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Socio-Economic Conditions of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon

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Summary

The socio-economic conditions of Palestinians in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon depend on various political and economic premises as well as on the ‘imaginary ethnic environment’ in each country. In Lebanon Palestinian refugees seem to be the worst affected. Being constantly denied any rights they are forced to struggle for life. International assistance is insufficient, and although effort is put into securing refugees’ basic needs it does not change in a significant way their standard of living. In Syria, Palestinians enjoy almost the same rights, or rather their lack, as Syrian nationals. However, the conditions of the refugee camps do not seem to vary from those in Lebanon or Jordan. In the Hashemite Kingdom most of the Palestinians are granted Jordanian citizenship, but the economic crisis and widespread poverty do not allow the full enjoyment of all the rights. Palestinians seem to be sharing the effects of poverty along with Syrians and Jordanians, and are relegated to the ‘third category’ citizens in Lebanon. Only few of them, mainly representing middle and upper class, managed to assimilate themselves into the host countries’ societies and can afford life on a decent standard comparable to the one they had before being forced to migrate. The misery of Palestinians in the region can be seen as an effect of discriminating legal norms, economic crises, political unrest and a low level of development in the host countries.

1. Introduction

Palestinians, as a nation of forced migrants, fall into two categories: internally displaced persons and refugees. It is claimed that currently over 3,000,000 of them live abroad, mainly in neighbouring countries, but also as far afield as in Brazil and Indonesia. Although 'it is not easy to see the similarity between the family in a refugee camp in Lebanon, the peasant in the occupied West Bank, the worker in Gaza, the rich businessman in Jordan, the specialist in the Gulf, and the academic in the West, [...] these people have one thing in common: they have lost their homeland' (Fossum 1987:40). For over 50 years the Palestinian issue has remained unsolved and it seems likely that it will feature in our minds for many years to come. In this paper I analyse the socio-economic conditions of their existence in the three main countries of refuge: Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. These countries are not only the major refugee destinations for Palestinian people, but also share with Palestine a common history. First, I will try to determine at which point Palestinians saw each other and were perceived by others as a nation. Second, I will examine the main international documents such as resolutions and agreements which directly impact upon Palestinians or in a significant way affect their life. Third, I wish to analyse each country's legal norms concerning residency rights, employment, freedom of movement, ownership, family reunion, political rights, access to governmental services such as social benefits, education and health care. Finally I look at social conditions of living in reference to the above mentioned legal norms. All these elements, in my opinion, form the socio-economic environment of Palestinians in the host states.

2. Palestinian identity

Palestinian society can be seen as a relatively new phenomenon. Golda Mier's statement that 'there are no Palestinians' (Graham-Brown 1989:37) was the Israeli authorities' motto in constant denial of the recognition of Palestinians as a nation. Although many historians point to the XIX century as a cradle of the Palestinian identity, I would rather opt for the end of World War II and the creation of the state of Israel as the decisive moment. At the end of XIX century the Arabic community under the Ottoman ruling consisted of Bedouins, Fellahs and urbanites (Ashkenasi 1997). The region, which currently consists of Jordan, Lebanon and Israel together with the Occupied Territories, was shaped by around 250 influential families who made up a political and social elite. The local Arabs described themselves as members or supporters of one particular clan (hamula), rather than members of an ethnic group or a nation. After World War II they suddenly found themselves under

different jurisdictions and not ruled by their own leaders. This was a direct consequence of a new political order in the region. The Arabs from the Valley of the Jordan River and surroundings started being recognised as one nation. In Israel they were persecuted not because they belonged to a certain clan, but because they were perceived as one ethnic group, and a threat to the new-born Jewish state itself. Having become refugees in the neighbouring Arab countries, they were treated as members of the same imaginary political and legal construction. This, I believe, was a basis for creating the Palestinian identity and finally the Palestinian nation. From that point the local Arabs shared a common fate and misery. The next step in developing the Palestinian nation was creating political and social organisations aiming to tighten links among people.

3. International regulations

There are many international laws in the form of UN resolutions, conventions, international agreements and treaties applying to the Palestinians as refugees. The most important international legislation concerned with refugees seems to be the 1951 Geneva Convention, which describes refugee as somebody who ‘...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return’ (RSP 1993:3). After the Geneva Convention the Refugee Protocol of 1967 was issued aiming to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. The problem of Palestinians emerged, however, much earlier and at that time a special United Nation agenda was created in order to help them. The first exodus of Palestinians as a direct consequence of the first Israeli-Arab war and the establishing of Medinat Israel took place in 1948 when over 700,000 people were forced to flee (Ashkenasi 1997). To deal with the waves of refugees the United Nations’ General Assembly established in December 1949 UNRWA – United Nation Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugee in the Near East. UNRWA is concerned with ‘[...] persons whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict lost both their home and their means of livelihood and took refuge in 1948 in one of the countries where UNRWA provides relief. Refugees within this definition and the direct descendants of such refugees are eligible for agency assistance if they are: registered with UNRWA; living in the area of UNRWA operations (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and, after 1967, the Occupied Territories); and

in need' (RSP 1993:4). The agency, however, was not granted the power to guarantee safety, security or legal and human rights. Those who are eligible for assistance, 'are excluded from the area of competence of UNHCR and from the provisions of the 1951 Refugee Convention' (RSP 1993:4). Therefore, paradoxically, one of the world's biggest, and definitely most well-known, refugee case in a substantive part is not in the main a concern of the UN organisation responsible for refugees. Nevertheless, Palestinians who previously profited from the UNRWA's assistance may be recognised as refugees under 1951 Convention if UNRWA ceases its aid.

Since 1948 there have been many UN resolutions issued concerning Palestinians both directly and indirectly. Resolution 194 describes Palestinian migrants as refugees and in article 13 urges the Israeli government to allow the return of those who wish to. Article 12 refers to political and citizens' rights. Resolution 237 repeats the request 'calling on Israel to respect human rights mentioning clearly the unconditional return of Palestinians and fully facilitate this return' (Rabah 1996). Resolutions 242 and 338 also deal with the effects of the wars of 1967 and 1973 respectively. Resolution 242 is mainly concerned with the question of Palestinian refugees. Resolution 338 calls partly for the implementation of resolution 242 (Rabah 1996).

Although other acts such as the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons are undoubtedly important when it comes to the refugee question, the most important document concerning the rights of Palestinians seemed to be the Casablanca Protocol adopted by the Arab League in 1965. It was supposed to grant all the Palestinian refugees freedom of movement, permission to work and full residency rights within the Arab states. This promising act failed completely, however, due to no legal links with the internal law of the Arab states and due to the lack of political will to implement it. The support, which Palestinians gave to Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, resulted not only in mass expulsions from Kuwait, but also in the rescinding of the Casablanca Protocol (res. 5093 of the Conference of the Supervisors of Palestinians in the Host Arab Countries, RSP 1993:3) and replacing it with each country's internal law regulations. An attempt to amend the situation took the form of adopting the Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons in the Arab World during the meeting under the auspices of the UNHCR in Cairo in 1991. It should be seen also as a part of 'a recent drive to protect human rights in the Arab world' (Zureik 1996:31).

Other international documents and projects on securing rights of the Palestinians were developed mainly in the 1990s. The Refugee Working Group was established during the

Madrid Conference in 1991, whose purpose was to solve the infra-structural problems of the refugees, by creating new jobs and making easier the access to different services in the host countries. In article 12 of the Declaration of Principles it is indicated that an Israeli – Palestinian committee with the participation of Egypt and Jordan, should deal with the refugee question. In the Gaza – Jerycho Agreement and the Israeli – Jordan Peace Treaty from 1994, the issue of refugees is mentioned again. The Oslo Agreements provide a rather blurred explanation of what should be done about the problem although the prefaces to both clearly indicate that ‘the permanent status negotiations will lead to the implementation of both resolutions: 242 and 338’ (Rabah 1996:5).

4. Internal conditions

The internal conditions of Palestinians in each analysed country varied and varies according to the political and economic situation as well as historical and ethnic background. In Jordan, although there have always been tensions between Palestinian organisations, and the Hashemite royal family, a positive climate lasted until 1988. It was then that King Hussein decided to break links with the West Bank. At that point the Hashemite Kingdom formally withdrew any claims towards the Occupied Territories. The decision seemed to be partly a reaction against the Intifada. An important event which could put in danger the relatively stable situation of Palestinians in Jordan, was the Fedayeen uprising in 1970 (seen by some as a civil war) where clashes erupted between several Palestinian liberation movements and governmental units. Fortunately for the population therein, only the major activists of the Palestinian movements were persecuted and the PLO commando was expelled from the country.

In Syria, the co-operation and the co-existence between native Syrians and Palestinians seemed to be good at all times. The only one event which, in my opinion, had the potential to disturb peaceful cohabitation was the purging of Sa’iqah - the Palestinian wing of Baath party by Hafez al-Asad after taking power in 1970. It was an act of retaliation for their having stood against Asad in the civil conflict. Asad’s policy, however, was directed into securing his long-term ruling position in the state rather than punishing Palestinians. Finally only the most active leaders of Sa’iqah, were arrested, and replaced by other trustful (in Asad’s eyes) Palestinians.

In Lebanon the situation has always looked diametrically different. In order to maintain an imaginary ethnic balance in the state, Palestinians were treated as people of the so

called “third category”¹. Often Israeli military operations and Lebanese militia actions lead to many deaths among refugees. It is estimated that around 30,000 to 40,000 Palestinians were killed in Lebanon since 1948 as an effect of violent conflicts (Zureik 1996). The most famous cases of genocide are those in the camps of Shatila and Sabria by the Lebanese Christian militia. Many Palestinians were forced to migrate within Lebanon, becoming not only refugees but also internally displaced persons. It is difficult to tell the exact number, but some sources claim that about 6000 to 8000 families had to leave their place of residence due to a threat of potential persecution (Zureik 1996). Even the Cairo agreement of 1969 between the PLO and Lebanese government, which guaranteed Palestinians ‘right to work, residence and movement’(Peretz 1993:63) did not change the situation.

Various sources claim that Palestinians make up 45% to 60% of the entire Jordanian population. ‘Jordan was the only Arab country, who offered full citizenship to all the Palestinian refugees and their descendants’ (UNRWA 1992:107) who, at the time of introducing the legislation (1954), were on the territory of the Kingdom. According to the 1954 Jordanian Nationality Law there is no difference between Jordanian non-refugees and Palestinian refugees. At that time Jordan also possessed the West Bank, which meant that all the Palestinians residing there could become Jordanian citizens. Therefore the West Bank refugees of 1967 are considered Jordanian citizens. Gazans, however, who arrived at the same time in Jordan, do not enjoy the same rights as others and are not Jordanian citizens.

Palestinians in Syria are estimated at around 320 000, which is about 3% of the entire population. They are granted full residency rights, with a few exceptions. They are not, however, considered Syrian citizens and may hold only special Arab League travel documents. Nevertheless the refugees of 1948 are entitled to a Syrian passport (Fossum 1987:45). There is evidence that as early as in 1949 ‘the Syrian government began to adopt what eventually developed into a series of laws that placed Palestinians on virtually equal footing with Syrian nationals’ (Takkenberg 1998:167). In January 1949 the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution – PARI was established in order to assist incoming forced migrants. The organisation was concerned with administrative matters as well as with providing relief. The most important legislative act relating to Palestinians seems to be Law No. 260 from the 10th July 1956, which says that ‘Palestinians residing in the Syrian Arab Republic territories are considered as Syrians by origin in Syria, in all matters pertaining to the laws and regulations’ (UNRWA 1992:139). The Syrian government wanted to control all the Palestinians on its

¹ The definition follows later.

jurisdictional territory. Therefore the successor of PARI – the General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees still seems to be ‘a dominant authority in the camps and in Syria’s Palestinian community’ (Takkenberg 1998:169). That, however, caused tension and misunderstanding with the UNRWA officials, when it came to the division of power.

A common opinion seems to be that the Lebanese government did not introduce any special legislation towards Palestinian refugees. That, however is not quite true. On the contrary, the Lebanese authorities put a great deal of effort into making Palestinians’ lives difficult. It is impossible to say how many Palestinians are currently residing in Lebanon. The government claims the number to be over 500,000, whereas UNRWA estimates it at 350,000. Nevertheless Palestinians build a significant minority within the Lebanese society, but they are classified by law as foreigners. Created by the legislative decree No. 42 in March 1959, the Directorate of Palestine Refugee Affairs acts as a mediating body with UNRWA. The Ministry of Interior in decree No 319 from August 1962 about the foreigners in Lebanon, relegates Palestinians to citizens of a “third category” – ‘foreigners who do not carry documents from their country of origin’ (UNRWA 1992:126). This category of foreigners residing in Lebanon, must settle their status with the Bureau of Internal Security, or obtain identity cards issued by the General Bureau for the Administration of Refugee Affairs in Lebanon. Practically only those who arrived in Lebanon shortly after the first Israeli - Arab war in 1948 are considered legal residents in the state. The rest are, in theory, seen as illegal immigrants. Elia Zureik (1996) divides Palestinians in Lebanon into three groups: those, who arrived in 1948 and are registered with UNRWA, those who arrived from the third countries and are not considered legal residents, and those of 1967 war seen as “completely” illegal. In 1975 the law was introduced incorporating refugees from 1956 into the Bureau of Refugee Affairs, but so far nothing else constructive has been done about the status of the refugees, apart from several quasi hostile acts.² About 50 000 Palestinians were granted Lebanese citizenship. The majority of these are Christians (about 45 000) and the rest are Sunni Muslims. This deliberate act of the Lebanese government aimed at strengthening the Christian side of the ethnically and religiously sensitive society.

Neither Syria nor Jordan impose any limitations on the Palestinians allowing them equal legal access to the labour market. In the case of Syria it is granted on the basis of securing all the rights already enjoyed by the Syrian nationals. In the case of Jordan it is

² I.e. After colonel Kadafi tried to expel Palestinians from Libya in 1995, the Lebanese authorities imposed visa requirement on all Palestinians with Lebanese travel documents, who were at that time abroad. This requirement was lifted in January 1999.

simply because Palestinians are Jordanian citizens. There is, however, an exception when it comes to Gazan refugees of 1967. They are allowed to work only in the private sector. 'The concession of work permits is in most cases subject to prior approval by the authorities concerned' (UNRWA 1992:108). Palestinians expelled from Kuwait, who possess non-Jordanian travel documents, are entitled neither to permanent residency nor work. The situation in Lebanon looks much more complicated. Palestinians as foreigners are, in general, not allowed to work unless they obtain a work permit. The Law regarding Entry to, Residency in and Exit from, Lebanon issued in July 1962 initially restricted legal job opportunities for foreigners. Another document concerned with this issue was decree No. 17561 from September 1962, which named professions limited exclusively for the Lebanese nationals (i.e. engineers, lawyers, doctors, pharmacists). The policy of discrimination was confirmed by decision No.289/2 in 1982. Moreover, decree No. 17651 from 1964, forbade non-Lebanese from engaging in any profession without the prior securing of a work permit. Obtaining such a permit, in general, and moreover for 'restricted' profession is virtually impossible for a Palestinian. As a result, it is estimated that the number of permits do not exceeds 5 000 for several hundred thousand refugees. In addition, the administrative decrees from the Ministry of Labour issued in 1990s complicated the employment possibilities for Palestinians even further.

The regulations concerning free movement vary from country to country. As Palestinians in Jordan hold Jordanian passports, travelling abroad does not seem to be a problem. Gazans, who usually hold Egyptian travel documents, are likely to encounter some difficulties. In Syria all the Palestinians are entitled to the special Arab League travel documents. Unfortunately these documents require their holders to obtain visas to most of the countries in the region. In Lebanon three different categories are distinguished when it comes to the eligibility for travel documents:

- a) Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon; a travel document is issued within a validity of one year, renewable three times;
- b) those not registered with UNRWA, but registered in 1948 with the League of Red Cross Societies; a travel document is issued for one year, renewable three times, distinguishable from the first category through a special rubber stamp indicating 'valid for return';
- c) those not registered either with UNRWA or LRCS, where a travel document is issued only for three months with a red rubber stamp indicating 'not valid for return' (Takkenberg 1998).

Moreover 'Palestinian refugees who wanted to leave the country had to obtain exit/re-entry visas from the Office of Public Security, which were affixed to their travel documents' (Takkenberg 1998:165). This requirement was lifted in January 1999. In recent years, even within Lebanon, the authorities have tried to restrict the movement of Palestinians.

When it comes to the issue of owning properties, in Jordan there are generally no restrictions, except in the case of Gazans who, in theory, are granted only temporary residency. In Syria the law limits Palestinians, with regards to owning properties, to one house for a private residence. As it may cause difficulties in running business, a regulation was introduced where a property can be bought by a Syrian national, but full control is in the hands of a Palestinian through a binding agreement. In Lebanon there are severe land restrictions and higher taxes are imposed if one owns a property. 'Palestinians must obtain presidential consent to acquire immovable property' (Peretz 1993:61).

Family reunion matters seem to be very complicated in this part of the world since not only political, but also religious factors play an essential role. As a Palestinian wife of a Jordanian citizen is a Jordanian by virtue of the citizenship law, the Palestinian husband of a Jordanian woman does not acquire Jordanian citizenship automatically. A Palestinian woman married to a Syrian man will obtain on request Syrian nationality upon submitting a petition to the Ministry of Interior if she can read and write Arabic, but the same does not apply to a Palestinian husband of a Syrian woman (UNRWA 1992). The foreign wife of a Lebanese can receive a Lebanese passport, whereas the foreign husband of a Lebanese woman is not entitled to one. This policy clearly indicates the influence of Islam and its impact on legal regulations, where women are not treated as equals to men.

In Jordan all the Palestinians, apart from Gazans are entitled to social benefits. The same applies to Palestinians in Syria. In Lebanon they are not eligible for social benefits at all. There are two main reasons for this: first: they do not usually hold a valid work permit, which is a precondition for any kind of assistance; second: Lebanese law in what seems a somewhat peculiar practice bases its treatment of a foreigner according to the way a Lebanese person is treated in the country of that foreigner. Palestinians, however, do not have, in legal terms, a country of origin, which renders this practice invalid.

Education and health facilities are in this region much less accessible than in western countries. However, in Jordan the access to education is equal for both indigenous Jordanians and Palestinians. In Syria education at all levels is free of charge, and Syrians as well as Palestinians can benefit from this. This is also the case, when it comes to health care. In Lebanon neither education nor health facilities are accessible to Palestinians. 'Lebanese

governmental educational institutions prohibit Palestinians from enrolment and the UNRWA educational programme [...] does not adequately fulfil the educational needs...'(PRCS 1994:14).

Political rights, in their widely acknowledged form, vary according to the country. In Jordan as Jordanian citizens, Palestinians can vote in elections, whereas in Syria they cannot. They are, however, allowed to establish political organisations. Indeed, within the Syrian state there are at least several important Palestinian organisations. The General Union of Palestinian Workers and the General Union of Palestinian Women in Syria seem to have played a significant role in the life of Palestinians, especially in times of political crises in the region. Political or rather military organisations, PFLP and DFLP being prime examples, have for many years been based in Syria. A friendly climate for Palestinian organisations in Syria seems to be part of government's policy of attempting to control Palestinians not only in its own country, but throughout the Middle East. Although in Lebanon Palestinians are not allowed to vote, between 1970 and 1982 some political freedom technically existed. This was during the time when the PLO commando resided there, and the Lebanese forces had failed to control southern part of the country, with a strong presence of Palestinian refugees. In Jordan and in Syria Palestinians are allowed to serve in the army, and some of them have even served as generals in both countries. In Jordan this law is based on Jordanian citizenship, whereas in Syria it is regulated by internal acts which make Palestinians 'almost' equals to Syrian nationals.

5. Social status

In general, the social situation of Palestinians is determined not only by legal matters within particular states, but also by the economic situation of the region as well as political events.

Palestinian Diaspora in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon can be classified in different categories, and, in my opinion, it serves no purpose to define the precise boundaries between them. Palestinian refugees can be divided into people from rural areas and people from urban areas. I deliberately avoid using words such as farmers and workers, as they seem to be far from accurate. Another classification which does not correspond with the one previously stated, can be made with regards to camp residents and non-camp residents or representatives of the middle class and the lower class. A special group can be created from those who worked or work in the Gulf states.

The status of Palestinians varied and varies according to the social group they belong to and, as mentioned before, according to the economic and political situation. In Jordan and Lebanon, in the years of prosperity, Palestinians, and especially their wealthy middle and upper classes, contributed much towards the economic development. 'Lebanon's supply-side economy and its free-market policies (between 1950s and 1970s) attracted hundreds of Palestinian investors and venture capitalists. They have been prominent in banking, as owners of airline companies and cinemas, and in auditing, marketing, and other technical services' (Peretz 1993:62). It was estimated that Palestinians brought to Lebanon almost 7 million US\$ of initial capital. As many of them were reasonably well educated and skilled, Palestinian income and living standards rose rapidly in the seventies. In Jordan, although it was claimed that the Hashemite royal family gave preference to indigenous Jordanians, Palestinian businessmen prospered investing in agriculture, industry, trade and finance. 'Possibilities of improving economic conditions attracted many West Bank Palestinians to Amman and other East Bank towns' (Peretz 1993:49). In the case of Syria, the waves of Palestinian refugees seem to be lacking middle class representatives, simply because the Syrian economy model was for many years a quasi – socialist one. The Palestinian middle class, due to its financial resources, did not have difficulties in assimilating in the host countries. In Jordan they even became important officials working for the royal family and the government. Some claim that 'the majority of the country's civil servants are of Palestinian origin' (Peretz 1993:48). The middle class, however, is a minority within the Palestinian Diaspora, and therefore its social position can not be taken as a reliable sample of the real social conditions. In Lebanon, the years of prosperity ended in the 1970s when the civil war erupted, followed by the serious economic crisis. By the mid-80s the recession also reached Jordan, which previously seemed to be performing economically well. In the nineties the expulsion of Palestinian workers from the Gulf states after the Gulf War made matters worse. Until then many families in Jordan and Lebanon, and some in Syria, relied on remittances from the Gulf states. This dramatically changed, and thousands of Palestinian workers came back to Lebanon and Jordan posing more threat to these countries' weak economies and adding to the number of unemployed. More than 300.000 Jordanians/Palestinians came back to Jordan. They represented about 10% of the labour force of the country (UNRWA 1992). Syria, however, seems to be the least affected by the Gulf crisis and political tensions of the region. It is likely to be due to a lack of major conflicts within the Arab Republic as well as the state's economy independence from the foreign remittances. Almost 50% of the Palestinians in Syria work in the industrial sector, whereas the rest are employed in agriculture and services as well as in administrative jobs

(Brand 1988). The first waves of refugees in 1948 were welcomed in Syria, since, according to the experts of economic policy, the country was underpopulated and desperately needed new labour force. Therefore Palestinians were quite easily assimilated within the society. As many of them were farmers, they were settled in the valley of Euphrates.

Although Syria also suffered, to a certain extent, from the aftermath of the Gulf War, the unemployment rate, estimated at about 10%, seems to be relatively low, compared to other states in the region. However, these are the official governmental numbers and should be treated with some scepticism. In Jordan the unemployment rate can be as high as 30%, which considerably affects both Palestinians and indigenous Jordanians. In Lebanon, the situation is much more severe since the majority of the Palestinians are stateless and not allowed to work. Unemployment among men between the ages of 18 and 60 is about 37-38%, according to many sources. Those who have jobs, however, usually work illegally earning less than the officially sanctioned minimum. Such jobs do not secure a decent social position and allow barely basic existence. Although women's role in the labour force increased recently throughout the region, 'only 5.1% of Palestinian women in Lebanon participate in the labour market' (Zureik 1996:38).

Living conditions, in general, are considered the best in the Syrian Arab Republic, where over 70% of Palestinian refugees live outside the camps. A well organised form of housing in special residential areas, allowed most of this 70% to own their houses. Consequent to the Gulf War and economic recession in Jordan the standard of life of Palestinians worsened. It is said that in the early 1990s the GDP per capita declined in Hashemite Kingdom by 40%. In Lebanon the situation has always been the worst, and even those residing outside the camps in the suburbs of cities live in very bad conditions. The housing density is estimated at five to six persons per room. 60% of the people live in rent-free accommodation provided by UNRWA, 30% pay rent, and 10% own their dwelling, even though there are so many restrictions in possessing properties (Zureik 1996). It is important to mention that the living conditions and work opportunities are in a limited way correlated with the presence of the PLO in a state. During the PLO residence in Jordan (until 1970) and in southern Lebanon (1970-82), some Palestinians were provided with jobs within the structure of the organisation itself.

The best situation in education is in Syria, where the government provides all the services. The authorities were quite successful in reducing the overall rate of illiteracy in the country. 'Between 1960 and 1992 the illiteracy rate declined from 29% to 6% for males and from 66% to 19% for females' (Zureik 1996:42). The number of university graduates among

Palestinians is around 4%. In Lebanon, the law prohibits Palestinians from attending state schools, unless they pay high fees in hard currency, usually unaffordable for refugees. To make matters worse 'repeated internal displacements have contributed to long absences from schools by children' (Zureik 1996:38). UNRWA can only secure access to its own elementary level educational institutions. As a result many Palestinians in Lebanon lack essential education.

About 30% of Palestinians in Syria and Jordan³ still live in the refugee camps. In Lebanon the number is estimated at around 50%. There are 10 camps in Jordan and 10 in Syria. As an effect of military actions conducted by both Israelis and Lebanese, the number of camps in Lebanon declined from 16 to 12.

6. Conclusion

The life of Palestinians in the Middle East can be described as miserable. In this sense it is not distinct from the lives of refugees or internally displaced persons all over the world. This hardship is caused by various premises, which depend on economic and political as well as the imaginary ethnic situations of each country. This is also the case of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Palestinians in Lebanon seem to be the worst affected. Being constantly denied any rights Palestinians are forced to struggle for life. In Syria, Palestinians enjoy almost the same rights, or rather their lack, as Syrian nationals. Asad family's regime refuses democratic reforms and closely monitors any kind of politically inspired activity. However, in my opinion, the position of Palestinian refugees requires more infra-structural aid than permission for political freedom. Therefore I am prone to accept the idea that their life in the Syrian Arab Republic is still the most comfortable. Sadly the conditions of the refugee camps do not seem to vary from those in Lebanon or Jordan. In the Hashemite Kingdom most of the Palestinians are granted Jordanian citizenship, but the economic crisis of the state and widespread poverty do not allow the full enjoyment of all the rights. Palestinians seem to be sharing the effects of poverty along with Syrians and Jordanians, and are relegated to the 'third category' citizens in Lebanon. Only few of them, mainly representing middle and upper class, managed to assimilate themselves into the host countries.

I believe that my paper cited all the main laws, both internal and international, which regulate the presence of Palestinians in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. I also aimed to present their social existence in relation to these laws. The reality, however, sometimes varies from

³ In case of Jordan the data covers only those refugees who are registered with UNRWA.

the theoretical norms accepted by decisive bodies. The most clear example is the implementing and later rescinding of the Casablanca Protocol. In many cases, however, the law has been already so restrictive, that a potential lack of its implementation does not change anything. The misery of Palestinians in the region can be seen as an effect of discriminating legal norms, economic crises, political unrest and a low level of development in the host countries.

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