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Palestinian Refugees of Syria's Yarmouk Camp: Challenges and Obstacles to Return

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On 22 September 2018, a boat carrying 39 refugees sank while sailing illegally from the Lebanese coast towards Cyprus. Five-year-old Syrian-Palestinian Khaled Nejme drowned in the incident, drawing attention to the plight of Palestinian refugees from Syria seeking refuge in Lebanon. Once considered lucky compared to Palestinian refugees in neighbouring countries, Palestinian refugees from Syria are now experiencing secondary displacement and are among the most vulnerable refugee groups in Lebanon.¹

This paper attempts to provide a better understanding of the attitudes toward the return of Palestinian refugees displaced from Syria. More specifically, the paper addresses the challenges faced by Palestinian refugees displaced from Syria's Yarmouk camp and currently residing in Lebanon. Since the Syrian regime and its allies have retaken control of Yarmouk, and amidst increasing calls from Lebanon for the "voluntary return of refugees", what are Syrian-Palestinian refugees' prospects of return? What are some of the major obstacles preventing their return? And what are some of the basic conditions to be met for a truly voluntary return to be encouraged?

To answer these questions, the authors conducted a series of interviews in Shatila camp and Ain el-Hilweh between 26 June and 16 September 2018.² The interviews were constructed in a way that

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Lebanon: Humanitarian Fund to step up support to the most vulnerable groups," March 2018. Available at <https://www.unocha.org/story/lebanon-humanitarian-fund-step-support-most-vulnerable-groups>

² A total of 12 people were interviewed, six in Shatila camp and six in Ain el-Hilweh camp. Of them, 10 were primary income earners for their families (six men and four women). Their ages varied between 26 and 67.

allowed ample space for the representation of different political positions, ideological orientations, social backgrounds, and age groups.

From Palestine to Yarmouk

At the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, more than 526,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria were registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The majority of Palestinians came to Syria from northern Palestine during the first wave of mass displacement starting in 1948. Other large groups of Palestinians came from the Golan Heights in 1967 and from Lebanon during the civil war starting in 1975. Palestinian refugees in Syria settled down in nine official camps and three unofficial camps. The camps are located in the western part of Syria, namely in the cities of Daraa, Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, with one coastal camp in Latakia.

Yarmouk camp is one of the unofficial camps that developed over time. The camp was established between 1954 and 1957 through the efforts of the General Directorate for Palestinian Refugees, part of the Syrian Ministry of Interior, in order to provide Palestinian refugees with a designated place to live. The Directorate rented 2.1 square kilometres of land owned by the al-Hakim family at the southern edge of Damascus and distributed it to the refugees. Yarmouk camp became home to the largest community of Palestinians in Syria and was dubbed the capital of the Palestinian diaspora. Its new residents named the neighbourhoods and streets of the camp after Palestinian areas. In 1964, a municipality was established in cooperation with both UNRWA and the Syrian authorities in order to manage the camp and provide the refugees with essential services.

Because of the unofficial character of the camp and its proximity to the centre of Damascus, its population was not exclusively Palestinian. A significant number of Syrians lived alongside Palestinians in the camp, bringing the overall population to around 400,000 people, out of which approximately 220,000 were Palestinians, according to unofficial sources. As stated on UNRWA's official website, the living conditions in Yarmouk were far better than those of Palestinian refugees in other camps in Syria.

The Syrian Uprising and a Secondary Exodus to Lebanon

Naturally, there are many different narratives of the Syrian conflict and the evolution of events in Yarmouk camp. Nonetheless, across political and ideological divides, a common understanding did emerge, which was confirmed by most interviewees and can be summarized as follows.

As the Syrian uprising gained strength throughout 2011, and the government responded with increasing violence, many residents of Yarmouk strove to remain uninvolved in the conflict.³ Gradually, however, the Syrian regime started to assign security and intelligence operations to the

³ Salim Salamah, "Starving the Palestinian Yarmouk Camp," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2014. Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55450>

Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) and other Palestinian factions loyal to the regime. This essentially negated Palestinian neutrality and caused alarm among Yarmouk's residents.

In addition, neighbouring residents fled to Yarmouk to escape increasing violence in their areas. Yarmouk's growing instability and strategic location started to attract Syrian opposition groups who saw the camp as a potential support base for the civil uprising. The situation worsened significantly when the camp itself witnessed its first armed clashes. A regime "MiG" airstrike on 16 December 2012 constituted a major point of escalation that pushed many residents to leave Yarmouk.

Factions of the Free Syrian Army later took control of the camp, which was later besieged by regime forces and loyal militias – including Palestinian ones. The partial siege spread throughout 2013 to encompass the entire camp, resulting in a dire humanitarian crisis that took its toll on civilians. Adding to the horror of the siege, ISIS infiltrated and took control of parts of the camp in April 2015. Their presence in the camp persisted until the regime launched a hugely destructive military campaign, regaining all control in 2018. This campaign displaced the remaining camp population, and regime combatants looted what was left of the residents' assets.

Many residents of Yarmouk had already fled their homes prior to the 2013 siege, with tens of thousands seeking refuge in Lebanon. A sizable proportion of Syrian-Palestinian refugees ended up in Sidon's Ain el-Hilweh camp and Beirut's Shatila camp, which were both established to accommodate refugees from northern Palestine in 1948 and 1949 respectively. Others went to Western countries by both legal and illegal routes.

Inside Shatila and Ain el-Hilweh

The interviewees were unanimous in asserting that their living, social and economic conditions in Yarmouk were much better than in Shatila or Ain el-Hilweh.

In Lebanon, Syrian-Palestinian refugees are lacking formal protection and assistance due to their lack of legal status, the disparity between the mandates of UNRWA and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and discriminatory legislation against Palestinians.⁴ As a result, the majority of Syrian-Palestinians in Lebanon do not hold valid residency papers. Whilst the renewal of residency papers for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is difficult and expensive, it is even more difficult for Syrian-Palestinians. This limits their freedom of movement, and their ability to secure income.

When it comes to birth and death registrations, Syrian-Palestinian refugees follow the same procedures as Syrian refugees. After medical registration at the hospital, the official files are transferred to the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and to the Syrian Embassy in Lebanon. However, unlike the case for Syrian refugees, there is no single authority in the Lebanese State authorized to deal with Syrian-Palestinian refugees. The creation of a Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs under Minister Moin al-Merebi has not remedied the situation, as the ministry's mandate is

⁴ Hanan Elbadawi, "The Second Exodus: Tracing the Footsteps of Palestinian Refugees in Syria," Atlantic Council, April 2018. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-second-exodus-tracing-the-footsteps-of-palestinian-refugees-in-syria>

not well defined. In addition to the renewal of residency, vested in General Security, various security apparatus and civil institutions – including the municipalities – are involved with the affairs of Syrian refugees according to their respective interests, and do not have a unified single national policy towards the issue.

Most people living in Shatila and Ain el-Hilweh camps suffer from the spread of drugs, proliferation of weapons, sexual harassment, child abuse, and the bullying of refugees by armed members of some Palestinian factions referred to as “Shabbiha.” However, none of the interviewees mentioned poor treatment or discrimination by the original residents of the camps. The original residents, on the other hand, did not hide their resentment towards the recent arrivals of Syrian-Palestinian refugees, deploring the increased competition for jobs and aid resources.

Returning to What?

With the Syrian regime’s military victories and re-assertion of control in many opposition-held areas, calls by Lebanese politicians and officials for the return of Syrian refugees have grown in strength and frequency. According to Human Rights Watch, statements on the repatriation of refugees from Lebanon to Syria have been issued by various parties, including Lebanon’s president, the speaker of the parliament and the foreign minister.⁵

Recently, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem called on refugees to return, declaring that “The return of every Syrian is a priority for the Syrian state. All conditions are now met for the voluntary and safe return of refugees to the country they left.”⁶ This was followed by a statement of the Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad,⁷ in which he informed the Palestinian National Action factions of an official decision allowing the return of refugees to Yarmouk camp. This decision remains unimplemented. Since the issuing of the statement, relatives of interviewees have reported several instances of people who were forced out of Yarmouk camp.

- **Concerns Related to Safety and Security**

Security and livelihoods remain the main factors influencing decisions to return from Shatila and Ain el-Hilweh to Yarmouk camp and Syria in general.

Mandatory military conscription is a defining factor for many male refugees when considering a return to Syria. This concern is shared by both pro- and anti-regime Palestinians. Whilst military service was already considered to be a burden before 2011, it was not yet a matter of life or death. Since the beginning of the conflict, however, serving in the military entails a high risk of death, injury or capture, with no set end date to the service. Some people have been serving in the military for more than seven years, “which is roughly 10% of the human life span,” emphasized one interviewee.

⁵ Bassam Khawaja, “Refugee Rights in Lebanon Not Up for Debate,” Human Rights Watch, July 2018. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2018/07/04/319850>

⁶ Taken from the speech of Walid al-Moualem before the United Nations General Assembly, the website of Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2018. Available at: <https://goo.gl/5HWB7y>

⁷ “Al-Miqdad: Syria Invites Palestinian Refugees back to Yarmouk Camp,” *Russia Today*, November 2018. Available at: <https://goo.gl/T5qZqC>

The regime has recently issued a decree that offers amnesty to civilian men who have been avoiding military conscription. In return, the men are still expected to serve in the Syrian Army, as the regime hopes to make up for the many defections, desertions and casualties. With no security guarantees in place, international monitors have urged caution.⁸

In addition, the fear of arrest or detention by Syrian authorities is high. Again, this concern is shared by all Palestinians in Syria, including those who support the regime. Interviewees spoke of acquaintances who were detained simply because they had names similar to the names of men wanted by the regime and could thus be exchanged for ransoms or bribes. Others also noted the insecurity and disorder that has emerged in many areas under the control of militias hired by the regime, who exercise control over people's daily lives.

For Syrian-Palestinians opposed to the Syrian regime, the fear of detention and oppression is accompanied by a resolute rejection of the logic of the so-called "reconciliation agreements" that have been reached in many areas regained by the regime. "These processes of reconciliation and compromise are unrealistic and dangerous," one interviewee stated, referring to cases where promises made by the regime and Russia were not honoured and many found themselves arrested or forced into military service to fight former comrades.

Several interviewees supporting the regime acknowledged the difficulty of trusting reconciliation agreements and reintegration processes. Yet, many opponents went further by emphasizing that voluntary return "cannot happen without achieving justice and radical political change in Syria."

- **Access to Property and Housing**

A major underlying issue remains the wide-scale destruction of Yarmouk camp. As the camp has been reduced to rubble, what will the former residents of Yarmouk return to? "We used to say that we might return one day, in case the situation stabilized, since we have a house there and we can manage minimal living costs in one way or another... But as this option looks more and more unrealistic, return seems unattainable," said a head of household in Shatila camp.

The scale of the destruction of infrastructure is such, that many believe it was the intention of the regime to prevent the return of former residents and to ultimately dispossess them of their properties. Regaining control of the camp did not probably necessitate the type of massive military operation that led to the destruction of an estimated 60% of the entire Yarmouk camp.⁹ "It is almost impossible to find a house that has survived the destruction," said a spokesman of UNRWA.¹⁰

On the other hand, there is the controversial Law No. 10, which allows the Syrian government to confiscate residents' property without due process or adequate compensation.¹¹ The law, promoted by the government as a measure for urban planning, will significantly impede the return of displaced

⁸ "Syria offers amnesty to military deserters, but exiles are cautious," *The Washington Post*, October 2018. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syria-offers-amnesty-to-military-deserters-but-exiles-are-cautious/2018/10/09/8dcdec26-cbcc-11e8-ad0a-0e01efba3cc1_story.html?utm_term=.d5066c889768

⁹ "60% of Yarmouk camp is destroyed and International organizations' participation in rebuilding it is denied" *Sputnik News*, May 2018. Available at: <https://goo.gl/wEL2GJ>

¹⁰ "What awaits Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee camp in Damascus?" *Russia Today*, May 2018. Available at: <https://goo.gl/SkGVnK>

¹¹ Text of the Law No.10. Syrian Prime Ministry's website. April 2018. Available at: <https://goo.gl/hrWiPx>

people.¹² There is conflicting information on whether the new law will apply to Yarmouk camp. What is known, is that an official directive has recently been adopted to create a new urban plan for the camp,¹³ yet local Palestinian figures close to the regime reportedly stated that “the talk of new urban planning is totally baseless.”¹⁴

With some difficulties, former residents of Yarmouk have been allowed to check on their homes, or what is left of them. However, they are not allowed to resettle, repair or rebuild their properties. This is partly due to security concerns, including the presence of unexploded ordnance, and more alarmingly, to the restriction of entry permits by the authorities.

- **Lack of Livelihood Opportunities**

A head of a household in Ain el-Hilweh shared some simple calculations. A family of four to five people (and many families are larger than five) needs around 280,000 Syrian pounds (approximately 620 US dollars) per month to live in Damascus.¹⁵ This includes rent. Yet the labour market in Damascus does not provide more than one third of that amount, and that one-third would come from the combined income of three family members, namely the father, mother and eldest son. That is, if they are lucky enough to seize some of the market’s scarce employment opportunities.

Some rural residents of Syria who own agricultural land and whose homes have not been too severely affected may be able to return and provide for themselves through the means of subsistence agriculture, poultry and livestock. But this does not apply to the majority of refugees from the Syrian cities and suburbs.

A report by the UN for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) covering August 2018 puts youth unemployment rate in Syria at 78%.¹⁶ In addition, the loss of men, husbands and sons due to death, disability or detention, has put a heavy strain on many families, increasingly shifting the traditional male roles of heading a household to women. On top of that, with talk of refugees’ return, the rental prices of housing are already said to be increasing. Apartments with reasonable rents are located in remote areas, which makes them unpractical for those who are looking for work, especially given that the cost of daily transportation eliminates most of the savings kept by renting a house outside the city.

Remittances from expatriates, migrants and refugees in the West and the Gulf continue to be one way to overcome the financial obstacles to the return of refugees. Large numbers of families in Syria depend on the financial remittances from their relatives to secure their basic living needs. According to interviewees, some refugees plan their future according to the periodic and regular financial support they receive from relatives, particularly those residing in Europe. As one interviewee

¹² Human Rights Watch, *Syria’s New Property Law*, May 2018. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2018/05/29/318466>

¹³ Commissioning the Ministry of Public Works and Housing of delivering organizational charts. The website of the Syrian Ministry of Public Works and Housing. July 2018. Available at: http://mopwh.gov.sy/?page=show_det&category_id=101&id=743&lang=ar

¹⁴ Officially: Yarmouk Camp is Among the Organizational Chart of Damascus City and the concerns thereon. Palestinian Refugees Portal. July 2018. Available at: <https://goo.gl/p4UvP1>

¹⁵ Costs of Living in Syria for a normal family are 309,000 Syrian Pounds for the month of September 2018. Kassioune Website. September 2018. Available at: <https://kassiounpaper.com/economy/item/33810-309-2018>

¹⁶ Humanitarian Response Plan 2018 (January-December 2018). Available at: <https://goo.gl/o6z4Je>

illustrated, “100 or 200 Euros is not considered a substantial amount in Europe, whereas it could have the greatest impact on the life of my family in Syria”.

Our interviews suggest that with a minimum degree of security and stability in greater Damascus, one possible scenario of return would involve mothers, women and children returning to Syria, while fathers and adult men remain in Lebanon. The men would stay to work and transfer earnings to the rest of their families in Syria. This scenario – familiar to those who worked in Lebanon before the Syrian revolution – has become a reality for many Syrian families.

- **The Longing for Palestine**

No interviewee addressed the questions concerning a potential return to Syria without significant reference to the suffering of all Palestinian refugees and their collective loss of homeland.

The interviewees confirmed that they enjoyed good living conditions in Syria before the revolution, where Palestinians were reasonably well integrated into society. Yet if they were given the choice, most of them would choose to return to Palestine.

“As Palestinians, we are tired of the instability we suffer from. Yes, we dream of returning to Palestine. Until then, we want to obtain the citizenship of a respectable country, where we can enjoy our human rights, settle down, and raise our children the way they deserve,” said a female head of household living in Ain el-Hilweh camp. Indeed, achieving a sense of stability was cited by many former residents of Yarmouk as one of their most important goals. That is why most of them now envision moving to a Western country currently receiving Syrian refugees, in order to start a new life.

Conclusion

Secondary displacement has rendered Palestinian refugees from Syria particularly vulnerable, as they lack formal protection and assistance. Considering the dire living conditions in Lebanon’s Palestinian refugee camps, most of them seek ways to leave the country but are reluctant to return to Syria for several reasons.

Safety and security are at the heart of most refugees’ hesitation to return. Their main safety concerns, including mandatory military conscription and fear of detention, could be addressed through comprehensive political reforms. However, given the history of the conflict, refugees now find it hard to believe promises made by the Syrian or Lebanese authorities. Without a genuine political change in Syria, deals of reconciliation and compromise will have no credibility, and talk of refugees’ return will remain hollow.

In addition, the question of livelihoods and income remains one of the most complex aspects to address. Syria’s battered economy, marked by high living costs, unemployment and inflation, constitutes an important barrier preventing the voluntary return of refugees. Even if recent statements made by Lebanese officials on the decline of life-threatening danger in Syria were true, they do not change the socio-economic realities on the ground. The

establishment of safe zones, where there is no more risk of shelling or bombing, does not mean that returning refugees will have access to housing, food, or medical assistance.

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ABOUT ARI

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