

An icon two years on begs some unsettling questions

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Palestine refugees crowd the main street of Yarmouk in February 2014, for the first UNRWA food distribution after six months of siege. ©UNRWA.

By Chris Gunness, UNRWA Spokesperson

It is now two years since the iconic photo of thousands of bewildered, besieged civilians in the Palestine refugee camp of Yarmouk, Damascus was taken. Traumatized and drained of all emotion, children, women, the sick, the elderly, the dying waited in the besieged camp for food from UNRWA, the UN agency mandated to bring them aid. It was an image whose graphic power seared itself into the collective memory of our age, as the word “Yarmouk” was added to the appalling lexicon of man’s inhumanity to man. The photo went viral and thus became an icon of Syria’s pitiless conflict.

The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon was later to describe Yarmouk as akin to the lower regions of hell; a refugee camp that had become a death camp. Yarmouk was once home to some 150,000 Palestinians. Each has a humanity, an individual dignity that must be recognized, respected and nurtured.

Yet two years on, as peace talks begin in Geneva and just days before the London conference on Syria, this haunting image begs some discomfiting questions. Where are the individuals now, whose faces stare compelling out at us? Are they alive or dead? Did they become part of a lost generation? Were they left behind? The majority are Palestinians yet is the plight of this marginalized community being overlooked, dwarfed by the sheer enormity of the Syrian tragedy?

We owe it to each and every individual in that photo, to ourselves and to future generations to find answers to these questions. Without them, the stain that is Yarmouk will forever be on the conscience of humanity.

Background Information:

UNRWA is confronted with an increased demand for services resulting from a growth in the number of registered Palestine refugees, the extent of their vulnerability and their deepening poverty. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions and financial support has been outpaced by the growth in needs. As a result, the UNRWA programme budget, which supports the delivery of core essential services, operates with a large shortfall. UNRWA encourages all Member States to work collectively to exert all possible efforts to fully fund the Agency's programme budget. UNRWA emergency programmes and key projects, also operating with large shortfalls, are funded through separate funding portals. UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and mandated to provide assistance and protection to some 5.4 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA across its five fields of operation. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, protection and microfinance.

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