

Geography In The News™

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PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS

Palestinian refugees are scattered across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. An estimated 1.3 million Palestinian refugees and their descendents live in 58 registered refugee camps in these countries. There are at least 2.5 million more Palestinians living outside refugee camps around the Middle East, according to the United Nations Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA).

One of the most serious conflicts in Lebanon deals with a radical militant group in one of the Palestinian refugee camps that is linked to the larger terrorist organization al-Qaida. This small group of militants, Fatah al-Islam, took up residence in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli. Accused by the government of using the refugee camp as a base to carry out bank robberies and violent crimes, an armed confrontation with the Lebanese army ensued. Even a U.N. relief convoy came under fire as its trucks tried to deliver water, food and medical supplies to the 15,000 Palestinian civilians caught in the crossfire.

A registered Palestinian refugee camp is a plot of land leased by a host government and made available to UNRWA to house Palestine refugees. The land is not owned by the refugees, but the refugees may build houses on the property. UNRWA may provide some services to assist with basic needs of the landless population.

Palestinian refugee camps are ripe places for militant group activities. These

camps tend to be tightly packed with sub-standard housing and high population densities. Buildings are poorly constructed of cinder blocks or unreinforced concrete, many with multiple floors added to existing structures. Potable water and sanitary sewers are inadequate or totally absent, and electricity is undependable. Roads are unplanned, poorly constructed and inadequate to service these densely populated camps.

Most of the camps are self-governing enclaves in the country in which they are located. They have only rudimentary internal security services with little outside governmental oversight. Job opportunities are few, relief agencies are strained to provide food and medical services and the camp populations are nearly destitute.

Americans and French to establish the new country of Israel. Displaced by the Jews, these early Palestinian refugees fled to surrounding lands, leaving most of their worldly goods and properties behind.

It was not until the 1967 war between Israel and the Arab countries of the region when such large numbers of Palestinian refugees fled that the United Nations began establishing refugee camps. Today, the 58 registered camps vary in size from a few hundred individuals to more than 100,000. There are 12 camps in Lebanon, 9 in Syria, 10 in Jordan, 8 in the Gaza Strip and 19 on the West Bank.

Today, however, more Palestinians live in these countries outside the camps than inside. One of the world's fastest-growing ethnic groups, the burgeoning Palestinian population is creating political problems across the region, as their numbers approach or exceed those of local populations.

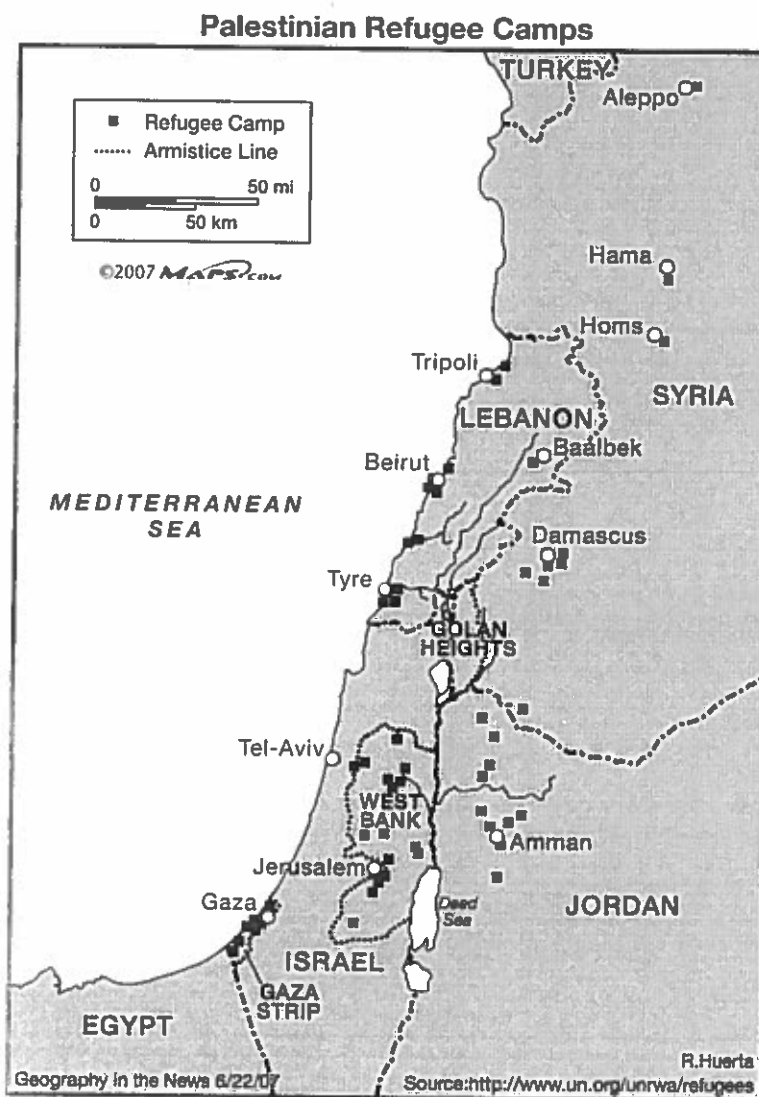
The Palestinians have been blamed for several uprisings as they strive for political identity and for the return of their homeland. Jordan ejected thousands of Palestinian militants in 1970 and most joined others in Lebanon, probably helping create the recent conflicts in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Palestinian members of the Hamas party, a violently anti-Israel party in Gaza, has tacitly, if not openly, supported rocket attacks against Israel. Israel has reciprocated with rocket attacks against the Hamas militants and has taken some of the legitimately elected Hamas leaders into custody.

The Palestinians represent a difficult problem in the Middle East. As a downtrodden people, their issues are symptomatic of problems associated with upheavals all across the region. It is easy to identify such social problems, but solutions defy even the best politicians.

And that is *Geography in the News™*, July 22, 2007. #890.

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Sources: *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 23, 2007;
<http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/images/map.jpg>

Refugees began leaving Palestine in 1948, as Jews from war-ravaged Europe received permission from the British,