

# Trapped: The Plight of Palestinian Refugees From Syria

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Last December, the Palestinian refugee neighborhood of Yarmouk in Damascus was hit by a series of deadly pro-regime [airstrikes](#). In addition to killing 25 civilians, the attack reportedly [drove](#) several formerly pro-government Palestinian fighters to defect to the rebel forces. The civilians -- which included women and children -- had taken shelter inside a nearby mosque, according to opposition activists.

The State Department estimates that Yarmouk was home to 150,000 of Syria's 500,000 Palestinian refugees, making it the largest refugee neighborhood in Syria. For over 40 years, the Assad family maintained Syria's position as that of a legitimate protector for Palestinian asylum seekers and their children. The Yarmouk attack, however, shattered whatever was left of this claim, as hundreds of terrified families packed up their belongings and fled to safety. They left for countries with established refugee camps, including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Jordan has had a particularly long history of harboring refugee populations from border nations. However, faced with surging numbers of shell-shocked Syrian refugees, Jordanian forces have begun turning Palestinian families away at the border, forcing them

to return to a country ravaged by a ruthless dictator and to a civil war with no end in sight.

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In a facility known as [Cyber City](#) near the border city of Ramtha in Jordan, 200 Palestinian families await their fate. Many of them have already been turned away from the neighboring Zaatari camp, which has [stopped](#) accepting anyone without Syrian identification. Anyone with a Palestinian ID is automatically directed to Cyber City, where they are detained until approved for asylum status. Eyewitnesses say the facility looks like a worn-down, six-story dormitory, its occupants forbidden from stepping outside its walls for any length of time.

At [Salon](#), [Bill Frelick](#) of Human Rights Watch and [Meera Shah](#) at Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic describe the camp's deplorable conditions. In some cases, four families are squashed into one room -- and those are the families that have managed to stay together. The authors spoke with a Syrian refugee who recounted what the Jordanian authorities told him as he approached the border with his family:

"You can come, but she is not allowed because she's Palestinian." I told them our house is burned down and that we have no house to go back to. The Border Patrol officer said, 'That is not our problem.' I begged him. My wife and children were begging and crying not to be sent back. He said, 'It is impossible,' and put us in a military vehicle and took us to the border."

According to the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#), close to 4,569 Palestinians from Syria have managed to enter Jordan since the conflict in Syria began. But the

number that have been turned away at the border is estimated to be significantly larger. However distressing, the government of Jordan has made no secret of its harsh policy of refusal. In October, Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour [announced](#) the plan in the Arabic-language daily *Al-Hayat*, "Jordan has made a clear and explicit sovereign decision to not allow the crossing to Jordan by our Palestinian brothers who hold Syrian documents."

This policy of refusal violates the principle of [non-refoulement](#). Though Jordan has not signed or ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, international human rights law [forbids](#) the government from sending anyone back to "a country where their life or freedom would be threatened." From Geneva, [Human Rights Watch](#) writes,

"To its credit, Jordan has allowed tens of thousands of Syrians to cross its borders irregularly and move freely in Jordan, but it treats Palestinians fleeing the same way differently," said [Gerry Simpson](#), senior refugee researcher and advocate for Human Rights Watch. "All those fleeing Syria - Syrians and Palestinians alike - have a right to seek asylum in Jordan, move freely in Jordan, and shouldn't be forced back into a war zone."

Jordan has a long and complicated history of harboring Palestinian refugees, and has borne a disproportionate refugee burden since 1948. While experts agree that Jordan's relationship with Palestinian refugees has improved over the past few years, a culture of suspicion and resentment persists in a country where more than [half](#) the population is of Palestinian descent.

For now, those that do return to Syria are faced with a harrowing choice: Stay and be kidnapped or killed, or try and seek refuge in another bordering country. Some manage to seek asylum in [Turkey](#) or Lebanon, but treatment of refugees in both places remains

distressing. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who were already subjected to a host of discriminatory laws are now [required](#) to renew a permit every month that costs 50,000 LBP (\$33.00) -- an unspeakably large sum.

As violence rages on in Syria, high-ranking members of the Palestinian Authority [visited](#) Damascus in February to call for an end to the attacks on refugee communities. While there is no question that displaced Syrian refugees are suffering immensely during the civil war, human rights groups argue that the fate of Palestinian refugees is even worse. Palestinians simply do not have the basic rights that passport-holding Syrian citizens do. They lack the ability to escape.