

The Palestinians of Iraq: Between Heaven and Hell

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Iraq, we know, is hell on earth. So, anywhere else outside Iraq would almost have to be heaven to those fleeing the inferno. But there is another place that no one would want to be and that is in no-man's land on the Syrian-Iraqi borders. A dusty, windswept, barren wasteland where the temperature is rising daily as the sun burns closer with the summer months approaching. More than one thousand Palestinian men, women and children find themselves there - rejected and deserted - in the tent camps of al-Tanf, al-Waleed, and al-Hol on the Syrian side, and in the most desperate of circumstances. They have been refused entry into Syria and no one else wants them either.

To be fair to Syria, they already have given refuge to some 450,000 Palestinians and their descendants from Israel's 1948 and 1967 ethnic cleansing of Palestine. And recently, Syria has taken in as "guests" almost a million Iraqis fleeing their own homeland, knowing that eventually they can and will return Iraq. Overwhelming numbers, and still Syria took in nearly 200 Palestinians stuck on the Iraqi side of the Jordanian border after Jordan refused them entry. But Syria has again closed its borders. The general fear is that thousands of frightened Palestinians leaving Iraq will swarm into neighbouring Arab countries and stay, putting a strain on the local economies. According to a 2003 UNCHR registration campaign, there are close to 34,000 Iraqi-registered Palestinian refugees in Iraq, 22,000 of whom live in Baghdad. These come from the refugees who fled to Iraq when Israel was created in 1948. The rest of the 80,000-90,000 Palestinians living in Iraq are registered as refugees in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.

The older Palestinians are refugees for the second time in their lives and both they and their children are stateless. Largely well-educated, they have been living quiet and respectable lives in the urban areas of Baghdad waiting for the day they can return to their homeland now occupied by Israel. But left on the border, they have in effect, been hung out to die - not able to go back to Baghdad because of the violence they sought to escape, yet still not able to leave Iraq properly because no country wants to take the risk of them remaining permanently. The Palestinian Authority has offered them to return home, but unsurprisingly Israel has refused to allow this. Currently, Israel is turning away scores of Palestinian foreign nationals who are seeking entry and re-entry at the border crossings to the Occupied Palestinian Territories to visit family, conduct business, or take up residency. It is also preventing family unification between Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip and their spouses from abroad. These sorts of prohibitions have been exercised against Palestinian refugees ever since the newly-created Israel refused them their right to return home after the 1948 war ended.

The problems now facing the Iraqi Palestinians stem from the time of Saddam Hussein's patronage when they were seen to have enjoyed privileges not offered to Iraqis, such as

subsidised housing. When Saddam Hussein's government fell, Iraqi landlords were no longer paid subsidies and promptly evicted their Palestinian tenants. Then Palestinians found themselves the target of arbitrary detention, torture, killings with many "disappearing". Home bombings began and still happen frequently. It seems that much of the violence against the Palestinians has been due to suspicions floating around that Palestinians support the insurgency. Last year, leaflets threatening to eliminate all Palestinians if they did not leave within ten days, terrorised Palestinians and left them in a "state of shock", according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), António Guterres. Both he and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas sought intervention from the Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to stop the killings, but the violence continued and fear is gripping Palestinian communities throughout the country.

On top of all the violence, Palestinians are now having to undergo rigorous registration procedures, despite their status as refugees which gives them the same rights as citizens, minus citizenship and property ownership rights. The Iraqi Ministry of Interior is treating the Palestinians as non-resident foreigners and where before they were able to obtain residency status with little trouble, they now are only permitted short-term residency permits valid for one to two months. Renewing these permits can take days or even weeks and to make the process as difficult as possible, the whole family has to attend. Already nervous about the physical threats, all this bureaucratic red tape only adds to the frustrations of Palestinians and further heightens their insecurity.

What has been happening and what is happening to the Palestinians is terribly inhuman. We treat our animals better. The only solution to their plight is to end it. Every country, on humanitarian grounds, should offer refuge to these Palestinians: anything less diminishes each of us. But, the true solution should be the return to their homeland, and the onus is on Israel to recognise and allow their right to return. Surely, 59 years of loss, agony and heartache is enough for any people to endure. Shamefully though, the no-man's land in which these Palestinian refugees find themselves, is a purgatory of our making: the way out for them is for us to choose, and quickly.

Reference: Human Rights Watch, "Nowhere to Flee - The Perilous Situation of Palestinians in Iraq", Volume 18 No 4(E), September 2006.

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