

Palestine Liberation Organization

## PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN IRAQ

Refugees Affairs Department

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(translated from Arabic for Palestinian Refugee ResearchNet)

## PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN IRAQ\*

*\* This research is based on two studies: the first by Issam Sekhini entitled "Palestinians in Iraq", Palestinian Affairs Magazine, Issue 13, September 1972; the second in 1998 by the Refugees Affairs Department, Baghdad Office, entitled "Overview of the Status of Palestinian Refugees in Iraq", unpublished.*

### **Introduction**

The Iraqi troops positioned in the central area, in particular, the rural triangle (Jabea/Ajzam/Ein Ghazal), played a major role in moving 3,000 Palestinian refugees to Iraq after the 1948 Catastrophe. The Army moved the refugees in military convoys until they reached Baghdad where they were told they were going to "temporarily" live in military colleges and army camps under the direct supervision of the Iraqi Ministry of Defence. It was only natural that the number of Palestinian refugees increased after the Catastrophe as a result of the immigration of Palestinians looking for work, particularly since Iraq, together with Arab Gulf countries, was a country that attracted immigrants. The Iraqi government treated the Palestinians who came to work in Iraq in the same manner it treated foreigners in terms of residence status and double salaries.

According to statistics, the number of Palestinian refugees dramatically increased in the years following the Catastrophe. Estimates put their number at 4,000-5,000 in 1948; 14,000 in 1969; 22,000 in 1997 and 30,000 in 1998. They lived in three major cities: Baghdad (28,000), Basra and Mosul (1,000 for each city).

Since 1950, the Iraqi Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was responsible for handling the Palestinian refugees file. For that purpose, it created the Palestinian Refugees Affairs Department entrusted with managing various aspects of the refugees' lives.

It is worth mentioning that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) excluded Palestinian refugees living in Iraq from its registry, mandate and services since day one. The Iraqi government was responsible for providing Palestinian refugees with in-kind assistance until 1958. Then it was replaced with monthly financial support plus benefits<sup>1</sup>, a move that was met with great satisfaction by the Palestinian

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<sup>1</sup> 5 dinars a month as birth benefit, 50 fils for each child under 5 and 100 fils for children between 6 and 18. There is also another plan that covers death, sickness and hospitalization benefits.

refugees because, more than the in-kind assistance, the financial support “further eased the stress of refugees and saved their dignity”.

However the financial support had its disadvantages because by withholding it, the authorities used it as a blackmailing weapon to punish every refugee who violated the instructions of the Ministry or who adopted a position that did not satisfy the Palestinian Department<sup>2</sup>. We should bear in mind that only 22% of refugees received full payments according to the April 1969 Register while 45% of them received full payments in 1964. These payments completely stopped in the first half of the 1970's<sup>3</sup>.

### **Housing Conditions**

The housing issue was the most difficult problem that Palestinian refugees in Iraq faced. Since the beginning of Palestinian immigration, refugees were housed in schools and social clubs, as a temporary solution, until the Iraqi government developed the “shelter system” to house the refugees. It was a unique social housing system that reflected a sordid reality that could not be accepted in a civilized society. The shelter is a big house, sometimes, with more than 80 rooms. In most cases, it was originally a school or an old hotel deserted by its guests and was rented by the Palestinian Department. Poor families were packed in shelters in inhuman conditions. Each shelter housed a minimum of 24 families and a maximum of 61 families in very bad sanitary and environmental conditions with no sanitary or sewage services. Each family of six was packed in a single room. If family members exceeded 6, they were allowed to have two rooms. Most of these shelters were old dilapidated buildings and only refugees “lived” in them.

The shelters had no sanitary facilities, no water or sewage systems. Very often, a shelter houses more than 30 families but has only two or three bathrooms. Garbage piles up in front of the shelter's doors and sewage flows from the shelter to the street and to the main entrance to the shelter<sup>4</sup>. In addition to shelters that house the majority of Palestinian refugees, there are rental houses, which are smaller, and government houses, which are located in the capital Baghdad, namely in Salam City and Horiya City.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, in May 1989, the Palestine Department in Mosul threatened to suspend payments for refugees when the population of Sanjar Shelter in Mosul demanded that their housing conditions be improved. Indeed, payments were suspended and power and water were cut until the population “was convinced” of the position of the Department. The PLO intervened to work out a fair solution with the Department in Baghdad to the refugees' problem.

<sup>3</sup> The register of the Refugees Affairs Department revealed that out of 13,743 refugees included in the April 1969 Register, only 3,872 received full payments while 541 received half of the payments. (see Issam Sekhini).

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the lives of refugees, consult Issam Sekhini's study, p. 94.

According to statistics, 63% of Palestinian refugees in Baghdad, i.e. around 8,944 refugees representing 1,466 families, benefited from free housing. The number of Palestinian refugees in Basra and Mosul is smaller and their housing conditions are not better than in Baghdad.

Several efforts were made to solve the housing problem and ease its miserable consequences. Successive Iraqi governments tried to find a solution to the housing problem and decisions were made by the highest authority in the state; however, those decisions were never implemented. Though on August 17, 1969, the Revolution Command Council made a decision “to build popular housing units, like in Salam City, that meet all sanitary needs, provided that these units remain the property of the state and Palestinians can only use them as long as they are in Iraq”, the decision was not implemented for various reasons, but mainly because of the rapid and constant changes in Iraqi governments and the adamant government’s policy to secure the life of refugees despite the social, sanitary and moral problems they faced. When Metro Shelter was no longer fit for human habitation in mid 1970’s, it was replaced with Zaafraniya Shelter and the problem of over-crowdedness remained unresolved<sup>5</sup>.

When talking about the housing problems that Palestinian refugees faced in Iraq, it is important to mention that Palestinian refugees, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, believed that any attempt to improve their housing conditions was linked to a conspiracy to settle them down in their host countries and to prevent them from returning to their homeland. On this basis, they refused certain proposals to change their places of residence with better ones. But well-informed refugees believe that such assumption is unjustified and that any attempt to improve the life of refugees and provide them with decent housing does not negate their right to return to their homeland.

Later on, the Iraqi government decided to build high-rise apartments<sup>6</sup> as a solution to ease the housing crisis. These are popular housing units that provide basic utilities. In 1970, the government launched its construction project. 16 high-rise apartments were built in Baladiyat area in Baghdad and 1 high-rise apartment in Karam in Mosul. In Baghdad, there were 768 apartments in all high-rises combined. However, construction works on high-rise apartments came to a halt in 1980 and housing still remained a problem for the majority of Palestinian refugees, who are concentrated in the following regions<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> Issam Sekhini, *ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Each high-rise apartment is made up of 3 floors and 4 entrance halls. Each entrance hall leads to 12 apartments. Each apartment houses two to three families. These families grew from nucleus families to extended families during the years following the Catastrophe. New families were formed and they were housed in adjacent apartments given the family and tribal ties.

<sup>7</sup> *Overview of the Status of Palestinian Refugees in Iraq. Ibid.*

## **Baghdad:**

- Baladiyat Ward: 1,500 families living in 16 high-rise apartments that have 768 apartments
- (New ) Baghdad Al-Jadida: 6 medium-size shelters (that used to be veterinary clinics)
- Tel Mohamad: contains small popular government accommodations
- Al-Amin Ward: contains 3 shelters (one of them is about to collapse)
- Zaafraniya: has two major shelters (one shelter for the disabled and the second for young orphans) in addition to 8 government accommodations.
- Horiya Ward: has three (big, medium and large size) shelters and popular rental and government accommodations.
- Seha Ward: contains a number of popular housing units
- Other: Various rental government accommodations spread out across Baghdad and its neighbourhoods.

## **Basra:**

There are refugee clusters in Zubair, Al-Marbad, Ishar and Al-Mawfikiya wards

## **Mosul:**

There is only one refugee cluster in Karama Ward

The housing problem remained without any drastic solution even though the Iraqi government met the demands of refugees by approving the right of refugees to own property as an attempt to solve the housing crisis. Though a decision was made to allow Palestinian refugees own a house or a residential piece of land, this decision was never implemented and the crisis was exacerbated by the sanctions imposed on Iraq. In this context, another important housing problem surfaced: each Palestinian holding a Jordanian passport or a non-Iraqi identity document was deprived of housing. Moreover, his identity document and passport were confiscated. This problem remains unsolved despite various attempts to find a solution to it.

## **The Socio-Economic Situation**

The birth rate of Palestinian refugees in Iraq is 5.4%, which is close to the birth rate of Palestinian refugees in Arab host countries. Statistics show that the Palestinian community in Iraq is a young community compared to international demographic standards (45% of the

population is under 15 and 50% of the working-age population is between 15 and 64). Those who were born after 1949 represent 58.3% of the population.

### **Income and Living Standard**

Refugees living in shelters and government houses represent 63% of the refugee population in Iraq. Most of them have a low living standard compared to those who live independently and those who came to Iraq not to seek asylum but to look for work. This low living standard is due to the low income and wages earned by Palestinian refugee workers, which are lower than those earned by Palestinian immigrants. Most of Palestinian refugees in Iraq had a rural background and they immediately felt a cultural shock when they moved to a totally different and more developed society like Baghdad and since they lacked the proper skills and qualification (professional, entrepreneurial and administrative skills), they worked in unskilled jobs to meet their daily needs. Therefore, 80% of Palestinian refugees families are low-income families, 16% are middle-income families and only 4% are better off.

On the other hand, a large number of Palestinian refugees in Iraq are unemployed, including those who usually work in inferior and low-wage jobs. Only a limited number of Palestinians work in companies and banks and few are those who work in government departments and services. The reason is that companies pay more than the government and a Palestinian “until very recently, did not enjoy the same rights as any Iraqi employee does in terms of salary, promotion and retirement”.

### **Health**

Though Iraq’s universal health care system included the Palestinian refugees in Iraq, the PLO office, in coordination with the Palestinian Embassy in Baghdad, oversees health clinics and centres that provide almost free health care to about 500 Palestinians and Iraqis a day in Baghdad, such as the Medical Centre that employs 20 specialist doctors. Besides the Embassy, funding is provided by the Palestinian Red Crescent, the Refugee Commission and governmental, regional and international organizations that provide in-kind assistance, though they are not obliged to provide permanent assistance.

### **Laws Governing Palestinian Employees**

Palestinian employees in government departments and institutions had been treated as foreigners until 1964 when the Minister of Finance issued Decision 15108 of July 29, 1964, in which the Iraqi Ministerial Council decided “to treat refugees in the same way it treats an Iraqi employee” in terms of “salary, annual benefits, cost-of-living allowances and leave benefits by applying the same employment laws and regulations on them”, except that their employment is without any retirement plan (because if there is a retirement plan, refugees and their families may decide to stay in Iraq even if their homeland is liberated). However, they are entitled to severance pay amounting to one month's salary per year of service at the end of employment based on the last

highest salary. The employment contract is renewed each three or five years while benefits and allowances continue<sup>8</sup>.

In 1969, this decision was amended by Decree No.336 of August 17, 1969 providing that “Palestinians should be treated on an equal footing with Iraqis in terms of appointment, promotion and retirement and that employment can be terminated if the Palestinians return to their homeland” and that “Palestinians and Iraqis should have equal opportunities to obtain scholarships, bank loans and mortgages in accordance with applicable laws”<sup>9</sup>. As for the residence status, the Iraqi authorities issue refugee cards and special travel documents to Palestinian refugees.

### **Education**

Palestinian refugees in Iraq have access to free public education (at the primary, secondary and university levels). Each year, the Iraqi government grants 20 scholarships to refugee students to study in its universities. The selection process is overseen by a tripartite committee made up of the Ministry of Education, the Palestinian Department and the PLO but this initiative has been abandoned since now there is total equality between Palestinian and Iraqi students in terms of admission to universities.

The educational assistance increased the literacy ratio among the Palestinian refugees population. However, a research study in 1971 showed a drop in Palestinian students in high schools and a considerable percentage of Palestinian students managed to graduate from high school only after four or five attempts. These results are poor compared to the results obtained by Palestinian students elsewhere. The study concluded that “the adverse economic conditions and the fact that many students juggled work and school, in addition to the miserable housing conditions of the Palestinian refugees in shelters are all problems that create an environment not conducive to schoolwork”. This accounts for this strange reality and the failure and poor showing of Palestinian refugees students in high schools<sup>10</sup>.

### **Cultural Activities**

One characteristic that marked the cultural activities of Palestinians in Iraq and that distinguishes them from other Palestinians in other Arab countries is the fact that there were very few prominent intellectuals among them and that cultural institutions remained very limited. Until mid-1970's, there were not enough qualified individuals among the refugees population to create Palestinian associations of writers and journalists, which required the membership of at least 8 people to complete the quorum. There was a shortage of painters and popular and drama artists<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *Issam Sekhini*, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Issam Sekhini*, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Among the few poets and novelist we mention Jabra Ibrahim, Salafa Hajawi and Khaled Ali Mustafa. In music, we can mention Jamil Keshta and Rohi Khamash; in journalism, there is only one editor in Baghdad Observer and another journalist who is the secretary-editor of Iraqi Alef Bae.

But the situation improved afterwards and refugees now participate in all labour and professional unions of PLO, such as Federation of Palestinian Students, Association of Palestinian Women, Union of Palestinian Teachers, Union of Palestinian Engineers, Union of Palestinian lawyers, Union of Palestinian Writers, Union of Palestinian Contractors and Union of Palestinian Farmers.

### **Sports**

Palestinian refugees athletes had a lot of potential and could have made many accomplishments if they had been allowed to represent Palestine in Arab and international sports events since 1973. Some sport clubs at home seek the help of players and coaches who used to work in Haifa Club in Baghdad<sup>12</sup>. The Club received several visits from sport teams and boy scouts from home. The Club, together with the Supreme Council of Palestinian Youth and Sports, played a major role in developing many young talents and won several awards in Arab and Olympic sport events. Moreover, Haifa Club provides national clubs with coaching expertise and athletes in various sports, which helped develop Palestinian sports.

### **Politics**

There are several factors that strengthened the feeling of Palestinian identity among Palestinian refugees in Iraq more than in other Arab countries. The rural characteristics of the Palestinian refugees community in Iraq, their farming background, their strong belief in their personal traits, good and bad, and their awareness of the struggle with the Zionist enemy at home prevented them from being assimilated in the Iraqi society, which was a new society to them by all social standards. So they preferred to isolate themselves in their shelters and neighbourhoods. In this regard many factors were in their favour. They were not allowed to farm the land, to participate in the agricultural production process or to have an attachment to the land. Additionally, Iraqi laws and regulations regarding refugees prevented them from integrating because the policies of employment discrimination, residence and travel remained in place.

Iraq's diverse demographic and social fabric and its multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic population helped Palestinian refugees, as a minority, to carve out a place on the demographic map of Iraq "without having to explain their strong attachment to their identity or

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<sup>12</sup> The PLO office created the Supreme Council of Palestinian Youth and Sports and Haifa Club in 1973. The Club has fields and rooms to practice several sports. In 1997, the Club built two swimming pools in addition to a computer room.

renouncing it vis-à-vis this justified and acceptable multiculturalism”<sup>13</sup>. A psychological aspect also prevented the Palestinian refugees from integrating in the Iraqi society. It involves their reaction to the false accusations levelled at them by many Iraqis who accused them of selling their land [to the Israelis] and the low opinion that some Iraqis unfairly had of Palestinian refugees, thus depriving them of their dignity. Though this opinion was also apparent in various Arab countries, it had more violent and harsh dimensions in Iraq given “the absolutist Iraqi psyche that leads to absolute and harsh judgments”<sup>14</sup>.

However, these factors did not prevent the Palestinians from effectively participating in the political life and assuming their role in the national political map. Before the Palestinian revolution and after the 1948 Catastrophe, it was only natural that Palestinians got involved in the Iraqi political activities and participated in Arab parties and helped create new ones.

However, the majority of Palestinian refugees in Iraq refused to actively be involved in Iraqi political parties and their membership in those parties remained marginal and insignificant. But this does not mean that Palestinian refugees did not have any impact on Iraq’s national political movements because a Palestinian is a natural born politician. As for Palestinians in Iraq, they found in Nasiriya what they were looking for in terms of their national hopes so there were attracted to Arab political parties with a nationalist agenda.

The Palestinian political experience in Iraq can be divided into two parts:

**First experience:** The first Iraqi Palestinian military unit was created in 1959 (during the era of Abdel Karim Kassem). It was called “Palestine Liberation Unit”. Upon its creation, 300 Palestinian soldiers and 50 Palestinian officers enlisted, assuming that they would form the core of a Palestinian armed movement that would play a leading role in the battle for liberation. But later on, they were disappointed; their duties were limited to parading in front Arab delegations visiting Iraq or to routine training in Rashid camp near Baghdad. It was no surprise that the enlisting of Palestinians in that unit came to a halt and the Palestinian soldiers gradually left the unit even though that the number of Palestinian officers reached 150 in 1964, bearing in mind that the unit was originally created to accommodate only 32 officers. After Ramadan 14, 1964, the unit was merged with other Iraqi military units in the north of Iraq and it was assigned combat missions in the Kurdish region. Its name was changed from Liberation Unit to First Unit

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<sup>13</sup> *Issam Sekhini*, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Issam Sekhini*, *ibid.*

– 65<sup>th</sup> Regiment Future. When the Army of the Liberation of Palestine was created, the majority of Palestinian soldiers in the unit joined that army.<sup>15</sup>

**Second experience:** On March 14, 1960, the Association of the Sons of Palestine in Iraq was created by a group of 14 members and set its own cultural, health, social, information and sport goals. The Association adopted the slogan “We Are Coming Back” to stress its non-political nature and its non-interference policy in domestic and foreign affairs. The Association lasted only 1 year and 8 months and “on November 14, 1961, it was dissolved by its own members and its movable and immovable property was transferred to the office of the Supreme Arab Board for Palestinians in Iraq.”

### **Palestinians and the Palestinian Revolution**

All the Palestinians in Iraq answered the call of the Palestinian revolution. A large number of Palestinians joined the armed struggle through various Palestinian organizations and took up arms to defend their homeland. Many of them died as martyrs.

On the other hand, since its inception in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization has been operating in Iraq. It was endorsed by the Palestinians since it represented the political and national aspirations of all Palestinians. The relation between the PLO and the Iraqi government went through various phases and had its ups and downs following the events on the Palestinian scene. It was only natural that the Palestinians refugees in Iraq felt the positive and the negative effects of this relation.

At a different level, the Iraqi government created the Palestinian National Office which insisted that any contact between the office of PLO in Iraq and the various Palestinian resistance factions should be channelled through it. Hence, the efforts of the PLO office was often curtailed and its activities and initiatives were considerably hindered.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions**

1. The possibility of registering Palestinian refugees in Iraq with UNRWA should be explored. In this context, the Embassy of Palestine discussed this issue with a number of UN organizations, such as UNHCR, with the Political Department and with Nasser Al-Qadwa, PLO representative in the United Nations, particularly after Iraq’s invasion of

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<sup>15</sup> *Issam Sekhini*, *ibid*

Kuwait and the failure of the Iraqi government to perform its duties. The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave its approval to the Palestinian Embassy to approach UNRWA and convince it to provide its services to Palestinian refugees in Iraq.

2. A final solution to the refugees housing crisis should be found. Meanwhile, the lamentable existing buildings should be renovated.
3. The Medical Centre in Baghdad should be provided with more medicine and medical needs and medical clinics should be opened in other population areas.
4. There is a need to provide photocopies of land and property registration documents of Palestinian refugees in their homeland (Tabo system ) before the 1948 immigration movement so as to preserve them.
5. There is a need to activate the role of Palestinian Affairs Department (PLO) in Baghdad by allocating a special budget to improve the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Iraq.