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Rejecting resettlement: the case of the Palestinians

Anne Irfan

Palestinian rejection of resettlement was driven by political concerns. This case study shows the importance of engaging directly with refugees when devising durable solutions.

Over their seven decades as a large-scale refugee population, the Palestinians have been remarkably consistent in collectively opposing resettlement as a durable solution to their plight. Both the grass roots and later the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) have repudiated any suggestion of third-country resettlement on the grounds that it would undermine the Palestinians' political and national rights as a people. Host-country integration was similarly spurned.

The Right of Return

The Palestinian refugees' vehement opposition to resettlement is explained

by their equally vehement attachment to repatriation. The right of return has been a central tenet of the Palestinian nationalist movement since 1948 when many Palestinian refugees left their homes believing that they would return shortly, as a result often taking only a few belongings with them. While events on the ground put paid to these immediate plans, they did not destroy the hope of eventual return in the future. On the contrary, the collective Palestinian desire for repatriation remained strong, buoyed by the United Nations' (UN's) formal endorsement of the right of return in Resolution 194. Calls for the realisation of this right became central to

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Palestinian political discourse, and Resolution 194 remains a popular and effective rallying cry today. When Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said in 2012 that he was willing to forgo his right to return to his hometown of Safad, his comments provoked outrage across the diaspora.

Palestinian opposition to resettlement must be understood within this context. Resettlement as a durable solution is by implication mutually exclusive with return. Many Palestinian refugees have feared, sometimes with good reason, that resettlement schemes are politically motivated and designed to undermine their political cause by 'solving' their problem once and for all. Resettlement was thus never seen as a purely humanitarian solution but was always politically tainted. The PLO institutionalised this widespread hostility to the idea by formally opposing any international plans for either host state integration or third-country resettlement.

Failed resettlement

The refugees' resistance to resettlement was fuelled by resettlement's perceived connection to the UN. Many Palestinian refugees were suspicious of the international community in general and of the UN in particular, which they perceived as biased towards Israel. The

programmes put forward by the UN with the unofficial aim of facilitating resettlement did nothing to allay such concerns.

In the first decade after 1948, the UN focused on attempting to resettle the Palestinian refugees into either the (Arab) host states or third countries (usually also imagined as Arab countries). This was in keeping with the post-war international preference for resettlement over return. Moreover, this seemed the most feasible solution for the Palestinian refugees in view of Israel's refusal to countenance their return. It was thought that resettling the Palestinian refugees across the Arab world would be straightforward in view of their shared linguistic and cultural ties.

On the world stage, both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) favoured this option. This was particularly significant as it was the US and the UK that championed and largely funded the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which had been established in 1949 as a specialist body for the Palestinian crisis. While its primary focus was on relief, in the 1950s it also became the focus for broader resettlement plans for the Palestinians. The 'Works' of its title referred to job schemes designed to facilitate the refugees' economic development and local integration. In 1952 the UN General Assembly even authorised a UNRWA Reintegration Fund for the precise purpose of resettling the refugees outside Palestine.

Such plans were overwhelmingly opposed and rejected by the Palestinian refugees themselves. Observing that the Works schemes presupposed their futures outside Palestine, the refugees largely declined to enrol and participate. Their intransigence, combined with the costly nature of the schemes, led UNRWA to eventually abandon the programme, switching its emphasis in the late 1950s to education. Yet the



Mural in a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank, calling for the right of return.

Works schemes' impact far outlasted their duration, and resettlement has remained a major source of tension and suspicion in the refugees' relationship with UNRWA. It is an early example of the lasting damage that can be caused when humanitarian planning fails to take sufficient account of the refugees' own expectations.

On similar grounds, the Palestinian refugees also resisted UNRWA's efforts to develop and stabilise the infrastructure in their camps in the 1950s. In the eyes of the refugees, these moves were another part of the same plan to permanently settle them outside Palestine. In response, they uprooted trees planted by UNRWA in the camps, sprayed structures with red anti-resettlement slogans, demonstrated and went on strike. Their opposition was so vehement that UNRWA was unable to implement its plans, another instance of the problems caused by inadequate engagement with the refugees themselves.

Hostility from the Palestinian refugees was not the only reason that resettlement was never implemented or seriously pursued. There was also a major obstacle in the form of opposition from the Arab states, both those already hosting large Palestinian refugee populations, and those who might be targeted for third-country resettlement schemes. With the possible exception of Jordan, these governments feared that resettlement would compel them to absorb large numbers of refugees as citizens. The Arab states consistently spoke at the UN against resettling the Palestinians, calling rather for return as the only viable and acceptable solution. Without Arab support, resettlement stood little chance and in 1987 the UNRWA Commissioner-General Giorgio Giacomelli stated that although the agency had been conceived with the intention of facilitating resettlement, financial and political factors had rendered this impossible.¹

Individual resettlement

The PLO too actively opposed resettlement, insisting that UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, not pursue this for the Palestinians. The PLO's opposition was grounded in the concern that resettlement would

fragment the Palestinian diaspora and thereby undermine their collective national rights as a people. Crucially, it explicitly requested that individual Palestinians refrain from applying for asylum in the West, fearing that any such moves might enable resettlement 'by the back door'.

Notwithstanding this, many individual Palestinians have successfully pursued third-country resettlement, acquiring citizenship in Europe, North America and Latin America. In the vast majority of cases they have done so while continuing to identify as Palestinian refugees and still favouring repatriation as a long-term solution for the exiled community as a whole.

Emigration to Western states received legal backing in 2012 from a ruling in the European Court of Justice, which created a precedent for Palestinian eligibility to claim asylum in Europe.² Even the PLO has reportedly softened its stance on individual resettlement, acknowledging that it is not necessarily incompatible with collective repatriation rights.

The issue of individual resettlement has taken on a new significance in the context of the Syrian crisis. Syria historically provided some of the best conditions and entitlements for Palestinian refugees in the Arab world, a situation that has been grotesquely inverted by the current war. Since 2011, more than 100,000 Palestinians have fled their homes in Syria, becoming second-time refugees. As first Jordan and then Lebanon have closed their doors to Palestinians from Syria, some are now looking to Europe for refuge.

The plight of Palestinians fleeing Syria has highlighted some of the long-term problems facing Palestinian refugees in general. Their affiliation to UNRWA rather than UNHCR places them at a unique disadvantage, rendering them ineligible for the large-scale resettlement programmes organised through the latter. Instead, they must make individual asylum applications, and often do not qualify as political refugees or even as stateless persons. Their legal vulnerability means that Palestinians can be denied the protections afforded to other refugees, including regarding resettlement.

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Conclusion

The Palestinian refugee situation is in many ways exceptional. Its longevity, scale and institutional uniqueness all distinguish it from most other refugee situations. It can nevertheless offer valuable lessons, not least when it comes to resettlement.

In the case of the Palestinians, resettlement not only failed but barely got off the ground. While the refugees' opposition to it was driven by political concerns, the situation was not helped by the failure of international humanitarians to engage with them directly. The result has been lasting mistrust and suspicion that have continually plagued the refugees' relationships with UNRWA in particular, and the UN in general.

The suspicion felt by many Palestinian refugees towards resettlement was also due to the perceived implications of the solution's permanence. This is certainly not exceptional, in view of many refugee groups' continuing preference for repatriation over

other solutions. If people wish ultimately to return home, they are less likely to embrace measures that they fear will undermine their ability to do so. It is therefore worth exploring ways of re-constructing the 'three durable solutions' so as to allay such anxieties. The Palestinian case shows that if resettlement can be devised and fashioned so as not to undermine the possibility of eventual return, it may prove more palatable.

Finally, it is worth remembering that UNHCR itself continues to hold up voluntary repatriation as the preferred durable solution for all refugees, and resettlement as the last resort. On this the Palestinian refugees are firmly aligned with the UN.

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1. The full interview can be found in the UNHCR journal *Refugees*, September 1987.
2. El Kott judgement <http://bit.ly/Curia-ElKottjudgement>