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POLICY BRIEF

The Impact of the War in Syria on Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon and Syria

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Introduction

The aim of this working paper has been to assess the impact of the war in Syria on Palestinian refugees, specifically in Lebanon and Syria. Amid, the wider narrative of 5.6 million refugees having to flee Syria as a result of the war, the impact on Palestinians has mostly been lost in media accounts of the conflict and policy responses by multilateral bodies, NGOs and governments. The factors that may account for this omission could include that most Palestinians in Syria were refugees before the conflict and, therefore, their status has not changed as a result of the war. Moreover, Palestinian refugees in Syria – like the 5.6 million across the Middle-East - fall under the protection of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the agency created in 1949 to protect Palestinians and help them ‘achieve their full potential in human development’ (UNRWA, 2020a). Therefore, Palestinians have had the assistance of UNRWA throughout the conflict in both Lebanon and Syria. The reality tells a different story, however, with 60 per cent (240,000) of Palestinian Refugees Syria (PRS) having been displaced at least once since 2011, with 120,000 having fled Syria mostly to other countries in the Middle-East (UNRWA, 2020b). Three Palestinian camps in Syria have been destroyed and more than 4,000 Palestinians killed in the conflict (AGPS, 2019). 29,000 PRS have fled to Lebanon which is itself in the throes of an economic crisis and social unrest since October 2019.

Refugee status in Syria and Lebanon

Before the war, Palestinian Refugees Syria (PRS) enjoyed ‘almost the same civil rights as Syrian citizens other than nationality and political rights’ as a result of Syrian Law 260 (UN, 2015). By contrast, Palestinian Refugees Lebanon (PRL) have a permanent foreigner status and are denied legal access to ‘36 liberal or syndicated professions (including in medicine, farming and fishery, and public transportation)’ (UNHCR, 2016). In Lebanon, there are 12 Palestinian camps with 475,075 refugees registered with UNRWA but only around 180,000 are estimated to remain in-country (UNRWA, 2019). According to Amnesty International, approximately half of the Palestinian refugees who fled from Syria live inside Lebanon’s 12 Palestinian refugee camps and the other half live outside the camps, mainly in informal Palestinian settlements known as ‘gatherings’ (Amnesty International, 2016: 12). These ‘gatherings’ lack the infrastructure and services found in the official camps and Amnesty has found that refugee women are, particularly, vulnerable to exploitation and sexual harassment in these environments (Ibid: 6).

The Lebanese government operated an ‘open border’ policy with Syria until January 2015 but then introduced ‘onerous new criteria for refugees to renew their residence permits’ (Ibid: 5). Lebanon has more refugees per capita than any other country in the world and has admitted over one million Syrian refugees (Ibid). Since October 2019, Lebanon has experienced increased social unrest, widespread popular protests and economic turmoil as a sectarian and corrupt political establishment has defaulted on a debt repayment (Cornish and Stubbington, 2020; Kassir, 2019). Palestinians are reluctant to openly support the wave of protests in Lebanon as they are often scapegoated by political parties at times of national crisis. PRL are conscious of the extent to which the conflict in Syria has enveloped PRS and caused widespread displacement, poverty and human rights abuses. Palestinian refugees, therefore, remain very much on the margins of Lebanese society without equal rights to

education, property, employment, healthcare and housing. Their precarious economic situation is exacerbated by their dependence on the informal economy, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown.

UNRWA funding cuts

The difficult context for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria has been exacerbated by cuts to the UNRWA budget and the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, the Trump administration announced it was withdrawing all of its financial support from UNRWA, amounting to approximately one-third of the agency's \$1.1bn annual budget. At a time, when the need for UNRWA's support has arguably never been greater with the ongoing war in Syria and economic and political upheaval in Lebanon, the agency has been subjected to budgetary constraints. By the end of 2019, UNRWA reported that 95 per cent of PRS were in need of 'sustained humanitarian assistance' and categorised 126,000 as 'extremely vulnerable'. It launched an emergency appeal for \$277 million in response to the Syria crisis in 2019 (UNRWA, 2019b).

The agency now faces the daunting task of limiting the spread of COVID-19 in densely populated refugee camps with sanitation problems and challenges to social distancing. The coronavirus will place increasing pressures on UNRWA health services already at full stretch in Lebanon and Syria.

Development theory

In discussing the intersection of development and security, Su-ming Khoo has discussed a zigzagging 'towards human security and human development and then back again to donor security and economic interests' (2019: 3). In the aftermath of the Cold War, she argues development became more closely aligned with human development and security referring to the 'state of the human being' (Ibid: 2). But the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror has seen state priorities shift to 'addressing external political crises beyond their borders' with a focus on 'donor security and economic interests, including arms exports' (Ibid: 3). While purporting to be 'about the global South', Khoo argues, the development security nexus 'is predicated on securing the global North' (Ibid). With the war in Syria significantly increasing internally and externally displaced refugees, the development security nexus has sought to contain this crisis to the global South and ensure these refugees are mostly absorbed by proxies in the region. As stateless refugees with a marginalised status in Lebanon and Syria, Palestinian refugees from the war in Syria have had limited options to seek security from the conflict and have mostly found themselves contained in other refugee environments. Indeed, the political attacks on UNRWA from the Trump administration and the reduced resources available to the agency, could further diminish the economic security of Palestinian refugees.

Areas for Policy Development

The following policy recommendations are based on the findings of this paper:

- Amnesty International has called on Lebanon to ensure that all refugees from Syria can renew their residency in Lebanon until there is a fundamental change in circumstances in Syria that means it is safe for them to return. To this end, Lebanon should remove obstacles to residency renewal for refugees.
- Ireland and its European partners should increase their contributions to the operating costs of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency to offset the loss of income – approximately one-third of UNRWA's budget – from the United States.
- A closer monitoring of the impact of the war in Syria on Palestinian refugees should be carried out by multilateral bodies in Syria. While, some of the Palestinian camps in Syria are in close proximity to the current epicentre of the conflict, most are not and should be assessed on the basis of their humanitarian and welfare needs as a result of the war.
- Palestinian refugees born in Lebanon should be naturalised and given full citizenship rights that would offer them the opportunity to enhance their social and economic status in the country. Their marginalised, permanent 'foreigner' status in Lebanon is creating severe health problems, poverty and high levels of dependence on aid.
- Lebanon has accepted more than one million Syrian refugees and requires enhanced international support and finance to manage this unfair burden in a country currently experiencing high levels of social and economic unrest. Amnesty International says: "The international community's failure to provide sufficient support to Lebanon and to the UN's regional response to the Syrian refugee crisis is shameful".
- The government of Lebanon has a long-established policy of not permitting new formal refugee camps on its territory to prevent permanent settlement by refugees. This is creating temporary, unregulated settlements which expose vulnerable women and children to exploitation and abuse. The Lebanese authorities should investigate allegations of human rights violations or abuses, including gender-based violence, committed against Syrian or Palestinian refugees from Syria.

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