

*The Palestinian Refugees In Syria  
Their Past, Present and Future*

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To ...

My Wife

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper seeks to provide an overview of the Palestinian refugee population in Syria, most of whom arrived in 1948-1949 via Lebanon, Jordan, the Golan Heights and on boats that departed from the coastal area in Palestine for Tartous and Latakia. Thousands of Palestinian refugees also came to Syria by train.

The number of Palestinian refugees in Syria in 1948 was 85-90,000. At present, there are 365,000 refugees. Their numbers could reach 399,000 by the end of 2000 and might be 463,000 by the end of 2005. They constitute about 11% of the total number of Palestinian refugees and 2.4% of the population of the host country. There are 14 refugee camps in Syria, seven of them are in Damascus area. UNRWA recognizes 10 camps only. However, about 70% of the Palestinian refugees in Syria are living in camps. Contrary to some expectations, camps are no longer isolated islands socially, culturally and politically separated from the community of the host country. This is because Palestinians are legally equal to Syrians in everything except for the right of candidacy to the Parliament and municipal councils and voting in elections.

Though primarily places for shelter, camps in Syria underwent great progress in almost every field. At present, a camp is a place for adaptation construction. It helps its inhabitants to preserve the unique essence of refugee status and enables refugees to create a collective memory, a political self-awareness and a sense of national belonging. Due to sharing common interests and common destiny, the camp experience enriches the Palestinian national identity and independent character. No doubt UNRWA helped Palestinian refugees in the camps and other gatherings to survive the catastrophe of dispossession and dispersion. Palestinian refugees in Syria believe that UNRWA should be able to continue its work as long as a final solution to the refugee problem has not been reached. They also believe that to enhance UNRWA efficiency it should be internally restructured.

The Palestinian refugee community in Syria grew from 85,000 by the end of 1948 to 374,521 by the end of June 1999, according to UNRWA. Other sources put the 1997 population at 420,000. It is necessary to indicate that the population growth is due to increased birth rate, not immigration. The majority came from Galilee in general, whereas Safad, Haifa, Tiberias and Acre, were the main areas of refuge. Also, the majority of Palestinians, i.e. 66.89 percent live in Damascus area. Surveys show that in Syria, the Palestinian man power is 70.3 percent of the population, though the labor force does not exceed 28.7 percent of manpower, one tenth of which is child labor. This is because 9.8 percent-of the female man power are included in the labor force, while the male ratio is 47.7 percent. A distribution of the work force by the economic branch shows that 21.1 percent work in the services, 19 percent are craftsmen and technicians, 45 percent work in industry. Female workers ratio is 9.8 percent. Health circumstances have improved a lot, thanks to UNRWA, the Syrian government health services, the International Red Cross, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, Islamic and Christian Charities and private clinics. Cuts in the UNRWA health budgets affect a large strata of the Palestinians. The legal status of the Palestinians in Syria is considered to be better than most of Palestinian communities in other Arab countries.

Fifty years after their expulsion in 1948, the Palestinian refugees in Syria contend that there has been little change in the power politics and unprincipled policies of the superpowers to whom the refugee problem is merely a humanitarian issue to be addressed on the basis of resettlement, adaptation and absorption.

The findings of this field research show beyond any doubt that to the Palestinian refugees, theirs is a political issue to be dealt with in accordance with international law and United Nations General Assembly resolutions. In Syria, the majority of Palestinian refugees might consider return the lawful and human solution to their problem and 96% of the Palestinian refugee population in Syria believe that time can never have any effect on this right and 95% stated that they would like to return to their homeland and if possible to their original locality.

Skepticism over the peace process and its possible effects is not uncommon. Sixty-one percent declared that the peace process would marginalize their problem. Sixty-three percent expressed their concern over the current negotiations and said the Oslo Agreement would have negative effects on the refugee problem. Fifty-two percent believe that peaceful negotiations could bring the solution to their problem. Sixty-five percent believe that the Palestinian National Authority does not have the right to negotiate on their behalf, and that representatives of refugees should take part in the negotiations. Allegiance to the P.L.O. as the sole and legitimate representative, has not been affected by Oslo Agreement.

## I Introduction

While much research has been conducted covering almost all aspects of refugee life in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Lebanon and Jordan, when it comes to the refugees in Syria, very little field research has been conducted.

### *The scope of this study:*

This study is concerned with the Palestinian refugees in Syria, their process of adaptation to the community around them without ever being assimilated and without giving up their national identity or forgetting their sense of belonging to the Palestinian people. Thus the themes of this research are politics, sociology, social psychology and anthropology rather than economy and statistics though these are indispensable.

### *The objectives of this study:*

The lack of previous field research makes this study very important because it will:

1. Shed some light on the Palestinian refugee community in Syria which is almost unknown abroad.
2. Remove some of the ambiguities and misconceptions pertaining to this community.
3. Study in full detail the various characteristics of this unique refugee community.
4. Prove that its being an incorporated community does not necessarily prevent it from sustaining a deep and real sense of political belonging to the Palestinian people and the struggle to regain their inalienable rights.

This study consists of four chapters. Chapter one deals with the exodus of Palestinian refugees and the different routes to Syria. The testimonies are taken from those who survived that experience. Chapter two focuses on the construction of the camps, the function of those camps, their development and finally their essence. Chapter three is concerned with the characteristics of the Palestinian refugee community in Syria. Tables and up-to-date statistical data are included where possible. Chapter four is concerned with the peace process, its impact on the refugees, the role of P.L.O and P.N.A, the just and lasting solution of the refugee problem and finally the impact of the passage of time on the right of return.

### *Methodology :*

Before designing the questionnaire, I had to formulate the thesis of the book clearly and had it itemized into categories of ideas. Judging that a hypothesis-testing questionnaire would be most

suitable and helpful in such a study as this, I planned to use various categories of questions, according to the topic, from simple questions requiring direct and definite data (e.g. the first twelve questions in the questionnaire); to questions suggesting answers which are known as baits; and finally topic questions asking the respondent to state an opinion on certain crucial and controversial issues. I took these brainstorming ideas to an expert who succeeded in designing the questionnaire accordingly.

### *The Questionnaire:*

A questionnaire was designed comprising 45 questions divided into units as follows:

- A. Questions 1-12 deal with the exodus, historical data pertaining to it, individual and collective experiences during migration, the attitudes of others towards refugees on their way to the unknown, various roads of migration, until they reached Syria.
- B. Questions 13-22 are concerned with camp life, collective memories formed in the camps, a comparison of camps today with those 48 years ago.
- C. Questions 23-29 cover the case of UNRWA.
- D. Questions 30-37 deal with self-consciousness of refugees.
- E. Questions 38-44 attempt to shed light on the future as conceived by the refugees and their conception of the peace process, the P.L.O and the P.N.A.

Further, to get the most productive interaction with the refugee camp residents, I lectured in the four biggest camps in Syria on the topic of my book. The discussions that followed the lectures helped intellectualize what I have already known; facilitated data collection - both quantitative and qualitative and provided me with prior information on the possible responses to my project as a whole and to each group of questions in particular. Consequently, I was able to quickly break the ice with the would-be sample. Still I realized soon that skepticism, radicalism and political factionalism would make certain of the refugees uncooperative, though not antagonistic to my project.

Conducting the interviews, however, was a major problem. Some people were hesitant or too reluctant to be interviewed due to the rarity of interviews. Others, especially old women, could not tolerate being interviewed directly by the author. Workability necessitated that the interviews be conducted as follows:

- 1. The majority of the interviews were conducted directly by the author.
- 2. A female assistant was necessary for conducting the interviews with some of the older women.

3. Some interviewees preferred to take the questionnaire and give written answers.
4. On some occasions a third party was needed to introduce the author to a would-be interviewee to reduce to the least level the obstacles pertaining to fear or skepticism.
5. The wording of some questions had to be modified to be sensible to some people.
6. Frequently the questionnaire was used as a guideline.
7. The sample: It is a brainstorming task to choose a sample which is as representative as possible.<sup>1</sup>.

***The sample:***

About 700 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and some 200 people interviewed though the sample consisted of 150 persons only. Every effort was made to make the sample as representative as possible keeping in mind that such a sample can never give an accurate overview of public opinion orientations. Here is a breakdown of the sample:

1. Distribution by sex: 126 males 24 females
2. Distribution by age: 26 below 25 years old,  
51 between 26-49 years old,  
48 between 56-74 years old, and  
25 above 75 years.
3. Distribution by work: 49 workers; 25 retired persons,  
19 journalists and writers;  
29 school teachers, 13 university  
professors, 15 housewives.
4. Distribution by area of residence: 119 Damascus, 6 Aleppo,  
5 Homs, 5 Hama, 10 Dara'a,  
5 Latakia.
5. Distribution by place of residence in Damascus area:
  - A. In the camps: Total 85  
54 Yarmouk Camp. 6 Set Zeinab,  
7 Jaramanah, 4 Khan Eshiekh,  
11 Sbeinah, 3 Khan Danoun.
  - B. Non-Camp gatherings: 7 Qaboun, 7 Joupar, 9 Ruken  
Ed-Deen, 6 Sheikh Khaled, 3 Al-Ameen Quarter,



***The function of the sample:***

- A. A group of the interviewees are 65 years old or above in order to extract the required data concerning the migration from Palestine. This group was chosen to be representative of the different geographical places in Palestine that refugees had left when coming to Syria via Lebanon, the Golan Heights, Jordan, on board boats and ships etc. Finally members of this group were chosen from as many refugee gatherings as possible in order to get the historical background of each of them.
- B. The sample was meant to comprise three generations, those who experienced refugeehood, their children and the younger generation between 20-25 years old.
- C. To get a wide spectrum of views, the sample included individuals from different social, cultural, political, geographical strata from both sexes.

***How was the sample used?***

There were different approaches to the different categories of persons composing the sample.

- 1. The age group between 50-74 and above was used to provide historical data related to the exodus, the variety of roads taken by Palestinians to reach Syria, etc.
- 2. The residents of each camp told the author the history of the camps.
- 3. The intelligentsia was to provide the author with theoretical, political, psycho-social ideas.
- 4. It is important to emphasize that the questionnaires were used as guidelines for the interviews.<sup>2</sup>

***Constraints:***

The reliability of oral history: Despite their high standard of learning, the Palestinians have not left archives to testify to their historical experience. Thus one must resort to oral history whose reliability is quite vulnerable because memories are affected by the state of mind, health and personal interests and motives on one hand, and are mainly based on perceptions and expectations on the other.<sup>3</sup> In addition, memories tend to select certain features from the past and interpret them according to the present situation.

Such constraints should be taken into consideration when depending mainly on oral history. Yet the oral history furnished us with lots of facts which have never been mentioned by historians up until now.

*The sources of data:*

A. Some of the data obtained from interviewees is considered important but have sources unknown to me.

B. Statistical and other data obtained from:

- 1- The Central Bureau of Palestinian Statistics in Damascus, (PCBSNR)
- 2- The General Authority For the Palestinian Arab Refugees in Damascus, (GAPAR)
- 3- UNRWA publications, registration reports.
- 4- Research and field studies of many Palestinian, Arab and foreign researchers on refugees in general, and several essays on the Palestinians in Syria in particular.

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## Endnotes

1. Agar, Michael, H., *The Professional Stranger, An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, Academic Press Series, San Diego, California, 1980, Chapter 6, p p.119-136.
2. Bernard, H. Russel, *Research methods in Cultural Anthropology*, Sage Publications, Newbury, California, 1940, part II, Chapters 7&8, p p 148-203.
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## II The Palestinian Odyssey

### 1. The Roads to Syria

During the 1948 war, Palestinians fled their homeland to other Arab countries. Geography, mainly, was decisive in the choice of the country of refuge. Due to geographical factors, Palestinian living in Galilee fled to Syria via the following routes:

1. From Lebanon to Syria;
2. From Lebanon to the Golan Heights;
3. From Palestine directly to Tartous and Latakia on board boats and ships;
4. From Tiberias and Hula areas to the Golan Heights;
5. From Haifa coastal area to Taulkarem and from there to Syria via Transjordan; and
6. From south Lebanon to Syria by train.

#### *A. Exodus to Syria via Lebanon*

The famous Palestinian historian Aref Al-Aref, the author of *Nakba* quoted by Nafez Nazzal, describes the exodus:

“The roads were jammed with trucks, cars, wagons, and push-carts, filled with panic-stricken Arabs. The early fugitives settled in Nazareth area until the new area was captured; then they had to join the new wave of refugees northwards to Lebanon.

A 71 year old woman villager from Saffourya, Ghazaleh Taher, told the writer:

“When Shafa Amr was seized, its inhabitants came to our village. The defenders planted mines around the village; but they had to be cleared upon Qawuiqji’s order. School children were evacuated. The school became a garrison. It was Ramadan (Moslem fasting month). We were waiting to have breakfast, when abruptly I saw a plane in the sky. “It will bomb the village”, I told my mother. I hurried to fetch my kids. When bombs began bursting here and there, I hid under a mulberry tree with my mother. A woman, her mother-in-law and a donkey were killed. They broke into the village. People ran away some on donkeys, others on foot. Some villagers did not even carry the food they were about to eat for breakfast. Under the olive trees, people spread as cattle. Bombs continued bursting all night. We walked northwards. My son fell from my hand several times. At midday the day after, we reached Al-Rameh whose inhabitants joined us “Once Saffourya has fallen, we can do nothing”, they said. In an answer to a question why she did not try to go back (return) to Saffourya a few days later, she said: “On our way to the Lebanese borders, news coming from Saffourya said that the village was demolished, and those who remained there were subjected to torture, humiliation, rape ..etc.

From a land owner to a beggar:

“It was mid-July. By this time the majority of the lower Galilee had been defeated by Israeli

forces. An endless line of refugees fleeing for their lives covered the roads leading to Lebanon. Some people had money to buy food, very few brought sheep, goats or even cows with them: but the majority had nothing to eat or give to their children”.

A notable from a village said:

“At Al-Rameh, I met my family and kinsmen. We walked together to the north. The road was jammed with people. To get food one had to beg. Sometimes we managed to get food by begging, and more than once we returned to our kids and wives empty-handed”.

As masses of refugees moved forward towards the borders with Lebanon, their numbers increased, their need for food and water becoming desperate. They were ready to sell the cattle, weapons, animals.. etc. In Bent Jubeil, a Lebanese village, tens of thousands of newly created Palestinian refugees gathered. “It looked as though people were on one another” a women refugee told me. Hunger, thirst and diseases spread. No one distributed food, sometimes refugees were forbidden to come near the pools of water. “Some Lebanese gendarmes urged Palestinian refugees to sell their kids to wealthy families,” Ghazaleh Taher remembered.

In Yaroun, another Lebanese village near the border with Palestine, there were many additional and unexpected discomforts and unpleasant surprises awaiting the refugees. The Arab League Army (ALA) appointed a military governor to monitor and supervise the affairs of refugees. On the road from Yaroun to Bent Jubeil, Lebanese patrols stopped refugees, looked for weapons, and sent armed men under arrest to Tyre to be sent to a court of justice. Fayez Fawaz Al-Amoury stated that two brothers of his were disarmed, sent to prison and sentenced to two months. His brothers were sent to Beirut and released two months later from the notorious Al-Ramel prison.

At that time, the notorious Lebanese intelligence service, widely known as “The Second Bureau” arrested many Palestinian political activists, sent them to Beirut under arrest to spend six months in jails. Both the Palestinian activists and writers, Emil Habibi, the author of the Pessimist, and Emil Touma, a famous Palestinian historian were among the prisoners. That is why they decided to return to Palestine and live there.

Abdel-Majeed Kena’an, 66 year old, said:

“I refused to become a refugee and a beggar. So I returned to Palestine. In Al-Rainah, I met the mukhtar, Saleh Saleem and asked him to give me a permit to visit Saffourya. He refused. In front of Abu Fares’ house, there were some Jewish soldiers. They did not notice me. Then a soldier riding a horse belonging to one of the absentee villagers stopped me. He hit me with a whip, and dragged me to the square. There soldiers gathered and began beating me. A women soldier intervened and saved me.”

Two months passed. One day buses, camions, trucks, etc. arrived and carried some refugees to a deserted French military camp at Qara’oun, a village in south Lebanon. The refugees had a warm brotherly reception by villagers. The mukhtar volunteered to collect donations from nearby villages and had them distributed to refugees who had to line up for hours to get some food. A

doctor called Mohammed Muzayan was appointed by the International Red Cross to offer health care. Meanwhile the Red Cross began distributing rations.

The first attempt to form a paramilitary organization took place at Qara'oun. A group of young men began training how to use weapons. They were noticed by the Lebanese intelligence service. One of the founders of this new born organization, Ahmad Mustafa Abdel-Ghani was on the verge of being arrested, had he not fled to Syria. His comrades followed him. In a short time a great number of refugees left the camp to Syria without permits.

Ibrahim Mohammed Dakakeny, 65 years old, said:

“A bus driver told me, because it was Eid, it was easy to go to Syria. We arrived in Damascus just in front of the Hejaz railway station. People looked at us sorrowfully. Then the police came and took us to a newly made camp. From there refugees were carried by trains to Homs and Aleppo”. By that time, thousands of Palestinians were crowded in mosques, schools, unfinished buildings.. etc. in Damascus.

### ***B. Galilee, Lebanon to the Golan Heights***

In south Lebanon, some refugees, driven mainly by the requirements of survival, specially those who brought herds with them, had to choose a suitable place of refuge. Possibly, that is why some Palestinian refugees went from Lebanon to the Golan.

A 65 year old peasant from Dallatha, Mohammed Hameed, told me that in south Lebanon he was afraid that his sheep would be stolen or might die because of the shortage of pastures. The best way out of this problem was to take the sheep to the Golan Heights where they had an abundance of grass and water.

Here is another story. Assa'ad Ayed Eisa, a 71 year old from Loubya, Tiberias district says: “In mid-July Loubya was captured by the Israelis. Refugees walked to Ailaboun, Al-Rameh, spent a night at Hourfaish, and another one at Sa'sa'e. We spent a fourth night at Yaroun where thousands of refugees from Nazareth and Tiberias districts dispersed under trees. We stayed there for two months because our sheep could find food. It happened that I went to Beirut with some refugees by bus. From there we went to Damascus. Passers by led us to a Damascus hospital which was not finished. There hundreds of refugees gathered. To look for the sheep, I had to go to Tafas in Hawran (Dara'a). From there I walked to Ein Zeiwan, a Circassian village whose people were very generous to me”. I met my family and the sheep. We stayed in the Golan Heights for 3 years”.

Some Palestinian refugees went to Hawran (Dara'a) via the Golan Heights. This is what Mahmoud Mohammed Al-Kurdi says:

“We walked from Al-Ja'ounah (Rosh Benih in Hebrew) to Al-Meghar, Qaba'ah, Meirous, Deishoum, and Sa'asa'e. After two months in the village, we walked to Remaish where we stayed for a month. A car took us from Sa'asa'e to Marje'oun, and from there to Syria via

Al-Ghajar valley in the Golan Heights, to Masa'da, Qunaiterah. The villagers gave us food and milk. Camels took us through the mountainous area to Al-Harrah in Dara'a where we stayed for 3 years”.

### *C. The Hula Valley to the Golan Heights*

The Sea of Galilee is the sole reservoir of water in Palestine. The Hula Valley is the area through which the Jordan River runs from Lebanon to Tiberias Lake (The Sea of Galilee). Consequently Israeli leaders and strategists were keen on expelling the Arabs from that area first. After the Nasered-Din massacre and the demolition of its houses, Tiberias, Tabegha, El-Manarah, Al-Ja'ounah.. etc. were captured. But there remained several bedouin localities which the Israeli were in a hurry to expel.

Subeh Saleh Hamzat, 80 years old, from Talhum, in Safad district remembers:

“On April, 15, after some clashes with the Israelis, they entered the village, had a meeting with the two mukhtars, Assa'ad Al-Said and Raja Al-Saleh, who were ordered to roundup the weapons and deliver them to the Israelis. Having been told that there were no weapons, the Israelis ordered the villagers to go to Syria at once. Tents were left in the village and burnt later. People crossed the valley to Al-Btaiha where they stayed for 6 months. Each family built a hut of wood, canes and some earth. At night men infiltrated to Talhum to bring food specially wheat for bread. The Syrian border guards were not pleased by such infiltration, so they removed the refugees to Kafr Al-Ma'e, near Khesfeen. Tents were distributed to families. In 1949 the camp was transferred to Khesfeen itself. Each tribe lived by its own in a part of the camp. The International Red Cross took care of health, rations and relief works. A big tent was built to be used as a school”.

Contrary to Israeli plans some bedouin tribes did not leave the area. A new massacre, therefore, was inevitable.

Massaud Mohammed Ahmad, 65 years old, from Al-Zahrani clan belonging to Mawaysah tribe, narrates:

“In mid-July, the Israelis attacked us from the south, two enemy soldiers were killed. Great reinforcements arrived, and besieged the locality. 18 men were rounded up and murdered. Among them were two brothers of mine, and Hassan and Qassem, three uncles.. etc. The 18 martyrs were buried in one grave in Ailaboun. Before we left to Al-Btaiha, our sheep and herds were confiscated. From Al-Samakiyah we walked for 14 hours to reach Al-Btaiha. For ten days, we had no shelter. Then the International Red Cross gave us tents. The camp was removed to Kafar Al-Mae and later to Khesfeen”.

In 1949, the refugee camp was removed to Al-Kursy on the bank of Al-Samak valley, in 1950 it was once more removed to Al-Razaniyah for 6 months. In the second half of 1950, the camp was finally removed to Khan Esheikh.

#### ***D. To Syria via Jordan***

A 62 year old Gazan school teacher living in Yarmouk Camp for more than 20 years wondered: “Is it merely a coincidence that Haifa and the villages to south of it were depopulated by evacuating the population to the Toulkarem and Nablus areas? Astonishing enough is the fact that this policy of depopulation was carried out by the International Red Cross, the mandatory power, and an Arab Army deployed in that area. Whose conspiracy was that?”

However, we shall review the historical events from the beginning. As early as February 1948, Haifa witnessed a series of military confrontations between Arabs and Jews. Palestinians living in Saint Town Street which was bordering on the area of confrontation left their houses. Latteefah Qassem Abed, a 68 year old woman remembered, “People took refuge in churches when Hagana forces broke into the city. Boats carried refugees to Acre, Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon. My husband and I left to Toulkarem area, then to Nablus where we remained for 18 months. Then we crossed the Jordan valley to Amman and Damascus.

The inhabitants of Ejzem, Um Ez-Zainat, Ein Hour, Jaba’e.. etc. took the same way to Toulkarem area. A 64 year old teacher of Arabic, Ali Fayez told me:

“On July 15, 1948, we left the village (Ejzem) to Dalyet Al-Karmel, a Druze village. Ten days later we walked on foot to Um Ed-Daraj, Eskak, and Um Ez-Zainat, passing by many Israeli settlements before reaching Arah in the Triangle Area, temporarily ruled by Iraqi forces. In September 1948, the Iraqi army urged refugees to go to Iraq for a short period. So camions loaded with Palestinians crossed Transjordan on their way to Iraq”.

At Al-Tantourah, a Palestinian village on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the south of Haifa, the expulsion of Palestinians to the Toulkarem area was preceded by a bloody massacre. Haleemah Dasouky a 71 year old woman remembers:

“On May 16, 1948, the Israeli invasion of the village began at midnight. The village was shelled from all directions. The invaders outnumbered the defenders and so made their way into the village. Men were rounded up and separated from the women. Fifty-two men were lined up against a wall and shot. Seven women were wounded. Then 60 men were driven by the invaders to a distant place to be murdered. At midday, the International Red Cross camions arrived at the village and conveyed Palestinians to Beit Leed, in the Toulkarem area. We stayed there for one year”.

#### **The way to Syria**

To cross the Jordan River, some people took buses from their gathering places to Amman or Irbid. Other people had to walk. Mariam Qassem Badawi narrates:

“We arrived at the Syrian borders. There we hired donkeys to convey us from Howarah to Tal Shehab, Mezaeraib Tafas, and Dara’a. We spent a night there, then moved to Sweida. The Syrian



authorities expelled us to Jordan because we entered Syria illegally. Yet we returned to Syria once more illegally”.

During this journey back and forth, from Jordan to Syria, refugees had to beg food and water. Some nearly starved.

### *E. The Train Refugees*

Trains were used to scatter Palestinian fugitives from Haifa district to Toulkarem, Nablus and Jenin, from Lebanon to Syria and Iraq. For some it is not possible to dissociate such an event from the pledges of some Arab countries to absorb one million refugees provided that they received American assistance.

To the best of my knowledge, this historical event has been kept a secret or at least no one has ever written about it. Thanks to Mr. Mustafa Al-Bash who narrated what happened in Tirat Haifa on April 23, 1948:

“People were terrified by the massacre of January 4, 1948 in which 17 persons were killed by Zionists. The fall of Haifa and the ensuing battle in which 6 men were killed and two women wounded made the dispirited villagers in a hurry to flee. Twenty boats loaded with Palestinians sailed to Lebanon. Military camions carried as many persons as they could to Ejzem, Tal Adas, Nablus and Irbid. A train conveyed hundreds to Itleet, Khoudeira, Toulkarem, Jenin and Nablus. Nemr Idrees looked out of the train window lamenting “Farewell, my homeland!” Everyone burst into tears”.

In Lebanon, trains were used more than once to scatter Palestinian refugees who crowded in the south not far from the borders. Abed Ahmad Abu Hmaida remembers:

“Cars sent by the government carried us from Rmaish to Tyre. There a very long train was waiting at the station. Animal dirt covered the floor of the carriages. Men, women and children were crammed in carriages weeping, approximately ten families in every carriage. No one knew the destination of the train. Bread and water were scarce. Three persons died during the trip. The train stopped for the first time in Homs. I got off in Homs”.

Here is another tale about the evacuation of Palestinians from South Lebanon by trains. The narrator is Fahmi Badawi, 61 years old: “A train usually used to carry cattle was used to carry us. Once the train started from Tyre, no one was allowed to get off. We travelled without food or water. A blanket separated men from women. Urination was in tin pots. A woman gave birth in the train. I don’t know if anyone died. In Aleppo the train stopped because the trip came to an end”.

A transitory camp on the road to Beirut was constructed for refugees who were taken to the railway station to be transferred to Aleppo. “The authorities took us by train” Atif Hayatleh

recollects, “via Zabadani area to Homs, Hama and Aleppo. At the railway station in Aleppo we had to choose either to continue the trip to Iraq or to live in Aleppo. We chose the latter”.

Trains carried Palestinian refugees as far as Jarablus, near the Turkish/Iraqi borders. Mustafa Al-Bash, 75 years old says:

“Policemen took many families to Al-Hejaz railway station in Damascus. The train moved slowly from Damascus, to Zabadani, Riyak in Lebanon, to Homs, Hama and Aleppo. Well-doers, almsgivers and beneficiaries threw bread and food inside the carriages at stations. The train stopped in Jarablus near the Iraqi/ Turkish borders. Possibly the aim was to settle refugees in villages there.

## **F. The expulsion of Kurds**

Krad El-Baquarah and Krad El-Ghanameh are two Palestinian villages situated in the medium Jordan Valley between the ex-Hula lake and the Sea of Galilee, with a combined population of in 1945 of about 610 people. After the 1948 war, the area became a demilitarized zone until 1951, when a conflict broke out when Israel decided to change the Jordan riverbed and Syria intervened. Israeli military units were deployed in Krad El-Ghanameh and Israel besieged Krad El-Baquarah. Kurds from both villages were taken to Sha’eb, a village near Acre and settled in homes deserted by Arabs. The villagers were eventually able to return, only to be ordered by the Israelis to go to Syria in October, 1956. The villagers moved to Jlaibeyeh for a month then to Sanaber for another month. A new camp at Etaibeh was constructed. It consisted of block houses with earth roofs. After seven months in Etaibeh, the Kurds moved to Sbeineh to work in agriculture. However, UNRWA doesn’t offer them services because it does not recognize them as refugees. Their total number is now about 7,000 persons living in many camps near Damascus and Dara’a.

## **Conclusion :**

The variety of treks to Syria, the troubles met on the roads and the incredible methods of dispersion are exodus experiences shared by the majority of the Palestinians before they settled in camps and non-camp gatherings in Syria half a century ago.

## End Notes

1. John, R. and Hbai, S. The Palestine Diary, Foreword by Arnold J. Toynbee, vol. I. 1914-1945. The Palestine Research Center, P.L.O Beirut, Lebanon, 1970. Palestinian. XIV-XV.
2. For Further details see, A Palestine Survey, Vol., pp 141-144
3. Al-Mawed, H.S. The Palestinian Communists in Syria, Dar Al-Talei'ah Al-Jadida and Dar Kena'an for Paletine Studies, Damascus, 1995, p. 38.
4. A Palestine Survey, opp.Cit. p. 141
5. John, R. and Hidawi, Vol II, opp. Cit. p.
6. Ibid, pp 325-326.
7. For further details see Al-Mawed, H.S. The Zionist Transfer of Palestinians in Jerusalem during the 1948-1967 Wars, Samed Economist, January - March 1997, pp 125,126,127.
8. Nazzal, Nafez, The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee, 1978. The Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, Lebanon. 1978, p. 29.
9. Ibid. John R. and Hidawi, S. opp. Cit. vol. II p.331. On the very same day Haifa was captured, an Arab committee met General Stockwell in presence of the District Commissioner of Haifa, the British Consul and Brigadier Johnson and asked them to stop the massacre by Jews of Arabs in Haifa. Stockwell said that he was unable and therefore not prepared to fight the Jews and put an end thereto and that he was not willing to allow Arabs armed men to enter the town to help the Arab inhabitants. (Source: a document supplied to R. John and S. Hidawi and included in the above-mentioned book, p334)
10. Ibid,p.
11. Begin, Menachem, The Revolt, The Story of Irgun, p. 105.
12. Morris, Benni, The Birth of the Refugee Problem, 1947-1949, Extracted by Hamad Said Al-Mowed, The Transfer in Zionist Ideology. Al-Hadaf, July, 23, 1990. p.22.
13. Nazzal, opp. Cit. P.
14. Abd Ahmad Abu Hamaida is a 71 year old man from Tarshiha. He joined the Arab army before leaving Palestine. After the exodus, he travelled to Homs looking for his family.

- Now he is a retired worker living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author on June, 26, 1998.
15. The New York Times, 3 May, 1948.
  16. John R. and Hidawi, S. *opp. cit.*
  17. The Atlas of the Arab - Zionist Conflict, Prepared by Mazen Bandak. The Historical data were prepared by Khayriah Qassemeyah, Dar Al-Quds, Beirut, Lebanon, p.43.
  18. Al-Aref, Aref, Al-Nakba (The Catastrophe) taken from Nazzal, *opp. Cit.*, p.
  19. Chazaleh Taher is a 74 year old woman living in Yarmouk Camp. She walked from her village Saffourya to south Lebanon. Then she accompanied her husband in his journey to Damascus. She is a mother of 8 children. Interviewed by the writer on May, 16, 1998.
  20. Interviewed by the writer on May 16, 1998. He would not like his name to be mentioned.
  21. Chazaleh Taher. Interviewed by the writer on May 16, 1998.
  22. Fayez Fawaz, Al-Amoury is a 74 year old man living in Yarmouk Camp. His original village is Loubya. He migrated to Syria via Lebanon. Later he was employed by GAPAR as a driver. Interviewed by the writer on May 16, 1998.
  23. See Emil Habibi, *The Pessimist*, the Palestine Research Center, Beirut, 1974, first edition, chapter one. I heard the same story about the imprisonment of the Palestinian political activist from many colleagues while collecting data for my book "Palestinian Communists in Syria published in Damascus, 1995.
  24. Abdel-Majeed Kena'n, 66 years old, was born in Suffourya. He returned to his village and stayed there for three years. Then he left for Lebanon and arrived in Damascus in 1951. Now he is a retired man living at Sheikh Ibrahim in Damascus. Interviewed by the writer on May, 16, 1998.
  25. Afif Al-Mawed is a 79 year old retired man. He was a political activist. He is living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author on May, 18, 1998.
  26. An Interview with Ahmad Mustafa Abdel-Ghani on March 15, 1998, four months before he died in July 1998.
  27. Ibrahim Mohammad Dakakeny, 65 years old, was born in Suffouryah. He left his village to Lebanon and arrived in Damascus in 1948. He is a retired worker and a father of 8 children. Interviewed by the author on June 23, 1998.

28. Mohammad Hameed is a 65 year old retired worker living in Ruken ed-Deen in Damascus. His village in Palestine is Dallatha. Interviewed by the author on February, 3, 1998.
29. Assa'ad Ayed Eisa is a 72 year old worker from Loubya. He was one of the workers who constructed Al-Ramadani refugees camp. When his sons joined Damascus University, he moved to Yarmouk Camp where he is now living. Interviewed by the author on May 23, 1998.
30. Mahmoud Mohammad Al-Kurdi was born at El-Ja'ounah, Safad district in 1924. Though a peasant, he managed to make contacts with some notables in Dara'a before 1948. For the time being, he is a shopkeeper at Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author on May 23, 1998.
31. For more information see, Hamad Said Al-Mawed, *The War Over Water in the Middle East*, Kana'an Publishing House, Damascus, 1990, chapter one.
32. Subeh Saleh Hamzat is 81 years old. His original village is Talhoum, Tiberias district. His clan left to the Golan Heights. He lived many years in Khan Esh-Sheikh camp before coming to Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author on June 5, 1998.
33. Massaud Mohammad Ahmad, is 64 year old form Al-zahran clan, a branch of Al-Mawaysah tribe. He was 14 years old in 1948. At present, he is living at Sbeinah Camp. He is a father of seven sons and daughters. Interviewed by the author on June 2, 1998.
34. Ahmad Musleh is a 57 year old teacher of Arabic. He left Gaza Strip after the 67 war. In 1970 he came to Syria. At first he lived and worked in Dara'a. In the early eighties he moved to Damascus, where he is now living. Interviewed by the author.
35. Latteefah Qassem Abedi was born in Haifa in 1930. After being married, she moved to Nazareth. In 1948 she migrated to Syria via Lebanon. Now she is living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author on June 8, 1998.
36. Ali Abdel-Qader Al-Fayez, a 61 year old teacher of Arabic, and a father of 11 children, left his village in Palestine in 1948. His family settled in Toulkarem, then moved to Irbid and Dara'a. He lived in the refugee camp in Dara'a many years, and migrated to Kuwait and has finally settled in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author on June 1, 1998.
37. Haleemah Dasouki is a 71 year old woman living at Al-Qaboun. Her original village is Tantourah, Haifa district. She could be an eye witness of the massacre which was committed against her fellow villagers. Interviewed by the author on May 30, 1998.

38. Marriam Qassem Badawi is a 78 year old woman who was born at Tantourah, Haifa district. Having survived the massacre committed by the Zionists in her village, she fled to Toulkarem and then to Transjordan and there to Damascus. Now she is living at Qaboun. Interviewed by the author on June 29, 1998.
39. For further information, See Hamad Said Al-Mawed, The United States of America and the Refugee Problem, Samed Economist, Spring 1996.
40. For further information see: Al-Bash, Ahmad Mustafa, Tirat Haifa, Al-Shajarah Publishing House, Damascus, 1998, pp. 182, 189, 196, 191.
41. Abed Ahmad Abu -Hmaida. Interviewed on June 25, 1998.
42. Fahmi Badawi, a retired P.L.O officer living at Al-Qaboun, near Damascus. His original village is Tantourah. Haifa district. Interviewed by the author on June 29, 1998.
43. Atif Hayatli, was born in Shejarah, Tiberias district in 1936. His family migrated to Lebanon. They were taken by trains to Aleppo. He moved to Homs where his kinsmen were living. Now he is living in Yarmouk Camp. He is a retired teacher of history. Interviewed by the author on May 22, 1998.
44. Mustafa Al-Bash is a 73 year old man living in Yarmouk Camp. His original country in Palestine is Tirat Haifa. Interviewed by the author on June 14, 1998.
45. The Palestinian Encyclopedia, Part I vol.3.
46. I am indebted for these details to Hussein Ali Abdel-Ghani, a 66 year old born at Krad el-Ghanameh, Safad district in 1932, who was captured in 1951 and removed to Sha'eb, Acre district. In 1956 was driven out of his village. Currently he is a shopkeeper at Sbeinah Camp. And Awad Ali Mohammad Abelel-Hadi was born at Krad El-Ghanameh, in 1930. He is living at Sbeinah now. Also I am grateful for the invaluable help of my colleague, the novelist Hassan Hameed who wrote a novel entitled "Jeser Banat Ya'ecoup" Hassan Hameed, 44 years old; was born at Krad Al-Ghanameh. He is a novelist and journalist living at Sbeinah Camp.

### III Survival in the Camp

Conceptually, a refugee camp is one of the controversial issues in contemporary Palestinian literature as well as national politics. Many Palestinian writers wrote novels, short stories and epic poems about refugee camps.

Dr. Ibrahim Shehabi, a member of PNC and a professor of English literature at Damascus University writes: “A camp is an expression of dispersion”. Whereas, Dr. Sami Sheikh believes “A camp is the concrete symbol of the Palestinian problem and the suffering of Palestinians”.

Hassan Hameed, a Palestinian novelist and author of “Jeser Banat Ya’acop” (Jacop Daughters’ Bridge) expresses his feelings towards the camp:

“A refugee camp is an odd place with which I have irreconcilable relations. I love it. I hate it. It preserves my identity and independence, spreads a Palestinian climate with an abundance of big and minute details everywhere. It is an exceedingly self-contradictory place expanding now and narrowing a while later: Yet it can never be a correlative of the Palestinian problem. A national belonging is not exclusively related to camp”.

Rasem El-Madhoon, a Gazan poet and journalist living in Syria since 1970, says:

“A refugee camp has had more than one purpose and task. In the early years of exodus, it was a kind of a place to protect the Palestinian existence and self-expression.. a place where people met with one another and coexisted. Now it is no longer a prerequisite for a political belonging. Once the Palestinian institutions have been established, the importance of the refugee camp would be reduced”.

Finally, Ghazi El-Nasser, a Palestinian poet living in Dara’a wonders: “Has a camp ever been a pot to melt the Palestinians? Partly, yes.. It was the basis of the Palestinian revolution..!”

Here are some issues to be met and dealt with whenever anyone discusses the role and function of the refugee camp. To discuss the above stated issues pertaining to a camp is very necessary, though unfortunately it is out of the scope of this paper.

This chapter will deal with:

- VII. The Chronology of Camp Construction.
- II. The UNRWA and Camps.
- III. The Essence of a Camp.
- IV. Centrifugal and Centripetal migration.
- V. Have Camps been Transformed?

## **The Chronology of Camps**

The aftermath of exodus was naturally the spread of refugee gatherings all over Syria, from the south to the north, and from the west to the east. Family reunification, the search for an environment similar to the one in Palestine, and a resentment of residence in extremely remote areas led to the congregation of Palestinian refugees. Consequently remarkable refugee gatherings appeared. However camps appeared a short time later. Here is the chronology of camps and their types.

### **I. Deserted military barracks:**

The first places used as transitory residence places for refugees were deserted military barracks in Sweida, Aleppo, Homs and Hama.

#### ***A. In Sweida:***

To reduce the number of refugees living in the castle of Bosra or on its roofs, the Syrian authorities removed numbers of Palestinians to deserted military barracks near the castle of Sweida. By the beginning of 1949, a Palestinian gathering had appeared and continued to exist until 1954, when the refugees who were mostly from the villages to the south of Haifa decided to leave for Joubar near Damascus. UNRWA never built any school in Sweida.

#### ***B. In Homs:***

Trains carried refugees to Homs either from Tyre via Beirut, Riyak, Zabadani area or to Homs directly from Damascus. At first Al-Khalideyah neighbourhood witnessed the birth of the first Palestinian gathering in Homs. Refugees were later transferred to a camp on the roof of Homs citadel. With the help of the International Red Cross and local charities, the refugees were taken to deserted military barracks previously used by the French army during the mandate era. Walls were raised to divide the barracks into equal rooms. Thus a new camp was born in 1949.

#### ***C. In Hama:***

In September 1948, a train loaded with refugees on their way to Aleppo stopped at Hama railway station. After failing to persuade some of the refugees to get off and settle in Hama, a small plot was fabricated by the authorities. The train left the station leaving three carriages crowded with refugees in Hama. Cars arrived and took the refugees to Shurfa deserted barracks formerly used by the French army. Other refugees were settled in the citadel of Hama.

In 1949-1950, a new Palestinian camp was constructed in Hama, consisting mainly of earth huts. UNRWA provided the camp with services. The first extension of the camp northwards occurred in 1959-1960 when GAPAR granted inside Hama city pieces of land for housing. This part is more organized than the first one. The second extension of the camp occurred in 1971-1980 when more land was given to refugees for housing. Multiple-storied concrete buildings spread northwards. The diversity of places of origin in Palestine lessened the influence of tribal relations in this area.



#### ***D. In Aleppo:***

Refugees arrived in Aleppo by trains. Those who decided to settle there were taken by cars to deserted military barracks at Al-Nairab. Returnees from Edlep, Jarablus and other northern cities joined their brothers in the newly created camp.

At first, the camp was surrounded by wire fences and anyone who wanted to go out of the camp was obliged to get a written permission. The development of the housing in the camp began after it had spread outside the military barracks, namely after the petrol dollar boom. In 1962, GAPAR distributed pieces of land at Handarat (a hilly area) which developed and became Handarat refugee camp.

### **II. In Dara'a and Latakia:**

#### ***A. In Dara'a:***

Several refugee gatherings in Dara'a schools, mosques and villages such as Sida, Nuo'ameh and Bosra appeared. Early in 1949, deserted military barracks previously used by the French army were used to shelter the refugees. Then tents spread in the vicinity of those barracks. But one year later, the refugee camp was removed to its present place. It was very cold in winter. The tents were brushed with asphalt to prevent rain from leaking. Gradually huts spread here and there and managed to replace tents everywhere in the camp by 1954.

#### ***B. In Latakia:***

To remove refugees living in mosques, the Syrian authorities took the Palestinians to Al-Ramel area near the coast. Each family was allotted 144 square meters. A one hundred Syrian pounds assistance was paid for every room a refugee built. People were too frightened to protest against the resettlement.

### **III. In Damascus Area:**

The majority of Palestinian refugees settled in and around Damascus for several reasons. However different types of camps appeared at different times with different purposes.

#### **1. Necessity created four camps to the south, east and west of Damascus in 1949-1950:**

Khan Danoun: 25 Km. to the south of Damascus on the highway between Damascus and Dara'a, was established in 1949. Palestinian refugees, mainly from Salehiyah, Al-Dawarah, Al-Mullaha and Al-Khalisah, four villages in Al-Hula Valley, arrived in the area via the Golan Heights. The population of the camp rose from 1500 in 1948 to 3391 in 1982. Khan Danoun is one of the poorest Palestinian camps in Syria.

Sit-Zeinab: 15 Km. from Damascus. In 1982 the population of the camp rose to 4910 of whom 764 were born in Palestine, 2264 were born in the camp. Khan Esheih: After residence in transitory camps in the Golan Heights, refugees were brought to the camp. Tents were given to

families. Clan and tribal relations were taken into consideration when appointing mukhtaras. 47% of the population in the camp are below 15 years old. 67% are born in the camp, 27% are born in Palestine. School regularity is 74% for males and 75% for females. Economically active individuals are less than 24% of the population.

Jaramanah Camp: Refugees living in many villages to the east of Damascus built bowers in Jaramanah. GAPAR gave the refugees pieces of land in the area to build houses. Beams were granted freely. Refugees from Deir Sras, Eyoun Al-Semsem and Al-Ulecka were taken to Al-Ramadani upon arriving at Jaramana. However they were removed to several camps in and around Damascus.

The Qudoura Committee:

Sheikh Assa'ad Quadourah, the mufti of Safad before 1948 chaired the first Palestinian committee to combat resettlement in Syria. Founded in Damascus 1951, the committee included:

Sheikh Assa'ad Quadoura, chair  
Atif Al-Mawed Secretary  
Zaki Abdel-Raheem, Mohammed Said Al-Jada'e, Abdel-Majeed Al-Hassan, and Sharkawi.. etc.

The objectives of the committee:

1. To keep the refugee problem alive.
2. To remove refugees from mosques and improve the circumstances in which they lived.
3. To get in touch with Syrian officials and inform them of the difficulties the refugees faced.

Dr. Mustafa Al-Seba'ei, a Syrian lawyer and a prominent Moslem Brothers activist, provided the committee with an apartment to be used as an office. The committee managed to make contacts with high-ranking Syrian officials including Nazem Al-Qudsi, the Prime Minister, Sami Kabara, Interior Minister, and a few Syrian parliament members. MP Akram Al-Hourani, representing the Ba'eth Arab Socialist Party, played a role in supporting the committee.

It is believed that the committee had a hand in the explosion which destroyed the first building which was the first step in a resettlement project at Al-Qadam village near Damascus. According to Fayez Fawaz Al-Amoury, "After the first strike campaign against rations, UNRWA succeeded in bribing some members of the committee".

### ***B. The Alliance Camp: (Hay Al-Ameen)***

Nowadays the area extending from Bab-Musla to the Airport Square is known as Al-Ameen Quarter (Hay Al-Ameen). Included in this quarter are three smaller quarters: Al-Muslakh (Slaughter House), Hay Al-Magharebah (Al-Magharebah Quarter) and Haret El-Yahood (The Jews Alley). To remove Palestinian refugees living in mosques, schools, unfinished buildings

etc. a new refugee camp was founded. Families moved into tents, sometimes a family in tent, others more than that. There were public toilets for each part of the camp. A nearby school built in the 1840s was used for teaching. In 1951, heavy rain drifted tents. Families had to be evacuated to Al-Mowasah Hospital which remained unfinished for two months. In 1953-1954 GAPAR permitted refugees to build rooms in place of the tents. Wooden beams were freely provided. In 1956, refugees were informed that the camp would be eradicated and that refugees would be transferred to the newly born Yarmouk Camp. Each family was given 700 Syrian Pounds to build a house in Yarmouk Camp. On the other hand, Palestinians were allowed to build houses of earth and wood in both Al-Muslakh and Al-Magharebah quarters.

But the Ministry of Islamic Waqf which owned the land decided to have the refugees evacuated. In 1960, they were given pieces of land in Yarmouk Camp.

## **Resettlement Projects**

### **1. Al-Ramadani Camp**

In the early 1950s, resettlement plans were discussed a lot everywhere in Middle East, United Nations, U.S.A and Europe. Attempts were made to resettle Gazan refugees in Sinai in 1955. In Syria, resettlement projects were fabricated earlier. Fayez Fawaz Al-Ayedi remembers:

“In 1951, I was the driver of the area officer’s car, Haj Adel Hamad, who ordered me one day to get his car ready because he wanted to survey some state properties. The team consisted of Haj Hamad, Mawafak Al-Jundi (A Syrian representing GAPAR), Major Simon (representing UNRWA) and the director of the state properties department. An area in Dhmail called Al-Ramadani was chosen. Upon asking Haj Hamad, I was told that a spot to resettle refugees in was needed”.

However, in 1953, the construction of the camp was in progress, tents were built for workers employed by UNRWA which was in charge of the project. Eight artesian wells were dug. Tractors began preparing the land. In the meantime, GAPAR began looking for refugees to be settled in the camp. Besides a mosque and a school, a small patch of land to be used for agriculture was to be allotted to every resident of the camp provided that he would sign a document declaring openly that he had given up his ration card, that is he is no longer a refugee.

Twenty-four families were resettled in the camp. Each family was given 350 Syrian Pounds for the ration cards. Refugees bought sheep and cows. “When workers had refused to sell their cards, the UNRWA officer threatened that he would fire them from work. Two months later, petitions were presented to Akram Al-Hourani, who pressured UNRWA which surrendered and gave the inhabitants back their cards. UNRWA withdrew from the project which is now a refugee camp. However UNRWA dropped out heads of families from ration cards which were delivered to their wives. Saline water, strong sand storms and the unbearable climate conditions caused a rise of infant deaths and spread of diseases. The current population of the camp is less

than one thousand”.

Two other resettlement camps were less successful and were prematurely aborted. The first camp was at Dhaba’ah on the highway between Homs and Palmyra. The second one was at Al-Nasseriya in Yabroud.

## **2. Al-Etaibah Camp:**

On October 29, 1956, Israel had expelled the Palestinian villagers of Krad Al-Baquarah and El-Ghanameh to Syria. After living in Jbelainah and Sanaber in the Golan Heights, they were transferred to Etaibah. GAPAR had constructed the camp and UNRWA gave rations. But suddenly both of them left the camp. Dignitaries from the camp met the Syrian president Shukri Al-Quatli who ordered GAPAR to return to the camp. In 1957, the inhabitants left the camp to Sbeinah camp because it was very near to villages where refugees could work in agriculture.

## **3. Yarmouk Camp:**

The biggest refugee camp in Syria - Yarmouk Camp - was constructed to solve the problem of many refugee gatherings particularly, the Alliance Camp. First, two clusters of one-storey houses appeared: one along the road to Yalda, the nearest village to the camp; the other near the entrance of the camp. The first extension of the camp occurred in 1956-1957, when GAPAR distributed small pieces of land between 40 and 80 square meters to families mostly from the above-mentioned camps or from mosques. Seventeen parallel straight alleys running from the east to the west separated the rows of houses. Another six streets running from the south to the north ran through the houses. Each of these streets was given a name of a village or city in Palestine. As a consequence of the 1967 war, Yarmouk Camp extended for the second time. The third extension happened after the 1973 war.

Ever since 1968, a municipal council and a local committee has been appointed to be in charge of the municipal services. UNRWA does not consider it a camp.

In Yarmouk Camp Palestinians and non-Palestinians live together; the several extensions of the camp in all directions resulted in making Palestinians in some areas a minority. The combination of economic activity in the camp broke down all the walls separating the refugees from the host community. Here are some features of the economic activity in the camp:

- A. Paid work in the state formal or informal economy, the private sector, workshops, etc.
- B. Investment in land, small enterprises by individuals from the host country.
- C. Investment in small business, workshops and trade.
- D. Education for children as an investment for the future of the economy.

E. To send family members abroad primarily to the Gulf, before the Gulf War of 1991, or to Europe, Canada and Australia.. etc.

F. Some Palestinians own companies.

When compared with other refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon, Yarmouk camp has a more favourable general appearance with straight lighted streets and alleys; many storied buildings; an abundance of stores and small businesses, and finally a relatively high standard of living. However, this is deceptive and misleading when considering the status of this refugee gathering.

No doubt, UNRWA has the following definition in mind when it ceased to consider Yarmouk Camp as a camp. “To some extent, a refugee camp represents a Palestinian cultural and national island where social interactions with native inhabitants in the host community are minimal”. By this criterion, one can never come across a refugee camp in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, because the socio-economic developments helped extend the camps, remove their character as isolated islands and transformed them into shanty urban communities.

A refugee camp is a socio-economic and political environment which plays a vital role in preserving a refugee community and prevents its vanishing. It gradually helps them to cope with the new situation, at the beginning, and later helps them form a self awareness (a national identity) which includes pre-exodus factors embodying the continuity of existence through time, whereas new factors indicate the accumulation of experiences. Consequently a camp is a double-edged weapon. It enriches the national identity of Palestinians with new elements on one hand, and it might have a negative impact if the national identity has disintegrated whatever the reasons.

### **The Collective Memory in The Camp**

Contemporary anthropological research suggests that a collective memory is merely a defensive action that helps to sustain an identity through a common recollection of history. Since the nearest or contemporary history of a group of refugees in general, consists of dispersion, homelessness and the destruction of the socio-economic and political basis of a pre-refugee community, that group would start making a collective memory of the post refugee era and through regression, directly to the pre-refugee era.

Further, anthropological studies stress that the relationship between refugees and the reconstruction of national awareness would be more self-expressive among refugees living in camps than those who live outside them. Palestinian refugees, however, have proved the ability of human beings to sail among difficult circumstances in order to build their own world which might be in disagreement with the general historical course of events and transform obstacles into helpful things.

In addition, refugees have so far managed to transform themselves into coherent groups in spite of the fact that they lived in circumstances to which they had never been accustomed. They manifested a remarkable capacity for self-organization and adaptation in a community which has new norms and rules.

Still, this process had gone concurrently with another one, namely, the formation of a collective memory in so exceptional circumstances that homeland was no more a territorial reality or an institution but a vision or a dream. Consequently, the urgent task was a common recollection of the national past. The hope or even the dream of return, which is a common factor among refugees, helped rejuvenate political, educational and human activity and create a refugee mentality which adapted itself to the new situation, simplifying its complex components as much as possible. So refugees had preserved their self-respect and acquired an incredible ability to stand unbearable conditions. Without the hope of return, refugees would have been changed into a welter of human wreckage hopeless to survive.

Refugees started constructing a collective memory once they had squatted in front of the tents recollecting their villages, recalling their own past in front of their families, sons and grandchildren who would sit down listening. Recollections would always be about life in pre-1948 villages and towns in Palestine. In the meantime, methods of life and work would be described accurately and in detail including dates, examples, myths, land, crops, the way to work the land and its requirements. It would be seasons, the same for festivals, occasions, traditions, national history of the village and its role in the 1929, 1936, 1939, 1948 revolutions and wars. Martyrs and heroes would also be respectfully mentioned. Over years, the construction of a collective memory had become part of a complex process aiming at creating a national collective memory. The task of the generations born away from Palestine became to talk to their sons and grandsons about oranges in Palestine, its seasons and feasts.

Such talks could be extended so as to include memories about the camp which became a symbol of Palestine in Diaspora. These talks would play a great role in strengthening the spirit of defiance and struggle especially once they were concluded with a wish of the elder persons to die or be buried in Palestine.

Outside the camp the construction of a collective memory would be a process taking place completely inside the Palestinian houses. Father and mother would recall their locality in Palestine. Professor Ahmad Barqawi says:

“We came to live in Yarmouk Camp years later. Thanks to my father from Toulkarem and my mother, from Jaffa, we were provided with memories which shaped our consciousness so that we are different from others, we live in a city which is not ours. You are sometimes called “Falastini” (Palestinian or “Laje’e” Refugee)”.

## **A Real or Imagined Homeland?**

The 1948 exodus and the dispersion of the greater parts of Palestinians who became helpless and homeless refugees waiting aid from UNRWA, all these things were a blow to self-respect and self-value. The manifestation of such a blow took the shape of a collective retrogression, the rejection of the new situation at least mentally and emotionally and a tendency to idealize the past.

The more circumstances became harsh and unbearable the more retrogression was a safe haven for the refugees. Psychologically, human beings in general and refugees in particular tend to create an imagined identity and to make contacts and relations with persons they had never met with before or would not meet in the near future. Bearing in mind that the majority of refugees in a camp are peasants, farmers or bedouins, one would find out that the mechanisms of creating an identity tend to follow this process.

1. Self-introduction in the camp takes place on the basis of the village of origin in Palestine.
2. The means of constructing a popular memory is oral narratives and speeches about one's village.
3. An identity, or an imagined homeland, becomes inseparable from the village of origin. Further, the imagined homeland or Palestine would originally start from the village.
4. Because the reference in the tales or narratives or memories is not the state or the homeland in general, but the village, the natural relation between a city and the countryside is reversed. Big Palestinian cities such as Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, Acre, would be looked upon through their relations to that village, the village in mind.

The availability of video tapes, cinema or TV films about Palestine in general and the majority of Palestinian villages would imply the withdrawal of the imagined homeland for the advantage of the real one.

## **UNRWA and the Camps**

Because of UNRWA, the Palestinian refugees were excluded from the Constitution of the International Refugee Organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Charter for Refugees in 1951. Paragraph D-1 of this charter states openly, "This charter is not applicable on those persons who had become refugees and enjoyed the protection of UN organizations", namely UNRWA. Further, the Palestinian refugees were deprived of coverage by The Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, 1954, and The International Convention of Civil and Political Rights 1966.

After civil wars had broken out, many persons were forced to flee their localities to live in other

areas inside their countries. According to International law such persons are referred to as “Internally Displaced Persons”.

UNRWA played a great humanitarian role in the survival of refugees in the camps, the institutionalization of the camps themselves, providing services, to every camp in Syria. Except for Yarmouk Camp where there is a municipal council and a local committee related to GAPAR, UNRWA is in charge of health, education, sewerage, collection of rubbish, digging artesian water wells, building schools, etc. UNRWA health services saved refugees in Syria from epidemics, and infectious diseases. The results of these services are tangible in the shape of the decrease of infant mortality, improvement in the health services and the high educational standard of refugees when compared to the citizens of host countries.

The majority of the Palestinian refugees accept UNRWA services and say that they are indispensable though no one hides resentment over the cut in UNRWA services. There is a common belief among refugees in Syrian camps and non-camp gatherings that such cuts in UNRWA services are politically motivated.

According to the survey, the greatest part of the Palestinian refugees in Syria believe that the role played by UNRWA should continue, and that its services should continue until a final and lasting solution of the refugee problem has been reached. For refugees, UNRWA has never been looked upon as a source of international assistance, because first and above all it is the material manifestation of the international commitment towards the refugee problem, because it was founded according to UN General assembly Resolution 194 of 1948 which recognizes the right of refugees to return to their homeland and their right to compensation.

“UNRWA should be restructured” the Palestinian refugees in Syria reiterate time and again.

In the past, UNRWA was very often an apparatus to implement international programs which were not necessarily in agreement with the Palestinian refugees interests, namely the resettlement projects. “Corruption spread everywhere in UNRWA to such an extent that the local officials are a part of the corruption spreading in host countries”. The latest pay rise of 50 -75% issued in August 1998 had many meanings. A very tiny stratum of officials in UNRWA benefited from that rise. The average monthly pay of those who benefited is 32-35 thousand Syrian pounds. Upon reviewing the names of the concerned officials some allege that all of them are responsible for services which were cut by UNRWA, and that they facilitated the UNRWA task and consequently deserved bribery.

The most controversial question in the questionnaire was about the impact of the ration card on the psychology of Palestinian individuals. Naturally Palestinians would look back to the early years of refugeehood, camp life and dependency in anger. “Suddenly, UNRWA officials became the new masters of the camp. One could not help being enraged by their provocations. Yet we had to give in”, a 71 year old woman told me.



“Surely we were humiliated,” Hassan Sami Yausef, a script writer and novelist, remembers. “When we were kids we had to go to get UNRWA milk rations. Now, after I have grown old and travelled abroad a lot I recall my childhood and feel the humiliation we underwent. This card embodies injustice”.

The young generation of refugees has a different approach to the ration card. Rations disappeared, friction with UNRWA officials during the distribution of rations disappeared also. The only meaning of a ration card is its being issued by UNRWA and its connection with the UN General Assembly Resolution 194 in 1948.

## **The Essence of a Camp**

### ***1. Sociologically:***

Unlike Israeli settlements, kibbutzim and moshavim, which are the real materialization of premeditated communities whose constituencies are chosen sociologically, religiously, ethnically and politically to implement certain purposes in definite locations, a refugee camp is a transitory shelter, a milieu of adaptation and above all survival. Over years, it has become a plot in which people from various localities in Palestine interacted to survive. Several sociological transformations took place inside the camp: a demographic growth, an enhancement of skills and qualities, and a comprehensive economic change.

Indoctrination inside the camp has been mainly preoccupied with the preservation of a Palestinian self-consciousness and the promotion of national identity. This should never mean that Palestinian non-camp gatherings were disengaged with this process.

### ***2. Economically:***

The nature of economic relations between the refugee camps, on one hand, and the host communities was based on wage labour, though the economic field in which this activity took place differed from a camp to another.

In Khan Esheikh, for instance, people traveled from one area to another to work in agriculture. In Homs, Palestinians formed a part of the Syrian working-class in the factories around the city. Some economic activities take place inside the camp itself in the form of shops, small businesses, and workshops. UNRWA and the P.L.O helped expand the level of economic activity inside the camp.

### **3. Politically:**

A camp has bestowed upon its inhabitants a sensation of a common character based on a common destiny, experience, policy, self-consciousness, collective interests and finally an ability to deal with changes through their ramifications on the camp as a whole. Here are some examples:

- a. Sieges, curfews, air raids, collective punishments and massacres.
- b. Complete or partial destruction of camps, during the early years of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the civil war in Lebanon.
- c. The role the camp played in the Palestinian national politics, especially after the establishment of the P.L.O and the start of the Palestinian revolution is so great that it is no exaggeration to state that camps, once upon a time, constituted the breeding ground for Palestinian nationalism.
- d. Considering a camp as a reminder of the refugee problem, Israeli officials and writers never hid their wish to see the end of camps.

### **Migration:**

The demographic structure of Palestinian gatherings (camps and non-camps) underwent great changes during the years which followed the establishment of camps. A multiform of migration took place.

- a. A centrifugal migration towards the camp from various non-camp gatherings, consequently some of these gatherings vanished completely, e.g. the gathering in Sweida, Edlip, Jarablus.. etc.
- b. Some Palestinian gatherings grew bigger at the expense of other gatherings. Waves of migration from Hama camp came to Jouber, for instance.
- c. The appearance of Yarmouk Camp caused a demographic upheaval in most refugee gatherings around Damascus.
- d. The appearance of camps near Syrian cities encouraged non-Palestinian migrants to settle in the peripheries of the camps.

Sbeinah camp is a very good example, because the camp is situated in an industrial area. The increase of the population created more investment opportunities.

On the other hand, a centripetal migration occurred. Mainly such a tendency was an indicator of the positive changes in the social structure of a camp. The directions of this migration are:

1. From a camp to the area surrounding it.
2. From a camp to another, especially from Yarmouk Camp to Sbeinah or Sit Zeinab.
3. New non-camp Palestinian gatherings appeared in Husseiniyah, Thiyabieh ..etc.

The daily contacts and incorporation with the community of the host country had raised the maturity of the Palestinian community in the camp. Professor Yousef Salameh noted: “Today, a camp is more mature and rational than ever because Palestinians, regardless of the educational and economic standards, had manifested a deep rationality in formulating their attitude towards Palestinian and Arab developments”.

### **Have Camps Been Transformed?**

This controversy about a camp, its appearance, and future is a matter of conceptualization.

1. A camp is a place to reproduce a community and communal life through marriage, social relations and institutions, economic relations, alliances and disputes.. etc. Yet all these forms of activities are related to time and place and have political content, that is, they are inseparable from Palestinian history and politics.

2. The supposition that a Palestinian camp reproduces a Palestinian village presumably depends upon some axioms such as:

- a) residents of Palestinian camps are mainly from rural areas;
- b) their settlement in camps is more or less based on tribal or family grounds;
- c) the camp institutions, especially the mukhtars, are appointed after taking into consideration tribal and family balance of power within the camp;
- d) some local habits, traditions, modalities of self-expressions, pronunciation, or even extremely local dialects have survived fifty years of exodus in the camp;
- e) The capacity of certain extremely rural marriage rituals, folklore songs, dances, and dabka have the chance to survive only in camps;
- f) The availability of extended family households is a remarkable characteristic of rural traditions in some camps.

Some of the above-mentioned indicators of a village community can be found in such camps as Khan Danoun, Sit Zeinab, Khan Esheikh or even Yarmouk Camp. Further, some writers believe that Yarmouk Camp is exceptional whereas the other camps really do reproduce a Palestinian village because the inhabitants of the camp have the following factors in common:

- \_ Common interest.
- \_ Similar economic circumstances.
- \_ Comparatively similar education standards.
- \_ Identical psychological making up.
- \_ Identical outlooks towards the surrounding milieu.

The abstract and eclectic nature of such arguments paves the way to misleading conclusions. A refugee camp is different from a village because the latter is inseparable from both agriculture and land ownership both of which refugees are deprived of. Possibly some refugees are agrarian workers but not peasants and here is the second difference.

3. Everything moves, grows, and becomes bigger, and so does a refugee camp. Ever since the early days after its birth, a refugee camp bears its internal non-antagonistic contradictions which should lead to its evolution on various levels. Demographically, once the population increases new houses have to be built, additional small businesses should appear and consequently more challenges and difficulties should be overcome.

To illustrate, here are some examples.

A welter of rural families from different areas in Palestine settled together in a camp. Automatically this would lead to the collapse of village walls step by step, the deceleration of endogamy, the slackening of families ties and the weakness of tribal institutions. Further, the restructuring of inter-family relations is a consequence of female labour in factories, schools, offices, companies or on farms and the consequent economic independence of women. However some discussants and interviewees give the following argument to prove the transfiguration of a camp.

- Today, a camp is much more comparable to a town or city. Material interests are extremely important. A camp is centripetal for Damascene craftsmen and merchants,.. etc.
- A camp is no longer a socially, economically and psychologically coherent unit sharing the poverty and oppression complexes. Yarmouk Camp plays the role of a great Palestinian city in Diaspora while the other camps represent the countryside.
- “I see a different camp. What happened could never be a rationalization of what had been irrational. We (Yarmouk Camp with its cars, business centers, Wedding halls, ..etc.) are the biggest Palestinian city in Diaspora. A camp means poverty, barefoot children, nakedness, rooms with earth or cane roofs ..etc”.

Argument number one has some valid points but they are not exclusively relevant to Palestinian refugee camps because in villages nowadays there is a change of values and community priorities.

However, argument number two speaks of coherence based on homelessness, poverty and dispersion. Over years, circumstances have changed and one should look for other criteria of coherence.

Finally, the third statement raises questions pertaining to the economic development in Syria in general and Damascus in particular. Mr. Abdu Al-Assadi was very accurate when he wrote to me:

“Considering the high standard of construction and services in Yarmouk Camp, one should look upon the camp as an integral part of Damascus city. The camp has become an important commercial center”.

What is at stake is the essence of the camp not merely its appearance. The main question is

whether the replacement of a tent by a house changes or even nullifies its essence. Here the refugee camp is unanimously considered a symbol of refugeehood. Whatever his house might be a tent or a palace in Yarmouk Camp, the dweller of that place is a refugee reminded every hour of every day of his dehumanization and inferiority.

## Endnotes

1. Professor Ibrahim Shehabi is a former PNC member. As a professor at Damascus University, Dr. Shehabi worked and wrote a lot about the Palestinian problem. He was a member of the PNC foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by Khalid Al-Hassan. Interviewed by author.
2. Hassan Hameed. Interviewed by author.
3. Rasem Al-Madhoun, fifty-two years old, was born at Al-Majdal, Gaza district. He came to Syria in 1971. He is a poet and a journalist , living now in Dara'a. Interviewed by author.
4. Ghazi Al-Naser is a 51 year old retired teacher of Arabic. He is a poet. His original village is Ballad El-Sheikh. He is a father of four children. Now he is living in Dara'a Camp. Interviewed by author.
5. Hussein Abu Jaida, a former PLA officer, is currently a teacher of philosophy. He migrated to Toulkarem, then to Jordan. His family settled in Sweida for a while, then moved to Joubar near Damascus. Now he is living in Yarmouk Camp. interviewed by author.
6. Atif Hayatli, interviewed by author.
7. Younes Khatab is a teacher of English in UNRWA schools. He lived in Hama. Now he is living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by author.
8. Arafat Murad is a 59 year old, teacher of English living in Aleppo. His original village in Palestine is Tarshiha. He is a father of four children. Interviewed by author.
9. Mahmoud Abu Abed, 61 years old, is a teacher of Arabic Language, living in Dara'a. He was as born at Ejzem Haifa district. He is a father of ten children. Also: Ghazi Al-Naser. Interviewed by author.
10. Salah Saleh Raya is an 85 year old man bom in Tiberias. He served in the police forces before 1948. After the exodus, he was employed by GAPAR and served in Latakia. Now he is living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by author.
11. Ahmad Hallawah, 42 year old teacher of English, was born at Khan-Danoun Camp. His tribe came from Al-Hula Valley to the Golan Hights, and then settled in Khan-Danoun Camp. Interviewed by author. Also see P.L.O Economic Department, PCBSNR. Statistical Surveys, 1, 82, p.3.
12. See P.L.O. Economic Department, PCBSNR. Statistical Survey, No 5/82, p.23.

13. See P.L.O. Economic Department, PCBSNR. Statistical Survey, No 4/82, p.20.
14. See P.L.O. Economic Department, PCBSNR. Statistical Survey, No 4/82, p.22.
15. An Interview with Atif Al-Mawed, the secretary of the Committee. August, 16, 1998.
16. Fayez Fawaz Al-Ayidi, is a 74 year old man living in Yarmouk Camp. His original village is Loubya. He migrated to Syria via Lebanon. Later he was employed by GAPAR as a driver. Interviewed by author, on May, 2, 1998.
17. Mohmmad Mahmoud Al-kurdi, Interviewed by author.
18. Suleiman Dabagh, is a 51 year old writer. Having graduated from Damascus University, Sociology Department, he got his M.A from Damascus University. Now he is living in Yarmouk Camp. His original village is Ballad El-Sheikh. Interviewed by author.
19. Fayez Fawaz Al-Ayidi, Interviewed by author.
20. Assa'ad Ayed Eisa is a 72 year old worker from Loubya. He was one of the workers who constructed Al-Ramadani refugees camp. When his sons joined Damascus University, he moved to Yarmouk Camp where he is now living. Interviewed by author.
21. Hussein Abdel Ghani and Awad Ali Mohammad Abed El-Hadi, Interviewed by author. June 16, 1998.
22. Hamad Said Al-Mawed, Al-Mukhayam wa Al-Hawyah Al-Falastinia, (The Camp and the Palestinian Identity). Samed Economist, No. 113, Summer, 1998. pp.189-190.
23. Signe Gilen, Arc Hovdenak, Rania Maktabi, Jon Pedersen and Dag Tuastad, Finding ways, Palestinian Coping Strategies in Changing Environments, Fafu report 177, 1994, p.49.
24. Anderson, B, Imagined Communities, London and New York, Verso Press, 1994, p.7.
25. Ibid.
26. Malki, Context of Consciousness, Local Conditions For the Foundation of Historical and National thought Among Huto Refugees in Tanzania, National Ideologies and Production of National Cultures. R. Fax. Taken from Randa Farah p.256.
27. Warmer. D. Repatriation and the Meaning of Retuming Home, Journal of Refugee Studies, 1994, p.169.
28. Farah, R. Crossing Boundaries, Reconstruction of Palestinian Identities in Al-Baqua'a

Refugee Camp. Jourdan, pp.261-262 .

29. Ahmad Barkawi is a fifty year old professor of philosophy at Damascus University. He studied at Damascus and Moscow Universities. His original village in Palestine is Thenabah, Toulkarem district. He lived many years in Yarmouk Camp before moving to Ma'azamieh near Damascus. Interviewed by author.

30. Anderson. B. Opp. Cit. p.

31. Ibid.

32. Guy S. Goodwin-Gill. The Refugee in International law. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, pp.2-4.

33. Shiblak, Abbas. Residency Status and Civil Rights of the Palestinian Refugees in Arab Countries, Journal of Palestine Studies, vol. XXV, No.3. Spring 1996, pp.86-95.

34. There were strikes and sit-in-strikes in refugee camps in Syria in summer 1996. Also there were strikes in Damascus camps specially UNRWA schools in August 1998.

35. Professor Yousef Salameh, 52 years old, was born at Um Ez-Zeinat, Haifa district, studied at Damascus University and Cairo University. Now, he is a professor at Damascus University. He lives at Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed my author.

36. UNRWA employees tell jokes that those who did not get rise in pay will be given solarium prizes!

37. Haleemah Dasouki, Interviewed by author.

38. Hassan Sami Al-Yousefi is a 53 year old novelist and script writer living in Yarmouk Camp. He was three years old when his family left Loubya, his village. He studied in Damascus and Moscow. His novels are: The Palestinian. 1988, A Boat in 1990, A Letter to Fatemah in 1996 and The Gate of Heaven in 1998., Interviewed by author.

39. For more information see Hamad Said Al-Mawed, Indoctrination In Israel, Cyprus, 1993.

40. The data were collected during our field research.

41. These factors are related to refugee camps in Lebanon.

42. Shlomo Gazit, The Palestinian Refugee Problem, Jaffee Center For Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1996, pp.4-7.



43. Mark Heller and Sari Nasseibih, No Trumpet, No Drums, A Two-State Settlement of the Israeli Palestinian Conflict, Foundation for Middle East peace. p.88.
44. These data were collected during the field research.
45. Hassan Hameed, Interviewed by author.
46. Professor Yousef Salameh. Interviewed by author.
47. This issue was raised in our essay “A Camp and National Identity”, opp. cit.
48. Hassan Hameed, Interviewed by author.
49. Such hypotheses are discussed when referring to Yarmouk Camp in particular.
50. Rasem Al-Madhoon, Interviewed by author.
51. Nabeel Mahmoud Al-Sahli is a 41 year old, writer and researcher from Ballad El-Sheikh, working at PCBSNR in Damascus. He lives in Damascus. Interviewed by author.
52. Hassan Sami Yousif, Interviewed by author.
53. Abdu Al-Assadi is a 35 year old writer and researcher. His is a very well known family in Safad. He was bom and brought up in Damascus city. After getting married, he moved to Yarmouk Camp where he is now living.. Interviewed by author.

## **IV The Characteristics of the Palestinian Refugee Community in Syria**

This chapter is intended to furnish the reader with data about the Palestinian Community in Syria and shed some light on its main characteristics. This cannot be done in isolation from the general circumstances governing the life and activities of this community either in relation to the host country or to the conditions in which the Palestinian people as a whole are living.

The following items will be discussed:

- I. The Demographic Profile
- II. Labour power
- III. Health
- IV. Education
- V. Legal Status

### **I. The Demographic Profile**

#### *An Introductory Note*

To say that no one ever has so far given the accurate number of the Palestinians in Syria is no exaggeration. The few research studies and essays on this subject give us a welter of demographic data.

Here are some examples:

2. Nabeel Al-Sahli published research entitled “The Palestinians in Syria - Demographic, Social and Economic Indicators” (Ram Al-Allah, Palestine, 1996). On page 11, the writer states that in 1995 there were 340,000 refugees in Syria.
3. In his essay “The Palestinians in Syria and the Peace Process” in the Journal of Palestine studies, No.23 fall 1996 p.102, Sari Hanafi states that by 1995, there were 329,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria.
4. Dr. S.H. Abu Sitta, the author of “The Palestinian Nakba, The Register of the Depopulated Localities in Palestine” 1997, says that by 1997 there were 444,000 Palestinians in Syria (p16).
5. A.S. Younis, whose research is entitled “Palestinian Women in Refugee Camps in Syria”, August, 1997, believes that there are 346,000 Palestinians in Syria.

6. UNRWA in a pamphlet issued by the Public Information Department in February 1998, says that by 31.12.1997, there were 362,096 Palestinians in Syria.
7. The General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees in Damascus estimated that at the end of 1996 there were 345,000 Palestinians in Syria.
8. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and Natural Resources issued its latest volume in 1994 stating that the number of Palestinians in Syria was 298,212 .(p. 39).

To do justice to the above-mentioned sources, one should clearly state that the divergence of data has to do with the complications pertaining to refugee status and the political developments in the Middle East, on one hand and the two main establishments dealing with the refugees, namely UNRWA and GAPAR.

#### **A. UNRWA:**

According to UNRWA refugees are “Persons whose normal residence was Palestine during the period of 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost their houses and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict and took refuge in one of the countries or areas where UNRWA provides relief and their direct descendants through the male line”.

According to its definition of a refugee, many categories of individuals are excluded:

1. Refugees who are living in countries outside the field of the activities of UNRWA, such as Iraq and Egypt
2. Refugees expelled from their villages but still living in Israel. Estimates say that there are 180,000 originally from the 418 demolished villages.
3. Individuals who left Palestine before May 1948 to any other country.
4. Persons who could not avail themselves of the time limit fixed by UNRWA for registration.
5. Persons who were not in need of UNRWA services and consequently were not registered as refugees.
6. Persons who, for political motives, refused to be registered by UNRWA.
7. The inhabitants of two Palestinian villages in the demilitarized zone who were expelled by Israel in October 1956 and had never been recognized by UNRWA as refugees.

Categories D, E and F include, according to an ex-senior official in GAPAR, approximately 5000

persons. But a former registration officer in UNRWA told me that the number is not less than 15000 persons.

But category G includes more than 7000 refugees living in camps near Damascus and Dara' a.

## **B. GAPAR registration:**

Being a governmental department in charge of refugees in Syria, GAPAR registers only refugees who have Syrian Travel Documents and Syrian Provisional identity cards. However, because a Palestinian can live in Syria without a residency permit, thousands came from Jordan, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. They work mainly with the P.L.O and other Palestinian organizations. Those are excluded from GAPAR demographic data. It is believed that there are 45,000 Palestinians with de facto residency in Syria.

## **2. Demographic Distribution of Palestinians in Syria**

Workability and the non-availability of accurate demographic data should imply the adoption of GAPAR data as a basis of this study.

According to GAPAR data, 85,000 Palestinian refugees settled in Syria by the end of 1948. In 1960 the number became 126,662 and in 1989, the refugee population rose to 296,508. By the end of 1998, the number of refugees was 366,493. GAPAR data also shows that there will be 410,000 Palestinians in Syria by 2000, a number which will increase to 450,000 by the end of the year 2005. UNRWA data shows that at the end of 1998, the number of Palestinians in Syria was 365,000. By the end of June 1999, the number reached 374,521 and will increase to about 399,000 by 2000. By the end of 2005, there will 463,000 Palestinians in Syria according to UNRWA statistics. It is important to note that the population growth is due to increased birth rate, not immigration.

Nowadays, the Palestinian refugees represent 2.4 percent of the country's total population and 11 percent of the refugees registered by UNRWA. There are 14 refugee camps in Syria four of which are not recognized by UNRWA. These are Yarmouk Camp in Damascus, Handarat in Aleppo, Latakia camp, and Ramadani camp. In 1998 about 300,000 refugees were living in camps in Syria according to PCBSNR. But UNRWA data state that 30 percent of the refugees live in camps in Syria. This table shows their geographical location and population.

**Table 1**

	Name of Camp	Population	Geographical location
1	Neirab	16 615	Aleppo
2	Handarat*	2500	Aleppo
3	Hama	7 033	Hama
4	Homs	13 168	Homs
5	Ramel*	8148	Lattakia
6	Qabr essit	12 467	Damascus
7	Jaramana	9 065	Damascus
8	Khan Eshieh	15 040	Damascus
9	Sbeinah	15 255	Damascus
10	Khan Danoun	7 841	Damascus
11	Dara'a	5 683	Dara'a
12	Dara'a Emergency	5 268	Dara'a
13	Yarmouk Camp*	120 000	Damascus
14	Ramadani*	1000	Damascus

**Source: Al-Sahli, N.M.,Al-Majdal, March 1999, pp.15-18**

The population of the four camps, Yarmouk, Handarat, Al-Ramel and Ramadani are approximations because they were not included in many refugee camps population statistics published by UNRWA Headquarters in Damascus or Vienna .

A study of the distribution of the refugee population in Syria by place of origin in pre-1948 Palestine reveals that the majority came from Galilee.

**Table II****The distribution of Palestinians in Syria by place of origin in Palestine 1948  
as at December 31, 1996**

<b>District</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Safad	137551	39.81
Haifa	76440	22.12
Tiberias	56867	16.46
Acre	26823	7.76
Jaffa	17679	5.1
Nazareth	16612	4.8
Jerusalem	3006	0.87
Lod	3060	0.88
Beisan	2217	0.64
Gaza	1525	0.44
Tulkarem	854	0.24
Nablus	191	0.005
Jenin	358	0.1

**Source: A private document prepared by GAPAR. Damascus, 1997**

But when we study the distribution of refugees by the area of settlement in Syria, we find that the majority of Palestinians, that is about 66.89 percent settled in Damascus district.

**Table III**

District	Number	Percentage
Damascus	231,084	66.89
Quneitra	29,545	8.55
Dara'a	26,801	7.75
Homs	12,232	4.69
Hama	7,260	3.8
Aleppo	26,386	7.63
Latakia	8,148	2.35

**Source: A Private document prepared by GAPAR, Damascus, 1997**

Surveys indicate that the majority of refugees from Safad and Nazareth were peasants and farmers and settled or are now settling in camps in Damascus, Dara'a and Homs and around them, whereas the refugees who came from the coastal area in Palestine preferred to live on the coast in Lattakia. However one has to bear in mind that the refugees did not have the opportunity to choose the place in which they could settle.

### **3. The demographic structure of the Palestinian Community in Syria:**

In general the demographic structure of the Palestinian refugee community in Syria is not different from that of the host country nor the Palestinian society in general. Here are some examples:

1. A high ratio of natural increase. Generally a Palestinian woman gives birth six times in her life. This means that the net increase is 3.7 percent a year. In other words, according to GAPAR, in the period between January 1st and December 31st 1996, there were 9,015 live births and 1,178 deaths, that is an increase by 7,037 persons a year.
2. The age group between 1-15 years is the largest and includes about 43.2 percent of the population. This causes a high ratio of dependency.
3. The distribution of the population by sex indicates there are 104 males for 100 females. Possibly this is a consequence of the deceleration of migration.
4. The surveys carried out in 1995 show a decline in marriage events which were no more than 1,402 in the twelve months of the year 1996 whereas there were 2,087 marriage

events in 1992. On the other hand there were 106 divorce cases in 1992 and 105 cases in 1996. Perhaps the 1996 data are inaccurate.

This above-mentioned demographic characteristics are common in all developing countries.

## **II. Manpower, Labour and unemployment:**

- A. Manpower is defined as the strata of the population who are able to work profitably. Accordingly, children, students, housewives, disabled persons, pensioners and old aged persons are excluded.

Surveys show that in Syria, the Palestinian man power is 70.3 percent of the population, though the labor force does not exceed 28.7 percent of manpower, one tenth of which is child labor. This is because 9.8 percent-of the female man power are included in the labor force, while the male ratio is 47.7 percent. An analysis of the structure of the female strata excluded from the labor force shows that: 48 percent are housewives, 44.3 percent are students, 1.5 percent are self- sustained, 1.4 percent retired persons and finally 0.8 disabled.

- B. Characteristics of the workforce in the Palestinian community in Syria:

1. The most remarkable characteristic of the Palestinian work force in Syria is that it constitutes a part of the work power in Syria that it does not play a vital role in Syria because of its relatively small size; that there is a very great similarity in the characteristics of both the Palestinian and Syrian work force; that the latter is having a dominant position, and finally it is not workable to develop a strategy for the work force in the refugee camps alone because the Palestinian work force has never been an independent entity. Instead it is an integral part of the Syrian work force at large.

2. A comparison between the data obtained from a survey of the Palestinian work force in 1988 and 1995 reveals the following:

- a) There is a current increase in the participation of children in the work force:



**Table IV****The distribution of child labor by age group and sex**

Age Group	Male		Female	
	1988	1995	1998	1995
10-14	1	1.3	0.8	0.6
15-19	10	10.9	9.9	6.5
20-59	84.1	83.6	86.6	92.3
60+	4.6	4.2	3	0.6

**Source: Al-Mughrabi, Randa, Characteristics of Palestinian Workers in Syria PCBSNR, and Unicef, June 1996, p.8**

The above-mentioned data show, beyond any doubt, the impact of the economic situation in Syria on the Palestinians.

- b) The distribution of the workforce by the economic branch shows a decrease in those who work in the administrative branch:

**Table V**

The Economic Branch	1988	1995
Craftsmen and technicians	19	19.4
Managers and management	1	0.5
Staff		
Clerks	4.8	2.8
Business	6.7	6.8
Services	21.1	18
Industry	45.9	51
Agriculture	1.8	1.5

**Source: Younis, Ahmad Said, \*Planning Human Resources and Workforce, The Palestinian Labor Power as a Model+ PCBSNR and Unicef, June, 1996, p.p. 19-20.**

There is a minor decrease in the percentage of workers in the services and crafts. This is one of the results obtained from the survey carried out in 1996 and covered a sample comprising 45869 persons.

**Table VI**

The Economic Branch	The Workers	The Percentage
Industry	23,392	51
Craftsmen and technicians	8,900	19
Services	8,256	18
Business	3,165	6.9
Clerks and official	1,284	2.8
Agriculture	642	1.4
Admin Personnel	229	0.5

**Source: Younis, Ahmad Said, opp. cit. p.31**

- c) The education status of the workforce:  
The distribution of the workforce by education status shows that the great part of the labourers has a low standard of education; 52 percent can read and write; 26 percent have secondary certificates; 15 percent have diplomas and finally less than seven percent have university degrees.

### **C. The Female Work force**

Contrary to the expectations of many Palestinian researchers, the female workforce ratio is very low in general and is lower than its counterpart in the Syrian society -- 9.8 percent and 10 percent respectively. Besides, there is a current drop in the ratio of female workforce from 11.8 percent in 1988 to 9.8 in 1995. Yet the relatively high percentage of female workforce in Syria when compared with that of the Palestinians has something to do with Syrian female workforce in agriculture in rural areas.

The characteristics of Palestinian female workforce in Syria:

- A. higher percentage of unmarried women only 15 percent in comparison to 13.1 percent for married women. But due to the current economic circumstances there is a rise in the married woman percentage.

- B. Surveys indicate that there is a rise in the percentage of educated women in the female workforce. Fifty percent of women who have a secondary certificate are included in the female workforce whereas less than 4 percent of the female workforce are illiterate.
- C. The Wages: A 350% rise in the wage of woman was materialized in the period from 1988-1995. The highest wages for technicians, administrative and crafts woman are 5600 Syrian Pounds in comparison to 2250 Syrian pounds for workers in agriculture (Excluded are UNRWA employees).
- D. The distribution of female workers by economic branch:

One notices a rise in the workers in the administrative technical and clerical branches. The following table shows the distribution in 1988 and 1995.

**Table VII**

The Economic Branch	1988	1995
The administrative technical and crafts	40.4	62.3
Agriculture	7.3	1.3
Services	11.3	7.3
Production (Industry)	27.6	20.5
Business	3.5	0.7

**Source: Younis, Ahmad Said, Palestinian Women in Refugee Camps in Syria, PCBSNR and Unicef. August, 1997, p.18.**

However, a survey carried out in 1997 covering 2,000 families comprising 3,392 women gave the following results: 5.6 % work in agriculture, 0.4% work in mining, 26.5% in industry, 0.4 in electricity, 0.6% in building, 3.3% in transport in storage, 2.5% in bank services, and 59.5% in services.

**Palestinian Children in the Labour Market:**

Poverty, school irregularity and the current economic circumstances in Syria are the reasons for the current increase in child labour. Two surveys were carried out in this regard, the first in 1988 and the second in 1995.

The sample included 9,011 children 4,571 males and 4,438 females. The data obtained show that

children constituted 7.8 percent of the work power in 1988. This ratio rose to 8 percent in 1995.

All male children workers were unmarried whereas 4.5 percent of the female children workers were married. These were the data of the 1988 survey. But in 1995, all the children workers, males and females, were unmarried.

An analysis of child workers by education status and age group shows the following:

**Table VIII**

Year	Age Group	Sex	Illiterate	read/write	elementary
1988	36-46	male	17.6	85.8	23.6
		female	33.6	33.4	33.3
1995	36-46	male	-	58.41	41.4
		female	-		
1988	15-17	male	5.1	17.8	
		female	13.6	58.9	
1995	15-17	male	2.82	68.88	2.3
		female			-

**Source: Abu Al-Hassan, Ahmad, Palestinian Child Labor in Refugee Camps, p.6.**

The distribution of children workers by branch of work shows that in the age group 10-14 years, the majority of children work in industry and crafts. The ratio in 1988 of children working in industry and crafts was 82.3% males and 66.7% females but there was a sharp increase of female workers in 1995 and a drop in the male workers, 71.7 for the latter and 100 for the former.

On the other hand, in age group 15-17, there is a change in the percentage of female children workers in industry, 95.1 in 1988 and 80 in 1995, whereas male workers in industry were 64.8 in 1988 and 85.4 in 1995.

### **III. Health**

The health circumstances in refugee camps and gatherings, the urgent needs and the problems of camps are not identical. Of course, this is partly due to the differences in housing, sanitary services, namely sewerage. UNRWA, the Syrian government health services, the International Red Cross, the Palestinian Red Crescent, and Islamic and Christian charities collaborated in providing health services to refugees. It is not fair to ignore the fact that the government health services in Syria are as much free for the Syrian citizen as they are for Palestinians without any discrimination whatsoever. However, the refugee population are still dependent on UNRWA

health services.

Below is an example of the relative distribution of giving birth by place of maternity:

**Table IX**

Government Hospitals	32.3 %
Private Hospitals	12.5
Private Clinics	7.8
By Midwife	46.3
Illegal Midwife	1.1

**Source: Al-Madi, Yousef, Haidar, Palestinian Health and Environmental Circumstances in Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Syria, a field study, PCBSNR and Unicef, January, 1996. p.20.**

UNRWA health facilities include 23 primary health and care facilities, 13 facilities offering dental services, 23 facilities for mother and child health, 23 facilities offering diabetes and hypertension care, 19 laboratory facilities..etc. The health staff is 443.

The shortage in budgets affected UNRWA health services in many ways. The worst impact of the current tendency to limit, step by step, UNRWA services was on the poorest stratum which cannot afford to pay for doctors, hospitals and medicine.

The Palestinian Red Crescent has health facilities in some camps, in addition to two hospitals: Palestine Hospital in Yarmouk Camp which replaced Jaffa Hospital at Mezzah, Damascus, and Beisan Hospital in Homs.

Due to financial difficulties in the aftermath of the Gulf war, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) is not as effective in health care and services as it was in the 1980s or 1970s. The Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) has a hospital in Yarmouk camp and clinics in most refugee camps. The Palestinian Charity Association (PCA) in Yarmouk Camp owns a hospital in Yarmouk Camp and plans to build another in the same camp. Patients who visit clinics run by PRCS, PLA and PCA have to pay fees and buy medicine. Patients in need of physical treatment and rehabilitation can get these services at Palestine Hospital. But patients in need of extremities have to apply to the Palestine Red Crescent Society.

### **Handicapped:**

By definition, handicapped means any health problem which prevents a person or limits his or

her capacity to behave as well as any other person in the same age group.

Surveys show that the total proportion of handicapped in refugee camps and gatherings is 0.85% of the total population, that is one handicapped in each 118 persons. For males, the rate rises to 1.1% whereas it drops for females to the proportion of 0.6%. 40% of the handicapped are youth (less than 16 years old).

The latest estimates say that handicaps - visual, auditory and physical rises approximately to 4% of the total Palestinian population in Syria.

The following table shows the relative distribution of handicapped by type and cause.

**Table X**

Handicapped		Type of Handicaps				
Causes	Other	Blind	Deaf	Mentally handicapped	1 hand only	Paralyzed
Natural	10	2.8	16.8	6	0	20
Morbid	6	4	2	6	2	10
Events	2	0		4	0	0
Other	8	0	0	0	0	0

**Source: Al-Madi Yousef Haidar, Ibid. p.9.**

#### **IV. Education:**

- A. When compared with the Arab world, the Palestinians have great and widely acknowledged achievements in education. To justify this judgement, it is good to say that the number of students was 51,174 in the year 1972-1973 and increased to 58,723 in the 1980-1981 and to 83,702 in the year 1992-1993 and dropped to 80,680 in the year 1997-1998.

The distribution of students by stages of education and types of schools in 1992-1993 is shown in the following table:

**Table XI**

Stage	UNRWA	State	Private
Elementary	41,294	12,088	708
Preparatory	18,922	3,331	226
Secondary	-	7,122	551

**Source: Palestinian Statistical Abstracts, vol. 9. 1993-1994**

Unlike most Arab Countries in which refugees live, education in Syria in all the stages is completely free.

The first stage of education is compulsory. Palestinians and Syrians are equal in everything in this regard. However it has to be kept in mind that the majority of students in the elementary as well as the preparatory stages study in UNRWA schools which are 109 schools distributed by areas as follows:

**Table XII**

Area	Number of Schools
Damascus	79
Dara'a	12
Homs and Hama and Latakia	14
Aleppo	8

**Source: A special report prepared by colleagues at UNRWA Education Development Center, Damascus 1998.**

Note there are four schools in Damascus which have a double shift.

- B. The educational achievements of the Palestinians in Syria differ from area to area. A survey of the results of the preparatory certificate exams of 1997-1998 prepared by The Education Development Center, Education Department, UNRWA, Damascus, furnishes us with the following indicators:

1. There is a rise in the ratio of students who passed the preparatory certificate examination.

2. The grades of the students indicate that there is an advance in the achievements.

Here is a comparison between the indicators of the years 1993-1994 and 1997-1998.

1. In the academic year 1993-1994, 4,399 students took the preparatory certificate examination, 4,018 students (85.10%) passed; 598 students (15.8%) got less than 150 marks; 1613 students (42.88%) got more than 200 marks 472 students (12.54%) got more than 250 marks. and only 39 students (0.97%) got more than 280 marks.

2. In the academic year 1997-1998, 5,393 students took the preparatory certificate examination, 4943 (93.3%) passed. 504 students(10.18%) got below 150 marks, 2,607 students (53.75%) got more than 200 marks. 810 students (3.5%) got more than 250 marks. 91 students (1.74%) got more than 280 marks.

3. A distribution of the achievements of students by area indicates:

- a. Damascus area is the best where the ratio of success is 86-96%.
- b. The southern area is the worst.

### C. School Regularity

School irregularity, by definition, means that a student leaves school before finishing the stage of education. Field research and surveys indicate that school irregularity among children 7-17 years old is the greatest in the preparatory stage. Educationists believe that the reasons of school irregularity in the elementary and preparatory stages are:

**Table XIII**

<b>Reasons of School Irregularity</b>	<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Preparatory</b>
Economic Problem	88.7%	36.9%
Failure at School	71.1	26.1
Parents Leniency	62.3	25.3
Parents Low Standard of Education	30.9	10.8
Psychological Problems	13.2	5.2
Problems Pertaining to School	14.7	4.4
Other Reasons	27.5	12.4



**Source: Yousef Al-Madi, and Hatem Sadeq, Education in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Syria, Reality and problems, 1997-1998. p.80.**

The following table shows the distribution of students school regularity by age and sex.

**Table XIV**

Age	Sex	Regular	Irregular	Total
7	Male	99.3%	0.7%	100%
	Female	99.2%	0.8%	100%
8	Male	99.1	0.9	100%
	Female	99.7	0.3	100%
9	Male	99.5	0.5	100%
	Female	99.7	0.3	100%
10	Male	99.8	0.2	100%
	Female	99.0	1.0	100%
11	Male	98.4	1.6	100%
	Female	97.7	2.3	100%
12	Male	95.3	4.7	100%
	Female	97.7	2.3	100%
13	Male	86.8	13.2	100%
	Female	87.8	12.2	100%
14	Male	75.1	24.9	100%
	Female	80.3	19.7	100%
15	Male	65.0	35.0	100%
	Female	72.4	27.6	100%
16	Male	61.5	38.5	100%
	Female	56.3	43.7	100%
17	Male	43.2	56.8	100%
	Female	57.1	42.9	100%

**Source: Yousef Al-Madi and Hatem Sadeq, Ibid. p.20.**

The comparatively high ratio of school irregularity of children between 15-17 years is related to child employment in the labour market. Estimates indicate that more than 12,000 children leave school to join the labour force.

**Table XV**

The distribution of school irregularity by sex and stage of education:

Stage of Education	School Regularity			
	Sex	Regular	Irregular	Total
Elementary	Male	97.1%	2.9%	100%
	Female	97.4	2.6	100%
Preparatory	Male	60.0	40.0	100%
	Female	68.2	31.8	100%
Secondary	Male	94.3	5.7	100%
	Female	95.3	4.7	100%

#### **D. Post Secondary Education Institutions**

Besides the Vocational Training Center in Damascus with its 788 students, there are tens of post-secondary intermediate institutes in which students study for two years and graduate with diplomas as technicians. There are also state institutes where thousands of Palestinian students study. Unfortunately they are not mentioned in either UNRWA or Palestinian statistics and no surveys have hitherto been made in this field.

#### **E. University students:**

In the academic year 1987-1988, there were 3,472 Palestinian students studying in Syrian universities. Distribution of students by faculties showed that the Faculty of Arts hosts 1,366, followed by the Faculty of engineering with its 664 Palestinian students, Palestinian students at the Faculty of Sciences were 635 students, 473 students at the Faculty of Commerce, 312 studied Medicine.

#### **F. Pre-school nurseries and kindergartens:**

In 1996, there were 31 pre-school education centers hosting 3,561 children. 75% were in Damascus area, 90% inside the camps whereas the other ten percent were in Palestinian gatherings outside the camps.

The 150 teachers in these centers were distributed by educational status as follows:

20 %	Without a secondary certificate.
56%.3	Secondary certificates.
11.5%	Intermediate Institutes.
7.7%	University degrees.

## **V. The Legal Status**

The legal status of the Palestinian refugees differs from one Arab country to another. In Lebanon, they live in complete segregation and are considered alien persons living temporarily on a foreign territory without any rights. In Egypt, Gazans were completely separated from Egypt, a traveler from Gaza to any Egyptian city should have a visa. The privileges the Palestinians enjoyed in the field of ownership of land were refused in the late 1980s and early 1990s because Palestinians owning farm land on the Red Sea coast were ordered to dispose of their farmlands within a limited period. In Jordan the Palestinians are legally equal to Jordanians in everything.

What does the legal status of the Palestinian refugees in Syria look like?

The incorporation of the Palestinian refugee community into the socio-economic, educational and political life in Syria dates from January 1949.

### **I. Law No 450, 25.1.1949**

#### **GAPAR:**

The General Authority For Palestine Arab Refugees was set up on January 25, 1949 according to law 450 of 1949. It was a directorate at the Ministry of Interior and became a directorate of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

The budget: According to the above mentioned law, the budget came from the revenue from Palestine stamps and donations, financial or in kind, from international institutions, the United Nations, gifts from charities ..etc.

Duties:

1. To keep registers of Palestinian refugees living in Syria, showing personal status and profession.
2. To be a junction between the Syrian authorities and the refugee community.
3. To contact international institutions, organizations, etc. for the purpose of obtaining assistance for the refugees.
4. To represent the refugees in the meetings of the Arab League Department of Refugee Affairs.

5. To represent refugees in the annual conferences of host countries which came into being in 1964.
6. To represent Palestinian refugees in Donor and Host Countries Conferences in which Japan, England, France, Turkey, Belgium and U.S.A take part.

Officially GAPAR is in charge of administering the refugee camps side by side with UNRWA.

The law number 450 was amended in 1988.

Finally, GAPAR is a member of the Educational Council set up in 1966, and is a supervisor of the radio lessons broadcast to Palestinians in the occupied territories ever since 1970.

## **II. Law No 260 of July 10, 1956**

Its aim was to enable the Palestinian refugees in Syria to be further incorporated into the different aspects of life in Syria.

It stated clearly and openly that the Palestinians in Syria are equal to Syrians in everything related to employment, residence, trade, military service, education and health without jeopardizing their national identity and citizenship.

## **III. Travel Documents**

Law No 1311 of October, 2, 1963 is about issuing travel documents for Palestinian refugees in Syria. The Law stated that the Minister of Interior, depending upon article 23 of Law No 89 in 1960, had decided to give the Palestinians living in Syrian territories and enjoying Syrian patronage, travel documents, provided that they are registered with GAPAR and have provisional residence cards.

Article 20 of the same law stated that a Palestinian with a Syrian travel document has the right to return to Syria without a visa contrary to the laws applied in Egypt and Lebanon.

Article 4 stated that any Palestinian between 17 and 50 years old should get the approval of the military service department before applying for a travel document.

## **IV. Ownership**

According to the letters of the Minister of Interior numbers 9816/5/1 on October 13, 1977, 4174/5/1(26-H) on October 29, 1986, and finally 74/5/1(26-H) in January 1981 to the real Estate Directorate in Damascus, and the minister's letters 3917/5/1 on October 1,

1969 and 3916/5/1 on October 1, 1969.

“A Palestinian refugee living in Syria is excluded from the legislative decree No 189 in 1952 which entitled Arabs living in Syria the right of ownership in governorate centers and summer resorts ”.

Further, a Palestinian has the right to own one house only in Syria. Residence in Syria does not entitle a Palestinian the right of ownership unless he is registered by GAPAR.

Finally, a Palestinian has the right to inherit real estate because it does not contradict the general principle.

## **V. Trade**

A Palestinian has the right to utilize a business center, a shop, center or a place for rent. He also has the right to own, sell and buy a car, a tractor, public transport vehicles.. etc. But on the other hand, he can not own land for agriculture or trade. (There are many exceptions in this case).

## **VI. Civil Rights**

A Palestinian is equal to a Syrian in civil rights except for candidacy to and voting in parliamentary and municipal elections.

## **VII. Residency**

In 1965, the League of Arab States adopted the Casablanca Protocol which referred in particular to the rights of Palestinian refugees to work and enjoy full freedom of movement and full residency rights. Most Arab countries do not abide with this protocol and many, such as Lebanon, Egypt, the Gulf states and Tunisia never fully implemented it. However, in Syria there are no residency restrictions for the Palestinian refugees who enjoy equal residency rights with the Syrians.

How do the Palestinian refugees in Syria look on their status?

The questionnaire contained four questions pertaining to the status of the Palestinian refugees in Syria:

- How do you look on your living conditions when compared with those of the host country citizens?
- How do you look on your living conditions when compared with those of refugees in other Arab countries?
- Do you think that the “privileges” the Palestinian refugees enjoy in Syria might have

any effect whatsoever on their national identity or their insistence on the right of return?  
- Has refugehood ever been a hindrance to your progress?

The answers the interviewees gave are very remarkable and note worthy.

First, there was a unanimity that the Palestinian refugees in Syria are formally equal to Syrians. Professors, school teachers, officials and workers take the same wage for the same work, regardless of his or her nationality as a Palestinian or a Syrian. Yet the deductions from a Palestinian worker's salary for Palestinian popular organizations and the P.L.O might become a burden, an interviewee said. For businessmen things are very clear. Restrictions on residency and visas imposed on Palestinians make them unable to travel as freely as the Syrian businessmen so that they do not have the capacity to visit fairs, participate in conferences or take part in regional or international business without the help of their Syrian partners.

Second: The interviewees in Palestinian refugee camps and gatherings dispersed in every part of Syria from Dara'a to Aleppo have the same answer: "The Palestinian refugees status in Syria is the best when compared with those of refugees in other Arab host countries" In addition to the legal status of refugees in Syria, many interviewees justified their answer saying that "Life in Syria is stable".

Had this survey been carried out forty years ago, no doubt, there would have been different answers and different concepts because the freedom of movement enjoyed by Palestinians living in Jordan and Lebanon gives them more chances of reaching the labour market in the Gulf states. Besides stability was not exclusively exceptional in Syria.

Third: The word "privileges" is hypothetical and provocative for many interviewees who correctly referred to equality in rights and duties between Syrians and Palestinians. But the impact of the so called privileges on the national identity of Palestinians and their insistence on regaining their right of return is less than nothing according to 70% of the sample.

Still a broad stratum of the Palestinian intelligentsia in Syria believe that the "privileges" are advantageous for the Palestinians. Professor Yousef Salameh of Damascus University says:

"The good treatment of Palestinians in Syria enhanced the Palestinian national identity and provided the Palestinian problem with a Pan Arab national dimension for which we should be thankful. It helped the Palestinian national identity be pure and free from tension, resentment and indignation".

Professor Ahmed Barqawi agrees with his fellow's conclusion and adds:

“We live in a society which helps us preserve our national identity. It has no intention to negate our self-awareness. It helps us uphold it. In Syria the Palestinian national identity is free from several symptoms of tension and anxiety visible in Lebanon.

Fourth: More than 20% stated that refugeehood had been detrimental to their options for progress. Had they remained in Palestine and not become refugees, they would have had greater chances of development, promotion and would have faced less amount of difficulties.

## **Conclusion**

There is a great similarity in the characteristics and the circumstances of refugee communities in Syria and other Arab countries in the field of demography, manpower, health and education. The uniqueness of the Palestinian refugee in Syria is mainly related to the legal status of the refugees. The aftermath of such status is a greater extent of incorporation of refugees without affecting their national citizenship and identity.

## **V The Palestinian Refugees in Syria and the Peace Process - An Overview**

### **The Oslo Agreement**

The Declaration of Principles triggered suspicions or even opposition among refugees everywhere including Syria. The refugee problem became a part of the new dichotomy within the Palestinian national politics between the conflicting requirements of state building on one hand, and the demands of the Diaspora. The common feeling among refugees was that theirs was no longer an urgent issue, that it could be shelved until the final status negotiations and finally they might be forgotten in the stalled and protracted interim negotiations. The opposition to the Oslo Agreement in some refugee camps in Syria took the shape of demonstrations, mass meetings and memoranda. Three sessions were held by the so called "The Popular Conference" whose members were appointed on the basis of consensus among the Ten Palestinian Organizations better known as "The Coalition of the National Palestinian Forces". Yet factionalism, inter Palestinian conflicts, the absence of democracy and the wish to manipulate the opposition to Oslo by non-Palestinian powers, stopped this peculiar form of opposition and deprived the Palestinians in Syria of the opportunity to formulate a positive and unified opposition which was seen by Palestinian negotiators as necessary and helpful. In consequence of the deplorable proceedings of the third conference, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) walked out of the Coalition of the Palestinian National Forces.

The second cleavage among the Palestinian refugees in Syria was connected with the emergence of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and the 1996 session of the Palestinian National Council in Gaza to amend the Palestinian National Charter in compliance with Oslo Agreement II.

To monitor the different attitudes among Palestinians in Syria, Majallat Al Dirasat Al-Filastiniyah (The Arabic version of the Journal of Palestine Studies) held a round-table debate on December, I, 1995 in Yarmouk Camp, near Damascus entitled "Palestinian Intellectuals in Syria Debate The Current Palestinian Crisis". The writer of this paper was one of the participants. It is fair to state here that the material published in the journal was not authentic and did not honestly reflect all the viewpoints.

What do ordinary people think of the peace process and its impact on the refugee problem?  
Would it lead to the marginalization of their problem?



As expected, the majority of the interviewees stated that the current peace process, due to the unequal balance of powers against the Arabs in general, and the Palestinians in particular, the politics of power of the Israeli governments in general and current coalition of religious extremists, right-wing hawks and pro-settler organizations under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu; the biased policies of the U.S.A administrations in general, and the Clinton administration in particular where pro-Israeli lobbies have the upper hand, and finally the weakness and disarray prevailing in the Arab World ever since the second Gulf War, all these factors would join together against refugees.

61 % said that the peace process would marginalize the refugee problem.

22 % said that it can not marginalize the refugee problem.

17 % did not give any answer.

Maher Al-Yousefi elaborates:

“The peace process is not based on justice and equality. One of the parties (the Palestinians) and its demands been nullified. Surely the right of return is dropped out. Such a rawboned peace process as this will never be interested in the right of return”.

To shed more light on this issue, the questionnaire included another question, “will the current and the on-coming agreements have a positive or negative impact on the right of return?”

63% of the interviewees said that it would surely have a negative effect.

14% said that there would be no effect.

23% did not answer.

When asked to explain, some of the interviewees gave the following explanations:

Hassan Sami Yousef says, “Whenever the P.L.O admits that Loubya (his village) is for Jews, it will no longer be a representative of me. My land and properties were registered at the cadaster in Arabic, English and Hebrew. I have documentation the three languages to that effect. I can institute legal proceedings against Netanyahu anywhere. There are 600-700 thousand Palestinians who can do the same. If I was an absentee, it was because I was expelled. I was not a voluntary absentee. Could this cancel my right? After 30 centuries the Jews came back asking for their rights. Will ours vanish after 50 years?”

Marwan Daraj believes that “The history of peoples has never been governed by signatures and an envelope of papers. As long as there are four million refugees in Diaspora, theirs will be a living issue.

### **The solution to the refugee problem**

In response to the question “How will the refugee problem be resolved?”, The interviewees gave

the following answers.

- 137 interviewees, that is 96% said that they would return to their homeland.
- 5 Interviewees said that the solution is the implementation of the resolutions of the international community about the right to return or compensation.
- One interviewee said that the only solution would be the elimination of the Zionist project in Palestine.
  
- Three interviewees said the solution would come through the armed struggle.
- Two interviewees said the solution should include:
  - \_ To get a Palestinian identity card.
  - \_ To get complete civil rights.
  - \_ To adhere to the right of return.
- One interviewee said that there should be a package of solutions including the right of return.
- One interviewee said he did not know.

The next question evoked a variety of answers. “Do you want to return to your own locality in Palestine?”

The interviewees gave the following answers:

- 86 interviewees said they wanted to return to their own localities.
- 40 interviewees said they wanted to return to Palestine.
- 24 interviewees did not give definite answers.

Such a unanimity is not exclusively peculiar to the Palestinians in Syria. A recent field research entitled “The Future of the Palestinian Refugee Issue in the Final Status Negotiations” conducted by the Israel / Palestine Center For Research and Information IPCRI, concluded the following:

- 92.2% of the West Bank and Gaza Strip refugees believe that the only solution that would satisfy their desires is return.
- 79.5% believe that neither compensation, resettlement nor rehabilitation can replace return as a solution.

Further, when Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were asked to define a refugee:

- 52.6% highlighted the loss of homeland.
- 35.2 defined a refugee as one who had lost his land.

To another question, “what do you miss most?” the West Bank and Gaza Strip refugees said:

- 37% said they missed their land.
- 26% said they missed homeland.

- 19% were overwhelmed to such an extent that they lost everything.

The political signification of these findings is that the adherence to the right of return, or even the dream of return, has been very advantageous and helpful to preserve the Palestinian national unity and independent character in homeland and Diaspora. This is the content of the question but its text is “Do you believe that adherence to the right of return has helped preserve the unity of Palestinian people and its independent character in and outside homeland?” All the interviewees answered “Yes”. Some interviewees elaborated.

Omar Assa’ad Murad, a 43 year old man living at Neirab refugee camp said: “The greatest majority of the Palestinian people are interested in return. Insistence on the historical dimension of the Palestine problem and adherence to the right of return are enough to combine all the sectors of the Palestinian people.”

Michael Ailabouny, a 50 year old retired UNRWA school teacher thinks that without adherence to the right of return, the Palestinian revolution would have never appeared.

Khuzama Rasheed, a 24 year old, student of Sociology in Damascus University “stresses that the right to return is the frame binding all the colours of the surrealist Palestinian picture.”

Finally, when asked to comment on the possibility of returning to areas under Israeli rule and acquiring Israeli citizenship, some interviewees accepted such an option referring with admiration to the heroism of the Arabs who remained in their villages and towns under Israeli rule. Unfortunately such a question was not included in the questionnaire.

On the other hand, the postponement of the refugee problem to the final status negotiations spread pessimism among refugees everywhere. In the refugee community in Syria, such symptoms are clearly visible. The questionnaire did not include a specific question about this item. But the field research carried out in the West Bank and Gaza Strip did include a question. The interviewees gave the following answers:

When refugees were asked their opinion on the prospects for solving the refugee problem:

- 57.4% stated their pessimism.
- 25.3% believed the solution would be reached through the peace process.
- 14.8% said that they were neither pessimists nor optimists.

When asked how they would look upon the postponement of the refugee problem to the final status negotiations, they gave the following answers:

- 56% said they opposed such move.
- 22% approved it.

## **The Efficiency of the Right of Return Over Years**

It was often said that the passage of time would be able to solve the refugee problem, Golda Meir, the former Prime Minister of Israel, is reported to have said “Those who lived in Palestine will die and the new generation will forget.” To what extent was she mistaken? Here are the responses of the interviewees to the question: “Do you believe that time might affect the right of return?”

- 136 interviewees said that time has no effect on the right of return. Abdel-Majeed Kena'an, 61 year old, says: “The Jews remained in exile for 3,000 years and returned. So far, we have been away from Palestine 50 years. This (period) has no effect.”

Omer Kailani, a 51 year old journalist, says: “Until now, fifty years have elapsed. Another fifty years might come. A Palestinian will not rethink the belief in his sacred right of return. Perhaps such a belief might become as strong and sublime as his belief in God.”

Salwa Sulieman, a 27 year old, university student, says “We will return. If we do not, our children or our grandchildren surely will.”

Khuzama comments on this issue saying: “Time affects everything. Yet I believe, our children suck the love of homeland with the milk they get from our breasts. If we fail to return the other generations will not abandon such a dream. Every people has dreams. Ours is return and here is our exclusiveness. Determination and will are more powerful than the impact of time. Time is endless. Will is efficient and powerful. We are powerful because our dream will be passed on to other generations.”

On the other hand, those who said that time will necessarily affect the right of return gave the following explanations:

- Fuad Audah connected the passage of time with the bad economic circumstances which might make people forget.

Sulieman Dabagh says unless the national movement grows, and influences positively the people's self consciousness, time will have an effect.

Finally, Professor Salameh believes that the influence of the passage of time is contingent on the political tricks of some Palestinian powers.

## **A passport and an identity card**

It is believed that Palestinian refugees have the so called “passport complex” because their travel documents are very much of a trouble. A refugee must follow long and even endless procedures to get a travel document which might not give him the right to return without a visa. More than

once UNRWA was compelled to construct camps on the borders of some Arab countries. All the interviewees without an exception refused the proposal.

Marwan Daraj, 40 year old, journalist from Al-Ja'ounah answers:

“Conceding the right of return can take place only once we have returned to homeland. It is as easy to get a passport as it is to seek refuge in more than one European country. Jewish and Zionist lobbies encourage this tendency. The real and practical meaning of a passport and an identity card is inseparable from one’s returning to his home. A Palestinian or even an American identity card would signify nothing except an attempt to by pass the national rights.”

“As a human being, it is my right to have a passport and an identity card. No one can say this is too much! I must be given the right to return and to self-determination. Then it is my personal freedom to choose to live or to migrate, to use my passport and my identity card or to throw them away.”

The political hypotheses included in the above-mentioned question of the questionnaire is not only provocative but tries to ignore a very simple fact: a passport and an identity card are not equal to self-determination.

In Jordan, the 1948 refugees are naturalized and are at least theoretically on equal footing with the East Jordanians. Yet one can never forget that the first clashes on grounds of national identity between Palestinians and non-Palestinians occurred in Jordan before the so called Black September 1970.

In Lebanon, there is a current tendency to naturalize Palestinians on a large scale. Estimates say that a bout 40 thousand Palestinians have been so far naturalized. Such a tendency is irreconcilable with the systematic politics of dehumanization and marginalization of the Lebanese governments towards the Palestinian refugees. Professor Sayigh emphasizes “Palestinians in Lebanon form a special issue of the marginalization of the refugee issue.” Meanwhile, a senior Maronite Lebanese official admits: “We did not welcome the Palestinians with open arms or take them to our breasts. We did not make available to them the most basic necessities of life-neither work, water, electricity nor drainage facilities, roads nor social services. It is we who deliberately put them near urban areas not on the frontiers, in response to the wishes of businessmen for their labor.”

### **Its Impact of Dispersion on Refugees**

Exodus, to a very large extent, was more than a moratorium imposed on the development of Palestine people in all aspects of life. The political, cultural and socio-economic institutions and organizations had suddenly ceased to exist. All the Palestinian political parties and organizations could not survive the exodus. Stranger still, wedding festivals had disappeared from the Palestinian gatherings from 1948 to 1954. I tried to find a reasonable explanation but unfortunately I did not succeed.

On the other hand, the impact of refugeehood on the personal lives of refugees varied. Here are the findings of my field research. In response to a question “Was refugeehood a hindrance to your development?”

- A. 40% of sample said that it had a negative impact. Here are some elaborations:
  - A. Socially, very often refugees had to begin from the zero point, had they remained in their homeland, their achievements would have been very great. For the middle class Palestinians integration into the society and economy of the host country was not so painstaking when compared with the circumstances of the Palestinian petite bourgeoisie and the lower strata.
  - B. Politically, though the contribution of Palestinians in the cultural, intellectual and economic development was hardly negligible, refugees were meticulously excluded from the political arena. Until the mid-fifties, Palestinians were not accepted by nationalist and religious parties in Syria. The communist party officially permitted Palestinians to join its ranks in the early seventies.
- B. 36% of the interviewees did not give any answer, possibly because the majority consisted of simple workers, and old-aged individuals.
- C. 14% of the sample said that exodus did not affect their personal lives.
- D. 7% said that exodus and uprooting were a collective as well as an individual challenge. Not only did they have to face it, but very often they had to excel themselves and others to secure a place under the sun.
- E. 3% answered that the main impact of refugeehood was on the Palestinian people as a whole because it might have destroyed it spiritually, morally and culturally. The emergence of P.L.O and the Palestinian armed struggle helped reverse this impact.

### **War.. Peace.. Negotiations**

Because return is the solution favoured by the Palestinians, it is necessary to reveal how such a solution can be achieved.

52% of the interviewees believe that war, or a change of the balance of power between Israel and the Arabs that enables the Arabs to launch war when needed is the only option. An interviewee stated “nothing is negotiable with the murderers of God’s Prophets.” The majority believes that Israel has never respected international law, UNGA resolutions, or even complied with the agreement signed by the Israeli government itself due to the continuous Israeli implementation of the politics of power.

19% did not answer the question at all.

13% stated that peaceful negotiations will finally lead to the implementation of the right to return.

8% said that what they were interested in was the return itself not the means of its achievement.

6% said that all options are possible.

2% believe that the conflict between cultures and civilizations is bound to lead to the right of return.

## **The Legitimacy of PNA**

The creation of the Palestinian National Authority, its limited political and administrative mandate over parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the indefinite borders between the PNA and P.L.O have led to a sort of political schizophrenia in the Palestinian arena that complicates relations between the PNA and the Diaspora. While both parties have the same broad national interests, their priorities are different. The Palestinian refugees in Syria and other Arab countries believe that the limited mandate of the PNA strips it of the authority to be their representative or to negotiate on behalf of refugees.

In answer to the question “Do you think the PNA is authorized to negotiation on behalf of refugees?”, the answers were:

65% of the interviewees said that it had no authorization.

16% said it had the authorization.

11% did not give any answer.

8% stated that Palestinian refugees should participate in the negotiations.

When the last category of interviewees were asked to indicate the best possible method to choose the representatives of the refugees bearing in mind that elections in most refugee communities are currently impractical, they said there should be referenda.

Luteefah Abdi stresses “The PNA has no authorization to negotiate on behalf of refugees. A referendum is required to choose the representatives of Palestinians in Syria.”

Professor Ibrahim Shehabi, a former Palestinian National Council member believes:

“No. The PNA should never be given this right. I insist on the necessity of the implementation of the (Referendum Card) which emphasizes the right of return and protects it from any tricks.”

Noteworthy is the fact that Dr. Shehabi proposed that all Palestinians in refugee communities should take part in this referendum which should be patronized by UNGA and other international bodies. However, the minority of interviewees who agreed to grant the PNA an authorization to negotiate on behalf of refugees said:

(Thiab Al-Yousef) “This authority had not come from nothing. It is the result of the long resistance of our people who proved to the world that they had a right to return and to self-determination. The Zionist enemy had never given it to us as bonus.”

## **Allegiance to P.L.O**

The status of the P.L.O as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, including refugees, suffered a shock after Oslo. Until then, even though it was not elected by Palestinians, the PLO had for 35 years been the body politic supported by Palestinians against all odds. In the wake of Oslo, there is much bitterness among refugees toward PLO policies. There is a feeling refugees have been forgotten, their problem shelved. The sense of betrayal is greater among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan than in Syria. In Lebanon, the destiny of refugees is left to the mercy of ethnic politics. In Jordan, Randa Farah says that almost invariably refugees refer to the peace initiative as a process that concerns the 1967 people and say that the P.L.O has abandoned their cause. Khalil, a refugee from Al-Baq'a told her:

“We, the 1948 people, they forget us. There is nothing for us in this solution. They are demanding the return of the 1967 people. They want to establish a government for them. I pray to God they will get it. I wish them well. As for us, we do not want war. We want to live happily and peacefully but we say we want our land we lost in 1948. A person does not forget it even after time. Those who have children will make them aware that we have land and that it is stolen. We are living here as refugees. We have no homeland or anything. We are living here in those borrowed homes. I will not forget the birthplace of my father, my grandfather and great grandfather, neither will my son, my grandson and my great grandson. All of us are refugees. A refugee is an orphan and I wish we had a father who can protect us.. but we have no one.”

Another refugee, Mohammad, told Randa Farah:

“There was a manipulation of our sentiments and the ideals of our people in the camps, and they (P.L.O leaders) used us as a fodder because P.L.O leadership knew that we are the ones willing to die for Arafat.”

Though less bitter than that in Jordan or Lebanon, the criticism of Palestinians in Syria of the P.L.O is not hidden under the carpet. Here are the answers to the question “do you think that the P.L.O is still a sole and legitimate representative?”

60 interviewees said yes.

40 interviewees said no.

27 interviewees said nothing.

11 interviewees said they would prefer a pan Arab dimension of the Palestinian problem.

8 people said P.L.O is one among representatives.

4 interviewees said they did not understand the question.



## **Conclusion**

Palestinian refugees in Syria consider their problem to be primarily political with related humanitarian and social aspects. Such an overview of the refugee problem is consistent with the resolutions of UNGA. A just and lasting peace should enable refugees to return to their homeland. Otherwise any talk about self-determination would be “much ado about nothing.” In some aspects, the Oslo Agreement was a step forward on the road to national statehood but at the same time this agreement triggered suspicion and fear among refugees that theirs is a temporarily shelved question.

The right of return is lawful, just and human and can never be timeworn or an antique. After tens or even hundreds of years, superpowers were obliged to comply with the national aspirations of very weak peoples.

Refugeehood has had destructive impact on the refugees collectively and individually. The eradication of such an impact requires that the essence of the problem be addressed. An identity card or a passport are less than nothing when compared to the refugee problem.

Despite the shortcomings here and there, the PNA and its institutions ushered the Palestinian problem in a more advantageous stage which will inevitably lead to national statehood. But until that day comes.

The P.L.O will remain the sole and legitimate representative of the Arab people of Palestine.

## Endnotes

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2. Maher Al-Yousefi, is a 35 year old shortstory writer and journalist. He took part in the war in Lebanon in 1982, and was captured by the Israeli army. His original village in Palestine Loubya. He is living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by author.
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12. Ibid, p.xv
13. Haaretz, 13.6.1998.
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15. Quoted by Tamari. S. Palestinian Refugee Negotiations, Institute For Palestine Studies, Washington, D.C 1996.
16. Quoted by Goldmann, N. The Jewish Paradox, 1978, p.99. taken form Mallison, opp.cit. p.411.
17. The Palestinian Encyclopedia, Part I, Vol 4. 405-406
18. Ibid, 406
19. Zureik, opp.cit.p.16
20. Tamari, Salim, opp. cit. p35.
21. Ibid, p.4.
22. Ibid, p.1.
23. See Kayali, Majid, Majallat Al-Dirasat Al-Filastinyah, No 25, 1996.
24. Maher Al-Yousefi. Interviewed by the author.
25. Hasan Sami Al-Yousef. Interviewed by the author.
26. Marwan Daraj, a 42 years old, journalist, living at Yarmouk Camp. His original village in Palestine is Al-Ja'ounah. Interviewed by the author.
27. Atif Hayatli, Interviewed by the author.
28. Yahya, Adel, opp.cit. p.98
29. Ibid p.p 99.
30. Ibid p.19
31. Omar Assa'd Murad, a forty-three year old worker from Tarshiha near the borders with Lebanon, is living and working in Aleppo. He spent many years at Handarat Camp. Interviewed by the author.
32. Michael Eilabouni is a member of the only Christian family which ever lived in Yarmouk Camp. He is a retired teacher. His father was well-known and respected in the camp. Interviewed by the author.

33. Khuzmah Rasheed, 27 years old, was born at Yarmouk Camp. Her original village in Palestine is Suffourya. Currently she is a student of sociology at Damascus University. Interviewed by the author.
34. Yahya, Adel, opp. cit.123.
35. Ibid. p.127.
36. Abedel-Majeed Kena'n. Interviewed by the author.
37. Omar Keilani, a fifty year old Palestinian journalist and researcher, is living at Yarmouk Camp. His original village in Palestine is Loubya, Tiberias district. He has five children. Interviewed by the author.
38. Salwa Sulieman. is a 27 year old university student of sociology, living at Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author.
39. Khuzama Rasheed. Interviewed by the author.
40. Fuad Audeh, 26 year old, student of English at Homs University, is living in Homs Refugee Camp. Interviewed by the author.
41. Sulieman Dabagh. Interviewed by the author.
42. Professor Yousef Salameh. Interviewed by the author.
43. Marwan Daraj, a 42 years old, journalist, living at Yarmouk Camp. His original village in Palestine is Al-Ja'ounah. Interviewed by the author.
44. Ibid.
45. Al-Mawed, Hamad Said, Towards Palestinian-Jordanian Relations, Without Fears. opp.cit.
46. Journal of Refugee Studies, Vol.10, No 3. September 1997, a special issue, p.232.
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48. Fuad Audeh, Interviewed by the author.
49. Lateefa Abedi. Interviewed by the author.
50. Professor Ibrahim Shehabi. Interviewed by the author.

51. Thiab Al-Yousef, a 52 year old businessman, was born in Loubya, studied in Spain Universities, came back to Syria. He is now living in Yarmouk Camp. Interviewed by the author.

52. Farah, Randa, opp. cit.p262.

53. Farah, Randa, opp. cit.p263.

## VI. General Conclusions

The Palestinian exodus of 1948 was a result of the implementation of the Zionist transfer plans adopted and developed in 1937 aiming at the systematic depopulation of Palestine. Consequently, Zionist organizations committed massacres and atrocities against civilians and manipulated rumours of oncoming massacres to increase the psychological pressure and spread a flight psychosis among Palestinian. Houses were set fire to villages and localities were shelled, bombarded and besieged whereas the mandatory authorities remained silent watching what was taking place. And when they intervened, it was to facilitate the depopulation of Palestine to the advantage of their allies. Realizing that unthinkable collusion and being unable to defend themselves, Palestinians had only to flee for their lives because the mandatory government and its forces were no longer interested in guaranteeing their safety.

Homelessness, dispersion of family members and expropriation dispirited, demoralized or even dehumanized refugees who found themselves without food. Some had to become beggars, others were asked if they would sell their infants to rich Lebanese families. (III)

The majority of Palestinian in Galilee fled to south Lebanon. To reach Syria, there were several roads. Buses carried thousands to Damascus directly. Since the Golan heights were very near to south Lebanon, refugees who drove their cattle with them thought that there might be pastures there. The villagers of the Hula Valley could only flee via the Golan Heights after having been driven out. People from the coastal area were taken by cars and trains to the West Bank and, via Transjordan, they arrived in south Syria. Trains carried refugees from south Lebanon to north Syria. (III)

Many questions which were raised were left without answers.

Why were refugees driven to leave to Syria? Who brought cars and camions to scatter them here and there? Why were trains used to disperse them hundreds of miles away from the borders with Palestine? Had refugees been permitted to stay in south Lebanon, there would never have been a refugee problem. Some would like to say that there was a conspiracy. At any rate, the scope of this research and its objectives have nothing to do with such historical controversies.

In Syria, as in other exiles, prior to the construction of camps, refugee shelters varied from one area to another. So lucky was he who could find a roof to live under and some food for his family. Mosques, schools, hospitals and churches were used to shelter the waves of refugees.

After the construction of camps in Syria a new era in the history of refugees began and a new phenomenon appeared. What is a camp? Palestinian might to a certain extent agree on some sort of functional or descriptive definition i.e. simply a camp is a place where refugees live temporarily. Their houses are built on a land not owned by them but distributed by GAPAR and UNRWA.

But when it comes to conceptualization and socio-politics one would come across a broad spectrum

of opinions (IV) Does the extension of a camp, the replacement of earth, one-floor houses with concrete many floor houses deprive a refugee gathering the status of a camp? Yarmouk Camp near Damascus is a very good example.

The uniqueness of this camp in Syria makes it worthy to be studied in full details, historically, socially economically, politically, educationally and culturally. How come it that such a camp has become a capital in Diaspora? I suggest that research be conducted about Yarmouk Camp.

As far as characteristics are concerned, the Palestinian community in Syria has many characters in common with other Palestinian communities. The demographic structure of this community shows that persons of the age group 1-15 years constitute more than forty percent of the population. The distribution of the labor power in the refugee camps by field of economic activity reveals that camps are not different from many shanty urban communities surrounding the main Syrian cities. So are the problems related to woman labour, child labour, employment and unemployment, etc.

In education, the achievements of UNRWA school students are very good and widely - acknowledged, though such achievements vary from one area to another - the lowest in Dara'a and the highest in Damascus area. School irregularity is very high in the age-group 15-17 years because more than 12000 children from this age group are in the labour market. Overcrowded classrooms due to the cuts in UNRWA budgets are very common in UNRWA schools. There are no UNRWA secondary schools in Syria.

Besides education, health is the second field where UNRWA services are very important for refugees. Statistics show that until now Palestinians in Syria are almost completely dependent on UNRWA health services. The financial problems of UNRWA deprive thousands of chronic patients the only possibility of getting medicine. The situation will be very serious among hypertension and diabetes, patients.

The legal status of the Palestinian refugees in Syria has so far been very helpful in boosting the socio-economic development of the refugee community in Syria and paved the ground for the "intermarriage" between Syrian and Palestinian capital which constitutes the most visible characteristic featuring the incorporation of the refugee community. Still such an incorporation has never had any effect whatsoever that might have any effect on the national identity of the Palestinians in Syria.

The Palestinian refugees in Syria believe that refugehood is a political problem and should be dealt with and solved in accordance with the United Nations resolutions 181 in 1947 and 194 in 1948 etc. This rationalism, realism and even pragmatism should never be misinterpreted in such away as to nullify the right to return which the majority of the Palestinian refugees in Syria, as in any other place in Diaspora, consider a human, just lawful, possible and applicable solution should the principles of international law prevail instead of the dominant politics of power pursued by super powers in the Middle East. Return is a human because it will help promote democracy in Israel and transform it into a citizen democracy instead of being a Jewish one. A ?Reality and Forgiveness? process in the

Middle East, similar to the one currently taking place in South Africa, is only possible once the Palestinians have regained their national rights, because in South Africa such a process was not workable before the collapse of apartheid. Time does not affect the right of Palestinian to return and to self determination. Those who claimed that once older generation had died, the younger generation would forget were mistaken. (VI).

It would always be preferable to achieve the return peace and negotiations (VI). The Palestinian National Authority does not have the right to negotiate the final status on behalf of the refugees P.L.O as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people is authorized to conduct the negotiations provided that Palestinian refugee communities have their own representatives who should be chosen through elections or referendums.



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## **Appendix**

### **The Questionnaire**

- A. Name:
  - B. Age:
  - C. Age in 1948
  - D. Locality in Palestine:
  - E. Present Place of Residence:
  - F. Number of Children:
  - G. Profession:
  - H. Numbers of Rooms in the House
1. When did you leave your locality in Palestine? Date and time if possible.
  2. Did you leave alone, with your family.. etc.?
  3. Did you leave any relatives of yours there?
  4. How do you manage to get news about them?
  5. Which route did you take to migrate from Palestine?
  6. Which country did you take refuge in at first?
  7. What were the most important difficulties you faced on the road?
  8. How did you reach Syria?
  9. Could you choose the country of refuge?
  10. Where did you live before the construction of camps?
  11. Which were the institutions or charities that were active in offering assistance?

12. Do you follow up the news about your locality?
13. How would you look upon a camp, its relations to refugeehood and the Palestinian problem in general?
14. Which was the first camp you lived in? Were you given the right to choose?
15. If you have never lived in a camp, why?
16. Can you recollect the first moments of camp construction? (The first camp you lived in)
17. How were people distributed in the camp according to family, clan or tribal grounds or the locality in Palestine?
18. Where are memories about Palestine narrated?
19. What is their influence on listeners, young people in particular?
20. Who were in charge of relief in the camp?
21. What is the difference between the camp today and in the past?
22. How would you evaluate the centrifugal and centripetal migration in the camp?
23. How do you see the UNRWA role?
24. What is the impact of the ration card on you as a refugee?
25. Are you content with its services?
26. Do you think it should be internally restructured?
27. How do you look upon the cuts in its services?
28. Why do some think of ending its services?
29. How long do you think the UNRWA services should continue?
30. How do you see your living conditions when compared with those in the host country?
31. How do you see your living conditions when compared with those of refugees in other countries?

32. Do you think the privileges refugees in Syria enjoy could have an effect on their national identity and their adherence to the right of return.. etc. ?
33. Was refugeehood a hindrance to your progress?
34. Would you agree that P.L.O is still the sole legitimate representative?
35. Does the peace process lead to the marginalization of the refugee problem?
36. Will the present and the oncoming agreements have a positive or a negative impact on the right of return?
37. Do you believe that adherence to the right of return has helped preserve the unity of the Palestinian people and his independent character in Homeland and Diaspora?
38. Do you believe that the Palestinian National Authority has the right to negotiate on behalf of refugees?
39. If you were given a passport and an identity card, would you give up the right to return?
40. What is the solution of the refugee problem in your opinion?
41. Do you want to return to your own locality?
42. Do you think that time might have an impact on the right of return?
43. How do you think the right of return is attainable by negotiations, war, peace.. etc.?
44. Do the economic conditions of individual affect their viewpoints towards return?

## **Curriculum Vitae**

The Author is born in Safforyah, Nazareth, Palestine in 1947.

A graduate of Damascus University in 1970.

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His books in Arabic:

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- Israel and International Changes.
- Indoctrination in Israel.
- Contemporary Islamism-Problems and Prospects.
- Palestinian Communists in Syria.
- The Security of the Arab Waterways

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