



ASSESSING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL AND  
COUNSELING NEEDS OF PALESTINIAN  
REFUGEES DISPLACED IN MALAYSIA

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

All refugees suffer from a range of physical, psychological, and social problems that may include memory problems, depression, anxiety, etc. Palestinian refugees in particular need safety and humanitarian assistance due to being victims of forcible and arbitrary displacement from their homeland. The Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia have experienced traumatic events and suffer from symptoms of depression and anxiety, in addition to experiencing difficulties in dealing with the stressors of adjustment. The experience of traumatic pain and multiple losses coupled with the struggle for survival in a foreign community place them at risk for diminished health and psychosocial well-being. The refugees' psychological and psychosocial problems call for more research about them in order to have holistic approach to their issues to compliment the existing efforts. The aim of this study was to investigate the Palestinian refugees' psychosocial problems in order to provide the proper assistance to overcome trauma, depression, and anxiety. The methodology used was the quantitative research design employing a survey method on a sample of 100. The findings showed that the Palestinian refugees of both genders suffer from symptoms of trauma, anxiety, depression and displacement anxiety at different degrees. The findings also showed that the humanitarian interventions being provided to be inadequate.

## ملخص البحث

يعاني جميع اللاجئين مجموعة من المشكلات الجسدية والنفسية والاجتماعية، التي قد تشمل مشكلات في الذاكرة والاكتئاب والقلق وغيرها. ويحتاج اللاجئون الفلسطينيون على وجه الخصوص، مساعدات إنسانية وأمنية، كونهم ضحايا التشريد القسري والتعسفي من أوطانهم. وقد واجه اللاجئون الفلسطينيون المشردون في ماليزيا صدمة الأحداث، وعانوا من أعراض الاكتئاب والقلق، إضافة إلى صعوبات في التعامل مع ضغوطات التكيف. إن مواجهة صدمة الألم والخسائر المتعددة، إلى جانب النضال من أجل البقاء على قيد الحياة في مجتمع أجنبي، وضعهم في موقع يُشكل خطراً على صحتهم المتضائلة في ظلّ تقلص الرعاية النفسية الاجتماعية. ودعت هذه المشكلات النفسية والنفسية الاجتماعية إلى إجراء العديد من البحوث، من أجل الوصول إلى منهج شامل لحلّ قضاياهم والثناء على الجهود القائمة. وكان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو التعرف على المشكلات النفسية للاجئين الفلسطينيين، من أجل توفير المساعدات الملائمة، للتغلب على الصدمات والاكتئاب والقلق. واستخدمت الدراسة منهج البحث الإحصائي، عن طريق دراسة استقصائية تمثل 100 عينة. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة بأن اللاجئين الفلسطينيين من كلا الجنسين يعانون من أعراض الصدمة والقلق والاكتئاب وقلق التشريد بدرجات مختلفة. كما أظهرت النتائج أيضاً إلى أن توفير التدخلات الإنسانية غير كافية.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Education

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Sharifah Sariah Sayed Hassan  
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Education

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This dissertation was submitted to the Institute of Education and is accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

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Siti Rafiah Abdul Hamid  
Director

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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PALESTINIAN REFUGEES DISPLACED IN MALAYSIA**

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my parents Bardhyl and Shpresa, to my sister Brikena, to my brother Orhan and to my lovely nephew Haris for continuous support, patience, guidance and prayer.*

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

DSM-III	Diagnostic and statistical Manual of Mental Disorder
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
UM	University Malaya
UN	United Nations
UNCCP	United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Work Agency
WRO	World Relief Organization

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Human history is fed with stories of forced migration and evacuation. The importance of safety and the obligation to protect the persecuted are part of all great religions, traditions and texts throughout early history across Europe and the Middle East. Sites of worship were recognized as places of sanctuary and protection, offering refuge to people fleeing wars, political upheavals, and religious strives in near distant lands (Loescher, Betts, & Milner, 2008). However, refugees only became a significant international issue after the formation of the modern state system in the seventeenth century. Moreover, as the number of refugees rose, refugees became the cause of the twentieth century, and some of the elements of modern refugee law began to be formulated in response (Loescher *et al.*, 2008).

Apparently, when presenting the refugees issue, one is struck by diversity; a large number of refugee groups from distinct cultures are forced to flee due to a wide variety of historical circumstances. However, scientifically, it is possible to develop a perspective which sees certain consistencies in the refugee experience and refugee behavior. The basic premise, which this research approaches, is based on the fact that there is a refugee experience and that this experience produces what David (1969) named 'refugee behavior'. Refugees should be seen as a social psychological type whose behavior is socially patterned. Refugees' problems should be analyzed from a general, historical, and comparative perspective that views them as recurring phenomenon with identifiable and often identical patterns of behavior and sets of

causalities. Specific refugees' situations should not be treated as unique, atypical, or individual historical events, but rather as part of a general subject; refugee behavior, problems, and situations that recur in many contexts, times and regions.

It seems that there is scholarly attention to the refugees' problem which is reasonable because of the nature of the problem itself especially when it comes to the Palestinian refugees cause. Some aspects of refugee researches appear to fit fairly easily into a disciplinary or study framework. Such aspects are like refugees' mental health, but most of the researches are inter-disciplinary and would benefit from cooperation among scholars with different skills. The breadth of the refugees' problems demands a multidisciplinary approach.

Palestine is one of the areas where refugees have terrible experience due to a series of conflicts and wars since Israel's invasion of their homeland in 1948, but this issue seems to be unique. This invasion led to massive displacement of Palestinians both internally and externally. As a result, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of uprooted refugees.

Palestinian refugees' problem has been the core of the Arab-Israel conflict since 1948. Palestinian refugees are those people, who fled or were expelled from their homes during and after the 1948 war. The 1951 UN Convention on the status of refugees defines a "refugee" as follows:

Any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

Having become part of the British Mandate, some parts of Palestine were declared as the State of Israel after the war. It is a complex historic and existentialist problem that involves matters of political and religious identity, demography, and

strategy. It is a conflict of competing grievances, traumas, and psychological disturbances.

Palestinian refugees are unique; therefore, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) has its own operational definition of Palestinian refugees as follows:

Palestinian refugees are persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israel conflict ([www.unrwa.org](http://www.unrwa.org)).

UNRWA's definition of a refugee also covers the descendants of people who became refugees in 1948.

The Palestinian refugees seem to be enjoying dual privileges due to the fact that the first definition has considered all refugees while the second focuses on the Palestinians and their descendants. The definitions differ slightly in content; the second definition provides broader composition of the refugees including their descendants unlike the first, which focuses more on the individual refugee. Due to the discrepancies of the definitions, Palestinian refugees remain vulnerable to inadequate participation in the society they live in. At present as some host societies may capitalize on the content of the second definition that specifically targets Palestinian refugees.

Generally, refugees are not a homogeneous population, they hail from different countries and cultures, and have, in their own and other countries, a wide range of experiences that may affect their health and nutritional state. In addition, refugees cope with the difficulties of leaving behind a familiar culture and environment and trying to settle into an unfamiliar country. They also face the same ups and downs of life that everyone experiences. While refugees are marvelously resilient, many are unable to



overcome the effects of torture and trauma without the support of services such as counseling.

Refugees everywhere in the world have experienced one form of torture or other traumatic events. These experiences include rape, beating, bombing, murder, and disappearance of loved ones. The psychosocial impact of disasters is attracting increasing attention, especially the one that involves refugees in order to prepare intervention strategy, restore their psychological functioning and to integrate fully into the environment they find themselves in.

Refugees displaced in Malaysia are of no different from others; they have similar experience of psychological imbalance just like any other displaced individuals residing in various locations as refugees across the globe. Assessing the psychosocial needs of this calibre of individuals will be a good footstep towards making counseling intervention strategy more effective.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Palestinian refugees in Malaysia are not different from other refugees residing in other places in terms of problems associated with refugees. They need safety and humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance is mitigating the effects of the conflict on Palestinian refugees. This assistance is also often preventing the worsening of humanitarian crises. It is only a temporary measure aimed at alleviating suffering. In this view, UNRWA has noted that emergency assistance is not substitute for a comprehensive political solution; it can only mitigate the effects of the crisis on the most vulnerable. However, Palestinian refugees outside UNRWA's area are eligible to assistance from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in line

with the current interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and division of roles between UNRWA and UNHCR.

Virtually, all refugees including Palestinians suffer from a range of physical, psychological, and social problems that may include memory and concentration problems, depression, anxiety, nightmares, and anger. The refugees reflect the problems of the uprooted individuals and traumatic experiences encountered. Tribe (2002) stated that there appears to be three major hypotheses that dominate the literature on refugees' trauma and psychosocial problem:

1. Anyone who has been through the experiences of an asylum-seeker and has lost so much must be 'damaged' or traumatized;
2. People are very resilient and any reaction they have must be a normal one to abnormal events.
3. Many refugees go through immensely trying times, which may be extremely distressing, and some may benefit from appropriate psychological help, which may not always be best presented as they may expect.

The Palestinian refugees have been backed up by international law to be given protection wherever they are displaced around the globe. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), protection encompasses: "All activities, aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e., human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law)". Palestinians are victims of forcible and arbitrary displacement; therefore, the international community should provide protection and should ensure that their basic rights are respected. The International Human Rights Law governs their rights as individuals. The International

Humanitarian Law provides additional protection for displaced persons who are refugees and are entitled to protection under a third international refugee law (UNHCR Survey, 2009).

The Refugee Convention and the UNHCR Statute single out Palestinian refugees for exceptional treatment. By the time the Convention and Statute were implemented, Palestinian refugees were already enclosed by a separate international protection and assistance regime in material form in the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) and in UNRWA, which were established to provide protection and assistance to the Palestinian refugees respectively in a broad manner.

The Palestinian refugees in Malaysia are given the opportunity to enjoy normal lives similar to the local citizens. Therefore, the refugees get higher education in different Malaysian universities. Some of these universities are University Malaya and International Islamic University Malaysia, where the researcher distributed the questionnaire to collect the required data. The researcher ensured that the respondents are Palestinian refugees under the UNHCR by directly asking the respondents confidentially and individually before handing them the questionnaire to answer.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

According to Masalha (2003) the intrusion of Israel in 1948 led to the evacuation and displacement of over 750,000 Palestinian refugees, to the loss of an enormous space of land as well as other properties belonging to the refugees. The displacement of Palestinians from their homeland forcefully made them to be identified as refugees. The event has made them to have psychological disturbance which might affect their roles in life if it remains unaddressed.

As the refugees began to settle down and start to think of the homes, relatives, and properties that they have lost, there is certainly a need for psychosocial assessment to determine the extent of the need of these people with a view to making them more functional in the host communities. It is certain that the refugees have suffered from series of psychological tension and distress, which is affecting their psychological well-being. The need to assess the influence of social factors on mental health and behavior cannot be underestimated with a view to designing the counseling interventions.

The Palestinian refugees have experienced extremely traumatic events and continue to suffer from symptoms of depression and anxiety, in addition to experiencing difficulties in dealing with the stressors of adjustment of the new culture. The experience of traumatic pain and multiple losses coupled with the struggle for survival in a foreign community place them at risk for diminished health and psychosocial well-being. The psychological and psychosocial problems of the Palestinian refugees displaced either in Malaysia or elsewhere, call for more research about them in order to have holistic approach to their issues to compliment the existing efforts.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study aims to investigate the refugees' psychosocial problems in order to provide the proper assistance to overcome trauma, depression, anxiety, etc. bearing in mind that such problems are associated with combined experience from uprooting from homeland down to camp life and finally resettlement in a new environment. Therefore the purpose of the study is to assess the psychosocial needs of the Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia with a view to determining the implication for counseling.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The research has the following objectives:

1. To determine the psychosocial problems among Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia.
2. To determine whether there is a difference of psychosocial support needs among genders of the Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia.
3. To assess the effectiveness of the existing intervention among the refugees displaced in Malaysia.
4. To determine local community's acceptance of the Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are psychosocial problems among Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia?
2. Are there any differences in psychosocial support needs among genders in Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia?
3. To what extent do the existing intervention strategies assist the Palestinian refugees displaced in Malaysia?
4. What are the perceptions of Palestinian refugees towards their acceptance in the local community in Malaysia?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The need for psychosocial support to adapt to the new environment cannot be ruled out, thus such assessment will be a milestone for providing information on counseling

intervention strategies. This research has significant importance to relevant refugees as well as agencies at national and international level.

Furthermore, the research will assist the agency responsible for refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations that deal with refugees to have clear picture of the psychosocial needs of the refugees. Consequently, provide adequate psychosocial support to the refugees. Moreover, it will help these agencies to develop appropriate counseling intervention so as to integrate the cost of counseling program in their annual budgetary plan.

The research will also increase the refugees' agencies awareness of the exact trauma being experienced by refugees and other related problems on individual and group basis so as to prepare for intervention in order to improve the well-being of the refugees, which is one of the objectives of the agencies.

The study will also provide the basis for effective counseling intervention as it will provide the degree of psychosocial needs and explore the social factors that influence the displaced Palestinian refugees' mentality and behaviors especially in Malaysia so as to provide measures for prevention and intervention.

Economically, the research will determine the extent of the psychosocial needs so that the United Nation High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in charge of refugees' affairs, and other organizations such as Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) that supplements the effort of UNHCR to have allocated funds for counseling intervention and prevention.

The necessary clinical help will be provided to the Palestinian refugees who suffer from emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, as well as psychological difficulties. This will help the counselors to carry out the

relevant assessment; and therefore, provide the appropriate counseling intervention to the targeted Palestinian refugees.

## **OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS**

### **Refugee**

The person that forcefully left or was ejected from his original territory and was forced to reside in other places other than his or her original place.

### **Needs Assessment**

The ways of measuring what the refugees are in need of psychological, emotional support etc due to the situation they are involved.

### **Psychosocial Problems**

They relate to one's psychological development in the interaction with social environment. These include understanding, compassion, self-esteem and acceptance.

### **Psychological Problems**

They relate to the disorder of thoughts and emotions. These include depression, anxiety, stress disorder, neurosis, hypochondriasis, somatization disorder, factitious disorder, schizophrenia, paranoia, mania, manic-depression, and others.

### **Psychosocial Needs**

These are needs that enable individual integrate fully into a society when they are met. Fitch (2008) defined psychosocial needs as those needs arising in the physical, informational, emotional, psychosocial, social, spiritual, and practical domains as part of a client's experience and treatment.

### **Counseling**

This is a professional relationship between counselor and client aimed at assisting the latter to overcome personal, social, and career difficulties.

## **Intervention Strategies**

A professionally designed way of assisting client to make adjustment so that he/she could challenge the factors that hinder progress and development in life.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The chapter has discussed the Palestinian Refugees' cause that started in the mid of the twentieth century. This research approaches refugees' behavior of being refugees due to the general historical and recurring experience.

Also this chapter has discussed mental health and psychosocial problems in Palestinian Refugees displaced in Malaysia. Refugees suffer from a range of physical, psychological and social problems, which are reflected within their life style. Many NGOs and UN organizations such as UNHCR provide help to the Palestinian Refugees for exceptional treatment.

The Palestinian Refugees in Malaysia are given the opportunity to enjoy normal life similar to the local population such as health care and education. Moreover, this chapter has discussed the refugees' problems in order to provide the necessary assistance to overcome trauma, depression and depression anxiety, to assess the psychosocial needs of the refugees displaced in Malaysia, and to assess the provided intervention and counseling programs.

In addition, the chapter discussed the help that NGOs and other international organization and agencies need to develop in order to improve the well being of the Palestinian refugees.