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## Syria: Situation of stateless Palestinians, including those in camps; whether they are being targeted by the government or rebel groups; information on the Yarmouk camp (March 2011-June 2013) [SYR104441.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### 1. Access to Documentation and Services

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) states that in Syria, as of 1 January 2013, there were 499,189 registered Palestinian refugees (UN Jan. 2013). According to the UNRWA, around 80 percent of Palestinian refugees live in the Damascus region, while others live "in or around camps" near Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia and Dera'a (ibid. [June 2013], 2). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Political Science at McGill University, who has published numerous articles related to Palestinian refugees, stated that approximately "30% of UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees lived in UNRWA camps" prior to the war (4 June 2013). Additionally, a professor of Middle Eastern History, who has published several books and articles related to Palestine, stated in an interview with the Research Directorate on 19 June 2013 that stateless Palestinians living in camps, as well as Palestinians living outside, may be registered refugees or unregistered refugees. He added that stateless Palestinians in Syria tend to move in and out of camps and the surrounding neighbourhoods without difficulty (Professor 19 June 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the UNRWA, there are nine official Palestinian camps and three unofficial ones in Syria (UN n.d.a). Unofficial camps were established by the government which is, in those cases, responsible for solid waste collection, but refugees have access to other UNRWA services (ibid. n.d.b). Yarmouk is an unofficial camp where "the largest Palestine refugee community in Syria" lives (ibid.). The Professor of Middle Eastern History stated that the Yarmouk camp began as a refugee camp, but is now a neighbourhood in Damascus (19 June 2013). The Professor of Political Science similarly stated that Yarmouk "isn't technically a camp - it is a district of Damascus heavily populated by Palestinians" (4 June 2013).

Sources note that stateless Palestinians in Syria have access to Syrian social services (Professor of Middle Eastern History 19 June 2013; Professor of Political Science 4 June 2013; US 19 Apr. 2013, 28). The Professor of Middle Eastern History stated that Palestinians in Syria, if registered with UNRWA, also have access to UNRWA services (19 June 2013). He noted that services available specifically to Palestinian refugees are located within refugee camps (ibid.). The Professor of Political Science stated that although Palestinians in Syria have access to

both UNRWA and Syrian services, "these have been less reliably delivered, and in some areas may be difficult or dangerous to access. In some areas, government services are no longer available" (4 June 2013).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012* states that in Syria "[t]he law allows for the issuance of identity cards to Palestinian refugees and the same access to basic services provided to citizens" (US 19 Apr. 2013, 28). Palestinian refugees have the right to work and attend educational institutions (ibid., 28, 37; AP 26 July 2012). Palestinians in Syria also have access to both identity cards and refugee travel documents (Professor of Middle Eastern History 19 June 2013; US n.d.). The Professor of Middle Eastern History noted that while most Palestinians in Syria had access to some form of documentation, many who fled fighting may not have their documentation on their person, underlining that some people "had to leave their belongings in the camps" (19 June 2013). The Professor of Political Science expressed the view that "[i]t would be much more difficult to obtain documentation now" although Palestinians in Syria did have access (4 June 2013).

## 2. Impact of the Civil War on Stateless Palestinians in Syria, Including in Yarmouk

Sources indicate that most Palestinians tried to avoid engaging in the conflict (AP 26 July 2012; UN [June 2013], 3), but this neutrality has "come under huge pressure with the conflict increasingly penetrating their communities" (ibid.). According to media sources, some Palestinians are supporting the government and some are supporting the opposition (*Le Monde* 3 Jan. 2013; *Le Figaro* 17 Dec. 2012).

The Syrian Arab News Agency, which is linked to the Syrian Ministry of Information (SANA n.d.), reported in May 2013 that, following a meeting with the UNRWA Commissioner-General, the Syrian Minister of Social Affairs pledged that Syria would continue to "provide aid and services to Palestinians in Syria," and the UNRWA Commissioner-General "said that the Syrian government is still offering services to Palestinians without discrimination" (SANA 21 May 2013).

A June 2013 UN News Centre article notes that the Commissioner-General of the UNRWA said that more than the half of the Palestinian camps were "theatres of war," and that "[k]illings, kidnappings, poverty, destruction and fear have become part of daily life" (ibid. 17 June 2013). A UNRWA press release states that "armed opposition elements have taken up positions in camp after camp, in turn attracting intense military responses from government forces" (UN 30 May 2013). The press release also noted that "Palestine refugee camps and neighbourhoods continue to experience some of the most intense armed engagements of the Syria conflict, with casualties and deaths on a daily basis" (ibid.). The UNRWA estimates that roughly 235,000 Palestinians have been displaced (ibid.). The Professor of Political Science stated that over "two-thirds of stateless Palestinians in Syria have been forcibly displaced by the fighting" (4 June 2013). In its 2013 *Annual Report*, Amnesty International writes that "[r]efugees from elsewhere resident in Syria, including Palestinian refugees, faced particular difficulties in accessing safety" (AI 2013).

The Professor of Middle Eastern History stated that Palestinians in Syria are targeted by both sides in the conflict (19 June 2013). An article in the *Irish Times*, a newspaper founded in Ireland in 1859 (*Irish Times* n.d.), cites Palestinians living in Syria who allege that Free Syrian Army fighters attack, rob, and arrest them at checkpoints, and that the regime's army also arrest them at checkpoints and that the government bombed a mosque in Yarmouk in December 2012 (ibid. 21 May 2013).

### 2.1 Yarmouk Camp

Both professors noted that there is neither state nor non-state protection available in Yarmouk (Professor of Middle Eastern History 19 June 2013; Professor of Political Science 4 June 2013). The Professor of Middle Eastern History referred to the Yarmouk camp as a "battlefield" and said that it was fought over by both sides in the civil conflict (19 June 2013). The Professor of Political Science stated that Yarmouk has been "shelled, subject to government cordon-and-search operation, and been the scene of arrests and fighting" (4 June 2013). The Agence France-Presse states that activists report "a sharp increase in kidnappings in Yarmuk" (19 Sept. 2012).

There have been various attacks at the Yarmouk camp:

- ε In July 2011 there were clashes between "residents" and the Assad regime-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, killing approximately 20 people (MRG 2012, 209).
- ε In July 2012, security forces allegedly opened fire on demonstrators, and five persons were reportedly killed (AP 26 July 2012).
- ε In August 2012, "at least 20 people" were killed when mortar shells fell on Yarmouk (UN 14 Aug. 2012; AP 3 Aug. 2012).
- ε In September 2012, the Syrian military shelled Yarmouk (MEMO 17 Sept. 2012) and

arrested "hundreds ... of what it called 'terrorists'" in the camp (Al Jazeera 22 Sept. 2012).

- ε In December 2012, the Syrian government hit Yarmouk with airstrikes (*Le Monde* 3 Jan. 2013; *Le Figaro* 17 Dec. 2012), allegedly killing 25 according to the Palestinian Authority (US 19 Apr. 2013, 28).

## 2.2 Other Camps

MRG reports that in August 2011 the Syrian army attacked a camp in Latakia and that at least 4 people were killed and 20 others were injured (MRG 2012, 209). The UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks reports that according to UNRWA, in August 2011, "[a]t least 5,000 Palestinian refugees ... fled their camp situated in Latakia's El Ramel district" (UN 17 Aug. 2011). The US Department of State's *Country Reports for 2011* notes that approximately 8,000 refugees fled this attack, and that "the military terrorized the few residents who remained in the camp" (US 24 May 2012, 18-19).

The Associated Press (AP) also reports that "[m]ore than two-thirds of the 17,500 [Palestinian] refugees in the southern city of Daraa fled an attack" in July 2012, and that there was a lack of food and medicine even after refugees began to return (AP 26 July 2012).

The UNRWA reports that in May 2013 an explosion at the Sbeineh Camp in Damascus Governorate killed at least five Palestinian refugees and wounded eight more (UN 30 May 2013).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources, including:** Attempts to contact an analyst from the International Crisis Group and a journalist who writes on the Middle East were unsuccessful.

**Internet sites, including:** Al Arabiya; Center for Strategic and International Studies; ecoi.net; Factiva; Forced Migration Online; *Haaretz*; Human Rights Watch; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; International Crisis Group; International Institute for Strategic Studies; Palestinian Return Centre; Syria Comment; United Nations — Refworld.

