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Corruption and crisis of representation in the West Bank refugee camps

In the West Bank, "popular committees", established by the PLO after its return in 1994, act as camp representatives. Many of these committees have lately come under investigation for corruption. An official responsible for the investigation at the "UNRWA file" of the Department of Refugee Affairs of the PLO in Ramallah, gave the following example: "A committee would go to UNRWA and say [for the job project], "I have a list of 50 people in need of work." We found that many of the people on the projects were not there. We found it was like a bargain for some of the committees and heads of committees. They got 450 USD a month for each name, and only paid each 100 USD." The investigator alleged that most of the popular committees in the West Bank were corrupt.

Aware of the widely shared perception of corrupted camp leaderships, the PLO initiated a process of holding elections in the camps. However, when elections were held, only one to two percent of the camp residents – PLO members, leaders of various institutions etc. – were allowed to vote. In the Balata camp 300 out of 23 000 registered refugees voted, in Aqbat al Jaber camp, 120 out of 8000. The old committee members in the camp were re-elected in both places, largely by those who benefited from having been appointed to various positions in the camp by the committee.

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"The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends" is a five-year research project funded by the Section for Peace and Reconciliation at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is based at the Centre for Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Oslo and involves researchers from the Institute for Labour and Social Research, Falo, The Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO, and the University of Oslo. The project is headed by Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik.

Dag Tuastad holds a doctoral degree in Anthropology and is an associate professor at the University of Oslo. His main research has been on Palestinian politics, including studies on the role of kinship in Palestinian politics, Hamas' concept of a long-term ceasefire, and the democratization process in the PLO. He is currently working as a researcher at the Center for Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Oslo.
In 2007 a Salafist-jihadist group, Fatah al-Islam, killed several Lebanese army soldiers and took refuge in the Nahr al-Bared camp. In the ensuing battle that erupted, the whole camp was destroyed. Planning for its rehabilitation, the Lebanese authorities called for the establishment of a transparent and effective governance structure for the camp. They referred to UNRWA and the Popular Committee of the PLO as the camp residents’ representative. But this role was refused by UNRWA, stating that they did not represent the Palestinians. Both Lebanese authorities and UNRWA maintained that the camps lacked a representative leadership which could act legitimately on behalf of the refugees. “The factions are sidelined. Where’s their mandate? UNRWA would have to pay attention to elected popular committees,” said a UNRWA representative.

“The only way is to hold elections. The so-called popular committees are not popular committees. The people inside the committees represent the Palestinian factions, not the people,” said Saleh Saleh, head of the refugee committee of the PLO, in Beirut. Indicating that the difficulties were due to technicalities, the Fatah Ambassador of Palestine to Lebanon, Abdullah Abdullah stated: “Elections are not only dependent on us, they depend on other factors as well. We are not in principle against holding elections anywhere at any time where it is possible.” Hamas also claim that they want elections in the camps, “We want within a year or two to have elections for the popular committee within all the camps in Lebanon, and to have an umbrella organization representing all these elected camp committees”, said Ali Baraka, the leader of Hamas in Lebanon.

But while they all claim to favor elections, there does not appear to be a plan for holding them.

Causes and perils of undemocratic camp representation

“Whenever there is a problem with funding, we play the protest card,” said an UNRWA official in the West Bank. Reluctant donor countries fund UNRWA if they fear that there is danger of unrest in the camps. This is revealing because it exposes how the fear of instability is the primary concern of the international community concerning camp refugees. This comes on top of the fact that the refugee issue is a turn-off in any Israel-Palestinian peace negotiations. Any initiatives disturbing status quo – which elections might be – is thus undesirable.

Hence, there is a common interest between donor countries and Palestinian groups controlling the camps in not initiating processes of camp elections. For the donors, it may create unrest and political demands, for the Palestinian factions, democratization could jeopardize the emphasis on resistance, and not least, diminish their own local power and benefits.

But in the absence of arenas for democratic political participation, the vacuum is filled by alternative modes of political agency. As refugees are outside the sphere where decisions are taken, unpopular decisions are met with violent protests. Moreover, lack of channels for participation make introvert, radical groups develop in isolation, with no challenges to their ideas. Being outside a political community, a lack of responsibility towards the collective follows. Thus, the politics of status quo is a recipe for the agency of spoilers. Today, Salafist-jihadists groups like Fatah al-Islam emerge not only in the camps of Lebanon, but also, reportedly in the largest camp in the West Bank, Balata.

Recommendations

• Show an interest in the question of camp elections in meetings with relevant actors, including Hamas, PLO, UNRWA and the Quartet. Most Palestinian parties see the need for creating legitimate camp leadership, but lack the initiative to move ahead with plans.

• Identify, meet and consider for funding Palestinian NGOs and civil society groups working on issues related to democratisation within the refugee communities.

Conclusion

Today there is a deep crisis in Palestinian politics regarding legitimate political representation. The PLO, recognized by the international community as the “sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people”, has never had an election. Moreover, the West Bank and Gaza are separated by the two different authorities of Fatah and Hamas. The Fatah and Hamas split also affects the issue of political representation in the refugee camps. In the West Bank, the camp committees are dominated by appointed or quasi-elected Fatah-people. In Lebanon, Fatah or Hamas committees claim to represent the camps, some places even two opposing committees exist in the same camp. No unified committee exists.

Camp refugees constitute a special category of Palestinians with their own specific interests. Firstly, they have special interests as refugees. The struggle for a two-state solution is basically not the struggle of the refugees. Secondly, they have special interests as camp residents. Inside camps, there is a need for governance and management and the camp residents have an interest in being represented when decisions that affect their daily lives are taken. Camp elections would fulfill this need, but for such elections to be implemented powerful advocates are needed.
As for the Jenin camp, UNRWA employees were threatened, their offices attacked and cars burnt. In 2011 UNRWA suspended its activities in the camp. Hostilities between UNRWA and the local committee originate from UNRWA carrying out a plan to reconstruct the center of the camp after its destruction following the Israeli invasion in 2002. Notably, the 2000 people who had been displaced by the destruction eventually organized their own committee and fully supported UNRWA plan for reconstruction, against the camp committee. The result was an urban design of the center with more sunlight and ventilation for residents, open spaces and common facilities, rather than a design of narrow roads as favored by the militias which would enable armed resistance or defense. Jenin is one of the camps where the leader of the popular committee has his own militia, and where the popular committee has been opposed to having elections, according to an official from the refugee department of the PLO.

The anarchy of camp representation in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the Palestinians were granted political autonomy over the refugee camps by the 1969 Cairo Agreement. A Popular Committee (al lijan al sha’abiya) acted as the political authority in charge of the camps, and a Security Committee, (iqdadat al kifah al rusooluh), as the police force. Today the popular committees are composed of representatives of various militias, either through a PLO committee, or a committee of pro-Syrian factions, including Hamas. But factionalism and clientelism characterize camp governance.

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<tr>
<th>UNRWA registered refugees and camp refugees in the Middle East</th>
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<td>Registered refugees</td>
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