

The Status of Middle-Eastern Palestinian Refugees Outside of Israel-Palestine

Written by Paul Knight

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PAUL KNIGHT, AUG 9 2009

The issue of Palestinian refugees is both an important and highly emotional matter in Middle-Eastern politics, representing one of the most divisive and enduring problems of 20th and 21st century Middle-Eastern affairs. The term "Palestinian" generally gives rise to the image of a hemmed-in people, exiles in their own land, discriminated against by the state which ostensibly represents them and subject to enormous problems of conflict (external as well as internal) and corruption. The Arab popular imagination often construes the plight of the Palestinians as an "Arab" struggle against "Western" colonialist encroachment. Terrorist movements, from the Palestinian Hamas to the Lebanese Hezbollah to the transnational Al-Qa'ida, have all taken up suffering in the Occupied Territories as a *causus belli* for open war with either Israel, the "West", or complacent and therefore "apostate" Arab regimes. Middle-Eastern elites have also championed Palestinian interests in various forms, perhaps seeking to divert attention from the enormous socio-political cleavages in their own domains; Palestinian suffering abroad provides a convenient "steam valve" through which to safely release local antipathy. Middle-East leaders have often sought to gain regional prestige through intervention in the Palestinian plight, whether in Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric against the "Zionist state" of Israel or the House of Sa'ud's attempts to act as a regional peace broker and guarantor. Beneath these facades exists a painful and unfortunate reality, which is that Palestinians have found little sufferage or refuge in the Arab nations beyond Israel's borders. They have instead found themselves forced into the role of regional martyrs, kept stateless for political reasons and given little in the way of fundamental employment, residence, or political rights. They have been, almost without exception, marginalized and poorly integrated into their new homes, with the shameful and anachronistic reality of the refugee camp remaining a part of the international Palestinian experience.

The reality underlying popular perceptions and appearances of the Palestinian exile is dramatically different from what one might imagine. The plight of the Palestinians extends far beyond the tiny Occupied Territories and into Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. As of 2000, there were more Palestinian refugees in Jordan (approx. 1.57m) than in the West Bank and Gaza Strip combined (approx. 1.37m) (UNRWA Table III). This statistic is augmented by large Palestinian populations in Lebanon and Syria, with 376,472 and 383,199 refugees respectively as of 2000 (ibid). Iraq maintains a much smaller Palestinian expatriate group, with approximately 34,000 persons as of 2006 (HRW 1). With the exception of the viciously attacked Iraqi Palestinians, these populations are, in all probability, significantly larger since these statistics were determined. Two issues contribute to this: the practical difficulty of accurately counting the dispersed and inconsistently registered Palestinian refugees, in addition to the birth rate of the refugee population, which averaged 3.9% *per annum* between 1990 and 2000 (HRW Table I). Assuming the continuance of these birth rates, the 2000 total refugee population of 3.73m may now be as high as 5.3m persons. Assuming a constant proportion of the registered Palestinian population living in refugee camps (usually between 28% and 38% of all registered Palestinians), this would mean roughly 1.74m Palestinians are now living in refugee camps in both Israel and the aforementioned Arab nations. As of 2000, around 56% of these refugees were under 25 years of age (UNRWA Table III), and this youth bulge is unlikely to change due to high population densities and small elderly populations among the Palestinians. In summation, these figures mean that the Palestinian issue, measured purely by population, is *more* pressing for the Arab states of the Middle-East than for the state of Israel (with which it is almost exclusively associated). It is therefore clear that the Palestinian issue is, and will remain, a *transnational* rather than an *domestic* problem. This statement should be tempered against the fact that the

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Palestinian refugees' origin is in Israel-Palestine, and their continued residence in the Arab states is intimately bound up with the contentious "right of return" to their homeland in Israel-Palestine. I will now shift focus to specific Middle-Eastern states in which the Palestinians have sought refuge, briefly discussing the situation of Palestinians in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

The small Palestinian population in Iraq is in its worst state since 1948-1949, when the returning Iraqi army brought Palestinian refugees back with it from its campaign in Haifa and Jenin. Palestinians were subsequently exempted from military service, although they were granted neither citizenship nor the right to own property (HRW 10).^[1] After this, the Iraqi government housed these Palestinians in schools and military camps, eventually constructing temporary "shelter residential systems" and issuing non-passport travel documents (HRW 9-10). These were superseded in the 1970s by completely subsidized housing complexes with basic water, sewage, and electricity services (ibid). It is estimated that 63% of Palestinian refugees in Iraq benefited from the government-provided housing offered under Saddam Hussein, who chose — not unlike other authoritarians in the region — to make the Palestinians a *cause célèbre* for his dictatorial regime. Unfortunately, after the 1991 Gulf War which crippled the Iraqi economy, the Ba'athist government achieved this housing in a decidedly inequitable manner, paying mostly Shi'a landlords the equivalent of U.S. \$1 per month as "rent" for the Palestinians' housing (HRW 9-10). This policy, which was legally challenged by Shi'a landlords as early as 1999, was to have disastrous consequences after the fall of the Ba'athist regime. Militant Shi'a groups have since targeted the Sunni Palestinians with widespread political and criminal violence, attacking communal buildings, threatening death unless Palestinians leave Iraq, and often resorting to murder (HRW 1). Suspicions of Palestinian involvement in the Sunni insurgency have only served to exacerbate this sectarian violence (ibid). Elements of the Iranian-backed Ministry of the Interior have been implicated in the detention, torture, and "disappearance" of many Palestinians, while the broader Iraqi government has worked to create new and difficult registration requirements, creating a new level of "bureaucratic hostility" (ibid). Flight to neighbouring states like Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, or Syria is impossible, while Israel continues to dismiss any "right of return" for Palestinian refugees outside its borders.

Until stability and security is achieved in postwar Iraq, it is unlikely that the plight of Iraqi Palestinians will be ameliorated; if and when such stability is achieved, bureaucratic and socio-economic barriers will likely continue to single out and degrade this small population. Iraqi Palestinians are thus left in a situation which is sadly reminiscent of their co-nationals in the Occupied Territories: without anywhere to flee (borders are almost ubiquitously closed to Iraqi Palestinians), they are subject to the depredations of the unrepresentative state in which they reside. Despite robust constitutional protection for minority rights, *realpolitik* within Iraq seems to indicate that the future of Iraqi Palestinians is bleak, consisting of ongoing discrimination aided and abetted by government agencies.^[2]

Jordan has been a very important player in Palestinian refugee issues, and has the capacity to affect that largest population of Palestinian expatriates in the region. While most Palestinians are religiously and linguistically identical to Jordanians, their Semitic ethnicity and relative socio-economic status (Hejoj 132) differs substantially. While about half of Jordan's population is Palestinian (MAR)^[3], their influence and existence in Jordan is marginalized, albeit perhaps less so than other countries in the region. Most Palestinian Jordanians either found themselves in the country after part of the British Mandate of Transjordan was incorporated into Jordan proper in 1946, or later as a result of the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars. Jordan presently contains ten refugee camps which together include over three-hundred thousand Palestinians. Their birth rate (34 per 1000 population, the second-highest in the region next to Saudi Arabia) and low average age (34.6% under 16 years) is similar to that of Sub-Saharan African populations (UNRWA Table IV). Their infant mortality rate (32 per 1000 live births) is, however, more encouraging, being fairly average among Middle-Eastern states (ibid). Politically, Jordanian Palestinians lag far behind their non-Palestinian Jordanian counterparts: 6 of 28 ministers, 11 of 80 lower house members, and 6 of 40 senators are Jordanians (MAR). No governorships are held by Palestinians, though the Queen of Jordan is a Palestinian woman. Electorally, greater representation is given to regions without Palestinian populations (MAR). Despite all these issues, Palestinian Jordanians continue to be more preoccupied with external (i.e. Israeli-Palestinian) rather than domestic problems; while riots and protest marches have occasionally occurred in Jordan, the main focus of anger is on the Israeli state across the Jordanian border.

In terms of poverty, Jordanian Palestinians, particularly those in the camps, bear the brunt of socio-economic

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deprivation. The difference between poverty rates among refugees and the rest of Jordanian society is 36.4% (Hejoj 133). Obtaining government services and benefits is frequently very difficult for Palestinians, especially those in the camps, and they are often forced to employ *wasta* (ethnic Jordanian proxies) to access these goods and services on their behalf (Hejoj 136). Jordanian Palestinians are often barred from employment in many professions, particularly high-end fields such as law and medicine (UNRWA). They are underrepresented in government-related employment, especially compared with non-Palestinian Jordanians whose labour force is 37% employed in government-related jobs (Hejoj 135). Yet when asked about the etiology of their poverty, about 50% of Palestinians in Jordan considered government policies to be at fault, while 30% blamed “the fault of individuals” (Hejoj 136). Regardless of perceptions, it remains true that Jordanian policies rest at the heart of Palestinian refugee poverty (Hejoj 142). This socio-economic disparity will not fade until the “dual system” which the Jordanian government has implemented for Palestinians is rescinded. Unfortunately, Jordan is rather like Israel in this regard: refugee ghettoization, political under-representation, employment inequity, and societal discrimination are all endemic in Jordanian Palestinian society. By maintaining this “dual system”, Jordan ensures two political objectives: first, the continuance of Palestinian suffering which draws attention to historical Israeli crimes, second, the guaranteeing of UN financial assistance (through UNRWA) which reduces refugees’ reliance on Jordanian government aid.

Like Jordan, Lebanon has proven a reluctant host to Palestinian refugees. This is based on similar reasons, including the financial, geostrategic, and political burdens which Palestinian refugees are deemed to carry with them. There is also the aforementioned “perverse incentive” to maintain Palestinian statelessness, thus guaranteeing the onus remaining with Israel to enact a “right of return”, rather than with the Palestinians’ host states to enact a fair and equitable system of refugee integration. Palestinian conditions in Lebanon are atrocious, having the highest number of individuals living in abject poverty of any Arab host state (CMI working paper). In Lebanon’s Ayn al-Hilwa refugee camp, the “sordid capital of the [Lebanese] Palestinian diaspora” (CMI Working Paper), over 70,000 refugees are confined within 1.25 square kilometres. With such high population density (rivalling Gaza, which boasts the highest density in the world), it is unsurprising that internal and external conflicts are a common feature of the camp. Like Palestinian Jordanians, this effectively stateless population is subject to widespread discrimination, including the 1964 Law 17561 which bars Palestinians from joining professions such as medicine, engineering, and law (CMI). While Lebanon signed of the 1965 Casablanca Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States^[4], which provides for granting of employment “in line with those of ordinary citizens” (ibid), Lebanon included several reservations which made the right to work “conditional on the country’s economic situation” (CMI). The PLO leadership eventually concluded a controversial treaty — the “Cairo Agreement” — with Lebanon in November 1969 which rescinded these restrictions and provided for better treatment of Palestinians, who at the time were seen as allies in the ongoing cross-border conflict with Israel.

This “Cairo Agreement” and a period of relative equality was ended in 1983 when, following Palestinian PLO scapegoating for the 1982 Israeli “Operation Peace in Galilee”, the Labour Ministry issued Decree 38/11 which effectively barred refugees from work in 72 professions. This was followed up by the formal abrogation of the “Cairo Agreement” in May 1987 (CMI), after which postwar Lebanese support for the Palestinians continued to decline, gradually being replaced by “mistrust and legal and political discrimination” (CMI). Restricted employment has in turn created deleterious effects on other Palestinian Lebanese human rights; since education is seen to play a lesser role in finding employment, many Palestinian families have chosen to have their children drop out of school, which only furthers the cycle of impoverishment (Elsayed-Ali). Restrictions on property ownership, grounded in the false assumption that property ownership somehow diminishes the Palestinian “right of return”, were similarly enshrined in a 2001 law passed by the Lebanese legislature (ibid).

Lebanon also had its own unique fears vis-a-vis Palestinian integration, as the addition of over 300,000 mostly Sunni refugees might have threatened the country’s delicate confessional balance between Maronite Christians and Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. Rejection of refugee settlement became a rallying cry that unified Lebanese popular sentiment, epitomized by the slogan “Lebanon for the Lebanese!” (Peteet 2005: 175 cited in CMI). By 1990, even the safeguard provided by the unevenly implemented Casablanca Protocol was diminished, as Palestinians — being punished for the PLO’s support of the Hussein regime — were stripped of their refugee rights through the subjugation of these rights to “national priorities” and the “laws of each member state” (CMI). These actions have occurred on the background of high-level political calls for the resettlement (i.e. removal) of Lebanese Palestinians, made on the

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basis that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was leading towards a Palestinian state that could accept the refugees back into their homeland.

The condition of Palestinian refugees outside Israel-Palestine is fragile and in some cases calamitous. Palestinian expatriates experience issues which are fundamentally identical to those of their co-nationals in the Occupied Territories. The states which have been discussed have almost universally adopted policies — in contravention of their obligations pursuant to international law and regional agreements — which demote Palestinians to the status of second or third-class citizens. Fundamental human rights pertaining to employment, discrimination, political representation and property ownership have been ignored by Arab host states. This is a particularly uncomfortable realization for the Arab world, since many Arab-Israeli grievances are based upon similar conditions for Palestinians within the Israeli state. A closer examination of the problem — partially stymied by the relative paucity of research on Palestinian refugees outside Israel versus those within Israel — reveals an unsettling and self-serving hypocrisy within the Arab host states. The matter of human rights is being eclipsed by the political desire to foment continued anger against the Israeli state; so long as Palestinians remain “unsettled”, so too will global political sentiment towards Israel. This by no means exculpates Israeli policies, nor their unwillingness (grounded in demographic concerns) to contemplate a “right of return”. It does, however, shed light on the painful reality of the stateless Palestinians, who must contend with being the often unwilling martyrs of their region and its grievances.

Palestinian suffering has become the latest physical representation of “Western” and “Zionist” depredations in the region, yet Palestinians have collectively faced some of the most horrid conditions within the states which claim to champion their cause. They are caught in a legal and political limbo, whereby their permanent return and their lasting residence are equally unacceptable to the many parties involved. Palestinians are in a state of exile, and indeed some — such as the Palestinian Iraqis — are being violently exiled *for a second time*. The plight of this group should therefore be interpreted as a moral stain upon the conscience of the entire region, and not solely upon the Israeli state which, despite having a primary role in the etiology of the problem, no longer maintains sole responsibility in this issue. Borders have increasingly closed to new Palestinian migrants (especially those fleeing Iraq), while the Arab states have foisted many of their caretaking responsibilities upon international agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and Amnesty International. This intractable problem will endure in the long term, and may only be ameliorated through painful and politically unpopular decisions from many of the parties involved.

1 ^[1] In early 2000, the Hussein government announced a policy to grant the few Palestinians who had resided in Iraq since 1948 the right to own property in Baghdad. Human Rights Watch interviews in 2002 contradicted this, noting that legal restrictions on Palestinians still prohibited them from registering homes, cars, or telephone lines in their own names.

2 ^[2] For example, in October 2005 the Minister of Displacement and Migration called upon the Iraqi government to expel all Palestinian refugees to Gaza, scapegoating them as Sunni terrorists and insurgents.

3 ^[3] <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=66302>

4 ^[4] Signed and ratified without reservation by Jordan, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Yemen.

*Written by: Paul Knight
Written for: Professor Jim Gould
Written at: Carleton University
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