

processes as this could be interpreted as an acceptance of the *status quo* and equated with the resettlement option and thus as an implicit erasure of their right of return claims. However there is increasing evidence that the latest generation of Palestinians does not regard the improvement of the material conditions in the camp as surrendering their identity.

The overall **living conditions** of refugees in the WBGS are substandard compared to that of non-refugees. According to the PCBS (2002), for instance, camp dwellers possessed far fewer durable goods (such as private cars, washing machines and microwaves) than their counterparts in rural and urban areas, had less rooms per housing unit, and a higher housing density. Furthermore, in 2002, three-quarters of the refugee population lived under the poverty line in 2002 as opposed to two-thirds of the non-refugees. Refugees in the West Bank camps are still better off than those in Gaza, where poverty and unemployment levels are much higher, mainly due to the comparatively stronger West Bank economy, the lack of workable agricultural land in Gaza, and the possibility for West Bankers to “sneak” into Israel to work “illegally”.

Gaza refugee camps suffer from tremendous overcrowding; having doubled their population since the 1950s without being allowed to expand their area, the **population density** is among the highest in the world. Expansion is difficult as the areas designated for refugee camps are limited and usually surrounded by urban areas. Housing in Gaza camps is very simple, while West Bank camps often resemble regular (lower-class) neighborhoods for the urban poor.

The refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have repeatedly been the target of aggression by the Israeli army, who claim that they are “hotbeds of terrorist activity.” Raids into the camps (often described in the Israeli media as “operations to dismantle the infrastructure of terror”) regularly result in Palestinian deaths and injuries, in addition to the large-scale destruction of property, a hallmark of Israeli operations. In April 2002, a major incursion into the Jenin RC, condemned internationally as a serious violation of international law, left scores of Palestinians dead and the center of the camp completely in ruins. Throughout 2003 and again in May 2004, the major target has been Rafah RC, located near the Egyptian border in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli forces have destroyed or damaged beyond repair thousands of houses, rendering over 12,000 people homeless.



Above: Destruction in Rafah RC, October 2003;
right: Jenin RC after the Israeli raid, April 2004.

Refugees with an improved household income and economic status tend to **move out** of camps but problems remain with the fact that most refugees cannot afford the much higher housing prices prevailing in the towns, especially for houses big enough to accommodate their extended family, and the difficulty of adapting to a new neighborhood.

ARAB HOST COUNTRIES

In 1965, the Arab League’s Casablanca Treaty obliged Arab states to preserve Palestinians’ refugee status by not granting them citizenship, but also stipulated that the refugees be given the same rights as nationals. This, however, is hardly the case. One of the main problems Palestinian refugees face remains that they are not granted full residency status and civil rights, and their hosts’ attitude towards them is mainly characterized by considerations of state security. It must be said in this regard that Arab governments have often been utilizing the Palestinian plight for their own political aims and alliances in the region. Because of their problematic citizenship status, Palestinian refugees are particularly vulnerable to expulsion. Two examples are the over 300,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave Kuwait and other Gulf states during the 1990-1991 Gulf Crisis, and the 30,000 Palestinians in Libya, who were expelled in 1995 in response to the PLO-Israeli accords.

UNRWA’s area of operation embraces Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the WBGS. Outside this area, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is expected to protect Palestinians but its activities are limited to assistance concerning travel documents, renewal of registration cards, and facilitation of interim solutions for Palestinian refugees in cases of forced departure.

In **Egypt**, there are no refugee camps and the over 50,000 Palestinians living there have not enjoyed any international or national assistance or protection. Until 1978, they were treated like nationals but since then laws and regulations were amended to treat them just like other foreigners, limiting their rights to education, employment and residency, and ending

