain al-Helweh's jihadis represent a genuine threat. They are heavily armed, well trained and spread out throughout the camp. The only way to get rid of them would be to destroy the camp. But they are not seeking a confrontation. They are basically Palestinian, and they care about camp security”. Crisis Group interview, Salah Salah, head of the Palestinian National Council's Refugee Committee and member of the PLO's Central Council, Beirut, 2 August 2008.

²⁰² Some Fatah officials accuse Hamas of backing these groups in order to weaken the PLO. “Hamas does not want these groups to be eliminated. They want the Islamists to go after Fatah. Its leaders opposed any step aimed at defeating Fatah al-Islam, and they helped strengthen it”. Crisis Group interview, al-Leeno, Fatah military official, Ain al-Helweh, 29 March 2008.

shape their ideology as well as their interaction with Lebanese groups and the state. One result of this interaction is that Usbat al-Ansar members – who used to resort to harsh verbal and physical attacks against Ain al-Helweh residents to enforce Islamic rules – have discarded such practices, which Hamas argued were inconsistent with Islam.²⁰³

Syria and others also played a role, though it remains somewhat ambiguous. During its military presence, Damascus sought to keep the jihadi movements at a safe distance from the camps it controlled, whether in the North, Beirut or the Bekaa, out of fear that they might turn into an unmanageable sectarian actor, threatening the Syrian regime's interests.²⁰⁴ At the same time, Syria's critics argued, Damascus used such groups in its dealings with certain Lebanese or Palestinians. A Tripoli sheikh with close ties to Islamist movements expressed a widely-shared Lebanese view regarding Syria's role:

In order to maintain its dominion over Lebanon, Syria made use of a number of destabilising actors, including extremists residing in the camps. In Ain al-Helweh, the jihadis were used to weaken Syria's principal enemy, Yasser Arafat's Fatah. Syrian intelligence manipulated extremist forces whenever voices would rise that challenged its presence. After the withdrawal, these groups assumed an even greater strategic importance for Syria.²⁰⁵

Most jihadi groups in the camps appear to have followed tacit understandings, refraining from openly criticizing the regime, except at the time of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.²⁰⁶ The U.S. invasion of Iraq and sharp deterioration of its relations with Damascus arguably opened a new chapter in Syria's approach toward the jihadis, who were allowed to reach the new battlefield from Syrian territory. According to a sheikh from Saida with ties to Ain al-Helweh jihadi groups, "many Palestinians and Lebanese crossed the border to go fight the U.S. in Iraq. That would have been impossible without a Syrian green light".²⁰⁷ Likewise, Syria has been accused of permitting jihadi militants, and in particular Fatah al-Islam, to cross its border into northern Lebanon.²⁰⁸

Other local and regional actors also are said to have turned a blind eye, each seeking to instrumentalise the jihadis for its own purposes. In the view of a Lebanese journalist:

Syria wants to demonstrate that it holds the key to Lebanon's stability. For their part, Saudi Arabia and the Future Movement see the jihadis as an essentially anti-Shiite force and – like Syria – have sought to infiltrate them. For them, the goal is use these groups to counter Syria and Hizbollah or simply to make sure that other parties don't get to them first.²⁰⁹

The murky case of Fatah al-Islam illustrates the degree to which each side blames the other for the growth of

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Ali Youssef, imam of Khaled Bin al-Waleed Mosque in Ain al-Helweh and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Saida, 29 December 2008.

²⁰⁴ In 1995, members of Usbat al-Ansar assassinated Nizar al-Halabi, president of a powerful Islamic social organisation known as the Ahabash. The murder was seen as a clear challenge to Syria's authority, insofar as Damascus had invested in the Ahabash as a counterweight to potentially threatening Sunni movements. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian and Lebanese officials and sheikhs, Beirut, Tripoli and Palestinian camps, April-December 2008. In Bernard Rougier's words, for Syria the Ahabash were "a mechanism to exercise exercising security control over the religious arena, a device to foster division within Sunni Islam and a weapon against political Islamism". *Le Jihad au quotidien*, op. cit., pp 104-105. Throughout the 1990s, Syria's and Lebanon's intelligence services were known to have arrested and tortured hundreds of Sunni Islamists, a symptom of Syria's fear of Islamic militancy. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian and Lebanese officials and sheikhs, Beirut, Tripoli and Palestinian camps, January-May 2006 and April-December 2008.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Lebanese sheikh, Tripoli, April 2006. This view was echoed by another sheikh, the imam of a mosque in Tripoli. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 25 December 2008.

²⁰⁶ See Bernard Rougier, *Le Jihad au quotidien*, op. cit., pp. 145-146.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Maher Hamoud, imam of al-Quds Mosque, Saida, 23 December 2008. "Members of Usbat al-Ansar claim to have sent fighters into Iraq. They are proud of it. What happened in Iraq was a provocation to all Moslems. Usbat al-Ansar saw Iraq as a land of jihad". Crisis Group interview, Ali Youssef, imam of Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque in Ain al-Helweh and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Saida, 29 December 2008.

²⁰⁸ Many Fatah al-Islam members were Palestinians coming from Syria. Syrian authorities have also been accused of facilitating the entry into Lebanon of jihadi fighters on their way back from Iraq. Crisis Group interviews, Mohammad al-Haj, imam of al-Taqwa Mosque in Nahr al-Bared and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Abu Samra, North Lebanon, 25 December 2008; Ahmad Ayoubi, president of the Freedom and Development Movement (backed by the Future Movement) and general supervisor of the Islamic Serenity Campaign, Tripoli, 5 January 2009.

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Lebanese journalist, Beirut, 31 December 2008. According to Mohammad al-Haj, Fatah al-Islam enjoyed close ties with Tripoli sheikhs known for having good relations with Saudi Arabia and the Future Movement. Crisis Group interview, Abu Samra, North Lebanon, 25 December 2008.

jihadism, suggesting complacency from all parties which saw some benefit in the movement's activities. Syria's critics point, inter alia, to the following elements: the fact that militants crossed its border; the ambiguous role played by a Syrian ally, Abu Khaled al-Amleh, in the emergence of a jihadi trend within Fatah al-Intifada and in its focus on Lebanon;²¹⁰ and the release from Syrian prison of Fatah al-Islam's leader, Shaker al-Absi, a mere two years after his conviction.²¹¹

In turn, those who blame Saudi Arabia and the Future Movement base their case on four allegations: the presence of Saudi nationals among Fatah al-Islam fighters;²¹² apparent contacts between sheikhs close to the Future Movement and leaders of the jihadi movement;²¹³ the purported passivity of the Internal Security Forces (also close to the Future Movement) which, they claim, allowed Fatah al-Islam to grow,²¹⁴ and claims that Hariri's movement funded the group.²¹⁵ Ultimately, just as jihadi militants could not

have crossed into Lebanon without Syrian knowledge and acquiescence, so too Fatah al-Islam's establishment in northern Lebanon, a Future Movement stronghold, could not have happened unbeknownst to the Lebanese party. Malign neglect, at a minimum, played a part in both instances.

Despite rising Sunni-Shiite tensions, the jihadi groups have avoided open confrontation with Hizbollah or Shiites more generally. This appears to be a function both of the uneven balance of power and of the priority given to their more immediate common foes, the U.S., the West and Israel.²¹⁶ As one of Fatah al-Islam's leaders put it, "my organisation is not opposed to Hizbollah's resistance against Israel in South Lebanon, notwithstanding our theological differences. We have no contact with Hizbollah, but we are hostile neither toward them nor toward Lebanon's Shiites since – unlike Iraq's Shiites . . . – they resist America's project. As a result, Fatah al-Islam has no intention of carrying out operations against Lebanon's Shiites".²¹⁷

Jihadi groups offer more than a new collective project. They also provide a model of personal fulfilment based on Islamic values which has particular resonance in an environment plagued by alcoholism, drugs and delinquency. Drawn to religious purity and humiliated by their discriminatory treatment at the hands of state authorities, refugees are a relatively easy target. A growing number among them view their socio-economic exclusion as a form of religious persecution, convinced they are being punished chiefly for their Islamic faith. In the words of an Islamist militant from Tripoli:

Palestinians are marginalised and oppressed because they are Sunnis. They are suffering from the war waged by the crusaders and traitorous Arab regimes against Islam. If they were Christian or Armenian,

²¹⁰ Abu Khaled al-Amleh was Fatah al-Intifada's secretary general. He was placed under house arrest after Fatah al-Islam's emergence. Crisis Group interview, Abu Adnan Odeh, PFLP-General Command official responsible for public relations and political affairs and leader of the movement in the Beddawi Camp, 28 September 2008.

²¹¹ Al-Absi was convicted in 2003 for arms trafficking toward Jordan. He was released in 2005. See www.aljazeeraatalk.net/forum/showthread.php?=&threadid=40053. Some view his surprise release as proof that Fatah al-Islam was used by Syria. Crisis Group interview, Lebanese and Palestinian officials, Tripoli, Saida, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-September 2008.

²¹² Crisis Group interview, Lebanese and Palestinian officials, Tripoli, Saida, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-September 2008. According to the Lebanese *An-Nahar*, 21 August 2007, 42 of the 227 persons indicted were Saudi.

²¹³ These sheikhs are known for their strong hostility toward Hizbollah and generally anti-Shiite discourse. Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese and Palestinian officials, Tripoli, Saida, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April 2008-January 2009.

²¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Lebanese and Palestinian officials, Tripoli, Saida, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-September 2008. General Aoun accused the Internal Security Forces at a press conference: "Fatah al-Islam entered Lebanon illegally. The security services knew it and did not stop them at the border....The movement cooperated illegally and illegitimately with a local force", *An-Nahar*, 22 May 2007.

²¹⁵ According to Lebanese opposition members, Fatah al-Islam's attack on the Hariri-owned Mediterranean Bank, which triggered the larger confrontation, was motivated by anger at the decision to freeze its account. Crisis Group interview, Lebanese and Palestinian officials, Tripoli, Saida, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-September 2008. This is strongly denied by the Future Movement, which points to an investigation led by the Central Bank that found no link

whatsoever between it and Fatah al-Islam. Investigation results have not been publicised due to bank secrecy. Crisis Group interview, Nader Hariri, Saad Hariri's chief of staff, Beirut, 26 January 2009.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Maher Hamoud, imam of al-Quds Mosque, Saïda, 23 December 2008; Ali Youssef, imam of Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque in Ain al-Helweh and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Saida, 29 December 2008. During the May 2008 Hizbollah takeover of Beirut, for example, when Sunni/Shiite tensions reached their apex, jihadi groups from Ain al-Helweh refrained from intervening. Crisis Group interview, Palestinian sheikh, Saida, November 2008. On the May events, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit.

²¹⁷ Abu Huraira, head of Fatah al-Islam's military committee, interviewed by *al-Hayat*, 25 May 2007.

their situation would be far better; they would have been granted citizenship and enjoyed basic rights.²¹⁸

Largely beyond the state's reach, the camps have become de facto sanctuaries for weapons but also for Lebanese and Palestinian fugitives sought by Lebanese authorities, including very often for minor offences.²¹⁹ Caught in the camps and with no realistic prospect on the outside, they form a sizeable pool of potential jihadi recruits. Militant groups offer protection, a social network and, in some cases, a cause in which to believe. A PLO official remarked: "They are trapped in the camps and have no future outlook. They fear they will live the rest of their lives as fugitives and thus are easily manipulated".²²⁰

In recent years, the jihadi focus increasingly has shifted to the international arena. As fighting Israel became increasingly difficult, jihadi groups in the camps turned to the global struggle against the West in general and the U.S. in particular. An Islamist militant said, "for Palestinian jihadis, the Palestinian cause remains central. But because fighting in Palestine has become virtually impossible, U.S. troops in Iraq emerged as an alternative target".²²¹ In turn, Lebanon's weak central state, combined with the camps' institutional, security and political vacuum, made the country a rich target for international jihadi movements. Militant groups in the camps, which purportedly recruited hundreds of Palestinians, Lebanese and others to fight in Iraq,²²² have been described as serving as both "a safe haven for fugitives and a travel agency for jihadi volunteers".²²³

As a result, the groups have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in the camps, avoiding state interference and reaching tacit understandings with a

variety of local actors.²²⁴ In Ain al-Helweh, Usbat al-Ansar is now seen by all Palestinian factions – including Fatah, its traditional foe – as a full-fledged participant in the camp's security structure.²²⁵ Likewise, the leader of al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida, Sheikh Jamal Khattab, helps mediate between major Palestinian factions and more militant groups in Ain al-Helweh.²²⁶

In this regard, Fatah al-Islam is more exceptional than typical. Unlike most other jihadi groups, it did not have deep roots in the camps,²²⁷ nor was its composition predominantly Palestinian.²²⁸ In the words of a Palestinian official, "members of groups such as Usbat al-Ansar and al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida were born in the camps and grew up there. Their residents knew them. In contrast, most of Fatah al-Islam's members were foreigners".²²⁹ The group emerged at

²²⁴ Ain al-Helweh provides a good example of how local actors seek to avoid clashes with jihadi groups. For Hizbollah, a confrontation could deepen sectarian tensions, thereby further exposing it to the charge of being a narrow Shiite group. See Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit. For its part, Fatah is wary of a confrontation with Usbat al-Ansar whose outcome would not be guaranteed. The Future Movement and in particular the Hariri family fear that a crisis with jihadi groups could jeopardise their hegemony over the Sunni community.

²²⁵ During a 2004 crisis, Usbat al-Ansar joined in efforts to force Jund al-Sham from one of the camp's northern neighbourhoods. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian officials, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-October 2008.

²²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian officials, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-May 2008.

²²⁷ The first mention of Fatah al-Islam came in November 2006, when Lebanese and Arab media spoke of the heretofore unknown organisation. See *As-Safir*, 28 November 2007. At the outset, members were scattered among various Palestinian camps; new recruits subsequently sought to base the bulk of their forces in Beddawi, near Tripoli, in hopes of gaining support from the city's powerful religious leaders. As early as September 2006, individuals who were foreign to the camp had rented a dozen apartments in Beddawi Camp with the help of a Beddawi salafist. However, in the aftermath of a confrontation with Beddawi's security committee, they were forced to take refuge in Nahr al-Bared. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian and Lebanese sheikhs and officials, Tripoli, Saida and Palestinian camps, August-September 2007.

²²⁸ The group recruited volunteers in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Militants who have been indicted include Lebanese, Palestinians, Saudis, Syrians, Algerians, Tunisians, Yemenis and Iraqis. See *An-Nahar*, 21 August 2007.

²²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Abu Khaled al-Shemal, official from the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, Chatila Camp, 6 April 2008. Others echoed this view: Crisis Group interviews, Kamal Naji, advisor to Abbas Zaki and PLO secretary, Beirut, 19 November 2008; Usama Hamdan, Hamas

²¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, March 2006.

²¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian officials and members of NGOs working in the camps, Beirut and Palestinian camps, April-November 2008.

²²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji, adviser to Abbas Zaki, Beirut, 10 September 2008.

²²¹ Crisis Group interview, Jamal Khattab, head of al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida, Ain al-Helweh, 29 March 2008.

²²² Crisis Group interviews, Maher Hamoud, imam of al-Quds Mosque, Saida, 23 December 2008; Ali Youssef, imam of Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque in Ain al-Helweh and member of the Palestine Scholars' League, Saida, 29 December 2008. See also *An-Nahar*, 8 June 2007, and Fidaa Itani, *Jihadists in Lebanon* (Beirut, 2008).

²²³ See Agence France-Presse, 1 October 2007. According to a local observer, Usbat al-Ansar and other Palestinian jihadi groups forged passports and facilitated as well as funded the transportation of fighters to Iraq or Afghanistan and in some cases elsewhere in order to establish ties with international jihadi networks. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, April 2006.

the intersection of external jihadi networks (in particular the one established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq) and pre-existing Lebanese and Palestinian movements,²³⁰ first enlisting Lebanese militants to fight in Iraq before shifting attention back to its host country. By the same token, Fatah al-Islam evinced little interest in avoiding confrontation with state authorities.

Tellingly, when fighting began between the army and Fatah al-Islam, Usbat al-Ansar refused to back their jihadi brethren. Chastened by their earlier clashes with the army and determined to protect their status in the camp, its leaders sought to preserve their relationship both with the state and local actors.²³¹ In the aftermath of the Nahr al-Bared events, jihadi groups have further limited their operations to avoid any possible recurrence. According to a Palestinian leader, “they don’t want to see what happened in Nahr al-Bared repeat itself elsewhere. It has become far easier to deal with these groups”.²³²

Still, as more and more jihadis return from Iraq, the risk of instability emanating from the camps cannot be excluded. The camps remain attractive to jihadi forces, and there are signs of budding dissatisfaction with some of the groups’ relative pragmatism. In splitting off from Usbat al-Ansar, Jund al-Sham accused that group’s leaders of “compromises and of betraying salafist principles”.²³³ There are no signs

that the problem is getting worse, but as an imam put it, “one never knows when Lebanon could become the jihadis’ chosen arena”.²³⁴

representative in Lebanon, southern suburbs of Beirut, 7 November 2008; Salah Salah, member of the PLO’s Central Council in Lebanon and head of the Refugees Committee in the Palestinian National Council, Beirut, 2 August 2008.

²³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Lebanese sheikh, Tripoli, 26 August 2007.

²³¹ On 11 July 2002, a Lebanese Islamist killed three members of Lebanon’s intelligence service; he then sought refuge in Ain al-Helweh under Usbat al-Ansar’s protection. After several days of tense negotiations, Usbat al-Ansar agreed to hand him over to the authorities. It later justified its decision by invoking Islam’s superior interests. Jihadi on-line publication Nida al-Islam (The Call of Islam), November 2002, quoted in Rougier, *Le Jihad au quotidien*, op. cit., p.138.

²³² Crisis Group interview, Abou Khaled al-Shemal, Palestinian Popular Struggle Front representative in Lebanon, Chatila Camp, 6 April 2008. Sheikh Jamal Khattab, a leader of the Fighting Islamic Movement (al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida) explained: “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”. *As-Safir*, 17 November 2008.

²³³ *As-Safir*, 12 November 2008. According to Sheikh Ali Youssef, “several Usbat al-Ansar members quit the movement and joined Fatah al-Islam. In their eyes, Usbat’s cooperation with the army was tantamount to treason. Real Muslims must avoid all contact with the party that killed their brethren in Nahr al-Bared”. Crisis Group interview,

imam of Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque in Ain al-Helweh and member of the Palestine Scholars’ League, Saida, 29 December 2008.

²³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Maher Hamoud, imam of al-Quds Mosque, Saida, 23 December 2008.

V. CONCLUSION: WAR IN GAZA, THE CAMPS AND LEBANON'S FUTURE

The 2008-2009 war in Gaza brought to the surface the multiple dimensions of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon: immediate and acute solidarity with brethren under attack; risk of refugee radicalisation and spillover violence; the question of their weapons; fear of permanent settlement; and, perhaps more than anything, a vivid reminder of their own vulnerability.

From the very outset, beginning on 27 December, Palestinian groups organized daily demonstrations, sit-ins and other events in the camps.²³⁵ For the more militant Tahaluf coalition, the war was seen as a seminal moment with quasi-existential stakes. As an Islamic Jihad official put it, "this is a struggle between two projects for the region, one of resistance the other of compromise. We cannot allow Hamas and other resistance movements to be broken, and we will do whatever we can to prevent such an outcome".²³⁶

But even Fatah took a strong position. Indeed, and in contrast to what happened in the occupied territories, the war appeared to bring it and Hamas at least superficially closer, most likely a result of pressure from refugees.²³⁷ Unlike President Abbas, Abbas Zaki refrained from criticising the Islamist movement, holding Israel alone responsible.²³⁸ He joined with Hamas's representative in coordinating a response with the Lebanese government and organising assistance delivery to Gaza.²³⁹ According to Hamdan, "Abbas Zaki's position will have a positive impact on our future relationship with Fatah in Lebanon. He

acted in a highly responsible manner. This could help lead to a more unified leadership in Lebanon".²⁴⁰

Although some suggested the opening of a "second front",²⁴¹ that option never appears to have been seriously contemplated; Hizbollah was opposed and, in any event, Hamas's resistance was deemed "satisfactory" and, therefore, not in need of military assistance.²⁴² That said, several rockets were fired from south Lebanon toward Israel on 8 and 14 January 2009, while the army and UNIFIL defused a few others both before and after the Israeli operation in Gaza.²⁴³ According to a UNIFIL official, "there most likely were additional attempts foiled by us and by the Lebanese army".²⁴⁴ While these were neither coordinated nor significant attacks, they were an ominous warning sign.²⁴⁵

²³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian residents and officials, Beirut and Palestinian camps, December 2008-January 2009. On the war in Gaza, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°26, *Ending the War in Gaza*, 5 January 2009.

²³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Abu Wissam Mahfouz, Islamic Jihad official in Beddawi Camp, 6 January 2009. This view was echoed by several others, including Usama Hamdan (Hamas) and Abu Adnan Odeh (PFLP-GC) in Crisis Group interviews, 30 December 2008 and 6 January 2009 respectively.

²³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian residents and officials, Beirut, Saida and Beddawi Camps, December 2008-January 2009.

²³⁸ See www.maannnews.net/en/index.php?opr=ShowDetails&ID=34308. President Abbas's attitude – seen by many as sitting on the sidelines and partly blaming Hamas for the war – was roundly criticised among refugees. A woman refugee described his stance as "shameful. Did he not see the dead?" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 January 2009.

²³⁹ *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 29 December 2008.

²⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, Southern suburbs of Beirut, 30 December 2008. That said, differences re-emerged in the wake of the war, in particular over Hamas suggestions concerning the creation of an alternative to the PLO. See www.arabnet5.com/news.asp?c=2&id=20864; Crisis Group interview, Kamal Naji adviser to Abbas Zaki, 30 January 2009.

²⁴¹ A PFLP-GC official said, referring to the group's leader, "Ahmad Jibril asserted that we are ready to open other fronts. He did not specifically mention Lebanon. But all movements will be mobilised if we felt the resistance forces in Gaza were on the verge of defeat". Crisis Group interview, Abu Adnan Odeh, PFLP-GC leader in Beddawi Camp, 6 January 2009.

²⁴² Ibid. See also Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's speech: "This mighty [Israeli] army stands helpless and incapable of fulfilling its goals in front of a resistance with modest capabilities yet with a great will". Extract at www.almanar.com.lb/NewsSite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=69425&language=en. In another speech, he said, "we need to bear in mind that all scenarios are possible". Al-Manar TV, 7 January 2009.

²⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Milos Strugar, director of political and civil affairs, UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Beirut, 27 January 2007. See also *Haaretz*, 4 February 2009.

²⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Milos Strugar, Beirut, 27 January 2007.

²⁴⁵ Hizbollah quickly denied any involvement. Analysts suggested a PFLP-GC hand, though it, too, issued a denial. The crude type of rocket would tend to exculpate Hizbollah, though it is difficult to imagine any group firing from the South without the Shiite movement's knowledge and acquiescence. In the words of a UN official, "there was a fear in the South of renewed conflict between Hizbollah and Israel. The memories of the 2006 war are still fresh. The rockets that were fired did not cause serious harm. But if they hit an Israeli school and killed children, or if the Israeli retaliation killed Lebanese citizens, this could have dragged both sides toward an unwanted escalation". Ibid.

The war also revived domestic debate on various aspects of the Palestinian presence. Some March 14 leaders, citing the rocket firings, renewed calls to disarm Palestinians outside the camps.²⁴⁶ The Aounist movement, depicting the war as an Israeli effort to deal advocates of the right of return a deadly blow, seized the opportunity to raise alarm bells about prospects for *tawtin*.²⁴⁷

For all Palestinians in Lebanon, whether pro-Hamas or not, the war revived and strengthened deep feelings of insecurity. As one camp resident put it, “the entire world is passively watching as the Palestinian people are being killed in Gaza. Most Arab regimes are complicit. This only reminds us we are on our own wherever we are, in Gaza, in Lebanon or elsewhere. For protection, we can only count on ourselves”.²⁴⁸ As a corollary, one senses signs of renewed radicalisation. A young camp resident said:

I used to be in favour of peace. But since Gaza, I don't believe in it any more. I used to oppose Hamas. But now, I support it and I think we have to continue the resistance struggle despite all the massacres they have committed against us.²⁴⁹

More militant groups invoke Gaza to attract new converts. Some went so far as to predict that al-Qaeda-like organizations could prosper, especially had Hamas been vanquished. In the midst of the war, an Islamist activist said, “if Hamas loses, extremist groups will win. The alternative to Hamas is not Fatah, it is al-Qaeda”.²⁵⁰

One likely outcome will be even greater Palestinian reluctance to turn over their weapons. Usama Hamdan explained:

²⁴⁶ Walid Jumblatt declared that “the Palestinian arms outside the refugee camps pose a serious danger to Lebanon”, *The Daily Star*, 12 January 2009.

²⁴⁷ In Aoun's words, “the objective of this war is to destroy the Resistance throughout the region and permanently resettle Palestinian refugees”. Cited in <http://mplbelgique.wordpress.com/?tag=europe>.

²⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian resident, Beirut, 5 January 2009. This view was echoed by other Palestinian residents and officials, Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli, Beirut and Beddawi Camp, 5-6 January 2009.

²⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Palestinian resident, Beirut, 6 January 2009.

²⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, president of the Freedom and Development Movement and general supervisor of the Islamic Serenity Campaign, Tripoli, 5 January 2009. Many camp residents were particularly incensed by Arab regimes' “complicity”, which many said would radicalise their outlook. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian residents and officials, December 2008-January 2009.

The Palestinian arsenal is a very sensitive issue; we are talking about a whole package including Palestinian rights, security of the camps, civil security of the Palestinian refugees. In addition, Gaza increased feelings of insecurity in the camps. Palestinians feel the need to protect themselves, which increases their need for these weapons.²⁵¹

At the same time, the war once again demonstrated the weapons' limited value for their original purpose, the struggle against Israel. Despite the scale of the fighting and destruction, as well as ensuing outrage among refugees, it became ever more evident that while “resistance” was taking place in Gaza, in Lebanon the weapons are primarily for self-preservation. They are linked to a feeling of insecurity rather than to a project of national armed struggle.

The Gaza war fortunately did not spark renewed unrest in the camps, but the tell-tale signs nonetheless were there to see, including political mobilisation, radicalisation and renewed emphasis on the role of weapons. The refugee population sits atop a series of dangerous fault lines that are not close to resolution: between Lebanese parties; between Palestinians and Israel; between Palestinian parties; between various Arab states; and, of course, between them and the wider Lebanese population.

The current precarious situation is the outcome of years of neglect and mismanagement based on Lebanon's security-first policy that discriminates against Palestinian refugees. Lacking means of socio-economic advancement, vulnerable on all counts – politically, legally and above all physically – the camp population is angry, armed and bereft of hope, a perilous combination. It also is a breeding ground for jihadi militants, as well a tool that can be manipulated by outside actors. The shift in the Lebanese state's language that began in 2005 is, in this sense, welcome, signalling awareness that the status quo is good neither for the refugees nor for Lebanon itself. Now this must be translated into concrete action by all, focusing on three levels:

Clarifying the refugees' status and improving camp conditions. This is a necessary first step, enabling the Lebanese government to consolidate gains made since 2005 and minimising risks of radicalisation and jihadism in the camps. Traditionally, the prospect of such improvements has been denounced as paving the way to permanent settlement. That argument is baseless; the refugees' fate depends first

²⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Usama Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon, southern suburbs of Beirut, 27 January 2009.

and foremost on a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, not on the extent to which they can lead more normal lives in host countries. It also is dangerous, insofar as its clear sectarian overtones helps jihadis in their effort to depict the struggle as a war against Sunnis. To counter the argument, principally invoked for political reasons during electoral season, it also is vital to clarify the meaning of *tawtin* and the refugees' legal status. *Tawtin* ought to be defined as pertaining to the acquisition of Lebanese citizenship and/or of the right to vote only; Palestinian refugees should enjoy all fundamental rights short of those two, including the right to work and to own property

Reviewing the approach to camp security. The devastating conflict in Nahr al-Bared is an indictment of an approach that has done little to improve security while deepening tensions with the refugees and allowing the spread of jihadism in the camps. In the wake of Nahr al-Bared, most Palestinian factions, including some considered jihadi, displayed willingness to increase cooperation on security. This presents an opportunity to develop new coordination mechanisms between the factions and Lebanese authorities. The former should seek to ensure camp stability, ban the public display of weapons and respect host country sovereignty, while the latter defines a clear code of conduct for local security forces, harshly punishing infractions and, in Nahr al-Bared, loosening restrictions on access by children, the elderly and relatives of camp residents. Palestinians and Lebanese also urgently need to agree on a system to regulate the presence of arms in the camps. In this context, the Lebanese and Syrian presidents should begin negotiations aimed at dismantling Palestinian military bases outside the camps.

Enhancing Lebanese-Palestinian and Palestinian-Palestinian cooperation. As this report clearly shows, one of the key impediments to progress has been inadequate coordination between the state and Palestinian representatives, as well as between the Palestinians themselves. Both need remedying. The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee should be strength-

ened, and Palestinian factions should establish a counterpart on their side. Lebanon also should immediately involve Palestinian factions and Nahr al-Bared refugees in decision-making concerning the camp's future by holding regular meetings with former camp residents and consulting with organisations that managed it prior to its destruction.

On the Palestinian side, divisions have been costly and could become costlier still. The struggle between Fatah and Hamas, its spillover effect in Lebanon and the battle for camp supremacy between the two organisations have heightened insecurity, given new life to smaller, jihadi factions and prevented the emergence of a coherent Palestinian position and effective leadership. So far, the struggle has been contained, and Lebanon has been spared the intensity of the split in the occupied territories. But, although the war in Nahr al-Bared had many causes, Palestinian feuding clearly was one.

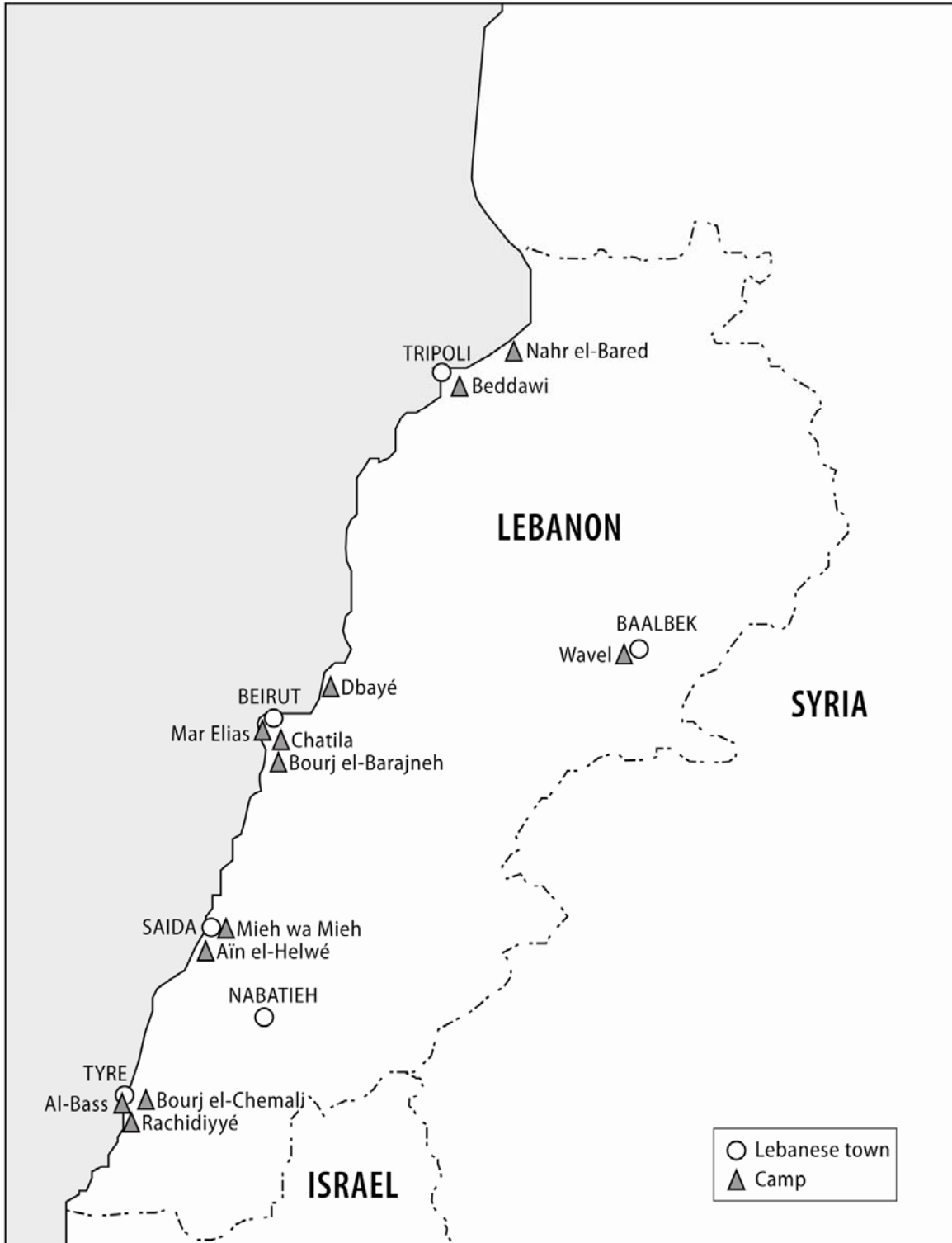
The key is to develop effective institutional mechanisms that can ensure camp security, immunise Lebanon as much as possible from the effects of the raging Fatah-Hamas rivalry in the occupied territories and facilitate effective negotiation with the Lebanese state. Among the most important steps is to establish a unified political command to coordinate camp management and to reform the organisation currently in charge of law and order in the camps by broadening its membership to all factions and agreeing to consensual decision-making and its status as the sole Palestinian organisation responsible for camp security.

The refugee camps are a tinder box, a dangerous blend of socio-economic deprivation, political marginalisation, mistrust of the central state, ineffective security structures, radicalisation, weapons and divided leadership. The Gaza conflict, fortunately, did not spark a conflagration. But the next match, domestic or regional, is likely to be struck soon. There is no time to waste.

Beirut/Brussels, 19 February 2009

APPENDIX A

MAP OF PALESTINIAN CAMPS IN LEBANON



APPENDIX B

MAIN PALESTINIAN FACTIONS IN LEBANON

- Main factions of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO):
 - Fatah (*Movement for the National Liberation of Palestine*), founded in 1959 by Yasser Arafat, the dominant faction within the PLO since its creation. The PLO initially adopted armed struggle as its approach to Israel,²⁵² but formally abandoned the principle in 1993 at the time of the signing of the Oslo accord.
 - Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), founded in 1967 by Georges Habash, it combines Arab nationalism and Marxism in its ideology.²⁵³ In 1993, it stopped attending PLO Executive Committee meetings in protest against Oslo, before resuming attendance in the course of the second intifada in 2000.²⁵⁴
 - Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a dissident PFLP faction, whose breakaway was led by Nayef Hawatmeh in 1969, has a Marxist-Leninist tendency. Like the PFLP, the DFLP boycotted Executive Committee meetings after the Oslo accord and only resumed attendance at the time of the second intifada in 2000.²⁵⁵
- Main factions of the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (Tahaluf):
 - Hamas, which entered Lebanon in 2000 by establishing an extensive social services network after its Jordan offices had been closed. During the 1990s, Jamaa Islamiyya prepared the ground for Hamas by developing social and educational networks in the camps.
 - Islamic Jihad, which has only a minor presence in Lebanon, is likewise engaged in social and charitable activities.²⁵⁶
 - The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), whose leadership resides in Damascus, possesses three underground military bases in Lebanon outside the camps (in Nahmeh, south of Beirut, and in the Bekaa Valley). These house heavy and medium weapons and, in the Bekaa, train militants.
 - Fatah al-Intifada, a group that splintered from Fatah in 1983. As with the PFLP-GC, its leadership resides in Damascus and it maintains military bases to store weapons and train militants.
 - al-Saiqa (Lightning), founded in 1966 by the Syrian Baath party.
- Jihadi-leaning Islamist forces:
 - Usbat al-Ansar (League of Partisans), founded in 1986, boasts a strong presence in the Ain al-Helweh camp. It was responsible in 1995 for the assassination of Nizar al-Halabi, the leader of Ahabash, an Islamist social organisation.
 - Jund al-Sham (Soldiers of Greater Syria), an Usbat al-Ansar splinter group. Its members were located in the Taamir neighbourhood adjoining Ain al-Helweh before evacuating to the Taware' area in the camp.²⁵⁷
 - al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida (Fighting Islamic Movement) also centred in Ain al-Helweh.²⁵⁸
 - Ansar Allah (God's Partisans), established in 1989 and with close ties to Hizbollah.²⁵⁹
 - Usbat al-Nour (The League of Light), an Usbat al-Ansar spin off, also present in Ain al-Helweh though not one of the principal organisations there.²⁶⁰

²⁵² Xavier Baron, *Les Palestiniens, un peuple* (Paris, 1977).

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Abu Jaber, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine leader in Nahr el-Bared, 17 February 2009.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ See Are Knudsen, *op. cit.*

²⁵⁷ See Mostafa al-Arab, "Tanzimat Mukhayyat Lubnan al-Mutashaddida [Radical Factions in Lebanon's Camps] (3)", CNN Arabic website, available at http://arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/7/20/sham.camp/index.html

²⁵⁸ Mostafa al-Arab, "Tanzimat Mukhayyat Lubnan al-Mutashaddida" (4), *ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

APPENDIX C

CAIRO ACCORD

[The 1969 Cairo Accord was confidential and has never been officially published. However, unofficial versions have appeared in the press and are considered authoritative. The Lebanese parliament declared the Accord null and void in May 1987. This version is taken from the Lebanese Forces' website, at <http://www.lebanese-forces.org/lebanon/agreements/cairo.htm>]

Decision no. 2550/D52 Date: 13 September 1969

Top Secret

On Monday the 3rd of November 1969, the Lebanese delegation headed by Army Commander General Emile al-Bustani, and the Palestine Liberation Organization delegation, headed by chairman Yasser Arafat, met in Cairo in the presence of the United Arab Republic Minister of Foreign Affairs Mahmud Riyad, and the War Minister, General Muhammad Fawzi.

In consonance with the bonds of brotherhood and common destiny, relations between Lebanon and the Palestinian revolution must always be conducted on the bases of confidence, frankness, and positive cooperation for the benefit of Lebanon and the Palestinian revolution and within the framework of Lebanon's sovereignty and security. The two delegations agreed on the following principles and measures:

A. The Palestinian Presence

It was agreed to reorganize the Palestinian presence in Lebanon on the following bases:

1. The right to work, residence, and movement for Palestinians currently residing in Lebanon;
2. The formation of local committees composed of Palestinians in the camps to manage interests of Palestinians residing in these camps in cooperation with the local Lebanese authorities within the framework of Lebanese sovereignty;
3. The establishment of posts of the Palestinian Armed Struggle inside the camps for to cooperate with the local committees and ensure good relations with the Lebanese authorities. These posts shall undertake the task of regulating and determining the presence of arms in the camps within the framework of Lebanese security and the interests of the Palestinian revolution;
4. Palestinians resident in Lebanon are allowed to participate in the Palestinian revolution through the Armed Struggle and in accordance with the principles of Lebanon's sovereignty and security.

B. Commando Activities

It was agreed to facilitate commando activities by means of:

1. Facilitating the passage of commandos and specifying passage points and reconnaissance in the border areas.
2. Safeguarding the road to the 'Arqub region.
3. The Armed Struggle should control the conduct of all its organizations' members and ensure that they don't interfere in Lebanese affairs.
4. Establishing a joint command control between the Armed Struggle and the Lebanese army.
5. Ending the propaganda campaigns by both sides.

6. The Armed Struggle command should conduct a census of its members in Lebanon.
7. Appointing Armed Struggle representatives at Lebanese army headquarters to participate in the resolution of all emergency matters.
8. Studying the distribution of all suitable points of concentration in border areas which will be agreed with the Lebanese army command.
9. Regulating the entry, exit, and circulation of Armed Struggle members.
10. Removing 'Aytaroun base.
11. The Lebanese Army shall facilitate the operation of medical, evacuation, and supply centers for commando activity.
12. Releasing detainees and confiscated arms.
13. It is understood that the Lebanese authorities, both civil and military, shall continue to exercise all their prerogatives and responsibilities in all areas of Lebanon in all circumstances.
14. The two delegations affirm that the Palestinian armed struggle is in the interest of Lebanon as well the Palestinian revolution and all Arabs.
15. This agreement shall remain Top Secret and for the eyes of the commands only.

Signature:

Head of Lebanese delegation

Emile Bustani

Head of Palestinian delegation

Yasser Arafat

APPENDIX D

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email, including to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations, and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

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