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# The Palestinian community: divided and ruled

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# MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

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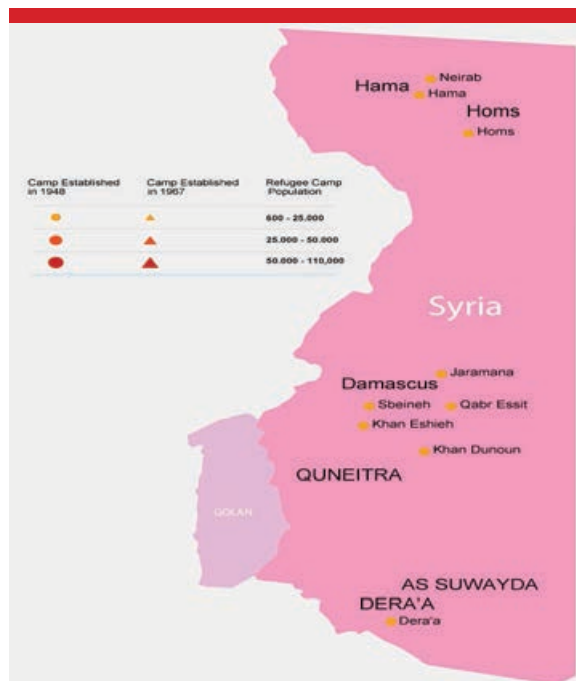
# The Palestinian community: divided and ruled

Henriette Johansen

Six of the nine Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have become battlegrounds between armed opposition groups and government forces. As a consequence of this, thousands of civilians are trapped, experiencing grave rights violations, deprivation of food and lack of medicine; their misery is used as a tool in a dreadful war strategy. Several blockades around the camps, inhibiting essential health supplies, food and other necessities from entering the camps, have been reported, along with stories of simultaneous infighting. The battlegrounds in Syria have indeed moved onto a whole new level of inhumanity.

“Recent reports of death by starvation are highly alarming,” UNRWA’s spokesman Christopher Gunness told MEMO. Since September, UNRWA has basically been unable to deliver assistance to the refugees in Yarmouk. Gunness revealed that even before September, since December 2012, in fact, when armed opposition elements entered the camp and relief operations inside became impossible due to extreme violence, the UN agency had to establish a distribution point just outside the camp in Zahera. The residents came out to collect aid and went back in. “Now,” he said, “no one is allowed out or in.”

As the photograph above testifies, the strategy appears to be to starve civilians and, doing so, to put pressure alternately on the opposition and regime proxies within the camp. As



The 9 Palestinian refugee camps in Syria [source: UNRWA]

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the siege strengthens and the lack of access for aid workers to the 18,000-20,000 people trapped in Yarmouk continues, the situation is decaying in contesting political agendas.

Recent statistics from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documents a total number of 130,433 casualties since the beginning of the Syrian uprising on March 18th 2011, with the first protester shot and killed in Der'a up to December 30th 2013. The deaths are broken down as follows:

- 46,266 civilians (including 7,014 children and 4,695 women)
- 19,937 rebel fighters
- 2,233 defected soldiers and officers
- 6,913 ISIS and Al-Nusra fighters, the vast majority being non-Syrian, some yet to be identified by name
- 32,013 regular (Syrian Army) soldiers
- 2,794 unidentified casualties (documented with pictures and footage)
- 19,729 combatants from the Popular Committees, National Defence Forces, Shabiha, and pro-regime informers
- 262 fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah
- 286 non-Syrian pro-regime Shi'ite militiamen

[Source: Syrian Observatory for Human Right, updated January 1st 2014]

These numbers do not include the more than 17,000 detainees and missing persons inside regime prisons, nor the 6000+ regular soldiers and pro-regime militants held captive by rebel fighters and the ISIS. Nor does it include kidnapped civilians.

SOHR estimates that there are about 50,000 casualties from regular forces and rebel fighters and non-Syrian fighters that the organisation has not been able to document, as both sides are discreet about the human losses resulting from clashes.

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## Co-opting the Palestinian resistance movements

For decades, both Hafez Al-Assad and his son Bashar have used the Palestinian cause as a political tool to strengthen their power. They co-opted a significant number of the Palestinian resistance movements and factions, whose ongoing presence in Syria is dependent on their loyalty and de facto reliance on the authorities. According to a recent report from the Beirut-based Palestinian Human Rights Organisation (PHRO), some Palestinian factions, mainly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), now act as an extension of the Syrian regime inside Palestinian refugee camps.

PHRO reported that the Syrian regime has used the Palestinian refugees' legitimate claim to their right of return to sidetrack the country's internal crisis since spring 2011. In this way the government hopes to break-down the opposition. For example at the Al-Naksa and Al-Nakba commemorations on May 15 and June 5, 2011, the regime and its representatives in the Palestinian camps urged the Palestinian youth to march to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights at a very dangerous time. As the demonstrators were met with Israeli gunfire four young Palestinians died and hundreds more were wounded. At their funeral, the mourners started protesting against the PFLP-GC, who responded by shooting them. This went on for several hours and resulted in an additional 40 wounded Palestinians and 14 killed. This illustrates the kind of infighting going on within the camps. The PHRO believes this is one out of a series of strategic steps to co-opt Palestinians to follow the government's agenda. As loyalty to the PFLP-GC strengthens, the number of opposition fighters within the camp is rocketing.

## Aid

UNRWA's Gunness explained how, only once, the agency was given clearance to enter the Yarmouk camp by the authorities in order to deliver polio vaccines. This was the second week of December. "We have now had news that a number of families may have left Yarmouk to the south," he said this week. "This is extremely hopeful news, but could also just be a one-off." He assured MEMO that UNRWA is on constant stand-by with

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trucks to deliver more vaccines as well as food and other material assistance.

He also confirmed that UNRWA is using all possible means to press the authorities on access. “Publicly we have called repeatedly on all parties to the conflict to heed their legal and humanitarian obligations, including a lifting of the siege of Yarmouk.”

The Syria crisis continues to have a devastating impact on the Palestinian refugee community, which must not be forgotten. Against this backdrop of populations in flux across borders, UNRWA is doing its utmost to deal with these suffering people, and sees the Palestinian community as especially vulnerable in the current state of affairs. Their statelessness and lack of political protection have made Palestinians susceptible to external and regime powers and attempts to break up their community; it is a community normally characterised by a strong sense of unity and patriotism, even across borders. The magnitude of the proxy structure within the Syrian war becomes all the more evident when suddenly their loyalty to the common goal becomes divided and turned against each other as puppets whose strings are pulled by external agents with their own agendas.

According to Guinness, the Syrian conflict “is a major crisis for Syria’s Palestine refugee community.” Internal displacement and besieged camps, along with the continuing fights within them, “has brought the effects of statelessness and associated vulnerabilities into stark relief,” he said. Having resided in Syria in relative peace for 63 years, Palestinian refugees are now facing a future in which their sense of security has been shattered.

## **UNRWA’s response**

UNRWA is stressing the importance of investing in the resilience of the Palestinian refugee community. The agency is appealing for \$417.4 million to address the most basic needs of Palestinians fleeing Syria in the 2014 campaign to improve microfinance, employment, construction and vocational training components.

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*UNRWA was given access to the Yarmouk Camp just once, to deliver polio vaccines*

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Most Palestine refugees face daily challenges of acute shortages of food, water, electricity, health care and other essential supplies. Poverty levels have increased for both Syrian and Palestine refugees due to the loss of economic opportunities, income and drastically reduced access to essential services. The congested Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are now feeling the strain on their already inadequate infrastructure. There has also been growing tension with local host communities, often due to competition over restricted employment opportunities.

Hostilities and armed confrontation both inside the refugee camps and in the surrounding areas in the Damascus and Rif Damascus Governorate have forced the majority of residents to flee repeatedly in search of safer locations. Those who have remained in Yarmouk, Husseiniyeh, Qabr Essit, Sbeineh and Khan Sheikh are amongst the most destitute refugees who do not have the means to move out.

There are also barriers to accessing UNRWA medical centres. New mobile health clinics and satellite TV education have helped to mitigate the effects of the contraction of humanitarian space, whilst the agency's microfinance programme supports creative new businesses, which have sprung up amidst the conflict. Cash distribution, both in Syria and to newly-arrived refugees in Lebanon, and the distribution of simple but essential items such as hygiene kits, blankets and warm clothes, are designed to alleviate the immediate vulnerability of those who have been displaced.

## Political Solution

Several human rights organisations maintain political pressure to find an urgent yet viable political end to the conflict. UN agencies have encouraged the development of a Comprehensive Regional Strategy, which brings together various component of international assistance, including assistance for host communities and host countries.

Christopher Gunness acknowledged that all internationally accepted paradigms for resolving the issue of Palestinian refugees

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*UNRWA needs  
\$417.4 million  
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Palestinians  
fleeing Syria this  
year*



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posit a political resolution, which needs a secure foundation in international law and UN resolutions. “UNRWA continues to urge the political actors to find a just and durable solution for the refugees on this basis,” he stressed. They need it; desperately.

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