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Conflict in Syria compounds vulnerability of Palestine refugees

Gavin David White

Palestine refugees in Syria find themselves once more engulfed in a cycle of conflict and displacement that exacerbates their underlying vulnerability and highlights the ongoing need for durable solutions.

Before the outbreak of conflict, Syria was generally seen to afford the best conditions for Palestine refugees among the nations of the Middle East. Palestinians benefited from relative freedoms, including access to social services provided by the government. Nonetheless, development indicators reflect a socioeconomic frailty compared with the wider Syrian population.

Of the 12 long-established Palestine refugee camps in Syria supported by UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), seven of the camps – largely in and around Damascus in the south and Aleppo in the north – are now caught up in the conflict. The vast majority of the some 529,000 Palestine refugees registered in the country have been directly affected by the unfolding violence. Armed clashes and the use of heavy weapons in and around these camps have resulted in extensive damage to homes, schools, health centres and the administrative infrastructure, and scores of Palestine refugees, together with eight UNRWA staff, have lost their lives.

In response, UNRWA is providing cash assistance, food aid, non-food items, water and sanitation services, emergency health and education, shelter and protection for

Palestine refugees, safety and security for UNRWA staff, and emergency repair of existing infrastructure. Seeking to ensure continuity of education for the 67,000 students enrolled in UNRWA's school system in Syria, the Agency has designated alternative safe learning zones including the temporary use of state schools on a second-shift basis; employed distance learning materials; developed virtual classes for its digital television channel; and

integrated students fleeing Syria within its wider school system in neighbouring countries. And with the temporary closure of a number of its 23 primary health-care centres due to their proximity to conflict, UNRWA has established new health points, relocating health services to newly displaced Palestine refugee populations.



Internally displaced Palestine refugees, Jaramana refugee camp, Damascus Governorate, May 2013.

Displaced again

Palestine refugees in Syria have been widely displaced. One of the most serious single incidents occurred in late April 2013 in Ein el Tal Camp in Aleppo, with the forced displacement of all 6,000 camp residents in a single day following months of sporadic armed engagements. The population of Yarmouk Camp in southern Damascus, which once numbered some 160,000, has dwindled to a mere 30,000 inhabitants following mass displacements in December 2012.

A total of 235,000 Palestine refugees are now internally displaced within Syria. Of those, 18,000 have sought refuge in other Palestinian refugee camps that for now afford a greater level of safety. But here, as around the world, UNRWA and other agencies such as UNHCR are not able to provide physical security and are reliant on the state (and other actors) to ensure the security of refugee camps. Homs Camp in central Syria, with an original camp population of 22,000 and now hosting 6,500 Palestinian IDPs from Aleppo, Damascus and the Homs countryside, finds itself on an emerging frontline between government and opposition forces, making further mass displacement likely. Of those displaced beyond Syria's borders, of 93,000 Palestine refugees from Syria who made themselves known to UNRWA in Lebanon, over 45,000 were consistently relying on the Agency's humanitarian services. Meanwhile, some 8,500 individuals have reached Jordan. In addition, around 1,000 Palestine refugees have reached Gaza via Egypt while small numbers have fled as far afield as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

The majority of Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon have sought refuge within one of the 12 existing Palestine camps. Overcrowded, with ageing infrastructure and challenging environmental health issues, these camps and services in them are being stretched beyond capacity, while UNRWA remains chronically under-funded. The new refugees compete for both limited and unsuitable accommodation options, with families of up to ten persons sharing a single room at a monthly cost of US\$200-400. With the start of the 2013-14 academic year, an existing Palestine refugee student population of 32,213 pupils has been joined by over 5,000 additional students from Syria.

Newly arrived Palestine refugees find themselves competing not only with the existing Palestinian population for limited income-generation opportunities but also with some 677,000 newly arrived Syrian refugees. Unlike Syrian citizens, Palestine refugees from Syria do not have the right to

employment in Lebanon, nor do they have the decades-old experience of working as labour migrants, as many Syrian citizens do. With 40% of the Palestine refugee population having been engaged as unskilled labourers in Syria, they also lack transferable skills.

In Jordan, the government's public confirmation, in January 2013, of its decision to close Jordan's borders to Palestinians fleeing violence in Syria has limited the flow of arrivals to some 8,500 individuals. A few thousand Palestinians currently reside within communities in border areas in southern Syria, where conflict is still raging. Their precarious legal status means they face difficulties in relation to civil processes such as registration of births and in access to services, are often unable to work and are left extremely vulnerable to high-risk survival strategies, and are at constant risk of *refoulement*. Palestinians are entitled to equality of treatment and non-discrimination in the application of international law, including protection from *refoulement*. UNRWA continues to engage key stakeholders to intercede with authorities on individual cases and to appeal to the government to provide the same humanitarian consideration it has provided to other refugees and allow them to enter Jordan without discrimination.

This secondary forced displacement of Palestine refugees is a painful reminder of what they have endured for 65 years. While this remains the most protracted of displacement situations, the vulnerability of Palestine refugees within an increasingly unstable Middle East charges the international community more than ever with the duty to ensure their care and protection, and the responsibility to reach a just and durable solution to their plight.

Gavin David White g.white@unrwa.org is External Relations and Communication Officer with UNRWA. www.unrwa.org The views reflected in this article are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the UN, including UNRWA. Palestine refugee figures correct as of 1 September 2013.