Executive Summary

Today more than 1.5 million Palestinian refugees live in refugee camps in the Middle East. Although the camps were established more than 60 years ago, the camps – some of them poor urban neighborhoods of various Arab cities – are largely managed as if they were still emergency shelters. In most of the camps so-called popular committees represent the camp residents. However, the camp committees are not elected and recently there have been expressions of widespread discontent within the refugee community from camp residents who perceive that camp committees are misrepresenting their interests. In the West Bank, camp committees have come under investigation for corruption.

Since the Arab Spring, discussions on having elections in the Palestinian refugee camps have gained momentum. Elections would imply that camp residents themselves would be included in decision-making on camp affairs. A main obstacle for having such elections is that factions and individuals controlling the camp committees are reluctant to give away their positions of power. Moreover, host countries are not interested in elections, perceiving that increased political activity might generate instability. Neither have donor countries put political development within the camps on the agenda.

As long as the status quo is sustained and no form of democratic governance institutions are established in the camps, underground forms of camp organization prevail, including that of radical, violent resistance groups.
**Introduction**

Empirically, when refugees organize strong exile organizations, the propensity towards violence increases. Refugees become catalysts of crisis. The case of Palestinian refugees clearly validates this thesis. In September 1970, the Wihdat camp in Jordan was attacked by the Jordanian air force, in order to drive out the PLO from their headquarters in the camp, as well as other camps in Jordan. The conflict cost 3,000 Palestinian lives, and hundreds of Jordanian casualties. In Lebanon, a decade later, during the Lebanese civil war in which 100,000 people died, more than 10,000 Palestinians lost their lives including 5,000 during the battle of the camps from 1984 until 1989. Moreover, in the West Bank and Gaza the camps were the heartland of the Palestinian uprisings which first started in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza in 1987. In the 2000s, occasional incidents of devastating violence have occurred, as in the Nahr al-Bared camp in Lebanon and in the Jenin camp in the West Bank, destroying respectively all or a large part of the camps.

The Palestinian refugee camps are, as the Palestinian scholar and politician Ziad Abu Amer once remarked, the symbol of the Middle East conflict, while also the core of the problem. During Israeli-Palestinian-American negotiations at Camp David in 2000–2001, the refugee issue was the single most intractable issue.

The camps were established more than 60 years ago, as emergency shelters. They are no longer such, as the refugees are so-called protracted refugees where the camps constitute concrete structured urban slum areas, most often located on the peripheries of cities. Approximately one third of the UNRWA-registered refugees live in these habitats, internationally defined as refugee camps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Registered refugees</th>
<th>Refugees in camps</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gaza</td>
<td>1,167,000</td>
<td>527,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1,979,000</td>
<td>346,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>487,000</td>
<td>154,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>436,000</td>
<td>234,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Bank</td>
<td>727,000</td>
<td>212,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,796,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,473,000</strong></td>
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In spite of being continuous resident areas with a relative stable population for more than six decades, most camps are nevertheless managed as if they were emergency camps, where most services are administered by UNRWA, and the refugees are largely absent in decision-making and governance.

This results from the fact that the PLO gained a monopoly on refugee representation through the 1969 Cairo agreement. As a national resistance organization, the PLO’s concern was recruiting and training refugees for resistance, not camp management. The PLO then established camp committees as sub-units of their military apparatus through which the PLO member groups of the camps were organized. Although the PLO has declared the military struggle over and recognized Israel in 1993, the military model of camp representation from 1969 remains, in which the PLO still controls the camps. Thus, camp representation mirrors the military factions of the 1960s, rather than the political reality of today. The political mechanism for camp governance and political representation is, in other words, completely outdated. The lack of grassroots participation of camp refugees in decisions affecting their lives create tensions within the camps. With the Arab Spring, hopes have been raised that the causes of these tensions could be addressed.

In this report, the issue of political representation of camp refugees in the UNRWA area of operation is discussed. What are the political implications of the crisis of representation in the Palestinian refugee camps? To illuminate this question, cases from the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are addressed consecutively.
The West Bank and refugee democratic participation

In the West Bank and Gaza, the PLO re-established the “popular committees” of the refugee camps subsequent to its return to Palestine in 1994. The committees were, as in 1969, composed of the PLO factions of the camps, along with some so-called independents. However, the committees gradually became more and more disconnected from the PLO, and consequently, camp refugees would have an acute lack of political representation.

Notorious in this regard was Jenin in the West Bank, where military groups came to rule the camp after the Second Intifada, following the April 2002 Israeli army invasion of the camp. 23 Israeli soldiers were killed when they were ambushed and booby-trapped in the camp during the invasion. Subsequently the centre of the camp was completely levelled by Israeli bulldozers. More than 2,000 of the 16,000 registered refugees then had to find alternative dwelling.

After the incident, the UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees), with aid from the United Arab Emirates, started a project to reconstruct the destroyed area of the camp. As the project was to begin, it emerged that nobody actually represented those most affected by the destruction, the displaced refugees. The frustrations of the refugees not having any of their own houses to return to accumulated as the reconstruction project was postponed over and over again. The postponement was caused by the demand from resistance groups in Jenin that the reconstruction should be a replica of the downtown area as it had been, to ease resistance and defence against possible future Israeli incursions. However, technical experts responsible for the project claimed that such an exact reconstruction was impossible to implement.

Initially the committee to represent the Palestinian refugees and the local community was a so-called “emergency committee,” established for the purpose of including the refugees in the reconstruction process. The committee was composed of members of militias and political parties, some being members of the popular committee of the camps. It also included Palestinians living outside the camp, community leaders leading various NGOs, and some members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

The militias of Jenin, though, had during the Second Intifada become notorious for being literally the armed groups of warlords. Jenin had been under the de facto control of Zakaria Zubeidi, the head of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade in Jenin.4 The Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades (AAMB) were a coalition of militias affiliated with Fatah, which had engaged in violent operations against Israel. Zubeidi also took on Palestinians. In 2004 he burnt down the office of the Palestinian Legislative Council in Jenin and kidnapped and “beat the shit out of” – as Zubeidi himself said – the PA governor of Jenin, to have him pay salaries to the AAMB.5

The reconstruction of Jenin advocated by the AAMB and the emergency committee was impossible to implement according to UNRWA’s technical expertise. Moreover, there was a need for a road network at the centre of the camp where cars could pass each other, and also a need for more ventilation and better living conditions to the benefit of the residents, “based on universal human concerns and standards.”6 As the emergency committee refused these needs, a standstill was prolonged for years.

Finally, the more and more frustrated families who were affected, more than 2,000 people, formed their own committee to have a say in the process. “These are political people, we are the ones who are suffering,” one said. The families fully supported the UNRWA plan, totally rejecting the position of the emergency committee. This finally made UNRWA, in an understanding with the donors, disregard the emergency committee, implementing their original plan against the will of the emergency committee and in line with the will of the affected families.

The reconstruction of the centre of the Jenin Camp represented a significant improvement in the quality of life of the residents, including enhanced ventilation, increased access to sunlight, communal facilitates such as a new mosque, a women’s centre, an elementary school and recreation space for children. “Now the camp is better than before,” a resident said.7

For UNRWA there was a cost, though. UNRWA experienced the burning of cars and premises, and violence and threats against employees following the reconstruction. In August 2011 UNRWA suspended all activities in the camp, fearing for their staff’s safety.8
Allegations of corruption

They took the money, stole the money. Like the job creation project of UNRWA. A committee would go to UNRWA and say, 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 committee. They got 450 USD a month for each name, and only paid each 100 USD. …95% of the committees were corrupted, and still are corrupted.

These are the words of an official at the “UNRWA file” at the Department of Refugee Affairs (DORA) of the PLO, based in Ramallah. The “UNRWA file” is a special investigation unit established by the PLO to investigate corruption allegations in the Palestinian refugee camps. One of the investigations the unit is responsible for is into the popular committee of Jenin and its leader, where a large part of allocated funds for a water project allegedly went into private pockets, according to the DORA official. Also some UNRWA staff were under suspicion: “We believe that some of the UNRWA staff are involved, we are really afraid to open all the files in front of us because of all the problems it will create for UNRWA in the camps they are taking care of.”

Not only in Jenin, but also in other camps, members of camp committees used external income for their own benefits, alleged the DORA official. “People were complaining, and UNRWA were complaining about these committees. UNRWA was even looking for other organizations in the camp to have someone from the residents to deal with, wanting to exclude the popular committees.”

Partly, the allegations of corruption stem from increased autonomy within the camps concerning development projects, where the popular committees could act directly towards donors to attract various development projects. “The committees were given millions and millions of dollars. This made DORA aware of the committees, and we made a strategy for the camps, starting with the local committees,” said the DORA official. An important part of this strategy was to ensure a clean camp leadership, and to have this, the idea was to arrange for elected camp committees. DORA thus went to the camps to prepare for such elections, but experienced overt opposition from the camp committees themselves. “They threatened us, one of them, Adnan Hindi, the head of the popular committee in Jenin, stood up at a meeting in the camp and said: ‘Anyone who talks about election, I will show him.’ …We know he has his own militia in the Jenin camp,” said the DORA official.

DORA ended up with the puzzling decision of limiting the voting access of the general public in the camps. This led to the awkward situation of the popular committees being able to claim to donors that they had been elected, when in reality they had merely been appointed by their own close network within the camps: “They started in Jericho, and in Balata last week. …What happened was that a general assembly elected the same committee, and the head of the committee came back. Now he is legal! He is the head by law, he is legal,” exclaimed the DORA official.

The mock elections for the popular committees in the West Bank camps

Balata camp, the West Bank

On the eighth of April 2012, elections were held for the popular committee of the largest refugee camp in the West Bank, Balata, located within the municipality of Nablus with a population of more than 23,000 registered refugees. Who were eligible to participate? A decree by the PLO stipulated that members of the NGO boards, prominent people, doctors, the well educated, professors and engineers were eligible. “The PLO leaders, the leaders of the NGOs, of the Jaffa centre, the youth centre, the boards of the NGOs, the headmasters of the schools, the UN office, the wujaha - the elders of the large families, participated,” said Mahmud Subuh, from the Jaffa centre of the camp. Eight out of nine of the previous members of the committee were re-elected; the ninth member had moved abroad. In addition, four new members were elected as the committee increased to 13 members. All the elected members but one were from Fatah. “You have maybe 25,000 people here and the people who voted, they are around 300. Out of 25,000 people. It is very controversial. The popular committee has been shot at many times in Balata,” said Subuh who could hardly conceal his frustration over the whole exercise. “People say they are thieves,” said a local in Balata on the committee.
Aqbat al Jaber Camp

In the Aqbat al Jaber Camp in the Jericho municipality, elections for the popular committee were arranged in 2010. 120 people out of the 8,000 refugees in the camp participated, said Imad Abu Sombul, the leader of the Popular Committee in the camp. Those who participated were the ex-committee members and other leaders of the various PLO parties, leaders of the institutions in the camp, of the women’s centre and women’s committee and the wujaha, the “important” people in the camp. “We said we could not hold elections like this,” said Abu Sombol, claiming that the PLO had instructed the camp committees to arrange the elections in this way – only for a small segment of the refugees. The popular committees were told that if they did not arrange the elections, their bank accounts in Ramallah would be closed. So then they arranged them. In Aqbat al Jaber, eight of the nine elected to the new popular committee were from Fatah. “The 120 people elected the same people that were in the committee, because they believed that this committee did a lot for the people,” said Abu Sombol, who himself was among those elected.

UNRWA has recently reduced its budgets and prioritized Gaza, where the economic situation is more severe than in the West Bank. UNRWA’s reduced activities in the West Bank implies that the popular committees are now more free to make their own arrangements directly with donors, although some donors go via the authorities in Ramallah. UNRWA deals with sanitation, health and education, water is shared, and the popular committees have the responsibility for the remaining projects. “We do the infrastructure,” confirmed Abu Sombol.

UNRWA having reduced its activities, and the camp committees in the West Bank being able to claim that they have elected leaderships, mean that the freedom of the committees to get involved in generating projects has increased unilaterally. As mentioned earlier, this is not good news for the UNRWA file of DORA, who undertake investigations into alleged corruption. The suspects may now be claiming that the authorities persecute elected representatives.

Prospects for underground organization

In the West Bank, the camps are regarded as a kind of space outside the ordinary realm of political activity. Thus, in spite of the fact that most Palestinian refugees live in area A under the control of Palestinian Authorities, these are excluded from participation in municipal elections, allegedly to symbolize the difference between refugees and non-refugees. It has been noted from the Palestinian camps in Lebanon that as the Palestinians are without civic rights and political representation, they seek alternative political expressions. Camps are turned into battlefields as the result of social and political deprivation, Knutsen has noted.

The phenomenon of “everyday jihad,” described by Rougier, points to how teenagers in the camps were re-socialized by radical religious networks. The young no longer wanted to follow in their fathers footsteps with “too many enemies” around them, rather they lined up with global jihad. They turned the isolation of camp refugees and the absence of channels of participation into voluntary introversion and refusal to mingle with anyone other than co-believers. Rougier thus anticipated the creation of Fatah al-Islam and the Nahr-al Bared incident to be discussed below under the Lebanon section.

Significantly, there are claims that a similar process is ongoing in West Bank camps, where channels for political participation have also been closed, especially after the Gaza-Hamas split in 2007, and for devoted Muslims who do not feel at home under the secular PLO umbrella. In Aqbat al Jaber, increased activity in addition to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, working mainly under the surface, had been observed according to Abu Sombol, the leader of the camp committee. The camp now has seven mosques for 8,000 people. “There is increased activity from Dawa, salafists, calling for the people to come to Islam, in addition to Jihad and Hamas,” said Abu Sombol.

“You would not believe it, the salafists have five mosques here,” said Mahmud Subhu in Balata. “Balata is complicated, salafists, jihadists, Hamas, they are growing more and more. It is because people have lost faith in the old politics, also in Hamas. They have lost faith in the political factions, even in Hamas, they feel Hamas is not so far from Fatah, so they feel they have betrayed them. They grow their beards longer and follow the emir.”
Gaza
Governance of the camps in Gaza is qualitatively different from the situation in the West Bank because in Gaza there is no question of limiting refugee rights for symbolic reasons. Refugee access to power is rather symbolized by the fact that the prime minister of the Gaza government, Ismail Haniyye, lives in a refugee camp, the Al-Shati camp adjacent to Gaza City. Moreover, when Palestinian Authority local elections were held, the camps participated, electing their own municipal authorities, as for the Bureij camp in central Gaza. Although the final round of the local elections has not been implemented, as the process was halted when Hamas won the 2006 national elections, camps in Gaza have municipal authorities to whom they pay tax, and who govern and represent them. The PLO committees established after 1994 have not been dissolved by Hamas, but because municipal authorities run the camps – and not the popular committees – the role of the committees is currently insignificant. Gaza, where two thirds of the inhabitants are UNRWA-registered refugees and close to 50% of these live in camps, is thus the exception for the political representation of refugees in the Middle East. The Gaza camp refugees have had equal political rights to other Gazans, and also autonomy to organize camp committees. Currently though, no one in Gaza experiences democratic rights, as the plans for elections agreed to by the Palestinian factions through the May Cairo 2011 agreement have been suspended.

Lebanon
In Lebanon more than half of the nearly half a million registered Palestinian refugees live in camps. The paradox of camp refugees is that while their social, economic and political level of integration is the lowest in the UNRWA area of operation, they have been granted political autonomy over the refugee camps since the 1969 Cairo Agreement. The model whereby the popular committee (al lijan al sha’biya) is to act as the political authority of the camps, and the security committee, (qiyadat al kifah al musallah) as the police force of the camps, has never been adjusted to the post-civil war period. Today the camp refugees lack legitimate political representation. Rather, rampant factionalism, clientelism and sectarian strife characterize Palestinian camp governance.16

Largely, the camps have been divided between those controlled by Fatah and the PLO in the south, and the those controlled by pro-Syrian forces, including Hamas, in the north, through the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF).17 In 2007, there was an incident in Nahr al-Bared, a camp in the north controlled by a pro-Syrian camp committee. A pro al-Qaida jihadist group, Fatah al-Islam, created havoc when they robbed a bank and later killed several Lebanese army soldiers in an attack, subsequently taking refuge in their base inside the camp. The popular committee of the camp failed to arrest and hand over the culprits, which led the Lebanese Army (LAF) to attack the camp. In the battle that followed the whole camp was destroyed and all 27,000 camp residents displaced. The PLO and Fatah had wholeheartedly supported the LAF in the confrontation with Fatah al Islam, and the PLO subsequently accused members of the pro-Syrian popular committee of the camp of having supported Fatah al Islam. A similar blame was echoed by camp inhabitants, accusing the popular committee of not having been able to curb a group that was largely considered to be comprised of fanatical lunatics.

In the aftermath of the armed battle and destruction of the camp, activities to have the camp reconstructed were initiated. In this planning process, the Lebanese authorities called for the establishment of a transparent and effective governance structure of the camp, to oversee the reconstruction. However, they did not invite the popular committee of the camp to participate in the planning and decision-making bodies related to the reconstruction process. Rather, UNRWA was referred to as the representative body of the camp residents. This discomforted UNRWA. “We are a service agency that provides health, relief, shelter and rehabilitation. We do this with the support of the state. We are willing to do in Nahr al-Bared what we do in other camps. Regarding who is in charge, that discussion is between the Lebanese and Palestinians,” an UNRWA official said.18 A crisis over how to represent the interests of the camp residents has since dominated the reconstruction process. There have been repeated calls for having elected camp representation, and to break with the hegemony of the militias. “The Popular committee in Nahr al-Bared [should be] elected by the community and be composed of qualified people representing all sectors of society. It should not be hijacked by the factions,” a camp resident said.19 Also UNRWA acknowledged the importance of having an elected popular committee in order to cooperate with them. “At the moment the factions are sidelined. Where’s their mandate? UNRWA would have to pay attention to elected popular committees, we wouldn’t be able to just fob them off, as we do sometimes do,” said an UNRWA official in Lebanon.20
Hamas acknowledges the importance of creating legitimate representative bodies for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. “Lebanese authorities want one address in order to discuss questions related to the Palestinians in Lebanon. Since 2005 we have wanted to establish a joint committee representing all the Palestinian factions in Lebanon,” said Ali Baraka, the leader of Hamas in Lebanon. Baraka claimed that Hamas in Lebanon favored having elected camp committees: “We want within a year or two to have elections for the popular committees within all the camps in Lebanon, and to have an umbrella organization representing all these elected camp committees.”

A key to the issue of having elections in the camps is in Fatah’s hands. Fatah is neither explicitly against elections, nor actively promoting them. It is not in the hands of the Palestinians, said the Palestinian Ambassador to Lebanon, Abdullah Abdullah: “Elections are not only on us. It depends on other factors as well. We are not in principle against holding elections anywhere at any time where it is possible. For example we have had elections for Fatah. But when it is beyond our control or capability, we have to follow the directions of the host country.”

Fathi Abou Al-Ardat, the General Secretary of Fatah of Lebanon, was less clear concerning Fatah’s position on camp elections. “The factions have to be empowered,” he said. Fatah’s priority was to “improve camp committees” by having workshops for youths and women. Thus, Al-Ardat did not appear to be someone who would push for elections.

Other PLO leaders in Lebanon are calling for camp elections, though. Saleh Saleh, former PLO Executive Committee (EC) member and now head of the refugee committee of the Palestinian National Council of the PLO, said that there is no way out of the crisis over Palestinian representation but to elect their representatives:

The only way is to have elections. The so-called popular committees are not popular committees. The people inside the committees represent the Palestinian factions, not the people. It should be committees of real people representing the people in the camps, it is the only way. Then they can elect a body representing the leadership for the Palestinians in Lebanon.

Also the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) leader in Lebanon, Marwan Abdel Al, calls for camp elections. “I live in a refugee camp, I know how important it is for people in the camps to have an elected leadership. First and foremost, to have popular committees which are elected, not only representing the factions.”

Among leaders of popular committees, some, like Muhammed Yassin, leader of the Mar Elias popular committee and a leader of the Palestinian Liberation Front, favor elections:

There is no practical problem of arranging elections in the camps. Lebanese Authorities would not interfere. We believe that it is urgent to have elections. Now, when I meet representatives from the Lebanese authorities, they say: “We can not do anything because we do not know who represent the Palestinians.”

But talk is cheap. When it comes to prioritizing plans for having camp elections, and a national unity committee, the representatives of the factions are not among the frontrunners. Indicatively, they blame each other for not having the elections. “The problem is that Fatah is split on this,” said Ali Baraka from Hamas. But also Hamas was to blame, asserted Abdel-Al, the PFLP leader in Lebanon: “People in the camps want an elected leadership, but Fatah and Hamas are obstructing the process of having democratic elections in the camps.”

In one single instance, in the Shatila camp, an attempt to arrange elections took place in 2005. Camp residents had been displeased with the mismanagement of the pro-Syrian factions of the camp, accusing them of corruption and acting out of parochial interests. Elections were held at the mosque of the camp, where the imam had been actively seeking to have elections. Only technocrats, male non-faction members who were refugees living in the camp, were permitted to run as candidates. Only 783 voters participated in the elections, out of a camp population of approximately 8,500 registered refugees. Thus it was the equivalent of the recent elections in the West Bank camps; it was an election, but not a democratic, representative one. Moreover, the elections only created more confusion concerning representation, as Shatilla had three committees in the aftermath of the elections, the elected one, the pro-Syrian ALP committee and a committee of the PLO factions. Reportedly, the members of the elected committee experienced death threats, and the activity of the elected committee gradually evaporated.
Undoubtedly, some popular committees in Lebanon oppose camp elections. “In our situation, we do not like to have elections,” said Yusef Merhi from Saiqa, the leader of the Burj al-Barajneh committee of the Alliance of the Palestinian Forces in the camp – the alliance in which Hamas and Islamic Jihad are also members.28 “The International community destroyed the idea of holding elections when they did not recognize the victory of Hamas,” said Merhi. “It shows that there is no point in having elections, nobody wants them.”29

Syria

Palestinian refugee camps in Syria are under the supervision of the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR), which has offices where various local committees are located in the camps, coordinating activities with UNRWA and the surrounding municipal authorities. Committee members are selected from the camps, but are all from the Baathist party or independents chosen by the Baathist party.30 Formally, the Palestinians in Syria are required to do military service and have most of the civil rights that fellow Syrians have, save for voting rights and holding passports. On the other hand, as Diab notes, no-one has any meaningful rights in Syria.31

When the uprising in Syria broke out, “positive neutrality” was the oxymoron used to describe the reserved attitude of the Palestinians in Syria. However, a proverb, “kiss the hand that slaps you, and pray that it gets cut,” may more accurately express the attitudes the Palestinians living in camps in Syria have had towards the regime.32 During the uprising, Palestinian camps in Deraa, Latakia, Homs, Damascus and Aleppo all suffered from attacks from the Syrian army and security apparatus. The Al-Ramle camp in Latakia was partly destroyed from artillery attacks in August 2011. Later, repeated attacks killing dozens of camp residents were directed against the largest camp in Syria, the Yarmok camp, which according to UNRWA houses more than 148,000 registered Palestinian refugees.33

In July 2012, 17 conscripts of the Palestinian Liberation Army (a Palestinian unit originally established as the army of the PLO), were brutally killed in an ambush. This killing led to unprecedented demonstrations in Yarmok. Camp residents were also furious by the fact that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), a Syrian-supported splinter group from the PLO, assisted Syrian security forces in trying to control the crowd. A year earlier, the offices of the PFLP-GC in Yarmok had been burned down by angry protesters, after demonstrators from the camp had been killed at the Israeli border during a march to commemorate 1948. The march to the Israeli border was perceived as a trick of the Syrian regime to divert attention from the internal uprising, where demonstrators were used as cannon fodder, and where the regime had used PFLP-GC to recruit demonstrators from the camps.

When a funeral was held in Yarmok for victims of the uprising, the PFLP leader in Lebanon, Maher al-Taher, was peppered with stones and had to be evacuated from the angry crowd. Posters in Yarmok from various factions, which claimed that martyrs had belonged to their faction, were replaced by other posters stating that the dead had not belonged to any faction. Moreover, as a joint statement was issued by the PFLP-GC, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the PFLP and Fatah Intifada – that Palestinians should stay out of the events in Syria – a statement from camp activists was distributed in social media and elsewhere stating that “Palestinian factions do not represent anyone.” Also, the statement stated that the factions appealing for Palestinians to stay out of events, “including Hamas, … are responsible for all the victims who died in the Palestinian camps.”34 Similarly, during demonstrations in the Yarmok camp in 2012, the camp residents were furious not only at PFLP-GC – widely perceived as an integrated part of the Syrian security apparatus – but at all its accomplices in the APF. The repeated chant of the demonstrators was Ash-sha'b yurid isqat al-fasail – the people want the fall of the factions, thus replacing the word regime (nizam) with faction (fasail) from the popular chant of the Arab revolutions, “the people want to bring down the regime” (Ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam).35

The anger of the demonstrators finally led Hamas to end what has been referred to as “temporary marriage” (nikah al-mutah) with the Syrian regime. Hamas reportedly realized that their alignment with the regime put the refugee population in danger, risking possible retributions from the Syrian street – including thousands of internally displaced Syrians who found refuge in Yarmok and other Palestinian camps.36 Moreover, their credibility among the Palestinian constituency in Syria had been damaged by their marriage of convenience with the Syrian regime, possibly beyond repair.
With the PLO also absent from the camps of Syria due to its falling out with the regime, this leaves the Palestinian camps in Syria with a huge tension between the committees seeking to represent and manage the camps and the residents. For the camp population, the camp leaderships are regarded as inimical to their own interests, which means that underground organization and cooperation with the Syrian resistance is flourishing, resisting not only the Syrian regime but also the “popular committees” of the camps.

**Jordan**

Most of the registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan gained Jordanian citizenship in 1950. However, in 1988 Jordan abolished its claim over the West Bank and revoked the citizenship of West Bank Palestinians. Later, thousands of Palestinians residing in Jordan with family and property had their Jordanian citizenship revoked. The fear of losing citizenship rights in Jordan has reportedly made the Palestinians in Jordan maintain a low political profile. The PLO was involved in a military confrontation with the Jordanian regime in 1970, leading to its expulsion to Lebanon and the subsequent suppression of expressions of Palestinian national identity in Jordan. “I tell you, when I was the [PLO] minister of refugees, I could not enter any refugee camp in Jordan. And I would not even try. I only went to camps in Syria and Lebanon,” said Asad Abdul Rahman, who is a member of the PLO’s executive committee and based in Jordan. Today, the Palestinian refugees in Jordan “do not want to be represented by the PLO nor would the PLO dare to represent them,” said Rahman. However, within the camps there is discontent with the lack of legitimate representation and this is acknowledged by Abdelkarim Abulhaja, the former general director of the Department of Palestinian Affairs in Jordan:

Some of the members of the committees were members for more than 10 years, 20 years. People resent that. ... People ask for elections for these committees, which they say do not represent them. ... [But] if we make an election inside the camp, it would give the impression that this is Palestinian identity on Jordanian soil. .. We cannot deprive these camps from their surroundings. It might affect their citizenship in Jordan.

Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship have the right to participate in elections in Jordan, also in municipal elections. The camps do not form their own municipalities, though. Moreover, elections are gerrymandered to the disadvantage of the Palestinians, with the vote in Palestinian voter areas counting for around one fourth of the vote of a Transjordanian vote.

Rather than “popular committees” the camp committees in Jordan are referred to as “notables of the camp” (wujahaa’ l-mukhayamat). Representation through “notables” (wujaha) is clearly a form of political organization that does not appeal to the young generation of Palestinians. The function of the “notable” committees, however, is not to represent the refugees; it is to represent the government within the camps and to help identify local needs for the authorities, according to the current Director of the Department of Palestinian Affairs in Jordan, Wajih Azayzeh. The camps are under the authority of various municipalities, and do not need any independent political representation, said Azayzeh: “A camp is geographically Jordanian land, is part of the municipality, is part of the region. So it is part of the regional area. If you want to isolate the camps you have to have a certain law for them alone, and in that case, people will not be permitted to go outside camps, as in Lebanon.” Then, rather than the management of daily affairs, rather than having an organization to take care of the specific interests of Jordanian Palestinian refugees, “it depends on what they want from those representatives,” said Azayzeh. “If it is related to services, then they are participating within the municipalities. If it is related to politics in Jordan, they are part of the lower house of Jordan. If they want to deal with the refugee fight, that is another question.”

To meet the camp committee of the Baqa Camp, the largest Palestinian camp in Jordan, where more than 104,000 registered refugees dwell, first one has to contact the office that the Department of Palestinian Affairs has at the entrance to the camp. The head of the office, Naim Hammad, along with a security man, accompany the visitor to the office of the committee. The secretary of the committee, Fahri Saadi, says that the committee represents “the camp” but when asked for more detail, he says that the committee primarily represents the Jordanian authorities.

Outside Baqa, at the centre of a crossroads, with cars passing outside, 20-30 demonstrators were carrying banners stating that they demanded elections in April 2011. “The situation inside Baqa is chaotic, and there is nobody who represents the people inside to get any improvement. We want to have elections, and elect our own leadership, not to have these old people,” said
Ali al Asmar, an activist in Baqa.\textsuperscript{11} While thousands demonstrated in Amman to have political reforms in Jordan during the spring of 2011, leading to the killing of a demonstrator and scores of injured protestors, the camp initiative in Baqa has not quite gained momentum. Nevertheless, there appears to be tension between the lack of indigenous participation in camp management and the residents’ political aspirations. The camp residents are wary that once in motion, a camp uprising could be difficult to curb. Wide protests could unleash devastating forces that could irreversibly jeopardize the Palestinian refugees’ citizenship rights.

Why do the camp refugees have no democratic representation?

There is today a crisis of representation for Palestinian camp refugees. When decisions are to be taken which affect the daily lives of camp refugees, there is nobody that de facto represents the refugees in the decision-making process, as witnessed during the reconstruction in Jenin in the West Bank and in Nahr al-Bared in Lebanon, as well as being reflected in statements from UNRWA officials, Lebanese authorities, camp refugees, and even officials within the PLO itself. Equally in both Syria and Jordan, the camp residents lack legitimate representation. What are the main reasons for this crisis of representation for camp refugees?

Three explanations may be referred to in order to explain why refugees lack democratic representation:

1. **The refugee dilemma:** the idea that camps are to be temporary and should not have institutions symbolizing permanent settlement.

2. **The fear of unrest:** the fear among host countries and donor countries that camp democratization may create instability and change the status quo.

3. **The hegemony of the resistance groups:** the interest of the groups controlling the camps in keeping their power positions.

The refugee dilemma

To maintain camps as localities symbolizing temporariness has been dogma within Palestinian resistance groups and also within Arab states. From 1948 until 1967, when Gaza was under Egyptian rule, Egypt denied the camp residents the right to build toilets inside their residence units. The camps were to symbolize temporariness. If the living conditions and residence standards of the refugees were improved, this could be used as a practical argument for resettlement, i.e. of settling the refugees permanent in the host country. Why would people leave a place where their living conditions were good? In Jordan, the former prime minister, Ahmad ‘Ubaydat warned in 1986 that camp refugees’ participation would “transform the camps, in their locations, into new cities, being “the real beginning of resettlement.”\textsuperscript{42} The refugee dilemma thus implied that political integration, or economic development, become arguments for resettlement.

In spite of nearly 70 years of refugeehood, the fourth generation of refugees now being born in camps, the idea that camp refugees should suffer to symbolize the refugee issue has not withered. Among the younger generation of refugees, though, few would comply with the idea that their meaning in life is to symbolize refugeehood. Political integration or improved living conditions do not affect their rights as refugees, it merely weakens the symbolization of their status. The democratization of political representation within refugee camps implies that camp residents would have access to participate in local decision-making, it does not necessarily imply an integration into wider political structures. Elections would be a mechanism merely to ensure that political representatives within camps have a mandate from those they represent, who are the ones who are affected and should therefore also be the ones to decide which takes priority: improved living conditions or the symbolizing of temporariness.

Also within the PLO’s Department of Refugee Affairs (DORA), the refugee dilemma is regarded as an anachronistic idea. “You leave people to suffer, children to sickness from playing in the sewage, just because of an idea from outside, from people living in luxurious houses. They [the camp refugees] are people, they have the right to live, to build houses, to buy houses, to buy land, they are still refugees,” said an official at DORA in Ramallah.
The fear of unrest

“Whenever there is a problem with funding, we play the protests card,” said an UNRWA official in the West Bank. What he referred to was that when questions were asked in some parliaments in donor countries about whether UNRWA funding actually contributed to sustaining the refugee problem rather than resolving it, and thus that donor countries should cut the funding, the answer from UNRWA was that reduced budgets would lead to political unrest in the refugee camps. “Playing the protests card” does not mean that it is untrue, that decreased funding will not actually lead to unrest and increased radicalization in the camps, but it is a game to the extent that UNRWA knows how to play on the fear of unrest among donor countries in order to ensure their income.

Thus, external actors and host nations have an interest in preserving the status quo in order not to have political unrest. Moreover, if the refugees organized themselves democratically, they would start to address political issues that are “turn-offs” in any Israel-Palestinian peace negotiations. This is probably also a cause for the lack of interest and motivation in addressing the issue of democratic institution-building from external actors and donors. In 2002, the international community threatened to withhold funding for the Palestinian Authority if democratic institutional reforms were not initiated and the power of the President reduced. This type of demand has not been made of the PLO concerning the funding and the management of the refugee camps, where democratic institutions are absent.

The hegemony of the resistance groups

“I don’t need the legitimacy of elections since I have the legitimacy of the gun,” Yasser Arafat, the late president of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah leader, and PLO leader for an uninterrupted 36 years, used to say. 43 40 percent of PLO income was historically allocated to the military wing of the PLO. 44 The clandestine nature of this funding exempted the PLO leader and leadership from ordinary principles of transparency. The income was distributed through deals with leaders of guerrillas, and these guerrilla leaders further allocated funds within their organizations. In this way a hierarchical chain of dependence was sustained which de-motivated debates of internal democracy. The PLO groups depended on each other, not on those they were supposed to represent within the camps. Resistance had priority over democratic nation-building. In spite of the elections for the Palestinian Authority in 1996 and 2006, the political culture that had cemented within the PLO during its formative years in Lebanon has never been transcended, and the PLO has never had any internal elections. The popular committees of today reflect how the PLO militias have organized, and not democratic political representation or governance.

When the Alliance of Palestinian Forces was established in Damascus as an umbrella organization of militias opposed to the Oslo Accords, these factions feared – even more than the PLO members – the de-militarization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, Fatah Intifada and Saiqa, members of the APF, even today are explicitly opposed to having any elections among Palestinian exiles. Democratization would take away the emphasis on resistance. Resistance rhetoric – not democratization – was also considered by the exiled Hamas leaders as their main capital. Although Hamas from time to time demanded elections for the PLO, the lack of such notions from the APF and the lack of initiatives from the APF to have democratization within the camps controlled by the APF, makes it questionable how sincere Hamas are about elections. In fact, the relative approach of Hamas to democratization appears to be a syndrome for all the main Palestinian factions, including Fatah, wanting to preserve their positions of power and only have elections when elections may gain them power.

Preserving the status quo

Apparently the interests of the main political actors coalesce concerning the preservation of the status quo in the refugee camps. The host countries do not want any activities that may create unrest in the camps, or attention on democratic deficits in their own political systems. Donor countries are also receptive to the unrest thesis; they want to backload the refugee issue in peace negotiations, solving the less insurmountable challenges first. In addition, the Palestinian groups controlling the camps fear democratization because they may lose their positions and their control of the flows of money and projects in the camps. They also ostensibly perceive that the emphasis should be on resistance and return, and that a focus on creating democratic camp leaderships would be contrary to their aims.
On the other hand, there are voices within the PLO that regard democratic institution-building within camps as necessary, not only to have refugee participation, but also to lessen the power of corrupt camp leaderships. Establishing mechanisms to avoid corruption is also in the interests of donor countries and UNRWA. In addition, for a host country like Lebanon, the demilitarization of the camps is a political aim. This implies that civil control through elected camp leaderships is preferable to the hegemony of militias. There are therefore a number of reasons to examine the lack of democratic governance and representation inside the Palestinian refugee camps.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, no popular committee legitimately represents any camp population today. The committees represent the faction members of the committees and lack mandates from the camp residents. Unarmed camp residents are hostages to armed forces that regularly act contrary to their interests. In the absence of arenas for democratic political participation, the vacuum is filled by alternative modes of political agency. At one level, because refugees are outside the sphere where decisions are taken, unwanted decisions are acted against through violent protests. This implies an immediate, collective action based political response of the grassroots. On another level, there is also a more long-term aspect of refugee camp political agency related to parallel, underground political organization. Lack of channels for participation make introverted, radical groups develop in isolation, with no challenges to their ideas. Being outside a political community, a lack of responsibility towards the collective follows.

Finally, the Arab Spring has not passed unnoticed in the camps. In the West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon there have been calls to have camp elections. In Syria, symptomatically, protesters have called for the “fall of the factions.” A relevant question for Western governments – being largely the donors funding health, education and camp infrastructure – is how they may contribute to the facilitation of creating legitimate, democratic representation within the refugee camps.
9. Interview Ramallah, April 2012. Name not revealed because of the sensitive nature of the information.
10. Interview DORA official, Ramallah, April 2012.
11. Interview Balata, April 2012.
12. Wujaha means “heads” and refer to public figures of the camp.
13. Interview Aqbat al Jaber, April 2012.
17. In 1993 *Palestinian factions opposed to the Oslo process formed the Alliance of Palestinian Forces* (APF), seeking to represent an alternative to the PLO. The APF rejectionist groups consisted of Hamas, the Palestinian Jihad, the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), Fatah Intifada, Sa'iqa, The Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF), the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSP), and the Palestinian Revolutionary Communist Party (PRCP). The headquarters of APF was Damascus and the APF members closely coordinated activities with Syrian authorities. DFLP and PFLP later parted from the alliance but met regularly with Hamas in Damascus until the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011.
20. Lebanon’s Palestinian Dilemma, 10.
22. Interview, Beirut, October 2011.
23. Interview, Beirut, October 2011.
24. Interview, Beirut, October 2011.
25. Interview, Beirut, October 2011.
27. Politics, patronage..., 203.
28. Burj al Barajne has two popular committees, one dominated by the Syrian proxy Saiqa and Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), and one PLO-committee.
29. Interview, Beirut, October 2011.
32. Palestinians on the Road...


35. Hamas and the Syrian Revolution...


37. Interview Amman, April 2011.

38. Interview Amman, April 2011.

39. Thus, for Parliamentary elections, a seat in Palestinian areas of Amman need 125 000 votes, while 25 000 votes are enough for a seat in Transjordanian Talfileh (“Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IX): Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan,” International Crisis Group, Middle East/North Africa Report 118, (2012), 12 March, 7).

40. Interview Amman, March 2011.

41. Interview Baqa, April 2011.


44. Nigel Parsons