

THE PLIGHT OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEES FROM IRAQ AND THEIR FUTURE SETTLEMENT

Report on the Parliamentarian Delegation to Syria

From 31st October to 3rd November 2009



The Palestinian Return Centre - PRC

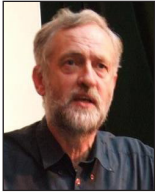
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Forward



I am very proud to present the report of the parliamentary delegation to Syria to address the plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq. This is part of our ongoing effort to address the many different challenges facing Palestinian refugees since their expulsion from their land in Palestine.

I am extremely grateful to the Syrian Ambassador, his Excellency Dr. Sami Khiyami, for facilitating this delegation. I am also grateful to Lord Sheikh Mohamed for leading the delegation and all other members of the delegation for their time and effort. Without their concern and initiative this would not have been possible.

In a year when we are marking UNRWAs 60th anniversary with the international community, this report provides great insight into the true reality facing Palestinian refugees and UNRWAs positive contribution in the region over the past six decades.

Palestinian refugees face many difficult challenges around the world. The failure of the international community to implement international law guaranteeing basic human rights of refugees has been tragic for Palestinians. This can be seen vividly in this report which is a microcosm of the life of Palestinian refugees.

We are working in collaboration with a number of institutions towards a resettlement plan that guarantees the right of return for the Five Thousand refugees that are stranded in the borders between Syria and Iraq.

The report provides a good summary of the background to the problem at hand. It cogently describes the situation in the camps and the broader effort towards a solution. It further makes sensible recommendations to all the different authorities that are crucial for the success of this mission.

I thank everyone involved in producing this report especially the delegates for taking time out of their busy schedule in providing their feedback.

Majed Al Zeer

General Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Challenge

For many Palestinians the tragic events of the 1948 Nakba - catastrophe - is not bound by time and space as new cycles of violent expulsion and dispossession follow them everywhere. The fate of the 34,000¹ Palestinian refugees in Iraq can be added to the many tragic stories relating the plight of Palestinian refugees. On the border between Iraq/Jordan and Iraq/Syria, there now live hundreds of Palestinian families, who fled the US war to now find themselves stranded in no-mans land. These families live in tents, in squalor, with little certainty or hope for the future, like their parents and grandparents did after their expulsion from their own homeland in the 1948 Nakba.

Palestinian refugees are amongst the most vulnerable population in Iraq. Unlike their fellow Palestinians who became refugees in other neighboring countries, Palestinians in Iraq experienced a more precarious existence. There were no international institutions or organizations, such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), to care for them in Iraq.

Their situation changed more dramatically following the invasion of the US-led coalition in 2003. In the wanton sectarian violence that followed, Palestinians became amongst the worst affected when they were systematically targeted by extremist militia groups. Due to their insecure status in the country, they were vulnerable to human rights abuses including murder, abduction, hostage-taking, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment. Many incidents were reported of Palestinians who were assassinated and their bodies were dumped at garbage sites bearing torture wounds and mutilation. They have no country to go to, no valid travel documents, no protectors inside Iraq and no forthcoming support from outside.

Neighboring Arab countries, which are already overwhelmed by refugees, are reluctant to allow these new refugees into their country. With nowhere to go they are stranded in several different camps, Al-Hol, Al-Tanaf and Al-Walid, which are all coordinated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with support from UNRWA. Conditions are terrible, with inadequate medical and sanitation facilities.

Our Response

The Palestinian Return Centre (PRC) has been diligently observing the plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq. Its director, Majed Al-Zeer, visited the camps in August 2009 in an effort to ease their terrible situation and he also visited the communities in Cyprus where some refugees have been temporarily relocated.



1) May 26, 2004 (estimating the Palestinian refugee population of Iraq at between 34,000 and 42,000). Prior to the 2003 conflict, estimates of the Palestinian refugee population in Iraq varied from 34,000 to over 90,000. See U.S. Committee for Refugees, Iraq Country Report 2002 (estimating 34,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq), and Palestinian Refugees in Iraq, Department of Refugee Affairs, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1999 (estimating 92,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq). A post-2003 war registration campaign by UNHCR, conducted in 2003, registered 23,000 Palestinian refugees in Baghdad, but acknowledged that the actual population of Palestinian refugees in Iraq was substantially higher.

Building on this initial momentum, between 31st October and 3rd November 2009, PRC co-ordinated a delegation to Syria with a determination to improve and possibly end the plight of 5,000² Palestinian refugees from Iraq. The cross party delegation consisted of parliamentarians from major parties in the UK and Ireland.

In a year in which the PRC, with the international community, is commemorating sixty years of UNRWA's service to the Palestinian refugees, this was a great opportunity to witness the tremendous work carried out by UNRWA and to develop a strategy for Palestinian refugees from Iraq to be incorporated fully under its mandate. The delegation was also an opportunity to realize the growing need for UNRWA to widen its services to include protection and resettlement for all Palestinian refugees, including those from Iraq, under international law.

The delegation was clear in its primary objective which was to seek a temporary resettlement plan with the collaboration of all international stakeholders concerned. This was pursued with the assumption and recognition that the final resolution to the Palestinian refugee's crises, including those from Iraq, would be achieved through insuring the basic human right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Palestine from where they were expelled.

With the extreme politicization of any mission related to Palestinians and Palestine it was imperative for the delegation to communicate its humanitarian message to all stakeholders, especially to the Syrian Government. It was also clear that any solution required the good will of the Syrian President who it was hoped would resolve the crises by permitting the refugees from Iraq to be relocated to Syria.



2) The numbers vary considerably as refuge numbers change regularly and also because some are resettled in different countries around the world. This figure includes those from Al-Tanaf camp, Al-Waled camp and Al-Hol Camp as well as those who are not registered in those sites but are assumed to be along the borders according to UNHCR



Strategy

In pursuit of the primary goal, which is to relocate the Palestinian refugees from Iraq into neighboring Arab countries, the delegation undertook a number of intermediary steps to gather facts about the situation. We also needed to look at the feasibility of such a relocation. As part of our fact finding mission we visited Al-Tanaf refugee camp, which hosts Palestinian refugees from Iraq. We also visited refugee camps in Syria that have housed refugees and their descendents since 1948.



The delegation was acutely aware of the need to provide very short term relief as any future plans for their relocation would no doubt take time. It was hoped that the visit to Al-Tanaf would provide the breadth of knowledge needed to understand the full scale of the problem. Through visiting existing refugee camps in Syria, it was also hoped that the delegation would learn of the services provided by UNRWA and be able to present a resolute case for it to incorporate the new refugees from Iraq.

A meeting with the Syrian President was arranged with the hope of getting agreement on a viable solution. The viability of relocating the refugees inside Syria was discussed with great candidness. The President provided conditional support for relocation on the proviso that UNRWA took on the responsibility and also if the international community offered enough funds for the development of an infrastructure to support the new refugees. The opportunity to speak on wider political issues was not missed and the delegation raised a number of related issues, including Iraqi Invasion and the Role of the European Union.

Another major pillar that was vital to the mission was to speak to UNHCR in Syria and find ways to support their existing work but, more importantly, to discuss potential for raising capital from the international community in order to fund the project.

The framework driving this mission is based on the normative standards of international law, the charter of the United Nations and the International Human Rights Law, all of which recognize the inviolability of the right of return. The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirm that;

- a) Everyone has the right to a nationality;
- b) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality³

The 1951 Refugee Convention also stipulates that refugees should not be returned to a country where he or she fears persecution⁴.



3) Article 15 of UN Declaration of Human Rights
4) <http://www2.ohchr.org/English/law/refugees.htm>

Chapter 1

I. Historical Background

Palestinian refugees constitute the world's largest and longest standing refugee population. They have virtually no prospect, in the foreseeable future, of being allowed to return to the lands and homes they were forced to flee when they were expelled from what is now Israel and the Israeli-Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), even though they have a well-established right to return under international law. Their plight is felt in many countries and continents, some more desperate than others.

In the six decades of forceful displacement which followed, the unpredictable and changing nature of the Middle East has continually threatened their safety and security. The plight of Palestinians in Iraq, which over the years has been rather muted, is now coming to the surface.

Iraq, like many other Arab countries, housed a significant number of Palestinian refugees that were displaced during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Although exact figures are not available, it is estimated, by official authorities such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR), that there were 34,000 Palestinian refugees living in Iraq in 2003.

The composition of the refugees, most of who lived in Bagdad, reflects the uniquely precarious characteristics of Palestinian refugees in general. Palestinian refugees in Iraq include those who fled the war in 1948 and in 1967 but also those who were expelled from other Gulf States during the 1991 Gulf War.

Unlike other Arabs states - Jordan, Syria, Lebanon- Iraq did not sign an agreement with UNRWA, established in 1949, preferring instead to address the assistance needs of the Palestinian refugees itself. This decision has greatly increased the uncertainty and insecurity which Palestinian refugees in Iraq now feel.



Their status during the following decades was, relative to other Palestinians in the region, good but by no means trouble free and uncomplicated. They were issued with travel documents, had the right to work, granted full access to health, education and other government services as well as to government-owned housing or a fixed rent charge on apartments. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of wars, the Palestinians face a life of growing threat and insecurity.



Their situation became extremely perilous due to the pariah status of Saddam's regime during the 1990s. With the crippling of Iraq's economy in the 90s, the government put a freeze on rents that were being paid for Palestinian refugees, which drastically reduced their already low standard of life.

II. Situation After 2003

Palestinian refugees in Iraq became the targets of violence, harassment, and forceful eviction from their homes soon after the Iraqi government fell to U.S.-led forces in 2003. The 13,000⁵ Palestinians who are still in Iraq, including those in camps near the border with Syria, are in legal limbo, as they do not fall strictly under the mandate of UNRWA and nor do they have Iraqi citizenship. They are recognized as refugees by UNHCR. However, few countries in the region or beyond are willing to accept them for resettlement. So far, the Iraqi government and the Multi National Force (MNF) have failed to provide them with adequate protection.

Expulsion of Palestinian refugees from their homes began almost as soon as the U.S.-led invasion began. In many cases, landlords expelled their Palestinian tenants while in other cases armed militias attempted to expel Palestinians from government-subsidized homes in order to seize the homes for themselves.

Iraqi Palestinians whom Human Rights Watch interviewed in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Saddam Hussein government in 2003 complained of attacks on their homes, threats, and other forms of harassment⁶.



5) <http://al-awdacal.org/iraq-facts.html>

6) Human Rights Watch Volume 18, No 4(E) September 2006. Nowhere to Flee The Perilous situation of Palestinians in Iraq

Where previously Palestinian refugees in Iraq had little trouble obtaining and maintaining their residency status, the Ministry of Interior ordered Palestinian refugees to obtain short-term residency permits, treating them as non-resident foreigners instead of recognized refugees. The residency requirements are onerous, requiring Palestinian refugees to bring all members of their families to Ministry of Interior offices to renew the permits, which can take days or even weeks, and the new permits are only valid for one to two months.

Almost all are believed to want to leave the country because of the precarious security situation. Members of this group are especially vulnerable to human rights abuses, including murder, abduction, hostage-taking, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment. Thousands are believed to have left Iraq with forged Iraqi passports, but the whereabouts of most is unknown. A few have apparently been to UNHCR offices, especially in Asian countries, to seek assistance.

Those who were not able to flee have found themselves in three separate refugee camps on the borders of Syria and Iraq. These camps are coordinated by UNHCR. The conditions facing them are extremely depressing. The tented camp in the desert is overcrowded and many people are suffering from various illnesses. The nearest hospital is in al-Qa'im, four hours away by car, and the road runs through areas where armed groups regularly carry out attacks. There are no schools and all other essential services are minimal.

According to the UNHCR, about 21,000 have left the country since 2003, and only 10,000 to 15,000⁷ remain. A number of Palestinians who were forced to leave are now stranded in refugee camps on the Syrian and Iraqi borders.

7) <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,UNPRESS,,PSE,4562d8cf2,489970c51,0.html>



Chapter 2

I. Visit to Al-Tanaf Refugee Camp

Getting firsthand experience of the dire conditions of life in the camps was very important for reaching the goals which the delegation set itself. This experience would not only allow the delegation to raise specific concerns with the relevant authorities in providing for immediate needs but also to state our case for a long term settlement plan.

Details of Al-Tanaf

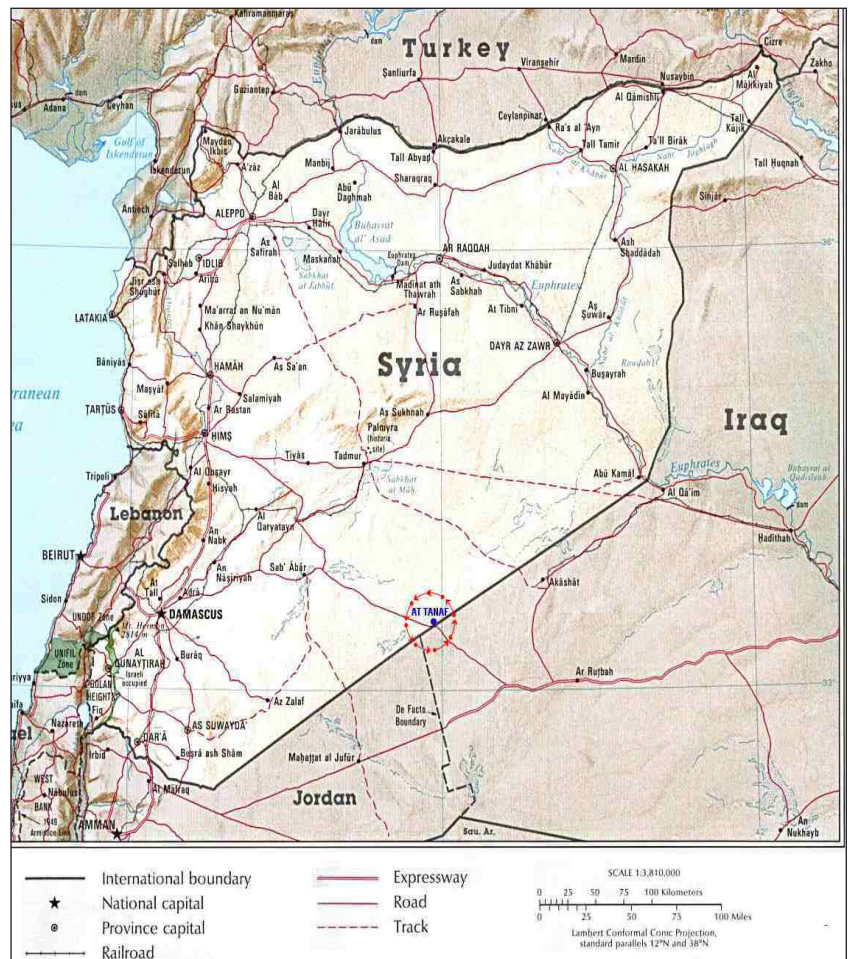
Al-Tanaf camp is located in the south eastern side of Syria, between the border posts with Iraq and in an area of about five kilometres of no-man's land. The camp, 110 miles from Damascus, shelters 630⁸ Palestinian refugees from Iraq. The narrow strip of land, wedged between a concrete wall and the

main transit road from Baghdad to Damascus, is dry and dusty. Temperatures soar to 50c in summer and plunge to below freezing in winter. Overcrowded tents are the only protection from the heat, the snow and the blinding sandstorms.

The immediate impression when visiting Al-Tanaf is its distance from any major towns. From Damascus, it takes nearly four hours to reach the camps. This no doubt creates major problems for a camp which comprises many children, women and the elderly. Within the camp, it was obvious that the refugees are not secure from the elements which, given its location, were invariably extreme; there is no escape from the desert heat, nor is there a relief from the extreme desert cold and when it rains there is no defense against flooding.

Danger, we were told, is everywhere, especially for children. Heating and cooking systems, which often burn kerosene, regularly cause fires that destroy tents. There are major hazards all over the camp all of which have affected one family or another. On one occasion the mother of a one year child, Muhamed, whom we met, died as a result of a fire that started in the camp. Residents also spoke of the dangers presented by snakes, spiders and scorpions. They further mentioned the dangers presented by the lack of light and the very uneven walking surface which caused mothers to drop their babies.

The people in Al-Tanaf are gravely distressed by the conditions in the camp and by the fear that they may be stuck there for many more years. Residents pleaded with the delegates saying "save us from this hell", others made striking and poignant observations of their plight: "A human being doesn't live just to eat." Another said: "We regret that our plight depends on political decisions rather than humanitarian considerations."



8) The number of refugees in Tanaf changes frequently. This is the latest figure we obtained from the camp committee

Fleeing violence and Persecution in Iraq

Most of the inhabitants of the camp have arrived from different parts of Baghdad after harrowing tales of terror and intimidation. Many of the camps residents described to us the horrific events that prompted them to flee Iraq and have left them traumatized. Some had been kidnapped and tortured. Others had relatives who had been abducted, mutilated and killed. Others spoke of armed militia cutting off ears, gouging out eyes, pouring acid over the heads of captives.

Basit Muhammed, a 46 year old Palestinian man is a typical example of the camps residents. He was born in Baghdad in an area where he claims that, after 2003, 350 Palestinians were killed. When asked why he left Baghdad, he spoke of the militias and the drive to cleanse Iraq of its Palestinian residents.

Everyone we meet in the camp had harrowing stories about their initial expulsion from Iraq. While many had terrible experiences in the camps it was clear that the psychological strain of coming to terms with their violent persecution in Iraq and their new reality was the most shattering. One could have assumed that the Palestinians that were targeted and driven out of Iraq were poor but the story of Sheikh Muhamed, the imam of the camp mosque, shows that violence in Iraq was indiscriminate and no Palestinians, irrespective of their social class and standing, were safe.

Sheikh, a refugee since 1948, was an accountant for an import export company from 1958-2005. He described how his two sons were hanged and shot by militias because they were Palestinians. Even though he owned his own home he was driven out with the remaining members of his family. He said 'every family in this camp was driven out and someone in each family was either killed or was threatened to be killed'.

The Sheikh's friend also mentioned that 'in Iraq, all the Palestinians are facing grave threats. There are still 10,000 Palestinians in Iraq and they are in danger because they cannot afford to leave the country. The women go secretly to the markets to buy the essentials as any men caught would be killed. Palestinians are also changing their names to hide their identity'.



Access to Services

UNHCR is the main agency helping refugees fleeing Iraq and provides food, water and fuel to those at Al-Tanaf. UNHCR staff in Syria visit the camp daily. UNRWA provides basic health, education and social services. Other UN agencies have also assisted Al-Tanaf, including UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, which has set up a child-friendly space for the camp's children. Some of the refugees are employed by UNHCR from whom they receive a salary of 80 dollars a month for the upkeep and maintenance of the camp. Some are also teachers, with degrees, at the school in the camp, where they are teaching two hundred or more children.

The refugees gave a favorable impression of the food supplies that come into the camps. Everyday 90,000 liters of water is brought into the camps and food is supplied once a week with a one month supply kept in storage. The red water barrels spread across the camp sometimes freeze due to the extreme cold in winter times and milk is never enough which is a major issue for mothers with new born babies.

Basic medical care is provided in Al-Tanaf, but people needing emergency treatment are taken to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society hospital in the Syrian capital, Damascus. A male doctor visits the camp once a week and a female doctor visits the camp once a month which puts greater strain on the female residents.

There was no provision for obstetric care in the camp and women nearing their time of delivery were encouraged to leave their families and undertake the 4 hour trip to Damascus to await the birth of their baby. The women recognized the necessity for this but were distressed nevertheless to have to go so far away from their other children.

The women were remarkable for their cheerfulness and determination to work together to do the best for their families.

Existing settlement plans

UNHCR has successfully secured resettlement for a number of refugees. Sheikh, the imam of the mosque we met, was amongst the groups of people whose temporary settlement had been arranged. He was given permission to enter Italy while two of his brothers had gone to Canada and one to the UK. It was clear that one of the strains of relocation is the separation of the family. This is a situation which is beyond their control. Whilst there were refugees relocated in various parts of the world there was no holistic solution to resolve their problem. The delegation was told that Finland admitted 50, Italy 168, Sweden 147, and the UK admitted 50.



II. Visit to Refugee Camps in Syria

Syria has hosted Palestinian refugees since 1948. Currently there are nine refugee camps with a registered refugee population of 461,897 of which 125,009 live in actual camps⁹. The delegation visited Khan Dunoun, which has a population of 9,788, and Sbeineh camp, which hosts another 21,210¹⁰.

Visiting these camps provided the means to gauge the situation of refugees in Syria where it was hoped the new refugees from Iraq could also be settled. It was also a means to understanding the wider ramifications of the Nakba and its affect on the Palestinian refugees.



Memories of Expulsion

The delegation to Khan Dunoun was hosted by Mr Mahmud, who became a refugee in 1948. He spoke of how he and his family were expelled from Salihya which is located in the northern part of Palestine. He said soldiers came and killed people in his village and destroyed their farms and threatened them to leave.

All the Palestinian refugees in the camps shared his shattering loss during their expulsion in 1948. The day of the visit, 2nd November 2009, also marked the anniversary of the Balfour declaration, a poignant reminder of their plight which they all wanted to share with the delegation. This date, for Palestinians, marked the beginning of their road to exile which all the refugees we met spoke of passionately. There was a palpable sense that Britain still shares a great responsibility and one of the ways for Britain to begin a process of redemption was to support the plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq who have suffered doubly from British miscalculations.

Double Standards in applying the Right of Return

Residents of the camps further mentioned how the memories of the Nakba are deeply entrenched in the Palestinian community and how it was intensely unfair to deprive them of their right of return when Israel, in its law of return, claims the right for all Jews to return to Israel even though no single Jew has any memories of their expulsion, which happened thousands of years ago.

In Sbeineh camp a group of refugees from the Nakba spoke of the great injustice done to them and their people who were forced out of Palestine to make way for people who have no physical connection with Palestine.

All the Palestinian refugees in Syria, when asked about the Palestinian refugees from Iraq, greatly lamented their plight and said they are willing to vacate their own homes



9) <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/index.html>

10) <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/syria.html>

to accommodate them. They further bewailed the fact that the Arab regimes have not come out to help the new refugees from Iraq, many of whom have now been displaced two or three times in their life.

Gratitude to Syria

Mr Mahmud, one of the residents in the refugee camps in Syria, spoke about the hospitality of the Syrian regime and the great kindness shown to the Palestinian refugees. He said 'we are equally treated, there are equal opportunities, and inter marriages between Palestinians and Syrians'.

Like Mr Mahmud in Khan Danoun, Abu Fuad, a resident of Sbineh, spoke of the struggles and limitations of living in the camps but still maintained his gratitude towards the Syrian Government for their kindness. One of his major complaints was that work was scarce and that they could not get jobs with UNRWA which paid better than other jobs in the area.

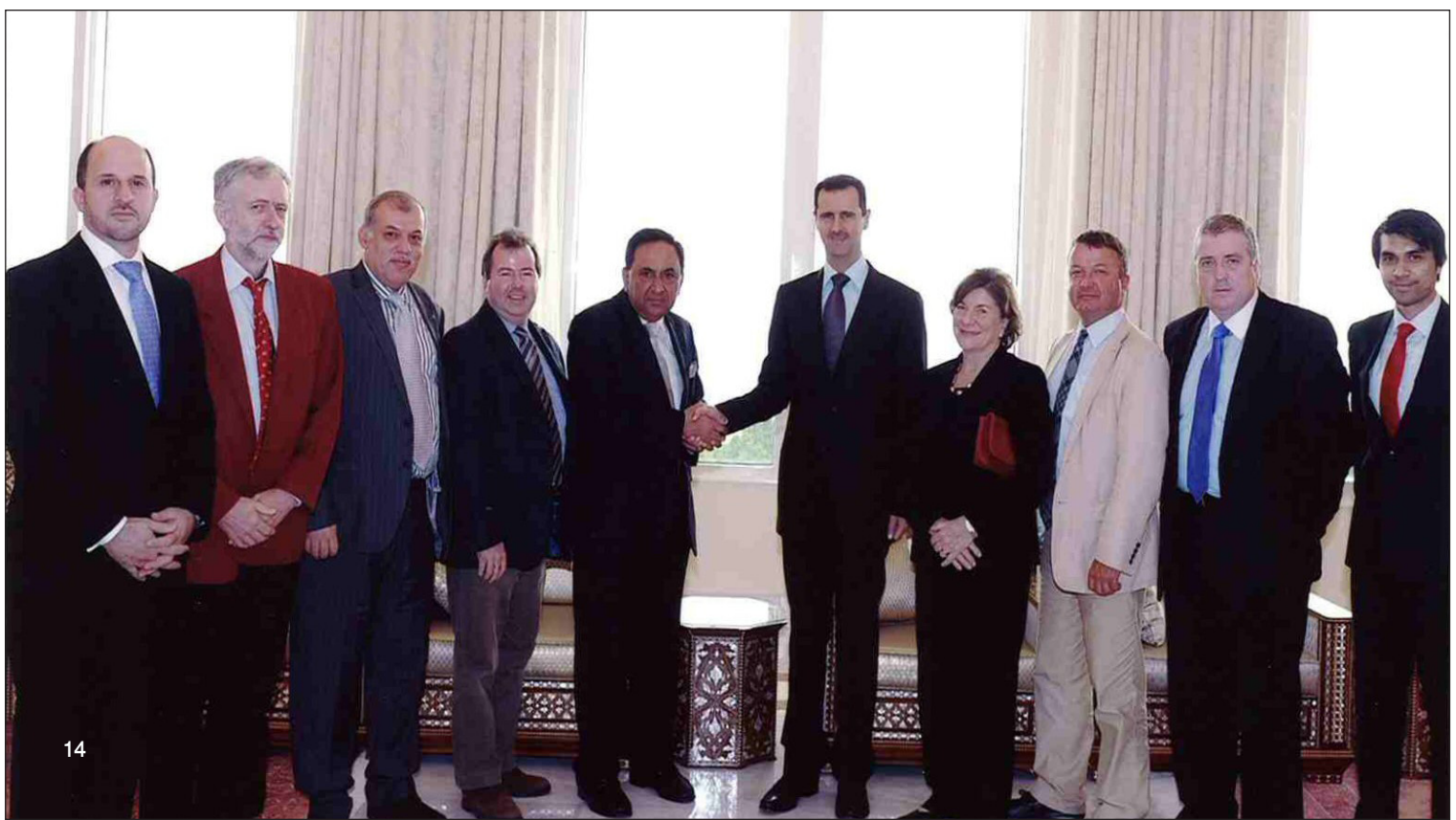
Concerns over health care

The residents mentioned that one of their major concerns was healthcare and water, both of which were insufficient to meet the growing needs of the refugee community.

Observing their living standards and gauging from their mood it was obvious that UNRWA has done a tremendous job in a very challenging situation. It was also obvious that through UNRWA and the support of the international community the refugees from Iraq could also be relocated in Syria or other Arab countries.

Support for Palestinian refugees

The delegation affirmed their mission and emphasized that the Palestinian refugees had many friends around the world, people who know their basic human rights and are fighting for them. The sentiment that peace without justice does not and cannot create lasting peace was expressed and that a key component of justice for Palestine included the rights of Palestinian refugees.



III. Meeting with President Asad

The delegation, led by Lord Sheik Mohamed, stated the humanitarian nature of the visit. Syria's treatment of Palestinian refugees since the Nakba was highly praised and the President's assistance was requested in working towards a solution for the Palestinian refugees from Iraq.

Refugees from Iraq

President Asad affirmed the Syrian government's position that camps - by which he meant tented accommodation- are not acceptable in Syria and he was already looking for ways to accommodate the refugees within Syria with the support of UNRWA and the international community. He spoke at great length about the need to develop proper institutions before the refugees can be accommodated. He said 'if the beginning is good the end will also be good', pointing out that unless a proper and reasonable climate and infrastructure is created, simply bringing the refugees into the country will harm the country's security.

He shared his fears about crime and terrorism, which are both symptoms of illiteracy, broken communities and a sense of hopelessness. '5,000 refugees are 5,000 unemployed' he said, which amounts to greater pressure on Syria and more tension on the streets. 'In principal, they can enter and live in the country like any other Palestinian refugee, it's a matter of infrastructure' he said.

UNRWA and development of Infrastructure

He stressed the importance of giving UNRWA primary responsibility for the daily needs of the refugees as it has been successfully doing for over six decades. He pointed to the fact that UNRWA was a constant in the region and has very good institutions, techniques and expertise to deal with the daily needs of the refugees.

In developing the infrastructure he spoke of his regret that wealthier states are not doing more to help the refugees. Although the most ideal solution is to return to Palestine, with the current impasse in the peace process this is not feasible and other nations have a moral responsibility to support these refugees. He mentioned with praise Arab nations that have shown willingness to take some of the refugees and he also mentioned those that have not lived up to their moral responsibility towards their neighbors.

Regional Politics

The chance to speak on broader issues pertaining to politics in the Middle East was not missed. President Asad spoke of the 'opportunity called Obama'. He recognized the positive impact of Obama but also pointed to the neutralization of this impact by the new right wing government in Israel. 'If the peace process moves without the approval of Leiberman it will fail'. He further stressed that the obstacles faced by Obama are internal and Obama hasn't found a way to lead major institutions with him to support his vision of the Middle East. 'We can help Obama' he said, 'but his internal success is vital for his external success'.

He pointed to Hamas' moderation after their 2006 election success when they agreed to accept a

Palestinian state based on 1967 borders which implicitly gave recognition to Israel. He also stressed that Khalid Meshal, Hamas' leader, accepts a two state solution, but the western media continues to play into the hands of extremists and prevent discussion on core issues.

The president also warned that each generation was becoming more radical than the previous. At present there is no partner for peace in Israel. Even the US, as the latest diplomatic efforts have shown, is unable to wield its authority over Israel's building of settlements which, as everyone in the world knows, is against international law. Instead of making Israel accept this demand, the demand is now dropped with a ruse that it is not a precondition to talks in the peace process.

The delegation shared its grave concern over Israel's total monopoly of water in the region and President Asad shared his fear that this could be a seed for future wars and a fair solution needed to be on the table. Syria, he pointed out, was doing its utmost by giving water for free from time to time to the people in the occupied West Bank.

Iraqi Invasion

On Iraq, he remonstrated that the 2003 occupation, which he was totally against, was very badly conceived. It was also pointed out that anyone who knows the region knows very well the combustible nature of Iraq and that Palestinians, being an unprotected minority, would always be in a situation of grave danger. 'Britain, with its knowledge of Iraq, should have known better than to have invaded Iraq'. The sectarian strife has led to mass displacement of around one million people, which includes the Palestinians.

His advice on how to solve the problems in the Middle East was perspicacious and refreshing. 'The money spent on war and invasion would have been far better spent on education, dialogue and an exchange of culture'. The invasion of Iraq and other wars of our time are not protecting civilization; if protection of civilization was the ultimate goal there are far better ways to do this than war.

Role of EU and wider relations

The President also bemoaned the fact that under Blair's leadership the UK was only following US foreign policy in the Middle East. The question now was whether the EU wants to play a more crucial role with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. The EU has to decide wheatear it is just an observer or a player given its greater role. 'For the past fifteen years we've had only diplomats and no policy from the EU and that has been a huge obstacle in moving forward. The solution to the Middle East and, in particular, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is not to say this is a good president and this is a bad president, and base relationships on such whimsical grounds. It requires real determination and seriousness to foster dialogue and more peaceful relations'



IV. Meeting with UNHCR

The delegation's meeting with the Director of UNHCR in Syria was crucial to the goals of the mission. UNHCR has been in charge of all the Palestinian refugees from Iraq and, from what the delegation witnessed in the camp, they have been doing a tremendous job with limited resources and a lack of support. One of their employees, Mutassim, visits Al-Tanaf camp three times a week, every week. Considering that it is an eight hour journey to the camps and back, this is a remarkable show of sacrifice and dedication.



Immediate concerns and relocation

The delegation raised concerns about immediate problems and also future settlement plans. It was surprised to learn that Al-Tanaf camp is scheduled to be closed by the 1st of December 2009 with the refugees being relocated in Al-Hol camp. This was an important piece of information that needed to be shared with the refugees in Al-Tanaf, who were clearly unaware of their imminent relocation to another refugee camp, instead of the long term resettlement that they were all hoping for.

The breakdown of the numbers of refugees being transferred to different parts of the world was provided at which point the delegation raised the issue of family separation. This was an issue which was discovered first hand in the camps where close family units were being separated. It emerged that as each country decides who to allow into their borders as refugees, they all apply different definitions of a family. This is obviously inhumane, especially when, as we saw in one camp, a father is separated from his 19 year old daughter who, because a country decided that a 19 year old and their parents do not comprise a family unit. Such policies demonstrated a tremendous lack of basic knowledge and understanding of the Palestinian family unit, especially with respect to daughters.

UNHCR informed the delegation that it was aware of this problem and it was appealing. It advocated that host countries needed to expand their definition of family and this has prevented greater separation where possible. Italy, we were informed, accepted a further 172 families and Sweden had agreed to take an unqualified number.

Traumatized refugees

UNHCR confirmed many of our findings and also provided further information which greatly helped in strategizing. They confirmed that none of the Palestinian refugees are intending to return to Iraq even though many had lived there for 60 years. They also confirmed our finding that a vast number of refugees are heavily traumatized.



Long Term Settlement

The delegation discussed its fears that Al-Tanaf and other refugee camps should not turn into a revolving door where refugees enter and exit several times over. The President's tentative offer to relocate the refugees in Syria, with the proviso that UNRWA and the international community take on the burden and develop all necessary infrastructures, was raised.

Discussions developed into outlining a long term settlement which was slowly emerging. UNHCR estimated that resettlement of the 5,000 refugees would cost around \$30 million dollars, part of which was already available. It became apparent that two of the major pillars for success in this mission were coming together. With tentative support from President Asad regarding settling the refugees inside Syria, notwithstanding various conditions, and with a pool of limited resources already allocated by UNHCR there appeared signs of great optimism.

Call for greater support from Arab Countries

There was consensus that Syria was playing more than its part in tackling the humanitarian crises and that neighboring Arab countries needed to take greater responsibility. Every Arab country speaks of helping the Palestinians but when they are called to provide tangible humanitarian support there is a poor lack of response. It was agreed that the delegation will make strides to pursue all the other avenues to make this a successful mission; it will speak to UNRWA and various Arab countries.

The delegation further thanked UNHCR for its exceptional work and cautioned against dropping any existing resettlement decisions for the refugees, some of whom have already been provided with a third country settlement plan.



Chapter 3

Recommendations

The conditions witnessed and the stories heard by refugees have led us to believe that there is a miserable failure by the international community to address the plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq. Human rights enshrined in international law are inviolable and it is the responsibility of all states and nations to uphold these rights. One of the human rights of all refugees is to have guaranteed international protection, and a permanent solution to their current predicament. The solution envisaged in international law for all the Palestinian refugees is to return to their homes in Palestine, which Israel has prevented for over six decades.

While the right of return is heavily contested on political grounds, Palestinian refugees suffer miserably due to their statelessness. The failure to ensure their right of return has led to subsequent displacement and expulsion. The plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq is now another saga to add to the original sin of expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homes.

In the meantime the world community needs to move quickly to provide a better settlement and insure that the basic human rights of Palestinian refugees from Iraq are not compromised for political gains. The situation they face is extremely dire and many countries have come to their aid, but it is not enough. There are still 5,000 refugees that face terrible danger and require immediate protection. The delegation has planted the seeds of a successful humanitarian project for all the Palestinian refugees from Iraq. To fully realize this vision all the key players have to play a role.

I. To the Arab Countries

- Syria has demonstrated its generosity and other countries in the region are obliged to support this humanitarian cause;
- The Palestinian refugees require various kinds of support above all financing for this settlement project;
- The Iraqi government needs to do more to secure the safety of Palestinian refugees, many of whom are still in grave danger; and
- Arab countries must provide succor to those that have fled Iraq into their borders to save their lives and avoid further state victimization.

II. To the British Government

- The ill conceived war in Iraq has had tremendous consequences for the region not least for the Palestinians. It is a moral responsibility, if not a legal requirement, for the British government to do all it can to support this project to provide settlement for Palestinian refugees from Iraq;
- The British government must recognize that without the war, for which it bares considerable responsibility, this new chapter in the history of Palestinian dispossession would not be written;

There is a very strong feeling of resentment amongst Palestinian refugees whom we met, specially those from the mandate period, that the British government failed in its responsibility to protect and guarantee their rights. History bares testament to the fact that the Palestinian people deserve greater attention from the British government to redeem itself for its failure that has caused so much misery to the Palestinians; and

- The British government must exert its power and influence on the Iraqi regime to provide greater attention to the safety and security of Palestinians who are being brutally targeted.

III. To UNRWA

- UNRWA is already doing a considerable job in providing for Palestinian refugees;
- Having witnessed firsthand the conditions of Palestinian refugees in Syria, UNRWA is best placed to take the new refugees from Iraq under its mandate;
- UNRWA is a constant in the region and has acquired enough expertise and has processes in place to support the infrastructure needed and it should begin, if it hasn't already, to plan how the refugees from Iraq can be incorporated; and
- UNRWA should make estimations of the extra resources that will be required and make demands to the international community. This delegation would muster all its resources in raising this fund.



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