

Helping the camps would help Lebanon

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As though Lebanon did not have enough purely domestic problems to preoccupy those tasked with maintaining security and stability, many observers are now worried about new threats brewing in some of the country's 12 Palestinian refugee camps. Several different phenomena, most of them interrelated, have the potential to raise havoc in the camps and therefore to destabilize Lebanon. All stem at least partly from the general dissatisfaction that rightly characterizes the long-suffering refugee population, making individuals, families and even entire neighborhoods susceptible to seduction by radical ideas.

The overriding fear at the moment is that "another Nahr al-Bared" will take place. That camp, just outside Tripoli, was pretty much destroyed in 2007 when the Fatah al-Islam militant group used it as a base and then took on the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). More than 30,000 Palestinians were displaced, and thousands of them remain homeless.

For some observers, the outbreak of another confrontation between the LAF and an armed group operating out of a refugee camp - be it an international outfit like Fatah al-Islam or a homegrown Palestinian one - is just a matter of time.

The most widely predicted venue for such a new disaster is Ain al-Hilweh in Sidon, for years the scene of regular intra-Palestinian violence and long known as a safe haven for fugitives ranging from ideological and religious revolutionaries to common criminals. With anywhere between 50,000 and 80,000 residents, the camp is Lebanon's most populous - and its immediate proximity to Sidon proper would figure to make any conflagration even more devastating for surrounding Lebanese neighborhoods than Nahr al-Bared was for its sparser environs.

Apart from being a worst-case scenario, Ain al-Hilweh is also made a more likely one by a coincidence of circumstances, none of them helpful. Some number of Fatah al-Islam members who escaped Nahr al-Bared are believed to have taken refuge at Ain al-Hilweh, adding yet another faction to an already splintered politico-military environment. The potential for volatility is also added to by the fact that the camp's internal security relies largely on cooperation between the two largest Palestinian groups, Hamas and Fatah - whose continuing power struggle in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza is building toward a new crisis in January over when President Mahmoud Abbas' term is scheduled to end. Both sides insist that no spillover will take place here, but they may not have to start slaughtering one another for Ain al-Hilweh to descend into chaos: The mere advent of reduced cooperation might be enough to allow conflicts between other factions to get out of hand.

One school of thought has it that the LAF could not possibly undertake a Nahr al-Bared-style offensive at Ain al-Hilweh because of a virtual certitude that the destruction and mayhem would rapidly spread to densely populated areas of Sidon. There is also the possibility, though, that a militant group might be emboldened by this very concern, eventually leaving the LAF with no choice but to act.

Fortunately, not everything is moving in the direction of conflict.

On the general level, there is a Palestinian-Lebanese Dialogue Committee that has made not insignificant strides designed to reduce the misery of daily life for the refugees by, for instance, increasing education and employment opportunities. With regard to Nahr al-Bared in particular, the Lebanese government has vowed to rebuild the camp in its entirety, theoretically reducing the

credibility of those who paint the 2007 conflict as the first of many aimed at repressing the country's Palestinian community. And in the camps themselves, some groups seem to have recognized the urgency of the situation and the necessity of preserving stability: Even Osbat al-Ansar, a hard-line Islamist organization with a considerable presence at Ain al-Hilweh, recently issued an edict banning its members from coming into conflict with the LAF.

On all of these scores, though, there is the danger that the best of intentions will be defeated by a paucity of resources.

The principals - both Lebanese and Palestinian - may be making a good-faith effort, but the pace of reconstruction at Nahr al-Bared has been too slow, due at least in part to inadequate attention and funding from the international community, including donors who have yet to honor their pledges. The Dialogue Committee has pushed through some key reforms, but its ability to help Palestinians here achieve greater self-sufficiency is hamstrung by the small size and uneven topography of Lebanon's economy, not to mention the need to avoid anything that anyone might regard as a step toward "resettling" the refugees. And on the security front, even if Hamas and Fatah successfully firewall Lebanon against the acrimony in Palestine, even if Osbat al-Ansar maintains its pragmatic position, a well-armed and well-financed group would not be easily contained.

There is no magical formula that will make these problems disappear, but nor is it a mystery how their consequences can be mitigated: money. Better funding can accelerate and enhance the process of housing the Nahr al-Bared displaced, lessen the sense of hopelessness that pervades places like Ain al-Hilweh, and reduce the perceived need for (and therefore the appeal of) radical organizations.

Between them, the countries of the affluent West have forked out hundreds of billions of dollars - and guaranteed trillions more in questionable debt - in recent weeks to help bankers escape the repercussions of their own actions. Surely they can spare some change in order to help Lebanon and its Palestinian population avoid what would just be the latest side-effects of a historical injustice that has been abetted by some Western countries and ignored by others. A little bit now will save a whole lot more later.

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