
UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History Within History
Riccardo Bocco (Guest Editor)*

It is difficult to conceive a sustainable, long-lasting solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict without examining the refugee issue and identifying a just solution to it for both sides. Over time, and beside its emotional dimensions, the refugee issue has been increasingly regarded as a “problem” for the Israeli and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)/Palestinian Authority (PA) leaderships, who have generally taken uncompromising positions. The international stakeholders have been unable to suggest compromises acceptable to the parties concerned. In a recent work, M. Chiller Glaus reviews in detail the juridical debates and the political proposals of the last twenty years and concludes that “there will be no Israeli-Palestinian Peace agreement if the question of refugees remains unresolved, and the question of Palestinian refugees will not be resolved without the concrete prospect for an overall Israeli-Palestinian agreement”.¹

Sometimes depicted as “the original sin” of the Israeli State,² the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinian civilians during the 1948 war contradicts the Zionist myth of the right to “a land without people for a people without a land”. Yet, for the Israeli population, the possible return of masses of Palestinian refugees is disconcerting as they view any such return as analogous to the effacement of Israel’s Jewish character.³ Denying, ignoring or sweeping the refugee issue under the rug, therefore, has been the main approach of most Israeli governments since 1948.

On the Palestinian side, and during the secret Oslo talks, the Fatah leadership accepted not to include United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 194 of 1948⁴ in the Declaration of Principles, signed in September 1993, as a basis for negotiating a final peace agreement with the Israeli government. This decision sparked resentment and opposition among a majority of Palestinian refugees worldwide, who felt their right to return to their original homeland and/or their right to compensation had been betrayed. Although the Palestinian leadership has become progressively aware of the impossibility of return for millions of refugees, it has been seeking “principled” solutions related to at least a partial acknowledgement of responsibility by Israel.⁵

As Rashid Khalidi has pointed out, “[a] combination of factors has prevented the negotiating process to be successful, including: callous pragmatism of US policy-makers, a balance of forces massively favourable to Israel (whose leaders would prefer to ignore both history and international legitimacy) and profound weaknesses in Palestinian negotiating performance from Oslo onwards”.⁶

Since the early 1990s, the United States of America and the European Union, in particular, have been advocating a realpolitik approach to the Palestinian refugee issue and have been pushing the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership to reach “hard compromises”. While still awaiting positive developments, international donors have continued funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is commemorating its 60th anniversary in 2009 and is presently assisting nearly 4,700,000 people in the Near East.⁷

This introduction aims to provide a background to the contributions included in this special issue. In the first part, some short historical information on UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees helps to outline a number of characteristics of the two main actors under consideration. In the second part, some present challenges facing UNRWA and relevant future research topics are grouped in transversal themes that take into account the relationships between UNRWA and its clients.

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Endnotes

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¹ See Michael Chiller Glaus, *Tackling the Intractable. Palestinian Refugees and the Search for Middle East Peace*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2007, 352.

² See Dominique Vidal and Joseph Algazy, *Le pêché originel d’Israël. L’expulsion des Palestiniens revisitée par les ‘nouveaux historiens’ israéliens*, Paris, Editions de l’Atelier, 1998.

³ See the contribution of J. Peters and O. Gal in this volume.

⁴ Interpreted by the refugees as a legitimization of their right of return, paragraph 11 of this resolution resolves that: “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the governments or the authorities responsible”. See UNGA res. 194 (III), December 1948.

⁵ See the contribution of M. Dumper in this volume.

⁶ R. Khalidi, “Truth, justice and reconciliation: Elements of a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue”, in Gh. Karmi and E. Cottran (eds.), *The Palestinian Exodus, 1948-1998*, London, Ithaca Press, 1999, 239.

⁷ See UNRWA, *UNRWA figures as of 31 December 2008*, Public Information Office, Gaza, March 2009.

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