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Palestinians

Profile

There are 442,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Syria, a fivefold increase on those arriving following the creation of Israel in 1948.

Historical context

Upon receiving the influx of refugees displaced by the creation of Israel in 1948, Syria at first toyed with resettling the Palestinians in a depopulated part of the Jazira. The refugees themselves refused any solution short of returning to Palestine. Syria did not grant them citizenship but initially placed them on a virtually equal footing with Syrians in employment, commercial activity and education. Consequently, they have successfully integrated into society and the economy. Like all large migrant communities, the Palestinians are vulnerable to popular hostility if a major downturn in the economy leads to unemployment. As with Syrians, membership of the Ba'ath (or the Palestinian military wing, al-Sa'iqa) is essential for advancement.

Damascus became home for the 'rejectionist' parts of the Palestinian movement, notably the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).

From 1983, when Assad expelled the forces of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yassir Arafat's from Lebanon, severe restrictions were applied on travel and public expression, and many Palestinians were arrested. In the words of Middle East Watch: 'Of all the people from all groups tortured to death in Syria during this period (1983-1986) at least half have been Palestinians...As of summer 1990 Syria held 2,500 Palestinians as political prisoners, including about 2,000 within Syrian territory (the balance presumably in Lebanon).'

At times the regime uses Palestinians to exercise pressure on different parties involved with the Arab-Israeli conflict and to gain concessions from them. The latest addition to the rejectionist Palestinian front in Syria has been the leadership of Hamas.

Current issues

Since it allowed 300 Palestinian refugees from Iraq to enter in April-May 2006, the Syrian government has singled out this group for denial of entry. By May 2007, around 1,400 Iraqi Palestinians were camped at the Iraqi-Syrian border - fleeing Shia militia attacks at home and refused permission to enter Syria. Despite assistance from UNHCR and the International Committee for the Red Cross, Palestinians are living in squalid desert camps, prone to blazing desert heat and sand storms, and lacking adequate water supplies. In May 2007 UNHCR appealed for international assistance in providing health-care at the camps, noting that some Palestinian Iraqis were dying of treatable illnesses.

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