

Palestinian Refugees: Challenges of Repatriation and Development



Palestinian children
IDRC Photo : P. Bennett

2007-04

By Nadine Robitaille

The magnitude of the Palestinian refugee issue is difficult to fully grasp. The number of Palestinian Arabs who were initially displaced in 1948 has been estimated at anywhere from 520 000 to 914 000, depending on the source. Several hundred thousands more fled the area in 1967 when war broke out yet again.

By 2005, natural population growth had subsequently increased the number of people registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) to more than 4.3 million. Of those, more than one million live in UNRWA-run camps in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Jordan, where many face abject poverty and overcrowding.

A new book is offering a collection of cutting-edge research and analysis into this complex issue. *[Palestinian Refugees: Challenges of Repatriation and Development](#)*, co-published by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and I.B. Tauris, explores the demographic and developmental challenges which the return of refugees to a future Palestinian state would generate. The many attempts at negotiating a peace plan between the Palestinians and Israelis have faltered, and there are a myriad of conflicting ideas on how best to achieve peace.

"I think everyone would agree that, regardless of what deal the Palestinians and Israelis eventually negotiate, it will involve in large part the repatriation of Palestinian refugees to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza," says Rex Brynen, a professor of political science at Montreal's McGill University who has been studying Palestinian refugee issues for some 20 years.

In an effort to contribute to work on Palestinian refugee repatriation, Brynen collaborated with Roula El-Rifai, senior program specialist for IDRC's Middle East Special Initiatives, on the book. This is the most recent of IDRC's contributions to policy research efforts on the refugee issue. Since 1992, the Centre has supported a number of research initiatives, including a 2006 book (*Palestinian Refugee Repatriation: Global Perspectives*, edited by Michael Dumper), and two conferences held in Ottawa, Canada.

[The Stocktaking Conference on Palestinian Refugee Research](#) took place in 1997, and its sequel in 2003. The conferences brought together some 100 experts, academics, and official observers from the Middle East, Europe, and North America to examine current and ongoing research on the Palestinian refugee issue.

“At the time of the [second] conference there was momentum in the negotiations and the idea was that if the momentum picks up even further, people will have to start thinking very seriously about these issues,” says El-Rifai.

“You cannot sit down and create a deal without having done all the technical research and evidence-based analysis on what you should be doing,” she adds. “You need this background technical work to support the decision-making process by the negotiators. That’s where our work fits in.”

There have been many attempts at peace, but no resolution. Though a decade has gone by since the first conference, the work presented there still holds true say the editors, and they were determined to capture some of the ideas generated on paper.

“The danger was that if you don’t get these ideas into an edited book, as time goes on, the wisdom that was accumulated on the refugee issue begins to disappear,” explains Brynen. “It really would be a tragedy if the gains that were made in thinking about the refugee file were lost.”

The book draws on several of the conference papers and tackles the challenges of refugee repatriation: how it might be done, the potential costs, the possible ways of addressing it, and future areas of research. It explores the potential social and economic effects from refugee repatriation and absorption, and the various policy options that could be adopted in light of such occurrences.

The contributors – Palestinian, Israeli, and international academics, experts and policymakers, including World Bank researchers – suggest a number of possible return, repatriation, and resettlement scenarios, as well as key elements of a repatriation program.

Brynen himself offers an overview of policy lessons, which include the need for repatriation to be voluntary and to avoid bureaucratic impediments, and the possible repercussions of large-scale public housing programs for refugees. “If there ever is to be a peaceful resolution – which we all hope there will be – these issues will all have to be addressed,” he says.

Planning ahead

Both editors admit that some refugee advocates might object to their tackling this subject for fear that it could draw attention away from demands by the refugees for their right of return to their original homes within Israel.

“There will be those critics who say ‘you’re compromising the other solutions,’ and we’re saying it doesn’t,” says El-Rifai. “We’re not excluding other possibilities in a repatriation solution. All we’re doing is zeroing in on a particular element of the solution.”

“The book has a range of approaches and attitudes,” explains Brynen. “It’s quite a diverse set of ideas, approaches, reflections, and analysis on refugee issues, and I think it will generally be received as an attempt to make a productive contribution to the debate and to the issue.”

Though a final settlement could be years or even decades away, Brynen and El-Rifai are confident that the book will continue to be relevant, no matter when formal negotiations recommence. In fact, they believe the time is ripe for such a body of work.

“The approaches outlined in the book are very sound and I don’t think anything on the ground is likely to change the approaches at all,” says Brynen. “It’s important to have these issues pre-digested and analyzed so that policymakers and negotiators will already have a range of approaches on the table that they can draw upon and, if we’re fortunate, foster more productive negotiations.”

“The ideal outcome is that at some future point when we’re back at Palestinian refugee negotiations or we’re planning refugee re-absorption someone [involved in the planning] picks up the book and says ‘oh that’s a good idea,’” says Brynen.

Building a new generation of researchers

The Arab world is lacking in refugee studies programs and academic centres. In fact, until recently, there was only one – the [Forced Migration and Refugee Studies program](#) at the American University in Cairo.

To help fill that need, and to ensure a steady flow of researchers interested in refugee studies, IDRC is helping to fund the establishment of a refugee and migration resource unit at Birzeit University in the West Bank and Gaza.

The one-year pilot program at Birzeit began in February 2007. Ultimately, the goal is to expand into a master’s program in refugee and forced migration studies.

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