

The Price of Statelessness: Palestinian Refugees From Syria

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by Rosemary Sayigh on May 15, 2013

"Palestinians never seem to have the luxury of digesting one tragedy

before the next one is upon them." --Joe Sacco, Footnotes in Gaza (New York, 2009: xi)

Tragedy and resistance have been linked to Palestinians' history since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and it is no surprise that there is an organic relationship between the current Arab uprisings and Palestinian resistance. Yet the Arab uprisings have exploded the post-1948 framework of existence of those Palestinians who live in the Arab world as refugees. As happened in the wake of the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003, the uprisings have exposed the basic insecurity and the loss of human rights to which statelessness makes Palestinians vulnerable.



With the current displacement and cross-border flight of Palestinian refugees in Syria, a new tragedy unfolds.

A recent [crisis report](#) by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) estimates that 400,000 of these Palestinian refugees, formerly self-supporting, are now in need of humanitarian assistance. Some 32,000 have sought sanctuary in Lebanon, around 4,500 in Jordan, and others are in Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. Communities that re-constructed themselves after the Nakba have once again been split and scattered, partly as internally displaced in Syria itself, partly as second-time refugees in neighboring countries. Between 120 and 200 Palestinian deaths have been reported so far, and with the civil war increasingly involving the refugee camps since last December, casualties are growing. Several of the casualties have been UNRWA staff members. Practically all the refugee camps in Syria have been pulled into the fighting, shelled by both government forces and the Free Syrian Army. As the regional and international supporters of the two sides increase military assistance the flow of refugees escaping Syria can only increase, as will the number of the displaced inside Syria.

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The simultaneous flight of Syrians and Palestinians from Syria reveals intertwined levels of discrimination: International, national and local. Internationally, donations have flooded in for displaced Syrians while UNRWA, chronically in deficit, is having difficulty obtaining emergency funds to help displaced Palestinians. [UNRWA's Response Plan](#) calls for \$26.85 million of which only \$19.04 million has been received so far. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) aided by a large cohort of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international funding, assists Syrian refugees in Lebanon, while UNRWA's capacity for aiding Palestinian refugees is exhausted to the point where its schools have had to stop taking in children from Syria. While some Palestinian NGOs in Lebanon also help Syrian refugees the reverse is not true for UNHCR and Lebanese NGOs. Space has been allocated to shelter Syrian refugees, but Palestinians have been forced to crowd into already over-crowded camps, two or three families in a single shelter. There are stories in 'Ain Helweh of people sleeping on stairways and the beaches. Some manage to sleep in UNRWA schools but have to evacuate them during the day. Some people sleep in shifts.

Mahmoud Abbas has taken several initiatives to protect Palestinians in Syria, sending delegations to Damascus to

plead for neutrality for the camps, and appealing for refugees to be allowed to take sanctuary in the occupied Palestinian territory. Israel has refused this appeal unless transferees formally disclaim the right of return. Abbas's failed efforts highlight both the Palestinian Authority (PA) lack of sovereignty over the occupied territory, and Palestinians' lack of protection under present legal and political conditions.

The different fates of Syrian and Palestinian refugees escaping war in Syria further illuminates the price Palestinians pay for statelessness. Jordan has permitted Syrian refugees to enter, and to move freely once inside Jordanian territory. Where Palestinian refugees are concerned, however, Jordan stopped allowing them entry in August 2012; further, the 4,500 or so it had allowed to enter earlier [are incarcerated in CyberCity](#) near Ramtha, and are only allowed to leave there if they return to Syria. Lebanon similarly has allowed free entry to Syrian refugees, whereas Palestinians until recently have only been allowed to enter if they had relatives in Lebanon. On entry every Palestinian must obtain a permit costing \$17 that has to be renewed every three months. Such a high tax on temporary residence appears unjustified in view of the fact that Lebanon offers no public services to Palestinians, and excludes them from most kinds of employment. In fact, it constitutes a form of refoulement (forced return) of the kind that UNHCR is mandated to prevent.

This differentiation between Syrian and Palestinian refugees on the part of neighboring Arab states mirrors a differentiation at the level of the United Nations. UNHCR's mission specifically excludes Palestinians. Instead they are served by a separate agency, UNRWA, and UNRWA's mission does not include protection. Thus even though the UNHCR and UNRWA are working jointly under the Syrian Regional Response Plan to assist all refugees from Syria, it is not clear so far if the UNHCR will exercise its protective mission to pressure Jordan and Lebanon to stop turning away Palestinians seeking sanctuary, or to prevent discriminatory treatment. As Terry Rempel [points out](#), no international agency has an explicit mandate to systematically work for the realization of the basic human rights of the Palestinian refugees. He adds, "No other refugee community in the world is so excluded." UNRWA has played an essential part in assisting the Palestinians to survive the 1948 Nakba, but the perception that it "looks after" the Palestinians en bloc and in every respect has concealed the ways it has not and cannot do so.

Forced to leave Syria where they had equal rights to state resources, such as medical care and education, those Palestinians from Syria face both state and social discrimination in Lebanon. A Palestinian mother who recently fled Syria [tells a reporter](#), "I am worried for the children. School has already begun and UNRWA has told us the schools are full. We were risking the ultimate price of fatality by staying in Syria, but here the cost of living makes survival just as much of a struggle if not more." This mother continues, "The Lebanese government allows a Syrian refugee to work, to stay for six months, and to renew their visiting permit for free. Why is it different for the Palestinians?"

Lebanese regulations against the employment of Palestinians have forced many Palestinians back to Syria. Though they continue to flee Syria for Lebanon, we can only guess how many have remained, risking death, because of what they would face if they take refuge in Lebanon. Palestinians in 'Ain Helweh, the largest area of their concentration, have demonstrated for jobs and assistance, but there is no sign that the Lebanese state or the international community is listening. Thousands of Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria to Lebanon face this brutal paradox on a daily basis. For them, the fate of discrimination and inequality in Lebanon is as dire as the fate of violence in Syria.

Before we blame Lebanon and Syria for their harsh policies towards Palestinian refugees, we should remember that if the Great Powers had insisted on Israel repatriating the refugees after the 1948 Nakba according to UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (December 1948), the refugee problem would not exist today, and the Arab states would not have to deal with it. Instead the Arab states have learned to treat the Palestinians as a people without national, civic or even human rights, as do Britain, the United States and the European community. And those countries do not exactly have a better record when it comes to refugees. Rempel recalls that the United States, UNHCR's largest state donor, spent some \$2 billion on military aid to Afghans fighting the Soviet-allied regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but found only \$14 million in cash for aid for 4.5 million Afghan refugees in 1992.

The current underfunding of UNRWA that handicaps its ability to assist Palestinian refugees from Syria is yet

another facet of the non-recognition of Palestinian national rights by the decision-makers within the UN system. Britain and the US were the two powers most instrumental in the planning of UNRWA, and it is clear that they envisioned the Agency's task as temporary support, followed by the integration of the refugees into other Arab economies. In this way, the Palestinians as a people with national rights would be made to disappear through their embrace by a humanitarian organization. The legacies of this defining policy are still played out in the way Arab states design their own policies toward Palestinian refugees, even when these states claim to support the Palestinian "cause."

As the largest refugee camp in Lebanon 'Ain Helweh near Sidon has received the largest number of refugees from Syria. Homes are bursting. Sara tells me there are 16 refugees in her neighbor's house. I visited Um Hazem, who came from Yarmouk in December to the home of her parents and younger brother in 'Ain Helweh. An elderly woman who can remember the Nakba of 1948, she weeps at particularly difficult points in her story, overcome by loss of home, separation from loved ones, and the lack of certainty about return. She describes how she stayed in Yarmouk until the "last moment," repeating that "we weren't afraid" when battles started on the fringe of the camp, or when Syrian aircraft bombed the mosque. It was only when mortars and missiles started to fall around them, and nearby houses began to collapse, that she decided to leave with her daughter-in-law and the children. Her husband and several of her adult children stayed in Yarmouk. Their fate there is a constant source of deep-set anxiety.

They didn't leave Syria straight away – "Who wants to leave their home?" – but stayed for a while in Sheeh, an hour's drive from Damascus, hoping that the fighting would end. In late December, when fighting intensified in Yarmouk, they were persuaded by Um Hazem's brother in 'Ain Helweh to take refuge there. He was worried by her heart condition and thought she would be better looked after in Lebanon. But UNRWA's chronic deficit shows up in the limited medical and educational services it can offer the new refugees. Um Hazem needs medications for high blood pressure and high cholesterol. She shows me a few pills wrapped up in a Kleenex which her doctor in Syria warned her not to stop taking. In Lebanon this medication is only available on the free market at a prohibitive cost, and UNRWA does not cover it.

When they first arrived, UNRWA registered them and distributed some food aid, blankets and mattresses, but they have seen nothing since. Now Um Hazem's adult sons cannot find work so that all their living expenses have to be covered by her brother. A rumor is going round the camp that Algeria has opened its doors to Palestinian refugees from Syria. Her sons are ready to go anywhere they can find jobs, which would mean yet further splitting up of her family. Meanwhile they have to renew their visas at the Municipality every three months.

In spite of the flow into Lebanon of international funds for the refugees from Syria, people in 'Ain Helweh say they don't see the NGOs to which international funds are channeled. The extent to which this is a problem of poor coordination and ad hoc distribution common to disaster relief efforts or is due to factors specific to Lebanon and its NGOs remains unclear. There is one point everyone I meet agrees upon, whether social workers or refugees: It is local communities, both Palestinian and Lebanese, that have sustained the refugees from Syria. If it were not for them, hundreds, maybe thousands, would have died from lack of shelter and food, especially during the extreme cold and freezing temperatures in January. For example, in 'Ain Helweh it is said that the Popular Committee collects money from residents to buy bread and distribute it to the refugees. Perhaps half the population has refugees staying with them. Neighbor-to-neighbor donations fill in some gaps. Nonetheless a refugee from Syria committed suicide in 'Ain Helweh in early January because he was unable to bring home food for his wife and four children. A criticism I hear frequently of the UNHCR Response Plan is that the larger part of its funds go to workshops and training programs that benefit salaried employees rather than in direct material aid to those most in need.

The urgency of the refugees' need for material aid is driven home by their protests. Palestinian refugees from Syria in March began a day-and-night "live-in" outside UNRWA headquarters in Beirut to protest the lack of housing, medical care, schooling and food. In a call for help for the protesters Abu Mujahed, director of a centre for children in Shatila refugee camp, sent a message dated March 17: "Two days ago it rained at night. They didn't have any

shelter... when we thought of moving the children and women to their homes until morning, the surprise was that many of them have no houses to go to... the refugees have stopped believing the excuses of the donors such as lack of knowledge, or that they are working on needs assessment, or they are waiting for the answers to their appeals. The refugees believe that the government is only concerned to support the military groups and gangs involved in the war in Syria.”

The overall situation is particularly worrying for three reasons: there is no resolution of the Syrian conflict in sight; there have already been incidents in camps in Lebanon that suggest that the Syrian conflict is being reproduced there; and UNRWA is not merely victim of a chronic budget deficits, but [is facing the likelihood of “devastating” cuts](#) in contributions from the U.S. In addition, there is an American-based campaign against UNRWA that portrays it as the major block to “peace negotiations” because [it sustains refugee rights and identity](#).

Indeed, even as UNRWA Commissioner General Filippo Grandi visited Washington to fight for the Agency’s life at this critical time, a think tank called “The Middle East Forum,” was holding a conference at the Harvard Club in New York on “Changing US Policy on UNRWA and the Palestine Refugees.” Participants included Israel’s envoy to the UN, Ron Prosor, and it was opened by Daniel Pipes, [advocate of a campaign](#) to draft U.S. legislation intended to end the automatic transmission of refugee status to the descendants of Palestinians that has been taking place since 1948, in line with UNRWA’s mission to sustain the refugees until their problem is solved.

What does the future hold for the Palestinian refugees from Syria? The likelihood is, tragically, that fighting in Syria will get worse, the refugee camps will continue to be attacked, and there will be more displacement and more refugees. Thus, what is urgently needed in the short term is:

- More international support for UNRWA;
- A change in the mission of the UNHCR allowing it to extend protection to Palestinian refugees both inside and outside Syria; and
- International pressure on Lebanon to abolish its entry and residence taxes on Palestinian refugees, allowing them to work. Indeed, Lebanon’s discrimination against Palestinian refugees from Syria draws attention to its own long history of refusing equal employment opportunities as well as property ownership to Palestinians who sought refuge there since 1947-48. UNHCR should be equipped to contest this policy since it amounts to a system of post-facto refoulement.

It is also important that whatever regime is established in Syria at the end of the civil war should be pressed to allow all refugees to return to their former homes and all camps to be reconstructed. In addition, there is a need to counter U.S.-based campaigns to re-define the Palestinian refugee and terminate UNRWA by raising American awareness of the Nakba of 1948, a task that requires energetic public education through the media, university outreach, coalition-building and civic society organization.

Last but not least, international pressure should be brought to bear on Israel to cease blocking the settlement of Palestinian refugees from Syria in the occupied Palestinian territory by setting conditions that would strip them of their right of return, and to enable their return with immediate effect. Further, this must be seen as a first step toward the long overdue return of Palestinian refugees and exiles to their homes as part of a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This commentary is based on a lecture delivered at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry on March 15, 2013.