

Refugee-led humanitarianism in Lebanon's Shatila camp

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Refugee-led humanitarian initiatives by 'established' Palestinian refugees in response to the arrival of 'new' displaced Syrians to Shatila camp raise key questions about the limitations of the humanitarian system and representations of refugees as passive victims.

Shatila camp, covering less than a square mile on the southern borders of Beirut, is one of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon that was established in 1949, for merely 3,000 people. Today, the camp occupies the same limited space but has around 40,000 residents. While poverty, overcrowded shelters and poor health conditions plague Shatila, the camp has become a space of refuge for new refugees from Syria since 2011. This emergence as a space of refuge for displaced Syrians was facilitated by pre-existing bonds and family relationships between the Syrian refugees – including Palestinian refugees from Syria – and Palestinian refugees from Lebanon already living in Shatila. As a result, the population of Shatila is estimated to have increased more than twofold since the conflict in Syria began. Refugee-led humanitarian responses to the Syrian refugees that arrived at Shatila camp are largely undocumented, yet such initiatives have offered key and palpable forms of support, solidarity and hospitality, in an example of what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh refers to as 'refugee-refugee humanitarianism'.¹

In spite of poverty, scarce resources and poor services, established Palestinian refugees – those already living in the camp – have used formal and informal resources to provide the new arrivals from Syria with material and non-material support during the initial stages of their arrival. Through informal networks, numerous Palestinian refugees hosted Syrian families in their homes for months, providing them with physical and moral support. More formally, mosques have also been used for housing the new refugees and to host days of solidarity with Syrians, where Palestinian refugees would donate extra clothes, mattresses, blankets and other resources.

Different classifications of Palestinians fall under different international mandates. Palestine refugees, who are "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict" (including the descendants of Palestine refugee males, plus their adopted children), fall within the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).² 'Established' refugees in Shatila come under UNRWA's mandate as they are formerly Palestine refugees (now referred to as Palestinian refugees from Lebanon). UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, offers its services to anyone who meets the definition of a refugee according to the 1951 Geneva Convention – which includes Syrians (excluding Palestinians). This separation not only produces a legal and social protection gap between Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Shatila but also has an impact on the relationship and power imbalances between the 'new' and 'established' refugees within the camp.

According to Majdi Adam, a Palestinian social activist and captain of Shatila's Palestine Sports Club, Palestinian refugees from Syria have been witnessed in the distribution centres for Syrians calling out for aid for themselves, asking, "We are refugees too – why is the aid only for Syrians?"³ Majdi told us that Palestinian refugees began using their own initiative to combat this unreasonable separation. One refugee had told him: "We started our own initiatives while working with the NGOs that only help the Syrians. For example, we would register the Syrian refugees on

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paper as required but then, at night, we would also provide the Palestinian refugees from Syria with what they needed."

The established refugee community is also critical of how the limited resources are distributed. For instance, Majdi told us that the aid agencies provide every family with the same amount of supplies, regardless of how many children they have. Established refugees that work with these organisations have used their own initiative in order to fill this gap. "For the families that have many children, we would tell them to come back at night and we would furnish them with more blankets and resources to fulfil their needs," Majdi explained. Such refugee-led initiatives reposition Palestinian refugees as providers of support rather than dependent recipients. Most importantly, such experiences demonstrate the refugees' perspectives on the shortcomings of the humanitarian response and show how refugee-refugee solidarity can help fill these gaps. As one of the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon working with UNRWA put it, "As Palestinian refugees, we know how it feels not to have anywhere safe to go or not to be welcomed. Our human, ethical and national responsibility is to offer them whatever we possibly can and to at least welcome them."

The sustainability of welcome

It is important, however, not to fall into the trap of romanticising this form of refugee-refugee humanitarianism. There has been a gradual development from hospitality to hostility and tension over the seven years since the Syrians' arrival. The established Palestinian refugees stated that when they realised that the Syrian conflict would extend longer than a year, their relationship with the Syrians in the camp started to change. Interviewees described the increasing pressure of hosting Syrian refugees over the last seven years as inevitable, considering the shortage of resources and poor living conditions that already existed in the camp.

The tension has mostly been felt around schools, jobs and access to health care. The schools have merged classes of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon and Syria, and

the classes have become overcrowded. Accessing health care takes significantly longer than it used to, and the informal job sector has become more competitive. A Palestinian refugee from Lebanon protested, "For someone like me, whose job is to paint walls, I ask a salary of US\$40 per day, while a Syrian accepts \$20."

As UNRWA has been forced by lack of funds to apply austerity measures over the last few years, a decline in services has been evident. In fact, UNRWA's average annual spend per refugee has dropped from about \$200 in 1975 to around \$110 today. Moreover, while UNHCR seeks durable solutions such as resettlement for the registered Syrian refugees, UNRWA does not offer equivalent opportunities to the Palestinian refugees from Syria or Lebanon under its mandate as this may mean them losing their right of return. On the other hand, since Lebanese labour law forbids Palestinian refugees from Lebanon and from Syria to work in 36 occupations (which include medicine, farming and public transportation) and due to the limited legal status of Syrians in Lebanon, both refugee populations are forced to compete in the informal sector. In effect, policies and international regimes contribute significantly to the negative impacts refugees have felt in an overcrowded and under-resourced space – and so hinder the sustainability of refugee-refugee humanitarianism.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that some refugees also felt positive impacts. When established Palestinian refugees were asked if their social life had changed after the arrival of the new refugees, all were positive. For Majdi, their arrival provided him with the incentive to become socially active: "[It] has made us remember our own displacement as Palestinian refugees. This motivated me to provide double the energy that I had for social work. We started welcoming and encouraging Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria to join the [sports] club to help them forget their sufferings and integrate with the community." Two Syrian refugees reflected, "When we first arrived here, we felt very uncomfortable and shy, just like strangers – so we always preferred to hang out with

Syrians alone. But today, we feel like we have integrated into the camp and the work life. Nowadays, if you walk on the streets, you will not notice a difference between a Syrian and a Palestinian in the camp.”

Considering the lack of resources, physical space and rights that the refugees endure in Shatila, the shift from hospitality to hostility may be perceived as inevitable. This generalisation does not, however, do justice to the key hindrances to refugee-refugee solidarity, which are largely driven by unjust government policies and an imbalanced humanitarian programme that offers differentiated treatment based on nationality. In order to build development-based approaches that could sustain refugee-refugee humanitarianism and limit the marginalisation of the established Palestinian refugees, it is important to re-evaluate the

effectiveness of current programmes by taking into consideration the refugees’ own perspectives and empowering them as stakeholders in their own futures.

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1. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh E (2016) ‘Representations of Displacement in the Middle East,’ *Public Culture* 28(3)
<http://bit.ly/F-Qasmiyeh-Public-Culture-2016>
See also Fiddian-Qasmiyeh E (2016) ‘Refugees hosting refugees’, *Forced Migration Review* 53
www.fmreview.org/community-protection/fiddianqasmiyeh
2. www.unrwa.org/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions
3. This article is based on interviews conducted with Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Shatila camp in Lebanon and with UNRWA staff members, carried out between April and May 2017. A longer version of this article is available as part of the 2017 report *Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Between Resilience and Vulnerability*, published by the University of Saint Joseph in Beirut
<http://bit.ly/ISP-Syrians-resilience-2017>