

# Israeli-Lebanese Negotiations: The Palestinian Refugee Issue

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## Brief Analysis

**S**yrrian foreign minister Faruq al-Shara's recent announcement that Damascus and Beirut will sign peace treaties with Israel together is not surprising, considering Syria's hegemony in Lebanon. But while Israel, Syria, and the United States have expressed guarded optimism about the latest resumption of peace talks, Lebanon has been more reserved in its enthusiasm. This is mainly due to its concern over the final disposition of the Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.

Hostile Minority Under Siege According to United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) figures, there are approximately 350,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (about 9 percent of the country's total resident population). The refugees have long been viewed with suspicion by their Lebanese hosts, who cite the delicate sectarian balance in the country, heavy Palestinian involvement in the Lebanese civil war, and the military attacks that provoked the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982, as justification for their spurning of the refugees. Although no national census has been held in decades, available evidence indicates that the country is 70 percent Muslim and 30 percent Christian. The longstanding conflict between and among the various Muslim and Christian sects led to the explosion of the Lebanese civil war of 1975-89. Their differences--papered over in the 1989 Ta'if agreement which is designed to guarantee representation of each group and subgroup in specific positions in the government--remain pronounced.

The Lebanese government rejects the integration of the refugees into the country, largely because it would upset whatever balance exists between religious and ethnic communities. Thus far, it opposes a priori any peace agreement that allows the naturalization or resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Lebanese laws reflect this policy of exclusion. Whereas Jordan and Syria offer citizenship or its functional benefits to their resident Palestinian refugees, Beirut bars refugees from employment in most sectors; denies them access to the Lebanese health care system and other social services; and prevents them from attending Lebanese schools and universities. Building is prohibited in and around the refugee camps, contributing greatly to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. These laws became increasingly restrictive following the 1989 Ta'if agreement, and since 1995, the government has imposed severe travel restrictions on Palestinian refugees.

Another 'War of the Camps?' One consequence of this isolation has been the political radicalization of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The camps are a microcosm of the Palestinian ideological landscape, represented by factions from the extreme left (such as Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command) to the extreme right ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad). During the 1970s and early 1980s, the camps were dominated by Fatah (the largest faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization, or PLO) led by Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat. The Israeli invasion of 1982 expelled the PLO leadership from Lebanon and in the 1985-87 "war of the camps," the Syrian-backed Amal (Shi'i Muslim) militia eradicated most of Fatah's military presence from the refugee camps. But during the years since Oslo, Fatah in Lebanon has been divided between supporters of Arafat and those who reject the Oslo process. Arafat has attempted to reconsolidate Fatah control over the Lebanese camps by

installing his own followers in the leadership of the camps' Popular Committees. Fatah's political resurrection has been noted with alarm in Beirut; Lebanon's al-Safir newspaper reported earlier this month, for example, that Fatah has intensified military training, recently graduating forty-five fighters from the "Martyrs of Return Course" into the Fatah militia forces. It is unknown whether these fighters are pro-Arafat.

The Palestinians have denied any plans to challenge Lebanese authority, claiming that the camp activities are designed to provide internal security and occupy time, as Faruq Qaddumi stated in an interview in the Arabic daily al-Sharq al-Awsat. Yet the Palestinians have implicitly acknowledged the validity of Beirut's concerns. An editorial in Jerusalem's al-Quds newspaper (a PA-friendly organ) acknowledges Lebanese sensitivity about the PLO (based on its heavy involvement in the civil war) but condemns Beirut's treatment of the refugees. The Lebanese government is mobilizing against the PLO. The government recently arrested several top Lebanon Fatah officials and passed a death sentence (in absentia) on (Fatah) commander Sultan Abul Aynain for "forming armed bands and inciting armed rebellion." The refugee camps were also surrounded in early December by the Lebanese military, placing them under a virtual state of siege. Tensions are exacerbated by the media on both sides, where accusations of the other's neglect of the refugees are common.

Achilles' Heel of the Peace Process? Lebanese president Emile Lahoud recently articulated seven conditions without which his country would not consider a comprehensive peace with Israel. In addition to demanding Israel's withdrawal from the entire security zone in southern Lebanon and compensation to the Lebanese government for the Israeli occupation since 1978 (as well as other conditions, such as "stopping water theft"), he called on Israel to provide for the total removal of the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon. The last condition threatens to disturb Lebanon's complacency with Syrian directives and the possibility of reaching an agreement quickly. More than anything else, the Lebanese worry that failure to satisfy their demands on refugees will not itself stop the Syrians from making their own deal with Israel on territory—and that any Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, whether unilateral or as part of a peace treaty, will mean that Beirut will be forced to accept the Palestinian refugees as permanent residents.

Any Israeli-Lebanese agreement that does not resolve the refugee problem is liable to be met with wholesale rejection in Lebanon, whose citizens agree on little else but the need to expel the Palestinian refugees. Yet there is potential for reconciliation of the Lebanese and Israeli agendas. Though the Lebanese position is for Palestinian "return" to Israel, their overriding concern is that the refugees leave Lebanon. Resettlement in third countries (i.e., Europe) would satisfy the main Lebanese demand without affecting the Israeli concern about increasing Israel's Arab population.

The issue is further complicated by its dual nature. Even if the Lebanese and Israelis could come to terms on third-country resettlement, the Palestinian-Israeli peace track must be factored in. Arafat sees the refugee question writ large as under his purview. A consequence of the increasing tension between Beirut and Arafat may be a worsening of living conditions for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Moreover, it is questionable whether Arafat would welcome a large-scale return of Lebanese refugees to the West Bank when their ideologies are potentially so threatening to his rule—he cannot even depend on the loyalty of many Lebanese-resident Fatah activists. The refugees' protracted presence in Lebanon, and even their misery, may be more politically useful to Arafat, either tactically (to impede Syrian-Israeli talks) or strategically (as a bargaining chip in his own negotiations with Israel, i.e., the conflict never ends).

Also, an Israeli refusal to concede on the refugee question may provide Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad with his own exit opportunity if he decides not to proceed with a peace treaty with Israel. But if Syria does want to deal, Lebanon will presumably be compelled to accept at least the deferral of the refugee issue to the Israeli-Palestinian talks.

The U.S. Dimension The Lebanese-Israeli negotiations will not be a quiet corollary to the Syrian-Israeli talks. The

issues between Beirut and Jerusalem are contentious and require creative solutions. If the two tracks are to culminate in agreements, it will be necessary for the United States to take a more active role in facilitating a workable proposal on refugee resettlement. It may make sense for Washington to elicit the cooperation of European and other Arab states in participating in the absorption of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, but such cooperation is unlikely unless the United States makes a gesture of its own.

Nicole Brackman is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

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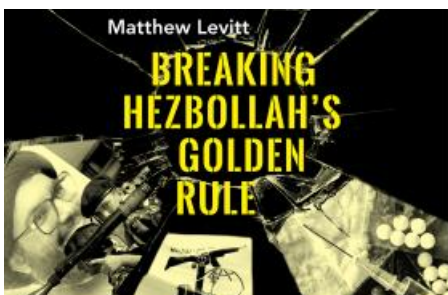
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