

Conference Paper

60 Years of Partnership for Palestinian Rights: UNRWA and Palestine Refugees

By John Ging, Director of UNRWA Operations, Gaza

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Palestinians share an experience most peoples of the world are shielded from, and fortunately so: over sixty years of exile and dispossession. Very few non-Palestinians witness and learn first-hand about the effects and living memory of this experience. It is perhaps for this reason that so many of us appear to fail to comprehend the magnitude and poignancy of the Palestinian refugee existence and thus fall short in targeted action to rectify its associated and ongoing injustice.

We have passed the 60-year mark since the Palestinian nakba, yet the question of Palestine refugees remains unsolved. More than 4.7 million registered refugees continue to live in conditions collectively characterised by uncertainty, injustice and insecurity. From the perspective of the grassroots – for those millions of refugees who live under testing conditions in the Middle East region and beyond – this translates into an acute lack of predictability, persistent denial of human rights, and fears about the future.

The Palestinian plight is unique among refugees the world over. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines protracted refugee situations as those comprising refugee populations of 25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five years or more. Against this measure, Palestinian refugees into their fourth generation prove a point of which we should all be ashamed. Inherently vulnerable by nature of their predicament, Palestine refugees have become synonymous with relentless suffering and collective international failure.

Only by recognition and implementation of measures towards the realisation of Palestinian self-determination will it be possible for prevailing sentiments to truly give way to those of dignity, freedom and hope. Through its humanitarian, human development and protection work, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is dedicated to supporting Palestine refugees on the long road towards greater awareness of themselves as a community and of them by the outside world, acknowledgement of the injustices perpetrated against them and efforts to end their plight.

UNRWA was established in the wake of the 1948 War to provide relief to the more than 700,000 Palestinians who had fled or been forcibly expelled from their homes in British Mandate Palestine. As agreed in the United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949, the Agency was mandated to carry out relief and works programmes in support of Palestine refugees until rendered obsolete through a just and sustainable solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. UNRWA has sought, from the early days of operations in May 1950, to ensure adequate access to basic services and assistance in line with universal principles and rights as enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The scale of UNRWA operations makes it the largest humanitarian and human development agency in the Middle East. Sixty years on, UNRWA maintains services in the areas of education, health, relief, microfinance and camp development for the assistance and protection of Palestine refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank and Gaza. More than half a million students are currently educated in UNRWA schools each day, some 10 million patients visit UNRWA health clinics each year, and

there are hundreds of thousands of individuals who receive from the Agency the basic items necessary to survive or to pursue their entrepreneurial dream. Out of a total of 4.7 million registered refugees, 1.4 million live in 58 recognised refugee camps throughout the region.

Any discussion of the role of UNRWA should be firmly grounded in the international community's well-established framework of instruments, principles and practice for protecting refugees. While UNRWA may appear unique in its mandate and direct service delivery, the organisation complements and, in certain respects, mirrors the role and activities of UNHCR. Similar to UNHCR, UNRWA has an obligation to assist and protect. Whereas UNHCR undertakes work for refugees worldwide, UNRWA's role is confined to its areas of operations.

Precisely like other United Nations agencies, UNRWA operates according to global norms of international responsibility. Only a durable solution to the Palestine refugee problem will put an end to their statelessness and dispossession and thus remove the need for UNRWA's existence. The option for Palestine refugees – as is the case in other refugee situations – is the informed and agreed choice between three durable solutions: repatriation, host country integration, or third country resettlement. Deep politicisation of the Palestine refugee issue and its prescribed role as an almost unmentionable obstacle in the context of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict must not, whether through rhetoric or practice, disqualify the millions of refugees from their rights or preclude their opportunity to fulfil the refugee cycle of flight, exile and solution.

Similar to refugee populations elsewhere, the pain of dispossession and the longing for justice remain part of everyday life for Palestine refugees. Collective memory of Palestine and the nakba unify the community despite decades of separation. Beyond the collective emotional connection, the refugees share certain characteristics, the most salient of which is fundamental vulnerability. Notable, however, is the fact that years of exile have erased past and major differences between refugee and non-refugee populations in Syria, Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory. The two-thirds of refugees who live outside refugee camp areas speak to this trend. And while differences may arise in terms of higher unemployment and lower socio-economic status, other indicators – in health and education – are testament not only to the relative success of UNRWA's programmes over sixty years, but also to the constant drive by refugees themselves to improve their condition and prepare for a different future.

Contrary to an often repeated myth, the refugees have not been passive, aid-dependent recipients of international largesse. Palestine refugees have traditionally placed great value on education, the result of which has been found in contexts as disparate as European university campuses and the Gulf public sector. Since its inception, the Agency has educated more than 4 million children in elementary and preparatory facilities. In the early years, UNRWA responded to community requests to make greater investment in education, thus steering the Agency away from a purely humanitarian mission. With the support of refugees, UNRWA's education programme in the 1950s was groundbreaking in its pursuit of equal access for boys and girls. In this area, as in so many others, the refugee community seized the opportunity to prove their commitment to universal values, productive livelihoods and compassion. Today, the vast majority of UNRWA's 30,000 staff are teachers who tirelessly serve the needs of fellow refugees.

From the time of the nakba, Palestine refugees have either actively pursued, or been forced to assume different roles under ever-changing circumstances. Now, after decades in exile, the Palestine refugee condition appears complex and challenged across the Middle East. In Jordan and Syria, poverty and an incessant undercurrent of vulnerability remain characteristic of refugee existence. In the West Bank, Palestinians are fenced in, have their lands expropriated, and live with the constant threat of further constriction of their physical living space. For refugees in the Gaza Strip, years of forced, man-made decline have culminated in a blockade that threatens to undo the fabric of society. And in Lebanon, Palestine refugees are restricted as much by history and perceptions as by the limitations that severely impinge on their freedom.

While the passage of time has brought positive change to the refugee communities living in Jordan and Syria, the pictures emerging from Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory are filled with recurring conflict, frustration and despair. Compared to Palestine refugees elsewhere, those who reside in Jordan and Syria enjoy the broadest range of basic rights and freedoms. In these countries, Palestine refugees are able to take greater charge of their own destiny through access to employment and quasi-citizenship. As conditions of relative stability have prevailed, Palestine refugees have been allowed to build their lives with UNRWA assistance – the latter constrained by funds rather than external factors and events.

Ravaged by civil war, Israeli occupation and repeated military operations, the case of Lebanon stands out as markedly different and measurably more difficult. The long and bloody civil war tarnished the image of Palestine refugees and continues to haunt a community desperate to improve their condition. Parallel to Lebanese rapprochement in the 1990s, progressive isolation of the Palestinians took place. Palestine refugees in Lebanon continue to be denied a defined legal status, have limited access to basic services such as medical care and social benefits, and are barred from entering 20 core professions including law, medicine and engineering. Marginalised, deprived and fragmented, the Palestine refugee community in Lebanon has witnessed recent flashes of violence – a contemporary reality devastatingly evident through the Nahr al-Bared conflict in 2007, when the refugee camp suffered complete destruction and all its 27,000 residents were forced to flee. Although constrained by circumstances beyond UNRWA's control – whether government-imposed restrictions or growing frustration – the Agency remains committed to its duties and will spare no effort to rebuild Nahr al-Bared. However, genuine freedom will stay elusive for the country's Palestine refugees until and unless there is political will to fundamentally alter their condition.

Beyond the bleakness of Palestine refugee existence in Lebanon, the prevailing situation in the occupied Palestinian territory presents perhaps the greatest challenges to the Agency and refugees alike. Dictated by external policy decisions over which they bear no control, ordinary people across the occupied Palestinian territory are forced into poverty and dependency on humanitarian assistance. In the West Bank, a patchwork of checkpoints and roadblocks, a snaking barrier and settler roads carve up the landscape of what was once contiguous land occupied by Israel in 1967. Simple journeys have become impossible. Entire communities have been cut off from ancestral lands and traditional sources of water; health clinics; schools; family and friends; and, most important for some, the West Bank barrier or wall cuts them off from the Holy Sites of Jerusalem. Territorial, economic and social fragmentation and segregation have given rise to food insecurity, unemployment and isolation. In response to the changing circumstances, UNRWA has been forced to shift its priorities: against increasing humanitarian demands for food provision, job creation and emergency health services, the human development challenge becomes ever more difficult.

Gaza provides ample evidence of the Agency's ability to cope and respond in times of crisis. Decades of Israeli occupation, the ebb and flow of two intifadas, repeated large-scale Israeli military operations, and the blockade now in its third year have turned the Gaza Strip into a challenge for long-term planning and service delivery. New realities – whether brought on by conflict or prospects of peace – have forced UNRWA to adapt in approach, emphasis and material assistance on the ground. The physical isolation of 1.5 million people since June 2007 is tragic, illegal and counter-productive, to use the words of the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon. It also carries serious consequences, not least for the hundreds of thousands of Palestine refugees who are now classified as abject poor, the tens of thousands who have lost their jobs and the 750,000 children whose values and mindsets are moulded by the daily experience of blockade and isolation. While prevented by the blockade from undertaking reconstruction and recovery activities, UNRWA seeks to counter the deleterious impact of collective punishment on the 1.1 million strong refugee community. The Agency has risen to the challenge, as in decades past, but only a just and sustainable solution for the occupied Palestinian territory, including its large refugee population is likely to temper the product of current policies in the long-term.

Six decades of service for Palestine refugees have undoubtedly seen both continuity and change. Despite conflict, violence, upheaval and chronic underfunding the Agency has attempted to balance the components of humanitarian assistance, human development and protection under its mandate. For generations, UNRWA's programmes of assistance have helped prepare millions of Palestine refugees for a better future. The education of several million children has been central to this aim and underlines the mistaken perception of the Agency as part of the problem rather than the solution.

Respect for the stateless and dispossessed in accordance with international principles should inform any assessment of the role and continued need for UNRWA in the Middle East. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has drawn the attention of world powers for decades, surprisingly little has been done to highlight the rights of Palestine refugees and our collective responsibility to uphold those rights. Identified and categorised as a final status issue, the plight of Palestine refugees has suffered the same fate as other core issues left in the opaque realm of a peace process gone astray. As all Palestine refugees remain acutely aware, public pronouncements of the importance of solving the issue have yet to translate into true and tangible commitment to achieving positive and lasting change.

UNRWA was never intended to survive for sixty years. Established by its genitors as a temporary body at a time when Europe was reeling from the experience of the Second World War, the Agency fulfilled a role collectively desired as a means to provide assistance and relative stability amongst a traumatised population. Responsibility for the failure to reach a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem undoubtedly lingers in political corners. For its part, the Agency has been and will continue to be in the forefront of efforts to shape a better future for all Palestine refugees regardless of the political agenda of the day. Our aim is identical to that of the community whom we serve: a solution to the plight of Palestine refugees for the sake of justice, peace and security. Set against this backdrop, UNRWA will remind us of our collective political failure and its consequences, but most importantly continue to represent a beacon of hope.