

The Nahr al-Bared camp as a space of exception

By Sari Hanafi

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Many actors play a role in alleviating the plight of the displaced Palestinian people. The most important actor has been UNRWA. In spite of its slowness, as some interviewees complain, it has done a great job. Donors and international NGOs have provided financial support, as well as the Welfare Association, the Norwegian People's Aid, and ECHO. NGOs such as Islamic Relief, Popular Aid for Relief and Development, Al-Soumoud and Najdeh have assisted the population and ensured the basic needs of the displaced population and the returnees. In addition to these institutions, Saudi Arabia paid seed money (\$1,200) to each family through the Lebanese government, and some Lebanese political parties, especially the Future Movement, provided food for the families.

Grassroots organizations were quickly established to help the Palestinians with their struggle. For instance, an AUB-based initiative composed of AUB students and faculty has helped the displaced. However, what has been extremely helpful is the establishment of the Committee for the Reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared. The idea came from a group who has already helped several cities in South Lebanon (such as Bint Jbeil and Aita al-Shaab) in their reconstruction. The significance of this group is that its members understand the importance of empowering populations by organizing them. They established, along with the Palestinian population, the committee. This committee has surprised UNRWA with the large amount of work completed through consulting the population of Nahr al-Bared about probable reconstruction options and preliminary work for future design. Nevertheless, the matter at hand is not to which extent there is solidarity and aid for these 33,000 displaced people but in fact it is the lack of coordination, and this again cannot be understood without referring to the vacuum of power in the refugee camps and the fact that these camps are under both the state of void and the state of exception.

Nahr al-Bared crisis has shown the weakness of all the Palestinian political factions in managing the crisis. We can distinguish this at two different levels: the relationship with the Lebanese state and society and the level of dealing with the displaced. Concerning the first level, the PLO has played a very careful and wise role with a clear position of unconditional support to the Lebanese Army against Fatah al-Islam.

Hamas has taken a very intriguing stand: either a stand of the "empty chair" or the non-stand. Calling for a political solution, Hamas and Jihad leaders refused to clearly denounce Fatah al-Islam. While other organizations like the Popular Front or the Democratic Front of Palestine Liberation have criticized Fatah al-Islam, they have also given preference to a political solution, if possible. In the beginning, the Palestinian factions, led by Fatah and PLO, were ready to offer 200 guerrilla men to support the Lebanese Army. Unfortunately, Lebanese authorities and some European and American diplomats seemed to refuse this initiative. For them, the battle should not give any credit to the Palestinian armed forces.

At the second level of crisis management, the situation is at the verge of chaos. The constant competition between the PLO factions and the pro-Syrian factions inside the camps has even impeded the possibility to take technical decisions on the ground.

The destruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp is one main of the consequences of the camps being a space of exception, but after the fighting ceased, there came more. From the official end date of the fighting in early September until October 10, the camp was placed exclusively under the control of the Lebanese Army, not allowing residents of the new camp to return. Later, thousands returned to houses that had been burned, looted and vandalized. Interviews I conducted as well as those by the Amnesty International fact-finding mission attest to what appears to be a systematic pattern of burning and looting. Racist graffiti written in many homes of the camp is accompanied by the names of various Lebanese Army commando groups. While the preliminary looting had committed seemingly by Fatah al-Islam and some camp inhabitants, however, who has been doing that if nobody can enter the camp except the Lebanese Army?

What is significant is that not only Fatah al-Islam who looted partially the camp during the battle perceived the camp as a space of exception and out of law but also by some of the army officers. It can be looted and vandalized, and thus, so far no independent investigation has been carried out, although Amnesty International has written to the Lebanese Primer Minister and to the Ministry of Defense calling for an investigation to be initiated and those responsible to be held accountable.

It is very interesting that there is almost no public debate over such an important issue. As a space of exception, the camp has constituted an emergency zone where witnesses are not allowed: Even journalists and human rights organizations are being denied entry to the camp. It is this suspension of laws that facilitates the potentiality of vendettas and looting. The Palestinian population are people whose property is not only destroyed but also looted without allowing the criminals to be prosecuted. Many refugee camps are at the verge of catastrophe and no security solution can stop this route. It can only be helped by engaging in a serious process based on the following elements: allowing the Palestinian refugees to have full access to the labor market, including liberal professions; allowing the Palestinians the possibility to possess land and property; establishing an elected popular committee in each camp, a quasi-municipality, to be in charge of the camp administration; establishing joint Palestinian-Lebanese police centers in each camp; and, finally, the ending of the space of exception status of the camps by submitting the camps to the full Lebanese laws.

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