

Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps Protest UNRWA Aid Cuts

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Image: Louisa Lamb interviewing people in Baddawi camp, Tripoli, in early June 2015

Life as a Palestinian refugee is more than a constant struggle these days, in fact more than in memory, according to a representative sampling of some of the more than 200,000 Palestinians in Lebanon's camps.

Every day looms with pessimism, as many wonder if they will be able to feed their families and have drinkable water, while also anticipating, with apprehension, the possibility of being shelled by militia or individual jihadists. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, including the tens of thousands of refugees coming from Syria since 2011, now face an even bigger problem as *United Nations Relief and Works Agency* for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) recently apologized for its drastically reduced funding and warned there would soon be even more aid cuts.

The UNRWA was established in December 1949, by resolution 302 (IV) of the UN General Assembly, as a reaction to the 1948 Nakba. It was created as a temporary measure designed to respond to the plight of approximately three-quarters of a million Palestinian refugees, pending achievement of a political settlement in their homeland, Palestine.

Sixty-six years after its establishment, in the continuing absence of a solution to the theft of Palestine, the agency continues to exist and function. These days, however, it lacks the necessary funds to fulfill its mandate. That mandate, was recently renewed by the UN General Assembly again until 30 June, 2017. This needed extension and the agency's continuing existence are due, as UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon said recently, to "political failure" and the inability of the international community to bring about a durable solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees, millions of whom are scattered all over the globe with nearly a quarter million existing in squalor and abject poverty in Lebanon. This political failure—a policy choice made and upheld by the leading world powers—has perpetuated and imposed continuous Palestinian suffering over four generations.

During my recent visit to Tripoli, Lebanon, where two of Lebanon's 12 Palestinian camps, Badawwi and Nahr al Bared, are located, I was able to witness the courtyard of the school filled with Syrian-Palestinians holding a peaceful, sit-in protest. When I first approached the gathering, accompanied by my friends Wisam and Manal, both from Syria, I noticed about 70 people in the courtyard, some standing in small groups conversing, others sitting silently, praying, or talking among each other. Many families gathered together in the evening for several hours before returning home to put their children to sleep, sometimes returning to re-join the demonstrators. With the help of Abdullah Othman and Wisam Kraein who interpreted, I had the privilege of speaking to several individuals about their background,

what they hoped to achieve, and what they expect of the future.

Among the people who had attended the protest every day since it started fourteen days ago, were two older gentlemen named Abo Feras and Abdullah. Abo Feras has been in Lebanon for thirty-three years, after coming during the civil war to fight for the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization). He was in Beirut when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, and has been residing in Baddawi camp ever since. Abdullah was born in the camp and has spent his life there.

Besides being at the UNRWA school protesting every day, the protestors sometimes spend the night inside the school. Abdullah described in detail the many problems in Baddawi camp, explaining with dolor that UNRWA has reduced financial aid to Syrian-Palestinians (and Palestinians born in Lebanon) by \$100 a month, effective in July. Monthly funding is contingent on how many family members are in a household, but the \$100 reductions means families will now receive only half on the monthly funding they rely on and are accustomed to.

Abdullah also informed me that UNRWA has fired teachers due to budget cuts, while increasing classroom sizes, from approximately twenty-five students in a classroom to forty or more students. Abo Feras described his concern about being able to pay rent, because that additional \$100 was barely, and sometimes not even, enough rent money. Abo Feras and Abdullah agreed that they would remain at the UNRWA school every day until something happens, and if in the future they can no longer pay rent, they will sleep at the site among other protesters.

The goal that all the Syrian-Palestinians want from protesting, Abo Feras explained, is for UNRWA to take responsibility to help refugees with health, education and finances. Approximately 70 to 90,000 Syrian-Palestinians have fled to Lebanon since 2011 and like Abo Feras, many believe UNRWA doesn't do enough.

One Syrian-Palestinian woman, who requested to remain anonymous, suspects that UNRWA is getting pressured by Israel to reduce funding as a method of dividing Palestinians and keeping them from their homeland. This, she says, encourages Palestinians to move abroad, most likely to Europe and South America, to keep Palestinians away from the Jewish state. She wasn't the only person I spoke with who believed this conspiracy; Abo Khaled, one of the main organizers of all Palestinians in camps in the north region of Lebanon, stated that this is the first course of action in a greater plan.

While these ideas spurred around the sit-in protest, most Palestinians were less concerned with the greater politics, but are more focused on what the immediate future holds for their families. Abo Khaled acknowledged a debate among many protesters between the Right to Return and staying in Lebanon compared to the wish to leave Lebanon and travel to other countries for a better life. According to Abo Khaled, the Palestinian parties want Palestinians to stay and fight against the obstacles, but the majority of Palestinians want to leave the Middle-East altogether.

Ikbal, a Palestinian from Yarmouk camp who has been living in Baddawi camp for a year and a half, says "it's like death" to live without the funding from UNRWA. She, like all the other members of Baddawi camp with cell phones, was informed of funding cuts through SMS message. She already struggles to pay rent, and lives with her family in a house with two

other families. She describes barely being able to afford rent and food before the cuts, and she doesn't know what to do now. Like many women, she sits every day at the UNRWA school in solidarity with other mothers, while their children play. Ikbal says the despite the war in Syria, she would go back because she hates her life in Lebanon.

Safeia, originally from Sabineh camp in Syria, who has been protesting for thirteen days with her son says she desperately relied on the UNRWA money because her husband has cancer and most of that money went towards his medicine. Her husband needs an operation which costs \$300, and she is stressed and discouraged about how to find money to pay for it. In Syria, her husband was a lawyer, but since coming to Lebanon their life has changed drastically, where work is scarce and Palestinians are lucky to find a job, and the jobs available to Palestinians pay little since they are barred by law from working in more than 35 professions. Safeia will continue to protest, and if she has to she will sleep in the school or the streets until she gets what she needs for her family.

Most of the people I talked with were Syrian-Palestinians, already living as refugees in Syria and had to relocate again to Lebanon. Manal, a mother of two small children, left Yarmouk Camp because of the lack of food and water and constant bombing. For eleven years she worked as a fashion designer, before getting married. Her husband worked as an electrician and doing home renovations. In Yarmouk, the living situation was terrible and she remembers getting food from the Palestinian Free Army. After her husband's arrest and worsening conditions in Yarmouk camp, Manal came to Baddawi with her children to stay with her husband's family. After 10 months of living with another family, she finally got her own place in April 2015. Manal is now worried about how to pay rent and feed her children, and if she cannot pay rent and is evicted, she will live among many others at the UNRWA school. Manal wants to leave Lebanon, but restrictions prevent her from doing so. She hasn't seen her mother in four years, and wishes to move to Egypt to live with her sister and her parents. Until she finds a way to leave, she will unite with her refugee community and protest.

For every person in Baddawi camp, as well as the people currently residing in the Palestinian camps of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories of Gaza Strip and West Bank, the future suggests hardship more severe than what they have already endured.

As an American whose government is partly responsible for their plight, I left with guilt and sorrow as I said goodbye to my new friends in Baddawi camp and returned to Beirut. Their gift to me was a deep effect of what their human spirit has shown as they continue to prove their ingenuity and resilience while staying in Lebanon.

Hopefully, sooner rather than later, UNRWA will find a way to gain funds and continue providing assistance to these noble people, and hopefully the world community will do what their claimed humanitarian values demand, and return them to their country, Palestine.

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