Palestinian Refugees from Syria: From Fractured Histories to Alternative Futures

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Fractured Histories

The Syrian refugee crisis has hit Jordan hard. UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) acknowledges that[1], as of September 2014, there were 646,000 registered “persons of concern” in Jordan. The Jordanian government holds the number at 1 million or more, believing that some 400,000 “unregistered refugees” have not yet sought formalization of their status as refugees with UNHCR. Za’atari, which opened in 2012, is home to about 100,000 of those refugees. These residents make Za’atari the second largest refugee camp in the world and the fourth largest “city” in Jordan, as well as one of the most widely-reported camp settings. Most Za’atari refugees are from the nearby southern Syrian region of Dar’a, where the uprising began in 2011.

The Jordanian government and populace share many concerns about this large influx and settlement of “foreigners.” These refugees are a comprehensive and robust drain on economic resources[2], noticeable and tangible users of precious natural resources[3], and increasingly seen as a security threat[4]. Debates within Jordan about the voluminous influx of refugees are not dissimilar to at least some of the debates within Europe that have occurred during 2015[5]. This is particularly true when the refugees are Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS).

In terms of the histories, prior to the Syrian Civil War, the 581,000 Palestinians in Syria, similar to those Palestinians in Jordan who compose nearly half of the country’s population, were refugees from the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. They resided primarily on the western and southwestern parts of Syria, including 13 refugee camps, the largest of which was Yarmouk with a population of nearly 150,000 and the closest to Jordan was Dar’a with 10,000 people. Palestinians were fractured away from a maintaining a cohesive population throughout the 20th century.

As has been discussed elsewhere, when refugees from the Syrian war first began to stream into Jordan in 2011-2[6], the Jordanian Ministry of Interior registered the newcomers (both Palestinian and Syrian) and placed them in the care of families, mainly in the capital of Amman. This kafala or “sponsorship” system is considered Bedouin custom, but contemporary alterations to the practice gives Arab states a “local” method of recruiting and maintaining migrant workers. A citizen or a company, known as a kafil,
sponsors the migrant for a work visa and residency permit. At first the kafala system was used for all refugees from Syria, regardless of nationality or legal status. But the Palestinian refugees soon overwhelmed the capacity of the their friend and family networks that could support them through the kafala system. In 2012, the kafala system was eliminated for Palestinians, and Syrians were moved into refugee camps such as Za’atari. Once again, Palestinians from Syria again experienced a fracturing, this time from Syrians with whom they have shared national experiences.

**Contemporary Uncertainties**

Such historically fractured trajectories make prospects for everyday life unstable and unmoored, and difficult to manage. Many of those Palestinians in Syria had previously been residents in Jordan. Prior to the conflict in Syria, Palestinians had some freedom of movement back into Jordan. Many who left Jordan during the 1970s for Syria lost their legal status in Jordan, but retained the option of returning to the kingdom to live or to visit family. After the Syrian uprising began in 2011, many of these Palestinians wanted to exercise the option to return to Jordan and also requested their Jordanian documents from the 1970s back so they could resettle in Jordan. The government refused to issue the papers, instead holding the Palestinians at the border for days, even months. To deflect international condemnation, Jordan permitted Palestinian children under the age of 6 to enter for emergency medical treatment, knowing that many families would not accept separation, or would have their child returned to Syria when well. As for the few who managed to get in, the government prohibited them from staying with Jordanian relatives or another kafil, and forced many to return to Syria, in violation of the international legal principle of non-refoulement. Others the government sent to Cyber City, a complex in northern Jordan that now serves as a camp especially for Palestinians coming from Syria. Jordanian policies served to fracture PRS from Syria with Jordanian families, other PRS family members, and even their own histories in Jordan.

As the Syrian war intensified in 2012, Jordan worked rapidly to construct the huge Za’atari camp to accommodate the influx of Syrian refugees. The Syrian nationals residing in Za’atari can still be bailed out of the camp by a Jordanian kafil. At the same time, however, Jordan stopped accepting any Palestinians from Syria under the kafala system, instead sending those refugees to Cyber City. In mid-2012, sometime in July or August, the government declared that Palestinians from Syria could no longer cross the border at all. In addition, the government asked all families who hosted Palestinians under the kafala system to present their guests for relocation to Cyber City.

Cyber City is part of a complex of QIZ (Qualified Industrial Zone) buildings that were rented out by the Jordanian government to host the growing number of refugees. The residential building consists of 6 stories, 2 units and 2 communal kitchens per floor, and
12 rooms in each unit, which has the capacity to hold around 480 people (with approximately 2 people per unit). Surrounding the building, there are about 14 single-room, mobile units that house non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as UNHCR and Save the Children, who provide basic needs and services to the refugees. In addition, the small area also contains a mosque, two supermarkets, a playground, a women’s room, and an activity center. The entire camp is under the management of the Jordanian Ministry of Interior.

As of June 2014, the number of refugees in Cyber City reached 397, around 90 families, and they consist of either completely Palestinian members, or Syrians who are mixed with Palestinian families; only 50% of the people themselves are Palestinians. Residents of Cyber City come from Yarmouk and Dar’a Palestinian refugee camps, the Dar’a region, and points elsewhere. Two sisters who live in the camp are from Homs, and had arrived in Jordan via a lengthy trip across the eastern desert; one elder was born in Palestine pre-1948 to a displaced family and said, “I was born in a refugee camp. I'll die in one.” Life in Cyber City is deemed to be a tough one as rules and regulations for those in the camp are becoming stricter and are more constrained. Palestinians and their families are not allowed to attain any formal identification card or a Ministry of Interior card (MOI cards) that defines their status as refugees and render benefits due to them.

Denied employment and income, Palestinian refugees in Cyber City are bored and listless, and the younger generations are driven into depression, refugee women say. It has become very hard to maintain a family, let alone to start one. The UNHCR vouchers are insufficient, there is no access to higher education and many families have been separated. Many refugees say they are living in an open-air prison, according to an UNRWA worker, and that they would rather return to Syria than stay in Cyber City. The unbearable situation has led several youths to attempt suicide or to escape. As of June 2014, the total number of runaways was 45, 30 of whom were found and returned to the camp. Many were able to abscond through the empty construction zones. Others request their “vacation time” and do not return. They are extremely isolated.

**Alternative Futures**

According to UNRWA, more than 560,000 Palestinians have been displaced or become refugees from Syria, nearly 100,00 of whom have sought refuge in neighboring Jordan and Lebanon. As of April 2014, over 13,836 Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) had sought support from UNRWA in Jordan. The vast majority of these refugees live in communities with host families or in rental premises\[7\]. Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) present a difficult case as they encounter compounded political vulnerabilities that
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ethnic Syrians do not. Most prominently of them, PRS movement out of Syria renders them legally both stateless and statusless.

Governments have responded to the PRS families in Cyber City. The Jordanians have sent “troublemakers” back to Syria; Europeans have offered to take many, ultimately decreasing the number of Cyber City residents by 25% between 2014 and 2015. However, the remaining 13,000+ PRS in Jordan face an uncertain future defined by such fractured histories: are they Palestinian Refugees eligible for citizenship in Jordan as they may have been in the 1970s? Are they “Syrians” and able to benefit from the possibilities for either migration to the west or safe return to Syria? By all accounts the answer to these questions is a resounding no, which prompts only more speculation about what alternatives might exist for their futures.


