

# The forgotten Palestinians: how Palestinian refugees survive in Egypt

by Oroub El Abed

*Some 50,000 Palestinian refugees live in Egypt without UN assistance or protection and burdened by many restrictive laws and regulations. Little is known about their plight and their unique status.*

**P**alestinians fled to Egypt after the wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967. Gazans employed as civil servants when the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian administrative rule and Gazan students in Egypt when it was occupied by Israel in 1967 were also prevented from returning home. Neither group of displaced Palestinians has been protected or

assisted either by UNHCR or by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) - the agency set up to assist Palestinian refugees which began operations in 1950. While UNRWA established relief and assistance projects in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, West Bank and Gaza, Egypt did not allow UNRWA to operate on its territories.

The rise to power of Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1952 ushered in a golden age for Palestinians in Egypt. Palestinians were regarded as equal to Egyptian nationals and were able to access education and other state services and to work without restrictions. However, by the late 1970s the dispersed Palestinian communities in Egypt were increasingly affected by tensions between the Egyptian government and the Palestinian liberation organisation. The Camp David peace agreement and the assassination of Egypt's culture minister by the Palestinian faction headed by Abu Nidal in 1978 proved a turning point. Laws and regulations were amended

to treat Palestinians as foreigners. Rights to free education, employment and residency were rescinded. The state media projected negative images of 'ungrateful' Palestinians and accused them of having brought about their expulsion by their greed and willingness to sell their land to Zionists. As a result, many Egyptians believe that Palestinians are rich, economically powerful and influential and deserve neither sympathy nor assistance.

### Palestinian rights in Egypt since 1978

University education, free for Palestinians under Nasser, now has to be paid for in foreign currency. Even those Palestinians entitled to exemption from paying 90% of the fees charged to foreign students are often unable to raise the remainder. Some Palestinians report forging birth certificates to indicate they are Egyptian in order to get free education. Others have initially paid the minimum fees that Egyptians pay, promising to pay the remaining foreign fees after graduation. Often they are unable to do so and are thus denied official accreditation.

Due to their educational qualifications Egypt-based Palestinians were able to secure well-paid employment in the Gulf in the 1960s and 1970s. Palestinians were known as highly educated professionals and worked in medicine, commerce, engineering, teaching and management. Those who began professional careers prior to 1978 have been able to keep their posts. However, education restrictions

### Young women have given up hope for an education

mean they have not been joined by younger Palestinians. Many adolescent Palestinians have dropped out of school. Aware of the constraints on their livelihoods, many young men only aspire to learning a vocational skill or owning a shop. Young women have given up hope for an education and resign themselves to household duties and child-rearing. Public sympathy for Palestinians as a result of new hardships suffered since the outbreak of the current Al Aqsa *intifada* has recently led to the education authorities allowing Palestinian students to attend government schools

without paying fees. This has assisted a few but has done little to make up for the lack of education over the years.

The private sector requires skills which, without education, Palestinians are unable to obtain. Private employers are required to obtain work permits for Palestinians and regulations restrict the number of 'foreigners' in any company to 10%. Palestinians are thus forced to work as truck or taxi drivers, unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, bicycle-repairers, street vendors of used clothing or itinerant 'suitcase merchants' carrying items from governorate to governorate.

A minority of Palestinians are more fortunate. Employees of the PLO and former Egyptian civil servants are assured a regular income and have been able to send their children to public schools and are exempted from paying university fees.

Palestinians are also affected by:

- the risk of health emergencies: while basic health services for Palestinians in Egypt are satisfactory, most fear inability to pay for unexpected and costly medical operations and prolonged medication.
- a 1976 law restricting foreigners from owning buildings and lands and a 1988 limiting ownership of agricultural land to Egyptians
- strict residency requirements: renewal of permits is conditional on paying a fee and proving a reason to remain in Egypt - even though none of them can go back to Palestine. Palestinians unable to provide evidence of educational enrolment, a work permit, marriage to an Egyptian, a business relationship with an Egyptian or a bank balance of \$5,000 are at risk of jail or deportation.
- tight travel restrictions: if Palestinians spend more than six months out of Egypt their residency may be revoked. Those who need to reside abroad for one year are required to apply for a one-year return visa which is invalidated if the holder does not return to Egypt before its expiry. Many Egyptian-born Palestinians are stranded in Arab states, living illegally and unable to return to Egypt. In 2001-2002 a student who

had studied in Russia spent 14 months shuffling between Moscow and Cairo airports before UNHCR managed to secure asylum in Sweden.

### Who protects the rights of Palestinians in Egypt?

In theory, UNHCR has a mandate to protect Palestinians living outside the five UNRWA areas of operation. However, Arab politicians have hampered UNHCR's ability to provide protection. Arab states have argued that as the UN is responsible for Palestinian expulsion - the General Assembly Resolution 181 in 1947 approved the Partition Plan for Palestine - the UN has therefore an ongoing responsibility to develop mechanisms for repatriation and compensation. Allowing Palestinians to be protected by UNHCR would prejudice their case by encouraging third-country resettlement.

Palestinians have been excluded from the protection of UNHCR, based on the fact that they receive assistance from UNRWA - regardless of the fact that only those who live within its five areas of operation are assisted. Only in September 2002 did UNHCR reinterpret Article 1D of the 1951 Refugee Convention in order to emphasise that Palestinian refugees are *ipso facto* refugees and are to be protected by UNHCR if the assistance or protection of the other UN body ceases. In light of this, it has included those Palestinians not living in the countries of UNRWA field operations within UNHCR's protection mandate. In practice, however, UNHCR is still not doing much for Palestinians who do not come under the UNRWA mandate.

### Conclusion

Egypt is a signatory to the 1965 Casablanca Protocol<sup>1</sup> and has ratified its articles designed to give Palestinians rights to residency, work and travel while emphasising the importance of preserving Palestinian nationality and maintaining refugee status. In 1981 Egypt additionally signed the 1951 UN Convention. In practice, neither document has been implemented. Egypt's shifting policies towards its Palestinians have led to a gradual erosion of their rights. Regulations have marginalised Palestinians and reduced them to the

status of foreigners denied access to international bodies able to voice their needs. All the legal instruments of the UN and the Arab League have failed to protect the basic human rights of Palestinians, not only in Palestine but also in exile. If Egypt, and other Arab states, are to sincerely support the Palestinian refugee cause they must provide rights and access to services until such time as Palestinians are able to return.

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*Research Centre ([www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca)). It is adapted from a forthcoming book 'Palestinians in Egypt: analysis of survival and livelihoods strategies'. For further information, contact the author: [oroub@yahoo.com](mailto:oroub@yahoo.com)*

1. For more information on the Casablanca Protocol and residency rights of Palestinians in Egypt and other Arab states, see : [www.badil.org/Protection/Documents/Arab\\_States/Casablanca\\_Protocol.htm](http://www.badil.org/Protection/Documents/Arab_States/Casablanca_Protocol.htm) and [www.shaml.org/publications/monos/mono1.htm](http://www.shaml.org/publications/monos/mono1.htm)