

CONFLICT ANALYSIS

Bourj Barajne Camp



Borj el Brajne camp destroyed in the aftermath of the 'War of the Camps' (1985-1988), a sub conflict of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) in which the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut were besieged by the Shiite Amal party. Image courtesy of the Palestinian Archive.

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Methodology

Mixed-method secondary and primary data collection was used to produce both national and local-level Lebanon Conflict Analyses. COAR analysts first relied on desk research to screen and collate secondary data relevant to past and present conflict dynamics. COAR field researchers collected primary data by means of semi-structured interviews with key informants including community leaders, CSOs, and security experts based in several regions. Data was reviewed and analysed by COAR programming and analytical experts. Evidently, the scenario plans presented here are speculative, and the events discussed may ultimately transpire differently.

Note, the Borj el Brajneeh conflict analysis presented here forms part of a series. The National Level conflict analysis should be considered as foundational to subsequent conflict analyses and scenario plans developed for selected localities. Local-level reports in this series are therefore informed by the issues and findings identified in the national level analysis.

Bourj Barajne Camp

Background

Borj el Brajne camp was established in 1949 by the League of Red Cross Societies and is located in the southern suburbs of Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold. The camp was built on one square kilometre of land to accommodate 10,000 refugees initially. However, following displacements from other camps, as well as the influx of Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees, the population is estimated to have swelled to more than 40,000 individuals (approximately 50 percent Syrian, 40 percent Palestinian, 5 percent Lebanese, and 5 percent migrants of other nationalities).¹ Living conditions in the camp are extremely dire as infrastructure is generally quite poor, access to basics such as clean water is challenging, the poverty rate is very high, and unemployment is as high as 90 percent. The camp is not structurally sound, as houses are improperly built and residents have been forbidden by law from bringing building materials into the camp, preventing the repair, expansion, or improvement of homes.² Moreover, loose electrical wires hanging low over the alleyways result in the death by electrocution of several individuals each year.³ Proliferation of arms and drugs is a notable feature of the camp. Palestinian refugees face restrictions in the labour market, with very few jobs available to them. Apart from support provided by UNRWA, Palestinians have no access to any form of social security or health care. The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis in Lebanon have plunged Palestinian refugees into a more precarious status than ever.

Indeed, tensions and conflict in Palestinian camps are inevitably shaped by the political schisms of Palestinian parties and factions in the West Bank and Gaza. But the camps, including Borj el Brajne, are also influenced by regional dynamics — particularly those of Syria and Lebanon. Two main events — the Lebanese Civil War and the Syrian war — have affected the dynamics of intra-Palestinian conflict as well as the host-refugee relationship.

Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990):

While the processes that sparked the civil war were highly complex and multifaceted, the collective memory of modern Lebanese society often blames Palestinians for sparking the conflict — referring to the infamous incident on 13 April 1975, when Phalangist gunmen ambushed a bus passing through of Ain Remmene, killing 27 of its mainly Palestinian passengers. What ensued was the Two Year War commonly referred to as the Palestinian-Christian War. Further fuelling antagonism towards the Palestinians was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, with the primary aim of rooting out the PLO and turning the civil war in favour of Israel's right-wing allies, the Phalangists. The invasion resulted in the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the bombardment of Borj el Brajne camp, and the evacuation of the PLO fighters. To this day, tensions between Lebanese and Palestinian refugees persist over the memory of the gruesome civil war and the perceived role of the Palestinians in it.

Syrian War:

Syria plays a role in both intra-Palestinian dynamics as well as in the Lebanese-Palestinian relationship. Syria's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War had two aims: to curb the PLO and to control Lebanon. In May 1985, the Amal Movement — aided by Syrians and the

1 "Burj El Barajneh Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon," Anera. Available at: <https://www.anera.org/stories/burj-el-barajneh-palestinian-refugee-camp-lebanon/#sthash.oL2JxdJA>

2 The Lebanese government claims that improving camp life would threaten Palestinians' "right to return" to their homeland, and ultimately lead to their naturalisation, which would upset Lebanon's delicate balance between Muslims and Christians (since more than 90 percent of Palestinians living in Lebanon are Sunni Muslims).

3 "Death by Neglect," The New Humanitarian, 1 June 2015. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/photo-feature/2015/06/01/death-neglect>

Syrian-backed PFLP-GC, Fath Al Intifada, and As-Saiqa — launched an offensive on the PLO and their allies in Sabra, Shatila, and Borj el Brajne, in what became known as the War of the Camps. Apart from heavy bombardment and destruction, Borj el Brajne camp was besieged for more than six months, resulting in dire living conditions that forced some residents to eat grass, cats, and dogs.⁴ This battle further marred the relationship between Lebanese and Palestinians, but it also created a division inside the camps that persists to this day. This divide between Palestinian factions — splitting them into pro- and anti-Assad groups — became further entrenched on two occasions: in 1993, after the Oslo Accord process resulted in the creation of the Damascus-based rejectionist front (see the below table: Fasa’el Al Tahalof); and in 2011, when the Syrian war forced Palestinian factions to choose sides, with those supporting Assad (mainly PFLP-GC, Fath Al Intifada, and As-Saiqa) aiding him in the besiegement and bombardment of Palestinian camps such as Yarmouk and Khan El Shih camps. In Lebanon, this schism - compounded by the arrival of Syrians and Palestinians from Syria- infiltrated the alleyways and neighbourhoods of Borj el Brajne, but it also affected the relationship of both factions and civilians with wider society. Naturally, Syria-allied factions (*mainly Fasa’el Al Tahalof*) had a stronger foothold, as they are supported by Hezbollah, an ally of Assad.

4 “Refugees in Beirut Eat Cats, Rats, Doctor Says,” Los Angeles Times, 11 February 1987. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-02-11-mn-1818-story.html>

Stakeholders

Type	Name/Role	Impact on Programme	Recommendations	
PALESTINIAN FACTIONS	Group A: PLO-allied factions (aka Fasa'el Monzamat Al Tahreer)	Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – aka Fateh	Potential spoilers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exacerbate tensions between Palestinians and between Palestinians and Syrians hold economic and political interests and seek to control resources in the area (possibility of aid diversion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordination and information sharing on project rationale. Important to keep a good relationship with all parties (as they hold power to halt/sabotage programmes) but maintain neutrality Ensure projects do not overlap with interests of parties Monitor impact throughout the project cycle
		Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) – aka Al Jabha Al Shaabeya		
		Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine – aka Al Democratiya		
		Jabaht Al Tahreer Al Arabiya (a very small faction that was backed by Saddam Hussein)		
	Group B: Alliance of Palestinian forces (aka Fasa'el Al Tahalof; also known as the Rejectionist Front, for rejecting the 1993 Oslo Accord)	As-Sa'iqa – a de-facto brigade of the Syrian armed forces	Potential spoilers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exacerbate tensions between Palestinians and between Palestinians and Syrians hold economic and political interests and seek to control resources in the area (possibility of aid diversion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordination and information sharing on project rationale. Important to keep a good relationship with all parties (as they hold power to halt/sabotage programmes) but maintain neutrality Ensure projects do not overlap with interests of parties Monitor impact throughout the project cycle
		Hamas – currently funded by Iran and warming up to Syria, after that relationship deteriorated at the onset of the Syrian war because Hamas opted for an impartial stance, but ultimately sided with the Syrian revolution. That decision resulted in Hamas leaders leaving Damascus in 2012.		
		Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) – aka Al Jabha Al Shaabeya- Al Keyada Al Amma A Palestinian nationalist militant organisation based in Syria. Was led by Ahmad Jabril, a former captain in the Syrian army.		
		Islamic Jihad – aka Al Jihad Al Islami An Islamic Palestinian organisation influenced and funded by Iran and enjoying a good relationship with Syria.		

Type	Name/Role	Impact on Programme	Recommendations	
PALESTINIAN FACTIONS (cont.)	<p>Fateh Al Intifada – aka Al Intifada</p> <p>Broke away from Fateh in 1983, during the PLO's participation in the Lebanese Civil War. Formed with Syrian support.</p>			
	<p>Ansar Allah – an Islamist organization, closely related to Hezbollah</p>			
Neutral	<p>Fateh – Democratic Reform Bloc – aka Fateh Al Tayyar Al Islahi or Al Dahlan. Formed and headed by Mohamad Dahlan, who was initially ousted from Gaza by Hamas and then expelled from the West Bank by the PLO after a fall-out with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The latter repeatedly claimed that Dahlan had murdered Yasser Arafat. Dahlan's main opponent in Burj Brajne is Fateh (PLO).</p>			
PALESTINIAN COMMITTEES	<p>Popular Committees (Lijan Shaabeye) (these act as municipalities, in charge of the social welfare of the camps)</p>	<p>1) Led by PLO: Significantly weakened in recent years due to lack of resources and support</p> <p>2) Led by the Fasa'el Al Tahalof: Considered more resourceful than the PLO-led committee due to the support it receives from Hezbollah and Syria; it regulates electricity, water, and other aspects of the camp.</p>	<p>Potential Stabilizer: provision of services as a 'unified' entity which diffuses tensions</p> <p>Potential Spoiler: certain groups benefiting more than others >>> increase tension and schism</p>	<p>Engagement, information sharing, project design, coordination for implementation</p> <p>Mitigate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conduct own needs assessment to confirm communicated needs • Develop and abide by own targeting criteria • restrict procurement and provision of in-kind and cash aid to organization's staff (mitigating aid diversion)

Type	Name/Role		Impact on Programme	Recommendations
PALESTINIAN COMMITTEES (cont.)	Security Committee (Lajne Amneye)	Formed of all Palestinian factions in the camp and led by Fateh, the committee is in charge of all security-related affairs.	Potential Stabilizer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uphold security as a ‘unified’ entity which diffuses tensions • Potential Spoiler: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • certain groups dominating the security paradigm >>> increase tension and schism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination and information sharing on the type of work conducted • Important to keep a good relationship with the committee (as they hold power to halt/sabotage programmes) but maintain neutrality • Ensure projects do not overlap with interests of parties • Monitor impact throughout the project cycle
	Quartet Committee (Lajne Robai'ye)	Formed of all Palestinian factions in the camp, in addition to members from Hezbollah, Amal, and the LAF Intelligence. The committee coordinates on the sensitive affairs of the camp and ensures the camp is stable in the wider Hezbollah-controlled area.		Avoid; no engagement
INFLUENTIAL ACTORS	Hezbollah	Located in the Hezbollah-dominated area of Bourj Barajne, all Palestinian factions without exceptions are obliged to coordinate with Hezbollah and inform them of the slightest action beforehand. Naturally, the camp is effectively controlled by Hezbollah, which is tacitly allied with and supports Group B actors.	Potential Stabilizers: uphold the fragile peace in the camp between factions and groups Potential Spoilers: exacerbate tensions as may be seen as one-sided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid, no direct engagement • Engage with potential conduits that are seen as more neutral and would pose less risk to the organization

Type	Name/Role		Impact on Programme	Recommendations
INFLUENTIAL ACTORS (cont.)	LAF Intelligence	Cooperates with Hezbollah for the maintenance of order in Tripoli; reportedly mainly has contacts with ‘Group B actors’. Due to a 1969 Arab agreement, LAF is prevented from entering Lebanon’s 12 Palestinian camps.		
	ISF Intelligence (Information Branch)	Plays a much lesser role than the LAF and maintains contacts with Group A actors.		
AID ACTORS	UNRWA	The primary agency responsible for the provision of relief and human development to Palestinian refugees. In Bourj Barajne, as in all other camps in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees are more often than not frustrated by UNRWA’s limited capacity and resources.	Potential Stabilizers: provision of aid, services and other programmes that diffuse tensions and mitigate economic hardships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share project plans and outcomes, engage and coordinate in project activities • Conduct rigorous vetting of local partners and avoid those with political/religious affiliations
	NGOs	Multiple local and international NGOs (such as MSF) are located in the camp, providing aid and services such as emergency distributions, health, protection, and education. Tensions arise sometimes between Palestinians and Syrians, and between Palestinians themselves over aid.	Potential Spoilers: several local CSOs affiliated with political and/or religious groups >>> politicizing aid	
MUNICIPALITY	Burj Barajne	Controlled and led by Hezbollah who plays a main role in coordinating with the factions and maintaining the stability/calm of the camp	<p>Potential Stabilizer: acts as a mediator sometimes between factions and keeps security under control</p> <p>Potential Spoiler: Hezbollah’s support to the Alliance of Palestinian forces exacerbates the schism with PLO-Allied Factions</p>	Occasional engagement and information sharing on presence in the camps and programme rationale



Army deploys on the outskirts of Bourj Barajneeh camp following armed clashes between the Shiite Jaafar clan and members of a Palestinian family on March 10, 2021. Image courtesy of LBCI Lebanon.

Scenarios

1 | Lebanon Conflict Dynamics ‘Spillover’ Into the Camps

Pessimistic – Most Likely

This scenario presumes that Lebanon’s crisis, along with rising inter- and intra-sectarian tensions, will spill over into the camp, ultimately resulting in restricted access and a tighter encirclement of the camp by Hezbollah and the LAF Intelligence. More than 95 percent of camp residents are Sunni Muslims, but it is situated in a predominantly Shiite area that is controlled by Hezbollah. As a result, any instability affecting both internal camp affairs and the wider environment is not tolerated. In terms of internal camp affairs, an escalation in clashes among opposing factions is highly unlikely for two reasons: Firstly, factions have neither the resources nor the desire to engage in a conflict that would produce no tangible benefits and only result in destruction and the exacerbation of existing grievances. Secondly,

Palestinian factions know, from recent history, that any confrontations on Lebanese soil would have disastrous repercussions. Therefore, while tensions are indeed present — particularly between Fasa'el Al Tahalof and the PLO-allied factions, as well as between Fateh and Dahlan — they are highly unlikely to escalate beyond minor short-lived skirmishes.

This scenario assumes heightened tensions between Palestinian and Syrian refugees in the camp and actors in the surrounding environment. Over the years, relationships between camp residents and neighbouring communities were mended, with Borj el Brajne residents becoming assimilated to their surroundings. Individual incidents that escalate in magnitude and intensity are, however, unavoidable. For instance, in 2013, clashes occurred between Hezbollah and some Palestinian factions after a group of Palestinians celebrating a wedding refused to be searched at a Hezbollah checkpoint; one Palestinian was killed and at least four others were injured in this incident.⁵ While Hezbollah quickly contained the situation by assembling an urgent meeting with the factions, it also tightened security measures on the checkpoints surrounding the camp. Similarly, in 2017, a dispute escalated into armed clashes between the Shiite Jaafar clan and members of a Palestinian family. Again, Hezbollah and the LAF quickly contained the situation and tightened security measures.

Of note, these incidents took place in a much more stable Lebanon. Currently, the situation is tense, with a countrywide increase in the number of armed clashes that begin as disputes over resources but develop into inter-sectarian tensions. Given the volatility of the present situation, incidents similar to those of 2013 and 2017, or even heightened tensions inside the camp itself, will result in tightened security measures around all camp entrances, hindering movement and access.

Conflict Dynamics

There are two potential triggers that will result in the camp's partial encirclement by both Hezbollah and the LAF Intelligence:

- Repeated, increasingly intense, clashes between Palestinians in the camp and the surrounding Lebanese areas over resources such as fuel, or even over personal disputes.
- An increase in clashes inside the camp among Palestinians (PRS and PRL) and between Palestinian and Syrian refugees.

As shown in the map above, the camp has several entrances, of two types: those that are big enough to allow cars and mini trucks through, and those that are narrower and only sustain passage of pedestrians and motorcycles. Checkpoints are initially expected to be erected around the larger entrances to check the contents coming in and out of the camps. At a later stage, pedestrian checkpoints will likely be erected by the smaller passages. In addition to the critical impact on access (*see below*), *these checkpoints will exacerbate two conflict dynamics:*

Inter-Palestinian tensions: As stated previously, the camp's factions are essentially split into two groups — those allied with the PLO, on the one hand, and those supported by and allied to Syria (and, by default, to Hezbollah), on the other. Naturally, the latter will have more privilege and enjoy some laxity in security measures due to their strong relationship with, and subjugation to, Hezbollah. This will inevitably increase tensions between the two groups, which might further trigger frequent clashes between them — or, worse, divide the camp into two de facto sections.

Palestinian-Lebanese tensions: The securitisation of the camp will promulgate the idea that refugees are a threat to Lebanon's stability — a threat that has been frequently invoked

5 "Clashes Between Hezbollah and Palestinians Result in One Fatality" Al Arabiya, 8 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/2013/09/09>

by politicians and parties, in reference to both Palestinians and Syrians. This will lead to escalated verbal and physical harassment of refugees who will face a greater risk of losing their jobs and being exploited.

Impact: Refer to the “General impact” section in the national scenario. Note the following specific impact for Borj el Brajne camp:

Restricted Humanitarian Access: Heavy security measures at checkpoints will impact both the quantity of materials entering the camp as well as the frequency of shipments. Shortages of basic items, already rampant across the country, will worsen and lead to the adoption of negative coping mechanisms – for instance, skipping meals. Health conditions will also deteriorate, as the camp’s sole medical facility, Haifa hospital, is already suffering from shortages of equipment and medication.

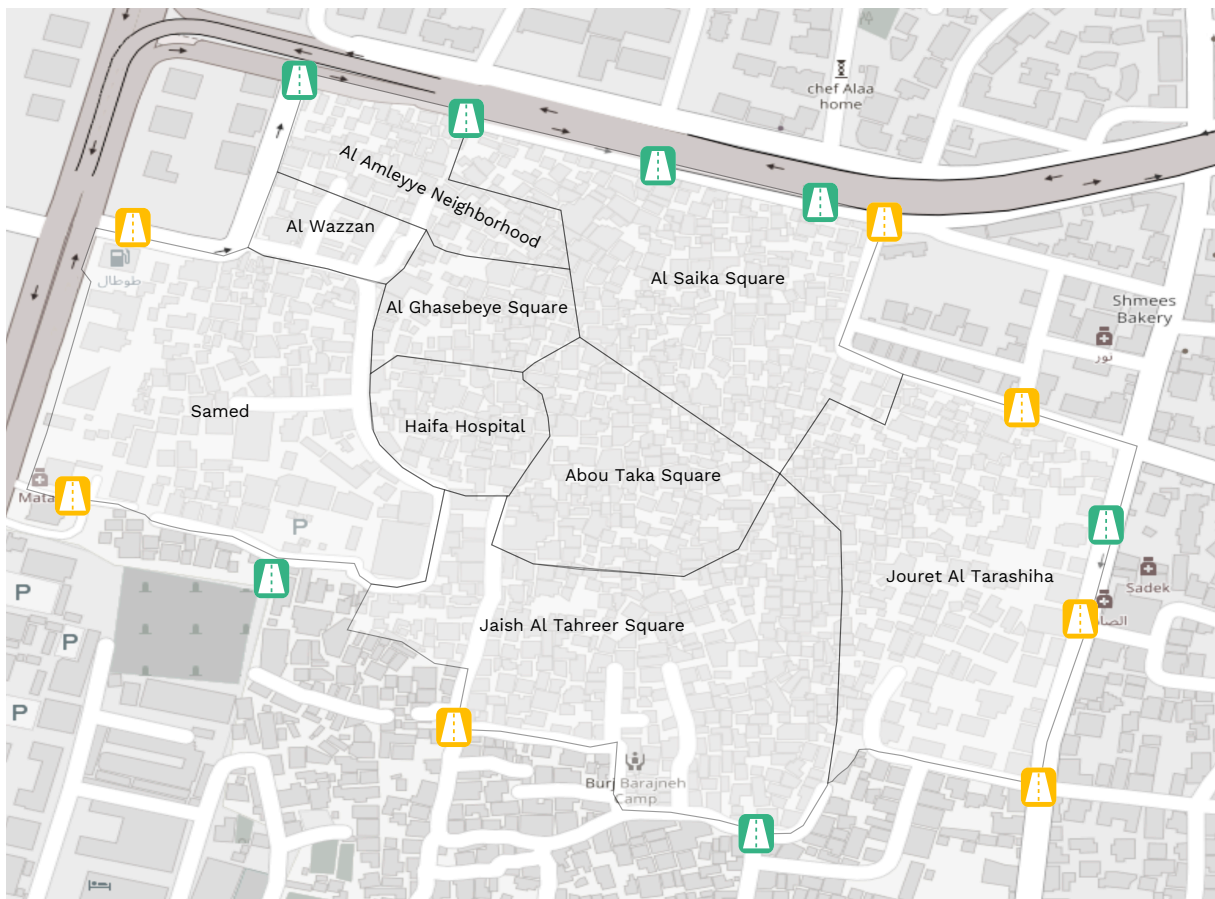
Aid Diversion: Agencies should be aware of the potential for aid diversion, especially given the restricted access and increased need for basic supplies.

Safety and Security: Staff and beneficiaries are at risk of being hurt or killed in armed clashes; a duty of care should be in place.

Negotiation with non-state armed groups: NGOs and civil society actors will be obliged to coordinate with non-state armed groups to negotiate access. Efforts should be made to ensure impartiality and neutrality of aid provision, especially with regards to the supporters of the conflicting Palestinian factions.



Big Entrances – Car Passages ■
 Small Entrances – Pedestrians and Motorcycles Passages ■





Armed presence of members of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Bourj Barajne camp. Image courtesy of Al Joumhouria.

2 Intra-Palestinian Resource Conflict Triggers Armed Clashes

Worst-Case Scenario – Least Likely

This scenario presumes that the trigger for conflict would be an escalation of tensions within the camp. The worsening economic situation and decreased availability of resources and basic goods will cause both residents and factions to fight over them. An armed clash over fuel, for instance, between supporters of two different factions is likely to result in several injuries and fatalities; ultimately, such a dispute would quickly turn into a political one, dragging factions into the conflict.

Camp-wide armed clashes will erupt between the PLO-allied factions and the alliance of Palestinian factions. As the latter enjoys Hezbollah's support, the power balance will quickly tip in their favour. The neutral Dahlan faction will likely side with the alliance of Palestinian factions due to their animosity against the PLO. Clashes will also result in the division of the camp by neighbourhoods or alleys, with frontlines and territories clearly demarcated. To avoid the spread of clashes to the wider area, Hezbollah and the LAF intelligence will totally besiege the camp, closing all entrances and only allowing pedestrians to go in and out during certain hours. Pedestrians will be subjected to rigorous checks, and the type and quantity of items they are allowed to carry in and out of the camp will be restricted. Supply of basic items such as food, water, fuel, and medication will be critically depleted, resulting in an acute humanitarian crisis.

Impact in this scenario is largely similar to the most likely scenario, albeit at a higher pitch. Humanitarian access will be more severely restricted, such that shortages of basic items will reach critical levels and lead to malnutrition cases, especially among children. Aid diversion is a high risk in this scenario; in any case, agencies will be obliged to work with local partners while supporting them remotely. The safety and security of both staff and beneficiaries is jeopardised. Women and children are at heightened risk and may be used as war hostages; children will also be engaged in the conflict, carrying arms in support of the factions that recruited them.

The content compiled and presented by COAR is by no means exhaustive and does not reflect COAR's formal position, political or otherwise, on the aforementioned topics. The information, assessments, and analysis provided by COAR are only to inform humanitarian and development programs and policy.

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