

Palestine Refugees in Today's Middle East

By. Mr Filippo Grandi*

C

olleagues of Coventry University and the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am grateful for this opportunity to exchange ideas on some of the issues that are current to the Middle East and to the Palestinian refugees whose protection and care constitute the mission of UNRWA, the agency I head. I offer special thanks to my friend Professor Özerdem for his invitation.

To say that we are witnessing momentous and historic events in the Middle East is to state the obvious. To even the most casual observer, it is clear that developments in the region go beyond whatever we may define as “ordinary” or “normal”. It is equally obvious that at this point in time, less than five months since Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in Tunisia, the waves of change do not show sign of exhaustion. Living, as I do, in the Middle East, you feel in the midst of a high-energy vortex in which social, economic, political, military, religious and demographic forces are colliding, unleashing new – or hitherto suppressed – extraordinary dynamics. Current events are often tragic, gripping to observe and dramatic to describe. They are work-in-progress whose outcomes and concluding scenarios are at this stage literally impossible to predict.

I said that I live in the Middle East. I should add, to be precise, that I live in a special place of the Middle East – in East Jerusalem, the occupied putative capital of the unborn Palestinian State. I have lived there for almost six years, witnessing several rounds of fruitless negotiations on matters underpinning the Israeli – Palestinian conflict, and the alternating fortunes of Palestinian hopes: hope for a reversal of settlement expansion, as demanded by the international community; hope for the end of the occupation and of its harsh apparatus, including the Gaza blockade; hope for Palestinian reconciliation to be achieved; hope for “final status issues” to be seriously addressed and resolved, for the Palestinian state to be born and for peace to finally come for Israelis and Palestinians; and among those issues, hope for a just solution – at long last – to the old, difficult and tragic plight of Palestinian refugees.

But as we sadly know, Jerusalem – a city of faith that continues to be a spiritual reference for millions – in these past years has become, instead, the capital of dashed hopes. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has languished for years. The Palestinian refugee question – one of its “final status” issues – is unresolved now as it was just after refugees fled their homes more than 60 years ago. In Jerusalem, one cannot avoid the sensation of being in a pond of stagnant political water, while all around the region is alive with waves – waves that carry both op-



portunity and risk, but which have injected a feeling of dynamic movement and of momentous promise.

Yet, it would be superficial to think of the situation of Palestinians, including of refugees, as insulated from the regional situation. On the contrary, there are key links that must be highlighted if one is to understand the current context. The agreement signed today in Cairo by the Palestinian movements Fatah and Hamas, moving towards a national unity government and seeking to hold free and fair elections within a year, is one dramatic example of these links. The split, lasting four years, seemed destined to persist despite the deep and growing anger it has generated among most Palestinians, and despite the damage done to the Palestinian quest for self-determination. We must hope, as many have said, that reconciliation will not only be durable, but that it will also constitute a contribution to peace. We can be sure, on the other hand, that this first step towards Palestinian reconciliation is also the result of momentous changes in the region.

With this in mind, I believe that it is crucial to seek in the elements of the regional situation the understanding and conviction we need to rekindle the peace process, and to ensure that the refugee question, long marginalized, be restored at the centre of the political and legal debate, through real efforts to bring it to a positive conclusion.

I would like to highlight just three features which I consider central to the current regional context, and which we can relate to the question of Palestinian refugees.

The first is the “transnational factor” - the ability of current trends to have an impact beyond borders. This dynamic is fuelled by the universal appeal of demands for social and economic opportunity, claims for human rights and political representation, and calls for greater individual freedom – all of them made “viral”, so to speak, by modern communication technology. Events have shown that wherever these factors exist and are not adequately addressed, the spiral of change may be triggered. This gives cause for uncertainty, and hope, across the region as well as further afield.

The second feature worth highlighting is the “youth factor” – the centrality of young people as leaders of change in the Middle East. The statistics are well-known and quite striking. Thirty-five percent of the regional population is below the age of 15 - about

double that of Europe and North America. At the high end is the occupied Palestinian territory, where youth account for approximately 45 percent of the population.

But statistics only tell one aspect of the story. One must look at other features of the “youth factor”, especially the contrasting but co-existing indicators of high literacy and high unemployment, and, in parts of the region, pockets of significant poverty and issues of democratic governance, by both of which the young feel, and are, particularly affected. Against the backdrop of the region’s oil wealth and the middle- or high-income status of many countries, these elements have interacted with the demographic dominance of youth to ignite a movement of surprising energy and appeal. The increasingly self-aware youth of the region are staking their claim for recognition as a constituency to be reckoned with – a constituency whose appeals must be answered.

**The Palestinian refugee question
– one of its “final status” issues –
is unresolved now as it was just
after refugees fled their homes
more than 60 years ago.**

A third feature of contemporary regional developments is the “dignity factor”. I suggest that reclaiming the basic dignity of people’s lives represents the deeper significance, the true core of the demands which we hear in the Middle East and North Africa for better socio-economic conditions, for an end to corruption in public life, and for genuine political representation of all sections of the population. In other words, poverty, the lack of opportunities, and the severe human rights deficit in the region have been identified above all as the antitheses of human dignity – a powerful contrast that speaks volumes about the depth and strength of the ‘Arab Spring’.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is an appropriate juncture at which to turn more directly to the Palestine refugees whose assistance, protection and well-being constitute the mission of UNRWA. How, if at all, are refugees in the region affected by current developments? In

what ways, if any, are refugees impacted by the features I have identified – the “transnational factor”, the “youth factor” and the “dignity factor”?

It is my belief that the situation of Palestine refugee tightly intersects with all three factors in compelling ways that suggest parallels between the refugees’ right to just and durable solutions and the aspirations of Middle Eastern peoples for greater freedoms.

If I may take the features in turn, Palestine refugees are a significant constituency and substantial reservoir of human capital across the region. In a real sense, they are a classic transnational presence and in the Agency’s areas of operation in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, those registered with UNRWA are currently around 4.7 million strong. The refugees carry demographic weight by virtue of their numbers and regional distribution, and, more importantly, are key contributors to society and development. The refugees also wield moral power, by virtue of their long-unresolved plight and the intense empathy for them across the Middle East.

The facts of their protracted dispossession and exile, now more than six decades long, serve as a glaring example of unresolved injustice, long predating the unrest sweeping the region.

The youth factor is pre-eminent in refugee communities, with some 50 percent of the population below the age of 25. Moreover, refugees embody the complex realities of the region. Like many uprooted people, they have a passion for knowledge – and thanks to their access to education, and abundance of talent, many have achieved social mobility. Their arc spans generations and borders in unlikely ways. Working with Palestinian refugees is a diverse experience: I meet many in overcrowded shelters, living in dispiriting conditions, but I often encounter others who pursue advanced study on scholarship at the best foreign universities. I have met with a few refugees who have provided my organization with management advice, after building successful business ventures themselves. Yet, many suffer disproportionately from unemployment and poverty.

For example, a 2010 UNRWA study showed that refugees in the West Bank experience higher levels of poverty, unemployment and food insecurity than non-refugees.

Palestinian refugees are thus a complex and complicated transnational issue, fraught with the problems affecting young people in the region, and in which the “dignity factor” plays a key role. In particular, among refugees, the thirst for dignity is as strong in their contemporary experience of suffering as is their collective memory of exile.

It is important to recognize that the three factors affect refugees in diverse ways in the areas where they live. In Jordan and Syria, which have generously hosted Palestinians for decades, refugees have enjoyed the benefits of relative stability and economic rights, including access to the employment market. Refugees in Jordan enjoy the privileges of special categories of Jordanian nationality, even though those residing in camps face higher levels of socio-economic hardship. In both countries, and especially in Syria (where the current, difficult situation in some areas has compelled

us to close schools and health centres) recent events have generated a heightened state of anxiety in refugee communities. Wherever conflict and confrontation occur, refugees are particularly vulnerable to the direct or collateral effects, along with the communities that host them.

Palestine refugees in Lebanon have inherited a legacy of suffering, including armed conflict and discrimination, that afflicts them to this day. There are, however, signs of positive change. Amendments to Lebanon’s labour code last year granted Palestine refugees the right to work. These amendments are a positive first step in helping refugees in Lebanon expand their opportunities and improve squalid living conditions. But they must be implemented, and so long as the refugees cannot enjoy the right to work fully and freely, and begin to exercise other human rights - without prejudice to the rights they enjoy as refugees - they will remain an underclass in Lebanon, a fragile state in which poverty and marginalization carry serious risks of instability.

...a 2010 UNRWA study showed that refugees in the West Bank experience higher levels of poverty, unemployment and food insecurity than non-refugees.



But it is in the occupied Palestinian territory, comprising the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza, that refugees face the most fraught conditions under the harsh rubric of the Israeli occupation, now in its forty-third year.

In Gaza, in the past few years, the closure of borders and severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods have posed serious challenges to the 1.5 million residents, some 70 percent of whom are refugees. We welcomed in mid-2010 the Government of Israel's decision to ease the blockade by improving access for a variety of consumer goods, and some construction materials for a tightly controlled number of internationally funded and supervised projects. The situation remains, however, unsustainable as the blockade still hampers our ability to carry out reconstruction projects with the urgency that is required. More importantly, the blockade has almost wholly isolated Gaza

But it is in the occupied Palestinian territory, comprising the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza, that refugees face the most fraught conditions under the harsh rubric of the Israeli occupation, now in its forty-third year.

from the outside world, caused a dramatic deterioration of public services and infrastructure, suffocated its formal economy, and given birth to one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. The population, of which almost half is youth under the age of 18, has been forced into the dangerous indignity of dependence on humanitarian aid. This is why I have no choice but to repeat what we have been saying for the past four years: the blockade must be lifted.

In the West Bank, many Palestinians, refugees and non-refugees alike, continue to experience severe restrictions on movement and fundamental freedoms. We are particularly concerned by the sustained pace with which home demolitions, evictions, permit denials and other forms of unacceptable pressure on Palestinian homes and properties are proceeding, notably in East Jerusalem, while at the same time Israeli settlements continue to expand on occupied land. This is a source of grave suffering for many already vulnerable to poverty and the daily humiliations from the occupation. It generates multiple situations of displacement among refugees

already dispossessed, including rural and herder communities, while denying fundamental human rights to those affected. The Separation Barrier and its associated regime of draconian restrictions permanently disrupt normal life for many Palestinians, placing impediments to their enjoyment of normal social and family interactions. I observe this first hand every day, given that access limitations are especially severe for Palestinians from the West Bank entering Jerusalem, historically their economic, social and cultural centre.

In short, nowhere else in the Middle East is human dignity trampled upon as gravely as it is in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Ladies and gentlemen:

This outline of the regional situation indicates that some of the defining factors of the "Arab Spring" help understand the key features of the Palestinian refugee situation. In addition, and worryingly so, we must not forget that refugees experience a particular form of vulnerability emanating from their condition of exile and from the absence of a political solution to their plight. Throughout my years of work with refugees worldwide, I have observed this vulnerability, and I believe that it is a critical element of crises and conflicts which is too often overlooked.

In the present circumstances of a region in transition, we have observed instances where refugees' exposure to risk has been heightened. There is the possibility that confrontation and conflict flowing from recent events could trigger humanitarian emergencies where none existed before, or cause deterioration in the socio-economic conditions of refugees. As any population in exile, refugees also become and feel particularly exposed in situations of crisis and are often victims of undeserved blame. There are concerns that the stable relations they enjoy with host communities could be rendered precarious. These eventualities would be a powerful destabilizing factor across the region.

Against this backdrop, we at UNRWA are firmly committed to maintaining our humanitarian and human development mission whatever the prevailing situation. This is very important at this complicated juncture. If adequately supported, UNRWA, through its services to refugees, can continue to be a positive, constructive influence across the region.

We offer primary education to around five hundred thousand refugee children across the region, using a curriculum that is enriched with courses and materials on human rights, tolerance and conflict resolution. We provide vocational training courses to over six thousand young refugee men and women eager to improve their chances for economically stable, self-reliant lives. We run comprehensive primary health care facilities that protect and promote the basic health of refugee families. We help build and maintain the homes of refugees and the infrastructure in refugee communities, and we manage a modest social safety-net programme that concentrates on supporting with food aid and cash assistance a small proportion of refugees worst afflicted by poverty. Through our microfinance service, we offer credit and advice to help refugees cope with economic upheavals and establish and sustain their own business enterprises, while contributing to the economic strength of the communities in which they live.

When need be, we are on the frontlines. In situations of violence and armed conflict, UNRWA offers courageous, principled interventions that help save lives and mitigate the effects of armed conflict. You may remember the pictures from the war in Gaza, two years ago, including UNRWA's brave staff providing assistance under fire. Our emergency responses include a recovery role beyond the immediate cessation of hostilities. We reconstruct refugee homes, schools and health care facilities destroyed during armed conflict and serve as a catalyst for a return to normalcy. And whenever appropriate, we call attention to the rights to which Palestine refugees are entitled under international law, and encourage States and other political actors to discharge their obligations in that regard.

What I have always found unique and especially appealing in UNRWA's work is its ability – and I do not say this lightly – to make a substantive difference in the daily lives of millions of people, through direct and concrete

interventions. This ranges from teaching in schools to providing short-term employment in Gaza to negotiating access to health facilities in situations of war and occupation. Our work is not difficult to describe – it is practical and straightforward – but it has allowed us to remain a key strategic partner to positive forces across the region, helping to promote the understanding and dissemination of United Nations values, including tolerance for diversity and opposing views, peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for human rights and dignity for all. That is why we believe that we continue to be relevant, and to deserve support. Somehow, through our work in schools and clinics, and with the poor, and speaking out for the rights of refugees, we have been addressing since a long time ago, and for the population in our care, some of the key elements of today's regional crisis.

And yet, it is also beyond doubt that there are inherent limitations to our work, many of which have actually been brought into sharp relief by recent events in the region. It is interesting to note that in a regional context where state authorities are being challenged to deliver on their promises to their people, UNRWA has not been spared by the refugees it serves. Refugees are becoming more and more assertive in calling UNRWA itself to account. Insufficient resources and the lack of political progress, however, do not allow us to respond satisfactorily to the demands.

Take, for example, recent incidents in the West Bank, Lebanon and Jordan where our health staff have been confronted by refugees angered by inadequate levels of care. In Lebanon in recent weeks the protests have been larger and more vociferous. Refugees have been complaining angrily about poor living conditions and inadequate coverage of hospital care. And in Gaza, recent protests were triggered by slow progress in reconstructing destroyed buildings. These protests are understandable and justified. For many years, the Agency's work has been impeded by a chronic finan-



Mr. Filippo Grandi



cial crisis. In spite of the continuing generosity of some donors, including, very prominently and commendably, the United Kingdom, our income consistently falls well behind the levels required – to ensure the quality of programmes that refugees deserve.

The impact of UNRWA's work is also inevitably limited by the inconclusive search for a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In all conflicts, and especially in protracted ones, humanitarian, development and political actors seeking peaceful solutions must reinforce each other. This constructive interplay between conflict-solving actors has been constrained in the occupied Palestinian territory. While humanitarian and development work has proceeded in earnest for decades, there has been little progress in addressing by political means the root causes of the conflict, including achieving a just and lasting solution to the plight of refugees. The failures in the quest for peace detract from the full effectiveness of our work and they frustrate our ability to make a real difference to the dignity and well-being of refugees.

These failures call to mind the transnational factor, the youth factor and the dignity factor because taken together, these features show the parallels to which the reality of the refugee situation mirrors the circumstances of the Arab street. Given the transnational significance of the refugee issue, can we continue to ignore the strategic weight of the refugee constituency and fail to account for refugee concerns in calculating national and international priorities? In light of the strength of the "youth factor", can we continue to turn a blind eye to the risks posed by the too many young refugees who are literate, yes, but unemployed, poverty-stricken and frustrated? And given the cumulative effects of decades of exile in wretched conditions, how best can we respond to the Palestine refugees' calls to be afforded the ultimate guarantee of human dignity, namely to benefit from a just and lasting solution to their plight and to be reconciled with their national identity in a state of their own?

Ladies and gentlemen:

I suggest that if there is an overarching highlight of regional events, if there is a single aspiration that captures the essence of demands heard in public squares and spreading through the internet, it is the quest for justice based on human rights and international law. The language of international law –

including its social and economic dimensions, and fundamental freedom – may not be precisely articulated on the placards of protestors, yet it is – in a deep sense – the true source of the calls for change which echo throughout the region.

Viewing current developments through the prism of justice allows us to recognize the relevance of the international rule of law as the ultimate underpinning for the demands which have been put to their leaders – and indeed, to all of us – by the courageous young people in the streets of Tunis and in Cairo's Tahrir Square. It allows us to invoke the shared responsibility of individual states and the international community to promote the peaceful realization of these demands. And it also enables us to acknowledge the inalienable and all-encompassing character of the demands, making them applicable to all who are deprived, marginalized or dispossessed.

Bringing these and other perspectives of justice into play also helps illuminate the dynamic of opportunities presented by the current regional context.

UNRWA takes the view that the current circumstances contain valuable opportunities to explore and address issues of justice that have been outstanding for far too long. We also believe that the regional events illustrate how these opportunities may be grasped.

If youth and other previously marginalized groups are demanding attention to their particular concerns, then let us likewise take the bold step of bringing the Palestinian refugee question to the fore alongside other final status issues constituting the elements of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And if, following years of enforced silence, ordinary people are finding their voice on the Arab street, then let us also grant to Palestinian refugees the license and channels to express their interests and make informed choices about their future – a future that must be inscribed in a negotiated search for peace, and that will only be accepted – and can only be acceptable – if it is realized within a just and lasting solution to their long exile. **PR**

Note:

* **Mr. Filippo Grandi** is Deputy Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)