Lebanon: Anger in Palestinian Refugee Camps Gives Rise to a New Mobilization for Dignity

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Those who visited Palestinian camps in Lebanon last month could not have missed a new upsurge in the popular mobilization on Palestinian streets. Their enthusiasm can be sensed in the spirits of the youth, their chants, and round-the-clock occupation of public spaces.

This upsurge in mobilization was not only the result of the Lebanese Labour Minister’s implementation of his plan to combat businesses employing foreign labour without a permit – after giving them one month to regularize their situation. It was also the outcome of an accumulated sense of frustration, injustice, humiliation, indignation, deprivation and finally, anger that crystallized in these latest rounds of collective political action. The question then remains: why have Palestinians in Lebanon reached a breaking point at this stage, and why did the movement take this shape?

There is no doubt that this anger accumulated gradually. First, it arose from the political-security arrangement for Palestinians in Lebanon, along with the historical absence of a socio-political contract with the Lebanese state. Second, it is the outcome of the deprivation, oppression, racism, and discrimination against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, which was finally exacerbated by international resolutions hostile to the Palestinian cause, threatening the refugee cause and the right of return. Moreover, the economic situation of Palestinian refugees has deteriorated and was further compounded after the USA cut off its funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

However, alone these factors are not enough to fully explain this mobilization. These latest developments are also the product of a degree of practical awareness among the Palestinian youth and their discourse which explains their involvement in a movement demanding civil rights and an arrangement in which Palestinians are an agent of change against injustice. This movement is also proof of the existence of a new paradigm of the oppressed, who no longer identifies with the oppressors and becomes dependent on them, but instead seeks to break free from their oppression, and in so doing, spontaneously and effectively imposes a new social formula and project.

This paper discusses the emergence of this popular mobilization and its transformation into a social movement, the challenges it has faced, and how its
actors built a common framework for action to address their status as oppressed. It relies on field interviews – formal and informal – with actors and politicians, participatory observation, the analysis of organized groups, and contributions via WhatsApp and Facebook. The paper focuses on the movement in Ain al-Hilweh camp as one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, with its political and security context that distinguishes it from other camps.

From Popular Mobilization to Social Movement

The first spark for the mobilization was lit by the Ministry of Labour shutting down al-Aref Ceramic Stores owned by Palestinian Ziad al-Aref on 11 July 2019, due to failure to provide all employees with work permits. After the al-Aref stores incident more information, some true and some based on rumour, circulated about other Palestinian workers being dismissed from other places of work or being given notices.

The popular movement began spontaneously in Palestinian camps and quickly turned into a social movement, that is, a deliberate and collective action consisting of stakeholders rallying together. This collective action then gave way to calls for the civil rights of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, with dignity being the primary demand. The demands revolved around four pillars: 1) revoking the Minister of Labour’s decision against the Palestinian people, 2) allowing every Palestinian to own a house in which he and his family could live with dignity, 3) allowing Palestinians to practice the 38 professions that they are legally banned from practicing, and 4) including Palestinians in the Social Security Act alongside Lebanese citizens.

Official attempts to contain or address the movement had failed by the time its first sit-in on 13 July 2019. A few days after the Palestinian streets erupted, the Palestinian President’s delegate Azzam al-Ahmad, a member of the Fatah Central Committee responsible for the Lebanese arena, returned to Lebanon on 17 July, days after having left, and contacted several representatives from Lebanese political parties, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament. A day earlier, he had also contacted the head of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee,
a governmental committee affiliated with the Lebanese Cabinet, to discuss the Minister of Labour’s decision which is at odds with the Lebanese National Vision document produced by the inter-Lebanese Political Dialogue and ratified by all Lebanese parties.\textsuperscript{8} These contacts and meetings culminated in an official Lebanese pledge by the Speaker of the Parliament and the Prime Minister to refer the case to the government for review, while the Labour Minister continued to escalate and to claim a strict application of the law.

The official Palestinian position regarding the Minister of Labour’s decision was clear in its condemnation as per a statement issued by the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) factions in Lebanon on 13 July entitled “Confronting the Trump Deal cannot be done by clamping down on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, closing the doors of life on them and starving them.” The statement also called for a boycott of the Saida International Festivals. The Palestinian Coalition Forces’ position was no different.\textsuperscript{9} The Palestinian Embassy, however, sought to find appropriate solutions by contacting Lebanese officials.

As to the Lebanese political and civil reactions, they have varied from support of the popular movement (such as marches in Beirut’s streets and camps), support of civil rights but opposition of the movement, or opposition to the Palestinian presence as a whole, with bigoted rhetoric threatening Palestinians by conjuring the spectre of civil war.\textsuperscript{10}

This social movement went through three main phases: 1) rallying, solidarity and national unity among Palestinians, 2) schism and crisis; and 3) consolidating ranks to preserve unity and control.

**Rallying, Solidarity and National Unity**

In the first period, the movement worked at the horizontal level. Coordination occurred between groups and civil society organizations in all camps by organizing demonstrations and calling on the Palestinian and Lebanese official authorities to take appropriate measures. Soon after, signs of a social movement emerged with clear demands and a proper organizational structure. Networks of grassroots initiatives were formed in all camps to channel mobilization and coordination, entice motivation, and escalate demands.
Fatah’s Reformist and Democratic Current was the first to support the movement. Its position was appealing to the remaining Palestinian factions and was clear when General Mahmoud Issa’s (aka Lino), joined the protesters in the first demonstration on July 16 and said: “We will take our rights and we should maintain our peaceful movements.” This put other factions in an uncomfortable position, pushing them to participate in demonstrations and to embrace the movement in the camps. The next day’s march brought together all Palestinian factions and Palestinian security forces in the camp. The Joint Palestinian Security Force, the Palestinian National Security Forces, the Islamic forces and all other factions and organizations worked to protect the peaceful demonstrations and prevented the participation of anyone who could cause trouble; breach the demonstrations inside the camp, or potentially clash with Lebanese army checkpoints. National unity was the most prominent theme in all the camps, especially in Ain al-Hilweh, with its many security quadrants and sharp political divisions. Sheikh Jamal Khattab, head of the Mujahideen Movement in Ain al-Hilweh, confirmed on July 16 that, “Our participation in the sit-in in Ain al-Hilweh today is part of the actions to demand the rights of our Palestinian people in Lebanon.”

As such, the popular initiative succeeded in coordinating with the factions, and therefore, in navigating popular pressure and political action and in compelling political factions to assume their responsibility in the movement. After meetings with the factions, where they had only spoken in the first few demonstrations about the meeting between the Palestinian ambassador and the Minister of Labour, on 14 July the popular initiative called on the Palestinian ambassador in Lebanon and the leaders of the Palestinian National and Islamic Action in Lebanon “to urgently form a crisis cell to follow up and supervise a comprehensive political and popular response to the arbitrary policy towards the Palestinian people.” The following day, the popular initiative confirmed that representative structures of the Palestinian people should draw up a well-thought and organized plan of political and legal action that is decided upon by the leadership in participation with Lebanese allies with a view to thwarting the measures of the Labour Ministry. Such a plan should be accompanied by popular movements such as sit-ins, demonstrations and strikes. This call led to a meeting between the Joint Palestinian Action Committee (JCPA) and the popular committees in Saida.
during which progressive decisions were taken to counter the measures of the Labour Ministry.

In the first phase, the popular initiative succeeded in overcoming attempts at destabilizing security after Abdallah Sobha of the Soufsaf killed Abdullah al-Badawi (known as Abu Maria), a young man from the camp from the Arab Zubaid neighbourhood, on 15 July. The movements also succeeded in breaking the imaginary boundaries between neighbourhoods in the Ain al-Hilweh camp. The demonstrations on Friday 19 July, for the fifth day in a row, transgressed the rules of previous clashes that divided the camp’s neighbourhoods between Fatah and “extremist” Islamist groups, where no party was able to enter the security quadrants of the other. This was a further sign affirming national unity.

The strike and the boycott proceeded for a second Friday of Anger as huge demonstrations marched through all Palestinian camps. The position of the Palestinian factions was noted in boycotting any official Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue unless the Minister of Labour reneged on his actions, a position that everyone complied with.

Following this escalating stance by the JCPA and the popular committees in the camps, strikes and boycotts continued, with the grouping of non-governmental associations confirming their support for the social movement.

Schism and Crisis

By the end of the second week of mobilization, the rift between protesters, civil society and the Palestinian political class had become evident. Lebanese and Palestinian political pressure to halt movements in the camps had increased for Lebanese-Palestinian political reasons and because of fears security might deteriorate. Palestinian factions attempted to control the movement by calling on people to adhere to the arrangements of the factions and popular committees.

The political leadership set itself up as a sponsor of the social movement in order to maintain discipline and act and speak with “responsibility and wisdom” so that – as it said – “things could remain within the required context. There were irresponsible statements made by people who are not in a position of
responsibility and in a state of anger that were offensive and did not reflect the view of the community.”

The tensions grew between activists in the social movement and the political class calling on them to remain loyal to the voice of the factions, and to abide by decisions and procedures in order to maintain control and avoid negative repercussions.

Some had begun to get tired of strikes entering the third week in a row. There had also been mutual accusations between political factions and activists. Opinions were divided between those who wished to open the entrances to the camp for pedestrians and others for vehicles and those who stressed their closure, with the political factions pressing for an end to the strike.

The JPCA formed a central follow-up committee in Lebanon in order to develop an action plan that corresponds with the political and popular movement in the camps.

The so-called Muslim Youth in Ain al-Hilweh published a statement warning of sedition and calling for vigilance and caution and for refraining from provocation or incitement and from surrendering to any security tensions or armed clashes.

At this stage, the situation had worsened between the JCPA and the popular initiative. The former held a meeting in which it emphasized the legitimacy of the movements and called for their organization. It also called for opening roads for pedestrians to facilitate life in the camp and for coordinating with all youth groups to achieve the objectives of the movements.

However, the popular initiative confronted the JCPA with what it called factional embarrassment, which became evident in the confusion of the Palestinian position and the contradicting opinions even within the same faction regarding solidarity with the movement and the ceiling of the demands.

Information was also leaked to activists from the meeting of the central follow-up committee of an attempt to destabilize security in the demonstration in order to instigate conflict by using live ammunition in order to intimidate activists.

However, all this did not prevent reconciliation between the parties on 1 August.
and follow-up committee’s unwavering support for activists and the call for a third day of anger.

However, after all reconciliation efforts a security incident took place on the third Friday of Anger on 2 August. Immediately after the march, Hussein Aladdin, a much-loved resident of the camp, was killed by Bilal Abu Arqoub. The killing caused a new crisis of trust between the two sides as no immediate political decision was taken to intervene militarily and arrest the suspect. This incident had a major impact on activists, even on the factions and the “extremist” Islamists. They all considered it as an attempt to increase tensions and undermine stability inside the camps and their efforts at demanding civil rights. Therefore, that night, the Palestinian political leadership decided to pursue the Arqoub family.

Consolidating Ranks Towards Unity and Control

A joint unit by the Palestinian National Security and the Usbat al-Ansar group raided al-Ras al-Ahmar neighbourhood. The Arqoub family evacuated the camp and hid in an undisclosed location. While tensions still brewed throughout that Saturday, camp residents were surprised that night by the spread of the Mujahideen movement and the Islamic Rami Ward group in the neighbourhood, in Manshiya, where the Arqoub family had taken refuge in an abandoned building. The fighting lasted for some time and ended with the killing of the father and the handing over of two of his sons to the Lebanese army, while a third son was missing at the time.

Hussein Aladdin’s funeral took the form of a popular march that brought joy and hope to the hearts of activists after an attempt at snuffing all their efforts in this security incident. The marches returned with all their momentum, and activities continued in honour of the man they called “the martyr of national unity”. Marches were organized in all camps to commemorate the “martyr of national unity and civil rights,” as he was called, declaring a unified Palestinian position and refusing any tampering with the security of the camps. Fridays were set for rally marches in all camps. Other activities determined by activists in each camp took place, with a reiterated focus on the movement’s demands at every social or political
Strategies and Requirements for Mobilization

Activists within the popular initiative in all camps united under the slogan of “Rejecting the arbitrary policy towards our people to the point of eliminating our humanity,” and adopted several strategies in their work to respond to the Labour Ministry.

The first strategy was to call for a boycott of Lebanese goods and the closure of Palestinian camps in Lebanon for three days using burning tires and preventing Lebanese food companies from entering and procuring goods from the camps. For example, the youths of Rashidieh camp, south Lebanon, blocked the road and returned all goods entering the camp on 15 July. The committee of bus drivers in Ain al-Hilweh confirmed the following day that they would stand with their people and announced that they would stop conducting trips to parks and tourist areas on all Lebanese territory until the people’s demands and rights were fulfilled.

The Palestinian refugees’ boycott had led to a decline in economic activity and to losses incurred by owners of Lebanese businesses and general goods, who began to voice grievances about the situation.

At the camps, a committee was formed to follow-up the boycott with merchants inside the camps, and meetings were held to monitor the situation and open and close entrances on a need basis and to allow Palestinian goods to enter.

The second strategy relied on rallying. Calls for rallies varied at first, with Palestinian youth and activists in Lebanon urging all refugees to pack up and go to the Lebanese border at Fatima Gate on Sunday 28 July at 10am, but this was later postponed. Second, there were calls on Palestinian refugees to collectively go to foreign embassies and seek immigration. The Palestinian Democratic Women’s Organization (Nada) organized a women’s demonstration in Ain al-Hilweh that roamed the streets of the camp. However, the remaining marches included women and men of all ages. At the same time, there were car marches in the
streets of Saida as well as a march in Beirut called for by the Palestinian Right to
Work Campaign Coalition and institutions and associations working with
 Palestinians in Lebanon that took place on 16 July before the House of Parliament.
Another march called for by the Popular Nasserist Organization was also held in
Saida.

In Parallel, a call to mobilize activists abroad was followed by a large gathering in
Berlin attended by Palestinian, Arab and European activists. Demonstrations in
solidarity with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were launched, and rallies were
held in Copenhagen, Sweden, Amsterdam, London and the United States, as well
as in Gaza and the occupied territories. Palestinian institutions in Denmark and the
Palestinian Merchants’ Committee in Copenhagen announced a halt of the import
of all commercial goods from Lebanon in solidarity with the Palestinian popular
uprising against the racist and discriminatory decisions of the Lebanese Labour
Ministry.

The third strategy was economic. A public call on Palestinian financiers to
withdraw their funds of from banks in conjunction with the boycott was launched
together with a call on Palestinian expatriates not to transfer money to Lebanon. It
was initiated by businessmen from al-Bass camp and followed by several
Palestinian financiers. A campaign to stamp the cash of Palestinian refugees with
the word “Palestine” or the Palestinian flag was also organized.

The fourth strategy took to social media using the hashtag
#RaiseYourFlagProveYourExistence, which relied on making a mark in public
spaces and to make the Palestinian presence visible. Residents of Saida and
neighbouring areas were asked to raise the Palestinian flag on the balconies of
their homes and on shops owned by Palestinians.

The fifth strategy included satire and parody, as well as celebrations. In response
to the enforcement of the Foreign Workers Law on Palestinian Refugees, the
following joke was circulated: “It is written at the camp checkpoints that no
foreigners are allowed to enter. You’ve confused us, are we foreigners or
refugees?!” For Instance, protesters at al-Hasbah checkpoint affiliated with Fatah
in Ain al-Hilweh celebrated a colleague’s birthday by lighting candles on a tire as if
it were a cake before burning it.
Mechanisms for Mobilization

The movement grew more organized by the day and attempted to be self-reliant. At the end of the first week, the United Camps Campaign in Lebanon was launched to support the people of Ain al-Hilweh and the continuous movement at its gates. This included collecting vegetables from crops inside Rashidieh camp and money donations to cover the expenses for the continuous movement throughout the day and night from Shatila Camp and the northern camps in solidarity with the protests.

Many Palestinians inside and outside Ain al-Hilweh have also taken individual initiatives such as donating breakfasts, sandwiches and water.

Organization is one of the pillars of mobilization, and teams to this effect were formed since the start of the movement. A Rubber Forces Squad, for instance, was known to remove the remains of burning tires and to clean up after sit-ins and protests. The Movement Committee set meetings to implement a daily work schedule that controls movement mechanisms and adapts to developments. There were also meetings aimed at managing the movement of the protests, taking into account the possibility of continuing protests until the popular demands for civil rights are met.24

Meetings were also held to determine the “spirit and identity of the demonstrations” so only the Palestinian flags were raised with the call “Reclaim Dignity” in order that the demands “be popular and bear the colour of the people beyond the religious, the secular, and the socialist.” Those who wanted to raise black or Islamist flags were reminded that one of the reasons the Syrian revolution failed was that the religious factor entered the picture and the idea of popular inclusion was ruined by doctrines and ideologies. In general, Palestinian flags were the predominant flags, although some black flags were in fact raised in Ain al-Hilweh.

Social media was significantly employed during the movements. The first hashtag the campaign adopted was #EnoughHumiliation, followed by #StarvingMeServesTheDeal, #FridayOfRageInTheCamps, #Enough, #NoToStarvation, #YesToImmigration, #WeWillStarveAndNotBow, and finally,
#RevolutionForDignity.

Songs of dignity were also widespread. The song “I want to Live in Dignity” from the civil rights protests in 2010 was popularized again; it summarizes the demands of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon: “Either we live well, or we die together.” The “Dignity Salute” anthem was dedicated to the Palestinian steadfastness in Ain al-Hilweh; it sang, “Ain al-Hilweh is a lion’s den... national and Islamist movements. We will not compromise until our human dignity is returned to us.”

Conclusion

This paper addresses the collective action in the Palestinian social movements in Lebanese camps since its inception in July 2019 and through its stages, and the challenges it faced with the political class and the saboteurs. For the first time in the history of refugee camps in Lebanon, a movement has persisted this long and aims to break the oppression paradigm and seek to break free from dependence on the injustice of the Lebanese sectarian system by demanding civil rights in order to live in dignity. Palestinian refugees have succeeded in overcoming the predominant political equation by closing the camps on themselves rather than being isolated inside them and by boycotting all components of the Lebanese state after having reached a high degree of alienation due to the accumulation of grievances over the years.

The structure and framework of the movement appear to have been developed to a great extent. There is horizontal and vertical coordination that allows for the protest movement to continue, despite some of the security, political and material challenges it faced but manged to overcome and may still face again in the future. In order to avoid such challenges, it seems necessary to invest in “awareness activists,” that is, activists who engage in the protest without being direct beneficiaries of it and constitute an external support that works in favour of the protesters’ goals and can take over from them if they are subjected to pressure. In order to maintain sustainability, the movement must also form ties with other Lebanese rights movements, to demand rights collectively and develop mechanisms to achieve social justice, while preserving the Palestinian specificities. Building bridges and alliances can indeed help in avoiding the prospect of the
camps and the refugees’ demands being isolated or trapped in minefields or security tensions that could destroy these Palestinian movements. Such an approach should be comprehensive in order to build alliances, rally support, and expand solidarity through churches, mosques, sports clubs, embassies, municipalities, human rights organizations, etc. It must also insist on the implementation of the Lebanese Constitution and the relevant international and Arab laws, treaties and agreements ratified by Lebanon. Finally, it is essential that collective action is coordinated in a spatial and temporal manner to avoid depleting the resources and energies of this social mobilization in the long run.
In 2005, the Lebanese government decided to establish the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, which faced the challenge of keeping a complex and sensitive file, especially in terms of its entanglements at the legislative, executive, procedural and security levels. This decision was followed by the reopening of the PLO office in Beirut on 15 May 2006, and then the level of Palestinian representation in Lebanon rose to the level of the embassy in 2008.

The Lebanese vision regarding the right to work should be lifted: Unnecessary restrictions on the granting and enjoyment of economic and social rights, including the right to work and social protection for Palestinian refugees should be lifted, and the exercise of these rights and their concrete manifestations should be regulated through legislation and public policies which respect these rights in a manner that does not contradict Lebanon's supreme interest, its realistic capabilities and the interests of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.
18. pulp.it.alwatanvoice.com. However, the Democratic Reform Movement - Fatah Movement continued to support it and affirmed on every occasion its support for what it called “the peaceful and civilized movement” and asked the leader of the movement General Mahmoud Issa (Lino), “not to be dragged into suspicious calls aimed at aborting our fair and righteous movement. We want to emphasize the need to respect Lebanese sovereignty in all our movements and to respect the laws and to make our demands successful and to mobilize the support of our Lebanese brothers for our just demands. Our peaceful movement has provoked risk-takers and has awakened them and pushed them to lead our movement astray with these suspicious calls. However, we are confident in our people's awareness and their adherence to the principles of peaceful and civilized demonstration.” A statement issued by the media office of General Mahmoud Issa (Lino) via social media on 19 July 2019.

19. Its five members were named “Member of the political bureau of the Palestine Liberation Front, Salah al-Youssef, for the PLO,” the representative of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Lebanon, Ihsan Ataya for the “Alliance of Palestinian Forces”, the Emir of the Mujahedeen Movement, Sheikh Jamal Khattab for “Islamic forces.” Deputy Secretary-General of the Ansar Allah Movement Haj Maher Owaid, and Major General Munir al-Maqdah, in charge of security for Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

20. They are a network of young Islamists who are described as “extremists” and are called as such by the media. Sheikh Osama al-Shihabi is considered the spiritual mufti of these youths who are close to the Islamic factions in Ain al-Hilweh camp.


22. janoubia.com and lbgroup.tv. Bilal Abu Arqoub, a resident of the Ras al-Ahmar neighbourhood near Bilal Badr, is named after the Muslim youth but is closer to the leader of an armed gang. Nicknamed Abu Hassan, Arqoub retaliated with Khomeini’s brother, Usbat al-Ansar, who shot Yusuf al-Arqoub in April. The assassination video was published on all social media to reflect the brutality of the scene.

23. alaraby.co.uk

24. The tasks were distributed as follows: • Logistical support to keep the movement sustainable. • Follow-up to UNRWA’s work and its mission in collecting and removing waste • Working to involve the female element, the participation of children and school kids • Accompanying and supporting protests outside the camp • Organizing and facilitating the movement of workers and staff outside the camp especially that the aim of the closure is to halt the importation of goods from outside the camp. The committee is to meet daily in order to set future programs.
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