

The Loss of Education: Palestinian Refugees from Syria & UN SDG 4

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Abstract:

UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ‘ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning’. This article identifies and examines the barriers to the realisation of this goal for Palestinian refugees from Syria. Firstly, it places SDG 4 in the Palestinian historical context, looking at how stateless Palestinian refugees have accessed education in the decades since the Nakba. The article’s second section then examines how the on-going Syrian conflict has affected the prospects of education both for Palestinians remaining inside the country and for those who have sought refuge in new host states. Finally, the article concludes by exploring the ways in which SDG 4 could be implemented in practice for Palestinian refugees from Syria today.

Education has been central to the empowerment of Palestinian refugees. Their access to schooling and training opportunities has led to them often being described as the most educated refugees in the world, and one of the most educated populations in the Middle East.¹ Moreover, Palestinian refugees themselves have long prioritised the importance of education in exile. Since the 1950s, they have participated as both students and teachers in the education programme run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza (the so-called ‘five fields’). Historically, Palestinian refugees in Syria were some of the greatest beneficiaries of access to education, as their host state’s lack of anti-Palestinian legislation meant that they could use their qualifications to pursue a range of professional careers.²

Today of course, the situation in Syria is very different. Since the outbreak of the war in early 2011, more than 100,000 of the 560,000 Palestinians registered in Syria have fled the country, becoming twice or three-times displaced as a population.³ Their Palestinian origins mean that they face additional hardships; in January 2013, the Jordanian government imposed a ban on Palestinian refugees from Syria entering the country.⁴ The Jordanian ban drove many to travel to Lebanon instead, putting huge pressure on already-overstretched Lebanese resources. The Lebanese government subsequently followed suit and closed its doors to Palestinian refugees from Syria in May 2014.⁵ Partly as a result of these restrictions, the majority of Syria’s Palestinian population remain inside the country, but over two-thirds of them have been internally displaced, and 95% are dependent on aid for their basic needs.⁶

The continuing crisis has had a major impact on education. Today, the call in UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 for ‘inclusive and quality education for all’, is little more than a dream for Syria’s Palestinian population. Many Palestinian refugees who have fled Syria are struggling simply to survive in new refuges and shelters, with little hope of sending their children to school. The

latter now comprise some of the 50% of out-of-school children who live in conflict-affected areas.⁷ Meanwhile those remaining in Syria must contend with the ongoing impact of the war; while UNRWA's education programme continues to operate, only 42 of its 118 schools in Syria are still functioning.⁸ To prevent a further deterioration, and to ensure that SDG 4 is meaningful, education must be treated as an essential right for even the most vulnerable groups, including the Palestinian refugees of Syria.

A Brief History of Education among Palestinian Refugees

Palestinian refugees have always placed a great importance on education, making SDG 4 particularly relevant to the plight of those in Syria today. Access to education has often lain at the heart of the Palestinian refugees' struggle in exile, due to the belief that it was an essential component for future generations' empowerment and liberation. Fawaz Turki, a Palestinian from Haifa who grew up in Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp in the 1950s, notably wrote in his memoir that 'education, probably seen as the only tangible investment for the future, became to a Palestinian family [in exile] the most crucial and the most momentous accomplishment ever.'⁹

As Turki's comment indicates, the importance of education among the Palestinian *shatat*¹⁰ has a long history. In the years after the Nakba, as thousands of Palestinian refugees survived in tents across the Middle East, the UN and various international aid agencies worked to provide them with food, shelter and medicine. UNRWA, which began operations in May 1950, initially prioritised the provision of the two services named in its title: Relief and Works.¹¹ In its first decade, the Agency established employment-creation schemes with the aim of facilitating the refugees' 'reintegration' into the Arab host states.¹² It was the refugees themselves, particularly those living in camps, who demanded that UNRWA replace these employment schemes with the full-scale education programme about which they were overwhelmingly enthusiastic.¹³

The reasoning behind these demands is illuminating. For many Palestinian refugees surviving in camps, education was a way out of poverty and deprivation.¹⁴ The camp refugees, who were overwhelmingly of peasant origin, had lost the land that had been their main currency for generations, and now looked to education as the key to improving their prospects.¹⁵ However, there was also a deeper rationale at play. Many felt that they had lost their land in 1948 because of ignorance; education was thus not only the key to better employment opportunities, but also a tool for reclaiming Palestine.¹⁶ As such, it was the polar opposite of UNRWA's 'reintegration' schemes, which the refugees widely loathed as an obstacle to their return.¹⁷

The refugees' stance had an impact – not least because their reluctant response to UNRWA's works schemes rendered the latter inefficient.¹⁸ From the mid-1950s, UNRWA accordingly began to focus its efforts on education instead, quietly dispensing with its 'Works' schemes by 1957.¹⁹ The Agency's schools

programme, previously small, was expanded and later developed into a full-scale modern education system. This included elementary and preparatory schools, vocational training centres, and an Education Institute for teacher training and development.²⁰

The impact was significant, leading literacy rates to skyrocket among Palestinian refugees within a generation, and providing them with key assets in the job market.²¹ As refugee communities achieved better exam results than those in government schools, the Palestinians gained an image in the region as a well-educated population.²² UNRWA's education programme also incorporated several elements that would later be laid out in the principles of SDG 4; as well as being free, it promoted the teaching of human rights and facilitated gender equity through its accessibility to both boys and girls.²³ As a result, Palestinian refugee women achieved higher adult literacy rates than the regional average. In pre-war Syria, 90% of Palestinian refugee women aged over 14 were literate, compared with 60% of the national population.²⁴

The high importance that Palestinian refugees place on education has remained a constant throughout their nearly 70 years of exile, withstanding numerous political upheavals, crises and disruptions. In 2008, a Save the Children report found that Palestinian refugees considered the improvement of education as one of the most important priorities for their future.²⁵ As recently as 2015, there were protests in camps across the region when UNRWA postponed the start of the school year due to insufficient funding. Many refugees argued that education is a core right that cannot be curtailed.²⁶ The content of SDG 4 is thus perfectly aligned with the aspirations and concerns of many Palestinian refugees. It is also particularly pertinent in their case, given the UN's direct role in providing them with education through UNRWA.

Education for Palestinian refugees in Syria: before & after 2011

Historically, Syria has provided some of the best conditions and entitlements in the region for Palestinian refugees. Unlike their counterparts in Lebanon, Palestinians in Syria were not subject to *de jure* discrimination preventing them from working in professions or accessing state services. Nor did the Syrian government promote naturalisation policies of the kind favoured in Jordan.²⁷ Instead, Palestinians in pre-war Syria retained their refugee status yet had many of the same rights as Syrian citizens. Palestinian-Syrian relations were relatively peaceable, in contrast to the armed clashes that occurred in Jordan and Lebanon.²⁸

Educational opportunities for Palestinian refugees in pre-war Syria encapsulated this state of affairs. While the Palestinians of Syria were still vulnerable – for instance, they lagged behind the host population when it came to school enrolment levels²⁹ – they were nevertheless comparatively better off than many of their counterparts elsewhere. Palestinian refugees were able to attend Syrian governmental schools as well as UNRWA schools and training centres. In fact, education for Palestinians in Syria before 2011 bore many of the hallmarks of

SDG 4, as it was inclusive, free, and uniform for boys and girls. In 2010, 118 UNRWA schools were operating in Syria, educating 67,300 registered Palestinian refugee children.³⁰

Since 2011, the situation has deteriorated. Many UNRWA schools are rendered vulnerable by their location in areas of serious violence; since the war began, 76 UNRWA schools in Syria have been forced to close. Through the use of a shift system and government schools, UNRWA has succeeded in keeping around 70% of pre-conflict students enrolled.³¹ However, as the conflict continues with no end in sight, considerable problems continue to plague the provision of education. The Palestinians enrolled in government schools have also seen their education suffer, as the war has damaged or destroyed at least a quarter of Syrian schools. Many have been used for military purposes or are now providing shelter to displaced families. Moreover, many parents are keeping their children out of school entirely due to concerns for their safety.³²

The situation is in many cases even worse for those Palestinians who have sought refuge outside Syria, and are struggling to establish themselves and survive in circumstances of huge insecurity. The picture is not entirely bleak - UNRWA estimates that nearly 8,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria are attending its schools in Lebanon and Jordan, although this leaves many more thousands unaccounted for.³³ The Agency has pledged that all Palestinian refugee children from Syria who register at UNRWA schools will receive a formal education.³⁴ However, they face barriers in the form of unfamiliar curricula and overcrowding, as well as social prejudice against refugees from Syria. UNRWA's education system is already overstretched and suffering from cuts. With UNRWA schools operating on shift systems even before the Syrian crisis, Palestinian refugees' chances of receiving the quality education specified in SDG 4 are looking bleak.

Much of the coverage of the Syrian war has rightly looked at the crisis in terms of homelessness, hunger and healthcare. However, the loss of education is in many ways a forgotten tragedy of the ongoing conflict, now in its sixth year. 31% of the Palestinians remaining in Syria are children, as are over 40% of those who have fled to Jordan and Lebanon.³⁵ The ongoing disruption to their education risks creating a lost generation. As the text of SDG 4 notes, the impact of armed conflict on children's schooling goes far beyond the obvious. Save the Children and UNHCR both point out that education can protect children in conflict areas from the risks of early marriage, child labour and military recruitment. At the same time, it can combat psychological damage by maintaining a sense of stability in their everyday lives.³⁶ Ensuring the continuance of education is therefore vital for supporting Palestinian refugee resilience. The multi-faceted importance of education, implied in SDG 4, has long been understood by Palestinian refugees, and is particularly important for those in Syria today.

Conclusion

In the Syrian context of total war, access to education is put at risk not only by direct and practical problems, but also by the impact of insecurity, danger and psychological trauma. In order to connect the vision laid out in SDG 4 to the reality on the ground, a comprehensive approach is needed – namely one that treats education as an essential service alongside emergency relief. Significantly, UN SDG 4 highlights not only inclusive and quality education, but also the importance of lifelong learning. It may therefore provide a framework for the long-term restoration of the educational opportunities lost to Palestinian refugees from Syria since 2011.

The plans laid out by the UN in SDG 4 have a direct route to Palestinian refugee populations via UNRWA. The Agency's Education Reform Strategy, launched in 2011 and continuing even in Syria today, draws on many of the same principles as SDG 4, including the importance of inclusivity, gender equity, and human rights.³⁷ However, UNRWA is a mixed blessing for Palestinian refugees in general, and those from Syria in particular. Its benefits include the positive impact of its education programme, detailed above, and the fact that its ongoing existence has helped keep the Palestinian refugees' plight on the international agenda.

Yet crucially, the existence of UNRWA means that Palestinian refugees are automatically excluded from UNHCR's mandate.³⁸ This distinction is hugely significant - as Palestinian refugees are not included on UNHCR's registration rolls, they have been unable to access many of the vital relief services made available to their Syrian counterparts in exile. In particular, their inability to register with UNHCR has caused problems for Palestinian refugees fleeing outside UNRWA's fields of operation. Those in Egypt cannot get residency permits, food vouchers or healthcare, while those in Turkey are stuck in legal limbo.³⁹ Nor are the problems contained to the Middle East; the UK government's resettlement programme for Syrian refugees is being implemented via UNHCR and will thus automatically exclude Palestinians.⁴⁰

The situation is evidently highly complex and has no easy solution. However, the necessity of certain steps is clear. Firstly, action is urgently needed to ensure that Palestinians are included in international responses to the Syrian refugee crisis. At the moment, Palestinian refugees are the hidden victims of the Syrian war. Their suffering is exacerbated by their additional vulnerability as a stateless people, with no government to call on for protection and representation. Their situation is also worsened by their exclusion from many of the international discussions about the Syrian refugee crisis, not to mention the emergency relief efforts.

Secondly, responses to the Syrian refugee crisis must consider the need to provide education as a core service, in line with the rationale behind SDG 4. This has increasingly been highlighted in recent months, as numerous international organisations have made calls to prioritise education as an urgent need for Syrian refugees.⁴¹ However, this needs to be applied to *all* refugees from Syria, including the stateless Palestinians. The text of SDG 4 states that quality education is the

foundation to improving lives. Palestinian refugees overwhelmingly agree. The question remains of how to establish this foundation and make its promise a reality for those suffering in Syria today. It is only by doing this that SDG 4 can take on a tangible meaning rather than remaining an abstract value. Most importantly, it is by doing this that Palestinian refugee children can retain vital hope of a positive future in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

¹ World Bank (2014), 'Regional Study: Palestinian Refugee Students Attending UN Schools Achieve Above-Average Results on International Assessments', <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/11/12/palestinian-refugee-students-un-schools-above-average-results-international-assessments> [accessed 9 July 2016].

² For more on the historical treatment and status of Palestinians in Syria see: Sayigh, Y (1997) *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949-93*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 39-40.

³ UNRWA, Syria Regional Crisis: Emergency Appeal 2016, http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016].

⁴ Human Rights Watch (2014), 'Jordan: Palestinians Escaping Syria Turned Away', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/07/jordan-palestinians-escaping-syria-turned-away> [accessed 9 July 2016].

⁵ Amnesty International (2014), 'Families ripped apart as Palestinian refugees from Syria denied entry to Lebanon', <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/07/families-ripped-apart-palestinian-refugees-syria-denied-entry-lebanon/> [accessed 9 July 2014].

⁶ UNRWA, Syria Regional Crisis: Emergency Appeal 2016, http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016].

⁷ UN webpage: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/> [accessed 9 July 2016].

⁸ UNRWA webpage: <http://www.unrwa.org/activity/education-syria> [accessed 9 July 2016].

⁹ Turki F (1972) *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile*, New York, Monthly Review Press: 41.

¹⁰ The Arabic term *shatat* literally means 'diaspora' and is used here to refer to the Palestinians dispersed across the region and the world after the Nakba.

¹¹ Petzet, J (2005) *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania: 64.

¹² For full details on UNRWA's early activities see: Schiff B (1995), *Refugees Unto the Third Generation*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press: 21-47.

¹³ Sayigh R (1994) *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, London, Zed Books: 53.

¹⁴ Turki F, *The Disinherited*, 39-41. Sayigh R, *Too Many Enemies*, 54.

¹⁵ Rosenfeld M (2010) 'From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back: UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees, 1950-2009', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28:2-3, 312.

See also: Sayigh Y, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 47.

¹⁶ Sayigh R, *Too Many Enemies*, 54-55.

¹⁷ Schiff B (1989) 'Between Occupier and Occupied: UNRWA in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 18:3, 62. Petzet J (2005), *Landscape of Hope and Despair*, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 62.

¹⁹ Takkenberg L (2010) 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees After Sixty Years: Some Reflections', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28:2-3, 255.

²⁰ More information on the evolution of UNRWA's education programme can be found in: Schiff B, *Refugees Unto the Third Generation*, 21-28; Al Husseini J (2010) 'UNRWA and the Refugees: A Difficult but Lasting Marriage', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 40:1, 6-26; Rosenfeld M, 'From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back', 289-300; Bocco R (2010), 'UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees: A History within History', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28:2-3, 232. On the UNRWA Institute of Education, see UNRWA webpage: <http://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/teacher-training> [accessed 12 July 2016].

²¹ Viorst M (1984), *UNRWA and Peace in the Middle East*, Washington DC, Middle East Institute: 18.

²² Al Husseini J, 'UNRWA and the Refugees', 14. Petzet J, *Landscape of Hope and Despair*, 64.

²³ Allen L (2010), *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights: Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine*, Stanford, Stanford University Press: 2013, 102. Shabaneh G (2012), 'Education and Identity: The Role of UNRWA's Education Programmes in the Reconstruction of Palestinian Nationalism', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 25:4, 500. Rosenfeld M, 'From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back', 286-306.

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- ²⁴ Dumper M (2006), 'Introduction' in Palestinian Refugee Repatriation: Global Perspectives (Dumper ed.), Oxford, Routledge: 4.
- ²⁵ Save the Children (2008) Fact Sheet, https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/palestinian-refugee-children-fact-sheet_june08_1.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ²⁶ The protests were reported in: Mohammed Omer (2015), 'Protests across Gaza as UNRWA threatens to delay start of school', <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/protests-across-gaza-un-shortfall-threatens-delay-start-school-283678309> [accessed 9 July 2016]; Lebanese National News Agency (2015), 'Palestinian refugees in Tyre protest UNRWA decision to postpone school year', <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/48079/nna-leb.gov.lb/en> [accessed 9 July 2016]; The New Arab (2015), 'Jordan: UNRWA crisis leaves 120,000 students in limbo', <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/8/13/jordan-unrwa-crisis-leaves-120-000-students-in-limbo> [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ²⁷ Magda Qandil (2012) 'The Syrian Revolution and the Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Realities and Risks', Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2012/5/2/201252132022536734The%20Syrian%20Revolution%20and%20Palestinian%20Refugees%20in%20Syria.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ²⁸ In September 1970 (known as 'Black September'), armed clashes between the PLO and the Jordanian army culminated in the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan. The PLO subsequently re-grouped in Lebanon and later became involved in the Lebanese Civil War. Most recently, there were direct Palestinian-Lebanese clashes during the destruction of Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in 2007.
- ²⁹ UNRWA webpage: <http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria> [accessed 9 July 2016]
- ³⁰ UNRWA webpage: <http://www.unrwa.org/activity/education-syria> [accessed 9 July 2016]
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Save the Children (2015), 'The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria's education system on Syria's future', http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/The_Cost_of_War.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ³³ UNRWA, Syria Regional Crisis: Emergency Appeal 2016, http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Save the Children (2015) 'The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria's education system on Syria's future', http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/The_Cost_of_War.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016]; Khaled Hosseini (2015) 'For refugees, education is as essential as shelter: just ask Aqeela Asifi', <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/21/refugees-education-aqeela-asifi-pakistan-afghan> [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ³⁷ UNRWA (2011), Education Reform Strategy 2011-2015, <http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2012042913344.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2016]. UNRWA webpage: <http://www.unrwa.org/activity/education-syria> [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ³⁸ The distinction between UNRWA and UNHCR is discussed in: Akram S (2001) 'Reinterpreting Palestinian Refugee Rights under International Law' in Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return (Aruri ed.), London, Pluto Press: 165-194. See also: Bartholomeusz L (2010) 'The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty', Refugee Survey Quarterly, 28:2- 3, 452-474.
- ³⁹ See: Abu Moghli M, Bitarie N, Gabiam N (2015), 'Palestinian Refugees from Syria: Stranded on the Margins of Law', <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/palestinian-refugees-from-syria-stranded-on-the-margins-of-law/> [accessed 18 July 2016]; BADIL (2015), Al Majdal: Palestinian Refugees from Syria 2, 57, <http://www.badil.org/phocadownload/badil-new/publications/periodicals/al-majdal/al-majdal-57.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2016].
- ⁴⁰ In 2015, David Cameron announced that the UK will welcome 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next 5 years. As these refugees will be identified through UNHCR, Palestinians will be automatically excluded. See: Patrick Wintour (2015) 'UK to take up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years, David Cameron confirms', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/uk-will-accept-up-to-20000-syrian-refugees-david-cameron-confirms> [accessed 9 July 2016].
- ⁴¹ Save the Children (2015) 'The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria's education system on Syria's future', http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/The_Cost_of_War.pdf [accessed 9 July 2016].