

AL-TANF CAMP

TRAUMA CONTINUES FOR
PALESTINIANS FLEEING IRAQ

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‘ONE DAY HERE IS LIKE 10 YEARS ANYWHERE ELSE’

A resident of al-Tanf camp talking to Amnesty International

At least 729 Palestinian refugees who have fled Iraq are stranded in appalling conditions in al-Tanf camp in the no-man’s land on the Iraq-Syria border, as of 2 April 2008. The narrow strip of land, wedged between a concrete wall and the main transit road from Baghdad to Damascus, is dry and dusty. Temperatures soar to 50°C in summer and plunge to below freezing in winter. Overcrowded tents are the only protection from the heat, the snow and the blinding sandstorms.



The camp’s school, which backs onto a busy highway without protection.

Danger is everywhere, especially for the children. The land is infested with scorpions and snakes. The school tents are unprotected from the busy highway, which has already claimed the life of a boy knocked down by a truck. Heating and cooking systems in the tents regularly cause fires that destroy tents – 42 tents in all, according to residents who spoke to Amnesty International delegates visiting the camp in March 2008.

A fire in April 2007, said to have been started by a spark from an electric cable, engulfed much of the camp. Three people were severely burned and 25 others, mostly children, suffered minor burns and smoke inhalation. Many people had their few possessions destroyed.

An official from UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, told Amnesty International that it was the second major fire in the camp: “It is an example of how inappropriate and dangerous this place is for humans to live in and underlines the need to move these refugees to an appropriate and safe place.”

Despite the unsafe and harsh conditions at al-Tanf, the population of Palestinian refugees from Iraq in the camp is growing.

The camp was initially established in May 2006 when a group of 389 Palestinians fleeing persecution in Iraq went to the Syrian border but were refused entry by the Syrian authorities. The Syrian authorities have allowed in



Emergency food provisions arriving for the camp's 700 residents.

over 1 million refugees fleeing Iraq but are generally not willing to accept Palestinian refugees. The camp continues to expand as some of the approximately 4,000 Palestinians who used forged passports to enter Syria are being picked up by Syrian security forces and deported to the camp on an increasingly regular basis.

Access to services

UNHCR is the main agency helping refugees fleeing Iraq and provides food, water and fuel to those at al-Tanf. UNHCR staff in Syria visit the camp daily. UNRWA, the agency that has been helping Palestinian refugees since 1950, provides basic health, education and social services. Other UN agencies have also assisted at al-Tanf, including UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, which has set up a child-friendly space for the camp's children, 18 of whom were born after their families arrived in the camp and have known no other life.

UNRWA and UNICEF have established a school in al-Tanf, and teachers from the camp now educate more than 150 children. However, older students forced to quit university in Iraq are unable to continue with their education.

Basic medical care is provided in al-Tanf, but people needing emergency treatment are taken to the Palestinian

Red Crescent Society hospital in the Syrian capital, Damascus. Al-Tanf residents say the size of the camp's population demands full medical services on site. In 2007, a man died of kidney failure – he had initially been treated in Damascus, but when his condition suddenly deteriorated the camp could not give him the necessary emergency care and he died.

WHY PALESTINIANS ARE FLEEING IRAQ

Palestinian refugees in Iraq have been targeted for gross human rights abuses since the US-led invasion in March 2003. They have been threatened, abducted, tortured and killed mainly by Shi'a armed militia groups, in particular the Mahdi Army, followers of the Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, but also by Iraqi government forces. The bodies of those abducted and killed are often found mutilated or with clear marks of torture. Palestinians have been targeted because of their ethnicity and because they are reputed to have received preferential treatment under the former Ba'ath government headed by Saddam Hussain. As a result of the persecution, thousands have fled their homes, mostly in Baghdad, after they or their relatives suffered abuses or received death threats. According to UNHCR, since 2003 the number of Palestinians in Iraq has fallen from 34,000 to around 15,000. UNHCR considers Palestinians, especially those at al-Tanf, to be among the most vulnerable among the 2 million refugees who have fled Iraq.



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Above: A boy playing on the edge of the camp.
Front cover: The red tanks scattered around al-Tanf supply residents with water.

At least 2,000 Palestinian refugees from Iraq are also suffering extremely harsh conditions in al-Waleed camp, another makeshift camp near the Syria-Iraq border. Al-Hol camp in al-Hassakah governorate in north-east Syria is home to a further 300 Palestinians from Iraq.

In October 2007 Amnesty International published a report – *Iraq: human rights abuses against Palestinian refugees* (AI Index: MDE 14/030/2007) – which detailed the abuses and urged the international community to act urgently to help resettle Palestinian refugees from Iraq.

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Trauma and despair

Many camp residents described to Amnesty International the horrific events that prompted them to flee Iraq and have left them traumatized. Some had been kidnapped and tortured. Others had relatives who had been abducted, mutilated and killed. Others spoke of armed militia cutting off ears, gouging out eyes, pouring acid over the head of captives.

Mas'ud Nur al-Din al-Mahdi and 'Adnan 'Abdallah Melham, both now living in al-Tanf, were among four Palestinians arrested in May 2005 and detained by the Iraqi security forces. They were tortured and paraded on television "confessing" to a bomb attack. The four were released in May 2006 after a court ruled that there was no evidence that they had been involved in bomb attacks. Mas'ud Nur al-Din al-Mahdi told Amnesty International that the torture he suffered included being suspended upside-down for a long time and having a large stone put on his genitals.

Members of one family now at al-Tanf described to Amnesty International the murder of two of their brothers in

Baghdad – Mohammad Hussain Sadeq in March 2006, and 'Omar Hussain Sadeq a year later.

The people in al-Tanf are also traumatized by the conditions in the camp and their fear that they may be stuck there for many more years. One resident pleaded with Amnesty International delegates to "save us from this hell". He added: "A human being doesn't live just to eat." Another said: "We regret that our plight depends on political decisions rather than humanitarian considerations."

UNHCR believes that resettlement in third countries is the only possible durable solution for these Palestinians at the present time. It told Amnesty International that the Chilean government offered to resettle an initial group of 116 Palestinians from al-Tanf; their departure is expected in April 2008. A number of other governments outside the Middle East have reportedly said they will resettle some of al-Tanf's residents, but their plight is desperate and safe resettlement cannot come quickly enough.

ACT NOW

PLEASE WRITE TO YOUR GOVERNMENT:

- draw its attention to the plight of Palestinian refugees in al-Tanf camp, highlighting the need for immediate action;
- call for urgent assistance in resettling them and other particularly vulnerable refugees from Iraq;
- call for expedited processing for resettlement in recognition of the extremely harsh conditions in the camp.

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