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## Human Rights Council

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**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

## **Written statement\* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 February 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **Palestinians of Syria: Deep anxieties over Severe Economic Hardship**

### **Overview**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, the situation of Palestinian refugees sheltered in the war-ravaged country has taken a serious turn for the worse. With 540,000 Palestine refugees affected by the conflict and registered with UNRWA, alarm bells have been raised around the clock over the calamitous humanitarian situation endured by such a vulnerable community.

### **Socio-Economic challenges faced by PRS**

The crisis in Syria has been one of the gravest and most demanding emergencies faced in the modern era. The vast majority of the 540,000 Palestine refugees registered in Syria are unable to meet their basic needs without humanitarian assistance.

According to UN data, over half of the Palestinian refugee population has experienced internal displacement since the beginning of the conflict (at least 270,000 individuals), while another 70,000 refugees have been forced to flee to Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza, Egypt and other countries.

Today, thousands of Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) have been scattered in known and unknown destinations, after they were forced out of their homes and torn apart from their families. Hundreds have become internally displaced across the war-ravaged Syrian territories.

The past few years have been unprecedented in so many ways for Palestinian refugees, who remain one of the communities worst affected by the conflict in Syria. They have experienced profound anxieties related to persistent hostilities, loss of life, injury, continued displacement, and destruction of their homes and livelihoods.

Since 2018, they were also confronted with a series of dramatic events, including the consequences of the final stages of the destruction of Yarmouk and the impacts of the US funding cut to UNRWA.

Of the 560,000 refugees registered with UNRWA in Syria, over 120,000 have fled to Lebanon, Jordan and beyond. Inside Syria, 254,000 Palestinian refugees have been displaced at least once since the beginning of the conflict, while 13,500 are trapped in hard-to-reach areas. Yarmouk, Ein el Tal and Dera'a camps – previously home to around a third of the Palestinian refugee population in Syria – have been almost completely destroyed.

After more than eight years of conflict, civilians in Syria continue to face significant humanitarian and protection needs. In the absence of a durable political settlement, intense hostilities and violence resulting in deaths and injuries, internal displacement, loss of livelihoods, decreases in the provision of public services, and extensive damage to civilian infrastructure have disrupted the lives of civilians and severely undermined coping mechanisms.

Of the estimated 438,000 Palestinian refugees remaining inside Syria, over 95 per cent (418,000) are in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance. Many PRS continue to face a precarious and marginalized existence due to their uncertain legal status and limited social protection mechanisms, making them heavily reliant on relief assistance for their basic needs.

UN data indicates that unemployment rates have hit 78% in Syria and prices increased between 2011 and 2019 by about 14 times. Over 12 million Syrians are in need of

humanitarian assistance. A family needs a minimum of 400 USD to be able to afford its economic and humanitarian needs.<sup>1</sup>

The UN has frequently sounded the alarm over such a calamitous situation. Panos Moutziz, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, warned that over 80% of the Syrian people live below the poverty line in the ravaged country.<sup>2</sup> The situation for PRS has been just as alarming. Most refugees lost their sources of income; refugee camps have seen unprecedented levels of destruction and displacement; rental prices have hit a high point; crackdowns and movement restrictions have been a daily dangerous struggle.

The deadly shootouts between the different warring parties and the tough cordons imposed on access roads have prevented Palestinian workers from reaching their workplaces. The sharp decrease in the exchange rate of the Syrian pound (SP) compared to the USD has made the situation far worse.<sup>3</sup> The price leap has also overburdened the cash-stripped refugees. A kilogram of powdered milk has hit 325 Syrian pounds while a liter of liquid milk has reached 400. A bread bundle costs 125 SP, olive oil 30,000, and a kilogram of chicken 25,000. House rents have also seen a striking leap from previous years. In such towns as Qudsaya, Palestinians have to pay over 75,000 SP as the current average for renting an equipped home.

### **UNRWA's assistance**

Of the estimated 438,000 Palestinian refugees remaining inside Syria, over 95 per cent (418,000) have been in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance by UNRWA. Some 254,000 Palestine refugees have been displaced at least once since the beginning of the conflict and an estimated 13,500 are trapped in hard-to-reach or inaccessible locations. Within this complex and challenging operating environment, UNRWA has struggled to adapt its interventions to meet the essential needs of Palestinian refugees affected by the protracted crisis. However, UNRWA was forced to opt for urgent measures to curtail in-kind and cash aids allotted to the Palestinians of Syria due to funding crisis. Aids were only handed over to Palestinian families deemed as worst affected by the conflict: Families with a female, elderly (aged above 60), or minor (below 18) breadwinner and families with a person with disability. Such a classification prevented scores of refugee families from receiving UNRWA aid.

### **Deep anxieties over an uncertain future**

The abject economic conditions endured by the Palestinian refugee community due to war-related incidents and years of unending displacement have resulted in a squalid humanitarian condition and made life unbearable for such a vulnerable population. In several cases, children are forced to drop out of school and join armed groups to help feed their starving families; hundreds of families have women as their sole breadwinners after they lost their male households in the war, and in several other cases boys and girls are spotted begging in the streets for a few pounds to be able to fetch bread loafs or milk bottles.

Economic hardship also forced thousands of families to embark on life-threatening journey to neighboring countries including Lebanon, Turkey, Libya, and Egypt. Scores of refugees have been arrested, blackmailed, and/or abused by human smugglers. Scores of other families boarded Europe-bound “death boats”, trying to get to safety to a European destination. Hundreds have died at sea.

<sup>1</sup> <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2012801/%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%8A/%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AC>

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/ar/audio/2019/03/1028831>

<sup>3</sup> Prior to the Syrian conflict, a worker receives an average salary of 300 USD. In early 2020, wages do not exceed 70 USD. Today 1 USD = 1,000 Syrian Pounds, compared to 47 Syrian Pounds prior to the outbreak of the war.

Unemployment rates have also hit unprecedented levels, with thousands of Palestinians being made redundant or forced to join a warring militia. The serious protection gaps along with the severe economic challenges have led to an increase in the rates of drug consumption and promotion among the displaced families in the embattled Syrian territories. The situation has brought about traumatic fallouts on Palestinian refugee children. Post-traumatic stress disorders, mental psychosis, sleeplessness and nightmares, eating disorders, and intense fear have all been reported among Palestinian children in/from Syria.

### **Findings and recommendations**

- Serious and urgent steps should be made by UNRWA, the international community, and the concerned humanitarian institutions in order to enhance the socio-economic condition of the displaced Palestinian families in Syria before it is too late.
- UNRWA should increase its financial and in-kind aid for Palestinian refugee families in Syria who have been gravely affected by the conflict.
- Serious efforts should be made by UNRWA and all other concerned parties in order to hand over humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees in northern Syria, a region classified as “dangerous” and “hard-to-reach”.
- The Syrian government should be pressurized to speed up reconstruction projects in order to rehabilitate Palestinian refugee camps and shelters, pending a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian refugee plight.
- Urgent measures should be carried out on the ground in order to safeguard children’s right to moral and physical protection and to prevent child labor and forced military conscription.
- The UN should take efficient steps in order to help create job opportunities and better economic conditions for Palestinian refugees in Syria and help reduce poverty and unemployment rates pending their safe return to their homeland—Palestine.

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