Yasir Arafat’s image is an omnipresent sight in Palestinian communities in Lebanon. His visage invariably looks down from PLO office walls. Fatah cadres in the camps spend hours designing and hand-making frames for poster-sized prints of his face using spare kaffiyehs and Palestinian flags. Elite officers often display high-quality, glass-protected portraits in their workspaces. Stencils of the “Old Man’s” face flutter on yellow flags above party offices and adorn the uneven surfaces of walls in camp alleyways. In their homes, retired militants proudly hang pictures of themselves shaking Arafat’s hand at a rally, receiving a plaque, or touring military installations at his side. My interlocutor’s one-year-old baby, when asked who the man in the photo was, readily identified Arafat as “Abu Wa Wa,” *wa wa* being the Arabic version of the English “boo-boo.” Not yet old enough to understand death, the child simply associated Arafat with being hurt or wounded.

Few Palestinian leaders approach this particular status of visual icon. Others who inhabit office walls and whose pictures feature on banners at camp entrances—the PFLP’s Leila Khaled, Hamas’s Shaykh Yassin, the PFLP’s George Habash, Fatah’s Dalal al-Mughrabi, and Fatah’s Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir), for example—are still not as ubiquitous as Arafat. As a consequence, it can initially be surprising, given the competition, to see small, modestly displayed, often original photos of a different bearded man around Fatah offices in Lebanon. His face—often enlarged from grainy, creased, decades-old prints—appears on banners at many party and PLO events. In recent years, dozens of photographs of the same bearded man were scanned and uploaded to a Facebook page titled “The Martyr, the Leader Ali Abu Tawq” [*al-shahid al- qa’id Ali Abu Tawq*].
In many ways, Ali Abu Tawq, the man in these photos, could be the poster child for a successful career in the Palestinian National Movement. According to the Facebook page, Abu Tawq was born on July 7, 1950, to a family from Haifa then living in Homs, Syria. He joined Fatah at the age of 16 or 17 and spent his early career active in student unions and Palestinian militias in Jordan. In 1971, he fought in the battles of Black September. By 1972, he had relocated to Lebanon. Elected to the General Union of Palestinian Students, he set about constructing relationships with Lebanese student organizations. Abu Tawq fought in early engagements of the Lebanese Civil War and participated in operations against the IDF invasion in 1978. During the 1982 invasion, he served around Nabatiyeh with Fatah’s Jarmaq Battalion as an operations and logistics officer in the PLA. Drawing on specialized training he received in China, Abu Tawq helped construct the famous system of subterranean earthworks under Beaufort Castle, a strategic asset that towers above the Israeli border southeast of Nabatiyeh (see Y. Sayigh 1997, 881). Following the PLO and guerrilla organizations’ defeat in 1982, Abu Tawq transformed into a full-fledged guerrilla fighter. He served in clandestine armed cells in South Lebanon before moving to Trablous to help defend the camps there against a mutiny by Fatah dissidents led by Colonel Saied al-Muragha. By 1983, Abu Tawq was a key figure in the secret supply network that supported underground guerrilla cells in Beirut and South Lebanon. In short, Ali Abu Tawq had a long, distinguished political and military career that introduced him to a broad array of Palestinian and Lebanese activists and militants. He had experience in both combat and logistics as well as conventional and guerrilla warfare. Yet Abu Tawq is best known for commanding Shatila’s and Burj al-Barajneh’s defenses during the War of the Camps from 1985 until his assassination in 1987.

Abu Tawq is a paradox when it comes to theories of military socialization and discipline. He joined voluntarily, completed multiple modes of formal indoctrination, participated in intensive military training, and consistently demonstrated respect for military discipline, all traits associated with military obedience and loyalty (Hoover Green 2017, 2018). In line with theories of military socialization and norm construction (Manekin 2017, 609–11, and 2020), Abu Tawq’s everyday social affiliations reinforced his commitment to Fatah and the PLO. Yet during the War of the Camps, when the Lebanese militia Amal, backed by the Syrian government and elements of the Lebanese military, besieged Palestinian refugee camps with the goal of expelling pro-Arafat guerrillas, Abu Tawq repeatedly bent the rules, violated the spirit of the orders he was given, engaged in insubordinate behavior, and refused exiled leaders’ direct commands. This profile put Abu Tawq in direct opposition to Yasir Arafat himself. However, during a three-hour, coffee-fueled midnight debate about the state of the current Palestinian leadership, a
regional-level Fatah officer told me that Abu Tawq is recognized and respected because “No one could say ‘no’ to Abu Ammar [Yasir Arafat]. But Ali Abu Tawq said ‘no.’”

Rather than being shunned within Fatah for his public, documented, and at times game-changing insubordination toward Arafat, Abu Tawq has emerged as a hero, an idol, and a symbol for many Palestinians throughout Lebanon, including non-Fatah members. Instead of people suppressing or banning tributes to the man who unapologetically disobeyed Arafat, Abu Tawq’s face seems to be featured in more official events every year. Why is the man who defied Arafat revered and not reviled?

Abu Tawq was not the only militant in Beirut to disobey orders during the War of the Camps. In fact, disobedience was relatively commonplace across factions in the largest Beirut camps, Burj al-Barajneh and Shatila. According to firsthand interview accounts, memoirs, and secondary literature, militants from nearly every faction repeatedly defied discrete top-down operational orders—e.g., orders to fire on Lebanese militia positions—from exiled leaders. Despite alliance structures that pitted Fatah members against affiliates of the Palestinian National Salvation Front (PNSF)—a coalition of anti-Arafatist parties formed in 1985 that included the PFLP, PFLP-GC, PPSF, Fatah al-Intifada, al-Saʿiqa, and a wing of the PLF—militants often cooperated on matters of camp defense and community survival. Unlike in Saida, militants institutionalized cross-factional defensive fronts in both camps, which facilitated community protection in spite of the clear, competing rationalist power considerations that many scholars argue drive militant behavior (Christia 2013; P. Krause 2017).

This chapter traces the remapping of independent factional combat apparatuses and the emergence of camp-level shared defensive fronts in Beirut in response to citywide repertoires of violence between 1982 and 1988. Patterns of violence against Beirut-based Palestinians from 1982 to 1985, specifically those surrounding the Sabra and Shatila massacre and the “mopping-up” campaigns in fall 1982, activated neighborhood-level ties. Militants then repurposed kinship and marriage ties to share money and information between various geographic locations, a move that facilitated the remapping of combatant networks into locally based cells that predominantly women couriers linked across neighborhoods. The PLO’s subsequent co-optation and strengthening of these underground operations (e.g., by adding flows of money and official orders) situated Abu Tawq, who assumed an official role in this hybrid apparatus, as a broker between community-level, cross-factional networks and formal command hierarchies. In effect, he became a robust actor—that is, someone who acts as a
broker between two networks based in distinct constitutive domains (Padgett and Ansell 1993), affording him considerable power among Palestinian militants in Lebanon.

The War of the Camps (1985–1988) challenged exiled Palestinian elites’ attempts to assert command and control via the Beirut underground. Yet this difficulty was not due to poor military training or to lack of political education. Rather, I argue that the context of the deployment—specifically, operating among civilian communities during a siege—interacted with militants’ local identities and also with their past guerrilla socialization to produce disobedience. That is, siege violence activated ground-level networks of people linked by previous socialization practices that broadly emphasized civic engagement, Palestinian nationalism, and community defense. This interaction prompted similar practices of disobedience across factions as a result of shifting logics of appropriateness, a process that has been observed in other settings (Manekin 2017, 610–11). Specifically, when the Syrian-allied Lebanese militia Amal targeted Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh from 1985 to 1988, Palestinian guerrillas were primed to understand violence in terms of threats to the entire Palestinian community, rather than in factionalized terms. Despite the tension between military socialization and reality, guerrillas applied and interpreted aspects of their training to understand the situation they were in, leaning on socialization and past networks rather than top-down orders via the formal chain of command.

Militants in Beirut faced tensions between their organizational affiliations, command hierarchies, and financial networks on the one hand, and their community identifications, guerrilla training, and conflict environments on the other. Under the guidance of officers such as Abu Tawq and the PFLP’s Abu Mujahid, militants repurposed various types of quotidian ties—such as those between neighbors and former classmates—and coordinated military operations across cross-factional, allied fronts in Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh. These locally evolved, remapped organizational forms drove priorities that came into direct competition with formal, transnational military hierarchies. Abu Tawq, as well as other local commanders, experienced role strain (Hundman and Parkinson 2019, 651–53) when given orders that contravened their feelings of obligation and loyalty to local troops and communities. Their decisions to disobey produced collective insubordination that in turn reinforced these emergent hybrid organizational forms. The result was an adaptive process through which local cadres managed conflict within larger organizational systems. As Palestinian militant groups’ exiled leaderships issued orders from Tunis and Damascus, their commands clashed not only with local fighters’ feelings of moral obligation to their communities, but also with the tactical decision-making of newly emergent organizations.
Militant Adaptation in Beirut, 1982–1985

After the 1982 evacuation of Beirut, Palestinians lacked direct communication with the PLO leadership and with guerrilla groups’ exiled command apparatuses. Members consequently focused on reestablishing relationships with each other on the ground. News of the Sabra and Shatila massacre (see chapter 3) activated community-level networks. Though the guerrilla factions’ formal communications chains were mostly silent, neighbors, friends, and families quickly spread word of “something horrible” happening at Sabra and Shatila. The information that flowed through them contained few details, some inaccuracies, and many ambiguities, all of which only heightened the perception of immediate collective threat. Aisha, for example, remembered that people rushed to Burj al-Barajneh saying that a massacre was happening, and that Israel was killing people; the role of Kata’ib and SLA militiamen was initially lost in the version relayed to her. Emphasizing the camp population’s related feelings of exposure and vulnerability, Aisha described an armed panopticon that led Palestinians in her neighborhood to believe that they were next: “There were [Israeli] tanks on the perimeter of the camp, in the neighborhood close to the camp, and in its surroundings.”

For Palestinian refugees remaining in Beirut, the massacre at Sabra and Shatila echoed the 1976 massacres at Tel al-Za’ tar, Jisr al-Pasha, and Maslakh-Karantina in East Beirut. People living in the camps, in particular, understood the Sabra and Shatila massacre as proof that they had to collectively organize to protect themselves in the absence of the recently departed fighters. By early 1983, small groups consisting mostly of men began to meet covertly in private homes to discuss community defense.

Nader’s Story

The personal narrative Nader conveyed to me captures many of the initiatives that underground militants explored and the ways they worked to adapt prior organizational structures to new realities. By 1982, Nader, like many of his colleagues, had a long history of activism and extensive social ties at his disposal. In 1970, when he was eleven years old, he was already a member of the local chapter of the military scouts, where he received basic combat training. When the April 13, 1975, bus massacre happened near his East Beirut neighborhood, he quit school and joined the local militia along with his brothers, an uncle, and a grandfather. Nader fought in Maslakh in January 1976 and during the same year’s sieges of Tel al-Za’ tar and Jisr al-Pasha. He eventually joined Force 17, the special forces brigade that comprised Yasir Arafat’s bodyguards. Post-September 1982, his military his-
tory and the fact that he was a known member of Fatah severely limited Nader’s movement and ability to communicate with his colleagues.

Nader described a process whereby members of the fledgling underground network added content to preexisting quotidian relationships or established new ties in the interest of local organizing. In 1983, despite the restrictions placed upon Palestinian men, Nader and a small group of local militants and activists started holding secret meetings in their houses. He explained that after the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, “We wanted to start again, so we made very small, secret groups.” They recruited subtly—in his word, “indirectly.” When he or another militant ran into someone on the street, they would chat with them for a while and look for signs that they wanted to be politically active. Nader or another vetted militant would then invite the person to a meeting to discuss things. Whenever they met, they’d have coffee, music, and food, to make it seem “normal” if an enemy was nearby. Nader and his friends also had an advantage because, as he explained, the Israelis thought that the neighborhood where he lived was Christian and thus “didn’t know about it.”

**Leveraging Connectedness**

In 1983 and 1984, amid ongoing civil war violence, members of these clandestine cells began forming small, secret militias in West Beirut. Unlike in South Lebanon, many members had not previously been involved in combat actions; they mobilized because they felt that Palestinian communities were threatened and required organized protection. While these militants eventually came to work at least partially in tandem with the exiled leadership in Tunis, they were focused first on creating information chains and defensive capabilities rather than assuming the trappings of political affiliation.

These militia members leveraged two sets of ties to achieve this end. First, members of the underground worked to connect small, localized cells such as Nader’s by remapping personal ties with comparatively mobile female kin and co-cadres, appointing women as couriers, cash smugglers, and intelligence officers. With women serving as city-level brokers between clandestine cells, these groups quickly consolidated a reliable organizational infrastructure on which to base riskier and more broad-reaching activities. Second, using the broader social and geographic reach that the mixed-affiliation, local, cell-based structure afforded, Beirut-based Palestinian militants contacted former colleagues among Lebanese fighters who had served in the LNM, the PSP, or Amal, repurposing and remapping what had previously been high-level alliances to more local ends.

With Lebanese allies and a reliable, redundant communication network based on personal ties to women cadres, local Palestinian militants were able to then
connect with higher-ups in Trablous and overseas. They began moving weapons and PLO cash into West Beirut. In particular, the PLO and Fatah co-opted small militant cells such as Nader’s to reinfiltrate fighters such as Ali Abu Tawq into Beirut.9 The cell structure in Beirut was much looser than in South Lebanon; local commanders would be responsible for distributing salaries to between fifty-five and sixty-five people, a system that became vulnerable to corruption and abuse as local leaders added “ghost cadres” to the payrolls.10 The PLO also opened a “bridge” between Tunis and Beirut that led through Cyprus. Paying US$50,000 a launch, the PLO started to send fighters through Beirut’s fifth port and through the northern port of Jounieh (Picard 2002, 133), both controlled by Lebanese Christian militias. Capitalizing on increased money flows as well as personal relationships with Lebanese militia members, operatives bribed the Christian militias and Amal to allow fighters into West Beirut and the refugee camps.11 One former high-level PLO intelligence officer who sneaked into Lebanon via Cyprus during this time relayed that he, like others of his rank, passed through Jounieh using forged documents directly provided by the Lebanese Forces and Kataʾib, a process facilitated by bribery.12

Lebanese groups such as the PSP, the Murabitoun, and Amal were mobilizing against the Lebanese government and the Multinational Forces (MNF). In August 1983, leftists from these militias regained control of southwestern Beirut from the government (Hanf 1994, 284). Palestinians and the leftist Lebanese militias closely supported each other in these efforts. For instance, Palestinian fighters aided the PSP in its war against the Lebanese Forces and Kataʾib in the Shouf (Hanf 1994, 288). I interviewed one former guerrilla who fought under direct PSP command at this time and who simultaneously used this position to smuggle Palestinian fidaʾiyyin into Beirut. Another interviewee lost a close relative who fought with the PSP when the American navy shelled the Shouf. Resistance to the regime came to a head on February 6, 1984, when this coalition expelled both the government and right-wing Christian militias from West Beirut and took control of the streets.

The 1984 collapse of the Lebanese government and the withdrawal of the MNF afforded Palestinian militants in Beirut new opportunities to organize. Specifically, it allowed the trickle of returnees to increase, adding personnel to emergent organizations and increasing the weapons and money flowing through local ties. According to Yezid Sayigh, “A number of veteran officers took advantage of the change of government to return illicitly. They set up ‘safe houses’, communications networks, and weapons stores in Beirut and Trablous and revived sections of the local organization” (Y. Sayigh 1997, 580–81). While Sayigh refers to the local cells as “dormant,” it is clear that the cadres who remained in Beirut after 1982 constructed much of the organizational and financial infrastructure
that allowed higher-ups to reinfiltreate Beirut. Indeed, the evidence presented here indicates that the organizational maintenance and learning functions that they performed constitute important resistance work in their own right.

Small cells like Nader’s shaped returnees’ experiences of participation by alerting reinfiltreating officers to the heavy presence of both dissident Palestinian organizations and Syrian intelligence, as well as by keeping members in close communication with each other throughout the return process (see also Y. Sayigh 1997, 581). In doing so, they deployed new skills and routines associated with organizational membership, including but not limited to physical evasion tactics and clandestine, cross-regional communication. Processes such as these, along with the partial reestablishment of formal military hierarchies, resurrected systems of formal factional affiliation; in contrast to Saida, Beirut-based militants whom I interviewed invariably referred to returning officers as their military superiors.

However, some returnees seem to have adopted the urban underground’s organizational norms and practices, especially the reliance on cross-cutting quotidian social networks and generally flattened military hierarchies. For example, Abu Hassan, a Fatah military cadre who worked in the financial arm of the PLO’s underground apparatus in Beirut, told me that he once entered his office to find Abu Tawq and two fighters sleeping on a mat of cigarette cartons in the antechamber rather than the internal sleeping quarters. Abu Hassan asked Abu Tawq, technically the superior officer, why he had not slept inside on his cot. Abu Tawq responded that the interior office was “private space” and that he preferred sharing with his men. Abu Hassan, along with several other Fatah cadres present when he told the story, used the incident to highlight Abu Tawq’s respect for the people under his command; the vignette was intended to show that Abu Tawq was literally “with his men” at all times while Arafat was comfortable in Tunis. Scaled up to the city level, the result was a type of hybrid local military organization with distinct modes of interfactional communication, intelligence-sharing, and structures of obligation that undergirded factional structures.

Unified Command in the War of the Camps, 1985–1988

These processes of repurposing and remapping fed back through the local environment, triggering substantial blowback. Many Lebanese feared a return of the PLO to Lebanon, given its potential to provoke Israel and escalate violence associated with the Israeli occupation and Lebanese resistance to it in South Lebanon. The consequences also reverberated geopolitically; the Syrian government
was engaged in a protracted power struggle with Arafat over the direction of the Palestinian National Movement. It and its allies actively battled a resurgent PLO apparatus in Lebanon, culminating in the 1985–1988 War of the Camps. During this period, Amal, the Syrian-allied Lebanese militia, and the Sixth Brigade of the LAF bombarded the camps with tank fire, rockets, and mortars. Syrian intelligence and its local allies surveilled, imprisoned, and tortured suspected pro-Arafat Palestinians. Amal blockaded the Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh camps from May to June 1985, for four days in January 1986, for twenty days the following April, and for thirty-five days in July–August the same year. In early September that year, Amal began a six-month complete blockade of Rashidiyeh that it extended to Burj al-Barajneh in October and to Shatila in November. During the sieges, no food, medicine, medical supplies (e.g., gauze, plasma, surgical tools), or fuel were allowed into the camps. When Amal did periodically lift the siege, the militia continued to strictly enforce bans on moving goods such as fuel, batteries, building materials, and weaponry into the camps and frequently attacked relief convoys as they attempted to access the camps during ceasefires. People in the camps eventually exhausted their food supplies and resorted to eating mules, grass, rats, dogs, and cats. The explicitly collective character of these violent repertoires recalled the 1975–1976 attacks on Tel al-Za’tar and Maslak-Karantina as well as the 1982 campaigns against Palestinian camps in Beirut, a fact noted almost immediately even by external observers (Aruri 1985, 4).

Learning from the Massacre: Factional Alliances and Civil Defense

The reaction to the 1985 attacks on Burj al-Barajneh and Shatila evolved directly from collective understandings of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Sami, a long-time resident of Shatila and a former member of the camp’s engineering committee, told me “we learned from the massacre” (referencing Sabra and Shatila). Activists planned ahead and often worked outside formal chains of command; people in both Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh had extensive procedures for military and civil defense in place by the mid-1980s.

Officers’ overlooking or outright ignoring of formal factional alliances and the Arafat-Assad rivalry provide evidence of a new, localized organizational form’s emergence. Naseer Aruri notes that “in the battle for the camps . . . both Amal and Damascus seemed to have miscalculated. Unlike the Tripoli battles of 1983, the pro-Syrian Palestinian forces refused to join the campaign against ‘Arafat. On the contrary, they suspended their political difference with him and defended the Palestinian camps side by side with his forces” (Aruri 1985, 7). Abu Tariq, the former leader of an ostensibly Syrian-allied, anti-Arafat faction under
the umbrella of the PNSF, confirmed that technically illicit discussions regarding cross-group organizing within Shatila started as early as February 1985. In his memory, officers in the camp formed a joint social committee that included both PNSF and PLO members; these efforts created a new set of mid-level, cross-cutting ties characterized by shared communication and norms within the larger organizational field. Illustrating the diversity of membership from his perspective, Abu Tariq emphasized that Amneh Jibril, the head of the GUPW and a member of Fatah, was a leading participant, and that the political committee spanned organizational divisions. Other sources concur. For example, Dr. Chris Giannou, a Greek-Canadian surgeon who worked in the Shatila PRCS hospital during the War of the Camps, writes, “I noticed that the contending faction leaders in Shatila . . . had established a modus vivendi among themselves. As a rule, PNSF leaders did not meet with Arafat top leaders, but second-echelon officers, often childhood classmates and friends, did. Some served as intermediaries between the organizations, as during the Four-Day Battle, to set up the work teams and co-ordinate the many services—water, electricity, distribution of building materials, or food, building of fortifications—necessary to organized life in the camp and resistance to Amal” (Giannou 1990, 43).

The civil defense and political committees that activists created via remapping were as essential to the camp community’s survival as the military front. The engineering committee, for example, which included members of Fatah, the DFLP, and the PFLP, managed infrastructural projects such as building repairs in Sabra, al-Daouk, and Shatila; Burj al-Barajneh’s own committee did similar work. These committees were also instrumental in building “underground cities” of tunnels and shelters that protected the civilian population during bombardments and allowed fighters to move beyond the camps’ boundaries to conduct raids. During the sieges, the committees operated generators on previously stockpiled or stolen fuel—both being products of planning by the citywide underground. Moreover, the camps maintained functional PRCS hospitals with minimal space and equipment throughout the sieges; the PLO’s original footage from the period plainly shows groups of men ferrying fighters away from the front on stretchers to the central hospital facility.

In direct, ongoing contradiction to each organization’s formal alliances, PLO and PNSF organizations cooperated on civil defense matters throughout the War of the Camps. According to Giannou (1990, 45), “In spite of fierce political rivalry, responsible and broad-minded leaders, Ali Abu Toq and some of the PNSF officers overlooked the entry of food, supplies, and even smuggled weapons and ammunition into the camp by other rival organizations. They knew that in time of war, with Shatila under total blockade, everything within the camp would be considered common property and distributed among all. Pragmatic co-operation, and
even co-ordination, in times of need tempered the antagonistic public pronouncements and insults traded among groups.” Other firsthand accounts of the siege reinforce this description of the militants’ collective, practical, and cross-factional approach to survival. Pauline Cutting (1989, 64), an English surgeon who volunteered for the PRCS in Burj al-Barajneh during the Camps War, reports similar behavior: “In Burj al-Barajneh, [the political organizations] generally managed to submerge their differences and unite against the common enemy outside.”

Organizational leaders also went out of their way to demonstrate to their leaderships that they deeply disagreed with Amal’s strategy of collective punishment and that it was influencing their microlevel organizational decision-making. Abu Tariq, for instance, noted that activists in Shatila would try to send letters to the outside, and particularly to the press, in attempts to draw attention to the growing humanitarian disaster in the camp. These letters represented their obligation to and activism on behalf of civilian communities and local organizations, rather than to factional bodies. He eventually learned that his organization’s national-level leadership, headquartered in Mar Elias camp, would change his reports before forwarding them to Damascus; his commanding officers repeatedly downplayed the carnage in order to protect their allies in Amal and to avoid offending Syria. Seemingly motivated by moral outrage and frustration, Abu Tariq paid 500 Lebanese pounds for a satellite telephone, smuggled it into his office, hid the antenna in a chimney, and started calling the local and international press himself. On air, he would identify himself as a leader of a PNSF organization and tell anyone who would listen: “I hate Amal!” This was extremely high risk; according to Abu Tariq, Amal would get on the radio to him and yell, “We hear your voice! We know it’s you!” His response was, in his words, either “Go to hell!” or, in mockery of Amal’s threats, “I’m just talking to my wife!” While Abu Tariq’s choices were highly individual, he was also acting as a representative of the local members of his organization. Not only did he defy the elite leadership, he also drew a distinct line between himself and local members of his faction (who did not stop him) on the one hand, and their national leadership on the other.

Organizational Hybridity

The blending of emergent organizational forms with recently reasserted military hierarchies produced strategic as well as tactical innovation. For example, Beirut-based militants adopted defensive tactics from the southern camps as southern militants migrated to Beirut. These knowledge flows produced and reinforced new understandings of community defense in the face of patterns of enemy violence. Prior to the War of the Camps, and with the input of Shatila’s
representatives, seven guerrillas from Burj al-Shamali camp had developed a military strategy for Shatila. Based partially on lessons from combat in the south during the Israeli invasion, the strategy preserved factionally based chains of command at the camp level while leveraging emergent, cross-factional organizations such as intelligence and supply networks. In network terms, the addition of new nodes (the fighters from Burj al-Shamali) to Beirut networks produced what was known as the “mihwar” (intersection/axis) system: a defensive strategy premised on remapped cross-factional forces based on nonhierarchal, community-level ties. This system required each organization to help defend a particular slice of the camp’s perimeter associated with a major intersection or landmark. Fighters would use tunnels leading from the camp into their assigned mihwar to unexpectedly appear behind enemy lines near the camp. Burj al-Barajneh employed an identical arrangement.

Strategic practices, remapped combat units, and patterns of incumbent violence coevolved and created a mutually reinforcing dynamic that deepened throughout the War of the Camps. By the Four Day Battle in Shatila in 1986, “Each political organization had an allotted area of the battle-front periphery as its military responsibility. . . . everyone scrambled to his respective position as each organization, pro- or anti-Arafat or neutral, posted a platoon or two of men at every critical point” (Giannou 1990, 33). Burj al-Barajneh operated in the same way; as I stood on a rooftop at the edge of the camp in 2012, former fighters and supply officers identified landmarks where each organization had assembled its section of the defenses, including entrances to each group’s committee-constructed tunnels. However, they always emphasized that, as in Shatila, the organizations operated under a shared command. These Shatila- and Burj al-Barajneh-specific cultures came into relief when replacement officers assumed new posts in the camp; Giannou notes the “narrow factionalism” of a Fatah officer who arrived in Shatila, emphasizing that it was “just as alien to the spirit of Shatila as was the brainwashed extremism of the dissident factions brought in from Damascus” (Giannou 1990, 212).

New cross-organizational supply and reinforcement ties mapped onto previously established community-based relations between members of dissident organizations such as the PFLP-GC and affiliates of its erstwhile enemy, Fatah. For example, a friend’s mother—the wife of a former PFLP-GC officer in Shatila—smuggled grenades for Shatila’s shared defenses in his swaddling. As the spouse of an officer in a Syrian-allied organization, she had safe passage when other women did not. The woman’s instrumental use of her infant child to smuggle military goods, and her choice to endanger both herself and baby by transporting live ammunition, demonstrate deep emotional and moral obligations to the broader Palestinian community that constituted these emergent defensive
fronts. Other fighters violated military orders to preserve supplies for their own members and often ignored commands to turn their weapons on members of other organizations within the camp. Pro-Syrian Palestinian militants responded to Amal’s violent repertoire by challenging their alliance; PNSF organizations also repeatedly fired upon their ostensible pro-Syrian, Lebanese ally despite orders from their leadership (Y. Sayigh 1997, 583).

For members of the PNSF organizations, military cooperation with the PLO had serious ramifications. George Habash, Secretary General of the PFLP, fled Syria at the end of May 1985 to avoid retribution by the Syrian government; the PFLP had participated in the PNSF’s shelling of Amal from positions in the mountains above Beirut (Y. Sayigh 1997, 583–84). Syria “ordered the PNSF and DFLP to cease artillery fire, blocked their reinforcements and combat resupply, demanded full personnel lists and detailed inventories of weapons and ammunition, and suspended publication of the PFLP, DFLP, and PFLP-GC weeklies” (Y. Sayigh 1997, 583). The dissident organization Fatah al-Intifada shot at least one of its members in Shatila for fighting alongside the PLO; he survived and subsequently left the organization. Syria’s actions were both punitive and aimed at regaining control; the Syrian regime’s order to suspend several Palestinian allies’ weekly publications betrayed a fear that powerful, community-based sentiments on the ground would spill into the organizations’ propaganda. Syria also attempted to preempt further insubordinate behavior among the Fatah dissidents by ordering “33 combat officers and senior cadres (including the head of the regional command) to return to Syria” (Y. Sayigh 1997, 599).

The Role of Mixed-Descent Militants

The creation of the opposition PNSF and Amal’s attacks on the camps introduced a new political dynamic during the camp sieges. Quotidian relationships between PLO-allied militant organizations, the PSP, and the recently-formed Hizbullah on the one hand and PNSF supporters and Amal on the other became especially significant throughout the sieges. These alliances challenge arguments that favor the primacy of ethnic and sectarian affiliations in civil war and within “deeply divided” societies (Horowitz 2000; Toft 2005; Cederman and Girardin 2007; Cederman et al. 2010; Chang and Peisakhin 2019), instead highlighting the ways that personal relationships and shared frames of reference undergird networks of loyalty, obligation, and protection.

Remapped cross-ethnic and cross-organizational ties benefited both militant organizations and civilians, yet did so in a predominantly unofficial way via quotidian relations. More than simply providing insurance, these relationships provided literal free passes to the network of barriers and local prisons that Amal
used to constrain and threaten Palestinians’ movement. Fatah- and DFLP-affiliated women with quotidian ties to members of PNSF factions or Amal became especially valuable to the clandestine apparatus. Aisha and her cousin Ibtisam, also a Fatah cadre, explained that when Amal periodically lifted the blockade, they would pick up weapons from male officers and then smuggle them through the remaining checkpoints into the camp. Their uncle by marriage, who was both Lebanese and a practicing Shi’a, was an officer in Amal to whom they could appeal if they were caught. Abu Husayn, a Fatah cadre, former member of the underground, and former PLA officer who identifies as Shi’a, deliberately selected his wife to smuggle arms through a network of tunnels and sewers under the camps. Between his two brothers in leftist factions and his contacts from the Shi‘i community, they assessed that if she were to be caught, his contacts in the PNSF could protect her. Murid, a member of the DFLP, was introduced to a Syrian intelligence agent who staffed one of the southernmost checkpoints outside Beirut by his sister and brother-in-law, both members of PNSF-affiliated organizations. He was subsequently able to move largely unchallenged between combat theaters for several years, using only that crossing.

Politically affiliated women with combat experience were redeployed to critical, high-risk underground positions. Many were caught and imprisoned. For example, Zahra, who was working in a kindergarten during the War of the Camps, started smuggling salaries into the camp by using her teaching position to cover her movements. However, her Fatah affiliation was semipublic knowledge in the camps; in 1986, she was denounced by members of a PNSF organization and imprisoned by Syrian intelligence. Upon her release, Syrian-allied groups set up a checkpoint under her apartment in West Beirut, forcing her to sleep outside her family home and to curtail her activities. Zahra began working in a humanitarian aid division of the GUPW, providing food and clothing to civilians rather than returning to clandestine work. Aisha, the smuggler from Beirut, underscored how Amal’s and the Syrians’ constant updating influenced clandestine militants’ organizational routines and strategy:

The Syrians learned that we were smuggling things in our clothes and started making us pull our shirts tight when we crossed the checkpoints. Like this [Aisha pulls her shirt tightly over her stomach and chest]. So what did we do? [Aisha leans closer to me and takes a drag of her Marlboro Red, looking for me to solve the puzzle. I wait.] We strapped guns and money to our thighs! [Aisha slaps her inner thigh, laughing heartily]. Not even the Syrians would search there!

Aisha later noted that the difference between women’s and men’s roles in the defense of the camps often inverted expectations about risk acceptance. She
emphasized that due to the stationary fronts, smuggling and logistics roles fundamentally became front-line positions: “Women died going to get food and water . . . women came face to face with Amal and the Syrians. They were searched, threatened, beaten . . . they were raped and killed while the men hid and shot at [Amal].”

The pathways that women smugglers used to enter the camps consequently earned the moniker “Corridors of Death” (Nofal 2006, 40, 49). Aisha emphasized the contrast in men’s and women’s risk acceptance, noting that she had to move through the camp—exposed and under fire—to deliver food, ammunition, and sandbags to the front while male fighters hunkered in fortified positions.

Militants refined and routinized clandestine operations during the War of the Camps, reinforcing new, hybrid organizational forms. Beyond simply moving information, finances, and supplies, clandestine networks allowed organizational politics to assume an increasingly dual character as militants used quotidian ties to bypass formal alliances. Militant organizations increasingly sought to create redundancies by engineering quotidian brokers into their structures. Marriages, specifically, formed new bases for militant organization and provided marked career advantages for both female and male Palestinian rebels.

Emergence and Disobedience

In the context of the War of the Camps, PLO as well as PNSF cadres—in addition to many members of Lebanese militias—regularly disobeyed commands. Evidence strongly indicates an important role for alternative membership in and loyalty to community-based networks that undergirded armed community defense fronts. Interviewees from Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh emphasized that the repertoires of violence associated with the sieges made political divisions at the local level (i.e., prewar organizational ties) irrelevant, even though almost all of them had been politically active at the time. The siege’s devastating effects on civilian communities provided both shared motivation and fodder to critique people seen as “playing politics” at the expense of people in the camps. A telex sent by foreign aid workers in Burj al-Barajneh in January 1987 underscores the collective humanitarian catastrophe of the camp sieges:

The camp has now been under attack with a complete siege more than 12 weeks and we, along with the 25,000 residents of the camp[,] are being subjected to conditions of deprivation and misery. Drinking water is the most basic human need. Most houses do not have running water and it has to be collected daily from taps in the street at great risk for the personal safety. Several women have been shot and killed by snip-
ers while collecting water for their families. Foodstocks have been completely depleted.\textsuperscript{31}

We are still under siege and now the people are beginning to starve. We have seen children hunting in garbage heaps for scraps of food. Today one woman was shot while trying to collect grass on the outskirts of the camp. . . . Some women and children are taking the risk of leaving the camp and many small children have been taken prisoner.\textsuperscript{32}

In this setting, people strongly believed that there was no space for organizational politics. Local loyalties and obligations reigned instead; in this atmosphere, “organizational” politics became synonymous with “elite” politics, which people viewed as the cause of the siege in the first place.

Rhetoric and orders that emphasized official ideological differences seemed not only absurd, but even dishonorable and immoral when the community was literally starving under the blockade and bombardment. Zahra, emphasized how shared routines, tasks, and sentiments came to constitute emergent defensive fronts in response: “There was no Fatah, Popular Front, General Command. Everyone worked in the siege. They cooked. They made sandwiches. They helped in the hospital. Everyone was together.”\textsuperscript{33} Abu Tariq simply said: “The camp had to look for survival and protection. . . . there was no time to think about organizations.” Ibrahim, who fought in Burj al-Barajneh when he was only fifteen years old, emphasized that even though he is now a loyal member of Fatah, during the siege he “did not think much about Fatah.” Instead, he explained, his first thought when Amal attacked was that “they were coming for my house and my camp, Burj al-Barajneh camp.”\textsuperscript{34}

These rhetorical distinctions worked to discursively constitute defensive fronts that de-emphasized organizational affiliation. Even when many militants were arrested by the Syrian allies of the PNSF factions and Amal, they highlighted their shared humanity; Abu Hassan, for example, told me of his arrest by Syrian forces, insisting: “In our cells—the cells in Murr Tower—we were facing guys from Amal, guys who had helped Palestinians. They were saying ‘Allah, Muhammad, Qur’an, Yassir Arafat, Palestine.’ They were reading Qur’an and we were reading Qur’an. Their general told us ‘we refused to fight you.’” Abu Hassan’s emphasis on the Qur’an not only works to render the predominantly Sunni Palestinians and Shi’a members of Amal alike; it also emphasizes his association of morality with Lebanese milititamen who disobeyed commands to fight with people in the camps.\textsuperscript{35}

This distinction between elite leaderships and local commands reflected emergent, camp-level solidarity patterns that crisscrossed organizational affiliations. Abu Tariq emphasized local actors’ agency in the camps, noting that his
larger group was allied with Syria, “but we [members in Shatila] were also not toys in Syrian hands.”

His political perspective demarcated local members of Fatah, to whom he was personally tied and against whom he held no grudge, from Fatah’s leadership, people whom he saw as traitors for negotiating with the Israeli government: “I was against the arresting of Fatah people, it’s not right. Arrest the leadership, not the Fatah people in the streets.” Yet Abu Tariq alluded to an even deeper political schism between the international leadership and his situation on the ground: “When the Camps War started, maybe the leadership knew. We weren’t informed as local leaders [author’s emphasis].”

While political officers like Abu Tariq superficially performed their stated political roles—in part owing to the presence of Syrian spies in the camp—they constantly violated political boundaries. This choice was often simply a matter of survival. For example, when Abu Mujahid, the local PFLP leader as well as the head of the camp’s Popular Committee, needed to repair water mains, he deliberately worked through a politically neutral intermediary in order to secure supplies and funding from the PLO:

Since Abu Moujahed was a leading official of a [sic] organization of the National Salvation Front, he could not negotiate the funds for payment directly with Ali Abu Toq, who as the head of Fatah controlled the PLO budget. Syrian spies in the camp watched to see who received ‘Arafat money.’ I assumed the task of negotiating the payment between my two friends. As the responsible official of the Palestine Red Crescent Society, a civilian institution of the PLO, I knew no such constraints. (Giannou 1990, 68–69)

Technically, the PNSF officers should have done anything possible to prevent the PLO and its members from persevering in the face of Amal’s attacks. Quotidian ties thus served to broker between those who could not publicly violate role expectations.

Yet disobedience went beyond securing the material necessities of survival and acquired a new meaning as a result of local understandings of Amal’s tactical repertoires. Remapped relational ties based on shared camp affiliation undergirded this cooperation. At the grassroots level, helping neighbors became a moral obligation for those who stood against Amal’s blockade, sniping, and shelling. This dynamic fed fighters’ motivation to flout orders from above. Abu Adnan, a Fatah officer who survived the War of the Camps in Burj al-Barajneh, noted explicitly (and despite his later expulsion from the camp by a pro-Syrian organization) that everyone distributed their supplies regardless of the recipient’s organizational affiliation.

I asked Aisha how camp life changed during the sieges and how people from different organizations acted toward each other. Her
immediate response was that everyone shared any supplies that they had: “If you had some coffee or labneh, and someone else had another thing, you’d divide it all.” She also remembered that people in the camp actively shunned and shamed those who did not share, noting that to have an egg and not split it with the family next door was haram. Her use of the term for something that is religiously forbidden was especially indicative of the moral implications of selfishness in a particular conflict environment.40

The Puzzle of Ali Abu Tawq

Ali Abu Tawq embodies the overarching tension between elite leadership and local emergent organizations; examining both his actions and the way people remember them offers insights into the role that community-level networks played in shaping militant action in Beirut during this era. When Yasir Arafat ordered him to violate a ceasefire with Amal in 1986, Abu Tawq refused; he had been quietly communicating with local Amal leaders via personal connections he had generated in the 1982–1985 Beirut underground. Arafat promptly cut Abu Tawq’s payroll allowance, punishing his subordinates and seeking to sever the financial and loyalty bond among them (Y. Sayigh 1997, 592).41 I asked several former militants who served under him what they made of Abu Tawq’s choice; rather than criticizing a renegade officer who defied Arafat and who cost them their salaries, they universally defended the choice as honorable, ethical, and appropriate.

Many Beirut militants drew clear lines between the “games” that exiled leaders played on one hand and local commanders’ moral stands for their communities on the other. Given these tensions, coupled with fighters’ perceived moral commitments to camp communities, it is not difficult to see why Palestinians in Beirut might hold the leaders who defied orders to protect them in high regard. Yet, Abu Tawq still seems to eclipse his contemporaries. Narratives surrounding his memory paint him as the leader of Palestinians, emphasizing his humility, tactical genius (particular with reference to guerrilla skills such as tunnel building), and the resulting social embeddedness among both Palestinians and Lebanese. This theme occurred across interviews; Abu Tawq frequently emerged as a symbolic foil to former as well as contemporary members of the elite leadership, especially when they were seen as engaging in “political theater” or “political games.”

Sami and Abu Houli, the latter being one of the fighters from Burj al-Shamali who smuggled materials into the Beirut camps, told me that, unlike Arafat, Abu Tawq “was living the reality.” This statement was not only a testament to the perceived competence with which he made decisions for his people, but also to his
moral right to do so. Abu Tawq came “from the same school as Abu Ammar,” said Ibrahim, the former fighter from Burj al-Barajneh, who wanted to demonstrate the high regard in which people viewed the man. Ibrahim’s response to my subsequent question about Abu Tawq’s insubordination—“No one could say ‘no’ to Abu Ammar. But Ali Abu Tawq said ‘no’”—strongly implied that Abu Tawq had not only moral standing, but also popular support.

Despite the combat setting in which it occurred, Abu Tawq’s ultimate assassination stunned residents of the Beirut camps. On the orders of Fatah al-Intifada’s military commander, four Fatah dissidents assassinated Abu Tawq in Shatila on January 27, 1987, detonating a buried 82mm shell in Shatila’s defensive earthworks. He died along with his deputy, who was announcing the birth of his son to members of the cross-factional defensive front (Giannou 1990, 136–39). The move—specifically, targeting the shared trenches—seemed to go against all the organizational and community norms that people had worked to establish. In a move that seems designed to “de-Palestinize” his assailants and distance them from the camp community, the Facebook page dedicated to Abu Tawq’s life attributes the assassination to “isolationist forces” and “Arab fascists,” rather than to Fatah al-Intifada specifically by name.

The devastating effects of the Sabra and Shatila massacre and the confinement of many Palestinian men to their homes led to the emergence of camp-based, often cross-factional militant cells based on neighbors’ shared perceptions of immediate threat. People repurposed everyday kinship and marriage ties, deploying female couriers to facilitate communication between cells and, eventually, salary payments. The PLO co-opted this apparatus, but never managed to completely control it.

The War of the Camps (1985–1988) challenged exiled Palestinian elites’ command and control of military and political apparatuses. The specific use of siege tactics reinforced militants’ identification both with camp communities and with previous socialization practices, subsequently producing disobedience. Feedback into neighborhood-based relationships facilitated the remapping of combat apparatuses onto quotidian ties, resulting in the emergence of united defensive fronts in Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh. A woman-dominated network of smugglers who were often connected to members of Amal or PNSF factions via kinship and marriage ties worked to resupply the camp with ammunition, bribe money, food, and medicine. Hybridized siege fronts facilitated tactical innovation and new forms of political contention via acts of disobedience and insubordination. Participants largely understood the conflict as a political one driven by geopolitics and elite rivalries between the PLO and Syria, rather than as a sec-
tarian conflict between Shi’a Lebanese on one hand and Sunni and Christian Palestinians on the other. This understanding undergirded network connections between Palestinians and Lebanese Shi’a that militants remapped to facilitate organizational survival.

Local organizations’ repeated successes in challenging elite leaderships and bringing horrific humanitarian conditions to light led to the erosion of international support for the Amal-Syrian axis, particularly from Libya and Iran. Palestinian organizations that had previously maintained strained relations with Syria changed their positions, as well; by the end of the War of the Camps, “the DFLP and PCP [Palestinian Communist Party] had already resumed the political dialogue with Fatah, while the PFLP, PPSF, and PLF tacitly followed Fatah’s political lead in the camps, prompting a disgruntled Birri [the leader of Amal] to observe that he could no longer distinguish the PNSF from Fatah” (Y. Sayigh 1997, 595). However, Amal, the Syrians, and their Palestinian allies also expelled known surviving Fatah officers at the end of the War of the Camps. Fatah members who remained in Beirut went underground; those who left Beirut filtered into the southern camps, into a distinct political system where they were forced to negotiate new roles for themselves and protection for their families.

These events have had lasting consequences. In contemporary Beirut, one frequently sees subtle traces of these past organizational configurations and alliances. Walking through the Sabra market with Abu Houli, the former commando from Burj al-Shamali, he sometimes introduced me to members of the PFLP and PPSF who stopped to exchange high-fives with him and ask about his children; he often told me that they know each other “from the siege.” Friends of mine tell me that they consider themselves to be from Shatila, not because they were born in that camp but because they were there for the entire six-month siege. Sometimes, the organizational resonance is less nuanced. For example, medical aid teams based in the camps almost immediately mobilized during the 2006 July War when the IDF bombed Dahiyeh and other nearby neighborhoods. Unified fronts among the camps’ inhabitants also emerged in times of danger; for instance, a cross-factional collective closed the camp during Hizbullah’s May 2008 invasion of West Beirut.44 Organizationally, one of the lasting effects of the sieges has been a generalized disdain for elite leaderships, though this dynamic has certainly been reinforced over time by broad feelings that the Ramallah-based leadership has abandoned Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However, given the history, the meanings embedded by lasting public and private displays of Ali Abu Tawq’s face are hard to misread.

Viewing these dynamics via the lens of remapping and emergence emphasizes both the material effects of violence and the ways that violent repertoires—particularly siege dynamics—interacted with factional apparatuses and everyday
relationships to produce specific understandings of threat and obligation. The use of siege tactics, in particular, amplified elite distance from the battlefield, bringing distinctions between long-standing socialization on one hand and realpolitik on the other into stark relief for those on the ground. That cleavage caused a shift in conflict dynamics, whereby the militants in the camps fought for themselves often independently of orders. In name, each of the factions “survived” and, for the most part, still exist today. However, the inherent changes to their structures, motivations, goals, and practices force us to problematize the concept of “survival” and to think more seriously about how emergence localizes conflict dynamics and drives divergent patterns of organizational adaptation.