Palestinian Refugees and Lebanese Security and Political Instability Post-1989

Yurike F. Wahyudi

yurikewahyudi@gmail.com

Universitas Airlangga

ABSTRACT

This research analysis the role of Palestinian refugees on Lebanon security and political instability after the end of Lebanon Civil War in 1989. Lebanon instability was mainly created around its fragile sectarian balance. The system was established to proportionally allocate political power to different sects in the society according to their shares of population. Instability in Lebanon further threaten as Palestinian refugees arrived in 1948 after Israel declaration of independence and the Arab-Israel war. Majority came from the Sunni Islam, Palestinian refugees has grown awareness to against its cause of displacement from Lebanon during the 1960s-1980s. Thus their activities, through PLO and its largest military wing, Fatah, has cause series of violent conflict which lead to the 1975 civil war. Today, the population live in destitute situation in refugee camps and gathering across Lebanon. Unable to go back home to Palestine in the last six decade, their existence represent a time bomb to Lebanon as host country and the regional at large. However, since 1989 until today Palestinian refugees can no longer create civil war in divided Lebanon. This analysis found that the relations between refugees and receiving country determined by three eminent variables: (1) rebel social network, (2) receiving country government and (3) society.

Keywords: refugees, refugees camp, conflict, political instability, rebel social network, policy of receiving country, society of receiving country

Introduction

The displacement of Palestinian refugees dated back to the upheaval in the region during the late 1940s. Israeli strive for independent in Palestinian territory and the Arab world resistance movements have trigger a series of violent conflict that forcibly displaced Palestinians to the neighboring Arab countries, including Lebanon. In 1948 at least 100,000 Palestinian, mostly Sunni Islam, arrived in southern part of Lebanon in search for safety abroad (Forced Migration Review, 2009). Their arrival
has not only reflect instability at home, but also trigger instability in Lebanon as the receiving country.

Lebanon recognized 17 different sects among their society, including Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, and Druze. In order to create stability through diversity, since 1943 a confessionalism system was adopted. Confessionalism system of government distributes political power to different religious or sects of their society based on their population shares (USIP, 2012). In Lebanon, the president must be a Maronite Christian, while the Prime Minister is a Sunni Muslim, Speaker of the Chamber is a Shia Islam and the Commander of Armed Force a Maronite Christian. Maronite has long predominated the system and continues to retains their dominance in Lebanese society despite the fact that Islam community has outnumbered their percentages in the society.\(^1\)

However, the sectarian balance dedicated to create stability within the society was indeed the center of Lebanon’s instability (Khawaja, 2011). The fragile sectarian balance was highly driven by their demographic figure and continues to highlight different sects and religions within the society (Mirsalari, \(nd\)). The atrocious level of national unity and integration was further worsen by the lack of common identities among the citizen. As a result, member of certain sect tend to be more devoted to their sect than to their country as a unity (Shils in Khawaja, 2011). Consequently, the presence of Palestinian refugees who mostly are Sunni Muslim, has startle the fragile sectarian balance within the society.

Despite the fact that Lebanese expressed sympathy and offer help to the refugees (Mackey, 2009: 90), their arrival triggered mix response in the sectarian society. Lebanese Muslims are the foremost supporter of the Palestinian cause while the Christian, fearing that Palestinian presence might jeopardized their dominance, opposed Palestinian settlement in Lebanon. The condition worsen when Palestinian across the globe organized themselves and formed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with Yasser Arafat as the leader. Along with its main mission to regain their independent, PLO has advocate the use of armed force against Israel. Palestinian refugee camps provide the breeding ground for PLO to recruit and train refugee fighters (Chaaban, 2010: 3; Knudsen, 2003; Hirst, 2010: 81).

\(^1\)National census has been forbidden since 1932, preventing the attempts to reaffirm the demographic composition, including share of each sect within the society. National census results are feared to be use as tool to shift Maronite dominance in Lebanese society.
Lebanon, strategically located just north of today’s Israel, served as a focal point for armed struggle against Israel (Yassine, 2010). While in 1969 Cairo Agreement between the PLO and Lebanese Armed Force Commander amplified Palestinian influence in Lebanon. Intensifying PLO activities has also caused immense impact to Lebanon security. Attack from and to Lebanon territory has forced southern Lebanon inhabitants to flee, avoiding the severe violent conflict (Salehyan & Glenditsh, 2006: 345). The situation once again was responded by divided opinion within the Lebanon society. Muslim in Lebanon support PLO struggle against Israel and blamed the government of Lebanon for their inability to protect their territory from Israel attack (International Crisis Group, 2009). While the Christian believes that the cause of instability are the Palestinian activities in the South and has been trying to stop PLO activities in Lebanon (Hirst, 2010: 85).

Divided within the Lebanon society reach its peak when a group of Christian Palanghis attack Palestinian refugees, during which the commencement of civil war within the Lebanon society was inevitable. The Lebanon civil war was followed by the Muslim demand to fairer political representation in the government (Salehyan & Glenditsh, 2006: 345), Israel invasion to Lebanon in 1982 and the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps massacre which draw massive international attention. By the time the civil war ended in 1989 and the Ta’if agreement was signed to restore order, Lebanon was in the state of political, security, social and economy devastation.

While Lebanese continue to mend and rebuild their country, Palestinian refugees remain living in the refugee camps and gatherings across the country in destitute situation. Today, the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is equal to 10% of Lebanon’s populations and continues to trigger series of violent conflict in Lebanon (UNRWA, 2011). The total number of Palestinian refugees worldwide reached 4,766,670 in their 64 years of exile. While their number and period of exile continue to grow, Palestinian refugees represent the largest and most protracted refugee situations across the globe. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are the group of

---

2 Cairo Agreement is a consensus sign by Yasser Arafat, the leader of PLO and General Emile al-Bustami, the commander of Lebanese Armed Force, in 1969. The Agreement recognized Palestinian right of armed struggle from Lebanese soil with respect to Lebanese independent and sovereignty. The agreement has also granted PLO the jurisdiction to govern Palestinian refugees and its camps in Lebanese territory.

3 UNHCR define protracted refugee situations as ‘one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. A refugee in this situation is often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance’ (2004). Refugee
Palestinian refugees with the worst living condition, resulting from the marginalization and suffering their suffer from the government restrictions on their rights. Their existence not only reflect the protracted conflict in Middle East, but also represent what International Crisis Group (2009) describe as ‘time bomb for the region’. While for Lebanon and its fragile sectarian balance the situations has set the country as ‘the battleground of Middle East’ (Hirst, 2010). Memories of civil war continues to linger in Lebanese as a deplorable reminder of the life of their multiethnic society (Haddad, 2003). Their existence not only indicate humanitarian issues, but also security and political concerns in their receiving countries, regional and the international community, including the 2007 violent conflict between Fatah al-Islam and Lebanon security forces in Nahr al-Bared Camp. Despite the high propensity of refugee related violent conflicts, civil war has no longer prevail in the Lebanese society.

**Weaken Palestinian Rebel Social Network**

During the 1960s to 1980s, at least 2/3 of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon involved in PLO political and armed struggle activities (Sayigh dalam Chaaban, 2010). Palestinian presence and activities in Lebanon was accommodate by the Cairo Agreement signed in 1969 between the PLO and Lebanon. Intensifying Palestinian armed struggle activities from Lebanese soil triggered a series of refugee related violent conflict, including the Lebanon Civil War during the 1975-1989 and Israel invasion in 1982 (International Crisis Group, 2009). The presence and development of rebel social network according to Salehyan and Glenditsch (2005) and James Milner is by far the direct consequences of refugees presence in receiving country. According to UNHCR (dalam Lischer, 2005: 34-35) socio-economic analysis, large refugee camps in the border, with high number of bored young man and destitute living conditions will lead to high refugees participation in rebel social network.

By the end of the civil war in 1989, the number of Palestinian refugees continue to grow in Lebanon. From only around 100,000 in 1948, there are 455,373 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in 2011 (UNRWA, 2011). Around 53%-57% of the crises a group of refugees experience might come to an end when one of the three durable solutions is finally reached. According to UNHCR, the three durable solutions are: (1) voluntary repatriation, (2) local integration, and (3) resettlement (UNHCR, 2006). In some refugee crises, durable solutions are proof to be easier said than done. To attain durable solutions, ones might took lengthy period of time, creating refugees in protracted situation.
Palestinian refugees live in 12 overcrowding refugee camps while the rest jumbled in refugee gatherings across Lebanon (UNRWA, 2011; Knudsen, 2003). The number represent the largest population of Palestinian refugees in receiving countries settling in refugee camps. Both refugee camps and gatherings have never improved in size and qualities while continue to provide housing for the growing number of populations. Overcrowding and poverty are commonly found in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees facing an array of restrictions. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon posses no political rights, restricted to own property, denied access to education and public healthcare. In 2005 and 2010, Palestinian refugees finally have the right to work in Lebanon private sectors and entitle to workers social services.

Though restriction to work in professional field of engineering, medical, law etc, still existed. Despite the improvement in economic rights, lack of training and education only allowed Palestinian refugees to work as cheap and seasonal labors. As a result, only 37% of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has a job (Chaaban, 2010) while only 7% of Palestinian out of that number has permanent job (Najdeh Foundation in The Guardian, 2010). Unemployment is also an important problem among the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This is especially hard, since refugees between 15-64 years old composed the largest age group within the populations. To survive Palestinian refugees continue to relied their live to international or local organization working to provide social services in the camps.

Consequently, until today Hamas and other Palestinian factions continue to recruit refugees (Hanafi, 2008). In Ein al-Hilweh and Nahr al-Bared refugee camps Palestinian rebel social network such as Fatah, Fatah al-Islam, Usbet al-Ansar, and Jund al-Sham train and established training camps within the vicinity of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon (Standford University, 2012; Time, 2009). Experience as victim and improvised living condition has inspired refugees to participate as fighters.

However, refugees participation was not the sole determining variable in rebel social network activities in receiving countries. The prolong period of exile has challenge rebel social network with different problems and issues. These include the nullification of Cairo Agreement and rebel social network internal conflicts. Palestinian fighters and PLO office has left Lebanon to Tunisia after the nullification

of Cairo Agreement and the end of civil war in Lebanon. The Cairo Agreement was a symbol for Palestinian social, economic and political freedom in Lebanon. The agreement granted Palestinian refugees the legitimacy for armed struggle from southern Lebanon (Chatty, 2010). While in the other hand it create state within a state, a Palestinian authority within Lebanese sovereignty (Suleiman, 2006). In instance, when Cairo agreement was nullified in 1987, Palestinian rights was abruptly remove. Armed struggle against Israel was stopped while the refugees watched one by one economic and social institution PLO built to support the refugees collapse.

While the rebel social network internal conflict rooted back to the Oslo Peace Accord. In 1993 Oslo Peace Accord was sign between PLO and Israel. Through the accord, PLO recongnized Israeli independence, and officially committed to end their armed struggle in exchange for the agreement of forming Palestinian Authority (PA) and moving to the peace talk. Though the accord marked a significant change in Israel-Palestine conflict, some Palestinian opposed it. Oslo Peace Accord was seen as a humiliation to Palestinian struggle for independence (International Crisis Group, 2009). As a consequences a growing number of Palestinian factions was born in opposition of the accord, PLO and continue to advocate armed struggle as a means to achieve their goals. They included a group called Tahaluf al-Qiwa, consist of eight factions: of Hamas, Fatah al-Intifada, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), al-Saïqa, Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian Liberation Front and the Palestinian Revolutionary Communist Party. Hamas was largely involved in an unending tension with Fatah. And also a Jihadi-leaning organization such as Fatah al-Islam, Usbat al-Ansar, Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami, al-Harakta al-Islamiyya al-Mujahida, dan Ansar Allah, Jund al-Sham, dan Usbat al-Nour.

The split proved to be more harm than good. Before the Oslo Peace Accord, unify rebel social network under the PLO work together to gain Palestinian independence. After the accord, Palestinian rebel social network is too busy fighting against each other in the refugee camps (Time, 2009). According to Rex Brynen (2009), internal conflict and tension over Palestinian representation between the factions has put burden in bringing the Palestinian together and struggle to end thei cause. While Kazem Hassan, Fatah spokesperson blamed how low level of
cooperation between Palestinian factions has worsen Palestinian prospect for independence (Brynen, 2009).

**Lebanon Policy Responses**

Post-1989 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon continue to live in destitute socio-economic conditions. The situations could possibly lead to stronger Palestinian rebel social network such as the heyday in the 1960s. In the contrary, Palestinian rebel social network has grown weaker due to the nullification of Cairo Agreement and the growing internal conflict. Not only that, the Government of Lebanon has also play an important role to prevent the outbreak of refugee related violent conflicts. According to Sarah Lischer (2005: 28-33), receiving country policy responses to prevent conflict are a determining factor in explain the relations between violence-prone refugees group and receiving-country security and political instability. Lischer (2005: 28) offer two important factors within the receiving country policy pivotal to the spread of conflicts, capabilities and willingness to prevent conflicts. Policy with high capabilities and wiliness to prevent conflict most likely resulted in the unlikeliness of violent conflict, while policy with low capabilities and wiliness will lead to high propensity of refugee related violent conflicts.

Before and during the civil war, Lebanese Government responses toward the Palestinian refugees was mainly reflected in the country’s divided leadership and the Cairo Agreement. Rather than strengthening the central government and the society to deal with the challenges rebel social network posed, Cairo Agreement reflect low capabilities and willingness of the Lebanese Government to prevent war. By the time Cairo Agreement was nullified in 1987, Lebanese government set a sequences of security and socio-economic policy concerning Palestinian refugees in their territory.

Lebanese Government capabilities to prevent conflict was reflected in their priorities to protect sovereignty as mentioned in the text of Ta’if Agreement. Lebanese government has also made statement on the important to protect Lebanese sovereignty. Such as Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati statement during his speech in 2012, highlighting the priorities to protect sovereignty and stability in Lebanon in respond of Palestinian presence (Najib Mikati Official Website, 2012).

---

5 Ta’if Agreement was a document discussed in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia which officially end the 15 years Lebanese civil war. Ta’if Agreement lays the blueprint for Lebanese national reform in politics, economy, security and social life (Karam, 2012).
Protecting borderline was Lebanese accomplishment to protect its sovereignty (Hokayem & McGovern, 2008). Lebanon has also impose strict security measure just outside each refugee camps. Security checkpoints was a compulsory for Palestinian and other entering and exiting refugee camps. A regular security check to control Palestinian weapons was also a regular security activities within the camps. The period of 1990-2000 marked the Lebanese Government effort to arrest Palestinian rebel social network supporters and fighters (Shanaa dalam International Crisis Group, 2009). With the help from United Nations and Syriah, Lebanese Armed Force protect their borders and received military training (Tahri & Donato, 2000).

While the willingness to prevent conflict are reflected in the Lebanese government inclination to protect and secure Palestinian refugees. Gradually, improvement in Palestinian refugees rights was granted, including the right to work through Ministerial Memorandum no. 67/11 in 2005 and 2010 and the establishment of Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) in 2005. LPDC works to improve refugees socio-economic conditions, building mechanism to eliminate rebel social network outside camp and demilitarization, and strengthen Lebanon-Palestine diplomatic relations (LPDC Website, 2010). It was expected that improvement in socio-economic conditions will impede Palestinian refugees participation in rebel social network (Blanford, 2012). The high capabilities and willingness of Lebanese Government to prevent refugee related violent conflict have worked to minimized the spread of conflict in refugee camps between Palestinian rebel social network into large scale war as well as minimized the willingness of Palestinian refugees to participate in rebel activities.

**Shift in Lebanon Society Perception**

While Palestinian rebel social network has engulfed by their internal conflict and further weaken by the high capabilities and willingness of the Government of Lebanon to prevent conflict, shift in Lebanese perceptions toward the Palestinian also determined the relations between refugees and receiving-country security and political instability. According to James Milner (2011: 14-15), the context in which refugees are perceived, determined how they are treated by the society. When refugees are seen as a threat, hostile treatment tend to be demonstrated by the society. On the contrary when the refugees population are seen as member of the economy and political
society, usually due to cultural and ethnical similarities, positive relations are likely to stranded.

Prior to the Lebanon Civil War, Lebanese perception toward the Palestinian are highly determined by their sectarian differences. Palestinian presence at the time, as Milner (2011) as well as Salehyan and Glenditsh (2006) put it, has worsen inter-sectarian tension within the Lebanon society. Palestinian refugees are seen by the Muslim as an important means to challenge Christian dominance (Mackey, 2005: 90). While for the Sunni Palestinian, Lebanese Islam population and the left wing provided pool of support for their cause (International Crisis Group, 2009). For the Christian, the relations between the two represent the threat to their dominance in Lebanon political, social and economy system.

However, since the end of civil war in 1989, Lebanese perception toward the Palestinian has shift dramatically. The shift expressed in the Lebanese public opinion toward Palestinian presence in their territory. A series of survey conducted in 1992-1993 (Khashan, in al-Khazen, 1997), 2003 (Knudsen, 2003), and 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2009), all found consistent tendencies in the Lebanese public opinion that Palestinian are responsible for the outbreak of 15 years civil war between 1975-1989. As a result, Palestinian are largely seen as the common enemies of the Lebanese. For the Lebanese, Palestinian are the one that cause series of violent conflict that lead to the civil war from 1960s to 1989 and their presence are the bitter reminder of the instability (International Crisis Group, 2009).

The consensus can also be heard in the sectarian leader statement after 1989, including in Walid Jumblat and Rafiq Hariri. Jumblat in an interview criticize how Yasser Arafat and PLO activities in southern Lebanon has damaged both Palestinian and Lebanese (Picard & Ramsbotham, 2012). While Hariri in one occasion stated "Lebanon will never, ever integrate Palestinians. They will not receive civic or economic rights, or even work permits." (Suleiman, 2006). The mantra was repetitively quoted by Lebanese prominent leader to restate their attitude toward the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. As a result, Palestinian presence are no longer seen by the Lebanon Islam populations as the potential allies to strengthen their influence in Lebanon. Indeed, the Sunni Islam population has tried to stand aside from Palestinian causes in Lebanon while the Sunni Shia strongly opposed Palestinian refugees resettlement in Lebanon along with the Maronite Christian (Al-Khazen, 1997). However, the society perceptions toward the refugees as threat or member of
the economy and political society are not enough to explained Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In the case of Palestinian refugees, the extensive period of exile create a unique dynamic of exile both for the refugees and receiving country’s population. Historical factors are found to play even greater role in changing the receiving country perceptions toward the refugees.

Conclusion

The relations between refugees and instability within the receiving country are highly determined by a complex interaction of three eminent variables, (1) rebel social network, (2) Lebanese Government, and (3) society. In the case of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the presence of Palestinian rebel social network, including Tahaluf and Jihadi-leaning organizations, is the direct threat of refugees flow to receiving countries. Refugee camps, such as the Ein al-Hilweh and Nahr al-Bared, served as the incubator of rebel social network recruitment and training activities. Destitute living conditions and no foreseeable durable solutions in the near future gave reasons for refugees to participate in armed struggle. As a result, large refugee camps are the home for Palestinian factions as well as their battleground for internal clashes. Their existence represent the microcosm of Palestinian in Lebanon territory. They only failed to torn Lebanon apart once again because of two main reason, the nullification of Cairo Agreement and the internal conflict within the rebel social network. The end of Cairo Agreement revoked Palestinian right to fight for their independence from Lebanese territory, resulted in a massive withdrawal of PLO fighters to Tunisia and the end of intense armed struggle against Israel. For instance this is resulted in the weaken influence of Palestinian in Lebanon. While the Oslo Peace Accord has give raise to the divided Palestinian movements. Internal conflict between Palestinian factions has prevented a unified liberation attempt through armed struggle. Palestinian factions in Lebanon are too busy fighting their own war against each other in search for power in refugee camps.

Furthermore, Lebanese government has been seen to create bold responses to prevent violent conflict triggered by the presence of Palestinian refugees. Through the Ta’if Accord, Lebanese government work hard to protect their territory, improve the quality of its armed forces, cooperate with Syria and the United Nations to secure its border, apply strict security measure outside the refugee camps as well as improve refugees economy and social rights. Even though the attempt to demilitarized the
refugees population was not success, strict security measure are imposed among the Palestinian refugee camps. The attempt successfully isolate any violent conflict within the refugee camps to spread to the society. Lebanese Government also committed to protect and secure Palestinian refugees in their border. Improving their socio-economic condition share equal priorities with mitigating the risk of conflict created by rebel social network. Granting refugees right to work and the establishment of LPDC are some of the important achievement of Lebanese government. Last but not least, Lebanese perceptions toward the Palestinian also influence the relations between Palestinian refugees and Lebanese security and political instability. Today, Palestinian presence are seen as a common enemies that eventually unite Lebanese public opinion. This perceptions was created around the historical relations between the two. The bitter memories of civil war and series of refugee related violent conflict serves as a reminder how Palestinian refugees has reshape Lebanese instability at the time.

However, it is also important to note that Palestinian refugees are principally trapped within the complex interaction of the three variables. Living in destitute situations with no foreseeable prospect of durable solutions, the protracted refugee situations are continues to be use as reasons for the development of rebel social network as well as their recruitment activities in refugee camps. To tackle the issue, protecting Palestinian refugees in Lebanon share important priorities with finding durable solutions to their displacement and the Israel-Palestine conflicts.

References
Blanford, N. *Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon become Less of a Hotbed*


Mirsalari, A., Approaching the Palestinian Refugees Crisis in Lebanon from Modified Human Security Perspective. *University of Waterloo*.


