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Written by Mounira Rabii

Between asylum, illegal residence and plight of displacement, Syrians in Tunisia tell a story of suffering

 Tunis, Oct. 23, 2015 (TAP) - Children in “Ettadhamen”, the most densely populated neighbourhood in the capital, were used to their neighbours Shady (5 years) and Rima (4 years), who came from the neighbourhoods of Homs, Syria two years ago. They live in a modest house still under construction with their parents Mohammed Fawaz and Sajida, a home provided to them by "good people," as the husband Mohammed Fawaz said.

Shadi is a child but his memory still conjures details about the bloody scene in Syria. He told us with all innocence that he longs to his home in Homs, to his friends to continue with them the game of “precision” and “marble balls.”

He said: "the hail of bullets still echoes in my ears. I'm afraid to go to our home and not find it or my friends in the neighbourhood and do not find them.

He went on saying: why did they attack us? Why did they drive us away from our home?

Sajida’s eyes welled with tears after hearing the innocent questions of her child and said

In a quavering voice, "my children witnessed all the destruction and underwent all the moments of death and destruction suffered by Homs, and until now they often wake up scared because of nightmares they have almost every night."

She added, "We have lived through difficult days, during which we feared being attacked by armed gangs. We also suffered days of hunger when we came out of Homs and I and my husband slept on an empty stomach so as to provide food to our children.

My husband had a traditional pastry shop in Homs, which is famous for its sweets, including mostly Konafa and Tamria… We left there in Homs our property which was looted by these gangs and came to Tunisia in search for a safe haven for my family and better living conditions.”

Her husband went on telling more details about this ordeal, saying "had we stayed in Homs, we would have been killed at the hand of those armed gangs. They attacked and looted houses and killed in cold blood and did not hesitate to rape our women and daughters. We did not want to yield to the will of death and we preferred to flee and risk migration into the unknown rather than stay there and wait for dying of panic and rage at every moment.”

Sajida said her Tunisian neighbours have come to help her and provided to her family free housing, blankets and oven and even clothes for her two children Shady and Rima, besides providing food provisions. She also receives financial assistance from some associations."

We did not feel any alienation or deprivation among Tunisians, but “the heart is there

In Syria and we hope we will be able to return to it one day.

Not far from this neighbourhood, Balkis, 50, lives with her family in EL Mnihla neighbourhood. She said:  "my mother died and I could not go to Aleppo to bid farewell to her because I do not have documents of legal residence in Tunisia. I fled with my husband Ahmed and my children and many Syrian to Tunisia after the outbreak of fighting in our country.

Balkis was forced to sell her house and furniture so that she could pay for travel expenses.

She first went to Jordan and them left it to Tunisia with her husband and her two children and settled in this neighbourhood due to the low cost of rent and living in it compared to other regions of the capital.

To the question on how could the family meet its daily expenses Balkis said “my sons, one of whom works in a bakery in the neighbourhood and another on a restaurant specializing in Syrian cuisine in the capital, are those who are spending on the family. They also pay the house renting cost, which is 200 dinars.”

She did not hide the difficulty of living in Tunisia because of the lack of resources, especially as she suffers from chronic diseases (diabetes, blood pressure) and has to buy drugs from the pharmacy.

Balkis’ husband Ahmed Al-Jasser wanted to talk only about the city of Aleppo. He told about memories that carry a nostalgia and affection about the “Shahbah” as he likes to call it.”

Aleppo has offered to Arab art great singers including Ali Darwish, Sabah Fakhri, and MayadaHinawi.”

It is home to the Citadel of Aleppo whose construction was ordered by Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamdani in which courts lived two famous Arab poets: Abu TayebMutanabi and Abu Firas al-Hamdani. "

"I still remember the voices of vendors in the markets of Aleppo, which is now under shelling though it was classified by UNESCO's as the tallest market in the world and entered Guinness World Records as it counts at least 73 markets whose length is at least 51 km.

He went on saying: "in these markets there were the famous spices of Aleppo and perfume shops…laurel soap, Aleppo silk fabrics and traditional carpets…

He added: "this noise to which we were accustomed and the active movement now turned into a complete silence broken only by the voices of gunshots and bombings."

He stressed that this in this "war on Syria, there is a deliberate intention to displace Syrians from their homes.  Shots were deliberately fired on homes. They killed everyone they encountered and looted homes.” He added: whether we are inside our outside the nation, Syria will long live and recover.

The story of Abu Mustapha (pseudonym) from Idlib is not different from the other Syrians.

He told his tragic story and asked not to be identified, saying "our destiny was uncertain in

Syria and our path was difficult and risky, we were blackmailed by smugglers on the Tunisian-Algerian borders."

He added "I entered Algeria legally with a number of Syrians in 2012, when the visa entry

for Syrian was not required by the Algerian authorities. A large number of Syrians there opted for migration to Europe via Libya, infiltrating from border regions into coastal regions to board smugglers' boats to Italy," he said, adding that USD 300 was the fee for one person.

Abu Mustafa explained that since January 2015, the Algerian authorities imposed the entry

visa on Syrians for fear of terrorists' infiltration and stepped up over entrances to Libya, even accommodation measures in refugee centres have become more complicated, compelling

many of them to change their destination and started to infiltrate into Tunisia deeming it a short way to Europe.

As regards the reasons to risk their lives and those of their children, he said: "Thesituation in Syria has become open to anything but life, no work and no security," adding"since losing Syria to gangs who deteriorated it, many Syrians has been looking for another

nationality, thinking that Europe is more respectful of the refugees' rights contrarily to

Arab countries, "what forces someone on bitterness is something all the more bitter," hequoted.

The Syrian families who took refuge in Tunisia following war in their country

represents a sample of the tragedy of Syrians who are united in their love and yearning for

the land of the Levant but have been separated by war, so their stories differed from each

other.

Some of them have been living in Tunisia for years, others are refugees who escaped from the

hell of war in Syria and entered Tunisia legally before cutting diplomatic relations with Syria

in 2012, or after it through neighbour borders with the help of smugglers and preferred not to

report to Tunisian authorities or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, waiting for an opportunity to migrate illegally.

According to the majority of humanitarian organisations in Tunisia, the number of Syrians

here is estimated at 4 thousand, however there are no accurate data or statistics about their

situation, how they entered the country, their living conditions and the difficulties facing

them.

It appears from a survey conducted in 2015 by "Sigma Conseil" in partnership with the High

Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organisation for Migration, the Tunisian Red

Crescent and the Tunisian Association for the Rights of the Child, that three quarters of

Syrians entered Tunisia legally, though the majority of them are living illegally as their

residence permits have expired.

According to the same survey which was presented last August, 98% of the Syrian

community are living in popular neighbourhoods close to the capital and that 36.6% among them came from Damascus, 30.1% from the city of Homs and 17.6% from Idlib.

A second category of Syrians in Tunisia seems to have a better situation than those compelled

to emigrate after the war. They are Syrians who have been living in Tunisia for years before the war.

For their part, they speak about another kind of suffering due to the ongoing closure of

Syria's embassy in Tunis since 2012, which has hindered their access to administrative

documents as the renewal of passports and residence permits, making their living and

movement harder in this country.

"Many among us are facing difficulties in renewing their passports and getting their

residence permits in Tunisia and even extracting other civil documents, as the registration of the newly born and deaths. Syrians living in Tunisia are living through real difficulties due

to the ongoing closure of their embassy in Tunis," according to president of the

association of Syrian community in Tunisia Talel Hassan.

He explained that these difficulties consist in the delay recorded in getting residence permits or renewing them from the Tunisian Interior Ministry, specifying that this delay may extend to months and even to a year in some cases.

Hassan said that "in the beginning we estimated that this delay is due to the cut of

diplomatic relations between the two countries, but now it is getting worse as the renewal of

residence permits now lasts for more than a year."

Syrian nationals are considered illegal residents under the Tunisian law unless they obtain the residence permit said HassenDiab, Vice President of the Association of the Syrian Community in Tunisia and Professor at the Tunis Manar Faculty of Law and Political Sciences. Thus, they may be sued and fined up to 80 Tunisian dinars/day starting from the expiration date of the entry visa or the residence permit.

For the renewal of passports, Syrians settled in Tunisia get in touch with their country’s embassy in Algeria which is entrusted with running the community affairs, Diab added.

In this very case, Syrians not holding a residence permit could not leave the Tunisian territory for Algeria since they are illegal residents from a legal standpoint and will be arrested over illegal border crossing.

Tunisian authorities are aware of the difficult situation which Syrians are facing in Tunisia, he underscored. Syrians have now little room for moving about since they do not hold such documents and the bulk of them, traders, saw their activity cease.

The only solution is a diplomatic representation in Tunisia, Diab highlighted.

Spokesperson for the Interior Ministry WalidLouguini said there is no delay in procedures to grant or renew residence permits for Syrian nationals unless some documents are lacking.

**//Gypsies of Syria ...in Tunisia//**

Syrians asking for money in mosques and public areas as they brandish their passports or identity cards has become commonplace; the phenomenon has gained scale in Tunisia over the last two years.

They are the Nawar of Syria, said Secretary-General of the Association of the Syrian Community in Tunisia Chawki Rajah. They are nomads originating in general from Homs and Aleppo countryside and are beggars from father to son in Syria or itinerant dentists working

illegally in cafés and public areas.

The Nawar crossed into Tunisia after refusing to live in camps in Algeria; some of them even managed to make the trip to Egypt.

The number of Syrian nationals residing in Tunisia does not exceed the one thousand mark; statistics for those who managed to enter the country illegally are not available but data show that they may be 3 to 4 thousands who did not report to Tunisian authorities lest they be deported. The High Commission for Refugees says the number of refugees goes beyond 600.

Illegal border-crossers paid 300 to 500 dinars each, while others entered Tunisia legally before diplomatic ties were severed with Syria.

Rajah denied migrants to Europe were all Syrians, saying only 53% are. There are many forged Syrian passports and identity documents that entitle their holders to reach Europe and a number of countries including Tunisia which is considered as a crossing point to the European continent.

UNHCR representative in Tunis Mazen Abu Shanab said, in a statement to TAP, the number of Syrian refugees registered in the UNHCR stands at over 650.

He added that registered refugees receive allowances and assistance from the UNHCR and its partners, underlining that in case of asylum in the Tunisian territory, the UNHCR investigates the causes for asylum seeking while recommending the asylum seeker to meet the conditions of asylum such as living in a homeland torn by wars and instability.

Abu Shanab said that the UNHCR does not give residence card in Tunisia, underlining that the asylum seeker certificate provided by the UNHCR shows that the holder of this certificate benefits of the rights of an asylum seeker. The Tunisian Constitution includes the right to asylum.

Tunisia has prepared a draft law for asylum seeking, to be discussed and approved by the House of the People’s Representatives. The UNHCR is now receiving asylum seeking applications to be examined along with studying the situation of their seekers, which will be given to partner Red Crescent in the governorates of Tunis, Medenine, Sfax and Tataouine.

He added that the UNHCR and the Red Crescent make field visit to get acquainted with the needs of the Syrian refugees and provide them assistance, noting that assistance is seasonal according to the assessment of the situation.

Red Crescent S-G TaherChniti talked about the Tunisian experience in matters of receiving asylum seekers underlining “that this experience was commended by the world when Tunisia hosted in 2011 thousands of Libyan refugees which helped us deal with the “humanitarian issue with more professionalism and confidence.

He said that the Tunisian government and the regional authorities pledge to protect the Syrian refugees by providing all the facilities to the humanitarian organisations to achieve success of this humanitarian action considering that there is no difference between the Tunisian people and the Syrian refugees who are treated the same way.

This attitude was materialised by hosting the children of the Syrian and Libyan families and facilitating their registration in Tunisian schools.

In this connection, Director of the Primary cycle in the Education Ministry KamelHajjem said the number of Syrian pupils in the Tunisian primary schools is over 40 during this school year distributed over the regional education authorities in Medenine, Sfax 1, Gabes, Kebili, Gafsa, Ariana, Tunis 2, Bizerte, Nabeul, Mahdia and SidiBouzid.

He added that among the conditions of registration is vacancy otherwise Syrian pupils are sent to another school by presenting documents including the birth certificate and a certificate showing the level of the pupil in Syrian schools and a residence card of the parents.

Besides, KamelHajjem said that a written test is required in the Regional Education Authority to decide on the class to be joined by the Syrian pupil.

He said that several Syrian pupils were taught the French language in previous summer holidays in order to facilitate their integration since Syrian education is based on Arabic and English languages contrarily to Tunisian education based on Arab and French languages.

The ongoing Syrian tragedy

The Syrians are still suffering, especially in the latest period after four years and half of war in Syria mainly after the picture of the body of the kid “Ilen” washed ashore, a full horror of human tragedy.

Most world reports noted that over 2,300 persons drowned in the Mediterranean in the last seven months of 2015 (International Organisation for Immigration) when attempting to reach Europe via North Africa and Turkey among whom hundreds of Syrian Children.

The UNICEF reported that the number of Syrian children who crossed the Mediterranean towards Europe since the beginning of this year reached 100,000 children.

The UNHCR also reported that 4 million Syrian Refugees are spread in the world. The number of Syrians heading to Europe is constantly increasing the latest period seeking asylum and security after war, destruction and fighting in several Syrian regions. Some of them see that there is no need to go back home, but most of them hope for resuming peace and security in Syria one day.