



Analysis: Palestinian refugees from Syria feel abandoned

RAMTHA/BEIRUT/DUBAI, 29 August 2012 (IRIN) - In Jordan and Lebanon, the UN agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA) has registered nearly 5,000 Palestinian refugees from the 17-month conflict in Syria. As both countries are already home to large Palestinian refugee populations, the newly arrived have become a political issue - with Palestinians feeling they are treated unfairly.

"It has been quite bad living like a prisoner, especially when you see other people come and go but you are trapped," said Samir, a Palestinian at a dormitory-style facility known as Cyber City, 90km north of the Jordanian capital Amman.

When Samir arrived in Jordan five months ago, Syrian refugees could move and work freely within Jordan with the signature of a Jordanian guarantor, while Palestinians, many of whom have family in Jordan, were prohibited from leaving the camp to visit or stay with relatives. This month, the Jordanian government discontinued the sponsorship system for Syrian refugees.

Samir's wife Hanah could have left the camp because she is Syrian. "Can you imagine such discrimination?" she asked IRIN. "I will not leave them."

Palestinians said they were not allowed to move more than 30m from the building. The camp is 12km from downtown Ramtha and is not served by public transport.

UNRWA told IRIN only 185 Palestinians without a valid visa - i.e. those who were smuggled over the border, or who had to leave their papers behind - have been sent to Cyber City, while another 770 live outside the camp. Refugees IRIN interviewed at the camp said Palestinians not holding Syrian or Jordanian nationality had been sent to the camp.

Palestinians at Cyber City told IRIN that family members trying to flee had been turned back at the Jordanian border, a phenomenon also noted by Human Rights Watch.

Reacting to the allegations, Samir Maaytah, minister of state for media affairs and communications, told IRIN: "Each country has the right to protect its sovereignty. At some point, we did not allow some Syrians to enter Jordan via air, for example, because we have the right to check who is coming in. Jordan should not be questioned over its sovereignty rights. Turkey, for example, had recently said it needs to regulate how many Syrians are entering its borders. No one has given a reason for it or questioned it."

Most of those at the camp are Palestinian Jordanians who had their citizenship withdrawn years ago in a Jordanian attempt to discourage Israeli transfers of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan.

"I was born in Jordan, but moved with my family to Syria. In 1995, they withdrew my citizenship from me and my brother. Although it is my country, I cannot move freely inside along with other people," said Samir, who showed his Jordanian birth certificate to IRIN.

Maaytah told IRIN: "Whether it is Palestinians or not, those who came without Jordanian or Syrian nationalities. will be given basic rights but any additional benefits are not Jordan's responsibility. These people came to Jordan seeking security and Jordan gave it to them."

But Jordan's fears might go deeper. While Palestinians are estimated to make up more than half of Jordan's population, the Hashemite dynasty relies on its non-Palestinian tribal support base for power. Since "Black September" in 1970 when Jordanian and Palestine Liberation Organization forces battled for control over the kingdom, the issue of how many Palestinians reside in the country has become taboo. During the second Gulf war, when scores of Palestinian expat workers fled to Jordan, the country found itself in a similar position as today.

"Jordan has experienced 500,000 Palestinians coming from Kuwait in 1992. It changed the way our society functions. In a country of just three million people, 500,000 refugees [are a lot]," a government employee, who preferred anonymity, told IRIN in March. "As Jordanians we are worried for the interests of our country."

Lebanon

Similar dynamics are at play in Lebanon, which hosted 455,000 Palestinians before the Syrian crisis.

"The Lebanese have made it clear they don't want to see more than a certain number of people coming here," a high-ranking aid official told IRIN on condition of anonymity.

Some 4,000 Palestinians have registered with UNRWA in Lebanon, many of them in the last month. Many more may not have registered because of their "vulnerable" status there, said Roger Davies, acting director of UNRWA affairs in Lebanon.

According to Palestinian-Syrian journalist Nidal Bitari, the problem in receiving Palestinians is rooted in the Lebanese civil war and the long-standing tensions between the Lebanese government and Palestinian factions.

Most of the Palestinians fleeing from Syria to Lebanon have gone to one of the 12 Palestinian refugee camps, but the camps in Beirut are overcrowded slums. With limited opportunities for Palestinians to find jobs and leave, many of these settlements have become breeding grounds for extremism. Fear that the new refugees might be recruited by armed Palestinian fractions such as Fatah al-Islam is influencing government decisions, thinks Bitari.

Forced to pay

Officially both Jordan and Lebanon are keeping their borders open for all refugees from Syria. But unlike Syrians, who can freely enter Lebanon for up to six months, Palestinians receive only a one-week residency permit. Once that expires, they must pay 50,000 LBP (US\$33) each month to renew it.

"There is a clear distinction between Palestinians from Syria and Syrians from Syria," said Davies.

For some of the Palestinians, the fee is hard to afford: "My son arrived on 18 July and is still here [without a permit]. Where do we get the money from?" said Umm al-Khayr, a sick woman in her sixties from Damascus. "Why don't they just give us six months like the Syrians?"

Corruption is also a problem: "I saw a Palestinian woman at the border, who did not know anyone in Lebanon and she was forced to pay \$300 in bribes, \$40 for each child," said Darim, a teenager from Damascus. Palestinians who want to leave Syria still need permission from the Syrian government. While UNRWA said the procedure has been eased, NGO worker Rawan Nassar told IRIN that people have been asked to deposit large sums of money to obtain permission from the Syrian authorities, or have even been forced into providing sexual favours by border officials.

According to Palestinian sources close to Fatah, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas is expected to visit Lebanon shortly to negotiate better conditions with the government.

Costly, cramped camps

In Lebanon, already poor conditions in the camps are affecting the Palestinians. But even in these camps, rents remain high. Refugees complain that even when they pay \$200, the rooms they get are in an awful condition. "In Sabra there is another family of 12 and they are all sleeping in one room without any mattress," said Abu Ahmad, an old man bearing the hallmarks of the Syrian intelligence's brutality: broken teeth and bullet wounds on his arms.

Jordan's Cyber City, visited by IRIN, houses about 400 refugees, both Palestinians and Syrians.

Families are given separate rooms; singles have to share. "The room is too small for a family. I feel awkward walking to the bathroom with so many strange men around. We are nearly 40 people on this floor," said Hanah.

Refugees who have to share kitchens and bathrooms with 30-40 people complained about unsanitary conditions in the camp.

"It is quite smelly here. Some of the mattresses had bugs. People caught skin infections and head lice," said Hanah.

Betrayed?

Many Palestinians feel betrayed, and blame the government and aid agencies. While Syrian refugees receive assistance from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Palestinians fall under the mandate of UNRWA, with its smaller relief budget.

"UN agencies turned their backs on us," said a refugee in Jordan who did not give his name. Refugees in Lebanon had similar stories to tell: "There is a woman in her seventh month of pregnancy who arrived two weeks ago with four kids and so far she hasn't received anything from UNRWA," said Umm Ahmad, Darim's mother.

UNRWA Jordan told IRIN that while funds are limited "we acknowledge all Palestine refugees registered with the agency. Those who live in the agency's five areas of operations are eligible for its services."

UNRWA is providing primary health care free of charge, but has only limited additional funds for the new refugees. The extra strain that refugee children might put on UNRWA's schooling system is of special concern. UNRWA has appealed to donors for an additional \$27.4 million for its consolidated regional plan, but so far has only received \$4.71million.

"We do not know our future," said one of the refugees. "People come and take pictures and speak with us, but they all leave at the end."

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