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Sami Hermez on the current crisis in Lebanon

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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The following is an interview held with Sami Hermez on the 6th of June on the current crisis in Lebanon, that started on the 20th of May with the fighting between Fath al-Islam and the Lebanese Army. This has meant a major crisis for the Palestinian refugees, thousands of them being further displaced, many of them killed and wounded.

Sami is a Lebanese anthropologist who has been active in providing support and relief to Palestinian and Lebanese refugees. As well, he writes frequently to Electronic Lebanon taking a brave political stance in defense of Palestinians and against the US project for the region.

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1. You have been in the refugee camps in Lebanon... could you please tell us what is the humanitarian situation of the refugees from Nahr-al-Bared?

The displaced refugees, if that term makes sense, are scattered across several camps in the country, with most in the Baddawi camp in the North as well as Chatilla and Burj el Barajneh in Beirut.

This week has seen also a wave of refugees coming from the Ein el-Hilweh camp in the South where there has been low-level fighting for the last few days.

The Palestinian camps were in a bad condition to begin with. In Baddawi camp, the population has doubled and water and electricity have become scarce. In this situation with the increased density disease is likely to spread. Already we have seen many cases of lice infections. The displaced are in need of chronic disease medicines as often they leave their houses without anything but the clothes on their back and without prescriptions. Of course, they have no money and have lost their jobs, so effectively they become totally dependent on humanitarian organizations to feed, clothe and shelter them. In addition to this, we are now seeing another crisis at work. The original inhabitants of the Baddawi camp are unable to go to work for fear of being stopped and harassed at army checkpoints. There have been a number of cases of Palestinians (one who is a friend of mine) being arbitrarily stopped, arrested for a few hours or days, and in some cases beaten, with one case of actual torture reported. These stories have been spreading and scaring people so that they are not leaving the camp as much.

The situation in the camps is controllable thus far but if the conflict continues for long it will turn into a humanitarian disaster not to mention the political disaster of these people feeling displaced for the 2nd, 3rd or 4th time.

2. *Being such a desperate situation, does these people have the hope of going back home soon? What's the situation in Nahr-al-Bared right now?*

They want to return as soon as possible but in most cases these people will be returning to destroyed homes. The question will be whether or not they will return anyway, like the people of the South last summer, and whether they will camp outside their homes till they repair them. The networks available to the Palestinian refugees are not as strong as those of the people in the South, where people stayed in the homes of relatives or in

On top of this, if the US can gain a strong foothold in Lebanon then it can control Hizballah and therefore put further pressure on Iran on the nuclear question and its collaboration in Iraq. Lebanon is not the goal, it is just the tool to exert pressure on Iran and other Arab countries. It is the goal of Israel and the US to silence all forms of resistance, and this is what they are doing to the Hamas government through their offensive in Gaza; in Lebanon, their strategy, after the failure this summer, is to turn the Lebanese against each other.

11. *Thanks very much for your time... do you have a last thing to say? How can people get involved and support the Palestinian refugees?*

If people would like to get involved they can visit the following website: www.nahrelbaredcampaign.org where they can get news and donate money to the relief effort in the country. I would urge people when speaking to connect the issues between Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon so that we may see this conflict in the greater picture. There is an effort to turn Lebanese society into a military state, which is increasingly succeeding. As many have learned in America, all you need to do is create a threat and that makes it easier to sacrifice freedom for security. People need to realize that what is happening in Lebanon with the militarization is similar to what is happening in the US and what is already complete in Israel. This is not the way to build a healthy democratic society capable of resisting Israel's unjust apartheid policies and occupation.

able to control the internal Lebanese-Lebanese situation. What will happen is that the internal security forces will take control and as I said earlier, they are loyal to one party (Hariri and the US).

All this may not “clamp down” on the opposition, but it might either put pressure on it or force it to retaliate, something the government tried to do in January but failed. Hizballah has spoken up in the last two weeks but it has largely remained silent and allowed the army to do its work as it sees fit. It will remain to be seen how Hizballah handles the next weeks to come to really get a true sense of where the country is going.

Today, there were several Israeli airforce incursions over Lebanese land. So with all this one has to consider Israeli’s next move and how it will capitalize on the weaknesses in the country and gaps left open. It is not far removed that Israel would seize this opportunity to attack Hizballah when it is busy trying to manage the internal situation.

10. In what way do you think the events in Lebanon reflect growing internal tensions or the regional scenario?

Lebanon is too small with no resources and no industry to demand this much attention from the international community or the regional powers. This makes it clear that the struggles here reflect larger tensions. If the US can neutralize Lebanon and make it a friendly ally then it would have effectively surrounded Syria. It will also have substituted Syrian influence in the country for American influence and from here can work on securing Israel’s borders. The current situation is an attempt to neutralize one of the strongest and longest lasting resistance movements against Israel in the Middle East. The Lebanese are fed up of fighting this battle alone and the US is trying to capitalize on these feelings. What the Lebanese must understand is that their struggle is a just one and that it remains for other Arab countries to learn from the persistence of the Lebanese and Palestinians in Lebanon rather than following the Jordanian or Egyptian model of becoming a Zionist Arab state in order to receive conditional loans and economic benefits.

neighboring villages, so it will remain to be seen how this will unfold. Because the camp is a contained and confined environment, unlike the South, it will be difficult to find places to set up tents near the destruction, or to find alternate places to live within the camp. Judging from both TV images and what I saw with my own eyes, the damage is pretty extensive and it is likely that all parts of the camp have been affected.

As it stands, the prospects are bleak. Instead of these people going back home we are already starting to hear gun fights break out in the Ein el Hilweh camp in the South. So things seem like they are spreading and it is anyone’s guess when people will return. According to some displaced people, they want to just storm the camp and return whether they can or not. But this is more of an emotional reaction than anything they are really planning.

The situation in Nahr el-Bared is disastrous at the moment. There are between 5–11 thousand people still in the camp and at least 160 mentally and physically handicapped people as well as many senior citizens. There is only one doctor in the camp who is not even a surgeon; there are many injured and sick who are not able to get out and the smell of the dead is overpowering. People are managing to use electric generators to power their homes thus far. On top of this, there is a media blackout so we are unable to determine the number of dead civilians.

3. Certainly the military response of the Lebanese government seems to be completely out of proportions. Why did you think this reaction was so?

I think there are many conspiracies being thrown around, none of them confirmed till now, as to why things are happening the way they are. What we do know is that the army responded to an attack, basically a massacre, on its troops, where something like 17 reservist soldiers were killed. And the army responded like a little kid lashing out with full force and not knowing what is in front of him. It went after Fateh el-Islam almost immediately and obviously with no plan as to an exit strategy or how they could fight

a militant group in a refugee camp setting. The army's reaction is quite similar to the reaction of the US' war on Afghanistan after September 11, except with even less preparation, and also similar to Israel's attack on Lebanon in the summer where the response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers was met with a full scale war.

I think the army felt that it needed to show its strength, and when it saw the Lebanese people united in support, I believe it took this as a greenlight that public opinion was giving them to react in any way possible to eliminate, what people here are calling, a phenomenon. Not to go off on a tangent, but this word "Thahira" or phenomenon, is interesting because it foretells the fact that it will be impossible to know the truth about this group: who armed them, who financed them, how they arrived, are they really the guilty ones? Calling them a phenomenon allows us to just blow them out of the sky and not bother with questions of accountability and justice. They are a phenomenon, something from out of this world and thus not worthy of our usual ways of dealing with people.

So with the people united behind the army, and with fresh fears from the 1970s when the army collapsed because it did not have political support or know how to deal with the political crises of the time, the army is seeing, this time, a chance to assert its strength. Everyone sees this institution as the last resort for holding the country together, and if it fails militias will come out to do the army's job for it. The militias will be far more gruesome and devastating. So the army has the greenlight. What no one realizes is that the army is not trained or equipped to fight such a battle; the soldiers are falling like flies, and the fighting may spread to other camps. If the fighting spreads the army will be stretched thin. In the end, it may not be able to win a battle it got involved in, proving the weakness of the army. A political solution will have to be forced on the situation, which is something we could have started with and spared the lives of both civilians and soldiers alike. A political solution, of course, that would lead to the disarmament of this "phenomenon."

8. Some people say that Fatah al-Islam has been armed and encouraged by the Hariri's as a way to counter-balance Hizbullah. Is there any substance to such claims?

There is some substance to this claim in the sense that some of its members were released two years ago during elections to vote for Hariri. Unfortunately, most of the other information is still at the level of conspiracy because there is no investigation, no accountability, and no transparency within government. If Hariri was involved then the government has a strong incentive not to get this out because his party largely controls the government. The opposition has not pushed this claim into the public's eye enough, probably fearing that it would result in internal fighting. Many people here are starting to believe this claim but there has still been no proof despite people from Fateh el-Islam being arrested.

There are also reports, coming from one of today's local Arabic papers, that Jund el Sham, which has been clashing with the army in the South in the Ein el-Hilweh camp, has been funded by Lebanese politicians to counter Hizbullah and other groups. So this idea of Sunni fanatic militant groups being funded by Lebanese politicians, especially Hariri, is not limited to the North or Fateh el-Islam.

9. What repercussions do you think the actions in Nahr-al-Bared will have on the rest of Lebanon? Do you think there's any chance of the conflict spreading to other refugee camps? Do you think the government, encouraged by the way they are getting away with this, can clamp down on the opposition?

The conflict has already spread to the Ein el Hilweh camp in the South. The fighting there is still largely under control but I see it easily exploding. Fateh el-Islam has threatened that it is not limited to Nahr el-Bared and if things continue Lebanon will see the true meaning of who this group is. I doubt this is just threats judging from the fact that there is already a Jund el-Sham in Ein el-Hilweh holding a similar philosophy. I see the army as being caught up in some conspiracy of trying to stretch it thin so it is not

7. What do you think has been the role of the US government in this conflict? Certainly from a while, they have been arming the government -actually, since January, when the protests of the opposition have been threatening Siniora's government...

The US government is pushing its policy in Lebanon. It is standing 100% behind the current government despite the fact that it is not behaving democratically. The Internal Security Forces is largely seen as a tool of the US and this is actually why there is a lot of support for the army from the opposition. The army is seen as being more neutral, perhaps leaning towards the opposition more. As I said above, the US government has been trying to push its agenda both politically and economically. It sees an ally in the current Lebanese government and is trying to make Lebanon a more solid partner in the war on terror, hoping this will be a way to defeat Hizballah. Of course, it is trying to force its way in against the will of the majority of the people.

The battles we are fighting against each other are battles we are fighting on behalf of the US government. So I think it would make more sense to ask what the role of the Lebanese government is in this conflict, because in all honesty, the perception is that the US government is the puppet master. We must be very clear: it is a US government agenda that is being pushed with the collaboration of the Lebanese government and not a Lebanese agenda with the help of the US.

As for US weapons, people are afraid that these weapons will not find their way to the army but into the hands of different militias. Just as aid never reached the displaced but instead, through middlemen, made it into the market where groups, like the one I worked with, purchased it in bulk, so it is possible that the US arms follow this same channel; not unlikely if the US is intent on lighting up the Lebanese stage.

4. Being such an obviously criminal and heavy-handed response, why has the international community, with all of the Lebanese political spectrum (including the opposition), sided so monolithically behind Siniora?

People have not sided behind Siniora. The opposition is not siding with him. Everyone is siding with the army (which is actually not seen as a pro or anti-Siniora entity) because at a time like this the patriotism card gets played against you if you take another position. All the news media and groups like Hizballah, do not want to be accused of being anti-nationalist at a time like this. Because the Lebanese army is weak, and because of the memories of the civil war that saw the army collapse, many Lebanese, the media included, do not want to be seen as outliers in the nationalist chorus that is being sung in the country.

In a recent action we did protesting the army's behavior, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, and the media censorship, we were accused by the army of not being Lebanese and not being nationalist. The army told us that anyone who protests against their army is basically an enemy of the nation. So you see, the nationalist card is a very easy one to play to silence dissent. But we will refuse to remain silent and watch the Palestinians take the fall for the internal conflicts of the Lebanese.

So this is in terms of why the Lebanese political spectrum has come out in support of the army. They cannot take what they fear is an anti-nationalist position, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah spoke out in favor of not destroying the camp and he was accused of siding with Fateh el-Islam, and his comments were not nearly as strong as they should have been, so even if politicians wanted to take a stand they are told they cannot. On top of this, no one feels like they want to commit political suicide by standing with the Palestinians. There is a racist attitude towards Palestinians because they are poor refugees who are perceived as outsiders. Also, the army was attacked and the army is weak, so the belief is that it needs ev-

everyone's support and that it had no other option so everyone must stand by it.

As for the international community, I am not surprised. As I wrote in a previous article, Secretary Rice's position is very consistent. She is standing with an army against a disenfranchised civilian population being bombed, she did so in the summer against Lebanon. The international community would like to see the Arabs do Israel's dirty work for Israel and for them by taking care of the Palestinian refugee question. I think they were hoping that this conflict would eliminate the camp and the Palestinians would either become confined to fewer camps, be massacred along with the camp infrastructure, or spread out among other Arab countries. Another thought is that they were hoping this conflict would lead to the disarming of the Palestinians in Lebanon and then towards resolving their humanitarian situation by naturalizing them and forcing them to give up their right of return to Palestine. So these are some reasons for their support of the army's heavy-handed response. The short answer is that it is a consistent one where the international community stands with whichever state is fighting the terrorist groups, regardless of the methods the state uses and how many civilians it kills, starves or displaces in the process.

5. And what has been the response of the Palestinian authorities?

The Palestinian authorities are fragmented in their response. They have all come out against Fateh el-Islam but do not have one unified position on how they would solve the situation. Nor were they given enough time to try and solve the situation peacefully. The army should have put heavy pressure on the Palestinian authorities to hand over Fateh-el-Islam before attacking the group on the first day. The Palestinian Fateh wanted to go into the camp and help the army, but Hamas was against this because they fear a Palestinian-Palestinian battle in the camps. The Palestinian leadership does not reflect the opinions of people on the ground,

with the leader of Fateh being himself a criminal charged on several counts.

6. Do you think there's any clear link between the offensive of the Israeli State against Gaza and the offensive against Nahr-al-Bared? Somehow they seem to have been perfectly coordinated...

On one hand the two are connected, but I do not think it is at the level of the Lebanese coordinating anything with Israel directly but more at the level of an American-Israeli agenda for the Palestinians in the region. There are many conspiracies out there, one is that they want to clear the Nahr el-Bared camp to make room for a NATO or US base, another is that they would get the camps to flare up and this would give political and military will to rid the camps of weapons instead of taking the diplomatic route to do so. Another idea is that this fighting will lead to some sort of settlement of the Palestinians in Lebanon and giving them full naturalization for letting go of their right to return. The connection is that there is a policy to defeat the Palestinian people and any hope they have for resisting their unjust situation. In this sense, the American-Israeli agenda is to put full force and pressure to break the spirit of these people.

I think the Gaza offensive has been going on for sometime, since last summer, so I wouldn't see them as perfectly coordinated. I see all this in a larger picture of how the US and Israel want to reshape the demographics of the Palestinians in the region and how they want to break the spirit of any resistance. So this is not only a connection with Gaza but also a connection with last summer's war and the heavy aid and sponsorship by the US government of the Lebanese government in the last 6 months. The US and Israel are trying to find different ways to weaken Hizballah. They hoped to get it embroiled in a civil war in January, but that did not work. Now they are hoping it will get involved in a fight with Fateh-el-Islam. The US is also trying to shift focus away from Iraq and prove that the Middle East needs its presence to maintain security.