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

A Working Paper by
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ABSTRACT

One of the largely unreported aspects of the Syrian conflict has been its impact on Palestinian refugees. Sixty per cent of these refugees (Palestinian Refugees Syria (PRS)) have been displaced at least once since the start of the conflict in 2011 and more than 4,000 have been killed. Three Palestinian refugee camps have been destroyed and more than 77,329 Palestinians are estimated to have been born since the start of the war into highly vulnerable and deprived communities. 29,000 PRS have fled to Lebanon and many have taken refuge in the camps for Palestinian Refugees Lebanon (PRL) administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This has increased pressure on UNRWA services which include cash and food aid, employment, schools and vocational training centres, health clinics and women's centres. Following the Trump administration's withdrawal of funding for UNRWA in 2018, which amounted to approximately one third of its budget, the agency has been under extreme financial pressure at a time when arguably the need for its services has never been greater. UNRWA's struggle to maintain support to 5.4 million Palestinian refugees across the Middle East will be put to the ultimate test with the 2020 pandemic, COVID-19, sweeping across the world. Palestinian refugees living in densely populated camps, many with high levels of illness and disability, are extremely vulnerable to the virus.

This article will consider the current situation confronting PRL and PRS in the context of the Syrian war, economic upheaval in Lebanon, the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and cuts to UNRWA's budget.

Key words:

Syrian conflict | Lebanon | Palestinian refugees | UNRWA | Economic Upheaval | COVID-19.

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Introduction

The Syrian civil war has cast a large shadow over the entire Middle East region with the United Nations (UN) estimating 500,000 people to have been killed in the conflict since 2011 (OCHA, 2018). A further 5.6 million refugees have fled the country, mostly to neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, and 6.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced (Ibid). According to UNHCR (2019), 950,000 UN registered refugees from Syria had fled to Lebanon by the end of 2018, making it the country with the highest number of refugees *per capita*. One of the largely unreported stories of the Syrian conflict has been its impact on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria. The marginalised and impoverished living conditions of Palestinians in both countries have worsened as 60 per cent (240,000) of Palestinian Refugees Syria (PRS) have been displaced at least once, with 120,000 having either left Syria or become fatalities in the conflict (UNRWA, 2020). Approximately 29,000 PRS (UNRWA, 2019f) who fled the war in Syria have taken refuge in Lebanon, many of whom are now living in Palestinian camps. This has greatly added to the pressure on services provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN agency established in 1949 to provide relief and protection to 750,000 Palestinians forcibly displaced from their ancestral homeland in the *Nakba* (catastrophe) 72 years ago (Pappé, 2006). UNRWA services, including health, education, cash assistance and food aid, are today delivered to 5.4 million registered Palestinian refugees in the West Bank / East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (UNRWA, 2019e).

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 (Beaumont and Holmes, 2018) which propelled it into what the agency's Commissioner-General described as an 'existential crisis' (UNRWA, 2019e). 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' (UNRWA, 2020a) and, yet, the agency was under unprecedented financial pressure to maintain services with a \$277 million Syria emergency appeal launched in January 2019 (UNRWA, 2019g). UNRWA has described the living conditions of Palestinian Refugees Lebanon (PRL) as 'dire and characterized by overcrowding, poor housing conditions, unemployment, poverty and lack of access to justice' (2019h). Therefore, at a time of acute pressure on UNRWA's financial resources, the Syrian war is greatly adding to the vulnerability and poverty of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria. This report will consider the current situation confronting PRL and PRS in the context of the Syrian war, economic inertia in Lebanon, and the threat posed to Palestinian refugees by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and cuts to UNRWA's budget.

Palestinian refugees in Syria

The Syrian conflict has had a devastating impact on Palestinian refugees with approximately 120,000 being forced to flee Syria since 2011 and 4,027 killed (AGPS, 2019). Around 60 per cent of PRS (254,000) have been displaced at least once during the conflict and a vulnerability assessment carried out by UNRWA in 2018, found that 90 per cent of Palestinian refugee households in Syria live in absolute poverty (less than \$2 per person per day) (UNRWA, 2019a). There are 12 Palestinian camps in Syria and, before the start of the Syrian war, there were approximately 560,000 registered

refugees - though they were not all living in country. In the absence of a census, the number of refugees is monitored through the take-up of UNRWA services which include healthcare, education, vocational training, cash and food aid, water and sanitation. Three of the 12 camps are considered 'unofficial' as they are not administered by UNRWA but by the Syrian authorities. Three of the 12 camps that were home to 30 percent of Syrian refugees - Yarmouk, Dera'a, and Ein el-Tal camps - were almost completely destroyed during the war and their populations have either been internally displaced or have fled abroad. 29,000 PRS have fled to Lebanon since 2011 (UNRWA, 2019f) and, by the middle of 2019, only 3,500 (McCloskey, 2019) had returned, which is unsurprising as the Syrian conflict continues and most of the refugee camps are in need of complete or partial reconstruction.

Civilian casualties

Before the conflict, Yarmouk was home to 160,000 refugees and the largest Palestinian camp in Syria. In 2012, fierce clashes erupted between the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), supported by Syrian government forces, and the Free Syrian Army. The intensity of the conflict displaced 140,000 refugees and the remaining 20,000 were trapped in a siege of the camp which denied the entry of vital food and medicine supplies. The fighting intensified when Islamic State (IS) (*Daesh*) invaded and took control of 60 per cent of the camp in 2015, which severed UNRWA's access to Yarmouk (UNRWA, 2015). The civilian population, already subjected to chronic hunger and shortages of medicines under siege, had to endure an air campaign from Syrian state forces which finally drove IS out of Yarmouk. Chris Gunness described Yarmouk at the time as a 'death camp' reduced to rubble and no longer habitable (Sanchez, 2018). The highest number of Palestinian casualties to date were in Yarmouk (1,422) (Ahroneim, 2019) with 263 killed in the Dara'a refugee camp, and 202 in the Khan El Sheikh refugee camp south of Damascus.

An example of the vulnerability of Palestinian refugees living in camps located close to the epicentre of the conflict in Syria was the killing of ten civilians in May 2019 in Neirab camp as they broke their fast for the Ramadan Iftar meal. Neirab is located 13 km east of Aleppo and is a densely populated camp with 18,000 residents. Among the victims were four children with 30 more people injured. The Director of UNRWA Affairs in Syria, Amany Michael Ebye, called on 'all parties to the conflict to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law' (Ebye, 2019). A consistent element of the conflict in Syria has been the targeting of civilians by all parties with the UN Human Rights Council reporting that:

"The conduct of an ever-increasing number of actors is characterized by a complete lack of adherence to the norms of international law. Since the outset, civilians have borne the brunt of the suffering inflicted by the warring parties" (UNHRC, 2015).

A 2019 UN Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) of Syria reported that 40 per cent of school infrastructure had been damaged or destroyed and that, between 2013 and 2018, there had been 367 attacks on schools and 355 attacks on hospitals and medical personnel (OCHA, 2019: 13-14). The UN statistics come with the health warning that 'Verified data on humanitarian actors killed and injured is not available' (OCHA, 2019: 12). This is one of the challenges of monitoring a conflict of such intensity and shifting frontlines.

The education of Palestinian refugees in Syria

There are 49,931 Palestinian students in Syria – 24,579 girls and 25,352 boys – 32 of whom have been killed in the conflict since 2011 (UNRWA, 2019c; 2020). Many of the 103 Palestinian schools in Syria have to double-shift, meaning that the same school building is used by two different school populations in the morning and afternoon. Schools double-shift because of the number of UNRWA school buildings that have been destroyed during the war and the rapidly rising Palestinian population in Syria. Since the start of the war in 2011, 77,329 Palestinians have been born, of whom 57,246 receive cash assistance from UNRWA. According to UNRWA, the Syrian government has provided 35 buildings for 41 schools (McCloskey, 2019) in response to the crisis in education caused by the war. Despite the difficult context in which they are educated, UNRWA students secured a pass rate to the ninth grade national exam of 82 percent in 2018 and 85 percent in 2019, while the national pass rate was 66.4 percent (Ibid).

In 2018, Aya Abbas, a ninth-grade student in an UNRWA school, was the highest performing student in national exams across Syria. Aya was born in Yarmouk and was one of those forced to flee with her family after the camp was destroyed. Pierre Krähenbühl, former Commissioner-General of UNRWA, said of Aya that:

“In many ways, her story is the story of Palestine refugees: often confronted with individual and collective suffering on a grand scale and yet, never prepared to give up. She also exemplifies the attachment of Palestine refugees to education, a field in which they continue to excel and inspire” (Krähenbühl, 2019).

Shifting allegiances

The historical ties between Palestine and Syria are complex and have shifted as the war has unfolded. Abu Amer (2018) suggests that ‘[t]hroughout their long struggle against Zionism, Palestinian political factions have found support in Syria, often maintaining headquarters on its territory’. He adds that leftist groups, including the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), continued to support the Syrian government after the start of the Arab Spring in 2011. However, Hamas, the militant and political organisation in control of Gaza, chose to leave Syria in protest at clampdowns on protesters. An opinion poll carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in the Gaza Strip and West Bank in 2012 found that ‘79% of the public support the Syrian rebels while only 13% support the regime and Assad’ (PSR, 2012). However, a subsequent poll carried out in 2016, found that 40 percent of respondents supported the Free Syrian Army and 18 percent said they supported Assad (PSR, 2016). It is likely that reports of Israel providing funding and aid to the rebels in their war against Bashar al-Assad’s government may have underpinned this shift in support (McKernan, 2017).

For Palestinians, their relationship with Assad’s Syria has been conflicted, particularly as, prior to 2011, ‘Palestinian refugees in Syria enjoyed much better socioeconomic conditions than their

counterparts in Lebanon and Egypt' (Abu Amer, 2011). Syrian Law 260 dated 10 July 1956 stipulates 'that Palestinians living in Syria have almost the same civil rights as Syrian citizens other than nationality and political rights' (UN, 2015). This law extends to freedom of movement, employment, trade and access to civil service positions and public services while preserving their Palestinian nationality. The main exemptions are that Palestinians don't have the right to vote or take seats in parliament and are restricted under a property law to owning one apartment (McCloskey, 2019). Palestinian refugees in Syria, therefore, enjoy almost full citizenship status in Syria which is in stark contrast to their counterparts in Lebanon who have been consigned to a perpetual 'foreigner' status shorn of rights in property and employment.

Economic upheaval in Lebanon

Lebanon hosts 950,000 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR although the Lebanese government estimates the total number of in-country refugees from Syria at 1.5 million (UNHCR, 2019). Seventy-five per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line compared to 27 per cent among the general Lebanese population, and their lives have become much harder over the past year following economic turmoil in Lebanon (Kranz, 2020). The devaluation of the Lebanese pound from 1,500 to one US dollar to 2,000 to the dollar has inflated prices and sparked a wave of anti-austerity protests since October 2019 (Ibid; Ensor and Haboush, 2019). Lebanon has a national debt of nearly \$90 billion, which is equivalent to 170 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with around 50 per cent of government revenues set aside for payment of interest on the debt (Cornish and Stubbington, 2020; *The Guardian*, 2020).

In March 2020, Lebanon defaulted on a \$1.2 billion Eurobond as its reserves had hit 'danger level' and Lebanese citizens were limited to cash withdrawals of \$200 per fortnight (Cornish and Stubbington, 2020). The confessional nature of Lebanese politics has resulted in a sectarian carve up of key political positions which ensures that the Lebanese prime minister is a Sunni, the president a Maronite, and the speaker of parliament a Shia (Fisk, 2019). Kassir (2019) argues that the sectarian nature of the political system in Lebanon has 'fostered clientelism, nepotism and corruption, lead to a poor governance, maintained an unstable political equilibrium and impeded the formation of a fully-fledged democracy'. Public anger at a series of austerity measures and tax hikes reached breaking point in October 2019 when the government planned to introduce a levy on Whatsapp, a popular and free form of social messaging. This eruption of anti-austerity protests forced the resignation of the government 13 days later, but protestors' demands for a non-sectarian, technocratic administration have not been delivered. A new government of 'specialists' was installed in January 2020, but they appear to be backed by the same old political parties and the president, Michael Aoun, remains firmly entrenched (*Aljazeera*, 2020). The protestors remain on the streets and the stand-off with the political establishment continues.

Palestinians in Lebanon have been wary of getting overtly involved in the popular protests against the established political order. They occupy a marginal space in civil society and have often been scapegoated in periods of national crisis and conflict. As Nayel (2013) suggests, during Lebanon's 15-year civil war (1975-90), when the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) fought Israel from

Lebanon, ‘the country’s Palestinian camps suffered terrible massacres, destruction and expulsion at the hands of various parties’. Speaking about the role of Palestinians in the current wave of anti-austerity protest, Ahmad Safadi, a taxi driver resident in Burj Barajneh camp, said: ‘We absolutely support the Lebanese people in their demands’, but added that, ‘we cannot be part of their uprising. Given our history in Lebanon, some Lebanese parties that are against the uprising would use us as an excuse to sabotage the protests’ (ElAshkar, 2019). Palestinians in Lebanon are acutely aware of the devastation wreaked by the war in Syria on Palestinian refugee camps and the subsequent displacement of PRS within Syria and across the Middle East. Samila Hussein, a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, probably spoke for many when she said:

“My heart is loaded with hope seeing all these people demanding reforms, but I am not allowing any of my children to participate. We have to be prudent. We do not want the scenario of Palestinians in Syria to be repeated” (Ibid).

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

There are 12 Palestinian camps in Lebanon with 475,075 refugees registered with UNRWA but only around 180,000 are estimated to remain in-country (UNRWA, 2019h). As in Syria, UNRWA services in Lebanon include schools, clinics, vocational training centres, health centres and women’s organisations. The difference in the number of registered refugees and users is likely to result from migration during and after the upheaval of the Lebanese civil war from 1975-1990 (Fisk, 1990). The Palestinians in Lebanon are subjected to a perpetual ‘foreigner’ status despite their lengthy residency in the country dating from the *Nakba* in 1948. An American University of Beirut (AUB) survey of PRL in 2015 found that the Lebanese authorities have strongly resisted the naturalization of Palestine refugees ‘which is sometimes used as justification for the various discriminatory policies against them’ (Chaaban et al., 2016: 7). According to UNHCR, these policies include denying legal access for Palestine refugees to ‘36 liberal or syndicated professions (including in medicine, farming and fishery, and public transportation)’ (UNHCR, 2016). Palestinians are consequently forced into the informal economy with less than 15 per cent having an employment contract, 48 per cent paid on a daily basis, and more than 70 per cent employed in ‘elementary’ occupations (Chaaban et al., 2016: 82-83).

The arrival of Palestinian refugees from Syria has increased poverty and unemployment among both PRL and PRS. In 2016, the unemployment rate for PRL was 23.2 per cent and 52.5 per cent for PRS while the overall poverty rate for PRL stood at 65 per cent and 90 per cent for PRS (Chaaban et al., 2016: 2). Ninety per cent of PRS were ‘living in extreme poverty unable to meet even their most essential food requirements’ and almost completely reliant on the services of UNRWA (Ibid). The arrival of approximately 29,000 PRS into Lebanon (UNRWA, 2019f) has increased competition for employment, often in low-paid, manual jobs without the security of contracts which perpetuate poverty. It has also increased the pressure on UNRWA services and accommodation in densely populated camps. As UNHCR suggests:

“The influx of Syrian and Palestine refugees from Syria into Lebanon are reported to have further compromised already limited living space, resources, services and job opportunities

available to Palestine refugees in Lebanon and contributed to heightened community tensions” (2016: 3).

Sixty-three per cent of PRL live in one of the UNRWA camps where living conditions have worsened through a combination of a ‘decaying infrastructure, a dearth of recreational spaces, insufficient access to roads, deteriorated water and sewage treatment systems, contaminated water, and jerry-rigged electrical wires’ (Chaaban et al., 2016: 7). Unsurprisingly, these highly impoverished living conditions result in severe medical problems. The 2015 AUB survey found that 63 per cent of PRL and 75 per cent of PRS respondents reported at least one family with ‘an acute illness in the last six months’ (Chaaban et al., 2016: 10). There are two additional problems that exacerbate the highly compromised living conditions in the camps. First, the land allocated to each camp has reportedly remained unchanged since 1948 which prohibits construction over a larger area as the population of the camps has increased. Second, Palestinian refugees are ‘reported prevented from legally acquiring, transferring or inheriting real property in Lebanon’ which severely limits their capacity to enhance their social and economic status (UNHCR, 2016: 7).

The combination of high levels of unemployment in a socially deprived environment has resulted in significant mental health problems. The AUB survey of PRL found that over half of respondents reported poor mental health with no significant differences between those living in poverty and in ‘non-poor households’ (Chaaban et al., 2016: 103). This suggests that all Palestinians are subjected to the same stressors – social and political marginalisation, insecurity and discrimination.

The education of PRS and PRL in Lebanon

The exclusion of Palestinians from most professional occupations and high levels of unemployment among refugees can lessen the motivation among young people of pursuing a full-time education. UNHCR reports that Palestinian children are denied access to Lebanese public schools which means they are either taught in one of UNRWA’s 69 primary and post-primary schools or in private schools which are likely to be beyond the means of most refugee families (UNHCR, 2016: 9). The AUB survey found that only 73.2 per cent of PRS students were enrolled on average across all education cycles, compared to 84.9 per cent of PRL aged 6 to 18 years (Chaaban et al., 2016: 167). UNRWA has 32,350 pupils registered in its 69 schools, although UNHCR suggests that for many “Non-ID” (non-registered) Palestinians and Syrian refugees, secondary school is inaccessible because they are ineligible for the intermediate schooling exam (UNHCR, 2016: 9). The average drop-out rate for PRS is 7.1 per cent (compared to 4 per cent for PRL) but increases with age (Chaaban et al., 2016: 168). This is likely to be due to the harsher social-economic conditions experienced by PRS which makes it more difficult to afford schooling even if there is no enrolment fee for UNRWA schools. Also, the lack of legal status for PRS impedes their freedom of movement and registration in full-time education. They may also be required to work to augment the family income or are unable to attend school because of an illness or disability.

The AUB survey found that 11.9 per cent of PRL hold a Baccalaureate, which is the secondary school leaving certificate in Lebanon, and just 6.2 per cent hold university degrees, reflecting the difficulties attached to progressing from primary to secondary school and then on to higher education as a refugee (Chaaban et al., 2016: 69). These statistics speak also to the challenges of teaching in UNRWA schools which are often chronically short of equipment, resources, textbooks and recreational facilities (McCloskey, 2018). Class sizes are high, and children regularly attend school while suffering from an illness or disability including behavioural problems associated with mental stress and hypertension. Many young people require psychosocial support to manage the effects of stress caused by exposure to extreme deprivation, a pressured domestic environment caused by poverty and unemployment, and trauma caused by the conflict in Syria among many of the PRS who flee to Lebanon. Moreover, many of the teachers are also refugees and live in the UNRWA camps.

Living conditions in the camps

The twelve UNRWA refugee camps in Lebanon – one of which, Nahr el-Bared, is currently under reconstruction having been destroyed in 2007 (Halkort, 2013) – suffer from many of the same social and economic problems, particularly in regard to living conditions. For example, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, is Burj Barajneh with a population of nearly 20,000 having been established in 1949 by the League of Red Cross Societies (UNRWA, 2019i). Men from the camp generally work as casual labourers in construction, and women mostly work in sewing factories or as cleaners. There is a Security Committee in the camp comprising representatives of the main communities, including PRS and PRL, and is responsible for dealing with the Lebanese authorities. The Lebanese military does not enter the camps, apart from Nahr el-Bared, and defers to the camps’ leadership on matters of security (McCloskey, 2018: 9).

One of the primary physical dangers to residents from the camp environment is an extensive network of criss-crossing electricity wires, which hang low between its narrow alleyways and intertwine with water pipes (Ibid: 10). There have been a total of 42 deaths from electrocution in Burj Barajneh over a two-year period (2016-18) with most of the victims being children (Ibid). These deaths can result from innocuously touching a wall where water and electricity wires collide. The camp, like many others, is a warren of narrow streets lacking any kind of meaningful sewage system, which means that they are regularly flooded during winter. Additional problems in the camp for some residents include food insecurity, chronic diseases caused by poverty, inadequate housing, sanitation, ventilation and a poor diet, and anaemia caused in some cases by lack of access to sunlight. The arrival of new refugees from Syria has enabled landlords to increase rents given the size of the market and rents on property vary depending on location and factors such as access to natural light (Ibid).

These poor living conditions are shared by Shatila camp, which is also located in southern Beirut and was established in 1949 to accommodate Palestinian refugees fleeing from villages in northern Palestine. Environmental health conditions in Shatila are extremely poor due to lack of sanitation, dampness, open drains and over-crowding. The sewerage system needs considerable expansion and an infrastructure project is currently being implemented to upgrade the storm water system and the water network. There is an intermittent electricity supply in the camp and the salt water in the pipes

is not drinkable (McCloskey, 2018: 10-11). This camp's residents, like many others, were subjected to attack and displacement during the Lebanese civil war. In 1982, 1,700 residents of Shatila, and the neighbouring Sabra camp, were brutally killed by Israel's Phalangist allies which remains a raw and enduring scar on the psyche of all the families impacted by these atrocities (Fisk, 2012). The United Nations General Assembly passed a strongly worded resolution, which condemned 'in the strongest terms the large-scale massacre of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps', and resolved that 'that the massacre was an act of genocide' (UNGA, 1982).

The living conditions in these camps, created by marked social and economic deprivation and discrimination, combined with the mental scars of Lebanon's turbulent recent history, makes the residents increasingly dependent on UNRWA as that agency has come under sustained political attack.

UNRWA

In 2018, UNRWA announced that it faced the 'greatest financial predicament in its history' following the withdrawal by the United States (US) of its funding to the agency, representing one-third of its total budget (UN, 2018). In what appeared to be a politically motivated move that fell in behind Israeli prime-minister, Benyamin Netanyahu's, call for UNRWA to be abolished (Beaumont and Holmes, 2018), US president Donald Trump said on Twitter: 'we pay the Palestinians HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect' (Trump, 2018). What seems to be driving the US funding withdrawal from UNRWA is the Palestinian right of return to their homeland, of which UNRWA is a permanent reminder as an agency created in the wake of the *Nakba*. Trump's former Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, at the time of the UNRWA funding cut said: 'I absolutely think we have to look at right of return' (Beaumont and Holmes, 2018).

This cut has already forced UNRWA to axe 250 jobs in the West Bank and Gaza and represents an 'existential threat' to the future of the agency (Beaumont, 2018). For the majority of Palestinian refugees across the Middle East, UNRWA's humanitarian relief is all that separates them from complete destitution so any cuts to frontline services will have a severe impact on poverty levels. Writing on the ninetieth anniversary of UNRWA's founding, Chris Gunness (2019) suggested that the agency had become a 'key battleground' in Trump's 'war against multilateralism'. In addition to United States withdrawal of funding from UNRWA, he was referring to the Trump administration's decision to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thereby reversing a longstanding Washington commitment to have the status of the contested Holy City agreed as part of a negotiated Middle-East settlement (Tisdall, 2018). Gunness was also referring to the US recognition of Israel's illegal annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights (Holmes, 2019) and the US insistence that Israeli settlements were not inconsistent with international law. In November 2019, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said 'Calling the establishment of civilian settlements inconsistent with international law has not advanced the cause of peace' (Borger and Holmes, 2019). However, Amnesty International argues that: 'Israel's policy of settling its civilians in occupied Palestinian territory and displacing the local population contravenes fundamental rules of international humanitarian law' (2019: 29).

While UNRWA has had to contend with a hostile US government extending ‘cost free’ support to Israel on ‘Jerusalem, refugees and settlements’ (Gunness, 2019), the agency has also been rocked by internal ‘allegations of mismanagement’ which forced the resignation of Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl (Beaumont, 2019). The alleged misbehaviour is being investigated by the UN and reportedly involves other senior staff, with these damaging allegations coming at a time of maximum pressure for the agency given the threat posed to Palestinian refugees by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 pandemic

At the time of writing, more than 780,000 people have been infected by the COVID-19 virus in more than 170 countries with 37,800 deaths confirmed globally (Boseley, Devlin and Belam, 2020). As a respiratory virus passed from an infected person by coughs, sneezes or droplets of saliva, the advice from governments has been to ensure ‘social distancing’ by staying two metres away from other people when outdoors. But for Palestinian refugees living in close proximity in densely populated camps in Lebanon and Syria, the likelihood of the spread of infection is high with an obvious difficulty in self-isolating. Lebanon’s financial crisis has impacted on its health service with a shortage of drugs and medical supplies, and just one hospital is being used to treat and quarantine COVID patients (Khatib, 2020). Palestinians are fearful that a surge in COVID cases could result in patients being forced to pay for testing or hospitalisation; costs which are beyond them. With Lebanon, like many other nations, in COVID lockdown, Palestinians employed in the informal economy dependent on daily payments, may find themselves without any regular income.

UNRWA accepts that ‘that Palestine refugees may face challenges in accessing hospital care at Ministry of Health facilities, resulting in increased demand on UNRWA’s hospitalization programme’ (2020b: 3). The fears of many Palestinian refugees in Lebanon that they could be denied medical treatment during the COVID crisis appeared to be born out when Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, a Christian political party, called for ‘measures regarding Palestinian refugee camps and the Syrian presence in Lebanon, namely, closing all camps and preventing everyone from entering or leaving them’ (*Middle-East Monitor*, 2020). UNRWA and NGOs have commenced a sterilisation programme in the Palestinian camps to clean the streets and alleyways to try to contain the virus and is establishing a field level task force in each region ‘to monitor the situation while reinforcing preparedness and response measures’ (Ibid; UNRWA, 2020b: 4).

On 17 March 2020, UNRWA launched a \$14 million ‘flash appeal’ to help prepare and respond to the COVID outbreak suggesting that: ‘Overcrowded living conditions, physical and mental stress and years of protracted conflict all make the vulnerable population of over 5.6 million Palestine refugees particularly susceptible to the ongoing threats of COVID-19’ (UNRWA, 2020b). While all UNRWA schools have been closed, its 144 health clinics remain fully operational but could face a health ‘disaster of unconscionable proportions in places like Gaza and Syria’ (Ibid). With Syria remaining in a state of conflict and Gaza mostly closed off to the outside world as a result of Israel’s siege, these two UNRWA areas of operation are of particular concern. However, Palestinian refugees across the Middle East will require national governments and multilateral agencies to support UNRWA to

mitigate the spread of the virus in the agency's camps and economically assist refugees through this crisis.

Conclusion

Before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Palestinian refugees in Syria enjoyed a status close to full citizenship which contrasted sharply with PRL, who have been perpetual outsiders in Lebanon despite their lengthy residency. The displacement of 60 per cent of PRS, over nearly ten years of war, has created a cascading effect of exacerbating the poverty levels of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The destruction of three Palestinian camps in Syria, particularly Yarmouk which was home to 160,000 PRS, forced 29,000 Palestinian refugees to flee to Lebanon, many of whom now reside in UNRWA camps. There has been a race to the bottom in living standards in Lebanon, as the entry of PRS to the informal labour market has reduced wages and increased competition for employment. The exclusion of PRL from 36 occupations in Lebanon and other discriminatory practices, that include denying Palestinians the right to own or transfer property, is preventing them from elevating their social and economic status. It is also demotivating young people's appetite for education if they are denied an opportunity to secure professional status in a contracted occupation. For many Palestinian refugees from Syria, education can be unavailable due to a lack of legal status or the need to take up employment to add to the family income. Educational drop-out rates for PRS are high and the numbers of PRS and PRL transferring from secondary to higher education remain small.

The movement of PRS into Palestinian camps in Lebanon has increased pressure on UNRWA services at a time when it has come under sustained political attack from the Trump administration and financial pressure given the withdrawal of US support (Gunness, 2019). The social upheaval and protests demanding an end to the corrupt, sectarian political system in Lebanon sparked by government austerity measures in October 2019 (Kassir, 2019) has been rapidly followed by a default on a national debt payment (Cornish and Stubbington, 2020) to create an economic crisis. For Palestinians, the protests offer the possibility of a more inclusive society, but they remain aspirations so long as the old confessional elites remain in power (Fisk, 2019). For Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria, the more pressing and worrying problem is how to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in densely populated camps with high levels of co-morbidities caused by appalling living conditions. The spread of the virus has emphasised the vulnerability of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria to this kind of health pandemic when their health infrastructure is weak, and needs are acute. Moreover, their economic vulnerability is accentuated in a societal lockdown when many refugees, dependent on day-to-day payments in the informal economy, are unable to work.

Given the immense suffering of Palestinians in Syria as a result of the war and the continuing marginalisation of Palestinians in Lebanon owing to discriminatory policies that prevent their naturalisation, now is the time to ensure that UNRWA services are enhanced, not diminished. As Chris Gunness suggests, support for the agency is more important than creating stability in the region, it 'is a singularly important defence against attacks on multilateralism and human rights' (Gunness, 2019).

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