

**“PALESTINE REFUGEES AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE
AMIDST TIMES OF CONFLICT”**

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Thank you, Professor Jastram, for your very kind introduction. Allow me to also thank the Miller Institute for the invitation to address you today. I am delighted to have the opportunity to meet you at this eminent centre of learning.

The United States, I am pleased to say, continues to be one of UNRWA’s key supporters – this is a reflection of the commitment of its people and its government towards the vulnerable, and of the role which the United States plays in supporting Palestinians. The US government is our largest bilateral donor, and without this support, we would not be able to provide crucial assistance to Palestine refugees. However, I also value our partnerships with a rich variety of local government institutions, civil society, academia, organizations and communities here in the United States. And by the way, I am also very grateful to those of you who participated in the recent fundraiser which UNRWA held in the Bay area – a 5K race, organized by our national support committee, the American Friends of UNRWA. The turnout, and the positive reception from the local community, were very encouraging.

The theme of my remarks is “Palestine Refugees and the Quest for Peace Amidst Times of Conflict.” Let us be frank: the question of Palestine refugees has been around for so long, and it is such a complex element of a difficult conflict, that it has become – somehow, and regrettably – an issue of interest to a rather narrow number of experts – usually divided between fierce critics and passionate supporters – besides of course the refugees themselves and those, like me, working with them. However, and precisely because of how marginalized or specialized it has become, I believe that shedding light on the current situation of Palestine refugees is of particular interest and urgency. I also believe that – far from being a secondary by-product of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which one day will simply disappear – the refugee question continues to be at the heart of this central, crucial crisis, which plays such a large role in our collective geopolitics; and that it continues to demand deliberate, informed and politically balanced efforts to be addressed and resolved in a manner that will transform five million Palestine refugees in stakeholders of a lasting peace.

In particular, and from UNRWA’s specific perspective, I want to impress upon you how the long-standing and unresolved plight of Palestine refugees has resulted in a continuous state of vulnerability, which has been exacerbated by conflict in Syria, as it has been by other conflicts in the region over the past decades. It is in this context that UNRWA strives to contribute to both the human development and the resilience of Palestine refugees, and the stability of the Middle East – by strengthening communities and preparing refugees for a better future, and for peace.

The plight of Palestine refugees has been a compelling political and humanitarian issue for over 60 years, and for many of them, the shocking devastation and violence in Syria is only the most recent chapter in a long story of displacement, dispossession and hardship.

I would like to step back in history, as I want you to fully appreciate the layers of vulnerability which affect this refugee population. In the first Arab-Israeli war, in 1948, around 750,000 Palestinians either fled or were forced to flee their homes in what had become the State of Israel. The areas to which they went currently form UNRWA's five so called "fields of operations": the Gaza Strip, then administered by Egypt; the West Bank, then under Jordanian control; Jordan itself; Lebanon and Syria. UNRWA was created by the United Nations General Assembly shortly thereafter, in 1949, and UNRWA remains the only United Nations organization whose operations are not global but regional, and which provides assistance to just one group of people, bringing a measure of stability to this troubled region. The Six-Day War in 1967, in which some of the refugees from 1948 were displaced for a second time, resulted in the occupation by Israel of the West Bank and Gaza, which continues to this day. Palestine refugees there now live under the occupation of the same power which had been the cause of their exile.

It was, and remains, one of the largest refugee crises in contemporary history; and in the absence of a political solution to the conflict (and hence to the refugees' plight) it has become one of its most protracted. Today five million refugees, a figure which includes the children and grandchildren of those who originally fled in 1948, are registered with UNRWA. All Palestine refugees are entitled to protection and are eligible for our basic services: education, health and poverty relief, as well as critical emergency aid in times of crisis. But like all people in exile, their needs are not just material: importantly, from their point of view, UNRWA's support also has a moral dimension, serving as a reminder that the international community has not forgotten the plight of Palestine refugees.

International attention is important for the refugees. Their situation differs greatly between UNRWA's five fields of operations, but these are variations on the same tune of vulnerability and hardship.

In Gaza, 1.7m Palestinians – including almost 1.2m refugees – live under the Israeli blockade, which compounds the 46 years of military occupation they have endured. Gaza's recent history, and its peculiar geography, have been harsh on its people, locked between Israel, which controls access by land, sea and air, and Egypt, which has been in a turbulent transition for almost three years; and governed by Hamas, one of the two main Palestinian factions, whose fracture, dating back to 2007, continues to prevent Palestinians from having a unified political leadership. The security concerns of Gaza's neighbours must of course be considered very seriously. However, the blockade, which has been imposed on its population, and of which Israel bears the greater responsibility, is one of the harshest forms of occupation of modern times, an unfair and illegal measure which blights the lives of the entire civilian population, generates poverty and food insecurity, and has profound psychological effects, particularly on children. Near complete restrictions on exports of goods towards Gaza's natural markets – Israel itself and the West Bank – have destroyed its economy and reduced the Strip to dependency on aid – itself dependent in turn on an erratic blockade regime – and on imports from Egypt through illegal tunnels which the Egyptian authorities are now in the process of dismantling. For the people of Gaza to move in and out of the Strip to do what for most people in the world are normal activities – for students, for example, to attend schools abroad, for entrepreneurs to do business, for the faithful to perform pilgrimages, for ordinary citizens to visit relatives – has become an ordeal which only Kafka could have imagined.

Worst of all is the constant threat that political tensions might escalate into military action. Twice in the past few years, in December 2008 and November 2012, war has erupted between Israel and Gaza, bringing death and suffering to Gaza and affecting civilians in southern Israel. Twice, Gaza was in the headlines. Twice, sadly, its plight was nearly forgotten after war was stopped. In the past few weeks – and in the past few days, even – the ever lingering tensions seem to have increased again, amidst the world’s indifference: international attention is riveted on Syria and other crises in the region. It is essential, however, that the international community remains vigilant in respect of Gaza. When the threshold of military action is crossed, as we have seen in the past, those who pay are the innocent civilians.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, one third of the population – about 800,000 people – are registered as Palestine refugees. The occupation, here, takes different and more complex forms than in Gaza. A web of policies and restrictions has been slowly depriving Palestinians of assets, of livelihood, and even of legal residence, for the past 40 years. Meanwhile, Israeli settlements, which are clearly a substantive violation of international law, continue to expand, swallowing the land and resources of Palestinian families and villages, and eroding the prospects for a comprehensive and just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Twenty years of peace process – should I say peace “processing”? – have created the expectation of positive progress and achievement in the occupied Palestinian territory. But for Palestinians on the ground, conditions have drastically worsened. With one third of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem – the putative capital of the Palestinian state – threatened with destruction, and – in stark contrast – the building of settler houses and structures constantly escalating, the slow separation of Palestinians from their land and resources appears, increasingly, not just an outcome but rather a long term strategy of the occupation.

In this context, direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians have recently resumed, crucially facilitated by the United States. Notwithstanding the skepticism, tensions and suspicions that surround this effort; and in spite, or perhaps because of the extraordinary challenges which must be addressed, it is imperative that they succeed and provide a just and durable solution to all dimensions of this sprawling conflict. This, as we have seen, must include Gaza. And it must include refugees.

That the question of Palestine refugees is in need of a solution – perhaps now more than ever – is further proved by the situation of Palestinians elsewhere in the region.

In Lebanon, a country with a fraught history and delicate balance between its ethnic and religious communities, Palestine refugees are barred from most professions and have little access to economic opportunities. Many, and especially the poorest and most vulnerable, must cope with appalling living conditions in overcrowded refugee camps, now hosting also an additional population of 50,000 Palestinians who have fled from Syria, amidst Syrian refugees in their hundreds of thousands. This small country is burdened by an influx of unimaginable proportions.

In Jordan, the environment has been more stable than anywhere else in the region; some two million Palestine refugees enjoy a form of citizenship and have access to jobs and services. However, refugees continue to be amongst the poorest and most marginalized, particularly in times of instability, economic problems and political crisis.

Paradoxically, until 2011, the 540,000 Palestine refugees in Syria benefited from the most stable and secure environment in the region. However, this relative safety has now disintegrated – stark evidence not only of the extreme brutality of the Syria conflict, but also of the vulnerability of Palestine refugees as a community.

Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have become battle zones, with little regard for civilian life being displayed by any of the parties to the conflict. Over half of the Palestine refugees in Syria have been displaced again – with some crossing the border into Lebanon and Jordan and even to Egypt, Gaza and beyond. Tragically, there were Palestine refugees from Syria – no doubt trying to escape an increasingly hostile environment in the region – among those who drowned in some of the boats sunk in the Mediterranean in recent weeks. It is the first time that we observe Palestinians – twice refugees, in this case – fleeing beyond the Middle East in sizeable numbers in decades; and it is of great concern that their plight is now compounding the broader one of refugees and migrants from poor and war-torn countries, risking their lives, at the mercy of unscrupulous traffickers, to reach the shores of southern Europe: a coincidence of tragedies which deserves more than short-term reactions and responses, and should make us reflect on how effective – or not – international efforts to solve conflicts and reduce poverty in Africa and the Middle East have actually been in past decades.

One can say that the Palestine refugees on those boats flee the failure of addressing their long exile; more obviously and immediately, however, they flee from the violence in Syria. Of course, they do not have a monopoly on suffering in Syria, and you do not have to look much further than the news to feel the urgency of the protection needs of all people, these millions of whom are now part of the largest forced migration movement in recent history.

There are some specific aspects of the plight of Palestine refugees affected by the Syria crisis, however, which I would like to highlight in order to bring their particular vulnerability, and acute need for protection, to your attention.

First, to use technical refugee terminology, their “flight options” are severely limited, whether inside or outside Syria. In Syria, almost all Palestinian refugee camps are in or near conflict areas, whilst seeking refuge in neighbouring states is increasingly difficult. Jordan has decided to close its borders to Palestinians, and Lebanon is becoming reticent about their entry – it can barely accommodate, as we have said, those who do arrive. Other countries in the region similarly see the arrival of Palestinians from Syria as a particular problem and their policies often reflect this attitude.

Second, the conflict is destroying the heart of many communities in Syria, and Palestinians have not been exempted. Yarmouk, a Damascus neighbourhood once home to 160,000 Palestinians – seen by many as a “piece of Palestine in Syria” is now under siege and on the edge of obliteration. This once overcrowded, bustling urban quarter has quickly become synonymous with the loss of Syria as a safe haven for Palestine refugees. Like in a number of locations in the outskirts of Damascus, where fighting between government forces and opposition groups has been raging, UNRWA and other agencies have been unable to reach the centre of Yarmouk for months. Our information is dramatically patchy and unclear. Many Palestinians have fled Yarmouk to the volatile safety of other locations. However, those still blocked inside Yarmouk are calling to inform us that their situation is desperate – some told us they have only sugar and water to live on – and we must assume, unfortunately, that their situation is among the most catastrophic of any of the conflict-affected communities in Syria.

Many Palestinians in Syria today compare current events to what they call the "nakba", or the catastrophe: their original dispossession in 1948. Older refugees say that at least in 1948 they were welcomed in solidarity. In 2013, the doors are barely open to these second-time refugees and displaced.

In spite of difficulties, UNRWA – and other humanitarian agencies – have continued to work in Syria. This is dangerous: staff are exposed to great risks. UNRWA has already lost eight staff members, and 17 are missing. But this is essential in order to provide at least some assistance to people affected by terrible violence; and – let me repeat this – it is also a tangible sign of moral support. UNRWA's commitment to ensure that schools, clinics and other services are running is an effort to keep families together and to prevent communities from unravelling. A community forced into exile for the second time needs – also – this message of international solidarity.

There is another, important dimension of the impact of the Syria crisis on Palestine refugees. Their protracted limbo is, of course, a direct consequence of the lack of a negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Since its inception, UNRWA has always been part of an interim arrangement, in which neighbouring states have temporarily hosted refugees from Palestine, while a political solution was found and UNRWA provided for the material needs of refugees, relieving the burden on host countries and communities.

This precarious arrangement – protracted for 64 years by the inability of the parties and of the international community to find a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – is now made more complicated by the war in Syria – just as was the case in preceding conflicts in the region, especially the civil war in Lebanon. The Palestinian refugee question is challenging even in times of stability – it risks becoming intractable if some of the most stable refugee communities become scattered and displaced again, as is the case in Syria, and the burden of hosting second-time refugees becomes too challenging in countries which already have large refugee communities.

The key response to this, of course, is to renew efforts to find a solution to the question of refugees. The more specific response is to ensure that Syria, if and when peace prevails, resumes its role of good host to Palestinians. This may prove more challenging than some believe. Despite the best efforts of the Palestinian leadership, which UNRWA has supported, Palestine refugees in Syria are now perceived, by some, as having become a party to the conflict. Rebuilding the indispensable, rich coexistence of cultures and communities which constituted pre-conflict Syria will be one of the great challenges of post-conflict. It will now have to include Palestine refugees.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Humanitarian action can never be a substitute for political solutions. However, there is a desperate need for both in the Syria crisis. I believe firmly that with regional tensions mounting, and with needs deepening and broadening, the work of humanitarian organizations becomes ever more important in taking the edge off the desperation of individuals, at least, and in mitigating collective concerns.

It is therefore positive that in early October, the Security Council finally issued a presidential statement calling for humanitarian space to be created and respected in Syria. I hope that concrete efforts will be made accordingly, and that the parties to the conflict will uphold them.

Bringing humanitarian relief to the suffering, and striving to maintain basic services in Syria is crucial. To ensure this, United Nations plans must be fully funded. Pressure must be brought to bear on all donor countries for significant and sustained funding. Meanwhile, neighbouring countries must be supported adequately so they do not implode from a combination of political, economic and resource pressures. Refugees fleeing Syria, including Palestinians, must be allowed access to asylum, protection and assistance. But what is essential is to bring the conflict to an end. There are no ready solutions, but they are certainly not military ones. Ceasefires must be negotiated to spare civilians, international humanitarian law must come to the forefront of political discussions, and a negotiated end to the conflict must be the main goal.

Within those efforts, it is critical that work be done to ensure that safe space in Syria is restored and respected also for Palestinians. Otherwise the consequences of protracted Palestinian displacement in and from Syria will be a further deterioration of stability in a region that cannot afford it. It will also be, by the way, a step further away from an overall solution to the long and painful plight of Palestine refugees, at a time when – as already mentioned – direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians are meant to encompass all elements of their conflict, including of course the question of refugees.

The dramatic situation of Palestine refugees in Syria is the most acute crisis which they are currently facing. However, as we have seen, they will continue to be one of the most fragile groups in all the societies in which they live, as long as their refugee status remains unresolved.

Let me say this again. Above all, and beyond Syria, we must not lose sight of the urgent need for this group to be granted a political resolution of their statelessness and dispossession. Without it, the Middle East will not find peace and its people will be deprived of the security and dignity for which they rightly yearn.

For this reason, and from our point of view, I continue to applaud the strong support of the United States to Palestinians, including as the largest bilateral donor to UNRWA. It is imperative that the United States also remain actively engaged in promoting peace and preventing and bringing an end to existing violations of international law that are causing so much pain and suffering amongst many people, including Palestine refugees.

Their plight, inscribed in the difficult history of the Palestinian people and in the context of a region shattered again by conflict, is daunting but must not be intimidating. Let me return to where I started: we must remember the plight of Palestine refugees. Doing so can only serve to advance the achievement of a permanent and lasting solution for this displaced population, and the pursuit of peace in a region which will continue to be at the centre of our strategic preoccupations and of our political and moral concerns – in other words, at the very heart of the history of our world.

Thank you.