

## Syrian refugees in Lebanon: an unwelcome burden

In the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, when the state of Israel came into being, around 750,000 Arab residents of Palestine became refugees. 100,000 of these came to Lebanon, where they have survived in refugee camps ever since. With subsequent generations inheriting refugee status, there are now more than 440,000 Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations in Lebanon. This represents around 10% of the entire population of Lebanon.

Exile has been a difficult experience for Palestinian refugees and for Lebanon itself. With its diverse population of 18 recognised religious groups, bound together by a confessional political system that divides power along sectarian lines, Lebanon was ill prepared for this influx of mostly Sunni Muslim Palestinians. Marginalising Palestinians in refugee camps, and resisting all forms of integration and normalisation, has been the state's response to this challenge.

At the same time, the Palestinian refugee camps gained autonomy from the state in 1969. This paved the way for Lebanon to become the terrain for the PLO's war of national liberation against Israel. From 1975-1990, the country was torn apart by civil war, in which Palestinian armed groups were heavily involved. Since the war ended, the Palestinian camps have remained uncontrolled zones, referred to as 'security islands' by many Lebanese.

It is into this fraught context that around a million Syrian refugees, fleeing the catastrophic war in their country, have sought refuge. The experiences of the earlier Palestinian refugee crisis are shaping the Lebanese response to the Syrian one. The government has refused to set up camps, seeking to house refugees instead in rented accommodation or with local families and communities. Just last week, **residents of a village in eastern Lebanon burned down a makeshift Syrian refugee camp** (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanese-residents-torch-syrian-refugee-camp-8978549.html>), on the pretext that a Syrian had raped a disabled Lebanese man.

Lebanon risks being torn apart by the Syrian war. Many Lebanese support the Syrian government, while many support the armed opposition; Lebanese of different religious communities are crossing the border to fight on each side in the Syrian war. Now more than 1 in 4 people in Lebanon are refugees - Syrians, Palestinians, and Palestinian refugees originally registered in Syria.

More than half of all registered Syrian refugees - more than 1.1 million - are children, and three quarters of these are under 12. **A recent UNHCR report highlighted their plight** (<https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/unhcr-campaigns/childrensreport/Future-of-Syria-UNHCR-v13.pdf>). With more than half not in school, "a generation is growing up without a formal education". Many are having to work; many others are isolated and confined to their places of shelter. Thousands are unaccompanied, separated from their parents or orphaned. Three quarters of babies born in exile have no birth certificates.

The huge strain of the Syrian refugee crisis is falling on the people and governments of neighbouring states like Lebanon. **17 more countries, most in Europe, have now agreed with the UNHCR to resettle Syrian refugees** (<http://www.unhcr.org/5249282c6.pdf>), but the numbers to be resettled are small compared with the scale of the problem. **The UK government has pledged £500 million in aid to those affected by the Syrian conflict**, (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syria-the-latest-updates-on-uk-aid>) including £66 million in Lebanon, but is not participating in the resettlement programme. **Refugee charities have called on the UK government to extend their humanitarian response** ([http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/3765\\_syrian\\_refugees\\_a\\_global\\_responsibility](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/3765_syrian_refugees_a_global_responsibility)) and institute a programme of emergency humanitarian evacuations for refugees in most need.

75 years since the Kindertransports, a million Syrian children now face another winter in tents and improvised shelters, away from home.

**Dr Adam Ramadan** (</staff/profiles/gees/ramadan-adam.aspx>), Lecturer in Human Geography, **School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences** (</schools/gees/index.aspx>), University of Birmingham.