

FMO Research Guide Palestinian refugees in Syria

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1. Basic information

Official name: Syrian Arab Republic.

Capital: Damascus.

Estimated population: 17,155,814 (July 2002, CIA World Factbook 2003)

Websites:

CIA The World Factbook 2002

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sy.html>

1.1 Map

http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia02/syria_sm02.gif

2. Summary

Syria is located in the south-east of the Mediterranean basin. It borders Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and Israel. The capital is Damascus and the other main cities are Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia. Its main ethnic groups include Arabs (90 per cent), Kurds, and Armenians. It is in main part a Muslim country with Sunni Muslims accounting for 74 per cent, Alawite, Shia, and Druze reported to 16 per cent. Christians (of various sects) are reported to account for 10 per cent of the population (CIA World Factbook 2003). Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire until World War I, and after the Empire's break-up, it came under French mandate until its independence in 1946. After that Syria lived through a period of political instability, including a three-year union with Egypt 1958–1961 (the United Arab Republic or UAR), until the Baath Party took power in 1963. In 1967, during the 'Six-Day' war, Israel occupied the Golan Heights.

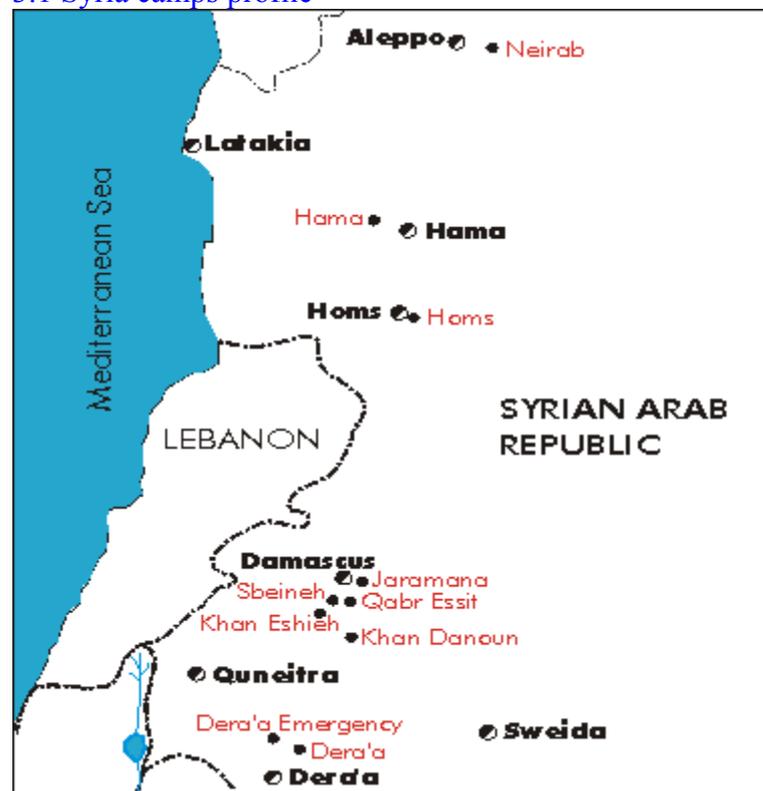
3. Palestinian refugees in Syria

The number of Palestinian refugees in Syria registered with UNRWA as of 31 March 2003 was 407,743 (UNRWA 2003). This represented about 3 per cent of the total population of Syria (Jarrad 1999) and about 10.5 per cent of all Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in the Middle East (USCR Syria Country Report 2002). There are also an estimated 125,000 displaced persons from 1967, who are not registered with UNRWA (Weighill 1999: 21). Most Palestinian refugees in Syria live in Damascus, although there are UNRWA camps in other parts of the country: in Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, for example. There are 10 official UNRWA camps in Syria with 115,863 registered refugees (UNRWA 2002), which represent about 28 per cent of all refugees in Syria (USCR Syria Country Report 2002), four unofficial camps, established by the General Administration for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR) in Yarmouk (Damascus), Latakia, Ramadani, and Ein-El-Tal.

In most of the UNRWA camps, house constructions remain very basic (UNRWA 2002): houses are of mud or crude concrete blocks (Brand 1988: 625). UNRWA is responsible for sewage disposal, solid waste disposal, and control of infestations. The Syrian government provides the basic utilities in the camps; however, the water supply is not constant, most streets are unpaved, and the water and sewage systems, where they exist, are in need of upgrading and repair (UNRWA 2002).

About 26 per cent of Palestinian refugee families live below poverty levels while 22 per cent live on the poverty line (Refugee Studies Centre Study 2001:11). There were 29,643 special hardship cases (SHCs) registered with UNRWA in 2002

3.1 Syria camps profile



Reprinted from UNRWA, <http://www.unrwa.org>

Websites:

UNRWA -

<http://www.un.org/unrwa/>

<http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/statis-01.html>

3.2 Historical background

Most Palestinian refugees fled to Syria in 1948 and came from northern Palestine, Safad, Haifa, Acre, Tiberias, and Nazareth. Some refugees arrived in Syria via Lebanon, some came from Galilee and the Hula Valley onto the Golan Heights, and others came directly from Palestine to Jordan to Syria (Mawed 1999: 19–25). By the summer of 1948, there were about 70,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, the majority concentrated along the border area with Israel (Morris 1988: 262). In September 1948, an official of the International Committee of the Red Cross visited the areas where the refugees were camped. The refugees were initially housed in deserted military barracks in Sweida, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. In 1949, Law no. 450 established the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution (PARI), which later was replaced by the General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR), to manage the Palestinian refugee affairs (Sahli 1996). GAPAR's responsibilities were refugee registration, relief assistance, finding employment opportunities for the refugees, and managing funds and contributions intended for them. GAPAR, with UNRWA, jointly administer the camps.

In 1967, Palestinian refugees fled the Quneitra governorate in the Golan Heights, and around 4,200 of them were housed in Dera'a Emergency Camp (UNRWA: 2003).

In 1970, as a result of the military campaign known as 'Black September', some Palestinian refugees fled from Jordan to Syria. In 1982, in the wake of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, a few thousand Palestinian refugees left Lebanon and found shelter in Syria (UNRWA 2002).

3.3 Rights and legal status

The legal status of Palestinian refugees in Syria is regulated by the Syrian Arab Republic Law no. 260 of 1957. The law stipulates that Palestinians living in Syria have the same duties and responsibilities as Syrian citizens other than nationality and political rights. In 1960, President Gamal Abdel-Nasser (then President of the UAR) issued Decree no. 28 granting Palestinians in Syria, Palestinian Travel Documents.

In 1963, Law no. 1311 regulated the issuing of Syrian laissez-passer or travel documents to Palestinians residing in Syria, on condition that they were registered with GAPAR and held Syrian provisional identity cards. The Palestinian Travel Document is valid for six years, like Syrian passports, and, according to Art. 20 of Law 1311, enables its holder to return to Syria without a visa. Travel Documents can also be reissued by any Syrian representative office outside Syria. In 1999, a new law was passed allowing Palestinian refugees in Syria to travel to and from Lebanon using their identity cards.

Palestinian refugees are granted freedom of movement in all parts of Syria.

The Syrian Government has taken strict measures to control the entry of Palestinian refugees with Egyptian, Jordanian and Iraqi Travel Documents as a precaution against any possibility of their resettlement in Syria (Jarrad 1999).

3.4 Right to employment

Palestinians do not require work permits, they may work in the government, and men must undertake military service (in the Palestine Liberation Army under the Syrian Command). They have the right to own businesses. They also have the right to join labour unions. Since the time of their arrival in Syria, most of the Palestinian refugees have not had difficulty finding employment, some in the agricultural sector, and the more educated as teachers or nurses. This economic stability is reflected in the high percentage of Palestinians who have found the means to move out of the refugee camps and take up residence as self-settled refugees (about 70 per cent) (Brand 1988: 624). Around 41 per cent of Palestinians in Syria work in the service sector, 27 per cent in construction, and 15 per cent in the industry sector (Sahli 1996).

3.5 Right to education

Although most Palestinians receive their primary and preparatory education at UNRWA schools, they continue their secondary school education in Syrian government schools. Enrolment in Syrian universities and institutes is open to Palestinians who are treated like Syrians. The Syrian Government also grants scholarships to Palestinian university students to study abroad (Brand 1988: 623).

3.6 Restrictions on land ownership/house ownership

Until 1968, Palestinians were not allowed to own any property in Syria. After 1968, this law was changed so that Palestinians were allowed to own one house per person, but they are still not allowed to own farm land (Davis 1996).

3.7 Naturalization

The 1965 Casablanca Protocol, which Syria ratified, stipulates that Arab countries should guarantee Palestinian refugees rights to employment, residency, and freedom of movement, whilst maintaining their Palestinian identity and not granting them citizenship. This is echoed in the Syrian legislation (Citizenship Law no. 276, 1969), which stipulates that the granting of Syrian citizenship to a person of Arab origin normally depends on habitual residence in Syria and demonstration of financial support or livelihood, but that Palestinians, in spite of fulfilling this condition, are not granted citizenship in order to 'preserve their original nationality' (Brand 1988: 623; Davis 1996).

3.8 Access to government services

Syria is the only country in the Middle East, apart from Jordan, in which Palestinians have full access to government services.

3.9 Civil society

The Syrian branch of the General Union of Palestine Workers (GUPW) was founded in 1965. The branch's activities mainly involved participating, with other Palestinian and Syrian Unions, in celebrations or national festivities. In 1971, the union's headquarters were moved to Damascus. However, Syria's 1976 intervention in Lebanon led to clashes between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Syrian military forces in Lebanon, and in 1983, Syria's attempt to control the

breakaway PLO organizations placed the union in a difficult position. In 1983, the PLO took the decision officially to transfer the GUPW to Tunis (Brand 1988: 631).

A preparatory committee for the establishment of the Palestinian Women's Union was elected in 1965. Its members consisted mainly of UNRWA teachers. In 1967, in the aftermath of the Six-Day war, the committee, jointly with the General Women's Federation in Syria, provided relief assistance to the new wave of Palestinian refugees. After 1967, many women volunteered to work in the fields of literacy and health care. Others received first-aid training and became involved in caring for the wounded in the post-1967 Israeli raids against Jordan and Lebanon. In 1972, the official branch of the Palestinian Women's Union was established and local committees were established in each of the refugee camps. After the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the Union provided relief assistance (food, clothing and shelter) to Palestinians who fled Lebanon and who came to the camps in Damascus. In 1983, the Palestinian dissident factions in Syria (PFLP/PFLP – General Command/Saiqah/Fath Uprising) gradually took over from the outlawed Fateh, DFLP and the Palestinian Communist Party and established a 'new union' in Yarmouk Camp. However, the dissident factions enjoyed limited popular support. By 1982, the women's committees of the DFLP were almost the only women's group which were active (Brand 1988: 634).

The Syrian branch of the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) is located in Yarmouk Camp in Damascus. It runs eight primary health care centres, three outpatient clinics, and three hospitals, and provides services to registered and non-registered Palestinians, as well as to Syrians who are unable to afford health care. The PRCS also provides some social services such as marketing refugees' handicrafts (embroidery), finding employment opportunities for refugees, and providing some vocational training for women (PRCS Syria Branch 2003 Overview Report)

Websites

PRCS Syria Branch 2003 Overview Report -
<http://www.palestinercs.org/prcsdiaspora/syria.htm>

4. International organizations

UNRWA provides health care, education, emergency relief, and infrastructure development. It runs 111 elementary and preparatory schools throughout the country. However, in the past few years, due to funding shortages, the classes have become overcrowded and almost all schools work double shifts. UNRWA has one vocational training centre in Damascus. UNRWA provides health services through 23 primary health centres, as well as contracted and PRCS hospitals. The recent funding shortages for UNRWA have resulted in the adoption of austerity measures, such as the limitation of the number of hospital referrals as well as the period of hospital care. In the refugee camps, UNRWA provides basic environmental health services such as sewage and solid waste disposal.

In 1999, ECHO (European Commission Humanitarian Office) held talks with the Syrian Government, the Syrian Red Crescent, PRCS, and UNRWA in order to

implement an assistance programme for Palestinian refugees, in the form of construction and equipment for hospitals and clinics, provision of training for medical staff, installation of sanitation in camps, and rehabilitation of handicapped persons.

UNICEF and the Syrian government have signed a master plan of cooperation 2002–2006. The plan’s official name is ‘Programme of Cooperation for Palestinian Children and Women in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the West Bank and Gaza’. In Syria ‘The Palestinian Refugee Programme’ is a joint programme between UNICEF and GAPAR, with the aim of giving assistance to Palestinian women and children in the refugee camps. The programme provides vaccines, and undertakes the training of health workers and capacity building in certain areas of education.

UNICEF and UNRWA are working together on ‘Palestinian Refugee Support’, a project for the assistance for Palestinian refugees in Syria in the areas of health and education.

Websites:

UNICEF -

<http://www.palestine-un.org/news/UNICEFPalestine.html>

http://unicef.un.org.sy/unicef_proj.htm#p4

UNRWA -

<http://www.un.org/unrwa/>

UNRWA – Press Release -

<http://www.un.org/unrwa/news/releases/pr-2003/syr03-03.pdf>

USCR -

<http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/mideast/syria.htm>

5. Other resources

5.1 Other electronic resources

Human Rights Watch Policy on the Right of Return – Treatment and Rights in Arab Host Countries

<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/israel/return/arab-rtr.htm>

‘Profiles: Palestinian Refugees in Syria’ – Dr. Nayef Jarrad

http://www.badil.org/Publications/Majdal/1999/4_12.htm

Shiblak, Abbas, ‘Residency Status and Civil Rights of Palestinian Refugees in Arab Countries’ -

<http://www.shaml.org/publications/monos/mono1.htm#Residency Status: A Case of Uncertainty>

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