Resettling the Palestinian Refugees in their Hosting countries - "Serious Trouble for Lebanon,"

December 16th 2003.

Introduction

After spending decades of misery in refugee camps around the Arab world, the Palestinian refugees deserve an end to their stateless condition. The exploitation by the Arab leadership of the "Palestinian cause" has kept the Palestinians in limbo in their host countries with the empty promise of "return".

The State of Israel, confronted with an increasing birthrate within its own Arab residents, is adamantly refusing the infusion of millions of Palestinians into its population. In this context, the inevitable alternative – as proposed by certain international authorities - seems to be resettling these refugees in the hosting states.

If the Arab countries should look pragmatically at the Palestinian plight they might find that the humane solution would include resettling numbers of the Palestinians in their present host countries where possible and providing the rest with incentives and opportunities to move to other Arab countries which are not presently hosting refugees. It is only fair that all the Arabs share the burden of improving the lives of the Palestinians and create for them an opportune future. The Palestinians should easily be able to integrate with people who share their same religion, culture, language and national belonging.

Lebanon's case

In Lebanon's case the resettlement of the Palestinians would create larger problems than the one it aims to resolve. Already in its preamble, the Lebanese constitution -after the Taëf agreement– asserts the Lebanese sovereignty over the entirety of the Lebanese territory and excludes "dismemberment, partition or resettlement" (article 1-i of the General Principles).

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This absolute rejection of any definitive settling of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is backed by a rare consensus among the different Lebanese communities on such an important and delicate subject.

The categorical rejection of resettlement in Lebanon is based on two principal sets of factors: national-political factors and socio-economic factors.

1. The national-political factors:

A. Religious identity: In the Middle East countries in general and the Arab world in particular, religious ideology permeates all aspects of political and national sentiments. Sectarian belonging prevails over any other national or secular ideology. Lebanon, whose survival is based on a fragile sectarian balance, will be devastated by the infusion of an estimated 350,000 mostly Sunni refugees. A causal relation exists between demographic equilibrium and political stability in Lebanon. This linkage has characterized Lebanon since 1920. In a pluralist society like Lebanon's, where the political regime is based on an equation of symbiosis between the various communities, every attack on the demographic equilibrium via massive naturalizations or by any other means will have a serious impact upon the internal structure of the country.

B. The bitter and antagonistic experience of the Lebanese with the Palestinians during the years of the war in Lebanon: the Palestinian presence (both political and military) served as one of the destabilizing factors in Lebanon, undermining its independence. Seeking refuge in Lebanon after the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948, the Palestinians were placed in camps around the main Lebanese cities (17 Palestinian camps scattered throughout Lebanon, the majority of which surrounding the large urban agglomerations). Lebanon received by far a greater ratio of Palestinians per capita than any other neighboring country. Beginning in 1965, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon served as staging bases for guerilla operations against Israel, a process which culminated in the Cairo agreement in 1969 which endorsed the existence of a state within a state, officially empowering the Palestinian militias. After breaching the armistice agreement signed between Lebanon and Israel in 1949 they dragged Lebanon into a lopsided and devastating conflict with Israel. Under the pretext of ensuring their security, they placed roadblocks on the roads, arrested, detained and interrogated Lebanese citizens; and under the pretext of liberating Palestine, they sided with radical islamists and ultra-leftists, sheltered international terrorists and launched the war against the Lebanese in 1975!

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Thus, Lebanese memory with regard to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon goes far beyond the humanitarian problem of the Palestinian refugees and of the inhuman living conditions to which they are subjected in the camps. Rather, this Lebanese memory tends to associate Palestinians much more with the concept of a "challenged Lebanese sovereignty", according to the description of Joe Maïla, dean of the Faculty for Humanities at the Institute for Catholic Studies in Paris. The majority of the Lebanese link the image of the Palestinians in Lebanon to the Lebanese civil war and to the involvement of all the Palestinian organizations in this war.

The developments of the last six years have only led to the reemergence of this image among a large number of Lebanese, in light of the fact that a certain number of Palestinian camps in Southern Lebanon have become true "security islets", harboring outlaws, criminals and terrorists.

Although Lebanese anti-Palestinian feeling is less intense today than it was in the 1970's or in the 1980's, it is nevertheless the case that the tension from the past remains. A recent study by the political scientist Simon Haddad revealed that 65% of the Lebanese have no contact whatsoever with Palestinians residing in Lebanon, and that only 18% of them have any Palestinian acquaintance. The people surveyed belonged to the six main religious communities, including the Sunnites, the community which counts more Palestinians among its members than does any other.

In light of the above, it becomes obvious that there is a difference between supporting the Palestinian cause, which is the cause of an uprooted people seeking to return to its homeland, on the one hand, and between accepting to integrate Palestinians into Lebanon.

2. The demographic and socio-economical elements

Socio-economic constraints are equally important: Lebanon is a small country of 4 million inhabitants living on a small area of 10,452 km^2, where the population per square kilometer is one of the highest on the globe (388); whereas the population per square kilometer in Arab countries with much larger areas vary between 1.38 and 40 inhabitants, as can be found in Egypt. It follows from all these figures that the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is overwhelming.

Furthermore, with the economic crisis in Lebanon and the rise of unemployment and of the national debt, one can question the logic of integrating the Palestinian refugees while the return of the displaced Lebanese back into their villages could not yet take place.

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The Syrian policy

In the 1970's, Syria used the "the Palestinian right to freedom of movement" as a means of pressure against the Lebanese authorities to force them to comply with Syrian demands. The Syrian role was decisive, both with regard to the provisioning of the Palestinians with weapons, ammunition and personnel, and with regard to the pressure applied upon the Lebanese government through economic embargo.

This double Syrian role regarding the Palestinians as well as the Lebanese continues up to the present. Salah Salah, ex-PFLP Central Bureau member, gives this view: "There are two Syrian red lines: Palestinian arms stay in the camps, and Lebanese Army stays outside the camps."

Thus, the weapons inside the camps create a "Palestinian threat", which will justify in certain circles the presence of the Syrian army in Lebanon; whereas the Lebanese army positioned outside the camps and imposing restrictions on the daily life of the Palestinians, renders Lebanon responsible for creating unbearable conditions for the Palestinians, forcing them to accept any solution whatsoever, including resettlement.

Conclusion

In the light of this situation, it is appropriate to ask the Arabs to alleviate the human misery of their brethrens by considering their integration in their midst while giving special considerations to the Lebanese conditions. The resettlement of Palestinians in various Arab countries, if accepted, could constitute a main part of the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and could contribute to the stabilization of the whole region.

It remains for the Palestinian and Israeli leaders to reach an agreement which will allow the Palestinians to return back either to their original regions or to other regions under Palestinian authority. Those refugees who cannot return must be compensated, and the countries of the Arab League as well as the international community must assume their responsibilities, in order to ensure them a decent life in a country capable - both through the expanse of its national territory and through its financial capacities – of absorbing them and ensuring them long term social and professional life.

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