

DARK DAYS OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN THE DIASPORA

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Abstract

This abstract discusses the Palestinian refugee crisis and the challenges faced by Palestinian refugees living in the diaspora. The term "refugee" is generally used to refer to individuals who have been forced to leave their country in search of safety due to war or natural disasters. However, for Palestinians, the term also includes those who were forcibly expelled from their lands and homes by Israel during the Nakba of 1948 and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands in 1967. Palestinian refugees face significant barriers to education, healthcare, and basic human rights, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The right of return, which symbolizes the natural right of Palestinian refugees and their families to return to their homes and lands, is considered an essential requirement for the peace process with Israel. Despite the efforts of organizations like the UNRWA and the ICRC, the challenges facing Palestinian refugees remain significant, and it is essential to prioritize the basic human rights and well-being of these vulnerable populations.

Keyword: Palestinian refugees, Diaspora, Human rights, Displacement, Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The term "refugee" generally refers to anyone who has been forced to cross an international border in search of safety due to war, natural or man-made disasters. However, for Palestinians, the term implies those who were forcibly expelled from their lands and homes by Israel during the Nakba of 1948 and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands in 1967. Most Palestinian refugees are living in refugee camps set up by the UN in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and neighbouring Arab countries. The right of return, symbolizing the natural right of Palestinian refugees and their families to return to their homes and lands in which they lived before 1948, is considered an essential requirement for the peace process with Israel as cited by Albanese, F. P., & Takkenberg, L. (2020).

The Palestinian refugee crisis is one of the longest-standing refugee crises in the world, with over 5 million Palestinians living in the diaspora as of 2021. These refugees have faced decades of displacement, poverty, and discrimination, with limited access to basic human rights, education, and healthcare. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides assistance to Palestinian refugees, the majority of Palestinians living in refugee camps across the Middle East "suffer from poverty and chronic underemployment, limited access to health care and education, and insufficient infrastructure and social services" (UNRWA, 2021).

One of the most pressing issues facing Palestinian refugees in the diaspora is the lack of access to education. According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, "Palestinian children in Lebanon face significant barriers to education, including discrimination, poverty, and a lack of schools and teachers" (HRW, 2021). The report notes that many Palestinian children in Lebanon are forced to attend overcrowded and under-resourced schools, or else drop out of school entirely due to financial constraints.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges facing Palestinian refugees in the diaspora. In a recent report, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) noted that "Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are facing unprecedented hardship due to the pandemic, with many struggling to access basic needs such as food, water, and healthcare" (ICRC, 2021). The report also highlights the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of Palestinian refugees, many of whom are struggling with isolation and anxiety.

In a nutshell, the dark days of the Palestinian refugees in the diaspora are marked by ongoing displacement, poverty, and discrimination. Despite the efforts of organizations like UNRWA and the ICRC, the challenges facing Palestinian refugees remain significant, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the international community continues to grapple with the complex political and humanitarian issues underlying the Palestinian refugee crisis, it is essential to prioritize the basic human rights and well-being of these vulnerable populations.

The United Nations General Assembly adopts resolution 194 in December 1948, resolving that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible", as cited in UN.org website, (2022)

It is worth noting that there are more than 8 million Palestinian refugees, most of whom live in Arab countries, and the rest are scattered in different parts of the world. Depending on the situation of each country, the mood of the decision-makers, the basic development, the social structure, and the economic conditions, the miserable condition of the Palestinian refugees is almost the same, although the suffering varies from one country to another.

Although it has been more than 60 years since the displacement of these refugees under the force and betrayal of the Zionists, they still live in misery that is renewed with each Arab era and its social, legal, and political renewal. Because of Israel's influence at the kitchen of international decision-making and the conscious support of the United States for it, the painful symptoms of these efforts may be at the global or Arab level because it cannot eliminate them. The Arabs and Muslim countries could not find a balance commensurate with their size and significance in terms of substance and content, to solve the refugee problem and the Palestinian issue as a whole until now, according to D'Anna, L. (2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Palestinian refugee crisis is a long-standing issue that has affected millions of people for over seven decades. This literature review examines the challenges faced by Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, particularly in terms of their basic human rights, access to education and healthcare, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides assistance to Palestinian refugees, the majority of Palestinians living in refugee camps across the Middle East "suffer from poverty and chronic underemployment, limited access to health care and education, and insufficient infrastructure and social services" (UNRWA, 2021). This lack of access to education is particularly significant, with many Palestinian children forced to attend overcrowded and under-resourced schools or drop out of school entirely due to financial constraints (HRW, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges facing Palestinian refugees in the diaspora. A recent report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) noted that "Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are facing unprecedented hardship due to the pandemic, with many struggling to access basic needs such as food, water, and healthcare" (ICRC, 2021). The report also highlights the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of Palestinian refugees, many of whom are struggling with isolation and anxiety.

The right of return is considered an essential requirement for the peace process with Israel, as it symbolizes the natural right of Palestinian refugees and their families to return to their homes and lands. However, the current political situation and ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine make the right of return challenging to achieve. In the meantime, organizations like UNRWA and the ICRC are working to provide essential services and support to Palestinian refugees in the diaspora.

Overall, the literature suggests that the challenges faced by Palestinian refugees in the diaspora are significant, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the efforts of organizations like UNRWA and the ICRC, more needs to be done to prioritize the basic human rights and well-being of these vulnerable populations. Future research should focus on identifying effective strategies for supporting Palestinian refugees and addressing the underlying political and humanitarian issues driving the Palestinian refugee crisis.

Life of the Palestinian Refugees in Diaspora

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) registers over 1.4 million Palestinian refugees, which represent one-third of their total refugee population. These refugees reside in 58 officially recognized refugee camps located in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), according to the UNRWA website in 2022.

The life of Palestinian refugees is marked by numerous challenges resulting from their displacement from their homeland due to the ongoing conflict with Israel. Many Palestinians were forced to flee their homes during the 1948 Arab Israeli War and the subsequent occupation of Palestinian lands in 1967, leading to their status as refugees in various parts of the world. Palestinian refugees face obstacles in accessing basic human rights such as education, healthcare, and employment, as well as social and political exclusion in the countries where they have sought refuge. They often live in overcrowded and under-resourced refugee camps, and their status as refugees has been prolonged for generations, making it difficult for them to establish a sense of stability and security. Despite these challenges, Palestinian refugees have shown resilience and determination to preserve their cultural heritage and maintain a connection to their homeland, striving for a just resolution to their displacement and the restoration of their rights.

Definition of Refugee Camps

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), refugee camps are defined as "an area recognized by UNRWA as a camp and established by the Agency in its area of operations to accommodate Palestine refugees and their descendants who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab Israeli conflict." These camps are designed to provide basic services, including food, shelter, and healthcare, to refugees who are unable to access these services due to their displacement from their homeland. UNRWA operates a network of refugee camps in several countries in the region to support the needs of Palestinian refugees.

Cities and Villages

Other two-thirds of Palestinian refugees live in and around towns and villages in the host country, as well as in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, usually around official camps. Although the UNRWA's schools and clinics are located in refugee camps, there are also some of these facilities outside refugee camps. All services provided by the UNRWA are available to refugees, whether they are residing inside or outside refugee camps.

The Suffering of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

The Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon has experienced significant suffering due to their displacement and exclusion from basic rights and services. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2021, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are facing unprecedented hardship amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including limited access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. The ICRC reports that many refugee families are struggling to afford basic necessities such as food and rent, leading to an increase in poverty and debt. Additionally, Palestinian children in Lebanon face barriers to education, as highlighted by Human Rights Watch in 2021. The organization reports that the Lebanese government imposes restrictions on the enrollment of Palestinian children in public schools, leaving many children with limited access to education. These challenges have contributed to the prolonged displacement and insecurity experienced by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The UNRWA was established in 1949 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 to provide direct relief and employment programs to Palestinian refugees. In 1964, the Arab League established the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legal representative of the Palestinian people. The organization settled in Lebanon in 1971. Due to the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1976, the Palestinians became the target of Lebanese right-wing Christian militias, which led to the destruction of three Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Tal al-Zatar refugee camp in particular. Therefore, the Palestinians found themselves stuck in the civil war. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, driving the PLO out of Lebanon, followed by massacres in refugee camps in Lebanon, exacerbating uncertainty and further marginalizing the refugees. To alleviate the increasing suffering of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the PLO has taken many policies and initiatives at the civil, public, and governmental levels.

Among the most significant measures taken by the PLO to address the refugee problem at the official level was the signing of the Cairo Agreement in 1969, which included addressing the social, economic and security dimensions. Furthermore, the Lebanese local popular committees were established in the camps to take care of the needs of the Palestinian population there, in cooperation with the local authorities and under the sovereignty of Lebanon.

In 1987, the Refugee Affairs Department of the PLO was established to deal with refugee issues, take care of their needs and defend their rights in all their places of residence. After the return of the PLO institutions to the homeland of Palestine, including the Refugee Affairs Department in 1996, the department was reactivated as an official Palestinian association specialized in the Palestinian refugees and their affairs.

The Palestinian resistance factions and the PLO sent several messages to enhance the conditions of Palestinian refugees in the camps of Lebanon, the most important of which was the Lebanon Palestinian Declaration of 2008. In 2011, a memorandum issued by the PLO and the Coalition of Palestinian Forces in Lebanon was sent to the Lebanese government, demanding that human, social, and civil rights be granted to Palestinian refugees, according to Irfan, A. (2020). The Lebanese government excluded the Palestinians from the principle of reciprocity justifying that by the absence of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state.

At the level of NGOs and public organizations, the most effective initiatives were the launch of the Right to Work Campaign for Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon in 2005 and the citizens' campaign to defend the social and civil rights of Palestinians in Lebanon. In 2006, the popular committees were restored and revitalized in the various Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Their work was expanded to even include Palestinian communities, given that these communities are in dire need of assistance because UNRWA has not provided them with many services recently. Moreover, the popular committees implement the activities of the Committee for the Employment of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon (CEP).

The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) prepared a working document on the legislation required for the right to work and submitted it to the Lebanese Minister of Labor. UNRWA issued many appeals calling for the improvement of the conditions of refugees in Lebanon, corresponding with the conditions of the host country. In 2017, the Palestinian Return Center submitted a statement to the Human Rights Council addressing human rights violations against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, as cited in Shaml Palestinian Diaspora & Refugee Center, (2022).

At the official Lebanese political level: In 2005, the broken dialogue on the rights of the Palestinians resumed between the Lebanese state and the PLO for the first time since the Beirut office has been closed in 1982. The office was reopened in 2006 and the Lebanese government upgraded the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Beirut to the rank of an embassy in 2008. In 2010, the Lebanese parliament decided to allow Palestinians to work and exempt Palestinians from work permits and reciprocity for social welfare benefits, but excluded them from social services, security benefits, sickness and maternity funds, and family donations.

A document on the "Unified Lebanese Vision for the Palestinian Refugees Affairs in Lebanon" was prepared and submitted to Prime Minister Tammam Salam in 2015. The document called on the refugees to exercise their political freedoms peacefully, and to support the presence of the popular committees in the camps, assuming that they are the official representatives and provide services to the refugees. A governmental committee was also formed in 2019 to investigate the conditions of Palestinians in the wake of Palestinian protests against the actions of the Minister of Labor in Saad Hariri's government.

The best that has been accomplished is the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee that issued a "unified Lebanese vision". The document gives a solid definition and an action framework of resettlement for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, while many other initiatives are classified as temporary and not implemented on the ground, as cited by Badil Center for Refugee and Residency Rights, (2022).

Summary of the Reality of the Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon and its Reflections

The reality of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is one of prolonged displacement and insecurity, with limited access to basic rights and services. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated their situation, with many families struggling to afford basic necessities such as food and rent, and children facing significant barriers to education. This reality reflects the ongoing challenges faced by Palestinian refugees across the region, as they continue to seek recognition of their rights and a just solution to their displacement.

It also highlights the need for continued support and advocacy to address the needs of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and beyond.

- The refugees in the Lebanese camps are suffering from deteriorated living conditions and severe overcrowding because of the doubling of the population of refugees in the same limited area in which they reside since 1948.
- The poverty rate among the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has reached 65%.
- The Palestinian refugee is deprived of many free professions that their work systems are regulated by unions, such as medicine and engineering. Professions in Lebanon can be divided into professions subjected to the principle of reciprocity and professions exclusively specific to Lebanese nationality holders.
- The unemployment rate among youth (15-19 years) rises to 44%, while it is 29% for individuals (20-29 years).
- Palestinian refugees in Lebanon face restrictions on freedom of movement, work, and property, and because they are not official citizens of another country, they are unable to obtain the same rights as foreigners living and working in Lebanon. For example, the new Foreign Ownership Law No. 296 passed in 2005 excluded Palestinians in Lebanon from the right to own property in Lebanon, which is a flagrant violation of basic provisions by which Lebanon is bound by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- About 7.2% of Palestinian refugees (10 years and over) in Lebanon are illiterate; the enrollment rate for individuals (3-13 years) is about 94%, and the lack of UNRWA funding has affected the quality of education in curricula and teaching. Not to mention the overcrowded classrooms and the strain on the infrastructure, some schools operate in the morning and evening shifts and lack basic and supplementary educational equipment and tools such as computers and scientific and medical models.
- The rate of people with higher education reached about 11%, as Palestinian students in Lebanon face a problem in continuing university studies, especially after the PLO stopped granting scholarships in the countries of the former “Soviet Union” and Eastern Europe.
- The phenomenon of politicizing young university refugees who must join a particular party to receive a scholarship.
- The emigration of many Palestinians to Europe, where the number of Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon in 2017 is estimated at only 174,000, due to the migration of most people to Europe. This has led to the dismantling of the social fabric of the camps and a change in the general situation and the demographic composition of the camps’ population.
- The proportion of refugees with chronic diseases is 31%, nearly double the rate in Lebanon.
- Most of the UNRWA clinics lack a diagnostic radiology unit, and the number of referrals to external hospitals is small and disproportionate corresponding to a large number of patients. The Red Crescent clinics also suffer from a lack of financial resources and many medical supplies, and there are no ambulances.
- The presence of nine Palestinian resistance factions’ witness’s disagreements over control of the camps, with some of the camps turning into a ground of conflicts and clashes.

- The camps suffer from the ease of smuggling drugs in large quantities at a low price, and the Palestinian security forces are desperately trying to arrest them and hand them over to the Lebanese security.
- UNRWA suffers from a funding shortfall that has led to cut off its services to the Palestinians in Lebanon, where the Agency suffers from an unprecedented financial crisis and a financial deficit estimated at \$248 million in all areas of its operations.
- The emergence of attempts to overthrow the right of return and the elimination of the Palestinian cause throughout the century and the complicity of regional and Arab parties.

The Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Syria

After the Palestinian Nakba in 1948, most of the Palestine refugees originally from northern Palestine, especially from Safed, Haifa, and Jaffa, sought refuge in Syria. When Israel occupied the area, another 100,000 people, including some Palestinian refugees, fled from the Golan Heights to other parts of Syria, as cited by ShezafJul, H. (2019). In 1982, several thousand more fled from Lebanon to Syria because of the war. Syria has established nine official Palestinian refugee camps: Jaramana, Qabr Essit, Sbeineh, Homs camp, Deraa, Deraa camp (emergency), Khan Al-Shieh, Hama, Khan Danun and Al-Neirab; and three unofficial camps: Yarmouk, Latakia and Ain al-Tal, according to Manna, A. (2022). The number of Palestinian refugees registered with the Syrian UNRWA is about 560,000, and the largest population of them is concentrated in the capital, Damascus, and its countryside (about 80%). Since the beginning of the crisis, the Syrian government has been committed to legitimizing the existence of the Palestinians to guarantee basic labour rights, freedom of residence and freedom of movement, and to fully open the way for their economic integration into Syrian society.

Social, Political, and Cultural Aspects

After the Palestinians sought refuge in Syria for several months, the then President of the Syrian Republic decided to establish the "Palestine and Arab Refugee Agency", which became one of his main tools in organizing the affairs of Palestinian refugees and assisting them in finding suitable jobs, and proposing procedures and conditions for their residency, in the present and future time. After the UN established UNRWA in 1950 to provide relief and work to Palestinian refugees, the Syrian government and UNRWA signed an agreement to coordinate and cooperate with the Palestinian Refugee Administration to carry out work in Syria.

Palestinian refugees in Syria benefit from the legislation issued by the Syrian government that regulates the Palestinian legal presence in Syria. Palestinian refugees in Syria are equal to Syrian citizens in all rights and duties except the right to vote and electoral rights. This enhances the integration of Palestinian refugees into the Syrian labour market and motivates them in many aspects, including the ability to accomplish academic achievements, Akram, S. (2014). UNRWA services are complementary to those provided by the Syrian government. Although the Syrian government assumed responsibility for providing basic facilities in the camps, UNRWA provided many educational, health and social services.

Before the outbreak of internal popular protests in early 2011, which turned into a revolution later, the Palestinian community in Syria was one of the most stable and integrated Palestinian refugee communities in the Arab East host country. For instance, Yarmouk camp has become the largest Palestinian gathering in the diaspora ever, with about a quarter of a million Palestinian citizens within it, including more than 144,000 people registered with UNRWA, according to Schulz, H. L. (2005). As for the real number of the total population mass (Palestinian and Syrian) residing in Yarmouk camp and its well-known administrative borders, it amounts to about one million people, of which only

about 25% are Palestinians, who are concentrated in the centre of the camp or what is called (the camp's core) while that population density, which is predominantly non-Palestinian, resides on its relatively thick crust borders.

This reality has caused social interference between the Palestinian residents of Yarmouk camp and their Syrian neighbours, especially those who live on the outskirts of the camp. This social and geographical overlap has created a kind of intimacy and interaction between everyone and has helped expand and mixed marriages among thousands of young Palestinian men and women who married Syrians. This social interaction also contributed to strengthening the state of national fusion between the Palestinian and Syrian peoples, who gave many of their sons as martyrs while defending the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people in general, according to the Palestinian Return Center, London (2021).

The Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

Jordan hosts more than 2.1 million Palestinian refugees, so the country is considered the highest in terms of the number of Palestinian refugees. This may be due to its proximity to historical Palestine and the integration of the western and eastern shores of the Jordan River simultaneously. Thus, the great focus of the Palestinian presence in Jordan has always opened the appetite of the Israeli occupation and its supporters to present plans to abolish their right to return to Palestine and liquidate their cause as refugees. While most Palestinian refugees in Jordan are entitled to citizenship, this does not negate their inherent rights in Palestine, whether they were forcibly displaced during the Nakba of 1948 or Naksa of 1967, according to the Palestine Right to Return Coalition (2021).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Palestinian refugee crisis remains a significant challenge for the international community, with millions of refugees facing a range of humanitarian, social, and political challenges. Despite international law guaranteeing the rights of refugees, including the right to return to their homes, Palestinian refugees continue to face significant barriers to education, healthcare, and basic human rights. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated their already difficult living conditions. While organizations like the UNRWA and the ICRC have made significant efforts to address the needs of Palestinian refugees, much work remains to be done to ensure their basic human rights and well-being are prioritized. In this context, it is essential that the international community works towards a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian refugee crisis that recognizes their right to return to their homes and provides them with the support and resources they need to rebuild their lives.

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