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OPERATION AL-AQSA FLOOD IN LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN CAMPS: EMOTION AND REASON, SOLIDARITY AND MILITANCY

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Cover photo: Palestinians storm the Occupied Territories east of the city of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, 7 October. © Anas Mohammed - Shutterstock

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Operation Al-Aqsa Flood in Lebanon's Palestinian Camps: Emotion and Reason, Solidarity and Militancy

In September and early October of 2023, I was in Lebanon on a working visit to the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp after the outbreak of bloody battles between the Fatah movement and the "Muslim Youth."¹ The clashes in Ain al-Hilweh began on 30 July 2023, following the assassination of Abu Ashraf al-Armushi, Fatah's security chief for southern Lebanon. The Palestinian National Security Forces, affiliated with the Palestinian Authority, are responsible for protecting and managing the security of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, and communicating with the Lebanese army to solve any incidents that occur. The clashes continued intermittently until late September, and stopped completely as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood began, with rogue elements on both sides promising to resume their conflict after the Gaza War. This was not the first time that Ain al-Hilweh camp has witnessed an armed conflict between Fatah and the «Muslim youth.»

This battle was one round in a series of escalations between Fatah and various Islamist militant groups which began with the establishment of Osbat al-Ansar in 1990, then with more extremist groups that splintered from al-Ansar after it concluded a peace agreement with Fatah in 2002. In reality, this battle was a conflict between Fatah and Hamas over control of the camp, as part of their fundamental struggle over Palestinian legitimacy. One hypothesis suggests that the recent clashes in Ain al-Hilweh resulted from an attempt by a party with no stakes in reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas to scuttle the dialogue conference in Egypt held on 30 July 2023. Fatah members, residents, and activists in the camp claim that Hamas is fighting "with another's sword" against Fatah, that is, using unrecognized Islamic groups in the camp such as the Maqdisi group led by Fadi Al-Saleh, a close affiliate of Hamas who works with Turkish non-governmental organizations and supports the «Muslim Youth» groupings.

1 The "Muslim Youth" is a media moniker for a group of young people from Ain al-Hilweh camp from various Islamic parties and groups, linked only by their lack of affiliation to a specific Islamist faction. It is considered close to the Islamist groups in Ain al-Hilweh, which include the Osbat al-Ansar, Ansar Allah, and the "Islamic Mujahid Movement," as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both of which are party to the coalition to be explained later.

Historically, the camps in Lebanon were under the control of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and still are. However, since Mahmoud Abbas took over the administration of the Palestinian Authority, the Fatah movement, the PLO, and all Palestinian national institutions have marginalized refugees and failed to prioritize their cause. As a consequence, Palestinian refugees became increasingly discontent with Abbas' positions, even those within the ranks of the Fatah movement, albeit this discord was not always made public.

As for Hamas, it lost its base in the Yarmouk camp in Syria after the rift between it and the Syrian regime with the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, which made it search for another base among the refugees. Ain al-Hilweh camp was one of its areas of interest, as the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon where Islamist movements such as the Osbat al-Ansar and the Mujahid Movement were present, making the camp fertile ground for Islamist activity. Hence, it became logical for Hamas to compete with Fatah over governance of the Lebanese camps, the most important of which is Ain al-Hilweh as the capital of the Palestinian diaspora.

This article presents a preliminary analysis of the perception of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon towards Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the forms of solidarity with Gaza, both as socio-political solidarity and as militant engagement at a moment of intense competition between Fatah and Hamas. The article also raises the issue of the mobilization of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Hamas's attempts to establish influence in the camps in the aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. The article is based on official and informal meetings, observations during field visits to the camps in early October and November 2023, and a review of news coverage.

Fatah-Hamas Duality and Competition for Palestinian Legitimacy in the Camps

Since its inception in 1987, Hamas has shifted its vision of how to achieve a Palestinian state, which had a discernible impact on its relationship with the PLO. According to its founding charter, Hamas proclaimed itself as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, seeking to liberate Palestine from the river to the sea, and eliminate Israel. Since its founding, the movement has maneuvered to avoid integration into the PLO. Then, after assuming power in the Gaza Strip, and according

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to statements in April 2008 by the movement's leader, Khaled Mashal, the movement accepted a Palestinian state on the borders of 4 June 1967, without recognizing Israel, as an interim solution in exchange for a twenty-year-long truce with Israel.

With the issuance of what was called the movement's Document of General Principles and Policies in May 2017, Hamas removed any mention that it was a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, instead identifying itself as "a national Islamic Palestinian liberation and resistance movement, whose goal is to liberate Palestine and confront the Zionist project, with Islam as its point of reference in its principles, goals and means."

Fatah considers that Hamas is vying for Palestinian legitimacy by attempting to seize control of Palestinian decision-making in the camps, and fighting through unrecognized Islamist armed groups. However, apart from the authoritarian and ideological dispute between the two factions, the fundamental disagreement between them lies in Hamas not accepting to join the PLO because it does not agree to recognize Israel, as do the rest of the PLO's factions. This discrepancy makes the relationship between the two parties fragile and volatile, and places Hamas in a popular struggle to upend the PLO's legitimacy, which often leads to tensions within the camps.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Models of Sociopolitical Solidarity

There is no doubt that the Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023 against settlements surrounding the Gaza Strip, tipped the scales and demonstrated Israel's vulnerability and weakness. The attack humiliated Israel and injured its pride, taking advantage of the severe internal crisis afflicting it. It also caused embarrassment to Arab states against the backdrop of the imminent conclusion of a peace agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. On 7 October, the Palestinian camps and neighboring Lebanese cities celebrated the valor of the resistance factions and the damage it inflicted on Israel, which brought the Palestinian cause back to the forefront.

Al-Aqsa Flood has also had a direct impact on Palestinian refugees. To them, the battle for liberation had begun, and

their hopes of return had been revived. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon believe that they are directly concerned with the military operations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, because these will determine the future of the Palestinian cause and their fate as refugees. They believe that, in Lebanon, they have been subjected to many attempts by international parties to neutralize their cause, mostly through attempts to destroy the Ain al-Hilweh camp.

Palestinian refugee solidarity with Gaza has taken several forms, including social and political solidarity, through marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, sending memos to foreign embassies, and keenly observing field developments in Palestine as they unfold.

On 18 October 2023, a general strike was called in several Lebanese cities and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, and there was widespread mourning in denunciation of the massacre committed by the Israeli occupation army by bombing the Baptist hospital in the Gaza Strip. In a show of solidarity, most shops and commercial institutions closed for business, and various UNRWA institutions suspended their activity, while camp residents mobilized in support of Gazan resistance. The Lebanese government also issued a statement on 11 December 2023, calling for adherence to the global strike called by Palestinian activists and organizations. Boycott movements and youth initiatives emerged in the camps, calling on residents to boycott international companies and products due to their support for Israeli aggression against Gaza.

On a logistical level, popular committees, representing the civil administration in some camps in Lebanon, have managed to conduct emergency safety training and preparedness plans. These included investigating the possibility of building safe shelters throughout the camp, although there are concerns that these shelters will not accommodate the immense number of camp residents. Fears also arose that the camps would be targeted in the event of an air campaign, especially Burj al-Shemali camp in Tyre. Known as the "Martyrs' Camp", al-Shemali was the site of fierce resistance against the Israeli Defense Forces' 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Moreover, the Fatah and Hamas movements have had military preparations to confront Israel in the event of an expansion of the ongoing war.

Despite the varying political views of different factions, this period witnessed a form of Palestinian national unity between them, as the aggression against Gaza became the rallying flag among all Palestinian factions, despite long-standing disputes.

Palestinian Camps: “Unity of Battlefields” and Hezbollah’s Calculus

The war in Gaza cannot be considered in isolation of its impact on Lebanon, particularly on Palestinian refugees and refugee camps. In the past few months, south Lebanon has become a target to Israeli strikes and a theater of the Gaza war, despite the rules of engagement being respected by Israel and Hezbollah until today. However, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, announced on 3 November 2023, in his first speech since the war, that Lebanon had entered the battle since 8 October, saying that “since 8 October, the Islamic Resistance has been waging a real battle different from all the battles it had previously fought... The operations that began and escalated, forcing the enemy to maintain its forces [south of Lebanon] and reinforce them. Even the elite forces it wished to transfer from the West Bank to Gaza were brought to the borders of Lebanon, and these operations relieved Gaza of these forces and attracted them here.”

This speech demonstrated the disparity in opinions regarding Hezbollah’s non-interference in the Gaza war, and adherence to what is called “unity of the battlefields.” The reactions of camp residents were divided between disappointment, understanding, and elation. Some impatiently awaited the speech of the “Master of Resistance”, perhaps announcing the opening of the border front in support of Gaza. However, they were disappointed a second time after this speech. These people had aspired to open Lebanon’s southern border to conflict, and supported the involvement of Hezbollah and Palestinian factions in Lebanon in direct and large-scale battles against Israel. They supported the bombing of Haifa and Israeli strategic sites to force the enemy into a ceasefire and stop the massacres in the Gaza Strip. This group consists primarily of ordinary people with no active engagement in politics, but they found in the personality of Hassan Nasrallah an embodiment of the dream of Palestinian return, citing his speeches and his defense of Palestine.

As for the group of supporters of the “resistance axis” and those committed to its line and its literature, both Sunnis and Shiites, they had an undivided understanding of Nasrallah’s position and his rhetoric, justifying their position by reference to him being “the master” and possessing insights and a vision that no one else had. The third group is composed of critical youths who separate discourse and practice on the basis of gains and losses. This faction rejoiced over Hezbollah’s non-interference in the war, in the view that Gaza and Palestine

should lead the way. They saw this as the start of the war of liberation against Zionism and the siege of Gaza, the liberation of prisoners, the cessation of settlement-building, and standing against oppression, injustice, humiliation, and the tyranny of Netanyahu and his government. They wished the battle to remain in Gaza with a Palestinian decision and scope of implementation, that is, a completely Palestinian war, and for the sake of Palestine and its people.

Despite these differences of opinion, all were in a state of anxious anticipation and fear, fear that pushed some to the point of indifference. To those observing from the outside, it appears as if the camps are living in another world that has nothing to do with Gaza, or that they were unaware of what was unfolding there. However, this seeming apathy points to a sense of powerlessness, and fear that the war would lead to the Palestinian camps’ turn. Residents of the camps are worried about the enemy’s ability to corner the Gaza Strip, despite the heroic operations taking place there and Gazans’ ability to resist and confront Israeli aggression. However, defeating this enemy requires lifting the siege of Gaza, and providing it with relief aid, fuel, medicine, water, and food.

The positions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon regarding Operation Al-Aqsa Flood are divided between the emotional and the rational, a division that varies geographically as well as amid the different factions. The emotions expressed include pride in the heroism and steadfastness of the Palestinian resistance. The social environment in the south that supports Islamic Palestinian resistance is reflected directly in the Palestinian youth who are affiliated with the resistance axis or sympathize with it, whether from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or the factions of the Palestinian Coalition Forces,² which are Palestinian factions affiliated with the Syrian regime. Moving north across Lebanon, this emotional charge is diminished (without disappearing entirely), and becomes interrupted by critical analysis, rational narrative, and lines of questioning. This applies to supporters and affiliates of the Fatah movement. Despite popular resentment against what happened in Gaza in the first week following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, there is an emerging Palestinian national unity, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, there is also an unspoken Palestinian resentment over the lack of alternative plans to help civilians. The catastrophic losses Hamas incurred are seen as evidence of its inability to protect its population in Gaza. Emotionally, however, all Palestinians are supportive of the operation.

2 The Palestinian Coalition Forces is a grouping of Palestinian political parties founded in 1993 in Damascus. It is a staunch opponent of the Oslo Accords and PLO policy, and enjoyed dominance over the camps due to its ties to the Syrian authorities. The Coalition comprises eight factions that are unaffiliated with the PLO: Hamas; Islamic Jihad; the Palestine Liberation Front-Talaat Yacoub; Fatah al-Intifada; As-Sa’iqa (Lightning Forces - Vanguard for the Popular Liberation War); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF), and the Revolutionary Palestinian Communist Party.

Refugee Mobilization, and Military Engagement Under Hezbollah's Umbrella

In May 2017, as Hamas released what was called the Document of General Principles and Policies, the movement became more pragmatic and closer to Iran politically, despite their ideological differences, and Iran's need for a Sunni Islamist ally. However, this change led to a division within the movement between the Iran line, the Turkey line, and the Qatar line. However, the Al-Aqsa Flood proved that the Al-Qassam Brigades in Palestine had nothing to do with this political division. Al-Qassam Brigades own their decisions over field operations, and work with other Palestinian resistance forces inside Palestine, such as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the Al-Quds Brigades, and do so away from political concerns.

In Lebanon, however, neither Hamas nor its military wing has any margin of freedom, as they cannot bypass Hezbollah, the Islamic Resistance framework, and the Iranian axis. Al-Qassam Brigades participates on the southern Lebanese front, under the auspices of the Islamic Resistance, with the Al-Quds Brigades and the Al-Fajr Forces affiliated with the Islamic Group in Lebanon, along with Hezbollah and the Lebanese Resistance Brigades. Several factions have also expressed their willingness to engage in battles on the southern border, but they will only be able to do so if Hezbollah leads the charge. Factions such as the Al-Qassam Brigades have already participated in missile strikes on the Galilee. Three resistance fighters infiltrated northern Palestine, with the Al-Qassam Brigades claiming responsibility for the attack. However, any such attack launched from Lebanese territory is carried out with the approval and coordination of Hezbollah, pointing to joint coordination with the "resistance axis."

It became clear through a field visit to the camps and meetings with youth from the PFLP that a large number of Palestinian youth are participating in the battle alongside Hezbollah. After meeting with a group of these young men in several camps, it became clear that most of them fell under the "disappointed" category. They are trained in Iran and in Hezbollah camps in Syria and Lebanon, and receive \$250 a month from Hezbollah. Immediately after the announcement of the mobilization, they were excited and joined the party groups in the south, but their hope was soon dashed as they prepared for the liberation battle, for which they were often told by Hezbollah to "be prepared."

These young men spend two days on the front and two days at home, and each battalion or group is separated from the others on the front under the command and supervision of a Hezbollah official. They are prohibited from interfering, infiltrating, or crossing any boundary set for them. They are equipped with a GPS monitor and an alarm goes off if this line is exceeded. It appears that not all young men have the tools to be clear-headed and weigh the costs and benefits of their military participation in this battle.

Hamas and the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguards

It was difficult, or even impossible, to meet with ranking Hamas or Islamic Jihad members. Most declined under the pretext of not having authorization to discuss recent developments. However, many Hamas and Fatah supporters were interviewed. An official from the Hamas movement was also interviewed in one of the camps through private contacts, but did not delve into questions about the movement. What is noteworthy, however, is that the discourse of Fatah members and supporters is broadly inclusive, while the discourse of the Hamas members is exclusionary and condescending towards other factions.

One neutral interlocutor said, "It has become clear to everyone the role Hamas is playing in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon is to implement its own projects at the expense of the Palestinian people, not caring that real outcomes may not meet expectations. The current reality in the camps, in light of Al-Aqsa Flood, has exposed a group of factors that Hamas is working on in Lebanon."

Amid the Gaza war, Hamas is seizing its political opportunity in Lebanon, forming what is called the "Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguards". The movement said in a statement: "In confirmation of the role of the Palestinian people, wherever they are, in resisting the occupation by all available and legitimate means, and in continuation of what Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has achieved, and as a victory for the patient steadfastness of our Palestinian people and our valiant resistance, and the sacrifices our people have made, and in an effort to share with our men and youth in resisting the occupation and benefiting from their energies and scientific and technical capabilities, the Hamas movement in Lebanon announces the establishment and launch of the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguards, calling on our people, the youth, and heroic men, to join the vanguards of the resistance, and to participate in shaping the future of your people, and in liberating Jerusalem and the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque."

This announcement caused ripples of shock and fear in Lebanese circles – and even some Palestinians. The movement clarified that this was not a call to militarize

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the camps or arm people in any way. Instead, according to Walid Kilani, a Hamas media official in Lebanon, it is to accommodate the great public sympathy for the movement after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. This includes asking people how they can help and join the ranks of the resistance, either through social, humanitarian, relief, public or military action, each according to their abilities and qualifications. Another Hamas representative in Lebanon, Ahmed Abdel Hadi, told a different narrative in an interview with An-Nahar newspaper. He reassured the Lebanese, and stressed that the goal of forming these vanguard forces is “to organize the youth within a specific political and social framework, and to seek to educate them politically, religiously, morally, and ethically,” stressing that, “there is no military role to any of these groups.”

There seem to be several contradictions within Hamas' narratives about the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard. After this statement, Hamas announced the start of recruiting young men in the Beddawi camps in northern Lebanon and Miye ou Miye, east of Sidon, from Saturday 9 December to Monday 11 December. At the beginning of this video statement, Abdel Hadi mentions that this is an act of popular mobilization. However, at the 5:41 mark, he says that it was a populist act. I tend towards the latter estimation, as it is in Hamas' interest now to gather numbers to show Fatah that it is capable of competing in the camps, and perhaps to take advantage of the Al-Aqsa Flood battle and exploit the situation in Gaza by garnering public sympathies and mobilizing the largest possible number of people behind them.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood also assisted Hamas in Lebanon to conduct near-daily activities in the Lebanese and international media, with seminars, popular mobilization, and official meetings, including a visit to the Grand Mufti of Lebanon. These visits were previously limited to the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and thus recent efforts have helped expand the Hamas movement's network in Lebanon. In this regard, chapters of the Al-Qassam Brigades were officially launched inside the camps, weakening all competing factions – including the Fatah movement. Some of the interlocutors who have good relations with Hamas indicated that Lebanon today hosts approximately 15 members of the political bureau of the Hamas movement, and they may be joined in the near future by people from the Al-Qassam Brigades in Gaza, and Hamas aspires to manage the camps. Moreover, a growing number of people within the PLO are today antagonistic towards Fatah, and there are entire Palestinian factions that today support Hamas at the expense of Fatah.

The announcement by Hamas of the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard was not born out of a vacuum, but rather came in preparation for the phase after the current Gaza war and for future military, security and political realities. In turn, Hezbollah provided safe haven for its leaders, ranking members and supporters who left Gaza years ago. They move freely and

are active politically and in the media, which seems to be a preliminary stage to reign in control of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon as an alternative to Gaza.

The announcement of the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard came after the announcement that an Israeli drone had targeted a leader of Al-Qassam Brigades, Khalil Hamid Kharaz (Abu Khaled) from Rashidiya camp, along with three others: Abu Bakr Awad, Khaldoun Minawi, and Sheikh Saeed Dennawi – all residents of the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. It was later revealed that some of these individuals were involved and active in financing jihadist groups. Many such Salafist jihadists are today spread across south Lebanon and in the Palestinian camps, in support of Hamas.

The situation in Gaza was reflected in Lebanon, and the conflict was transferred to it. The arming effort by Hamas inside the camps, and the readiness for internal mobilization within its ranks for any emergency have both become clear. In northern Lebanon, Hamas has a significant force in the Beddawi and Nahr al-Bared camps. According to a reliable source, Hamas also operates nearly ten official headquarters distributed between Nahr al-Bared and Beddawi, all of which are governed by strict arrangements whether in terms of security or protection.

Lebanese Reactions to “Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard”

There were varying Lebanese responses to the declaration of the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard, as it raised quite some concern and strong reactions including outrage and condemnation. All Christian Lebanese parties and blocs joined in denouncing Hamas's declaration of Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard, and reiterated calls for the necessity of disarming Palestinian camps in order to preserve Lebanon's sovereignty. The head of the Lebanese Kataeb Party (Phalanges), MP Sami Gemayel, stated: “The vanguards of Al-Aqsa are in Palestine; not in Lebanon nor from Lebanon.” The head of the Free Patriotic Movement, an ally of Hezbollah, MP Gebran Bassil, stressed the absolute rejection of the Hamas movement launching the Al-Aqsa Flood Vanguard and considered any armed action launched from Lebanese territory to be an assault on national sovereignty. He also mentioned the necessity of disarming Palestinians in the camps and canceling the Cairo Agreement which, since 1969, legalized armed action by Palestinians from Lebanon. He stressed that there is no “Hamas Land” in the south of Lebanon from which to attack Israel alongside the “Lebanese National Resistance”, which is the only such statement to mention the Lebanese resistance at all. MP

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Mark Daou affirmed Lebanon's solidarity with the Palestinian people and their cause, but refused to allow the issue to be used as an excuse to undermine Lebanon and mobilize non-Lebanese armed forces. Daou stressed that "Lebanon is a state, not a theater of war, and Hamas has no right to undermine Lebanon. Hamas leaders must immediately withdraw from that measure or we shall consider this a hostile act against the Lebanese and a violation of our security."

The joint meeting at Our Lady of the Mountain described Hamas' announcement of co-opting armed elements in Lebanon as "a provocative step to all Lebanese who believe in Lebanon, the sovereignty of its state, its constitution, and its laws... and [an attempt] to transform Lebanon into a land of jihad and a launch point for the liberation of Palestine." The head of the Lebanese Forces Party, Samir Geagea, recalled the Palestine Declaration in 2008, which stipulates very clearly "full commitment, without reservation, to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence." He stressed that "Palestinian arms in Lebanon should be subject to the sovereignty and laws of the Lebanese state."

However, it seems that Hamas made no consideration as to Lebanese sovereignty, either due to the Lebanese cover it enjoys from Hezbollah, or regional cover from one of its allies. It is likely that Hamas' primary concern today is to seize the political opportunity before the war ends, as long as there are sympathies and enthusiasm among the youth in Lebanon.

Lest We Forget: Fragility of the Camps and the Temptation of Political Influence

The situation in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon will certainly not remain unchanged in the wake of Al-Aqsa Flood. Hamas is making a concerted effort to mobilize the camps, with the aim of increasing its popular standing – and perhaps its membership. The question, however, remains as to how Hamas conducts this mobilization, and its future relationship with Fatah and other Palestinian groups, as well as with the Lebanese authorities and political parties. Does Hamas adopt an inclusive Palestinian national discourse that could overcome ideological divides and calculations of regional

powers? Will it manage to build broader alliances that protect the camps from a fragile and divided regional and Lebanese situation?

Hamas must learn from the lessons and experiences of Fatah as a Palestinian liberation movement – and not as a Palestinian authority. It must learn from what Fatah was exposed to by moving from one country to another, interfering in the internal affairs of each host country, and the final besiegement of Fatah which forced it to recognize Israel, leading to the Oslo Accords. Hamas has undergone a similar experience in the Yarmouk camp in Syria, as well as in Lebanon. Several Lebanese political parties are dissatisfied with the Vanguard's announcement and reject the idea of "Hamas Land", just as they had rejected 'Fatah Land' before. Hamas must benefit from Fatah's mistakes in revolutionary and resistance work, both at home and abroad.

Hamas is not a terrorist organization, but rather a Palestinian and Arab resistance movement with an Islamic ideology, elected by the Palestinian people. However, its placement on terror lists has made it fragile and weak in an international environment whose foremost priority is counterterrorism. This made it easy to target, to the point where comparisons are being drawn between Hamas and ISIS in pro-Israel propaganda. This was an easy pretext for Israel to secure American financial and military support, and a green light to practice collective punishment against Palestinians and to ignore humanitarian law, the laws of war, and international conventions. Therefore, Hamas must be very cautious not to grant any excuse for attacking the camps in Lebanon under the guise of 'fighting terrorism.' The situation of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon is unstable, and it suffices to recall the destruction of Nahr al-Bared camp in 2007 under the pretext of combating terrorism, and the recent clashes in Ain al-Hilweh camp, to realize the fragility of the current situation. The overwhelming fear is that the camps will be turned into a hotbed of tension, with who controls Palestinian decision-making there being a pretext.

Here, we must also caution against jihadists or extremists from different countries joining the Hamas movement, as was evident from the targeting of a car carrying Khalil Hamid Kharraz, along with two Islamists from Tripoli and two from Turkey, in south Lebanon on 22 November 2023. One final line of questions remains: Will Hezbollah accept a Sunni armed movement in Lebanon and in the Palestinian camps, and to what extent will pragmatism overcome religious ideology?

About the Arab Reform Initiative

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



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