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The vulnerability of Palestinian refugees from Syria

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While Syrian nationals may eventually return to their home country, the future for Palestinians from Syria is increasingly uncertain. Meanwhile they are more vulnerable, and treated worse, than most other refugees from the Syrian conflict.

Some 270,000 – over half – of Syria’s Palestinian population have been displaced either internally or outside the country. Although the conflict has affected all people from Syria regardless of their religion or ethnicity, the dire consequences of the Syrian conflict have highlighted the inherent vulnerability of Palestinians.

Those who fled to Lebanon or Jordan have found little support and cannot return to Syria since two-thirds of the Palestinian refugee camps have been destroyed or are caught up in the conflict. Syria’s capacity to absorb Palestine refugees in the first place stemmed from favourable economic conditions at the time and the relatively small numbers that sought refuge in the country over 60 years ago. However, Syrian economic losses for the year 2012 amounted to 81.7% of the country’s 2010 GDP, with unemployment rising from 10.6 to 34.9%. The current economic situation is extremely detrimental to Palestinians and even if they are able to return to Syria they are likely to face limited work opportunities and discrimination.

Being chronically underfunded, UNRWA (the UN agency mandated to assist Palestine refugees) has been unable to provide for their basic needs in Jordan and Lebanon. The proportion of Palestine refugees in Syria requiring assistance from UNRWA has increased dramatically from 6% prior to the conflict to currently over 90%. The once partial independence of the Palestinian community in Syria has now crumbled, leaving them largely dependent on UNRWA and funding from the international community. UNRWA’s mandate, being limited to relief and works programmes, does not allow for undertaking protection activities.

The vulnerability of Palestinians within the Syrian conflict is exacerbated by the obstacles they face when attempting to flee the country. Since the beginning of the conflict, over 70,000 Palestinians have fled to neighbouring countries including Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and Iraq where they are being singled out for increasing restrictions on access to asylum and have become the target of growing hostility within the host countries and communities. Instances of discriminatory treatment, indefinite detention, border closures, detention of minors, violence, xenophobic attitudes and *refoulement* characterise the current treatment of Palestinians from Syria in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt as these countries continue to violate their obligations under international law.

In Jordan, the border has been closed to Palestinians from Syria while it remains partially open to Syrian refugees. Those Palestinians who do enter, or who entered early on in the conflict, are subject to arbitrary detention and *refoulement*. In Lebanon, Palestinians from Syria are prevented from working in many professions, and have to apply for a work visa through a different and much more expensive procedure than Syrian refugees. The difference between the treatment of Syrian refugees and Palestinians from Syria in Egypt is clear too, with Syrians able to register with UNHCR and thereby benefit from third country resettlement, health care and other assistance. The Government of Egypt has barred UNHCR from registering Palestinians from Syria, who therefore receive little to no help, despite fleeing from the same conflict.

For Syrian refugees, a possibility exists that in the future they will be able to return

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to their country, yet the return of the Palestinian community to Syria is much more complex. The Syrian conflict has caused a rapid deterioration of the material condition of the Palestinian community in Syria which faces additional threats in post-conflict Syria in respect of the possible ability to reintegrate back into society.

Throughout the conflict, schools, health facilities and community centres for Palestinians have been attacked and destroyed both in camp and non-camp settings. The perceived 'heart and soul' of the Palestinian community in Syria, Yarmouk refugee camp, which hosted over 150,000 Palestinians prior to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, has dwindled to a mere 18,000 people and has been targeted by both regime and

opposition forces. Humanitarian aid had been prevented from entering the camp resulting in 128 deaths from starvation, according to Amnesty International.¹ Despite the reaching of a ceasefire in January 2014, the return of the army to Yarmouk in March once again halted the distribution of aid. As central to the political and commercial life of the Palestinian community in Syria, its demise is representative of the future difficulties of Palestinians in resuming the life they once led in Syria.

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1. www.amnesty.org/en/news/syria-yarmouk-under-siege-horror-story-war-crimes-starvation-and-death-2014-03-10