



Building a Better Relationship

Palestinian Refugees, Lebanon, and the Role of the International Community

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Summary

In recent years, official Lebanese policy towards Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has undergone major changes. Increasingly, Lebanese officials have voiced their support for improved social and economic conditions for the refugees, while at the same time maintaining staunch opposition to their permanent resettlement (*tawteen*) in the country.

These policy changes have been marked by the formation of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), by limited policy reforms in areas ranging from employment to the issuance of ID to unregistered refugees, as well as an unparalleled change in the tone of official pronouncements. The government has also been an essential partner with UNRWA in efforts to reconstruct Nahr al-Barid refugee camp (NBC), destroyed in fighting between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the radical Fateh al-Islam jihadist group in 2007. Just as important, LPDC has sought to change the narrative of Lebanese-Palestinian relations in a way that holds out greater promise to all communities.

These changes in policies have profound implications for the humanitarian circumstances of the refugees, as well as the economic and security interests of Lebanon. Improved Lebanese-Palestinian relations could also pay significant dividends for the region and international community too.

The continuation and deepening of the reform process is far from certain, however. It could be derailed by political changes following the recent June 2009 elections, local and regional developments, and limited Lebanese government policy capacity. A failure to deliver on promises of NBC reconstruction (due to insufficient donor support) could prove especially damaging.

The international community has an important role to play in supporting further policy reform by:

- encouraging both the Lebanese government and various Lebanese political groups to continue and deepen the reform process.
- supporting the reconstruction of NBC, as well as UNRWA's Camp Improvement Initiative, and encouraging others to do so.
- encouraging and supporting greater Lebanese policy capacity in this area.
- framing such encouragement in ways that do not raise the spectre of *tawteen*, or which suggest that changes in Palestinian-Lebanese relations are linked to such other issues as Hizbullah weapons, or relations with Syria or Iran.
- strengthening consultation and coordination within the donor community, and between donors and the Lebanese government.

About the Author

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Cover: Laying of the first ceremonial stone for the reconstruction of Nahr al-Barid refugee camp, 9 March 2009 (Rex Brynen).

Inside: Destruction at Nahr al-Barid refugee camp (IRIN).

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In May 2007, clashes erupted in and around Nahr al-Barid refugee camp (NBC) in northern Lebanon, pitting the Lebanese security forces against violent jihadists of Fateh al-Islam. When the fighting finally ended in September, more than four hundred people—including 170 Lebanese soldiers and 54 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians—had been killed. Some 1,200 Lebanese soldiers were wounded. Most of the camp lay in ruins, and surrounding Lebanese areas had suffered both rocket attacks and severe economic dislocation.



The cost of reconstruction and recovery for the camp and district was put at \$382.5 million. Since then, the estimated costs of reconstruction for the camp alone have risen from \$277 million to \$323.4 million.¹

The fighting in Nahr al-Barid was one of the largest and most destructive single episodes of global terrorism since the 9/11 attacks against the United States, especially given the small size of the Lebanese population and economy.

It also highlighted two major issues. First, the situation of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon is not simply a pressing humanitarian concern, but also has important security implications. Second, those implications are not merely confined to Lebanon, but also have broader regional and global implications. Many of Fateh al-Islam combatants were not Palestinian, or even Lebanese, but had come from elsewhere in the Middle East. Some had fought in Iraq; others had hoped to do so, or to carry their violent struggle even further afield. The poverty and largely ungoverned character of the refugee camp had, for a while at least, provided a sanctuary from which to do so.

For the international community, therefore, events at Nahr al-Barid underscored the need to support the government of Lebanon (GoL) in initiatives aimed at improving the situation of Palestinian refugees in the country. The process of reform has been a difficult one, and continues to be uncertain. The donor community, while almost universally welcoming policy changes, *has failed to fully recognize how important yet precarious*

¹ Presidency of the Council of Ministers of the Lebanese Republic, *Nahr el-Bared Crisis Appeal Post Conflict Relief, Recovery, and Reconstruction: Background Paper*, 10 September 2007; UNRWA, *Nahr el-Bared Reconstruction*, UNRWA Lebanon Field Office, March 2009.

they are, and how critical external assistance may be in assuring that the process continues. The changes of the last few years, however marginal some may appear to those unfamiliar with the Lebanese history, are unparalleled.

Within Lebanon the question of government policy towards the Palestinian refugee population remains an extremely sensitive one. Critics are quick to characterize any attempt to improve the social and economic situation of the refugees as *tawteen*—that is, the permanent resettlement of the Palestinians in Lebanon. The refugees themselves are suspicious of government motives, and cynical about the slow pace of change.² The question is also caught up in broader local and regional political dynamics, intersecting with such delicate and important issues as the presence of armed non-state groups in Lebanon, Lebanese sovereignty, the Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflicts, factional tensions within Palestinian politics, Syrian-Lebanese relations, the growth of radical jihadist groups, and others. All of these serve to immensely complicate matters.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the recent June 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections, and with the formation of a new Lebanese government, the reform process may have reached particularly vital juncture. *Donor support and encouragement may prove key in contributing to the momentum and sustainability of reform efforts, as well as their eventual expansion.*

This paper will examine the historical context and present situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, as well as the reform efforts undertaken by the Lebanese government since 2005. In doing so, it will highlight the obstacles to greater change, and how these might be overcome. Finally, the paper will highlight concrete initiatives that the international community can undertake to encourage additional reform. *Put simply, appropriate donor engagement on this issue could pay substantial future dividends: for the social and economic conditions of the refugees, for Lebanon's own development, and for local, regional, and even global security and stability.*³

Background: Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

Understanding the current critical juncture in Lebanese-Palestinian relations—and the dangers and very considerable opportunities that it presents—requires an understanding of the complex history of the Palestinian refugee presence, and its associated political, social, and security consequences.⁴

² For an overview of conditions and attitudes in the camps, see Samaa Abu Sharar, *Study on the Conditions of Palestinian Refugees in Camps Across Lebanon* (Beirut: Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, June 2008), online at http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/php/Uploads/2008-06/Report19_1.pdf.

³ This paper does not examine the broader question of the long-term future of the refugee question, which would require detailed analysis of the prospects for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. However, it is essential to note that Lebanese policy towards the refugees is at best a temporary mechanism for addressing problems that fundamentally must be resolved in the context of a full peace agreement.

⁴ Given the complexity of this history, only a very brief overview can be provided here. For a fuller examination, see Rex Brynen, *Sanctuary and Survival: the PLO in Lebanon* (Boulder: Westview Books, 1990); Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed

With the establishment of Israel in 1948, some three quarters of a million Palestinians were fled or driven from within their homes in the nascent Jewish state. Of these, approximately 100,000 sought refuge in Lebanon. Today, UNRWA reports a total of 422,188 Palestinian refugees in the country.⁵ Most observers, however, place the number significantly lower than this, however, in the range of 250,000—with many Palestinians having migrated to other countries over the years as a consequence of war and deprivation.



Table 1: Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon

Source: UNRWA.

engage in armed attacks against Israel, and enjoy a degree of autonomy in the camps. Israel stepped up its retaliatory and punitive strikes against targets in Lebanon, in response to Palestinian attacks. With the descent into civil war (1975-90), Palestinian groups became major combatants in Lebanon's internal political and sectarian strife. In 1976, Syrian forces intervening in the Lebanese civil war clashed with PLO fighters. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in an effort to destroy the PLO. The invasion left approximately 17,000 dead, and resulted in an ongoing Israeli occupation that lasted until the IDF finally withdrew in 2000. Up to one thousand or more Palestinians lost their lives in 1982 Sabra and Chatila massacres, at the hands of Israeli-supported Christian militia. In 1983, Syrian-backed Fateh dissidents and others fought a bitter military campaign against Fateh loyalists, resulting in hundreds of casualties. Palestinian groups and the

While some Palestinians managed to obtain Lebanese citizenship over the years, the vast majority was not able to do so.⁶

The arrival of large numbers of (predominantly Sunni) Palestinian refugees had significant implications in Lebanon, where sectarian demography has long been a fundamental aspect of local politics. The social and political impact of the refugee presence was also exacerbated by the growth of armed Palestinian guerilla groups from the 1960s onwards, as well as by the extent to which other Arab states could and did use both the Palestinian issue and Palestinian groups to further their own interests.

By 1969, armed Palestinian groups had clashed with the Lebanese Army, and had won Lebanese approval to retain arms,

Books, 1993); International Crisis Group, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Middle East Report #84, 19 February 2009, online at <http://www.crisisgroup.org>.

⁵ UNRWA, *UNRWA in Figures*, 31 December 2008, online at <http://www.un.org/unrwa>.

⁶ Over the years, however, there has been Palestinian-Lebanese intermarriage and other forms of social (if not political) integration.

Shi'ite militia Amal fought bitter battles around the refugee camps in 1985-87, at the cost of more than two thousand dead.

These decades of strife contributed to a substantial deterioration in Lebanese-Palestinian relations. The heavy-handed presence of Palestinian militias and their establishment of a “state-within-the-state” in the 1970s were widely resented. Many Lebanese, especially in the Christian communities, blamed the Palestinians for both attracting Israeli attacks and sparking the civil war. Many Lebanese Shiites who had once supported the Palestinian movement were increasingly alienated from it by the burden of Israeli retaliation and the poor behaviour of many PLO groups. Arab countries also used Lebanon, Lebanese groups, and even Palestinian proxies as a way of trying to influence, or even pressure the mainstream PLO. In the decades since 1948, no fewer than four Palestinian refugee camps have been destroyed: Jisr a-Basha and Tal-al-Za'atar, overrun by Christian militias in 1976; Nabatiyya, partly destroyed and abandoned in 1974 due to Israeli attacks; and Nahr al-Barid, largely destroyed in the summer of 2007 during fighting between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Fateh al-Islam.

This potent mix of sectarian-political-demographic tensions and bitter experience (on both sides) of more than four decades of periodic armed violence and confrontation has led to the emergence of strong opposition throughout Lebanese society to any suggestion of the permanent resettlement or naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon. Palestinians are, for all intents and purposes, treated as foreigners with no right to access the Lebanese education, social security, or health care systems.⁷ For many years Palestinians had difficulty obtaining work permits, and they continue to be effectively barred from employment in most professions due to a series of restrictive laws, decrees, and ad hoc administrative decisions. Lebanese property laws were amended in 2001, effectively prohibiting Palestinians from owning real estate of any kind, including their own homes. Under an amendment to the Preamble of Lebanese Constitution that was purposely directed at the Palestinian presence (and agreed to as part of the Ta'if Agreement process that brought an end to the civil war), *tawteen* was explicitly prohibited.

In turn, a combination of Lebanese government policy, neglect, and the devastating consequences of years of war left the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon poor and particularly underdeveloped. According to UNRWA, some 53% of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon still reside in camps, compared to 27% in Syria and 17% in Jordan. Moreover, fully 12% of all Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon are categorized by UNRWA as “Special Hardship Cases,” requiring additional assistance—the highest of any of UNRWA’s five areas of operation⁸ An estimated half of all Palestinian refugee households in Lebanon live below the poverty line.⁹

⁷ For a much more detailed examination of these issues, see Souheil el-Natour and Dalal Yassine, *The Legal Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon and the Demands of Adjustment* (Beirut: Human Development Centre, 2007).

⁸ UNRWA, *UNRWA in Figures*, 31 December 2008, online at <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/pdf/uif-dec08.pdf>.

⁹ Willy Egset, Penny Johnson, and Lee O'Brien, *Finding Means: UNRWA's Financial and Refugee Living Conditions, Volume II: The Persistence of Poverty* (Oslo: Fafo, 2003), p. 9.

For all intents and purposes, the Lebanese state has had no presence or control within the camps since 1969, with the recent exception of post-conflict Nahr al-Barid. Because of this, there is little or no effective rule of law, and the camps themselves are potential sanctuaries for armed groups, both Palestinian and even non-Palestinian. The refugees themselves resent the frequent Lebanese stereotype of the camps as lawless areas. However, in some cases—notably Ayn al-Hilwa camp near Sidon (south Lebanon), which has been the site of a number of clashes involving militant jihadist groups—this is certainly the case.¹⁰

Public opinion polling undertaken in 2002 highlighted the extent of social distance between many Lebanese and the Palestinian refugee community (Table 1). Overwhelmingly, respondents in all confessional groups indicated their opposition to extending citizenship rights to Palestinians, and expressed their hope that the refugees would return to Palestine. Almost a quarter of Shi'ites and a third of Christians favoured permitting the refugees no rights at all.

	Maronites	Sunnis	Shi'ites	Druze
How close do you feel to the Palestinians as a group?				
close	9%	44%	23%	44%
neutral	17%	24%	22%	29%
distance	74%	32%	55%	27%
The Lebanese civil war was the responsibility of:				
the Palestinians	46%	15%	31%	14%
all parties	40%	36%	28%	26%
the Lebanese	14%	50%	42%	61%
How often have you felt sympathy for the Palestinians?				
most of the time	10%	40%	30%	38%
sometimes	26%	39%	44%	44%
never	65%	22%	26%	1%
I have frequent contact with Palestinians in the following areas:				
friendship	11%	29%	18	20
residential	1%	10%	7	3
occupational	4%	7%	4	7
civic or political	2%	14%	12	0
no frequent contact	80%	40%	58%	68%

Table 1: Lebanese Public Attitudes Towards Refugees (2002)

Source: Simon Haddad, *The Palestinian Impasse in Lebanon: The Politics of Refugee Integration* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam Among Palestinians in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Polling also demonstrates, however, potential public support for an improvement in Palestinian conditions. In the 2002 survey, significant majorities —63% of Maronites, 69% of Shi'ites, 75% of Sunnis, and 82% of Druze—were prepared to extend greater non-political civil and social rights to the refugees.

A Changing Policy?

In October 2005, the Lebanese Council of Ministers authorized the establishment of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), with Ambassador Khalil Makkawi appointed as its president. With this decision, the government of Lebanon also embarked on a major shift in government policy towards the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon.

The initiative arose, in part, from the withdrawal of Syrian troops earlier that year—while they had been present, the issue had been effectively beyond the reach of the Lebanese government. Idiosyncratic factors undoubtedly played a role too, with Prime Minister Siniora being a leading advocate of the initiative. However, these were far from the only factors at work, as evidenced by the support of the pro-Syrian parties within cabinet (Amal, Hizbullah) for the move. It also reflected a gradual change in attitudes, and a recognition that Palestinian marginalization and underdevelopment was of little credit or benefit to Lebanon.

The LPDC's initial mandate was four-fold:

1. To address outstanding socio-economic, legal and security issues related to the Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon, in collaboration with UNRWA.
2. Develop a mechanism that puts an end to Palestinian armed presence outside the camps.
3. To study the creation of a mechanism that regulates the use of arms inside the Palestinian camps.
4. To examine the possibility of creating formal relations through re-establishing the PLO representation in Lebanon .

As the name of the Committee suggested, it was originally intended to serve as the Lebanese component of an ongoing, formal process of dialogue with a Palestinian counterpart. This proved difficult, however, as factional divisions and disputes over representation prevented the Palestinian side from establishing a formal counterpart group. As a consequence, LPDC evolved as a policy analysis, facilitation, and internal advocacy unit within the Lebanese government, involved in a much broader array of activities than originally intended. In order to strengthen Lebanese government capacity in this area, Canada (through the International Development Research Centre), Italy, and the United Nations Development Programme have provided financial support for LPDC

staff, operations, and technical consultants since 2007. The UK has provided support for technical assistance to strengthen LPDC in areas of human security and strategic communications.

Of the issues outlined in LPDC's initial mandate, the most rapid progress was achieved on the question of reestablishing formal PLO diplomatic representation in Lebanon in July 2006. Thereafter, the PLO office, and PLO Ambassador Abbas Zaki, became the Lebanese government's primary interlocutor on issues relating to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.¹¹

The question of Palestinian weapons has proven far more difficult. Some hoped that Palestinian disarmament might be part of a broader *quid pro quo* whereby the refugee community was accorded fuller economic rights. However, Palestinian factions oppose complete disarmament within the camps, given that small arms are an important component of local political-military influence within camp communities. Moreover, many Palestinians view weapons as a defensive necessity, given Lebanon's history of civil strife and past attacks against the camps themselves. Arms are also linked, ideologically and otherwise, to the continuing conflict with Israel. Disarmament is therefore widely seen by both the factions and many refugees as an abandonment of the struggle for refugee return and Palestinian self-determination. Given this, the mandate of the LPDC was limited to trying to develop more effective *regulation* of arms within the camps, a development that many refugees would certainly welcome. Here, however, Palestinian factional competition has made it difficult to move forward.

There was broader agreement, especially between the PLO and LPDC, on the desirability of ending the Palestinian armed presence outside of the camps. Of the various armed Palestinian groups, only the pro-Syrian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command retains a significant military capability outside of the refugee camps. In January 2006, PFLP-GC gunmen shot and wounded two Lebanese municipal workers near their military base at Naameh (south of Beirut), resulting in a brief and inconclusive stand-off with the Lebanese Army.¹² The issue of ending the armed presence outside of the camps, however, is complicated by both local and regional politics. Hizbullah would oppose any effort, political or otherwise, to close the facilities of the PFLP-GC, or indeed to disarm any Palestinian faction. Not only is PFLP-GC allied to Hizbullah, but furthermore the party would see any effort to disarm Palestinian factions as a first step on a slippery slope towards fuller implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the “strict respect of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity, and political independence of Lebanon under the sole and exclusive authority of the

¹¹ LPDC does, however, maintain ongoing contacts, and periodic dialogue, with a range of Palestinian political actors in Lebanon. Ironically, it is criticized at times by some for its predominant relationship with the Fateh-dominated PLO, and at times by others for contact with other factions despite the present of formal Palestinian diplomatic representation in the country. The PLO office in Beirut was elevated to diplomatic Embassy status (“Embassy of Palestine in Lebanon”) by the Lebanese Council of Ministers in December 2008. The administrative process has not yet been completed, however.

¹² The PFLP-GC also has a number of military facilities in the Biqa Valley, and al-Saiqa and Fateh Intifada also likely have some arms outside the camps.

Government of Lebanon throughout Lebanon” and “the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias”—including, of course, Hizbullah itself.

On the question of the socio-economic status of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the Siniora government—for the first time ever by any Lebanese government—strongly encouraged donors to contribute to UNRWA efforts to improve refugee camps through its Camp Improvement Initiative. The Lebanese Army substantially relaxed earlier restrictions on building materials entering the camps. The GoL took steps to facilitate the issuance of work permits to Palestinians.¹³ The government also undertook to provide IDs to non-registered Palestinian refugees.¹⁴ To date, some 2,200 applications have been prepared, 765 IDs have been issued, 300 refused, and 300 sent back for additional information. Unfortunately, the process was suspended by the Ministry of the Interior for “administrative” reasons (or, more likely, out of fear of a possible Lebanese political backlash).

According to the LPDC:

Lebanese and Palestinians are today bound by a number of common interests and viewpoints. Both agree that they should work to **improve refugee living conditions**. The conditions of the camps are unacceptable, and the limited socioeconomic opportunities available to the refugees are an impediment to their welfare. Palestinian refugees have the right to a dignified and prosperous life under the rule of law.

The Lebanese government, in cooperation with UNRWA, the international community, and the Palestinian community, is unconditionally committed to creating the conditions that will promote a better life for the refugees.

The *security conditions in the camps* are not only a major impediment to the welfare of the refugees; they are also a threat to the stability of Lebanon and to international peace and security. Establishing the rule of law is a common Lebanese and Palestinian interest that will be pursued in collaboration and dialogue between the two parties.¹⁵

Similarly, in addressing the donor community in September 2007, Prime Minister Siniora noted:

As you know, the history of Lebanon's relations with the Palestinian refugees has often been a difficult one. This government came to office a little over two years ago with the intent as well of putting that history behind us and working to build Lebanese-Palestinian relations on healthy and solid ground. Our aim has been to provide the Palestinians living in Lebanon with a life of dignity, security and prosperity, within an environment where law and order prevails, until a just solution is realized when they can exercise their right of return.¹⁶

¹³ Although permits are now more readily available, most refugees prefer to avoid the time and cost of applying, and instead continue to work informally, especially within the camps. Under ministerial decree 1/79 of 2006, all Palestinian refugees born in Lebanon are now allowed to work in unskilled and semi-skilled positions.

¹⁴ LPDC, *Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee: Partners in Responsibility* (Beirut, 2008).

¹⁵ LPDC, *Government Strategy towards Palestinian refugees in Lebanon*, Beirut, nd.

¹⁶ *Speech of His Excellency Fuad Siniora, President of the Council of Ministers, Nahr al-Bared Crisis Appeal*, Beirut, 10 September 2007.

Addressing some of the key socio-economic issues facing Palestinians in Lebanon, however, will require legislative change—in particular, changing the laws regarding both property and employment in the syndicated professions. Here, the challenge of promoting reform is much more severe, for several reasons. Legislative change (as opposed to changes in declaratory or administrative behaviour) is far more likely to become an object of political contention, given Lebanon’s highly-charged political environment and the domestic sensitivity of anything that is seen to be promoting *tawteen*. From November 2006 until May 2008, domestic political crisis prevented the Lebanese parliament from meeting. Thereafter, Lebanese politicians and parties were all jockeying for position in the run-up to the June 2009 elections—making it a particularly poor time to inject the Palestinian issue into domestic politics. Indeed, even the electoral platform of the March 14 coalition explicitly rejected *tawteen*, and called for a constitutional amendment that would require parliamentary unanimity before any naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon.

Because of the difficulty of moving forward on issues requiring legislative change, LPDC attempted to pursue other avenues. It has helped to start a dialogue involving key Lebanese and Palestinian stakeholders on the application of principles of “human security” to a future policing and security regime in Nahr al-Barid Camp. It has engaged in quiet dialogue with a range of Lebanese political groups, as well as engaging both Lebanese and Palestinian civil society in activities ranging from film-showings and school activities to town-hall and discussion meetings. LPDC has sought to change the narrative of Lebanese-Palestinian relations in a way that can sustain greater cooperation and a more positive relationship.

The gradual change in the political atmosphere in Lebanon on the Palestinian issue has been evident in a series of statements by Palestinian and Lebanese leaders. The LPDC’s approach was endorsed by Lebanese political leaders at the March 2006 National Dialogue meetings. In January 2008, Palestinian ambassador Abbas Zaki issued a historic statement on the past and future of relations between the two sides, noting:

...it is fair to say that the Palestinian demographic, political and military presence in Lebanon burdened this friendly nation in excess of Lebanon’s duties and capacities to support the achievement of the Palestinian issue. It also affected the Lebanese state, economy, and society...

We apologize for any harm that we caused to our dear Lebanon, intentionally or unintentionally. This apology is not conditional on a reciprocal apology.

Zaki went on to call for a “sincere and substantive reconciliation process worthy of our two peoples,” reaffirmed the PLO’s “total commitment without reservation to the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon,” accepted that “Palestinian weapons in Lebanon must be subject to the sovereignty of the Lebanese state.”¹⁷ In April, Phalange Party leader Amin Gemayel also made comments on the need for both sides to recall “the social, cultural, and spiritual proximity between our two peoples that made Palestine, of

¹⁷ Abbas Zaki, “Apology to Lebanon on behalf of the Palestinian People,” 7 January 2008, excerpted in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37, 4 (Summer 2008): 163-164.

all Arab states, closest to Lebanon.”¹⁸ Other Christian leaders have expressed similar sentiments.

Nahr al-Barid Camp: Threats and Opportunities

In addition to the factors identified above, Lebanese government policy on the refugee issue was also profoundly challenged by the onset of the Nahr al-Barid crisis in May 2007. The ensuing three months of bitter fighting saw 27,000 Palestinians and hundreds of Lebanese displaced, hundreds killed, Fateh al-Islam rocket fire against surrounding Lebanese populated areas, and the disruption of electrical supplies to much of northern Lebanon. A preliminary joint analysis undertaken by LPDC, UNDP, UNRWA, ILO, and the World Bank in September 2007 put the total economic cost of the conflict—including assets destroyed, lost commercial activity, and increased government expenditures—at \$320 million.¹⁹ This amounts to over 1.1% of Lebanon’s entire GDP.²⁰

Given the past history of Lebanese-Palestinian relations, it might have been politically expedient for the Lebanese government to respond to this challenge by placing full blame for events on the refugees. Certainly many ordinary Lebanese did.

The official message, however, was quite the reverse: the Prime Minister, LPDC, and other government spokespersons repeatedly emphasized that the fighting in Nahr al-Barid camp was between the Lebanese Armed Forces and a terrorist group, and not a clash between the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples. Lebanese schools were opened as emergency shelters for the displaced refugees, and the Lebanese government (through LPDC) organized systematic relief efforts in addition to those provided by UNRWA. With funds provided by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, emergency family support payments were made to all of the inhabitants of NBC, as well as those of nearby Baddawi camp—and jointly issued by LPDC and the PLO. A government advertising campaign—featuring prominent Lebanese and Palestinian flags—assured the refugees that “Your departure is temporary. Your return is certain. Reconstruction is guaranteed.”

Our Palestinian brothers and sisters. Your departure from Nahr el Bared is a safety precaution to protect you and your family from becoming hostages in the hands of terrorists that have assaulted Lebanese and Palestinians alike. It is in now way a plot to force you from your home as it is only a temporary measure until peace and order are restored in the camp.

The Lebanese Government is adamant on the return of all those who were forced to flee the fighting and will strive to ensure their homecoming as soon as the current conflict comes to an end. The government is also determined and committed to assist in redressing all the damage suffered by Palestinian civilians and their possessions.

¹⁸ *Daily Star* (Beirut) 16 April 2008.

¹⁹ Lebanese Republic, *Preliminary Economic Impact Assessment of the Conflict at Nahr el Bared*, 10 September 2007, p. 9.

²⁰ This amount (1.1% of GDP) is the equivalent, in relative terms, a terrorist attack inflicting \$163 billion dollars of damage on the (very much larger) US economy.

Not since Lebanon had initially sheltered Palestinians displaced from Israel in 1948 had this sort of support been expressed by the Lebanese state.

Moreover, it has continued since the end of the fighting. At a special donor meeting for NBC and surrounding areas convened in Vienna in June 2008, Prime Minister Siniora personally called upon the international community to provide the funds that would allow full reconstruction (and improvement) of the camp, as well as support for the economic recovery of the surrounding areas. A specialist Recovery and Reconstruction Cell (RRC), attached to the Prime Minister's office and acting in coordination with LPDC, was established to support the technical aspects of reconstruction. There is close and ongoing cooperation between the Lebanese government, UNRWA, and the PLO.

Unfortunately, the donor response has been less than adequate to date. In June 2009, UNRWA reported that pledges of \$67.3m (plus \$10.3m from the World Bank Multi-donor Trust Fund) had been received, approximately one quarter of what will be required.²¹ Nevertheless, reconstruction of the first two parcels of the official (old) camp was formally begun in March 2009, in the hopes that additional donor resources would eventually be forthcoming for the other areas of the camp. In comments made at the official launch of the reconstruction, Ambassador Makkawi emphasized, "We share a will to rise above destruction, and to rebuild the camp even as we build a new relationship." He added "The dignity and prosperity of the Palestinian community is also a Lebanese interest," while also confirming Lebanon's political commitment to "the rights of the refugees, most important among them their right of return to Palestine in accordance with UN resolutions and Arab peace initiative."²²

Lebanese leaders have been clear that Nahr al-Barid camp will remain under full Lebanese sovereignty in the future, unlike those camps where the rule of Lebanese law does not reach. While currently under tight LAF control, it is planned that the Internal Security Forces will ultimately assume responsibility for internal policing, as in Lebanese communities. There are also myriad legal and political questions to be addressed in developing suitable models for camp planning and governance. Doing this in a way that promotes positive community relations and allows a gradual transition to a more normal and less intrusive security environment will pose many challenges, but also holds out the promise of significant benefits.

Indeed, reconstruction of the camp—or the failure to do so—will have long-lasting effects on Lebanese-Palestinian relations. Many refugees saw the LAF's destruction of the camp in 2007 as motivated less by military necessity than by a desire to drive out or resettle the Palestinians. Rumours of Lebanese ill intent abound. Incidents of unprofessional behaviour by LAF personnel (including incidents of looting and wanton destruction of property during and immediately after the crisis), delays and unmet expectations with regard to relief and recovery efforts, current and rumoured security

²¹ Karen AbuZayd, "Commissioner-General's Opening Statement," UNRWA Advisory Committee Meeting, Amman, 9 June 2009. Online at http://www.un.org/unrwa/news/statements/2009/AdCom_9jun09.html

²² Comments made by Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, Nahr al-Barid refuge camp, 9 March 2009.

measures, and decades of past history have all combined to make the refugees understandably cynical about Lebanese government promises to rebuild their homes and build a new relationship. Failed reconstruction will be seen as proof that such cynicism is well-founded, and confirmation that declared changes in Lebanese government policy are little more than cosmetic. It is not simply the population of Nahr al-Barid that is looking to the camp as a test of the credibility of the Lebanese government and international community—the entire Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon is doing so.

The failure of NBC reconstruction would also mean a continuation of the very social and economic circumstances that previously allowed Fateh al-Islam to grow there. Alternatively, successful reconstruction would establish a precedent that might facilitate both improvements in other camps and a graduate extension of Lebanese policing and sovereignty into those areas. Given the complex issues involved, a transformation of security conditions will only ever occur slowly, through the force of positive examples and local support.

Challenges Ahead

As noted earlier, neither the significance nor the potential effects of recent Lebanese policy changes towards the Palestinian refugee community should be underestimated. They are, in the context of recent decades of Lebanese-Palestinian relations, unprecedented. If successfully implemented and expanded over the coming decade, they have the potential to significantly improve the socio-economic situation of Palestinian refugees, enhance the ability of refugees to contribute to Lebanese society and the economy, strengthen the rule of law and extend Lebanese sovereignty, and enhance security not only for Lebanon but also for others in the region, and even internationally.

Conversely, if such policies fail, falter, or are reversed, the refugees will continue to suffer from chronic underdevelopment, increasingly dependent on external support. Palestinian camps will continue to exist outside of Lebanese law and sovereignty. They will also, for both socio-economic and political reasons, continue to act as potential recruitment, training, and organizational sanctuaries for radical jihadist groups. The cost of this might well be attacks against Lebanese or Western targets (in Lebanon or abroad), or even another Nahr al-Barid type confrontation.

As the government repeatedly emphasized, reform measures are not intended to pave the way for *tawteen* or the permanent resettlement of Palestinians in Lebanon, but rather to improve their circumstances until such time as there is an agreed, permanent resolution of the Palestinian question. Improving the social and economic conditions of the Palestinians is, as the LPDC has often noted, a Lebanese as well as a Palestinian interest.

Lebanese government policy, however, faces several major challenges:

- Unless the Lebanese government is able to facilitate more positive and concrete changes in the daily lives of Palestinian refugees, the policy is likely to be viewed in an increasingly cynical light by the refugees. Already, many see it as little more

as a rhetorical posture intended to improve Lebanon's international image, rather than a real change. Political realities precluded substantial action on major elements of the issue until after the June 2009 elections. Now, however, a new government needs to be ready to continue and accelerate its reforms.

- The continuation of the reform policy could be affected by changes in the composition of government in the wake of the June 2009 elections. The original policy initiative in 2005 was supported by all parties that were in cabinet at that time—that is, the bulk of what later became the March 8 and March 14 coalitions (with the exception of the Free Patriotic Movement). Consequently, the issue is *not* one of fundamental contention between the two political blocs. However, given the sensitive nature of the issue, it always has the potential to become political lightning rod. Moreover, while the reform process has never been an idiosyncratic initiative, it certainly benefited from the strong personal commitment of Prime Minister Siniora. Support by individual cabinet members has varied. In a new cabinet, with different ministers, the cabinet and bureaucratic dynamics around the issue could shift in unpredictable ways, despite the victory of the March 14 coalition in recent parliamentary elections.
- Policy reform in this area, as with most areas of Lebanese public policy, is often constrained by limited public sector capacities. This includes not only financial and technical/staff resources, but also shortcomings that arise from highly personalized channels of influence and communication, weak coordination processes, and other bureaucratic deficiencies. Outside of LPDC, there is particular need for enhanced capacity on the refugee issue within the Ministry of Interior and Foreign Affairs, as well as greater and more nuanced strategic policy analysis within the security services.
- There remains the potential for outside developments or internal acts of violence, possibly by small radical groups, to affect the process, much as the onset of the Nahr al-Barid crisis did in 2007. This could take the form of jihadist terrorism, internecine Palestinian clashes (whether between or within organizations), or local groups being used as paramilitary proxies by regional states. The assassination of senior PLO official Kamal Naji by unknown assailants in March 2009 highlighted this potential danger.
- For the reform process to be effective, sufficient resources must be made available, especially for NBC reconstruction as well as UNRWA's Camp Improvement Initiative and other activities. Given the serious fiscal situation of the Lebanese government, as well as the continued costs of reconstruction elsewhere in the country after the 2006 war, such resources will need to come from international donors. It is important that in providing resources, the needs of all camps—and not just the obviously important priority of NBC—be considered.

From the perspective of the international community, this suggests several important sets of actions that could and should be undertaken by donors:

1. Donor governments should consistently encourage the government of Lebanon in its reform efforts. In doing so, it is essential to emphasize that donors do not see improving the social and economic conditions of refugees as a first step to eventual *tawteen*. Rather, it should be emphasized that such measures are in the economic, social, and security interests of Lebanon, as well as consistent with Lebanon's international obligations. Care should also be taken to approach the issue of improving the conditions of refugees as one upon which many Lebanese parties agree, rather than part of any factional, sectarian, or coalition agenda. This should be done, moreover, at a sufficiently high level that the positive repercussions of reform are made clear to senior policymakers, and not just to counterpart officials. In the wake of the June 2009 elections, particular effort should be made to encourage the new government to take ownership of the process, rather than regard it as a hold-over from the previous Siniora administration.
2. Similar messaging should be quietly conveyed in bilateral meetings with officials from Lebanese political parties. Again, it is especially important that an improvement in Lebanese-Palestinian relations not be portrayed as a first step towards permanent resettlement, or as somehow linked with the Arab-Israeli peace process. Rather, it is an area where the security and humanitarian concerns of donors intersect with the political, economic, and security interests of the Lebanese, as well as the well-being of the refugee community itself.
3. In framing the issue, the international community should attempt to decouple Lebanese policy reform both from the question of Hizbullah's weapons, and from issues related to Syria or Iran. This is not to say, of course, that there isn't a powerful intersection between these dimensions: Syria supports some Palestinian groups (Fateh Intifada, the PFLP-GC, al-Saiqa and Hamas in particular) and views them as useful policy tools; Iran has a close working relationship with Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Hizbullah views all of these groups as allies; and Syria, Iran and Hizbullah all fear that any moves towards reducing Palestinian arms or extending Lebanese authority in the camps will ultimately lead to greater pressures for Hizbullah disarmament. To the extent that the international community also stresses these linkages, however, it makes it harder to move forward reform efforts.
4. The international community should follow up on some of the recommendations of the excellent February 2009 International Crisis Group report on Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, and press LPDC and the GoL to do the same. These include adopting a legislative definition of *tawteen* as citizenship and voting rights—thereby facilitating reforms that don't involve naturalization; reenergizing LPDC; and encouraging Palestinian groups to develop a stronger process of dialogue and an LPDC counterpart committee.²³

²³ International Crisis Group, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, pp. i-iii.

5. Donors should regularly engage with LPDC, keep abreast of its activities, and offer supportive advice. Donors should also coordinate their policies in support of the reform process.
6. Donors should encourage more effective policy coordination and information sharing across all of the GoL on Palestinian refugee issues, including potential capacity-building in line ministries as well as LPDC. The government should also be pressed to clarify lines of responsibility, and the extent to which LPDC and the inter-ministerial LPDC committee has a policy leadership role in this area.
7. Donor resources are key to financing camp reconstruction, infrastructure improvements, and educational and social services programmes. While most of these resources would flow through UNRWA, they nonetheless send positive signals to the government of Lebanon about international support for its reform efforts. In addition, the GoL needs assistance in coordinating infrastructure services between the refugee camps and the surrounding municipalities.
8. Adequate donor resources for NBC reconstruction are especially important. In addition to their own contributions, donor governments should encourage other donors (especially in the Gulf) to be more generous.
9. In addition to donor support for the camps (largely through UNRWA), there is a need for additional resources to support the continued work of LPDC and the RRC, as well as to support initiatives (such as development efforts around NBC in north Lebanon) intended to reduce Lebanese-Palestinian tensions and foster economic growth that would benefit all. There may also be opportunities for additional capacity-building on the refugee issue within other Lebanese government units, such as the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
10. In addition to resources specifically provided for Palestinian refugees and related reforms, donors could also do more to leverage other aid programmes to encourage and support reform efforts. One area of particular importance is in the area of security assistance to the ISF and LAF. Donors should encourage these organizations to develop new strategic approaches to policing and security in NBC that might ultimately provide a model for other refugee camps, when conditions permit. While there has been some engagement on these issues, such as through donor-provided technical assistance to the LPDC or in cooperation with community policing training assistance to the ISF, there has been less effective engagement with the LAF. In addition to engagement by donor aid and political officials, there is also scope for productive engagement by ministries of defence, defence attachés, and other security agencies that already have a positive working relationship with their Lebanese counterparts.

Fundamentally, of course, it is for the government of Lebanon, and not for donors, to advance policy reforms regarding Palestinian refugees. Yet however limited recent

efforts may seem when compared to the enormity of the task, and however skeptical refugees may (quite understandably) be about the changes to date, such initiatives nonetheless represent a striking departure in both tone and substance from previous eras. Moreover, the new policy has been sustained by the GoL *despite* the domestic political difficulties it has faced, and *despite* the sensitivity and even unpopularity of such initiatives in many quarters.

As Lebanon now enters a new political phase after the June 2009 elections, maintaining momentum and even increasing the pace of reform will be critical. Doing so is a shared humanitarian, development, and security interest of both Lebanon and the international community, as well as in the best interest of the refugees themselves. In all of this, as this paper has shown, *donors have a key role to play*.

Ultimately, resolving the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon awaits a political resolution of the broader Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israeli conflicts. In the meantime, however, there is much that can be done to promote the social development of the refugee community and foster a more secure, cooperative, and mutually beneficial Lebanese-Palestinian relationship.