

Conference Paper

Predicament of a Different Order: Palestine Refugees under Occupation

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Refugees under occupation. Nowhere else in the world are these three words combined to describe the living reality of nearly two million people. But for Palestine refugees in the occupied Palestinian territory, these words have for more than 40 years captured the essence of a doubly deprived existence caught in a political impasse, denied basic human rights, and largely removed from the international agenda except irregular and elusive references to final status issues in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a peace process long derailed.

The Palestinian plight speaks to us and demands our attention: through the elderly woman, waiting patiently to receive her basic food ration; the young men and women barred from higher education abroad for want of a respected travel document; and the hundreds of thousands of bright and eager children learning about our shared international human rights framework and principles in United Nations-run schools. The largest and longest-standing refugee problem in the world exposes international political weakness in a tableau of individual and collective tragedy. Three generations since the flight and forced expulsion from their homes in British Mandate Palestine, Palestine refugees long for nothing other than a solution to their predicament through the fulfilment of the fundamental human imperative of having a place to call home.

The provision of basic services to needy refugees is an uncontroversial international obligation of universal validity and application. Mandated by the General Assembly on 8 December 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) assumed this role at the behest of the international community. Duty and principle offer no excuses of convenience and the Agency has never shirked its responsibilities despite political tension, vocal criticism and chronic financial difficulties. Operational in a highly charged environment through decades marked by conflict, violence and hope unfulfilled, UNRWA has stood by Palestine refugees in their quest for dignity and protection.

More than 60 years since the devastation of the nakba, the relentless suffering of Palestine refugees finds its most acute expression in the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank and Gaza. There, the nakba not only represents an historical event that continues to define the lives of generations, it also denotes an ever-present policy of further dispossession and constricted physical space. While the consequences of events in 1948 remain a present tense experience for millions of Palestine refugees throughout the region and beyond, those who reside in the occupied Palestinian territory will add that the nakba stays unyieldingly manifest in their current surroundings, as evidenced by forced evictions, house demolitions, rejections of building permits, movement restrictions and barriers erected to separate them from family, neighbours and the outside world.

In any society, four decades of military occupation would leave an imprint in geographical, psychological, social and economic terms. Beyond their respective political leaders, the peoples themselves – both occupied and occupiers – are continuously defined by their actions. Our agreed international legal framework obliges us to distinguish between legal and illegal action. And with such international principles and standards rests a responsibility to take appropriate measures when violations occur. However, in the occupied Palestinian territory, accountability has taken a back seat, to which six decades of refugee distress, continued dispossession

and open disregard for common values enshrined in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Fourth Geneva Convention provide ample testament.

In the West Bank, behind walls and fences, separated by roadblocks and checkpoints, held captive to the logic of territorial expansion and pronounced Israeli security needs, Palestine refugees are forced to witness the steady division and erosion of what prior to Israeli occupation in 1967 was contiguous land full of promise and potential. Since 1967, military occupation combined with systematic abuses has changed the land and with it the conditions for its residents beyond recognition. Cut off from Jerusalem the centre of commerce, culture and home to the Holy Sites, Palestine refugees in the West Bank are forced to live a doubly disjointed existence – denied their right to maintain relations within their territorial unit and to other parts of the occupied Palestinian territory. Segregation, separation and isolation are all fitting descriptions of the current situation, to which reality the level of international concern and decisive action should be made to match.

Economic hardship and recurrent violence combine to undermine any minimal standard of security amongst a population already exposed to devastating losses. The deepening crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory is one of human development and dignity denied, grounded in socio-economic hardship and humanitarian distress. According to a 2008 UNRWA study, nearly 40 per cent of West Bank Palestine refugee households are considered poor, with 26 per cent falling below the deep poverty line. Current coping mechanisms among these households mirror those of Gazans in the early days after the onset of the second intifada in September 2000. Once jobs, income and livelihoods have been lost in the process of ever-increasing movement restrictions, ordinary people are left with no other choice than to sell their meagre assets, reduce consumption and rely on credit or handouts to make ends meet. In this environment, the challenge to assist and protect becomes not only harder, but also exponentially more difficult.

When faced with the West Bank situation of today, knowledge of the process, consequences and implications of policies employed towards the Gazan economy and population since the early 1990s should signal a warning to all those concerned about Middle East peace and stability. Over the last year, the economic success of the West Bank has given rise to optimism. However, the nature and scale of this enterprise – restricted to certain areas and sectors – must be measured against the overall experience of ordinary West Bank residents and remaining obstacles to true economic freedom. In Gaza, the past experience of economic prosperity through relations of dependency on Israel became hampered by progressive restrictions, isolation and, finally, separation. As only unimpeded access of people and goods can arrest socio-economic decline and ensure reversal of de-development reminiscent of the Gaza experience, current West Bank prosperity takes the form of distraction from the issue of occupation and the common goal of reaching a just and sustainable solution.

Shattered livelihoods, abject poverty and profound insecurity characterise the lives of more than one million Palestine refugees resident in what many are increasingly denoting as the wilful impoverishment of the Gaza Strip. Almost three years of blockade have eroded the productive base and triggered private sector collapse in a policy which threatens to undo the fabric of Gazan society. Only a few years have passed since more than 100,000 Palestinians crossed into Israel to work for and with their neighbours on a daily basis. Through restrictions on movement, this number became steadily reduced, until it reached a few thousands during the years of the second intifada. It is thus through step-by-step measures of encirclement, closure and separation that today's reality has been in the making.

Gaza demonstrates the massive material and human costs of political failure. A full year after a conflict of unprecedented destruction and hardship, the people of Gaza have yet to see results of the \$4.5 billion pledged by the international community in Sharm el-Sheikh in March 2009. Destroyed facilities of hospitals and schools, clinics and homes serve as reminders of the effective ban on humanitarian recovery and reconstruction activity imposed by the illegal and counter-productive blockade on the innocents.

As time moves on, ordinary people's experience of opportunity, hope and common humanity becomes increasingly defined by those who condone and perpetuate the current policies. The practices of occupation, collective sanction, rocket fire and other acts of violence spare no one – young or old, weak or strong. But amongst the product of a relentlessly suffering population in Gaza, Sderot, Ashkelon and other affected places are 750,000 children who no doubt forever will be marked by their experience of physical deprivation, psychological trauma and isolation from the outside world. For their sake, and the sake of their future, human development must remain at the front of our minds. Unless given a different experience, removed from the daily torment of violence, oppression and despair, the mindsets and outlook of these children would be left at the mercy of an environment diametrically opposed to the stated international goals of peace, security and freedom. This is why UNRWA – under occupation, under blockade – has a very intensive and comprehensive Human Rights curriculum, teaching the children of Gaza tolerance, respect and justice to protect the values that have traditionally characterised Palestinian society and give them a realistic basis to hope for a just peace and a realisation that this will only be achieved through lawful, peaceful means.

Past failure to address the Palestinian refugee problem is undoubtedly increasingly undermining confidence in a just solution to their dispossession. Nowhere else is the refugee reality more complex than in the occupied Palestinian territory, where, in the absence of an effective mechanism to ensure accountability for the application of international law which would enjoy the confidence of all communities caught up in this conflict, the lives of 2 million Palestine refugees are dictated by the consequences of occupation and collective sanction. Despite the obvious obstacles and limitations by nature of its operational environment, UNRWA continues its human development, humanitarian assistance and protection work in the West Bank and Gaza. De-development of the economy, but also, insidiously, of the mind, is compounding our current challenge, and for UNRWA, reversing this trend has become its preoccupation.

Like any other refugee community, Palestine refugees live to see a better future built on respect for and commitment to their inalienable rights. Assistance to alleviate their plight and ensure human development according to shared values and standards has been the dutiful obligation of UNRWA for 60 years. Notwithstanding operational and financial constraints, the Agency strives constantly for improvement and awaits the day when the refugees under its mandate have the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is precisely by this Declaration that we know the elderly lady – food coupon in hand – as our mother; the young boys and girls as our cousins or our friends; and that ours are the children who one day feel their basic human rights unfailingly upheld and respected, not only taught in a United Nations school.