



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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### Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

## Written statement\* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.


[03 June 2019]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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## **Palestinian Refugee women in the Syrian Arab Republic**

### **Introduction**

At a time when the bloody warfare continues to take away the lives of dozens of innocent civilians in the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), it is striking how little attention has been devoted to addressing the aftermaths of the war on Palestinian women, who make up 49% of the Palestinian refugee community taking shelter in the Arab country.

Palestinian women in the Syrian Arab Republic have been denied their basic rights and subjected to the most flagrant violations of international law.<sup>1</sup>

### **Palestinian Women in the Midst of the Deadly Warfare**

AGPS documented the death of 487 Palestinian women and girls since the outburst of the bloody hostilities in SAR in March 2011, making up nearly 13% of the overall death toll recorded until May 2019.

The list includes 240 female refugees who died under shelling and 68 who died as a result of the blockade and medical neglect in Yarmouk. 28 women were, meanwhile, killed by snipers; 37 died in blasts; 24 were fatally gunned down; 26 drowned at sea; and five others were subjected to extra-judicial executions.

As many as 34 Palestinian female refugees were, in the meantime, tortured to death in Syrian government prisons and another 20 refugees died of various causes, including murder, assassination, suicide, health setbacks, burns, and suffocation.

As for the geographical distribution of the victims, Damascus topped the list with 163 casualties, followed by Rif Dimashq, with 152 victims. 66 female refugees were, meanwhile, pronounced dead in Daraa, 23 in Aleppo, one woman in Hama, and another in AlRaml Camp, in Latakia.<sup>2</sup>

### **Most Flagrant Violations against Palestinian Women in the Syrian Arab Republic**

#### *Crippling Blockade*

The tough cordons slapped on and around Palestinian refugees have had disastrous fallouts on the lives of Palestinian women and girls in the embattled Syrian territories. 200 female refugees died as a result of the blockade imposed on Yarmouk Camp, according to statistics until May 2019.

Women made up 32.63% of the toll of deaths caused by the blockade.

Child mortality saw a striking leap as a result of dehydration, undernourishment, and medical negligence.

On August 18, 2013, Palestinian toddler Jana Ahmad Hasan breathed her last as a result of the acute dearth in children's milk, shortly after she was torn apart from her mother who went out of the camp but never returned due to the crippling cordon slapped by the government forces. Such violations blatantly breach the international humanitarian law which forbids the mistreatment of pregnant and breastfeeding mums.

Palestinian toddler Hana Faysal AlAwad died on May 12, 2013 of a hemorrhage infecting her vulnerable body soon after her birth, causing her severe anemia.

92-year-old Palestinian women Aziza Mohamed Na'imi also died of dehydration.

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<sup>1</sup> Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict  
The Declaration was proclaimed by General Assembly Resolution 3318(XXIX) of 14 December 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Source: The Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (AGPS).

The bodies of a number of elderly women were found dead inside their homes or shelters after they were torn apart from their families and relatives. On May 20, 2014, the disintegrated body of an elderly lady was spotted at a building in Yarmouk. Forensic reports said she died more than six months earlier.<sup>3</sup>

### **Blasts and Assassinations**

Blasts took away the lives of 37 Palestinian women across SAR. Direct shooting also led to several deaths. On November 19, 2012, Asmaa Saleh Abu Bakr, the internal monitoring chief at Syria's Central Bank, was fatally gunned down with two head shots fired from a sound suppressor gun, in front of her daughter.

#### *Abduction, Forced Disappearance, Fatal Torture*

According to AGPS database, 107 Palestinian women and girls have been secretly held in Syrian state prison. 39 women have also gone missing across the country.

AGPS also documented the death of 34 Palestinian women and girls under torture in Syrian government prisons.

According to affidavits by ex-detainees and breakaways, Palestinian women and girls have been subjected to harsh psycho-physical torture tactics in Syrian penitentiaries, including electric shocks, heavy beating using iron sticks, and sexual abuse.

Such practices represent flagrant violations of the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict of 1974, Article 5, which criminalizes all forms of torture and mistreatment against women and children.

AGPS believes the numbers to be far higher as scores of casualties have gone undocumented after the Syrian authorities kept their names secret. Several families have also refused to reveal their relatives' names over retaliation concerns.

Inherently a taboo misdemeanor in the MENA region, violence against women, be it sexual, physical, or verbal, has remained under-reported among the Palestinian refugee community in the Syrian Arab Republic, with reasons wavering between fear of retaliation, embarrassment, social prestige, fear of punishment for those below the age of criminal responsibility, and distrust in law enforcement.

### **Deaths on Migration Routes**

At least 33 Palestinian women died onboard Europe-bound migration roads or on the Syrian borders, trying to cross into such countries as Italy, Greece, and Turkey, fleeing war-tattered SAR.

### **Recommendations**

Palestinian women in SAR have been shorn of their right to the psycho-physical protection guaranteed by international laws and conventions, particularly at times of armed conflict. Women have not been safe from deadly onslaughts targeting Palestinian refugee camps and communities using internationally-prohibited weapons. Women have seen it all: they have been molested, abused, kidnapped, forcibly disappeared, and subjected to all sorts of degrading treatment.

Serious action should be urgently made, nationwide and overseas, to rehabilitate the infringed rights of Palestinian women, secure their psycho-physical protection, disclose the fate of those who have gone missing, and release those who have been held behind Syria's prison bars. Those involved in crimes and human rights violations against women should be urgently brought before national and international courts.

Article 3, which is common to all four Geneva Conventions and applies to non-international armed conflicts, prohibits outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.actionpal.org.uk/ar/reports/special/wastedlives.pdf>

degrading treatment against protected persons (i.e. those not taking active part in the hostilities).

Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, relating to the protection of civilian persons in time of war, also states: "Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honor, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault."

Article 75 (Additional Protocol I) of the Geneva Conventions, relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts, prohibits outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment, enforced prostitution and any form of indecent assault.

At the same time, Article 7 (1) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) dubs as "crimes against humanity" rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence.

Time is running out. Urgent action should be made in order to enforce international laws and bring universally-condemned human rights abuses and war crimes to a halt.

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