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Editorial
Unlocking the Impasse

Turbulence pervades some countries of the Middle East, especially Libya, Syria, Lebanon, and some other Arab countries. In the wake of the so-called 'Arab Spring', these countries are afflicted by turmoil, political instability and deterioration in socio-economic conditions. These countries are also home to millions of Palestinian refugees who are the worst sufferers of this process of ongoing upheaval. Under the prevailing unstable conditions in Syria, Palestinian refugees there cannot expect to exist outside a paradigm of danger and unpredictability. Their brethren in Lebanon learned the same lesson years ago. Palestinians in Kuwait were also victimized on a large scale in 1991, along with other communities accused of being sympathetic to Saddam Hussein. True to form, the small Palestinian community in Iraq also received its share of maltreatment following the US invasion in 2003. Before 2003, a small community of 35,000 Palestinians resided in Iraq. They were hardly ever associated with political controversy.

When the US invaded, however, they became an easy target for various militias, US forces and criminal gangs. Many were killed. Others ran in circles seeking safe haven elsewhere in Iraq, to no avail, and thousands found themselves stranded in refugee camps at the Jordanian and Syrian borders. Their number now stands at nearly 7,000. Their tragedy highlighted how the Palestinian refugee problem was as real and urgent as ever. Palestinian refugees might well find themselves on the run again as the situation is so perilous. During the Arab-Israeli war that preceded the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, approximately 750,000 Palestinians either fled, or were forced to flee, their homes. Many sought sanctuary in neighbouring countries with today some 4.8m Palestinians registered as refugees in the Middle East, one of the world's largest refugee populations.

Past experience shows that confining the refugee question to the margins of peace negotiations or to be left to the final stages of any agreement, is a failed policy. For Palestinians, the peace process must end the injustice and ordeal of forced displacement that they continue to experience. On the basis of this experience, the Palestinians are 'frequently subject to legal, political and socio-economic discrimination.' The continued exclusion of Palestinian refugees from any peace process, along with the systematic denial of their rights, is ensuring that a viable solution to the conflict remains out of reach.

Palestinian refugees do not want to be regarded as passive, hapless victims; neither do they want to exist on humanitarian assistance. They want recognition of their identity, of their rights and also of the vibrant and critical contribution they can and should make to unlock the impasse. Palestinian factions must place their personal interest aside and unite, even if temporarily, to protect Palestinian refugees in Syria. The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, whose primary purpose is "to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees", must act now to ensure the safety of Palestinian refugees in any future grim scenario. The Arab League, which has done little to protect Palestinian refugees when caught in past regional conflicts, must act this time to redeem past failures.

There is nothing worse than being a refugee on the run, except being a refugee on the run again and again, with a legal status of perpetual statelessness, and with no country in which to seek shelter. As for Arab media, they should know well that their insistence on representing Palestinians as a relevant party in the bloodshed in Syria equals to setting them up for a major disaster, to say the least. Recognising the rights of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland with dignity and honour is critical to unlocking the conflict. With vastly increased numbers of refugees still living in poverty, often without hope and at a time of political upheaval across the region, the need to address their situation is perhaps more pressing than ever.

The way forward 'requires a long-term, just and peaceful solution that guarantees a viable future for the Palestinians. This calls for a radical shift from the current political paradigm to one where Palestinians, Israelis and the international community have the political will and create the space necessary to take bold steps towards peace. The international community should establish a workable and effective mechanism to examine repatriation, resettlement and compensation issues for refugees in detail.

—BK