



Situation of Palestinian Refugees Humanitarian Statement on Brussels VI Conference

It sounds that the 74th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba (1948 catastrophe) we are commemorating, has become a marginal event alongside the events that the region and the world is witnessing. One of the most impacting effect of the Palestinian people's catastrophe 1948 is the Palestinian refugees issue which is resulted from the mass transfer to the people of Palestine through straight wars that forced hundreds thousands of the Palestinians to seek refuge in the neighboring countries. So, both Syria and Lebanon have received a notable amount of refugees since 1948.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria are living in extreme hardship at every level. The straight crisis that engulfed the two countries have hit the Palestinian refugees' socio-economic security.

In Syria, despite the attempts to keep the Palestinian refugees on the sidelines, the upsurge in incidents affected the PRS camps in varying degrees on both sides of the conflict. So, PRS got their share of killing, destruction, detention and abduction. The poverty rate among PRS has reached unprecedented level accompanied with the devaluation of the Syrian pound, the increase unemployment and the low rate of production. As in the Yarmouk camp, the refugees suffered a full besiegement for over 9 months resulted in the death of tens of people due to the lack of nutrition and medicine. Children were denied from their rights in food, security, education, health and humanitarian care.

The war has directly affected a number of camps, such as Yarmouk, Khan Eshieh, Handrat, Dar'a, Sabeina and Husseinieh. These camps were subjected to extensive destruction (70% -80% as in Yarmouk and Dar'a) as well as the displacement of a notable part of their population to other areas/camps or outside the country.

Surveys indicate that approximately two thirds of all PRS were displaced from their places of residence during and after 2012 (according to UNRWA estimates, currently 438,000 Palestine refugees in Syria out of 560,000 before 2011), especially from Yarmouk camps south of Damascus and Handrat in Aleppo and Dara 'a camp. The largest proportion of displaced persons was in the form of internal migration. (About 280,000) Palestinian refugees in war-affected camps were forced to migrate to camps and other safer areas such as Jaramana camp, Qudsya town, Dummar, Zahira, etc., and towards (150,000) Palestinians who took refuge in neighbouring countries, including Lebanon (27,000), Jordan (17,000), Turkey (10,000), Egypt (3,500) and increasingly Europe (80,000).

Thousands of PRS have also been forced to the north of Syria following the signing of reconciliation agreements between the GoS and the Armed Opposition groups, such as in Yarmouk, Khan Eshieh, Dar'a, Handarat, Homs, eastern Ghouta, etc., today's estimated 7,000 refugees (1,600 families) spread over three main areas of the north, Idlib, rural Idlib, Afrin (Olive Branch) and the northern countryside of Aleppo (Euphrates Shield), given that Idlib has the largest number of Palestine refugees. All residents of Handrat camp (7,000 refugees) were forced from their homes after Syrian opposition forces seized the camp in 2013.

Current Situation of the Palestine Refugees in Syria

According to UNRWA, more than 91% of the Palestine refugees' families in Syria live in absolute poverty (less than \$2 per person per day), and 40% of them remain in prolonged displacement as a result of conflict and long-term destruction. The continued depreciation of the Syrian pound and the deterioration in the socio-economic conditions suffered by all civilians in Syria over the past year have increased the hardship faced by Palestine refugees, whose resilience is near collapse. The recent rise in the world's fuel and commodity prices has increased the suffering of refugees, many of whom are living on one meal a day. Given that more than 80% of Syrian Palestine refugees rely on UNRWA cash assistance as a major source of income. It is estimated that many of UNRWA installations remain inaccessible or have sustained severe damage. Furthermore, forty per cent of UNRWA classrooms have been lost and almost 25 per cent of the Agency's health centers are currently unusable due to the conflict.

The escalation of violence has placed an increasing burden on Palestine refugees' freedom of movement, given that Jordan strictly closed its borders to PRS early in the conflict; this was followed by Turkey, which closed its borders to holders of Palestinian Syrian travel documents in the summer of 2013 and then Lebanon in May 2015. Under the closure of neighboring countries' borders to PRS, thousands were forced to take illegal migration route, forced to resort to dangerous routes, during which dozens of people lost their lives or were arrested as illegal immigrants.

For years, UNRWA has been experiencing a chronic crisis in securing funding to pursue its operations. However, the Agency's financial problems have worsened after US President Donald Trump cut off the United States contribution to the UN agency entirely in 2018. Prior to that, Washington provided more than \$300 million annually, almost one third of the Agency's core annual budget.

Under these circumstances, any disruption of UNRWA's services would cause considerable suffering, depriving vulnerable refugee communities of the main and often only source of assistance. Failure to provide the necessary support will have a devastating long-term impact that will become more difficult to deal with over time.

For the Palestinian people, UNRWA considers the international community's recognition of the crime that has caused this catastrophe, the consequences of which that persist to this day. It was therefore the responsibility of the international community and the United Nations to ensure the necessary support for the continuation, enhancement and development of UNRWA's services so that they could secure all basic services provided for the protection of Palestine refugees and their basic rights to a dignified life.

While the reduction or integration of UNRWA services by some other international bodies was being discussed in preparation for the determination of the UN Agency, Palestine refugees were under additional pressure because of the difficult security, humanitarian and economic conditions caused by the conflict in Syria and its catastrophic repercussions at all levels.

The Palestine refugees affirm that any talk of terminating or curtailing UNRWA's services before finding a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian question, above all the question of Palestine refugees, is unjust and unfair, so that UNRWA continues to attest to the responsibility of the international community for the disaster that led to the displacement of all these refugees out of their lands, villages and cities of origin.

At the same time, UNRWA is being subjected to a vicious campaign by suspicious actors to discredit it and attempt to undermine it in preparation to finish it. The campaign has succeeded on more than one occasion in reducing or pressuring support allocated to this UN agency to pass suspicious messages or change educational curricula to suit the policy of normalization blessed by the same suspicious entities. Here, we reaffirm that rights are indivisible and irrevocable. The Palestinian people's right to self-determination and resistance against occupation and the injustice to which they are subjected on a daily basis is legitimate and humane and does not contravene any of the humanitarian principles that everyone must adhere to.

Palestine refugees have been subjected to deliberate mutilation campaigns because of their loss of the foster environment and the benefit of living together with the Syrian people. The focus must therefore be on exclude the Palestinians from the ongoing conflict and protecting them from its direct and indirect consequences.

All the above requires all to work together to support the resilience of Palestinian camps and Palestine refugees until they return to their homeland from which they have been forced to leave. Everyone must shoulder their responsibilities, starting with the international community, especially the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, all Arab and Islamic countries and peoples in favor of the rights of the Palestinian people and their just cause. All this requires effective mechanisms of continuous and sustained coordination and even exchange of internal and external experiences, reprioritization and coordination of joint efforts to obtain better and more sustained results. This requires joint action and efforts at both internal and external levels.

Finally, on the occasion of the **Brussels VI Conference on Syria**, international donors should take into account the sad figures that the Commissioner-General of UNRWA had spoken in his address to the Conference. Regardless of the Palestine refugees' whereabouts in Syria and those who control the refugees' areas of residency, it is imperative to protect them, secure their needs and ensure the future of their children and youth. We therefore call on all donors and international and local organizations to provide the necessary support to the Palestine refugees and to include them in their priorities.

Jafra Foundation for Relief and Youth Development
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