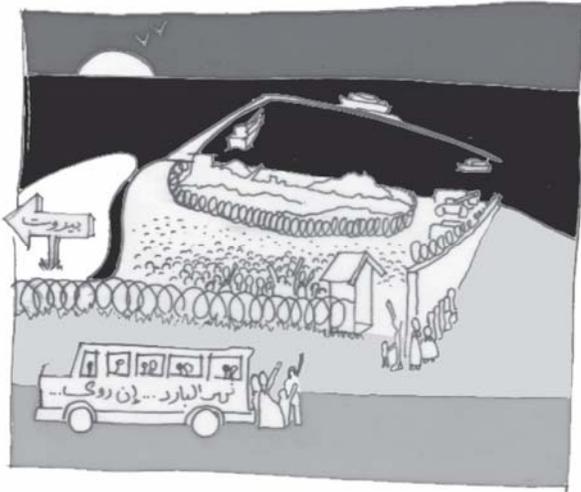


The Halting of Reconstruction of Nahr el Bared Refugee Camp



This call comes after a court order decision taken on the 18th of August 2009 by Andre Sader, a judge in the Lebanese Legislative Council, ordering to freeze the backfilling process of the archeological site in Nahr el Bared reconstruction project, for 2 months. The halting of backfilling is in essence a stopping of the commencement of reconstruction in Nahr el bared. This action comes after two years of delaying bureaucratic procedures, where every decision concerning the reconstruction project, including planning and design decisions of the master plan,

required governmental, ministerial and political approvals. More significantly this is the first time that a decision which halts actual work on site is taken, hence prolonging the displacement period of more than 20,000 Palestinian refugees. This document aims at updating on these recent developments; it presents background information about the halting procedures, and explains the community's perspective and reactions to the mentioned actions.

In the past two years, UNRWA and Nahr el Bared reconstruction committee for civil actions and studies (NBRC) have been working on the planning and design of the old camp, this two years process led to the finalization of the Master plan, the expropriation scheme and the design of around half of the buildings of the camp. When the Archeological site was discovered under Nahr el Bared site, DGA, UNRWA and the Prime Minister's technical office on Nahr el Bared's reconstruction agreed on a technical procedure to protect the archeology and rebuild the camp, referring to international standards. This procedure ensures that before any backfilling takes place, the DGA's team would excavate the archeological site found, and would document all archaeological findings. This procedure is however not mentioned in the decision issued by the council of ministers which only gave order to backfill the archeological site and reconstruct the camp without indicating the role of DGA in the process of backfilling. According to our lawyer consultant, by doing that, the government has created a weak decision which is easy to be attacked.

A court order was issued as a result of a plea submitted in summer 2009 by Michel Aoun to the Legislative Council, objecting to the government's decision to backfill the archeological site found in Nahr el bared. The court's decision was to freeze the backfilling, and to give Aoun one month to present his case.

The process of backfilling, which cost is being covered from the budget of Nahr el Bared reconstruction project, had already started in the past two months. The refugees of Nahr el bared did not object to the archaeological excavations that were taking place and delaying reconstruction, out of respect to the common historical heritage that is shared in this region. However, with the latest developments, the residents are getting worried that archaeology is only being used as an excuse to halt/delay reconstruction or to score political gains, for since the start of the conflict, the camp has been used over and over again as a pressuring tactic by various internally competing Lebanese political actors at the expense of a marginalized, post-war refugee community. Moreover, the residents fear that the decision

of the court, and hence the time which will be given for investigation beyond the two specified months, will definitely extend further their enduring instability, and increase their dependency on the relief agencies.

We share with the residents the feeling that the current situation is highly critical, if the Court gives right to Aoun's Plea, the reconstruction of Nahr el Bared risks being stopped with no feasible solutions. There are no serious thoughts being discussed about how to deal with this issue. Moreover, the plea of Aoun is complemented by a discourse claiming to have an alternative suggestion, but which is technically unfeasible and socially rejected from the community. It proposes to excavate the archeology, expose it, and transform its site into a touristic site. As for the camp, they suggest that the government could expropriate the lots of the new camp and the empty lots surrounding it, and would relocate the residents to the empty lots. This is definitely a theoretical and unworkable suggestion for three main reasons:

- First, the lands of the New Camp are already sold, and most of them are densely built up, so each lot is owned by a number of owners, most of whom are Palestinians. Hence the expropriation of these lots is legally and logistically unfeasible. Moreover the area of the camp (around 190,000 m²) is much larger than any empty land in the adjacent area.
- Second, the design and planning suggested for the old camp is molded to the location and shape of the plots where the camp was located. Any minor change in the location of the camp results in the need to restart the design all over, which means that the work which has been achieved over the past two years will be disregarded.
- Third, the old camp is a coalition of interrelated neighborhoods, integrated within a larger adjacent area- currently known as the new camp- which itself is integrated within the larger Lebanese surrounding. It is not in any way recommended to detach a region from its context and relocate it to other empty lots, or to segregate the different neighborhoods forming the social fabric of the camp.



The yellow border in the map delineates the boundary of the old camp. The buildings highlighted in red are the 700 designed buildings so far.

On August 28th, the residents of the camp were informed that, as a result of communication from the Government of Lebanon, UNRWA has instructed its contractor to halt backfilling temporarily. As a reaction to these developments, the Nahr el Bared community organized, on August 31st, the largest demonstration yet at Nahr al-Bared. Around 3,000 to 4,000 residents gathered at the entrance of the besieged old camp, demanding the right to return and to rebuild their homes. The different political and civil actors expressed their point of view in a common speech, which objected to the current developments and to the previous practices by different state institutions, which are continuously delaying the start of the reconstruction of Nahr el bared camp. The speech also objected to the security procedures, mostly the permit, which prevents the residents from entering the old camp's site, and restricts their movement in the adjacent area to the camp, hence preventing their moving forward. The second action consisted of a press conference organized by the Civil Advocacy Committee for Nahr el Bared on the third of September. Speeches depicted actions of abuse and oppression which have been taking place in the past two years in Nahr el Bared. Moreover the speakers announced the launching of a series of civil, non-violent yet escalating actions, which aim at ensuring that all obstacles that are placed on the reconstruction of Nahr el Bared, and all procedures that are humiliating and violating human rights principles, are removed. The planned actions are expected to start with manifestations in Tripoli and Beirut, but are expected to escalate to reach a non-violent civil boycott of the permit.

Destruction, war and displacement are common themes within Palestinian history and camps. In cases of massive destruction of camps, like Tall El-Zaatar and Dbayeh, the camps were never reconstructed. In other cases such as Ein el Hilweh, Burj el Barajneh and Shatilla, the communities were able to spontaneously build within months. In Nahr el Bared, and since the destruction of the camp was a result of the armed conflict between the Lebanese army and Fateh el Islam, the community has been promised by the Lebanese State and by the international community and donors to reconstruct their homes. Since the end of the conflict, the refugees of Nahr el Bared were literally prevented by direct military force to access their homes and to reconstruct them on their own initiatives. Simultaneously the every day life of the refugees of Nahr el Bared takes place in the shadow of checkpoints, barbed wire fences, military permits, and decisions by the government to build naval and military bases around the camp.

We thank you for your support and solidarity with the ongoing plight of Nahr el Bared Refugee Camp.
Nahr el Bared Reconstruction Commission for Civil Action and Studies.

