

# PALESTINIANS OF SYRIA

## The Forgotten Refugees



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House of Commons  
21st March 2016

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مركز العودة الفلسطيني

PALESTINIAN RETURN CENTRE

Organisation in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2015

The **Palestinian Return Centre** is an independent consultancy focusing on the historical, political and legal aspects of the Palestinian Refugees. The organization offers expert advice to various actors and agencies on the question of Palestinian Refugees within the context of the Nakba - the catastrophe following the forced displacement of Palestinians in 1948 - and serves as an information repository on other related aspects of the Palestine question and the Arab-Israeli conflict. It specializes in the research, analysis, and monitor of issues pertaining to the dispersed Palestinians and their internationally recognized legal right to return.

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## Preface

On Monday 21st March, the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC) and SNP Friends of Palestine held a seminar in the House of Commons hosted and chaired by Tommy Sheppard MP. The seminar focused on the issues faced by the Palestinian refugees of Syria, in light of the 5th year anniversary of the Syrian crisis. The discussion explored how Palestinian refugees remain particularly vulnerable and have been disproportionately affected by the conflict in Syria.

## Speakers

**Tommy Sheppard** MP, Host and Chair

**Andy Murray**, SNP Friends of Palestine

**Sameh Habeeb**, Head of Media/PR at the Palestinian Return Centre

**Anne Irfan**, PhD Student examining UNRWA Camps and Former Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP)

**Magda Qandil**, Consultant for Refugee and Humanitarian Affairs in the Middle East and Europe for UN agencies and major INGOs

**Kathryn Ramsay**, Gender Researcher and Policy Advisor for Amnesty International (AI)

## Biographies

**Sameh Habeeb** is the Head of Media and PR at Palestinian Return Centre (PRC). Sameh has worked as a journalist in the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead, and from 2011 to 2015 he also led PRC's successful application for the United Nations NGO consultative status.

**Anne Irfan** is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics, where she is researching UNRWA's role in the Palestinian refugee camps. She previously worked at Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and has spent time in refugee camps in the West Bank and Lebanon.

**Magda Qandil** is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School for Social Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She has been working as a consultant for Refugee and Humanitarian Affairs in the Middle East and Europe for UN agencies and major INGOs.

**Kathryn Ramsay** is a gender researcher and policy adviser at Amnesty International. She holds an MA in the theory and practice of human rights and has previously worked at Minority Rights Group International.



## Speeches

### Introductions

*Tommy Sheppard, MP, introduced the event and presented the speakers. Andy Murray welcomed the audience to the event and introduced the work of SNP Friends of Palestine. Next, Sameh Habeeb stressed the importance of the right of return for the refugees within the current humanitarian crisis.*

**Tommy Sheppard:** My name is Tommy Shppard, I am the MP for Edinburgh East and SNP MP. I am an active supporter of the SNP Friends of Palestine group, which was established inside the Party to try and raise awareness on the plight of the Palestinian people and to argue for justice for them. We are delighted as a group to be able to host this meeting on behalf of the PRC. We have a number of distinguished speakers, who are going to be giving us hopefully some new information. And I do want to spend half of the meeting having a discussion and raising points.

I'll introduce each of the speakers as we come to them, and as you can see already we are going to be relying on new technology to connect us to places elsewhere in the world to contribute to the debate tonight, because we have a speaker right from the frontline of the refugee crisis.

I should say that the reason why we've done this now is because last week was the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and we thought it would be timely to consider at that period the plight of particularly the Palestinian refugees in that region who are now in a situation of being serially displaced. Having been displaced from their own homeland, many have gone into Syria and into Iraq and to then find themselves as a result of these wars being displaced yet again. Really against that backdrop we want to focus on the plight of the Palestinian refugees.

Before that, I just want to introduce Andy Murray, from SNP Friends of Palestine and Sameh Habeeb from PRC to say a few words about the respective organisations, just so you know who our hosts are. They promised they're going to be very brief. Andy.

**Andy Murray:** Hi everyone. First of all, I'd like to welcome you here on behalf of SNP Friends of Palestine. This is just one of a series of events we will be hosting both here and within the British Parliament in the months to come, working with the PRC and other NGOs to raise the plight of the Palestinian people and how we can all effectively offer solidarity and help where possible.

**Sameh Habeeb:** I don't want to talk for long, as we have a panel of distinguished speakers here tonight. On behalf of the PRC, I'd like to welcome all of you to our meeting, which is number 7 of a series of events in the last 6 months discussing

every issue regarding the Palestinian issue. We're happy to organise this event with SNP Friends of Palestine, hosted by Tommy, who's been working hard although it's been less than a year since he is in Parliament, but he's done a lot more than many of those MPs who are in the Parliament here.

The one important point I'd like to assert on; the speakers will be talking about the humanitarian conditions and what is happening to the Palestinian refugees in Syria and the difficulties they have been encountering in the last five years, but the PRC has been working for the past 20 years to highlight the issue of the right of return. And that's why we exist and that's why we will continue to exist despite the Israeli attempt to attack what we do and the message that we hold. We are adamant to defend and to work towards implementing the right of return, which is guaranteed, and enshrined in international law and many UN resolutions. We hope that we will be reaching our mission with the help of our friends here and many of the supporters across the world. I will leave the floor to Tommy and the other speakers. Thank you for coming and see you next month, we have a very important event about the Christians of Palestine and how they are suffering due to Israeli policies often neglected in the headlines, but we are discussing this next month around the 24<sup>th</sup> of April. Thank you.





## **ANNE IRFAN, Palestinian Refugees of Syria: Excluded from Support and Protection**

*Anne Irfan discussed the vulnerabilities of the Palestinian refugees from Syria and the institutionalized discriminations that they face in other countries. They can't ask for protection by the UNHCR, which deals with all refugees worldwide except Palestinian refugees, while UNRWA has limited services, which places Palestinians at a disadvantage.*

Thank you for the introduction and thanks to all of you for coming on this not very pleasant night to this very overheated room to hear about quite a depressing topic, Palestinian refugees from Syria. Of course we are all too aware that Syria is in the midst of a serious humanitarian crisis. We have more than 5 million Syrian refugees who have fled the country since the beginning of the war, 5 years ago last week, as we've just heard.

What we've heard quite a lot less about the plight of the Palestinians who are also fleeing Syria in very large numbers and who, as a stateless population, are becoming twice displaced, sometimes even three times displaced. These Palestinian refugees from Syria are suffering from further persecution and torment simply because they are Palestinian. At the core of their plight obviously is the fact that Palestinians are stateless. This makes them inherently vulnerable for the obvious reason that they lack the protection of a state. But in the case of Palestinian refugees from Syria, they're additionally vulnerable because they are also lacking protection from all kinds of other international organizations and bodies that are responding to the Syrian crisis by focusing solely on Syrian refugees rather than all refugees from Syria. Now this might seem just an issue of semantics but it's actually a very important distinction, as I'm going to explain. I have a slightly dry historical account of the institutional discrimination against Palestinian refugees, I'll try to make it as lively as possible.

Before the beginning of the Syrian war, 5 years ago, there were around 560,000 registered Palestinian refugees living in Syria. 560 thousand. Very much a minority but a significant number. This Palestinian population in Syria of course can be traced back to the original refugees who came from Palestine in 1948 and their descendants. The Palestinians' conditions in pre-war Syria were actually relatively good. They didn't have citizenship, of course, but they were relatively well integrated into Syrian society. They had many of the same rights as the Syrian citizens; they had access to state healthcare, education, employment, etc. To make a comparison, the situation was much better than that of Palestinians in the neighbouring Lebanon, who are denied the right to work in many professions, to own property or to access state services. Of course today the situation of Palestinians in Syria has changed drastically, or for the worse.

So, more than 100,000 Palestinians fled Syria today. It's estimated that about half of them, 45,000 have gone to Lebanon. The numbers going to Lebanon have become even more significant since the beginning of 2013. So at the beginning of 2013, the Jordanian government imposed a ban on accepting Palestinians from Syria, although it continues to accept Syrians. As a result, unsurprisingly, a lot of Palestinian refugees sought refuge in Lebanon, instead. This put an incredible amount of pressure on Lebanese resources, which were already overstretched and unfortunately the Lebanese government has now responded by imposing their own ban. As of May 2014, Palestinian refugees from Syria have also been banned from entering Lebanon.

So, Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria are now really stuck. As I mentioned, they are uniquely vulnerable because of their statelessness. They are also uniquely vulnerable because the international organisations that are theoretically around to help them often end up leaving them at a disadvantage. Palestinian refugees are administered and categorised differently not only to Syrians but actually to every other group of refugee in the world. Palestinian refugees are, under international convention, administered and categorised differently to every other group of refugee in the world. This might seem a little absurd or bizarre. It's worth considering it's nothing new. It's certainly nothing that has emerged in the last 5 years or with the Syrian war.

Actually, this kind of Palestinian exceptionalism dates back to the very beginning of Palestinians existence as a long term refugee population. I won't go into this into very much detail because everyone here is aware of it, but as we know, the Palestinian refugee crisis began in 1948, what's known as the Nakba, meaning catastrophe or disaster, when the establishment of the State of Israel led to around three quarters of the Palestinian population at the time losing their homes and becoming refugees. This is 1948. The UN was around 3 years old at that time. The UN sought to intervene directly in what was considered this major humanitarian crisis in the Middle East. So in 1949, the UN created the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, better known by its acronym UNRWA. UNRWA was created to deal specifically and exclusively with Palestinian refugees, only Palestinian refugees. UNRWA mandated to be responsible for their welfare in 5 areas only. 5 areas with the largest Palestinian population: West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan. 5 areas. This is important. I'll come back to it and explain why.

The year after the UN created UNRWA, it moved to establish a broader organisation for refugees across the world. So in 1950, the UN created the Office for the High Commissioner of Refugees, again better known by its acronym UNHCR. This is significant because when the UN created the UNHCR, it made the decision not to merge it with UNRWA. Instead it was decided that both organisations would continue to exist and to operate alongside one another. UNRWA's responsible for Palestinian refugees; UNHCR is responsible for all other refugees in the world. Now, as a result, the Palestinians are the only group of people excluded from the UNHCR mandate. This setup, established in 1950, remains in place to this date, 2016.

So today, UNHCR is responsible for all refugees in the world except the Palestinians. There's one organisation for the Palestinians and another one for everyone else. Now, you might ask why this matters, if the result is everyone has some organisation that's taking care of them. The reason it matters is because there are fundamental differences in what these two organisations are mandated to do. UNRWA, UNHCR have different mandates. UNRWA's mandate is much more limited and this means that the Palestinian refugees are placed at a serious disadvantage. Let me explain what I mean.

The most crucial difference is the disparity in the two organisations' mandates to provide protection. UNRWA is not mandated to provide protection to Palestinian refugees. It's only mandated to provide relief, humanitarian assistance; not to provide protection, not to pursue political solutions. That's the role of yet another UN body, called UNCCP, I apologise for all of these acronyms. UNCCP exists to pursue protection and political solutions. UNCCP has been inactive for many, many decades. So in reality, no UN organisation is formally mandated to provide protection or to pursue political solutions to the Palestinian refugees. UNRWA may do so on an ad hoc basis that it's informal and it's very limited. By contrast, UNHCR is mandated to provide protection and to pursue political solutions for the refugees that it serves, which as we've just heard, does not include the Palestinian refugees. There is what is known as a protection gap in the services available to the Palestinians, and this is why we say that they are uniquely vulnerable as refugees.

I would also point out that in practical terms, UNRWA is limited geographically. As I mentioned, UNRWA only works in 5 areas: West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria. By contrast, UNHCR has a much larger mandate and operates across the world and works in every continent. Why am I telling you all of this. Unfortunately, this disparity between UNHCR and UNRWA, the protection gap between the two bodies, is having a whole host of negative repercussions to Palestinians fleeing Syria today.



Firstly and fundamentally, this means that Palestinian refugees are lacking formal protection at the time when they need it the most. As Palestinian refugees are ineligible for UNHCR services and are not Syrian citizens, too often they are falling through the gaps. They are not able to access the services that they need, because they cannot register with UNHCR. Their numbers, their needs, their conditions are excluded from much of the data we see about the Syrian refugee crisis. There is a particular problem we have today when Palestinians from Syria are seeking refuge outside UNRWA's five fields. Now, in theory when this happens, Palestinian refugees should fall under the mandate of UNHCR. How the system works is if a Palestinian refugee finds themselves outside those five fields and in need of assistance, they should become eligible for UNHCR services. In practice, it's often quite complicated and the Syrian refugee crisis has been really highlighting the difficulties especially now that Palestinians are denied entry to Lebanon and Jordan anyway.

To take a couple of examples, Turkey shares a very long border with Syria, as we know. Turkey is receiving huge numbers of refugees from Syria. UNRWA does not operate in Turkey; UNHCR does. It operates though the Turkish government. We have reports that Palestinians from Syria have not been allowed to register with UNHCR in Turkey. And as the Turkish government does not allow the UNHCR to perform refugee status determination, the legal status of Palestinians in Turkey remains unclear. This is a big problem in terms of accessing services.

The situation is even worse in Egypt. In Egypt, the government is not allowing Palestinians to register with UNHCR, explicitly on the grounds that Palestinians should come under the mandate of UNRWA. Of course, UNRWA is not mandated to work in Egypt, so what this means is that Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria seeking refuge in Egypt are not getting any assistance whatsoever, let alone any protection. Unlike Syrians, Palestinians in Egypt can't register with UNHCR as refugees, so they can't receive residence permits, they can't access food vouchers, medical support, any kind of emergency relief.



Even more worryingly, we have reports that the Egyptian government has forcibly deported some Palestinians back to Syria, which is of course in direct contravention of international refugee law, including the convention to which Egypt is a signatory.

There are some Palestinian refugees of Syria who have been able to register with UNRWA, those who have taken refuge in Jordan and Lebanon. Unfortunately, even these Palestinian refugees remain at a disadvantage. They're relying on UNRWA's extremely limited resources. Even before the Syrian war, UNRWA experienced a huge deficit and major financial problems. This has worsened during the Syrian crisis and of course it is the Palestinian refugees who are suffering as a result. There are various examples of specific services that UNHCR provides and UNRWA does not.

Finally and perhaps more relevantly given our setting tonight, Palestinians are ineligible for the many relief programmes that have been set up for Syrian refugees, including the one that David Cameron has announced on behalf of the UK government. As many of us will remember, MR. Cameron announced in September, the UK will take 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years. 20,000. He also announced that these 20 thousands will be identified through UNHCR. So no Palestinians.

What can we do about all of this? We need to start of course with the basics. It sounds very cliché to talk about raising awareness but many people are simply not aware that there are Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria, let alone that they're suffering from a protection bias. With the view to try to turn this around, Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) is launching a new factsheet tonight, providing all kinds of information and summaries about Palestinian refugees from Syria. We're also trying to highlight the fact that the UK government's programme excludes Palestinians. We've launched a petition to the UK government, asking them to ensure that their response to the Syrian refugee crisis will also include Palestinians. You can find it online at [www.map-uk.org/syria](http://www.map-uk.org/syria) .

Unfortunately, in the meantime, we see the conditions of so many Palestinian refugees from Syria getting worse every day. While raising awareness may seem basic, I would say it really is a necessary step to ensure that Palestinian refugees from Syria can get the protection and the assistance they desperately need. Thank you.

## MAGDA QANDIL, Palestinian Refugees of Syria on the Balkan Route

*Magda Qandil connected via Skype from Serbia and described her encounters with Palestinian refugees from Syria across the Balkan route. Palestinian refugees from Syria are left with no solutions and are attempting the dangerous journeys to Europe through the Balkans in greater numbers. They often have to register as Syrians at borders, as Palestinians are not allowed to pass. She also discussed the situation in the Yarmouk camp.*

Hello everyone. I'm currently in Serbia. I've been working here for the last few months to report on the European refugee crisis. I have met many Syrians and many Palestinian refugees from Syria while working here and I think I can risk a statement. Palestinians from Syria are desperately overrepresented among the people leaving Syria but also overrepresented among those desperate enough to have no other solution but to take death boats from Turkey to Greece and to try to make through the Balkans to Europe. It's not the case anymore because as everyone knows the Balkan route has been closed recently, with the EU and Turkey deal.

However, there were many Palestinians taking this route, many Palestinians taking the boats. I think the reason behind this is because through the Syria war, through the complete destruction of the Palestinian communities in Syria, through the destruction, dispossession, displacement, Palestinians came to a very bitter realisation: that there is no solution for them in the Middle East. There is no hope. There is basically no solution. The gist of the Palestinians' vulnerability has already been covered by other speakers, so I will just reinforce the fact that they don't have the same rights, not only as any other people in this world, but they don't have the same rights as other vulnerable people leaving Syria and the Middle East right now.

They cannot cross borders, even within the Middle East. They are excluded from the international protection framework, especially from resettlement, which is part of the protection package of the UNHCR. They are also excluded from access to humanitarian assistance and protection inside Syria. Through all this, they came to the realisation that there is no solution for them. Through this realisation they are overrepresented in all the irregular, illegal channels to try to make it out of the Middle East.

There is a lot to say about the situation inside, especially in the Yarmouk camp. There is a lot to say about UN OCHA's verdict to remove Yarmouk from the list of besieged areas.

In proportion, Palestinians of Syria are only a small percentage of a population of 20 to 22 million people in Syria. If you look at the numbers, and there are no statistics, which is a big issue. If you look at people who are classified as Syrians,

I would say a very big proportion of them, probably half of the people coming over from Syria, are Palestinians, because of their desperation, because of how difficult the situation became for them. They are only a small percentage of the whole of the population of Syria, but within this crisis and in the Balkans, they've crossed in huge numbers, passing from Greece through the Balkans. This is what I meant by overrepresented. It just proves their vulnerability.

One of the dimensions of Palestinians passing through the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans, which is very important, is that in the initial period there was this regulation that only certain nationalities can pass, I mean Syrians, Iraqis and Afghanis. So in the first few months of the crisis here, Palestinians were actually not let through. They were very often getting stuck at the borders and this is very typical for Palestinians not to be able to cross borders. They would get stuck at the Greek-Macedonian border, the Macedonian-Serbian border and so on and so forth. This was resolved at the point when the Greeks, Macedonians, and Serbians started registering them as Syrians. As long as Palestinians from Syria can go by as Syrians, we can say they are sort of fine. When their true identity is established, they are not okay to cross any borders; they are not allowed to pass. Many Palestinians that I met in Serbia entered the country as Syrians. There is no mark; it is not registered anywhere that they are Palestinians, because otherwise they wouldn't be allowed to enter. It is very important to make this point, because it illustrates their vulnerability.

The situation in Yarmouk camp hasn't unfortunately improved or hasn't changed much. It's the same old siege that we all know. There are a few sorts of milestones in the history of the Syrian crisis, or during the Syrian war or revolution, whatever we call it. The first milestone was in December 2012 when the camp was attacked by government's forces, by the regime's planes. This has changed the situation of the camp in an irreversible way. Then, we have July 2013 when the siege started. These are the two key milestones. The third one is April 2015 when ISIS entered the camp. This is also the time when the camp started being bombarded by the Syrian regime.

This is the story of Yarmouk in the last few years in a few sentences. The situation hasn't change whatsoever. There has been very irregular access for the population of Yarmouk to food, very irregular access to drinkable water, almost no access to medical aid. The services that are inside have no availability of these basic services and they are not provided by UNRWA, as they should be. If provided, they are usually provided by local Palestinian humanitarian groups who were either formed during the crisis or existed before the crisis, before 2011. Many of them are short of aid or used to work in a different field before and with the onset of the crisis they became humanitarian organisations providing all these services as much as possible and as much as they can get access to the camp. However, it's only them providing a rushing humanitarian response; UNRWA is not providing anything in Yarmouk. So of course, the services are extremely irregular and the issue continues. There is very irregular access to food; people are dying because of starvation.

What is particularly horrible about this crisis is the lack of access to medical care. It's important that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people are dying not because of complicated diseases but they are dying because they don't have access to basic medicines, and services to address their needs. What was very shocking in this story was that at some point last year, I think in August, UNOCHA decided to remove Yarmouk from the list of besieged areas. The justification given for this was that UNRWA was able to provide food once. This food distribution happened only once in a particular area in Yarmouk and it's not happening anymore but the area was still removed from the list. The siege continues and there is no international response to it whatsoever.

## **Kathryn Ramsay, The Conditions of Palestinian Women of Syria in Lebanon**

*Kathryn Ramsay presented Amnesty International new report, 'I want a safe place': Refugee women from Syria uprooted and unprotected in Lebanon. The report included a number of Palestinian women from Syria. The women face issues of daily violence and harassment, which is heightened by the lack of support and the restrictions of movement due to expired permits.*

Thank you very much. I was asked to speak about Amnesty's recent report on the situation of refugee women from Syria living in Lebanon, which was published at the beginning of February and is available on our website. Amnesty has done a number of reports on the situation of refugees in Lebanon since the start of the crisis. In July 2014, there was a report on the restrictions that the government of Lebanon introduced on Palestinian refugees entering the country and the difficulties that they were starting to experience in renewing their residency permits. Other reports have focused on healthcare for refugees and in June 2015 there was another report, this time focusing on the restrictions that were introduced on Syrians entering Lebanon.

For this report looking at the situation of women, we wanted to make sure that the situation of Palestinian women was included throughout the report. In terms of the methodology, we made two visits to Lebanon in June and October 2015 and interviewed refugee women from Syria in Beirut, in Mount Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley and in the South. We also met with both UNHCR and with UNRWA. We also met with international NGOs working with refugees and national NGOs. We wrote to the government with our findings although unfortunately we didn't get a reply in time before the report was published. We spoke to Palestinians in Shatila and Mar Elias camps in Beirut. UNRWA says that there are around 44,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. UNRWA figures also show that about one third of the households of Palestinian refugees are headed by women. The figure for Syrian refugees is about one fifth. A larger proportion of Palestinian households are headed by women.





This report focuses on how a combination of factors puts refugee women from Syria at risk of gender-based violence and harassment. The reasons for this combination are that the lack of international support for refugees in Lebanon has led to a worsening of the economic conditions. Combined with the tighter restrictions introduced by the government of Lebanon leaves refugee women in particular at risk of violence. For residence permits, as it has already been mentioned, the government introduced restrictions on Palestinians entering the country in 2014. From around May 2014, it became more and more difficult for Palestinian refugees from Syria to renew their residency permits in Lebanon. A study cited by UNRWA gave figures that in March 2015, 85% of Palestinian refugees from Syria had expired residency permits. Another 12% was due to expire in April 2015. When we interviewed Palestinian refugee women, only 2 of them had a valid residency permit; one of them was due to expire one week after we talked to her and the other was valid until the end of December.

So, virtually all of the Palestinians currently in Lebanon do not have a valid residency permit. Why is this important? It's important because the consequences include a risk of being detained and deported if your family is found without valid documents. The Lebanese government says that they do not deport people to Syria at the moment, but the risk is there and the consequences are that people restrict their daily movements. The women that we spoke to were afraid to go out anywhere where they had to show their papers. This applied to Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria.

Refugees living in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon were very wary about leaving the camps, because they were afraid of getting stopped at the checkpoints and asked for their documents. For women, this fear of having

anything to do with the authorities because you don't have a valid residency permit, means that women are unable or unwilling to report any cases of violence or harassment that they experienced. They cannot seek the protection of the authorities because they are afraid of the consequences of not having a valid residency permit. UNRWA has a shortage of financial resources for supporting Palestinian refugees from Syria.

The UN relief effort as a whole was chronically underfunded in 2015. Overall, the UN appeal for refugees from Syria in Lebanon only received 57% of its funds by the end of 2015. For UNRWA, the consequences meant that they had to reduce the amount of money that they provided per person each month for food and they stopped altogether the US\$100 dollars per family that they used to provide for housing support. For Palestinian refugees from Syria, this meant that they had increasingly difficult financial situations. UNRWA's study said that its system is the primary source of income for 98% of refugees. So when that assistance gets cut, you can see immediately that that's going to have a huge impact.

Palestinian women that we talked to spoke about the difficulties they faced. They talked about how UNRWA's support was totally inadequate. Many of the women we met were working informally, but they were paid extremely low wages. Several of them said that employers are taking advantage of the fact that they know that Palestinian refugees are in economic need, so therefore they will offer them incredibly low wages, knowing that they will have to accept them because they have no other alternatives. Pretty much everyone knows that Palestinian refugees from Syria don't have valid residency permits, so they take advantage of that as well, they know that they can't go to complain.

One woman told us how one of her daughters worked in a shop and the manager sexually harassed her. She said that now she won't let any of her daughters work, but this means that the economic situation of the family has got a lot worse because they don't have any income coming in from those daughters.

With the cuts to the housing support, paying rent has become a huge problem for refugees and particularly for Palestinian refugees from Syria. The average rent is US\$257 dollars a month, according to UNRWA, and in Beirut it's more expensive. Palestinian women told Amnesty about their landlords asking for increases in the rent without any warning. One woman said that all of her family was thrown out of the house when they were 4 days late in paying the rent and they had to go and stay with some friends until they could find somewhere else. Although evictions are not in line with Lebanese law, without a valid residency permit they feel that they can't go and complain about it.

The women we spoke to were all very certain that they wanted their situation to be known by the world. Given that the experience of Palestinian refugees from Syria and particularly of Palestinian women is not very well known, I'd like to share some of their stories.

We talked to a woman who told us about an incident that happened to her on a bus. She was coming back to Beirut with her daughters; her eldest daughter was 16. The bus was quite empty; there was the driver and one other person, and her and her daughters. When the driver took out a gun and started making it clear that he wanted something sexual from her. Her daughter was terrified. She kept saying, "Yes, whatever you like" and to be very nice to him and gave him her phone number just so that she could get herself and her daughters off the bus, which she managed. She was so angry that she went to the police station to try to report it. They refused to take her report because she didn't have a valid residency permit.

Another woman told us how at the time that the government changed and increased the restrictions on Palestinians from Syria being able to travel back to Syria and come back to Lebanon. Her mother had gone back to Syria to get some documents and she got stuck at the border. She couldn't get back because the rules had changed. This young woman called one of the officials that she had dealt with in the past at the General Security office and he said, "Yes, I can help but you have to come to Jounieh - a town up the coast - with me". She just said, "Ok, well, I don't want your help."

This kind of help in exchange for something else is happening more and more to refugee women as their situation gets worse and worse. She also told us about how her lifestyle had changed. She couldn't go out with her friends anymore; she had to change the way she dressed, changed the way she does her hair. When she comes back, if she comes back at 8 at night, there are men who are harassing her on the way home.

The feeling that we got from the women that we spoke to is that they are completely stuck. Survival in Lebanon is becoming more and more difficult but there are very few options. They really feel the differences between their situation and the situation of Syrian refugees. They feel and they see the fact that UNHCR provides more support and that for Syrian refugees there is the possibility of resettlement, however small that possibility is, however few resettlement places have been offered to Syrian refugees by countries around the world. Palestinians know that they are excluded from that.

The report makes a number of recommendations both to the international community and to the government of Lebanon. For the international community, increasing the funding for the refugee crisis in the host countries is essential as is increasing resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admissions for all refugees from Syria, including Palestinians. For the Lebanese government, to lift the restrictions on the residency permits to ensure that it is no so expensive and so bureaucratically complicated that nobody can renew their residency permits; to facilitate those renewals. Also to ensure that any woman, whether she is Lebanese, Syrian, or Palestinian, who experiences gender-based violence can go and report that to the authorities and be assured of an effective investigation.

## Questions and Answers

*The Q&A session was introduced by Tommy Shappard. The following questions have been summarized.*

**Question 1:** a member of the Teachers' Union raised the question of refugee children and education, as well as of the responsibility for the siege of Yarmouk.

**Question 2:** Baroness Jenny Tonge asked about the reason why only one fifth of Syrian refugee households are headed by women compared to one third of Palestinian refugee households.

**Question 3** asked for clarification on residency permits in Lebanon for refugees from Syria.

**Question 4:** a Palestinian refugee who lived in the Yarmouk camp in Syria talked about his experience. He reached the UK through the Balkan route and Calais. Palestinians face discrimination when crossing borders as Palestine is not recognised as a state. Palestinian refugees who reach Europe face more difficulties when applying for asylum than Syrian refugees.

**Question 5:** a PhD student at SOAS on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon specified that the issues that the refugees face in Lebanon are not new and that Lebanon cannot cope with the amount of refugees because of the limited resources;

**Question 6:** stressed that Israel has not taken any refugees and although there is a lot of pressure on other countries, there hasn't been any discussion about Israel taking more refugees;

**Question 7:** pointed about the relations of Palestinians with host countries

*Key points that were raised by the speakers in response to the questions above:*

- Lebanon has a population of just over 4 million citizens and has taken 1 million refugees from Syria and the number is rising;
- The West has taken very few refugees by comparisons;
- Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon are often left behind by their husbands, who try to reach Europe to seek for a better life and seek for family reunification if successful;
- Something needs to happen in the UK to help Palestinian refugees who claim asylum here;
- Palestinian refugees are incredibly resilient and determinate, in contrast to

the media's representations of refugees as 'helpless victims';

- The need is for a comprehensible international response to the crisis;
- The issue lies in Israel and its denial of international law, including its denial of the right of return for the Palestinian refugees. This is their right as embedded in international law.

## Conclusions

- Palestinian refugees from Syria face discrimination and reduced rights in other countries because of their identity as Palestinians;
- Western states should ensure that Palestinian refugees from Syria are included in the resettlement and other humanitarian programmes to admit refugees to third countries. This resettlement should be temporary until those refugees are granted their right of return to their homes and villages in occupied Palestine.
- Western states should assist Lebanon and offer more resettlement for all refugees from Syria;
- Western governments should continue to donate to UNRWA to allow it to provide its services to Palestinian refugees in the Middle East;
- Israel should abide by international law and allow the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes from which they were displaced;
- The international community should raise awareness of the issues faced by the Palestinian refugees and pressure their governments to take action.







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