



Report, 28 October 2021

# Activism in the Context of Reconstructing Nahr al-Bared Refugee Camp: Lessons for Syria's Reconstruction?

→ Ismael Sheikh Hassan



Lebanese soldiers stand guard near the ruins of houses in Nahr al-Bared during a ceremony to launch the reconstruction process of the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon 09 March 2009. Thousands of Palestinian refugees fled Nahr al-Bared in the summer of 2007 from heavy clashes between the Lebanese army and the Islamist militant group Fatah al-Islam that killed some 400 people. © EPA/ADEL KARROUM



The reconstruction of the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in Northern Lebanon, destroyed in 2007 after fierce battles between the Lebanese army and an armed Islamist group, is sometimes suggested as a useful case study that can inform reconstruction processes in Syria. Such impressions usually emerge due to the relative success of the local activists – who hailed from a refugee camp where residents lived in informal housing with little formal legal protection – in confronting the security visions of the Lebanese State and military for the reconstruction of the camp. This paper aims to discuss the usefulness but also the limitations of the Nahr al-Bared reconstruction experience to the Syrian context.

## 1) The Destruction and Exceptional Conditions of Nahr al-Bared

Nahr al-Bared refugee camp was established in December 1949 to accommodate Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 due to the Israeli colonial project and its ethnic cleansing operations in Palestine.<sup>1</sup> It is made up of two areas: the "official" or "old" camp, under the responsibility of UNRWA since 1949, and an "unofficial new" camp where Palestinians have expanded their urban fabric beyond the official camp into the surrounding lands in order to accommodate population increases, particularly after the 1970s. Around 30,000 Palestinians lived in Nahr al-Bared's official/old camp and its new/urban extensions. Both these areas exhibit forms of informality whether in the form of their urban fabric that does not follow Lebanese zoning laws or from the perspective of ownership, as Lebanese laws do not allow Palestinians to register property. Thus, even though Palestinians bought lands from Lebanese owners to expand into what became the new camp and built urban neighborhoods that house almost 30% of the Nahr al-Bared residents, such properties and apartments are not legally registered and are considered informal.

In 2007, the official Nahr al-Bared refugee camp was totally destroyed and its extensions were severely damaged. Nahr al-Bared was the site of a battle between the Lebanese army and Fateh al-Islam, an Islamist militia that had arrived in the camp just a few months prior to the outbreak of the battle.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the second-largest Palestinian camp in Lebanon, which was also the most important urban and economic center for the rural region of Akkar in the North of the country, was

<sup>2</sup> Activism in the Context of Reconstructing Nahr al-Bared Refugee Camp: Lessons for Syria's Reconstruction?



totally destroyed in a matter of three months.

The total destruction of Nahr al-Bared in 2007 was part of a new trend of urban warfare and destruction in the Middle East that emerged after 2001, with States launching what they described as “precise” and “contained” military campaigns against non-State armed groups in urban contexts with significant western political and financial backing under the slogan of the global war against terror (Jenin 2004, West Bank 2004, Beirut 2006, Iraq 2006, Gaza 2007, Yemen 2010, etc).<sup>3</sup> Nahr al-Bared was thus an early example of the urban warfare and destruction that emerged more clearly after 2011 in Syria and other contexts in the Middle East, in which total urban destruction is achieved through indiscriminate shelling and bombing.

When a peaceful demonstration in the early days of the battle by camp residents demanded that the camp not be destroyed in the army’s battle against the Fateh al-Islam militia, which the residents also opposed, the Lebanese military opened fire on the demonstrators, killing two refugees and injuring dozens.<sup>4</sup> This was the first of several incidents that occurred in Nahr al-Bared where the Lebanese military used unwarranted lethal force against peaceful civilians. After the battle, the camp remained a no-access military zone for more than one month, during which the official camp and its urban extensions were looted and burned. Because the army was able to commit such acts with no political or legal consequences, several academics consider the destruction of Nahr al-Bared as the manifestation of a state of exception<sup>5</sup> that also typically occurs within totalitarian regimes

Against such a background, one can draw parallels between the suspension of the rule of law and civil rights of a refugee population in the sectarian Lebanese political system, especially during periods of armed conflict and the total suspension of civil rights of the Syrian population within the authoritarian regime in Syria. Within both these contexts, military and security regimes were able to commit massive urban destruction in order to create new post-war realities with no regard to the livelihood, property, and lives of the civilian communities.

## 2) Competing Reconstruction Visions: The Role of Local Organizing

<sup>3</sup> Activism in the Context of Reconstructing Nahr al-Bared Refugee Camp: Lessons for Syria’s Reconstruction?



## Arab Reform Initiative

During the battle, the Lebanese government commissioned an architectural and engineering consulting company to draw up plans that followed the priorities of the Lebanese army for the reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared. The army's instructions to the firm were to prioritize the ease of security control of the camp's rebuilt fabric.<sup>6</sup> The resulting proposal was based on a grid with wide streets and free-standing buildings to facilitate the military's control of the camp's urban fabric and to make it more difficult for imagined future terrorists to wage guerilla warfare in the urban fabric of the camp. Apartments were all of one standard size and did not take into consideration the previous home sizes of the refugees. No one from the Nahr al-Bared community was consulted on how reconstruction should take place, and thus the urban vision disregarded Palestinian refugee's neighborhood structures, social practices, and property rights in the design of the new camp.

Despite the exclusion of the Palestinian refugees from the planning and design process, the displaced of Nahr al-Bared commenced their own property documentation processes and began elaborating their own vision for the post-war reconstruction of their camp. These efforts were led by a newly created entity known as the Nahr el Bared Reconstruction Commission for Civil Action and Studies (NBRC). The NBRC was created at beginning of the battle by diverse networks of local Nahr al-Bared activists and other activist-professionals from outside the camp.

These local processes started while the battle was still being waged. Nahr al-Bared residents and activists realized that they were powerless in preventing the demolition of their camp, but they nevertheless prepared themselves for confronting problematic top-down visions that might be imposed on them by the Lebanese State and military. This mobilization was informed, inspired and aided by a number of factors:

- The Palestinian refugees' experience of undergoing multiple displacements, urban destruction, and conflicts ever since their expulsion by Zionists in Palestine and during the Lebanese civil war;
- The moving of most of those displaced from Nahr al-Bared during the battle to the same area – the Baddawi camp, another Palestinian refugee

4 Activism in the Context of Reconstructing Nahr al-Bared Refugee Camp: Lessons for Syria's Reconstruction?



## Arab Reform Initiative

- camp -- which facilitated organization and communication;
- Alliances between the local community and urban-planning activists and various Lebanese activists who played important roles in transferring knowledge in confronting top-down planning from other post-war reconstruction projects in Lebanon and giving visibility to the refugees' plight and activism within Lebanese media, academia, and broader activist circles.

As a result, the local community and the NBRC managed during the 3-month battle period to produce a detailed map illustrating the locations and sizes of all the camp's 1,697 buildings as well as a database identifying the dwellers and owners and sizes of the camp's various apartments. These maps and databases were informal documents, and thus at the time had no official or legal value.

Nevertheless, they had very strong local legitimacy and the process of their production played a significant role in organizing the community in fighting for their rights to return and reconstruct the camp in times where such prospects appeared to be almost impossible.

NBRC also managed to form a partnership with the Camp Improvement Unit in UNRWA, which was charged by UNRWA with leading on the reconstruction planning and processes in Nahr al-Bared official camp. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the UN agency with a mandate to support the relief and human development of Palestinian refugees since 1949, and thus such an alliance would prove quite effective in realising community priorities in reconstruction.

Fortunately for NBRC, this unit was led by progressive professionals who were strong advocates for refugee participation and leadership in camp development and who had significant experiences in housing and reconstruction projects in different Palestinian camps in Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. The progressive professionals within UNRWA were empowered by the activism of the community, and both entities were able to push UNRWA to take more assertive positions vis-à-vis the State, thus diverging from more neutral and passive approaches that could have been followed by UN agencies. UNRWA thus adopted NBRC's priorities for reconstruction and the informal ownership registry which they had assembled. One of the conditions of forming this partnership was that UNRWA would include



NBRC in all negotiations with the State, and that any agreements with the State on reconstruction needed the consent of NBRC. This way, NBRC gained access to the formal negotiations and discussions with formal Lebanese actors.

The negotiation process was long and complicated, but eventually the NBRC-UNRWA coalition managed to get their vision for reconstruction adopted by the State. A detailed participatory process for rebuilding the camp neighborhoods and homes then proceeded, which was led by the UNRWA-NBRC partnership, and Nahr al-Bared was celebrated as a model of participatory planning and design in post-war conditions. The project started to gain recognition in various urban planning circles and was even selected as one of ten finalist projects for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

### 3) The darker side of Nahr al-Bared's reconstruction

The participatory approach for post-war reconstruction was only limited to the physical design and urban form of the camp. Meanwhile, security and military priorities dominated how the camp was governed and controlled in the post-war era, and ultimately this affected the economic dynamics around the camp. After the end of the war, families were thus restricted from returning to the rubble of their homes in order to salvage whatever personal belongings remained. A security perimeter was created around the destroyed camp, and permits were only given for families to visit their homes for 10 minutes, after which the entire camp was bulldozed and demolished. The security perimeter around the empty site remained enforced, even during the reconstruction process.

Another larger security perimeter was created around the camp's urban extensions, where a majority of the displaced from Nahr al-Bared camp returned after the war to wait out the reconstruction. This larger perimeter was controlled by checkpoints, and camp residents and all visitors needed permits that needed complicated processes to be granted and renewed.

The civilians of Nahr al-Bared therefore remained governed by a military regime which controlled their mobility and prevented the re-emergence of Nahr al-Bared



as a socio-economic center in northern Akkar, given the extreme difficulty of entering and exiting the area. Meanwhile, the checkpoints were sites of humiliation given the long queues and the manner in which some soldiers treated the refugees.

The situation deteriorated in 2012 after an incident during which some soldiers harassed a brother and his sister in the Nahr al-Bared camp extensions (new camp).<sup>8</sup> Local residents assembled around the commotion and the soldiers grew tense. They started shooting in the air to disperse the crowd and a 15-year old boy, Ahmad Qassem, who was not part of the crowd but who happened to be delivering water as part of his daily job, was accidentally shot and killed. The crowd started throwing rocks at the military vehicles which retreated back to the camp's security perimeter for the first time since the 2007 conflict.

That was the day when the camp revolted against the military rule of their camp. Rock-throwing refugees forced the military to retreat to the outside perimeter wall and an open sit-in and strike was organized until the military emergency measures were lifted. After a month, the military cancelled the permit system, though the security perimeters and checkpoints remained.

Meanwhile, the refugees were not allowed to rebuild the camp by themselves. The reconstruction process had to wait for international funds to arrive, which would pay contractors to build the camp's urban blocks and neighborhoods. Once the construction of a particular neighborhood was complete, the military would change the location of the first security perimeter around the destroyed camp, allowing people to access their rebuilt homes. However, as international funds for reconstructing Nahr al-Bared decreased because of the escalating wars, armed conflicts, and refugee crises that have dominated the Middle East in recent years (e.g., Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya), the pace of reconstructing Nahr al-Bared slowed almost to a halt. By 2021, after 14 years of the destruction of the camp, only two thirds of the camp had been rebuilt.

## 4) Conclusion: Lessons from Nahr al-Bared for Syria

<sup>7</sup> Activism in the Context of Reconstructing Nahr al-Bared Refugee Camp: Lessons for Syria's Reconstruction?



Nahr al-Bared presents a case where community and activist-professionals specifically from architectural and urban-planning backgrounds were able to achieve some gains for local residents in conditions where refugees lacked civil and political rights and their camp was governed by a military regime. However, the authoritarian rule of the State over the camp was not absolute, and Lebanese activists played important roles in raising the plight of Nahr al-Bared residents in Lebanese media, academic, and policy making circles. Although the power of the military in the space of Nahr al-Bared seemed totalitarian, the strength of the Lebanese State in the broader Lebanese context is a different affair. Lebanon is a 'weak state' which is fragmented by the sectarian political system and infighting Lebanese parties. It is also partially influenced by Lebanese civil society, donor countries, and humanitarian/international organizations. In such a context, the alliances between an organized local advocacy group in the camp and activist-professionals who worked in UNRWA's Camp improvement programme, as well as other official institutions, proved effective in influencing and affecting the reconstruction strategies to a certain extent. Such alliances were able to mobilize their different resources and networks effectively, with the community activists mobilizing Nahr al-Bared residents through demonstrations and activist-professionals mobilizing their networks with donors, media and sympathetic officials in various Lebanese institutions. Thus, they were able to partially affect the design of the reconstruction and to partially improve mobility and certain security restrictions imposed on the ground.

Similar strategies in a total authoritarian context such as Syria, with political agendas aiming for the permanent population displacement in certain communities in order to create new demographic or new socio-economic conditions on the ground, will obviously be less effective. However, residents' efforts to create local and informal land/property registries remain powerful tools for organizing residents to defend their rights. Commencing such processes early on is useful, as they require significant effort and time on behalf of the residents. Unfortunately, original documents might get lost with time and social connections and memories may fade. Such registries present proof of local claims and rights and further expose the tragedy and scale of the destruction/displacement that had occurred while providing an embarrassing criticism of the new realities that are being planned for implementation by authoritarian regimes. The processes of



## Arab Reform Initiative

creating such registries are also powerful tools for organizing displaced communities in exile. Hence, even in totalitarian contexts, they are latent sources of power and knowledge that can be utilized if or once political realities on the ground change or shift, even if partially.



## Endnotes

1. Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Second Edition edition (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).
2. On Fateh al-Islam, see, for example, Fida Itani, *Jihadists in Lebanon : From the Forces of Dawn to Fateh El Islam [Arabic]* (Beirut: Al-Saqi, 2008); Ismael Sheikh Hassan and Sari Hanafi, "(In)Security and Reconstruction in Post-Conflict Nahr al-Barid Refugee Camp," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (November 2010): 27–48, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2010.XL.1.027>.
3. Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*, 1 edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).
4. "Lebanon: Investigate Army Shooting of Palestinian Demonstrators: Government Must Prevent Further Anti-Palestinian Violence," Human Rights Watch, July 3, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/07/03/lebanon-investigate-army-shooting-palestinian-demonstrators> (accessed August 2, 2018).
5. Adam Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (2013): 65–77, here 72; Are Knudsen, "(In)Security in a Space of Exception," in *Security and Development*, eds. John-Andrew McNeish and Jon Harald Sande Lie (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 99–112, here 101.
6. Ismae'l Sheikh Hassan, "On Urbanism and Activism in Palestinian Refugee Camps" (Phd Dissertation, Belgium, KULeuven, 2015).
7. "Reconstruction of Nahr El-Bared Refugee Camp | Aga Khan Development Network," March 12, 2018, <http://www.akdn.org/architecture/project/reconstruction-of-nahr-el-bared-refugee-camp>.
8. Ismae'l Sheikh Hassan, "Palestinian Camp–Military Relations in Lebanon: The Case of Nahr al-Bared," in *Civil-Military Relations in Lebanon - Conflict*, | Are John Knudsen | *Palgrave Macmillan*, ed. Are Knudsen and Gade Tine, 2017, <http://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319551661>.



# Arab Reform Initiative

## About the author



### Ismael Sheikh Hassan

Ismael Sheikh Hassan is an urbanist and activist who has engaged in various post-war reconstruction projects and activist initiatives in Palestinian refugee camps and various Lebanese contexts.

## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

[arab-reform.net](http://arab-reform.net)

[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)



© 2021 by the Arab Reform Initiative.  
To view a copy of this licence, [click here](#)