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A Refuge for Refugees: The Historical Context and Socioeconomic Impact of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

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Jordan: A Refuge for the Refugees

The Historical Context and Socioeconomic Impact of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

“Camp residents today are four-generation refugees who came from different villages, and are united by their shared experiences of pain, forced removal and refugeehood. They are united by their dreams and hopes for a better future. Above all they are united by a shared collective of their memory of their original homeland, Palestine.”

~ Voices from the Camps: A People's History of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

INTRODUCTION

Jordan is a Middle Eastern state known for its dry, desolate landscape, moderate government, and relationship with the West. Various conflict-prone regions surround Jordan, including Israel/Palestine to the west, Syria to the north, and Iraq and Saudi Arabia to the east. Because of its strategic location, Jordan has become a place of refuge for millions of refugees. According to the Pew Research Center, Jordan has a current population of 6,190,000 people, 60 percent of whom are refugees.¹ One major ethnic group that has fled to Jordan during numerous conflicts is Palestinian refugees. Jordan, hosting roughly two million registered and possibly more than one million unregistered Palestinian refugees, has the largest Palestinian refugee population in the world. In fact, Palestinian refugees currently make up 41 percent of the country's population.² Given the Palestinian refugee presence in Jordan, Geraldine Chatelard, an anthropologist and scholar at the Middle East Institute, states, "Migration to, from, and across the Jordan since the Palestinian exodus of 1948 has played a key role in the country's politics, economy and society."³ The purpose of this research paper is to understand the extent to which a large refugee presence in Jordan has affected the socioeconomics of Jordanian society. In order to evaluate the impact of Palestinian refugee resettlement in Jordan, this paper will focus on the two major Palestinian refugee influxes into Jordan during the 1948 and 1967 Israeli-Palestinian wars. The paper will begin with the history and background of Jordan and the two Israeli-Palestinian conflicts aforementioned; it will then present Jordan's Palestinian refugee policies

¹ "Pew Research Report: Jordan," Pew Research Center, accessed December 06, 2016, http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/jordan/#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2013.

² "Microfinance in Jordan," United Nations Relief and Works Agency, accessed December 06, 2016, <http://www.unrwa.org/activity/microfinance-jordan>.

³ Geraldine Chatelard, "Jordan: A Refugee Haven," *The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute*, accessed December 06, 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/jordan-refugee-haven>.

and support operations. Finally, it will analyze the socioeconomic successes and challenges of the Palestinian refugee presence in Jordan.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The Mandate of Palestine and Transjordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is home to some of the most ancient civilizations of the world, dating back to the hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic period.⁴ While its terrain makes for desolate land and poor farming, its Bedouin inhabitants learned to endure the region's challenging climate and form lasting settlements. The proximity of Jordan to what Jews, Christians, and Muslims all refer to as the Holy Land has also played a significant role in the country's development and its complex history filled with settlements, city-states, kingdoms, empires, dynasties, and four centuries of Ottoman rule.

In 1916, following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, colonial powers including Britain, France, and Russia signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement which divided the empire into regional states under colonial mandates.⁵ Further, in 1917, the British Government's Balfour Declaration letter announced its support of establishing Palestine as the "national home for the Jewish people."⁶ Many Arabs in the region argue that the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 directly violated the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence in which colonial powers promised to support the independence of the Arab world.

⁴ Myriam Ababsa and Caroline Kohlmayer, *Atlas of Jordan: History, Territories and Society*, Beyrouth: Inst. Française Du Proche-Orient, 2013, 94.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Arthur James Balfour, "The Balfour Declaration," *Speeches on Zionism by the Rt. Hon. The Earl of Balfour (1917)*: 19-21.

Following the partition of the region, the area of Transjordan and Palestine were both defined under the British Mandate of Palestine. In 1922, the Transjordan region—modern day Jordan, comprised of the land east of the Jordan River—was officially established following the British Mandate’s request to the League of Nations.⁷ Following its separation from the British Mandate of Palestine, Transjordan was deemed a semi-autonomous region governed by Emir as-Sayyid Abdullah bin al-Husayn.⁸ In 1946, following the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations ended the British Mandate over the region and the country gained its independence on May 25, 1946. Upon independence, Jordan declared as-Sayyid Abdullah bin al-Husayn as King Abdullah of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.⁹

The 1948 War: The Nakbeh

Since the birth of the modern state of Jordan, the instability of the surrounding region has impacted its economic and political development.¹⁰ In 1948, just two years following the Jordan’s independence, the British Mandate over Palestine was concluded and the region of Palestine was partitioned into a Jewish and Palestinian state. Because of Jordan’s historical ties to Palestine both geographically and politically under the previously mentioned British Mandate of Palestine, Jordan was greatly affected by the partition of the two states. Jordan offered not only military support to its Palestinian neighbors during their fights against the Israelis, but also its land as a home for the displaced Palestinians following the ongoing conflict.

While Jews refer to the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 as a victory, Palestinians refer the event as the *Nakbeh*. This war is especially important since it continues to shape the Palestinian identity.

⁷ Philip Robins, *A History of Jordan* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ Warwick M Knowles, *Jordan since 1989: A Study in Political Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 1.

The Nakbeh marks a special and traumatic point in history because, although Palestine was always a target for invasions and attacks, never before in their modern history were Palestinians forced out of their land or were prevented from returning to it.¹¹ The 1948 conflict led to the displacement of 900,000 Palestinians, half of whom sought refuge in Jordan.¹²

The 1967 War: The Occupation

In 1967, war again ensued between the Israelis, Palestinians, and surrounding Arab nations, including Jordan. This conflict resulted in the Israeli occupation of Egypt's Gaza and Jordan's West Bank, which includes East Jerusalem. This war displaced 300,000 Palestinians from the captured West Bank; many of these individuals were forced into Jordan's East Bank.¹³ This war marked the second displacement for many of the former refugees who entered Jordan's West Bank in 1948.¹⁴ The economy of Jordan struggled following the 1967 war, not because of the influx of Palestinian refugees but instead because of the nation's loss of the fertile West Bank territory, which composed 70 percent of its limited agricultural industry.¹⁵

REFUGEE POLICIES AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

The Constitution and UN Resolution 194

Though Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 Convention of the Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, Jordan is currently the only country in the world whose refugee population outnumbers its indigenous population. Article 21 of the Jordanian Constitution claims, “[p]olitical refugees

¹¹ Nabil Marshood, *Voices from the Camps: A People's History of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan* (Blue Ridge Summit: UPA, 2006), Accessed December 07, 2016, <http://pepperdine.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=616271>

¹² Geraldine Chatelard, "Jordan: A Refugee Haven," *The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute*, accessed December 06, 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/jordan-refugee-haven>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Keys to the Kingdom: Jordan," *The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, accessed December 06, 2016, <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/history.html>.

¹⁵ Israel remained in control of the West Bank and Gaza territories until the September 1993 Oslo Accords, when the Jewish State withdrew from the area and allowed the Palestinian Liberation Organization to slowly gain control over the region.

shall not be extradited on account of their political beliefs or for their defense of liberty.”¹⁶ In addition to this article, which clearly protects political refugees, the Jordanian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have a formal agreement on the treatment of refugees. In this agreement, Jordan pledges to allow refugees the freedom of religious exercise, non-discrimination, ethical judicial ruling and legal assistance, and excusal from overstay charges.¹⁷

Article 3 of the 1954 Jordanian Citizenship Law, which was last amended in 1987, defines a Palestinian refugee and explains the political response of Jordan:

Any person who, not being Jewish, possessed Palestinian nationality before 15 May 1948 and was a regular resident in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan between 20 December 1949 and 16 February 1954; shall be deemed to be Jordanian nationals.¹⁸

Despite Jordan’s willingness to grant citizenship to Palestinian refugees, in the years following the 1948 and 1967 wars many Palestinian refugees were hesitant to become official Jordanian citizens. Often, they believed Jordanian citizenship would make their displacement permanent, yet they still hoped to return to their homeland. Because of this, the Jordanian government has made their opinion on the “right of return” known to the international community in their support of Article 11 of the 1948 United Nations Resolution 194:

Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.¹⁹

¹⁶ “Refugee Law and Policy: Jordan,” Library of Congress, accessed December 06, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/jordan.php>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Law No. 6 of 1954 on Nationality,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed December 07, 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4ea13.html>.

¹⁹ “Resolution 194,” United Nations Relief and Works Agency, accessed December 06, 2016, <https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194>.

Through its support of this UN resolution, the Jordanian government argued that the Jordanian citizenship of Palestinian refugees would not negate their “right of return” to Palestine. In the 1950s, when Jordan clarified this, many Palestinians decided to become Jordanian citizens. In addition to granting entry, citizenship, and affirming Resolution 194, the Jordanian government also invested in Palestinian refugee support organizations.

Government Support and UNRWA Camps

In 1950, King Abdullah I created the Ministry of Refugees and the Ministry of Construction, both of which focus on supporting Palestinian refugees through establishing refugee camps and promoting social and educational infrastructure.²⁰ The first camps developed were in the pre-occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Following the displacement of refugees from the West Bank in 1967, the government created the Higher Ministerial Committee on Occupied Territories, which supported the organized movement of refugees from the occupied region. By the 1980s, the Higher Ministerial Committee evolved into the Department of Palestinian Affairs. The agency’s official mission is to maintain a statistical analysis of the Palestinian refugee numbers and affairs, to protect Palestinians on an international level, to supervise and evaluate the Jordanian Palestinian refugee camps, and to gain partnerships with donor countries who will support the Palestinian refugees within Jordan’s borders.²¹

The Department of Palestinian Affairs has a special partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Since 1950, UNRWA has been the principal supporter of Palestinian refugees through the establishment of refugee camps in Jordan. There have been ten official UNRWA Palestinian camps and three

²⁰“Palestinian Refugees,” United Nations Relief and Works Agency, accessed December 07, 2016, <http://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>.

²¹“Historical Background,” The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, accessed December 07, 2016, <http://www.dpa.gov.jo/>.

unofficial camps created on government-leased Jordanian land since the 1967 conflict. These camps typically include housing, medical facilities, and schools.²² In Jordan, UNRWA currently operates 174 schools, 23 health facilities, 10 rehabilitation centers, and 14 women's program centers. Though nearly 20 percent of the Jordanian population resides in Palestinian refugee camps, the living conditions of the Palestinian refugee camps are often considered to be extremely poor. However, there have been improvements in the camps since the creation of the Department of Palestinian Affairs' Social Productivity Program, which supports the improvement of the Palestinian camp living conditions.²³

SOCIOECONOMIC SUCCESS

The Immediate and Long-term Economic Impact

Following the conflicts in 1948 and 1967, there was almost a 100 percent increase in the Jordanian population; this led to evident economic, social and cultural shifts in Jordanian society. Though there are clear challenges incorporating Palestinian refugees into Jordanian society and the immediate aftermath of the 1967 influx of refugees did strain the Jordanian economy, the presence of Palestinian refugees in Jordan has, in the long run, increased its foreign aid and subsequently supported the economic growth and development of Jordanian society.

While the World Bank does not offer economic figures surrounding the 1948 influx of refugees, it does offer some basic figures and economic indicators prior to and following the 1967 war. In 1966 the population of Jordan was 1,210,948; its population growth was 7.8 percent; its gross domestic product (hereafter, GDP) was \$657,999,736.80; and its population

²² "Palestinian Refugees."

²³ "Summary of the Project Report 'Using recent Palestinian refugee-camp Statistics,'" Department of Palestinian Affairs, accessed December 07, 2016, http://www.dpa.gov.jo/uploads/Summarr_y_of_the_project_report_in_english.pdf

density was 13.7 people per square kilometer. Just following the 1967 war and occupation of Jordan's West Bank, the population of Jordan was 1,438,986; its population growth 8.6 percent; its GDP \$561,119,775.60; and its population density was 16.3 people per square kilometer. As expected, there was an increase in population, population growth percentage, and population density following the refugee influx. The \$96,879,961.20 decrease in gross domestic product immediately following the 1967 influx of refugees suggests Jordanian companies received lower profits, investment decreased, and the economy was thus weakened following the second Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the years following the second major Palestinian refugee influx, however, the population growth decreased, GDP increased, population density continued to increase at a slower rate, and Jordan began to receive more development assistance. The GDP of Jordan following the 1967 influx is displayed on the diagram:

NATIONAL GDP JORDAN: 1965-1975

YEAR:	GDP (CURRENT US\$)
1965	\$599,759,760.1
1966	\$657,999,736.8
1967	\$631,679,747.3
1968	\$561,119,775.6
1969	\$698,879,720.4
1970	\$639,519,744.2
1971	\$678,159,728.7
1972	\$788,479,684.6
1973	\$943,783,839.7
1974	\$1,197,483,948.7

1975	\$1,363,073,497.8
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DATA ACCORDING TO WORLD DATABANK

As the diagram presents, after 1970 there was a steady increase in Jordan's GDP, which reveals that in the long run the influx of the refugees did not weaken the Jordanian economy or lower its GDP. Rather, due to increased infrastructure support and increased foreign aid, the refugee influx helped the Jordanian economy. Some wealthy Palestinian refugees even invested in the Jordanian infrastructure, which also boosted its development.²⁴ The direct foreign investment in Jordan increased in 1974 to 1975 from \$6,830,353.0 to \$25,641,693.90, which remained high and reached \$37, 646,775.30 in 1990.²⁵ Though the Gulf Crisis and the subsequent sanctions on Iraq—one of Jordan's trade partners—temporarily reduced the foreign investment, the foreign investment remained relatively stable in the subsequent years.

The current GDP of Jordan is \$79.6 billion and the country received a score of 68.3 out of 100 according to the Heritage 2016 Economic Freedom Score. Further, the Heritage Foundation ranks Jordan fifth in the Middle East and North Africa region for economic freedom. This score is evaluated through an assessment of the country's open market, government size, rule of law, and regulation of business, labor, and monetary freedom.²⁶ Though the country does fairly well economically, its increasing population, desolate land, and resource scarcity have led it to import more than 97 percent of its natural resources. Despite this, the annual economic growth of Jordan is 3.1 percent and its 5-year compound annual growth is 2.7 percent.²⁷

The economic strength of Jordan is also displayed by its membership in various international organizations including the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World

²⁴ Chatelard, "Jordan: A Refugee Haven."

²⁵ "World Development Indicators: Jordan," The World Bank Group, accessed December 07, 2016, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=JOR#>.

²⁶ "Index of Economic Freedom: Jordan," The Heritage Foundation, accessed December 06, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/jordan#>.

²⁷ Ibid.

Bank, and the World Trade Organization. In 2014 Jordan began its two-year term serving as a non-permanent UN Security Council Member and is also serving as a Partner for Cooperation in Europe's Organization for Security and Cooperation.²⁸ Though the previously mentioned economic indicators would suggest that the integration of the Palestinian refugees into Jordan was a success, there have also been numerous challenges associated with the integration of Palestinian refugees into Jordanian society.

SOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The Palestinian Dilemma: Isolation and Identity

While foreign aid and UNRWA assistance supported Jordan's economic stability following the 1948 and 1967 wars, the social and political integration of the Palestinian refugees into Jordanian society remains a challenge for a two primary reasons. First, though the Jordanian government grants refuge for Palestinians, many Palestinian refugees still remain confined in camps, separated from society. Second, though indigenous Jordanians do accept Palestinian refugees as Jordanian citizens, Palestinian refugees tend to identify with their Palestinian heritage rather than their Jordanian citizenship.

The Isolation of Refugee Camps

Though Palestinian refugees are, according to Article 3 of the Jordanian Constitution, granted citizenship, UNRWA estimates that roughly 18 percent of all Palestinians reside in refugee camps. These refugee settlements provide housing, education, healthcare, and services for the Palestinians and leave little incentive for the refugees to integrate into the Jordanian society. Not only do the camps physically isolate the Palestinian refugees from the Jordanians, but also the poor development and living standards of the camps separates the refugees from the rest of Jordanian society.

²⁸ Ibid.

Despite the work of UNRWA and the Jordanian government to improve the living conditions of Palestinian refugee camps, there is still reported overcrowding, high unemployment, dissatisfactory medical services, and a poor educational system, according to the 2014 Norwegian government-sponsored empirical study titled *The Socioeconomic Conditions of Jordan's Palestinian Camp Refugees*. The study, consisting of a brief questionnaire given to a sample size of 4,000 Palestinian camp residents, gathered infrastructure and housing information throughout the 13 different Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan.²⁹

According to the study, though 85 percent of all Palestinian camp refugees are defined as Jordanian citizens, they still complain of exploitation, discrimination, and lower wages when compared to indigenous Jordanians. Because of this, one in three Palestinians work inside camps and many work near their respective camps.³⁰ Additionally, the study found that the labor force participation of working age Palestinian camp refugees—age 15 and above—was 60 percent.³¹ There is a stark disparity between genders in the workforce: 60 percent participation for men and 10 percent for women. Further, one third of youth aged 14 to 24 are unemployed and one in five people describe themselves as financially poor. However, recent UNRWA developments have begun to improve the economic situation of Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan.

UNRWA recently began to operate a microfinance program for Palestinian refugees. This program is competitive, provides for market and social involvement outside of the camps, and currently makes up four percent of Jordan's market.³² This UNRWA program began in 2003 and in 2015 alone its output increased by 18 percent. Though the program has been expanding and

²⁹ Age A. Tiltnes and Huafeng Zhang. "The Socioeconomic Conditions of Jordan's Palestinian Camp Refugees," Fafo Report 2014, 9, accessed December 07, 2016, http://www.dpa.gov.jo/uploads/sumary_report_in_eng_and_arabic.pdf.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

³² "Microfinance in Jordan."

released 13,293 loans totaling \$14.24 million USD in 2015, the program in Jordan has never received donor support; it needs this support to continue to develop and thrive in the future.³³

The Palestinian camp study also noted that the Palestinian camp refugee labor force participation is positively correlated to an increase in education. This remains promising for the future of Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan since nine in ten children attend UNRWA schools. Though there is reported overcrowding in school classrooms, the illiteracy rate of refugees who are 15 years of age has decreased from 18 to 10 percent and kindergarten enrollment has increased.³⁴ Despite the harsh living conditions and overcrowding of the camps, increased education enrollment figures and UNRWA's microfinance program provide reason to believe that the situation of Palestinian camp refugees will improve in the future.

The Palestinian Identity

Though the Palestinian refugee and indigenous Jordanian populations are both Arab societies and geographic neighbors, the Palestinian refugees have a different narrative and identity that separates them from Jordanians. According to Nabil Marshood, professor of sociology and author of a 2006 Palestinian sociological study, *Voices from the Camps: A People's History of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan*, "the question of Palestinian identity is unique." Since their status and identity is "imposed," it "removes the option of individual choice from the process of identity formation."³⁵ Since many Palestinians acknowledge the gravity of their permanent displacement and see their grievances to be outside of their own personal control, this has made their integration into Jordanian society particularly challenging. Further, identity for the Palestinians is rooted in their past identity in the villages of Palestine, which the camps fail to represent. Marshood also explains,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 28.

³⁵ Marshood, *Voices from the Camps: A People's History of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan*, 15.

Camp residents today are four-generation refugees who came from different villages, and are united by their shared experiences of pain, forced removal and refugeehood. They are united by their dreams and hopes for a better future. Above all they are united by a shared collective of their memory of their original homeland, Palestine.³⁶

Many Palestinian refugees, according to the research of Marshood, remain “trapped in a cycle of despair” because they fear that their identity as a Palestinian may become diluted if they assimilate to the Jordanian society and culture.³⁷ Given this narrative, many Palestinian camp refugees believe remaining in the camps is a reasonable way to preserve their distinctive history and identity, which makes the Palestinian refugee social and political integration into other social and political structures arduous.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From its early years as an autonomous kingdom, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan provided a place of refuge for Palestinian refugees. Today, Palestinian refugees comprise roughly 41 percent of the Jordanian population. While the economy of Jordan has fluctuated in recent history, especially following the flow of Palestinian refugees into the East Bank in 1967, through increased foreign investment, contributions from wealthy Palestinian refugees, and support from UNRWA, the Jordanian economy has significantly developed following its massive intake of Palestinian refugees. According to the World Bank, the Jordanian economy currently ranks as an “upper middle income economy” and is one of the top forty countries with the best global infrastructure.³⁸ Yet, there are still numerous issues that make Palestinian refugee integration into Jordanian society particularly challenging. Nonetheless, there is hope that with the recent success of the UNRWA microfinance development program and the increased education enrollment

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁸ “World Development Indicators: Jordan.”

figures, Palestinian refugees will be supported as they integrate into the economic, social, and political spheres of Jordanian society.

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