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HOW TO SECURE THE ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE OF EXILE

Lebanon's Palestinian ghetto redesigned

Lebanon proposes to rebuild Nahr al-Bared, the Palestinian city-camp near Tripoli pulverised in a long siege last year in an attempt to kill Sunni militants holed up there. The new, as yet only imagined, town is intended to preserve the memories of the old, yet return the area to the control of Lebanon.

BY DON DUNCAN

SOME time before 2007 Fatah al-Islam, an extremist Sunni group tied to al-Qaida, made up of fighters from all over the Middle East, began to hole itself up in Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp outside the northern Lebanon city of Tripoli. After incidents with security forces in Tripoli, the group attacked an army outpost near the camp, killing 27 men on 20 May 2007. The Lebanese state then shelled the camp for three months, reducing it to rubble, and killed the militants. After the shelling stopped in September, the smoke cleared to reveal a camp and people once relegated to the periphery of the Lebanese political stage, suddenly at the centre of the country's struggle to regain hold of its national security.

As reported by Fidaa Itani (1), the Nahr al-Bared conflict made it clear that Lebanon was vulnerable to extremist militant cells and that its army was too weak to handle such a threat. It was also proof of significant al-Qaida activity in Lebanon, a key US ally in the Middle East.

Nahr al-Bared was 600 densely packed acres by the Mediterranean coast, a few kilometres north of Tripoli. A conglomeration of buildings, people and businesses, it dominated the area and supplied Lebanese villages in the surrounding hills. In the 1950s and 1960s, Palestinian merchants packed their wares on donkeys and sold them up in the villages around. They drew the villagers down to the camp, which became economically and socially integrated, unlike the 11 other Palestinian camps. It was a Palestinian city, but in Lebanon.

Now the camp lies silent and in rubble. Its residents, displaced to other camps, see a chaos of shattered history, a puzzle they are eager to return to and solve. The government sees an opportunity to gain some control of the Palestinians (who may be about 10% of the population) and of their camps, considered dangerous, lawless and a liability.

"This was a wake-up call," said prime minister Fouad Siniora of the conflict, just after the fighting ended. Vowing to rebuild Nahr al-Bared, he said it would serve as a model for Lebanon's other Palestinian camps, promising increased security. "We cannot risk chaos and violence in any of Lebanon's other camps. If we fail to rebuild, it will not only be tragic, but the dangers will be limitless."

Palestinians remain unwelcome in Lebanon and restricted in their right to own property. The

camps have become symbols, physical correlatives of this marginalisation, even though as many as half of all Palestinians in Lebanon live outside the official boundaries of the camps.

State within a state

The Palestinians arrived in Lebanon as refugees from the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948-9 and the creation of the state of Israel 60 years ago. The estimated 100,000 who first arrived in Lebanon came mostly from cities and villages in Galilee, now in northern Israel. They expected the upheaval to last only weeks or months and waited to return. Older Palestinians remember the first harsh winter at Nahr al-Bared under UN tents. By the second winter they had started to pile mud, stones and sticks along the bottom of the tents to keep out the bitter weather. Gradually, out of the earth, there emerged Palestinian urban ghettos.

From the arrival of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1969, to 1982 when Israel drove the PLO from Lebanon, the camps were solidified in concrete, which was trucked in by the Palestinian resistance. The Lebanese political elite looked on in horror as the camps went from squalid zones, dumping sites of an unwanted people, to become "New Palestine": an archipelago across the country, exclusionary zones with their own economies and a unified political leadership, an atomised state within a state. The resistance movement became a unifying force across the camps, its leadership providing the protection and unity under which the Palestinians developed as a political entity.

The camps enjoyed an autonomy accorded at a time when Palestinians were politically unified under Yasser Arafat and the PLO, based in Lebanon. But the Palestinian body politic has since fractured along multiple fault lines, and the camps have become security liabilities for the Lebanese government and open zones for Islamic extremist groups.

This parallel Palestine, a mixture of historical commemoration and political expediency, began to disintegrate after the PLO was ousted from Lebanon. Funding for the resistance went with the PLO to its next base in Tunisia. With the disappearance of the PLO and decreasing funds from the United Nations, poverty returned to the camps. They have reverted to chaotic, ungoverned zones, devoid of leadership, and isolated.

To the government, they are a network of weakness in national security. As long as there is no agency able to control what is going on in the camps, there will be infiltration, according to Bernard Rougier, political scientist and author of *Everyday Jihad*, a study of the growth of Islamic militant groups in the camps (2).

A means to remember the past

Even before the conflict at Nahr al-Bared ended, the government was evaluating the camp to find the best way to rebuild it to mitigate security risks. "It was very clear from the beginning, from the way [the army] was bombing the camp, that they were destroying it," said Ismael Khassan, a Palestinian urban planner who helped start the Nahr al-Bared Reconstruction Commission. Many in Lebanon believe the government seized on the conflict as a rare opportunity to destroy a camp that was otherwise untouchable.

The commission tried to establish a popular consensus on how the camp should be rebuilt. Data was collected through meetings and focus groups in which planners elicited the feelings of people

through “mental mapping” (sketching the camp as they remembered it emotionally). Neighbourhood names featured, and spots rich in camp folklore, banal places – alleys, corners and doorways – which were key social spaces in a camp devoid of green areas. Many children drew themselves into their maps, flying away from the burning camp. “So when the war ended and [the government] started putting out their ideas, we were able to challenge them,” said Khassan.

Some of the initial government proposals contradicted the way Palestinians had organised their living space for 60 years, he said. The government proposed three basic apartment unit models, small, medium and large, that could be mass-constructed and assigned to nuclear family units. But the Palestinian family cannot be reduced to nuclear units: its architecture results from a population growing in a cramped space. Palestinians have been forbidden to expand camps beyond their original boundaries, yet their numbers are thought to have quadrupled since their arrival in Lebanon. The original family habitat, the tent and later the shack, grew vertically into multi-storey buildings as rooms and floors were added. The family unit is a multi-level building, tailored to the contours of an extended family.

The commission argued that the reconstruction needed to reproduce this exactly. To design the camp any other way, Khassan said, would disintegrate its social fabric. The ecosystem of neighbourhoods in Nahr al-Bared would have to be preserved. The Palestinians who first settled Nahr al-Bared were grouped by village of origin: neighbourhoods became a means to preserve and remember the past. Most were named after the villages in Palestine the refugees came from, each with its own accent, dress and cooking habits.

An ‘illegible space’

The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), a government agency set up by Siniora in 2004, has worked with the Palestinian factions, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the army to draft a master plan for the rebuilding of the camp to be presented to donor countries in Vienna on 23 June; the project will cost \$300m and take up to five years to complete. It includes the recommendations made by Ismael Khassan and the Nahr al-Bared Reconstruction Commission. Families should, at least on paper, return to buildings in the same place and in the same neighbourhood as before.

But now that Nahr al-Bared has become the centrepiece of Lebanon's new offensive against Islamic fundamentalism, the question of Palestinian rights is on the political agenda. “When you reconstruct a camp like that, you're basically addressing issues that have not been addressed here for 60 years,” said Nadim Shehadi, from the British think-tank, the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), who is advising the government on the reconstruction. The Lebanese government, through the LPDC, is calling the reconstruction a progressive move in human rights for the Palestinians.

Public health is the main pretext for structural changes that will enable the state to take greater control of the camp. The narrow alleyways and tightly packed houses let in little light and air, and created sewage and refuse problems, while the dense, impenetrable architecture was hard for the Lebanese army (trained in symmetrical warfare) to control.

Widening one-metre-wide alleyways to three or four metres will bring air and light to the Palestinians once they return, says Khalil Makkawi, head of the LPDC; it will also enable the army to access unreachable parts of the camp. Six-metre-wide “circulation loops”, new connector streets to cross and connect the widened alleyways, will give access to the densest parts of the

camp for ambulances and fire trucks – and allow the army to coordinate infiltration of the camp. “Security-wise [the camp] will be in the hands of the government, like any other territory in Lebanon,” says Makkawi.

The camp architecture developed haphazardly without an explicit military logic but, just as the Palestinians used their camps to protect their identity and culture, they used their warren-like nature as physical protection in a country hostile to their presence. “I have been told directly by one of the fedayeen who defended the camps during the 1970s and 1980s that part of the architecture of the camp, this labyrinthine [layout] where you can't find your way, was so that outsiders wouldn't be able to find their way,” says Laleh Khalili, author of *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (3), about Palestinian commemoration of the past. “There's conscious thinking in making the camp into this illegible space.”

A convenient 'other'

Though the camps may appear homogeneous from outside, the resistance has been fractured into multiple movements and militias which share influence over the camps: PLO factions (Fatah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah-Intifada, Saiqa and PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command). Boundaries of influence, lines of alliance and zones of confrontation crisscross the camps and within the crevices of these political fractures, Salafist clerics are gaining influence, winning followers to their vision of Islam. Salafism, a purist strain of Sunni Islam, seeks to rid Islam of western influence and to return it to its original state – a wish that has translated into car bombs, roadside explosions, the hijacking of Nahr al-Bared and war with the Lebanese army.

The motivations of extremist Sunni groups like Fatah al-Islam are many: to stage a Sunni response to the growth in Shia power in Lebanon through Hizbullah; wage jihad on western influence in Lebanon, for example, on the US embassy (two vehicles were bombed in Beirut in January); on UN peacekeepers in the south (three attacks since last July); and the US-backed government.

The Nahr al-Bared reconstruction will cost \$445m and is expected to be completed by July 2011 according to the LPDC. A conference of donor countries was held in Vienna on 23 June where the plans for the camp were presented. Some \$122m was raised at the conference and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait pledged to cover half the total cost between them. The final cost will cover the rebuilding of the camp and of homes belonging to Lebanese communities surrounding it, which sustained damage during the conflict.

Even though the Nahr al-Bared reconstruction is unprecedented in scale, its ideological role in Lebanon's response to threats to its security is not new. In a country fraught with sectarian tension, the Palestinians have been a convenient “other” to explain away what have often been domestic Lebanese problems. Contrary to the dominant narrative that Sunni extremism is limited to the camps or that the camps foster extremism, many members of Fatah al-Islam were Lebanese, and much of the group's activity prior to the Nahr al-Bared conflict was not in the camp but in middle-class Sunni neighbourhoods in Tripoli. “By focusing on Palestinians, the [Lebanese] don't have to explain their internal lines of fissure, their internal tensions,” says Khalili. “It's a diversionary tactic.”

A Palestinian civil war

On paper, the new Nahr al-Bared ends decades of quasi-autonomy in the camps and promises the re-appropriation by the state of places that are now a security threat. But in practice this would mean that Palestinians disarm and relinquish their camps, now politically impossible in Lebanon. "It's a false statement to say that disarming the Palestinians will secure Lebanon. Palestinians are not the only people with arms," says Usamah Hamdan, Hamas representative in Lebanon. "If you go to any Lebanese village you will find guns in their houses."

With rumours of Christian Lebanese militias training in the mountains above Beirut, and Hizbullah rearmed to the south, it is impossible, says Rougier, to expect the Palestinians to disarm and surrender their camps to the state. "All the forces such as Hizbullah, all the groups backed by Syria on the Lebanese scene, plus Hamas, would refuse disarming the Palestinians as serving the interests of Israel in settling Palestinians in Lebanon," he says.

Many observers think Lebanon's political constellation is lining up for another civil war, and the stars moved dangerously close into position in May. If a civil war does break out, adds Rougier, Hamas would fight with Hizbullah and Fatah would fight with the government majority. Civil war in Lebanon would trigger a Palestinian civil war in the camps. Fatah/Hamas rivalries born in the occupied territories have spilled into the camps, and these lines of fissure have begun to align with fractures in the Lebanese political landscape.

The government has not yet worked out how to maintain security in the camp without impinging on the Palestinians' sensitivity to autonomy in Lebanon. One solution would be to co-opt the PLO and its Fatah militia to govern the camp, reporting to the Lebanese government. This may seem sensible but it would further marginalise Hamas. Estranging Fatah and Hamas, the two largest factions, could compromise ideological resistance to Salafist fundamentalism. By widening the divisions between the mainline resistance factions, the government risks playing into the hands of the fundamentalism it seeks to halt.

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Original text in English

Don Duncan is a journalist; this article is based on research for a Masters thesis at Columbia University, New York, for which he travelled to Lebanon on a fellowship from the Pulitzer Centre on Crisis Reporting, Washington DC

- (1) See Fidaa Itani, "[Al-Qaida roots itself in Lebanon \[2008/02/02lebanon\]](#)", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, February 2008.
- (2) Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon*, Harvard University Press, 2007.
- (3) Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.