



UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development

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UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development, edited by Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal and Lex Takkenberg. Series: Routledge Studies on the Arab–Israeli Conflict. New York, NY, Routledge, 2014. 318 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-71504-1 (hb)

The body of knowledge on the plight of Palestinian refugees is relatively rich (*The Lancet* 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013). Research on the relationship between Palestinian refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), however, appears to be sparsely undertaken except for a few articles by scholars such as Al-Husseini (2010), Bocco (2009) and Takkenberg (2009). This lack of research is especially striking given that the Palestinian refugee population is one of the world's oldest and largest, and the fact that UNRWA is one of the oldest UN agencies that was founded in 1949 to cater for the humanitarian and subsequently the developmental needs of Palestine's refugees. The agency currently serves around five million registered Palestinian refugees. The book under review is therefore a much-needed study.

Based on a conference hosted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut in 2010, *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees* was edited and written by a cohort of both established and aspiring scholars. It is very timely, coming at a period of precarity for Palestinians – be they in Gaza, Syria or Lebanon. It is also a period when UNRWA is facing considerable challenges, be they organizational or funding related, or resulting from operating in a region currently experiencing uncertainty and upheaval.

The book consists of six main parts. Part I discusses UNRWA's service provision role and the challenges it faces from lack of funding and changing internal management. Protection is tackled in Part II, where Mark Brailsford discusses how the concept is currently incorporated into UNRWA's operations and planning. Part III looks into camps and their governance, and is perhaps one of the most important parts of the book since it delves into how Palestinian camps are managed and controlled. Kjersti Berg's Chapter 5 in Part III comprehensively describes the history of building camps, and contextualizes it in the administrative and organizational environment in the corridors of UNRWA, as well as the political climate after 1948 and after 1967. This is indeed a very interesting historical analysis that is central to understanding the current challenges to liveability in the 58 official Palestinian refugee camps. Part IV addresses the subject of civic participation and community engagement and stresses the importance of refugees' involvement in UNRWA's strategies as a way to enhance trust

between the organization and the refugees themselves. Part V discusses camp improvement and reconstruction initiatives as well as community development projects, where the authors advocate a more coherent urban planning process to respond to the special conditions and needs of Palestinian refugees. The last part of the book proposes some durable solutions and the prospective role of UNRWA in providing advice and support for Palestinian refugees in response to the general political environment. In Part VI, Chapter 14, entitled 'Business as usual?', Leila Hilal puts forward the role of UNRWA in resolving the Palestinian refugee issue, and suggests that the agency should play a role and intervene on behalf of Palestinian refugees should a political settlement be reached.

Although the book undoubtedly has merit and deserves to be recommended to scholars and practitioners interested in Palestinian refugee matters, there are, however, two issues that were not adequately addressed in it. The first relates to the lives of Palestinian refugees residing outside the 'official' camps, and perhaps for reason of focus the way those Palestinians govern their local communities, access services and maintain their neighbourhoods are not addressed either. I argue that UNRWA is also responsible for supporting Palestinians in such aspects besides providing education, health and social services. In Lebanon alone, there are around 110,000 Palestinian refugees living in informal areas that are not 'officially' served by UNRWA; in addition to them are 30,000 Palestinians from Syria who are recent refugees from the conflict there. The Palestinian refugees are mostly left to their own devices to 'govern' and 'run' their communities through an assortment of self-help mechanisms and through their informal ways of dealing with local municipalities, politicians and non-governmental organizations. This is indeed a delicate issue that touches on the relationship between UNRWA, the host countries and communities, and of course the refugees themselves. This issue deserves more attention in the book.

The second matter is more substantial. Any scholarly work on UNRWA cannot disconnect Palestine and politics from the Palestinian refugees who are the book's subject of enquiry. In reading it, one cannot but notice the *de-politicization* of some contentious issues. The book, consequently, steers from such issues to focus excessively on the way UNRWA carries out its business. The latter is undoubtedly an interesting aspect and the agency is certainly to be congratulated for opening up to scholars, a situation which, historically, had not been the case. Furthermore, the number of instances of excessive congratulatory praise showered upon the agency did not go unnoticed either. Programmes were described to be: 'highly cost-effective', referring here to health interventions bringing 'spectacular results'; 'highly successful', referring to micro-finance; 'innovation in a more sustained and systematic effort in improving physical infrastructure inside camps'; 'collective decision-making and shared responsibility – with refugees referring to UNRWA's participatory approaches etc. Indeed, any objective observer could not but look at the many good things that UNRWA is doing; but for someone who have engaged with Palestinian refugees in camps and in informal neighbourhoods, the picture appears somewhat different. I believe that constructive criticism, built on shared responsibility, would better serve the agency.

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