
Influx of Syrian refugees highlights ongoing Palestinian struggles in Lebanon

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Harsh winter storms hit the Levant this week, affecting millions of refugees. Emergency relief supplies and services, such as shelters, sanitation, health care and food, are now completely inaccessible to the hundreds of thousands of people living in areas besieged by the Syrian government. Basic needs are also curtailed by severe budget shortfalls at the UN, NGOs and INGOs. Whilst the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon remains a government vexation, the arrival of at least 57,000¹ Palestinian-Syrian refugees (PSRs), forces the issue and highlights the lack of civil rights for Palestinians in the country.

As temperatures plummet, existing refugee camps in Lebanon are totally inadequate for hosting the many who are fleeing from the violence in Syria. Health care, food supplies and infrastructure in Lebanon's 12 official UN-run camps are already stretched to breaking point, even though a clear majority of refugees who have crossed into Lebanon settle in "unofficial" shelters in the overcrowded "adjacent areas" (settlements of refugees in the immediate vicinity of the official camps) or in the uninhabitable and unofficial "gatherings".



by (Hugh
Macleod/IRIN)

According to the UN, Palestinian gatherings on privately-owned land in Lebanon represent one of the most vulnerable host communities for refugees displaced from Syria. They sprang up in the 1950s and whereas post-civil war Lebanon generally was followed by positive developments for the gatherings, the return of normality to the 25 municipalities made life for the Palestinians fractious as land claims were lodged by private landowners and public authorities. This remains a complicating factor as local communities and NGOs have difficulties communicating and getting permission to work within gatherings on private land.

Palestinians residing in these settlements (which are often little more than a collection of huts in a field) receive no support from the Lebanese government, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) or the UNWRA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). UNHCR does not cover UNRWA aid recipients and Palestinians are de facto exempt from UNHCR support; and whilst the UNRWA mandate is restricted to covering the 12 official refugee camps within Lebanon, Palestinians in gatherings or the adjacent areas have no protection or support from the UN whatsoever. The official camps are overcrowded but nonetheless are provided with emergency assistance, education, health care and food supplies by UNRWA. According to a recent report by the Palestinian Human Rights Organisation (PHRO), there is a “protection gap” as UNRWA does not generally protect Palestinians in terms of basic human rights, as the UNHCR does.

It is against this background that Palestinian-Syrian refugees are particularly vulnerable, not only in terms of the repercussions of displacement, but also politically. Inside Syria itself, Palestinians in the Yarmouk Refugee Camp, now a suburb of Damascus, have experienced intense fighting between the Free Syrian Army and its Palestinian ally Liwa al-Asifa on one hand and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), supported by Syrian government forces, on the other. Neighbourhoods have faced starvation and a serious shortage of medical supplies thanks to a merciless siege of the camp. Palestinians are accused of supporting first one side and then the other but the PHRO told Middle East Monitor (MEMO) that

this extreme instability and fragmentation within Yarmouk, along with the heated fighting, has led to the destruction of around 80 per cent of the camp and cost many lives. As it accommodated at least 168,000 Palestinian refugees, this internal unrest and partition has increased the number of Palestinians from Syria seeking refuge in Lebanon.

In June, UNRWA expected the Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon to increase by 23 per cent; the agency had donors pledging aid of \$45 million and recently tried to prepare for winter, but its assistance only covers 51,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria within the overcrowded camps. UNRWA's country director for Lebanon, Ann Dismorr, said that had they received \$62 million from donors but pointed out that this was evidently "not enough" to meet refugee needs.

UNRWA assumes that most PSRs will settle in the existing official refugee camps, despite the lack of space and infrastructure to sustain this, and whilst the UN expressed "extreme concerns" about the harsh living conditions faced by refugees inside as well as outside Syria's borders, these "unofficial areas" remain unprotected. Instead, hundreds of thousands have been accommodated in schools, garages, half-built buildings, universities and abandoned malls.

There are 455,000 Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon; most live in the official camps, which are overcrowded and straining to provide adequate infrastructure, economic opportunities, food and medical and educational services. UNRWA is struggling to help at least 432,200 Palestinian refugees within Syria, and PHRO's estimated 57,000 PSRs in Lebanon.

Since 1949, when the first Palestinian refugee camps were created, the Lebanese government has feared its "guests" outstaying their welcome; as such, it has done everything possible to block citizenship for the refugees and the social and civil rights attached thereto. One of the ways in which Palestinians have suffered from this is through their legal status. Their lack of civil rights in Lebanon, such as the right to own property and their socio-economic right to work, is a direct violation of international

human rights. “Palestinian refugees [in Lebanon] have no political rights or civil rights; they can’t own property or join labour syndicates and unions; nor do they have access to social services and health care provided by the state,” PHRO told MEMO.

According to Manuel Pirino of Transparency International, the present situation in Lebanon is “rather overwhelming” for the government. “It is increasingly difficult to guarantee a clean and transparent relief operation for refugees.” Nevertheless, the special needs of Palestinian refugees are acknowledged by the government, at least verbally. Since 2005, it has “invited” interested parties to have a dialogue about the situation.

The Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) is an initiative started by the Lebanese council of ministers to address the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon. The LPDC mandate includes providing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon with the conditions to live in dignity, prosperity, security and harmony with their environment until they are able to enforce their right of return as stipulated in UN Resolution 194 and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Within the Lebanese government framework, this dialogue manifests itself as somewhat of a soliloquy in which recitation of laws “invites” rather than engages Palestinians to take part in the group and achieve the objectives of the project. Thus, while the LPDC is a good gesture as it recognises the vulnerable position of Palestinians within Lebanon, it fails with no Palestinian representatives on board.

Another obstacle for the PSRs is the prohibition on taking refuge in neighbouring countries. Human Rights Watch said that Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon have closed their borders to Palestinian refugees, specifically, on a frequent basis. The Lebanese government started to do this on 6 August in direct violation of the customary and tracial law of nations on non-refoulement, which forbids the rendering of a true victim of persecution to their persecutor.

Now it seems that the same issues of human rights and dignity are faced by Syrian refugees. The rights of refugees are a legitimate

concern for the government. As the number of refugees exceeds a quarter of the population, shelters and inhumane/exploitative settling arrangements are far too common. UNHCR said that there seems to be a general fear of naturalisation of refugees, with the Lebanese government forbidding the UN commission from using the emergency housing units designed and built by Sweden's IKEA Company. The units took three years and \$4.6 million to develop; with solar lights and insulated wall panels they are equipped to accommodate people for up to three years, compared to the more usual refugee tents, which can last just 6 months. The Danish Refugee Council also developed warmer and sturdier Box Shelters and began housing people a year ago. The government recently banned the construction of any more than the 160 existing Box Shelters, due to their "permanent features". UNHCR's communications officer, Roberta Russo, told MEMO that the government has only now allowed the testing of 6 units in a few weeks time. "Once the units are tested, we will discuss with the Government their use in Lebanon," he added.



CNN.com



Hussein Malla / AP (Roberta Russo, Communications officer for UNHCR shows the result of three years' cooperation between IKEA and the UN to built better suited shelters for refugees)

For the PSRs suitable shelter is thus looking even more uncertain. Deprived of any UNHCR aid and assistance, the majority of PSRs are obliged to reside in the overcrowded UNRWA camps. Most take refuge in the Ein El-Hilweh Camp, the biggest and most overcrowded in Lebanon, in order to secure some kind of protection. There is a desperate need for the government and international community to acknowledge Palestinian's vulnerability during their awful displacement, within and outside the official camps.

"Humanitarian aid is a field where corruption can find fertile ground," said Manuel Pirino, "mostly at the expenses of the intended beneficiaries of relief aid." This is especially true, he pointed out, when the international status of the recipients is ambiguous, such as the Palestinian refugees. He explained that there are recommendations which are valid for communities in need of emergency aid all over the world, and "which are all the more valid for Palestinian or Syrian refugees".

Although UNRWA is trying urgently to accommodate and assist the massive influx of people to the refugee camps, one of the main obstacles remains for Palestinian as well as Palestinian-Syrian refugees in Lebanon; the country is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951. As such, their rights and status are extremely vulnerable, especially in the current circumstances of war and displacement. Palestinians require special protection, as UNRWA's mandate does not protect their general human rights.

There is a need for international bodies such as UNHCR and UNRWA to cooperate or extend their mandates in order to secure Palestinians their civil and human rights within Lebanon.

End Notes

¹ Palestinian Human Rights Organisation (PHRO) 2013.



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