Palestinian Refugees and Lebanon’s Election

By Franklin Lamb – Wavel Palestinian Refugee Camp, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

"My work here is very difficult. To be honest with you there isn’t a single day when I don’t leave work completely depressed, sometimes in tears. The amount of abuse of Palestinians in Lebanon is at a level that you cannot even imagine unless you live here. At the end of the day I go home and sit. And think. How is this possible? I think of these Palestinians and feel they are so pale and patient and ‘moderate’ compared to what I feel. I tend to keep quiet but what I feel inside is shocking and I am not comfortable describing it. This place is close to exploding." (European NGO social worker who assists children of NON-ID Palestinians in Ein el Helwe Refugee Camp).

Beirut’s Casino de Liban north of Beirut at Maameltein, perched above the Mediterranean north of Jounieh, was offering as late as 3 a.m. Saturday morning May 9, 2009, 2 to 1 odds that US President Barak Obama will drop out of the sky a la C. Rice and H. Clinton in an 11th hour ‘hail Mary’ to score a last minute goal for Israel. Another US ‘quick drop-in’ to shape the ‘US Ruling Team’ into a ‘US Wining Team’ during President Obama’s upcoming visit to the region.

Will He and will It Work?

Hard to say, but the likes of David Hale, Michele Sison, Jeff Feltman, Madeleine Albright, Susan Rice, Alenjandro Wolf (from the sidelines) David Welch, John Burns and David Shapiro – various USAID and other officials do not appear to have built up their squad sufficiently and the election is in less than
one month away. Signs of desperation are wafting down from Mount Lebanon and Awkar, site of the US Embassy.

Soon George Mitchell and his expanding entourage will give it a go and maybe, according to this morning’s rumors, President Obama himself, dues ex machina, since the State Department knows he is way more popular among Arabs and Muslims than is current US policy.

As Lebanon wonders if the much admired ‘gifted one’ will appear, the US coaching staff insists that it has been trying not to interfere in the internal affairs of this independent, democratic and sovereign country and explains during carefully culled media interviews, that before the election, none of them will engage or even dialogue with Lebanon’s Hezbollah led Resistance or with Hamas. Some here believe that after the election they may be obliged to seek meetings with both.

The job of recent visiting American officials has been to convince Lebanese voters that PM Fuad Sinioria’s Campaign slogan: “Our policy is to negotiate; theirs is to deter,” as he runs for Parliament from the voter and cash rich Hariri home base in Sidon, will deliver votes. The problem is that many Lebanese feel Lebanon is far better off with deterrence against Israeli aggression than what Human Rights Ambassador Ali Khalil calls “fake negotiations carefully designed in Washington and Tel Aviv to achieve nothing”.

Arriving Americans campaign advisors are also expressing alarm over the number of alleged Israeli spies that are being caught – on average of one a week since last January. The US concern appears not to be that there are an awfully lot of Israeli spies in Lebanon, but rather the fact that since the July 2006 War Hezbollah and the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) seem to be working well together and have revamped the ISF unit into Lebanon’s first effective spy snatching outfit.

The implications of this Opposition-Majority cooperation are
sobering for the White House. If Hezbollah can so effectively integrate and even merge its intelligence capabilities with those of the Lebanese government to catch Israeli spies, what if there were to be a linkage of Hezbollah’s military capability as some sort of an adjunct to the Lebanese Ministry of Defense? Would this integration force the end of the “Hezbollah has a militia!” chorus that the US team and Israel repeat ad nauseam?

“There goes the US ‘Hezbollah Militia’ Card” explained Adham, an energetic Palestinian AUB student who operates a part-time mobile DVD business (lest the cops catch him and it costs him a bribe) selling just released pirated Hollywood movies (only 2000LL or $1.34 each!) on Hamra Street, explains: “I am sure Israel would love to do to Lebanon what it did to Gaza. If they did the US and the international community would say destroying Lebanon yet again was “unhelpful to the peace process”. — Them! Our ‘peace process’ is now deterrence. If Hezbollah and Lebanon’s military linked and perhaps even merged, we can provide for our deterrence and security after the election.”

Watching from the Sidelines

As the Lebanese get ready to vote, more than 10% of its population, three generations of whom were born in Lebanon, wait, watch and listen.

Still possessing almost no civil rights including voting, home ownership, employment, secondary state education, health care, identification documents, marriage registration, places to bury their deceased loved ones or equal protection of Lebanese laws, Lebanon’s Palestinian refugees nonetheless have a huge stake in next month’s election results. The 420,000 UNRWA registered Palestinians, more than half living in squalor and jammed packed into 12 camps and half a dozen ‘Gatherings’ barely subsist, the wretched refuge of Zionist ethnic cleansings in 1947-48, and 1967. They are the survivors of
various illegal population transfers as well as massacres at Sabra-Shatila (1982), Qana I (1996), Qana II (2006), Hula (Burg Shemali Camp 1982) Tel al-Zaayter Camp (1975) to mention a few.

“We are eternally one with our Palestinian brothers and sisters!”

Were one to credit, as Hadith or Gospel, recently published Lebanese political Party Platforms, one might imagine hearing “Happy Days are Here Again!” being hummed in Lebanon’s Palestinian Refugee Camps and whistled by the decreasing number of ‘camp kids’ who bother trudging to school.

Judging from the sanguine responses offered by would-be Parliamentary delegates who responded to a Sabra-Shatila Foundation Candidate Questionnaire last month, Lebanon’s Palestinians could be forgiven for lapsing into fantasy and mentally packing their belongings. Perhaps even convening family gatherings, and day dreaming about arranging transport south to return to their homes across the ‘blue line’ in Palestine. Damping this euphoria, in addition to decades of broken Lebanese government promises of “providing dignity and help for our Palestinian brethren”, would be the words of the five times Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. His ubiquitous election billboard photos reminds one these days that before his February 14, 2005 murder, Hariri sometimes told voters, followed with a wide grin: “In Lebanon, believe nothing of what you are told and only half of what you see”.

It is probable that Martyr Hariri would have included current Political Party Pledges to Lebanon’s Palestinian Refugees.

Our Word is Our Bond!

All Lebanese political parties state unequivocally that following next month’s elections they want to grant the Palestinians full basic rights. All the Parties reject the US-Israel project of Tawtin (naturalization). All the Parties and
Candidates solemnly pledge that they will work to implement the Palestinians internationally acknowledged (UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (12/11/1948) legal Right to Return (Haqq al-Awada) to Palestine: (Article 11):

"Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible."

Simultaneously, all the parties blame their opponents for obstruction and preventing the implementation of their own Party’s trustworthy altruism.

The pro-US March 14 Future Movement (Tayyar Al Mustaqbal) majority Palestine Plank states: “We pledge to return to the traditional role of Lebanon among Arab countries contributing to the cause of Arab solidarity that is the first condition for the Arabs to have their rights, and the total commitment to support the Palestinian people’s struggle and unity under the leadership of the PLO to attain an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as capital, following the “two states” solution and the Arab peace initiative”. That sounds pretty good.

It continues: “We are committed to rejecting the resettlement (Tawtin) of the Palestinian brothers in Lebanon, and favor a constitutional amendment proposed by March 14 MPs regarding this subject 6 months earlier and that requires the unanimity of the parliament in order to amend the constitutional article of the resettlement” (of Palestinians in Lebanon). Also not bad.

A ‘Christian’ Political Problem?
The Free Patriotic Movement, under the leadership of General Michel Aoun, electorally allied with Hezbollah since 2006, also rejects Tawtin and favors the blood stream issue of Right of Return, but FPM is not quite so public about other Palestinian planks.

FPM’s public stance (party operatives speak more encouragingly in private) is impacted by the fact that Lebanon’s Christians are split roughly in half between supporters of the pro-US-Hariri Future Movement and the Hezbollah led Opposition. Consequently, Michel Aoun’s FPM needs to convince more right wing Christians to support him. Committing the Party to full Palestinian rights will not achieve that goal. To some of these voters the very word Palestinian brings back bleak memories of bitter years and personal loses.

Aoun is also in a tough election fight with the likes of fellow Maronites Samir Geagea’s Lebanese Forces (who, under Israeli, supply, command, control and attempted cover-up, perpetrated the 1982 Sabra-Shatila Massacre, some of whom with other gangs participated in the slaughter at Tel al-Zaatar, and even encouraged some Christian Lebanese Army Brigades to go AWOL and join the Syrian organized Camp Wars (1985-88) against Lebanon’s Palestinian Refugee Camps. That very black chapter of Lebanon’s history was led by long time Parliament Speaker, Nabih Berri and his Amal Militia, currently allied with Aoun.

Some in today’s FPM don’t like to recall the fact that the siege of Tel a Zaatar Palestinian Camp, which became a massacre, was the result of a plan drawn up by the then leader of the Lebanese party, Free Patriotic Movement, and by none other than today’s leader of FPM, Michel Aoun who was the army commander of the area in 1975-76.

The public opinion at that time among many Lebanese was expressed in Phalange Party slogans and statements such as those contained in the September 1975 Phalange Party
Communiqués which viciously attacked the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, and even advocated that Lebanon should dissociate itself from Arabism. The Phalange party spread its messages around Beirut using hate speech Graffiti.

One popular slogan from the late 1970’s was: It is a duty for each Lebanese to kill a Palestinian", reminiscent of today’s “Kill the Arabs” graffiti by some Zionist groups.

The FPM is not about to rile these voters by rubbing the salt of Palestinian Rights into their wounds. Moreover, Aoun’s FMP is also battling for Christian votes with Amin Gemayal’s right wing Phalange party and his clan’s 61 years of antipathy towards Palestinians, especially at Tel a Zaatar.

The FPM Platform demands that the Palestinians give up their weapons (i.e. certain armed Palestinian groups such as Fatah Intifada and Ahmad Jibril’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (arch foe of the increasingly well armed Kataeb-Phalange-Lebanese Forces and Druze Militias) and presumably armed groups inside Bedawi and Ein el Helwe camps). Finally, the FPM half heartedly promises the Palestinians the right to work, but “to be given on the basis of what Lebanon economic needs require.”

Some analysts in Lebanon feel that civil war era memories and wounds have yet to heal here and that while the public generally supports the Palestinians, strong anti-Palestinian sentiments still fester just under the skin of some powerful Lebanese politicians and their widely extended families. This may be part of the reason they have failed for many years to act to relieve Palestinian suffering. One cannot visit the Camps and associate with the current younger Camp generation without feeling that, mired in near hopelessness, they are tragically paying dearly for their elder’s unsettled accounts.

**Hezbollah: Palestinians Last Best Hope?**

Hezbollah’s political stance towards Palestine is well known
and its support among Lebanon’s Palestinians is strong within all 9 PLO factions still existing here. Even though they cannot offer any votes in the June election, secular Palestinians want the Party of God to do much more it for them if forms the next government.

Hezbollah intends to liberate Palestine and escort Lebanon’s Palestinians home. That’s the only reason it’s still on the US political terrorism list. If it abandons the Palestinian cause it immediately comes off the list according to increasingly numbers of western diplomats seeking dialog with the Party of God.

Hezbollah’s Party platform focuses on improving and developing Social Services for Lebanese citizens and Palestinian Refugees.

Mohammed Ra’ad, the head of Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc, presented Hezbollah’s election platform on April 3, 2009:

"The resistance is determined to complete the liberation of the remaining occupied lands, and particularly the Shebaa Farms and the hills of Kfar Shuba. We believe that any strategy of defense must integrate the current capabilities of the resistance and the capabilities of the Lebanese army, enabling it to stand up to Israeli aspirations regarding our lands and our water sources. We affirm our enmity to Israel, our support and assistance to our Palestinian brothers to liberate their land and the holy places...

"In light of our conviction that the state cannot shirk its caring role nor behave in an indifferent manner or be apathetic towards the needs of the citizens, it is the duty of the state to improve services in the field of health, education, housing, and social care."

Hezbollah intends that Palestinian Refugees receive these social services and pledges “generalizing the principle of
healthcare and preventive medicine”, which is an urgent need in the Palestinian Camps despite UNWRA’s ever diminishing, underfunded but noble efforts.

Hezbollah’s electoral Platform also pledges “Backing efforts to develop and reform the National Fund for Social Security and expanding the circle of its beneficiaries.”

Palestinian social workers and researchers at Beirut’s Mar Elias Palestinian Camp, including renowned Palestinian scholar Dr. Samer Suheil, emphasize that including the Camp populations in Lebanon’s social security system is essential to help sustain them until they return to Palestine.

Hezbollah agrees, and is pledging to fulfill its Party Platform.

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