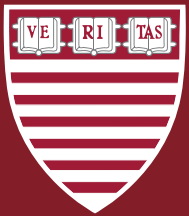




Forgotten Frontlines: The Case for a New U.S. Approach Towards the Palestinian Camps of Lebanon



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John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University



Nadia Naviwala

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Executive Summary

The Palestinian camps are characteristic of the greatest foreign policy challenges that face us today. They are ungoverned spaces in Lebanon, subject to official discrimination, extremely radicalized, and tied to decades of conflict. However, the United States has almost no official policy or means of engagement with the camps. This paper argues that the United States can and should engage them by introducing USAID projects, expanding exchange and educational programs, and targeted outreach and communications. **Most importantly, the United States should adopt a policy of urging the Lebanese government to improve human rights and living conditions for the Palestinians.** The significance of a new approach is not only for the camps, but more broadly as we struggle to more effectively counter global instability and terrorism.

Introduction

The Palestinian camps in Lebanon present one of the most dangerously overlooked and depressing situations in the world. Their circumstances are oddly parallel to that of the tribal areas in Pakistan. Both are ungoverned spaces, suffer from extremely poor economic and social conditions, perceive direct negative effects of U.S. foreign policy, and have a very high presence of radical political and terrorist organizations. But while the situation in Pakistan draws consistent international attention and has become the center of our operations against terrorism, the United States has no clear policy, direct aid, or public diplomacy programming directed towards the camps in Lebanon.

During January of 2009, I spent three weeks researching U.S. policy towards the camps. While my time there was brief, it clearly indicated that these camps deserve more attention and study. The camps are an unusual space where one can see how terrorist psychology originates—by observing a population that is constantly exposed to conflict, poverty, state neglect, and are victims of an absurd political reality. The situation brought to life the debates on terrorism that I had watched in Washington and Cambridge, exposing the ways in which our “War on Terror” framework and policies have fallen short of the challenges that we face.

This paper is a reflection of both my experience within the camps, as well as my interaction with the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. It concludes with several policy recommendations, suggesting a more aggressive, innovative, and patient approach to dealing with a space that has until now been overlooked by U.S. foreign policy.

Background

Approximately 100,000 Palestinian refugees came to Lebanon when Israel was created in 1948. Since then, the population has grown to 400,000, constituting a staggering ten percent of Lebanon’s population. However, the Palestinian population largely lives in slums, still referred to as refugee camps that are closed off from Lebanese society, sometimes by military checkpoint.

Legally, the camps are outside of the Lebanese state. Lebanese security forces do not enter them and they are governed internally. Arms are prolific and militant groups—mostly Palestinian but recently also foreign—have capitalized on the lack of state

authority in the camps as they have in ungoverned parts of Pakistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Palestinians in Lebanon face legal discrimination and are denied basic human rights. The Palestinian population in Lebanon is specifically barred from employment in twenty professions, effectively limiting them to menial or clerical work. They cannot own property and have no access to state schools, hospitals, or social services.

The current status of Palestinians in Lebanon serves as a constant reminder that they are refugees and legal foreigners who have no place in Lebanon. The situation has given them an unrealistic political reality, based on the right of return. The amount of Palestine imagery in the camps is incredible. Palestinian flags, maps, pictures of Yasser Arafat and the masjid al Aqsa, are everywhere, even in homes.



Images of violence around the camp were disturbing. In addition to the photographs of Hassan Nasrallah and Khaled Meshaal, the leaders of Hezbollah and Hamas respectively, posters depicting fighters and masked gunmen were everywhere. More surprising are the series of headshots strung on buildings and clustered on posters—suicide bombers, I was told.

While the poor and radicalized condition of Palestinians in Lebanon is extreme, especially relative to Syria and Jordan, there are major historical and political barriers to improving their condition.

Historically, the Palestinians are seen by some as responsible for the violence that led to Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war and Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to remove the PLO base. Thus, the Lebanese approach has been an attempt to contain rather than deal with the radicalism and desperate conditions that have grown within the camps, leading to hostility and discrimination against Palestinians. Politically, it is feared that rights for the Palestinians will ultimately lead to their settlement in Lebanon, upsetting the country's delicate confessional balance which distributes power amongst the Sunnis, Shi'ites, Druze and Christians. The Lebanese constitution also explicitly rejects the idea that the Palestinians can be permanently settled in Lebanon.

Finally, Palestinian refugees are a politically loaded symbol and their fate is intricately tied to the Middle East peace process. They are living evidence of the "disaster" caused by Israel's creation and so it follows that improving their condition in Lebanon would undermine the argument that they must be allowed to return.

U.S. Policy: Current

U.S. policy towards the Palestinian camps in Lebanon is one-dimensional: we provide generous assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Besides this, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon are almost as much of a black hole in U.S. policy as they are in Lebanon.

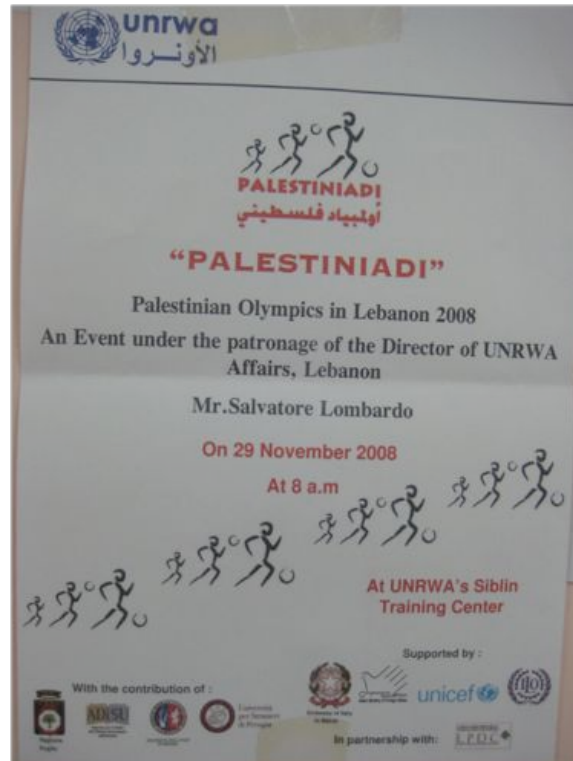
The United States gives over \$80 million to UNRWA annually and is its largest bilateral donor. UNRWA was created in 1949 to care for the Palestinian refugees—the only population beyond the purview of UNHCR. In the absence of state care, the refugee population in Lebanon relies almost completely on UNRWA for subsistence.

There is some criticism among regarding our level of funding to the to efficiency and accountability issues that working out. There are also those who question the need for us to help Palestinian refugees at all. But the biggest question that Washington needs to be asking about our aid to Palestinians in Lebanon is: Why doesn't anyone know about it?

Most Palestinians and Lebanese that I encountered identified the United States, along with Israel, as the source of their problems. No one that I met knew that the United States was one of their biggest caretakers—providing food, shelter, education, and healthcare—through UNRWA. The U.S. and UN officials I interacted with in Beirut seemed to be cognizant of this situation, implying that those who 'need to know' (i.e. those who attended donor conferences) were aware of it. But based on my work experience in the U.S. Senate, it is my impression that the people signing the checks in Washington, the U.S. Congress, probably like to think that our aid is sending a signal that 'America cares.' In Lebanon it is clear that the message attached to one of our most important foreign aid programs is not going through.

Remarkably, the agency designed to deliver that message, USAID, does not work in the camps. A few good, but not insurmountable, reasons were offered for this, including that many groups refuse U.S. funding and U.S.-sponsored projects might be targeted or attacked. However, the arrangement stands in stark contrast to our allies and many European countries who run large, nationally-branded NGOs in the camps. In fact, the British *only* provide assistance to the Palestinians in Lebanon. USAID's absence in the camps seemed to indicate a lack of initiative and capacity rather than an intentional decision. Interestingly, USAID does run programs in the spaces immediately outside of the camps, called "gatherings," where the refugee population often overflows and mixes with the Lebanese.

The justification for a lack of U.S. programming, policy, or public diplomacy effort towards the camps is that legally, the camps fall outside of the Lebanese state and



The event promoted by this poster displays the logos of ten UN, European, and Lebanese organizations, but not USAID.

are therefore beyond the purview of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. Ironically, such spaces should be a foreign policy and programming priority, as are the tribal areas of Pakistan. If this logic prevails in Lebanon, then it is worrisome to think how many ungoverned spaces in the world are being similarly overlooked by the State Department.

U.S. Policy: Options

The United States has many policy options in the camps, ranging from new approaches to aid, public diplomacy, and interaction with the Lebanese government.

Aid

We should consider initiating new USAID programming in the camps. Unlike aid channeled through UNRWA, these projects might bear the USAID logo or otherwise make people aware that the United States is directly sponsoring projects to address the various needs of the people within the camps.

However, an aid initiative large enough to be effective will require staffing and space that the current USAID Lebanon office simply does not have. Current USAID Lebanon staff are crammed in trailers and stretched to capacity, seemingly eligible for an aid rescue themselves. Serious consideration should be given to separating the USAID mission from the Embassy compound and moving its office to downtown Beirut, where UN offices and several other Western embassies are already securely based. Improving their office space would not only improve their capacity to meet their mission, but also send a message that Washington values the work that they do.

Another feasible suggestion is to raise the profile of work we are already doing. We should consider approaches to increase awareness of the generous assistance that we are currently providing through UNRWA. We must devise ways to ensure that U.S. assistance is better realized in the camps, and more broadly in the region.

Public Diplomacy

There are two major components to public diplomacy: cultural and educational exchange and communications.

First, Congress should authorize an expansion of the YES program to specifically target Palestinian youth. This program has been enormously successful in recent years, and was recently expanded to include a younger subset of children. The State Department and Congress should work together to design a program that specifically targets Palestinian youth from the camps.

Palestinians in Lebanon are eligible to participate in the existing program, assuming that they have the necessary travel documents. Short of dedicating new funds for them and creating a new program, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut should make a particular effort to reach out to the youth in the camps to make sure they are aware of the opportunities that are available to them. (Since the camps are seen outside of the Lebanon, thus outside of the Embassy's responsibility, such a specific effort has not been considered.)

Similarly, the U.S. Embassy should expand the English and civic leadership classes, that are already offered to Lebanese youth, to Palestinians in camps. There is a desperate need to build a civic sense within the camps, and to encourage a new, positive generation of community leaders. The United States is perhaps best equipped to train teachers and provide the resources to fill this need.

Finally, the United States should provide scholarships for Palestinian youth to pursue higher education. The psychological, cultural, and institutional barriers to being educated in the camps are already high, especially since Palestinians are barred from all meaningful employment. For the few who overcome those barriers, the cost of higher education can put it out of practical reach. While UNRWA and private donors are providing scholarships, the need is still great.

Given the security restrictions in Beirut and the fact that the Palestinian camps are off-limits to embassy personnel, there is a significant opportunity for a media and communications strategy towards the camps. The need for such a targeted effort was obvious, and unfortunately missing during the Gaza conflict. The State Department should work with its diplomats in Beirut to devise appropriate messages and determine ways to deliver them, as well as make resources available to do so. The process will require some innovative thought and imagination.

Policy

There are limits to what assistance and exchange programs can accomplish. The cornerstone of our approach to the camps should be to urge the Lebanese government to grant Palestinians in Lebanon basic human rights. The Lebanese government has begun to reexamine this issue in recent years, primarily through the creation of an inter-ministerial government body called the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee, but progress risks stagnating and becoming ensnared in broader political issues.

Specifically, there are two obstacles to adopting such a policy. First, the Lebanese have always resisted efforts to grant the Palestinians rights because they fear it will lead to their permanent settlement in Lebanon. Second, they would be especially suspicious of U.S. urgings, seeing it as preparing the ground for a denial of the right of return in an eventual Israel-Palestinian peace settlement.

While these arguments would be crucial considerations in the development of a new, progressive policy, they should not stop us from proceeding with this approach. The first concern is specious. There is an increasing movement, among both international and local advocates, to de-link human rights for the Palestinians from citizenship and settlement. Improved access to jobs, security, schools, and healthcare for the generations of Palestinians who have lived and may continue to live in Lebanon is a basic human right, and does not amount to citizenship.

Second, we must also de-link the situation of the Palestinians in Lebanon from the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. Historically we have been disengaged with the camps in Lebanon because we see them within the rubric of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the fundamental problem is that their fate is tied to the hope, or hopelessness, of a peace settlement. We must convincingly argue that we care about the conditions of the Palestinians in Lebanon—on their own terms.

We also have vital security interests at stake in the camps, and can convincingly argue a new policy on that basis. However, human rights must factor heavily in our arguments because it gives us an opportunity to demonstrate that we genuinely care about this issue in a part of the world that needs this sort of attention the most.

We can follow the lead of the Europeans and the United Nations in furthering these arguments. They are already involved in discussions with the Lebanese government regarding the status of the Palestinians, and would likely welcome the United States' engagement.

Nahr el Bared Camp (NBC)

When discussing a revised policy towards the Palestinian camps of Lebanon, something must be said about the Nahr el Bared camp (NBC) in Tripoli.

NBC is receiving a huge infusion of international aid and attention after fighting broke out in 2007 between al Qaeda-affiliated Fatah al Islam—which sought to hide in the camp—and the Lebanese Army. Through the course of the battle, the Lebanese Army reduced the camp to rubble and displaced the population. It is now being completely reconstructed with significant amounts of international assistance, with considerable amounts coming from the U.S.



Policy-makers should be wary not to let discussions about NBC distract from the larger issue of the camps. Activity in NBC does not compensate for a lack of attention towards the other camps. In fact, NBC demonstrates exactly why the other camps must be urgently dealt with.

At the same time, reconstruction of NBC is providing an opportunity for the Lebanese government to pilot new initiatives—most significantly, the introduction of state security. The United States should also take advantage of this opportunity to pilot new aid and educational programs in the camps, especially because the population of NBC is accustomed to seeing foreign officials and welcoming of their involvement.

Conclusion

The first step to a new approach towards the Palestinian camps of Lebanon is to recognize that we can and must deal with them. To use the Lebanese logic that the camps fall outside the state of Lebanon and are therefore beyond the area of responsibility of U.S. officials in Lebanon is absurd and runs counter to our security and humanitarian interests.

There are several relatively small ways in which the United States can begin to engage the camps. First, it can raise the profile of its contributions to UNRWA. Second, we can extend USAID programs in the “gatherings,” areas immediately outside the

camps, *into* the camps, and we can initiate new projects in NBC. Third, public diplomacy officers in Beirut should make a particular effort to reach out to camp youth and make them aware of their eligibility to participate in exchange and educational programs. The Embassy should also consider the camp population in their overall press and communications strategy.

The camps raise larger issues that confront us not only in Lebanon but in many other parts of the world. We must do a better job of ensuring that populations receiving our humanitarian assistance, especially those that are highly anti-American, realize that aid is coming from the United States. We must also be more aggressive and consistent about proactively dealing with ungoverned spaces, but through *non-military* means and *before* they become serious security threats.

We must also recognize the psychological and human dimensions of violence, and work to improve the environments in which hopelessness and radicalization thrive. In Lebanon, this means adopting a policy that urges the Lebanese government to improve its treatment of the Palestinians. Beyond Lebanon, our efforts against terrorism must become a prism through which to stop basic and widespread violations of human rights, including by our allies.



None of this will be possible unless we revise the extreme security policies that have paralyzed our diplomats. Washington must develop a mechanism to check or review the excessive security restrictions placed on our diplomats in some locations, and balance it with our broader policy objectives and overall vision for the State Department.

If we are truly committed to fighting terrorism, it will be a long battle, but does not have to involve the

bloodshed that we have seen thus far. Now is the time to develop our non-military capacity through more innovative and aggressive policies that elevate the role of our diplomats. Achieving sustained results in development, human rights, and governance will take time. In the meantime, we must focus our efforts on increasing our profile as *visible* champions of the process. Only then might people like the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon start to see our efforts against terrorism as a cause worth supporting.

Resources for Further Study

The Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut is the best resource for anyone seriously interested in learning about the camps. Their Program on Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps closely track discussion on the issue while producing the most innovative work themselves.

The International Crisis Group recently produced an excellent study, focusing on recommendations to local and regional actors. It can be accessed here: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5928>.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) produces excellent and detailed reports on the situation in the camps. They are available on the UNRWA website.

The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) is also impressively informed and engaged on the issue of the camps.