

What's Still “Palestinian” in the Palestinian Refugee Camps? Revisiting Ain al-Hilweh

The Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, seen by its residents as the locus of the “Palestinian diaspora,” lies to the east of Saida, some 45 kilometers south of Beirut. Between April 7 and 11, 2017, the camp was home to some of the most violent clashes since the Lebanese civil war ended more than 25 years ago.

The simplest way to explain the significance of those events is by referring to a headline run at the time by *al-Akhbar* newspaper, which characterized the clashes as “The Second Battle of Abra.”¹



As many observers note, despite the fighting that periodically strikes Ain el-Helwe, the camp has been subjected to extreme security measures for many years. Taking those measures a step further, construction of a fence to cordon off the area in earnest began last fall....

The gravity of that comparison is evident, since it refers to the LAF's June 2013 assault on the Saida-based mosque-headquarters of Lebanese Salafi Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir and his group, situated relatively close to Ain al-Hilweh.²

(1) *Al-Akhbar*. April 11, 2017.

(2) Several investigative reports suggested cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah in that military operation. The most interesting of these reports is a documentary, “Who fired the first shot,” broadcast in March 2017 by al-Jazeera TV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqzyITXnnCU>.

Of note, “the first battle of Abra” wrecked al-Assir, his headquarters and his organization, and forced him to seek refuge in Ain al-Hilweh (he was ultimately captured at Beirut–Rafic Hariri International Airport while trying to flee the country).

As a preamble, it is necessary to consult the timeline of events from last April. In early March 2017, a decision coordinated by the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority, Hamas and other smaller Palestinian entities (not for the first time, but on this occasion with substantial, official “chaperoning” by Lebanese authorities) was made to form a “Joint (Palestinian) Security Force” (JSF), which would be tasked with maintaining the camp's order and security.³ Before proceeding, it may also be helpful to remind readers that “Lebanese authorities” are by no means restricted to State-oriented institutions. By extension, since antagonism between the Lebanese state and its primary non-state actor (Hezbollah) is fading quickly, the concept of “Lebanese authorities” must be taken with a grain of salt....⁴

As the JSF began its deployment,

it was stopped when it was fired upon by the so-called Bilal Badr group. Bilal Badr is neither particularly large, nor does it have a clear structure or agenda. Moreover, it is referred to intermittently as “Islamist,” “mercenary” or “terrorist” in nature. Soon enough, the clash intensified into an armed standoff, and while the viciousness of the confrontation certainly captured the attention of many observers, the vehemence displayed in the associated verbal exchanges was proportional in nature...at least during the initial phases.

In the first two days of clashes, statements published by the JSF's political mouthpieces insisted that the operation was “conclusive” and would not be stopped until the “phenomenon of Bilal Badr had been ended.”⁵ As time passed, however, that rhetoric was diluted, and an ad hoc cease-fire was eventually brokered to stop the clashes. The most interesting feature of that agreement was its stipulation that Bilal Badr would no longer lurk in the camp's alleyways! In true Lebanese style, therefore, the entire event was ended by brushing its dust under the carpet.⁶

³ For information about the JSF, see A. Ayyash's “The constitution of the Joint Security Force in Ain al-Hilweh,” published by *an-Nahar* on March 5, 2017.

⁴ See “Revisiting the purported antagonism Between Hezbollah and the Lebanese State.” ShiaWatch. June 2017. <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/650>.

⁵ Consider the various statements made on April 8, 2017, the most vocal of which was made by Mounir Makdah, the head of the so-called “Palestinian National Security,” who lauded the “conclusiveness” of the operation.

⁶ See, for instance, “The battle is over in Ain al-Helweh...Who Won?” *An-Nahar*. April 14, 2017.

This fiasco of a military engagement, however, cannot overshadow the dynamic that enabled it to surface. In fact, the April 2017 clashes were preceded by a string of smaller skirmishes. For instance, tensions flared when construction began in fall 2016 on a wall and fence project just outside the camp.⁷ Concurrent with those daily clashes, a steady number of individuals “wanted” by the Lebanese security forces, surrendered in the hope of sorting out their cases. Additionally, several unprecedented actions also occurred. In September 2016, an LAF intelligence team captured a purported terrorist who had been residing in the camp. That development was unique, as the Lebanese security forces typically refrain from operating within the camps.⁸ Equally novel was that information was being disclosed to the Lebanese authorities concerning the training of Fateh combatants in various Lebanese camps.⁹ Finally, statements made by Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during his visit to Lebanon in February 2017 seemed to suggest that the LAF should not only enter, but

also take charge of the camps' security.



The events that reached their apex in Ain al-Hilweh last April are little more than another flagrant example of what can surely be described as the “Lebanonization” that has encompassed Ain al-Hilweh and other Palestinian refugee camps in the last several decades. Of course, the notion of *Lebanonization* can best be understood by reviewing its semantic layers. The first and most obvious layer refers to the role played by the Lebanese authorities in the April 2017 clashes. In one case, Palestinian fighters equipped with arms and ammunition were transferred from camps in Tyre to Ain al-Hilweh under Lebanese supervision.¹⁰ Yet, other features of *Lebanonization* must also be considered. Taking the example a step further, it can be asserted that Lebanese authorities are “managing” Palestinian infighting to impose their will on the camps, to include their unique concepts for camp and resident security.¹¹

⁽⁷⁾ A *Daily Star* article published November 21, 2016, “Construction of wall around Ain al-Hilweh in full swing,” described the early stages of that project.

⁽⁸⁾ See, for instance, “Imad Akl Caught by the LAF.” *Al-Akhbar*. September 22, 2016.

⁽⁹⁾ See Ridwan Akil's article, “Fath Fighters trained in Rashidiyyeh with the knowledge of Lebanese Authorities,” published by *an-Nahar* on March 6, 2017.

⁽¹⁰⁾ See, for instance, “Ain al-Helwe moves towards a full conclusion of the battle: more troops moved in.” *LebanonDebate*. April 8, 2017. <http://www.lebanondebate.com/news/325525>.

⁽¹¹⁾ Beyond open source resources related to the extent of this “managerial approach,” UMAM D&R interviewed several social and human rights activists involved with the discord in the camp. They described most of the camp's key political and military figures as simply implementing the will and policies advanced by the various Lebanese security apparatuses.

Today, some 51 years following the establishment of Palestinian refugee camps on Lebanese soil (Ain al-Hilweh was among the first), we must ask ourselves a relatively simple question: what particularly Palestinian aspect remains present in those camps? A logical response would likely be prefaced by three preparatory questions. First, isn't it true that several thousand Palestinians still reside in those camps? Second, hasn't the number of Palestinian organizations that exert and compete for influence in those camps increased in tandem with the emergence and diversification of Islamic factions in the camps? And finally, hasn't the issue of "Palestinian weaponry" escaped resolution?

Despite the fact that the answer to all three of those preparatory questions is an emphatic and immediate yes, the original question, *what's still "Palestinian" in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps,* remains unanswered. At this point, we are faced with a conceptual mismatch, especially since our chief concern is to produce a qualitative rather than a quantitative assessment. Since we must also consider the evolutionary processes that have affected those camps, the correct answer is that *not much remains of the original Palestinian influence in those camps.*

Based on today's penchant for political correctness, the 1982

Israeli invasion, the 1985 Tripoli War (that forced Yasser Arafat and the PLO out of Lebanon) and the "War of the Camps" must be seen as chapters in the civil war. More often than not, however, political correctness fails to produce a shortcut to the "truth." Indeed, the simple act of considering the aforementioned events as chapters of the Lebanese civil war effectively strips the Palestinians of the part they played in those engagements. Thus, the *Lebanonization* of these Palestinian refugee camps has made them auxiliary battlefields, simple *geographic extensions* of the Lebanese civil war. Along with the lengthy struggle for power and influence in Lebanon, the camps rode the very same waves of turmoil that all but destroyed the country. Over time, the scope of some of those camps was reduced while others were destroyed.

Beyond the civil war-era *Lebanonization* described previously, Palestinian camps also experienced that process during the era of Syrian tutelage, a period that imposed a certain degree of *equality* among the Lebanese and Palestinians. But when Syria's forces finally left Lebanon in 2005, that equality was altered *in favor of the Lebanese*, who shared little of their collective relief with their Palestinian counterparts. Over time, it seems Lebanese decision makers—despite their disagreement over various policy and ideological issues—agreed

that the Palestinian camps should remain as they were following the civil war and during the period of Syrian tutelage.

Perhaps the most concrete example of this propensity can be seen by examining the Nahr al-Bared camp—though the reality of "the war" that rocked Nahr al-Bared in 2007 is becoming increasingly ambiguous over time.¹² But while we can choose to ignore the "historical truth" about that war, we cannot do the same where its legacy is concerned. Using that frame of reference, it is very telling that it took a Lebanese official 10 years following the end of that war to "realize" that reconstruction of *Nahr al-Bared* would not only reaffirm the refusal to obliterate the Palestinian national identity, but would also, by asserting a national position, align Lebanon with Palestinians' right to return to their homeland....¹³ By understanding that the minister believes that refugee camps are a fundamental aspect of a resilient Palestinian national identity and a reaffirmation of their right to return (a questionable statement in and of itself), we can deduce that this decade-delayed reconstruction process is an actual representation of the enduringly poor management of the Palestinian

diaspora in Lebanon—to say nothing of Palestinian/Lebanese relations before, during and after the various wars.

Yet, it appears this same "paradoxical Lebanon," beset and seemingly haunted by the Ain al-Hilweh camp, is striving to "forget" the need to commit to reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared. Further, it seems this state-level vacillation (and confusion) is a common factor in the general context of the Lebanese management of Lebanese and Palestinian affairs.

Just as this constant vacillation continues to dominate the Palestinian diaspora, it also seems to permeate the Syrian diaspora. Today, one of the most pervasive notions related to refugees in Lebanon is that the huge number of displaced Syrians and Palestinians in Lebanon represent a fundamental threat to the "Lebanese entity." In reality, however, that same Lebanese entity is plagued by never-ending internal conflicts among the Lebanese themselves. Ultimately, that reality leads us to conclude that unless dramatic changes take place in policies and practices, creeping *Lebanonization*, in its worst sense, indeed awaits Syrian asylum seekers in Lebanon!

¹² As part of the Saudi/Qatari media war, *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* (the semi-official Saudi pan Arab daily) published a lengthy report on June 11, 2017 that accused Qatar of having helped fund the terrorist group that confronted the LAF in Nahr el-Bared in 2007.

¹³ See statements made by the Lebanese Minister of Displaced following his June 8, 2017 visit to Nahr el-Bared with the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon.