2 Governing the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria
The cases of Nahr el-Bared and Yarmouk camps

Sari Hanafi

Introduction

Camps have been presented by some humanitarian organizations and political actors as settings self-evidently suitable for dealing with the refugee populations. However, when camps become the transient space for a population dwelling there for more than 60 years, like in the case of the Palestinian protracted refugees, camps become slum areas that are hard to govern.

This chapter will attempt to clarify the relationship between power, sovereignty and space in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria, by examining modes of governance inside the camps. ‘Modes of governance’ refers to how a camp is managed in terms of relationships to the legal authorities of the host country and to the surrounding municipalities, relationships among groups within the camps and conflict resolution for everyday problems. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recognizes ‘governance’ as autonomy over formal institutions as well as informal ones:

[G]overnance is the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.

(UNDP 1997: 2–3)

This chapter recognizes the informality of governance, inspired by Foucault’s concept of governmentality, i.e. ‘how we think about governing others and ourselves within a variety of contexts’ (Dean 1999: 212). Governmentalities thus grant us one more analytical tool for understanding power as something distributed rather than wielded from above.

This chapter illustrates the need to (re)examine governance, not from a security angle but from a segregation angle. Segregation becomes a central concept in debates about the spatial concentration of social risk and about urban/local governance. I
argue that while Syrian authorities have taken a strategic decision since 1948 to incorporate the Palestinian camps into the tissue of the surrounding city, Lebanon did the opposite. Camps there were perceived as ‘security islands’, treated as spaces of exception and experimental laboratories for control and surveillance.

While the governance of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria will be explored, the focus will be placed on the Nahr el-Bared camp (north of Lebanon) and in Yarmouk camp (Damascus, Syria). This chapter relies primarily on the field research, direct observation and in-depth interviews with camp leaders and inhabitants that I conducted in Nahr el-Bared and other camps in Lebanon with the help of a research team in 2008–9 and in Yarmouk camp from March until July 2009.

**Camp governance: multiple actors**

Many actors play a role in the governance of Palestinian refugee camps. In Syria, the state controls camps closely, through specific organs: it is the General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR) that assigns a camp director who plays a major role in organizing the urban and political life inside the camp. In contrast to this classical state control over slum areas including camps, the situation in the Lebanon is radically different. There is a web of complex power structures composed of popular committees, a security committee, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) camp officers, notables, political factions, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) popular unions and organizations (workers, women, engineers, etc), community-based organizations (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Palestinian Scholars’ League (imam coalition close to Hamas). These forces vary in importance from camp to camp and from area to area. In each camp, leaders impose measures, which frequently change, a consequence of a constantly shifting balance of power between these different groups. The Popular Committee, however, stands out as the most important local governing body in Lebanon. It is worth noting that the label ‘popular’ could be misleading because members are not elected, rather it projects the strength of one group or party vis-à-vis others. The Tables 2.1 and 2.2 summarizes the different actors of governance and are based on how the importance of different stakeholders is classified according to the interviewees.

Instead of one sovereign, camps are ruled by a tapestry of multiple, partial sovereignties. This includes real sovereignties (the Lebanese and Syrian authorities) and a web of actors who contribute to the governance of the camp. The situation is made even more complex if UNRWA’s role is taken into account. Here, I would like to introduce the notion of ‘phantom sovereignty’ in order to describe and analyze the critical position of the UNRWA in both Syria and Lebanon.

Michel Foucault reminds us that it is not the power that stems from the exercise of sovereignty but rather the effects of power that a governmental technology generates. While UNRWA was not intended to, nor does it pretend to, govern the camps, it is ascribed the status of a sovereign by many camp dwellers. This is perhaps best exemplified by the ambiguous role of UNRWA’s ‘camp officers’ (the precise
names vary from country to country), a camp-based staff member who historically assumes a powerful position vis-à-vis the camp community. Powers included, for example, the ability to cut ration rolls for an individual who did not obey UNRWA regulations. UNRWA historically appointed these officers from among the camp community, after consultation and the verbal approval from the local tribal and village leaders. This policy is doubly accommodating: while UNRWA is appointing a representative of the camp’s new elite to become official staff member, UNRWA also seeks legitimization and acceptance. From the early 1990s, UNRWA increasingly appointed members of new camp elites, such as well-educated camp residents (being engineers, instructors, pharmacists or scientists) and sometimes those known historically by their political activism and their good relations to the community. In interviews, camp dwellers in Lebanon often refer to this officer as ‘camp director’, yet in reality, his official function is merely to act as a facilitator of UNRWA services. Interviews clearly showed the gap between his perceived role and actual function. This confusion is not due to the refugees’ cognitive disorder but rather stems from the historical role played by UNRWA directors in not merely providing services but also in administering and coordinating many aspects of the refugees’ lives. As a result, ‘camp directors’ are perceived as occupying a ruling position without acting accordingly.

The confusion over the role of camp officers is symptomatic of the confusion over the role of UNRWA as a whole. Many camp residents, for instance, consider
UNWRA and the popular committee responsible for the disorder in the camps. Expressing her anger at their perceived passivity: ‘Who can I complain to when my neighbor builds a second and third floor without leaving any proper space for my apartment?’ Many interviewees indeed used the word ‘chaos’ to describe the situation in the camps and blame UNRWA’s inaction as a major cause.

The Lebanese case: the state of exception

I will take the new development concerning the plan for new governance of Nahr el- Bared camp as a starting point to discuss the Lebanese authorities’ vision concerning the Palestinian refugee camps in general. Indeed the Nahr el-Bared camp (hereafter NBC) crisis was an opportunity to establish new relationship between Palestinian and Lebanese authorities and has shown the weakness of traditional Palestinian political factions in managing the crisis. The topic of governance in the camp is commonly misrepresented and misunderstood. This is partly due to the fact that governance practices are informal, inconsistent, changing and variable from camp to camp. It takes the form of a multi-layered tapestry with multiple actors, groups, individuals and factions maneuvering, competing and negotiating different aspects of life in the camp. While it might be incomprehensible to the outside spectator, it is a reflection of the complexity, irony and difficulty of Palestinian politics and status of a 60-year old temporary-permanent urban refugee camp. In the case of the NBC, the traditional actors were present: a popular committee (composed of representatives from all political factions in principle, but in reality and historically, the pro-Syrian coalition prevailed), neighborhood committees, an assortment of prominent notables, religious figures and some NGOs.

Using the ‘refugee file’ for internal use, the Lebanese government decided to institute a new model of governance in the camp, based exclusively on principle of Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) control and surveillance, ignoring the genuine issues of everyday life in the camp, and without consulting and dealing with the current actors in the NBC. The NBC is also an interesting case study in how several grassroots committees, initiatives, commissions and advocacy groups became involved in the reconstruction, playing a bigger role in the camp’s scene. In actuality, the crisis evidenced the weakness and ineffectiveness of traditional factions. A special team prepared a document for the NBC donor conference in Vienna.

The Vienna document

The Vienna conference was hosted by the Austrian government, Lebanon, the Arab League, the UNRWA and the European Union. The Vienna document was compiled by the Lebanese government in collaboration with the Lebanese Palestinian Dialog Committee (LPDC), its consultants and what was to be later known as the Recovery and Reconstruction Cell. The Vienna document compiled several technical studies that had been prepared by the UNRWA, Nahr el-Bared Reconstruction Committee for Civil Action and Studies, UNDP and World Bank; in addition, the firm Khatib
& Alami presented a unified and comprehensive vision for the reconstruction as well as an estimate of total cost. In spite of Palestinian officials’ endorsement of the document, Palestinian political representatives played only a symbolic role in its actual preparation because of the lack of technical experts within the PLO to conduct, co-author and prepare such a study. This vacuum was filled in part by the various civil society initiatives, NGOs and experts who played an active role in collection data and lobbying, used formal and informal channels as well as participatory mechanisms. The political implication of questions of security and governance in the document were authored entirely by the government and its consultants in absence of any Palestinian counterpart.

The Vienna document proposes ‘establishing a transparent and effective governance structure for Nahr el-Bared camp. This includes enforcing security and rule of law inside NBC through community and proximity policing’ (p. 46). The document further explains that community policing in NBC context entails the presence inside the camp of a culturally and politically sensitive ISF that will work to reduce the fears and tensions that existed prior to and after NBC conflict. Such type of policing will promote community engagement, partnership and proactive problem solving. The above security arrangements for NBC were agreed upon with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. [...] Building trust between the ISF and the NBC community would encourage camp residents to be more supportive and forthcoming in reporting community problems and security issues. Police officers would engage in various types of community activities (youth schemes, community programs, etc.) to foster a closer relationship with the residents of the camp. A closer partnership between the ISF and the community would ultimately help make the rebuilt NBC a safer place and would promote a successful security model for other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The ISF police officers will be exposed to the political history of the Palestinians refugees in Lebanon, and will be trained to better understand the cultural and social specificities of the Palestinian community. Moreover, officers will be trained on problem solving, conflict resolution, and communications skills.

In spite of the fact that the various Palestinian civil society entities sensed that such a document was being prepared, it was only made public a few days before the inauguration of the Vienna conference and it had been already printed and distributed to donors. The Palestinian embassy received the document at the same time as the other donors. Although the PLO objected to the concept of community policing during an official meeting with LPDC head, then ambassador Khalil Mekkawi, a few days before the Vienna conference, no changes were made to the document. None of the Palestinians presented an objection during the conference. The funding for training Lebanese ISF officers, budgeted at 5 million US dollars was pegged and the American team has started training the ISF according to the Vienna document.
The director of the Palestinian Organization for Human Rights, Ghassan Abdellah suggested to adopt the municipal policing experience in Lebanon and to adapt it to the human security concept. According to him,

‘the popular committees present in the camps would be elected directly by the residents, linked to the neighboring municipalities and become integral parts therein. They would also operate according to the same governance and electoral regulations that rule the councils of the municipalities. Such a procedure would put an end to the designation quotas imposed by the political factions. The civilian police members would be selected among the residents of the camp and would respond to the elected popular committee. Consequently, just as it happens to the municipalities, the elected popular committees would be ruled by the legitimate authority that is represented by the Ministry of Interior Affairs and Municipalities. A cooperation formula might be attempted between the representatives of the legitimate authority of the Ministry of Interior and the civilian police of the camp – based on the human security concept and the experience of community policing.

(Abdellah 2009: 8)

Governance reduced to security

In the Vienna conference document, the governance section is brief. It does however clearly reflect the continuation and further development of an existing policy. It was authored by Lebanese policy makers and their consultants without consultation with the local community, and framed in the language of partnership and community policing. Community policing or neighborhood policing is a philosophy and strategy based on the assumption that community interaction and support can help control crime, with community members helping to identify suspects, detain vandals and bring problems to the attention of police. If theoretically a community policing strategy needed to be implemented, it would need the full cooperation of the community and it cannot be forced on the community. While community policing is embedded in the discourse of improving and empowering citizenship action and initiative, in the case of Nahr el-Bared, it was reduced to counterinsurgency policing treating refugees to ‘security’ subjects and the camp as ‘security island’. In fact, implementing norms, laws and practices that pertain to the citizenship of a refugee population denied basic civil rights illustrates the dark irony of the concept.

Extensive interviews determined that the section on governance generated a strong and negative reaction among the local community. Moreover, a petition addressed directly to the then Prime Minister, then Fouad Saniora, signed by hundreds of the camp’s dwellers, was published two Lebanese dailies, al-Akhbar and as-Safir on January 24, 2009. It stated clearly their rejection of the government’s exclusive regard for security in dealing with their camp and the government’s policy for governance. Any potential for partnership and discussion with the community in the future have been tarnished by the political implications of the Vienna
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document. And finally, in spite of the fact that the Vienna document states, officially, its authorship in coordination with the PLO, effectively, there was neither understanding nor approval for its policy proposals among the various factions of the PLO. Only in September 2009 did the PLO show awareness when it formed a strong team headed by Marwan Abdel-’Al who requested the change in the rules of game to a clear partnership.

The document answers solely to the concerns of Lebanese security bodies, in vision and perspective. The Popular Committee, for instance, is remarkably absented as an interlocutor to the ‘community police’. The documented glosses over the reality that preceded the eruption of the conflict, and the various actors that played a role, in addition to the Popular Committee, such as the Armed Struggle group, the Security Committee, the political factions, neighborhood committees, notables, various professional unions and local NGOs, in other words all the bodies that interacted and competed to negotiate the public good of the camp.

Obviously, there were tremendous problems in the management of this formal and informal form of governance that include conflict and corruption; however, there was no ground for excluding these local actors. Creating a real Palestinian–Lebanese partnership is based on respecting, building and developing the camp’s local political and social structures to develop clear and transparent mechanisms of interaction with the Lebanese and is not achievable through teaching the ISF officers the ‘political history of the Palestinians refugees in Lebanon (and) . . . their cultural and social specificities’, as Vienna document has formulated.

More significant is the fact that implementing security is regarded simply as introducing a ‘new’ police force. Research on post-war reconstruction (GTZ 2004) and actual experience reinforce the argument that the foundations for a successful post-conflict reconstruction articulate rebuilding the spatial environment, re-starting the economic cycle, establishing truth and reconciliation commissions and instating principles for good governance. Only through such a holistic approach can NBC overcome the social, political and economic challenges it faces in this post-conflict phase and a real and sustainable Palestinian–Lebanese relationship be grounded.

Instead, the situation that preceded the conflict was maintained: arbitrary checkpoints, barbed-wire fencing, controlling movement in and out of the camp requiring permission for all Palestinian and Lebanese residents. Shortly after the battle was concluded, the cabinet of ministers approved the building of a military base at the edge of the old camp. In February 2009 the cabinet of ministers issued another decree to establish a naval base on the coast of camp’s beach. And the LPDC and ISF continue to lobby for instituting a police station inside the old camp. To draw a clearer picture, the density of the space in question is of the highest in the world, with 1,700 buildings squeezed into 190,000 sq. meters, housing 20,000 refugees. There were other options, more sensible and respectful to the community, such as locating the police station at the edge of the camp, but these were vehemently rejected by the Lebanese government and LPDC. It almost seems as if it were a political statement to assert their absolute authority over the camp. Other states hosting Palestinian refugees prefer to maintain police stations at the outskirts of camps, in Amman, for example, where, after insisting on locating stations in the
center of the camp, they were eventually relocated to the periphery because of repeated burnings by the refugees.

The Vienna conference proposal introduces unilaterally a new actor in the camp. The principal question is why should Lebanese policing be introduced into the camp? And why are the established conventions being over-ridden? If policing is meant to control crime, the NBC was not a crime-infested ghetto; whatever crimes took place were contained and the violators prosecuted. If policing is meant to control the presence of Fateh el-Islam, then one can only wonder why the ISF and army failed to arrest an armed militant group whose offices, bases, training grounds and homes were predominantly based outside the camp’s boundaries, on Lebanese territory prior to the eruption of the conflict. The point is not to inculcate the Lebanese authorities in what happened, rather to highlight the fact that the security of the camp is not the outcome of the absence of a Lebanese policing force. One of the main problems pertaining to security and policing is the nature and coordination mechanism of jurisdiction between Palestinian structures and the Lebanese state with regards to the camp and its environs. Since the expiration of the Cairo Agreement (1969), the terms of reference between the two parties have remained ambiguous at best. The camp is a legally suspended space where military intelligence has governed it in a state of exception.

De-legitimizing the Popular Committee

The Lebanese state’s de-legitimizing of the Popular Committee was neither new policy nor practice; interviews with members of NBC’s Security Committee spoke a great deal about the absence of an external political cover and how Lebanese military intelligence treated them merely as informants and implementers of their orders. As one of the members testified:

If any citizen from the camp was in trouble, if he had wronged someone and the Security Committee jailed him, he would sue and would become a fugitive of the state. I have been jailed three times by the government . . . I am working for my people! I have no problem as long as I am serving my people. But if the state jails me three times because of complaints, then what? Once a thief complained about me and had me jailed.

The role of the Lebanese state in creating a security vacuum within the camp through disempowering its local security structures is clear. Lebanese military intelligence and the ISF used the Security Committee when they needed favors, like delivering wanted persons for justice, but in exchange, they never gave them the acknowledgment or resources as a local municipal power. ISF still resort to recruiting local ‘informants’ who ultimately use their connections to the security apparatus to exert influence and deploy intimidation. After the crisis in NBC, that practice intensified, focusing specifically on disenfranchised youth.

However, recent fieldwork in the Ain el-Helweh, Baddawi and Nahr el-Bared camps revealed that the absence of a legitimate popular committee was a serious
stumbling block. Historically, popular committees were dependent on the political and financial backing of the PLO and various political factions. Since the transfer of the PLO’s leadership from Lebanon to Tunisia in 1982, their resources have been scarce, with the passage of time; as the camps became among the most dense urban configurations in the world, the popular committees gradually lost their capacity at dealing effectively with them.

The Vienna document does not mention providing resources, capacity building or assistance to re-empower popular committees. In NBC, a disempowered popular committee can only play a symbolic role in the reconstruction, in which a swarm of international NGOs, development agencies, United Nations agencies and government agencies has been involved formally and directly. In February 2009, International Habitat, the Italian cooperation organization, initiated a project of connecting the sewage system in the new camp areas of Nahr el-Bared to al-Muhamara, the neighboring municipality. The LPDC organized several meetings without excluding the popular committee, at the conclusion of negotiations, the committee was invited to come and sign. They refused to do this. Community leaders complained in interviews that several projects proposed by international cooperation offices and organizations did not meet the list of priorities for their camps. They were often driven by technical considerations, such as the kind of expertise the cooperation offices have at their disposal, or their ability to disburse only small grants that cannot cover the cost of serious infrastructure projects. In another instance, an Italian cooperation organization proposed to provide equipment for sanitation and waste removal to be shared by the municipality of Muhamara and NBC’s Popular Committee. However, considering that the committee has no legal status in Lebanese law, the contract for joint-ownership could not be drafted.

Beyond the scarcity of means at their disposal, absence of expertise and systematic deligitimization from the Lebanese state, the Popular Committee ails from fundamental problems at the level of representation. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s most refugees were affiliated to political parties and movements that had more or less democratic processes in electing their leadership; popular committees included members from the various political groups in each camp and thus were representative of the camp’s population. Moreover, there was space allotted to unions and to a member from a liberal profession, such as engineer or teacher. With the steep marginalization of party politics and dramatic reduction in numbers of active party affiliations, the committees no longer represented the camp’s population appropriately, and their legitimacy was further undermined from within. Recently, there is a committee established in the PLO offices in Beirut to reform the popular committee in Lebanon and preliminary plan was set up for that.

A critique of security-based sovereignty

Although camps in Lebanon can be easily compared to the size of towns (varying from 10,000 to 80,000 people), they are managed without municipal structures. In interviews, people often used terms and words signifying arbitrariness and chaos. ‘Camps are not under the responsibility of the Lebanese state’, claimed a senior
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officer in the ISF. This said, while camp residents are excluded from the realm of municipal planning and service provision, they are at same time included with regards to questions of security and taxes. This paradoxical implementation of the law is characteristic to the space of exception, specifically in uncovering how power structures define the relationship between the space of the camp to the space of the city. While under the Refugee Convention of 1951 have the right to work without requiring a permit, in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees are barred from practicing more than 70 professions, and are required a work permit even in the case of manual labor.

After 60 years and three generations, Palestinian refugees still cannot be considered as belonging to the category of ‘foreigners’, which, in Lebanon, is usually made up of temporary migrants. Reduced to their status as individuals in need of shelter and food, the governance of their bare-life has been transferred to the hands of the police and military on the one hand, and to an apolitical relief organization such as the UNRWA, on the other hand. The Lebanese state has sustained a status quo (of sorts) by juggling the inclusion/exclusion duality, subverting the legal with the political and vice versa. So while Palestinian refugees are excluded from the regime of rights and benefits and rights, they are included in the regime of security, as subjects under permanent control and surveillance, under the guise of the writ of law or political imperative. Moreover, the Lebanese state has endorsed international humanitarian laws, as well as Arab League decrees pertaining to human right laws; however with regards Palestinian refugees, these laws and regulations are at best overlooked, at worst violated. The Lebanese state implements the state of exception by all means but specifically using the recourse to law, essentially political questions are treated as a matter of law. When Palestinians lobbied to be granted basic civil rights as refugees, the government claimed the question did not pertain to the law, rather to the political construct of the country and its cautiously gauged balance between confessional groups.

While the question of governance in the camps should be part of the responsibility of the Lebanese state, this cannot be done without the camps’ population, organizations, committees, factions and networks. Understandably, establishing genuinely representative bodies is not a simple ambition for a nation under occupation at home and in a state of dispersal in various host countries. And while there are no clearly defined solutions or models and a great deal of what exists on the ground is flawed, there is also a rich legacy of practices within the camps that can be learned from or used as starting points. It was hoped that after a tragedy of the scale that at NBC, there might have been serious motivation for a sober assessment of previous (and existing) policy and practices, and a thorough investigation into the conditions that led to the crisis. Unfortunately, neither the LPDC nor Lebanese officialdom is willing to admit the reality of institutional and legal discrimination against Palestinians. Until Palestinians are considered equal to the Lebanese, there cannot be a real partnership or cooperation, and the destruction of NBC would simply be another tragic chapter of the Palestinians’ difficult presence in Lebanon.

The establishment of the LPDC in 2005 was a positive first step, after years of conflict, to try and bridge the divide between both parties (Brynen 2009). In the
four years since 2005, however, the state has made little progress on this front. The general dysfunction of the Lebanese state – which in these years has witnessed massive demonstrations and protests, a war with Israel, sectarian violence, a boycotted government, political infighting, a presidential vacuum and two highly contentious cabinet formations – has prevented it from taking any initiative on the much needed reform of its policies. Instead, it has left the Palestinians to be fed by UNRWA and guarded by the army until such time as the parliament – the only governmental body capable of licensing meaningful reform – sees fit to weigh in on the issue.

Sadly, for the foreseeable future, indicators suggest that the Lebanese state will continue excluding Palestinians from the rights and benefits they ought to enjoy as residents of Lebanon while simultaneously including them as a security threat, as ‘something’ to be contained and subjected to strict control and surveillance. As a result, tensions between Lebanese and Palestinians will continue to mount, the factions will carry on in their struggles inside the camps and these ‘spaces of exception’ will continue to present a threat to Lebanese sovereignty and security. This fact is what the International Crisis Group has aptly referred to in a recent report as ‘nurturing instability’ (Atrache 2009).

In spite of this, Palestinians in Lebanon will continue to cope in remarkable ways. By drawing from their shared history, their common experience as refugees, the motivating force of Palestinian nationalism and by relying on strong moral and ethical norms, which in recent years have been underpinned by Islamist discourse, they will govern themselves in the absence of any real, legitimate government as best they can.

The Syrian case: Yarmouk camp as space normalcy

Unlike in Lebanon, the Palestinian refugees in Syria have enjoyed the same civil rights and services as those enjoyed by local citizens, and are more socially integrated than Palestinian refugees in any other host country (Hanafi 2001). Their presence in Syria is regulated by Law 450 issued January 25, 1949, which provides for the administration of Palestinian refugee affairs and ensures their needs are met. This law authorized the establishment of the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution (PARI) under the auspices of the Syrian Social Affairs and Labor Ministry. PARI was later replaced by the Syrian General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugee Affairs (GAPAR), also a department of the Social Affairs and Labor Ministry.

However, one of the most important laws in Syria, Law 260 issued October 7, 1956, granted Palestinian residents nearly the same status as Syrian nationals. The law stipulates that Palestinians living in Syria have the same duties and responsibilities as Syrian citizens, though they are not granted nationality or political rights. Palestinian refugees in Syria were granted equal rights, for example, in the areas of education, owning property, labor and employment, trade and military service, while at the same time, maintaining Palestinian nationality.
Urban situation

Yarmouk is an ‘unofficial’ refugee camp in Damascus that is home to the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria. It is located 8 kilometers from the center of Damascus, still inside the capital’s municipal boundaries, and has now begun to merge into the surrounding city. As of December 2008, there were 144,312 registered refugees living in Yarmouk, comprising a quarter of the total 453,000 Palestinians in Syria, another quarter of whom live in official camps.

Living conditions in Yarmouk appear to be better than in other Palestinian refugee camps in Syria. Residents of the camp include many white collar professionals such as doctors, engineers and civil servants, as well as many who are employed as casual laborers and street vendors. ‘We are a five-star camp, compared to Jaramana and Khan Sheih camps’, explained one inhabitant of Yarmouk. The vibrant camp is crowded not only by Palestinian inhabitants but also Iraqi migrants and refugees. Syrians from surrounding areas add to the bustle, seeking bargains at fancy clothes boutiques. One said: ‘Here you can buy bridal clothes for half the price of what you find in Souk al-Hamadiyya and Salhiyya [two shopping areas in downtown Damascus].’

Over time, refugees living in Yarmouk have improved and expanded their residences, adding rooms. According to a 2003 Fafo survey, 90 per cent of Yarmouk residents live in apartments (Jacobson 2006) and market rates for real estate in Yarmouk camp (for 2005) were 2,400 SP ($490) (Jacobson 2006: 35), which was comparable to rates in rural areas. Only 8 percent of apartments are rented.

Cement block buildings and narrow streets typify the layout of this densely crowded camp. The average family size is 4.4 members and 12 percent of the households are ‘objectively crowded’, defined by Gove and Hughes (1983: xvii) as habitats with at least three individuals per room. However, interviewees expressed a feeling of intense subjective crowding (one’s perception of not having enough space in the home) because there are no parks or playgrounds in the camp. Indeed, the streets are the children’s playground, making the neighborhood very noisy. There are three main roads running through the camp, each lined with shops and crammed with service taxis and microbuses. Moreover, Yarmouk has also become home to thousands of newly arrived Iraqi refugees.

Actors of governance: the local committee as a major actor

The main actor of governance in the Yarmouk camp is the municipality (baladiyya), which is like any municipality but with two major exceptions: first, some of the urban regulations applied to the camp are different of surrounding municipalities; second, the body is unelected and under the heavy control of the Ba’ath Party. The Yarmouk baladiyya is governed by a local committee. For political reasons, this local committee is under supervision of the GAPAR, whose General Director has been the president of the committee. After 1989, the president was nominated by the Ministry of Local Administration and the whole committee came under its tutelage. However the General Director of GAPAR maintains his power of nominating
members of the local committee after approval by the Palestinian Commandant of Baath Party (al-kyada al-qotriyya al-falastiniyya). It is worth mentioning that the label of baladiyya exists only at the Yarmouk camp – other refugee camps in Syria have only a GAPAR office, which coordinates its work with UNRWA and the surrounding municipalities.

The local committee members are selected from camp dwellers, either Ba’athist or close to the Syrian regime, and usually have a university degree. The current local committee, for example, is composed of five engineers, a lawyer and a teacher. This new elite, called ‘neck tie elite’ by Yasmine Bouagga (2008), is very different from the traditional elite, the wajahat (notables) and the mukhtars. From these seven members, five are Ba’athists and the two independents are chosen by the Baath Party.

Historically, the head of the municipality is accountable only to the Director of GAPAR, but since there is the problem of corruption in this baladiyya, the governorate (muhafazeh) of Damascus is supervising the work of the local committee. Its main source of funds comes from the Ministry of Local Affairs and from baladiyya taxation.

Except for some anomalies, the camp is constructed according to a master plan. As such, it is also well connected to the Syrian infrastructure, including the sewage, water, electricity and telecommunication systems. The municipality has carried out many infrastructure projects including roadway and sidewalk renovations, street lighting and maintaining green spaces. The construction of a new cemetery is overseen by an ad hoc baladiyya committee in order to find funding to buy the land. Palestinian factions such as Fatah and Hamas are providing the bulk of the funds, while the remainder is being sought from the business community.

Contrary to other camps in Syria or elsewhere, the presence of the Syrian state is very clear in Yarmouk, detected not only through symbols (such as posters, presidential portraits of Asad, flags, etc.) but also through the state’s intervention in all aspects of life in the camps. In 1996, the Ministry of Culture opened an Arab Cultural Center in the camp. It is significant that the Yarmouk camp has such a center, like those of other residential neighborhoods. Similarly, there are nine Syrian secondary schools i.e. they are dependent on the Syrian ministry of education (Fadhel 2008).

As it has in other camps, GAPAR mandated a Committee of Social Development in Yarmouk in 2005, but it is hardly active. Effectively, the baladiyya is replacing the function of this committee, while in other camps in Syria, this committee has a much more crucial role.

Interviewees expressed satisfaction with the functioning of the Yarmouk municipality. They wished the local committee was elected and not appointed but they were also realistic with their expectations. One young medical doctor said: ‘In any case, Syrian local elections are also very controlled by the Baath Party. Independents are filtered before being accepted as candidates.’

Some accused local committee members of being corrupt or just ‘looking out for themselves’, arguing that some construction permits have been granted that were against the municipality regulations. In fact, two former heads of the local committee ended up in prison on charges of corruption.
Minor actors

There are other actors that are investing in the social and political space but not really playing an administrative role in the camp. These will now be discussed.

UNRWA plays a major role providing services for the camp, but is not really involved with issues of governance. UNRWA’s camp officer (in Arabic modir al-mokhyam – camp director), for example, is not really known to the public, making Yarmouk very different from other camps in Syria and elsewhere. However, the presence of UNRWA’s services in the camp is very important. With regard to education, UNRWA has 28 double-shifted schools, operating in 14 school buildings and accommodating 23,438 pupils. It also has three health centers providing 24,639 patient consultations per month, and a food distribution center for the special harsh cases. UNRWA’s Social Safety Net (SSN) program has benefited 17,470 individuals (6,464 families) and just last June, a Microcredit Community Support Program began operating in the camp. UNRWA also sponsors women’s centers and community rehabilitation centers.

In contrast to UNRWA, which has historically recycled the old notability and has given them a leading role in the camp management in other fields (Gaza and West Bank), the Syrian authorities have been rather interested in creating a new elite, as we will see later on. The Syrians have used only extended family leaders for the function of mokhtar, which is often an officer who knows people, but has mostly a bureaucratic role without any significant power. This does not mean that the tribal and extended family structure does not exist. In May 2009, a man (originally from Ja’oun) was killed by someone from another neighborhood after the two had engaged in a dispute. The murder led to quarrelling between the two communities, prompting the Syrian police to intervene and maintain a heavy presence in the area for a month in order to protect the people living in the killer’s neighborhood (Safouriyya neighborhood) from possible reprisals. Such events are really rare in Yarmouk, as one policeman reported. Our interlocutors were surprised to find such a tribal solidarity suddenly revived in the camp. With poverty rates constantly increasing, the resulting instability and threatening circumstances cause kinship to take on new meaning. Mukhtars and religious sheikhs have played a leading role in relieving the tension, as we will see later on.

The PLO’s popular organizations are also actors in the camp, also playing a minor role in governance. The Palestinian General Women’s Union was established in 1972 and local committees convened in each of the refugee camps. After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Union provided relief assistance (food, clothing and shelter) to Palestinians who fled Lebanon and came to the camps in Damascus. In 1983, the Palestinian dissident factions in Syria gradually took over from the outlawed Fateh and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and established a ‘new union’ in the Yarmouk camp. However, the dissident factions enjoyed limited popular support (Brand 1988: 634).

The Syrian branch of the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) is located in Yarmouk. It runs eight primary health care centers, three outpatient clinics and three hospitals, and provides services to registered and non-registered Palestinians, as
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well as to Syrians who are unable to afford health care. The PRCS also provides some social services, such as marketing refugees’ handicrafts (embroidery), finding Palestinians employment opportunities and providing some vocational training for women (PRCS Syria branch 2003 overview report).

Palestinian factions are granted a restricted space for activism in the Syrian context, outside of the legal context, with the aim of intervening in intra-Palestinian political affairs inside and outside Syria, though this permissiveness is not equal for all factions. The Vanguard for the Popular Liberation War (al-Sa’iqa), as part of the Baath Party, is given full operating space, while Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Palestinian dissident factions (such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and Fatah Uprising) are given much less, followed by the most restricted leftist organizations (PFLP, DFLP and the People’s Party). As for Fatah, Syrian authorities have required them to keep a low profile. Leaders of Palestinian factions complained that the youth are disinterested in joining their factions and many young interviewees confirm that.

The PLO has kept some popular organizations relatively active in Syria, such as the Palestinian Youth Organization, the Palestinian Scout Association. The Syrian branch of the General Union of Palestine Workers (GUPW), which was founded in 1965, is not really active – it mainly just participates, with other Palestinian and Syrian unions, in celebrations or national festivities.

The case of the Yarmouk camp shows that camps are not, per se, extra-territorial or subversive sites out of the state’s bounds, and neither do they inherently pose security threats. It is only when Palestinian refugees are subject to systemic discrimination and urban marginalization that their communities have become problematic from a security point of view.

Syrian authority ensures formal and necessary structures of governance in the Yarmouk camp – structures that replaced the traditional elite composed of wajih (clan leaders) and sheikhs. Yarmouk camp is now part and parcel of the social fabric of Damascus. Even as the Yarmouk camp continues to display distinct administrative, social, demographic, political and economic features, its boundaries are increasingly blurred. The spatial integration of the camp with its surroundings became easier because of the general social and economic integration of the wider Palestinian community into Syrian society. For instance, marriages between Yarmouk camp dwellers and Syrians are not rare. Integration occurred because of enabling Syrian policies, societal acceptance of the refugees and because of Palestinians’ proactive efforts to insert themselves into their hosts’ urban, social and economic spheres. But what about the political space?

In Syria, like in Jordan and Egypt, Palestinians experience numerous difficulties when attempting to participate in political activities and are widely considered to be interfering in internal and local affairs. Mourid Barghouthi noted in his biography that

the stranger is the person who renews his Resident Permit. He fills out forms and buys the stamps for them. He has come up with evidence and proofs. He does not care for the details that concern the people of the country where he
finds himself or for their ‘domestic’ policy. But he is the first to feel its con-
sequences. He may not rejoice in what makes them happy but he is always afraid
when they are afraid. He is always an ‘infiltrating element’ in demonstrations,
even if he never left his house that day.

(Barghouthi 2003: 3)

However, in Syria (like in Lebanon and Jordan), the second Intifada has been the
occasion for some Palestinian organizations to mobilize the Palestinian population
in those countries.

Hamas: an Islamic governmentality

So far this chapter has focused on the actors of institutional governance, whether
they are a real sovereign or a phantom one (UNRWA) in both Lebanon and Syria.
However, the absence of a formal structure of governance in Lebanon and the authori-
tarian nature of the state in Syria has encouraged other forms of governmentality.

In Lebanon, after the departure of the PLO leadership in 1982, the existing
popular and security committees were almost completely disabled by the Syrian–Lebanese military intelligence apparatus and replaced with pro-Syrian committees,
which were weak, considered illegitimate and were virtually without their own
financial resources. They were not permitted to develop their own effective police
programs or to participate in legitimate security functions. Regarding the day-to-
day regulation of behavior, therefore, camp residents resorted to new, informal and
alternative structures of governance, self-policing and auto-conditioning to keep
the peace and preserve order.

The conservative Islamic environment of the camps, coupled with constant
policing and surveillance by the factions, has thus far succeeded in deterring most
of the sorts of crime that one might find in a similarly impoverished Lebanese
neighborhood, though at the same time, it also seems to have enabled some of
the factions themselves to commit other sorts of crimes. For example, as Nahr el-
Bared residents are keen to point out, their society accepted Fatah al-Islam in their
midst for several months, because the group appeared pious and was effective in
preventing crime and promoting good Islamic behavior: ‘The camp is fertile ground
and if you throw a seed there, it will grow on its own. The camp and the religious
environment that the sheikhs talk about exists, and the conservative environment
tends to dislike crime.’

Even more telling, however, were the words of one sheikh in the camp:

I am one of those who approved of some of the accomplishments of Fatah
al-Islam, when you consider dealing with the drunkards and the fact that our
girls could come and go without anyone misbehaving with them. All this was
positive.

Many witnesses in NBC confirmed that some imams condoned the presence of
Fatah al-Islam in the camp during their Friday sermons. For example, after two
clashes between the population and Fatah al-Islam fighters in the spring of 2007,
at least two imams interceded on behalf of Fatah al-Islam, as they were ‘pious faithful people’, reported residents. Islamist movements are, to some extent, welcomed in the camps for their ability to preserve the social order in the absence of other regulatory authorities. Because no Palestinian authority recognized by both Palestinians and Lebanese as legitimate and sovereign exists, Palestinians have been forced to adopt alternative – but less effective – ways of maintaining order in the camps. This phenomenon should be seen in parallel with the revival of a conservative Sunni Islam, also in recent years, in Lebanese cities neighboring the camps. In both Tripoli, near Nahr el-Bared and Beddawi, and in Sidon, near ‘Ayn al-Hilweh, groups such as Al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya, the Muslim Brotherhood and several locally established Salafist groups have been competing with municipal authorities, and to a lesser extent, with secular camp leaders, for bases of social support. One youth from Beddawi commented on this:

There are schools in Tripoli, and there are many students from the camp who study at these schools, such as Al-Hidaya al-Islamiyya of Sheikh Abdullah al-Shahhal and Al-Sahab Islamic Foundation, the schools of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Islamic University, which has now shifted to Hamas’s control.

These new manifestations of a conservative and urban Islam in Lebanon, in such close proximity to the camps, have made a distinct impression on many Palestinians. By welcoming camp residents into their midst socially, by accepting Palestinians in their religious colleges and by popularizing conservative Saudi satellite media such as Iqra, Al-Majd and Al-Nass in their geographical locales, these actors have provided many Palestinians with new frames of reference to discuss their situations. As a result, more and more Palestinians have begun to turn to Islamic authorities rather than to the PLO or other political authorities for answers to their questions and for assistance. For example, as one focus group participant observed: ‘Regarding matters of marriage, divorce and problems between neighbors, even problems on a political level – all these have witnessed involvement by the imams of mosques, who have played a role in calming things down.’

Unable to turn to municipal or larger Palestinian authorities to solve their problems, camp residents have been compelled to seek mediation in highly individualized ways such as these. Camp residents have begun to rely more on shared notions of morality and ethics – particularly, Islamic ones (akhlaq) – to promote norms for acceptable behavior. As a result, sheikhs, imams, and other ‘morally sound’ persons, like the wujaha’, have been granted much of the authority that, 20 years prior, belonged to secular political organizations such as the PLO.

In Syria, politics is monopolized by the state (Wedeen 1999: 45), with the Baath Party ensuring the de-politicization of the population, especially the Islamists. In this context, it is not easy for a Palestinian faction such as Hamas to carry out political activities. But the regime and the Islamist faction have made a clear deal: as long as Hamas politics conforms to Syrian foreign policy, Hamas is afforded political space (Blin 2008: 48). Hamas mobilizes a community of believers through mosques to financially support its actions of resistance and assistance to Palestinians.
under occupation. This effort has borne some fruit, as Syrian businesspeople have shown their generosity toward Hamas. Moreover, despite Hamas’ arrangement with the Syrian authorities, Hamas still plays a role in framing the Islamist opposition outside the camps (Blin 2008: 59). Syrian citizens now attend Hamas rallies and festivities inside the Yarmouk camp. Indeed, the camp has become a central place in Syrian internal politics.

However, Hamas primarily invests its limited political capital through social channels, rather than overtly political ones. As a result, while the municipality manages the camp, Islamic governmentality occupies the social arena. Hamas’ social power extends not only to a fundamental (i.e. moral and world-view) level, but also in more concrete terms in the form of real control and surveillance. Hamas and the official Syrian brand of Islam (promoted through channels such as the Assad Institute for Memorialization of the Quran) have thereby become the major actors in such governmentality.

Hamas is not only a movement of national liberation but also of religious re-socialization (Le Grand, cited by Blin 2008). For instance, Hamas regularly sponsors mass weddings. At one recent Yarmouk ceremony, 382 couples were wed. Palestinian grooms wore religious scarves and held Palestinian flags as they sat together before 10,000 attendees. Such weddings aim to help young couples deal with high marriage expenses that force many to delay matrimony.

In both countries, Syria and Lebanon, Hamas has also created organizations that parallel the PLO’s popular committee and many PLO-sponsored activities. In this sense, specific interpretations of Islam – not just shari’a but also ikhlaq (morals) – appear to have begun to function as ‘mentalties of governance’, or governmentalties, for camp residents. Anthropologist Michael Jensen, in conducting fieldwork on a Hamas soccer team in Gaza, observed how ‘the creation of sound Muslims at the individual level’ was accomplished through the physical conditioning of one’s body through sport; it was this ‘care of the self’ that marked one as an Islamist (Jensen 2009: 5). The soccer players with whom Jensen interacted also adopted new styles of dress and new ways of talking about themselves, morally distinct from other Palestinians in Gaza.

It is, as Rose reminds us, ‘through self-reformation, therapy, techniques of body alteration, and the calculated reshaping of speech and emotion, we adjust ourselves by means of the techniques propounded by experts of the soul’ (Rose 1990: 10). Islamism, as articulated by Hamas, literally as a science of the soul, has transformed the way many Palestinians, especially young men, construct their sense of self. It has brought to the forefront the idea that an ‘economy of morals’ can order societies in the absence of traditional hierarchies. The accumulation of moral capital thus becomes a way of standing out, of setting oneself apart from one’s peers and ultimately even a way of commanding respect and authority in the camp.

Conclusion: three models of governance

In this chapter, I posited two general theses. First, while in Syria, the state has normalized the space-camp and has treated it as any residential area, in Lebanon, there
is an endemic crisis of governance in Palestinian refugee camps. Rampant factionalism, clientelism, sectarian strife, oppressive Lebanese security and surveillance and a lack of central administrative and juridical Palestinian authority continue to prevent Palestinians from establishing effective governance structures. Second, in this near-absence of conventional governance, alternative governmentalities have emerged among camp populations, which to a remarkable degree, have succeeded in regulating camp residents’ behavior. I contended that these governmentalities have helped ensure the daily functioning of the camps and have contributed to the rise and spread of Islamism.

Hamas governmentality is the main Islamic governmentality in the camps but not the only one. Yarmouk and Ayn Helwa camps were also one of the niches from which Zarqawi in Iraq recruited his fighters, as Fatah al-Islam did later. However, these recruits did not necessarily believe in global jihadi ideology embodied by al-Qaeda, but rather adopted new modes of action and tactics. Our interviews with some men who fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq showed clearly that they oppose the American project in the region and not Western values. These marginalized, educated, (lower) middle-class individuals – not of the disenfranchised poor – are mainly only loosely tied to al-Qaeda or merely sympathetic to its ideas. In other words, a protracted defeated context intertwined with a conservative Islam widely disseminated through Saudi TV channels, the influence of the mosques and the political discourse of Islamist groups (including Hamas and Jihad) all constitute a backdrop that enables an easy shift from regular citizen to insurgent for a global cause, fighting Israeli-American domination in the region.

This chapter has shown rather three models of camps governmentalities: the normalization of the Syrian camps versus a presence model of exclusion and absence of the formal governance in Lebanese camps and the more subtle future model of governance based in the sophisticated form of control and surveillance.

In Syria, in spite of the fact that camps are considered and perceived by the official discourse of Syrian authority as a distinct political entity, the same authority has unofficially acceded to the camp’s spatial normalization, a de facto reality demonstrated by the residents’ everyday life. This does not mean that Palestinians in Yarmouk have abandoned their ties with Palestine or their claim of the right of return. Walls in this camp are covered in iconography referring to Palestine, martyrdom and the resistance. Khadija Fadhel (2008) talked about the double games of actors, be they Syrian or Palestinian. That Yarmouk is not technically an ‘official’ camp is an example of how the game is played. This double game is better expressed in how the Syrian authority labels Palestinians’ Syrian identification cards ‘temporary ID for unlimited period.’ This does not mean that Palestinians in Syria feel what Cambrézy (2001) called ‘temporal incertitude’. Social actors that we interviewed read the power structure in the region perfectly well. While they continue to claim the right of return, they are establishing themselves in the camp as if it were their permanent dwelling.

In Lebanon to understand the presence and the future model of governance, I will draw upon the work of Foucault (1995: 198–200) and Shamir (2009). Foucault invokes two modalities of power that rose between the seventeenth and the end of
eighteenth centuries in response to the treatment of lepers and the plague. Leprosy was treated by the logic of segregation, exclusion and ‘great confinement’. Lepers were excluded from the city and locked away in leper colonies through laws and regulations and rendered invisible through ‘exile enclosure’ and left to their deaths in a mass among which it was useless to differentiate. In contrast, as a contagious disease that spreads rapidly and kills many people, the plague set off new forms of response, based on spatial partitioning, i.e. multiple separations and individualizing treatment. Quarters, streets and housing were under close scrutiny, surveillance and control. Each resident should present themselves to inspectors. Segmentation prompted the rise of bio-politics where statistics aid governments in refining control and surveillance techniques. Both the separation of lepers and the segmentation from the plague are techniques from the Middle Ages, but unfortunately they persist in modern treatment of ‘undesirable’ populations. Refugee camps in Lebanon are treated a spaces needing surveillance, as well as spaces of exception and exclusion. Nowadays area is ordered, divided and managed by strict enclosures. The new governance model, which is based primarily on counterinsurgency policing the camp, is a way of treating the camp like a plague-stricken city in the Middle Ages. Governance becomes a way of moving from a leper stricken-city where the affected should be invisible to a state of hyper-visibility, where everyone is a potential suspect who will be registered when they enter and watched while inside the camp.

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Notes

1 For more details about the articulation of the two levels of governance see Hanafi and Long (forthcoming).
2 Some CBOs are mainly youth centers, women’s centers as well as rehabilitation centers for people with disabilities. They were created by UNRWA in the 1980s but now are quasi-financially independent.
3 In many camps, the social role of NGOs is much more important than that of the political factions. However, some of these NGOs are connected to the political factions. Interviewees reported a climate of mistrust towards the NGOs. Meanwhile, Hamas is increasingly playing a social role in the camps.
4 However, fearing the Israeli reaction, in the Palestinian Territory UNRWA avoid appointing people marked politically.
5 Some parts of this section have been co-authored written with Ismael Sheikh Hassan see Hanafi and Sheikh Hasan (2009).
6 These NGOs included: a community-managed women’s program center, a youth center and a number of NGOs active in Nahr el-Bared, including Al-Najda, Beit Atfal al-Sumud, Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation, the Khalidieh National Association and Community-based Rehabilitation Programme for the disabled.
7 See Knudsen (Chapter 6, this volume).
In addition, document requests donor funds (to the amount of 5 million US dollars) for ‘capacity building and technical assistance to the (Lebanese) Internal Security Forces (ISF) aimed at introducing community and proximity policing into NBC’ (p. 48).

For more details see http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/community-policing/neighbourhood-policing/?version=3 (accessed February 24, 2010).

Eventually, the popular committee refused to be part of that project. The major reason was the conviction that such projects were designed to undermine them and empower the municipality.

Palestinians are subject to many taxes related to trade and employment like other Lebanese.

Although most Palestinians receive their primary and preparatory education at UNRWA schools, they continue their secondary school education in Syrian government schools. Enrolment in Syrian universities and institutes is open to Palestinians, who are treated like Syrians (Brand 1988: 623).

Palestinian refugees in Syria have the right to own more than one business or commercial enterprise as well as the right to lease properties. These rights extend to trade and commerce. Membership in professional associations and labor unions is also open to Palestinians.

Palestinians do not require work permits – they may work in the government, and men must undertake military service (in the Palestine Liberation Army under the Syrian Command).

Fafo has cooperated with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria (PCBS-Damascus, which is under the authority of the PCBS-Ramallah) on research on Palestinian refugees in Syria. A multi-topic household survey in all refugee camps and a number of other areas where Palestinian refugees reside was carried out in 2003.

Syria’s 1976 intervention in Lebanon led to clashes between the PLO and the Syrian military forces in Lebanon, and in 1983, Syria attempted to control almost all the Palestinian factions but specifically Fatah.