

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: New Source of Cross-Border Tension?

May 20, 2000



Brief Analysis

While Hizballah still mulls over its options in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon—terrorism, political activism, or both—there remains in Lebanon one other sizable community that could be the source of renewed tension and violence: the 350,000 Palestinian refugees. This group has a long and tortured history in Lebanon, but the development of the Oslo process (which most refugees in Lebanon perceive as an illegitimate betrayal of their cause), along with both the loss of Syrian-Lebanese leverage over Israel following unilateral withdrawal and the increasing desperation of the refugees, has fostered those ideological movements inside the refugee camps that may turn violent in order to bring attention to the refugees' humanitarian plight.

Ideological Landscape Fatah, traditionally the most dominant group in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, has been attempting to reconsolidate control by installing Arafat loyalists in the leadership of the camps' Popular Committees. This has been partially successful; in August 1999, Fatah did gain at least partial control over Lebanon's largest refugee camp, Ein al-Hilweh. Any power Fatah has been able to recoup however, has been partly offset by the gains made in the camps by the various Islamist groups. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and several smaller and more extremist groups aligned with Hizballah have made substantial inroads in refugee support in the camps over the last few years as the political influence of Fatah (and, to some degree, the other secular-leftist groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [PFLP]) has diminished.

Secular rejectionist groups: These groups are all supported by or under the influence of Damascus; thus it is likely that they will yield to Syrian wishes regarding their operations. They all maintain some infrastructure and support in the Bekaa Valley, and in the past they engaged in terrorist activities both against Israeli targets and in the international arena. The Fatah Rebels, the Abu Nidal Organization, and the PFLP-General Command (PFLP-GC) are uncompromising toward Israel and the Oslo process. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) opposes accommodation with Israel, although founder Naif Hawatma has petitioned to return to the West Bank. The PFLP is undergoing a leadership transition; founder George Habash's deputy and putative successor Abu Ali Mustafa returned to the West Bank and expressed a willingness to be incorporated into the Palestinian mainstream, although he also opposes Oslo.

Islamist groups: Hamas and PIJ are the most active in the refugee camps, although the Lebanese group Hizballah and extremist splinter factions such as Usbat al-Ansar and al-Jamal Islamiya are also active. The vacuum left by the combination of Fatah's focus on activities in the Palestinian Authority and the decision of the other secular groups to give priority to political over military action has given unprecedented opportunity for the Islamist groups to gain support in the camps. Although in the past Hamas collaboration with Hizballah was limited, lately the two have developed closer ties. This relationship extends from the training of Hamas operatives in Iran to cooperative recruitment efforts in the refugee camps. PIJ, the other major Islamist group, has focused on military operations against Israel, creating opportunities to exploit Hizballah's resources and facilities in Lebanon.

The fostering of improved relations between Hamas, PIJ, and the Iranians (through Hizballah) has dramatically

increased the groups' penetration of the camps, expanding their influence and their ability to mobilize there. That Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi toured southern Lebanon only two days after the Israeli withdrawal demonstrates that Iran remains determined to boost its involvement with Hizballah as well as its role as patron of the organization's "victory" over Israel. Although Hizballah may want to keep a low profile on Israel's northern border for some time, these Palestinian groups can provide a willing and increasingly better-trained proxy to continue the fight. Moreover, these groups can lay claim to a legitimacy Hizballah no longer has: although Israel has withdrawn from Lebanon, the refugees have had no relief for their predicament.

More disturbing than the sheer growth of the Islamist movements in the camps is the growing evidence of their links to terrorist groups outside Lebanon. For example, Usbat al-Ansar, the Islamist splinter group in Ein al-Hilweh with ties to Osama bin Ladin, has been linked to the Jordanian group arrested in December 1999 for terrorist conspiracies and is currently on trial. Usbat al-Ansar was involved in clashes with the Lebanese Armed Forces in January 2000 that occurred concurrently with riots in northern Lebanon pitting other Sunni Islamists against the Lebanese government. Also in the north, Hizb'al-Tahrir al-Islamiya (the Islamic Liberation Party) has escalated its activities in northern Lebanon, especially among Palestinians not living in refugee camps.

Hizballah is furthermore actively exporting its experience to Islamist groups in the West Bank and Gaza. Reportedly, the group recently issued a joint statement with Hamas calling for the "Lebanonization" of the territories—an imperative not only to continue violent activities, but to switch from terrorist to guerilla tactics. In May 2000, the Hamas monthly Falastin al-Muslim made this call explicitly. And the Hamas website reported this quote from the semi-official Palestinian newspaper al-Hayat al-Jadida: "O Lebanese joy, spread your delicious disease among us!"

Policy Imperatives In his report on Israel's implementation of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 425, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan hinted at the importance of Palestinian radical organizations when he referred to the roles of both "Lebanese and other armed groups" (emphasis added). Addressing this problem requires the recognition that Hizballah is not the only wild card poised to promote violence among Palestinian groups toward Israeli targets. The refugees also present the Syrians with an opportunity to launch proxy attacks reminding Israel that peace will not come until the Golan Heights are returned to Damascus. Although Syria is the principal conduit of Iranian aid to Hizballah, Damascus also extends support—overflights, landing rights, tacit permission—for Tehran's outreach to Palestinian Islamist groups. Syrian intentions are therefore central to the maintaining of quiet both on the northern border and within the Palestinian camps themselves. As outside parties like the U.S. government warn Syria it that will be held responsible for ensuring calm on the Israel-Lebanon border, this arrow in Syria's quiver must be kept in mind.

Apart from an eventual refugee solution contained in a Palestinian-Israeli final status agreement, the lack of adequate arrangements for alleviating the refugees' plight in Lebanon must be recognized. There is a need for interim policies to forestall violence and stunt the growth of the terrorist cells within the refugee camps. This kind of policy will have to encompass both "sticks" and "carrots." Specifically, the United States should encourage Lebanon to improve the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian refugees by, for example, loosening restrictions on employment, education, travel, and access to health care. Washington and other parties should also require the Lebanese to provide the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) with the authority to act decisively against violent groups should it become necessary, relaxing the rules of engagement and giving UNIFIL soldiers jurisdiction to carry out enforcement both in and around the camps and on the border with Israel. This two-pronged approach is in the best interests of an international community anxious about the potential for renewed violence on the Israel-Lebanon frontier and of the Lebanese government itself, legitimately concerned about the prospect of destabilization on the border and within the refugee camps.

Nicole Brackman is a 1999–2000 Soref research fellow at The Washington Institute.

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

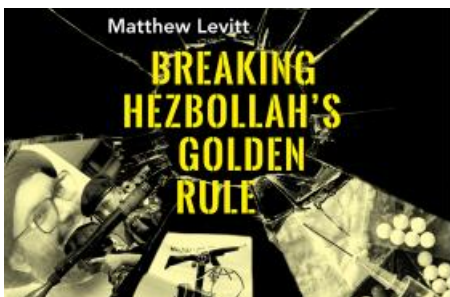
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)