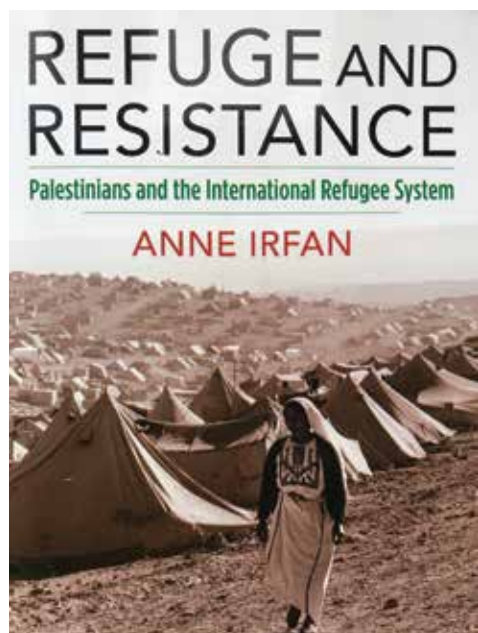


BOOK REVIEW

Palestinian Refugees and Their Love-Hate Relationship with UNRWA

Review by Michael Dumper

Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System, by Anne Irfan. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023. 328 pages. \$140.00 hardcover; \$35.00 paperback; \$34.99 ebook.



Abstract

Anne Irfan argues in this book that the relationship between Palestinian refugees and UNRWA is complex and multilayered and that Palestinian agency has contributed to the transformation of UNRWA, a point overlooked by many studies. The author examines the establishment of UNRWA and its expansion within the five areas of operation – Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, West Bank, and Gaza. Based on a comprehensive and diverse range of sources, this interdisciplinary study considers the way in which UNRWA has played a dual role – mitigating the disaster of their dispossession and expulsion in 1948 but also containing Palestinian refugee frustrations at the lack of international support for their rights.

Keywords:

UNRWA; United Nations; Palestine refugees; international aid; education.

Tragically, this book is well-timed. Following the genocidal actions carried out by Israel in Gaza since October 2023, Israel has been directing its formidable diplomatic and public relations firepower at the UN organization responsible for Palestinian refugees, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). In so doing, it is complementing its destruction in Gaza of what is the largest Palestinian refugee community with an assault on whatever international material support and diplomatic infrastructure the refugees have left. Unintentionally,

Israel's actions have brought back the Palestinian refugee issue, including the long and almost symbiotic relationship between Palestinian refugees and UNRWA, to front and center of the world's attention. Anne Irfan's clearly written and careful analysis of the role that this vital, but much unloved, organization plays in the politics of Palestine, the Palestinians, and the Arab-Israeli conflict will be very welcome to specialist and general reader alike.

The first three chapters of *Refuge and Resistance* serve as an extended but thoughtful introduction to the main objective of her study: how Palestinian refugees demonstrated resistance, among other forms of agency, to the catastrophic upending of their whole society following the Nakba in 1948. These chapters cover the genesis of the refugee issue, its subsequent transformation into a nationalist platform as a result of the defeat of Arab armies in 1967, and the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as an independent military and political force, as well as the establishment of UNRWA and its emergence as a key nonstate actor in the region, and its relations with the refugee "host" states of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and with Israel as the occupier of the West Bank and Gaza.

To some extent these chapters restate much that is already known to scholars of the refugee issue. What makes Irfan's contribution significant and noteworthy, however, is the meticulous and comprehensive research that she brings to her text. Each point and development of her argument is superbly referenced, opening up vistas of data and new areas to consider. (There are sixty-one pages of notes!) Her approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on autobiography, interviews, UNRWA archives, photographs, and a wide range of academic works, weaving the nuggets she has gleaned into her material and giving it both depth and helpful accessibility. Two wonderful quotes I must share: one by Palestinian writer Fawaz Turki who referred to UNRWA as "our contemptuous stepmother"; and the other by senior PLO leader Salah Salah who lamented, "The Jews got Israel and we got UNRWA." As a result of this approach, Irfan's style is relaxed and highly readable, with academic vocabulary deployed judiciously.

The second part of the book, also three chapters (and an epilogue), examines the part UNRWA plays in the international refugee regime and the related field of humanitarian assistance studies, with the Palestinian refugees as a case study. It is a deft and sharply delineated analysis of the complex relationship between Palestinian refugees and one of the biggest UN agencies in the UN family. (Save for the UN peacekeeping forces, it has the largest number of direct employees in the UN.) Irfan demonstrates how, due to the geographical spread and disparate political systems in which the refugees live, the relationship with UNRWA is highly variegated, dynamic, and multilayered. She writes: "Refugees saw UNRWA as 'their' agency but did not have the financial leverage to call it to account, fueling the notion that the agency was really a foreign implant controlled by the West" (137). Irfan clearly shows how UNRWA simultaneously plays two roles: first, as a symbol of the refugee dispossession of their land and homes in the area that became Israel and, second, as a vehicle for the mitigation of that dispossession. She unpacks the painful irony of how Palestinian national identity is partly forged through refugee resistance to UNRWA as a tool to

pacify their demands and as the channel through which the international community, dominated by reluctant Western donors, has sought to reduce its commitment to the Palestinian refugees.

This is not, in essence, an international relations study and its strengths do not lie in contributing to the large corpus of literature on the study of international organizations. Irfan's approach is much narrower and inductive. Despite some passing attempts at theorizing concepts such as "hybrid internationalism" (92), the author does not develop the insights drawn from the data she collects on UNRWA itself as a regional actor. This aspect of her work is eclipsed by her focus on Palestinian refugees as actors. Given the largely historical and archival nature of her data, this is the appropriate emphasis. So while flagging the international context and constraints under which UNRWA operates in the region, Irfan sidesteps the temptation to drift into international relations theory and evaluate the relationship between UNRWA and Palestinian refugees through those lenses.

This empirically grounded research serves Irfan's argument well. For example, in elaborating on the theme of resistance as a manifestation of refugee agency, she identifies the Palestinian refugee espousal of education as key. It has been both popular and a valued form of empowerment. Irfan cites a striking political tract written by a Gaza-based NGO in the 1970s which declares:

We are not fighting the treacherous enemy with words void of action and work. Education is first necessary requirement [*sic*]. It is the lamp which lights the way for us and makes us reach our holy aim successfully with all security and certainty ... Also, you who claim you are patriots when at the same time you throw stones at schools and glass bottles at walls. The grounds of patriotism have no room for such things. (159)

As a result of such sentiments, Palestinian refugee input into the content and forms of services delivery has been quite significant. The standardization of the UNRWA schools and curriculum across the five areas of UNRWA's operation led to the perception of the UNRWA education system as a Palestinian "national system of education" (161). Pressure from Palestinian teachers, UNRWA unions, and PLO leaders led to the incorporation of more Palestinian-specific issues and narratives into the curriculum, albeit unevenly and only gradually across the UNRWA system.

Often overlooked in studies of the work of UNRWA is the impact of the gender-blind basis of UNRWA's education. As Irfan spells out, schooling was available "free of charge to *all* registered refugee children, regardless of sex. This meant that families did not have to choose which child they could afford to send to school" (161). While Irfan is at pains to point out that this did not eradicate the social conservatism and misogyny prevalent in both UNRWA and Palestinian society, the widespread and effective participation of women in Palestinian resistance can be partly attributed to the universality of UNRWA's education system. Methodological purists may quibble at the lack of a systematic framework in Irfan's presentation of this important data on the part that education played in Palestinian refugee agency, but here again Irfan's

accumulation of sources and citations demonstrate the strength of her insights and observations.

In an ironic twist, part of the Israeli argument for the dissolution of UNRWA – its role in consolidating Palestinian nationalism – confirms Irfan’s thesis. The political engagement of many teachers and former students of UNRWA schools is indisputable. Many PLO leaders and activists in the Palestinian resistance – from the cofounder of Fatah Salah Khalaf, to the communist activist Mu‘in Basisu, to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) figure and writer Ghassan Kanafani – were teachers in or graduates of UNRWA schools. At the same time, this Israeli complaint misses an important point: given the absence of alternative options for refugee families, it is not so surprising since the greater proportion of refugee children were graduates of UNRWA schools.

There are numerous studies on UNRWA – government reports, donor evaluations, journal articles, think tank studies, in-depth media articles, theses and dissertations, and edited volumes – to the extent that the study of UNRWA verges on constituting a subdiscipline of its own in the overlapping fields of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Palestine studies, and forced migration studies. Surprisingly, however, there are very few single-authored books, and none in the past few years, which incorporate both new archival material and the findings of the most recent publications on UNRWA. Irfan’s *Refuge and Resistance* is a thoughtful and nuanced contribution to this work. While recent challenges to UNRWA will demand yet another evaluation of its checkered role in the Palestinian refugee situation, this book is likely to stand the test of time and has set down a marker by which those that follow will be judged.

Tragic though the timing of this publication may be, it is also very opportune for advocates. The current diplomatic and financial assault on UNRWA by Israel and other grossly misinformed states is one of the most serious of UNRWA’s seventy-five-year existence. If you want to understand why UNRWA exists, why its relationship to those in its care is one of both love and hate, why it has both served and undermined Palestinian refugee resilience and independence and why it is unlikely to be replaced until Palestinian refugee rights are to some measure addressed, then you should read this book.

Michael Dumper is emeritus professor in Middle East politics, University of Exeter, UK, where he worked since 1986. He has acted as a consultant on Middle East politics for the UK and Canadian governments, UNRWA, UNSCO, the European Commission Task Force on Refugees, and think tanks and research centers in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. His research and teaching has largely focused on Jerusalem and on Palestinian refugees. He is the author of Power, Piety and People: The Politics of Holy Cities in the 21st Century (Columbia University Press, 2020); Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History, and the Future of the Holy City (Columbia University Press, 2014); and The Future of Palestinian Refugees: Toward Justice and Equity (Lynne Rienner, 2007). His most recent research project explores ways in which Palestinian refugee voices can be strengthened in debates concerning the future financing of UNRWA (see mas.ps/en/publications/7047.html).