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The Palestinian Refugees: Facts, Figures, and Significance

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The decision by US President Donald Trump to freeze a third of the United States' contribution to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, has brought renewed attention to an organization whose very existence and activity arouses harsh criticism in Israel. UNRWA was established in 1949 after the War of Independence to deal solely with Palestinian refugees. As with the question of Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugee issue has been seen for some seventy years as a principal obstacle to a resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For the Palestinians who have been raised on the Nakba heritage, any compromise on this issue is an attack on Palestinian national identity.

The number of individuals forced to leave their homes during the War of Independence is estimated at 720,000. Most of them settled in refugee camps in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. According to UNRWA, all the descendants of Palestinian refugees are considered refugees, and therefore today they number over five and a half million. Citizenship of another country, for example, Jordan, does not cancel their refugee status. In other words, only the return of the refugees and their descendants to their homes can cancel this status.

For Israeli governments, the Palestinian demand for the "right of return" of refugees was and remains a red line. This position is supported by an absolute majority of Israeli citizens from all parts of the political spectrum, because the return of such large numbers of Palestinian refugees to the State of Israel would have far reaching consequences for the character of the state. However, all the attempts by the State of Israel over the years to change UNRWA's definition of refugees have failed. Israel's efforts to change UNRWA's status as an independent entity and subject it to the UNHCR, which handles all other refugees worldwide, has failed as well. This is largely because the Arab countries believe that such a change would make it impossible to pass on refugee status to the descendants of Palestinian refugees and thus weaken the Palestinian position in negotiations.

The social and political shockwaves in the Middle East since 2011 make it imperative to reexamine the refugee issue. First, the expanding numbers of refugees from the Middle East and Africa challenge the uniqueness of the Palestinian situation. Today there are

some 60 million displaced people, including 17 million refugees, half of them under the age of 18. These refugees are the responsibility of the UNHCR (High Commissioner for Refugees), and some make their way to Europe. Their movement has enormous economic, security, political, and national consequences for most of the countries of the continent.

This is the reason why the issue of Palestinian refugees is perceived more as the reflection of an ongoing lapse by Arab countries, Israel, and the international community, which have been unable to separate the solution to this problem from the greater political arrangement between Israel and the Palestinians. Despite the ongoing distress of the refugees, the subject is still seen as the Palestinians' main bargaining chip in peace negotiations with Israel. However, the value of this historical card appears to be ebbing with the growing numbers of refugees worldwide and the absence of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In contrast to figures on UNRWA's official site, which cite 526,700 registered refugees in Lebanon, newly published figures based on a Lebanese census conducted in cooperation with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimate their number at 175,000. This figure is interesting in itself, because of the familiar tendency of Palestinian elements to be reluctant to reduce the number of refugees. More specifically, the situation of the refugees in Lebanon has always been considered worse than in other countries, due to the strong restrictions there against them. Therefore, it is generally accepted that they be dealt with first in any settlement. Even when ideas were proposed for a symbolic return of refugees to Israel in the framework of family reunification, refugees from Lebanon were spoken of first. The gap in the figures strengthens the assumption that the numbers on the UNRWA site do not reflect reality – not only in Lebanon, but also in other countries. This assumption undermines the reliability of this organization, which has always been seen in Israel as a hostile entity at the forefront of the struggle to perpetuate the refugee issue and the demand for the "right of return."

Moreover, due to the ongoing war in Syria, refugees from Lebanon and Syria have migrated to other countries. The demographic changes in Lebanon, particularly the dramatic decline in the proportion of Palestinian refugees, mean a reduced threat to a breach of the delicate balance between different population groups. This could enable the Lebanese government to introduce a more lenient policy regarding refugee rights, which could perhaps reduce the pressure to promote a special arrangement for refugees there. Although there are no new independent figures about the number of Palestinian refugees in Syria, their numbers have likely dropped significantly, and the problem of Palestinian refugees in Syria is no longer the focus of the refugee agenda in that country.

With the refugee issue ongoing for so long, changes have occurred in their integration into their "host" countries. Contrary to widespread opinion, only 45 percent of the refugees in Lebanon live in camps. Fifty-seven percent of the refugees in the Shatila camp are from Syria, and only about 30 percent are Palestinians. Similarly, in Jordan, which granted citizenship to most of the Palestinian refugees, many live in "regular" residential areas rather than camps.

It is hard to preserve refugee status forever, and in view of social, political, and economic processes, the integration of Palestinian refugees into the economy and society of host countries is inevitable. This does not mean that the subject of refugees should not be settled. However, after seven decades and many changes in the Middle East, perhaps this complex issue should be disconnected from the greater political settlement. The problem of the refugees is a national Palestinian problem, but also a personal problem for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and failure to resolve the subject does not make them more moderate.

President Trump's decision to freeze aid to UNRWA without giving it a proper chance to prepare for the provision of services to needy refugees in the Gaza Strip does not contribute to stability or moderation in the region. It is not inevitable, as has happened before, that the State of Israel will have to settle this account.