

The Palestinian Diaspora: Status and Rights in Middle East and North African Countries

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ABSTRACT

The Palestinian diaspora, beginning with a mass exodus following the establishment of Israel in 1948, has faced diverse and evolving challenges in Middle Eastern and North African host countries. This paper explores the historical and contemporary status of Palestinian refugees in these regions, examining the legal, social, and economic conditions they endure. While neighboring Arab states initially supported Palestinian refugees, their experiences have since been defined by prolonged refugee status and fluctuating levels of hostility. In Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and the Gulf countries, policies have fluctuated based on geopolitical interests and local dynamics. North African countries, while offering some support, also reflect the complexities of Palestinian integration. The ongoing refugee crisis underscores the need for international efforts to address the root causes and ensure the rights and welfare of Palestinian refugees.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the modern-day Palestinian diaspora fleeing to neighboring countries begins in 1948 when after the establishment of Israel, many sought temporary shelter in the Jordan-controlled West Bank and the Egypt-controlled Gaza Strip. The United Nations defines Palestinian refugees as people “whose normal place of residence was Palestine” between June 1, 1946, and May 15, 1948, and “who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” Before 1948, the region housed a diverse population of Arabs, Christians, and Jews, who lived under various ruling powers, including the Ottoman, Byzantine, Roman, and Babylonian empires. Britain was granted a mandate over the region by seven Allied countries and was formally adopted by the League of Nations in 1922, thereby incorporating the 1917 Balfour Declaration establishing a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. As Palestinian Arabs were vehemently opposed to a partition of land and the creation of a Jewish state in the region, demanding that Britain halt the immigration of Jews. This opposition led to ongoing conflict until the Peel Commission proposed partitioning the land into Jewish and Arab states.

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, which significantly altered territorial control between Israel and a coalition of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, in which Israel captured control of the territories, approximately 500,000 more Palestinian Arabs fled to neighboring countries and greatly increased the numbers of Palestinian refugees living in international camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

Neighboring Arab countries initially offered shelter and refugee status to Palestinians, believing the political situation would be temporary. As the years went on and it was clear that the situation would be prolonged, the policies towards Palestinians began to change. As disputes continued, most Arab governments opposed the resettlement and naturalization of refugees, adopting policies to preserve Palestinian identity and their refugee status

Examining the circumstances and discrimination faced by Palestinians in host countries cannot be made without the context of their status and history over time as it relates to each individual state, its geopolitical goals and local attitudes towards regional conflicts. In most cases, the Palestinians have been used as pawns in the political agenda of each host country and their predicament evolved with the changing political leadership, alignments and sentiments of the political tide, their rights and legal status adjusting as a result. As well, their stateless status leaves them vulnerable to abuse, discrimination and defenseless in many situations.

Further, Palestinians are the only refugees in the world whose descendants are born as refugees and remain legal refugees pending either resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or if they are granted citizenship in another country, which typically occurs outside the Middle East region.

DEFINITIONS OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

Today, Palestinians are the only refugee group to inherit refugee status across generations, regardless of resettlement or assimilation. Whereas 750,000 refugees were initially registered when the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) began operating in 1950, it now registers approximately 6 million Palestinian refugees. UNRWA has automatically registered descendants of Palestinian refugees as refugees in perpetuity. However, UNRWA does not resettle refugees; instead, it provides education and healthcare. UNRWA operates only in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza where most Palestinians reside. As a result, the majority of Palestinian refugees have maintained their refugee status and continue to live in camps [1].

The UN agency that typically covers refugees around the world, UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) was formed during the establishment of the 1951 Refugee Convention, after the 1948 war and so was not yet in existence to provide services to Palestinian Refugees. However, it does have the authority to provide status to the refugees so that a state or country specifically “will protect the person against refoulement, permit the person to remain on the territory and provide access to humane standards of treatment.”

Many Arab states were unwilling to assume responsibility for absorbing Palestinian refugees and only committed to non-binding UN resolutions. However, in 1965, the League of Arab States put forth the Casablanca Protocol [2], more formally known as the Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab states. While eight nations (Jordan, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Egypt & Yemen) agreed to the protocol, some signed it with caveats or reservations. The goal of the Protocol was to grant Palestinians the right to movement (entering and departing) and the right to employment on par with national citizens. However, it was revoked in 1991 due to the inconsistencies in incorporating and enforcing the doctrine across signatories.

The lack of a legal national identity has left the Palestinian diaspora in a precarious situation in many host countries, as is reflected in the dramatically varying national laws, human rights and assimilation across countries.

RIGHTS BY COUNTRY

Middle East

The countries in closest proximity to the Palestinian territories saw the greatest influx of migrants seeking shelter over the decades. Palestinians have become the target of growing hostility within the Near East host countries from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Human rights organizations cataloged instances of discriminatory treatment, unlawful or indefinite detention, border closures, violence, xenophobic attitudes and refoulement. The current treatment of Palestinians in these countries continue to demonstrate the vulnerability and mistreatment towards this group.

Lebanon remains the biggest offender, with hundreds of thousands of stateless Palestinians, and over half of the 491,000 refugees living in overcrowded camps. Their right to work is severely restricted, and widespread poverty persists. Many Palestinians struggle for basic survival, overwhelmed by poor conditions in the refugee camps, high unemployment, underemployment, and inadequate medical services. Palestinians face severe work restrictions, requiring annual work permits from the labor ministry, similar to other foreign workers. Without work permits, they are excluded from employer benefits and often resort to the underground economy, where they are paid significantly less. Several legal barriers prevent Palestinians from working in professions like medicine, pharmacy, engineering, law, or journalism. Professional associations in Lebanon require members to hold Lebanese nationality for at least ten years or mandate reciprocity for Lebanese professionals in the foreign professional's home country—an impossible condition for stateless Palestinians. As a result, Palestinians in Lebanon are often exploited, working without benefits and unable to officially sign off on projects they supervise.

Life inside Palestinian refugee camps, such as *Ain al-Hilweh*, is tightly controlled by the Sunni Muslim extremist group Osmat al-Ansar, which subscribes to Salafi-jihadist ideology. The group promotes a strict interpretation of Islam and advocates violent jihad to achieve its goals. No Lebanese police or soldiers enter *Ain al-Hilweh*, leaving the camp effectively lawless, governed only by Sharia Law as enforced by Osmat al-Ansar. The danger is extreme for those who do not adhere to their strict Salafi interpretation of Islam—particularly for those who reject Islam altogether.

This was the case for a young Palestinian, whom we'll call Mahmoud, who privately rejected Islam while living in *Ain al-Hilweh* refugee camp. Mahmoud's close friend was murdered by jihadists in the camp when they discovered he had abandoned Islam, an act considered apostasy. In extremist interpretations of Islamic law, particularly within Salafi groups, apostasy is seen as a grave sin, punishable by death. This is derived from the Hadith, a collection of sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which prescribes death as the penalty for abandoning the faith. Mahmoud overheard the jihadists discussing his own imminent execution at his friend's funeral, and he has been in hiding ever since. Even among their own people, Palestinian refugees, and their descendants, are not safe in these camps.

With regards to the Protocol, The Republic of Lebanon signed the Protocol maintaining the following reservations: Palestinians residing at the moment in Lebanon are granted the right of employment, together with the right of keeping their Palestinian nationality, in accordance with prevailing social and economic conditions in the Republic of Lebanon, and added the phrase "on equal terms with the Lebanese citizens and in accordance with the laws and regulations in operation" be added. They also added that "allowing Palestinians into Lebanon is conditional upon their obtaining an entry visa issued by the concerned Lebanese authorities."

Successive Lebanese governments have consistently opposed the permanent resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and state policies reflect this stance, denying virtually all social and economic rights. In addition, the state has prohibited the expansion of existing refugee camps and illegal and unsafe building of additional stories on existing structures which contributes to overcrowding. They cannot purchase or inherit property, leaving them almost no options for permanent housing. As well, various Palestinian faction groups operate an autonomous system of justice in the refugee camps with little transparency to outsiders and beyond the control of the state.

Jordan:

Jordan hosts nearly half of all Palestinian refugees—about 2.4 million people—with approximately 370,000 living in camps after the 1948 war. [3]. According to UNRWA, around three quarters hold Jordanian nationality which allows them to work, access public health services, and obtain an education. Approximately 185,000 'ex-Gazan' refugees who fled to Jordan after the 1967 hostilities face legal restrictions that severely limit their rights and exacerbate their vulnerability. When Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1994, Jordan insisted on including Article 2.6 and Article 8 on Refugees and Displaced Persons to guard against the possibility of mass transfer [4].

According to Minority Right Group, "The challenges are more severe for Palestinians from Gaza and others without Jordanian nationality, who are effectively stateless. These children are excluded from free primary and secondary education and face higher costs and stiff competition for the limited university spots available to non-nationals. Non-Jordanians are also disadvantaged in the labor market and cannot enter professions such as law and engineering, since membership in professional associations requires Jordanian citizenship. Without citizenship, Palestinians also face problems buying and selling property, opening a bank account and completing other daily tasks. Gazans are three times more likely to be living under the poverty line compared to other Palestinians in Jordan." [5]

Following October 7, 2023, Jordan refused to accept a single Palestinian refugee on the grounds that it believes Israel wants to evacuate more Palestinians to have claim to the land. This was not too different from when the war in Syria broke out in 2011 and Palestinians living in Syria tried to enter Jordan but were turned away while Syrian refugees were permitted to enter. In addition, Jordan stripped some Palestinians of Jordanian citizenship and involuntarily refouled them back to Syria.

Syria:

From 1948 until the civil war in 2011, Syria hosted approximately 550,000 Palestinian refugees. Syria has maintained the stateless status of some 450,000 Palestinian refugees with

approximately 280,000 being internally displaced. While they did not grant citizenship, Syria initially provided access to employment, trade and education to the population.

However, things took a turn in 1983 when Assad expelled Yasser Arafat's PLO forces and Syria began arresting Palestinians [6]. According to Middle East Watch, "Of all the people from all groups tortured to death in Syria during this period (1983-1986) at least half have been Palestinians...As of summer 1990 Syria held 2,500 Palestinians as political prisoners.[7]"

Those who remain or have been forced to return to Syria during the conflict face extreme hardship. Two-thirds of the Palestinian refugee camps have been destroyed and 91% of the refugees live in absolute poverty and require assistance from UNRWA (as compared to 6% prior to the civil war). The regime and opposition forces have reportedly restricted the freedom of movement of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps. The serious economic hardships due to war leave few opportunities to obtain livelihood as nearly all schools, hospitals and utilities have been destroyed in conflict.

According to a US Department of State 2022 Report on Human Rights in Syria, both regime and opposition forces reportedly besieged and shelled several Palestinian refugee camps, neighborhoods, and other sites, rendering them largely inaccessible. This has led to severe malnutrition, a lack of medical care and humanitarian assistance, and numerous civilian deaths.

Turkey:

Palestinian migration to Turkey began later than to other neighboring countries, largely due to Turkey's economic turmoil and limited benefits. The first wave arrived in the 1970s after Turkey and the PLO established official relations. However, following the Arab Spring, many more Palestinians found refuge in Turkey away from the uprisings in the Middle East. Historically, Turkey and Palestinians share a common social bond as Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian State in exile.

As of 2024, around 30,000 Palestinians live in Turkey, most of whom arrived as students with their families. Many of these 'first-generation' Palestinians have since acquired Turkish citizenship. Palestinians in Turkey have the same rights as other foreign nationals, allowing them to obtain tourist or student residence, work permits, residency through property ownership, or citizenship by marrying a Turkish citizen.

Since the outbreak of war on October 7, 2023, many Palestinians have fled to Turkey, drawn by its strong anti-Israel stance, nearly tripling the number of registered irregular migrants since 2022. Some receive temporary protection from the UNHCR, but it is often short-lived. One Palestinian man recently experienced this harsh reality when local police arrived at his home without warning and took him to the airport for deportation. He had committed no crime and was living with his wife and four children, one of whom was critically ill in the hospital. Forced to remain in the airport for twelve days, he eventually contacted a relative who provided money for a plane ticket. The only country that would accept him was Colombia. However, facing dangerous conditions there, he undertook a perilous journey, walking all the way to the United States, where he is now seeking asylum. This is the grim reality for stateless Palestinians, who, three-quarters of a century after leaving their homeland, continue to face uncertain and dangerous futures.

In March 2022, Turkey granted a two-year tourist residence permit to Palestinians already residing in the country, provided they met other requirements, such as obtaining health insurance. However, Palestinians holding these permits have faced tightening regulations, making renewals more difficult. These permits allow residency but do not grant the right to work or own property.

Although Palestinians initially avoided the widespread anti-Arab racism in Turkey, the Syrian and Gaza refugee crises have intensified discrimination against Arabs, including Palestinians [8].

Gulf Countries

Palestinians began to migrate to the Gulf states heavily in the 1950s when the region started attracting skilled labor from the West Bank to help facilitate the oil boom. However, the situation of Palestinians in the Gulf has worsened over the years due to multiple expulsions resulting from armed conflicts such as the first Gulf War of 1990-1991, instability, and other security concerns that have led Arab states to target Palestinians.

Kuwait:

Kuwait signed the Protocol but reserved the right to interpret its first article as excluding the right of Palestinians to engage in private business on par with Kuwaiti citizens, citing the country's specific regulations regarding private business.

More extreme punitive actions against Palestinians include Kuwait's expulsion of tens of thousands of long-term residents after the 1991 Gulf War, primarily because Yasser Arafat's PLO aligned with Saddam Hussein, who had recently invaded Kuwait. Prior to the war, approximately 357,000 Palestinians (18% of Kuwait's population) had been living in the country and about 287,000 Palestinians were forced to leave in March 1991. More extreme punitive actions against Palestinians include Kuwait's expulsion of tens of thousands of long-term residents after the 1991 Gulf War, primarily because Yasser Arafat's PLO aligned with Saddam Hussein, who had recently invaded Kuwait. Others were from Jordan where the Jordanian government arbitrarily and without notice withdrew Jordanian nationality from its citizens of Palestinian origin, making them stateless [9].

Qatar:

During the First Gulf War, Qatar expelled many Palestinians, citing the Palestinian Authority's alignment with Iraq. This swift expulsion primarily targeted high-profile Palestinians, including the Ambassador, oil industry workers, and government officials, giving them just 48 hours to leave. Qatar intentionally did not renew of residency permits and terminated employment, effectively forcing Palestinians to emigrate since their residency status depended on continued employment [10].

Qatar's foreign policy shifted in 2020, as other Gulf nations distanced themselves from the Palestinian cause and normalized relations with Israel. However, Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Muhammed, reaffirmed the country's 'firm position in supporting the rights of the Palestinian people.' 11]

Despite maintaining trade and economic relations with Israel—it was the only Gulf state to allow trade following the 1996 Oslo Accords—Qatar has also housed top Hamas officials, including Ismail Haniyeh, Moussa Abu Marzuk, and Khaled Mashal, collectively worth \$11 billion. The terrorist group runs an office in Doha, although in May 2024 the Qatari government reconsidered closing the office due to its role as mediator in the post October 7th cease-fire negotiations. In March 2024, Qatar launched an initiative to reunite 1,500 wounded Palestinians with relatives in Doha and provide them with medical treatment. However, it remains unclear what rights they will have or whether they will be required to return post-war. [12].

Saudi Arabia:

Although the general public in Saudi Arabia sympathizes with the Palestinian cause, the government has carefully balanced its support with maintaining strong relations with its U.S. allies, particularly for security against hostile actors like Iran.

On one hand, Saudi Arabia maintains a Palestinian embassy in Riyadh and appointed its first non-resident Ambassador to Palestine in September 2023. Following the war on October 7, the government maintained active communication with the Palestinian government, coordinating political and legal efforts to establish humanitarian corridors for aid delivery and raised over \$133M during their November 2023 campaign to aid Palestinians in Gaza. On the other hand, approximately 300,000 Palestinians living in Saudi Arabia—many since the 1950s and unregistered as refugees—are excluded from the naturalization process and can only obtain residency. [13]. As a result, they are not eligible for state benefits, have no security and are at risk of being deported. As well, UNRWA does not have jurisdiction in Saudi Arabia and therefore Palestinians do not have rights or support that other refugees benefit from such as education, healthcare.

While life in Saudi for Palestinian refugees is arguably better than in Lebanon, religious dictates of the kingdom are equally oppressive to those inside Lebanon's camps. One young Palestinian man suffered the consequences of Saudi royal wrath when his curiosity about Christianity became known to undercover agents. When they discovered him hiding in his small business rather than attending mandatory prayer in the mosque, he was publicly caned in the city's stadium. Eventually he recovered from the beating, but unwilling to give up his growing faith in Christianity, he decided to flee the country knowing his life would always be in danger. As with other parts of the Gulf, Yasser Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi invasion of Kuwait caused a rift between Saudi Arabia who was a strong ally of Kuwait and the Palestinians.

More recently, Saudi Arabia has taken a hard stance against Hamas extremists. In August 2021, before the October 2023 war, Saudi authorities sentenced dozens of long-term Palestinian residents to up to 22 years in prison for alleged links to a terrorist group. This followed the detention of several other Palestinians in 2019 linked to terrorism. Saudi Arabia maintains a balancing act pushing for the normalization of relations with Israel and leaving the door open for a peace agreement, while pushing for a Palestinian state.

North African Countries

North African countries saw both opportunities and challenges in absorbing Palestinian refugees, as the influx of hundreds of thousands was perceived as potentially destabilizing to

their socioeconomic and political systems. While these host countries publicly voice strong support for the Palestinian cause, they often view accepting Palestinian refugees as enabling Israel to displace Palestinians without the right of return.

Egypt:

Despite sharing a border with Gaza, Egypt hosts a relatively small Palestinian population compared to its neighbors. The Philadelphi Route established a buffer along the Gaza-Egypt border in 1979, and in 2009, Egypt reinforced the boundary by constructing a steel wall to tightly control the movement of people, goods, and weapons. However, many Palestinians fled to Egypt following the wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967.

In the years following the 1948 war, Egypt, under President Gamal Abdul Nasser, warmly welcomed Palestinians, granting them access to public-sector and government jobs, as well as free state education at both school and university levels. Under Law No. 28 of 1960, Palestinians were issued Egyptian travel documents, but these did not grant automatic entry into Egypt; a visa from Egyptian consulates abroad was still required [14].” In 1978, following the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat by Palestinian Jihadists, laws were swiftly amended, rescinding Palestinians' rights to residency, employment, and education

Since 1978, holders of such visa documents who were born in Egypt or who have lived there for most of their lives have no automatic right to stay in or reenter the country but must renew their visas every six months to three years. As foreigners, Palestinians were restricted from owning land or property under a 1976 law and barred from owning agricultural land by a 1988 law.

There are also implications for their residency rights under the Egyptian Travel Document for Palestinian Refugees which is valid for 5 years and contingent on renewing the residence permit. Those spending more than 6 months abroad could jeopardize their residency renewal thereby leaving some Palestinians in limbo and unable to return. Stateless Palestinians have been detained and imprisoned for indeterminate lengths of time or deported.

Although Egypt strongly rejected Palestinian resettlement, it hinted that its position might change if border arrangements and international technical and financial assistance were provided. In practice, Egypt provides almost no rights or recognition to Palestinians either as refugees or citizens residing in its borders and does not maintain a UNRWA office in-country. UNHCR assists other refugees in Egypt, but not Palestinians. Many fears revealing their Palestinian identity for fear of discrimination. UNRWA does not operate in Egypt nor does UNHCR service Palestinian refugees in the country due to the interpretation of Article ID of the 1951 Convention stating that refugees protected by UNRWA are not protected under UNHCR) combined with political agendas of some Arab states. One solution towards permanent residency for some Palestinians has been to marry an Egyptian whereby an Egyptian man can naturalize his Palestinian wife and children. However, Egyptian women married to Palestinian men cannot do the same nor can they pass on the citizenship to their children.

Libya:

Under the Casablanca Protocol, Libya generally welcomed Palestinian refugees from across the region, including those from Gaza and Lebanon. Many Palestinian refugees received subsidized

housing, free education, and healthcare, and were valued for their skilled labor, particularly in the oil and gas industry.

1994, Muammar Gaddafi announced plans to expel Palestinians from Libya, which many saw as a reaction to Arafat's peace negotiations with Israel. The government began by refusing to renew the one-year residency visas of approximately 30,000 Palestinians and initiating summary deportations. As a result, labor contracts were not renewed, and previously approved contracts were canceled. As well, the Libyan Passports and Immigration Department halted the issuance of residency documents to Palestinians. Gaddafi had stated "Since the Palestinian leaders claim they have now got a homeland and a passport, let the 30,000 Palestinians in Libya go back to their homeland, and let's see if the Israelis would permit them to return. That's how the world will find out that the peace it's been advocating is no more than treachery and a conspiracy. [15]"

When Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011 and revolution erupted, approximately 70,000 Palestinians living in Libya were displaced and caught in the conflict between pro-regime and opposition forces. Many lost their property rights, faced evictions or let their residency documents expire out of fear of the dueling authorities.

During the war, Palestinians faced limited access to public health care and do not qualify for free medications like Libyans. As well, Palestinians working in the private sector are typically only accepted for low-income jobs like driving trucks, construction, and gastronomy. At the time, Palestinians proactively attempted to leave Libya to escape the violence.

In a show of solidarity with Palestinians, Libya announced after the October 2023 war that the approximately 50,000 Palestinians residing in the country would be granted the same rights as Libyan nationals. Moreover, Libya removed the residency and visa fee requirement for Palestinians (under Decision No. 289 of 2024) and announced additional support in the form of pensions to Palestinians with disabilities, widows, and divorcees and monthly allowances to Palestinian students studying in Libyan universities and institutes [16].

CONCLUSION

The plight of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa reflects a complex intersection of historical, political, and legal factors that continue to shape their status and rights. Since their initial displacement in 1948, Palestinians have faced fluctuating levels of hospitality, hostility, and marginalization throughout the region. The differing policies and conditions in each host country reveal the broader geopolitical dynamics, where the Palestinian issue remains deeply entwined with regional politics. Although Jordan offers some rights to Palestinians with citizenship, those without it face significant hardships. Lebanon and Syria, however, have imposed stringent policies that heighten the vulnerabilities of Palestinians, particularly amidst ongoing regional conflicts.

The Gulf states, once more accommodating, have adopted fluctuating policies shaped by regional conflicts and shifting political alliances. The expulsions from Kuwait and Qatar during periods of heightened conflict illustrate the fragility of Palestinian status and the profound impact of geopolitical tensions on their lives. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has expressed support

for Palestinians while simultaneously maintaining an open door toward normalizing relations with Israel.

In North Africa, conditions vary significantly. While Egypt has historically alternated between granting and restricting Palestinian rights, recent policy shifts in Turkey and Libya suggest a more supportive stance, though this shift follows periods of severe instability and hardship. The varied experiences of Palestinian refugees across different countries highlight the profound influence of political decisions and regional dynamics on their lives.

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