The vulnerability of Palestinian refugees from Syria

Leah Morrison

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
The mental health of Syrian refugee children and adolescents

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Mental health services can be key to restoring basic psychological functioning and to supporting resilience and positive coping strategies for children, adolescents and adults.

The men, women and children fleeing Syria have commonly been subjected to and/or witnessed torture, kidnappings and massacres. They have been victimised by rape and other forms of sexual violence. Their homes and neighbourhoods have been destroyed. They have been targeted – and seen people killed – by bombs and snipers. They have suffered physical injuries resulting in chronic disability, and had loved ones killed or disappeared.

An assessment of the mental health and psychosocial needs of displaced Syrians in Jordan revealed persistent fear, anger, lack of interest in activities, hopelessness and problems with basic functioning. Of the almost 8,000 individuals who participated in the assessment, 15.1% reported feeling so afraid and 28.4% feeling so angry that nothing could calm them down; 26.3% felt “so hopeless they did not want to carry on living”; and 18.8% felt “unable to carry out essential activities for daily living because of feelings of fear, anger, fatigue, disinterest, hopelessness or upset”.¹

Many Syrian adults report that the well-being and future potential of their children constitute their greatest source of stress; in light of this, mental health services targeting children are a priority for the community as a whole.

Many adults worry constantly about their children and the impact of the horrors they have experienced. One describes his daughters as “psychologically very affected” by the war – anxious, scared and unable to believe anywhere is safe.² Children asked to draw a ‘safe place’ from their pasts in counselling groups are sometimes