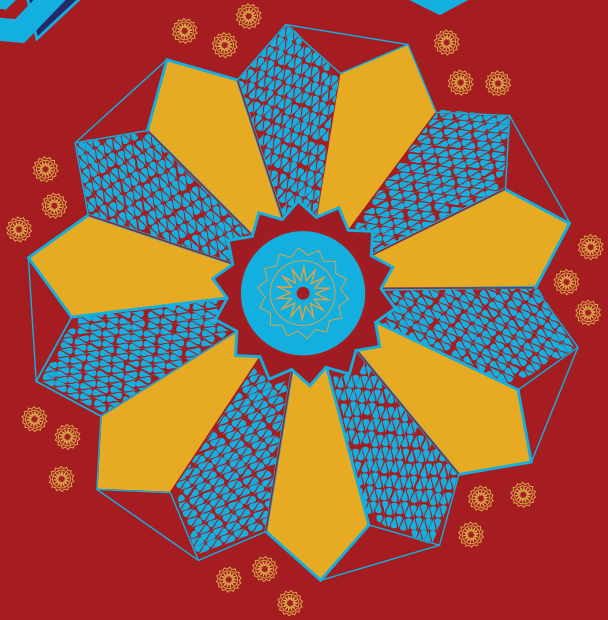
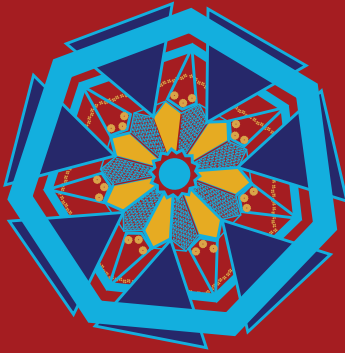
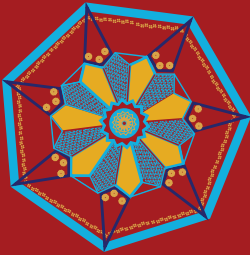




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# *Preventing a New Displacement for the Palestinian Double Refugees*

By Ibrahim Sharqieh

Talking to people in the narrow streets of Ayn al-Hilwe—the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon—you frequently hear a new term in their daily conversations about the Syria conflict: “Death Convoys” (Qawafel al-Mawt). It refers to Palestinian refugees who fled the fighting in Syria, found no refuge in the neighboring countries, and ultimately decided to take part in the extremely dangerous voyages across the Mediterranean to Europe. The Lampedusa tragedy, where at least 359 refugees drowned in October 2013, was only one example.<sup>1</sup> The Palestinians face sieges and starvation in Syria and systematic discrimination in the neighboring countries if they manage to escape. The United Nations (UN) and all the neighboring countries have failed miserably to respond to the latest Palestinian refugee crisis. This must change immediately.

More than 125 Palestinians and Syrians have died of starvation and a lack of medical treatment over the past nine months in the besieged Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Most of Yarmouk’s more than 160,000 refugees have fled, but the less than 18,000 people that

remain are trapped, victims of an increasingly strict blockade. The pro-Assad factions surrounding the strategically located camp have not allowed residents to leave or food to enter for months now, and approaching humanitarian convoys have been attacked. Small deliveries of food aid have recently made it through, but the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) say it is “nothing like enough to meet the needs.”<sup>3</sup> More Palestinian refugees are expected to starve if the blockade is not lifted. This is just the starkest example of how Syria’s Palestinian refugees have been subjected to what UNRWA has called “extreme human suffering” since the beginning of the country’s conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The first displacement of Palestinians occurred during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War when approximately 750,000 were forced out of their homes and sought refuge in neighboring countries. Israel continues to deny those refugees their right of return to their homes—even though it is prescribed by UN General Assembly Resolution 194—and so a series of regional crises have

pushed them from one place to another. Syria was one of the main destinations for displaced Palestinians. Approximately 540,000 Palestinian refugees lived in Syria before the fighting began over three years ago. Most of them have now experienced the bitterness of a second displacement, and the conflict has turned many of them into “double refugees.” As of 31 March 2014, roughly 270,000 Palestinians were internally displaced, and at least 52,000 have fled to Lebanon, 12,000 to Jordan, 6,000 to Egypt, and smaller numbers to Gaza, Europe, and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The misery of displacement for the Palestinian double refugees has manifested itself not only in being forced from their homes in Syria but also in the conditions they face at their destinations.

Jordan has been flooded with nearly 600,000 refugees from Syria, raising serious concerns

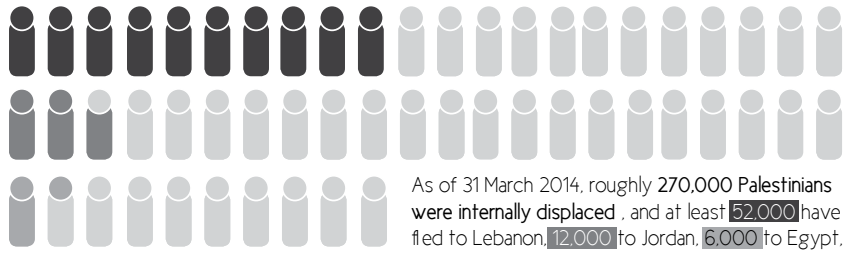
accommodate them in special camps like Al-Zaatari, it has established strict procedures that make it nearly impossible for Palestinians to gain entry. Some of the Palestinians that have been admitted are constrained to the campus of a converted technical college—an area called Cyber City—where their movement is tightly controlled by Jordanian security. UNRWA has also reported cases of forced deportation, where, in a blatant violation of international law, Palestinians have been dumped back across the border to fend for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Lebanon has also been less than welcoming to the double refugees. Overwhelmed by an estimated 868,000 refugees and ever-concerned with its sectarian demographics, in August 2013 Lebanon initiated a set of measures that significantly limits the entry of Palestinians. The

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over how many more it can accommodate. The small nation also continues to host over 30,000 Iraqi refugees that fled their country following the 2003 American invasion. The issue of taking in Palestinian refugees is particularly sensitive due to the delicate balance between Jordanians and Palestinians in the country. While Jordan continues to receive Syrian refugees and

new policy does not explicitly ban Palestinians, but the government regularly uses its arbitrary nature to effectively do just that. For example, a refugee can be returned simply because he does not have a clear destination address like a hotel or for not having a visa to travel to a third country. Lebanon has not established any camps, leaving the refugees to seek their own



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shelter throughout the country. The Palestinian double refugees often end up in the already overcrowded preexisting camps, such as Ayn al-Hilwe, which has added over 20,000 new refugees to its 70,000 residents who live on a space of almost a square mile. Multiple families regularly share single rooms, and food, water, and electricity are scarce. Unlike Syrian refugees, the Palestinians are not allowed to work in Lebanon, exacerbating their hardship. According to the current system, after one year, each refugee must either pay a \$200 fee or return to Syria before attempting to reenter Lebanon. Both options are clearly untenable. The outcome is that the double refugees are living “illegally” in Lebanon, making them vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation. The UN has utterly failed to alleviate the misery of the Palestinian refugees. Despite Secretary General Ban Ki-moon constantly advocating that the UN work in a united fashion, bureaucratic and jurisdictional issues are negatively impacting the Palestinian double refugees. UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for providing aid

to the refugees of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that live in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, historically struggles with funding and is underresourced by the UN. UNRWA’s reliance on donations and lack of a protection mandate leaves the Palestinian refugees in constant limbo. UNRWA is limited to providing health and education services with no proper mandate to protect and advocate for Palestinian refugees.

Though the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is leading the effort to care for the Syrian refugees, it insists that Palestinian refugees are exclusively UNRWA’s responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Under UNHCR protection, Syrian refugees are able to enjoy residency privileges in Lebanon that Palestinian refugees do not. Such privileges—in addition to others—enable Syrian refugees to infiltrate the market in Lebanon and secure jobs and incomes. This is not the case for Palestinian double refugees. Cash assistance to vulnerable refugees varies depending on availability of resources, but in December, for example, UNHCR was paying seventy dollars a month per

vulnerable refugee in Jordan while UNRWA was paying only thirty-five dollars. Systems and policies created by the UN and the authorities of host countries led twenty-nine-year-old Mahmoud, a Palestinian double refugee in Ayn Al-Hilwe to say, “Our dream is that we Palestinian refugees would just be treated like the Syrian refugees. This will help us to cope with the harsh life of refuge.”<sup>8</sup> This is not in any way to suggest that the Syrian refugees are experiencing good conditions in Lebanon. On the contrary, their situation is dire, and their suffering is mounting every day. This comparison endeavors to illustrate the flaws of the UN system and its inability to respond to this humanitarian crisis, in the hope that these issues can be rectified.

This systemic discrimination is perhaps most harmful in Egypt. UNHCR continues to claim that Palestinian refugees are not their responsibility, UNRWA does not have a mandate in Egypt, and Egyptian authorities refuse to acknowledge the existence of Palestinian refugees on their soil to avoid Egypt being identified as a “place of refuge.” As a result, Palestinian refugees in Egypt are not receiving the aid—cash assistance, medical care, education for children—that Syrian refugees enjoy. Egypt has also arbitrarily arrested and detained Palestinian double refugees, even deporting several groups to Syria.<sup>9</sup>

The crisis of the Palestinian

double refugees is a grievous moral and humanitarian dilemma. This displaced population is vulnerable not only to physical suffering, but many types of exploitation, such as price gouging and extremely low wages. Due to increased demand, rent for apartments in Lebanon’s Shatila refugee camp has jumped almost 300 percent since the beginning of the Syria crisis. By not adequately addressing the situation, the host nations are also creating risks for themselves. Particularly in Lebanon, the longer the government goes without providing the Palestinians with legal methods of survival, the more likely they will be to set up their own illegal systems that will be difficult to eradicate in the future. Many Palestinians have already overstayed their one-year residency limit and are now living in the shadows in constant fear of being deported back to Syria. To be fair to the Lebanese government, not a single case of deportation has been reported so far, but nevertheless, this shadow life subjects them to exploitation and radicalization, threatening to further destabilize these fragile countries.

What is the answer for the Palestinians? Some are actually refugees for the third or fourth time, having been previously forced from Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, or Iraq during the region’s many conflicts. In 2003, Palestinian refugees who were

forced out of Iraq after the U.S. invasion ended up stranded in the desert between Iraq and Jordan for three years with no one accepting them until they were finally sent to Brazil and Chile. There is no guarantee that the refugees that have now fled from Syria will be able to return when the situation there improves. This long journey of suffering that began with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and has since turned many Palestinians into double, triple, and quadruple refugees must end. Israel bears a major responsibility

treat them fairly, like the other Syrian refugees, especially with regard to entry and residency requirements. Lebanon especially must change its visa and residency policies, allowing the Palestinian double refugees to remain in the country as long as the conditions that caused them to flee persist, and without paying exorbitant fees.

Lebanon should also take the domestically controversial step of establishing refugee camps, or at the very least, expanding the ones that exist. Leaving the

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for the current situation because it caused the original displacement and continues to deny the refugees the universal right of returning to their homes. This experience has left no doubt that no shelter in the region or the world presents a sustainable alternative to returning to their own land. Applying the right of return is the only solution to one of the most horrific humanitarian crises in the world today and will save the region from further conflicts, radicalization, and destabilization.

As for countries currently hosting the double refugees, Jordan and Lebanon should repeal the policies that discriminate against Palestinian refugees and

refugees to roam the country has serious potential to create many security, economic, and humanitarian problems, both for the refugees and the country. It is time for Lebanon to define and address this issue—through official registration and proper residency regulations—rather than continuing to push it underground and pretending it does not exist.

However, Jordan and Lebanon should not be left with the entire responsibility of handling their refugee influx just because they happen to border Syria. The massive number of refugees these two countries have absorbed far exceeds their resources and has imposed a heavy economic burden. The

international community should take responsibility and contribute significant additional financial resources to deal with the serious challenge Jordan and Lebanon are facing. Israel should not be exempted from its responsibility towards the first displacement of the double refugees and contribute today towards a solution especially on applying the principle of the right of return. Moreover, other Arab countries should offer to host some of the refugees fleeing Syria. Many refugees have excellent skills and can contribute to market needs, especially in the Gulf region. This approach is particularly important as it advances a dignified method of alleviating the suffering of the refugees. Refugees could contribute positively to Gulf economies while supporting themselves and their families wherever they are taking refuge.

The UN must better integrate UNRWA within its system. The UN should recognize that UNRWA is only mandated to provide services such as health and education, and though it tries its best to advocate for the refugees, it does not have a proper protection mandate like UNHCR. UN agencies must include Palestinian double refugees in their planning and studies—such as needs assessments—and stop assuming that UNRWA is capable of handling all types of needs.

Finally, the UN must step up to its responsibility and

intervene strongly in Egypt to ensure Palestinian double refugees are receiving the health, education, shelter, and protection they need. Leaving the double refugees vulnerable to the UN's conflicting mandates and systemic inconsistencies in addition to the brutal policies of Egyptian authorities will only multiply the “convoys of death.” It is in the interest of everyone to end the suffering of the Palestinian double refugees. One should not assume that they will be forever passive participants in this misery. Eventually, they may very well take things into their own hands. ♦

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<sup>1</sup> Agence France-Presse. “Lampedusa Migrant Shipwreck Toll Rises to 359,” 12 October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International. “Syria: Yarmouk Under Siege - a Horror Story of War Crimes, Starvation and Death,” 10 March 2014.

<sup>3</sup> BBC. “‘Aid Enters’ Besieged Damascus Camp of Yarmouk,” 18 January 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Agence France-Presse. “U.N. Warns on Syria's Yarmuk Refugee Camp,” 9 January 2014.

<sup>5</sup> UNRWA. “Syria Crisis Response Update (Issue No 73),” 7 April 2014.

<sup>6</sup> UNRWA. “UNRWA Syria Crisis Response January–June 2013,” 21 December 2012.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR officials. Author interview, Beirut, January 2014, and Amman, December 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Mahmoud. Author conversation, Ayn al-Hilwe, January 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International. “‘We Cannot Live Here Any More’: Refugees from Syria in Egypt,” 17 October 2013.