

**Islamism in the *diaspora*:
Palestinian refugees in Lebanon**

Are Knudsen

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Introduction¹

In recent years there has been increasing academic interest in Islamism in the Middle East, not least in Palestinian Islamism championed by groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are waging a bloody war of attrition against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (Milton-Edwards 1996a). Interestingly, there has been less concern with Islamism among the Palestinian diaspora dispersed in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon number about 350,000 and are the second-largest Palestinian diaspora community. Since their forced exile from Palestine more than fifty years ago, the majority of the refugees have been living in squalid shelters and cramped refugee camps. They now form a disenfranchised minority, suffering from economic marginalisation and fearing being excluded from future peace settlements, which would leave them exiled in Lebanon.

There is now a large body of research on the Islamist revival among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (see, Hroub 2001, Milton-Edwards 1996a, Mishal and Sela 2000), but Islamism in the Palestinian diaspora communities in the Middle East has not been widely studied. Despite the importance of political activism in the refugee camps, and the rise of local Islamist movements, there have been few attempts to examine how this has shaped Islamist sentiments among the refugees. This paper outlines the sources of Islamism (“political Islam”) among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (Figure 1). The primary aim is to increase our knowledge of how conditions in the host country (“national”) as well as the quest for Palestinian statehood (“nationalism”) have shaped Islamist sentiments in the refugee population. The paper is based on interviews with representatives of the refugee bureaucracy (NGOs, committees, individuals), political parties and Islamist groups as well as specialists on Lebanese Islamism.²

The paper begins with a brief overview of the Palestinian refugees exiled to Lebanon since 1948. Next, I sketch the current living conditions in refugee camps and outline how the refugees have coped with increasing marginalisation and alienation and the implications for Palestinian refugee identity. The growth of political activism, in particular Islamic activism, is used to examine the factors that contribute to a nascent Islamism among sections of the Palestinian refugee community. This is followed by an overview of the major Islamist groups, their ideology and their political goals. The paper ends with a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.

¹ *Acknowledgements:* The paper is based on fieldwork in Lebanon during April–May 2003. I am grateful to Mona Nsouli and the Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS) in Beirut for granting me a temporary research affiliation with the Institute. I would like to thank Ahmad Makkie and Rashid Khatib (Norwegian People’s Aid) for organising interviews in Beirut and Jaber Suleiman and Abu Ali Hassan for organising interviews and providing translation in Sidon. Finally, I thank Muhammad Ali Khalidi and Henrik Lunden for commenting on an earlier draft. None of the above should be held responsible for the views expressed here which, along with any mistakes, are solely my own.

² I did not undertake to poll or survey the political allegiance of the refugees because this could be construed as undesirable political surveillance.



Figure 1: Map of Lebanon

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon: A brief history

In 1948–49 around 100,000 Palestinian refugees fled to Lebanon following their exodus from Israel. In the first phase (1948–67) most of them were settled in makeshift camps, and from 1950 received help from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) (Khalidi 2001). In the following decade (1967–75) conditions in the camps improved somewhat along with a general politicization of the refugee population and a surge of political activism following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Jerusalem in June 1967. Following the signing of the Cairo Accord (1969), Lebanon became a base for guerrilla attacks against Israel, but Israeli retaliatory attacks caused a high number of casualties, including direct attacks on refugee camps, such as the destruction of the Nabatiyeh camp in 1974. This started the civil war in Lebanon (1975–90) and led to the invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon by Israeli forces, first in 1978 and again in June 1982, which destroyed a number of refugee camps and led to a massive loss of Lebanese and Palestinian civilian lives. The period 1975–82 ended with the massacres in two refugee camps located in Beirut, Sabra and Shatila, where more than 3,000 refugees were killed (Shahid 2002). In the following period (1982–87) war broke out between different Palestinian factions as well as between Palestinians and the Shia Amal militia. By 1987 the “War of the Camps” had claimed more than 2,000 lives and obliterated refugee camps such as Sabra and Burj Barajneh. In the most recent period (1987–2000) economic support to Palestinian refugees from the PLO and UNRWA has been severely reduced. In 1987 the Lebanese government unilaterally abrogated the Cairo Accord, which not only meant ending guerrilla warfare from Lebanese soil, but also removed refugee privileges such as the right of work, residence and freedom of movement in Lebanon. Political developments have also taken a turn for the worse, since the Oslo Accords did not resolve the Palestinians’ right of return but deferred it to the stalled “final status talks” (Brynen 1997). Most of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon hail from northern Palestine and the Galilee region. This means that they are barred from returning to their homeland and suffer from progressive marginalisation in Lebanon.

Refugee camps

From a legal point of view Lebanon only hosts refugees who in legal terms are labelled “foreigners”, but admits no responsibility for them. This responsibility rests with UNRWA, which is supposed to provide adequate housing and living conditions for the refugees. Of the total 350,000 registered refugees in Lebanon, about half (55.4%) live in UNRWA camps (c. 160,000) and “informal” camps (c. 38,000) (Table 1). The majority of the camps are located adjacent to the major coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, Beirut and Tripoli (Figure 1). The refugees living in the “official camps” run by UNRWA are provided with a meagre package of services and welfare benefits (schooling, medical care etc.) which are insufficient in relation to their present needs (Abbas et al. 1997). The most comprehensive study of present living conditions among camp-dwelling Palestinian refugees to date (Ugland 2003) finds that the refugees suffer from widespread unemployment, poor living conditions, ill health, low education levels and rising illiteracy. Lebanon has the highest percentage of camp-dwelling refugees (55.4 %) of all the countries hosting Palestinian refugees. This is because of stringent policy measures in Lebanon designed to keep the refugees trapped inside cramped and squalid camps and shanty towns from which there is no escape – except by leaving the country.

Table 1
Refugee camps in Lebanon

Name of camp	No. of registered refugees
Ayn Hilweh	44,133
Nahr e-Bared	28,358
Rashidieh	24,679
Burj Barajneh	19,526
Burj Shemali	18,134
Beddawi	15,695
Shatila	11,998
El-Buss	9,840
Wavel	7,357
Mieh Mieh	5,078
Dbayeh	4,223
Mar Elias	1,406
Dikwaneh & Nabatieh (destroyed camps)	15,838
Total	206,265

* In most camps the actual number of residents is much higher than the official UNRWA figures suggest. Source: UNRWA (Online).

Unable to leave, the majority of the refugees pass their lives in increasingly overcrowded refugee camps. Some camps, like Shatila in Beirut, are still heavily scarred from the civil war and the “war of the camps” and many residents still lack potable water, electricity and sanitary facilities. Because the camp areas cannot be enlarged, the residents need to find alternative ways of fitting more people into the already cramped space. Their remaining option is to add additional stories to existing houses, although building regulations prohibit this. In the larger camps shops, bazaars and small enterprises (hairdressers, pharmacies, restaurants etc.) have sprung up. In recent years, some of the camps have seen major changes

in their ethnic composition or have had sections turned into offices. In Beirut, only Burj Baranjeh remains a “pure” Palestinian camp. Currently, more than half of the residents in Shatila are Syrian guest workers (Hammarberg 2000).³ A number of flats and houses in the tiny Mar Elias camp in Beirut are now used as office space for political parties while many of the original residents have moved out. In the offices party emblems are proudly displayed, as are posters of slain leaders and cadres together with pictures of Palestinian martyrs, as well as other examples of group emblems and paraphernalia. In the offices of left-wing parties posters of revolutionary icons such as Che Guevara have found their place amidst large maps of Mandatory Palestine, the unitary symbol of the Palestinian nationalist struggle and the ultimate destination of the exiles.

Refugee camps have their own bureaucracy and leadership, the most important being the camp manager and popular committees (PC). The popular committees are quasi-official bodies mostly concerned with the daily running of the camps, conflict resolution and arbitration, dispensing social provisions (together with UNRWA) and being the camps’ mouthpiece vis-à-vis Lebanese authorities and law enforcement agencies.⁴ The popular committee’s main function is to ensure law and order within the camps.

The phrase “popular committees” is misleading because the leadership in the camps is not based on a popular vote or the projected strength of one group or party vis-à-vis others. Instead, the make-up of the committees tends to reflect the strength of third-party interests, in particular those of Syria, to which the Lebanese authorities as well as Palestinian political groups remain subservient. This is the reason why the chairmanship of popular committees in Beirut camps such as Burj Baranjeh and Shatila is vested with pro-Syrian parties. Instead of openly challenging the leadership of popular committees, a common strategy is creating rival committees with similar names and functions; this diffuses the political and social authority of the committees and makes solving social problems more difficult and time-consuming (Suleiman 1999: p. 76).

Since the camps function largely as autonomous bodies, internal “policing” is left to the political leadership of the camp. Conflict resolution is mostly local and follows customary rules and regulations rather than those inscribed in the Lebanese penal code (see, Petee 1987). This does not mean that the camps and their residents are out of reach of Lebanese laws. With the lifting of the Cairo Accords by the Lebanese authorities in 1987, the right to conduct military activities from Lebanese soil ended, as did the refugees’ formal right to bear arms. At one point a deal to surrender arms in return for civic rights was close to being accepted by the Lebanese authorities but then fell through. The demand for surrendering arms was therefore never enforced. To this day the refugee camps are flooded with light arms. While the Lebanese security forces can, and sometimes does, enter the camps to round up suspects or search for weapons, the authorities prefer monitoring and surveillance instead of military involvement in the camps. Ayn Hilwa, the most conflict-ridden camp in the country, is surrounded by barbed wire and legal entry is only possible through a few

³ This is one reason for social problems in the camp and the inability to solve them.

⁴ Abu Badr (Chairman, PC Burj Baranjeh), *interview*, 6 May 2003; Abu Hani (Chairman, PC Shatila), *interview*, 14 May 2003.

checkpoints guarded by the Lebanese army, with secondary checkpoints manned by armed guards representing the popular committees. In recent years the boundaries of all the camps have been more closely demarcated and are subject to stricter security measures (Peteet 1998). In addition, the camps themselves have come under scrutiny and been branded “security islands”, a euphemism meaning that they are beyond the reach of Lebanese law, harbouring weapons and sheltering criminals and assassins (see, Suleiman 1999: p. 72). To the refugees, however, the camps are better viewed as “islands of insecurity” which serve to isolate them from the host population (Sayigh 2000). This has increased the refugees’ feeling of alienation from mainstream society and severed personal ties to local residents, in effect creating an encapsulated refugee existence and identity.

This has intensified the distrust between Palestinians and the host population as well as the Lebanese government. Although the recent onslaught on the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza sparked widespread pro-Palestinian protest marches in the spring of 2002, this has not eased the refugees’ living conditions (Ziade 2002: 56). The general feeling of despair and misery among the Palestinians in Lebanon and the refusal to address their plight by the Lebanese government has been likened to a “ticking bomb” (Nasrallah 1997: p. 358). So far, however, there has not been any open protest from the refugee community, a reflection of their precarious situation and constant threat of expulsion. The Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon is an impoverished and disenfranchised minority, living in a hostile environment. How have the refugees coped with this situation during their alienated exile in Lebanon?

Palestinian identity

The Palestinians exiled since being expelled from Mandatory Palestine in 1948 represent the longest lasting refugee exile group in modern history. The forced exodus, which the refugees refer to as the “tragedy” (Ar. *naqba*), is a catastrophic event that unites the refugee community and can only be reconciled when the refugees are entitled to return to their homeland. The importance of returning is reflected in the commonly used self-ascription “returners” instead of the legal term “refugee” (see, Peteet 1998: p. 75). For the refugees it has been important to preserve their cultural unity and integrity in the “diaspora”, better described as a state of “alienated exile” (Ar. *ghourba*) that is qualitatively different from the Jewish experience ingrained in the term diaspora (Sayigh 1979).

The refugees have in a number of ways sought out strategies for enduring in exile and surviving as a distinct ethnic group with a common history and future destiny. In order to create a symbolic continuity with the past, the refugees have organised space so that the camp’s quarters carry the names of the villages they left behind. This serves two purposes: it keeps the memory of the past alive and inscribes this imagery into the daily lives of the residents. This is also the case with story telling, narration and oral narratives which keep the memory of the homeland and the hardships in exile alive (see, Sayigh 1987, 1994, 1998). The importance of preserving their ethnic identity is also one reason for the prevalence of marriage endogamy. In addition, cultural activities are used to increase knowledge and appreciation of their cultural heritage, especially among the youth. This serves to

recreate and reaffirm Palestinian identity and uniqueness and as such the Palestinians in exile may be considered a moral community (Peteet 1998).

Nonetheless, despite the constant struggle to resist marginalisation, the refugee community has not been able to prevent a shift from being considered “refugees”, a culturally significant label in the case of the Palestinians, to simply being an ethnic “minority” (see , Peteet 1996). Palestinian refugee identity is not only individual and social but to a large degree communal and political. The three pillars of Palestinian political activism in Lebanon are as follows: the provision of civic rights to the refugees, resisting naturalisation, locally referred to as “implantation” (Ar. *tawteen*), and upholding the “right of return” to their homeland/natal villages. These claims may at first glance seem contradictory. The refugees demand “civic rights”, that is the right to live and work in Lebanon, but do not seek citizenship (which, *inter alia*, includes the right to vote). This is because naturalisation would compromise the right of return and symbolically erase the Palestinian refugee community, as well as being construed as a victory for the Israeli authorities, who categorically reject the refugees’ “right of return”. Upholding the right of return is therefore a highly charged symbolic issue, especially for the older generation, and bridges past wrongdoings (forced exodus) with future redemption (returning to Palestine). Nonetheless, a large number of Palestinians have been naturalised in recent years. Since 1994 decrees by the Lebanese authorities have naturalised about 30,000 Palestinians, the majority of them from the former security zone to the south of the country (Peteet 1996: p. 29).

Despite efforts to prevent the disintegration of the refugee community, more than fifty years of tumultuous exile in Lebanon, which includes, to name but a few episodes, civil war (1975–90), factional conflict during the “war of the camps” (1982–87) and progressive economic marginalisation and exclusion in the post-war decade, have taken their toll (see, U.S. Committee for Refugees 1999). In recent years there has been growing social discontent, disillusionment, despair and pent-up anger, especially among the youth (Ar. *shebaab*). Although a number of Palestinian NGOs provide vocational training for the youth,⁵ it is inevitable that social problems earlier unheard of have now found their way into sections of the refugee community. This includes drug abuse, crime and prostitution, as well as the increased presence of Islamist groups in the refugee camps (see, Hammarberg 2000: p. 12).

Lebanese hosts

Lebanon has been a reluctant host to the Palestinian refugees since 1948. A mainstay of Lebanese policies vis-à-vis the Palestinian refugees has been preventing their permanent integration and settlement in the country. Unlike other Arab countries such as Jordan and Syria, which also serve as hosts to Palestinian refugees, Lebanon did not grant the Palestinians civic rights and only a few were granted work permits (Shiblak 1997: 263). In recent years the Lebanese government has removed refugee privileges: in May 2001 the Lebanese government passed a law prohibiting Palestinians from buying property (Khalidi

⁵ Kasseem Aina, *interview*, 9 May 2003; Suikaina Salameh, *interview*, 6 May 2003.

2001: p. 17). However, the most extreme measure used to discriminate against Palestinians is preventing them from holding jobs and seeking higher education. Palestinians are barred from entering more than seventy high and low status professions so that they come to form a permanent underclass. To escape this fate a few have been able to obtain Lebanese citizenship although traditionally this has been condemned as unpatriotic (see, Sayigh 1995: p. 41). Recently, some Palestinians have left the country voluntarily so that the total number of refugees may now (unofficially) be around 200,000 (Ziade 2002: p. 57).

The reasons for the Lebanese authorities' policy of preventing naturalisation are a mix of foreign policy objectives demanding that Israel honour the refugees' right of return and domestic pressures related to the country's political system.⁶ Lebanon is home to 25 different denominations which can broadly be fitted into two opposing ethno-religious blocs: Christians versus Muslims. Because of the precarious balance between Christians and Muslims, a nation-wide census has not been held since 1932 (Maktabi 1999). Instead, the results from the 1932 census are used to underwrite the current power-sharing between Christians and Muslims.⁷ This makes Lebanon's consociational democracy very sensitive to the numerical balance between Christians and Muslims (Jabbara and Jabbara 2001).

The Palestinian refugees, the majority of them Sunni Muslims, currently constitute about 10 per cent of Lebanon's population (currently around 3.5 million) which explains why naturalization of the refugees will upstage the precarious demographic and religious balance between Christians and Muslims as (as well as the balance between Sunni and Shia Muslims). Naturalisation of Palestinians in Lebanon is therefore considered a recipe for conflict between Christians and Muslims (el Khazen 1997). This has made the Lebanese suspicious of the Palestinians and many consider them a threat to the country's stability (Nasrallah 1997). This view is shared among Christian and Muslim Lebanese communities alike (Azar and Mullet 2002).

This is especially important as Lebanon is still struggling to overcome years of civil war that have caused political instability (Haddad 2002), economic turmoil (Norton 1999) and lingering tensions between the country's multiple confessional identities (Johnson 2001). Since the ending of the civil war, Lebanon has to a considerable degree been able to put its war-torn past behind it, but there are nonetheless growing tensions between Christians and Muslims and a resurgent sectarianism in present day Lebanon. This is especially poignant since Lebanon's economic troubles have sharpened the conflict between Palestinians and the host population, many of whom blame the Palestinians for igniting the civil war.

Lebanon is a middle income country with huge income disparities. The macro-economic framework favours the tertiary service sector, in particular banking, which is the cornerstone of the country's rentier economy.⁸ Rebuilding the country has incurred large costs and failed economic policies have left the country

⁶ Khalil Shatawi, *interview*, Beirut, 13 May 2003.

⁷ Without a nationwide census the size of confessional groups is uncertain but informed guesses suggest that the "Muslims" (Shia, Sunni, Druze) constitute about 58 per cent of the population and the "Christians" (Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics etc.) about 42 per cent.

⁸ Antoine Haddad, *interview*, Beirut, 13 May 2003.

heavily indebted (Norton 1999). The country's stagnant economy is now burdened with a debt of US\$ 31 billion (180 per cent of GDP). Debt servicing alone amounts to US\$ 3 billion annually. Recent studies of living conditions in Lebanon show that about one third of the population is below the poverty line (MoASA and UNDP 1998).⁹ More troubling still is the fact that income disparities appear to be correlated with confessional identities: poor and Muslim and rich and Christian. Overall, Muslim majority areas to the south (Shia), the east (Shia) and the north (Sunni) are the country's poorest.¹⁰ There are indications that the economic downturn and widespread poverty has reinforced Islamist sentiments among Sunni and Shia Muslims and increased support for alternative, Islamist forms of government. In particular, the poverty stricken rural areas with a Muslim majority population have turned to confessional parties for assistance in a context of low government investment and neglect (Haddad 2002: p. 215). The Palestinian refugees are Lebanon's most impoverished and disenfranchised community: an important question is, therefore, whether there are concurrent processes of Islamisation among them too.

A useful starting point for examining this question is Suleiman's (1999) study of political actors in Ayn Hilwa (a.k.a., 'Ayn al-Hilwa, Ein el-Hilweh), a refugee camp on the outskirts of the coastal port Sidon in southern Lebanon. Ayn Hilwa is not only the biggest but also the most conflict-ridden camp in the country, with frequent skirmishes between political factions. Suleiman provides a detailed overview of the politically active groups in Ayn Hilwa, which can be split into three main categories: loyalist, Islamist and oppositional (Table 2). The "loyalists" are secular groups formed around PLO's largest faction Fateh and share its secular ideology and political programme. The "Islamists" are a heterogeneous mix of Palestinian and Lebanese Islamists with divergent ideologies and political agendas. While some remain ideologically opposed to Fateh and its policies vis-à-vis Israel (Hamas, Islamic Jihad), others seek to break Fateh's political hegemony in Lebanese refugee camps, if necessary by violent means (Osbat al-Ansar). The "oppositional" camp is likewise a heterogeneous coalition of secular parties, many of them breakaway factions from Fateh itself, which find a common ground in their difference with Fateh and the loyalists over their policy of appeasement vis-à-vis Israel. In the camps there is also a diverse range of committees and groups whose main function is not political but bureaucratic. Still, control of the popular committees and trade union groups does provide political gains and leadership of them is therefore coveted and sometimes turns violent. As shown by Suleiman, the political situation in the camps is premised on *internal* battles over political hegemony of the camp itself, and *external* policy differences over the Palestinian nationalist struggle.

Suleiman's article demonstrates that Islamist groups are politically significant in Palestinian refugee camps and gives important insights into the composition of political groups and actors.¹¹ However, there is no further discussion of why and

⁹ A poverty line for Lebanon has not been computed due to its sensitive political implications. The report therefore adopted an indirect measure of poverty known as "unsatisfied basic needs" (Jerve 2001).

¹⁰ Adib Nehme, *interview*, Beirut, 14 May 2003.

¹¹ Although this survey refers to a single camp, Suleiman argues that the findings are applicable to all camps in southern Lebanon, but differs from camps in Beirut and to the north (*ibid.*: 77). There

how they have come to enjoy this position. To do that, we need more details of the groups or their ideology, which are necessary to understand the reasons behind the support for various Islamists groups among Palestinian refugees.

Table 2
Political actors in a Lebanese refugee camp (Ayn Hilwa)

Loyalist	Islamist	Oppositional
Fateh	Hamas	Palestinian National Alliance * Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFs)**
Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)	Islamic Jihad	Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)**
People's Party (Communist)	Islamic Group (Jamaa al-Islamiyya)	
Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF)	Islamic Philanthropic Association (al-Abash)	[Trade Union Groups]
Arab Liberation Front (ALF)	Ansar Group	[Village Committees]
	Miscellaneous Islamist Groups	[Popular Committees]

* Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), Fateh-Intifadah, Sa'eka, Palestine Liberation Front, Palestine Popular Struggle Front (PPSF), Revolutionary Communist Party, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

** PFLP and DFLP, both leftist secular parties, oscillate between the opposition and the loyalist (Fateh) camp.

Source: Compiled from Suleiman (1999, pp. 72-76)

Lebanese Islamism

Lebanon is a small country with a large number of ethnic and religious minorities, hence it is not a country which gives rise to powerful Islamist groups. Thus, most Islamist groups in Lebanon are offshoots of movements originating outside the country, in particular Egypt and Syria (Sunni groups), as well as Iran (Shia groups) (Khashan 1998: p. 225). Among the first studies of Islamism in Lebanon was Marius Deeb's (1986) overview of militant Sunni groups. Deeb argued that the Iranian revolution, Syrian sponsorship, the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon as well as the economic crisis were the main reasons for the formation of Islamist groups after 1980 (ibid: p. 2-3). In post-war Lebanon, there has been a steady growth of fringe Islamist groups; there are now more than twenty Islamist groups and parties in the country (see, 1997, 1998, Hamzeh 2001b, Khashan 1998). They can be divided broadly into either "quietist" (activists) or "militant" (Hamzeh 1998) but in practice this dichotomy is too rigid.¹² In Lebanon there are many examples of Islamist groups starting out as "quietist" which later engage in political violence. There are also examples of the opposite; that is, groups starting out as "militant" later embrace power by the ballot box. In order to capture the diversity of Islamist groups, this paper divides them into four different types: "mainstream" (Hizbollah, Jamaa al-Islamiyya), "quietist" (Al Abash), "militant" (Hamas, Islamic Jihad) and "revolutionary" (Takfir wa al-Hijra, Osbat al-Ansar). The "mainstream" and "quietist" groups remain wedded to national concerns in Lebanon and take only a cursory interest in the Palestinian cause as such. Not so

the camps are under the control of the opposition groups rather than the PLO loyalists and there are no rival Fateh committees. The northern camps (Beddawi, Nahr al-Bared) also manifest significant activity by the Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups such as al-Abash (Islamic Philanthropic Association) and the Islamic Group (*Jamaa al-Islamiyya*) as well as minor groups such as the Islamic Liberation Party, the Daw'ah party and Wahabi groups.

¹² A. Nizar Hamzeh, *interview*, Beirut, 16 May 2003.

with the two militant Palestinian groups (Hamas and Islamic Jihad): to them all political goals are secondary to liberating Palestine. The “revolutionary” groups engage in guerrilla warfare in order to turn Lebanon into an Islamic state. Using Palestinian refugee camps as a base for their activities, they are involved in a bloody vendetta with rival political factions. While groups such as Hizbollah (Hamzeh 2000, Ranstorp 1994, Saad-Ghorayeb 2002), Hamas (Mishal and Sela 2000) and Islamic Jihad (Abu-Amr 1994) have been studied in detail, the membership and ideology of the clandestine and revolutionary groups are veiled in secrecy (but see, Hamzeh 1998, Khashan 1998).

Mainstream

Hizbollah

It is impossible to understand the growth of Islamism in Lebanon without considering the role of Hizbollah (Party of God), the most influential of the Islamist parties, which was founded in 1982. Hizbollah defies easy categorisation and is both a political party and a resistance movement. Hizbollah has since the beginning been strongly opposed to Israel and the organisation scored a major victory when its fighters forced an Israeli withdrawal from the southern security zone, which had been occupied by Israeli forces assisted by Lebanese militia, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), since 1982 (Murdon 2000). Hizbollah has demonstrated not only its military prowess, but also its political acumen. Underlining the fluency of labels such as “militant” and “quietist”, Hizbollah has since the Taif Accords remade itself from a militant organisation into a major democratic force and vocal mouthpiece for the Lebanese Shia (Hamzeh 2000). Hizbollah has in recent years reoriented its political goals towards an Islamic nationalism and process that has been termed “Lebanonization” (Ranstrop 1998). The reorientation of Hizbollah has been problematic and has led to clerical factionalism inside the organisation, including the ouster of Sheikh Nasrallah’s opponent Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli (ibid.).

Hizbollah stayed outside the devastating “war of the camps” which pitted Palestinian factions against each other and the Syria-backed Amal militia. This fact, together with Hizbollah’s strongly anti-Israeli stance, is one of the reasons why the organisation enjoys close relations with the Palestinian refugee community and its leaders.¹³ Hizbollah’s main constituency is the Lebanese Shia, but the organisation also provides social welfare to Palestinian refugees. In the dilapidated Shatila camp, for example, Hizbollah provides residents with potable water and supplies diesel for the run-down power generators. Hizbollah’s leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah has on various occasions supported Palestinians’ claims to civil rights but without committing the organisation itself to this goal (Sayigh 2001: p. 103). Nonetheless, there are limitations to how far the organisation can embrace Palestinian political aspirations without alienating its Shia constituency, which remains the organisation’s power base. Nonetheless, Hizbollah’s pragmatism and willingness to compromise has seen its influence grow beyond its narrow confessional constituency. Through alliances with secular and Christian

¹³ The Shia Amal Movement has been left out in this overview because it does not attract Palestinian supporters or sympathisers, see (Deeb 1988).

Lebanese parties, Hizbollah has been able to win several seats in municipal elections and in 1996 won seven out of 128 parliamentary seats (Hamzeh 2000).

Hizbollah supports social welfare programmes on a very large scale, running subsidised hospitals, schools and housing schemes, which in many areas eclipse those provided by the state (Hamzeh 1998: p. 263). This has led to Hizbollah rivalling the government in the Shia-dominated parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa valley, where it is the *de facto* government (see, Hamzeh 1994). Hizbollah has also been able to circumvent the traditional patron-client networks *zu'ama*, networks formerly controlled by an urban-based merchant elite of political bosses (Ar. *za'im*, pl. *zu'ama*) (Johnson 1985, 1996). The civil war disrupted these networks and replaced *zu'ama* clientelism with a new and more complex mix of clientelist networks developed around militias, parties and Islamist groups such as Hizbollah (see, Hamzeh 2001a). This has enabled the organisation to compete successfully in municipal elections. The organisation's success has served as an inspiration for smaller and less important Islamist groups, which seek to emulate Hizbollah strategies.

Jamaa al-Islamiyya

The Jamaa al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group) is an urban-based Sunni Islamist movement founded in Tripoli in 1964 and today operating primarily in Sunni majority areas such as Tripoli, Sidon and Akkar. The group advocates the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon and has called for a holy war (*al-jihad al-muqaddas*) against Israel. Unlike Osbat al-Ansar, the Jamaa reconciled itself with the Taif Accords which ended the civil war (1975–90) and established Lebanon's Second Republic. The organisation took part in the first parliamentary elections in 1992 and won three seats, and just one seat in 1996 (Hamzeh 1998). Like its larger Shia counterpart Hizbollah, the Jamaa is also engaged in providing social welfare but on a much more modest scale.

The Jamaa's ideology is influenced by radical Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb (1900–66) and his follower, Fathi Yakan, a native of Tripoli and member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Hamzeh 1997). The Jamaa's political activism is marked by being opposed to the traditional Sunni establishment of political and religious leaders. The organization has also been involved in fights with moderate Sunni groups espousing a spiritual ("quietist") ideology such as aAl Abash and Harakat at-Tawhid al-Islami (The Islamic Unity Movement).

There are indications that the economic downturn in Tripoli and its rural hinterland (Akkar region) has reinforced Islamist sentiments and grown support for such Sunni Islamist groups as the Jamaa. This coincides with the fact that the lack of government services has increased the support for alternative forms of government (Haddad 2002: p. 215). As shown above the Jama'a is a Sunni Islamist organisation whose objectives can be likened to that of Hizbollah, that is, Islamist nationalism. Like Hizbollah, the Jama'a has embraced power through the ballot box and with the help of joining mixed coalition lists has secured votes outside Sunni majority municipalities (Hamzeh 2000).

Quietist

al-Abash

The al-Abash is an untypical Islamist group whose doctrines, political ideology and non-violent stance set it apart from other groups. The group blends Sufism with elements of Sunni and Shii theology and may be termed charismatic because of the personal devotion members have to the group's founder, Sheikh Abdallah al-Abdari (also known as al-Abashi). The group is commonly referred to as Al Abash ("the Ethiopian"), because of al-Abdari's Ethiopian origins. After being expelled from Ethiopia in 1947, al-Abdari eventually settled in Beirut in 1950. He took over the leadership of the movement in 1983. By the end of the civil war, aggressive proselytization (uncommon among Sufi orders) swelled the group's ranks to become one of Lebanon's largest Islamic movements (Hamzeh and Dekmejian 1996) and in 1992 the organisation won one seat in the parliamentary elections. Because of its pro-Syrian and pro-Western stance, the al-Abash has been targeted by rival Islamist groups, in particular the Jamaa al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group). In 1995, following many bloody clashes between al-Abash and the Islamic Group, Sheikh Nizar al-Halabi, the al-Abash president, was killed by unknown assailants (ibid.).

The spectacular rise of al-Abash is particularly interesting given the fact that most Islamist groups espouse a Wahabi ideology and adamantly reject Sufism. Al-Abdari and his followers also condemn the use of political violence, including the violence committed by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in the Middle East. Importantly, the movement also rejects the goal common to Islamists of all persuasions: the creation of an Islamic state, as well as jihad as a means to achieve this goal (ibid.). Additionally, the movement rejects the argument inherent in Sayyid Qutb's notion of *jahiliyya*, a Quranic term which refers to the pre-Islamic condition, combining ignorance and savagery. Taken to its logical conclusion, Qutb's radical views legitimised internecine killings among Muslims.¹⁴ In sum, the al-Abash is a (predominantly) non-violent, spiritualist movement which preaches moderation and tolerance. In al-Abash teachings and literature there is no special reference to Palestinians or Palestinian rights except support for UN Resolution 245 demanding an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (ibid.).

Militant

Hamas

Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya) was founded in 1987 shortly after the first Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) broke out (Hroub 2000, Mishal and Sela 2000). The goals and ideology of Hamas are inscribed into the organisation's charter (Hamas 1988) and can briefly be summarised as ending Israeli occupation by the use of force (in the form of a *jihad*) to establish a Palestinian state in all of Mandatory Palestine. Hamas is often portrayed purely as a militant organisation,

¹⁴ Qutb and the Islamists following in his footsteps argued that current Muslim societies had reverted to *jahiliyya* and must be defeated (through a jihad) in order to re-establish divine rule (*hakimiyya*). Qutb argued that where *jahiliyya* prevailed, the members of society were no longer Muslims (*takfir*, "impious") and could legitimately be killed (see, Knudsen 2003).

but in reality the organisation is better described as pragmatic. This pragmatism is borne out of the fact that “one who aspires to lead the Palestinian nationalist movement, has to be pragmatic”.¹⁵ Hamas also prides itself on its credibility among the Palestinian people, due, in part, to the organisation’s transparency. Hamas endorses the use of violence, including suicide attacks, but the organisation stresses that it only targets Jews in Israel and never attacks Jews outside the country. Although Hamas favours an Islamic state in Palestine, their first priority is to Islamise the society. Hamas rejects negotiations with Israel, considering this as tantamount to recognising the Israeli state. Hamas’s political goals are narrowly linked to liberating Palestine by all means available. The organisation does not have a political manifesto aimed at the refugees except sharing the three goals common to Islamist and secular groups alike: civic rights for refugees, resisting naturalisation and upholding the refugees’ “right of return”. Local spokesmen for Hamas see their presence in Lebanon as an integral part of the Palestinian people’s nationalist struggle but are vague about details of the movement’s history and activities in Lebanon. Hamas does not recruit members for the Palestinian *intifadah* from Lebanon, but provides its trademark social services and social welfare for the refugees. As on the West Bank and Gaza, the social work of Hamas is a major reason for the grassroots support the organisation enjoys in Lebanese refugee camps.

Islamic Jihad

Islamic Jihad (i.e., Palestinian Islamic Jihad) was founded around 1979–80 as an outgrowth of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. The main pillars of the organisation’s philosophy can be summarised as “Islam, Palestine and jihad”.¹⁶ There are subtle ideological differences between Islamic Jihad and Hamas: the former tends towards a more universal application of jihad, while Hamas has adopted a more nationalist interpretation of jihad, restricting the term to armed resistance against Israel (Milton-Edwards 1992). Compared to Hamas, Islamic Jihad tends to be more violent and, possibly due to its pan-Arabic orientation, places less importance on providing social services. Nonetheless, in Lebanon the organisation is engaged in social activities and runs cultural clubs, clinics and kindergartens in the camps. However, due to its weaker funding, it is less involved in charitable activities than its more influential counterpart Hamas (see, JPS 1999: p. 68). This may be one reason why Islamic Jihad has seen its support wane in recent years and its supporters shift their allegiance to Hamas. Like Hamas, Islamic Jihad is a movement rather than a party and the group’s support among the refugees cannot easily be measured. As with Hamas, local spokesmen for the organisation do not offer detailed information on the group’s history and activities in Lebanon.

Revolutionary

Takfir wa al-Hijra

Takfir wa al-Hijra (Redemption and Flight) is a militant group which was founded in 1996 by Bassam Ahmed Kanj (a.k.a. Abu A’isha), a Lebanese educated in the

¹⁵ Abu Ahmed Fadl (Hamas), *interview*, Ayn Hilwa 15 May 2003.

¹⁶ Shakib (Islamic Jihad), *interview*, Ayn Hilwa, 17 May 2003.

US.¹⁷ By the end of the 1980s he had become involved with fundraising for the Afghan *mujaheddin* and moved to Pakistan for a year, where he met many of those who later became key figures in the close-knit movement. The group was aided by donations from foreign associates; these were used to purchase arms supposedly provided by a former head of Hizbollah, the rebellious Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli. The group subsequently established a camp in the Dinniyeh mountains east of Tripoli in order to provide military and ideological training to followers.¹⁸ According to reports, the group's core was Lebanese but also included a significant number of Palestinians and Syrians as well as other Arab nationalities. There the group, now numbering perhaps 200–300 men, developed plans to establish an Islamic “mini-state”, later to be extended to all of Lebanon. The doctrine of the movement is influenced by Wahabism, and the group's ultimate goal was to establish a united “State of Islam” in the Arab world with the same Caliphate government system that the Prophet Mohammed instituted. The group's name is a reflection of its ideological links to the militant Islamic group of the same name (*al-Takfir wa al-Hijra*), which emerged from the ranks of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the mid-1970s (see, Abu-Amr 1993: p.8).

The Lebanese authorities took little notice of this clandestine group until they allegedly bombed Orthodox Churches in and around Tripoli in October and November 1999. At that time, the Syrian authorities were busy hunting down Islamic militants. The manhunt spilled over to Lebanon and the Lebanese authorities were instructed to take action against the Dinniyeh militants. In early January 2000 a unit of 15,000 Lebanese soldiers attacked the rebel bases with heavy artillery and tanks. About twenty-five rebels were killed, including the leader Bassam Kanj, and about fifty-five arrested. The remaining militants fled to southern Lebanon where they sought refuge in the Ayn Hilwa refugee camp. Now referred to as the “Dinniyeh Group”, they were shielded by members of Osbat al-Noor. Members of the group were eventually persuaded by mediators to leave the camp of their own accord, but it is not known whether they gave themselves up to the authorities or remain fugitives.

Osbat al-Ansar (a.k.a. Ansar Group)

Osbat al-Ansar (League of Partisans) is a loosely organized Sunni group espousing a Wahabi ideology.¹⁹ The organisation was founded in 1985 by Sheikh Hisham Shreidi. In the 1980s Shreidi had been a senior leader of the Lebanese Islamist group Jamaa al-Islamiyya. The group consists of both Palestinian and Lebanese members and its main power bases are the refugee camps Ayn Hilwa in Sidon and Nahr al-Bared outside Tripoli.

¹⁷ Takfir wa al-Hijra is a clandestine group about which little is known. The information here has been collected from various on-line sources such as the Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, www.meib.org/articles/0001_11.htm www.meib.org/articles/0109_11.htm

¹⁸ In the 1970s, the Dinniyeh region was one of the bases of the Islamic Group's (Jamaa) militias (Deeb 1986: p.5).

¹⁹ Osbat al-Ansar is a clandestine group about which little is known. The information about the group has been collected from various net-based sources, including al-Ahram Weekly, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/431/re4.htm> the Lebanese Foundation for Peace, www.free-lebanon.com/LFPNews/August_2002/August9/august9.html#_1_2, the Center for Defence Information, www.cdi.org/terrorism/asbat.cfm and the US Department of State's Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003: Middle East, www.state.gov/documents/organization/20115.pdf.

In 1991 Shreidi was assassinated on the orders of Amin Kayid, then the commander of Yasser Arafat's Fateh movement in Ayn Hilwa. Shreidi was succeeded by his chief aide Ahmad Abd al-Karim al-Saadi, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohjen, who reshaped the group's ideology and sharpened its political aspirations. In the early 1990s, Osbat al-Ansar bombed nightclubs, theatres and liquor stores throughout Lebanon. Since then, the group has come into conflict with rival Palestinian and Islamist groups operating in and around Sidon. In 1995 members of the group killed Nizar Al Halabi, the leader of al-Abash, a rival Islamist group. Three Ansar members were convicted and subsequently executed for the murder of Halabi. In 1996 Abu Mohjen was sentenced to death in absentia for ordering the assassination. The whereabouts of Abu Mohjen are unknown but some sources claim he is hiding inside Ayn Hilwa.

Currently, Osbat al-Ansar is split into four different factions.²⁰ The mainstream faction is Osbat al-Ansar (League of Partisans) which is headed by Abu Mohjen's brother, Haitam Abdul Karim Al Saadi (a.k.a. Abu Tarek). The major breakaway faction is Osbat al-Noor (League of Enlightenment), which is headed by Sheikh Abdullah Shreidi, the elder son of the founder of Osbat al-Ansar, Sheikh Hisham Shreidi. Shreidi junior claims that his father never authorized Abu Tarek to lead the Osbat al-Ansar group, which may be one reason for the formation of Osbat al-Noor.

In 2002, fighting broke out between Osbat al-Ansar and Osbat al-Noor. The reason for this was a row over extradition of the Lebanese Islamist Badi Hamadeh (a.k.a. Abu Obeidah), who in July the same year killed three government soldiers who tried to arrest him in Sidon. Following this incident Hamadeh sought refuge in Ayn Hilwa, where he was shielded by members of Osbat al-Noor and activists from the Dinniyeh Group (see this below). The deadlock was broken when a Sidon cleric, Sheikh Maher Hammoud, with help from the mainstream Osbat al-Ansar, seized Hamadeh and delivered him to the Lebanese authorities waiting at the entrance of the camp. This incident put Osbat al-Ansar at odds with Osbat al-Noor. In a statement released to the press shortly after, Osbat al-Noor threatened to turn "Ayn Hilwa and the whole of Lebanon into a pool of blood" should there be further attempts at extraditing members of the Dinniyeh Group.²¹ They also charged Sheikh Hammoud with "betrayal" and shortly afterwards a bomb was found planted near the rostrum in the al-Qud's mosque where Hammoud delivered his sermons.

Currently, Osbat al-Ansar draws its members from three different groups: the clansmen of Abu Mohjen, Palestinians from various Lebanese refugee camps, and fighters who staged an uprising in the Dinniyeh mountains near Tripoli in January 2002 (see, below Dinniyeh Group). The group has, it is claimed, links to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and for this reason was put on the US Government list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) in 2002 (US Department of State 2002).

²⁰ The two minor splinter groups are Osbat al-Ansar – Emergency Bureau which is headed by Abu Mohjen's military commander Abu Obeida, and a group which carries the name of the mainstream group and is led by Imad Yassin, wanted by Lebanese authorities on a spate of criminal charges involving bombings and attacks.

²¹ Middle East Online, 7 August 2002, www.meo.tv/English/?id=2127.

The group's stronghold is the refugee camps Ayn Hilwa near Sidon and Nahr el Bared outside Tripoli. In Ayn Hilwa, Osbat al-Ansar has become a formidable challenge to Fateh's political hegemony. Since the tit-for-tat killings in the 1990s, the groups have been locked in a bloody vendetta. In May 1999 the Fateh official Amin Kayed was killed in a drive-by shooting and his aide Jamal Dayekh lost both legs in a booby-trapped car in Sidon. No one took responsibility for these attacks, but it is widely believed that Kayed was killed to avenge the murder of Osbat al-Ansar's founder, Sheikh Hisham Shreidi. In June the same year the group stood accused of killing four Sidon judges, most likely in revenge for the executions of three of Ansar's members in 1997.

In March 2003, a remote controlled bomb killed Abu Mohammed Al Masri, claimed to be one of the leaders of the splinter faction Osbat al-Noor. This incident sparked new clashes between the Ansar factions and Fateh with a new series of attacks and ambushes which killed two people (one of them Sheikh Abdulla Shreidi's relative, Ibrahim Shreidi) and injured the leader of Osbat al-Noor, Sheikh Abdulla Shreidi who later died from his injuries. On May 17th more serious armed clashes broke out between Fateh and what was probably a united group of fighters from Osbat al-Ansar and Osbat al-Noor.²² The total death toll in this incident was seven killed, all of them Fateh soldiers, and more than twenty wounded. Currently, there is a lull in the fighting and the parties to the conflict have signed a ceasefire agreement.²³ Still, there is no doubt that sooner rather than later, this will set off a new round of tit-for-tat killings.

Secular nationalist groups

In order to assess the influence of Islamist groups, it is also necessary to examine the role of secular parties and groups which compete with the Islamists for political hegemony and influence with the refugee population. The groups are all widely studied and therefore a short summary of their history and goals will suffice.

Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO)

The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) was founded in 1964 as a Palestinian nationalist umbrella organisation dedicated to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The biggest PLO faction, Fateh, was founded by Yasser Arafat, who since 1969 has been PLO's chairman. Fateh is the leading organization of the Palestinian resistance.²⁴ Fateh is the largest, oldest and best organised of the political movements and has offices and representatives in most camps in Lebanon, especially in the camps to the south. The organisation is also better funded and therefore able to underwrite social welfare programmes which are larger than those of their political rivals.²⁵ Like the other secular and religious political organisations, Fateh campaigns for civic rights for the refugees, resists implantation ("tawteen") and upholds the "right of return". The reason for the

²² BBC News Online, 19 May 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3041451.stm

²³ Middle East Online, 20 May 2003, <http://www.meo.tv/english/Default.pl?id=5626>.

²⁴ Fateh, which literally means victory or conquest, is also a reverse acronym of *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*, Palestinian National Liberation Movement.

²⁵ Fathi H. Abou El Ardaat (PLO), *interview*, Ayn Hilwa, 15 June 2003.

secular opposition group's falling out with Fateh is that unlike the opposition groups, Fateh and the PLO seek a peaceful solution to the Palestinian problem and support a two-state solution with borders to be established after negotiations. In order to accomplish this, PLO abrogated its charter, which could be summarised as the "three nos" – no recognition, no negotiation and no peace with Israel. Abrogating the charter turned these into "three yeses" – recognising the state of Israel, a negotiated settlement and peace between two nations. The high point of this policy was the negotiated solution to the Palestine problem known as the Oslo Accords signed by PLO and Israel in 1993. The main criticism of the Oslo Accords was that it was a sell-out and handed large parts of Mandatory Palestine to the Israelis with only empty promises to the Palestinians (see, JPS 1999). Moreover, the accords and the Declaration of Principles (DOP) did not resolve the refugees' rights of return and increased fears that in the end the rights would be compromised (Milton-Edwards 1996b: p. 207). This, together with the Palestinian uprising (*intifadah*), marked a growing opposition inside the PLO and criticism of its leader Yasser Arafat. Nonetheless, despite the criticism of Fateh and PLO, the organisation does have a loyal following in Lebanon, who prefer PLO's secular pragmatism to the opposition's Islamism.

While Fateh does not endorse political violence, it has nonetheless been involved in a bloody vendetta with political rivals, in particular fringe Islamist groups such as Osbat al-Ansar and Osbat al-Noor. Fateh seeks to uproot the organisation and has repeatedly targeted its leaders, including the recent attack which injured Osbat al-Noor's leader Sheikh Abdulla Shreidi and two of his bodyguards. Fateh's leader in Lebanon, Sultan Abul Aynain, took responsibility for the attack and said that Fateh had been "forced to decide Shreidi's fate" and accused him of terrorising the Ayn Hilwa refugee camp.²⁶

Palestinian National Alliance (PNA)

In Lebanon, Fateh is opposed by an alliance of secular opposition groups which includes secular parties, militias and splinter groups whose main difference with Fateh is their policies vis-à-vis Israel. The Palestinian National Alliance (PNA) competes with Fateh and Islamists for the ideological leadership of the Palestinian nationalist cause. They can collectively be labelled "absolutist" or "maximalist" because they reject the Oslo Agreement, demand full withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, refuse to accept the state of Israel and reject negotiations and support armed struggle against Israel. They include leftist *parties* such as PFLP and its breakaway twin, the DFLP, Sa'iqa (an offshoot of the Syrian al-Baath party), *militias* such as PFLP-GC (a breakaway from PFLP in 1968), minor *splinter groups* such as the Palestine Liberation Front (split from PFLP-GC in 1976), Fateh-Intifadah (split from Fateh in 1983), the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF) (founded in 1967), and *militant* groups such as the clandestine Fateh-Revolutionary Council (a.k.a. Abu Nidal Group).²⁷ All these groups are pro-Syrian and depend on Syrian sponsorship and political support. Currently, three of the groups (PFLP, PFLP-GC and Fateh Revolutionary Council) have been

²⁶ Middle East Online, 19 May 2003, www.meo.tv/english/Default.pl?id=5617.

²⁷ The details of the history, leadership and ideology of the secular opposition groups falls beyond the scope of this paper, whose main concern is the Islamist groups, but see, (Cobban 1992) and MidEast Web, www.mideastweb.org/palestinianparties.htm

put on the US list of foreign terrorist organisation (FTOs) (US Department of State 2002).

The groups are all secular in outlook but have formed a loose coalition with Islamist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which also oppose the Oslo Accords and authorise the use of violence to liberate Mandatory Palestine. This ten-member coalition was formerly known as the Coalition of Ten Contingents, but after the withdrawal of DFLP in 1997 has been known as the Palestinian National Alliance (PNA) (Suleiman 1999).²⁸ The clandestine Abu Nidal Group has remained unaligned and is not a member of the alliance. There is close operational cooperation between the secular and Islamist opposition groups so that PFLP-GC bases have been used to train Hamas and Islamic Jihad supporters and the PFLP-GC has been a major conduit of arms supplies to Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Palestine (Gambill 2002). The particularity of the Lebanese diaspora situation has brought Islamists and secular groups together under the banner of Palestinian nationalism. In Ayn Hilwa, the mainstream Islamist groups (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and the secular opposition groups (DFLP, PFLP) enjoy close relations. The leaders of the secular parties liken this to a triangle: in one corner are the Islamists, in the second the secular nationalist movement (Fateh) and in the third the democrats (DFLP, PFLP). “This is a healthy division – this is democracy”, they maintain.²⁹

The secular opposition groups share the goal of creating a Palestinian state, but differ on the means to achieve this goal. Unlike Fateh and PLO, they support armed struggle for liberating Palestine and reject negotiated settlements which relinquish claims to all of Mandatory Palestine (such as the Oslo Accords). This puts them at odds with the policies of Fateh and the PLO loyalists as well as their local political hegemony in some of the refugee camps. Nonetheless, the secular opposition groups have shied away from political violence as a means to end the political hegemony and leadership of Fateh and PLO in Lebanese refugee camps.

Conclusion

The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are doubly marginalised: they are deprived of civic rights and barred from returning to their homeland. Exiled in Lebanon, the refugees suffer from social and political marginalisation that leaves them disillusioned and frustrated. Can this explain the gradual radicalisation of the refugee community, expressed as increased support for militant Islamist groups? The conventional approaches to explaining the Islamic “resurgence” or “revival” in the Middle East (see overview in, Knudsen 2003) argue that it is fuelled by social and political discontent. The Palestinian Islamist revival in Gaza and the West Bank was a local response to the regional Islamist revival that after 1982 took the form of a political challenge to PLO and the secularisation of Palestinian society (Milton-Edwards 1996a: p. 8). It was not, however, simply a result of political discontent with Fateh and the PLO. Is this also the case for the rise of Islamist sentiments among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon? This paper suggests

²⁸ Interviews were carried out with members of the alliance, including Marwan Abul Al (PFLP), Suheil Natour (DFLP), Abu Hani (PFLP-GC), Abu Ali Hassan (Sa’eka), Abu Fadi Hammound (Fateh-Intifadah), Abu Ahmed Fadl (Hamas) and Shakib (Islamic Jihad).

²⁹ Marwan Abd’ul Al (PFLP), *interview*, Mar Elias, 12 May 2003.

that the rise of Islamism is a complex mix of contingent factors that is fuelled by social and political deprivation and shaped by divergent views on Palestinian nationalism (secular vs. Islamist), the Islamist revival in Lebanon and also what could be termed “strategic localisation” that turns refugee camps into battlefields between Palestinian factions. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the majority of the refugees appear weary of politics and disinclined to join Islamist movements. Their main concern is to protect Palestinian identity and remain loyal to the nationalist struggle to liberate their homeland.

The most striking feature of Palestinian political activism in Lebanon is its fragmentation. Both among the secular and Islamist lobbies we find a plethora of smaller and larger groups, often with conflicting views and sometimes involved in fratricidal battles that weaken the refugee community and ultimately undermine their quest for political hegemony. None of them are able to speak on behalf of the whole refugee community and this serves to “compartmentalise” and therefore weaken the Palestinian nationalist struggle to regain their homeland. Unlike the Shia Hizbollah, the Islamist groups cater for narrowly defined segments of the refugee population and have been unable to attract wider support. Instead, they cater for minor, camp-based constituencies which compete with secular groups for internal control of the camps and, by implication, of the Palestinian nationalist cause itself. This is especially the case for “revolutionary groups” such as Osbat al-Ansar and its offshoots, which are engaged in bloody turf war with Fateh over local leadership in the Ayn Hilwa refugee camp. However, the strength of the Islamist groups varies from camp to camp, reflecting the turmoil following the PLO’s departure from Lebanon in 1983 and the divisions that followed the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. This pitted Fateh “loyalists” against Islamists and secular opposition groups, although open violence did not break out. The support for Islamist groups could therefore be interpreted as a reaction against the policies of Fateh and PLO which spills over into internal battles in the refugee camps. The support for the two “militant” Palestinian Islamist groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, suggests that to a segment of the refugee population at least, Islamism is linked to nationalist sentiments that include defeating Israel and liberating all of Mandatory Palestine. However, the political goals of Hamas and Islamic Jihad are shared by a number of competing secular parties and movements and cannot therefore be a rallying point for the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Lebanon is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a Muslim majority population. This has given rise to a plethora of Islamist movements which are a response to, as well as catering for, specific local conditions, what could be termed Lebanese “exceptionalism”. An example of this is the emergence of “quietist groups” such as the al-Abash with its exceptionally heterodox blend of Sunni and Shia doctrines wedded to a Sufi framework. This heterodoxy has clearly been one reason for the nascent Islamist revival among refugees who are influenced by the radicalisation of their Lebanese Sunni co-religionists. An example of this is the support for Lebanese Islamist groups such al-Abash and the Jamaa al-Islamiyaa. The future of Sunni-based Islamism in Lebanon hinges on local factors, in particular socio-economic conditions, as well as regional factors such as relations with Syria, the Arab-Israeli peace process and the fate of Islamism in the Middle East more generally (see, Hamzeh 1998: p. 249). The

future of Islamism among Palestinian refugees, however, is more complex and uncertain.

The Palestinian refugee camps have become sites of contestation between militant Islamist movements and secular parties. The strength of this factional conflict is not simply a measure of Islamist sentiments in the refugee population but rather of the special security status that is accorded to the refugee camps. Lebanon is a small country (10,452 km²) where hiding is difficult and militant movements find it hard to evade government surveillance. This means that clandestine groups are drawn to Palestinian refugee camps, which can provide security cover and serve as a base for their political activities. An example of this is the military defeat of the Takfir wa al-Hijra in the Dinniyeh mountains and their subsequent refuge in the Ayn Hilwa camp. This strategic localisation represents a security problem for the camps and the Lebanese authorities and adds fuel to the claim that Palestinians are engaged in anti-Lebanese activities and should therefore be expelled. For the refugee community these incidents not only increase tensions in the camps across the country, but further tarnish the Palestinians' reputation in Lebanon. This can, and probably will, be used to as enforce even stricter army control and surveillance in the camps, additional measures to insulate Palestinians from economic and political activities and louder demands for expelling the refugees from Lebanese soil. It will also increase demands to enforce the abolished Cairo Accords and proceed with disarming the Palestinian factions and stationing army troops inside the refugee camps. In the end, it could force the Lebanese government to attempt a military "showdown" against the militants in the camps. The future of Islamism among Palestinian refugees is therefore uncertain and depends in large part on whether the refugee camps retain their independent status or become subservient to the Lebanese security forces.

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Summary

In recent years there has been increasing academic interest in Islamism in the Middle East, not least in Palestinian Islamism championed by groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are waging a bloody war of attrition against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. There has been less concern with Islamism among the Palestinian refugees dispersed in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. The paper outlines the sources of Islamism (“political Islam”) among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The rise of Islamism is a complex mix of contingent factors that is fuelled by social and political deprivation and shaped by divergent views on Palestinian nationalism (secular vs. Islamist), the Islamist revival in Lebanon and “strategic localisation” that turns refugee camps into battlefields between Palestinian factions. The Islamist groups cater for narrowly defined segments of the refugee population and have been unable to attract wider support. Instead, they cater for minor, camp-based constituencies which compete with secular groups for internal control of the camps and, by implication, of the Palestinian nationalist cause itself

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