**Forever refugees?**

B Y A R I F A Z A D | 5/9/2019

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| THE tragedy of the ongoing Palestinian dispossession has been played out in full view of the world ever since the creation of Israel. In two big waves, 1948 and 1967, the Palestinians were driven out of their land, with large segments becoming refugees in neighbouring countries. The dream the diaspora had of returning to their ancestralland began tofade asIsraelexpanded its oppressive sway over Palestinian territory, grabbing more land through wars and then through building illegal settlements on Arab lands, which is an ongoing exercise.The total number of Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) stands at 5.3 million. Jordan hosts more than 2m refugees, and has operated a largely Palestine-friendly policy in terms of giving passports and citizenship rights to Palestinians, except for those from the Gaza Strip. Syria has been hosting another 526,000 refugees, who enjoy all rights of the local population, except citizenship.The UNRWA runs camps in Gaza and the West Bank. Egypt and Iraq also host thousands of refugees.Lebanon, the smallest of the countries, accepted more refugees in proportion to its local population. It is here that the plight of the Palestinian refugees is the worst in the region. With no access to citizenship since 1948, the bulk of Palestinians have been destined to lead a squalid existence in refugee camps the most (in)famous ones being Sabra and Shatila which were the site of a horrific massacre of Palestinians at the hands of Phalange militia with Israeli connivance during the civil war.With the first generation of refugees slowly dwindling, the second generation finds itself limited to the circumscribed life of the camps with no promising future prospects.Palestiniansrefugees donothave the same rights as other foreigners.Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are barred from entering over 20 professions and cannot buy property. They cannot even make changes to the makeshift structure of the camps. One report by the American University of Beirut found that only 36 per cent of the Palestinian population was employed and only 6pc of Palestinian youth were participating in university training schemes.Though the total number of refugees registered with UNWRA in Lebanon is somewhere in the region of 500,000, the actual figure is reckoned to be less between 200,000 and 300,000, according to various estimates, while there are between 3,000 and 5,000 Palestinians refugees who are believed to have no identification papers.This group is wholly dependent upon the charity of local NGOs. There are also around 30,000 Palestine refugees from Syria who have fled the civil war there.A Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue committee has identified increasing migration trends among Palestinians from refugee camps in Lebanon. Palestinians are so depressed by their living conditions in the camps that they are desperate to migrate to Ethiopia, and even go as far afield as Brazil, Bolivia and Uruguay.In recent years, the plight of the Palestinians has been worsened by the withdrawal of funding to UNWRA by President Donald Trump`s administration. This has placed an enormous burden on the already scarce social services operated by UNWR A.The funding cuts have seen essential services such as health and education being drastically hit. The funding shortfall currently being met by the Gulf nations and other countries may not last forever. This may be a factor in forcing Palestinian refu-gees to seek a better life elsewhere.The flight of the Palestinian population from the miserable camps, where the dream of return is still entrenched, may reduce the count of refugees with implications for the rightto-return debate.With a declining ref-ugee population, the issue of the return of displaced Palestinians may fade.The UN resolution upholds the right of return of Palestinian refugees which has been at the heart of the Arab-Israeli talks.As more and more Palestinians flee the life of camps for the West, the dream of return may dim as the Palestinian diaspora in Europe and the West is less likely to press its claims of right of return. However, beyond the politics of return and dispossession, the tragedy of Palestine continues to be enacted in the camps in neighbouring countries where many generations of Palestinian are trapped in a dead-end life.The politics driving the larger cause of the Palestinians adds to the destitution of the refugees triggered by funding cuts as well as the withholding of citizenship and human rights for the refugees. The writer, author of Patient Pakistan : Reforming and Fixing Healthcare for All in the 21st Century, has worked on refugee projects in Lebanon and Syria drarifazad@gmail.com Twitter: @arifazad |