



Human Development Center

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THE HUMANITARIAN AND LEGAL STATUS OF DISPLACED PALESTINIANS FROM SYRIA AND



Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon

Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) began trickling into Lebanon shortly after the onset of the Syrian crisis in March 2011. Their numbers, however, only dramatically increased in the second half of 2012, as the crisis intensified.

Slightly over half of PRS who currently reside in Lebanon entered the country in 2013, with the largest proportion arriving during the first three months of that year.



In August 2013, the first set of restrictions on access into Lebanon were introduced and therefore as of May 2014, PRS entry into Lebanon was curtailed. Their numbers have not increased since then.



Vulnerability assessment findings on (PRS) conducted in summer of 2014 and published in October 2015 by (UNRWA) in collaboration with American University of Beirut were as follows:

- Around 60% share a household with one or more other families.
- Almost one third of PRS families (29.66%) are headed by women; with the largest proportion of female-headed families resides outside camps in Beqaa (33.05%)
- With the exception of PRS who live inside camps in the North, the proportion of individuals who paid the fees of 200 US\$ to renew their residency is less than 10% in all regions regardless of whether they live inside or outside camps. Thus, by the end of June 2015, the overwhelming majority (85.7%) of PRS living in Lebanon will have no valid legal residency.
- A large proportion of PRS families experience severe vulnerability in the health and protection sectors (18.8% and 24.3%, respectively).
- A considerable proportion of PRS families (15.8%) are classified into the moderate overall vulnerability category. As reductions or cuts in assistance can push a refugee family from moderate to severe vulnerability
- A larger proportion of families headed by a woman or a widow experience severe vulnerability in protection compared to other families.

This new displacement as a result of the conflict in Syria has stripped Palestinian refugees of the social protection, they had cultivated since they fled to Syria in 1948. In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees encountered discrimination, whether from the government or the Lebanese society.



The government announced its inability to provide any aid, and some of its members also called for closing the borders, as Jordan and Iraq have done. Others dismissed the worsening security conditions of Palestinians in Lebanon under the pretext of fearing their permanent settlement.



The Lebanese government, as a result, did not provide places of refuge for displaced families, which forced them to live in the camps. This posed an extra burden on host communities due to the crowded population density and the lack of provision of basic health necessities.



UNRWA was, and still is, unable to provide protection or even humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees from Syria. Firstly, UNRWA argued that the allotted services to Palestinians in Lebanon, which have a specific budget, were already deficient and could not bear any additional burden..



Moreover, the assistance to Palestinians within Syria had been given priority, given the danger of areas of confrontation, the deficient budget had been redirected to provide for the enormous exigencies of internal displacement



The budget could not be used to support the refugees in Lebanon, since the existing budget for those within Syria had become more urgent. Displacement of Palestinians within Syria reached 235,000 refugees in 2013, according to an estimate put out by UNRWA in May of that year.



Finally, UNRWA claims that it issued several calls for funding its budget, but the incoming funds were funneled towards Syrians, and UNRWA did not receive but small amounts, which had already been distributed amongst the refugees over a protracted period of time.



UNRWA issued several statements saying it would grant the Palestinian refugees from Syria the same treatment given to the Palestinians in Lebanon..



These reports did not take into account that most of the Palestinians in Lebanon struggle daily and call upon UNRWA to grant them the most basic levels of treatment and hospitalization



It also ignored the meager health capabilities of UNRWA's clinics, the lack of even the most basic treatments; the fact that hundreds of Palestinian families from Syria were forced to beg for treatment at the doors of public and private hospitals, to no avail; and the decreasing capabilities of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society's hospitals as well.

In terms of education, UNRWA reports indicated that about 6,000 students joined UNRWA schools. In addition, over 900 children attended transitional programs specified for them, in order to guarantee that they are properly acclimated and can continue their education.



However, the larger portion of Palestinian refugee students, estimated to be approximately 11,000, was not taken into account.



These students have no access to education. In addition, UNRWA was unable to provide enough instructors, due to the difference in curricula between Syria and Lebanon.



Lack of leadership



The inability to anticipate the possibility of a Palestinian exodus from Syria also had an impact on how the Palestinian leadership handled this crisis. The conditions in which Palestinians lived in Syria and the favorable state policies made the current situation unthinkable and caused the lack of preparation for assisting these massive waves of refugees.



The greatest gaps in the performance of the Palestinian social and political bodies can be felt in Lebanon, in the way they dealt with the case of Palestinian refugees coming from Syria:

- Lack of preparation and sufficiently comprehensive emergency plans by factions, popular institutions, civil society institutions, or social groups.
- No coordination of NGOs in the field of humanitarian aid, which increased in the prevailing exclusionary culture as a result of political divisions.
- Slow pace in dealing with Palestinian refugees from Syria, resulting from a short-term political vision that saw crisis will take a matter of days.
- Unpreparedness of UNRWA and its inability to aid the refugees.
- Refusal of the Lebanese government to take responsibility for the refugees, which has shifted to UNRWA, coupled with the silence of other political and social organizations.
- Slowness of the Palestinian leadership (the PLO, the PA, the political factions, etc.) in dealing with the issue of aid seriously, shifting the responsibility towards UNRWA.
- Lack of a body in charge of organizing wealthy Palestinians outside of Lebanon and Syria, so that they may play their role in systematically aiding the refugees.

The Legal Status of the Palestinians Displaced from Syria to Lebanon

The point of entry into Lebanon was subjected to strict bureaucratic measures ever since Palestinians began to come in from Syria. In addition to having to provide travel documents issued by the Syrian authorities, the refugees also had to pay fees for entry reaching \$17, which only provided the right to stay in the country for one week. For a three-month extension additional fees were required.



These fees are very costly, especially when compared to the fees paid by the Syrian citizens traveling to Lebanon. Nonetheless, waivers were included in these fees as a result of repeated request from the leadership of the Palestinian factions. The identity cards and travel documents issued by the Syrian authorities for Palestinian refugees remain the first condition for legal flight across Syrian-Lebanese borders.



The agreement between both countries allows the holder of these documents to pass, including the fee requirements and an adherence to the agreed-upon period, but most refugees never requested for such documents to be issued, which prevented many of them from even thinking of fleeing to Lebanon.



Palestinians do not enjoy the same level of protection as Syrian citizens. The UNHCR diverted the responsibility over Palestinian refugees from Syria to UNRWA, since it is the official international body responsible for assisting Palestinian refugees



Recommendations

- Secure displaced Palestinians from Syria with legal international protection and take into account the situation of emergency and security risks that surrounds them.
- Cancel all decisions and policies that discriminate against Palestinians displaced from Syria to Lebanon.
- It is necessary to find a mechanism or to create a database and share information among all bodies, local committees and regional organisms for relief of Palestinian refugees from Syria.
- There is also a need to coordinate the relief operations on the basis of equitable distribution and integration of disciplines, in addition to monitoring the quality of the materials distributed.
- Finally, a strategy must be devised to involve embassies, international aid organizations, human rights and charities, and to coordinate all efforts to provide for the needed support.

This would include customizing programs to address the social, educational and work-related problems. It would also involve activating the role of unions to contribute in providing medical services to refugees in cooperation with existing institutions like UNRWA or the Red Crescent Society.