

Palestinian cries fall on deaf ears

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Title: *Palestinian cries fall on deaf ears*

Cover: Commissioner-General of UNRWA gives a Final Speech on Yarmouk

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Commissioner-General of UNRWA gives a final speech on Yarmouk

This photograph is one of the few testaments we have to the horror of the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp in the south of Damascus; it has been ongoing for 14 months. Thousands of people are besieged in the two square kilometre camp. Filippo Grandi, the Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), visited the war-torn district this week. He reported a lack of aid, access and most of all international leadership to achieve a political solution specifically in relation to the Palestinian community.

With a strategic location, and therefore devastatingly vulnerable to armed groups in their endeavour to gain leverage in Damascus, this triangular district pointing towards the heart of Syria's capital city is the only witness to the empty, hopeless gazes of people who have been exhausted to the point of submission. Their questions and cries for help have fallen on deaf ears

internationally; they have nobody and nowhere to turn to. Hope has disappeared, as international lethargy and lack of leadership on the breaking the siege on Yarmouk has resulted in a deadlock in negotiations over access for humanitarian assistance. An already vulnerable community has been marginalised further.

Against the backdrop of the lengthy siege, and months of failure to provide humanitarian assistance, extreme food and water shortages have caused thousands of starving Palestinians to ask, “As Palestinian refugees, what is our fate?” What, they wonder, are they supposed to do; to go? As Grandi observed, these simple questions are markers of the unresolved question of the Palestinians at large; their safety, lack of rights, livelihood and future prospects of a dispersed population which is, increasingly, losing its political and existential bearings. The Palestinian refugees have lost faith in the international community; they find themselves at the crossroads of their prolonged predicament in exile and the unfolding tragedy of the Syrian war. The Palestinian questions have never been more urgently in need of answers.



image source: Palestinians of Syria Network

The world must carry the blame for ignoring the cries for help from the Palestinians trapped inside Yarmouk. Filippo Grandi accused geopolitical actors, academics and journalists of failure in their work, because the brutality has become so visible that it is now more or less “normal” and thus unreported, uncared for and ignored in negotiations, at the expense of the Palestinians.

Grandi met with UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and insisted on the inclusion of a separate, independent mission for Palestinians as an agenda item at the Geneva II negotiations. “The international

community has been unable to help the people of Syria,” Grandi told a conference in Beirut marking the end of his eight year-long stint as UNRWA Commissioner-General and, before that, the Agency’s Deputy Commissioner-General. “Unfortunately, it may not be until the guns fall silent, and we fully realise the price paid by the ordinary people, that we will also realise the extent of our shared loss and the magnitude of our shared shame.”

Last week alone, five Palestinian schoolchildren and twelve staff members were killed in an explosion in an UNRWA school in Dara’a. “Lakhdar Brahimi’s recent warning about the ‘Somalisation’ of Syria is not simply a shocking political observation, it is also a daily reality,” the retiring UNRWA head observed.

Within Yarmouk the destruction of the infrastructure and local economy is matched by resultant extreme poverty. A report commissioned by UNRWA from the Syrian Centre for Policy Research reported the loss of the equivalent of 174 per cent of Syria’s 2010 GDP in the first half of 2013 alone. Over half of the population lives in poverty due to the violence. The economic devastation is felt in neighbouring Lebanon, a host country for refugees, Syrian and Palestinian alike.

For over 60 years, the Yarmouk camp has been a vibrant melting pot of Syrians and Palestinians, of whom there are 570,000 registered as refugees with UNRWA. With 28 schools and several UNRWA community centres and hospitals, Grandi explained how Yarmouk had the conditions necessary for them to work at their optimum capacity. A sub-culture blossomed quickly after the first Palestinian refugees settled there in 1948 after the ethnic cleansing of their homeland by the nascent state of Israel. “This contributed to a resilience that could enable them to develop human capital, sustain communities and build for a positive and peaceful future,” he pointed out.

Development of the upheaval

Next month will mark the fourth year of the Syrian crisis and 15 months since the Palestinian community was first embroiled,

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inside their official and unofficial refugee camps. According to a recent report by the Palestinian Human Rights Organisation (PHRO), fighting engulfed the Palestinians primarily because the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), acted as an extension of the Syrian regime.

The PHRO reported that the Syrian regime has used the Palestinian refugees' legitimate claim to their right of return to their homeland in order to divert attention from the country's internal crisis. In this way the government hopes to break-down the opposition. The PHRO believes that this is one of a series of strategies used to try to co-opt the Palestinians into following the government's agenda.

As loyalty to the PFLP-GC strengthens, the number of opposition fighters within the camp is increasing. In December 2012 Yarmouk became a warzone even though the Palestinians wanted to stay out of the conflict. Yarmouk has now come to symbolise the suffering of Palestine refugees in Syria during the course of the war.

All twelve of the Palestinian camps and unofficial "gatherings" are affected by the war. They are usually located in contested areas so their efforts to remain neutral are vulnerable to armed engagement, a development which is the biggest fear for the Palestinian community, claimed UNRWA's Grandi. Each camp feels the tension of being adjacent to fierce battle zones, living precariously where answers are disregarded as the questions pile up.

In mid-December 2012 the government surrounded Yarmouk and clashes broke out. UNRWA's schools and clinics all ceased to function. Armed groups occupied houses and looted the hospitals; those who could not or would not flee became caught-up in the fighting.

Fleeing "irregularly"

MEMO met one of the families caught in the conflict when I spoke to Mrs. Sitta, a brave woman who fled from Syria and her shelter in Yarmouk to find refuge in the run-down Palestinian refugee

in mid-December 2014, UNRWA's schools and clinics in Yarmouk ceased to function

camp of Shatila in Beirut. She explained to me how her late husband was working as an activist in Yarmouk for many years. In fact, the whole neighbourhood knew him for his work. One day he was shot by regime forces, in front of their two children, one then only 5 years old. She started volunteering as an anaesthesia nurse as the war became worse. “Every day I took my children to go out, and every day the shooting started,” she said. This confined them to their shelter. The government forces were targeting all volunteers, even those working for the hospitals, and she feared for her children’s well-being, given her own “activism” on behalf of the wounded.

After this horror, she decided to flee from Yarmouk for the sake of her children’s future; she wanted to go somewhere peaceful but was faced with an array of incredibly patriarchal and bureaucratic regulations. She had to have a letter signed by her husband in order to flee, she said. She told the guards that her husband was dead, a well-known fact in the district; his death was even reported in the media. Her story was dismissed and in desperation she decided to move in any case, in what she calls an “irregular” way”. Living a precarious life in Shatila, she explained that every checkpoint she passes (and there is already one on the 15 minute drive from downtown Beirut to the camp) increases the risk of being sent back to Syria. With no permit to reside in Lebanon, despite her efforts to obtain one when she arrived, she has to use the border in a “regular” way. Two of her friends were sent back to Syria in order to be able to come back again and get a Lebanese resident’s permit.

Going back to Syria poses a real threat that she will be detained by the regime for her voluntary work in the hospitals. All volunteers in Yarmouk have been accused by the government of being “activists”. Her fears for her family are genuine due to the torture, arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances in Syria.

As a Palestinian, the UNHCR referred her to UNRWA, as a “double” refugee, but the agency staff said that there was nothing they could do for her. If, however, she leaves Lebanon and goes

“Every day I took my children to go out, and every day the shooting started”

back to Syria, she explained, “They can do me a deal.” It is impossible to stay in Lebanon legally so she is in an undignified limbo.

Mrs. Sitta emphasised that she would like to leave Lebanon, as Palestinians there have no right to work or own property and so, really, they have no future, but there is nowhere to go as a Palestinian refugee. “What choice do we have? We can escape by sea and risk our life or die in the battle zones; we are no longer welcome in Arab countries,” she stressed.

She is scared for her brother and sister who are stuck in Yarmouk. Sustaining themselves on leaves, grass and spices in water, they are but two of the thousands trapped there. She Skypes them as often as she can, and all they say is, that “for now we are still alive”. They might run out of bread or be hit by a bomb; they have no money, as conditions have prevented them from working for a year now and they dare not make plans for their future.

Couldn’t they get out “irregularly”? The besieging forces shoot people trying to escape from Yarmouk, says Mrs Sitta. “These people have only one language; they pull the trigger.” She saw mothers and their children being killed as they tried to escape.

Host countries and the future for Palestinians

Mr Grandi described how he met the residents of Yarmouk, with them “emerging like ghosts from the depths of the camp as in a medieval siege.” He reported that they subsisted on grass, spices mixed in water and animal feed; they burned furniture on their balconies to keep warm; they suffered severe malnutrition and dehydration; and many died from readily treatable conditions.

At the moment, the entry and exit points at Yarmouk are controlled by warring parties; the camp was sealed completely in September until a small agreement led to some food being let in on 18 January. Only women and children were allowed to leave, thus making all the remaining men “legitimate” targets for the fighters.

Palestinians do not have support networks beyond where they live

and have been shunted from camp to camp in search of safety. It is estimated that 70 per cent of Palestinian refugees in Syria are displaced externally and internally, which is the largest movement of the population since 1967. Displacement and insecurity are the main characteristics of the Palestinian condition, having experienced expulsions from Kuwait and Libya, the destruction of camps during Lebanon's civil war, and grave human rights violations in Iraq a few years ago. About 53,000 have approached UNRWA in Lebanon, a country which also hosts hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees along with 300,000 Palestinians in existing refugee camps and where the situation is already dire and inhospitable.

The help that UNRWA can give in Lebanon is limited to the provision of essential services. Palestinian refugees are prohibited from working in more than 70 occupations beyond the confines of their camps in Lebanon and cannot own property. With no possibility of getting to Jordan or Egypt, the current comparison between the war now and the Nakba of 1948 doesn't stand up; today's Arab countries no longer offer sanctuary to Palestinians. Turkey has a no-entry policy and European refugee regulations remain stringent, especially for Palestinians. Their reality, then, is that they are in a country that will not, and to a large extent cannot, accommodate more refugees, and does its best to make it more feasible to leave than to stay.

Mr Grandi reported that many Palestinians flee in boats, losing their lives at sea. "They feel that they are not wanted, they cannot manage any longer and they want their children to have a dignified life." Last autumn alone, hundreds tried to reach Europe by sea only to be drowned on the way.

The international law of non-refoulement and equal treatment of refugees is of little avail in the case of many of the neighbouring countries and thus UN agencies and NGOs are left with an enormous task which should, in all fairness, be a collective international duty.

Filippo Grandi urged the world not discount the power of localised agreements in place such as Yarmouk. If nothing else, he said,

"They feel that they are not wanted, they cannot manage any longer and they want their children to have a dignified life."

they may be an indicator that an exhausted country is ready for peace. He added that it was perhaps “not by chance” that the Security Council finally, last Saturday, was united in calling for access to be given to UN agencies and their partners so that urgent humanitarian assistance can be provided to those suffering in Syria. “In so doing, it provided a valuable framework for us humanitarians to carry out our work.” Although important, the results are yet to filter down to the battlefield and demands for ceasefires, which are rarely manageable in the chaotic Syrian war. The resolution does not mean access, but it is a start.

Yarmouk was a hub for Palestinians after the 1948 Nakba and was recognised in the region for its positive embodiment of the diaspora; as a cultural centre where identity was nurtured. Grandi emphasised the small successes in these most testing of times for the Palestinian community in that humanitarian access was negotiated under an agreed ceasefire, remaking the racist image of them as “troublemakers”. The UN official explained how Yarmouk could empower Palestinians in their right to return and rights as refugees, no matter where they are in the world. “We must hear and listen to their cries,” he insisted. “It is crucial if we are to build a stable Middle East.”

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