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Vol 15 No. 4 & Vol 16 No. 1, 08/09 / **The Refugee Question**

Focus

The Role of UNRWA and the Palestine Refugees

UNRWA is an expression of international commitment to the welfare of the refugees.

by [Paul McCann](#)

For six decades the Palestine refugees and their descendants have suffered dispossession, exile, conflict and poverty. Many thousands have lived their lives in concrete shanties where opportunities are few and despair can be endemic. Their plight is unique in its longevity and intractability and so, in turn, a unique organization has catered for their needs.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) came into being in December 1949 and has been with the refugees as they faced conflicts and crises, periods of hope and long years of disappointment. It is a relationship unparalleled in the annals of humanitarian and development assistance.

The Palestinian flight from Mandate Palestine began in 1947, but the vast majority left between April and August 1948. The population from northern Palestine largely moved into Syria and Lebanon. From Jaffa and the south, the refugees crowded into the Gaza Strip. In all, some 200,000 refugees, including about 30,000 Bedouins from around Beersheba, went to Gaza, increasing the population of a dusty strip of dunes by a factor of three. The Arab population of the coastal plains, including some from Haifa and Jaffa, and most Arab inhabitants of Ramle and around Jerusalem sought protection in the hills of the West Bank — doubling its population in the process. In 1948 and again in 1967, tens of thousands were displaced into Jordan.

Like all refugees they suffered greatly. They lost homes, businesses and farms, were separated from family and, in unknown numbers, lost their lives. There was disease, lack of food and water and little shelter. Tens of thousands crowded into disused barracks or caves. More lived in the open until tented camps were erected. Initially the Red Cross and the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker charity, provided relief.

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The total number who fled has always been disputed. Largely because no census had been held since 1931 and because of the nomadic Bedouin population, accurate figures were hard to establish. The UN's Economic Survey Mission, which was known as the Clapp Mission, estimated the number to be 726,000 in December 1949. Neighboring countries have generally put the number of refugees at between 750,000 and 800,000, while Israel has contended that no more than 550,000 refugees abandoned their homes. The Clapp Mission figure has generally been considered the most reliable.

In December 1948 The General Assembly adopted Resolution 194 with its famous commitment to the Palestine refugees either returning to their homes and/or receiving compensation. However, all efforts, either to repatriate refugees or to resettle and compensate them, proved to be in vain. Resettlement was rejected by the refugees and repatriation was rejected by Israel.

The Clapp Mission recommended the establishment of a completely new organization to concentrate solely on the interests of the refugees. In December 1949 the General Assembly established UNRWA under GA Resolution 302 of December 8, 1949 "to prevent starvation and distress and to further the conditions for peace and stability." The Agency began operations on May 1, 1950. It was unlike most other UN agencies because it delivered its services directly. The Clapp Mission had envisioned UNRWA establishing large-scale public works in the host countries to provide employment for the refugees. These included plans for agricultural terracing as well as road construction, irrigation schemes and school construction. Significantly, Gordon Clapp, its chairman, was a former head of the New Deal-era Tennessee Valley Authority.

However, by the mid-1950s it was clear that the lack of a peace settlement as envisaged in Resolution 194 doomed the works and resettlement programs to failure, nor was there ever adequate funding from donor governments to execute them. From that point onwards, UNRWA focused on developing the human potential of the refugees by giving them the healthcare, shelter and, in particular, the education to allow them to improve their own lives. It moved from a "works" organization to a quasi-governmental human development agency — but, crucially, it has no territorial authority, no legislative power and no jurisdiction over the refugees in its care.

From the 1960s onwards, the Agency expanded its education provision by establishing training colleges and achieving gender parity in all its schools. It also radically reduced infant mortality rates with comprehensive vaccination coverage and by focusing on maternal and child health. An important innovation was UNRWA's pioneering use of oral re-hydration salts on a mass scale. Throughout its history, UNRWA has worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to ensure that its programs reflect the very best practice in healthcare and education provision.

Today the registered refugee population has grown to 4.8 million, and the Agency employs over 29,000 staff, mostly refugees themselves, to cater for their basic needs. It provides education to nearly 500,000 pupils enrolled in 684 schools, and its healthcare program runs 134 health clinics, which receive 9.5 million patient visits a year. The very poorest refugees, 255,000 special hardship cases, receive support from UNRWA's relief and social services program, which also operates 65 community-run women's centers and 39 rehabilitation centers for refugees with disabilities. Since 1990 it has also operated one of the Middle East's most successful micro-credit lending programs, which currently finances 24,000 loans worth \$30 million each year.

For the past six decades, it has also been there to provide emergency relief in every one of the conflicts that have rocked the region and which usually find a way to disproportionately harm the refugees. From Gaza in 1956, through the cataclysm of June 1967, to Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s and on to successive intifadas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), UNRWA has provided food, water, shelter and emergency healthcare, often in the most dangerous of environments.

UNRWA had initially been envisaged as a temporary agency with a three-year mandate. The lack of progress towards a peace settlement or a resolution of the refugee issue meant the General Assembly repeatedly renewed its mandate. In this way, the Agency has become an expression of the international community's continuing commitment to the protection and care of Palestine refugees. UNRWA furnishes visible proof that the underlying issues remain on the international agenda and that one day they may be successfully addressed.

The Status Quo of the Refugees

At various stages in its history, UNRWA has faced competing claims that it was either attempting to resettle the refugees against their wishes, and against the terms of Resolution 194, or that it was perpetuating the refugee situation rather than solving it. In the 1950s there was suspicion among the refugees that the replacement of tents by concrete shelters was resettlement on the sly. Similarly, some of the early "works" projects seemed predicated on the idea that an improvement in economic conditions would see the refugees abandon their right of return — something that has never proved to be the case. Nevertheless, at various times in the last 60 years, the Agency has had to argue the point that an improvement in the refugees' living conditions needn't be at the expense of their rights.

Critics of the Agency who argue that it perpetuates the refugee problem have made allegations that the Agency has, at various times, prevented refugees from leaving the camps, something which the Agency has no power to do. It has a mandate simply to provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees pending a political settlement — a settlement that will be drawn up by the parties involved, not by

UNRWA. Removing UNRWA from the scene would not resolve the refugee issue; it would simply cause untold hardship and distress and would contribute nothing to the stability of the region.

It is sometimes tempting to believe that those who accuse the Agency of perpetuating the refugee problem have in their sights those elements of UNRWA's structure and organization that act as a repository for the refugees' experience. Hundreds of thousands of UNRWA family files, each filled with supporting documents stretching back to 1948 — and to long-vanished villages in Mandate Palestine — are a link to the past that some would like, no doubt, to see broken. Equally damning, to some critics, must also be the way in which many refugees acknowledge the small role UNRWA has inadvertently played, through its registration lists and service delivery, school culture and other systems, in contributing to a Palestinian sense of identity.

That identity notwithstanding, there remain disparities in the legal and socioeconomic status of the refugee communities UNRWA serves in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and the OPT. The refugees in Jordan and Syria have the best levels of stability in their status and personal security. In Jordan, the 1.9 million refugees mostly enjoy Jordanian citizenship and are legally entitled to work and to have access to government institutions. However, Palestinian refugees who left the Gaza Strip in 1967 and their descendants are issued renewable Jordanian passports valid only for two years and without national identity numbers. They form a sizeable minority who are unable to access Jordanian government services.

In Syria, the 450,000 registered refugees there have full access to government services and to the labor market, with the exception of those refugees who arrived on or after July 10, 1956, who are not allowed to occupy civil posts in the government. According to Syria's 1957 law on the legal status of Palestinians, the refugees have almost the same legal protection as Syrian citizens but have no right to be naturalized or to vote.

In June 2005 Lebanon's Ministry of Labor allowed registered Palestinian refugees born in Lebanon to work at manual and clerical jobs and to obtain work permits, both of which had been previously denied. Palestine refugees are still effectively banned from several professions, including medicine, law, journalism and engineering. Consequently, unemployment among the 416,000 registered refugees is high and living conditions very poor. All Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA received identity documents and can acquire renewable travel documents. According to a 1957 decree still in force, Palestine refugee camp residents have to apply for permits to move to other camps. They have limited access to government programs and have to depend almost entirely on UNRWA for basic services, and Lebanon is the only country in which the Agency has to provide secondary education for refugee children. Legislation preventing Palestine refugees from buying immovable property remains in force.

As has been well documented, in the OPT the movement of Palestinians, including refugees, within, to and from the territory is tightly controlled and subject to a complex permit regime implemented by the Israeli authorities. Palestine refugees may obtain identification documents, but the Israeli authorities administer the population and control the issuance of identity documents for the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. Palestine refugees have full access to Palestinian Authority services in the OPT and the same voting rights as other Palestinian residents.

In socioeconomic and security terms, the refugees in Lebanon and the OPT, and especially the Gaza Strip, have the greatest difficulties to face. In Lebanon, 12% of the registered refugees fall into UNRWA's special hardship category of refugees living in dire poverty. In Gaza, the effects of years of conflict and siege since the start of the second intifada mean that 900,000 people are now reliant on UNRWA for emergency food aid.

Camp or non-camp residence also tends to mark a division in the refugees' living conditions. The one-third of registered refugees living in camps often suffer appalling squalor, overcrowding and lack of natural light, with the worst conditions to be found in Lebanon and Gaza. UNRWA estimated, before the recent conflict in Gaza, that there were close to 10,000 refugee shelters in the camps urgently in need of renovation to bring them up to minimum international standards.

Lack of donor funding prevented UNRWA from rehabilitating any more than 500 shelters during 2008 and, across the board, the inability of donations to keep pace with rapid population growth has undermined the quality of provision. Overcrowded classrooms containing 40 or even 50 pupils can be found. Almost all of UNRWA's schools operate on a double shift — where two separate groups of pupils and teachers share the same dilapidated buildings. Doctors in UNRWA clinics see over 100 patients a day, and its social workers can have caseloads of 300 families. And all these regular programs are run in conjunction with emergency relief programs in the OPT and during crises like the summer war in Lebanon in 2006 and the destruction of Nahr el-Bared camp in 2007.

Before the second intifada, UNRWA had been planning its own demise based on the expectation that there would be settlement of the refugee issue. Donors reacted in the same way, and funding for the Agency failed to keep pace with the needs of the refugees. The prolonged and bloody conflict since 2000 extinguished hopes of an immediate political breakthrough, and the Agency is now working to raise the standards of its services and has made significant strides towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals. In the area of women's health, education and employment, for instance, the social and economic advancement of Palestinian refugee women is one of the great unsung stories of the UN.

Bringing the Refugees to the Negotiating Table

In looking to the future, UNRWA advocates that the refugee issue should be brought forward from its current designation as a "final status issue" to be addressed only when all other problems are resolved. The Palestine refugees embody the collective sense and experience of Palestinian loss, and we ignore them at our peril. A negotiated settlement will not be worthy of its name unless it commands the endorsement of the Palestine refugees. And it will not achieve that endorsement if there is not adequate refugee representation during peace negotiations. Indeed, not just representation, but the entire formulation of the refugee issue has to be changed from the current discourse that sees it purely in terms of a demographic and existential threat to Israel. There also needs to be acknowledgement of the issue as one with human rights dimensions — as one with legitimacy as an authentic issue of international protection.

Excluding refugees from the negotiation process and recasting it in purely demographic and existential terms prevents the valuable preparatory work that should be taking place to clarify its parameters. At this stage we should be seeking answers to questions such as: Who will be entitled to avail themselves of the refugee component of a settlement? There should also be a mechanism to ascertain the interests, views and preferences of refugees. If mediators fail to consult with the refugees, then they will deny themselves the option of fully exploring the available avenues for solutions.

Instead of assuming to know what the refugees want — that, given the right of return, for example, they would attempt to return en masse to Israel — the refugees should be given a place at the negotiating table and a voice of their own. Refugees all around the world often surprise with the wisdom of their choices — if, that is, they are enabled and empowered to choose.

Article Comments

1 - Palestinians

Lola Flores | U.S. | 18:26:32(Jerusalem)

I think that by talking about refugees, their rights, wishes, etc., we're getting a tad ahead of the game. First, we have to figure out how they'll get safe out of that concentration camp called Palestine.

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