



World Refugee Day and a historical Right to Return to Homeland

24th of June, 2019- occupied Palestine

Whether they are refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons or returnees, every minute 20 people leave everything behind to escape war, persecution or terror¹. Globally, provisions of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol as the only two relevant legal instruments help protect refugees. According to the UNHCR's 2018 Global Trends Report, 68.5 million people were forced out from their homes by the end of 2017 because of persecution, conflict and violence; approximately 25.4 million of these individuals were formally designated as refugees². The security crises triggered by the precarious instabilities and wars within the last 8 years across the MENA region have created new epicenters of refugees and internally displaced persons. Debates confirm that the main challenge is the massive influx of immigrants within the MENA itself. Although the 1951 Refugee Convention guarantee the refugees' right to work, housing, education, freedom of movement, public relief, and else, tensions continue to arise between refugee populations and hosting communities. In structures of weak governance, the tendency for radicalization and violent extremism is very high within this context.

Palestinian refugees constitute the largest and longest suffering group of refugees in the world. They have been involuntarily displaced since 1946 in what has become a recurring Nakba and practices of ethnic cleansing by the Israeli occupation. Around 85% of indigenous Palestinians were forcibly expelled from their homes and lands between 1947 and 1949. More than 750,000 Palestinians were internally displaced or forced to reconstitute their lives in exile. Today, about 7.2 million³ Palestinian refugees are scattered in and outside Palestine with a historical Right to return; of whom nearly one third live in 58 recognized Palestine refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. More than 4.3 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants displaced in 1948 are registered for humanitarian assistance with the United Nations⁴. With one in three refugees worldwide being Palestinian. However, Palestinian women are the most affected by the aftermath of displacement, with severe impacts on their mental, emotional, physical and economic well-being, all while having to deal with further social burdens. Refugees, especially in the Gaza Strip, depending on UNRWA's support for humanitarian aid, infrastructures, health and social services, in addition to education and microfinance programs have been profoundly impacted by the US large cut of funding to the main UN Agency addressing the refugee crisis, sharply worsening their already precarious situation. The decision also has a strong political effect: Palestinian refugees' right to return to their lands, currently denied by Israel, has been a deeply conflictual topic in all negotiations. By cutting their funds to UNRWA, the US took a clear political stand against any recognition of the rights of refugees.

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/events/refugeeday/background.shtml>

² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/mena-countries-in-the-middle-east-have-the-highest-proportion-of-refugees-in-the-world/>

³ <https://al-awda.org/learn-more/faqs-about-palestinian-refugees/>

⁴ <https://al-awda.org/learn-more/faqs-about-palestinian-refugees/>

The security crises across the MENA region not only left a vast segment of population displaced or stateless, they have also witnessed new grim developments in war strategies. Sexual violence, and rape most specifically, has become a feature in armed conflicts around the world, and often used as a strategy rather than just a by-product of war.

We urge human rights defenders, international community and duty bearers across official entities and Member States of the UN to take immediate action to protect women in times of conflict as entitled in the WPS agenda and UNSCR1325 and international law. We demand that war perpetrators are held to account for their crimes against humanity, and that compensations are offered to refugees and women victims of war crimes. Whether it is in occupied Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Georgia, Iraq, Nepal or elsewhere, we demand that refugees are treated with dignity and granted prospects of peace and right to return to their homes and families.

Established in 1981, The Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development (PWWSD) is a Palestinian women's, mass, developmental, learning human rights organization that contributes to developing the feminist struggle within social, and developmental dimensions.